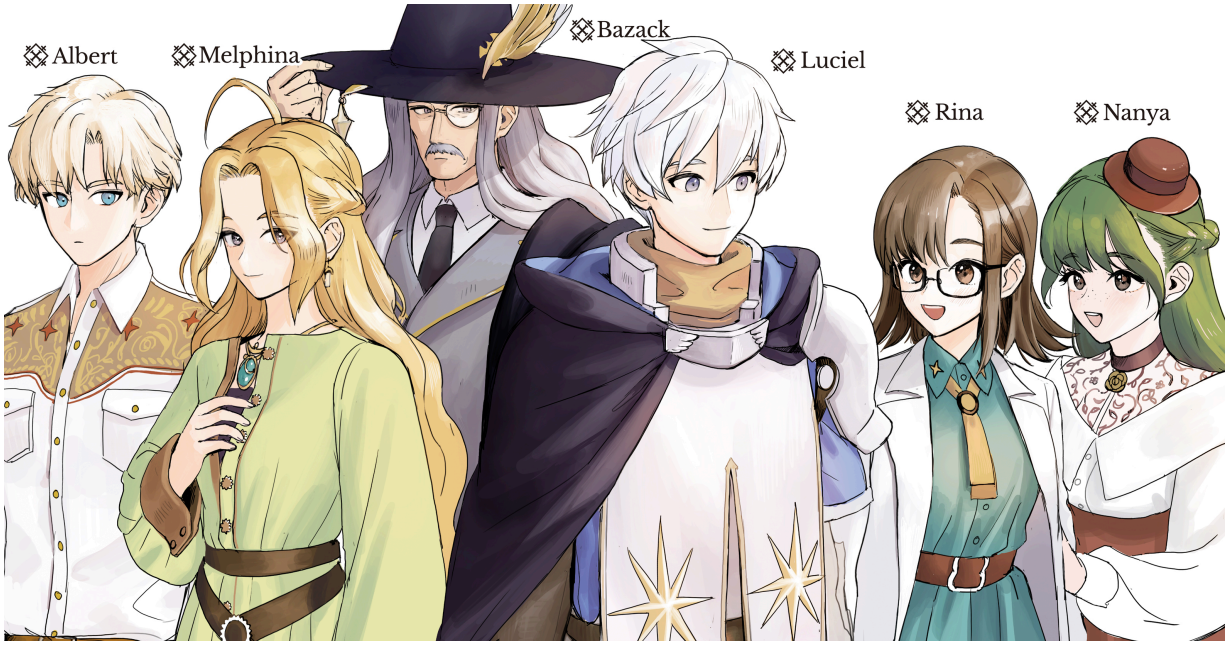

11
The Great Cleric
White-Collar Survival in Another World
Broccoli Lion
Illustrator: sime


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Albert
Melphina
Bazack
Luciel
Rina
Nanya



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Chapter 12: A Trip to the Empire and the Spirit of Dusk's Wish

01 — Complaints

Everyone will, at some point in their life, find themselves struggling between their ideals and reality. They are willing to risk everything to protect what matters most to them, even if they know they will come to regret that choice down the line.

Dongahar had been willing to give his life to protect the Church of Saint Shurule and the pope. Yet, protecting them hadn't been his only objective—he was determined to rid the Church of anything he deemed "unnecessary," even if it meant enduring greater suffering in the process.

Having lost the qualifications to keep my title of S-rank healer, I was part of the "unnecessary" that Dongahar had sought to purge. From my perspective, I had simply wanted to save my master and Lionel by using the Revive spell when they were turned undead by the Wicked One. This had cost me my holy magic, but thankfully, I'd managed to get it back by visiting the flying city-state of Neldahl in a last-ditch effort, where I'd found a way to change my class from healer to sage.

But Dongahar saw things differently. Once he'd heard the whispers that I—the symbol of the Church—had lost my holy magic, he'd decided to take action without even asking me if the rumors were true or not. Though he *was* aware that it was most likely a ploy from Blanche, he still couldn't shake his lingering doubt that perhaps it wasn't. So he'd resolved to purge the Church of all its corruption in one sweeping move, dragging out everyone he deemed tainted, even if it meant forfeiting his own life in the process.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I was partly to blame for

Dongahar's decision. I wondered if things might have turned out differently if I had trusted him more, if I had built a relationship where he could confide in me. Not that I was willing to excuse the guy's actions or anything—I was still pissed he'd tried to kill me.

Dongahar revealed that the masterminds who'd been plotting my demise were from Blanche, and he entrusted the future of the Church and the pope to me. Then, he vomited blood and collapsed right before our eyes. I managed to save his life with a few quick healing spells, but his last words left me shaken to my core. Looking around, I saw that everyone was feeling just as conflicted as I was at that moment.

The pope had been gazing at Dongahar with tears in her eyes, but she managed to pull her gaze away from him and turn to me, a resolute look on her face. She raised her hand, commanding everyone's attention.

"Compose yourselves, all of you. As long as the sage Luciel is with us, Dongahar will not die," she declared before announcing what awaited those who'd conspired with him. "All those who have been demonized will be stripped of their jobs and abilities. Your memories will be erased, but only after we have thoroughly interrogated you for information about the demons and the other nations."

The knights who had helped Dongahar with his plan collapsed to their knees at her words. To my surprise, none attempted to flee or defy her decision. Perhaps they had reflected on their actions after listening to Dongahar and the pope's conversation and had resolved to atone for their sins.

The pope put a hand on the closest knight's forehead and muttered something under her breath. The next instant, the expression on that knight's face was replaced with a blank look, as though his soul had left his body. Yet, even after witnessing this, the remaining knights stayed where they were.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes with every knight she stripped of their job, but she fought to hold them back. Yet, as the process wore on, she could no longer keep them at bay. The image of her punishing the culprits with tears rolling down her cheeks

would be seared into the mind of every onlooker for the rest of their life.



The knights must've been terrified at the idea of losing their jobs, but I surmised that the reason they weren't running away was that they felt guilty about what they'd done. Being stripped of one's job not only meant that their stats would drop drastically, but their skills would also be reset to zero. But what was even scarier was that they would lose their bonuses.

While my master and Lionel had their levels and skills reset to zero, they had kept their job bonuses, which made their rehabilitation process easier. Without those bonuses, the knights' bodies would struggle to execute the moves they once knew, and there was a real risk they might forget the techniques entirely. In other words, it meant that all the effort they had invested since reaching adulthood would be erased.

Perhaps that was why the pope had chosen this punishment for them.

"I have hereby stripped all of the knights and paladins who were involved in Dongahar's plan of their jobs," the pope announced. "In the last moments before your memories are removed, I command you to reflect upon the turmoil you have wrought upon the Church. And remember, above all, to direct your ire toward me—the one who led you down this path."

She surveyed the faces of each and every knight she'd stripped of their job before bowing her head deeply to them. They eyed her with stupefaction, most of them in tears.

The pope slowly raised her head, a look of determination on her face, and resumed, "I am to blame for this series of events. I have, on countless occasions, thought of stepping down from the papacy and entrusting the Church to the next generation."

Everyone froze at her sudden, completely unexpected declaration, and I wasn't any different. Her words threw me off-balance, and not just a little.

"But when the labyrinth appeared below our headquarters, I felt like it would be much too irresponsible to hand over the Church to someone else while it was in such turmoil. But my greatest crime was failing to consult with anyone on this matter. Therefore, I have decided to arrange individual discussions with each of you."

There were around seven hundred people working at the Church's HQ, yet she wanted to have personal interviews with *every single one of us*?

"I wish to hear all of your thoughts and opinions—your goals, your hopes, and your visions for what the Church should become," the pope continued. "Though I may not be able to fulfill every suggestion, I still wish to hear your perspectives. My first objective is to help you all grow to love the Church. As such, I humbly request that you lend me your wisdom and power to aid me in this endeavor."

I couldn't tell you for sure if her plea truly resonated within everyone's hearts. However, as soon as she was done, the knights sank to one knee, each placing a hand over their chest and bowing their head, while everyone else brought their hands together in prayer. And with that, the pope's judgment was complete.

I was about to step in to deliver my speech and bring the proceedings to a close when Kefin approached me, carrying a stack of parchments. "Do you have a minute, sir?"

Oh, right. I'd sent him and Galba to investigate the Executive Division. If Galba had been there to take Catherine away when she'd begun arguing with the pope earlier, it only made sense that Kefin would be back as well.

"Yup. What are those?" I asked, glancing at the stack in his arms.

"Some of the documents we found in the Executive Division that seem relevant to the case. Well, most of them are just evidence of what we already know, so they've lost their usefulness. But..." He trailed off. It seemed that most of the documents they'd found would serve to confirm whether Dongahar had been telling the truth.

"Is something bothering you?" I asked in response to his sudden evasiveness.

Nothing could've prepared me for the words that left his mouth next. "It seems that Dongahar had been planning on dying all along. He wrote a farewell note," Kefin said, showing me a piece of parchment.

"A farewell note?!" I accidentally exclaimed, though not too loudly, thank goodness. The people around us shot me curious

glances, but it didn't cause a scene.

Perhaps the letter contained the details of Dongahar's plan and what had pushed him to rebel against the Church in the first place. I glanced at the pope. She was pretending to be fine, but I could tell she was pretty shaken by the day's events, so I made the executive decision not to show her Dongahar's farewell letter until she felt better. For now, I needed to put an end to the incident.

"Since you could tell it was a farewell letter, does that mean you read it?" I asked Kefin.

He nodded. "Yes. Mister Galba and I read it together. We also found documents and studies about demonization, a thorough account of the risks associated with summoning, and even a compilation of evidence regarding misconduct committed by some of the clinics, healers, and knights."

It was obvious that Dongahar had been looking for a way to protect the Church in the event that I hadn't managed to become a sage. Still, I couldn't help but question whether starting a rebellion had truly been his only option. Surely, there must have been other, less extreme ways to secure the Church's future. Then again, perhaps that was just my ego talking. After all, I barely knew Dongahar.

"Thanks for the report," I told Kefin. "The pope has finished passing her judgment, but I'd like to investigate the documents you and Galba found before telling her about them. Can you take me to the Executive Division when we're done here?"

"Of course, sir. Oh, and before I forget, Mister Galba and I also found a glowing necklace that neither of us could touch."

A weird necklace, huh? I really didn't like the sound of that, but I'd probably have to investigate it. I had so many questions for Dongahar. I would save him and have him pay for his crimes, mark my word.

"You'll show it to me when we head to the Executive Division. Things have mostly settled down by now, but be careful, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

With those words, Kefin handed me the parchments he'd been carrying and went to join Ketty, who had beckoned him over. I had a

feeling that everything would fall into place once I'd read Dongahar's farewell letter and the documents Kefin had found, but first, I needed to bring this gathering to a close.

Facing the crowd, I said, "Today's incident was a tragedy born from the clash of your doubts and suspicions surrounding the Church. I suppose I must be partly to blame for what happened—I haven't spent much time at HQ since becoming an S-rank healer, and I've never even spoken with some of you. It is a shame, but I assume that's why you were so quick to believe the rumors."

This seemed like a good occasion to open up a little to the HQ members I hadn't interacted with before, so before wrapping up, I decided to talk about myself a bit.

"The reason I haven't been around HQ lately is simply that I've been handling duties for the Church in other nations. To be completely honest, I haven't had much time to think about all of you, as—despite being a healer—I seem to always end up in life-or-death situations."

I began to recall my adventures to the crowd of knights and other members of the Church.

"First, I spent two whole years exploring the labyrinth beneath HQ and ended up getting trapped down there for six months. If Her Holiness hadn't offered me a magic bag that allowed me to store food and other essentials, I most likely would have died back then," I said nonchalantly as though it were no big deal. "Then, I went to Yenice to rebuild the Healer's Guild, got attacked on my first day there, somehow ended up in a dungeon where I nearly died fighting a red dragon—only to get caught up in yet *another* attack over some political stuff."

Kefin was staring into space, perplexed by my speech, while Ketty chuckled to herself. As for the knights, they seemed a tad bewildered by my words, but I paid them no mind.

"But despite how much I struggled against the red dragon, it was only the beginning. After that, I found myself fighting for my life against monsters and demons over and over again. And now, I'm suddenly the target of a ploy orchestrated by another nation, and for what? Just because I haven't used my holy magic in a while?"

My words had clearly divided the crowd—half of them seemed uncomfortable, while the other half looked at me as though I were some kind of hero.

"In all honesty, it made me realize how much of a luxury an ordinary, peaceful life truly is," I added with a broad smile, and everyone in the crowd looked down to avoid my gaze. "My point is this: even someone like *me* has managed to survive all of this. With enough effort, I'm sure you could all become even stronger than I am. Your passion will be the Church's newfound strength. I'm certain of it. With that, I would like to bring the proceedings to an end. Supervisors of each department, please stay behind. The rest of you may return to your duties."

"Luciel, report to me in my chamber once the investigation is over. I shall return to my room now," the pope told me.

"Of course, Your Holiness. Also, may I ask that you let me handle Dongahar's case?"

She nodded. "I am leaving him in your capable hands."

"Thank you, Your Holiness."

With that, the pope, accompanied by Rosa and Estia, made her way back to her chamber. I saw them off before heading to find Lumina. I needed her assistance with the knights who had conspired with Dongahar.

"Lumina, I'm sorry to bother you, but can you and the other Valkyries take Dongahar's accomplices to the cells?"

"Sure. But can I have a minute of your time later, Luciel?" she asked, and I couldn't help but notice she seemed much more nervous than usual.

"I'm going to inspect Dongahar's room right now, but I have time after," I replied.

"I'll wait for you here in the big training field once we're done putting the knights in jail. Come when you've finished."

"Got it. Well then, I'm leaving them in your hands," I said.

Lumina nodded before turning to the Valkyries and giving them instructions to take the demonized and almost-but-not-fully demonized knights to the cells, minus Dongahar. Speaking of which, I cast Extra Heal, Recover, and Dispel on him one more time for

good measure. Then, I decided to put him into a hermit coffin for the time being.

Now, I could finally take a breather, albeit a short one. Oh, wait. I figured I should probably apologize to my master and Lionel while I was at it.

"Master, Lionel, sorry for having gotten you two involved in this mess."

"It's all good. More importantly..." My master trailed off, his eyes drifting to the crowd of knights who hadn't moved an inch despite my earlier order for them to return to their duties.

I had a pretty good idea of what he was getting at, so I once again turned to the knights and announced, "Everyone, let me make some introductions. This man right here is my combat teacher, and this is the leader of my followers. Some of you may be familiar with him already," I said, gesturing in turn to my master and Lionel. "They have offered to hold mock battles to help you all improve your fighting abilities, so if you want to become stronger, you should definitely take them up on that. You'll get to witness for yourself the kind of training I've been undergoing on a daily basis. Well then, master, Lionel, I'm leaving them to you."

"Sure thing. They'll be in good hands," my master said.

"Don't mind us and take your sweet time with your investigation," Lionel added.

"Okay. Ketty, can you assist them while I'm gone?"

"Yup!"

With that settled, I left the knights to deal with the two battle maniacs—or "battle demons" might be more fitting—and followed Kefin to the Executive Division's building.

"This place has so many twists and turns, it's like a labyrinth," I remarked. "I'm impressed you've managed to remember the way after coming just once."

He chuckled. "It's something I picked up in my childhood. Once I've walked a path, it tends to stick with me."

"That's a pretty damn useful skill. Do you have any tips and tricks to remember directions?" I asked.

I'd spent so long in the labyrinth below HQ and drawn countless

maps of it, I still knew that path like the back of my hand. But drop me in any other labyrinth I'd cleared and I'd be completely lost.

"Tips and tricks, huh?" He hummed pensively. "One easy method is to identify landmarks as you go. And always look back once you've turned a corner. Even though you just came from there, it'll be a completely different view, so by mentally trying to retrace your steps, you shouldn't get lost the next time you walk the same route. Once you get used to it, you'll even become able to picture your steps from above, almost as if you were looking at a map."

"So it's not something I can learn in a day. Got it. But I guess it wouldn't be as rewarding if it was that easy, right?"

"Indeed. Once you feel like you've finally mastered it, you'll run into yet another challenge, so you basically have to train your routing skills every day."

"Fair point. Daily training, huh? Is it just me, or is that all I've been doing ever since coming of age?" I mused out loud.

"But that training is exactly what allowed you to become a sage. Besides, scouting and navigating unknown paths for you is *my* duty now, and I take great pride in that role. I don't plan on losing to anyone on that front."

"Thanks! I definitely feel more secure with you by my side, Kefin," I said, eliciting another chuckle from my companion.

As I chatted with Kefin, I found myself thinking back on my past life.

I'd once had the opportunity to listen to a Buddhist monk give a sermon. He'd said that we humans borrow our souls from Buddha himself and, as such, have to polish them to ensure they are spotless when we give them back. We're already polishing them just by living, but the more effort we put in, the more our souls sparkle—and, as a result, the happier we become. And if the Buddha is satisfied with our work, he might lend us a soul to polish again, along with a few bonuses along the way.

Thinking back on those words, I couldn't help but wonder if I was doing a good job of polishing my soul. Even if I was, with all the help I'd been getting from Monsieur Luck, I might need to put in some extra effort to make sure it shone as bright as it could. After

all, with all the chaos I'd been dragged into despite my desire for a peaceful, tranquil life, I must've accumulated quite a bit of bad karma in a past life. The more I thought about it, the clearer it became that the peaceful life I longed for would remain out of reach unless I trained diligently while I still could. With that realization, I made a firm resolution to dedicate myself to my training.

After about five minutes of walking along the twisting hallways of the labyrinthine building, Kefin eventually came to a stop.

"I take it we've arrived?" I said.

"Yes. This is Dongahar's private room."

I retraced our steps in my head and looked around, noticing that there were no other rooms in the vicinity.

"Is it just me, or is this room really far away from the others?" I asked.

"You'll see why once you're inside," Kefin replied as he opened the door. "Come on in."

I stepped inside and was immediately struck by the size of the place. It was far larger than my own. Even Lumina's room, which I had thought spacious, felt like a closet in comparison.

"This place is ten times the size of my room," I commented. "Looks like the Executive Division has plenty of money to throw around, huh?"

The walls and ceiling were white, and the furniture was understated, calming, and quite visibly expensive. As I took in my surroundings, I couldn't help but think that Dongahar had great taste when it came to interior design.

"It does indeed seem so," Kefin said, "though the documents I handed you weren't in this room, but in the book storage next door. We found them on the desk beside the bookshelves."

I couldn't help but wonder how Dongahar avoided feeling overwhelmed living in such an enormous place. Or perhaps he didn't?

With that question in mind, I headed for the mini-library connected to the room, which, to my surprise, was quite snug and cozy. Perhaps it was the warm, dim orange lighting that made it seem so calming.

The desk Kefin had mentioned was plain and simple, much like the one in my room. I opened the drawer and found a necklace with a glowing orb the size of a baseball encased in metal chains. Upon closer inspection, it seemed less like an accessory and more like the orb was trapped by the chains.

"Did no documents mention this thing?" I asked Kefin, pointing at the necklace.

"It looks like a regular necklace to me, so I don't see why they would. But Mister Galba quickly skimmed Dongahar's journal just in case, and there didn't seem to be anything about it," he replied.

I should've known the two of them would've looked into it already. They were pretty much experts at intelligence gathering. But...a regular necklace? Really? I held a hand over it to inspect it. "I can sense a bit of mana emanating from it," I said.

"Is it an artifact?" Kefin asked. "Mister Galba and I aren't very good at detecting mana, so we didn't notice."

"Well, we all have our strengths," I reassured him. "But still... Hmm. I can't shake the feeling that these chains are blocking the orb somehow. It's hard to explain, but it feels like there are two distinct mana signatures emanating from it, and the one from the chains is suppressing the other."

"What orb? To me, it just looks like a necklace made of some chains."

Could Kefin not see it? "There's an orb in the center of the chains," I explained. "There might be some sort of condition to be able to see it. Either way, I don't want to break this seal. I'm scared of the mess we might get dragged into if I do."

"What about putting it in your magic bag for the time being?" Kefin suggested. "Assuming you can touch it, of course."

"Good idea. I'll do that...if I can touch it. Kefin, can you search the room one last time to make sure we didn't miss anything?"

"Yes, sir," he replied with a nod before leaving the storage room.

"All righty, then," I muttered, reaching a hand toward the necklace without giving it much thought. To my surprise, I was able to touch it without issue, which made me hesitate. Perhaps I *shouldn't* put it in my magic bag just yet.

For the time being, I decided to leave the necklace where it was and read Dongahar's farewell letter. I had no intention of letting him die, so the letter had kind of lost its purpose anyway.

I took a seat on the desk chair and began.

"I am quite reluctant to write a farewell letter not knowing whose hand it might end up in, but all I hope is that whoever reads this sincerely cares about Her Holiness and the Church."

Dongahar then went on to recount his childhood and the events he had witnessed within the Church since the labyrinth had appeared, all in minute detail. A little later, he explained that two years ago, he had begun looking into the missing person cases in the Luburk Kingdom, suspecting that the demon sightings in Illumasia might be connected to the disappearances. Then, six months ago, the paladins had brought the bodies of the demons we'd killed on our way to Merratoni to HQ, confirming his suspicions that someone was turning humans and beastfolk into demons. This prompted him to investigate Blanche and Illumasia.

But shortly after, his chronic illness had worsened, causing him to vomit blood and collapse. Knowing that he didn't have much time left, he'd decided that his final mission would be to uncover the truth behind the demonization cases. He couldn't afford to waste time, so he had decided to use his position as head of the Church's foreign relations department to get in direct contact with Blanche and Illumasia. This had proven relatively easy, as he had received numerous secret reports about rebellions brewing in those nations. All that had remained was for him to provide them with concrete evidence of his intent to betray Shurule, which he had accomplished by using me and the paladins as bait.

Illumasia had dropped any communication with him after this, but Blanche had taken the bait and sent a messenger to meet with him. The messenger had allegedly been especially interested in the Valkyries and me and had asked Dongahar many questions about our activities. The messenger had also told him about a forbidden technique that could increase one's lifespan, which had piqued Dongahar's interest. However, the messenger's conditions for teaching him the spell had been for Dongahar to, one, give him

information about Lumina and me, and two, offer test subjects to Blanche for demonization.

As Dongahar had debated whether to accept the offer, the messenger had told him about the rumors circulating about me—the ones claiming I'd lost my holy magic. If that was true, it could threaten the very existence of the Church, so Dongahar had decided to act before it was too late. However, he knew that even if he were to start immediately, he wouldn't have time to rebuild the Church before his illness took him. So after much hesitation, he had resolved to use the forbidden technique on himself and bear the consequences of his misdeeds.

In exchange for the forbidden spell, he had offered up those who had been a blight on the Church to Blanche: the human supremacists who constantly spewed their toxic beliefs, and those who'd wronged the Church or sold information about it.

"What if I told you that I know of a secret technique that could make you stronger?" he'd asked them.

None of them had shown the slightest hint of hesitation before replying that they wanted it. Even after Dongahar had told them that the powers in question were demonic in nature they hadn't backed down. And so over the course of three months, the knights had gradually undergone demonization through all sorts of experiments.

"If this is true, it's highly unlikely he was the one who tried to turn the Valkyries into demons," I muttered to myself.

The demonized knights seemed to have gained the trust of Blanche, as they had received books containing demon-summoning techniques, which they definitely had *not* wanted the Church to discover. In the event that the Church did find out, Blanche had instructed the knights to claim it was all Illumasia's doing. When Dongahar heard about this, he had resolved to kill the demonized knights himself before they were discovered.

But it was at that exact moment that I had returned from Neldahl. Upon learning that I had become a sage, Dongahar had ended up rethinking his plans.

"Did I underestimate him?" he wrote in his letter. *"Or perhaps his return is my punishment for deceiving the Church. Either way, as*

long as the Church can be saved, I do not care about what happens to me. All I hope is that this man will turn out to be a hero as valiant as Lord Reinstar himself."

I shifted my gaze away from the letter and looked up at the ceiling. "You expect way too much of me, dude," I mumbled.

Why had he decided to pin his hopes on *me*, of all people? And if he *had* this much faith in me, why hadn't he come to ask me for help directly?

After this brief pause, I focused my attention back on the letter, where Dongahar described the demon summoning books Blanche had offered him and the knights. He wrote that he'd burned the one the messenger had given him immediately after he was done reading it but had made a record of everything he remembered. He'd also made note of everything related to demonization. I assumed I'd be able to find all these documents in the stack Kefin had given me earlier.

I finished reading the letter, and the last sentence revealed the true reason he had written it in the first place.

"If someone reads this letter after my death, please give it to either Her Holiness or the sage. The Church is a noble and sacred institution, and I wholeheartedly hope that it will become a place of salvation for all."

I let out a sigh. Every sin requires just retribution. *If only it were easier to categorize things as good or evil...*

No one could see a situation from all perspectives, and some things couldn't be resolved with pretty words. The glum realization made my chest hurt, and I instinctively breathed another sigh. I wanted nothing more than to take a break and do something fun to clear my mind, but I ultimately decided to read Dongahar's notes about demonization first. He had documented the effects he'd observed in the knights, recording his observations day by day, much like a journal. A particular sentence toward the end made me pause.

"The dukedom of Blanche once attempted a hero summoning, but instead of a hero, they received the power to dominate the world. It is said that when they tested that power, they managed to reshape the very landscape, turning a plain into a valley. This power

is currently blocked, but they say they will soon reclaim it. If this proves to be true, it is a matter of great concern."

Blanche seemed like an incredibly dangerous nation—perhaps even more so than Illumasia.

"It seems that they plan to make Illumasia's research on demonization public and use them as a cover to hide their own misdeeds. The messenger from Blanche told me that their plan was already in motion. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to reinforce the barrier around the Church's headquarters as soon as possible."

Was it Blanche's plan to use Illumasia as a decoy to buy themselves time until they'd regained their power? If that was the case, Saint Shurule could find itself in a tricky position, caught between the dukedom and the empire.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder why Dongahar had told me to go to Illumasia and not Blanche. I supposed I wouldn't get the answer to that question until he woke up, though. Regardless of the situation, the fact remained that Saint Shurule was at a disadvantage when it came to military strength, so we absolutely needed to devise a plan to deal with the situation.

"I'm going to have to tell everyone about this, not just the pope."

If I didn't act now, I might regret my decision in the not-so-distant future. A sense of urgency washed over me, and I found myself hoping that by the time I reached the age at which I had died in my past life, things would be calmer and I could *finally* live the carefree life of my dreams.

I exited Dongahar's mini-library with mixed feelings just as Kefin came to tell me he was done inspecting the room. From what he said, he'd looked into every nook and cranny.

"Did you find anything of note?" I asked.

"There's a magic circle under this rug, but it wouldn't react no matter what I tried. Other than that, the Executive Division claimed that Dongahar was a human supremacist, but I can't find any evidence of that in here," Kefin told me.

It would indeed be weird for Dongahar to be a human supremacist, considering how much he admired the pope, who was a half-elf. Perhaps he had simply been faking those extremist views

to keep the rest of the Executive Division in line. In the end, only he knew the truth.

All righty, then. What was that about a magic circle?

I considered leaving it alone if it hadn't reacted to Kefin's attempts, but once I cast Dispel on it, the magic circle disappeared and the floor gave way to reveal a staircase.

"Oh, wow," I said.

"Should I call for reinforcements, sir?" Kefin asked.

I peered down the stairs and saw a light shining below, which told me it most likely led to a rather small chamber.

"No. It doesn't seem like whatever's down there is all that big, so I'm just going to check it out real quick."

"Then allow me to go first."

With that, Kefin began to cautiously descend the stairs, and I followed him. The room we arrived in had a cell in which, to my surprise, Granhart sat kneeling on the floor.

"Mister Granhart?!" I exclaimed.

My voice caught his attention, and he opened his eyes, though he didn't make any move to stand up. He nodded slowly. "Has Mister Dongahar passed away, as he wished?"

"I take it you knew what he was up to?" I replied.

"I accidentally found out about the knights' demonization. But Mister Dongahar saved me before they could kill me and hid me here until things settled down. Then he told me about his plan."

"Can I ask you to relay his words to Her Holiness?"

"Of course. That was Mister Dongahar's last request as well."

With that, he stood up and left the cell. The door wasn't locked, meaning that Dongahar had most likely told him the truth when he'd said he would let him hide down there.

"Oh, by the way, I couldn't get behind Dongahar's last request, so I healed him so that he can tell the pope everything himself," I said casually as we started up the stairs.

Granhart bowed his head to me. "You have my thanks, Sage Luciel."

"None of that, please. I did it for myself, not for you or anyone else," I replied as the three of us headed back up to Dongahar's

room. “Mister Granhart, can you please go to the pope’s chamber and tell her everything Dongahar told you?”

“Of course.” Granhart nodded, offering me one last bow before leaving.

“All right. I wanted to investigate Dongahar’s room myself, but I should probably head back to the training grounds for the time being.”

I was a bit worried about my master and Lionel. They were much weaker than before, and I was scared they wouldn’t listen to their bodies’ limits and would push themselves too far.

“Sir,” Kefin called out to me after a short pause. “May I stay behind and inspect the other rooms after you head back?”

“Something bothering you?” I asked.

“Yes. I didn’t come across the demonization medicine Dongahar mentioned in his letter. I’d like to find it to confirm that what he wrote in his farewell letter was true,” he explained.

“I see. Well, almost all members of the Executive Division are behind bars, so you can roam around freely. But we don’t know what else could be hiding here, so be careful, all right? Don’t do anything reckless.”

“Yes, sir.”

I had Kefin take me back to the entrance of the Executive Division, and after asking him the way back to the training field, I set off on my own.

When I returned to the training grounds, I was met with the sight of my master and Lionel dripping with blood. A dozen or so of the knights were unconscious on the ground, but the others didn’t even have a scratch on them. Yet they looked anything but calm.

“Ketty, how are things going?” I asked.

“Ah, chief,” she said when she spotted me. “Sir Lionel and the Whirlwind said they can’t hold back in their state, so they’re fighting unarmed to avoid accidentally killing the knights.”

“They want to fight *that* badly?”

It looked like I’d made the right decision coming back when I had. Neither of them seemed to mind the pain, but they were pretty beaten-up. If I’d left them alone a bit longer, they would’ve lost

control, and it would've been nearly impossible to stop them. They were so starved for battle—for any kind of combat, really—that their little bout with the knights should've had helped them blow off some steam, on top of being a good training drill—though I figured they might be a little traumatized by how competitive my master and Lionel were.

Ketty crossed her arms and shifted her gaze to the two of them. "It's good to get heated during practice," she said as if she'd read my thoughts. "But during a real battle, you've got to keep your cool and fight smart instead of just pouncing on your prey. That's the way of a true warrior."

"It sounds really cool when you put it like that...though in their case, I'm sure they just wanted to fight without holding back."

"Well, duh. Who do you think we're talking about? And now that you're back, they might even allow themselves to use their weapons," she said with a resigned sigh before walking up to the two battle-crazed lunatics.

She told them something I couldn't hear, and they looked at me, breaking into ferocious grins as they reached for their weapons.

"All righty, play time's over," Brod announced as he turned back to face the knights.

"We'll be using our weapons too, if you don't mind," Lionel added. "Don't worry. As long as Mister Luciel's here, it's fine if you lose an arm or two. He'll patch you right up."

"Careful, though. If you let your attention slip, you might cross over to the other side before you realize what's happening to you," my master continued, picking up where Lionel left off. "So if you wanna finish the training fast, you'd better hope Luciel runs out of mana."

"Let's pick up from where we left off, shall we? C'mon, attack us. Don't be shy."

"No? All right, then. If you're not gonna make a move, we'll just have to come to you first!"

No sooner had they finished their little exchange than they put their threats into action and charged at the knights.

"No matter how you look at it, they just wanted another go at the

knights, didn't they?" I commented in exasperation.

The knights' morale was already at rock bottom, so I probably should've stopped Brod and Lionel from beating them up further, but I couldn't exactly do that now that they'd dragged me into their shenanigans, the sneaky rascals.

"But they're still your teachers despite their quirks, are they not?" a voice said from behind me.

I whipped my head around and was surprised to find Lumina standing there. When had she arrived? My attention had been so focused on Brod and Lionel that I hadn't heard her approach.

"When did you get here? I didn't even notice," I said.

She chuckled softly. "You were distracted, so I thought, why not give you a little fright?" she replied, a mischievous smile curling her lips.

Now that I thought about it, wasn't it her first time meeting Brod?

"My master and Lionel are more than just my combat teachers; they're my life mentors, almost like a father and an older brother. They've shown me what it truly means to be a man," I explained.

"You trust them a lot, I see."

"I do. If I hadn't met my master, I'd probably be stuck in Merratoni doing regular healing jobs. And if I hadn't met Lionel in Yenice, I might not have made it out of there alive. The more I reflect on it, the more I realize how lucky I've been with the people I've encountered—including you, of course."

"Stop it; you're going to make me blush," she said.

"It's true, though. If you hadn't come to my rescue back in Merratoni, I never would've found the Healer's Guild that easily. And since I didn't have time to get lost, I had no idea how badly people viewed healers when I jumped in headfirst to offer my services to the Adventurer's Guild."

Had I known, I most likely wouldn't have dared to set foot in there. In a way, my meeting with Lumina had kind of become the first turning point of my new life.

"The thing that has got you so far was your hard work, Luciel. You've even risen to the rank of sage. Most people could never even dream of achieving such a feat."

"I didn't really have the option not to try. After all, my life was pretty much always on the line."

I was happy to hear Lumina praise me. Still, I probably wouldn't be here right now if I had given up at any point.

"Perhaps it's because of that attitude of yours that the people around you always seem so happy," she said.

I shot her a quizzical look.

"I'm a bit envious," she added.

"I was actually really envious of the bond between you and the other Valkyries at first," I confessed.

I'd always wished I had someone close in age to share a friendly rivalry with. Actually, scratch that. I probably never would've been able to befriend someone I considered a rival. It was only because I had older figures to guide me, like my master and Lionel, that I'd gotten to where I was today.

Another chuckle escaped her at my words. "You haven't changed at all."

"Really? I feel like I've matured a bit, at least. But I'll keep working on myself until I become someone others can rely on," I said.

"That's not really what I meant, but I'm looking forward to it."

"This new, gentler manner of speaking is quite refreshing," I remarked.

"That's...not something you should say to someone's face."

"You're right, sorry. The words just slipped out."

I'd accidentally put my foot in my mouth. Still, I hoped the reason Lumina's face was all red was because she felt embarrassed.

"Luciel, there's something I've been meaning to ask you. Why are you so passionate about fighting? As a former healer, you must've had ways of avoiding combat, did you not?"

I wouldn't say I was *passionate* about fighting. Unlike my master and Lionel, I'd never actually *liked* combat.

"You're making me sound like a battle-crazed lunatic like those two," I said with a smile.

"Ah, um, that wasn't my intention..."

I grinned at her, and she returned my smile, though she looked a

little tense. She must've been worried about me after hearing me mention all the times I'd almost died during my little speech earlier. It felt like all I ever did was make her worry.

As to *why* I fought... Well, thinking back on it, it had all started when I met the Holy Dragon and he'd told me that unless all the Eternal Dragons were freed, the future hero wouldn't stand a chance against the Demon Lord. In other words, if I didn't do everything in my power to save the dragons before then, a lot of people would unfairly lose their lives when the Demon Lord made its move. I wanted to avoid that scenario no matter what. Plus, I'd given the Holy Dragon my word that I'd try to save the other dragons when he gave me his blessing, and breaking that promise wasn't an option.

While it might sound a bit contradictory, I genuinely believed this was the best choice if I wanted to live a long life in this world. And I *hated* it. But I couldn't level up without fighting, so here I was.

"Well, to answer your question, I've come to realize that I have a knack for getting myself into all sorts of troublesome situations. Even worse, I can't just ignore them and let things be, or they'll spiral into the worst-case scenarios imaginable."

Between the Wicked One and the demons, I had my hands full. I couldn't waste a second dealing with all the problems popping up in my path, or I'd definitely end up getting dragged into this whole mess. Well, I guess I already had been after the whole Dongahar debacle. But yeah, if I didn't make my move soon, things would definitely take a turn for the worse.

"You could try an exorcism to get rid of that bad luck of yours," Lumina suggested.

"If that was enough, I'd have done it already, believe me," I replied.

A serious look came over her face as she locked eyes with me. Then, she abruptly asked, "Luciel, where are you headed next? Blanche or Illumasia?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"If you plan on visiting Blanche, I have many connections there, who..." She stopped and shook her head. "No, forget that. I'd like you to take me with you."

Right, Lumina was originally from Blanche. She must've been worried about her family back there.

"I'd definitely feel a lot more reassured with you by my side," I replied. "Unfortunately, I can't tell you for sure what my next destination is until Dongahar wakes up."

Both Illumasia and Blanche were involved in demonization experiments, so I probably wouldn't be able to avoid them forever, no matter how much I dreaded the thought of going.

"I wish the higher-ups would send me on missions with you sometimes," Lumina said, her cheeks reddening slightly.

When I saw the embarrassed look on her face, it felt like the world came to a stop. I racked my brain to come up with something to say and decided that, for now, replying to her comment was my best course of action. "Um, Lumina. I—"



"Luciel! Stop flirting with your girl and come heal the knights!" my master shouted, interrupting me halfway through.

"Coming! Sorry about that, Lumina. I'll make sure I take the time to have a long chat with you once this is all over."

Brod's interruption had been an absolute godsend. I genuinely felt like I shouldn't raise any flags right now.

Good job, master! I thought, deciding to put the whole matter with Lumina on the back burner for now. "Like" and "dislike" were pretty straightforward feelings and easy to communicate, but when it came to more nuanced matters, I didn't want to say anything without being certain of how I felt. It'd just be rude. For that reason, I was *very* grateful for my master's interruption. He'd really saved my hide there.

It may not have seemed fair to Lumina, but I needed more time to sort out my feelings. After all, in this world, most people my age not only had significant others but were often already married.

Lumina chuckled. "All right. Hurry up and go."

If she was disappointed that my master had interrupted us, she didn't show it. In fact, she even urged me to get to work.

"I'm going, I'm going. See you, Lumina."

"See you soon, Luciel."

With those words, I headed for the training grounds to heal the knights who were now unconscious on the ground.

02 — Recruitment

A pile of knights awaited me in front of my master and Lionel. The pair clearly hadn't worried about the difference in level between their opponents and themselves. In fact, they must have seemed like the perfect opponents to practice their counters on.

I couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for the knights. They were the protectors of the Church, and I knew firsthand that they had the skills to live up to that title. Opposite them were my master and Lionel, two insanely powerful fighters. This mock battle would've served as training for the knights to subdue and restrain strong opponents, while giving Brod and Lionel a chance to face off against multiple adversaries at once—something they didn't get to do very often these days.

It should've been a great experience for both parties. "Should" being the keyword here. Because as soon as I returned to the training grounds and healed the knights, the pair decided to change their strategy. Despite having sustained some injuries, they completely brushed them off and shifted their offense to a more aggressive approach.

The knights managed to hold their ground and fight back, successfully wounding the duo. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't have known that this would turn the two battle-crazed lunatics into battle-crazed demons.

The demons in question asked me for some healing, which I readily provided. Then, once their wounds were closed, they broke into ferocious grins and charged back at their opponents. The knights must've felt the shift in their demeanor, as they began slashing at them for real to end the training as fast as possible.

