
Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
15
Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles
Hero's Rhapsody


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"..."
Rio stopped swinging his sword and greeted the two sisters, but the two of them were frozen, their eyes wide.
"GOOD MORNING, YOUR HIGHNESSES."


Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles


"EVEN YOU MUST BE FEELING NERVOUS RIGHT NOW, HUH?"
"HMM? OH, YES. PERHAPS."
Hiroaki chuckled smugly. She's definitely got the hots for me, he thought to himself.

CONTENTS

Prologue: Liselotte's Melancholy
Chapter 1: After the Fierce Battle
Chapter 2: Recuperation of the Royal Sisters
Chapter 3: The Future From Here
Chapter 4: Meanwhile…
Chapter 5: Departure and Pursuit
Interlude: Duke Huguenot's Melancholy
Chapter 6: Return
Epilogue: Sakata's Decision
Afterword

Illustrations: Riv



Rio (Amakawa Haruto)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom.
In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.



Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.



Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.



Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. In her previous life, she was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.



Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.



Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.



Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.



Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under Rio's protection along with Miharu and Aki.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION



Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Finally reunited with her older sister, Christina.



Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Protected by Rio, together with Flora.



Roanna Fontaine
Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. Traveling with Sakata Hiroaki as his attendant.



Sakata Hiroaki
A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.



Shigekura Rui
A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.



Kikuchi Renji
One of the heroes from another world. An adventurer unaffiliated with any kingdom, until...



Liselotte Cretia
Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.



Aria Governess
Liselotte's head attendant and an enchanted sword wielder. Has been friends with Celia since their academy days.



Sumeragi Satsuki
Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.



Sylvie Rubia
First Princess of the Rubia Kingdom
A warrior also known as the Princess Knight.



Reiss
A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.



Lucius
Leader of the mercenary group The Heavenly Lions. Killed in a battle with Rio.

Prologue: Liselotte's Melancholy

Southwest of the Galarc Kingdom, in the trading city of Amande... Ten days had passed since Christina and Flora disappeared.

One morning, Liselotte Cretia was in the drawing room of the governor's estate. She was accepting a letter from Roanna, who was visiting as a messenger from the Restoration. She was seated on one of the reception chairs, scanning over the letter penned by Duke Huguenot.

The contents were detailing the possibility of an engagement between Liselotte and the hero, Sakata Hiroaki. Liselotte would become his third wife from the public point of view, but the letter emphasized that Hiroaki hated the thought of ranking his wives and believed there was no meaning to the order. It also asked for her to immediately visit the Galarc Castle with Roanna in order to meet Hiroaki, noting that Roanna was to be the second wife and Galarc's third princess Rosalia would be the first wife.

However, the first thought that came to Liselotte's mind after reading the text was...

How do I reject this...?

Suppressing her desire to sigh heavily, she glanced up at Roanna seated before her. The girl who had arrived as Duke Huguenot's messenger was sitting elegantly with her eyes closed as she waited for Liselotte to finish reading the letter.

The marriage meeting will take place in the Galarc Castle. The sender says Duke Huguenot, but it's been stamped with King Francois's signature, so I'm essentially being summoned by His Majesty himself. This is Duke Huguenot we're talking about, so of course he wouldn't overlook the proper procedures regarding this.

When making a marriage proposal to a noblewoman of a distinguished family, it was only natural to seek the permission of the king. But the fact he had gone

to approach the king formally before Liselotte herself was a cunning move. With the proposal crafted like this, Liselotte was now one step behind.

His Majesty approved of my freedom in marriage already, but...

It was unclear how far King Francois was willing to respect Liselotte's freedom when the Restoration—their allies—were in such a precarious state. Since the Restoration's headquarters were located in Marquess Rodan's domain, it was in a position that bordered the Galarc Kingdom and could suppress the Proxia Empire.

Even if the organization itself was terminated, it would still become the potential frontline if a war between the Galarc Kingdom and the Proxia Empire ever occurred. The Beltrum Kingdom's main government was already strengthening its connections to the Proxia Empire, so the Galarc Kingdom's best interests lay in having the Restoration alive and well. That way, they could act as a breakwater in case of an emergency.

Duke Cretia's domain in particular was located along the border, and the royal family of Galarc had entrusted them with the protection of the western border, so they had a mutual interest in that respect. It was an important matter of whether one's own kingdom would be the frontline for a war.

If things continue at this rate, the Restoration movement will be at risk. I don't know what circumstances prompted me to be nominated as a marriage candidate, but I can't take an optimistic view without hearing His Majesty's opinion first.

Liselotte thought to herself calmly—she needed to confirm the facts. Did King Francois summon her through this letter because it was the least he could do to show his cooperation with their allied hero? Or was the situation worse than imagined and he needed to act proactively?

If it's come to this, I can't just send a rejection without showing my face. I guess I have no choice but to visit the Galarc Castle... Good grief, this is going to be trouble.

Liselotte finally let herself sigh. When she imagined how offended Hiroaki would be when she rejected him, she couldn't help feeling heavyhearted. But there was no helping it: no matter who the offer came from, Liselotte had no

intention of marrying someone she didn't even like. It would be her choice and her choice alone who she devoted the rest of her life to. In order to make that possible, she had become the governess of Amande and established the Ricca Guild, making her position and power unshakable.

"I have read the letter." Liselotte looked away from the paper and up at Roanna.

Roanna bowed her head solemnly. "I apologize for bringing such sudden news to you."

"Not at all. I've heard of the news already."

The leaders of the Restoration—that is, Christina and Flora—had disappeared with no clues as to their whereabouts. The Restoration had separated from the main government under the just reason of overthrowing Duke Arbor with the two legitimate princesses on their side. With the foundation of the organization having disappeared, they were on the brink of collapse.

Duke Huguenot, who was leading the Restoration, surely felt a sense of panic about this, and it was a troubling issue for the Galarc Kingdom as well, as they wanted the Restoration to act as a cushion between them and the Proxia Empire and the Beltrum Kingdom.

"I'm terribly sorry to bring up another sudden request, but as it says in the letter, would you be willing to come with me to the Galarc Castle as soon as possible? I understand you have your own business to attend to, but if you could create some time within the next few days..." Roanna looked at Liselotte with an apologetic face.

"I don't mind—I just so happen to have business to take care of in the capital. We can leave today."

"Thank you very much."

"There's no need for that. I just need to give the hero my reply directly, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's what Sir Hiroaki desires."

"The hero..." Liselotte paused for a brief moment, then nodded firmly. "I

understand.”

If he wants to hear my reply directly, then he must be on board with this proposal. If he wasn’t interested in the proposal, he wouldn’t have specified the reply to be through a direct meeting, Liselotte analyzed from Roanna’s response.

“I will go and prepare for my departure. It shouldn’t take that long, so please wait here in the drawing room until I’m done,” she said to Roanna.

“Okay. Please take your time.”

“I’ll leave a servant in the room, so tell her if you need anything.”

Liselotte looked at Natalie, one of the attendant ladies waiting in the corner of the room. Natalie replied with a respectful bow. Incidentally, Aria and Cosette were also waiting next to Natalie. The order to Natalie was an indirect order for the other two to follow her, so Aria and Cosette also nodded faintly to show Liselotte their understanding.

“Then, if you would excuse me.” With those words, Liselotte stood up and headed for the door. Aria and Cosette followed her quietly, and the three of them left the room.

Honestly, what should I say when I reject him?

As soon as she stepped out into the corridor, Liselotte let out a melancholic sigh. Aria and Cosette watched their master with sympathetic smiles.

Chapter 1: After the Fierce Battle

In the Paladia Kingdom, at a hilly area near a farming village thirty kilometers west of the capital...

The entire area was completely destroyed. The ground was gouged open, with slabs of soil turned up everywhere. But contrary to the disastrous sight, a fantastical spectacle was taking place in the surroundings. Water hung in the air as mist, creating a rainbow. Rio walked beneath such a sky with Lucius's corpse burning brightly behind him. He walked until he reached Christina in her tattered dress and the feverish Flora who had fallen unconscious.

"Is Princess Flora okay?" Rio asked Christina as he sheathed his sword at his waist. Christina had been staring at the mystical sight of Rio passing under the rainbow in a daze, but snapped back to her senses to explain Flora's symptoms.

"Oh... Umm, she was bitten by a venomous spider in the forest and has a fever."

"A venomous spider... Have you tried casting *Purgo*?"

"Y-Yes. But it isn't a poison that can be treated with magic..." Christina regained her composure a little and examined Flora's state with a pale face.

"I see..." Rio looked down at Flora's fever-flushed face.

Detoxification magic can only decompose harmful substances inside the body into harmless substances, which means her body is being attacked by an infection rather than a toxic substance. She may heal if I strengthen her natural recovery with spirit arts, but...

There was another recovery method that would have a more immediate and reliable effect. And so, Rio decided to use that instead. He reached into the pocket of his coat and moved his mouth faintly to chant a spell.

"*Dissolvo*."

The space beneath his coat immediately distorted and a small bottle

appeared in his hand. Rio grabbed it and took his hand out of his pocket. To Christina and the other figure standing nearby, it looked like Rio had taken it out of his pocket normally.

“Take this. It’s a powerful magic potion that can be considered a panacea. She looks fairly exhausted so it may take some time before she regains her stamina, but it should treat the poison right away,” Rio said, holding the bottle out to Christina. It contained a secret recipe made by the spirit folk, so its effect was guaranteed.

“Are you sure...?” Christina blinked in hesitation.

“Of course?” Rio cocked his head, unsure of why she was asking such a thing.

“Th-Thank you so much,” Christina said with her sincerest gratitude and accepted the bottle.

“It’s fine. More importantly, your injuries...” Rio asked, looking at Christina’s appearance.

Her bare, dainty feet were peeking out from under the tattered hem of her muddy dress. They were clearly stained with blood, making it obvious that she was injured. There was a magic-sealing collar around her delicate neck, adding to the tragic sight.

“I-I’m fine. I was walking through the forest barefoot, but it isn’t anything major.” Christina moved her hands to cover her dirty feet in a fluster.

Rio reached inside his coat pocket once more and whispered the discharge spell to retrieve another bottle. He then offered it to Christina. “Pour this over the wound and drink the rest. It’ll ease any pain you have in your body. I’ll remove that collar later.”

“Umm, magic potions are meant to be fairly valuable items... Please use it on your own wounds before me,” Christina said hesitantly, looking at Rio’s bloodstained coat.

However, to Rio, it was something he could mass-produce, and he had no qualms about using it. “I applied some minimal treatment to my wounds while I was fighting, so I’m fine. The more pressing matter right now is the person approaching from over there, so I’m going to deal with that while you treat

Princess Flora.”

Rio half-forced the bottle into her hands before turning his gaze to the approaching third party—the Paladia Kingdom’s first prince, Duran. His gaze wasn’t entirely hostile, but Rio placed a hand on his sword handle warily. However, Duran held both his hands up as he approached, expressing his lack of intention to fight.

“Stop. I do not wish to fight you.”

“But you were Lucius’s ally, no?” Rio asked.

Duran was the one who had told Rio of Lucius’s location while he was in the capital. He had even accompanied Lucius here to spectate the battle; there was plenty enough reason to conclude that the two of them were allies.

“We were comrades in arms who had fought on the same battlefield before, but I’m a prince and he was a mercenary. We were bound by no more than a contract in the end. There’s no way I would consider retaliating just because he was killed—all the less after seeing you fight just now. I’m not that reckless of a fool.” Duran recalled the sight of Lucius fighting Rio and laughed with a hint of exasperation.

“Why were you here with Lucius, then?”

“He asked me to lure you here, but after meeting you in the capital, you piqued my interest. That’s why I wanted to watch your battle with him—I’m no more than a curious onlooker, really. Ah, but I did agree to accept one of the royal sisters as a reward for my assistance,” Duran answered honestly, turning his gaze to Christina, who was feeding Flora the medicine.

Rio’s gaze grew sharper. “So you want the two of them?”

“There’s no way you would allow that, no? As I said, I do not wish to oppose you.” Duran’s attitude remained as carefree as ever.

“In that case, would I be right to assume you have no problem with me taking the two of them away from here?” Rio asked, searching Duran’s expression.

“Sure, I don’t care,” Duran replied, nodding readily. “But I’d like to negotiate with you a little first.”

“...About what?” Rio asked with suspicion. Duran’s connection to Lucius alone was enough to make Rio cautious, so those words immediately made him suspect an ulterior motive.

“Don’t be so wary. Like I said just now, I don’t need those two. Instead—what was your name again? Rio, or Haruto?”

“Rio is a name I have discarded. Please call me Haruto,” Rio answered with a glance at Christina and Flora.

“I see. Then, Haruto. Would you have any interest in working for Paladia...? In working for me? I want you more than those two,” Duran said, suddenly making an unexpected proposal.

“...Huh?” Rio made a bewildered face at the topic at hand, which surpassed his expectations.

Duran began his headhunting pitch with an entirely serious expression. “I’m asking that you work for me. I can give you whatever you want, be it money, power, or women.”

“No, I will not,” Rio declined clearly despite his bewilderment.

“Give it some careful thought before you give an answer. You may be wondering what I’m going on about so suddenly, but I’m being completely serious. I’m not trying to trap you into anything. I also don’t have an ulterior motive,” Duran appealed persistently.

“Even if you say that... What made you bring this up?”

Just what is his goal?

“A most reasonable point. How about we discuss this more at the castle over some alcohol and a seat?” Duran nodded solemnly, coming closer to Rio.

“I humbly pass on that offer.”

The Paladia Castle was where Duran had the greatest amount of power. There was no reason for Rio to go out of his way to visit such a place.

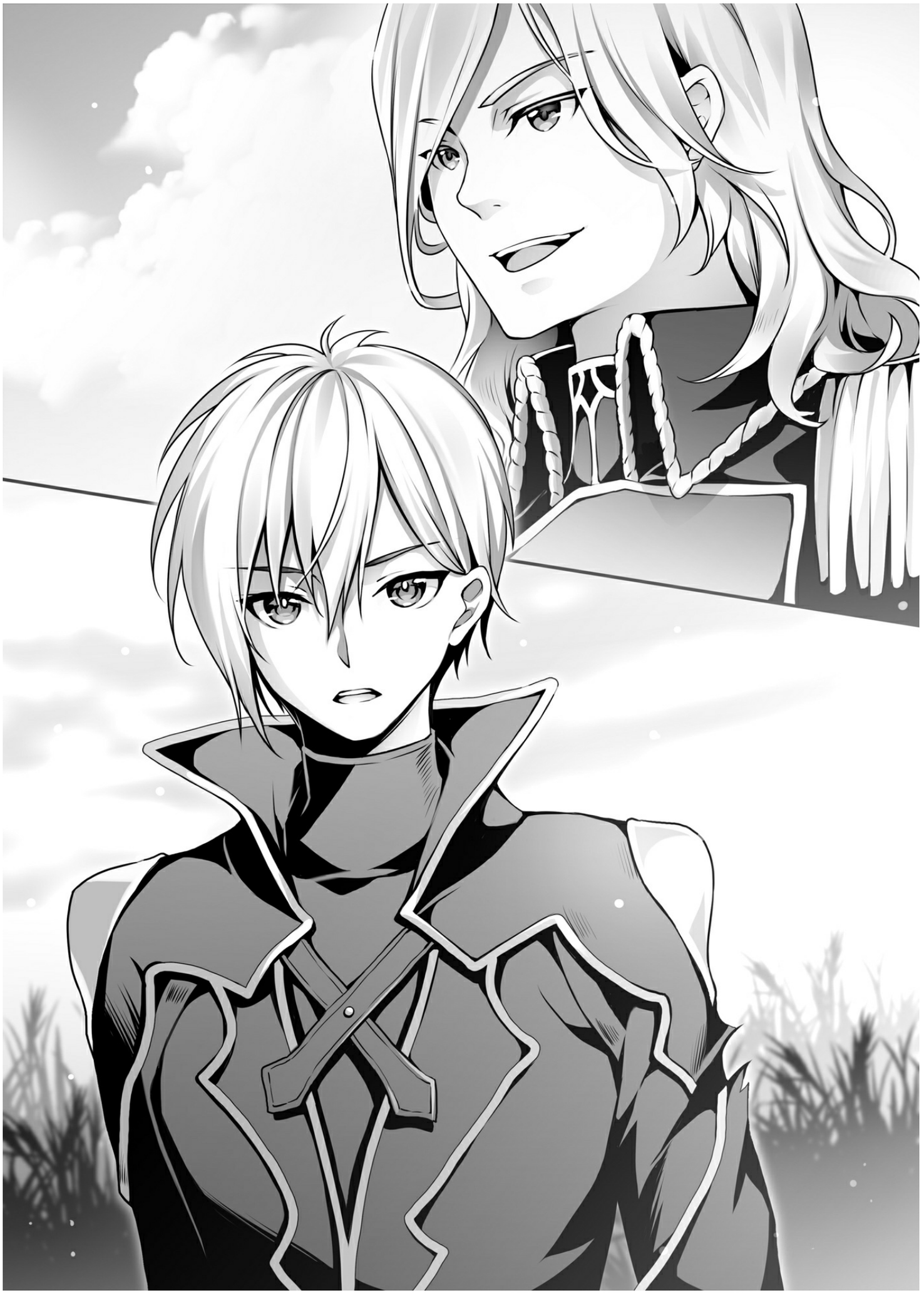
“Come on now, don’t be like that.” Duran was extremely persistent.

Rio stepped back from him. “N-No thank you. I’ll listen to whatever you want

to say here.”

“Hmph... What a killjoy. But I guess there’s nothing I can do—I don’t want to overstep my boundaries and antagonize you.” Duran sighed dramatically and accepted Rio’s words with reluctance. With that, Rio could see Duran really didn’t have any ill will.

He really throws me for a loop... Rio’s guard relaxed for the first time.



He lowered the hand he had over his sword and sighed.

“Let’s get back on topic, then. Do you have an interest in working for me?” Duran said, encouraging Rio with an eager look.

“Honestly, the fact you got along with Lucius as comrades in arms is enough reason for me to decline.” There were myriad other reasons he couldn’t explain well enough, so Rio chose to answer that way.

“Hmm. So you consider me to be the same as Lucius?”

He already knew he would never work for him, so Rio spoke his thoughts without bothering to hide the truth. “Not exactly—but I cannot trust you.”

“Ha ha ha! I see you really hated that man a lot. Well, that’s only understandable after he killed your mother... But if he was walking the road of heresy, then I’m walking the road of domination. Power is justice—I take whatever I want with my own hands. I suppose I’m similar to Lucius in that way, and I won’t deny I have the temperament of a tyrant, but my tastes aren’t as terrible as his. Thus, I’m not the same as him, but we were similar enough for me to find some parts of him tolerable.”

Duran showed no offense at being compared to Lucius and instead started rambling fluently about himself. He even grinned when he called himself a tyrant. It was probably his way of making himself sound appealing to Rio as an employer.

“...You speak very frankly.”

If Duran really is trying to scout me, he should have phrased his words a little more nicely, Rio thought.

“That’s because I’m seriously trying to employ you. If I lied to you now, what would I do once you’re actually hired?” Duran answered openly.

“A just reason. But even then, I still question your decision to hire a stranger who just killed your acquaintance,” Rio argued back.

“We’re not complete strangers, and one needs to be open-minded to walk the road of dominance. Whether you killed a friend of mine or not, I want what I want. That’s why I’ll say it one more time—I want you more than the two

princesses. Will you work for me?" Duran tried to persuade Rio once more.

"We're going around in circles," Rio said with a wry smile and a shrug.

Duran chuckled. "Well, we'd be done right away if you'd just agree."

"I'm flattered by the offer, but why do you have such a high opinion of me?" Rio sighed at Duran's tenacity.

"Bwa ha ha! Why, it's simple—I love strong people. I want them for myself. That's why I want you. By any means possible."

"Why are you so desperate for strong people? Is it for the dominance that Your Highness spoke of earlier?"

Dominance—the power to subdue others and make them obey. The fact they were talking like this meant Rio was being dragged into Duran's pacing already, but Rio decided to ask anyway.

"It's my ideal way of being, but it's not completely related. In short, I believe in the need to look at things more broadly."

"By which you mean...?"

"My kingdom is merely one of many small kingdoms. That's why the kingdom needs enough power not to be looked down upon by other kingdoms in a diplomatic sense. I pride myself in being able to do the work of a thousand foot soldiers, but there are skilled warriors in other kingdoms, and we're no match for the resources of a major nation. That's why we've formed an alliance with the Proxia Empire, but we're still a small kingdom in their eyes. I cannot stand for my kingdom being seen as the weak to be eaten. For the future of the kingdom, I need to overturn that view. Do you understand?" Duran looked at Rio with fire burning in his gaze.

"You need military power so that other kingdoms won't look down on you?"

"That's right," Duran nodded smugly. "There are countless small kingdoms crowded around us, and they're constantly in a restless state. I personally don't want to pick fights with nothing to gain, but war could start at any moment depending on the major nations backing them. Thus, I'm constantly in search of strong people."

“When it comes to conflict, there are times when words cannot solve everything. I agree that strength is required in such cases.”

However, the way Duran phrased his words made it sound like he was willing to start war when there *was* something to gain. Rio couldn’t agree with a stance like that.

“A nonaggressive defense approach. The act of proactively avoiding conflict as long as the other party doesn’t make a move, huh? But there’s a countless number of small kingdoms around us, so we cannot exist without interacting with them. Once you consider the scheming of powerful nations on top of that, there’s no way we can use naive methods of nonaggressive defense. In order to feed the people, we have to pursue the profits of the kingdom before anything else.”

“I’m sure you do. However...I do not wish to be associated with any particular kingdom,” Rio uttered tiredly, truthfully.

Duran laughed heartily. “Hah! You have that much strength, yet you don’t want to be associated with a kingdom. Here I was thinking you were pursuing the path of justice, when you actually seek detachment from the real world. Do you intend on becoming a hermit?”

“Who knows? Perhaps I may,” Rio chuckled lightly, dodging the question.

“Hmm... Has the demon haunting you been exorcised now that you’ve exacted your revenge? You have no spirit. Overly ambitious subordinates are a problem, but completely apathetic ones are troublesome as well. They’re terribly difficult to motivate.” Contrary to his words, Duran stifled his hearty laughter as he spoke.

“In that case, please give up on recruiting me.”

“Mm... No. I won’t back down that easily. I can see you have enough strength hidden to overthrow a battlefield. No, an entire kingdom.”

“I’m technically an honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom...”

Will you continue your recruiting attempt in spite of that? The Paladia Kingdom is on the side of the Proxia Empire, hostile to the Galarc Kingdom, no? Rio implied.

“I am aware. That’s why I can’t leave you as is. As long as Paladia is part of the Proxian side of things, I fear we could face you on the battlefield one day.”

“In that case, you can be at ease. I do not intend on standing on the battlefield.”

He hadn’t wanted a title in the first place, which was why he was made an honorary knight. He had no obligations to the kingdom, but all the benefits—it was a special case.

“Even if you have no intention yourself, the state of affairs may not permit such a thing. You might also change your mind. For example, if someone close to you is taken hostage. Considering how you walked the path of revenge, it’s a perfectly realistic possibility, no? You may seem like a coldhearted person at times, but you’re not heartless. Those two princesses there weren’t close to you, yet you protected them to the end perfectly,” Duran said, looking at Christina and Flora behind Rio.

Flora was still lying limply, but Christina had finished feeding her the medicine. She’d also finished her own bottle Rio had handed her and was quietly listening to their conversation.

“...” Rio denied nothing, remaining silent with a conflicted face.

“It’s a hardship, but wouldn’t it be easier to separate yourself from those close to you if that were the case? There’s no one close to you here in the Paladia Kingdom, no?” Duran appeared to be a brute military man, but he actually seemed to have a broad perspective and deep insight. Rio himself had also considered leaving those dear to him, after all.

“Indeed, you make a fair point.” Rio nodded with a strained smile.

“Right? Now that you’ve fulfilled your revenge, you need a new goal in your life. I’ll be able to provide you with one. Major nations are fussy about social status and tradition, but my kingdom will allow you to rise as far as your abilities extend. You can have any wish of yours fulfilled once you’re officially appointed.” Duran’s recruitment speech was truly persistent and skillful. He valued Rio highly and brought out all his favorable conditions at the perfect moments.

“It’s a very tempting proposal, but... I’m not sure about a life goal, but I do have somewhere I wish to return.”

Rio’s feelings hadn’t changed. The wariness he had at the beginning disappeared over the course of their conversation, and he found Duran to have a very charming personality, but the people he wanted to be with were somewhere else.

“So I cannot sway you...” Duran stared at Rio’s face, then sighed sadly.

“My apologies. If that’s all you wanted to discuss, I will be taking the two princesses into my care.” Rio glanced at Christina and Flora behind him.

“If you desire it, I can invite the three of you to my castle as guests.”

“I’m still technically an honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom, and the two princesses cannot afford to create a debt to the kingdom allied with the Proxia Empire.”

“...Can you carry the two injured princesses alone?” Duran asked.

Rio returned the question boldly. “Did you think I couldn’t?”

