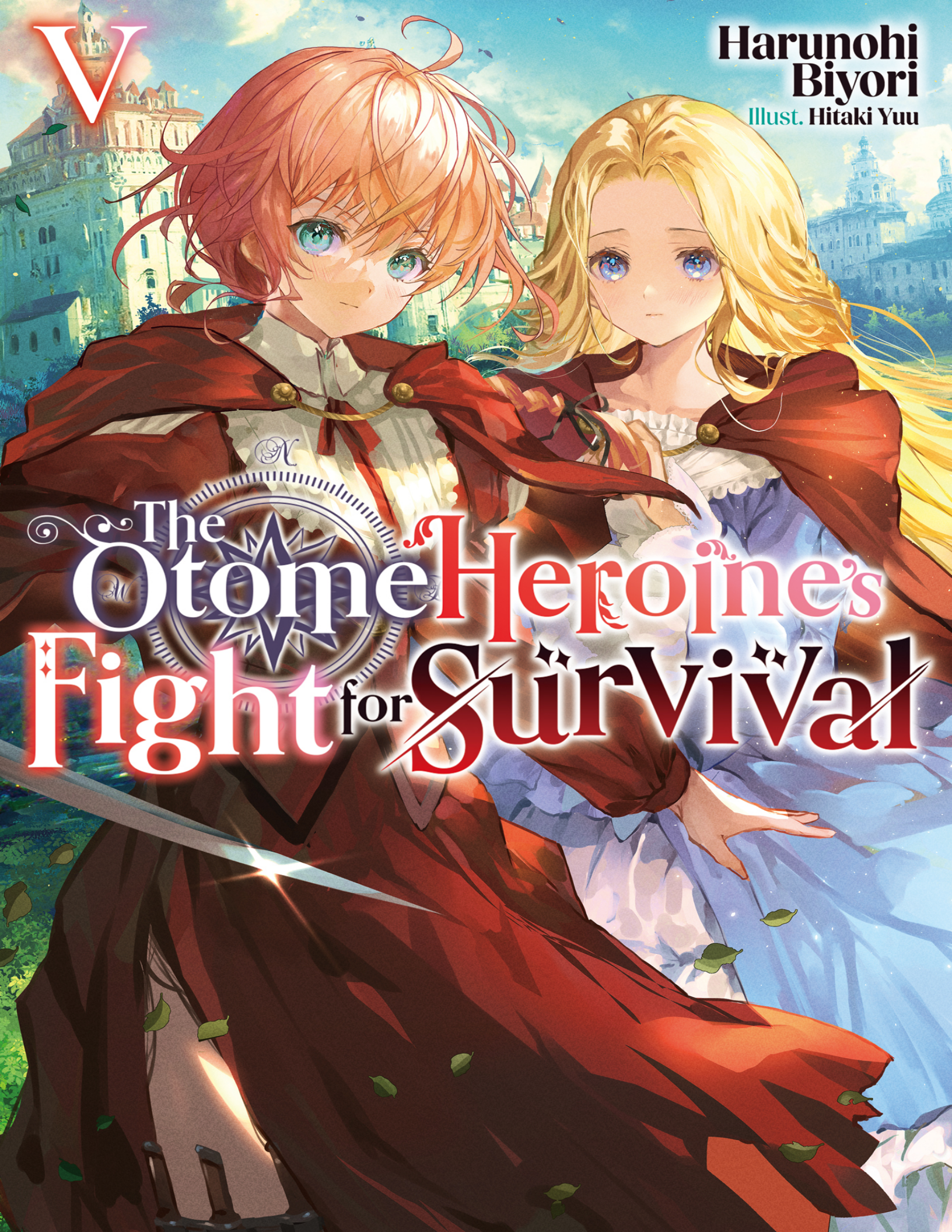

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The Otome Heroine's
Fight for Survival

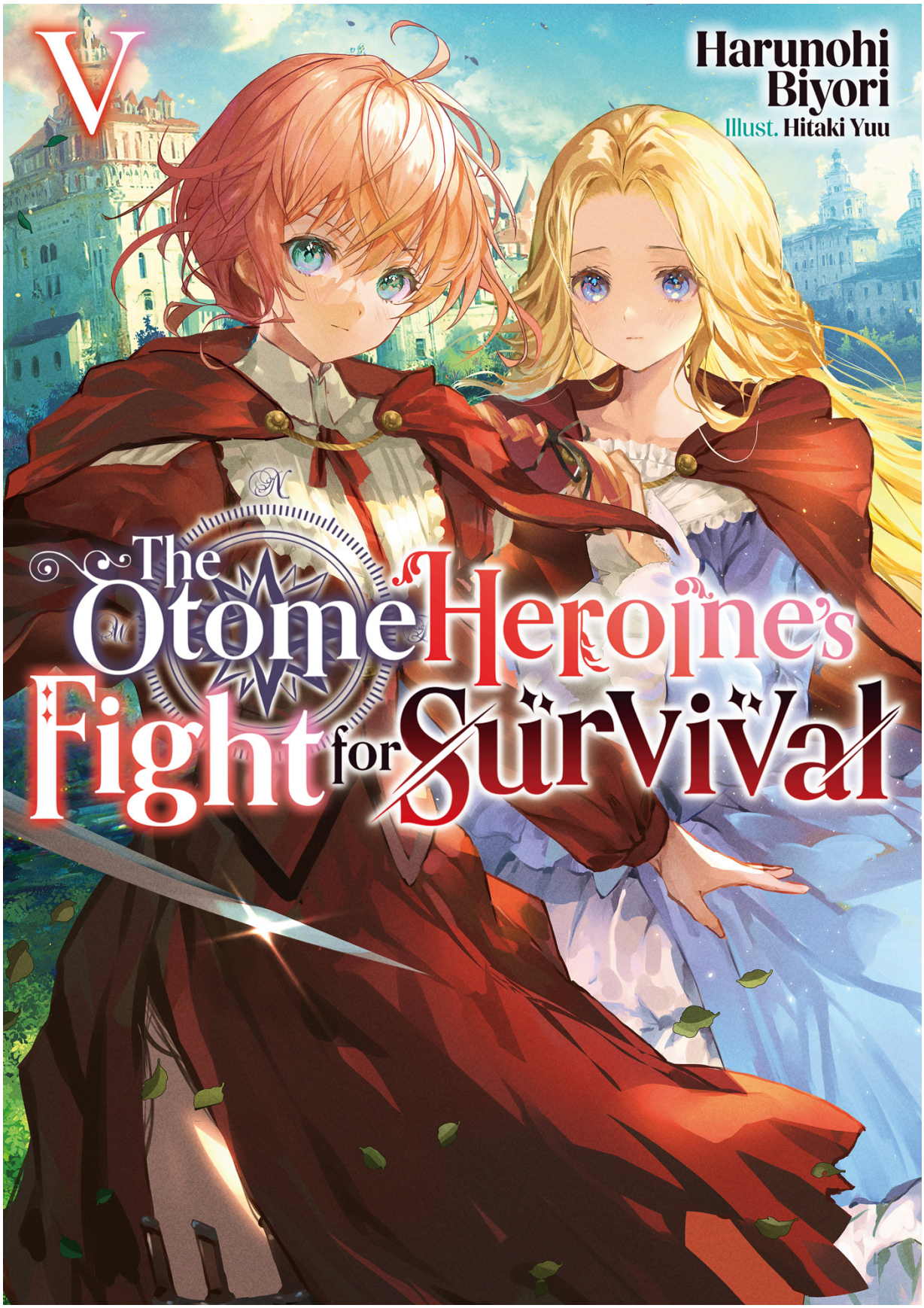

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Harunohi Biyori
Illust. Hitaki Yuu
The Otome Heroine's Fight for Survival





Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Jnovels
4. Chapter 1: Otome Game
5. Characters
6. Bonus High Res Color Illustrations
7. Afterword
8. About J-Novel Club
9. Copyright



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Act Two: Academy / The Iron Princess of Thorns

Chapter 1: Otome Game

The False Heroine

The Royal Sorcerers' Academy—the longest-standing educational institution in the Kingdom of Claydale, where members of the aristocracy could enroll in the year they were to reach the age of thirteen—was attended by the majority of noble children.

It had initially been established to teach those with an aptitude for aether how to control that power. But in the more than one hundred years since the kingdom had merged with the former Dukedoms of Dandorl and Melrose, the academy had evolved. Now, the three years of coursework were intended to bridge wealth-related educational disparities within the nobility, thus elevating the nation's overall standards by teaching aristocratic children everything they needed to know as members of the ruling class.

Over the past year, the most talked-about topic at the academy had been the enrollment of the crown prince, Elvan. Though some knew him as a meek prince lacking ambition, he had nevertheless secured three fiancées hailing from families of influence within the kingdom and had thus begun steadily solidifying his position. At the time of his enrollment a year ago, one of his fiancées, Lady Patricia Hoodale—daughter of a duke and the likely future third queen—had already been in her final year. Meanwhile, Lady Clara Dandorl—daughter of a margrave and likely future first queen—had enrolled alongside Elvan as a first-year student. This had created a somewhat restless atmosphere throughout the academy.

And this year, with the arrival of even more students, the academy was expected to be even more abuzz.

In the year after the crown prince's birth, many noble families had conceived children of their own in hopes of forming closer ties with the royal family, leading to a larger-than-usual incoming class. Furthermore, illustrious figures such as Elvan's younger sister, Princess Elena, as well as his third fiancée, Karla Leicester—daughter

of a count and likely future second queen—were also entering the academy.

"What a wonderful stage this academy will be!"

At the start of the school year, which marked the dawn of a new period in high society, a girl—one of many students making their way to the entrance ceremony—walked briskly along the open central pathway. Next to her was a young steward. The girl's blue eyes and reddish, dark-blonde hair stood out, and her small frame—particularly childlike among the nobility, whose growth was often accelerated by aether—combined with her restless behavior made her look like a baby bird.

Unlike the rest of the students, this girl had obviously not been educated as a noble. Her large eyes drooped slightly at the corners, giving her a somewhat sleepy appearance. Thanks to her petite stature, even her knee-length skirt, which a noble lady would've considered immodest, seemed acceptable. The aura about her was inexplicably charming.

"Look at how magnificent this place is, Theo!" she exclaimed. "I'm going to be a student here! Isn't that wonderful?"

"Please, calm down, my lady. Move a little more to the side, and...please, let go of my arm..." The young steward, a boy of Krus descent, looked a bit awkward as the girl clung firmly to his arm.

The academy's central pathway was clear so that carriages bearing high-ranking nobles would not be obstructed, and lower-ranking nobles deliberately avoided walking in the middle. Theo had tried to reprimand the girl upon feeling others' critical gazes fall on them, but she simply tightened her grip on his arm.

"Theo! I told you to call me 'Licia,' didn't I?" The girl chided him like an older sister, employing a tone far too mature for her age. "We're practically family now, so don't be so formal with me!"

"My apologies."

Interpreted charitably, her words could have implied that she saw even her own servant as family. But her sweet, almost flirtatious tone and the overly familiar closeness she maintained with Theo went against the protocols for men and women of noble standing, which lent an oddly alluring air to her childlike appearance.

Just as the awkward, out-of-place display began to draw the attention of the surrounding students, a black carriage arrived. A young lady with dark hair, wearing a navy dress and a burgundy robe, stepped out of the vehicle. Her unsettling aura and sickly visage made even the students who didn't recognize her instinctively step aside and clear a path for her.

"You're in my way," she said to Theo and the girl in a cool, flat tone. In an instant, the atmosphere shifted, and the stage of the academy was painted anew. The black-haired girl's voice, neither loud nor soft, seemed to erase all surrounding noise the moment it spilled from her lips.

Sensing the overwhelming malice and the immense aether emanating from the young lady, Theo instinctively stepped forward to shield his charge.

"Step aside," the young lady responded with a small, frosty smile. "Keep blocking the path like that and you may get burned."

"M-My sincerest apologies," Theo stammered, bowing his head emphatically. Though he recognized her as a high-ranking noble, the more immediate reason he'd given in was that his survival instincts were screaming at him to defer to someone much more powerful.

But not everyone could sense the danger.

"The road is wide enough, no?" the girl beside him said with a bright smile and an unargumentative tone, as if stating the most obvious thing in the world. "There's plenty of space to walk."

Theo's tan skin turned pale, and the noble girl's shadowed eyes narrowed slightly, as though she'd just discovered an intriguing new toy. The color drained from the onlookers' faces, and everyone thought the same thing: *This won't end well.*

Just then, a male student's voice broke through the frozen tension. "What is this commotion?"

A boy, wearing ceremonial knightly attire and a burgundy robe, emerged from the direction of the entrance ceremony hall alongside two other students. As he stepped between the two parties to mediate and got a better look at the black-haired girl, he widened his eyes slightly in recognition.

"Karla? What are you doing here?"

“Hello, Prince El,” Karla replied. “My esteemed fiancé didn’t come to pick me up, so I was making my way inside on my own.”

“Ah...my apologies. I was preparing to give my speech as the students’ representative...” The prince trailed off, avoiding Karla’s gaze as he made excuses.

Karla—one of his three fiancées—deliberately widened her smile, as though enjoying his discomfort. “Oh, it’s no trouble at all. You’ll make it up to me later, won’t you? Either way...” She turned back to Theo and the girl. “How long do you two intend to remain in our line of sight?”

“M-My apologies!” Theo stammered, gently urging the girl forward. “My lady, this way, please...”

“Oh, yes. Ah—” As she stared intently at Elvan’s face, the girl stumbled in front of the prince.

“Be careful!” Elvan exclaimed, swiftly catching her before she hit the ground.



“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“No, I’m fine!” the girl responded, leaning even further into Elvan’s arms.

Seeing this, Karla seemed to lose interest in the exchange. Her expression turned cold, and she walked past the others.

“Karla,” Elvan called out instinctively. “As one of my fiancées, could you please refrain from using threatening language toward ordinary students?”

She stopped and cast him a sidelong glance over her shoulder. “Oh? And why would I do that, Prince El?”

“You’re a future crown princess. You should behave in a more...reasonable manner.”

Karla covered her mouth with a folding fan and laughed softly. “I do believe I’m being quite reasonable. Especially compared to someone holding another woman in his arms right in front of his fiancée.”

“I—”

“Now then, have a wonderful day, Prince El. I’ll see you later,” Karla concluded with a chuckle. Wearing an inexplicably satisfied smile, she headed toward the ceremony hall.

Elvan watched with a somewhat pained frown as she left, then helped the girl to her feet. “Please don’t think too poorly of her. She must simply be in a foul mood...”

“It’s okay! I’m used to it!” the girl said rather strangely as Elvan pried her off of him and handed her back to her young steward.

Only then did the prince get a proper look at her face. “Forgive me for all the trouble. Are you a new student?”

“Yes! I just enrolled this year!” Stepping back slightly, the girl pinched the edges of her knee-length skirt and exposed her pale calves further as she curtsied with a smile bright as a flower. “I’m Alicia Melsis! I look forward to learning from you!”

***

As I took Princess Elena’s hand and led her out of the carriage, she watched with cold exasperation the scene unfolding before us: a

timid and kind prince's first meeting with a naive young noble lady. It was almost like something out of a play.

"Let's go, Alia," said Elena.

"Yes, Princess Elena."

Theo forcefully pulled the noble girl toward the auditorium, where the entrance ceremony would take place. Karla, who had driven them off, noticed us and offered a small, knowing smile before walking toward the auditorium as well. She was alone, without so much as an escort.

"Karla hasn't changed at all," I remarked.

"Indeed she hasn't," Elena agreed. "It's both a flaw and her own brand of charm. She's a difficult one, but I can't help but empathize with her this time."

Not only had Elvan failed to set a boundary with the girl from before, he hadn't so much as reprimanded her for her impudence. Instead, he'd seemed completely overwhelmed. It was Elena's cold gaze that seemed to finally make her older brother aware of the awkwardness of the situation. He ordered his two escorts to handle the remaining matters and approached us.

Both of his escorts looked like high-ranking nobles. I recognized one of them, and he seemed to recognize me as well, staring at me in stunned silence and leaving the other escort, a red-haired boy, to manage the crowd.

"Elena!" the prince called out.

"Good day, brother. I'm sure you've been quite busy. Are all your preparations in order?"

"Ah," he murmured. He lowered his head awkwardly, perhaps still feeling the sting of Karla's earlier sarcasm. "I apologize for not coming to fetch you."

Elena's eyes narrowed briefly. "Brother. You're the crown prince. You mustn't lower your head so readily, even to your sister. I am not bothered by your absence."

"Is that so...?"

In the past, to play her part politically, Elena had feigned utter adoration for her brother, to the point of displaying jealousy toward other women around him. Now, however, her connection to Elvan's

supporters had weakened significantly, and the necessity for such behavior had diminished. Still, the crown prince hadn't realized that the dynamic between them had shifted, and he looked slightly confused by the change in his sister's demeanor.

"Until a few years ago, we spent so much time together," he remarked wistfully. "I miss it. What changed?"

"Nothing, brother. I've simply grown up a little."

"I see." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, and I gave him a silent nod. "And this one, has she become your attendant?"

"Something like that. Please don't try to take her from me, brother. You already have Clara and Karla, do you not?"

"I...do, indeed." Elvan gave a small nod, though he looked somewhat conflicted at the mention of Clara's name.

As I'd learned after the dungeon expedition, the third person whom the dungeon's spirit had offered a gift was Clara, daughter of Margrave Dandorl. According to Elena, this achievement had been a significant factor in Clara securing the position of Elvan's primary fiancée. Although Karla also possessed a gift, her personality being what it was, she was instead a candidate for second queen.

"Now then, I, too, have a speech to deliver as the representative of the newly enrolled students," Elena said. "I shall take my leave. I hope everything goes smoothly for you, brother. Alia, let's go."

"All right," I replied.

"Ah, yes..." the crown prince muttered, slightly flustered. "Do your best, Elena."

I nodded once more to the prince and his retinue before following after Elena under their and the surrounding crowd's curious gazes.

Before long, many would come to recognize Elena's exceptional talent—and until then, she had to continue strengthening her ties with influential nobles while gathering capable individuals within the academy into her own faction. But she couldn't be too hasty; that might create enemies instead. There would also undoubtedly be those who would resort to force to approach Elena—and in such an event, it would be my job to eliminate them.

Elena seemed to read my thoughts. Gently, she whispered, "I'm counting on you, Alia. I'll turn a blind eye as much as I can."

I replied quietly, so that only she would hear, and bowed deeply—as a close aide should. “Got it.”

Reunion at the Entrance Ceremony

One year after the dungeon expedition, Elena and I entered the academy together as first-year students. I was there in my capacity as an adventurer, fulfilling a request from a client—that is, Elena.

"For three years, I charge you with my protection within the Sorcerers' Academy."

The general terms of the contract had been carefully laid out with the help of Dalton and the rest of the Rainbow Blade. The gist of it was...

One: I would protect Princess Elena from the time of her enrollment at the academy until her graduation three years later.

Though the contract specified three years, that time could be shortened if significant issues within the royal family were resolved sooner than that. According to Elena, once the crown prince graduated in two years, most of the problems were likely to be settled. And though this arrangement required a long-term commitment, I was allowed to handle other work as an adventurer—with Elena's permission—when necessary.

Two: I would eliminate threats within the academy.

This extended to threats to not only Elena's safety but also the safety of the crown prince and other royals. If my strength was necessary, I had the authority to use it. This included apprehending nobles confirmed to have committed crimes and using force to neutralize any dangers. For this purpose, I had been temporarily granted the same level of clearance as Sera, making me a senior combat maiden for the Order of Shadows.

Three: Viro would infiltrate the academy as well.

I didn't have a say in this part. Viro, who was already affiliated with the Order, was assigned to gather intel and provide me with

support from within the academy. That meant this mission wasn't just a personal request to me from the princess but an official commission from the Order of Shadows to the Rainbow Blade. Despite being kind of a terrible adult from a child's perspective, Viro was an excellent scout. I had no cause for concern.

Lastly, four: To provide protection even during lessons, I would attend classes as a student, rather than simply acting as Elena's servant or handmaiden.

For me, this had been the biggest point of contention. To enroll in the Sorcerers' Academy, a place meant exclusively for nobles, Dalton and Sera negotiated that she would adopt me. Sera was, after all, a baronetess of House Leighton. For a moment, I had wondered if this was even allowed, but according to what I was told, it was an accepted loophole for high-ranking students wishing to bring attendants of a similar age to the academy. Essentially, the attendant could be formally adopted as a child of one of the noble houses serving under the high-ranking student's house.

In such cases, the adoption was usually provisional. If the adopted child failed to show potential, the adoption would be annulled after graduation. But if they proved promising, they remained an adopted child of the lower-ranking noble family and continued to serve the higher-ranked noble.

Honestly, I wasn't very fond of nobles. But if this was necessary for Elena's protection, I would deal with it. At first I'd thought maybe Dalton could adopt me instead, but since he was an honorary noble, his relatives wouldn't have been recognized as nobles despite his own status.

After the details were settled, I was given permission to act independently for a spell. I returned to Cere'zhula, who promptly scolded me for fighting a Rank 6 opponent. After that, she trained me in light sorcery, claiming I would need it later. I also asked her to look into my new Iron Rose technique, and her interest seemed piqued.

Next, I visited Galvus's smithy and gave him special materials to upgrade my weapon. While there, I heard about Jil and Shuri's recent exploits. They'd apparently joined an acquaintance's party

and were receiving training, which gave me some peace of mind.

Once the dust settled a bit, I went to the royal capital, where I formally became Sera's adopted daughter and received education for my role as the princess's attendant. Theo, whom I hadn't seen in a while, seemed quite dejected about this—partly because even though the adoption was temporary, I had technically become his older sister, and partly because I was still taller than him.

And now, after all that, here I was, keeping a watchful eye over the entrance ceremony from the wings of the stage.

This academy did not divide students into fixed groups. Because of the vast differences in the budgets and curricula allocated by each noble family for education, there was no point in standardized teaching. For lower-ranked nobles, the academy was a place to raise their basic education level to an acceptable standard and demonstrate their competence. For higher-ranked nobles, it was a place to learn social skills and political strategy and identify talented individuals.

Therefore, there was no need to divide students into "classes" as described in that woman's knowledge. Nevertheless, there was a clear distinction among the students taking part in the ceremony. A small number of high-ranking nobles were seated in special front-row seats, while a much larger number of low-ranking nobles filled the rear rows. People were very evidently divided by rank.

Ordinarily, I would have been seated among the low-ranking nobles, but as Princess Elena's attendant and protector by royal decree, I was under no obligation to attend the ceremony formally.

"No one seems blatantly suspicious, but..."

From my vantage point in the wings, I could see that Elena and Karla stood out prominently. In contrast with the over six thousand low-ranked noble families and nearly six hundred mid-ranked families, there were only thirty-six high-ranking noble families, royal family included. As a result, the number of new students from prominent families was quite small. That, plus the empty space around Elena and Karla due to the fact no one dared approach them, made them stand out even more.

Other than them, the most noticeable student was the girl Theo

had been guarding, seated among the mid-ranking nobles. She had the same name as me—Alicia—and was entirely too cherubic. Her bright, oblivious demeanor seemed completely out of place as she brazenly charmed the surrounding male students with her cheeriness.

I felt as though I recognized her from somewhere. The way she seemed to sidle up to boys gave me an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu.

The ceremony proceeded smoothly. After Prince Elvan delivered his welcome speech to the new students, Elena gave a speech of her own as their representative. There was no one suspicious near the princess. The guards likely believed no one would be foolish enough to do something in such a public, highly visible setting, but she and I knew better than to assume her only enemies were the members of the nobility faction.

Graves had declared his intent to harm her, after all, and he was still lurking somewhere within the kingdom. Not even he would dare attack Elena within the heavily guarded royal palace, and so I was certain he would make his move while she was staying at this academy.

As Elena concluded her speech and stepped down from the stage, I blended in with the other servants to discreetly return to her side. But, just as I was about to move away, someone reached out to grab my arm.

"Wait. You're—"

In a single breath, I activated Boost, swatted away the attacker's hand, swept his legs out from under him, and pinned him to the floor. With a swift motion, I drew a concealed blade and pressed it to his forehead as he lay beneath me. When I looked down at his face, my eyes narrowed in recognition. I'd seen him earlier this morning, standing behind the crown prince.



The young man gritted his teeth in pain and forced out a few strained words. “I wanted to see you again.”

Unable to grasp the meaning behind his words, I didn’t respond immediately. I tried to recall if I knew anything about him. “You’re one of the crown prince’s aides, aren’t you? What do you want with me?”

“We’ve met before in the royal capital, with El—with His Highness and his adventurer guards! Don’t you remember me?”

I paused for a brief moment. “I do remember.”

He was one of the noble boys I’d encountered during the incident that had led to me reuniting with Feld. I recalled this boy being unusually persistent in his attempts to engage with me as we walked alongside the crown prince.

“El told me you joined the Rainbow Blade and became a powerful adventurer. But every time I tried to meet with you, I couldn’t because you were under the princess’s protection. Tell me, how is it that you’re now a noble? Why are you serving as the princess’s attendant?!”

Even as he lay pinned down, his agitation was such that he tried to sit up. I gave him a deadly glare, and that, along with the edge of my blade, was enough to silence him.

“I’m the one asking questions here,” I told him.

Someone being close to the crown prince didn’t automatically make them loyal to the royal family. Even if he was an ally, why was he approaching someone like me, whom he’d only met once before? I sharpened my gaze further, trying to assess his intent, and let my aura of malice grow thicker.

He clenched his teeth and endured my intimidation, meeting my eyes with a determined stare. “I’m Mikhail Melrose, of House Melrose, the family that oversees the Order of Shadows of the Kingdom of Claydale. Knowing that, are you still going to point that blade at me?”

Upon hearing that family name, I quietly lowered my weapon. “Very well.”

Melrose. The dungeon spirit had hinted that I, too, might belong to the Melrose bloodline. When Sera had first brought up the

adoption plan, she'd mentioned that House Leighton served under House Melrose. I hadn't given it much thought at the time, but now this boy claimed that the family actually oversaw the Order of Shadows—which meant they were a grand noble house, on par with the Margravate of Dandorl.

It seemed Elena had managed to keep information about me under tight wraps. But if House Melrose was indeed in command of the Order, it wouldn't have been unusual for something to have leaked from those in close proximity to Sera. I hadn't quite expected that, but the name Melrose alone would've been enough to dissuade me from making an enemy of him prematurely. I needed to investigate further, but if he truly was part of the Order, I would consider him an ally for now.

Without a sound, I stepped back from the fallen Mikhail, straightened the hem of my disheveled skirt, and extended a hand to him. He stared at me silently for a moment, started to reach out, then hesitated and pulled his hand back.

"I can stand on my own," he muttered, turning his flushed face away. As he tried to rise, however, his face twisted with pain. "Ngh..."

I wasn't entirely sure how to hold back against ordinary people. Perhaps I'd cracked one of his bones. I quickly laid out a spell in my mind and reached a hand toward him.

"*High Cure.*"

A warm light washed over his body, healing his injuries. Mikhail stared at me in surprise before finally pushing to his feet. Upon confirming that everything was fine, he exhaled deeply, as though letting out pent-up tension.

"I suppose I should thank you. Your power is impressive. So you really are the princess's bodyguard, then? Did you transition from being an adventurer to being an agent of the Order?"

"My contract was arranged with the Order as an intermediary, but my employer is Princess Elena herself. I'm not a member of the Order or a subordinate of yours. If you want to know more, you'll have to ask the princess directly."

Mikhail's eyes widened slightly at the word "contract." "The

princess recruited you herself? I heard about an adventurer with the Rainbow Blade who possesses a special power. Is that you...?”

“No more questions. If you are who you claim to be, you’ll be able to find out more on your own. Also, while I do apologize for pinning you down, I’d advise against trying to grab people without warning in the future.”

“I... I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know how things worked with nobles, but in the underworld, reaching out abruptly like that was practically a declaration of hostility. Mikhail might’ve had his reasons, but at least he was genuine enough to lower his head and apologize. His face was flushed... I didn’t know what it was that I’d said that had caused him to blush, but perhaps I’d gone a bit too far as well. It was best to drop the issue altogether.

“Now then, if you’ll excuse me. I’m sure we’ll cross paths again in a professional capacity.”

“W-Wait!” he called out nervously as I turned to leave. I glanced back slightly and noticed his features were set in a determined expression. “Your name. Could you tell me your name?”

“Alia.”

“I see... Alia, then...” he muttered softly, a faint smile crossing his lips.

At that moment, I thought I caught a fleeting resemblance to my mother in his expression, despite the difference in gender and age. Perhaps this meant we really were related by blood. Maybe he felt the same way. His eyes were directed at me but seemed to be looking past, as if seeing something far away.

“As a member of the Order, Alia, I will share this bit of information with you. Shortly after enrollment, nobles of baronial rank and higher will participate in a Royal Guard training exercise outside the city. The princess will likely attend as well. Normally, the Order would handle security, but this time the Royal Guard itself will be responsible, leaving the Order to operate from behind the curtains. Be mindful.”

“Understood.”

The Royal Guard and the Order of Shadows acted as sword and

shield protecting the country, both publicly and behind the scenes. But...if the crown prince and Elena were ever to oppose each other, which side would they choose?

The Royal Sorcerers' Academy

"Haah... Haah..."

In a spacious room with tightly drawn lace curtains, a girl's hands, clasped as though in prayer, slowly parted to the sound of her ragged breaths.

The windows were fully paned with glass—a rarity in this world where sorcery and alchemy had developed in place of science. Even a small, imperfect pane of quartz glass cost at least one gold. This room, with windows covering nearly half of the wall, undoubtedly belonged to a noble of the most rarefied status.

The lone girl, who had dismissed even her maids, steadied her breath. She soaked the nib of a pen in ink and began scribbling frantically across one of many sheets of paper scattered about.

There was a sequence of soft knocks at the door.

"Lady Clara," came her maid's hesitant voice. "His Highness the Crown Prince has arrived to pay you a visit. How shall I respond?"

Clara paused briefly before replying. "Let him in."

A few minutes later, Elvan was admitted to the chambers. He was alone, having come under the pretense of visiting his unwell fiancée. When he saw Clara writing as though in a trance and the ink stains on her white stone table, he rushed to her side.

"Clara. You shouldn't be doing this," he urged her softly. "You need rest and quiet."

"Prince El, please...reconsider attending the training exercise. No matter how many times I scry, the result is always danger."

"You used your gift again, didn't you?"

Clara had received a gift from the dungeon spirit: Foresight. With it, she could predict future events with a high degree of accuracy, but it was somewhat different from what one would call prophecy. This ability functioned based on Clara's capacity to calculate and analyze the information currently available to her, thus selecting the

most probable outcomes. That data would then be further processed into highly likely predictions.

What she had sought was an ability similar to advance knowledge of the possible outcomes in an otome game. This ability's practical utility lay in the fact that even if she couldn't verify the accuracy of her intel herself, she could still glean the most likely outcomes based on the current situation.

Clara combined this ability with her past life knowledge, which included information about events that took place in the otome game—events she couldn't have known about were she not a reincarnator. This made her predictions remarkably accurate.

But each use of her gift came with a price. Simple predictions like tonight's dinner menu or tomorrow's weather had insignificant costs, but predicting events weeks in advance, especially those involving volatile variables such as human actions, took tens of thousands—sometimes millions—of calculations in her brain. Each use of Foresight caused significant damage to Clara's mind, doubtlessly shortening her lifespan.

"You shouldn't use that ability too often, Clara," Elvan cautioned. "You've said it yourself: The future is always changing. Based on your prediction, I've already requested a bodyguard of elite knights. I'll be fine."

"But..."

In the game, when Elvan was in danger, it was often due to being involved with the heroine. One of the game's recurring events, regardless of romance route, was the off-campus training exercise. During this event, the level of danger the prince was in scaled with the heroine's level of affection toward him. At the lowest level, it was an attack by a man-eating bear; at the highest, an attack by demonic forces.

Clara had yet to meet the heroine directly, but based on reports from her servants, it didn't seem that the protagonist, whoever she was, had amassed significant affection points with Elvan. Still, the possibility of an accident couldn't be ignored. Both the Royal Guard and Clara's older brother—son of the grand general of the royal knights—would be on-site, which meant a bear attack shouldn't pose

a significant threat. But even if the heroine hadn't yet awakened to her affinity for the light element and acquired Holy Magic—the best-case scenario from Clara's perspective—the higher-difficulty encounters could result in Elvan being grievously injured.

Still, with knights already escorting the prince, Clara couldn't insist any further without running the risk of exposing her true motivation: preventing the in-game event between Elvan and the heroine.

Seeing Clara falter and grow dejected, Elvan gently drew her head against his chest.

"Prince El...?"

"Don't worry so much," he assured her. "It's strange for me to say, I know, but...I think I like you better now, Clara. Before, you used to be this flawless noble lady, and now you wear your heart on your sleeve. Don't worry. I'll come back to you, safe and sound."

"I'll try..."

Clara, the game's perfect villainous noblewoman, had grown weak after regaining memories of her past life. But this newfound vulnerability had brought her closer to Elvan, who was burdened by insecurities of his own. Still, instead of finding comfort in his warmth, Clara felt her anxiety spike further. Elvan's weakness was a testament to his lack of ability. How might he change if he encountered danger and witnessed the heroine's power?

Was that girl, who didn't resemble and acted more assertively than the game's heroine, truly her? And what of the pink-haired girl with uncanny combat power, who had resurfaced and now acted as Elena's guard? Was *she* the heroine? And either way, if the true heroine awakened to Holy Magic and became a Holy Maiden, there would be no future in which Clara could find happiness with Elvan—unless she were to remove the game's protagonist from the equation.

***

Fifteen minutes later, Elvan left. Once she was alone, Clara rang a handbell to summon her handmaiden.

"Hilda," Clara said. "Gather everyone."

"Right away, my lady."

The handmaiden swiftly brought in the three maids assigned to Clara for the duration of her stay at the academy.

"I want all of you to investigate Lady Alicia Melsis," Clara told them. "You understand what this entails, don't you?"

"Of course, Lady Clara," Hilda replied.

The three maids each chimed in.

"We still owe you for taking us in."

"We'll be of use."

"Okay..."

Considering they were serving as attendants to a candidate for the position of crown princess, there was something distinctly uncouth about their demeanor.

"Are you still in pain, Vivi?" Clara asked.

"No," replied the third maid, Vivi. The black-haired girl avoided Clara's gaze and gave a small shake of her head. "It's just a little hard to...move."

Though Vivi's injuries had improved greatly thanks to the spell Restore, as evidenced by the burns on her wrists and neck being reduced to faint traces, they had not yet fully healed. Her strained speech likely reflected her lingering discomfort.

