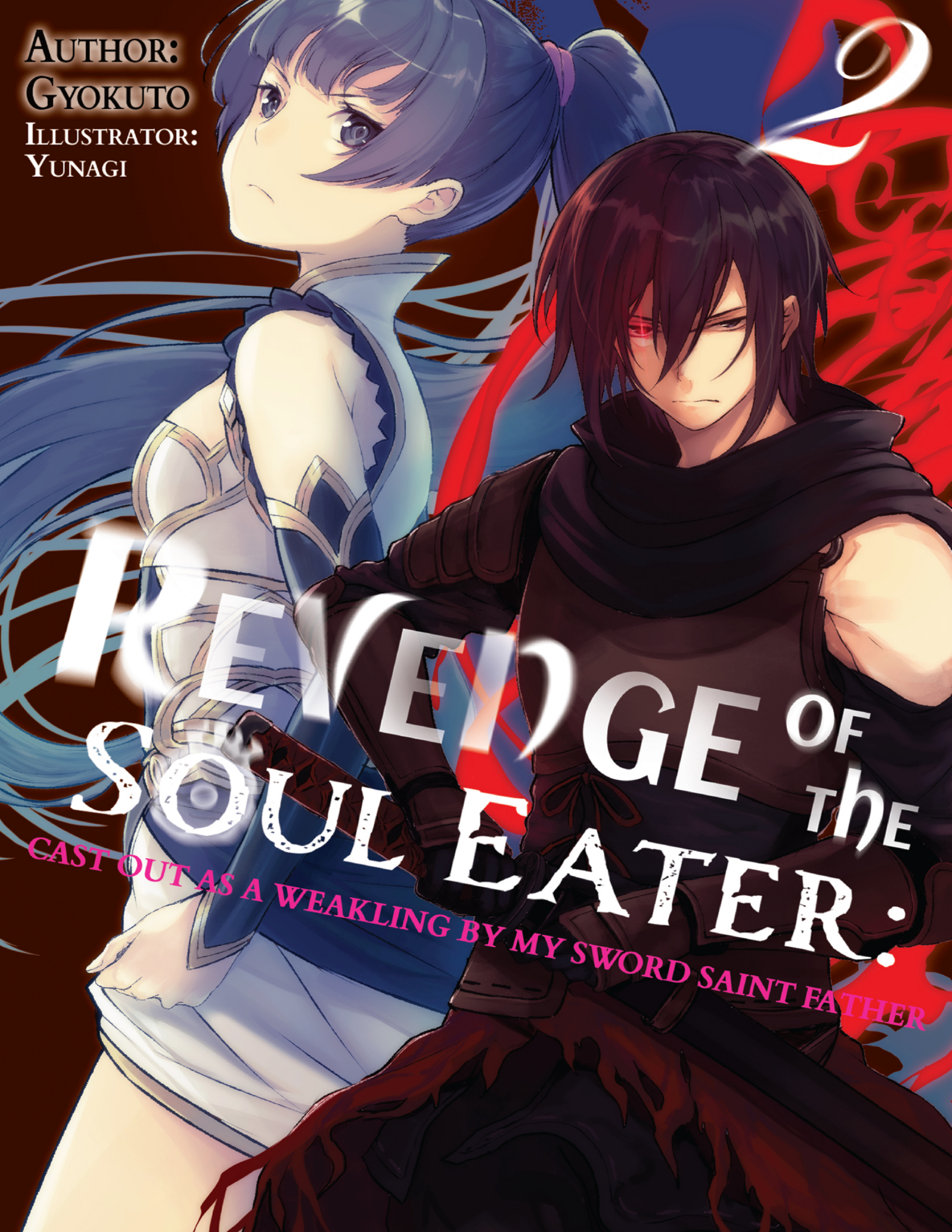
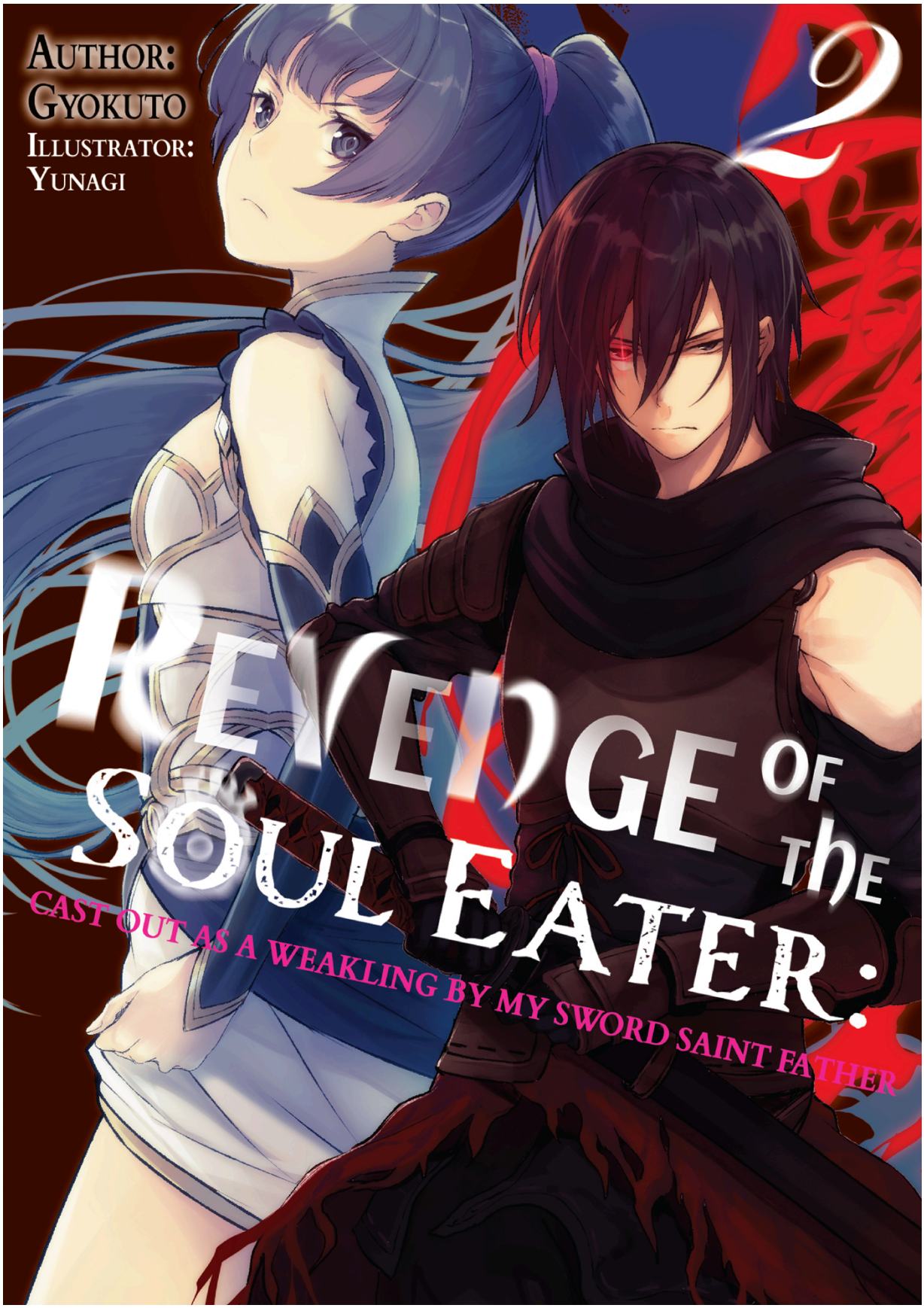
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Reedge of the Soul Eater.

Cast Out as a Weakling by My Sword Saint Father




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REVENGE OF THE SOUL EATER:
CAST OUT AS A WEAKLING BY MY SWORD SAINT FATHER

Revenge of the Soul Eater

Gyokuto ／ ill Yunagi



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Prologue

That day, the town of Ishka was blessed with a clear, cloudless sky.

About the time the sun showed itself in the east that morning, I quietly awoke and got dressed so as not to disturb Seele, who'd been asleep beside me. Stifling a yawn, I headed outside and toward the north gate.

The path beyond the gate led to Titus Forest, but today, that wasn't my destination. Along the north fortress wall was a stable for monster pets, and the indigo wyvern, whom I'd officially registered as my pet just the other day, was there, no doubt impatiently waiting for me to bring its breakfast.

Within the kingdom of Kanaria, wyverns were viewed and treated the same as dragons. Since one wouldn't normally think of a dragon as an adventurer's pet, I had worried that I might have a hard time trying to get my indigo wyvern registered, but surprisingly, my request had gone straight through. Most likely, the slave trader's association had pulled some strings behind the scenes. It sure was convenient, being backed by a massive organization.

Anyway, monsters registered as familiars were granted permission to enter Ishka. And the association had given me a mansion with more room than I even knew what to do with, so I had the space to turn part of my yard into a wyvern stable if I wanted. But I had a reason for keeping my wyvern in the stable outside the town walls instead. Even officially registered as a pet, a wyvern was a powerful beast, and as such, it couldn't just enter the town unconditionally. I would have to outfit it with a special monster pet collar, one that the town officials could detonate to instantly kill it whenever they saw fit.

Of course, my wyvern wasn't a special case; any monster pet considered medium-sized or larger was bound by the same

conditions, and I did understand that it was a necessary measure to ensure the town's safety. If a monster that large ended up going on a rampage, the guards and townsfolk would of course be in extreme danger. Still, it would mean placing the life of my wyvern, one of my trump cards, in the hands of town officials, and I couldn't afford to let that happen, especially considering my current standing with the Adventurer's Guild. I could easily imagine the bigwigs of Ishka forcing me into a position that suited the guild's interests—and their own—by using my wyvern as a hostage, which would be a revolting development for sure.

So I'd decided to keep my wyvern outside town instead. With the help of Fyodor and his association, I'd rented out an entire stable located just outside town exclusively for the indigo wyvern to use. Recently the creature had even been receiving frequent oohs and aahs from excited and astonished passersby. Dragon knights were practically revered within the kingdom of Kanaria, so wyverns were extremely popular among the locals. Perhaps that opinion would change if they were ever attacked by one, but instances of wyverns attacking the general public were extremely rare. For that reason, there was hardly anyone in Ishka who wasn't familiar with my pet by now. Apparently there was even a bizarre rumor going around that anyone who approached it and rubbed its scales would be blessed with good fortune, which, according to the stablehand, had instigated no shortage of trespassers attempting to hop the fence.

And that was precisely why, when I reached the stable and saw the sight there in front of me, my instinctive reaction was to scowl. As the rays of the morning sun illuminated the stable's interior, a woman was there, reaching out and touching the wyvern's scales. How could I be blamed for initially assuming she was just another reckless trespasser?

But then I realized something. Except for me, the indigo wyvern wasn't particularly keen on humans. In fact, it was only just recently that the creature had warmed up to Seele enough to let her feed it. And yet, it was allowing this complete stranger to touch its scales without even resisting. It didn't even look wary or agitated.

Then the wyvern finally noticed my presence. It chirped happily,

and its tail slammed up and down on the ground in excitement. Noticing the wyvern’s abrupt change in behavior, the girl also turned in my direction. She was so stunningly beautiful that I was almost surprised bells didn’t start suddenly ringing out.



She looked older than me, probably in her early twenties. Her vivid golden locks and amethyst eyes suggested she might hail from nobility. Her skin was as white as snow, and her face curved in all the ideal spots. Her lips were also full and round. She looked exactly like a cloistered princess from a fairy tale. Yet despite that, the aura she gave off was anything but delicate. That stood to reason, considering I could see she had a sword at her hip, and just at a glance, I could tell that the weapon was no mere decoration. The way she was standing didn't leave any openings either.

The moment her eyes met mine, the first thought that came to my mind was *Whoa, she's tough.* The toughest person I knew of in Ishka was Elgart Quis, a Level 35 adventurer and the town's guildmaster. Yet I suspected this woman could give him a run for his money or even surpass him entirely. Behind her dainty appearance, I could sense an immeasurable wellspring of strength.

My next immediate thought was *Whoa, she's tall.* Her silver boots were the combat variety, meaning there were no heels to add to her height. And yet, she was still taller than me. I hadn't measured myself recently or anything, but the last time I checked, I was around 175 centimeters. By that metric, this woman was probably over 180. Her long limbs were toned and muscular, like a seasoned warrior's. Truthfully there was nothing "girly" about them, but her proportions were so well-balanced overall that they didn't seem too manly either. She looked like someone who'd had natural talent from birth and through years of tireless effort had only honed that talent further.

There was also no doubt that she was from a well-to-do family. Her clothes had clearly been sewn from the finest threads, and her armored boots and chestplate were gleaming silver. There was no way she was a mere adventurer or local guard. She had to be a knight, and a rather high-ranking one at that.

The problem was that the sun had yet to even fully rise. *Why is someone like this here, in my stable, first thing in the morning?* I thought, question marks filling my mind. And as though about to answer my doubts, the woman slowly opened her mouth to speak.

"I-I'm..."

"Yes?"

"I'm so sorry!" she cried, bowing to me abruptly and with such force that I nearly jumped. Her apology was so intense that her hair whipped through the air.

With widened eyes, I stared dumbfoundedly at the back of her bowed head. Truthfully, considering her obvious pedigree, I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd shouted, "Just who do you think you're goggling at, you pervert?!" which made her reaction that much more shocking.

Oblivious to my surprise, however, the woman continued to apologize. "Please forgive me! I'd heard rumors that there was a wyvern in this stable and wanted to see it for myself, but there wasn't anyone around...and it was so early in the morning that I doubted anyone would notice if I just took a little peek..."

"You just wanted to take a peek, huh? And yet here you are, trespassing and petting my wyvern."

"Forgive me!" she repeated. "I was going to take a look and leave, but I never expected it'd be an *indigo* wyvern, and I just couldn't help myself! No, that's actually a lie," she muttered. "I *did* hear that it was an indigo wyvern, but they're so wild and unruly that I couldn't quite believe a human had managed to tame one. I was certain the rumors were false."

Apparently, she'd never seen a real one before, and, her curiosity winning out, she'd decided to not only look but touch. Now that I understood the situation, I urged her to raise her head.

"No, don't worry, you don't need to apologize. If the wyvern let you pet it, it must have taken a liking to you."

Continuing to have a woman of clearly higher status bow to me wouldn't be good for my mental health, so I had her stop.

In response, she raised her head, looking relieved. "I'm grateful for your generosity. And before I go, while it pains me to do so, would you mind if I took advantage of that generosity to ask you one question?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Would I be correct in assuming that you are this indigo wyvern's master?"

"That's right," I nodded.

Her eyes narrowed in an appraising look, as though trying to size me up. But it was only for an instant before her gaze returned to normal. Then she looked down at the basket I was carrying. Interpreting her wordless question, I pulled out one of the fruits inside and showed her.

"This is an anzu fruit. They're the wyvern's breakfast."

"Anzu, you say? The wyvern really eats those? If memory serves, uncooked anzu are hard as a rock and awfully sour. But...aren't wyverns carnivores?"

"Generally, yes, but some past traumatic experiences have apparently turned this one on to the deliciousness of fruit," I said, tossing the fist-sized anzu into the wyvern's open mouth. The creature chirped with delight before snapping it in its jaws. Indeed, anzu fruit was hard to bite and cut into, but it was no match for the wyvern's sharp teeth. It crunched down on the fruit, chewing happily, and devoured it in no time at all.

Of course, the "traumatic experience" I'd alluded to was the wyvern being attacked and poisoned by the manticores, after which the curative fruit Jirai Ao Ochs had given it a taste for the fruit. At the time, it hadn't been a fan of the acidity and had cried out rather loudly in anguish, but because the sour fruit had restored its health, the creature had come to mentally equate it with being good for the body and now requested it regularly. Of course, it'd be a pain to have to go to Titus Forest for Jirai Ao Ochs fruits every day, so I'd chosen a more widely available hard-to-eat sour fruit as a substitute.

Watching the wyvern chow down so happily, the woman looked taken aback. "Were indigo wyverns always this partial to fruit? No, actually...I do recall that fruit was among their fodder, but I've never heard of a *wild* indigo wyvern willingly eating anything sour..."

She folded her arms, muttering to herself in thought again. Perhaps it was an unconscious habit of hers. My eyes couldn't help but be drawn to her ample chest between the gap in her folded arms, but I got the feeling she'd notice if I stared, so I forced myself to look away.

I'd expected her to press me next on the traumatic experience I'd

mentioned, but it seemed she was trying to avoid prying too much, because when she next spoke, it was on a different topic.

"By the way, I couldn't help but notice you haven't called the wyvern by its name. Have you not decided on a name, by any chance?"

"Well, it's not the first time someone's asked that, but no, it doesn't have a name yet. It doesn't seem to like any of the names I've chosen so far. Each time I suggest one, it just gives me this sorrowful look."

"Did any of those names you suggested contain your own name within them? That's probably why."

"Huh? My own name?" I wasn't sure what she was getting at.

The woman looked up at the wyvern happily munching on the fruit and smiled. "Wyverns prefer their names to include the name of those they recognize as their master, and the more intelligent the wyvern, the more particular they are about it. Considering this one can already understand human speech, it probably really wants a name similar to its master's."

"Really? First I've heard of that. My name's Sora, so the name just has to have 'Sora' in it, right? Let's see...Sorari? Sorara? Soran?" I tried voicing some names, and lo and behold, the wyvern didn't seem to be immediately averse to them like the others. I was on a roll, so I decided to get a little more creative. "Soramichi? Misora? Sorato? Soralis? Hmm...I feel like we're on to something, but I'd kind of like to give it a cooler name, you know?"

The wyvern nodded and cooed as if in agreement.

"Hold on, I've got this. It's on the tip of my tongue... Sorasa. Sorashoi. Soras. Or...we could just go all out and call you Soratarou?"

The wyvern chirped angrily.

"Ow! Hey, watch the tail! C'mon, I was just joking! I'll give you a proper name!"

Meanwhile, the woman clapped her fist in her hand as though she'd just thought of something. "Oh! How about 'Claimh Soras'?"

"Huh? Claimh Soras?"

"Yes! In the ancient tongue, it means 'sword of flame'!"

"Ooh, sword of flame? That *does* sound cool! And 'flame' is perfect, since this is a wyvern we're talking about! What do *you* think? Oh, looks like I didn't even need to ask, huh?"

The wyvern chirped joyously, flapping its wings with glee.

Hey, you're blowing dust everywhere, so stop that.

"All right, from now on, your name is Claimh Soras!"

At my declaration, the wyvern raised its long neck high and shrieked proudly. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but it almost looked like it was trying to adopt a gallant, dignified expression. I stroked its neck gently, then turned to the woman once more.

"I appreciate the good name suggestion, Miss, er..."

"You may call me Astrid. And thank you too. This lesson was quite fascinating...in many different ways. Um, may I call you Mr. Sora?"

"Just Sora is fine."

"Very well, Sora. I truly would love to stay and chat more, but regrettably, I have a previous engagement, so I must take my leave now. Well then, until next time!"

"Yes, perhaps— Wait, next time?" I blinked in confusion. It almost sounded like she was certain we'd meet again. But Astrid just giggled and put her slender index finger on her lip.

"And when that time comes, just act like our meeting today never happened, okay? Now then, good day!"

Chapter 1: The Village of Merte

1

That same day, Lunamaria was summoned to Sora's room. He wanted her to give him a lecture on magic.

When one said "magic," it could refer to many different types, but Sora had specifically asked to learn earth, water, fire, and wind magic—in other words, offensive spells. He wanted to control the elements like Miroslav the mage had.

As a graduate of the Sage Academy, Lunamaria was well-versed in magic and had the qualifications to teach it to others as well. However, she didn't use offensive magic herself. Offensive magic and spirit magic were like oil and water, so one would cancel the other out. When one chanted an offensive spell, it used up mana, the natural energy that filled the world, and mana and spirits were closely related. For instance, the salamander spirit Lunamaria often summoned to heat their bath at home was like an agglomeration of mana given mind and form. But offensive spells devoured that same mana, and of course, spirits didn't find that too agreeable. For that reason, it was effectively impossible to wield offensive magic and spirit magic at the same time.

Still, spirits were generally terrified of the dragon within Sora, so there was no reason to hesitate to teach him offensive magic. However, there was another problem: Sora used od, the energy within an individual, not natural mana.

"Magic cast using od tends to be far weaker than mana-based magic," Lunamaria explained. "And since you're supplying your own energy, you have less to draw from. That's why, unless absolutely necessary, mages typically avoid using their od to cast spells. The only real advantage of using od over mana is that the spells are

easier to chant."

One of the things a mage absolutely had to learn was the ability to amass large quantities of mana quickly. Any mage worth their salt would not only know how to do this but be an expert at it. Miroslav was a prime example. "And for that reason," Lunamaria said with a hint of a wry smile, "the spirits I summoned never really liked Miro too well."

"Huh, interesting. But wait, what do they think about me, then?"

"Well, let's see... It's kind of like they're observing you from the shadows in the distance, timidly watching your every move?" She told him to imagine a group of kids gathered around, watching something in the distance that frightened them, and he'd get the idea. At first the spirits had rejected Sora much more strongly, but by now they'd gotten a little more used to his presence.

Of course, that probably also has something to do with their summoner's change of heart toward him, Lunamaria thought.

Seemingly oblivious to her feelings, however, Sora continued. "Well, easier chants would certainly make it simpler for me to cast the spells, so is there really a problem?"

"You wouldn't have an issue casting the spells, no, but in your case, master, the amount and quality of od in your body is far higher than normal, and that concerns me."

More specifically, while in combat, the od brimming up from within Sora was like a raging torrent, and learning how to control it wasn't something Lunamaria could teach him. After all, in all her years studying at the Sage Academy, she had never seen or heard of anyone having such a high concentration of od. As he was now, if he were to use offensive magic to burn a forest monster to ash, he might very well end up burning the entire forest along with it.

Lunamaria was qualified to teach magic to others, but that was all the more reason she needed to be careful about who she taught it to. And, truthfully, she had no intention of teaching Sora offensive magic at the moment. She would first get him started with basic, nonoffensive elemental magic like Flare or Create Water, then once he'd shown that he could properly balance his abnormal od output with minor spells, they'd move on to offensive magic. Even as his

slave, this was the one point she would not concede.

To be frank, Lunamaria was treating Sora as an amateur regarding magic, a novice. And if Sora decided to punish her later for looking down on her master, she was fully prepared for that. But after she explained this entire thought process to him, determination and grit in her eyes, something happened that she'd never expected: He nodded and immediately agreed.

"That's fine. I barely know anything about magic, so it's only natural you'd treat me like a novice. Don't worry; I wouldn't activate your collar for a petty reason like that."

As he spoke, Sora glanced at the collar around her neck. The device, enchanted with the spells Suffocate and Paralyze, would activate and harm Lunamaria if he ever felt the need. By all rights, he could have activated the collar and forced her to teach him offensive magic right away. But Sora had no such plan for two reasons: First, he agreed with Lunamaria's reasoning, and second, showing his slave that he understood and accepted her opinion would make it easier for him to secure favors from her in the future. It would also make her more emotionally receptive to their nightly soul-eating sessions, granting a bigger soul yield.

Sora had learned from his experience with Miroslav that it was easy to devour the souls of enemies while in combat, but in the bedroom, it was the opposite. The more his enemy resisted, the less efficient his soul-eating became. It was still possible to eat the soul, of course, but the more the enemy put up a fight, the more exhausted they became, and the weaker their soul got. For a onetime meal, it wouldn't matter as much, but considering he was eating Lunamaria's soul on a daily basis, it was more efficient from a soul-yield perspective to show a degree of consideration to her instead.

In fact, back when he'd taken Miroslav prisoner, there had been a huge difference in soul gain once he'd started treating her better; in other words, once she'd given up on resisting. And he was now getting even greater results with Lunamaria than he had with Miroslav. Perhaps that was because Lunamaria had been prepared to obey him from the start, but that just meant it would be all the more

foolish to antagonize her merely for treating him like a beginner.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. When Sora opened it, Seele, the ocelot beast girl, and Suzume, the demonkin girl, entered nervously. It had only been a few days since they'd moved in to the ridiculously roomy mansion from the association, and neither had gotten used to the change in environment just yet.

The two girls bowed to Sora politely. Seele's outfit was no different from usual, but Suzume had undergone a drastic wardrobe change. Instead of the clothes fashioned out of fur and leaves she'd been wearing before, she was clad in a stylish black dress. The transformation had been Seele's handiwork.



After Sora had brought Suzume back to Ishka with him, Seele had said, "A girl this cute has no business walking around in a getup like that!" and in no time at all, she had picked out and bought her a complete outfit to wear, including a pair of shoes and a hat. Lunamaria had commented that Suzume's appearance reminded her of the younger sisters she'd left behind when she'd departed her birthplace.

Since then, Seele had privately taken Suzume under her wing in order to get her used to town life and train her on the finer details of human culture. Never once had she shown any hint of revulsion or apprehension toward the demonkin girl. Perhaps the beastkin, like the humans, had been at war with demonkin three hundred years ago, but to Seele, that was little more than a fairy tale. She didn't feel any fear or loathing toward demonkin at all, and even if she had, she certainly wouldn't have directed those feelings toward Suzume. Besides, humans and beastkin had also been in conflict with each other a number of times in the past. Some humans even resented beastkin to this day, calling them "impure abominations." Depending on the country and region, in certain parts of the world, not only beastkin but demihumans in general were still discriminated against and oppressed. In fact, given their history, the majority of beastkin would probably be much more wary of humans than any demonkin.

Come to think of it, I was wary of master at first too, wasn't I?

Seele suddenly found herself remembering when she and Sora had first met. In reality, not even three months had passed since Sora had purchased her, yet to Seele, it already felt like a distant memory.

She had been born on the western frontier of the empire of Ad Astera, in a reclaimed village near Kanaria's border. She was now fifteen, the eldest daughter of her family, and for most of her years she'd lived a frugal life in peace and harmony with her parents and six siblings. However, that had all changed when her father, a hunter, had been attacked by a monster in the mountains and lost one of his legs. With him no longer able to work and provide for the family,

they had fallen into squalor. The second-oldest of Seele's sisters was ten, and her oldest brother was eight. Her youngest brother was still only an infant. It hadn't taken long for Seele to decide to sell herself to make ends meet.

The empire granted civil rights to demihumans, so they weren't publicly discriminated against. Despite that, some humans still privately despised them, and there was no telling how one might be treated if they were to become a slave. Well aware of that, Seele had nonetheless shown up at the slave traders' door, sold off every one of her rights and, after sending all of the money back home, been forced into a slave collar. It had been the only way she could think of to save her family.

While at the slave traders, Seele had heard all sorts of horror stories from the other slaves. One rabbit beastkin had been stripped naked and dragged around town like a lowly pet by an especially cruel aristocrat. Another one, a lion, had been nearly whipped to death under the guise of "discipline" and forced to kowtow at all times. Other stories had been so horrific that she'd instinctively felt the need to cover her ears, but the stories made her realize one thing: All the resolve and determination in the world wasn't going to help someone like her, ignorant in the ways of the world, to survive.

Therefore, when she'd first met Sora, she'd been so nervous that she couldn't even speak properly. Even after crossing into Kanaria and arriving in Ishka, she'd still been more fearful than anything else. And considering how immediately after reaching Ishka she'd been subjected to sleepless days and nights of having her ears, tail, and the rest of her body stroked and groped, and how her master had given her the absurd and outrageous reason that it turned him on to see girls exhausted, anyone would think she'd been absolutely correct to feel that way.

Now I realize he was only joking back then, she muttered internally. Still, during those days, she'd seriously been in the throes of despair. Truthfully, even now she wanted to scold him for not knowing that there was a time and a place for jokes, but naturally, she kept that deep within her heart.

The turning point had been when Lunamaria had become his

slave. After that, Sora's treatment of Seele had improved dramatically. He'd even proposed to set her free, and Seele would be lying if she said his offer hadn't moved her. But even if she went back to her family, it wouldn't be long before she'd have to sell herself again. Considering she had seven mouths left to feed and taxes to pay on top of that, all the money she'd earned so far wouldn't even last two years. She'd have an even greater burden to manage, and her savings would dwindle much faster. After all, no one else in her family was able to work.

Therefore, at least until her eight-year-old brother turned thirteen and came of age, Seele needed to stay here and save all the money she could so that her family could survive. It went without saying, but even a year or two of honest work wouldn't earn her the kind of money she needed. Even after selling her body twice now, she still didn't have enough. So she had no choice but to get the money through dishonest means. Like, for instance, sucking up to her master, who was clearly so well-off that he could afford to tip the innkeeper's daughter an entire silver coin on a daily basis!

And so, rather than being defensive around Sora, she'd deliberately changed her attitude and started sleeping with him willingly in hopes that he'd favor her more. She'd already sold away her rights and become his slave, after all. In fact, at this rate, if she didn't change her tune, he might just regard her as useless and abandon her altogether.

I should have just done this from the start, she'd thought regretfully, and partly to make up for her mistake, she'd made a much greater effort to serve him any way she could. In turn, Sora's attitude toward her had improved without him even realizing it, and before they both knew it, relations between them had stabilized.

Lunamaria had taught Seele all sorts of things about the world and how to fight, and as a result, she had now successfully completed a number of quests as an adventurer. Ever since Sora had founded the Bloodstained Blades, she'd also been earning a good salary. Using the slave trader association as an intermediary, Seele had sent that money back to her family, enough that they wouldn't have to worry about food for half a month. If she kept it up, she

might at least be able to prevent her family from starving and her younger sisters from having to sell themselves into slavery as well.

For their sake, she needed to work her absolute hardest for her master. She'd become more determined and enthusiastic than ever...and then the demonkin, Suzume, had shown up. Seeing the frightened, timid girl apprehensive of the world around her had reminded Seele of herself back when she'd first become a slave. Regardless of whether the girl herself wanted it, she'd taken it upon herself to encourage Suzume, dote on her, and teach her everything she knew.

Seele had never even realized that her efforts were essentially the lubricant greasing the clan's wheels. Thanks to her, the Bloodstained Blades were operating so successfully that it shocked everyone.

2

"Raz, you can't be serious, right? You're really not going to go back?"

"No, Iria. I'm not going back to the village. Rather than worrying about something like that, I need to stay here and get much, much stronger!"

Seeing that her childhood friend was dead serious, Iria couldn't help but raise her voice. "Something like that?! A plague's broken out in the village we were born and raised in, and you don't even care?!"

Her sudden outburst made Raz flinch. Then he hung his head, which was proof to Iria that he at least felt guilty about what he'd said. She was about to apologize and say that she hadn't meant to shout when a redheaded figure stepped between them to intervene. It was Miroslav.

"Iria, calm down. We already know the plague was caused by poison and that they're working to get an antidote ready. That's why Raz doesn't feel the need to return home right away."

"Just because there's an antidote doesn't mean everyone will be

safe!” she shot back, glaring at the mage.

Miroslav could sense no small amount of dissatisfaction in Iria’s tone toward her. And it had everything to do with Raz. Ever since losing Lunamaria to Sora, he had clearly lost his luster. To Raz, who, up to that point, hadn’t experienced any major setbacks, the defeat had affected him far too severely for him to simply chalk it up as a loss and move on. It didn’t help that more and more adventurers were regarding him with cold stares and scornful laughs. Iria, finding it hard to watch Raz’s liquor intake continue to increase, had tried to light a fire under him numerous times, urging him to be productive, but each time, Miroslav would always intervene.

The mage never blamed Raz for his weakness, listened to his grumblings and idle complaints, and fawned over him as much as she possibly could. In Iria’s eyes, it was no different than giving a spoiled child all the candy he wanted. The child would be happy, of course, but too much candy was bad for children. A proper adult would take the candy away even if it meant being the villain, yet Miroslav continued to indulge Raz and enable him.

What was more, whenever Iria scolded him, Miroslav would always smile and sympathize with him, taking his side. Thanks to that, Iria and Miroslav’s relationship had steadily deteriorated.

Around that time, a plague had broken out in Kanaria. The source of the disease was the Kale River, a body of water that ran through to the kingdom’s north and south. It caused fever, vomiting, chills, and the sensation of pins and needles all over the body, and most of those who’d contracted it were children. At first it was thought to be an especially nasty cold, but the symptoms had become too severe to classify it as such, and there were even reports of children who were supposed to have recovered falling ill again several days later.

Then the adults had gradually started falling ill as well, and it was recognized as a national emergency. A notice from the government office in Ishka was released, announcing that a Sea of Rot had appeared in Titus, the forest north of Ishka. It stated that a massive amount of toxin had flowed into the Kale River, and the rot in the forest was thought to be the source.

The term “Sea of Rot” referred to a phenomenon where the earth

started to decay under specific circumstances. And it later became known that the source of it in Ishka had been the venom of a basilisk. Fortunately, the basilisk had been quickly exterminated by the adventurer who'd discovered it, but eradicating the rot in the deepest depths of the forest wasn't so easy. Even now, the venom was continuing to poison villagers and townsfolk.

Merte, the village Raz and Iria had been born and raised in, was near the Kale River, meaning the people there were undoubtedly suffering as well. Iria glared once more at Miroslav, and Raz behind her.

"Even if they do make an antidote, there won't be enough for the whole kingdom right away. Those with weaker constitutions might not hold out that long, and even if they do, it's not like the medicine will immediately take effect! What about the farmers? The village will have fewer people able to protect them! They'll be at risk of monster attacks and bandit raids."

"Indeed, you do have a point," Miroslav agreed.

"So you understand, then, why Raz and I have to go back! We have to help them! What about you, Raz?!" she yelled, rounding on him. "Aren't you worried about the others?!"

"Of course I am, dammit!" His response was immediate.

"Then—"

"But I can't go back right now! I just can't!" he screamed in her face.

This time it was Iria's turn to flinch. Raz had gotten carried away by his emotions and flared up without meaning to, of course, but even so, he rarely ever shouted in anyone's face like that. At least, in all the years she'd known him, she could count on one hand the number of times he'd done it to her, and most of them were when they'd been kids.

Seeing Raz shout so angrily that he was now panting, Iria's brow naturally furrowed. "And why don't you want to return?"

"Isn't it obvious? What kind of person would I be if I just up and left Ishka while Luna's still a slave?! Everyone already talks about me for putting her up as a bargaining chip! What do you think they'd say then?! I'm not gonna turn tail and run from Sora like a coward!"

"Run from Sora? Raz, Sora has nothing to do with what's happening in the village right now! Our people are suffering, and you're going to go save them! No one's going to call you a coward for—"

But before she could finish, Miroslav interrupted with a sorrowful voice. "Unfortunately, we can't say that for sure. I don't know how he did it, but that boor tamed a wyvern, formed a clan, and took down a griffin and scylla, and his reputation's rising by the minute. The rumor at the guild is that he formed a partnership with the slave trader association and was even responsible for defeating the basilisk and producing the antidote. He has far more influence than he did back then. If Raz did leave, I'm sure he'd find out and start spreading nasty rumors right away."

Raz bit his lip hard. The redheaded mage pretended she didn't notice and went on.

"I'm sure he's already expecting us to try and take Luna back. And I doubt he'll miss his opportunity to take us out. It's just as Raz said. Right now, we can't afford to give him any openings."

"That's right," Raz added, nodding as though Miroslav had said exactly what he was thinking. "We can't go to the village right now. Besides, Aunt Sela is still in the village, isn't she? She can manage even if we're not there."

"She can *manage*? Listen to yourself! You really think one woman can tend to who knows how many sick people on her own?! Did you even stop to consider that Aunt Sela might be sick herself?!"

Despite Iria's sound reasoning, Raz remained optimistic, or perhaps he was just hardheaded. "She'll be fine. Aunt Sela's level is even higher than ours, remember? Plus she can use recovery magic and purify poison! No way she'd go down that easily! Besides, the guild just gave us a really important job! Apparently, some noble wants us to go take down a griffin for him, and Miss Parfait said she handed the job to us before anyone else! If we succeed, we can restore the Falcon Blades' reputation *and* gain some connections to nobility! Then maybe we can get them to pull some strings and deliver the antidote to Merte before anywhere else—"

"RAZ!" Iria shouted, her brow furrowed down in anger. His

shoulders jumped. “Do you mean to tell me that you’d leave an old woman to carry the burden of caring for the village all by herself so you can prioritize some griffin extermination that might not even succeed?! Our family and friends are *suffering* as we speak! Now is not the time for a make-or-break gamble!”

“But if we succeed, the antidote—”

“That’s *if* we succeed! Now that Luna’s no longer with us, do you really think we can defeat a griffin as we are now?!”

“O-Of course we can! That bastard Sora did it by himself, didn’t he?! With all three of us, surely we can win!”

Seeing that Raz was dead set on exterminating the griffin, Iria lost her patience, even tousling the black hair she was so careful to maintain. “It takes four days to get to the base of the Skim Mountains at the earliest and another two to make it up to the peak where the griffin is! And even if we do defeat it, the noble wants to mount it on his wall, remember? How many more days do you think it’ll take to get back if we have to carry its head with us?!”

“Well...”

“Then we’d have to wait for the nobles to secure enough antidotes, then borrow carts so we can carry them to the village. Let me ask you this, Raz: Exactly how long will it be before that medicine gets there? A month? Or two? Can you really be certain that the village will hold out that long?”

“W-Well, no...but I already told you, I can’t just up and leave!”

He wasn’t budging an inch, just like a petulant child. Iria was about to give him another tongue-lashing, but before she could, Miroslav grabbed her shoulder.

“That’s enough, Iria. I understand you’re worried about your aunt and the rest of your family, but getting up in arms and raising your voice here isn’t going to solve anything.”

“But—”

“I know, I know. Depending on the severity of the plague, it could be a race against time for your village. So I have a suggestion.”

“A suggestion?”

“Yes. It’s just a thought, though. First, you head to the village as

soon as you can. Confirming that your family and friends are safe ought to put your mind at ease, and with your recovery magic, you can take some of the burden off your poor aunt. Meanwhile, I'll use my Sauzaar name to get my hands on at least one of the antidotes. That way, even if your aunt *has* fallen ill, we'll be able to avoid the worst possible outcome."

"Can you really do that?" Iria asked, sounding slightly wary. "I heard that not even one of those vials can be obtained immediately, even for the richest nobles."

"Well, I'm going to try. My investment with the company is precisely for times like this, after all. And Raz?"

"Y-Yes?"

"You'll go take care of the griffin quest we signed up for. I'll accompany you as backup."

Raz's and Iria's eyes both went wide with surprise. "Huh? You mean...it's just gonna be you and me, Miro?" he stammered.

"No, that would be far too reckless. Unlike the matter of the plague, the griffin quest is *not* a race against the clock, so we'll take our time and recruit some temporary party members to assist. I have an idea regarding that as well...but I'll explain it to you later. Right now, getting the antidote is my top priority. And while I'm busy with that, Iria, you can go ahead and get ready."

Iria gave Raz a look. He seemed to notice but turned away regardless, determined not to meet her gaze. With that, she let out a small, irritated sigh and turned to Miroslav once more. "All right. Take care of him, Miro."

"I certainly will," she replied.

Iria turned on her heel and left without another word. Had she stayed in that room for another second, she was certain she would have started screaming again. And thanks to that, Iria never ended up hearing the conversation Miroslav and Raz had afterward.

"Hey, Miro...you think maybe I should go with her to the village after all? No, I definitely should. I really upset her."

"Yes, it seems so. I think your decision probably sounded awfully cruel to Iria. Of course, if you want to change your mind and go with

her, I won't stop you. However..."

"What?"

"There's the issue of Sora to worry about. Knowing that boor, he'll definitely try to ruin you by spreading rumors that you ran away like a coward. What's more, you've already accepted the griffin quest, so going to the village now might look to the nobility like a breach of contract."

"Then I'll go right now and cancel it—"

"Even if you did, it's a quest from a noble. Knowing how Miss Parfait is, she probably immediately informed the client as soon as you accepted. If you turn the quest down now, you'll fall into disgrace with them all the same. Not only will you not get the antidote, they might bar you from working with the nobility ever again."

"Dammit...guess I jumped the gun in taking the job."

"I understand how you feel, believe me. When you heard about all that boor's accomplished recently, it made you want to tear your hair out, right? Taming the indigo wyvern, defeating the griffin, the scylla, the werewolf... Honestly, the more I hear, the less I believe it. Not to mention that clan name of his, the Bloodstained Blades, was definitely meant to mock our own party name. Just thinking about it makes me furious!"

"You said it! And not only that, he has Luna working for him now, and no doubt he's still tormenting that poor girl, Seele, even as we speak!"

"Indeed, there's no doubt about that. Which is why we need to free them both from his clutches as soon as we can. And you, Raz, are the only one who can. So you absolutely weren't mistaken in accepting that griffin quest. Nor were you misguided in your steadfast resolve to stay in Ishka. Don't worry, Iria will come to understand that in time. She's just a little on edge right now because she's worried about her aunt."

"Really? You think she'll come around?"

"I know she will. So don't worry about being misunderstood and stick to your original path. Everything will be fine. I'm sure it'll all work out for the best in the end..."

3

"So, Raz and Iria have gone their separate ways. Hmm..."

It was nighttime, and for once, I was spending the night alone, reading the letter that I'd just received. The sender was someone named Alexandra. While it was true I didn't know anyone by that name, I'd accepted the letter without suspicion because "Alexandra" was Miroslav's alias.

That was one of several secrets I'd gotten out of her during our time cohabitating in the Lord of the Flies' cave. Before she was born, her mother had decided they would name the child Miroslav if it was a boy or Alexandra if it was a girl. However, her father, the boss of the Sauzaar Company, who'd only wanted a son, had rebuked her, saying that it was ill-omened to be considering a name for a girl. Despite having spent the night with many women, for some reason he'd had nothing but girls so far and still had yet to obtain his male heir. That was why he'd had such high hopes for Miroslav being male.

But the child had turned out to be another girl, and when her father had found out, he'd flown into a rage, screaming and insulting her mother. Miroslav having a boy's name had been her father's decision in order to get back at her mother. And this, in turn, was one of many reasons for her intense dislike of men.

Not that any of that was particularly important. I, for one, had no interest in the Sauzaar scion's relationship with her father. What *did* interest me was why she'd chosen to contact me at this particular time. Indeed, I'd told her to use the name Alexandra whenever she got in touch with me, but I'd also told her to refrain from contacting me unless there was an emergency. In order to avoid rousing suspicion, she needed to keep her interactions with me to a minimum. For her to go out of her way to inform me that Raz and Iria were now working separately meant...

"She thinks now's my chance?" I muttered.

That seemed likely enough, except I hadn't given her any specifics on how we were going to ruin Iria. We'd come up with a detailed plan for Lunamaria, and I'd also told her to try and put an

end to Raz and Iria's relationship, which I'd guessed would already be strained by the time Lunamaria was mine. But that was all I'd said. I'd left the details of how she was to break them up and bring Iria over to my side to her own discretion. Since she was contacting me now, it probably meant that Raz and Iria's relationship was on the rocks or was about to be. In other words, by sending this letter, she was telling me I should make my move.

"Now then, how to proceed?"

Indeed, I'd been thinking that it was about time for me to feast on another soul besides Lunamaria's. Taking down the basilisk had raised my level to 8, but I was far from satisfied. If a chance to obtain Iria was presenting itself, I had no reason to hesitate. That is, if Miroslav's report could be trusted.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't particularly doubt her. After all, she hadn't given me any reason to. So far, she'd responded perfectly in line with my expectations. In fact, without her cooperation, I never would have been able to make Lunamaria my slave so easily. Well, Lunamaria might have seen right through her scheme, but Raz losing his cool at my treatment of Seele was undoubtedly thanks to Miroslav. And she'd gone above and beyond this time as well, detailing Raz and Iria's conversations in the letter as well as whenever their feelings toward each other changed.

Right now, Iria seemed to be in an unstable state of mind. It wouldn't be too difficult to tear her away from Raz at this point. Or, now that she was by herself, I could take her prisoner in the Lord of the Flies' cave, like I had with Miroslav. Either way, once I had Iria, Miroslav would be free and have Raz all to herself. She and I would both get our happy endings, so it was in her best interest *not* to betray me and to do her best to make my plan succeed. The only thing that concerned me was that she seemed almost *too* willing to cooperate. In other words, I couldn't sense any of her attachment to Raz whatsoever.

When I'd released Miroslav from the cave, I'd promised her that I wouldn't interfere with the Falcon Blades anymore once I had Iria and Lunamaria in my grasp. That had been my way of baiting her into cooperating, but I'd also meant it. I'd already eaten enough of

Miroslav's soul to grow sick of it, for one, and thanks to that, I had gotten to learn more about my own soul-eating power. Though I'd wanted to kill her at first, my grudge toward her had abated over the course of that month. As far as revenge on Miroslav went, I was satisfied with what I'd already done.

For Raz, it was the same. I'd already dined on the souls of two of his party members, Miroslav and Lunamaria, and Iria would be next. That was sufficient revenge for me, especially since he hadn't realized I'd done it, which gave the revenge extra spice.

To be honest, I couldn't have cared less what happened to Miroslav or Raz in the future. They could get hitched and I wouldn't bat an eye. But I'd only promised the mage that I wouldn't interfere, so there was probably still a fear in the back of her mind that I would break my promise. That was why I'd expected at least a little bit of pushback or a hint of rebellion in this letter, the first contact we'd had since I'd released her. But there was nothing of the sort. In fact, outside of her report, the rest of the letter felt like she was trying so hard not to offend me that it was almost pitiful.

It was enough to make me doubt that these really were the words of Miroslav Sauzaar. Perhaps it seems cruel of me to cast suspicion on her for showing obedience when I'd already kidnapped her, confined her to a cave, and coerced her into cooperating with me, but this was someone who'd never had a good word to say about me in the years since we'd met and had even attempted to kill me. So there was definitely something fishy about her attitude here. Then again, for over a month I *had* repeatedly told her I could kill her anytime I felt like it, so maybe she still had some residual fear toward me, and it had come out in her letter.

"Well, whatever. If she's telling the truth, it's convenient for me, and even if it's a trap, given my power now, I can handle whatever she throws at me."

Shelving my doubts about Miroslav, I focused my thoughts instead on Iria. With the knowledge this letter contained, I had two options: One, take advantage of Iria's frustration with Raz to bring her over to my side, or two, kidnap her by force. But thinking about it rationally, the latter would probably be impossible. Back when I'd

abducted Miroslav, no one had been watching, but I now had eyes on me everywhere I went, many of them clients expecting me to fulfill my role as a stray dragon knight.

The Sea of Rot had originated in the depths of Titus Forest, which wasn't a place your average adventurer should go, so most of the locating and exterminating of the rot was becoming my job, as well as the retrieval of the Jirai Ao Ochs fruit used for the antidote. Of course, that was because my wyvern made me the most suitable candidate for those tasks, so I didn't particularly mind. Plus, according to Fyodor, the dragon knights were going to be dispatched from the capital soon, which would relieve my burden considerably. But since I didn't know exactly when they'd be showing up, I'd just have to give it my all until then. Besides, if I left Suzume behind in Ishka to fend for herself, I could hardly be called her guardian. So I just didn't have the time to kidnap Iria and confine her right now.

"Besides, knowing Iria, she'd definitely bite off her tongue and kill herself if she ever thought I was going to defile her. Instead, I should use the antidote to cure her village and make her indebted to me. I'll pick a Jirai Ao Ochs fruit first thing tomorrow morning, then head to the village. Straining the juice from the fruit should be enough to make an antidote, but it'd be more effective to carry the fruit there directly. I can bring several dummy medicines to disguise the antidote's identity..."

As I thought about these things, a yawn suddenly escaped my mouth. I'd been between Ishka and Titus a number of times today already, so it was only natural that I was starting to get tired. The one who'd done most of the work, though, Claimh Soras, was probably snoozing soundly in the stable right now. I was so tuckered out I didn't even feel like calling Seele or Lunamaria to bed and lay down to sleep by myself. As I drowsily stared up at the ceiling, I let sleep take hold of me.

Just before I fell asleep, I thought I heard a beast-like moan from somewhere.

4

Raz and Iria's home village, Merte, was located downstream from the Kale River. From Ishka, it took around seven days to reach by horse and buggy and was close to the border of the Holy Monarchy to the south.

When the village came into my view, I recalled what Raz had said before about leaving because he was tired of living the poor farm life. Now, seeing the village with my own eyes, I understood why he'd wanted to go. The few dwellings I came across all had shabby fences and gates, and the villagers walking around were all wearing rags. It was the exact opposite of anyone's idea of luxury, and the settlement seemed almost lifeless. With an atmosphere this stagnant, it was no wonder a passionate, hot-blooded youth would want to escape.

