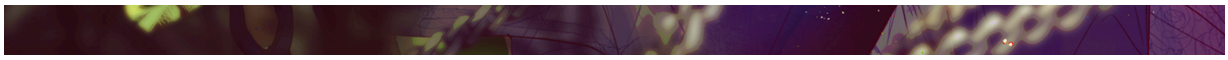

Shin Kouduki
Illustrator: Chocoan
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The Banished Former Hero Lives as He Pleases


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The Banished
Former Hero
Lives as He Pleases



The Adventurers



Allen Westfeldt

Former heir to the Duchy of Westfeldt. When he didn't receive the divine blessing of a Gift, Allen was labeled a good-for-nothing and eventually banished from his family home. In his past life, he was actually the hero of another world, but in this one, he only seeks a peaceful life.



Riese Westfeldt

Former first princess of the Kingdom of Adastera and Allen's former betrothed. She gave up her inheritance to become the current Duchess of Westfeldt. The public call her the Saint due to her ability to heal wounds using her Gift of Star Maiden.



Noel Leonhart

An elite elven blacksmith from the Frontier. She's best friends with Riese and travels alongside Allen. She has the Gift of Glamsight and is the only high elf in the world.

Demons

Those who rebel against the world.
In lieu of Gifts, they use powers known as Skills.

Demon Woman



A mysterious woman who asks Allen to join forces with her.
What exactly is her goal?

Beatrice Allereade



Riese's former bodyguard.
Said to be the strongest in the kingdom, but currently works as the stand-in head of House Westfeldt in Riese's stead.

The Cathedral

The Church's main headquarters.
Removed from the reach of any other power and said to be impenetrable, this location is considered a prime neutral meeting ground.

Amazons



Isabel

Chief Amazon who was captured by demons.

Chloe



An Amazon Akira brought home from the demon stronghold.
She seems to be Mylène's friend...?

Anriette

Former heir to the Linkvist marquisate, but she now has no claim.
She was a Disciple in her past life.





Akira Kazaragi

The Hero who wields the Gift of the Champion. She was summoned around three years ago from another world.
She went missing for some time while she searched for the demon stronghold but has since regrouped with Allen.



Mylène Haguestadt

An Amazon who was enslaved by the demons. She was freed by Allen and now accompanies Noel wherever she goes.

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The Champion and the Demon

With a roar, a bolt of blue lightning exploded hard against the ground. The air crackled with electricity as the dust slowly settled. Akira looked ahead and clicked her tongue disdainfully—the obstruction that had stood before her had disappeared.

"Damn it. Missed. Or maybe I was too slow? After everything I've seen, there's no way there was nothing here."

She scanned the area as she muttered to herself. It seemed like nothing more than an empty room, its ceiling some two meters high and wide enough that it was difficult to judge its size at a glance. It seemed most comparable to a gymnasium, aside from the fact that all of its surfaces—floor, ceiling, and walls—were made of stone.

But that wasn't the problem. The problem was that there wasn't a single thing to be found inside. It was so abundantly clear that someone had recently made their exit that Akira wondered if it was a trap.

"I *hope* it's a trap. It'll be easy enough to handle something like that. Doubt I'll be so lucky, though."

Akira stepped forward nonchalantly, testing the walls and floor with her hands, but nothing happened. Perhaps they'd been too cautious of her discovering any trap they set, or perhaps they just hadn't had time. She sighed; it was probably the former.

"Ugh, what a pain in my ass those guys are. They started this, but they're so quick to run away. Wish they'd just cut it out."

Making a sneaky approach wasn't her strong suit. A full-frontal assault was what suited her best.

"Damn it. I was so excited that I'd finally found their little hideout too. Demons really are a pain in the ass!"

Akira had come to settle things with the demons hiding here. It wasn't that she particularly *wanted* to; not originally, at least. She didn't have much of an opinion about them at all and certainly bore

them no malice. But through various brushes with them during her travels, she had obstructed their plans more than a few times, and it seemed they now regarded her as their enemy.

She'd never actively tried to oppose them, but their various attempts on her life had gotten to be a nuisance. And if they insisted on picking a fight, she was perfectly happy to accept. She'd resolved to clear the air between them by giving the entire lot of them a good beating.

The only problem was figuring out how to go about that. She didn't really know where demons could be found. People spoke of other countries being attacked by the Demon Kingdom, but it wasn't like demons attacked using conventional armies. As a rule, they preferred to control monsters, having them do the dirty work of conquering rival nations. Such monsters didn't need to be rotated or reinforced like regular troops, nor did they need military outposts, and they couldn't be taken prisoner and interrogated.

When the demons conquered one country, they would move on to the next. Akira had never heard of them ruling over a conquered territory or even establishing outposts. The nations that had been reduced to rubble proved that demons existed, but she had no idea where to find them until she finally discovered a location she was confident served as a base.

"I feel pretty pathetic, coming all the way out here only for them to slip away from me. Maybe I should've ignored the monsters on the way? Nah, they would've gotten involved while I was in the middle of fighting the demons."

What *should* she have done, then? She was still sure, at least, that this *was* a demon base and that demons had been there until recently. Monsters had been rife on the road along the way, and then there was the state of the room itself: completely absent of any objects, as if the entire contents of the space had been hastily teleported elsewhere. But how did knowing that help her?

"I guess it tells me that I failed, at least. And that I can't expect to find any clues lying around. Damn it, don't tell me I've tripped at the final hurdle and have to start the race over again."

Complaining wouldn't change anything, of course. Akira tried

rapping against the walls and floor several times, but nothing happened. She groaned with exasperation. It really did seem like she'd have to start from scratch.

"Maybe I should swallow my pride and ask somebody for help. Knowing my luck, the same thing will happen again next time. But there's really only one group of people that come to mind..."

She paced the room as she muttered to herself, though she didn't really expect to find anything. She couldn't blame her ignorance on matters related to demons; few others were any better versed, though many had tried to understand those destroyers of nations and men. Demons were both cunning and cautious; it would take several lucky breaks for her to find even one clue. *Just* locating *this place was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,* she mused.

She took one final step, arriving at the far side of the room, ready to conclude that there was nothing to be found there.

"Huh?"

Something beneath her feet felt strange. Furrowing her brow, she took a step backward. The floor didn't look any different. Stepping forward again, she confirmed that it seemed to be made of the same material too. But again she felt that something wasn't right.

She crouched down and knocked on the stone. She could hear the vibrations reverberating beneath the floor. There was a cave beneath her! A large one, it sounded like.

"Well, well. Now what? I guess that's obvious."

She wasn't about to turn back empty-handed now, no matter the danger. With a smile, Akira drew her sword and thrust it into the ground below.

A Sudden Visit

She appeared suddenly, no more than a week after they had returned from the empire to the Frontier, when the group had only just begun to think that perhaps they had spent enough time lazing around and should start planning their next move.

"Huh? Akira? You could've let me know you were coming."

Allen had opened the door to greet their visitor and seen her standing there. It had been a while since they'd crossed paths, but there was no mistaking her. He couldn't help feeling a little surprised.

"Hey," said Akira. "You busy? I'm in a spot of trouble."

"Trouble? Man, you really should've given me some notice. No letter this time?"

It wasn't the first time Akira had paid him a visit. The two prior times, though, she'd let him know she was coming.

"The trouble came suddenly too. Faster to just tell you face-to-face."

"You must've been close by."

He knew that Akira freely traveled the world. Her travels weren't limited to this country; as a Champion, she couldn't be contained by the laws of ordinary people. She'd told him that could get into even the most insular countries, though that tended to result in problems. As a result, she generally remained within Adastera's borders. And within Adastera, the Frontier contained the most unexplored territory. It wasn't too surprising that she'd be close by.

"Not too far afield, yeah. And check this out: I found something pretty interesting."

"Oh yeah? Anything to do with the girl standing behind you?"

Akira turned, and the brown-skinned girl behind her trembled. It wasn't Mylène, but another Amazon—a rare sight in the kingdom. Clearly Akira had brought her along.

She grinned at Allen's perceptiveness. "Kinda. Why don't I fill you in? I'm sure it'll capture your interest."

"Oh, I can't wait," he said sarcastically. "Knowing you, you'll get me involved in another mess."

"You got me there, but who else am I supposed to tell?"

"How rude of you to disrupt a peace-loving guy's life like this."

"Got me again. But the fact that you attract trouble like honey attracts bees is *your* problem, not mine."

As much as it bugged Allen, she was right about that. He shrugged. The fact that peace never came to those who sought it seemed to be one of the nonsensical rules of this world.

"No point standing out here all day, I guess," he relented. "You can tell me the details inside. Oh, but it's just me here right now. That okay?"

"Huh? The others aren't around?"

"Nope. Noel and Mylène went to the workshop, and Riese went back to her manor in the duchy."

"Huh? Noel and Mylène I understand, but Riese? Don't tell me she got tired of her boy toy already."

That wasn't the case; Riese had returned to report on everything that had happened in the empire. After so many monumental incidents, a written report wouldn't suffice. She'd planned to meet with Beatrice at her manor and then head to the royal capital. In fact, since Allen had delivered her to her manor three days ago, she was probably riding a carriage to the capital at that very moment. He couldn't take her directly to the capital himself. Having received an official request from the kingdom to investigate the empire, Riese had to follow proper procedure in reporting her findings, including arriving by carriage. Besides, it wasn't wise to use teleportation except in the utmost of emergencies, as it would only elicit unnecessary caution from others, and it wasn't good for security either. Allen couldn't deny he was worried about her, but to say as much would imply that he didn't have faith in Beatrice. Riese wasn't a child anymore. He'd just have to trust her.

"Wait, you went to the empire?" said Akira. "Damn, I should've gone with you."

"Huh? You've never been? It's not like anything's stopping you from getting there—not particularly, anyway. We just walked right in."

"That's off-limits for me. Those guys are jerks."

"Oh, right. I think you mentioned before that it's one of the countries you can't get into. When exactly did you try?"

"I guess it was...just after I reunited with you guys in the royal capital. I handed the kid over to the orphanage, and as I was thinking about where to go next, I realized I'd never been to the empire. But like I said..."

"I'm not surprised you couldn't get across the border at that time. They had a lot on their plate."

With the turmoil going on inside the empire, they couldn't have spared the manpower to keep tabs on whatever the Champion was up to around the clock. Nor did they have time to plan how they might permanently keep her in the empire amid all the chaos. Ultimately, it seemed they'd concluded that the safest bet was to simply not allow her inside their borders.

"I know you must've been mixed up in something over there," said Akira. "You know too much. Besides, why else would Riese have to give a report?"

"I don't appreciate how certain you seem about that."

"Oh, spare me your fake indignation. Anyway, was the mess in the empire related to demons somehow?" Akira looked unusually serious.

Allen wondered why she'd asked, but he had nothing to hide, so he nodded. "'Related' is more right than you know."

"You mean they weren't involved anymore by the time you came along?"

"That's not exactly it. The initial confusion was thanks to demons, no doubt, but someone else came along to take advantage of it."

"Serves them right. But it was demons who caused everything to begin with?"

"Something like that."

"So what do you think of demons, Allen?"

"As a group? I don't have much of an opinion. I've seen far too

much of them in recent times, though."

"Gotcha. Actually, that's just about perfect. I don't have any intention of wiping out the lot of them either."

Allen was about to tell her to get to the point, but he could guess well enough. This was the reason she was here today with the unknown girl in tow.

"I wish the others were here," Akira continued, "but only so I could ask how they're doing. For what I'm planning, you should be more than enough."

"All I know is no good is gonna come of hearing you out, but whatever. Come on, you can tell me the rest inside. I'm not the best host, though."

"Don't worry. I've only come here to get you into trouble, after all." She grinned widely.

Allen sighed. What was Akira up to?

Meetings and Reunions

Allen invited the Champion and her companion into the hallway.

"All right," he muttered to himself as he observed the pair of them. Akira was the same as ever, although she seemed strangely happy—probably something to do with whatever she'd come to tell him.

On the other hand, the Amazon, whom he assumed was intimately related to the matter, seemed frightened. Perhaps the sudden visit to an unfamiliar person's home explained that, but what troubled Allen was how she showed no sign of depending on Akira for support. It was natural in uncertain situations to look to someone for comfort, but the Amazon just stood there, eyes turned downward and fists clenched, as if she didn't have a friend in the world. She and Akira couldn't have been too close; in fact, they'd probably met very recently. Or perhaps her strange behavior, too, had something to do with why Akira was here. He'd find out soon enough.

After pouring each of them tea, he got straight to the point. "So, what do you want?"

"Huh? Oh, right. No small talk, huh? I guess we'd be leaving Chloe out that way."

"That's her name?"

"Oh, yeah. This is Chloe. Actually, that's pretty much all I know about her."

Akira smiled, but Chloe didn't look up. Allen wasn't surprised to hear that they weren't well acquainted. It was possible that Akira had simply accepted a request from the Amazon—although given how the pair conducted themselves, he sensed that this was a different situation.

"Actually," Akira continued, "that's part of why I'm here, in a way."

"Has she lost her memory or something?"

"If only it were that simple. I guess I would have come here if

that were it. Anyway, before I explain, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, I guess. Something bothering you?"

Akira suddenly seemed unusually on edge, though her anxiety wasn't directed at Allen. In fact, it wasn't directed at anything in that room—it was something outside.

"Kind of. Are you sure you're the only one here?"

"Huh? Oh...I follow you." Allen grinned to himself. He understood now. He hadn't explained very well earlier. "Sorry. I should've said there's nobody else that you know here."

"What? Oh. Sorry."

"Not at all. It was my fault. Can't blame you for being paranoid after I told you there was nobody else around."

"Doesn't bother me," came a voice from outside the room. "She didn't lay a finger on me."

It was Anriette. Akira had sensed her presence. Allen hadn't felt the need to mention her. Akira didn't know her, and he'd assumed Anriette wouldn't enter the room during their meeting. She was surprisingly shy and didn't tend to show herself to unfamiliar people.

"That's good to hear," said Allen. "What are you doing in here anyway?"

Anriette shrugged. "Greeting our guest, of course. Do I need another reason?"

Allen didn't recall her being so conscientious in the past. He peered at her, trying to figure out her real motive.

"Anyway...nice to meet you, Champion. I'm Anriette. I have no family name. No need to use any titles with me."

"You know who I am and you have no family name? I see you've picked up another one," said Akira, casting a sideways glance at Allen as she observed the newcomer with curiosity.

Allen shrugged. "What do you mean, 'another'?"

"Come on, you know exactly what I mean. Everyone who lives in this house has a checkered past."

"Hey," Allen began to object, then reconsidered. "Well, you're not wrong, I guess."

In addition to the princess turned duchess, there was the elite elven blacksmith who was qualified to become Elven King, the

Amazon who had been taken away by demons who had attacked her village, and a former imperial marquis who was supposed to be dead. And also the eldest-son-of-a-duke turned nameless wanderer. Still, everyone in the Frontier had some kind of skeleton in their closet. Those of the people who lived in this house just happened to be a little bigger than average.

"I didn't pick them up, though," said Allen. "They basically invited themselves to live here."

"Hey, should you be saying that?" said Akira.

"Doesn't matter," said Anriette. "It's not like he can get rid of us now. We offered our bodies and minds to him, and he had no choice but to accept."

"Yeah, yeah," said Allen, rolling his eyes. "Enough joking around. Weren't you in the middle of introducing yourselves?"

"Right," said Akira. "Well, I dunno if it's really necessary, but...I'm Akira Kazaragi. No title needed here either."

Allen still had no idea what Anriette was doing there. There was no need to ask, though; if he needed to know, she'd tell him, and if it was something she couldn't say, then asking wouldn't help. He knew there had to be some reason, but it was enough to store that fact in the back of his mind.

"Besides, aren't you the one who goes around picking people up?" said Allen.

"Huh? What are you—" Akira began, before realizing she couldn't argue. At the very least, she'd picked up the child who was set to be sacrificed to the dragon. And now she'd come with an Amazon in tow.

"So you did pick up this new girl somewhere, huh?" said Allen.

"You're too perceptive for your own good." Akira sniffed. "Anyway, I was halfway through explaining that to you."

"You mean she has something to do with why you're here?"

"Yup. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't come across Chloe."

"Ah, wait a moment. I'm interested in your story, but could you just hold on a second?" he asked.

"Huh? I don't mind, but why?"

"To save you the trouble of having to tell it twice, I imagine," said

Anriette.

Akira looked toward the door and smiled as she understood. The door opened, and Noel and Mylène entered the room.

"I thought we had a visitor," said Noel. "Nice to see you, Akira."

"It's been a while, you two," Akira replied.

Akira had seen both of them on her previous visits to the house, but this time, Noel was the only one to greet her. Mylène regarded her with silent suspicion. Or no, it was the girl next to Akira of whom she was suspicious.

The girl in question suddenly rose to her feet. "Mylène?"

"Chloe?"

Dumbfounded, the Amazons stared at each other.

A Friend’s Request

Mylène observed the girl before her with astonishment—she *knew* her. There was no mistaking it; the girl had even spoken Mylène’s name herself. But how could she be here? How could she even be *alive?*

Before Mylène could think, the girl—Chloe—had leaped on her and embraced her tightly. She began to pepper Mylène with questions as she prodded at her body.

“Mylène! It *is* you! You’re... You’re alive! Are you all right?! Are you well?! You’re not in pain?!”

Allen and Noel watched with vacant expressions; they’d hardly had time to react. Slowly, however, Mylène realized that she was smiling.



It *was* Chloe. The way she wore her emotions on her sleeve, the speed with which she jumped into action based on them—it was inimitable. It was Chloe. Her friend, Chloe.

"Huh. This I did *not* expect," said Allen. "A moment ago she seemed like she was afraid of her own shadow, and now this."

"No kidding," said Akira. "She barely spoke to me, no matter what I asked. I brought her here hoping you could do something to help. I guess I had the right idea."

"*That's* why you brought her here?" asked Noel.

"It wouldn't shock me if Allen *could* have done something," said Anriette. "Maybe he did without even realizing it."

"You think so too, huh?" said Akira.

"I need to have a little talk with all of you about what exactly you think I am," said Allen before turning to Mylène and Chloe. "But let's find out what's going on here first."

The others looked at them too. But Mylène had the same questions as they did: What were Akira and Chloe doing here? She didn't understand what was happening. But it seemed like the others' questions took priority.

Allen spoke first. "I'm not surprised you know each other. Amazons aren't exactly common around here, after all. But it seems like you're more than just acquaintances."

That much was obvious; Chloe was still prodding and poking at Mylène. Unless she was some kind of pervert, they had to be close. But Mylène wasn't sure how to explain the nature of their relationship. As far as she was concerned, they were more than just friends—Chloe was the person she cared for most in the world. But that was only from her perspective—she wasn't sure how Chloe felt.

"Chloe is sort of...a friend from my village?"

"What?!" Chloe erupted. "Could you sound any *less* certain?! We're besties, aren't we?! W-Wait, don't tell me I was the only one who felt that way?!"

Her shock made Mylène smile. Chloe *did* feel the same. She felt her confidence that it really was Chloe who stood before her redouble. Only Chloe would react like that. At the same time, this confidence brought to mind a question—the same one that had

come to mind when she had first laid eyes on the other girl here.

Chloe was Mylène's best friend from her village, which had been destroyed by demons. It wasn't as though, by some stroke of fate, Chloe had been away from the village when it fell. Mylène had been with her when it had happened. And yet here Chloe was, as healthy as could be. It was impossible.

"Chloe..."

"Huh? Oh! What is it, Mylène?! Sorry! You're not mad at me for saying we're besties, are you?!"

"No. You're *my* best friend too."

"Oh! R-Right?! Phew! You scared me there. Thank goodness I didn't have the wrong idea."

"But Chloe...you're...alive?"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?! Do I look dead to you?! Wait, don't tell me I really *am* dead?! No way!"

"She sure is energetic, huh?" said Akira.

"No kidding," said Anriette.

"Forget that. So what happened?" asked Allen.

Mylène pulled her gaze away from Chloe for a moment to glance at him, but Allen just shrugged. She'd told him about her village before. He had to know that there was no way this girl could be alive, but he didn't seem too concerned. Chloe must not have looked dead to *him*, at least.

Mylène thought so too. Her head still looked firmly attached. She breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that this wasn't another case of a demon controlling a dead person.

"Chloe, how are you alive?"

"Whaaat?! That's a heck of a thing to ask your best friend! Wait, you *are* mad at me, aren't you?!"

Mylène was confused for a moment but quickly understood. "That's not what I meant."

"I wanted to ask too," said Akira. "I imagine that's the root of both of our problems."

"What do you mean?" asked Noel.

"It's related to why I came here," said Akira. "The place I found her was a demon base."

"You mean she'd been captured?" said Anriette.

"In a way," Akira replied. "The thing is, the place was deserted when I got there. But I found her hidden in a secret area beneath the floor."

"I can't help but wonder how you ended up in a place like that," said Noel.

Mylène looked at Chloe as if to request an answer. Chloe returned her gaze with an inquiring look. She didn't know any of these other people. She wouldn't be quick to trust even Akira, who had just rescued her. But Mylène nodded, letting her know it was okay, that the people here could be trusted. Besides, *she* was worried too.

As if sensing Mylène's concern, Chloe looked around the room, sighed, then began to speak. "Let's see... Yeah, I guess you could say I was...captured? By demons. But it's not like they kept me there the entire time."

"Why were you hiding there?" said Akira.

"I wasn't hiding; I was trying to escape. One day, one of the stones came loose, and I found a little hidden room."

"Little? Seemed pretty big to me."

"That's because I dug it out."

"You were trying to *dig* your way out of there? That's crazy."

"How else would I ever get away from them? Well, I guess you *did* rescue me. Uh, not that I don't appreciate it or anything."

"I thought you were dead," said Mylène.

"Yeah...we thought the same thing. But they didn't kill us. They said we might be useful."

Chloe spoke as casually as though she were talking about the weather. But Mylène knew there was a lot she wasn't saying—*couldn't* say. But at that moment, one thing concerned her above all: Who was this "we"?

"I don't know how much you know about us," said Chloe, "but from how Mylène was acting, I thought you knew everything. That's why I've told you so much. Anyway, I don't mean to say you owe me, but...is there any chance you can save everyone?"

"Chloe, you mean..."

Chloe nodded firmly and spoke with steely eyes. "Yup. Everyone

from our village is still alive. Please, save them.”

Beyond the Desert

Allen sighed. Including his past life, he'd traveled far and wide. He'd traipsed through deep forests and ridden aboard great ships. And out of all those, his least favorite landscape to journey through, bar none, was the kind of desert that stretched around him in all directions at that very moment.

"Great idea, starting our search in the desert," he complained.

"What do you want from me?" said Akira. "You think I wouldn't rather avoid it too? Somebody told me there might be demons there."

"They *do* tend to build their hideouts in places where people don't go," said Anriette.

"I can't dispute that," said Allen.

He would still have preferred to avoid the desert, with its blisteringly hot days and freezing cold nights. As if dealing with those extremes wasn't enough, he knew his clothes would soon be full of sand, and it wasn't like there were any sights to see to make the journey worthwhile; just miles upon miles of desert. Still, complaining would only waste precious energy. With another sigh, he started toward their destination.

"Hey, at least we know where we're going this time," said Akira. "The real work was in finding the place to begin with."

"It *better* be the right place," said Allen.

"I'm sorry for asking so much of you," said Chloe.

"Me too," Mylène added.

"Don't you two worry," Allen replied hastily. "It was our choice to accept."

He saw their guilty expressions transform into smiles and shrugged. He had to stay positive; complaining any further would only cause the two Amazons undue stress. And where they were going, none of them could afford to lose focus.

They had quickly accepted Chloe's request. Normally such a plea would require at least some deliberation, but those she was asking them to save were Mylène's people too. There was no need for debate.

Though they had all agreed fast, Noel wasn't with them at the moment. She had wanted to come but had received a sudden request for her smithing services and couldn't leave her forge. In fact, that was the reason she had returned to the town. Allen could imagine her swinging away with her hammer at that very moment, a sullen expression on her face.

Even Chloe didn't know where her people might be found. She had been with them before but had been deep inside the hidden passageway when Akira had staged her attack on the hideout. She had known the demons were distressed about something, but checking on *what* would have meant exposing the existence of the passageway. More importantly, she was afraid of what that something might be. So she'd just stood there and listened, and as she had hesitated, Akira had discovered her inside the hidden passage.

As a result, Chloe didn't know where the demons had gone. But searching for demons without a lead was futile. Therefore, Allen decided, they ought to first head to the lair that Akira had discovered. Though Akira claimed there were no clues to be found there, there was always a chance that she'd missed something. Allen didn't think Akira was incapable, but he knew the powers that demons wielded. They could have hidden something in such a way that she couldn't detect. Besides, it was the only lead they had. It couldn't hurt to check.

Akira and Chloe had told him that the base was located in the middle of the desert. It was a difficult place to build anything and an even harder place to search for something.

"Hey, why were you looking for demon hideouts, anyway?" said Allen.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Akira replied. "They've just really gotten to be a nuisance, getting in my way every time I try to do anything. I thought I'd go give them a piece of my mind."

"I guess they probably think *you're* a nuisance too."

"Maybe you're both getting in each other's way," said Mylène.

"Well, I never wanted them to like me, anyway," Akira replied.

"Me neither!" said Chloe. "I'd *rather* they see me as a nuisance."

They continued through the desert, seeing only its vast, sandy plain extending before them. The desert was the reason the Kingdom of Adastera had no relationship with the nations to its south. People on both sides agreed that the benefits did not justify the several days of hard travel required to cross the desert, and few ever tried, save for the most capricious—or suicidal. That made it the perfect place for demons to construct a hideout.

"How long does it take to reach the hideout, anyway?" said Allen.

"Shouldn't take too long," said Akira. "It took me a while because I was being cautious, but the journey back was pretty fast."

"It can't be *too* deep inside," said Anriette. "It would be too inconvenient for them. I'm impressed they can even build a hideout in a place like this at all, even if they *are* demons."

"You can credit us Amazons for that!" said Chloe. "Working through the heat and the cold was rough. The work itself wasn't that hard, though—they only used us to do the heavy lifting, after all."

"Right, Amazons are known for their strength, aren't they?" said Allen.

"I only know about the people from my village, but other than Mylène, they were all incredibly strong. Not too smart, though, so Mylène's intelligence really helped them out. I'm no exception, of course!"

"Is that something to be proud of?" Mylène asked, but Chloe only giggled in response.

Allen considered what Chloe had told him as he watched the two Amazons interact. This was the first he'd heard of demons putting another race to work. Conventional wisdom said that the only way to survive a demon encounter was by killing the lot of them, though he already knew from Mylène that this wasn't always true.

But according to Chloe, they'd captured the entire village. That was more than a rare exception. And yet there wasn't much chance that the demons had captured countless people in the past. That

fact would be hard to hide, no matter how scrupulous they were. The fact that Chloe had exposed them this time was proof enough of that. Besides, there'd be no need to hide it. What would the demons achieve by convincing others that they had killed everyone while secretly taking them captive? It wasn't inconceivable that they'd found *some* reason to do so, but until that reason presented itself, it seemed more fruitful to consider other possibilities.

While it was said that demons constantly invaded other countries, it had been years since there'd been talk of them conquering another country. It wasn't that the attacks had ceased, just that a sort of equilibrium had been reached. No countries that the demons were capable of conquering remained—only nations like Adastera and Viktor, which were quite capable of repelling their incursions despite sharing a border with the Demon Kingdom. If this state of affairs continued, it would be no surprise if, at some point in the not-too-distant future, those nations joined together to destroy demonkind entirely, and it seemed likely the demons had long since become aware of that fact. Why else had they undertaken such uncharacteristic actions as the killing of the General and the Emperor?

The previous brute-force approach had failed, so they had changed strategies. Both assassinations had not only been successful but had spread considerable disorder throughout the kingdom and empire—disorder that would be difficult to recover from fully, even after it was quelled.

That brought them to the base, located in the south of the kingdom, deep within the Frontier's secluded desert lands. That they had established such a stronghold from which an attack was sure to come was a terrifying prospect. Fortunately, Akira seemed to have driven the demons out of that particular lair, but there had to be others.

"It's not looking good, is it?" said Allen.

"I could've told you that the moment you got involved with demons," said Anriette. "But like you said, you have a habit of sticking your nose into trouble."

"I guess you've got a point." He accepted that he'd gotten himself

involved, but he still wanted to bring the matter to a close as quickly as possible so he could return to his peaceful life. He looked across the desert and sighed.

The Demon Lair

Just as Akira had said, the group arrived at the lair surprisingly quickly. It wasn't located far from the edge of the desert, but was still unknown to the wider populace. That was a testament to how few people visited the region, and to the measures the demons had taken to ensure their lair would not be noticed. It was camouflaged so that it could not be seen until one drew close.

"Huh, they haven't used any kind of magical barrier," said Allen, "just ensured that the color blends into the surroundings. And...I see, this area is a total blind spot."

"I was pretty shocked when I came across it too," said Akira.

The building seemed like it had appeared out of nowhere. Its walls were painted the same color as the sand that surrounded it on all sides.

"If you hadn't told me, I don't think I would've even noticed it," said Mylène.

"Did you and the other Amazons do the painting, Chloe?"

"Not that I recall," said Chloe. "Like I said, strength is our forte, not delicate work like this. I guess the demons must have done this themselves? It was just them and us here."

"I guess it's not *that* strange," said Anriette, "but it's kinda funny to imagine."

The group continued to examine the area. For an isolated structure in the middle of the desert, the building was rather small, almost too small to call a building. It had only one floor, and even that didn't take up much space. Assuming it really was as it looked from the outside, it didn't seem like much of a lair at all.

"I'm guessing only the entrance is exposed?" said Allen.

"That's right," said Chloe. "There're stairs going down as soon as you go inside."

"Ohh," said Anriette. "I *did* wonder why you were digging a

tunnel underground."

"Were you digging the whole time you were here?" asked Mylène.

"Yeah. It was only recently that we finished this place," said Chloe. "And now it's been abandoned. I'm glad they won't be using it as a base, of course, but seeing all my work be for nothing..."

"That's a tough one," said Allen. "In this location and with its history, it'll be tough to find anyone else who wants to make use of it."

"Isn't this technically part of the Frontier too?" asked Chloe.

"Technically, yeah. Actually, the border is somewhere in this desert. But nobody really worries about exactly where."

"Isn't that where the demons attack from, though?" said Anriette. "Shouldn't you be monitoring that?"

"I guess?" said Allen. The desert base had been abandoned, presumed useless. A handful of people standing watch for demons wouldn't do much good; establishing a base and preparing for a demon attack would require considerable military force. Any insistence that such a force was only there to watch out for demons wouldn't hold much water; it would be difficult to refute the perception that this was just an excuse for mounting a force to cross the desert and attack the Demon Kingdom. Preparations would have to be made accordingly, and at that time, the Duchy of Westfeldt and the Kingdom of Adastera itself did not have time for such concerns.

"Anyway, it's Riese's job to worry about that sort of thing," said Allen. Harsh as it might have seemed, it wasn't his concern. He'd bring it up with her when she returned, and she'd make a judgment. For now, his concern was what was right in front of him.

"There's no point just standing around here," said Akira. "Let's get inside. I already took out all the monsters I found nearby last time I was here, but look out for yourselves, all right?"

"Yeah, new monsters could've shown up since then," said Allen.

"Sounds extremely likely to me," said Anriette.

The desert wasn't host to many monsters, but they *did* exist. Even to them, however, this was an inhospitable place, so abandoned buildings made for perfect shelters.

"I'd rather the place wasn't inhabited by monsters," said Chloe.

"Better than being used by demons, isn't it?" said Mylène.

"I guess so. Not like one is much better than the other, though."

Heading into what had once been a demon base, even one that Akira had already explored, was still risky. There was no telling what might await them. The banter that Mylène and Chloe shared seemed lighthearted, but Allen could tell it was their way of calming their nerves. He much preferred it to them being scared and on edge.

Allen peered at the building. What, if anything, awaited them? Along with the others, he stepped into the lair, sure that any clue or simple resolution would not be easily forthcoming.

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As soon as he stepped inside, Allen was struck by how surprisingly *normal* the interior seemed. But demons were, after all, still people. An unusual structure would only make the place harder to live in.

"This is more normal than I expected," said Mylène, echoing Allen's thoughts.

"I was surprised the first time too," said Akira. "In fact, I still am. I imagined it seeming more unmistakably demonic."

"I expected something like this," said Anriette. "Function over form. A strange-looking lair wouldn't be practical."

"Speaking of surprising, where are all the monsters?" said Chloe.

"Yeah, that's kinda surprising too," said Allen.

After walking around for some time, they still hadn't run into a single monster, nor had he even sensed there were any lurking around. While Allen wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, something about it didn't feel right. He couldn't say for sure if it was due to the demons' handiwork or simply because they were out of the sun, but it was far more comfortable in the lair than out there in the desert. Any monster that happened across the place would have surely taken refuge here.

Only two things could explain why there were no monsters: either they hadn't discovered the lair, or those that had discovered it were

somehow unable to inhabit it.

"The camouflage doesn't seem good enough to fool monsters," said Anriette. "They'd be able to sniff the place out, even if they couldn't see it."

"Maybe they didn't like the smell?" Mylène suggested.

"Oh, you mean like the stuff traveling merchants use?" said Akira. "I've smelled that stuff before. It has a special scent to it. We would've noticed."

"Maybe they recognize that it's another monster's territory?" Chloe offered. "There *are* some that demons make use of. And it hasn't been too long since they left."

"I guess it's possible," said Allen, "but are monsters even capable of that? I don't understand how demons are able to control them in the first place."

There was no clear distinction between monsters and animals. "Monster" was, for the most part, a term for powerful animals that posed a threat to humans. Their behaviors were no different from animal behaviors. It wouldn't be strange if they could sense when territory had been claimed, and the fact that demons could put them to work didn't seem particularly mysterious either. But with monsters being so dangerous, they had not been well researched, and many things about them were still not understood. It seemed unlikely the group would be able to figure out why monsters hadn't gathered in the old lair.

"Do you have any idea what the demons were doing here?" Allen asked.

"I'd tell you if I did," said Akira. "They must have been up to something, though. Why else would this place be so unusually comfortable?"

"I doubt demons like being uncomfortable more than anyone else," said Allen. "It wouldn't surprise me if they did something to ward off monsters as part of that."

"But isn't it strange that whatever they did is still keeping the monsters at bay after they're gone?" said Mylène.

"It's strange, for sure," said Akira. "And this place is still just as comfortable as it was when they were here. If it was just down to

technology and not demonic power, I'd understand it, but...that's not possible, is it?"

Everyone nodded in agreement. They'd never seen demons demonstrate any particular technological competence. It was definitely odd how comfortable this place was.

"You know, that's not the only thing that's weird," said Allen.

"Huh? What else?" asked Akira.

"It's way too pretty."

"Pretty?" said Mylène.

"You think so?" said Chloe. "It's really dusty."

Anriette seemed to understand, at least. "Maybe not *pretty*, exactly," she said, peering at the walls, "but there's not a scratch on the place."

"Yeah, I guess that's a better way of putting it," Allen agreed.

"What do you mean?" said Mylène.

"You took out all the monsters lurking around here, right, Akira?"

"Yeah, like I said..." Akira began, but she stopped with a gasp of understanding. This was the place she'd stormed, sending the demons fleeing, and yet there were no signs of her attack—no bodies, no scratches, nothing but dust. There was no way Akira had taken the trouble to clean up after herself.

"So there's *something* going on here," said Mylène.

"I assumed as much from the start," said Allen. Still, compared to his vague sense that something was amiss, the clear recognition of at least one specific, strange thing about the place made him feel even more cautious.

Akira grinned with excitement, but Mylène and Chloe seemed increasingly nervous. Allen heard someone gulp. Perhaps nothing awaited them, but that possibility seemed slim.

With great trepidation, the group advanced into the lair.

An Unnatural Place

They might have known something was off, but they were still in the dark about what it all meant. That sense was only exacerbated when Akira showed them to the room where she had found Chloe. There they found...nothing. The stone floor was pristine. The hole that Akira had made was gone.

"You're sure it was this room?" asked Allen.

"Positive," Akira replied. "There are no other rooms this big."

"That's right," said Chloe. "But there *were* hidden rooms."

"Didn't you build this place?" asked Anriette. "And you're saying you found hidden rooms?"

"Well, to be precise, we dug a big hole, transported materials, and did a little processing of those materials. We didn't have anything to do with building individual rooms."

"If they'd let you build the rooms, the place would've ended up falling down," Mylène remarked.

"That's why we stuck to the grunt work," said Chloe.

The group wandered around the room, occasionally knocking on the floor. From the sensation and the sound this produced, it seemed to be plain old stone. It didn't seem like the demons had used a strange material that filled in any holes on its own.

They approached the part of the room where Akira had found the hidden room.

"Stand back," said Akira, raising her sword high above her head. Unsurprised, the others stepped back silently.

"Not too rough, okay?" said Allen.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm just gonna blow a little hole in the floor."

An explosion resounded as she brought her sword down. Stone fragments flew through the air, revealing what lay beneath—only earth. There was no sign of the hidden room.