"I'll...kill her," Vivi managed, speaking haltingly, her voice uneven. "For your sake too, my lady."

The other three nodded in wordless agreement.

All of the attendants present here had been identified through Foresight and were former assassins of the Northern Border District branch. When she'd found the first two in an abandoned mine near the royal capital, Hilda had been suffering from a severe abdominal wound, and Vivi bore burns across multiple parts of her body.

Hilda had been gravely injured during a battle against an adventurer known as Lady Cinders. Vivi had been tending to Hilda's wounds when a fire broke out. Despite the chaos, the two, alongside a third companion, had managed to survive by escaping through a crevice they'd discovered deeper within the mine. They'd made it to their base and lain low but, without proper medical care, had been

left waiting for death. Clara had tracked them down through her gift and ultimately saved them.

The other two maids, Doris and Heidi, were survivors from the same branch. After the destruction of the guild, their families had fallen into poverty. Clara had sent Hilda to aid their families and bring the two into her service with one clear purpose: eliminating the heroine.

"Will we be able to make contact soon?" Clara asked.

"Yes, my lady. She's already working on it behind the scenes, but...with the way she looks now, she can't be out in public," Hilda replied with a conflicted expression. She had once been betrayed by this particular woman and hadn't quite gotten over it yet.

"I see..." Clara replied with a curt nod.

The woman in question had suffered grievous burns all over her body but managed to survive thanks to her mithril equipment and the sheer force of her spite. She now lived solely out of hatred for Lady Cinders.

That girl...

Alia, the pink-haired girl who had gained a special ability of her own. With her new power, she'd pushed back a Rank 6 monster and fought on equal footing against the similarly gifted Karla. Her hair color matched that of the heroine of the otome game *Silver Wings of Love*. If she truly was the protagonist, eliminating her would be no easy feat.

It was hard to imagine that a girl like Alia would willingly abide by the game's plot. And even if she wasn't the main character, there was still the girl under House Melrose's protection to contend with.

Clara's initial goals had been to survive and to avoid being sentenced. But if the heroine followed the game's plot and became a Holy Maiden, Clara would inevitably be forced out of the position of crown princess by will of the Holy Church and the people, who would view the heroine as the best candidate. Clara's Foresight had recently confirmed as much.

Before, she would've run away if the opportunity had presented itself. But now, escape was no longer an option—Clara had fallen in love with Elvan.

I won't let anyone else have him.

Not the heroine, not the pink-haired girl. No one. No matter what.

It was that resolve that had made Clara start down the same path as her villainous counterpart, even if it came at the price of her own lifespan.

***

"Hee hee..."

Some time after the entrance ceremony, a girl let out a soft, knowing laugh as she lay sprawled on her bed in a dormitory for mid-ranked nobles.

"Elvan was pretty as a CG. We didn't talk much, but Lord Rockwell and Lord Mikhail were lovely too." She chuckled. "And, of course, Theo is adorable."

Nearly all academy students lived in dormitories, which were clearly divided by rank. Low-ranked nobles shared large lodge-like dorms, often with dozens of students living in the same building. High-ranked nobles, meanwhile, resided in private estates built by their families. Mid-ranked nobles, like the girl, lived alongside their personal servants in stand-alone houses provided by the academy.

A knock came from the door.

"Milady? Your bath is ready," said the maid from the other side.

"I can bathe on my own. You may leave now," the girl replied in a curt, dismissive tone.

Alicia Melsis—the girl who called herself by the nickname Licia—had with her, besides her steward Theo, a maid assigned by House Melsis to tend to her daily needs. But Licia only allowed the maid to perform the bare minimum of her duties.

"I hate women. They're always so mean to me just because I'm cute. But you..." She fished a half-broken aethercrystal out of the pouch around her neck and held it up. "You're different. You teach me so many things."

She'd found her treasure at age seven, while dredging sludge as part of her volunteer work at the orphanage where she'd lived. She'd accidentally cut her finger on one of the crystal's sharp edges, and it

had shown her a dazzling future. Nothing like the gray, hopeless life she'd led, with no money, no one to protect her, and even the prospect of her future beauty affording her no more than a chance of being sold to a kind master. No, the future this crystal had shown her was the glittering path to royalty.

The girl had long since forgotten her true name.

To become the original heroine, whose whereabouts were unknown, Licia had learned to mimic her mannerisms, speech, and expressions as shown to her by the aethercrystal. She'd done this so thoroughly that she no longer remembered her own original personality. Now she had fully become Alicia.

From within the crystal, knowledge seeped into her—alongside a woman's bitter lingering resentment and memories of the past. But how she would use that knowledge and what choices she would make were entirely up to *her*. The woman in the aethercrystal desired a radiant life, holding hands with the crown prince, but...

"Oh, lay off," Licia snarled. She slammed the crystal against the edge of the bed, silencing its push toward the prince's route and slicing open her fingertips in the process. From the fresh wounds, pure new information flowed, and she nodded in satisfaction. "That's right. *I* get to decide."

She had once been an orphan, with nothing to her name and only death for company. The fear and despair she'd felt back then could never be erased—and they lingered even now that she was the adopted daughter of a mid-ranked noble family. No matter how cheerful she seemed on the outside, an endless hunger gnawed at her from within, never to be satisfied.

Now, her weapons were the knowledge within the crystal and the beauty she'd inherited from her courtesan mother. Feeding that ravenous hunger was more important to her than life itself. Her bloodied fingers curled around the aethercrystal as though it were the most precious thing in the world, and she whispered a soft prayer.

"Oh, how I wish to love deeply, and be loved in turn..."

A Lesson at the Academy

"Shall we, Alia?"

"Yes."

The academy was almost as large as the royal capital. Though shared carriages circulated around campus, transporting students here and there, nobles of middle rank and higher were allowed to use small private carriages. I guided a two-person carriage, with the driver's seat next to the passenger's, toward the building where today's classes would be held. The path was clear; other students, upon realizing that this was the princess's carriage, had made way.

Elena wore what was referred to as a type-two uniform, favored by daughters of high-ranking nobles: a crimson robe, shaped like a mantle, over an elegant—but not overly extravagant—dress made especially for today. As her attendant, I wore a type-three uniform. It was similar to the type-one uniform worn by ordinary female students in that both featured skirts with tights underneath, but type-one skirts ended mid-calf, whereas type-three skirts like mine extended down to the ankles.

High-ranking nobles like Elena were allowed to bring two attendants into this academy, whereas mid-ranking nobles could bring only one. Of course, there existed those who flaunted their status by disregarding the rule and parading about with numerous attendants and guards. But Elena—as a royal and role model to other students—would never have engaged in such behavior.

Since retainers and guards weren't allowed to follow their charges into class either way, many high-ranking nobles chose to enroll others close to them in age so they could act as part of their retinues. Prince Elvan, for example, who'd enrolled last year, had an entourage consisting of one retainer to tend to his needs; two close aides, both of whom were high-ranking nobles and a year older than him; and two attendants, one in his year and another who had

joined with this year's cohort.

I wasn't the only member of Elena's entourage. Yosef, the guardian steward who tended to her in the royal palace, and Chloe, a guardian maiden I knew well by now, had also been assigned to protect her. But I was her only close aide, fulfilling a dual role as her personal attendant and guard. Although I was a lower-ranked noble, as Elena's handmaiden, I lived in her private dormitory—a manor guarded in shifts by ten royal knights. My main duties, therefore, were carried out on the academy grounds, where I acted as her personal attendant, guard, and classmate, always by her side.

As we navigated the path, Elena spoke up.

"At present, Alia, only His Majesty knows that my body has recovered. But since, as a royal, I must prove myself at the academy, sooner or later my improved condition will become obvious. When that happens, the nobility faction is likely to spring into action and resume plotting to make me their puppet."

We had already discussed this previously, so I was well aware.

"For now, I will work in secret toward my goal of becoming queen. But officially, the heir is my brother. And so it must remain, or the nation's domestic affairs will descend into chaos once more, just as they did when a viscount's daughter became first queen."

"Then why do you want to be queen?" I asked bluntly.

It might've sounded harsh, but if Elena truly cared for the Kingdom of Claydale, she would instead have continued to support the crown prince as she always had—that would've been best for the country's stability.

I'm happy she's doing better physically, but...

I looked at her, my mind swirling with such thoughts, and she smiled at me—like a villain in a stage play.

"It's simple, Alia," she replied. "The princess in me has seen what her overly kind father's actions have wrought. And she trusts her brother no more than she trusts her father."

The king had followed his heart and taken a mid-ranking noblewoman as his first queen. To this day, he struggled with the domestic aftermath of his decision. Elena believed that the crown prince, raised by that very queen, bore similar flaws.

"I'll rule this country. But the nobility faction will soon realize that doesn't mean they'll get the policies they hope for. And if I take clear action to depose my brother as heir, the conservative royalist faction, my current allies, will turn against me. Most will become my enemies, in fact. Will you protect me when the time comes, Alia?" she asked with a slightly mischievous smile.

My expression remained unchanged as my eyes briefly reflected her. "It's my job to protect you."

"Still cold as ever, I see." Despite her words, her smile widened slightly.

When we arrived at the building, I entrusted the carriage to the staff and escorted Elena inside. The surrounding students began to murmur among themselves. Those of sufficiently high rank would recognize Elena on sight, but they likely didn't know who I was, as I hadn't attended the entrance ceremony. All they saw was a lone female student escorting the princess. A few of them stepped forward, perhaps intent on putting me in my place, but froze when I casually swept my gaze across them.

"I couldn't have picked a better aide. I dislike needless commotion, you see," Elena said in a teasing tone, a small smile on her lips. "Look at them, Alia. They're not afraid of you—they're captivated."

I didn't respond. What was that supposed to mean? I shot her a mild glare, and she covered her mouth as though unable to suppress her amusement, chuckling softly.



***

"Ha!"

With a loud *thwack*, Elena's wooden sword struck the shield a male student was holding.

After spending the morning attending the political and economic classes Elena had selected, we had eaten lunch, then moved on to participate in our first-ever practical class. It was a coed self-defense class, and while noblewomen tended to lack melee skills, the high-ranking ones did learn self-defense growing up, so they weren't complete novices. Still, the physical differences between men and women made serious mock battles between them extremely impractical. That being said, young noblewomen who wanted to become knights or those living near frontier regions were often skilled enough to take down a grown wolf.

"That was incredible, Your Highness!" Elena's opponent exclaimed, his cheeks blushing softly.

"Thank you," she replied, wiping the sweat from her brow.

Her level of skill was sufficient for her role as princess; there was no need for her to acquire advanced swordsmanship. If she wanted to keep her improved condition a secret, she could've easily come up with an excuse to skip practical classes altogether. But, knowing that the nobility faction would continue to meddle no matter how much she distanced herself from them, Elena chose to demonstrate her strength and prove that she was no mere puppet. In so doing, she could maximize the number of allies she gained while at the academy.

Elena couldn't afford to back down—unless something happened and Crown Prince Elvan changed, the nation was sure to fall into chaos.

Her recovery after the dungeon expedition had been the pivotal moment when she'd decided to forsake her overly idealistic brother. She'd also resigned herself to the possibility of the tradition-oriented royalists—her brother's supporters—turning against her. By showcasing her academic abilities, leadership, and the qualities of a

ruler, Elena would gradually gain more support among the students. The early signs of this were already visible; it was impossible not to notice the budding admiration of her earlier opponent and the surrounding onlookers.

But the brighter Elena shone, the more strange individuals were bound to appear.

"You there!" shouted a tall female student in a knight's uniform, pointing the tip of her wooden sword at me. Rather than participating in the class, I'd been on standby, holding a cloth for Elena to wipe her sweat with. "I refuse to believe a lowborn mongrel like you has the power to serve as Her Highness's aide! I challenge you to a duel!"

That was fast...

Elena and I had already anticipated this kind of confrontation. I was the only attendant present, and she had no noble ladies in her entourage. Since I was a fellow student and close to Elena in age, people naturally assumed I was vying to be her close aide. The reality was that a princess aiming for the throne didn't choose her close aides lightly, but the others wouldn't see it that way.

Although my identity had been kept vague, it would take only a bit of investigation to determine that House Leighton had no girls my age. Which meant a peasant adopted into a low-ranking baronetcy was being considered for a highly sensitive role. Others were sure to be displeased.

The young noblewoman glanced briefly at Elena, then raised her voice. "Well? What's the hold up? Fight me!" she demanded in an obvious attempt at provocation.

If memory served, a report from the Order of Shadows listed her name as Sandra, from the Barony of Mars. House Mars supported the nobility faction and was an upstart military family, elevated from a low-ranked house to a barony for their achievements during the war with the demons several decades ago. They were famous for producing elite knights.

A close aide to the princess was also expected to act as a guard. Even if Sandra couldn't best me, she must've assumed that by demonstrating her loyalty and skill she could position herself as a

candidate too. Her reasoning wasn't entirely off, but had she been a bit more perceptive, she would've noticed the delicate political balance between the king's children. The savvier nobles had kept their contact with the princess discreet to avoid being seen as enemies by the prince's supporters.

I gave Elena a silent glance, and she nodded wordlessly with a small frown.

There was no point in considering someone who couldn't read the political climate as a prospective close aide. Besides, Elena would never choose someone who had gone out of her way to insult the attendant she had personally selected. Such behavior only made it obvious that Sandra didn't understand Elena at all.

"W-Wait!" shouted the instructor in charge, who had hurried over to intervene upon noticing the commotion. "Lady Mars! What do you think you're doing?! You can't engage in personal duels during class!"

"I beg to differ, sir," Sandra retorted. "This is about a noble's pride and way of life. Surely, as a fellow noble, you understand that?"

"Maybe so, but..."

The instructor, himself a former knight and a low-ranked noble, found himself cowed and struggled to rein Sandra in. He knew of my abilities and had exempted me from participating in the practical lessons, so he might've been trying to subtly defuse the situation before it escalated further.

But then an entirely unrelated figure interjected.

"Why not allow it? Lady Sandra bears the spirit of a true noble of our nation. Surely a lady of House Mars would prove more useful than that boorish girl over there. Do you not agree, Elena?" the interloper asked, a smile on his refined features as he addressed Elena and Sandra.

"Your Highness!" the instructor exclaimed, kneeling on the spot.

Sandra, taken aback by the sudden appearance of the handsome man, turned bashful in an instant and hurriedly bowed her head.

"What brings you to the academy, uncle?" Elena asked, her eyes widening slightly.

Her uncle Amor gave her a gentle glance before turning to me

with a somewhat twisted smile. “I had myself appointed an instructor to watch over you and Elvan. I’d thought perhaps, given how sensible you are, I wouldn’t need to worry about you much, but alas, there are too many dangerous elements here. I decided to start teaching this term.”

“I see...”

By “dangerous elements,” he’d likely meant me. Amor seemed to have harbored an aversion toward me ever since the dungeon incident.

“A young lady of House Mars could serve well as your bodyguard,” he insisted.

“Perhaps so, uncle,” Elena replied, her expression briefly going blank before a serene smile spread across her lips. “If she can prove herself superior to my handpicked guard, that is.”

“Very well,” Amor conceded with a sly grin. “However, to ensure fairness, both of them will use wooden swords of the same length. How does that sound?”

I usually fought with knives and daggers. Dagger Mastery and Sword Mastery were separate skills because the weapons had distinct centers of gravity and techniques. Without the appropriate skill, one could handle a weapon similar to one’s specialty at roughly Level 1 proficiency at best. From what I had gleaned, Sandra’s Sword Mastery was somewhere around Level 2. That was why Amor had meddled; it was a deliberate attempt to eliminate me flat out.

“The winner of the duel shall become Elena’s close aide. I trust you have no objections, Lady Sandra? And...you, girl?”

“None at all! Thank you, Your Highness!” Sandra exclaimed, already convinced of her victory. She flashed a triumphant smile as she smugly tossed a wooden sword toward me. “En garde!”

As soon as I grabbed the sword out of the air, Sandra charged at me, her own weapon raised. The instructor tried to intervene, since I hadn’t even assumed a stance yet, but Amor’s sharp glare stopped him.

My sword didn’t appear to have been tampered with, but when Sandra raised her weapon, her stance wavered slightly. It seemed likely that her wooden sword had an iron core or similar weight

hidden inside. Swung with force, it would hit as hard as an iron rod, and with our difference in skill levels, even blocking it would be difficult. But...

Thwack!

"Augh!"

Thanks to Boost enhancing my body and accelerating my thoughts, her sword looked as though it was moving in slow motion. I easily dodged its tip, then swung at her wrist and sent her heavy wooden sword flying.

She was far too slow for skill levels to matter. Not even a full breath had passed since the match began, and although her Sword Mastery skill allowed her to move at the speed of an average knight, our differences in physical agility, mental processing, and actual combat experience were too great.

Sandra collapsed to her knees, clutching her wrist. I tossed my wooden sword to the ground in front of her and returned to Elena. The princess gave me an amused smile, which didn't lose its edge as she turned it toward Amor.

"Uncle, I'm afraid this contest wasn't even worth entertaining."

"So it seems," Amor replied, his face scrunched up as though he were swallowing bitter medicine. He shot a glare at both Sandra and me before turning on his heel and walking away.

***

"Haven't I seen her somewhere before...?"

From the shadow of the building, a lone girl watched the events at the training grounds unfold. She wasn't admiring the princess, nor was she particularly interested in the exercise or the strange duel. She'd simply been following someone, which had led her to this spot by chance. What had caught her attention was one particular person: the girl with peach-tinted blonde hair. Something about her stirred a faint memory.

"But where?"

Before she'd come to the royal capital. Before she'd lived in her new family's estate. In the orphanage.

She hummed. “Ah, well.”

Her memories of the orphanage to the north were already fading. The overwhelming flood of knowledge and emotions she’d received from the aethercrystal had dulled the painful recollections, reducing them to a nondescript haze. Though she remembered her parents had worked at night, she no longer remembered their faces. She couldn’t even recall her own name.

But that was fine. She was destined to be the protagonist of this world, after all.

“Excuse me,” she called out, addressing the one she’d been following. “May I have a moment of your time?”

“Who are you?” Amor asked, rounding on her with a hint of irritation.

The girl responded with a carefree smile, gazing up at him in a way that was both innocent and alluring. “You looked like you were in such distress, I couldn’t help but speak to you. Has something happened?” She paused. “Oh, I’m so sorry. Am I bothering you?”

“N-No,” the prince stammered, unsettled by the girl’s bewitching-yet-childlike concern.

She smiled softly, as though relieved, and gently reached for his arm. Her fingertips brushed against the fabric of his clothes as her presence seeped into his frayed heart. “My name is Licia. We could...speak for a while, if you’d like.”

***

The Sorcerers’ Academy was abuzz with talk of a certain girl.

She was the only close aide whom the first princess, Elena, had brought with her. The girl’s beauty was comparable to Elena’s own—and the princess was renowned domestically and abroad for her elegance and charm. But the attendant wasn’t just there to look pretty; she had also instantly defeated a knight-in-training from a prestigious martial family in a mock duel, silencing any who might’ve underestimated her as a lower-ranked noble.

Winter was drawing to a close, and the afternoon was bright, with a gentle breeze brushing against the students’ cheeks. The

academy, said to be as large as a district of the royal capital, boasted not only various school buildings, training grounds, and student dormitories but also a commercial street lined with famous shops from the capital. These stores, rigorously inspected by the Order of Shadows, operated free of rent, allowing them to sell their goods at prices far lower than in their primary locations. This attracted large numbers of students on a daily basis.

On the terrace of one such shop, which served tea and sweets, the girl everyone was talking about sat at an outdoor table, enjoying a light snack while her eyes focused on a small notebook. The breeze stirred her pink-blonde hair softly as several passing students paused to look at her, drawn by her presence. Her uniform, featuring a long skirt that reached down to her ankles, marked her as an attendant to a high-ranking noble. Despite her youth, she carried an air of maturity that perfectly suited her.

The academy's students ranged from twelve to fifteen years old. At that age, boys and girls were keenly aware of the opposite sex, in addition to which younger girls often admired older, more sophisticated women. Still, no one seemed to want to disturb the peach-haired girl—not only because she was an unattainable beauty but perhaps because she exuded an air of dignity, like that of a flower too sacred to touch.

One girl did nevertheless approach. Anyone keeping up with recent events at the academy would have recognized her as the knight-in-training whom the peach-haired girl had defeated. Why had this aspiring knight waited until the princess's attendant was alone before making her move? Whatever her reasons, the interaction didn't seem hostile. The knight-in-training handed something like a letter to the peach-haired girl. Then, despite being a mid-ranked noble, she bowed repeatedly to the lower-ranked girl before leaving quietly.

***

"I trust you actually succeeded this time, Sandra."

"Y-Yes, Lord Rudolph."

In a section of the academy that was currently unused due to a shift in class schedules, Sandra sat across from a young high-ranking nobleman. Although not even nobles of his stature were permitted free use of the state-owned academy facilities, he'd made himself comfortable. Steaming cups of tea sat on the table before them, prepared by his attendants, of whom Rudolph had brought nearly ten to the academy, in a blatant attempt to flaunt his power by disregarding the rule limiting nobles to two at most.

These were no ordinary servants either. Their menacing stares gave Sandra the same uneasy feeling she'd once experienced when an older, rowdier friend had dragged her into seedy streets at night.

"If you'd succeeded in becoming a close aide to the princess, I wouldn't have had to go to such trouble," Rudolph spat sardonically.

"My sincerest apologies!" Sandra exclaimed, quickly bowing her head.

Sandra's family, House Mars, was a vassal barony to the Countdom of Haydel. Rudolph Haydel was a student of the knightly arts whose abilities as a Rank 2 placed him among the top academy attendees. With his family's connections, he could have easily aimed to become a captain of the elite Royal Guard. But that wasn't enough to satisfy Rudolph. His craving for recognition drove him to seek ties with the royal family.

And there was the declining economy of the Countdom of Haydel to consider as well. Rudolph's goal was to improve his family's standing and revitalize the countdom's finances by securing a marriage with the sickly princess, who was unlikely to marry abroad, thus simultaneously fulfilling his ambitions and sating his ego.

"I'll wipe the smug looks right off their faces," Rudolph muttered. Simmering just under the surface was a profound envy for other high-ranking nobles.

There were two prominent figures in Rudolph's year: Rockwell and Mikhail. Rockwell was the heir to the Margravate of Dandorl, while Mikhail belonged to the Margravate of Melrose—both noble houses that had once been royal families in their own right. As heirs to these influential families, the two were destined to hold critical positions in the future: grand general and prime minister,

respectively. From birth, they had been selected as close aides to the crown prince, Elvan.

Rudolph believed that the glass ceiling he had to contend with in the Royal Guard existed due to favoritism toward Rockwell. Being excluded from the crown prince's inner circle further fueled his resentment toward the two young men, both close friends of Elvan. Thus, an arranged marriage to Elena would serve as an act of revenge against the royal family for having overlooked him.

To that end, he'd pulled strings to position Sandra, a girl from one of his house's vassal families, as Elena's close aide. But the plan had been thwarted when a lower-ranked noble's *adopted* daughter, whom he'd initially dismissed as merely a decorative servant, easily defeated Sandra.

"Lord Rudolph," Sandra said, "the girl has accepted my apology and agreed to speak with me privately after class."

"Just like that?" he asked before leaning back arrogantly on the sofa and calling out to the man standing behind him. "Hey. Is everything ready?"

The man, who had been taking a report from someone else, turned around with an uneasy expression. "We may want to consider delaying the plan, young master."

"What?" Rudolph glared at the man. "What are you talking about, Gordon?"

Gordon shrugged noncommittally. Though he wore a steward's uniform in keeping with his role as Rudolph's caretaker, the man's demeanor and aura didn't align with those of an ordinary servant.

"That pink-haired girl is far too skilled for a student," Gordon said. "I've been digging into her past, but my informants in the capital have yet to reach out. Maybe she's with the Order of Shadows?"

"Hah! What is this, Gordon? Is the Thieves' Guild scared of a lone first-year girl?" Rudolph asked mockingly.

Gordon sighed—not at the provocation but at the careless mention of his affiliations. And he wasn't alone in this sentiment; most of Rudolph's supposed "attendants" weren't students either but operatives sent by the Thieves' Guild.

The Countdom of Haydel had once been prosperous and safe, but

the collapse of the local branch of the Assassins' Guild—which had been an informal partner of sorts to the countdom—had left a power vacuum. Bandits and criminals, previously kept at bay by their fear of the guild, had quickly moved to fill the void, plunging the region into chaos.

Count Haydel, concerned about the deterioration of law and order in his territory, had turned to the Thieves' Guild for assistance with maintaining public safety and securing funds for bribes. With the guild's involvement, the territory was safe once more, at least on the surface. The guild had begun to establish new operations in the region, funneling a portion of their profits to the countdom in exchange for political influence. While this enriched the territory's economy, it also attracted unsavory individuals, casting a shadow of corruption and decadence over the domain.

"I've sent people to probe into that girl's combat abilities," Gordon said cautiously. "We should at the very least wait until they report back. Worst case, I can scan her when she gets here. Until then, I'd hold off on any rash actions."

Gordon's gentle resistance further soured Rudolph's mood. "It doesn't matter how skilled she is when we have numbers and a magic drug on our side. It's ready, yes?"

"Yes," Gordon admitted reluctantly. "It's ready."

The reason Gordon and his operatives had followed Rudolph into the academy was to expand the distribution network for their magic drug—an addictive substance and their primary source of profits within Haydel. The drug, which provided a cheap sense of euphoria and intoxication, was gaining popularity among those who were too young to frequent taverns. While small doses were harmless, excessive consumption led to severe addiction. As a result, many promising youths, desperate for their next hit, would end up taking on illegal jobs for the Thieves' Guild, thus becoming a major source of income for the organization.

"Get her addicted. I'll make her my woman," Rudolph sneered, his face twisted with depravity.

Gordon gave a small sigh in response, whereas Sandra, who was already showing early signs of addiction, looked at the magic drug in

Gordon's hand with a mix of fear and yearning.

"So the magic drug trafficking *is* related to the Thieves' Guild after all," a female voice interrupted suddenly, causing everyone in the room to lift their heads in alarm.

"Who's there?!"

"Where are you?!"

The thieves spun around, searching the room for the source of the voice. A faint breeze led their gazes to the door, now slightly ajar, where the peach-haired girl stood cloaked in shadow.

The moment Gordon—a man all too familiar with the underworld—saw the girl, his face turned pale with recognition. "You..."

But Rudolph, panicking over his secrets being exposed, immediately moved to silence her.

"Seize her!" he commanded. "Get her hooked!"

Rudolph didn't order the men to *kill* her because he believed that once she was addicted, she could be easily controlled. He hadn't yet abandoned his desire for revenge and personal gratification.

That mistake sealed his henchmen's fate.

"Wait! Stop, all of you!" Gordon shouted, trying to rein in the thieves, who had reacted reflexively to Rudolph's command and lunged forward.

"Gah!"

Gordon's warning had come a moment too late. The girl glided forward gracefully in her long uniform and stabbed her fingers through the throats of two of the men mid-leap. Before their bodies could hit the floor, she tossed them to either side of her and continued forward in one smooth, flowing motion. She grabbed the jaw of a nearby woman and twisted her neck sharply to the side, breaking it with a brutal crack.

"Wh-What the hell?!"

"Th-This girl—"

Though still in shock and unable to grasp the situation fully, several of the thieves, instinctively realizing they were under attack, drew their weapons and rushed at the girl.

"Stop! Stop right now!!!" Gordon cried out desperately, but his pleas went unheard in the chaos.

The girl crushed one man's throat with her fingertips, incapacitated another with a kick to the groin, and shattered a woman's sternum with a palm strike as she continued to close in on Rudolph with lethal precision.

"Eee—" another man whimpered as he lunged at her, trembling with fear, only to get kneed in the face. The girl wrapped her arm around his neck from above, snapping it with a swift motion.

"What the..." Rudolph murmured, his voice quavering even as he stood frozen in place. The girl's pale fingers, now stained with blood, moved with such horrifying beauty that he couldn't tear his eyes away.

Suddenly, Rudolph felt thick arms wrap around his neck from behind. Before he could react, Gordon pressed a dagger to his throat.

"S-Stay back!" Gordon warned. "I'll kill this brat."

Rudolph stammered. "Wh-What are you—"

"Shut up! I'm not gonna die here for your little game! Fuck, what is a monster like you doing at an academy for kids?!"

"Gordon!" the nobleman protested.

"He may be an idiot, but he's still the son of a count! You don't want him dead! Stay back!" Gordon shouted, his voice a desperate mix of pleading and screaming.

Even if House Haydel was in decline, the death of a high-ranking noble on academy grounds would fall on the royal family's shoulders. It would only serve to embolden the noble faction, further compromising the balance of power.

"And you, Sandra! Is that sword just for show?! Kill her!" Gordon shouted, issuing contradictory orders in his panic—telling the peach-haired girl to step back while simultaneously telling Sandra to kill her.

Driven by her own confusion and lingering hatred for the girl, Sandra finally drew the sword at her hip—a real blade, this time—and charged. "Raaaaaaaah!"

With a sharp crack, the girl's palm struck Sandra's jaw, breaking it in an instant. As she crumpled to the ground, Sandra realized with bitter clarity that the girl had been holding back even during their mock duel.

Sandra’s attack had momentarily obscured the girl from Gordon’s view. By the time Sandra collapsed, the girl had vanished from sight—only to reappear next to Gordon and deliver a powerful kick that sent Rudolph flying sideways into a wall. At the same time, Gordon’s thick arms snapped like dry twigs.

It had all happened in the blink of an eye.

Gordon couldn’t even scream or curse. His wide eyes were fixed on the girl who now stood serenely before him, her peach-tinted blonde hair catching the light and blending with the swirling dust around them so that it took on a hue reminiscent of cinders in a fireplace. And then he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt—the girl who had annihilated a branch of the Assassins’ Guild. The one who’d crushed a combat-focused branch of the Thieves’ Guild. A figure so feared in the underworld that none who knew of her dared to oppose her. A force that had allegedly wiped out entire organizations, leaving none alive to exact revenge.

That was the girl who stood before him now. The girl no one dared to cross, for fear that their entire branch would be annihilated, with no one left to tell the tale. The girl no one should ever provoke.

“Lady Cinders...” Gordon muttered, his voice tinged with despair, as though the world were crumbling around him.

Rudolph had heard of her legendary exploits from both his father and the Thieves’ Guild. He sat collapsed against the wall, trembling and utterly paralyzed with fear. “P-Please... Don’t...”

“I won’t kill you,” the girl said flatly. “But make no mistake...”

For a moment, Rudolph’s eyes flickered with hope, only to meet the girl’s cold, expressionless gaze. Her piercing jade-green eyes, like shards of ice, swept over the fallen figures in the room.

“You are all under arrest for associating with the Thieves’ Guild. Do not expect the princess to be lenient with a noble who dared to bring criminals into the academy.”

Rudolph looked up at the breathtaking sight of the girl before him—terrifying and beautiful in equal measure.

▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 265/300 △ +30
Health Points: 234/250 △ +40
Strength: 10 (14) △ +1
Endurance: 10 (14) △ +1
Agility: 15 (22) △ +1
Dexterity: 8
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 4] △ +1
[Martial Mastery Lv. 4]
[Throwing Lv. 4] △ +1
[Bow Mastery Lv. 2] △ +1
[Guard Lv. 4]
[String Manipulation Lv.4]
[Light Magic Lv. 3]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 4]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4]
[Practical Magic ×6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4]
[Intimidation Lv. 4] △ +1
[Stealth Lv. 4]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 4]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 3]
[Status Resistance Lv. 1] NEW!
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 1,152 (Boosted: 1,440) △ +236

A Day Off

I wasn't the only member of the Rainbow Blade working at the academy.

As I approached my destination, I noticed a beautiful maid in her twenties disposing of trash near a smokeless alchemical incinerator. A middle-aged man, dressed in janitorial overalls, was speaking to her. Though she was cold toward him, he didn't seem disheartened at all. He crouched on the ground and took a puff of his pipe.

"Viro," I greeted him.

"Oh, Alia. You saw that, I'm guessing?"

"I did."

Why was this man such a great fit for this type of role?

"It's not what it looks like, okay? I'm just playing the role of an ordinary janitor, all right? Don't get the wrong idea! And don't go telling Sera or Chloe either!"

"I don't care about that. I'm here to report that the sting operation was successful."

A certain substance, referred to as a magic drug, had recently become a problem within the academy—particularly among lower-ranked nobles. Although the Order of Shadows had managed to identify the supplier, the ultimate culprit was a high-ranking noble family, making direct action difficult. I had used force to resolve the issue so Elena would receive credit for the achievement. Since Sandra had initially been implicated as an associate of the culprits, the incident with her during the practical lesson had proven useful.

"By the way, the king's younger brother was connected to the perpetrators," I pointed out.

There was no evidence that Amor was directly involved with distributing the drugs, but still. I hadn't been able to ascertain whether the story about him being a teacher was true.

Viro, however, seemed to know something.

"Ah, so he approached you, did he? I'm sure the timing was strange, but don't worry about him—he's clean."

"That's not surprising." Amor's actions had been haphazard; the only logical conclusion was that he wasn't involved.

"The bit about being a teacher seems to be true. The drugs thing was just a coincidence. And, well, as for the reason he became a teacher this year, I'd guess...it's you."

Witnessing the new powers that Karla and I had acquired seemed to have unsettled Amor in some way. He'd always been oddly protective of Elena, so I couldn't imagine him getting directly in her way, but I could see him trying to take me out of the picture instead.

"Also, I checked out the info you got from the Melrose kid. As part of this year's outdoor training, you'll observe the Royal Guard's Second Division carrying out exercises. Like the kid said, the knights will be providing security instead of the Order. You should focus on the royal family's safety."

I'd asked Viro to look into what Mikhail had told me during the entrance ceremony. It seemed Elvan, as usual, had refused protection from the Order. While I understood humans were emotional creatures, watching Elvan and Amor made me think that Elena was more sensible than her relatives, and had been even at age seven.

"Does the royal family include Karla, since she's the prince's fiancée?" I asked.

Karla and Clara had been given the same treatment as the royals during the dungeon expedition due to their status as the crown prince's fiancées. But did these two, Karla in particular, actually need protection?

Viro—who had very nearly ended up on Karla's list of kills—furrowed his brow in understanding. "I don't mean the spooky girl, no. I just mean that even if the students are just gonna be observing, something could come up that a noble instructor wouldn't be able to handle. That's why the crown prince's being sent to oversee it. There was talk of Prince Amor attending too, but he's in a difficult position, that one..."