“Goodness. There’s absolutely no weakness to pick at here. Should I just threaten you with the crime of ruining my kingdom’s land?” Duran argued back, though he didn’t have any intention of doing so.

“If you did, I’d threaten you back for the Paladia Kingdom’s involvement in abducting the two princesses...”

“I figured. Just so you know, it was Lucius who planned the whole thing. All I did was help Lucius face you after he had already kidnapped the princesses.”

“But you accepted the opportunity to receive one of the princesses as a reward, no?”

Duran chuckled. “That plan was suspended, but it sure makes me sound bad.”

“If you allow me to leave this place quietly, then I will personally refrain from making unnecessary statements regarding the Paladia Kingdom.” Rio presented a bargaining chip and glanced at Christina.

“...We will follow Sir Amakawa’s lead. As long as your side doesn’t act upon

this incident, I do not intend on pursuing your kingdom for any further responsibility," Christina said.

"Goodness... Ugh, fine. Do as you wish." Duran ruffled his own hair in frustration.

"Thank you for your generous consideration."

"Hmph. Just so you know, I'm unsatisfied with this. But if I cannot negotiate to bring you to my side, then I have no choice but to let you leave quietly. I already know what will happen if I try to stop you with force."

"While this isn't a trade by any means, feel free to take Lucius's sword back with you." Rio looked at Lucius's sword, which was stabbed into the ground nearby.

Duran replied after a long pause. "...I see no reason for me to accept it. It's the sword of the man you defeated, so it rightfully belongs to you."

"I will conduct a minimal amount of cleanup, but I've caused a lot of trouble for this land and the village. Would you consider it compensation for that, as well as a bribe for your silence regarding my name?" Rio said, offering reasons for entrusting Lucius's sword to Duran.

"I see..."

"That enchanted sword probably has the ability to release the wielder's magic essence as slashing attacks, the ability to teleport the blade within one's field of view, and the ability to teleport oneself within one's field of view. If Your Highness is seeking military power, then it shouldn't be a loss for you to keep."

"Indeed, it isn't a bad deal... But don't you think it's a little expensive for hush money? That's probably a top-class enchanted sword, you know?" Duran said, laughing.

"I don't mind. I have no interest in swinging around the sword of my enemy." Just looking at the sword was enough to remind him of Lucius's face.

"Hmm... Fine. I shall accept it."

"Then it's a deal." Rio smiled in satisfaction, turning around as though to end the conversation.

“Wait,” Duran called Rio back.

“What is it?”

“This isn’t a recruitment, but a pure invitation—the next time we meet somewhere, have a meal with me as a friend.”

“A meal...as a friend?” Rio cocked his head curiously.

“I’m saying we’ll have drinks. Don’t tell me you can’t handle your alcohol?”

“No, I can drink in moderation...”

“Then it’s decided.” Duran smiled in high spirits.

“...All right.” He doubted they’d ever have such an opportunity, but there was nothing Rio could do but nod.

“Well then, I’ll be taking Lucius’s sword and leaving. I’m curious as to how you’ll go about cleaning this place up, but a promise is a promise.” Duran shrugged.

I don’t know what effect is instilled in his enchanted sword, but it’s probably that strange sorcery he used during his battle with Lucius. I’ll investigate that further the next time we meet, he thought to himself.

“Take care.”

Duran quietly walked over to where Lucius’s sword was stabbed into the ground and pulled it out. It was common courtesy to clean up after oneself, after all. He then turned and set off in the direction of the village. This left only Rio, Christina, and Flora behind.

Now, then...

Rio checked that Duran was out of sight, then drew his sword from its sheath. He stabbed it into the soil and poured magic essence into the ground through it. The ruined land started to stir as though it were alive. Dirt and stone wriggled until the land returned to a flat state.

“Wha...” Christina watched the sight with her jaw dropped. She had witnessed many outlandish sights during the battle with Lucius, but this was something to behold as well. This was something she couldn’t recreate with

Strahl magic.

Rio adjusted the terrain in roughly ten seconds or so, then looked around the area. “...That should do,” he muttered, sheathing his sword back at his waist.

“...” Christina blinked at Rio’s face with wide eyes. He turned back to her.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said.

“Ah... R-Right,” Christina replied, snapping back to her senses.

“Can you stand up?” Rio offered Christina his hand.

“Yes...” Christina accepted his hand nervously and let him pull her onto her feet.

“That collar needs to be removed,” Rio said, reaching for her neck. Christina couldn’t see it happen, but his hand glowed faintly before the collar unlocked with a clack.

“It’s off.” Rio grabbed the collar and tossed it to the ground.

“Huh? Oh... Thank you very much.”

How did he do that without using disenchanting magic? That was the question clearly showing on Christina’s face. Confused, she reached up to confirm that the strangling sensation around her neck had disappeared.

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“N-No. Everything’s healed thanks to the potion you gave me.”

“Great.”

“What about your injuries, Sir Amakawa? You said you at least stopped the bleeding...” Christina noted, worried about Rio’s injuries.

“Yes, it seems like the bleeding has stopped. There shouldn’t be a problem if I treat myself after I’ve transported the two of you, so we should get moving soon. I’ll get you to a place where you can rest peacefully—we can discuss everything else there.”

He could feel a dull pain, but the blood attached to his coat was already starting to dry. Rio touched the area that Lucius had cut as he thought to himself.

That aside, I hadn't expected the black wyvern leather to be cut through so easily. I wonder if it can be fixed...

Lucius's sword had the ability to teleport through space, so perhaps cutting through space itself had an effect on what the sword could slice through.

"You haven't healed yourself yet, so you shouldn't be moving around... Will you at least take the time to cast *Cura* properly before we depart?" Christina suggested worryingly.

"But we can't stay here either, right? Prince Duran left, but there's a possibility he might return to check the area. I won't be moving that strenuously, and it's only a short distance, so I'll be fine."

"In that case, allow me to treat you while we're moving. I can use *Cura*, so..." Christina said with a frown as she suggested the second-best plan.

"No, I can cast healing magic myself while I move, so I'll be fine."

He needed to place his hand directly on the affected area in order to heal efficiently, but it was possible to stop his wound from bleeding without touching it while running or flying in a physically enhanced state. Because he had needed to use his spirit arts to continuously detect magic essence across a wide area to predict where Lucius would teleport during their battle, he hadn't had the leisure to focus on healing. However, now he could spend that share of his focus on healing.

"No, please let me heal you. It isn't enough to thank you, so I just want to do something—anything—for you. So, please... Allow me." Christina lowered her head, pleading.

Rio looked up at the sky in discomfort. "I understand... In that case, could you please do so? And raise your head, please."

"Thank you very much..." Christina's voice and shoulders trembled as she kept her head bowed down.

Chapter 2: Recuperation of the Royal Sisters

Rio picked up Flora, who had lost consciousness and fallen asleep. He carried Christina on his back and prepared to depart.

“Now, shall we get going? I won’t move that fast, but please hold on tightly to make sure you don’t fall off. You only have to cast the healing magic to a degree you can handle too,” Rio said to Christina before they left. Since he was carrying her on his back, her face was right before him when he turned to look over his shoulder.

“O-Okay...” Christina replied in a faint whisper.

What should I do? I stink, don’t I?

She was uneasy over that. She had sweat a ton walking around the forest, hadn’t had a bath, her dress was in tatters, and yet she had to cling to Rio in order to avoid being thrown off.

“She’s filthy and she reeks. I have no interest in holding such women.”

She recalled Duran’s words and felt even more uneasy; he had even said she looked just like a beggar. In contrast, there was a faint scent of soap on Rio, making her even more aware of her own body odor.

“Is something the matter?” Rio felt Christina stirring on his back and turned his head slightly to look at her.

“N-No, it’s nothing!” Christina shook her head, her voice sounding shrill. She casually slackened her hold around Rio.

“Umm, could you hold on a little more tightly?” he warned immediately.

“R-Right...” Christina hesitantly tightened her arms around Rio’s upper body. However, from how timid she was acting, it was clear she was still feeling reserved.

“Is there something wrong after all...?” Rio asked carefully.

Christina blushed and ducked her head. “I-It’s nothing, really...” she

whispered. It was almost like the action of an ordinary shy girl—an unimaginable look for her usual dauntless self.

“That’s good, then... Oh, Your Highness wouldn’t normally have to cling to a man like this, right? I apologize for saying something so tactless. The journey won’t take long, but I’m sorry for this.” Rio seemed to realize the reason for Christina’s bashfulness and apologized awkwardly.

“Oh, no, that’s not it... I’m the one who should apologize for dirtying your clothing in such a state...” Christina explained in a faint voice. She wasn’t able to ask if she reeked, so she went about it indirectly.

Rio was finally convinced he didn’t need to worry with that. “If you’re going to say that, then my coat is stained with blood as well. I’ll have to prepare a change of clothes and a bath for us once we’re done traveling,” he chuckled.

“Thank you very much...” Christina quietly tightened her grip around Rio again.

“Now, let’s get going.” With Christina and Flora secured, Rio moved to leave. He kicked off from the ground and used wind spirit arts to float gently into the air. Then, once he reached an altitude of ten meters or so, Christina tightened her hold on him even more.

“Wha...” She glanced around, dropping her gaze down to the ground.

“You won’t fall, so don’t worry,” Rio said, guessing Christina’s thoughts from her reaction. He had revealed his flying spirit arts during his battle with Lucius, so he didn’t have to hide that anymore.

“Um... How are you flying right now?” Christina asked timidly.

“I’m manipulating the wind to fly,” Rio explained broadly. He had used his spirit arts without holding back in his fight with Lucius; it’d be impossible to explain every one of the abilities he used as an effect of his enchanted sword—Christina wouldn’t believe it. It was clear he’d have to explain spirit arts, but he hadn’t decided how much detail he’d have to go into yet.

“I-I see...” Christina hummed, looking around at the scenery in a daze. Perhaps she didn’t know how far she should pry, or perhaps her thoughts weren’t able to keep up with the series of shocking truths she’d been given.

Perhaps it was both.

They were currently off the road at a hilly area with a great view, and she found herself captivated by the scenery.

“There’s a lot I have to explain, and I’m sure you have a lot of questions as well. It’s embarrassing to admit, but so much has happened that my head hasn’t caught up yet, so could you allow me some of your time for that once we’ve rested?”

“R-Right... That’s right, I have to treat your wound. Shall I start casting my magic around here?” Christina snapped back to her senses and extended the right arm she had reached around Rio’s chest. She placed her hand over his left arm where the bloodstain was and confirmed if treatment was required.

“Yes. But if you’re not in the right position to do so, it’s fine.”

“No, I can manage.” Christina uttered the spell *Cura* and a magic circle appeared by her right hand, glowing faintly. All that was left was to wait for time to pass. She watched Rio’s left arm closely.

“Thank you very much.”

“Uh... Y-You’re welcome.”

Because she had her arm extended out to heal, her face had moved right beside Rio’s before she realized it. When she noticed Rio’s face was close enough to kiss her if he turned his head, Christina immediately flushed bright red.

Despite that, she didn’t stop the treatment and continued casting her magic.

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Several minutes later, Rio arrived at a rocky area several kilometers southwest of where he fought Lucius.

This should do.

If the best place to hide a tree was a forest, then the best place for the stone house to blend into the surroundings would be a rocky area. The surroundings appeared to be uninhabited as well, so it was the perfect spot to set it up.

Showing them the stone house would end up revealing information he wanted to keep hidden, but with Flora in the state she was in, the situation was an emergency. Since bringing Christina and Flora to the city in their tattered dresses would just attract unwanted attention, he decided to set up a place where they could rest quickly.

“We’re landing here.” With that warning, Rio descended the dozen-odd meters to the ground.

“What are we doing in this rocky area...?” Christina looked around the area curiously. Rio landed soon after, allowing her to confirm that there really wasn’t anything of interest around.

“You can get down here.”

“Okay.” At Rio’s prompting, Christina obediently stepped down onto the ground. Meanwhile, Rio sent his magic essence through his feet and into the ground, using his spirit arts to flatten the foundation. His sword played a supplementary role to the activation of his spirit arts, so stabbing it into the ground would be faster, but his hands were full with Flora right now.

“The ground...is moving?” Christina muttered, looking down.

“I’m going to use an artifact with space sorcery to take out a house. This is just in preparation for that.”

“Huh...?”

“It may be faster to see for yourself. *Dissolvo*.” The foundation was flattened just at that moment, so Rio chanted the spell to use the Time-Space Cache he wore on his arm. Immediately after, the space before Rio and Christina distorted, and a huge boulder appeared with a heavy thud.

“Huh?” Christina blinked.

Rio ignored her and walked towards the entrance, opening the door nimbly while still carrying Flora. “Come in. This is the entrance. After you.” He knew there’d be no end if he started explaining everything, so he decided to put it off until he could explain everything at once later.

Christina was speechless for a long moment, but she eventually determined

there'd be no end if she stopped to be surprised by everything.

"Okay..." she said, following Rio to the entrance. But the living space she entered was so comfortable, she lost her words once again. The stone house wasn't decorated with the extravagant ornaments preferred by the noble class, but it was constructed far better than the average noble estate.

Rio entered the house after Christina and closed the door behind him. "I'd like to set Princess Flora down to sleep, but a change of clothes comes first, right? There are spare clothes that belong to Miharu and the other girls in the wardrobe room at the back. Can you go check to see if any are a suitable size?"

Rio had two stone houses: the one he first received, and the one he was gifted when leaving the spirit folk village with Sara and the others. Since it was a burden to carry clothes between the two houses, there was a spare set of clothes stored in each house for everyone.

They couldn't go to the market to buy more clothes in their current state, so he decided to lend them those clothes and apologize to the girls later. Rio himself couldn't pick out the clothes—especially the underwear—so he asked Christina to select them herself.

"..."

"Princess Christina?"

"Oh, r-right." Still unable to shake off her state of shock, Christina looked around the room curiously. She only snapped back to her senses when Rio called her name.

"I'll show you to the room where the spare clothes are stored, so could you please pick out a change of clothes for yourself and Princess Flora?" The change from the usually moody Christina to this person was new to Rio, who chuckled as he repeated his explanation.

"Right..." Christina nodded, embarrassed at how absorbed she had been in taking in the house.

"Once you find a suitable change of clothes, I'll show you to the bathroom. If Princess Flora wakes up, you can give her a quick wash as well..."

“She looks a lot better now, so I’ll borrow some clothes and try to wake her.”

“Okay. For now, I’ll leave Princess Flora on the sofa and show you the way. Follow me.” Rio laid Flora down on the sofa and showed Christina to the wardrobe room. They arrived at the destination room a moment later.

“This is the wardrobe room. The closet has clothes that are hard to fold, and the drawers have the rest. The closet is shared, but the drawers are separated by person, so once you find something that fits you, you can stick to using that drawer. I’ll explain the situation to the girls who own the clothes later. Please come back to the living room where Princess Flora is once you’re done. I’ll excuse myself for now,” Rio explained, looking around the room. He normally never entered the room, so even he didn’t know whose clothes were located where.

“Thank you for doing all of this.”

“It’s not a problem at all.”

Christina bowed her head at Rio, who then left the room.

Now, to quickly borrow some clothes and return to Flora... She couldn’t keep Rio waiting for too long. Christina first opened a nearby drawer.

“This compartment is for underwear... It’s all made by the Ricca Guild too. This one has skirts, and this one has shirts. If we’re not traveling anymore today, something comfortable should be good, right?”

With that thought, Christina looked inside the closet. It was lined with tailored clothes like dresses and coats.

Wow... Just how many people lived in this house? she wondered, but it probably meant that she could find something her size. After that, Christina checked what kind of clothes were in the other drawers.

I’ll just pick a dress since it’s easy to put on.

She decided to borrow two dresses from the closet. The gowns she normally wore were too complicated to put on herself, but the dresses in the closet looked simple enough to wear easily. She held them up against her body to check their sizes, then picked one belonging to Sara and one belonging to

Miharu. There was also a slip, so she borrowed that too.

This size should be all right... Probably.

She wouldn't know how tight the clothes were until she actually wore them, but she'd dirty them with her dirt-stained body if she put them on like this. She was especially unsure about Flora's size since she wasn't here, but at worst she could borrow something else later.

I should head back.

Christina closed the closet door and drawers, leaving things the way they originally were before exiting the room.

Once she returned to the living room, she spotted Flora sleeping on the sofa. *Where's Sir Amakawa...?*

"It looks like you found some clothes."

Christina looked around the room to see Rio leaving the kitchen with a tray of drinks.

"Yes, I picked these dresses."

"I've prepared some cold drinks, so please help yourself." Rio placed the tray on the table. The ice clattered around inside the metal mugs, melting in the drinks.

"..." Christina gulped. She hadn't been able to hydrate properly while walking around the forest, so her throat was parched.

"Go ahead—help yourself." Rio immediately reached for his own cup.

"Thank you. I'll drink it now."

It must've been a hot tea cooled with ice. It hadn't been cooled to an icy degree yet, so it was the perfect temperature to swallow down in one gulp.

Gulp, gulp. Christina drank the tea with vigor. Once her parched body was hydrated enough, she let out a dreamy sigh. "Phew..."

"There's more if you'd like." Rio immediately walked up to Christina and poured her a refill.

"I-I apologize. Drinking it all in one gulp must have been unsightly," Christina

realized with a start, cheeks flushing.

“It’s fine. Make sure you hydrate yourself properly.” Rio shook his head and smiled.

That made Christina’s face redden further. “Okay... Oh, umm. I have to wake Flora up as well. Flora, wake up.” She placed her cup on the table in a fluster and walked over to where Flora lay on the sofa. Then she gently shook her by the shoulder to wake her up.

“...” Flora must have been exhausted as she didn’t wake up. But Flora had been sweating a lot since being poisoned, so if she continued to sleep like this, she was in danger of becoming dehydrated.

“Flora. Flora?” Christina continued to call her name and shake her, forcing her to wake up.

“Mm...” Flora eventually opened her eyes, slowly.

“Thank goodness. Can you understand what I’m saying?”

“Christina...?”

“That’s right. You remember what happened, right?”

“Y-Yes... Sir Haruto came...then he gave me medicine...”

“After that, Sir Amakawa brought us to a safe location. You might still be feeling bad, but we can’t have you getting dehydrated, so you need to drink something. Can you sit up?”

“Yes...” Flora sat up with some support from Christina. Her gaze was still unfocused and bleary.

“Here you are.” Rio handed Flora’s cup to Christina.

“Go on, drink up.”

“Thank you very much...” Flora wet her parched throat with Christina supporting the cup for her. Her body must have been craving hydration, as she mindlessly continued drinking. After some time passed, she moved her mouth away from the cup with a cute gasp of air.

“I’ll pour you some more.” Rio approached Flora with the glass bottle of tea.

“Huh...? Sir Haruto?” Flora looked up blankly.

“Yes?” Rio cocked his head curiously.

“Ah... R-Right. You’re the one who saved me. My mind is still fuzzy...”

Apparently she hadn’t noticed Rio in her field of view until now. Now that she had rehydrated, her mind was clear enough for her to blush through the fatigue on her face.

“Your body must be exhausted. The poison’s been removed by the medicine, but you should still take it easy for a while.”

“How long will it take for her to fully recover?” Christina asked, worried for Flora.

“She’ll have a slight fever for a few days and she might feel sluggish, but once that’s gone, she’ll be fully healed. Is it okay if I send you two to Rodania after that?”

The spirit folks’ secret remedy was a powerful panacea that could heal everything other than bone fractures and external wounds, but it didn’t have an instant effect. Christina had also exhausted herself quite a bit, so the two of them would need to recover before they traveled.

“Will you take us there...?” Christina asked, watching Rio’s face.

“Of course.”

“But we’re...”

“Is there a reason why you shouldn’t return...?” Rio asked curiously.

“Sir Amakawa... You’re...the boy...” Christina faltered, looking guilty. Flora was watching Rio’s face with a similar expression.

“Are you referring to my past...?” Rio assumed.

Christina nodded heavily. “Y-Yes. We’re now aware of your identity.”

“And that’s the reason why I can’t take the two of you to Rodania, you’re saying?”

“The Beltrum Kingdom wasn’t good to you, and I don’t believe you have a favorable impression of me either. I’ve also treated you terribly.” Christina had

a serious expression, brooding over the things they had once done to him.

“Speaking of terrible treatment... Come to think of it, the first time we met in the slums, you slapped me in the face,” Rio said, looking back on the past with a jesting laugh as though to clear the heavy atmosphere.

“Th-That’s... No, that too. I apologize sincerely for that. It was an extremely thoughtless action to take...” Christina recalled that moment as well and bowed her head with a blush.

“Y-You did something like that, Christina...?” Flora was taken aback and blinked blankly.

“Y-Yes. I saw you unconscious on Sir Amakawa’s back in the slums and flew into a rage...” Christina explained with a fading voice.

“If it’s about the slap, then I’m no longer bothered by it,” Rio said jokingly.

“That’s not all. When you were being harassed by the students at the Academy, I turned a blind eye to it all. And the biggest problem was during the outdoor drill...” Christina referred to that incident with a bitter look.

“Something did happen.”

The outdoor drill was the trigger that caused Rio to leave the Beltrum Kingdom. That had been the last time he had seen Christina and Flora under the name of Rio as well.

“At the time, I didn’t witness it myself, but I doubted the accusation that you were the one who pushed Flora off the cliff. Yet, despite that, I didn’t try to stand up for you,” Christina said shamefully.

“If you didn’t witness it, then you shouldn’t fabricate testimony.” Rio didn’t seem particularly bothered.



“But the truth was different, wasn’t it?” Christina asked, half-confident.

“There’s no way for me to prove it now, but...I wasn’t the one who pushed Princess Flora off the cliff,” Rio replied with a shrug.

“I believe you,” Christina stated immediately.

Flora also joined the conversation without missing a beat. “I-I believe you too! No, I’ve always believed you!”

“Thank you very much,” Rio said awkwardly.

“I should be the one thanking you. I’ve always wanted to thank you for saving me from the minotaur back then. You’re always saving me... Yet all I do is cause trouble for you...” Flora said with a trembling voice.

“I wish to offer my gratitude as well. For saving us this time and all the times in the past,” Christina said, bowing her head.

“No, all those incidents just happened by chance... And I’m the one who ended up involving the two of you in my conflict with Lucius this time. I’m very sorry for that.” Rio bowed his head in return.

“No, as long as that Lucius man had a connection to the Proxia Empire, there was always the possibility he would come after us. That was proven after he went after Flora in Amande, or when Reiss came after me on the way to Rodania. If anything, I believe we wouldn’t have been saved without your grudge against that man. If it weren’t for you, Flora and I would never have been able to reunite...” Christina shook her head as she calmly gave her view on the series of events. In reality, after Rio’s victory over Lucius, the two sisters should have been offered to the Proxia Empire to be used as hostages.

“It’s still unclear whether the Proxia Empire is the one behind all this, but... Let’s discuss this more later. What I wanted you to know right now is that I don’t mind taking the two of you to Rodania,” Rio said, returning to the topic at hand.

“Of course, we would love nothing more than that, but...”

Is it really okay? Christina looked at Rio as though to ask that.

“If you’re still bothered by my past, then allow me to ask this: now that Your

Highness is aware of my background, do you plan on acting upon it once you return to Rodania?”

If there was one thing Rio was worried about, it was this.

“I won’t tell anyone about your past. But if you have any separate requests, I plan on fulfilling them as best I can. If you tell me to clear the false accusation on your name, I shall do just that,” Christina answered.

“It wouldn’t be wise to dig up such an old incident just to clear the false accusation. I don’t plan on bringing up my past, so I would appreciate your silence on the subject. I have no intention of being Rio in the Strahl region at this stage.”

Rio himself didn’t feel much anger about the outdoor drill incident. The only thing he couldn’t forgive was what happened to Latifa. He suspected Duke Huguenot was the mastermind behind that, but the only way of obtaining concrete evidence was to let Latifa see Duke Huguenot’s face directly to confirm that fact. And he didn’t intend on acting if Latifa herself didn’t desire it.

“I understand.” Christina nodded quietly. “Then I shall do just that—you understand, right, Flora?”

“Yes...” Flora nodded, looking as though she wanted to ask Rio something.

“If there’s anything else to discuss about this, we can talk about it later. The bathroom is ready, so allow me to show you the way.”

Rio was still wearing his bloodstained coat, and Christina and Flora were still in their tattered dresses. They couldn’t keep chatting leisurely in their current state, so Rio wrapped up the conversation for now to lead the two of them to the bathroom.

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Rio and the princesses headed to the bathroom of the stone house. They entered the spacious changing room, and Rio opened the door leading to the bathing area.

“This is the bathtub.”

The bathing facility before them was luxurious even from the perspective of

the castle-raised princesses—in fact, it was so well made, the ones they had used until now almost paled in comparison.

The room was large, the ceiling was high, and the walls were made of bare rock. Behind the stone tiled washing area was a stone bathtub large enough to fit several people. There were spouts that kept the tub filled through magic artifacts, and white steam rose from the surface of the water to fill the inside of the bathroom.

"..." Both Christina and Flora gazed at the bathroom in shock.