After that, it felt like I was watching a combat scene straight out of a movie. The two demons (my master and Lionel, that is) evaded, warded off, and repelled attack after attack. However, at their current level, they couldn't dodge every single hit, and the number of wounds on their bodies quickly multiplied. I genuinely began to

think they might lose.

Overwhelmed by knights on every side, they found themselves standing back-to-back. Without exchanging a single word, they began rotating on the spot to shield each other from the knights' relentless assault and counter with swift strikes. They would occasionally allow themselves to take hits if it meant that they could deal more damage in return, slowly chipping away at their opponents' numbers. Soon, some of the knights began backing away from the fight, cowering in fear. The sentiment quickly spread through the rest of their ranks, and hesitation began to ripple through the group.

Unfortunately for them, my master and Lionel weren't generous enough to overlook that weakness. They took control of the fight, forcing their opponents to attack in ways that were easier for them to handle, and managed to isolate duels wherever they could. Knowing that friendly fire was more likely to happen when fighting one-on-one battles, the knights quickly tried to regroup, but it was too late. They soon found themselves crushed—both physically and mentally—and Brod and Lionel began knocking them out one after the other, as if to say they weren't interested in such weak opponents.

"D'you really think you can protect the Church with those weak muscles and pathetic willpower? Luciel's a million times more fun to fight than you," Brod said.

"Hard agree," Lionel chimed in. "You're all in a miserable state. What do you hope to accomplish like this?"

The two of them tried to rile the knights up by taunting them, but the knights got cold feet and wouldn't budge. Brod's and Lionel's expressions soured, disappointed and frustrated that their opponents wouldn't fight back.

But then, two figures approached them.

"From now on, we shall take over the fight," the first said.

"We got it, you're strong. So we've gotta step in before you damage the Knights of Shurule's reputation too badly."

The voices belonged to none other than Elizabeth and Saran, two members of the Valkyries. The other members of their squad were

standing alongside them, weapons at the ready. It seemed they had finished throwing the demonized knights into the cells.

"Oh? The Church's strongest paladins have come to challenge us?" Brod said.

"I've sparred with them before," Lionel commented. "They're the cream of the crop of the Church, for sure."

When the Valkyries were first established, they were frequently dispatched to the battlefield or tasked with dealing with thieves—assignments their superiors labeled "routine tasks." The true intention was likely to undermine the Church's only female-only regiment before they could make any significant impact. However, the outcome was quite the opposite. These adverse circumstances had helped the Valkyries grow tremendously, both by raising their levels and skills and by building trust between the members. As a result, they had become the Church's strongest regiment. Some even claimed that Lumina, the Valkyries' leader, was stronger than Catherine, the Captain of the Guard.

Six months ago, the Valkyries had faced off against Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin and lost miserably. Since then, Ketty and Kefin had only gotten stronger, and I was positive they would be able to easily defeat the Valkyries on their own. But my master's and Lionel's skills and levels had been completely reset after the pair had died. They had started building their stats back up again, but I genuinely had no idea if they could hold their own against the Valkyries yet. As such, I was quite curious to see how the fight would unfold.

Unfortunately, it seemed I'd have to wait to find out. Why? Well...

"Luciel. I'm hungry," Pola said.

"Mister Luciel, when can we go to that artifact store you mentioned?" Lycian added.

Dhoran was next. "Luciel, I'm tired of watchin' these blokes brawl. I reckon it's high time we head back to the airship and get that magic artillery installed."

It seemed that the members of Luciel and Co.'s research and development squad had finally gotten bored with waiting around. I couldn't blame them. We'd arrived in the city when the sun was still high in the sky, but after the whole demonized knights debacle, the

ensuing fight, and the cleanup that had followed, it was already getting dark.

My master and Lionel had been training with the knights for almost three hours now. I had no doubt that the two battle-crazed demons could continue, but all the knights—minus the Valkyries—were exhausted, both physically and mentally. If they continued to push themselves, they wouldn't be able to do their job to the best of their abilities tomorrow.

Besides, although Lycian wouldn't cause me too much trouble, I had a feeling that Pola and Dhoran would be a pain to deal with if they got cranky. With that in mind, I decided it was time to wrap up the mock battle.

"Master, Lionel, let's stop here for today."

"But, Luciel, we don't get this kind of opportunity too often," Brod argued.

Yeah, I'd had an inkling he wouldn't give up so easily. Good thing I had a plan—one that might just ignite some motivation in the knights as well.

"Take a look around," I replied. "You've beaten up the knights so thoroughly, they don't have an ounce of fighting spirit left in them."

"Yeah, that's why we're going to fight the Valkyries now," my master retorted.

"If you start now, you won't be done before night falls, and you'll be off your game because it's too dark. It's best to call it a day," I urged them.

"Tch. You've got a point, I guess."

To my surprise, they backed down without too much of a fight. Then again, one was a guildmaster, and there was no way he could have risen to that rank if he relied solely on passion without any strategy.

I still made sure to give him a little comfort. "We have the airship now, so you'll be able to come train with the knights from time to time. We can even go clear labyrinths together again if our schedules line up."

"Sure thing. Hey, you know what? I might bring some Substance X with me next time and force those who lose their spirit to drink it.

It'll be good for them. Well, if they manage to keep it down, that is," he said loudly enough for the knights to hear.

Those who knew what Substance X was instantly paled at his words. I had a good feeling they'd train even harder from now on.

With that, Brod and Lionel's mock battle with the knights came to an end. Normally, I would have headed straight to the pope's chambers to give her my report and Dongahar's farewell letter, but for once, I decided to prioritize my own business. I wanted to scout Rina—a fellow reincarnator—to work for Luciel and Co., head to the Adventurer's Guild to cancel the job I'd commissioned them for, and enjoy a nice dinner cooked by Grantz, the guildmaster, while I was there.

Galba and Catherine were nowhere to be found, but I decided not to go look for them. They clearly had a lot of things to work out. I was about to go find Kefin in the Executive Division building when I spotted him returning to the training grounds.

"I'm back, sir," he told me as soon as he arrived.

"Perfect timing, I was about to go get you. Did you find anything new at the Executive Division?" I asked.

"Yes. I believe my new findings could bring a huge profit to your company once we tell the Church about it."

"Okay, now you've got my attention. I have some business at an artifact shop and the Adventurer's Guild, but I'll listen to your report after, if that's all right with you."

"Yes, sir. Will we be spending the night here in the Holy City, then?" he asked.

"Either here or in the airship's passenger cabins, depending on how things go," I replied.

"Understood." Kefin nodded before making his way to Ketty, who seemed bored out of her mind at the edge of the training field.

I turned to the knights. "Thank you for entertaining my master and Lionel, everyone. We'll come back, so please be ready for another round next time. I'm sure one day you'll be able to defeat even a ten-meter-tall golem like Pola's if you keep up the good work!"

I would always remember the way their expressions melted away

at my words. They all looked like they were wearing blank Noh masks. As for Pola, she simply shot me a quizzical look upon hearing her name.

We left HQ soon after. I sent my master to the guild first, while I, Lionel (who was acting as my bodyguard), Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian went to Rina's shop.

"WELCOME TO COMMEDIA ARTIFACTS," a golem greeted us as soon as we stepped in.

Pola and Lycian made a beeline for it and began poking it all over.

"It's still as interesting as last time," Pola commented.

"I'm *so* impressed that she thought of making a talking golem. How novel!" Lycian marveled.

They'd been here before, but they were as excited as if it were their first time. I really wished they would learn the meaning of the word "restraint" at some point, though.

"Welcome to Commedia Artifa— Oh! You're the girls from last time! And you're from the Church, are you not?"

It wasn't Rina who had come to greet us, but the employee we'd met last time.

"Good evening. Is Rina here?" I asked.

"Ah, yes, she is. Just give me a moment."

She disappeared into the back room, and the next instant, Rina emerged. I hadn't asked her directly yet, but based on the type of inventions she made, I was convinced she was a fellow reincarnator.

"Welcome, Mister Luciel. I'm glad to see you well. I'd heard a lot of rumors about you, so I was a little worried."

"Good evening, Rina. I'm honored that you remember me. As for the rumors...well, they're just that. Rumors."

"That's good to hear. So, what brings you to my shop today?" she asked, her gaze drifting to Dhoran and the girls before returning to me.

"I'm here to recruit you for my company's research and development squad," I said without missing a beat.

"Uh...recruit *me*?" she asked, clearly taken aback by my sudden declaration. She was so shocked that her glasses were threatening to slip down her nose.

My three companions stepped forward.

"I'm Dhoran, the head of Luciel and Co.'s research and development squad. I'm mostly in charge of smithin' and the likes."

"I'm Pola, a master magic artificer. I make all sorts of automatic cooking things."

"And *I* am Lycian, the star employee of the research and development squad! I'm currently in the process of making a magic device to detect monsters."

Dhoran's introduction was pretty normal, but the other two were *definitely* tooting their own horns.

"Oh, wow! You two are incredible!" Rina marveled, beaming at the girls. But...was it just me or were there invisible sparks flying between Pola and Lycian? "I've been working on a magic item that can appraise objects for ages, but I'm still stuck in the manufacturing phase," Rina continued.

"Let's return to the topic at hand, shall we? For your contract, I would like to discuss the terms that would best suit your needs," I said.

Her shop had started to take off lately, but based on my impression from the last time we talked, I guessed she was more interested in developing magic items than running a business. For that reason, I had no doubt she would accept my offer.

But, to my surprise, she bowed and said, "I'm sorry. I can't come work for you."

I hadn't expected her to refuse, so for a while, all I could do was stare at her, befuddled. After snapping myself back to reality, I asked, "May I ask why?"

"I have a dream, you see," she said. "I want to make a vehicle that can fly in the sky. Did you see the aircraft that landed at the Church's headquarters at noon? I went all the way to the Church to take a look at it, but the guards refused to let me in. So I've decided that my new objective is to study under the engineer who made that aircraft...though I don't know who they are yet."

Her eyes were burning with determination.



I turned to Dhoran. "Well...what do you say?"

He nodded. "She's motivated for sure. I don't mind takin' 'er under my wing."

He'd been scrutinizing her since we'd entered the shop and, after hearing her enthusiastic speech, he seemed willing to let her join the team.

Next, I looked at Pola and Lycian. "Girls, do you think you'll be able to get along with her?"

"Engineers express themselves through their skills. Magic artificers do so through their creations," Pola said matter-of-factly.

Lycian nodded thoughtfully. "It's important to not only be inventive but also have the skills to bring those inventions to life."

Despite the pragmatism of their comments, it felt to me like the two of them were happy to welcome a new member to their squad. A creative genius and a genius of hard work... Now imagine adding a reincarnator with the memories of her past life to the mix. I was excited to see what kind of creations the three of them would come up with.

"Um, I told you I can't work for you..." Rina said, stopping us before we got too excited.

"That aircraft you saw isn't just any aircraft—it's an airship. Well, it's actually a flying boat, if you want to get technical. The engineer who built it is Dhoran right here, while Pola made the interior. It even has a space-expansion enchantment that makes it much larger inside than it seems on the outside. And it belongs to yours truly. So? What do you say? If you agree to join us, you'll even get to ride on it within the next few da—"

"I'll join you!" Rina interrupted me. "I'll go *anywhere* if I can study under the master who made that airship."

Well, that was fast. We hadn't even talked about the salary yet.

"Perfect. I'll hire your employee too. Well, if she's interested, that is, so how about we discuss the terms of your contracts over dinner?" I suggested.

I was glad Rina had ended up accepting my offer, but I had definitely *not* expected the airship to be what won her over. Monsieur Luck had been making himself scarce lately, but it looked

like he was finally back in business.

Dhoran was about to have his hands full with an apprentice, so I made a mental note to ensure he got the rest he deserved. I glanced at him, a sheepish smile on my face, and saw him pressing his palm to his forehead. He must've reached the same conclusion I had.

"Sure. I'll go get ready. Nanya, you're coming with us," Rina called to her employee, who had just returned from the back room and was now manning the register.

A look of surprise registered on the girl's face. "But what about the shop?"

"We'll close early for today. I'm going to do something very important, and I want you to come with me. I've *finally* found my master," Rina announced.

The employee gasped before giving a vigorous nod. "Yes, ma'am!"

Yup, sure enough, she's already begun calling Dhoran "master."

More impressive, though, was how readily her employee agreed to come with us given how little information Rina had offered her. It looked like the two of them had a lot of trust in each other.

"I'll be right back!" Rina told us determinedly.

"Um, sure," I replied, taken aback by her sudden transformation. She had gone from quiet and reserved to a confident business owner in the blink of an eye. I assumed it was because she now saw me as a potential collaborator and not a customer, but it still gave me a bit of whiplash.

I really don't understand women, I thought, puzzled, while waiting for the pair to return.

03 — A New Nickname

We reached the Adventurer's Guild with Rina, the owner of Commedia Artifacts, and her employee, Nanya, following closely behind.

"Mister Luciel...this is the Adventurer's Guild," Rina remarked, instantly stiffening when she noticed where we were. It seemed she had been so caught up in her excitement about the airship that she hadn't realized where we were headed until now.

"Yep. This is where we'll be having dinner. Don't worry, it's not the kind of place you imagine," I said to reassure her.

For many reincarnators, the term "Adventurer's Guild" conjured up images of a rough-and-tumble place filled with rowdy individuals armed to the teeth, who drank too much and were ready to pick a fight with anything that moved. The mere thought of stepping inside used to terrify me when I'd first reincarnated, so it made complete sense that Rina would feel scared as well, especially since she was a woman.

We stepped into the building, and several adventurers flocked to me.

"Saint Weirdo! We heard ya found the guy who spread those nasty rumors about ya! And ya showed everyone they were just lies!" one said.

"We worked so hard trying to track 'em down for ya. Can ya at least treat us to a drink?" another chimed in.

"First, though, we thought of a new nickname for— Oh crap! What's the Tempest doing here?!"

"Evacuate the building, guys! Hurry! She's come to destroy the guild again!"

"Ugh. Didn't the owner ban her from the premises?"

"Ya sure got weird taste in women, Saint Weirdo."

"No, I think he just wants to help her. Knowing Saint Weirdo, he'll try to save the poor little lost lamb before she turns into a full-blown goddess of destruction."

"Oooh, ya might be onto somethin'! If anyone can reform her, it's *definitely* him."

"We have high hopes for ya, Saint Weirdo, sir!"

The adventurers had been their usual frank and unreserved selves when we stepped into the building, but for some reason, they were now keeping their distance, eyeing me with a mix of respect and anticipation. I also noticed that they kept glancing at Rina.

"Um, Rina? What did you do to them?" I asked.

She avoided my gaze, her expression stiffening. Her earlier excitement seemed like a distant memory. "Well...there was a *teeny* tiny little accident when I was testing my artifacts in the training area downstairs," she explained. "One of my creations malfunctioned, and it kind of blew up the barrier around the training grounds along with a couple of walls and part of the ceiling. Ha ha..."

So that was why she'd been so hesitant to go inside. She hadn't been *scared*, just fidgety because she knew what she'd done.

"It's no laughing matter! We had to give most of our profits to the guild to cover the repair costs. We almost had to close up shop for good," Nanya said, dealing another blow to Rina's already weakened confidence.

How was it that *none* of the researchers and craftspeople I encountered possessed the slightest bit of common sense?

"Artifacts malfunction all the time. Failure is the mother of success," Pola chimed in.

Lycian nodded. "If you're too afraid of what *might* happen, you'll never make any progress," she agreed.

"Pola, Lycian..." Rina whispered. Her voice was tight with emotion, and she looked like she was seconds away from crying in relief. The poor thing had no idea what awaited her.

"But you should always make sure to restrain the power and output of your artifacts so that nothing bad happens even if they *do* malfunction," Pola continued sternly.

"You should *never* cut corners when it comes to your experiments!" Lycian added.

Pola's point was valid, but wasn't it ironic that Lycian was

lecturing Rina about money, considering she'd ended up in slavery because of her own debts from creating magical artifacts? What, did she not like people who had the same flaws as her or something?

"I-I'm being more careful now! But back then, I'd received an order for a device to kill flying monsters, and the deadline was tight, so I didn't have a choice," Rina argued defensively.

At least she wasn't brooding anymore, thanks to Pola and Lycian. I had a feeling the three of them would become fast friends. I glanced at Dhoran, and he returned my gaze with a shrug. Looked like we were on the same wavelength.

With that, I decided it was high time we moved to the dining hall.

My master quickly spotted us when we arrived. "Well, that was fast," he noted. "We've ordered for the group already. Oh, and the others have reserved the table over there for us."

A crowd of adventurers had gathered around him.

"You're quite the popular one around here, aren't you?" I commented.

"Sure am. Those idiots underestimate me now that I'm young again, so I have no shortage of sparring partners to choose from. We were just talking about heading to the training arena downstairs when you showed up," he said, flashing me a smile.

I couldn't help but wonder if he'd been doing this at the guild in Merratoni as well. No wonder all the adventurers ran away when they saw him.

"Are you going to fight *again*?" I asked.

"Nope. I'm just going to watch and give them some advice."

And then you'll get into the mood and end up joining in, I thought.

Well, I figured these adventurers would love the chance to spar with someone they admired so much, so it was all good.

"Okay. We'll let you know when we're about to leave," I told him.

"Sounds good. Oh, and I might need your healing at some point, so I'm counting on you, Luciel."

So, you are *planning to fight!*

He looked so happy, I decided to indulge him this time. "Just don't overdo it, all right?"

"Sure thing," he said before turning to the surrounding adventurers. "Sorry for the wait, guys. Ready to show me what the adventurers of the Holy City are made of?"

"Yes, sir!"

Having the opportunity to talk and get advice from the Whirlwind would be a great source of motivation for them.

"Have fun," I told him.

"Oh, and before I leave, no booze for you, you hear?"

"I *know*."

With that, he headed to the basement with the adventurers. I waved goodbye and turned to my friends. "Can you all head to the table first?" I asked.

"Sure." Lionel nodded, albeit a little reluctantly, before joining Ketty and the others at the table, along with Pola, Lycian, and Dhoran.

Rina (who was *still* technically persona non grata at the guild) and Nanya were about to follow him, but I stopped them. "Rina, Nanya, come with me."

"O-Okay."

I walked up to Grantz, the guildmaster, with the two young women in tow.

"Good evening, Grantz," I said.

"Evenin'. I've 'eard all 'bout yer recent achievements. Dealt with those nasty rumors, did ye? Can't say I'm too surprised. No, what really has me curious is how you managed to leave the city two days ago for Merratoni and yer already back," he said with a shrug. Then, he glanced at the two young women behind me and crossed his arms. His gaze was sharp as he looked at Rina, but he didn't seem particularly angry or anything.

"Yeah, I guess most people would wonder the same thing," I said. "To be honest, I didn't think I'd be able to solve the case this smoothly. Since I ended up taking care of it, can you cancel the job I commissioned the guild for? Of course, I'll compensate those who were working on it. Take these coins and share them among the adventurers."

"Ye sure? That's real kind of ye."

In this world, it was all about give and take. Not only did I think it wouldn't be fair not to compensate the adventurers for their efforts, but more importantly, I didn't want to make any more enemies than I already had. If that meant building trust with the adventurers, a few coins was a small price to pay.

"Yes. I knew this might happen when I put up the request, after all. Did the adventurers manage to get any intel before I resolved the situation?" I asked.

"Nothin' worth mentionin'," Grantz replied. "More importantly, can I ask what the Tempest and her assistant are doin' in my guild?"

It seemed he was genuinely curious about Rina's presence here.

I chuckled evasively. "I actually just learned a few minutes ago that she was the 'Tempest' who blew up the underground training area. She's part of my company's research and development team now, so I wanted to ask if you could unban her. She won't be testing out her gadgets here anymore, I promise."

"Ye sure 'bout that?" Grantz eventually asked after a pause.

"She's very talented, so as long as she's not a complete lunatic, I don't see it being a problem."

"Ye really *do* have weird tastes, Saint Weirdo."

"Eh, what's two or three more troublemakers? Besides, Dhoran is a solid leader. I'm sure he'll keep them in check."

"Don't off-load all the trouble onto him," he lectured me. "If I were in his shoes, I'd be pissed at ye."

I chuckled at his comment. His gaze was still fixed on Rina, who eventually spoke up.

"I'm really sorry for the trouble I caused you last time. I won't be using the guild's training grounds to test out my inventions anymore. Can you forgive me?"

"Sure. If Sir Saint Weirdo says he'll take responsibility for yer actions, I'll unban ye."

"Please," I said.

"Consider it done. I can bill Saint Weirdo if ye destroy my guild again, so by all means, blow it up to yer heart's content."

With that, he disappeared into the kitchen.

"Please carry out your experiments outside the city as much as

you can," I told Rina as I watched his retreating form.

"Will do. Thank you. I promise to work even harder on my inventions from now on!" she assured me.

The fact that she took a fighting stance while uttering the words didn't exactly inspire confidence, but I decided to trust her for now.

"I'm looking forward to it," I said in a strained voice.

Now that Rina was free to roam the guild, the three of us returned to the table where our companions were. The food had already arrived, but they hadn't started eating yet, likely waiting for us to join them. I took a seat, introduced Rina and Nanya to the rest of the group, and dug into my well-deserved dinner.

"So, Kefin, about that thing you found earlier..." I began.

He nodded. "Long story short, it might be possible to repair the barrier around the Church's headquarters."

Ooh, I understood why he'd said we could make a profit from his findings now. The Church would definitely owe us a big one if we fixed the barrier.

"How?" I asked.

"It's only a 'maybe' for now. But, basically, it seems the barrier was created by a certain magic device, which is said to be somewhere in HQ—though it doesn't work anymore," he explained.

"A magic device?" It definitely sounded plausible, but I couldn't help but wonder how it had gotten broken in the first place. It wasn't like it had been left in the open or anything.

"Yes. I found a note stating that someone intentionally sabotaged it."

I assumed that Kefin was about to suggest that we have Dhoran and the others take a look at the device to see if they could fix it, but when I asked him if I was right, he shook his head.

"Not exactly. According to the documents I found, the barrier can only be activated by loading the magic device with fire, water, earth, wind, and light mana at once. I thought that sounded like something we could manage," he said.

"Did it say anything else?"

"No. But it reminded me of the airship Mister Dhoran and Pola built. It has a barrier that cancels wind resistance. I was thinking

that, if we could replicate this with all five elements, we could create something that worked a bit like the barrier device."

I turned to Dhoran, who'd been listening to our conversation in silence until now. "What do you say, Dhoran?"

"I'm thinkin' that barrier must be the same as the one in Rockford," he answered.

That made sense; after all, it was likely Lord Reinstar was the one who had set up this barrier as well.

"We might be able to find clues about how to create a similar device there," I mused. I was almost positive the barrier around the City in the Sky had been created using a similar method, but Neldahl wasn't the kind of place you could just waltz into.

Reinstar sure was a good guy, huh? Setting up all those barriers everywhere, I thought with a smile.

Kefin tapped his chin pensively and asked, "Are we heading to Rockford next, then?"

Well, if it was up to *me*, we'd go anywhere we wanted. But unfortunately, the world was in the midst of a big crisis, so I didn't exactly have the luxury of making that decision. Couldn't some cheat-tier, overpowered reincarnator do *something* about Blanche for us?

I let out an inward sigh and said, "It all depends on what Her Holiness decides, but I'm thinking we need to check on Blanche. They've got trouble written all over them."

"Then is that our next destination?" Kefin asked.

"Maybe. We still need more information. And for that, we need Dongahar to wake up. Also...this might surprise Lionel, but I'm starting to think a trip to Illumasia could be worth it now that we've got the airship."

At that, everyone's eyes turned to me.

04 — Why the Empire?

Before going to Neldahl, there had been one nation I had *never* wanted to set foot in: the Illumasian Empire. You see, I had accidentally thwarted so many of their plans that I was sure they must've been holding a grudge against me. Also, though I didn't know if the empire had given the orders directly, I'd witnessed countless tragedies befall those who crossed its path. For those reasons, I very much wanted to stay away from its territory.

According to the history books I'd read, Illumasia was a militaristic nation that had gradually expanded its territory by waging war after war and built its economy through both strict regulations and the labor of the people they'd enslaved during those conflicts, forcing them to work until they could no longer stand.

I'd heard that they had agreed to a ceasefire with the Luburk Kingdom—the nation they were currently at war with—but the situation was still pretty tense. On top of that, they had a reputation for spying on other countries, and there were rumors that they conducted demonization experiments on human test subjects. I'd actually gotten proof of the latter firsthand. The first person I'd healed after becoming a sage had been the Baron von Wisdom of Luburk, whom Illumasia had subjected to their horrific experiments. Who in their right mind would willingly go to such a place?

But at the same time, I felt like I'd never be able to learn the full truth behind the demonization cases if I kept avoiding it. And now that we had our airship, which gave us the ability to escape if the situation took a turn for the worse, I wasn't *as* opposed to the idea of venturing into Illumasian territory anymore.

When I told my plan to my friends, their lively chatter died down, and our table fell into a sudden silence as they all stared at me. I closed my eyes and took a few seconds to compose myself before explaining my reasoning.

"There are several reasons I think we should visit Illumasia next. The main one is that, if we keep on letting them do their thing, we

might end up having to fight overpowered imperial soldiers."

My companions grew even more confused at my words.

"Wouldn't that be resolved by just...*not* going there?" Lionel asked.

Yeah, I shouldn't have expected them to get it with just this one statement. I kinda brought it up out of the blue too.

"The only reason I think it might be a good idea to go to Illumasia is because of you, Lionel," I said.

"Why?"

I turned to Ketty. "Ketty, do all the people in Illumasia know Lionel's—the Lion of War's—face? And how much would a regular soldier know about him?"

"Only new recruits wouldn't know of him. Sir Lionel was the symbol of Illumasia's military power. He's pretty much the face of the empire. More people recognize his face and his legendary feats than they do the emperor's," Ketty told me proudly.

This assured me that I was making the right decision. The only thing I was a little worried about was that Lionel looked much younger now. But we could just have him grow some facial hair; that should do the trick. If that didn't work, I supposed our only other option would be to use makeup to age him up. When we first met in Yenice, he'd looked like an old man but had instantly lost twenty years after shaving his beard. All I could do was hope the reverse would work just as well. If it did, we could easily apprehend the fake Lionel and perhaps even use him as a bargaining chip with the empire.

"Thanks, Ketty," I said. "So, to fill you guys in, I read in the documents Dongahar left behind that the mastermind behind the knights' demonization case was Blanche."

"Then shouldn't we go there instead of Illumasia?" Lionel asked.

I nodded. "That's why I'm hesitating. But my goal this time isn't to fight; it's to focus on diplomacy. And which country seems the easiest to negotiate with, considering the members of our group?"

"The empire, I suppose," Lionel reluctantly said.

"Bingo. The worst-case scenario for Saint Shurule would be Blanche and Illumasia forming a military alliance. That's why I want

to ask for your help this time around."

I had made my case, but I ultimately wanted Lionel to have the final say. If he refused, we'd go to Blanche, and I'd probably enlist Lumina's help.

"It's true that as things stand, the Knights of Shurule can't win against Illumasia, even if they were to make an alliance with Blanche," Lionel said, a hint of pride creeping into his tone as he spoke about his homeland.

"I've been thinking the same thing since I first saw you, Ketty, and Nalia in action," I replied. "That's why I believe we should head there as soon as possible. Their knights shouldn't be fully demonized yet, so I can probably cure them before they completely lose their minds."

I was aware that my plan was risky and that we might even end up having to fight at some point. But if the people of Illumasia turned into demons, the world would soon fall under the rule of the Wicked One, and it'd most likely collapse before the next hero was even born. If I didn't find a way to stop that from happening, I could kiss the calm and leisurely life of my dreams goodbye for good.

"You've already done it before, so you should definitely be able to cure the demonized knights," Lionel agreed. "So, you'd rather go to Illumasia first, huh?"

"Once again, it depends on what Dongahar will tell us once he wakes up."

"But won't we be attacked if we try to sneak into the empire? We have the airship, that's great, but Illumasia has squads of wyvern riders."

That was a fair concern. But my plan had never been to fly directly into Illumasia. I was thinking of using our airship to reach the empire's border and then finishing the journey on horseback. This would give us more opportunities to cross paths with people who knew of Lionel and ask them for useful information.

"We could always just land when we spot the wyverns. Then we'd be able to counterattack," I suggested.

"That would be completely reckless, sir," he replied. "You may be strong, but the Illumasian army counts tens of thousands of soldiers

that I've trained myself among its ranks."

Soldiers trained by Lionel... The mere thought of it made my head hurt. Then again, they'd be a hundred times more annoying to deal with if they turned into demons. Besides, it might just be wishful thinking, but I didn't think we'd be fighting the Illumasian army this time around.

"Well, unless you trained them so harshly that they hate you, those soldiers probably admire you a lot. So I'm thinking you could just make a triumphant return to Illumasia as the Lion of War and we wouldn't have to fight anyone," I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked, a confused look coming over his face along with a hint of melancholy.

"You could claim you're there to confront the impostor who's been pretending to be you, for instance."

He paused. "But would the empire believe me?"

I shifted my gaze from Lionel to Ketty, and she gave me a nod.

"Even if they don't, I'd expect the Lionel I know to just laugh it off and say he could settle things on his favorite playground—the battlefield. Am I mistaken?"

Oh, crap, had I gone too far by comparing a battlefield to a playground? Lionel was shaking.

"Sorry, did I go too fa—" I started, but he suddenly burst into laughter.

"Ha ha! How exciting!"

"Guess not, huh? Glad to see my little comment motivated you."

My master and Lionel were the only two people in the world who would consider a battlefield a "playground," but hey, if it lifted his spirits, I wasn't going to question it.

"I will face any threat with all my power if you command me to do so, sir. So, my goal is to defeat the fake me and deal with the imperial soldiers. Is that right?"

"Yup. But I also need you to prepare for the worst-case scenario," I said.

"And what might that be?"

"If the emperor chases you out of Illumasia and insists on pursuing his demonization plan, you'll most likely end up having to

turn your blade against him." Of course, if it turned out that the fake Lionel was manipulating the emperor and pushing for the demonization experiments, the situation would be different.

Lionel stayed silent for a moment before saying, "If the emperor is the one behind the demonization plan, I will kill him myself."

I could feel both his sorrow and his determination in his tone. I turned to the rest of our group and announced my plan. "Just as I said before, I'm not sure if we'll be going to Illumasia first. But *if* we are, our goal is to destroy all of their research on demonization as well as their experimentation facilities without any of us dying in the process. Remember that no matter how badly wounded you are, I can always heal you. So do everything you can not to get one-shotted. All right?"

"Yes!" they all replied in unison, except for Rina and Nanya.

"Um, Mister Luciel, I'm not really sure what's going on, but would Nanya and I come with you?" Rina asked me, visibly confused.

I...hadn't thought about them at all, actually. I should probably have them sit this one out.

"You can come if you want, but there is a possibility we'll need to fight, so I think it might be better if you stayed back. I'll be taking Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin along, but it doesn't mean there's no risk of something going wrong," I explained.

"I see," Rina replied, exchanging relieved glances with Nanya.

"We don't really need any more people, do we?" I asked.

"Guess not," Dhoran chimed in. "But I'm surprised by the lasses' lack o' curiosity and inquisitive spirit."

"There must be all sorts of interesting things in the empire," Pola added.

"I'd *love* to play around with wyvern magic stones!" Lycian exclaimed.

Rina and Nanya seemed a bit flustered by their comments.

"As for you three, you can wait for us back in Saint Shurule after dropping us off with the airship," I said.

"We could," Dhoran said, "but we won't."

"Huh?!" I was taken aback by his refusal. Dhoran had *never* refused to do anything I'd asked of him before.

"I've 'ad a bitter experience with Illumasia before. I want ta settle things with 'em meself," he explained.

I had been wondering what kind of reason he had for being so insistent on tagging along, but I'd never expected *revenge* to be his motive.

"Um...you'll be putting Pola and Lycian in danger too," I remarked.

"They won't die as long as yer here. Plus, we'll be able to give you more time with the golems."

Pola nodded. "We've been preparing for this."

"I *still* haven't forgiven the empire for driving me to the brink of starvation!"

Huh. So it wasn't just Dhoran; Pola and Lycian were raring to accompany us as well.

"We're not going there to fight, though, Dhoran," I pointed out.

"Aye, I understand. But those bastards tried to destroy our kingdom. I won't be satisfied until they've paid for their crimes."

Yeah, so he *didn't* understand. I'd heard before that dwarves never went back on their decisions. But I couldn't just call him stubborn to his face...

Guess I have no choice but to try to distract him with what he loves.

"Dhoran, not everyone in the empire is your enemy. Besides, don't you have machines and stuff to work on?" I asked.

"I can just finish 'em after," he replied.

"See, I wouldn't mind if we were *sure* there was going to be an after, but you never know. I can't just ignore the possibility of something going terribly wrong. Besides, we'll need the airship if we have to run away, and I don't want to risk it getting shot down by a wyvern."

A bitter look appeared on his face and he crossed his arms. I decided one more push should do it.

"We need you to install that magic artillery on the airship if we want to escape Illumasia alive, as well as a mana radar. Could you prioritize those?"

"Ye went straight for the throat, huh? Fine. If you insist, I'll focus

on the machines rather than come with ye."

"Thank you," I said with a relieved sigh.

Lionel then chimed in, "So, when are we headed for Illumasia?"

"As I said earlier, we'll only decide if and when we'll go once Dongahar wakes up and answers our questions. I need to discuss it with the pope too. Plus, we have to take master and Galba back to Merratoni anyway, so we won't be leaving for a week at the very least."

"Perfect. That gives us more than enough time to come up with a rock-solid plan of action," he said excitedly. He seemed to be looking forward to our struggle with the empire.

"With everything out of the way, we can finally dig in. Actually, let's make today a welcome party for Rina and Nanya," I said.

"Yeah!" my companions cheered as they dug into their meals.

I turned back to Lionel and bowed. "I'm sorry for putting you in such a difficult position."

"Please raise your head, sir. What you are trying to do is not something just anyone can accomplish. Besides, by going with you, I'll be able to cure the empire's ills."

Not only had he told me to raise my head, he'd even reassured me that he was doing it for himself.

"Sir Lionel's right," Ketty interjected. "Back then, we didn't have the luxury of doing anything but running away, but now we'll finally have the chance to clear the darkness that has plagued Illumasia."

Just like Lionel, she wanted to take her revenge on those who had enslaved her. As for Kefin... Well...

"It'll be a great opportunity to add yet another achievement to your legend, sir!"

I felt like his focus wasn't entirely aligned with ours. But with that, we began preparing for the journey ahead, all of us united by a common purpose.

Well, *almost* all of us.

05 — Prudence

When we were done with our meal, I decided to swing by the guild's basement to collect Brod and head back to the Church, but things didn't go as planned. As I climbed down the stairs, I heard what sounded like shouts of joy. I finished my descent and was met with the sight of my master, beaten black and blue, yet grinning intrepidly, and the adventurers in an even worse state and with tears in their eyes.

The second they spotted me, they called me over and begged for help. I plastered an awkward smile onto my face and made my way to Brod, casting a couple of healing spells on him.

"We're leaving, master," I said.

"Got it. These guys ain't half-bad. Look how much fun they're having!" he told me, a bright grin lighting up his face.

The adventurers clearly weren't as enthusiastic as him, though. Their faces seemed to scream, "Please give us a break!" They didn't know that he'd lost his levels and skills, so they must've felt like he'd just been toying with them.

"Let's go, master," I said before turning to the adventurers. "Thanks for keeping him company. I'll heal you guys right away."

"Hey! Don't make it sound like *I* was the one who asked them to spar."

Ignoring Brod's protests, I cast a quick Area High Heal on the adventurers. Their weapons looked a little worse for wear, but so did his, so I figured they could call it even.

"Thank you for your guidance, Mister Whirlwind!" one of the adventurers said.

"We still aren't anywhere near yer level, huh?" another added.

"And thanks for the healing, Saint Weirdo!"

"You truly are the only one crazy enough to have the Whirlwind as your master."

"We'll keep training hard...among ourselves."

The adventurers slowly backed away from us as they spoke, and

as soon as they were done, they ran up the stairs without even waiting for a reply.

"Tch. Cowards," Brod commented under his breath as he watched them scramble up the stairs.

This world sure is full of unreasonable people, I thought as we made our way back to the Church.

Once we got there, we made the arrangements for the night. Everyone agreed to sleep in the airship's cabins, except for Brod, who insisted on sleeping outside in the big training field. Apparently, he would feel "restless" if he had to sleep inside the airship, despite how excited he'd seemed when he first laid eyes on it this morning.

"Are you sure you want to sleep out here, though?" I asked. "There are guest rooms at HQ too."

"I know, but someone might try to sneak into the airship at night. So I'll sleep here and keep an eye on it. You get it now? If you do, hurry up and take out a bed for me."

"Fine, fine," I relented, producing a bed from my magic bag. "I'm counting on you to keep the airship safe."

"Leave it to me."

With that, he sat on the bed and began to meditate.

I spotted Rina and Nanya standing a little farther away. I'd thought that the two of them would return to their shop, but for some reason, they'd followed us to HQ. When I'd shown them in, they'd begun gazing around in awe, and their excitement had only grown when they had laid eyes on the airship—the very reason they had agreed to accompany me in the first place. Their reactions reminded me of my master's enthusiasm that morning.

All of my companions had received special authorization to enter HQ, as I had introduced them as my followers. However, I suddenly realized how insensitive it might have been to invite guests over after the events of the day, and I found myself regretting my decision. Then again, I had contracts with nearly all of my friends, so the Church's staff must have deemed them trustworthy enough not to leak any confidential information.

Rina still wasn't making any move to enter the airship, so I

decided to strike up a little conversation with her. "I meant to ask, Rina, but are you sure you're fine with not returning to your shop?"

She nodded. "I might not get this kind of opportunity ever again, after all. Besides, the airship looks so cool when it's lit up, I don't think I'll be able to sleep a wink tonight!"

"I can't believe someone managed to create something like this," Nanya added. "Dwarven craftsmanship is incredible."

"Ye can't say that after only seein' it from the outside. Ye need to take a look inside to make yer judgment," Dhoran said. He must've come out to collect Rina and Nanya, seeing as they weren't boarding the airship on their own.

I couldn't help but notice that his expression didn't match his words. He looked incredibly smug, and it was obvious that he was trying to stop himself from smiling. Pola and Lycian, who'd come out with Dhoran, were sporting similar expressions. The three soon disappeared into the ship, Rina and Nanya in tow.

"Well, I'm gonna leave you guys to it," I muttered before making my way to the pope's chambers.

After receiving permission, I stepped into the pope's room, where I found Rosa and Estia, as well as Nadia and Lydia, whom I'd asked to stay behind and protect the pope in case of an attack, and Galba, Catherine, and Granhart. I'd freed the latter from Dongahar's underground cell a little earlier that day.

"My apologies for the wait, Your Holiness," I said. "I have thoroughly thought about today's incident and the steps we should take moving forward, so I've come to share my findings with you."

"Thank you, Luciel. I have burdened you with considerable trouble this time," she replied.

"Not at all. It was the rumors circulating about me that sparked today's incident. I am deeply sorry for the trouble it has caused you," I said, bowing in apology.

"Raise your head, Luciel. We cannot have a conversation if you look at the floor."