I'd been wondering why the crown prince—a second-year student

—would be participating in an exercise for first-years. I figured making Elvan oversee things instead of Amor was likely an attempt to give the crown prince meaningful royal duties. Granted, Elvan was an upstanding person at heart, so he was better suited for the task than Amor anyway.

"You were chosen as a guard at Her Highness's request," Viro continued. "While Prince Amor's complaints have some weight, Princess Elena has greater influence as a royal, so there won't be any issues there."

"That's fine, then..."

"Look, I'm just saying, Prince Amor was never groomed to rule. We can't really compare him to the princess. Her education was on a whole other level."

"I'll try not to," I conceded with a firm nod. Perhaps Viro was right—I had unconsciously been making the comparison in my mind. After a pause, I spoke up again. "Hey..."

"Hmm?"

"I don't think I can hold back if I spar with the students."

"Oh, brother..." he muttered, regarding me with an expression of utter exasperation. "Look, when you get time off, go back to Sera's and spar with your 'little brother,' all right? I'll let Sera know."

"Ah. Makes sense."

Indeed, Theo was likely the perfect sparring partner for me. Besides, the items I'd commissioned were probably ready by now. I decided to take a day off and head for the royal capital.

***

I got permission from Elena to visit the Leighton estate in the royal capital on a day we didn't have class. The maids, already familiar with me, greeted me warmly.

"Welcome home, my lady."

"Hello," I replied.

Letting the maids look after me like they would any other young lady and practicing the manners expected of a noblewoman were part of my duties. I was sitting in my assigned chambers, elegantly

sipping tea and taking care to keep my gestures graceful, when the door burst open with a bang.

"Alia!!!" shouted a boy with tanned skin as he ran in.

I reached for his face, stopping him mid-leap. "I haven't seen you since the entrance ceremony, Theo. Were you able to take time off?"

"Alia, it's gonna crack! My head! You're gonna crack it!"

He'd lunged at me with such force that I hadn't been able to adjust my strength, I realized as I let go. Theo, now slightly teary-eyed, beamed at me and spread his arms wide. His face, now marked with my handprint, was radiating happiness. He'd been working as a guard for that strange noble girl, so we hadn't spoken in a while.

"I missed you, Alia!"

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▼ Theo Leighton
Species: Human♂ (Rank 3)
Aether Points: 125/130
Health Points: 141/180
Overall Combat Power: 299 (Boosted: 355)
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Theo worried often about the gap in power between us, but he was already quite impressive for his age at Rank 3. He seemed to have grown a bit taller too. At eleven, Theo was a year younger than me, but his body—like mine—had grown quickly thanks to his aether, making him look closer to a fourteen-year-old.

"You're still taller than me," he grumbled.

"I don't see the problem."

"There *is* a problem, okay?! It's bad enough that now you're my 'older sister'!"

"But you're still the heir, aren't you?" I asked, tilting my head.

I couldn't understand what he was so concerned about. I'd only been adopted for the duration of this job, so what was the issue?

"Th-That's not it at all! I don't care about being the heir or anything! Um, but maybe if you were the heir and I was your advisor, that could work..."

Theo seemed to fall into deep thought more often than before our reunion. Curious.

"Anyway," I said, "I wanted to spar."

"Oh, right, yeah. That's why you wanted to see me. Should we do it in the courtyard, you think? I can't spare too much time, but I can join you for about half a day."

The Baronetcy of Leighton, despite being a low-ranking noble house, was part of the Order of Shadows. Sera, for instance, served as the chief of security for the royal palace. As a result, they were wealthier than most mid-ranked families. Even their estate in the royal capital—merely a secondary residence—had many servants and a vast courtyard that could double as a training ground.

"I have some things I need to pick up today, so I figured I'd rent the training grounds at the Adventurers' Guild," I explained. "I've called Feld over, so you can spar with him too, Theo."

"Wait. What?!" Theo exclaimed, caught completely off guard. He seemed deeply unsettled, muttering under his breath, "Come on, Alia. Not that man again..."

Theo had his own reasons for feeling uneasy about Feld, it seemed. Since he was just standing there in a daze, I had no choice but to grab him by the collar and drag him to the Adventurers' Guild.

***

"So, how's it going with that noble girl?" I asked curiously as Theo and I walked through the royal capital.

Theo, now back to his senses, replied, "A-Are you bothered that I've been spending time with another gir—"

"Something's off about her," I interrupted.

Theo looked crestfallen for some reason.

While that girl's combat power was no different from an ordinary person's, I had a bad feeling about her. I hoped she wouldn't become a problem, but if Theo couldn't handle her, things might turn sour.

"Honestly, I'm kind of uncomfortable around her," he admitted. "She acts...overly familiar. She touches me all the time, and

sometimes I don't get what she's saying."

"What does Sera think?"

"Mom says she's a young lady in a difficult position, so I need to be good and guard her as best as I can regardless of what I think about her."

I doubt that's all Sera really thinks...

The uncharacteristically neutral assessment made me even warier. Who was this girl whom the Order of Shadows had felt the need to assign Sera's own son to guard?

That being said, between that girl and Amor, it seemed like a lot of the people around me were in difficult positions...

***

It wasn't spring yet, but in the Kingdom of Claydale, located in the southern part of the continent, it never got cold enough to snow. I was wearing only a light coat over my uniform as I gently pushed open the door to a shop.

"Gelf, are you here?" I called out into the seemingly empty store.

Soon the clicking of heels rang out in the distance, almost like a horse's hooves striking the ground. A middle-aged male dwarf, wearing a mermaid-style red dress and high heels, stepped out of the back.

"Oh my, if it isn't Alia!" he exclaimed. "And you have a cute boy with you today! How's life as a noble lady treating you?"

"It's going fine. Is my order ready?" I asked.

"Taciturn as ever, aren't we? Yes, yes, it's ready. I used the latest design from Dandorl as a base and added my own twist to it. Come, let's go to the back. I'll teach you how to put it on. And you, boy?" Gelf asked, winking at Theo with his long eyelashes. "Do you want to try something on too?"

Theo frantically shook his head.

Despite his eccentricities, Gelf was a first-rate craftsman—a crag dwarf skilled in armorsmithing whose specialty was beautiful gear he wished he could wear himself. Even Dalton acknowledged Gelf's skill, though he for some reason refused to come visit the shop.

I'd asked Gelf to enhance my armor using materials I'd gotten from the dungeon and to craft some lightweight armor I could wear under my uniform. Specifically, I'd commissioned a bustier made of mithril fiber, similar to the one Sera had worn on the expedition. At the academy, I could no longer wear my black leather dress and instead had to wear either the academy uniform or a royal palace maid uniform like Sera's. Their low defensive capabilities made me uneasy, so I'd come to Gelf.

"For maintenance, you should either soak it in water or use the spell Cleanse," he explained. "The mithril fiber will draw on your aether to restore itself to an extent, but the silk parts won't, so be mindful."

"Got it."

"And here, have these too. I had some materials left over."

Gelf handed me a pair of lightweight tights, also made of mithril fiber. They were so thin as to be nearly transparent, and they clung tightly to my legs—close in appearance to what that woman's knowledge referred to as "stockings." They were meant to be held in place by something similar to a garter belt.

"Is the payment enough?" I asked, concerned. "These must be worth a fortune."

Making fiber out of mithril was a highly specialized technique, and Gelf was one of only five craftsmen in the kingdom who could do it. Although the bustier was made of mixed fabric woven with silk threads, it had still taken several large gold coins' worth of mithril to craft a single piece.

"My brother took care of that," Gelf explained. "You gave him plenty of coin, didn't you? He sent me half of it along with your weapons and told me to use it for this."

So once again, Galvus didn't take the full payment...

The Rainbow Blade had received a large sum from the royal family as a reward for the dungeon expedition. I'd also been personally awarded the broken horn of the minotaur destroyer—a Rank 6 monster—that Dalton had snapped off. Since Karla had incinerated much of the creature, what could be salvaged had been claimed by the royal family. But Elena had spoken directly to the king

and gotten permission to give me the horn fragment as a personal reward.

Horns, teeth, and other parts of high-ranked monsters and mythical beasts often contained minerals that such creatures absorbed, making them a special type of metal. When refined, this metal could rival mithril and magic steel in hardness and surpass other rare metals in aether conductivity and regenerative properties.

I unwrapped the leather bundle Gelf handed me, revealing the black knife and dagger I'd left with Galvus. When I gently drew them from their sheaths, the two jet-black blades emitted a faint crimson glow.

"Wow..." I marveled.

"Right? Those weapons are reinforced with adamantite."

Adamantite was the name of a rare "living metal" that could only be extracted in minute quantities from high-ranked monsters. Only dwarves possessed the skill to work with it, and when I'd first shown the broken horn to Galvus, he'd explained that the adamantite content wouldn't have been enough to craft entirely new weapons. Instead, he'd suggested using it to reinforce my black knife and dagger.

I couldn't tell exactly where or how they'd been enhanced, but it was clear their new quality was on a completely different level from the plain magic steel of before. Just from holding them, I knew they'd be able to slice through an ogre's hide, perhaps even chain mail.

"Thank you," I said. "All of this will really help in combat."

"I believe in you, Alia! You'll master these weapons in no time at all. Oh, and one last thing!" Gelf handed me a carefully wrapped paper bag. "A little gift from me to celebrate your enrollment at the academy."

"Huh?"

"Women need to be brave! Wear this when it's time for conquest!"

I silently stared at the contents—ten pairs of tiny drawers made of pure-white silk that tied at the sides, supposedly the kind that was popular in Dandorl.

Just what kind of "conquest" was he talking about?

***

"H-Hurry up, Alia! Let's go!"

Although Theo was uncomfortable with the idea of visiting the Adventurers' Guild, he seemed even more uncomfortable with the idea of lingering in a ladies' boutique. He grabbed my arm and hastily dragged me out of Gelf's shop, almost as if fleeing.

Theo held on to my arm as we walked, and people's gazes began to turn to us. Our attire probably contributed to the attention. I was still wearing my academy uniform, which I'd put on to try out the mithril bustier, and my hair was free of ash. Theo, meanwhile, wore a steward uniform that indicated he was a servant to a noble family, and like me, he looked like a young adult due to his aether-fueled growth. We naturally stood out.

Even at the guild we attracted attention. While the majority of the adventurers who frequented the branch in the capital were highly skilled, it also had its fair share of self-proclaimed "powerful" adventurers visiting from other regions. Though many at the guild had come to recognize me over the years, the constant influx of travelers meant there were always clueless newcomers there as well.

"Since when is the Adventurers' Guild a place for little ladies to have secret trysts with their butlers?" asked a man in his thirties with a shaved head, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Though this was the capital, any branch of the guild was bound to be a rough-and-tumble place. It wasn't uncommon for overconfident newcomers to target younger adventurers, nor was it unusual for Rank 1 academy students to pick up odd jobs at the guild for pocket coin. As soon as the man's voice reached the reception desk, however, a familiar receptionist saw me and visibly paled. She frantically tried to leap over the counter, but before she could, the man squared his shoulders and began to approach me.

"You know, now that I look at you, you're a pretty little thing, huh? How about you and I—"

Crack.

“Aliaaaaaaa?!” a horrified Theo screamed in a strangled tone as he watched me grab the man’s jaw and twist it sideways.

“Someone call a healer!” the receptionist shouted in alarm as she rushed over.

The other adventurers in the guild looked at the collapsed man with a mix of exasperation and fear but nevertheless sprang into action, as though used to this type of situation.

“He’s fine,” I said. “I just twisted his neck a little. It’s not broken.”

“That was a pretty loud crack, though!”

When someone had more muscle mass than flexibility, joints could make loud noises like that. As guild staff and guards hurriedly carried the man away, the receptionist approached me from behind.

“Alia,” she muttered. “Please be a little less aggressive next time.”

“Sorry, Mary...” Learning how to hold back was the exact reason that I’d wanted to spar.

Mary was the receptionist from the Adventurers’ Guild in the Barony of Horus who’d helped me during the orc incident. I wasn’t privy to the details, but apparently she’d been transferred to the royal capital through Viro’s connections. She’d since been assigned to handle all my needs—and Viro’s—at the guild.

“Well, you *are* an adventurer, so I won’t keep nagging,” she said. “By the way, Mr. Feld is already waiting for you at the training grounds out back. They’re reserved for your group, so take your time.”

“Got it,” I replied. “Thanks.”

The fact I was a young girl occasionally led to trouble like this, but Mary seemed to take it all in stride. Theo, meanwhile, looked nervous around the beautiful older woman. He gave her a small nod of thanks when she smiled at him.

***

“Hey, Alia. Up to no good again?” Feld asked casually. He was already out on the training grounds, practicing swings with his greatsword.

“I don’t...think so?” I replied, tilting my head.

“No, she definitely was,” Theo interjected without missing a beat. Feld’s eyes narrowed with amusement.



"So, what's the plan?" Feld asked. "Gonna give the Iron Rose another spin?"

Occasionally I would test my combat technique, Iron Rose, to see how it behaved during combat and how it interacted with sorcery. Feld often helped me with these experiments. Since the technique boosted my combat power significantly, it wouldn't have been very efficient to test it with people under Rank 5. I wanted to run more tests, but Theo was with me this time, and he couldn't stay away from his charge for long, so I figured it was best to focus on the original purpose of our visit.

"All right, then," Feld said. "Let's start with—"

"Sir Feld!" Theo interrupted. "Please spar with me!"

And before I could say anything, Theo and Feld began sparring, completely ignoring me even though I'd asked them both to come here so *I* could train...

***

It was as though I wasn't even there.

Clang! Crash!

"What's the problem, kiddo?" Feld asked. "That all you've got?"

"No way!"

Although Theo was holding his ground, he'd only just reached Rank 3 and was still far from Feld's level of skill—and Feld had grown even stronger since our dungeon expedition too.

Theo specialized in hand-to-hand combat. While I engaged in similar combat using Martial Mastery, for me, it was supplementary to my dagger techniques. My focus was mainly on evasion and parrying. He, meanwhile, used his Level 3 Brawling Mastery skill paired with Martial Mastery in an unorthodox fighting style that really suited his personality. The biggest difference between us, though, was that he could use those Brawling Mastery techniques.

Feld...looked like he was having fun. He was good with kids and enjoyed teaching, so I figured training Theo was a joy to him.

Although this wasn't helping me practice holding back, watching Feld fight was still a little educational. Since I had no real alternative,

I observed them closely.

Soon, a familiar presence came from the direction of the entrance.

"Is something the matter, Mary?" I asked. It had barely been fifteen minutes since we'd parted ways.

"I just received some intel that Viro requested," she said. "Could you deliver it to him at the academy?"

"Sure." I took what appeared to be a letter from her. "Am I allowed to read this, though?" If Viro had requested this personally, wouldn't it have been better to hand it to him directly?

Mary chuckled softly. "The Rainbow Blade commissioned it. And since you're a scout like Viro, it's probably fine for you to have a look. Besides, Viro specifically instructed me to hand it to him *or* you."

"I see..."

I'd been gradually taking over Viro's duties, as he had begun to consider retiring from adventuring. While I wasn't fully familiar with his information network and sources yet, I nevertheless decided to take a look and perused the letter in silence for a moment.

"Is it bad news?" Mary asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," I replied.

This was definitely something I should have been looking over.

***

"Whoa, look at the time!" Theo exclaimed another quarter hour or so later. "Sorry, Alia! I'll come again soon!"

He rushed off in a panic to return to work, bringing today's training session to an early close.

"That kid's going places," Feld remarked. "I hope he becomes an adventurer someday." Though the match had clearly put him in a good mood, his expression shifted suddenly as he walked toward me. "Is something the matter, Alia?"

"No, nothing."

"Hey!"

To divert Feld's attention, I moved behind him and hopped up

onto his shoulders, draping my torso over his head and making him pause mid-step.

"Oh, come on, Alia! Don't act like a child," he protested.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

He sighed lightly and adjusted his posture to carry me more comfortably. "I forget that you *are* still a kid."

Ever since Feld had lifted me up in the dungeon, I'd grown fond of the wide vantage from his shoulders. I knew it was childish, but I'd nevertheless gotten into the habit of climbing onto his shoulders every so often. Today, in particular, though, I wasn't just interested in the view from above; I was also having trouble masking my expression, so this was perfect.

The intel mentioned threats that might arise during the upcoming outdoor training exercise. It also implied Elena's life could be at risk, with a certain individual potentially being involved. Someone I'd once lost to, fought again, and failed to kill. Someone who had challenged me to show my true worth and threatened Elena to make it happen.

Graves, the madman.

I would be hunting him down of my own accord this time.

Corrupted Event, Part One

The outdoor training exercise was a tradition for first-years at the Sorcerers' Academy. On the surface, it was simply an annual observation and inspection—nothing out of the ordinary. The details of the exercise were kept from students until the last minute due to concerns over potential kidnappings and attacks, especially given the participation of high-ranking nobles.

"It's not surprising my brother will be involved, given his position," Elena remarked. "But...I didn't expect my uncle to want to take part as well. I dislike the fact that his appointment as an instructor was only communicated to us after the fact, but...I'm glad that's been dealt with."

I had told Elena the news about Amor while we were coordinating over tea on the terrace of her academy lodgings, and she'd reacted by pressing her fingers to her temples as though to stave off a headache.

"I don't think he'll do anything foolish, but be careful, Alia. That man might try to get you away from me based on some nonsense reason, driven by his personal feelings."

"Can he really override a royal decree?"

"Perhaps, if he were to exploit a weakness or resort to brute force..." Elena trailed off, then looked at me with an amused smile. "Neither of those things would work on you, of course."

As she finished speaking, her butler Yosef began pouring fresh tea into her cup. "Your Highness, I've just received some additional information which may be related to the matter at hand."

"What is it, Yosef?"

"The training exercise will involve observing drills in a location far from the royal capital. It is expected that noble ladies of high-ranked families will decline to participate. Given this fact, it is likely that Your Highness will be placed in the same group as the noble ladies

without personal carriages of their own. But there is one young gentleman who has been added to that group as well."

"And who might that be?" Elena asked, her graceful smile taking on an almost intimidating edge as she tried to discern the implication behind Yosef's words.

"Lord Nathanital, grandson of the ordained baron who currently serves as the high priest of the royal capital's branch of the Holy Church. The recommendation came directly from His Highness Prince Amor."

"Oh dear."

The high priest of the Holy Church was an "ordained" baron? My knowledge didn't cover what exactly this entailed, but judging from Elena's expression, it was safe to assume that an ordained baron was higher in rank than a typical baron.

"I recall playing with him during a visit to the Holy Church as a child," Elena said with a nostalgic sigh. "At first, I mistook him for a young lady. He was quite adorable and delicate. I placed a flower crown on his head, only for him to burst into tears." She paused. "I know my uncle is a devout follower of the Holy Church, but what could he possibly be thinking?"

Though Elena's musings ended in a question, her weary expression suggested she'd already deduced some of the answer.

In my opinion, this was likely a scheme to keep Elena away from earthly matters by placing her in the sanctuary of the temple. If, as I suspected, an ordained baron was regarded as similar in status to a count, this might even involve plans for a marriage alliance orchestrated by Amor—completely disregarding the wills of both Elena and the king.

"For now, we'll remain vigilant. We can't have people acting purely on emotion. Their actions become unpredictable," Elena concluded.

Yosef, Chloe, and I all nodded in silent agreement.

Elena had very few trusted allies. Besides these two, who had cared for her since birth, and Sera, whom she'd brought as a retainer to the dungeon, there were almost none. Perhaps that was why she kept someone as dubious as me by her side. She couldn't

even count on her own parents or brother.

I silently renewed my resolve to protect her heart.

***

Deep in a shadowy forest, a figure that appeared to be a woman cloaked entirely in black spoke the common tongue with a heavy accent, pausing between words.

"Are preparations complete?"

"How many times must I ask for your trust?" replied another woman, similarly shrouded. "Their group remains ready to strike. Our own forces are in place. You have nothing to worry about."

Although these two women were cooperating with each other, they were by no means allies. They belonged to different organizations and had different objectives—but, because these goals overlapped, they'd chosen to act together.

"I've done my part. Now ensure you can use what I've given you. With stats like yours, it should far exceed the power of any weapon you've used before."

"Understood."

The black-clad woman swung a chain made entirely of magic steel. Moving with a force that was nothing short of extraordinary, the chain left deep gashes in the trunks of nearby trees. The other woman, who had given the first woman the weapon and explained how to use it, pulled out a thin mithril chain for her own use. Beneath her cloak, her burn-scarred skin was visible, alongside a lone eye emanating pure hatred.

I will *kill you, Lady Cinders.*

***

Another month passed without issue. Just as the first few signs of spring began to emerge, the Royal Guard's training exercise was announced. It was scheduled to take place in neutral territory—a grassland located between the crown's domain around the royal capital and the March of Wancarl. The area was considered

inhospitable due to unimpeded sea winds, and so no one took issue with it being used for training exercises.

As expected, most of the female students—for whom participation was optional—were unwilling to travel to a remote location from which the nearest inn was three days away by carriage. Only a few girls signed up. The academy had suggested that perhaps the group of girls could all travel together, but when Karla announced her participation, the idea had been dropped.

On the day of the departure, Elena, myself, two other female students, and a boy named Nathanital—the grandson of a high priest—gathered to share a carriage. Nathanital seemed to have some sort of complex about his feminine features and his height; he was shorter than even Elena. He looked displeased that he had to ride in the same carriage as the female students.

I don't mind him, as long as he doesn't become a problem, I thought as I loaded Elena's luggage into the carriage.

An unfamiliar presence approached me from behind. A young man who looked like a knight asked, "Excuse me. Aren't you Lady Alia?"

"I am. May I help you?" I replied in a tone befitting my station as a high-ranking handmaiden.

The handsome young man smiled politely. "I'd like to discuss the matter of security during the journey. Might you spare a few minutes?"

"Of course."

Apparently, the young knight was a squad leader of the first company of the princess's escort unit, which was in turn part of the Royal Guard's Second Division. Why would he need to talk to me? It wasn't public knowledge that I was guarding the princess. Had he somehow found that out?

Accompanied by his subordinates, all of whom wore impressively ostentatious gear—presumably due to being on escort duty—the knight led me toward a building on campus that served as the knights' station.

"There isn't much time before departure," I pointed out.

"This won't take long," he said. "Besides, the Second Division is

assisting with preparations for Her Highness's carriage, so I don't believe there will be any issues."

With an apologetic smile, he led me to what appeared to be a reception area within the station.

"Would you care for some tea?" he offered. "We have fine tea leaves imported from Kal'Faan. We could brew it with sugar and spices, as is customary there. It's a bit of an acquired taste but quite enjoyable once you grow used to it."

"I thought you wanted to discuss the journey?" I said calmly, showing no emotion.

He shrugged lightly. "I'm sure Her Highness would permit us a moment of leisure for tea. Ah, where are my manners? I seem to have neglected to introduce myself. My name is Joey. I confess I'm quite eager to hear of the exploits of the youngest-ever adventurer to join the Rainbow Blade."

I kept my tone quiet and even. "How do you know about that?"

Joey paused for a moment, perhaps having been struck speechless by something in my demeanor. "His Highness mentioned that you are a highly skilled Rank 4 scout."

"I see..."

That man again. Information leaks were always a nuisance, but doubly so when someone with status and entirely too much free time was involved.

Joey's subordinates brought over the tea, which had a peculiar aroma. I took a small sip from the cup offered to me, then gently placed it back on the table, casting a half-lidded gaze in their direction.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"You've barely touched your tea. Shall I have something light prepared for you to eat?"

I dropped all pretense of politeness. "Did someone order you to stall me like this?"

"What are you implying?" Joey was still smiling, as though I'd just cracked a joke, but malice flickered faintly across his face. At the same time, a subtle commotion arose outside the room.

Unbothered, I lightly tapped the rim of my cup. "There's a

sleeping drug in here. Why do that to the princess's bodyguard?"

At that moment, the door burst open with a loud *bang*, and Joey's subordinates stormed into the room. Joey himself drew his sword, stepping in front of his men and pointing the blade at me with a mocking smile as I rose from my seat.

"So you have Poison Resistance, do you? I guess I shouldn't have underestimated you just because you're a young woman. Our orders were to avoid killing the princess's associates if possible. Surely you know that a scout like you, Rank 4 or no, doesn't stand a chance against trained knights in a confined space like this. Surrender."

Scouts were often seen as inferior in combat to fighters and sorcerers of the same rank. In a direct confrontation, a fighter-type would likely have the upper hand.

"Are you after the princess?"

Joey's expression tightened minutely. "We're knights of this kingdom. We would never harm Her Highness. But our goals require that the crown prince step aside and the princess take her place as our leader. We've arranged a meeting to persuade her, and you...are an obstacle to that. Stand down."

"So you're with the nobility faction. Who do you work for?"

The atmosphere among the knights changed immediately.

"Do it," Joey commanded. "Break her arms and legs if you must!"

The knights began to move, but before they could react, I stepped forward, drew my black knife from Shadow Storage, and slashed at Joey's throat.

"You threaten Elena, you die."

***

"Your Highness," called out the captain of the Second Division's Fifth Company, sent as part of the princess's escort unit. "The preparations for departure are complete. We're on a tight schedule, so we should be on our way soon."

"Already?" Elena asked from her seat on an outdoor bench. "But Alia has yet to return. She's supposed to accompany me. Can we not wait for her?"

The trip was intended for the heirs of barons and above. Alia, as an adopted daughter from a baronetcy, wasn't eligible to participate. But nobles from countdoms and above were allowed to bring one companion each, and Elena had, naturally, chosen Alia.

As a member of the royal family, Elena could've easily demanded that she be permitted to bring multiple guards, but she'd chosen to lead by example. Besides, with an elite force of forty knights of the Second Division acting as her escort, she'd deemed Alia sufficient for her personal guard.

While a company was normally composed of around two hundred soldiers, this number included infantry, and given the constraints of travel by carriage, the escort for this trip consisted only of cavalry. Nevertheless, forty knights were sufficient protection for a few days.

Though the princess had asked her question in a calm and dignified tone, the captain smiled wryly, as though addressing a willful child. "Please consider the other students already waiting in their carriages, Your Highness. Alia can be sent after us in a separate carriage. I assure you, she will catch up at the next rest stop. You will see her soon."

"I see..."

The unit tasked with the princess's protection was composed of the most elite soldiers within the already elite Second Division. All squad leaders in the unit were Rank 3, and the Fifth Company's commander, Rutger, was one of the few Rank 4 knights in the entire order despite being in his early thirties. Not only that, he was a baron—his words could not be easily dismissed.

"Very well, then. I leave matters in your capable hands for the duration of the journey. Please ensure that Alia rejoins us before the day's end."

"Of course, Your Highness. As you command."

Although Elena felt a sense of unease, as a royal, she couldn't afford to constantly be distrustful of others' intentions. Besides, with the other students already in their carriages, it would've been difficult to insist on waiting for Alia.

With that, Elena boarded the royal carriage, leaving Alia—her sword and shield—behind. Already seated inside the carriage were

two young ladies belonging to noble houses without male heirs, one from a barony and one from a viscountcy, as well as Nathanital, the grandson of an ordained baron.

"It has been quite some time, Nathanital," Elena said casually. "How fares the high priest?"

"A-Ah, Your Highness! Grandfather is quite well!" replied the petite boy, as delicate-looking as the young ladies in the carriage. He was visibly nervous.

"I see you've come without an escort."

Because of their religious affiliation, ordained barons owned no territory, but nevertheless, Nathanital's family was treated with honors similar to those afforded to counts. He could've easily requested an escort had he so wished.

But the boy quickly dismissed the notion. "Ah, yes, but I am a man of the cloth first and a noble second! I have been taught to handle my own affairs!"

"I see."

From Nathanital's expression and tone, Elena could tell that his words, while admirable, had been strongly influenced by the church's dogma—and men of the cloth often looked down upon the nobility's more worldly ways. She suppressed her disappointment and decided not to pursue the conversation further.

Sensing the shift in the atmosphere, the other young ladies chose to remain silent as well. Left with nothing to occupy her time, Elena gazed out the carriage window, only to notice something peculiar: The carriage, which should have exited the southern gate, then turned eastward, was instead moving through a forest.

"Where is this carriage headed?" she asked the coachman through the small window at the front. "Judging by the sun's position, we seem to be heading south."

The soldier in charge of the reins spoke to someone. Moments later, without the carriage stopping, the door opened and Rutger, who had been riding next to it, climbed in from his horse.

"My apologies, Your Highness, but I must request that you cooperate."

"You...!"

“We shall be taking you to a certain location. As long as we have your compliance, the other students’ safety is assured.”

***

“What?!”

“No!”

“You killed Joey!”

As Joey collapsed to the ground, his throat slit in an instant by the bloodied knife still in my hands, the other knights all directed their rage at me.

“How dare you!” snarled one knight, likely a close friend of Joey’s, as he lunged at me with his sword.

I sidestepped his thrust with minimal movement, then drove the black knife into his throat.

“Dammit! Stay on guard!”

“She’s just a scout! Surround her! Don’t let her escape!”

“Yes, sir!”

Joey, the late leader of the squad, had been about Rank 3. The others all had roughly 200 overall combat power, placing them on the upper end of Rank 2 by my estimation. They weren’t backing down, despite Joey and their other comrade’s deaths, likely due to a combination of anger and misplaced confidence in their superiority.

Outdoors, facing fighters of the same rank as myself, I’d have prioritized keeping my distance and splitting them up to take them down one by one. But in a confined space like this, where my ability to maneuver was limited, those with shields and armor typically would have had the advantage. Even with the disparity in rank, these men believed they could defeat me, their confidence bolstered by their armor and the fact I looked like a slender young girl.

Those assumptions were flawed. Confined spaces didn’t make evasion impossible.

“What?!”

As several blades closed in on me simultaneously, I spotted the fastest one and deflected its tip with my knife. I placed a hand on the head of the knight who had rushed in first and launched myself

upward, dodging into the limited space overhead. As soon as I landed upside down on the high ceiling, I pivoted firmly with my feet, then twisted my body in a full rotation, snapping the neck of the knight I'd grabbed. My skirt fluttered with the motion, distracting the knights as I pulled the black dagger from its sheath strapped to my calf.

With the knife in one hand and the dagger in the other, I drove both blades into the temples of the knights to my left and right before descending gracefully, my skirt billowing around me.

"Wh-What the..."

"How is a scout this strong?!"

"And a little girl too!"

Only three soldiers remained now. They'd have to lay their lives on the line if they wanted to overcome the disparity in rank between us. But unfortunately for them, while I might have been classified as a scout-*type*, I was not a *scout*. And although the knights were armored, their armor was light—chain mail with breastplates and gauntlets, rather than the full plate worn on a battlefield. An *assassin* could take advantage of any amount of exposed skin and go for the kill.

Before they could recover from their confusion, I slipped into their midst and drove the dagger into one knight's flank above his chain mail, then slashed another knight's throat with the knife. Using the attack's momentum, I kicked off the ceiling again, flipped over the knight whose throat I'd just cut, and propelled myself toward the man behind him. My loafer's hard heel smashed into his face with such force that it caved his skull in.

"You're the last one," I said, pointing my bloodstained knife at the remaining knight, who was down on one knee, bleeding profusely from the dagger wound in his flank. "Where are you taking Her Highness?"

The knight glared at me, sweat rolling down his face. "Don't think you can break me," he muttered. "We who align ourselves with the nobility faction lament the state of this kingdom! Torture me if you want, but I will never betray—"

"Then die."

I cut his throat cleanly, ending his life before he could end his sentence. If not even torture could have swayed him, trying to get him to talk would've been a waste of time. I didn't care what convictions these knights of the nobility faction had; they had turned their blades on the royal family knowing that the punishment—even for the lowest-ranking of them—would have been execution. And even if I had somehow managed to extract information from someone who'd been prepared for death all along, I'd have had no time to check its veracity.

"Elena," I whispered.

After confirming that Joey had nothing on him, I ran back toward the meeting point outside, looking for Elena. Unsurprisingly, the carriages were already gone. I saw faint tracks on the ground and immediately took off in their direction.

At the academy's southern gate, I confirmed that Elena's carriage had passed through. I showed the gatekeepers an insignia proving my affiliation with the royal family and asked them to rush a message to Yosef, the steward at the princess's estate, then continued to follow the tracks. But once I reached the forest, the tracks mingled with several others, making them impossible to follow any farther.

Which way did they go? Am I missing anything? I wondered, pushing my Detection skill to its limit as I scanned my surroundings. I sensed something watching me from afar—something not human.

I turned around and focused on the shadows deep within the forest.

"Nero...?"

Out of the darkened woods, by coincidence or fate, emerged a mystical coeurl—Nero, as I had named it. It stood there silently, its piercing gaze directed straight at me, inquisitive. In the dim early morning light, we stared at each other, as if each were verifying the other was really there. Slowly, I raised my black dagger and pointed it toward Nero.

"If you intend to stand in my way, we'll fight. If not—"

Clang!

In a flash, Nero's whiplike whiskers lashed out from the shadows,

clashing with my blade. As our movements intertwined, I shifted my stance and thrust the dagger directly at Nero's forehead.

"Help me, Nero."

"...Yes..."

With that single word, Nero swiftly moved to my side, its speed belying its massive form. It sniffed the ground where the carriage's tracks had ended.

"Can you tell where they went?"

"Grr..." it growled. I thought perhaps it was asking me, *Why wouldn't I be able to tell?*

Why did it side with me? Had I earned its respect during our battle? Before, when we'd parted ways, Nero had called me "moon." The dungeon spirit had called me a "child of Melrose"—and a melrose was a flower also known as the "moon rose." Even Karla had once said that I was "just like the moon" and that creatures of the night reached for me.

What image did they have of me, I wondered?

"Let's go, Nero."

"...Yes...Moon..."

Nero sprang into motion, following the tracks, and I ran alongside it. After some time, deeper in the forest, we came across two knights attempting to force two female students into a carriage.

"Nero!"

"Groooooooooooar!"

Nero's roar made the knights flinch and spin around. Seizing the opportunity, I rushed forward, shouting instructions to the female students.

"Get down!"

The enemy knights, confused by my sudden command, hesitated—but the two girls instinctively obeyed and threw themselves to the ground. Using Boost, I wrapped my pendulum around a tree branch to spring up, and, distracted by tracking my movement, the knights failed to notice Nero's massive body barreling toward them at full speed. The collision sent them flying in opposite directions.

"Begone."

I swung toward the airborne knights and wrapped the strings of

two pendulums around each of their necks mid-flight. Using the centripetal force to twist my body and kick off the air itself, I snapped their necks. I released the strings, letting their bodies fall into the depths of the surrounding forest.

The girls were the noble ladies who had been sharing a carriage with Elena. Why were they here?

"Are you two all right?" I asked.

