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Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles
Theatrics in Spring


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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 23 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12


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Prologue

Early morning in the Galarc Castle, in the kitchen of the mansion where Satsuki and the others resided...

Ayase Miharu paused in the middle of making breakfast and stared vacantly into space. She was distracted by the thought that had suddenly crossed her mind:

What was that dream...?

The dream she'd had last night had taken place in an unusual white space. Someone had spoken to her in that space.

"You will have to make a decision at some point," the female voice had said. "An extremely vital decision."

It was just a dream. At the end of the day, it wasn't real. Miharu understood that there was no point in thinking too hard about what happened in a dream, but...

"I highly recommend you choose the wrong choice."

Even though it was a dream, it was oddly vivid in her memories; it had left a strangely strong impression on her.

Whose voice was that...?

Perhaps that was why Miharu found herself thinking about the voice without realizing it. And when she thought back on it now...

I think I've heard that voice somewhere before...

That was the feeling she got from the dream. She shouldn't have known who it was, but there was something oddly familiar about their voice. It was a feeling she couldn't quite put into.

Just then, Aki called out to her, bringing her back to the present. "Miharu."

"Hmm? Good morning, Aki." Miharu smiled affectionately at Aki, who she considered her little sister. Just the other day, the two still lived in separate

nations, but now they were living together.

“Good morning...” Aki said, returning her smile happily. Being able to exchange morning greetings like this was proof of how they had returned to their peaceful days together.

“Come over here.” Miharu beamed gently at Aki and spread her arms for a hug.

“Huh? Embarrassing...”

Despite her complaints, Aki hesitantly approached Miharu and yielded herself to Miharu’s warmth. Miharu patted her on the back like she was soothing a baby.

A choice, huh...

The words in her dream resurfaced in her mind. If she had to make a vital decision in the near future, it would probably involve Aki. Miharu never wanted to see Aki sad again.“I have to pull myself together...” Miharu mumbled to herself with determination.

“Huh?” Aki looked up at Miharu in question.

“It’s nothing.” Miharu tightened her arms around Aki lovingly.

Chapter 1: Two-Person Journey

Near the border between the kingdom of Beltrum and Galarc, several hundred meters from the fort that Celia had visited...

“*Endless Force*...”

“*Infinitus*...”

Celia flew through the air with wings of light growing out of her back. Renji and Reiss were hot on her tail, with Renji being carried by Reiss as he flew.

“...*Blizzard*!” Renji yelled.

“...*Durandal*!” Celia cried out.

Cold air collided with burning light, sending a huge shockwave and bright light through the area.

“Guh!”

“Aaah!”

Renji and Celia were both blown away by the blast, tumbling mid-air. Their vision was obscured by the light, and they lost all sense of direction—they were barely managing to remain conscious.

Keep it together, Celia! She desperately clung to her consciousness and racked her brain for a solution.

The worst case scenario was for her to become incapable of combat and fall into the hands of Reiss and Duke Arbor. She had used increased the output of the already essence-heavy Durandal, and only had a meager amount of essence left.

I-I have to run... Her only choice was to flee. She was at a disadvantage in number already, and she wasn’t conceited enough to think she could face two people whose strength was still unknown to her.

I have to take this chance! Celia yielded herself to the blast of air, using it to distance herself from Renji and Reiss. She then confirmed which direction the

ground was and attempted to straighten herself.

“Ugh...” Flapping her wings of light, Celia used the remainder of her magic essence to propel herself. She accelerated in a straight line towards Galarc.

It seems I have no other choice... Instead of going against the blast to move towards Celia, Reiss went in the opposite direction to suppress the momentum of the shockwave. He was pushed nearly all the way back at the fort where Duke Arbor was located before finally coming to a stop.

Then, Reiss resumed his flight towards the center of the blast with Renji in his arms. There was a chance Celia had fled using the shockwaves, but it was also possible she had been knocked out or incapacitated instead.

The air in the area was still obscured by dust clouds, but Reiss was able to fly through the debris without an issue.

“Damn... What happened? Where’d the woman go? Is she dead?” Renji asked in quick succession. His left hand covered his eyes from the dust while his right hand grasped tightly onto his halberd.

Reiss stared at the epicenter of the explosion, expressionless. “What happened indeed,” he replied.

“What did that woman do?” Renji asked more calmly this time. Their attacks had collided so quickly after they fired them, he hadn’t been able to witness what happened. Or perhaps he *had* witnessed what happened, but couldn’t believe his eyes.

“She released a powerful attack just as strong as yours, and the two attacks canceled each other out.”

“Really...?”

“Yes, there’s no mistaking that,” Reiss said with certainty.

“Wasn’t my Endless Force Blizzard meant to be the most powerful of the highest class attack spells in this world...?” Renji asked, suppressing his displeasure. Reiss had previously given his personal seal of approval to the wide-ranged annihilation magic Renji could cast in succession, so how had Celia opposed it?

“There are more powerful offensive spells in this world,” Reiss answered casually.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! How can you call that the highest class then?! There’s magic out there on par with the swing of a Divine Arms?! That’s like one of those shitty stories where there’s a great demon lord after the demon lord!” This time, Renji didn’t hold back his displeasure. That was how much of a problem it was to him that Celia had been able to use an equally strong attack as him.

The chosen heroes were meant to wield the strongest weapons in the world—the Divine Arms. If there was someone out there with equal strength to the weapons, they wouldn’t appear as special anymore. And if the weapons weren’t as impressive, then the heroes wouldn’t be as special either. This was a matter that directly affected Renji’s identity and pride. However...

“Hahaha!” Reiss burst into wide-eyed, hearty laughter—a rare sight for him.

“H-Hey, stop messing around! This is no laughing matter!”

“Pardon me. You truly say the funniest things sometimes. The highest rank of offensive magic refers to the magic that is the strongest in the current era. A long, long time ago—in the age of the past heroes, to be precise—there was stronger magic.”

“Are you saying that woman used that magic...?”

“Yes. Although it could have been the work of a powerful ancient artifact, she didn’t appear to be equipped with any.”

“I don’t like this... That would mean she used a magic that shouldn’t exist.”

“Indeed so. Even I am struggling to understand how she came across that magic.”

“...” Renji still looked like he wanted to ask something, but held his silence. “How long are we going to be here for?” he eventually asked instead.

They had already returned to the epicenter of the explosion. Reiss was flying around the area in search of Celia. Since he was flying in the air, he had to carry Renji in his arms. It seemed like Renji was getting fed up with being carried by

such a shady man.

“Oh, my apologies. Perhaps it’s about time you learned how to fly for yourself. Since there’s no longer any risk of you fleeing anymore.”

Originally, Renji was at risk of fleeing due to the animosity between him and Reiss. They had met in a confrontation over the Rubia princesses Sylvie and Estelle, where Renji was defeated by Lucius.

Of course, Reiss had kept an eye out for any attempts to flee from the beginning, but Renji gradually began showing a more cooperative attitude under Reiss’s efficient training regime. Obtaining the ability to use spirit arts to fly would be a huge upgrade to his mobility, and it seemed like Reiss had decided he was no longer a flight risk.

Above all, it wouldn’t be strange for Renji to start flying himself at any moment now.

If Renji was going to learn anyway, it’d be better to teach him first and create a reason for him to feel more gratitude towards Reiss.

“Hmph.” Renji snorted. “Put me down. I’ll look around on the ground. You keep searching the air,” he ordered curtly.

“Very well. Please do that, then.”

Reiss released him easily. They were over twenty meters above the ground—a height no normal human could survive falling, but Renji’s body was currently enhanced as far as his Divine Arms would let him.“...” Renji fell rapidly to the ground without a complaint, landing without a problem.

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Around the time Renji landed on the ground...

Seems like I’ve shaken them off... Celia retreated to a point several kilometers from the fort and hid in the forest, watching the direction she fled from carefully. She let out the tense breath she had been holding, but didn’t drop her guard completely in case they were still searching. While she wanted nothing more than to fly as far away from the fort as she could...

Infinitus Durandal consumes a ridiculous amount of magic essence... I don’t

think I could have activated that with my own essence alone.

Right now, Celia was completely out of magic essence. She had been using the essence in the spirit stone Rio gave her to activate her spells.

However, if a sorcerer were to instantly draw the essence from a spirit stone for magic activation, twenty to thirty percent of that essence would be lost in the process. In order to use a hundred percent of the essence without any waste, the essence had to be slowly transferred from the stone through the proper process.

The only way of replacing the magic essence consumed from a spirit stone was for someone to add it in manually. Most of the spells Celia obtained when she regained her memories of Rio and Aishia were extremely inefficient in essence consumption. Because of that, she had consumed a lot of essence in the battle just now.

There's still essence left in the spirit stone Rio gave me, but...

With a look of resolution, Celia looked up at the sky above Beltrum.

First I have to get back to Amande. Okay, let's do this!

She then spent a moment retrieving essence from the spirit, then—

"*Alis luminis.*"

Celia recited the ancient magic spell for flying and grew wings of light from her back, then took off towards the city of Amande past the Galarc border.

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It took less than ten minutes for Celia in her current state to cross the distance to the city of Amande. There had been no sign of Reiss and Renji pursuing her on the way, and she safely arrived at the city governed by Liselotte.

She landed in the forest on the outskirts of the city and walked through the gates. Her destination was, of course, Liselotte's governor's estate.

Shortly after Liselotte was abducted by Saint Erica, she had employed a representative to act as a temporary governor, but she was now back at her post. She had also resumed her work as the president of the Ricca Trading Guild

and spent every day extremely busy with her duties.

Considering Liselotte's situation, it wouldn't have been strange for Celia to be turned away like every other noble that visited without prior notice. But fortunately, Celia was an important friend of Liselotte—and she had arrived at the estate all alone. She was quickly allowed a meeting without any issue.

Celia's old friend and Liselotte's current attendant, Aria, was also present in the meeting. She stood to the side as Celia and Liselotte sat down on the reception room sofas facing each other.

Celia gave a brief explanation of what had happened: just a few moments ago, she had been in the Beltrum Kingdom as a messenger from Christina. Duke Arbor attempted to capture her, but she successfully fulfilled her duty and fled to Amande. She wanted to notify Christina and Francois in the capital of this news as soon as possible.

"And that's the gist of it. Would you be able to pass that message to Princess Christina in the Galarc Castle? I know that barging in here and making such demands out of the blue is extremely rude, but if you don't mind..." Celia tried to entrust her message to Liselotte.

"Um..." she replied. The explanation had gone by so fast, Liselotte was baffled. She had no idea how Celia was in Amande right now just by listening to her explanation.

No matter how much of a genius sorcerer Celia was, she should have been captured the moment she was surrounded by knights. There were plenty of other things that she was bothered about, but...

"For now, let me put the situation in order. You left the Galarc capital to deliver Princess Christina's response to Duke Abor in the Beltrum fort. You were about to be captured, but you managed to get away. You then came all the way here, is that correct?" Liselotte pressed a hand to her forehead as she tried to confirm the facts.

"Yes."

"I... see..."

Celia had nodded earnestly, but Liselotte's expression was still confused. She

didn’t think Celia was the type of person to lie, but this was a little too wild to believe without any doubts.

“I don’t mind passing on the message, but won’t you be returning to the Galarc capital yourself, Celia?” Liselotte continued the conversation under the presumption Celia was telling the truth.

“Yes. I’m thinking of returning to the Beltrum Kingdom.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to return to the Galarc capital from here? Why would you go back to Beltrum?”

She had barely fled from Beltrum by the skin of her teeth, yet she intended on turning around and returning right away. Liselotte couldn’t help asking pretty much the same question twice.

“I wish to inform my family of what happened today. Princess Christina’s considerations have made it harder for them to touch my father, but there’s no telling what Duke Arbor will do to him...” Celia said worriedly, explaining her reason for returning.

Well, it was only natural. Although Christina had declared her accession as queen and demanded for objections to be delivered through the Count Claire family’s envoys, there was no guarantee her parents would be safe.

“You’re worried for your family.”

“Yes.”

It seemed like Liselotte could understand Celia’s feelings. It was certainly a matter that should be reported if possible.

“Celia, you’re an important friend not only to Aria, but to me as well. I would have offered to lend you an enchanted airship to take to your family’s territory, but the Ricca Guild was restricted from entering the Beltrum Kingdom shortly after Rodania fell...”

When the Restoration was still based in Rodania, travel between the two kingdoms was unrestricted. But after the Restoration lost Rodania as their headquarters, the Beltrum Kingdom closed most of their borders to Galarc. The trading guild’s airships were only permitted into a select number of cities to

import product.

While the Ricca Guild's airships could be sent to those cities they were permitted in, Celia's hometown—the Claire territory—wasn't among them. Even if she were to be dropped off at the closest neighboring city, there were strict inspections to prevent illegal entry into the kingdom.

The wrong move could potentially turn into an international problem, and it was too risky to use the Ricca Guild airships to send Celia to the Beltrum Kingdom. Even if Liselotte decided to do so, she would need her father and King Francois's permission first.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but no thank you. I will go by myself," Celia said lightly, dismissing the need for assistance.

"Isn't that a little too reckless...?"

Liselotte sent a subtle, questioning glance towards Aria as though to ask if Celia was capable of such a thing. Aria seemed to have the same doubts as her master, as she tilted her head with a dubious look.

"I understand your concerns. But it's really fine. I escaped Beltrum by myself fine, didn't I?" Celia said lightly, emphasizing the lack of any problem.

"You say that, but..."

Although she trusted Celia, Liselotte couldn't agree to sending her back by herself without a care. And there was a clear reason for that: because she was worried. This was something Celia could tell as well. Which was why...

"Just between you and me, it'll only take me three days to make a return trip there from Amande," Celia said reassuringly.

"Th-Three days?"

Traveling from Amande to Celia's hometown of Cleia on foot would easily take months. At most, using a horse could reduce that time by half—so it was natural for Liselotte to be shocked. Three days for a return trip was even faster than using griffins.

However, that was only if Celia didn't run out of magic essence. After using that flying magic today, she realized that the faster she flew, the more essence

was consumed. Without Rio's spirit stone, she only had enough of her own essence left to make a one-way trip.

"The truth is, I've learned a sorcery that allows me to fly through the air. Only I can use it right now, but that's what I used to cross the border into Amande."

"I thought it was weird how you visited me out of the blue after returning from Beltrum... All by yourself, at that."

Amande was positioned relatively close to the border with the Beltrum Kingdom. There were a number of forts controlled by the kingdom along the border and down the main road to Amande. If Celia had entered Galarc from the Beltrum Kingdom, those forts would have been notified of her presence first. If she had been visiting a foreign nation as an envoy, then she should have had guards with her too.

"The knights Princess Charlotte prepared escorted me to the border, but Duke Arbor demanded I make the rest of the trip into the kingdom alone..."

"What happened to the guards, then...?"

"They're waiting for me in a fort near the border. They would have received an order from Princess Charlotte to escort me back to Galarc."

Since there was an unfortunately large chance of Celia not returning, the knights would most likely return to the royal capital after some time. But they should still be at the fort at this moment in time.

If Celia had returned to the fort and informed Charlotte's knights of her intent to return to Beltrum, they would have stopped her no matter what. If they didn't, they would be defying Charlotte's orders to return.

As knights of the royal castle, they were unable to make their own judgments or act against their orders.

"And that's why you came to me."

Liselotte let out a pained sigh, having made sense of the situation. She had been probing details from Celia in order to aid her judgment, and the situation was as complex as she had been expecting.

"I'm sorry for causing you trouble..." Celia said, bowing her head awkwardly.

“No, I’m honored to have you rely on me as your friend. But after hearing everything you’ve said, I’m now obliged to bring you to the castle as well.”

If she didn’t, Liselotte would be the one defying Charlotte’s will instead. However, she could understand Celia’s concerns for her family. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Liselotte held her head in her hands.

Celia hadn’t been entrusted with any further duties beyond delivering Christina’s reply, so she was meant to report back to Christina as soon as her task was done. Her desire to return to her hometown was entirely her own judgment. That’s why she was here to rely on Liselotte.

“I am aware... Could I ask you to make an exception just this once? I’m afraid Duke Arbor may move right away. I’d like to depart as soon as possible.”

Celia bowed her head further, fully understanding how unreasonable her request was.

“Very well... I will make the report to the capital on your behalf. I will also arrange an explanation for the knights at the fort.”

“Thank you very much!”

“However, I have one condition.” Liselotte pointed a finger at Celia, stopping her from rejoicing too soon.

“What condition...?”

“Please take Aria with you for protection.” Liselotte looked over at Aria, who was still standing in the room.

“Huh? But...” Celia’s gaze was drawn to the same spot. She opened her mouth to voice her objection, but Liselotte interrupted first.

“As a friend, I cannot allow you to walk into danger alone. Princess Charlotte wouldn’t approve either. That’s why I will not back down on this.”

“B-But if the Beltrum Kingdom found out you sent personnel to help me, wouldn’t it become an international problem...?”

“That’s why I am sending the bare minimum I can: Aria alone. You are aware of Aria’s abilities yourself. And she’s a former noble of the Beltrum Kingdom, so you have plenty of excuses if you’re spotted together.”

“That may be true... But Aria’s your personal guard and confidant. Wouldn’t you be troubled without her around?”

“Although they aren’t as skilled as Aria, I have plenty of capable attendants. If Aria isn’t around, I can just increase the number of guards. And so, Aria. Make sure you escort Celia properly,” Liselotte ordered before Celia could say anything else.

“I understand,” Aria nodded with a sigh.

“A-Are you sure, Aria? You should be protecting Liselotte...” Celia asked in a fluster. Everything had been decided so suddenly.

“If my master has ordered it, I have no objections,” Aria replied with a fed up look, emphasizing how she didn’t have a choice in the first place.

“If you’re worried for my safety, Celia, then surely you can understand how I feel about yours. Am I right?”

“Urk. Yes...” Celia nodded awkwardly, the weak point of her argument revealed.

“Then you better return as quick as you can.”

“I will do my best...”

“I will be waiting. Is there anything else I can help with? You mentioned sorcery that allowed you to fly through the air, but I could also lend you a griffin or provide essence crystals for you to use...”

If Celia’s means of flying was sorcery, then the fuel that was her magic essence had to be limited. She couldn’t keep flying forever.

“Thank you very much. I am indebted to you. If possible, could you spare me some of your essence crystals? And a sword for self-protection.”

“Very well. Aria, you can go and get ready for your departure first. Arrange a sword and essence crystals for Celia as well.”

“Understood.”

With that, Aria left the room first.

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Roughly half an hour later, preparations for departure were complete. Celia and Aria stood in the garden of the estate, bidding farewell to Liselotte and her attendants, Cosette, Natalie, and Chloe. Aria had changed from her attendant uniform to a light, adventurer-like outfit. The enchanted sword Liselotte lent her was attached to her waist.

“Please take care of everything in my absence,” Aria said to her subordinates as the head attendant.

“Yeah, yeah. We’ve got this. You just worry about yourself... Though I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Cosette replied casually. She was one of the more frivolous attendants that worked for Liselotte.

“That’s true. I’m more worried about you,” Natalie muttered, her demeanor as serious as it always was.

“Me?! Shouldn’t you be worried for Chloe instead? She’s the newbie.”

“Chloe’s a hard worker. What she lacks in, she makes up for by reporting all her mistakes, so I don’t have to worry about her work.”

“Th-Thank you very much!”

Cosette had attempted to single out Chloe, but Aria praised her instead. Chloe bowed her head humbly.

“At any rate, this is a good opportunity. I expect a detailed report from everyone on whether my absence poses a hindrance to duties, what differences there are in daily tasks, and whether there are any latent issues that need to be addressed.”

“Ugh.” Cosette let out an unladylike noise at the thought of more work. There was probably a reason why Aria had specified a “detailed” report.

“Do not attempt to skip the report by writing “There was nothing of particular note” again. I don’t mind if you discuss things with the others, so please review the entirety of the current task system. Especially regarding Lady Liselotte’s security.”

Or so it seemed. Only a short amount of time had passed since Liselotte’s abduction. Although they had returned to their peaceful days, they couldn’t be

too relaxed.

“Understood.”

When the matter of Liselotte’s security was brought up, all the attendants’ faces tensed.

Meanwhile, beside the attendants, Celia and Liselotte were having their own conversation.

“Are you sure it’s okay for Aria to come with me...?” Celia asked worriedly. Although she had gained much more movement range with her ability to fly, she was still uneasy about traveling alone. Having an old friend who was powerful in her own right accompany her was a huge relief.

However, Aria’s absence would create a hole in Liselotte’s work. Celia felt apprehension about that.

“Yes. It’ll be beneficial for me as well, so don’t let it bother you.”

“Really?”

“We’ve reestablished peace here, but Aria seems rather stressed these days.”

There was no doubt Liselotte’s abduction had a lingering effect on her. Her heart was being tormented like a thorn digging into her skin.

“But in that case...”

Wouldn’t it be better to let Aria stay by your side? Celia asked with her gaze.

“No. Please work her hard enough so that she completely forgets about me. I need to prove to Aria that my work can run without her too.”

It seemed like Liselotte’s intention was for Aria to reset her mood by traveling together with her old friend.

“I understand... We’ll just be going there and back, as long as no trouble occurs. But if that is what you insist, then I won’t feel any reservation. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Celia bobbed her head in gratitude, which Liselotte returned while meeting her eyes.

“Hehe,” the two both giggled in amusement.

“Let’s get going, Aria,” Celia called.

“Right away.” Aria ended her conversation with the attendants and stood next to Celia.

“Oh! I told you we were flying already, but are you okay with heights? I’ll be the one carrying you...”

“Yes, that won’t be a problem. I’ve previously...” Aria replied naturally, but trailed off mid-sentence.

“Previously what?” Celia asked curiously.

“It’s nothing. I feel like I’ve flown through the air in someone’s arms before, but there’s something odd about that memory... Perhaps it’s just deja vu.”

Aria tilted her head in confusion.

It’s Rio...

Celia immediately knew why Aria was experiencing déjà vu..

“You too, Aria? I also had a similar feeling... How odd.”

Apparently Liselotte was experiencing deja vu as well. It was probably caused by the remnant memories of when Rio saved her from Saint Erica. The flashback caused Liselotte to frown in question.

“Perhaps you were remembering the time you rode a griffin?” Cosette asked. She had never flown while being carried by Rio before, so she was curious in her own way.

“Maybe... I apologize for derailing the conversation.” Unable to recall her memories, Aria quickly brushed the matter aside.

Celia shook her head with a somewhat sad look. “It’s okay.”

“What’s the best way of doing this? I don’t think you could carry me unless you reinforced your muscles with magic...” Aria wondered as she looked down at Celia.

“Right. Flying while enhancing my physical abilities will consume a lot of magic essence, so I think it’d be best if you clung to me? The wings that emerge from

my back are powered by an essence that emits heat, so don't touch them."

"I see... How about this?" Without any hesitation, Aria approached Celia and hugged her from the front. To be more precise, she crouched down and looped her arms around Celia's waist.

"Yeah, that's good."

Petite Celia, and the tall and slender model-like Aria. It'd be a more natural sight if Celia was the one doing hugging, but when it was the reverse...

"H-Hehe... Oops. Ahem."

It must have been a comical sight. Cosette let out an amused laugh, but a glare from Aria quickly quietened her. She coughed to cover up her laugh.

"Well, we can always adjust our positions if it turns out to be a hindrance while we're flying."

"Right."

"Okay, I'll bring out my wings now. *Alis Luminis*." Celia recited the spell; a magic circle appeared on her back and released particles of light in the shape of two wings. Her appearance was almost like that of an angel.

"Oh my."

Liselotte and her attendants gasped in awe.

"We'll be going now. Don't forget to contact the capital," Celia said.

Liselotte snapped back to her senses. "O-Of course. Leave it to me."

"Here we go, Aria. I can go pretty fast, so take care not to fall."

"Understood."

Aria tightened her arms around Celia, who then rose into the air.

"Goodbye."

With those final words directed at Liselotte, she accelerated into the sky.

"Wow..."Liselotte swallowed another breath as she watched the two fly away.

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Meanwhile, a short time before Celia arrived in Amande, Reiss and Renji had given up on their search for Celia and returned to the fort where Duke Arbor and Charles were waiting. As soon as Reiss landed with Renji—

“M-Mr. Reiss!” Charles immediately ran up to them.

“Unfortunately, Celia Claire got away,” Reiss reported in his usual calm tone.

Of course, it was possible that Celia’s body had disintegrated under the force of the explosion from the two attacks, but Reiss had determined that possibility was extremely unlikely and didn’t bother to mention it.

“I-I see... No, that’s not good! What are you going to do about this?!” Charles exhaled in relief for a brief moment, but promptly snapped at Reiss.

“What do you mean?” Reiss asked, tilting his head as though he didn’t have a clue what Charles was referring to. It was at this moment that Duke Arbor approached them.

“Attempting to kill a messenger trying to return isn’t a good look.”

“Oh? But you didn’t intend on letting her leave in the first place. You didn’t care about how you looked when you called her to this fort. Am I wrong?”

“That’s...! Things have changed now that Princess Christina has declared her accession. We must avoid doing anything to worsen our position,” Charles argued, looking at his father for support.

“My point still remains. You lost all chance of plausible deniability from the moment you attempted to capture her. I needed to stop her to prevent her from spreading questionable rumors upon her return. Am I wrong?”

“Th-That doesn’t mean you can do as you please in our territory! Creating an explosion that large at the border of our kingdom is a problem!” Charles struggled to find a counter to Reiss’s logical reasoning and attempted to change the topic.

“I do feel apologetic in that regard, but we had to go that far for any chance of stopping her. She had wings of light growing from her back and was flying through the air. I figured if we couldn’t capture her, the next best option was to silence her. Even if she died, it wouldn’t have posed any major problem, no?”

Reiss immediately corrected him.

“That’s...!” This time, Charles was unable to argue back at all.

“I know she was your former fiancee, but surely you didn’t have any special feelings towards her, did you?” Reiss’s question was more than just a little insensitive, it lacked humanity entirely.

“Wh...!” Regardless of what he actually felt for Celia, Charles frowned in displeasure.

“I apologize if I’ve offended you. But the agreement with the Restoration is long broken. It’s just rather illogical to be worrying about appearances at this late stage just because Princess Christina has declared her accession.”

“...” Charles fell silent with a pained grimace.

“Official accession will require a coronation ceremony, but surely you don’t intend on acknowledging that?” Reiss’s question wasn’t directed at Charles, who was standing in front of him, but at Duke Arbor, who was waiting to the side.

“Of course, we would never accept her accession. That is out of the question.” Duke Arbor said gravely, frowning with a look of detestment.

“In that case, nothing we do will change. We will continue doing whatever is necessary to destroy the Restoration. It would be extremely undesirable to have a woman like her by Princess Christina’s side.”

“Indeed, it would be best to erase her if possible. The life of one girl couldn’t possibly cause any problems,” Duke Arbor said, agreeing with Reiss.

“B-But father...! Attempting and failing to assassinate someone is a terrible look for us. If the enemy obtains information that puts us at an advantage, we could have people betray us for them...” Charles objected in a fluster.

“No one other than your former fiancee witnessed what occurred in this fort. No matter what she claims, we merely have to remain firm on our version of events. The truth holds no value when it comes to politics and diplomacy. Have you forgotten that after being imprisoned for so long?” When it came to cross-national conflict, the truth was whatever the more powerful nation claimed.

Duke Arbor scolded his son to remind him of this.

“Ah...”

“We are still in control of the overwhelming majority of nobles in the nation. Their claims will be white noise falling on deaf ears. Declaring accession to the throne using the regalia won’t change that...” Duke Arbor said, grinding his teeth. Despite his words, Christina’s claim over the throne was a great annoyance to him.

The reason for this was because Christina, who was rightfully the first in line to the Beltrum throne, had declared her accession while in possession of the regalia. In order to deny her legitimacy, they had to follow the procedures set forth in the kingdom’s law. But until that legitimacy was denied, Christina had to be treated as the rightful queen in the interim. This was the supreme law of the kingdom that not even the current king could change easily.

If Duke Arbor were to break this law and drag Christina down from the throne without going through the correct procedures, he would be branded a criminal for the act of committing unjustified treason.

In short, although her claim to the throne could be rejected with the right procedures, the current Beltrum Kingdom temporarily had two royal rulers: the current King Philip III, and his daughter Christina. A two ruler system was unheard of in the history of Beltrum.

“Good grief, how infuriating... No matter how far they fall, they always seem to hang on by a hair,” Duke Arbor muttered, understandably clutching his head.

“Indeed. It’s almost like they’re being protected by god. Like an omniscient god has taken their side...” Reiss said with a sharp look.

“Hmph.”

Duke Arbor sneered on reflex, as though to say there was no such thing as god. But he didn’t put that thought into words. The government system was formed under the majesty of the Six Wise Gods, so he hesitated to deny the existence of the gods openly.

“Just to confirm, you haven’t given up denying her the accession, have you?” Reiss asked Duke Arbor.

“Of course not. Three quarters of the vote required belong to nobles in our faction. No one has the spine to jump to a sinking ship like the Restoration, who have lost both their headquarters and their personnel. It is impossible for Princess Christina to take the throne. This is just their way of buying time.”

Duke Arbo’s faction currently had over 90% of the nobles eligible to vote. Some of the members had questionable loyalty, but there weren’t many who would step up to support Christina in the current situation. If they did, they’d face pressure from Duke Arbor and risk their social lives as nobles.

“I’m relieved to hear that,” Reiss said, applauding Duke Arbor. “However, wouldn’t it be better to be as prepared as possible? If I were to make one suggestion...”

“Does it have to do with Count Claire?”

“How perceptive. The one most likely to bring benefit to their side is from his family. It’s evident that Princess Christina wishes to protect the Claire house. We have no reason to let them be.”

An agreement had been formed between the Beltrum Kingdom and the Restoration to keep the Claire house neutral. But now that they had attacked Rodania and attempted to capture Celia, it was too late to be worried about that. The only potential issue was if Count Claire was used as the window for new negotiations after Princess Christina declared accession, making him untouchable until her legitimacy was denied...

“I was just thinking of bringing in the rest of her family now that Celia has escaped. The Count is well known for being a loving husband. His wife should be a good target.”

Even without Reiss’s prompting, Duke Arbor was already thinking of the Claire house.

“Ah, it’s a relief to know nothing gets past you,” Reiss said dryly, applauding him again.

“The problem is Celia Claire. I don’t know what kind of magic or sorcery she used, but if she uses that mobility to return home, she could make the first move before us.”

“Indeed so. I advise you to head to the Claire territory at once. If you depart by enchanted airship now, you should arrive by tomorrow morning. Of course, we will accompany you too,” Reiss said naturally, glancing at Renji, Lucci, and Arein.

Duke Arbor eyed Reiss’s face carefully, then called his son’s name. “Charles.”

“Yes?”

“You heard what we just discussed. Take your squad to the Claire territory. Capture the Count’s wife and bring her back. I will be returning to the capital,” Duke Arbor ordered. It was clear that Duke Arbor intended on using her as a hostage.

“Understood.”

“Make haste. You may fall behind even if you use the airships.”

“Right.”

“Or perhaps... Mr. Reiss, you seem able to fly through the air. Could you head there first?” Duke Arbor asked with a searching gaze. He had only just learned that Reiss could fly today.

“Yes, it is possible for me to head there alone or with Renji first. If you wish to entrust me with such a task, I am willing to do that,” Reiss replied without any change in expression, seeking approval to act alone.

“This is a problem for our nation. For now, I’d like you to accompany Charles as he heads there. Please use your power if conflict arises at the destination.”

But Duke Arbor still didn’t trust Reiss completely and denied his independent actions.

“Very well. Then Renji and I will go with you. These two mercenaries will be moving separately,” Reiss accepted smoothly, looking at Lucci and Arein.

“Just to confirm, where will they be going?”

Lucci and Arein both had their own griffins. Duke Arbor was wary of them causing trouble within the kingdom.

“I’ve sent some mercenaries to check on the state of the Galarc Kingdom.

They will be meeting up with them before coming to the Claire territory.”

“I see.”

“And so, Lucci, Arein. You two will head to the Galarc Kingdom before meeting us in the Claire territory.”

“Sure...”

Was it an unexpected order?

Lucci and Arein exchanged looks before nodding.

“Oh, and take this with you.” Reiss took a small pouch out of his breast pocket, approached Arein, and handed it to him.

“It would be terrible if we missed each other, so please hurry to the Count’s territory,” he added with a smile.

Arein glanced at the contents of the pouch through the opening. There was a familiar crystal made of magic essence inside—a disposable teleport crystal.