"I'll explain the different types of soap to you. Please, come this way," Rio said, entering the bathing area. Christina and Flora exchanged looks with each other before following him.

"This bottle has liquid soap that's for your hair. The liquid inside comes out when you press the top. Depending on the length of your hair, you may need to press it several times to get the appropriate amount of liquid—make sure you use enough to lather your hair," Rio said, first explaining the use of shampoo. He then proceeded to explain the use of conditioner, body soap, and face wash.

"Once you're ready to wash off the soap, please touch one of the round stones. They absorb magic essence proportionate to the duration of contact and release water from this spout here. The right stones are connected to the lower spout and the left stones are connected to the higher spout. The hot water may splash, so please step back," Rio warned the two of them before touching the round stone on the right. His magic essence was absorbed for a short moment before hot water started pouring out of the lower spout.

"W-Wow!" Flora exclaimed in shock. Christina was also gazing wide-eyed at the water. Strahl's standard of sorcery required an immense amount of magic essence to create water and adjust its temperature, so it was only natural she'd be surprised to see an artifact create hot water so easily.

"Be careful—if you touch the round stones for too long, your essence will just be sapped in vain. Several seconds of contact is enough for 30 seconds of water, so please use that as a rough estimate," Rio added to the surprised girls. To prove his point, he removed his hand from the round stone and demonstrated how the water was still flowing out.

“Is that huge stone tub over there a bathtub? If the washing area already has a source of water, I don’t see any meaning in having a bathtub filled with water as well...” Christina pointed to the stone bathtub and cocked her head in question.

In Japan, it was commonplace to fill a bathtub with water and soak in it, but that wasn’t necessarily the case in Strahl. In the Strahl region, bathtubs weren’t for soaking in, but for storing water to wash the body with.

Only wealthy homes had separate bathrooms, and they were generally one of two types: the type where the bathtub also acted as a washing area and the water had to be changed after every wash, and the type where the washing area was outside the bathtub to save water consumption (the bathtubs were generally too shallow to fully soak in too).

“Umm... Could this be a bathtub to soak in?” Flora asked Rio.

“That’s right. I’m sure it’s a rare sight in the Beltrum Kingdom, but the bathtub in this house is for soaking in. The correct way to use it is to soak yourself in the bathtub over there once you’ve washed yourself in the washing area,” Rio said, explaining the proper way to use the stone bath.

“Come to think of it, I’ve read that the hot spring area has a similar culture... I’m surprised you knew of it, Flora.” Christina looked at Flora in wonder. Flora grinned happily at that.

“Sir Hiroaki often said he wanted to soak in a bath,” she said.

“It seems like the soaking style of bathing is the norm where the heroes came from,” Rio said.

“Yes. There’s a soaking type of bath in Sir Hiroaki’s quarters in Rodania. A craftsman was called in to build it, and he uses it every now and then,” Flora added.

“Have you tried it before, Flora?”

Flora shook her head shyly. “I haven’t. Using the bath in a man’s room is a bit...”

This bathroom is technically in my home, and I’m a man, though...

In other words, she was about to use the bath in a man's room, but there was no reason to point that out. Rio chose to hold his tongue.

"Soaking in hot water causes your body temperature to rise and depletes your stamina, so while Princess Christina will be fine, Princess Flora should probably avoid the bathtub until she's fully recovered. Just wash your body for today."

It was preferable to keep the skin clean even while sick, and accomplishing that could be done by just washing oneself. Bathing with a slight fever should be fine, but Rio wasn't a medical expert, so it was better to recommend the safer option.

Flora nodded with a disappointed look. "That's a shame, but I understand."

"Then I'll pass for today as well," Christina added, reluctant to try the bath ahead of her little sister.

"Understood. If there's nothing else you need, I'll be excusing myself... Oh, you still need towels. Please wait in the changing room and I'll go and bring some."

Rio suddenly remembered the lack of towels and left the bathroom through the changing room. Christina and Flora also retreated to the changing room as instructed.

"By the way, Christina..." Flora began.

"What is it?"

"Umm... Where are we right now?" Flora asked, cocking her head. She had been unconscious when she was carried into the stone house, so she lacked that piece of information.

"We're in Sir Amakawa's house..." That was the only thing she was certain of. Christina also had her own questions, but that was one answer she could provide.

"Sir Haruto's? Isn't this the Paladia Kingdom?"

"Yes, it is... But we'll get an explanation about that later, so let's wait until then."

"Okay." Flora didn't look completely convinced, but her reply was lively.

“You look happy,” Christina pointed out.

“Yes... I am. I’m happy. Of course, there’s a lot I have to apologize for, but knowing that Sir Haruto is Sir Rio and being able to talk to him like this is good...”

Rio’s name had come up when he saved her from Lucius in Amande, but he had denied it when she asked him whether he was actually Rio. But this time was different. She wasn’t able to explain it well, but Flora was so happy she couldn’t contain herself.

“Right.” Christina smiled gently, vaguely sensing the reason for that.

“I never even imagined I’d be in Sir Haruto’s home and using his bath.”

“Me neither. Especially while I was attending the Royal Academy...”

“The Royal Academy... That sure brings back memories. Speaking of which, Christina, Sir Haruto said you slapped him in the slums...” The discussion of the past stirred Flora’s memories, making her bring up that topic.

Christina’s head drooped. “Urk. That’s... I have no excuse for that either.”

“You met Sir Haruto in the slums, right?”

“Yes. I remember it well. It was my first time stepping foot in the slums, and I acted rude to him in many other ways too. Rather, I got furious at him and said rude things I shouldn’t have.” Christina pressed a hand against her forehead and sighed heavily with guilt.

“Like what, for example?” Flora asked out of curiosity.

“Like what... Like calling him dirty and smelly, I guess...” Honestly, why had she said such heartless things? Christina looked back on her actions nine years ago and felt a tremendous sense of regret.

Even Flora frowned at that. “That’s...a bit mean indeed.”

“It was. We’re so dirty ourselves right now...”

Did they stink as well? She couldn’t tell herself, but Duran had said so. If she really reeked, then that meant Rio had carried them all the way here without a single complaint.

It all felt too much to bear.

“Hey, Flora... Do we smell right now?” Christina asked her little sister.

“Huh?! I-I wonder... Maybe?” Flora was taken aback by the sudden question, but she had sweated a lot while walking in the forest. The sweat was still stuck to her dress, and her skin felt disgusting, so...

“I... I’ll try smelling myself.” Flora brought the hem of her dress up to her nose to sniff at it with a blush.

“M-Me too...” Christina also lifted her dress with resolution. Despite knowing that it was an unsightly action, she couldn’t stop herself from smelling it. When she imagined the possibility of Rio smelling a strange scent on her, she couldn’t stand the embarrassment.

After a while, Flora lifted her head. “I-It’s kind of hard to smell yourself.”

“Yes... Shall we try smelling each other?”



Christina suggested a more objective method of checking.

“Y-Yes,” Flora nodded timidly.

“Come over here.”

“Okay...”

The two approached each other.

“I’m going to smell you then.”

“Please.”

After confirming with Flora, Christina brought her face towards Flora’s neck. However, when she took a sniff and looked in the direction of the changing room door, she saw Rio standing there with towels in hand.

“S-Sir Amakawa?!” Christina shrieked hysterically.

“Eek... That tickles, Christina. Hehe—S-Sir Haruto?!” Flora was trembling at the ticklish feeling when Christina’s outburst made her realize that Rio had returned. She panicked, flustered.

“Umm... Sorry for the wait,” Rio said awkwardly.

“I-It’s not what you think!”

“Y-Yes, it’s not what you think!”

The royal siblings clarified with shrill voices.

“Yes... I am aware.”

“A-Aware... Aware of what, may I ask...?”

“That the two of you are extremely close,” Rio replied with a smile.

“Erm... Y-You’re not wrong, but I apologize for acting so unsightly.” Christina’s head drooped, her face flushed. Flora’s face was similarly red, but she had completely frozen up.

Rio walked to the back of the changing room and put all the towels on the shelf. He then turned to leave, a slight smile in his voice. “I’ll leave the towels on this shelf, so please use them freely. Take your time.”

The changing room door closed, leaving Christina and Flora alone.

“...Shall we go inside?”

“Okay.”

With slightly bashful looks, the two started taking off their dresses.

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In the bathroom of the stone house, a splash echoed—it was the sound of Christina washing the shampoo out of her long hair.

With her social status being what it was, she normally had her servants wash it for her, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t wash it herself. She finished cleaning in roughly the same amount of time her servants usually took and placed the wooden bucket down on the floor.

“Just washing my hair is enough for me to feel refreshed...” Christina sighed dreamily.

Beside her, Flora was rubbing bubbles into her own hair. “Yes. This soap smells so nice and healing too.”

She brought her hair, which was covered in bubbles, up to her nose and sniffed it happily. This was probably why she had taken more time to wash herself than Christina.

“Wash up quickly or your body will get cold. You still haven’t fully recovered, remember?” Christina warned Flora while adding conditioner to her hair.

“R-Right.” Flora resumed washing her hair. Since it was so long, she had to be extra careful she hadn’t left any bubbles.

“Err, I believe this one was the face wash soap, right?”

Christina demonstrated her dexterity even here, applying conditioner to her hair and washing her face. She made sure to lather the soap before rubbing it on her face.

Ah, it feels so good...

She could tell her dry skin was rapidly absorbing the moisture. With her eyes closed, she basked in the bliss. Without using too much strength, she washed

the dirt off her face, then washed off the bubbles.

"Ack! Are you washing your face already, Christina?" When Flora saw that, she rushed to use the bucket to wash out the shampoo in her hair.

"Make sure you wash off the bubbles properly. The warm water should heat up your body a bit, so there's no need to rush," Christina chuckled, then moved to wash her body last. She rubbed body soap into a hand towel to work it into a lather and started cleaning herself with her non-dominant hand.

It really is a lovely scent, though. I thought the best soaps out there were the ones developed by the Ricca Guild, but this soap foams wonderfully and smells good too...

There was no way of confirming how effective it was until she got out of the bath, but that was the impression Christina got.

Or is this soap also made by the Ricca Guild? Be it this house, or the space sorcery artifact that stored this house, Sir Amakawa's belongings are shrouded in mystery too.

Christina turned her head and looked around the bathroom covered in stone. She'd been shown rare items she hadn't witnessed before even as royalty, making it tough to stifle her curiosity completely.

That being said, Rio probably hadn't wanted to show them this house—he hadn't brought it out once on their journey from Cleia to Rodania. And the reason for that was clear: if word of it got out, everybody would want it. Soap aside, the space sorcery and magic artifacts in this house couldn't be reproduced.

I'm curious about its origins, but I shouldn't pry too much. Even if he tells me, it isn't something that should be shared. I'd have to tell him I don't intend on telling anyone else... Christina thought. Her hand moving the towel stopped and the scent of the body soap tickled her nose.

"It really smells wonderful..." she mumbled to herself, her mouth twisting in slight bitterness. It was the same scent she had smelled on Rio when he carried them to this house.

"Did you say something, sister?" Flora asked, massaging the conditioner into

her hair before beginning to wash her face.

“No, it’s nothing. I’m almost done washing myself, but did you want me to wash your back for you?”

“Huh? Are you sure? Oh, but...” Flora’s face brightened, but she then looked at the stone bathtub. “Why don’t you take the chance to soak in the tub too?” she suggested.

“It’s fine. If you’re not getting in, I’d feel bad for doing so alone.”

“There’s no need to feel bad. I’d like to hear your thoughts on how it feels too. Please, give it a try on my behalf.” Flora looked at her older sister in anticipation.

“Really...? Then I’ll get in for a little bit... Just until you’re done washing, okay?”

“Yes! Please do!”

“Then, if you don’t mind.” Christina chuckled and stood up from the bath stool, touching the round stone to use the higher tap to wash the soap off of her body. She then stepped towards the bathtub.

It really is a huge bathtub...

It almost looked big enough to fit ten people in at once. Hot water poured out of the taps, constantly keeping the environment hygienic, according to Rio.

“Is it really hot?” Christina muttered, looking down at the steam rising from the water. Her naked figure was faintly reflected on the surface of the moving water.

“If I recall correctly, I’m meant to get in like this without a towel...”

She started by slowly dipping her right foot into the water, making a splashing sound as ripples spread across the surface.

“It’s hot...but not too hot to get in.” Christina continued by stepping into the bath with her left foot, then slowly sank into the water. The sensation of hot water wrapped around her body.

“Wow... I see, this is indeed...”

She closed her eyes until she got used to the temperature and relaxed her stiff body. It felt so good, she let out a blissful sigh.

“How is it, Christina?” Flora paused as she was about to wash her face and looked up curiously.

“It’s hot, and it feels great. I could get used to this,” Christina replied honestly.

“That’s great! I want to try getting in too.”

“You can once you’re fully recovered. Come on, your hands have stopped. Hurry up and finish washing. The bathroom is warm from the steam, but you’re still naked, so your body will get cold.”

“R-Right!” Flora moved her hands and finally began washing her face.

Good grief. But it seems like Sir Amakawa’s medicine is working well. Her complexion is clearly better than before.

While soaking in the tub, Christina gazed at Flora and thought to herself in exasperation. However, there was a faint smile on her face.

I’ve washed my hair already, so would it be best to leave it out of the water? Christina thought after a minute of watching Flora, and promptly scooped up her hair with her hands. Her thinking wasn’t wrong either—it was actually better to keep your hair out of the water, but Rio lacked that knowledge as a man and hadn’t explained it. Her hair had been floating on the surface of the water.

I’ll wrap it up with a towel.

She stood up abruptly, but she had stayed in the bath for too long and became dizzy.

“Wha...?!”

Christina was unable to support herself with her own legs and sank back into the water with a splash.

Wh-What?

Christina was confused. She had never experienced getting dizzy from a bath until now, so she felt uneasy.

“Christina?”

Flora had just finished washing her hair and body and noticed the abnormality. When she saw Christina stand up and sit back down right away, she called out to her.

“I felt dizzy for a moment...”

“Huh?! Are you okay?” Flora looked worriedly at Christina, who was pressing a hand to her forehead.

“Yes. If you’re done washing your body, let’s go out together.” Christina tried to stand up after saying that, but the dizziness made it impossible. Her vision blurred until it was nearly pure white, and her heart was racing in her chest.

“I-I’ll go call Sir Haruto!”

Flora was unable to contain herself and ran out of the changing room. She dried her body in a hurry and wrapped a towel around herself before opening the changing room door.

“U-Umm! Sir Haruto, are you there?” She called Rio’s name in a slightly louder voice.



Rio soon approached the changing room. “Princess Flora? Is something the matter...?” He froze when he spotted Flora in only a single bath towel and quickly averted his gaze.

“Ah. U-Umm, my sister isn’t feeling too well.” Flora noticed the state of her dress and blushed, but prioritized her report on her sister’s condition.

Rio’s expression immediately turned serious. “Princess Christina...? Is she still conscious?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll speak to her through the door of the changing room. Princess Flora, you should return to her side.”

“Understood.”

Flora promptly turned back to the bathroom. Rio waited until he heard the door of the bathroom open, then stepped into the changing room.

“Princess Christina, it’s Haruto,” Rio said through the door.

“S-Sir Amakawa. I apologize for creating a fuss,” Christina’s voice replied. Her tone helped Rio determine that it wasn’t an emergency.

“Not at all. May I ask what happened?”

“Umm, I was soaking in the bath when I suddenly felt extremely dizzy and my vision blurred, and I couldn’t stand up...”

Rio formed a hypothesis from Christina’s explanation. He believed the cause of her symptoms had yet to be resolved, but confirmed the situation with her. “You became dizzy after soaking in the bath... Are you still in the water now?”

“Y-Yes.” The reply came back through the echo of the bathroom.

Rio sighed in relief. “I’m sorry, my explanation was insufficient. In my opinion, I believe you’re experiencing bath dizziness. It’s only temporary, so there’s no need to worry about it.”

“Bath dizziness...?” Flora’s curious voice said. She seemed to be right on the other side of the door connecting the changing room to the bathroom.

“When you soak yourself in a hot bath, blood circulates in your body faster

and rises to your head. The dizziness you feel is because of that. Did you perhaps try to stand up suddenly after soaking in the water?" Rio asked.

"I did..."

"I see. Your body was just surprised by the sudden change in blood pressure. It's hard to notice when you're in the bath since it feels so nice, but you can experience dizziness after just a minute or two. As long as you're not unconscious, you can take your time getting out of the bath or sit on the edge until you cool down. It's one of the tricks to taking a long bath, actually." Rio explained the ways of dealing with dizziness and even gave advice for taking long baths on top of that.

"Is that so...? I'm so sorry for causing any trouble," Christina apologized, her voice trembling in embarrassment. However, since soaking-style baths weren't commonplace in the Strahl region, it was no wonder she hadn't experienced such a condition before.

"No, it's understandable since you're not used to these types of baths. My explanation was lacking. Please take your time getting out."

"I-I understand."

"I'll excuse myself now, then. I'll prepare cold drinks and wait outside."

With those words, Rio left the changing room behind him.

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Christina and Flora got out of the bath and changed into the dresses they were borrowing from the wardrobe room, then made their way to the living room.

The moment Christina saw Rio, she blushed and apologized for her earlier mistake. "I apologize for the trouble I caused you just now, Sir Amakawa."

"Not at all—don't let it bother you. It was my fault for not explaining things more. I should be the one apologizing."

"No, I was the careless one."

"Then let's just say we should both move on." They'd never be able to reach an agreement at this rate.

“I understand...” Christina bowed her head awkwardly.

“I’ve prepared cold drinks and some easy-to-digest food for your fatigue. It may not suit your tastes, but would you like to eat it? I’m going to go wash up myself now,” Rio said, looking around the dining table.

“We can wait until you’re done with your bath.”

“You probably won’t be able to relax with me around, so don’t worry about me. You can enjoy your time with your sister instead,” Rio said considerately.

“That isn’t the case, but...”

“I agree.”

Christina immediately denied it and Flora nodded firmly in agreement.

“I’m honored, but the food will go cold. Please eat it while it’s still warm.”

“I understand...”

“Thank you very much, Sir Haruto.”

Christina bowed, Flora following suit.

“If you’re tired, you can call it a day afterwards and sleep. The two rooms over there are guest rooms, so once you’re sleepy, you can use them as you wish.”

“We appreciate everything you’ve done for us.”

“Now, if you’d excuse me.” Rio left with those words.

He returned less than thirty minutes later, done with his bath. Christina and Flora had just finished eating. Flora was falling asleep on the spot, exhausted from the long day. Since the fatigue was clear on Christina’s face too, they decided to set aside the serious talk for the day and rest properly instead.

Chapter 3: The Future from Here

The next morning...

One night had passed since Rio enacted his revenge on Lucius.

The sun had only just risen in the sky, making it a little early to be awake. A sunny sky stretched outside the stone house without a cloud in sight. A comfortable breeze blew through the air.

On such a morning, Rio was doing his daily training beside the house. His routine had been ingrained in him since his academy days, and he naturally woke up early. With no particular reason to skip his training, he found himself swinging his sword outside the house before he knew it.

Without even the slightest deviation, Rio's sword moved from point to point. He went through all kinds of forms several hundred times each, reaching his daily goal in what felt like no time at all.

Daily goal, check.

Rio came to an abrupt stop. He didn't feel like putting away his sword immediately and gazed at the blade in a daze.

Yesterday, I killed Lucius with these very hands...

He suddenly thought back to the day before. He felt no guilt in having killed Lucius. If he hadn't, other people would have been dragged into it; he truly believed Lucius was a man who deserved to die.

And yet...he felt an indescribable sense of discomfort.

Killing Lucius wouldn't bring back what he'd lost. His dead parents wouldn't come back to life, and so Rio's irritation remained ever present.

He'd probably have to bear this discomfort for the rest of his life. Every time he looked back on the past, his memories would resurface and Lucius's presence would stay in his mind.

But he had known that from the start. He had decided to pursue the path of

revenge knowing there was nothing to gain and nothing to be left behind.

That's why he pushed forward. He pushed forward and achieved his goal.

I've lived with my eyes on the past until now. If it was for the sake of revenge, I didn't need a tomorrow. That's what I thought while I pushed forward. But...

But there *was* a tomorrow. There were people waiting for Rio's return.

Miharu, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma in the stone house, and Celia and Aishia in Rodania. Part of him wanted to welcome the new day together with those girls.

It's strange...

The discomfort remained, but his emotions were calm. Needless to say, the reason why was...

Because I have a place to return to, huh...?

Honestly speaking, was it really okay for him to return after trudging forward according to his selfish desires? Wasn't it too convenient for him? Part of him thought that as well.

So what if it's selfish? I'm going back.

He'd return and live the rest of his life peacefully. He'd live for the sake of the people closest to him. Only by doing that would he truly sate his revenge on Lucius.

I don't want to lose anything anymore—that's why I'll live to protect from now on. I want everyone to be happy. For that, I hold my sword. And I'll return to everyone.

This world was filled with injustice, so he needed the strength to protect others now that he had killed Lucius.

Just then, the door to the stone house opened with a creak. Rio looked in the direction of the door. Two girls had quietly stuck their heads out—it was Christina and Flora.

"Good morning, Your Highnesses." Rio stopped swinging his sword and greeted the two sisters.

“...” The two of them were frozen with wide eyes.

“Is something the matter?” Rio asked curiously.

“Ah, no. It’s just that your hair is black...” Christina offered hesitantly.

“Oh, I figured there was no reason to hide it while I’m here, so I removed the magic artifact that alters hair colors. I suppose it’s been four years since you’ve seen me with this hair color,” Rio said with a light shrug.

“Hair color really does have a large impact on a person’s looks... When I see you like this, I can clearly see the resemblance to your past self.”

“Yes, just like back then...” Flora nodded while staring at Rio’s face.

“It *is* a unique hair color in the Strahl region, after all. That aside, it’s still early in the morning—did you get enough sleep?” Rio changed the topic somewhat bashfully.

Christina giggled and went along with it. “Yes. The bed was so comfortable, we were able to sleep soundly. Although we both slept so early, we ended up waking up early too.”

“That’s great.”

“The living room light was on but no one was around, so we thought you might have gone outside. Were you doing your morning training?”

“Yes, though I’ve just finished.”

“You’re such a hard worker even at this hour.”

“It’s just my daily routine.”

“Really? Back at the Academy, I often saw you practicing with your sword alone after class. You also studied fervently in the library,” Christina recalled and giggled.

“Christina... You were actually watching Sir Rio rather closely, weren’t you?” Flora asked curiously. She remembered Christina frequently warning her against getting close to Rio back then.

“I-I wasn’t watching him; his activities just happened to overlap with mine. In fact, you were with me most of the time,” Christina said, defending herself with

a blush.

“It sure brings back memories. I do recall seeing Princess Christina in the library often...” Rio thought back on his academy days.

“I’ll go and prepare breakfast. It’s cold in the morning, so let’s go back inside. I’ll prepare a warm drink for you,” he said as he sheathed his sword and headed back in the house.

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Rio and the sisters ate breakfast at the dining table of the stone house before their important discussion. They ate mushroom and egg porridge, fluffy omelets, a garnish of sausage and bacon, soup, and salad. Apple juice was prepared as a drink.

“Thank you for preparing breakfast.”

They began eating.

“It’s delicious...”

“It truly is! It’s amazingly delicious.”

Christina and Flora both pressed hands against their mouths as they gave their thoughts. The older sister blinked and muttered hers, while the little sister expressed her happiness exactly as she felt, making the two of them complete opposites to one other.

“I’m glad it suits your tastes. Last night you only ate porridge because it’s easy to digest, so I thought I’d prepare a little extra this morning so you wouldn’t feel hungry. Please, eat up.”

At Rio’s words, the royal siblings reached for all the different dishes.

“Where did you learn to cook such delicious dishes, Sir Haruto?” Flora suddenly asked.

“I read about the basics of cooking in the library of the Academy, then I trained by cooking for myself. When Miharu was in my care, she taught me all kinds of dishes from the heroes’ world and increased my repertoire.”

“Lady Miharu... We only exchanged brief words at the banquet, but she

seemed like a very kind person. She's in the Rodania outskirts right now, you said?" Flora asked about Miharu.

"Yes. Sara and the others are protecting her in a safe place."

"You don't have to answer me if you don't want to, but you lived with Professor Celia and Miharu before meeting with the Restoration, right? Umm, did they know about...your identity...?" Figuring the change of topic was the perfect chance, Christina watched Rio's face while asking about Celia. She wasn't sure how far she could pry, so she seemed a little nervous.

"Yes. Professor Celia knows my identity. I have another stone house just like this one, and Professor Celia, Miharu, and Sara's group are living there. As long as you keep your promise not to spread word of my past as you promised yesterday, I have no intention of continuing to hide things. I intend on giving you the information you need, so don't be so nervous."

Considering Celia's affiliation with the Restoration, it'd be better to keep a good relationship with Christina and Flora too. On top of answering Christina's question, Rio offered gentle words so that she could relax.

"Okay..." Her nerves eased a little. The tension in Christina's shoulders relaxed as she nodded.