"You're *sure* this is the right room?" said Allen.

"I don't remember the exact spot, but it was definitely somewhere around here. I can't be *that* far off," said Akira.

"So it just went back to how it used to be?" said Mylène.

"That's hard to believe," said Anriette. "You called it a hidden room, but it was just a tunnel dug underneath the floor, right?"

"Yup," said Chloe. "I dug down a little, then kept digging ahead, and then I was planning to dig upward to make my way out."

"Right, but Akira showed up before you got the chance," said Allen.

Mylène had neatly summed up the situation; everything seemed to have returned to how it was. Both the monsters Akira had slain and the hole in the floor had disappeared.

"Some kind of restorative Gift? I mean, a demon power?" Mylène mused.

"Gotta be," said Allen. "There's no other way to explain the monsters' bodies disappearing. Maybe the entire lair is the target of some kind of enchantment. Whenever it's damaged in any way, it repairs itself more and more over time."

It was a simple idea, but it would be an incredibly high-level ability. To restore a place to its former state was to meddle with time itself, to reverse its flow. Allen *might* have been able to perform such a feat on a place of this size but not without expending massive amounts of energy.

Of course, they didn't have any clear proof that the theory was true, but it seemed highly likely. Such powers were extremely limited—it was said to be impossible to use them on living things. The mere *presence* of living things in the target area could neutralize their effects. But monster corpses were no longer living; they were things to be swept away along with all the damage to the lair as it was restored to some prior state—one from before it was damaged and before the bodies were ever there.

The hidden room was an even simpler matter. Chloe said she'd slowly dug the passageway herself. Once she was gone, it had returned to its previous state.

There was still something that bothered Allen...but he'd forget it for now. One thing was for sure: If the lair really *was* under such an

enchantment, the demons had expended incredible energy to build it, far too much for it to be a place they were content to simply abandon.

"They must have really been planning to conquer the kingdom from here," said Anriette.

"Wow. Nice work, Akira," said Mylène.

"I don't think I did much of anything," Akira answered. "It's not like I took out a buncha demons. They ran. There's nothin' for me to brag about."

"You rescued me, at least," said Chloe. "That's enough for me, even if it wasn't what you set out to do."

"Not for me," said Akira with no sign of false modesty. "If I'd defeated the demons, I would've rescued your people too."

Allen smiled. Of course a Champion—or rather, Akira specifically—would never be satisfied with such a result. "Well," he said, "sounds like we have plenty to look into. I pretty much knew it from the start, but now we know for sure that something is going on here."

"To perform a feat like this, though..." said Anriette with awe. "The demons must have drawn a *lot* of power from somewhere. If the effects we're seeing are just the remnants, that's one thing, but..."

"If not, we're in trouble?" said Mylène finished.

"They might pretend to have abandoned the place for a while, but they'll be back at some point," Allen explained. "At least, they'll want to return, though it'll be a lot of work for them."

"But will they bring the Amazons back with them?" asked Chloe. "We were only brought here to build the place, after all."

"We'll just have to beat the answers out of 'em if it comes to that," said Allen. "But who knows if it will?"

He scanned the room. The first step would be to thoroughly inspect the chamber in which they stood. As the largest room, it must have been built with some important role in mind. Chloe had said it held all sorts of objects. It seemed unlikely they'd managed to take everything with them in the wake of Akira's sudden attack.

As far as Akira had noticed, there were no other hidden rooms, but of course they could have been hidden by unusual means. They

now had three people present who were capable of detecting such means. The only problem was whether there was anything to find at all.

Allen peered around the space, hoping they would soon find the answers to their questions.

An Incomprehensible Something

Allen scanned the room, then returned his gaze to the ground beneath his feet. “Hmm,” he murmured to himself.

“What’s with all the staring at the floor?” said Chloe, drawing closer to him. “You find something?”

Evidently she was keen-eyed. *This* was the real Chloe, he assumed. It was hard to believe how much more relaxed she was than when they’d initially met, but it seemed that either meeting a familiar friend in Mylène or the trust Mylène’s friendship with Allen conveyed to him had put her mind at ease. There was no doubt, at least, that he preferred her like this.

Chloe’s words reverberated through the large, empty room, and the scattered party gathered around Allen. Each had been using their own approach to search the room for clues, but so far no one had turned up anything.

Allen grinned at their expectant looks. “I found something, but I dunno if it’s *something*.”

“The hell are you babbling about?” said Akira. “A weird-lookin’ monster, or what?”

“Not even,” said Allen. He was unsure how to answer Akira, who seemed to be considering giving up her exploration. A simple description of what he saw wouldn’t achieve much.

“Huh,” Akira replied, nonplussed. “All right. Judging by where you’re looking, we oughta start digging about here?”

“I mean, we *could*,” said Allen, “but it’ll be pretty tough.”

“Huh? Why?”

“We’d have to dig pretty deep.”

“How deep?” said Chloe. “Ten meters?”

“Try ten times that.”

A dumbfounded “Huh?” was the only reaction Chloe could offer as she stood staring at the ground.

Akira, too, looked at the spot where Allen stood with curiosity. Their gazes were so intent that he almost forgot that, unlike himself, Anriette, and Mylène, neither of them had the ability to see through solid surfaces.

"I can't see anything," said Mylène, sounding slightly dejected as she drew closer, narrowing her gaze as she walked. But proximity did nothing to help; she looked up and shook her head.

"No good, huh?" said Allen. "How about you, Anriette?"

"A hundred meters?" said Anriette. "Right beneath your feet? Ah, yeah, there *is* something there." She focused her gaze. A moment passed, and she raised her eyebrows in a look of incomprehension. Allen knew exactly what she was thinking. "What is that? A room?"

"A room? Like this one, you mean?" said Chloe.

"Pretty much, although it's half the size at best," Allen replied.

"Why the big performance, then?" said Akira. "Couldn't you have just told us?"

"Well...it really *is* like this room," said Allen. "There's nothing in it, just like this one. And...it's weird. It's not connected to anything."

"What do you mean?" Mylène asked.

"What I said. There's no way of getting into or out of it. There's not even a door." It was more like a huge, hermetically sealed box than a room.

"That does sound impossible. There's gotta be *some* way of getting inside, though," said Akira.

"Teleportation, right?" asked Mylène.

"That's it," said Chloe. "But what would be the point?"

"Some kind of emergency shelter?" Allen suggested. "But anyone who could teleport wouldn't need to hide in a hole in the ground. They could go wherever they wanted."

"They'd suffocate before long, anyway," said Anriette. "There's no way for air to get in there."

"Maybe they planned to use something to help with that?" Mylène mused.

"I guess that's the most likely explanation," Allen agreed. "Anyway, now what? Do we go check it out up close, just in case? It'll mean digging a hundred meters down."

"It's not impossible, but it'll be a huge pain and take forever," said Akira. "Let's leave it until after we've explored everywhere else."

"Maybe I could handle the digging?" said Chloe. "I don't think it would take too long."

"You?" said Allen. He knew that Chloe's Gift boosted her strength. It was the most common Gift among Amazons and the reason they'd been used to build the lair. Though the party had made their way through the underground halls fairly quickly, it must have taken a lot of power to excavate such a large hole in the ground.

"She can do it," Mylène confirmed.

"You think so?" said Allen.

"She was the strongest person in our village."

She would know. Chloe responded by flexing her biceps triumphantly. What harm was there in giving it a shot? If it turned out to be impossible even for Chloe, they would try something else.

"All right. Chloe, can I leave it to you?" Allen asked.

She nodded vigorously, smiling as she clenched her fists in a gesture of readiness. "I've got this!"

The others stepped back to give her space.

"Here I go! One, two..." Chloe began before swinging her fists against the floor, shattering the stone with a great booming crack, sending rubble flying. It seemed more like the blast from a magical beam or an attack that rose up from under the ground than from Chloe simply pounding on the stone with her fists.

She repeated the action twice more. Even from Allen's distant vantage point, it was clear how quickly she was digging deep into the ground.

"Are all Amazons like this?" he asked.

Mylène cocked her head in response. The answer was obviously not. "Chloe is incredible. But she's still taking it easy."

"What? Doesn't look like it to me," said Anriette.

"She's awe-inspiring in battle. The others too."

"I guess the Amazons *are* a warlike race," said Akira. "Hell, it even gives *me* pause about tryin' to spar with 'em."

Allen wasn't sure if any Amazon would really consider a sparring session to be a battle per se, but he had no doubt that the blows

Chloe was directing at the ground would send him flying. A single one would turn most normal humans into a fine paste, so Akira's wariness was common sense.

He'd only met two Amazons so far, but if most of them were like Chloe, he could understand why the demons had made such an effort to forcibly recruit them. What he couldn't understand was how, with such strength at their disposal, the Amazons had even permitted it.

He quickly realized it wasn't the time to ponder that. "Chloe, don't overdo it, okay? At this rate you're gonna turn the room we're trying to reach into dust!"

"Yeah, I know!" she said, somehow managing to hear him above the racket she was generating. She would have no idea how far exactly she'd dug, so they'd have to stop her along the way and take another look. If they weren't careful, the room would be obliterated before they had the chance.

What was the room for? Would seeing it up close tell them anything? Allen watched as Chloe dug through the ground at incredible speed.

Underneath the Earth

The chamber seemed like nothing more than an ordinary structure: a rectangular box made of stone. It looked like it had been white at one time, but it was stained brown through contact with the earth. Nothing else about it stood out, at least in terms of appearance. The only thing that was unusual was where they had found it.

"At the very least, we can say this must have something to do with the demons, right?" said Allen.

"Huh? What are you basing that on?" said Akira. "We hardly know anything yet."

"We're a hundred meters down," said Anriette. "It should be warmer, but it feels exactly the same in here as up there."

"So this is part of the lair too?" said Mylène.

"Seems likely," Allen answered.

"Whoa," said Chloe. "Is that right? In that case, they must've built it for a reason."

The group circled the room as they talked but found nothing resembling an entrance. They tapped on the walls, but the only response was the sound of cold stone.

"Maybe they blasted their way in?" Akira offered.

"Wouldn't they be crushed by the stone, though?" said Mylène.

"Only if it's normal stone," Chloe explained.

"Seems like it is to me," Allen noted.

"Agreed," said Anriette. "The only thing that's special is its location."

Allen looked around, but nothing struck him as significant. All he could see were the pit walls and the faraway ceiling of the room they'd been standing in before. He'd been sure to confirm there was no risk of the walls caving in before he'd jumped down. If they did collapse, he'd be buried. But the earth was tightly packed and

wouldn’t crumble unless deliberately destroyed.

If it came to it, he could always teleport out anyway. How else were they going to get out of a hundred-meter hole? They hadn’t brought any tools for that job with them. Allen’s and Akira’s hands had been full carrying Anriette and Mylène, who couldn’t withstand a hundred-meter drop. Fortunately, Allen’s abilities meant that even if this turned out to be some kind of trap, they should be able to make it out before they were buried alive.

“Hmm, yeah, there’s no doubt this isn’t a normal place,” said Chloe, “but what are we gonna do about it?”

“Same as before,” said Allen. “We find out what’s unusual about it.”

“You mean I *can* blast a hole in it?” said Akira, excitedly drawing her sword with a smile. Allen realized she’d probably been watching enviously as Chloe dug. There was no reason to stop her.

“Just make sure not to overdo it,” he said. “We only need to get inside.”

“She’s gonna blow the whole thing to smithereens,” Mylène remarked.

“Ha, come on!” Akira laughed. “I’ll leave it in one piece.”

“She’s one of those people who always takes things too far, huh?” said Chloe.

Akira’s sword began to pulse with azure lightning. She clearly didn’t intend to hold back; she must have determined that a full-force attack was required. Despite her coarse manner of speaking, she was thoughtful and had good intuition. Preparing herself for an all-out attack simply meant that she felt it was necessary, whether she herself was conscious of it or not.

The others said nothing. They understood. The only exception was Chloe, who didn’t know Akira well enough to have gained such an understanding.

“Uh, should we stop her? She seems ready to blow up the whole thing...”

“It’s okay,” said Allen. “Akira knows what she’s doing. Actually, we better stand back.”

“Right,” said Anriette, “although there’s not much room to do so.”

Allen retreated until his back was against the wall of the pit. Chloe still seemed perplexed but followed suit.

A bolt of blue lightning surged through Akira's sword as she prepared her attack. "Come, lightning! Destroy!" she shouted as she swung her blade, striking the wall.



For a moment, Allen was blinded by a bright light and deafened by a blistering roar. When his vision returned, he saw that the wall before Akira had disappeared without a trace.

"You *did* overdo it," said Mylène. "A hole would've been enough."

"Instead she removed an entire wall," said Allen with a shrug. "The insides are scorched too."

She'd made the room's interior visible—and breathable—but if there had been anything inside, it likely would've been destroyed, and any living things would have been in trouble, to say the least. Still, Allen *had* told her there was nothing in there.

"Did you mean to do that?" asked Chloe.

"Huh? Oh, kinda, I guess," Akira replied.

"She did what was appropriate," said Anriette. "I'd expect nothing less."

"Huh? What?" said Chloe.

"What do you mean?" asked Mylène.

Both Amazons looked confused, but Allen didn't bother to explain. There was no need. Suddenly, the empty space inside the newly opened room warped, and a man appeared.

"Hmm. Not only did you find this place, but you made a wise decision just now. I see why you are the Champion. You were meant to be impaled the moment you set foot in here. Burning the entire room to a crisp right as you destroyed the wall was an inspired move."

At a glance, he looked like a normal human. But just like the room itself, that couldn't be the case. The nature of his appearance was more than enough proof of that. There was no need to ask what he was. He was inside—or had just appeared inside—a demon lair.

"A demon..." said Chloe in a quivering voice.

What Was Done

The man could have been nothing other than the word Chloe uttered, but her words still shocked Mylène. Demons held a privileged place in Mylène's mind, and not for good reasons. Her reunion with Chloe and the knowledge that the other people of her village were somehow still alive didn't change the fact that the demons had attacked her home and made her their slave. Some time had passed since then, but not enough to make her forget.

The presence of another person even more bewildered than her brought her back to her senses. Never taking one eye off the demon, she glanced at Chloe and saw her transfixed in utter astonishment.

"Someone you know?" asked Mylène.

Chloe was slow to respond. "One of the demons that dwelled here," she said.

Mylène was concerned about her friend, but she couldn't afford to avert her eyes from the demon. She'd had a strong suspicion about what he really was, of course, but Chloe confirming it felt different. She knew from her experience as a demon's slave that demons were individualists, or perhaps just selfish, every one of their actions informed by what would benefit them the most, including cooperation with others of their kind.

They hated giving their possessions to other demons. For that reason, she knew there was a strong chance that the demons who had dwelled here were those responsible for capturing the Amazons —those that had attacked her village. She couldn't keep a cool head when faced with one of them. Only the knowledge that her fellow Amazons were still alive kept her from doing something hasty. She'd just been given a chance to find out where they were being kept; she couldn't afford to let that slip through her fingers.

As Mylène wondered how she would extract the information she

needed from the demon, she saw him look at her. Or no, at *Chloe*. He narrowed his gaze as though trying to confirm her identity.

"Hmm. Not only have you determined that I'm a demon, but that I dwelled here too. I wasn't aware of any Amazons fleeing our attack. You must have escaped from here." The demon's eyes traveled between each member of the party. He smiled condescendingly as he looked into their eyes. "And yet you returned. I don't know how you encountered the Champion—" He paused. "Ah, perhaps you met when she attacked this place? If that is the source of your inflated confidence, then I can only tell you how foolish you are."

"That's rich, coming from someone who turned tail and ran when I showed up," said Akira. "Wouldn't that make *you* a fool for coming back to face me now?"

"Ran? I can't say I'm too happy to hear that's how you understand it, but...no matter. Why expect a fool to understand the actions of a sage?"

"Oh, I'm wrong, huh? Sure seemed like you bolted to me."

"Not at all. We knew you were coming."

"Huh?" Akira peered at the demon. He stood there proudly, as if to confirm that she hadn't misheard.

It made sense. Akira had told them how she'd discovered the lair was here. It wasn't intuition; she'd purchased the details from an intelligence broker, a merchant who had claimed there was no information he couldn't find. Exaggeration or not, there was no doubt that he *did* possess a vast array of information, including other countries' national secrets and other extremely privileged details.

Of course, such a man knew the value of information better than anyone. And while most intel had a price, there were some things he would never sell: falsehoods and information about his own customers. He even refused to trade in rumors; all information he sold was backed by some amount of proof and was priced accordingly.

As an information broker, he could not maintain relationships. It ran contrary to his professional pride. If duty required it, he was not

opposed to selling information about friends. Spending excess time in his presence was tantamount to giving him that information for free, and those who had no information to offer could never get close to him. This professionalism conveyed credibility, which was corrupted by the poison tongue of demons.

The moment he told Akira about the existence of the demon lair, the broker had headed there himself. It was the only way the demons could have known that her attack was coming.

Then again...there *was* another way. The demon had only said that they'd seen the attack coming. Perhaps they had learned of Akira's plans by some other method, or simply predicted them. After all, there could have been no doubt that the Champion would come after them at some point. That could have been the extent of what the demon meant, and he still wouldn't have uttered a lie—although they had no proof that he wasn't lying.

It seemed Akira, too, realized that all this talk meant nothing; she scoffed. "Ooh, I'm shaking in my boots. For a demon, you're a real coward. But then again, I guess all of you demons are."

"Talk your talk," said the demon. "Those who are truly wise always appear as cowards to the fool. But I *am* curious. How did you see through our scheme? None of you should have been able to do so."

As the demon had implied earlier, it sounded like this seemingly ordinary room did hide some manner of trap that had been destroyed by Akira's sword. Mylène had no idea whether Akira had known what she was doing or not; certainly *she* hadn't noticed that the inside of the room was rigged, despite carefully inspecting it with her own eyes. But if it hadn't been intentional, Akira had really overdone it. Mylène hadn't spent much time around Akira, but she knew that the Champion wasn't the sort of person to do something so reckless for no reason. It seemed likely that Akira's intuition had told her something was off.

"What?" said Akira, rolling her eyes. "It doesn't take a genius to guess you demons would try that sort of thing."

Mylène could tell she was being truthful. With simple intuition, she had saved them from a threat no one else had noticed.

Or...perhaps someone had? She glanced at Allen. He hadn't said a word since the demon had appeared, only stared at him silently. Noticing her gaze, he looked in her direction for the briefest of moments and shrugged.

So he *had* known there was something inside the room. Why hadn't he told them? She recalled the demon's earlier words. He had said that none of them had noticed. He wouldn't have said that if he hadn't thought one of them *might*. Besides, the timing of the demon's appearance was far too convenient.

Mylène nodded with realization. The demon had somehow been watching them, and Allen had noticed that, as had Anriette, who'd been in agreement with him every step of the way. That was why they'd left dealing with the demon to Akira too: They were focused on listening for any information he might reveal.

Mylène bit her lip in frustration. Those three had put together an expertly arranged front while she had been useless, unable to do anything but stand there in shock. How could she hope to save her people, or even attempt to? Still, until the current confrontation was resolved, that was all irrelevant. She could reflect later. Following the others' lead, she focused on the demon's words.

"Intuition?" he said. "You foiled my plan with *intuition?* The Champion is a fearsome foe indeed."

"So now what?" said Akira. "Gonna run away like a coward again?"

"No need for childish taunts. Very well. You have provided me with the perfect opportunity. Let's see how fearsome you are when you're dead!"

"Bring it on, you punk!" said Akira as she leaped at the demon.

Allen and Anriette kept still, as if they knew she could handle it herself. Mylène wondered for a moment what she should do before again deciding to follow their lead. She knew how strong Akira was and had no idea what level of enemy they were dealing with. Better to wait for the demon to show his hand before she jumped in to assist.

Besides, she wasn't sure how Chloe was going to react. The other Amazon ought to resent the demon with a fervor much more

personal than Mylène's own. At the moment, Chloe was staring at the demon with an expression that Mylène couldn't read from her position to her side. Nothing Chloe did next would surprise Mylène; she had to be ready for whatever happened.

On the other hand, she was surprised by how uncharacteristically Chloe had behaved so far. She was a very straightforward person, inclined to act before thinking. The Chloe that Mylène knew would have already pounced on their foe. The change, she realized, must have been down to whatever had happened to her here at the demons' hands. Though Chloe looked just like her old self, even acted like nothing had changed, from time to time Mylène sensed something strange about her—something caused by some event her friend had not yet told her about.

Mylène, too, had experienced much during their time apart that she hadn't had the chance to tell Chloe about. She was sure that was true for both of them. But for now, they had bigger problems. Mylène remained aware of the girl to her side but refocused her attention on Akira as the Champion leaped into battle.

The Power of the Champion

Allen sighed in admiration as he watched the scene before him unfold. Akira's sword crackled loudly with azure lightning. It hadn't even been a year since he'd sparred with her, but she had clearly become much stronger.

He knew if they were to spar again, he wouldn't be able to defeat her so easily, but that was no surprise. It had only taken her about two years to reach the level she had been at during their last encounter. It was only natural that, given a further six months, she would make huge strides. It wasn't Akira who impressed Allen at all, but the demon who deftly deflected Akira's fierce attack.

"From how he talked, I figured he was more of a rear guard type, but I guess not, huh?" said Allen.

"He wouldn't have chosen to show his face if he couldn't defend himself," said Anriette. "Although...wouldn't that mean he *wasn't* the one watching us?"

"Hmm... Nah, it probably was," said Allen. "I don't feel like I'm being watched anymore."

Allen had noticed there was some kind of trap set up in the room. Technically there really wasn't anything there, but occasionally he'd notice a slight distortion in the air. From that alone, it was clear that some sort of trap was in play. He hadn't mentioned it because he could tell they were being watched. Why give their observer information that might help him, especially when he was likely to be a demon—the perfect entity from whom to extract a lead? Letting the wrong information slip might have sent him packing, and Anriette had seemed to arrive at the same conclusion without him needing to communicate it to her.

The demon showing himself meant the first part of his plan was complete. The next part depended on Akira.

"Shouldn't you help her?" asked Anriette.

"You think so? Yeah, the demon's defending himself well, but she's still got the upper hand. I don't wanna get yelled at for getting in her way."

"I guess she does seem like that kinda person," said Anriette.

The battle before them continued as the two talked. Blue lightning coursed from Akira's sword every time she took a swing, scorching the floor and walls. At first glance, the lightning didn't seem particularly harmful, but Akira had told Allen that it only showed its true power when the sword struck a being associated with demons. In those moments, the holy sword Hauteclaire would exponentially multiply its power. The lightning that sparked from the blade was nothing more than an aftereffect.

Allen had seen the sword slay a being as powerful as the mighty dragon. It should have no trouble with a demon, provided Akira could actually make contact. With every swing, a shrill sound resounded, followed by a grunt of discontent from Akira.

"Damn it! Not again!" she cried. "Is that all you know how to do? Block with your arm?"

"What a strange thing to say," said the demon. "This is where my power lies. Of course I shall defend myself this way. If that bothers you, perhaps you'll cease attacking me with that irritating lightning?"

"I'm not dumb enough to give up my special weapon against demons!"

"Then why should I give up my defense? Typical Champion. Very well... Into warped space your sword goes."

Akira's sword stopped just before it reached the demon. From the look on her face, Allen could tell that this wasn't what she'd intended. Looking closely, he saw that the air around Hauteclaire appeared distorted. That was why Akira's attacks weren't connecting—the demon was able to manipulate the fabric of space itself. It was a multifaceted power: It had allowed the demon to watch them, set traps for them, suddenly appear out of nowhere, and defend himself from attack. Such powers were known to be very difficult to use. That the demon was able to use this ability mid-battle and against the Champion, no less, meant he must have been a highly talented practitioner.

Even so, Akira was not only a match for the demon, but stronger. Her attack had failed to reach her foe, but just barely. And the demon had barely managed to deflect it. Forcing the sword into a warped space essentially meant the demon was creating a tear in space. That Akira had gotten so much closer than her previous attacks was a testament to how much she'd grown and her incredible ability to adapt.

Just as Allen was reflecting on how Akira truly deserved the title of Champion, she swung once again. The demon hadn't moved since the last swing; it must have been difficult to do anything else while focusing on warping the fabric of reality. Akira brought Hauteclaire down on the demon that stood right before her, but again the blade failed to make contact as the demon dashed backward to avoid it. He must have determined that his warped space was about to be destroyed and decided to evade rather than maintain the effect. Clearly the demon was quick on the draw; if he had been any slower to react, he would have been torn in two.

At first, Akira just seemed irritated that her attack had been avoided once again. Then she smiled in her signature way. "Oh! I just destroyed your little trick, huh? I know how it works now, so I won't miss again. I'll give you one last chance to surrender, buddy."

"You'd accept my surrender?" asked the demon.

"There's a lot I'd like to ask you. You're in the know about all sorts of stuff, aren't you?"

It wasn't clear what, if any, chain of command existed among demons, but Allen knew this one was the strongest one he'd encountered so far. Perhaps not as strong as the Fenrir, but he was no slouch. And he had been left to monitor the lair. He *had* to have some information at his disposal. This potential was why Allen and Anriette had stood back and watched, leaving the fighting to Akira.

"Hmm, I suppose I *am* rather well-informed," the demon admitted, "although I don't know why you came here. I can hazard a guess, given you have an escaped Amazon with you. Yes, I know about *that."*

"Lucky for you," said Akira. "Well, then..."

"You truly do have the stuff of a Champion. But you're still

nothing but a brat!”

“Huh? What the hell are you—”

The demon swung his arm. At first it seemed a meaningless gesture; it made no sound and produced no visible effect. But, no—something had appeared in the empty space where the demon had swung his arm. Another warp in space, just like the one he had used to block Akira’s attacks, but now unleashed offensively.

Akira’s eyes grew wide, but the warped space had almost reached her. The demon grinned.

“Hey! Weren’t you listening to me?!” said Akira.

Now her opponent’s eyes grew wide. “What?!”

Akira smiled. There wasn’t a scratch on her.

“Ridiculous! How did you...?!”

“You weren’t listening, were you? I told you I know how it works now.”

“Ghk... How dare you, Champion?!”

“Anyway, I get the picture. You won’t see sense until I beat it into ya, right? Fine by me! Come, lightning!”

“Hnh?! Who do you think—”

The demon made a hurried attempt at some maneuver, but Akira was too fast. She closed the distance in an instant and thrust Hauteclaire forward. A pillar of blue lightning erupted from the sword, and the demon collapsed before he even had a chance to cry out.

“Sorry, was that too much?” said Akira with a smile. “Eh, looks like you’re still alive, at least. No harm, no foul, right? Maybe that’ll loosen your lips a little.”

“She really *has* gotten stronger,” said Allen.

“Of course. She’s the Champion,” Anriette replied. “We didn’t even have to do anything.”

“Can’t complain about that,” said Allen. He glanced at Mylène and Chloe and saw them breathing sighs of relief. They hadn’t said a word the entire encounter. Considering their history with demons, he couldn’t blame them.

“Heh heh... I see,” said the demon. “So this is the power of a Champion. Indeed, you are even more fearsome than I expected.”

“Still conscious, huh?” said Akira. “You really are resilient. But do you understand now that you’re no match for me?”

“Quite arrogant too, I see. Allow me to repay you for this humiliation.”

“Huh? What are you thinking of trying now?”

“Have you forgotten, Champion? You cannot capture us.”

“Huh? Crap!”

Realizing the meaning of the demon’s words, Akira thrust her sword at him but only made contact with the ground. The demon’s body had already turned translucent, and Hauteclaire passed straight through.

“Damn it!”

“Heh heh. Goodbye, Champion. Come and find me, if you wish. With no clues, I imagine you will find that quite difficult.” He disappeared, leaving only Hauteclaire jammed into the ground.

Akira fell to one knee, pounding her fist on the earth. “Damn it! I’ve *heard* that they disappear if you try to capture them!”

“Right,” said Allen. “Anriette, where did he go?”

“Let’s see... I can sort of tell. Not his exact location, but the general area.”

“Perfect. I can’t tell where he is, but I could locate him if he was in my general proximity.”

“Huh?” Akira chimed in. “What are you two talking about? Don’t tell me...”

Allen and Anriette hadn’t simply been standing idly by. Allen turned to face the dumbfounded Akira and shrugged. “Even if we’d captured him here, who knows if we could’ve trusted the information he gave us. Finding his hiding place ought to be more useful.”

Assistance

Allen and Anriette had lured the demon right into their trap. Allen knew that demons disappeared into thin air when they were about to be captured—he'd heard about it happening during the incident in the royal capital. At that time, he'd had two theories about how the trick could work: Either they really did disappear into nothingness, or they had some kind of teleportation ability that could only be used in times of great peril. He quickly determined that the first theory was impossible, as he'd seen demons that had previously disappeared after being captured. That made the second theory highly likely.

He couldn't say for sure that it was teleportation; more like some kind of imitation. The demon hadn't disappeared into thin air, after all. But it still involved instantly transferring one's body from one location to another. If the demon had teleported to somewhere in their general vicinity, it was likely they'd be able to track him down. By focusing their attention, Allen and Anriette managed to do just that.

Akira groaned. "Once again, you've set things up so you get all the glory."

"Hey, I'm just the right person for this job, just like you were for that one," said Allen.

He meant it. He hadn't known when the demon would disappear. If Akira hadn't fought the demon for him, he probably wouldn't have known where he had gone. Even Anriette might not have been able to fill in for him. She could have figured out the demon's general whereabouts, but searching those areas would still take a lot of time. With the status of the captured Amazons unknown, it made sense to take the quickest possible approach.

"But you can take it easy now, Akira," said Anriette.

"Yeah," said Allen. "The really tough part is still to come, though."

They didn't know how many foes they'd be up against or what

state the Amazons would be in. And whatever was going on right at that moment, the situation could get even worse if they took too long to explore. The demons might move the Amazons elsewhere, or even kill them.

"How many people lived in your village, anyway?" Allen asked the pair.

"Hm? Oh, about fifty, I think," said Chloe.

"Fifty-two, to be exact," said Mylène.

"So we have exactly fifty to rescue, then," Allen noted. "That's not too many, but it'll be tough to protect them when there are so few of us."

"I don't think you'll have that many to rescue," said Chloe. "I only remember seeing about thirty. I never saw any children or elderly people. I hope that just means they didn't bring them here."

"If they're not wherever that demon went, we'll have a hard time finding them," said Anriette.

In that case, they would have to find out where the remaining Amazons had been taken, doubling their workload. It wasn't all bad; that would mean less Amazons to defend at once. But it was one more possibility that they had to spend precious mental effort considering. If it came to it, they'd have to extract the information from the demons.

Allen wasn't sure if the demons would have even allowed the young and the elderly—in other words, those who were of no use to them—to live, but he knew giving up on them without even trying was no way to act.

"So where did that bastard go, anyway?" asked Akira.

"I can tell you the rough location," Anriette answered, "but wouldn't it be better to leave that 'til later?"

"Huh? Why?"

"You seem like the easily distracted type, and I want you to stay focused."

Akira snorted and turned away. Allen could tell she knew Anriette was right. Even knowing where the demon had gone, they couldn't sacrifice a chance to gather additional information. They had to fully explore the other rooms. Besides, it would be impossible to locate all

of the lair's secrets without some kind of map. Anriette only knew roughly where the demon had disappeared to, but until someone else was able to point out the exact location, it would remain a rough approximation. Anriette held herself to a high standard—too high, Allen thought. She would rather be vague and accurate than precise and at risk of being wrong.

Allen's job was to supplement Anriette's read by discovering details about the general area she had pinned down. Without those details, they might have found that they couldn't actually reach the location. Of course, since the demon had quickly disappeared, Allen had limited time for analysis, and spending that time discovering the coordinates their enemy had moved to would have been risky. If he'd been alone, he probably would have opted for that approach, but with Anriette able to follow the demon's overall location, he'd chosen to use his skills to gather information about the place where he had gone instead.

However, that information wasn't enough to pin down a specific location. They'd have to search for a place that fit what he'd found within the range provided by Anriette. For that, a map would be useful.

"I suppose we'll have to leave for now, then? Since we didn't bring a map," said Mylène.

"Yeah," said Allen. "We'd better just teleport, though."

"Only after we've taken a thorough look around," said Chloe. "Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah!" Akira answered with dissatisfaction. "I might wanna go beat that guy's ass after he got away from me, but I'm not gonna mess up our list of priorities!"

Allen couldn't blame her for feeling frustrated. Nor could he blame Mylène and Chloe, whose usual blank expressions bore faint signs of impatience. Their people's lives were potentially in danger. But at that moment, what they needed most was more information. It might have seemed like an unnecessary delay, but he knew if they didn't take their time, they might well regret it later. If that meant risking all their efforts being for naught...well, there was nothing they could do about that. Allen had considered their options and

chosen the one he believed was most likely to result in success. They would explore the lair, then briefly return to town, and then head for the site where they thought they would find the demons.

There was much about the plan—and about what had happened here in the hidden room—that worried Allen. The demon had gone down far too easily. It wasn't that he doubted Akira's ability to defeat him, but the demon had acted as though he had always intended to retreat. Perhaps he was just imagining things, though.

"Let's head up," said Allen. "There's nothing left to do here."

"Right," said Anriette. "There don't seem to be any clues in here."

"Was the demon only here to act as a trap?" asked Mylène.

"Seems like a long shot if that's all it was for," Allen replied. "No point wondering about it now."

The group gathered together and joined hands, then Allen focused his mind on transporting them all out of the room.

The Demons and the Slaves

The man peered at the structure that stood before him. He had wondered what would happen if he simply destroyed it outright, but he chose not to. Why demolish it before it had served any purpose? True, if it were capable of killing that annoying Champion, it would have already done so. Counterintuitively, the fact that it had failed in its task meant it would be wasteful to destroy it.

On the other hand, there *was* a chance that... No, he couldn't destroy it based on some scant possibility. Its creation might not have required any hard labor from his kind, but it *had* required a significant time investment. His impulse to demolish it quickly ran up against thoughts of how long it would take to rebuild it. Besides, he didn't have the authority. This was nothing more than idle fantasy.

As he stood in thought, a figure appeared before the building that until a few days ago had been intended to serve as a new lair. A young girl with the dark complexion characteristic of Amazons. He'd been waiting for her. Keeping a safe distance, he began to speak.

"You're late."

"There's no need for that. It took a lot of work to slip out of there."

"That's none of my concern. You haven't forgotten your duty in the time you've been away, have you?"

The girl looked blankly into his eyes and trembled slightly. The man nodded with satisfaction.

"That's enough about you. What about *them?"*

"They've split up to explore the area. That's how I was able to slip away."

"I see."

The man narrowed his gaze. Multiple landscapes, some thirty in all, overlaid the current one in his field of view, showing him what was happening inside the building. He saw a familiar young man and

woman searching for something, beating on the walls and floors. The man's Skill allowed him to see what was happening in many distant places at once. If necessary, he could even hear sounds.

The Skill could not be used that freely—its use was limited to places he had prepared in advance. But in certain situations it could be incredibly powerful, such as when observing intruders in their lair. Used skillfully, it even allowed him to remain in secret contact with a faraway person, transmitting his voice and image to one of the places he observed. That was how he had called the girl to him.

"Did you engineer this situation?" the man asked.

"Yes. I proposed splitting up to save time. It was the only way I could create an opportunity to get away from the group."

"Weren't *you* the one who said a change of plans was necessary?"

"Yes, but I didn't expect you to summon me so soon."

"As I told you, what is convenient for you is none of my concern. If you tell me that a change of plans is necessary, it should be *obvious* that I will summon you to ask why."

"I assumed as much, but if I wasn't careful, they could've found out—"

"*I don't care.*"

"Hm?" The girl stood dumbfounded by his interjection.

The man snorted. It seemed these slaves still didn't understand where they stood. "What does it matter to me—no, to *us*—if your cover is blown?"

"That's... But..."

"Don't tell me I must keep reminding you to remember your place. The risk of exposure is your problem alone. If you want to save your people, you will make yourself useful to us."

"Yes, sir..."

The man snorted again at the sight of the trembling, supplicant girl. In truth, her exposure would very much concern him and his kind. Fighting the Champion head-on was a possibility, but one that would entail significant losses—losses they would prefer to avoid. It was desirable for things to go according to plan. But the girl couldn't be allowed to know that. However minute the chance of her turning

traitor was, it was better to reduce it to zero by continuing to remind her of her position in the pecking order.

"We'll return to this topic later. Now, what of these changes you believe necessary? You were to guide them using your memories of the place."

"Well...it seems unnecessary for me to guide them."

"What?"

She could only mean that they already knew what he had intended them to discover. But that was impossible. The Amazons had helped with the lair, but his side had built *that* place themselves. There couldn't have been a leak. But how else could they have found out?

"You mean to tell me that they already located the other lair? So quickly?"

She could mean nothing else. Only *they* should have been capable of such an act, but there were no other possibilities.

"Y-Yes."

"I see. It seems we have continued to underestimate the Champion's abilities. Unless this was the result of one of her compatriots' Gifts? Not that it matters either way."