“Got it...”

Sensing what Reiss was implying, Arein smiled in return and nodded.

“I’m counting on you,” Reiss said, patting Arein on the shoulder. “If she arrives first, erase her. As quickly and quietly as you can,” he whispered so that only Arein could hear. He then turned around without waiting for a reply.

“Let us hurry, Charles.”

“Right...”

Thus, Reiss and Charles boarded the enchanted airship to the Claire territory.

Interlude: Tremor

In the living room of the guest suite at the Galarc Castle.

Lilianna was seated on a sofa, waiting for the arrival of the male noble representing the Centostella Kingdom.

An important matter regarding the hero, huh...

Lilianna sighed listlessly as she gazed out the window. She had a bad feeling about the topic they were about to discuss.

Up until recently, the only hero of the Centostella Kingdom was Takahisa. But now Takahisa's little brother Masato was a hero as well. That's why whatever they were about to discuss had to involve one of the two Sendo siblings.

But what really bothered her was how so many days had passed since the Centostella Kingdom's delegation arrived in the Galarc Kingdom. If it was such an important matter, they would have met her as soon as they arrived in the Galarc Kingdom.

Yet they had only just requested a discussion with her. The leader of the delegation was the same capable man who served as the prime minister of Centostella, and she couldn't imagine him saying that something was important on a whim.

Which meant...

They must have been comparing Sir Masato and Sir Takahisa, Lilianna guessed.

It was still undecided where Masato would belong, but there was currently a once in a lifetime opportunity for either Centostella or Galarc to come into the possession of two heroes at once.

And normally, if there were two people suitable for one position, they would naturally be compared with each other. Takahisa had caused enough trouble for the kingdom until now. If the higher ups of Centostella found Masato to be easier to handle than Takahisa, they would naturally want him for their

kingdom.

As the First Princess of Centostella, Lilianna was also obliged to think of her nation's interests first. And an intelligent woman like her naturally understood —Masato was someone they had to keep.

Indeed, she knew what she had to do. However...

"..." Her expression as she gazed out the window was one of indecision.

"Princess Lilianna."

Someone called her name.

"Princess Lilianna."

Once again, someone called her name.

"Princess Lilianna...?"

This time, the tone of voice sounded concerned for Lilianna's health. That was what brought Lilianna out of the depths of her thoughts.

"Excuse me. I was rather out of it," she replied, standing up from the sofa.

"You seem tired," the man standing before her replied. This was the prime minister of the Centostella Kingdom and leader of the delegation in Galarc, Duke Libelt Toscana. He appeared to be around his forties. Beside him was the girl who served as Lilianna's guard, Alice. She appeared to be the same age as Aki or Latifa.

Lilianna had ordered Alice to let the duke through as soon as he arrived, and it seemed she had done just that.

"I was just thinking. There's nothing to worry about."

"Has my daughter caused troubles for Your Highness again?" Duke Toscana asked worriedly, glancing at Alice. Indeed, Alice was the duke's daughter.

"P-Papa! I have not!" Alice objected in horror.

"That's father to you. And I've told you to speak more politely."

"Yes *sir*," Alice replied sarcastically, causing Duke Toscana to touch his forehead with a pained look.

“Alice... can be a little inattentive at times, but she’s doing her best. She’s my childhood friend, so it’s very relaxing to have her around. Please praise her more,” Lilianna said, complimenting Alice.

“See!” Alice beamed proudly, but a cold glare from her father quickly caused her to stand at attention.

“It seems like she’s causing more trouble for you, Duke Toscana,” Lilianna pointed out in amusement.

“I have no excuse. It seems I’ve spoiled her a little too much as the youngest child.”

Duke Toscana sighed tiredly. He then pulled himself together and turned to his daughter. “Alice. I have an important matter to discuss with Princess Lilianna. Unless someone of high status arrives, do not let anyone enter.”

“Yes sir!” Alice saluted him and left the room.

“Please have a seat first.”

“If you don’t mind.” At Lilianna’s prompting, Duke Toscana took a seat on the sofa opposite her.

“Here you are.”

Lilianna’s personal attendant, Frill, immediately brought tea to the table.

“Frill, you may wait in the room next door.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Frill bowed and exited the room quietly, leaving Lilianna and Duke Toscana alone in the room.

“So what did you wish to discuss regarding the heroes?” Lilianna asked, cutting straight to the chase.

“This is a message—or rather, an order from His Majesty... I was told to observe the situation before informing you, and I believe it’s about time.”

“I see. So father did have orders...”

This meant what Duke Toscana was about to say weren’t the words of the prime minister, but of the king himself.

“Did you predict this already? As expected of Your Highness.”

“It has something to do with Sir Masato, I’m guessing.”

“Yes. And you as well, Princess Lilianna.”

“This may sound repetitive, but I cannot rush Sir Masato into deciding which kingdom to associate with, you know?” Lilianna said in warning. If it was an order from the king, then it had to be something for her to do in regards to Masato. The first thing that came to Lilianna’s mind was for her to personally ask Masato to stay in their kingdom.

“Of course. His Majesty has no objections to that.”

“Then what does father want me to do?”

“Nothing immediately. This is just a discussion of the future of our nation.”

“Of the future of the nation? That’s a rather roundabout way of saying things.”

Lilianna couldn’t hold herself back from smiling wryly.

“It’s that difficult of a matter to discuss, please understand.”

Duke Toscana was the same.

“I don’t mind. Just say it.”

“Very well. To put it bluntly,” Duke Toscana said solemnly, “His Majesty is thinking of an engagement between Your Highness and Sir Masato.”

There was a long pause before Lilianna replied. “Is that so...” she eventually mumbled.

“If you have no objections, you are to make contact with Sir Masato with that in mind in the future.”

“...” Lilianna fell silent. While she didn’t voice any objections, she didn’t nod, either.

“Does that mean you have objections?” Duke Toscana asked, seeing through her thoughts. He sounded extremely calm, as though he had predicted her hesitation.

“I have no objections. My marriage was never for me to decide, so if this is what His Majesty decided, it is my duty to fulfill that However...”

“Do you have concerns?”

“Several,” Lilianna nodded.

“Go ahead.” Duke Toscana urged her to speak with a wave of his right hand.

“The first is the age gap between Sir Masato and myself. This entire discussion is built on the assumption that Sir Masato doesn’t reject the proposal, and I’m afraid I won’t be a desirable partner because of this.”

“There’s less than a five year age gap between you, no?”

Masato was twelve, and Lilianna was sixteen; it was a four-year age gap.

“I’ve heard that even four years is undesirable if the woman is the older one.”

“I won’t deny that such a trend exists among male nobility, but I personally do not agree with it. My own wife is four years older than me, and I love her from the bottom of my heart. We even have five children together. Besides...”

Duke Toscana started rambling passionately about his own family, but suddenly trailed off and stared at Lilianna.

“Besides?”

“Just between you and me, it seems to me that Sir Masato has affectionate feelings towards you.”

“That’s just your wishful thinking, Duke Toscana.”

Lilianna’s eyes widened briefly but she brushed him off with a laugh.

“What makes you say that? I’ve been in the presence of both of you numerous times, and it has always seemed to me that Sir Masato feels a certain level of affection towards you.”

“You truly are mistaken. Sir Masato is a polite gentleman.”

“I didn’t think of all people, you would be one to miss the signs of his affection...” Duke Tosocana said, emphasizing his point.

“That makes me sound like some kind of enchantress,” Lilianna dismissed jokingly.

“Pardon me. At any rate, I understand your first concern, but I do not believe

it will be an issue for your engagement. It all depends on your efforts."

"Right."

“So what were your other concerns?”

While Duke Toscana had started the conversation from a place of consideration for Lilianna’s position and mental state, he wasn’t the prime minister for nothing. Once they started discussing the actual matter at hand, he switched to his professional mode and started expressing his opinions without reservation.

“I thought Sir Takahisa was supposed to be my marriage partner. I have interacted with him until today with that intention. Is that now off the table?” Lilianna asked with a sigh.

“Yes, you may think of it like that.”

“Then my next concern is regarding the choice of changing my partner to Sir Masato. Wouldn’t my little sister have also been an option for him?”

“Surely you know the answer to that yourself, Princess Lilianna. The standards of our kingdom’s royal family have to be considered when selecting your marriage partner.”

The Centostella Kingdom was one of the more traditional, closed countries of the Strahl region. Thus, when it came to the First Princess Lilianna and her little sister, there was a distinct difference in social status between them. That status applied to their marriage partners as well, and would affect how they were treated by the kingdom.

That was why Lilianna’s little sister was not permitted to have a marriage partner of higher importance than Lilianna’s. The partner with better circumstances was to be paired with Lilianna. This was what Duke Toscana was referring to.

“His Majesty has given up on Sir Takahisa. That, or he has decided Sir Masato should be favored over Sir Takahisa. Is that what you’re saying?” This was the natural conclusion that Lilianna had come to.

“He hasn’t given up. As long as Sir Takahisa is a hero, he will always be an important figure of our kingdom. But...”

“But what?”

“Sir Takahisa is already in love with the girl named Miharu, no? He has been visiting her at her mansion for multiple days in a row,” Duke Toscana pointed out.

Lilianna nodded with a slightly crestfallen look. “Yes, he has...”

“In which case, it is only appropriate to select the hero you have a higher chance with for your partner. Under the current circumstances, Sir Masato is more worthy of being your marriage partner. However, there is still leeway for this to change in the unlikely event of Sir Takahisa shifting his feelings towards you.” Duke Toscana seemed to have already determined that the chance was low.

“Right...” In fact, Lilianna, being as intelligent as she was, had realized that too. Yet her movements as she nodded were oddly slow.

“Besides,” Duke Toscana added, observing Lilianna’s expression carefully to glean her thoughts. “Hmm, how should I put this...”

“There’s no need to hold back,” Lilianna said, urging him to continue.

“I feel terrible for saying this, but Sir Takahisa’s mind doesn’t seem to be in the most stable place. His anti-war sentiments lean on the extreme side, and the balance of that makes it rather difficult to place him in a position of leadership in the nation...”

“Unlike Sir Masato, you mean.”

“Yes. Well, the reason for his instability is rather evident, and his anti-war ideology could be improved with proper education, but...”

Unless those factors were corrected, Takahisa would have no chance of being reconsidered for Lilianna’s marriage partner. That was what Duke Toscana was implying.

“I understand,” Lilianna nodded hesitantly.

“Is there something else?”

“Regarding marriage to Sir Masato... If that is what my father—what His Majesty wants, then I will endeavor to gain his affection. However, there may be a chance of me leaving a bad impression on him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Until today, I have served as Sir Takahisa’s caretaker. Blatantly shifting my interests to him just because he became a hero may be unpleasant to him...” Lilianna frowned with guilt at how selfish her actions would be.

“His Majesty was also concerned with that. His order was for you to use your own judgment to slowly and unobtrusively make the transition with that intention.”

“He sure makes it sound easy...” Lilianna said with a self-deprecating smile.

Her complaint was most reasonable. The order to interact with him with the intention of marriage was the same as telling her to love him. Until just moments ago, she had been trying to love Takahisa with the intention of marrying him. Without any freedom in who she could marry, he was as good as Lilianna’s first love.

People weren’t built to immediately switch who they loved upon command. But. even so...

“I understand your emotions may not have caught up yet, but it’s for the sake of the nation,” Duke Toscana emphasized. Lilianna Centostella was royalty, after all; she was born to sacrifice herself for the sake of the kingdom.

“Understood,” Lilianna nodded.

Whether it was towards Masato or Takahisa, the guilty expression on her face lingered.

Chapter 2: At the Galarc Castle

The four heroes Sumeragi Satsuki, Sendo Masato, Sakata Hiroaki, and Sendo Takahisa were all gathered together in the training grounds of the Galarc Castle, the very same morning that Celia departed for Beltrum. Standing nearby and facing them were Gouki and Kayoko.

It seemed that something was about to begin. A small number of royalty and nobility including Christina, Lilianna, King Francois and Duke Huguenot were observing them from a far distance away. Kouta and Rei were also there as Hiroaki's aides.

"As you have all heard already, I have been newly appointed as Lady Satsuki and Lord Masato's combat instructor. And since we were holding a lesson anyway, we decided to extend the invitation to the other two heroes."

As residents of the same mansion, Satsuki and Masato seemed to be aware of this already. Gouki's explanation was directed to Hiroaki and Takahisa, who weren't staying at the mansion.

"The fact you are all in attendance means you all have the will to get stronger. Am I right to assume this?" he asked Hiroaki and Takahisa.

"Ah... It's true that I want to get stronger, but I have no plans on taking lessons from someone weaker than me, you know?" Hiroaki replied boldly, questioning whether Gouki was worthy of instructing heroes.

"I'm pretty sure Gouki's far stronger than you. Even the four of us would struggle to take him on together."

Satsuki shot Hiroaki an exasperated look. She and Masato had faced him numerous times at the mansion, but they were yet to win even once.

"Ha! That has to be an exaggeration. Are you trying to make him sound good in front of us?" Hiroaki asked skeptically.

"Bwahaha! It's good to have some skepticism. In this case, it's better to see for yourself.s How about we spar?" Gouki suggested.

“Hmm...”

Hiroaki’s disinterested attitude was quickly replaced with wariness.

It’s damn obvious this old man is strong.

He could tell that Gouki was probably stronger than him, and that there was a decent chance he would lose if he fought him.

It was unclear how much awareness Hiroaki had of this himself, but until now he only maintained a confident attitude in safe situations where he believed had the advantage or superiority. This was mainly out of vanity, but his fear of losing to others and being looked down upon also played a part of it. In a way, it was a precaution of his.

However, the current Hiroaki knew the taste of defeat. He had suffered a humiliating loss in Rodania to Kikuchi Renji, another hero just like him. He still kept up his brave front because he didn’t want to be looked down on, but—

“Fine. Let’s do it.” Hiroaki accepted Gouki’s suggestion. Until now, he would have confidently started making excuses for himself if he thought there was a chance of him losing and embarrassing himself, but the current Hiroaki had nothing to add. His expression merely stiffened nervously.

“Very well. Could you act as our referee, Kayoko?” Gouki smirked as though he could tell what Hiroaki was thinking.

“Sure.”

Thus, Gouki and Hiroaki moved to the center of the training grounds. Kayoko followed them to judge their match, and the others all moved to the edge to observe them.

“The Divine Arms you possess, the Yamata no Orochi... I find that weapon rather interesting. Its shape resembles my Kamaitachi,” Gouki said, drawing his own sword made by the elder dwarf Dominic.

“I also find your weapon curious. Especially how it’s a katana made in this world... It even has a flashy name like Kamaitachi.”

Hiroaki materialized his Divine Arms from nowhere and grabbed it.

Let’s see what this old man with his Japanese sword thinks of my fighting

style.

Until now, Hiroaki had never received any formal fighting instruction from anyone. Part of the reason was because he didn't want to train beneath someone, but another reason was because there were no other katana-like swords in the Strahl region. He believed there was nothing to learn from knights that only used European swords.

But now that he had lost to Renji, this military man from the Yagumo region who was a master of such weapons could be the perfect instructor for him.

"The use of any arts besides physical body enhancements is forbidden. This will be a match of only swordsmanship."

"All right." Hiroaki had a rare look of enthusiasm on his face.

"If both parties are ready, you may begin."

"Ready."

"Okay."

The two distanced themselves from each other and held their swords ready. While Gouki's stance was as stable as an ancient tree, Hiroaki's posture was shaky like a twig in the ground.—

"Begin!" Kayoko called, signaling the start of their duel.

"Rah!" Hiroaki first charged straight towards Gouki...

"Huh?!" Gouki closed the gap between them first, stopping Hiroaki in his tracks. Gouki also came to a stop at that, and the two faced each other from a few meters apart.

"I commend your initiative to cut me off by charging at me first, but your intentions were too obvious. You weren't expecting me to charge back, which caused you to come to a stop. You shouldn't stop moving just because of something unexpected."

Shortly after beginning, Gouki immediately began correcting Hiroaki.

"The one who's come to a stop is you, old man!" Hiroaki snapped back.

"Haha! You make a good point. In that case..." Gouki said. He then moved.

“Whoa!” Hiroaki reacted belatedly. He had kept his eyes on Gouki the entire time, yet he had no idea when he had moved. Gouki was simply in front of him before he knew it. Hiroaki quickly attempted to block him with his sword, but—

“Guh...” Gouki easily knocked away Hiroaki’s sword and pointed the tip of his blade at his throat. It was clearly enough to end the match, but Gouki immediately pulled his sword back and retreated a few steps.

“It’s too early to end this. Let’s continue a little longer. I will refrain from attacking, so show me what you’ve got,” he said.

“Don’t look down on me! Damn it!” Hiroaki charged at Gouki once more, swinging his sword. But Gouki stepped out of his sword’s range without even lifting his weapon.

“There’s no need to worry about your attacks hitting me, you know?”

“Shut up!” Hiroaki’s competitive spirit burned even hotter. From there on, Gouki went on the defensive, giving Hiroaki time to attack. He saw through all of Hiroaki’s attacks and dodged them one after another.

“Hmm,” he said after one attack.

“I see, I see,” he said after another, observing Hiroaki’s movements.

“Hah... Hah...” Hiroaki’s breath gradually grew more uneven, and he eventually came to a stop.

The template definition of a self-made style with no form, it seems. He could overpower the average person with his physical abilities alone, but that would be such a waste. It would be worthwhile teaching him.

Gouki smiled as he evaluated him.

This old man has completely seen through me... The moment I start swinging my sword, he already knows where it’ll go.

Sensing there was a bigger gap in their abilities than he expected, Hiroaki watched Gouki fretfully.

“I like your decisiveness. You’re using your head and thinking about how to make your attacks hit. But there’s too much excess in your movements. That sword length is intended for two-handed use. Swinging it without thinking will

make your sword easy to see through," Gouki said in his evaluation of Hiroaki.

Tch... If he can read my movements, then...!

While he was pretending to catch his breath, Hiroaki thought of a way to counter Gouki. After a while, a brilliant idea popped into his head. If his movements were being read, then he just had to move faster than Gouki could react to them. With that thought, he charged forward at his fastest speed today.



“Ooh...”

Gouki's eyes widened, impressed he could get even faster. But in contrast to the surprise in his eyes, Gouki's body moved extremely calmly. He took a step forward and swung the sword in his hand. In the next moment, Hiroaki's Divine Arms was deflected and flew through the air. The blade landed upright in the ground and scattered into particles of light like a spirit returning to its spirit form.

"..." Hiroaki was posed at the end of his sword swing, having missed the moment his sword left his hand. But he quickly noticed something was off and stood staring at the lack of weapon in his hands.

"Are you serious?" Hiroaki eventually muttered with an impressed grin. His gaze was fixed on his bare hands.

"The main problem is your excess movements. That charge just now would have been ineffective even if you moved at double that speed," Gouki said in the same easygoing tone as before.

"Ah, I see." Hiroaki scratched his head with his empty right hand.

"Do you wish to continue?" Gouki asked.

"No, it's my loss." Hiroaki accepted his defeat gracefully.

"Oh? So you accept me as an instructor?"

"Yeah, you'll do. I'd like to ask you to instruct me. I suppose I should call you something better... Would Mr. Gouki do?"

"Hahaha! Call me whatever you wish." Gouki laughed heartily.

◇ ◇ ◇

After the match ended, Satsuki, Masato, and Takahisa approached them. They had been observing the match, so could pretty much guess how it had ended.

"How did it go?" Satsuki asked Gouki anyway.

"He has approved of me," Gouki said with a firm nod.

"I see. So is it safe to assume the four of us here are fine with Gouki as our instructor?"

Satsuki looked at Takahisa. Masato and Hiroaki did the same.

Takahisa had an especially strong aversion to war and murder. He had gotten into an argument with the other three heroes over that just a short while ago. His presence at a training session to learn how to fight was questionable.

“Is that fine with you too, Lord Takahisa? Appointing me as an instructor means you’ll be learning how to fight with real combat in mind. Some of the techniques are designed around taking the lives of others,” Gouki added, purposefully giving his words bluntly.

“I...” Takahisa started to speak, but trailed off.

“I was wondering about that too. You said you were against war and murder. You called it stupid to take up weapons to avoid fighting. Wasn’t that your stance?” Hiroaki asked with a look of disgust, questioning why Takahisa was there with them.

“...” Takahisa frowned sullenly.

“Hiroaki, don’t twist things by jumping to conclusions. Let Takahisa speak first. He may have changed his mind since then.”

Sensing how the air had soured, Satsuki tried to soothe Hiroaki gently.

“Tch. What are you, the class president? He’s the one twisting things. I just don’t want his anti-war sentiments to get in the way of my own learning. He could slow our training down as well.”

“I understand how you feel, but... deciding that right off the bat and starting a fight makes it harder for Takahisa to give his honest opinion.”

Humans were flexible creatures, so it was important to listen to what someone was thinking every time. This belief was a charm of Satsuki’s. In contrast, Hiroaki had the tendency to be influenced by his first impression of someone.

There was no right or wrong to either of their beliefs. Discussions could sometimes solve problems, and sometimes make problems worse. There were times when presumptions had to be made to create solutions. Either way, people tended to believe their own beliefs were right.

And right now, there was no way of telling whose stance towards Takahisa

was right. Only god would know.

“In that case, even if you don’t want to kill people, you have to be willing to use violence to repel idiots that act violent towards you. That’s the minimum requirement to join us. If you don’t agree, you should leave,” Hiroaki demanded.

“Please stop. I just came because Lily asked me to. If I’m in the way, I’ll leave,” Takahisa said bitterly, turning and leaving the grounds.

“Ah...” Satsuki stretched her hand out after him, but stopped herself from calling him back. If Takahisa’s thoughts really hadn’t changed, then there was no point for him to remain.

“See? He hasn’t changed his mind at all,” Hiroaki huffed triumphantly.

“...” Masato seemed determined to have nothing to do with his brother regarding this topic. He didn’t even try to keep his gaze on Takahisa.

“Geez.”

As their upperclassman, Satsuki had hoped to mediate the relationship between the two brothers a little better than this. She sighed dejectedly.

“Well, no need to stop those who wish to leave. We cannot force him into learning. Let us endeavor in our own training. Now, let’s have a three-on-one to clear the air! It’ll help me grasp an understanding of your abilities, and it’ll create a sense of rivalry amongst you,” Gouki said, clapping his hands to get them back on track.

Thus, Satsuki, Masato, and Hiroaki began their joint match against Gouki.

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Meanwhile, as Takahisa left the training grounds...

“Sir Takahisa,” Lilianna called. She pinched the hem of her dress and hurried to catch up with him.

“Lily... Sorry, I couldn’t participate after all.”

Because he had withdrawn from the training session, Takahisa averted his gaze in shame. He apologized to her awkwardly.

“No, I am the one who should apologize for asking you to attend. Thank you for granting my selfish request.”

Lilianna returned the apology with a delicate smile. Indeed, the reason why Takahisa had been there was because Lilianna had invited him to participate with everyone. Takahisa had refused at first, but Lilianna’s request had been more firm than usual, so he eventually agreed. But this was the result.

“Ah, no... It’s okay, don’t worry about it. Besides, I’m thinking of going to see Miharu and the others. Do you want to come along?” Takahisa asked, scratching his cheek as he awkwardly changed the topic. While he had an obvious reason to change the topic, his desire to go and see Miharu was probably genuine.

Since there was royalty and nobility in attendance at the lesson, Miharu had remained at the mansion. It was hard for Takahisa to visit alone, so he wanted Lilianna to accompany him. However...

“I apologize. Sir Masato is still in attendance at the training, so I cannot leave yet.”

Lilianna rejected Takahisa’s request while gazing at Masato, who was still sparring in the training grounds.

“Huh? Oh... Okay,” Takahisa replied in confusion. He had expected Lilianna to willingly agree. The observant Lilianna naturally knew this, but—

“How about you make the visit yourself? I will join you once Sir Masato is done,” she suggested instead.

But it seemed he didn’t have the courage to visit Miharu at the mansion alone.

“Ah... No, I’ll watch as well. Let’s go together once they’re done,” Takahisa awkwardly proposed as an alternative. He may have been able to start a conversation with Miharu if she had been in attendance watching the lesson, but considering his past mistakes, he was unwilling to visit her mansion alone.

“Okay.”

Had Lilianna made her suggestion knowing what Takahisa would respond

with? Only she knew the answer to that.

◇ ◇ ◇

In the corner of the space allocated to observing the training grounds sat the Second Princess Charlotte of the Galarc Kingdom and First Princess Christina of the Beltrum Kingdom. Lilianna had been sitting with them moments ago, but she was currently speaking to Takahisa.

Flora was seated with Roanna a short distance away from them. There was no other royalty or nobility there, so Charlotte and Christina's conversation wouldn't be overheard by anyone. The two gazed at the sparring heroes as they spoke.

"Princess Christina. Or should I refer to you as Your Majesty, Queen Christina?" Charlotte asked.

"I'm still a princess right now. I can only call myself a queen after the coronation ceremony," Christina answered with a strained smile.

"It's a little lonely to think we won't be fellow princesses anymore, but I sincerely hope your rule will be bright and peaceful. I will give my formal congratulations on another occasion, but please allow me to congratulate you now."

"Thank you very much."

Christina thanked her with a smile, but there was still a shadow of unease in her expression.

"Are you worried about Lady Celia?" Charlotte guessed in response to the expression that Christina carried. Celia was, after all, currently on her way to Duke Arbor as a messenger from the Restoration to the Beltrum Kingdom.

"Yes..." Christina nodded honestly.

"It will be fine. I'm sure Lady Celia will return," Charlotte said with certainty. She was extremely serious about it too. Her strong belief in Celia could be seen in her eyes.

"You're very strong, Princess Charlotte," Christina murmured, eyes widening in admiration as she stared at Charlotte's profile.

“No, I believe this is due to the difference in our relationship. To you, Lady Celia is your well-respected teacher. But to me, she’s a friend of equal standing.”

“I see...”

“She promised to come back safely, so please believe in her. Lady Celia will definitely return to us.”

That was the duty of someone who stood above others, was what Charlotte didn’t say out loud.

“Right...” Encouraged by Charlotte’s words, Christina nodded slowly.

“Besides, once Lady Celia returns, the others will all give her a harsh scolding for leaving without a word. I can’t wait to feed them half-truths and make her even more troubled.”

“Try and go easy on her...”

Seeing the wicked but adorable grin on the mischievous Charlotte’s face, Christina could only smile wryly.

◇ ◇ ◇

One hour later, the heroes that had finished sparring moved over to the observation area.

“Whew, I’m beat.”

There were many spectators for the first day of training, so they had wrapped things up early. Although they were sweating, the session must have been productive to their mood, as they all had rather refreshed expressions.

Rei and Kouta greeted Hiroaki upon his return. “Welcome back.”

“Yeah,” Hiroaki replied, raising his right hand in a wave.

Meanwhile, Masato spotted Takahisa with Lilianna and called out to him in surprise. “Huh? You stuck around?”

“Yeah... I figured I might as well. I was worried about you too,” Takahisa replied, averting his eyes.

“Hmm...” Masato replied shortly. Although they were at odds about their opinions, he seemed to be happy Takahisa cared, as he looked a little embarrassed.

“Good work, Sir Masato. Would you like to have a drink?” Just then, Lilianna approached Masato with a cold drink on a tray.

“Whoa! Thank you, Princess Lilianna!” Masato accepted the glass politely, shocked that the princess herself was bringing him the drink. But he couldn’t resist his thirst and chugged the drink down in one go.

“Ah, that hit the spot!” he said like a man with a beer after a long day of work might say.

“You sound like an old man, Masato,” Satsuki giggled.

Charlotte came over with a drink just like Lilianna. “Please have one too, Lady Satsuki.”

“Thanks, Char.”

“Sir Gouki and Lady Kayoko, there are drinks for you too.”

“Ooh, this is much appreciated.”

“Thank you very much.”

Gouki and Kayoko accepted their drinks from Charlotte’s attendant.

“Hey now, why couldn’t you two think of preparing that for me?”

“Oh, well...” Hiroaki glanced at the empty-handed duo beside him and sighed at their lack of consideration.

“Here you are, Sir Hiroaki.” Roanna came over with a cold drink on a tray and offered it to Hiroaki.

“At least she’s on top of things,” he said. “Thanks.”

“See, we figured you’d prefer to receive a drink from Roanna than dull guys like us,” Rei immediately added in explanation.

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Hiroaki huffed, taking a sip of his drink.

“Oh, by the way, Sakata,” Satsuki suddenly called out to him.

“What?”

With training over, Hiroaki hadn’t been expecting Satsuki to talk to him any further. He stared at her in suspicion.

“We’re thinking of inviting Princess Christina and Princess Flora to the mansion tonight for dinner. Would you like to come too?”

“Hah?” Hiroaki narrowed his eyes, questioning her sudden change in attitude.

“What’s that look for? The three of us will be taught by Gouki from now on, so I just thought it’d be a good chance to get to know each other more. Of course, Roanna, Saiki, and Murakumo are welcome to come along too,” Satsuki said, explaining why she had approached him.

“Getting to know each other, huh...” He wasn’t particularly interested, so he’d pass. Just as Hiroaki was about to say that—

“Hold on, Hiroaki,” Rei said, tugging at his arm. They turned their backs on Satsuki and started whispering to each other.

“Wh-What, Rei?”

“Were you about to refuse just now?”

“Hmm? Well, yeah.”

“Dumbass. Stupid Hiroaki.”

“What?! What’s wrong with you, Rei? Did you want to go?”

“Of course I do! The mansion Satsuki lives in is rumored to be packed with pretty girls, you know? Sara, Orphia, and Alma are there too, and I want to worship— I mean, I want to see them again to say thanks. And Princess Christina and Princess Flora are going too, right?” Rei protested passionately.

Being right beside them, Roanna and Kouta could overhear every word of their conversation. Christina and Flora were talking to other royalty and nobility a short distance away, but they could tell their names had been mentioned and tilted their heads, wondering what they were talking about.

“Wait... Don’t you have a fiancée named Rosa already?” Hiroaki asked, shooting Rei an exasperated look.

“That is a different matter to this! I’m still seventeen! I want to have fun too, you know?”

I have a fiancée. But I’m seventeen. I want to mess around. Rei used his age as justification, his reasoning broken.

“Hmm. But...” Hiroaki’s response wasn’t very favorable.

“This isn’t like you, Hiroaki. This isn’t like you at all. I want to see the high-spirited Hiroaki I know. Didn’t you love to go to tea parties with the ladies before?” Rei said, refusing to back down.

“I suppose I did, yeah...”

When Rei pointed it out like that, it was indeed odd. Previously, Hiroaki would have actively marched wherever the pretty girls had gathered and acted as the star. Perhaps it was because he was objectively looking back on his own actions, but he seemed to be aware of this himself.

They just don’t interest me... Kind of like how a woman with a boyfriend is less attractive?

Hiroaki considered what that reason could be. But as far as he knew, all the residents of the mansion were single. Neither Satsuki nor any of the others had

a fiance—which was why Rei was so enthusiastic about going.

He thought for a few more seconds, then suddenly glanced over at Satsuki.

Oh, it might be because that fussy woman will be there.

He thought, reaching his own conclusion.

Satsuki tilted her head when their eyes met. “What?” she asked tiredly. “Are you going to attend or not?”

“Wait a minute. I’m still deciding.”

“It...It’d be nice if you could hurry it up,” Satsuki replied, smoothing over the twitch in her smile. Hiroaki’s manner of speaking was irritating, but she decided to endure it. Roanna bowed her head at her apologetically.

Why does a nice girl like her stick with a guy like him? Satsuki shook her head in return and sighed sadly, unable to understand.

“Go on... You shouldn’t keep Satsuki waiting. Just say we’ll attend.”

“The girls in that mansion won’t pay you any attention either way, you know?” Kouta mumbled at Rei, who was still urging Hiroaki to attend.

“Shut up, you’re just saying that because things with Mikaela have been going well for you. You don’t get an opinion.”

Incidentally, Mikaela was a friend of Rei’s fiancee Rosa, a girl of a lower noble family of the Beltrum Kingdom.

“Wh-What? It’s not like we’re going out or anything.”

“Huh? Wait, you’ve never mentioned her to me, Kouta.”

“I said we’re not like that! There was nothing to say...”

“Can you believe this guy, Hiroaki? He’s a coward who can’t make the first move—”

The conversation between the three boys continued to derail like that, until...

“Excuse me, Sir Hiroaki,” Roanna called, unable to remain silent any longer.