"There are a lot of things involved, so talking about it will take some time. Let's eat first, as the food tastes better when it's warm." Rio smiled as gently as possible. The expression was almost like the one he had shown Celia during their academy days.

"Okay..."

Christina and Flora gulped and nodded.

After that, they continued eating while chatting about the dishes cheerfully. Christina and Flora were as hungry as Rio expected they'd be and finished all the food in its entirety, bringing their breakfast time to an end.

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After their meal, Rio prepared fresh tea and sat back down at the dining table, facing the royal sisters across from him.

“I’m happy to answer questions regarding my past, but shall we discuss the plan for the future first?” he started.

Christina nodded firmly. “Yes.”

“Two days have passed since the two of you disappeared. Rodania must be in quite an uproar by now.”

“I can only imagine...”

“What effects do you think your disappearance will have on the Restoration?” Rio asked, looking at Christina.

“It’ll definitely be shaken up quite a bit, and it won’t be long before the nobility starts to desert us for the main Beltrum government. At worst, the organization could fall apart.”

“I see. So it’s as I expected.”

Rio frowned at Christina’s bleak reply. When dealing with politics, it was extremely important to have a legitimate reason to justify the actions of one’s faction. Without that reason, the nobles of the Restoration would be no different than rebels of the kingdom. The Restoration’s legitimacy was currently being maintained by the affiliation of the current king’s daughters—the first and second heirs to the throne. The disappearance of these two figures meant the loss of the organization’s legitimacy.

“Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan have been politically purged as the leaders of the organization, so they wouldn’t back down at this stage, but there aren’t many low-ranking nobles with the guts to defy the main government without the two of us present as political symbols,” Christina stated flatly.

“But if it’s a political symbol they need, then Sir Hiroaki is still there as the hero...” Flora added nervously.

“Indeed, Sir Hiroaki can play the role of a political symbol, but as long as he isn’t married to me or Flora, his ties to the Beltrum Kingdom are too weak. He’s unfit to be the symbol of opposition to the main government. It would’ve been a different matter if he had married one of us already, but...”

Under the current circumstances, Hiroaki was a great reinforcement to the

legitimacy of the organization, but he couldn't act as the foundation. Figuratively speaking, he was like an accessory worn to make the wearer look good.

"I see..." Flora's face fell as she comprehended the situation.

Rio spread the map he had prepared in advance on the table, pointing at the location of the Paladia Kingdom. "This is a rough map of the Strahl region. We're currently in the Paladia Kingdom. If we leisurely made our way to Rodania on foot, it would take roughly one and a half months depending on the weather."

"..." Christina's face was as stern as ever.

"Which would take far too much time, it seems? Several weeks of absence could have an irreversible influence on the organization," Rio pointed out.

"Yes. Duke Huguenot wouldn't just stand by and watch it fall apart, so I'm sure he'll enact some form of counteraction, but..."

"But the Restoration doesn't have such a solution, does it?"

"He'll probably work out a plan around Sir Hiroaki's presence. That being said, there's nothing the Restoration can do on its own, and our political dissolution from the kingdom means we cannot rely on the main government. Which means..."

Christina looked pensive as she answered Rio's question. She seemed to have finished organizing her thoughts and looked at Rio.

"Sir Amakawa, I have a favor to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"Could you change our destination from Rodania to Galtuuk, the capital of the Galarc Kingdom instead?" Christina requested.

"I can, but may I ask why?"

"There's a high probability that Duke Huguenot will seek assistance from Galarc. In fact, the only chance of getting out of this situation is to rely on Galarc. It's a rather risky last resort, but I can't think of any other good ideas."

“What kind of plan is it?” Rio wasn’t familiar with the inner workings of the Restoration, so he had to rely on Christina for more information.

“The minimum requirement needed to raise Sir Hiroaki into a symbol for the Restoration is marriage to a Beltrum royal who hasn’t been demoted to a subject of the kingdom,” Christina explained.

In other words, he had to marry a member of the Beltrum Kingdom’s royal family. Demotions from royalty to subject occurred when a member of the royal family married anyone who was non-royalty.

“The only ones who can fulfill that condition in the Restoration are me and Flora. If they were to search outside the organization for someone to fill that requirement, they would have to avoid the Beltrum main government for the reasons I mentioned earlier. This means the easiest option Duke Huguenot can turn to will be the Galarc Kingdom.”

“There’s someone of Beltrum blood in the Galarc royal family?” Rio asked.

“She’s already passed away, but King Francois’s mother was the little sister of the previous Beltrum king—in other words, my great-aunt. In the case of marriage into foreign royalty, the royal in question is allowed to keep their status in their motherland. They can only claim that status under certain circumstances, but those circumstances also apply to their direct descendants of two generations.”

Direct descendants of two generations meant her children and grandchildren.

“Which means... King Francois’ daughter—Princess Charlotte—would be able to claim status as Beltrum royalty under certain circumstances?” Rio said, bringing up the name of one candidate he knew. At the same time, he recalled Charlotte’s face from when she had teased him at the banquet.

“Yes. Third Princess Rosalie would also fit the conditions. However, the circumstances required to claim status as Beltrum royalty are so limited, one would normally never do it, so it won’t be of much help...”

“If such limited circumstances are to happen, will it cause any issues?”

And what kind of circumstances are they? Rio had asked this, but indirectly.

“Yes. Claiming the status itself is simple—it just needs a change of kingdom affiliation. In other words, the transfer from being Galarc royalty to Beltrum royalty. The most important factor of this change is the will of the person involved, and the royal family receiving them cannot refuse without a legitimate reason. Thus, it is possible for Princess Charlotte or Princess Rosalie to become members of the Beltrum royal family,” Christina said, explaining the situations where the exception could be applied.

“Wouldn’t a transfer like that cause all kinds of problems? Especially if they have to receive permission from both kingdoms,” Rio wondered.

If a transfer could be done with only the will of the person involved, they could risk incurring the wrath of the royal family they transfer from or creating a succession dispute and faction dispute in the royal family they transfer into.

“Exactly. The exception was created to allow the royal family member back into their home kingdom in cases such as the foreign kingdom being in peril, or the home kingdom losing all the heirs to the throne. Outside of emergencies, a discussion generally takes place between the two kingdoms involved, transferring only when an agreement is reached. Depending on how the discussion goes, the transfer may not be approved of. But it’s extremely unlikely for transfers to take place outside of emergencies in the first place.”

In other words, the destination kingdom couldn’t refuse an heir from another kingdom, and nor could they repel blood relatives of their own royal family seeking asylum as it was morally unacceptable.

“So if Duke Huguenot were to take in Princess Charlotte or Princess Rosalie, he would be doing so under the clause of a lack of heir to the throne?”

“Yes, he would have to twist things that way. If one of King Francois’ daughters is engaged to Sir Hiroaki, the Galarc Kingdom’s support of the Restoration in the future will be guaranteed... Even if a few people express their doubts over the legitimacy of the organization, the departure of the low-ranked nobles should be prevented this way.”

Christina expected a number of people to have doubts over the organization’s legitimacy, as the strength of legitimacy was weaker than if Hiroaki had married Flora or herself. The Galarc Kingdom would also have more control over the

organization in the future, which was another potential point of disagreement.

“In that case, things may become more difficult if Your Highnesses show up alive after everything has progressed.”

Hiroaki would end up marrying a princess of Galarc royalty while Christina and Flora were still alive. If a hero and a royal were to publicly announce their engagement, it wouldn’t be so easy to call it off again.

“That is correct. Duke Huguenot would be in quite a panic, so I’m sure he’d approach the Galarc Kingdom as soon as possible—it’s the only option the Restoration has to survive after our disappearance. That’s why I’d like to avoid any trouble by heading to the Galarc capital directly.”

“I understand... Our destination will be Galtuuk, then. We’ll need to keep to a strict schedule—I wanted to keep an eye on Princess Flora’s condition for a few more days, but we may need to depart earlier than that,” Rio said, looking down at the map.

Flora clenched her fists and tried to demonstrate how much energy she had. “I-I’m feeling much better now! I could even leave today if needed!”

However, Christina immediately rejected that idea. “No. You were poisoned and feverish up until yesterday. There’s no way I’d allow you to move without observing your condition for longer.”

“I agree. Your Highness should rest for at least one more day, just to make sure there are no side effects on your body,” Rio said in agreement.

“Okay...” Flora nodded timidly, yielding to the serious expressions on their faces. However, her lips were pulled upwards into a faint smile, happy that they were worrying for her well-being.

“Since a month and a half is too long, we can shorten the time if I carry the two of you. It’ll take approximately one week to get to Galtuuk that way, I believe.”

This duration assumed good weather and movement via spirit arts. He could actually arrive much faster, but he had to slow down while carrying the two of them, and he also had to set a lower cap for how long he would fly in a day.

“O-One week?!”

“As you know already, I can travel by flying. With that in mind, how long do you think we can delay our departure?” Rio asked Christina, who was still shocked.

“They would continue searching for us for a few days. But since it’s Duke Huguenot we’re talking about, the talks with King Francois in case of our deaths will probably go on at the same time. Considering the time they need to reach an agreement and make the necessary preparations, I’d like the Galarc capital to be informed of our survival by the tenth day of our disappearance. If we can arrive in Galtuuk in a week, then I believe we can spend two or three days on Flora’s recovery. However, in order to be absolutely certain, I have one more request... You could also consider it a suggestion...” Christina looked down at the map.

“What is it?” asked Rio, cocking his head.

“On our way to the Galarc Kingdom, could we make a stop at one of our allied cities?”

“I don’t mind, but...what for?”

“Large cities have magic artifacts capable of long-distance communication. Only those of a certain status can use them, but we should be allowed to do so if we reveal our identities. I was thinking of using that to inform Galtuuk of our survival ahead of our arrival in the city,” Christina suggested.

“I see, so you can contact Galtuuk earlier that way. But I thought artifact communicators only had a limited range? Anyone with a receiver within that range can receive the message, so it isn’t recommended for the exchange of confidential information. Are you okay with that?” Rio had only ever read about the artifact, so he wasn’t entirely sure how it worked.

“It’s not a problem. There’s always a city within the transmission range, creating a network that can pass messages on from city to city. It’s true that it isn’t suitable for confidential information, but measures can be taken against that by using code or trivializing the information.”

“I understand. In that case, the best ally kingdom to use is...”

Rio looked down at the map, but Christina pointed her finger at a destination first. “I believe the Rubia Kingdom should be most suitable.”

“From where we are now, it should take under half a day to get there if I carry both of you,” Rio said, looking at the positions on the map.

“U-Under half a day... Amazing...” Christina was shocked even after hearing the travel time to Galtuuk already. It was a distance that would easily take several days on foot.

“Two days have passed since your disappearance. If we were to spend another two to three days on Princess Flora’s recovery, it’d be four to five days. If we spent two days traveling to the Rubia Kingdom, it’d be seven days at most. Once you use the artifact there to send a message, we’ll have plenty of leeway. Is that correct?”

“Yes. That should be more than enough time.” Relief finally filled Christina’s expression.

“I’m glad we can accommodate your request. Is that all that needs to be discussed regarding what’s to come? I will handle the route we take on my end.”

“Yes, it’s perfect. I feel terrible for leaving everything to you once again, Sir Amakawa...”

Rio lightly brushed off her apology. “We’re heading for the same destination in the end, so it isn’t any trouble at all. Don’t let it bother you.”

However, that wasn’t enough for Christina’s expression to lighten. She looked at Rio with determination. “There are so many things we have to be grateful to you for, and so many things we have to apologize for. May I ask a few questions about you?”

“If it’s something I can answer, then by all means.” There was no hesitation in Rio’s reply.

“First, I’d like to ask the details of what happened at the outdoor drill...”

“The incident when Princess Flora fell from the cliff, you mean?”

“That too, but also what happened after you fell from the cliff while you were

protecting her. I heard that you were the one who defeated the minotaur in front of Flora...”

The only one who knew what exactly happened after falling from the cliff was Rio.

“Before I tell you what happened, I have a request to make as well. Can I have your word that you’ll never speak of what I say here to anyone else without my permission? I may talk about information that I want to keep secret.” Rio first made the two of them swear they would keep the information he was about to reveal confidential.

“I understand.” Christina nodded with a serious look of resolution. “I, Christina Beltrum, swear I will never speak of what I hear from you to anyone else without your permission. Is that okay with you too, Flora?”

Even if it was just a verbal agreement—no, *because* it was a verbal agreement, she would absolutely see it through to the end. Breaking this promise would be equivalent to losing Rio’s trust forevermore. For Christina, that was unconditionally taboo.

“Y-Yes. I swear,” Flora nodded nervously, feeling the intensity of her sister’s resolution.

“Thank you very much. Then I will trust the two of you and tell you what happened,” Rio said, bowing his head. “First, there’s something I need to explain beforehand. I’m sure you’re faintly aware of it already, but the ability I use is not magic.”

He decided to talk about spirit arts first. Hiding the existence of spirit arts and explaining around it would cause more trouble than it was worth. It’d only cause suspicion if he hid it, so he thought he might as well reveal it under the agreement of confidentiality. Rio raised his right hand and formed a bubble of water in his hand.

“...”

Christina and Flora held their breaths and froze. Like Rio said, they had the feeling the technique he used wasn’t magic, but it was still shocking to hear it directly.

“This is called spirit arts, a technique capable of creating phenomena different to sorcery. Unlike magic, which takes the spell formula into the body to be utilized, it doesn’t require a verbal incantation, and the phenomena created can vary greatly depending on the caster’s ability. It also takes much longer than magic to learn, sadly.”

Along with his verbal explanation, Rio started moving the bubble in his hand in a way that couldn’t be recreated with magic. He tossed the several-centimeter-wide bubble like a juggling ball, transformed it into the shape of a dog, then transformed it into the shape of a cat.

“A-Amazing...”

“It’s so cute...”

In contrast to Christina’s surprise at the free control of spirit arts, Flora’s eyes were sparkling with excitement at the dog-and cat-shaped bubble.

“I can also do things like this.” Rio placed the water cat on the table and made it walk over to Flora.

“A-Adorable! C-Can I touch it?” Flora became even more excited. She extended a hand timidly, looking at Rio.

“Sure, go ahead.” Rio controlled the water cat remotely, making it climb onto Flora’s hand.

“Wow, it’s cold...” Flora’s hand trembled faintly. The texture of the cat was the exact same as water, but its movements were so real, Flora tilted her head curiously.



“Does this cat have its own will?” Christina asked, examining it closely.

“No, I’m just controlling it. Shall I move it to Princess Christina’s hand?”

Rio made the water cat jump down from Flora’s hand, walk across the table to Christina, then leap onto her hand instead.

“Wow, it really is cold to the touch. Even though it looks alive...” Christina blinked, looking down at the mini water cat. The cat then jumped back down to the table and trotted back to Rio, before vanishing without a trace.

“It was so cute...” Flora muttered in disappointment.

Christina cleared her throat to remind her sister of the time and place. “Flora...”

“R-Right.” Flora nodded.

“If you’d like, I can make it again after I’m done explaining things,” Rio chuckled. Flora’s eyes sparkled again at that.

Christina sighed, then recollected herself. “Spirit arts... It still uses magic essence like magic, right? As far as I know, it isn’t used in the Strahl region at all...”

“In regards to your first question, you are correct. As for its use, the technique became obsolete after the use of sorcery and magic was popularized during the Divine War.”

“Why did it become obsolete?”

“As I mentioned just now, spirit arts require a far longer amount of time to learn than magic. An amateur could learn to use magic in as fast as a month if they have the magic essence for it, right? As long as they succeed in taking the spell formula into their body, they can activate it even with imperfect control over their essence.”

“Right.”

“Meanwhile, in order to learn spirit arts to a usable level, the average person has to train for several years. Though this period can vary depending on talent.”

“It takes that long...” Christina’s eyes widened in wonder.

“Magic is a technique to alter the phenomena of the world, but you are aware most of the altering process is left to the spell formula, right?” said Rio. It was a topic learned in the Royal Academy.

“Yes,” Christina replied immediately.

“In spirit arts, the caster is the one who does the altering the spell would have done on the world. The training for that is what takes several years. The other reason it became obsolete would be because the commanders of the armies back then wanted to unify their troops by making them use the same magic, I suppose.”

“I see...”

“Also, you don’t have to pay too much attention to this part, but once you take a spell formula into your body, you become unable to use spirit arts. The reason why I was unable to use magic when I was in the Academy was because I could already use spirit arts back then.”

The real reason why Rio couldn’t learn magic was because he was contracted to a spirit at the time, but explaining Aishia and spirits was a bit too complicated, so he omitted it for now.

“So that’s why...” Christina and Flora were both wide-eyed.

“I explained spirit arts because it seemed necessary before I could talk about everything else, but I’ve digressed pretty far from the topic. Let’s go back to what happened after I fell from the cliff at the Royal Academy,” he said, getting back on topic. “After I fell from the cliff, I used spirit arts to land on the ground. I immediately climbed back up the cliff afterwards, but everyone was discussing who had pushed Princess Flora, so...”

Rio explained the truth that Christina and Flora weren’t aware of. Since he had told them about spirit arts already, he didn’t need to go into detail about how he survived the fall from the cliff.

“So you were there back then...” Christina grimaced, recalling the conversation that had taken place at the time.

“Yes. I was unable to show myself, so I watched the discussion from behind a tree. It was Duke Huguenot’s son himself who claimed that I shoved him,

causing Princess Flora to fall off the cliff.” Rather than seeming mad, Rio had a tired smile on his face.

“I apologize for the situation...”

“I-I apologize too.”

Christina and Flora spoke with pale faces.

Rio shook his head flatly. “No. Princess Flora, you were a victim of the incident; and Princess Christina, you weren’t the one who falsely accused me. There’s no need for either of you to apologize.”

“But...”

“You didn’t see with your own eyes who pushed Princess Flora, right? And I recall Princess Flora tried to stand up for me. So please don’t worry about it,” Rio said, stopping Christina from objecting further.

“Do you know who pushed Flora off the cliff, Sir Amakawa?” Christina asked, seeking the truth.

“I do, but there’s no point in asking that now. There’s no guarantee that what I say will be the truth, and there’s no way of obtaining any objective evidence.”

“Even so, as I said yesterday, I believe in your words. Back then, Stewart Huguenot claimed that you lost your mind in fear of the ambush and shoved him when he was injured. But I cannot believe a warrior like you would lose yourself over an ambush of that scale,” Christina stated immediately. There wasn’t even a hint of doubt in her words.

“In that case, you can listen to this from the perspective of an eyewitness testimony. Do you remember how the monsters threw wooden spears from the forest and injured some of our squad? It was a very sudden ambush, so the scene immediately turned into chaos...”

As a result, everyone’s attention was turned to the attacking monsters, and no one witnessed the moment Flora was thrust off the cliff. This meant Rio was the only one who had seen things properly, so he added context to his explanation.

“Yes. Stewart was injured during that attack.”

“When he was injured by the spear, he started wailing for someone to pull it out and thrashed about in a panic.”

“Wait, does that mean he pushed Flora off the cliff?” Christina’s expression turned grim.

“It’s true that he was pushed first, causing Princess Flora to get caught in the process. The only difference in my testimony is that it wasn’t me who pushed Duke Huguenot’s son, but another male student he sought help from. And so, when Duke Huguenot’s son was pushed away, he crashed into Princess Flora and caused her to fall.”

“The male student who pushed Stewart must be aware he was the culprit, but was Stewart also aware that it was that male student who had pushed him?” Christina’s voice was trembling with anger.

“Most likely.”

He must have been looking at the face of the person he was seeking help from. “He knew, and he chose to blame you instead of that male student?”

“If he was truly aware, then that would be the case.”

“I truly cannot apologize enough,” Christina said, her face full of shame. She wasn’t just angry at the boys who tried to blame Rio, but also at herself for silently watching the whole thing take place.

“Not to repeat myself, but you do not need to feel any responsibility for the crime that I was accused of. I may have disappeared with a false accusation on my head, but I planned on leaving the Beltrum Kingdom after graduating from the Academy anyway. It merely hastened my departure,” Rio said casually, explaining how there was no need to be bothered by this.

“But if you weren’t falsely accused, you wouldn’t have had to use an alias like you do now,” Christina said, pointing out the inconvenience Rio was suffering right at this moment.

“That may be true, but if acting as a different person is all it takes to avoid involvement with the people who accused me of the crime, then I’m happy to do so.” Rio’s voice remained simple and steady as he spoke.

“Your view of this is too philosophical... You have more than enough reason to hate them, the Beltrum Kingdom, and the two of us. Yesterday, you said the things the Beltrum Kingdom and I did weren’t enough reason for you not to save us, but I cannot believe it. There’s no way you can feel so indifferent after suffering so much. Am I wrong?” Christina asked firmly, her refined face twisted in pain.

“I suppose it would be a lie to say I feel nothing... I have no intentions of retaliation, but big or small, I no longer trust Beltrum’s nobility.” Rio frowned, hesitating.

“It’s not something that can be settled with just distrust. It’s something worth hating for. You should be angry.”

So please act angrier at me, Christina implied bitterly.

“As someone who finally sated their desire for revenge against someone, I know how tiring it is to hate someone and feel constantly angry. Approaching someone I hate would be out of the question when I can just live my life forgetting them. So I’d rather leave myself distanced without any contact. I’ll save my anger for the things I cannot forgive and forget,” Rio said with a lopsided smile. Only he knew the weight of his words, as he had fulfilled his revenge.

“You’re... You’re truly too detached.”

Christina averted her eyes from Rio as though he was too bright to look at. She muttered with her head down, her voice nearly faded. Rio’s complete lack of malice had left her shocked and somewhat disappointed.

“That’s not true. A lot of the memories I have of Beltrum I can forget about with the passage of time, but there are some things that I absolutely cannot forgive.”

Rio purposefully increased the sharpness of his tone. He was recalling how Duke Huguenot had raised Latifa as a slave.

“What... What happened in our kingdom?”

“It involves someone other than myself, so...” So it wasn’t something he should tell them.

“Does it have to do with Professor Celia?” Christina asked.

“It doesn’t involve Celia, so please drop the subject. If I have a chance to tell you in the future, I shall do so then,” Rio said, slowly shaking his head.

“I understand...” Christina nodded, exchanging a look with Flora.

“We’ve somewhat strayed off track, but that’s basically why Your Highnesses shouldn’t feel any responsibility about what happened to me in Beltrum.”

“But...we still cannot allow that,” Christina protested with great difficulty.

“Why not?”

“Even if you hold no hate for me, I still did something terrible to you.”

“I did too! I caused Sir Haruto so much trouble...”

Christina and Flora both objected to Rio’s words.

“I don’t really know what you’re talking about... Princess Christina, are you possibly referring to the slapping incident?”

“L-Like I said, the slap was... No, the slap is part of it.” Christina blushed faintly, her spirit chipping away.

“I had a bad temper back then myself... It’s possible I glared at you rebelliously and scared you. I also touched a princess with my dirty hands,” Rio said jokingly.

“You weren’t dirty. You weren’t dirty at all!” Christina immediately interrupted firmly.

“Christina...?”

Flora looked at her sister in surprise—Christina didn’t raise her voice often.

“I was the dirty one—*me*. You had nothing but pure intentions, saving Flora as you did, yet I said horrible things to you in the slums. I was far dirtier than you.” Christina confessed her sins from her beautifully shaped lips.

“The situation was what it was.”

“There you go again...” Trying to forgive her. To Christina, that was brutally painful—but this could be her punishment. Rio forgave her, but she wouldn’t be

able to forgive herself. And probably never would.

“Will you let me thank you and apologize? Even if you never make contact with me again as Rio, I want to express my remorse when interacting with you as Haruto.”

Now that she knew Haruto was Rio, an apology was absolutely necessary. On top of that, she would be indebted to Rio for the rest of her life. She wanted to repay that debt no matter what.

“I’ve already gotten words of gratitude and apology from you...” Rio made a pained face.

“Just saying it isn’t enough. This is a matter of sincerity. In addition to expressing my gratitude for every favor you have done for us, I apologize for all the wrongdoings that have occurred to you in the past. It’s not something that should be forgiven now, but allow me to swear that your kindness will never be returned with spite again.” Christina bowed her head towards Rio firmly.

“Thank you very much. And I’m very sorry. It was because of me that you became a wanted criminal. I’ve only ever caused you trouble...” Flora bowed her head like her sister.

“I understand. I forgive you, so there’s no need to go this far. What if I told you this: I had an ulterior motive in saving the two of you,” Rio said, a little flustered by the two princesses bowing at him.

“An ulterior motive?” Christina cocked her head.

“The stability of the Restoration means the guarantee of Celia’s safety and comfort. That’s why I want to send the two of you back to the organization. That is my intention behind protecting the two of you.”

So there’s really no need to feel overly indebted or worried about it, Rio more or less said without words.

“In that case, we’re sincerely grateful for Professor Celia’s kindness and your generosity,” Christina said with a hint of guilt in her smile, bowing her head once more.

Chapter 4: Meanwhile...