"Yes, Your Holiness." I nodded and did as I was told. "Firstly, I would like to commend you for the way you handled the incident

this afternoon. The judgment you passed on the knights demonstrated both your kindness and firmness."

"I am glad to hear it," she said after a pause. "All day long, I have pondered whether my decision was indeed the correct one."

"I imagine those who hold such power often grapple with similar doubts. But I also think that it proves your sincerity regarding this matter."

"I had no idea that passing judgment upon others was such a heavy responsibility." She cast her eyes down, a sorrowful expression on her face.

"It is," I replied softly. "Now, I believe that you must have a good idea about what led to today's events thanks to Granhart, but allow me to share my findings with you as well."

"Please do."

"Just as Dongahar said before losing consciousness, it appears the mastermind behind this incident is the Dukedom of Blanche."

Nadia's and Lydia's expressions soured at the mention of their homeland.

"Blanche... To think that they used to dislike conflict and rarely engaged in scheming," the pope muttered.

"It truly is a lovely place," Nadia chimed in. "If only the nobility didn't have so much influence..."

"The weather is mild, the landscape is lush, and most of the people are warm and welcoming," Lydia added. "Plus, it was the last known residence of the mage who created the hermit items."

And now this "lovely" nation is turning people into demons. You must be kidding me.

"I heard that Blanche once summoned a hero in the past," I said, turning to the sisters.

"Rumors do indeed claim that they did," Nadia answered.

"Are the duke and his relatives the only people involved in those types of ritual?"

"No. They are usually accompanied by knights and mages for protection. However, they likely do not know the specifics of the summoning rituals."

"Hero summoning... My father once researched it, but it seemed

to already be a lost tradition three hundred years ago," the pope said.

Yeah, well, it would've been nice if it had stayed lost forever.

"Apparently, Blanche has resurrected this tradition, not to summon a hero this time, but for something else. At least, that's what Dongahar said in his farewell letter," I said.

"A farewell letter... Dongahar, you moron," the pope muttered.

"This is the letter." I handed it to Rosa, and she passed it to the pope. "I have thought about it a lot, and I don't think Dongahar lied to us. As such, I'm thinking of leaving for either Blanche or Illumasia in the near future."

"Catherine, what do you think?" the pope asked.

"Under normal circumstances, I would suggest first making Luciel's ascension to sagehood official to quiet the rumors and dispel the doubts surrounding the Church, but..." Catherine stopped there and looked at Galba.

"Luciel, according to my information, Illumasia is currently in a state of chaos," Galba told me. His sharp gaze sent a chill down my spine.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I thought it was odd that they suddenly agreed to a ceasefire with Luburk, so I decided to investigate. It seems that a faction of nobles has formed in opposition to the emperor's decision not to send the Lion of War to the battlefield. This has led to the rise of an anti-imperial resistance movement in the empire," Galba explained.

"So, unless this whole thing is a trap, it might be in our best interest to make our move sooner rather than later," I said pensively. "Oh, by the way, what are you doing here, Galba?" He looked exhausted, a stark contrast to Catherine beside him, who seemed oddly satisfied.

It was the pope who replied. "Catherine informed me of his intelligence-gathering abilities, and I had him take an oath of confidentiality. He will now work as a secret agent under my direct supervision."

"What?! Seriously, Galba?" I gaped at him. "Can you really do that and oversee Merratoni's Adventurer's Guild at the same time?"

"I need to discuss it with Brod. Speaking of which, can you take me to Merratoni tomorrow? It'd be a huge help."

I mean, if he had truly made the choice to juggle working for both the guild and the pope, he'd most likely be fine, but I couldn't help but notice that he seemed a bit hesitant around Catherine.

"Master said he's sleeping in the big training field tonight, so you can probably go talk to him now if you want," I said.

"Then I'll go with you once we're done here."

Yeah, he really was acting weird. But I decided not to address it and let sleeping dogs lie for the moment.

The pope let out a soft sigh. "Could you please tell me about your plans, Luciel?" She had just finished reading Dongahar's farewell letter, and her eyes were red.

"Yes, Your Holiness. As I said earlier, I'm thinking of traveling to either Blanche or Illumasia to investigate their experiments on demonization," I replied.

"It will be difficult for you to carry out your investigation. The empire will be watching you closely as soon as you set foot in their territory."

"I'll think of something," I assured her.

"You sound quite confident."

"Let's just say that I have my own worries and fears. Anyway, I meant to ask: Won't Blanche send a new spy to HQ now that they've lost Dongahar as their point of contact?" I asked.

"How? The cream of the crop of the nation's knights are stationed here."

"The knights lost to my master and one of my followers, even though they were weakened, I can't feel at ease under the circumstances. Just imagine what would happen if the situation were different and my squad were to attack HQ."

At my words, Catherine's gloating expression turned into one of frustration, and Granhart—who'd been listening to our conversation in silence—frowned.

"I'm aware that the knights have their own style of fighting. But if they find themselves facing a group with a *single* stronger opponent, they may be decimated without a chance to fight back, even if they

are at full strength," I continued.

"I trust that you must be criticizing them for a reason," the pope replied.

"Indeed. I was thinking of leaving Nadia and Lydia here with you. That way, Catherine will be able to focus all her energy on training the knights."

"Sir!" the sisters exclaimed in unison.

"Lydia, this would give you the opportunity to learn spirit magic from Her Holiness herself. As for Nadia, you'll be protecting the two of them. Your combat style would complement theirs well," I explained.

"Will you not need their power in Illumasia or Blanche?" the pope asked.

"I will. That's why I would like to ask you to help them train so that they can be fully prepared when the time comes. As for Catherine, I would like you to completely revamp the knights in the meantime."

Catherine stared at me in silence for a moment before turning to the pope and dropping to one knee. "Your Holiness, may I take the liberty of accepting Luciel's proposal?"

"If that is your wish, then I do not object."

"Thank you. I promise to turn the Church's knights into the strongest force they can be."

Good. Now, Catherine could fully devote herself to training the knights and—c'mon, Galba! At least *try* to hide your relief.

"Oh, and I found this in Dongahar's desk. I was the only one able to touch it. I can feel some strange power coming out of the gem part, do you know what it is?"

The second I took the gem thingy out of my magic bag, the pope and Estia—no, the Spirit of Dusk, based on her aura—appeared right in front of me. Wait, what? I hadn't even seen them move! Had they used a teleportation spell? But I would've felt *some* fluctuation in the ambient mana if they had... Then again, the pope was Lord Reinstar's daughter. Perhaps she was as extraordinarily powerful as her dad... Who knew?

"You said that you found this in Dongahar's room?" the pope

asked me.

"Yes."

She took the gem from my hands and exchanged glances with the Spirit of Dusk as if to confirm it was in fact what she thought it was.

I decided I might as well explain exactly where I had found it, just in case the information was relevant. "It was inside a drawer in the desk of Dongahar's book storage room. Do you know what it is?"

"It's a spirit crystal—a gem that contains a spirit's power. Oh, I'm so glad. I'm so, *so* glad!"

The pope was so overwhelmed with joy that she broke down crying, and the Spirit of Dusk cast a grateful gaze in my direction...but I was too confused to process what was going on.

06 — Spirit Crystals

"So, what exactly are spirit crystals?" I asked the pope once her tears had subsided.

"They are a place of solace for spirits as well as the source of their powers," she explained. "Spirits typically remain in their birthplace for an extended period, and over time, the particles of their mana coagulate, eventually forming what we call a spirit stone—a portable home for them."

So it wasn't just a random gem with a spirit's power inside it.

"Then, if spirit stones are basically solid spirit mana, I take it spirit crystals are even *more* special. Do they form after a spirit has been alive for a really long time?" I asked.

"Exactly. However, this one is a little special. It is a spirit stone into which my father has imbued some of his mana."

Lord Reinstar sure could do *everything*, huh?

"I see. What are spirit crystals to the spirits?"

"A spirit stone evolves as the spirit matures, until it eventually turns into a crystal—the most powerful form it can take. This serves as proof that the spirit has met the conditions to become a supreme being," the pope explained.

"So the spirits I've met up until now all have one?"

"Indeed. There are some exceptions, but they should all have a spirit crystal."

I glanced at the Spirit of Dusk, and she turned away without a word. It seemed like the pope was telling the truth.

"What happens when they don't have their spirit crystal in their possession?" I asked.

"This is akin to a heart or a core, if you will. They need it to maintain their existence. Without it, their powers are sealed off, and they cannot rest or regenerate their mana, gradually becoming weaker and weaker until they eventually disappear," the pope told me.

"Got it. So, what is this special spirit crystal Lord Reinstar

created?”

“This takes on the burden of a spirit’s mana to prevent their stone from turning into a complete core. It ensures that the spirit does not perish, even if their crystal is destroyed.” Lord Reinstar’s biography had called him a “friend of the spirits,” and it looked like that hadn’t been a lie.

There was still one last thing weighing on my mind. “Can anyone see and touch spirit crystals?”

“Only those with the proper qualifications—people who have received the protection of the spirits, that is. Aside from that, any being with a higher status can also perceive them, and I believe they can touch them as well. However, this particular spirit crystal has been away from its host for so long that it has almost completely lost its powers.”

It was *finally* starting to make sense. Galba and Kefin had only seen it as a plain necklace, which was why they hadn’t collected it.

“Hmm? Hold on a minute. Would a spirit’s host be able to wield their spirit’s power as their own using the crystal?”

“I shouldn’t have expected anything less from someone blessed by the spirits,” the pope said with a nod.

It seemed like I’d gotten it right. Since Dongahar had the crystal in his possession, did it mean that he had been blessed by a spirit as well?

“Oh, I just realized that I’ve been bombarding you with questions since earlier, but shouldn’t we do something with the crystal? Its owner must be really weak by now, so we should probably start looking for them soon,” I said.

“You’re right. I plan on returning it right now. The spirit this crystal belongs to has exhausted all of their mana manifesting itself to humans and lost its spiritual form. As such, it had to bear being seen by people who can otherwise not perceive the spirits.”

From our conversation, I was pretty sure this spirit crystal belonged to Forêt Noire. The pope must have been incredibly frustrated to have lost her spirit crystal. That explained why she’d cried so much when I’d shown it to her, even though there were people around.

But Forêt Noire had given me her protection before I'd fought the Wicked One, even though she couldn't use her spirit form anymore. Was that why she was always biting my head? I couldn't know for sure, but I felt like I should be even more grateful than I already was for her protection.

"Your Holiness, you mentioned earlier that if a spirit lost their crystal, their powers would be sealed. How does that work? Do they seal their own powers? Or did you mean that whoever has the crystal in their possession can suppress the spirit's abilities?" I asked.

The pope shook her head. "The spirits seal away their powers of their own volition."

"I see. But something's been weighing on my mind. I'm not entirely sure, but I think that I can feel two distinct mana signatures coming from that crystal, so I was wondering if someone had blocked the spirit's away on purpose."

Perhaps that other mana signature belonged to Lord Reinstar, in which case it probably wasn't an issue, but I still wanted to bring it to the pope's attention.

"Two distinct mana signatures, you say?" she asked. "Now that you mention it, I *do* indeed feel one that isn't my father's... Hmm? The chain around it is also different from the one I remember. Is it a seal? Is that why I've been unable to track it down all these years?" she muttered before looking at me and demanding, "Luciel. Remove the enchantment on it—right now."

"Huh?! Ah, uh, sure. *Dispel*."

The chain surrounding the crystal instantly disappeared, and the gem began shining much brighter.

"Luciel, bring Forêt Noire over," the pope told me, visibly anxious.

"Yes, Your Holiness."

I opened Forêt's stable with the hermit key, and she slowly came out of it. The crystal immediately flew over to her, as if it had been waiting for its master, before being absorbed into her forehead.

I watched, flabbergasted, as Forêt Noire's coat emitted a blinding light, so bright that I had to close my eyes. It faded almost as quickly as it had appeared and, when I opened my eyes, I was met with the sight of a white horse with wings sprouting from its back—a

pegasus. This must've been Forêt Noire's true form.

As I stood there, frozen in shock, the pope and the Spirit of Dusk controlling Estia's body threw their arms around her. A stupid question came to my mind as I watched them. Well, hear me out: Forêt Noire meant "black forest" in French, right? Would she get a new name now that her coat was white? Judging by the way the pope kept repeating "Forêt Noire" as she clung to her, I guessed not.

At any rate, it was high time I joined the celebration. "You're Forêt Noire, right?" I asked. "So, you're back to being a spirit now?"

Forêt turned to me, the pope still embracing her. *"Thank you, Luciel,"* a voice echoed inside my head. *"I was able to regain my powers thanks to you."*

I had expected her to sound more androgynous, considering she was a spirit, but her voice was unmistakably feminine. I'd always thought that she felt like a "she," so I wasn't too surprised.

"I accidentally came across your crystal. Besides, you've saved my hide more times than I can count, so this makes us even. Right, partner?"

"It would seem it does. I look forward to our next adventurers together, partner." She sounded happy, and it made me smile.

"I'm thinking of heading to Illumasia next. Will you come with me?" I asked.

"All this time, I could do nothing but run away... Heh. I'm looking forward to it."

That was a yes...right? Also, was it just me, or had I had a similar conversation with someone else very recently? I decided not to dwell on it and asked the next question on my mind.

"What happened to your spirit crystal?"

"It's currently inside me. Once it has finished optimizing my mana, I'll be able to take it out again."

"I see." I nodded. "So, can I ask you to stay with Her Holiness and the Spirit of Dusk tonight?"

Forêt seemed to hesitate but eventually agreed. *"I will. I have a promise to fulfill to Fluna, and there is something I've been meaning to discuss with Dusk. I'll stay the night."*

I really wanted to ask her how she'd lost her spirit crystal, but I

decided to let her spend the night with the pope.

"Got it. I'll return tomorrow, Your Holiness," I announced and noticed that her shoulders were shaking.

I glanced at Galba, and he silently mouthed to me that we should leave the room. Lydia and Nadia looked like they wanted to follow suit, so the four of us began heading for the door, leaving the pope with Rosa, Catherine, and Estia.

"Luciel!" The pope's voice stopped me. "Thank you for finding Forêt Noire's spirit crystal."

When I turned around, her form was obstructed by Forêt's. "Please don't mention it, Your Holiness. I'm just glad things turned out all right in the end. If you allow me, I will take my leave now," I said, and I did just that.

Okay, things should calm down a bit at the Church now, phew, I thought, relieved.

Yet, for some reason, I had a feeling that something really annoying was about to happen soon. Let's hope it was just my imagination...

I'd decided to entrust the matter of Blanche to Nadia and Lydia, and told them as much as our group made its way to the big training field.

"I asked you two to stay here to protect the pope, but that's not the whole story. I want you to stay in the Holy City to prepare for a potential confrontation with Blanche," I explained.

"But we haven't set foot in Blanche in over a year, sir," Nadia remarked.

"I'm not asking you to gather information about them. I just don't believe that the Dongahar situation was their only scheme. For example, I think it's highly likely they'll try to claim I've abducted you two."

"But my sister and I were adventurers for more than a year before meeting you," Lydia pointed out.

"People don't care about the truth. They believe what they *want* to believe," I said. "Today's incident made me painfully aware of that fact."

"That's..." the sisters said in unison, but neither of them knew how to continue.

"Anyway, once Blanche learns that you two are the pope's bodyguards, they'll have a harder time trying to harm you," I continued. "In the meantime, Lydia, I'd like you to learn spirit magic from the pope, and Nadia, I want you to exchange information with Lumina of the Valkyries."

"Lady Luminalia?"

"She's probably more aware of the situation in Blanche than you are, and things might evolve while I'm away," I explained.

"Could you not simply give her an arclink crystal?"

I shook my head. "Lumina strikes me as the kind of person who won't ask for help until she's completely out of options. Besides, after today's events, the Church's knights and staff are most likely going to be busy cleaning up for the foreseeable future, so it'll give me some peace of mind to have people I can trust stay back. If anything happens, you can always contact me through your arclink crystals."

"I understand," Nadia answered.

"But please let us accompany you to Illumasia one day," Lydia added.

"Sure thing."

All right, I'd successfully convinced the sisters to remain in the Holy City this time. However, there was still one issue weighing on my mind: Galba, who had barely spoken a word the whole time. Sorry for being a gossip, but I was *really* curious about his relationship with Catherine. Yet my gut was telling me that I shouldn't talk to him now if I didn't want to get dragged into a complicated mess.

Instead, I decided to re-analyze Dongahar's farewell letter in my mind. The most pressing matter was absolutely the demonization experiments. First, there was the matter of Lord Wisdom. Illumasia had implanted a magic stone in his body to try and make him harness the powers of the demons. Then, there were the bandits my master had defeated near the forest that stretched from Merratoni into Blanche. According to him, they'd triggered their own

transformation into demons after seeing they stood no chance against Brod. In other words, Blanche had already succeeded in turning people into demons.

This was precisely why I had chosen Illumasia as our next destination: There was still a chance to save the test subjects before it was too late. The only thing that worried me was that I had no idea how many people they had implanted with magic stones. I really didn't want to kill anyone if I could help it. I could probably handle ten or twenty people, but if there were a lot more than that, things could get dicey for us before I could even *think* about healing the test subjects.

Besides, if the emperor was involved in the demonization experiments, we'd end up making an enemy out of him. Again, that would be fine as long as we managed to thwart his plans, but if we lost, the empire might falsely accuse Saint Shurule of attacking them. This meant that if the emperor truly was behind the demonization attempts, we'd have no other option but to defeat him. But first, I needed to have a long chat with Lionel and Ketty, as they were much more familiar with Illumasia than I was. Ideally, we'd just destroy the empire's research facilities and call it a day. We probably wouldn't face any backlash from the other countries for merely destroying a couple of buildings.

I still had no idea what to do about Blanche, though. Were the masterminds behind the demonization experiments the duke and his relatives, or Lord Kamiya, who had been trying to set me up this whole time? Unfortunately, I couldn't reach any conclusion until we had more information, and that was frustrating.

Another question I had was why Blanche, a human supremacist nation, hadn't attacked Yenice despite having allegedly acquired a power so overwhelming it could allow them to dominate the world. The more I pondered that, the more worried I became.

If I hadn't had my encounter with the Wicked One and someone had told me that Blanche and Illumasia were involved in demonization experiments, I probably would've said it wasn't any of my business and left it at that. But now that demons had begun appearing in Saint Shurule, the likelihood of someone I knew being

in danger was getting higher and higher. I couldn't just stand by and do nothing. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't doing this to save mankind or anything grand like that—it was really just about my own selfish hope for a calm, peaceful life. At this rate, the world would soon be overrun by demons, which would put humanity's very existence at risk. I had to act now, or I'd regret it until the end of my life.

"Better to regret something you've done than something you *haven't* done. I'd have an easier time accepting defeat that way," I muttered as I walked.

When we reached the training field, Galba went to talk with Brod, while Nadia, Lydia, and I boarded the airship and retired to our assigned rooms.

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Galba followed Luciel with his eyes until he disappeared into the airship before turning to Brod to relay the information he'd gathered. "I want to hope things will get calmer for Luciel, but it seems like it's not going to happen just yet," he said.

"Hah. It's a bit late for that," Brod replied. "So? What did you learn?"

The two of them checked their surroundings to make sure they were alone before Galba, a serious expression on his face, said, "It seems that the war between Illumasia and Luburk will soon resume."

Brod clicked his tongue and clenched his fists, visibly angry. "Can't they just stay put for once? Guess that's asking too much."

"It also seems the King of Luburk is the one pushing for the war to start again."

"What? Surely, he knows that the empire isn't a nation to be trifled with."

"It's Luciel's fault," Galba said.

"Huh? What does Luciel have to do with their war?"

Galba shrugged and shook his head, a resigned look appearing on his face. "He apparently healed a wounded noble from Luburk when he was in Neldahl and told him that Illumasia's current Lion of War was a fake."

A long sigh escaped Brod's lips. "That was a massive blunder."

"Luciel probably thought that just putting a contract on the noble to keep him from talking would be sufficient. He likely had no idea that Luburk possessed artifacts capable of reading memories and that they would use one on the noble."

"Well, dangerous artifacts *are* classified as forbidden. Damn it, I should've warned him about them."

"Even if you had and he'd been more vigilant, he couldn't have known that the noble in question is close to the kingdom's third princess."

"No way..." Brod sighed, pressing his right palm to his forehead as he tried to organize his thoughts.

But before he could do so, Galba interjected, "Brod, this is the perfect opportunity to head to the empire while it's in chaos. You should take Luciel and make your move now."

"Why should *I* go to Illumasia? Besides, I can't just leave my position as guildmaster vacant for several days." He glared at Galba before turning his gaze away.

"You can leave Merratoni to Gulgar and me. You don't want Luciel to keep getting targeted by the empire, do you? Not to mention—"

"Oh, just shut up," Brod interrupted him.

"So?" Galba replied nonchalantly.

Brod answered with another click of his tongue. "Fine, I'll go. But it'll be *your* fault if things get messy."

"I know. Don't worry; I'll make the necessary arrangements for you to return to Merratoni."

"Have I ever told you I hate this ruthless side of you?"

Galba chuckled. "I'm flattered."



Another long sigh escaped Brod's lips. "Damn you, Luciel. A student shouldn't make his master worry. I'll punish you, mark my words."

"Well, that's all I had to report about the empire," Galba concluded. "Let's move on to the next topic."

The hour grew later and later, and yet the two of them continued to converse.

★☆★

"Whew... This whole situation with Dongahar only lasted for two days, but it felt like forever."

It hadn't been easy to convince Nadia and Lydia to stay with the pope, but I was glad they'd accepted in the end. I sat on my bed and let myself fall back, the weight of the day's events crashing over me. I made a mental note to ask the pope if I could take Forêt Noire along with me as usual the next day. I still didn't know why Dongahar had her spirit crystal in his possession. The pope had said that one could only touch a crystal if they had received the blessing of the spirit it belonged to, so Forêt Noire—the Spirit of Dawn, that is—*must* have given hers to Dongahar. But when? And did the pope know about it? Moreover, Forêt Noire hadn't noticed that Dongahar had her spirit crystal, even though she'd given him her blessing.

Well, I supposed I'd have an answer to all these questions once he woke up, huh? Also, if I ended up bringing Forêt along to Illumasia, I'd need to ask the Spirit of Dusk if she planned on coming with us. Estia had managed to escape from Illumasia using the Spirit of Dusk's powers. I hadn't brought it up until now, but perhaps she would know secrets about the empire that could help us.

There was one problem, though: Returning to Illumasia might cause Estia's emotions to become unstable again. I wanted to prevent that from happening, which was why I usually had her stay with the pope whenever I was heading somewhere dangerous. As long as she stayed in the Holy City, the Spirit of Dusk could most likely deal with any threats coming her or the pope's way.

As I pondered these questions, I suddenly thought of Lihzalea, whom I hadn't seen since the day we'd left the Kingdom of Dwarves.

"I wonder how she's doing," I muttered before closing my eyes.

Our next destination was most likely Illumasia, and I knew I'd be relying on Lionel a lot. After swearing to resolve this situation without anyone dying, I finally surrendered to the pull of sleep.

I didn't know how long I'd slept, but a sudden chill in the air woke me up, causing me to raise my head from my angel's pillow. Glancing around, I noticed a silhouette standing right next to my bed and immediately used Purification Wave. A bright light illuminated the room, allowing me to instantly recognize who the intruder was: Dongahar.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed in surprise.

Riiight. I'd put the hermit coffin into my magic bag, but I'd forgotten that once whoever was in the coffin woke up, they'd be automatically ejected.

"Why are you so surprised? If any of us has any right to be shocked here, it's me. I can't believe I'm still alive," Dongahar said, perfectly calm.

I'm sorry? Anyone *would be surprised under the circumstances!* I yelled inwardly, but I tried to compose myself to deal with the situation with a level head.

"Anyone would be surprised to see someone right next to their bed in the middle of the night, especially with the lights off," I retorted.

Yeah, the whole level head thing? I failed. Perhaps it was because Dongahar had been my enemy only hours ago, but I was terrified, though it wasn't the same kind of fear as what I'd felt when Trett had done his wake-up prank on me.

"It seems that I failed to die when I meant to," Dongahar said, inspecting his body.

"Well, it would be a huge problem for me if you were dead. I'll save you as many times as I need to until you've told us the whole truth," I replied.

He huffed in annoyance. "How very reassuring. But it's too bad

for you. I am going to die soon, and there's nothing you can do about it. I had to agree to a soul contract to perform the demon summoning. It's too late for me to run away."

A soul contract? Was that different from a regular contract?

"The demon you made a deal with has disappeared, so shouldn't you be in the clear?" I asked.

"Soul contracts are carved into one's soul. Once made, they can't be removed."

"If you knew all that, then why did you... I mean, I get it was for the Church, but why go to such extremes like demonization and summoning when your body is so weak?"

"So, you read my farewell letter. Well, then you should know that I did all of this *because* I knew I had no time left. Besides, I believed that by making Her Holiness pass her judgment on me, she would grow from the experience."

I felt anger surge through my body at his words. What a selfish man. Did he think that as long as it was to "help the pope grow," he could force her to bear such a heavy burden?

I didn't say any of that, though. He'd made up his mind and carried out his plan. I, on the other hand, had brought trouble to the Church by accidentally showing weakness. My words wouldn't reach him, no matter what I said.

I drew in a long breath and decided to ask him the questions that had been weighing on my mind instead. "If you truly had betrayed the Church and allied with another nation, there wouldn't be any point in asking you questions. But you didn't. You don't intend on hiding anything from us anymore, do you?"

"I don't. I'll reply to any questions you may have—as long as I have the answer, of course," Dongahar said before settling into a nearby chair.

I'd already decided what to ask him first. "The necklace in the drawer of your desk—how did you get it? How did you get your hands on a spirit crystal?"

"A spirit crystal? So that's what the gem is called?"

"Did you have it in your possession without knowing what it was?"

"Yes. That room used to be my father's, you see. I have many fond childhood memories there, so when my father passed away, I asked the pope to let me move into his former room."

So Dongahar's father must've been the one who put the crystal in that desk. Did he also put the seal on it, then? I could try asking Dongahar, but he probably wouldn't remember. His father used to be someone the pope trusted a lot, so it might make more sense to ask her.

Still, both Dongahar and his father must've been part of the Church's *elite* elite to have joined the Executive Division. Not only that, but both had been quite high in the ranks. That proved just how much they'd contributed to the Church and explained why Dongahar had been so worried about its future, regardless of how crappy his plan had been.

I shook my head to pull myself out of my thoughts and decided to move on to my next question. "I'm going to ask you something else now. If you can't answer, you don't have to say anything."

"My life might end any second now. Don't worry about me and just ask your questions."

He truly was an upright and honest man. I understood now why he'd been one of the pope's closest aides. I wished we could've gone back to the time when we were deciding on the Church's new guidelines, but alas.

"First question: You told me to go to Illumasia, but do you really think that I can just waltz into their territory and have any chances of success?"

"I have faith that *you*, Sage Luciel, can reach the empire's central figure."

"Why?"

"Because I know the empire has had to pay a hefty price for their research on demonization and demonic power."

"Do you think I should spread rumors that I can undo demonization in the empire and wait for them to invite me over?"

"You won't need to do that. They most likely already know that you've done it before."

From his words, I deduced that there must be a spy from

Illumasia within the Church. "You anticipated all that? Then you must have information about the empire for me, right?"

Dongahar nodded. A look of deliberation crossed his face before he eventually spoke. "I will start with the information I believe you're most interested in."

"I want to know *everything*. I'd appreciate it if you didn't decide what I might find interesting."

"Very well. I'll start with the rumors circulating in the empire about the Lion of War."

"Lionel?"

"Yes. When you were in Yenice, the Lion of War was fed food laced with poison by an inhabitant of a city Illumasia conquered during the war with Luburk. As a result, he spent some time hovering between life and death, and his memories are now clouded. I've also heard that he is now wearing a mask, since his face was disfigured by the effects of the poison."

I nodded. "I'm aware that there is a fake Lionel and that he has been fighting on the front line."

"How strange. Based on the information I've gathered, the Lion of War withdrew from the front line after the incident. That allowed Luburk to push Illumasia's forces back, which led to a ceasefire, with both armies glaring at each other on opposite sides of the battlefield."

How would Lionel react if he heard about that? A true warrior like him would likely say that it was better to die honorably than to flee from the battlefield.

"You probably know more about Lionel when he was the Lion of War than I do," I said.

"Naturally. And so do many others in the empire, which is why they found it odd to hear he'd fled from his duties. However, the emperor has forcefully shut down the rumors by ordering anyone who speaks of them to be beheaded."

If the emperor had issued that decree, it was likely that he knew about the fake Lionel.

"Since we're on the topic of the war with Luburk, have there been any changes at the border between those nations in the past two

years?" I asked.

"I've heard that the Illumasian army is getting pushed back. Their forces must be in complete chaos without the Lion of War. He was the cornerstone of their military strength, after all. His absence is bound to affect the morale of both Illumasia's troops and those of Luburk."

If the empire was losing, there must've been certain information they couldn't disclose.

"Do you think the emperor had anything to do with Lionel's exile?"

"I can't say with certainty that he did. There have been instances of people causing a stir, claiming that demons had appeared in the empire, but those were quickly shut down with gag orders. If the emperor truly was involved in such serious matters, it would be unthinkable for these kinds of rumors to leak out."

"So do you think Blanche was the mastermind behind the rumors? Just like they spread those stories about me?"

"That's also hard to say. There could have indeed been demons that escaped from Illumasia's research facilities. Blanche has the means to turn people into demons, but I don't see why they would make them appear in Illumasia."

He had a point. Even if Blanche were to use those demons as "proof" that Illumasia was experimenting with demonization, the empire could just deny the claims. Their proven track record of defeating demons would allow them to frame the narrative in their favor. They could easily claim that they were researching how to combat demons and were attacked as a result, or that a demon they had captured had managed to escape. There would be no real downside for them. Luburk hadn't publicly denounced Illumasia either, even though Lord Wisdom had told me that the empire had thrown him out after experimenting on him, thinking that he was dead.

I decided to ask Dongahar for more information about Illumasia to better organize my thoughts. "Do you have any updates on what the Lion of War has been doing since his return to the capital?"

"He hasn't been making many public appearances, which likely

means he's holed up at the demonization research facilities," Dongahar replied.

Truthfully, I was pretty scared of the fake Lionel. Not from a combat perspective, but because of how easily he'd framed the true general and taken control of the empire's army. Another concern weighed heavily on my mind regarding our plan to enter the empire: Lionel's level reset. My initial plan had been to make him fight the fake to prove that he was the real deal. But if the impostor had been undergoing demonization experiments, I couldn't neglect the possibility that he was stronger as a result.

If the worst-case scenario were to unfold and Lionel were to be defeated, I needed to have a clear plan in place. This meant that rather than having Lionel make a triumphant return to his home nation, we would likely need to sneak into the capital and even into the emperor's palace. But if we couldn't find any documents about the empire's experiments with demonization or locate their research facilities, we'd end up putting the Church in a difficult position.

Just like Dongahar had said, if we were to be invited to the empire, we'd most likely be able to reach its core. However, this approach could lead to us getting crushed without being able to do anything. The quickest method would be to fly all the way to the imperial palace with the airship, raid it from above, and arrest the emperor. But without proof of any wrongdoing, we wouldn't be able to justify such a drastic action. Besides, Illumasia had wyverns that would most likely prevent us from reaching the palace. I needed a better plan.

A sigh escaped my lips before I suddenly remembered something. "Oh, right. I have another question. Do you know how Blanche learned that I killed the demon in the labyrinth in Grandol?"

"They told me that you and your companions appeared when their men were pretending to be adventurers. But I personally think that Lord Kamiya has been keeping an eye on you. It's only a gut feeling, though—I haven't been able to confirm my theory."

Seriously, how had he managed to gather so much information? I often wondered the same thing about Galba. It was almost like they were ninjas or something.

"Did you learn all this just through your work at the Executive Division?" I asked.

"No. The messenger from Blanche proudly told me about it."

I assumed he must've confirmed one way or another that the messenger was telling the truth, or he wouldn't have brought it up. I decided to ask him more questions about the messenger.

"Wait, you're saying that the *messenger* from Blanche told you all this confidential information?"

"He seemed to really resent you. He thinks that you're a scoundrel who tricked and deceived his younger sisters."

I was flabbergasted by his reply. I hadn't been expecting that at all.

"His younger sisters? He must be a relative of Nadia and Lydia, then. Right?" I asked.

Dongahar nodded. "He's the older brother of the two sisters in your entourage. He's clearly not used to scheming and tends to let his emotions get the better of him, so it was easy to extract information from him," he explained calmly. He didn't smile or seem amused, so I could tell he was being truthful.

Should I tell Nadia and Lydia about this? I now had one more concern to add to my ever-growing list.

"I see," I said after a short pause. "Next question: What is that 'power' Blanche received? The one you said could allow them to rule the world in your farewell note."

"The messenger didn't tell me what it was, as you might expect. But he seemed afraid when he mentioned it."

"Afraid..."

Even someone as loose-tongued as that messenger wouldn't reveal such crucial information, huh? Still, I wondered what he was afraid of. As I sat there, trying to come up with a reason to explain his behavior, Dongahar suddenly bowed his head to me.

"Sage Luciel, I know that I am in no position to ask anything of you, but I have a request."

"What is it?"

"You'll most likely be traveling to Blanche and Illumasia in the near future. When you're there, you need to destroy the labyrinths

in their territory—for the sake of our nation."

I'd most likely do it, but that meant I had something else to add to my to-do list, along with figuring out the two nations' schemes and coming up with ways to deal with the demons they'd been summoning-slash-creating. My head hurt just thinking about juggling all those tasks. But all I could do was nod in response to his request.

After that, I continued to ask him questions, my impromptu interrogation finally ending when the sun began to rise. Dongahar had answered every single one of my questions. I debated taking him to the pope, but it was early, so she might still be asleep. Instead, I decided to lock him up in one of HQ's underground cells.

Opening the door, I saw that Ketty and Kefin were guarding my room (when had they gotten there?), so I entrusted Dongahar to them.

"May the day come when I can call myself a fool and regret doubting you, Sage Luciel," he said as he was led away to the cells.

Alone in my room, I reflected on Dongahar's retreating figure and his final words.

"I don't care if you regret your actions or not. All I want is to achieve my own goals, and I'll keep working toward them," I muttered. I wasn't talking just to Dongahar—these words were also for me.

After that, I got dressed and decided to head to the dining hall for some breakfast, even though it was still pretty early. When I stepped out of the elevator and into the big training field, I was met with the sight of my master swinging his sword around.

"Good morning, master," I said. "It's really early. Did you not manage to get much rest last night, sleeping outside?"

"Oh, Luciel," he said when he spotted me. "I did sleep. I've just never been the kind to sleep in. Plus, I like moving around at this time of the morning. Helps me clear my head."

"I see. If you feel like it, could we have a sparring match?" I asked.

"Ooh, how rare for you to ask. We don't have to limit ourselves to one match, y'know? I'd be more than happy to go a few rounds with

you."

"Thank you. I'm going to stretch, then. Please give me a minute."

"Something happen?" he asked me.

"I just feel like moving my body to clear my head."

"That so?"

"Yes."

Brod looked like he wanted to add something, but he didn't, and the two of us began sparring. Even as the others left the airship for breakfast, and Ketty and Kefin returned from the cells, and the knights arrived for their morning training, the two of us kept at it.

I'd lost to him when we had sparred in Merratoni—when I'd used the Thunder Dragon's powers—but this time, it was just a battle of stats and techniques, and I was impressed by how well I was doing. I felt like if I were to use the power of the dragons in between attacking and defending, I could win the match. But I didn't want to do that to Brod when he was already taking time out of his day to help me clear the annoying fog in my heart.

Then, Lionel said he wanted to join our match. Perhaps he'd sensed that I wasn't feeling my best, or perhaps he just couldn't hold back anymore and wanted to join in on the fun. Normally, I would've told him to take my spot, but I still felt like moving my body, so I had him team up with Brod and informed them I'd be using my magic from now on.

My little suggestion seemed to ignite their pride, as they launched into a relentless flurry of attacks. I had to focus every nerve in my body on fighting them, which allowed me to gradually empty my head. Then, the fog inside me finally lifted.

After that, I was sent rolling to the ground more times than I could count, but I managed to take both Brod and Lionel down a fair few times as well. It seemed that even I had made some progress since the last time. Still, they would have easily overpowered me if they hadn't lost their levels. Our little practice session made me realize that I still had a long way to go. It helped me to envision my future self, one who had grown stronger, and motivated me to keep pushing myself to improve.

I dodged Lionel's greatsword as he swung it at me, and seizing

that opening, I fell backward to evade Brod's sword, which was closing in on my chest, barely escaping it. I landed in a bridge position and fluidly rotated my body before kicking him in the back and sending him flying.

But before I had time to process what was going on, Lionel's large shield came swinging at me with impressive speed. I couldn't dodge it and took the hit head-on, which launched me backward and sent me rolling to the ground. But just as I stood up and grabbed my sword to resume the fight, a large shadow appeared on the field. Turning around, I was met with the sight of an enormous golem right behind me.

I whipped my head to Pola—the only one who could make golems randomly appear like this—and she pointed at her stomach with an annoyed look on her face. "I'm hungry," she said.

I glanced up at the sky to check the position of the sun and finally realized how long Brod and I had been going at it.

"Oh, my bad. Should we head to the dining hall together?"

Pola put away her golem, and Brod and Lionel grudgingly tucked their swords back into their scabbards. I was about to leave the training field when I noticed some of the knights were staring at me.

"We've borrowed the training field for a bit. I'm very sorry if we got in the way of your training," I said, thinking I should apologize just in case we had been bothering them.

The knights stared at me with bewildered expressions but didn't say anything in response, so I left for the dining hall with my companions. At the time, I didn't realize that this incident would drastically change the way the knights saw me.

Rosa wasn't supervising the dining hall today, but the older ladies who worked there and the pope's attendants were present. Judging by how the girls were crying while obeying the dining hall ladies' orders, I surmised this must've been their punishment. While I didn't care about the opinions of those who had participated in Dongahar's scheme or plotted against the Church, I couldn't shake the fear that those who were unwittingly complicit might hold a grudge against me.

"Luciel, stop worrying so much," Brod said when he saw me looking at the pope's attendants.

"Yes, master," I replied. His words were enough to ease my anxiety.

After we were done with our meal, I took Nadia and Lydia and headed to the pope's chambers. She was much calmer than yesterday and greeted us with a refined expression.

"Good morning, Your Holiness."

"Good morning, Luciel."

The previous day had been absolutely crazy, but the pope seemed much more cheerful than she ever had since we'd met.

"Thank you for everything you did yesterday. You seem to be in a good mood today," I remarked.

"Indeed. Forêt Noire has advised me to maintain my dignity at all times. She said that if I dwell on the past, I might inadvertently jeopardize the future you have so diligently forged for us."

Spotting Forêt Noire from the corner of my eye, I turned to her and noticed that her coat was black again, not white and sparkly like the previous day.

"Why did Forêt's coat change color again?" I asked the pope.

Forêt Noire replied in her stead. "Don't worry. I've just changed my appearance so that people won't know I'm a spirit."

"Why?"

"If people know what I am, they'll try to worship me, and it'll be annoying."

Her words made me think of the dragonewts. People who worshipped spirits likely considered them supreme beings far greater than humans.

I nodded. "It's better to avoid overwhelming people. But will you be all right in that form?"