“Hm? What?”

“It’d be rude to keep Lady Satsuki waiting any longer, so if you could quickly

give her your response...”

“Ah, all right. I’ll go. Hey Satsuki. All of us will attend. Not like we have anything better to do,” Hiroaki said, finally reaching a decision. He conveyed his intention to go to Satsuki, who was still waiting.

“All right. See you later, then.”

Satsuki waved and turned around.

“Hell yeah! Awesome!”

Rei pumped his fists in a show of excitement, but—

“If you act too over the top, I will tell Rosa,” Roanna warned him with a cold glare.

“A-Aww, don’t say that, Roanna...” Rei suddenly faltered weakly. Meanwhile, Takahisa had been watching the conversation between the three boys and the duke’s daughter from the side.

“There’s a dinner party tonight?” he asked Masato and Lilianna, who were having a friendly chat between themselves.

“Come to think of it, I forgot to mention that.”

“Yeah... Why don’t you come too?”

Masato and Lilianna seemed to have heard of the gathering already and would be in attendance themselves.

There was time before training to tell me... Why didn’t anyone say so earlier?

Takahisa thought, feeling a slight sense of alienation. “Yeah, I’ll go,” he nodded. He had no reason to refuse. In fact, he had all the reason to go.

“In that case, it may be better to return to your room first and get changed.”

Takahisa was still wearing the thick cloth armor he wore to the training session. What Lilianna was suggesting was for him to put on something easier to move around in.

“Good idea. Then...” Takahisa was about to suggest they return to the castle together, when—

“Okay, let’s meet up again later. I will head to the mansion first with Sir Masato.” Lilianna spoke over him.

“Huh? Oh... Okay.” Takahisa froze like a deer in headlights before nodding weakly. He hadn’t expected Lilianna to prioritize moving with someone else over himself.

Lilianna’s choice must have been a little surprising to Masato as well, as his eyes widened slightly. But he quickly went along with it, figuring it would be a good wake up call for his older brother.

“Shall we get going then, Princess Lilianna?” he said.

“Yes, Sir Masato.”

Thus, the two naturally started walking side-by-side. Up until now, Masato’s place had belonged to Takahisa. No, Lilianna had chosen to walk beside Takahisa. Yet now—

Why...? Why wasn’t it him beside her, but Masato?

Lilianna probably didn’t have any ulterior motives. There shouldn’t be a need to be bothered by every little thing.

But for some reason, it felt like he was being ignored and isolated. He didn’t think he had let go of anything, yet it felt like he had lost something... It gave him a sense of feeling panicked, like he was falling from.

“...” He gazed after them in silence.

◇ ◇ ◇

That night, many visitors gathered at the mansion where Satsuki and the others lived.

The get-together was in the form of a standing buffet. Many dishes lined the tables in the dining room, and there were seats for those who wished to rest from standing too.

“Hey, Masato. I won’t lose next time.”

“Hehe. Bring it on. I won’t lose to Satsuki next time either.”

“You can say that again. Tch, to think I’d lose to that woman...”

“It’s just a matter of compatibility, you two. My Divine Arms is a polearm, and I’ve been practicing how to use the naginata for a long time now.”

Hiroaki, Masato, and Satsuki were chatting about the training session they participated in. As their conversation implied, the results of the matches between them were as follows: Satsuki won over Masato and Hiroaki, Masato won over Hiroaki, and Hiroaki lost to both Satsuki and Masato.

Swinging their drawn Divine Arms, there had been moments where they faltered from attacking due to their inexperience, but they were able to measure each others’ abilities. Thanks to that, Hiroaki and Masato were able to form a healthy rivalry. Meanwhile...

“...”

Despite being a fellow hero, Takahisa was unable to join the conversation due to sitting out of the training. He could only watch on awkwardly while being left out.

“How about you participate in the training after all, Sir Takahisa? You’d have something in common to discuss with them,” Lilianna suggested gently.

“No, I... I’ll pass.” Takahisa shook his head with a bitter look. He had no intention of changing his mind.

“That’s enough from you, Rei.”

“Oww! W-Wait, hold on a minute, Hiroaki!” Rei seemed to have teased Hiroaki about something, and was being held in a headlock out of retaliation. He frantically tapped Hiroaki’s arm to surrender.

“Hahaha. You guys are funny,” Masato laughed in amusement.

“Oh...! Will he be okay?” Flora asked worriedly. It must have been a shocking scene to a sheltered princess like her. If nobles treated each other like that, they could potentially start a war between their houses.

“It’s fine, boys their age are always like that. It’s a normal sight back in our world,” Satsuki explained, recalling the antics of her classmates with a sigh.

“R-Really?”

“Yes. I haven’t seen a sight like this since coming to this world, so it brings

back memories of Earth.” Satsuki smiled in amusement

“I was also surprised at first, but it seems like in Sir Hiroaki’s world, gentlemen of the same age group communicate with each other like this,” Roanna added, having spent a lot of time with Hiroaki and the others.

Flora hummed curiously. “I see...”

“No, it’s not quite the same when you explain it like that... They’re simply being childish...” Satsuki corrected with a troubled look, sensing a strange misunderstanding was being created.

“H-Hiroaki, don’t forget about Kouta! You still have to ask him about Mikaela, remember?”

Rei tried to redirect Hiroaki’s focus onto Kouta.

“Oh, that’s right. Kouta, spill the details. What’s this about you being a coward?”

“Wha— Stop that! There’s really nothing between us.”

“Well, I didn’t expect a loser like you to be able to make a move anyway. But there’s a likely chance Mikaela might do something. Is that right, Rei?”

Hiroaki had sharp senses for this kind of vulgar topic and promptly gave Rei his theory.

“That’s exactly right!”

“I’m serious, it’s nothing!” Kouta protested frantically.

“It isn’t up to you to decide if there’s nothing going on. It’s up to me.” Hiroaki finally freed Rei and pointed at him with his index finger.

“What kind of reasoning is that...?”

“Haha. I want to hear more about Kouta too.”

“Masato! Not you too!”

Masato raised his hand and expressed his eager interest, making Kouta’s shoulders fall.

“Yeah! It’s the request of two heroes now. Tell us, Rei.”

“Roger that!” Rei made a jesting salute and began to retell the recent events between Kouta and Mikaela. Watching on as the boys from Japan chatted between themselves was Christina.

“Seeing a heated discussion like that makes me think there isn’t much difference in mental maturity across worlds,” she said with a smile. Indeed, getting excited about such vulgar topics was the same in any world.

“Perhaps,” Satsuki agreed with a giggle.

The dinner party had naturally split into a group of the boys from Earth and a group of all the other girls.

Even Roanna, who usually remained by Hiroaki’s side, seemed to find it insensitive to stand by the boys as they were opening up to each other. She stood with Christina and Flora instead.

The only exception was the older Gouki, who watched over the younger ones with Kayoko, and Takahisa. Takahisa was from the same world and was of the same age, yet he kept his distance from them, making him seem oddly out of place.

By process of elimination, Takahisa was staying beside Lilianna, which brought him closer to the circle of girls. However, that didn’t mean he was participating in their conversation.

“Say, Lily. Do you know what Miharu’s up to?” he asked, wondering why Miharu wasn’t there with them.

“She’s cooking the dishes for us. She’ll be joining us later with the others.”

Indeed, Miharu was on kitchen duty. Incidentally, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and the Yagumo group with the exception of Gouki, Kayoko, and Komomo were all busy with preparing and serving the food. The residents of this mansion generally didn’t hire any castle staff, so they tended to do everything they could by themselves.

“I see... Maybe I should help them.”

Whether it was because he was feeling impatient after visiting the mansion for days in a row with no progress towards mending his relationship with

Miharu, or because he was unable to mingle with the others at the gathering, Takahisa's mind was focused elsewhere. He tried to leave the dining room and head for the kitchen where Miharu was. He didn't even look at Lilianna beside him.

"Please don't. You are here as a guest, Sir Takahisa," Lilianna scolded him gently.

"But there's no point in me being here..." Takahisa replied.

If so, why was he attending the get-together at all? That was the question anyone would think of first. But there was no productive answer to that question. Besides, even without asking that question, Lilianna knew the answer.

Because Miharu was here. Takahisa chose to attend this dinner because Miharu lived in this mansion. Even now, Takahisa only had Miharu in his sights. Lilianna understood that much.

"That's not true. There is plenty of meaning in your attendance today."

"Do you really think so? I don't think it would make a difference to anyone if I wasn't here..."

Takahisa's gaze lingered in the direction of the kitchen as he gave himself a self-deprecating smile. He then looked back around at those in the dining room.

"Hey Masato, you lucky kid. You live with all these pretty ladies every day?"

"But Rei, don't you have a pretty fiancee yourself?"

"Wow Rei, are you really envious of a primary school kid?"

The sight of Masato getting along with Rei and Kouta came into view. It was like he was being shown an opposite existence to himself.

"It's like I'm not here at all. Like no one remembers me. No one looks at me. The only person who saw me for myself was Aki, but even she's with Miharu right now..."

Takahisa gazed yearningly in the direction of the kitchen once more.

"That is definitely untrue. You say that there's no point in being here and that no one looks at you, but I... The one who truly isn't looking is..."

Lilianna objected to Takahisa in a rare show of emotion. But she trailed off from what she was saying partway.

Based on the parts of her statement that could be heard, Takahisa's words about no one looking at him and no one caring about whether he was here or not had affected her more than expected.

Because until today, Lilianna had always looked at Takahisa... Yet Takahisa himself only had eyes for Miharu.

I have always watched you until now, Sir Takahisa. But you've never looked at me... I should be the one asking if there was any point in me being by your side.

Lilianna stared at Takahisa's face, wanting very much to say those words out loud. Takahisa met her gaze.

"What's wrong?" he asked in confusion, having no idea what she was implying.

Lilianna sighed in resignation and slowly shook her head. "No, it's just that there was someone who had been watching you until now. Even if you don't understand right now, please don't forget that."

"Is anything wrong?" Komomo suddenly asked.

She had noticed the air between Takahisa and Lilianna was a little odd, and called out to them out of concern. Embarrassed by making a girl so much younger than her worry about her.

"Oh, how embarrassing. I just choked on my food a little. I'm fine now." Lilianna instantly erased her gloomy expression and smiled gracefully.

Chapter 3: Returning Home

In a city to the east of the Beltrum Kingdom, two women entered an inn just as the sun began to set. It was Celia and Aria.

Being the hour that it was, many of the nearby inns were fully occupied. They had to go around several places before they were fortunate enough to find a room.

“Thankfully we found a room,” Celia said once they entered, sighing tiredly as she sat down on the bed.

“Indeed. You’ve worked hard carrying us such a long distance.”

“You must be tired too.”

Aria shook her head. “All I did was hold on to you.”

“But I’m sure it wasn’t the most comfortable journey having to be carried—having to hold on—the whole way... We were moving pretty fast too.”

In the end, Aria had held on to Celia the entire way from Amande while they flew. Celia tilted her head, struggling to find the right words to describe how they moved, but—

“It was fine. Your body was perfectly comfortable to hold on to,” Aria giggled.

“G-Geez! Don’t make fun of me!”

Celia ducked her head, blushing.

“I’m not making fun of you. That aside, we did travel at a considerable speed. What was even more impressive was how little air resistance there was...”

When an object traveled through the air, it collided with the air it was traveling against. This caused a force opposite to the direction of travel, also known as air resistance.

“It seems my wings of light create a wind barrier around the caster, neutralizing the force of air resistance. Although I’m not sure how much speed it can withstand...”

Celia herself was yet to fully understand how Alis Luminis worked herself. But Rio had said something about using a barrier to reduce air resistance when flying with spirit arts, so she figured this magic did something similar.

“Does that mean you can increase your speed even further?”

“Yes, although it depends on my magic essence. But the faster I try to go, the less efficient my essence consumption is, so it’s not optimal for traveling long distances.”

Rio was able to fly faster and for longer without taking breaks, but that was because Rio had a ridiculous amount of essence.

“I see... At this rate, we’ll be able to reach Cleia tomorrow morning. Will your magic essence last until then?”

“Yup. I have the essence crystals Liselotte gave me as well. I’ll rest up tonight, and whatever I don’t recover I’ll refill from the crystals.”

While it varied from person to person, it was generally said that thirty percent of one’s magic essence could be recovered by sleeping overnight. Recovery speed fell while awake, so the most effective way of recovering lost essence was to sleep well.

“Got it. If we run low on essence crystals, I can hunt monsters for their enchanted gems, so just say the word.”

“Thank you. But I’ll be okay for now. You rest up too..”

“Understood,” Aria said.

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Meanwhile, while Celia and Aria were checking into the inn...

Elsewhere, at the capital of the Claire territory in the Beltrum Kingdom, Cleia. Sneaking around outside the Count’s estate grounds were a few mercenaries.

“Hey, Arein. The others have assumed their posts,” Lucci whispered to Arein.

They were the members of the Heavenly Lions, formerly led by Lucius Orgueil. . At his waist was the black enchanted sword that once belonged to Lucius Orgueil, their former leader. The sun had set, and their surroundings were

almost dark.

“All right. Now we wait until Mr. Reiss arrives. We’re going to take shifts keeping watch! You go sleep first,” Arein ordered.

But Lucci’s gaze remained fixed on the Count’s estate. “Say, Arein... Mr. Reiss’s goal is the Count’s wife, right? Why don’t we go in first and grab her, then?” He wondered why they couldn’t act before Reiss’s arrival.

“Dumbass. They think we left the fort and went to Galarc, remember? How are we going to explain things if we invade first and capture her? Are you going to hand her over and just tell them the truth?” Arein asked in exasperation.

While Charles wasn’t a concern, his father Duke Arbor was quite formidable. He was yet to trust Reiss completely either. If they acted out of line, it was possible they could completely lose his trust. Even if they managed to hand the Count’s wife over with a plausible explanation, the situation put Reiss at risk of suspicion. That was why—

“In order to avoid complicating things, we have to refrain from making noticeable movements ourselves. It’s best we wait for Mr. Reiss to arrive and help Charles capture her himself,” Arein added.

In the first place, they had no way of knowing if Celia was headed for the Claire territory at all. Even if she came, they didn’t know if she intended on taking her parents away. She could arrive before Reiss, or she might not arrive at all.

If it was possible for the Count’s wife to be captured without issue, there was no need or urgency for the mercenaries to act and complicate things. And if they were to act, then they had to do so in a way that could be reasonably explained.

“But if that woman comes... We have to act then, right?”

“That’s right. We’ve been ordered to erase her if she arrives on an enchanted ship before Mr. Reiss. In a way that doesn’t identify us, that is.”

“In other words, our mission is to finish off that tiny brat, but not capture the Count’s wife, right?”

“Yeah. If we kill that woman, she won’t be able to take Count’s family anywhere.”

“I see... Well, as long as I get to fight her.” Lucci grinned eagerly. He was looking forward to a rematch with Celia after crossing swords at the fort.

“You know we have no reason to fight her head-on when she’s in her best condition. Why do you think we went to Galarc to bring reinforcements to surround the mansion with?”

“To ensure we’ll be able to end her, no?”

“Well, you could put it that way... But the goal is to capture her before she can do anything. And the reason why we want to do that is...”

“So we can kill her before she casts any weird magic?” Lucci guessed, finishing Arein’s sentence with an unimpressed look.

“Exactly. So you do get it. I don’t know what kind of magic or sorcery she used at the fort, but she’s no stronger than you average girl on the streets without it. She’s no threat without her magic.”

That’s why they’d kill Celia before she could use her magic. It was as simple as that.

“Assassination is no fun,” Lucci muttered. It seemed he was only interested in defeating Celia in a direct confrontation.

“That part of you resembles the Commander the most.”

Arein recalled the late Lucius and mumbled to himself.

“Ha. But the new commander is you. Keep it together, Commander Arein. I will move exactly as you order.

“That’s what I should be saying. I may be in charge of the group, but you’ve got the Commander’s enchanted sword. Don’t forget you’re the face of the squad now.”

The two glared at each other for a moment.

“Yeah... I won’t do anything unworthy of this sword.” Lucci touched the sword at his waist and nodded with a serious expression.

◇ ◇ ◇

The next day, Celia and Aria departed from the city early in the morning and arrived at the Claire territory capital of Cleia before noon. The two passed through the gate and entered the city. Like the last time Celia was here, there were unemployed citizens loitering the streets.

Celia had only learned afterwards that Duke Arbor had pulled strings, forcing migrants to flock to the territories of the nobles of the princess's faction. Among those migrants were those formerly employed in Duke Huguenot's territory.

In order to prevent public order from falling apart, Roland was doing his best to prepare temporary employment for them, but the situation was rather harsh.

"..." Celia looked around at the city listlessly and sighed. There was nothing she could do.

"Does the state of the city bother you?" Aria asked.

"Huh...? Yeah, I last came here several months ago, but I wasn't able to look around the city at the time..."

The last time she came here was with Rio. When she recalled that moment, sadness filled Celia's eyes.

"In that case, perhaps we could secretly look around before we leave. We traveled so fast, there was barely a chance to enjoy the journey. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"I'd also like a proper break from time to time. Especially if it's with a trusted friend."

Out of consideration for her old friend, Aria offered those words with a sigh.

"I see... Then let's take our time on the way back. As thank you for keeping me company on my business, I'll keep you company on your break." Celia smiled happily.

"In that case, let's get your business over with. It'd be tragic if Duke Arbor's forces made a move before us."

“You’re right. Let’s go.” Celia pulled herself together and nodded.

“But before that... There’s a chance Duke Arbor’s forces are already here, so I have an idea.”

“What do you mean?”

The two held a quick strategy meeting before heading for the Count’s estate.

◇ ◇ ◇

Later, at the Claire estate...

Hidden in a corner of the grounds, Arein and Lucci monitored the path leading from the front gate for every visitor approaching the estate.

“Hey.” The first one who spotted her was Arein.

“Hey now, who’s that babe?” Lucci’s eyes widened as he saw the approaching visitor.

A young blonde-haired woman dressed in an adventurer-like outfit was walking down the path. She had a slender and toned body, as though she had trained quite a bit, but her glamorous figure was still well-padded in all the right places.

Above all, what was most remarkable about her was her shapely, sculpture-like face. There was no doubt she was beautiful enough to turn the heads of every man and woman she passed in town, making them stop and stare in awe.

Now, the identity of this woman was naturally Celia’s old friend, Aria... But Lucci was completely distracted by her appearance.

“Dumbass. Look at her waist,” Arein warned him.

“Yeah, it’s a nice waist. I’d love to put my hands around it.”

“Not that. It’s a sword—and a rather sharp one, at that.”

“Huh? Oh, is that an enchanted sword?”

Lucci finally directed his gaze to the sword at Aria’s waist.

“She isn’t just a visitor, she must be some noble’s knight. I think I’ve seen her before somewhere...” Arein muttered, glaring at Aria with a sense of deja vu.

“Shall I go and find out for you?” Lucci suggested, ready to go and hit on her.

“Stop messing around.”

“Tch. It’s not like there are any guards around.” Lucci eyed her regretfully. That was how attractive of a woman she was.

“The other guards are watching other locations.”

During that time, Aria marched through the gate and onto the estate grounds.

That seemed to make Lucci finally give up.

“Nothing we can do, I guess...” he sighed.

Ten more minutes passed after that without any particular movement from the patrolling guards or servants. But then a new person came down the path, drawing the attention of the mercenaries.

“Tch, this one’s got a hood on.”

Lucci clicked his tongue. As he described, the new visitor was wearing a hood pulled down over their face. However—

“That height is suspicious...” Arein mumbled.

“True. That’s around the same height as that brat.” Lucci glared harshly.

“They’re armed as well. It doesn’t look like a cheap weapon, but it doesn’t seem well-used either.”

There was over seventy meters between Arein and Celia, but he observed her carefully.

“Hmm. Do you think that brat bought a new sword before returning home?”

“It’s possible.”

“Which means this is the one we’re after, right? What do we do first? Will it be a problem if she enters the mansion? Shall we kill her first?”

“...” Arein didn’t answer Lucci immediately. The reason was because if the hooded figure *wasn’t* Celia, they’d have to deal with the trouble of disposing of an extra corpse. There was also the risk of being spotted by the patrolling guards.

However, like Lucci said, it would be just as troublesome if Celia entered the mansion. This was the only opportunity they had to ambush her from an advantageous position. Sure enough—

“We have no other choice. Let’s do it. I’ll attack with magic from here. You close in on them, finish them off, then confirm their identity and come back. If it isn’t that woman, bring the corpse back here,” Arein decided.

“Got it.”

“All right, go! *Photon Projectilis*.” With that order, Arein held his hand up at Celia and recited the spell.

“Got it.”

Lucci had already drawn Lucius’s enchanted sword before he replied, enhancing his physical body. He ran towards the hooded figure—at this point, he was sixty meters from Celia. With his body enhanced by the enchanted sword, he could close such a distance in a mere two or three seconds.

“Ugh...!”

“Huh?”

Arein, who had been ready to fire the magic circle in his hand, let out a sudden cry. Sensing something was wrong, Lucci immediately whirled around.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Aria stood there with her enchanted sword in hand, having just rendered Arein unconscious.

◇ ◇ ◇

As Lucci and Arein had guessed, the hooded figure had been Celia; she was walking down the path to her family’s mansion. The two were plotting to attack her a mere sixty to seventy meters away.

It’s quiet...

There was no way for Celia to know that. Aria had ordered her to approach the mansion as naturally as possible, so she focused on moving her feet down the path.

Incidentally, this was the strategy the two came up with before heading for the mansion: because it was possible Duke Arbor’s forces were already planted at the estate, Aria would approach first to check for any enemies hidden on the grounds. After entering the mansion and giving Celia’s family a brief explanation of the situation, Aria would slip out the back and search the area. Celia would then approach the mansion from the front gate and lure out any hidden attackers. That way, Aria would be able to ambush any lurking enemies from behind and meet up with Celia before returning to the mansion. This was their

plan.

Over ten minutes had passed since Aria entered the mansion. Celia's arrival had been announced to the gatekeeper, so she was shown straight through the gate.

She approached the mansion, when she spotted her parents looking out the front entrance of the mansion. Celia held back the urge to run up to them. If there really was someone watching her, running towards the mansion could have an adverse effect. That's why she feigned composure as she approached the entrance, but when she eventually stepped inside—

"Father! Mother!" Celia said emotionally as she reunited with her parents. She used all of her tiny body to hug both her parents at the same time.

"Celia!" Her father, Roland, pulled her close and patted her on the back gently.

"Celia, oh Celia. My darling daughter." A silver-haired woman of small stature hugged Celia lovingly. She didn't look a day over her twenties, but her actual age was over forty. Her name was Monica Claire, and she was Celia's mother. It seemed like Celia's young appearance was inherited from her mother.

At any rate, Monica hadn't been in attendance at Celia's wedding to Charles, and she hadn't been able to meet Celia the last time she snuck into the basement with Rio. It had been a long time since Celia last saw her mother.

"Mother..." Celia clung tightly to her mother, filling the loneliness from being separated until now. Incidentally, there was a reason why they hadn't met until now. It had to do with the rare congenital disorder that appeared within the Claire family bloodline.

In short, some people were born with unstable physical conditions.

When they were healthy, they could run and jump perfectly fine. As long as they took care of themselves, their lifespan was unaffected, and they could live perfectly normal lives.

But there were times where they would fall ill without warning and be forced to rest. While there was no risk to their lives if they stayed on bed rest, moving around too much in this weakened state could potentially kill them. Their

conditions could get so severe, they would be unable to walk more than a few meters.

The duration of this condition varied from person to person, but they were forced to live in bed the entire time. And there was no telling when the next bout of this disorder would be—it could be weeks, months, or even years.

That was why most people afflicted by this disorder never left the city they were born in. Monica had never left Cleia in her life either—Roland did everything in his power to spend time at home with her over his secondary residence in the capital.

Incidentally, this disorder was said to reveal its symptoms in the affected within a few years of birth. In other words, those who showed no symptoms in their childhood were spared from this disorder.

Fortunately, Celia was born without this disorder, but Celia's mother was born with it.

Digressing further, it was often a risk for women of the Claire bloodline afflicted with this disorder to give birth. If their condition deteriorated during the pregnancy, they could potentially lose their life. That's why Roland and Monica had once disputed heavily over whether to make an heir together. It was only after many trials and tribulations that their daughter Celia had been born.



“I’m sorry it’s been so long... If you’re here now, does that mean you’re okay now?” Celia asked, peering at her mother’s face worriedly.

“Yes. The last time you were in the basement of the mansion, I was on bed rest. I recovered two months ago, but the six months of lying down took a toll on my muscles, so I’m not fully back to normal yet.”

Monica didn’t seem to consider her body’s disorder unfortunate at all. She giggled cutely as she answered. There was a charm to her that was unthinkable for someone over forty years old. Even a teenage boy could fall for her.

“I see...”

“Don’t make that face. Nothing will happen to me as long as I rest.”

Monica touched Celia’s cheek gently.

“I’ve wanted the three of us to hug together again. Heh.”

Roland gathered his wife and daughter in his arms.

“It’s suffocating. You—step back a little.” Monica gently let him down, making him step back.

“Ah, okay...” Roland nodded dejectedly and loosened his hold on them.

“...” Feeling like she had finally returned home, Celia smiled happily. However...

“U-Umm, there’s something I need to discuss with you...”

Unfortunately, she couldn’t continue to enjoy her family time like this forever. After being attacked at the fortress, Celia feared that Duke Arbor would make a move on Roland and Monica next. She had hurried here in order to inform them all about it.

“That’s right... Aria explained things briefly. She went to check on the grounds as planned, but was everything okay on your end, Celia?”

Roland took another step back and pulled himself together, showing worry for Celia.

“Yes, as you can see. But what’s more important right now is the two of you. Duke Arbor may come for you. I came here today to tell you that.” Celia looked between her parents’ faces from her mother’s arms.

“Hmm...” Roland hummed in thought. It was at that moment that a loud

explosion could be heard outside the mansion.

◇ ◇ ◇

A short while ago, outside where Aria and Lucci were facing each other.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Aria asked Lucci. He had whipped around after she hit Arein on the back of the head with her sword hilt and knocked him out.

“Well, well... If it isn’t the babe who went into the mansion just now.”

Despite being on the receiving end of a surprise attack, Lucci was extremely composed. In fact, he even had a relaxed grin on his face. This was because he knew from all his experience that panicking was unhelpful in unexpected situations.

“Answer my question.”

“Say, want to have a good time with me?”

Aria shook her head in annoyance. “This conversation is going nowhere.”

“Hey now, don’t say that. I’m glad to be talking to you, you know?” Lucci said, carefully assuming a combat-ready position.

His opponent was someone capable of surprising them and knocking out Arein. There was no way he would let his guard down.

Judging from his features, this is the enchanted sword user from the Heavenly Lions that Celia mentioned. He looks like a thug, but he’s apparently quite skilled. And his sword’s ability is...

Even without crossing swords with Lucci, Aria could tell who he was from his behavior. She began walking in a circle around Lucci while keeping a close eye on his enchanted sword.

There’s no helping it. At worst, an unconscious man may have to be the only prisoner I can capture.

She glanced at the unconscious Arein and made a decision.

“The fact you left me alone means you prefer me over him, right?” Lucci asked, also glancing at Arein before looking at Aria.

“...” Aria sighed heavily, too annoyed to reply.

She had aimed for Arein first because he had a magic attack aimed at Celia. She could see that Lucci was equipped with a troublesome enchanted sword, so while she had wanted to take him out first, she prioritized Celia’s safety.

“I’m going to assume your silence is affirmation.” Lucci grinned smugly.

“I don’t know what you’re misunderstanding, but I suggest you surrender immediately if you do not wish to die. Unless you’re claiming to be related to the Claire house—in which case I ask that you present proof.”

The fact they were hiding in the bushes and attacking people passing by was more than enough proof they were suspicious, but she had to go through the right process.

“I should be asking you that. Who are you to Count Claire? I’ve never heard of him having such a skilled female knight,” Lucci asked in return.

“I will assume your avoidance of the question means you are unrelated. I don’t know which country hired you mercenaries, but I will use force if you refuse.”

“Really, now.”

Aria insinuated that she was aware of Lucci’s background. Lucci’s gaze grew sharper at that, and the two took on positions fully prepared for battle.

They both moved at the same time.

Each side possessed their own enchanted sword. Their physical bodies were enhanced to a similar level. The moment they were within range of each other, they both swung their swords at the same time.

The screech of metal clashing against metal repeatedly echoed through the air. The two swords clashed multiple times in the span of one or two seconds.

Unable to reach a resolution in a single round, the two stepped back and caught their breaths before closing in for a second round,

“Whew. You really are a fine woman! How about we go for a round in bed as well?” Lucci whistled in admiration and praised Aria.

“I refuse.”

Aria paid Lucci’s flirting no mind and charged forward.

“Whoa!”

Lucci deftly handled Aria’s attack and proceeded to aim a counterattack at her in return. But Aria immediately distanced herself again. Without pausing to rest, she swiftly ran in an arc around Lucci.

Tch, she sure moves around a lot. In fact...

Lucci clicked his tongue, sensing something was off. It felt like Aria was overly aware of his counterattacks. She never stopped moving, even in situations where it would normally be safe to do so.

Lucci was able to use his enchanted sword to cut through space and teleport his blade to a point within his field of view. It was a sure-kill move against anyone who was unaware of the sword’s ability. But it was still difficult for Lucci to aim precisely against a moving target, so he was unable to use that ability against Aria when she moved.

“You already know what my sword’s ability is, don’t you?” he guessed after he’d watched her move for a while.

“...” Aria neither confirmed nor denied it. But Lucci was convinced that she knew and narrowed his eyes warily.

There aren’t many who know the ability of this sword...

It hadn’t been long since Lucci learned to use the sword. It was possible she had seen Lucius use the sword before, but it was hard to imagine Lucius would show the sword’s abilities to anyone. Which meant...

“You heard about it from Celia Claire, didn’t you? So that hooded figure who went inside just now was her after all...”

Lucci’s focus turned to the mansion for a brief moment. At that, Aria took the chance to approach him. She swung her sword and overwhelmed him, forcing him backwards.

“Should you be looking away right now?”

“Ugh...!” Lucci was knocked off balance. While he managed to keep a hold of the hilt, the sword was blown back so far, he was leaning backwards.

Aria proceeded to close in on him, swinging again.

“Huh?!” She suddenly leaped aside as though she had noticed something. At almost the same moment, darkness spread on the ground one step away from Lucci, the blade of his enchanted sword emerging upwards. If Aria had been one step closer to him, the blade would have gone through her foot. Upon closer inspection, the blade of Lucci’s sword was covered in darkness, and its length was shorter than before.

“Seriously? You evaded that?” Lucci grinned. Although his attack had missed, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

So he showed an opening and feigned weakness on purpose. Being able to use traps like this is rather annoying...

Aria looked down on the enchanted sword reaching out of the ground in annoyance. He had made her lower her guard before activating the sword’s ability and attacking from an unexpected position. It wasn’t so easy to avoid a move like that. However...

If I keep an eye on his sword, I can tell when the ability is activated. There has to be some process to casting the ability and attacking too...

She could see a chance of victory. She had been able to see his ability with her own eyes, so there was no need to observe him any further. With that, Aria prepared her next attack.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Three hooded men appeared out of nowhere, surrounding Aria.

He had more men after all... Aria sighed in annoyance.

After explaining the situation to Roland and Monica, Aria’s first priority once she left the mansion was Celia’s safety. She had headed straight for the entrance of the grounds, where she discovered Lucci and Arein hidden in the trees to the side, leading to their current situation.

“As you can see, I’m being hit on by a babe. But it seems she’s a bit of a wild

one, and our flirting got a little out of hand."

Lucci looked over at Arein, who was still unconscious, and explained the situation to his fellow mercenaries.

"You need to end this woman quickly. The sound of your swords reached the garden. Any longer and the guards will come."

"Tch, guess I have no choice."

The four mercenaries decided to take out Aria together.

"*Magicae Displodo*!" Aria recited in a quiet voice, aiming her hand in the air. A magic circle appeared.

"Wha...!" The mercenaries hurried to stop her, but Aria leaped away from them and onto the branch of a nearby tree. She then fired the magic cannon into the air. A deafening boom could be heard throughout the estate.

Her ability to remain calm in this situation and rapidly cast a magic spell without any hesitation was remarkable.

"You..." The mercenaries glared up at Aria angrily.