Indeed, if what the girl said was true, it would require them to change their plans. Even if it changed nothing in the end, the process itself was important. But at this point, the plan to exhaust the Champion by leading her along a laborious path to them was over. He had instructed the girl to claim her memories were hazy, but if they'd already found the place, that was pointless now.

"On the other hand, no major changes should be required. In the end, they have still been led to us. We will have to reconsider the procedure, but...no matter. We have some time. Even knowing the location, I imagine they will have to return home for a short time. We will use that time to prepare."

"Um...they said they don't need any time. They can get home in an instant. I've seen it myself, so I think it's true."

"What? Teleportation?"

The girl nodded. The man sniffed. The Champion was capable of such a thing*?* They really had misjudged her. In that case, they

wouldn’t have much time—they had to revise their plans at once.

“Message received. Indeed, a change of plans will be necessary. I will instruct you further once the details have been worked out.”

He couldn’t hang around now. He had to return to base and begin discussing what was to be done, even if the best they could manage was slowing down the Champion’s plans as much as she had sabotaged theirs.

“I will take my leave now. You understand that this is a delicate situation, yes?”

“I’ve heard it so much I could repeat it in my sleep. This is the only way to save my people.”

“Very good.”

He had taken measures to ensure that even the small possibility of her turning traitor presented no threat, but he would still prefer if she didn’t try anything stupid before they confronted the Champion.

With that final warning delivered to the Amazon Chloe, the man—the demon—disappeared from sight and hurried back to the lair.

The Shelter

Technically, Allen and the others hadn't found any new information about the lair; but he'd expected as much. He wasn't particularly disappointed; he didn't have time to be. They had already returned to the town and procured a map to help them locate their next destination.

"Hmm," said Allen. "Putting together my information with Anriette's, the place we're looking for should be about...here?"

He pointed to a spot far to the south of the kingdom, in the middle of a deep forest. Though not the Frontier, it was probably one of the less monitored places on the border. It was a dangerous place, full of roaming monsters that posed a threat to even a Level 20 adventurer. Every nation that bordered the forest forbade its citizens to enter it. No nation could spare the resources required to render it safe, and none wanted to risk luring the monsters that lurked inside further into their respective countries.

Just to be safe, the forest was surveilled to some extent, and periodic searches were held. But a forest of such size was far too large for any small nation to thoroughly search it. No one was capable of using it to cross the border anyway, so there was no need for heavy security.

It was the most suitable spot for a demon lair. In fact, it was one of the best places Allen could imagine for one: an isolated place that would never be seen by human eyes. The monsters posed no threat to demons, given the demons' ability to control them.

Searches were light, despite how perfect a hiding place the forest was for demons, because there was no sign of any demonic presence there. None of the four countries whose borders intersected with the region had been attacked from that direction. With no evidence of any threat, no nation had made surveillance a priority.

“Demons are cowardly, no doubt,” said Akira, “but they’re not as aggressive as people think. In fact, maybe that’s exactly why they want people to believe otherwise.”

“I think you’re right,” said Anriette. “That’s how they’ve been able to hide this lair so well.”

“It’s right in the middle of the forest too,” said Chloe. “Man, it’s great that we know exactly where it is! Exploring that place would be awful.”

“I’m sure Allen and Akira could handle the monsters, but the demons might notice us approaching,” said Mylène.

“I dunno,” said Allen. “We can’t afford to be too pessimistic or optimistic.”

The deepest areas of the forest were completely unexplored. No one knew what kind of monsters dwelled there; something of equal or greater power to the Fenrir was far from out of the question. They couldn’t afford to be confident that they would simply find a way through.

“We also don’t know exactly how to get to the lair, even if we know where it is,” Allen mused.

“I guess we’ll just have to wade right into the middle,” said Chloe.

“And there’s no way we’ll be lucky enough to do that without running into monsters along the way.”

“Maybe with Noel’s help, we could?” Mylène suggested.

“That would definitely help our chances,” said Anriette, “but all elves can do is understand the layout of the forest. We could still run up against things that she can’t address.”

“Besides, she’s busy right now,” said Allen. She would surely help them if they asked, but considering how dangerous the forest was, making such a request wasn’t something to be taken lightly. “Let’s forget about her for now. Chloe, do you know anything about the place?”

“Huh? Me?”

“They can’t have taken you to that desert as soon as they captured you, right? Maybe they took you to the lair first?”

“Anything you can remember might be useful,” Mylène added encouragingly.

“That’s right,” said Anriette. “Which direction you came from, how you traveled there, what the surroundings were like... Anything might help.”

Everyone looked at Chloe expectantly. She seemed slightly taken aback. “Um...I’m sorry. I’m pretty sure they took us somewhere before the desert, but...”

“You don’t remember?” asked Mylène.

“It’s not that I don’t remember anything. But after everything that happened, it’s hard to remember specifics in all the confusion. I remember some things from inside the lair, but that’s it.”

“If you don’t remember, you don’t remember,” said Akira. “Besides, it sounds less like you forgot and more like they ensured you’d never know.”

“They certainly wouldn’t want directions to their lair getting out,” said Anriette. “She probably never saw the place from the outside, but in all the confusion, she never even thought about it.”

“If that’s the case, we’ll just have to factor the lack of information into our plans,” said Allen. More details would have been nice to have, but still, they were no worse off than they had been to begin with.

“Isn’t it going to be a struggle once we get there, though?” asked Chloe.

“We’ll just have to gather information as we advance,” Allen answered.

“Demons are cautious,” said Akira. “Attacking them head-on without sweating the details might be faster, but that’s never worked out for me, so I’ll let you guys handle it your way this time.”

Unlike the newly constructed base in the desert, the forest lair had probably been around for some time. They would have to be wary of monsters, and that would only be a prelude to what was to come. The real fight would begin after they had entered the lair itself. But if they spent too much time preparing, they might find that the demons simply escaped from them, just as they had Akira.

“Yeah, it’s gonna be tough,” said Allen. “Not much point in worrying about it, though.”

“I really am sorry,” said Chloe.

“Don’t worry,” said Mylène. “We’re here by choice, after all.”

“That’s right,” Anriette agreed. “We could bow out whenever we wanted if we were so inclined. Don’t sweat it, Chloe.”

“I’m more concerned about finally giving those bastards the beating they deserve,” said Akira. She was sincere, but her words were clearly intended to reassure Chloe.

It was true; they were here by choice. The elimination of threats was the kingdom’s responsibility, not theirs. But leaving it to the government would risk the safety of the Amazons. If the kingdom had to choose between saving the lives of a couple dozen noncitizens and eliminating the demons, they would almost certainly choose the latter.

“I couldn’t sleep at night if I left those Amazons to die,” said Allen. “But we’ve gotta think long and hard about how to ensure we’re successful this time.”

The time for apologies or shows of appreciation would be after the job was done. Allen looked over the map once again.

The Demon-Shrouding Forest

Allen looked at the forest that spread out in all directions before him and sighed. Even from the entrance, it was clear that this one was much deeper than any found in the Frontier. It really was a perfect place for the demons to build a lair.

"Any issues jumping out at anyone?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not surprised they don't thoroughly monitor this place," said Anriette. "It'd be impossible."

"No sign of any monsters," said Akira. "That's good, but there's no sign of the people who are supposed to be watching the forest either."

"I bet this 'surveillance' mostly involves culling the monsters," said Allen. "Maybe there's some kind of magical perimeter that alerts them when a monster crosses it."

Such a simple enchantment could remain in operation with little need for upkeep and would reduce the chance of anything going wrong. Due to the risk it presented, there was not a single village, let alone a town, on the forest's outskirts, and yet it seemed that no one thought there was a need for in-person surveillance.

"It seems really lax," said Chloe. "Is this seriously enough security? At least it means we can get inside without attracting attention."

"Wouldn't keeping a strict watch from here be tough too?" said Mylène.

"Yeah, they probably have to divide their attention between multiple areas," said Anriette.

The area in which they stood wasn't even in the Duchy of Westfeldt's domain. It wasn't any of their concern, and besides, it seemed to have worked out so far. There was no point in criticizing the situation.

"Let's get moving," said Allen. "We hurried here for a reason."

The group exchanged nods and headed into the forest.

"It's just as deep as it looked from the outside," said Anriette. "It hasn't even been fully explored by humans. Honestly, it's more of a frontier than the forest that's actually in the Frontier."

"This is more like uncharted territory than a frontier," said Akira. "It's dark, there're barely even any animal trails, and it feels like something's about to jump out at us at any moment. Makes sense that there's a demon lair up ahead."

"I imagine they don't want it to feel like a walk in the park," said Mylène.

"Yeah, if they felled a bunch of trees to let more light in, it would be pretty obvious," said Allen. It certainly didn't seem like anyone had managed to forge a path inside, though no such path would have changed the amount of caution they had to exercise.

The group continued toward the center of the forest as they talked. Mercifully, their caution didn't require them to keep silent. Any monsters would hear their footsteps regardless...if the demons didn't hear them first. Besides, no one could hold intense concentration indefinitely. They had to take care, but casual conversation would help them preserve their mental reserves for the real battle up ahead.

With that decided, the party continued their conversation as they advanced. Allen knew it should be perfectly safe, but just to be sure...

Eyes of Akasha: Clairvoyance.

"Hey," he said, holding up his right hand. Everyone fell silent and began to scan their surroundings. This was the agreed-upon signal to say that monsters were nearby. Still, if the monster wasn't close enough to already hear their voices, there was little chance of them being able to see it through the dense forest growth or even sense its presence. Even Allen would have struggled to sense it had it not been for his unique skills.

Furthermore, there seemed to be some kind of effect in the forest that was stunting their senses—not a magical barrier, but something more natural. Otherwise Akira would have been able to sense its presence even if she couldn't see it. Perhaps the natural effect was

another reason the demons had chosen to build their lair there. It appeared to affect everyone indiscriminately; without proof or venturing deep into the forest, no one would be able to tell that demons were there.

The effect wouldn't be of benefit to demons alone. In fact, in their current situation, it seemed to be benefiting Allen and the others, as they already knew the demons were there, but the effect would make it difficult for the demons and monsters to notice them.

Allen continued to advance carefully, not letting this unexpected boon make him careless. Soon they came to a small clearing. A smattering of light poured in from overhead—a tiny haven in the middle of the oppressive forest. However, all was not as it seemed.

The others breathed a sigh of relief. Allen looked at them and pointed to the left. They looked over, confused, and saw a monster standing there. It was large enough that they had to look up at it: a giant tortoise-like thing some ten meters tall, standing a mere five meters from them. The others shot him shocked, questioning looks, but Allen only shrugged. He didn't get the impression that any sudden moves might catch the thing's attention. He'd never seen a monster like it before, but his Eyes of Akasha had already provided him with the necessary information. The creature had poor hearing and wasn't even facing them. Provided they didn't talk or make any loud noises, it seemed unlikely to notice them.

The creature was sensitive to the presences of others, and aggressive. If not for the effects of the forest, it would have attacked anyone encroaching on its territory. Fitting its appearance, its shell was hard enough to make a blacksmith weep, and at Level 50, they would be well advised to simply ignore it and be on their way.

As if they'd implicitly understood Allen's conclusion, everyone began to walk again, silently this time. For some reason, Akira and Chloe occasionally looked back at the monster, probably because it was such a strange-looking thing.

After reaching a safe distance, Allen spoke. "Okay, we can talk again now."

"Phew. I was sweating for a moment there," said Anriette.

"I thought I felt weird ever since entering this forest," said Akira.

“Seems like I can’t sense presences as well as usual.”

“Some kind of concealing effect?” Mylène suggested. “I didn’t notice a thing until Allen pointed it out.”

“Something like that,” said Allen. “But it only affects auras. If we’d tried fighting it, the whole forest would’ve rumbled us.”

“Seemed like a worthy opponent,” said Akira. “I almost wanted to give it a shot.”

Allen was sure Akira would’ve won the fight with Hauteclaire, but it wouldn’t have been worth it to bring the wrath of every monster in the vicinity down on them.

“Hey, this way you get to stay fresh for the demons,” said Allen.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Akira. “But once this is over, I might come back here just for the fun of it.”

“Yeah, knock yourself out. Wait!” Allen raised his right hand again.

Akira rolled her eyes in exasperation. Allen peered into the distance and gasped. The approach they’d taken with the previous monster wouldn’t work this time. Up ahead stood a Fenrir. The creature had a natural resistance to all kinds of effects, meaning it would be affected by the forest’s dulling of the senses only half as much as they were, at most.

To make matters worse, the party was standing just barely outside of the monster’s range of awareness. A single step forward would catch its attention. Avoiding that would require them to take a roundabout route, but they had no other choice.

With his right hand still raised, Allen opened his palm, then brought his arm back to his side: the signal to wait. Then...

Sword of Cataclysm: Swiftness.

The color drained from Allen’s vision, and time seemed to slow as he moved with lightning speed. Assuming the stares he felt behind him to be his imagination, he closed the distance with the monster in an instant. The monster only began to sense his presence when it was already too late.

Sword of Cataclysm: Sundering Slice.

Allen cleaved the monster in two before it had a chance to act. The color returned to his vision, and time returned to its normal

speed.

"Phew. There."

The monster's two halves fell to the ground, causing a small tremor. Allen looked around. It didn't seem like the rumbling had attracted any further attention. Akira ran up to him, the four others following behind her, looking confused.

"I didn't tell you to stop waiting, did I?" he asked.

"I followed right behind you, and you've already killed the damn thing. Typical," said Akira, staring regretfully at the cloven creature. It was smaller than the previous Fenrir and ten levels weaker, an easy match for Akira after all the progress she'd made. But she would never have been able to kill it in an instant.

"I think it's Allen being stronger than her that's really bothering her," said Anriette.

"The rules of logic don't apply to him, as usual," said Mylène.

"Whatever," said Akira. "The fact that I can even tell how much stronger he is than me shows that I've closed the gap. Just you wait—soon I'll be able to do the same stuff as you. No, even better!"

"Looking forward to it," said Allen. And he meant it. In fact, he'd hoped it would happen sooner. Then he would be able to leave everything to Akira. It was the only thing likely to increase his chance of being able to enjoy a peaceful life. For now, though, Akira wasn't at that level, and he'd have to keep going. "Let's keep moving. Just make sure you keep your wits about you."

Things had proceeded well thus far, but the two monsters they'd encountered would have been among the worst to run into in most situations. The forest had provided an unexpected benefit, but they couldn't afford to let their guard down. With so little knowledge of the local terrain, they had only made rough plans regarding their battle tactics, which seemed to have been a smart decision. They'd have to continue to be adaptable. The group exchanged nods and continued ahead.

The Heart of the Forest

After several encounters with monsters, sometimes eliminated and sometimes avoided, the party finally reached the heart of the forest. The dense foliage suddenly opened up into a clearing. The entrance to a cave stood before them.

"That looks about right," said Mylène.

"Something as clearly unnatural as the structure in the desert would be too obvious here," said Anriette. "In the unlikely event that anyone came across this place..."

She looked up at the sky, trying to determine their current location. Their intention had been to travel in a straight line to the center of the forest, but they couldn't be sure that they hadn't wandered off track at some point. Now that they'd encountered what looked like it could be the entrance to the lair, they had to confirm they really were at the center.

"Is this the place, then?" Akira asked. "I'd feel really stupid if I got all excited just to find out we screwed up. Let's avoid another near miss."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," said Allen. "I could see something like the entrance to this cave when I tried to track that demon before. A forest like this might have multiple caves but not one that looks exactly the same."

"Right," said Anriette. "And this is definitely the heart of the forest. If it matches what Allen saw, then it must be the entrance to the lair."

Anriette's seal of approval was all Allen needed to feel confident they were in the right place. Their next steps would require even more caution.

"I didn't sense any demons monitoring us so far," said Allen. "Probably due to the effects of the forest."

"I bet that means they'll be tracking our every move once we

step inside," said Anriette.

"Probably," Akira agreed. "But what can we do about it? Should Allen just run in there and start attacking?"

She was only half joking. It *would* have been a viable plan if they'd known the layout of the lair and the situation inside, but with those things being impossible to ascertain, it was no good.

"Wait, can't you guys see through walls?" Akira asked. "You can't just take a peek inside?"

"That power has its limits," Allen replied.

"We might end up with them seeing us too," said Anriette. "Not that I expect Allen to make a mistake like that, but there's still a chance the demons will realize they're being watched."

He had felt something like that at the lair in the desert. The demon there had noticed he was being watched. Anyone of a certain level of ability would. It would be tantamount to giving the demons advance warning of their attack. Of course, that was something they had to avoid if at all possible.

"Damn," said Akira. "Should've known. Nothing ever comes easy to us."

"So what are we going to do?" asked Mylène.

"I've got a few ideas, but first...you okay, Chloe?" Allen asked.

Surprised at being addressed, Chloe was slow to react. "Hm? Am I okay? Do I look like something's wrong?"

"If you didn't, I wouldn't have asked if you were okay," said Allen.

"You *have* been quiet for a while, Chloe," Mylène added.

"She has, now that you mention it," Akira agreed. "I can understand why you asked."

Chloe recoiled nervously as everyone's eyes fell upon her. Unable to withstand their gazes, she averted her eyes. "How did you know?! I guess... I guess I'm not really okay."

"Did you remember something?" Allen asked.

"No, that's not it," Chloe replied. "Like I said before, I only remember a little of the inside." She trembled. "I was just thinking about how I'm going back in there, willingly this time."

Allen mumbled to himself in concern. "I see what you mean. Would you rather wait here?"

"That's not the most comforting thought either. I'm not brave enough to wait here by myself. Besides, I don't want to leave the rest to you after bringing you all the way here...though if you think I'll just slow you down, I'll wait here."

"I'd never make you do something like that," said Allen. "I know: Mylène, can you take care of this?"

"Me?" said Mylène. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'll let you determine how we head inside," said Allen. "If you're the one in charge, I think it might put Chloe at ease a little."

Mylène seemed confused for a moment but soon understood. She looked at Chloe and nodded. "Got it. If it'll make Chloe feel better, I'll do it."

"You understood what he was asking just from that?" said Akira. She looked at Allen quizzically. "Because I still don't have a clue."

"Hands," said Mylène, extending both hands.

"I still have no idea what you're talking about. I mean, you want us to hold hands with you, I guess? All of us? Even if we're not holding hands with you directly?"

"Indirectly should be fine, I think."

"I sure wish you sounded more confident about that." Allen smiled before doing as instructed.

Chloe held Mylène's right hand. Allen held her left. Chloe joined hands with Akira, and Allen with Anriette. With that, Mylène casually began walking toward the cave entrance.

"Hey!" Akira objected. "We're just walking inside while holding hands? You sure about this?"

"Look down at your legs," said Allen.

"My legs?" Akira looked down. "What about them? Agh!"

Her legs—and those of everyone who had joined hands with her—had disappeared.

"Wh-What?! My legs!" said Akira. "But I can still feel my feet on the ground!"

"They're just invisible," said Mylène. "And to anyone other than us, you look even more different."

"We're totally invisible to others, right?" said Allen. "Let go of Chloe's hand for a second and it'll make sense."

“Let’s see,” said Akira. “Huh, yeah. You all disappeared the moment I let go. So this is how we’re gonna sneak inside?”

“Yup.”

Allen didn’t trust the approach too much. Any sufficiently capable foe would be able to recognize the trick. And with three of five people having their hands full, it could be dangerous. Ideally, Allen would have been on one end of the row, but Mylène had extended her hands to Chloe and him. Still, so long as they were cautious, even being caught shouldn’t present too much of a problem.

“Invisibility, Mylène?” said Chloe. “Since when could you do that? You really are smart.”

There were a number of subtle implications in Chloe’s words, but Allen couldn’t inquire further—not here in the cave. “Our voices still echo around this place like normal, you know,” he said.

“We’d better be quiet from here on,” said Anriette.

“Let’s keep the chatter to a minimum, at least,” said Akira. “Only what’s necessary.”

“Right,” said Allen. “Now, into the demon lair we go!”

In the Gloom

The party slowly advanced deeper into the gloomy cave. At a glance it seemed like any other cave. Mylène gulped, not attempting to hide her nervousness. Akira had said the desert lair was scattered with monsters. Some had special powers, such as senses far stronger than any human's. Invisibility wouldn't hide them from such creatures. Perhaps the forest here provided such good natural defenses that the demons had deemed monsters unnecessary, but they couldn't take that for granted.

She continued forward calmly and cautiously, trying to keep her fear to a minimum. This was the first time Mylène had encountered a demonic lair. The demons had already been driven from the structure in the desert. It hadn't technically been a lair anymore, and Akira's battle with the demon had been similar to many others she'd experienced on her travels. She found it difficult to imagine what demons actually got up to inside these lairs.

Even as she led the group from the middle, she wasn't sure how best to act. Of course, she understood that their priority was to gather information. Rescuing the people of her village would come later. First they needed to know where the villagers were being held or if they were even in this lair at all. Allen and Anriette had left her with no doubt that this was indeed the demons' lair, and that the one they had encountered in the desert had escaped here. But that didn't necessarily mean her people were being kept here too. They could have been taken elsewhere, either immediately or after a temporary stay in this place. That was what they needed to find out.

"What now?" she murmured, turning her head in Allen's direction. She was conscious of how much she depended on him but didn't blame herself. He was, after all, the most dependable person in their party.

Chloe was her best friend, but not as reliable in a situation like

this. In fact, at that moment, she found it hard to rely on her at all. When they had first joined hands, Chloe had been trembling. That had stopped now, but Mylène didn't believe that Chloe had calmed down, only that she was better enduring her fear. It was clear to Mylène that she would have to be the one to support Chloe in this situation. She owed her after all Chloe had done for her, anyway, and she'd been waiting for the opportunity to show her how much she'd grown.

Besides, Chloe would never claim to be the sharpest tool in the shed. Allen grinned back at her, as if acknowledging that Mylène had chosen the right tool for the job. He tapped twice on the back of her hand—the signal that there was nothing to worry about. For now, she could just continue walking.

Mylène nodded and carried on. The cave was shadowy, but she wasn't blinded by the darkness. A dim light emanated from the walls. The cave tunnel seemed to extend forward endlessly, with no sign of any demons. Clearly a natural cave, the tunnel was an irregular shape, wide enough for the five of them to walk side by side, with a ceiling low enough that Allen could touch it if he jumped. Any careless combat risked causing a cave-in. She understood why they hadn't encountered any demons here.

Suddenly, something entered her field of view. "There's a hole here. Think it goes farther down?"

"Looks like it," said Allen. "It's pretty narrow, though. We'll have to go one at a time, so we won't be able to hold hands. Is that okay, Mylène?"

"No problem."

"You'd better take the lead, Allen," said Anriette.

"Yeah," said Akira. "I'm not as versatile as you, much as I hate to admit it. I'll take the rear."

"Got it," said Allen. "Then...Mylène behind me and Anriette before Akira?"

"I can't say I care for that," Anriette replied sulkily. "But I suppose now isn't the time to be clingy."

After quickly confirming their plan of action, Allen released Mylène's hand and stepped to the front. The others were now

invisible to him. Of course, he didn't see that as a problem, but Mylène knew they should link up again as quickly as possible. She grabbed Allen around his waist.

"Uh, Mylène?"

"Contact with any part of the body works," she replied. "Akira can hold on to my shoulders."

"Seems like you're holding on to his *whole* body," said Akira. "Not that I care."

"I kinda do," said Allen. "I can't walk too discreetly like this. Not a problem for now, but it might be if we get into trouble."

"That's unfortunate," said Mylène. She was joking, of course—half joking, at least. She released her grip and, after thinking for a moment, held on to the hem of Allen's shirt. She'd said "part of the body," but this should be sufficient too. She ignored the curious gazes of the others and gave an encouraging glance to Chloe, who held on to Mylène's shoulders.

Mylène raised an eyebrow as she watched Chloe from the corner of her eye. She seemed slightly different from her usual self. Restless. And while there was no reason for Chloe to involve herself in the conversation thus far, that didn't usually stop her. The Chloe that Mylène knew was uninhibited. For her to so quietly do as instructed was unsettling in a way that even the nerves and fear she was surely experiencing given their present location couldn't fully explain.

Perhaps it was just a matter of how long it had been since she herself was rescued by Allen? She, too, was conscious of being inside a demon lair, but for her it was only a faint sensation, little stronger than any ordinary person's feelings toward demons. But Chloe had escaped their clutches only a short while ago. Perhaps she wasn't behaving so strangely after all. Mylène struggled to say specifically what felt so off about her, anyway. If there really was something wrong, one of the others would surely have sensed it before her. Perhaps she was just overthinking things. They were, after all, heading deeper and deeper into the demon lair. It was only normal for her to be a little high-strung.

Hoping that was all there was to it, Mylène followed Allen into the

narrow passageway.

The Pit

The passage opened up into a cavernous space, the ceiling some ten meters high and the far wall at least twenty away. The floor, however, couldn't be seen. A massive, seemingly bottomless pit spread out before them. A path, which the party currently stood on, outlined the giant hole. It was roughly two meters wide, so they were in little danger of falling, but it was a disquieting sight nonetheless.

"There's a place this big underneath the forest?" said Allen.

"This looks like a natural cavern too," Anriette remarked. "They were lucky to find such a perfect place."

"So, we go looking for a lair and find a giant pit," said Akira. "These demons always fulfill your expectations. You think they're living here?"

"I dunno," said Allen. "We haven't seen the first sign of life."

He looked around. Most of the great cavern had been consumed by the pit. It wasn't a place anyone could live without excavating holes in the walls to make rooms. But, with the exception of the passageway from which the party had entered this space, Allen could see no such holes. It seemed unlikely that anyone was living there.

"It looks like there's another pathway like this one farther down there," Mylène observed.

"So there must be a way of getting down," said Akira. "Even demons couldn't jump that far."

"Right," said Allen. "Maybe it's farther inside?"

Somewhere, there had to be a path that led to the lower reaches of the great, cavernous room. There was certainly nothing of the sort visible from where they stood.

"I guess we'll just have to follow this path," said Anriette.

"There's nowhere to hide here," Allen added. "Usually, this would

be begging for someone to spot us. Your Gift really does come in useful, Mylène. Can you keep this up, though? You must be absorbing a lot of energy, using it for so long."

"I can keep going for now, at least," said Mylène.

"Maybe we should consider taking a break along the way or even retreating for a while if it seems necessary?" Allen suggested.

The need to be sure that even their footsteps didn't attract attention had made progress slow, and they hadn't run into a single demon, or even a monster, that might provide them with some information about the place. They had no idea how deep the pit was and hadn't sensed a presence or even heard a sound. For all they knew, the great cavern was nothing more than a huge passageway. If that was the case, they had to consider retreating temporarily to gather their energy once they found the real lair.

"In the end, all we know is that demons came here," said Anriette.

"Yeah, and we've seen no sign of any," Allen answered. "We've gotta consider the possibility that this isn't even a lair yet."

"It can't be completely unrelated, though," said Mylène.

"Right. After everything we've seen, the fact that there are no monsters here is pretty suspicious."

Perhaps the large monsters they'd encountered couldn't make it this far inside, but he'd still expect them to use the caves as their dens. That they'd seen no such signs made it likely that someone was deliberately warding them off—and there was no need to ask who. He just wished they could find some kind of evidence to support his hypothesis.

Allen glanced at Chloe. She was still silently staring at the ground. At this point, he didn't need to ask what was wrong.

"Let's move," said Allen. They couldn't learn much more from where they stood. They had to head farther down the path.

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The path was wide enough, but there was no reason to insist on walking side by side. Again, Allen took the lead as they carefully

advanced forward. The cavern had decent visibility, and considering its vastness, their destination wasn't too far away. Even moving with great caution, it wasn't long before they arrived.

"So there *is* a path leading farther down," said Allen.

"It's the same width as this one, and the slope is pretty gentle," said Anriette. "Doesn't look too dangerous."

"My eyes have gotten used to the dark at this point," said Akira. "It's not too hard to see. I guess we just keep going?"

Allen didn't respond. He looked over their surroundings. They hadn't found anything on the side of the cavern they had traced as they'd followed the path, but they couldn't be sure that there wasn't anything on the other side. He hated to be a stickler, but he knew they ought to exhaustively explore the place before they headed downward. If there was nothing to be found, it would at least provide a welcome opportunity for a break. And if they ran into someone, they were still close enough to the tunnel to make a hasty exit. Considering they had no idea what was up ahead, it didn't seem like a bad idea.

Despite needing the rest the most of any of them, Mylène seemed confused. "I don't think we need to take a break."

"If you say so, I won't insist on it," said Allen, "but don't push yourself too hard, all right?"

"I won't," said Mylène. "I wouldn't want to slow us all down at the wrong moment."

"So long as you realize that," said Akira. "Should we still explore the other side, then?"

"I don't think it's necessary, personally," said Anriette. "It might be dark over there, but not so dark that we can't tell there's nothing there."

Allen had to agree. He looked at Akira and Mylène. Both nodded. Finally, he looked at Chloe. Even she offered a slight nod. They would continue farther into the pit.

As Anriette had said, the gentle slope made it an easy path to walk. Before long, the slope joined another pathway. Aside from the view of the earlier pathway some five meters overhead, this one appeared much the same. At a glance, there were no signs of any

holes in the walls.

"Well, we already knew to expect that," said Allen.

"If anyone was living here, we would've sensed a presence, heard a sound, or something," said Anriette. "Of course, it's not impossible that they're suppressing our ability to sense those things."

"In that case, they'd know we were here already," said Allen. "I have to think not."

"So this is just some kind of waypoint?" asked Mylène.

"I don't think we can say that just yet." They had descended into the pit, but they still couldn't see the bottom. It was possible that something was living even farther down, although he wondered why it would be necessary to live in a place like this. One thing was certain, though: The only way to find out was to continue forward. "Let's go on."

The party carried on walking. Suddenly, Allen heard a sound. If he wasn't imagining things, it had to have come from farther down the pit. He peered down into its depths.

Faraway Noises

No matter how much he squinted, Allen couldn't make out anything up ahead. He did have an ability that would help with that, but it was a double-edged sword, since there was a chance that anyone present might notice him if he used it. At that moment, they couldn't afford any unnecessary risks.

Once again, a noise came out of the pit. It wasn't his imagination; Anriette reacted too. He looked at her, and she nodded.

"I thought I heard a noise. Something being cracked."

"And something like a scream," said Akira.

They kept their words brief. If they could hear whatever was down in the pit, there was a chance that it could hear them too.

Allen nodded at them. Then came a third sound. Once again, it was difficult to identify, but it sounded like something being smashed. He had a feeling that if the ground under their feet were smashed, it would make a similar sound.

Judging by the echoes, the source of the sound had to be at least a hundred meters down. That had to be where the bottom of the pit lay. He could venture a guess as to what was happening down there, but if he tried to get down there to confirm, he'd likely be too late. Still, he had to confirm *somehow.*

His hesitation was brief. He looked at Anriette. "I'll only use it for a moment."

"I'll back you up," she replied.

That exchange was enough. Akira and Mylène shot him quizzical glances, but he didn't have time to explain. He squinted hard at the deepest parts of the pit.

Eyes of Akasha: Clairvoyance.

For a moment, he saw two things in his field of vision: a brown-skinned girl and an eagle-like monster about three meters tall. He quickly closed his eyes and exhaled.

"There's an Amazon being beaten by a monster down there."

Chloe gasped and stared at Allen with a vigor that was all the more striking given her earlier demeanor.

"I dunno what's going on, exactly," he continued, "but I'm sure it's just what you think."

"I'm sure they're not playing around," said Akira.

To Allen's mind, there were two possibilities. Either the demons had set the monster on the Amazon for some reason, or the monster had caught her as she tried to escape. Either way, the Amazon's life was in danger.

"Can we get there in time?" said Mylène.

"Not the way we've been moving," said Allen. "Even if we run, we might be too late."

Two hundred meters could be traversed in a matter of seconds directly, but they would have to make countless loops of the great hole to reach the bottom. Even if he threw caution to the wind and ran at top speed, there was little chance he'd make it in time.

In other words, the direct route was the only way to go. Allen looked around and shrugged. "You guys handle things up here."

"Huh?" said Chloe, her bewilderment finally encouraging her to speak up.

The others simply nodded in understanding, which only confused Chloe further. He didn't have time to explain. He'd leave that to the others. He'd come here on a rescue mission, and after what he'd glimpsed, he wouldn't be able to sleep at night if he ignored it. If that caused future problems, he'd just have to deal with them later. He was sure he'd find some way of dealing with whatever that *thing* down there was.

Steeling himself, Allen kicked off the ground and leaped into the darkness.

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Isabel snorted as she was pelted by rubble from the cracked ground. A hole now lay where the ground had once been before her. Evidently, the attack she had just dodged had been a powerful one,

perhaps even powerful enough to kill her if it had landed. This should have caused her no great distress. As an Amazon, death at the hands of a worthy foe, such as a monster capable of killing her with a single blow, was to be welcomed. But she couldn't help other feelings welling up inside her.

She raised her hand to her neck. The collar was still there. Even with all her might, she couldn't make it bend an inch. It was not physically painful, but being rendered unable to use her Gift caused her immense frustration. She wasn't even capable of offering a good fight to her powerful opponent. What could be more vexing for an Amazon?

"Damn it. I don't know why you did this to me, but at least let me fight freely!" she roared, clenching her fists as she dodged the monster's swooping front legs.

Even without her Gift, she was still a capable fighter. She beat against the monster's torso with her fists, showing that she was prepared to fight with everything she had. The impact produced a dull thud, the shock waves reverberating through her arms.

"Damn it! It's hopeless!"

The impact had barely registered for the monster. She quickly retreated and lost her focus for a brief moment.

"Guh?!"

It was only when she felt herself slam back-first against the ground that she realized she'd been sent flying. She didn't understand. She'd been paying close attention to the monster's movements, and she'd dashed out of range of both its front and hind legs. She turned her head in the direction she assumed the monster to be...and smiled.

"Ha... Ha ha... So *that's* what you hit me with."

The monster looked different. It had spread its wings, tripling its total reach. Considering its birdlike appearance, such a possibility seemed obvious, but Isabel hadn't considered it at all, allowing it to catch her off guard.

"Serves me right."

Had she assumed the monster would take it easy on her, knowing that she couldn't unleash her full power? No. It was just that she'd

hesitated and her foe hadn't. At any rate, the blow had been a devastating one. Pain coursed through her body, preventing her from moving. If she'd had access to her Gift, she could've forced herself to move regardless, but that was no use now.

"Damn it... This sucks."

It had always been her dream—the dream of every Amazon—to die in battle. But to die in vain like this seemed more like a nightmare. She wanted to scream at the monster to at least remove the collar before it killed her, but she knew it would do no good. The demons would never listen.

Was this really how she was going to meet her end? She'd thought the demons would simply kill her when they attacked her village. Then, for some reason, they'd taken her as a slave and set her to work digging holes for them. And now she was about to die like this? She couldn't stand the thought.

She didn't even understand why she had to fight this monster. They'd told her it was to make an example out of her, but for what? All of them had worked hard, even if it was against their will. Now she realized this was hardly the first time that the demons had behaved in inscrutable ways...but that realization wouldn't change her imminent fate.

Nevertheless, she stared down the monster obstinately. Her pride as an Amazon wouldn't allow her to avert her eyes from death. The creature slowly raised its wings. It seemed too far away for its wings to reach her, but perhaps it intended to close the distance first. She couldn't help but admire its lack of hesitation. She only regretted that she hadn't been able to fight it with her full power. Though she knew it was almost impossible, she prayed for more satisfying deaths for the rest of her people.

And then it happened.

The moment before the monster brought its wings down, its body was cleaved in two. A dumbfounded gasp was the only response she could manage as something came falling out of the sky and landed on the ground in front of her.



The Amazon Chief

Allen exhaled as he landed on the floor of the pit. He'd been just in time. Even knowing as little as he did about the situation, he had sensed that the monster's next attack would have taken the girl's life and had opted to attack from above. As a result, he hadn't been able to explain himself beforehand.

The girl now stared at him cautiously. He had healed her wounds but wasn't sure what to do next. It would only make his job more difficult if things turned sour between them. The best course of action would be for Chloe and Mylène to come and explain things to her.

Before he had the chance to act, the girl spoke. "You must be pretty strong to take out that monster with one attack."

Now Allen understood. It wasn't just caution the girl had been showing. She'd been sizing him up.

"There's a lot I wanna ask you," she continued, "but it's not that important. When there's a more powerful foe standing before you, there's only one thing you can do, right?"

"I dunno if I agree with that," said Allen. He recalled, despite Mylène being an exception and Chloe being unable to show her real nature in her present state, that the Amazons were a race of berserkers.

The girl's eyes flickered with curiosity and excitement as her warrior's instincts coursed through her veins. It would be difficult to talk her out of it. "Let's rumble," she said.

"How about we don't just yet?" Allen replied. "Ugh, I wish I'd asked Mylène and Chloe how to stop you when you get like this."

The bloodlust vanished from her eyes, replaced with suspicion. "Mylène? Chloe? How do you know those names?"

Allen heaved a sigh of relief. He'd narrowly avoided a fight that would have been pointless at the best of times, but that here, in this

moment, would surely have resulted in negative consequences.

"Hmm, I guess I might as well tell you," he mused. "But could you keep your voice down? And if you could hold on a little for your explanation, you'd really be helping me out. It'll be much simpler if you hear it from their own mouths."