"Y-Yes," managed the viscount's daughter, despite trembling in fear of Nero's imposing presence.

The baron's daughter gasped and quickly said, "The princess and the priest's grandson are still being held captive! They got rid of us, saying we were in the way..."

"Where have they taken Princess Elena?"

"That way! They can't have gone too far!"

I glanced in the direction the baron's daughter indicated for a moment, then turned back to the pair. "Stay in that carriage. Reinforcements are on the way."

"Understood!"

"Please, help the princess!"

I nodded to them, then called to Nero without looking back. "Let's go, Nero."

"Grr!"

Watching us resume our pursuit, the two girls clasped their hands as if in prayer.

To ensure I wouldn't miss any clues, I climbed into the trees, leaping from branch to branch while scanning the surroundings. Eventually, I spotted an open clearing in the forest, where a large tent—the kind used on the battlefield—had been erected. We adjusted our course toward it.

With a sharp *clang*, Nero's whiskers deflected an incoming arrow.

So they have archers as sentries, I thought. These were definitely not ordinary bandits.

I pinpointed the direction the arrow had come from and pulled a crossbow loaded with a poison-tipped bolt from Shadow Storage to retaliate. Luckily, the bolt found its mark, and the archer dropped to the ground. My counterattack dispelled our element of surprise,

though, and as I emerged from the trees, Nero and I found ourselves exposed near the tent. Several knights spotted us immediately.

"Alia!"

"Elena... Are you all right?"

Before I even had the chance to feel relief at hearing her voice, the knights—likely Rank 3 like Joey—drew their weapons and pointed them at us as they quickly formed a defensive line around Elena and Nathanital. Among them were a man in his thirties, presumably a commander, as well as a middle-aged man with the demeanor of a noble. The two stepped forward, shielded by the other knights.

"The Rainbow Blade truly is remarkable," the knight said. "You're so young, and yet you've already taken down my men and caught up to us..."

"Rutger!" the noble shouted. "What is that creature?! Does the academy keep such beasts as pets?!"

"No, Lord Savoire. I believe that adventurer girl has tamed it herself." Rutger turned to me. "Lady Alia, would you mind ordering that beast to back off? Resist, and that boy might end up with scars on his face that will never heal."

"Eek!" the captive Nathanital squeaked as the knight holding him pressed a dagger to his face.

"As the princess's bodyguard, I trust you understand the gravity of the situation," the commander continued. "Lay down your weapons and surrender. Truthfully, I'd rather not make an enemy of a renowned adventuring party. If you agree to continue serving as the princess's guard on our side, I'll promise you a reward equal to—no, greater than what you're being paid now."

"Stand down, Nero," I said cautiously.

Understanding the situation, Nero retreated silently into the forest and disappeared from sight.

I thought back on the noble's name—Lord Savoire. Sera had told me about him. He was a viscount and well-known as a radical member of the nobility faction. This meant the faction had finally decided to stop lying low and made a move.

As Nero disappeared, Viscount Savoire's face relaxed, and he turned to address the captive Elena. "This wasn't part of the original plan, but may I ask Your Highness to encourage your bodyguard to surrender as well? If you cooperate, we won't harm you. But if you continue to resist, we'll be forced to resort to this..."

Elena's face twisted with disgust as the viscount held up a small black vial and twirled it between his fingers.

That vial... I'd seen one like it before, at Cere'zhula's home, though that one had been empty. It was a protective container, meant to hold a certain rare substance used by demons. I didn't know exactly what drug the vial contained, but judging from Elena's expression, it was probably something like a narcotic to strip away free will, leaving its victims little more than hollow shells.

Though the knights seemed intent on making Elena their leader, it was anyone's guess whether their goals aligned with those of the nobility faction. Worst-case scenario, they could turn Elena into an unwilling puppet and even threaten the infant second prince.

How do I save her? I asked myself. *Can I carry her to safety?*

Even if I activated my Iron Rose skill, I would run out of aether partway through, leaving me to face any pursuers in a weakened state. Perhaps Nero would allow Elena to ride on its back, but even if it did, would Elena allow me to leave Nathanital behind? Nero might tolerate Elena, since I trusted her, but it would never accept someone as frightened and helpless as that boy.

Can I take on all of them while protecting Elena?

Before I could find an answer, Elena smiled gently at me. She'd already made up her mind.

"Thank you for coming, Alia. I'm glad you're here." She exhaled, then fixed her unwavering gaze on me. "From this point on, do as you wish. It'll only cause you trouble to stay with me. You, at least, should be free to choose your own path..."

"Elena..."

She'd dedicated her life to the people of her kingdom, risking life and limb in the dungeon to restore her health, all so she could one day rule as their queen. And yet these people, for their selfish ambitions, had trampled on her dreams. Viscount Savoire was even

frowning at her small wish to spare me from being dragged into this mess.

"Please do not make such careless remarks, Your Highness," the nobleman said. "A skilled guard capable of controlling such a beast would be an invaluable asset. Order this filth to obey."

"You...!" Elena's delicate brows furrowed sharply in anger at the man's brazen demand, making even Rutger grimace.

I see now, I thought. *She's resigned herself to the possibility of her own death. I'm the one lacking in resolve...*

In that case, I would do as she asked of me. I would choose my own path.

"*Iron Rose,*" I chanted, immediately vanishing from sight.

"What?!"

Scattering trails of light in the air as though sprouting wings, I lunged forward and slit the throats of the knights holding Elena and Nathanital captive with one swift movement. I wrapped my right arm around Elena, my left hand around Nathanital's collar, and pulled the two away, landing far from the others.

"Alia..."

"I'll do as I wish, Elena."

My burnished-iron hair fluttered in the wind as I cast a sharp glare at Viscount Savoire and his knights, all of whom were staring at me in utter astonishment.

"All of you die here," I said in a tone cold as steel.

Corrupted Event, Part Two

"Who the hell is that girl?! Hurry and get Elena back, you fools!" Viscount Savoire ordered, so shocked by the fact that I'd taken the princess and Nathanital that he even forgot to refer to her by title.

Lightning wouldn't strike the same place twice. If the knights managed to recover their hostages, I wouldn't be able to rescue them again. Either way, escaping with two civilians in tow would be nearly impossible. Not only that, but it was clear that although these people were dragging Elena into their schemes, they genuinely believed they were acting for the good of the kingdom. If left alive, they'd simply try again.

I had to kill them here and now. I would protect Elena, no matter what—even if it meant staking everything I had on it.

"Alia..." Elena murmured.

"Y-You—" Nathanital began.

"Be quiet," I interjected. "You'll bite your tongue."

I turned to face the knights charging toward us and, using the power granted by Iron Rose, leaped forward while holding both Elena and Nathanital.

"Haaah!"

As a knight thrust at me with a spear, I stepped onto its tip, using the shaft to propel myself upward. The knight hesitated to release his weapon, and I took the chance to deliver a kick powerful enough to crush his face.

"You! How dare you!" one knight snapped.

"You'll pay for this!" another declared.

Using the dead knight's body as a springboard, I vaulted into the air and deflected an incoming sword with the flat of my right foot. I kicked at another knight with my left foot, snapping his neck. Finally, with the combined weight of three people, I landed a crushing blow on the neck of the last knight, shattering it.

“Don’t underestimate her!” Rutger shouted. “She may be a scout, but she’s Rank 4! And she has some sort of strange ability!”

At their commander’s words, the shaken knights regained their composure.

“Keep your shields forward!” Rutger commanded. “Archers, ready your bows! It doesn’t matter if they take a few hits!”

Their original plan had involved drugging Elena into compliance, but now they were clearly growing desperate to take her back. Perhaps they’d accepted that failure meant their deaths, and thus they were willing to risk her safety despite the fact their duty *should’ve* been to protect her at all costs.

Elena, cradled in my arms, clung tightly to my sleeve. Gazing intently at my ash-gray hair, she whispered, “Alia, you should’ve just left me here.”

“If I were the type to do that, I wouldn’t have chosen to stay by your side in the first place, Elena.” I looked at her—at the face of someone who would rather accept death than become a puppet for the nobility and a source of discord—and our gazes met. “Fight against fate, Elena. Even if it means death. Fight until your last breath.”

“You don’t mince words, do you? But you’re right.” Her eyes flared with determination again. That fierce expression suited her far better than resignation ever could have.

“Loose!”

Arrows flew toward us from behind the line of shield-bearing knights as they slowly advanced toward us. They’d clearly expected me to shield Elena with my own body.

“Eek!” Nathanital shrieked, covering his head with his hands as I continued to hold him by the collar.

Elena, clutched in my right arm, began to gather wind mana at her palms. Seeing this, instead of retreating, I stepped forward.

“*Air Curtain!*” Elena chanted, unleashing a wind spell that sent forth whirling curtains of air to deflect the incoming arrows.

Without hesitating, I dashed forward toward one of the knights. I kicked at his shield, breaking their formation, then leaped into the fray with a spinning kick and snapped one knight’s neck. With my

other foot, I crushed the throat of the first knight.

My movements were slower than usual due to the burden of carrying two people, but my reflexes and my kicks were still as sharp as ever.

▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 265/300
Health Points: 234/250
Overall Combat Power: 1,152 (Uniquely Boosted: 2,182)
Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 234 seconds

I had less than four minutes left on Iron Rose's timer, and using spells to fight at full power would shave off another two minutes.

"Shields up if you're not an archer! Stop her!" Rutger commanded.

The knights who had been wielding spears dropped them and instead drew round shields and single-handed swords from their backs, preparing for close combat. If they managed to surround me, my freedom of movement would be greatly restricted, putting me at a severe disadvantage. But I wasn't fighting alone.

"Groooooooar!"

At that moment, Nero, who had retreated earlier, pounced on the knights' flank. Our enemies, focused on me, were helpless against the coeurl's claws.

"Nero!" I called out.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" Nathanital shrieked as I tossed him toward Nero. The coeurl looked annoyed as it caught the boy with its whiskers.

Not bothering to place Nathanital on its back, Nero charged at the knights, tearing through them with brutal efficiency. As a mystical coeurl, it had fur that was naturally resistant against slashing and piercing attacks. Even while protecting the boy, Nero could easily hold its own against Rank 2 and 3 enemies.

"*Waterball!*"

Elena launched a massive sphere of water at the archers

targeting Nathanital and Nero, knocking them away and making the remaining archers shift their focus to us. At this range, some arrows could still pierce through Wind Curtain. I braced myself, tightening my hold on Elena.

She was a royal. She couldn't take her own subjects' lives. I would just have to kill her enemies for her.

I would never allow anyone to harm her again.

"Loose!"

The archers unleashed another volley of arrows. I intercepted the ones that broke through the wind barrier with the flaring hem of my skirt, knocking the projectiles out of the air. Then I pulled throwing knives from my thigh with my left hand and flung them with precision, hitting three of the archers in the throat and between the eyes.

With one fewer person to carry, my speed had increased. Before the bodies even hit the ground, I leaped into the knights' formation. I pulled my slashing and sickle pendulums from Shadow Storage and spun at the center of their ranks, slicing through the surrounding archers. Blood stained the ground as Elena and I twirled as though waltzing on a macabre stage.

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▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 265/300
Health Points: 234/250
Overall Combat Power: 1,152 (Uniquely Boosted: 2,182)
Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 175 seconds
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"Wh-What the...?! What *is* this beast?!"

Viscount Savoire's panicked shrieks made me glance to the side, where he sat collapsed on the ground in terror now that most of his guards were gone. His face twisted in fear when he noticed my attention, and he began to shout hysterically.

"Y-You can't kill me! It'll be a disaster! Skilled assassins are already on their way to the crown prince! Only I can stop—"

Before the viscount could finish his confession, a single-handed sword whooshed through the air and lodged deep in his throat. Blood foamed at his mouth as he tried to speak, and before long, the light left his eyes.

"Spineless traitor," Rutger hissed, spitting on the ground near the viscount's corpse.

"Rutger... You..." Elena murmured.

Rutger, having lost nearly all of his men, gave a tired, self-deprecating smile. "Your Highness's bodyguard is outstanding. I thought we were acting for the good of the kingdom, that our ideals were noble, but it would seem not everyone shared that conviction..."

"What are you talking about, Rutger?!" Elena demanded. "You've sent assassins after my brother?!"

"Her Highness is right, sir!" one of the knights exclaimed. "None of us were informed of a plan to assassinate the crown prince!"

"This kingdom, the royal family... They will never change unless they know true pain. Had any of you known, you would've faltered. I couldn't tell you."

"No..."

At their commander's words, the surviving knights dropped their weapons and slumped to the ground in despair.

"Surrender, Rutger," Elena ordered. "You cannot win this on your own."

"I'm afraid that is not an option, Your Highness," Rutger said firmly, rejecting Elena's offer of mercy. Shaking his head, he retrieved a sword from one of his fallen men and pointed it not at the princess but at me. "I will not abandon my cause. Even if, by some miracle, I were spared execution, I would simply try again. Surely *you* understand that?"

Their plan to depose the crown prince and place Elena on the throne aligned with our objectives in some ways, but their methods and ultimate goals were completely different. Had Rutger not chosen to align himself with the nobility faction—had he taken the time to get to know Elena—perhaps he could've become a valuable ally.

"Elena, retreat to where that black beast is," I told her. "Nero

won’t attack my allies.”

“Alia...”

I deactivated Iron Rose and allowed my hair to return from the ashen-steel hue to its natural soft, peach-tinted gold, then stepped forward slowly.

“Ash-dyed hair,” Rutger said. “So you’re the famed Lady Cinders. No wonder ordinary knights stood no chance against you.”

“I survived because Elena fought alongside me.” Had she not resolved to, the result would’ve been very different.

Rutger gave a small smile. “I see. I challenge you to single combat, then. You’re free to refuse, of course. You may even choose to summon that beast to your aid.”

His expression made it clear he was seeking an honorable end as a knight.

“This is a waste of time. Let’s go,” I replied curtly, raising my black dagger in one hand and my black knife in the other.

Still smiling, Rutger gripped the borrowed sword with both hands, not bothering with a shield.

With my scant remaining aether, pushing myself to the limit with Iron Rose would’ve been dangerous. Using a potion wasn’t an option either. Besides, over-relying on the technique against opponents of the same rank could make me complacent and leave me unprepared for truly formidable foes.

And more importantly, I wanted to honor Rutger’s resolve. I would wield my blades with my own strength alone.

Holding our weapons, Rutger and I silently circled counterclockwise to position ourselves opposite each other’s dominant hands.

▼ Rutger
Species: Human♂ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 134/160
Health Points: 285/320
Overall Combat Power: 747 (Boosted: 921)

Rutger was Rank 4, similar in strength to Viro and Sera. His combat power was slightly lower than mine, but his experience in direct combat against other humans likely far exceeded my own. But the difference in numbers had made less of an impact on his level of wariness than the sight of me under the effect of Iron Rose—so even if I didn't intend to activate it again, it still served as a potent psychological weapon.

Clang!

After slowly closing the distance, Rutger was the first to step into range. His sword clashed against my black dagger, sending a shower of sparks flying. The next moment, he kicked at me from the side with his left leg.

Though he was wearing light armor, I couldn't get the right angle to slice through it with my black knife, so I chose not to counter directly. Instead, I twisted my body and hooked my right leg around his left, then swept his right leg with my left.

"What?!"

Since he'd only ever trained as a knight, he'd likely never encountered this kind of fighting style before. We fell at the same time, and Rutger caught himself with his left hand braced against the ground. Like a true knight, he didn't let go of his weapon.

I, however, released both my blades and landed nimbly on all fours like a cat. Using my legs to propel myself forward, I straddled Rutger and took a small crossbow from Shadow Storage, then unloaded it directly in his face. The bolt pierced his forehead between his wide, shocked eyes.

He'd had the advantage in hand-to-hand combat but had been too bound by his own principles as a knight.

Thanks to all of you, I've grown a little stronger.

▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 265/300
Health Points: 234/250
Strength: 10 (14)

Endurance: 10 (14)
Agility: 15 (22)
Dexterity: 9 △ +1
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 4]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 4]
[Throwing Lv. 4]
[Bow Mastery Lv. 2]
[Guard Lv. 4]
[String Manipulation Lv.4]
[Light Magic Lv. 3]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 4]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4]
[Practical Magic ×6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4]
[Intimidation Lv. 4]
[Stealth Lv. 4]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 4]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 3]
[Status Resistance Lv. 1]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 1,296 (Boosted: 1,620) △ +144

"H-How can you be so callous with human life?!" Nathanital, now freed from Nero's grasp, shouted in an accusatory tone as I stood up.

"Survive first, worry later," I retorted dismissively.

"What do you mean by that...?" Visibly stunned, Nathanital was struck speechless and trailed off.

Most of the enemies were dead. The few surviving knights, having learned the truth and witnessed the death of the Rank 4 Rutger, had lowered their weapons and showed no intent to continue fighting. Still, the spark hadn't left their eyes. That was the problem with people with convictions. While they might not have

shared Rutger's goals, their resolve remained unbroken. They hadn't surrendered completely.

I cast a quick glance at Elena, and a flicker of hesitation crossed her features.

Under normal circumstances, she would've spared their lives and brought them in as witnesses. But now that she knew the crown prince was being targeted by assassins, leaving these knights behind and rushing off to save him wasn't an option.

That was why I was here.

I raised my knife and dagger, moving toward the survivors. Their faces, along with Elena's and Nathanital's, turned pale as they realized what I was about to do. But before I could close the distance, faint sounds came from nearby, and I turned toward the noise.

"Is Her Highness safe?!"

A squad of royal guards came galloping in on horseback. I knew them; they were part of the security detail at Elena's private dormitory. They were led by Masche, the knight I'd first encountered when embarking on the dungeon expedition. I waved to him, and he realized both Elena and I were unharmed. Relief spread across the guards' faces as they approached.

So they managed to find us, I thought, then immediately spotted Viro riding at the rear of the group. The steward must've delivered the message to not just the knights but Viro as well, as I'd hoped he would. With Viro's expertise, they'd managed to swiftly follow the trail of knife cuts I'd left on the trunks of trees in the woods.

Nero, ever sharp, had already left. The royal guards dismounted, keeping a cautious eye on the now-disarmed knights of the Second Division.

Mashe rushed over to Elena. "Your Highness! Oh, thank goodness..."

"Alia came for me," Elena replied. "Please, detain these men. There's also the matter of two other female students. I don't know where they've been taken..."

"We found them on our way here and left one knight behind to ensure their safety. They said Lady Alia rescued them." Mashe cast a

disdainful glare at the surviving knights. “These traitors are from the Second Division, aren’t they?”

The knights paled. One of them, desperate to explain, spoke up. “Not all of the knights in the Second Division are aligned with the nobility faction! This operation was strictly restricted to our unit, under Commander Rutger. The rest of our comrades knew nothing...”

“I see. That matter will be investigated thoroughly and reported to Margrave Dandorl, the grand general. Right now, the crown prince’s life is in imminent danger. We must send word and reinforcements immediat—”

But time was of the essence, and Elena, turning to Viro and me, cut in, “Alia, Viro. I request your assistance as members of the Rainbow Blade. You need not extricate His Highness yourselves, but at the very least, I ask that you ensure his safety until reinforcements from the royal palace arrive.”

“What about the other noble kids?” Viro asked as he dismounted from his horse.

It was a challenging question about a critical matter—and it would determine not only the difficulty of the task but test Elena’s resolve as a leader as well. I listened intently for her answer.

“The crown prince’s safety is paramount. If necessary, the others may be considered sacrifices for the greater good. I ask that you two act accordingly.”

“Understood.” Viro stepped away from Elena to get ready to move out.

Nathanital, who had overheard the conversation, spoke up with wide eyes. “Your Highness! That’s far too callous!”

Elena’s shapely brows knit slightly as she sighed. “Royals must make difficult decisions. Serving the kingdom means being prepared to sacrifice lives if necessary, my own included. The crown prince’s close aides would understand this as well.”

“But...!” Nathanital pressed, unable to grasp her reasoning, as he tried to reach for her.

“Do not come any closer to the princess,” I warned with a hint of intimidation, grabbing his outstretched arm.

Nathanital might have been the grandson of an ordained baron, but he was nevertheless a mid-ranked noble. He had no right to make direct appeals to the princess without permission. If he continued, I'd have to restrain him for Elena's safety.

He glared at me, gritting his teeth. "And who are *you* to speak to me like that!" he snapped. "Only the divine has jurisdiction over life and—"

"Raaaaaaah!"

As everyone's attention shifted to Nathanital's outburst, one of the surviving knights from the Second Division surged forward with a roar, throwing off the royal guard who had been restraining him.

"Stop him!"

Not all of the survivors were loyal to the crown. Some of them undoubtedly shared Rutger's ideals. This knight, wanting to delay the prince's rescue at any cost, even if it meant harming the princess, pulled out a knife and charged at Elena. For him, eliminating the crown prince would have been victory enough; recruiting Elena into the nobility faction would have been simply a bonus.

Nathanital stood in the knight's path, frozen in shock.

"Out of the way, boy!" the knight shouted, his eyes bloodshot.

"Eek!" Nathanital shrieked in terror. If he didn't move, he would be killed too.

As soon as the knight thrust his knife, I grabbed Nathanital by the collar and pulled him out of harm's way, positioning myself between him and the attacker. Twisting to avoid the blade, I drove my black dagger upward, piercing the knight from under his jaw through to his brain.

"Eee..."

The tip of the man's knife came to a stop just before Nathanital's eyes. I withdrew my dagger, and blood sprayed forth from the falling attacker, splattering across Nathanital's pale face. The boy slumped to the floor, paralyzed with fear.

"You can do as you please," I said, glaring coldly down at him. "But know that these men put their lives on the line for their cause. To live means to fight. Don't cheapen the value of their lives by

implying they belong to some deity."

Nathanital stared, trembling, at the lifeless knight.

I gave the other members of the Second Division a quick glance, then returned to Elena's side.

Turning to Viro, who was preparing to depart, I said, "Viro, our primary duty is to protect Her Highness. You stay and guard her. I'll go save the crown prince."

"What? On your own?" Viro asked, exasperated.

He wasn't wrong to question me. He was experienced, and having him with me would've made rescuing the prince a lot easier. But as I'd said, Elena wasn't out of the woods yet. Saving the crown prince would be meaningless if anything were to happen to her.

"If I go alone, I can take a shortcut through the mountains. It'll save more time than using a horse. I'm faster than you, Viro."

"Well aren't you cheeky, talking like that to the guy who taught you everything." Viro grinned, baring his teeth, and tossed me a potion. "Fine. Take this with you."

"An aether recovery potion? I already have one."

"What, that mid shit you made yourself? This puppy is high quality. Costs eight silver, you know. I know potions make that skill of yours harder to use, but you're gonna be running there, right? So use it on the way."

It was true that using a sustained aether recovery potion made controlling Iron Rose difficult, and doing it during combat was therefore impractical. Viro had extensively studied my new technique; he couldn't see mana like I could, which meant he couldn't use it himself, but he'd still gained a good grasp of its intricacies. Not surprising coming from the man who'd taught me all I knew about scouting. I gratefully accepted the potion.

Elena stepped closer to us and gently dabbed at the blood splatters on my cheek with a handkerchief. "I'm sorry for putting you in danger, Alia. But I trust you. I know you can do this."

"I can and I will," I replied with a nod.

In preparation for the journey, I tore a vertical slit into the right side of my skirt—which was now riddled with holes from the arrows. This would give me greater freedom of movement; it was the same

reason that the tights I wore underneath the skirt were thin almost to the point of translucency. I flexed my leg to test the skirt's maneuverability, and the guards all averted their gazes for some reason.

"Could you arrange for a new uniform for me?" I asked Elena.

"Of course," she replied with a somewhat strained smile, like that of an exasperated older sister.

"I'll be off, then."

Elena gave me a silent nod and Viro raised a thumbs-up. I downed the aether recovery potion in one gulp and broke into a sprint, using Boost to dash through the forest as my depleted aether began to recover.

The crown prince was headed for the coastal grasslands where the Second Division was scheduled to conduct its training exercises. But I doubted assassins would attack in such a heavily guarded area. If they were to strike, it would be somewhere along the road leading there. Based on the carriage's travel speed and the likely route, I could estimate where on the road the prince was—and so could the assassins. Thus, I decided to head directly to the spot I thought would be the most vulnerable to an ambush.

Even at my pace, it would take two hours to get there. I wasn't sure whether that would be enough time to beat the prince's carriage to it. As I leaped from tree to tree and rock to rock through the pathless forest, I noticed a black beast running parallel to me.

"Nero..."

"Grr..."

Using its whiplike, prehensile whiskers, Nero pointed at its back.

"You're saying I can ride you?" I asked.

"...Yes..."

I gripped Nero's extended whiskers and leaped onto its back. Nero ran faster than I did normally—although when I was under Iron Rose, I was actually faster than the coeurl. This gave me an idea, and I began to channel my aether into Nero's whiskers as I held them like reins.

"Grr!"

"Please bear with it."

In theory, this should work. Nero growled in displeasure, and I gently stroked its back to soothe it. Using the same technique I did for my pendulums, I synced the flow of my aether with Nero's, activating the coeurl's boost.

Once Nero adjusted, I whispered, "*Iron Rose*."

"Groooooooar!"

Nero roared as I surged with volatile aether. My hair turned an ashen color, and I tightened my grip on the whiskers to adjust my balance as we narrowly avoided crashing into a tree. Once Nero grew used to the rampant aether, it started to look pleased with its enhanced physical capabilities. With a burst of newfound speed, it tore through the forest even faster.

"Let's go."

"Groooooooooooar!"

Corrupted Event, Finale

"Look, Lord El! The mountains are so far away!" said the girl next to Elvan, looking over her shoulder at him and smiling ear to ear. She knelt on the cushioned seat like a toddler might, chattering as she peered out the window.

They were both in a carriage headed for the site of the knights' training exercises. Although the exercises were to be observed by new students, the crown prince had come along to supervise them.

"Y-Yes, they are," he agreed awkwardly, his expression strained.

Each year, the kingdom arranged for new students to go on field trips and observe various national practices. Only nobles of middle rank and higher were eligible to participate; low-ranked nobles were excluded. The purpose of these trips was to educate future lords and ladies on matters of governance, such as the importance of taxes and how they were utilized.

In the Kingdom of Claydale, there were over 6,000 noble families, including those with knightly titles. Among them, 589 were mid-ranked and 35 were high-ranked. Thus, each academic year had over sixty students who qualified for the program. Organizing the transportation of that many noble children was already a massive undertaking, which was why the crown prince—a second-year student—had been assigned as a supervisor, even if only sixty percent of eligible nobles had actually signed up for the field trip.

While tours of important royal facilities in the capital were quite popular, field trips to observe knights' training regimens, far from the city, saw fewer participants. Many female students, uninterested in territorial management, opted out, and only five girls had chosen to join this year's trip.

Since the journey took three days by carriage, students were expected to travel in small groups. And with such a small number of female students attending, there was an unspoken rule that since

high-ranking noble girls were permitted to bring one attendant each, mid-ranking noble girls would join them in their carriages, regardless of regional affiliations. This time, the only high-ranking female participants were Princess Elena and Lady Karla Leicester. No one wanted to travel with Karla, leaving two of the three mid-ranked noble girls to share the princess's carriage.

The last girl, however, had refused to ride in an all-female carriage. Her past experiences being bullied by other girls at the orphanage where she'd grown up had made her uncomfortable with such arrangements. Since it would also have been inappropriate for her to ride alone with a group of male students and no maidservant, she'd ultimately chosen to join the prince's carriage, which was shared by the heir to the Margravate of Melrose—the noble house to which House Melsis, into which she had been adopted, was a vassal.

With a soft *thud*, Rockwell, eldest son of Margrave Dandorl and close aide to the crown prince, kicked the foot of his friend Mikhail, eldest son of Margrave Melrose, who was seated beside him.

"What are you doing, Rockwell?" Mikhail whispered.

"That girl is from a vassal of your house," Rockwell whispered back. "Rein her in."

"You're the one who's here as His Highness's personal guard. Keep her away from him."

"No. I don't like dealing with her. Besides, I'm only here to guard him from actual danger."

"And you think I like dealing with her? She won't listen to a word I say..."

"Lord Mischa!" the girl exclaimed. "Lord Well! Let's chat!"

The two boys' whispered argument stopped when the girl—Alicia Melsis—casually called them by nicknames they had never agreed to, just as she did with Elvan. Their faces stiffened, and out the corners of their eyes, they could see Elvan sighing with relief, as though he was glad to be rid of her.

"Um... Lady Alicia?" Mikhail said.

"Oh, please, Lord Mischa! There's no need to be so formal with me! I told you, call me Licia! We're family, after all!"

"And who, exactly, told you this?" Mikhail asked in a low, serious

tone, his gaze growing sharper.

The fact that this girl was a direct descendant of the Melrose family was known only to a few noble houses with extensive spy networks, such as House Dandorl. A mid-ranking noble house should not have had access to that information. Neither House Melsis, which had adopted her, nor the knight-in-training with the Order of Shadows assigned as Alicia's guard would've been foolish enough to blab.

So who had told her?

As a member of the family that oversaw the Order's operations, Mikhail couldn't let this slide. Alicia, however, seemed unbothered by his intimidating posture. She simply brought her finger to her lips and tilted her head in an attitude of innocence. It was like a flawless imitation of someone's idea of "picture perfect." Combined with her delicate appearance, it made even those with no interest in her catch their breaths.

Alicia Melsis was a girl with an inexplicable aura. She was the only daughter of a runaway lady of Melrose and a knight's apprentice, raised as a commoner after losing her parents to a tragic incident. She'd spent her early years in a harsh orphanage before being located and brought into the fold by Mikhail's grandfather, the current head of House Melrose.

Due to her lack of formal education as a noble, she'd been adopted into a viscountcy rather than being directly claimed by the Margravate of Melrose—or, at least, that had been the pretext. In reality, this had been done to ascertain whether she truly did have Melrose blood.

She did not possess the distinctive peach-tinted golden hair of the women of Melrose descent. She did not bear any resemblance to the surviving portrait of the runaway noble lady. Those two facts alone gave Mikhail reason enough to doubt this "Alicia."

But deep down, his feelings were rooted less in logic and more in his personal impression of the portrait of his aunt. Her dignified expression had fascinated him since childhood. Mikhail's aunt had, he'd heard through his work with the Order, excelled in martial arts and horsemanship. Mikhail had even followed in her footsteps and

pursued those same skills, so taken was he with the idea of his aunt and her daughter.

And so, when he finally met the girl who was supposedly his cousin, he'd felt a profound cognitive dissonance. She lacked the strength and resoluteness emblematic of House Melrose. Instead, the soft, endearing girl seemed to exist solely to be cared for—a far cry from the mental image he'd had of Alicia.

Though he understood he was biased, every time he thought of what his cousin might be like, he couldn't help but picture the adventurer girl he'd first encountered in the royal capital, who was now serving as Princess Elena's guard. She had pink-blonde hair the color of the moon rose and possessed both strength and a dignified beauty—a perfect match to the Alicia he'd envisioned and idealized.

The "Alicia" he'd met was the complete opposite of that.

Although the girl was lacking in noble education and had somewhat poor manners, her movements and demeanor were almost unnaturally polished. It was as though she'd spent years learning to mimic the perfect ideal of grace, which gave her a meticulously crafted, "flawless" charm. It would take an almost-obsessive level of effort for a child to consciously cultivate such a persona.

The girl's youthful appearance, perhaps the result of her low aether, stood out among the others present, whose aether-fueled growth made them look closer to seventeen years old. Watching her dark reddish-blonde hair sway softly, even Mikhail, in spite of his misgivings, found himself momentarily captivated.

Alicia hummed, tilting her head in that perfectly charming manner. When her gaze met Mikhail's, she smiled warmly, her expression seeming utterly genuine. "I don't know!"

"What?" Caught off guard, Mikhail blinked.

Alicia bent forward, bringing her face closer to his. "I mean, aren't all nobles related if you go far back enough? It wouldn't be strange for us to be relatives, would it, Lord Mischa?"

"I...suppose not."

It was true that House Melsis, which managed part of the Melrose territory, was a branch of the Melrose family and shared its

bloodline. Still, this "Alicia" had been adopted. Had she somehow discovered she had noble blood? It was possible she'd heard rumors, but Mikhail couldn't shake a nagging sense of unease.

"Don't you agree, Lord Well— Ah!"

The carriage jolted violently, and Alicia, who had turned to Rockwell to ask for his opinion, let out a small yelp and fell against his chest.

As the heir of a martial house, Rockwell easily extended a hand and caught the petite girl. Softly, he chided, "Careful there. A lady shouldn't be moving around in a carriage. Also, it's not proper for unrelated men and women to address one another by nicknames, so I would appreciate it if you would stop."

Alicia brought her small hand to Rockwell's where it rested on her shoulder, looked directly at him, and chuckled brightly. "You don't have to be so strict. We're still students! There's no law that says nobles can't have a little fun."

"Is that so?" Rockwell replied. He maintained a serene smile, but internally, he was bewildered, as though he were encountering a strange creature for the first time. He gently pushed Alicia's shoulders, helping her sit back up.

But her words rippled in an unexpected direction.

"Are we truly allowed to have fun?" Elvan murmured as he observed the exchange.

The crown prince's mother, born to a viscountcy, had lived freely and raised him herself instead of entrusting the task to his royal caretakers. Because of that, Elvan constantly yearned for freedom, even as he was groomed to be the next king. Though he had tried his best and worked hard, the sister he'd thought to be strongly attached to him had grown to embody the ideal of royal dignity far more perfectly than he ever could. And his fiancées, high-ranking noblewomen, were incomprehensible to him. There was Patricia, an aloof and detached girl who was older than him; Clara, who was tense and seemed to be always at her wit's end; and Karla, who was frightening in both looks and demeanor.

When Clara had acquired a gift in the dungeon, her mental state had weakened further, and she'd grown dependent on Elvan. While

this had endeared her to him, he was not yet mature enough as a man to shoulder her burdens.

Had he been heir to a mid-ranking noble family instead of the crown prince, he might've become a truly beloved lord. In another ten or so years, with more life experience, he might've been capable of fully connecting with Elena or Clara.

But his mother's wish for him to live freely had left him with a sort of boyish naivete, and as the mental gap between him and those around him grew wider, so, too, did his distress grow. To him, Alicia's words—the simple statements of a girl raised as a commoner—were as a sweet poison, seeping into his tormented heart and leaving him numb.

"It's unsafe to stand," he told the girl. "Come here. Sit. Ah... Licia, was it?"

"Yes, Lord El!" Alicia replied, beaming at having been called by her nickname. She immediately bounded over to sit beside him.