"I couldn't help but notice that you didn't want the guards to find you, so I called them over," Aria said simply. With this, the guards of the estate would gather within the next few minutes.

"Tch."

Lucci swung his sword, warping his blade to slash at Aria while he remained on the ground. But Aria leaped to another branch before jumping down to the ground. The branch Lucci slashed fell to the ground behind her.

"Surround her!"

The mercenaries charged towards where Aria landed. They wanted to finish her off before the guards arrived to prevent her from spreading any information.

The members of the Heavenly Lions were all equipped with mass-produced enchanted swords. They weren't unique pieces like Aria and Lucci's swords and could only enhance their physical bodies, but that enhancement was far

stronger than using magic to enchant their physical abilities. The mercenaries drew near faster than expected.

They're fast!

Aria's eyes widened faintly. But in contrast to her surprise, her body moved calmly. She deflected the swords of the three mercenaries with precision, then backed away to make sure they couldn't get behind her.

"Th-This woman...!" Even though three men were attacking her at once, they couldn't land a hit on her. Sensing Aria's strength, panic started to spread across the men's faces.

"Haha! Strong, isn't she?!" Lucci was the only one who remained back, laughing happily.

"This is no laughing matter!"

"We have to silence her quickly!"

They had the advantage in numbers. With enough time, they should be able to take her out. But they didn't have time to waste in a situation like this.

However, Aria was in a similarly pressured position.

Each one of them has extremely high skill. So this is the rumored Heavenly Lions. This might be a bit of a problem...

If she had been facing three knights that had their physical abilities enchanted with magic, she would have had no issue suppressing them.

But against three veteran warriors with bodies enhanced through enchanted swords, that was no longer the case. Furthermore, the most dangerous man was waiting behind them, and she had to spend some of her attention watching how he moved. Considering the ability of his enchanted sword, she could be attacked from anywhere. Under such unfavorable conditions, merely being able to block all their attacks was a feat.

"Hey, Lucci! You need to fight too!" One mercenary yelled in anger.

"Don't panic. There's an order to this. Once you three are rejected, it'll be my turn to win her heart!" Lucci replied, thrusting his enchanted sword forward. His sword moved through empty space, but he wasn't trying to stab the air.

The tip of his sword was swallowed in darkness, and a similar darkness appeared behind where Aria was retreating. The blade flew out from that darkness. The three mercenaries had made it easier for him to aim by directing where Aria could move. It was improvised teamwork, but it had gone well.

“Oh!”

Aria had naturally expected Lucci to attack from behind, so she noticed the blade early on. However, although she had noticed it, she was unable to react.

This was because of the three men surrounding her from the front, left, and right of her. If she tried to turn around and deflect the sword behind her, they would attack. But if she continued facing them at this rate, Lucci’s enchanted sword would stab her.

The teamwork of the mercenaries created a situation where she couldn’t avoid the attack even though she knew it was coming. There was only one thing she could do: avoid the sword behind her without looking.

Merely avoiding could create more openings for further attacks, but this was her only choice to get out of this dilemma without injury. Her current stance was too unstable to jump too. She wouldn’t be able to put much distance between them, and she’d be targeted the moment she landed.

Thus, Aria twisted her body with her feet on the ground.

“That’s what I thought!” Lucci had been waiting for the moment she tried to evade him. He shifted the enchanted sword to swing in the direction she was evading.

“Guh...” With no other choice, Aria braced herself for impact. She wouldn’t be able to block other attacks if she blocked this one, but there was no other option for her.

“Aria!” a girl’s voice shouted; it was an extremely familiar voice to Aria.In the next instant, a fifth sword that didn’t belong to the mercenaries appeared in Aria’s field of view. That sword swung from bottom up, deflecting Lucci’s enchanted sword just before it reached Aria’s body. Metal clashed against metal.

Lucci’s enchanted sword flew in an unexpected direction, slashing through the

air before disappearing into the darkness and returning to its original position.

Sure enough, the one who repelled Lucci's blade was Celia. Celia flipped her sword after her swing and brought the blade back down on the other three mercenaries.

"Whoa!"

The elegant swordsmanship made the three men back away from Aria.

"I apologize for arriving late," Celia said, lining beside Aria.

"Not at all. Thank you for that. But I'm shocked—when did you learn that kind of swordcraft?" Aria asked in surprise. Celia's movements just now were impressive even to a swordmaster like Aria. Although they were in the middle of battle, she couldn't help herself from asking about it. When she shot Celia a sidelong glance, she could tell there was keen light in her eye that wasn't there before. However...

"I'm actually cheating a little. I'll explain it to you later," Celia said with a wry smile. She was still her usual self.

"Please do. I would love to hear it. But for now, I assume I can entrust my back to you?" Aria asked with a smile.

It was strange. There was nothing logical about it. As far as Aria knew, Celia was a sorcerer that should be protected in this situation, yet she felt assured enough to leave her to fight.

Celia nodded firmly. "Of course."

Thus, the battle changed from four on one to four on two. Aria and Celia still had the disadvantage in numbers, but there was a vast difference between taking four people on at once compared to taking on two people each. With a reliable partner by her side, she had nothing else to worry about.



Celia and Aria watched the mercenaries carefully.

“Hmph. Well. Guess this is it, huh?. We’re retreating.”

With a glance at the unconscious Arein, Lucci clicked his tongue and ordered a retreat.

“What about the plan...?” one of the men asked him.

“The plan failed. We might have a chance of winning, but dragging out the fight and getting one of us captured would be the worst case scenario,” Lucci explained.

Although Reiss would probably be able to silence us anyway... He thought with a bitter frown.

He had a fairly certain hunch that Reiss had used a magic artifact to silence their comrades that were captured during the attack on Rio’s mansion in the Galarc Castle. Among those captured was Ven, a man he had worked with for many years now.

Those who failed their mission would be silenced. As mercenaries, this was the line of work they were in—there was nothing they could complain about. But that didn’t mean they were willing to lose their comrades.

“Once we retrieve him, we’re getting out of here.”

Lucci shot another distracted glance at Arein and urged his comrades to hurry. But neither Celia nor Aria were about to let them leave so easily.

“You seem to think you’re going to leave like this. Did you think we would allow that?” Aria asked coldly.

“Yeah, I do.” Lucci stabbed his enchanted sword in the ground. Darkness immediately spread everywhere.

“Wha...”

Aria and Celia watched the area around them cautiously. But Lucci hadn’t activated his enchanted sword to harm them.

Darkness spread around where Arein lay on the ground. The darkness swallowed him like a swamp, and his body reappeared on the ground by the sword.

“Hey, take care of him,” Lucci ordered one of the men. A mercenary picked up Arein’s body and threw him over his shoulder.

“Aria, let’s let them leave,” Celia whispered to Aria.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. We want to avoid any unnecessary fighting as well. If they’re here, then that confirms Duke Arbor is after mother and father. It won’t be strange for the main army to show up soon. These men might even be a distraction for them...”

It was possible another squad could be marching upon them right at this moment, in order to target Roland and Monica. That’s why Celia decided it wouldn’t be wise to draw out the battle. Oddly enough, her reason for withdrawing was the same as Lucci—they both had people they wished to protect.

“Very well...” Aria agreed without sheathing her sword. Meanwhile, the mercenaries slowly and carefully backed away. The one carrying Arein went first, flanked by two others for protection.

“Hmph.”

Lucci guarded them from the rear, holding his enchanted sword ready to use at a moment’s notice. But Celia and Aria showed no sign of following them, so they quickly made their departure.

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Several hours later, before noon, a number of Beltrum's enchanted airships landed on the lake beside Cleia, the capital of the Claire territory.

Led by Charles, the Beltrum army's knights and soldiers marched straight into the city and made their way to the Count's estate. They entered the estate without any warning and rudely threw open the front door of the mansion.

"Count Claire! Count Claire!" Charles yelled from the entrance.

"What's all this commotion about?" Count Roland Claire appeared before them. He took one glance at Charles, the armed knights, andReiss and Renji behind them.

"Well this is a rather showy gathering," Roland sighed with a frown.

"Where is your wife?" Charles demanded, getting straight to the matter at hand without any greeting. It was an extremely rude act towards any noble, be it a lower noble or someone as high ranked as Count Claire. One would have no right to complain if they were told to leave. However, there weren't many nobles who could stand up to Charles.

Roland paused. "Why do you ask?" he asked after a moment.

This seemed to convince Charles that Roland was worried for his wife. "I've heard that your wife is a skilled healer. There's an important figure in need of emergency treatment. Your wife is being summoned to the capital to treat them," he said in a pleasant tone.

Roland's expression stiffened. "I thought you were aware that my wife has been in poor health since birth?"

"Of course I am aware. But we will be sending her by airship. I believe you said her ailment wasn't a life-threatening disease, merely one that makes her feel unwell, no? This is an emergency; she can endure a little discomfort," Charles declared brazenly. His insensitive words showed no understanding of the congenital disorder Monica was afflicted with.

"Even the shaking of the ship is too much for her when her condition is poor," Roland said calmly, his brow furrowed.

"Are you saying she's in poor condition right now?"

“No, but her condition could worsen in transit. Couldn’t you bring them to the mansion?”

“Impossible. The patient is even weaker than that. Your wife absolutely has to be the one to go to the capital.”

“We’re getting nowhere like this...”

“No, this decision is final. If you refuse...” Charles implicitly threatened Roland with forcefully seizing his wife if he refused to hand her over.

“I see. In that case, I have no choice.” Roland backed down reluctantly.

“Hmph.” Charles smirked triumphantly. But for someone so well-known for being a devoted husband, Roland had accepted the situation rather easily.

If someone familiar with Roland’s temperament were here right now, they would probably find his reaction odd. Normally, Roland would have raged and revolted against Charles the moment he declared he was bringing Monica to the capital. Sure enough...

“However, I’m afraid I am unable to hand her over to you,” Roland said with a shrug.

“You’re refusing after all? We are prepared to use force to some degree...”

“You can use force, but my wife isn’t at home right now.”

Charles tilted his head, unable to comprehend what he said. “What...?”

“It seems my wife finally got fed up with me. She stormed out of the mansion today, saying she was going to find our daughter herself.” Roland sighed heavily.

“Wha... That can’t be! Find her! Search the harbor as well. Hurry!”

He’d probably had a bad feeling—or rather, he expected it. Charles gave the knights under his command the order to search the estate, but they were unable to find Monica anywhere, and Charles’s angry roars echoed throughout the mansion.

Please look after your mother, Celia.

Roland walked outside the door by himself and stared up at the sky in the

direction of the Galarc Kingdom in the east.

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In the skies to the east of the Beltrum Kingdom, a single enchanted airship belonging to Count Claire was flying. The ship seemed to be in a hurry, as it flew towards the Galarc Kingdom far faster than normal, without any concern for magic essence consumption.

In the special guest room of the ship, Monica Claire was seated on the bed. Beside her was an attendant that had accompanied her from the mansion.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Monica said.

“It’s me, mother.” Celia entered. Aria was behind her.

“Welcome.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Monica replied with a soft smile.

“We’ll arrive in Amande this evening.”

It had taken Celia and Aria an overnight trip to reach Cleia as they had departed in the afternoon, but this time, they had fortunately left Cleia in the morning. If they hurried along like this, they would arrive on the same day.

“I can’t wait. Your father’s always been such an overprotective worry-wart, I’ve never left the city even once.”

It was her first time leaving the city since she was born. She probably wasn’t lying about looking forward to it.

“Umm, about father...”

“It’s fine.”

When Celia brought up her father, who had remained in Cleia by himself, Monica shook her head with a fleeting smile.

“It’ll be okay,” she stared out the window and said, as though to convince herself. It was clear she was thinking of her husband.

As Monica turned her face to stare into the distance, a ray of light ran down her face. It almost looked like a droplet falling from her eye.

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Earlier in the day, after Celia and Aria had repelled the mercenaries returned to the mansion.

“My dear Celia. Can you take your mother to the Galarc Castle with you?” Roland suddenly asked.

“What about you, father?”

“I will remain here. I may leave the city for work, but I cannot abandon this land and the people that His Majesty entrusted to me. Besides, if I go to Galarc as well, I will no longer be of use to King Philip and Princess Christina,” Roland said, giving his reason for staying in Beltrum. This was the duty of a noble.

“...”

It was why Celia couldn’t ask him to abandon his duty and come with her. However, it was clear from her expression that she was worried.

“It’ll be okay. Don’t make that face, Celia. Duke Arbor still has a use for me right now. He will have no choice but to use me for a while, in fact.”

That’s why there was no need to worry about anything happening to him, Roland explained in a calm tone.

“But your mother is a different matter. There’s no telling when and how Duke Arbor may make a move on her. I don’t have the power to stand up to them right now. If they grab her while I’m away from Cleia, I don’t know what I would do...”

The fact that Lucci and his men had been hiding on the grounds was confirmation that Duke Arbor was willing to make a move. If Monica remained in Cleia like this, Roland would be unable to protect her if he got desperate enough to act.

“That’s why I’d like you to take her somewhere safe. I can only pray that her condition doesn’t worsen while traveling... Please take care of her, Celia.”

He had many apprehensions towards sending her outside the city. But Roland

entrusted Monica to Celia, believing it was better than her remaining in the mansion.

“Yes. Leave it to me, father.” Celia nodded quietly.

“You too, Monica. Please watch over Celia,” Roland said to Monica.

“Of course.”

“I’m sure you feel uneasy about your first trip outside, but...”

“I’ll be fine. You’re just too overprotective...”

The two exchanged words while gazing at each other, communicating beyond words.

“But it’s because you’ve protected me all this time. Because you’ve protected me until now, I’ve been able to live a happy, peaceful life. Thank you for everything. I love you,” Monica said to Roland.

“Why so formal all of a sudden?”

“My husband is staying behind for the sake of his family. It’s only right to say some words of appreciation and love. No... I can’t say enough.”

“Did you fall in love with me again?”

“I do every day.” Monica nodded, reaching to stroke Roland’s cheek lovingly. She then wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

“Haha.” Roland grinned shyly. The two continued to embrace each other for some time.

“Take care of yourself.” Monica bid her husband farewell.

These were troubling times. Roland was in the midst of a power struggle. There was no knowing when they would meet again, or if they would ever meet again. It could even be Monica who could meet an untimely end first with her weak constitution.

Forgive me for being a burden of a wife.

Monica said this through her expression, but not her words. She knew that Roland didn’t consider her a burden by any means. Just like how Roland fulfilled his duty as a noble without any objection, Monica understood that her duty as

his wife was to flee to safety. Which was why she would do just that.

“I will. Take this chance to enjoy your time outside. Have a safe trip, my dear Monica.”

Thus, the Claire husband and wife bid their farewells.

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Later in time, back on the enchanted airship headed for Amande...

“Then, I will be going now, mother. Please call me if you need anything.”

Celia and Aria left Monica’s airship suite and made their way through the ship’s corridor.

“...”

Seemingly distracted by something, Celia let out a sigh; it was almost as though she was releasing an emotion that couldn’t be described in words. While she wasn’t completely lost in her own world, she certainly seemed to have her mind on something.

“If you’d like to talk to someone, I’m all ears. It can be a complaint, a concern, anything.” Aria shot a sidelong look at Celia’s face and offered to be a conversation partner.

“Huh...? Oh, thank you.” Celia snapped back to her senses.

“I’m not upset about anything. I believe in my father,” she explained.

“I know.” Aria agreed frankly with her.

“It’s just...”

“It’s just?”

“Yeah... This feeling isn’t a complaint or a concern. It probably isn’t appropriate to be thinking this at a time like this... But I thought it was kind of nice. Watching mother and father, that is.”

“They’re wonderful parents. I also admire them greatly,” Aria agreed with a smile.

“Right, admiration. I felt admiration. They way they were able to understand

each other beyond words, the way they're connected even when they're apart—it made me think this is what a married couple should be."

"I see... So you felt the desire to get married?" Aria asked flatly.

"Who knows...? I used to be against the thought of marriage, but..." Celia was slightly taken aback, but the thought of marriage resonated oddly comfortably in her heart. She didn't get worked up and deny it outright.

"..."

Instead, she blushed belatedly like there was someone of the opposite sex she immediately thought of.

"Well color me surprised. It seems like you have someone in mind?" Aria's eyes widened. She couldn't think of anyone around Celia who she seemed to be interested in.

"Oh, come on, don't tease me."

"Either way, this isn't a topic to discuss here. Please tell me more about it another time."

"Oh, right. I'm sorry, Aria." Celia suddenly apologized as though she had remembered something.

"Hmm? What are you apologizing for?"

"We agreed we'd take our time returning so that you could get a break, right? But now we're heading straight back to Amande as fast as we can."

"Oh, is that it? Don't worry, we can go another time."

Aria smiled softly, happy that her friend remembered the conversation which could barely be called an agreement that happened just after they arrived in Cleia.

"I know this won't make up for it, but let's have a talk after we return to Amande tonight."

"I'd be happy to."

"Yay. It's a promise."

This time, Celia and Aria made a proper promise. This was what happened on

the enchanted ship headed from Cleia to Amande.

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Meanwhile, back at the Claire territory, in the capital of Cleia...

Reiss informed Charles that he was stepping out to check the city and left the estate with Renji. Once he reached the city, he planned on meeting up with the mercenaries hiding there. Thus, he visited a certain inn. Lucci and the other men waited for him in a room there, ready to report on what happened before Reiss arrived in Cleia.

“I see. So that’s the situation.”

“My apologies, Mr. Reiss. It was my fault. I let my guard down.”

Arein apologized to Reiss, ashamed of how he was immediately knocked out by Aria’s ambush attack.

“There was nothing you could do. I cannot say for certain, but based on your description, it sounds like that person was Liselotte Cretia’s trusted confidant, Aria Governess. Not even I expected her to accompany Celia Claire all the way to Cleia.”

In fact, if Celia had gone to Cleia alone, the mercenaries would almost definitely have succeeded in their assassination.

Celia’s close combat abilities were a product of magic, so there were plenty of openings to attack her when that magic wasn’t being used. However, Aria’s presence as her guard completely filled those openings.

They keep exceeding my expectations, I see. Good grief... Perhaps I should assume they’ve seen through everything?

Just who was Reiss referring to, and what had they seen through? He almost seemed to be wary of some supernatural opponent that couldn’t be seen.

“But won’t Duke Arbor hear of how we were working behind his back? That may put you in an unfavorable position, Mr. Reiss.” Arein said, expressing his concern for the negative effects of failing at their plan.

“Indeed, things may become a bit more troublesome, but he should be able to overlook something of this degree. I’ll deal with it when the time comes. At

least it came at the perfect timing.”

“What do you mean?”

The mercenaries tilted their heads, unsure of what he meant by “perfect.”

“I’d like to go and retrieve all my trump cards in preparation for the future. I will therefore be revisiting my old haunts. This should give Duke Arbor some time to cool down, and I won’t have to see him face-to-face either. Renji, Arein, and Lucci will accompany me.”

“Obviously. I’m not letting you put off my flying lessons for later.”

Renji was greedily eager to become stronger, so he had no objections to accompanying Reiss wherever he went.

If they truly have seen through everything, then I have no choice but to prepare enough power to oppose them. It’s too much for me to handle right now, so I’ll have to consider activating that*.*

What was Reiss going to fight with, and what kind of battle was he planning on unfolding? At the moment, there were only a few people who knew that answer.

Chapter 4: Erica's Tracks

Around the same time Celia and Aria were returning to the Galarc Kingdom, Rio and Sora were visiting the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. They were moving separately to Aishia, who had remained at the Galarc Castle to watch over Miharu and the others. There were two main goals associated with their journey:

The first was to investigate the events of the Divine War.

Miharu's supposed past life, Lina of the Seven Wise Gods, had used her power of future sight to foresee what would happen in this era and helped the former Dragon King reincarnate as Rio. However, there was no way of knowing what would happen for sure. That was why they had decided to travel to the lands mentioned in the legends of the Divine War.

The second goal was the reason why they were here in the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica: to hold a quiet burial for Saint Erica, the hero who released her transcendent powers in battle against Rio and passed away.

Humans are extremely foolish and ugly creatures. That's why I don't regret what I've done. I still think those fools should die. But there are kind people out there. Foolishly kind people. You must be one of them. So I have a favor to ask of you, kind one. Whether you listen is up to you.

Rio recalled Erica's final words before she passed.

There's a remote village in the nation that I established, fifty kilometers east of the capital. The worst village with the worst people living in it. But deep in the mountains past the village, there's a waterfall, where his grave is... If possible... I'd like to be...

Honestly, the explanation had been rather lacking, but it seemed like Erica's wish was to be buried beside her late fiance.

She had waged war on the Galarc Kingdom and caused all that trouble. He was under no obligation to fulfill her wish.

Was the reason why Rio was granting her wish in spite of that simply because

he was a soft soul? Or did he feel sympathy for her as someone who also hated the world and sought vengeance?

So this is the capital.

Either way, Rio arrived at the capital of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica. It was apparently called Ericaburg.

She said it was fifty kilometers east of here. We could head straight over, but...

Rio looked down upon the capital from where he flew in the air using spirit arts. He was curious how the country was doing after losing their leader.

“Since we’re here already, we might as well look around the city a bit,” he suggested.

“Okay!” Of course, Sora had no reason to refuse. The two of them descended to the ground to check out the city.

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The fastest way of finding out the state of the nation was to probe around the leaders. And so, Rio and Sora used spirit arts to turn invisible before spying on the highest decision-making body of the country, the congress.

There was a congress meeting being held just as they entered the hall, but... To put it simply, dark clouds loomed over the future of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica.

“Next is the statement of protest from the kingdom of Galarc. How will we respond to their demands for compensation in exchange for their prisoners? We need to reach a conclusion on this today.”

The prime minister of the nation, a man named Andrei, was running the meeting. He was still a young man, slightly older than Rio, but deep exhaustion could be seen from his expression.

“There’s nothing to be done.”

“You can’t get blood from a stone.”

“But what about the prisoners? Do we abandon them?”

“I’m not saying that. We could attempt to negotiate for their return...”

“Ha! What do we have to negotiate with?”

“If money is impossible, then something else... Like food...”

“Food?! You want to hand another nation our food when we don’t have enough for ourselves for the next year?! You must be kidding me! I am against it!”

Some people expressed their uncertainty at the idea of offering food instead of cash compensation.

In the first place, the agriculture and land development of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica was conducted by Erica and her Divine Arms. Now that she was gone, all their plans had fallen apart.

“Why did we even wage war on a distant nation like Galarc in the first place?”

“That’s because it’s our great cause to defeat all evil royalty and nobility...”

“But that didn’t mean we had to pick a fight with another country over it.”

“...”

Because Erica had become a transcendent one like Rio, everyone had forgotten her. Their passion and how they reached the decision to invade Galarc had all been erased from their memory, which was why they all fell silent when asked why they had done such a thing.

“I understand everyone’s opinions. However, we need to reach a decision soon. Do we save our comrades who were taken prisoner, or do we abandon them?” Andrei redirected the direction of the discussion.

“We *are* trying to reach a decision.”

The congress members evaded their gaze awkwardly.

“What you’re doing is repeating the same questions. You’ll eagerly debate with others, but you’re avoiding the topic of whether we abandon our comrades or not. That’s what it seems to me, at least.”

They probably wanted to avoid the responsibility of making a decision. They would make statements that could lead to a decision, but they would never state their actual decision. The congress was formed of sophists like that. No

constructive discussions could be held like this.

“Isn’t that a given?! The prisoners’ fate will be decided by our hands! You’ll have to bear the responsibility too, you know?!”

“Of course. That’s why we need to discuss this without running away. The envoy from the Galarc Kingdom won’t wait forever...”

“Why don’t we just take that envoy hostage and offer them in exchange for our people?”

Someone spoke up the moment someone suggested that. “A-Are you out of your mind?! You’ll truly enrage the Galarc Kingdom if you did that!”

“The cowardice!”

Angry yells filled the room.

The meeting was a mess. The congress that was once a picture of solidarity under Erica’s leadership was now a jumble of individual opinions. Most of the nobles of the former kingdom had been executed or exiled when the nation was established, so the lack of experience amongst the congress members was fatal.

Honestly, it was unbearable to watch. Only a few minutes had passed before Rio decided to leave the room.

Let’s go, Sora.

Rio patted Sora on the shoulder and spoke to her telepathically. The two left the capital and rose into the sky with spirit arts. They then started making their way to the village Erica used to reside in,

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Around half an hour after they left Ericaburg, Rio spotted a village right at the fifty kilometer mark east from the capital. He paused mid-flight and looked around at the surrounding terrain.

There’s a mountain, a waterfall, and a village at the bottom.

The information Erica had provided was fragmented, so he couldn’t tell for sure, but based on the distance from the capital, this was very likely to be the

spot.

“It might be over there. Let’s descend by the waterfall,” Rio said to Sora.

“Dragon King, over there...”

“Yeah, that must be it.”

There was a man made structure that appeared to be a grave marker. The two made their way over to it. The grave was a large, flat stone with a simple square design.

It’s clearly a gravestone. This is...

Was it carved by hand? There were letters engraved in the stone.

“What does it say?” Sora asked, staring closely at the letters.

Rio read the name engraved on the stone. “Teshigahara Akira, I think.”

“You can read it? That’s amazing!”

“It just happens to be a language I recognize.”

The name was carved in english letters. There was nothing else written on it. He didn’t even know what the Japanese letters for the name would be.

Rio touched the ground and sent his magic essence flowing into the soil. He checked the shape of what was buried by feeling along the surface with his fingertips.

There are bones buried here. There’s no trace of the grave being disturbed, so this must be Erica’s fiance.

Once Rio realized that, he lifted his hand off the ground. He could proceed to bury Erica like this, but...

“Let’s go to the village first.”

There was something he wanted to look into first. Rio decided to visit the village where Erica lived with her fiance.

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The village at the foot of the mountains was quiet. When Rio and Sora stepped inside, they attracted the gazes of all the villagers.

As a transcendent one, it should have been difficult for Rio to leave an impression on people, but it seemed these villagers were particularly wary. They were clearly an insular village that didn't want to have anything to do with outsiders.

Despite that, Rio spoke to the villagers and asked for directions to the village chief's house. Once he got there, he knocked on the wooden door, which slowly creaked open after a while.

A middle-aged man greeted him. "Who might you be?" The man scanned Rio from head to toe.

"Just a passing traveler. I'd like to ask you something about this village, if you have a moment. I can offer an appropriate reward if you provide me with the information I'm seeking," Rio said, showing him a small pouch of bronze and silver coins. The reward seemed to be effective, as the look in the man's eyes changed.

"Are you a noble?" he asked, eyeing Rio's well-made clothes.

"Well, I was once. But my status doesn't matter right now."

Rio was once an honorary knight. This wasn't a lie, and he was willing to reveal it if it helped the village chief open up.

"Please come in." The man welcomed Rio and Sora inside.

"If you don't mind me asking, are you the village chief?"

"That I am. Ah, help yourself to a seat."

"Thanks."

Rio and Sora sat at the dining table he gestured at.

"So what did you wish to ask?" The village chief cut straight to the point, uninterested in any small talk.

"Did a man called Teshigahara Akira move into this village a year ago?" Rio asked.

"Ah..." The village chief didn't answer immediately. There was an intense look of surprise in his eyes, followed by awkwardness, then guilt.

“There was, wasn’t there?” Rio guessed from his reaction.

After a moment of fierce conflict, the village chief nodded awkwardly. “Well... Yes.”

“Did anything notable happen to that man? Something that would lead to his death, to be specific.”

“U-Umm, may I ask how you’re related to him?”

Whatever happened must have been quite serious, as the village chief was extremely shaken as he asked after Rio and Erica’s fiance’s relationship.

“I have no direct relation to him. We’re complete strangers to each other. However, I was briefly acquainted with his fiancee. She’s passed away now, but I was looking into her past and wanted to know more about the man she was engaged to.” Rio explained his reason for probing around honestly.

“I see...” The village chief seemed reassured to hear Rio had no direct relation, as he regained some composure at that answer. Perhaps he feared retaliation.

“Can you tell me what happened in this village? I merely wish to know the truth, I don’t plan on doing anything about it. If you can tell me the entire truth without hiding anything, I will be happy to leave this entire pouch here.”

Rio took out the pouch of bronze and silver coins from his coat and placed it on the table before the village chief.

“Oh...!”

After a long pause, the heavily conflicted village chief reached for the pouch. He then began to retell the events of the past.

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Some time ago, a well-dressed man with black hair moved into the village. The man did all the unpleasant jobs no one wanted to do in order to earn the villagers' trust. He was intelligent, and could do jobs the villagers were incapable of doing themselves.

Little by little, the man began to find his place in the village.

However, the villagers weren't too happy with the way he flaunted his knowledge, or the way he showed off his valuable possessions while the rest of the village struggled to make ends meet. One day, the man was selected to join the group of villagers heading to the city to trade their produce. This was when the terrible incident that shook the entire village happened.

Because the man had shown off his valuables in the city, he had caught the eye of a noble. This caused the noble to march into their village.

Then, to everyone's surprise, it was discovered that the man's possessions were stolen items. The noble had come to their village to retrieve them.

Enraged, the villagers denounced the man. The noble wanted to settle things peacefully, but the man showed no remorse and refused to return the stolen items. Out of the stolen items, the man was particularly attached to a ring with an expensive-looking gemstone. He lied, saying it was an engagement ring, and firmly refused to return it to the noble. But when it was eventually taken from him, the man retaliated with extraordinary strength. The noble who wished to settle things peacefully had no choice but to order the knights he brought with him to kill the man.

Out of appreciation for the villagers who were cooperative throughout the entire process, the noble granted them an exemption from village taxes, and the incident was resolved.

Or so they thought. Another shocking incident was right on the horizon.

On their way back to the city, right outside of the village, every last member of the noble's party was murdered. In addition, a young couple and their baby were also murdered within the village.

But who was the killer? The village fell into a great panic. Of course it would; a noble had been murdered near the village, so the first to be suspected were the

villagers. The entire village could be executed as a result. The kingdom even placed them all under arrest.

Fortunately, there were traces of magic discovered at the scene. This, in addition to the presence of multiple knights in the noble's party that could enhance their physical ability, helped clear the charges on the villagers. It was determined no mere villager could have done it.

But the mystery of who killed them remained to this day. Was it a strong monster or beast? Many possibilities were suggested, but no one ever spotted anything in the area around the village. That remained true to this day.

Which was why...

Were the villager couple and noble cursed by the man's grudge against them?

That was what the villagers began to believe. After all, everyone who had been murdered had done something for the man to resent them. The noble went without saying, and the couple had testified against the man despite being heavily indebted to him during the birth of their child. It was perfectly reasonable for them to be cursed. On top of that...

What if the man had cursed the other villagers too?

Fear spread throughout the village. This was spurred on by the bizarre and supernatural phenomena that began after the man died.

Earthquakes that were unheard of in the Strahl region, harvests being completely ruined, cattle being found dead out of the blue... The villagers began to fear the wrath of the man's curse. Some even started suspecting other villagers.

The supernatural phenomena had ceased recently, but everyone was still on edge, fearing the moment they returned.

This was how distrust spread throughout the village, ruining their relationship with even the neighboring villages.

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This was the general synopsis the village chief gave, but...

Erica had become a transcendent one just before her death, causing the rules

of god to erase her from memories and create false ones to supplement her presence. There were a number of sentences where it made more sense to assume Erica was the subject, and not her fiancé.

In addition, Rio had no idea if the village chief was even speaking the truth. As the village chief was speaking from his own perspective, it was highly possible that events had been twisted to make himself sound better.

According to the village chief, Erica's fiance was a criminal with a terrible personality. But even that was questionable.

However, the truth could still be glimpsed from his story.

The man's valuable items were definitely not stolen. He moved straight into this village after being transferred here from Japan, there was no way he could have stolen the possessions of a noble.

They were most likely the items he was transferred here with from Japan. Rio saw through the truth of the village chief's story, certain that Erica's fiancé had been killed on a false accusation.

Whether it was because they feared nobility, or because they had been tempted by the promise of tax exemptions, the villagers hadn't tried to save Erica's fiance. As a result, Erica's fiance was falsely deemed a liar by the villagers and killed by the noble.

On top of that...

The noble's party was killed outside the village, on the trip back. Does that mean she wasn't there when her fiance was killed?

Erica didn't seem like the type to stand by and watch as her fiance was killed before her eyes. That's why it seemed like she wasn't present when he was killed.

No, he said the man showed extraordinary strength when he struggled. Was Erica the one who attacked? And did she get killed as a result?