"What? Come to think of it, I haven't seen Chloe in a long time. And I have questions about Mylène, but I think I get the picture." She nodded.

Allen believed her. Somehow, it seemed that what little he'd said had been enough for her to understand, in a broad sense, what was happening. She was even trying to keep her voice down. Clearly she wasn't your typical berserker.

"But I'll have to wait a while for a full explanation, won't I?" she asked.

"Probably. They can't just hurry down here. They've gotta be careful."

"Then why don't we spar until then? Of course, if you want to fight for real, that's fine by me."

"I'd really rather not."

Perhaps she *was* a typical berserker after all. He looked at the girl, who was unable to hide her excitement, and sighed. He hoped the others would show up while he could still keep her in check.

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Allen sighed with relief as the others finally arrived. He had been unable to contain the girl any longer. He hardly had time to catch his breath before he noticed the shock on the other Amazons' faces.

"Chief?!" said Mylène.

"It really is you, Chief Isabel!" said Chloe.

"'Chief' is nothing more than a title," said Isabel. "It only meant that I was the strongest person in our village. Nothing more."

"How'd the strongest person in the village end up stuck down here being attacked by a monster?" asked Anriette.

"That's what *I'd* like to know," said Isabel. "But if you've already met Chloe, you should know what happened, right?"

"We had to fill in some blanks, but yeah," said Allen. "They moved you here from that lair in the desert, right?"

"What?" said Isabel. "You make it sound like you were there. Anyway, that's right. They kept all of us together somewhere else, but for some reason, today they said for one of us to leave."

"Just one?" said Mylène. "So they didn't pick you since you're the chief?"

"No," said Isabel. "But when they said only one, I had to stand up. I didn't get the impression they were setting one of us free."

"Did they say why?"

"To set an example."

"A-An example?"

"Yup. Only they didn't say a word about *why*."

"I see," said Allen.

Isabel had no idea why she'd been attacked by the monster. From her perspective, it seemed like an utterly senseless act. "I don't remember disobeying them, but it isn't rare for demons to behave in incomprehensible ways."

"So there *are* demons here?" Allen asked.

"I just saw one not long ago," she confirmed.

"Seems like we're in the right place," said Anriette.

"And we know where the Amazons are too," Mylène added.

"Right," said Akira. "She says she was with all of them not long ago."

"Huh? I guessed that you came to rescue us," said Isabel, "but you're not really planning on fighting the demons, are you?"

"If you ask me, that's the main reason we're here," said Akira.

"Whoa," said Isabel. "Now *that* sounds fun!"

From the grin on her face, Allen could tell she really meant it. It seemed it sounded even more fun than the prospect of fighting him had been. If they stuck together, he imagined she actually would end up joining the fight, not only as a distraction from her troubles but simply because the idea of fighting a group of demons sounded like great entertainment.

"I came up short against them last time," Isabel continued, "but *this* time I'm gonna give 'em what for!"

“Are you sure about that, Isabel?” said Chloe. “You’ve been imprisoned all this time, and even back then...”

“Yeah, I got my ass kicked,” said Isabel. “I should be dead already, really. But so long as I’m alive, I’ve gotta challenge them again! What else can I do as an Amazon?”

“As an Amazon...” Mylène murmured.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Isabel. “I know what you’re gonna say. Trust me, I’m not stupid enough to fight them in this state. I’ve gotta get rid of this thing and fight them for real.”

“Ah, does that collar suppress your Gift?” said Anriette. She glanced in Allen’s direction. “She doesn’t stand a chance in that state.”

Allen shrugged. He knew what she was getting at: Surely there was some way he could break the collar. He knew he probably could, but doing so would ensure that Isabel would try to fight the demons. He didn’t intend to allow that; he’d come here to rescue the Amazons, not get them killed. He would prefer to leave the collar on until after they were out of the lair.

“Well, now you know what happened to me,” said Isabel. “What about you? I was stunned when you said Mylène and Chloe were with you.”

“We don’t have time to explain fully right now,” said Allen, “but I guess I can give you a quick overview. Can’t blame you for being curious, after all.”

He remained cautious of his surroundings, but he couldn’t sense anything in the vicinity, and if the others had encountered anything on their way, they would have told him. They had time to talk for a little.

He began to explain how they had met Mylène.

Beyond the Gloom

At the bottom of the pit, the tunnels continued. Isabel claimed it was by following this tunnel that she had, by complete accident, ended up where the party had found her. She'd had no intention of running from the monster, but in order to determine how it moved, she had continually evaded its attacks. In the narrow space, this meant retreating over and over again until she'd found herself in the pit, much to her displeasure.

As soon as they entered the tunnels, it became clear that Isabel was telling the truth. Even with the monster now split in two, Allen could roughly guess its usual size. The tunnel was just barely large enough to contain it. Retreating would indeed have been the only way to dodge its attacks, traces of which were carved into the tunnel floor.

Mylène observed these traces of the battle, sighing as Isabel insisted that if only she'd been able to use her Gift, she would have beaten the monster to a pulp on the spot. Mylène knew it was no false bravado. With how everything had worked out, she was glad that Isabel hadn't been able to use her Gift after all. Mylène respected the chief, but she could be a real pain.

Besides, Mylène was a most un-Amazon-like Amazon. She didn't excel at fighting, nor did she care for it. She didn't shy away from combat when necessary, but unlike other Amazons, she didn't seek it out when it wasn't. She knew this made her a strange fit, but that wasn't why she felt the way she did about Isabel. She knew it because she'd seen Chloe also quietly roll her eyes at Isabel's behavior countless times. For whatever reason, Isabel had a love of fighting that seemed excessive even to other Amazons.

She thought about Chloe. As soon as the party had finished explaining how they had ended up there, Chloe had returned to her dejected state and fallen silent. She seemed to be deep in thought,

but Mylène had no clue what she could be thinking. Having found Isabel and learned that the other Amazons were indeed imprisoned here, she knew they should be able to rescue them. There should have been nothing for Isabel to be so troubled by. If there was something that concerned her, Mylène wished she would just share it with the others.

"So, turning anyone you're touching invisible?" said Isabel. "That's an incredible ability. I see we made the right choice."

For a moment, Mylène wasn't sure who Isabel was addressing. Isabel looked between both her and Chloe as she spoke. She couldn't believe that Isabel, the strongest Amazon in the village, respected by all and admired by the children, would say such a thing to her. Mylène was her complete opposite—the weakest Amazon in the village. She had never imagined the chief would have any praise for her.

"What's that?" said Allen. "You make it sound like you had high expectations for her for a long time."

"Of course," said Isabel. "I have high expectations for all of the villagers, but even among them, Mylène always stood out. After all, she was the weakest of all of them."

"You had high expectations for the weakest of the villagers?" said Anriette.

"That's right," said Isabel. "Not only that, but her personality wasn't suited to being an Amazon, and the Gift she received was totally different from anyone else's. And yet she remained with us. I could only have high expectations for her."

The party had been advancing through the tunnel single file. Isabel stood between Chloe and Anriette, a head taller than both of them. Mylène wasn't sure how to respond to the unexpected words that seemed to come from directly overhead. She could only continue walking silently.

"I see, so you respected her determination," said Allen. "But what do you mean, 'made the right choice'?"

"We never really understood the nature of her Gift," said Isabel. "We Amazons aren't too bright."

"Really?" said Allen. "Mylène told us you're all pretty smart."

"I guess the way I put it was a little misleading," said Isabel. "It's more that we aren't too interested in applying our brains to anything other than battle."

"Ah, so you're just fiends for fighting," said Anriette.

"Something like that. But even we had a hunch about Mylène. It didn't seem like she was some kind of genius to make up for her lack of strength, so we presumed she must have *some* kind of special skill instead. Something that perhaps hadn't bloomed just yet but would, in time, become an incredible power. That's why she was the one we hid away when the demons attacked our village."

"Hid away?" said Allen. "But Mylène was captured by somebody else, right?"

"We know how we're perceived by others," said Isabel. "If we fought valiantly, who would ever expect that we had hidden someone away? Yes, she was captured in the end, but she still gained this incredible power and came to rescue us all. We were right on the money, weren't we?"

Mylène could only feel like Isabel was overestimating her, but it didn't feel half bad. She'd always believed the others had told her to hide because she was too weak to be of any use. If she'd known, she might have been in an entirely different place right now, though she couldn't say with any confidence that it would be for the better. Perhaps she wouldn't have felt so hopeless when she was captured by that demon...but it was her despair and indifference that had allowed her to meet Allen and the others. And if not for them, where would she be now? She might even be dead, and then she would never have been able to save her people...although she suspected that Allen and friends would have found a way to rescue them regardless.

What mattered was that she could be involved in saving her people—the same people who had saved her. That they had believed in her all along didn't change that fact. It only made it more important that this time, it was her turn to help them.

Of course, one of those people was Chloe. Mylène still had no idea what Chloe could be so unsettled by. Even as the group conversed, she couldn't even begin to broach the subject. For now,

knowing she was troubled by something was enough. Ever since Chloe had come asking for help, Mylène had been strengthening her resolve, hardening her determination, praying that she would be strong enough to help her.

The first step was rescuing the other captured Amazons. Mylène fixed her eyes on the farthest depths of the seemingly endless tunnel.

A Familiar Scene

The party was met with a familiar scene as they left the tunnel. Unlike the natural system of caves they had explored to that point, what they saw now was clearly the work of intelligent beings. It looked just like the lair they'd encountered in the desert.

"This better be the real one this time," said Allen.

"My people are here," said Isabel. "And there was at least one demon here recently."

Allen looked around. If the inside also resembled the lair in the desert, there would be more than enough room to house a group of demons, and they'd only need a supply of food and water. It sounded like the Amazons were all being kept in one area, which avoided further complications.

"How many demons have you seen here, Isabel?" asked Anriette.

"Just the one I mentioned. I doubt the other Amazons have seen any more. We were always kept together."

"Does that go for when you were building the lair in the desert too?" asked Allen.

"No. There were four there, to my knowledge," said Isabel. "I dunno if they're here, but even if they are, there shouldn't be any more than that."

"Why not?" said Mylène.

"Those were the four who attacked our village," said Isabel. "I suppose there's a chance there were more that we never saw, but what would they achieve by hiding from us?"

"Good point," said Allen.

Demons were known to be vigilant sorts, but there would be no need for that level of vigilance around people they had enslaved. Besides, the presence of four demons was enough to know that Allen's party had to take the utmost care. They couldn't exactly be any more careful, even if there did turn out to be more.

“So, you said the demons enslaved you,” said Allen. “But didn’t they bind you magically in any way? Usually slaves are prevented from turning against their masters.”

“I don’t remember them doing anything like that, so I suppose not,” said Isabel.

“How can we be sure?” said Anriette.

“Chloe wouldn’t have been able to escape if they had,” said Isabel. “Plus, she’s told you all sorts of things, right? She wouldn’t have been able to do that either.”

“Makes sense,” said Mylène.

Everyone looked at Chloe, who was so deep in thought that she seemed not to notice their gazes.

“Forget the demons for a moment,” said Allen. “They can wait until after we’ve confirmed that the other Amazons are safe.”

“True,” said Isabel. “We don’t know if they’ve been messing with others like they did me.”

“Will they have been okay without you?” said Mylène.

“Come on, they’re not that soft,” said Isabel. “I told them I was leaving things to them. They’ll have handled themselves just fine. If they haven’t, they’re gonna get a lecture from me.”

The group headed farther into the lair. It felt much like when they’d first entered the lair in the desert, except they all felt much more on edge this time. The chances of encountering a demon seemed much higher. To Allen, it made little difference, but he couldn’t help being influenced by the feelings of the others, instinctively slowing his pace. Suddenly, he paused.

Something was off. If this really was the demons’ lair, then why could he sense no one there? Why hadn’t he heard a single noise?

“Hmm, is the lair made out of some kind of special material?” he wondered aloud.

“I think it might be,” said Isabel. “I could never sense the demon before it showed up. I couldn’t sense its presence even when it was standing right in front of us. But in the desert, I remember noticing that I could. So yeah, that would explain it.”

“Does that mean there’s no point in us being so cautious?” said Anriette.

"Surely it means the opposite?" Allen replied.

"Yeah. There could be a demon around the next corner and we'd never know it," said Akira.

"But doesn't the same go for them?" asked Mylène.

"I'm sure they have some method of knowing that we're here," said Allen.

That method probably wasn't in use at that moment, though. It would have to be some kind of ability to see through solid surfaces, and Allen knew he should be able to sense such an ability in use. Of course, it would make no sense for the demons to keep using such an ability continuously. But on the other hand, knowing they'd used it wouldn't give Allen a way of stopping it. Regardless, all they knew for the moment was that they weren't currently being watched. That meant they had to move as quickly as possible. If the demons *did* notice their presence, there would be nothing they could do about it.

"So hurry, but be careful?" said Anriette. "These things are never easy, are they?"

"That's how it goes, sneaking into an enemy's hideout," said Allen.

"You folks don't get too nervous, do you?" said Isabel. "It's almost like you're enjoying this."

"I guess we are," said Mylène.

"Hey, to each their own, right?" said Allen. "Anyway, do we keep going straight here?"

"Yeah," said Isabel. "Then turn right at the end. There are stairs leading down. Then straight again until we reach our destination."

"Somehow I knew it was over that way," said Akira.

From the near-identical layout, it seemed the lair in the desert had been based on the one they were exploring. There were some differences, such as variations in the lengths of the hallways, but the number of rooms and their locations were almost exactly the same. As a result, the party was familiar with the place to which Isabel was directing them.

"Well, if the layout's the same as the other one, that's the only place that could contain a few dozen people," said Allen.

"There were hidden rooms in the other lair," said Anriette. "They

could use those, couldn't they?"

"Chloe said there were all sorts of things lying around. Sounds like the rooms are used for different purposes."

"Hidden rooms?" said Isabel. "Ah, like the place where Chloe was hiding? I'm not sure if we've got any of those here or not. I certainly never looked for them, but I imagine someone did. We've had a lot of time on our hands, after all."

"Well, we don't have time to look, even if they are there," said Allen.

Defending the Amazons and escaping from the lair was enough to worry about without adding additional concerns. Even he couldn't use teleportation to transport dozens of people at once. Ten at a time, yes, but the demons would surely notice once he used the skill. They couldn't afford to gamble on the hope that there were no demons in the area. Simply sneaking the prisoners out quietly had a better chance of success. Allen had his doubts about the limits of Mylène's power, but he would worry about that after he'd confirmed the Amazons' safety.

The group descended the stairs. At the far end of the tunnel lay a door leading to a huge room. They still saw no sign of demons. Slowly but confidently, they approached the door, stopping in front of it.

"No presences and no sounds, as usual," said Allen.

"I hope the place isn't completely empty," said Anriette.

"Don't even say that," said Akira. "Then we'd be in real trouble."

"So this is where they're keeping everyone?" asked Mylène.

"Should be," said Isabel. "No, it definitely is. I can just imagine the stupid looks on their faces. Hopefully I don't have to give them a lecture, but I don't have much hope of that."

Her statement had the tenor of a joke, but Allen could tell she wasn't sure if the others would be behind the door or not. Still, this was no time for superficial reassurances. All they had to do was open the door and find out.

Allen reached out and pushed the door open. Behind it lay nothing but a vast, empty hall.

The Other Amazons

The place was completely empty. It was clear now that the lair in the desert had been based on this one—a huge room spread out before them. Allen exhaled in consternation as he looked over the silent room.

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't see this coming," said Isabel, seeming more like she was thinking out loud than speaking to anyone. "They only asked for one of us, but they never said I'd be the only one. They certainly didn't guarantee that if one of us volunteered, the others would be safe. I knew this was a possibility. But it still hurts to find out for sure." She cast a sorrowful gaze over the room and sighed. "Well, they're not here. This messes up our plans. But..."

"What do we do now?" she seemed about to say. But as she turned to take in more of the huge space, a great roar rang out from below.

Isabel gasped and reflexively looked down. Another roar rang out. Then another.

"There you are, you demon bastards!"

"Did you think we'd keep on taking this forever?!"

"Give Isabel back!"

With each voice, the ground split open, and several figures exploded forth, each of them a dark-skinned woman standing menacingly, fists clenched. But as they landed on the floor of the room and observed their surroundings, their threatening demeanors soon transformed into confusion, and the tranquil space was suddenly filled with noise.

"Huh? There're no demons?"

"Did we mess up? But the door *did* open."

"Did they run away already? Ugh, you're all too slow!"

"Hey, are you saying it was *our* fault?"

"Are you saying it *wasn't?*"

Isabel watched the women, dumbfounded. The others were less surprised, all of them having predicted that something like this would happen. True, there had been no sign of life in the silent room. But they had all sensed some kind of presence nearby. Judging by Isabel's reaction, she was the only one who hadn't noticed the dozens of auras hiding beneath their feet.

Allen hadn't wanted to allow her alone to be surprised, but he couldn't be sure that the Amazons weren't about to ambush them. They had been enslaved by demons, after all. Isabel had said she hadn't been placed under any kind of enchantment, but that didn't mean the same went for the others. Here in the demon lair, an abundance of caution was always warranted.

"Mylène," said Allen.

"Are you sure?"

"Doesn't look like a trap."

"Right. Back to normal, everyone."

It was safe for Mylène to stop using her ability. The Amazons clearly weren't being controlled by demons, and the party's continued invisibility was only causing them confusion. Mylène released her grip on the hem of Allen's shirt.

"Who the hell are y— Huh?!"

"What are you blabbing abou— What?!"

"Huh? Wh-Where did you come from, boss?!"

The Amazons had just seen the party blink into existence before their eyes.

Isabel looked at them in shock. "I know we all have a lot to ask each other, but I owe you all a lecture first! Damn it, I've told you never to let your guard down just because you can't see your enemy!"

"Sorry, boss!" the Amazons replied.

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"What a pathetic display that was," Isabel groaned.

"Hey, at least they're all safe, right?" said Allen.

“Anyway, now what?” said Anriette.

“I guess we should split into two groups?” said Allen. “One side can double as a diversion.”

“Double?” said Mylène. “In addition to what?”

“Akira came here to beat some sense into the demons, right?” said Allen. “This seems like a fine opportunity.”

“Aha!” said Akira. “Good point. I like your thinking, Allen. I guess that means I’m on the diversion side, then.”

“The problem is how to divert their attention. I’m sure they’ll see what we’re up to if we just attack them.”

“Yeah. There’s only one way out of here.”

As far as they knew, there was only one exit, just like the lair in the desert. If the demons checked what was going on at that exit, it wouldn’t matter how much trouble the diversion was causing them. Though Allen and Akira couldn’t see themselves losing in combat to demons, the demons had the benefit of familiarity with the terrain. They couldn’t protect dozens of Amazons from demons who were determined to stop them from escaping. Ideally, the diversion would somehow draw the demons far away from the entrance.

“Um...” came a voice. It was Chloe. She hadn’t spoken a single word during her reunion with her fellow Amazons. “I think I might have an idea.”

“Yeah?” said Allen.

“Yeah. I actually knew about the room they were all hiding in back in the other lair. I wondered if there might be one here just like it.”

“Huh, that makes sense,” said one Amazon. “But what’s your point?”

“Well, did all of you look any farther inside?”

“Farther?” said another Amazon. “Was there anything else but that one room?”

“Nah,” said another. “I didn’t see anything.”

“It’s hidden, so it’s pretty hard to notice,” said Chloe. “But there’s a passageway there. That’s actually...”

She hesitated. Then, with a look of determination, she continued her story. Allen listened silently and with great interest.

The Demon’s Grin

The man listened to the faraway noises. The materials used in the lair’s construction were unique; they absorbed sound, usually preventing any noise from traveling at all. That he could hear noises meant that either the sound was so loud or its source was so powerful that it surpassed the capacity of the lair to contain it.

Judging by the sound itself, in this case, both applied. It was the sound of destruction. Still, he didn’t move. There was no need; it was just a distraction. He already knew what was going on inside the lair, and it wasn’t hard to deduce what course of action the intruders would choose.

Of course, he couldn’t stand by and do nothing. It was important that the intruders believed their diversion was effective.

World’s Enemy: Space Manipulation—Mirror of Nitocris.

The man snapped his fingers, and the empty space just beside his head shimmered like a mirror, though rather than reflecting anything, it showed an image of some other place. The man had expected to see some familiar area of the lair, but instead he saw something he had never seen before; a place where both the walls and floor had been peppered with huge holes.

“They’ve certainly done a number on that place. And unlike the other lair, this one can’t be returned to its former state.”

Due to the help they had received from others in its construction, the other lair had been imbued with such an ability. But the damage to the current lair would not be reverted over time. Still, it was no problem. They had been using the location as a prospective lair, but their work there was almost done. The intruders were almost doing them a favor by aiding in its destruction.

“The Champion. I knew it,” the man said, clicking his tongue as he saw her familiar form in the mirror. Vexing as ever, she was using her azure lighting to destroy her surroundings. He realized he would

probably have to confront her in person and contemplated whether he would rather see her face distorted by the humiliation of defeat or the despair of failure.

"It seems I will have abundant opportunities for revenge. It is clear what I must do."

The man began to leave. With another snap of his fingers, the mirror disappeared.

World's Enemy: Space Manipulation—Wings of Shantak.

He snapped his fingers again, and an entirely different location appeared all around him. A tunnel extended behind him. He was standing in the lair's entranceway—and its exit. He was sure that soon *she* would come this way.

"Take this, you bastard!"

World's Enemy: Space Manipulation—Scimitar of Barzai.

A metallic sound rang out as he repelled the azure-cloaked sword of his attacker, who was repelled backward but only slid across the floor rather than being knocked off her feet. He had expected the Champion but nevertheless let out a gasp of admiration.

"Impressive. I had intended to blow your arm off. Not only do you still have it...there's nary a scratch on you. Perhaps your sudden appearance didn't give me enough time? What was that, some power of your Amazon friend unknown to me? How interesting. I regret that it is difficult for me to sense her presence at the current moment, but she must still be nearby, yes?"

"Why the hell would I tell you?" said Akira.

"Most sensible. Very well. There will be plenty of time to find her after I have removed your limbs."

"Remove my limbs, huh?"

"You mean to imply that I cannot?"

"Yeah, but more importantly, what would be the point? Trying to get some kind of sick relief for all the trouble I've caused you?"

"I won't deny that is indeed part of it, but... Well, you will understand soon enough. Let's leave the fun for later."

"I'm afraid I never was too good at saving the best for last!"

"Is that so? What a shame that we couldn't come to an understanding."

The Champion was already moving before he had finished speaking. But there was no need to make any rash movements. He had already anticipated this. The space was not too expansive; no matter how fast she moved, there were few places to go that would be any surprise.

World's Enemy: Space Manipulation—Scimitar of Barzai.

Ten rifts in space appeared before him, each no larger than a fingernail. If the Champion didn't notice them and continued forward, each would tear a hole in her body. If she did notice them, they were too small for her to do anything about other than avoid them entirely. But such rifts in space were difficult to see at the best of times. She would never be able to avoid each of the ones in her path. Perhaps if she could see each of them... But he had been told that the Champion's visual acuity paled in comparison to her combat skills.

The only problem was the risk of a well-placed hit killing the Champion on the spot, but that was a risk he was willing to take. It would be disappointing to lose the chance to torture her, but her capture was not essential. So long as the other two were successful, there would be no problem. He had already learned the Champion's measure during their previous encounter and was confident that she could not dodge this attack.

"Hah! What do you take me for?" said the Champion as she leaped into the air, not forward but toward the wall. Kicking off its surface, she flew upward to the ceiling, then turned in the air and kicked off again. She didn't stop there; again she bounced off the wall toward the ceiling. Then, without ever having set foot on the ground, she headed in his direction.

He hadn't anticipated any of these movements. None of his rifts obstructed them. Before he knew it, the Champion stood right before him. He winced with pain as he felt his flesh cut open. Blood gushed from the wound.

"I see you still haven't shown the depths you are willing to sink to," he said. "You moved like an animal!"

"Oh, give me a break," said the Champion. "Winning is all that matters. I don't give a crap what you bastards think."

"I see. Of course."

"This is the end for you. I won't let you get away this time."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible."

The Champion gasped as she noticed what he was doing, but it was too late.

World's Enemy: Divine Protection—Resurrection.

The Champion's sword sliced through the man's translucent form and pierced the ground. She grunted with irritation. "Damn it! Not again! I'll make you pay for this!"

"*You'll* make *me* pay? I have seen what you're capable of. You cannot defeat me now."

"Sounds like you can't admit defeat to me!"

"It is simply the truth. You will understand soon enough."

The Champion's ability to suddenly appear in an entirely different location and to gauge the location of his rifts in space... He had no doubt that both were in fact the work of her collaborators. Next time he would be ready for them. Besides, though her movements had surprised him, he had always expected to lose to her here. He closed his eyes in satisfaction.

When he opened them, he was back in his previous location—his own room. Due to the close proximity, this time he had come here directly. As ever, his body was completely unharmed. If he wished, he could immediately do battle with the Champion again. But he chose not to do so. He had much more to do—that was why he'd allowed himself to be so easily defeated by the Champion to begin with. Besides, he assumed the Champion would pursue him here before long. He grinned confidently when he suddenly heard the door creak open.

He laughed as he saw someone step through the doorway. "What perfect timing."

It was Chloe, wearing a strangely blank expression. The demon's grin widened.

Betrayal

"Good work, leading them here," said the man.

Chloe flinched. It seemed she still felt burdened by guilt. It was that conscience that made her such a good tool. A more willing traitor would have provided him with no amusement. She had been the perfect choice. Though not always unfailingly obedient, she had followed his orders and carried out her duty successfully. She had been most entertaining to observe.

For that reason, he regretted that once her betrayal was revealed, she would no longer provide him with any amusement. Perhaps, at least, he would be able to leave her to those she had betrayed and savor her final reaction. He had hoped to see her writhe in pain, but there seemed to be no chance for that now. At least he would have the chance to witness her last moments.

The man spoke. "Bring them to me. Those you have betrayed."

He knew that the Champion's actions he had witnessed with the mirror had been a diversion. He assumed there was no meaning behind them at all—simply random violence. He realized now that they had anticipated that he would recognize the Champion's actions as a diversion and know that there had to be another group up to something else somewhere in the lair, presumably composed of the Amazons that had been imprisoned here. Their goal, of course, could only be to escape while his attention was diverted, meaning all he would have to do to stop them was head them off at the entrance. He himself had known that the Champion would expect as much.

Perhaps "known" was misleading. He had led the Champion to act as he wanted. Beneath the room where the Amazons were held was a hidden room of the same size. In one corner, a hidden passageway led to the outside—or so he had led them to believe.

It was all a lie, of course. The passageway led to where he now

stood. The hidden room itself had been constructed precisely for such an occasion as this. He had never expected it would actually prove to be useful, but now he was thankful that he had ordered it to be built.

The crushed hopes of their failed escape. The anger and resentment at a presumed friend's betrayal. The grief of the betrayer upon their friends' discovery of their actions. All these moments would soon be his to savor. His grin widened. Then, puzzled, he raised his eyebrows. The Amazon stood motionless, head downturned, seemingly ignoring his instructions.

"What is it? Finally feeling regret? It's too late for that. There is no other way to protect the lives of your people. You understand that, don't you?"

The slaves had been made well aware that resistance would only cause them further pain from the moment they had been brought to the lair. Perhaps the influence of the Champion and her friends had filled the Amazon with courage, but that didn't make her resistance any less futile. She was under an enchantment of control. She could not take any action that would serve to harm him. If she tried, her entire body would be racked with pain. If she continued to resist, she would die. From the moment she had agreed to follow him, she'd no longer had a will of her own. And had she not agreed then, he would have killed her. In truth, she had not made a single choice of her own since the moment she had been captured.

"Bring them to me at once. Anticipation is all well and good, but it's about time I savor your broken hopes. This small token of resistance is pointless now. You understand, don't you? Now mo— Hm?"

Averting his gaze from Chloe, he looked toward the door behind her, squinting as he noticed something for the first time. The door to the room had a special property; even when it was opened, the inside of the room could not be seen from the outside, nor could the outside be seen from the inside. The effect could be relaxed at will, but since it applied to the entire room, even Gifts could not be used to view the inside of the room from the outside.

But the trick only affected sight. He should still have been able to

sense the presence of the dozens of people who should have been waiting past the door. If he couldn't, there was only one possibility. He removed the effect from the door, allowing him to see what waited past it. As he expected, not a single Amazon stood there.

"What are you up to?" he asked, trying to control his anger.

Slowly, Chloe raised her head. He'd expected her to be wearing a look of fear or perhaps resolve. Instead, she wore a smile of pure satisfaction.

"What do you think?" she said. "I did the obvious thing."

"Obvious?! Do you want to die? To kill your friends?"

He had agreed to spare the lives of the Amazons if Chloe turned traitor. Of course, her service was not so important that it warranted offering such a bargain. He simply thought it would make things more interesting.

The agreement was incorporated into the enchantment that had been placed on Chloe. So long as Chloe followed instructions, he would be unable to harm the Amazons. If she defied him, however, he would no longer need to abide by the agreement.

"What, were you unable to bear the guilt? Decided to end it all? You'll get no objection from me. I will enjoy killing each of your people one by one, making sure that you know it is all your fault."

"Is that what you think?" she chuckled.

"What are you laughing at? Have you lost your mind?"

"I'm finally seeing clearly. I understand now how stupid what I did was. What a fool I've been."

"You certainly are a fool. Do you think your friends can't be killed? Do you think they've already escaped? I know what they've been up to while you've been here alone. After I retreated, they escaped from the lair, yes?"

There was only one route out of the lair. The Champion wasn't the only one at the exit—the Amazons must have been hiding there too. After he had left, they had made it out of the lair. By now, they must have all been gone. It was simple enough to deduce, but he had failed to anticipate it, and now the Amazons were gone. For a moment he reflected on his own lack of experience.

"But what of it? If they have escaped, I need only follow and

apprehend them again. Do you not think me capable? Your actions were not only foolish but pointless. They will only result in me killing your friends."

"Killing my friends? That's what makes me a fool?"

"What?"

"I completely misunderstood. You told me that neither you nor they could do anything, that my actions alone could save them. I really thought it was my job to protect them. But I was wrong. We're Amazons, after all. We're not the smartest bunch. Even when death is certain, we keep struggling until the very end. And if someone extends a hand to keep us alive, our only option is to bite it off!"

"I see. So you are even greater fools than I thought."

He gathered his thoughts. The Amazon appeared so determined that it was clear she would not be shaken by any cheap trick. Perhaps she really would bear witness to the total humiliation and extinguishing of her fellow Amazons without batting an eye.

This made things all the more interesting. Though inflicting further hopelessness on a victim who had already surrendered was enjoyable enough, breaking a seemingly indomitable spirit was all the more delicious.

"I see that your mind is made up. But you are weak. Very well. I shall once again show you where you stand."

"Hmph, don't you think I know already? That's why I'm the only one who stayed. I'm sure I can only buy a little time, but that should be enough for him. He'll have saved everyone by then. That's enough for me."

"I don't know who you speak of, but you will soon see that you mortals can never oppose us."

Demons had chosen to make an enemy of the world itself. Mortals could never be any match for them. He had been told that even the Champion should be no match for him, provided he was prepared for her attack, although he should still seek to keep conflict with her to a minimum, given the toll it would surely take. Still, he had to teach her a lesson. When he found a suitable opportunity, he could both break the Champion's spirit *and* end her life. Then demonkind would be rid of the one person capable of saving the

world single-handedly.

"First I'll take that loud mouth of yours. Then I'll remove your arms and legs to make a fine example of you. Then I'll force you to watch as I kill each of your friends."

"Oh, good idea," Chloe replied. "That'll take plenty of time."

She showed no sign of either fear or enthusiasm. She meant what she'd said. She really believed she would save her friends. How could she be so confident? His curiosity only deepened.

"I wonder how that expression of yours will change when you realize that your confidence is mere delusion? I cannot wait." He smiled, drawing closer to the Amazon.

Suddenly a figure appeared between him and Chloe.

"You won't have a chance to find out, I'm afraid. I promised her I'd get her home safe."

Slaying the Ringleader

"Huh?"

Allen sighed at the confused grunt he heard behind him. He had a lot to say, but for now just one thought would do. "You're in for an extra-large lecture later."

"Huh? What?"

"That's what Isabel says. There's a lot more I could say, but in short, everyone's pretty mad at you. Mostly for not saying anything."

"Oh."

It seemed she'd gotten the message. She said nothing further, but Allen could sense that she was troubled.

"So, she told everyone what I did?"

"I don't know the specifics, but they know that you deceived us all."

"So they know," she muttered in resignation.

Before Allen could respond, he heard the figure before him speak.

"Hm. So you found out before I could expose her myself. Is that why you came here? Because you discovered her betrayal?"

"Nah, I already knew."

"What? Impossible. Since when?"

"Hmm. I guess you could say since the beginning?"

"Huh?" said Chloe, dumbfounded.

"Even with Akira attacking them, there was no way you'd have been able to escape without the demons noticing. I have plenty of other reasons, but that made me doubtful from the start. I'm pretty sure Akira and Anriette must have thought the same? For Mylène, I think her faith in you overpowered her suspicion. She probably doesn't even know she was suspicious at all."

"Hm," said the man. "I suppose it isn't so hard to believe. I didn't expect that. Considering that, I suppose simply leading the Champion here as expected merits a passing grade. But there is one

thing that concerns me."

"Oh yeah?" said Allen.

"If you knew she had betrayed you, why come here?"

"Oh, that? It seemed to be true that you had the other Amazons, and she *did* ask us to save them. Why not come? I couldn't have slept at night if I'd left them to die."

"Even though she betrayed you?"

"You keep going on about betrayal. Is it really that big a deal?"

"What?" said the demon, wide-eyed.

To Allen, it seemed obvious. "Is it so surprising? Betrayal happens all the time. In fact, knowing from the start made it easy to predict how she'd act. It's almost the same as if she'd never betrayed us at all."

"What?" said Chloe. "I feel like it's pretty different."

Allen didn't feel any need for Chloe to agree with him. She hadn't directly put him in any danger, anyway. He couldn't recall her leading him anywhere. Everything he'd done had been his own choice. Coming here had been his own choice. What Chloe had thought or done hadn't presented much of a problem.

"And you have no problem with a traitor asking you to help them?"

"So long as the request is sincere, it doesn't make much difference if they're a traitor or not."

"Hmph. You almost sound like the Champion."

"No way. I could never fill her boots."

Allen felt that acutely. He was sure he knew better than anyone that he wasn't anything so important. All the more reason not to ignore a request for help.

"Hm. A most interesting person, you are," said the demon. "How unfortunate. I can only maintain an interest in one person at a time, so I will be unable to make you my victim at this time."

"That's great since I've gotta get Chloe home soon. I left the rest to Akira and the others, so I'm pretty sure it should be fine, but I'd like to meet up with them soon just the same."

"Wait!" said Chloe. "What are you doing here in the first place? I thought you'd left with everyone else."

“I don’t really know how to answer that,” said Allen. “I guess I’m here in place of your friends? To bring you home safely. And to teach the ringleader a lesson.”

With that, he narrowed his gaze.



Allen understood the situation—or at least the broad strokes. The demon had used the lives of the other Amazons to control Chloe, forcing her to lead Akira here. It had taken some guesswork, and he still didn't understand the reason, but he knew that had to be the gist of it. As a result, slaying the demon that stood before him should be enough to resolve the entire situation. That was why he had come.

"You intend to kill me?" said the demon. "Yes, that will indeed solve everything...if you can manage it."

"I get the feeling you're about to tell me it's impossible," said Allen.

"Why, of course. If you really were the Champion, or if she herself were here now, you might stand a small chance of victory. The Champion represents the greatest hopes of you mortals. They are not that dissimilar to us demons, in a way. But you have no way of killing us forever. We will always win in the end." The demon snapped his fingers. Nothing seemed to happen. "And there's no chance that *you* will defeat me, since you're going to die here."

The scene before Allen changed only slightly, but that slight change was a major problem. Rifts in space materialized all around him, completely surrounding him. The rifts, he assumed, were formed by compressing the atmosphere. Making contact with them would be seriously hazardous. To create even a single one should have required considerable effort and skill. To see the demon rapidly create so many immediately told him how powerful a being he was dealing with.

"It seems you understand the situation," said the demon. "How unfortunate. It would have been most enjoyable to toy with you until I had my fill. How unlucky I've been as of late."

"You're unlucky, that's for sure," said Allen. "If you hadn't tried that, I might've played around with you for a little longer."

"Correction. You understand what I just did, but you still don't understand the situation or where you stand, at all."

"You know, I think I do. There's a demon in front of me flailing to keep himself alive."

"I see. You want to die, is that it? Then die."

Sword of Cataclysm: Demon-Cleaving Dance.

In an instant, the rifts in space that surrounded Allen were cut to pieces. Allen sighed.

"What?!" said the demon. "I-Impossible! What did you do?!"

"Huh? I cut them, obviously."

"Cut them? Cut them?! Impossible! Not even the Champion—not even *I* could cut down so many points of compressed space so quickly!"