Still, with the plague currently affecting the village, perhaps it was only natural that the place felt so dead. Perhaps Merte was normally a little more lively than this. Thinking that, I approached the village gate. I had Claimh Soras hiding out in a forest a ways away so as not to spook any of the villagers. I also had a large backpack so that I would look like a merchant, as well as my black katana sheathed at my hip.

Seeing me at their gates, alone and not on horseback, the two guards looked clearly alarmed. One was a youth probably in his early twenties, while the older man looked like he was around forty.

The youth was the first to call out. "Stop right there! I don't recognize your face. Where did you come from?!"

"I heard this village was ailing, so I came bringing some medicine that might help."

Despite the youth's overbearing tone, I replied affably. Like I said, it took seven days to get from Ishka to Merte by horse and buggy. Therefore, Iria had yet to arrive. I'd considered picking her up on the way to the village and taking her with me, but I had the feeling that if I showed up with a Raz-like grin and said, "I've brought a fruit that will cure everyone in your home village! Now come with me, and we'll go and save your aunt!" she wouldn't believe me. She'd definitely raise her defenses toward me, and she might even suspect I was up to some nefarious plot.

Even if she *did* agree to come with me to the village, the locals would surely notice her wariness and would become wary as well. I couldn't let that happen, so I'd decided to head to Merte first and start building trust with the villagers before she arrived. Not to mention, Iria's mother was here, and of course, in war, the smartest way to go about killing a commander was to first aim for his horse.

Of the two guards, the younger one seemed the most suspicious of me, but with my next words, his suspicion turned to shock.

"I've come here at the request of Lunamaria of the Falcon Blades. I was told this village is where Raz, the leader of the Falcon Blades, and Iria, the warrior priest from the Temple of Law and Order, were born. Lunamaria wanted me to come here and offer you all my assistance. That is, if you'll permit me to enter?"

"The Falcon Blades?! You know Raz and the others?!"

"Yes, we're acquainted. In fact, I'm indebted to them in a number of ways. Oh, where are my manners? I haven't even introduced myself. My name is Sora."

Upon giving my name, I watched the guards' reactions. If, by any chance, they associated that name with the word "parasite" or were aware of my duel with Raz the other day, they would no doubt show signs of revulsion. Even if they had only heard about me through the Bloodstained Blades or my reputation as a dragon knight, there was no way they wouldn't react.

Yet neither of their expressions changed much at the name "Sora." Merte was quite a distance from the imperial capital, Ishka, and Kanaria's main roads. Because of that, news probably didn't spread quickly here, and even when it finally arrived, it was often inaccurate. Just to confirm, I asked if they knew the origin of the plague, and neither of them had heard about the cause of it. They were no doubt still unwittingly drinking the water from the Kale River even now. In a place like this, information likely only traveled as fast as horses and people could bring it. I did wonder why the kingdom didn't use some of those dragon knights to spread news around to all of the villages, as it would've made Kanaria's communication network stronger and more efficient than any other nation's, but perhaps dragon knights were considered too valuable to be used for

anything like that.

At any rate, after a lengthy exchange with the guards, I was given permission to enter the village at last. They'd confiscated my black katana at the gates, but that was understandable since I was a total stranger. I was then led to the church at the center of the village, where the sick were being tended to.

"Can that fruit you've got there really cure everyone here?" the young guard who'd guided me asked, sounding skeptical. This was the fourth time he'd asked that question.

In the course of our conversation, I'd learned that he'd played with Raz often when they were kids. He'd enthusiastically volunteered to lead me to the church, rather than letting his older colleague do it, but it clearly wasn't because he trusted me. Was he just a skeptic by nature, or was it a consequence of living in a village so isolated from civilization? I didn't know, but as he'd asked the same question four times now, clearly none of my attempts to reassure him were working. Truthfully, at this point, I wanted to simply ignore him, but that could get me in even more trouble, so I disguised my irritation behind a cordial smile and repeated my answer.

"We won't know for sure until we try, will we? But if you're worried about the fruit being poisoned or spoiled, I'd be happy to taste test it for you."

"I'm sure you would, but that's not what I'm worried about. I'm asking, can that fruit really cure illness?"

"It can, that I guarantee. You can even go ahead and arrest me if it turns out to have no effect at all. That's how confident I am."

"All right, I'm holding you to that, then. Don't forget what you said just now. Also, Sela's working very hard, and if you get in her way or act rude to her, you'll have my sword to answer to."

"Heard loud and clear," I said. It was a little smarmy, sure, but not enough that he could call me out on it.

I was supposed to be an adventurer who accepted quests based on my heart, not the reward, so I'd have to leave it at that remark. Besides, the youth had mentioned the name Sela several times just now. She was the church's supervisor, the one who was apparently

using her healing magic to tend to the ill villagers. I'd also heard Iria had learned martial arts and healing magic from her mother. I doubted there were many magic users in a small remote village like this, so there was a good chance that this Sela was Iria's mother. If I wanted to make a good first impression on her, I couldn't get into it with this cheeky guard here.

If I just happened to come by here with Claimh Soras later on to give him a little scare, though, that probably wouldn't hurt, I thought as I opened the church door.

Immediately, I was hit with a stench so foul that I unconsciously scowled. I saw numerous people lying on the floor. Many were children and elderly, but there were also some who, age-wise, were likely in the prime of their life. What's more, there were far more villagers than I ever would have guessed from just looking at the settlement. The people of Ishka knew that the poisonous river water was causing the disease, so almost no one was getting sick there now. But here in Merte, that information was still unknown, so more and more people were surely falling ill by the day. Worse, the villages here didn't have proper water or sewer systems like Ishka did, so they had to rely on river water for pretty much everything. It was little wonder, then, that the plague had spread as much as it had.

As I considered all this, I searched for the woman named Sela. As it turned out, I didn't have to search long. A woman's voice reciting a prayer, or perhaps singing a hymn, rang out as clear as a bell, as though to soothe the hearts and minds of all who heard it. A gentle light then came from the woman's palm, and the ailing villager's pained expression gradually relaxed, becoming serene. Whether she'd used a curative spell or restored the villager's stamina, I didn't know, but either way, the woman was clearly a practiced user of magic. She had to be the Sela I was looking for.

As though to confirm my guess, the young guard who led me here spoke up. "Miss Sela!"

The woman, wearing priests' garb, turned in his direction. At that moment, my gaze met hers so naturally that it was almost *unnatural*.



She had long, dark hair, gentle eyes, and white skin. She looked humble, plain. Actually, she looked a lot like Iria, except that while Iria gave off an air of sharpness, Sela's aura was calm. Back when I first met Iria, I'd thought she'd looked a lot like my ex-fiancée Ayaka, but Iria's mom reminded me more of my own deceased mother. Not just the length and color of her hair, but the overall impression she gave off was eerily similar. She even had her long hair in a ponytail—presumably to keep it from getting in the way when she moved, just as my mother had done whenever she'd gone for walks in the garden.

When I looked closer, all the stress and fatigue of caring for these patients day in and day out was evident on her weary face. Her hair was frayed a little at the ends, she had dark circles under her eyes, and her cheeks looked gaunt. But none of that detracted one bit from how beautiful she was. At least, that was how I felt.

5

Three days after I'd first shown up in Merte, the plague ailing the village had already abated. The villagers were regaining their spirits, and the village, though still quaint, was becoming more active than before. By using the Jirai Ao Ochs to neutralize the toxin making them sick, as well as learning where the poison came from, the residents were now much less anxious as well. Knowing that the plague was not some mysterious disease but one that had originated in their water source had relaxed them enough that they could afford to devise a countermeasure.

They were no longer drinking water from the river, only from wells. They didn't eat the fish in the river, and the children could no longer swim there either. As long as they stuck to these rules, no one else would get sick. But it would take time for those who were already poisoned to recover, and the effect of the plague wasn't limited to humans.

For instance, the soil. The farmers needed water from the river to grow their crops, and losing that source would cause entire fields to

dry up. That was just how it would have to be for a while, but they couldn't ignore the possibility that the poisoned water had affected the crops as well. Many villagers were hesitant to eat any food at all, worried that they might become poisoned as a result, and they couldn't sell tainted crops either. There were also concerns that the poison had gotten into the soil and would continue to affect the crops in the future. The fear of the plague had dissipated, but new fears were taking its place. The true influence of the basilisk on this village, and likely the other villages in the kingdom as well, was revealing itself.

That was where I came in. I'd more or less predicted all of this would happen and had already come up with countermeasures. Along with the Jirai Ao Ochs, I'd brought along some stamina potions to use on the poisoned villagers and an abundance of holy water to purify the soil, just in case. I'd gotten both through the good graces of the Temple of the Earth Mother, whom I'd become acquainted with while completing the orphanage's requests after the guild had neglected to fulfill them. More specifically, the orphanage had introduced me to the Temple, their parent organization, once I got rid of the banshee taking up residence in the public cemetery nearby, which had been wailing every night and keeping the children awake.

This time, I'd used my connections with them to procure a great deal of stamina potions and holy water to use on the village. Of course, the items hadn't been free; rather, they'd cost a pretty penny, but the money I'd received from the slave trader association for taking care of the basilisk had been more than enough to cover that amount.

Truthfully, while the stamina potions would definitely help the village, I wasn't confident that the holy water would really purge the poison from the soil. But the Temple of the Earth Mother worshipped the Goddess of Earth, and since they had made the holy water themselves, I had reason to believe it might work. The villagers also seemed to believe in the water's power, as they calmed down almost instantly when I poured it onto the soil. To me, that alone made the water worth bringing. As for whether it'd have any effect, only the

gods knew.

"Honestly...we can't thank you enough for all you've done for us, Sora. We're eternally in your debt," the priestess Sela said, bowing deeply in gratitude. As there were no inns near the village, she'd graciously lent me a room in the church. And of course, as Sela was the one in charge of the church, she was staying there as well. For the past three days, we'd been living under the same roof and eating our meals together.

However, it wasn't just us. Several others were living here as well. As for who...

"C'mon, Sora, bring out your dragon! We wanna see you feed it!"

"For real!"

"Yeah!"

Three children clinging to the priestess's robes demanded I show them my wyvern, one after the other. All three were residents of the village but had lost their parents and had no other family to speak of, so the church had taken them in as fosters. And it was because these three were constantly swarming Sela that I hadn't been able to put my plan to ruin Iria in motion.

Go play somewhere else, you irritating brats!

As a bit of revenge for them getting in my way, for the past three days Claimh Soras and I had been killing all the wild boars and deer we could find and piling them up for the village to eat. Seeing the children's eyes sparkle as they gazed upon the mountain of meat in front of them was a hilarious sight indeed.

Heh heh...that's right, children, eat your fill and get disgustingly fat! You're all far too skinny, anyway!

I concealed those nefarious intentions with a friendly smile. "All right, all right, if you really want it that badly. Do you three really like wy—dragons that much?"

"We do! They're *super* awesome! I wanna be a dragon knight when I grow up too!"

"Me too!"

"Me too...though I'm a girl."

"Then maybe I will be as well!" said Sela, raising her hand.

"Hey now, priestess," I said with half-lidded eyes, but she just tilted her head innocently.

You have an eighteen-year-old daughter, for crying out loud! You're too old to behave like a child! And what's worse, it somehow feels like that behavior suits you, so I don't really know what to say in response!

Sela's complexion had improved considerably over the past three days. Being able to leave the ailing villagers in the church to someone else and rest for once had greatly helped, and I'm sure the stamina potion I offered her had something to do with it as well. The bags under her eyes had disappeared, and her cheeks were filling out once more. The melancholy on her face was gone, and she was gradually showing more of her true personality. My first impression had been that she was gentle and humble, but as I'd now come to realize, this priestess of law and order could be surprisingly mischievous at times. Perhaps because she was around kids all the time, their impishness had rubbed off on her.

Afterward, we all headed outside the village to see Claimh Soras. I'd gotten permission to use an empty lot behind the village to keep him in, so we didn't have to go all the way out to the forest. As always, Claimh Soras wasn't keen on any humans besides me. The creature would even roar at the children menacingly. The three kids accompanying me had figured that out, which was why they'd wanted me to be present when they visited. It was a little more receptive to humans when I was nearby.

When the wyvern spotted me, it cooed happily and flapped its wings. The children's eyes sparkled with amazement. I was about to toss an anzu fruit into its mouth when I had a better idea. I beckoned the three kids over and handed each of them a fruit. Then I called Claimh Soras over, warning it with my eyes to behave.

Indeed, perhaps I was being too soft on these kids. But over the past three days I'd seen them work tirelessly to help Sela with tending to the sick, running in and out of the church to fetch whatever was needed. I'd even watched them give up their own bedrooms to some of the ill villagers. Now that the situation was under control, I figured it wouldn't hurt to reward them a little for

their efforts. It would also score brownie points with Sela, who was currently watching over the kids with a knowing smile.

Seeing that the kids, rather than I, would be feeding it, Claimh Soras cried out in indignation, but I silenced the wyvern with a glare.

I'll go hunting with you later, just the two of us, so just do as I say for now.

As it happened, I already had an idea of what I wanted to hunt. According to the villagers, a group of orcs had recently been spotted in the area. Only a few villagers had claimed to have seen them, so there wasn't any definite proof yet, but last year, orcs from the neighboring nation had crossed the border and formed a settlement in the mountain range to the south. Because of that, the villagers had been on edge for quite some time about a possible invasion.

Goblins and orcs had an outstanding sense of smell, and they were especially likely to show up in towns or villages ravaged by war or disease. If there really was an orc settlement to the south, it was entirely plausible that they might try to attack Merte. Iria would probably arrive in the village two days from now, at the earliest. If I searched from the skies, I could locate the orc settlement with ease, and even if it didn't exist, simply letting the villagers know would ease their concerns.

Either way, it'd benefit the village to hunt for the orcs, and it'd raise my reputation with them even higher, I thought as I watched the children eagerly offer their anzu fruits to my wyvern.

However, my expectations were betrayed. Iria showed up that very afternoon. Rather than using a horse and buggy, she'd bought her own horse and ridden here as fast as she could. I had miscalculated: She was a Rank 6 adventurer like Raz, so I should've considered that she'd be able to afford a horse or two.

When she saw me at her family's church, chopping wood alongside the orphaned children, her eyes bugged out of her head, and her jaw dropped open. In the next three seconds, she'd probably come to her senses and scream, "What the hell are *you* doing here?!"

The question was, how should I answer? I quickly began constructing an explanation in my head that might set the warrior

priestess's mind at ease.

6

"Hey, Iria! What do you think about that guy over there?! Isn't he cool?!"

"Huh?"

Five years ago, at the training ground of the Adventurer's Guild, Iria looked at where Raz was excitedly pointing. Ahead of his finger was a lone boy repeatedly swinging his sword in silence. He was really only raising his sword and lowering it over and over again, but Iria found his movements were so polished and pristine that it was little wonder Raz was so captivated.

That was how Iria and Sora had first met. Iria had always had a hard time understanding Sora. To her, he was a complete enigma. She mostly felt contempt and scorn toward him now, of course, but at first, she hadn't disliked his mysteriousness at all. In fact, she'd even respected him as a companion of the same age. That was in part because when Sora had first joined, it had been Raz and Iria who were dragging the party down in combat. Unlike Sora, who'd trained with the sword from an early age, they had needed to prioritize chores and help their family instead.

Merte was a poor village, so the children had to work if the village was to survive. Raz and Iria had had very little free time to prepare for becoming adventurers, and at first, the difference in Sora's skill and theirs was clear. In fact, Sora's practiced, fluid techniques had saved the party on more than a few occasions. His strikes were elegant and reserved, yet powerful, like that of a distinguished noble. Iria could keenly feel the gulf between them, and yet there were also times where he'd pal around with Raz and goof off, like when they'd secretly visited the local brothel together. The women had chided both Sora and Raz for that, and Iria could still remember how the boys had cowered in fear.

Back then, the Falcon Blades really had felt like a gathering of friends. Iria herself had never gotten close to Sora as Raz or

Lunamaria had, yet she hadn't shunned him like Miroslav had either. She'd felt a little envious of Sora for the buddy-buddy relationship he had with Raz, but she'd never disliked him.

That had changed when Sora announced he was still Level 1. At that time, the scales in Iria's mind had significantly tipped from "indifferent" to "dislike." Miroslav, too, had called him a parasite. In response, Sora had stressed that he'd never intended to leech off the party. He'd apologized for hiding the fact that his level hadn't gone up but promised that if staying in the party was going to cause problems, he'd leave with no hard feelings.

He probably wasn't lying back then, Iria now thought. Sora had never wanted to leech off his friends. He had probably thought he owed it to them to come clean but was planning to leave before he could actually become a parasite.

However, the definition of "parasite" differed depending on who you asked. Sora had thought he wasn't a parasite yet, but in Miroslav's eyes, he had done nothing *but* leech off the party. And Iria's opinion was closer to hers than anyone else's. The way she saw it, Sora's inability to level up was his own problem, not the party's. Perhaps if Sora had leveled with the party from the start rather than keeping it secret, it would have become a group issue they could discuss and possibly work out. But he'd been with the Falcon Blades for half a year by then and had never brought it up despite having had ample opportunity to do so. A strength imbalance within a party could easily lead to unforeseen, undesirable tragedy. And yet, well aware of that, he'd chosen to stay silent because it was more convenient for him to do so. How could she show favor toward someone who was knowingly putting them all in danger?

At that time, she'd had one thought: *You're weak.* He couldn't take care of himself, so he'd needed to rely on everyone else to do it for him. Having lost her father at an early age, Iria's mother had raised her to be a strong, independent woman and instilled a rigid sense of discipline into her. Put another way, she'd been taught *not* to rely on anyone else. In Iria's eyes, Sora's decision to not reveal his lack of growth was a sign of his own weakness. Even the fact that he was confessing now looked to her like he was just hoping they'd

forgive him for keeping it a secret as long as he told them the truth. More than anything, though, he'd disappointed her. And the fact that she'd once acknowledged him as having promise made her disappointment even more severe.

Iria hadn't actively participated in spreading rumors of Sora's parasitic behavior later on. But she'd never denied them either, because that disappointment had stayed with her long afterward.

In fact, her negative impression of Sora was still fresh in her mind even during the Lord of the Flies incident. Of course, Iria thought that what Miroslav had done was inexcusable and that she deserved to be held accountable for it. She couldn't forgive herself for tacitly allowing it to happen either, even if she had been carrying an unconscious Raz at the time and hadn't had a choice. She understood that to the one they'd used as bait, none of that was an excuse. She thought he had every right to be angry. At the same time, she couldn't help but think that this, too, was another of Sora's attempts to deceive the party. If he'd already withheld information despite knowing full well it might lead to their ruin, he probably wouldn't hesitate to use himself as bait if it meant ruining the Falcon Blades' reputation. Why should she bow and apologize to someone like that?

Looking back on it now, she realized that she'd been wrong for thinking that way. Sora might have joined the party while hiding the fact that he couldn't level up, but the Falcon Blades had attacked him with magic and used him as monster bait. Any way she looked at it, they had committed a greater offense. So why had she still acted so harshly toward Sora at the guild? When she thought about it, it had to be because of that intense disappointment she'd felt. Sora acting all high-handed and overbearing toward her at that meeting, even though he was the last person who ought to be criticizing her, had made her flare up.

She couldn't take back anything she'd said. And now it was too late to apologize. Even if she tried, she doubted he'd listen. But most importantly, apologizing to Sora would be the same as criticizing Miroslav's actions. And if she spoke up when Raz was defending Miroslav, she feared it would drive a permanent wedge between her

and Raz. For that reason, to this day Iria had not apologized to Sora and had continued to keep a lid on the guilt that plagued her.

Now, Iria was in her own room in the church. It had been a long time since she'd last slept in this room, yet there wasn't even a speck of dust on the floor or her desk. Her mother, Sela, had likely come in and cleaned it regularly. Her bed even had the clean, comfortable smell of the sun.

Lying spread-eagled on that bed, Iria was limp with exhaustion. She'd come back to her home village to help the locals suffering from poison, yet by the time she'd arrived, they'd already been cured. The antidote Miroslav had taken pains to get was utterly useless compared with the healing properties of the Jirai Ao Ochs. How could she not feel utterly defeated right now?

"Of course, I'm thrilled and appreciative that no one's sick anymore and everyone's okay..." she mumbled. But she hadn't been able to contribute anything, and it frustrated her. To make matters worse, it was *Sora* who'd contributed the most. Like it or not, their fates seemed to be linked, which was even more vexing. Infuriatingly, he'd even brought plenty of stamina potions and holy water with him.

"He really thought of everything," she said bitterly. "Now no matter what I tell the villagers about him, no one will believe me."

And it wasn't just the villagers. Her mom, as well as the orphans she considered her siblings, couldn't get enough of Sora. Even if she told them how he'd enslaved a former comrade, put a collar on her, and forced her to do his bidding, no one would take her seriously. If she told them about the Lord of the Flies incident, they might even blame her and take Sora's side. After all, he had rushed to the village and immediately solved all of their problems. In contrast, Iria had gotten here late and been utterly useless. And then there was Raz, who hadn't even bothered to come.

"Still, I can't imagine Sora would just come here on a whim. Given his timing, he has to have some ulterior motive."

She bit her lip. He'd brought along the Jirai Ao Ochs fruit, said to grow in the depths of Titus, stamina potions, and holy water. Procuring all that would have taken time, effort, and money—far

more than any one person would spend out of pure goodwill. And it was obvious that whatever he was planning, it had something to do with her and Raz. But she couldn't figure out what. If his goal was to make Iria his slave like he'd done with Lunamaria, he wouldn't have needed to come here to do it.

At first, she'd thought he might have been planning to tell the village about the Lord of the Flies incident and have the villagers condemn her and Raz. After all, they'd both made a name for themselves as adventurers, and as residents of Merte, they were the village's pride. If their people learned of the scandal, their disappointment would be immeasurable, and if her mother, a priestess of law and order, found out, she might even revoke Iria's right to be a warrior priestess. That was certainly one way Sora could get his revenge.

And yet her mother and all the villagers were treating Iria as kindly as ever, no different from before. At the moment, he hadn't made a single move against her, and it was driving her up the wall.

"Just what is he...planning..." she mumbled with a yawn. The more she thought, the more tired it made her, and at last, her eyelids grew heavy. After another brief yawn, she shut her eyes. Whatever he was plotting, she couldn't do anything about it if she was tuckered out. First she'd rest up, then think about it again in the morning.

Before long, she was sound asleep. Judging from the frown on her face as she slept, her worries were likely haunting her even in her dreams.

Chapter 2: Swear on Your God's Name

1

The mountain range at the border between the kingdom of Kanaria and the Holy Monarchy was known as the Lemme Mountains, and it stretched the length of the border to both the east and west. If the orcs had a base somewhere in that area, I suspected it would most likely be within those mountains. There was a stronghold belonging to the kingdom in the Lemme Mountains, but it was mainly just there to make sure the roads stayed safe and was more like a checkpoint on the road. Therefore, it would be a tall order to dispatch those soldiers to Merte, since it was so far away from the main road. Especially since the orcs still had yet to attack or even show themselves at the moment.

"So that's why I decided to see if I could spot the orcs' base from the sky."

"I understand that much, but why do *I* have to go with you?"

The day after Iria and I had met each other once again in Merte, I'd told her I wanted her to ride Claimh Soras with me and scout out the mountain range. She'd immediately scowled. If she was riding my wyvern, she'd have to either sit behind me and cling to my back or sit in front of me and be clung to. And Iria had probably thought she'd rather die than do either. She didn't say so out loud, of course, but that was likely because her mother, siblings, and fellow villagers were nearby. She didn't want to openly disparage the village's savior in front of them.

If my efforts to spread potions and holy water all over the village are keeping her from mouthing off, that alone made the work worth it, I thought with a smirk. Then I answered her question politely.

"Even from the sky, there's only so much a single pair of eyes can spot. Don't they always say two heads are better than one? Plus, I'm not as familiar with the region as you are. I needed someone who can guide me." And while a regular guide with no combat ability would just become a burden in the event of a battle, there would be no need to worry with a Rank 6 adventurer.

My reasoning was perfectly logical. Anyone who'd been around to hear it would have accepted it. And indeed, Iria also nodded, albeit reluctantly. "In that case, I'll go."

"I appreciate your willingness to cooperate," I replied. Meanwhile, the three children were all watching our conversation, looking jealous.

"No fair, Iria! I wanna ride the dragon too!"

"Me too!"

"Me three!"

They all raised their hands, expressing their desire to ride. I glanced over at Sela expectantly, but I suppose even *she* wouldn't raise her hand and say "Me four!" in front of all the villagers. Kind of a shame.

I shooed the children back over to Sela. "Hey, now, it'll be dangerous if you get too close. We didn't come here to play, you know."

The kids looked dissatisfied, but some gentle but firm chiding from Sela brought them in line. Seeing that they were at a safe distance, I approached Claimh Soras. The indigo wyvern was waiting there with its long neck on the ground to make it easier for me to get on and ride. Given how happily it was chirping, it seemed eager to fly with me on board.

"Ready, Iria? Just for reference, I'll ask—would you rather ride behind me or in front of me?"

As though realizing exactly what I meant by that question, Iria responded harshly. "Behind you, of course!"

"Roger that. In that case, be sure to hold on to me tight. Wouldn't want you to fall off and hit the ground headfirst or anything."

With that statement doubling as a warning and a threat, I

mounted the wyvern and sat down on the saddle. Iria sat down behind me, but perhaps she was still being a little stubborn, because she didn't wrap her arms around me.

Well, no matter. Once we're in the air, she'll have no choice.

I grabbed the wyvern's reins. "All right, Claimh Soras, time to fly!" I declared. In response, the wyvern's wings spread out majestically, and it lifted off the ground surprisingly easily for such a large, scaled creature. That was because it wasn't just staying afloat with the power of its wings—it was using mana to support itself as well. Claimh Soras and I had been training specially to fly using its mana, and we could now fly directly up off the ground without even needing a takeoff run.

The wyvern climbed higher and higher into the air. While in the saddle, I felt an uncomfortable sensation crawl up my back. It was a feeling that only those who rode Claimh Soras could experience, a curious sensation similar to weightlessness or surfacing from underwater. Of course, this was Iria's first time experiencing it, and just as I'd expected, I heard a muffled scream come from behind me. Immediately afterward, her arms twined around me as though desperately searching for something to hold on to. Perhaps unconsciously, she squeezed me, and I could feel her soft yet toned warrior priestess body against my back. Because of her leather armor I didn't get to feel her chest against me, though, which was a little disappointing.

Claimh Soras craned its neck around to look at me and blinked its round eyes as if to say, "Did I mess up?" It must have heard Iria's scream or perhaps sensed her fear.

"Don't worry. Everything's fine," I told the creature, petting its head. Realizing I wasn't upset, Claimh Soras turned its neck forward again and spread its wings out as though relieved. To the wyvern, as long as *I* wasn't in distress, it was fine. It couldn't care less about how Iria felt.

As the indigo wyvern made its way through the skies, the bird's-eye view of Merte behind us grew more and more distant. I could see the swiftly flowing Kale River to our left and Kanaria's various plains and forests to our right. And ahead, I could just make out the

vivid green of the Lemme mountain range. Beyond those mountains lay Caritas, the Holy Monarchy, where various temples and shrines were built to worship deities like the God of Law and Order, the Earth Mother, the God of War, and so on. It was literally a holy land, and I'd heard the Adventurer's Guild headquarters was there as well...but none of that was important at the moment. For now, it was time to focus on searching for those orcs.

Numerous mountains made up the Lemme mountain range, but none of them were especially tall. They could all be easily scaled on foot, so it wasn't like I needed a wyvern to reach the top. But that also meant that monsters, apparitions, and the like could easily cross the mountains as well. For the time being, I'd decided to pick a mountain to search at random, hover over it, and examine the area below for any signs of orcs. Once I'd made my selection, I heard Iria's astonished voice behind me.

"A-Amazing... I can't even see the village anymore!"

Perhaps I should have expected it from someone like her, but it seemed she'd already gotten used to being high up in the air enough to look down at the scenery below. That said, her arms were still tight around my body, so she hadn't calmed down completely. Good. I'd only made her come along to tease her in the first place, so it would've been a shame if she'd regained her composure so soon. In fact, I even considered making the wyvern do a somersault just to shake her up even more, but I couldn't have her get *too* upset with me or it would defeat the purpose. I wasn't going to suck up to her by any means, but if my little pranks ever crossed the boundaries of logic and reason, I might end up with a problem on my hands. So for the moment, at least, I had to satisfy myself with just having her hold on to me for dear life.

Those thoughts ran through my mind as I pulled the wyvern's reins to slow its speed.

2

Once we had slowed down, Iria and I looked over the mountain

slope to see if we could catch a glimpse of any orc activity. The biggest advantage of searching from the air was, of course, that we could see a wider area. In fact, if the orc base had been in a flat, open region like a plain, we probably would have been able to spot it immediately. But this was a mountain range, meaning there was nothing below us but trees, trees, trees. If the orc army numbered in the thousands, it might have been a different story, but a hundred or so orcs wouldn't be so easily discovered among all the shrubbery. Therefore, we had to lower our altitude to get a closer look, though it would make our visual range that much narrower. I couldn't risk a plan of action that might delay our search.

That said, I'd already guessed this wouldn't be easy. Even in the air, I'd suspected searching a mountain range for a group of monsters would be tougher than searching a plain, especially since there was no guarantee the orcs were even there in the first place. Most of it had been rumor and hearsay from people who might not have even seen the orcs themselves, so as anticlimactic as it would be, it was entirely possible they had just seen a bear or something with a similar body shape.

Even so, that would be fine. Like I said, as long as I could confirm that the orcs *weren't* near the village, I'd be laying the villagers' concerns to rest. And I could still use the search as a pretext for my first step in getting revenge on Iria. To me, the latter was the most important.

After about an hour of searching, I lowered Claimh Soras onto a bare mountain surface, explaining to Iria that the wyvern needed to rest. She nodded slightly, released her arms from around me, and quickly hopped off the saddle. Her face was flushed red with bashfulness, resembling an apple. In her excitement and nervousness over flying through the sky, she must have completely forgotten she'd been holding on to me the entire time, then suddenly remembered the moment we'd hit the ground. Observing her reaction, the corner of my mouth turned up into a smirk.

Truthfully, the indigo wyvern was an elite species. It could fly for two, even three hours without even getting tired or losing a

significant amount of mana, especially when it wasn't even in combat. So why was I taking a rest here, then? Naturally, so that I could see this reaction from Iria. For her, begrudgingly accompanying me and clinging to me, break times between flying sessions would normally be an opportunity to relax and catch a breather. But she'd have to go back to holding on to me once we took flight again. She would have to consciously wrap her arms around me, again and again, every time we took a break. Watching her face go pale and flush red every time was, honestly, a supreme joy. It also forced the fastidious adventurer to get used to touching my body, which was, in a way, training her for when I'd eat her soul in the future.

Lastly, it allowed me to use her as bait to lure out the orcs. The reproductive capabilities of orcs were incredibly high, and they were even capable of mating with other species like humans and elves. If one of them detected the scent of a human woman, they would probably come to us rather than us having to find them. That said, Iria was just one woman, so dragging her around the mountain range probably wouldn't be too efficient. But it was better than having no plan at all, and when I thought of it as payback for the Lord of the Flies incident, I certainly didn't feel guilty about it.

"Hm?"

Around the time we were taking our seventh break, I noticed a certain smell. By this point, the sun's rays peeking through the trees were taking on a shade of crimson. Sitting in the shade of a tree, I was starting to think it was about time to head back to the village when a sudden stench pricked my nostrils. Frowning, I stood up. Iria, who'd been sitting a short distance away, had also gotten to her feet. Even Claimh Soras let out a wary growl.

Thirty seconds later, the thing that I'd expected to see finally appeared. I heard heavy, rumbling footsteps, and just as the stench became especially intense, I saw it: hairless black skin, a flat face, and its trademark hammer-like head. Its limbs were as thick as tree trunks, and it was a head taller than I was. In place of its eye sockets were two hollow, sunken holes. It was like staring down into

a dark, deep, well or void. A gluttonous void hungry for food, sex, and destruction.

Its nose was inconspicuously small, but in contrast, its mouth opened wide, probably about twice as wide as a human's or more. Its rows of sharp, sturdy teeth could tear a human's limbs off and no doubt chew up the bones as well.

The creature was ghastly, to be frank, and the fact that its facial structure most closely resembled a human's was even more unsettling. Worse, the thing absolutely reeked. Just looking at it was tough enough, but if I fought it at any closer range than this, the smell would probably be even worse. As I mentioned, orcs were extremely fertile, and imagining the source of that smell certainly wouldn't be good for my mental health.

Suddenly, the orc screamed—a metallic, high-pitched screech. In its sights, of course, was Iria. In the next instant, the creature charged at her, drool flying from the corners of its mouth. In response, Iria glared at the monster and got ready to defend herself. As expected of a Rank 6 adventurer, the likes of a single orc wouldn't frighten her. Her face was a little scrunched up, but that was probably because she couldn't stand the smell the orc was giving off. Or perhaps she just wasn't looking forward to the prospect of fighting it up close with that smell in her face.

"GROOOAR!"

I doubted it was because it felt like Iria would upstage it or anything, but at that moment, Claimh Soras let out a howl so mighty it shook the trees. Its long neck bulged, and it released its fire breath as though to sterilize a piece of filth. It was the same breath that had reduced a manticore to ash, so naturally a mere orc couldn't withstand it.

Before Iria could even attack, the orc was enveloped in intense flame and burned to a crisp. The sheer power of the wyvern's breath set the nearby trees aflame as well, but Claimh Soras flapped its mighty wings and generated a gale to extinguish them.

How do you like that*?* the wyvern seemed to say as it turned its head proudly to me. I rubbed its long neck in approval. Indeed, it had received a perfect score in my book. I felt like it was getting

stronger and more reliable by the day, in fact. It had probably used its mana to generate that gale, and I got the feeling that if it mastered its mana attacks, it would be an incredibly helpful asset against illusory types, including dragons, in the future.

At any rate, we'd confirmed that there were indeed orcs here on the mountain range. What luck! The orc just now was probably either a scout or had been sent out to gather food. Looking at the ground, I could see that it had left a trail. If we followed it, we might be able to find the rest of them. Of course, there was also the chance that it had gotten separated from the rest by coincidence and had just been wandering around aimlessly, but even if that was the case, we could return to Merte for the day, change our strategy, and go at it again tomorrow.

"Now then, time to see where these footsteps lead. Oh, and Claimh Soras, you should just stay here and wait for us." Somehow I got the feeling that a large wyvern walking around, knocking down trees, would get us spotted by even the most inattentive of orcs. First, we needed to see how many we were up against. The wyvern whined in disappointment, but it didn't protest and followed my order without complaint. To show it I truly was sorry, I decided to stroke its scales once more time, then cast a furtive glance at Iria while doing so. Her eyes were already fixed on me, and our gazes met.

"What about you, Iria? Are you coming too? If you'd rather wait here with Claimh Soras, I don't mind."

"No. This is the village's problem, and as a villager, it'd be irresponsible of me to stay behind." There was a crease in her brow, but she seemed determined to come along. She walked up beside me. "Um, thank you," she said to the wyvern timidly.

In response, Claimh Soras turned away disinterestedly, cold to other humans as always. Iria slumped her shoulders dejectedly.

"Don't let it get to you," I said. "It acts that way with pretty much everyone besides me." And that female knight I'd met in the stable the other day. She'd been the only exception so far.

"I'm not bothered by it or anything," Iria said, turning up her nose slightly. "More importantly, if we're going to go, we ought to get a

move on. If it gets too dark, we won't be able to find much of anything."

She walked away. I watched her retreating back, and once I was sure she wouldn't notice, my lips curled up into a grin.

3

To make a long story short, by following the orc's trail, we were able to find their base easily. In fact, had we flown with Claimh Solas a little farther, we probably would have spotted it on our own. As for why: They'd constructed a massive settlement in the corner of the mountains using fallen trees and grass. At a glance, I could see over fifty orcs there, and there were surely more inside the various primitive dwellings. I suspected that if all of them came outside, there'd be well over a hundred. It wasn't unusual in itself for orcs to build settlements and live in groups, but they were typically small groups of ten or so. The most I'd ever heard about living in one place was thirty, so for there to be this many was clearly abnormal.

As proof, Iria looked tense beside me. And unlike the revulsion she'd been feeling toward me up until now, this tension was clearly out of wariness. Before her eyes was a giant orc. The creatures were already larger than the average monster, but this one was especially massive. Rather than tree trunks, its limbs more closely resembled steel pillars, and its skin glinted with a black luster like some types of insects gave off, suggesting a toughness like armor. Considering it was also wielding a battle axe, perhaps it had stolen both the weapon and its armor from a fallen adventurer. It was clearly a cut above every other orc I could see in the area. In other words...

"A high orc!" Iria uttered. She was trembling uncontrollably.

I, on the other hand, regarded the creature with fascination. Just as humans were capable of leveling up, some creatures were as well. That was why the longer an organism lived, the stronger and more intelligent they normally became. And of course, some monsters could level up as well. Therefore, a "superior" creature usually meant it was an exceptionally higher level than all the

others.

Whether animal or monster, all carnivores instinctively hunted weaker prey, which meant they didn't level up all that often. As was the case for humans, the quickest path for a creature to level up was to take down stronger beings. This applied to goblins and orcs as well, but it had been discovered that goblins and orcs were more likely to level up than any other type of creature. The reason was simple: They were usually attacked and subjugated by adventurers on sight. In other words, those who ended up finishing the adventurers off instead were the ones who leveled up and became "superior."

To elaborate, there were different rankings of superior beings as well. Those known as goblin lords and orc generals were the cream of the crop, and this black orc, most likely the settlement's leader, had surely reached that level himself.

Iria whispered to me nervously, "Sora, let's retreat. We need to tell the other villagers about this. Then let's fly back to Ishka and report it to the guild. If we don't hurry and get an extermination team down here, everyone could be in grave danger."

"Grave danger, eh? Would it perhaps be something we'd need to report at all costs even if it meant sacrificing someone in the process?" I said sarcastically.

When Iria heard that, she scowled. Of course, that had been a dig at what she'd said during our meeting at the guild to justify her party leaving me to die. At the time, if they'd tried to save me, they could have potentially all been wiped out, and no one would have been alive to report the Lord of the Flies' existence to the guild. Considering its ability to reproduce, waiting too late to inform Ishka of the threat could have resulted in the entire town's demise. Therefore, though it had pained them severely to do so, they'd decided the best option was to flee instead—or at least, that was what Iria and Miroslav had told the guild. Lunamaria had admitted to me that she hadn't been present for that discussion, since at the time, she'd been tasked with guiding the extermination unit hastily formed by the guild and Ishka's government to Titus Forest and back.

"What exactly are you trying to say?" Iria hissed.

"Hmph, just seeing the look on your face, it's clear that I don't have to explain," I spat back.

With that, anger joined the traces of fear and panic on her face. "If you've got something you want to say to me, I'll hear it later! Right now's not the time for this! Don't you get that?!"

"Oh no, I'm well aware. Much more aware than you realize, in fact. That's exactly why I used those kids to coax you into accompanying me, Iria." For the first time since she'd arrived in Merte, I removed my mask of politeness and gave her an evil, triumphant grin.

Realizing my demeanor had changed, Iria took one step backward, then another. "Wh-What nonsense are you going on about now?!"

I laughed. "Nonsense, she says! You already know exactly what's happening here, don't you? Right now, I'm like you and the rest of the party were back then. And *you're* in the same situation I was. The shoe's on the other foot now, isn't it? You're in an orc settlement with over a hundred orcs in the area and a high orc as the leader. Did you know orcs are quite partial to using human women as seedbeds for their fertilizer? If we let them be, they might destroy all of the villages at the base of these mountains or even lay waste to the entire southern region of Kanaria."

To keep that from happening, we needed to report the situation as quickly as we possibly could. We needed to make sure we returned home safe, so we could warn everyone. But...what would happen if one of us was unfortunately spotted by the high orc before we could escape? The answer was obvious: Someone would have to sacrifice themselves and act as a decoy to let the other escape.

So, which one of us was most suited to becoming the orc's bait, the most suited to appealing to the orc's healthy sex drive? That answer was also obvious.

"You're the woman here, Iria," I said. "And as such, it falls to you to save everyone and lead them to happiness through your noble sacrifice. C'mon, compared to serving as bait for the Lord of the Flies, *your* job isn't going to be nearly as tough. The orcs' goal is to

procreate, so as long as you obey them, they won't kill you...probably. And of course, I'll make sure Raz knows about your heroic deed as well. I mean, knowing him, he'll probably be the first to volunteer for the extermination team, so if you want to survive until you two have your tearful reunion, do your best to form a happy orc family!" I stuck my tongue out at her and bowed dramatically.

All tension, panic, anger, and distrust drained from Iria's face as she looked at me. All that was left was the same hostility she'd regarded the orc with. "Just so we're on the same page, you're serious about this, right? This isn't just some prank you cooked up to get back at me?"

I shrugged without replying. When she saw that, her voice became like ice.

"I see."

A split second later...

"HAAAH!" With a sharp cry, her left leg abruptly flew toward me. There was no windup, making it difficult to predict the timing of her attack. The old me probably would have been struck in the chest so hard that I threw up everything in my stomach and passed out. But as I was now, a kick like that was child's play.

I casually lowered my right hand and blocked her foot with the gauntlet I was wearing. The impact made my hand go numb, but her attack failed to breach my defenses. At least, I assumed so, but in the next instant, she used my gauntlet as a fulcrum to launch herself into the air as though she were completely weightless. The hem of her white undershirt billowed in the wind as she twisted her hips in midair.

"YAAAH!"

She delivered a sweeping kick so powerful, it could have easily decapitated anyone it hit. I used the gauntlet on my left hand to block this time, but the impact was at least three times more powerful than the first. If I'd taken the full brunt of the attack, it would have shattered my bones to pieces.

Claimh Soras had been the one to finish off the orc before, but I could now say for certain that Iria would have had no trouble

defeating it on her own. It was no wonder she'd made it to Rank 6. Still, seeing as her first and second attacks hadn't been too fast for me to handle, the outcome was already confirmed. With my free right hand, I grabbed the hem of her undershirt and yanked her straight down. Since she had nothing to brace herself with in the air, she slammed into the ground helplessly.

"Ow!"

"Jumping up into the air was a bad move. Then again, an attack like that would have finished the old me with ease." I stomped down on the hem of her garment with my iron boot, pinning it to the ground. The force of it flipped her shirt up, revealing much of her body above her thighs. Iria gave me a death glare, but I didn't even flinch. Covering her body with my own, I grabbed both of her wrists so she couldn't move. She made every effort to resist, but she couldn't do a thing against my vigor-enhanced arm.

"You pervert! Get off me! Get off now!"

"No, thanks," I replied, sneering at her futile attempts to resist, and gradually brought my lips closer to hers. As though guessing my intent, her face screwed up in revulsion and she flailed her limbs madly, attempting to shake me off. But resistance of that degree didn't break my restraint, so she shook her head—the only part of her body I didn't have pinned down—frantically, hoping it would help her escape.

"You... You!"

"Now, now. I wouldn't make too much noise if I were you. The orcs might hear you."

"Shut your mouth! Unhand me this instant! The only one who's allowed to touch me is Raz— Augh!"

When I put more power into my grip, enough to break both of her wrists, Iria's face twisted in pain. Now that I had my opening, I quickly sealed her lips with mine and ate her soul.

I now knew much more about my soul-eating ability than when I'd first attacked Miroslav. I knew how to devour them efficiently, I knew the potential reactions my opponents would have and what I needed to do to get the reactions I wanted, and I knew the optimal way of keeping a struggling opponent down. So Iria had never had

any chance of escaping. However disciplined in the martial arts she was, however much more of a fight she put up than Miroslav, it was all useless against my mastery of vigor manipulation.

Violently, forcefully, as though to trample her will to shreds, I gorged, gorged, gorged myself...and by the time Iria's body had gone limp with exhaustion, I'd become Level 9.

4

"Wh-What...happened...to me? Urgh..."

Feeling a sharp pain in the back of her head, like a drill boring into her skull, Iria asked the person in front of her what was going on. She had no idea where he'd gotten it from, but he was holding a rope in one hand, looking down on her with a vulgar expression. He didn't answer her. She wanted to resist, but with her hands tied behind her back and her legs bound together as well, she was helpless. No, even if she *hadn't* been tied up, she wouldn't have been able to stand. Sora had somehow absorbed all of her stamina and vitality. She didn't think that such a thing was possible just by touching his lips to hers, so she could only think he'd done something to her. When she thought about it, the earlier scene from before unconsciously replayed in the back of her mind, and she felt the urge to vomit rising up from the back of her throat.

Not even possessing the energy to suppress it, she threw up right there, again and again. She could still feel Sora's saliva on her lips. She wanted to wipe it off right this instant. Wipe it off, rinse her mouth out, maybe even down some strong alcohol to forget the scene, forget the sensation, forget it all. That was her sincere wish.

Even as she was thinking it, however, Sora's barbarism continued. He forced her to stand, pushed her against a nearby tree trunk, and tied her to the tree. He went around the tree with the rope more than five times so that she couldn't possibly escape.

Eventually... "There, that ought to do it," he said with a satisfied nod.

Iria was wrapped in so much rope that she looked like a

bagworm. Now, even if she regained her stamina, she still couldn't move a muscle. All she could do was glare at the man in front of her.

He chuckled. "After I ate that much of your soul, you still have the energy to glare at me like that? Impressive."

"You ate...my soul? Then that strange power you have...that's the cause?"

"Snooping around for information even in your current predicament, are we? Well, I wasn't particularly trying to hide it from you anyway. You're more or less correct. After the Falcon Blades left me for dead and I nearly became insect food, this is the power I gained."

With a malicious smile, he drew his face closer to hers, causing her to recall what he'd done to her before. She instinctively tried to back away, but tied to the tree, she couldn't budge and only hit the back of her head on the trunk.

"So there you have it, Iria. Like I said, when the orcs find you and capture you, you'd better work hard for them. Who knows? Maybe if you're lucky, you too will awaken to some new power while you're in the throes of despair."

He was clearly mocking her. She bit her lip in chagrin. But behind her expression, her mind was analyzing the situation rationally. If Sora really was intending to use her as bait, why hadn't he just cut off one of her limbs and left her behind? Why had he gone through the trouble of tying her up with rope? Judging by what he'd done to her earlier, he must be feeling some sort of sexual desire for her.

In other words, Iria guessed, he was doing all this just to threaten her. If the orcs found her, she'd be done for. She knew that, and so did he. He was probably about to tell her something like "If you want me to untie you, you'd better do what I say." She was sure of it.

On the other hand, it meant that Sora recognized enough worth in Iria to take the time and effort to do all this right in front of a gigantic orc settlement. And if so, she wasn't out of options just yet. Determined not to fall in line with this coward's motives, she'd do whatever it took.

However...

"Hmph. Just from that look in your eyes, I can tell exactly what you're thinking. But sadly, you're nowhere near as valuable to me as you think you are. Flower of flame, illuminate the darkness...Flare!"

Sora muttered an incantation, and a dazzling light appeared in the air. The surrounding trees, which were about to be swallowed up by the darkness of the night, immediately regained their hue. This was Flare, a Category 1 fire spell. In terms of fire magic, it was the most basic of basics. Given the proper resources and time, even Iria could learn it if she wanted, so she wasn't particularly surprised that Sora could use it too.

What *did* surprise her was his decision to use the fire spell in their current situation. They had only just discovered the orc settlement. They were far enough away that their fight hadn't alerted any of the orcs to their presence, but night would soon be upon them. If Sora used Flare in the middle of the mountains at night, the orcs would surely notice.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm letting the orcs know where we are. By the way, if you're wondering why I went out of my way to tie you up, it's actually for your own sake. You may not have any energy left to resist right now, but you're a Rank 6 adventurer. You could probably handle one or two orcs, but the orcs might get mad and kill you. So I tied you up. That way you can't hurt the orcs, and they won't consider killing their woman. They'll carry you back to their settlement and take good care of you there."

Sora kept talking, but Iria didn't listen to any of it. She was listening to the cries of the orcs in the distance. The hostility and caution in their bellows indicated that they'd noticed the presence of intruders. Sora had to have recognized it as well, because the black-haired young man shrugged exaggeratedly.

"Whoops, looks like I've spent too much time talking. Well, Iria, I guess this is goodbye. Like I said before, I'll let Raz and the others know where you are, so do your best until then."