Rio reconsidered his theory. He couldn't imagine Erica losing to mere knights, even if they were physically enhanced with magic or if she wasn't as strong as when she faced him.

But Erica was originally a normal woman, born and raised in Japan. She wouldn't have had any experience in killing. Someone like her wouldn't be able to kill someone just because they suddenly gained the power of the heroes.

Even if she was dragged into combat against her will, she would have felt fear and reservation. The noble had multiple knights on his side, and she would have been outnumbered. It would be reasonable to assume she had been killed by then. Rio knew firsthand that Erica was capable of resurrecting after being fatally wounded.

Either way—

It was definitely her who killed the knights and villager couple.

Rio was sure Erica had been the one to exact vengeance on the noble's party and villager family. What he wasn't sure of was why she hadn't touched the other villagers. Perhaps they hadn't been as involved in the incident, or perhaps she had wanted to make them suffer without killing them...

She fought in a suicidal way, knowing she would resurrect. Maybe this was the incident that made her realize how difficult it was for heroes to die.

The secret to the power of the heroes was the upper high ranked spirit sealed and "assimilated" within them. Through a special contract called a spirit bond, the contract holder and spirit were literally unified into one being.

By assimilating with upper high rank spirits, heroes became nonhuman-like existences, capable of using powers far beyond a regular human. The manifestation of the Divine Arms was one such power.

However, heroes couldn't completely assimilate with their sealed spirit. Complete assimilation would cause the sealed upper high rank spirit to rise to the surface and take control of the physical body. That's why there was sorcery in the Divine Arms system to limit the amount of assimilation with the hero.

But for some reason, Erica was able to surpass that limit. Renji had also fought to an impressive degree in Rodania, but he was yet to reach Erica's level. It was unclear how Erica had removed that limit until now, but...

Could the condition to draw more of the hero's power out be...to die?

A chill ran down Rio's spine. Erica's regenerative ability that allowed her to resurrect had been a power granted by assimilation. In which case, it was possible that the assimilation limit was raised by receiving fatal wounds and resurrecting over and over again.

After learning of what happened in this village, Rio started to understand what prompted Erica's suicidal style of fighting.

However, there was no way of testing his theory. Testing would require a hero to mortally wound or kill themselves over and over. It was insanity to ask someone to test that.

It was only possible for Erica because she had been spurred on so manically by revenge. It was unclear whether Erica herself had been aware of this secret when she chose her fighting style, or whether she was just attacking without a thought.

Either way, it was a depressing story that had been.

I never understood why she hated the world so much, but...

After learning what happened in her past, Rio finally started to understand what made Erica who she had been.

Normally, Rio wouldn't meddle in the affairs of others without thinking. He always tried to maintain his distance from people. The fact he had gone out of his way to visit this village and ask about Erica's past was because he felt empathy for her as someone who also sought vengeance once.

Now that he had put the pieces of the puzzle together, that empathy was even stronger. An unpleasant emotion rose within him, making him frown in spite of himself.

Meanwhile, the village chief was just wrapping up on his rant about how terrible of a personality Erica's fiancé had.

"Thank you for listening to all this, young man. It feels like a load has been lifted from my chest," he said, sighing deeply as though to expel his guilt. The expression on his face was relieved, like he had been forgiven after giving his confession.

“...” Rio’s expression soured. The village chief had to be making such a face because he felt some sort of guilt towards Erica’s fiancé. He was feeling relieved after confessing his sins to Rio.

But...was that something that could be forgiven?

“Do you or the other villagers have something to feel guilty about?” Rio asked with a fake look of hesitancy.

“Huh? Wh... Why do you ask?” The village chief was taken aback for a long moment. A look of guilt belatedly spread across his face once again.

“It sounded to me like you felt guilty about something regarding the dead man, and that weight was lifted off your chest,” Rio said, guessing at the village chief’s thoughts.

“N-No, of course not. I...” The village chief denied the accusation in a panic and awkwardly averted his eyes. It was a reaction that all but confirmed his guilt. However, Rio had no intention of dragging out his question either.

“I see. That’s good, then,” he said, wrapping up the conversation and moving to stand up.

“Wh-What...”

“Hmm?”

“What’s good about that?” the village chief asked, stopping Rio from standing.

Rio hesitated a little before choosing his words. “You can’t apologize to the dead, after all. It’d be painful to live with a guilt that cannot be resolved. You’d have to repent for the rest of your life.”

“...” Shocked, the village chief’s eyes widened. While he was frozen, Rio continued.

“But it’s one thing if the victim wants an apology. There are many times where an apology only makes the perpetrator feel better. For mistakes that can’t be forgiven with an apology, it may just be better to live in regret without ever apologizing.”

The village chief remained silent, but his face was rather pale.

“Which is why I said it was good you have nothing to feel guilty about. I’m sorry, it may have been a strange way to put it. I will be going now. Thank you for telling me your story,” Rio said, finally standing up properly this time. He signaled to Sora with a look, and the two of them briskly headed towards the door.

“Ah!” the village chief cried, reaching for Rio’s back. But Rio either didn’t notice him, or pretended not to notice him, as he opened the door and left without stopping.

The village chief stared at the pouch on the table with a bitter expression.

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After leaving the village chief’s house, Rio immediately departed from the village and returned to Erica’s fiance’s grave. Sora and Rio both seemed to have felt something after hearing the village chief’s story, as they both spoke very little.

Rio looked down at the gravestone in silence.

A strong negative emotion from the murder of her fiance. That is what changed her into Saint Erica. If she hadn’t wandered into this world, she wouldn’t have lost her fiance. That thought is what made her hate the people living here. That’s why she wanted to ruin this world.

In his opinion, her vengeance had been twisted and irrational. Besides, the world she was trying to bring disaster to was home to people close to him, so either way, he had no choice but to fight and kill her.

However, Rio was able to relate to Erica’s fury. Because he was someone who had lived with a burning thirst for revenge as well. There was no way he could claim that her rage had been mistaken.

That’s why he felt overwhelmingly helpless at how there had been no other choice but to fight to the death like they had done. He would have been much happier not knowing Erica’s past...

But now that he knew of her past, there was something he was able to do.

“*Dissolvo*.”

Rio decided to hold a respectful burial for Erica. He took out a chisel out of the Time-Space Cache and began to carve Erica's name on the gravestone beside her fiance's name

Sakuraba... Erika...

Rio could remember Erica's Japanese name, but he didn't know the kanji it was written with. It was fortunate that her fiance's name was carved in romaji. Perhaps she had done so on purpose, so that her name could be carved alongside his upon her death.

Nah, that couldn't be. I'm overthinking things...

Either way, the person who had carved her fiance's name in romaji was now dead. Rio kept Erica's full name in his mind as he carefully carved it into the gravestone. Once he was done with that...

"*Dissolvo*."

Rio dug up the dirt of the grave and took Erica's frozen corpse out of the Time-Space Cache. He carefully lowered her into the grave and covered her with dirt, completing the burial. But just before he finished burying her, he caught a glimpse of her peaceful expression, which seemed to leave a deep impression on him.

Rio paused in his work and stared at Erica's face. But the dead could not speak. Rio shook his head and completed the burial for good this time. He then stared down at the gravestone marking where Erica and her fiance rested together for a while.

"Dragon King..."

Beside him, Sora peered into his face worriedly. The height difference between them was like an adult and a child, so she had to look up a fair bit, though...

"Sorry. I was lost in my thoughts." Rio smiled gently and patted Sora on the head, making her squirm ticklishly and grin. But she seemed to think it wasn't the appropriate time and place for that.

"Y-You know, Dragon King!" she shouted.

“Know what?” Rio asked softly, tilting his head.

“Rina said that the Six Wise Gods were sick of how ugly and foolish humans were. Sora hated the Wise Gods, but their way of thinking makes a little more sense now...” Sora said, explaining how she felt after hearing what happened in the village.

“Right...” Rio had also experienced the negative sides of humanity in the past. That’s why he was able to relate to what Sora was saying, and nodded with an even more conflicted look than before. But it seemed like it wasn’t Sora’s intention to make him look like that.

“Th-That’s not what Sora wants to say! Sora just wants the Dragon King to cheer up. Don’t worry about the nasty people in the world...” Wishing she could cheer him up more persuasively, Sora verbalized her thoughts with frustration.



“Thank you, Sora. I know. It’s wrong to look at a single side of humans and decide that the rest of humanity is hopeless. Humans aren’t just their bad side.

That’s why...”

Rio took a small breath. “That’s why we’ll put this behind us and continue our journey,” he said firmly, looking towards the future.

“Okay!” Sora nodded eagerly.

I will come again someday.

Now that the world had forgotten Erica, only an extreme few people could pay respects to her grave. Rio glanced at the gravestone one more time and bowed before turning his back on the grave in preparation to take off into the sky. But just before he activated his spirit arts...

“Thank you.”

“Huh...?” Rio turned around, thinking he had heard Erica’s voice. But no one was there.

“Is something the matter, Dragon King?”

“No... It’s nothing. Let’s go. Next stop: the land where the Divine War began.”

In order to accomplish the original goal of their journey, Rio and Sora took off towards the skies stretching west of the Strahl region.

Chapter 5: Takahisa's Recollections

Sendo Takahisa loved someone from the moment he first met her. Her name was Ayase Miharu, and it was the first time he had fallen in love at first sight.

Takahisa first met Miharu a few days after his father remarried. The chance was given to him by Aki, his new step-sister that resulted from his father's marriage. She had introduced Miharu to him.

Aki was a little shy when the marriage first happened, but she quickly opened up to Takahisa and Masato. The trauma of losing her father and older brother in her parents' divorce had left a hole in her heart. Takahisa and Masato had filled that hole without realizing it themselves.

At any rate, that was the reason why Aki introduced Miharu, the person she adored like a real sister, to Takahisa and Masato.

The first time they met, Takahisa was just about to enter middle school. He could still vividly recall how shocked he had been at that moment.

"..." Miharu had been so cute, he was rendered speechless.

"You remember what I told you before, Miharu? I have new brothers! This is my older brother Takahisa, and younger brother Masato!"

Back then, Aki had introduced them proudly to Miharu.

"I see... I'm Ayase Miharu. It's nice to meet you." Miharu seemed to be nervous, as she greeted them with an awkward smile.

"..."

"Takahisa...?"

Takahisa remained frozen for so long, Aki quietly checked on him. That prompted Takahisa to come back to his senses.

"Huh? Oh, right... Umm, I'm Takahisa. Sendo Takahisa. I've just become Aki's older brother. I-It's a pleasure to meet you." His voice cracked out of nervousness.

“You’re really cute, Miharu. I’ve never seen someone so cute before,” Masato said honestly and upfront.

“H-Huh? Th-Thank you. I’ve never been told that before.” Miharu blinked a few times before smiling shyly.

“Masato...” Takahisa muttered Masato’s name enviously and reproachfully. Perhaps he was jealous of the way Masato could say whatever he was thinking so frankly. He wanted to be able to do that himself.

“Hey, Masato. You’re not good enough for Miharu, so don’t even think about it,” Aki said, clinging to Miharu’s arm.

“I know that much! Geez.” Masato scratched his cheek.

“But Takahisa might be a good match?” Aki said in question form, still clinging to Miharu’s arm. She looked between Takahisa and Miharu’s faces, her statement seemingly directed to the both of them.

“Huh?! H-Hold on, Aki...!” Takahisa startled, his body shaking fiercely. Unable to think of a smart reply on the spot, he spoke in a fluster.

“Ahaha. Takahisa will be distraught if you say that, Aki.” Miharu chided Aki first. Her wry smile showing how she was troubled herself left a deep impression on Takahisa.

“What do you think, Takahisa?”

“Huh? Oh... Well.” Aki tried to get Takahisa to speak more, but all he could do was smile bashfully, not at all displeased with the suggestion.

Yeah, I wouldn’t be distraught at all.

The person that Takahisa was back then was unable to say that out loud. That was the first meeting between Takahisa and Miharu; it was unclear if Miharu still remembered that, but Takahisa definitely did.

A few days after that...

“Say, Aki... Does Miharu have anyone she likes?” Takahisa asked, having made up his mind.

“Huh? Miharu...?” At the time, Aki had repeated his words happily. But when

the question reminded her of her former brother, Amakawa Haruto, her face stiffened for a brief moment.

“Aki...?” Takahisa peered into AKi’s face.

“N-No, she doesn’t. Miharu doesn’t like anyone.” Aki’s voice trembled as she shook her head firmly. As a result...

“I-I see. She doesn’t...”

Takahisa sighed in relief, the muscles of his cheeks relaxing in happiness. He had been beside himself with worry, wondering what he would do if she had someone she liked and envying an imaginary rival. The Takahisa of this time was unable to read the subtleties of Aki’s heart and merely rejoiced in the good news.

“Takahisa, could it be... That you...?”

The shadow across Aki’s expression had disappeared at some point. She watched Takahisa with a look of expectation.

“Oh, well, you know...” Takahisa didn’t explicitly confirm or deny her question, but the way he blushed and scratched at his cheek shyly all but confirmed it for him.

“Hehe!”

Thus, Aki easily saw through Takahisa’s feelings for Miharu.

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However, for the three years of middle school after that...

There was no development in the relationship between Takahisa and Miharu. This was because Takahisa hadn’t made an active approach towards her for those three years.

Miharu didn’t have any feelings for Takahisa in the first place, so without an approach from him, there’d be no reason their relationship would develop.

Even if Takahisa had made a move, the thought of Amakawa Haruto still existed within Miharu. It would have been difficult for Takahisa to get Miharu to turn towards him even if he was actively pursuing her. However, the fact was

that Takahisa did nothing. Even though it wasn't as though he had no chance at all, Takahisa's actions made sure he had no chance. Perhaps he had been overly hopeful that he had a good chance with her even if he didn't make a move.

But because Aki was there, Takahisa was able to be beside Miharu whenever he wanted. Miharu was like a real older sister to Aki, and Miharu treated Aki like her own little sister too. In other words, Miharu and Aki were inseparable.

Thus, as long as Takahisa was a good brother to Aki, he would inevitably have an excuse to speak to Miharu. In reality, the only male student close to Miharu in and out of school was Takahisa alone. The way Miharu wasn't very comfortable around the opposite sex also played a part in that, so Takahisa was the only one around her.

That's why Takahisa was confident. Confident, and scared. What if he did something unnecessary and changed their relationship? He loved Miharu so, so, *so* much, he was absolutely terrified of confessing to her and being rejected.

Besides, it was kind of fun.

Miharu was so cute, she was always attracting the attention of male students in school. But the only one who was always with her was Takahisa, and that alone was enough to let him feel like he was special. He was beside himself with joy when he heard the rumors of other students who thought they were dating.

There was no need to rush. The closest man to Miharu was himself. Which meant at the very least, Miharu was a little conscious of him. If he could keep their relationship like this, they'll naturally start dating one day.

Takahisa told himself this until his three years of middle school ended.

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After that, Takahisa graduated from middle school. And with the entrance ceremony for high school fast approaching, he became uneasy. He was going to the same high school as Miharu, but high school changed people. A new male student might fall in love and confess to her.

Besides, what if Miharu herself fell in love with someone?

Takahisa began to panic. He agonized over it for all of spring break—whether to confess to Miharu.

That was when he reached a decision: while he wouldn't go as far as confessing, he would approach her more proactively in high school.

Thus came the day of the entrance ceremony. On their commute and after they arrived at school, the comments were neverending.

"Whoa, isn't that girl really cute?"

"Is the guy beside her her boyfriend?"

"What a handsome face."

The voices of the students around them gave Takahisa a slight sense of superiority.

That's right. He should be confident. He just needed to be a little more proactive. He was still the closest person to Miharu at this school. Takahisa silently cheered himself on.

At this moment in time, he still had no idea that Miharu's heart was taken by her childhood friend Amakawa Haruto, and that Haruto was also enrolled in the same high school as them.

That being said, nothing would change even if he knew that... Because on their way home from the entrance ceremony, Takahisa was summoned to another world. Neither Takahisa nor Miharu would be able to experience their high school lives.

Up until the moment of his summoning, Takahisa was together with Miharu, Aki, Satsuki and Masato. But before he knew it—

"Huh...?"

The scenery was completely different. They had been walking through the suburban streets of Japan together, but now Takahisa stood in an unfamiliar place by himself.

It was a spacious and stylish space; perhaps it could be described as an ancient Greece or western style temple. Takahisa stood on an altar, gazing forward in a daze.

There were others in the room with him. All of them wore fancy clothing no one from modern day Earth would wear. Their outfits looked like they came straight out of a fantasy movie.

“Wh-Whoa...”

They stared at Takahisa in wonder and sighed. No one in the room was able to comprehend the situation, creating a long moment of silence, until—

“Wh-What? Where are we? Hey guys, are you oka—“

Takahisa snapped to his senses and turned around. He tried to call out to his friends, but naturally, it was just an illusion. There was no one next to him.

“M-Miharu? H-Hey, guys?!” Takahisa shouted in a panic. He searched the faces of the people standing at the foot of the altar, looking up at him, but none of them appeared to be Japanese.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” Takahisa fell to his knees. Just then, two people with far more extravagant clothing than the others stepped forward from the crowd. Knights that appeared to be their guards followed behind them. The two were far enough apart in age to be parent and child, and they clearly weren’t Japanese.

One looked like a king, while the other looked like a princess. Takahisa would soon discover that these two were the King of the Centostella Kingdom, and his daughter the First Princess Lilianna.

They addressed Takahisa, who was kneeled lifelessly on the altar.

“Are you the great hero?” the king asked.

“...Huh?” Takahisa’s gaze turned towards the king and Lilianna. But at this moment in time, he was still unable to hear their words.

“I am asking if you are the hero of legend,” the king asked once again. This time, Takahisa was able to take in his words properly.

“...Wha?” His eyes widened.

“...” The king stared at Takahisa, observing him silently.

“H-Hero? What are you talking about?” Takahisa finally managed to find his words. His confusion was only natural.

“Huh? I’m a hero? Was I summoned into another world?”

In any other situation, someone asking a question like that would’ve been quite the oddball.

“The altar you are standing on...” The king slowly raised his hand, gesturing at the altar.

“Altar...” Takahisa’s gaze fell to his feet.

“That is where our kingdom’s national treasure, the sacred gemstone, was enshrined. That sacred stone emitted an enormous pillar of light mere moments ago. When the light faded, the gemstone and its stand were gone, and you were standing in their place,” the king said, giving a simple explanation of the events leading to Takahisa’s appearance.

“Is that... so...” Takahisa had no awareness of himself as the hero.

So what? he thought to himself.

“The Six Wise Gods left behind sacred scriptures. Your arrival matches the events foretold within them regarding the heroes.”

With that introduction, the king recited the passage in the scriptures of the Six Wise Gods relating to the heroes:

Armed with fierce weapons of divine power, the heroes protected humanity. A thousand years after the war between gods and demons, sacred stones of six colors will shine, releasing pillars of light into the sky. When that moment comes, they will return. Descending upon the land of Strahl, they will lead the people of this world in place of the six wise ones.

“I... see...” Takahisa was nervous about how to react to the prophecy passage.

“Umm, did anyone come here before me? I was with a girl called Miharu!” he asked restlessly. More importantly, he wanted to know where Miharu and the others were above anything else.

“Unfortunately, only you, the hero, appeared here.”

“That can’t be...”

There were so many other things that should have been on his mind, such as where he was, what was a hero, why he was here...

Perhaps the situation was so abnormal, his mind was unable to catch up with everything going on. Or perhaps the shock of Miharu not being here left him no room to worry about other things. Either way, Takahisa was at a complete loss, stunned into a daze.

“I am Giovanna Centostella, the king of the Centostella Kingdom. May I ask for your name, great hero?”

“I’m Takahisa... Sendo Takahisa...”

His heart unable to slow down,Takahisa muttered his name with a disoriented look.

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After that, the king treated Takahisa as the hero, welcoming him as a guest of the kingdom and appointing First Princess Lilianna as his caretaker, who would explain things to him.

At that, Takahisa finally understood what happened to him. This was a different world from Earth. The heroes were summoned irrelevant to the Centostella Kingdom’s will. Miharu and the others that had been with him were nowhere to be found, and he had arrived in this world alone.

No matter where he searched within the castle and royal capital, there was no sign of Miharu and the others. On top of that, Takahisa had a strange dream where he was one-sidedly taught how to use the proof of a hero—the Divine Arms. And he was actually able to materialize it. This confirmed that Takahisa was the hero the legends spoke of, but—

I don’t care about becoming a hero...

Takahisa himself desired none of it.

He wanted to wake up from this dream. But no matter how many times he went to bed and woke up again, he never returned to Earth. This wasn't a dream, but reality. It was as good as a nightmare to Takahisa, but he had to accept that this was reality.

However, whether Takahisa's heart could withstand that reality was another matter. Could he no longer return to Earth? Would he never meet Miharu and the others again?

"What should I do... What can I do...?"

Unable to give up, Takahisa brooded for days.

It was all about to start from here... Once we started high school, Miharu and I would...

Did he wander into this world all by himself? The fact that he'd pondered so much over how to approach Miharu in high school seemed ridiculous now.

Because now, he might never return to Earth again. His relationship with Miharu had been physically snapped by coming to another world. He would never be able to convey his feelings to her again.

If... If I knew things would turn out like this, I should have found the courage sooner...

He should have told Miharu his feelings. Takahisa fiercely regretted how much of a foolish coward he had been. The same thoughts revolved around his mind, stirring the same emotions within him.

"Argh...!" Takahisa yelled in irritation.

But anger couldn't expel these negative emotions. The sense of uneasiness and impatience accumulated with nowhere to go.

"Argh, damn it! Damn it damn it damn it!"

Takahisa remained in this state for the first few days after he was summoned.

"Good morning, Sir Takahisa."

Every morning, Lilianna would visit Takahisa's room at a certain time each

day. Beside her was her attendant, Frill.

"...Yeah." Takahisa's gaze turned in the direction of the doorway where they stood. Even though he recognized their presence, his mind wasn't focused on them. He didn't have the mental leeway to respond to the two of them properly.

To put it bluntly, it didn't matter if Lilianna was there or not. It took a few more days before Takahisa began to get closer to Lilianna.

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Roughly ten days had passed since Takahisa wandered into this world.

"Good morning, Sir Takahisa."

This morning, like every other morning, Lilianna had prepared breakfast for Takahisa and brought it to him. As always, Frill pushed the serving cart as they entered his room.

"Morning... You came today, too."

Takahisa was a little different from usual today. He still seemed to be brooding and in low spirits, but had he finally gotten tired of moping until now? His attention was turned to the two of them as he replied, and he was holding up his end of the conversation. Lilianna could tell he was expressing a slight interest in them.

"Yes. If it isn't a bother to you, would you like to have breakfast together today?" she asked. Although she was appointed as Takahisa's caretaker, Lilianna didn't try to speak to him until he spoke to her first. She could tell that forcing him into interacting with her would only have the opposite effect. That's why until yesterday, her routine had been to bring him breakfast and leave immediately. But today was different.

"Huh? Oh, sure... I don't mind..." Takahisa blinked in surprise, but accepted the offer readily.

"Thank you very much. Frill."

"Right away."

At Lilianna's order, Frill retrieved two meals from the serving cart and brought

them to the table in the room. Takahisa and Lilianna sat down, waiting to be served.

She prepared enough for both of us from the start...

Takahisa absentmindedly watched Frill move plates and cutlery around while wondering what Lilianna wanted to talk about. The truth was that two servings had been prepared every day until now, but he was unable to reach that realization. Once everything was set up—

“Sir Takahisa. Was there any part of your meals that you disliked until now?” Lilianna asked, seated across from Takahisa.

“Oh, no... Nothing, I think...” Takahisa stammered terribly. Up until yesterday, Takahisa had practically no appetite. While he did manage to eat a little, he left behind most of what he was served. His low spirits had made him barely able to taste anything, and he couldn’t really remember what he put in his mouth.

“If there are any flavors you dislike, please don’t hesitate to inform me.”

Naturally, Lilianna knew that Takahisa hadn’t been eating well too, but she couldn’t tell whether that was because of his feelings, his food preferences, or possibly both, so she was probably trying to figure out the reason why.

“Ah, yeah. I think it’s fine... Thanks,” Takahisa thanked her awkwardly, then continued. “Umm, I just wanted to say sorry. You’re letting me stay at this castle for free, yet I’m spending every day doing nothing while moping about...”

He apologized and bowed his head. Did his depression help him calm down and objectively reflect on his recent actions?

Indeed, if Takahisa were to use an example from his perspective as a modern day Japanese person, it was like he was living in the penthouse of an ultra luxury hotel, with all his food, clothing, and shelter provided for free without limit. Although he had been in a depressed haze, after living like that for ten days, it was only natural that the thought that this might be bad would cross his mind.

“No, I believe that was unavoidable considering your circumstances, Sir Takahisa. Please don’t let it bother you.” Lilianna smiled at him gently and shook her head.

“I’m really sorry...”

Maybe it was because she had so pleasantly used words that showed understanding for him. Takahisa looked terribly apologetic as he bowed his head.

“I should apologize as well. Although we hadn’t expected such a thing, the sacred stone in our possession ended up summoning you to this world.”

“No, well... No matter who had the stone, the result would have been the same anyway, right? So it’s nothing you need to apologize for. If anything, I’m glad I was summoned to a castle.”

Takahisa appeared to be straining himself quite a bit, facing downwards as though to stifle his emotions. Lilianna stared at him closely.

“Thank you for your generous words. After you were summoned, we conducted our own investigations. Unfortunately, we were unable to find a direct solution to your woes. However, it isn’t entirely impossible for the people you were to be in this world as well, I believe,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I’m unsure if this will be of any hope to you. It isn’t confirmed, so it has the potential to turn into more despair for you. That’s why we wavered on whether to inform you or not, but I decided to tell you now that we’re talking like this.”

“Wh-What does that mean?! Miharu and the others are in this world too?!”

Unable to contain himself, Takahisa rose from his seat.

“It isn’t entirely impossible, is what I said. They could be in this world, and they might not be in this world. It will be difficult to search for them right away. If that is okay with you, then I can proceed to explain things further.”

“Y-Yeah. Please tell me!” Takahisa replied immediately, as though there was no need to think about it.

“I understand. However, I have one condition.”

“A condition...?”

Just what kind of condition would she ask from him? Takahisa tilted his neck

awkwardly, nervous about how she was staring at him.

“Let us eat while breakfast is still warm.”

“Huh?”

The condition Lilianna presented was shockingly anticlimactic.

“It seems like you haven’t had much appetite since coming to this world. We can’t have you collapsing because of that, so please... Please make sure you eat well.” Lilianna worried for Takahisa’s health and gazed at him fretfully.

“...” Takahisa blinked and looked back at Lilianna.

Oh, this girl is worried about me.

That was the clear message he got as he stared at her.

So this is what this girl’s face really looks like...

Lilianna was a very cute girl. For the first time, Takahisa registered Lilianna as an individual human being. He realized that he had been so occupied with himself, he hadn’t tried to see what emotions other people were directing towards him.

Oh, I’m the worst.

Takahisa felt so ashamed and pathetic, he couldn’t help but clutch his head in his hands. Lilianna was startled by that.

“Umm, Sir Takahisa? Was the food of this kingdom not to your tastes? If so, there’s no need to force yourself to eat, but...”

Lilianna got to her feet in a panic, approaching Takahisa with hesitance.

“N-No, that’s not it. It’s not like that... I’m just... I’m so sorry...”Takahisa sighed deeply, apologizing to Lilianna.

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for, Sir Takahisa...”

Perhaps this was the moment that Lilianna felt Takahisa’s humaneness for the first time as well. A hint of a warm smile could be seen on her face at the sight of Takahisa hanging his head in repentance.

What could be said for sure was that it was none other than Lilianna who

supported Takahisa when he was depressed from wandering into a new world, gently extending her hand and helping him stand back up. The only one who could realize the weight of that action was Takahisa, the one who'd been on the receiving end of her helping hand.

"I'll eat breakfast properly. I'll listen to what you have to say after." Takahisa prioritized breakfast over their talk.

"Okay. Please have a seat then."

The food had already been served, so the two began eating together.

"Was the food always this warm...?" Takahisa muttered after taking the first bite, his eyes widening in surprise. Ever since he came to this world, he had never touched his food right away. It was always cold by the time he got around to eating it.

That's why it felt like it had been a long time since he ate freshly cooked food. For the first time in a long while, he could taste the food. It also felt like a long time since he'd had a meal together with someone like this...

I'm such... I'm such...

Takahisa couldn't stop his hand from moving his tableware. He discovered he was hungrier than he thought. Before he knew it, tears were spilling from his eyes.

"Huh? That's weird..." Takahisa wiped his eyes.

"Sir Takahisa..."

"I think some dust got in my eye."

"Right..." Lilianna nodded quietly, refraining from speaking further.

"Umm... Princess, err..."

Once Takahisa had finished wiping his tears, he looked at Lilianna and tried to address her. But as soon as he opened his mouth, he stammered and glanced around awkwardly.

Crap. What was the princess's name again?

He belatedly realized he didn't know the name of the girl who was eating

breakfast with him.

No, it wasn’t that he didn’t know. When Lilianna was appointed as his caretaker, she had introduced herself to her. However, Takahisa hadn’t tried to remember her name at that time. There was no room in his heart, and his brain had considered it trivial information.



But things were different now. He wanted to look at the girl before him and learn more about what kind of person she was. That’s why he racked his brains

on how to ask for her name once again, when—

“Sir Takahisa. My name is Lilianna. Please call me that.”

“Huh?! Oh... Okay.” Takahisa startled, then nodded.

Ugh, was I that obvious? Takahisa thought in embarrassment. That being said, he was relieved she introduced herself again.

“Sorry. I know I was told your name, but I forgot it...” He apologized honestly.

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that. It’d be natural for anyone to forget in the circumstances you were under.”

If he hadn’t admitted to forgetting her name, they could have brushed it all aside without addressing it. But Takahisa had apologized up front—and this made Lilianna’s eyes widen in surprise. She seemed to have a favorable impression of such sincerity, as she shook her head with a sweet smile. She wasn’t bothered by her name being forgotten in the slightest.

“No, I should have remembered the name of a girl who introduced herself to me. As both a human and a man, I’m the worst.”

“It really doesn’t bother me at all, so don’t beat yourself up over it,” Lilianna said gently.

“I’ve made up my mind. From now on, I’ll never forget the name of a girl again. Never.”

With a completely serious look, Takahisa spoke with determination. It felt like he had missed the point somewhere, but this was his resolution after reflecting upon himself.

“Hehe.” Lilianna laughed in amusement, unable to hold herself back.

“Wh-What’s so funny?”

“What you just said. Please try and remember the names of gentlemen too, or they’ll be too pitiful.”

“N-No, it’s just that my father said a man who makes a woman cry is the worst—”

Takahisa scratched at his head awkwardly. It was unclear what the exact

trigger was, but their conversation took off from there. Takahisa himself probably didn't know, but he laughed like he'd done when he was back on Earth.

After their meal, Takahisa received the explanation of how Miharu and the others may have been summoned in this world as heroes. Hope lit up within him.

As of that day, Takahisa became optimistic. He was especially close with Lilianna, who devoted herself to him in many ways, and they had a good relationship. Eventually, when he learned that Satsuki was summoned in the Galarc Kingdom, that hope changed to anticipation.

Perhaps he could see Miharu again soon. The next time he saw her, he would tell her his feelings for sure.

With that decided, Takahisa attended the banquet held at the Galarc Castle.

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Why did things end up like this?

Honestly... Why... Why...

How did this happen?

After attending the banquet, Takahisa lost everything.

He told Miharu his feelings, but she didn't accept them. In an act of desperation, he tried to take Miharu to the Centostella Kingdom against her will.

Instead of there being zero chance of a relationship with Miharu, there was now a negative chance. Satsuki and Masato had both lost hope in him too.

After that, Takahisa was forced to return to the Centostella Kingdom, and there he remained shut in his room all day. He felt too awkward to talk to Liliannam so he actively avoided her. The only person he could directly face was Aki, who had experienced the same pain as him.

But then one day, it happened.

It was the same day that Rio became a transcendent one. Although Takahisa

was unaware that this was the reason...

Oh, what have I done...

How could I have been so foolish?

I have to apologize. I need to apologize to everyone...

Those feelings rapidly grew out of nowhere, snapping Takahisa back to his senses like waking from a nightmare. The guilt he had shut away in his heart came pouring out like a waterfall. With that, Takahisa was unable to sit still—he burst out of the room he had shut himself away in like a different person.