"Now that I have recovered my spirit crystal, I'll be fine. I can always activate my powers when needed, so I'll be able to help you if you run into trouble."

"That's reassuring. But are you sure?"

"We're partners, aren't we? It's only natural that I accompany you on your travels."

I turned to the pope. “Your Holiness...”

“Forêt Noire wants to go with you, Luciel. As for me, I just want her to do as she wishes now that she has regained her powers,” the pope replied with a smile.

Her words made me wonder if *she* also wanted to do what she liked. At that moment, I set a new goal for myself: to make it so that one day, the pope could go outside without feeling like she was bothering anyone. It wouldn’t be possible right away, but I was determined to make it happen.

“I’m looking forward to our next trip,” Forêt said.

“Yeah, me too. Oh, I might need your help dealing with some wyverns. Do you think you’ll be able to fly without being scared?”

She chuckled. “What do you take me for? I’ll make quick work of those wyverns.”

Her nonchalant attitude reassured me.

“I’m counting on you.”

“Leave it to me.”

Forêt Noire hadn’t been able to speak before, but I was secretly happy to see that now that she could, she was exactly as I’d pictured her in my mind.

All right, now that that’s out of the way, let’s move on to what really brings me here today.

“Your Holiness, I’m actually here to report something important to you.”

“I am listening.”

“Dongahar regained consciousness during the night.”

“So he really did survive... Thank you, Luciel.”

“Don’t mention it. Anyway, I questioned him and had my companions lock him up in one of the underground cells when I was done.”

“I see. I am truly grateful for the trouble you took.”

“After listening to what he had to say, I’ve come to the conclusion that Blanche is an incredibly dangerous nation. It’s highly likely that they’ve completed their research on demonization.”

“Impossible...” Nadia whispered.

“Is there nothing we can do about it?” Lydia asked.

I paid them no mind and resumed my report to the pope. "We still have too little information about Blanche, so I believe we need to keep gathering intelligence for now. But we might still have a chance to stop Illumasia before they can finish their experiments. For that reason, I'm planning on heading there in the near future," I explained.

"I continue to burden you with these matters," the pope said, a hint of concern in her voice.

"Not at all. The last incident was my fault, and I ended up dragging the Church and the Healer's Guild into my mess. I'm very sorry."

The pope shook her head. "No. My failures are what caused the situation. From now on, I will stop relying on others so heavily and take full responsibility. I refuse to allow anyone to suffer a fate like Dongahar's again."

Her words reassured me that she would most likely be fine from now on. Plus, if she ever felt overwhelmed, Rosa would be there to support her, and Catherine would know just how to lift her spirits.

"Oh, right. Sorry for suddenly changing the topic, but I have a question. The broken barrier Dongahar talked about—was it created using some sort of artifact?" I asked.

"It was. However, it does not work anymore."

"Has it been destroyed? Discarded? Or do you still have it?"

"It's broken, but we still have it. Unfortunately, no one has the expertise to repair something my father created."

So it really *was* Lord Reinstar who made that artifact. If it was only broken, my companions might be able to fix it, and it'd be much faster than trying to rebuild it from scratch.

"Could I have it? And let's assume we managed to fix it or create something similar, would the Church be interested in buying it?" I asked.

"Do you mean to say that you can repair it?"

"I'm not sure yet. But some of my crafty friends would like to give it a try. Of course, we wouldn't ask you to pay anything until after we fixed it."

The pope nodded. "Fine. Follow me. Just you."

She led me to the door opposite the one that led to Neldahl, and I was met with the sight of a large golden bell like the kind you'd find in a Buddhist temple.

"It's a bit big for me to just carry around, huh?" I remarked.

"Put it in your magic bag and take it with you. I am looking forward to seeing it fixed." She touched the bell and returned to her throne.

"Well, I sure wasn't expecting this," I muttered, looking at the bell. "Putting this kind of bell in a church is a *bit*..."

Breathing a sigh, I retrieved the bell and returned to the pope's chamber, where I decided to address the matter of Estia next. "Your Holiness, I was thinking of taking Estia along to Illumasia, if she agrees to come, of course."

After a lot of contemplation, I'd decided to ask for Estia's help—well, the Spirit of Dusk's, to be specific—to deal with the situation in Illumasia...even if it meant reopening old wounds.

"Estia?" the pope said, looking at her.

Estia hesitated for a moment before saying, "I'm sorry but—" Her aura suddenly shifted, and she declared, "We'll come. Luciel, you *have* to take Estia with you to Illumasia."

It seemed that the Spirit of Dusk had taken the reins.

"Are you sure? I know I'm the one who brought up the idea, but it might trigger her trauma," I remarked.

"It might. But I want her to heal the emotional wounds she has suffered in the empire right there, where it all began." Based on her words, it seemed that this was her way of asking Estia for forgiveness.

The pope must've thought the same thing, as she said, "Luciel, if you are worried about the Church, do not be. As long as Rosa and I are here, everything will be all right. Besides, the two young ladies behind you will be staying as well, won't they?"

Well, it looked like the pope had chosen to send Estia to Illumasia with me as well.

"They will," I said. "Apparently, the messenger from Blanche who met with Dongahar is their older brother. That's why I'm thinking it's better to take preventive measures before people can start making

up weird rumors about me again."

"Impossible!"

"I can't believe it..."

Needless to say, Nadia and Lydia were shocked to learn that the messenger had been their brother. I'd debated keeping it a secret from them but decided against it. It would've been an even greater shock if they'd accidentally discovered the truth down the line.

"I'll need your help again when I'm back from the empire," I told them. "Until then, I want you two to act as Her Holiness's bodyguards."

"Understood."

"We'll keep training so as not to get in your way next time."

The sisters agreed to stay behind, albeit a tad reluctantly. In all honesty, I could've used their help dealing with the empire, but I ultimately decided it would be better for them to sit this one out.

"Thanks, girls. Now, I'd like to get Estia's consent as well, if she's to come with us, not just the Spirit of Dusk's."

At my words, the Spirit of Dusk's overwhelming aura disappeared. "Um...I'm scared to go. And I might collapse and cause you trouble again," Estia said timidly.

I nodded. "I know I'm asking for a lot. It could put your life in danger. But I really want you to come. And I'm counting on the Spirit of Dusk to help you if you ever find yourself in danger."

"I won't show mercy to anyone who tries to harm Estia," the Spirit of Dusk said. "I'll eliminate them all."

"Careful. If you're too reckless, I'll have to ask Forêt Noire to scold you," I said.

"I'll be care—" the Spirit of Dusk began, but before she could finish, Estia took control of her own body again. "I look forward to traveling with you again, sir," she said. Unlike before, there was a glint of determination in her eyes.

I turned back to the pope. "I'll contact you through my arclink crystal once we have successfully escaped the empire."

"Please do. In the meantime, I will defend the Holy City to the best of my ability. I am counting on you, Luciel."

"Yes, Your Holiness," I replied, dropping to one knee and bowing

my head to her. Then, I stood back up and addressed Forêt Noire. "Forêt, can you return to the hermit stable for now?" I asked.

"Nope. I'll be in my spirit crystal, so call me whenever you need me."

"Fine," I said reluctantly.

She's absolutely going to come in and out of her crystal whenever she pleases, my gut told me. Still, I decided to let her do as she wanted.

After that, I gave one last bow to the pope and Rosa, reminded Nadia and Lydia that I was leaving them in their hands, and left with Estia.

"Sir, if we make it back from Illumasia, could you take me to Merratoni one more time?" she asked as we made our way to the big training field.

Was this her way of trying to overcome her trauma? I didn't know what kind of emotions the Spirit of Dusk preferred, but I wondered if that would weaken her. Still, if both of them wished for Estia's emotional scars to heal, I'd help.

"Just Merratoni?" I asked.

"Yes. Just Merratoni is fine."

"Sure thing."

She told me about the three months she'd spent at the Church's HQ as we walked the rest of the way to the training field. But when we reached the entrance, angry roars and the sound of clashing swords reached our ears.

"A battle?" I gasped. "No way!"

I had thought we had dealt with all the demonized knights, but I hadn't considered the possibility that there could be more that Dongahar had been unaware of. I flung the doors open, only to stumble upon the same scene as the previous day: a pile of unconscious knights lying on the field.

"What's going on here?" I muttered.

"Your master and Mister Lionel have had their stats reset, have they not?" Estia asked, just as puzzled as I was. "How are they able to defeat the knights?"

"They aren't normal people like you and me; they're battle

demons. Reality doesn't apply to them."

"That's not very nice," she said, bringing a hand to her mouth to hide her smile.

With a sigh, I marched up to my master, who was *still* fighting, to heal him, Lionel, and the knights.

07 — Small Matters Before Great Ones?

After healing the knights, I asked them what had happened. To my surprise, I discovered that they had actually come to ask my master and Lionel to help them train of their own volition. Even more shocking, *I* was apparently the reason they'd made that decision. They said that seeing me getting beaten up over and over but still getting back up and trying again had inspired them somehow, on top of proving that I wasn't just all talk. So when Brod and Lionel returned to the training field after breakfast, seeing that I wasn't around, they had challenged the pair to another mock battle.

"They had a lot more spirit than yesterday, so it was pretty damn fun," Brod said, visibly satisfied.

Lionel seemed to be in a good mood as well, pleased to have had a great training session so early in the day.

Anyway, the knights thanked me for healing them and began heading back to their respective squads.

"As long as you feel the frustration of losing and refuse to give up, you will only grow stronger," Brod told them. His words must've reached them, as they all stopped in their tracks and turned around to bow to him, before continuing on their way. "Oh, by the way, Luciel, we don't have to go to Merratoni," he told me next.

"Huh? But what about your job at the guild? You already left your post without even telling Gulgar," I pointed out.

"I had a little chat with Galba yesterday. He agreed to act as substitute guildmaster until I come back."

"I mean, having you around would definitely help if we have to fight, but..."

"You're going to Illumasia, right? I've got some business there too, so mind if I tag along?"

Well, if he'd already discussed it with Galba *and* had affairs in the empire, I didn't have a reason to refuse. I was a little surprised to hear he had business in Illumasia of all places, though.

"I am." I nodded. "Fine, you can come. But please don't wander

off on your own, all right?"

"Worry about yourself instead of me," he retorted, muttering, "Who do you think I'm going to the empire for?" under his breath, although I didn't really hear that part at the time.

"I mean, you do have a point, but..."

I felt like Brod's mood was gradually souring. He turned to Lionel, completely ignoring my response, and said, "Heard that, Lion?"

"Always got to have your way, huh?"

The two of them stared at each other for a few seconds before they both turned away.

"What about Galba? How's he returning to Merratoni?" I asked.

"He borrowed a horse from the knights and left last night," Brod replied.

"I see."

Now that I thought about it, Catherine hadn't been in the pope's chambers when I came to visit her... *Aaand I'm going to stop that line of thought right now.*

I looked at Lionel. He didn't appear any different from usual, but there was a noticeable tension in him, perhaps because Brod would be tagging along for Illumasia.

After that, I gathered everyone in the airship's briefing room to tell them about all the things Dongahar had told me, as well as to discuss our future plans. Well, "plans" wasn't exactly the right word for it; I mostly wanted to talk about the route we'd take to infiltrate Illumasia and how we'd deal with their wyvern squads if we were to use our airship to get there, as well as to get a better idea of their military strength.

"All right, first question: Can we fly all the way to the capital in the airship?" I asked.

"It's technically possible, but it all depends on whether we cross paths with the wyverns or not. It's a matter of luck, really," Lionel said. "The ones that have been deployed to fight in the war against Luburk should be on standby near the battlefield, even with the ceasefire. There are still the ones guarding the capital, but they shouldn't be that much of a threat to us."

I'd thought that the wyverns would be a much bigger threat than

that, so I was surprised by Lionel's statement.

"Does the empire have weapons to deal with flying threats?" I asked next.

"Back when I was there, we used ballistae and defensive magic to keep them at bay. There were also powerful magical weapons to deal with monster and demon threats, but those shouldn't be too much of a problem for us. The empire probably isn't expecting an attack from above."

Based on Lionel's information, it seemed that we should be able to use the airship without too much trouble. But there was one little problem: While I could use Sanctuary Barrier to protect us from the magic weapons, I wasn't sure how to deal with the ballistae. I hadn't seen them for myself yet, but I was pretty sure they could kill someone instantly if aimed accurately. Would flying as high as we could to prevent the bolts from reaching us be enough? But what about landing, then? We could use parachutes, but that'd make us easy targets...and we didn't have parachutes anyway.

Hold on. I might have an idea.

"The airship is pretty quiet, right? How about we fly into the capital at night and take advantage of the cover of darkness?" I suggested.

"Wyverns are nocturnal creatures, sir. Also, there are a lot of small conflicts going on in the empire, so they tend to be more cautious at night," Lionel informed me.

"Small conflicts, huh?"

"If it's the ballistae's bolts yer worried about, don't be," Dhoran interjected.

"But don't we risk the airship falling if they hit us?" I asked.

"Nah. She ain't gonna sink just because of some big arrows. If the wyverns keep gnashin' and breathin' fire at her, sure, the armor might take a hit, but ballista bolts? They ain't takin' her down."

He'd built that airship using ore from the Earth Dragon, and I could tell he fully believed in its resilience.

"If you're that confident, I'll take your word for it. You're the head of the research and development squad, after all."

"Good. She's also got a barrier to protect 'er from long-range

magic attacks, so as long as they don't hit us with a forbidden technique, we'll be right as rain," he added.

Well, that was a bit of a flag, but I decided to ignore it.

"All right, in that case, let's go straight from the Holy City to the empire by flying over the mountains. That way, we should be able to avoid going over any other cities."

"That does seem like our best option," Lionel agreed with a nod.

"The only problem is that it makes it trickier to explain ourselves if we get caught," I said. "I want to make sure we can claim we're just there for a friendly visit, after all."

"You might want to give up on that idea," my master chimed in.

"We could say we didn't notice we had crossed the border because it's our first time using the airship?"

"If that was a serious suggestion, then it's back to the classroom for you," he said. His eyes weren't smiling.

"I'm just kidding," I assured him. "Anyway, between dropping directly into the palace and sneaking into it from inside the city, which option seems safer?" I asked our Illumasian companions.

Ketty was the one who replied. "There are lots of ways to sneak into the palace, so both seem viable to me."

Judging by her words, perhaps she had done it before. Or perhaps it was just knowledge she'd gained from her year as an assassin. Either way, what mattered was ensuring everyone's safety.

We also needed to get the empire's citizens on our side, and for that we needed Lionel. If he succeeded, we should be able to confront the emperor without having to fight anyone. Plus, if the empire was oppressing its citizens through war, we'd need Lionel to inspire the people to rise against the emperor's tyranny.

"As I said before, I'd like Lionel to act like he's making his triumphant return to the empire."

"Then we'll boldly walk all the way from the center of the capital to the palace. Even if someone were to attack us on the way, we should be able to deal with them easily. And if my impersonator is around, I'll unleash hell upon him," Lionel said. He seemed to have made up his mind already. Ketty's eyes shone with determination as well. The fake Lionel was done for.

But then, I noticed that Estia—who had chosen to accompany us to the empire—looked a little grim.

"What's with the long face, Estia?" I asked. "Is there something you'd like to say?"

"There are a lot of child slaves in the imperial capital, most of whom were brought there against their will. I'd like to save them," she said.

Saving slave children, huh? Had she remembered part of her past?

Talking about the empire's slaves and children made me think of Bottaculli. He had sold his patients as slaves to the empire in order to save his daughter's life. Just like Estia, I hoped we could save as many of the child slaves as we could.

"Our safety comes first, but I'll do my best to find a way to rescue the children if we can. After all, I can easily remove their slave crests with Dispel," I said. "Our main objective this time is destroying the empire's demonization research facilities, but we'll try to free as many child slaves as possible along the way."

"Thank you so much," Estia said.

I nodded and turned to my comrades, scanning their faces one by one. "If anyone has anything to add, now's the time to speak up."

Lionel raised his hand. "The empire's soldiers are strong. A moment's hesitation and you can consider yourself dead. I want you all to remember not to lower your guard a single second until whoever you're fighting is down for good."

It felt to me like those words were meant for him. After all, it was possible he'd end up having to fight soldiers he'd trained himself or that he was familiar with. His warning made me wonder how I would fare in his position...if I'd be able to fight my former allies in cold blood.

Everyone's gazes shifted back to me, and I decided it was time to wrap up our meeting. "Let me remind you all of our objectives one last time. First, we need to destroy the demonization research facilities. Second, we'll cure any demonized test subjects we come across, if there are any. Third, we must deal with Lionel's impostor. And if possible, we'll also free the child slaves. But no matter what

happens, we're all coming home alive."

A chorus of "Yes" and "Yes, sir" echoed around the room, and our briefing session was officially over.

My next order of business should have been to take Galba back to Merratoni, but he'd already left. I thought of heading to Dongahar's cell to take him to the pope, but that was Granhart's job, so I wasn't sure what to do next.

"Well, if we don't have any other tasks, how about we head straight to the empire? We don't have that many things to get ready before we go, do we?" Brod suggested.

He had a point. But then Lionel pointed out that my master was just impatient to leave the airship because he didn't like being in there, and Brod left for his room, sulking.

"His idea wasn't bad, though," Lionel added. "Illumasia probably doesn't know about our airship yet. Making our move before they catch wind of it might be an option."

Everyone seemed on board with the idea, so we decided to leave without even telling the pope. However, Dhoran noted that he had some adjustments to make to the ship before we headed to Illumasia, so Estia came up with an idea. She told us about the little town where she'd stayed after escaping the empire and suggested we head there first, seeing as it was located in the Republic of Saint Shurule.

I personally thought it would have been better to stay where we were and take care of the last-minute arrangements, but seeing how much everyone disliked the idea of staying at Church HQ, I reluctantly channeled some mana into the airship, causing it to lift off the ground and slowly ascend into the sky.

08 — Intertwined Fates and Bonds

It was my second time steering the airship. There really was something epic about soaring through the sky, huh? In that moment, I began to understand why some pilots were so hesitant to retire, even after years of pushing their bodies through long hours in the air.

As I admired the scenery rushing by, two voices I wasn't very familiar with echoed through the control cabin.

"We're going so fast, yet the ship is barely shaking. This proves just how incredible the control system is! We can't feel any g-force either. Is it because the barrier is dispersing the pressure on the airframe?" she muttered under her breath.

"Look, Miss Rina, we're already so far from the Holy City!" Nanya said excitedly.

"Huh? Didn't you two return to your shop yesterday? I didn't see you at breakfast," I said, confused.

"Hello, Mister Luciel," Rina said.

"Good morning, boss!" Nanya greeted me next.

The two of them exchanged glances before Rina said something completely unexpected, "Um, master and the others showed us around the airship and talked to us until dawn, so we slept in one of the cabins."

Dhoran probably hadn't wanted to lose his new working force, which explained their presence. And Rina had mentioned "the others" too, which meant Pola and Lycian must've been in cahoots with him.

Oh well. I just wished he'd told me about them *before* we left the Holy City.

"You don't understand what's going on...do you?" I asked.

"Is there anything to understand other than the fact that we're flying in the sky?"

"Our destination, maybe?" I suggested.

"Isn't this just a trial run?"

Nanya gasped. “Hold on a minute!” she exclaimed, her face growing paler and paler by the second.

It seemed that she’d noticed something was wrong.

“Are we going to...Illumasia?” she asked.

“I request an immediate U-turn,” Rina declared.

“I don’t want to die just yet!” Nanya added.



Having understood the situation they were in, the two of them immediately requested that we turn back.

I chuckled at their reaction. "Don't worry. We're not going to the empire just yet; we're heading to a little town up north in Saint Shurule. And of course, I'll make sure everyone's safety is my main priority."

"But still!" Rina whined.

I glanced at Dhoran, silently asking him to turn the airship back, but he shook his head. It seemed that he wanted them to tag along. But I really didn't like the idea of forcing them to come with us without even giving them time to prepare themselves mentally.

With a sigh, I shifted my focus and tried to find a compromise that would satisfy the girls as well. "You can just stay in the airship with Dhoran and the others," I said.

"Can we?"

"Yeah. We'll prepare you three meals a day, and you can just stay in your cabins if you want."

"Three meals a day and no work? Miss Rina, is this place heaven?" Nanya marveled, seemingly overjoyed.

"Wait, what?" I didn't think my offer had been *that* generous.

"We heard you talking about the empire, and we know that it's a very dangerous place. That's why we wanted to go home," Rina explained. "But could we really just stay inside the airship?"

"Sure, yeah."

The girls exchanged glances before lowering their heads to me and saying in unison, "Thank you for having us!"

It seemed like I'd managed to convince them to stay.

After that, they went to find Dhoran to ask him more questions about the ship while I asked Estia for directions to the town she had told us about.

"Am I going the right way? Oh, and if you could share what you know about the topography, that'd be helpful."

"I think our current route is correct. As for the terrain, there's a mountain range between the Holy City and the empire, and Ebiza—the town I used to live in—is located at the foot of it, on the Holy City's side," she explained.

"Ebiza... I feel like I've heard that name before."

"Did the pope tell you that I used to live there, perhaps?" Estia offered.

I hummed. "Maybe. I don't remember. Is it a nice place to live?"

"I don't recall much about when I first arrived, but when I left, all the people who took care of me came to see me off. Oh, and there's a large inn in the town, so you can probably all stay there," she said, a fond smile curling her lips as she reminisced.

Knowing how tumultuous her life had been, I was relieved to see that she had at least some happy memories to look back on. That made me a little excited to actually get to Ebiza.

For a while, the airship smoothly continued on its course, maintaining a steady speed and altitude. At some point, my master —who really, *really* seemed to dislike flying—came to ask me if we were nearing our destination. I noticed that he didn't look well, but perhaps it was just the serious look on his face that made him appear that way. Or maybe he was getting restless from being unable to move his body.

Unwilling to watch him struggle any longer, Dhoran told him about the deck on the top of the airship, and Brod immediately headed there.

"Not so tough now, huh?" Lionel muttered under his breath.

His humorous comment made the tense atmosphere lighten instantly. Rina and Nanya let out relieved sighs and began to happily chitchat with Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian about artifacts. Meanwhile, Estia helped me steer by giving me directions.

"What kind of town is Ebiza, by the way?" I asked her.

"Ebiza? Well...my impression of it when I lived there was that there were a lot of rowdy people," she replied.

And here I thought it would be a town full of nice people who'd supported her in her time of need. My expectations were already crushed.

"Rowdy people, huh? That doesn't sound like the kind of town one would visit willingly."

She nodded. "I can understand that. But they're actually just putting on an act to keep any stray soldiers from the empire or

kingdom from causing trouble. It's an unspoken rule that everyone works together to keep the town safe."

"It kind of sounds like it's been forsaken by the rest of the nation. From what you said, the people there seem more used to fighting other human beings than monsters."

"They're used to both. Mercenaries and adventurers go to grind levels in the nearby labyrinth, and both enemy and allied soldiers work together to protect the townsfolk."

Hold on a minute. Could it be that they were even stronger than the knights? "Did you learn how to fight there?" I asked.

"No, I was a healer. I learned how to fight when I was a slave in Illumasia."

Oops. I had accidentally put my foot in my mouth. "I see. Uhhh, so there's a labyrinth too, you say?" I asked, changing the topic to hide my embarrassment. "What kind?" I'd have loved it to be one with an Eternal Dragon trapped inside.

"It's a rare type of labyrinth, as it has entrances in both Saint Shurule and Illumasia. I went through it when I escaped from the empire, so I've seen both for myself."

"So it's basically a tunnel that links the two nations, huh?"

That was useful to know. The tunnel had been a spider's thread that had brought her out of hell, just like in that famous Japanese novel. She didn't seem to have struggled that much in the labyrinth, and there could be an Eternal Dragon hidden within, so I supposed I had no choice but to go.

After that, I decided to switch to more harmless topics, such as life in Ebiza and the people who'd looked after her, to avoid triggering her trauma again. But I felt like that made Estia careful not to upset *me* instead.

Before long, the mountain range between Saint Shurule and Illumasia came into view. I adjusted our route based on Estia's instructions, and a little town finally came into view in the distance.

"Is that Ebiza?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Can you tell the others to prepare for the landing?"

"Yes, sir. Huh? What is that?!"

I reflexively looked in the direction she was pointing and saw something flying our way. I was about to lower the airship's altitude when *it* happened. Brod jumped from the deck, brandishing his sword at the thing that was approaching us.

"Master!" I yelled, instantly dropping our altitude to intercept him midair.

That turned out to be a great idea. Brod successfully struck the flying object, but the next instant, he was caught in an explosion that sent him hurtling back. Thankfully, I managed to catch him in time with the airship, so he didn't crash into the ground below.

"That's bad for my heart," I sighed.

Brod was making some gestures at me, but I ignored him and landed the ship.

"Master, are you all right?"

"Yeah. But why didn't you charge into that flying thing?"

Oh. So that was what those signs meant.

"Because we're still within the Saint Shurule Republic. And we're not here to fight."

"But they're clearly wary of us," he pointed out.

Glancing in the direction of Ebiza, I saw a group of people who looked like either adventurers or mercenaries standing near the town entrance, surveying us from afar.

"True. Estia, do you know why they're so cautious?"

"Um, I'm not really sure, but I think it might be because of the airship? They saw a large flying object, and they're trying to protect their town from it."

"Ooh, makes sense." I nodded. "Lionel, can you store it in your magic bag?"

"Yes, sir," Lionel replied and did as he was told.

Somehow, I felt like that made the people of Ebiza even *more* cautious of us.

"I'm not gonna go fight them myself, but we'll need to knock them down if they attack us," Brod said.

"That's fine, but please don't kill them," I reminded him.

"Sir, could I try talking to them first?" Estia suggested. It was rare for her to take the initiative like this. It showed just how attached

she was to that little town.

Ebiza must've been an important place for her, just like Merratoni was for me.

"I don't mind, but are you sure? They're on high alert."

"I'm sure." There wasn't a hint of hesitation in her tone, so I decided to let her do her thing.

"I'm leaving it to you, then. But I can't just send you over there alone. Can someone go with her?"

"I'll go," Brod offered. "I wanna know who fired that spell at us."

"Absolutely not. Kefin, Ketty, can you two accompany Estia?"

"Yes, sir!" Kefin responded eagerly.

Ketty let out a sigh. "Guess this kitty doesn't have much of a choice."

"Hey, Luciel!" Brod shot me an accusatory glare.

I ignored him and turned to Estia, Ketty, and Kefin. "Do not hesitate to defend yourselves if they attack you. We'll go with you until a certain point so we can rush to your help if needed," I said.

My master's furious aura dissipated at my words, and I felt a sense of relief. With that, we made our way to the little town. The rest of us stopped when we were about fifty meters from the entrance, while Estia, Ketty, and Kefin continued forward.

"I really don't like the idea of sending them alone to what might be a dangerous place," I muttered under my breath.

"You'd feel less nervous if you'd gone yourself, huh?" Lionel commented beside me, his eyes never leaving Estia and the other two. "I'm just like you; I hate that feeling as well. That's why I fight on the front lines."

"By the way, Estia mentioned that the labyrinth nearby has a tunnel that leads from Saint Shurule to the empire. Does Illumasia know about it?" I asked.

He nodded. "I've heard about it before, but I've never been in there. It's usually where knight aspirants go to grind levels."

"Are there other labyrinths in the empire?"

"No. Illumasia's territory has gradually expanded, and they explored every new region under their control with each expansion, but there have been no reports of other labyrinths being discovered

anywhere.”

So, there *could* be an Eternal Dragon in the labyrinth Estia had mentioned. Maybe I should’ve brought Nadia after all.

All of a sudden, cheers echoed from Ebiza, pulling me out of my thoughts. Glancing over at the town, I saw Estia surrounded by the adventurers and mercenaries that had been posted at the entrance, offering her a warm welcome. Even the rugged adventurers were sporting laid-back smiles as they greeted her.

“Looks like it went fine,” I commented.

“It seems that it did.”

A wave of relief washed over me. As it turned out, I had worried for nothing. Brod, on the other hand, didn’t drop his guard, perhaps because the adventurers had tried to attack us before. Maybe it was a good thing that at least one of us remained alert, because I felt like my own vigilance was slipping away, possibly because I felt reassured by the stories Estia had told me about the town and the fact that I was surrounded by friends.

Estia beckoned us over, and we began making our way to Ebiza, but I felt the gazes directed at us gradually turning harsher and harsher. I had a feeling things were going to turn into a huge hassle.

Estia rushed over to me, a large smile on her face. “Everyone is very happy about your visit, sir.”

Were they? It sure didn’t seem that way to me.

“Sorry, but I don’t think you should believe them. I feel like they’re being a little more hostile than they told you.”

“What?!”

Estia whipped her head around and seemed to understand what I was getting at, if the confused look that registered on her face was anything to go by.

Refusing to get any closer, I decided to greet the adventurers from afar. “Hello, everyone. I’m Luciel, a healer from the Republic of Saint Shurule. We’re not here to cause trouble, so could you let us approach the city?”

A man stepped forward. He was wearing a pointy hat and a black robe and was holding a staff in his hand. He was basically the exact image of what came to mind upon hearing the word “mage.”



I did notice, however, that he was wearing a black glove on his right hand but nothing on his left.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance. My name is Bazack, and I am in charge of the town of Ebiza."

"Bazack?!" Lionel exclaimed. "What is the Abyss Sorcerer doing here?!"

The "Abyss Sorcerer"? Was that man a powerful mage or something? Either way, it didn't look like he and Lionel were on friendly terms, based on the way Lionel looked like he was ready to stab him. I guess it was at least better than Brod, who had already drawn his sword.

"An acquaintance of yours?" I asked Lionel.

"He gave me a hard time back when I was still a general for the empire," he replied.

"I see you still remember me, General Lionel of Illumasia. Hmm? No, it cannot be. You are much too young to be him. Who are you?" Bazack asked.

"Did all those years as a war slave make you senile?" Lionel shot back.

"You!" Bazack pointed his staff at Lionel, radiating killing intent from his entire body.

The mercenaries and adventurers followed suit immediately, drawing their weapons and bracing themselves for a fight. Ketty and Kefin stood back-to-back, weapons ready, while Estia watched the scene unfold in confusion.

At this rate, things would absolutely turn into a fight, so I decided to intervene. "Let me introduce myself once again. I am Luciel, an S-rank healer. And this right here," I gestured at Lionel, "is a follower and companion of mine. We haven't come to fight. We're here to have a discussion with you all."

"*The* S-rank healer? Rumors claim you cannot use your magic anymore, but I am glad to see these stories were baseless. We would welcome you with open arms if you were alone, but we cannot let you into our town accompanied by a general of the empire," Bazack said.

"Let me correct what I just said: I am not an S-rank healer

anymore. I am a sage now. As for Lionel, he was set up by the empire two years ago and sold to me as a slave. I freed him, but he isn't a general of Illumasia any longer."

"A slave?" Bazack repeated before chuckling derisively. "Impossible. We know that the Lion of War is currently residing in the imperial capital, preparing for battle..." He paused as if struck by a revelation and stroked his goatee with his left hand.

A silence fell over the group. If I spoke and broke the silence, there was a possibility Bazack might label me as someone who lacked confidence or assume I was trying to be deceitful.

I glanced at Brod, and he said, "If they come for us, I'll aim at their necks. You focus on supporting me."

"Yes, master."

The silence stretched for what felt like an eternity, and when the adventurers and mercenaries began running out of patience, Bazack hit the ground with his staff, his gaze fixed on Lionel and me. This must've been some sort of signal, as the adventurers and mercenaries immediately put their weapons away.

"When I heard that the Lion of War had to leave the battlefield, I rejoiced, thinking that your fortune had finally begun to decline, but it was actually a ruse..."

"Mister Bazack? I can tell that you and Lionel have a history, but can you let us into the town?"

"I cannot refuse the S-rank healer passage into my town just because of a personal grudge. However, there is still something I wish to discuss with you."

"Is it about Lionel again?" I asked.

"While it is true that the Lion of War and I have a history, that is not what I wish to talk to you about," he replied.

"Then what is it?"

"You said that you have become a sage, yes?"

"I did."

"May I assume that you can use healing magic, then?"

"I sure can. I can heal someone to prove it to you if you'd like. For free, of course." I didn't love the way they were all watching me, but for some reason, it didn't feel *that* hostile either.

“Sir, I cut off Bazack’s right arm back when I was a general of the empire,” Lionel informed me.

So, that hand with the glove must’ve been a prosthesis. If their “history” was that Lionel had cut off Bazack’s arm, would healing Bazack ease the tension between them? Probably not. There was no way a grudge like that could be so easily resolved. But it could alleviate it a little. Besides, it might make Bazack more willing to cooperate with us, so it was worth a try.

And so, with that exceedingly simple line of thinking in mind, I decided to heal Bazack’s arm. “Mister Bazack? Having to speak so loudly is taking a toll on me. Can the two of us move a bit closer to finish this discussion?”

“I suppose it is fine.”

I promised to show him my healing magic, and he and I moved a few steps closer to each other.

“I’m going to heal you right now. If you’re wearing a prosthetic arm, could you please remove it?”

“What are you saying?”

A murmur ran through the adventurers and mercenaries. Perhaps it was rare for Bazack to be flustered.

I paid them no mind and waved my hand to urge Bazack to remove his prosthetic arm. “It’s not exactly pleasant to be surrounded by adventurers and mercenaries like this,” I said. “Can you please remove your prosthesis?”

The man was visibly hesitant, but he eventually removed his fake arm, and I immediately cast Extra Heal on him. His body was enveloped in a warm light that faded away just as quickly as it had appeared.

He hadn’t felt my spell and must have assumed that I hadn’t done anything, as he asked, “What was that li—?!” He interrupted himself midsentence, having noticed that something was different about his body. Nervously, he raised his right arm and inspected it before freezing in place.

“Is that proof enough that I can use healing magic?” I asked.

All Bazack could do was nod, speechless. Behind him, the adventurers and mercenaries couldn’t keep quiet any longer.

“H-His arm grew back!” one of them cried.

Those words served as a catalyst, prompting the others to speak up one after the other.

“It’s a real arm!”

“So, that’s the true power of an S-rank healer...”

“He’s just like the sages of old!”

“Well, yeah. He *did* say he was a sage.”

“We’ll be able to fight again!”

“Go round up all those in need of healing!”

A group of men rushed into the town. Glancing at the rest of the adventurers and mercenaries, I noticed that the wary gazes they had been directing at us had morphed into warm, welcoming looks like the ones they’d given Estia.

Bazack must have returned to his senses after seeing their reactions, as he dropped into a deep bow and said, “Sage Luciel, Ebiza welcomes you and your followers.”

We had finally earned the right to enter the town, but I had a feeling we were about to get roped into yet another annoying situation.

I began to regret having agreed to come here in the first place.

09 — Bad Feeling

After I healed Bazack, who seemed to be the leader of Ebiza, my comrades and I were finally allowed through the town gate under the welcoming gazes of the adventurers and mercenaries.

Bazack showed us around town, but it seemed that his attention was still on his newly grown arm. I saw him open and close his right hand over and over again as we walked through town.

Still, the man seemed to be loved by the adventurers and mercenaries. They had all thanked me even though they hadn't been the ones who'd been healed. It reminded me a bit of the Adventurer's Guild in Merratoni, and I felt a wave of nostalgia hit me.

However, as we progressed farther into the town, I gradually felt wary gazes returning to us, this time, from the townsfolk. Perhaps there was a rift between Bazack and his group, who made their living through combat, and the regular townspeople.

Bazack must've noticed my confusion, as an apologetic look crossed his face. "Please do not be too harsh on the locals. These past few years, there has been an influx of wandering healers coming around and charging exorbitant prices for mediocre treatment, as well as former imperial soldiers turned bandits who stole and caused us trouble. The town is a lot less safe now than it used to be."

Immoral healers and imperial soldiers turned criminals... If that was true, we could consider ourselves lucky that all we got were suspicious glances.

"I thought they were overreacting a bit, but I understand now," I said. "I suppose these kinds of things tend to happen when your town is located so close to a battlefront."

In places like these, experienced and honest healers were an absolute necessity. However, it was difficult to convince good healers to stay in such dangerous and sparsely populated areas. Not every healer was willing to risk their own life to save others. Even I had

hired Lionel and the rest to keep me safe in Yenice even though I already had a group of knights protecting me at all times.

Still, one's impression of a place sure can shift from merely hearing rumors to actually experiencing its atmosphere firsthand, I thought idly.

Meanwhile, Brod and Lionel seemed less concerned about the healer situation and more furious about the former soldiers wreaking havoc in the little town. I once again felt glad that Merratoni had been the first place I'd visited after my reincarnation. I'd only chosen to become a healer to have a chill, grounded life, but if I hadn't met Brod, I wouldn't have been where I was now.

Thank you for bestowing your blessing upon me, Monsieur Luck.

If Ebiza had been the first town I'd visited, I might have settled here for the rest of my new life. Or perhaps I'd have become an adventurer or a mercenary and aimed to explore the outside world...though I had a feeling I would've quickly found myself worn out physically and mentally from having to battle for survival day after day. Perhaps this world was actually much harsher than I'd initially thought.

As we walked along the main street of Ebiza, I noticed that the Healer's Guild and the Adventurer's Guild stood directly opposite each other.

"This is the heart of the town: the plaza. All guild halls are located around it."

Turning around, I saw that we had indeed walked past the Merchant's Guild and the Doctor's Guild, which stood opposite each other as well. It was only then that I noticed how clean and well-maintained the place was, especially considering it was filled with "rowdy" folks according to Estia. I would never have imagined it was situated so close to a battlefront.

As I looked over the townscape, my eyes met Estia's. *Oh, right. Now that I think about it, she might have friends at the Healer's Guild.*

"Estia, you should go to the Healer's Guild if there are any people you'd like to see," I suggested.

"Thank you, sir, but I'm fine," she replied, plastering a smile onto

her face. But I could tell from the way she had been staring at the building that she was pretending. Judging by how warmly the adventurers and mercenaries had welcomed her, I was sure the people of the Healer's Guild must've been just as fond of her.

But then, I realized something: Estia could use a little bit of Healing Magic thanks to the Spirit of Dusk, but it wasn't like she could do it over and over again. Maybe the healers had mocked her, and the Spirit of Dusk had erased their memories. Or no...that was probably just my imagination running wild.

I decided to stop thinking about it and not confront Estia either. "Got it. If you feel like going there at any point, you're free to do so," I said simply.

"Thank you, sir," she replied with a smile, but it felt to me like she seemed a little sad.

Turning my thoughts back to the town, those crappy healers and bandits were still weighing on my mind. I really didn't want to have to deal with any more hassles while we prepared to head to the empire (which was a huge hassle in and of itself), but I couldn't bring myself to ignore the issue when healers were involved.

Now that we'd reached the center of town, I decided to ask Bazack what he really wanted from us. "Mister Bazack, did you bring us all the way here to show us to an inn?"

"No. I would like you to heal our wounded."

Right. The adventurers who had rushed into town earlier had mentioned something about gathering all those in need of healing. Since we were in the middle of the town square, it was likely that there were a lot of people for me to heal, and some of them might be sporting serious injuries.

I didn't hesitate before saying, "I refuse."

My words seemed to have caught him off guard, and a hint of anxiety crossed his face. "May I ask why?"

"You have a Healer's Guild, and I'm sure there must be clinics in town. The only reason I healed you was to prove that we aren't your enemies."