"You can't be serious! Sora, don't you know what'll happen to you if you do this?! Once I report your actions to the guild, you'll be finished!"

He laughed again. “Then I’ll just tell them this: I had to leave you behind because I had to report the whereabouts of the orcs as soon as I could. And Iria’s lying because she’s still upset at me for making that call.”

“What?!”

“Now, who do you think the guild will believe? The Falcon Blades, who are currently in shambles, or the indigo wyvern knight who helped the guild out with all of their stalled requests? You should know how the guild works by now, right?”

Iria ground her teeth in frustration. Between her and Sora, she knew which one of them was currently more useful to Ishka. There was a good chance they’d side with him, even if it meant bending the rules. Just like the guild had bent the rules to take the Falcon Blades’ side over his.

Even now, the rumbling in the distance was getting closer, and the tremors were getting more intense, like a landslide had occurred nearby. The orcs were very close now.

“Well then, even *I* might be in trouble if I stay longer, so farewell, Iria. This time, once and for all.”

Iria recalled that those were the cursed words Sora had said to the Falcon Blades and the guild back during their meeting. Seeing that he didn’t feel sorry in the least about leaving her behind, Iria realized something: There was no bargain to be made here. If she didn’t speak up right now, he really would leave her to the orcs.

“Wait,” she managed to squeeze out.

But Sora didn’t stop. Perhaps he could no longer hear her over the din, or perhaps he was deliberately ignoring her.

“Wait!” she shouted in the loudest voice she could muster. Now he had to have heard her.

But he didn’t turn around. He didn’t even stop, as though to say, *You’re of no value to me as you are now.* With that, she had another realization: He wanted her to adopt a certain attitude toward him.

“Wait, Sora! Please, save me!” she shrieked. She couldn’t think of any greater humiliation than falling into Sora’s trap, being pushed down, tied to a tree, and then begging for mercy on top of all of that. But it was far better than staying here with the orcs, so she

suppressed her rage. Then, with upturned eyes and quivering lips that in no way reflected her inner feelings, she spoke. “I apologize for everything I’ve said and done to you up until now, Sora. So please, save me.” With her best attempt at flattery, she pleaded toward Sora’s back.

Her actions were effective, to a degree. He stopped. But he didn’t turn around. In other words, it wasn’t enough.

She gritted her teeth so hard they nearly broke. Then, in a shaky voice, she continued. “When the Lord of the Flies attacked us, I’m sorry for abandoning you. I truly am! I shouldn’t have done it, and I regret it!”

“Finally, you said it.”

At that, he slowly turned around. There was a small, somewhat wry smile on his face. Seeing that the maliciousness had vanished from his expression, Iria unconsciously felt relief. There, before her eyes, was a Sora no different from the one she’d seen helping her mother and the children at the church.

5

Sora turned on his heel and walked back over to Iria. She couldn’t hide her impatience at his relaxed pace. The orcs could show up at any minute, after all. She wanted to yell at him to hurry up and cut her loose, but if she changed her tune here, he might think she had only apologized to get him to save her. She didn’t want his attitude to harden again, so she bowed her head in apology.

“I’m sorry... Back then, I...”

“You thought it’d be fine to abandon someone who’d hid their inability to level up from the rest of the party for half a year?”

That was exactly what she’d thought, but of course, she couldn’t tell him so.

He chuckled at her silence. “Hit the nail on the head, did I?”

“I... I’m sorry! I really am!”

“Hmph. Well, if I was in your shoes, I can’t say I wouldn’t have thought the same thing. I forgive you for the Lord of the Flies

incident.” He was now standing in front of her again. He raised his head to her cheek. The sensation of his hand on her made her recall the sensation of his lips on hers, and she got goose bumps all over. Her subconscious revulsion wasn’t something she could suppress and hide with willpower.

Sora grinned as he looked at her. “Now then, once I’ve rescued you from here, I’ll apologize to you too. Then we’ll be even.”

His expression was bright, and his tone was cheerful. But Iria could somehow detect intense scorn behind that smile, and it made her freeze. “What...did you say?”

“What’s wrong? I said, once I rescue you from here, I’ll say sorry for what I did to you. You apologized for abandoning me, so I’ll apologize for leaving you here. I forgave you, so now you’re going to forgive me, right? I mean, compared to being eaten alive by maggots, becoming the plaything of a few orcs is no big deal.”

“But... What?!” Iria said sharply.

“Oh? If you’re scowling at me again, perhaps that gentle attitude of yours was an act all along? When I see your face like that, I can’t help but think that maybe you only apologized to get me to save you...”

Now Sora wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that he’d been mocking her. The corners of his lips turned up into a smirk as he ridiculed the aghast Iria.

“You... You never intended to save me, did you?”

“Of course not. Now, if you’d just apologized to me back during our meeting at the guild, things might have turned out differently, but I suppose there’s no point in bringing that up now, is there? Oh...”

Just before he finished speaking, one dark shape after another leaped into the illuminated area around them. It went without saying that they were all orcs.

“One, two, three...five of them, huh? Guess we wasted too much time. And with this many gathered in one place, they sure do stink!” He made a show of holding his nose, then let out a cackle.

Iria, of course, was in no mood to laugh. The orcs’ eyes had all swung to her in unison. They were looking at her helplessly tied to a

tree, staring hungrily at her face, breasts, hips, and legs. A waterfall of drool poured from their mouths. She could see that the loincloths covering their crotches were slowly starting to bulge. This was a nightmare, plain and simple.

At that moment, the wind blew in her direction and brought the stench of the orcs along with it. Unable to even cover her nose, she was subjected to the full brunt of the odor, and her face warped in revulsion and fear.

These creatures are going to have their way with me?! Again and again?! For days on end?! There's... There's no way I can endure that!

"Nooo! Sora, please, have mercy! Save me! Don't leave me here!" Before she even realized it, her mouth was moving on its own, against her will. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I'll apologize, I will! And if words aren't enough, I'll prove it with my actions! I'll do whatever you want; just get me out of here! Please!" Her words were so brittle, so timid, so shameful, that she wanted to cover her own ears. But she was so desperate not to be abandoned that she fervently tried to win his favor.

And in response, a wide grin came to his face. "This is just an act too, isn't it?"



Once you get out of here, you'll go right back to defying me.

That was what Sora was suggesting. Iria frantically shook her head.

"No! This time, I absolutely mean it! I'll do whatever you say! I'll even become your slave like Luna, if you want! So please—"

"Hm. Sorry, but I just can't trust you. If you want to prove that you mean it, swear it on your god's name, right here, right now."

Naturally, Iria couldn't respond right away. She was a priestess, and swearing an oath on her god meant much more than just words. If she broke an oath made on her god's name, not only would the blessings she received from that god wane, but it would leave a permanent blemish on her faith. More specifically, her level of authority as a priestess—in other words, her ability to perform holy magic and the like—would plummet. Even if someone was forcing her to make the oath, as was the case now, that wouldn't change. Plus, she'd have to live with the regret of using her god's name to save herself. Her reputation and confidence as a woman of unshakable faith even at the cost of her life would be in tatters.

That was precisely why priests and priestesses rarely ever swore anything on their god's name. Even if they were coerced into making an oath, they would resolutely refuse as a rule. They *had* to. If they swore an oath on their god's name in order to save themselves, who could call that true faith?

Iria knew that well and had long since decided what her answer would be were she ever in a situation like this. She'd been prepared—or at least, she thought so. But...she wanted to be saved.

"To be a priestess of the law is to uphold the natural order of things. And order is the lamp that illuminates the darkness of the human world." The teachings of her faith came tumbling out of her mouth in a groan, like a lament—or perhaps repentance. "Here and now, I swear to the God of Law and Order that I, Iria, will obey you, Sora..."

"For the rest of your life."

"Kh... F-For the rest of my life! There! *Now* are you satisfied?!" she shrieked, despairing at having just relinquished something even more precious than her chastity. She couldn't keep tears from

spilling from her eyes.

As though to cut through her self-loathing and hopelessness, a voice resounded.

"Shinsou Reiki! Soul Eater, devour them all!"

A torrent of mana began to swirl with Sora at its center. It was such a high concentration of mana that she could sense it even though she wasn't a mage. Before she knew it, Sora was holding a black katana in his hand, and unlike the one at his hip, merely laying eyes on this one sent shivers down her spine.

In the next instant, the black katana sliced across the landscape with a howl. The orcs were far away enough that there was no way the blade would reach them—or so Iria thought. But before her eyes, the five orcs' upper bodies all simultaneously *slid away* from their lower halves. Their faces frozen in surprise, they were all silenced for eternity. A beat later, their upper halves hit the ground with a thud. With a single swing of his sword, Sora had sliced them all in two.

"H-Huh?" Iria couldn't believe what she'd just witnessed. She was so shocked that she completely forgot the rage and despair she'd just been feeling and stood there with a dumbfounded expression instead. Sora glanced furtively at the look on her face, then with another slice of his sword, freed her from her bindings. It was so abrupt that she didn't have time to put strength into her legs, and she fell onto the ground on her rear.

In the distance, she could see many other orcs knocking over trees and shrubs to get to the scene. The deaths of their brethren and the smell of a woman had them all agitated as they let out battle cries. Sora just looked at them and smirked. He didn't seem frightened in the least. Rather, it looked like he couldn't have cared less.

"So this is what they mean when they say 'like lambs to the slaughter,'" he remarked with a grin, standing in front of Iria as though to protect her from the horde.

Naturally, Iria didn't feel an ounce of security or comfort from that back of his. She might have sworn on her god's name that she'd stay loyal to him, but she couldn't feel safe around someone who'd

tortured her to such an extent.

And yet...

She didn't know why, but for some reason, she was certain that as long as she stayed behind him, those orcs weren't going to harm her one bit.

6

I could hear the excited cheers and whoops of the villagers in the distance. The village of Merte was bustling like it usually only ever did once per year during their harvest festival. The sun had already set, and around this time, adults and children alike would have normally been asleep in their beds. But now, the village square was brightly lit and filled with song and dance. Even the children had been permitted to play outside and were running around energetically, as this was a cause for celebration.

Merte's villagers weren't the only ones participating in the festivities. Residents of the neighboring villages were also present, and all of them were either mayors or village advisers. In other words, they were all in positions of leadership. In fact, Merte was perhaps even busier at present than during its annual harvest festival.

"Honestly, they just keep coming one after another. There's no end to the people who want to meet and thank me," I muttered, having used the toilet as an excuse to leave the festivities. "Maybe I overdid it by donating all those orcs to them."

It went without saying, but I'd achieved a complete and total victory against the orcs. I'd eaten the souls of each and every one in the settlement, including the high orc. Their forces could have easily conquered not only Merte, but the surrounding town and villages as well. The news of the tribe's destruction had brought joy and relief to everyone in the area.

I myself was also in extremely high spirits. Not only had my revenge on Iria gone off without a hitch, I'd leveled up in the process of eating her soul, and with the orc threat laid to rest, now I

had the entirety of Merte in my debt. Everything had gone exactly as planned—scarily well, in fact. So, although that wasn't exactly the reason, I'd decided to contribute to Merte's prosperity myself by donating the monetary reward for the orcs' extermination, as well as the raw materials from their corpses, to the villagers.

Whenever a monster like a goblin or orc proactively attacked humans or their settlements, it was common to offer a reward for their extermination. And the corpses of such monsters were treasure troves of materials. Orc meat was pungent and had an acquired taste, so it wasn't often used in dishes raw, but once the astringent taste was cooked out, the meat could be dried and mixed with grain to make a highly nutritious feed for livestock. The monsters' bones and skin could be used to make useful tools, and the testicles and heart were common ingredients in medicine and tinctures. Even the entrails could be spread into the soil as fertilizer or used as bait to tame a carnivorous monster, among many possible uses. The profit the village would make from selling these materials, coupled with the bounty for the orcs, would more than offset the losses they'd incurred from the epidemic. Now, with this and the profit from the latest harvest, no villager in Merte would go hungry even if they didn't yield any profit from next year's harvest.

Leaders from other villages had come here because of the treasure trove Merte had suddenly gained. It went without saying that the epidemic had severely affected not just Merte, but the other villages as well. Not only did they all highly approve of what I'd done, but they were jealous of what I'd donated to Merte and wanted a slice of that pie for themselves.

Merte's village chief had welcomed them with a smile and open arms. If the village kept all the wealth for themselves, they would end up antagonizing the surrounding villages, so he'd probably felt it better for the village in the long run to share. And since doing so would put the other villages in Merte's debt, Merte would no doubt profit from this decision further down the line as well.

So yes, it was cause for celebration. For my part, however, I'd intended my contribution to the village to be the coup de grâce to my plan. Now that I'd gone this far, their trust in me would be set in

stone. No matter what Iria did or said now, she'd never be able to overturn it. And indeed, the villagers had been thrilled, acting exactly in line with my expectations.

Iria had kept quiet since returning to the village and hadn't tried to disrupt the celebration or deny my achievements in any way. In fact, she hadn't said much at all to me ever since witnessing my Shinsou's power. From that, I could safely assume she had lost her will to rebel against me. And thus, my plan had ended largely without incident.

If there was one thing I hadn't counted on, it was just how lively the festivities would become. I wasn't really used to a crowd like this, and ever since the party had begun, everyone had grouped around me so much that I hadn't been able to eat a single skewer of meat.

Stop swarming me with those dollar signs in your eyes, people!

I'd heard "please contribute to our village as well!" so many times that even my hands and feet wouldn't be enough to count them all. Not to be outdone, the Merte village chief had also requested that I stay longer.

At this rate, maybe I should just take it all back, I thought.

Anyway, that was why I had decided I couldn't take it anymore, said I needed to use the toilet, and got out of there. Now that I'd done everything I needed to do there, I didn't plan on returning. I made my way to the empty lot where Claimh Soras was staying, thinking about what I'd feed it to reward it for all its hard work today, and was surprised to find someone else already there.

"Priestess Sela? Is that you? Oh, it's just the little brats," I said.

None of the three took too kindly to that remark. "Hey, I'm not little! And I'm not a brat!"

"Me neither!"

"Or me!"

I chuckled. "Sorry, but to me, you just look like a bunch of little brats. If that frustrates you, then you'll just have to hope you grow to be older and taller than me one day!"

"Grr! You'll see! Soon I'll get even taller than you, and older than you too!"

"I don't think you can get older than him, Ein."

"You can't, Ein!"

"Huh?!"

Oh, so even you kids know how to perform the straight man routine, huh? The other two brats, named Zwei and Dora, had retorted back at Ein, who looked shocked.

As the brat trio talked among themselves, Priestess Sela joined in as well. "Since everyone else was feasting, these children thought the dragon might want to join in the festivities as well, and they wanted to come feed it. We've been preparing for this since before noon. I planned to call out to you when you got back to tell you, but..."

"Right, I was swarmed almost the instant I returned, so you couldn't have. By the way, Claimh Soras hasn't been too rough with them?" Honestly, I was concerned about that. It still hadn't entirely warmed up to Seele, and she was always tending to it kindly. It hadn't threatened Sela or the kids, had it?

In response, Sela gave me a big smile, dispelling my worries. "No, it's been calm the whole time! It must be behaving itself for the children's sake!"

"Well, that's a relief." I glanced at Claimh Soras. Apparently the indigo wyvern hadn't realized its master had shown up yet, because it still had its head in the barrel of food and was chowing down ravenously. Judging by the way it was repeatedly smacking the ground with its tail, it must have been enjoying the priestess's meal.

In other words, it isn't that it's being especially careful around the kids. It's just focusing on eating instead. And judging from the acrid smell coming from the barrel...

"You pickled the meat, I take it?"

"Yes, that's right. I heard that it likes sour foodstuffs, so I thought pickling might do the trick. I'm so glad it seems to favor them!" She thrust her chest out as though proud of herself.

What's pressing against her plain priestess garb is definitely larger than her daughter's, I found myself idly thinking...then I shook my head to clear that lewd thought from my mind. Iria was one thing, since I had a grudge against her, but her mother didn't

deserve such rudeness.

I concentrated instead on listening to the cooking process that Sela explained. Preparing the wyvern's food had been more involved than I'd thought. According to her, she'd drained the blood and removed the skins of the smaller boars I'd hunted the other day, then removed the guts, stuffed the bodies with fragrant herbs, and placed them onto large skewers. Then she'd rotated them on an open flame for around three hours. Instead of a pork roast, it was a boar roast.

While the meat was busy cooking, she'd prepared the vinegar, but it sounded like that in itself hadn't exactly been simple. She'd boiled some village crops, then after preparing them in various ways, poured them into a barrel of base vinegar so that the vinegar would take on the natural flavor of the vegetables. I didn't cook, so to me it all sounded rather complicated and incredibly time-consuming. However, I could at least tell she'd put a lot of effort into it.

Once the meat was done, she'd cut it up into bite-sized pieces for Claimh Soras to eat more easily, then poured the meat into the barrel of the vinegar she'd made. Finally, she'd let the meat pickle for another three hours. Uh, was it just me...or had it taken more effort to make Claimh Soras's food than the rest of the food at the party?

"Actually, don't tell anyone this, but..."

"Yes?"

"I spent more time on this dragon's food than the food the village chiefs are eating right now."

"I figured."

"Keep it a secret between us, okay?" She put her index finger up to her lips in a coquettish manner. I coughed awkwardly and averted my eyes, because at that moment I recalled all I'd done to her daughter. I couldn't help but feel embarrassed. That said, Iria was being treated as another key player in the orc extermination and currently enjoying her own moment of fame and recognition from all of the partygoers.

Still, from a future perspective, I was a little anxious about introducing Claimh Soras to food that took this much time and effort

to prepare. What if it got picky and refused to eat raw meat from now on?

Sorry, partner, but if you think you're going to get food like that every day, you're sorely mistaken.

Lunamaria was a skilled cook, but like most elves, she had an aversion to meat dishes, and perhaps because Seele was originally from a large family, she automatically equated deliciousness with how many cheap, easily obtainable ingredients were used in a dish.

As for Suzume, who'd been living on her own in Titus Forest, cooking comprised one of two things: boiling something in water or heating it with fire. And my own cooking abilities could probably be determined by the fact that, lately, I'd seriously been looking into hiring a house maid. So if Claimh Soras started expecting the same quality of food as Priestess Sela's every time, we'd have a problem.

Or, wait...maybe I could use this as an excuse to visit the village every now and then? It took seven days by horse and buggy to travel from Ishka to Merte, which wasn't an easy distance, but on my wyvern, I could make the journey in half a day. If I came to visit Priestess Sela on a regular basis for no real reason, it might look suspicious to outsiders, but if I was coming to have Sela whip up my wyvern's favorite food, I could probably avoid that. Of course, the easiest thing would be to invite Sela to join my clan, but a village on the outskirts of the kingdom like Merte would never be able to find anyone else to employ such eminent miracles as Sela could. If she left the village, it would surely cause a terrible commotion. Even before that, she ran the church here and had orphaned children to look after. She wasn't going to leave so easily. I supposed I'd have to give up on recruiting her for now.

No, wait again. In that case, wouldn't I just need to find someone who could replace her? And as for the three brats, I supposed I could take them under my wing. Luckily, my home currently had an excess of rooms, so I had the space to accommodate three children and Sela. Oh, but she had told me her late husband's grave was here too, so she probably wouldn't want to leave. There was also her daughter to consider. I'd taken pains to ruin Iria so that I'd have a larger stock to eat souls from, so if we were all living under the

same roof, Sela would definitely notice that her daughter was behaving strangely. And my slaves Lunamaria and Seele were there too. From an outsider's perspective, anyone without context would probably just assume I was some playboy with a new woman every night, huh? I didn't even want to imagine what Sela's eyes would look like when they were clouded with revulsion.

So let's not get greedy, I told myself. *Let's just focus on making sure my connection to Sela stays open in the future.*

With the sincerest expression I could muster, I spoke to her. "Er, Priestess Sela, there's something I want to ask you..."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Well, since you pickled this meat, doesn't that mean it'll keep for a while?"

"Yes, well, longer than usual, at least. But the weather here is about to get hotter, so we'll want to eat as much of it as soon as we can. In this case, though, I don't think we'll have to worry about having too many leftovers," she said with a smile as she looked at Claimh Soras.

Yes, I doubt we'll have to worry about that. It looked like the wyvern had licked the barrel clean. I almost thought I saw it let out a satisfied sigh before noticing my presence and turning its round eyes toward me. It brought its face closer, looking almost apologetic that it hadn't noticed me.

Hey, you've got vinegar all over your face, you know. Naturally, since you had your head all the way in the barrel...

"Was it really that good?" I asked.

The wyvern chirped happily. When Sela took out a cloth to wipe its face, it slammed its tail on the ground even more energetically and even flapped its wings. I guess that meant the food was a hit. And it wasn't just the meal Claimh Soras liked. The creature had apparently become fond of Sela as well. As she wiped the other side of its mouth with her own cloth, it didn't reject her hand at all. Considering it had never let any human but me touch it before, this was a pretty significant development. Perhaps the closest way to the heart really was through the stomach.

"Pretty soon, it'll start bringing its hunted prey to you instead of

me," I joked.

"If it's a request from one of the key figures who saved this town, I'd be happy to whip something up for it any time," she replied, grinning back. "Well, I don't think I'd have the time to do it every day, but..."

"I understand, but I appreciate the offer. In fact, I think I might take you up on it. Not every day, of course, as that would be asking too much, but I'm prepared to pay you for your cooking services from time to time."

"Of course! I wouldn't mind at all! As for payment, rather than paying me directly, I would rather you donate the amount to the church instead," she said with a bright smile.

Guh! N-No, I can't!

For a moment, I casually felt that I wanted to eat her soul right then! I was losing confidence in my ability to restrain myself while talking to her, so I walked away.

A-At any rate, mission accomplished! Rejoice, Claimh Soras.

Now I wouldn't have to come up with some new excuse every time I visited. With that, I could return to Ishka without any regrets.

Then Priestess Sela turned to me, her eyes wide with surprise. "What? You're leaving so soon?"

"O-Oh, yeah, you know, I've been away from Ishka for a while now, and I need to check up on my clan. I'm also worried about the Sea of Rot."

Of course, the Sea of Rot itself probably wouldn't be an issue anymore, but there was no guarantee that some other abnormalities wouldn't pop up as a result. I was also concerned about the demonkin Suzume. I'd asked Lunamaria and Seele to look after her while I was gone, so I probably didn't need to worry, but those two were problems on their own. An elf woman and beastkin girl wearing slave collars were, in a sense, just as conspicuous as Suzume was. To be honest, I was really throwing caution to the wind by being here.

Since saying so would sound rather high-handed on my part, I'd made my explanation as brief as possible, but Sela must have somehow sensed that I had my own circumstances, as she bowed

her head deeply in gratitude.

"Thank you, truly. I can't even begin to thank you enough for all you've done for us."

"No, no, the pleasure was all mine. We've got to help each other out in our times of need." I smiled gently, trying my best to seem like a kind, agreeable young man.

Did I really seem like that to her? I wondered, then I suddenly realized something. *Come to think of it, the kids have been awfully quiet recently.*

I turned to look in the trio's direction. They were all rubbing their eyes sleepily. It was probably way past their normal bedtime, so that was no wonder. Ein opened his mouth wide in a yawn. The other two seemed to be half asleep already.

"Ein, could you take Zwei and Dora back to their rooms, please?" Sela asked sweetly.

"All...right," Ein answered with another yawn and a nod, rubbing his eyes again. He guided Zwei forward with his right hand and held Dora's hand in his left as they made their way back to the village.

As I watched them go, I had a thought. *Ein's a good big brother, huh? I feel like there was once a time where Ragna and I held each other's hands like that, but the memory's far too dim for me to recall now.*

How long ago had that been, anyway? I remembered my mom and Ragna's mom were both there, so we had to have been younger than seven at the time. As I struggled to recall the bitter nostalgic memory, I felt a gaze from my side. When I turned to look, Sela, who I'd assumed had followed the kids back to the village, was staring at me intently. There was a sympathetic look in her eye, almost as though she was worried about me. It was like she'd sensed the loneliness in my heart without me even having to tell her. Ashamed by the kindness in her eyes, I turned away.

Chapter 3: The Sisters of the Dukedom

1

The kingdom of Kanaria was only about a third as large as the neighboring empire of Ad Astera. Because the kingdom was filled with breeding grounds for monsters such as Titus Forest, the Skim Mountains, and the Catalan Desert, the region was constantly plagued by such creatures, and as a result, its power and influence couldn't touch that of the empire. In fact, outside of the kingdom, it was often considered a small nation beneath most people's notice...except for one location.

The kingdom's capital, Horus, welcomed tons of people through its gates daily and was always lively and bustling. It was a hub of commerce, and where there was commerce, there was money. Thanks to that, Horus was often thought of as the kingdom's crown jewel. Now, how had a small nation like Kanaria come to house such a cornerstone of economic activity?

As previously mentioned, Kanaria had many monster hives within its borders. While this had led to great losses for the kingdom, at the same time it generated big profit, and that was what had juiced the kingdom's economy and turned Horus into the hub of trade it was today. In other words: raw materials from monsters.

A monster's skin, bones, claws, or fangs could be used to make powerful weapons. Their meat, blood, fur, and entrails were also useful in armor and potions. Over time, the people of Kanaria had discovered monetary value in the monsters infesting their lands. Even the inedible meat of the orcs had been repurposed as popular livestock feed. For many generations now, these efforts had accumulated and led to the kingdom becoming a critical mecca of

commerce.

Furthermore, while the monster hives were a problem in Kanaria, they were generally only on the kingdom's outskirts. Forward bases and fort towns like Ishka and Belka kept the monsters from heading too far inland, and as long as one stayed within the town walls, they would never so much as catch sight of a monster. Traveling merchants were pretty much guaranteed to be safe as long as they stuck to the main roads, so trade between towns wasn't a problem either.

Titus Forest made up the kingdom's north, and the Catalan Desert comprised the western section. Therefore, the only nations "neighboring" Kanaria were the empire of Ad Astera to the east and the Caritas Holy Monarchy to the south.

For the past several years, relations with both nations had been friendly, so there was no danger of either of them invading. This had everything to do with Kanaria's capital, Horus. However, as light got stronger, it created darker shadows. And as prosperous as Horus was, there was also darkness lurking within its walls.

One such example was the Dragonaut estate located in the very heart of the capital. The Dragonaut dukedom was an esteemed family that had been around since the kingdom's founding and was one of the most distinguished noble families in all of Kanaria. In fact, there was no one in the kingdom who hadn't heard of the Dragonauts, the sworn bulwarks of the royal family.

As such, Pascal Dragonaut, the family's current head, was highly regarded by everyone, and his nickname as the head of the dragon knights, "Raikou," had even made its way to other countries as well. Pascal had two daughters: the eldest, Astrid, and her younger sister, Claudia. Astrid possessed extraordinary natural talent as a dragon knight, to the degree that she was Pascal's second-in-command. In fact, as Pascal's duties often had him staying in the royal palace, lately more and more people had started to call Astrid "Raikou" as a replacement for her father.

At present, Astrid was in front of the estate's entrance, pacing back and forth impatiently. Before long, a horse-drawn carriage stopped in front of the gates. Her father had returned from the royal

palace. Astrid ran over to greet him, but the moment she saw his face as he descended from the carriage, she knew what had happened and solemnly closed her eyes.

"Then it's true, father?"

"Yes, it's true. His Majesty informed me directly. The engagement between Prince Azaal and Clau has been called off."

"But we've finally found a glimmer of hope that might cure the poison once and for all! Couldn't they give us a little more time?!"

"I told them that as well, but they've already waited a year, and it seems that they're not going to wait any longer."

"But—"

"And even if we do cure the poison, as long as Clau has that curse on her, she still can't bear a child. At least, that was the reason His Majesty gave."

"Well..." Seeing no room to argue, Astrid gripped her fist, frustrated with her own powerlessness.

Astrid's younger sister, Claudia Dragonaut, was betrothed to the crown prince Azaal—or rather, she had been. At present, she was suffering from a curse of unknown origin. A curse that afflicted her entire body with constant, severe pain at all hours of the day. No recovery magic or miracles so far had been effective against it, nor had any antidotes, potions, or even the elixir the family had taken great pains to obtain. It was a sadistic curse that seemed to have no cure.

Actually, they hadn't been completely ineffective. They at least temporarily alleviated her pain. But over time, the curse would always return, over and over again.

Claudia had been a cheerful, optimistic girl. And she was strong-willed: Even though her mother had died when she was still a child, she'd kept a stiff upper lip and hadn't let anyone see her tears so as not to make them worry about her. At first, she'd resisted the curse. She'd smiled at her worried father and elder sister, reassuring them that she'd be all right. But as though to mock her optimism, the curse slowly but surely grew stronger. When she became used to a certain threshold of pain, the curse would raise its intensity. Once she got used to that threshold, the curse would intensify again...and

so on. This had happened four, five, six times, and even after the pain was so unbearable that it made her scream and cry in agony, the curse never stopped evolving.

Her spirit had finally shattered, and after witnessing her beg between choked sobs for someone to end her life, her father and sister had come to a decision. In order to relieve Claudia of her pain, they would use the analgesic herb known as tanashia. Its effects were incredibly potent, but in exchange, it took a toll on the patient's body. Put bluntly, it was a drug most commonly given to patients who were at death's door so that they could pass away without having to suffer. It certainly wasn't the type of drug one should administer to a twelve-or thirteen-year-old girl. But with no other cure in sight, they knew she would die from the severe pain at this rate. There was no other option.

Thanks to their decision, Claudia had barely managed to survive. But the drug's effects didn't completely erase her pain, and she spent her life living in fear of the day a fresh wave of pain would hit her next. In addition, each time she took a dose of tanashia, the toxin within the herb would settle inside her. Day by day, hour by hour, her body grew weaker.

In order to keep her from wasting away, Pascal and Astrid had searched desperately for some kind of solution, but even the most reputable doctors and eminent priests hadn't been able to save her. At their wits' end, Raikou Pascal and his daughter Astrid had fallen to their knees—and at that moment, a plump slave trader from Ishka had knocked on the Dragonaut estate doors, informing them both of a newly discovered fruit. Its name was Jirai Ao Ochs.

It had neutralized a basilisk's venom, so it surely had extremely potent detoxification properties, the trader, Fyodor, had said. Neither Astrid nor Pascal had believed the man right away. In fact, they'd found his story quite dubious. But they were too desperate to ask him to leave, so after having the fruit taste tested for poison, they grasped at the only straw they had and fed it to Claudia.

The effect had been miraculous. The effect of the poison inside her had immediately begun to wane. It went without saying that Astrid and her father were elated. The curse remained, but they had

been able to push back against a situation that had previously seemed hopeless, and that gave everyone in the family renewed determination.

With the Jirai Ao Ochs, they could keep the effects of the tanashia's toxin to a minimum. In the meantime, they could look for a way to remove the curse. Then Astrid's sister would be freed from her suffering. They could all laugh together again like they used to. Astrid believed that with all her heart.

And right after Astrid had been filled with hope, Claudia's engagement to the crown prince had been canceled.

A monarch's duty was to ensure that the royal family's bloodline didn't die out. Claudia couldn't have children in her current condition, and it didn't look like she'd be recovering anytime soon, so she wouldn't be an appropriate wife for the crown prince. Astrid couldn't deny the reasoning behind the royal family's decision, especially since there was no guarantee Claudia's mysterious curse wouldn't spread to the crown prince as well.

But there was another, unrelated motive behind the annulment.

"The empire is preparing to offer Princess Sakuya to Prince Azaal as his bride in Claudia's place. Apparently this agreement was made behind the scenes quite a while ago, and the wedding could take place as soon as two months from now," Pascal said bitterly.

According to her father, the cancellation of Claudia and the crown prince's engagement had been planned by the royal family for some time now.

Astrid's tone was just as bitter. "Princess Sakuya. Ad Astera's third imperial princess. By arranging a marriage with another kingdom, doesn't the empire realize that they're just asking for a war?"

"I wonder. Perhaps they realize it fully and they're doing it anyway," Pascal said thickly.

The Dragonauts were so renowned and trusted by the royal family that they'd chosen Claudia Dragonaut to be their future queen. Pascal himself had gladly borne the weight of the kingdom's honor and the king's favor. But naturally many around Pascal were jealous of his fame, and a few of the kingdom's courtiers calling themselves the "empire faction" had thrown their hats in with Ad

Astera in order to oppose the Dragonauts. This empire faction had no doubt pressured the royal family into going through with the annulment. In fact, Astrid strongly suspected the faction was involved with Claudia's curse, but despite their efforts to investigate, the Dragonauts had yet to find such a connection.

Pascal's voice was heavy as he continued to speak. "Whatever the empire faction's planning, we need to be ready for it. I'm going to be tied up at the royal palace for the foreseeable future, so you're in charge of the family while I'm gone. While you're at it, see if you can't get a hold of those Jirai Ao Ochs fruits on your own. If we leave everything to those slave traders, we'll essentially be putting Claudia's life in their hands."

Astrid nodded. She didn't want that to happen either. As members of the Dragonaut dukedom, she and her father both recognized the necessity of slaves and the importance of the slave trade to the kingdom, but it didn't mean they could place their full trust in the association.

"According to that Fyodor fellow," her father muttered, "the fruit was discovered by that stray dragon knight that's the talk of the town these days. Rumor has it he tamed an indigo wyvern with his own strength, which I find hard to believe, but..."

Seeing the doubt on his face, Astrid's expression brightened for the first time since the conversation began. "That much I can confirm, father. After all, I've seen the indigo wyvern with my own eyes."

She had originally been in Ishka to confirm the status of the Sea of Rot and pollution of the Kale River, but when she'd spotted the rumored indigo wyvern outside town, she'd changed course and headed to the stable on impulse. When she'd coincidentally met its rider in the stable and told him "until next time," it'd been her idea of a joke. She was implying that if he was strong enough to tame an indigo wyvern and thus on par with Kanaria's most elite dragon knights, they'd surely meet again somewhere down the line. In fact, at the time she'd had a mind to persuade her father to invite the young man named Sora to the estate once she was back at the royal capital. Circumstances had changed her plans considerably since

then, but ultimately, she still expected to meet him again some time in the near future.

Recalling the puzzled look on Sora's face as she'd said "until next time," Astrid couldn't help but smile. Then she turned her attention back to her father, who was now speaking like he was at a loss.

"To be honest, even with your eyewitness account, I still can't quite bring myself to believe it. You know just how much blood, sweat, and tears I've poured into taming an indigo wyvern of my own, and in the end, I still have yet to succeed. How exactly could he have done it? If it's true, I would love to know what trick he used. If it gave me a chance to realize the dream I've had for thirty years now, I'd even break the white seal on my forty-year-old prized possession!"

Seeing her father's mood turn completely around the instant he began talking about his dream, Astrid giggled despite herself. Between her sister, the royal family, and the empire, she had a lot on her plate to worry about, but her father's burden had to have been at least three times as heavy. Yet despite that, he was resilient enough that he could still focus on his hobbies and passions in the middle of everything plaguing him.

Even if only to get this reaction out of father, I'm glad I met that young man, Astrid found herself thinking with a smile.

2

"Man, I'm bored," I muttered to myself inside the carriage en route to the royal capital. The space was tiny, so my voice probably reached the ears of the other passengers as well. And as if to prove my guess correct, Lunamaria, sitting opposite me, spoke up with a worried look.

"But, master, it hasn't even been two hours since we left Ishka. We still have quite a way to go before we reach Horus."

"Yeah, I know, but I just can't help but think how much faster it would've been to travel by wyvern. Plus, riding like this, I just can't get comfortable." The carriage seats must have been stuffed with

feathers or something, because they were abnormally soft. That in itself wasn't a bad thing—rather, it was much appreciated considering the carriage's constant rattling. But no matter how I tried, I couldn't just get used to the softness underneath me. And judging from the way Seele's ocelot ears were twitching impatiently as she sat beside Lunamaria, she must have felt much the same way.

"I know exactly what you mean, master! I can't get used to this level of luxury! Perhaps it's just in my nature to prefer the simpler things in life. What about you, Suzume? Are you comfortable?"

"Well...I'm not really used to riding in carriages in general, so..." Sitting next to me, the demonkin girl looked anxious as her eyes darted around the carriage. She was gripping my sleeve tightly. According to what Lunamaria and Seele had privately told me, Suzume had been down in the dumps the whole time I was in Merte. She was cagey around others by nature, but it seemed she'd warmed up to me considerably in comparison. Saving her from not one but two formidable monsters now had probably helped with that. And yet I'd left her behind and gone to Merte on my own. I'd asked Lunamaria and Seele to look after her while I was gone, of course, but I can't deny it was a little inconsiderate on my part.

Suzume turned to me, looking almost fearful. "Um...is the royal capital...even bigger than Ishka?"

"Oh, yeah, way bigger. It's probably the size of three Ishkas, in fact."

"I can't even imagine that..." she said with a shudder and a shake of her head. "And the royal palace... Is it even bigger than your house?"

"Most definitely. It's like comparing a lizard to a wyvern."

Her face paled. "And...we really absolutely have to go there?"

"Yeah, considering Fyodor graciously set the stage for our arrival, it's in our best interests for the future to go."

Indeed, our trip to the royal capital today had all been masterminded by Fyodor and the slave trader association. "Masterminded" was a word one used to imply something was a scheme, but since I'd only learned I was going on this trip after

everything had already been arranged, I couldn't see it as anything but. That said, since he'd introduced the royal palace to me and my accomplishments, I couldn't really complain. Of course, these "accomplishments" included taking down the basilisk, keeping the Sea of Rot from spreading, and bringing the Jirai Ao Ochs fruit to the public's attention as a cure for the toxin, as well as the fact that I'd tamed an indigo wyvern on my own. According to Fyodor, that was all more than enough to pique the royal family's interest and invite me into the kingdom's service.

I wasn't particularly interested in the "kingdom's service" part. That just sounded like a chore. Being noticed by the royal family would give my reputation a huge boost, but I had no intention of working under anyone's thumb. If they made me an offer to serve them, I was going to turn them down, but at the same time, I doubted the likes of nobility or royalty would just back down and take no for an answer. Things would probably get messy. Therefore, I really didn't want to go to the capital at all, as it would likely lead to more trouble. But upon hearing the rest of the proposal, I'd had no choice but to accept the invitation—because it involved Suzume.

At present, no one in Ishka had even made a move to threaten or harm her, thanks to my deal with Fyodor. He and his association had spread the word around town that Suzume had been the one to defeat the basilisk and provide the antidote to the Sea of Rot and its toxin, and at the same time, they'd warned that anyone who tried to target her would become the association's enemy. It was exactly the kind of support I'd hoped for when I'd relinquished the profits from the Jirai Ao Ochs to the association, so I was grateful to him for that. However, Fyodor must have been the type to follow through on the investments he decided to make, because he seemed to be shooting to ensure an even greater degree of safety for Suzume.

While those intimidated by the association would refrain from laying a hand on her, as things currently stood, the threat still wouldn't prevent someone who *wasn't* afraid of the association from making a move. Put more bluntly, Fyodor was most concerned about the royal family and affiliated nobility. So he'd come up with the idea of getting the king to directly acknowledge the demonkin and her

rights. If the king publicly recognized her accomplishments and contribution to the kingdom, the royal family and nobility would no longer be able to take any rash actions against her.

Truthfully, when I'd first heard his plan, I hadn't been so sure it would work. But when he'd told me he'd already enlisted the cooperation of the Dragonauts, the most eminent family in the kingdom, I'd reconsidered. He'd offered the duke the Jirai Ao Ochs to cure the duke's daughter, who'd been suffering from a curse, and the fruit had alleviated her pain significantly. I was surprised by Fyodor's sagacity, and I'd also recalled hearing a rumor during my time in the guild about a noble's daughter who'd been stricken with a curse that no elixir or bishop-class miracle could remove. At the time that had meant nothing to me, a Rank 10 adventurer who could barely even afford daily necessities, so I'd completely forgotten about it until Fyodor brought it up.

At any rate, the slave trader had arranged everything for my trip shockingly quickly. I was grateful, but I couldn't help but feel like the more he did for me, the further I was sinking into the debt of the narrow-eyed businessman. Then again, Fyodor had used the Jirai Ao Ochs antidote as a vehicle to deepen his own connections to the nobility and royalty in the process, so maybe I didn't need to feel so indebted to him after all.

At any rate, that was why going to the royal capital today was necessary despite it being a chore. But for Suzume, who'd only just made her debut in the human world, it probably felt like she was just getting dragged along at everyone else's whims, or riding a small boat in the middle of a storm. I doubted telling her to calm down or relax was going to help, so instead, I gave her my brightest smile.

"No need to worry. I'll be with you the entire time," I said, rapping her head lightly with my knuckle.

The twin-horned girl still looked uneasy but seemed to relax a little and bowed politely. "Thank you... I'm in your care."

"You can count on me. Besides, if things get too rough, we can always just call Claimh Soras, and the four of us will jet out of there. There's nothing to worry about. Try to enjoy the trip."

The wyvern in question was probably somewhere above us right now, flying without a care in the world. As for why we couldn't just fly to the capital, I didn't want Claimh Soras to be burdened with carrying four of us on its back unless it was an emergency. I'd let the other three on if it was necessary, but the wyvern was mostly used to having me as its only rider. Also, flying that way was so uncomfortable that the other three really had a hard time with it. But the biggest reason? After the royal palace had gone through the trouble of sending an escort all the way to Ishka to pick us up, I couldn't just refuse their hospitality and fly to the capital on my own.

What's more, Fyodor himself wouldn't be participating, likely because he understood how it would look for a slave trader to attend such a formal meeting. He understood his role as an arranger and didn't try to crash parties he wasn't invited to, just as I'd expected from a shrewd businessman of his caliber.

As for Iria, I hadn't brought her along this time. I hadn't even brought her to Ishka, but had ordered her to stay behind in Merte. The orc settlement in the mountains was no more, but that didn't rule out the possibility that a few of them had fled far away without our knowledge and might return later. Furthermore, if one of us didn't stay behind, I was worried greedy villages might visit and get Merte to share its bounty and materials through more forceful methods. So to prevent any more misfortune befalling the village, I had deliberately left Iria there—though truthfully, it wasn't the village I wanted to protect, but Priestess Sela and the little brats.

Of course, I didn't plan on leaving Iria there forever, since it'd be a waste of a good soul to feast on. Once things calmed down in the village, I planned on bringing her back to Ishka. I couldn't do anything to her there and risk Sela seeing me, after all! I was a little worried she might detect a change in her daughter's behavior, but I'd already warned Iria not to act suspicious or unusual around her mother, and if it did get noticed, to inform the village chief and other key figures of the village that I'd fallen in love with the priestess. The village chief wouldn't want to lose their connection to a dragon knight like me, so if I announced my intent to marry a woman of the village, they'd no doubt do everything in their power to keep me in

their circle.

As for Sela, who not only oversaw the village's church but the orphans living there, she'd need the other villagers' support no matter what. Even if she wasn't on board with the villagers' recommendations that she marry me, she'd at least have to listen to their opinions. In fact, if I spread a mix of fact and fiction about my exploits around the village, gradually building up her affection toward me, it probably wouldn't be impossible to seduce her eventually. It definitely would have been before, but with my current reputation and wealth, it was at least more feasible now.

Of course, it went without saying, but I'd never actually do such a thing. Still, there was nothing wrong with being in a position where I could threaten it. And Iria had no way of knowing my true intent, so she was probably on tenterhooks wondering when I'd go after her mother next. No doubt she was fraught with anxiety even now while trying her best to remain calm and composed around everyone.

3

Even by carriage, it took around two days to get to the royal capital from Ishka. Naturally, that meant we had to spend the night somewhere, but since we were here at the request of the royal family, there was no need for us to camp out. Instead, we got to stay at a government-managed hotel on the main road. I figured I might as well take this opportunity to bond a bit with Suzume and the others, but it got dark far earlier than I expected, and Suzume, unable to withstand her sleepiness, ended up being carried to her room by Seele.

That left just me and Lunamaria. As though she'd been waiting for such an opportunity, the elf sage began speaking.

"Master, there's something I need to discuss with you. It concerns the matter we talked about before."

"Hm? What is it?"

She looked almost afraid to bring the topic up, so I urged her to continue. The topic in question was indeed something we'd

discussed previously: namely, how my flesh and blood was currently equal to that of a dragon, and how I bestowed great power onto whoever I was intimate with. The incident with Suzume had happened soon after, so I hadn't had time to hear the details, but judging from the fact that Suzume drinking my blood had actually saved her life, Lunamaria had probably hit the nail on the head. And what she had to say today supported her conclusion even more strongly: Ever since I'd left for Merte, Lunamaria and Seele had both noticed a significant decrease in their strength.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Both Seele and I experienced the same thing."

According to her, both their stamina and mana capacities had reverted to what they'd been before meeting me. In other words, my blood didn't just have healing properties, it had strengthening properties as well. Just as when she'd brought this up before, Lunamaria seemed incredibly uncomfortable with discussing it. She was probably worried that she was getting too close to encroaching on one of my secrets.

The first time, she'd said she could "sense the dragon" in me. She was a spirit user and an elf, so what she sensed was probably my Anima. However, she hadn't asked about it since. She was probably assuming that I wanted to keep the dragon's existence under wraps. And in fact, she was right: I was trying my best to keep my power, my Shinsou, concealed. Whenever I'd used it thus far, I'd always made sure no one was around first. When there *were* other witnesses, like during my duel with Raz, for instance, I'd refrained from using it.

That wasn't because I wanted people to think I was weak. In fact, I didn't particularly mind if they knew I was strong. After all, there wouldn't be any point to feigning weakness now that I'd already taken down griffins, scyllas, and the like. But details like *how* strong I was, the secret to my strength, and my fighting style, I wanted to keep secret.

The reason? To err on the side of caution. It wasn't like the Illusory Blade, Shinsou, and vigor were completely unheard of outside the island. When it came to sharing information between

adventurers, there were no national borders. There were probably some individuals in the empire who'd at least heard of the Illusory Blade style. If they saw my Shinsou or my vigor, they might immediately deduce that I was from Onigashima. And if that information spread, people could potentially find countermeasures to use against me. Take my vigor, for instance: It was a technique that sprang from one's internal mana reserves, so if someone had an item that could seal one's mana or could raise a barrier to defend against mana-based attacks, I would be at a serious disadvantage.

To keep that possibility as slim as I could, I wanted to reveal as little about my power as possible. Lunamaria surely knew that as well, meaning she must have had a good reason for bringing it up now.

"Since time immemorial, the easiest way to lure a skilled individual to one's side has been to use the opposite sex," she said.

"In other words, you're worried that the nobles could try and use a woman to get me to leak information on my own power."

"Precisely. Naturally Seele and I wouldn't reveal anything, and even if we did, you could just silence us before we said anything important, using this collar."

She gently touched the black collar around her slender neck. It was from the slave trader association itself, and it was enhanced with the spells Locate, Paralyze, and Choke—countermeasures against slaves who tried to escape, rebel, or say something they shouldn't. The collar was made with the association's unique technology, and it was impossible to mimic or reproduce. That was because if anyone so much as attempted it, the association would send their people to silence them for good, even if that someone happened to be a nation's leader. That was how important an item like the slave collar was to the association.

That aside, I knew what Lunamaria was getting at. If my own slaves were about to talk, I could just keep them from talking. But I couldn't do the same with a woman sent my way by the nobility, which was why she was warning me to be careful about accepting invitations and proposals from them in the future.

Truthfully, I appreciated her concern. I didn't know whether there

was a girl out there who'd actually attempt to woo me, and even if there was, I had no intention of canoodling around with a stuck-up rich girl whose face was all caked in makeup. It might sound surprising, but as the heir of the Mitsurugi family, I'd actually attended a bevy of formal banquets in the past. Or rather, I'd been *forced* to attend most of them. Anyway, out of all of the high-class women I'd met at those gatherings, not one of them had given me a good impression. Which was exactly why I wasn't expecting much from this upcoming meeting with the royals either. Frankly, I wanted to finish my business here as soon as possible so I could head back to Merte. Or it might be nice to do some adventuring work with Lunamaria and Seele for once. I'd been sending them on separate quests up until now to hide my Shinsou from them, but from what Lunamaria was saying, it seemed that was no longer necessary.

As I was thinking that, I grabbed Lunamaria and pulled her close. She went wide-eyed with shock for a moment, but from the look on my face, she must have realized my intent. Her cheeks flushed slightly, but she didn't resist.

The next morning...

"Wow!"