But it was at that exact time that something else happened in the castle. Lilianna and Masato had suddenly vanished into thin air. Takahisa and Aki were also shocked when the news reached them, and they worried for the two dearly.

The reason for their disappearance was confirmed several days later: Masato had been summoned as a new hero, and Lilianna had been dragged into his summoning. The two were safely waiting in the Galarc Castle. Hearing that, Takahisa made a direct appeal to the King to go to Galarc himself. He bowed his head low, desperately explaining how he was worried about Masato and Lilianna, and that he wanted to apologize properly to Miharu and the others for what he did.

Finally, Takahisa was permitted to set foot in the Galarc Castle once again. He was able to meet Masato, Lilianna, Miharu, and everyone else again... And after apologizing as soon as he saw them, Miharu and Satsuki permitted him to stay in the castle for a while.

Have they really decided not to forgive me? Will we never return to what we were when we were on Earth?

He couldn’t stop worrying. The worries grew greater as more time passed, until they had surpassed worry—and turned into fear.

What if...

What if Miharu hates me this time?

No. He didn’t want to be hated. He couldn’t afford to be hated this time.

The thought of being hated was so, so, so terrifying...

“Huh?!”

Takahisa opened his eyes and leaped up in bed. His face was pale as a sheet, and he was soaked with sweat. His heart wouldn’t stop racing unpleasantly. Panting heavily, Takahisa looked around the room in worry. It was still late at night, so the room was pitch dark.

Eventually, he realized that this was reality.

“A dream, huh...” Takahisa sighed in relief, as he realized it had been a nightmare.

But his reality was no different to his nightmare. No, there were problems that only existed in reality. When he imagined himself messing up again...

“No, no... I can’t fail this time. I don’t want to go back to Centostella.”

He was so terrified, his face twisted until it was crumpled.

Interlude: Miharu's Dream

Before she knew it, Ayase Miharu was standing alone in a white space.

She knew this feeling. She knew this scenery. It was something she had experienced just recently. Was this what they called a lucid dream?

Miharu knew she was dreaming. She didn't know the reason why, but she instinctively knew that this wasn't reality. But at the same time, another thought crossed her mind.

"Is this... really my dream?" She wondered to herself, when a woman's voice called out to her.

"Hello. Or should I say 'good evening'?"

She couldn't see anyone, but the voice was oddly familiar.

"Is it you again...?" Miharu asked. She was sure that this voice was the same as the voice that called out to her in her last dream.

"Yes, it's me again. You remembered," the woman confirmed easily.

"Who are you...?" Miharu wondered.

"If this is your dream, I may be your unconscious mind."

"My..."

"The only thing that's certain is that your real self is asleep, I suppose? Yup, it seems like the settling process has progressed more than last time. That's a good sign."

"Settling process?"

"Nothing to worry about," she answered without actually answering Miharu.It seemed that the voice had no intention of answering any of Miharu's questions directly.

"Do you remember anything from last time?" the woman asked Miharu.

"You said something about how I'd have to make an important choice one day."

“Good girl. That’s right, a very important choice is approaching you. I also said this: I recommend you choose the option you think is definitely wrong.”

“Umm, what kind of decision will it be?” Miharu questioned. Without knowing what kind of choice it would be, there was no way for her to make a decision.

“I’m doing things in such a roundabout way *because* I can’t tell you, silly,” the woman sighed.

“But even if you say that...”

“Then here’s a hint for you, since you’re so slow on the uptake. First, the time to make the choice is fast approaching. Second, the future will diverge depending on your choice. Third... I can’t tell you after all. This is all the information I can give you for now.”

Did something happen?

When the woman was about to say the third hint, it felt like the voice had trembled.

“H-Huh? That’s basically nothing you haven’t said already...”

“I said I can’t, so I can’t. Accept it as it is.”

“That’s so...”

Unreasonable, was what Miharu was about to say, when—

“What’s unreasonable is this world.”

The owner of the voice spoke over her, anticipating her words. There was a tired sigh mixed into her tone.

“...” Miharu blinked, speechless.

“It is what it is. There isn’t much time left, but there’s one more thing I wanted to tell you.”

“What is it...?”

For some reason, the woman sounded a little irritated. Unsure of the reason why, Miharu questioned her nervously.

“I think I might hate you.”

“Huh...?”

Just as when she was wondering whether she had misheard her, Miharu’s consciousness cut off.

Chapter 6: Impatience

The day Celia arrived at the Claire family estate, Liselotte had reached the Galarc Castle on her enchanted airship to give King Francois and Christina her report on the former's whereabouts. She was immediately shown to Francois's office upon her arrival, where she explained the situation right away.

"Hmm..."

"I see..."

Francois and Christina were both confused. Second Princess Charlotte, who lived with Celia, was also in the room, but she was merely smiling as though she had heard something extremely amusing.

A very brief summary of the report was as follows: Duke Arbor tried to capture Celia, and a battle took place at the fort. Regardless of this, Celia fulfilled her duty as an envoy and returned to Amande. Because she feared Duke Arbor would make a move on her family, she immediately turned back and flew towards the Claire territory once more.

"It is fortunate that she fulfilled her role as an envoy safely, but unexpected events just keep happening one after another. I do not wish to doubt it, but the use of magic or sorcery to fly is..."

Francois implicitly questioned Celia's ability to fly. His words were directed to Christina and Charlotte, who were well acquainted with Celia.

"It's my first time hearing of it," Christina said.

"I wasn't aware either. If she could do something so interesting, I wish she would have informed me earlier," Charlotte added. Both shook their heads.

"It's the truth. I saw wings of light emerge from Celia's back with my own eyes. She took Aria and flew into the sky herself. If she can travel in such a way, I'm sure she'll be able to return safely—as long as nothing happens at her destination, that is. Aria is with her for protection, so I believe they'll be back within a few days." Liselotte added her thoughts and theory as a reassurance.

“In that case...” Francois glanced over at Christina. Celia’s movements were her jurisdiction. It wasn’t the place for him to say anything, so he refrained from any further statements.

“Thank you for your report, Lady Liselotte. If this is the case, we have no choice but to keep an eye on the situation for a few more days.”

There was nothing Christina could do right now. Thus, although there were still some concerns, they decided to wait for Celia’s return for the time being.

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Meanwhile, on the grounds of the Galarc Castle, everyone except Charlotte was going about their daily lives with no knowledge of what Celia was doing.

During the day, Satsuki and Masato trained with Gouki and the others at the castle. Everyone else—Miharu, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Sayo, Komomo, and Aki—remained in the mansion. They preferred to prepare any essentials by themselves, so they were always processing food ingredients and designing their own clothes. The Ricca Guild would even purchase manufacturing rights to some of the results; right now, they were working on a small vegetable garden behind the mansion.

“I’m done here, Sayo”

“Then help over here next.”

Sayo and Shin, who came to the Strahl region with Gouki, were siblings born and raised in a farming village. Under their instruction, Gouki’s other servants were in the middle of preparing suitable soil for growing vegetables.

“Is this how you plant it?”

“Yup, that’s fine!”

“With this, we’ll be able to have tomatoes in this region too. I’m looking forward to having pasta with tomato sauce and omelet rice!”

“Ahaha, they’re still yet to grow. You have to be patient, Suzune.”

Aki, Komomo, and Latifa were planting tomato seeds. Komomo’s attendant Aoi was with them.

Originally, tomatoes didn't exist in the Strahl region, and the areas that did have them only used them as seasoning for an extra layer of flavor. For those who knew how to use them properly, not having a means of obtaining them was quite the inconvenience.

There was still a stock of them in the Time-Space Cache, and they could always restock by returning to the spirit village, but when the suggestion to grow them in the Strahl region came up, it was decided they would cultivate it at the mansion. The origin of the seeds was to be explained as something Gouki brought with him. The topic of rice was also brought up, but setting that aside...

At a further point away, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were also planting seeds. The voices of the younger girls seemed to reach them, as they were watching the heartwarming scene. Miharu was also beside them.

Just what was that dream...

She had paused in her work to once again recall the dream she saw last night.

"I think I might hate you."

Those words had left a deep impression on her. She couldn't keep them out of her head. Who had she been talking to? It was her own dream, so it should have been her subconscious—but for some reason, that didn't feel the case. She didn't know why someone hated her. Besides...

She said the time to make my choice was fast approaching, right...?

She had no idea what the choice was about, but words of the woman in her dream continued to bother her. She shouldn't need to think about the events of a dream so seriously, and yet...

Hmm... was it a precognitive dream? No, that can't be...

Miharu smiled wryly at how unrealistic it seemed, when—

"Miharu?"

Sara peered into Miharu's face curiously.

"Oh, yes? What is it?"

"Nothing, it just seemed like you were thinking about something. Is there

something bothering you?”

“No, I’m fine. I was just remembering this weird dream I had...” Miharu replied.

“Aki!”

A young man’s voice echoed through the garden. Everyone’s attention was drawn to the person who had shouted.

“Takahisa...”

It was Aki’s older brother. The other three heroes were training with Gouki, but Takahisa wasn’t participating with them. Lilianna was at the training arena attending to Masato, so he must have come to the mansion alone.

“Umm...” Aki was in the middle of work, and seemed uncertain about how to deal with Takahisa.

“You can go, Aki.”

“Yes. Leave this to Suzune and myself.”

Latifa and Komomo pushed her back out of consideration.

“Okay... Thank you both,” Aki said before hurrying over to Takahisa.

“...”

In the time it took for Aki to run up to him, Takahisa’s attention was clearly focused on Miharu, as he kept glancing her way. That was evident to Sara, Orphia, and Alma as well, who were with Miharu.

“Let’s get back to work, everyone.” She looked away from Takahisa awkwardly, urging Sara and the girls to resume working.

“Right...”

Sara and the spirit folk girls casually positioned themselves around Miharu, blocking Takahisa’s view of her.

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“Ah...”

When Miharu averted her eyes from him, Takahisa shook, his heart skipping a

beat.

Is she avoiding me after all...?

Negative thoughts crossed the back of Takahisa's mind.

No. No... I don't want to think about us never returning to normal.

Impatience surged within him.

"Is something the matter?" Aki asked, approaching him.

"Oh, no... I wanted to see you, but did I come at a bad time?" Since it felt like Miharu was avoiding him, Takahisa had a dejected look on his face.

"Huh? No, not at all... I'm happy you came to see me." Aki was taken aback, but she quickly shook her head and spoke truthfully.

"I see..." Takahisa looked a little relieved to hear that. "What's Miharu up to?" he asked directly.

"Huh? Uh... We're working on making a vegetable garden together right now. Miharu's planting the seeds with everyone," Aki replied somewhat awkwardly. She had sensed there was no chance of Miharu ever falling for Takahisa and no longer wanted them to be together anymore.

"I see... Can I help too? I'm sure the extra manpower would be useful." Takahisa's offer was clearly because he wanted an excuse to talk to Miharu. Anyone could see that.

"We have enough hands right now..." Aki was still fond of her older brother even now, but she wasn't keen on letting him get close to Miharu anymore, and so she gently rejected his offer with an excuse.

Unaware of her intentions, Takahisa didn't back down. "You don't have to be polite."

"I don't want the nice clothes you're wearing to get dirty either."

"It's fine, they're just clothes. I can wear them even if they get dirty, and I can always change out of them."

Indeed, clothes could be worn even if they got dirty; it wouldn't affect their function. But when the hero wore dirty clothes, the opinion of others around

them began to matter. The dignity of the Centostella Kingdom was also at stake.

Besides, it went without saying that clothes weren't obtained for free. The everyday wear of the hero was all made to order. Its costs were covered by the Centostella Kingdom's treasury.

"In that case, you should get changed into clothes that you can get dirty."

"I said it's fine." Takahisa was unwilling to go through the trouble of returning to his room in the castle just to change.

"Is it okay to make a hero help with farmwork like this?"

"If I say it's fine, then it's fine. It's not like I became a hero because I wanted to." A dark shadow fell over Takahisa's face. He didn't seem to think too highly of how strict the position of the heroes was.

"Takahisa..." Unsure of what to say to her brother, Aki hesitated. That action looked like reluctance in Takahisa's eyes.

"Hey, don't you agree, Aki?" Takahisa begged with a sincere look.

"Then... will you help me plant seeds?"

"Of course."

"Okay. Follow me."

Aki glanced at where Miharu was in the garden and started walking while pulling Takahisa's hand. She first returned to where Latifa and Komomo were.

"Suzune, Komomo. My brother's going to help plant seeds, so we'll work on the next row over."

"Sure!"

"Got it."

After informing Latifa and Komomo, Aki decided to plant seeds together with Takahisa. "This way."

Aki took a small pouch of seeds and crouched down in the row next to the other girls. Miharu and the spirit folk girls were planting from the opposite end of the field, so they wouldn't come in contact with each other until the work was nearly done.

That is, unless Takahisa approached Miharu himself. He stood beside Aki and gazed in her direction without moving. He wanted to speak to Miharu, but he couldn't speak to her from the position Aki had picked for them.

"Should I start from the row beside Miharu instead? It'd be more efficient that way," he suggested. But why would starting from there make things any more efficient?

"Umm... There's four people in Miharu's group, and five with you here, so I don't think the efficiency would change either way..." Aki said, struggling to express her opposing opinion. There was absolutely no reasoning behind Takahisa's suggestion. It would make sense if Miharu's group was moving at a noticeably slow speed, but that wasn't the case either.

"I mean, yeah, but..." Takahisa's gaze lingered on Miharu regretfully.

"Do you have a moment?" Aki pondered to herself for a moment, then stood up and pulled Takahisa by the hand. She brought him over to the corner of the garden so that Latifa and the others wouldn't overhear them.

"You're still in love with Miharu, aren't you?" Aki asked bluntly.

"Oh... Well... It's not like that..." Takahisa's eyes darted about nervously as he stammered his answer.

"I'm pretty sure everyone in the mansion has realized it. Miharu too..."

"Huh?!"

"It's obvious. You're always looking at Miharu, and you were blatantly looking for an excuse to approach her just now."

Aki pressed a hand against her forehead, exasperated at how he had no consideration for what others thought of him, or how Miharu had noticed his feelings.

"It's not like I want to talk to her because I love her... I just want to be forgiven, so that we can go back to the way we were before, when we could talk to each other without reservation..." Takahisa admitted honestly. Perhaps it was because he was talking to Aki, one of the few people he could show his weakness to. Just like how he did during the banquet.

“I understand how you feel, but...”

Aki wanted to be on her brother’s side, but she already knew that his feelings wouldn’t ever be returned.

“Our original plan was to come and apologize whether we were forgiven or not, remember?”

Takahisa nodded reluctantly. “Right... But still...”

Up until they arrived in Galarc, his only intention was truly just to apologize. He didn’t expect to be forgiven, but he wanted to apologize anyway. That’s why he was able to bow his head as soon as he arrived in front of Miharu.

But humans were difficult creatures to satisfy. Every time they made one step of progress towards their goal, they began to aim for the next step beyond that. They began to stretch their hand in order to grab a better result. It was difficult to lose those desires, for that was part of being human.

That’s why apologizing alone was no longer enough. Takahisa now wanted to be forgiven by Miharu as well. The longer he stayed in Galarc, the stronger that feeling grew. Before he knew it, that feeling grew into a desire. A wish he was unable to resist...

“Are you panicking, Takahisa?”

“I’m not...! No... Of course I would panic. I don’t know how long we’ll be in Galarc for, and I don’t know how long it’ll be until the next time I see Miharu if I let this chance go...”

“But it might be hard to return to normal and talk to each other comfortably again, you know? That’s how grave our mistake was... We can’t pretend it never happened,” Aki said with a pained look. The past couldn’t be erased. Her words seemed to be the final nail in the coffin.

“But still...!”

Even so, he still wanted to pretend it hadn’t happened. Takahisa raised his voice, face twisting with grief. Naturally, the others in the garden noticed the unusual behavior.

“Is something the matter...?”

Everyone stopped working and watched Aki and Takahisa carefully. Miharu's fretful gaze was amongst them, as she was worried for Aki.

"That's not... That's not what I wanted to hear from you, Aki! I just... I just... It's not like I want to confess to Miharu or anything. I just want to..."

"I'm sorry, but I can tell you're getting more impatient with each passing day. I can relate to your impatience, but maybe it'd be better to go back to the original plan. Not to ask for forgiveness, but—"

Aki's words were made out of consideration for her brother. However, Takahisa didn't have the composure to listen to such words right now. Which was why...

"You sure have it nice... Since Miharu's already forgiven you."

He made the worst statement possible.

"I'm sorry..."

Aki apologized with an extremely hurt look. That expression seemed to be the clincher that let Miharu determine something was wrong.

"Aki?" Miharu called out loudly—a rare volume for her. She hurried over to Aki faster than anyone else in the garden.

"Oh..."

Aki and Takahisa both flinched. As though they had both been seen when they least wanted to be seen.

"What happened, Aki?" Miharu immediately gazed into Aki's face.

"Ah, umm..." Aki hesitated, wanting to defend her brother.

"Takahisa?" Miharu looked at Takahisa in suspicion.

"N-No, I just..."

After being so desperate for an excuse to talk to her, Takahisa avoided her criticizing glare as though to flee.

"What did you say to Aki? You promised not to do anything to make Aki sad when you came to this castle, remember?" Miharu pressed.

“I-I didn’t do anything...”

Stop, don’t look at me like that, I haven’t done anything wrong, trust me—was what Takahisa’s pained grimace was saying. Which was when—

“H-Haha. What’s gotten into you, Miharu?” Aki said cheerfully, soothing Miharu.

“Aki...?” Sensing that Aki was trying to defend her brother, Miharu frowned with uncertainty. The three continued facing each other like that until—

“We’re back!”

Satsuki and Masato returned, having finished their training for the day. Gouki and Kayoko, who had been instructing them, were with them.

“Oh, you guys are back. Hi!” Aki called in an even brighter voice, waving at Satsuki and the others.

“Oh...?” Satsuki’s attention turned to them. Although Aki was with them, it was rare to see Miharu and Takahisa together.

“Say, Suzune, Komomo. What’s up with them? Did something happen?”

Naturally, she noticed something odd was up. She narrowed her eyes at them and approached Latifa and Komomo for more information.

“Oh, umm... Takahisa came to the mansion just now...”

“Hmm. I see.”

Latifa and Komomo exchanged looks before explaining what they witnessed. They hadn’t heard everything, so there were gaps in their knowledge.

“Right. Thank you for telling me.”

Satsuki was able to piece together what happened. She thanked the two of them and sighed quietly as she looked back over at the group.

“Hey, Takahisa!” she called.

“Huh...? Y-Yeah?” Takahisa’s eyes widened as he responded. He hadn’t expected his name to be called.

“You came to the mansion by yourself today.”

“I did... Is that a problem?”

“Nope... It’s just that Princess Lilianna went back to the castle to get you. Looks like she made her trip for nothing.”

Satsuki looked in the direction of the castle, where Lilianna was right now.

“I see. I thought it’d be okay if I came by myself for once...”

In fact, if looked at in another way, visiting the mansion alone was proof of how panicked he was. Takahisa averted his gaze out of guilt.

“Hmm... Well, now that you’re here, how about you stay for dinner tonight?”

“Huh? Can I?” A mix of happiness and surprise filled Takahisa’s eyes.

He had visited the mansion for multiple days in a row now, but he had always returned to the castle to have dinner in his room alone. The only time they invited him to dinner was when they had some kind of event going on, so this invitation on a regular day was a sign he had gained their trust. That being said...

“Yup. There are a few others coming, and there’s something I wanted to discuss too.”

“Something to discuss?” Takahisa stiffened.

“Yes. I’ll let Princess Lilianna know myself. Set some time free, okay? Oh, and Miharu, do you have a moment?”

“Yes...?”

Without saying what it was she wanted to discuss, Satsuki called Miharu away, leaving Aki and Takahisa behind.

After their earlier argument, an awkward air flowed between them. Takahisa had the strong fear that Miharu’s impression of him had worsened again.

“Sorry, Aki...” Exactly what he was apologizing for was unclear, but he apologized.

“It’s okay... I’m sorry as well.” Aki said with a commendable, heartbreaking smile. She was looking out for her brother, mustering the brightest voice she could manage to talk to him.

“I really feel bad about everything. I swore I’d never do anything like that again. That’s why I just want her to trust me...”

“I know. I know how you feel, because I’m the same. But that’s why I don’t want you to lose sight of yourself. You still have me, brother...” Aki pleaded to Takahisa sincerely.

“...”

Takahisa neither confirmed nor denied her, falling silent with a grimace.

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Meanwhile, dinner was to be held with Christina, Flora, and Liselotte, who had come to the castle to give her report on what happened to Celia.

“Liselotte!”

As soon as Latifa spotted Liselotte in the mansion entrance, she ran up to her excitedly. She adored Liselotte like a sister, but Liselotte wasn’t someone she could see whenever she wanted.

“Good evening, Suzune.”

Liselotte also treated Latifa like a little sister, patting her head gently. That prompted Latifa to throw herself at her for a hug.

“Were you at the castle? Welcome!”

“Yup, I had a small errand to run here. Princess Charlotte invited me to the mansion, so I’m here to disturb you for dinner. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all! You’re always welcome here, Liselotte. If only you could live with us all the time... Oh, how come Aria isn’t here today?”

Liselotte was normally accompanied by Aria, but Latifa couldn’t see her around today, which she found strange.

“Yeah... She’s a little busy right now. She’ll be coming to the capital in the next few days, though,” Liselotte replied. Charlotte had told her to keep Celia’s return a secret, so her expression was slightly downcast. However...

“I see. Does that mean you’ll be staying in the capital for a few days too?”

“Yup, I’ll be here.”

“Yay! Then you should stay in the mansion. Let’s talk a lot!”

“I’d love to.”

Seeing Latifa’s innocent joy made Liselotte act cheerfully, not wanting to cause her any unnecessary worry.

“Come this way. Let’s sit together!”

Latifa took Liselotte’s hand and led her to the dining room.



Not long after that, Christina and Flora arrived at the mansion. They were shown to the dining room by Gouki’s servants.

“Thank you for the invitation today, Lady Satsuki, Princess Charlotte.”

“Welcome. Please make yourselves at home.”

They greeted Satsuki, the owner of the mansion first, followed by Charlotte, the princess.

“Sir Takahisa, Sir Masato, it’s good to see you again. Good evening to you too, Princess Lilianna.”

Christina also greeted the other heroes in the mansion, followed by Lilianna, who was accompanying them. Flora belatedly bowed her head after her sister.

“R-Right. Good evening.”

Masato straightened his back and replied awkwardly. He wasn’t too familiar with Christina and Flora, so he couldn’t help but feel nervous before the two beautiful princesses of the Beltrum Kingdom.

“Good evening to you, Princess Christina, Princess Flora.” Lilianna giggled beside Masato.

“Good evening... Is Hiroaki not with you today?” Takahisa asked Christina, his gaze darting about the place warily in search of Hiroaki.

“No, he has prior plans with Mr. Saiki and Lord Murakumo today.”

“I see.”

The reason behind Takahisa’s wariness was how he had been butting heads with Hiroaki recently. Takahisa himself knew he didn’t get on very well with Hiroaki. When he heard that Hiroaki wasn’t attending, he let out a breath of air. But to anyone watching on, that was a clear sigh of relief.

He’s too obvious...

Satsuki was seized by the urge to sigh tiredly. No full-fledged member of society should express such blatant joy hearing about someone’s absence at a social event like this... It was improper enough as a human—but it was even more rude when the person in question was the hero backing Christina’s organization.

“...”

Lilianna bowed silently as though to apologize. Christina tilted her head as though she didn't understand why, brushing off the matter.

"Hehe. It's a shame that Sir Hiroaki is absent, but let us enjoy dinner with the people here. Now, this way, everyone," Charlotte said, urging everyone to take a seat. Her voice was animated and lively, as though she was expecting something interesting to happen soon.

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This was how dinner began. Under Satsuki and Charlotte's direction, Miharu and Takahisa were seated apart from each other. As a result, one table only seated the heroes and royals—that is, Satsuki, Masato, Lilianna, Christina, Charlotte, and Takahisa. Flora sat at Miharu's table instead.

I'm separated from Miharu again...

Immediately after taking his seat, Takahisa looked at Miharu's table and sighed. Masato noticed his actions and frowned.

"Takahisa," Satsuki called.

"Huh?"

"Is something the matter? You just sighed." Satsuki had probably guessed the reason already, but she asked Takahisa anyway.

"Oh, no, it's nothing..."

"You sure? Well, try to have a good time."

"Right..." That allowed Takahisa to pull himself together and face the table before him with a nod. Masato's mood was settled with that, and the amicable dinner began.

"Wow, today's dishes look great as always." He began eating before anyone else and offered his opinion with a satisfied look.

"Indeed," Lilianna agreed, watching him with a pleasant smile.

"The food served in this mansion is always so delicious. Sir Hiroaki was delighted with the meal we had here last time. Lord Saiki and Lord Murakumo too," Christina said, joining the conversation.

"Miharu's presence probably makes the flavor more tailored for the tastes of Japanese people. Speaking of which, Hiroaki and the other guys really wanted to have white rice and miso soup when they heard we have it here," Masato said to Satsuki, as though he had just remembered that.

Masato was a friendly person. After all the training sessions together with Gouki, he had become close friends with Hiroaki. He had probably been asked to put in a good word with Satsuki after their training today.

“Right, we didn’t serve it at the get-together the other day. If he wants, we can give him some of our ingredients...”

“No, he said he’s not confident that he’ll make it well, so he’d like to eat it here... Would that be okay?” Masato asked Satsuki, as she was the master of the mansion.

“Geez. Then let’s invite them over after the next training session,” Satsuki agreed, giving in to the request.

“My apologies for the trouble, Lady Satsuki.” Since that meant Hiroaki and his friends were to be treated to a meal at the mansion, Christina immediately spoke up.

“We’re all from the same home country, so don’t worry about it. Come to think of it, you and Princess Flora haven’t tried white rice and miso soup before either, right? Feel free to come along if you have the time,” Satsuki said.

“Thank you very much. We’d love to”

And so, Christina and Flora’s future visit was also decided.

“Satsuki... This is my first time hearing you have white rice and miso soup...” Takahisa said nervously, as though he wanted to join too.

“Oh, have we never served it before you as well? Hmm... Then you can come too.”

Whether she was looking back on the meals Takahisa had experienced at the mansion, or just so happened to be thinking about something else, Satsuki paused before inviting Takahisa as well.

“Yay! Thank you so much!” Takahisa said happily. However...

“You don’t have to be that excited about it. We can give you as many of the ingredients as you want, so you can make it yourself once you return to Centostella,” Satsuki added.

Takahisa’s face stiffened at those words. The mention of returning to the Centostella Kingdom reignited a sense of panic within him.

“I’m sure Miharu’s cooking is better than mine,” he said with a hint of impatience.

“Men who can cook are popular, you know?”

And why are you assuming Miharu will be cooking for you? Satsuki swallowed along with the urge to sigh tiredly.

“In that case, how about you give us the recipe along with the ingredients? I’m sure Frill will be able to learn it,” Lilianna suggested.

“Okay. Then let’s arrange a time to make it together,” Satsuki agreed readily.

“In that case, could you teach me too?” Takahisa interrupted hurriedly. He probably believed that the cooking lesson would be a good excuse to talk to Miharu. But his intentions were too obvious.

“You can get Frill to teach you once you go home, no?” Satsuki said, brushing him off.

“That’s a bit hasty of you, isn’t it? Our return date still hasn’t been decided...” Takahisa muttered sullenly, feeling like he had been told to go back to the Centostella Kingdom.

“That’s true.”

However, Satsuki had no intention of dragging out the discussion in front of Christina. She easily nodded in agreement to Takahisa’s statement, making him sigh in relief.

After that, Satsuki and Charlotte led the conversation as the hosts. With the intelligent princesses of three nations gathered together, there was never a lack of topics to go around.

“Ahaha.”

Takahisa occasionally shot casual glances at Miharu, but his earlier panic disappeared through the lively conversations. He was even in a good enough mood to laugh. Time passed as such, until the end of the dinner approached.

“How has your stay been in our kingdom, everyone? If there are any issues I can help resolve, just say the word,” Charlotte asked as she looked at the current guests of the Galarc Kingdom—Christina, Masato, Takahisa, and Lilianna.

“Thank you very much. You have been more than accommodating to us,”

Christina replied first.

“Right! I was able to see Satsuki and Miharu again, and Gouki’s been giving us combat training. I’m more than satisfied.” Masato nodded in agreement.

“Me too. The food in Centostella is great, but it’s much more comfortable here. If anything, I’d rather stay in Galarc,” Takahisa said, also satisfied with his stay in the Galarc Kingdom.

“...”

But Satsuki and Masato didn’t look too happy about his comment. Takahisa’s opinion had been a little too honest, giving the uncomfortable feeling he was criticizing his stay in Centostella in order to praise Galarc.

He hadn’t done it to intentionally object to anything. His words were purely because he didn’t want to return, but that was what made it all the worse. Saying such things in front of Lilianna, who was Centostella royalty, sullied her reputation.

“Like Sir Masato and Sir Takahisa, I too am satisfied.”

But Lilianna smiled without any particular concern. However, it probably wasn’t anyone’s imagination that her gaze wavered with sadness. Masato glanced at her, looking like he wanted to say something to Takahisa. But since Christina was with them, he held back and merely frowned silently.

I’m sorry, Princess Christina.

Satsuki made eye contact with Christina and quietly lowered her head. She seemed to be apologizing for how their disputes had created an awkward atmosphere.

Not at all.

Christina accurately guessed what Satsuki was trying to say and smiled softly as though to tell her she wasn’t bothered.

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Eventually, the dinner party ended, and Christina and Flora left.

“Takahisa, do you have a moment?”

Satsuki asked Takahisa to stay behind and showed him to a drawing room of the mansion. She then excused herself from the room again, saying she would be back later. Takahisa ended up waiting by himself for about ten minutes.

Just what does she want to discuss?

He wondered while he was waiting, feeling nervous as he sat on the sofa with a stiff expression. Before long, the door to the room opened again.

“Go ahead.”

“Sorry for the wait, Takahisa.”

Satsuki returned to the drawing room, Masato right on her heels. No one else was with them. It didn’t seem like they were about to discuss something very lighthearted, and a wary look crossed Takahisa’s face.

“From the look of your face, you have an idea of what we’re going to say, right?”

Takahisa shook his head with a deeper frown. “I do not.”

“Well, it’s fine. Let’s sit down as well, Masato.”

“Yeah.”

Satsuki and Masato sat down across from Takahisa.

“You don’t have to be so guarded.”

“Anyone would be after being summoned like this.”

“I suppose. But still. It might be mean to put it this way, but that also means you have a reason to feel guarded after being summoned, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t get what you’re trying to say. Why don’t you stop beating around the bush? I have no idea what you want to discuss, or what reason I would have to feel guarded...”

“You say that, but weren’t you arguing with Aki before we returned from training today?” Satsuki asked specifically.

“Is that what Aki told you...?” Takahisa avoided admitting there was an argument between Aki and himself,choosing to confirm Aki’s testimony first.

“You speak like a suspect being interrogated.”

“Because you’re acting like you’re interrogating me...”

With no other choice, Satsuki informed Takahisa of what Aki had said. “Aki said you didn’t argue about anything.”

“Then why...!”

There was no argument. Takahisa was about to repeat that with emphasis, but—

“But the others around you two heard you raise your voice. Everyone saw Aki look like she was about to cry,” Satsuki said over him.

“...” With the proof of having argued with Aki thrust in his face, Takahisa awkwardly shut his mouth.

“So what was that about? I want to hear what you said to Aki in your own words.”

Satsuki sought Takahisa’s testimony with a cheerful smile. She was determined to hold the discussion as rationally and calmly as possible.

“It was nothing... I just wanted to ask her something about Miharu...”

When Takahisa gave in and began talking, Satsuki pressed her right hand to her forehead tiredly. “I knew it. It had to do with Miharu.”

“Just so we’re clear, I wasn’t saying anything weird to her, okay? I just want Miharu to forgive me, but I never get the chance to talk to her even when she’s around. That’s why I was asking Aki if she could help me out...”

“You want her to forgive you, huh? I see... Because you had the wrong idea, you became discontent with the current state of things and started going off in the wrong direction.”

“The wrong idea? You don’t have to put it that way...”

“But you do have it wrong.”

It was at this moment that Masato, who had refrained from speaking until now, spoke up to criticize Takahisa.

“What?” Takahisa frowned.

“Sorry Satsuki, I know you said to leave things to you, but do you mind?”