The man clenched his teeth. "But some of our wounded can only be saved by a sage!"

"If I heal them, I'll be taking work away from the healers at the clinics."

Back when there had been no guidelines for healers, there had been cases where some of them had used high-level spells on their patients without reason, simply to inflate the cost, and sold anyone who couldn't pay into slavery. Ever since we'd put the new guidelines in place, most healers must've seen a big loss in their profits. If I went around and started healing people for free, the healers would likely see their livelihoods threatened even more.

I only made an exception for Merratoni and the Holy City's Adventurer's Guilds, as I owed the people there a debt of gratitude. I'd even gotten the pope's permission to hold healing sessions on certain days, which the adventurers had dubbed "Saint Weirdo's Day." However, from now on, I probably shouldn't heal anyone other than the people I knew. I made a mental note to bring it up with the pope next time.

But that wasn't the reason I'd denied Bazack's request.

"Bazack, you've underestimated Mister Luciel," Lionel interjected. "You shouldn't have tried to manipulate his emotions like that instead of telling the truth."

"Lion...the people I want him to heal cannot be saved by this town's healers. The guild tried to appeal to the headquarters to dispatch the S-rank healer to our town, but we received no response, so we gave up."

Well...yeah. Things had gotten a bit messy at HQ because of the rumors about me. But were those people who needed saving still alive?

"Master, is it possible for healing magic not to work, either partially or at all, on someone?" I asked Brod.

"It's not impossible. Healing magic won't work if someone has been hit by a dark magic spell or a curse from a high-level monster, or wounded by a cursed sword, for example."

"I see."

"Don't overthink it, Luciel. You're fine the way you are. And if anything or anyone tries to harm you, I'll stop them and protect you, got it?"

Ugh, you can't say that, master! It's not fair!

But my spirit always felt lighter thanks to him. The fact that I had even noticed that in the first place might mean that my heart had become much more tired and strained than I'd thought, though.

I let out a sigh. "Where are the patients?"

"Will you examine them?!" Bazack asked expectantly.

"I want to take a look at them before making my decision. Oh, and I'll make sure the Healer's Guild's story lines up with yours—and I'll only heal the people the guild has given up on."

I actually wished I could heal all the injured, but I'd meant it when I said that I didn't want to steal the healers' jobs. Unless the clinics here were corrupt, it might be a good idea to try to give them some support.

A look of relief appeared on Bazack's face, and he raised a hand. It must've been a signal, as people from all around the town began gathering in the square. There were so many that my friends immediately assumed fighting stances and Lionel went to stand behind Bazack.

"Are you saying these are all patients?" Lionel asked.

"No. Well, yes, they are, and we would be grateful if you healed them, but the guild can handle most cases here. There are ten people I wish for you to heal, Sage Luciel."

I thought idly that Bazack must've been quite a person of character to have so many people looking up to him. However, something was bothering me: I felt intense gazes coming from certain faces in the crowd. Perhaps they were Bazack's guards, or perhaps they were the protectors of this town's true ruler. There was no way so many people would've gathered to watch me heal a handful of people otherwise. Surely Bazack must've understood by now that if this was a strategy to intimidate me into healing the ten people he'd mentioned, it would have the opposite effect.

"I don't like being stared at so intensely right before I'm about to heal someone, so can anyone who isn't a patient leave?" I asked.

My comrades all drew their weapons at my words. Was that what people called telepathy?

"They are not your enemies," Bazack told me with a shake of his

head. “They are just very worried about those ten people—two of them in particular, in fact—so they have come to see what’s happening.”

It didn’t look to me like he was lying. So was I right about who those people were? For a while, we just stood there in silence, but soon, people carried the wounded over.

It wasn’t me or Bazack who broke the silence, but Lionel. “Wha—?! Prince Albert! And Melphina?!”

I was surprised to see him so uncharacteristically flustered, but what shocked me the most was that he had called one of the people who’d been brought over “prince.” That must’ve meant that one of them was a prince of Illumasia. I finally understood: The man Bazack wanted me to save was his lifeline—his master.

A question formed in my mind. Would the residents of Ebiza be so desperate to save former Illumasian soldiers turned bandits? No, surely they wouldn’t. If so many people wished for their recovery, it could only mean...

“Lionel, who are these people?” I asked.

My voice brought him back to reality. “The first two are Illumasia’s first prince, Albert, and Melphina, the holy oracle,” he explained.

Perhaps *this* was the bad feeling I’d been having since before we left. “Can you explain?” I asked Bazack.

“We are the resistance, a faction that opposes the empire’s military strategies. Former prince Albert is our leader,” he said. But that was nowhere near enough information.

“Former prince?” I repeated. “And do all of these people want to save a prince of Illumasia?”

“I shall give you a more detailed explanation once you have proceeded with the healing. Please save him.”

The people carrying the makeshift stretcher on which the prince was lying lowered it before me, and I immediately understood what was wrong with him. Why? Because there was miasma leaking out of his body.

“Lionel, tell me if I should save him or not,” I said.

“Please help him, sir,” Lionel replied without a hint of hesitation.

"You agree with me, Whirlwind?"

Brod nodded. "Do it, Luciel."

Why had Lionel asked Brod for his opinion? Feeling a little confused, I nodded and gave directions to my companions. "I'll heal him. But before I do, I want you all to grab your weapons and stand ready to fight. If you see anyone among the townsfolk looking like they're in pain, apprehend them immediately."

"What?!" Bazack exclaimed.

But I paid him no mind and chanted, "*O holy hand of healing. O birthing breath of the land. Wash away these demonic impurities and engulf them in a cleansing sea. Purification Wave!*"

As I used my new purification spell, the one I'd used at the Church's HQ, a bluish-white light rippled from me in waves. I decided to let my friends deal with any potential demons that might be hiding among the townsfolk and began healing the prince, the holy oracle, and the other eight people, who were all in pain due to my spell.

But I had barely opened my mouth when a dagger was thrown at me, and blood splattered into the air.

10 — Unconventional Methods

The people Bazack wanted me to heal turned out to be a former prince of Illumasia, an oracle, and what I assumed to be more people from the empire. After examining them to see what their symptoms were, I noticed that there was miasma leaking out of the prince and the oracle. If I hadn't already cured Lord Wisdom—who had been in a similar condition—in Neldahl, I likely would have been a little hesitant to heal them, as I wouldn't have known what would happen.

I decided to tackle the matter right there and then, but before that, I cast a quick Purification Wave on the town square just in case there were some demons or people involved in demonization cases hiding among the crowd. Purification Wave didn't hurt humans, so I figured it wouldn't cause any harm to the innocent bystanders. The prince, the oracle, and the other injured people from Illumasia must've felt like they were being attacked, though, because of the magic stones in their bodies. I immediately cast Dispel and Recover on them, and was about to use Extra Heal when...

"Watch out!"

The moment those words reached my ears, I was shoved from my right-hand side.

"What the—?! *Extra Heal*!"

Bazack was the one who had pushed me. But when I turned around to protest, I saw a dagger planted deep into his back, the tip protruding from his chest. His robe was turning darker as it soaked up the crimson blood that flowed from the wound. I caught him right as he was about to fall and, praying that the dagger hadn't killed him instantly, cast Extra Heal.

A pale light enveloped his body, and I asked, "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yes. It doesn't even hurt. A holy oracle's healing magic is truly remarkable," he said.

"Thank you for protecting me from the attack."

I hadn't noticed the multiple daggers flying around and, as such,

hadn't been able to react in time. As for my companions, Brod, Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin had immediately jumped in to attack the demonized bystanders who had fallen when I'd cast Purification Wave, while Dhoran and Estia were busy protecting Pola, Lycian, Rina, and Nanya. As such, Bazack had been the only one there to save me.

"Please don't mention it. It's my fault that you were in danger in the first place. I apologize for the trouble, but could you please heal them now?"

"I will."

Thankfully, it seemed that he had made a full recovery. The way he had shielded me with his own body despite being a sorcerer and having immediately apologized for what had happened reminded me of Brod and Lionel in a way.

Pulling myself together, I finally cast Extra Heal on the former prince and the others.

As a side note, the man who had thrown the daggers was one of the people Bazack had asked me to heal, one I assumed was a knight. After suffering damage from my Purification Wave, he had somehow managed to rise to his feet, pulled a handful of daggers from who knows where, and hurled them in my direction. Estia had incapacitated him, and I had no doubt that the Spirit of Dusk, Ketty, and Kefin would be torturing—*ahem*, I mean *interrogating* him later.

"I'm done healing them," I told Bazack.

"You have my thanks, and I apologize once again for what just happened. I never expected someone would try to attack you," Bazack said, bowing deeply, nearly at a ninety-degree angle.

"You already apologized earlier, and you saved my life, so it's all good. I was so focused on my healing spells that I didn't notice the daggers. Plus, it looks like there were some dangerous individuals hiding among the crowd."

Other than the man who had thrown the daggers at me, a few of the town's residents had reacted to my purification spell, but none of them had attacked me other than the knight. Either way, it meant that the former prince and the other wounded from Illumasia had been in danger. Still, I wondered why the people of Ebiza were so

attached to them.

"Lionel called those two a prince and an oracle earlier. Why are so many of the town's residents so loyal to them?" I asked Bazack.

"His Highness former Prince Albert and Lady Melphina have been questioning the current state of the empire for quite some time. They shared their concerns with the emperor, but it only strained their relationship with him further. The rift between them deepened to the point where Prince Albert ultimately rebelled, demanding that the emperor abdicate. However, the operation ended in failure. He became the one hunted by the empire, and eventually, he was imprisoned."

Yeah, that was pretty much what happened when you attempted a coup d'état and failed.

"Do you know how they managed to escape from the empire?"

"Lady Melphina helped him break out of prison, and we all left the empire together."

Lionel, whose return I hadn't even noticed, clenched his teeth at Bazack's words. Brod's gaze fell on the prince, and he immediately shut his eyes, his frown deepening.

"Can you tell us how you escaped from the empire?"

"Illumasia has signed a temporary armistice with Luburk because they haven't been able to win the war yet, despite all the budget they've allocated to it," Bazack said.

Things had likely reached that point after Lionel had left. But was that enough of a reason to sign an armistice?

"Is that how you managed to escape? Because of the ceasefire?"

"Not quite. You see, the empire has not only been imposing heavier and heavier taxes on its people to fuel its military efforts, but it's also begun to give better treatment to those who can fight while neglecting the civil servants. As a result, a lot of them have decided to side with former prince Albert."

The intense pressure that I'd been feeling from Brod and Lionel grew even more palpable as Bazack spoke. Based on his words, it seemed that the empire would soon collapse all on its own, without us lifting a finger.

"Wouldn't that throw the power balance out of whack, though?" I

asked, referring to the empire's favoritism of military officers.

"Indeed. And that is why those who were dissatisfied with the situation helped us escape the imperial capital."

It made sense. But based on the state the former prince had been in and the fact that there were spies mixed in with the crowd, it was likely that the empire had willingly let them escape and was keeping an eye on them. It would be too dangerous to take everything Bazack said at face value. Either way, I still didn't know why the people of Ebiza respected the former prince of Illumasia so much.

"Ebiza is part of the Republic of Saint Shurule. So why are the people of this town so worried about a prince of Illumasia?" I asked.

There were too many things I didn't know. If only there had been someone as knowledgeable as Dongahar in my group, I could've discussed the situation with them.

"The empire's reputation has been getting worse and worse since we took refuge in Ebiza. As such, many people who shared the former prince's opinion decided to move here to join our faction in hopes of putting an end to the emperor's tyranny."

"So you've absorbed Ebiza as part of the resistance?"

"No. We have built a cooperative relationship with the townsfolk by forming a vigilante committee."

If Ebiza's residents became *too* dependent on Bazack and his group, then it might be more akin to a strategic invasion rather than them offering their support to the townsfolk. But Saint Shurule hadn't tried to forcibly remove them from its territory, and the inhabitants of Ebiza were most likely pleased to have an organization they could rely on.

The prince and his faction had taken advantage of the instability at the core of their nation, yet their coup d'état had failed. He'd successfully gathered many people on his side to join what he called the "resistance," but I couldn't help but wonder what his goal was. Did he want the emperor to abdicate so that he could seize the throne?

I glanced at Lionel. If he had still been in Illumasia at the time, the emperor likely would've managed to stop the prince's rampage,

and the furrow in his brow confirmed my theory. To my surprise, I sensed an even stronger, more dangerous anger coming from Brod. Did he have some sort of connection to Illumasia?

"What kind of things did your faction—the resistance do in Illumasia?" I asked Bazack.

"We freed slaves sold by illegal merchants, cleared the imperial capital of the soldiers who were acting as if they owned the city, freed people who were arrested on false charges... We attempted to assassinate the Lion of War as well, as he was the reason the empire has been going on such a rampage, but we failed. If he really is an impostor, we should have managed to kill him, though."

I could only assume that those people they had freed had accompanied them to Ebiza. As for the fake Lionel, perhaps he had allies who wanted to keep him alive. But Bazack's wording gave me pause: *"If he really is an impostor, we should have managed to kill him."*

That raised a lot of concerns. Perhaps the impostor was as strong as the real Lionel, or maybe the resistance was weaker than I had assumed. It was also possible that there were traitors within their ranks who had prevented them from killing him.

Freeing the slaves and innocents, bringing down soldiers who were abusing their authority... It made sense that people would rally behind the prince if he had indeed accomplished all those good deeds. But looking at things from another perspective, if we assumed that the former prince's goal was to ascend the throne, the failed coup must've been a significant blow to his plans. The fact that Bazack had been truthful and mentioned it to us meant that he likely wanted to enlist our help. I wasn't skilled enough to deal with such cunning individuals, so I would prefer to leave the situation to Brod or Lionel. But I wanted to make sure our intentions were aligned first. With that in mind, I decided to retreat before accidentally making a promise I would regret.

"I see. Managing such a faction sure doesn't seem easy. Well then, I'm done healing the people you wanted me to, and I'm all out of mana, so could you please show us to an inn?" I asked.

"Can you not wait until they have woken up?" Bazack asked me

after a short moment of hesitation. He was trying to get us to stay, but I had no intention of doing so.

"I did my best to heal them. I swear it on Lady Crya and the Divine Healer. Is there a reason you cannot take us to an inn?"

"Nothing of the sort, no," he replied, but sounded unsure. "However, to show you my gratitude for healing the former prince, I would like to invite you to stay at my residence instead."

He was using every trick in the book, huh? Under normal circumstances, I would have refused his offer, but I was hoping that Rina and Nanya could stay here while we went to Illumasia, so I didn't want to cause any trouble. As such, I reluctantly agreed to stay at Bazack's residence for the time being.

Bazack's mansion turned out to be as large as the fancy hotel we'd stayed at in Grandol, so it seemed there would be no problem accommodating all of us. However, Dhoran and the rest of the research and development squad refused to stay put, considering it was still light outside. After making sure the backyard was large enough, they secured a corner for themselves and went to work on the airship without even stepping into the mansion.

"I need to get my thoughts in order, so I'm leaving the rest up to you," Brod said, joining Dhoran and the others to make sure nothing would happen to them.

As for Ketty, Kefin, and Estia (well, the Spirit of Dusk), they headed to the basement, which Bazack had told us wasn't being used, to tortu—*interrogate* the people who had turned into demons. Kefin asked me for a cask of Substance X, which I readily provided, but I couldn't help but worry that one wouldn't be enough.

Lionel and I sat in chairs on either side of the sitting room table and began to discuss our future plans.

"I'm very sorry, sir," Lionel said right off the bat.

"What for?"

"I used to be in charge of training Prince Albert in the military arts. He's always been the type of person to put more emphasis on the well-being of his people than on warfare."

"That's why he attempted that coup." I nodded. "Bazack calls him

‘former prince Albert,’ so it must mean the emperor already disowned him. I assume you want to hear the details of that story directly from him.”

“I do. I am proud of being one of your followers, sir, and I have no intention of returning to Illumasia. However, to be completely truthful, I cannot bear to see and hear about the empire rotting from the inside like this.”

He must’ve been feeling some level of attachment to his homeland. I couldn’t say I didn’t understand.

“Do you have a suggestion?” I asked.

“We should cooperate with Prince Albert’s faction and head to the imperial capital together. Our goal is to destroy the empire’s research facilities on demons and demonization, and I also want to kill the man impersonating me. We’re not going there to take control of the capital.”

“That is indeed our goal. All right, then; when Bazack comes back, you’ll be the one in charge of dealing with the prince.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Speaking of Bazack, do you think we can trust him?”

“When I wasn’t yet a general, I once had an encounter on the battlefield with a sorcerer who could wield all four primary elements at will. After a grueling battle, I managed to defeat him, and that victory earned me my promotion to the rank of general.”

“A grueling battle? Don’t make me laugh. You used your sword to slash at my spells like a madman. You charged at me while laughing as your entire body was on fire and cut me down like a devil.”

I turned in the direction of the speaker and saw Bazack entering the living room, followed by the former prince and the holy oracle Melphina. I stood up and looked at them.

Bazack said, “Sage Luciel, let me introduce you to the leader of our faction, former prince Albert, and our deputy leader, Lady Melphina.”

“Sage Luciel, you have my thanks for saving our lives. I was once the first prince of Illumasia, but now I am simply Albert.”

“Thank you kindly for saving us. I also simply go by Melphina now.”



The two of them thanked me and introduced themselves to us plainly, without any air of superiority. I had a feeling that they were intentionally trying to convey a sense of approachability.

Still, that man was the first prince of Illumasia, huh?

"You are much too kind," I said. "I am but a mere healer who, just like you, simply wants to go by Luciel. How are you feeling?"

"My body still feels a bit light, but I can move just fine," Albert said.

"Me too." Melphina nodded. "I tried to use my magic earlier, and I encountered no difficulties whatsoever."

Oh, so she hadn't been able to use it before? They had most definitely been the subjects of some experiment.

"That's good to hear. I know you must be curious, so let me do the introductions. This is Lionel, one of my followers."

Albert's and Melphina's expressions stiffened the moment they heard his name.

"It has been quite some time, Your Highness, Lady Melphina," Lionel said with a slight bow before sitting back down. He was composed, showing no sign of inner turmoil. Albert and Melphina were the complete opposite.

"Are you *really* my master?" Albert asked. "You seem much younger than in my memories... You look exactly the same as you did back then."

"I remember you looking more like a devil, Mister Lionel," Melphina said hesitantly.

While his body *was* technically younger now, the fact that he didn't have a beard probably didn't help their impression of him. Besides, he only looked like a devil on the battlefield. Plus, ever since he'd learned that Nalia was pregnant with his child, he'd been practicing how to smile every day. The fact that his expressions looked less severe than before was the result of his hard work.

"I gave you spankings every time you misbehaved until you were twelve, Your Highness," Lionel said. "Then, when you became an adult, I listened to you ramble on about Lady Mel—"

"F-Fine. You're my master. I'm convinced now," Albert hurriedly interrupted him.

“Is that so?”

All it took was for Lionel to bring up the prince’s embarrassing childhood to convince the prince that he was the real deal.

“You truly are Mister Lionel. But then, who was that masked man in the Holy City who called himself by your name?” Melphina asked.

She had spoken before Lionel could continue his conversation with Albert and embarrass him further. Women sure were good at preventing crises, huh? Perhaps it had something to do with their emotional maturity.

As I pondered that question, we began our discussion with the prince, Bazack, and Melphina: Would we be joining forces with the resistance, or would we be heading to the imperial capital on our own?

11 — Alliance

We had already decided that our next destination would be the capital of Illumasia. Now, it was time to determine if we'd help the resistance or not. Truthfully, I didn't see any benefit to us in doing so at present, but the annoying truth about life was that things were rarely that simple.

If the emperor was the one behind the demonization research, we'd have to stop him, meaning we'd be making an enemy of him. If we succeeded, the emperor would abdicate, and we'd need to put someone else on the throne. Failing to do so could lead to the empire's collapse, and it would be the people who ultimately suffered. Illumasia was a large nation that had expanded its territory through war. If its government collapsed, that would likely lead to a civil war. That was the one thing I wanted to avoid at all costs, which was why we couldn't flat-out refuse the prince's cry for help, even though he'd been disinherited.

I'd entrusted this discussion to Lionel because I trusted he could make that decision. He was likely quite familiar with the prince, and I trusted his judgment. I was only here because I wanted to know a little more about former prince Albert.

"Your Highness—no, Albert. Can you tell us why you want to join forces with us?" I asked.

"Why? Well, because I want to put a stop to the emperor's reckless behavior. The empire has signed a temporary ceasefire with Luburk, but if the war drags on, we'll end up with more losses than gains, even if we were to win."

After hearing that, I decided to ask him more questions. "I understand that you want to stop the emperor. I also believe that you did a good thing by freeing the slaves and the people who were unfairly imprisoned. Is your objective to become the next emperor?"

"No, I do not wish to ascend the throne. I simply—" Albert started, but the holy oracle interrupted him.

"Mister Albert," she said before turning to me, "is concerned

about the possibility of a civil war. If that were to happen, the people would be the ones suffering the most from it. That is why he has decided to take action and form the resistance."

When Melphina finished speaking, I glanced at Lionel, and he nodded silently. I was starting to understand. The former prince seemed like a kind person, but I wasn't convinced he was a strong leader. It felt to me that Melphina was the one truly commanding the resistance. Initially, I'd wanted Lionel to handle the discussion, but I may have pried a little too much, and I felt like they were now wary of us.

As such, I decided to make it clear that there were certain conditions if they wanted to become our allies. "Our goal is to destroy the research facilities in the imperial capital," I started.

"Sir..." Lionel began.

I felt a bit bad for him, but if there truly were no merits in joining forces with the resistance, then I wouldn't do it, and the sooner I made that decision, the better.

No sooner had the words left my mouth than the atmosphere, which had been friendly and relaxed, suddenly became much tenser.

"Master, why would you allow him to attack Illumasia?! It's your homeland!" Albert bent toward Lionel, visibly agitated.

Lionel, on the other hand, was completely impassive. He looked at me, let out a sigh, and said, "I'm leaving it to you, sir."

Albert must not have liked that response, as he threw me a nasty glare. He sank even further in my estimation, yet at the same time, I was kind of mad at myself for not letting Lionel handle the whole thing.

"Aren't you getting a little too heated, Albert?" I asked.

Still glaring at me, he replied with a question of his own. "Why do you wish to attack my nation's research facilities?" he asked, his face slightly red, perhaps because I'd taunted him.

"While I do find it appalling that the emperor and the fake Lion of War are imposing such tyranny upon their people, I can understand that the emperor made these decisions in his role as the ruler. But I cannot overlook the empire having facilities specifically made to turn people into demons. You two were demonized as well, so I trust

you'll understand I am telling the truth—"

"Demonized? Me?" Albert interrupted me, his entire body shaking. Did he not know what the empire had done to him? Melphina was much calmer—surprisingly so.

"That research is a threat to humanity," I continued. "If it wasn't, I wouldn't bother attacking the empire's facilities."

I'd told them about our objective, but based on how shocked Albert was, he might not be able to continue the discussion. So I turned to Bazack. "We've offered you quite a lot of information about our plans. Now, the question is, would it be worth it for us to fight together? To make an alliance or not."

"If destroying the research facilities in the imperial capital is your only objective, then I assure you that we will be able to help," Bazack answered.

"How many people do you count among your ranks? And how much help can we expect?" I asked.

"We can ensure that you infiltrate the palace with no one standing in your way. As for our numbers, I would prefer to keep that information confidential for now."

"I see. By the way, do you still think we should join forces even after learning our plans?"

Bazack likely wanted us for our fighting ability to help them defeat the empire, but Albert and Melphina didn't seem enchanted by the idea.

"I believe it would be wise, yes. We will cause a commotion in the capital, which should give you enough time to destroy the research facilities. And with those out of commission, we would have more leverage against the emperor."

I could see the benefits for us in his plan. But after giving it some more thought, I realized that he wanted us to act as decoys to distract the demonized individuals so that the resistance could achieve its own goals.

"I see. Is that the only advantage we would gain from this alliance? If it is, then it's not enough for us. Are you all right with that, Lionel?"

"Yes. I'm disappointed myself."

"What? Master!" Albert cried out in surprise, standing up abruptly, almost as if his attitude up until now had all been an act. He must've thought that Lionel was on his side.

"Your Highness, how many times have I told you to always have a clear picture of the people you're dealing with? Do you truly think that the man I serve with unwavering loyalty would be so easily deceived?" A murderous aura radiated from Lionel before disappearing as soon as it had appeared, but it was enough to cause the prince to collapse onto his chair.

"We have a few arrangements to make, but once they're done, we can head to the capital as early as tomorrow," I said.

"T-Tomorrow?" Bazack stammered, a panicked look on his face. He must've understood that, at this rate, it was likely that these negotiations would lead to nothing. Then again, he'd seen our airship but didn't know anything about our true abilities yet.

"There would be other benefits for you if you were to ally with us," Melphina said. "We can tell you where to find the fake General Lionel as well as the underground research facilities."

It seemed that she knew quite a lot about the capital, which I'd already suspected upon hearing she had helped the prince escape.

"I see. So the research facilities are underground, huh? In the palace, perhaps?"

The prince and Melphina exchanged panicked glances.

"The holy oracle"? To me, Melphina seemed more like a tactician than an oracle. I made a mental note to ask Lionel about her later.

"Sage Luciel, could you please not be so tough on us?" Bazack interjected. "Your Highness, the sage may be younger than you, but he has likely fought more battles. At this rate, negotiations will break down."

Hey, no need to call me young. That was rude.

It seemed that Bazack was the one who wanted our help the most. I made sure to stay on guard, ready to anticipate whatever tactic he might employ next.

"Tough? Me? What a strange thing to say. Negotiations require an equivalent exchange of value, don't they?"

"Let's assume that the emperor insists on pursuing the

demonization research and that you find yourself having to kill him. Who will you put on the throne then?"

Just as I'd thought, he had started poking holes in my plan. I absolutely couldn't afford to falter now. "As we told you, our goal is to destroy the empire's demonization research facilities and expose the fake Lionel. If killing the emperor is necessary to achieve that, we'll do it—and we'll announce his death publicly. What happens next will be for the people of the empire to decide."

"Do you not wish to rule over the empire, Sage Luciel?" Bazack asked. His tone was casual, as if out of mere curiosity, but I suspected he wanted the prince to hear my stance on claiming the throne for myself.

"Why would I want to deal with such a huge hassle? Now, if Lionel said that he wanted to govern over the empire, I'd back him, but—"

"I have absolutely no intention of doing anything of the sort," Lionel cut in. His expression made it clear just how much he despised the very idea of becoming the empire's ruler.

"There you have it," I told Bazack. "You can deal with the empire's political struggles yourselves."

He nodded a few times. "And don't you think that the empire will retaliate and attack the Republic of Saint Shurule if you kill the emperor?" he asked, as if to try to assess our military potential.

"If you want to attack us, we'll reveal to the world that Illumasia was experimenting with demonization," I replied. "Also, if you were to declare war on Saint Shurule and not just me and my companions, consider that you'd be making an enemy of Luburk, the Dwarf Kingdom, and Yenice as well." I was a little worried about his reaction but still decided to tell him what the consequences of such a move would be.

When I was done, Bazack smiled and turned to the prince. "Your Highness, if you truly care about the future of the empire, please bow your head to Sage Luciel. This is your only way of surviving the situation."

As soon as he heard Bazack's words, the prince bowed to me without hesitation. "Sage Luciel, please help us restore the empire to

the strong, noble nation it once was—the kind that can protect its people."

So, the prince was willing to cast aside his pride and bow to others if it meant saving his homeland.

"Sage Luciel, General Lionel, please extend a helping hand to us," Melphina added in a similar fashion. There was a strange persuasiveness to her, the kind that drew people in.

So *that* was the holy oracle, huh? Albert had only been able to form the resistance because he had their help. Melphina, a woman who could easily move people's hearts, and Bazack, a good advisor, as well as being strong enough to hold his own against Lionel. However, I still didn't understand what had happened for them to be forced to flee from the empire. If anything, their explanations had only made me *more* worried. So, before laying out my conditions, I decided to figure out Bazack's true intentions.

"I have a question for you, Mister Bazack," I said. "Why do you want our help so much that you're willing to make Albert beg for it?"

"Because I feel like you are already prepared to fight the empire and have a clear idea of your objectives. Moreover, I know that no matter how many times we refine our plans, given the circumstances, a bitter defeat is the only future that awaits us."

I would have almost been convinced by his explanation, as it made sense, but the fact that he had made the prince bow his head to us—an unthinkable act—led me to suspect that he had another objective in mind.

"So were you using this conversation to test me, or something?" I asked.

Lionel's shock upon seeing Bazack when we'd arrived in this town most likely meant that he hadn't known the man was one of Albert's close aides—well, his servant really. Then again, to me, it seemed more like Bazack had the former prince in the palm of his hand rather than merely being a servant.

"To be completely honest, I was wondering why the Lion of War, the guardian of the empire, has sworn allegiance to a healer," Bazack said.

"And? Did you learn everything you wanted to know about me?" I

asked.

"Not at all. I intend on understanding you better through our cooperation moving forward," he replied in a somewhat carefree way. I felt like he was enjoying this conversation way too much.

"Something's been weighing on my mind since earlier," I said. "Why are you acting as Albert's advisor? If your own nation fell to the empire, shouldn't you be happy to see its downfall?"

"Ah, you've *finally* asked that question. His Highness and Lady Melphina saved my life, you see."

"They saved your life?" I echoed, my curiosity piqued.

"Yes. I thought it was the end for me after I lost to Lionel, but miraculously, I regained consciousness after the battle. By the time my injuries healed, however, my homeland had already been destroyed by the empire, leaving me with nowhere to return to."

It was a fate all too familiar for many defeated generals.

"Five years later, I met His Highness and Lady Melphina. The village that had kindly taken me in was attacked by monsters, and while I managed to defend the villagers with my magic for a time, I eventually ran out of mana and found myself backed into a corner."

"And that's when Albert and Melphina saved you," I said.

"Yes. They were still young back then, but the army they led successfully managed to repel the monster threat and save the village. I am merely repaying my debt to my saviors—not the Illumasian army, but the prince and the oracle."

"I'm thinking of making him my prime minister once we return to the empire," Albert said.

Bazack smiled but didn't say anything in response. Did the prince realize his tongue had slipped? He'd told me earlier that he had no intention of becoming the next emperor, but this time, it seemed like he hadn't managed to keep his ambitions a secret. His exchange with Bazack was proof to me that I couldn't fully trust them. As such, I decided to let Lionel decide if we should help them or not, and if so, until what point.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"I have my doubts about Bazack. He attempted to deceive you, after all. But I want to believe that the empire could restore its lost

honor if Prince Albert were to ascend the throne."

Leaving Illumasia to decay like this would be playing right into Blanche's hands, which would in turn lead to more innocent people suffering. I really wanted to avoid that scenario, so I simply nodded at Lionel's words and agreed to help the prince.

"Well then, how about we share our information to try and come up with a way to defeat the empire?" I said.

"Thank you so much," Bazack replied, bowing his head deeply to me.

I still couldn't bring myself to trust the guy, but oh well. For now, we had a strategy meeting to tackle.

12 — A…Strategy Meeting?

Our newly formed alliance's objective was *not* to commit a terrorist attack on the empire. All we wanted was to find a way to sneak into the imperial capital safely. As such, I told Bazack and the others that we wouldn't be traveling with them but instead using our airship to enter the capital from the sky. I didn't want them to get in our way, no matter how they chose to act. I didn't want to keep suspecting them of betraying us, so I convinced myself that, if the resistance could help us enter the capital more easily by causing a commotion, it would ultimately benefit our cause.

They seemed to have several infiltration routes of their own, so we decided to each do our thing so as not to get in each other's way. Then, once we had all successfully made it into the capital, we'd regroup at their hideout, and they would help us sneak into the palace. I was surprised by how easy they'd made it sound, but apparently, the underground area of their hideout led directly into the castle. I'd ask Ketty and Lionel if there were any discrepancies in their information later.

The next important thing we needed was a way to escape the capital, whether or not our operation was a success. The resistance apparently had maps of the city in their hideout, and they said they'd give one to us once we made it there.

Bazack had explained the entire plan to us. That was great and all, but I wanted to know if Albert had the ability to lead the troops or if he was merely there as a figurehead.

"Regardless of how well our operation goes, the people of the capital will likely be confused and panicked. How do you plan to handle that, Albert?" I asked.

"What do you mean, handle it? If you're asking whether I intend to let them be swept up in the chaos of battle, the answer is no."

"I see. Even if that means putting yourself at risk?"

"I'm aware that this will be a dangerous operation. But if I don't do it, the only fate awaiting Illumasia is destruction from within."

There was no doubt that Albert valued his homeland and its citizens. I supposed it made sense that someone who had built an anti-imperialist faction would be so spirited. Then again, I had a feeling he wasn't exactly aware that the resistance was an anti-imperialist faction... Either way, this little exchange proved that he was the kind of person to stick to his beliefs.

"I see," I said. "I have another question. Those people who follow you—actually, I'm going to call them the resistance, as in the people who oppose the empire, from now on—how strong are they? I'd like to have an idea."

"That's difficult to quantify. Most of the people here in Ebiza are on our side, and we have allies in the empire who leak out information to us. But the number of skilled fighters in our ranks is quite limited."

They'd turned the majority of the inhabitants of a foreign town into their allies? That showed just how charismatic they were. But unfortunately, the number of allies did not equate to fighting power.

"How many of them can hold their own against imperial soldiers?" I asked, a tad worried.

"Probably around fifty. Some of them were part of my personal guard, so they're the cream of the crop of Illumasia's soldiers," Albert replied with a bright, innocent smile, and I couldn't help but question his sanity. Especially since, just earlier that day, we'd uncovered some demonized spies hidden among his personal guard. Of course, he'd still been unconscious at that point, so perhaps he didn't know.

Lionel had told me that the empire's soldiers were all powerhouses, but I wondered exactly how strong they were. I hoped the ones on our side weren't too bad. I wasn't expecting them to be as powerful as, say, Ketty, but I hoped they could at least provide us some level of help without getting in our way, much like Nalia used to do.

"If your personal guard truly is the cream of the crop, then they must have an outstanding general. Someone as strong as Lionel."

"Ah, um, no. None of my soldiers can compare with my master," Albert replied, sulking a little as he shifted his gaze away from me

and looked at Lionel. It was obvious from the look on his face that he wanted Lionel to join his personal army, but Lionel didn't say anything in response to his words, his expression remaining unchanged.

At this point, I was truly beginning to wonder *how* the resistance intended to carry out their plan with such a lack of military power.

"I'm aware that what I'm about to ask might sound rude, but do you really think that you'll be able to enter both the capital and the palace, and convince the emperor to listen to your demands with such limited military strength?" I asked.

"O-Of course," Albert replied. "We have many allies in the capital, so infiltrating the city and the palace won't be too difficult. Moreover, the citizens and soldiers alike are all exhausted due to the war with Luburk, despite the ceasefire. This is a great moment to strike."

I agreed that direct combat wasn't the only way to make war, and a well-planned surprise attack, even with limited manpower, could work just fine in certain contexts. If their goal was only to meet with the emperor, then it was a perfectly viable plan. But did the prince realize that there was another issue in his strategy?

"Have you ever sneaked into the capital before?" I asked.

"Once, with my allies' help. But if you add it to the number of times the others have, we're easily in the double digits...though it seems that every time we use a bypass to sneak into the empire, it gets plugged later."

That must've been the work of the spies. I looked at Bazack, and he met my gaze but shook his head. I didn't know what he meant by that. At any rate, with how little fighting power they had, it seemed unlikely that the prince's wishes would be fulfilled as long as the emperor was alive. This must've been why Bazack and Melphina were so intent on joining forces with us. But would we really be able to accomplish both of our goals without getting the empire's citizens involved in the chaos? It seemed I would have to remain cautious and consider the possibility of them betraying us after all.

"How much time do you need before leaving for the capital?" I asked.

"Bazack?" the prince said.

“We would appreciate a week to ten days to prepare, at the very least.”

If we waited for ten days, Illumasia might learn that we had an airship. They might already know it, but if we gave them ten more days, they’d most likely have detailed reports about it. I glanced at Lionel, and he shook his head.

“That won’t do. If you can’t be at the imperial capital in five days at most, we won’t help you,” he stated.

“Wha—?! Lion! Are you saying we need to hurry that much?” Bazack exclaimed.

“Absolutely. If you can’t manage that, then there’s no benefit to us in forming an alliance with you.”

“But...” Albert muttered, glancing at Lionel with a look of betrayal, as if he felt abandoned.

“You want us to be in the royal capital in five days...” Bazack murmured, turning toward the oracle. “Lady Melphina?” He was aware that we were already making concessions, so he turned to get her opinion, as she was the one who had the final word.

“Mister Lionel, we simply need to reach the capital in five days, is that right?” Melphina asked.

“Sir?” Lionel turned to me, leaving the decision in my hands.

“That’s fine, yes,” I replied. “We’re planning on flying to the capital on our own anyway. The only reason we’re allying with you is to lighten the burden.”

Melphina nodded calmly. “Then we shall regroup near the capital in five days.”

She didn’t seem to have an issue with that, but Bazack might, if the grimace on his face was anything to go by. “If we make it there in one piece, that is,” he muttered.

“Lionel and I will work out the details and decide where we’ll meet up later. If you have any requests, feel free to let him know.”

“Understood.” Unlike Bazack, Melphina was able to maintain a perfectly calm expression at all times, perhaps because she was an oracle. It made her really difficult to deal with.

Oh, right, I hadn’t asked them about the spies yet.

“I’ve been wondering, Mister Bazack, were you involved in

helping Albert escape from prison?"

"I was indeed. However, I didn't go into the palace; my role was to create a diversion in the city." He wasn't smiling. In fact, he looked somewhat frustrated.

Albert averted his gaze at Bazack's words. As for Lionel, I heard him let out a resigned sigh.

"Albert, Melphina," I said, turning to them this time. "There was miasma coming out of your bodies before I healed you. Did someone put magic stones in you?"

"When I tried to fight the fake Lion of War, a red magic circle appeared out of nowhere. I barely had time to process what was happening before the room was filled with some sort of purple smoke. The impostor laughed as he vanished from before us, and I felt my body growing heavier and heavier as my consciousness slipped away. I managed to escape before collapsing, but I couldn't even tell you how I did it. That's how desperate I was."

Smoke—that must've been miasma gas. So the empire was most likely developing other methods to cause miasma to seep out of people's bodies, not just using magic stones anymore.

And the longer I let them do as they please, the more difficult they'll be to deal with.

They were carrying out research on demons, so perhaps I should think of a way to deal with those as well...

At any rate, I now knew that Albert had been played by the fake Lionel and that said impostor could manipulate miasma. I would cast some Aura Coats on us when we entered the palace. I'd never used that spell, but it should prevent us from turning into demons.

"Well, if there were traitors and spies among your ranks, I suppose it's only natural you'd end up playing into the empire's hand, no matter how well thought-out your plan is. Let's make sure we don't fail this time, shall we?"

My words were met with silence.

Oh, crap; I'd accidentally dissed them without meaning to. No one had been expecting me to say that. Albert's shoulders were shaking with frustration, while Melphina was staring at me, speechless. As for Bazack, he seemed to be holding back laughter

for some reason. Yet, I knew I had to make them realize how naive they'd been in their information gathering and what a huge mistake it had been not letting Bazack plan their escape. If I didn't, there would only be demerits in allying with them.