We were in the carriage once more. Passing through Horus's gates as the sun had yet to fully rise, Suzume was open-mouthed in astonishment at the view before her eyes. The demonkin girl hadn't shaken off her nervousness yet, it seemed, but even her heart was dancing at the capital's gorgeous vista. For someone born and raised in the forest, it probably looked like something out of a fairy tale.

If I were to name all the things that made Horus a unique town, I'd be talking forever. That was because *everything* was different about it, right down to how it had been designed. The royal capital was the only town in Kanaria with separate paths for carriages and pedestrians. As far as I knew, even in the empire, no towns were that systematic and well organized. What's more, there wasn't just one path for carriages per road, but two: The left one was for those coming into the city, and the right one was for those leaving. This was so hundreds of carriages could go in and out of the city during

the same time period without holding up traffic. The footpaths for pedestrians, too, were rather wide, allowing for many people from both directions to traverse them without bumping shoulders. There were also fragrant trees and grass planted along all of the roads and footpaths, giving passersby treats for the eyes and nose.

Ten main roads to the east and west, ten to the north and south, and a tessellated townscape that ran in all four directions—that was the royal capital, Horus. The layout wasn't some grandstanding expansion that went hand in hand with an increase in population; it was a megalopolis designed that way from the start with deliberate, scrupulous planning and advanced engineering. Its designer, Kanaria's first king, must have been quite a sharp fellow.

It sure runs circles around the imperial capital, I thought as I admired the scenery anew.

At that moment, I heard the plucking of an instrument from outside the carriage. When I looked out the window, there was a gorgeous young girl on the side of the road, strumming a lute dexterously. She was probably a traveling minstrel. As our carriage continued farther into the capital, we came across more entertainers, displaying their skills in not just music but other arts as well. One was spitting fire into the air, another was piercing a copper coin and pouring oil through the hole, and one was making monsters known as blackhounds race one another, letting spectators bet on the winners. Suzume's—and from the looks of it, Seele's—eyes sparkled with wonderment as they took it all in.

"Sora! What are all those people doing?"

"They're showing their talents to passersby so that people will give them money," I explained. "If they do a good job, their spectators are supposed to reward them with small change."

Of course, if the townsfolk were hard up for money, they wouldn't be giving any away. The fact that so many entertainers had gathered in this town proved just how well-off the capital and its residents were.

As we talked and the carriage made its way farther into town, the crowds gradually thinned. Finally, we stopped at an ornate, majestic building at the very center of Horus. Its location, appearance,

everything about it made it clear that the residence belonged to aristocrats and that the owner held a higher status than a mere count or earl. If someone had told me the royal family lived here, I wouldn't have been surprised. And they'd already been informed of our arrival, because attendants from all over were gathering in front of the mansion to greet us. Knights, soldiers, butlers, and maids alike welcomed us as hospitably as if we were royalty ourselves.

Finally, a silver-haired gentleman, most likely the head of the household, appeared in front of the gates. Looking at him, I could tell he was no slouch. In fact, I suspected he could get a wild tiger to stand down, he had such an intense light in his eyes. By my guess, he was probably around fifty, but there was no hint of old age or weakness anywhere in his posture. There was no doubt about it: This man was even stronger than Elgart, a Rank 1 adventurer. Who in the world was he? I could probably already guess the answer...

As it turned out, I didn't need to, because he introduced himself the moment we got out of the carriage.

"Retainer to His Majesty Torvald, Pascal Zimm Dragonaut, at your service. Heroes of Ishka, the Dragonaut dukedom and I welcome you with open arms to the royal capital, Horus." The moment the duke finished his introduction, his attendants behind him all saluted in unison. The knights and soldiers lined up to his right placed their right hands over their chests, while the butlers and maids to his left bowed deeply and uniformly. Their movements were as disciplined as an army's. Not one of them was out of step. However, Suzume and Seele looked more frightened by their coordination than impressed.

I wasn't frightened, per se, but I did feel a little intimidated. *So, when Fyodor said we'd be staying overnight in the capital, he meant* here, *at the Dragonaut estate? Under the same roof as the kingdom's renowned Raikou himself? Er, I'll pay my own way, so can we just stay at an inn in town instead? I'm sure the other three would raise their hands immediately in agreement if I put it to a vote.*

But despite my inner thoughts, no one in their right mind would tell the duke "no thanks" to his face after such a warm, hospitable

welcome. It would be the height of rudeness. So my hands were tied. I just had to pray that the Dragonaut family wasn't too much of a stickler for etiquette.

I really should have taught Suzume and Seele at least the bare minimum, I thought ruefully. I only knew what passed for etiquette in the empire, but it would've been better than nothing. Actually, Lunamaria was a graduate of the Sage Academy, so her etiquette was probably perfect. I should have had *her* to teach *me* about proper conduct within the kingdom.

Either way, there was no use crying over spilled milk. With the duke at the head of the procession, we passed through the estate gates, through the immense courtyard—and when I say immense, I mean large enough to fit Ishka's Adventurer's Guild headquarters—and into the mansion proper. There, in the foyer, the Dragonaut family was waiting to greet us. And when I spotted the woman I'd met in Claimh Soras's stable among them, my eyes nearly bugged out of my head. She must have noticed me as well, because she gave me a subtle smile that no one else could have noticed. She must have known I was coming, because she didn't look surprised to see me in the least.

It was only a little later that I learned her name was Astrid Dragonaut and that she was the duke's eldest daughter. And there was one other curious individual present as well: a young, slender girl who couldn't stand without Astrid supporting her. As frail and emaciated as she looked, however, she smiled at us all politely and with resilience. She had to be the cursed noble daughter Fyodor had mentioned, Claudia Dragonaut. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Not in an infatuated sense, but a horrified one. Perhaps because Astrid's soul was so robust and gleaming in comparison, Claudia's abnormality seemed all the more prominent.

Claudia's soul was little more than a wisp. I had the feeling that were I to lick it just the slightest bit, it would vanish. She might make it through today or tomorrow, but with a soul like that, I doubted she'd last another month, her condition was that critical. If it was because of a curse, then perhaps the person who cast it on her had the ability to tamper with souls. That would make their

power rather similar to mine.

My eyes unconsciously narrowed. And when Claudia saw the expression on my face, she blinked as though perplexed by my reaction.

4

Torvald, king of Kanaria; Azaal, the crown prince; and Corquia, the marquis: Out of the figures seated before me, those were the only three for whom I could put names to their faces.

As far as His Majesty went, I was impressed, to say the least. I greatly appreciated that his ceremonies were simple and no-frills. Thanks to that, I was only about half as fatigued as I would have been in one of the long, drawn-out, and overly formal ceremonies of the empire. Oh, and the king himself? He didn't seem like much, if I was being honest. He carried the authority and dignity of a monarch, of course, but it was nothing compared to the intensity of Duke Dragonaut.

But the crown prince...he had a little more fire in him. The moment he saw my face, he shouted, "Gift me your indigo wyvern!"

The boy of thirteen apparently wanted Claimh Soras as his future mount. Indigo wyverns were a superior breed, and Claimh Soras, born and raised in the wild, possessed a different level of power than those raised by human hands. As an example, whenever I put it in the dragon knights' stable, the other wyverns would all immediately fall silent and lower their long necks to the ground in reverence. So it was no wonder the crown prince had his eye on Claimh Soras. Of course, I'd never give the beast to him, but the fact that he never doubted I would was scary in its own way.

Still, I didn't feel any malice from him. He clearly wanted me to give him Claimh Soras simply because he liked the wyvern. There was no motive beyond that. I could tell he got a bit envious when his father pointed to me and referred to me as the "Indigo Dragon Knight," but that was all. It was a pretty cool alias, and aliases like that do tend to stoke young boys' hearts. I should know.

However, the king introducing me like that wasn't simply to acknowledge my achievements. By referring to me as a dragon knight—a *knight*—he wanted to give the impression to everyone else in the room that I was working for him. It was a kind of performance, in a sense. So really, the crown prince shouldn't have been envious of me at all...but perhaps it was unreasonable to expect a thirteen-year-old boy to pick up on all that.

Azaal was just what you'd expect from a thirteen-year-old prince: spirited like a young boy and arrogant like royalty. When he had realized Duke Dragonaut and Astrid were present, he'd immediately slunk away from me in shame, so I didn't even get the opportunity to turn down his request for Claimh Soras. Finding his behavior odd, I cocked my head, at which the duke helpfully explained. Apparently, Prince Azaal had called off his engagement to Claudia the other day. The duke had only heard this news from the king himself—even now, the crown prince hadn't spoken a word about it. And of course, he hadn't come over to see Claudia since then either. Indeed, that would explain why the boy had such a hard time meeting the Dragonauts' gazes.

Lastly, Marquis Corquia. In terms of nobility, her family was second only to the Dragonauts. I'd also heard her ties with Ad Astera ran deep, as opposed to the Dragonaut's policy of independence and self-respect, which caused the two families to butt heads on occasion.

"Mr. Sora, I hear you're from the empire as well. Since we'll have a new royal family member from the empire soon enough, would you mind telling me about where you grew up?" she asked me with a cordial smile.

If I were to describe her with a number, it would be one. That was because she literally looked like the numeral—thin like a needle and towering like a tree—and because she only had about one percent of the intensity Duke Dragonaut had. However, the look in her eyes was razor-sharp, and her dark-gray pupils glinted like newly forged blades. I guessed she was more the intelligent, bureaucratic type rather than combat-oriented.

Corquia was also all too happy to inform me of the annulment. I

suspected it was her roundabout way of letting me know that the Dragonauts' influence was on the decline. Despite having no interest whatsoever in the political strife brewing within the royal palace, I was fed one useless tidbit of information after another. I talked to several other counts and knight leaders too, but it would be a pain to recall everything they said.

The next day, I awoke in the Dragonaut mansion. While heading over to Claimh Soras to feed it breakfast, I shrugged to myself. "Well, at least they seem willing to recognize Suzume's achievements. I guess I should be grateful to them for that alone."

Just as the association had requested, His Majesty Torvald had acknowledged Suzume and her deeds with his own mouth. Now Suzume's safety within Kanaria would be all but guaranteed. I highly doubted anyone in the kingdom would be impudent enough to try and steal the horns of a demonkin who'd been publicly commended by the king himself. And if anyone *did* still try to go after Suzume after all this, I'd devour them without hesitation.

While ruminating on this, I arrived at the estate's wyvern stable. At first I'd been asked to put Claimh Soras in the royal palace's stable, and I did for a while, but as I couldn't guarantee that the crown prince wouldn't attempt anything if I left it there overnight, I'd asked the duke to have Claimh Soras moved back to his own place. More than anything, I was worried about Prince Azaal's safety. After all, if he unwittingly snuck out to try and meet Claimh Soras, and the wyvern got angry and flattened the prince with his tail, I might be suspected of a royal murder. No thanks.

"Huh?"

When I entered the stable, there was a figure already in front of my wyvern. I felt déjà vu—just like before, the figure had long, flowing golden hair. My first thought was that Astrid had come to visit Claimh Soras again, but the figure was smaller than hers. Even without heels, Astrid was taller than I was. Plus, the figure's chest was as flat as mine.

The intruder, having noticed my presence, turned toward me somewhat stiffly. It was the duke's younger daughter, Claudia

Dragonaut.

"Oh... Good morning, Mr. Sora."

"Good morning, Lady Claudia. Come to see the indigo wyvern?"

"Oh...yes! I heard so much about it from my sister, you see, that I absolutely had to see it with my own eyes!"

Her hair was golden, and her pupils were light purple. Thin, toothpick-like limbs and pale, ghostly white skin. Her cheeks looked like they'd been gaunt for so long that they were permanently sunken in. But her voice and behavior were normal, and the look in her eyes as she stared straight at me was full of determination and willpower. To be blunt, she was my type.

"This early in the morning?"

"Well, I woke up feeling better than normal, so I decided to take a morning walk. If I don't exercise first thing, I can't move for the rest of the day, you see." She opened and closed her fists as though to exercise them. She seemed to have quite an energetic personality.

When I drew closer, Claudia gave me a slight bow, then turned and looked up at Claimh Soras. I didn't even have to see her face to know the young girl's eyes were sparkling with delight. Her cheeks were tinged slightly pink, though. Perhaps that, too, was from the excitement of seeing an indigo wyvern up close.

"Really, though, aren't they pretty? These indigo scales, I mean. I can understand why papa's so infatuated with these creatures now. Do you mind if I pet it?"

"Don't ask me; ask the creature itself," I replied.

"Oh, right! Of course, silly me! Um, um, excuse me, Claimh Soras? Would it be okay if I touched you?"

The wyvern screeched.

"C'mon, please? Oh, I should introduce myself, shouldn't I? My name is Claudia. But my friends and family call me Clau."

The wyvern chirped in surprise.

"That's right! You're Claimh, and I'm Clau! Our names are almost exactly the same! It's like we're already friends!"

Claimh Soras looked somewhat conflicted, but since it didn't rear back in anger, it seemed that calling attention to their similar names had been the right move to befriend a wyvern, a species that placed

great importance on names. Finally, as if to say *Fine, you win,* it thumped its tail on the ground once.

"Thank you!" Claudia said, overjoyed, and reached out to touch the scales. It had taken days for the wyvern to allow Seele to get that close, yet this girl had accomplished it in no time at all. Scary.

Was her ability to naturally converse with a wyvern thanks to her dragon knight lineage? Come to think of it, Astrid had also managed to touch Claimh Soras rather effortlessly back in Ishka, hadn't she? A dragon knight's wyverns were typically considered the kingdom's property, but judging from the fact that the Dragonauts owned their own stable, they must have had a number of personal wyverns as well. And perhaps Claimh Soras could sense that familiarity exclusively in the Dragonaut sisters, who'd been raised in such a household.

"By the way, Mr. Sora..."

"Yes?"

"Did Aza—the crown prince—say anything to you about this wyvern?"

"You could say that. The first words out of his mouth were a demand that I give it to him."

Claudia frowned, as though she'd expected the answer. "I knew it. Please, Mr. Sora, don't think too badly of him. He may be impolite at times and can be a bit arrogant, and he's susceptible to flattery, but he's a good person at heart. Ever since I've known him, he's told me how much he loves dragons and how when he grows up, he wants to be the strongest dragon knight the world has ever known. I think when he saw your indigo wyvern, he was just unable to contain himself, that's all."

Perhaps realizing her explanation of Azaal's behavior had served as a rather poor defense of the boy so far, she hurriedly continued.

"Oh! And I guarantee he won't use his royal authority to forcibly take your dragon. So please, don't worry about that."

"Oh, is that right?" True, seeing the way he'd avoided the Dragonauts back there, he didn't seem strong-willed enough to want to possess the world and everything in it. If he was like that, he would have had the balls to greet them like normal, without

worrying about how they felt about the annulled engagement.

"Yes, absolutely! And if Marquis Corquia ever tries to goad him into any wrongdoing, I'll take him to task; trust me! I might not look like it, but I can beat Prince Azaal in a sword fight, you know? And I'm better at handling dragons too!"

It sounded like Claudia had been quite the tomboy before the curse had taken hold of her.

"And to be honest," she said with a hint of sadness, "that's probably why he was never really that interested in me. The prince likes girls who are more ladylike and demure. I tried growing out my hair, speaking more politely, and other things too, but I guess no matter how much someone changes on the surface, they'll always be the same on the inside..."

Then, as though coming to her senses, she jerked back up and shook her head frantically, sending her long golden hair back and forth.

"N-No, never mind! Sorry, Mr. Sora, I know none of that's your concern..."

"No, I'm actually glad you gave me some insight into what the prince is actually like. To be completely honest, I was indeed concerned that the royal family might try to take my wyvern by force, so if that happens, I'll be counting on you to take the crown prince to task, as you say."

"Oh...well, yes, just leave it to me!" She looked a little shocked that I'd taken her up on her offer for a moment, but now that she knew how I felt, she smiled brightly. And when I looked at that smile, I couldn't help but smile back.

Just like her older sister, Astrid, Claudia might have been a duke's daughter, but she didn't put on airs while conversing with me. Perhaps it had something to do with owing me for the Jirai Ao Ochs, but I doubted it. I had the feeling it was just her personality. She was higher in status than me, had more power than me, and yet she treated me like her equal, like she would one of her friends. I was hopelessly weak against people like her. After all, most of those I'd met in similar positions thus far had treated me the opposite.

If possible, I wanted to do something about the curse plaguing

her. Before my eyes, I could clearly see the abnormality in her. Claudia's soul was so wispy that it was nearly nonexistent, almost like Iria's had looked after I'd devoured most of it the other day. That was why I'd initially suspected that someone around Claudia had an ability similar to mine, but after searching the Dragonaut estate, I hadn't seen anyone like that. To begin with, it would've been impossible for anyone to eat her soul with her family and their vassals guarding her around the clock.

Besides, Claudia's condition was too unusual for someone to have merely eaten her soul. Even if someone lost their soul for whatever reason, it would recover over time. I'd confirmed this multiple times myself with Miroslav and Lunamaria. No matter how many times I ate their souls, they always came back. But Claudia's soul hadn't recovered one bit since yesterday. In fact, it looked like it had decreased even more since then. A soul that couldn't recover and continued to dwindle even though no one had devoured it...but why? Just from looking, the answer was obvious: The vessel that normally held her soul was gone.

To illustrate this, think of it like a rice bowl with a hole in the bottom. If more of the rice was falling out through the hole than what got poured in, it was no wonder her soul was continuing to leak out. That was the truth behind Claudia's curse: Her abnormal mental and physical symptoms were only side effects of her soul being depleted. And in that case, it was no wonder elixirs and miracles only worked temporarily before the curse reared its ugly head once more.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before her soul dried up entirely, which meant before that happened, I'd need to seal her soul back inside a vessel somehow. Not that I had any clue how to do that. I only knew how to *eat* souls, not heal them.

No, wait. Maybe there was no need to heal her soul at all. The problem still needed to be solved, of course, but the most pressing matter was preventing her symptoms from progressing any further. If I couldn't stop her soul from leaking, what if I just replenished more than she'd lost? What if instead of a soul eater, this time I became a soul donor?

It went without saying, of course, but I'd never attempted anything like that before. I hadn't even considered the possibility. So I wasn't sure it would work, and even if it did, I didn't know what would happen to Claudia afterward, if anything. It was possible that overfilling her soul could cause her vessel to break beyond repair. And because we'd need to lock lips for me to offer part of my soul to her, I couldn't exactly test what would happen. I was certain that if I tried, Duke Dragonaut would cut me down where I stood. I did think about sneaking into her bedroom in the middle of the night and striking while she was asleep...but if I was caught, I'd be branded as a criminal.

Well, let's save that as an absolute last resort. For the time being, I decided to search for the origin of Claudia's curse. If I could perhaps eliminate the curse at the source, she might recover on her own without me having to lay a hand on her at all. Of course, if the duke had already poured all of his resources into eliminating the curse and finding a way to cure her, part of me doubted the likes of me would get any further. Still, I wouldn't know until I tried.

We returned to the mansion together. An anxious maid came out to greet her, relieved she was safe. Apparently, Claudia had asked her attendants not to accompany her, as she was afraid that other people might spook Claimh Soras. Indeed, she really was a kind, considerate girl.

All the more reason to save her, I thought, mentally giving myself the green light to act.

5

When it came to the source of Claudia's curse, the most likely suspect on my list was Marquis Corquia. I had a feeling there was a reason the bearer of the curse wasn't the head of the house, Pascal, or the vice captain of the dragon knights, Astrid, but an ordinary noblewoman. And I couldn't see the reason for it being anything but Claudia's engagement to the crown prince.

I'd already learned that even though not much time had passed

since the engagement was called off, arrangements for the prince to marry Ad Astera's Princess Sakuya were already well underway. If all went well, Sakuya would be arriving in the royal capital within the next two months. That was far too soon for things to have been decided after canceling the engagement; in other words, while I wasn't yet sure which of the nations had proposed the idea, the plan had been in the works for quite a while now. That would mean they would have had to foresee that Claudia would be physically unfit to wed the prince. And if that wasn't fishy, I didn't know what was.

But if *I* was able to guess that much, of course Duke Dragonaut and Astrid had as well. In fact, they'd had their retainers keep a close watch on the marquis and other suspects. But no incriminating information had yet come to light. That made me think that I'd have no hope of finding anything as long as I was an outsider.

"In other words, I just need to be an *insider*," I muttered, knocking on the door to Astrid's room. The dragon knight vice captain welcomed me in with open arms, then rested her hand on her chin thoughtfully. "Ever since your audience with the royal family last night, the palace has been abuzz with talk of the 'Indigo Dragon Knight' and his achievements," she said with a smile. "No doubt the marquis, too, is looking to bring you into her own faction, or at the very least, make sure you're not aligned with us. My guess is she'll come and talk to you first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yes, I believe you're right. In fact, she even mentioned to me last night that she had some seats open. Were I to give her the response she wanted, I'm sure she'd usher me onto her side as though it were completely natural."

That said, while combat was another story, I didn't think I could win a battle of wits, charisma, or etiquette against Corquia, who'd been a noble all her life. So perhaps it was futile for me to try and search from inside the marquis's circle from the start...but I did have one advantage. The empire faction didn't know I'd already figured out how Claudia's curse worked. There was no way someone who cast a curse like that could be pure of heart. Once I'd gotten close enough, I'd definitely be able to sense the rot in their soul. So getting in good with the marquis served a purpose. However, I

couldn’t tell Astrid that I’d learned the truth either, because then I’d have to explain my ability to see souls.

Just as I’d expected, she was rather critical of my plan to accept the marquis’s offer. Not because she thought I wouldn’t learn anything, but because she was worried about my safety.

“Corquia’s family is one of the most esteemed in all of Kanaria,” she warned. “And being well aware of that, she’s used her wit and influence to poach several promising members of our faction now. If you’re not careful, she’ll trap you in her web of words. You see, she’s quite skilled at knowing when to offer the carrot and when to threaten with the stick. And those she can’t cajole to her side, she crushes. That’s what has me the most concerned.”

“You think she’ll crush me?”

“Not from the front and not directly. That’s not her style. She’ll spread rumors about you or implicate you in a scandal, and that’s just if she’s feeling generous. She’s put pressure on some families to remove the retainers that oppose her, or blackmailed merchants from opposing factions into breaking their contracts. And because she’s always just toeing the line of the law but never overstepping it, we’ve found her quite troublesome to deal with.” She gave a heavy sigh, then continued. “It doesn’t matter what status her opponents hold; she’ll find some way to ruin them. And I worry that because you lack a court rank, she’ll have no reason to hold back. She might be more ruthless than ever. Of course, my father and I will make sure that doesn’t happen... Ah.” She held her hand up to her mouth as though she’d just said something she shouldn’t have. When I cocked my head in puzzlement, she bowed her head apologetically.

“Forgive my presumptuousness, Mr. Sora. I’ve been talking like you’ve already decided to ally with us even though you’re only here for Clau’s sake. I know you have no interest in Kanaria’s political affairs.”

“Er...well, you’re not wrong, but was it really that obvious?”

She patted my head with a chuckle. “Considering your attitude toward the nobles at that banquet last night, I could hazard a guess. In fact, I was even a little worried you might announce your intent to return to Ishka at that very moment. After all, simply by being

here on this estate, people will inevitably assume you're siding with us regardless of how you actually feel."

Having been seen through so thoroughly, I managed a wry smile. Indeed, if it wasn't for Claudia, I'd probably have been on my way back already. But truthfully, she wasn't the only one of the Dragonauts I'd taken a liking to—I'd come to be quite fond of her older sister as well. And I liked how the duke treated me too. If their family was in trouble, I didn't mind offering a helping hand. So I told Astrid as much.

"It's true I have no interest in the affairs surrounding the royal family. And I have no intention of entering into the Dragonauts' service. But I'm grateful that you went through the trouble of inviting me here, and I'm honestly moved by how hospitable your father and everyone else here has been. So if there's any way I can be of use, I don't mind helping you all out."

Astrid's eyes widened in surprise. Then she beamed, as though overjoyed from the bottom of her heart, and bowed deeply. "No, Mr. Sora, it's us who should be grateful to you, and Miss Suzume as well. Without your efforts, we never would have found a way to remove my sister's toxin. And when I recall the way she smiled for the first time in so long, I couldn't possibly think of your visit here as any trouble. And yes, we would love for you to help us in any way you can in the future. The Dragonaut family will never forget what you did for us."

Astrid and I continued to talk for a bit longer about our plans until someone knocked on the door. When Astrid gave the okay to enter, two people appeared—a pair that I was quite shocked to see together.

"Sorry for interrupting your talk, dear sister and Mr. Sora. C'mon, Suzume, don't be shy! Go on in!"

"R-Right... Apologies...for the intrusion..."

Claudia grabbed Suzume's hand and half dragged her into the room. The demonkin was wearing the black dress Seele had bought for her and her newsboy cap that concealed her two horns...

Wait, huh?

"Where'd that hat come from?" I asked. "I've never seen it

before."

When I did a double take, it wasn't her usual newsboy cap, but a wide-brimmed hat that a noblewoman might wear outside. It was fashionable, and she could hide her face with the brim, so it was suited to keeping a low profile. Right... It was the type of hat a certain tomboyish young noble might use to sneak out of the house.

And just as I'd suspected, the tomboy in question threw out her chest proudly. "I was sure Miss Suzume would look good in it, so I gave it to her as a present!" Claudia declared. "Well? Not bad, huh?"

"Indeed, it suits you rather well, Miss Suzume," Astrid said with a radiant smile.

"Oh...thank you," Suzume said in a small voice, sounding bashful. Having come out of the forest only just recently, she was still quite aloof in the ways of human society. And in this case, that seemed to have worked out for the better. If Suzume had properly recognized Astrid and Claudia as the daughters of the esteemed Pascal Dragonaut, she would probably be cowering with anxiousness alone in her room right now. In fact, Seele had been too nervous to talk to either of them. Lunamaria, meanwhile, conversed with them like a pro.

As I was ruminating on this, I noticed Claudia was staring at me intensely. And...was it just my imagination, or was her older sister's gaze on me expectant as well? Oh, right—they wanted my opinion on the hat, didn't they?

"Yeah, it looks great on you, Suzume," I said.

"Th-Thank you very much!" Her face lit up at my compliment. She was so easy to understand that it was almost adorable.

"Actually, since we're here in the royal capital, it wouldn't hurt to go shopping for some new clothes for her," I murmured. A girl her age probably ought to have more than one outfit. Come to think of it, I hadn't extended the same consideration to Seele yet, so perhaps I ought to take both of them shopping.

But my suggestion excited Claudia most of all. "In that case, let's go to the store Astrid and I always buy from!"

"Oh? A store so high-class that the Dragonauts recommend it, eh?"

"Yeah! Their fabric is high-quality, and their sewing is so expertly done! Miss Suzume and I are about the same height, and while I don't know the rest of her measurements, I should be able to take those right away. Oh, except..."

"Except?"

"Miss Suzume's bust is much larger than mine, so that part's probably more dear sister's department," she said with a grin.

Directed by her words, my gaze traveled over to Suzume's and Astrid's supple chests...

Not! Nice try, Claudia Dragonaut, but I'm not going to fall for your trap! Not that I thought either of them would particularly mind if I *did* look, but still, I wasn't going to deliberately walk into something I recognized as a trap.

"Clau, that's enough. It's not nice to tease your elders."

"Aw, but I just wanted him to recognize the aspect of my older sister that I envy so much," she said, looking down at her own chest sadly.

Astrid sighed. "This is what happens when schemers get carried away by their own schemes," she said. "Calm down, Clau. I know you're all excited because you're in good condition today, but overdo it and you'll pay later tonight. Be careful." After scolding her younger sister, she turned to Suzume with a gentle smile. "Miss Suzume, thank you for accompanying my sister. Because of the status she holds, she doesn't have very many friends her age, so if you could continue to be her friend, I would be very happy. She can be a handful at times, but as her older sister, I'd love for you two to continue to get along."

"O-Oh, no, that's... Well, I'm also happy that Miss Clau has been so...kind to me!" Suzume replied, incredibly nervous. Partway through her answer, she glanced at me as though asking me to bail her out, but from the looks on the sisters' faces, her reply had clearly earned a perfect score from them both.

6

As it turned out, Claudia was so gung ho about the idea of shopping that it didn't stay a mere suggestion for long. The very next day, we went out on the town. We had to wait a day out of consideration for Claudia's condition, but it turned out to be the right move, because her complexion today was much better than yesterday. She'd probably drunk an especially powerful stamina potion before heading to bed last night.

Just at a glance, it looked like her soul had recovered a little as well. It was still wispier than the average soul but more robust than yesterday for sure. That was probably mostly thanks to the Jirai Ao Ochs, but I also wanted to believe that her improved mental state from making friends with Suzume had something to do with it. It made me almost think that them being together for another month might cure her completely. Of course, as long as Claudia was cursed, it wouldn't be that simple... Or wait a minute. If the purpose of the curse was to dissolve her engagement to the crown prince and that goal was now complete, maybe they didn't hold any ill will toward her anymore?

While thinking such things, I was standing outside the store Claudia had dragged Suzume and Seele into. The owner hadn't kicked me out or anything; I simply couldn't keep up with Claudia's—or rather, all three of the girls'—enthusiasm. Seele had been awkward and nervous around Claudia at first, but it looked like she'd gotten over it at some point. Perhaps talk of fashion and accessories was a universal communication tool for girls that transcended race or class. That said...from here, it just looked to me like they were making Suzume their own personal dress-up doll, but I decided not to worry about the details.

Still, Seele's slave collar really stands out in a store like this, huh? I'd been thinking about it for a while, but maybe it was about time to release her and Lunamaria from my servitude, even if it was against their will. It was getting to the point where it could seriously turn into a problem. Neither of the Dragonaut sisters had said anything to me about it, but they surely had their own opinions. And thinking about how I'd be continuing to correspond with Priestess Sela in the future, the sooner I released them, the better.

Thinking about the priestess made me wonder how Iria was getting along now that she'd sworn on her god to obey me. Then, Astrid came out of the store and walked over.

"Oh, there you are. I didn't know you'd left. I apologize on my sister's behalf for her...overeagerness."

"No, I don't mind at all. They all look like they're enjoying themselves, and if they'd just been with me, heading to a store like this probably never would have crossed their minds. I'm grateful to Claudia for giving them this opportunity."

As I spoke, I looked at the storefront. There was a big sign advertising that it was the preferred clothing store of the nobility, so Seele and Suzume would indeed have refused to go in there on their own. Not that commoners would go to stores to have new clothes tailored in the first place. Much like adventurers, they usually either wore old garments or bought them secondhand. In fact, Suzume's black dress, which Seele had found, was also secondhand. Still, that didn't necessarily mean "bad," and as far as secondhand attire went, the black dress might as well have been new.

At any rate, since the store catered to nobility, its wares were no doubt accordingly expensive. Just imagining what the bill would look like when they were done sent a shiver up my spine like I'd suddenly seen a ghost. But then Astrid casually said something I never would have expected.

"Mr. Sora, would you like a new outfit as well, perhaps? As a small token of my gratitude, I'd be happy to purchase anything you take a liking to."

"Huh? M-Me?" I was so surprised that my voice came out in a croak. I cleared my throat before continuing. "No, that won't be necessary. I'm an adventurer, first off, so such apparel would just be wasted on me."

"I understand that there's no point wearing nice clothes when you're out adventuring, of course. But when I look at you, I see more than an average adventurer. And I feel like whatever you're destined for in the future, it certainly wouldn't hurt to own some formal attire."

She narrowed her eyes as though sizing me up, just as she'd

done in Ishka's stable. It wasn't necessarily a prying look like she was trying to find out my secrets, but it made me a little anxious all the same. "Besides, I thought this back when I witnessed your actions at the royal palace as well, but I do sense an air of propriety in the way you carry yourself. I'm not asking you to wear formal attire all the time, of course, but I do believe that wearing nicer clothing every now and then will change the way people look at you. And you already take such good care of your hair and body that it'd be a shame to not have some good clothes to match."

"R-Really?" I didn't pay much attention to my hair or hygiene; I just liked taking baths a lot. But apparently Astrid approved of my cleanliness all the same.

"Yes, really. While you may seem slender at a glance, your muscles are healthy and well toned, almost like a tiger's. The most powerful warriors in ancient times were said to have similar builds. Personally, I find them quite attractive. It's my opinion that a thin jacket might serve to emphasize those muscles and draw more people's attention."

"O-Oh, you don't say? Th-Thanks."

With a completely serious face, Astrid complimented me over and over again. If it had just been flattery to butter me up, I might have been able to brush it off, but Astrid didn't have a reason to do that. In other words, these were her honest feelings. I could feel my face growing hot. I was actually blushing.

As though she could read my thoughts, she reached out and touched my left hand. Perhaps she didn't grab it because she thought it might be rude to grab the hand of another warrior, even though it wasn't my dominant hand. And after being showered with such compliments and shown such polite consideration...

"Now then, shall we head inside?"

"Uh...sure."

I had no choice but to nod and follow her.

In the end, quite a bit of time passed before we all ended up leaving the store. The original plan had been to get Suzume and Seele measured and have them choose what fabric they wanted, but

now that I'd joined in, I had to get measured too. Then Suzume and the other girls took it upon themselves to decide on *my* outfit as well, which ended up being a hot topic. By the time everything was said and done, it took all I had not to collapse to my knees from fatigue. As for why they were so enthusiastic about my outfit in particular, I didn't know, and I probably never would.

Anyway, after leaving the store, we started to walk back to the Dragonaut estate—Claudia had asserted she wanted to walk, so we didn't go by carriage—when along the way, she said she wanted to stop by the cemetery to the north of the capital and pay a visit to her mother's grave. She said she'd been so sick recently that she'd only had enough energy to walk around in the garden on her good days, so she hadn't paid her respects to her mother in quite some time. Obviously I couldn't refuse after hearing something like that, so we all headed there.

As we walked, Claudia told us that the cemetery's only regulation was that everyone buried there, whether they be nobles or commoners, were to have graves the exact same shape and size. And when we arrived at the gates, I saw it was true: The graves were all identical and equally spaced like on a grid. I found it a pretty bizarre sight. Depending on perspective, I suppose one could either say it was a functional, efficient setup or gloomy and bleak. And considering it mirrored the design of the royal capital itself, this was no doubt also the work of Kanaria's first king. According to Claudia, by going through the proper procedures, it was possible for families to have their loved ones' graves and burial costs paid for by the government.

Astrid and Claudia's mother was buried here as well. As lauded as the Dragonaut family was, they could have easily put her in some other cemetery where they could erect the most lavish, ornate monument they wanted. In fact, many noble families had built their own personal graveyards on their own land, and the Dragonauts were no exception. However, their mother had specifically requested to be buried here, and from that alone, I could get a good idea of what kind of person she'd been. Of course, I could have been wrong, but knowing Astrid's and Claudia's personalities, I suspected

the apples hadn't fallen too far from the tree.

As they stood in front of their mother's grave, their hands clasped together in reverence, Suzume, Seele, and I did the same behind them. And at that moment, I heard soft music coming from somewhere. When I turned to look, an old man was sitting on the ground all alone a short distance away, playing a long-necked string instrument. It looked like a biwa, a type of lute usually only played farther east. There were holes in his clothes, like they'd been eaten by moths, and his limbs were emaciated like twigs. If he hadn't been playing a biwa, I might have assumed he was homeless.

"Oh, you came again, mister!" Claudia said.

I was a little shocked to see that she was acquainted with the man. When I asked about it, she said that before she'd fallen victim to the curse, she'd seen the man in the cemetery every time she'd come to visit her mother, and one day she'd been curious enough to go talk to him. According to Claudia, the man called himself an "off-seer," and he walked around the large cemetery playing his respects to the departed with his songs. When Claudia had asked him why he did that, he'd responded with the following:

"No reason, really, though if I had to give one...I suppose I just don't want to leave them alone."

"Alone? Why?"

"Well, you see, my job is to purify vengeful spirits and suppress the malevolent god with my songs. That's what this biwa's for."

"Then there are evil spirits here?"

"Hee hee, no, not exactly. But in a large cemetery like this, there are inevitably more than a few who wander around, unable to pass on. And as a priest, it's my duty to guide them to nirvana. If souls without bodies stay in the mortal world too long, you see, they're at risk of becoming *evil spirits."*

According to Claudia, he'd said this with a toothless grin. She hadn't been sure whether he was telling the truth but didn't sense any evil intent in him, and every time she'd seen him, he'd always been diligently playing his lute. The old man had been worried the gravekeeper might chase him away, so Claudia had told the gravekeeper his story. The gravekeeper had understood and was

even grateful for the old man's service.

Even as Claudia recounted all this, the old man was using both hands to play his biwa, with dexterous, agile movements that belied his apparent age. He clearly hadn't just picked up the instrument a mere two or three years ago. And his voice... Every now and then, he would vocalize something that sounded like neither a song nor a prayer, but his voice was strong and pleasing to the ears. While I had no way of knowing whether his music really did purify evil spirits, it certainly looked like he'd done it enough.

At the very least, he probably plays music for a living, I thought as I followed Claudia over to greet him.

Upon our return to the mansion, Duke Dragonaut was waiting for us, proudly carrying a freshly killed deer. He must have wanted to provide his daughters with a hearty meal that night.

"Look forward to tonight's dinner, eh?" his momentary glance at Astrid seemed to say. Astrid responded with a smile and a nod, at which the duke seemed relieved. Having let the ailing Claudia out on the town, he and his attendants were naturally concerned. But they hadn't stopped her, most likely because they thought letting her go outside would give her some much-needed hope. And in the end, Claudia had been completely fine. She didn't look like she was just trying to act tough either. Perhaps the duke had sensed from Astrid's smile that there hadn't been any problems.

As for me, I assumed from Claudia's condition today that I would still have plenty of time to solve the problem of her curse. Unfortunately, later that day I would learn just how wrong I'd been.

Chapter 4: Devour It All

1

"I hunted this deer myself just a little while ago," the duke said proudly. "The meat's still fresh, so enjoy to your heart's content."

We were at the dinner table. The main dish of the night was deer sauté, and indeed, the steam rising from it was enticing, the smell mouthwatering. Before even tasting it, I could tell it was going to be delicious. Suzume's and Seele's eyes were both sparkling as they gawked at the food. It seemed the two were more partial to meat than I'd expected.

Many other dishes were lined up on the table as well. Sheep stew from the duke's own personal livestock, steamed and seasoned shellfish from the waters of Ad Astera, a medley of trout from Lake Toya and in-season vegetables, a red-meat oriental melon with walnut sauce, and much more. Perhaps the bread had been made with some super high-quality wheat, because it was gleaming white like a jewel. The soup looked plain but was packed with so much flavor from the broth of the vegetables that I'd probably never get tired of eating it.

There had been luxurious food at the royal palace during the banquet after the recognition ceremony, but it had been too extravagant for my palate. This food, however, had clearly been prepared to fit a commoner's tastes. I guessed they normally probably had five-course meals with an appetizer, soup, fish, meat, and dessert, but they had probably limited it tonight so as not to intimidate their guests. "Enjoy to your heart's content," the duke had said, and I was certainly grateful for his hospitality. They'd even been thoughtful enough to prepare vegetarian options for Lunamaria. It was no wonder they were such a highly regarded

family in Kanaria.

And so, amid feelings of anticipation and awe, our evening meal began. Everyone, including me, enjoyed the food with relish. The bread and stew were delicious together, and the walnut sauce on the melon was so good it was almost criminal, causing me to reflexively murmur in approval. Beside me, Suzume heard and nodded vigorously in agreement. Once her plate was empty, she stared wistfully at it, as though hoping food would magically appear on it again. We'd been instructed to eat our fill, but it seemed the demonkin found calling the maids over for seconds too high of a hurdle. I sympathized with her, so I raised my hand to summon a maid—when the sharp sound of tableware shattering on the floor rang out through the dining room.

I turned to look in the direction of the noise. Claudia was doubled over onto the table, holding her chest in pain. At her feet were the shattered remains of a porcelain plate and the shellfish dish that had been resting upon it.

"Clau?!" Astrid, who'd been sitting next to her, leaped up to help her sister with a pale face. The duke and the maids wore anxious expressions as well.

"S-Sorry..." Claudia said in a weak, trembling voice, addressing everyone at the table. "M-My hand...just slipped a little... Agh!"

But before she could finish speaking, her thin body jolted upward as she let out a cry of pain. Then it happened a second time. Then a third and fourth. She tried to cover her mouth in desperation, but moans of intense pain and agony leaked through her fingers all the same.

At the sight of this, Astrid's face became paler, and she tried to lift her sister off her chair, perhaps intending to bring her back to her room. But before her hand could touch her...

"Guh...guhhhh..." Claudia's body bent forward at a ninety-degree angle, and a strained scream issued from her throat. That was probably her last effort to resist the pain that had suddenly assaulted her. But her resistance was hopelessly crushed, because in the next moment, her subdued scream became a full-blown, earsplitting shriek.

"GAAAAHHH! IT HURTS, IT HURTS, PLEASE, MAKE THE PAIN STOOOP!"

"Clau! Claudia! Please, get a hold of yourself!"

"AAAAAGGGHHH!"



She screamed so loudly and harshly that it probably tore her throat. I could scarcely believe the scream came from the same tomboyish girl I knew. What the hell kind of pain did she have to be in right now for her to scream like *that*? I couldn't even imagine it.

Astrid gave a brief command to one of the maids, who immediately ran out of the room like she'd been fired from a cannon.

"Father, it's—" Astrid began.

"Yes, I know," Duke Dragonaut said, cutting her off with a sorrowful expression as he looked at us. "Dear guests, I apologize for the shocking scene you just witnessed. It appears that Claudia got a little too overstimulated today."

After another apology, he told us to return to our rooms. They would carry our dinner to us once we were all inside. Of course, we did as he asked. I doubted any of us would have had the appetite to continue eating after seeing Claudia like that. Plus, it was clear the duke was trying to shoo us away. With no doctor or priest in our ranks, we wouldn't be any help anyway. And I still didn't know whether I could use my power to help Claudia.

As the maids quickly got to work cleaning her plate off the floor, my group left the dining room in a hurry.

"Master, there's something I'd like to report," Lunamaria said somberly the minute we'd returned to our room.

Seele and Suzume had their own rooms, so since she'd waited until we were alone, this was probably something she could only discuss with me. And that alone was enough for me to realize that whatever she was about to tell me, it wasn't going to be good news. Bracing myself, I urged her to continue.

"While you were all out shopping, the duke asked me something. He asked whether the Jirai Ao Ochs fruit could remove the toxin from a tanashia herb."

"A tanashia herb? You mean the herb of death? Oh, I see. So *that's* what they used on her." I was familiar with the medicinal herb—or poisonous herb, really—called tanashia. It was billed as an analgesic, but what it really did was kill a person's ability to feel pain, allowing one to pass away peacefully rather than in suffering. The

duke and Astrid must have given it to Claudia as a last resort to suppress her pain.

But it wasn't any different from a person on the verge of starving to death devouring their own limbs in order to survive. If Lunamaria had told me this before our dinner tonight, I probably would have been furious. But after hearing a scream like that come from the poor girl, I couldn't blame either of them.

"And what did you tell him?"

"There's still much we don't know about the fruit or what it's truly capable of, so I couldn't give him a definite answer. However, even if the Jirai Ao Ochs *could* completely remove a tanashia herb's toxin, it can't reverse the damage to the body that's already been done. Each time she takes the herb, her body inches closer to death. No antidote will be able to change that. And though it pained me to do so, I told the duke as much." The forest elf and sage looked miserable as she spoke. Perhaps it was even harder for her to say all this out loud after seeing the pain Claudia was in just now.

Claudia needed to take the herb to withstand her pain, yet every time she took it, it brought her closer to her demise. That was a reality that not even the Jirai Ao Ochs could overturn. Of course, the fruit would reduce the adverse effects of the tanashia to a minimum, so it could at least extend her life a little. But the longer she lived, the more her suffering would continue.

I unconsciously bit my lip in chagrin. "So that's what it means to be up against a curse. If I'd known this would happen, I'd have researched curses a lot more thoroughly before coming here. Come to think of it, you're a spirit user. Have your keen eyes picked up on anything unusual?"

"Regrettably, nothing concrete at the moment. However, there is one thing that I noticed."

"You did? What was it?"

"Yes, well, just before Miss Claudia collapsed in pain, I felt an...oppressive sensation in my ear."

"Oppressive sensation? You mean you heard a weird noise?"

"It wasn't a noise, per se... Let's see. Master, do you know what a dog whistle is?"

"Yeah, it's an item tamers use, right?" It was a flutelike object that supposedly only dogs and wolves were able to hear. Rumor had it that an extremely skilled tamer could control an entire pack of wolves with that one item alone. Astrid had also briefly mentioned during one of our conversations that dragon tamers used a similar item called a dragon whistle to control the beasts and summon them from afar. But apparently the details were a trade secret, because she wouldn't tell me any more than that.

Anyway, Lunamaria told me that the sensation she felt near her ear was very similar to that of someone blowing a dog whistle nearby. "I'm not sure it has anything to do with Claudia's abnormality," she clarified. "However, if it *was* related, I find it odd that it didn't make everyone in the room suffer."

"Agreed. But I think it's too soon to dismiss it as unrelated. Seele also has exceptional hearing, so we'll ask her whether she heard anything strange."

"Understood. Then I'll summon Seele here right away."

"No, not yet." I stopped Lunamaria before she could leave the room. She looked confused, but I beckoned her back over. That made her even more puzzled, but she came over to me obediently. I grabbed her slender shoulders.

"We're going to test it out right now."

"T-Test it out...now?"

"That's right. I wanted to proceed at a more careful pace, but now I realize we don't have time to dally."

Naturally, I was talking about testing whether I could transfer part of my soul to someone else. That said, even if it succeeded with Lunamaria, there was a chance it might not work for a regular human. But Seele was part beast and Suzume was a demonkin. I didn't have time to go back to Ishka and test it on Miroslav...or Iria in Merte for that matter. So Lunamaria was my best bet. Even if there wasn't a specific method to it, getting a general feel for it would be good enough.

I had expected Lunamaria to push back upon being told she'd be my guinea pig, but the golden-haired elf didn't resist one bit. She relaxed her shoulders and stared into my eyes. In those emerald

irises of hers was my own slightly taken aback image.

"What do you want me to do? Just name it, and I'll do whatever I can."

"Er...just the usual is fine."

With that, Lunamaria closed her eyes and waited. And, as though to mask my own bewilderment at her response, I covered her lips with mine.

2

"Ugh, I'm gonna throw up."

The following morning, I exited the mansion alone, covering my mouth with my right hand as I muttered weakly to myself. My head was killing me, I was nauseous, chilled, and my joints ached. My symptoms were so severe that I couldn't even walk straight. If anyone saw me right now, they'd probably think I looked like a walking corpse. The guards were definitely regarding me with concern as I passed.

It felt as though I'd come down with some nasty cold, and normally, I would have stayed in the mansion to rest. But my joints hurt so bad it was like they'd been torn off, and I couldn't even go to sleep with the pain. It hurt like crazy to walk too, but going outside for fresh air seemed a more preferable option to writhing around in bed all day. So I decided I'd walk around the royal capital for a bit and see how I felt after that.

"Guh...I didn't expect the reaction to be this severe." Of course, I meant my body's reaction to my experiment last night: donating part of my soul to Lunamaria. The experiment itself had been a success—a huge one, as a matter of fact. Upon receiving a portion of my soul, Lunamaria had leveled up from 19 to 20.

That meant I now had the ability to raise other people's levels at my own discretion. And it didn't even need to be said just how terrifyingly powerful that ability was. Were I to publicly announce I was capable of such a thing, simply imagining the commotion that would ensue sent a chill down my spine.

To be honest, I'd been elated at first. The higher one's level, the higher the quality of their soul. In other words, I could raise Lunamaria's level, then eat her soul to raise my own, then rinse and repeat for a perpetual motion machine. I'd be invincible! Or so I'd thought at the time. But when I checked my own level, my excitement cooled down in an instant. For whatever reason, even though I'd reached Level 9 upon feasting on Iria's soul, my level had reverted to 8. The headache, nausea, chills, aches, and other feverish symptoms plaguing me right now were apparently from the physical burden of going down a level.

A soul was a highly potent vessel of experience. However, it still took a great amount of soul energy for me to level up. If you compared the amount of experience Lunamaria would need to reach Level 20 and the amount I'd need to reach Level 9, mine would definitely be higher. There was already a huge imbalance between Lunamaria's required experience and mine, and yet Lunamaria's level had gone up and mine had gone down! I wanted to shout out in indignation, but I was the one who had carried out the experiment in the first place, so the blame lay entirely with me. I would just be directing any complaints and shouts of anger at myself.