"Like I said, this won't take long. It's over."

Sword of Cataclysm: Sundering Slice.

Allen's blade cut the demon's body in two. That would kill most people instantly, but this was a demon. Eyes wide, he pawed at his body, unable to believe what had just happened.

"So you dealt with *me* as easily as my rifts... I find this hard to believe, but... Very well. In the end, the outcome will be the same. No matter how powerful you are...we...will..."

The demon still seemed to think he had a chance. But after a moment, his eyes grew even wider as he realized the unbelievable truth. "Impossible! I can't regenerate myself?! You... You can kill us?!"

"I mean, yeah. Is that so surprising?"

From what Anriette had told Allen, demons were ultimately still human. Even a higher-dimension being like Anriette could be killed if her head was cut off or she was cleaved in two. Of course the same actions would kill a mere human. The demon seemed to be under the impression that he couldn't die, but Allen had never met such a being.

True, when he'd cleaved the demon's body, he'd felt something else giving off a strange sensation that he'd sliced along with the demon himself. Could that have something to do with it? It was too late to wonder now, he supposed.

"So it is not only the Champion that can truly kill us?! I see... Damn you, world! For how long will you—"

With that, the demon fell dead. Allen wondered what he had been about to say, but he didn't have time to ponder it. "I don't feel as relieved as I thought I would. Anyway, let's get out of here and

meet up with the others."

"I thought you were in trouble for a moment there, but I guess it was no problem for you, huh?" said Chloe. "I tried to understand how you did that, but it just seems ridiculous."

Allen shrugged at the astonished Chloe. He couldn't offer her an explanation, but he was glad to see his actions had made her capable of an expression other than the morose one she'd worn the entire time he'd known her. He extended his hand to the Amazon, and they left together.

An Uneasy Return

Allen was relieved to finally see the familiar Frontier town again. It had taken longer than expected, but they had made it back home. He felt fatigued—not physically, but mentally.

"What a journey that was."

"Good work out there," Anriette replied. "I think you did great."

"Yeah, you really helped me out," said Akira. "I was glad I had you with me."

"Um...I'm sorry?" Mylène added.

"You've got nothing to apologize for," said Allen.

"But it was because of us that—"

"I can't deny that, but even so." He couldn't blame Mylène for that. He smiled and shrugged.

Allen's exhaustion wasn't due to any pursuit by the demons as they escaped the lair. In fact, they had escaped without any problems and soon reunited with the Amazons led by Akira in a cave a ways ahead. The journey out of the forest hadn't been without incident, but those incidents had amounted to no more than a handful of battles with monsters that everyone survived without much harm.

The problems had come after that. Allen had intended to bring Isabel and the other Amazons to the Frontier town. Since they had been brought to the forest by demons, they couldn't cross the border by official means. He had planned to explain the situation to the relevant parties, hoping they would understand. But the necessary proceedings to arrange travel for a few dozen Amazons would take time, so he thought it would be best for them to rest in the Frontier town for a while first.

The Amazons had accepted the proposal itself but disagreed on how to get to the town. Allen had intended to use teleportation, moving a handful of them at a time, to quickly get them all there.

But the Amazons had refused that option. Apparently, it was important to them in general that they travel under their own power. Of course, they could be swayed in urgent situations, but as a rule, they were opposed to using even horse-drawn carriages, let alone teleportation.

Allen had never heard Mylène voice any objection to riding in a carriage, but upon asking her, he found that she was just going with the flow. Besides, she wasn't Amazon-like to begin with. To the others, however, it was not only a concern but a priority.

There was therefore no choice but to allow them to walk to the Frontier town. The only problem was that they didn't know the way. They would need a guide, and while Mylène or Chloe could have fulfilled the role, their friends would have felt guilty leaving the job to them and then teleporting away. As a result, the entire group decided to walk back together.

If that had been all, Allen wouldn't have had to work too hard. But once their nerves had cooled and they finally felt as though they were out of danger, the Amazons, including Isabel, had started to lecture Chloe. In turn, the conversation had turned to the demon and the question of how he had been defeated. While the Amazons' village had been attacked by multiple demons, they had been utterly powerless to stop them. The Amazons loved to fight, so it was natural that they would wonder how it was possible to defeat a demon.

At some point, while Allen was busy preparing a bath, Chloe had informed the others that he had slain the demon without breaking a sweat. Allen had only overheard part of the retelling, but it had sounded like she was delivering a significantly dramatized account. He returned to the Amazons to find them with sparkling eyes, begging him to spar with them.

Allen wouldn't have objected to a single sparring session like the one he'd had with Akira in the past, but he ended up taking on each Amazon one after the other. That wasn't a big deal, although all he could think was how fortunate it was that no monsters had shown up.

And then it happened. The Amazons, unsatisfied with their

results, their fighting spirits once again inflamed as they watched their peers spar with Allen, began to demand second rounds. Allen had accepted, believing the second set would, at least, be the end of it. But then came a third, and then a fourth. In the end, he'd wound up sparring with every Amazon on every day of their journey. The impact on his body wasn't so bad, but he'd felt unable to refuse, while Isabel and the others had been having altogether too much fun. Sparring with dozens of people as part of his daily routine was more than enough to mentally exhaust him.

"I feel like I should be the one apologizing," said Chloe.

"True. If you hadn't gone running your mouth, there wouldn't have been so many people determined to challenge Allen," said Anriette.

"You think?" said Akira. "I'd say it was just a matter of time."

"Agreed," said Isabel. "I was watching him from the start, and I'd always planned to ask him to spar. There's no way the others wouldn't have been interested once they'd seen that."

"I've gotta agree with you," said Allen. "It sounds like even Akira got a few challenges."

"Nowhere near as many as you, though," Akira answered.

Allen looked toward the town. These tiring days would come to an end once they made it there, but it would still be some time before he could return to an easygoing life. He and his friends would have to help the Amazons get comfortable with living in town and inform anyone who needed to know about both them and the demons. That would take several days, if not more.

Even then, he couldn't be sure if that would mean a return to a more relaxing lifestyle. The simple fact was that it wasn't clear *who* he should report to. Given the magnitude of the incident, it would make sense to speak to the head noble of the region. Though the Frontier was ungoverned, that would technically be the Duchess of Westfeldt—Riese. But she was probably already in the royal capital. Reporting to her would have to wait until she returned. Until then, Allen was stuck wondering when he would finally be able to relax.

Furthermore, there were aspects of the incident that were still unclear to him. He knew about the relationship between the demon

and Chloe, and Chloe's accounts had helped to fill in some blanks. But why had they decided to lure Akira to the lair in the first place? According to Chloe, that had been the goal, but it was unclear what they had intended to do to Akira when she got there.

Judging by the demon's actions, he had intended to kill her, but there would have been no need to bring her to the lair if that alone was his goal. Akira had already fought the demon in the lair in the desert. It seemed unlikely that the location was so essential to killing her. They could have led her anywhere to do battle. Allen could only conclude that the demon had had some other goal.

Another concern was how neatly the entire incident seemed to have been wrapped up. Just as after the incident in the desert, he felt like there had to be something more at play. Of course, this was all just a hunch. He didn't intend to tell anyone about it or to report it. It could easily just be his imagination. He hoped it was.

Akira suddenly got to her feet. "I guess I'll get going." They had been taking a break, but she was already ready to move. She was heading in her own direction rather than returning to the Frontier town.

"You're sure you don't wanna stop in town first?" asked Allen.

"I'm good on food and water. If we'd teleported there, I would've stayed a while, but getting here has taken too long. If I wait any longer, I'll be late. I've got things to do too, ya know."

"Oh..." said Isabel. "Sorry for making you accompany us."

"Don't worry about it. I had a blast!"

"Take care, okay?" said Anriette. "I'm sure you know this already, but there are monsters surprisingly close by. And they seem to target you in particular."

"Hey, I'm used to it. Besides, it saves me having to hunt them down."

"She's serious, isn't she?" said Mylène. "Awesome."

"Right?" said Chloe. "I could never be like that. And, uh, sorry for everything. I feel like I caused you more trouble than anyone."

"I told you to forget it, didn't I?" said Akira. "Like I said, it was a blast."

"Yeah... Sorry."

It seemed like everyone's insistences had done little to assuage Chloe's sense of guilt. She stood with her head bowed in apology. Allen hated to see her like that as Akira said goodbye and decided to meddle a little.

"I think you're looking at it wrong, Chloe."

"Huh?"

"Well, it's your problem, so I'm not gonna tell you to stop worrying about it, but...however someone feels deep down, being apologized to over and over isn't gonna make them feel any better about it. Besides, if you think they helped you, isn't there something else you should be saying?"

"Ah..." It seemed he'd gotten through to her. She raised her head and offered an awkward smile. "Yeah, you're right. Thank you, Akira."

"No problem," Akira replied. "We both helped each other out. It was my pleasure." She waved. "Well, see ya."

With that, Akira left for her destination, never once looking over her shoulder. Allen watched her leave, then exchanged glances with the others. They grinned and sprang into action themselves, having independently realized it was about time to leave.

A lingering unease lurked in Allen's mind, but he distracted himself by preparing to set out and waiting for the others to be ready, then headed in the direction of the familiar town.

An Abnormality

Beatrice gazed out of the window absentmindedly as she rocked lightly with the carriage. The view from the window was a familiar one. She hadn't visited the region much recently, but it was only a day's ride from the royal capital. In fact, she'd passed through only a few days prior on the way to the capital itself. The only difference now was that she was moving in the opposite direction. But why was she bothering to observe such a familiar scene?

"I suppose it's just a little surprising," she muttered unthinkingly as she organized her thoughts.

"Hm? What was that, Beatrice?" asked Riese.

Beatrice smiled. "Oh, just talking to myself. It's just..."

"Yes?"

"I was just thinking how short our time in the capital was."

"I suppose so. We were only there to report on what happened in the empire, so I never expected to be there long. Besides, I shouldn't need to be away for too long."

Beatrice couldn't say Riese was entirely wrong. They had come to the capital to deliver a direct report on an important matter, but that matter had been concluded. She hadn't visited the empire herself, but she had heard about what had happened from both Riese and Allen. With both of them telling her they had resolved the matter and that things in the empire would settle down before long, she had no reason to doubt them.

It therefore made sense to simply deliver their report and quickly leave the capital behind. Riese was an active duchess and shouldn't be away from her domain for long. Her actions were most befitting of a duchess—at least, they would be in the case of an ordinary one. In Riese's case, her actual duties were left to others. Beatrice herself fulfilled some of them. So although there was perhaps an argument for Beatrice's speedy return to the duchy, there was no particular

reason that Riese needed to return home so quickly as well.

In fact, Beatrice had planned to remain in the capital for some time and had arranged for her duties to be performed in her absence. Since the journey had been smooth, they could have safely spent not just a few but even dozens of days in the capital. Furthermore, while Riese was now a duchess, she was also a former princess. It wasn't as though her connections to the royal family had been severed. They were still her family as much as they had ever been. To Beatrice, it seemed quite normal that she would want to stay for a while and share all the experiences she had acquired in the long months since she had last seen them.

In fact, Riese's family had asked her to stay longer, but she had offered various excuses for why she couldn't, ranging from her domain to demons to the empire. Each of these had some logic to them, and her family was forced to begrudgingly accept them. But Beatrice wasn't fooled. She spent more time with the duchess than Riese's family had and was confident that she understood her. She also knew *where* Riese had spent her time and what she'd been doing ever since taking on this role. There was only one possible conclusion.

"Whatever reasons you give, the real one is that you want to see Master Allen again, isn't it? It's been a while since you've seen each other."

"No! It's no—"

"Oh really? It wouldn't bother me if it *was* the case, but does that mean you have no problem returning to your manor rather than the Frontier? That would make the most sense if your concern is fulfilling your duties as duchess."

"No, that's... Listen, the Frontier is also part of my domain, so..."

Beatrice gave a knowing grin. "Lady Riese."

The former princess flushed with embarrassment. "You're cruel, Beatrice!"

"You're the one who can't be honest about it. Isn't it time?"

"I suppose so, but still..."

"It's already clear enough from how you act, but if you just say it out loud, I think it would be over."

"My concern is that it wouldn't be 'over' in a good way."

"Thinking like that is why you never get anywhere."

"Ugh... I know, but..."

Beatrice knew she really did understand. But it was clear that Riese's fear of ruining her friendship with Allen was preventing her from moving forward. Beatrice had no specific advice to offer her. Though she supported Riese wholeheartedly and would happily welcome Allen as the new duke, she had little experience in such matters. She had always dedicated herself to the blade and had no time for romance. Before she'd known it, she had reached an age where she would soon lose hope of ever finding love. Though she tried not to regret that fact, it left her with little of use to say in situations like this. With a minimal understanding of the finer points of courtship, the best she could do was attempt to light a fire under her liege.

Still, from her perspective, it seemed that Allen regarded Riese with affection. She had a feeling they would end up together regardless of her involvement, but she knew that it was common for a hunter's quarry to be stolen right as they allowed themselves to think it was a sure thing. She had to remain vigilant to ensure that didn't happen.

Suddenly, the carriage was rocked by an impact that interrupted her thoughts. Catching Riese as the young woman fell from her seat, she looked out of the window. The scenery outside was no longer passing by.

"Thank you, Beatrice. What was that?"

"I'd usually say a monster, but there shouldn't be such strong creatures in these parts. And if any *did* show up, the knights would be after them."

They were still in the vicinity of the capital. Any danger should have been swiftly dealt with, and Beatrice hadn't heard of any such incursions to begin with. Lesser monsters were meant to be cleaned up by those who patrolled the area. Beatrice and Riese were no longer on secret business and were therefore being escorted by three other knights. That was enough to handle even a powerful monster.

At least, that was what logic dictated, but it couldn't rid her of the feeling of foreboding that had come over her. What *had* that impact been? Why had the carriage stopped? Why couldn't she hear anything?

"Don't leave the carriage, Lady Riese. I'll go and investigate."

"Understood. Take care."

Beatrice nodded and quickly, but with the utmost caution, hopped out of the carriage.

That was the last thing she remembered.

Far from a Rest

Brings back memories was the first thing thought that occurred to Allen. It hadn't even been that long; maybe that was a testament to the feelings he had for his home. Or perhaps it was just because he'd ended up setting back out again almost as soon as he'd returned from the empire. Either way, it was a relief to see his Frontier home again.

"Still...not like I can just take it easy now," he muttered.

"We've got a lot to do, don't we?" said Anriette.

"Like reporting what happened with the demon?" said Mylène.

"Yeah," Allen agreed. "The forest is under a different jurisdiction than this place anyway, so Riese being away shouldn't be much of a problem. I think it's the Marquis of Leygraf we need to talk to? Usually we should report to the national government too, but we can leave that until after the marquis has investigated."

The marquis ought to take care of the other finer details too. The only problem was whether he would even believe their report. But although Allen had never met him in person, he had heard he was a man of upstanding character who seemed unlikely to simply disregard what they told him.

"So the real problem is the Amazons," said Anriette.

"It's not much of a problem if they can live here," Allen answered. "If they have to go somewhere else, we'll need to go through the proper procedures. And we'll have to report it either way."

"Some of them said they want to live *here*," said Mylène.

"I'm gonna have to turn them down. I do have a few rooms left, but I'd be fighting for my life every day."

"You're right about that," Anriette agreed.

"I think the people who don't live here will still challenge you," Mylène remarked.

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Allen. He'd never even wanted to

end up living with his friends. He didn't know the Amazons that well, and there was no shortage of other land and houses. They'd be better off finding their own places to live. "Do you have any idea how many of them will stay in town?"

"That depends on Isabel," said Mylène. "If she stays, most of the others will too. If she goes somewhere else, most will follow her."

"Yeah, it seems like they adore her...or respect her, or something," Anriette added.

"I guess it'll be easier to just ask Isabel her intentions, then," said Allen. "We'll have to take everything one step at a time."

It would be better to report everything at once after Riese had returned, he thought. But for the moment, she was probably still in the capital. She enjoyed a good relationship with her family, so it would likely be a while before she returned. They could afford to take their time.

"And what about you, Mylène?" asked Allen.

"What *about* me?"

"You rescued your fellow villagers, right? It seems like they want to live together somewhere. Are you sure you don't want to go with them?"

"Am I getting in your way?" she replied. Her expression was as blank as usual, but Allen could somehow tell she felt saddened by the possibility.

"No, I'm not telling you to get out. I just thought you might want to return to the people you used to live with."

"I would like to if I could," said Mylène, "but I don't think they'd welcome me with open arms."

"What are you talking about?" said Anriette. "It seemed like you were all getting along on the journey home."

"That's because they see me as belonging to a different group. I'm not a member of the tribe anymore."

Allen had seen everyone in the Frontier as one big group, but it seemed Amazons had their own views. "If you want to go back to them, I could talk to them about it," he mused.

"There's no need. Actually, that would cause more problems."

"Really? Then I won't bother." He didn't want to cause Mylène any

trouble.

"I'll go and report to Noel first," said Mylène. "I want to check on her anyway."

"Good idea. She's always grouchy when I interrupt her, but she's had plenty of time to shut herself away in the forge now. Good luck."

"I'll handle it," said Mylène with a nod. She left the house, closing the door behind her.

"Now what?" Allen muttered.

"Shouldn't we go see the Amazons?" Anriette suggested. "It's the most time-consuming task. And it's already past noon. Even if I started on the report about the demons right now, I wouldn't have time to deliver it."

"That was my first thought, but I think as long as we listen to Isabel, everything will work out okay with them. And they probably want to rest too."

"Do that lot *need* to rest? They always seem to be bursting with energy."

From what Allen had seen on the journey back, that was true. Even the Amazon children could walk all day and still be hooting and hollering when they took their baths in the evening. In fact, considering their insistence on sparring with Allen, it seemed like they had altogether too much energy.

"Yeah, it's hard to imagine all that was just them putting on a brave face," he replied. "But even so, it doesn't mean they don't get tired, right?"

"Now that you mention it, *you* get tired even when you're physically fine, don't you?"

Allen couldn't deny that, but that didn't mean he wanted a break, even now when he was mentally exhausted. The Amazons, however, had been attacked in their village, captured by demons, and forced into slavery. That had to have taken a considerable toll whether they realized it or not. They could probably use several days' rest.

Unless, perhaps, the sparring they'd done on the journey was their way of relieving stress? But no, that just had to be how they had fun. Whatever the case, Allen wanted to let them rest for as long as he could.

“Shouldn’t you take a break too, then?” asked Anriette.

“No, like I said...”

“You may be tougher than the average person, in more than one way, but you still get tired, right? Considering your habit of getting mixed up in trouble, you should get some rest while you have the chance.”

“Hmm... If you insist, I guess I have no choice.”

In the end, she did understand him better than anyone else, and she was telling him to take a break. But just as he decided to take her advice, he felt a strange sensation in his chest. Reaching into his pocket, he felt some kind of small ornament. He pulled it out and peered at it. It was a red stone hanging on a silver chain.

“Allen, is that...”

“Yeah, it’s a magical artifact for urgent communications. I have one of the two, just in case.”

The artifact’s activation meant that Riese could be in some kind of danger. He only hesitated for a brief moment, then touched the stone. Someone’s thoughts flowed into his mind. He couldn’t use the artifact to communicate with the other party, only to receive whatever information they had sent to him.

It was Beatrice who had used it. Riese had been kidnapped.

Allen clenched his fist and sighed deeply.

A Pair of Abductions

The most important thing was to keep calm. The magic artifact used for emergency communications could only transmit a few words at a time. All Allen knew was that Riese had been abducted, that it had happened in a spot about a day's carriage ride from the royal capital, and that at the moment the details of the kidnapping, including the culprit, were unclear.

Judging by the fact that Beatrice had been able to communicate with him, he could surmise that she was safe, but he didn't have enough information to infer much else. If the pair had been a day away from the capital, they must have been traveling there—it was too soon for them to have gone and left the city already.

But what did Beatrice mean that the circumstances were unclear? Considering previous incidents, security ought to have been excellent, and he couldn't imagine Beatrice leaving Riese's side for a second. She must have been somehow rendered unconscious before she even had a chance to see what was going on, and Riese had been abducted while Beatrice was incapacitated.

Or else Riese alone had vanished using some sort of teleportation—but that would be very difficult to pull off. Teleporting a person was very delicate work, and doing it without their consent was almost impossible, especially while they were in a moving carriage. Even if the carriage had stopped, it was too far-fetched to warrant consideration. There was therefore only one real possibility.

"Hmm... But even so..."

"Allen?" said Anriette. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, sorry. Just thinking things over. Hold on a sec."

"It's unusual for you to have to do that. Are you telling me that not only was Riese abducted, but there are no details about what actually happened?"

Allen wondered if Anriette was really *that* good at reading him or

if it was just written all over his face. Whatever the case, he appreciated not having to explain the situation to her. It gave him more time to think.

Who could the culprit be? What was their motive? Was their goal even to abduct Riese? It was highly likely. He knew Beatrice must have been knocked out because otherwise she would have raised the alarm the moment she realized the culprits posed a danger to Riese. That she hadn't done so meant that she hadn't even recognized the threat, and it was almost inconceivable that someone powerful enough to knock out Beatrice without revealing themselves beforehand had simply passed by them on the road by sheer coincidence.

No, this was a planned and targeted abduction. But while the fact that Riese was traveling to the capital wasn't exactly a secret, only the kingdom's highest-ranking officials should have known. It hadn't even been a year since the previous incident with the demons. Everyone ought to have been on high alert. Considering Riese's position and the information she was carrying, he couldn't imagine they would have publicly announced her arrival.

But by the same logic, it couldn't have been a kingdom official who was responsible. After the previous incident, a thorough house-cleaning had taken place within the capital, ridding it of spies and anyone with dangerous aspirations. So how, Allen wondered, had the culprit known that Riese would pass through that spot?

He soon realized it wasn't so hard to puzzle out. The fact that the culprit had knocked out Beatrice without her even knowing who was responsible left only one possibility. On top of that, he knew of only one type of being that could acquire information that should have been unobtainable.

Allen and Anriette spoke at the same time. "Must have been..."—Their eyes met.—"a demon."

They both smiled. "What a meeting of the minds," said Allen.

"Yeah," Anriette agreed. "But I'm guessing we arrived at that conclusion in different ways."

"True. But that just strengthens our conclusion, right?"

"We still don't know for sure."

"Well, we don't have enough information."

Talking to Beatrice wouldn't offer any further insight. She had already told them the circumstances were unclear. They would simply have to move forward on the assumption that a demon was responsible.

"Anyway, with that as our preliminary conclusion, I guess the next step would be to talk to Beatrice," said Allen.

"Right. What she *doesn't* know could turn out to be a clue in itself."

"Have you ever met her?"

"At the same time I met Riese. I never spoke to her, though."

"Hmm. I'm sure Riese has told her a little about you. I bet you'll get along fine."

Fortunately, they didn't need to waste time figuring out Beatrice's precise location. They could simply follow the magical artifact.

"I'd say let's go right away, but I guess we can't, can we?" asked Allen.

"We should at least wait for Mylène. Otherwise, she'll come home to find we're gone."

"I mean, *you* could wait for her."

"You're gonna leave me behind when demons are involved? *Me*, someone who knows more than anyone else about them, including the demons themselves?"

"Yeah, yeah. Does this mean you're coming with me?"

"I mean, I'm not so cold that I wouldn't lift a finger to help my roommate."

"I know you're not. I never thought you were, not even once." After all the help he'd received from Anriette, he would never think that of her.

For some reason, Anriette responded to what was supposed to be praise with a blank gaze. "You know, you really are dense."

"I'm not sure I understand why you're insulting me."

"Ugh, forget it. We don't have time for this."

Suddenly the door swung open and in burst Mylène, breathing heavily. Allen blinked at the unusual sight...and then a feeling of foreboding came over him.

"Don't tell me Noel was abducted?"

Mylène looked up, eyes wide, and gasped. It was a look that said, *How did you know?*

Allen sighed. "Noel too, huh?"

Finally, Mylène spoke. "Noel...too? You mean..."

"Riese," said Allen. "I just received an urgent message from Beatrice."

"I see..."

"You seem sure of what happened, Mylène," said Anriette. "Did you see it yourself?"

"I didn't," said Mylène. "I could be wrong, but..."

"So why do you think she was abducted?" said Allen.

"She wasn't anywhere to be found in her store. She wasn't in the forge either, but the fire was still lit, and the sword she was working on was still there."

"That is unusual..." Allen knew from their six months living together that Noel never left her forge until her work was finished and that she never left the flame on when she did leave. And Mylène, who'd spent more time in Noel's shop than anyone other than Noel herself, knew it too. Either one of those two irregularities would be strange, so both at once left no doubt that something had happened.

"I still don't understand why you jumped to such a conclusion," said Anriette.

"Even an earthquake wouldn't make Noel stop smithing before she was done," Allen insisted.

"That makes sense, but why does that mean she was abducted? Couldn't there be some other explanation?"

"I can't say for certain," Mylène chimed in. "There was no sign of a struggle and no sign that she ever left her workshop. From asking around, nobody has seen her recently."

"I can definitely see her taking advantage of us being gone and holing up in her workshop," said Allen, "but that wouldn't explain things seeming off in there. If the flame was still lit, she must have been there until very recently."

"It does sound like she was taken," said Anriette. "At the very

least, she must have disappeared very suddenly. And Riese was abducted too. It can't be a coincidence, can it?"

Allen shrugged. There was no need to ask. "Did you see this coming, Anriette?"

Anriette looked straight into his eyes. "What makes you say that?"

"Because I remember something similar happening, I guess. I wish I knew how Akira was doing."

"It would be hard to catch up with her now, but I think we'll find out while following Riese and Beatrice."

She hadn't given him a clear answer, but Allen knew she was right. He wouldn't press further. He knew enough for now. When more information was necessary, Anriette would give it to him.

"Sounds like we won't learn anything from checking out Noel's shop," he stated. "We should just head in Beatrice's direction."

"Right," Anriette agreed. "Let's hope we can learn something useful."

"I sure hope so," said Allen. "Oh, yeah. Mylène, we're going to ask Beatrice if she can give us any more information. Are you coming with us?"

"I'll come. I can't just stand around and wait."

"Got it. I guess we should talk to the Amazons first?"

"Shouldn't we at least inform the Guild that there's a demon about?" Anriette suggested.

"Maybe if you tell them, they'll handle the rest," said Mylène.

"I dunno if they're capable of all that," Allen answered. "But yeah, it sounds like we have a few things to do before we can leave."

He was worried, but he knew that rushing wouldn't help anyone.

"First things first," he repeated to himself as he quickly moved into action.

The Knight's Story

Allen knocked on the door. Moments later, a voice replied, "Come in." He opened the door and saw Beatrice sitting up in bed. He'd already known she was safe, but he couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief now that he saw her in the flesh.

"Seems like you're doing well," he said.

"About as well as it looks," said Beatrice. "Sorry we had to meet like this."

"No problem. Are you wounded?" asked Mylène.

"No, there's not a scratch on me. They said they stuck me in here just in case, although that's just an excuse, really."

"To keep you under house arrest?" asked Anriette.

"Exactly. Anyway, so...you really are here, Lady Anriette. It's been a long time. In fact, I believe this is the first time we've actually spoken."

Anriette frowned. "No need to call me 'Lady.' I'm just Anriette."

"Understood," said Beatrice. She looked at Allen. "I seem to be surrounded by people with similar attitudes."

He shrugged. "Yeah. Maybe you attract them. Even Riese wishes you'd treat her that way."

Beatrice chuckled. "That's true. But enough small talk. You want to know about Lady Riese, right?"

"Do you know something?" asked Mylène.

"I assumed they were keeping you locked up here because you *don't* know anything," said Anriette.

"You're right. Neither I nor the kingdom's top brass have any clue what happened. But maybe you lot will be able to figure it out from the same information. The higher-ups must agree, or they wouldn't have let you in here."

"I did think it was pretty easy for us to get in," said Allen. "So, the kingdom's clutching at straws, huh?"

They were standing in one of the rooms of the royal castle, which was, of course, not a place that was easy for the average person to enter. Beatrice was a former royal guard, but "former" was the operative word. Allen had known there was a reason she was being kept in the castle, especially when, upon trying to meet with her, he'd found it almost disappointingly easy.

"Perhaps, but even so, there isn't much I can tell you," said Beatrice.

"You mean that you're actually allowed to tell us?" asked Mylène.

"No, I just don't know very much."

"You did say the circumstances were unclear," said Allen. "So what exactly *do* you remember?"

"It happened this morning," Beatrice began. "As I told you, we were returning to the duchy, traveling across a plain about a day's carriage ride from the capital."

"Wait, you were already on the way back? That was fast," said Allen.

"We had our reasons. We decided not to stay in the capital."

That detail disqualified one of the reasons for Allen's conclusion, but—at least for the moment—it didn't change his overall assumptions. If Riese had already been in the capital, that increased the number of people who would have known her whereabouts, but they surely wouldn't have predicted that she would leave so quickly. Of course, he didn't know what had led to her early departure, but it probably didn't matter given how unclear the circumstances were.

"What sort of reasons are we talking?" asked Anriette.

"The duchy, demons, the empire... In short, we didn't have time to hang around in the capital. We thought it best to immediately return to our domain."

"So nothing to do with what happened..."

"The truth is, Riese insisted. Nobody could have anticipated it."

"Got it," Mylène interjected. "What else?"

"Let's see," said Beatrice. "It's hard to explain exactly where it happened. Much of that area looks the same."

"And what happened?" asked Allen.

"I don't know. All I know is that the carriage suddenly stopped. I

knew something was wrong. I didn't hear the guards spring into action—I didn't hear any sound at all. I hopped out of the carriage, on my guard the whole time, then lost consciousness."

"So that's how you know something had happened, but not what," Anriette remarked.

"I fell unconscious the moment I stepped outside. Before I could even *sense* anything. In truth, all I have to tell me that Riese was abducted is circumstantial evidence. How could there be any better evidence when nobody saw her?"

Allen looked at Mylène. She'd surmised the same thing about Noel based on the evidence she'd seen. He'd already assumed the incidents were related, but they'd found a point in common sooner than expected.

Anriette looked at Mylène too. The three of them nodded in unison.

"Something I should know?" asked Beatrice.

"I'll let you finish first," said Allen. "But there has to be some connection."

"Oh? Do you have some sort of clue? All right. Anyway, when I woke up, some time had passed. I was surprised to be alive, let alone unharmed and lying right next to the carriage. But the inside of the carriage was empty."

"And the guards?" asked Mylène.

"All unharmed, but they have even less insight to offer than I do. They fell unconscious before leaving the carriage. All at the same time, I believe, since none of them noticed anything strange."

"Any chance they could be lying?" asked Allen.

"They were interrogated, of course. They're all blameless. The coachman and the horse fell unconscious too, by the way. Only the horse was hurt, and only a little. Inevitable, considering the poor thing fell asleep while drawing the carriage."

"But the shock of the collision didn't wake it up, huh?" said Allen. "Nor did the sudden stop rouse the knights."

"Sounds like the work of a Gift or something similar," said Anriette. "Why didn't it work on you and Riese? Do you have any status resistances?"

"I do," said Beatrice. "Huh, a status effect? I hadn't considered that."

"Well, there'd be no way to do it," said Anriette. "Nobody's capable of that."

Gifts that inflicted status effects on others were impossibly rare, and those who possessed them usually concealed that fact. In most cases, simply possessing a Gift wasn't enough; the wielder had to learn how to effectively use it. But Gifts that inflicted status effects could have an impact regardless of the wielder's skill, although an unskilled wielder would struggle to differentiate between friend and foe, spreading its effect haphazardly. Historical records contained accounts of status effect wielders wiping out their entire party by accident. Few were willing to partner with people who possessed such Gifts.

As a result, those who *did* possess them tended to keep it a secret. As far as Allen knew, no one capable of wielding status effects had been heard of in the past ten years. That was why Beatrice hadn't even considered the possibility.

"Hmm. Well, after that, we returned to the capital," she continued. "It was close enough for us to make it back within the day if we ran. I made my report, and they shut me up in here, officially to make sure that there's nothing wrong with me."

"Do they suspect you?" asked Mylène.

"No. The excuse is more for the sake of others. They have the guards holed up somewhere too."

"Still, I'm sure they wouldn't just set the prime witness and biggest suspect free when a former princess has been kidnapped," said Allen.

"Even as a former princess, she still has value," Anriette mused. "It's natural to suspect an inside job. And can you imagine the criticism they'd get if they didn't do anything? It's a reasonable measure."

From Beatrice's point of view, it was unreasonable, but it was far from unfair. Beatrice seemed to have accepted it, anyway—or perhaps she just blamed herself for failing to protect Riese.

"And that's all I can say," said Beatrice. "It hasn't been long

enough for me to learn anything else."

"From the sound of it, there isn't much else you *could* learn," said Allen.

"So then, what were those suggestive glances about?"

"Oh, that? We heard a similar story recently, is all," Anriette replied.

"It seems likely that Noel was abducted too," Mylène explained.

"Noel?"

They told her what had happened. Beatrice furrowed her brow and sighed, then nodded in comprehension.

"It does sound similar. And the targets are connected too. We'd actually considered the possibility of a larger issue ourselves."

"Right, it's possible that a demon is responsible," said Allen.

"One of them wielding status effects would be no surprise," Anriette added.

"Which makes it even more likely," said Mylène. "Although..." She trailed off, but the implication was clear: *That still doesn't get us anywhere.*

Allen shrugged. There was no point complaining; it wasn't Beatrice's fault, and Mylène nodded in understanding.

But what *were* they going to do now? Even if they hadn't gotten anywhere, Allen certainly wasn't about to give up. Should he talk to the knights in hopes of hearing something Beatrice hadn't already told him? Visit the scene of the crime? With so little to go on, his options were limited.

He sighed, unsure of how to proceed.

The Scene of the Crime

Allen nodded in understanding. The site of the abduction really was much like anywhere else on the plain, which stretched out in all directions with no identifying features to speak of, save the horse-drawn carriage. With such high visibility, it was possible that the guards had been less vigilant, assuming there was no chance of a surprise attack, but that was just baseless speculation. Allen couldn't see any reason this spot in particular would be chosen for an attack.

He and the others had chosen to head straight to the site to inspect it in person. They couldn't see encounters with the guards going as smoothly as with Beatrice, nor could they imagine there would be any significant discrepancies in their stories.

"I didn't want to believe that there wasn't a single clue to be found," said Allen, "but it's even more barren than I expected."

"Judging by the condition of the horse and carriage, it's very likely they were inflicted with a status effect," said Anriette. "But that doesn't tell us anything new."

"There's nothing inside the carriage either," said Mylène.

"So...now what?" Allen regretfully recalled Beatrice's expression as she'd said she would leave the rest to them. He'd hoped to discover something himself, but the circumstances refused to allow it, and now he'd stumbled at the first hurdle, while Beatrice could do nothing but sit in that room and wait for him to report back. As much as he wanted to help her, simply wanting it wouldn't make anything happen.

"Hmm... Even fewer people had any idea what happened in Noel's case," said Mylène.

"Yeah, it seems like nobody saw anything at all," said Anriette.

Before coming to the capital, the group had checked in on Noel's shop. It was exactly as Mylène had described—not a single clue to be found. They'd inquired nearby, but no one had seen anything or

even known that Noel had disappeared. The only conclusion they could draw from inspecting the scene was *when* it must have happened.

"I think they must have been abducted at the same time," said Allen.

"Agreed," said Anriette. "But we don't know if the same demon was responsible for both."

"Wouldn't it be two separate ones?" asked Mylène.

"Yeah, the capital is just too far from the Frontier," Allen agreed.

"They can use some sort of teleportation, though," said Anriette. "I don't think that's an ability of theirs. They use some kind of device. That would allow them to cover the distance."

"I think it was the same culprit," said Mylène. Allen looked at her. She slowly scanned the scene, then turned to him. "Noel wouldn't let herself be kidnapped without resisting. She must have been unconscious when it happened."

It wasn't impossible that she'd simply collapsed after being too engrossed in her work. But she had known that no one would be coming to check on her and should have been smart enough to avoid that. Of course, Allen wished that she wouldn't do such things even when she did know people were coming to check on her, but that didn't matter much now.

"That makes it very likely that the culprit is the same person," said Anriette. "Besides, two demons snatching people away at the same time by sheer coincidence is hard to believe. At the very least, I bet we'd find both of them in the same place."

Allen thought for a second. "Hey, Anriette."

"Yes?"

"Do you have any idea where they are?"

Anriette froze for a moment.

Mylène's eyes widened slightly, and she turned to face Anriette. "Really?"

"I can't say it's entirely baseless speculation," said Anriette. "But how did you know?"

"Just a feeling, I guess," said Allen. Anriette glared at him silently.

Despite their calm demeanors, both Mylène and Allen were

feeling some amount of desperation. Both were trying to avoid overthinking things and envisioning possible scenarios, but neither could totally keep their cool. By contrast, Anriette was the picture of composure. But as Allen had told her, he knew she wasn't the cold and uncaring sort. She wouldn't be able to so easily keep her cool with two of their friends missing and not a single lead to be found. She had to have some reason, unbeknownst to the other two, to believe that both of them were somewhere safe from imminent danger.