What should I do? As things stood, joining forces with them really didn't seem to offer any advantages to us. Well, no, there were a couple: We could use them as sacrificial pawns, and helping them out would ensure the empire didn't collapse once everything was done and dealt with. But beyond that, there was little for us to gain.

Lionel must've stayed out of the conversation except when it was necessary because of the internal conflict in his mind. He had said that he didn't want to become a general of the empire again, after all.

"I'm going to clearly explain our goals to you, just to make sure we're on the same wavelength. We want to destroy the demonization research facilities and free all the slaves acquired illegally. We'll be using our airship—the flying thing Bazack tried to shoot down when we were nearing Ebiza—to enter the city, and have no qualms about defeating anyone who tries to prevent us from destroying the facilities."

Everyone other than Lionel stiffened, a bewildered look registering on their faces at how plainly I had laid out our intentions.

Surprisingly, Albert was the first to return to his senses. "Our nation has wyvern squads! They'll shoot you down if they spot your vehicle!"

"I've heard that wyverns are the best at flying among all the types of dragons but that their breath attacks aren't all that powerful. Besides, we *want* to be seen; that's why we're using the airship. Imagine Lionel leaping down from the sky above the capital. That would be one showy way for the Lion of War to return to his homeland."

"I-It is true that most people won't attack you if they see master with you," Albert said. "But what if the impostor accuses *him* of being the fake?"

"The Lion of War is a warrior. We'll simply challenge the impostor to a duel. If he refuses, he'll be proving our point, and if he accepts,

Lionel just has to win. Defeating him and exposing his identity to the world is one of our goals anyway."

Someone began to clap. It was Bazack. "How audacious. You truly believe in your abilities to the point where you are willing to charge straight ahead without resorting to tricks or deception. If you succeed, there won't be any unnecessary casualties. So, that is the ingenuity of a sage."

He had misunderstood my point big time, but I purposefully didn't correct him. Instead, I hit him with a question of my own. "As I just explained, our strategy is simply to charge forward. What will the resistance do?"

"How about we ride on that airship—or whatever it's called—with you so that I can make my triumphant return alongside master?" Albert suggested.

That was way too shortsighted. I'd thought that he seemed like a fellow hard worker, the type who had to struggle a lot to get to where he was, but it turned out I'd been completely wrong. He was just an entitled prince. But I supposed it'd be better to have him ruling over Illumasia rather than the current emperor and his obsession with demonization.

"Absolutely not," I said.

"Why?"

"First, because the emperor has already disinherited you. Actually, you're probably on the wanted list, aren't you?"

"He has indeed been disowned. However, I don't believe that he is considered a criminal," Melphina supplied.

But my point still stood. "Either way, our airship doesn't belong to you, Albert, or the empire. If we let you use it, depending on how things go, people might make it a symbol of the rebellion that brought peace to the empire, and we don't want that. For those reasons, we can't allow you on board."

"Then what is the point in forming an alliance if—" The prince stopped himself before he could finish. That sentence alone would have been enough for us to break our agreement. Bazack and Melphina were staring at him in shock, and Albert himself was frozen in place, having realized what he'd just said.

An idea popped up in my mind, and I decided to use his verbal gaffe as leverage in the negotiation.

"You're right. There are no advantages for us in joining forces with you and the resistance. On the other hand, for you, it is nothing but beneficial."

"What are you trying to get at?"

"Hear me out and decide whether you wish to ally with us or not. The choice is yours to make."

I made two demands of him, and he agreed to both. Our alliance was now set in stone.

After that, Bazack adjusted his plan, and we agreed to meet at the imperial capital in a week's time. With that, our long meeting finally came to an end.

13 — Free Time

The day after our strategy meeting, the former prince set off for the imperial capital with his resistance troops. I wondered to what extent Bazack could keep him in check. That would most likely play a significant part in the outcome of this mission. The population of Ebiza had drastically decreased now that the resistance had left, which confirmed to me that the prince's troops could pose a threat to us in the future.

The previous night, I'd contacted the pope with my arclink crystal to apologize for leaving without a word, and she'd told me that the knights had started doing much better after our departure. A bitter smile curled on my lips at her words.

I then explained to her how dire things were in Ebiza, but she replied that the Church unfortunately couldn't afford to help until the situation with Dongahar was resolved for good. I hadn't been expecting it to act immediately, anyway; I'd simply wanted to report the town's current state of affairs to her. As for the matter of the empire, she'd agreed to let me handle it, so I promised we'd try to achieve our objectives without causing any trouble for Saint Shurule.

After my conversation with the pope, Estia and the others shared the information they'd gathered from the townsfolk and the demons they'd interrogated, and their findings left me in shock. It was about Cloud, aka the fake Lion of War, and the man Lionel wanted to take his revenge on. As it turned out, he might have once been a slave from Blanche. Galba had done some investigating into the man while I was in Neldahl, and he'd said that he used to be an adventurer in Grandol who specialized in transformation magic—just like the slave from Blanche mentioned by the people my friends had interrogated.

However, when I raised this possibility, Brod and Lionel pointed out that by the time the fake Lionel had reached Illumasia, he might no longer have been a slave of Blanche. Their reasoning was that if he had still been a slave, it would have caused a significant uproar in the empire. Most slave crests were designed simply to prevent the

slave from harming their master, but those assigned as spies in other countries had different conditions. They were required to stay within a specific distance from their master and needed to have their crests regularly renewed. Some even included built-in punishments in case the slave disobeyed orders. And if they were to betray their master, their crest would detonate, killing the slave instantly.

If he'd been sent as a spy, Cloud wouldn't have been able to stay in Illumasia for long before needing to renew his crest or he would have died. Only slave merchants could renew crests, and the empire considered any slave without a master to be a fugitive and would imprison them on the spot. Moreover, crests were different in each nation, so any slave sporting a foreign crest with a short renewal period would be flagged by the empire's slave merchants, who were slaves themselves, which meant they couldn't betray the empire.

Back to the topic of Cloud: According to my companions, if he'd been going around the empire pretending to be Lionel for years without incident, then it was likely he wasn't a slave anymore. Their logic was sound, but I couldn't help but wonder how he'd gotten rid of his slave crest. Of course, a powerful holy magic spell like Dispel would easily do the trick, but since slavery was authorized in the empire, the cost of getting one's crest removed must have been insanely high, and I couldn't imagine Cloud having the money to afford such a service. But then, how could he have removed the crest—the chain that bound him to Blanche—on his own?

An idea crossed my mind. "Do slave crests disappear when one gets demonized?" I muttered.

"That sounds possible. If demonization turns one's mana into demonic mana, it wouldn't be surprising if it also affected the slave crests," Lionel, who was walking in front of me, replied.

Demonization was still being researched, so it made sense that most people wouldn't know that yet.

But if demonization really does modify one's mana, would they lose the ability to use their Adventurer's Guild card and other similar identifications? I wondered.

Next, I decided to ask Lionel what he thought Cloud's worth was to Blanche. "Cloud's transformation magic must be incredibly useful

for intelligence gathering, but did Blanche not see much value in it?”

“Their research on demonization probably wasn’t that advanced at the time, so they didn’t know he’d lose his slave crest. Or maybe they didn’t think that demonized people could keep their free will. I believe it’s safe to assume they simply didn’t have time to investigate the matter.”

“Either way, we don’t know if he’s undergone demonization or not. Still, I’m glad we managed to learn in advance that Bazack and the others were hiding over fifty—perhaps even over a hundred—demonized soldiers.”

“No demon can hide from your magic,” Lionel quipped. He seemed to be in a much better mood than the previous day.

When we’d learned after our meeting with the prince that Illumasia’s emperor had approved the research on demonization, his expression had turned into something terrifying—like a devil preparing for battle.

“Sir, please kill the people who became demons of their own volition and cure those who were forced into it. I’m sure some of them can be saved even if the damage can’t be fully undone.”

I could sense kindness in his tone. Perhaps it showed that he still found me reckless and thought he had to guide me.

“I’ll save everyone I can,” I assured him, and Lionel nodded in satisfaction.

Oh right, there was something I’d meant to ask my companions but hadn’t been able to with Bazack around. “I’m surprised you guys managed to get so much information out of the people you captured, and good details at that,” I said to Ketty, Kefin, and Estia, who were walking ahead of me. “I hear the soldiers talked almost right away too. What methods did you use?”

Kefin paused his meal and looked at me. “We simply made them drink three cups of Substance X, as Mister Galba taught me,” he said. “We were just as surprised as you by how quickly they confessed. Thanks to that, we managed to finish without losing our sense of smell.”

“You’re really a weird one for being able to drink that stuff undiluted, chief,” Ketty added teasingly.

Estia, on the other hand, praised me. “I believe the fact that you cured the prince also made them more cooperative.”

The three of them got along unexpectedly well. I decided to leave any interrogations and information gathering to them from now on.

“I don’t know if I should say thank you or be insulted.” I sighed. “Back to the topic of the empire... In the end, we gave Bazack and the others a week to get there. I wonder how that’ll impact our plan.”

Lionel nodded gravely. “It’s not easy to stay motivated when we have to wait for that long.”

“You worry too much,” Brod chimed in. “You just need to assume we’ll be fighting the empire’s army and stop overthinking it. Still, you’re losing your motivation just ’cause you’ve gotta wait one week? Didn’t think you were so impatient, Lion.”

As always, my master was there to remind me to stop overthinking things.

“Then you can act as Luciel’s bodyguard, Whirlwind.”

“Oh, shut up!”

The two of them started bickering as we continued our trek.

I addressed my other companions. “Since we have a week off, I was thinking of taking Rina and Nanya back to the Holy City, but...”

“It seems to me that they would rather not leave Mister Dhoran’s side, despite how much they have been complaining,” Kefin said.

“Yup, it’s just like Kefin says. You know how craftspeople are. Once they start focusing on something, they lose track of everything else,” Ketty added.

“Mister Dhoran was happy to have more people helping him work on the ship as well,” Estia said.

They had a point. When I’d told Rina and Nanya that I could take them back to the Holy City the previous evening, they’d told me that they would prefer to stay in Ebiza to study under Dhoran. All of them seemed to be having a lot of fun, including Pola and Lycian.

“Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m pretty sure we said that we’d just be resting this week, right?” I asked.

“Yup, exactly! That’s why we’re enjoying a nice walk for a little change of pace right now,” Ketty answered.

Her words left me confused. People all had different ways of relaxing, and walks certainly were nice, as they let you enjoy the scenery. But when Ketty had brought it up, I'd assumed we'd be strolling around the town or exploring the surrounding areas. That made sense, right?

"I've finished disarming the traps, sir," Kefin told me.

"Oh, we should be able to see the staircase soon," Estia said, glancing at the map in her hands.

"I'll go scout the area." With that, Kefin went ahead of us to check if there were more dangerous traps that needed disarming.

Yup, that's right; we were currently inside the labyrinth that connected Ebiza to Illumasia. There had been no traces of Lionel that morning, and when he returned, he'd simply told me that he'd gone to buy ingredients with Ketty and Kefin. I'd already felt that something was fishy at that point, but I was impressed he had thought of stocking up on food in case something happened when we traveled to the empire.

After that, we had gone all the way to the labyrinth to see the prince and his troops off, and before I'd realized what was happening, we'd begun clearing it. I *did* know it was strange, but my friends were having so much fun, I couldn't bring myself to rain on their parade.

Is this really what we should be doing with our week off, though? Truthfully, I had serious doubts about it, but since no one had objected, here we were, dungeon-diving.

"Master, Lionel, do you really intend on destroying this labyrinth in *a week*?"

"We're just trying to maximize our chances of survival, something you always like to remind us to do. We even got our hands on a map. And who knows? Maybe you'll get a new power down there," Lionel said.

"Better to focus on getting stronger than to sit around overthinking things when we don't have all the information," Brod added.

I did understand Lionel's point. Trying to increase our odds of staying alive after our mission in Illumasia was definitely the right

move, and what Brod had said made sense too. But I knew that the *true* reason we were here was that they wanted to level up.

We spotted a monster, and they both rushed at it, each trying to steal the kill from the other. Early this morning, Brod had gone to the Adventurer's Guild and had provoked the adventurers we'd captured the previous day into a five-on-one battle. He'd won, and his spoils had been a map of the labyrinth he'd stolen—ahem, *purchased*—from the adventurers. It was almost as if he and Lionel had arranged for us to clear the labyrinth today. The two of them must've been excited to learn that there was a place where they could level up nearby.

"It is true that I'm always telling you not to die, so I won't tell you that leveling up is a bad idea, nor do I think it is. But I wish you'd consider how it feels to be in my shoes when you come to me acting all embarrassed when you get hurt," I said.

"Are you afraid of people giving you another nickname?" Estia asked.

The mere thought sent a chill down my spine, and I shot her a glare.

Lionel soon returned with minor scratches on his forehead, arms, and thighs. "If anything, we're not training enough. The heroes and champions who went down in history all had to fight, regardless of the era they lived in. I'm sure it'll be the same for you, sir; many more battles await you in the future."

"Please don't say ominous things like that, especially not with such conviction," I said.

If Lionel's warrior instincts were picking up on something, it meant there was a possibility I'd be dragged into more fights. What a pickle.

"Well, I've gone through a lot of things that most people would find unimaginable. As such, my instinct tells me that you will get involved in many more dangerous situations."

The bright smile on his face as he predicted all those unsettling things in my future in the middle of the labyrinth almost made it look like he wished for them to happen. Lionel had dedicated himself to protecting me since the day we met, and I sensed he had been

quietly watching me grow all this time. In the end, it had led to him being dragged into a fight with the Wicked One, where he'd lost all the levels and skills he'd accumulated so far just to protect me. I couldn't help but wonder how he truly felt about it.

"Shouldn't you be scared of being the head of my followers if you have such ominous premonitions? You came back from hell after that battle with the Wicked One, didn't you? Don't get me wrong, I'm insanely grateful for everything you've been doing for me, but..."

It was a bit harsh, but Lionel had a family waiting for him in Yenice. He wasn't a slave anymore, so why did he—no, scratch that, why did all of my companions insist on risking their lives for me? Was I truly worth their efforts? To be honest, I wasn't sure about that anymore.

However, Lionel didn't seem bothered by my words. He turned to me and said, "Back when I was a general in Illumasia, I never thought of anything but the empire. I don't think it was *wrong* per se, but I always felt that something was missing."

"I don't think being with me is that different, though. While we're not actively participating in *wars*, you and the others still end up in dangerous battles because of me."

Recently, my friends had been forced to fight demons and dangerous opponents like the Wicked One. It wasn't as if I had intentionally put myself in those situations, but I still felt bad.

Unlike me, however, Lionel didn't seem bothered in the slightest. In fact, he was smiling. "Killing someone means robbing them of their future with no chance of turning back. Back when I fought in wars, I always hoped the enemy soldiers would retreat while I ran around the battlefield trying to protect my allies from serious harm. It left me feeling empty inside."

I realized I hadn't often heard him talk about his life in the empire.

"But this is different. Ever since becoming your follower, I've had the chance to take part in exciting battles and experienced things no one would ever imagine—including regaining my youth," he said, a smile lighting up his face. There was no hint of regret or sadness in his expression.

"Do you have any regrets?"

"None whatsoever. I got to fight dragons, have full-blown duels with the Whirlwind, and even challenge demons and the Wicked One. And with my renewed youth, I can aim to achieve even greater feats. Plus, it's given me the chance to have a family."

"I'm impressed by how much you've come to terms with things."

He chuckled. "I simply believe that I am protecting the future of the world by protecting you."

"Please stop thinking that the future of the world depends on me. No matter how you look at it, that's an unrealistic expectation."

"It's not; it's just right. Besides, I have my own ambitions too."

"Do you? Can I ask what they are?"

"I want to appear in your future biographies as the former Illumasian general who became the head of your followers and supported you throughout your journey."

I hadn't been expecting that, and his words left me floored. "What?"

"When people write your life story, I want them to include me as your most loyal retainer. That's my dream." With that, he resumed walking ahead, laughing heartily.

"My biography? I've read Lord Reinstar's, and it was impressive. But having mine sit next to it? Yeah, that's not happening."

Feeling a little dejected, I followed my companions to the tenth floor of the labyrinth. Meanwhile, Brod, who'd overheard my conversation with Lionel, launched into an argument with him, claiming that *he* would be the one to appear the most in my life story as the man who'd taught me how to fight.

14 — Time Flows Equally for All

The tunnel connecting Ebiza to Illumasia was located on the tenth floor of the labyrinth. Apparently, this was the path the resistance would be taking to sneak into the empire. After seeing them off at the entrance, we took the same route as them, purposefully choosing the one that had traps. Despite her title of Holy Oracle, it seemed that Melphina couldn't see what we were doing.

With Brod and Lionel's overwhelming strength, combined with Kefin's clever use of the trap-disarming techniques he had learned from my master in the Labyrinth of Wiles, we reached the boss room on the tenth floor impressively quickly, considering how small our group was.

"This labyrinth's monsters are so damn weak," Brod said, looking bored out of his mind.

"For now," Kefin rebuked him. "But the adventurers who tried clearing this place all gave up on the thirtieth floor, so I assume that's where the real challenge begins."

"Then let's stop wasting our time here and hurry up."

"Master, whatever you do, please don't step on a trap and die on the spot," I interjected.

"What do you take me for? I've already got the skill, so I'm not gonna do something that stupid."

That's my master for you, I guess.

It seemed that Lionel wasn't too happy about being left behind, though.

"Kefin, Ketty, you two focus on disarming the traps, all right? I'll be going ahead."

"Yes, sir."

"Yep!"

Kefin and Ketty nodded in unison.

You'll "be going ahead"? That's what you've been doing this entire time! I almost retorted, but there were so many sparks flying between Brod and Lionel that I decided to keep my comeback to

myself.

After a bit more walking, we regrouped with Kefin in front of what I assumed was the boss room door.

"The boss of this floor is on the other side of the door. According to my information, it should be a pack of black wolves," he announced.

"Are they strong? Do they have any annoying abilities?" I asked.

"No to both. We shouldn't have any issue defeating them. Well then, let's go."

With that, he touched the door, and it opened on its own. We made our way to the middle of the boss room, and twenty or so black wolves appeared from the ground. The biggest of them let out a howl, and all the beasts charged us at once. I wouldn't say that this was a coordinated attack of any kind; it was more likely that rushing at their opponent was the black wolves' only way of dealing damage. As long as they didn't change direction midair, they posed no real threat to us. All I needed to do was place the blade of my Illusion Sword directly on their path, and they began turning into magic stones. Of course, Brod and Lionel didn't struggle either, and we managed to gain control of the room in the blink of an eye.

"This was surprisingly easy," I remarked. "So? Do you guys really want to keep going?"

"What would have been the point of coming all the way here if we left now?" Brod shot back.

"We haven't been here for so long that we need a break, so I'd like to keep going, if that's all right with you," Lionel added.

"Sure."

We gathered the magic stones left behind by the monster and descended the stairs to the eleventh floor.

"Is it just me, or is it a bit dark down here?" Brod asked.

"It is. The labyrinth might be getting darker the deeper we venture," Kefin replied.

"Maybe. Just remember, Kefin, it's only going to get tougher from here, so prioritize your safety, you hear?"

"Yes!"

Why did I feel like Brod treated Kefin more like his apprentice

than he did me?

Anyway, it was amazing how different this place was compared to just ten floors above. Black wolves—the monsters we'd fought in the boss room—soon began appearing in the corridors.

We're about to get busy. I sighed inwardly as my companions and I pressed on, subjugating the monsters as they appeared.

"We've come all the way to the twentieth floor and didn't end up running into any annoying monsters," Brod said. "Having an accurate map of the place sure is handy."

"It is." Kefin nodded. "But there are a lot of blanks from the next floor onward, so we'll need to be more careful."

"Yup."

Brod gestured for him to open the door to the twentieth-floor boss room. As before, it swung open on its own when he touched it.

I entered the room, progressing with caution, but couldn't find any enemies. "There's no way there's nothing in this— Over there!"

I swung my Illusion Sword at the shadow charging toward me, and by the time the wolf revealed its appearance, it had transformed into a magic stone. It seemed that this was some sort of assassin-type wolf.

I turned around to warn my friends to be careful, but it turned out I didn't need to. They had already taken down multiple wolves, as evidenced by the magic stones scattered around them. Closing my eyes, I let out a sigh of relief when I realized I couldn't sense any more monsters nearby. However, I was a bit taken aback by how efficient my comrades had been. Don't get me wrong; I knew they were strong (especially Lionel), but this showed just how big the gap between their combat abilities and mine was.

"I didn't notice the monster at all until it lunged at me. How did you guys spot them so quickly?" I asked without thinking.

Brod shrugged. "I just sensed their presence."

"I'm always on the lookout for unusual presences and mana signatures," Lionel said. "When something feels off, I attack in the direction I sense it coming from."

"Monsters have a scent. This time, I used that as a hint to know where to strike," Kefin told me.

"Same here," Ketty chimed in. "I saw some dark shadows moving, so I swung my sword at them."

"I can tell where enemies are hiding, so I used that to my advantage," Estia explained last.

The only information that could be of use to me had come from Brod and Lionel. Ketty and Kefin had simply made use of their beastfolk abilities, while Estia could apparently sense monsters thanks to the Spirit of Dusk's blessing. Upon hearing my companions' explanations, I realized just how much of a fool I was for believing I was crazy strong just because I had the powers of the dragons. I very much wanted to crawl into a hole and hide right now.

It wasn't like I had been the only one working hard and making progress, yet I'd somehow started assuming Brod and Lionel were less powerful, especially since their levels had been reset, and arrogantly believed I was on par with Kefin and the others.

Thank goodness I realized how much of an idiot I am before we left for the empire.

My recent defeats against Brod should've served as lessons to help me improve, but instead, I'd let my arrogance cloud my judgment. How was I supposed to look him in the eyes now?

Feeling a little down, I asked my companions to stop for a break. As I turned my gaze to Brod, I began reminiscing about our training sessions in Merratoni. One day, around the time Bottaculli had started actively trying to kill me, I'd asked my master if I had gotten stronger.

"The moment you start thinking you've gotten stronger, you'll begin to arbitrarily decide which fights you can and can't win, and you'll stop challenging the tough ones. Before you know it, you'll only be able to beat those you consider beneath you. And mark my words, if those you underestimate are hell-bent on rising up, they'll pull the rug out from under you at some point," he'd replied.

"So you don't even think that I'm *beneath you when we fight?"*

"Nope. If anything, I'm always on my toes when I'm training you. Wouldn't want to accidentally...y'know."

"Uh, thank you. Please keep being careful so you don't do...that, yeah."

"Sure thing. Anyway, if one day you find yourself realizing you're getting cocky, and you're not dead yet, consider yourself very lucky."

"While I do want to get strong to the point where I can even think of getting cocky, for now I'll just try to focus on surviving. I'll think about this whole overconfidence thing once I've become stronger than you."

"Heh. I like your guts, Luciel. All right, let's make today's session even more intense than usual."

"Y-You're kidding, right?"

"You want to become stronger than me, right? C'mon, make sure you stay focused and train hard to avoid getting yourself killed."

"Ugh... Why did I have to get carried away? I'm such a moron!"

Back then, I'd seriously been living on the edge, worried I was about to meet an untimely death at any point. I almost wanted to give my past self a pat on the back for surviving those hellish days. Now, I needed to ensure that my future self would want to do the same for me. To achieve that, I needed to do two things: One, to be thankful to my companions for always being by my side, and two, to work hard to reach a level of skill that would put me on par with Brod and Lionel at their full potential.

In the end, this little labyrinth excursion had given me a precious occasion to reflect on myself.

"Thanks, everyone," I said, standing up. "All righty then, should we continue? We've got a labyrinth to clear."

"I see someone is finally feeling motivated," Lionel replied, a grin on his face as he pushed the door of the twenty-first floor open.

"We'll likely encounter more shadow wolves the deeper we go, so let's be on our guard, everyone," Kefin warned us.

Ketty nodded. "We can always use artifacts to light our path if we need to."

"It seems that I have a good affinity with this labyrinth, so I will protect you, sir," Estia assured me.

"Let's go" was all Brod said before descending the stairs faster than anyone else.

Having companions I can rely on is so nice.

"Let's do our best, everyone. And remember: safety first."

"Yes, sir!" everyone exclaimed in unison.

With our newfound resolve, we took the stairs down to the twenty-first floor of the labyrinth, which was even darker than the previous one.

"Should we take out the artifacts?" I suggested.

"Not yet. We should be fine until the thirtieth floor," Kefin assured me, so I decided to trust his word.

Given how dark it was down here, I struggled to see the monsters—both the regular black wolves and the shadow wolves—but thankfully, my companions seemed to have no issues. As I watched them, I got used to the darkness, and I soon began fighting alongside them. I managed to progress without getting surprised, perhaps because I had finally started focusing on the task at hand.

"Considering how weak the monsters are here, I'm surprised no one ventured much deeper. I wonder if there's a reason for it," I mused.

"We have almost no information about the floors below thirty," Kefin said. "After all, progressing while holding a lantern is difficult for adventurers. Besides, if they're after profits, the labyrinths in Grandol are more lucrative. Perhaps that is why this one remains uncleared."

"We might stumble across some treasure chests, then."

"Or some demons," Ketty pointed out.

"Don't say that, Ketty; it's bad luck," I chided her. "Anyway, if we want to know what lies deeper, we have no choice but to go see it for ourselves. Lionel, you can roam around freely, but let me know if you get hurt, even a little. You're still the cornerstone of our offense and defense."

"Yes, sir." It was too dark for me to see his expression, but he sounded happy. I didn't usually tell my companions these sorts of things, but perhaps I should do it more often.

"The same goes for you, master. Please come back if you get hurt."

"Yeah."

With that, we resumed our exploration of the labyrinth.

15 — A New Mindset

Clearing labyrinths always made me realize all the things I lacked, so it felt a bit like I was being taught a lesson. This time, I'd realized that I was the only one out of my companions who struggled to fight shadow wolves. It wasn't like I couldn't kill them at all; I just couldn't deal with them immediately when they took me by surprise. Panic began to set in. I'd fought monsters much stronger than those before, so why was I struggling so much?

"You move the same way as you did before we went to Grandol," I heard Estia mutter. Was she implying that I wasn't applying the training I had done in Grandol?

"But I always put safety first..." I said.

"Ah, I'm sorry, sir."

I took a step toward her, curious about what she'd meant. "I'm not angry. But if you have any concrete advice for me, I'd like to know. We're risking our lives here, so it won't help me if you hold back on telling me what you've noticed."

She turned toward me as if she'd made a decision and began explaining. "I think that you rely too much on your sight."

"What do you mean?"

"It felt to me like your intuition was better when you were training in Grandol."

I agreed that I could sense things better back then, but was there really that big of a difference? I decided to ask my master and the others for their opinions.

"Do you four agree with Estia?"

"I thought you were intentionally leaving yourself open," Brod replied.

"It feels like you've lost your combat intuition, sir," Lionel added.

Damn. It seemed that I'd really wasted everything I'd learned from my training in Grandol.

"Before, you could kill demons without your sight or hearing, even though your level was much lower. But it seems like your claws

have dulled since the last time we saw each other," Ketty said, rubbing salt into the wound.

"We actually brought you to this labyrinth so that you could regain your fighting instincts and the senses you developed in Grandol," Kefin confessed.

So, while my physical abilities had improved, my combat instincts had taken a hit. Those words danced through my mind.

"We don't have time to blind you and destroy your eardrums like the Whirlwind did during your training back then, but we wanted you to notice what was wrong for yourself," Lionel told me.

Was it really *that* terrible? I was too scared to ask. "So I've accidentally lost all the weapons I've worked so hard to polish?" I muttered.

"No, you haven't lost them," Lionel said. "Your true weapons are your sense of danger and your willpower. You've probably just become a bit too comfortable after gaining those new powers of yours."

That was a nice thing to say, but it didn't change the fact that I'd lost the abilities Brod had helped me cultivate in such a short amount of time, almost as quickly as I'd gained them. I did agree with Lionel that I'd let my ego get the better of me, but I hadn't intended to let myself grow complacent. Regardless, the fact of the matter was that my combat instincts had grown dull after not fighting for so long. At that moment, I fully understood how dangerous it was not to be aware of one's own condition.

"So you didn't tell me because you wanted me to figure the problem out on my own?" I asked.

Lionel nodded. "Yes. Although we could have pointed it out to you, I believe it was more beneficial for you to come to that conclusion on your own. That way, it will stick with you and be harder to forget. Moreover, acknowledging your own failures can help you remember the determination you had when you were focused on improving." His words were severe yet kind at the same time. This gave me a glimpse of the inner struggles he and Brod had gone through after their levels had been reset.

"So the reason I haven't been able to beat master in a duel, and I

didn’t notice the demonized knight’s attack in Ebiza, is that I’ve grown complacent?”

“Heh. You lost to me because my fighting instincts are better and I’m more experienced than you. I told you before that levels and stats aren’t absolute indicators of one’s strength, didn’t I?” Brod said.

“Ugh...”

“You only had one real fight in the three months you spent in Neldahl, didn’t you?” Lionel asked.

“Yeah. Against the Water and Wind Dragons.”

“How nice. I wish I’d been there... Ahem. My apologies, sir. I believe that you relaxed a little too much during these three months. Besides...”

“There’s something *else*?” I asked in shock.

“The stronger the new powers one acquires, the more they want to use them. Every warrior feels the same way. But there is no need to destroy the foundation you’ve built upon.”

“I’m not a warrior,” I reminded him. Then, I let out a long sigh. “Estia, everyone, I’m sorry. And thank you. I’ll do my best to keep your advice in mind and put it into practice, but it might take some time for my instincts to become as sharp as they once were. I’ll probably cause you a lot of trouble along the way, but I’m counting on you to have my back.”

I’d thought I’d gotten stronger, yet I’d ended up holding my friends back even more than before. In the end, I was glad Brod and Lionel had dragged me here.

“The Whirlwind and I have lost our levels as well, so we’ll be able to compete with you to see who improves faster,” Lionel said teasingly.

“I’ll have your back, chief!” Ketty assured me.

“If you work hard, you might be able to get your intuition back by the time we finish clearing the labyrinth,” Kefin said.

“I’m sure you can do it, sir,” Estia encouraged me.

“Thanks, everyone. Okay, let’s keep going!”

Having been made aware of my shortcomings, I tried to stop relying on my sight as much, focusing instead on trying to detect the

monsters' presences and mana signatures. The map had a few mistakes, and we ended up having to retrace our steps a few times due to dead ends, but aside from that, we were making good progress. Before long, we reached the thirtieth floor and headed straight to the boss room without even stopping for a break, where three shadow bears and five black bears awaited us.

"Is it just me, or did the difficulty of the labyrinth spike all of a sudden?" I said.

The monsters were over three meters tall, and the pressure emanating from their massive frames was on a whole other level than that of the wolves.

"Careful! Shadow bears can hide in darkness!" Kefin shouted.

How was it possible for such a massive creature to disappear into the shadows like that? It was so unfair! Grumbling inwardly, I, along with my companions, focused on trying to detect the presence of monsters. Lionel intercepted their attacks, while Ketty and Kefin targeted their arms and legs to weaken them. Estia kept the monsters occupied, drawing their attention away from Lionel and me as she dodged their strikes like she was dancing. Soon, Kefin and Ketty joined her, launching a coordinated three-pronged attack that quickly brought the beasts down. As for Brod, he charged the black bears with no regard for his life, swiftly cutting their heads off.

I cast a quick spell to heal him and Lionel, all while focusing mana into my Illusion Sword to take down the monster that was attacking me.

"Sir!" Lionel warned me.

Thanks to him, I managed to sense the monster quickly closing in from behind me, and I quickly launched an attack at it.

"*Flame Blade!*" I yelled, swinging my Illusion Sword. A dragon materialized from the blade, swiftly biting into the bear, causing it to ignite and burn away until nothing was left but its magic stones.

Staying alert, I readied myself for my next target, but the monsters had begun to panic, giving Kefin and the others the opportunity to swiftly take them down. Brod faced off against the last shadow bear in a one-on-one duel and emerged victorious without any trouble.

"Phew, we managed to clear this place without any issue. I'm a bit hungry, so should we stop for a meal?" I suggested once we'd finished gathering the magic stones. However, I quickly noticed that my companions were acting a bit strange.

What did I do now? I wondered as Lionel marched over to me.

"What was that attack, sir?! Not only can you use magic, but you can also directly use the powers of the dragons now?!" he exclaimed.

Uh...I'm pretty sure I showed you that in Merratoni already...

"Luciel! Why didn't you use that attack during our duel?!" Brod barked at me next.

Well, because that would have been dangerous... Yeah, no, I shouldn't say that.

"You can use other magic attributes by swinging your sword?" Kefin asked me, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"I haven't tried yet, but maybe?"

"It's no wonder you thought you'd gotten stronger with attacks like those," Lionel said.

"Considering how scared the monsters were, it must have been quite powerful," Kefin added.

A pensive look crossed Lionel's face. "So you're not using your full powers unless absolutely necessary... I see. I shall work harder to regain my full strength as soon as possible."

"Perhaps the Dragon God might approve of you!"

Lionel and Kefin were visibly excited, while Ketty and Estia simply stared at me with awkward smiles.

"I see. You thought I'd become weak to the point where you needed to worry about me," Brod muttered, his face expressionless. But I was too preoccupied with Lionel and Kefin to offer him any comfort.

"Stop it, you two. You're making a big deal out of this. Besides, the Dragon God lives in a scary place, so I don't want to go there, *ever*."

The two exchanged thoughtful glances before responding in unison, "I see."

Praying that our little conversation hadn't raised any flags, I

began getting everything ready for our meal.

16 — Past Conflict

After a nice little break in the thirtieth floor's boss room, we proceeded deeper into the dungeon.

"From this point onward, we don't have a map. Enemies will likely use the darkness to their advantage and attack us. So let's stay on our guard, everyone," I said.

"Should we turn on our magic lanterns, sir?"

"Not yet. We can still see where everyone is, and the light might attract monsters. Plus, I feel like this added tension will help me recall the feeling I used to get when I was able to anticipate my enemies' moves—that prickly sensation that ran through my skin."

"Understood."

"Let's go."

With that, we shifted into full exploration mode. We dispatched the monsters that tried to creep up on us from the shadows, disarming traps as we encountered them, all while mapping out the labyrinth. Of course, we also had to have full-blown fights along the way, and we ran into a few dead ends and monster rooms, which slowed down our progress. But this all helped to heighten my sense of urgency.

Don't get me wrong; I wasn't expecting a dramatic change to occur just because I was suddenly focusing on the monsters. But by honing in on their presences, mana signatures, and killing intents, I felt like I could predict the timing of their attacks better, linking it to the images in my mind. That synergy caused me to become more aware of my companions' movements as well, allowing me to have a clear vision of my surroundings and, in turn, to adapt my strategy accordingly.

But something weighed on my mind; not only was Brod getting wounded a lot more often than before, but he flat-out refused to let me heal him unless he really was in danger.

I was so focused on the monsters—and worried about my master—that I didn't even realize how much progress we'd made until we

found ourselves standing before the entrance to the fortieth floor's boss room.

"We reached floor forty already?" I asked.

"You were focusing on the monsters, so it's no surprise you lost track of time," Lionel said. "However, you should try to relax a little. Your body might feel fine, but you *will* make mistakes if you're so tense."

"Then let's take a break after we're done with the boss."

"Stay alert, everyone," said Kefin.

"Will do."

He opened the door, and we cautiously made our way to the middle of the boss room. There, we found countless monsters that looked like turtles wearing helmets, just like in that one famous game.

"Oh, met-turtle bombs," Kefin said.

"You know about them?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes. I've heard that on top of having hard shells, they can also use magic. But they have their weaknesses: First, they are almost completely immobile, and second, they will detonate the moment they take any damage."

"They shouldn't pose much of a threat, then."

"Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't. If you encountered them in the wild, you could easily provoke them into self-destructing by throwing something at them from a distance. However, if we try that here, it'll trigger a chain reaction, causing the others to explode as well. And given we're in a closed room, that probably wouldn't end well for us."

I tried to envision the potential outcomes of our situation. If the explosion simply caused the turtles' shells to fly at us, I could cast Area Barrier on Lionel and have him protect us with his shield while healing him continuously. But if it was the kind of explosion that was accompanied by flames, the temperature of the room would shoot up, and we might not be able to withstand the heat.

"Is there really no way for us to deal with them safely?" I asked.

Kefin shook his head. "This is beyond what I expected."

"Master, do you have an idea?"

"Just use wind magic to blast the flames away and water magic to cool the room down. Then, you can let the Lion handle the rest," Brod said.

That was my master for you. He was able to come up with a plan on the spot.

"Lionel, can I leave the defense to you?"

"Of course, sir."

I nodded. "Everyone, fall back to the entrance. I'll follow master's suggestion. First, I'm going to create a wall of ice. It's going to completely drain my mana, but I'll drink a potion to recover as much as possible to prepare for the explosion. If things get dicey, I'll use the Wind Dragon's powers to contain the flames."

My companions agreed and did as they were told.

"Lionel, I know it won't be easy, but do everything you can to withstand the explosion, all right?" I said.

"Yes, sir."

"Kefin, can you shoot something at the turtles from here? Any turtle is fine."

"Yes, sir. They're not too far from us, so I can reach them."

"I'll do it," Brod volunteered, and Kefin agreed to let him take that role.

"Oh, okay then. I'm leaving it to you, master," I said as I turned my Illusion Sword back into its staff form and channeled my mana into it. "Let's go with brute force here. Can you target the monster farthest from us?"

"Sure can."

"Throw the dagger on my mark, then immediately go behind Lionel and me. Everyone, wait where you are too," I said.

"Got it!" my companions replied in unison.

I cast Area Barrier and told Brod to attack the turtles. He hurled the dagger at one of the monsters, and the blade grazed its leg. I worried the cut was too shallow but decided to trust Kefin's information and immediately chanted, "*Water Dragon, shield us behind a frozen barricade and block any attack that might come our way!*"

In an instant, most of my mana was drained, and a massive wall

of ice appeared in front of us. An instant later, a boom echoed in the distance, followed by more explosive sounds. It was like a string of firecrackers going off one after the other.

I'd made it so that my wall would automatically regenerate itself if it broke or melted, but that had been unnecessary. It took less than a minute for all the monsters to explode, and my wall was still standing at the end, not having melted in the slightest.

"The power of the dragons truly is incredible," Lionel said, impressed as he placed his hand on the wall.

"It is, but it also costs a ton of mana to use. Conjuring this wall just drained eighty percent of my maximum mana."

"Eighty percent of a sage's mana..." Lionel muttered, falling deep in thought.

"It's a bit chilly behind this wall, chief," Ketty chimed in. "Can you undo it already?"

"I could, but given how huge that explosion was, part of the room is definitely still on fire. We might be hit by a wave of heat if I take down the wall," I replied.

Ketty pouted. "Guess this kitty will just have to stay cold, then."

"Doesn't your robe have a temperature-regulating function?" I asked.

"It used to, but it stopped working at some point."

"You should have told me when you noticed it wasn't working." I handed her a white robe from the Church.

"Oh, it's been a while since I wore one of those. Thanks for lending it to me, chief."

"No problem. Everyone, if you ever notice some defect in your equipment, please let either me or Dhoran know, all right? We'll repair it for you."