Just as Rio left the village with Christina and Flora, First Prince Duran of the Paladia Kingdom bid his farewell to Rio and stopped by the village before his return to the castle. The villagers watched him enter their village fearfully, but he didn't even spare them a glance as he headed straight for the path that led to the main road. In his hand was Lucius's sword that he'd gotten from Rio.

"Why, if it isn't Prince Duran."

Just as he was about to leave the village, someone appeared in Duran's way. It was Reiss, the Proxia Empire's ambassador.

"Oh? And when did you get here?" Duran replied with a grin.

"Moments ago. Just as Lucius was killed, in fact. Good grief, what a sly scheme," Reiss lamented with a sigh as he protested.

Duran gave a dramatic shrug of his shoulders and feigned ignorance. "Hmm? I do not recall scheming anything."

"You ignored my request in favor of Lucius's, did you not?"

"I was merely told by Lucius that the plan had changed. There was no way for me to tell which request was the real one, so I believed the person who came to me directly."

"Why did you give me a false location, then? It is a matter of fact that you deceived me regarding Haruto Amakawa and Lucius's location. I ended up searching around an unrelated area because of you."

After Lucius had used the teleport crystal to Paladia, Aishia pursued Reiss. Once he had barely made his getaway, he flew to Paladia and visited Duran. But when he asked about Rio and Lucius's whereabouts, he was told Rio had been sent elsewhere and Lucius had gone after him.

"Bwa ha ha! That's because the situation changed after I spoke to you. I don't know how and why it changed, but Haruto reappeared before me once you left.

Then Lucius reappeared as well. After that, I followed Lucius's orders and lured Haruto to this village. But who would've expected Lucius to outwit a man like you? You sure seem panicked about it," Duran lied smoothly, claiming his innocence with confidence.

"Indeed, I was utterly deceived this time...and went through quite the ordeal as a result. Well, what's done is done. With Lucius dead, there's no way of finding out the truth, and I don't intend to punish you either." Reiss sighed and backed away reluctantly.

"That aside, I'm impressed you made it here. How did you know this was the place?" Duran asked out of curiosity.

"There's nothing to be impressed about considering I didn't make it in time. I pretty much arrived just as the finishing blow was being dealt. As for how, well—it's a secret," Reiss said. He then looked at the sword in Duran's hand.

Duran noticed Reiss's gaze and tried to wrap up the conversation quickly. "Hmm. I suppose it doesn't matter. So, what business do you have with me? I'd like to get back to the capital soon."

"Now, don't be hasty. I have a favor to ask of you—could you return that sword to me?"

"'Return'? That's strange. When Lucius was killed, Haruto became this sword's owner, correct? And I received this from him because he said he didn't need it. You're telling me to return a sword that rightfully belongs to me?"

"That sword originally belonged to me—I let Lucius borrow it. I'm its true owner."

"Do you have proof of that?" Duran chuckled with a grin.

"Of course, I won't ask you to return it for free. I will offer several enchanted swords from our country in exchange." It was an extraordinary offer.

"Oho, so you say this sword has the worth of several enchanted swords? I expected it to be exceptional based on the spell embedded within, but..." Duran didn't bite right away.

"I won't deny it, but that sword is a particularly evil blade with a past."

“Are you saying it’s cursed?”

“I’m not certain, but that sword has a mind of its own. It savors the blood of the living and swallows the souls of those it kills. It’s said that it ultimately eats the soul of its owner too,” Reiss said with a creepy grin.

“A sword that eats its owner... You think I’ll be eaten?” Duran laughed heartily, then looked down at Lucius’s sword. The blade was completely enshrouded in darkness, reflecting no light at all.

“Well, that’s if you’re able to bring out the power of that sword in the first place. It’s rather particular about its owner. The sword won’t approve of you unless you’re a deviant like Lucius; someone who gives in to his negative emotions and enjoys killing others. If someone unsuited for the sword uses it, they’ll merely be swinging a sharp sword with a black blade.”

“Interesting. Let’s test that out,” Duran sneered, sending magic essence into Lucius’s sword. This was the way of testing aptitude for most enchanted swords in the world. If the wielder was found to be suitable for the blade, they would sense it right away.

“Hmph. No good, huh?” Duran huffed, unamused.

“Well? Do you feel like returning it now?” Reiss grinned.

“Fine, an exchange it is,” Duran agreed, clicking his tongue. “Bring the enchanted swords of your choice—I’ll hold on to this until then.” He was stubbornly thinking about having his knights test their aptitude for the sword.

“Understood. I shall return to the Proxia Empire on a later date and pick out several swords before sending a messenger to your castle. I have some minor business to attend to after this, so it won’t be immediate—but no longer than two or three weeks.” Reiss bowed his head with a fake-looking smile.

Duran narrowed his eyes. “Minor business, you say... Is it related to Haruto?”

“How sharp of you.” Reiss’s mouth warped with a chuckle, not bothering to hide anything.

“Isn’t it obvious? You asked me to cooperate in luring Haruto in the first place. Now that Lucius made the first move and failed, it’s only natural to assume your

goal has yet to be achieved.”

In which case one would assume Reiss’s next target would be Haruto himself.

“I didn’t just fail at achieving my goal—it’s no longer possible to achieve at all now that Lucius is dead. My plan was to arrange a duel between Lucius and the boy, you see,” Reiss answered somberly.

“If so, I don’t see the reason why Lucius would act against you, since it seemed to me that he desired a duel with Haruto as well...” Why hadn’t the two cooperated with each other? Duran hadn’t heard anything regarding that from Lucius, so he cocked his head dubiously.

“I don’t understand either. Our goals and interests were perfectly aligned, yet for some reason Lucius couldn’t trust me as a partner. This is why humans are such...”

Mystifying creatures. Reiss sighed as though to say that.

“You certainly are the shadiest man I’ve ever met—enough to feel apprehension at the thought of entrusting my back to you in a war. I can relate to Lucius there,” Duran laughed heartily.

“I try to act as rationally as possible in order to be trusted, though.”

“Too rational. You should learn to be emotional when necessary.”

“Emotions, you say... Sounds difficult. Well then, I suppose I should leave now.” Reiss sneered, then made to leave the area. He was heading for the battlefield where Haruto had fought Lucius.

“Wait,” Duran called out.

“Yes?”

“I know you have your own mysteries, but you can’t win against Haruto.”

“I am aware. I nearly died when I fought him, after all.” Reiss nodded plainly at Duran’s blunt words.

“Why are you going after him? I watched his fight with Lucius, and it’s clear that you’ll be walking into your own death. I don’t care if you anger him and cause trouble for the Proxia Empire, but he’s also an honorary knight of Galarc,

no? At worst, he could show up on the battlefield if Galarc and Proxia go to war. Paladia is allied with Proxia, so I'll be at risk of facing him—and I don't intend on fighting a lost battle, you know?" Duran emphasized with a sharp tone, putting some heat behind his words.

"I can follow that train of thought, but what do you want me to do about it?"

"I'm telling you to turn back if you're going to provoke him needlessly. If Proxia's ambassador shows up in a situation where the Beltrum princesses were abducted, then Proxia's involvement in the incident will be assumed. The suspicion towards Paladia will also heighten."

They were already toeing the edge of the gray zone in their current state, but if Reiss pulled something now, they'd be completely standing in the red zone.

Reiss gave a rare chuckle of amusement. "Ha ha ha! Harsh, but fair. Rest assured, I don't plan on launching a surprise attack on him or anything. It wouldn't have been an issue if Lucius had outwitted me and won, but the situation has changed now that he's been defeated," he replied seriously to Duran's concerns about Rio.

"What do you intend on doing in the direction you're heading, then?"

"They're all important figures, you see—Princess Christina and Princess Flora included. I'm going to observe their next move from afar. But I won't make a move on them while they're still in the Paladia Kingdom. I do value my life somewhat," Reiss said with a shrug, passing by Duran and walking away.

It's none of my business if he drops dead somewhere... But he's been acting more suspiciously ever since the heroes were summoned. Hmm.

Duran glared sharply at Reiss's back and sensed that something unknown was about to occur.

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Meanwhile, in the forest on the outskirts of Rodania, Celia was visiting the stone house with Aishia. The encounter with Reiss in Rodania, pursuing him with Aishia, and being retrieved by Orphia midway to hide in the stone house had all happened the day before yesterday.

Once Aishia defeated Reiss and returned to the stone house, Celia immediately left to check on the situation in Rodania. There she learned that Christina and Flora were missing and spent the entirety of yesterday in Rodania watching over the situation for any developments before sneaking out to the stone house today. Welcomed by Miharu, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma, she sat down on the sofa in the living room with Aishia.

“Thank you for the other day, everyone. I wanted to come visit yesterday, but a dire situation has cropped up in the Restoration.” Celia looked around at everyone as she thanked them, then sighed worriedly.

“What happened?” Sara asked.

“Princess Christina and Princess Flora have gone missing.”

“Huh...?” Everyone present was shocked.

“They apparently disappeared on their way back from the Galarc Kingdom. The enchanted ship they were on was attacked and many on board were killed,” Celia explained with a frown.

“They still haven’t been found yet, right? Do you have any leads...?” Orphia asked.

“They haven’t. There are no leads either. Their bodyguard, Vanessa, miraculously survived, but she lost so much blood that she’s still unconscious even now...”

“Vanessa...”

“Will she be all right...?”

Orphia and Alma worried.

“She’ll be fine... I think. Her wounds have been closed with healing magic, her breathing is stable, and she doesn’t have a fever or anything,” Celia explained.

“If there’s anything we can do to help out with the search for Christina...” Sara offered with a worried face. Sara, Orphia, and Alma had traveled together with Christina and Vanessa from Cleia to Rodania, so they weren’t strangers.

“Thank you,” Celia said happily, then immediately switched to a stern expression. “But you should stay and strengthen our defenses here. Aishia

defeated Reiss, but the fact Princess Christina and Princess Flora were attacked is unsettling. You shouldn't leave while Rio isn't here."

"I understand..." Sara nodded quietly.

"The timing is a little strange, though. Christina and Flora's disappearance outside Rodania coincided with Reiss's appearance inside Rodania... I imagine the two incidents are related," Alma said thoughtfully.

"You think so too? We never found out Reiss's goal in infiltrating the building either..." Even without evidence, the suspicion surrounding Reiss was there. Celia bit down on her lip listlessly.

Miharu hesitantly raised her hand. "Is it possible that you were his target?"

"Hmm... I don't think so. He tried to flee as soon as we ran into him. And he actually fled too... I think it'd be more natural to assume he had business in the central office," Celia answered. The fact Reiss's first action had been to drop everything and run made her think she wasn't the target.

"Did you tell the people of the Restoration that Reiss had snuck into the building?" Orphia asked.

"Yes. I informed them that a man resembling the Proxia Empire's ambassador had snuck into the building and fled as soon as I saw him. No one else was there to witness it, so I hid Aishia's presence, but..."

"What did the people of the Restoration say?" Alma asked.

"They pretty much had the same opinion as me—that he had snuck into the central office in order to steal something from the Restoration. They also said they're considering the possibility of the airship attack being the work of the Proxia Empire or a collaborative effort between Reiss and Duke Arbor's faction. Though they couldn't see any reason why the ambassador himself would do something like this... They'll be looking into it further alongside the search for the princesses." When Celia finished speaking, she sighed heavily.

"Celia? You don't look too good. Are you all right?" Latifa asked, staring at Celia's face.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Celia nodded with a gentle smile to reassure her, but it was

still clear she was pushing herself.

Latifa turned her thoughts to Rio worriedly. “I hope Onii-chan comes home soon...”



◇ ◇ ◇

Around noon of the same day, in the Rubia Kingdom bordering the southwest of Paladia, one boy slept on in the royal castle.

“...”

Beside the bed where Kikuchi Renji slept, First Princess Sylvie sat in a chair and gazed out the window. Just then, someone knocked on the door to the room.

“Enter,” Sylvie called towards the door.

The door was ajar to begin with, but it opened slowly at Sylvie’s voice. A female knight stood in the doorway—it was Elena, the commander of Sylvie’s personal guard.

Sylvie took one glance at Elena’s face. “Elena. What is it?”

“Your meal is ready. I came to show you to the dining hall.”

“No thanks. I have no appetite.”

Elena’s brows furrowed in worry for Sylvie. “You’ve already skipped breakfast today, and you barely ate anything last night.”

“I can’t help it if I don’t have an appetite,” Sylvie replied tiredly.

“In that case, please go outside and move around. There’s no appetite to be gained staying inside this room all day.”

“No. Renji might wake up while I’m gone.”

“Princess Sylvie, please leave the nursing to the servants. Why do you have to trouble yourself over a man like this...?” There was a tone of disapproval in Elena’s voice.

“You’re speaking out of line. Renji is a hero,” Sylvie said with a bitter smile.

“I still cannot believe that this man is a hero... His reckless actions placed Your Highnesses in so much danger,” Elena complained with a stern look.

It was three days ago that Renji had tailed Sylvie and Reiss, crashing her reunion with Estelle. There, Renji lost to Lucius and had his limbs cut off in what

was a crushing defeat.

Renji had probably intervened thinking he was helping Sylvie by saving Estelle, but the situation wasn't that simple. A small kingdom like Rubia couldn't oppose a large nation like the Proxia Empire. It would be one thing to retrieve Estelle secretly, but rescuing the hostage in front of Reiss was equivalent to declaring war on the Proxia Empire.

In other words, Renji's actions had been far too thoughtless. Because of his actions, Sylvie had been forced to make a choice—whether to oppose Proxia, or join sides with Proxia.

But Sylvie was unable to deny Proxia. She thrust aside Renji and left him to fight Lucius alone.

If I had chosen to fight alongside him and save Estelle...

Would the result have differed? Could Renji have avoided being defeated? These were the only thoughts that had filled her mind for the past three days.

"We would have eventually had to make a choice between siding with Galarc or crossing sides to Proxia. The fact our kingdom has changed sides is still unknown too—it's merely an agreement between Reiss and me, so there's still a chance of saving Estelle." Sylvie's mouth was twisted bitterly as she spoke.

"What if Reiss makes further demands next time, though? This man has also become part of the Proxia Empire. He made a pact with Reiss himself. If we are to face the Proxia Empire in the future, then this man..."

...May end up becoming your enemy. Are you sure? These were the words in Elena's throat, but she swallowed them down with a sour look.

"Well, there's no telling what will happen." It almost sounded like there was resignation in Sylvie's words, making Elena glare at Renji on the bed.

"..."

Elena hadn't liked Renji from the beginning. Her first impression of him was the worst. He looked like a child on the outside, but on the inside he was an arrogant adventurer like any other. His manner of speaking had been impolite from the first time he met Sylvie and Estelle, but she could admit he had the

strength to back up his attitude.

“Come to think of it, you mentioned a meal. I have no appetite, but could you bring some soup?” Sylvie seemed to notice Elena’s scowling and sighed as she changed the subject. She had just made up a reason for Elena to temporarily leave the room.

“Mm...” Renji suddenly groaned, his body trembling.

“Renji?”

Renji opened his eyes faintly at Sylvie’s voice. “Mmgh.”

“You’re finally awake,” Sylvie said and beamed.

“Syl...vie...? Guh...!” Renji snapped out of his daze as he recalled the events before he had passed out and shot up in bed. At the same time, he summoned his Divine Arms in his dominant hand and clutched it tightly.

“H-Hey! Renji! Calm down! Stop!” Sylvie said in a panic.

“Where...?” Renji asked, looking around the room nervously.

“A guest room of the Rubia Castle. Can you put away your weapon...the Divine Arms?” Sylvie said with a sigh.

“...” Renji silently made his halberd disappear.

Sylvie shrugged in exasperation. “If you can move that much, your body’s probably fine. The limbs that were severed have been restored perfectly.”

Meanwhile, Elena was watching Renji with a look of discontent.

“What happened...?” Renji asked in wonder, examining the presence of his cleanly reattached limbs.

“‘What happened,’ you say...?!” Elena immediately snapped in rage.

“Quiet, Elena. I didn’t give you permission to speak.”

Elena reluctantly heeded Sylvie’s warning. “My apologies...”

“Do you remember what happened before you lost consciousness?” Sylvie asked first.

Renji nodded with a frown. “Yeah...”

“Your limbs were cut off, and you lost to Lucius. The shock of the blood loss left you unconscious for three days, but now you’re awake.” Sylvie summarized the events in a frank and concise manner.

“How were my limbs reattached?” Renji asked in confusion.

“It was apparently the work of the Divine Arms. An ability activated to keep you alive, but I don’t know the details as to how that happened either.”

“I see...”

“Any other questions?”

“Where are they now...?” Renji asked nervously. He was referring to Reiss and Lucius.

“They returned to the Proxia Empire. Do you remember your pact with Reiss before your battle?”

“...” Renji fell silent with an awfully uncomfortable look. He remembered.

“You’ve become a subordinate of Proxia... No, of Reiss. You can stay in this castle until he comes for you, but once he comes you must follow his orders,” Sylvie stated flatly.

“...” Renji frowned.

“Don’t tell me you intend on going back on your word.”

“Is it worth keeping a promise with people like them?” Renji replied to Sylvie, ashamed.

“I heard you often picked fights with the adventurers who looked down on you,” Sylvie said, abruptly changing the topic.

Two sides presented something important to them, and the victor obtained both—those were the basics of a duel. Royalty and nobility didn’t perform them thoughtlessly, but they were a frequent occurrence amongst hasty adventurers. Renji defeated anyone who picked a fight with him through duels, taking his opponents’ fortunes as a warning to others. That was how rumors of Renji spread, which greatly reduced the number of ruffians who looked down on him.

“Yeah...?” Renji nodded, slightly confused. He couldn’t figure out why duels

were being mentioned.

“Have you ever let anyone you defeated go against their word?”

At Sylvie’s question, he finally understood her point. “No.”

Renji recalled how he stripped everyone he defeated of their fortunes mercilessly and awkwardly averted his eyes from Sylvie.

“In other words, you’ll make anyone weaker than you obey, but you’ll break your word against someone stronger? You’re running away?” Sylvie stared at Renji with a look of disdain.

“Uh...” Unable to make eye contact, Renji flinched.

“Pathetic. I liked your rebellious spirit towards the injustices of the world, but it seems like I misjudged you. You’re just a coward who can only act big before the weak—an outcast of society. You’re nothing but a lawless brat.”

“...” Her mocking tone made Renji clench his teeth, eyes still cast downwards.

“What’s wrong? Nothing to say for yourself? Wasn’t it your motto not to forgive those who look down on you? Who was it who spoke to a princess on an equal level the first time he met her?”

“...” With his head still bowed, Renji clenched his fists.

“I’m looking down on you right now, you realize? Same with Elena over there. She scoffs whenever she looks at you,” Sylvie said, looking at Elena. Elena purposefully scoffed so that Renji could hear, finding satisfaction in doing so.

Renji finally snapped. “Why are you saying this?”



“Why, you ask? After all the trouble you’ve caused me, you think I don’t have the right to voice my complaints?”

Despite being sullen, Renji raised his voice to make his point. “I-I was just trying to save Estelle. If you’re saying I ran away, then you’re a coward who couldn’t save Estelle too.”

Sylvie gave an undaunted reply, acknowledging her own cowardice. “Yes, that’s right. But I don’t intend to run from Reiss like you. I have to bear the burden of not just Estelle, but the entire kingdom. There’s no way I can run.”

“I-I tried to save her. But you sided with Reiss...” Renji implicitly placed the blame on Sylvie—that it was all because she did nothing.

Sylvie grit her teeth, harshening her tone as she scolded him. “The situation’s taken a troublesome turn because of your reckless savagery. Reiss is backed by a large nation called the Proxia Empire. If I had opposed him there, they would eventually confront our kingdom. Are you telling our small kingdom to face a major nation? Or would you fight the Proxia Empire alongside us? You, a man who would run away from your promise with Reiss, wouldn’t run from a war with his empire?”

“I-I... I didn’t know he was backed by the Proxia Empire.”

“I called you a savage because you meddled in my business without knowing anything. Reiss and Lucius mentioned it before the duel—you’ve grown arrogant in thinking that everything can be solved with your strength, haven’t you?”

“...” He couldn’t deny it. He wanted to argue for himself, but he couldn’t find the words. The one defense he had on the tip of his tongue was that it was an overstatement, but it was so pathetic that he swallowed it back down.

“Coward. Where did the self-righteous man I know go? I guess the attitude was just a facade and this is your true self, huh?” Sylvie sighed in heavy disappointment.

“I...!” Renji raised his head to object, but when he noticed Sylvie staring back at him he quickly looked down again.

“So pathetic... Enough. Leave this castle—no, leave the kingdom. You’re an eyesore,” Sylvie spat coldly.

Elena was shocked. “P-Princess Sylvie?! What about your agreement with Reiss? You can’t leave this man to his own devices.”

Sylvie waved her hand in irritation. “I don’t care. He’s such an eyesore. I’ll come up with an explanation for Reiss and Lucius later.”

“...” Renji didn’t stand. He was still sitting up in the bed, clenching the sheets in both fists as he worked through his inner conflict.

“What? Get out already. Or are you asking to be cut down here?” Sylvie jeered.

“I... I’m...” Renji murmured.

Sylvie looked at him warily. “What?”

“I’m sorry... You’re right. I have no excuse,” Renji said at an audible volume.

“So what?” Sylvie asked in a detached tone.

“Please allow me to assist in Estelle’s rescue. You want to save her too, right? I’ll do anything I can to help. I’ll atone for my failure after she’s rescued.” Renji’s reply took on a rather meek attitude. It was a look that actually fit the age of the boy Sylvie first met.

After a dazed pause, Sylvie burst out laughing. “Ha! Ha ha ha! So you have the capacity to make a face like that?”

“Don’t make fun of me; I’m being serious,” Renji said, biting down on his lip.

“Sorry,” Sylvie said with a wry smile, then changed her tone to a gentle one. “But your assistance is unnecessary. I appreciate the sentiment, but you really should leave.”

“Wh-Why...?” Renji asked, confused.

“You wield tremendous power, but you’re fatally lacking something. I’ve always found that strange, but that was also the part of you I was drawn to. And yet, the answer was surprisingly simple. For better or for worse, you’re still a child. I realized that today. That’s why I can’t allow you to get involved,” Sylvie

warned.

“That’s not true! I’m seventeen!” Renji yelled.

While it wasn’t the case in Japan, seventeen-year-olds were formally treated as adults in this world. Sylvie herself was eighteen, which was why Renji based his argument around his age.

“The way you bring up your age only makes you more childish.”

“Y-You’re wrong! Don’t treat me like a kid!”

“I’m not. You force others to take responsibility while lacking any sense of responsibility yourself. That’s what makes you a child.”

“That’s not...!”

“You’re trying to break your promise with Reiss right this moment.”

“That’s... I...” Renji stumbled for something to say in protest.

“Listen, Renji. This is a warning. You’re just a child bestowed with an incredible power through no effort of your own—it’s all the work of the Divine Arms. That’s why you’re all mixed up,” Sylvie stated bluntly. “You live within society while shirking all social obligations. You only participate in society when it benefits you—when it doesn’t, you exert your power to bend things your way. That’s how you’ve been living all this time, but you’ve finally encountered someone that won’t work on. Did you think you could live like that forever?” she said angrily to intimidate him.

“...” Renji gulped silently.

“There are people stronger than you—you’ve already lost to one of them. Just because you’re strong as an individual doesn’t mean you can underestimate the power of the masses. I’m going to teach you that lesson right now.”

“...Huh?” Renji looked confused, wondering how she would do that.

“For your grave crimes against the kingdom, I declare you an enemy of Rubia as of today. You may no longer live in this kingdom from here on out.”

“Wha...” Renji fell speechless at the sudden declaration.

“However, I will atone for my share of the blame. This is my final act of

kindness—I shall allow you to flee. So leave this castle now," Sylvie declared.

"..." Renji remained frozen on the bed.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you leaving?" Sylvie asked unhappily.

Renji finally raised his voice. "W-Wait a moment, please! I can't do that, Sylvie!"

"Why not?" Sylvie asked with a fed up expression.

"I've realized it thanks to your words—if I flee now, I'll regret it forever! I'll no longer be myself! That's what I feel! I have to defeat Lucius in order to move forward with my life!"

Sylvie's expression wavered for a brief moment during Renji's desperate pleas, but she quickly gathered herself and shook her head. "That's your own personal business. It has nothing to do with us."

"B-But you need my power, right?! That's right... My power will be beneficial for this kingdom. Because I'm a hero," Renji said without a care for how it made him sound.

"It's not your power, but the power of the Divine Arms... That petty pride of yours is what I'm calling childish."

"Then I'll become an adult! I won't screw up next time! Please believe me!" Renji protested stubbornly.

"Don't assume there'll always be a next time. And believe you? Do you really think I can believe in the way you are now?" Sylvie said, giving Renji a cold dose of reality by pointing out his arrogance.

"Uhm..." Renji gulped.

"That's all I have to say. Get out. And never step foot into this capital—no, this kingdom again. The next time I see your face in our lands, I will cut you down without mercy. So be prepared," Sylvie threatened.

Renji was at a loss for words. "Are you serious...?" he asked, trembling.