“Go ahead...”

“Takahisa. Wouldn’t it be better if you returned to Centostella by yourself first?”

“Wha— You have no right to decide that!” Takahisa snapped at the sudden suggestion he return to his kingdom.

“No, I think he does. But even if he didn’t, then I’m in agreement with him. You should return to the Centostella Kingdom by yourself first.”

Although Masato’s statement had moved the flow of conversation in a different direction, Satsuki also spoke up to support him.

“Wh-Why?! I haven’t done anything wrong! I swear I’d never try to take Miharu anywhere by force ever, ever again!”

“Even if we set aside that incident for now, our answer is the same. The bigger problem at the moment is how your mind is completely occupied by Miharu, and how you’ve lost sight of yourself.”

“I haven’t lost sight of myself!”

“You have. To the point where it’s affecting your daily life. The dinner earlier was quite problematic as well...”

“All I did was have dinner like the rest of you!”

“You really don’t see anyone but Miharu and yourself...” Satsuki sighed, not bothering to hide her disappointment.

“That’s not true. I’m looking at everyone else too.”

“In that case, why did you say something that nearly made Aki cry today? What was it that you said to her exactly?” Satsuki asked in a completely calm and rational tone.

You sure have it nice... Since Miharu’s already forgiven you.

This was the decisive line that made Aki cry. Takahisa clearly remembered it himself.

“Th-That’s because...! I said it for everyone’s sake, since I’m looking out for

everyone! You don't want everyone to remain in such an awkward relationship forever either, right? That's why I'm trying to get Miharu to forgive me, so we can quickly go back to normal...! I just want us to be like what we were before..." Takahisa explained himself, his voice cracking with guilt.

"That's enough."

"Huh?"

"I said that's enough making excuses to justify yourself. I know that's what you really feel, but what you're doing is just making yourself sound better," Satsuki pointed out with a tired look.

"You're wrong!"

"I'm not wrong. You're the one who wants to be forgiven. Don't speak for the rest of us."

"Then are you all fine with things being like this? With us never returning to the way we were before? Do you really want things to be this twisted up forever?" Takahisa said like a whining child.

"I'm telling you to stop trying to expand the subject to include others. That kind of phrasing is both selfish and cowardly. It makes it sound like Miharu is at fault for not forgiving you. Don't use us as an excuse to make Miharu the villain," Masato said, criticizing his brother without bothering to hide his irritation.

"I'm not making her the villain! If anything, it's the opposite! Everyone's trying to make me...!"

To make me the bad guy—is what Takahisa couldn't say.

"You *are* the bad guy, though. Because of what you did." Satsuki pointed out flatly.

"I know that... I'm the one at fault... But..."

"But what?"

"Stop it... Please stop. Don't look at me like you can read my thoughts."

"Then don't do anything that makes people read you." Satsuki bitterly

emphasized how she wasn't doing it because she wanted to.

"You're wrong. Everyone's misunderstanding me. None of you are seeing me..."

"We were watching you. Everyone tried to watch you with a positive mindset, to see you if you had truly repented and reformed yourself. You're my friend and Masato and Aki's brother, so we gave you that chance."

"A chance... Just when...?"

"We allowed your stay in Galarc, we approved of you coming into the mansion with restrictions. We watched your behavior and actions whenever we were around you, Takahisa."

"You were watching..."

Was there nothing but watching?

Were they really just watching?

If so, why would they do such a thing?

Takahisa's face was easy to read.

"Like I said, we were watching to determine if you had truly reflected and reformed. Because that kind of thing shows up in one's daily behavior and actions."

"So you were just observing me without saying anything?"

"Observing... Well, yes, if you put it that way. And as a result, we came to a decision: you shouldn't have appeared before Miharu."

"Why..."

Why would they do something to test him behind his back? That was awful of them.

That's what Takahisa's face was saying. No, that wasn't all.

"Why... would you test someone like that... like you suspect them of something..."

Feeling like he had been deceived on purpose, accusatory words spilled from

Takahisa's mouth. He was completely disregarding the fact he was in a position where he couldn't complain if he was suspected and tested.

It's so evil of them. There must have been other things they could have done... That's right, like giving me a chance to talk to Miharu. If they had just done that, I...

—wouldn't have been cornered to the point of losing composure. While Takahisa was the one who deserved the blame, he began to feel like the victim himself.

"That's right. It isn't the nicest way of saying it, but we suspected you and tested you. But that's because we *wanted* to believe in you."

"Now that's what sounds like an excuse to justify yourself. You just want vindication!"

Takahisa was in a completely emotional state. He protested against Satsuki, unable to hold back his dissatisfaction.

"Hey, bro. Stop acting like a spoiled brat..." Masato began to say with a frown.

Satsuki held out a hand to cut Masato off. "Would you rather we gave up on you from the start, than give you a chance to redeem yourself?" she asked instead.

"That's..." Takahisa bit down on his lip so hard, it was in danger of bleeding. Realizing nothing he said would get across to them, he fell silent. Satsuki and Masato both watched him with conflicted looks.

All that was left was to bring up the topic of his return again, and the discussion would be over. But Satsuki seemed to realize that this wouldn't help Takahisa change.

"Takahisa," she said to him in an admonishing tone. "Have you forgotten how you originally came here to apologize, without any expectation of forgiveness? Your goal wasn't to be forgiven. Why did that change?"

"Is it so wrong to want to be forgiven?"

"It depends on the time and place, I believe." Satsuki avoided giving a generalized answer of good or evil.

“But it’s true that you’re suffering because of your desire to be forgiven, no? And while I still don’t know what you said to Aki, it doesn’t change the fact that you upset her.”

“...”

“You know why that happened, right?”

“...”

“Takahisa. You’re still in love with Miharu, aren’t you?”

“I...” Takahisa, who had been desperately holding his tongue, trembled when Satsuki pointed out the feelings that were the root of the problem.

“I will take your silence as affirmation. And with that in mind, here’s my advice: you should start with giving up on Miharu.”

“Wha...?! I can’t just—!” Unable to hold back the emotions swelling within him, Takahisa spoke up. But when he realized Satsuki and Masato were staring closely at him, he quickly swallowed his words.

“Miharu rejected you after the banquet, remember?”

So why haven’t you given up on her? Satsuki thought, despite knowing just how difficult of a task that was.

“It’s because I love her that I can’t give up on her...”

“I can respect the intensity of your feelings, but they’re traveling down a one-way road. That’s why you have to give up on Miharu. If you can’t do that, you’ll never be able to move on,” Satsuki said, pointing the reality out to him.

“Give up...”

After wandering into this world and falling into despair, I gave up on so much... I endured so much. I had to go through so much loneliness. And yet...

Why do I have to be the only one to give up?

Those were the words written on Takahisa’s face.

“I know it’s difficult to give up right now. That’s why you should return to Centostella first, Takahisa. You can come visit Miharu again once you’ve given up on her,” Satsuki said, bringing up Takahisa’s return once again. Ordered him

to do so, really.

“Just to be clear, this has been decided already,” Masato emphasized.

“What gives you two the right to decide...”

“Let’s see. If the right to make this decision isn’t with us, then it’s probably with Princess Lilianna and Miharu.”

“Then why don’t you...”

“Do you want to be told to go home by the two of them? And here I thought I was showing you kindness by not bringing Miharu and Princess Lilianna here today.”

“Oh...” Fearing rejection by Miharu, terror filled Takahisa’s face.

“Okay. That’s all I wanted to say today. You’ll be leaving in the next two to three days at the latest. We’ll make sure to invite you for rice and miso soup before then, since we promised that much.”

“...” With no grounds left to argue against Satsuki, Takahisa hung his head bitterly.

“Now, Masato.” Satsuki signaled him with a look.

“Right.”

Masato stood up and walked over to the door. Upon closer inspection, it hadn’t been shut the whole way. As proof, it swung open without resistance when Masato pressed his hand against it, revealing Miharu, Aki, and Lilianna standing on the other side. Because the door had been ajar, they were able to hear the entire conversation that took place.

Everyone had been in on the plan except Takahisa. As though to reinforce that, neither Satsuki nor Masato looked particularly surprised to see them. Takahisa, who still had his head hung and gaze lowered, didn’t notice them outside the room.

“It’s over.” Masato glanced back at his brother inside the room. With a glum sigh, he beckoned them into the room. But Miharu didn’t seem to believe she should face Takahisa, as she bowed at Satsuki before retreating into the corridor.

Aki didn’t chase after Miharu, a mix of emotions on her face. She looked at Takahisa inside the room.

“Excuse me. Sir Takahisa, I’ve come to pick you up,” Lilianna said, entering the room alone. Aki remained standing outside the room. Takahisa continued looking down with a pained expression, frozen in place.

“Let’s return to the castle together, Sir Takahisa.”

Takahisa didn’t budge.

“Stand up, Takahisa. Don’t throw a tantrum like a child.” Satsuki scolded him harshly.

Takahisa’s face twisted in frustration. He reluctantly picked himself up and walked out the room without a second glance towards Satsuki and Masato.

“Takahisa...”

Takahisa briefly paused as he passed Aki in the corridor, but his grim expression only crumpled further before he resumed walking out of the mansion.

“U-Umm... Can I see my brother off up to the front gate?”

“Of course, please do.”

Lilianna made eye contact with Satsuki for permission before nodding. With that, Aki followed behind Lilianna as she left after Takahisa. This left Satsuki and Masato in the room.

“Sorry, Satsuki,” Masato mumbled quietly.

“For what?” Satsuki gently feigned ignorance.

“For my brother. It’s a problem between us siblings, and yet...”

“It’s fine,” Satsuki said brightly, shaking her head.

“Satsuki, Masato.” Miharu entered through the open door. She had probably stayed hidden in the corner of the corridor to avoid meeting Takahisa face-to-face. She only stepped forward once she confirmed he was gone.

“Welcome, Miharu. I’m sure you were listening, but it’s over now,” Satsuki turned to Miharu and smiled softly. There was a hint of mental fatigue in her

face.

“I’m sorry, Satsuki.”

“Masato was just apologizing to me too... But what is there to be sorry for?”

“I think I should have been the one to tell Takahisa after all. I forced an undesirable role onto you.”

“Really? Like I said just now, until Takahisa can put this behind him and move on, I don’t think you two should be seeing each other.”

Seized by her strong sense of responsibility, the bitter look on Miharu’s face remained.

“You know, Miharu. In the first place, it was Takahisa who went and fell in love with you, so you don’t have to feel any responsibility. You even rejected him properly at the banquet. He’s the one refusing to give up. If you appear in front of him right now, you’ll be doing exactly what he wants. That’s why it’s only right for me to be the one in the firing line,” Satsuki said firmly in an attempt to cheer Miharu up.

“Thank you very much.” Miharu smiled awkwardly and bowed her head.

“Well, while this is kind of everyone’s problem, the one who has to resolve this is Takahisa himself. It’s not a problem we can solve for him. That’s why I know you’re feeling anxious over how this problem hasn’t been resolved, but all we can do is wait. Let’s be patient, okay?” Satsuki’s appeal seemed to settle their emotions a little.

“All right...”

“Okay.”

Miharu and Masato both nodded quietly.

After that, Miharu’s gaze was naturally drawn to the corridor. Rather than being worried for Takahisa, she seemed to be worried about Aki, who was going to see him off.

“Takahisa should have left the mansion by now. Why don’t you go check on Aki?”

“Okay...”

At Satsuki’s suggestion, Miharu left the drawing room.

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As Satsuki predicted, Takahisa had already left the mansion. It was already almost bedtime, so naturally, it was dark outside.

Takahisa walked along the dark path back to the castle in silence. Lilianna and Aki were right behind them, and they were all surrounded by the knights Hilda, Kiara, and Alice. The knights held magic artifacts to illuminate the way. Lilianna's attendant Frill was also with them.

Everyone could sense Takahisa was on edge; no one said a word as they approached the boundary of the mansion grounds. Aki wasn't going all the way back to the castle, so she had to say goodbye soon.

"Takahisa..." She called out to his back with everything she had.

"..." Takahisa came to a stop. He was still silent, but Aki was relieved to know her voice had reached him.

"I... I will definitely return to Centostella later. Wait for me."

Aki was just getting used to living in the mansion, having restored her relationship with Miharu. She should want to live with Miharu again. By telling Takahisa she would return to Centostella, she was telling him the place for her to come back to was by his side.

"You know, Aki, Lily..." Takahisa said to Aki and Lilianna, turning around to face them.

"Yes?"

"What is it?"

"Everyone... Everyone's misunderstood me," Takahisa insisted. However, there was no misunderstanding; he hadn't changed. If anything, being mentally cornered was what made this side of himself more prominent. There was no denying this, and yet...

"R-Right... That may be true..."

Aki didn't disagree with him. She knew that Takahisa was aching for someone to see his true self. She tried to gently accept the way he was at the moment with all her heart.

“It’s not a ‘maybe’...”

“Yeah... I know. I know what you’re really like, because you’re my brother.”

Aki approached the heartbroken young man and hugged him softly. She patted his back as though she was soothing a crying child.

“Do I really have to return to Centostella by myself?” Takahisa asked in a terribly weakened voice, almost sounding like a whine.

“...”

“If it’s what everyone else wants, it can’t be avoided,” Lilianna answered in place of Aki.

“But... But couldn’t you convince everyone, Lily?! If the two of you talk to Satsuki and Masato for me... maybe it could work out? Since they won’t listen to me...” Takahisa seemed to understand that they were his last chance left. He begged them like he was grasping at straws.

“That’s...”

Rejection was written on Aki’s face. Even under the dim light of the glowing magic artifacts, Takahisa could see that clearly.

“You want to be with Miharu too, right? That’s why next time, we can invite her to the Centostella Kingdom. Everyone else too!” Takahisa added in a hurry, cutting Aki off before she could reject him completely.

“I want to be with everyone as well... I want to support you,” Aki said sincerely.

“Then...!”

“But... I don’t want to betray everyone’s feelings.” This too, was the sincere truth in Aki’s heart.

“Wha...?”

“I can’t betray everyone anymore. That’s why I won’t convince them. I’m sorry. No... I think you should go back to Centostella first too. It’ll be better for you, Takahisa,” Aki said with a pained look.

“You...” Takahisa was speechless for a moment. “You’re joking, right...?” he

asked with a trembling voice.

"..."

"Answer me, Aki..."

"I'm not joking. It's for the best. Even without Miharu around, you're not alone, Takahisa. I'll be there for you, so don't give up on earning everyone's trust again, okay?" Aki said, facing Takahisa directly.

"What is trust?! Not alone? How can you say that when none of you even know what it's like to be alone?! You haven't been alone before—that's why you can tell me to go back so easily! That's why you can tell me to be alone and give up!"

The frustration built up in Takahisa exploded all at once. His angry yells filled the darkness of the night, causing silence to fall over everyone with him.

"If you're lonely, I'll go back together with you instead of later... I'm on your side." Aki patiently tried to convey that Takahisa wasn't alone, but...

"No... That's not it. That's not what I mean." Takahisa shook his head in frustration. So what did he mean?

"Am I... not good enough? Am I not enough to fill your loneliness?" Aki asked, looking like *she* was the lonely one.

"That's not it... That's not... You want to be with everyone too, right? You want to be with Miharu, don't you? I'm saying we should find a way for everyone to be together. Not to be separated like this...!" Takahisa continuously repeated the word "everyone," as though to emphasize that.

"Takahisa... The one you want to be with..."

Aki already knew that Takahisa's logic was no more than an excuse. She probably knew it from the beginning, but pretended not to notice. But she could no longer act blind to it any longer.

The one you want to be with isn't "everyone," it's Miharu.

Aki was still unable to say those words, which was why she had no choice but to fall silent. She conveyed her inability to grant Takahisa's wish without words. Takahisa seemed to understand that.

“Please, Lily!” he turned to Lilianna in a panic.

“...” Lilianna stood there in silence without responding immediately.

“Can’t you do something about it? Please, I beg you. You’re the only one I can count on...” he pleaded desperately.

With a sigh, Lilianna slowly spoke. “To be honest, I’m confused as to why you’re in such a fluster, Sir Takahisa.”

“B-Because I’m about to be sent back to Centostella! Of course I’d be flustered!”

“I mean about everything else leading up to that decision. When you arrived in Galarc, you were extremely rational. You felt regret for your past actions and had repented from the bottom of your heart. But the longer you stayed here, the less that regret and repentance could be seen. Instead, it was replaced with impatience. Even in this conversation, you were only concerned about yourself and gave nothing but excuses... Why did your regret and repentance disappear?” Lilianna asked in utter confusion.

“I-It didn’t disappear... I still regret things now, and I’m still reflecting on it. That’s why I’ll never try to take Miharu to Centostella against her will again. I really do regret it... That wasn’t the real me. That’s why I just want people to see who I really am...” Takahisa answered bitterly, clenching his fists.

“In that case, why can’t you wait patiently? You say you want people to see your true self, but trust that has been lost once cannot be regained so easily. There’s nothing you can do about the distance between you. No matter how they treat you, you should reflect on yourself and accept that. That’s how you regain their trust little by little. Why can you not see that?” Lilianna listed her points plainly.

“Th-That’s just deceiving. There’s no guarantee that doing that will lead to regaining their trust.”

“Either way, if the reason why you’re going around in circles is in this castle, then it only makes sense for you to leave. I believe it would be best for you to return to Centostella as well, Sir Takahisa.”

“A-Aren’t I free to be where I want?! Why do all of you have the right to

restrain me?! You're all ignoring my feelings! How can you expect me to accept things when you won't look at me or even give me a chance?!"

"This all started when you ignored Lady Miharu's feelings, remember? That is the reason why you cannot be with her. She's asking you to leave because your presence is a nuisance. Do you understand that?"

Nothing Takahisa said mattered anymore. Lilianna was unshaken, her words as sharp as a blade.

"That's... I..."

Takahisa seemed to have some awareness that he was being a nuisance, as he made a hurt face. But in spite of that, he still seemed to have something to say.

"In the first place, I didn't become a hero because I wanted to. If I hadn't become a hero, I wouldn't have been forced to stay in the Centostella Kingdom away from everyone..."

It was an indirect way of saying the Centostella Kingdom was at fault for restricting him.

"Was..."

Was living in Centostella that bad to you, Sir Takahisa?

—was what Lilianna wanted to ask, her expression hesitant. But she quickly shook her head and thrust the reality at Takahisa. "Even if you quit being a hero, Lady Miharu will not want to be beside you."

"That's... That's...!"

Not something you know for sure—was what Takahisa couldn't say. However, he still couldn't accept that reality, and struggled to change it.

"Come on, Lily. Don't torture me like this..." Takahisa's heart was finally seeming to fold, as he started begging with a pleading look.

"I do not wish to torture you, Sir Takahisa."

"So why would you say something so horrible?"

"I'm saying it for your sake."

"For my sake..." Takahisa grimaced bitterly. "Really? Is it really for my sake?"

He shot a questioning look at Lilianna, as though he were suspecting her of something.

“What do you mean...?”

Lilianna, in all her intelligence, was unable to infer what he was suspicious of. She tilted her head in question.

“You’re in love with me, aren’t you? Aren’t you saying such horrible things for the sake of your kingdom, because you don’t want me to be with Miharu?”

Did he think he was counterattacking by striking a raw nerve? Takahisa had a leering smirk on his face.

“Ah...”

The words struck like a bolt out of the blue, rendering Lilianna speechless for a while. She tried to think of something to say, but could only move her mouth wordlessly. In the end, she hung her head with deep sorrow. Tears fell, landing on the ground at her feet.

That was only natural. Takahisa’s words were the lowest of lows. No matter how impatient or panicked he was, no matter how much he had lost sight of himself, those words couldn’t be overlooked.

“HEY!”

An enraged voice echoed across the mansion grounds.

“Huh?!”

“M-Masato?!”

Takahisa flinched and looked in the direction of the voice. There, hiding in the darkness, was his little brother, Masato. Miharu and Satsuki were behind him.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me... How much of a jerk can you be?” Masato glared at Takahisa hatefully, marching forward as though he was about to throw a punch at any moment. But someone grabbed his shoulder from behind, stopping him.

“What...?”

Don’t stop me, Satsuki—was what he was about to say as he turned, but...

“Miharu?”

The one who had stopped him was Miharu.

“Wait, Masato.”

“O-Okay...”

In that instant, Masato understood that Takahisa had infuriated her to her limit: this was the angriest look he had ever seen on her face.

“Miha...!” Satsuki immediately called, but stopped mid-word. She seemed to decide against stopping her, pulling back the hand she had extended out and ruffling her own head instead. Miharu continued walking silently towards Takahisa.

Takahisa opened his mouth in a panic, quickly trying to come up with an excuse.



“M-Miha—?!”

Miharu closed his mouth by slapping him across the cheek. The dull sound of the slap physically obstructed Takahisa's words. He was unable to speak her entire name.

"Huh? Huh...?" Takahisa was terribly confused.

"You..." Miharu glared at him with intense resentment. "You're the worst, Takahisa." Her words were heavy with both anger and sadness.

"S-Sorry! Miharu, I—!" Takahisa apologized reflexively.

"For what?"

"Huh?"

"What are you sorry for?" Miharu asked as though she was completely mystified.

"Ah, I— That's... for saying weird things," Takahisa mumbled weakly.

"Don't apologize if you don't know what you're apologizing for. I can't trust your apologies," Miharu snapped bluntly.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sorry..." Takahisa apologized over and over again in a panic.

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to, am I? Princess Lilianna must have been really hurt."

Miharu's voice was trembling. No, it wasn't just her voice—she had never slapped anyone in the face before. The hand she struck Takahisa with was still shaking. The arm she swung and the rest of her body was trembling as well. She felt like she could fall apart at any moment, but that didn't stop her from criticizing Takahisa.

"Oh, I..." Takahisa looked at Lilianna.

"Did you hurt Princess Lilianna for my sake? Is that why you said something so horrible?" There was a strong look of guilt on Miharu's face as she asked that.

"N-No, you're wrong. You're wrong, I—!"

"Nevermind. I don't want to know. You're always trying to change the subject, I don't want to listen to what you have to say anymore. But there's something I have to say to you in my own words. It's my fault I didn't make this clear from

the start," Miharu said as a preamble.—

"I don't like you, Takahisa. I hate you. I won't be with you. I don't want to be near you. Don't show your face in front of me ever again."

She rejected him using the strongest language she could.

"No..." Takahisa looked like his world had ended.

"Hilda. Could you please take Takahisa to his room in the castle? I will bring Princess Lilianna back inside, where she can wait for you to pick her up afterwards," Miharu asked the captain of Lilianna's guards.

"Understood. Please look after the princess. Frill, you stay by her side."

Hilda bowed deeply towards Miharu and gave Frill directions to stay back. Frill nodded silently.

"Princess Lilianna, please forgive me. It's my fault that this happened..." Miharu approached Lilianna and bowed deeply.

"N-No, you're not to blame, Lady Miharu..." Lilianna wiped her tears and shook her head, still somewhat dazed.

"Come now, Sir Takahisa."

"H-Hey! Wait! Miharu, wait...!" Takahisa shook off Hilda's hand and yelled in Miharu's direction.

"..."

Miharu didn't try to look at him. There was no way she couldn't hear him, yet she looked in the opposite direction as though she hadn't heard him.

"I was lonely! I hated being alone! I was alone from the moment I came to this world, that's why I was scared of becoming alone again! Because I love you, Miharu. That's why I started getting weirder and weirder..."

Takahisa voiced his weakness, confessing his love in the confusion of the moment.

"I hate myself for being like this too! But please, please... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, please forgive me... I'll repent properly this time! I'm begging you..."

He fell to his knees and lowered his head desperately, his face ghastly pale,

Miharu looked extremely conflicted as she frowned, considering whether there was room to give him any consideration. But she had the feeling that if she forgave Takahisa here, the same thing would just happen again. She believed that forgiving Takahisa here would definitely be the wrong thing to do, which was why she had to reject him properly.

“Let’s go, Lady Miharu.” Lilianna seemed to think the same way as Miharu, as she gently touched her back and nudged her away.

“Right. Come here, Aki. Let’s go back together.” Miharu nodded firmly, calling out to Aki who was watching Takahisa worriedly.

“Okay...” Aki tore her eyes away from Takahisa, severing her lingering attachments and nodding. Then, Satsuki walked up to Takahisa.

“Takahisa. Stay in your room and cool your head until you return to Centostella. Think long and hard about what you did wrong. I will see you off when you leave, so we’ll talk then.”

That will be your true final chance—was implied in Satsuki’s words as she looked down at Takahisa.

“Ngh...”

Instead of replying, Takahisa sobbed into the ground. Thus, Miharu and the others returned to the mansion while Takahisa was taken to his room in the castle.

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Two days after that was the morning of Takahisa’s return to the Centostella Kingdom. Lilianna had informed him the night before that he would be leaving the Galarc Kingdom this morning.

“I’ll be off then.”

Satsuki was about to leave the mansion to go see Takahisa off. She bid a temporary farewell to Miharu, Aki, and Masato, who were staying back at the mansion.

“Satsuki... Please take care of my brother.” Aki bowed her head.

“Yeah...” Satsuki nodded.

“Huh? Princess Lilianna?”

Masato was about to say something when he looked out the front door and noticed Lilianna coming up the path to the mansion.

She seemed to be in a great hurry, as she had the hem of her dress pinched in her hands as she ran up the path. Everyone was wide-eyed at the sight of it.

“H-Hey, did something happen?”

Satsuki hurried out of the mansion and ran towards Lilianna. Miharu, Aki, And Masato were close behind her. Once they reached each other—

“I’m so sorry,” Lilianna apologized through panting breaths.

“For... what?”

The residents of the mansion were puzzled by why she was apologizing.

“Sir Takahisa has disappeared...”

Lilianna revealed that Takahisa had run away.

Chapter 7: Holy City of Tonerico

Over a thousand years ago, the Divine War was said to have begun from the west side of the Strahl region. The demon army had originally appeared in the west before marching towards the east, resulting in the west side of Strahl being dominated by the enemy. The land became uninhabitable for humans.

Humans only moved back to the land after the war was over. Descendents of the former residents of the west returned to the land and built a new nation. This was all recorded in historical texts.

Furthermore, it was a well-known historical fact that the first spot where the demon army appeared was the westernmost point of the Strahl region. So strictly speaking, the Divine War began from the westernmost side of Strahl.

The major nations on the eastern side of Strahl were the Galarc Kingdom to the east and Centostella Kingdom to the southeast, while the major nations in the middle of the region were the Proxia Empire to the north and Beltrum Kingdom to the south.

Meanwhile, the major nation of the west was the Holy Kingdom of Almada located at the westernmost corner of the region.

“We’re here.”

After giving Saint Erica’s body a proper burial, Rio arrived at a certain city within this Holy Kingdom of Almada—the Holy City of Tonerico. As mentioned already, this was the land where the demon forces of the Divine War first appeared.

“Good work on the long journey, Dragon King.”

Floating in the air, Sora bowed her head at Rio.

“You too, Sora.”

Rio smiled at Sora before looking down on the holy city below them. The most eye-catching man-made object of the city was the palace where the governor of the city resided, but there was a more notable object that wasn’t man-made.

So that's the labyrinth...

On the wide plains by the sea was a huge cavernous hole that was releasing dark energy. It was said that the original demon army had appeared from this labyrinth.

The labyrinth was surrounded by layers of walls sturdier than the ramparts defending the city itself. It was unclear if the labyrinth could even be considered a part of the city like this. There was a leveled path leading from the entrance of the labyrinth to the city, but the road was over a kilometer long.

There were people that could be seen walking along that road, but it was a completely non-residential area. The cave was clearly being walled off out of fear.

Those armed people are the soldiers of the city... and adventurers? They taught us a bit about the labyrinth back at the Royal Academy, but it seems the rumors of monsters still appearing inside it are true.

Seeing the strict precautions and adventurers heading in and out of the labyrinth, Rio came to that conclusion.

I just hope there are clues of what happened during the Divine War...

Lina of the Seven Wise Gods had predicted something would happen in this era. That was why she had reincarnated the Dragon King's soul into Rio. But the most vital details of what would happen and what Rio had to do were still unclear. There was still too much information that was missing.

That's why the purpose of this trip was for them to gather more information. The land where the demon army first appeared could hold some clues. They had come all the way here based on that vague hope.

That being said, there was still a lot that Rio didn't know about the holy city and labyrinth. He had never planned on coming here before hearing about Lina, so he only possessed the general knowledge that he learned back when he was studying at the Royal Academy.

"Let's go down to the city and find out what we can about the labyrinth and the Divine War first."

“Okay!”

There was no time to waste. Rio and Sora immediately descended to the Holy City of Tonerico.

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After entering the city, the first thing Rio and Sora did was ask around about the holy kingdom, the city, and the labyrinth. As a result, they learned a few things.

First, in terms of the nation, Almada wasn’t called a holy kingdom for nothing. The nation had an extremely strong belief in the Six Wise Gods.

The kingdom was ruled by a king, but there was also a pope that served as the religious ruler of the nation.

The current king’s name was Fenris Tonerico. The king had a higher status and more power, but the pope possessed an autonomous region of extraterritoriality, approved of by the king. That autonomous region was the Holy City of Tonerico, where Rio and Sora currently were. The capital where the king lived was located elsewhere.

After two or three hours of walking around the holy city and gathering information—

“I think this should do for the political side of things.”

Rio and Sora entered a cafe to organize the information they gathered.

“Right. What’s more important is the labyrinth,” Sora said.

“Yup.”

The more important matter at hand was the labyrinth. They had learned some things about that as well. As Rio guessed before they entered the city, monsters were still appearing in the labyrinth. If left alone, they had the potential to overflow from the labyrinth, which was why many adventurers went cull down their numbers every day.

“The two of us could make it to the furthest depths and back in no time at all!” Sora declared confidently.

“Well, we’ve come this far already. I’d like to go inside too. But if no one’s reached the depths in the past thousand years, there may be other things lurking there besides monsters.”

In contrast to Sora, Rio maintained his careful stance. There was no telling what was inside the labyrinth, as it was uncharted territory.

With no experience in exploring such places, he was unable to predict what dangers could be within. They could get lost, or there could be problems that couldn’t be dealt with using simple combat.

“Do the rules of the transcendent ones apply when fighting with monsters?” he suddenly wondered out loud.

As a transcendent one, Rio currently had to follow the rules decided by god. It was forbidden for him to support the interests of certain individuals or groups in a way unfair for the rest of humanity.

In other words, transcendent ones had to use their power for the sake of humanity as a whole. Violating this rule would result in the penalty of forgetting who he had been trying to support.

“It depends... Defeating a few monsters far away from civilization shouldn’t activate the rules, but defeating too many is a problem. Having people nearby can also be an issue. It would be better to wear your mask while inside the labyrinth,” Sora answered after some thought.

There were five masks left that could evade the rules of god. One was cracked in the fight to get Celia and the others away from Rodania, and Celia was currently analyzing how to fix it. Another was left for Aishia, who had remained in the Galarc Castle. Thus Rio only had three left in his possession.

“Got it. We can restock on supplies and store them in the Time-Space Cache... All that’s left is to ask about the labyrinth at the adventurer’s guild then.”

The labyrinth was also part of the holy city, meaning its management was under the pope’s jurisdiction. Adventurers went to the guild to receive formal requests from the pope before going into the labyrinth. Registration at the guild was required in order to enter the labyrinth.

This meant that the guild was the most knowledgeable about the labyrinth. It

was best to investigate as much as they could before they entered such an unknown area. But just then...

“Thank you for waiting.”

A waitress came over with their order. Rio had ordered an iced tea, while Sora had ordered a juice and fruit platter.

“Wow...!”

Sora looked at the dish on the table with sparkling eyes.

“But let’s finish what’s before us first,” Rio corrected himself with a chuckle.

“Okay!”

Sora stuffed her cheeks with fruit happily.

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Once Rio and Sora left the cafe, they headed for the adventurer’s guild.

“This seems to be it.”

The adventurer’s guild was an organization established by the nation. It was intended as a way to force monster extermination jobs and national security onto thugs that otherwise couldn’t find proper work. This reduced the costs of stationing the army to exterminate monsters, which was a huge benefit to the nation.

Because of this, the structure of the adventurer’s guild was adopted by many nations, turning into a semi-international organization.

In a way, the adventurer’s guild could only function due to the existence of monsters, but this was especially true for the Holy City of Tonerico, where monsters spawned in the labyrinth. In fact, it was believed that Tonerico was where the first adventurer’s guild was located.