We killed time for about an hour, at the end of which I finally lowered the wall. Then, I purified the room, we sat down to eat, and when we were done, I decided to take a little nap to speed up my mana recovery rate.

Well, that *was* the plan, but...

"Where am I?"

I always woke up with my stamina fully restored after sleeping on

my angel's pillow, but this time, things were different. Something was wrong with my surroundings. I had definitely fallen asleep in the labyrinth, but I was currently sprawled on the ground outside, somewhere surrounded by mountains.

I had stood up and tried to make sense of the situation when a voice called from behind me, "Don't panic; you're still dreaming. I'm currently guiding your consciousness."

Turning around, I saw Estia—well, the Spirit of Dusk controlling her body—standing there.



"Did something happen for you to come visit me in my dreams?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. There's something I need to tell you about the dragon lying in this labyrinth—the Umbra Dragon."

I stood there, confused. She had just shared some pretty damn important information with me. "The Umbra Dragon? So you're telling me one of the Eternal Dragons is trapped in here?"

"Yes. But it won't be easy to free him. Only someone as strong as Reinstar could subjugate and release him."

"Based on what you just said, I assume I'm going to need to fight him. What kind of dragon is the Umbra Dragon?"

"Take a look around. Haven't you noticed?"

"Huh? Uh..." I did as I was told and glanced around. "Now that you mention it, it looks a bit like the land near Rockford. Did I get that right?"

The Spirit of Dusk paused before saying, "I'm going to show you the past. Try to think of a way to purify the Umbra Dragon."

"What do you mean?"

She didn't answer and looked up at the sky. Faced with no other choice, I raised my gaze as well and was met with the sight of a pitch-black dragon about to use a breath attack from up in the sky. I tried to cast Area Barrier only to realize that I couldn't use magic. Not only that, but I noticed that my body was transparent. This was when I realized that I was indeed in a dream.

A slash of light hit the dragon straight on, interrupting his attack.

"*You dare attack me? Who are you?*" the dragon's voice echoed in my head as thick bloodlust that made my skin prickle filled the air.

This must have been the true power of a dragon. It seemed that the ones I had encountered so far had gone easy on me, and not just a bit. As I mentally thanked them for sparing my life, a young man appeared, flying in the sky. It was unmistakably Lord Reinstar.

"Umbra Dragon, why do you want to destroy the world?" he asked.

"Do you truly believe that I owe an explanation to a mere human?" the dragon replied before firing a dark-purple breath attack, this time not at the ground but at Reinstar. The flames

reached him in an instant, engulfing him completely and piercing the mountain that stood behind him.

"It's all because you humans keep trying to get in my way," the Umbra Dragon rumbled, preparing to cast yet another breath at the land below.

But then, a radiant light as intense as the attack the dragon had unleashed earlier flooded the scene and engulfed him. Looking in the direction the light had come from, I saw Reinstar hovering in the same exact spot as he'd been in before, a spherical barrier surrounding him. It was at that moment that I realized Lord Reinstar wasn't human anymore. There was no way in the universe that he and I were the same species.

"You... You're not a simple human, are you?!" the dragon asked, smoke billowing from his body.

"Apparently, I'm a hero or something. After I, surprisingly easily, killed the Demon Lord, humanity has finally started to work together to progress and grow, so I can't exactly let you wipe them out, you know?"

"You killed the King of Darkness?! The balance of this world will be thrown into chaos!" the dragon exclaimed. He sounded more distressed than angry.

"It's not like I eradicated demons altogether. I've erected a strong barrier to prevent them from coming into human cities, but they should be able to develop in their own territory."

"If you disrupt the equilibrium of this world, humans will start fighting each other," the dragon warned him.

"I won't let that happen as long as I'm alive. I'll create a world where children won't ever have to see blood; a world where nations strive to outdo each other in the pursuit of knowledge."

"If that is your desire, then prove it to me. Reflect on the meaning of the destruction I have unleashed upon this land as you face your end."

The dragon's words marked the beginning of an intense combat between him and Reinstar. Light and darkness clashed, both sides unwilling to back down. However, neither was able to gain the advantage. Then, Reinstar made his move. He brandished his sword,

which began glowing, likely with mana. The next instant, he was behind the Umbra Dragon, and blood was gushing from his opponent's back. I understood that Reinstar had attacked him, but it had been so fast that I hadn't seen it myself. Before I could process what had happened, he vanished into thin air once more, perhaps to prepare his next strike.

However, the Umbra Dragon wasn't about to stay still and do nothing as Reinstar attacked him. To my amazement, scales began detaching themselves from his body one after the other. They flew around the dragon, gradually gaining speed, forming a protective barrier that prevented Reinstar from closing in.

The fight went on for quite some time until Reinstar eventually managed to knock the Umbra Dragon to the ground by enlarging his glowing sword, which was followed by a mana cannon attack, bringing the battle to an end. As I surveyed the devastation of the surrounding mountains, I realized that this land was where Rockford would later be founded.

"I shatter this world, and the Radiance Dragon breathes life back into it, allowing the other Eternal Dragons to be reborn. This is how we have prevented Galdardia from decaying since the dawn of time," the Umbra Dragon said.

"Aren't you bored with just destroying everything all the time?"

"If I don't, the people will kill each other, ravage the land, and disrupt the balance of this world until the planet itself has lost its powers. If that were to happen, no life-form would be able to survive here any longer."

"I understand your concerns," Reinstar said. "I can't promise that it won't happen, but I vow to do everything in my power to prevent that fate. I will seek wisdom from all civilizations to protect this world. So please, will you stop your destruction?"

"I have lost. I will cease my actions for as long as you are alive. However, if you fail to create the world you envision, I shall become the avatar of destruction once more."

"Then I'm going to need you to work hard for me to prevent that fate from happening."

The Spirit of Dusk turned to me. "Luciel, the Umbra Dragon has

honored the promise he made to Reinstar and refrained from causing destruction all this time."

"Can I ask why you wanted to show this to me?"

"The Umbra Dragon never goes easy on his opponents, and he has no tolerance for those who don't fight fair. Be aware that he won't let himself be freed as easily as the other dragons. He will unleash breath attacks so powerful that they could incinerate your body until nothing is left. Just thought you should know."

"Got it," I said after a brief pause. "I'll try to think of a way to earn his respect and will decide if I should challenge him or not based on that."

"I pray that you won't make a decision you'll come to regret—for Estia's sake as well."

With that, I felt my consciousness rise to the surface and finally woke up. Realizing that I was sweating as if I'd just had a bad dream, I cast a quick purification spell on myself. Based on the fact that I could see the labyrinth's ceiling from where I was lying, I confirmed that I was back where I'd fallen asleep. Letting out a sigh, I began to think of a way to deal with the Umbra Dragon waiting for me within the labyrinth.

17 — Imitation

The Spirit of Dusk had shown me a fight between Reinstar and the Umbra Dragon. Both of them were absolute powerhouses, but while Reinstar's strength was clearly extraordinary, I could take inspiration from parts of his strategy.

"Such power is so unfair," I grumbled. "But now I truly understand just how amazing Reinstar was."

He had utilized his entire body—not just his legs—to change direction midair. I assumed he must have been employing walls of air, much like the Wind Dragon. On top of that, he had identified the element his opponent was weakest against while actively fighting, and once he'd figured it out, he'd imbued his sword with that element, which had allowed him to deal significant damage to the Umbra Dragon both in close combat and from a distance. By mixing all sorts of attack patterns, he'd had his opponent completely at his mercy.

But what surprised me the most was his defense. To shield himself from the breath attacks, he'd conjured layer upon layer of magical walls while continuously casting healing magic on himself. That last part was something I often did as well, but I'd never even thought of using magic walls to protect myself from attacks. And by making those walls thicker in close-range combat, Reinstar had been able to momentarily slow down his opponent, allowing him to use the brief window to either give himself time to evade the next attack or launch a counterattack. Such a technique required not only perfect situational awareness but also a physique capable of keeping up with it.

"I mean...I have the Accelerated Thought and Physical Enhancement skills, I can probably make magic walls with the Wind Dragon's power, and I'm pretty sure my healing magic isn't any worse than Lord Reinstar's..."

I decided to try copying some of the moves I'd seen him perform in my dream, determined to absorb any techniques I could

successfully execute as my own. I got up and saw that only Brod and Lionel were awake. “Master, Lionel, leave the watch duty to me and go get some rest, even if it’s just for a little while.”

“Something happen while you were asleep?” Brod asked.

Ugh. Sharp as always. But I had a feeling things would get way too complicated if I told him about the Umbra Dragon, so I pretended to be confused by his question.

“Sir, I was thinking and came to the conclusion that I probably won’t have the luxury of holding back against the imperial soldiers,” Lionel cut in, changing the topic. “As such, I’ve decided to go all in against them, except for those you can weaken with your magic.” He seemed to be resolved. Perhaps he and Brod had spoken about the topic.

“Right. Okay. But if you see any familiar faces you want to save among the soldiers, feel free to let me know.”

“Yes, sir.”

With those words, he went to sit against the wall. As I watched his retreating form, I noticed that the strong fighting aura he’d been exuding since I’d told him we’d be facing the empire had vanished.

“I hadn’t noticed how strange he was acting up until now, but it looks like he’s back to his usual self. Perhaps he was feeling conflicted before,” I mused.

Knowing that even someone like Lionel, whom I thought could do everything perfectly no matter the circumstances, could feel conflicted made me realize that everyone had their own struggles and doubts. As I waited for the others to wake up, I just stood there, silently practicing my sword technique.

Estia was the first to rise, followed by Ketty and Kefin. I decided to ask the latter to practice with me while we waited for Lionel to get up.

“There’s something I’d like to try out. Kefin, can you join me for a light sparring session?”

“That’s unusual. But yes, of course. If that is your command, I will gladly oblige.”

“Thanks. You’re a big help. I’m going to protect myself with my shield, so attack me with all you’ve got. I’d just appreciate it if you

didn’t kill me.”

“I won’t, I won’t. But if all you’re doing is defending yourself, be prepared to lose your arms and legs.”

“That’s fine. I’m counting on you.”

Kefin blinked at me in surprise before brandishing his sword. I took a shield out of my magic bag, took a deep breath, and positioned myself so that I was facing him.

“When you’re ready.”

“All right, here I come,” he said, and his body immediately turned into a blur. Just as I thought, he must have leveled up his Physical Enhancement skill and had become quite strong.

I activated the same skill and cast Area Barrier. Then I released some more mana outside my body and manipulated it to form a wall. Focusing my consciousness on Kefin’s aura and mana signature, I tried to anticipate his movements. I heard a whoosh and felt like his attack had slowed down, just for an instant. However, I did get a slight cut on my arm as a result.

I know *that my idea isn’t a bad one,* I told myself, ready to resume our mock duel. “No need to hold back. Come at me as many times as you’d like,” I said aloud.

I increased the amount of mana in my magic wall and manifested it, envisioning a thick, sturdy shield. This allowed me to block Kefin’s attacks with my real shield, and I decided to reinforce my wall even further. As a result, I managed to completely evade Kefin’s strikes once or twice out of ten attempts, though it was a close call every time.

“Kefin, did you feel anything when attacking me?” I asked.

“Not particularly, no. It just seemed to me like your reaction speed was faster this time,” he said, tilting his head to the side.

“I see. To me, it felt like your attacks got slower for the brief moment you came into contact with my wall, but maybe I was just more focused because I was sensing the danger. Not sure if it’s because of that or something else, but I’m feeling a bit tired all of a sudden.”

Mastering this new technique wouldn’t be a walk in the park, but I was happy to have a new goal to strive toward.

“You’re already trying to improve your abilities after the events of yesterday. This truly is your best quality, sir,” Kefin praised me.

“It’s all thanks to you guys.”

This new technique had been born from the fight the Spirit of Dusk had shown me yesterday, combined with all the Magic Handling and Magic Control I’d been practicing since reincarnating into this world. To be fair, I should have realized something was wrong with me sooner, but for now, I decided to just be happy about the progress I’d made. After all, if I could keep myself alive, it was more likely that my friends would be safe as well.

After Kefin, I asked Estia to spar with me too. I figured it would be a good idea to know what would happen if a mana sword cut into my wall, just out of curiosity. The results were shocking: Unlike when Kefin had attacked me, Estia’s blade slowed down significantly when it came into contact with the wall.

“Did you feel something?” I asked.

“Yes. It felt like my sword was blocked by something hard.”

“I see.”

Perhaps the mana in her attack had reacted to the mana in my wall. It was just a hunch, but I felt like I was getting closer to perfecting the weapons Brod had helped me to develop. I decided to make some food while pondering these revelations, and Brod and Lionel woke up right just as I finished. I was worried about how little they’d slept, so before we ate, I made them promise to take a long rest before our trip to the empire.

We had our meal and then descended to the forty-first floor, which was so dark that we couldn’t see more than a meter ahead of us.

“There’s no way we’ll be able to see or disarm traps in this darkness. Luciel, we’re taking out the lights,” Brod told me.

“You’re right. It’ll probably be better to fight monsters than get ambushed or insta-killed by a trap. If push comes to shove, I can always take the lead while carrying a cask of Substance X,” I offered.

“What, so the rest of us end up losing our sense of smell?” he retorted, and I laughed.

“If monsters charge us because of the light, it’s likely they’ll

activate the traps on their way, so we should be able to focus solely on fighting," Kefin said.

"All right, everyone, to the fiftieth floor we go!" I announced.

"Yes, sir!"

Just like before, Brod took the lead while I traded my shield for a lantern and let my companions handle most of the fighting. As I illuminated our path ahead, I saw the same type of monsters as the ones we had been battling so far charging toward us. After that, we were caught up in one fight after another. My companions couldn't dodge every attack, of course, so they all got pretty banged up. But they also killed a ton of monsters, which was great. Perhaps it even helped Brod and Lionel level up, as I noticed their moves seemed much smoother than before.

We'd completely given up on the idea of drawing a map and just headed down whichever staircase we came across, eventually reaching floor forty-five, where we encountered our first humanoid monsters. Dark knights—headless figures clad in armor—and shadow knights, which were essentially living suits of armor, emerged from the shadows. From floor forty-eight onward, we even had to face dullahans. This partly explained why my companions' moves had gotten better. After all, Brod had always preferred fighting people over monsters, and Lionel and Ketty used to be soldiers who fought in wars.

Kefin's and Estia's fighting styles hadn't changed, but they'd become more aggressive, perhaps because they now had a better understanding of the monsters' patterns. The same went for me: I was now able to time my attacks based on our enemies' movements, slashing at them with my mana-infused Illusion Sword.

But despite how well the combat portion of this labyrinth was going, something was bothering me. We hadn't come across a single treasure chest.

After some time, we reached the fiftieth floor's boss room...and were immediately met by a thunderous roar coming from inside.

18 — One Hell of a Warm-Up Match

We stopped dead in our tracks upon hearing the sound.

"That came from inside the boss room, right?" Brod asked, turning around to face us.

"Yes. Looks like someone got here faster than we did," I replied.

"That explains why we couldn't find any traps or treasure chests on the last few floors. Whoever's in that room right now must be quite strong to have gotten this far."

I nodded. "They're definitely above average, that's for sure."

If I remembered correctly, when we'd come across dullahans in the Labyrinth of Wiles, Brod had said that someone would need to be at least A-rank or equal in strength to defeat even one of them. Then again, it seemed to me that the dullahans we'd encountered in that labyrinth were stronger than the ones we'd just fought, though I couldn't tell if it was because we'd gotten stronger or simply that this labyrinth's monsters hadn't been able to make use of their main advantage—the darkness—against us.

All I could do now was pray that whoever the strong individual(s) in the boss room were, they wouldn't summon the Wicked One and turn into the undead.

"Either way, all we can do for now is wait for them to be done," Brod said.

"Monsters keep coming our way, though," Ketty pointed out.

"Should we turn off our lights, sir?" Kefin asked me.

I'd become quite good at making my moves match my vision, so I felt like I wouldn't struggle too much through the rest of the labyrinth. Plus, if we stayed in front of the boss room, we wouldn't risk falling into traps. Some of my companions might want to fight more monsters to level up or sharpen their battle instincts, so I decided to ask them for their opinion on what we should do.

"I think we can probably turn off our lights, yeah," I replied to Kefin. "What do you think, master, Lionel? If you've reached your level-up goal, we'll put away our lanterns so as not to attract more

monsters.”

“Don’t. I haven’t had enough yet,” he replied.

“If it’s all right with you, I’d like to keep boosting my skills just a while longer, sir,” Lionel added.

Just as I’d thought, they still wanted to fight.

“What about you, Ketty?”

“There are so many monsters, this kitty’s feeling a little mentally exhausted. But I can keep going.” She didn’t seem to want to fight anymore, but we could all tell that she was feeling just fine.

“And you, Kefin?” I asked next.

“I would like to keep going for a bit. We’re going to Blanche when we’re done with the empire, right?”

“Yeah. Well, nothing’s set in stone yet, but that’s the plan, at least.”

“Then I would like to hone my abilities a little before then,” he said.

He was already thinking that far into the future, huh? Blanche was a human supremacist nation, so I understood why Kefin would want to be stronger before our trip there. He glanced at Ketty, and it was clear why he was so determined to become more powerful.

“Estia?” I asked our last companion.

“I’m not feeling particularly tired, but I’m starting to worry my weapon might be reaching its limits,” she told me. She was still using the holy silver sword I’d given her ages ago.

“Got it. Everyone else including master is using weapons crafted by Grand, right? I’ll commission new weapons from him when we go back, Estia. In the meantime, I think I must have something you can use in my bag.”

I rummaged through my magic bag and handed her the mithril and holy silver swords Brod had given me as a parting gift when I left Merratoni.

“You don’t mind if I give them to her, do you, master?” I asked just to be sure.

“Nah. Weapons are made to be used. If anything, keeping them stored away is a crime.”

I chuckled. “Estia, how about you try them out for a bit and tell

me which one you prefer?"

"Thank you, sir. I'll borrow them from you, if you don't mind."

"All right, let's keep fighting until the match in the boss room is over or our moves start getting sluggish. If that happens, we'll put down some casks of Substance X to chase away the monsters and turn off our lights," I announced.

"Sounds good."

"All right!"

"Yes, sir."

And so, we decided to keep fighting the labyrinth's monsters for a while longer. Just like before, we mostly ended up facing dark and shadow knights and dullahans, along with gorgons—those eerie creatures with human faces and snakes for hair.

Lionel blocked the attacks with his shield, then cut down the monsters' limbs one by one before finishing them with a grand slash of his sword. Meanwhile, Ketty and Kefin worked together, attacking from both sides, leaving Estia to deal the final blow. I kept a watchful eye on my companions, ready to heal them if needed, all while shielding myself with my new magic wall and slashing at the enemy with my mana sword.

"Your mana-infused sword's power truly is out of this world. One hit is enough to take down any enemy," Kefin remarked, clearly impressed.

Now that I understood how to utilize different attributes by focusing my consciousness on the mana I channeled into my sword, I was determined to practice that technique until it felt as natural to me as it had to Reinstar.

"Thanks, Kefin. Hearing you say that makes me more confident. But rather than focusing on offense, my goal is to learn how to avoid fatal wounds. I have a feeling that will significantly boost my chances of survival."

"You're not going to put your life on the line to win fights anymore?" Ketty asked teasingly, referencing the scolding my master had given me about my reckless behavior in the past.

I chuckled and replied, "I only did that because it felt like I'd die if I didn't. If I can help it, I'd rather avoid it from now on."

"You say that, but I have a feeling you'll do it again for sure, chief," Ketty chimed in.

"It's our duty to ensure he doesn't have to resort to such reckless tactics," Kefin replied.

Ketty let out a sigh, disappointed that her fun had been spoiled.

"Without him, we wouldn't have any barrier to protect us or healing magic to cure our wounds, which would drastically weaken our offense," Estia pointed out. That was a pretty accurate description of our party.

"I'll keep working hard to—" I began but was abruptly cut off by a dangerous aura that reminded me of death itself. "That presence... Is it *him*?!"

Lionel immediately confirmed my suspicions. "It is. There's no doubt about it."

"D-Do you know what that intense aura is? It's making my entire body tremble," Estia stammered.

"Is it the Wicked One?" Ketty asked, her face paling. She had dropped her usual cutesy mannerisms and looked completely serious. She'd been looking at Lionel when she'd asked that question, but I replied in his stead.

"Yes. It's the Wicked One. We won't be able to save whoever is trapped in that room, but we absolutely need to purify them."

"Do not move, everyone," Estia—the Spirit of Dusk said, wrapping us all in a black mist.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Our opponent might be a god, but if we cloak ourselves in dark mana, he shouldn't notice our presence. We can't kill the Wicked One, so our only option is to wait for him to leave."

"Got it. Do as Estia says, everyone."

Despite my warning, Brod seemed like he was seconds away from opening the boss room and charging inside. Thankfully, he didn't, and we simply stood there until we couldn't feel the Wicked One's presence anymore, which didn't even take an entire minute. Yet, the Spirit of Dusk didn't lift the mist.

"Estia, can't you remove your spell now?"

"Not yet. The Wicked One is sly. He's likely just pretending to

have left and is awaiting our next move."

The Spirit of Dusk seemed more familiar with the Wicked One than I was, so I decided to heed her advice.

"Let's stay like this until Estia says we can move. Hmm, but monsters are closing in on us, so be ready to fight them when the time comes. We'll do a clean sweep, then wait some more, and then finally enter the boss room," I said, and my friends nodded in agreement.

When we were done dealing with the first group of monsters, we repeated the process two more times before finally deciding to go into the next room. The door swung open, and I saw that this one wasn't dark like the other rooms in the labyrinth; it was lit like a regular boss room in any other dungeon. We stepped inside and immediately found ourselves face-to-face with enemies. Just as I'd thought, the people who'd entered this room before us weren't human anymore. But, contrary to expectations, they weren't undead either. Five demons were staring fixedly at us.

"What are demons doing in a dungeon? Plus, we felt the Wicked One's presence, so why didn't they turn into undead?" I asked, immediately beginning to cast a magic circle.

One of the demons spoke up. "Inferior beings like you dare ask questions without even announcing your names to us? Who do you think you are?!" he asked, his tone overbearing.

"Oh, sorry about that. I'm Luciel, a sage. I make a living killing monsters and demons."

"Well, would you look at that? The little dungeon crawler isn't a mere healer anymore; he's become a sage. The empire will have their hands full with you," the demon replied.

What?!

The demon had called me a "dungeon crawler" just like the Wicked One had in Grandol. Was the latter controlling this demon to prevent me from freeing the Umbra Dragon?

"You still haven't answered my question," I said, raising my voice in agitation. "What are demons doing in a labyrinth?"

"We're just looking for treasures. But I have to say, we were a bit surprised to see the Wicked One make an appearance."

So the Wicked One hadn't sent these demons here? If he had, they surely would have known he'd left. That meant they had likely been demonized.

"You guys aren't real demons, are you? Were you involved in the empire's demonization experiments?"

The demon chuckled. "Don't lump us in with those poor imitations. We're Illumasia's special forces."

I was right. They weren't pure demons. But from what they said, it seemed they weren't the products of regular demonization experiments either. I glanced at Ketty and Lionel, and they shook their heads as if to tell me they didn't know what the demons meant either.

"So you're special demons. Great. And? What are you trying to accomplish here? Do you plan on becoming subordinates of Blanche or something?" I asked.

Once again, my words were met with chuckles. "See? That's exactly why you humans are an inferior species. Why would we work for another nation?"

"I suppose you're not just going to kindly let us go either."

"You suppose right. Sir Lionel fears that you'll get in the way of his plans, you see. We're going to bring your head back to him."

At that, everyone in the room drew their weapons.

"I have two last questions. Can I?" I asked.

"Sure, we're quite magnanimous, so we don't mind granting your final request," the demon replied mockingly.

"I'll take you up on that offer, then. Who is your leader? The emperor or the Lion of War?"

"The *emperor*? Like hell we'd work for that living corpse," the demon scoffed, and his four comrades erupted into laughter. It seemed that Cloud was the one calling the shots for this particular squad.

"Last question: If you had the option to go back to being human, would you take it?"

"No way. Why would we? Enough with the questions. You're going to experience our full power as you perish!"

"What a shame," I said before silently casting Sanctuary Circle.

The next instant, my comrades charged the demons, Brod and Lionel leading the attack. As they flew past me, I caught a glimpse of Lionel's expression. He looked just like a devil. *This* was the true Lion of War.

The demonized "special forces" of Illumasia shrieked in pain after being hit by my spell. They tried to fight back as best they could, but it didn't take long for them to bite the dust. All in all, it took less than a minute for us to wipe them out. I cast one last Sanctuary Circle for good measure, and it appeared the demons had still been alive, as they let out a round of final, anguished screams before being consumed by pale flames, leaving only their equipment behind.

I felt a little hollow after dealing with them, but I pushed it aside and made my way to my friends. We'd reached the last floor of the labyrinth.

19 — The Umbra Dragon's Feelings

In the end, the empire's special forces had been so drunk on their newly acquired powers that we'd managed to defeat them without issue. It was a bit of a shame that we hadn't been able to squeeze more information out of them, though. While they must have been strong to some extent, I had a sneaking suspicion they had just been sacrificial pawns. If they hadn't, they wouldn't have been so loose-lipped about what was going on in the empire.

Still, I'd never get used to killing people who were once humans, even though they'd turned into demons. It didn't make me feel particularly great.

"You saved us, sir. I didn't think they'd still be alive after we chopped their heads off," Lionel remarked.

"I didn't expect it either. I just cast Sanctuary Circle as a precaution, so I guess we can consider ourselves lucky. At least we'll know what to expect the next time we fight them."

"Yes, sir."

"Chieeef, what should we do about all this?" Ketty (who was back to acting cutesy) asked, pointing at the equipment on the floor.

"I'm going to purify it just in case, and we'll pack it all up. Just don't touch that big magic stone."

"I *know* that."

"Sir, a return circle has appeared over there," Estia told me.

I followed her gaze, which was indeed directed at a return circle. And just as I thought, a sealed gate stood beyond it.

"So, is there really a..." Lionel trailed off.

"Yeah. I'm going to remove that seal and free the Umbra Dragon. Let's pray it doesn't turn into a fight."

"Best of luck, sir," he said.

I felt Brod grab my shoulder. "Master?"

"I'd like to see if I can come with you this way. You don't mind, right?"

"Ah, uh, no. Lionel, I'm leaving the cleanup to you. It might take

a while, so if I'm not back after twenty-four hours, go back to Ebiza with the others."

"The longest it's taken you so far is a few hours," Lionel pointed out.

"You weren't there, but the Water and Wind Dragons held me back for quite some time."

"Are you sure we can leave after a day?"

"Yep. I have Forêt Noire, so I shouldn't have any issues returning. I'd feel bad for making you walk back all the way to Ebiza while I'm on horseback."

"I will pray for your prompt return, sir," Kefin said.

"Me too!" Ketty chimed in.

"We believe in you, sir," Estia added.

Lionel turned to Brod. "I'm leaving him in your hands, Whirlwind."

"Sure thing."

They were acting as if I'd be heading to the dragon's chamber right away. But this time, I wanted to be in perfect condition before proceeding, so I awkwardly dispelled the misunderstanding. "Uh, I'm not going just yet. Unlocking the door will drain some of my mana, so I'm going to take a break after it's open."

My friends must've found my embarrassed expression quite amusing, as they burst into laughter. However, their amusement didn't last long. I'd put my hand on the door, and as usual, it absorbed my mana until the sigil on it began glowing in a dark-purple light. The door opened and then...*it* happened. I silently cast Sanctuary Barrier and quickly jumped to the side. Something crashed into my barrier, which began emitting creaking sounds and cracking in various places.

A beam of dark-purple light had pierced my barrier. I quickly made sure that my friends were all right, which they were, thankfully. It seemed that no one had gotten caught up in the beam.

Needless to say, I had *not* expected to be attacked out of the blue like this. I'd hoped I could convince the Umbra Dragon to cooperate with me, but it seemed I would indeed need to fight him.

Shifting gears, I turned to my friends. "You guys leave, right now. That attack must've been the Umbra Dragon's breath. This room

might not be safe anymore."

"Sir, please promise that you'll return to us safely."

"I promise. If I'm not back within a week, we're canceling the trip to Illumasia. Kefin, Ketty, Estia, look out for Lionel, all right? Just...have faith in me and wait for me."

"I fully believe old age is the only thing that can take you down, sir," Lionel said.

"Good. Master, go back with them."

"Why can't I get through that door?! Luciel, lend me your shoulder!" Brod had repeatedly looked around the area where the dragon's breath had come from, but every time his hand touched the door, it went right through it as though there was nothing there. He grabbed my shoulder and tried to go through the door that way, but he still passed right through.

"Master, return to Ebiza with the others," I urged him.

"You *have* to come back safely, you hear me?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure you'll have no issue freeing the dragon," Kefin said.

"Lots of people would find themselves in a pickle if you died, so you have to come back and keep working, 'kay?" Ketty added.

"Please don't give up, sir," Estia encouraged me.

Lionel was next. "As your follower, I am deeply frustrated not to be able to follow you through that door. Please return to us alive, and give us a chance to fix things in the empire."

"I will. I promise I'll come back alive. We don't know what's waiting for us out there, so be careful on your way back to Ebiza."

My companions nodded and, using the return circle that had appeared when we'd defeated the empire's special forces, teleported out of the labyrinth.

"All righty, guess it's time to go. The thing that broke my barrier when even the Wicked One wasn't able to pierce it was definitely the Umbra Dragon's breath attack, which I saw in my dreams. Granted, I'm not at full strength right now, so my barrier was a bit weak, but still. Let's hope I can reason with him," I muttered under my breath before running down the stairs. "It's about as dark as the thirtieth floor, huh? Umbra Dragon, can you hear me?"

"A mere human like you dares call out to me? You must not value your life very much," the dragon's voice echoed inside my head.

"Looks like you really don't like humans, just like in my dream. Didn't Lord Reinstar succeed in building a new world, as he promised he would?"

"That man is a liar. He thoroughly used me and my powers only to die before accomplishing anything of value."

"Well, he built a city in the sky, established a church right at the center of the world, and created a nation brimming with advanced technology, all to make people's lives easier," I said. "We humans don't live as long as dragons and other long-lived species, but he still worked hard to fulfill his promise to you, didn't he?"

"Results matter more than intentions. His lifespan was a little longer than that of a regular human, yet he still died without completing his vision. He broke his promise to me. If it weren't for these pesky chains, I would have already reduced this world to ashes."

He was lying. How did I know? Well, the Wicked One had sealed him in here only fifty or so years ago. He couldn't have been trapped for more than a hundred years absolute maximum. Reinstar, on the other hand, had died three hundred years ago. Yet, the Umbra Dragon had kept his word and hadn't destroyed the world. In other words, somewhere deep in his heart, he must have believed in Reinstar's vision. As for that breath attack he'd fired at us...

"Was that attack earlier your attempt at destroying the world?"

"Indeed. There isn't a thing that my breath cannot destroy. With it, I shall reestablish the balance of this world."

The Umbra Dragon was currently chained, but I knew for a fact that you should never relax your attention when faced with a foe stronger than you or things would be over before you even realized it. Gathering my mana, I recalled the conversation I'd heard in my dream.

"You can't destroy anything right now, though. The Radiance Dragon is still trapped," I pointed out.

"Lies. The Radiance Dragon's seal has already been broken."

The pressure emanating from him grew more intense, mixed with

anger. I, on the other hand, was so shocked that my own thoughts were thrown into chaos.

"Wha—?! I've only freed the Holy, Flame, Earth, Thunder, Water, and Wind Dragons. The Radiance Dragon is still imprisoned!"

"I do not care whether you have freed it or not. Only the results matter."

I strengthened my resolve. "If I can make you accept me and lift the Wicked One's curse to free you, will you tell me about what happened to the Radiance Dragon?"

"Fine. If you wish to command me, then you must earn my respect, just like Reinstar did."

"You've said it." I took in a deep, deep breath to prepare myself. "All right, here I come."

Under normal circumstances, I'd cast Sanctuary Circle first thing, but I decided against it this time. What mattered here wasn't my ability to replicate Reinstar's fighting style. The Umbra Dragon was testing me. At least, that was what my gut was telling me.

"*Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and forge with it mail of light. Don for me a holy aegis. Sanctuary Armor!*"

Sanctuary Armor was basically a compact version of Sanctuary Barrier, so I'd cast it in case the dragon fired his breath at me again. It should allow me to evade it, though it would be a close call.

"Come at me with the powers of my brethren."

"*Be my wings and soar, Wind Dragon!*"

I chanted, feeling my body lifting off the ground. Then, I created a wall of mana under my feet to see if I could dash forward by using it as a temporary ledge. It worked perfectly. Under normal circumstances, I'd be overjoyed by this discovery, but I didn't have time now. Chanting an incantation under my breath, I channeled every ounce of mana I had as I flew straight at the dragon.

"Fool. You have put yourself in the trajectory of my breath all on your own. Die," the Umbra Dragon warned me before unleashing his attack.

Dark-purple flames instantly engulfed the space where I'd been flying.

"*How disappointing. I had high expectations for you, yet you didn't hold a candle to Reinstar,"* the dragon's voice echoed through my brain, full of sorrow.

"*Heal*," I chanted from behind it, and a pale light illuminated its body.

"Y-You! You're still alive?!" he exclaimed, letting out a pained cry.

"Yup. I don't feel like dying just yet. I kinda winged this whole thing, but it looks like I successfully managed to land a hit on you."

"*How did you get behind me? My breath should have burned you to a crisp.*"

"It did. Well, it destroyed a decoy I created with the Flame and Water Dragons' powers. I made a mana clone of myself, then used the power of the Thunder Dragon to maneuver behind you, all while restraining my mana so you wouldn't be able to sense me. What your breath destroyed was merely an illusion."

"You did that?"

"Sure did. But my plan only succeeded thanks to you. You kindly hinted that I should avoid your breath."

"What?! I would never do such a thing for a mere human like you!"

"If you had attacked me without warning like you did Lord Reinstar, or if you had fired a breath so powerful I couldn't have avoided it, I would have been completely obliterated. There wouldn't be a single hair left behind," I stated.

The Umbra Dragon remained silent.

"Besides, you're so weak that you were only able to detect me by sensing my presence and mana signature. That's why my crude, hastily made strategy worked. How long have you been bearing the Wicked One's curse for you to be so weakened?"

When my Heal had illuminated the Umbra Dragon, I had seen that he was already emanating miasma and that most of his body was either rotting or reduced to bones already. It was so severe that I was surprised he hadn't become undead.

"When did you notice that I was not fighting seriously?" he asked me.

"When the breath you fired on the fiftieth floor didn't instantly

break my barrier. The Spirit of Dusk showed me your battle with Lord Reinstar, and I immediately understood that you were in a completely different league. So when I saw how weak your attack was, I realized you were either holding back or unable to use your full power," I explained.

"So it seems your success in freeing my brethren was not merely due to luck. You are neither a coward nor a reckless fool. Someone with the courage to oppose fate and the determination to strive for peace no matter the cost... Let me ask you, human, how will you maintain the world's order?"

How was I supposed to answer that question? It felt far too grand for a regular guy like me. But I didn't think the Umbra Dragon would appreciate such a response, so I decided to tell him how I genuinely felt.

"That's such a big question, I'm not sure how to answer it. All I know is that, while many people live in this world, it's not so small that we have to resort to fighting each other instead of coexisting peacefully. At least I don't think so."

"You believe that humanity can coexist and thrive together? Then why was Reinstar unable to stop them from fighting among each other?"

"Isn't that just a consequence of being alive? Everyone wants to be richer, happier, and more loved than others."

"Then they will never stop fighting, will they?"

"Your observation is both right and wrong. I believe that people are capable of both living in harmony and letting go of that harmony when they choose. If one person took their neighbor's hand while reaching out to someone else with their other hand, there would be no conflicts. However, it is true that greedy people also exist."

"Just as I thought, humanity is a failure."

"That's what we might seem to you, but I personally believe that all these mistakes we commit are what allow us to grow and learn."

"Then why did Reinstar break his word to me?"

"Lord Reinstar has created a Church to heal the people, a land for craftspeople to develop technology for the betterment of society, and a nation specialized in magic research. By doing so, he has sown the

seeds that will allow humanity to grow and thrive. However, he didn't have the time to accomplish everything he intended, and his will faded with the passing of time," I said, although there were some holes in my argument.

"You seem to hold him in high esteem. You should become his successor, then," the Umbra Dragon said, seemingly pleased with that conclusion.

But I knew I could never fill Reinstar's shoes. I would simply do what *I* could do with my own capabilities. "I won't. I'm just going to do everything I can to live a peaceful life. I wouldn't place high expectations on me if I were you, because I know for a fact that I won't be able to meet them," I said. "So? What about the Radiance Dragon? Has he really been freed already?"

The Umbra Dragon stayed silent for a moment before saying, *"He has, there is no doubt about it. However, strangely, his consciousness has not reincarnated yet. It still lingers in this world."* He shared this important information with me as though merely stating a fact.

I suddenly realized something. Could the "power" Blanche had gotten their hands on, the one that was supposedly strong enough to bend the world to their will, be the Radiance Dragon?

I decided to ask more questions, just to be sure. "Is it possible that he turned undead?"

"No. Unlike the Holy Dragon, which has strong healing abilities but weak resistance to status ailments, the Radiance Dragon is immune to such effects entirely."

"Then did something feel different after you felt his seal being broken?"

"Sometimes my voice does not reach him. It has happened before, but it is becoming more common as of late."

The Radiance Dragon may have been immune to status ailments, but could he be possessed?

"If you were to fight the Radiance Dragon, would you be able to win?"

"As long as I canceled his breath with mine, I would not lose. But I do not have any reason to fight him."

Well, that wasn't very informative. "What would happen if the Radiance Dragon were to be summoned using a magic circle designed to enslave it?" I asked next.

"He *would be bound to the will of those who summoned him. Summons are a type of contract, after all."*

"Is there a way to break that contract?"

"There is. If it were me, I would simply destroy the nation of those who had enslaved me, but I do not know what the Radiance Dragon would do."

"Out of curiosity, what would happen if someone used a technique for demonizing humans on the Radiance Dragon?"

"It has never happened to me, so I do not know. But we Eternal Dragons possess a magic core, so I assume nothing would happen."

I nodded. "I see. All right, then, since we're done here, can I lift the curse the Wicked One put on you?"

"Sage Luciel, I will not ask for much. However, if you truly care about Reinstar, do everything in your power to build the world you envision."

"I'll do what I can," I said reluctantly.

"Hah. You have already freed all of us except for the Radiance Dragon, so I have high expectations for you."

"Wait, what? This necklace has holes for nine gems, doesn't it?" I pointed at the necklace I'd received upon defeating the Holy Dragon.

"If you wish for the answer to that question, you ought to visit the Dragon Valley. You will know everything when the Dragon God grants you his power. Goodbye, Sage Luciel. I expect great things from you."

"Yes, sir."

I lifted the Wicked One's curse, and the Umbra Dragon vanished. Then, I took out my light and collected all the gold and items lying on the ground, making sure to avoid the trapped dungeon core that would summon the Wicked One on contact. When I was done, I made my way to the return circle.

A ping echoed in my head.

Title Obtained: Protection of the Umbra Dragon

All of the Eternal Dragons' seals have been broken.