Anriette sighed. "Ugh, you two. Yes, I have *some* idea of where they are. I didn't tell you because it's somewhere we can't go without something concrete to go on."

"You mean it's dangerous?" said Mylène.

"Dangerous, yes, but not how you're thinking. Dangerous in that we'd make enemies out of most of the world if we messed it up."

Allen immediately knew the place she was speaking of. But why would they be taken *there?* And by demons, of all things? He couldn't make sense of it.

"I'll explain my reasoning," said Anriette. "But not now. Not here."

"Would it be bad if someone overheard us?" asked Mylène.

"I'd rather die than risk it."

"It doesn't matter now, anyway. It's getting late," said Allen, turning to watch the setting sun on the horizon.

He had never been to the place in question, so he couldn't use teleportation to get there. But it was too late in the day to use any other method. At best, they would have to wait for morning. There was no urgent need for Anriette to explain herself.

"Let's head back to the capital, then," he decided. "But what should we do with the horse?"

With its injuries, it was unable to run. It seemed the kingdom had prioritized interrogating Beatrice and the guards and left inspecting the scene of the crime until the next day. They would presumably recover the carriage then, but Allen wasn't so sure about the horse with its broken leg. They might leave it or just put it down on the spot. But if his group healed the horse, it would make Beatrice's account seem false. Presumably, the kingdom had used a Gift to

ensure the truth of her statements, but it would be an awkward discrepancy nonetheless.

"Couldn't we just chalk it up to one of the Saint's miracles?" Anriette suggested.

"You mean, tell them we saw that it had been healed with our own eyes?" said Mylène.

"That could cause some bother for Riese once she's home safe, but I guess it's a little late to be worrying about that," said Allen.

They nodded at each other. Riese was already renowned. Another miraculous feat or two wouldn't alter her reputation all that much. Allowing conflicting reports to cause confusion was probably the worse outcome. Allen felt conflicted, but he was in a hurry to rescue Riese and Noel. He faced the fallen horse and prepared to heal it.

An Unfamiliar Place

She opened her eyes and found an unfamiliar scene before her. Starting with the ceiling, she moved her neck to scan the entire room. There wasn't a single recognizable sight to be found. In the darkness, she couldn't tell much at all except that she was in a fairly large room. It certainly wasn't her familiar workshop.

"What is this place?" She groaned and slowly began to stand up. She wasn't in pain. She just felt a little sluggish, as if she were waking from a long night's sleep.

Why had she been asleep, though? She frowned, struggling to recall her most recent memories. She didn't remember going to bed. She couldn't have passed out either. Yes, she'd taken advantage of her friends' absence to focus on her work, but she couldn't have been pushing herself *that* hard. Besides, in that case she should've awoken back in her workshop, not in this place.

"Couldn't have this, couldn't have that," she muttered, rebuking her own thoughts. "But I can't blame myself for speculating in this situation."

Still, speculating wouldn't help her understand what was happening. Finally climbing to her feet, she took another look around and sighed.

"I guess my first move should be to figure out where I am."

There was no hope of determining what was going on all at once. She'd have to start with what she *could* learn right now. If she could figure out where she was, perhaps that would provide some insight into what was happening.

She looked at the ceiling. All she could glean was that it was high; too high to reach even when jumping. It was too dark to see anything else, she realized—and then, as if the realization helped her eyes adjust to the darkness, the details of the ceiling suddenly came into view.

"Seems like it must be a pretty fancy room," she muttered. From the ornamentation alone, she could tell it was a much nicer place than her workshop. That didn't tell her much about her situation, though. At least if she'd been thrown into some grubby basement, she'd know she'd been kidnapped by a group of thugs or something, but this one looked similar to the ceiling of an expensive inn where Riese had stayed before. What could she infer from that?

She looked down. The floor was covered in soft carpeting. This was definitely no grubby basement. That explained why her body didn't ache from sleeping on the floor.

"I should've noticed that already," she sighed in exasperation. She'd been too confused to notice. Apparently her disposition truly *was* delicate enough that suddenly awaking in an unfamiliar place filled her with confusion.

Having made that personal discovery, she looked all around. For the third time, her eyes seemed to adjust to the darkness. This time, she could see more clearly than before.

"It's still hard to see, but this has to be a pretty big room," she muttered. She couldn't make out the walls. How big could it be? And it seemed as luxurious as it was large. She felt even more confused about how she could have ended up there.

Ensuring that she couldn't find any signs of danger, she began walking, intending to find out exactly how large the room was. Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, she saw something move. Suppressing a gasp, she hurriedly stepped backward. She hadn't even considered that someone—or something—else could be in there with her. Or rather, she'd thought about it right away but immediately dismissed the thought when she'd heard no response to her waking up and beginning to move around.

What was that? she wondered as she scanned her surroundings. She had nothing on hand that she could use as a weapon in the event that she had to defend herself. But running away seemed equally unreliable. She didn't even know how large the room was, let alone if she could escape from it. Her thoughts raced as she tried to decide whether to fight or run.

"Ugh..."

Noel froze when she heard the moan. It sounded like a person—a woman. A faint, quiet voice. It sounded familiar. She was probably imagining things. But, after a moment's hesitation, she decided to move toward the voice. Holding her breath and taking the lightest of steps, she slowly drew closer. Ever so gradually, a silhouette came into view. It looked like a silver-haired human girl. Just as her face came into focus, the girl's eyes opened and their gazes met. The girl blinked several times, then began to speak casually.

"Oh? Noel? You're awake?"

Noel felt like collapsing on the spot. She'd been so scared that she could have died, and here she was, being spoken to like she was at a sleepover. She looked at the girl—at Riese—and sighed.

"Of course. Wide awake."

"I see. That's nice," said Riese. Suddenly her eyes grew wide. "Wait... Noel?! You're awake?!" she squealed, her drowsiness disappearing.

Noel smiled. It really was Riese. "I told you. Anyway, it sounds like you already knew I was here. Maybe you know where the heck *here* is?"

"Hm? Yes, I know. You mean you don't?"

"I just found myself here. Last thing I remember, I was at my forge working on a new sword. I don't even know what's going on."

"I see... So you were dragged here, were you? I suppose I was too, in a way."

Noel raised an eyebrow at Riese's choice of words. She would have used the term "kidnapped." "It sounds like you know who brought me here."

"I think so. You were already here when they brought me. I can't say for sure that the same person is responsible, but I imagine it was someone similar, at least."

"And who might that be?"

Riese cast her gaze downward slightly, as if wondering whether she should tell Noel. Moments later, she looked into Noel's eyes with an expression of resolve. "Yes, you ought to be informed now that you're here. About who brought you here and what this place is."

"Part of me thinks I'm better off not knowing, but I get the

feeling I can't keep my nose out of this at this point. All right, let's hear it."

"I believe a demon brought you here."

Noel's eyes widened. She hadn't expected that a friend was behind it, of course, but she had particularly bad memories of demons. She wondered why they had suddenly interfered with her life again but soon realized now wasn't the time for such thoughts.

"We're in the Cathedral. The headquarters of the Church."

Noel could only stare at Riese in shock.

The Demons and the Church

Allen gulped in surprise. A moment later, he sighed slowly. Anriette was right; they really couldn't risk anyone overhearing this. Looking out of the window, he saw that night had fallen over the sky. Inside an inn in the capital, Anriette had told them where Riese and Noel had been taken. It was a truly unbelievable story.

"The Cathedral? The Church's Cathedral?" said Mylène.

Even the stoic Mylène had shock written all over her face. Allen looked back at Anriette. She nodded sternly.

"That's right," said Anriette. "The Church's headquarters. It stands on independent ground, beholden to no government, its dominion inviolable. That Cathedral."

For the average person, the Church as an organization was considered to be less about revering God than about granting Gifts. After all, whatever their differences in the specifics of their beliefs, almost everyone in the world believed in God.

For that reason, the Church was not permitted to wield any power. If the organization that controlled Gifts had any other power, it could easily lead to rebellion. Rumors circulated about those who rebelled against the church having their Gifts revoked. If the Church was capable of such things already, it was clear what would happen if it ever did achieve power.

The Church joining forces with any single country had the potential to cause a similar result. It therefore maintained a presence in all the countries of the world and treated them as equals. That was the Church's policy. But like any organization, it needed a center of operations. That place was known as the Cathedral. It was located on neutral ground, free of the influence of any country and likewise unable to influence them. It existed only for the members of the Church, and only a small number of people were permitted to enter. That Riese and Noel had been taken there

was unbelievable enough, and even more unbelievable was that it was a demon or demons that had taken them there.

Demons were to the Church what oil was to water: completely incompatible. They were the enemies of mankind, and yet for all the enmity they held toward mankind as a whole, their hatred for the Church ran even deeper. For all the harm demons had done to people, they rarely destroyed buildings. But they relentlessly attacked the temples, destroying them until not even rubble remained.

Given how little was known about demons, one of the few things people knew for sure was how much they despised the Church and its temples. It was also often said that they would prioritize killing believers. The Church itself, in turn, designated demons the enemies of mankind and called for their destruction, the only exception to its usual impartiality. Allen had heard that the Church's members were regularly on the front lines of clashes with demons, marching into battle despite their lack of combat prowess, with nothing but God's blessing and their prayers for victory to protect them. It was said that these warriors reported seeing burning hatred in the eyes of their demonic foes.

That demons had taken Riese and Noel to the Cathedral seemed not only unbelievable but impossible—or so Allen would have thought if it hadn't been Anriette who had told him.

"And you're totally sure about this?" he said.

"Not at all. Like I said, we need something more concrete to go on. But there's definitely some sort of connection between demons and the Church. It's the Church that supports them."

"The Church supports demons?" said Mylène.

"Let me put it like this: The land we call the Demon Kingdom—there's a Church temple right at the center of it."

Anriette's words would have been grounds for immediate execution for heresy if any Church official overheard them, but they made sense to Allen. It explained, he realized, how demons were able to run so rampant across the land. Demons didn't plunder; they massacred. They wrought destruction but didn't take anything from people in the process. Nor did they seem to produce anything by

themselves. It was difficult to explain how they managed to survive. What better institution to prop them up than the Church, which had outposts throughout the land?

"To be precise," Anriette continued, "they provide each other with mutual support, but it's a marriage of convenience. Each side is just waiting for their chance to get the jump on the other. And I'm sure that on both sides, there are more people that truly despise the other side than know what's actually going on."

"That's kind of a relief," said Mylène.

"It would be a lot scarier if they really were friendly with each other," Allen agreed. "But how did this happen? I can see how demons would benefit from joining up with the Church, but I can't see how the Church benefits."

"If anything, it's the other way around," said Anriette.

"The Church benefits more?" said Mylène.

"Right." Anriette glanced at Allen. "There are a lot of complications involved."

Allen immediately knew what she was getting at—how she even knew about this to begin with. It had to involve the very foundations of this world. She wasn't speaking as a former Marquis but as a former Disciple. There must have been a lot she couldn't say.

Her gaze wandered as she searched for the right words. Finally, with a sigh of resignation, she spoke. "Most people see the Church as the organization that manages Gifts, but its real purpose is to worship God. Gifts are simply a useful tool. They'll gladly use them to spread the word of God's power."

"Use them how?" asked Mylène.

"Gifts are granted to mankind by God. But there's more to it. When mankind is in crisis, the chance of it being granted powerful Gifts increases. Gifts are one of the ways that mankind can adapt to and survive in this world."

"I've heard that before," said Allen. "So it's not just a believable story the Church made up, huh?"

"They have plenty of those, but this one happens to be true," said Anriette.

Allen wondered which stories she might be referring to, but he

didn’t want to derail the conversation. “Gotcha,” he replied. “So demons exist to provide mankind with a sufficient threat?”

“That’s the role the Church has given them, at least. Gifts that are useful in battle are the easiest to comprehend the value of, and it encourages people to feel gratitude toward God for granting them such abilities.”

“But we’re not in a time of crisis right now, are we?” asked Mylène.

“We’re not. But that’s precisely why they’ve taken Riese and Noel. Their powerful Gifts are proof that God loves them—or that’s what the demons would say, anyway. They’re hoping to take advantage of that love to accomplish some sort of goal. I can’t see any other reason they’d abduct them.”

“They could have killed them if they wanted,” said Mylène.

Allen realized they had still not been cautious enough, but correcting that would have to wait. He understood now how Anriette had been able to guess where Riese and Noel might be.

“We should at least try the Cathedral,” he said. “I agree, there’s a strong possibility that’s where they’re being held.”

“Bear in mind that we’ll anger the entire world if we put a toe out of line,” said Anriette.

“We won’t, then,” said Allen.

She glared at him.

“I’m serious!” He shrugged. “Do you really think I’d be nonchalant about the risk of making an enemy of everyone in the world?”

He meant it. If it turned out Riese and Noel really were in the Cathedral and causing a stir was the only way to save them...at that point, all bets would be off. But for now, he intended to behave himself.

Mylène peered at Anriette. “Who *are* you, really?”

It was clear to anyone that even a former marquis shouldn’t have access to this information.

Anriette just shrugged. “Who do you think? These days I’m just a regular person. Less than a regular person, actually. A person of no birth.”

Allen knew she was telling the truth, but to anyone else, her

words had all the hallmarks of falsehood.

Mylène slowly nodded, as if she'd just pieced something together. "Got it. So you and Allen are the same kind of *thing*."

"I don't know if I like the sound of that," Anriette protested.

"Yeah, that's a little rude," said Allen.

"That's unfortunate, but it's still true," Mylène replied.

Allen glared at her, but she ignored him. He shrugged with exasperation, and slowly, the corners of her mouth turned upward ever so slightly, causing Anriette to burst out laughing.

Allen couldn't help but smile too. He knew the pain of rejection all too well. But Anriette didn't feel rejected, and Mylène wasn't the type of person to reject her. He'd always presumed as much, but he was glad to realize it really had turned out that way.

He knew that if Anriette knew he was thinking about this, she'd tell him it was none of his business anyway. Knowing that Mylène had rumbled them both, all he could do was shake his head and smile.



The Cathedral

Even with their visit to the Cathedral set, the group couldn't inform anyone of their intentions. They told Beatrice that they were paying a visit to the place they thought Noel and Riese had been taken. From that alone, Beatrice seemed to know that something serious was afoot. She asked no further questions, only reluctantly saying that she would leave the rest to them. Assuring her that they would handle it, they left for the Cathedral.

The building would not be not easy to reach. It stood on neutral territory, and the Church insisted that it not be meddled with by other countries.

"I've always thought the tallest mountain of the world's largest mountain range was a crazy place to build the thing," said Allen.

"It's common for temples to be built in high places," said Anriette. "It means they're closer to God."

"And makes it easier for them to keep an eye on each other," said Mylène.

"That's part of it too."

The entire mountain was considered neutral territory. Any Church officials who drew close could be spotted in an instant, as could any who left. There was no better vantage point from which to monitor one's surroundings.

"I can't imagine demons are casually walking in and out of a place like that," said Allen.

"I'm sure they wouldn't dream of it," Anriette replied.

"But it's possible to sneak in and out of places unnoticed. We're proving that right now," said Mylène.

Allen chuckled with admiration as they slowly drew closer to the Cathedral. "Yeah, your skills are something else."

He couldn't believe they had made it so close with such ease. The guards at the foot of the mountain hadn't noticed a thing and were

still none the wiser now that they only had a short distance left to cover. As useful as Mylène's power was, he couldn't help but worry about how it could be put to more malicious use. Now that he thought about it, he'd already seen an example of it with various assassinations.

"Well, Mylène's power is both like and unlike a Gift," said Anriette. "I'm not sure if anyone could see through it even if they knew she was using it. But if they don't know, they don't stand a chance."

"But Allen saw through it before," said Mylène.

"Of course Allen could," said Anriette. "Don't you know what he's like by now?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Yeah, you treat me more like a miracle worker than anyone," said Allen.

The group continued to scale the mountain, and before they knew it, the Cathedral was just up ahead.

"Enough chitchat," said Allen. "How are we gonna get inside?"

"It would be nice if we could confirm if Noel and Riese are in there without going inside," said Anriette. "But I'm sure only a handful of people even know. Maybe not even a handful. Taking a look around is probably the only way to be sure."

"I could slip in there by myself, but not with you two," said Mylène.

"Even if you could, it would be risky. And sneaking in there by yourself is plenty risky too," Allen answered.

The plan was for him and Anriette to hide themselves away while Mylène snuck inside. She would then open the door from within and rejoin them, at which point all three would enter together, closing the door behind them.

The door presented a serious risk. It could be booby-trapped or not even possible to open.

"Hmm...I wonder how the demons get in," Allen mused.

"They probably just teleport inside," said Anriette. "Although, with permission, maybe they do just walk in the front door."

"Maybe there's another way in?"

"Even if there is, how would we find it?" asked Mylène.

"It would be nice if someone walked up right now and headed inside, but traffic in and out of here is probably very rare," Anriette noted.

"So we'll just have to look around for ourselves," said Allen. "We don't even know if there's a place we can hide."

The sharp incline gave way to a wide plateau as the party reached the mountain summit. A massive building, so tall it was difficult even to crane one's neck enough to see it all, stood before them. It was even more enormous than it had seemed from a distance.

"I still can't believe they built a whole building here," said Allen.

"It's a symbol of how powerful the Church is," said Anriette. "Even if it officially has no power, nobody who's seen this could really believe that."

"Must have been expensive," said Mylène.

"Yeah, it must've taken a lot of money and manpower," Allen agreed.

Even with the help of dwarves and their Gifts, there were limitations. He assumed they must have had the help of demons. After seeing the demons' lairs, he knew they had such talents at their disposal. But he couldn't afford to feel overwhelmed. Looking around, he saw no sign of other people, let alone any guards. The idea of sneaking in behind someone else seemed to be off the table.

"There's no hiding place jumping out at me. The ground here is unnaturally flat, and there're no boulders or anything. They probably leveled the top of the mountain to build this."

"If worst comes to worst, we can probably head back and look for a hiding place along the way," said Anriette. "But the real problem is that great big door."

"It has to be rigged, right?" said Mylène. "Should I try it?"

"That's too dangerous," Allen replied. "Let me take a look at it first." For now, he didn't need to know what was behind the door. He'd worry about that after he'd inspected the door itself.

Boundless Knowledge: Eyes of Akasha.

He sighed as he read the information. Worrying about what was behind the door wouldn't be necessary.

"Your face says it all, but I'll bite," said Anriette. "Something wrong?"

"I only took a quick look, but that was enough to know that opening it would be stupid. I dunno the details, but even *starting* to open it will sound the alarm. And if you still insist on it, at best, you won't get through unharmed."

"And at worst?" asked Mylène.

"At worst, you get blasted by fire hot enough to reduce a few dozen people to ash in an instant."

"Like in a military base?"

"Like in the room where they keep top secret documents."

Allen believed he could cut through the door without being harmed, but that would doubtless expose their intrusion. That kind of brute force might be warranted if they knew for sure that Riese and Noel were inside, but at the moment, it would be foolish.

"Should I take a look around for myself, then?" asked Mylène.

"I think you'd better not," said Allen. "The place is locked down tight to prevent outsiders from getting in. The door is the focal point, but the effect applies to the whole building. You wouldn't be able to get in through a hole in the wall either. I think it might even repel teleportation."

"So they couldn't have just walked in with Riese and Noel," said Anriette. "Maybe they opened the door specially for them?"

"Probably."

If, of course, they were inside at all. For the moment, what mattered was whether it was even possible for them to be in there. Having concluded that it was, they couldn't dismiss the possibility that they actually were inside. But a possibility wasn't a certainty. All they had established so far was that the Cathedral would be very difficult to enter.

Allen had no intention of giving up, but the situation seemed rather tough. Should they look for another entrance? Wait for someone who could enter to show up? Or try to think up another approach?

"Okay, now what?" He sighed as he looked up at the Cathedral's imposing exterior.

A Strategic Meeting

After taking an initial look around the Cathedral's exterior, the group decided to descend the mountain again. There was no alternate entrance to be found and no sign of another visitor showing up. Staying any longer would mean spending the entire night at the top.

Allen glanced at the others. "Everyone happy with staying in the town at the foot of the mountain?"

"Fine by me," said Anriette. "We'll just have to come back."

"It's probably safer that way," Mylène agreed.

Having visited once, Allen could use teleportation to return to the summit. But security was so tight that he couldn't be sure teleporting in its proximity wouldn't sound the alarm. As a result, they chose to go on foot even for their descent. Perhaps he could have teleported to an entirely different town, but having no real reason to do so, Allen thought it better not to take any unnecessary risks.

The town at the bottom of the hill did not fall under the Cathedral's neutral territory. It belonged to the Kingdom of Clarus. Due to its location, it resembled a Frontier town more than a normal town. It had become a gathering place for the Church's believers, most of whom would not risk the dangerous mountain ascent, let alone be able to enter the Cathedral if they made it to the top. Instead, they would gather in the town to behold the Cathedral's majesty.

Thus, despite the Kingdom of Clarus being primarily a nation of humans, the town saw people of many races and nationalities pass through. While Clarus did not exclude other races, it did not receive them warmly. But as a poor country, it could not afford to reject the influx of foreign currency. Thus the town at the mountain's foot—the town of Caelum—was a place that anyone, regardless of race or

nationality, could enter without trouble. As a result, it flourished even more than Clarus's own capital.

Allen, Anriette, and Mylène were therefore easily able to enter and find an inn in which to stay the night.

"Now what?" Allen muttered.

He'd always known they'd be able to stay here. Nothing about the remainder of the night concerned him—it was what lay ahead that was uncertain. But he was at a loss, and he was sure that if either Mylène or Anriette had any ideas, they would have mentioned them already.

Confirming this, he looked at each of them in turn, then smiled. "I was hoping maybe one of us would come up with some kinda bright idea on the way down here."

"I've been racking my brain," said Anriette, "but the Cathedral security is tighter than I expected. I suppose I should've known. It's the Church headquarters, for one thing. And the fact that there are demons in there hasn't come to light yet."

"So all we can do right now is wait for someone else to go in or out?" asked Mylène.

"Yup," said Allen. "And I don't think we can place much hope in that either."

He was sure they'd see someone if they waited for a week, but they'd have to maintain a watch the entire time, and he wasn't sure they'd be able to time everything perfectly. What if it turned out that teleportation wouldn't be deflected only when the door was open? That still wouldn't guarantee that no one would notice the fact that they teleported to the mountaintop. They couldn't afford to assume that simply being present when the door opened would mean the end of their problems.

Those problems weren't limited to teleportation either. The same thing could happen using Mylène's invisibility. That power wasn't perfect. Allen already knew *he* could see through it. They couldn't afford to place too much trust in it. Until they got inside, they couldn't know how effective it would be.

With such complex security in place, Allen couldn't be sure what would happen even if he, for all his strength, tried to open the door.

It was entirely possible that simply getting the door open would be enough, but if they didn't consider other eventualities, they could easily find themselves at a loss. Anriette thought Riese and Noel were safe for now, but for how long would that continue? And besides, that was only *if* they were inside the Cathedral.

They didn't have the time to be patient.

"If it comes to it, I guess we can use brute force," Mylène suggested.

"That has to be our very last resort," said Allen. "If we force our way inside, we'll have to flee to get out."

It would have been easy to say that there'd be no problem so long as they weren't identified, but staging a heist like that without being identified seemed pointless to even consider. If they did take that approach, they had to assume they'd be picking a fight with the entire Church. Believers around the world would be after their heads, and he could kiss any hope of a peaceful life goodbye. If that was what it took to save Riese's and Noel's lives, Allen would do it, but not until it proved absolutely necessary.

"Don't even think about it," said Anriette. "Just believing we have a last resort will make it harder to come up with something else."

"Agreed," said Mylène. "It would defeat the point of rescuing them, anyway."

"I guess so," said Allen. "Even if we managed to rescue them, turning ourselves into outlaws would be a failure."

Still...it would be much better than leaving them to die. Though he didn't say anything out loud, Allen knew he wouldn't hesitate if there truly was no other option.

Suddenly he felt someone's gaze on him. It was Anriette, giving him a piercing look. She knew what he was thinking. He could only shrug. He knew her words had been intended for him alone. Her look wanted him not to repeat his past mistakes. But he couldn't help it; he'd rather turn the entire world against him once again than abandon Riese and Noel for the sake of an easy life.

Recognizing his resolve, Anriette's expression changed. Allen averted his eyes. Nothing was set in stone yet. He'd do everything within his power to avoid such an eventuality—but if it came to it, he

wouldn’t waver.

“Seems like we’re stuck for the moment,” he said, breaking the silence. “How about some food?”

“Yeah, we could use a breather,” said Anriette. “Good ideas can come when you least expect them, after all.”

“Fine by me,” said Mylène.

I’m not trying to avoid a tough conversation. I just think a change of subject will do us good, Allen thought, though deep down he knew he was lying to himself.

He turned away from Anriette and left to find something to eat.

Food and Conversation

Allen exhaled as he sat down amid the crowd. He was surrounded by people of all races, and yet no hint of animosity existed between them. As he soaked up the congenial atmosphere, he realized why his thinking had felt so stiff earlier—he'd been getting impatient. As the aromas from the table stirred his appetite, he realized his mind had finally strayed from his eagerness to rescue Riese and Noel, and he had begun to release some of the tension that had built up in his body. He stared at the spread laid out on the table before him and sighed.

"Let's eat first," said Anriette.

"We can talk while we eat," said Mylène.

"Sure," said Allen. "We reached a standstill anyway. If we wait until we've figured something out, the food'll be stone cold by the time we get to eat."

As a result of his noble upbringing, Allen knew it wasn't too polite to talk while eating, but one look around told him that no one else seemed concerned about such etiquette. There was no point in them alone adhering to them. He brought his hands together, gesturing to the other two to begin, then brought a spoonful of soup to his mouth.

Neither the salty brew nor the vegetables that swam in it were first-class fare. These were the hardy flavors of the common people. Nevertheless, the first mouthful seemed to remind Allen's body how hungry it was, and hunger was the best sauce in the world.

He followed the soup with bread and steamed potatoes, then looked at Mylène and Riese and saw that they too were completely focused on eating despite their intention to talk as they ate. He realized they'd begun their journey up the mountain before noon, skipping lunch. The conversation didn't even begin until they'd already eaten half of the meal.

“Maybe we should ask if anyone’s noticed anything unusual?” said Mylène.

Allen blinked in confusion, then nodded in comprehension. It had taken him a moment to realize what Mylène meant and why she was asking now. “You’re right. Them having been here would change things, wouldn’t it?”

It had been ten days since the disappearances. If Riese and Noel really were inside the Cathedral, their captors would have needed a significant amount of food to feed them. It seemed unlikely the demons were completely self-sufficient; they had to be getting their food from somewhere. And even if he didn’t know exactly where, someone in the surrounding area had to have noticed some sort of change.

As the closest town to the Cathedral, this was also the best source of information about the Cathedral. If they asked around, they’d probably learn something.

“We’ll have to make sure we have our story straight to avoid arousing suspicion,” said Anriette.

“I bet questions like that are pretty normal around here,” said Mylène.

“Probably depends on how many people you go around asking,” said Allen. He scanned his surroundings. “And there’s a lot of people we might want to ask.”

The dining hall—or perhaps it was more of a tavern—took up much of the first floor of the inn. Considering the size of the inn itself, the place was packed. He assumed many were staying at other inns that didn’t have taverns attached. It seemed most of them, some merchants, had come specifically to mix with other followers of the Church whom they would have no other opportunity to meet.

Rare places like this, where people from around the world gathered, were highly valuable locations for gathering information. Allen could see many people who clearly had their own business to attend to dotting the place. Trying to gather information wouldn’t necessarily attract suspicion, but it would definitely attract attention. Doing so thoughtlessly could easily get them wrapped up in more

trouble.

"Still, I don't think it's a bad idea," he continued.

"Agreed," said Anriette. "Even if we don't find what we're looking for, at least we'll have something to work with."

"There's a lot we could stand to learn, anyway," said Mylène.

"You got that right," said Allen.

They really had been overeager, he realized. They'd expected to get results when there was still so much they didn't know about the Cathedral. He sighed as he recognized his own inexperience, but he would have to wait until later to reflect on how he could've done better.

"Maybe we should wait to actually start asking around, though?" he said.

"Yeah, we should decide exactly what we're going to ask about first," Anriette agreed.

"Probably," said Mylène. "We don't even know what's safe to ask."

It wasn't just they who were keenly aware of their surroundings. Bringing up any specifics in a place like the tavern could be dangerous. They would have to return to their room to discuss it first.

As they talked, they polished off the remaining plates. Allen sighed, his hunger satisfied. "Shall we head back to our room, then?"

"Won't things be a little delicate in here later?" said Mylène.

"For now it's still fine," said Anriette.

The place was a tavern, after all. As the evening progressed, the chances of an awkward interaction with a drunken patron increased. Allen wondered if he should come back by himself. But they could work that out after they got back to their room.

He began to rise from his seat when someone called out to him.

"Excuse me, could I have a moment?"

Allen had noticed someone looking at him, but it was a look he didn't care for—cloying and eager to get his attention. He'd avoided even glancing at her face, but evidently it had done no good. He sighed and turned to face her.

His eyes widened, so struck was he by the girl's chestnut eyes

and similarly colored hair. She had to be in her early twenties. A mole by her eye lent her an alluring quality, but that couldn't explain the chill he felt. He peered at the woman, wishing he'd simply ignored her and left.

"You want something? We're about to leave, as you can see."

"That's why I called out to you," the woman replied. "I'm just a little interested in you. No, let me be blunt. You want to know about the Cathedral, don't you? I happen to have some fascinating information about the place."

It was clear to Allen that he shouldn't let his curiosity win out over caution. No one in his group had mentioned the Cathedral once in the tavern. Of course, it wasn't that strange for anyone to bring up the Cathedral in this town, but it could easily cause problems depending on the course the conversation took. It was better not to invite trouble. What was strange was bringing up the place, out of the blue, to a group of people who had never expressed any interest in it.

But there was an even bigger problem than that. This was clearly not a person it was worth getting involved with. Allen tried to think of an excuse, however half-baked, to leave at once.

"Do the names Riese and Noel mean anything to you?" asked the woman.

Ah. No excuse would be good enough, Allen realized. He looked at the others, both of whom wore wary looks. They nodded, and he nodded in return.

He turned back to the woman with a stern glare, but she responded with a warm look and a smile, then giggled. "That's quite the look you're giving me. But there's far too many people around here. Will you come back to my room so we can get better acquainted?"

Allen didn't have time to consider his response. With his eyes fixed on the woman, never letting his guard down for a moment, he nodded.



The Proposal

The woman's room was different from the one in which Allen's group was staying. While their room was a mid-tier one, this was clearly one of the most expensive in the inn. It faced the town's main street and was located in the center of the building.

Still, it wasn't so different from the room where Riese had stayed at the Frontier inn. Allen wasn't about to be so easily impressed. Besides, he was too focused on remaining alert to pay much attention to the decor.

Now inside the room, he cut to the heart of the matter. "What do you demons want with us?"

Mylène was the most surprised. Anriette had likely noticed at the same time as Allen. She just stared at the woman. The woman herself simply raised an eyebrow, as if to say "We're doing this already?"

"A demon? Her?" said Mylène.

"There's no mistaking it," said Allen. "Right?"

"I never planned on hiding it. But I didn't expect you to bring it up so abruptly. I was hoping you'd probe me a little first."

"You don't seem too surprised," said Anriette.

"Well, I am!" said the woman. "I didn't see it going this way. After all, I'm trying my best not to let it show that I'm here on business."

Indeed, the woman's constant smile made it hard to read her true intentions. That, in addition to the fact that she'd mentioned his missing friends, was why Allen had continued to play along with her method of conducting herself.

"Business, huh?" he said. "And that's why you talked to us?"

"I can't say it didn't play a role. But it's not directly related. Although, from your perspective, I suppose it is."

"What is she talking about?" said Mylène.

"I have no idea," said Anriette. "Can you stop talking in circles

and get to the point already? If you're just going to stall, we're outta here."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That wasn't my intention at all. I suppose this is part of doing business too. All right, how can I put it in a way you might understand? It was me who took the girls you call Riese and Noel to the Cathedral."

A chill came over the room. Riese and Noel really were in the Cathedral, and that meant...

"Oh, look how *angry* you are!" said the woman. "I want to play with you already. But I'm afraid I have other business to attend to. Sorry to have gotten you all worked up like this, but you'll have to hold on for now."

The woman looked at him. Allen tried to control his anger. She was in a state of ecstasy, he realized. She was smiling, yes, but it was no ordinary smile. Anyone—even a demon—who could be so excited by a rage-filled look was clearly no good. This was a type of person he'd encountered many times in his past life—a person with more than few screws loose. She lusted for battle, and regarding her with anger would only serve to delight her further. Allen composed himself.

"Oh, you stopped!" said the woman, her ecstatic expression replaced by a look of dissatisfaction. "I wish you'd keep showing me that wonderful bloodlust, although I suppose we'll never be able to talk properly if you don't calm yourself down."

Allen sighed in exhaustion. If this whole performance had been intended to make him drop his guard, it would have been dangerously effective. But that wasn't the goal at all, which only made her more difficult to deal with.

The woman giggled again. "A little energy escapes your body every time you sigh, you know."

"Funny thing for an energy leech like you to complain about," said Anriette.

"It really does feel like that, doesn't it?" said Mylène.

"Oh, how mean!" said the woman. "I may be a demon, but I'm certainly not capable of *that.*"

Standing there and smiling like she was, she certainly didn't look

like a demon. She really was difficult to get a grip on. Allen felt more confused than he did hostile, and he sensed that Anriette felt the same way. But she *was* a demon, no doubt, and she had confessed to kidnapping Noel and Riese. He wasn't about to get friendly with her.

"Well?" he said. "You still haven't told us why you wanted to talk to us."

"My, aren't you impatient? I suppose there's no reason we need to be friendly. In fact, we're meant to be enemies. If only I could, I'd love to face you in mortal combat until we're both satisfied."

"So what's stopping you?" asked Allen.

"Oh, nothing, really. We could go at it right here, right now."

"Then why don't you? I've never known you demons to practice discretion."

"Such horrible things you say to me! Still...I don't think I've ever had one quite like you before."

Allen gave her a look that pressed her to finally get to the point. Her smile deepened. Suddenly, he looked off into space, remembering something.

"You know, I've been so fed up," said the woman.

"Over what?" said Allen.

"The way we demons do things. We're not as free as people tend to believe, you know."

"Because of what the Church has you doing?" said Anriette.

"That's right. I must admit, I'm a little surprised. I didn't expect you to know about that. But...no, I'm sure my judgment is solid."

"What are you talking about?" asked Mylène.

"First..." The woman paused. "Wait, where was I again? Ah, yes, the Church won't let us do whatever we like. Isn't that strange? Comical, even? We're demons, for God's sake! We're supposed to trample all over the world and its people, spreading our hatred far and wide! True, perhaps our current approach is more efficient, but all work and no play makes a demon a dull girl! To be honest, I'm so *bored* with it all!"

Allen didn't know exactly how the Church was setting demons to work or what it was having them do, but from what he did know

about the demons' activities and the Church's goal of increasing God's dominion over the world, he could hazard a guess: The demons were being used to cause suffering in an extremely systematic, efficient fashion. With that in mind, he could also imagine why they would be extremely reluctant to go along with the plan. Of course, understanding didn't mean he agreed with it.

"And?" said Allen.

"I had great hopes for those two," said the woman. "Riese and Noel have both foiled our demons' plans before. In repayment, I'd hoped I could force the Church to change too."

"Repayment?" said Mylène.

"I kind of thought that's why you brought them here," said Anriette.

Mylène shot her a questioning look, but Anriette shrugged. Her explanation would have to wait.

"It sounds like you're saying your hopes were misguided," said Allen.

"I expected too much of the hierophant," the woman answered. "It seems he has no intention of changing. In that sense, I suppose I did place too much hope in those two. I've begun to have misgivings about them."

"What sort of misgivings?" asked Mylène.

"Whether it was truly those two who were responsible for foiling our plans."

Now Allen understood. So, this had become a matter of debate among the demons—or among the Church. But he still had suspicions.

"I understand Riese," he began. "The kingdom made a grand proclamation about her accomplishments. But why Noel?"

"We monitor each of our initiatives. On a certain day, Riese was not even present. We naturally assumed it must have been Noel who defeated the monster," said the woman.

She must have been talking about the Fenrir attack, Allen realized. But he'd never sensed that he was being watched by another demon. Unless it was simply some Church official, perhaps watching from the window of the inn, who had reported that Riese

wasn't there, but nothing more.

"But we have begun to wonder if *both* of them have simply been bystanders to someone else foiling our plans." The woman looked straight into Allen's eyes. "In fact, in the case of the incident in the royal capital of Adastera, there can be no doubt, can there?"

There was no point denying it. Despite the gag order and the official insistence that it was all Riese's doing, there had been plenty of witnesses to the fact that wasn't true. It would hardly be shocking if a Church official was among them, and the information had spread from there.

"You're not wrong, but what makes you think it was me?" said Allen.

"It was difficult to pin down," said the woman. "It couldn't be established from just one piece of information. But recently, after combining several findings, I was able to figure it out."