Thus, Tonerico was considered a sacred land for adventurers as well. It was even said that the city had the highest number of adventurers in the world. The adventurer’s guild here was also considered the general headquarters of every adventurer’s guild.

Rio had seen the local headquarters of the adventurer’s guild in Galarc and

Beltrum, and both were magnificent buildings. However...

This is more of a fortress than a mansion. Wow.

The adventurer's guild of Tonerico was even more splendid. The majority of adventurers here made their living from the labyrinth, which was probably why it was built into the wall that separated the city from the labyrinth.

It was probably designed to be a barrier against monsters if they ever escaped from the labyrinth. The exterior was exactly like a sturdy fortress. Adventurers had to go through the guild if they wished to enter the city.

"Let's go." Rio entered the guild through the open door.

Unlike the rustic stone exterior, the interior was a rather stylishly decorated spacious area. Armed adventurers could be spotted everywhere. There was a plain wooden counter towards the back of the room, manned by multiple staff. Some of them were busy dealing with adventurers.

"Looks like we can register over there."

Rio pointed at the reception counter. Considering the literacy level of this world, there were probably many people who couldn't read the words, but there was a sign indicating which counter was for new adventurer registrations. The counter just so happened to be free at the moment, so they quickly made their way over before anyone else lined up.

The people inside the guild lobby were diverse in both appearance and stature, but Sora stood out amongst them all with her appearance of a seven or eight year old girl.

However, Rio's presence was currently weakened by being a transcendent one. He could be perceived if he spoke to someone first, but something like his appearance wouldn't draw any unwanted attention. The rules also applied to Sora more strongly when she was with him, so no one paid any particular notice to them.

"Excuse me."

"Huh? Oh, yes?"

The woman at the counter also failed to notice Rio as he went up to her,

startling when she suddenly heard his voice out of nowhere.

“We’re considering registering as an adventurer here. Could you tell me more about it?” Rio asked, seeking information using the excuse of registration. While registration was necessary to obtain the pass required to go into the labyrinth, Rio was still undecided on whether he would actually register.

The reason for this was because of the obligations that came with registration at the adventurer’s guild. Rio feared that doing so would count as part of the rules of god against supporting certain individuals or organizations.

Besides, even if Rio and Sora didn’t register with the guild, they would be able to sneak inside the labyrinth. And even if they failed at sneaking in, the rules of god would erase them from the memories of others if they created a bit of a fuss.

And so, they decided they would visit the guild to gather more information about the labyrinth. If they were told there was information limited only to those registered as adventurers, they would probably register, but...

“Ah, I see... It’s quiet right now, so I don’t mind.”

Welcoming new adventurers must have been part of her job, as she nodded readily.

“Thank you very much. We’ve never interacted with the adventurer’s guild before, so we barely know anything...”

“I see. If you don’t mind me asking, who’s ‘we’...?”

“The two of us,” Rio said, looking down at Sora standing beside him.

“Huh? Umm...”

The reception lady stood up from her chair to look over the counter and down at Sora. She hadn’t failed to spot Sora because of the rules of god, but rather because Sora was too short to see over the counter. While Sora’s head did reach over the counter, the lady probably wanted to confirm what she looked like from head to toe.

With monster extermination being the livelihood of an adventurer, there was an age limit of twelve years old to register. While there was no way for the guild

to confirm ages, that didn't mean they could skip the check entirely.

"Despite her appearance, she's two years younger than me," Rio lied awkwardly. He doubted she would believe him if he said her true age was over a thousand, so he had no other choice.

"And your age would be..."

"I'm almost seventeen."

"Understood. That... shouldn't be a problem..."

The woman at the counter seemed to be struggling to see Sora as anything other than a young child. She looked down at Sora with an uncertain look.

"Sora is an adult!" Sora's unhappy voice echoed past the counter.

After that, there was a bit of a brief dispute, but they obtained the information from the adventurer's guild successfully. Since no one would remember they were there, they took the chance to ask as many questions as they could.

As a result, there was no information directly related to their goal, but they received quite a bit of knowledge regarding the labyrinth and the residents of the city.

"Thank you very much. That was very informative."

"Feel free to come back if you have any further questions."

With this, they succeeded in gaining the minimum knowledge they needed to go into the labyrinth. Thus, Rio and Sora left the counter without registering with the guild.

When they stepped out of the building, the sky was a sunset red. It was almost evening.

"Let's do a little shopping and return to the stone house for the day. We can go to the labyrinth tomorrow morning."

Rio thought of the list of supplies they were told they would need if they were going to the labyrinth. They had enough stock currently stored in the Time-Space Cache, and their spirit arts could solve a lot of the issues regular

adventurers would face, but it never hurt to be too prepared.

“Okay!”

After they finished shopping, their day in the city came to an end. Rio set up the stone house outside the city, and the two of them went to sleep early in preparation for their exploration of the labyrinth the next day.

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In the thousand years after the Divine War, countless adventurers attempted to conquer the labyrinth. However, no one had ever reached the innermost depths.

There were many reasons for this, but the simplest explanation was because it was just too difficult to traverse. The inside of the labyrinth was vast, complex, and extensive. As one progressed deeper into the labyrinth, the monsters increased in number and strength, making it more and more dangerous to explore.

Despite that, the number of adventurers who strived to reach the depths was endless. Every adventurer seeking fame and fortune dreamed of becoming the first to clear the labyrinth and striking it rich.

Monsters dropped enchanted gems when they were defeated. Natural essence crystals of high purity and spirit stones—known as “enchanted beads” in the Strahl region—could also be excavated from the labyrinth. One could even live like nobility if they brought back enough of these to sell.

The size of an enchanted gem was reflective of how strong the monster it dropped from was. Essence crystals and enchanted beads could only be obtained in the deeper floors, so their acquisition served as proof of one’s progress. In other words, bringing them back was a simple proof of accomplishment. Fellow adventurers would watch on in envy, while the general public would look on in admiration.

For an adventurer, the labyrinth was the most clear-cut path to success. This was also the reason why adventurers from all around the Strahl region gathered in the Holy City Tonerico. Thus, the countless adventurers in the city dived into the labyrinth day and night, risking their lives and competing with each other to clear it.

And right now, Rio and Sora were about to go inside in a mere group of two. Early in the morning, using their spirit arts to turn invisible, the two of them infiltrated the wall surrounding the labyrinth entrance. Once they were within the walls, there was no way of distinguishing them from the other adventurers, so they canceled their invisibility and boldly walked up to the entrance.

“So this is the labyrinth entrance...”

Rio and Sora stood side-by-side and looked up at the entrance before them.

It was several hundred meters wide and easily over a hundred meters tall. The size was impressive enough when they were looking down at it from the sky, but it was basically a mountain when they looked up at it from this close.

There were other adventurers about to enter the labyrinth nearby, but the entrance was so wide, there was no need to decide on who would enter first.

“Let’s go in.”

“Okay!”

Like the other adventurers, Rio and Sora stepped inside the labyrinth, but they stopped as soon as they stepped inside.

“Wow...”

The interior of the labyrinth was just too breathtaking. The height of the ceiling inside was the same as the labyrinth entrance. There were no artificial lights, yet Rio and Sora could clearly see the ceiling a hundred meters above their heads.

This was because of the natural lighting within the labyrinth. The entire wall of the cave emitted a faint light that made their view perfectly clear. This was something the receptionist at the adventurer’s guild had explained in advance, but it was still a surprise to see with their own eyes.

It was believed to be caused by a special mineral inside the labyrinth walls, but the light disappeared quickly after being mined from the wall.

“There’s a small amount of magic essence in the walls. That’s probably why it glows.”

Rio stared closely at the ceiling and found he could see the magic essence contained in the walls.

“The essence in the air is also quite dense,” Sora observed, curiously looking around the cave herself.

“Yeah. It may have something to do with why monsters keep appearing in the labyrinth...” Rio said, looking away from the ceiling and at the scenery before them.

The two were currently on the first floor of the labyrinth, which was nothing but a vast, empty space. There was a path at the back that led to the lower floors, but it was over three kilometers away, making it difficult to see all the way to the end.

With this much space available, there was no need to worry about having not enough room to fight. They could see some adventurers locked in combat with goblins in the distance, but they didn't seem to be struggling or anything.

If the memories Lina planted in Aishia are accurate, the Six Wise Gods held some kind of experiment here a thousand years ago. As a result, the Divine War occurred.

Rio looked around the interior and recalled the memories Aishia regained after their battle with Saint Erica. The Six Wise Gods once confined Lina here and opened a hole in the dimension of the world. This resulted in monsters arriving from outside of the world—monsters that continued to appear in this labyrinth to this day.

That was why Rio suspected that whatever Lina was fearing would happen here. They had traveled to the Holy City Tonerico for this reason, but...

There's something about this labyrinth after all.

Now that they were here, Rio was even more certain that was the case.

"Apparently there's a strong monster that guards the tenth floor... You normally need the adventurer's guild permission to take it on, but let's head towards it for now."

"Okay! It'll be a piece of cake for us!"

Although Sora called it easy, the furthest humanity had progressed through the labyrinth was that tenth floor. There were some adventurers who had defeated the monster guarding the tenth floor before, but they all turned back after entering the eleventh floor.

Furthermore, there seemed to be more than one monster guarding the tenth floor, as the same monster was always waiting for the next challengers.

"Well, just keep your guard up. *Dissolvo*."

That being said, Rio was aware of Sora's abilities. He wasn't worried about her falling behind. After taking his mask out of the Time-Space Cache, they began their exploration of the labyrinth.

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As one would expect from a transcendent one and their disciple, Rio and Sora moved through the labyrinth smoothly. They ran straight to the end of the first floor, arriving at the second floor in a matter of minutes. Most of the monsters on the first floor were goblins, with the rare orc appearing here and there.

The second floor also had goblins and orcs, but there were a greater number of them than the first floor. The terrain of the floor was the same open space as the first floor, with the inclusion of boulders scattered about as obstacles. Monsters tended to hide behind them, so adventurers had to pass them with caution.

However, the two of them were no ordinary adventurers. They ran straight for the path to the third floor at the same speed as they did on the first floor, clearing the second floor in the same amount of time.

Once they reached the third floor, they found there were clearly less adventurers around. This was because of the increase in difficulty—the terrain was the same as the second floor, but the monsters were different.

Mutated strains of the regular monsters—identified by their different colored skin—had a low chance of appearing amongst the other monsters. Mutated monsters were stronger the darker in color they were, but the ones on this floor were still a lighter shade of grey. They were no threat to Rio and Sora, who cleared the floor with the minimum number of battles.

There were black mutations on the fourth floor, but mutated goblins and orcs were still easy for them to handle. There were less adventurers around, but the terrain was the same as the second and third floor, so they were able to clear it without issue.

Then, they reached the fifth floor. The terrain here was different; the vast space up to the fourth floor was now split into multiple paths. The ceiling was also lower, but still dozens of meters high.

“It’s exactly like what we heard at the adventurer’s guild.” Rio stopped at the start of the fifth floor and gazed out at the diverging paths before him.

When they were gathering information at the adventurer’s guild, they were given the features of all ten floors that had been previously cleared. It had been the right move to go to the adventurer’s guild first—if they had come here without any preparation, they wouldn’t have known which path to take.

“Which shall we go down?” Sora asked.

“Every path leads to the next floor, but... Let’s take the middle one. The paths on the fifth floor are complex, so let’s take our time and walk the way there.” Rio picked a path at random.

“Okay!”

And so, the two began to make their way through the fifth floor.

But after two or three minutes of walking, a roar could be heard from in front of them.

“WROOOH!”

A roar could be heard from in front of them.

“Wha...?!”

The source of the sound was clear—it had come from the minotaur in front of them. Rio and Sora had been using their wind spirit arts to search for enemies around them as they walked, so they were aware it was there. But the roar was far louder than they had expected, making them both jump.

“How noisy... Shut up!” Sora pointed her index finger at the charging minotaur to take aim. A bullet of magic essence immediately shot at the beast. The minotaur had roared because it had spotted Rio and Sora in the first place, so it was already prepared for combat, but...

“WROO—OOH?!”

Sora’s bullet of light shot straight through its heart. While her glowing finger had been visible to the minotaur, the attack had already stuck by the time the minotaur spotted it. It had been impossible to evade. The minotaur disintegrated into nothing as it flew back, its enchanted gem clattering to the

ground noisily.

“The information about minotaurs appearing on the fifth floor was accurate too.”

“Even a thousand minotaurs are nothing to me,” Sora said triumphantly.

“But if the monsters keep getting stronger like this, we may struggle to clear the monsters beyond the tenth floor too. Most people would hit their limit at the sixth or seventh floor if they don’t possess an enchanted sword.”

Parties formed of magic-casting knights or sorcerers could probably take on one or two minotaurs, but they would need to keep their guards up at all times. They wouldn’t risk taking them on directly like Sora had done just now.

When they continued to the sixth and seventh floor, mutant variants of minotaurs began to appear and the number of monsters increased. Considering the need for breaks between battles—and the return trip to be made after—most adventurers found it safest to fight on the fifth floor even if they were capable of fighting on the sixth or seventh.

Skilled warriors equipped with powerful ancient enchanted swords and highly competent spirit art casters were absolutely essential to progression past the fifth floor.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. Oh! Sora will pick up the enchanted gems, Dragon King!”

Seeing Rio move forward to retrieve the enchanted gems, Sora quickly dashed ahead of him. After picking up the gems, she turned to him with a puppy-eyed look, hoping for praise.

“Thank you, Sora.” Rio patted her head gently.

“Sora is the Dragon King’s disciple, so this much is a given!” Sora said happily, beaming from ear to ear.

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A little while later, when Rio and Sora were making their way through the ninth floor...

Elsewhere deep in the labyrinth, a small child stood in a wide, wide hall. Their

face was covered in a white hood, making it impossible to determine their gender from a glance.

"..." The child was gazing up at the glowing ceiling of the labyrinth.

"There are two intruders on the ninth floor. Who are they? They seem quite strong," the child said, their interest piqued by whatever it was they were seeing.

"What shall we do?" a creepy, unnatural voice echoed from beside them.

What seemed like a regular boulder at first glance was actually a human-shaped creature with jet black skin kneeling beside the child. If Rio or Aishia had been there, they would have immediately recognized it as a revenant.

"They'll reach the tenth floor soon. I'll send you there, so go and watch them," the child ordered the revenant.

"As you wish."

The revenant showed respect to the child as though they were a superior. It bowed low on the ground, demonstrating tremendous intelligence, before it disappeared.

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Several minutes later,

Rio and Sora had reached the path connecting the ninth floor to the tenth floor.

"This is the path that goes to the tenth floor. The one that needs the adventurer's guild's approval to challenge," Rio said, looking down into the cave that continued to the floor below.

The reason why approval from the adventurer's guild was required to take on the tenth floor was because they didn't want to lose the skilled adventurers capable of clearing the ninth floor. The guild's approval was thought to be required to encourage the adventurers to think carefully before making the decision to take on the challenge.

However, the guild didn't station anyone to watch out for any adventurers breaking that rule, as the location was just too dangerous.

The last floor Rio and Sora saw other adventurers on was the seventh floor, so there was unlikely to be anyone on the ninth floor. The adventurer's guild wouldn't notice if they proceeded to take on the tenth floor like this—Rio and Sora weren't adventurers in the first place.

"Let's go, Dragon King," Sora said without any hesitation.

"Well... We did come here for this." Rio felt a tiny bit of guilt at the thought of breaking the rules like this, but he accepted his fate. They descended down the path connecting to the tenth floor.

"So this is the tenth floor..."

The first thing Rio did was stop at the exit of the connecting path and look around the area. It was completely silent.

The ninth floor had been a complicated maze, yet the tenth floor was an open space like the first floor, only with a dome-shaped ceiling. The space was also far smaller than the other first floor. While the floors until now had all been several kilometers in width, the tenth floor was only seventy or eighty meters in diameter. However, the ceiling was still abnormally high.

Wow... We've come pretty far underground, but the ceiling is easily over a hundred meters high.

Rio's breath caught in awe as he estimated the height of the ceiling. With this much height to the room, they could freely fly around the inside of the labyrinth if they wanted.

Just how far down does this labyrinth go?

The entrance of the labyrinth had been beside the sea, and the direction of their descent had been diagonally in the direction of the water. They were probably beneath the sea floor by now. If their current depth was the sum of the height of all the ceilings until now, they would be a considerable distance beneath the surface.

The furthest floor mankind had ever reached was the eleventh floor, but if there was more to the labyrinth past that, how deep into the earth did it go? They were yet to see any man-made objects, but was it possible for a space like this to be created naturally?

Such questions filled Rio's head, but he dismissed them in favor of looking in front. The path to the eleventh floor was at the very back.

"ROOOOOOH!"

However, the gatekeeper of the tenth floor waited in front of it, roaring with resentment. Its body was over ten meters tall, and the sinister-looking sword it held was several meters long. Furthermore, its skeleton body was protected by a shield and full suit of armor. Black wings grew from its back, making it look like both a fallen angel and a demon. It had been kneeling before the path as though it was asleep, when it suddenly stood up and roared.

They were aware of the gatekeeper's existence from their investigation before entering the labyrinth, and its size made it visible even from a distance of several hundred meters, so neither Rio nor Sora were particularly surprised.

It's noticed us. Isn't that the monster Aishia fought with before?

The Hero Killer Draugul. The horrendous creature Reiss had sent to fight Aishia back when Rio was visiting the Paladia Kingdom for his revenge against Lucius.

It was also the creature Celia, Gouki, and the others left at the Galarc Castle had repelled when Rio left to rescue Liselotte who was abducted by Saint Erica. It hadn't dropped an enchanted gem upon its defeat, so they were unsure if it was a monster or not.

This was Rio's first time seeing it in person, but its features were exactly as Aishia and Celia had described. He assumed it was the same creature—and that assumption was correct. From what he had heard, the creature was meant to be extremely formidable, but...

"Oh, this thing," Sora said, as though it was a familiar face to her. She seemed to know how strong it was too, as she wasn't particularly wary of it either.

"Sora, do you know what that is?"

"It appeared in the Yagumo region back during the Divine War. It's a tiny bit stronger than the other monster."

"I see... I'll fight it first then. It doesn't seem like there are any other monsters

around, but don't let your guard down," Rio said, getting ready to fight it himself, but—

"No! The Dragon King shouldn't have to bother with such small fry. Please leave this to your disciple, Sora!" She held her hand to her chest and humbly offered to fight herself.

"Well... All right. Show me your strength then, Sora."

Seeing Sora's young appearance, Rio considered rejecting her offer for a brief moment, but ultimately decided to entrust the battle to her. He was aware of her ability thanks to the previous duel she had with Aishia, but her true strength was still unknown to him, so he figured this was a good chance to witness that.

"Okay! Please watch me closely!" Sora nodded happily. She was delighted to be granted with a duty as his disciple and ran off excitedly. She rotated her arms as though she was doing warm up stretches, when the Hero Killer flapped its wings and rose into the air.

"RAAAH!"

The space is just big enough for it to fly around... Looks like it was created specifically with this fight in mind. Almost like it's an arena...

Rio calmly analyzed the room under the current situation.

But what's this strange feeling I'm getting?

Sensing something was off in an indescribable way, Rio skeptically looked around the room that should have been empty apart from themselves.

However, he couldn't see any other monsters besides the Hero Killer that was flying rapidly towards them. Despite the uneasy feeling that lingered around him, Rio turned his attention to the battle about to start between Sora and the Hero Killer before him.

"Here goes!"

Sora started running enthusiastically. She closed the hundred meter distance to the Hero Killer in a single instant. Her dragon body that was normally hidden in spirit form was materialized around her arm. She met the Hero Killer mid-air.

"GRR?!" The Hero Killer quickly positioned its shield in front of its body, then

thrust it forward to knock Sora away. There was more than ten times the height difference between them. And the weight difference was even greater than that.

It was like an adult man using a shield to knock away an animal small enough to sit on his palm.

“Annoying!”

The one that flew away wasn’t Sora. She swung her right arm that had turned into her dragon body and smashed back the shield that came into her reach. A thundering sound rumbled through the labyrinth.

Sora’s single blow had carried an absurd amount of power behind it. The Hero Killer’s shield was pulverized into pieces.

“GRAH?!”

The force of the blow sent the Hero Killer’s shield hand flying back into its body, knocking it backwards mid-air. Furthermore...

“Let’s finish this quickly!”

Sora moved to the front of the Hero Killer and used her left dragon arm to punch its face with all her might. It wasn’t her dominant arm, and yet, with a dull snapping sound, the Hero Killer’s neck tore off. The bones of its face were shattered, the fragments disintegrating into dust.

“This is the end!”



It was already dead at this point, but Sora put her whole body into a right-handed punch aimed at the Hero Killer’s heart. As a result, the armor that

resisted the attacks of countless adventurers throughout history was destroyed in a single hit. Her fist continued through the armor, destroying the Hero Killer's ribcage too. The ten meter tall giant skeleton crashed into the ground.

"..."

It was dead before it landed. The sword in its hand, shield, armor, and skeleton body all vanished without a trace. Its death was extremely similar to those of regular monsters, but it didn't leave behind any enchanted gem.

At any rate, Sora defeated the Hero Killer in a mere three blows. It was actually dead by the second blow, but the Hero Killer should still be commended for withstanding the first blow using its shield. Sora's fighting was just that overwhelming.

"That was amazing..." Rio couldn't help but mutter.

"It's over, Dragon King!" Sora turned around beaming and made a peace sign. Rio returned her smile.

Guess my worries were for nothing.

He shook his head, dismissing the strange feeling he felt before the battle as just his imagination.

After defeating a monster this strong, there was still no burden on the mask he was wearing. It was unlikely for there to be anyone other than them on this floor.

However, in the path to the eleventh floor, there actually was someone—or rather, something that had been watching their fight. It was the revenant with jet-black skin. It had been rendered speechless by the sight of Sora slaughtering the Hero Killer, but it quickly retreated down to the eleventh floor.

"Hm?"

From beside the cave that led to the tenth floor, Rio stared into the cave down to the eleventh floor. The two caves were separated by several hundred meters, but he had felt a strange presence there. However, the revenant was already gone at that point, leaving only the eerie cave gaping back at him.

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The eleventh floor.

It was said that only a handful of adventurers had ever attempted this floor throughout history, all of whom either died or turned back immediately. And the reason for that was...

“MROOOOOOH!”

The moment Rio and Sora stepped onto the eleventh floor, they were met with a minotaur’s roar. But they couldn’t make light of the opponent they had defeated numerous times already—because there were just too many of them.

How many is that?

Rio scanned the area with a grim look. The structure of the space was very similar to the second floor. The room was several kilometers wide, and there were countless boulders scattered on the ground, creating blind spots. However, all the monsters seemed to have gathered at the entrance of the room, blocking their view of the back of the floor.

They had heard about what had happened on this floor in the past from the adventurer’s guild, and they could also detect the large number of monsters in advance with their wind spirit arts as they descended. But seeing it was another matter.

Goblins, orcs, minotaurs. There were even a few revenants among them. It was like a bargain sale of all the monsters Rio had seen in the past.

It made sense why the adventurers of the past had either turned back or died. There were more than a thousand, two thousand, even three thousand of them. An absolutely astonishing number of monsters lay in wait on the eleventh floor, ready to kill any adventurer that reached them.

No amount of confidence in one’s abilities mattered. Being able to easily take down a monster in a one-to-one was irrelevant. Any adventurer party would be helplessly outnumbered if they charged straight in. Even if they turned back, the monsters could chase them up to the next floor, so there was no guarantee they would survive.

The past adventurers who reached the eleventh floor probably turned back as soon as they saw this sight. Experienced adventurers with common sense would

all make that decision.

However, Rio and Sora couldn't be described with common sense. They were a human who had ascended to a transcendent being and his disciple.

"How filthy! Don't come near the Dragon King!"

Sora took a few steps forward and opened her mouth widely. Heated light converged before her mouth, which she immediately released into the approaching swarm of monsters. The burning light surged forward like the breath of a dragon.

"MROOOH!"

Swallowed by the breath of light, a thousand or so of the monsters at the front of the swarm disappeared without resistance. Sora had even held back her power to refrain from damaging the interior of the labyrinth.

"Dragon King, Sora will reduce their numbers! Wait there just a moment!" Sora said, hurrying to take care of the rest of the monsters.

"No, I'll fight here too! Let's team up to get rid of them together! Can you handle the ones on the right side?" Rio called, drawing the two daggers at his waist.

"Together with the Dragon King... Okay!" Sora replied energetically, happy they could fight together.

"Let's begin!" As soon as Rio said that, he charged into the swarming group of monsters to his left. Countless orbs of magic energy appeared around him.

"Agh?!" The orbs became a straight beam of light, mowing down the monsters in the direction he was charging. On top of that, Rio wrapped his magic essence around his daggers and created a large energy blade. With a single swing, he took down multiple monsters.

"A-Amazing as always, Dragon King...!" Sora watched him with rapt attention. "Gasp! R-Right, isn't the time for that right now! Sora must be useful to the Dragon King! Here goes!"

She snapped back to her senses and charged into the monsters with enthusiasm. She swung her dragon arms that she normally kept out of view,

sweeping away every last monster that came into view.

Thus, the transcendent one and his disciple quietly began their battle in the unknown depths of the labyrinth.

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On the eleventh floor, several hundred meters from the entrance where Rio and Sora were fighting...

“Wha...”

A black revenant was gazing at their backs in awe. Every time they made an attack, monsters went flying like ragdolls.

“What... ridiculous strength...!”

The number of monsters meant nothing to them. At this rate, the monsters would lose the will to fight far before Rio and Sora did. The black revenant trembled.

“...”

This wasn’t an opponent the revenant could handle. It was only a matter of time before the thousands of monsters were defeated. Panic spread across the revenant’s face.

Ahaha! Well this is something.

Just then, a child’s laughter echoed in the revenant’s head.

F-Forgive my incompetence! The monsters you bestowed me with are...! The black revenant apologized reflexively.

There’s no need for you to feel responsible. There are still plenty of monsters left, and that isn’t an opponent that can be dealt with using monsters anyway. Especially that small child. There’s no mistaking it—she’s a disciple of a transcendent one. A being that surpasses reason.

Disciple...?

The black revenant parroted in confusion, unsure of what that word meant.

The other man appears to be a human, but he’s strong too. I wonder why?

The child didn't bother answering the revenant's question. They were more concerned with their own questions about what was happening.

Well, whatever. I'd sealed the path to the twelfth floor. They won't be able to find it, so you can come back now.

But the child immediately cut off that thought and ordered the revenant to return.

Understood.

The black revenant vanished with a nod.

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Thanks to Rio's participation in the battles, their efforts in exterminating the monsters went by rapidly. Before long, the waves of monsters attacking them came to an end.

"That was the last of it," Rio said, joining up with Sora.

"Sorry to have troubled you, Dragon King."

Although she had been excited to fight alongside Rio earlier, Sora apologized with a dejected look.

"It's fine, I couldn't let you fight alone anyway. It's more fun fighting together," Rio said brightly to ease Sora's concerns. He then looked out over at the now-quiet floor.

"Let's look for the path to the twelfth floor. It'd be a shame to waste this many enchanted gems, so pick up what you can along the way," he directed Sora.

Naturally, the floor was covered in enchanted gems. Minotaur gems sold for a high price, and there was enough here to live off of for the rest of their lives.

"Got it."

Rio and Sora began their search for the never-traversed path to the twelfth floor. It was more efficient to split up and gather enchanted gems as they went, so they divided the floor into two and searched by themselves. However...

That's strange. There's no hold to the next floor down.

All the other floors until now had paths leading to the next floor located on the opposite side to the start of the floor, but there was no such path here. Rio tried walking around the room by following the wall, but he still couldn't find it. As a result, he assumed it'd be on Sora's half of the room, but...

"Dragon King. There was no cave connecting to the next floor here."

Sora had finished searching her side and came over to report there was no path.

"I couldn't find it either."

"Is this the last floor of the labyrinth then?" Sora asked, tilting her head curiously.

"Maybe... But let's look a little more. I'll fly around the middle, can you search the perimeter one more time?"

Thus, Rio and Sora investigated the floor more carefully. But no matter how much they searched, they couldn't find the path to the twelfth floor...

Their breakneck progress through the labyrinth came to a screeching halt on the eleventh floor.

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Meanwhile, somewhere deep within the labyrinth...

"They're still searching. What a pointless effort."

A child looked up at the ceiling of the labyrinth and smiled cheerfully. In the corner, a black revenant was kneeled on the ground.

"But what should I do? It might be fun to invite them to the twelfth floor too. Or maybe I could go and greet them myself?" the child pondered indecisively.

"Good evening," another voice echoed. It was the voice of an adult man.

"Oh, it's you. Long time no see," the child replied. But they didn't seem particularly interested in the man who had appeared, as their eyes were still fixed on the ceiling.

"I'm in need of a golem, so I came to pick it up... What are you looking at?"

The man stated his business before questioning the child's actions.

The child's gaze was still fixed on the ceiling as they replied. "There's someone rather interesting here. No, someone *very* interesting. How's the outside world been lately?"

"It's rare to hear you express interest in the outside world," the man said, surprised.

"Yeah, it just hit me out of the blue. It might even have something to do with why you're here to pick up a golem... Right, Fenris?"

The child finally tore their gaze away from the ceiling to grin at the man called Fenris.

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Roughly one hour after that, in the Holy City Tonerico outside of the labyrinth, in the palace where the pope, Fenris Tonerico resided...

"Goodness..."

A man sat down at the desk in the pope's office and sighed tiredly. The pure white robes he was dressed in was a clear indication that this person was the pope.

"Do you have a moment, Your Holiness?"

"You may enter."

With the pope's permission, a young woman presumably carrying the status of a high priest entered the office.

"Thank you very much for your hard work on the sealing ceremony over these past few months," she said, bowing her head reverently.

"Yes, I am very tired. I must return to the sealing ceremony soon, so I would appreciate the time to take a break."

"You must not. There are multiple items that came up during your absence which require your attention. Please check them."

The woman who shook her head was holding a bundle of documents in her arms.

"This is why I didn't want to return... Explain the situation briefly, Priestess

Anna.”

The pope let out another dignified sigh and smiled at the woman named Anna. As the pope and a high-ranking priestess, they were reasonably familiar with each other.

“Gladly, Your Holiness.”

Anna nodded with a look of resignation and returned the smile to the master of the Holy City Tonerico: the pope, Fenris Tonerico. He for some unfathomable reason, looked identical to Reiss Vulfe, Proxia Empire’s ambassador—the man who had been in the depths of the labyrinth just now.



Epilogue: Criminal

Back in the kingdom of Galarc, in the royal capital of Galtuuk, the sun was just about to set. In a dark alleyway off to the side of the slums and red-light district...

Drip, drip.

The sound of a dripping liquid echoed.

“Ah... Ah...”

Sendo Takahisa gripped his Divine Arms in his hand as he trembled.

“You...”

A sinister-looking thug was glaring at Takahisa.

“...”

Right beside Takahisa and the thug was a young girl dressed in old rags. She stared at them in vacant shock from where she had fallen on the ground. The dripping sound continued incessantly. A red puddle spread across the ground of the alley—a puddle of blood.

“Ah... Ah... Ah...”

Takahisa looked between his hand, the red puddle of blood, and his sword that was stuck in the thug’s chest. He looked multiple times, over and over again, thinking of a way to recover from this situation. However, his Divine Arms was mercilessly thrust through the heart.

“Th-This isn’t good...”

Indeed, it wasn’t.

It was illegal.

If he killed a person...

Murder...

It was absolutely illegal.

“U-Urk...”

A large amount of blood spilled from the thug’s mouth.

“Eek...!” Takahisa let out a scream.

At the same time, he panicked and his body drew backwards. His sword was pulled from the thug’s heart, causing blood to flood out.

“Gah...”

The thug fell to the ground heavily, turning into a lifeless corpse.

It was too late.

Everything was too late.

There was no going back anymore.

On this day...

“Ah... Aaah...”

Sendo Takahisa became a murderer.



Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 23: Theatrics in Spring.*

And so, here is the first volume of 2023! Thanks to the support of all the readers and everyone involved in the series, volume 23 was safely released. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I managed to write everything I wanted to write in this volume, so I hope you'll look forward to the next volume! If you have other opinions like "you've done it this time" or "who even is this?" please send them in too!

Finally, as you may have seen from the end-of-book preview, a fifth volume of the drama CD will be released! The CD will be included in the special edition of volume 24, so check it out! That's all this time. See you again in volume 24!

Yuri Kitayama

January 2023