Rockwell and Mikhail—Elvan's friends, close aides, and guards—exchanged glances. They opened their mouths to reprimand him, but before they could say anything, the carriage jolted violently.

"What's happening?!" Rockwell demanded as he stood, sword in hand.

"Shut up!" came a rough male voice from outside. "Get out of the carriage or we're setting it on fire!"

***

A luxurious black-lacquered carriage traveling about fifteen minutes ahead of the crown prince's had also been ambushed.

"Get out of the damn carriage if you don't wanna burn to—"

At that moment, an enormous blaze erupted from within the carriage, blasting the door away. The man in leather armor who'd been issuing the order and those around him were instantly charred to a crisp before they could so much as scream. Flames roared as the stench of charred bones filled the air.

From within the carriage emerged a girl wearing a mantle over a light-green dress, her jet-black hair swaying against the bright

backdrop of the flames spreading through the forest. She ran her fingers through the unruly locks as the flames illuminated her sickly, pale face, contrasting with the dark circles under her eyes. She picked up a piece of charred bone and crushed it between her fingers as a delicate smile blossomed across her lips.

"How did I do? Cooked to perfection, you think?" she asked.

Shaken by the sight of their comrades being burned to ashes in an instant, the panic-stricken ambushers faltered.

The blazing carriage bathed the surroundings in a crimson glow. Encircling it were leather-clad men belonging to the Southern Border branch of the Assassins' Guild, sent to this road with a mission to abduct the crown prince's fiancée. They'd been instructed to, if possible, bring her alive so she could be used as leverage against her father, Count Leicester—the kingdom's foremost court sorcerer. The count, despite belonging to the royalist faction, was known for his neutrality and could potentially be swayed. This objective was not a priority, however, and so they'd been granted permission to eliminate her if necessary.

Aristocrats belonging to the nobility faction had orchestrated the abduction of Princess Elena and the assassination of Crown Prince Elvan in collusion with certain members of the Second Division of the Royal Guard. Normally, such an assignment would've been handled by the central branch of the Assassins' Guild—however, the Central Western District branch, known for its combat prowess, had lost many of its skilled assassins in recent years. Because of this, the central branch—which boasted the most extensive intelligence network out of all branches—had balked at the request.

The primary reason behind this was the potential involvement of two figures infamous in the underworld: Lady Cinders and the Witch of Thorns. These two were so feared in northern and central Claydale that even the Thieves' and Assassins' Guilds, both of which were deeply entrenched in noble politics, hesitated to take requests involving them. Of course, the Southern Border branch knew of their reputation, but nevertheless, one of the branch's executives had accepted the job, with the mediation of a certain individual.

This executive's true objective had nothing to do with

assassinating royalty. Instead, he was acting to settle a personal vendetta on behalf of the individual who had arranged the job—who had once been his lover.

Abducting the daughter of Count Leicester had been part of the scheme. The executive was well aware that the girl was the dreaded Thorn Witch, but he had failed to gather enough intelligence and, as a result, underestimated the girl's skill. He'd assumed she was considered dangerous purely due to the political quarrels of the nobility. But it was hardly for political reasons that Karla Leicester was feared by all who knew her. She was also terrifying as an individual and as a sorceress.

Karla examined the residue of the charred bone on her fingertips as though she were a craftsman proud of having made a high-quality piece of charcoal. The fire illuminated her pale complexion, highlighting her smile.

"K-Kill her!" one of the assassins stammered.

Having realized that tales of Karla's prowess were not exaggerated, the assassins abandoned the idea of abducting her. They understood that it was kill or be killed. But no matter how skilled Karla was, she was still a sorceress, a young girl, and frail and sickly at a glance; most sorcerers were weak in close combat, with no means to counter an incoming blade.

That line of thought, though sensible on the surface, would prove fatal.

Blades made of magic steel gleamed dully in the firelight as the assassins lunged toward Karla. "Die!"

Sadly, Karla was no ordinary noblewoman. With a speed unthinkable for someone in a fancy gown, Karla easily leaped out of the way of the assassin's deadly strike.

"What?!"

Born into the Leicester line of sorcerers, Karla had endured her father's experiments and acquired affinities for all six elements. While this had granted her immense power, it had also cost her her future. Now all she had was this power—and the fearful gazes it inspired in others made it all the more worth clinging to.

Plotting to destroy both her father and the country that had

allowed his atrocities to go unchecked, Karla had spent years delving into dungeons alone in search of more power, honing her Boost and Martial Mastery as she trained to fight multiple opponents at once.

"*Air Curtain. Stoneskin,*" she chanted in quick succession, using both spells to deflect the incoming volley of arrows. Taking advantage of the assassins' bewildered state, she extended a palm toward them. "*Ice Javelin*."

The high-level ice spell hurtled toward one of the assassins. He attempted to dodge, but the massive javelin was unexpectedly fast and pierced through his abdomen. Despite its complexity and the brutal injury it had dealt, however, the spell—as all ice-elemental sorcery—wasn't immediately lethal; the wounds inflicted would freeze over, stemming the flow of blood and making it so the victim wouldn't die quickly and could still retaliate. Nevertheless, sorcerers used ice magic because of its powerful chilling effect, which slowed the target and all others in the vicinity.

The assassins' movements visibly dulled as the surrounding temperature dropped. Even with Boost on par with Karla's, they could no longer keep up with her.

But Karla hadn't used ice magic as a defensive measure. Sparks crackled at her fingertips, causing those familiar with sorcery to recoil in terror.

"*Dig Volt*."

Already ravaged by fire and ice, the forest grew dazzlingly bright as lightning streaked across it. Dig Volt, an advanced composite spell of wind and water, incinerated the impaled assassin from the inside out. Electricity spread across the frozen ground, shocking and paralyzing the remaining attackers.

As flames rose from both of Karla's palms, one of the assassins, overcome with despair, finally understood the situation: Karla had never intended to escape, nor had she planned on letting any of them escape. Her smile had remained unchanged throughout because the only thing she'd wanted was to kill them all.

"You monster," the assassin cursed as the barrage of flames consumed him.

Why hadn't they retreated the moment their comrades were first

killed? It had never been a matter of pride or stubbornness. No, it had been paralysis from sheer terror upon encountering an overwhelmingly superior predator.

"People die. They all do," Karla mused.

She didn't kill for survival. She killed because life, even her own, was meaningless to her. Death had been Karla's close companion from an early age. Having gained affinities for all elements, she'd never believed she would live long; there were no records of heroes with six affinities making it to the age of thirty, after all.

Her desire to kill people, to crush this country, had been born of pure spite. With no future, knowing she would die before long, Karla was merely ensuring that she would drag as many as she could down with her in a grand spectacle of death. To her, life had always been worth less than even a single copper. She didn't care when she'd breathe her last; it didn't matter at all. But until then, she would make sure to send as many people as possible to the afterlife too.

Still, Karla's reason for killing had shifted, if slightly, after she'd met a certain girl. This girl, with ashes in her hair, carried with her the thick scent of death, just like Karla, fighting ceaselessly in defiance of her own fate.

If death was inevitable, then Karla wanted her own to be at that girl's hands. Thus, she would allow no other to take her life. She grew stronger because she wanted to be killed. For that purpose alone, she'd even accepted a dungeon's gift—something she would've dismissed as nonsense only a few years ago.

Karla dreamed of a grand stage before a large audience, where the two of them would fight to the death, engulfed in flames. Where she would kill that girl, and that girl would kill her. From the moment Karla had met that girl, her initial goals—destroying the country, slaughtering her father in a gruesome spectacle—had become mere side objectives.

Now her true purpose was to make that girl see her as a worthy opponent.

To that end, Karla was seriously considering bringing the entire kingdom to ruin. All to get the girl's attention. All so they could love

each other.

"Heh heh...ngh."

Karla's laugh caused her feeble health points to dwindle further, sending her into a coughing fit. Her health grew worse by the day—perhaps as a side effect of the gift she'd received. She brought a hand to her mouth, and blood seeped into her palm.

But this, too, was something she'd wished for. She alone would decide how to use her life. Not these assassins, who had targeted her simply because of her engagement to the crown prince.

Still...if they had targeted someone like Karla, unimportant in the grand scheme of things, that had to mean that the royal family was also under attack. And if that was the case, then *she* was certain to appear. That girl would doubtless come to kill everyone who stood in the way of her own chosen fate.

Karla turned in the direction her carriage had come from, where the royal siblings' respective entourages were. Sensing something, she inhaled slowly, and then, with an almost playful step, she began walking down the road.

"Ah... Death comes..."

***

"Who sent you?!"

Rockwell and Mikhail stepped forward, shielding Elvan, the crown prince, and Alicia, who clung to his arm.

A group of unknown assailants had stopped the prince's carriage, forcing out the occupants and lining them up in front of the vehicle. The crown prince's personal guards as well as the knights of the Order whom Mikhail had brought along had already been slain.

Besides the nobles' escorts, a squad belonging to the Royal Guard's Second Division—which was supposed to provide security for the field training exercise—had been assigned to the carriage as well. Rockwell—son of the grand general—realized quickly that they were in league with the attackers and glared at the man who appeared to be their leader.

"Lord Rockwell, we bear no personal grudge against you or the

grand general," the man said. "This is all for the greater good."

"What good is there in an act like this?!" Rockwell demanded. "Were something to happen to His Highness, the nation would plunge into chaos once more!"

"A necessary evil. We can no longer turn back."

"An evil that will befall the people!"

Mikhail, meanwhile, understood that these knights' convictions were far too different from Rockwell's for there to be any meaning in trying to argue. Neither side would convince the other. He chose to leave the talking to Rockwell and instead focus on a way to at least guarantee Elvan's survival.

Elvan stood protectively in front of the girl he was now calling Licia, shielding her from harm. But from Mikhail's perspective, that was a sign of a lack of resolve—as the crown prince, Elvan's priority should've been his own survival, even if it meant using the girl as a shield.

Licia might have looked scared at a glance, but her expression showed no true fear. Whether she even fully grasped the situation was uncertain.

"We will give you, Lord Rockwell, and the Melrose boy a chance to join us. Do so and we will spare you. Of course, we will have to restrict your freedoms, you understand. What will it be?"

Elvan turned pale and held his breath as the weight of the leader's words sank in.

"Neither Mikhail nor I would ever agree to such a thing!" Rockwell interjected before Elvan could react.

"A pity," said the leader, as though he'd been expecting that response. He raised a hand, signaling the leather-clad assassins to step forward. "Then allow me to grant you a swift death."

At his command, the assassins drew their blackened blades.

Whoosh.

At that very moment, the forest seemed to come alive with an eerie rustling. Animals stirred in alarm, and then, tearing through the thick, green canopy, a massive black beast emerged—carrying on its back a pink-haired girl.

"Tear them apart, Nero."

***

"Groooooooooar!"

The black beast's deafening roar shook the trees, sending shock waves down the road. Without hesitation, Nero lunged at the scattered knights.

"What *is* this monster?!"

"Stay calm! Raise your shields!"

The knights reacted quickly, drawing their weapons and raising their shields—but any not clad in full plate stood little chance against Nero's attacks, and the powerful coeurl easily swatted away the knights in light armor. Its massive frame avoided the more cramped areas, instead targeting the knights on the outer edges of the battlefield.

From atop Nero's back, I confirmed that the crown prince was still unharmed. I slipped off the beast in one smooth motion, my dagger and knife glinting in my hands as I slew two of the assassins before they could react.

"Wh— Gah!"

As another man cried out, I drove my elbow into his face, shattering his nose, then wrapped my arm around his neck and twisted until it snapped.

"Y-You're...!" exclaimed Mikhail, who I recalled was one of the prince's close aides.

"Stand back," I told him.

I flipped my skirt, drew knives from the side slit, and flung them at the approaching assassins. Two managed to dodge, but a third got struck in the throat. It didn't seem any of them were below Rank 3—which made sense if they were attempting to assassinate the crown prince.

Without hesitation, I leaped forward, drew my sickle pendulum, and slashed open the throat of a man as he rushed at me. Another assassin lunged with a knife, but I bent backward to avoid the strike. In one motion, I pivoted on my toes and delivered a sharp kick to his jaw. I released my slashing pendulum mid-spin, sending it arcing toward the man's neck. It cut deep, finishing him off instantly.

Blood splattered through the air like petals as lives were plucked one after another. The girl clinging to the crown prince let out a muffled shriek at the sight of my methodical rampage.

"Eek..."

One of the assassins noticed her terror and immediately sprinted toward the two, intent on taking them hostage.

"I won't let you!" the prince's other close aide shouted as he moved to intercept the attacker.

"Rockwell!" Mikhail called out.

Rockwell was built like a knight and had clearly trained a fair amount, but even he had to know that stopping a Rank 3 assassin with his bare hands was impossible.

"Out of my way!" the assassin snapped, raising his single-handed sword to strike down Rockwell.

Instantly, I ducked low, digging my nails into the ground to propel myself forward. I lunged at the assassin from behind and latched onto his back, slamming him onto the ground. Before he could react, I used the momentum to drive my knee into his neck, killing him instantly. A sickening crack rang out, like a dry twig wrapped in a wet rag snapping in half.

The prince's companions instinctively averted their gazes, unwilling to watch the brutal spectacle. I grabbed the dead assassin's weapon and tossed it at the stunned Rockwell.

"You're Her Highness's bodyguard..." he muttered.

"She sent me to rescue the crown prince," I told him. "There are enemies about. Don't just stand there in a daze. If you have the will to fight, then take that sword. You have someone to protect, don't you?"

"R-Right! I do!" Rockwell picked up the weapon and nodded firmly.

With Nero keeping the knights occupied, I could afford to focus on the remaining assassins. As I drew my black knife, I sensed something sharp and dangerous. Reacting on instinct, I leaped aside while throwing my knife in the direction of the presence.

A metallic *clang* rang out as my knife was deflected. A split second later, a blade that looked like a machete came hurtling

toward me. Judging from the sheer force of the throw, blocking it wasn't an option. Instead, I twisted my body and jumped sideways to evade—but the attacker was already closing in.

A powerful kick whistled through the wind, flying toward me. I met it with my own heel, countering the force to push myself back and create distance. Swiftly, the man swung his massive machete upward, aiming to strike me midair.

"*Vorpal Blade*!" he chanted, sending countless razor-sharp slashes at me.

With nothing to pivot off of in midair, I kicked against the void and twisted my body to dodge. I landed on one knee and crouched, locking eyes with the attacker.

"Wow. I never thought I'd see the day when someone would dodge *that*," the man remarked.

I hadn't managed to fully avoid the attack. Blood dripped from a shallow cut on my right cheek, and I pressed a hand against my side, where another slash had grazed me. That technique...it was Level 5. I'd seen it before. My nemesis had used it once.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Assassins don't usually reveal their names, but for you, I'll make an exception." The man grinned, baring his teeth like a beast bared its fangs. "I'm an executive of the Assassins' Guild. Southern Border branch. My name's Gilgan—and you, with that face of yours, that skill... I know you, Lady Cinders."

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▼ Gilgan
Species: Human♂ (Rank 5)
Aether Points: 184/200
Health Points: 402/410
Overall Combat Power: 1,344 (Boosted: 1,712)
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Gilgan was a rough-looking man, appearing to be in his forties. If he was a high-ranking member of the Assassins' Guild...that meant they were quite serious about eliminating the crown prince. But what was their true objective? Was it really to put Elena on the

throne and turn her into a political puppet, as Joey had suggested? If they were willing to go as far as using drugs to control her, why wouldn't they try to control the prince instead?

I didn't have enough information. Interaction wasn't my forte, but I needed to get this man to speak.

"Why do you assume I'm her?" I asked.

Gilgan looked at me like I was an idiot. "Hah! How many girls your age can fight like that? Isn't it obvious why I recognized you? I'm with the Assassins' Guild. And you've made *plenty* of enemies among us."

So there were still remnants from the Northern Border District branch coming after me besides the one I'd dealt with near the capital.

"An old flame asked me for a favor," Gilgan said with a grin. "I know all about you. What you look like. Your combat style. How to counter it. And I know that going for the princess is the best way to goad you into fighting."

"What?"

"Word gets around in the underworld. The average assassin may balk at going after the princess when you're her guard dog, sure. But how many more will want to test themselves against you once they hear how strong you are? And the price for all that intel was that I had to tell you all of this when I met you, so there you go. Fun stuff, right?"

Someone I knew well had also once implied that targeting Elena was the quickest way to goad me into a fight. Someone who was involved in the recent turmoil in the capital. This sealed it. That madman had finally begun to make his move.

Graves...

Still pressing a hand to my side, I slowly rose to my feet. Gilgan kept his focus on me but glanced over at Nero.

"A coeurl, huh? Even more of a monster in the flesh. But I'm Rank 5 too, and with a bit of assistance, I can handle it. I'll take you both down." He gave me a predatory grin, raising a pair of massive machetes, one in each hand. The dual-weapon stance reminded me of Graves.

At the moment, I couldn't use Iron Rose; the aether recovery potion I'd drunk before coming here meant it would be a while longer before I could activate it again. Gilgan seemed wary of Nero interfering, but I had no intention of leaving the fight to the coeurl. Even if I couldn't use my special technique, even if my opponent was a seasoned Rank 5 combatant—as long as we stood on the same battlefield, I would not back down an inch.

I slid my black dagger and knife back into their sheathes and reached into Shadow Storage. Then I pulled the sickle and weighted pendulums out, flicking each wrist to give them a light spin.

Gilgan, a Rank 5, far outmatched a Rank 4 like me in terms of pure combat power. But as always, experience and ability mattered more than raw stats. And if I was to face off against Graves one day, I had to defeat this man by my own hand.

"What are you plotting?" Gilgan asked with a furrowed brow as he watched me switch weapons.

"You want to fight me, right? Don't you want me to go all out?" I retorted. "Or do you just have a habit of asking pointless questions on the battlefield?"

Most people could grind their way to Rank 3 in due time. But going beyond that—breaking past the limits of ordinary humans—took something else. Whether out of madness or obstinacy, obtaining immense power was only possible by parting with one's humanity. That was why I was always warier of humans than monsters.

"Hah! You're not wrong," he scoffed. "Well then—"

Before Gilgan could finish his sentence, I lunged forward at full power, the ground cracking loudly beneath me. In the same motion, I swung my sickle pendulum at one of the assassins trying to surround me, slashing his throat open.

"Urk..."

A strange gurgling sound escaped his lips just before blood sprayed forth from his neck. Using the crimson splatter as cover, I arced my weighted pendulum through the air and brought it crashing down onto the skull of another nearby assassin. It cracked open with a crunch, like a pumpkin smashed with a hammer. Before

the man's body collapsed, I pivoted off his face to launch myself into the air. Spinning, I flipped my skirt, drew knives from my thigh, and threw them at two of the assassins, who had frozen in shock at the sight. The blades found their marks, piercing the men's eyes, and the two lifeless bodies slumped to the ground.

Furious, Gilgan hurled one of his massive machetes toward me, screaming, "Cindeeerrrs!!!"

While he had no doubt planned on dueling me, unfortunately for him, I wasn't one of those knightly types who would honor duels while surrounded by enemies. Besides, I had no guarantee that his men wouldn't try to interfere, even if Gilgan himself saw it as a one-on-one fight.

My goal was simple. Kill all the distractions first.

The machete roared through the air as it whirled toward me. I leaned backward at a sharp angle and kicked out with the heel of my leather boot; the reinforced sole met the blade mid-flight, deflecting it at an upward angle with a *clang*.

I wasn't wearing the adventuring boots Cere'zhula had given me—those would have looked suspicious paired with my uniform and drawn unnecessary attention. At the academy, I wore the standard-issue uniform loafers. Right now, however, I was wearing a pair of special boots reinforced with magic steel plates in the toes and heels.

"Y-You little bastard!" one of the assassins said, finally snapping out of his trance and realizing he wasn't just a spectator but an actual part of the battle. He drew a dagger from his waist and raised it high, ready to strike.

Bad move. Though I looked as though I'd lost my balance after kicking away the machete, this was still a battlefield. Dropping one's guard for even a fraction of a second, no matter how far away the enemy seemed, was a fatal mistake.

"Gah!"

Just as the assassin lunged forward, my weighted pendulum swung down and smashed into the side of his head. Blood gushed from his opposite ear as he staggered.

I wouldn't give any of them a single moment of peace. The area

around me was now a death trap with multiple pendulums spinning in rapid, unpredictable arcs, acting as both offense and defense.

"Stop her!" Gilgan roared to his men as he chased after me.

I'd considered the possibility that perhaps he would abandon the fight and take the crown prince hostage, but it seemed my initial impression of him had been correct. His pride wouldn't allow it. Instead of seeking out a tactical advantage, he wanted to fight me, the legendary Lady Cinders, the girl infamous for destroying an entire branch of the Assassins' Guild.

"Ngh!"

Gilgan tried to close the distance but was forced to step back when a third pendulum—the slashing type—whipped past his face at high speed.

I'd put away my other weapons to free both hands, which allowed me to control up to four pendulums simultaneously. At my current level of skill, I needed full focus to maneuver them properly.

"Die, Cinders!"

The others, following Gilgan's command, raised their weapons and moved to block my path. In that instant, the sickle pendulum, still in its deadly orbit, arced forward and tore through the eyes of the man in front.

As he shrieked in agony, the two men behind him used his body as a shield to close the gap. Heartless, but the correct decision; despite his brutish appearance, Gilgan seemed to have taught his men well. They'd realized that throwing weapons were useless against a target in constant motion and that melee combat was the better choice here—especially since I'd stowed away my close-combat weapons.

Clang!

A spear swung toward my landing point in a sweeping strike, but I intercepted it with the sheath of the dagger strapped to my calf before kicking it away.

"What?!"

That dagger had withstood an attack to a Rank 5 monster, remaining intact even after delivering a finishing blow. It was sturdy enough that it could block most hits, even from within its sheath. I

was using my hands for offense and my legs for defense—a combat style specifically designed for fighting multiple enemies at once. That was why I'd put away my blades.

"Enough of this!" Gilgan demanded. "Fight me, damn you!" Perhaps because I'd paused briefly, he had managed to close in on me, using his machete to deflect my thin slashing pendulum.

I drove the reinforced heel of my boot into the face of the spearman whose attack I'd just blocked, crushing his skull. Another assassin moved in from behind, so I wrapped my weighted pendulum around his neck, strangling him and keeping anyone else from attacking my back.

But Gilgan was still charging at me from the front. I yanked hard on the string, finishing off the strangled assassin, and, using the recoil, propelled myself farther away from Gilgan.

"Stop running from me, Cinders!!!"

"Big words for a man who had me surrounded."

Evading Gilgan's pursuit, I continued to eliminate the surrounding assassins. One of them, seeing me close in, finally snapped—he turned around and started running.

Don't waver. Don't falter. Don't run, even when they come at you. Fear will kill your spirit.

The weighted pendulum spun past, grazing the back of the fleeing man's head just enough to momentarily daze him. Taking the opportunity, I lunged forward and drove my knee into the back of his skull, then wrapped my legs around his head and twisted my body midair.

As I landed, I snapped his neck.

***

Even as he held his borrowed weapon at the ready, Rockwell found that he couldn't so much as take a step, let alone join the fray.

As the son of the kingdom's grand general, Rockwell was expected to inherit that title in ten or so years and thus had undergone intense, focused training to become the greatest among knights. Though the Margravate of Dandorl had lost its

independence due to a disparity in strength with Claydale, it had originally been a militaristic nation; the royal Dandorl blood had put Rockwell well above his peers in raw talent. It was a given that he would reach Rank 3 during his time at the academy, and he had absolute confidence that not even elite royal guards could best him in swordplay.

To a younger Rockwell, being the kingdom's finest knight had been synonymous with being the strongest. But as he grew older, he'd come to the realization that in order to lead the entire Royal Guard, he needed more than simple combat skill—political acumen and leadership were also imperative. The child within him still wished to grow stronger, but his more mature side would remind that child that strength alone was not enough.

That is, until the battle unfolding before him shattered that understanding. The girl with pink hair all but danced across the battlefield, cutting down enemies as though it were second nature to her. Rockwell's values had been completely upended by her sheer display of skill. Honestly, it frightened him how she killed without a trace of emotion. His legs were trembling, refusing to move, and his fingers were locked around the hilt of the borrowed blade.

Yet he couldn't bring himself to look away. His long-suppressed desire to grow stronger surged back as his grip grew impossibly tight.

"Is she the princess's bodyguard...?" Rockwell asked.

"Yes," Mikhail responded.

Mikhail, meanwhile, didn't match his friend's admiration. Instead, his eyes gazed upon the bloodstained girl with anguish.

"How...?" whispered the crown prince, Elvan, who stood safely a few steps behind the other two boys.

He, too, was staring at the girl, his face pale. Years ago, he'd met her in the royal capital while on an incognito outing. At the time, he'd felt a naive sort of admiration for a girl so young working as an adventurer. During their short time together, something stronger than curiosity had sparked within him in the rare moments when her innocence had slipped through. But now...

"How can she kill with such ease...?"

Elvan had always wished for a life of freedom. His wish had been inspired by the stories his mother—who had faced constant scorn from higher-ranked nobles—had told him about her youth. That had been why he'd wanted to sneak into the city, and why the girl he'd met there had become something of a symbol of freedom from the responsibilities and pressure he constantly faced.

But now that this girl was his younger sister's bodyguard, that initial perception had been crushed. Elvan found himself questioning whether this was what it meant to rule—whether this was truly the world that royalty had to live in. And so, as he gazed upon the girl, a deep sense of despair welled up within him.

At that moment, a small, warm hand slowly wrapped around his own.

"Licia?"

"It's okay, Lord El. This world isn't all scary. There are many beautiful things in it too. If you don't want to look at the horror, look at me instead. I'll always smile for you," Licia said and, indeed, offered him a gentle smile.

Elvan's mind had finally found an escape. He gave her a weak, strained smile of his own and slowly squeezed her hand back—a moment that inadvertently drove a wedge of guilt into the bond he had with his fiancée Clara.

"Groooooooar!"

Nearby, Nero roared as it toyed with several human knights, using them as target practice. Though it knew there were exceptions—humans strong enough to lay traps even for Alia and itself—it still viewed humans as feeble creatures. Few could ever stand against it in single combat.

Alia had been the first "other" to ever interest Nero. At first, it had merely stayed by her side to hunt down a common enemy. But as it watched her—living in solitude, just as it did, yet always gazing skyward—it had begun to see in her the image of a moon, illuminating an endless night. And so it found itself wishing to witness her life's path.

If it stayed by her side, there would be times when it would choose to lend a hand—such as now. Humans were weak, but Nero

knew they could be threatening when they gathered in numbers.

Abruptly, Nero leaped away from the knights and let out a low growl as its attention shifted to the forest behind them. And a split second later, a monstrous bear emerged from the trees, sending the knights scrambling to raise their shields.

"Groooooooooar!"

"What the hell is that?!" a knight shouted.

"It's a blue huskbear! What's it doing here?!"

Blue huskbears were creatures boasting a protective chitin carapace derived from the crabs they preyed on. While they were Rank 3, their durability was such that that the Adventurers' Guild classified them as Rank 4 threats. Still, Nero was a Rank 5 mythical coeurl. To it, a blue huskbear was no threat at all. So what was Nero wary of?

This particular blue huskbear wasn't here to attack the knights—it was fleeing. Several parts of its body were scorched, and it bore numerous lacerations. Something had been hunting it, and that something was formidable enough to send a Rank 4 creature fleeing.

Suddenly, a deafening roar rumbled through the forest as several massive pillars of fire erupted from its depths, piercing the blue huskbear from behind. Two knights, caught in the blast, were also engulfed in flames.

"Oh! Looks like I got myself a nice big pelt. And there's a kitty!"

As the huskbear and knights writhed and shrieked in agony, a black-haired girl emerged from the darkness of the forest. Paying no heed to the burning figures, she fixed her gaze on the wary black beast before her, her lips curled in amusement.

"Grrr..."

Nero's instincts were screaming that this girl was the most dangerous being here. Its whiplike whiskers sparked with magical energy as it growled in warning. From its perspective, her strength was on par with that of the peach-haired girl it had chosen to observe. Just as the peach-haired girl harbored an immense hidden power, so too did this sickly-looking girl radiate something unnatural. Nero watched her warily.

"Hee hee..." Karla, the sickly girl in question, ran her fingers

through her long black hair. Her wan complexion made her amused smile even more unsettling.

Thanks to the vast amounts of knowledge that had been drilled into her since childhood, Karla had immediately recognized the creature before her as a Rank 5 coeurl—a powerful entity, superior in strength to her Rank 4 self. She also knew that ranks were merely guidelines, and she'd spent her life refining her spells solely for the purpose of effective killing.

That was why she was smiling. The blue huskbear that had crossed her path had been nothing more than foolish prey that had failed to recognize her strength. But this coeurl, which so fortuitously happened to be here, was intelligent enough to fear her. To Karla, this was incredibly exciting.

"Here, kitty, kitty..."

▼ Karla Leicester
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 425/530
Health Points: 34/52
Strength: 7 (8)
Endurance: 3 (4)
Agility: 12 (14)
Dexterity: 9
[Martial Mastery Lv. 3]
[Light Mastery Lv. 3]
[Shadow Mastery Lv. 3]
[Earth Mastery Lv. 3]
[Water Mastery Lv. 4]
[Fire Mastery Lv. 4]
[Wind Mastery Lv. 4]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4]
[Practical Magic ×6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4]
[Intimidation Lv. 4]

[Detection Lv. 2]
[Status Resistance Lv. 2]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 1]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 1,030 (Sorcery Power: 1,545)
Gift: Soul Thorn

▼ Nero
Species: Mythical Beast/Coeurl (Rank 5)
Aether Points: 224/280
Health Points: 465/510
Strength: 20 (30)
Endurance: 20 (30)
Agility: 18 (27)
Dexterity: 7
[Claws Lv. 4]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 5]
[Defense Lv. 4]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 5]
[Intimidation Lv. 5]
[Stealth Lv. 4]
[Night Vision Lv. 4]
[Detection Lv. 5]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 4]
[Slashing/Piercing Resistance Lv. 5]
[Status Resistance Lv. 4]
Overall Combat Power: 2,136 (Boosted: 2,704)

"Wh-Who's this girl?!" a knight asked.

"Count Leicester's daughter! Be careful, she's—"

Karla casually flicked her arm at the surviving knights, annoyed by their presence. "*Hurricane.*"

The Level 4 spell hurtled toward the knights. Countless blades tore through them as the swirling winds lifted them into the air, blasting them away.

"Groooar!"

Nero, who had been observing silently, sprang forward, baring its fangs at Karla.

As a beast, Nero didn't scan its opponents—but Scan was, in essence, a skill that measured a target's abilities as perceived through the caster's senses. While weaker creatures needed to rely on the skill itself, high-ranking monsters like Nero could naturally gauge an opponent's strength without it. And although Nero sensed that Karla's aether was astonishing, even by a mythical beast's standards, it could also tell that her health points were barely on par with those of a human child. A single graze from its claws would be enough to inflict a fatal wound, but...

"Grah!"

"Hah!"

The moment Nero's claws reached Karla, a sudden gust enveloped her body, lifting her gently into the air like a drifting leaf. She effortlessly evaded the attack.

Boost wasn't just a tool for increasing offensive capabilities. It wrapped the body in a coating of pure aether, thus increasing defenses as well. This granted resistance not just to direct attacks but spells too. Thus, capable sorcerers used Boost both for evasion and for the overall defensive increase. But people had limited aether generation—not even long-lived beings such as elves could compete with the lowest-tier spirits. One could master Aether Manipulation, but it still took extraordinary composure to simultaneously evade attacks and regulate one's aether in the thick of combat.

But Karla, thanks to her gift, had grown used to wielding vast amounts of aether—far beyond normal limits. Having fought countless enemies on her own, she'd perfected the art of coating herself in powerful aether and could maintain absolute control even in battle. It should've been impossible for a Rank 4 sorceress to dodge the attacks of a Rank 5 monster—but Karla's mastery of aether had allowed her to manipulate the wind to dodge Nero's

assault.

This strength of mind and wit was the kind of thing that overall combat power couldn't measure.

"*Flame Javelin*," Karla chanted in midair, targeting Nero as it passed below.

Coeurls had resistance to slashing and piercing damage, but offensive spells were a different story. Sorcery was a true threat to Nero—but at the same time, spells could be countered, provided one could get in melee range.

"Groooar!"

Nero's whiskers crackled with electricity, disrupting Karla's spell. The lance dissipated into nothing, and Karla's face twisted slightly with discomfort. The coeurl's claws tore through the earth as it skidded across the battlefield.

Still afloat, Karla—now at a safe distance—launched another spell at Nero the second it turned back around.

"*Ice Javelin*."

Ice-elemental spells had freezing properties that could dull an opponent's movements. But through pure instinct and physical skill, Nero managed to dodge the incoming javelins—straight into the path of the rampaging, blazing blue huskbear.

"Graaah!" the bear roared, lunging at Nero.

"Groooar!" Nero bellowed back.

As Karla's Ice Javelins rained down on the pair of beasts, Nero didn't hesitate—it sank its fangs into the flaming bear's throat, swinging the massive creature around like a rag doll and crushing its neck, then using its corpse as a shield against the ice javelins.

As Karla watched Nero charge at her, still using the blue huskbear's carcass for protection, her lips twisted into a wicked, borderline mad smile.

"*Soul Thorn*."

▼ Karla Leicester
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: ∞/530

Health Points: 26/52
Overall Combat Power: 1,030 (Special: 2,957)
Gift: Soul Thorn / Life Exchange

***

"Cindeeerrrs!"

Gilgan bellowed in rage as I wove through his relentless attacks, killing his men one by one. His furious, desperate strikes were growing sloppier by the second. Rationally, he had to understand that I was someone dangerous enough to have annihilated an entire branch of the Assassins' Guild, but his mind still could not bear the humiliation of being toyed with by someone below him in combat rank.

From my observations, Gilgan had the leadership skills to command others and the guts to accept an assassination contract that even the guild's central branch had refused. But from a different perspective, one could argue that his behavior amounted to reckless arrogance, which was hardly fitting for a high-ranking executive responsible for others' lives.

People like him had short fuses, and impatience and frustration dulled the precision of their attacks. To provoke him, I easily dodged one of his wild swings—but the hem of my split skirt loosely tangled around my leg in the process.

"Game over!!!" he shouted, seizing the chance and hurling both of his blades at me.

Knights and ordinary fighters rarely resorted to throwing their weapons, even as a finishing move, because of how exposed it left them. Still, in this situation, it was the most effective decision.

Sadly for him, I dodged by letting myself collapse to the ground.

"What?!" he exclaimed.

You should keep your cards closer to your chest, Gilgan, I thought.