"Good job," said Anriette. "But what was it all for?"

"No need to worry. I'm not trying to exact revenge on you or anything like that. I don't really regard my fellow demons as friends or comrades. But when they're killed, I still need information about who was responsible. How else would I ever be able to relax and enjoy mysel— I mean, keep myself out of danger?"

But that still didn't explain why she was talking to them, and especially not why she'd told them about Riese and Noel.

"I reached out to you because I want you to cooperate with me," said the woman.

"Cooperate?" Mylène echoed.

"Yes. When those two turned out to be disappointments, I lost my last shred of patience. I joined up with the Church because I stood to benefit. Naturally, now that things have turned to my disadvantage, I'm ready to bare my fangs."

"You want to destroy the Church?" asked Anriette.

"I don't mean to go that far. I'm just trying to get into the center of the Cathedral."

"Why?" said Mylène. "What's in there?"

"Something that the Church *really* doesn't want anyone to get their hands on. It's a secret."

“And why should that concern us?” asked Allen.

“I would’ve thought you’d understand by now. It wouldn’t exactly be any surprise if those two girls just happened to disappear amid all the chaos in the Cathedral.”

As expected, they were being told, not asked, to cooperate.

“I was able to get inside without assistance, but I can’t get to the center,” said the woman. “That’s our only goal, we demons. It shouldn’t bring us into conflict with you. You should be able to work with us.”

This was a lot to think about. But if what the woman said was true, it sounded like a convenient arrangement. Allen was sure she wasn’t telling him the whole story, but what she’d told him was enough to see the benefit. He glanced at Anriette and Mylène. After some hesitation, both nodded. He turned back to the woman and saw her smiling as if she already knew what his response would be.

“You can’t get into the Cathedral with brute force alone,” said Allen.

“If you could, we could do it ourselves,” said Anriette.

“You won’t have to resort to that with me. I can get inside whenever I want.”

“How?” asked Allen. “Only a handful of people should be able to get in.”

“I’m one of those handful. How else would I have gotten those two in there?”

Her explanation was suspicious, but at that moment, they didn’t have any other option. Gathering information could prove effective, but it would be time-consuming. Furthermore, if they left the woman alone, it seemed she was going to head into the Cathedral by herself, and they’d have no way of knowing what would happen next—including Riese and Noel’s fate.

Reluctantly, Allen agreed to help her.

A Different Night

Riese sighed. It brought her some measure of comfort that the night sky looked the same as always, even when viewed from the window of this unfamiliar room.

"I still don't get it," said a voice.

She turned and saw Noel lying there, then sniffed with exasperation at her slovenly demeanor. "Do you have to laze around like that?"

"It's not like there's any chairs around here."

"I suppose you're right."

The room didn't even have a light. The moon and stars provided the only illumination, and that wasn't enough to dispel the darkness. Only a bare minimum of ornamentation was present, as if the room had been almost completely stripped.

"I wish they'd at least given us something to pass the time," said Noel. "It's not like I'm asking for a lot. A furnace, an anvil, and a hammer would be enough for me. Well, and a little iron, of course."

"That sounds like more than 'a lot' to me," said Riese. She smiled, noticing that the unusual circumstances hadn't changed Noel's nature. "You're still the same old Noel, I see."

"What's that supposed to mean? You're the same old Riese."

"Do you think so?"

"Yup. *You're* the one who hasn't let this change you. You barely even seem agitated."

"That's because I got it out of my system before you showed up."

Everything Riese's demon abductor had told her had exhausted her ability to feel surprise or agitation. Later, Noel's surprise had allowed her to remain calm.

"Really?" said Noel. "You still seem awfully calm. I know it's been ten days, but still."

"Goodness, it's already been that long?"

Noel had been brought here shortly after Riese. The days were slow. They had nothing to do and no interaction with the outside world, save for their meals being slid through a small opening at the bottom of the door. On the first day, they had received bowls and forks, but Noel had attempted to use her fork to smash the window, then to break down the wall—to no avail, since there seemed to be some kind of magical barrier in place—and since then they had only been provided with food they could eat with their hands.

Given Noel's actions, Riese could understand why their captor hadn't deigned to provide them with anything to pass the time. The only reason Riese hadn't attempted the same thing herself was because she knew she didn't have the physical strength. Besides, there had been nothing in the room to attempt it with. They'd also received blankets on the first day, but nothing since. Riese wondered if better behavior might have resulted in better treatment. On the other hand, they were prisoners and had been from the start. Perhaps this kind of treatment was to be expected.

"And now we've spent another day with nothing to do," said Noel. "Couldn't she at least explain things to me too?"

"I wouldn't say she *explained* anything to me," said Riese. "She *told* me things, but I think she was just babbling about whatever was on her mind."

"But she told you why she brought you here, right? That's a pretty big difference in the treatment we got."

"I suppose that's true," Riese agreed. What she'd heard didn't help much, though. "Payback for the General and the Archbishop, she said. But I still don't know what she intends to do with me."

"I guess not. Still, don't you think being shut up in here without knowing *anything* would've driven you crazy? Not to mention the effect on your nerves."

"It's hard to take that seriously when you're lying around like that."

"Right back at you. Like I said, you don't seem worried at all."

"Well, appearances can be deceiving." Looking at the night sky had provided some relief, but until then, Riese had felt very uneasy.

"Really? I mean, I'm sure you have *some* nerves, but it seems like

you think this is all going to work out in the end."

"I... That's... I can't deny that."

It was what Riese thought to herself whenever she felt uneasy. That no matter how nervous she was, things would work out in the end—even here, in this faraway, unfamiliar place, so long as they were under the same familiar sky.

"Allen does seem to have a way of showing up whenever we find ourselves in danger, doesn't he?" said Noel.

Riese began to protest. "That's not what I—"

"Don't even *try* telling me that's not what you meant."

"I-I..." Riese stuttered, realizing she was turning red. "And what if it is?"



"Doesn't matter to me," said Noel. "But you always have something to say about me when *you're* the one who seems about to ask him to live with you. Then again, I guess you already *do* live together."

"What are you talking about?!"

"Oh, I don't know." Noel shrugged, still lying on the floor. She rolled onto her side.

"Ugh!" said Riese, and she turned to stare out of the window.

For the moment, time passed in a procession of eventless days. But they'd been abducted. There had to be some reason they were there. Payback for the General and the Archbishop, the demon woman had said, but what did that mean? All Riese could imagine was that there was something that connected not just the Archbishop but also the General to the Church. She hadn't heard anything to that effect, but she could see no reason for the demon to lie. She'd never heard about the Church having any kind of association with demons, though. It would be no surprise if they were hiding something—and that something couldn't be good.

"Noel..."

"What? We've got so much time to kill, we might as well try to sleep away some of it."

"At least use your blanket, then. You'll catch a cold."

"That's an idea. If I need medicine, someone'll have to come into the room. Then we could grab 'em and make 'em spill their guts. How about it?"

"Don't be ridiculous. They'd be prepared for that. And how would you subdue them with a cold?"

"You'd have to take care of that part, obviously. Whatever, I was just joking. What is it?"

"Is everything all right?"

Riese knew that it wasn't altogether clear what she was talking about from her words alone, but Noel seemed to understand.

"Of course. Like I said, Allen will show up if anything happens. You know that better than me, right?"

"Right."

She didn't know if anything would actually happen, but she'd

been saved by Allen twice and seen him save countless others too. Remembering those times, she smiled, and a sense that everything really would be all right welled up inside her.

"Thank you, Noel."

But her companion had fallen asleep without her blanket.

"Ugh!" Riese grabbed the blanket and covered her with it. "Good night, Noel. And thank you."

She didn't know if Noel could hear her, but she felt compelled to thank her regardless. She took her own blanket, lay down next to Noel, covered herself, and slowly closed her eyes. She wondered what the next day would bring, not out of concern but simple curiosity. Then she fell asleep.

Goals and Measures

Unsurprisingly, the mountain hadn't changed since a half day prior. This time, however, they didn't need to hide themselves. Allen, now fully out in the open, beheld the imposing Cathedral and exhaled loudly.

"Something wrong?" asked the demon woman with a smile.

Allen couldn't believe he was working with a demon, and right in front of the Church's headquarters at that. He shrugged. "Just glad we made it this far without incident. So, we're really going inside, huh?"

The woman giggled. "That's right. You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"The only problem is how exactly you're going to manage it," said Anriette.

"I'm sure there's no point asking, though, right?" said Mylène.

"Correct," said the woman. "You'll just have to accept that it's the truth."

"That's rich, coming from a demon," Allen retorted.

She giggled again. "Ah, but that's just what makes me so trustworthy."

It was a little late to object now that they'd accepted her offer. She looked at Allen with her now familiar strange smile.

"Come to think of it, now that we're partners in crime, shouldn't I ask your name?" he said.

The woman bit her cheek and squirmed slightly. "That's a nice thought, but...oh, I don't know."

A chill ran down his spine. He felt like he'd made a mistake.

Anriette sighed. "For demons, telling someone your name means submitting your entire being to them. Unless you want to be stuck with her all year round, I suggest you take that back."

"Sorry," said Allen. "Forget I said anything."

“Oh?” said the woman. “What a shame. I was hoping to play with you until we were both satisfied.”

Allen assumed the “play” she had in mind looked more like a massacre. She’d already told him she’d collected a lot of information about him. Every so often she’d shoot Allen a look that seemed to ask if he was interested in reciprocating her advances. He found it strangely unsettling. It wasn’t the question of losing to her in battle that bothered him—it was as though her gaze provoked a physical reaction.

This time, however, the demon looked at Anriette, her eyes full of curiosity. “You’re unusually well-informed about our kind. You don’t seem to be one of us, though...”

“A lady is entitled to her secrets,” said Anriette.

The demon giggled. “Very true! Forgive me.”

The apology’s insincerity was as clear as day, but it seemed the demon didn’t plan on probing further for the moment.

Never losing her smile, she looked at the Cathedral. “It’s about time, don’t you think?”

Allen felt uneasy for a variety of reasons, but he swallowed his concerns and nodded, as did Anriette and Mylène in turn. The demon’s smile broadened, and she walked closer to the Cathedral. Allen prepared himself for anything, never taking his eyes off her. But when she laid her hand on the door, it simply swung open.

“Shall we head inside?” she asked, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Allen had to follow. He and the others stepped inside and found themselves in a plain passageway, perhaps five meters wide and about as high, which contrasted with the exterior’s magnificence. A carpet ran across the floor. The walls and ceiling were unadorned, but their color was a pure white, bearing not even a speck of dust. That alone was enough to signify that this was a place with access to vast riches.

“There’s no sign of anyone,” said Anriette. “Do people really live here?”

“You mentioned that only a handful of people can enter, didn’t you?” said the woman. “This place’s purpose is mostly symbolic. Of

course it seems deserted—it could be ten times smaller and still have plenty of room to house the few people who live here. In theory, anyway."

"*Mostly* symbolic?" said Mylène. "So it has some other purpose?"

The woman giggled. "How sharp you are. It's simple, really. The fact that I can enter whenever I please must have given you some idea, no?"

It seemed to Allen like the place's size was designed to avoid the residents butting heads with one another. The passageway from the entrance extended so far that the front door was now out of view. "So this way must be an entrance only, right? There's another exit somewhere."

"*Very* observant," said the woman. "And that one can only be used as an exit, although there are some here who can't use the exit at all."

It sounded like the enchantment that guarded the place was only designed to guard against interference from outside and did nothing to prevent people from leaving. He'd been concerned about that eventuality, so that was a relief.

The hallway's carpet absorbed the sound of their footsteps, but since it seemed to continue endlessly, never opening up into a room, Allen felt no need to practice caution. He was thankful that the place was designed to avoid contact with others; it would be a lot of trouble if they happened to run into someone unexpected.

"I take it nobody knows you're here?" asked Anriette.

"Is that what you think of me?" said the woman. "Of course they'll know by now."

Allen had assumed as much, though he wasn't sure what she intended to do about it. All three of them looked at the woman as her strange smile once again surfaced.

It was Mylène who spoke up for all of them. "What are you going to do?"

"That's not the question. I show up here unannounced whenever I like."

"A real free spirit, aren't you?" said Anriette.

"Well, I *am* a demon." She smiled confidently. "There's nobody

here you have to worry about."

Allen had to admit it seemed to be true. After all, they hadn't encountered anyone yet, and he didn't sense anything that indicated someone might soon show up. "That's great," he said, "but now what? You said you'd tell us the details once we got inside. Isn't it about time?"

"I suppose so. We shouldn't be interfered with here."

"You said something about that yesterday," said Anriette. "Does the Church have eyes in the inn?"

"The Church has eyes everywhere. It operates the inn, and all the employees are Church personnel, although they often aren't even aware that their coworkers also belong to the Church. Sometimes their small talk accidentally reveals that they're monitoring you."

"The Church is pretty scary," said Mylène.

If people learned that they were all Church members, they would naturally band together, and that would give them power. As a result, the Church insisted that, with a few exceptions, its believers were not to speak of their belief—that their personal prayers to God were sufficient.

The long hallway finally came to an end at a door the same size as the entrance. Again, the demon woman casually opened it, revealing a spacious room with a ceiling and walls as ornately decorated as the hallway had been bare. Dozens of benches were lined up on the floor. In many ways, it looked like a typical hall of worship.

"This is the chapel, right?" said Allen.

"Something like that. This sort of thing is of little interest to me. Anyway, this is the center of the Cathedral."

Given how far they'd walked, Allen believed it.

"Now, as you were saying, while the Church seems like a fearsome organization to some, I don't see it that way. It's more of an annoyance than anything. It's not the Church's members who have hindered me."

Before Allen could ask what she meant, a thunderous sound rang out, and the ground shook. He was unperturbed—he'd already seen that the source of the sound was the demon woman's right foot,

from which cracks spread out through the ground.

Anriette cried out. "What on earth are you doing?!"

"Simple," said the woman. "I told you that my goal is to get into the Cathedral's deepest regions, didn't I? The Church might not worry too much about me getting this far, but they're preventing me from getting any farther. I have to direct their attention elsewhere so they won't be so worried about me."

"You said our goals weren't in conflict," said Mylène.

"And they aren't. But this is a different matter. In other words, I'll let you handle the rest."

"You mean you're hanging us out to dry," said Allen.

"What an awful thing to say! I mean, surely you must have had an inkling of what I was planning, darling?"

She grinned broadly and disappeared. Probably some kind of teleportation. Allen sighed in exasperation, then realized Mylène and Anriette were staring daggers at him.

"Don't just roll your eyes," said Anriette. "What is she up to?"

"Why did she do that?" asked Mylène.

"I think you two have misunderstood. It's not like I was cooperating with her. But her strategy is on point. There's a magical barrier out there to stop us from getting in, so of course someone kicking up a fuss is gonna attract attention."

"But at this rate, we might as well have gotten in by brute—"

Anriette was silenced by the sound of hurried footsteps. Both she and Mylène turned, ready to retreat to the hallway. Allen took another step forward. He felt the others glare at him with astonishment, but before they could object, the footsteps reached the great hall. A door to his left swung open.

"It came from here, didn't—"

"What on earth was— Wha?!"

"Gah!"

Several Church followers appeared and quickly fell to the ground.

They'd only gotten to see the inside of the room for a split second, so Allen and his friends' identities were still hidden. Allen looked at the collapsed Church followers and shrugged.

"This isn't quite the same as getting in using brute force. This

way, we can pick our battlefields, and since they know a demon's here, they'll assume whoever's running amok in the Cathedral is that very demon before even checking the scene."

Or rather, it was precisely because they had yet to see the truth that they would believe as much. Who else but a demon would dare wreak havoc in the Cathedral? And even if someone were to discover the truth, they'd need proof to convince any of their peers that the true culprit wasn't a demon.

"I don't see any reason *you* have to be the decoy, Allen," Mylène commented.

"But there is one. Even if we manage to sneak Riese and the others out, something similar will happen again, but next time will be even worse. We need to convince the Church that this sort of thing isn't worth the hassle, but I didn't have any ideas for how to do that...until now. So in a sense, the demon woman was right. Our interests really were aligned."

"You know..." Anriette sighed. "It seems like you were really pissed at the Church after all."

"What? Why would you say that?" *No, no, I'm not angry. It's just... It's a good opportunity to blow off some steam while teaching these people a lesson.*

He could feel a pair of weirded-out gazes boring into the back of his head, but he ignored them and drew his swords at the sound of approaching footsteps. The sorry figures rushing in were met with a blade fueled by all the frustration he had been bottling up until now.

Hierophant

"Eek!"

Riese couldn't help but yelp—the entire building was shaking. She instinctively looked down at her feet as the tremors rocked her from below. The deafening sound that had kicked off the rumbling let her know that something serious was going on out there. Still...

"Hm, perhaps this is *her* handiwork. Ah, well, no matter. My apologies for the ruckus."

The man before her didn't show the faintest sign of concern. In neither his voice nor his expression could a sliver of doubt be seen. It was as though he'd already accounted for whatever was going on, though, of course, he wouldn't have said what he had if that were the case. That meant he remained composed despite some unforeseen event occurring. Perhaps that was to be expected of a man like him.

"Still, it isn't anything for us to worry about. This is the Cathedral, the Church's home temple. We have the best of the best ready to take care of any hiccups that may arise."

The man flashed a reassuring smile. Combined with his refreshing attire, he gave off the impression of a dashing young gentleman.

But Noel wasn't impressed. "The 'best of the best,' huh? Do you mean the same people who kidnapped us?"

"Oh dear. Forgive us; that was hardly our intention."

"Then what exactly was your intention, O great Hierophant?"

At Noel's sarcasm, the man's smile—the *hierophant's* smile—took on a snarkier quality of its own.

Sensing as much, Noel widened her eyes and said harshly, "You know, we haven't even been told why we're here."

"Of course you haven't," the hierophant said. "I was just about to explain that myself." His expression remained soft, but the tone of his voice had become that of an adult pacifying a rebellious toddler.

"Will that explanation include why we were called out so suddenly this morning?" Riese asked.

"But of course," he said, nodding.

The man wasn't lying—or at least, he didn't seem to be. To be more precise, Riese *felt* that he wasn't. There was still a good chance that this was a facade too good for her to see through.

How could she, if that were the case? What seemed to be a polite young gentleman was actually the hierophant who reigned over the entirety of the Church. That he looked to be in his early twenties was an impossibility; the last time the title had changed hands was over fifty years ago. It was to the point where, when Riese had first laid eyes on him, she'd thought that he was a representative of the hierophant.

Very few people had ever met the hierophant in person. That much was well-known, and it was one of the reasons people said that the archbishops were the ones who held the real power in the Church. But whatever the case, whether out of concern for his safety or some other reason, it was well accepted that he didn't show his face often, and yet the young man in front of them had claimed he was indeed the hierophant.

Not to be rude, but Riese found it fishy. Yet no matter how suspicious she was, no mere representative would dare usurp the identity of the highest authority in the Church, at its headquarters in the Cathedral, no less. With no other explanation, it was clear that the man really was the hierophant. As unbelievable as it was, there had to be some kind of reason for his appearance...not that she could bring herself to ask.

But that was the kind of man Riese was faced with. Surely, he would be more than capable of pulling the wool over her eyes. Besides, even though she didn't get the feeling he was *lying*, it wasn't as if she trusted him. This was apparently the mastermind behind her kidnapping, after all. He had admitted to that much as soon as they'd first met. "Yes, that was my order," he'd said.

While he hadn't explained why yet, he was about to do so now...or at least, he was about to when the tremors interrupted him.

"Now, then, where to begin?" Now that the shaking had subsided,

he was ready to pick up where he'd left off. "Well, I suppose you two are most interested in why you were taken, so let us begin there. To tell the truth—and to start from the conclusion—there wasn't any need to kidnap you at all."

Noel's confusion practically spilled out of her mouth. "What?"

Riese didn't say anything, but she was right there with her. They'd gone out of their way to pull her out of a moving carriage, and now their boss was saying there wasn't any need for that?

"Ah, well, perhaps that's a misleading way of putting it. What I mean to say is that there wasn't any need to bring you here in that specific manner. There were, to be fair, other means of inviting you here that would have been more palatable."

"And I'm sure you have an explanation for why you didn't choose them," Noel spat.

"But of course. There are three reasons, the first of which is that we feared our invitation would be intercepted."

"Intercepted?" Riese echoed.

"Indeed. The Church as an entity has publicly renounced any claim to power, and we enjoy some privileges in light of that. However, if we were to invite the two of you here, it could be seen as an attempt to gain that very power we renounced."

"Okay, fine," Noel said. "It's true that if the Saint that everyone talks about became a follower of the Church, you'd gain massive influence. But what does that have to do with me?"

"How humble you are! While it's true that you aren't as widely known as Lady Riese, you are highly acclaimed among those who do know of you. If you were to join our ranks, rumors would certainly fly about 'what the Church is plotting.'"

The hierophant was right: Noel was a true master when it came to smithing. Though her skill lay mainly in swordsmithing, that meant anyone who could coerce her to join their cause could expect an unending supply of top-of-the-line swords. Anyone familiar with her work would not let an organization like the Church lay claim to her.

"But in that case, why didn't you explain as much to us?" Riese asked.

"Because we couldn't. After all, the part about us wanting you two to join us is true."

"Figures," Noel said. "I doubt you'd bother dragging us here otherwise. So basically, you're saying that since it'd be true, you wouldn't have been able to dodge suspicion?"

"Exactly. That we have no interest in worldly power remains true, but it would be impossible to avoid the scrutiny of others."

"I see," Riese said. "Then what was your second reason?"

"The second reason was to help you understand us better. I thought it would be easier for you to see for yourself than it would be for me to explain the situation to you."

"You mean the situation between demons and the Church?"

The hierophant didn't respond. His silence was confirmation enough. True, it was difficult to believe. But seeing as they'd been brought there by demons, they didn't have any room to doubt.

"Hey, wait," Noel said. "*I* didn't see for myself."

"That is because we determined it would cause problems in your case. Besides, an explanation from Lady Riese would do well enough."

"I see," Riese answered.

"Hey, don't let him convince you like that!" Noel shouted. "But honestly, I was kinda convinced too."

"At any rate, I believe witnessing things firsthand has helped you understand: We and the demons are in a symbiotic relationship. The Church is able to convert even demonkind. And, of course, this isn't something we do in the name of power, but for the good of humanity."

"For...the good of humanity?"

Why was it that Riese couldn't sense a lie, but his words still sent shivers down her spine? Why was it that his smile seemed so genuine but left goose bumps across her skin?

"Humankind knows nothing of God's will. We were graced with such a wonderful thing in Gifts, and yet humanity fails to ponder what they might mean. But ignorance is not a sin. Thus, it is up to us to help people realize exactly what God's will is."

"To 'help' them, eh?" Noel said. "Sounds pretty high-and-mighty

to me."

"I apologize. That truly isn't our intent—if it came across that way, it must be due to my own failings. I might have risen to a fancy position as hierophant, but even after a century of life, I remain as ignorant as I ever have been."

"A century?" Riese asked. "Are you truly so old? You hardly look it..."

"That, and all I am, are the result of the miracles God has afforded me. Rather, a hundred years is nothing to be proud of. I have precious few achievements for humanity's sake to my name..."

"Achievements for humanity's sake?" Noel eyed the hierophant suspiciously. "What exactly have you done?"

Riese was just as doubtful. She couldn't quite imagine what he'd consider an achievement, but her gut told her it wasn't going to be what she would've picked.

"Let me see... It won't do to brag about events long past, so let me keep to things that are relatively recent. Hm..." Then, with a big, bright smile, he said, "Ah, yes, that's right! I had a master smith dwarf dealt with."

"*What?*"

Unlike before, Noel's confusion was so deep this time that she didn't even know what the man was saying. But the hierophant didn't seem to heed her shock and instead merrily continued.

"There was an oddball dwarf who lived out in this remote town, and her skills with a hammer were simply too spectacular. That, and she was very spontaneous. No matter how many times we warned her to stop, she couldn't help but forge one powerful weapon after another. Imagine what might happen if one of those got into the wrong hands. So I had her dealt with. A demon and its monster performed the task, all for the good of humanity."

Reasoning aside, the story sounded all too familiar. Riese snuck a glance at Noel to find that emotion had disappeared from her face, replaced by a piercing glare directed straight at the hierophant.

In a measured, curt tone, Noel said, "Wow. *What else?*"

"As for other achievements... Come to think of it, I had the emperor removed. That man went much too far. There must be

balance and moderation in all things. We couldn't let him expand any further, after all. I happened to have a demon ideal for matters of assassination, so I— Oh! Speaking of assassination, there was a case much nearer to you both. Indeed, there was a general in your kingdom who was killed, and that too was on my orders."

"You!" Riese sputtered. "You did that?"

"Indeed. Ah, and speaking of which, I might as well mention that he was one of our own. But if word got out that he was a member, there would be such a commotion. I recruited him in secret, much like the two of you."

"Come to think of it," Noel said, "you mentioned those people needing a change of the guard... Is this what you were talking about?"

"Precisely. The reason I want you two to join us is because they have passed on. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say I had them pass on."

"Then, the archbishop too?" Riese asked.

"An astute observation. As for the general, he worked well during his tenure, but a little too well. His mere existence totally quelled strife around him. An excess of violence is forbidden, of course, but a moderate amount is a necessity. That sort of struggle leads men to hone themselves and become more in tune with God's glory. And so, he became an impediment to humankind."

Uninterrupted, the hierophant went on.

"The archbishop did well serving as my substitute, but for some unfathomable reason he attempted to rebel against me. I failed to understand his motives until the end, but I suspect his time spent in my shoes led him to misinterpret his position. To turn his blade on me, the spokesman of the heavens, is ludicrous, but he knew not his own worth. As unfortunate as it is to lose a Gift like his, I'm sure the gods will bestow me with another of his ilk if it is needed for their will."

After saying all that, the hierophant still had that same smile. As kind as it seemed, Riese could feel nothing but horror. Was this person before her truly a person at all?

"Hmm, gotcha," Noel said. "So basically, you kidnapped us

because that way, it'd be easier to get us to help you with that kinda stuff."

"Make no mistake—I wouldn't have you carry out such orders with your own two hands. But yes, in the broader sense, you may be asked to help with such decrees. Most of all, though, I wanted you both to understand that we have the power to make such things happen."

"Gotcha. Loud and clear."

"Truly? I've yet to share the third reason, but..."

"No need. Right, Riese?"

"Yes... If this is what you'd ask of us, then our answer is already set."

Faced with the pair's dauntless expressions, the hierophant's own morphed to something resembling concern. It didn't seem fake, but his concern wasn't going to change their minds. They could never join forces with someone so gleeful about such atrocities.

"How troubling. I feel as though I have an idea of what your answer will be."

"Really?" Noel asked. "I bet you're right on the money."

"That's right," Riese added. "If that's what you want from us, then we refuse!"

"I knew it," the man said sulkily. "Strangely enough, when I deem someone due for disposal, they always make faces just like yours now. Why is that?"

"They're giving you what you're due." A new voice suddenly cut in, accompanied by its speaker.

Riese whipped around to look, only for her eyes to go wide. Noel furrowed her brow in confusion at who the newcomer was, but how could she not? They might have spoken, but Noel had never *seen* her.

"It's you!" Riese cried.

"Long time no see—not that it's been all that long. I'm sure there's a lot you want to say, but hold on to that for me, will you? I have some business to take care of with this gentleman over here."

"You have business with *me*?"

"That's right." The familiar demon woman donned her sweetest

smile. “Won’t you humor me, Your Eminence?”

Trick

As he stared at the demon woman, the hierophant tilted his head in confusion. Apparently, he really had no idea what this business could be about.

That, or perhaps he could envision what it was she wanted to discuss but couldn't fathom why she would bother to do such a thing.

"Business is all well and good, but can I ask you one thing first?"

"Of course, Your Eminence. I owe you as much to get an audience with the oh-so-great hierophant."

"Then if you don't mind...how did you get here? I figured that you were behind the ruckus just now, but I imagine my loyal followers would have all gone to stop you."

"That's simple. Do you really think I'd come to meet someone of your stature without an escort? I bet my accomplice is keeping your people nice and busy right about now."

"An accomplice? But I can tell you're the only demon here."

Realizing that whoever was working with the woman wasn't a demon, Riese instantly thought of a certain young man. Noel apparently did the same, as the two of them exchanged glances that turned into smiles. Naturally, they didn't have any proof their hunch was right, but they just *knew*.

While the two of them wordlessly communicated, the hierophant and demon continued their glaring contest. They were both smiling, but the mood was anything but happy.



"Well," the woman said with a giggle, "you're probably too stubborn to understand. And it's that stubbornness that will be your downfall."

"Downfall, you say. So, your goal is as I thought."

"That's right. You've brought tens of thousands to ruin, and now your turn has come. But it's only natural, isn't it? After damning so many to a miserable end, you can't possibly tell me you're exempt. This is a little thing they call karma."

"To think a demon like you would lecture me on the ways of the world..."

"Surprised? I feel like it only makes sense. No matter how you, your Church, or the world sees and judges us, we're people just the same."

"Nonsense," he spat.

Riese wasn't sure what exactly the demon woman was implying, but whatever it was, it stripped the hierophant of his cool. His smile was gone, and the twinkle in his eye was cold and dim.

"Very well," he said. "You have a point. In any case, I have much more that I must do. If I am to fall to ruin, then it must be after that is all done; you will be the one to meet your end today."

"My, my—what *big* talk," she replied. "You take people's blessings. You take people's lives. But you cling to this world like the pathetic wretch you are. You think you can kill me, you half-baked storyteller?"

"I could say the same to you. As potent as your Skill is, it won't work against me. I thought you would know that better than anyone. How do you intend to bring me down?"

"Oh, please. Did you think I wandered in here without any tricks up my sleeve? You both over- and underestimate me. You're evil incarnate, living in humanity's midst. Since the dawn of time, there's only ever been one sort of person who could strike you down."

"Nice speech," a new voice said, "but your whole plan was to just throw it at someone else?"

A bolt of blue lightning zipped through the air, arcing toward the hierophant and demon. The former calmly watched it dissipate before reaching him, and the latter jumped out of the way in a

panic.

"Hey! You nearly hit *me* too!"

"Yeah? If there's a demon standing next to my target, I'm obviously gonna zap them both."

"Oh, you have to tell me in advance! I had to dodge instead of taking it head-on!"

"Ugh, *that's* your problem?" The scowling newcomer was a familiar young girl. Black hair and black eyes lined up next to the sword on her shoulder, while the weapon itself glowed with blue electricity. There was no mistaking her: Akira.

"Akira?" Riese said incredulously. "How are you here?"

"Huh? Uh, well...honestly, I was kinda against joining this whole scheme, but the more I heard about it, the less of a choice I had. Plus, I figured I should get a look at the person trying to kill me."

"The hero? Now this is a surprise—both that a demon like you would ask her for help and that she would cooperate. To begin with, how did you summon her here?"

"Come, now, Your Eminence. Wasn't it you who told me to bring a Gift Holder back with me? With your permission, it's child's play to teleport someone right in."

"I see. It seems I was careless in my choice of words. I suppose I'll keep that in mind for next time."

"Don't worry—there won't be a next time," Akira said. "And who's cooperating? I'm using her to clean up all my nuisances at once."

The demon giggled. "You're going to treat me to a fight as well? I'd love to, but I don't think you'll have any time for me. That *thing* is an utter monster."

"Tch, I know. I hate to admit it, but..." Akira scrunched up her face as she looked at the hierophant. "This guy sure is a freak."

Truthfully, Riese wasn't sure what they were talking about, and neither was Noel, whose gaze she met once more. The two of them squinted at the hierophant in an attempt to figure out what they were missing but only ended up cocking their heads in confusion.

Despite that, Akira clearly wasn't joking around. There must have been some kind of field that they couldn't perceive.

Recognizing that this wasn't going to be settled by a peaceful

conversation, the two of them stepped back—though Noel seemed frustrated that she had to do so. Akira stepped forward in their place.

"Now then," she said. "We can skip the pleasantries, right?"

"Indeed," the hierophant replied. "I was caught by surprise, but maybe this is a blessing in disguise. Now I can settle two separate matters at once and show Lady Riese my strength. I'm sure once you see this divine power, you'll understand the greatness of the gods and happily come to my side."

"Sorry to intrude on your little fantasy," the demon cut in, "but that isn't going to happen. You're going to meet your maker right here and now."

"I am but a servant to the gods' will. If they will my end, then so be it—but I know that they will not."

"Hah!" Akira laughed. "Then it's time for you to find out if you're right firsthand!"

Lightning spewed forth from the hero's blade, and as she smacked the ground, it zipped toward the hierophant. Behind the bolts, both Akira and the demon woman leaped forward at their target.

Riese knew a little about combat, but nothing beyond basic self-defense. She hadn't needed any more than that, for one, but more to the point, she just didn't have the talent for it. So she hadn't bothered studying martial arts, nor would she have been able to pick them up anyway.

Yet even she could make sense of the scene before her: The three fighters present were in a league of their own.

"Man, this is killing my confidence," Noel said. "I'd say I'm on the stronger side, but I'd get vaporized if I set foot in there."

"I think that's perfectly normal," Riese replied. "Besides, you're a smithing specialist, Noel."

"I know, I know, but this is its own thing."

It was more phenomenon than fight, like some kind of natural disaster. The ground cracked and shattered, lightning streaked every which way, and a deafening cacophony echoed in all directions. Akira

swung her sword, the demon woman kicked, and the space around the hierophant morphed into a localized war zone. How many people *could* join the fray without getting instantly obliterated? That the hierophant was one of them was a testament to his strength.

"Tch, this bastard's acting all smug and unfazed. How's this, then?!"

"No, not at all," the hierophant told her. "Frankly, I'm amazed. What incredible strength you two possess to not allow me to counterattack! I was correct to eliminate you as soon as I could."

"I might appreciate the compliment more if you weren't defending every attack," the demon said. "And you're keeping an eye on everything around you to boot! This is worse than I imagined!"

"Less talking and more attacking!" Akira shouted. "Get serious, demon!"

"How rude! I *am* being serious!" the woman cried. "But I can't help not being enthused about fighting an opponent like this, can I? I suppose now isn't the time, though!"

From their back-and-forth quips, one might imagine the hero and demon had just as much slack as the hierophant, but that wasn't the case. Their faces were a dead giveaway, even if you weren't paying attention to the actual battle. But if you were, the hierophant hadn't moved a single step, nor had he suffered a single stain on his clothes, let alone any sort of injury.

The pair's attacks were being blocked right on the cusp of landing. He must have had some kind of barrier around him, but even so, that he could continue to parry this many strikes was odd. Stranger still, both Akira's and the demon's attacks were strong enough to wreck their surroundings. As mentioned, while the hierophant himself was unharmed, the area around him looked like a war zone—at this rate, it wouldn't just be the ground around him, but the whole building. These weren't merely some light cracks forming, but utter destruction.

Yet Riese had no need to worry that the building might come down; the damage was being repaired as soon as it was dealt.

"This is a serious problem," the demon said. "Even on the one-in-a-million chance we land an attack, he might just completely shrug it

off!”

“It is *not* one-in-a-million,” Akira corrected. “But, yeah...not really sure what to do about that!”

“Ah, no need to worry there,” the man said. “I can only restore inanimate objects back to their original form...which is another reason why I would love to have Lady Riese’s cooperation.”

“Get real,” Akira said. “You’re going down right here, right— Hey, hold on. Did you say ‘restore’? Wait, did you use that power for the demonic base?”

“Base? The demons have plenty of bases of operations, so I’m afraid I’m not sure what you mean.”

“If you’re talking about the one in the southern parts of the Adasteran Kingdom, then yes, we borrowed that power of his,” the demon answered. “Not directly, though.”

“Ah, that one. Yes, I did lend a hand there. Adastera was getting a little too peaceful. I did so to help the people reawaken to the idea of bettering themselves through conflict.”

“I see,” Akira said. “I already knew you were up to no good, but that settles it. You need to die, *now*!”

Enraged, the hero’s attacks grew even fiercer...but to no avail. All their attacks still fizzled out just short of landing. Obviously, no one thought that this farce would continue forever. No matter how powerful the barrier, there had to be some type of cost being paid in order to stave off the attacks. The same could be said of the repairs to their surroundings. Eventually, the hierophant would run out of gas.

The only issue was that Akira and the demon were likely to hit their own limits first. Akira in particular was blasting off lightning without hesitation, and signs of fatigue were already present in her expression. Meanwhile, the hierophant had yet to break a sweat. He surely couldn’t have been completely untired, but he was obviously better off. Worse still, while he hadn’t attacked yet, it wasn’t as if he *couldn’t* attack. At this rate, they’d simply lose the war of attrition—not that they needed Riese to tell them that. If they could’ve done something about it, they would’ve done so.

Suddenly, Akira’ face contorted for a split second. She regained

her composure right away, though, and shot a glance at the demon. When even the bystanders got the gist of its meaning, obviously the demon woman did too: She unleashed a barrage of rapid attacks as Akira leaped backward.

The hero held her sword to the sky and said, "Lightning, heed me: pierce through, bolt of heaven!" A deafening boom rang out from above. Akira's lightning smashed straight through the ceiling.