"Yes, I am. So leave." Sylvie nodded without hesitation, pointing at the open door.

“I... I won’t,” Renji declared. His eyes were bloodshot and his breathing harsh.

“What?”

“I won’t leave this place,” Renji repeated clearly.

“Renji, you...” Sylvie said, clearly displeased.

“If I stay in the kingdom after leaving this castle I’ll be cut down, right? Then I won’t leave. You won’t cut me down if I don’t leave, right?”

“You think your shoddy logic will work on me?!” Sylvie shot to her feet with a fierce look, reaching for her sword resting nearby.

“P-Princess Sylvie.” Elena quickly grabbed Sylvie’s arm and blocked her with her own body.

“Let go, Elena!”

“I-I will not!”

Sylvie and Elena argued back and forth, while Renji spoke up beside them.

“I’m not leaving this castle,” Renji declared sullenly.

“You child... Are you saying you’ll become Reiss’s subordinate, then?!” Sylvie yelled.

“If that’s taking responsibility as an adult, then yes,” Renji replied with a frown.

“Ngh... Do what you want! Release me, Elena!” Sylvie grimaced bitterly and gave in out of frustration. She sheathed her sword and shoved aside Elena’s clinging grip before marching out of the room.

“P-Please wait a moment, Princess Sylvie!” Elena said and hurried after her.

◇ ◇ ◇

In an uninhabited area of the Paladia Kingdom, just after Rio left the outskirts of the village where he killed Lucius and invited Christina and Flora into his stone house...

There was someone observing from above. Reiss. He had shadowed Rio as he carried Christina and Flora away from the village where he had dueled Lucius to

the death.

If he's brought out his house, then he won't be traveling again today. Princess Flora seemed rather exhausted, so he must be prioritizing her recovery, Reiss surmised to himself from where he looked down on the house.

That aside, how shall I act next? With the option to coordinate with Lucius gone, I have no choice but to give up on dealing with Haruto. The risks of making a move outweigh the risks of leaving him be, but letting him return without any resistance at all...

It felt humiliating. The mess that Lucius made had left Reiss in a very troubling situation.

What would happen if he allowed Rio and the princesses to return like this? What kind of information would reach the Restoration and Galarc, and how would they react? Reiss considered the possibilities.

*There's no hiding the fact it was Lucius who abducted Beltrum's royal princesses. It's also common knowledge that Lucius had connections with the ambassador of the Proxia Empire—*with me*. Considering the fact that I was spotted in Rodania just before the royal siblings went missing, then...*

The abduction of Christina and Flora would most likely be deemed the work of the Proxia Empire. If he was unlucky enough, his connections to the Duke Arbor faction could be raised as well.

While there's nothing that can be done about Galarc and the Restoration's increased wariness towards Proxia, the risk and return will be far too unbalanced if things go on at this rate. The only thing that was gained in all this is my faked death, and I don't even know if that spirit was fooled...

During the battle at Rodania's outskirts, Reiss had made it look like Aishia cornered and defeated him. He had actually summoned a monster to be killed in his place, helping him escape successfully.

I cannot appear before Haruto right now. If me faking my death actually went as planned, then his attention will be directed away from me. It would be a waste to discard that advantage here. Which means I'll have to send the squad members to make up for the failures of their commander. They can think of it as

a way to get revenge for him.

There were only two problems with that—the first being what kind of situation he wanted to create with them.

However, Princess Sylvie should come to terms with her situation soon, and I've obtained a new pawn to replace the old one, so perhaps I can make a scapegoat out of him instead.

Reiss immediately came up with a good plan and grinned wickedly.

The remaining problem is where to make them face each other, but they should be heading for either Rodania or Galarc. Whichever way they go, they'll have to pass through the Rubia Kingdom. The window of opportunity will be extremely limited if he flies with the two princesses, but I'll endeavor to arrange something.

Since it was an ironclad law to only travel during daylight, he'd spend his daytime hours tracking Rio. If he needed to give orders and move personnel, he'd do that after Rio had stopped moving to rest.

I guess I'll head over to Arein and the others after marking this location.

With that decided, Reiss descended to the ground.

◇ ◇ ◇

Roughly ten or so minutes later, Reiss used a single-use teleportation crystal to relocate immediately. He reappeared elsewhere in the Paladia Kingdom, in a deserted village just a few dozen kilometers away from where Rio had set up his stone house.

"Now..." With no hesitation in his steps, Reiss marched forward. He stopped before a run-down house that would've belonged to the past village chief and knocked on the door in a particular rhythm. Soon after he did, the door to the house flew open. It seemed like the occupant was feeling rather hasty.

"Why, Mister Reiss..."

Sure enough, the one who opened the door was Arein, Lucius's subordinate. Lucci and Ven stood immediately behind him.

"The three of you look well," Reiss said with an unreadable smile.

“Umm... The captain isn’t with you?” Arein asked, examining Reiss’s expression before looking around for anyone accompanying him. As his question implied, he was wondering about Lucius’s whereabouts.

This deserted village was originally meant to be the meetup point after the plan was completed, but Reiss already visited two days ago after he escaped from Aishia. He had been seeking information from Arein and the others. However, he hadn’t been aware that Christina and Flora had been abducted at the time—he only found out when he arrived at the battlefield—and had no choice but to prioritize his meeting with Duran.

Consequently, Arein’s side hid in the village for two days, believing Lucius would return victorious.

“He was killed,” Reiss stated simply.

“...”

The faces of the three men stiffened—their expressions were of disbelief, clearly in denial of the truth. Reiss repeated himself once more, leaving no room for doubt.

“I said, Lucius is dead. He fought his fated enemy and, regrettably, lost,” he said with a heavy sigh.

“What kind of a joke is that? The captain was killed? Don’t make me laugh.” Lucci laughed dryly, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“It’s not a joke,” Reiss said with a straight face.

“That’s impossible!” Lucci yelled. The walls of the house were made of dampened wood, yet his voice echoed loudly.

“There’s no need to yell,” Arein muttered with an annoyed look.

“Shut up! It’s the captain we’re talking about, okay?! And he’s supposed to be dead?! No, it has to be a joke. The captain wouldn’t kick the bucket so easily!” Lucci stubbornly refused to accept the truth.

“...”

Arein and Ven both fell silent, clenching their teeth.

“It’s a lie. It has to be,” Lucci muttered. His body was trembling slightly.

“Like I said before, two days ago, Lucius suddenly acted on his own. You claimed you had no idea where he went, but you actually knew all along, didn’t you?” Reiss suddenly asked, looking around at the three men.

“...”

Lucci was still shaking with his eyes fixed on the floor, but Arein and Ven exchanged a secretive look with each other.

“There’s no point in hiding it. I already know that Princess Christina and Princess Flora were abducted as hostages to be used against the boy. Considering the situation, you three are the only people who could have cooperated with him. I have no intention of blaming you. I just want to confirm the truth,” Reiss explained tiredly, implicitly urging them to come clean already.

Arein and Ven gave in with a guilty look. “Well, yeah. We prioritized the captain’s orders.”

“The three of you were originally his subordinates, after all. It makes sense. However, things may have ended differently if you had cooperated with me instead of him—I’d like you to keep that thought in mind.”

Reiss implicitly suggested that Lucius wouldn’t have died if they had obeyed his orders.

“Guh...”

Arein and Ven averted their eyes awkwardly. They had believed in Lucius’s clear victory. They had followed his orders under that belief, but the reality waiting for them was cruel.

“There was a beauty in the way that he was always victorious. He may have used cowardly tricks, but he was strong precisely because he didn’t hesitate to use those tricks. But the defeated are worthless. That was his belief, and he followed that belief to rise to the peak of all mercenaries. Now that he has lost, he’s become nothing more than a coward. He wasn’t strong because he was cowardly, but a coward because he was weak. That’s all there is to it, I suppose,” Reiss lamented in a dramatic tone.

“That’s not true!” Lucci suddenly yelled, eyes widening with rage.

“What isn’t?”

“The captain isn’t weak. He wasn’t a coward because he was weak...” Lucci’s voice trembled.

“Can you prove that?” Reiss asked.

There was no way of proving it—it was an instance of the devil’s proof.

“We’ll win. The captain’s Heavenly Lions will never lose. We haven’t lost to that boy as a mercenary squad yet—so we’ll win. We can prove the captain’s strength that way.” Lucci breathed heavily through his nose. Then, a slow clap echoed around them—it was the sound of Reiss clapping.

“Wonderful. In that case, may I place a request with the members of the Heavenly Lions before me? My request won’t be for you to win against the boy, but it will include combat against him. Does that sound interesting to you?”

Arein and Ven exchanged frowns. Rio was the one who killed Lucius—he had also crossed swords with Arein’s group before, and they were fully aware of the gap in their abilities. They weren’t intimidated, but they knew they couldn’t accept the request so easily.

“Are we not allowed to dispose of him, Mister Reiss?” Lucci asked with a glare.

“You’re free to eliminate him, of course. My request will be completed the moment you engage him in combat, but you’re most welcome to go further.”

“Then we’ll accept that request.”

“Hey, Lucci. You haven’t even heard the terms yet...” Ven scolded with a sigh.

“What? It’s a fight for revenge over what happened to the captain. Are you chickening out?” Lucci said, completely raring to go.

“Fool. Did you forget how easily we were brushed aside before? This is the bastard that killed the captain. I just don’t want to underestimate him,” Ven scoffed in disgust.

“There’s one thing I want to confirm first,” Arein said to Reiss, ruffling his own

hair. “It sounds like you’re asking for this as a separate request from our tasks for the Proxia Empire. Is that right?”

The men were officially mercenaries of the Heavenly Lions, but during times of peace, they were paid to use their abilities as covert agents for Reiss.

“Yes. This is a fight to avenge Lucius, after all. You will be rewarded appropriately based on your results. I don’t mind entrusting you with the enchanted sword I had lent him either. It’s somewhat of a memento for you, no?” Reiss looked around at them and chuckled.

“We can’t say no to that,” Lucci said with an aggressive smile, looking at Arein and Ven.

“Let’s listen to the details first.” Arein sighed, deciding to give in.

Chapter 5: Departure and Pursuit

Three days passed since Rio invited Christina and Flora into the stone house, and five days since the two disappeared. Flora's condition had fully recovered, and it was finally time for them to depart for Galarc.

"*Conditum*."

They exited the stone house in the morning, and Rio chanted the spell to store the stone house back in the Time-Space Cache. The air distorted, making the huge boulder disappear in an instant.

"..."

Christina and Flora blinked in surprise. The Time-Space Cache had been explained to them at some point during the past three days, but the reality of it was so detached from what seemed like common sense, they still had trouble accepting what they saw.

Rio turned back around to them. "Shall we go, then?"

"Okay."

"Thank you for your help, Sir Haruto."

Christina and Flora both bowed their heads.

"I'll carry you in the same way as I did three days ago... Is that okay?" Rio confirmed with Christina. In other words, Rio would carry Christina on his back and Flora in his arms.

"I don't mind..." Christina nodded with a faint blush, recalling the time she had clung to Rio's back.

"Speaking of which, how did you carry us here?" Flora had been unconscious until they entered the stone house, so she cocked her head curiously.

"Respectfully, I carried Princess Christina on my back and Your Highness in my arms. Would you be okay with a similar arrangement this time?" Rio explained to Flora.

“H-Huh? Oh, b-but... Right. O-Okay. That’s fine.” Flora blushed bright red in surprise, but she soon realized there would’ve been no other way for her to be carried. In fact, she had been carried similarly back when Lucius abducted her in Amande, so there wasn’t anything for her to be shocked about. Though, it was still embarrassing.

“Well, there’s no point in standing around forever. Princess Christina, please get on first,” Rio said, offering his back to Christina.

“Right... Excuse me.” With a faint blush on her cheeks, Christina climbed onto Rio’s back.

It should be fine today. I took a bath this morning, so there’s no need to be worried about my scent, she thought to herself. Even if she had to cling to Rio’s back, she wouldn’t have to lament over the same thoughts that plagued her three days ago. However, she was still extremely nervous. Would he be able to feel her heartbeat? That was one worry that rose within her.

Now that I think about it, in this position, my chest is constantly pressed up against Sir Amakawa’s back...

She was wearing a thin dress right now, so the sensation was more obvious than the gown she wore three days ago.

Th-That should be okay, right? I’m not that big to begin with... Yeah, it’s better off this way. Flora’s bigger than me, after all...

Christina’s face stiffened in a blush, her body freezing where it was pressed up against Rio’s back.

“Princess Flora—you’re next.”

“R-Right.”

“I’m going to pick you up,” Rio said, bending forward a little to place his arms under Flora’s back and knees to scoop her up lightly.

Flora blushed, looking down as she lay in Rio’s arms. “Eek... A-Am I heavy?”

“Not at all. Your Highnesses are both very light.”

“Thank goodness...” Flora sighed in relief.

“...” In contrast, Christina clung closely to Rio’s back in silence.

“I won’t go too quickly, but please hold on tight so you don’t get thrown off.”

“Okay!” Flora replied shyly but energetically.

For the record, the coat made of Black Wyvern leather had been ripped in several places during his fight with Lucius, so Rio had swapped it out for another coat. Flora grabbed on to it.

“Umm, I don’t mind if you grab my coat, but it’d probably be safer if you held on to me,” Rio pointed out awkwardly. If she didn’t secure her upper body by holding on to him, she could be jostled quite a bit by any sudden movements.

“Wha...? Oh, o-okay! L-Like this?” Flora nervously wrapped her arms around him.

“Flora, move your hands to where my stomach is,” Christina said from Rio’s back.

“Thank you, Christina.” Flora rested her face in Rio’s chest and wrapped her arms around his back.

We must look like quite the sight... Rio thought to himself, making an awkward face. If he lowered his gaze a little he’d see Flora’s face, and Christina’s breath was against his neck, tickling him slightly. But he couldn’t let it bother him—there was no other reasonable way of carrying them.

“That should be fine. Now, let’s get going—first stop, the Rubia Kingdom.”

It was an effort to just depart, but Rio managed to set off. He kicked off the ground and it was like his feet had grown wings, lifting him into the air at a leisurely speed. The scenery around them changed in a blink of an eye.

“W-Wow! This is amazing, Sir Haruto!” Flora yelled in excitement.

Meanwhile, Christina—who had enjoyed the same scenery three days ago—was just as wide-eyed again.

“Truly, it’s beautiful... It’s a different view than what you’d see in the airship,” she muttered in a daze.

“I’ll be moving at this speed, but let me know if it’s too fast.”

Their current speed was roughly thirty kilometers per hour. It wasn't as fast as Rio's running speed, but it felt faster than it actually was. The princesses weren't used to flying, so this speed should've been just right for them.

"I'm fine."

"Right."

The two of them looked around the sky in great interest as they replied, seemingly comfortable.

"Please do enjoy the journey from the sky, then."

Thus, Rio and the girls departed for the capital of the Galarc Kingdom without any issues. Or, so they thought.

"Well, then. It's time for me to go too."

Observing just one kilometer away from them was Reiss, who began his pursuit.

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The journey through the sky continued several hours later, with Rio descending regularly to allow Christina and Flora to rest on the ground.

The frequent breaks were partially for Christina and Flora, and partially because the two of them didn't know the exact amount of magic essence that Rio had. He had explained spirit arts to them, but he hadn't told them his essence was practically limitless. They would have noticed he had a tremendous amount of essence from the many spirit arts he used during his battle with Lucius, but he hadn't explained anything to them.

"We'll be crossing the Rubia border soon. Let's enter the next city we see to get an accurate grasp of our location," Rio said to the two of them as he flew.

"Okay. If it's a city, it should have a magic artifact for transmission, so we can head for the governor's estate as soon as we confirm we're within Rubia," Christina said, proposing a plan for once they arrived in the city.

"Understood."

It was mere minutes later that they spotted a city in the direction Rio was

flying. It appeared to be a fortress city—it was surrounded by stone walls and a fort-like building stood in the center.

“I’m thinking of landing there. Does that sound good to everyone?” Rio asked Christina.

“Yes please.”

“All right. I can’t land in the middle of the city, so we’ll be descending by the road. It’ll be a short walk, so please bear that in mind,” Rio said, then began his descent to the road.

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After a short walk down the road, the group arrived at the fortress city and immediately headed for the fort. It was a city in a small kingdom, so it wasn’t that large. They reached the fort after only a few minutes of walking. Rio led the way, followed by Christina and Flora. There were three guards in front of the gate, and one of them called out to them as they approached.

“Stop. Outsiders aren’t allowed past this point. This isn’t a tourist spot. Leave.”

Naturally, they were turned away at the door.

“I am Haruto Amakawa, honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom, ally of Rubia. I wish to meet the governor. Can you pass on that message?” he said, having no set appointment. The guards exchanged looks with each other.

“P-Please wait a moment...”

The three guards turned their backs on them and started whispering to each other. Rio and the princesses were currently wearing casual travel clothes, so they didn’t look like nobility. But the guards’ reactions changed the moment Rio announced his title.

“Hey, isn’t the Galarc Kingdom...”

“It’s one of our allies, like he said. A huge one too.”

“Upon closer inspection, the girls behind him are really cute as well. They must be noble ladies or something.”

“Would it be better to let them in, then?”

“Yeah. But we’ll need some kind of identification first.”

The guards whispered back and forth to each other in a short amount of time, before they whipped back around and questioned Rio politely.

“Thank you for waiting. Do you have any proof of your identity?”

“Yes. This is the emblem His Majesty bestowed me.”

Rio took the emblem out of his breast pocket and showed it to them. The guards didn’t know what the crest of Galarc’s royal family looked like, but it was clearly an expensive object, so they deemed it to be authentic.

“Indeed, this will do. Who are the other two?”

“They are the ladies of high rank that I am escorting.”

In order to avoid causing a scene, Rio avoided revealing them as Beltrum’s royal sisters.

The guards exchanged another look with each other and one stepped out to guide them. “Please, come on through. I shall show you the way.”

“My apologies for the trouble.” Rio bowed politely and followed the guard leading the way. Christina and Flora continued after him. The two remaining guards stole glances at the girls as they passed.

“Hey... Did you see that?”

“Y-Yeah. I’ve never seen such beautiful girls before.”

“Their hair was the same color and their faces looked similar... Could they be sisters?”

“Perhaps.”

There wasn’t much to gossip about in a fortress city in the countryside, and the guards had a very idle job. There were even some days where no one visited the fort. Thus, the two guards left behind started chatting to each other in excitement at the beauty of Christina and Flora.

However, as soon as Rio and the others were out of sight, another person approached the gate. It was Reiss. The two guards began whispering to each

other.

“Hey, someone else is here.”

“You’re right. He looks like a traveler, but there’s something creepy about him.”

During that time, Reiss came up to them.

“Hello. I’m Jean Bernard, advisor to Princess Sylvie and a noble of the royal court.”

In order to enter the fort after Rio, Reiss revealed his position in the Rubia Kingdom.

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Rio and the princesses were led to a drawing room of the fort. The three sat down on the sofa and waited.

“Hello, hello, I’m sorry for the wait. I heard Galarc’s honorary knight was here? I’m the governor of this city, Marco Tonteri. I believe you said your name was...”

The door to the drawing room opened to reveal a plump man in his middle years. There was a layer of sweat over his forehead as he humbly sought a handshake from Rio first. When he spotted Christina and Flora, a faint light sparkled in his eye.

Rio stood up to accept the handshake from Marco. “Haruto Amakawa. I apologize for visiting unannounced.”

“Not at all. What business would an esteemed honorary knight have with a governor of the countryside like me?” Marco cocked his head in wonder. He glanced at Christina and Flora, who flanked Rio’s sides on the sofa.

“I have an urgent message I need to send to the capital of the Galarc Kingdom. May I use the transmitter in this city to contact the capital?” Rio asked.

“I see. If it’s the request of an honorary knight from an ally, then it would be my honor,” Marco agreed easily.

“Thank you very much. If I may ask, how long does it take for a message to reach Galarc from Rubia?”

“The message can arrive as early as today, but if you’re expecting a reply from the other side, then it will probably arrive tomorrow...”

If the message Rio was about to send reached Galarc’s royal castle, there was no way for Galarc to confirm the truth of the message. Since the receiver wouldn’t be able to verify the identity of the sender, the credibility of the message was an issue.

That being said, neither Galarc nor the Restoration would be able to ignore any news of Christina and Flora in their current state, so it would at least delay things from taking an unhelpful turn before they could make it back.

It was already afternoon. Sunset was still a fair way off, but it would start to darken in a few hours, so it would be strange for them to leave the city at this hour to continue their journey.

“In that case, may I visit the fort again tomorrow morning?”

They could afford to wait one night for a reply from the Galarc Castle before departing in the morning.

“Of course—that wouldn’t be a problem. Do you have any plans after this?”

“Not in particular. I’m actually in the middle of escorting these two ladies on a journey, but we won’t be traveling further today, so I was thinking of finding an inn for us.”

“I shall refrain from prying further, as it seems you have your own circumstances you’re dealing with... I cannot allow our guests from Galarc to go without shelter, but I’m afraid this fort isn’t furnished with guest rooms for nobility. I shall arrange accommodations for you at an inn, so please stay there,” Marco offered. Christina had explained on the road that it was noble etiquette to accept accommodation offers from a host if you didn’t have a prior arrangement—even though it would be more comfortable to stay outside the city in the stone house.

“We’ll accept your kind offer.” Rio bowed.

“It’s a simple city with nothing to see, so allow me to prepare some entertainment for you after you have finished sending your message. Would you like to join me for dinner?”

“Yes, thank you very much for the offer.”

He wasn’t very comfortable with talking to an unfamiliar noble, but declining the offer of someone doing them a favor would be rude. Besides, Marco had an overwhelming lack of information regarding Rio’s party. They managed to get this far smoothly just by the possibility of Rio being an honorary knight of a large allied nation, but Marco probably wanted to know a bit more.

If Rio rejected him here, they would seem suspicious. A conversation with Marco was unavoidable.

“Now, please write your message down on this paper. Ah, I’m sure you’re aware of this already, but transmission artifacts can only send a maximum of one hundred letters at a time, so please keep that in mind.” Marco handed Rio writing tools and paper for him to write his message.

“Thank you very much. If you don’t mind...”

Rio must have had his message decided in advance, as his hand moved without pause.

King Francois.

The two VIPs you want are safe. On the way back now.

Honorary Knight Haruto Amakawa.

“Please send this.” Rio held the paper out to Marco.

“Understood.” Marco accepted the paper and read over the words carefully. There was nothing written that shouldn’t be read—the message was going to be revealed to every city along the transmission line anyway, so there was nothing to worry about there.

Just then, a knock came.

“Excuse me.” A soldier of the fort hurried inside.

“I’m in the middle of a meeting with an important guest here.” Marco glared

at the soldier to scold his lack of consideration.

“M-My sincerest apologies. There is a matter requiring your urgent attention, Sir.” The guard approached Marco in his chair beside the doorway and started whispering in his ear.

“What...? Ugh, all right. I’ll be there immediately.”

Marco puffed up with a sullen look and sighed. “I’m sorry to interrupt our conversation, Sir Amakawa—I haven’t even greeted your two acquaintances properly yet. I’m afraid some urgent business has come up.”

He bowed his head to his guests across from him.

“No, I’m sure you have many duties as a governor. We’re the ones who intruded without warning, so please prioritize your work,” Rio said on behalf of his side.

“Much obliged. I shall return after sending this message. Would you be all right with relaxing in this room until I am done?” Marco folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

“Yes, we would be happy to. Thank you for attending to the message.” Staying in the room would be the least tiring option for Rio and the girls.

“Please excuse me.”

With those words, Marco left the room with the soldier.

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Marco exited the drawing room, leaving Rio and the girls behind. As soon as he did so, he was approached by the figure waiting in the hallway.

“Long time no see, Lord Tonteri.”

“Why, if it isn’t Sir Jean Bernard. It’s been a while,” Marco said.

It was Reiss, though he was using the alias of a Rubian noble named Jean Bernard.

“My apologies for calling you out in the middle of a meeting,” Reiss apologized politely.

“Not at all. What business would a noble of Princess Sylvie’s court have

here?”

“I have something to discuss with you regarding the guests you were just dealing with.”

“Is that so?” Marco looked back at the drawing room door and tilted his head.

“There’s a young boy and two young girls. The boy is the honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom named Haruto Amakawa—am I correct?”

“Y-Yes... How did you know that?”

“What is their purpose here? Did you hear anything about their plans?” Reiss asked with a sly grin.

“They wish to send a message to the Galarc Kingdom through our transmission artifact. I will be arranging an inn for them to stay at while they wait for a response, but it seems they plan on leaving this city tomorrow...” Marco took the message paper out of his pocket and held it up.

“I see. What was the message?”

“It’s a report for the King of Galarc. It says he’s secured two important figures and will be bringing them to the castle soon. I believe he means the two girls with him, but... Is there something wrong with that?” Marco asked, suspecting the implication behind Reiss’s prying.

“This is highly confidential, but...”

Marco waved away the soldiers nearby. “You lot can leave.”

Reiss made sure that there was no one left in the hallway. “For now, do not send that message to Galarc. But tell them that you have done so,” he ordered him.