Just as Gilgan had readily cast aside hesitation and thrown his weapons, I, too, had cast aside my evasion strategy and focused on dodging just this one attack. I knew it made me vulnerable to the

other assassins, but just as I'd taken notice of his wild swings, his men—who undoubtedly knew of his short temper—were hesitating, afraid of getting caught in the middle. And Gilgan, blinded by rage, failed to notice them balking.

"Argh!"

One of his men, who'd been preparing to attack me, was struck squarely by Gilgan's weapons. Gilgan's focus briefly wavered, and I took advantage of this and kicked up into the air as I fell, sending my long skirt fluttering and obscuring his vision. With the motion concealed by the fabric, I pulled a knife from my thigh and flung it at him.

"Tsk!"

Gilgan regained his focus in the nick of time. He just barely managed to avoid a strike to a vital point, and the blade only grazed him. I dashed forward, tearing my tangled hem free, and swung down my sickle pendulum—but Gilgan deflected it with his gauntlet, turned to me, and let out a thunderous scream.

"*Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*"

The moment his battle cry reached me, my body momentarily froze.

What was that?! That's not Intimidation. Is that his trump card? Perhaps it was a stun-type sorcery skill, similar to my Pain spell.

Gilgan seized the chance and picked up a fallen assassin's sword, raising it up high. "*Vorpal Blade!*"

He unleashed the Level 5 technique again, sending a barrage of invisible slashes hurtling toward me. At this range, dodging was nearly impossible—he had to know that. And I knew that too, which was why I'd anticipated he'd use a combat technique.

His battle cry didn't stun me for as long as Pain would have. As soon as I recovered from my brief paralysis, I threw the torn hem of my skirt forward, startling him. Gilgan was *too* close; the scrap of fabric was enough to obscure his vision, and even for a Rank 5 like him, hitting a foe he couldn't see was difficult.

I dropped low like a cat, slipping underneath the slashes. Then, using my foot to control the string wrapped around it, I launched my pendulum's blade toward Gilgan's face.

"*Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*"

He let out another battle cry, and the sound of muscles tearing all over his body filled the air. Blood spurted from the gashes as he managed to dodge the pendulum.

"Not bad, kid," Gilgan said, baring his teeth in a beastly grin despite his bloodied state.

Even an attack that should've been fatal hadn't taken him down. Perhaps he had some sort of shout-based skill set? Either way, my strike hadn't been decisive. I'd managed to take down his men and force a one-on-one fight, break his focus, and reduce the precision of his techniques, but even then I hadn't been able to end him.

What's my next move...?

A sudden, deafening *boom* echoed in the distance, disrupting my thoughts and sending tremors through the battlefield. Keeping my gaze locked on Gilgan, I focused on my hearing—and in the cacophony, I recognized Nero's roar and a faint, familiar voice.

"What the hell was that?!" Gilgan demanded.

"No clue," I replied flippantly.

The next moment, I bolted in the direction where Nero was fighting *her*.

"Where do you think you're going?!" he shouted.

Gilgan hurled a throwing knife at me, and I deflected it midair with my weighted pendulum.

The next moment, a Fireball burst into flames in the distance I'd created between us.

"Aaaaargh!" he screamed as he just barely dodged the attack, singeing his arms in the process.

Even I had taken some damage from the heat and the blast, despite managing to put up a quick Shield spell. Still, I seized the moment, sheathed my pendulums, and drew my black dagger and knife.

"This will be our battlefield," I told him. *Watch how I actually fight.*

***

“I’m going to join the fray,” Rockwell muttered, tightening his grip on the borrowed sword.

Elvan and the others all gasped in shock, turning their stunned gazes toward him.

A faction of the knights’ Second Division had turned traitor, and the nobility faction had hired the Assassins’ Guild to attack the royals. Princess Elena had sent the adventurer girl to their aid, drawing the assailants’ focus away from the prince and his entourage. As a member of a lineage of many grand generals, Rockwell likely had his own feelings on the matter—but even skilled as he was, the young Dandorl nobleman was still a student. If he acted rashly, he might end up drawing attention back to their group.

Even so, as a knight and a man, Rockwell couldn’t accept the idea of hiding behind a young maiden and readied himself for combat.

“Then I will join you,” Mikhail declared, stepping forward to stand beside his friend. He knew Rockwell’s words were likely bravado but still smiled. “My sword skills don’t compare to yours, but my sorcery might be of some use.”

“Mikhail...”

Mikhail’s and Rockwell’s feelings were aligned but not exactly the same.

As a high-ranking noble, Rockwell had locked away his ideal of knighthood—but now, in the pink-haired girl’s strength, he saw a reflection of it. He wished to join her and fight, as a boy admiring a hero might. But perhaps the reason that he couldn’t stand by and watch while she fought alone had less to do with pride as a man and more to do with that admiration shifting into a different, deeper, feeling.

Mikhail, on the other hand, had been first captivated years ago by this adventurer girl, so unlike the noble ladies who constantly swarmed him, and so similar to the mental image he’d had of the aunt he’d admired intensely as a child. Watching her solitary existence, he felt a desire to rescue her from the abyss of loneliness. Though he knew it was presumptuous of him—a result of his privileged life as a noble—he nevertheless wanted to support her, even if she didn’t want it. Whether that stemmed from an almost

familial desire to protect her or something else, he wasn't sure. All he knew was that, like Rockwell, he could no longer stand by and do nothing.

But their remaining friend couldn't understand them at all.

"What are you two saying?!" Elvan snapped. "What could throwing ourselves into such a dangerous battle possibly do?! Do not be foolish! Remember your duties!"

Mikhail and Rockwell exchanged glances. Elvan was right; as high-ranking nobles, their priority was to survive. What could they possibly achieve in a battle where an elite adventurer, a member of the Rainbow Blade, was fighting for her life? At worst, they'd get in her way.

"Forgive us, Your Highness. We simply cannot sit and watch any longer."

"As high-ranked nobles, quelling this rebellion is our responsibility, not our savior's. Even if it means falling in combat."

"But..."

Elvan was speechless in the face of Rockwell and Mikhail's determination. Though he'd tried to reprimand them, deep down, he was afraid. As a prince who'd grown up bereft of the resolve expected of royalty, he could not comprehend this girl—someone who killed so easily, as though life and death meant nothing. Watching enemies and allies alike be slaughtered, watching his fiancée Karla battle a massive black beast, he felt as though he were in hell itself.

And in his fear, watching his two friends step away from him, Elvan felt a strange distance growing between them. His gaze turned dark as he looked at the peach-haired girl who had caused all of this.

"Please, wait!" called out the young girl, still bearing traces of innocence, who clung to Elvan's hand. She gave Rockwell and Mikhail a sorrowful look. "You don't have to do something so dangerous! Nobility, duty, those things don't matter! There is more to humanity than this! Leave the brutality to them!"

Mikhail quietly shook his head, and Rockwell placed a hand on his shoulder. Together, the two stepped forward toward the battlefield.

"Rockwell... Mikhail..." Elvan murmured sadly as his friends pulled away.

Licia gently pulled the prince's hand to her chest, and as if her kindness were a lifeline, Elvan wrapped his arms around her slender frame. "Licia..."

"It's okay, Lord El. I'll always be by your side," she said with a compassionate smile, stroking Elvan's head as though soothing a child.

At the same time, she curiously watched the two boys walk away.

What went wrong? she wondered. She'd used the exact same lines spoken by the heroine in the story she'd heard from the aethercrystal, but that hadn't stopped them.

The information she'd been given had begun to diverge from reality.

She'd known that the true heroine's disappearance would cause inconsistencies with the game's story, but the complete change in demeanor in these two key characters made her realize she needed to further process what she knew.

The face of the girl who now called herself Alicia, who had long since forgotten her true name, twisted with frustration. Her gaze turned cold as she looked toward the two girls in the distance—the pink-haired one and the black-haired one.

Those two are in the way...

***

Karla had appeared out of nowhere and begun to battle Nero, tearing through the woods in the process. That power of hers... Was it her gift? Even with my ability to see mana, I couldn't identify the limit of her aether. But I could sense one thing—her life force was rapidly fading.

That hellish fire was burning fiercely at the cost of her own life.

Is this the power you wished for, Karla?

Propelled by her surging aether, Karla soared through the air as she fought Nero—a Rank 5 beast—on equal footing. No, that wasn't quite right. In terms of sheer destructive power, Karla was equivalent

to a Rank 6.

Coeurls, beasts with slashing and piercing resistance, were naturally weak to offensive sorcery, but they also possessed the ability to disrupt spells. Both Nero and Karla wielded immense power. Neither could be left unchecked. But due to their opposing skill sets, this wasn't a fight that would end quickly, as neither side was likely to fall immediately—and Karla's wanton use of magic had already set the entire area ablaze.

That was precisely why I'd chosen this as the battleground for my duel against Gilgan.

"You...!" Gilgan hissed. Caught in the cross fire of Karla's attacks, he turned his weapon and his furious gaze toward me.

He was an elite assassin, and so it wasn't surprising that even with the burns on his left arm, his visible combat power hadn't dropped significantly. That didn't matter, though. Had he been so weak that a stray spell could've taken him out, there wouldn't have been any need for me to lure him here for a one-on-one fight.

Let's end this. This place will be your grave.

Gilgan clicked his tongue and spat on the ground, then lowered his stance, gripping his sword tighter. I silently raised my black knife and dagger in turn.

Boom.

A nearby explosion from one of Karla's spells rang out, and as if it had been a signal, Gilgan and I leaped forward at the same time.

Clang!

His sword clashed with my dagger, sending sparks flying. I struck with my knife, wielded in my left hand, but despite his burns, Gilgan blocked the attack with a dagger of his own.

I had no intention of fighting him in a contest of pure strength, locking blades like this. But Gilgan seemed to be in the same boat—perhaps due to his burned arm. While our weapons were still clashing, he kicked at me.

"Hah!"

"Ngh!"

I just barely managed to block the kick with my knee, but the force of the impact sent my lighter frame flying. Using that

momentum, I created distance between us, flipped midair, and kicked a rock from the ground toward him as I landed. Gilgan, who'd been ready to give chase, was forced to pause. By using every trick I had, I'd finally managed to hold my own against a Rank 5.

Still, the power difference between us remained, and I lacked a way to decisively end our fight. Closing that gap was precisely why I'd chosen this battlefield. From now on, the outcome of our duel was up to focus and resolve.

Boom!

"Groooooooooar!!!"

"Ah ha ha!"

The searing heat of the flames swept over the battlefield amid the deafening explosions, Karla's maniacal laughter, and Nero's furious roars. The scorching winds and shards of shattered rock made Gilgan's focus waver, if only for an instant.

I dashed through the chaos, dodging only the debris that would've otherwise been lethal, and slashed deeply at his shoulder, sending blood spraying into the air.

"You're crazy," he groaned.

"You think?" I retorted.

No sane person would've taken on the Assassins' Guild alone.

Even as blood dripped from the gash on my forehead, where a stray rock had grazed me, I kept swinging. For the first time, a flicker of fear sparked in Gilgan's eyes.

"*RaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!*"

His feral scream, unlike Intimidation or my spell Pain, couldn't be resisted easily. I braced myself against the sudden shock and readied my stance to deflect Gilgan's incoming attack just before the stun effect hit me. Gilgan lifted his sword once more, focusing all his energy into executing yet another combat technique.

But before he could swing, a wind-elemental spell struck his back from an unexpected angle, slicing into him.

"What...the?!" he exclaimed in shock.

And a moment later...

"Ngaaaaaaaaah!"

...A blade plunged deep into the newly opened wound.

The boys who had been standing beside the crown prince—Rockwell and Mikhail—had managed to each land a hit while Gilgan's attention had been focused entirely on me.

I could've been annoyed at their interference, but this was entirely Gilgan's fault. He'd lost awareness of his surroundings. He should've killed the weaker ones first, just as I had.

Still, his wound was too shallow to be fatal.

"You fucking brats!!!" he roared.

Gilgan spun and smashed his elbow into Rockwell, sending him sprawling. Then, he whipped out a throwing knife, aiming straight for Mikhail, who'd cast the wind spell.

"Damn it!"

"Mikhail!"

Is this not enough against a Rank 5? What's missing? What do I need? Speed. I need to be faster than anyone. I can't use Iron Rose yet, but I remember. My body remembers that speed. It knows how to achieve it.

At that instant, my consciousness shifted. The world slowed to a crawl, ashen and silent, as every ounce of my aether rushed to my legs. Then I moved, a blur of light, leaving even sound behind.

My dagger, which I'd barely had time to draw, tore deep into Gilgan's throat.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Gilgan’s dying cries echoed as I shot past him, the momentum of the lunge carrying me forward.

I tumbled onto the ground, rolling once before pushing myself upright with both arms. In an instant, I thrust myself between the two figures still locked in battle, unleashing a burst of Intimidation and kicking up a cloud of dust.

The sheer pressure forced both human and beast to freeze. Immediately, I pressed my knife and dagger to each of their foreheads.

“You two stop that.”

“Grr...”

“Oh, Alia, you’re covered in blood again...” Karla murmured, her pale skin marked with dark, thornlike coils. She smiled, crimson blood dripping from her lips.

“...Ah ha ha!”

At the sound of Gilgan’s laughter and the realization that he wasn’t dead, I drew a throwing knife from my thigh and took aim. Maybe the previous movement had pushed my body too far—both of my legs were shaking uncontrollably, blood seeping from my skin as if the capillaries had burst. I couldn’t move.

But Gilgan’s wound was clearly fatal. He stood rigidly as blood gushed from his slashed throat and his life force rapidly faded away. Still, his lips curled into a small mocking smile as he stared at me.

“I...lost. Wow. I guess it looked to you like I wasn’t taking this seriously, huh, Cinders?”

I stared at him silently. Perhaps this was the difference between us—he enjoyed battle, and I sought victory.

“You win, Cinders. But don’t let your guard down. This wasn’t just the work of one or two masterminds. Look. Over there. Right, Taba—”

Before he could finish, a small whooshing sound cut through the air and a black arrow pierced straight through Gilgan’s head.

Startled, I immediately adjusted my stance, knife at the ready, and turned toward where the arrow had come from. Perched high in a distant tree stood two silent figures, clad in black and with bows

drawn.

Women? I wondered. Judging by their silhouettes, that appeared to be the case.

The moment they turned to flee, Karla unleashed a spell in their direction. "*Ice Javelin.*"

Frozen projectiles shot toward the women at terrifying speed, and the two only barely managed to dodge. But they couldn't evade perfectly. A javelin grazed one of them, ripping the fabric of her outfit and revealing dark skin underneath. Another struck the mask of the second woman, tearing it away to reveal a burned face twisted with hatred, glaring right at me.

The black-clad assassins vanished into the distance.

That skin color... And those burns...

Wait.

"Tabatha?"

Settling Scores

At the Dandorl estate within the Sorcerers' Academy, Clara slammed both hands on the table, her voice trembling with fury.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

Her maids, including Hilda, all flinched under her intense gaze.

Clara had known about the planned attack on the crown prince—but only as an event in the otome game. She'd never intended for it to escalate into a full-blown attempt on his life. In the game's plot, the Second Division's rebellion had been a political protest against the royal family, nothing more. So how had the Assassins' Guild gotten involved? Why had this turned into an actual assassination attempt?

The maids exchanged uneasy glances.

Hilda, the one in charge, finally spoke up. "W-We beg your forgiveness, Lady Clara. *She* secretly contacted the Assassins' Guild—"

"*She?* You mean Tabatha?!"

Hilda and Vivi were both survivors from the Assassins' Guild. It had been a miracle that they'd made it out at all, and during their recovery, they'd relied on Tabatha's assistance—only for Tabatha to later betray their trust and use them as shields to save herself during a fight against Alia. Though Tabatha herself had gotten severely burned in the process, she had managed, if barely, to survive.

The two maids had suffered burns during the fight as well, but Clara had spared no expense in their treatment, leaving them with almost no scars. Tabatha's wounds, however, had been too severe; she still hadn't fully recovered, and because of this, she had been working from the shadows. She'd done an excellent job up until this point, negotiating with forces that Hilda and the others were still too young to handle.

“I should’ve done a better job of assessing her true nature,” Clara muttered.

“That’s not true!” Vivi exclaimed. She bit her lip, casting her gaze downward. “As her former allies, we should’ve been warier...”

Despite having already been betrayed once, Vivi—the youngest among them—hadn’t been able to let go of her previous attachment to Tabatha. Now, after everything that had happened, she seemed to have reached a breaking point.

Clara’s gift, Foresight, wasn’t perfect. All it could do was predict future outcomes based on information she already had. Because Clara also possessed knowledge from the game, her predictions had thus far been quite accurate.

This time, however, that knowledge had led her astray. The game’s events had begun to deviate from the original storyline. And Tabatha had, on her own initiative, been working from behind the scenes, which had limited Clara’s interactions with her, further impairing Clara’s ability to use Foresight effectively.

“We cannot allow her to remain at large,” Clara declared. “You all understand that, correct?”

“Yes,” replied Doris, Heidi, and Hilda—the latter of whom had never been fond of Tabatha in the first place.

After a long pause, even Vivi finally agreed. “Yes.”

“But...how do we do this? We don’t know that we can defeat Tabatha. And...that man is probably with her as well...”

“That man...” Clara echoed. “You mean Graves?”

Graves had taken refuge within the same organization that Clara had made contact with. He was a man of dangerous ideologies, and Clara had once thought that perhaps he could be used to eliminate the heroine, if he could be convinced that the girl would bring ruin to the kingdom. But now, with things unfolding as they were, she could no longer predict how he would act.

Clara activated Foresight, processing the updated information. After several minutes of calculations, she arrived at a single conclusion.

“Leak information about them to Princess Elena’s faction,” she commanded.

"Wait, but Lady Clara..."

Tabatha had orchestrated the crown prince's assassination attempt for one reason alone—her hatred for Alia. She'd used the hit request as bait, manipulated the nobility faction, and drawn both the Assassins' Guild and that girl into a deadly confrontation. Taking captives, coercion, assassination, changing targets—everything, every deviation from the plan, had been Tabatha's doing, driven by her obsession with revenge.

Clara's analysis had revealed that the organization had shifted its target from the crown prince to the princess. But there was still a strong possibility that Graves wanted Elvan dead. If the information they had was leaked, all of their carefully laid groundwork would be undone. Clara would be directly opposing the organization.

But Clara was no longer thinking rationally. She couldn't—*wouldn't*—forgive those who had tried to take the life of the man she loved.

"We'll sic Lady Cinders on that lot. They're all as good as dead."

***

A plot by the nobility faction, which opposed the royalists, had disrupted the Sorcerers' Academy's annual outdoor training exercise. The plan had involved the abduction of Princess Elena and the assassination of Crown Prince Elvan—but both attempts had failed, and as a result, the incident had been formally resolved to all outward appearances.

The exercise had, of course, been canceled; students had not been informed why. Noble children belonging to both factions attended the Academy, and revealing the truth could've led to conflicts among them. Moreover, it had been deemed inappropriate to risk alerting foreign powers to the kingdom's domestic strife. After all, despite being the largest nation on the southern continent, the Kingdom of Claydale was gradually losing influence due to internal discord.

After striking a plea bargain with a captured knight from the nobility faction, Margrave Dandorl—the grand general of the

kingdom—was in the process of purging knights loyal to the nobility from the Royal Guard. At the same time, the royal family was dismantling the viscountcies and lower-ranked noble houses involved in the incident, in addition to investigating the high-ranked nobles who had allowed their vassals to take the fall.

One such noble family was harboring an old enemy of Alia of the Rainbow Blade—the girl who had thwarted the nobility's scheme.

"You were reckless. Again," Elena chided as she sat across from Alia on the terrace of her estate in the Sorcerers' Academy. "I know I was the one who asked you, but please, leave it to me to orchestrate the investigation surrounding that man and take care of yourself for now."

Alia gave a small nod in response.

I don't know if I can trust that she truly agrees, Elena thought, glaring lightly at Alia.

Normally, Alia, as a guard and handmaiden, would not have been sharing a table with her charge. But she'd pushed herself too hard in the recent struggle, and even with healing magic, her leg had not fully recovered. A healer had examined her, determined that the injury had been magically affecting her nerves, and, rather than attempting to brute force a cure with medicine, decided that a few days' rest would allow for natural recovery.

Though Alia was currently being fostered by a baronetcy, she had grown up a commoner and tended to have little regard for her own life. To her, it was kill or be killed—and that belief meant she was hard on herself and showed no mercy to her enemies. It was precisely Alia's nature that had offered reprieve and a sense of kinship to Elena, but still, seeing Alia repeatedly risk life and limb made Elena's heart ache.

"We're not friends," Elena had once said.

They were noble and commoner, princess and adventurer. Their differences in birth and station were too vast, and Elena had known from the beginning that the only way to keep Alia with her would've been by force. Instead, the two had chosen to walk separate paths. Even now that Alia was a noble, keeping her here had meant robbing her of her freedom. Still, honoring the vow that the two had

once taken together, Alia had chosen to stay at Elena's side.

Elena didn't want to protect her own life. What she wanted to protect was her pride—as a noble and as an individual. She had never voiced those feelings to anyone, and Alia was the only person in this world who understood.

Likewise, Alia lived not for others but as her own individual with her own pride. Because of that, Elena had vowed to protect her—once and once only—no matter the circumstance. Alia, in turn, had vowed to kill a single person—whomever it might be—to defend Elena's pride.

They had vowed to defend each other's pride even at the cost of their own lives. Theirs was a difficult relationship for others to understand.

Over the course of her time with Alia, Elena had begun to see parts of the adventurer that she'd never noticed before. Alia, who fought fiercely and relentlessly against all odds in combat, had strange moments of absentmindedness in everyday life.

The two girls were only twelve years old—thirteen in a few months—and still considered children by society at large. Due to the effects of aether on their bodies, they had matured early, and had they been commoners, they would have been taken for young adults. Alia in particular had a certain charm, a dignified bearing and composed manner of speech, that turned heads wherever she went. And not just the heads of young men—a number of female students had also found themselves drawn to Alia, who stood taller than most girls and carried herself with an air of quiet strength.

I wonder what they'd think if they saw this side of her.

Alia didn't talk much—not because she was inarticulate or had a poor vocabulary, but rather because she didn't waste words on anything unnecessary. It was as though she'd skipped childhood entirely and jumped straight into adulthood. Still, she had a peculiar childlike side to her at times, even if few people noticed. As she had just now, she would sometimes offer a very brief response—often just the word "okay"—followed by a small nod, which made her seem younger than her actual age. In those rare moments, she was almost unbearably adorable.

The young guardian maiden had received strict guidance from her foster mother, Sera, on how to carry out her duties. Between her natural aptitude and her training, Alia had reached a level of refinement in grooming and etiquette comparable to the average noblewoman, in Elena's opinion. Her hair—soft, pink, naturally straight and lustrous—remained effortlessly smooth and glossy even with minimal care. Elena, whose hair was prone to curls, envied Alia's silky locks, but Alia herself seemed indifferent to them. She would sometimes leave her long hair in a disheveled state after training, for example.

During such moments, Chloe—Alia's fellow guardian maiden—would delight in combing Alia's hair as though tending to a little sister. Alia, in turn, seemed entirely unbothered by others handling her hair and would sit still with the expression of a young girl being cared for by her mother.

Just this once, Elena thought as she stood up. She retrieved her own comb and quietly stepped behind Alia.

"Elena?"

"Stay still, Alia."

Gently, Elena began to run the comb through Alia's hair. From behind, Elena could see how delicate Alia's neck and shoulders were. The sight made the princess's heart ache with the awareness of the burden this girl carried. On her shoulders, through battle, lay the fate of the entire kingdom.

The thought momentarily slowed Elena's hands. Sensing something was wrong, Alia reached softly for the princess's fingers.

"It's okay, Elena," she said. "I chose this."

"I know, Alia. Thank you."

With no further words, Elena continued to comb Alia's hair, and the two remained like that, in quiet understanding. From the doorway, Chloe, who had come to refill the tea, smiled at the sight and silently excused herself.

***

Two months had passed since the nobility faction's failed attempt

to assassinate Elvan and abduct Elena, and spring had arrived. The royalists had quietly dealt with the noble and knightly houses involved in the incident—and promoted royalist nobles to fill those spots. Among the more notable promotions was the baron of a certain territory, who had been elevated to viscount.

Alia had met the former baron once, back when she'd first been taken into House Leighton; he was a mild-mannered man who'd been loyally serving the royalists' cause for years now. But that was mere context for something more important to Alia: House Leighton, a baronetcy, had been a vassal of this particular former baron, and as a reward for their past achievements—including Alia's role in saving both the prince and princess—the Leightons had been elevated to barons themselves, gaining new lands and status.

Sera had gone from the wife of a minor baronet to a baroness governing her own domain. Consequently, Alia's title had also changed.

"One, two, three... One, two, three..."

Under the moonlight at the princess's estate, two young girls moved with graceful, light steps as they practiced their dancing. There was no music. No audience. The only sounds were Elena's rhythmic counting and the tapping of her heels against the floor. Not a single sound could be heard from the other girl—not even her breathing.

"You've improved quite a bit, Alia."

Halting her steps to take a light breath, Elena looked up at the pink-haired girl, who stood about half a head taller than her. Alia, who'd been playing the role of the princess's partner, showed no signs of tiredness.

"I have a good teacher," Alia remarked, a faint smile on her lips.

"Thank you. I'm happy that I can teach you something," Elena replied. "But...because you're always partnered with me, you've gotten good at the part of the male dancer." She chuckled softly, bringing her fingers to her lips as her golden hair swayed.

Alia kept the same expression. "I won't be dancing anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"I'm sure there are gentlemen who would love to have a dance

with you...”

Though it was hardly a proper replacement for the canceled training exercise, the academy had decided to hold the summer ball earlier than usual. Since the academy’s program included teaching the necessary qualifications to attend high society functions, the school regularly hosted balls as practice, though they weren’t proper formal events.

Most years, these balls were held across all grades, but since it was still early in the term and many students weren’t yet used to dancing, this ball would be exclusive to first-year students. Elena had been teaching Alia to dance in preparation for the event, but due to their height difference, Alia often ended up playing the part of the male partner. She also seemed more comfortable with the role, and as a result, she’d gotten quite good at it.

“Are you really going alone?” Elena asked, having caught her breath.

“Yes,” Alia replied, quietly stepping away as if to reaffirm her resolve.

The nobility faction’s ploy had already led to the downfall of the involved viscounts and barons—but those were little more than scapegoats for the higher-ranking nobles. Elena had been negotiating with the prisoners Alia had caught to extract more information, but unexpectedly, a separate source had provided critical intelligence. Though the precise source was unknown, both Elena and Alia thought the information was credible, as it had been confirmed through multiple channels.

The March of Kendras, a powerful noble house located near the northwestern border, held the rights to extract resources from the Kond Mines. As one of the key players in the Kingdom of Claydale, House Kendras held both political and financial sway. But, due to how far the march was from the capital as well as the absence of intermarriages with the royal family in recent years, its domestic influence had waned. For this reason, the house had aligned with the nobility faction.

And now it had come to the royal family’s attention that a known traitor to the Order of Shadows and dangerous radical, Graves, was

hiding in the march. Not only that, he had allies with him—enemies of Claydale hailing from another nation. The Order had suffered several casualties while attempting to verify this information, lending credence to it despite the lack of a verifiable source.

If Graves was indeed there, then any large-scale movement by the Order was likely to alert him, leading to the destruction of key evidence. Given his beliefs, it was unlikely he was loyal to the nobility faction, but regardless, he was too dangerous and too much of an unknown to ignore. It had been decided that the Rainbow Blade would, once again, spearhead efforts to eliminate him.

"This is the fastest option," Alia pointed out. "Dalton and Feld are too well-known. If they make a move, Graves will vanish. But if I go alone, he'll show himself and fight me."

"I understand that, but..." the princess murmured, visibly concerned.

"Elena," Alia called out—not as the princess's guard but as a kindred spirit.

Their gazes met, and Elena stared straight into Alia's jade-green eyes.

"Believe in me," Alia pleaded.

"I do," Elena conceded. "But...return to me before the ball. Promise me."

***

After making a new promise with Elena, I left the mansion quietly at the crack of dawn. I was dressed not in my uniform but in my adventurer's gear—which I hadn't worn in a long while.

The first time Graves and I had fought, I'd been nowhere near his level. The second time, he'd retreated—but my victory hadn't come from pure skill. I'd grown stronger since then, but I was certain he had too. This would likely be my toughest battle yet—but this time, I would make sure to end things.

He wasn't just Elena's problem.

This was my battle. I had sworn to kill this man, and I would do exactly that. I would settle things with him once and for all.

▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 136/300
Health Points: 98/250
Strength: 10 (14)
Endurance: 10 (14)
Agility: 17 (24) △ +2
Dexterity: 9
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 4]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 4]
[Throwing Lv. 4]
[Bow Mastery Lv. 2]
[Guard Lv. 4]
[String Manipulation Lv. 4]
[Light Magic Lv. 3]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 4]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4]
[Practical Magic ×6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4]
[Intimidation Lv. 4]
[Stealth Lv. 4]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 4]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 3]
[Status Resistance Lv. 1]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 1,339 (Boosted: 1,576) △ +43

Even by carriage, it would take about three weeks to travel between the academy and the March of Kendras. Given my promise to Elena, I didn't want to waste too much time.

Fortunately, I had a means of traveling faster.

“Nero?” I whispered into the forest.

The surrounding mana grew thicker, and a coeurl emerged from the darkness as if seeping from the shadows themselves. Moving like the wind, it approached me and gently licked my cheek.

Nero, a mythical coeurl, had chosen to stay by my side and now resided in the woods around the academy. Word of sightings occasionally circulated among students, but none of them would have been able to track a coeurl. I still didn’t fully understand why Nero insisted on staying with me, but if remaining by my side was its wish, I had no reason to deny it.

“Nero. It’s time.”

Reading my thoughts as electric pulses, Nero saw the enemy I had in mind and let out a low growl, almost sounding amused. “Grr...”

Riding on Nero’s back would drastically reduce travel time—not just because of its speed but primarily because no monster would dare challenge a mythical beast. I stroked its fur, preparing to mount, but suddenly its whiskers cracked with electricity, alerting me to something.

Immediately, I drew a knife from the holster around my thigh and flung it behind me. There was no need to ask who was there; anyone who approached me from behind, friend or foe, deserved whatever happened to them.

“Grah!”

Nero lashed out with its whiplike whiskers; I grabbed onto them, and it flung me backward as some kind of sorcery deflected the knife I’d thrown. At that moment, a Fire Arrow spell came flying toward me, but I knocked it away with Shield. I clicked my heels sharply as I landed and kicked into the shadows where my foe lurked.

Instead of taking the hit, the figure dodged effortlessly, floating as though weightless.

“What do you want?” I asked.

All traces of hostility vanished in an instant. Her long black hair swayed as she smiled a sickly, wicked grin, made all the more striking by the deep dark circles under her eyes.

“You came!” Karla said in a cloying, singsong tone.



Forest of the Dead

"Karla..."

Just as I'd been about to depart, Karla had appeared out of nowhere.

"May I join you?" she asked. "I'm not as connected as the Order of Shadows, but I do have my own sources of information. I knew you'd make a move! I've been waiting."

Karla, who had all elemental affinities, was Rank 4, but her power was closer to Rank 5. She had multiple skills in both close combat and magic, and her combat power was on par with mine. But because of her six affinities, her health points were as low as a child's and never recovered to full, always sitting at half capacity. I suspected it had something to do with the gift she'd received, which strengthened her aether; perhaps the gift was continuously eating away at her life force.

She'd dodged my knife throw and even countered it, but despite her fluid movements and easy speech, her body was far from healthy. Her complexion was pale as paper, and the life force radiating from her was so faint she was almost spectral. Yet paradoxically, the immense amounts of aether emanating from her body as well as her powerful presence surpassed even those of the coeurl standing beside me.

I suspected Karla was forcing her ailing body to move by manipulating her aether and using sorcery. Even knowing that doing so would further shorten her lifespan, she seemed fully committed to keep going.

"I'll ask again," I finally said. "What do you want?"

In the dungeon, when Karla had wished not for survival but for the power to destroy the country, our paths had diverged for good. One day, Karla's chosen path of destruction would clash with Elena's desire to protect the kingdom, and that path would lead to a bloody

showdown between Karla and me—which could only end in one of us dying.

Karla would never give up her convictions, and neither would I. We both knew that someday one of us would kill the other.

She had to have known I was going after Graves and waited for me to make a move. What she planned to do once we got to him, I didn't know, nor did I care to know. What I *did* want to know was simple—why someone so determined to fight me to the death someday would present herself to me so brazenly now.

"Do you want to die here?" I asked.

"Oh, that would be lovely...but no. This time, I believe you need my help to save your precious princess," she said in a tone too casual for a noble lady as she took a step forward.

The tip of my knife nicked her forehead, and a thin, crimson line of blood streaked down her pale face. With a flick of her red tongue, she licked it away.

I could kill her now, I thought as I watched her health points tick down.

We glared at each other for several seconds before she spoke. "I'm cleaning up some waste I left behind when I was weaker. I don't need it anymore, and it would be a shame if it got in my way."

"And you're saying this 'waste' is with my foe?"

"Even trash can turn into a nuisance when fools decide to use it."

"Fine. Do as you please." I withdrew my knife, and Karla gave me a sweet smile.

Beside me, Nero—who had previously fought against her—growled in discontent.

I exhaled slowly, running my fingers through the fur at Nero's neck. "I know you don't like this, Nero, but let her come with us. If we leave her to her own devices, she might eat our prey."

"Grr..."

"I'm not so desperate that I'd steal your kills," Karla said.

"Liar," I retorted.

I climbed onto Nero's back, and begrudgingly, the coeurl flicked its whiskers, motioning for Karla to climb on as well. Though they'd been mortal enemies only months ago, Nero seemed to now harbor

complex feelings toward her as well.

Suppressing a sigh, I extended my hand toward Karla. "So what 'trash' is this exactly?"

"Say, Alia, have you heard how tiny western villages, so small they don't even appear on maps, sometimes just disappear overnight? Heh heh." Karla took my hand and climbed onto Nero's back, wearing a cruel smile as she subtly dodged my question.

In the end, Karla would go off on her own and kill people regardless. I didn't think she would die so easily, but I did think she might inadvertently create an opening for Graves to escape, and that would be a problem. I had no choice but to let her accompany me. Purely from the standpoint of protecting Elena, killing Karla here would've been the better choice—but Karla was the prince's fiancée, and killing her could cause even more trouble for Elena.

Either way, she was a hassle.

Karla could use teleportation sorcery, so if all she'd wanted was to get to the destination, she wouldn't have needed to travel with me. Why, then, had she chosen to do this? I had no answer to that question besides simply: "Because Karla."