Title Obtained: Protection of the Dragon God

20 — The Destroyed Golem

In the end, the fight against the Umbra Dragon hadn't taken me that long, but that was because he had been weakened. If that hadn't been the case, I wasn't sure I would have managed to return to my friends safely. After seeing the state he'd been in, I was certain he must have been the first one to receive the Wicked One's curse. Perhaps the Wicked One had wanted to see if his curse would work on the Umbra Dragon before putting his plan into motion. Who knew?

I pondered that question as I exited the labyrinth and found my companions waiting for me near the entrance.

"Hey, guys, I'm back."

"Sir! You're safe!" Lionel exclaimed first, seeming both surprised and happy to see me. I had noticed it before, but it seemed like he had become a bit more hot-blooded ever since I'd brought him back from the dead.

In contrast, Brod only looked relieved to see me for a split second before turning his gaze away and glaring at the labyrinth.

"Yup. The dragon was weakened because of the Wicked One's curse, so he didn't put up too much of a fight. It's sunset already, huh?" I commented. Actually, the sun was almost completely down by now. Wait. Did that mean we'd cleared the labyrinth in a day? Well, more like a day and a half. Still, that was pretty impressive.

"We were just eating while waiting for you, sir. Would you like to join us?" Kefin asked me.

"Now that you mention it, I'm pretty hungry. I'll gladly take you up on that offer." I decided to join my companions for a meal.

"Despite how dark it was in that labyrinth, we managed to clear it without too much trouble," I commented as I ate. "But I wonder if we'd have succeeded if we had done this one before the labyrinth in Grandol."

"That one was indeed the perfect place to grind levels. We got through it in less than two days thanks to how much we've all

improved, but if we hadn't cleared the one in Grandol first, the Whirlwind and I would have struggled. Plus, you might have struggled a bit more to free the dragon, sir," Lionel replied.

"I agree," Kefin added. "There were many traps I wouldn't have been able to disarm if the Whirlwind hadn't taught me how in Grandol."

I had a feeling the God of Fate and Monsieur Luck had guided our path all along. Now that I saw things that way, it made me feel like all the things that had happened back then—including losing my Holy Magic—had a purpose and that I was being rewarded for my efforts.

"Master, Lionel, you two leveled up quite a bit in there, right? Do you feel like you've regained some of your power?" I asked.

"Nope," Brod replied.

"Yes," Lionel said at the exact same time.

Ooh, looks like they had different opinions.

"Hah. You're only at thirty percent of your original strength, yet you're saying you regained it?" Brod asked Lionel.

"I'm obviously not as strong as I was at my peak, but I can probably manage in any one-on-one fight now."

Once again, sparks were flying between those two. But I was glad to hear that Lionel had made that much progress. I needed him to kill the potentially demonized Cloud, after all.

"Well then, Dhoran and the others are waiting for us, so should we head back to Ebiza for now?" I suggested.

My companions hesitated for a minute before Lionel said, "Sir, can we clear the labyrinth one more time?"

"Why?"

"We've only used two days out of the seven we had before heading to Illumasia. We'll be taking it easy on the last day, of course, but I'd prefer working on my skills to lounging around Bazack's mansion," he explained.

"I'm of the same mind," Brod added, even though he and Lionel had been at each other's throats mere minutes ago. They only ever seemed to agree when it came to fighting.

"What do you guys think?" I asked the others. I had a hard time

picturing myself relaxing while thinking of the battle that awaited us in Illumasia. Plus, I didn't think that working on our combat skills was a bad idea. I could try out the new powers I'd received from the Umbra Dragon and see if I could come up with a good use for them.

But the rest of my friends didn't seem to be of the same mind.

"Wouldn't the monsters be weaker since we've already cleared the labyrinth, though?" Kefin asked.

"Yeah!" Ketty nodded. "It'd be less dangerous for us to sleep in front of the boss rooms of that place than it would be to sleep outside in the wild. I think we should decide what to do after seeing how weak the monsters got."

"I would like to return to Ebiza. There might still be spies from the empire in town, and I would like to go check on Mister Dhoran and the girls," Estia chimed in.

I knew Kefin and Estia always gave me their honest opinions, but I was surprised to see that Ketty hadn't blindly followed Lionel's suggestion. Perhaps she'd started changing her way of thinking a little.

I sat there for a minute, trying to decide on the best course of action. While I did think getting stronger was a good idea, we were way past the phase where we could level up quickly, so challenging this specific labyrinth again wouldn't be particularly effective. Besides, I didn't *need* to be in there to use the dragons' powers. Most importantly, Estia had a point. If the Illumasian spies were trying to sabotage our airship, we wouldn't stand a chance. I couldn't entertain Brod and Lionel's demand under the circumstances.

"I understand your points of view. Master, Lionel, I'm sorry, but we're going back to Ebiza. I'll ask Dhoran to create a makeshift training area somewhere in town. You can train there until our departure."

"Guess we don't have a choice," Brod grumbled.

"If you believe that's the best course of action, then I trust your judgment. Let's head back," Lionel said.

"Yup."

Thankfully, they agreed to back down as soon as they heard

they'd be able to train. And so, having finished our meal, we returned to Ebiza. Nothing of note happened on the way back, other than me noticing that I could now see much better in the dark. Perhaps my affinity with darkness had been strengthened after receiving the Spirit of Dusk's and the Umbra Dragon's blessings?

As I rode on Forêt Noire, lost in my thoughts, I suddenly felt a telepathic nudge from Forêt, telling me to pay more attention to what I was doing, so I quickly refocused on riding.

We reached Ebiza...only to hear a huge boom that resonated deep in my stomach coming from the little town.

"Let's hurry," I told my companions.

The explosion sound had come from the direction of Bazack's mansion, so I dashed through town on Forêt's back. As soon as I reached my destination, I was met with the sight of the airship billowing with smoke and parts of what seemed like one of Pola's golems flying around. What kind of crazy monster had just appeared here? Panicked, I tried to look for any hidden presences or mana signatures but couldn't sense any that belonged to a monster or a demon.

"Oh, welcome back, Mister Luciel, everyone," Rina said when she spotted us.

"Mister Luciel, please stop them!" Nanya urged me. "They made a mess of the garden!"

I climbed down from Forêt. "Hi, girls, we're back. Just to be clear, you guys weren't attacked by a monster, were you?"

"No. Mister Dhoran and the others have made magic artillery, and they were in the process of testing its power and accuracy and making adjustments," Rina explained to me.

"The sun has set already, so I told them to stop so as not to bother the townsfolk, but..." Nanya trailed off.

Hearing that, I instantly regretted my decision to leave Dhoran and the girls alone for two days. I never imagined they'd be testing magic artillery in the middle of town.

I let out a long, *long* sigh. "I can't believe they've already made a prototype of the artillery I asked them to craft. I really underestimated them, huh? Fine, I'll go talk to them."

Feeling relieved that we didn't have to deal with a demon attack, I prepared to lecture Dhoran and the other two.

"Hey, guys, we're back," I greeted them.

"Ooh, Luciel! We were just 'bout done with that magic artillery ye requested," Dhoran said, a bright grin on his face.

I took a look at the airship and saw that three cannons had been installed. "Yeah, I heard that. All the way from the entrance to town, in fact. Why did you install *three* cannons?"

"The one in the middle's powerful enough to bring down any enemies with a single hit, while the ones on the sides are weaker but can fire off shots faster. Was Rina's idea."

I glanced at Rina and saw her fidgeting in embarrassment at the praise. I wondered how long it would take her to realize that Dhoran was playing her.

Casting him a suspicious look, I made my way over to inspect the artillery. "I know I'm the one who asked for this, but I can't believe you're done already."

"I figured it'd help us deal with those pesky wyverns when we head to the empire."

"I mean, it'll definitely help us keep them in check, but I feel like we don't necessarily *need* cannons powerful enough to shatter one of Pola's golems into pieces," I pointed out.

"Oh, I actually dialed down the power a wee bit for that test. If I hadn't, it could've caused a right mess with the airship's flight."

What in the world was Dhoran planning on firing the cannon at?

"We're only using the artillery to take down the research facilities from the sky if our airship is on the verge of being shot down," I reminded him. "I have no intention of using it on people or to start a war with the empire."

"I *know* that. I'm not 'bout to go slaughterin' innocents. What d'ye take me for?" Dhoran retorted, vexed.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. Looking over, I saw Pola standing behind me.

"Grandpa wants to use the cannons against the Wicked One. He always says that it's our job to protect and support you."

A warm feeling welled up inside me at her words. If more people

started thinking like her, I might be able to fulfill my promise to the Umbra Dragon after all. Such competent followers were almost wasted on the likes of me, though I felt like I had to address their "We'll make any sacrifice to achieve our goal" mindset someday.

"I'm sorry for doubting you, Dhoran. I really appreciate everything you and the girls do for us, and I'll keep counting on you moving forward. But it's getting late, so can we pause the firing test for today? The noise will scare the townsfolk—both the kids and the adults—and they won't be able to get any sleep."

"Guess we don't have a choice."

"Oh, and I have a little request I'd like to talk to you about. Do you have a minute?"

"Of course."

We talked well into the night.

21 — Preparing for Battle

Four days had passed since we returned from the labyrinth, and now my companions and I were gathered in the airship for one last strategy meeting before setting out for the empire early the next morning. For the past few days, we'd had countless mock battles against Lionel in the underground training facility Dhoran had built for us, with the goal of helping him sharpen his combat skills against human opponents. I'd initially claimed I would only participate as a healer, but my companions had insisted I join in on the fights, which I ended up doing.

Of course, I hadn't only spent the past four days fighting. I'd used the rest of my time productively, mostly by researching magic with Estia. I had hoped the Spirit of Dusk would help us, but alas, she hadn't. Still, these four days had felt quite fruitful, perhaps thanks to the combination of physical training and magic study. The only hiccup was when Pola, Lycian, and Rina almost killed us all with their experiments, but aside from that, it had been a pretty fulfilling time.

As my friends settled into their seats at the airship's dining table, I began our strategy meeting.

"Our plan is to reach the imperial capital before the sun rises tomorrow. Then, we'll jump down and the others will immediately take the ship back to Ebiza. Dhoran, you're in charge of that second part."

"I'd prefer fightin' with ye, but I suppose I don't really have a choice this time, eh? But I ain't goin' back to Ebiza. We'll stay over the capital," Dhoran answered.

"Do you really plan on fighting the wyverns? The ship has cannons now, but still..."

"How are we supposed to rescue ye if ye fail without a means of escape?" he shot back.

"That's a valid point, but I don't want you to do anything too crazy."

"Don't worry. Leave it to me."

I was worried, especially because it was Dhoran we were talking about. But there wasn't anyone else I could put in charge of the mission, so I'd just have to trust him.

"If the imperial army tries to stop us, we'll have Lionel make a speech to them. Then, if everything goes to plan, we'll head straight to the imperial palace."

As I outlined the plan for my companions, I thought back to the request Lionel had made to me that morning, going as far as to lower his head to me. My initial plan had been to show off by jumping from the airship as we reached the capital and fight the wyverns midair. But Lionel had pointed out that the beasts falling from the sky might damage nearby buildings and that he'd prefer avoiding making too grand an entrance so as to avoid dragging civilians into the conflict. When I'd said that we might need to fight demons in the city while he made his speech and that it would put the citizens at risk no matter how careful we were, he had replied that it was fine and that the people needed to know about the current situation in the empire.

"I understand that I'm asking a lot of you, but can you please not kill any of the demonized people on the spot?" he'd asked me next.

That was an insane request, but I didn't think he would have asked it of me without good reason.

"You're aware that what you're asking is completely unreasonable, right? Why shouldn't I kill them?"

"I believe you can manage it, despite how impossible it may seem."

"C'mon, that's not an answer. And it's easy for you to say that," I replied lightly.

But Lionel didn't stop looking at me for a single second. That was when I realized he was serious: He truly believed that we could achieve our mission without me killing any of the empire's demonized test subjects. I didn't know how to respond to that.

"It'll help you gain the trust of the capital's citizens. Please consider it, sir," he said, lowering his head to me.

It made me want to lower my own head, which was weird. He

was obviously aware that there was a limit to what I could do, but he still believed that I could pull this off.

I let out a sigh. “Under normal circumstances, I would have refused right away. But you’re the head of my followers. If you trust that I can carry out our mission without killing anyone, then I’ll do my best to make it happen.”

“Thank you so much, sir.”

“In exchange, I’m putting you in charge of the whole thing. All I’ll do is heal the citizens and weaken the demonized people. Oh, and I’ll need you to protect me as well.”

I couldn’t possibly give directions to all of my companions in the heat of the moment, and it would be impossible for me to do what Lionel was asking without someone to ensure that no enemy got too close to me.

“Yes, sir. I will put my life on the line to do what needs to be done.”

And so, I decided to entrust command to Lionel once we were in the empire and follow his plan, and I announced as much to my companions.

“I’m aware this will make the mission more dangerous to everyone involved, and I’m very thankful for your understanding, sir,” Lionel told me, bowing his head for the umpteenth time.

I felt a bit embarrassed by his earnestness and decided to change the topic. “Still, I can’t believe you used to wear such intimidating armor...”

“Yup! Sir Lionel used to sweep through the battlefield in that red and black armor. He looks just as full of vigor as he did in the past, so I’m sure everyone will know he’s the real deal!” Ketty said, putting her stamp of approval on the armor I’d had Dhoran craft for him—a perfect copy of the armor he used to wear back when he was the Lion of War. She nodded, pleased, claiming that he looked just like he used to back then.

Imagining him charging across the battlefield in that scary armor, with the same wild look in his eyes as when we’d fought the empire’s special forces in the labyrinth, I totally got why his enemies were so scared of him. The beard we’d had him grow also did a

great job of masking his new youthful appearance.



"We intentionally left his helmet open so that people could see his face, but I'm sure some will still try to shoot arrows at him. Do you think he'll be able to handle that? And are you absolutely sure people will recognize him?" I asked Ketty.

"For some reason, arrows never seem to hit him. And with his beard, he looks just like he used to back then! I'm sure the people of the capital will listen to him."

I idly thought how great it would be to have a skill that made me immune to arrows, though I knew the reason Lionel's enemies always missed their shots had to be that they were so nervous to be facing him. Regardless, I was a tad surprised by how adamant Ketty was that Lionel's facial hair was our key to success. I decided to trust her, but I was a bit nervous about what would happen.

"All he needs to do is talk to the citizens using this voice-amplifying artifact, right?" I asked Rina, who was the one who'd come up with the item in question.

She nodded. "I made it so that it would barely cost any mana. I just completed the testing phase, and it seems to work fine. All Nanya and I can do now is pray for your success."

"Thank you. But I have to ask, are you two *sure* you want to come with us to the empire? You seemed so against the idea when we first arrived in Ebiza."

"Yes. I was scared at first, but I really want to see my Lil Tempels blow away some wyverns."

I figured her "Lil Tempels" referred to the two smaller magic cannons on the airship, since Dhoran had built the big one.

How many times do I have to tell them that I do not *have any intention of fighting the wyverns?*

I thought about reminding her of the plan, but I just couldn't do it when she was smiling so innocently despite the dark circles under her eyes.

Nanya stood beside her, seemingly on the verge of crying as she looked at Rina.

"Nanya, you can stay back, you know?" I told her.

"No. I'm too scared to stay alone in a town where I know no one, so please let me come with you."

I hesitated before replying with a simple, “Okay.” I felt incredibly guilty seeing her like this, so I decided not to probe any further.

“Let me remind you of the plan one last time, everyone. The only ones who will be raiding the palace are me, master, Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, and Estia. We’ll absolutely need the airship later on, so Dhoran, make sure you don’t miscalculate when to leave.”

My words were met with a chorus of “yeses” and “yes, sirs,” some more enthusiastic than others. Pola’s monotone reply in particular made me grimace.

With that, our strategy meeting came to an end. We all sat down for dinner, promising each other that this wouldn’t be our last supper before heading off to get some rest for the journey ahead.

22 — Forêt Noire’s True Strength

In the blink of an eye, the day of our expedition to the empire was upon us. After waking up in my cabin, I did some light stretching to loosen up my muscles before heading to the cockpit as soon as the first light shone outside. To my surprise, someone was already there.

“Good morning, Dhoran. Couldn’t sleep?”

“Oh, hey, Luciel. I’ve been so caught up in making the magic artillery that I didn’t really keep up with the ship’s maintenance these past few days, so I came to fix ’er up. Plus, I wanted to take this li’l guy for a walk,” he said, holding up the enemy detection device that Lycian had developed at my request.

“That’s the artifact Lycian made, right? Is it finished?”

“Nah, it’s only about fifty percent done. It’s becomin’ pretty decent at detectin’ mana, but its scope is still way too small. I’d love to add it to the ship one day, but I just don’t think it’s ready yet.” It seemed to me that he was more invested in Lycian’s creation than she was.

I figured I’d give him a little nudge and suggest he ask Rina. If she could come up with a cannon that fired continuously, she should have no problem creating an item that could detect enemies. “Rina’s pretty good at that sort of stuff, if I remember correctly. She might have an idea for how to improve it.”

“Aye, she might have an interesting point of view on the topic.” He nodded thoughtfully. It looked like he’d fully accepted her as his new student. I noticed that Dhoran tended to like anyone who could provide some competition for his granddaughter. Then again, being a craftsman, he probably wouldn’t hesitate to lecture Rina if she made a mistake, even if he had taken her under his wing.

“Well then, we haven’t had breakfast yet, but should we take off before the others wake up?”

“Aye. I just got done with the maintenance, so we can leave whenever yer ready.”

I felt much more confident about starting up the airship with Dhoran by my side. But before I did, there was one last thing I wanted to ask him. "Hey, we can switch pilots mid-flight, right?"

"Sure can, but why are ye askin'? That wasn't the plan, was it?"

"I was thinking of going to fight the wyverns myself if we encountered any before reaching the capital. That way, we won't have to use the cannons."

"Hold on. Ye plan on fightin' big flyin' monsters midair by yerself?" he asked, his tone suddenly a lot harsher.

I understood his concern. In fact, if someone had told me the same thing, I would have questioned their sanity. But my strategy was viable specifically because *I* would be the one doing it.

"They're draconic monsters, so my blessings should protect me against them."

Dhoran stared at me in silence for a few seconds before eventually relenting. "Fine. If we 'ave to fight the wyverns, I'll take the wheel in yer stead."

"Thanks. Should we set off, then?"

"Shouldn't ye wake the others up?"

"Nah. We're just going to be flying for the next few hours. Plus, I'd like them to get as much sleep as possible. Especially master, since he's so nervous on the airship."

Dhoran guffawed. "Good point."

I pushed the crystal that acted as the ship's start switch in and let some mana into it to turn on the machine, and we began rising into the dim sky. Then, I slid my hand forward and we were off.

As I gradually cranked up the speed, Brod and the others eventually came to join us in the cockpit.

"Good morning, everyone. You can go back to sleep, if you'd like," I said.

Brod frowned at my words, while the others forced themselves to smile. They probably hadn't slept well either.

"Luciel, open the hatch," Brod barked at me.

I did as he asked, and he immediately headed to the deck.

"Always the free spirit, huh?" I commented.

"We were all feeling too anxious to sleep properly. I'm sure the Whirlwind must have been especially nervous," Lionel said.

I shot him a quizzical look, unsure of what he was implying.

"Yup, we can't just lounge around the whole day, after all," Ketty added.

I understood why the two of them were up already, since we were going to fight their homeland, but why was Kefin awake when he still looked tired? I assumed Ketty must have woken him.

"I'm awake enough to keep watch, so please let me help out," he said. He'd likely fall back asleep without anything to do to keep himself occupied.

I turned to Estia and remembered that she had an objective in the empire as well.

"I'm going to overthink things if I'm alone, so can I please stay here?" she asked.

"Sure. But there's not much to do, so you guys can just try to work on our battle strategy or eat or something."

"All right."

"Yes, sir!"

I felt my lips curl into a smile. Perhaps having my friends with me had helped me to relax a little.

We flew for a while longer and eventually passed over the labyrinth we'd cleared before. Now all we had to do was cross the mountain ahead of us and we'd be in Illumasia. I began feeling nervous.

"We're in the empire," I announced once we'd passed the mountain. "We're going to follow the highway from above."

The plan from now on was to gradually reduce speed while gaining more altitude. If we were too fast, the sound of us cutting through the air would agitate the nearby birds, animals, and monsters and might give our plan away to the enemy. This was also why we were avoiding the mountains—so that no one would spot us.

"I'm worried about Albert and the others. I hope they managed to get into the empire without causing any problems..."

"No need to worry about His Highness, sir. Consider that we're on our own," Lionel told me.

"Sir Lionel's right," Ketty chimed in. "You made the right choice by not agreeing to let them come with us."

I was a bit surprised by how dismissive they were of the prince. They were basically saying it didn't matter if he was here or not.

"Did he tend to screw things up back when you were in the empire too?"

"His Highness is unable to keep a secret, to the point where it's almost shocking. That is why Lady Melphina became his fiancée, to cover up his messes."

I nodded. "He does seem like the type to let his feelings get the better of him and— Wait. What's that?! Dhoran, I'm leaving the controls to you!"

"What's wrong, Luciel? Somethin' the matter?" he asked, surprised, as he took my place at the controls.

"I saw large wings flying right underneath us."

"You can see that even though it's so dark outside?"

"I think so. Ever since I released the Umbra Dragon, I've been able to see somewhat better at night."

Dhoran seemed surprised, but I definitely could feel the effects of the Umbra Dragon's blessing on my body.

"If you only saw one, doesn't it mean that they haven't noticed us?" Kefin asked.

Unfortunately, I hadn't seen just one but an entire squad of wyverns. There were over ten of them flying around us.

"No, I saw a group of them. They were attacking someone, and I believe it must be the resistance. But I didn't see anyone using magic, so it's probably not Bazack's group."

"Helping them might interfere with our plan. Shouldn't we just leave them to their own devices?"

"Maybe... But I figure it'll make things pointlessly complicated if Albert is part of that group and they get killed."

"That would certainly be a disaster. But do you plan on going out there alone? I cannot allow it," Kefin stated.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of losing, and I won't be alone. Dhoran, please maintain this speed and altitude, and open the hatch for me when I'm done."

"Aye, aye."

"Who will you be taking with you, sir?" Kefin asked me.

"My partner, of course," I replied with a smile before leaving the cockpit and immediately taking the elevator to the deck, where I ran into Brod.

"You're going to help those guys down there?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"Can I come with you?"

"Please leave this one to me. I'd like you to take the lead when we reach the capital."

He hesitated for a short moment before saying, "Fine. Go."

"I'm on it."

I summoned Forêt Noire from her stable and quickly explained the situation to her. "Anyway, that's the gist of it. I'm going to fight these wyverns. Can you help me?"

"You know I can't say no, right?" she replied telepathically. *"I haven't used my powers in a long time, so if I run out of mana, I'll take some of yours."*

"Sure thing. We can't let the wyverns shoot the ship down. But don't overdo it, all right?"

"Yes, yes. C'mon, get on."

"Yes, ma'am."

I climbed on her back and made a mental note to ask Dhoran to create a dedicated gate for us later. We jumped off the ship and almost fell over because of the wind, but Forêt quickly transformed into her spirit form. Light began emanating from her body, and the next instant, her coat turned from black to white and wings sprouted from her back, making our flight much more stable...or not? It seemed that the wings were just there for show, as Forêt began galloping through the sky. I was a bit surprised, but the cold wind biting at my skin immediately pulled me back to reality. I knew that going to fight the wyverns on my own was a little out of character, so I reminded myself not to be too reckless and to simply focus on neutralizing the threat.

"Wyverns don't really have any long-range attacks, but if you get hit, I'll instantly heal you, all right? Show me what you've got," I told

Forêt.

"Okay. You'd better hold on tight."

"Will do."

I cast a quick Area Barrier just to be safe, and Forêt immediately began picking up speed, heading for the group of wyverns a little farther away.

"I'm going to charge straight at them," she said. *"You tell me what to do, and I'll do everything I can to help. Let's do it!"*

"Yeah, let's go."

As Forêt dashed through the sky, five magic circles appeared in front of my eyes, shooting rays of light ahead of them. They seemed pretty aggressive, so maybe I should call them laser beams? Whatever they were, they pierced the wings of the wyverns in their path, setting them on fire. Countless laser beams shot out of the magic circles one after the other, and soon, the wyverns began falling to the earth, their wings burned to a crisp. I had been expecting an epic sky battle, so needless to say, I was completely dumbfounded by this turn of events.



"The wyverns won't die from the fall, but they won't be able to chase the humans down, so mission accomplished," Forêt announced.

"Uh... Forêt Noire, ma'am, don't you think you went *slightly* overboard?"

"I just forgot how to hold back a little. Besides, things were easy this time because they didn't notice us, but I wouldn't be able to conserve this much mana at once under normal circumstances," she explained.

I couldn't tell if she had been holding back or not, but I had a feeling she had.

"Well, good work either way," I said. "I didn't spot any familiar faces among the resistance, so let's head back to the ship."

"All right. Hmm, but I can still sense a few monsters, so we might want to remain on standby even after we return."

"Okay."

I took out my arclink crystal to contact Dhoran, and Forêt landed on the airship. I alerted my friends to be on the lookout for flying monsters and directed my gaze toward the imperial capital, which we couldn't see just yet.

23 — Infiltrating the Imperial Capital

Forêt's attack on the wyverns had been so flashy that it had ended up attracting other monsters to our location. Thankfully, they had no way of reaching us at such a high altitude, so we didn't have to fight again until we could see the capital. Truthfully, I felt it was pure luck that we managed to avoid combat almost entirely.

"We've almost reached the capital, so I'm going to head back to the others, all right?" I told Forêt.

"Sure. But...something's bothering me," her voice echoed through my head as she stared at the city in the distance.

"What's wrong?"

"I've been observing the capital since earlier, but I can't sense a single presence or mana signature inside."

"You can't?"

"No. We're so close, yet I can't feel a thing. There might be a barrier around the city."

Forêt had good mana detection abilities in her pegasus form, so if she couldn't feel *anything*, it must've been a pretty strong barrier.

"Well, that's a pain. I was hoping nothing would get in our way, but alas... Do you think we can just charge straight ahead or not?"

"*Hmm... You should be able to break through the barrier without issue, but I'm not sure if you should. I can't see any soldiers guarding the city walls, so they must have other measures to deal with trespassers...unless the guards are just hiding.*"

"So not only can you not feel anything in the city, but you can't even see any guards? There's definitely something fishy going on. The sun hasn't risen yet, but that shouldn't be a reason for the walls to be completely unguarded."

Monsters occasionally appeared in Illumasia, so it was unthinkable that the imperial capital would be left defenseless like this. As for the potential barrier, neither Albert, Melphina, nor Bazack had mentioned anything about it, so I couldn't tell if it truly existed. Perhaps they had already charged into the capital and begun

causing chaos to lead the guards away from the walls? No, they wouldn't do something *that* stupid. Bazack was with them, so they'd most likely managed to sneak into the city unnoticed.

Don't get me wrong, it would have been great for us if the capital truly was defenseless, but if it was a trap, we might end up having to fight much sooner than anticipated...

"Maybe the imperial soldiers are simply disorganized. Or maybe we're flying into a trap," Forêt said. She seemed to have reached the same conclusion.

"Well, we don't have anything to lose by being cautious. I guess the only thing we can do right now is hope that the prince has managed to recruit the city guards, and that's why they're not guarding the walls."

"Are you really heading back?" Forêt asked me after a short pause. *"We could also charge ahead, just the two of us, and attack the city."*

"Yeah, that's a hard pass. I get that you're strong, but we're not here to destroy the capital. Plus, that could potentially work if we could slowly lower the ship into the city, but there are too many variables for us to do that. No, it's better if I take the others and we sneak into the capital."

"If you say so," Forêt replied, before flying me over to the elevator. Then, she turned back into her regular, black horse form and added, *"Summon me immediately if you need my help again."*

With that, she disappeared into the hermit stable.

"Forêt really values my opinion, huh? I definitely have a nice, reliable partner. If she ever wants something in the future, I'd better do my hardest to help," I muttered to myself as I returned to the cockpit. "Hey, guys, I'm back. Uh, is something wrong?"

Everyone's gazes immediately converged on me as soon as I stepped into the room.

"Whaddya mean, 'Is something wrong'?! What was that horse? It dealt with them wyverns in seconds! We lost our chance to use our magic artillery 'cause of ye," Dhoran said, though he seemed quite excited despite his complaints.

"Yeah, I didn't expect Forêt to be that strong either," I said,

unable to stop a chuckle from escaping me.

Dhoran laughed as well. “Guess it can’t be ’elped, then. We can still keep goin’ with the airship as is, right?”

“Yeah. But it seems like there’s a barrier around the capital. According to Forêt, she couldn’t sense any presence or mana whatsoever coming from the city. It might be an ambush, so to everyone who’s coming with me to the palace, we’ll be jumping together, all right?”

“S-Sir, are we sure it’s a good idea to jump from this height?” Kefin asked me. He seemed completely fine on the surface, but I could tell from the way he’d stuttered that he was slightly nervous. I mean, people did say that dogs were afraid of heights, didn’t they? Perhaps it was the same for beastfolk. Then again, I supposed being scared of heights was just an instinctual thing for most people.

“Don’t worry, we’ll make it safely even if I run out of mana,” I reassured him.

“I’m sorry, sir. I spoke out of turn,” Kefin said, forcing himself to smile despite how stiff his expression was and bowing to me.

The sight was so comical that I couldn’t help but burst into laughter. “I’m counting on you when we’re down there, okay? We might get arrows and spells fired at us as soon as we land, so I’ll be relying on you guys and gals to handle that.”

“Yes, sir!” Kefin replied.

“His Highness can be a bit careless at times, so he might have given away our plan,” Ketty commented.

“Yup. His Highness always had a knack for royally screwing things up, so I’m a little worried,” Lionel added.

The two of them were saying those troubling things with dead serious expressions, and it didn’t look like they were entirely joking.

“Well, let’s just pretend he’s been captured and be extra careful. Oh, by the way, is it common for the wyvern squads to patrol at this hour?”

“No. They were mostly in charge of reconnaissance back when I was a general, so they almost never flew this early.”

“It doesn’t matter if our plan was discovered or not,” Brod interjected. “I’ll take you to the castle.”

"And I will protect you no matter what, sir," Lionel added.

I was glad the two of them were so reliable.

"I'm letting you two supervise the operations this time. Estia, we're going to have to postpone it a bit but I promise we'll deal with the slave merchants before leaving."

"Thank you, sir."

I turned to Dhoran next. "Dhoran, I'm counting on you to come get us when everything's over."

"Sure thing. Leave it to me, Luciel."

"As for... Huh? Where's Pola? Oh well. Lycian, make sure to help out Dhoran, all right?"

"Understood, sir."

"Rina and Nanya, you two will be in charge of firing the cannons when Dhoran deems it necessary. Be careful, though. They take a lot of magic stones."

"Uh, all right..."

"Y-Yes, sir."

The airship was powered by mana, and it obviously wouldn't do if we ran out of magic stones in the middle of the sky, so I'd made sure to give the girls a stern warning not to overdo it. Thankfully, they'd immediately understood my point and nodded. They'd been firing the cannons like crazy in Ebiza, but that had just been to test them. Now that we were in a serious situation, I was confident they would listen to Dhoran.

"All right then, should we head out?"

"Yes, sir!" my companions replied.

"Dhoran, I'm leaving the ship to you."

"Yep. Ye better come back alive, ye 'ear?"

"Will do."

With that, I headed to the elevator with the other five who'd be jumping down with me.

"Grab each other's hands, everyone. I'll be flying us to the middle of the capital, so Ketty, I'm counting on you for directions."

"This kitty's got it!"

"Estia, can you use Dark Magic to hide us?"

"Yes, sir." She nodded, wrapping us in a cloud of mana.

"All right, off we go. *Be my wings and soar, Wind Dragon!*" I chanted. Six people was a bit much for the power of the dragon, though, and we couldn't fly quite as freely as I'd hoped. Our bodies gradually began to float, so I decided that our best bet would be to just jump off the ship. "Okay, change of plan. We'll jump down and I'll use my power to reduce our falling speed. Just trust me."

They nodded and jumped off the ship with me. I suddenly felt a weight on me, as if someone had clung to my back, but I paid it no mind. I was too busy slowing our descent and listening to Ketty's directions.

After three minutes of what felt like free fall, we safely landed in the capital's central square—and were immediately attacked.

"*Become a barrier and shield us from all the threats, Wind Dragon!*" I chanted right as my feet touched the ground.

Not a second later, a barrage of arrows and spells was fired at us. Thankfully, they were swallowed by the swirling winds I had summoned before they could reach us.

"So it really was a setup," I said.

"Luciel, don't move a hair from where you are. Darkness girlie, make sure to protect him. As for you, Lion, take the other two and deal with the enemies on the front lines—I'll take care of the ones in the back."

"Yes!"

"You sure you'll be okay alone?" Lionel asked.

"Shut up."

With that, Brod vanished, and Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin headed to fight our foes on the front line.

That was when I heard a voice from behind me. "Luciel, do you need a golem?"

I finally realized what the weight I'd felt on my back since jumping off the ship was. I hadn't noticed at first because I was wearing my armor, but Pola was clinging to me from behind.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"You said we couldn't fire the cannons at the empire. But I want to get revenge on them for causing grandpa to lose his arms. Please let me come with you," she said, lowering her head. I wasn't used to

hearing her speak such long sentences.

If I had it in me to refuse her request, I probably wouldn't even be here in the first place.

"Well, I can't exactly send you back right now. I'll give you a proper lecture later, but for now, listen to me. You don't need to take out the golems yet, but be ready to do so when the time comes. I might need you to break the gate of the castle over there," I told her.

"Okay," she agreed, though she seemed a bit frustrated about not being able to join the battle just yet.

I noticed that the barrage of attacks had stopped while we'd been talking, so I removed my wind barrier right as Brod and the others returned.

"You've taken them down already?" I asked.

"Not quite. Once they noticed it was me they were attacking, they immediately dropped their weapons. It seems like there were no demons in the lot," Lionel explained, seemingly a bit lost.

"A bunch of the soldiers recognized him!" Ketty chirped.

"And?"

"They'll be joining us now, so you can give them your orders."

"Ugh, is it just me, or am I about to get dragged into a really annoying situation?"

"I'm leaving them to you, sir," Lionel said, flashing me a bright smile as he happily passed all the responsibility to me.

But then, all of a sudden, we heard a weak, pitiful voice calling our names. "Sage Luciel, Master Lionel, please help me..."

Looking in the direction of the voice, we saw Albert tied up with ropes, being stepped on by a completely expressionless Lihzalea.

That was when it finally came back to me: Lihzalea had mentioned that she used to live in Ebiza.

Afterword

To everyone who purchased this volume of *The Great Cleric*, I am so sorry for the wait. As I mentioned in the afterword for the last volume, life is a funny thing. You see, I, Broccoli Lion, have been dealing with some intense lower back pain lately. If everything had gone according to plan, this volume would have been out around this time last year, but my back pain got so bad that I couldn't write anymore. As a result, I ended up causing a lot of trouble for everyone involved in this project.

This series got an anime adaptation, which has already aired. Because of that, more and more people are discovering the manga, and *The Great Cleric* became better known than ever—all things that I am very thankful for. Yet, I had to pause the progress of this series due to my health issues. I am still extremely frustrated by that turn of events. I would have loved to have announced the anime to all of you who have been supporting this series and shared behind-the-scenes stories about the production, but unfortunately, I wasn't able to do that. I'm really, really sorry.

Anyway, I apologize for how late this is, but I want to mention that this series receiving an anime adaptation and doing so well on ABEMA is all thanks to you. Thank you so much, everyone.

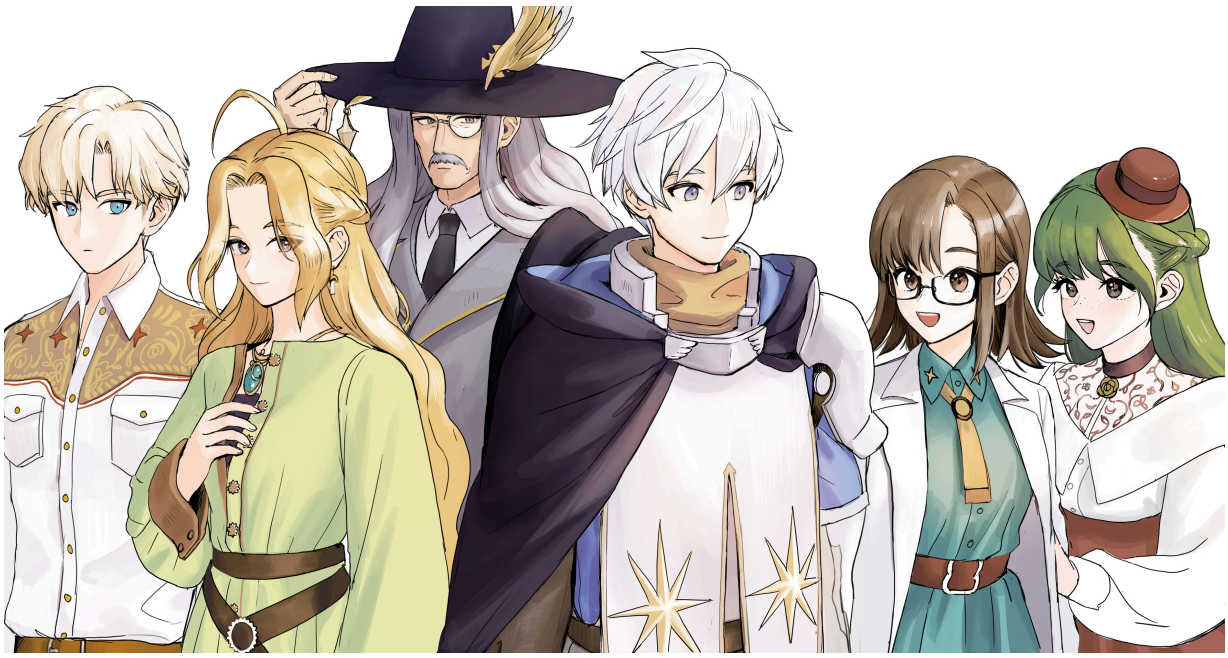
Now, let me talk about some of the things that made me happy about this series getting an anime. First off, I got to listen to the recordings of all the voice actors who were cast, as well as those who auditioned. I am nothing but grateful to everyone who lent their voices to my characters and am beyond satisfied with their work. Moreover, listening to their acting gave me ideas for new characters and plot points, though I haven't been able to introduce them in this volume. Those voice recordings are a treasure trove of inspiration for me moving forward.

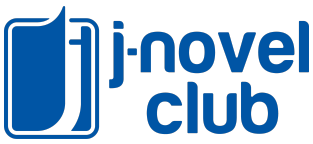
And it is all thanks to Hiiro Akikaze, who has been doing

incredible work to bring this series to life in the manga adaptation, sime for the incredible illustrations, and my editor, Mister I (who hasn't given up on me despite everything) that I was able to get my hands on such precious material in the first place. I'm also incredibly thankful to everyone involved in this series, as well as to Kodansha for the manga and anime adaptations, TBS, Yokohama Animation Laboratory, and Cloud Hearts for their fantastic work.

We've reached the end of this afterword, but I want to give one last big thank-you to everyone who bought this volume despite the two-year wait!







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by Broccoli Lion

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