Regardless, the simple fact remained that as a result of my soul-donating experiment, Lunamaria had gone up a level and I had gone down one. And there was nothing I could do but accept reality.

"Well, at least now I know how I can save Miss Tomboy." The pain assailing Claudia was most likely the result of her soul being drained. So if I filled her vessel with a larger amount of soul energy than what was leaking out—level her up, in other words—I could negate the effects of her curse, or at the very least, drastically reduce her pain.

And that wasn't all. I'd said this before, but a person's level was a measure of their potential. A vessel of Level 10 couldn't be filled beyond that, but as one's level went up, so did their vessel's capacity. Put simply, a person's vessel grew alongside their level, and I was planning to use that to my advantage. By leveling Claudia up, I could seal the hole in her vessel. Not entirely, of course, but I could reasonably expect it to become much smaller.

If I could successfully pull this off, I'd be well on my way to solving her problem completely. Raising her level two or three times might even be enough to cure her for good. Of course, my own level would likely decrease to 7 or even 6 in exchange...but I could still hear her scream at dinner last night in the back of my mind.

I'd heard the curse had started affecting her a year ago. That meant she'd been dealing with the pain for an entire year now. A twelve-or thirteen-year-old girl had been struggling that long against pain that could hit her at any given moment, and yet her spirit hadn't broken. If there was a chance that admirably resilient girl would never have to scream and cry in pain like that again, losing a few levels was a small price to pay! I'd just have one more thing I could announce with pride to my mother resting in her grave once I made it back to the island. And besides, I could always regain the levels I lost!

However, I was only shouting all of this loudly in my heart to convince myself that it was the right thing to do. The truth was, there was a part of me that was reluctant to give up my own soul for Claudia's sake. Right now, my highest priority was to become as strong as I possibly could, and whatever part of my soul I gave up would put me that much further away from my goal. I even found myself hesitating to save her. And perhaps it was just my imagination, but whenever I thought about helping Claudia, I thought I could hear the dissatisfied roar of a beast coming from somewhere.

"Still, I've already made up my mind. I'm going to help her... Blegh!" Feeling a sudden urge to vomit, I raised my hand to my mouth once again. Normally, I would be heading to Claudia right away, but it was hard for me to even walk in this state. I doubted I could successfully transfer my soul to her like this. In fact, I was almost certain it would fail if I tried. So for now, I'd have to prioritize my own recovery.

According to what I'd heard as I was heading out, the tanashia had managed to dull Claudia's pain. Once some time had gone by and the worst of her pain had passed, they would use the Jirai Ao Ochs to remove the side effects of the tanashia. At present, her

condition was stable. This process repeated every time her pain flared up, and she'd made a gradual recovery every time thus far. But there was no guarantee that'd be the case this time. If her pain really could come back with a vengeance to attack her at any moment, I couldn't be negligent. I had to do what I could to recover so I'd be in proper condition to transfer my soul energy to her. Therefore, I'd decided to walk to town today to find some sort of potion or temple's healing magic that might cure me.

To make a long story short, none of it turned out to be effective. Apparently, this was an incurable condition caused by my soul-donating. In other words, I would just have to endure until my body naturally recovered.

I guess it was too much to hope for something that convenient, I thought with a sigh.

As I turned back toward the mansion, a minstrel's lute reached my ears.

"Um...before Claudia collapsed, you say?"

"Yes. Lunamaria mentioned she heard a strange noise just before Claudia fell on the table. Did you notice or hear anything at the time?"

Upon returning to the mansion, I headed to Seele to ask her about what Lunamaria and I had discussed. I would have asked her yesterday, but I'd felt so bad after the soul donor session that doing so hadn't even crossed my mind.

Seele scrunched up her eyebrows as she tried to remember. "That was right before the sound of the plate breaking on the floor, wasn't it? You know...now that you mention it, I thought I heard a voice like someone crying."

"Really?"

"Yes, and it sounded female. My...ocelot ears are really sensitive, you see, so I hear sounds from neighboring houses and nearby streets quite often. And the shrill voices of women or babies carry especially well over the wind, so I hear those even from far away."

Her head drooped in apology, as if she was ashamed of herself for not having the information I required. Of course, I wasn't going

to blame her for that, so I told her to raise her head and not worry about it. Besides, the information she'd given me was indeed intriguing. If all she'd heard was a crying voice, then Seele would've been right, and it was something I could have ignored. But Lunamaria, an elf, had heard an unusual noise at the exact same time, and intense pain had assaulted Claudia immediately afterward. Therefore, I felt like this "female voice" Seele had heard was significant.

Some undead monsters had the ability to damage their enemies with their screams. I couldn't rule out the possibility that an undead had caused the curse. But then, why hadn't the monster's screams hurt anyone else in the room? That doubt kept me from being sure, but the possibility was enough to make it worth investigating.

Fortunately—if you could call it fortunate—I was sick right now, and it would take some time for my body to recover. So while I waited for soul donation to become possible again, I decided I'd take a little more time to roam the capital.

3

"Why am I playing an instrument in a place like this, you ask? Hee hee, perhaps you have a hobby of asking people strange questions?"

The old man who'd been strumming away on his lute without a care in the world in the corner of the public cemetery grinned, showing his yellow teeth. There was no malice or hostility in his aloof tone; however, the light in his eyes as he stared at me was sharp, like a needle.

"Why does it matter to you what an old man does in his spare time or where he does it? Shouldn't my actions be completely beneath your notice, guest of the Dragonaut dukedom?" He plucked his lute with his finger several times as he spoke.

When Claudia had greeted the old man yesterday, he'd only briefly looked in our direction. We hadn't even introduced ourselves to him, and yet it seemed he'd remembered my face.

"It's none of my business, it's true, but yesterday I heard that your job was to guide the lost souls in this cemetery to nirvana. Why would you take it upon yourself to do something so selfless, when no one asked you to do it in the first place? That's what has me curious."

The man let out a shrill laugh. "I see, you must have asked that girl about me. For her to believe the ramblings of an old man without any proof when most people would just let my words go in one ear and out the other, she sure is an honest soul." Even as he talked, he strummed his lute as dexterously as ever. "I believe I also told that girl that whenever I see a wandering soul, I can't just leave it be. I'm a senile old coot now, but long ago I carried around a staff and pacified evil spirits. You could call it an urge left over from that time, I suppose." He cackled.

"Actually, I have another question for you as well. Do you mind?"

"Go right ahead."

"Last night, did any strange people or spirits visit this graveyard?" By "last night," I was referring to around the time Claudia had collapsed at the dinner table.

The old man cocked his head, as though not understanding the meaning of my question. "I didn't see anything like that. Wait...come to think of it, there was one shady-looking individual here."

"Oh? Who was it?"

"Why, the old coot in front of you," he said with a grin. "To be here in the cemetery at that hour, playing a strange instrument, what could be more suspicious than that?!" He cackled again.

Despite his laughter, my expression remained unamused. He was clearly making fun of me, in which case, I was wasting my breath talking to him. I turned away without another word.

"You're worried about the curse that's bitten into that girl, aren't you?"

His voice reached my ears, stopping me in my tracks. With a wary expression, I turned back to face him. "What makes you think so?"

"Isn't it obvious? You're asking strange questions about any strange people entering the cemetery at night, and you're curious about the movement of unusual spirits. What else could you be

doing but searching for the origin of a curse? And you were accompanying that girl who's been suffering from one. So there's only one answer."

"Impressive."

"Hee hee hee. Well, I appreciate the compliment. As thanks, I'll give you one little nugget of wisdom from an old codger. Since drifting into this town a year ago, I've learned a few things."

"I'd love to hear whatever advice you can give," I said, bowing to him. When I did, a sharp light appeared in his eyes. His voice was no longer aloof, but rather, the complete opposite. He spoke gravely.

"It's not spirits you should be worried about. Human beings are far more frightening than any evil spirit. If you're looking for a way to remove the curse, I'd advise you stop looking for spirits and look for humans instead."

"In other words, I shouldn't be searching for 'what' put that curse on her, but 'who'?"

"You got it. When people gather, their true natures come to light. They covet others, and their blighted hearts manifest as jealousy. No matter how distinguished they may be, they can't run from their shadows. Even if the target of their envy is a longtime friend or a cherished family member, the shadows will always show themselves."

"Then...you're saying the person who cursed Claudia is someone she's close with?"

"Sounds improbable, doesn't it, sonny? But that's human nature for you. All over the world, there are too many stories of patricide or infanticide to even count. And within a family as influential as the Dragonauts, those thick ties between blood relatives can create even darker shadows."

"Hmm..."

"The duke has two daughters he treasures: the older one, Astrid, and the younger one, Claudia. I happened to hear that the younger daughter was to be wed to the crown prince as the next queen, while the older one was to remain here in order to succeed the family. But there's no reason the younger daughter can't succeed the family instead. And it would mean that the older daughter would

eventually have to bow her head to the younger one. Forced into such circumstances, wouldn't some particularly ugly shadows manifest? At least, that's just the opinion of an old man."

"You're saying that Astrid cursed her?"

"All I'm saying is that the easiest people to curse are the ones close to you. Wouldn't it be easy for Astrid to plant something inside Claudia without her even suspecting? And I wonder, when she collapsed yesterday, was her sister the closest one to her?"

"Now that you mention it, Astrid was sitting right next to Claudia at the time, wasn't she?"

"I've been wandering the continent for many years now, sonny, and I've never heard of a curse that couldn't be lifted with any medicine or miracle. Therefore, the origin of her curse has to be the shadow lurking inside her sister," he said, plucking a few strings on his biwa.

Hearing that conclusion, I nodded in agreement, making sure not to forget to look at him with admiration. Perhaps pleased by my reaction, the old man began recounting his first meeting with Claudia without even asking me if I wanted to hear it.

"Despite her noble upbringing, she didn't even hesitate to come up to a ragged old codger like me and start chatting. Not only did she listen to everything I told her, but there wasn't an ounce of doubt in her expression. Rather, she thanked me for working so hard to purify the place her mother was resting in. Even now her figure and voice are seared into my mind." He looked up at the sky. "I've been almost everywhere on the continent by now, but I've never met someone like her before. And if it wasn't for her convincing the gravekeeper to let me stay, I would've been chased off long before now. Whether man or beast, everyone ought to repay kindness." At that moment, he began strumming very fast, as though to deliver a grand finale. Then he bowed deeply to me. "I've helped as much as I can. The rest is up to you. Please, save that girl from her curse."

"Don't worry. That's exactly what I intend to do," I replied. When I'd come here to the public cemetery, I hadn't expected to learn much. But I'd gotten a better lead than I ever could have guessed.

"Just one question before you go, sonny: Have you and I met

somewhere before?”

“Before yesterday, you mean? No, I don’t think so—though if you’ve visited Ishka in the past few years, we might have passed each other at some point.”

“No, I’ve never been to Ishka. Sorry, your face looks so familiar, but it must be just my imagination.”

4

Having returned to the mansion, Lunamaria and I requested an audience with Astrid. Naturally, it wasn’t to ask her whether the old man’s suspicions were on the money. My body had finally recovered enough to perform the soul transfer on Claudia. I could just opt for eliminating the source of the curse instead, of course, but since I wasn’t certain yet whether I’d actually be able to win, I decided to focus on curing Claudia first. And even if I proposed my method to Duke Dragonaut, I doubted he’d actually trust me. So my plan was to first persuade Astrid, then get Astrid to convince her father.

However, for better or for worse, when I went to talk to her, I was informed she was currently in the middle of a conversation with her father. Perhaps Claudia’s condition had taken a turn for the worse. Once they gave Lunamaria and me permission to enter, I decided there was no need for formalities or clever lead-ins and cut right to the chase.

“You want to know if there are any priests in the area capable of using Sense Lie?” the duke asked, looking puzzled. “Of course there are, but why would you ask such a question?”

“Because I want you two to believe what I’m going to tell you.”

“Hm... In other words, it’s something so outrageous that you think we wouldn’t believe it unless you have some incontrovertible proof like Sense Lie.”

“That’s exactly right.”

I bowed to show the duke my appreciation for being so quick on the uptake. His gaze still had a hint of suspicion, but then again, the same could be said of Astrid standing next to him, as well as

Lunamaria behind me. That wasn't surprising, since I hadn't told Lunamaria why we were there.

Keenly sensing their doubt, I continued. "I know that time is of the essence for you right now, and every moment you spend talking to me is a moment wasted. I also know that asking you both to invite a priest here while you're both so busy with Lady Claudia is the height of rudeness, and I apologize, but even so, I must ask for your consent on this matter."

"No, no, there's no need to be so formal," the duke said with a wave of his hand. "You and your entourage are this kingdom's—and indeed our family's—benefactors. And on a more personal level, I can't thank you enough for providing me with more information on indigo wyverns. The least I can do to repay you is hear you out, but..."

Duke Dragonaut glanced furtively at Astrid, who nodded in agreement with her father, then fixed me with a serious look.

"I'm of the same mind as father. And might I add, even without the use of Sense Lie, I do not intend to cast doubt on someone we're so indebted to. If you have something you'd like to tell us, why not just say it now?"

"Really? Okay, in that case, I'll get right to the point: I've found a way to save Lady Claudia, and I want your permission before I do it. That's what I came to ask."

Taking Astrid up on her suggestion, I said what I wanted to say. In response, both she and her father looked stunned. But the duke must have come to his senses right away, because he scowled on what seemed like reflex. He must have heard the same thing from so many different people at this point, placed his hopes on them, and had those hopes betrayed every time.

"Are you sure?" he said, his voice thick with wariness.

"Well, I can at least guarantee it's a better option than using tanashia to mask her pain. Now I know your next question is going to be 'How do you plan to do this?' So I'll go ahead and take the liberty of answering: I'm going to raise Lady Claudia's level. And of course, there'll be no need to take her out of the mansion. I'll perform the procedure here."

"Th-That's..."

"Preposterous? I don't blame you for thinking so. As a matter of fact, up until a few days ago, I myself had never even dreamed that such a thing was possible." I indicated Lunamaria behind me. "Lunamaria here can vouch for me. Just last night, I raised her level by one. Still, I'm aware that a testimony from a slave of mine isn't much proof, which was why I wanted to bring a priest with Sense Lie here."

A long silence fell over the room. The length of the silence indicated just how shocked—or perhaps dubious—Duke Dragonaut was. Finally, Astrid spoke up, her voice sounding strained. "I've never heard of any magic, be it a spell or item, that has the ability to raise someone else's level. Just how did you do it?"

"Put simply, by offering part of my soul to her. To be honest, I don't understand the specifics of how it works either, but the fact remains that I was able to raise Lunamaria's level. And if I can raise hers, I should be able to raise Claudia's as well. My guess is the higher her level she is, the more she'll be able to resist her curse."

"And you're saying that will save my sister? What if I tell you that I can't possibly entrust her to you on such a flimsy premise?"

"I'd tell you that I wouldn't fault you for it. It's understandable you'd hesitate to leave a precious family member's life in the hands of someone you've only just met. If that's how you feel, though, then I'm leaving and heading back to Ishka. It was never my intent to stay in the capital for very long anyway," I said, expressing my honest feelings as I bowed.

Instead of Astrid, however, the duke replied. "Raise your head, Mr. Sora."

"Yes, sir."

"To be honest, this news comes as a real shock, and I'm still not sure I believe all of it. But as a duke and as a retainer to the royal family, I've come across many people from all walks of life up until now, and I can at least tell that you're not attempting to deceive us with your words. More importantly, such a person could never tame an indigo wyvern like you did," he said, flashing a grin with that last comment. Just like when he was asking me everything he could

about Claimh Soras, it seemed that when indigo wyverns were mentioned, the duke's attitude instantly became more casual and friendly. Or perhaps he was just trying to meet me halfway. His next words proved my guess correct.

"Therefore, first off, I'd like to express my gratitude to you for divulging that secret for my daughter's sake. If anyone else found out that you had such an ability, you'd never be able to live a peaceful life again. And yet, well aware of the risk, you're prepared to help Claudia, more or less a complete stranger to you. I truly do appreciate such generosity."

"Your words honor me."

"However, what I don't understand is why you'd go so far. I said so myself just a bit ago, but you've only met us Dragonauts within the past several days. So why are you doing all this for us?"

If I were a normal adventurer, I could probably have said, "So I can make connections and get myself noticed by the nobility," and the duke would have accepted that explanation. But I'd already tamed an indigo wyvern, slain two types of Lords, saved Ishka, and been commended for my achievements at the royal palace. It wouldn't make sense for me to reveal my secret just for the sake of getting in good with the dukedom. Introducing them to the Jirai Ao Ochs had already been more than enough to make them indebted to me. So what was the real reason I was going to such lengths to save a family member of theirs? That was what the duke was asking. And I didn't have to think about how to answer. I just told him how I truly felt.

"You went through such lengths to help me out with the Suzume incident. And though it might be presumptuous of me to say so, I've been deeply moved by the generosity and hospitality that you, Lady Astrid, and Lady Claudia have shown over the past several days. Most of all, if I see a girl younger than me suffering in pain from a curse in front of me, and I know I have the power to free her from that pain, what kind of person would I be if I didn't help?"

Claudia was roughly the same age as Suzume; in other words, around twelve or thirteen, and the same age as I'd been when I was exiled from the island. A girl of that age, suffering and screaming in

pain from a curse she didn't deserve? Did I really need a reason to want to save her? Still, if I was forced to say, there was one reason that came to mind:

DEVOUR IT ALL.

Yes. I remembered. In that place that felt neither like a dream nor reality, I remembered what I'd thought back then. A thought that had seemed to consume my entire being. If I wasn't a capable fighter and I couldn't protect anyone I cared about, then I'd eat. Eat everything. Devour it all.

So what was stopping me from devouring a curse or two as well? Why couldn't I just devour the curse that was making this poor girl wail in pain?

IT'S IRRITATING. IT'S A NUISANCE.

And so I'd save her. And at the cost of my own soul, if necessary.

I didn't tell the duke or Astrid this because it would just complicate things, but even if they refused to let me heal Claudia, I was going to sneak into her room at night and ask the girl herself for permission.

Duke Dragonaut and Astrid listened intently to what I had to say, watched my behavior carefully, and thought it over. Finally, the duke slowly gave his answer.

5

The moment I opened the door and was hit by the atmosphere in the room, I reflexively scowled. The air was so sweet it was almost suffocating. It was probably the fragrance of the tanashia, and it seemed to have spread to every square inch of the room.

Claudia Dragonaut was inside, lying on the bed. Her face was twisted in agony, and every now and then moans of pain would leak from her throat. She seemed to be suffering much less than last night, but even so, it was enough that I couldn't bear to look at her. In that state, she'd never be able to recover no matter how much she slept. Yesterday her soul had seemed to have recovered a little as a result of befriending Suzume, but now it was once again a wisp.

Which meant I would need to be extra careful with her soul, even more so than I had with Lunamaria.

Claudia's eyes drowsily opened. Perhaps she'd sensed that someone had entered the room. Raising her body up in pain, she looked in my direction, and when she saw me, her eyes went wide with surprise. "S-Sora? Why are you in here?" Her voice was raspy, barely a whisper. Perhaps her consciousness was still hazy.

I spoke to her as gently as I could. "I came in here to save you," I said. "Would you permit me to come over to your side?"

"I-I can't. The air in this room..."

"Sorry, I can't hear you." I walked up to her bed despite her reply. Then I got on my knees next to her and looked her right in the eyes.

She chuckled with a pained smile. "If you weren't going to listen to me anyway, then why did you even ask permission in the first place?"

"Sorry about that. It'd be a different story if you really didn't want me by your side, but that wasn't what you were going to say, was it? You were about to warn me not to come in because the air in this room was poisonous. Right?"

In that case, there was no need for her to worry. If that had been a concern, I never would have come here to meet her. I would have liked to have explained as much to her, but considering her condition right now, there was no time to waste. So I decided to save the explanations for later and got right to the point. In other words, I told her that I'd come to free her from her curse.

When Claudia heard that, her eyes opened slightly wider. Then she smiled, a weak smile that appeared both happy and sad. Perhaps she thought that I was just trying to make her feel better. "That'd be nice...but how do you plan to do that?"

"Well, I would have to place my lips on yours and transfer part of my soul to you."

"Huh...kiss me, you mean? Is that...really necessary?"

"Yes, I believe it's the only way. But rather than a kiss, it's really more like giving CPR to someone who nearly drowned in a river. Your maiden lips will still remain pure, so don't worry."

"Father...wasn't too happy about this suggestion, I'm guessing?"

"He was so mad he nearly cut me down where I stood," I said with a serious look.

At that, Claudia managed a genuine smile for the first time. "Heh heh...I would have liked to see that...but you're going to give your soul to me, huh? Why would...you go that far...for someone like me?"

"I'm a guy. Isn't it natural for me to want to save a girl that's suffering before my eyes? Besides, Claimh Soras wanted me to."

"Claimh Soras...the wyvern?"

"Yeah. It told me to save the girl who shared its name." Of course, I was alluding to what Claudia had told the wyvern back at the stable. And she must have picked up on that, because her eyes went as wide as saucers. Then she grinned with delight.

"Ha ha...well, in that case, I suppose I can't refuse, can I?"

"Then let's get right to it."

"What do you... Mmpphh?!" The moment I got her permission, I covered her lips with mine. I was worried that if I hesitated, she might get nervous. It was better to get it over and done with before she changed her mind. And the moment I started pouring my soul into her...

"Mmmm?!"

Her frail body jolted upward. Right now, she was experiencing the same sense of pleasure I'd felt in the cave when I'd first killed those maggots with my Shinsou. Actually, considering the amount of soul she was receiving and its density, the sensation was probably ten times as strong. And according to Lunamaria, whom I'd tested this ability on, an excess of pleasure was incredibly painful. Even now, Claudia was using both hands to push against my chest forcefully. Perhaps the sensation was making her want to shove me away. Her purple eyes were filled with panic and confusion as she looked at me. But I deliberately ignored her attempts to resist.

I'm sorry, Claudia. If I stopped midway like she wanted and tried again later, I might go down *two* levels instead of one. In other words, I would end up sacrificing two levels just to raise her up one, which would be problematic. So I grabbed her waist with my right hand and used my left hand to fix her jaw in place as I continued to

transfer soul energy to her, using my strength to suppress her jolting body.

After who knows how long, Claudia went limp in my arms, as though she'd given up on resisting completely. Then I sensed a new reaction from her. It was the same reaction I'd felt from Lunamaria yesterday, and apparently Claudia felt it too, because her languid eyes opened wide. Normally, I'd have considered the job done at this point. But I was still a little uncertain that only one level up would be enough to cure her. So I poured even more of my soul into her and waited for a second reaction. Once the reaction came, I finally released her.

"That ought to do it," I muttered, satisfied at last.

"'That ought to do it?!' Seriously?!" she exploded in rage. "I-I mean, I know I agreed to it! I gave you permission! But even so, there's an order you have to follow with these things! You could have at least been a little gentler!"

Her face was beet red as she covered her mouth with her right hand, panting like she was out of breath. Judging from the way she was glaring at me, it seemed like my actions had rubbed Miss Tomboy Princess the wrong way.

Not that I can blame her, I thought as I observed her.

"You have every right to be angry with me. I'll apologize all you want, but first, go ahead and check."

"Check?! What could you possibly want me to— Oh, right, my level. Hmph...I almost forgot, thanks to *someone* doing this and that to me." She glared at me as she brought up her level display. "Wow! My level actually did go up! *Two* levels?!"

"Excellent, that's what I wanted to hear! Now, how do you feel? Seems like you're at least perky enough to raise your voice and get all angry with me."

"Huh? Just...give me a second! This is all way too much to take in at once... I can move my arms and legs like normal again! The strange numbness I've felt all this time is gone!"

"I see. Anything else?"

"Oh, and my head feels...clear! Clearer than it's been in a while! Also..."

"Yes?"

"W-Well...no, never mind. It's nothing." She seemed to be hesitating over whether to say something but then waved her hands in dismissal.

Just then, a strange noise reached my ears. A noise that sounded almost like the rumbling of a tummy. As sorry as I felt for Claudia, who looked like she wanted to melt into the floor from embarrassment, when I heard it, I was finally able to relax. If she had an appetite, it meant her body wanted to recover its energy. That was the biggest proof that we'd avoided the worst outcome.

I took a look at her soul. As far as I could tell, her vessel was full to the brim with soul energy. Only time would tell whether the curse's effects would appear again, so I couldn't declare for certain that it was completely gone, but I doubted she'd be feeling any of those effects for the next couple of days, at least. Even if someone hit her with a new curse, her body was in such good condition right now that it'd at least be able to resist. And knowing that was a huge relief.

So much of a relief, in fact, that I collapsed to the floor. The aftereffects of my soul transfer hit me all at once. I'd already experienced this with Lunamaria, but it hadn't even been a full day since then, and this time I'd given two levels' worth of my soul, so the impact was far greater than before.

Claudia called my name in a panic, but I didn't even have the energy left to respond. Like tumbling off a ninety-degree cliff, my consciousness instantly sank into darkness.

6

By the time that the brilliant light of the moon hit the royal palace's steeple that night, the Dragonaut estate was still in the throes of merriment. The duke's daughter Claudia, who'd suffered from her curse for so long, had been miraculously cured and made a shockingly quick recovery. It went without saying that the duke, his eldest daughter, and his attendants were all beside themselves with

joy. They were still a little worried about Claudia's savior, who'd collapsed shortly after performing the miracle, but the estate's physicians and the elf sage Lunamaria had both assured them that he was just fatigued from the procedure and would recover with enough rest. Upon hearing that, the duke, Astrid, and Claudia had all been extremely relieved.

Afterward, there was a modest banquet. However, it was only a banquet in the sense that the dinner menu was a little more extravagant than normal. No alcohol was served out of consideration for the resting Sora, but it was nonetheless clear from the scale of the festivities just how beloved Claudia was by everyone on the estate.

Her father and older sister were, of course, the most thrilled of all. Over the past year, their anxiety regarding the curse plaguing Claudia had eaten away at their minds and bodies, so for those two, today was literally a dream come true. And the attendants and knights in the duke's service all felt much the same way. Though the banquet itself was humble, their joy and elation was so abundant that the party lasted well into the night. If the day had ended like that, without incident, then it certainly would have been immortalized as an auspicious date in the Dragonauts' history.

However, that same night, calamity befell the royal capital.

"Excuse me for interrupting, but we have an emergency!"

The moment Astrid heard that voice, she snapped back into her knight persona. It was already in the wee hours of the morning, and Claudia had retired to her room. Astrid had just been starting to think about heading to bed herself, but when she saw the soldier's expression, she immediately abandoned the idea of sleep entirely. Judging from his face and the panic in his voice, one would think he'd just been ambushed.

"What happened?" she asked, staying calm as she rose from her chair. He was one of the soldiers who had unfortunately been tasked with guarding the gate for the night and had thus been unable to join in the merriment. She knew that because she'd personally gone and delivered food to those soldiers earlier that night. The man, whose cheeks had flushed pink as he'd graciously accepted the food,

now looked grave. His face was deathly pale, resembling a corpse.

"We're under attack! Undead monsters are rising up from the public cemetery and going on a rampage, attacking the residences in the capital! And they're heading this way! It won't be long before they're here!"

"Undead monsters?" Astrid repeated, frowning. She'd already guessed his report would be something serious, but she hadn't expected *this.* In Horus and any other town in the kingdom large enough to have a public cemetery, temples always deployed barriers around the grave site to prevent necromancers from causing turmoil. The Temple of Law and Order had used over a hundred of their most devout priests to create these barriers over every kingdom cemetery.

For someone to break them, they'd need over a hundred necromancers, Astrid thought, just as another voice spoke up from beside her.

"What was that? Undead sighted in the capital?"

It was Pascal, her father. Just a short while ago, he'd had tears in his eyes from happiness, but he now wore the visage of an experienced knight commander.

"Yes, sir! An old man who came running here from the cemetery told me, plus I saw them with my own eyes! A great number of them are already swarming the main road!"

"How many, exactly?"

"Definitely not just a hundred or two hundred. By my guess, there are probably over a thousand! And if they're not just on the road but all over the capital, we could be dealing with many more than that!"

"Thank you for your report. Return to your station immediately and tell the others to defend the gate. We'll be there shortly to back you up."

"Understood, sir!" The soldier ran back to the gate.

By now, everyone else on the estate had put the festive mood on hold and was awaiting the duke's orders. Thinking his first priority ought to be to check the situation outside, the duke left the mansion, accompanied by his attendants and daughter. The moment he stepped outside, he realized the situation was even graver than

he'd thought. His skin prickled. There was a strong chill in the air, as well as a rotten smell. Even though it was supposed to be summer, a cold wave was coming up from the ground as though the season had reverted to winter.

Astrid scowled. "Father, that's—"

"Yes. Magic that generates a penetrating cold, almost like a miasma. And this rotten smell... No doubt about it. Our enemy's a necromancer." He looked grim. They were bastards who toyed around with the deceased, and for one's presence to be this strong, it couldn't be just any necromancer. It was precisely because the duke was certain of this that he looked so worried.

At that moment, a voice called out to the two of them, coming from the direction of the mansion. "Father, sister!"

"Clau?!" Astrid cried, sounding shocked. Indeed, Claudia was in front of the mansion's entrance when she should have been in her room resting.

Why did she come out here? was Astrid's first thought, but then she shook her head. Knowing Claudia's personality, the answer was obvious.

"Clau, you need to stay in—"

"Don't you dare tell me I need to go back to my room! Father's got to head to the royal palace from here, and you've got to leave too so you can protect the town with the other knights! That means it's my job to defend our home!" She must have heard about the situation from one of the maids inside, because she already knew what was going on. And looking closer, Astrid saw that she even had her sword at her hip.

What was more, Claudia was right. The duke had a duty to help defend the royal family, and Astrid had her duty as vice captain of the dragon knights. She and her father exchanged glances. They must have reached the same conclusion, because they both sighed in unison.

By the time the duke and his knights arrived at the gate, the commotion on the main road had already gotten close enough to be audible. Human screams and the howls of the undead were being carried on the wind. Several fires had broken out as well, and

glowing red lights could be seen here and there, scorching the night sky. Luckily, none of them were very large, but as the undead rampage made it hard for anyone to come and put out the fire, there was a chance the night wind might spread the glowing embers and create a conflagration large enough to set the entire town ablaze.

"Time is of the essence! Eliminate the undead wandering the town, and extinguish as many of those fires as you can! A few of you head to the cemetery as well! If the undead really are coming from there, there's a good chance the ringleader of the operation is there too!"

Astrid nodded. "We're in agreement, but our soldiers alone simply won't be enough. Father, you fly to the royal palace by wyvern and get His Majesty to send his royal guards. In the meantime I'll use my own wyvern to fly to the cemetery to search for the culprit."

"Good idea. Just be careful, Astrid. If the enemy is capable of this much, there probably aren't just one or two necromancers."

"Don't worry. I'm aware. Clau, you mind the house while I'm gone."

"Leave it to me!" Claudia answered with a big nod.

"Hee hee hee hee! That voice... That stance! It seems you really have made a full recovery, little girl!"

Hearing a familiar voice, Astrid turned around. There, before her eyes, was an old man sitting against the mansion wall with a biwa in his hand. Seeing him grin in amusement despite the gravity of the situation, the duke scowled. His daughters, who both knew the man, just looked puzzled.

"Mister? What are you doing here?" Claudia asked, almost reflexively.

"Clau. Who is this man?" her father asked.

"Er...I met him at the public cemetery. He's always there, playing his songs so the dead can pass on."

"The cemetery? I see. So I suppose that makes you the old man who came here to escape from the cemetery; the one my guard mentioned."

"Hee hee, that's right. But to be more accurate, I didn't escape; I

came here to attack. It was a mistake for you to let me in here assuming I was fleeing, Pascal Zimm Dragonaut."

At that moment, the old man plucked his biwa loudly, and an abnormal noise reached the duke's ears. He grimaced, and not just because the stranger had addressed him without any honorifics. The soldiers around him, however, seemed much more upset by the old man's rudeness and surrounded the newcomer with angry glares. But the old man didn't even seem to register them as a threat, because his attitude didn't change.

Astrid unconsciously reached for her sword. "Attack? Attack *us*, you mean? Would I be correct in assuming that you're the one behind this?"

"You would indeed, Astrid Dragonaut. My job is to soothe malevolent gods and vengeful spirits with my music, helping them to pass on. But at the same time, my job is to agitate calm gods and contaminate the peacefully sleeping dead with curses. The undead you see taking over the capital right now... That's all my handiwork."

Duke Dragonaut regarded the man with a stern glare. "Preposterous. However skilled you may be, you expect me to believe a single person was able to break the barrier around the cemetery? I realize a vagabond musician like you has to lie now and then for theatrics, but even so, there's a time and place. And what you said just now could very well land you in prison."

"Hee hee hee! Barrier, he says! A barrier! Right, yes, there was a decent amount of mana gathered there, now that I recall. But in the end, that was set up by the priests of the continent. A hundred or so priests at Level 20 or 30 can't stop me. I'm Level 73, you know?"

"Have you gone mad?!"

"Hee hee hee hee hee! In the end, the Raikou of legend, Pascal Zimm Dragonaut, is nothing special, huh? He can't even recognize that someone much more powerful than him is right before his eyes. If someone like that is the strongest the kingdom has to offer, Kanaria's as good as done for!"

It was not the duke himself who exploded with rage at that statement, but everyone else around him. They didn't try to cut the decrepit old man down, of course, but they seemed more than

willing to give him a beating as they all raised their swords still in their scabbards. In response, the old man's lip curled, and he plucked a shrill note on his lute. Suddenly...

"GAAHHH!"

The soldiers all screamed, covering their hands with their ears, then collapsed on the spot. The old man plucked his instrument several more times, sending convulsions through the collapsed soldiers with each strum even though they were still covering their ears. Soon after, dark red liquid sprayed from their ears.

Having confirmed that the old man was their enemy, the duke and Astrid simultaneously took action. Astrid was Level 37 and the duke Level 49. They both slashed at the old man with the intent to kill, but...

"Rise, impregnable fortress! Fortress!" A black wall rose up around the old man to protect him, fully repelling both their attacks.

The duke cried out in astonishment. "F-Fortification?! It can't be! That's a Category 8 spell!"

"And he even omitted the incantation," Astrid muttered grimly.

"Hee hee hee, did you not hear what I said the first time? There's someone standing in front of you that's far stronger than you both. Even siccing your precious wyverns on me wouldn't give me a scratch."

He strummed his lute so furiously that it looked like he was trying to snap the strings. Yet, in direct contrast to his cacophonous performance, his tone to everyone present was soft and gentle.

"This is my requiem to you all. A gift of death from me to you. Enjoy it to your heart's content."

His mana was increasing rapidly by the second, swelling into a ghastly aura. Astrid and the others had to grit their teeth just to endure his power. And in the meantime, they heard his voice resound loud and clear.

"Shinsou Reiki! Cry and scream, Shizuka!"

Chapter 5: Gluttonous Slice

1

The old man's biwa transformed before Astrid's eyes, becoming thinner and longer until it resembled the female long-necked demon of legend known as the rokurokubi. As the old man's strumming became more intense, the coquettish moans from its mouth morphed into harsher shrieks.

Duke Dragonaut and Astrid stared at the repulsive sight, frozen to the spot. That was in part because the old man's power had shocked them, but they were also on high alert. The highest level for spells based on the four fundamental elements of magic—earth, water, fire, and wind—was Category 9, and the higher the category, the more the mana required to cast the spell. The spells themselves also became increasingly difficult to learn.

Traditionally, mages who mastered Category 9 magic were given the title of Sage Lord. But while there were records of such mages having existed, they were few and far between: for even one to appear in the span of several generations was considered miraculous. At least, that was the case within the borders of Kanaria.

The earth spell the old man had used, Fortification, was a Category 8 spell. What's more, he'd cast such a powerful spell without an incantation. Astrid had never seen anyone pull that off. Even the most capable mages in the royal court could only manage up to Category 7 spells, and sans incantation, probably not even Category 6. Evidently, the old man's claim that he was Level 73 hadn't been a bluff, and Astrid could feel that reality sinking in. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

Duke Dragonaut, meanwhile, emitted a strained voice like a moan. "You said 'Shinsou' just now. Then that means you're an

Illusory Blade user?”

“Hee hee, precisely. It seems you’re already aware of us, Raikou—though I already suspected as much.”

“I know your kind have kept the Demonic Gate on Onigashima sealed for the past three hundred years. But why would you turn against our kingdom?!”

Three hundred years ago, the Sword Saint had come up with the Illusory Blade style in order to defeat the Demon God. The technique was so immensely powerful that ever since Ad Astera’s founding, the empire’s territory had expanded but never shrunk.

The duke himself had once witnessed an Illusory Blade user’s fighting style as a little boy, so he knew the extent of their power firsthand. If the empire ever mobilized those warriors to invade other nations, they’d probably have the strength to unify the continent. But based on what the duke knew about Illusory Blade users, he doubted that would ever happen. When it came to foreign affairs, the Mitsurugi family and the warriors they governed had a strict policy: Don’t invade, and don’t let the others invade. If the empire was to be invaded, the Illusory Blade users would defend their mother nation, of course, but they would never lead a full-scale invasion against another country, even if it was an order from Ad Astera’s emperor. The Mitsurugi family had enough pull within the empire that they were allowed that level of freedom. The Illusory Blade was meant to be used on monsters, not humans.

In fact, if the enemy was any manner of evil spirit, demon, or apparition, the Mitsurugi forces would even cooperate with other countries to eliminate the threat, just as Kanaria had enlisted the aid of the family to wipe out a tribe of demonkin forty years ago. It was during that battle that Duke Dragonaut had seen the Illusory Blade power for himself.

At present, Kanaria had no desire to invade the empire. The duke was remaining vigilant of the empire’s intent to attack, of course, but there were no plans in place to strike the empire first. So why had one of their warriors come to bare his fangs at the kingdom? He could only think of one reason.

“It’s because the kingdom chose to protect that demonkin, isn’t

it?”

To the Mitsurugi family, the Demon God and any of its descendants were mortal enemies, which included the demonkin girl, Suzume. Duke Dragonaut suspected Kanaria had incurred the Mitsurugis’ wrath when the royal family had praised the demonkin’s achievements and permitted her to live within their borders.

The old man made no attempt to keep his true objective under wraps and answered readily with a cackle. “It’s a good guess, and I won’t say it’s not one reason. It’s true that we must wipe out anyone related to the Demon God. But in this case, let’s just call that a side mission, shall we? My main target is Claudia Dragonaut herself.”

“You attacked the royal capital just to kill Clau?!”

“Well, if she had died from her curse like she was supposed to, I wouldn’t have had to go this far. And yet, I don’t know how you all did it, but you removed the curse. I’ve waited a whole year for it to saturate her body to make her unfit to marry to the crown prince, now I’m back to square one again!” The man laughed again, flashing his yellow teeth. “The crown prince is scheduled to wed Princess Sakuya two months from now, in tandem with her coming-of-age, so I don’t have time to curse Claudia again. Therefore, I was forced to take a more direct approach. Much like the forest is the best place to hide a tree, the best place to hide a corpse is in the middle of a bigger tragedy! No one’s going to pay much attention to the death of a single girl while undead are running loose all over the capital!”

“You secretly put a curse on my daughter a year ago so that no one would suspect the empire was involved in her death. Now that your plan has failed, you sic undead on innocent townspeople to distract them while you kill her?! Is this how the Mitsurugi family conducts business?! Aren’t the guardians of Onigashima supposed to defend their country rather than attacking others?!”

“Hee hee hee hee! Oh, but we are defending our country—the empire. And once Ad Astera’s rule encompasses the whole continent, we’ll protect the entire world and everyone in it. How is that going against our creed? Sure, a few innocents might get trampled in the process, but in order to walk, you have to crush a few ants, no? You can’t call it cruel when it’s an inevitability. Hee hee!”

The old man's shrill laughter caused Claudia, who'd been listening silently up until then, to finally speak up. "So...you lied to me back at the cemetery, mister?"

The man goggled at her, and the scorn and ridicule seemed to vanish from his tone. "No, miss, nothing I said back then was a lie. It's true that I see unruly spirits off to nirvana for a living, and it's also true, Claudia Dragonaut, that I admire your behavior." His voice became almost a whisper. "I use my music to suppress malevolent gods and purify evil spirits. But that's not my only job. As retainers of Mitsurugi, my brethren and I serve as the emperor's sword and shield, and sometimes that means I'm ordered to do dirty work. Even if it means I'm forced to cast a curse on an innocent girl to give her a slow, painful death."

"Mister, you—"

"Although," the old man continued, cutting her off with a grin, "my master only tasked me with ending Claudia's engagement to the crown prince, and doing it in such a way that no one would suspect the empire's involvement. I was free to choose exactly how I wanted to get it done." It sounded like he could barely contain his delight.

"What?" Claudia looked shocked.

"In other words, little girl, *I* came up with the idea of killing you with a curse that slowly takes effect! And the undead currently attacking the royal capital! Hee hee hee hee! Do you know why?! It was so I could enjoy hearing your screams of suffering over this past year! Those shrieks of pain are like music to my ears—and that one you let out the other night was your best yet!"

Claudia gasped.

"Oh, how I enjoyed it! Oh, how thrilling it was! People shine brightest when they're suffering, you know! Brooding! Agony! Despair! And let's not forget lamentation! It's all so radiant! Not since I strangled my wife to death with my own two hands have I felt such delight in another's suffering, Claudia Dragonaut!"

The man began to strum his biwa—now his Shinsou—violently. The biwa shuddered intensely before emitting a noise that could hardly be called a note. The cursed, incomprehensible sound struck the ears of the duke and his daughters alike, stabbing into their

brains. They howled in pain, collapsing to the ground.

In contrast, the old man's voice was calm. "However, I am curious about something. How in the world did you remove my curse? That was my greatest masterpiece, devised with my own Shinsou. Not even the most potent rejuvenating water could have dispelled it, of that I'm certain."

"Oh, you don't know, mister?" Claudia said through gritted teeth. "A princess's curse can only be dispelled by her prince's kiss."

"Hee hee hee! Funny joke, but if one kiss was enough to dispel a curse, sorcerers couldn't make a living, now could they? Well, if you don't want to tell me, that's fine. I'll just take my sweet time getting it out of you. Remember, it's the right of the strong to savor their prey!"

The man grinned again. Just as he was about to expel another peal of shrill laughter, however, *it* happened. As though it couldn't bear to hear the old man prattle on any longer, a black flash of light erupted from the mansion with a noiseless impact, swallowing the night sky. Its sheer power disrupted the Fortification spell the old musician had deployed.

"What was...?" The man narrowed his eyes as the light even swallowed up the rest of his sentence. He felt intense pressure on his skin. His throat went dry. The presence coming from the mansion was like nothing he'd ever seen or felt before. He immediately abandoned the idea of torturing the duke and his daughters to death. Or rather, this new opponent was so formidable that he was *forced* to give up on the idea.

Before long, a lone young man emerged from the mansion's entrance. The old man recognized him from the public cemetery. Back then, the stranger had approached the seemingly homeless old man without any fear or prejudice, just like Claudia Dragonaut had done.

And there was something else he recognized as well.

"Mr. Sora!" Claudia cried out.

The young man's name. As a retainer to the Mitsurugi family, it was a name that, for a variety of reasons, the old man could never forget.

2

"Sora... Sora... As in, *that* Sora? Oho! You don't say!"

Upon hearing the name Claudia had shouted, the old man's eyes narrowed with great interest. Having served the Mitsurugi family for many years now, the name definitely rang a bell. Sora Mitsurugi, the puny son of the mighty Sword Saint himself.

"Washed up on the shores of Kanaria, did you? Ah, no wonder you looked so familiar! And yet..." There was a hint of doubt in his voice. He could feel a torrential outpour of vigor coming from this young man, roaring audibly as it coursed through his body, its pulse causing the air around him to tremble. How could this be the same ordinary boy who couldn't even overcome his trial ceremony back on the island? The young man in front of him had definitely awakened to his Shinsou, there was no doubt about that. And most likely, the black sword in his right hand was his Shinsou's manifestation.

The Illusory Blade style was only taught on Onigashima. Someone who had nothing to do with the style or Onigashima could never awaken to their Shinsou. Therefore, the Sora before him had to be Sora Mitsurugi. But he hadn't passed his trial, so he wasn't an official Illusory Blade user. Had someone so weak really managed to gain his Shinsou's power on his own? That was hard to believe.

But if so...interesting! Quite interesting indeed! The old man's lips curled into a grin of amusement, and he let out a throaty chuckle. He'd never met Sora before and had no emotional attachment whatsoever to the Sword Saint's exiled son, but if Sora truly had crawled up out of the abyss to obtain the power of his Shinsou on his own, the old man felt that alone was worthy of respect. After all, he had once traversed a similar path himself.

"Sora Mitsurugi, I presume? Please forgive this old codger for not recognizing you right away. I am Jijinbou, one of the Eight Banners of Seirin."

The old man—Jijinbou—spoke to Sora as respectfully as he could manage. However, since he'd announced his intention to attack and already caused the duke's family and attendants to collapse, Sora would no doubt still regard him as an enemy. And indeed, Sora only

glared at him without saying a word. Therefore, Jijinbou went right on speaking.

"So, young 'un, did my little suggestion that Astrid Dragonaut cursed Claudia Dragonaut prove useful?"

At that, both sisters simultaneously snapped their heads up to look at Jijinbou, then looked over at Sora.

"It sure did," Sora said with a small shrug. "The moment I saw the repulsive look in your eyes as you named Astrid as the culprit, it was obvious that she was innocent."

"Hee hee hee! Then perhaps I ought to praise your keen insight. It seems you've grown up a little from when you were exiled from the island on account of failing to beat a single Dragon Fang Knight, eh?" His voice was laced with malice and scorn.

"Oh? But if I recall correctly, weren't you similarly exiled?" Sora retorted, his tone equally derisive. "I don't think our positions are too different."

"Hee hee hee hee! Now that's something I didn't expect to hear. I've been trusted to carry out the emperor's orders. You were exiled from the island on account of being too weak. What could the two of us possibly have in common? If what you said just now wasn't just some thoughtless comeback, then by all means, inform this senile old coot how he's mistaken."

"Certainly. It's simple: If you really were of any use to the Mitsurugis in combat, they never would have sent you off the island." Sora's lip curled in a smirk as he looked at Jijinbou. "As the most powerful force in Onigashima right behind the Mitsurugis themselves, the Eight Banners of Seirin are duty bound to use their Shinsous to protect the island. Otherwise, the place would be overrun by monsters pouring through the Demonic Gate in no time. Were there any exceptions, they would have to be rookies who'd just enlisted, those too sick or wounded to fight, or those who were capable fighters but whose Shinsous' power were wholly unsuited to combat on the island."

Those from the third case would be given orders to act outside the island. Even if they couldn't fight the tough monsters on Onigashima, they could fight weaker monsters elsewhere in the

world, and they could certainly defeat other humans. In other words, they were suited to working for the empire outside the island's borders. They would be tasked with taking care of the empire's nagging dirty work, while the most elite Illusory Blade users continued to form the cornerstone of the island's defenses. Sora knew all too well how the current head of the family distributed the forces under him.

"Based on the fact that you're here right now and not on the island, I can guess your real standing within the Eight Banners. I might have been exiled, but you were essentially demoted. So our positions really aren't that different, now are they?"

"Hee hee, what nonsense. I'm Level 73! For an upstart young 'un to view me on the same level as you, I'm honestly offended!" He cackled again.

Sora came at him from a different angle. "Seeing the way you used your biwa-shaped Shinsou just now, it seems like your Shinsou specializes in sound and curses."

"Oh?"

"Considering your curse was able to reach all the way from the public cemetery to this estate, your range is truly impressive. So why was it deemed unsuitable for combat on the island? Was it perhaps because it doesn't work against anyone possessing a certain amount of vigor?"

The old man didn't answer.

"In other words, no matter how high your level, you're only able to bully opponents weaker than you are. And in that case, I have no reason to fear you."

Sora spoke with absolute confidence as he swung his Shinsou forward with a flash of black light. Immediately afterward, a loud, cacophonous noise like a hundred ceramic vases shattering resounded throughout the duke's garden. It was the sound of Jijinbou's Fortress spell being shattered into a million pieces by Sora's ranged Gale attack. The shards of the broken barrier fell to the ground and disappeared like melted snow. The old man's eyes went wide—his toughest shield had been destroyed with a single swing of Sora's blade.