Riese had seen this spell before, when Akira had been sparring with Allen. But hadn't she tried to hit him directly back then? Riese supposed that Akira had jumped back to avoid getting caught in her own blast radius, but at this rate, the demon woman would be struck. Was she truly intending to hit them both?

No, she wasn't. The lightning fell not on the two locked in combat, but on Akira's sword. This was no self-destruction, but a means of charging the hero's blade with the power of her magic. Akira raised her arms, twisting her upper body like a bow ready to fire...and in an instant, let the tension loose.

"Outta the way!"

The demon woman obliged. She kept up her assault until the last possible second to keep the hierophant from moving and then stepped to the side just before impact. In her place, a human arrow coated in the lightning from the heavens and Akira's own blue lightning whistled by.

With the sound of shattering glass, the space around the hierophant's face cracked...and no more. Akira's blade had gotten closer than ever, but its tip only just grazed the man's cheek before coming to a stop.

"Now that is *truly* surprising," he said. "To think you'd actually manage to hurt me. Be proud, hero—you're the first to do so in all the years since I took the mantle of hierophant. Alas, it isn't enough to defeat me."

Akira was sent flying back the way she'd come even faster than when she'd attacked. She slammed into the wall with an earsplitting *bang* and coughed up a large glob of blood. The demon woman's lips curled, only slightly but still enough for Riese to feel her anxiety from afar.

"This is...less than ideal," the demon said. "Honestly, this really is worse than I thought. To think you'd be *this* powerful... Your Eminence, you really are a monster."

"If monsters are beings beyond humanity, then perhaps you're right to call me one. I suppose the average person would see God as another sort of monster."

"Hah!" Akira heaved, "So, what? You—augh—you trying to say you're a god?"

"You continue to surprise me again and again. Not only are you in one piece, but well enough to speak! I should have expected nothing less from the hero."

The hierophant's praise was genuine, but its authenticity was proof of just how far beneath himself he considered Akira. But that was the cold, hard truth. Whether because she'd come to that conclusion or just out of pain, Akira grimaced.

"Tch... Haughty bastard... I'm not dead yet, you know?"

"You intend to fight again? I'm not fond of causing undue suffering, so I would really prefer that you accept your death soon. Do not worry; this is the will of the gods, for the betterment of all those who will come after you."

"Heh. Everyone after me, huh? I couldn't care less about what happens after I die."

"Is that so? How unfortunate. But, regardless of what you think of it, your power will become a building block for the future, so you may rest easy."

"Shut up! I told you I don't care! Seriously, who do you think you are?!"

"I couldn't agree more," the demon jumped in. "This god act is getting oh so tiring."

"Say what you will, but it's clear from this scuffle that I do indeed bear the will of the gods. Had I been wrong, I would have been killed long ago; that I am still alive is proof that I am the embodiment of divine will."

"Sounds more like the ramblings of a guy on a power trip to me," Akira spat. "But I guess I just sound like a sore loser. Can't really say anything when I'm the one who lost."

“Are you giving up?” the demon woman asked. “I’m still not willing to quit, you know.”

“That’s great and all, but what am I supposed to do about this guy?” Akira looked ready to give up. She seemed fit to continue fighting, but maybe she’d suffered more damage than she was letting on. Or perhaps the gap between her and his strength was so apparent that she’d lost her will to fight.

What was certain was that she was set on throwing in the towel...but then her lips pulled into a grin.

“But, y’know, I kinda knew this going into it. Everyone calls me a hero, but I’m not the real deal yet anyway. I’ve still got a ways to go before I can be the main character, so for now, all I can do is perform the opening act.”

“What are you talking about?” the hierophant asked with a quizzical gaze.

“What am I talking about?” Akira laughed at the man as if to call him crazy. “Duh! I’m telling you that I’m finished buying time! With that lightning bolt I called down earlier, he should know right where we are.”

The instant she finished speaking, the wall opposite where Akira had been thrown disappeared. It simply vanished without a trace.

And who walked through the gaping hole but a young man? A very familiar young man.

“I have to admit, that did help a lot. I was getting lost in here.”

Allen shrugged, the same as ever, and Riese couldn’t help but smile.

Remnants of a Hero

Allen looked around at the situation and sighed. Akira was slumped over by the far wall with some serious injuries, but nothing so serious that she was at risk of dying. She'd be able to manage on her own—in fact, she'd probably get mad at him if he lent her a hand.

The demon woman looked healthy enough, so there was no need to help her either. He could sense that behind him, Anriette and Mylène still had some words for her, but personally, he was fine with how their deal had turned out. She was looking at him with shock in her eyes for some reason, but he doubted he needed to pay her any mind.

As for Riese and Noel, he'd known they'd be here, but physically seeing them safe and unharmed put his fears to rest.

And lastly... "It's nice to meet you, Your Eminence."

"This is indeed our first meeting...but who are you?"

Allen had pegged this twenty-something-year-old as the hierophant based on his general vibe, but he was clearly too young to fit the timelines Allen knew. It must have been the work of a Gift. He'd never encountered such a thing in this world but had seen a handful of cases in his last life.

The hierophant was eyeing him incredulously, but he ignored that for now and scanned the rest of the room. The demon had said she'd go on ahead, and this seemed to be the deepest part of the Cathedral. It was a tier smaller than the worship hall he'd just been in, but it was big enough.

What really set this room apart was that this place lacked the ornamentation of the worship hall. In exchange, the ground was littered with writing; it was hard to make out the whole thing all at once, but it was probably a magic circle. Allen looked up at the ceiling to find a similar pattern there, but since it was farther away, it

was a lot easier to recognize that it was indeed a magic circle.

There were two runes in the deepest part of the Cathedral, in a room that—according to the demon woman—could only be entered by a small handful of people, even among those who could access the Cathedral itself. Was it prejudiced to assume that this was a site of some kind of terrible ritual? Then again, it didn't matter if it wasn't going to affect him now.

Allen returned his gaze to the hierophant, who was still staring back at him. Looking at Riese, he asked, "So is this guy the cause of this whole mess?"

"Well, yes," she answered, "but how did you know? You weren't listening to our conversation, were you?"

"Nope. I had some stuff to take care of, so I was busy running around all over the place until now."

"I don't think *you* were the one having to run around," Anriette quipped.

"That would better describe your opponents," Mylène added.

Allen shrugged. Sure, his enemies had seemed pretty busy, but he'd cut them down before they could even look at his face. Maybe "running around" was an overstatement, but he'd been plenty busy himself.

"Then how do you know he's behind it all?" Noel asked.

"Huh? Uh, well, I kinda just figured from the situation."

The demon had only told him the bare minimum. They were cooperating for now but were likely to become enemies once this was over, so it would be stupid for her to reveal more than necessary to a future foe.

But even that minimal information was enough to guess that the hierophant was behind all sorts of the issues they were facing. It looked like the demon's end goal was the hierophant himself, and Akira had clearly been fighting him too. Riese was glaring at him, and Noel looked like she'd lunge for his throat if she could, so the clues all lined up.

"I don't think a normal person would have guessed that," Riese sighed.

"Business as usual for you, I guess," Noel said.

"Getting up to speed I can understand," the demon said, "but how in the world did you get here? What happened to the suppression squads that went your way? They're strong enough to drive us demons off if we ever attack. Are you saying you three defeated them all by yourselves?"

"I mean, yeah, I guess."

"Hey, *we* didn't do anything," Anriette said.

"Allen wiped them out on his own," Mylène added.

That was all true, but Allen couldn't help but feel the enemy hadn't been that strong to begin with. Sure, they had the basics down, and maybe they were good enough to call "elite," but he doubted they'd be able to beat a band of demons. Maybe they specialized in group warfare or something, in which case they could potentially fend off the demons. But then they should have come to him in formation to play off their strengths. They hadn't, which meant that either way, they were inexperienced.

"Is that so?" the demon said. "It seems I was right about you—or perhaps I was very, very wrong. Either way, it looks like I'll have all the more to look forward to!" She laughed gleefully.

Then her gaze suddenly shifted to something that gave Allen a bad feeling. Maybe he'd overshared, but he didn't get long to dwell on it.

"You...defeated them? Alone?" The hierophant squinted at him as if he'd had a revelation. "Now that I think about it, there were many matters that couldn't have been the work of Lady Riese or Noel alone. I wrote off the events in Adastera as the handiwork of those wretched fools, but could it have been *you* instead?"

Allen had a feeling he knew who the "fools" in question were. As a matter of fact, they had indeed been foolish. But to hear them spoken of in this way soured his mood.

"What if it was?" he asked.

"If it was...then it all falls into place."

"What do you mean?"

"It just makes sense." The man's face was beaming, as if to say he'd just solved an impossible mystery. "I was so confused. It didn't make any sense why Lady Riese would stand in our way since she,

too, was chosen by the gods. Could she involve herself to help our cause? Of course. But hurt it? It didn't make sense. But if *you* were the one to impede us, then everything falls into place. In fact, were you not also the one to lead the hero astray? Oh, what a revelation! If I slay you, surely the hero will also come to her senses. What a blessed day!"

Since the hierophant had begun rattling off incomprehensible gibberish, Allen looked over at Riese to figure out what was going on, but she seemed just as lost.

Yeah, can't blame you... he thought.

The demon sighed and said, "That *thing* is convinced that he's God and willfully misinterprets everything to suit himself. Sickening, isn't it?"

"Think what you will of me," the hierophant answered. "But the truth is the truth."

"The truth, eh? Well, maybe from a certain point of view, Allen wasn't chosen by the gods. After all, he doesn't have a Gift."

"Anriette?"

Surprised by his companion's sudden comment, Allen looked at Anriette. Her eyes were gleaming with rage and contempt. It seemed she had a bone to pick with the hierophant's claims as a former apostle herself. If she had something to say, then Allen was content to let her say it.

"To think this man was forsaken by the gods!" the hierophant cried. "No wonder he would go to such lengths to stop us. This truly must be a message from above: Destroy those who would oppose the gods and awaken the chosen to their true destiny!"

"But that only works if you think that Gifts are proof the gods chose you," Anriette answered. "You have that the other way around. *Allen's* the one the gods chose."

"Excuse me? What nonsense are you spouting? Gifts are powers bestowed upon us by the gods, evidence of our blessing, and—"

"And I'm telling you that you're wrong. To begin with, you think God has the time to be picking out boons for each and every person? Gifts are a blessing, for sure, but they're just crutches. We get them because life is tough without them."

The man laughed uncertainly. “What? Goodness, listen to yourself. That can’t be!”

“So if you don’t have any Gifts, that means the gods figured you didn’t need the help. Those without Gifts are the true chosen who are fit to live in this world as they are.”

In truth, Allen had gotten three powers from the god in question, so Anriette’s theory wasn’t quite on the money...but that was probably intentional. Her story was an exaggeration, but she delivered it with absolute confidence to say that she knew the one, singular truth.

For all his denial, the hierophant was growing paler by the minute. It really seemed like he was being shown a side of the world he hadn’t considered. From Allen’s point of view, he couldn’t see what the big deal was, even if Anriette had been telling the whole truth. As someone who had verifiably been handpicked by a god in his last life, he felt qualified to say there was nothing worse. It wasn’t the sort of thing you needed to care about. Chosen or not, people were best when they did what they wanted to do. Otherwise...all that lay ahead was regret.

“Heh... Ha ha! I see your game! Did you truly think you could lead me astray like this? No, not I. My faith will protect me from your lies. But I’m sure that others are not so resolute. I’ll have to dispose of you before you can worm your way into their ears and corrupt the faithful.”

“It’s always disposal with you when the going gets tough. Is God really that convenient?”

“See?” the demon said. “I told you, he willfully misinterprets everything. You should learn something from us demons, you know. We may go around picking fights with the world, but at least we own up to our choices. Our rebellion is, and always has been, of our *own* will.”

“Enough. I will hear no more heresy. I don’t know why I tolerated this to begin with. Evil must be dealt with swiftly.”

Brimming with hostility, the hierophant was ready to kill. For an old man, he sure did have a short temper—or maybe it was *because* he was old. Whatever the case, Allen was happy to be done with all

the talking. He'd made up his mind before the conversation had even begun. If this guy was the root cause of everything, then all Allen had to do was put him in the dirt and take Riese and Noel home.

"All right, since you're finally in the mood, let's get this over with."

Allen dashed forward.

The moment Allen brought down his sword, a high-pitched sound rang out and stopped his arm in an unnatural spot. Just before he could make contact, some invisible force prevented his advancement.

"Heh heh. No matter how strong you are, I have the blessing of the gods on my side. You won't be able to lay a finger—"

Sword of Cataclysm: Beast Cleaver.

Before the man could finish talking, Allen put strength behind his arm and swung down again. This time, he felt minimal resistance and made a clean slash diagonally across the hierophant's body that spurted blood.

"What? But, what? How? I have the gods—"

"You call it a blessing, but you're just bending space, right? I've seen a demon with that kind of power. Are you saying the gods bless demons too?"

"You *heathen!*"

The hierophant let loose some kind of shock wave, but Allen was already gone. As the Church leader's face twisted in anger and pain, Allen could only sigh.

"I'll admit that you have some strong powers, but they're so...all over the place? Like you can't even use them all properly."

"Of course he can't," the demon chimed in. "The hierophant's Gift is one that lets him steal other people's Gifts. There seem to be some restrictions on it, but it lets him collect all sorts of powerful abilities that he hasn't mastered himself. He must have let his collection go to his head."

"Ah, you see that a lot with that kind of Gift," Anriette said. "If you used your brain to come up with combinations that suit yourself, it'd be an amazing opportunity, but you can't be clever when you're drowning in a lust for power."

“Run your mouths all you want,” the hierophant said. “Very well, then! I didn’t want to wrap up the Cathedral in this, but I’ll have to go all out. I’ll take my time rebuilding once you all are out of my hair.”

The man’s body began to expand. There was no better way to describe it: He grew to more than twice his original size, standing at around five meters tall. His skin darkened beyond that of the Amazons’ until he was pitch-black, and his eyes glowed crimson. His nails fused with his fingers into long claws, two horns poked out of his head, and wings sprouted from his back. By the time his transformation was done, not a single one of his original features remained.

“Whoa,” Allen said. “What the...”

“Is that a demon?” someone asked.

“Did you call for me?” the woman replied. “But no, *that* isn’t one of us. It’s hard to say who the real demon is in this case.”

“I’ve heard the story of demons having horns was made up to make them more memorable,” Anriette said, “but maybe this is where that rumor came from.”

“You’re saying the Church leader who joined forces with demons was a demon himself?” Allen laughed. “Come on, isn’t that a little too cliché?”

“Don’t say that,” the demon cooed. “I, for one, think this hideous form is a perfect fit for his hideous heart.”

The hierophant glared at them to cut off their heckling. His eye was no longer human but reptilian in nature.

“This form is hideous, I’ll admit. I try my best not to let it see the light of day, but I can’t sit idly by when faced with an enemy of the gods!”

“Allen,” Riese said, “when did you become an enemy of the gods?”

“You know, I’m not sure. If I had to guess, maybe a few minutes ago.”

He returned Riese’s quip with one of his own, but it was clear she was putting on a brave front. There was fear in her eyes, and how could there not be when faced with a monster like this?

Giant as he was, there were plenty of monsters out there that were bigger than the hierophant in size. But he likely had some kind of ability that exuded an aura of intimidation. He emitted more pressure than the dragon Allen had faced a while ago, and any normal person would pass out from fear.

Riese was doing a great job of staying calm, but perhaps that was because there was something else mixed in with her fear: her belief in Allen. She could stay sane in the face of this monstrosity because Allen was with her and because she had faith that he would handle it.

Shouldering that trust, how could Allen call himself a man if he didn't rise to the occasion? Besides, the threat the hierophant posed was real. He wasn't using this new form effectively, but that also meant he couldn't control the power it afforded him. He wasn't just talking a big game—he really could turn the Cathedral into a pile of rubble.

"Listen, I'm sorry to do this when you've shown me your trump card, but I don't think I can handle going blow for blow with you. I'm going to end this in one strike," Allen announced.

"Ha ha! Even as a bluff, I commend you for having the audacity to say that to me, of all people! I would expect as much from an enemy of the gods. Very well. Let me show you all that I can muster! Begone, sinner! Today is a day to remember—the day I prove my devotion!"

The beast raised his arms. The energy charged within them wouldn't just destroy the Cathedral but obliterate it to the point where not even rubble remained. Obviously, Riese and Noel wouldn't survive that either, but that no longer seemed to be a priority.

"This is malice in its purest form," Allen said. "I'm sure you really did want to better the world at first, but it's too late for you to turn back now. The only mercy I can give you is to let you die as a human being."

"What are you saying?! I have always been a human, just as I've always been a servant to the gods! That's why I, I—"

"Sorry, I can't bear this anymore." Allen watched as the hierophant swung. "This is over."

He watched the mass of pure violence rush toward him...

Sword Cataclysm: Ultimate End.

...but it never arrived.

A gentle breeze was all that remained. Allen cast his gaze at the hierophant, who was split cleanly in two.

"This...can't...be! I... I was *chosen!*"

With his final words, the hierophant crumbled into a pile of thinly sliced bits, to be carried off into the wind and never seen again.

Slowly exhaling, Allen sheathed his sword. A quiet click echoed in the space, signaling the end of the battle.

"Why did you destroy all traces of him?" Anriette asked. "You didn't have to go that far."

"I mean, it's not like I had a huge grudge against him, and it probably would've been easier to explain things if I'd left the body, but...I was just kind of put off by the idea of leaving him with a corpse that looks like a monster, you know?"

"Soft as ever."

"I think that's very like you, Allen," Riese chimed in.

"She has a point," Noel agreed.

"Yeah, that is very him," Mylène said.

Allen shrugged off their comments and turned back to rejoin the group.

Scenery of a Bygone Dream

Lying on his back, Allen stared up at a familiar ceiling.

It wasn't the most becoming way to relax, but he didn't care. This was the first time in nearly half a year that he'd been home, after all. No one could take the right to laze around away from him. Doubly so when he was home alone.

"But man, this one turned out to be such a mess."

It was arguable how many events really were part of this one larger incident, but for Allen's money, the start of the adventure had been when he'd gotten back from the empire and Akira had brought Chloe along with her.

From there, he'd scoped out the demon stronghold to the south, he'd helped the Amazons in Mylène's homeland, and when he'd thought everything was settled, Riese and Noel had been kidnapped.

Only after a lot of twists and turns had he ended up at the Cathedral. He'd thought the hard part was over, only to find it was just beginning. But once the hierophant had been defeated, he and his friends had been ready to put the whole thing behind them. Everyone—Anriette, Mylène, Akira, Noel—was ready to leave the Cathedral...except Riese.

"The Church is going to be thrown into disarray," she said to the others, "so we should do what we can to help."

True, the Church was due for some difficult times ahead. They had already been struggling with losing the archbishop as their de facto leader and had yet to replace him. The hierophant had been the only reason things were chugging along as normal, and that was no longer the case.

Worse still, Allen had vanished the hierophant's body into thin air, so they wouldn't even be able to confirm his death—only label him missing. He might already have been a mostly absentee leader, but there was a world of difference between "not present" and "not

alive.” Any attempts to continue business as usual would be a temporary fix that would collapse pretty quickly.

There was also proof that the Cathedral had been attacked. Maybe it could be glossed over, since there were so few people there to begin with, but Akira’s magic would be hard to ignore. A bolt of lightning that left a gigantic hole in the ceiling? In a highly visible spot? With what were probably dozens of eyewitnesses? “The Cathedral was attacked, and the hierophant has gone missing!” How could they not expect people to panic if that was all they had to go on?

Riese believed that she bore at least a little bit of the responsibility, so she wanted to help. No one knew why, since her only role had been getting kidnapped. But the mastermind behind that kidnapping was no longer around to shoulder the blame, and it wasn’t like an evil leader should damn all members of the Church. While they had cooperated with the demons, as a whole, they still served large swaths of people through services like their blessing ceremonies.

The choice not to let the Church spiral out of control was a smart one, even if Riese’s motivations lay more in a desire not to cause trouble for those who would be caught in the fallout. Not only was it the righteous thing to do, but everyone present knew how hardheaded Riese could be. They knew she would stay behind all alone if they didn’t agree to lend a hand, so they grudgingly stuck around.

That said, it only took around a month. Losing the top two members of an organization was bad, of course, but they hadn’t been the *only* leaders. So long as they could iron out the succession process without incident, the new brass would figure it out.

Obviously, Allen’s group couldn’t do anything in the public eye. They weren’t Church affiliates, so they instead helped rebuild the Cathedral or snooped around hidden rooms for important documents, sending the decent ones to the new leaders and the shady ones away.

The chaos was far from over, but the Church was stabilizing, and with the rest of the restoration best left to its constituents, Allen

took the opportunity to finally go home.

But as soon as he got back to his remote town, yet *another* annoyance had popped up—though this one was his own fault, in a way...

Lying on his bed and reminiscing, Allen sighed. "I wonder if things would've been different if I hadn't stopped by the guild."

As soon as he'd returned, he had thought, *Oh, right. I asked the guild to handle all the reports. I wonder how that's going.*

To sate his curiosity, he'd decided to stop by before heading home—a grievous mistake. They'd taken him in, and he'd suffered a barrage of questions grilling him about how he'd discovered *two* demon strongholds.

"If only I'd just gone home. Then I would've at least gotten a breather. I guess it didn't change much in the end, though."

No matter how much they interrogated him, Allen had nothing to share. They really should have been asking Akira those questions, but they'd split up a while ago at this point: Akira had already headed off on her next adventure. Call her lucky if you will, but Allen had a hunch that she'd known trouble was waiting for her and had fled early.

Regardless, he'd managed to weasel his way out of the situation by pinning everything on her, but only enough to land him in another conundrum as they brought him to Margrave Raygraph's estate. Allen was happy to tell the authorities where the southern stronghold was, but it was in a dangerous uncharted forest...and they had requested that he come with them as a guide for reconnaissance.

Frankly, he didn't have any reason to obey, but not doing so would leave the margrave's men to march to their doom. Knowing that would keep him up at night, Allen had given in. He'd been there before and knew how strong the monsters were, so it wasn't that bad. The hardest part was convincing the margrave's soldiers to listen to him. From their perspective, he was just some random guy—why should they take orders from him?

But if they went off on their own in that forest, it was plain to see they would die. He'd taken on the request for some peace of mind,

so letting them get killed was obviously not an option. Skipping the details, Allen's efforts to make them listen had led to a one-versus-everyone mock battle...but hey, it got them to obey his orders, so maybe it had been for the best. Even if he couldn't comprehend why Mylène, Noel, and Anriette had joined the soldiers' side, causing him even more anxiety.

Allen had eventually managed to safely lead the men through their scouting mission, but for some reason, he'd caught the eye of the margrave. The nobleman kept insisting that he'd introduce Allen to his granddaughter, but that was obviously a path to more headaches, so Allen continuously refused and eventually won out. The last time he saw Margrave Raygraph, the man had looked defeated. Probably a coincidence.

But with all that, a whopping half year had gone by before Allen could once again laze around in his own home.

"Hm, looking back at it like this shows how much really happened. *Too* much has happened since coming out here, actually..."

Maybe it's this area? he mused. Moving to the empire wouldn't be free of issues either, but refusing to leave felt like accepting that all of this hassle was his fate...

"Well, whatever. I'll think about it later. For now, it's time to kick back, relax, and—"

"Allen, are you here?! Something terrible has happened!"

Get some rest, he internally finished as Riese ran in, huffing and puffing. He wasn't about to ignore her, but he had a bit of a nagging thought. *Hey, this feels kind of familiar.*

"Uh... What's up, Riese? Did something happen? I thought you were over at Noel's place."

Noel had been itching to "make up for lost time," so Riese had gone with her to keep an eye on her. Anriette had mentioned that she'd never seen Noel work either, so she and Mylène had tagged along. Allen had been confident nothing would go awry with all of them together, but obviously that hadn't been the case.

"Yes," Riese said. "Sophie came out of the blue, and Noel's been kidnapped!"

"Sorry, what? How does that even happen?"

Sophie, as it turned out, was the name of the demon they'd met during the Cathedral episode. She'd vanished back then but reappeared one day just to tell them her name. And it seemed she was fond of them, as she'd continued to drop by to bother them every so often. But since she'd never caused any real issues—and since Allen didn't really have any bones to pick with her—he'd just kind of shooed her off until now. So how had this happened?

"She was apparently interested in watching Noel work, so she did...until Noel finished one of her blades. Then, Sophie's eyes started glimmering, and she said, 'I want one too!' and whisked Noel away."

"Oh, I see. Yeah, I can picture that. What about Anriette and Mylène?"

"Anriette is tracking them as we speak. Mylène is guarding and cleaning up Noel's workshop."

"And you came to call for me. Gotcha. I think she'll probably bring Noel back once she's had her fun, but she is still a demon, so it's probably best to play it safe."

Allen got up, and Riese watched him guiltily.

"What's wrong, Riese?"

"It's just," Riese said with an apologetic pause, "you were resting."

"No, don't worry about it. It's not your fault someone else did something stupid. Besides, I'm kinda used to it now."

Allen wasn't trying to play it off either; the busyness he'd encountered recently really had primed him to feel, at most, a sense of *Oh, again? Well, guess I gotta do something.*

And frankly, though his life was busy and chaotic and tiring...spending his days being busy and chaotic and tired with his friends wasn't so bad. Maybe the quiet life he'd longed for was already here.

With that thought in the back of his mind, he shrugged and joined Riese in heading off to yet another incident.

The Joy Now Present

As soon as he entered the space, Allen was struck by a sense of peculiarity, though he was surprised he didn't feel something more. The place before him was all too familiar, but he'd made his peace long ago with the idea that he might never see it again: the estate of Duke Westfeldt.

In the year since he'd thought that, however, a great deal had happened. As a matter of fact, every day since had been packed so full that he could hardly believe it had only been a year. With that in mind, it made sense that merely returning to the manor wouldn't be that big of a shock.

"Welcome home, Lord Allen."

He wasn't surprised by the sudden voice and turned to see an older man bowing to him. He'd known the man was there and sensed his approach, so the awkward smile on Allen's face could only be explained by the man's choice of words.

"Silas, don't you think that 'welcome home' is a bit odd?"

The story of how the former head butler of the Westfeldt estate had begun to work here once again wasn't complicated. After being fired, he and his companions had been picked up by House Linkvist, almost entirely due to Anriette's wishes. So when Anriette had "died" in official terms, they had once again been out of a job.

However, now that Riese was the head of the household, and since House Westfeldt was always understaffed, there was no reason *not* to hire a bunch of servants familiar with the family's workings. But that meant their loyalties lay with Riese. Allen was the son of their previous master, and the estate was owned under the same name, but at this point, he was a mere guest.

"Apologies," Silas said. "I suppose it's still too soon for that greeting."

"Too soon? I don't exactly have plans that would let you say it in

the future."

"Truly? I was convinced that you were here to once again—ahem, to finally take your place as lord of our manor."

Allen didn't need to think very hard to figure out what Silas meant by that, but he doubted the butler was saying it seriously. The man's head remained bowed and his face was hidden, but around him was an air of humor.

"I never knew you were one for jokes, Silas."

"I may serve nobles, but I'm a regular person myself. And I was only half joking, you know? Lady Riese only returns when there is a suitable occasion, and she's here today. You never even attempted to return here, Lord Allen, but here you are. It's only natural that I might draw some conclusions from that, isn't it?"

Silas wasn't exactly wrong. Riese was present now, though she usually wasn't. Allen was back for the first time since being exiled. Still...

"I never came back because I never had any reason to. Today I do. That's all there is to it. And Riese is here for the same thing, which you should know."

"Is that so? I am but a humble butler, unaware of such dealings."

"You? A humble butler?"

Allen chuckled at the man still folded in a deep bow. He'd heard a bit about how Silas and the others were being treated here, so he determined that Silas wasn't outright lying.

Silas was the former head butler and knowledgeable about the inner workings of the house, but he was a new face among the staff. Yet while his official position was on the lower end, he was respected much like a proper head butler. He definitely knew why Allen and Riese had come.

"Well, let's set that aside for now," Allen said. "You're making it harder for your real master to show herself."

Allen chuckled again as the presence trying to hide herself inside the manor gasped. He'd noticed her a while ago, but she hadn't realized that until just now.

"Aww..." Riese came out from the shadow of the doorway. "I thought I could surprise you while you spoke with Silas, but nothing

gets past you. And here I'd thought this was my golden opportunity."

"What for?" Allen laughed.

"Well, it isn't every day that I get a chance to surprise you!"

Yeah, but why would you need to?

"Hm," Silas grunted in awe. "It seems my help wasn't needed after all."

"What?" Allen said.

"No need to say any more, my lord. I have enough life experience to know a happy couple when I see one. My apologies for even thinking of meddling—I should have known that the one and only Lord Allen wouldn't need our assistance to put things together."

Silas finally raised his head to unveil a content expression. As if to say that his work here was done, he bowed once more and promptly made to leave. But before he departed, he had one last comment to share.

"Ah, so that you're aware, Lady Riese's room has been thoroughly soundproofed. Rest assured, not a peep will leak to the outside world no matter what you do inside."

And with that, he was gone.

"Man," Allen sighed. "What are we supposed to do with that information?"

"I... Right!" Riese agreed. "We're only here to take care of business..."

Despite her words, her movements suddenly turned very choppy. At that, Allen sighed again. It was true that they had business to settle, so they would do best to prioritize that.

"Well, let's start off by going to your room, I guess."

"Oh, uh, um, right. Yes, let's. The preparations are there, after all." After a pause, she added, "Honestly, it doesn't really feel like 'my' room, though."

"That's normal since you're never here." As Allen slipped through the front door, he said, "Oh, sorry, where are my manners? Excuse my entrance."

"Ah, yes. Um, welcome in? This feels a little funny, doesn't it?"

"You've got a point."

They were saying the right words, but when the two of them

exchanged greetings, it was almost always “I’m home” and “welcome home,” so it didn’t quite feel right in this case.

“Well, anyway, let’s go.”

“Let’s. It won’t do to take too much time. Um...here, I think it’s this way.”

As the two of them walked, Allen stared at Riese’s back. It made sense for her to lead—this was her estate, after all. But just like with the greetings, he had a funny feeling in his heart as he trailed right behind her.

Allen and Riese had met at the Westfeldt estate to work in Beatrice’s place. Beatrice was still in the capital, so the paperwork had begun to pile up. The reason Beatrice had been stuck there had already been dealt with, so Allen could bring her back anytime, but she’d been working very hard at this head-of-household business despite her inexperience.

Riese had wanted to let her rest and had therefore offered to take on her work. Technically, though, Beatrice had originally been Riese’s stand-in, so this was just Riese doing the work she was already meant to do.

Allen was around to help with things that Riese might not have been able to decide on her own. For all the education she’d received as a royal, she didn’t have the specialized training to lead a duchy by herself. Without specific knowledge of Westfeldt’s affairs, a lot of the matters that had piled up would’ve been unsolvable—and so came the summons to Allen.

Of course, he hadn’t been taught to succeed the duchy either, but he was still more familiar with matters than she was. Anything the two of them couldn’t handle, they could probably iron out with Silas’s help...or so they thought.

“Hrm,” Allen groaned. “Looks like we’ve only gotten through half of what we thought we would. I don’t think we’ll be able to finish today.”

“I’m sorry... That means I haven’t been pulling my weight, doesn’t it?”

“No, uh... Well...”

Truth be told, she was right. But it wasn’t that Riese couldn’t

handle the tasks in front of her. Normally, she certainly would have been able to handle twice the amount they'd finished. The reason for her inefficiency was her lack of focus.

Let it be known that the fault didn't lay with her, though: It was absolutely Silas's fault. As previously mentioned, the two of them were in Riese's study, and naturally, it was connected to her bedroom. That bedroom was separated from them by a shut door, but it was right there all the same. Apparently, Silas's statement had gotten to her, and she kept awkwardly glancing its way every few minutes.

While the blame lay with Silas, the reasons for her awkwardness made it difficult for Allen to say anything to calm her down. Maybe it was time to reset.

"Hey, I don't think we'll get much done at this rate, so how about we take a break?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't say that—it's not your fault, it's Silas's. Honestly, what does he think he's doing bothering his master? A former head butler should know better."

Silas probably did know better and had said what he had anyway, but that was a separate matter. Allen led by example and tossed the report in his hands onto a nearby table before sinking into the sofa he was on. He let out a long sigh.

"You know what? I think we were due for a break anyway. I'm tired."

"That's true. It's amazing that Beatrice managed all of this alone. I can't thank her enough."

"Seriously! But you're gonna have to do this all alone one day too, Riese. That sounds rough."

"Why are you saying it like it isn't your business?"

"Because it isn't. I know I'm helping this time, but I doubt you'll need me again."

If Riese ever needed help in the future, she would probably call for Beatrice and not him, which meant that he would never have to do this sort of work again. He could probably ask to help if he wanted to, but ruling over a duchy wasn't in the cards for Allen's

future plans for relaxation.

"By the way," Riese quietly blurted out, "have you given marriage any thought, Allen?"

"Whoa, that came out of nowhere."

"Well, I... Never mind. I was simply curious."

"No, it's fine."

Silas's comments were probably still bouncing around in her head. Plus, Riese was just around normal marrying age, so it made sense that she might have that on her mind.

"In my case," Allen said, "I don't know if there's anything to think about. I don't think I *can* get married."

"Huh? Do you mean, um, that you don't have a partner?"

"No, I'm talking about something more basic. Since I still don't have any way to identify myself, I don't think I can get married. Maybe in the sense of being with someone, but not officially."

"Oh, I see." Riese thought for a moment. "But if you could solve that problem, would you want to get married then?"

"Hm...I dunno. I haven't really thought about it before."

Now that he was thinking about it, though, there was no reason his peaceful life couldn't come in the shape of marriage. He'd never considered that before because he'd thought it wasn't a possibility—or maybe he just had convinced himself of that.

The end of his last life flashed before his eyes. Maybe he subconsciously wanted to keep others away so that no one would ever have to be swept up in something like that again. No, that was overthinking things. He'd probably just never thought about it because he didn't have any opportunities to.

"On the other hand," Allen said, "you probably do want to, if you're asking me that. Right, Riese?"

He'd meant for it to be a harmless continuation of the conversation, but there was a pause before Riese answered.

"I...do. Not right away, but I'd like to eventually."

"I see."

"Oh, but maybe that wasn't the best way to put it. To be more precise, I'd like to marry eventually, but I *don't* want to right now."

"Oh? So you wouldn't want to get married if it was too soon?"

“No. There’s...a lot I think about, but right now, I’m really enjoying my everyday life the way it is.”

Suddenly, Allen felt like he’d had an epiphany. Maybe this was the real reason he’d never considered marriage—not because it was something altogether removed from his life, but because what he had now was already so fulfilling.

“I see. Yeah, I get it.”

“You do? Um...sorry for getting all sappy. That was a little embarrassing.”

“Was it? I thought you made a great point.”

“Really? If that’s true...then I’m happy you think that.”



Riese smiled, and Allen felt himself ease up. All he wanted in this moment was to go back to that house with Riese and see everyone again.

Unfortunately, there was work left to do.

"All right, let's get back to it. Otherwise we really will be here until tomorrow."

"Let's! I'll need to do my fair share this time so we can go home...even if it's a bit of a missed opportunity."

Allen chose not to hear the last few words Riese mumbled, but his lips pulled up a little all the same. Still, there was work to be done.

Not intending to let Riese do her fair share without him, he reached across the table to grab the report he'd thrown away earlier.

Afterword

Hello, this is Shin Kouduki. Whether you've been around since the first volume or are a new reader—though I doubt there are any of the latter now—I'd like to thank you for picking up this novel.

I can't believe we're already on volume five. Five volumes was my biggest goal back when I first started, so I can hardly express how deeply moved I am to reach it. All of the material on the original web version has now been novelized, and none of this would have been possible without your support. Thank you so much.

I'm not sure what the future will hold for me, but I'm fairly certain the manga version will continue, at least. I'd be very happy if you could support the manga as well.

As an aside, the second volume of the manga will be coming out in the same month this volume releases, if you're interested in picking that up. Perhaps because they were more familiar with the material now, Karasumaru's second volume is even better than the already stellar first, so whether you've been reading the manga or haven't gotten around to it, I would greatly appreciate you taking a look.

As always, many people helped put this volume together.

I'd like to thank my editors S and F, who once again helped me with all sorts of things.

The illustrator Chocoan drew even more wonderful illustrations for this volume. At this point, I'm no longer bothered by the fact that my writing can't match up to the beauty of the drawings. I've begun to wonder why we don't cut out my words entirely and just make it a picture book, but I digress—thank you as always.

My deepest thanks also go out to the proofreaders, managers, designers, and everyone else who made the publishing of this volume possible.

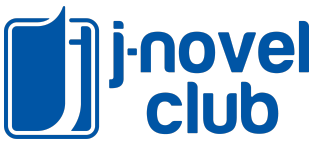
And of course, most of all, I thank you for purchasing and

reading this book. I can never thank you enough.

That's all from me for now, but I pray that we might meet again!







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by Shin Kouduki

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