Marco was taken aback for a moment, but then chuckled awkwardly. “You must be joking. If they find out I did such a thing, the Galarc Kingdom might retaliate against us, right?” he asked.

“It’s not a joke. I have no time to explain, either,” Reiss said in a completely serious tone. He then grabbed Marco’s head with his right hand.

“Wh-What?! The disrespect...!” Marco struggled for Reiss to release him, but

Reiss's right hand was like a vise around his head. A dim glow of light shone from Reiss's palm.

"Ugh..." Marco's body jolted, then collapsed towards the floor.

"Whoa, there... I see he's as heavy as he appears." Reiss gently caught Marco's bulky body, lending him his shoulder to lean on. He then snatched the paper from Marco's hand and started down the hallway.

"Is there anyone there?" he called. He turned the corner and went down the hallway.

"Yes...? Huh? Governor?"

A patrolling soldier spotted the two of them and rushed over. "You're...a guest, right?" the soldier asked Reiss dubiously.

"Yes. My name is Jean Bernard, and I'm a noble of the royal court. I was discussing important matters with Lord Tonteri when he suddenly collapsed—it seems he's been lacking sleep. Where can I find his bedroom?" Reiss explained the situation to the soldier in an exasperated tone.

"Huh..." The soldier cocked his head, wondering if that was even possible.

"Zzz... Zzz..." Marco snored in his sleep.

"Ha ha... I see. What a terrible snorer," the soldier snickered inappropriately, before covering his mouth with a gasp. "Oh, please pretend you didn't hear that."

"Of course. I was just thinking the same," Reiss agreed with a chuckle.

"Heh. Right, so the governor's room is right over there. Let me assist you." The soldier nearly snickered again, but quickly moved to support Marco on the other side of Reiss. They arrived at Marco's bedroom in less than a minute and laid him down on the bed.

"Good work. With Lord Tonteri like this, I shall go to the deputy governor and explain the situation. You should head to the drawing room and inform Lord Tonteri's guests that some urgent business has come up, then show them to an inn. Oh, and tell them that their message has been sent," Reiss said.

"Understood, sir. Please come this way," the soldier said respectfully, then

began to show Reiss the way.

After that, Reiss went to find the deputy governor of the fort and explained the necessary facts. After carefully laying the groundwork to prevent problems from occurring later, he left the fort. Once he was out of the fortress city, he relocated to the nearby forest.

"*Instans Motus.*" Taking a teleport crystal out of his breast pocket, he vanished instantly. His destination was still within the Rubia Kingdom—a room of Jean Bernard's house in the capital. It was essentially a vacant home with no one managing the premises.

"Now, it's time to win over the hero and Princess Sylvie with Princess Estelle as the reward. I'll also need to bring Arein and the others along. Time to get things done."

Reiss left his estate and headed for the castle.

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Thus, Reiss visited the Rubia Castle. His position as Jean Bernard was fabricated, but it had its uses within the castle as well. Most people didn't know of his circumstances and respected him as a noble.

"Your Highness, Reiss has arrived. He's waiting in the drawing room..."

Reiss had gone through the castle gate to meet with Sylvie. On behalf of her personal knights, Elena went to the room Sylvie had shut herself in to report the situation.

"I'll head there immediately."

Sylvie had been seated on the sofa gazing out of the window somberly, but when she heard Elena's words, she stood up and sighed heavily. It took her a few minutes to relocate.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Sylvie entered the drawing room and addressed Reiss flatly.

"Not at all. Thank you for arriving so promptly," Reiss said, standing up from his chair and replying with a friendly smile.

"Are you here for Renji?" Sylvie cut to the chase to ask whether he was here

for his subordinate. She made her way to the seat across from Reiss and sat down. At that, Reiss also sat back down.

“That’s part of it, but I was thinking our relationship could move on to the next stage as well,” Reiss said with a grin.

Sylvie immediately frowned. “The next stage of our relationship...?”

“The current state of the Rubia Kingdom is extremely unstable, don’t you think?”

“Whose fault do you think that is?” Sylvie said coldly.

“It’s because the Rubia Kingdom is a minor nation, of course,” Reiss stated without fear.

“...” Sylvie glared at Reiss in seething anger. She could normally endure things with just a furrowed brow, but her aura was more hostile than usual today.

“With the king in such bad health, you’re handling half of this kingdom’s duties right now. I’m sure you’re more than just a little overworked,” Reiss said with a cool face, as though he was reciting his words.

“I’m in an irritable mood right now. I have no intention of entertaining your disdainful, long-winded speeches. Get to the point.”

“In that case, I shall ask frankly: are you siding with the Galarc Kingdom, or are you swapping loyalties to the Proxia Empire? I would appreciate a straight answer,” Reiss said boldly.

“I’m afraid I can’t make that decision by myself,” Sylvie answered.

“And I’m saying it’s about time you stopped making excuses. Like I said already, it’s time we moved to the next stage of our relationship.” Reiss wouldn’t allow Sylvie to brush off his question.

“In that case, stop putting on that act. Like *I* said already, get to the point.” Sylvie stared directly back at Reiss.

“I wasn’t putting on an act, but... Ah, I suppose this must be a bad habit of mine. Allow me to rephrase my question, then. Does the Rubia Kingdom have any intention of changing sides from Galarc to Proxia?”

“It depends on the conditions.”

“Well, that’s a welcome change from your attitude in the beginning. We haven’t known each other for that long, but I guess all our interactions have added up to something.” Reiss smiled pleasantly.

In contrast, Sylvie sneered. “Ha.”

“I suppose your change of heart is due to the hero’s defeat the other day.”

“I haven’t changed at all. I still hate you as much as ever. The ways of the Empire too,” Sylvie said, distinctly denying Reiss’s observation.

“I find that resolute disposition of yours to be extremely favorable. Your lack of a scheming side makes you very easy to deal with.”

“That’s because I hate people like you, who have nothing but a scheming side.”

“I hear that a lot.”

“Not that it matters now. Get back to the point,” Sylvie sighed.

“Straightforward is what you want, yes? Then if I may ask, what kind of conditions would make you swap sides from Galarc to Proxia?”

“There are several... But first, we do not want to form an alliance with a country we cannot understand. What merit does the Proxia side gain by having a minor nation like Rubia as an ally? Why are you so concerned about our kingdom?” She wouldn’t allow him to lie his way out of this, and she stared at him to emphasize that.

“Hmm... Then let’s have a bit of a heart-to-heart, shall we? The answer is extremely simple, though—the reason why Rubia caught my eye was because you started to form a favorable friendship with the hero, Renji,” Reiss replied smoothly.

“Wh-What...?” The unexpected answer left Sylvie dumbfounded.

“The Proxia Empire wanted a hero, you see, but unfortunately there weren’t any that were summoned within the country’s borders. So I kept an eye on all the heroes summoned in the nearby countries, and that was when I discovered him.” Reiss continued his explanation with no regard for Sylvie’s state of shock.

“I believe I found him shortly before meeting you, I think? But it was evident that Renji had a tricky personality to deal with. The fact that he was working as an adventurer meant he probably had no intention of allying with your kingdom, but just as I was trying to work out a solution, I learned that he had met you and developed a friendship. And so I thought I could use that,” Reiss concluded.

“Disgusting. You’re revolting,” Sylvie cut in.

“Oh, was I a little too direct? I thought you wanted to understand my intentions.”

“It’s fine... But I still don’t get it. What did you think you could use?”

“Of course, I thought I could use hostages.”

“You mean Estelle?”

“And you as well. People can function as hostages even without being abducted. In addition to Estelle, you’ve also become an irreplaceable existence to the hero Renji, you realize? Enough for him to fight for your sake,” Reiss said knowingly.

“Did you predict this situation from the moment you kidnapped Estelle...?” In other words, had he lured Renji into witnessing the hostage situation, then made him lose to Lucius in order to gain a subordinate?

“Yes. Thanks to that, as long as the Rubia Kingdom joins sides with Proxia, we’ll be able to suppress the risk of the hero rebelling. Wouldn’t you agree?” Reiss said smoothly, as though it was obvious that was the reasoning behind the Proxia Empire’s actions.

Sylvie spat out her feelings bitterly. “Honestly, you’re revolting...”

Apparently that was praise to Reiss, who thanked her with a smile. “I’m honored to receive such praise.”

“...” Sylvie frowned, unable to speak further.

“Have I fulfilled your condition of understanding my intentions?” Reiss asked.

Sylvie nodded with a furrowed brow. “I suppose you could say that...”

“In that case, allow me to offer some attractive benefits in anticipation of the Rubia Kingdom’s cooperation,” Reiss said, changing the topic. “First, if the Rubia Kingdom ever faces conflict with an enemy hereafter, the Proxia Empire will dispatch its Winged Knights to assist in dispatching the enemy forces. We’ll also send over enough demi-dragons to form a small squadron for your army. On top of this, we’ll provide a large amount of funds and resources to assist in the technological development of the kingdom,” he listed.

Sylvie gulped in spite of herself. “That’s an unbelievable offer...”

It was practically unheard of for a major nation to offer a minor nation such favorable conditions. The Galarc Kingdom certainly hadn’t done this much for Rubia.

“I can offer more benefits than that too. Such as returning the person you personally want the most, for example,” Reiss said suggestively.

Sylvie gasped. “You’ll hand Estelle back to us...?”

“Indeed. If you cooperate in resolving a problem I’m dealing with right now, I can return her as early as tomorrow—even without your answer on your kingdom’s official stance.” Reiss grinned eerily.

“...” Sylvie’s face stiffened—she was containing herself from reflexively agreeing with his conditions.

“How about it? The problem I’m dealing with is rather urgent, you see. Even if I receive the hero’s assistance, I still need to relocate to where my other subordinates are waiting. If I cannot receive an answer from you tonight, I’m afraid Princess Estelle’s return will have to be delayed to another day...” Reiss said, indirectly pressing Sylvie for an answer.

“I cannot make a decision without hearing the details. Tell me more,” Sylvie said with a serious expression.

Reiss chuckled, then began to explain the circumstances. “Why, it’s nothing that can’t be solved as long as the Rubia Kingdom allies with Proxia. You see, there’s a certain knight of the Galarc Kingdom staying within Rubian territory right now...”

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That night, someone from the fort arranged an inn for Rio, Christina, and Flora to stay in. They were to check for a reply from Galarc in the morning, but if they left it until too late it'd be noontime, so they set off for the fort a little earlier. The inn they stayed at was the best one in the city, and they arrived at the fort in no time at all.

"Did you sleep well last night?" Rio asked Christina and Flora during the short walk.

"It wasn't as nice as the bed in your house, but I slept soundly," said Christina.

"Me too. I've grown used to taking baths these past few days, so the ones here felt unsatisfactory," Flora answered with a giggle.

"I feel the same about the baths. Considering how we need to return to Rodania, you might be getting too used to them. There are no facilities like that in Rodania, after all," Christina said with a wry smile.

Just then, the gate of the fort came into view. They crossed the bridge before the gate to find the same gatekeeper as yesterday standing there.

"Go on through." He took a look at their faces and allowed them through without a fuss.

We just came yesterday, so it isn't strange that he remembers our faces, but...wasn't his expression a little stiff? Did he work through the night?

Rio noticed the guard's face was oddly tense as he passed him. However, he didn't pay it any further mind and led the way through the gate. There was an open courtyard past the gate where the sun shone brightly. There was no sign of anyone else in the courtyard, but when they progressed farther forward into the fort, they found three swordsmen dressed in coats. Furthermore, the fortress walls and watchtowers were lined with a crowd of soldiers. Among them was Marco, the governor who had welcomed them yesterday. He looked down on them with a conflicted expression.

What?

It was at this point that Rio raised his guard; he released his magic essence into the air and melded it into the atmosphere. He then activated his spirit arts to search within a radius of over ten meters.

Then, the door of the gate slammed down behind them.

“Huh?”

“Eek!”

Christina’s and Flora’s shaken voices could be heard from behind Rio.

There are soldiers outside the gate, but none behind us. They closed the gate, so they won’t be coming in. The enemy is only to the front and along the walls...

Rio had gathered his thoughts that far, when the soldiers on the fort walls drew back their bows and fired their arrows at once.

“Stay behind me,” Rio said to the two behind him. An uncountable volley of arrows came flying.

“Huh?!”

Rio drew his sword and created a sphere of wind around Christina and Flora, protecting them. The rain of arrows had their trajectory altered by the wind wall and stabbed into the ground. The soldiers gazed at the scene in dumbfounded silence.

“Bastard! How dare ya kill the captain!”

The largest of the three coat-clad swordsmen standing ten meters before Rio removed his hood and yelled at him.

He was the one with Reiss when we were moving from Cleia to Rodania...

Arein, Lucci, Ven. Lucius’s three subordinates. The three of them drew their swords and chanted a spell together.

“*Augendae Corporis!*”

They use their enchanted swords together with their physical ability enhancements to become twice as strong, if I recall correctly.

Rio immediately recalled the way they fought and poured magic essence into his sword. At the same time, Arein and the others split up and closed in on Rio from three directions. Rio braced his sword and swung it not at the three of them, but towards the sky overhead. A tremendous explosion thundered, sending a fierce gale of cold air through the area.

“Wha?!”

Rio’s attack had been directed at a boy holding a halberd. He had been hidden on top of the gate in order to ambush them. His eyes were widened at how easily his surprise attack had been defended against. Despite the fact he swung his halberd with the momentum of his fall from above, the boy lost in strength and was pushed back.

“Guh!”

He was thrown slightly off balance and landed back on top of the gate. It was then that Rio was able to see his opponent’s face—it was Kikuchi Renji, the Japanese boy summoned as a hero.

“The fifth hero...?” Rio murmured to himself as he spotted his clearly Japanese appearance and the divine-looking halberd in his hand.

Renji looked down at Rio with a sharp glare.

“Hey, rookie! That was pathetic!” Lucci yelled angrily at Renji.

“Hmph...” Renji snorted unhappily and lifted his halberd.

That distortion of mana and the cold wind from the first attack... He can control air.

Rio poured essence into his sword once more.

“*Photon Projectilis*!”

Arein and the men used the photon bullet spell to attack. With his attention on Renji, Rio came under concentrated fire. However, he concentrated the wind wall around him towards the front and blocked it.

At the same time, countless spears of ice fell from above—those came from Renji. Rio swung his sword and released a wind-clad strike to repel the spears.

“Tch.” Renji backed away in a hurry, hiding from the projectiles.

Neither the boy above, the three men in front, nor the soldiers on the wall are getting close. How troublesome. They’re focused only on provoking me. For a group that was waiting in ambush, they’re surprisingly cautious.

Rio analyzed the enemy’s tactics. Because he had to protect Christina and

Flora, he was in a similar situation to when he fought Lucius. He'd be able to crush them individually if he could move freely, but with people to protect, his movement was limited. However, they weren't as threatening as Lucius, who had been able to move through space.

"Are you two okay?" Rio asked the two behind him.

"Yes," Christina answered. She held Flora in her arms to protect her.

"The three men in front of me are Lucius's subordinates, and the one on top of the gate is probably the fifth hero. They also seem to have the Rubian soldiers of the fort on their side... I don't understand what's going on," Rio said to them.

"Sir Amakawa, is there anything we can do?"

"Can the two of you use barrier magic? And preferably keep it up for thirty seconds?"

Christina and Flora exchanged a look before nodding. "Yes..."

"At my signal, stand back-to-back inside the gate and use that magic. I'll reduce the enemy's forces in thirty seconds."

If the enemy wasn't going to make the first move, then he would.

Christina gulped. "I understand. We're ready whenever," she replied.

"Then... Go!" Rio said loudly.

"Let's do this, Flora!"

"Right!"

Christina and Flora stood back-to-back inside the gate. "*Magicae Murum*!" they chanted together. A magic circle immediately appeared before the two girls, creating a giant wall of light in front of them.

Rio felt the wave of magic essence behind him and sent a burst of wind at the three men coming to attack him.

"Ngh..."

The three of them leaped high and avoided the attack, but Rio kicked off the ground and approached Lucci, who was directly before him.

“Ha! This is for the captain!” Lucci grinned fiercely, swinging his sword at Rio’s approach. Their swords clashed with each other, but Rio won in strength and knocked Lucci’s sword away, sending him crashing into the wall.

“Urgh, damn it...” Lucci’s face twisted in vexation. At this point, Rio’s attention was turned to Ven, who was still in the air from his leap and couldn’t move. He sent essence into his sword and pointed the tip at him.

“Hah...!” He fired a blast of wind to blow Ven back to the wall. There didn’t seem to be any formidable opponents amongst the fort soldiers, leaving only Arein and Renji. At this point, only ten seconds had passed.

“Rookie! Get the princesses!” Arein landed on the ground and yelled at Renji on top of the gate.

“Tch...” Renji hesitated for a moment, then leapt down from the gate. He poured essence into the halberd in his hand to attack the magic barrier that Christina had up.

Christina stiffened. “Eek...!”

“What?!”

However, the tip of the halberd Renji swung down was frozen just inches before grazing the wall. Rio had squeezed himself between them and caught the halberd with his sword.

Lifting his blade vertically upwards, he deflected the halberd away. With a quick step backwards, Renji tried to gain distance from Rio, but Rio tackled Renji’s undefended torso with his back.

“Guh...!” The force was diminished thanks to the backstep, but Renji was still blown away dramatically.

“Wh-What’s with this guy...?” Renji picked himself up after rolling across the ground and questioned Arein beside him.

Arein glared at Rio in detestation. “Hah! He’s the one who killed the man you lost to.”

“What...?” Renji’s eyes shook.

“You can disperse the barrier for now. Stay hidden underneath the gate, but

be careful of the enemies on the other side.”

Rio watched Renji and Arein as he stood before the gate, blocking their way to the princesses he was speaking to. He sent essence into his sword in order to be able to react at a moment’s notice.

“Okay.” As soon as they replied, Christina and Flora dispersed the magic barrier they had set up.

“It’s infuriating, but he’s got a monstrous amount of strength. Completely different from you. You couldn’t even protect Princess Sylvie and Princess Estelle, huh?” Arein said to Renji with a mocking sneer.

Renji glared back at him. “Shut up...” He then turned to glare at Rio.

I understand the mercenaries’ hostility, but why does the hero have so much aggression towards me? Maybe I should dig a little deeper, Rio wondered to himself, then made a decision.

“Are you the hero of the Rubia Kingdom?” he asked, looking at Renji.

“Hmph.” Renji merely huffed sullenly.

“I failed to inform you yesterday, but the two people with me are the Beltrum Kingdom’s Princess Christina and Princess Flora. Am I correct in assuming this attack is made with that knowledge?” Rio asked the governor hiding in a corner of the fortress wall. Arein had looked at the girls and called them princesses during the battle, so he believed the soldiers of the fort were cooperating with Arein while knowing the truth.

“Wha...” Marco’s face twisted in fear as he tried to open his mouth. But before he could, countless attack spells started raining down on the courtyard of the fort.

“Ngh...” Rio swung his sword and released a gust of wind to slice apart the attack spells and cancel them out. His view cleared to reveal female knights riding on griffins.

Hmm? Where have I seen that woman before?

There was one woman among them dressed in particularly ornate armor who looked familiar to him. Of course she would—he had met her at the banquet in

the Galarc Kingdom. It was First Princess Sylvie.

“Impossible... You blocked that?” Sylvie looked down at Rio with widened eyes, her expression shocked.

“S-Sir Amakawa. The flag that the griffin squad is holding belongs to Rubia’s royal family! And the person over there is Princess Sylvie!” Christina yelled from below the gate, pointing at the griffins.

Which means the Rubia Kingdom is part of this whole situation after all. If the three mercenaries are here, then the Proxia Empire is involved too? Rio thought immediately.

“All units, attack from above! Kill that man no matter what!” Sylvie pointed her sword at Rio and gave the surrounding griffin squad the order to attack, then immediately fired a ray of essence light from her sword. The other female knights riding the griffins also used spells to bombard Rio with attacks.



A dozen or so griffin knights... While it isn't more than I can handle, I may end up killing them. If the enemy is royalty, that might end up creating more trouble in the future... In which case...

It was time to retreat.

Rio stopped where he was and called out to the two princesses as he continued slashing away the rain of spells. "Princess Christina, Princess Flora. We're withdrawing! Hold on to me when I give the signal. Understand?"

"Y-Yes!" the two behind him replied.

"Wh-What is with that man, honestly... We were so close to getting Estelle back too. If only I could kill him here..." Sylvie grimaced as she looked down at Rio on the ground. All the spells being cast had lethal force behind them, but they were being blown away with every swing of Rio's sword. It was almost like there was an invisible wall of wind.

"Raaagh!" Renji roared, swinging his halberd at Rio from over ten meters away. A powerful blast of air cold enough to freeze the ground was released towards Rio.

"Sir Amakawa!" Christina yelled, sensing the danger. The cold air targeted Rio, whose attention was on the rain of spells from above. However, Rio released a violent burst of wind with a vertical slash, crushing the cold air Renji had sent. The air scattered across the courtyard and nearly blew away the soldiers on the walls.

"Wha?!"

"Guh..."

Renji and Arein were also in the courtyard and were almost swallowed up by the wind. It took everything in them to remain in place. The only ones who were unaffected were the griffin squad, but they were shaken by the disastrous sight of the courtyard.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Don't ease up on your attacks! Fire!" Sylvie snapped back to her senses first and gave orders to those around her. The knights on the griffins chanted spells and made magic circles appear, but Rio

pointed his sword upwards and created a dozen or so orbs of light. He fired them before the knights could finish casting their spells.

“What?!”

The trajectory of each orb was carefully controlled to directly strike every one of Sylvie’s griffin knights. He held back his strength in case there were any other important figures among them, but the orbs still had enough power to render the griffins incapable of flight. They descended to the ground unsteadily.

Rio used that chance to yell at Christina and Flora. “Now! Come to me!”

“Let’s go, Flora!”

“Right!”

The two hurried over to him and clung on to him tightly.

“Make sure you hold on tighter than usual!”

With that warning, Rio used the sword in his right hand as a catalyst to activate his spirit arts. A fierce wind wrapped around him and pushed his body upwards, accelerating his ascent into the air.

“Eek!”

Surprised by the unexpected speed of acceleration, Christina and Flora tightened their hold in a panic. They were going so fast, they instantly slipped past Sylvie’s side and out into the open air. Even the griffin Sylvie was riding lost its balance in midair in shock.

“Wh-What?!” Sylvie looked up at the skies in a panic.

Rio had ascended several meters above her already, accelerating as he began their flight through the air towards the southeast.

Interlude: Duke Huguenot's Melancholy

Four days had passed since Rio was ambushed in Rubia, and ten days had passed since Christina and Flora first disappeared.

Liselotte had just boarded an enchanted ship with Roanna, who came to her as a messenger. They departed from Amande to meet Hiroaki about the arranged marriage.

Meanwhile, in the Galarc Castle, Duke Huguenot was alone in his room and sitting on the sofa. He took a deep breath to calm himself.

Roanna contacted me earlier. Liselotte will arrive in Galarc in a few hours. Finally. Finally, it will be time...

He was nervous—a rare look for him. And it was all because the fate of the Restoration, and of Duke Huguenot himself, depended on the results of this discussion.

I've somehow managed to set up a meeting to at least discuss the marriage, but...

In all honesty, the situation wasn't looking good.

I've gotten King Francois' help, but that was only for setting up the meeting. He emphasized that he wouldn't force Liselotte into a marriage.

The Restoration was a vital piece of protection for the Galarc Kingdom—this was why Francois had agreed to the marriage between the third princess and Hiroaki; in effect, he'd forced his own daughter into marriage.

However, even if it was for the Restoration, he *wouldn't* force his vassal's daughter into a marriage. This meant that Liselotte Cretia held more importance to Francois than his own daughter.

Of course he would. He could use a royal decree on her, but doing so would antagonize Liselotte. Losing Liselotte would mean losing the Ricca Guild—which could end up impacting Galarc's economy.

Furthermore, he had heard rumors that Liselotte was good friends with the hero, Satsuki. It was only natural for Francois to tread carefully.

We should be grateful he even helped set up this meeting out of consideration of the Restoration and respect for our hero. He even promised not to mention to Liselotte that he didn't mind if she turned down the marriage. Which only leaves Sir Hiroaki's proposal and Liselotte's reply... But...

It'd be simple if Francois just ordered Liselotte to marry, but that wouldn't happen. A meeting was the second best option, but it left Duke Huguenot feeling uneasy.

Things will also depend on how much value Liselotte placed on Sir Hiroaki's position as a hero. But really, our chances are slim.

Duke Huguenot was aware of the fact that Hiroaki was infatuated with Liselotte, which was why he had observed their previous interactions to see if things could go well between them.

Liselotte is a noblewoman, but she's also a merchant when there are profits to be gained. She sought her own freedom in marriage because she understands that her greatest asset is herself. It would be one thing if the organization was in its best condition with Princess Christina and Princess Flora present, but even I can't see anything that would appeal to her in the current state of the Restoration.