But Jijinbou didn’t have time to be shocked. Ahead of him and his destroyed barrier, Sora lunged forward with his blade drawn. Jijinbou had his back against the mansion’s wall, so there was no room for him to jump backward and evade. Instead he used Shizuka, his biwa, to block. The moment both Shinsous clashed, Shizuka let out a piercing howl of anguish. It was the Shinsou’s automatic counterattack, and its power was several times greater than the attack that had sent the duke and his daughters to the floor.

A normal opponent’s eardrums would have ruptured, with blood spraying out of their ears, but Sora calmly endured the assault. In fact, he paid it no mind whatsoever. Just as he had guessed, Shizuka’s reverberation didn’t work on opponents with enough vigor. In fact, instead of injuring Sora, Shizuka itself began to crack.

Realizing that he’d lose if the clash between Shinsous persisted, a peal of shrill laughter escaped Jijinbou’s throat. “How truly amusing! To think that I was about to torture Miss Claudia Dragonaut to my heart’s content only to end up in a difficult situation myself! Indeed, life doesn’t always turn out like you expect, which is what makes it so enjoyable! Very well, then. If that’s how you want to play it, I suppose I can get serious!”

Jijinbou shrieked eerily, almost like a bird, and Sora was immediately blasted backward as though an invisible hammer had slammed into him. Jijinbou had struck him with a powerful vigor cannon at point-blank range. If Sora could execute a vigor cannon when he was just a beginner, it wasn’t surprising that Jijinbou could too. Sora received minimal damage, but that hadn’t been Jijinbou’s aim in the first place. He’d just wanted to put some distance between them.

Before Sora could even get up, Jijinbou began casting his next spell. “O one million horsemen of steel and iron, may your wounded bodies and weary bones take refuge within these walls!”

His incantation was as fast as it was precise. As the magic took shape around him, not a bit of his mana was out of place. Had another mage been present to watch, they would have correctly recognized that Jijinbou’s mastery of his mana had reached Sage Lord level.

"Even after your iron, food, and water have all run out, this fortress's flag will continue to fly. Gather, rank-and-file soldiers, and swear revolution! Amass roof tiles to build these walls, and bore through hills to form these trenches! Here lies your impregnable stronghold—Fortress!"

The moment he finished chanting, the black walls—no, the walls of a fortress—appeared to surround him once more. Their thickness, height, and resilience were all on a different level from the wall Sora had just shattered. It was literally like a miniature fortress had appeared around the old man.

"*This* is my ultimate shield! With all the mana I've put into these defenses, don't think you'll pierce them as easily as before! Now your attacks won't reach me, but mine will reach you, young 'un!" Jijinbou chortled with joy. "Now, I believe you said before that you had no reason to be afraid of me? Don't tell me you honestly thought you could win with such a half-baked understanding of my power! In that case, I'll have to award you a five out of ten! It's true that my Shinsou doesn't work on the monsters in Onigashima. Nor does it work on the other Banners and knights of Seirin who've awakened to their Shinsous. But I've got another technique as a work-around. Whoever said my Shinsou had just *one* ability?!"

Jijinbou immediately began chanting a second spell.

"May the trees rot! May the grass wither! May the earth decay!"

At the same time, another unfamiliar voice began chanting a different spell. "Your blood boils, your hair is set aflame, your eyeballs melt in their sockets!" The voice was coming from Jijinbou's Shinsou, Shizuka. The long-necked, grotesque biwa in his hand continued to shriek the incantation.

"Dance, embers of destruction! Spread, miasma of disease!"

"Your castle in vibrant flame, its furniture made out of skulls! The flag of treason flies high! The assassin's dagger takes its sacrifice!"

Double casting. That was the other ability Jijinbou's Shinsou afforded him.

"Fester! Bloat! Decompose—Abscess of Rot!"

"May those eyes and hands become the flame to immolate your enemies—Princess Blaze!"

Once Jijinbou finished his incantation, a Category 7 earth spell activated. Decay rapidly began to spread out all around the old man as the soil in the duke's garden became muddy, emitting squelching noises. Jijinbou's spell had manifested a Sea of Rot in the duke's estate. Even the neat cobblestone path leading from the mansion's gate to the foyer became clumpy and muddy, like clay. The verdant, neatly trimmed grass withered and turned dark purple, and a putrid stench blanketed the area.

The duke's attendants cried out in panic and confusion as the estate they worked so hard to maintain continued to decompose. The ground gave way, becoming a bottomless swamp. Everyone on top of the ground started to sink into the soggy earth. Even if they had managed to squirm free, the entirety of the duke's garden was already infected by the old man's magic. There was no escape. The more they struggled, the deeper they sank and the less they were able to move.

Sora was no exception. What's more, over ten raging tentacles of flame from Shizuka roared as they shot toward him. If Sora had only had himself to worry about, he could have strengthened his body with vigor to leap out of the way in time, but the duke and his daughters were behind him. If he evaded, the flames would hit the helpless family. And from the scythe-shaped grin on Jijinbou's face, Sora could tell it had been deliberate.

3

As my feet continued to sink into the rot, the tentacles of flame streaked toward me.

"Now I see," I muttered to myself. Jijinbou had protected himself with a Category 8 defensive spell as resilient as any normal fortress, then used his Shinsou to attack with two spells at once. In other words, his fighting style was to hide behind his defenses while taking out his enemies. Just hearing his chants was enough for me to tell that even without using his Shinsou, he was already an incredibly skilled mage capable of casting extremely powerful spells. And by

adding his vigor and Shinsou to his repertoire, he guaranteed that no regular mage would be able to stand up to him. In fact, with power like that, he could probably take on a whole army by himself.

The force of his Category 5 fire spell, Princess Blaze, was also tremendous. It was the same spell Miroslav had used against me back in the cave, but her flames had been much thinner, and there had only been three or four tendrils. Yet Jijinbou had fired over ten tentacles at once, each of them thick like a pillar, and they were approaching at a much faster speed. If even one of them hit me, my body would probably burst into flame and be reduced to ash in an instant.

But so what?

Just before one of the pillars of flame reached me, I cut it down with my Shinsou. The roaring mass of fire was eliminated in an instant. Not severed, *eliminated.* Like an invisible monster had swallowed it whole. I didn't so much as feel a hint of heat on my face. A faint burnt smell reached my nostrils, but that was all.

I swung my blade again, snuffing out a second, third, and fourth tentacle. My legs might have been stuck in the mud, but as long as I could swing my sword, it hardly mattered. I continued eliminating the flaming tentacles one by one as they approached me, and after I got rid of the twelfth, the attack was completely nullified. After confirming as much, I stabbed my sword into the ground while I was at it, absorbing the rotten mana poisoning the ground into my blade. Getting rid of the miasma wouldn't restore the earth to normal, but at least now the others wouldn't sink any farther into the mud.

Jijinbou's eyes were wide with shock, like he couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed. And when he spoke, his voice was laced with surprise and confusion. "Hee...hee hee! I see, I see! So your Shinsou has the power to absorb, and your techniques are all specialized for absorption! That's how you were able to shatter my Fortress earlier, no? Hee hee hee! That means your Shinsou is the natural enemy of a magic user like me!"

He began strumming his lute furiously.

"However! You need to swing your sword to use that ability, don't you?! So if I attacked you from all directions, you wouldn't be able to

withstand it, would you, young ’un?! And you probably have a limit to how much mana you can absorb. You’ve already absorbed the entirety of my Princess Blaze, so I wonder how much more you’ll be able to take in! If your body takes in more mana than it can handle, it’ll explode along with the mana inside! And now that I’ve discovered the trick to your ability, I’ll do my duty as a priest and guide you to the circle of hell reserved for gluttons!”

Shizuka began chanting again, its intonation chilly as its voice resounded through the night sky. “Eri Eri Urus Eri Urus! Protect the pretas, keep the vengeful apparitions safe! The demons howl with joy tonight!” it screeched. The voice sounded even more pained than before.

A Shinsou was the manifestation of an Illusory Blade user’s Anima. Though it wasn’t “alive” in the human sense, it did exist as a being, so it most likely had a will of its own. As Jijinbou continued to make his other half suffer, he was all smiles.

“First, let this old man impart some wisdom upon you, young ’un. What this world calls ‘magic’ is actually a sanitized version meant for human use. For instance, this Fortress magic is a sanitized Category 8 earth spell, and my Shinsou’s Princess Blaze earlier was a sanitized Category 5 fire spell. However, there are surprisingly few mages out there who are aware of this.”

He went on to explain that magic was an otherworldly force, and the logic it operated under did not apply to this world. Normally, this would mean it would be beyond human grasp; however, long, long ago, a group of summoners had made a pact with a demon in order to modify powerful offensive magic for human use, and through the techniques they’d passed down, humanity had unlocked the ability to use magic. This was “sanitized magic,” or “sorcery.”

“Put simply, what we humans know as magic is a heavily modified version, meaning an original version has to exist as well. And we exceptionally powerful mages call this original power ‘eclipse magic.’”

It was magic that humans were never meant to wield. Therefore, one needed a superhuman amount of mana and vitality to control it. For demons, the amount was a drop in the bucket, but a normal human body couldn’t endure such a burden. Therefore, when a

human used eclipse magic, it forced an irreversible mutation. In short, the more a human used eclipse magic, the less human they became.

"Most people know of the existence of vampires and liches, but did you know some of those creatures used to be human? They used too much eclipse magic and became inhuman as a result. But as dangerous as the knowledge of eclipse magic is, anyone aiming to become a high-ranking mage must learn it. Much as there's no worth in a lottery where everyone wins, you can't truly master sorcery without learning the harmful original magic."

According to the old man, eclipse magic wasn't even taught at the Sage Academy. If one truly wished to become a first-rate mage, they would need to discover the existence of eclipse magic and learn it all on their own. And by the time Jijinbou finished his spiel, Shizuka had nearly completed her incantation.

"Hee hee hee! Now, young 'un, witness the *true* Fortress, the forbidden version of a Category 8 spell! Whatever disadvantages I'd normally receive from using eclipse magic, whatever demon's curse might befall me, my Shinsou will bear it in my place! But here's the kicker—each time my Shinsou is cursed, it mutates and becomes even more powerful! That's the beauty of Shizuka, the incarnation of my late wife! Now, young 'un—or should I say Sora Mitsurugi! If you think you can devour *this* magic, be my guest!"

"The five viscera pile up to form a wall!" Shizuka shrieked. "Wring their blood to form a moat! This is your stronghold, forever in limbo —Forsaken Fortress!"

The moment the incantation completed, a bloodred castle gate manifested in front of Jijinbou. The vermilion gates then creaked open, and an army of malevolent spirits poured forth. The hellish castle and undead army stationed within had all been summoned by that powerful spell.

If Fortress was a spell that prioritized defense, this one was clearly grounded in offense. However powerful my Shinsou was, I couldn't fend off the undead if they were attacking me from all directions, and against an infinite army of undead, I'd reach my limit for devouring sooner or later—at least, that was surely what Jijinbou

was thinking. Whether or not he was correct, his aim was obvious.

But there was nothing saying I had to play his game. While the old man had prattled on and his Shinsou had chanted its spell, I hadn't just been twiddling my thumbs. I'd already gathered the maximum amount of vigor possible into my right hand. Just like when I'd annihilated the manticores in Titus Forest, my vigor was spiraling violently around my blade. This time, I was going a step above a simple Gale. This voracious technique even devoured the distance to my enemy. If I were to name it, perhaps it would be called something like Gluttonous Slice? At any rate, my blade rattled and howled, or perhaps it was cackling like mad. Almost like a greedy, impatient child banging on the dinner table in anticipation of his meal. It must have sensed that my opponent had a level of soul energy that couldn't even be compared to the manticores. And I decided I'd grant my Shinsou's desire.

With a spirited cry, I raised my blade high, slightly at an angle...and brought it down with all my might.

"Eh?" Realizing that the area encompassing the duke's garden had gone completely silent, Jijinbou uttered a sound of surprise. Using his right hand, he felt around on his own body, first his left shoulder, then his right flank. Just as he'd suspected, there was a deep, diagonal gash running between them. And as though waiting for the moment he'd confirmed it, a sound like thousands of glass panels shattering at once assaulted the ears of everyone present. Of course, it was the sound of my slice shattering his fortress, double-layered with both standard and eclipse magic, into tiny shards. At the same time that his magic vanished, the army of undead that was about to be unleashed on the living world returned to their resting places.

"Hee...hee hee...hee hee hee!" The shrill cackle erupting from Jijinbou's mouth was no longer an amused one, more like a scream. "Ridiculous! It can't be! How could just one sword slice sever my Category 8 spell—fortified with eclipse magic, no less?! No, you didn't just sever it...you erased it without a trace! Like you swallowed it whole! But that's impossible! As bad a matchup as my

ability is with yours, wielding greater power requires greater restrictions! Otherwise it'd upset the balance!"

As the man grew more frantic, I slowly approached him. The decayed, muddy ground made it harder to walk, but Jijinbou wasn't making a run for it, so it didn't matter. Even if he had, he was already fatally wounded. As proof, I could feel his soul energy beginning to seep into me. Perhaps Jijinbou could feel it too, because he let out a high-pitched wail. "One's Shinsou is a manifestation of their heart! For you to devour a forbidden art like nothing... What kind of monster lives inside you?!"

Oh? What happened to calling me 'young 'un'? I wanted to retort, but there was probably no point in smarmy banter with him now. What was more, he might have been my enemy, but I didn't want the Dragonaut sisters to see me ridiculing an old man on death's door. So I didn't say anything more than was necessary.

"You're going to die soon anyway, so it wouldn't matter even if I told you. Any last words?"

"D... Die?! Y... You're going to kill me?! W-Wait, let's not be hasty now, young 'un! You're the Mitsurugi family head's son! Are you really going to harm a Banner of Seirin?!"

"Unfortunately for you, I've already been disowned by that family. So there's no need for me to hold back on their account."

"Then... Right! If you let me live, I'll vouch for you! I'm the Fourth Banner of Seirin, ninth seat of the knights! With your current power and my backing, Lord Mitsurugi will surely take you back in!"

"I don't care about that anymore. I no longer have any interest in rejoining that family. Mitsurugi is my mother's last name as well, so I do plan to at least reclaim my name at some point. But I certainly don't need *your* help to do it."

I thrust my Shinsou forward, and the tip of the blade pierced Shizuka's face. Our Shinsous had been equally tough when they'd clashed the first time, but my last attack must have damaged Shizuka severely, because it was now no more resilient than an ordinary biwa. Its automatic counterattack didn't even activate against me, and it crumbled to dust so easily it was almost anticlimactic.

At that moment, for just a split second, I thought I heard someone whisper in my ear. The voice was faint, so I couldn't tell what it was saying. But to my ear, it sounded calm and gentle.



Having lost his Shinsou, Jijinbou's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. He opened his mouth to scream, but before he could make another sound, I used my black blade to lop off his head. If he wasn't in the mood to offer up any dying words, I had no reason to wait around for him.

I turned on my heel and walked away from the headless old man. Behind me, his corpse crumpled to the ground, blood spraying from his neck like a fountain.

4

When Claudia saw Sora walking in her direction, the decapitated old man's corpse spraying blood behind him, she'd have been lying if she'd said she didn't feel fear in her heart. While she lacked the real combat experience her father and older sister had, she could still grasp how incredibly powerful Jijinbou had been. After all, he'd forced her father, lauded as the strongest in Kanaria, and her sister, endlessly praised for her skills in battle, to the ground as easily as taking candy from a baby.

But most of all, only someone that powerful could have made her suffer as much as she had. When she'd looked at him, she'd shuddered uncontrollably. And yet Sora had kicked that man to the curb with apparent ease. He'd devoured Jijinbou's overwhelming magic and devastating curses, then beheaded the old man like it was nothing. When she looked at Sora, she felt not relief or trust in her heart, but terror. To Claudia's eyes, he was something inhuman, covered in black scales, enveloped in a malevolent aura. Something that could swallow up her, her father, her sister, and even the entire kingdom of Kanaria if it so wished.

So when she saw Sora turn on his heel and walk toward her, she felt an involuntary urge to back away. She was still on the ground, so she dragged her body backward, as though to try and get as far away from him as she could. But at that moment, Sora collapsed.

"Huh?" she uttered in bewilderment. Sora was on his knees, looking like he was in extreme pain. His eyes were squeezed shut,

and he was gritting his teeth and clutching his chest. Beads of sweat dripped from his forehead.

But he didn't look like he was in one bit of pain during that fight! she thought. Then it hit her. She'd seen Sora look like this before, and very recently. In other words, when he'd apparently removed her curse by sharing his soul with her. After that, he'd fallen to the ground looking exactly like he was now.

She didn't know what it meant for him to share his soul with her. In fact, at first she'd thought he'd just been lying to make her feel better. But she really had gone up two levels, and the terrible curse had left her body. There was no way such a miracle could occur without someone paying a price. Wasn't Sora paying the price for saving her right now?

At that moment, the noise of a slap resounded through the estate. Claudia had slapped herself. Even if everyone else was afraid of Sora, she of all people shouldn't be scared of him. She should know that better than anyone else!

As her cheek grew red and slightly swollen from the blow, she made her way toward Sora across the muddy, squelchy ground as quickly as she could. "Mr. Sora! Mr. Sora!" she screamed.

"Guh..." he attempted to reply but could only manage a moan of pain.

Claudia's face went pale as she clung to him, shouting his name over and over...

"Clau, get a hold of yourself," her older sister said, placing her strong hand on her shoulder. Her voice was clear and powerful.

Claudia turned around. "But Astrid, just look at him!"

"Yes, I know. I'll send for help right away." She turned to ask an attendant to bring some medicine, when Sora himself stopped her.

"Medicine...won't help," he said, grimacing. "Nor will recovery magic..." The sisters turned to look at him in unison. "This...will go away...with time... There's nothing I can do...but wait to recover..."

"But Mr. Sora, it should help at least a little!"

"It'll heal on its own... Keep your meds and magic...for everyone else."

Claudia and Astrid reflexively exchanged glances. Indeed, Jijinbou

might have been defeated, but the undead monsters he'd summoned hadn't stopped rampaging. Even now they could hear cries of fear and panic coming from outside of the estate.

Sora's head then drooped, as though he'd used the last of his energy to speak, and a beat later, he collapsed, his face landing in the rotten mud.

"Mr. Sora!" Claudia quickly crouched down and raised his head out of the mud, then brought him back to a kneeling position. She used the sleeve of her dress to wipe the mud off his face, not caring one bit about getting dirty herself.

Shortly afterward, Suzume and Seele flew out of the mansion in a panic, having learned what had happened. The two of them, as well as the maids on duty, helped to carry Sora inside and back to his bed.

Claudia's father and sister left the estate along with their knights to slay all of the undead. Astrid had been worried about Sora up until right before she'd left, but her duty as the vice captain of the dragon knights wouldn't let her stay cooped up in the mansion while an emergency was going on outside. The reliable Astrid Dragonaut wasn't one to prioritize her own feelings over the people.

Therefore, she'd entrusted Claudia with Sora's care. And ever since Sora had been carried back into the mansion, Claudia hadn't left his side for a single second, wiping his sweat, making sure he sipped water, and holding his hand whenever he moaned in pain.

In the meantime, she heard about Sora's condition from Suzume, Seele, and Lunamaria. Lunamaria told her that Sora had woken up the moment Jijinbou had unleashed his Shinsou. He'd been in no condition to fight but had been so determined to rescue Claudia and the others that he'd headed outside anyway.

In truth, before heading outside, Sora had feasted on Lunamaria's soul to replenish the soul energy he'd lost by healing Claudia. And he'd done so so forcefully and violently that she'd temporarily lost consciousness, leaving Suzume and Seele to care for her. That was the real reason they'd been in the mansion during the attack. But Sora hadn't given her permission to talk about his soul-eating ability,

so she'd omitted that part in her explanation to Claudia. Therefore, Claudia wouldn't learn the truth until a little later.

Claudia felt something was off about Lunamaria's explanation. She wondered why Lunamaria and the others hadn't followed Sora outside of the mansion, but she also judged that now was not the time to ask. Besides, there was a more pressing question on her mind.

"Mr. Sora said that the pain would go away on its own, but are you sure there's nothing we can do to help? Please tell me if there is, even if it would only help him the slightest bit!"

"What you're doing now is plenty of help already," Lunamaria said. "Although..."

"What is it? Please, don't hold back on my account!"

"All right... In that case, his sweat isn't accumulating only on his face. Sleeping in sweaty clothes is surely uncomfortable, so I was thinking at some point we'll need to change his clothes and wipe the sweat from the rest of his body as well..."

Claudia was listening and nodding intently at everything Lunamaria was saying up until she realized what doing so would mean. Then her face immediately went beet red. "W-Wait! Wouldn't that mean...he'd be...naked?"

"W-Well, yes, that would be the case. But naturally, we wouldn't ask such a thing of a lady like yourself, so please don't worry. The three of us will take care of it."

"N... No, I'll do it! I don't mind! Mr. Sora saved my life, so if I can do even the slightest thing to help him, I can endure a little embarrassment!"

Claudia was determined not to repeat her earlier indiscretion of a short while ago. Of course, Lunamaria and the others didn't know that, so they were shocked by her reply. An unmarried noblewoman coming out with such a declaration was worrying. In fact, it was a serious problem. If Duke Dragonaut had been in the room, his face would no doubt have gone as white as chalk.

But for better or for worse, the duke was not currently present. Moreover, even if Claudia was being spurred on by a sense of duty and her own guilt, no one else in the room could put a stop to her

enthusiasm.

The next day, when Sora learned about what Claudia had declared, his eyes had widened in surprise like someone had just shot him. He turned to Lunamaria and the others to ask what had happened afterward, but all three of them just smiled vaguely and looked away without answering him.

5

The abnormal situation in the royal capital continued after Jijinbou had been defeated. However, the summoned undead were all low-level enemies, and once the initial commotion with Jijinbou was over, it wasn't much longer before all of the undead in the capital had been eradicated.

Most likely, Jijinbou had never truly intended to destroy the capital. If he had, it would have affected the wedding between the crown prince and the empire's princess, scheduled to take place two months from now. That was probably why all of the undead he'd summoned had been weak. And with the combined effort of the capital's guards, knights dispatched from the royal palace, and the most capable priests the temples had to offer, the undead threat was gone by the following day.

Even with the incident over and my business in Horus concluded, however, I wasn't able to immediately return to Ishka. First, Duke Dragonaut interrogated me in detail about everything that had happened, naturally. After all, everyone in the garden had heard my conversation with Jijinbou, so the cat was out of the bag. Besides, after all he'd done for me, I felt I owed it to him to come clean.

I told him everything I knew. Then Astrid joined the conversation, and to make a long story short, we all agreed to keep my true ability and involvement in the incident a secret—from the empire, of course, but also from the rest of Kanaria. Duke Dragonaut had taken Jijinbou down, and the old man was the only one who'd mentioned Onigashima and Ad Astera.

That was the story we decided on. At a glance it might seem like

the duke was trying to take credit for my achievement, but in fact, I'd made the suggestion myself. At the moment, I really didn't want to make my debut on the stage as Sora Mitsurugi, so I'd decided it'd be best to conceal my identity underneath the duke's shadow. And as for why I didn't want to show myself yet, it was all to buy time. Jijinbou had been an experienced Shinsou user. And if the other Illusory Blade masters back on the island learned that he'd been killed by Sora Mitsurugi, exiled from Onigashima five years ago, the Mitsurugi family would take notice.

I knew my father wasn't the type to talk things out. Now that I'd been disowned, I was no more than a stranger to him. And if a complete stranger took out one of his Banners of Seirin, he'd use every resource at his disposal to crush them, even if that stranger was his own flesh and blood. I wasn't afraid to go up against my father, but to be completely honest, I wanted to delay our clash just a little longer.

I was currently Level 10. Back when I'd arrived at the capital, I'd been Level 9. Then I'd lost a level in the process of transferring my soul to Lunamaria, and lost two more levels after that doing the same to Claudia. Killing Jijinbou had boosted me four levels at once, making me one level higher than when I'd first arrived at the capital. I was proud of the fact that I'd defeated a master Shinsou user, of course, but as I'd said in the middle of the fight, Jijinbou had essentially been demoted from his position; otherwise he would have still been on the island. If my fight had been against one of the higher-seated Banners instead, I probably would've had a much tougher time.

So before I antagonized my father, I needed to get stronger. Luckily, with Iria's acquisition, I now had two sources of soul energy to draw from. I wanted to go up at least another level or two before going to war with my former family.

With my name hidden, the Mitsurugi family would no doubt go after the duke instead. However high his position, they wouldn't stand for him taking out a Banner of Seirin. I apologized to the duke, explaining that my suggestion would most likely put him in danger, but the man just laughed it off and told me not to worry about it.

After all, he'd said, it was the Mitsurugis who'd antagonized him first when one of their own had cursed his daughter and caused her to suffer for over a year. They'd just be getting what was coming to them. And even if we did decide to announce my name instead of his, it wouldn't reduce the Mitsurugis or the empire's hostility toward the duke. Now that the empire's intent to attack Kanaria had been exposed, Pascal Dragonaut was just an obstacle in their eyes. The empire and the Mitsurugis would continue to target him regardless of who we said had killed Jijinbou.

"Therefore, you needn't worry about putting me in danger with your plan," the duke had said with a wry smile.

Once that was all decided, Astrid spoke up. "I just have one question for you, Mr. Sora. What was that man talking about when he asked you whether his suggestion that I cursed Claudia proved useful?"

"Oh, that?" There was no need to hide it, so I explained that I'd met Jijinbou alone in the cemetery before removing Claudia's curse. When I detailed the reasoning Jijinbou had given for suspecting her older sister, Astrid frowned, looking uncomfortable. Not with me, of course, but Jijinbou's logic.

But then she sighed in resignation. "As unpleasant as that reasoning is...I have to admit it's not without merit."

"Huh? You mean you're actually jealous of me, Astrid?" Claudia asked.

"Of course not," she said, rapping her sister on the head. Claudia dramatically put her hands up to her head as though in pain, but she had an impish smirk on her face. "The queen's throne is a lonely seat, after all. I feel much more comfortable flying through the sky on a wyvern. If anything, I pitied you, dear sister."

"Then we felt the same way about it. It was honestly exhausting, you know, pretending to be that prince's ideal girl."

The two sisters continued to converse like old friends. Anyone who knew how close these two were would have immediately recognized Jijinbou's accusation of Astrid as nonsense. Truthfully, I was surprised I'd been able to hold back from bursting out in derisive laughter when he'd said it. That was when I'd known for

certain that Jijinbou himself had cursed Claudia.

To begin with, I could tell the man's level was extraordinarily high just by looking at his soul, far higher than anyone else's I'd seen in the kingdom. Coupled with his behavior, he had obviously been the culprit. There was simply no room for doubt. Ideally, I'd wanted to kill him right then and there in the public cemetery where there were no witnesses and no innocent bystanders. Then the estate and everyone in it never would have been attacked, and the undead wouldn't have been set loose on the capital. But at the time, I hadn't been certain I could beat him in a serious fight. If he'd ended up beating me instead, Claudia's curse wouldn't have been removed.

I could have also called for backup from the duke, but if Jijinbou was a Banner of Seirin, like I'd already suspected, numbers alone wouldn't be much of an advantage against him. So I'd chosen to go back to the mansion to heal Claudia first instead. I'd been fairly certain that as long as I raised her level, I could lift her curse. And even if Jijinbou tried to curse her again afterward, her higher level would give her more strength to resist. Therefore, I hadn't planned to fight Jijinbou until Claudia's safety was ensured and the effects of transferring my soul to her had passed. I'd never counted on him coming that very night. That was entirely my mistake. I should have warned everyone that he might attack the moment he realized his curse was gone.

Then again, even if I had, I doubt they would have believed that a single knight of Seirin could cause that much destruction, I thought.

"Er, when that man accused me, you didn't suspect me even a little, Mr. Sora? As I said earlier, his reasoning was entirely sound. It very well could have been the case."

"Not even for a second. It's a little embarrassing to say this in front of you, but when I first met you that day in Claimh Soras's stable, I found myself astonished by how amazing you were. And the more I've gotten to know you, the stronger that feeling has gotten. To be honest, when that old man disparaged you with that smirk on his face, it took all I had to not draw my blade right then and there."

As I confessed my feelings, Astrid's face grew redder and redder before my eyes. Beside her, Claudia elbowed her in the side with a grin.

"Wow, dear sister, Mr. Sora called you amazing! When's the wedding?"

"*Clau!*"

The younger sister looked like she was in high spirits, while the older sister looked flustered. Meanwhile, their father wore a grim expression.

"Mr. Sora...if you're going to court my daughter, could you at least wait until I leave the room?"

And thus, the curtain fell on my trip to the royal capital. I returned to Ishka afterward, just as planned. Of course, I could always return to Horus on Claimh Soras if need be.

After informing the duke of my departure at the dinner table the previous night, Claudia had been the first to react.

"Father, I want to go to Ishka with Mr. Sora!"

"What?" Perhaps he'd never expected to hear that from his younger daughter, because he blinked in surprise. "Why would you want to go to Ishka all of a sudden, Clau?"

"Why, as a hostage, of course," Claudia said, blurting out that incredibly dangerous sentence with a cheerful smile.

I had no clue what she meant, but Duke Dragonaut must have understood her intent, because he made a face like he'd swallowed vinegar.

"Er, I'm sorry, but I'm totally lost. Could you please explain?" I asked. Based on what she'd said, it sounded like she wanted to become *my* hostage, but why?

"Mr. Sora...sometimes, depending on the situation, we nobles have to discard our personal feelings to perform our duties," Claudia looked serious, so I had no choice but to stand up straight and listen. "You see, there's a chance, however slim, that my father might cancel my agreement with you once you return to Ishka. For example...let's say the empire uses this whole incident as an opportunity to invade Kanaria, but they say they'll back out of the kingdom if we hand you over. In that case, His Majesty and Marquis

Corquia wouldn't hesitate to agree."

"And your father would agree as well?"

"Of course not! He'd be against it, certainly. But father is as much His Majesty's retainer as he is the head of the Dragonaut family. He can't go against what His Majesty orders. So if His Majesty forces him to give you up, he can't really refuse. Otherwise, he might be accused of treason, potentially causing his attendants, subjects, and family—hundreds of thousands of people—to suffer. And as the head of the Dragonauts, he couldn't possibly make such a choice."

As a duke, he had a responsibility to keep his family intact first and foremost. He couldn't let feelings get in the way of a decision that affected those he had a duty to protect. So regardless of how he really felt about it, his hands would be tied, and he'd have no choice but to sell me out. That was what Claudia was essentially saying.

Honestly, I hadn't expected this level of seriousness and foresight from her. "I see. So that's why you're offering to become my hostage."

"Yes. This way, should my father ever betray you, you may do as you see fit to me in exchange."

"Er...you just want to go to Ishka, don't you?"

"Yes! Dear sister and I worked hard to come up with this plan together!"

Wow, now that's a bright smile. And you were involved too, Astrid? No wonder it sounded so uncharacteristically logical for Claudia. Duke Dragonaut, too, was smiling bitterly at his daughters' actions.

Then Claudia's expression became serious again. "Honestly, though, I think having the second daughter of the Dragonauts by your side would be to your benefit, Mr. Sora. Not many people out there want to mess with our family, you see."

"Yeah, I can imagine."

Of course, taking Claudia with me would mean we'd be living under the same roof, which I had multiple reservations about, but she was right in that having her in my household would give me serious pull within the town. The guild wouldn't be able to look down

on me anymore, and the people's hostility toward Suzume would soften as well, since she'd be living in the same house.

Still... I shot a glance at Astrid. Why would she help Claudia with this plan? If I had to guess, she was probably thinking that if Claudia was away from the capital, she wouldn't get wrapped up in any more of the kingdom's political strife. Now that she'd no longer be marrying the crown prince, she wasn't likely to be the target of any more curses or assassination plots, but since the empire's scheme had come to light and the curse was gone, it was also possible that the royal family would try to reinstate the engagement. Or, barring that, many other noble families might come to her with marriage proposals upon hearing that she'd recovered. Most likely, Astrid's love for her younger sister drove her to shield Claudia from all of that. And perhaps after seeing a Shinsou user's power for the first time, she was also thinking that should the empire or other hostile force attack the duke's state once more, Claudia could continue the family bloodline if she was away in Ishka.

6

"Master, I need to talk to you about something," Seele told me the night before we left for Ishka. Her brow was creased with worry.

At first, I considered playing dumb and pretending I didn't know what was on her mind, but when I saw the look on her face, I reconsidered. She looked so serious that I felt it would be cruel of me not to respond in kind.

"You want to ask about what you saw that night during the battle, don't you?"

She nodded.

I knew it. Still, I scratched my cheek, unsure how to answer. The night Jijinbou attacked, I'd collapsed after donating a great deal of my soul to Claudia. Jijinbou activating his Shinsou had jolted me awake, but I'd still been in no condition to face him. To remedy that, I'd eaten Lunamaria's soul, the very same Lunamaria who'd been caring for me while I was down. And Seele and Suzume, who'd been

assisting with my care, had witnessed the whole thing. Worse, because I was desperate to help everyone outside, I'd taken her soul rather forcefully. In the end she had collapsed, and I'd asked Seele and Suzume to look after her while I went out to face Jijinbou.

After a display like that, it was understandable that Seele (and probably Suzume too) would be wary of me. They would have picked up on the fact that Lunamaria had lost consciousness after I'd kissed her. Looking back on it rationally now, there were many better ways I could have gone about it, like at least asking Seele and Suzume to leave the room first, but I'd been so focused on getting in fighting shape that everything else had slipped my mind.

I could've lied to Seele and told her that I'd kissed Lunamaria no differently than usual, but I doubted she'd believe me. I could've used my authority as her master to order her to forget about what she'd seen, but if I was going to gather more sources besides Lunamaria to harvest soul energy from in the future, and those sources ended up living under the same roof as me and Seele, it would become harder to hide it from her anyway. So perhaps the least troublesome option for me was to just come clean. Besides, if I'd already told the Dragonauts about my Shinsou, why should I continue hiding it from Seele? In a sense, this was the perfect opportunity to fess up. Sure, I was a little worried that she'd get scared of me and want to leave, but hadn't I already planned to free her from my servitude at some point? If it came to that, I'd just let her go back to her hometown where it was safe...as long as she didn't spill my secret, of course. If she couldn't keep her mouth shut, then unfortunately she, too, would become my enemy.

While keeping that in the back of my mind, I told Seele everything. She listened intently, nodding and asking for clarification when she didn't understand something. Then, when I was finished, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"I see, so *that's* what's going on! Thank you for telling me, master. I'll explain all of that to Suzume, so don't worry about having to repeat it to her."

"That's it?" I asked, puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"Well...I eat other people's souls, you know? Don't you find that...unsettling?"

She was afraid of ghosts, after all. But in response, she gave me a brief look of surprise, then held her head in her hands and sat down on the floor. "Aaaughhh?!"

"Wow, that's the first time I've ever heard an interrogative scream," I remarked, not sure how else to respond. But if she felt comfortable enough to joke around after hearing my story, I certainly wasn't going to complain.

"There, I tried my best to be scared. How'd I do?" she asked with a smirk.

"I... No, I wasn't saying you *needed* to be scared of me...but...you know, Seele, you've really grown. When we first met, you were so nervous, you were shaking like a leaf all the way to your ears. And now, you feel comfortable enough to tease me."

"That's because I wasn't sure what kind of person my new owner was. And then you petted my tail and ears without letting me sleep for all those days afterward...so don't blame me if it took some time to warm up to you," she said with a hint of admonishment. I looked away bashfully, which made her smile again. "But...I do want to confirm," she said, her grin disappearing, "you plan on eating my soul at some point too, don't you?"

"Huh?" I cocked my head at her unexpected question.

Seele looked equally puzzled by my reaction. "Wait, you're not? I thought for sure that the reason you were getting me stronger and leveling me up was so you could feast on my soul later."

Hearing that, I finally understood. Seele thought the reason I'd asked Lunamaria to teach her how to fight was so her soul would be ripe for an eventual harvest. She also thought the strength I'd given her each time I'd bedded her was for that purpose. Put bluntly, she was wrong. I hadn't even known about that ability until arriving at the royal capital; I'd only bedded her because I'd wanted sex. But now that she knew everything, she must have assumed I had an ulterior motive. I was about to tell her she was wrong, when...

"Don't worry about me! I'm ready to go anytime!" she cried.

"R-Ready to go? Like how?"

"Like what you did to Luna! I don't mind; I've already prepared myself!" She got right up in my face and gave me a serious look with upturned eyes. Whether because she was determined or because she was nervous about how I'd answer, her ocelot ears jolted straight up.

I was taken aback. "No! There's no need for that!" I cried, waving my hands. "I don't want to force myself on you and eat your soul!"

"Then don't force yourself on me. I'm giving you permission. I want to help you any way I can."

"Mmgh..." With such a sincere response, I couldn't say anything back. If I was being completely honest with myself, I *had* been craving her soul. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that it'd be delicious. There were more than a few times when I'd taken her to bed or watched her sleeping soundly near me when I'd been sorely tempted. But I'd already sworn to myself that I would only eat the souls of my enemies or those who'd harmed me, and Seele fell into neither of those categories.

On the other hand, I did hear a little voice in my head whispering to me that if she herself was allowing it, it would be fine. After all, I'd only imposed those conditions on myself because I didn't want to turn into a power-hungry monster that attacked innocent people. If Seele was giving me permission, I wouldn't be hurting anyone.

After a moment of thought, I decided to make sure she knew what she was signing up for. "I can't promise you won't suffer any side effects afterward."

I'd observed that the souls I'd eaten recovered over time, but I couldn't take that for granted. It wasn't impossible that Miroslav, Lunamaria, or Iria might die or become severely disabled without warning. I could also safely assume that having your soul eaten repeatedly changed your personality. For example, Miroslav used to hate my guts, and now she was nauseatingly subservient to me. And though Lunamaria's shift hadn't been nearly as extreme, she'd warmed up to me considerably as well.

I explained all this to Seele, but the look in her eyes didn't change. Honestly, seeing that she was so determined for my sake made me incredibly happy. I was about to chow down right away,

but then my eyes fell on the slave collar on her neck, and I held myself back. As her master, I held her life in my hands. In other words, she'd have to stay on my good side if she wanted to live. She probably wasn't giving me permission out of her own free will. She likely saw what Lunamaria was letting me do and felt pressured to do the same lest I think her worthless and expendable. And if so, exploiting that would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

So I decided to take it a step at a time.

"All right, but first, I'm going to free you. You're no longer my slave."

"Huh? But..." She was about to protest, but I cut her off.

"Now, still feel up to it? If so, I won't hold back. But let's at least hold off until we get back to Ishka."

She looked sullen, a rare expression for her. She probably felt like I was trying to sidestep her determination. But it was true that I'd taken the wind out of her sails after she'd displayed her feelings so sincerely to me, so I couldn't really blame her for being upset.

I'm sorry, Seele. If I took advantage of you right now, I'd be sullying what little conscience I have left.

Still, I never would have expected she'd been so willing. *Don't tell me Suzume's going to feel the same way once she learns my secret...*

At any rate, it took quite a bit of effort to get back on Seele's good side after that. She was normally happy-go-lucky and easy to get along with, but perhaps agreeable girls were even more dangerous than the difficult ones when they got upset. Luckily, she didn't stay mad for long, and I was relieved to see that by the next day, she was her usual cheery self on our trip back to Ishka.

As it happened, Claudia did not end up joining us after all. She'd wanted to, but the estate had only just been under attack, and she'd just recovered from her curse. It was too soon for her to make such a big move, so the duke had kept her at home. But once her condition fully stabilized, she'd be able to join us.

And so, the four of us left the royal capital behind, scars of the earlier attack still visible all over the town, and headed home.

Truthfully, I'd expected either the crown prince, with his burning desire for Claimh Soras, or Corquia, with her cozying up the empire, to try and stop us or harm us, but they must have had their hands full with the Jijinbou incident, because we were able to leave in peace. Only after seeing the familiar fortress walls come into view was I finally able to breathe a sigh of relief, proving how apprehensive I'd actually been.

Thank goodness we made it back without anything happening, I thought, but as it turned out, I'd been a little too quick to relax.

When we reached the house, there was a familiar young man sitting with his back against the wall, looking haggard. The moment I saw his face, I reflexively scowled.

"Raz?"

Chapter 6: The Broken Blade

1

"Please, Sora! I need your help! I need...your strength!" Raz shouted upon noticing my arrival, bowing deeply. Since he was already sitting, it looked more like he was kowtowing.

I couldn't help but feel bewildered. I had no obligation whatsoever to hear him out, of course, but I'd never seen him look so weak and helpless. I was curious about what could have happened to put him in this state. More than that, though, I was curious about why he was alone. Obviously Iria wasn't with him, but where was Miroslav?

I invited him in to explain what had happened. I'd been away for long enough that dust had accumulated inside, but Raz didn't seem to notice as he repeatedly begged me to help him. This was what he told me:

He and Miroslav had temporarily hired three more adventurers to join their party before heading to the Skim Mountains after I'd made my way to Merte. Around the time I'd met Sela, he and his group were mountain climbing. Their goal was to defeat the griffin at the peak, a guild request from some aristocrat.

But I already knew that much without Raz needing to tell me. After all, Miroslav had told me all of it in her report. What I didn't know yet was what had happened to the five of them while they were there. And according to Raz, just before he reached the griffin's habitat, he had found himself turning back the way he'd come.

The reason? While he was on lookout duty with Miroslav at camp the previous night, something had ambushed him and knocked him out. The Skim Mountains were just as dangerous a monster hive as Titus Forest, so Raz assumed one of the monsters nesting in the

mountains had assaulted him. When he'd woken up, though, he'd been confused. He'd no longer been on the mountain, but in a carriage on his way back to Ishka—without Miroslav. The other party members, determining that they couldn't kill the griffin without Raz's help, had carried him down the mountain while Miroslav stayed behind.

At that moment, I frowned. Raz must have thought I was admonishing him, because he started making excuses.

"I told them to go back to her right away! I really did! But..."

His spirit seemed to deflate. I could guess the rest: The three new party members hadn't obeyed their leader's orders. Upon asking, I learned that they weren't so much temporary members of the Falcon Blades as direct hires by Miroslav to take down the griffin. In other words, Raz was only their leader on paper, and she was their true boss. Which meant Miroslav had ordered them to protect Raz and return him to Ishka. Then, on the way back, they'd slipped him a note.

"This letter," he said, pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket and handing it to me.

It was written in Miroslav's handwriting. In it, she apologized for acting out of line, but she hadn't wanted any harm to come to Raz while he was down, so she'd decided to take the griffin on by herself. She promised him she'd return to Ishka as soon as the job was done, so he just needed to wait until then. Upon reading it, Raz had been unable to hold himself back and attempted to head back up the mountain on his own, but the other members had forbidden him from doing so. Miroslav had ordered them to prevent him from returning to the mountain no matter what, even if they needed to use force. It was one against three, and Raz was already weak after losing consciousness, so he couldn't win. Defeated, he let them carry him back.

Once they'd arrived, the new members had left Raz in the lurch and disappeared without a trace. Their agreement with Miroslav had only been to escort him as far as the city gates, so they'd had no more need to involve themselves with him. Of course, Raz had immediately turned back toward the mountain once they were gone,

but in his condition, he'd struggle to even defeat a lower-level monster on the city's outskirts. He was in no state to climb back up the mountain.

He tried recruiting more adventurers to go with him, but the Falcon Blades' reputation had plummeted, and his destination was the peak of a hazardous mountain, so there were no takers. He'd tried asking the guild for help directly, but since Miroslav hadn't escaped in spite of having ample opportunity to do so, she was staying on the mountain of her own free will. That hardly merited a rescue, and in the guild's eyes, if she died up there, she'd only have herself to blame. Finally, he'd asked Ridelle and Parfait for their help as a personal favor. They'd agreed but needed time to get ready. Raz didn't want to wait—Miroslav could be dead by then.

It had taken Raz four days to make it from the mountain back to Ishka. Including the time it had taken to go back down the mountain and the time he'd spent in Ishka since, it had already been ten days since he and Miroslav had parted, and leaving her that long had left him at the end of his rope. He simply couldn't wait any longer.

That was when he'd heard that I was back from the royal capital. Someone had most likely spotted Claimh Soras on the road and spread the news that I'd returned. And Raz had swallowed his pride and decided to ask me for help.

As I'd guessed, his request was for me to take him up to the mountain on my wyvern so he could rescue Miroslav. I'd wondered if he was going to ask me to help fight it too, but he didn't. When I asked if he wanted my help, he shook his head. It seemed that since his own desire to redeem himself and restore his honor had led to the situation, he wanted to solve it on his own. Sensing the regret in his expression, seeing him bite his lip in chagrin, I narrowed my eyes ever so slightly.

Raz was probably thinking Miroslav had stayed behind on the mountain so she could be useful to him. And to be fair, anyone who knew how infatuated she was with Raz would have also thought so. But was that really her motive?

Of course, I didn't think for a second her earlier subservient letter

was suggesting she had eyes for me now instead of Raz. I just found her behavior here far too suspicious. Why in the world would she stay behind and fight the griffin alone? Even if she *was* capable of beating it, how did she plan to carry its body back? The client probably wanted it so he could have it stuffed and displayed, so she'd have to get it back before the body rotted, and she couldn't damage its face, or she might fail the request. By the time she made it back to Ishka on her own, the corpse could very well be unusable. It'd be a waste of effort.

I was also curious about what she planned to do about food and water. And most questionable of all, Miroslav taking the monster out on her own wouldn't restore Raz's honor in any way. Rather, since Raz had left her behind to fend for herself and escaped to safety on his own, he'd be thought of even more poorly.

As much as she cared for Raz, there was no way she hadn't considered that. As a matter of fact, if I was being honest, it looked to me like she was doing it to ruin his reputation even further. And if that was the case, her mission was already accomplished. That meant there'd be no issue with blowing Raz off and calling it a day. As I said before, I had no obligation to hear him out. Rather, I wanted to point and laugh at his misfortune. But then a voice spoke up in the back of my mind.

Hey... If it's all right with you, would you like to join our party?

Those were the first words he ever said to me. And when I remembered that, my plan to scorn him naturally faded away. I was still grateful to him for inviting me to join the Falcon Blades that day. It went without saying that, given everything that happened years later with the Lord of the Flies incident and the confrontation at the guild, I didn't feel indebted to him anymore, but much like a debt with no concrete deadline, it was enough for me to at least give him some consideration.

In the end, I decided to repay him. Not in the way he wanted me to, of course. I wasn't going to carry him up the mountain on my wyvern. To begin with, I wasn't sure he could handle the journey in his current state, since riding Claimh Soras took a lot of stamina. Rather, I planned to head to the mountains alone. Raz would

probably be dissatisfied with that, but his priority right now was to rescue Miroslav, not slay the griffin. As long as I brought her back safely, he probably wouldn't complain. Even if he did, I'd just ignore him.

In the meantime, I planned to ask Miroslav what her true motive with this stunt was and confirm whether she was still on Raz's side. So after Raz bowed his head and pleaded with me a final time, I agreed to his request.

2

"Invisible bird of prey, take to the skies! Transparent Hawk!"

The moment Miroslav finished her incantation, a blade imperceptible to the eye flew from her hand into the sky. The Category 2 wind spell struck the monster harpy in the air with perfect aim, severing its right wing.

The harpy was an abomination: It had the face and upper body of an old woman but the lower half of a bird. It screeched as it descended to the ground in a tailspin. Whether it collided with the mountain or got impaled by a conifer branch in the treetops below, it was dropping with such velocity that it wouldn't survive the fall.

Having finished the harpy off, Miroslav moved on to the next one.



A group of seven harpies had attacked her. She'd already taken out three, meaning over half were still remaining. They were ferocious creatures with healthy appetites. In such a sizable group, they'd be capable of preying on much larger, tougher enemies. Four harpies were more than enough to tear the likes of her to shreds. She couldn't let her guard down until they were all dead.

She fixed her sharp gaze on the next closest harpy. Perhaps sensing her intent, its movements in the air became panicked and erratic. As ferocious as they were, they became cowardly and fled when they determined they were at a disadvantage. They'd probably sensed they had no chance against someone who had already dispatched nearly half their brethren with her wind blade.

But the harpies' movements made them easy prey for Miroslav. She sent a merciless spell at their backs, cleaving two more in half. In the end, only one successfully managed to escape. The other six had succumbed to her in that short amount of time. For a solo hunt, it was quite an impressive feat. And as though to prove it, her body shuddered all of a sudden. Checking her level, the red-haired mage grinned in relief and delight, squeezing her fists together.