***

It had been several days since our departure. Riding on Nero's back would've killed an average person, yet somehow, Karla was still alive. How odd.

With Nero's speed, it would be another week before we reached the March of Kendras. We were avoiding towns, of course—cutting through forests and mountains, and making camp at night.

"We'll camp here," I said.

Nero went off to hunt, later returning with a wild boar and a bear. I took a leg, still dripping with blood, and grilled it along with some wild vegetables I'd foraged nearby. Without protest, Karla sliced off pieces of the roasted meat with a knife and casually ate the gamey flesh.

To me, food was simply a way to get nutrients. I didn't care about taste—and meat was more nutritious without draining it of blood.

Karla, who had spent a long while delving into dungeons solo, likely thought the same.

Still, watching Karla eat like a normal person felt off to me. Perhaps it made her look human for once. As we continued our grueling journey, Karla's stamina would occasionally drop into the single digits—yet I was never under the impression that she'd die from it.

"I *am* human, you know," she said.

"You're the only one who thinks that," I pointed out.

"Then we're two peas in a pod, aren't we?"

Are we really?

***

We were three days away from our destination.

I'd been resting by the campfire, wrapped in my cloak, when my eyes suddenly snapped open. Nero's whiskers twitched, and Karla raised her head, turning her gaze toward the forest.

"That was a scream," I said.

"It was," Karla confirmed. "If I recall correctly, past this valley is a viscountcy under the jurisdiction of Marquis Dans. There must be a village there. Are you going?"

"Just to check."

As I stood, folding away my cloak, Karla remained seated, looking up at me. If this was just a fight between villagers or adventurers, I wouldn't interfere. But if bandits or monsters were involved, I couldn't just ignore it.

Suddenly, Karla's earlier words about villages disappearing overnight came to mind. I glanced at her face, half of which was illuminated by the firelight, and she smiled softly.

"Have you developed a taste for human blood yet?" she asked.

"Don't lump me in with you."

"Oh, how rude." Karla rose, wrapping her cloak around herself, and her smile deepened with amusement. "I'll have you know I don't like my meat rare. I much prefer it well-done, with a nice sear..."

"...I'm leaving."

Karla looked like she wanted to come along, but Nero had decided to stay back and sleep. Regardless, I chose to go alone and dashed into the pitch-black forest, in the direction of the scream. With Level 2 Night Vision and my ability to see mana as color, night or day made no difference to me.

Dense forests muffled sound, but in the dead of night, human screams carried far. I heard another scream, confirming I was headed in the right direction. Dashing through the trees at full speed, I soon caught sight of the ravine I'd spotted on the map. Beyond it was the silhouette of a woman, cornered by the shadow of a man.

The woman screamed again, holding her head. I had a bad feeling about the man, so I instantly shifted into battle mode.

"*Iron Rose*."

My pink hair turned the color of burnished steel as it fluttered in the wind. I crossed the ravine—about fifty paces—in a single leap, scattering light behind me like a comet's tail.

Whoosh!

"Take a nap."

"Gah!"

Using the momentum of my landing, I kicked the man's head, sending him flying before he could bring down his bloodied machete.

I landed smoothly, dispelled Iron Rose, and turned to the trembling woman. "Are you all right?"

The woman turned toward me, her teeth chattering loudly and her face so pale it was obvious even under the faint moonlight. "P-Please, help..."

"What happened?"

"O-Our village was...attacked..."

A rustling sound came from behind us, and the woman shrieked. I spun to see that the man I'd just knocked out was standing again, his neck bent at an unnatural angle. He pushed through the bushes, charging at me. His eyes were a murky yellow, his teeth grotesquely elongated.

His foul presence, his stench—this man was not human. Not anymore.

"Ngaaah!" the "man" roared, swinging his machete as he lunged at me. "Gah!"

But I could still kill this thing. I deflected the descending machete, stepped forward, and slammed my elbow into its forehead with enough force to cave it in.

"Ghh... Gaaah!"

Still, it didn't die. Perhaps it couldn't be killed by ordinary means.

"An undead," I muttered.

Dead creatures that could still walk. Though they were undead, they were not *immortal*—by casting aside fear, one could see they were no different from any other monster.

As it attacked, I sliced its tendons, shattered its bones, peeled away its muscles. I swept its legs to knock it off-balance, then drove my black dagger deep into its heart.

"Agh... Gah..."

All undead had a weakness in common: the aethercrystals in their hearts. Aethercrystals formed over time as mana and fragments of one's soul crystallized within one's blood. That was why bloodless creatures, such as skeletons, and creatures whose blood no longer flowed, like zombies, could cling to existence; they were created when humans who already possessed aethercrystals had their mana corrupted by miasma. Cere'zhula had taught me that much.

Judging by this man's clothes, he'd once been a villager. Some ordinary villagers could use sorcery, so it wasn't impossible for them to have aethercrystals, but...why was there an undead villager here?

"M-Miss?" the woman stammered, hesitantly stepping toward me as I crushed the aethercrystal to ensure the undead's destruction.

Whoosh!

"Eek!"

"Can you use sorcery?" I asked sharply, pointing my black knife at the woman.

The man from earlier had been dressed in ordinary clothes, so it was unlikely he'd already been dead and buried when he turned. In fact, it was possible he'd turned before dying at all.

The frightened woman's teeth chattered, and then—

"Miiiiiiss!" she shrieked, baring her elongated fangs and lunging at

me.

In a single motion, I dodged her sharp claws and moved behind her, sliding my black dagger sideways and severing her spinal cord. Then, with a swift reverse cut, I beheaded her.

Silently, I observed her corpse. She'd been human mere moments ago, and all of a sudden, she'd turned undead and pounced.

Something was definitely happening ahead. If the village had truly been attacked, and if there were survivors, I needed to act immediately. I focused my eyes, analyzing the nearby broken branches to determine where the village was located, and started running.

***

I was running through the dimly lit forest when I suddenly came to a halt. I'd caught a faint waft of the scent of blood drifting in the air. Moonlight illuminated the area, revealing a conspicuous number of tree stumps. Perhaps I was getting closer to the village.

My attention turned to a partially cleared area nearby, where several figures lay on the ground—fallen villagers, I assumed, but all I could see in their bodies was shadow-aspected mana.

Living beings mostly possessed non-elemental mana, but with traces of all other elements—fire for body temperature regulation, water for blood flow, wind for breath, earth for flesh and bone, light for life, and shadow for the soul. There was no doubt that these people were already dead. Corpses were rife with shadow mana because lingering thoughts and feelings easily took root in the deceased.

"Guh... Argh..." one of them groaned, stirring slightly. This was a young man, in his late teens or early twenties, lying face down and reaching out as though pleading for help.

I observed the body silently, detecting faint traces of other elements besides shadow. He was still clinging to life, although barely, and seemed to sense my presence as I stood there motionless. The young man lifted his face, and the moment I saw his eyes, I drew a knife from my thigh and flung it. The blade struck

the space between his brows.

"Graaah!" he roared, jerking upright, his eyes now feral like those of a beast.

I threw another knife into one of his eyeballs, then swung my slashing pendulum across his throat. Finally, the young man seemed to recognize his own death and slowly collapsed to the ground.

"Not even failures get any mercy, I see," Karla remarked mockingly from behind me.

So she's caught up already, I thought as I glanced briefly at her. I looked back at the young man's corpse and murmured, "A vampire..."

Vampires, despite their infamy, were rarely seen. It was commonly believed that they turned to ash in the sun, fed on the blood of people, and, through their bite, multiplied like rabbits—but that wasn't entirely accurate.

The blood of living beings was rife with the power of their souls. Cere'zhula had taught me that people turned into vampires when that power was lost; their bodies would transform into monsters in an attempt to reclaim it. And while this process could happen after a vampire's bite, not every victim underwent it. Most simply died.

Those who turned did have certain weaknesses, such as a sensitivity to sunlight, but they could not be underestimated. They had immense regenerative capabilities, so they couldn't die from ordinary wounds. Because their bodies healed so quickly, they could exert their full strength without worrying about damaging their muscles, making them one of the most formidable types of undead.

What Karla had called "failures" were those whose vampiric transformation had failed.

Some people possessed large amounts of aether even without aethercrystals or any sorcery training—for instance, individuals who had learned multiple types of Practical Magic, or those with non-elemental magic abilities such as Boost and various combat techniques. These people wouldn't become undead upon death but, in rare cases, could attract and be possessed by lesser spirits, becoming moving corpses of sorts.

Similarly, if a vampire's victims had significant amounts of aether,

they might not turn into vampires themselves—but their souls would become tainted, making them subservient to vampires while maintaining a human appearance. These failures craved blood but couldn't turn their victims into vampires. They could move in the sun but weren't immortal in the way that vampires were.

Most importantly, they were no longer human. Despite being able to function in sunlight, their bodies were now fundamentally different from those of ordinary people. They'd lost their former reason and intelligence, existing only as mindless puppets of the higher-ranked vampires.

"They might still be human," Karla said.

"Something that doesn't even struggle to survive can't be considered human," I retorted.

Could these creatures truly be called human if they didn't live by their own will and were instead driven solely by their hatred for the living and an insatiable thirst for blood?

They were victims. They weren't evil. But once they'd lost enough of their blood, there was only so much that could be done to save them. Unless the victim had extraordinarily high health points, there was no means to save the soul of someone who'd lost half their blood in a remote place like this—except through death.

I looked grimly at the victim I'd just slain.

"What a harsh way of life you have, Alia," Karla said, her pale fingertips reaching out to brush softly against my cheek. "But I do like that cold gaze of yours."

"What do you know about this, Karla?" I asked, my hand shooting out to grip her slender wrist tightly.

When we'd first set out, I'd questioned Karla about her reasons for coming along, and she'd only given me vague statements about cleaning up trash and small villages disappearing. She knew *something*—something that even the Order of Shadows wasn't aware of.

She smiled faintly, shifting her gaze toward the direction where the village likely was. "Let's head to the village. You'll understand when you see it."

"Fine."

Karla and I advanced through the dark forest side by side. Despite the dense vegetation, she kept up with my speed effortlessly—perhaps due to her distinct brand of sorcery. After a short while, we spotted what appeared to be a fence surrounding a village. We leaped over it and pressed forward, and the stench of blood grew stronger. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Karla's lips curled into a small smile.

Ahead, scattered human corpses came into view. There had been no sounds indicating a struggle, so perhaps it had already ended. The bodies seemed far too few; even a mountain village unmarked on maps would have at least a few hundred inhabitants. While a small number of families could survive almost anywhere, settlements still needed a decent population to defend against monster attacks—yet we'd found fewer than a hundred corpses total thus far. The rest of the villagers, alive or dead, had to be somewhere else.

"I see a light over there," Karla said.

"Yeah."

Farther in, near the center of the village, we spotted what appeared to be a bonfire. We sped up and, as we got closer, saw a group of terrified survivors among piles of corpses, surrounded by several vampires...and failures.

"Who?" asked a pitch-black figure that had been facing the villagers. The words were spoken in an odd accent.

While Karla lacked the skill Stealth, the figure had still spotted our approach in the dark far too easily. The figure turned slowly, and the dim light of the bonfire revealed the profile of a young girl. Her skin was the color of polished obsidian, and a pair of long ears peeked from beneath her silver locks; her eyes, a shade of golden tinged with red, reflected our forms as we drew near.

"A dark elf," I murmured.

"A demoness," Karla said.

On this continent, dark elves like my mistress were often referred to as demons and considered the enemies of humans, wood elves, dwarves, and beastkin alike.

The dark elf girl's eyes widened with recognition. "You two... You're..."

There were very few dark elves who would know of us. Immediately, I thought back on the black-clad duo that had fled during our confrontation with the prince's would-be assassins—one woman with burn scars, another with dark skin.

"You. Killed Gilgan," the girl said.

"Please!" a villager shouted desperately to Karla and me. "Help!"

But before we could do anything—

"Quiet. Pest," the girl said.

With a swing of her right hand, she brought a black iron chain down on the head of the man who'd just pleaded for help, smashing it apart. Blood and gore showered the surrounding villagers, and horrified screams pierced the night air.

"Tsk!"

Just as I was about to dart forward, the girl swung her chain again and struck the ground near where the villagers stood—halting both their shrieks and my movements.

"You. Why here?" she asked.

"That's what I want to know," I said. "Why is a dark elf here?"

"Is odd?" The girl tilted her head at my question.

Her speech was crude, and she looked young, but given elves' long lifespans, she was likely much older than one might have thought. Not only that, there was something otherworldly about her presence that went beyond simple age.

"Salalah, clan, kill humans. Obvious?"

I paused briefly. "I see."

The next moment, a black-dyed throwing knife flew from my hand and pierced the right eye of the girl, Salalah. I estimated her to be around Rank 4 in terms of power, but she seemed unfamiliar with weapons, which left me plenty of openings.

Salalah wavered slightly as she took the hit, but just as she was about to collapse, she steadied herself with her feet. Fixing her remaining eye on me, she yanked out the knife, and the wound rapidly generated.

So she wasn't *just* a demoness.

"You're the vampire who attacked the village," I said.

"Yes," Salalah confirmed as she tossed away the bloodstained

knife.

▼ Salalah
Species: Dark Elf/Vampire♀ (Estimated Rank 4)
Aether Points: 243/285
Health Points: 265/265
Overall Combat Power: 940×2 (1,880)

This girl was the true mastermind behind the carnage we'd seen.

Elves who didn't dedicate time to combat were no different from anyone else. Though they were long-lived, their sense of time differed from that of humans, so their skill growth was slower. But dark elves, who had been declared evil by the church, had been forced to become warriors and fight constantly from a young age—just like Cere'zhula. She'd once told me that due to its smaller numbers, the demonic nation even took in intelligent monsters as citizens to bolster their ranks. But, as formidable as the demons were, they would never send ordinary soldiers into enemy territory just like that.

Salalah, despite having scanned both Karla and myself, still seemed relaxed. Was this arrogance borne of her own strength? She had a detached air of unshakable confidence about her. Perhaps it was at least partially due to the fact she had lived so long, far beyond what her youthful appearance would suggest.

The Adventurers' Guild considered a typical vampire to be at least a Rank 3 threat, but those who had lived for over a century were classified as greater vampires and considered Rank 6 threats. While Salalah didn't have the air of a Rank 6 threat, the combat power of a greater vampire was estimated to be double the displayed value. This meant she was a vampire with a combat power close to 2,000, and a demoness on top of that—there was no telling what tricks she might have up her sleeve.

"Clan leader say, make more minions. You become minions. Clan leader pleased," Salalah said, clapping her hands sharply.

Four villagers who had turned into vampires and over ten failures

stirred, fixing their bloodshot, beastly eyes on us.

Is she part of an entire clan of demon vampires? I wondered. *How did such a group get into this country? Unless...*

I glanced over at Karla. Maybe these were the people she'd referred to a few days ago. She noticed my gaze and, as if sensing my thoughts, responded with a placid smile.

Without hesitation, I adjusted my grip on my knife, taking it in both hands. The four vampires would be troublesome, but the failures—while tricky to kill—were not immortal in the same way. They couldn't comprehend death, but once I finished them off, they would stay dead.

Just then, a child's voice rang out from the direction of the survivors.

"Dad! Stop it!"

A boy, still quite young, cried out with tears in his eyes before a woman—likely the mother—hurriedly grabbed him and covered his mouth.

Is this boy's father a vampire or a failure?

The failures still looked human, but a vampire's thralls were no different from monsters. Adults might have been able to understand this, even if emotionally they couldn't accept it. Not so a small child who'd just lost a parent.

Both the vampires and the failures lunged at us. For a moment, the boy's tearful gaze brought back the image of my own parents. My kind father. My gentle mother.

Vwooooosh!

A roaring column of fire tore through the night, catching two of the vampires. Their upper bodies were incinerated instantly, and their charred lower halves stumbled forward a few paces before turning to ash. The villagers screamed in horror at the sight of their former loved ones burning to a crisp, and the remaining vampires and failures, sensing danger, hesitated. Even Salalah's eyes widened with shock.

"Are you going to die for that boy?" Karla asked. "I can kill these, if you want. They're my leftovers, after all." She stepped forward with an air of delight as flames and massive amounts of aether

blazed on her palms.

At Karla's flames and words, Salalah's eyes widened further. Her words came out in furious screams, echoing through the night forest. "Ah. Fire! Human sorceress, black hair! You!" She glared at Karla. "Human woman! Betrayer! Murderer!"

"I'm so glad you remembered," Karla replied nonchalantly to Salalah's enraged accusations.

I figured Karla had colluded with the demons at some point, using them for her own ends, only to dispose of them once they were no longer useful.

Salalah's rage flared, and Karla's flames surged in response. Against undead enemies, Karla's fire sorcery was far more effective than my own combat style. I knew that, but...

"Karla..." I said, stepping forward and standing directly before Salalah.

There was still weakness within me. I'd vowed to grow stronger in spirit, even if my skills and power fell short—yet I was still too soft.

My true enemies lay ahead.

I couldn't afford to slow down until everything was taken care of.

After casting a quick glance at Karla—who, in her own strange way, was showing me a measure of consideration by letting me handle this—I swung my knife as though severing the remnants of my hesitation.

"I'll take them on alone."

In response, Karla gave her usual serene smile and a small shrug.

I stepped forward with my knife at the ready. Salalah, who had been fixated on Karla, now turned her fury toward me.

"Human filth. Not interfere."

Salalah slammed her black iron chain against the ground. At her signal, the vampires and failures—who had been still, wary of Karla's flames—suddenly shifted, their eyes flaring with bloodlust. Salalah narrowed her golden eyes in irritation as she reinforced her command over her thralls, her long jagged fangs gleaming in the dim firelight.

But even as she shifted her focus to me, her gaze lingered on

Karla. This wasn't simply a matter of hatred for a traitor who had slain her kin—Salalah didn't see a scout-type like me as a real threat.

"Teach this one manners!" she ordered her thralls. "The sorceress suffers! Then kill!"

"Raaaaaah!" the vampires and failures roared in unison.

The two vampires stepped forward, aiming to take me out first. But before they could attack, the boy's voice once again rang out.

"Daaad!"

Was one of these the boy's father? The moment the child's cry echoed through the air, a large vampire wielding an axe, who looked like a hunter, turned his gaze toward his son.

"D-Dad..." the boy stammered, his trembling voice filled with a mix of fear and sorrow.

But the man before him was no longer human, his face twisted with a grotesque, animalistic grin. Bereft of all reason, driven solely by his newfound vampiric instincts, the father now craved the blood of his own child.

Without reason to guide them, humans were little more than beasts.

"Graaah!"

The vampire's hunger overpowered his mistress's command, and he lunged toward his terrified child as the mother desperately tried to shield the boy.

"Gah!"

But before he could reach them, my dagger pierced clean through the base of his skull, coming out his mouth with a spray of blood.

Vampires couldn't be killed so easily, however. Even with his throat skewered, the man convulsed, reaching for me. I slipped past his grasp and retrieved the dagger, then sliced his throat open with my black knife. Without hesitation, I drove the dagger deep into his chest, where his aether was strongest.

"Gah...?"

Unable to comprehend what had happened to him, the father collapsed. His borrowed life ran out, and he reverted to a mere corpse. His son, drenched in his blood, stared in shock as his father died before his eyes.

"Dad...?" the boy whispered, his voice cracking.

"Graaaaaah!" the last vampire and the failures roared, lunging at me.

Though they had lost the ability to reason and were under Salalah's control, these creatures' eyes still flickered with fear—perhaps because they understood, on a primal level, that I had just killed a man in front of his own child.

These people were victims. They'd done no wrong. But they were still my enemies.

"Gh—"

My slashing pendulum's blade shot out, cutting a failure's throat open before I stabbed my black dagger into his forehead.

My skirt fluttered with the motion as I threw a knife between the eyes of the man behind the failure I'd just killed. I activated my Level 4 Boost and lunged forward, shattering the man's neck with a kick. As I spun midair, I swung my black knife and sliced the man's carotid open, finishing him off.

As I landed, I swung my weighted pendulum, and the moment my feet touched the ground, I yanked it down in a vicious arc. The heavy black iron smashed into the skull of a distant woman with a sickening crunch.

Even vampires and failures had their limits. Though they were hard to kill, they weren't much better at combat than their human counterparts—a lesser vampire was only about thirty percent stronger than a regular person. Their sturdiness was a significant threat, but the biggest threat of all was the fear they instilled in the living.

But I didn't fear them. Undead or not, they were still subject to the rules of this world. I'd just have to keep killing them until they died.

In the dark of night, my black blades sang as they cut through the failures, ending them one by one. Even though these creatures were no longer human, the surviving villagers still screamed in terror as I slaughtered monsters wearing faces they had once known.

Finally, I crushed the spine of the last villager-turned-vampire with my dagger and severed his head with my black knife. The

villagers choked on their screams, too horrified to even breathe.

***

Is that girl really human?

Salalah's question wasn't related to the pink-haired girl's power. Having lived as a monster, Salalah could see that the girl possessed an inhuman level of mental fortitude as she methodically slaughtered the failures, all while keeping a blank expression. The thralls were expendable, yes, and so Salalah cared little for them; what was astonishing was that the girl was disposing of each of them in a mere instant.

She's not to be underestimated...

The vampire had known that killing the black-haired betrayer was critical, but now she could see that the pink-haired girl, whom Tabatha—an envoy of Salalah's new ally—had warned her about, was just as dangerous as the sorceress.

She tightened her grip on her black iron chains. For hundreds of years, the demon race had been at war with the human nations. Though there had been no large-scale battles in the past few decades, skirmishes remained frequent. In preparation for the next major conflict, the demons had been dispatching agents to infiltrate various countries.

Humans were physically weaker and had much shorter lifespans than demons, but they still dominated other races—partially due to their warlike nature, partially due to their sheer numbers. Among the human nations, four were particularly threatening to demons: the Empire of Kal'Faan, a nation of warriors bordering the demonic nation; the United Kingdom of Ganzaal, a wealthy alliance of various states; the Theocratic State of Fandora, home to the Holy Church that had marked demons as the enemies of mankind; and the Kingdom of Claydale, with its vast military and national power. Those were the greatest adversaries of the demon race.

In this world, it was kill or be killed. Human life was cheap, and if one wanted to live, one had to take life in turn. Only those who had never feared for their lives would be naive enough to condemn this.

Salalah's clan had to fight to survive. The demonic nation had few inhabitants, and because of this, the dark elves living there accepted intelligent monsters like vampires and werewolves as citizens where other nations would've tried to exterminate them. But although Salalah and her clan had originally been dark elves themselves, it was difficult even for demons to fully trust bloodthirsty monsters. Her clan, composed of only a few hundred members, was small compared to the others; they had to continually prove their worth to find acceptance.

That was why a few dozen elite members of her clan had been chosen to infiltrate Claydale, far from their homeland. If, on the one hand, vampires were considered untrustworthy, on the other, they were extremely capable, out of all proportion to their small numbers. Only they could truly succeed at infiltrating this country and getting anything done.

Vampires couldn't walk in the sun, and they were too different in appearance from ordinary humans to blend into their society. Yet a number of people had nevertheless approached the group—the black-haired sorceress among them. The demons had accepted her deal, and then she'd betrayed them.

Infuriating as that was, locating a lone child in a kingdom this vast was an impossible task for them—and so the vampires had postponed their revenge. Instead, they'd used the information they'd received from the girl as advance payment to establish a base and a feeding ground in the kingdom, thus securing a foothold here.

One of their recent plans, the abduction of the princess, had failed due to a conflict with the schemes of the local nobility faction. But the vampires had never intended to leave such an important mission in the hands of outsiders in the first place. Salalah, who had been dispatched to oversee the abduction, had been trying to obtain new thralls to take control of the plan herself when these two had arrived.

A pair of girls, both with unnatural combat power. Why were they here? Had someone leaked information on Salalah's whereabouts? Was her clan being betrayed yet again?

After the black-haired sorceress had turned on them, they'd been

approached by a different group. And the more people who knew of their existence, the likelier it was that information would leak. But if only these two girls had come, that had to mean the exact details of the vampire clan's movements hadn't been fully exposed yet. In which case all Salalah needed to do was eliminate the two here and now.

At first, she'd thought the black-haired betrayer was the greater threat, but the sorceress was staying her hand in favor of the pink-haired girl. The clan's ally, Tabatha, held a grudge against this one. Tabatha had wanted to mete out vengeance herself, but as much as Salalah could sympathize—it was precisely because they could understand the scarred woman's hatred that their clan had agreed to this alliance in the first place—Salalah now had no choice but to eliminate the pink-haired girl first.

"Girl. Say name," Salalah said.

"Alia."

Clang!

The moment Alia's name left her lips, both women moved without warning. Salalah's chain lashed out like a serpent, and Alia deflected it with her black dagger.

During her time as a human, Salalah had fought with a whip. To compensate for her lack of physical strength, she'd honed her speed and precision to reach Rank 4. After she became a vampire, however, her old techniques had ill served her enhanced body—something Tabatha had noticed. The scarred woman had taught Salalah how to fight with weapons that better suited a vampire's raw power.

Salalah's ears caught the sound of something slicing through the air, coming from her flank. It was likely the same threaded weapon she'd seen earlier, the one with a black object at the tip. Evading that attack would leave her open—but vampires had their own way of fighting.

A sickening squelch echoed through the forest air as Salalah caught the black-iron weight with her arm. Her flesh split open and her bones shattered, but she did not flinch and lunged forward, swinging her chain.

Alia narrowly avoided the chain's deadly tip by leaping backward. Her combat power didn't match Salalah's, but her speed was slightly higher.

Still, Salalah remained unfazed. A lesser vampire might take tens of seconds to regenerate a crushed limb, but a greater vampire like her could do it in mere moments. As an undead, she was immune to poison, and unlike the living, she never experienced fatigue.

"Lose, Alia!" Salalah said.

Even if she was slower, there was no way she would lose this fight. Alia's blades were slashing at Salalah repeatedly, yet every cut healed instantly.

She's wasting her time!

Salalah whipped her chain again, and Alia dodged, slicing at the vampire in turn. But one attack became two. Then three slashes struck home at once. Something had changed.

Alia's attacks are getting faster...!

The pink-haired girl's breaths were growing ragged, her fatigue evident, yet she continued to move, sweat glistening on her skin as she slashed like a dancer in flight. For a moment, it looked as though silver wings of light had sprouted from her back.

At some point, she'd begun wielding weapons in both hands, unleashing a relentless flurry of attacks. Alia's black knife severed Salalah's tendons and muscles, and the black dagger pierced the vampire's eyes and crushed her bones.

"Ngh!"

Salalah's regeneration couldn't keep up. No, not even that—her aether was being depleted by the sheer amount of healing her body had been forced to do in such a short time span. This had never happened before. Without aether for regeneration, she would die.

The vampire abandoned all pretense of being a young girl, her face contorting into a bestial snarl as she threw aside her chain. She would just have to drain Alia's blood and aether directly. No matter how close to death Salalah was, as long as she didn't actually die, she could still kill Alia.

She cast aside her pride and made a final gamble. But...

"Ghh!"

The moment Salalah stepped forward, her knee shattered, and she collapsed to the ground. She'd taken too many unguarded hits, and she'd realized it too late.

Alia stood before the vampire, slowly and deliberately drawing her knife back for the finishing blow. A word that Salalah hadn't thought of in over a century—since before her turning—flashed through her mind: *death*.

"*Critical Edge*."

Vampires were not truly immortal. They could be killed, either via direct sunlight, by crushing the aethercrystals in their hearts, or...by decapitation.

The last things Salalah saw were the world tilted on its side, the dirt beside her face, and her own body—spraying black blood from the severed neck.

***

The vampire attack on the mountain village had been dealt with, but I still wondered why Salalah, who'd been involved in the attempt on the crown prince's life, had come here. Why had she tried to make more of her kind at a place like this? Ideally, I would've captured her, but had I not fought her with the intent to kill, she might've come out the winner.

Only a dozen or so of the villagers had survived. The acting village chief had said that they'd decided to head to the town where the local lord resided. Since they were so few in number, they could all ride in a single carriage and reach safety while it was still daytime.

With the sun out, all the vampires' bodies had turned to ash, and only their aethercrystals remained, making it difficult to explain what had happened. Still, taking the crystals to the Adventurers' Guild for appraisal would prove the involvement of vampires—one of them a demoness—in the massacre. Plus, the crystals could then be sold for funds, which would help the survivors get by for a while.

Whoosh.

A stone came flying at me from behind, and I wordlessly knocked

it aside. Upon turning around, I saw a woman hastily pick up the boy who had thrown it.

"Why... Why did you kill my dad?!" the boy screamed, clinging to his mother.

The other villagers, who had lost loved ones of their own, dropped their gazes at the sound of the boy's raw grief. But...I had no words of comfort to offer.

"Because you and I were weak," I told the boy.

"What...?"

I stepped toward the speechless boy, looking down at him coldly. "I was too weak to find another way to save everyone that didn't involve killing your father. You were too weak, so your father had to fight the vampires to protect you and your mother."

As I spoke, the villagers looked up, fixing their gazes on me.

"If you don't want to lose anything else, then become stronger. Your father faced those vampires to protect his family, didn't he? If you don't like that I had to kill him, then become strong enough to kill me. Become so strong that nobody can take anything from you ever again."

The boy bit his lower lip and looked down in silence. Some of the villagers closed their eyes and turned away.

My words had been for myself as much as they had been for the boy. If I never wanted to lose anything ever again, I had no choice but to grow stronger. If I stayed weak, I'd lose everything and end up a corpse like the rest of them.

The villagers finished gathering their belongings and got ready to depart from the place where they'd been born and raised. Just before they left, a few of them—the boy's mother included—lowered their heads in silent shows of gratitude. The boy himself never looked back, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead.

And then someone approached me.

"Karla..."

"You know, Alia..." she crooned, reaching out to wipe the blood from my check with her fingertips and regarding me as if enraptured. "You always look best when covered in blood."

"So, what do you know about all this?" I asked her.

"You already know the answer, don't you? I *caused* all this."

She grinned like a mischievous child, her words drifting on the morning breeze.

The Dark Castle

"How did it all come to this?" Clara lamented to herself, alone in her room at the Dandorl estate within the academy grounds.

She'd been skipping classes recently due to her poor health—and her health had been poor ever since the day she'd first obtained the gift from the dungeon spirit. Her condition had yet to show any signs of improvement, and she'd even lost some weight.

Her brother Rockwell was under the assumption that this was a result of the immense pressures on Clara as the crown prince's fiancée, and, concerned, he visited her daily. In contrast, her fiancé Elvan no longer visited her as frequently as he once had.

Rockwell had grown dissatisfied with Elvan's attitude. During their time in the academy, Rockwell, as the future grand general of the Royal Guard, had been serving the crown prince as an aide alongside their close friend, Mikhail Melrose. But both Rockwell and Mikhail had begun to distance themselves from Elvan's supporters.

And Clara and Elvan, who had been growing closer, had begun to distance themselves from one another once again.

Who was to blame for this? What had gone wrong?

En route to the outdoor training exercise, Elvan had been ambushed. The event had left him emotionally scarred, and rather than coming to Clara for support, he'd grown distant from her. Between the guilt he felt for not heeding Clara's warnings and the growing bond between him and another woman, Elvan had chosen to deal with his feelings on his own, like a child fearing reprimand.

And someone had exploited that moment of weakness.

Alicia Melsis, the protagonist of the otome game. The girl who now called herself Licia looked different from the heroine Clara remembered from the game, but her actions mirrored those of the character exactly. And yet...something about her was fundamentally wrong.

All of the love interests in the game were burdened by darkness in their hearts. Licia was supposed to fill the cracks in their hearts, offer them the words they needed to hear, and occasionally be harsh with them to help them grow—but instead, she was indulging them, coddling them, keeping them in their comfort zones. The more broken a man was, the more dependent he grew on Licia.

Seeing what Licia's excessive validation and indulgence did to Elvan, Mikhail and Rockwell—despite having burdens of their own—had recognized something was amiss and withdrawn from Licia.

But those who had fallen for her coddling were constantly hovering around her: the crown prince, Elvan; his uncle Amor, the king's youngest brother; and the traumatized Nathanital, grandson of the high priest.

Meanwhile, Theo—Licia's steward—had begun to distance himself as well. As a member of the Order of Shadows, Theo answered to Mikhail's family, House Melrose, and since Mikhail had been pulling away, the young steward had followed suit. He was now often seen in the company of Mikhail and Rockwell.

What was the difference between those who had fallen for Licia's influence and those who had rejected it? Houses Dandorl and Melrose were pillars of the royalist faction, yet Elvan and Amor, both of whom were royals, had distanced themselves from Rockwell Dandorl and Mikhail Melrose. What were they thinking?

If things continued this way, the nation would fracture, and a new conflict would begin. Not only would the royal family's influence weaken, but foreign powers would undoubtedly exploit the discord.

To mend this split, Licia—the daughter of a viscount, just like the current queen—would need to become the Holy Maiden and be made a princess of House Melrose. Elvan would need to come into his own as king.

But at this rate, such a future was not possible. Clara had wondered for a moment whether Licia, too, was a reincarnator, but as far as she could tell, that didn't seem possible; the choices this heroine was making could only lead straight to a bad ending.

The current heroine was nothing more than a deranged girl consumed by her own desires—which made her much more

dangerous than her in-game counterpart. Licia had to be eliminated, and quickly.

At first, Clara's plan had been to forcibly trigger a major event that took place during the game's second year—known as the Demonic Ploy—and eliminate the heroine that way. Triggering this event required multiple preconditions. One, it could only happen during a second playthrough of the game, after the player had already cleared it once. Two, Elvan needed to have the highest affection score. Three, the other love interests' affection scores had to be evenly distributed. That way, the event would trigger and unlock a secret character's route.

In that route, the heroine would be kidnapped by the demons, prompting all of the romanceable characters to launch a rescue mission into demon territory. Then, depending on the affection score of the secret character, this event could either end in a peace treaty with the demons or a confrontation resulting in the demon king's defeat.

However, if the player hadn't raised the heroine's stats enough, she would be killed in the final battle, leading to a bad end.

That was precisely why Clara had begun laying the groundwork for the event immediately after the dungeon expedition. She'd gathered allies, made contact with demons, and provided them with hideouts, maps, and other resources to ensure that the heroine would be kidnapped.

The demons would abduct the heroine because of her connection to the royal family. And if her abduction had happened now—far sooner than in the game, and while the love interests' affection scores were still low—no one would've gone to rescue her...and she could've been eliminated without issue. But due to the interference of irregularities such as Tabatha and Graves, the demons had allied with the nobility faction and plotted the assassination of the prince.