Duke Huguenot's analysis was generally correct—the only point he had missed was the possibility that Liselotte wanted to marry as a normal girl. But that was an unavoidable error under the current situation. Presently, the Restoration was being backed by the Galarc Kingdom. In accordance with this, they were receiving funds and resources from the Ricca Guild, so Liselotte was well versed in the internal affairs of the organization. She should've had a clear understanding of the negative effects of Christina and Flora's disappearance—and of the fact that Hiroaki's betrothal with Rosalie wouldn't be enough to completely erase those effects.

I must plan for when the marriage discussion fails...

Duke Huguenot pondered over the conditions Hiroaki presented for his betrothal to Rosalie—in other words, to receive Liselotte as his third wife.

There's no telling what Sir Hiroaki's mood will be until after he's actually rejected... Who knows which way the dice will fall.

Just imagining it was enough to give him a headache.

However, even if Liselotte rejects the proposal, I must make sure Sir Hiroaki marries Rosalie no matter what.

If he failed to do that, the Restoration would be over. What steps could he take to prevent that? Duke Huguenot struggled against the pressure weighing on him as he waited for Liselotte's arrival.

Chapter 6: Return

In the Galarc Kingdom, ten days after Christina and Flora first went missing, Liselotte boarded an enchanted ship with Roanna, who had visited Amande to bring the message of Hiroaki's proposal. They were now at Galtuuk, the kingdom's capital.

After arriving at the port, they swapped from the enchanted ship to a horse-drawn carriage and headed to the castle. Roughly ten minutes later, they arrived on the castle grounds and made the rest of the way on foot.

The two daughters of dukes walking side-by-side was a truly elegant sight. They conducted themselves with the utmost refinement, catching the attention of all the guards and servants nearby.

"Oh my, it's Lady Liselotte."

"Looks like the rumors of her betrothal to the hero were true."

"There haven't been rumors about Liselotte's marriage for years now..."

"Could it possibly be...?"

The sounds of people gossiping could be heard here and there. It seemed like news of Liselotte's meeting with Hiroaki had spread throughout the castle. According to the chatter, Liselotte received marriage proposals on a regular basis, but this was the first time in years she had attended a meeting about one. She normally rejected them all using the excuse of being busy with her work. And now, she was here to meet the hero. If she had bothered to make the trip to the castle, surely this could only mean one thing.

That was the atmosphere in the castle—it made it rather difficult to refuse and put pressure on Liselotte.

Everyone sure says whatever they please.

Liselotte may have looked like she was walking elegantly, but her feet felt heavy as their destination got closer. Eventually, they arrived at a drawing room

reserved for royalty. The two knights in front of the room opened the door without saying a word. As the messenger, Roanna was the first one to step inside.

“I have brought Liselotte Cretia here from Amande,” she reported with a graceful bow.

“Excuse me.” Liselotte entered after Roanna and bowed deeply.

Waiting inside were the potential marriage partner, Sakata Hiroaki, his candidate for first wife, Galarc’s Third Princess Rosalie, as well as King Francois, Liselotte’s parents, and Duke Huguenot.

A full lineup. I didn’t expect to wrap things up with just a greeting, but were they thinking of holding the meeting here?

Liselotte glanced around the room to confirm who was present. Just then, Duke Huguenot, who was seated diagonally to Duke Cretia and his wife, stood up and approached Roanna.

“Good work, Roanna. You may wait behind Sir Hiroaki,” he said.

“Yes, my lord.” Roanna nodded respectfully and moved to stand behind Hiroaki, who was seated in the chief seat. Beside Hiroaki was Third Princess Rosalie, who was to become his first wife.

“Welcome, Liselotte. Come, sit over here.” King Francois invited Liselotte into the seat beside him. It was directly across from Hiroaki.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Liselotte nodded cheerfully and started walking towards the sofa opposite to Hiroaki.

“Excuse me,” she said as she sat down.

“Liselotte. It must have been a great effort to leave Amande the same day you received the summons. You have my apologies,” Francois said with a remorseful expression. Was it because Liselotte was the most disadvantaged one present? It was extremely rare for the king to utter words of apology, so those words had a great weight behind them.

“Not at all, Your Majesty. I didn’t want to keep anyone waiting—and I’m able to meet Mother and Father again this way.” Liselotte shook her head in a

sociable manner, looking at her parents. The two of them looked back at her with frowns on their faces.

“Now that everyone is here, let’s get down to business. We’ve gathered everyone here today for one reason—to hold an official marriage meeting between Lord Hiroaki and Liselotte. If the agreement goes through, both families will... Ah, Lord Hiroaki is a bit of a special case.” Francois looked at Hiroaki and Duke Huguenot. Hiroaki had no family, so as the representative of the Restoration, Duke Huguenot was there as his guardian.

“If the agreement goes through, Lord Hiroaki’s guardian organization—the Restoration—and the Duke Cretia family shall be tied together. Considering the influential power of each side, there could be political consequences no matter how the discussion goes. Thus, I will be in attendance as a mediator. The Cretia family is invaluable to the Galarc Kingdom too. Whatever the result, I want you to remember that I wish for both sides to end this on an amicable tone. Understood?” Francois corrected himself to properly include both parties, then looked around at everyone to emphasize his point.

“Now, how shall we do this? With the circumstances being what they are, this is a rather urgent matter. Everyone is gathered already, so as long as Liselotte is fine with it, we can proceed with the meeting like this...” He looked at Liselotte.

“That’s fine with me. I came with my answer prepared,” Liselotte replied resolutely.

“Acknowledged. If this were a first meeting between the two parties, it would have been custom for the meeting to begin with everyone present, then proceed with the two of you getting to know each other. However, I hear Lord Hiroaki has met you many times already—there may be things you cannot mention openly before us. How about it? Would you like to take a walk through the rooftop garden together?” Francois suggested to them.

“Oh... Well, I suppose, yeah. It’s a little stuffy having so many people here. Might as well. Let’s have a chat together, Liselotte.” Hiroaki started speaking a bit shamefully, his words sounding somewhat forced as he directed them at Liselotte.

I see... So this situation was created at his request, Liselotte thought,

immediately understanding what had happened to create this scenario.

"Okay," she answered curtly.

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Afterwards, Hiroaki and Liselotte went up to the rooftop garden. There were no guards nearby—they were completely alone.

"Huh, I didn't know the Galarc Castle had a place like this. How fancy. What do you think, Liselotte?" Hiroaki walked in front, addressing Liselotte without looking back at her.

"Use of this area is normally restricted to the royal family. I've only been here a handful of times myself."

"Huh, is that so?" Hiroaki hummed.

"..."

The conversation died off there.

Ah, shit. I'm getting nervous—no, I am *nervous. This is the most nervous I've been since coming to this world.*

Hiroaki panicked. Left alone with Liselotte, he was more flustered than he had ever been before. He recalled the conversation he had with Duke Huguenot merely days ago in Rodania.

"It's not really for me to negotiate, so I'll leave that to you, but...I want Liselotte as my third wife. Can you make that happen?"

This was the condition he gave to Duke Huguenot in exchange for his engagement with Rosalie and Roanna. As a result, Duke Huguenot moved as quickly as possible to lay the groundwork in the Galarc Kingdom for him to meet Liselotte.

Thus resulting in what was happening today.

I heard Liselotte rejected every proposal she got using her work as an excuse and never sent out any offers herself, so I was wondering what would happen, but...Duke Huguenot really can make things happen. He's amazing, Hiroaki thought. However, there were still certain issues with this meeting to address—

the main one being the fact Duke Huguenot had only been able to prepare a meeting and nothing more.

The problem is how he's left the rest completely up to me. I even made him handle things so I wouldn't have to be the one to confess my feelings... Damn it, it's not my style to take chances where I'm not guaranteed to win...

Until now, Hiroaki only had marriage interviews where the outcome he wanted was guaranteed. In other words, he only had meetings where the other party approached him first. As a consequence, he was severely lacking in experience when it came to making the first approach himself.

What did I normally talk about at those meetings? I can't keep this conversation going.

His thoughts slowed down, hindering his ability to think of a topic.

But Liselotte isn't speaking either... Even though she normally chats about things to keep a lively conversation going. She's oddly quiet today—wait, could that mean she's nervous as well? That means... Does she have feelings for me too? The moment that thought entered Hiroaki's mind, he chuckled to himself with lifted spirits.

Well, that makes sense. Now that I think about it, Duke Huguenot was the one who set up this meeting, not me. Since neither of us have mentioned any feelings yet, we're standing on even ground. Duke Huguenot prepared things perfectly, dragging Liselotte out to a marriage meeting she normally avoids. Since she's actually here in person, she must feel something favorable for me—that's what Duke Huguenot said earlier. But in order to bring up the topic of marriage, my ability to communicate will be tested. How could I falter here? Hiroaki admonished himself.

"Uh..." he said and turned around, meeting eyes with Liselotte, who had her head tilted in question.

She's so cute... Following behind me silently, so meekly... Definitely marriage material. Hiroaki had regained his inherent optimism.

"Er, sorry about this. You must've been shocked to receive the news out of the blue, right? That was Duke Huguenot's doing—he really wants us to get

married.”

First on the agenda was to make his position absolutely clear. In doing so, he could establish an advantageous situation for himself. In other words, he clarified his relationship with Liselotte as a premise.

I’m not the one who wants to get married.

“I was surprised at how it came up suddenly. So it was Duke Huguenot who initiated this marriage interview?” Liselotte asked, casually trying to confirm the facts.

“Mm. Well, yeah.” Hiroaki’s reply was oddly inarticulate because he had been the one to set the condition of having Liselotte as a third wife before marrying Rosalie and Roanna. However, as long as Duke Huguenot wanted him to marry Rosalie and Roanna, he’d try to fulfill that condition no matter what. Since the one who had arranged the meeting was Duke Huguenot, Hiroaki decided this was in line with the truth.

“You’re oddly quiet today, Liselotte. You must be feeling nervous, huh?”

This time, Hiroaki tried to figure out Liselotte’s position. In reality, Hiroaki was just as quiet as her, but he disregarded that.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Perhaps.” Liselotte was actually feeling annoyed more than nervous, but she nodded anyway.

“I see.” Hiroaki chuckled smugly.

She’s definitely got the hots for me.

“We haven’t really had the chance to talk alone like this before, have we? It was always when we were with other people.”

“That’s right... Our dinner in Amande with Princess Flora and Lady Roanna is a fond memory of mine. Though it’s very unfortunate what happened to Princess Flora...” Liselotte said with a distant look, recalling Flora’s disappearance and frowning.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, it is,” agreed Hiroaki.

“If you don’t mind me asking... If Princess Flora returns alive after you’ve taken Princess Rosalie as your first wife, what will happen?”

“Ah... I suppose the engagement with Rosalie would be called off in that case?”

“I believe it’s extremely difficult to go back on an engagement once it’s been publicly announced, though...”

It wasn’t like there was no precedent of an engagement being canceled after its announcement, but appearances were important in their society. Whenever an engagement was canceled, it usually implied one side had caused a problem. Of course, if his original fiancée was discovered alive, such rumors could probably be dispelled easily, but that didn’t make the matter any simpler.

“Huh. I guess Flora would be my fourth wife, then?”

“If Lady Roanna is to become your second wife, it would be similarly difficult to have royalty like Princess Flora ranked below her.” In fact, it was impossible.

“Hmm. I don’t really want to place any meaning in the ranks, personally. Can’t you change those ranks afterwards?” Hiroaki asked with an annoyed sigh.

“It isn’t really heard of, but it should be possible if all the involved families agree.”

Most families didn’t want to have their rank lowered, but if it was for a logical reason, then most would understand. Considering Roanna’s loyalty to her royal family, there was a good chance she would willingly swap ranks with Flora.

“I see. Oh, but in that case, your position as the third wife might get affected as well. Though there may be some troublemakers who’ll complain if Roanna jumps from second place to fourth place as well.” Hiroaki spoke as though Liselotte was already his third wife in his mind.

Liselotte nodded after a slight pause. “Perhaps so.”

“In the end, I really don’t like the idea of ranking by order. It’s not like you’re inferior to Rosalie or Roanna just because you’re my third wife—I want to make that clear.”

“The hero is a very unexpected person indeed.”

Liselotte was unable to do anything but giggle. There just wasn’t any precedent for this.

“‘The hero,’ huh...” Hiroaki sighed with a frown, looking at Liselotte in objection.

“Is something the matter?” Liselotte tilted her head.

Hiroaki stared at her. “Say, Liselotte... Isn’t it about time we graduated from our business relationship?” he suddenly said.

“‘Business relationship’...?” The sudden change in conversation topic confused Liselotte, but she was able to question him back without letting that confusion show in her voice.

“I was just thinking about how I’ve never met you in private before.”

“Is that so...?” If Liselotte’s memory served her right, Hiroaki was constantly visiting Amande for no particular reason.

“And you always refer to me as ‘the hero.’ You never call me by my name. I figured that was because you’ve always considered our meetings until now part of your work—you were drawing a line as a form of hospitality. I just realized that.” Hiroaki stared at Liselotte.

Oh my, I guess even he could notice that much, Liselotte thought, slightly impressed.

“I respect your professionalism towards your work, but you don’t have to call me ‘hero’ forever, you know? Especially if you’re to become my fiancée.”

She could call him “Sir Hiroaki,” was what he was trying to tell Liselotte with his gaze.

“Umm... Should I take those words as a marriage proposal?” Liselotte asked.

“Oh... No?” Hiroaki’s gaze faltered as he denied that.

Huh? Then what was that? Liselotte snapped back in her head. Was he suddenly taking back his words?

“It’s just, y’know. I heard you’ve been rejecting marriage proposals because of your work. I get that you’re busy with all your different roles, but that means you barely have any time to date men outside of work, right?” Hiroaki continued. Most of what he was saying was uncalled for.

“You would be correct...” Liselotte nodded anyway.

“Marriage isn’t something to be done as business. That’s why I think you need a man you can date outside of your work. So I’m offering to let our relationship evolve from a business relationship. As long as you’re interested, that is...” Hiroaki explained his reasoning.

“In other words, you’d like us to date with the intention of marriage?” Hiroaki’s words were so vague, it felt like he was evading what he was trying to get at—so Liselotte decided to pursue the specifics.

“Yeah. If you can’t marry right away because of your work, we can just get engaged and wait for things to settle down first. It’s all up to you,” Hiroaki said, attempting to give Liselotte the option to choose.

Wait, does he want to make it sound like I’m *the one requesting this marriage?*

It was at this point that Liselotte finally reached this conclusion. If this were true...

“I see... However, even if it were an engagement, I don’t intend on marrying anyone right now. I’m sorry,” Liselotte stated clearly. She rejected the proposal in a way even Hiroaki would understand.

“So you won’t get engaged to me...?”

Hiroaki was nearly rendered speechless, but he questioned her again with a pout.

“Yes. I have no intention of doing so at present,” Liselotte stated bluntly.



“Oh, is that so... There are lots of people anticipating our engagement, so I reckon it’d be better to meet their expectations...” Shaken by how directly he had been rejected, Hiroaki’s voice trembled.

“Who would those people be?” Liselotte asked calmly.

“Y’know, like the Galarc Kingdom and the Restoration. Christina and Flora disappearing has left things in a huge mess, after all. If we married for the sake of our respective parties, we’d be opening up the future for everyone.”

“In that case, you’d find a brighter future for the Restoration and Galarc in marrying Princess Rosalie instead of a duke’s daughter like me.” After all, it would be an engagement between a hero and a princess. They would naturally have a greater influence than a betrothal to a duke’s daughter as the third wife.

“I see... So the meeting is over, then.”

Hiroaki pursed his lips unhappily. The marriage discussion with Liselotte had ended in failure.

After that, Hiroaki and Liselotte returned to the drawing room with King Francois and Duke Huguenot to inform them of their decision. An awkward air hung in the room after they heard the result.

“Well, there was no point in getting engaged when we had no romantic interest in each other, I guess,” Hiroaki uttered indignantly, giving a short reason why the proposal had failed. The one who reacted with the most shock was Duke Huguenot—the engagement to Liselotte had been the condition Hiroaki required, so his composure faltered under his desire to speak to him right away.

Francois seemed to read the atmosphere. “There’s nothing that can be done if it wasn’t meant to be. Let us end this meeting here,” he announced.

“Sir Hiroaki, do you have a moment? You come along too, Roanna. We shall see you again later, Princess Rosalie.”

Duke Huguenot immediately left the room with Hiroaki and Roanna.

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“Rosalie, you may return to your quarters,” Francois said after the members

of the Restoration had left the room.

“Yes, Father.”

Third Princess Rosalie left, leaving behind Francois, Liselotte, and her parents. The next moment, two figures stood at the doorway of the room. The Galarc king had summoned the hero, Sumeragi Satsuki, and Second Princess Charlotte.

“Can we enter now?”

“What a boring wait.”

Satsuki and Charlotte spoke up respectively.



“Thank you for waiting. Please come in, Lady Satsuki. Everyone, please be seated. The servants may leave.” Francois invited Satsuki into the room and sat down on a sofa himself.

Are we about to discuss something confidential? Liselotte wondered.

“Hey, Liselotte. It’s been a while... Since the dinner at your place, I think?” Satsuki said to her cheerfully.

“Yes. Long time no see, Miss Satsuki.” Liselotte smiled with a sigh of relief.

“Honestly, I wanted to attend that dinner so much. Come on, now. Lady Satsuki. Sit over here.” Charlotte pouted cutely and urged Satsuki into the head seat. They passed the servants on their way into the room and sat down. Duke Cretia and his wife selected seats diagonal to them and seated themselves.

“Your Majesty. Please accept my sincere apologies for rejecting the hero’s marriage proposal,” Liselotte said to King Francois, bowing where she stood.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve achieved enough to earn your freedom in marriage. That is something I have acknowledged myself, and I expected you to decline this offer from the beginning. However, the current state of the Restoration complicated things. I had to give the other side a chance to meet you to avoid souring relations. I’m sure that made it more difficult for you to decline. My apologies for that,” Francois said, sighing tiredly.

“No, I am most grateful for your consideration, Your Majesty.”

It was at this moment that Liselotte finally relaxed. She had sensed that things had been arranged to make it harder for her to refuse when she was devoid of the chance to confirm Francois and her parents’ thoughts on the matter. She figured Duke Huguenot had arranged that with Francois, but his words just now confirmed her thoughts. And the fact he had revealed this to her meant that there was no issue in her rejecting the proposal.

“It seems like our worries were for naught, Lady Satsuki,” Charlotte giggled.

“So it seems,” Satsuki replied with a faint pout.

“The two of you were worried...?” Liselotte cocked her head.

“Isn’t it your belief that marriage should only be done out of love? If you

agreed so easily to an arranged marriage, you'd be throwing away that belief. Lady Satsuki and I were worried you were being forced into the engagement."

"I-I see... I appreciate that," Liselotte said with a faint blush.

"But rest assured, if that man ever tries to force you into an engagement, I'll stop him with my own authority as a hero," Satsuki said firmly.

"Aha ha. I'm glad your fears were unfounded, then." Liselotte sweated nervously at the thought of the trouble that would have created. Francois must have felt uneasy at that as well.

"But you can't remain without a marriage partner at your age either, Liselotte—that's asking for trouble to come to you, you know?" Charlotte pointed out with a heavy sigh.

"I'm sure it's a challenge to find a boy worthy of someone like Liselotte," Satsuki said with a giggle.

"Th-That's not true..." Liselotte stuttered. Her parents watched that rare sight with curious looks. They were impressed that the princess and hero could make their daughter react in a way fitting for her age for once.

"Oh, speaking of gentlemen worthy of Liselotte, I believe I know of someone..." Charlotte put on a mischievous face.

"Th-This is urgent! I have an urgent report to make! Excuse the intrusion!" Fierce banging sounded from the door moments before it burst open to reveal a breathless knight.

"How dare you enter without waiting for a response?! What is it? This better be important!" Francois warned with a furrowed brow.

"Honorary Knight Sir Amakawa has arrived! H-He requests an immediate audience with Your Majesty!" The knight was so heavily flustered, he made his report without a second thought for Francois' anger.

"Haruto, you say? In that case, you can bring him here. What is the reason for the urgency?"

"Th-That's because he's accompanied by..." The knight wheezed, out of breath from running the whole way here.

“What is it? Calm down and speak. What about his companions?” Francois asked unhappily.

“He’s accompanied by Beltrum’s First Princess Christina and Second Princess Flora!”

The two missing princesses were alive.

“What...?” At that moment, even Francois was as dumbfounded as everyone else present.

Epilogue: Sakata's Decision

With his marriage meeting with Liselotte ending in failure, Hiroaki left the drawing room and started marching away to vent the anger he held back in front of Liselotte. His walking pace was brisk.

"P-Please wait, Sir Hiroaki! Where are you going?" Roanna hurried after him.

"Back to my room. Leave me alone for a while. Save the talk for later." Hiroaki kept his eyes forward. Duke Huguenot also followed after him at his brisk pace.

If he isn't even allowing Roanna near him, he must be in a considerably bad mood. This isn't the right time to discuss his marriage to Princess Rosalie. I do want to confirm his intentions on what to do about the engagement with her, but...it doesn't seem possible right now, Duke Huguenot thought in a panic. Hiroaki was in such an irritated state, there was no telling what he could say.

Hiroaki had a vain sense of pride that made him pretend he wasn't angry, but that facade was paper thin—it was very easy to see how intense his anger really was.

In reality, that was exactly what he was thinking.

Oh, I'm so over this. She just had to go and create an atmosphere to make me think I had a chance when she never planned on marrying me in the first place...

Hiroaki was building resentment towards Liselotte.

Ugh. Honestly, what do I do now? I used an engagement with Liselotte as a condition for marrying Rosalie, but...

Hiroaki and Rosalie's engagement was still a highly confidential matter. Since it hadn't been officially decided and announced, he could easily brush it off, but...

But if I reject Rosalie now, people will definitely think I'm not over Liselotte or something. Fuck this.

He had basically dug his own grave; his plan had completely turned on him.

Hiroaki clicked his tongue and continued marching. He didn't particularly dislike Rosalie—he just found thirteen-year-olds too childish. He did think there was future potential in her looks, so he didn't have any complaints about actually marrying her. However, he was still unhappy with the situation, and his irritation was only growing.

Ugh, I wanna go back to Earth. I wanna go home and play games. Will I end up back on Earth if I jump from here and kill myself?

Hiroaki looked out the corridor window at the courtyard below and saw two familiar girls with lavender-colored hair.

"Huh...?" Hiroaki froze in his steps and stared at the two people walking through the courtyard. Or rather, three people. There was a gray-haired boy behind the two in front. It was Rio.

"So they're alive..." Hiroaki muttered.

That was when Roanna and Duke Huguenot noticed the two in the courtyard as well.

"Princess Christina and Princess Flora?!" Roanna yelled in shock.

"Hah... Ha ha ha..." Even Duke Huguenot was in a rare daze state, the laughter spilling out of him not forced for once. With Christina and Flora alive, he no longer had to worry about the state of Hiroaki and Rosalie's marriage; it filled him with a sense of relief.

"W-We have to go meet them! Duke Huguenot, Sir Hiroaki, let's hurry!"

"Right."

Roanna and Duke Huguenot hurried back down the corridor.

"Huh? Oh..." Hiroaki replied vaguely and watched the two of them disappear, then he looked back at the three people approaching the castle in the courtyard. Strangely enough, learning that the two princesses were alive didn't fill him with any particular feelings of joy.

Good for them, I guess... But why are they with that bastard?

Inside Hiroaki's chest, something burned quietly and intensely, yet coldly. Christina and Flora had happy expressions that he'd never seen on their faces,

and they were walking at a distance much closer than when they had been with him. He didn't like that.

"Hmm, so they're alive... Which means Flora is reinstated as my first wife?"

He thought for another moment, then spoke up.

"I've decided... I'm going to get engaged to Rosalie," Hiroaki murmured plainly but bitterly.

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, volume 15, Hero's Rhapsody*.

The afterword this time will be shorter than usual due to the page limit, but there's one thing I have to mention before anything else: the results of the copywriting contest have been announced, so you can find the winning text printed on the obi strip of this volume! The runner-up text should be on the page before or after this afterword, so please check it out. Thank you for all your submissions—we received nearly 350 of them!

Furthermore, thanks to everyone's support, we've reached one million total sales! With vengeance achieved, there'll be a short intermission before we take a different turn from the web novel, so please look forward to volume 16 as well! That's all for now!

Yuri Kitayama

January 2019

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Character Introduction

Prologue: Liselotte’s Melancholy

Chapter 1: After the Fierce Battle

Chapter 2: Recuperation of the Royal Sisters

Chapter 3: The Future from Here

Chapter 4: Meanwhile...

Chapter 5: Departure and Pursuit

Interlude: Duke Huguenot’s Melancholy

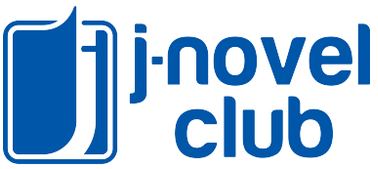
Chapter 6: Return

Epilogue: Sakata’s Decision

Afterword

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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 15

by Yuri Kitayama

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