Afterward, Miroslav left the area behind in a hurry. She was worried that the sounds of fighting and smell of blood would draw other monsters to the spot. She welcomed more prey being lured to her, of course, but too many consecutive battles would tire her out. So she headed to the makeshift camp she'd set up, surrounded by a barrier to ward off monsters. Using this place as her base for the time being, she was hunting as many monsters in the Skim Mountains as she could.

She was putting herself in danger, of course. Mages weren't suited to the front lines; they were supposed to stay in the back. One could have seen her behavior as suicidal, but she'd been able to harvest a wealth of experience. Since leaving Ishka, she'd already gone up two levels to reach Level 17. However, she'd spent over half of her once-brimming bag of magic stones in the process.

True to their name, magic stones were ore with mana inside, and they dramatically reduced a mage's burden in combat. Because of

that, they were precious. If she'd turned in all of the magic stones she'd used instead of spending them, she could have made a fortune. If her father could see what she was doing right now, he'd probably be red with rage.

When she thought about that, a smirk came to her lips. She'd bought the magic stones she had now, as well as the item she'd used to deploy her barrier, with the Sauzaar Company's support. She'd convinced her father that exterminating the griffin was absolutely necessary by alluding to the connections he could forge with the client afterward...but in truth, she'd essentially scammed him out of his resources. After all, she'd never had any intention of fulfilling the client's request.

Her true goal was to disband the Falcon Blades once and for all. Step one of her plan had been complete when Raz and Iria had gone their separate ways, but her own relationship with Raz was also included in that plan. She no longer felt any desire to take Raz for herself, even with Iria gone.

At one point, she had. At one point, she'd loved him. But those feelings had faded. After experiencing a month of feeling like she was being dragged down into a bottomless swamp, assaulted by raw, powerful emotions like hatred and lust the likes of which she'd never experienced before, even having her soul tampered and defiled with, the attachment she'd felt toward Raz and the affection he'd returned now felt dull and trivial in comparison. All that Miroslav had in her heart was her fear and loathing of Sora. Her regret and memory of her actions toward him. Her desire to atone. To flatter him. To stay in his favor. To serve him. This contradictory jumble of emotions, like a raging torrent, had swept away her old feelings without a trace until her only desire was to break her bonds to her friends, which she'd forged over the past five years.

Miroslav hadn't come to dislike Raz or anything like that. She didn't even want to hurt him, let alone kill him. In fact, she felt this was all for his own good more than anything. As far as she knew, Sora didn't seem to be as hostile toward him. She could tell because while Sora had given her strict orders regarding Lunamaria and Iria, he hadn't said anything about Raz. On the other hand, Raz clearly

saw Sora as his enemy. Now that Sora had taken Lunamaria, he wouldn't forgive him, and he'd no doubt explode with rage once he learned that Sora had taken Iria too.

At this rate, Raz would end up antagonizing Sora. She needed to snuff out his hostility before it was too late. But that was easier said than done; after all, Miroslav herself had been the one to fan the flames of Raz's anger toward Sora. If she defended Sora now after all this time, it would seem unnatural. So she'd decided to use the upcoming griffin hunt to her advantage. By cleverly and inconspicuously aligning her plan with Raz's desire to restore his honor, she'd been able to set everything up without attracting suspicion.

Her objective was simple. Ever since losing Lunamaria, it was like Raz had a shadow hanging over him that made him reckless and impatient. As a result, the rift between Iria and him had grown wider and wider. Raz probably knew better than anyone that hunting the griffin was rash, but he was so determined to return to his former self that he'd accepted anyway.

So just how deep would his regret be if his recklessness caused him to lose Miroslav next? Wouldn't his grief and lament over his own actions be strong enough to override any hostility he felt toward Sora?

Miroslav saw the Skim Mountains as the perfect opportunity. However much he hated Sora, she knew Raz wouldn't hesitate to ask the stray dragon knight for help if her life was at stake. She'd also made sure he'd have no one else to turn to. With her deliberately choosing to stay on the mountain, the guild wouldn't respond to his request to rescue her. Even on the off chance they did, the other adventurers would just say she deserved what she got. And the temporary party members, whom she'd hired to escort Raz back to town, would probably explain the circumstances to the guild so that they wouldn't think they'd abandoned her.

If there was one uncertain element in her plan, it was that she didn't know how long Sora planned to stay in Ishka or if he would even be interested in helping Raz rescue her. She'd considered sending an Alexandra letter to Merte explaining the circumstances to

him, but in the end, she hadn't. That was because there was one small doubt in her heart: Even if her plan succeeded, the Falcon Blades were no more, and Raz and Sora buried the hatchet, what would happen afterward?

Once Raz was out of Ishka, she intended to return to Sora. But he probably wasn't counting on her coming back to him. He still thought her actions up until now had ultimately been to get Raz all to herself. He couldn't care less about her anymore. That much was evident from the fact that he'd promised to leave the Falcon Blades alone once Lunamaria and Iria were his. He'd only freed her from captivity because he'd needed her to bring down the party from the inside; trust and faith had nothing to do with it. If Miroslav obeyed him, she'd benefit, and if she didn't, he'd kill her. She was sure that was how he saw their relationship.

Therefore, her main goal in risking her life on the mountain to hunt monsters and level herself up was to show Sora that she could still be of use to him and that he could put his trust in her. She was certain he had some sort of ability similar to the spell Energy Drain. And recalling his actions and behavior back in the cave, she suspected its ability was closely related to levels. Put more succinctly, Sora seemed to be seeking out prey with higher levels. So she was hoping that if she raised her level enough to stimulate his appetite, she might be able to draw his interest again.

However, Miroslav hadn't accounted for Sora traveling to the royal capital right after returning from Merte. When he'd left for Horus, Raz hadn't yet made it back to Ishka, so naturally, Miroslav couldn't count on Sora to come save her. As a result, she had been alone on the peak of the mountain for over ten days.

As an adventurer, she'd grown accustomed to camping out in the wilderness, so that wasn't a problem. But she didn't like the fact that she couldn't change clothes or take a bath. Her food and water supply was limited, and her barrier wasn't effective against all monsters. She'd lost count of how many times she'd jolted awake in the middle of the night after hearing a monster crush fallen leaves underfoot. She knew that she wouldn't last much longer, physically or mentally, and that she was at the end of her rope. But she stayed

put and kept hunting monsters. She'd expected this might happen and prepared for it. That was why she'd brought enough magic stones to last well over ten days.

I think I've probably been insane for a long time now already. So there's no going back now, is there?

Spurred on by that thought, she killed every monster she saw. And thanks to her efforts, by the time she heard the flapping of wyvern wings three days later, Miroslav was Level 19.

3

When I arrived at the Skim Mountains and saw Miroslav's figure, at first I didn't even realize it was her. Her robe was in tatters, her trademark pointed hat was nowhere to be seen, and her hair was a tangled mess like a lion's mane. Her face was caked in mud, sweat, and blood that may or may not have been hers. If she hadn't been carrying her usual staff, I might have mistaken her for a goblin.

I'd found her almost immediately upon reaching the peak because I'd seen a fireball exploding nearby. After ordering Claimh Soras to head toward the explosion, I saw that she was locked in combat with a monster that looked like a large monkey. The monster was known as a giant ape. It possessed extraordinary strength, and just as its long arms might suggest, it could dexterously make its way across the mountain at high speeds. It was also highly intelligent, capable of conversing with humans, and skilled with wind magic. Some giant apes attacked and ate humans, and unfortunately for Miroslav, it appeared she'd run into one of those.

Then again, seeing as how the ape was already missing an arm and had one of its legs reduced to ash, and it looked like Miroslav was preparing to deliver the final blow, perhaps the unlucky one was the ape in this case. After sending the beast's decapitated head high into the air with a powerful wind spell, Miroslav looked up at the sky in my direction. She must have heard the flapping of my wyvern's wings overhead. I was too high up to see her expression, but shortly afterward, she fell to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Extremely concerned about the sudden collapse, I didn't even wait for Claimh Soras to descend and leaped straight off the saddle. Normally, hitting the ground from such a height would have seriously injured or even killed me, but I'd strengthened my body with vigor before jumping off, so I had no problem enduring the impact.

By the time I ran to her side, the red-haired mage was unconscious. I called out to her and even slapped her lightly on the cheek, but there was no response whatsoever. Like I said before, her skin and clothes were filthy with blood, sweat, and dirt. And when I got a closer look at her limbs, I could see they were even thinner than usual, and her cheekbones were hollowed out. She probably hadn't had a decent meal in quite a while.

Inspecting her condition, I frowned. I'd planned to hoist her onto the wyvern and take her right back to Ishka, but it'd be dangerous to have her ride Claimh Soras in her current state. There was no village at the base of the mountain either. There was nothing for it, then. I'd have to stay with her on the mountain until she recovered enough stamina to travel. Fortunately, I knew a good rest spot. Pulling Miroslav onto my back, I made my way to the mountain's summit, careful to not jolt her while I was moving.

A short while later, we arrived at a small spring near the summit, hidden between a row of trees and the mountain face. The mountain was a volcano, so most of its spring water was not potable. But the water close to the summit had no sulfur in it and was therefore safe to drink. As for how I knew about this place: It was the old watering hole of the griffin I'd taken down back when I'd fulfilled those requests for the guild. Because a griffin had used it, other monsters hadn't approached, so it wasn't polluted in that sense either. They'd probably stayed away even after I'd killed the griffin, but as I had no way to be sure, coming here was certainly a gamble. It looked like I'd won that gamble, though, because I didn't detect any other monsters' presences.

I lowered Miroslav down onto the bank and undressed her immediately. Since she'd been stranded on the mountain for several days now, I'd brought her a change of clothes, so there was no need to worry about that. Besides, I doubted she'd be mortified about me

seeing her naked body after living with me for so long in the Lord of the Flies' cave— *Ahem.* Just for the record, of course I didn't feel any sexual desire toward her in her current state. I was just worried that if I didn't clean her up, she might fall ill. For the clean freak Miroslav to allow herself to fall into such a state... What exactly had she been trying to accomplish?

While wondering about her motives, I bathed her in the spring water, making sure to apply the medicinal herbs I'd brought to any wounds I saw. I washed her head, neck, shoulders, arms, chest, waist, thighs, and ankles. Her hair too. Her body slowly but surely started to regain its original color, but Miroslav herself remained unconscious. If not for her faint breathing and the occasional rise and fall of her chest, I might have taken her for dead.

She didn't wake up even after I was done bathing and treating her, so with no other choice, I fed her some stamina potions in lieu of food. She finally awoke a day and a half later.

Miroslav's awakening was sudden. With a sharp cry, she jolted upright. Then she looked around, observing her surroundings with a wary expression to get a grasp on the situation. Having spent over ten days on a mountain alone, it was a natural reaction, I suppose. Then her gaze met mine.

I half expected her to let out a scream or a cry of anger and steeled myself for it, but it never came. She just looked at me blankly, almost curiously, her gaze not leaving mine. Her stare was so intense that it felt like it could bore a hole right through me.

How strange. *Don't tell me her extreme fatigue gave her amnesia,* I thought. Perhaps it wasn't full-blown amnesia, but it was certainly possible for extreme mental stress to cause memory loss. I'd been all ready to snarkily reply, "Sorry I'm not your precious Raz" in the event she shouted at me, but given her response, I wasn't sure how to react. For the time being, I tried speaking to her as gently as I could manage.

"Are you all right? Do you know who I am?"

"Er...Sora, right?"

When I heard her reply, I reflexively breathed a sigh of relief.

"Whew...so you *didn't* lose your memory, then. The way you were staring at me, I was beginning to wonder."

"Why...are you here?"

"Raz asked me to come save you. Oh, and don't say it wasn't necessary. If I hadn't shown up, you would have been monster food by now. I guarantee it."

"Yeah...I don't doubt it," she mumbled, agreeing. She attempted to stand several times but lacked the strength in her legs to stay upright and ended up falling on her rear. Having now realized the state she was in, with no other way to move, she crawled over to where I was sitting. Her hands and knees got dirty again, but she didn't care. Her gaze stayed fixed on me all the while.

"Hey, what gives?" I asked.

She didn't reply, simply making her way over to me. It didn't take her long to reach my location, since I was sitting nearby. Once she was in front of me, close enough that our noses were nearly touching, she continued to stare in silence. I frowned, unsure what she was planning. It wasn't like her gaze was out of focus, and she didn't look addled or confused. The look in her eyes was clear, so I knew she was lucid. So why in the world was she staring at me like that?

Then, when I cocked my head slightly in puzzlement, she suddenly moved, burying her face right in my chest. It was such an abrupt and nonhostile action that it caught me off guard. I never would have dreamed in a million years that Miroslav, of all people, would do such a thing, so I was absolutely gobsmacked. I would have been less surprised if she'd attacked me with magic.

Then, with her face still in my chest, she began to sob. She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed tight, like she wouldn't let me go even if her life depended on it. At this point, there was nothing else I could do. I couldn't bring myself to throw her off me, but I didn't want to cross-examine her either. So I just let her do as she pleased. To be honest, it was incredibly awkward for me. I would have been far more comfortable if she'd just sent attack magic my way. But she was showing no hostile intent whatsoever. With no other choice, I used one hand to stroke her head and patted

her back gently with the other, comforting her like I would a child. When I did, her sobs became higher and louder. Whether that meant it had been the correct answer or not, I had no clue.

Miroslav continued crying for some time afterward, and even after her tears had dried, she kept her face buried in my chest. Then she began telling me everything. How even after I'd let her go home from the Lord of the Flies' cave, the memory of what I'd done to her had strangely remained in her heart. How during the process of breaking up Raz and Iria like I'd asked, her feelings for Raz had gradually faded. How the excursion to the mountain had been another part of her plan to disband the Falcon Blades. How she didn't want to be with Raz anymore. How she'd planned to raise her level so that she could come back to me. How she'd succeeded by raising her level to 19.

The more she talked, the more obvious it became that the target of her affection had switched from Raz to me. Of course, I highly doubted that my actions in the Lord of the Flies' cave had unexpectedly sown seeds of romance. I'd once heard a story: In the empire, a group of bandits occupied a small village for an extended period. They were taking the villagers hostage in order to save their comrade who'd been arrested by the empire's knights. In the end, the knights killed them all, but the important thing was that the villagers ended up sympathizing with the bandits' cause more than the knights'. Some even tried to resist the knights' advance.

The villagers were cut off from the outside world as hostages, so their lives were literally in the bandits' hands. They had to do whatever the bandits wanted in order to survive. Therefore, their obedience was probably reluctant at first. But as time went on, a sort of understanding formed between the two parties. The villagers began to rely on the bandits of their own will, and as a result, they grew somewhat fond of their captors—or so the story goes.

I suspected Miroslav currently had a similar mindset. In other words, through violence and confinement, I'd twisted the heart of a young girl to bend to my will. While embracing Miroslav, I unconsciously looked up at the heavens. *Oh, what have I done?*

Yeah, right. If Miroslav had been completely innocent, of course, it'd be a different story. But she'd tried to kill me! I wasn't about to regret an ounce of revenge I'd taken on her. Even if I'd accidentally twisted her heart as a consequence of that, that actually worked out in my favor. I didn't feel a shred of guilt about what I'd done. There was also the possibility that her experience in the cave really *had* sublimated into feelings for me, but that, too, would just be to my benefit in the end. It'd certainly make it easier to keep her around as a source of soul energy as I'd already planned to do, and I could take that last thread that she'd been saving for Raz, the one thing left tying her to him, for myself. In her current state, she might even be *happy* to give it to me!

While I continued to stroke her head and pat her back gently, the corners of my mouth turned up into a wide grin.

4

Within Onigashima, an island rampant with powerful monsters and dangerous apparitions, there was only one place the residents could consider truly safe: the fort city Shuuto, founded by the creator of the Illusory Blade style, the very first Sword Saint.

Looking at the city from overhead, Shuuto was shaped like a heptagram. Each of its seven points housed a different district, and one of the two tasks required of the Eight Banners of Seirin was to defend these districts from foreign invaders. Each of the seven districts was protected by a Banner, ranging from second to eighth, each with their own military forces, while the first Banner—the head of the Mitsurugi family—and his forces were stationed in the middle of the city.

In addition to protecting their districts, the Eight Banners had another critically important task: to suppress the monsters emerging from the Demonic Gate located at the city's center. That meant they had to eliminate threats coming from outside and on the island at the same time. And for over three hundred years now, the threats had come from both directions without stopping. Any other nation or

city would have been hopelessly overrun in no time flat.

But Shuuto was still going strong to this day. Even now, one could see the residents within the city's walls living their daily lives, the adults hard at work and wiping sweat from their brows and the children laughing and playing. They were all certain no threats would ever reach the city, and even if they did, no harm would ever befall them.

That wasn't simply naive optimism or delusion. Their belief was founded on the fact that the peace had lasted for over three hundred years and their unshakable faith in the Mitsurugi family whose ironclad defenses and leadership had made it happen. *The people's trust in the Mitsurugi family might be even sturdier than the walls protecting the city,* Gozu Shiima mused as he followed his master, gazing at the man's back in admiration.

The seventh Sword Saint, Shikibu Mitsurugi, had a medium build with slender limbs and wasn't strikingly tall. In fact, Gozu was taller and bulkier than him. But Gozu's strength paled in comparison. The power Shikibu held justified his position as the First Banner of the Eight Banners of Seirin and proved his title of Sword Saint wasn't just a decoration.

Shikibu Mitsurugi: the strongest in Onigashima, making him not just the strongest in the empire but the strongest in the world. Gozu revered the man from the bottom of his heart and thought it the highest honor that his sister Cecil had birthed his child. Shikibu had many children, of course, so his four-year-old nephew, Ibuki, would have no chance of succeeding the Mitsurugi family, but that didn't make Gozu any less proud. Just the fact that the Shiima family now had Mitsurugi blood in it would have made his deceased father's and mother's chests similarly swell with pride, he was certain. He couldn't wait for the day when Ibuki was grown enough to learn the ways of the sword.

At that moment, however, the figure of another young boy suddenly appeared in his mind, and his expression became sorrowful. Mitsurugi's legitimate son, whom he himself had taken pains to bring up and train until adulthood to disappointing results... The bitter memory was five years old. *I wonder where he is now and*

what he's doing, Gozu found himself thinking, then realized he was falling slightly behind and quickened his pace to keep up with his master.

Having descended a long staircase, Shikibu and Gozu were now deep underground. At the foot of the stairs was a room that the light of day would never reach. And inside that windless space, a seemingly endless row of candles were lined up. Nearly all of them were lit. Since there was no wind in the room, the flow of air couldn't snuff them out. The candles wouldn't be able to burn forever, of course, but at present, at least, their flames were still going strong.

The moment Gozu entered the space, he couldn't help but scowl. In the center of the room, surrounded by countless burning candles, sat an old woman. He knew that the candles were the manifestation of the woman's Shinsou. He also knew that they represented the conditions of everyone within the Eight Banners of Seirin and that his own candle, and most likely Shikibu's as well, was included somewhere in the bunch. Seeing his own life represented as a candle and at the mercy of the old woman felt unsettling, to say the least, which was why he disliked coming here, even though he knew having his candle snuffed out wouldn't necessarily cause him to die.

"Which Banner fell?" Shikibu spoke up suddenly in a low voice that reverberated through the room.

"The fourth, seat nine, my lord," the old woman replied.

"Jijinbou, then?"

"Correct, my lord. And judging from the fact he manifested his Shinsou before his death, he had to have been killed in battle."

Hearing that from behind Shikibu, Gozu scowled again, this time for a different reason. He didn't know who this Jijinbou was, nor what he'd been up to. But if someone had died while on the island, Gozu definitely would have heard about it. Therefore, this person had to have been outside the island. That meant someone on the mainland had killed a Shinsou user, and if Jijinbou had manifested his Shinsou in battle, it couldn't have been an ambush. That alone was abnormal enough for even a seasoned warrior like Gozu to furrow his brow.

After a brief silence, Shikibu spoke once more. “Gozu.”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Jijinbou was in the kingdom of Kanaria, on secret orders from the emperor himself. He’d been tasked with setting up Princess Sakuya’s marriage to Kanaria’s crown prince. As he failed to carry out an imperial command, the emperor’s retainers will now surely raise a fuss. I’m curious about who on the mainland could have defeated a Banner of Seirin.”

“Understood, my lord! I will head to Kanaria straightaway and investigate!”

“Please do. Oh, and take two of our youngest Banners with you. It doesn’t matter who.”

That wasn’t because he doubted Gozu was capable. He was asking Gozu to show the youngest of his forces what the outside world was like so they could get their feet wet. Since the youth were confined to the island their whole lives, it was critical for their development that they got to experience the world beyond the island. However, even the youngest Banner of Seirin would have heroic strength there. Aware of that, some of the youth could abuse that power and find gaining fame and prestige on the mainland far preferable to fighting deadly monsters on the island. So a chaperone like Gozu was necessary to monitor and keep them in line. Gozu already understood this second task without Shikibu having to state it explicitly.

This also meant that Shikibu didn’t find the matter urgent enough to warrant his personal involvement. His main focus was still on protecting the island and sharpening his own skill with the sword. But regardless of Shikibu’s feelings, as a retainer of Mitsurugi, Gozu had to respond to his lord’s wishes.

“Yes, my lord,” he said, nodding emphatically in understanding. “As you command, I will take two youths off the island.”

As it happened, the first two names that came to his mind were the same age as Shikibu’s legitimate son he’d been reminded of earlier—two of the seven belonging to the island’s “Golden Generation.”

5

"I'm afraid you've made such an egregious blunder here that it simply can't be overlooked, Elgart, though I'm sure you already realize that without me having to tell you. You *are* a Rank 1 adventurer, after all."

The moment Ridelle heard that voice, laced with scorn and sarcasm, her brow furrowed deeply. She unconsciously opened her mouth, intending to defend her guildmaster, but stopped herself in the nick of time, reminding herself of the position the speaker held.

The man addressing Elgart in front of her was the guildmaster of Horus's branch, the aristocrat Sergei Uri. He had attained his current position despite only being in his twenties, a testament to how capable he was. And Ridelle, a mere guild receptionist, had no authority to butt into a conversation between guildmasters. To do so would be the height of insubordination, so she had no choice but to stay silent.

Perhaps Sergei had sensed Ridelle's feelings, however, as his next words were dripping with even more cynicism. "Not only did you discard an adventurer skilled enough to tame an indigo wyvern, but you allowed him to form a clan and take some of your most capable members away from you from right under your nose. Have you heard? Sora has since formed a strong bond with the Dragonaut family here in Horus. And even before that, he single-handedly took out a habitat of a hundred orcs to the kingdom's south and was recognized as the 'Indigo Dragon Knight' by His Majesty himself. Rumor has it that the duke's second daughter, Claudia Dragonaut, will be moving in with him in the near future. No doubt a marriage is on the horizon."

Claudia Dragonaut's position within high society had plummeted once her curse had forced the royal family to call off her engagement to the crown prince. But she was still the daughter of Pascal Dragonaut, and many nobles were champing at the bit for her hand in marriage. Finding a marriage partner for her would be an easy task. If they were ignoring all that to send her to Sora, who was affiliated with no one, then either they just saw that much

potential in him, or they wanted him and his power as a dragon knight on their side. Either way, there was no doubt "Raikou" held Sora in extremely high regard.

"And yet you, Elgart, just tossed someone like that away like insignificant trash. Someone who could have been an incredibly valuable asset to our guild!"

"I take full responsibility for my actions, Sergei."

"Naturally. That goes without saying. The important thing is, how do you plan to make up for this failure? Since you shunned him, I highly doubt Sora thinks fondly of the guild now. In the worst case, we might even end up antagonizing the Dragonauts at this rate, the most esteemed noble family in the kingdom! Yes, this is a severe blow to the guild indeed. And that's even before mentioning the matter of the Falcon Blades." His eyes glinted fiercely, as though this was the main topic he'd intended to broach all along.

Elgart's eyes narrowed slightly. Ridelle pursed her lips. The Falcon Blades: Ishka's most well-known and promising party of young adventurers. Or at least, they had been. Word among adventurers nowadays was that the party had effectively disbanded.

"The Falcon Blades failed to defeat the griffin that Count Elbe asked them to. Their leader turned tail and ran back home, leaving the scion of the Sauzaar Company stranded on the mountain. In fact, she would have died if Sora hadn't stepped in to save her. Apparently, the party leader asked him to do so on the very day he got home from the royal capital. Now then, just what were you and the guild doing to resolve the situation during all that time? Twiddling your thumbs? No, you don't have to answer. It's clear just from looking at the result that you didn't send anyone to help her."

"W-Wait! We *did* send a rescue party!" Ridelle blurted out despite herself.

Sergei didn't scold her for speaking out of turn. He just shook his head lightly. "No, Miss Ridelle. You *tried* to. But you were too late, weren't you? So the result was the same. Comparing a bunch of adventurers only capable of walking on land to a dragon knight who can fly through the sky might seem unfair at a glance, but the Ishka branch should have gotten word of the situation several days before

Sora found out. So you could have beaten him to it if you'd been diligent enough. Am I wrong?"

"B-But..."

"By the way, Elgart, Mr. Sauzaar was *quite* upset when he found out what happened. Naturally! His beloved daughter was left to die in the mountains. The Sauzaar Company has contributed greatly to the guild up until now, but no more, I'm afraid. Oh, yes, and before coming to meet you, I also visited Count Elbe at his home to speak with him. He was quite displeased as well, you know? Not that I could blame him: An adventurer met with adversity while trying to complete a request of his, and it was Sora, not the guild, who had to step in and save them and even dispatch the griffin. He was very disappointed to learn what an irresponsible, cruel organization the Adventurer's Guild truly was."

A look of triumph appeared in Sergei's eyes as he looked at Elgart and continued.

"A little birdie also told me that a number of former Falcon Blades members have joined Sora's clan...the Bloodstained Blades, isn't it? If that's not a humiliating outcome, I don't know what is. What a truly egregious blunder you've made. I'm sure you already know, but HQ in the Holy Monarchy is already considering this a serious issue. You may be one of only five Rank 1 adventurers and admired by many, but if I were you, I wouldn't count on that being enough to get you off the hook."

"Please don't sulk like that, Miss Ridelle. It spoils your good looks," Elgart teased her once Sergei had left the room, leaving just the two of them inside.

"I'm not *sulking*!" Ridelle cried out, louder than she'd meant to. "It's just...he treated you with such disrespect! Anyway, the royal capital was attacked by undead only a few days ago! Shouldn't he be at home dealing with the aftermath of that instead of coming all the way here to gloat?! He needs to get his priorities straight!"

Elgart chuckled. "So even the esteemed Sergei is little more than a petulant child in your eyes, eh, Miss Ridelle? Well, I can't deny his attitude did get on my nerves a little," he agreed with a wry smile.

In contrast to Elgart, who'd made a name for himself as an adventurer, Sergei had no adventuring experience whatsoever. His talent was not in combat but in the art of negotiation. It was by coming to agreements with fellow nobles and other organizations, accumulating sponsors and supporters, that he'd risen to the rank of guildmaster at such a young age. But since he had no experience in the field, adventurers weren't too fond of him, and he knew it. For that reason, he had a personal grudge against Elgart, a famous adventurer and fellow guildmaster beloved and admired by all.

"I can't say he was wrong about my failure to handle Sora, though. And I can't fault the guild for seeing it as a major problem."

"You didn't do anything wrong! He was thrown out because he didn't follow the rules!" Regardless of what had happened later, that fact wouldn't change, and for that reason, Ridelle didn't think Elgart was to blame. But those looking to trip Elgart up, like Sergei, didn't see it that way. Or even if they did, they were pretending otherwise, and that infuriated her.

She didn't think Elgart should be held responsible for what had happened with the Falcon Blades either. The guild had handed the party the quest, just like they should have, and the Sauzaar scion Miroslav had chosen to stay on the mountain of her own accord. Her companions had said as much, and she herself had even confirmed it upon returning to the town via wyvern. So why should the guild be blamed for what had happened to her?

And yet, there seemed to be no end to the voices criticizing Elgart. They were all wondering why the guild hadn't lifted a finger to save a single adventurer in distress, without even considering whether it was even a logical conclusion. That was the nature of criticism through hearsay, Ridelle knew, but being the target of such baseless accusations was frustrating regardless. She'd wanted to do something about it, to put a stop to it somehow, but in the end, she'd been powerless.

Her scowl deepening, she excused herself from the room. Perhaps because they saw the expression on her face, none of her colleagues approached her even as she returned to her seat. Normally, Parfait would at least say something like "Riddie, your

face! It's scary!" But Parfait was currently slumped over her desk with her head down, so she didn't even notice Ridelle had come back.

Ridelle sat down and performed the rest of her work without a word, reflecting on the Falcon Blades' current state all the while. She'd heard that not just Lunamaria but Miroslav too had left the guild and joined the Bloodstained Blades instead. Raz hadn't left the guild just yet, but he'd shown an intent to do some soul-searching and "remember why he became an adventurer in the first place," in his words. So he wouldn't be taking on any guild work for a while.

Apparently, he planned to head back to his hometown, Merte. Parfait had tried to persuade him to stay, but looking at her current state, it was clear she'd been unsuccessful.

That left Iria the only remaining member of the Falcon Blades. But based on what Ridelle had observed of her behavior so far, she wasn't likely to continue adventuring without Raz. All of it pointed to the same truth: The Falcon Blades were as good as finished.

6

"Thank you so much, Sora! Honestly, I can't thank you enough!"

Three days earlier, after bringing Miroslav back to Ishka, Raz was extremely grateful and relieved to see Miroslav was safe. His face was even more haggard than the other day, as though he hadn't slept a wink since he'd asked me to rescue her. He'd probably been afraid it would turn out to be a repeat performance of the Lord of the Flies incident, where he'd been the first to fall unconscious and the party had blundered as a result. Plus, if he lost Miroslav because of his negligence, this time he'd have no one to blame but himself. The guilt and regret had probably weighed on him heavily.

When he'd seen her alive, he'd jumped for joy, completely forgetting his animosity toward me. Miroslav also cozied up to him, turning on the charm. Her eyes were moist, her cheeks blushing as she held Raz's hand. Anyone seeing her would think she was a maiden in love. You'd never guess she'd been the one to attack Raz

and knock him unconscious while they were on the mountain. Knowing the truth, I was impressed and, quite frankly, frightened by her talent for acting.

Still, based on what she'd told me while we were on the mountain, perhaps that was because her behavior toward him might not entirely be an act.

While talking with Miroslav in the Skim Mountains, I'd learned exactly what the red-haired mage had been aiming to accomplish. She wanted to leave Raz and come back to me instead. I'd already planned to use her as a soul source alongside Lunamaria and Iria, so I had no reason to turn her away—especially when I'd learned that she'd fought the mountain's dangerous monsters by herself specifically for that purpose. However, she did give me one condition: that I would leave Raz alone for good.

To make a long story short, I agreed. After all, I'd never intended to do anything more to Raz in the first place. But I did warn her that if Raz ever attacked me first, all bets were off. Miroslav seemed to understand that, and ultimately, we decided we were going to make him leave Ishka. Raz had given his reason for leaving as wanting to do some soul-searching and start from scratch, but in truth, Miroslav had egged him on to make him think it was something he should do.

As for Miroslav herself, she'd announced her intent to leave Raz and join my clan instead. She'd told him it was to repay me for rescuing her, and he seemed to understand. Well, "understand" is a generous term—he was probably just aware he was in no position to oppose. After all, he believed *he* was the reason Miroslav had been exposed to such danger.

If there was any concern, it was that Raz would reunite with Iria upon returning to Merte. How exactly would he react if he learned that Iria had sworn her loyalty to me? And what attitude would he take toward me when he saw how I'd changed her? What's more, if Iria came to my side as well while he was in Merte, Raz would definitely suspect something was up. So it was probably in my best interest to head to Merte and pick up Iria before he got there. It would also give me an excuse to see Priestess Sela.

Come to think of it, I had already talked to her about Claimh Soras's food. Perhaps I could use that as a pretext to invite mother and daughter to Ishka together. Not to move there, but just to show them the town and sightsee some. Naturally, the three brats could come as well. Plus, since I didn't plan to eat Sela's soul, there was no need to rush. I could take my time winning her over with a more subtle, indirect approach.

That left just one more item on the agenda, which I took care of next: the matter of Seele's status as a slave. The next day, I took Seele, and Lunamaria as well, to Fyodor and asked him to remove their collars.

"You want to emancipate them both. Do I have that right, Mr. Sora?" In a room within the association's building, the narrow-eyed slave trader asked me to confirm.

"That's right," I said with a nod. "Please."

"Very well, then." Fyodor mumbled something I didn't understand, then touched both Seele's and Lunamaria's collars. Despite not having any joints or connecting pieces, they came off right away. Seele, who'd clearly been a ball of nerves up until now, blinked in shock. Lunamaria also looked bewildered as she raised a hand to her neck.

Fyodor faced them both with a big smile. "The deed is done. And don't worry; we'll also strike both your names from our registry. Miss Lunamaria, Miss Seele, congratulations on your newfound freedom!"

Seeing the oddly overjoyed Fyodor, neither of them quite knew how to react and settled for small nods. That made sense—after all, a slave trader was telling them, "Aren't you glad you're no longer a slave?" It was too bizarre for them to take his words at face value. And indeed, his brief comment about striking their names from the registry had had everything to do with the slave collars they'd been wearing.

Back when I'd first bound Lunamaria to my service, I'd wanted the slave trader association's help specifically for that collar. That was what I'd stood to gain. But what did the association have to gain from helping me? Well, my promise to hand her over to the

association in the event of my death. Once I died, rather than being released, she would become the association's property. That was why they'd gone so far as to let me borrow their precious slave collar technology. In the event I'd died, I could have ordered the association to free her in my will, but I would have had to compensate them monetarily beforehand in order for them to honor that request.

So then why had I asked Fyodor to remove their collars? In Seele's case, it was as I'd explained earlier: I wanted to make sure her desire for me to eat her soul wasn't just because she served me and was truly her own will. This was the only way to be certain. And Lunamaria... Truthfully, I just felt I couldn't free one without freeing the other. But there was a reason for choosing to do it now: My enslavement of Lunamaria had been a thorn piercing Raz's heart, and if I removed that thorn, his animosity toward me might weaken or even disappear completely. Besides, if I was going to invite Sela into my clan at a later date, I couldn't have Seele and Lunamaria walking around the house in slave collars. There's no telling what she'd think of me. It could even be the deciding factor that made her refuse to join. Most of all, even if I released Lunamaria now, I trusted that she wasn't going to turn on me, so I used the opportunity to wipe out all of my concerns at once by freeing them both from my service.

With the two women freed, it was time to prepare for welcoming Claudia to my home. While I was tidying up and doing chores, feeling like an overworked housemaid, Miroslav came over to me with some interesting news. Apparently, the royal capital's guildmaster wanted to arrange a meeting with me.

My response was brief but definite. "Politely turn him down."

She blinked in surprise. "Really? Are you sure?"

"I am. However he reacts, I'm not worried." At the moment, my plan was to pick a fight with the guild peacefully. And if I ended up getting into it with the guild here, it wouldn't be peaceful anymore. So the safest bet was to just ignore their advances.

Of course, I'd be happy to watch Elgart and Ridelle squirm from a

distance, grinning and crowing, "Serves you right!" That should still count as peaceful. Probably.

Of course, I wasn't choosing to rest on my laurels and spectate from the sidelines. It was just that if I made a move now, the guild might catch on to my real plan, and I wanted to avoid that at all costs. In other words, it was time for part three of Operation Pick a Peaceful Fight with the Guild! The plan was simple: publicly announce the Falcon Blades' intent to use me as bait during their battle with the Lord of the Flies, and then make them apologize for it. And with the leader Raz already heading to Merte, the next logical candidate to apologize to me was the true mastermind behind it all, Miroslav. This way, she and I could claim that she'd joined the Bloodstained Blades as a way of taking responsibility for what she'd done, and Miroslav joining my clan would look completely natural.

The culprit would apologize, and the victim would forgive her. With that, the incident would come to a close at last, and everything would be resolved peacefully. Of course, when the truth got out to the public, it would become clear what stance Ishka's Adventurer's Guild had taken on the matter, and their attempt to twist the facts to protect their own reputation would be exposed, but how could they blame me for that? All I'd done was come to an amicable settlement with the Falcon Blades. Even if the guild's reputation happened to take a nosedive and they were shamed by the public, even if guildmasters from other towns tried to accuse me of foul play, they couldn't pin all that on *me*! Elgart and Ridelle should have stuck to working for the sake of Ishka, as they so proudly claimed to.

Miroslav, for her part, had probably assumed I was going to use Sergei and his Horus branch to corner Ishka's branch even further, which was why she'd looked so surprised. But if I did that, I'd be coming up to the front line. I wanted to resolve this peacefully and indirectly but also make sure those involved knew exactly what my intent was. In that sense, this was the perfect way to do it. And there was another reason as well: Onigashima. I probably still had a bit of time before the Mitsurugis found out about Jijinbou's death and dispatched a substitute here, but even so, I couldn't waste time feuding with the guild at present.

"So that's why I've decided to put the guild on hold for now."

"I see. I understand, master," Miroslav said. By the way, her "master" was not the same as Lunamaria's "master." She was referring to me not as a slave owner, but as the leader of our clan. I still wasn't used to this politeness and deference from her. To think that the day would come where she'd come up to me and call me her master! Back during our time in the cave, I never would have guessed this would happen. Even in those days, she'd never been this submissive. To be honest, it was pretty awkward, even uncomfortable, to the point where I even suspected this might all be part of her plan to "peacefully pick a fight with her clan master."

Whether she guessed my inner feelings or not, she continued in a calm voice, "I have something else to report as well."

"Hm? What would that be?"

"My father wants to meet with you. If you could at least give this proposal some consideration, I'd really appreciate it."

"The Sauzaar president? What, to thank me for saving you?"

"That's what he says, but I suspect he's really after the connections you possess. Not only have you made the acquaintance of Count Elbe now, but you've formed close ties with the Dragonauts as well. I'm guessing he heard about both of those."

"He'd have to have some good ears, then. What do *you* think? Should I accept?"

"I will abide by whatever you decide, master," the man-hating, father-despising mage said calmly. "He's probably looking for a replacement for the support the Falcon Blades gave him. If you accept, it might make it easier for you to gain his aid in the future. But as a trade-off, nobles and their ilk might try to use you more. If that's not ideal for you, it might be best to refuse."

"So you're saying it doesn't matter to you either way?"

"Yes, master. Whatever choice you make, I'll be happy." She looked at me with moist, upturned eyes. The gaze that had once held such disgust and loathing now displayed the exact opposite.

My chest began to flutter, and I found myself thinking that she was absolutely captivating. I swallowed nervously. Before, her hair had been long, all the way down to her waist. Once I'd released her,

she’d chopped most of it off, but now her hair was shoulder-length again. Despite knowing this woman all too well, I felt like I was looking at a complete stranger. Feeling a stifling, oppressive air for some reason, I attempted to shake it off by wrapping her in a sudden, tight embrace.

She didn’t resist.

Chapter 7: Stampede

1

After officially joining the Bloodstained Blades, Miroslav came to live at my house. I didn't want to have to come to her or call her over every time I wanted to eat her soul, so this had been my plan from the beginning. And apparently she'd prepared for it as well, because it took hardly any time for her to move.

With this, however, the dynamic between my clan members would change a little, and I'd been most worried about the relationship between Miroslav and Lunamaria. Well, perhaps it'd be presumptuous of me to say I was "worried," considering it was my fault things had soured between them. Although she'd only done so on my orders, Miroslav had been my accomplice in enslaving Lunamaria, and naturally, the elf sage had realized as much. I'd expected things to be awkward between them.

But contrary to my expectations, no arguments broke out between them whatsoever. Perhaps now that they were both in the same boat, they shared a sense of kinship instead? Of course, they weren't as amicable as they had been when we were all in the Falcon Blades together, but I didn't detect any malice or anger in their tones toward each other, at least.

Regarding Miroslav and Seele, they were generally friendly with each other. The mage regarded Seele reverently, almost like her "clan senior," and Seele respected Miroslav as her "clan junior" in turn. No problems arose between either of them whatsoever.

Perhaps the most surprising thing of all was how Miroslav and Suzume got along. Surprising in a good way, in fact: Suzume ended up becoming the mage's disciple. As I've said before, demonkin horns were rare magical items that held an abundance of mana.

Therefore, as you might expect, demonkin themselves were essentially mana generators and thus possessed a great deal of magical energy. But according to Miroslav, because Suzume had two horns, she had double the mana capacity of the average demonkin. In other words, she'd been born with the potential to become an extremely powerful mage.

As for why I hadn't steered Suzume in the direction of becoming a mage until now, it was simple: I hadn't wanted to force her to fight. On top of that, getting her used to living among humans was my top priority for now. When I'd heard that Suzume had started learning magic from Miroslav, I'd been surprised, but even more so when I'd learned that Suzume herself had asked the red-haired mage to teach her. When I'd gone to ask her the reason, puzzled, Miroslav was having her run laps, saying stamina was essential to becoming a mage. When she'd seen me, she'd given me a big grin, dripping with sweat, and explained her reasoning: "I want to be useful to you too, just like Seele and Luna and the others! I don't like being the only one doted on all the time."

She'd tied her dark hair up in a ponytail to prevent it from getting in the way while exercising. I could sense her determination. There was no hint of reluctance or obligation in her behavior. This girl was clearly motivated to learn magic from the bottom of her heart. Unconsciously, I covered my mouth with my hand, avoiding her gaze.

Guh! She's such a good girl! I knew I didn't make the wrong choice rescuing her back then! As I tried to hide the tears I inwardly shed, however, Suzume's voice reached my ears once more. This time, she sounded troubled.

"Um...S-Sora?"

"H-Huh?! What is it?!" I cried, snapping back to my senses.

"Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?" *If not, I'd like to get back to running, if you don't mind,* she seemed to want to say.

"Oh! No, there's nothing else!" I said, shaking my head vehemently. "Sorry for bothering you! I'll let you get back to it!"

"Oh, no! It wasn't a bother! Honest! If there's anything I can do

to help you, please let me know anytime." With a bow, she turned away and resumed her laps. If she'd been running around the town, I might have monitored her secretly to make sure she didn't get into trouble, but she was just running around the grounds, so there was no need. I also considered being her running partner, but...she'd probably get all self-conscious and distracted. Leaving her alone was likely the best choice here. So I went back inside the house and, after thinking it over for a bit, hurried to prepare a bath. The least I could do was have it ready for her by the time her training was over.

Several days after Miroslav added her name to the Bloodstained Blades' register, an envoy for the Dragonaut family showed up on my doorstep, informing me that Claudia was on her way. At first I was confused by the news. It hadn't even been half a month since the battle with Jijinbou. Wasn't it far too soon for the duke to make the bitter decision to part with his beloved daughter?

But surprisingly, it was Miroslav who had an answer to that. Apparently the Sauzaar Company had a branch in the royal capital, and as its scion, she knew what the company did about the word on the street. According to her, while the panic and disarray from the incident had abated within the town itself, the situation inside the royal palace was still tumultuous.

Crown Prince Azaal's marriage to Princess Sakuya of Ad Astera had been postponed, thanks to vehement opposition from the anti-empire faction. And among that group of nobles, some were looking to have Claudia engaged to the crown prince once more. Miroslav suggested that the duke was trying to get his daughter out of town before she could get wrapped up in their schemes. If they heard that she was going to be living with me, a stray dragon knight, most people would come to the conclusion that I planned to marry her. It was a de facto engagement, really. Of course, if I was just some average adventurer, the nobles wouldn't buy it, but when they got word that her fiancé was the oft-talked-about dragon knight, they'd probably be more inclined to believe it.

Still, from an outsider's perspective, it'll probably look like I'm trying to marry into their family, huh? Well...I mean, that's just how

it looks from the outside! I'm not actually *planning to make her my wife. Besides, I ought to consider it an honor that I can use my presence to keep her safe. There isn't a boy out there who hasn't dreamed of becoming a princess's knight, right?*

Of course, in the worst case, a radical noble might try to send an assassin my way, but if that happened, I could just eat the assassin's soul, no problem. It was no cause for concern. Thus, I set about preparing for Claudia's arrival as much as I could before she arrived, but there was one thing that had me worried. Over the past few days, a number of monsters had been spotted around Ishka's perimeter. In fact, the Adventurer's Guild had been so swamped dealing with this threat that they'd passed on a number of quests to our clan to alleviate the burden a little.

As a result, I'd taken Lunamaria, Miroslav, Seele, and Suzume, in order for her to gain some combat experience, along to take a few of those monsters down, but the creatures' numbers weren't diminishing. Rather, it seemed like even *more* were showing up by the day. The rate at which they were appearing was clearly abnormal. Moreover, they were all coming from Titus Forest nearby, so some aberration had probably occurred there. Of course, the most likely candidate would normally be the Sea of Rot, but this time, the timing was too far off for that to be the reason.

At any rate, as long as the monsters were around, there was a possibility they could show up on the road and attack the carriage Claudia was on. So I decided to mount Claimh Soras and head to the forest on my own. Much like the basilisk situation, I suspected some larger monster had chased the smaller, weaker ones out of their habitat, forcing them to flee. I also thought I'd restock on Jirai Ao Ochs fruit while I was at it. According to Suzume, it took an entire season for them to grow, so it'd be best to get them while I could, just in case I needed them later.

As I was about to leave, however, I heard Suzume's timid voice behind me. "Er, Sora...I have...a request."

"Consider it done."

"Huh? But... But I haven't even told you what it is yet..."

"Whatever it is, if it's a request from you, I couldn't possibly

refuse," I said seriously.

Suzume blinked a few times, then smiled awkwardly. I'd really meant it, but apparently she thought I was joking. That depressed me a little, but to save face as her senior, I masked it with a smile.

Oblivious to my inner turmoil, Suzume spoke up again. "I was wondering...if you're going to the Jirai Ao Ochs, um, could you take me with you?"

"Hm? Are you sure? The forest is pretty dangerous. Wait, I don't have to tell you that, do I? Is there something there you're curious about?"

"Um, well...I just wanted to see my village again...and check if my house is still standing."

My brow creased a little. Kamuna Village, Suzume's former residence, was where the basilisk spreading the Sea of Rot had been nesting. I'd used fire to burn the basilisk, rot, and everything around it to a crisp, so no doubt the village dwellings and such had burned along with them. Suzume had been with me at the time, so she should've known that as well...but at the same time, I could understand why she'd want to see the state of the home she'd been born and raised in for herself. Perhaps she hadn't mentioned it until now because she thought she'd be a bother.

"I don't mind, but just to let you know, Claimh Soras isn't exactly a comfortable ride. Are you sure you'll be all right?" If the wyvern in question had heard me, it surely would have sulked, but that was the truth.

In response, Suzume pursed her lips and squeezed her fist. "I'll endure it," she said.

What a cute reaction! "*Ahem*! All right, if you're sure! Just hold on to me and don't let go!" I said quickly and in a higher tone than intended.

She tilted her head a little at my behavior but responded with spirit. "I will!"

And so, Suzume and I boarded Claimh Soras and flew over to the cliff face where the Lord of the Flies' cave was. I felt two large mounds press up against my back along the way, which was blissful,

but only until Titus Forest came into view. After all, there was nothing blissful about the current state of the forest.

"Again, huh?" I said with a grimace. Looking down from the cliff face, the forest didn't seem all that different. There was no dramatically spreading rot or any other immediately obvious anomaly. But there was a strange noise. Sounds like low roars were rising up from all over, most likely the cries of monsters. Some even sounded like dying screams, as though they'd lost to whatever creature they'd been fighting.

It sounded like monsters were running all around the forest instead of staying within their habitats or territories. And the monsters were attacking one another the moment they crossed paths. That was the only possible explanation for the noises I was hearing. In other words, they were going berserk.

Not even the basilisk's appearance had caused such turmoil. Suzume, standing beside me, leaned into me as though needing comfort. After living in the forest so long, she had to have noticed how abnormal the situation was as well.

Shit! I messed up. I cursed inwardly. Truth be told, I hadn't thought Titus could have gotten *this* dangerous. It would have been one thing if I'd been alone, but I'd brought Suzume with me. Of course, I couldn't have refused her request when she hardly ever asked anything of me, but I should have left her behind regardless.

Perhaps it's not too late to take her back, I thought. But then I felt a soft sensation around my hand. She'd grabbed it with both of her hands. Her light pink eyes gleamed with pleading as she looked up at me, and I could tell she wanted to stay.

After a few seconds, I finally sighed. I couldn't win against those eyes.

I entered the forest with Suzume, more or less carrying her in my arms. At first, I'd planned to harvest the Jirai Ao Ochs fruit before heading to her village, but given the current state of the forest, I went straight to the village out of consideration for her.

Just as I'd expected, the place was in ruins. Debris of what used to be houses was scattered everywhere, all burned either black or to

ash. The houses that *were* still standing looked like they'd been ravaged and ransacked by monsters. None of the dwellings retained their original shapes.

Suzume looked at the devastation in sorrow, then walked toward the village's edge. Curious about where she was going, I followed, until she stopped at a plot of land with small stones lined up in the ground. It seemed the Sea of Rot hadn't affected this place. Perhaps it was being protected by some barrier I didn't know about. It wasn't until she knelt in front of one of the stones, closed her eyes, and began to pray that I realized it was the demonkin village's cemetery.

Both her parents were probably buried there. According to what she'd told me before, her father had gone missing when she was very young, and her mother had also died long ago. Even with the barrier protecting the village, it had to have been extremely difficult for a young girl to live on her own in the depths of Titus Forest for so long. And her parents had to have realized that as well. When I thought about how they must have felt, having to leave their child behind in such an environment, I couldn't help but bow my head too.

At that moment, however, I sensed a presence. Shaking off my sentimentality for the moment, I scanned our surroundings. I heard multiple roars in the distance, and they sounded like they were getting louder. Were they reacting to my human smell? Or maybe Suzume's demonkin mana like the basilisk had? Either way, they were clearly coming in our direction. While I would have liked to have let Suzume talk to her deceased parents at length, it seemed that wasn't going to be possible right now. Reluctantly, I called for her to come back to me. She was already standing and looking in my direction.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking like she was about to cry. "I got you into trouble after all by wanting to come here."

"No, this isn't your fault. Don't worry about it. Besides, if I give it my all, these monsters won't even be a threat," I said as confidently as I could manage to try and reassure her.

That said, it wasn't a lie. If I used my Shinsou, I could take out any monster in the Titus depths while still having the leeway to

protect Suzume. But I hesitated to stain these demonkin graves with monster blood and guts. I'd already confirmed the abnormality in the forest, which was my goal in coming here, so it might be wiser to retreat. I would have liked to have thrown up a barrier to protect her parents' gravestones, but unfortunately I didn't have that ability. But come to think of it, back on the mountain, Miroslav had been using a device that generated barriers. I'd be sure to bring one with me next time I came.

With that thought, I picked Suzume up again, imbued my entire body with vigor, and dashed off.

2

When we got back to Ishka and arrived at the house, Lunamaria and the others greeted us. To my surprise, there was another face mixed in with theirs.

"The guildmaster wants to see you to discuss what you've learned about the situation in the forest," Ridelle said, bowing her head while explaining the reason she was there. "I know it's probably a bother, but could you come to the guild at your earliest convenience?"

At first I wondered how the guild had found out I'd been to the forest, but then I realized they must have seen my wyvern in the sky heading in that direction.

What exactly makes you think I'd cooperate with the guild now of all times? I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to retort out loud. *If the guildmaster wants to speak with me, he ought to have the gall to come to me.*

But regardless of how she truly felt about me inside, Ridelle was asking politely. Besides, I understood that Elgart wouldn't be able to leave the guild with the forest in a state of emergency. He had a duty to stay and manage the situation. Most of all, though, having seen the look on Suzume's face earlier, if I put my grudge against the guild and desire to resolve this incident on a scale, the latter would definitely win out. *Anyone* would want the resting place of their family to stay peaceful. It was only natural.

"I understand. Would now be okay?"

"Huh? Er, yes. That would actually be a big help if you came now," she immediately replied, looking somewhat shocked by my answer.

Ooh, this is the first time that composed face of hers looks so flustered! She must have expected me to turn her down. *It feels like I'm getting my revenge on her just with that,* I thought wryly as I followed Ridelle, who hurried back to the guild.

When I entered the guild for the first time in quite a while, it was pandemonium. People were running this way and that in a panic. Ridelle was wearing her uniform, so the adventurers cleared a path for her as she walked. They looked surprised to see me walking behind her as well, but none of them called out to me. Not that I was necessarily thrilled to see any of them again either.

Ridelle led me to a room that was likely reserved for the guests. "I'll fetch the guildmaster right away," she said and left the room.

Now then, how long is he going to purposely make me wait? I thought with a smirk, but there was an immediate knock on the door. Not even thirty seconds had passed since Ridelle left, so I doubted he was already back. And just as I expected, it wasn't her. It was another guild receptionist, one I'd thought I'd seen before. After a moment of thought, I finally remembered her. She was the one who'd first interrogated me about what had happened when I'd come back to town after surviving the Lord of the Flies' cave. Her name was Parfait, if memory served.

In contrast to Ridelle, who was nearly unflappable, this woman seemed bubbly and happy-go-lucky. She was also four or five years younger than Ridelle. That said, at the time, she'd treated me with the same level of disdain her older colleague had, which made it easier on me now, because now I wouldn't have to pretend to be polite to her.

She set a steaming-hot cup on the table. It seemed she at least intended to welcome me with the bare minimum by offering some tea.

How things change. Last time I was here, they didn't even do

that much. It seemed that as long as I was in the building, I couldn't help but think cynically about everything.

Smiling wryly at my own attitude, I looked at what was in the cup. Judging from the amber color, it was probably tea. I couldn't vouch for its quality without drinking it, but it smelled pretty good, so the leaves were most likely high-quality. She also set a plate of baked sweets on the table next to the cup, which looked delicious. To think that after being tossed out of the guild without a second thought only a few months prior, the day would come when I'd be given such a warm welcome!

I'd like to go back in time and let my former self know, I thought. Even so, I didn't touch the cup or any of the sweets. It wasn't because I thought partaking right away would make me look like I was poor or anything pretentious like that. I simply didn't want to accept anything given to me by a guild who had thrown me out. In other words, it was stubborn pride. "Petty" was another good adjective to describe it, but even though I knew that, I wasn't about to change my ways.

"Eat up!" Parfait said cheerfully, looking right at me. "Don't worry, it's not poisoned or anything." She let out a small, odd sound somewhere between a chuckle and a snicker.

I glared at this new visitor with half-lidded eyes, which made her laugh louder.

"These sweets are the latest from the Khukuri Company. They're all the rage with young girls these days, and I *might've* abused my authority as a guild receptionist a little to snag some for myself," she told me, putting her index finger to her lips and grinning impishly.

True, any sweets meant to be served to the guild's guests would have to be disposed of once they hit their expiration date. And of course, it was up to guild staff to dispose of them.

I see. Quite clever. Or perhaps I should say "greedy"?

"Why go that far? Your salary here should be more than enough for you to buy a few sweets, right?"

"Well, you see, sweets bought with my own money just don't taste quite the same as sweets the guild paid for," she said with a big grin. "Kind of like when a hunk of a man offers to treat me to

dinner, you know?" She looked right into my eyes.

Wait, is she flirting with me? Am I supposed to reply, "In that case, how about dinner?" here?

Unlike Ridelle, whose hair and makeup were always perfect, Parfait presented herself just barely above the line of what would be considered crude for a receptionist. According to Miroslav, she really wanted a promotion. So perhaps with my status as a dragon knight and connections to the Dragonauts, I measured up to what she was looking for.

Not that I could care less. Instead of answering her, I gave her the cold shoulder.

"Huh?" Parfait tilted her head a little, puzzled by my behavior. She didn't seem to have expected that reaction. She opened her mouth to speak again, but before she could, there was another light rap on the door. This time Ridelle strode in. She looked surprised to see Parfait there but quickly recovered and told me she would escort me to the guildmaster's room. She also said that upon hearing of my arrival, Elgart had immediately cleared his schedule. Perhaps he was worried that if he made me wait too long, I might get fed up and leave. With a snort, I stood up and followed her.

"The last time we met like this was during your duel with Raz, wasn't it? You've grown so much since then, I almost didn't recognize you, Sora." The Rank 1 adventurer and Ishka's guildmaster, Elgart Quis, smiled softly. There was no hint of unfriendliness in his words or expression. His appearance, right down to the faint scent of perfume and well-groomed beard, was just refined as always.

"Weren't we supposed to be sharing what we know about the situation in Titus Forest?" I replied coldly, dispensing with the pleasantries and cutting right to the chase. I wanted him to know I had no intention of being on friendly terms with him, especially after our last discussion.

Elgart's smile became strained. Ridelle, on standby behind him, gave me a sharp glare, but I pretended not to notice. I was just going to ask what I needed to ask, hear what I needed to hear, then

get out of there. That was all.

"Yes, that's correct. Then let's get right to it, shall we? Over the past several days of investigating, I've concluded that a monster stampede has broken out in the forest."

Elgart had started from the conclusion, so I did the same.

"Then I'll tell you what *I've* learned. The depths of Titus Forest are like an iron kettle about to boil over right now. And at this rate, it'll only be a matter of time before the monsters in the depths make it to the forest outskirts." That would mean the monsters already on the outskirts would be pushed out of the forest.

Elgart nodded, as though he'd already suspected as much. "In other words, it won't be long before those monsters head for Ishka. Correct?"

"That's right. And I'm guessing the monsters in the depths won't be far behind." That would mean Ishka would experience a monster invasion more dangerous than any previous attack. And from what I'd witnessed in the depths, it was only a matter of time before it came to pass.

Elgart looked up at the ceiling in silence, then muttered, "So it's a repeat of the nightmare from twenty years ago."

"What happened twenty years ago?" I asked.

The guildmaster sighed heavily. "The truth is, this kingdom has experienced a monster stampede like this before—twenty years ago, when I was even younger than you are now. But back then, the abnormality didn't come from Titus. It came from the Skim Mountains."

Elgart went on to say that the enormous stampede had laid waste to many towns and villages. At the time, he and his adventuring party had stood against the horde, and he'd lost two of his comrades in the process. Ishka hadn't come out unscathed either. In fact, the fortress wall had been erected after that incident to ensure nothing like that happened again.

I frowned in puzzlement. "And did you ever figure out the cause of the stampede?"

"Yes. Most likely, the volcanic activity in the mountains caused a sudden disruption in the monsters' ecosystems."

In other words, it had just been due to the whims of nature. That was better news than it being caused with malicious intent, but it was worrying nonetheless. Still, the present incident was our immediate concern right now. And judging from Elgart's conclusion, the cause was probably something just as serious as a volcanic eruption, if not more so. The question was, what was it?

That was the reason I'd accepted the guild's invitation today—to find out the answer. The guild had far more information and connections than the Bloodstained Blades did right now, so I needed their help. I had no choice but to admit that. That said, if they'd gotten to the bottom of things already, they wouldn't have needed to share information with me in the first place, so they most likely didn't know the answer either. But I thought that by accepting and learning what they knew, I might at least get some sort of hint.

And Elgart's next words proved that guess of mine correct.

3

"Also, I'm not sure if it's related to this incident or not, but there has been one other concerning development. The villages upstream of the Kale River have once again fallen ill, it seems."

"Guildmaster?! That information has yet to be confirmed!" Ridelle blurted out in apparent shock and panic.

"It's all right, Miss Ridelle," Elgart said calmly. "I called him here so we could exchange information, after all."

"Y-Yes, guildmaster. My apologies for speaking out of turn." She clearly didn't agree with his decision, but she bowed her head and fell silent. I was the only one here out of the loop, but I could at least take a guess as to what this news might be pointing to.

As I explained before, Titus Forest was the source of the Kale River, and the villages and towns upstream were the ones closer to the forest than Ishka. According to Elgart, the epidemic caused by the Sea of Rot polluting the river had reared its ugly head once more. The antidote created from the Jirai Ao Ochs fruit should have cured all of the affected areas, but now the disease was back.

Meaning...

"The antidote stopped working, I take it?"

"It seems so. Either the toxin is potent enough to render the medicine ineffective, or the potency of the medicine simply diminished. To be honest, we only just learned about it this morning, so some guild staff headed to the afflicted towns and villages to investigate. We haven't heard back yet."

"I see."

"It goes without saying, but that information needs to stay confidential. At the moment, we don't want to alarm the townsfolk who are confident in the medicine's ability to protect them."

I nodded. Of course, I didn't want to cause a panic among the populace either. That wasn't the way I wanted to take my revenge on the guild. Still, I had to consider the gravity of what I'd just learned. While in the forest with Suzume, I hadn't sensed any trace of a Sea of Rot. Yet the disease had come back, and so strongly that the Jirai Ao Ochs no longer had any effect? What's more, the river water would have diluted the poison. In other words, it had originally been even more toxic. If that was the cause of the monster stampede and the imminent threat to Ishka, then...

Just as I'd thought that far, however, there was a sharp knock on the door. "Excuse the interruption, guildmaster, but we have an emergency!" came the voice of a panicked woman.

"Come in," Elgart said.

But before could speak further, Parfait flung open the door and ran into the room. Her expression was the exact opposite of the one she'd had in the guest room—deadly serious. "Smoke signals have been spotted coming from Titus Forest! White, black, and red smoke!"

Upon hearing that, Elgart's eyes glinted with the sharpness of a blade. Ridelle's face also tensed. Most likely Elgart had sent some of his staff to monitor the situation in the forest, and they'd decided beforehand on color-coded smoke signals as a means of communication. Based on Elgart's and his receptionists' faces, the smoke must have signified something grave.

That day, Ishka's government office, in conjunction with the guild, issued an emergency declaration to all of the town's residents. The announcement: A horde of monsters from Titus Forest was stampeding toward Ishka. The town went on emergency lockdown, and the bustling adventurers' hub grew quiet.

However, probably only a small fraction of those residents felt like they were actually in danger. For one thing, adventurers who dwelled in Ishka were used to monster attacks. If monsters appeared, they took them out—problem solved. It happened frequently, and it wasn't uncommon for emergency announcements like this one to be issued on occasion either.

But none of those monsters had ever broken through or passed over the fortress walls to attack the town. The Skim Mountains incident twenty years ago had happened before those walls had been built. Since their completion, the town had never been invaded. So Ishka's residents didn't know what real danger was like. They were naively optimistic, certain that no monsters would ever come into the town, and that even if they did, it'd only be on a small scale. After all, with all the fighters and adventurers in Ishka, they'd surely make short work of any intruder.

Having left the guild and returned to my house, I thought back on the town's current mindset with a grimace. I didn't want to criticize their optimism; after all, if the people weren't confident in their safety, Ishka wouldn't be able to run as well as it did in times of emergency like these. Because of their familiarity with monster attacks and trust in the fighters and adventurers guarding the town, the townsfolk were able to stay calm, and business went on as usual. In fact, that was one of Ishka's strong points as a town...which was why I felt this was so ironic.

After all, Elgart had thrown me away in order to protect the town. If he had actually allowed the wrongdoings of the Falcon Blades to be exposed and made public the truth that they'd used me, a regular citizen, as bait and left me for dead, it might have made some residents more apprehensive now. They might have worried that the adventurers meant to protect them would use them as decoys to flee Ishka and save themselves. There was no denying that it would

have made things much worse. In that sense, as loath I was to admit it, Elgart's judgment back then had been correct. Or, no, I couldn't bring myself to say that, but at the very least, it hadn't been wrong.

"As frustrating as it is, I've got to give him that much," I muttered once I was in my room. Well, whatever. Just because he'd made the right call as guildmaster didn't change the fact that he'd thrown me away, so I had no reason to discard my grudge against him either. Once I chased these monsters back to Titus where they belonged, Phase Three of my plan to pick a peaceful fight with the guild would proceed as intended. In fact, perhaps I could coordinate that plan along with my newfound rapport with Sergei to get Ridelle out of the guild next. She probably wouldn't agree through normal negotiations, but if I suggested to her that leaving would protect Elgart in the end, it might be enough to move the needle.

Right now, her wariness and animosity toward me were about on par with Miroslav's before I'd abducted her. In other words, I could safely consider her a genuine enemy. I continued to mull this over while preparing to depart once more.

This time I wasn't heading to Titus Forest, but to the afflicted villages and towns upstream of Ishka. Not all of the monsters would be heading straight for the fort town; some would surely attack the villages along the way. Elgart had planned to send adventurers and the town's soldiers over to help, but none of them could travel as fast as I could with my wyvern. I'd immediately agreed to help out—not only was it a golden opportunity to raise my clan's reputation, but it'd also be a chance to learn why the Jirai Ao Ochs had stopped being effective.

The antidote being distributed to those towns and villages had been produced by the slave trader association using the Jirai Ao Ochs. More specifically, it had been mass-produced by diluting the fruit from the tree. Now then, was it the antidote that was ineffective or the fruit itself? I wanted to find out as quickly as I could. If it was the former, then we'd just need to adjust the antidote's potency to fix it. But if it was the latter, we'd have to take more drastic measures.

I already had one possible method in mind: the draconic properties inside me that Lunamaria had mentioned. If the fluid in my body was like that of a dragon, I might be able to use it to make an extremely effective antidote.

"Miroslav, you get to work on that antidote."

I'd selected Miroslav for the job rather than Lunamaria because I figured a mage would be better suited to such experimentation. I'd already spent several nights with her at this point, so she too had experienced a boost in her abilities. Because of that, she wasn't shocked to hear about draconic properties at all.

"Right away," she said with a nod. "I'll be sure to live up to your expectations."

"Good to hear. Lunamaria, Seele, Suzume, you three go get Claimh Soras's food supply from the stable and bring it here."

If the monsters were heading for the town, I couldn't use the stable outside anymore. Thankfully, Elgart had gotten me special permission from the government to bring my wyvern inside the walls. And as luck would have it, my current home had more than enough space to house a wyvern or two. Claimh Soras might pout at being left out in the open garden, though, so I'd probably need to build a stable with a roof. I decided to task Lunamaria with that project.

"Feel free to hire whoever you need to get the job done. Don't worry about the cost," I told her.

"Yes, master. Leave it to me."

"Er...you know I'm not your master anymore, right?"

"Then leave it to me, darling."

"O-On second thought, 'master' is fine."

She'd said it with such a serious expression that I reflexively took back my comment. I mean, I was sure she had to be joking, but there was something about her smile that unnerved me regardless. Could the addition of Miroslav have made her worry about her own status within my clan? True, ever since Miroslav had started living with us, I'd only been spending the night with Lunamaria half as much as usual. No, that couldn't be it—Lunamaria wasn't that type of woman. That said, if someone asked me what type of woman she

actually was, I wasn't sure I could answer.

Seele had been casting hopeful looks in my direction every night as well. What a bizarre situation this was. I now had more people to eat the souls of, as I'd wanted, but things were almost going too well, and it was a little nerve-racking. At this rate, I felt like my actions were going to backfire at some point.

"Well, whatever happens, I'll have no one but myself to blame," I muttered under my breath so no one could hear. Whenever misfortune struck, it was always easier to accept when it was your own fault rather than uncontrollable happenstance. So I nodded to myself, bottling up my anxiety for the time being.

4

Upon mounting Claimh Soras and flying to the north, I first noticed that Kanaria's soldiers had already formed a triple-layered barrier of ditches and fences to block off the main road and constructed a simple watchtower. They couldn't have accomplished that much in such a short time with human labor alone, so they'd probably used magic to speed up the process.

As Claimh Soras sailed high over their heads, I saw the soldiers on the ground look up at the sky in surprise, and seconds later, they let out whoops of joy. They weren't directed at me, of course, but at my wyvern, who'd grown incredibly popular among the townsfolk. But even though I knew that, I felt my spirits lift all the same. After all, I'd never once experienced being cheered for like this since becoming an adventurer. Reveling in the praise, I continued to head north until I spotted a rising plume of smoke just ahead. There were occasional flashes of red within the smoke, so it was probably caused by explosions from fire magic.

Squinting, I could see several human figures swinging swords and spears below the smoke. Since their gear wasn't uniform, it was obvious at a glance that they weren't official soldiers. Most likely, these were the adventurers Elgart had dispatched to the forest. And judging by how many there were, the guildmaster must have

predicted there'd be a big fight.

As I watched them battle, the corners of my mouth turned up into a grin. "All right, Claimh Soras, let's take a little detour!" I cried out, loud enough to be heard over the din below. My reliable steed responded with a spirited chirp. Apparently the cries of praise and admiration had invigorated the creature as well. We truly were kindred spirits.

Without further ado, we charged into the fray like a fierce gust of wind. But I didn't draw my blade and just start cutting enemies down. For one, as long as I was on the wyvern's back, my katana wouldn't reach the enemy. According to what Astrid had told me in the royal capital, Kanaria's dragon knights favored long spears and crossbows precisely for that reason. Normally I would have considered using one of those as well, but I could fire my vigor like a projectile, plus I'd learned a few fire spells of my own from Lunamaria and Miroslav, so there was no need for me to use a weapon I wasn't familiar with. The biggest reason, though, was that Claimh Soras's attacks were so strong I usually didn't need anything else. Here, too, all I needed to do was sit back and let my wyvern do its thing.

"GROOOAAARRR!" Claimh Soras roared, landing in the middle of the monster stampede. Or more like *crashing* into it, really. I've mentioned it before, but wyverns didn't just fly with the power of their wings; they also used the mana in their bodies. And whenever they hovered, took off straight up into the air, or landed straight down, they didn't use their wings at all, only mana. Before crashing down on the ground, Claimh Soras had raised its own output of mana and slammed into the ground at nearly maximum speed.

The impact was similar to a large boulder touching down on the ground after being launched from a catapult. With a thunderous roar, the monsters underneath were eradicated without a trace, and the monsters in the area, along with scattered clumps of earth, were blown into the sky. The blood and guts mixed in with the downpour of sediment, staining the ground scarlet.

The other monsters who'd been attacking the adventurers in a frenzy suddenly froze, as though flabbergasted. The adventurers,

too, looked like they were in awe. Silence filled the battlefield. I didn't miss the opportunity to shout out to them.

"Adventurers, I come bearing a message! The Bloodstained Blades will take care of this incident from here on! Retreat immediately!" Though my voice sounded resolute and confident, inwardly I was on cloud nine. *I'll hold them off here, so you guys go on*—though I worded it differently, I'd always wanted to say a cool line like that at least once! Even though I knew now wasn't the proper time for it, I couldn't help but feel giddy.

Still, I didn't have much time to revel in it. The monster horde wasn't stopping. While the sudden appearance of Claimh Soras had surprised and intimidated many of the monsters into stopping in their tracks, some in the rear continued to advance, shoving through and trampling those that had frozen in front on their way to me and the wyvern. In fact, more than a few ended up squashed and killed by their allies.

I urged Claimh Soras to fly upward. If we stayed on the ground, the monsters would surround us and we wouldn't be able to move. "Time for the next one," I said. "This time, instead of landing on the ground, dive down to ground level and sweep through the horde."

The wyvern chirped affirmatively and spread its wings wide. However, since we'd lost our momentum from the first attack, we first needed to circle around the horde in a wide turn in order to regain the necessary speed for the second one. And the newly arrived monsters from the rear were moving so fast that at this rate, they'd easily reach the adventurers before we could even finish circling around.

I clicked my tongue in frustration. Up against such a large group of monsters, making my wyvern sacrifice its momentum had been a mistake. I had no choice but to acknowledge my inexperience in combat as a dragon knight. Pascal or Astrid Dragonaut would have fought this battle with much more finesse.

"Well, no use crying over spilled milk. Right now I just need to focus on keeping these guys from advancing. O plant that breathes in flame! Grow, ripen, and bear fruit so large it falls off the vine!" It was a Category 2 fire spell that Miroslav had taught me just recently.

Put simply, it was a spell meant for stopping enemies in their tracks. "Let your explosions ring out continuously—Phoenix Fruit of Flame!"

Red balls resembling round fruits appeared in the air, each about as large as my head. There were thirty fruits in all. Then, as though unable to support their own weight, they dropped to the ground in quick succession. The moment they touched down, they exploded into blazing columns of fire, spitting embers and scattering them all over. A heat intense enough to burn human flesh quickly engulfed the area.

The spell was more useful than I'd expected. While it wasn't powerful enough to incinerate a monster or anything, it was perfect for keeping them at bay. And the incantation was short too, so I didn't have to worry about getting interrupted while chanting and inadvertently casting a less effective version of the spell. I could also increase its power by adding my own vigor, and if I used it while on my wyvern, no enemy would be able to withstand it. I had to tip my hat to Miroslav for finding a spell appropriate for a dragon knight and teaching it to me.

"In fact, I should've used that spell as my first attack to begin with," I muttered.

My wyvern whined in response.

"No, don't get me wrong, I'm not criticizing *you*! That really was a good ground slam back there! You did great!"

It chirped as if to say, "You mean it?"

"I mean it, I mean it! So cheer up already!" By the time I'd successfully encouraged Claimh Soras, we were about to finish circling around the enemy. Looking down at the ground, I could see most of the adventurers had already retreated. Unlike actual soldiers, who had to wait for their superiors' orders to do anything, adventurers acted according to their own judgments. And for better or for worse, when they determined they were in danger, they could immediately make themselves scarce. Now that nearly all of them had escaped safely, I could take out just two or three more monsters, then consider my job done. I was concerned about how the ailing villages were managing, so I wanted to wrap this up as soon as I could. With that thought, I braced myself atop my saddle,

preparing to swoop down into the horde once more.

Once I'd confirmed that all the adventurers had safely escaped, I headed to the villages upstream of the Kale River as planned. As I flew, I noticed there was more than double the normal number of seacraft on the river's surface, most likely carrying refugees who'd had to evacuate their homes due to the stampede. Considering the monsters were charging along the main road, it stood to reason they'd use a sea route to escape.

When the passengers on the ships saw my wyvern in the sky above, they mistook it for a monster at first and cried out in fear, but when they noticed me on top, waving at them, their screams of terror became cheers and shouts of joy. They were probably thinking a dragon knight from the royal capital had come to save them. They were misunderstanding, of course, but I didn't particularly feel like correcting them either.

Anyway, I arrived at the first village in question, and as I'd expected, there were signs that monsters had attacked here as well. But it had been such a minor attack that the village's guards and residents had taken care of the threat by themselves. Apparently, after the attack the majority of the villagers had boarded the evacuation ships dispatched by Ishka's government and escaped. But a few villagers had stayed behind—in other words, the ones who were too sick to move—and the local officials were at a loss as to how to handle them.

I told these officials that I'd brought a cure even more effective than their current antidotes, but their expressions didn't change. Overhearing one of them mutter that "no medicine could possibly save us now" as I walked away, I entered the hut where the patients were being quarantined. The moment I set foot inside, an intense rotting stench assaulted my nostrils. It was so bad that I had to cover my nose and mouth with several layers of cloth the officials had handed me.

It was dark inside the hut and eerily quiet. No one was speaking, and there weren't even any moans of pain. I instinctively furrowed my brow—for some reason, my feet didn't want to move any farther.

It was as though the very atmosphere here was rejecting my presence as a living being.

That said, turning back now wasn't an option. Steeling myself, I forced my feet forward, approaching one of the sickbeds in the room. I glanced down at the face of the person sleeping there...and I immediately wished I hadn't.

There's a game called fukuwarai in which blindfolded players place cutouts of facial features, like the eyes, mouth, and nose, onto their proper positions on the outline of a face. Of course, because the participants are blinded, most end up putting those features in bizarre places, making everyone present erupt with laughter. If I had to describe what I saw when I looked down, it was as if a demon had tried to play the game using a living human as the outline.

In other words, despite still being alive, the patient looked like a rotting corpse. It was an appalling sight—enough to make you think an assassin's poison that killed on the spot would be far more merciful. Now I knew what that official had meant by his offhand comment as I turned away. He'd been absolutely right.

Most likely, the reason I hadn't heard any moans upon entering the hut was that none of them even had the strength to moan anymore. Either that, or the poison had gotten into their vocal cords as well. I tried squeezing the juice from a Jirai Ao Ochs fruit into the mouths of one of the diseased, just in case, but as I'd already suspected, it had no effect. One would need a miracle as powerful as Resurrection to cure anyone this ill.

I left the hut in a hurry, then continued to walk until I was out of the village. I mounted my wyvern and flew back toward Ishka. The village officials probably assumed I'd fled in terror. And in fact, they wouldn't have been wrong. Each time what I'd seen in the hut replayed in my mind, I felt a fresh layer of cold sweat cover my body. The basilisk's venom had been formidable, but nothing like what I'd just witnessed. A normal poison would gradually cause the body to deteriorate, eventually leading to death. But with this poison, it looked more like it had first killed the victim, then toyed with their corpse by eating into their body afterward.

In other words, there was no hope of saving them. Even the soul transfer method that healed Claudia wouldn't work. And if poison like that was to spread even beyond the village, the outcome would be obvious.

"I have to eliminate the poison's source. Otherwise not just Ishka, but all of Kanaria could fall into ruin."

Luckily it didn't appear to be contagious, which was a silver lining, but I also couldn't definitively say it wasn't. It was possible some were already infected and wouldn't fall ill until a certain period of time had passed. In a sense, this poison was an even greater threat to the kingdom than a monster stampede. And it was even possible that the origin of both threats were one and the same. Truthfully, I wanted to head to the forest right away and check, but I couldn't leave Ishka to fend off the monsters by itself while I searched the forest for days on end with no concrete leads. Besides, if I was going to search, I wanted Lunamaria and Miroslav to accompany me. Lunamaria the sage and Miroslav the mage might be able to pick up on a hint or clue that I couldn't. So rather than heading straight to the forest, I urged Claimh Soras to fly faster and made a beeline for the town.

5

"I've never heard of such symptoms," Lunamaria said, her brow furrowed in shock and confusion when I told her what I'd seen. As for Miroslav, she was sleeping like the dead, so I didn't bother waking her. According to Lunamaria, she'd been up until morning tirelessly working on the experiment I'd asked her to—namely, mixing my blood in with an antidote and testing its effectiveness. *Guess it was a tall order for her.*

I turned to Lunamaria and replied, "Well, the part about it being incurable is just speculation on my part. There might be something we can do after all, and I'm just not aware of it."

"No, master. There must have been a reason you felt it was incurable. In other words, the disease was really that serious. You're

probably not far off the mark."

Wearing her dark-purple sage robes, Lunamaria frowned in thought. It was an odd feeling for someone as intelligent as her to trust my intuition more than I did. Then again, she had recognized my Anima, the Soul Eater, within me. If she'd acknowledged my intuition as the intuition of a dragon, perhaps she simply felt it was worth trusting on principle.

As I was lost in thought, however, her face clouded over. When I peered into her eyes, wondering what was the matter, she began stringing words together hesitantly.

"Master...keep in mind...this is just a guess on my part...so don't be too alarmed just yet, but..."

"What is it?"

"Actually, when I heard your speculation just now, a certain passage from an old myth came to mind," she said, running her fingers through her golden hair.

"A myth?"

"Yes. This particular myth speaks of a poison incurable by any means—a poison that killed a god," she said.

Gods were supposed to be immortal. Normally they couldn't be killed by something like poison. But Lunamaria went on to say that one poison had made a god suffer so badly that he'd thrown away his immortality, finding death preferable to eternal agony. Another immortal hero, famous for his Twelve Penances, had been afflicted with this poison, couldn't endure the agony, and burned to death by setting himself on fire. And the origin of this dreadful poison was...

"The toxic hydra of many heads," she finished.

"A dragon, in other words. An illusory beast." I'd already heard of the hydra rather recently, in fact, back when the basilisk had appeared and turned a portion of Titus Forest into a Sea of Rot, Lunamaria herself had mentioned the name. The nation to Kanaria's south was known as the Holy Monarchy today, but even farther south lay a massive Sea of Rot, and that rot had come from the hydra's corpse upon death. Therefore, it sounded like Lunamaria was worried that a hydra had appeared in Titus Forest.

But she wasn't finished. "However, if a hydra really did appear in

the forest, the entire forest would be rotting by now. So rather than the hydra being in the forest, it's probably more like the conditions there are appropriate for it to appear."

Unlike lower-class dragons like wyverns, true dragons weren't born. They came upon the world like lightning, typhoons, or earthquakes. Or perhaps even more accurately, volcanic eruptions. In other words, they were natural phenomena that appeared when the world's conditions were right for them to appear. Fantastic calamities of flesh and blood—those were dragons in a nutshell. Conversely, if even one of the appropriate conditions wasn't met, they wouldn't show up. That fickleness was also characteristic of dragons.

If the conditions were now right for a hydra to appear, it meant that whatever condition was keeping the beast from manifesting in the world up until now had been removed. Either that, or it had been removed long ago and the hydra had been gradually manifesting all this time, little by little. If the reason for the stampede and the incurable poison was that a hydra had manifested enough for denizens of this world to notice, then...

"We're in deep shit."

"Indeed. That's only if my guess is correct, however."

"I mean, in this case, I'd be thrilled to learn you were way off base. But for now, just to err on the side of caution, we should operate on the premise that you're right."

First we needed to inform Ishka's government, the guild, and the slave trader association of this possibility. Of course, chances were they wouldn't believe us at first. They might even laugh us out of the room, but I didn't want them to come back to me later and complain I hadn't warned them. Next, I needed to get Seele and Suzume out of there. Perhaps I could send them back to the royal capital for the time being, where it was safe. I needed to let Duke Dragonaut know about the situation anyway. After that, depending on the situation, I could send them out of the kingdom, perhaps to the empire or the Holy Monarchy.

At that moment, the village of Merte appeared in the back of my mind. Come to think of it, it was also in the vicinity of the Kale River,

meaning it was also in danger. Even putting aside the possible threat of a hydra, there was no doubt that the awful poison was making its way downstream at this very moment. For Iria, Sela, and the brats' sakes, I needed to warn them as soon as possible. Ideally, I'd want them to evacuate to safety with Seele and Suzume.

Also, Raz was supposed to be heading there right now as well. A lot had happened between us, sure, but I didn't want him to die from such a poison. Besides, there was my agreement with Miroslav to uphold. The ongoing stampede was the only issue, but I'd noticed coming back from the ailing village that the defensive line was holding, so Ishka could probably endure for a few days without me. But the stampede would only grow worse as time went on, so if I was going to go to Merte, now was my only option. And so, I prepared to head out once again.

"Master!" The moment I was about to fly out to Merte, I heard a voice. Turning around on Claimh Soras's saddle, I saw Miroslav breathlessly running toward me. She was usually so meticulous about her appearance, but her hair was a mess, her clothes all disheveled. It looked like she'd just sprung out of bed. Doubting she'd just come to say good morning, I hopped down from my wyvern, my expression serious.

"My...apologies. I didn't mean...to keep you..." she wheezed, her shoulders heaving with every breath. I noticed she was carrying a large bag. Had her experimentation with the antidote been successful? When I asked her, she nodded emphatically.

"I've confirmed that the antidote is much more effective now and that it's safe for human consumption. No harmful side effects were observed. It's far from perfect, of course, but it should be a much better bet than the association's."

"You confirmed it? Already?" Not even a full day had passed since I'd given her the task. Based on what she just said, she'd probably only done the bare minimum confirmation, but still, she'd managed that in less than a day? To test the effectiveness of an antidote, she'd need a guinea pig already afflicted with poison. Normally such tests would start with rats or other small animals, then gradually

work up to humans, but...

"I tested the antidote on myself, so there's no doubt it works," the red-haired mage said casually. In other words, the reason she was sleeping like the dead wasn't because of the fatigue from her all-nighter. It was because she'd performed the experiment on herself.

I couldn't help but furrow my brow at her. "No one said you had to go that far."

"Well, desperate times call for desperate measures. I didn't really have the time to start with rodents and work my way through like normal, did I?" she said with the hint of an impish grin.

I couldn't help but notice the dark circles under her eyes. It was so pitiful I wanted to look away. Perhaps noticing the pity in my gaze, she shook her head with a smile as though to tell me not to worry.

"More importantly, master, I've also confirmed that your blood has a profound effect on the human body when consumed. I believe it even has the potential to conquer this deadly poison Luna informed me of. However, you need to be careful about who you administer it to. Your blood is far too powerful to offer to just anyone."

"Far too powerful? What do you mean by that?"

"Think of it like a medicine so potent it can actually be poisonous if you're not cautious. For instance, if you gave it to a patient with a weak body, it might actually prove fatal."

"Hm, you don't say."

"There's also a chance it could reinvigorate the disease within the patient. Dragon blood is often thought of as a panacea, but that doesn't mean it's an unconditional cure-all. There's always a possibility it'll cause more harm than good. Don't forget that."

"I won't," I said seriously, nodding at her warning. According to her, she could make some truly powerful, harmless curatives by mixing in my blood in just the right way, but it would take time and effort. Most likely, we wouldn't make it in time to save everyone. So Miroslav had experimented on herself to test the medicine's effectiveness. The bag she held out to me was the result of her risky efforts. I took it with gratitude, then mounted my wyvern once

more.

"Please take care, master. I'll be awaiting your safe return," she said, bowing deeply.

In response, I gave her an additional order. "You take care of yourself too. Don't experiment on yourself like that again. Understand?"

"Oh...yes, I promise, m-master!" Seemingly understanding my feelings, she smiled radiantly. She'd spoken so hurriedly, she'd even bit her tongue on the last word.

In order to escape that gaze of hers, I commanded Claimh Soras to take flight.

At that time, the two major issues in my mind were the monster stampede and the deadly poison. The reason Onigashima wasn't included in that list was that I'd assumed it would take two months at the very least for those on the island to learn of Jijinbou's death and for the Mitsurugi family to investigate and dispatch a replacement. Knowing the current head of the Mitsurugis' personality, I didn't think he would get seriously involved in an issue unrelated to the defense of the island, even if it was at the empire's request.

For that reason, it never even crossed my mind that he might dispatch new personnel the very day of Jijinbou's death. And I certainly hadn't counted on those chivalrous individuals to run headlong into the monster stampede in order to save the populace almost immediately upon arriving at the royal capital.

Epilogue

Those three individuals had joined Ishka's defensive line not long after the monster stampede began, telling the rest of the soldiers they'd come from Horus, Kanaria's royal capital. However, all three looked quite different from the rest of Kanaria's citizens. One was a towering, bulky man wearing an armored headpiece of eastern design. Another was a woman with ruby eyes and silky white hair. She wore a kimono with a pattern resembling arrow feathers, as well as a red hakama. Attire like that was almost never seen within the kingdom.

The third person, a youth, had white hair and ruby eyes exactly like the woman's. He looked like he could have been her brother. Unlike the other two, the boy's outfit wasn't noticeably Eastern, but a traditional gray-brown robe. However, his glare was like ice.

All three wore swords on their hips. They'd come all the way to Ishka from the royal capital because they wanted to help defend the town—at least, that was the reason they'd given.



The defense force was shorthanded to begin with, so it wasn't about to turn away anyone willing to help. The three newcomers were added to the defense force right away, treated like a party of adventurers. The strength they displayed was jaw-dropping. Whenever a group of monsters approached, they would stand in front, obstructing their enemies' paths like a giant boulder in the way of a raging stream, and cut them all down without mercy. Just like legendary warriors.

At first, Ishka's government had only intended for the defense force to buy time. The soldiers at the hastily constructed first bulwark were to hold the monsters off as long as possible while they built a second bulwark behind it. When the first bulwark fell, they'd move to the second bulwark, buying time to build a third, and so on. In other words, they were to delay the monsters' invasion as long as possible to give Ishka's actual military the necessary time to mobilize.

But with the arrival of these three newcomers, the monsters didn't even make it past the first bulwark. The line of defense was so solid that the second, third, and fourth bulwarks were constructed in no time. Everyone who'd assumed the stampede would eventually reach Ishka and ruin the town was even starting to wonder if the entire horde might be eradicated before they even reached the town's walls.

But there was one thing everyone could agree on: This great success was almost entirely due to the three newcomers who'd come from the royal capital. One Kanarian soldier mused that their strength might rival that of the highest-ranking knights of the kingdom, or even the strongest of the dragon knights. One adventurer wondered if they might even be as skilled as the five Rank 1 adventurers in the kingdom.

None of them knew the truth. The reality that the white-haired youth muttered in exasperation upon overhearing one of these astounded kingdom dwellers heap praise onto them.

"'Rival' them, huh?" he scoffed. "They really have no idea, do they?"

"Minister, how much longer are we going to hunt such easy prey?"

"What's the matter, Klimt? Dissatisfied?"

"Of course I am. After all, we came here to investigate how that priest died, did we not? And now we know the culprit was that duke, Drag-something-or-other. So why can't we just cut him down and go back to the island? Why do we have to waste time fraternizing with these weaklings and fighting their battles for them?" The boy, Klimt, kicked the ground in irritation. "If I hear one more person say I'm on par with a dragon knight or a Rank 1 adventurer, I'm gonna be sick. I haven't even unleashed my Shinsou yet, and they're already showering me with praise? Give me a break."

"Remember, the standard of strength on the continent is very different from that on the island," the man Klimt had called "minister"—Gozu Shiima—warned. "Their customs, common practices, and values as well. I put you on this mission so that you'll learn as much. And I believe I've already explained to you both why we're participating in this fight. As retainers of Mitsurugi, we have a duty to atone for Jijinbou's misdeeds."

Klimt merely shrugged. "Does that really matter? It's not like fighting here will resurrect the people he killed."

"It *does* matter," Gozu answered sternly. His self-possessed demeanor rarely ever slipped, but a hint of anger showed itself in his expression. Of course, the anger wasn't directed at Klimt, but at Jijinbou, who'd made this mess in the first place. Having investigated the disturbance in Kanaria and learned the full extent of what Jijinbou had done, Gozu was furious. Even setting aside his personal feelings on the matter, as the Mitsurugi family's Minister of War, assisting Shikibu in overseeing the island's military, Jijinbou's actions had been unconscionable.

"The Illusory Blade style was founded to protect the world," he muttered. "That means we have a duty to use this power to defend those without. Jijinbou's misdeeds violated our creed."

For that reason, Gozu had no intention whatsoever of killing the duke and avenging Jijinbou. Rather, he would have liked to apologize to the duke for his colleague's insubordination and even wanted to

praise him for having the strength to take out an Illusory Blade user.

Klimt nodded reluctantly. "Well, I'm not going to disobey you, so whatever you say goes, I guess. Still, if we keep fighting these small fry much longer, I feel like it's gonna dull my edge. Don't you think so too, sis?" The boy turned to the woman, who'd been listening to the conversation silently up until then.

"Pride and arrogance are two different things, Klimt," she replied with a shake of her head. "Whatever the situation may be, conceit is prohibited. Also, you'd do well to watch your tone a little more. However skilled you may be in combat, that's no reason to look down on others."

"You're always saying things like that, Kuraia. However you want to dress it up, weaklings are weaklings," he spat coldly. But rather than animosity toward his older sister, it sounded more like a child pouting after being scolded. From that alone, one could probably surmise what kind of relationship they shared as siblings.

Gozu observed the two of them silently. The older sister was Kuraia Berch, and her brother was Klimt Berch. The Berches were one of the most eminent families on Onigashima—much more so than the Shiima family, in fact. The Mitsurugis had four chief vassals called the Four Ministers supporting them: the Minister of Welfare, the Minister of Works, the Minister of Justice, and the Minister of War, the last of which Gozu was currently serving as. Two of those other seats were occupied by Berch family members, a good indicator of the amount of influence the family held.

As members of that bloodline, Kuraia and Klimt were also expected to take their own seats within the Mitsurugis' central network one day. And secretly, Gozu had given them this mission to test whether they truly had the potential to serve as vassals of Mitsurugi.

As Gozu reflected on this, Kuraia spoke up. "Minister, I have a question regarding Duke Dragonaut."

"The duke? What do you want to know?"

"Do you really think he was capable of defeating a Banner of Seirin?"

Gozu narrowed his eyes slightly. He urged her with his gaze to

continue. Correctly interpreting his gesture, Kuraia went on to explain the reason for her doubt.

"I've only been observing from a distance, of course, but as far as I can tell, the duke does seem quite skilled. Most likely his level is somewhere in the fifties, like mine and my brother's. I daresay he'd prove more than a match for us in a fight."

When her brother heard that, his eyes went wide. He opened his mouth to protest, but a wry smile from Kuraia kept him silent. "However," she went on, "that's only assuming we didn't use our Shinsous. If we did, we'd most definitely win. And from what I heard, Jijinbou's level was over 70, and he used his Shinsou in the battle. I find it hard to believe that the duke could win against him in that state."

"Is that your only reason for doubting the duke?" Gozu asked.

"Not quite. I also find the actions he took after the battle to be suspicious. Apparently he's currently exerting every effort to help the town rebuild. In other words, he was unharmed enough in the battle against Jijinbou for him to be this active. I just don't see how that's possible."

"I see," Gozu said, nodding slowly. Truthfully, he had found that dubious as well. But news of the stampede had reached the royal capital before he'd had a chance to investigate more thoroughly.

Just as he was about to explain to Kuraia that they'd investigate in greater detail once the current issue was taken care of, a voice came from outside their tent.

"Excuse me, but is there a Gozu Shiima inside?"

When he heard the voice, Gozu arched an eyebrow. It sounded female. Naturally, their success in battle today had earned them the admiration of soldiers and adventurers alike, and while few in number, there had been women among them as well. Some had even approached Gozu and Klimt with bedroom proposals. For a moment, Gozu wondered if this visitor might be another one of those.

But then he reconsidered. There was no flirtation in the voice calling for him. Nor did it sound like the speaker was seeking him for anything so frivolous. It sounded almost businesslike.

Gozu opened the tent flap and invited the two women he found there inside. They introduced themselves as envoys from Ishka's Adventurer's Guild. While they looked young, Gozu could sense that they possessed nerves of steel.

Their names were Ridelle and Parfait.

Afterword

For those who are picking up this series for the first time, thank you so much, and nice to meet you! I'm Gyokuto. For those who picked this volume up after reading the first one, thank you so much, and nice to meet you again! If you recall, in the last afterword, I wrote, "while hoping we meet again in the next volume," and I'm extremely glad we were able to!

Now then, with the greetings over, I want to talk a little about the work itself. But before we get into that, I have an announcement to make: This work was entered into Earth Star's first-ever web novel contest, and while volume one was published in advance of the results getting announced, on October 15 of this year, those results were posted! And unbelievably, this work of mine won the grand prize! This, too, was only possible thanks to all of you readers, so I'm eternally grateful! The rewards for the grand prize winner include a manga adaptation and audio drama, among other exciting things that will probably be announced by the time you read this afterword, so please look forward to it all. To be honest, my own anticipation is so sky-high that I probably look suspicious even while doing daily tasks. For instance, I'll be on a train or in the middle of shopping, then find I've been grinning to myself. So if you see someone like that, please forgive them.

Still, I also mentioned this in my response to winning the grand prize, but to me, this victory is not the goal—it's more like I've made it to the starting line at last. So I don't want to get too complacent and will put out many more creative works from here on.

Now we can talk about the story. First off, the web version of this volume didn't give the duke's daughters or the Falcon Blades' warrior priest many chances to shine, so I added a few scenes focused on giving them the spotlight. Of course, because of their respective relationships to the protagonist, some might have received a more

favorable spotlight than others. In particular, I feel like I ought to apologize to the warrior priest for what I put her through.

Including these changes, there were even more revisions to the web novel in this volume than the previous one. While the main story is largely unchanged, the depictions of some characters have changed considerably and will likely diverge from the web novel even more in the future. Readers might find it interesting to compare and contrast the differences, offering an even greater degree of enjoyment to engaging with this humble work.

Now it's time to acknowledge and thank the staff who made this book a reality. Yunagi, once again, thank you so much for your wonderful illustrations. Even when I struggle to provide a concrete image in my head of what I want my characters to look like and wear, you always provide designs that go above and beyond my expectations. Editor Furusato, I apologize for always being such a nuisance. I'll try to approach my work with a little more composure next time. And to all the readers who picked up this book, as well as the readers of the web novel version, this series would not have made it out into the world without you. I'll continue to work on both the published version and the web version from now on, so please continue to support them both in the future as well.

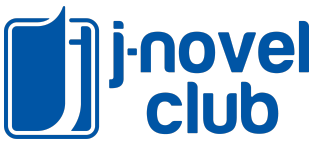
Lastly, a special thanks to all those who are holding a physical copy of the book in your hands at this moment. Now that the cast from Onigashima have shown up in the published version as well, the end of the first act is drawing near. While hoping I can announce the end of Act 1 to you all in the afterword for volume 3, I lay my pen down for now. Thank you again.


AKANE FUJITA AS SUZUME
AKI TOYOSAKI AS SEELE
BE SURE TO LISTEN TO THE AUDIO DRAMA TOO!









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Revenge of the Soul Eater: Cast Out as a Weakling by My Sword Saint Father Volume 2
by Gyokuto

Translated by Perry Logan Edited by RSN

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