With that, the story had already diverged from the original.

Lady Cinders was now making a move to kill Tabatha and Graves.

And what effect this would have on the game events related to the demons...not even Clara's Foresight could predict anymore.

***

"I'm the one who carved out a space for the demons in this kingdom," Karla explained.

Elena and Elvan had been attacked. Graves had joined hands with those who sought to bring the country to ruin. And Karla had been the one to light that spark. She'd lured the demons in, fed them information so they could establish their base, and then...betrayed and killed them.

"What were you thinking?" I asked.

"Nothing. It's not like I had a grand reason," Karla replied with a small, nonchalant shrug, like a mischievous child. But deep in her eyes, a dark fire still burned—blazing hatred toward the Kingdom of Claydale.

I took Karla's cold hand, turning her toward me.

And Karla, who always wore a smile on her face, never revealing her true emotions, gave an unusual, troubled laugh. "Oh, Alia, how cruel you are."

There was no single correct way to live, and there was no single correct way to die. Karla had summoned demons into this country in an attempt to destroy it—not for power or revenge, it seemed to me, but simply to end things on her own terms. But now that Karla had a gift, and in accordance with what was perhaps her personal aesthetics, she had deemed that the demons she'd made deals with were no longer necessary to her.

"I'll clean up my own toys," Karla said. "You focus on killing your nemesis, Alia, and growing stronger. I'll grow stronger too." She grinned like a beast baring its fangs, her violet eyes gleaming with madness as they locked onto mine.

Karla sought power in order to take everything down with her. For her own sake, and to keep me alive until then.

I vowed to myself to become even stronger and free her from her suffering. Even if that meant taking her life.

Without another word, we returned to our campsite.

***

A few days later, we arrived at the March of Kendras.

The march bordered the massive Kond Mines—one of the largest mineral deposits on the continent. Its capital was teeming with laborers: human miners, physically powerful beastmen, and crag dwarves all extracting iron and copper. Skilled dwarven artisans crafted weapons and fine metalwork, attracting merchants from all over.

But we didn't stop in the bustling city and instead headed straight for a border town. Like the town where the Northern Border District's branch of the Assassins' Guild had been located, this one had a large chapel dedicated to the victims of mining accidents. This particular region had once been governed by a baronial house, vassal to House Kendras, but that lineage had died out about a decade ago. The area had been under the march's direct supervision since.

The town boasted a castle that had once served as the baron's home. It now sat empty, with the exception of its caretakers. And it was in that abandoned castle that the demons—and Graves—were hiding.

I couldn't trace the source of this information, as it had been deliberately concealed. But from the intelligence gathered by the Order of Shadows, I could glean Graves's intentions. And I suspected that was exactly what he'd wanted.

As Gilgan had said, there were multiple factions behind the attack on the royals, each with its own agenda. There were those who wanted to eliminate the crown prince and place Elena on the throne. There were those who wanted to eliminate Elena but not the crown prince. There were those who wanted to eliminate both. And there were those who had no interest in politics and acted solely out of a desire for revenge.

Which of these categories did Graves fit into, I wondered?

"Well then, I'll be taking my leave," Karla said. Her objective wasn't Graves; she wanted to exterminate the demons.

We went our separate ways before reaching the town. Karla had claimed to have her own sources, so I presumed someone had told her about a demon stronghold other than the castle where Graves

was hiding.

And according to her, "Where else would a group of vampires congregate if not in catacombs?"

Even for Karla, who had a gift, high-ranking vampires would be formidable enemies. But she, like I, wouldn't stop moving forward.

Karla had her own battles to fight. I had mine.

Our gazes met for a moment before we turned away and walked toward our respective battlefields without a word.

This town had, supposedly, once boasted tens of thousands of inhabitants. Now, it had barely a thousand. Was its decline tied to the loss of its lord? Or was it the work of the vampires lurking in the nearby shadows?

The clan of demon vampires had yet to make any major moves. I assumed they were still in the process of bolstering their ranks; presumably that was what Salalah had been trying to do in that mountain village. If so, this was the perfect time for me to strike—but I knew that these conditions could've been orchestrated by Graves.

Even if the main forces of the vampire clan were in the catacombs as Karla suspected, there were bound to be a few of them inside the castle. Nero and I made our way there through the forest, avoiding the town. As soon as dawn broke, we began our assault.

Nero let out a soft growl and came to a sudden halt, communicating with me through the electric pulses of its whiskers. *"...Forest...Corpses..."*

"Are there failures in the forest?" I asked.

"...Yes..."

Failures could survive in the sun, so perhaps these had been stationed in the forest as sentries. I didn't know how many of them there were, or what their combat power was—but even if they had no skills and were only about as strong as common soldiers, they would still rush toward the castle the moment a commotion began.

If I'd had a large weapon like Dalton and Feld wielded and could perform sweeping attacks, I could've handled the failures, but my primary weapon wasn't suited for fighting several enemies at once.

The logical move, then, was to eliminate the enemies in the forest first—but if I spent too much time clearing out the scattered failures, the sun would set and the vampires would come out.

"...Proceed..."

At that moment, Nero stepped in front of me without a sound, flicking its whiskers toward the castle.

"You want me to go ahead?" I asked.

Nero turned its head slightly, its mouth curling into something that resembled a smile.

"All right, then. I'll leave these to you."

"Grr."

We nodded to each other and parted ways.

Nero had a grudge against Graves as well, but it chose to prioritize me over itself, willingly relegating itself to a support role from the shadows. I had no room for hesitation. If I wasted time second-guessing Nero's generosity, it would be wasted. I concealed my presence and sprinted through the dim morning forest.

Upon reaching the castle's stone walls, I hooked my sickle pendulum over the protruding bricks and began my ascent.

***

Inside the castle, the windows were all shut, boarded up, and covered with heavy curtains that completely blocked the outside light. The castle, far grander than what would have been appropriate for a baron, had originally been a fortress built back when Dandorl was still a dukedom. It had been constructed near the border to facilitate the expansion of human territory at the time. Its walls were uncommonly thick, even by today's standards, so much so that not even fresh air could penetrate them. The air inside was stale and reeked of mold and blood.

There were no visible signs of human life. The only beings within the castle were undead—creatures that didn't even breathe—and failures. And yet a faint light glowed in the distance. Not for the vampires' sake but to accommodate two things: the failures, who still needed some visibility, and...a single human.

In the grand hall, where soldiers and nobles had once gathered in great numbers, a lone man sat on a worn, decaying sofa under the flickering light of a candlestick. In his left hand, he swirled a glass of bloodred fruit wine; the hand released a strained creak as it moved.

A woman dressed entirely in black emerged from the darkness.

"The girl has come," she said. "You promised to let me kill her."

"Do as you please," the man replied.

The woman, Tabatha, twisted her lips into a mad, hateful smile before dissolving into the shadows.

Once her presence had completely vanished, the man leaned back against the sofa and smiled for the first time. Then, with his prosthetic left arm, he crushed the expensive glass with a sharp *crack*.

"Finally you're here, Alia."

***

In the morning sunlight, I gripped the stone wall and began to climb.

This castle, originally built as a residence for the former baron, was difficult to infiltrate, even from here. But the only alternative was to wait for the massive front gates to open and try to sneak in that way, so climbing—though the walls were as tall as a three-story building—was the better option.

Though it was still early morning and visibility wasn't great, there was still the risk that the failures would spot me. There were no vampires outside, but I couldn't afford to be careless. There were bound to be hidden sentries out during the day. As I scaled, I adjusted my aether to perfectly match the surrounding mana, camouflaging myself by manipulating light-aspected mana to bend even the morning sunlight and merging my figure into the scenery.

Quietly, I leaped onto the walkway atop the wall and moved with the flow of the wind. A failure patrolled nearby, its face devoid of life. I crept closer, wrapped my arm around its neck from the side, and twisted—snapping it in a full rotation. The creature died without a sound.

Against these pseudo-undead, my Stealth worked flawlessly. I'd also learned exactly how much damage I needed to do to kill them. With both of those things in mind, I knew that, under sunlight, practically nothing stood a chance against me. The strength of these failures depended on how skilled they'd been in life, but anyone powerful enough to hold their own against me would've likely turned into a full vampire instead.

For the next hour, I continued to eliminate the failures prowling the courtyard.

But something felt a little off. Even assuming the vampires had only just begun to bolster their numbers, if they'd been using villages like that one near the mountains, there should've been more failures around. Were most of them stationed outside the castle? Or had Nero's presence drawn some of them outside?

It was also possible that most of their forces were concentrated in the catacombs beneath the chapel, where Karla had gone. If so, it was possible Graves had predicted my arrival and left this area deliberately undermanned. What a strange obsession this man had with me. Although, granted, it was better than him turning that attention toward Elena.

Even as a child, I'd often found myself running into strange men like Feld and Viro. Was there something in my scent that lured in difficult people?

After dealing with the failures in the courtyard, I climbed up the castle's inner wall. I'd initially considered setting fire to the castle from outside, but the smoke might've attracted townsfolk. Or worse, soldiers aligned with the nobility faction—Graves's collaborators.

Assassination was my preferred method of combat. If I was to make sure Graves couldn't escape, I had to kill him myself.

I checked the windows around the second floor and found they were all boarded up from the inside, probably making the interior of the castle pitch-dark. If so, the vampires within were likely active. I could break through one of the boarded-up windows to enter, but that would attract unnecessary attention.

So...what to do, then?

I decided to climb to the top of the castle and sneak in through

the watchtower.

Using a mix of Boost, Martial Mastery, and my pendulums' strings, I made my way up. Upon reaching the tower, I found a hatch and carefully soaked its hinges with oil to ensure they wouldn't make a sound.

"*Touch,*" I chanted.

After confirming the internal structure of the hatch's lock using the spell, I slipped a thin thread into the keyhole and used aether to manipulate it within the lock and slide the latch open.

Inside, darkness reigned—but not fully. There was just enough faint light to suggest the presence of a few failures. In which case...were the vampires in the areas of complete darkness?

And where was Graves?

It was possible that he'd been turned into a vampire as well, but I doubted it. Becoming undead, to me, was the same as running away. If someone had grown desperate enough to abandon their attachment to life, I had nothing to fear from them, no matter how powerful they might've become.

But if Graves, living in an environment like this, had managed to stay human, then...this battle would be unlike any I'd ever faced.

At that moment, a single footstep echoed in the darkness. The sound was deliberate, meant to announce the presence of the one making it.

I halted my own steps and watched as, from the far end of the passageway, the flickering glow of a candle drew nearer. Judging from the sound, this person was wearing high heels—the kind a noble lady might wear. And anyone purposefully announcing their approach like that had absolute confidence in her own strength.

This was definitely a vampire, and a greater vampire like Salalah had been.

With each step, the candlelight wavered, yet the flame itself remained perfectly steady.

▼ Demoness

Species: Dark Elf/Vampire♀ (Estimated Rank 4)

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Aether Points: 254/260
Health Points: 327/327
Overall Combat Power: 982×2 (1,964)
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"Welcome, young lady," she said. "You must be our intruder."

The vampire had golden hair, silver eyes, and obsidian-black skin wrapped in a crimson dress. As she smiled, sharp fangs peeked from beneath her lips.

"You're from the vampire clan, I assume," I said.

"Oh? Have you met my fellows before?"

So she was part of Salalah's clan. Though she'd acknowledged my words, she continued to close the distance between us nonchalantly.

"Where's Graves?" I asked.

"Oh, are you a guest of his? How unfortunate..."

She let out a languid, almost bored-sounding sigh. We were now twenty paces apart, and she still showed no signs of stopping.

"Unfortunate why?"

"Oh, you didn't notice?" At ten paces, she grinned broadly like a confident predator. "I'm feeling a little peckish."

Whoosh!

At that moment, two lines sliced through the darkness. I barely managed to step back as my shoulder was slashed. At the same time, my sickle pendulum struck her from her blind spot, gouging out her left eye. The candlestick she'd been holding fell to the ground with a dull *clang* as the candle's flame went out.

"Oh, how awful," she muttered, bringing up a hand to cover her injured eye. Black blood seeped between her fingers. "How many decades has it been since someone last marred my face?"

As if time itself were turning back, her torn flesh regenerated, restoring her beauty in an instant.

"If you know that man, you must be a knight of the Order of Shadows," she ventured. "Such a lovely girl, and so strong besides. Ah, how utterly intoxicating."

She gazed hungrily at the blood trickling from my injured shoulder down to my fingertips.

"What weapon did you use?" she asked. "I couldn't see."

"Oh, nothing special."

Neither of us had been able to get a proper read on the other's weapon, but the vampire remained at ease, confident that whatever I was wielding couldn't kill her. Vampires were strong, but...that very strength was their weakness.

"My name is Shera'lur. Do remember it. If you're still alive after I've satisfied my hunger, I'll make you my servant."

Shera'lur unleashed another razor-sharp strike. I could tell she wielded her weapon with her right hand only, but even with my mana sight I could not discern its shape. The unseen weapon left shallow cuts along my arms and legs, and the fact they weren't deep told me that she was wary of my weapon. Her instincts were keeping her from closing the distance.

That gave me the upper hand for now, so I bought time to strategize. As I dodged her attack, I flipped in the narrow passageway, kicked off the ceiling, and threw several knives drawn from my thigh.

Shing!

"Useless!" Shera'lur declared, deflecting the blades with her own weapon.

Had she fought like Salalah and used her own body to intercept the knives, my attack would, indeed, have been useless. But, confident in her own advantage, she'd deflected them to avoid damage—and the resulting sparks had illuminated her weapon's true form: a foil-type saber.

Sabers came in various types. In the Kal'Faan empire, where leather armor was favored over full plate, crescent-shaped sabers were used to slice through enemies' defenses. Meanwhile, in the northern countries, sabers were designed to pierce through metallic armor, and thus their blades were long and needle thin.

Of those, foil-type sabers were weapons made specifically for dueling; they were slender, flexible, and built specifically to kill people.

"I'd give up if I were you," Shera'lur said, her eyes gleaming red from the scent of blood as she lunged at me. "It'll only hurt for a

moment!”

Her unseen blade howled through the darkness. The black edge was made of magical steel, and with an inhumanly strong vampire wielding the sword, few would be able to react to the thrust in time.

But weapons designed for dueling only worked within the rules of a duel.

“What?!”

I moved forward just as she struck, and though her blade caught my body, it didn’t cut, instead whipping against me like a lash. Foil-type sabers were designed for precision thrusting and only sharp at the tip. They were deadly at range, but Shera’lur had let her overconfidence blind her; by closing the distance, she’d neutralized her own advantage.

Seizing the opportunity, I raised my right hand.

Shera’lur couldn’t dodge the incoming strike, but in spite of this, the corners of her mouth lifted subtly. Just as I swung down my weighted pendulum, I used the knife in my left hand to slash at the darkness behind me.

“Gyaaaaaaah!”

Two shrieks echoed in the dark.

“You...damn...brat!” Shera’lur growled. Even an ageless vampire would fall if their brain was destroyed—yet, though half of her skull had been crushed, she was still moving.

Her remaining eye locked onto me, gleaming with pure hatred, reflecting me as I lifted my arm once more. Her face contorted with pure terror moments before my weighted pendulum came crashing back down.

“Cinders...!” came a voice from behind me.

“So you were the ambusher, Tabatha,” I said simply.

I turned to see Tabatha with her mask split open, on her knees, clutching her face where I had cut through.

A weapon’s effectiveness depended on how it was used. On a pitch-black battlefield like this, suited for assassins, only a fool would lower their guard like that.

“How...did you notice...?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I replied.

Tabatha had concealed her presence flawlessly—I hadn't sensed her at all. But the wounds on my body had self-evidently been too numerous to be just Shera'lur's doing. And the vampire had spoken about me with a tone that implied she'd already known me, which would only have been possible if someone else had told her.

From that, I could deduce the rest. That was why I'd swung at the most optimal position for an unseen attacker to strike from. Shera'lur had unwittingly clued me in as to the timing.

"Don't mock me, you little shit!" Tabatha howled as she sprang to her feet and charged at me.

I threw my black dagger at her, piercing through her right eye, and still she didn't stop. A twisted grin spread across her face as she raised her mithril chain.

"You're done, Cinders!"

Truly, the powerful of this world were too reckless.

At that moment, my sickle pendulum shot out from Tabatha's blind spot and tore halfway through her neck.

Whether it was because of her grudge against me or the need to heal her burn scars, Tabatha had become a vampire too. She must've thought she'd concealed it well and caught me off guard—she'd been covering her face to hide the fact that her scars were already disappearing. It was impressive, really, that she'd gone as far as discarding her own humanity out of hatred for me.

But with my mana vision, I could clearly see who was human and who wasn't. Even if I couldn't, it was still evident that the burns she'd suffered in the forest from Karla's spell had disappeared. That would've been more than enough of a hint.

I'd expected her to take my attack on purpose, and so I'd thrown my weighty dagger to force back her head and used the deadly pendulum to deliver the fatal blow.

"Aghhh..."

Tabatha hadn't died instantly, but her nearly severed neck was gushing blood. She clutched at her head, her long black claws pointing at me.

She might've been able to kill me had she been able to withstand my attack during her ambush. But she hadn't, had she? Newly

turned vampires just didn't have that kind of regeneration.

"Seeing you again was useful, Tabatha," I told her.

Her eye reflected my raised arm, just as Shera'lur's had.

"This time, I can make sure I finish you off properly. You won't be a problem again."

Splatter.

Just to make absolutely sure they were dead, I beheaded both Tabatha and Shera'lur. Then, I treated my wounds and continued on.

There was no longer a point to using Stealth. The battle against Shera'lur had already attracted the attention of every vampire and failure inside the castle—but none of them were dark elves, nor were any of them as powerful as Shera'lur or Salalah had been.

Using my pendulums as traps, I cut through the oncoming vampires, steadily moving forward. Eventually, I found myself standing before a vast hall—the kind meant for soldiers to gather—as though I'd been guided there.

I pushed the doors open, and inside, a single candle on a single table flicked dimly in the darkness.

A man in flowing black robes slowly rose to his feet.

His presence was stronger than when I'd last seen him. His frame had grown bulkier too. The left arm Nero had torn off had been replaced by a gauntlet-like prosthetic, forged from magic steel.

The man's eyes narrowed at my arrival before his lips quirked into a small smirk.

"Welcome, Alia."



“Graves...”

The true monster lurking in this kingdom had grown even stronger and now stood before me once more.

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▼ Graves
Species: Human♂ (Rank 5)
Aether Points: 245/250 △ +30
Health Points: 402/410 △ +60
Overall Combat Power: 2,025 (Boosted: 2,565) △ +600
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“Gyaaah!”

Flames shot out like a dragon’s breath, incinerating several vampires—demons included—and hordes of failures.

“You’re the betrayer!” a dark elf snapped, his eyes and words filled with hatred.

Amid the raging blaze, Karla gave him her usual cheerful smile. “Are you the last of the trash?”

“Do not mock me!”

The furious man, whose name was Gostaura, had promised his close friend—the chief of their clan—that he would spearhead the mission to infiltrate the faraway Kingdom of Claydale. He’d left the demonic nation accompanied by only ten-odd of his kin, determined to secure recognition for their clan.

Their ultimate objective: to assassinate the royal family of Claydale.

But their initial plan had changed based on the advice of Graves, a local collaborator. To humans, their new plan would’ve sounded like playing an absurdly long game, but dark elves’ lives spanned hundreds of years—and vampires might as well have been called eternal.

When the time to execute their plan drew near, the vampires had taken a risk and worked to increase the number of pawns at their disposal. But their forces, acquired painstakingly over a prolonged

period of time, had been reduced to ash in an instant in Karla's flames. Within the blazing catacombs, Gostaura's gaze fastened onto the girl—the betrayer who had first enabled his comrades' infiltration only to then annihilate them.

"Betrayer?" Karla echoed. "We were just using each other the whole time. Am I wrong?"

Karla had first learned of the existence of these demons when she was ten years old. She'd made contact with them, told them of her own grudge against Claydale, and lured them in by offering a detailed map of the kingdom to facilitate the demons' strategy. She'd then killed the vampires she'd spoken to, using them to fuel her own power.

"I don't need you anymore," she said. "I solved my problems without you. But I don't like other people taking the trash I've discarded."

"You call us trash...?" Gostaura hissed, his handsome features twisted into a beastly snarl as he bared his fangs.

The hatred from the surrounding vampires seemed to darken even the flames, but Karla's smile remained unchanged.

"Someone else contacted you, right? Who was it? The traitor to the Order of Shadows? That naive little lady? Although...I suppose it doesn't matter."

Perfectly composed, Karla ran a hand through her rich black hair. Sensing an opportunity, a tall, lean demon sprang at her from behind, moving like the wind.

"*Stone Lance,*" Karla chanted, not bothering to use an incantation or even look back at her target.

"Gwaaaaaaah!"

Rock rose like an icicle from the earth, coalescing into a spear that pierced through the demon's chest. Skewered midair like a shrike's prey, the demon writhed in agony as his existence began to ebb away.

With a twisted, mad grin, Karla licked her lips.

"Do you still think anyone needs you?" she asked. Her mocking tone seemed to be directed at herself as much as the demons, perhaps because she had once been the same way.

You poor, discarded pawns.

"Kill her!" Gostaura commanded as the meaning of her words dawned on him.

In response, the remaining vampires—as well as hundreds of failures—all lunged at Karla at once.

"*Soul Thorn*."

Black thorns like living, writhing tattoos coiled around Karla's pale skin as though hungry for her life force. As her power flared, the immense aether radiating from her body swirled into a storm, pushing back the wave of failures like a tsunami and lifting Karla into the air.

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▼ Karla Leicester
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: ∞/550 △ +20
Health Points: 33/53 △ +1
Overall Combat Power: 1,069 (Special: 3,069) △ +39
Gift: Soul Thorn / Life Exchange
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"Here we gooo! *Fireball!*"

As Karla swung her arm, five orbs of the Level 5 fire-elemental spell manifested in the air.

Mages could only use spells up to the level of their Aether Manipulation skill; casting anything above that level typically required several times more aether. While Karla's skills were at most Level 4, the massive amount of aether granted by Soul Thorn allowed her to cast spells up to two levels higher than her skills.

The vampires and failures, pushed back and clumped together by the wave of aether, were helpless as the five Fireballs—an attack that had once even stopped a Rank 6 monster in its tracks—exploded in their midst. Over a hundred failures were engulfed by the flames, but some were merely blown away by the explosion and quickly picked themselves up. The vampires, with their high stats, managed to leap out of the flames and lunge at Karla again.

Karla's health points were equivalent to those of a small child;

even a failure could kill her with a direct hit. And yet...

"Gah!"

She dodged out of the way of one vampire's attack, then countered with a knee directly to her assailant's face. As more of them rushed her, she used her arms to deflect their blows, struck at their eyes with her hands, and overwhelmed them through Martial Mastery.

Karla's physical abilities weren't superior to the vampires'—her Martial Mastery was Level 3, and her Aether Manipulation was Level 4, so even pushed to its limit, it could only accelerate her thoughts to an extent. With Karla's stats, it should've been impossible for her to fend off these attacks using physical skills alone.

But the black thorns manifesting on her skin weren't simply coiling around her—they were manipulating her body like the strings of a puppet, making it move exactly as she willed it.

"*Stone Shot!*"

"*Splash!*"

"*Fire Arrow!*"

The vampires unleashed numerous offensive spells as the remaining failures once again surged toward Karla. While they couldn't match her in skill or raw power, they still had the advantage of numbers. Rushing her was a simplistic strategy from lesser vampires, but considering Karla's health points, it *should've* been effective.

"*Typhoon,*" Karla chanted then, unleashing a Level 5 wind spell that swept up both the incoming spells and their casters.

While normally Typhoon was used to push away enemies with a single explosive gust, Karla instead kept it active with her right hand, trapping the lesser vampires and failures within the whirlwind.

She held out her left hand and chanted, "*Fire Breath,*" unleashing her signature Level 4 spell.

The flames licked over the group within seconds. Trapped in the confines of the catacombs, the failures couldn't so much as let out death cries as they were charred to a crisp, and soon they crumbled to ashes in the blazing inferno.

"Raaaaaaaaaaah!"

From the five-meter-high ceiling, Gostaura launched himself down at Karla, swinging his sword.

Karla immediately launched a counterspell. "*Ice Javelin*."

But at that moment, black blood gushed from Gostaura's back and transformed into a pair of misshapen wings—not a vampiric ability but rather shadow magic, passed down within the vampire clan, that used their own blood as a medium. The greater vampire glided through the air to evade Karla's spell, then swung his blade in a wide and vicious arc.

Shing!

Karla hurriedly raised a dagger to block the attack, and the impact shattered her blade into pieces. Though Gostaura hadn't managed to land a finishing blow, he had nevertheless created a major opening.

"This ends now!" he declared, seizing the opportunity and readying a combat technique to unleash his most devastating blow yet. As steel shards danced in slow motion, his accelerated thoughts told him that at this distance, he was certain to kill Karla.

Still, an inexplicable chill ran down his spine.

"*Fire Arrow,*" Karla chanted.

A Level 1 spell. Vampires were weak to fire, but low-level sorcery like that couldn't possibly stop Gostaura's attack.

"What?!"

But with that chant alone, Karla had manifested over a hundred Fire Arrows, enough to fill the entire space around her.

"Curse yooou!"

Gostaura raised his arms in an attempt to deflect the incoming volley, but just a single arrow instantly burned his arm to a crisp.

"Gaaaaaaaah!"

"Lord Gostaura!" cried out a female vampire as she stepped forward to shield him, only to be hit by a dozen fire arrows and turned to ash in an instant.

The other lesser vampires under his command also jumped into the line of fire and succeeded in shielding their master. But—

"Where do you think you're going?" Karla asked.

Focused on avoiding the Fire Arrows, the vampires had failed to

notice Karla's approach. She gripped Gostaura's arm as it regenerated and tore it off easily with the strength granted by the black thorns.

"Curse you! Cuuurse yooou!" Gostaura screamed as he pulled back.

Karla descended to the ground, toying with the bloodsoaked arm in her hands. The hundreds of failures had been reduced to ash, and only four demons—Gostaura included—remained.

Although the sorceress had a combat-oriented gift, she was nevertheless just one girl—yet she'd completely crushed the vampires. They themselves were monstrous, but they now looked at Karla as though she were the true monster.

"I think it's about time to wrap up," Karla said softly.

"What?" Gostaura asked, clutching the stump of his severed arm.

But Karla didn't answer. Instead, she looked around at the blazing catacombs and, unbelievably, said, "This place won't last much longer. You can go now."

"What are you saying?!"

After all this, Karla was telling the demons to escape? The words were so egotistical and baffling that Gostaura couldn't help but question her again. In response, Karla just smiled and gave a small wave.

"I told you before. I hate this kingdom," she explained. "Oh, right! By the way, the kingdom's greatest power, the princess's bodyguard, is here. You can team up with that man to take her down or go attack the academy. It's a sitting duck now. Do as you like."

Gostaura glared at her, trying to gauge her intentions. What did she truly want? Her actions were incomprehensible and infuriating to him. But seeing that he was at a disadvantage against her in combat, he decided it was best to retreat.

"It's never been personal, you know," Karla said. "Now hurry along. You don't want to get buried alive, do you?"

"You'll regret this," Gostaura spat before vanishing into the darkness with the remaining vampires.

Karla wordlessly watched them go, and once she sensed their presences had completely disappeared, her cheerful smile twisted

into an expression of dazed madness. Amid the sea of flames, she exhaled a hot breath.

"Ah, Alia..."

The reason she'd accompanied Alia wasn't just to dispose of the demons who had escaped her grasp. Karla's true objective had been to send a suitable number of demons after Alia, thus dragging her into endless combat. Still, the demons were just a few of the many pieces in Karla's grand game. She did, of course, want them to wreak havoc across Claydale. But after meeting Alia, her hatred, her anger, her schemes—everything had fallen to the wayside.

Their first meeting had been a major shock to Karla. A girl her own age had faced her head-on—she, Karla Leicester, whom even adults feared and trod carefully around. Alia alone had dared to do such a thing. All her life, Karla had walked barefoot in a pitch-black void with only the blade called madness at her side, harming herself and others. Alia alone could walk beside her in that dark place.

Alia's eyes were always looking far ahead—to a place Karla could never go. And so, Karla had decided, the only way to see herself reflected in Alia's gaze, even for just a moment, was to hurt the other girl. And in order to see Alia covered in blood, she would hurt herself to supply it.

Blood looked good on Alia. Whether her own or Karla's...

Karla imagined Alia, covered in blood, killing her. A beautiful vision, she thought. Standing amid the flames, pressing a fingertip covered in blackened blood to her cheek as her lips tugged into a smile, Karla wore the expression of a girl deeply in love.

Now that the demonic forces had been weakened, they were sure to seek out new allies—and wherever they were, Alia would certainly be too. And Karla was the only one allowed to kill Alia. Just as Alia was the only one allowed to kill Karla.

Karla wanted to destroy this country for driving her mad. If she began to massacre the nobles at the castle, Alia was sure to come and fight her. Karla would get her wish: a grand stage for their final battle, in the form of a bloodsoaked kingdom.

But as Alia was now, someone was sure to interfere with their death match. Karla needed Alia to bathe in the blood of demons and

grow even stronger. Only then could the two kill each other atop a glamorous stage, filled with nobles, adrift on the sea of their blood.

"Hurry and grow stronger, Alia... And come kill me."

Death Match: Graves

Graves had grown even stronger since I'd last seen him.

He'd been waiting for me in this wide, stone-built room, all by himself. His presence was so oppressive it made my skin tingle. He'd surpassed Feld, another Rank 5, and was approaching the level of Dalton and Cere'zhula.

"You didn't want to regenerate your left arm?" I asked.

Graves raised an eyebrow slightly, then, with a soft creak, flexed the fingers of his magic-steel prosthetic arm as if to show off. "It would've been a waste of time to spend months—a year, perhaps—waiting for an arm to regenerate. Don't you agree?"

"I do," I replied after a short pause.

Our brief exchange had given me the bare minimum information I needed to proceed, and so I stepped forward without a sound. Graves, in contrast, began to approach with deliberate, heavy steps.

"Now, Alia. Show me your way of life."

Graves and I kicked off the floor at the same time, crossing paths midair. He swung at me with the sword held in his good arm, and I managed to avoid the full brunt of his blade by maneuvering my body to kick off the air itself—but my evasion wasn't perfect, and his sword nicked me in the shoulder.

He'd once fought by dual wielding swords, but now he was only using his right hand. Why? Could his prosthetic arm not handle a weapon?

No, that couldn't have been it.

With his prosthetic arm, he no longer needed a second weapon at all.

We accelerated our thoughts and remained airborne, time seemingly slowing around us as Graves raised his left arm toward me.

Sensing danger, I immediately leaped out of the way and swung

my slashing pendulum at his flank. Graves used his prosthetic arm to deflect the attack, and we landed at a distance from one another.

"You're being awfully cautious," he pointed out. "What happened to the poisons you used to like so much? Don't hold back, now."

Going all out against an opponent who kept his cards close to his chest was dangerous. But this brief exchange had taught me something: Graves's magic-steel arm was a significant factor in his combat power surge.

Prosthetics in this world weren't particularly advanced—anyone with wealth typically used sorcery to fully regenerate limbs. Only those without the means to wait six-plus months wore prosthetics. And yet Graves's metal arm had independently moving fingers. Normally, equipment quality didn't significantly impact combat power, but judging from the mana I could see, I presumed the prosthetic was a high performance magic device that synchronized with its user. Its strength and power almost certainly surpassed those of his original arm, and it likely had some sort of built-in mechanism, like my boots.

Analyze it, I thought to myself. *Expose the source of his power.*

There were only two areas where Graves and I were evenly matched: speed and observation skills.

"Very well. If you won't make a move, I will!" he declared, firmly gripping his single-handed blade as he lunged forward.

"*Dark Mist,*" I chanted.

"Pointless trickery!"

With a single sweep of his prosthetic, Graves scattered the mist I'd unleashed. My magic had always been largely ineffective against him—his old magic swords had been enchanted with a diffusion effect that dampened spell power, and I suspected his prosthetic was too.

"Haaah!"

Crash!

I managed to dodge Graves's sword, and the blade shattered the stone floor where it struck.

"What's the matter, Alia? Did you grow stronger just to run from me?!" he shouted—another obvious taunt.

Graves had been a light-fighter-type before, but now he was a full-on fighter. Members of the Order of Shadows were widely believed to be scout-types due to the nature of their work, but at their core, they were closer to knights. And my fighting style was ill-suited to straight combat against knights—but that didn't mean there was nothing I could do.

"*Shadow Snatch,*" I chanted, casting the shadow spell of my own creation.

"Hmph!"

Graves seemed wary of the unknown spell—he'd been present when I'd used it on Nero, but still, he likely didn't know its exact effect. Regardless, he sliced through several scattered shadows with his sword and fearlessly charged ahead.

Unused trump cards needed to be wielded effectively. I couldn't afford to waste a single one.

Graves's sword and my black blade collided, sending a shower of sparks into the air as my lighter body went flying. He took the opportunity to swing his weapon in a wide arc and chant, "*Vorpal Blade!*"

Five rapid slashes came at me in quick succession—but I'd been expecting his Level 5 technique. I reached into Shadow Storage, pulled out a crossbow, and fired a bolt into the shadow beneath my skirt. The bolt crossed into another shadow, just below Graves, and flew up at him.

"Ngh!" he grunted, narrowly dodging it but unable to cancel his Vorpal Blade.

With the slight delay after using the technique, most people wouldn't have been able to dodge my bolt, but I'd already considered the possibility that he might and had a countermeasure for that.

"*Iron Rose*."

▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 232/300

Health Points: 221/250
Overall Combat Power: 1,339 (Uniquely Boosted: 2,520)
Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 232 seconds

My hair turned the burnished gray of heated iron, and my thoughts were now accelerated to twice their usual speed. Within scattered particles of light, I twisted my body to evade Graves's technique and, using that momentum, kicked off the ceiling. I pointed my blade at his neck, launching myself like an arrow from a bow.

"What?!" he cried out in shock. His wide eyes reflected my expressionless face and the wings of light trailing behind me as my blade drew closer.

Having just unleashed a combat technique, Graves couldn't move.

But his prosthetic twisted unnaturally and the gauntlet's plates slid open. Something I couldn't see lashed out, slashing at me.

"Tch!"

I managed to maneuver in time to avoid a fatal blow, but I still took several gashes. Bleeding, I rolled away and immediately readied my knife.

Graves regarded me with a twisted smile. "So *that's* your true power, Alia!"

My wounds weren't deep, but if I kept losing blood, my health points would run out quickly. What had that attack been—a hidden mechanism in his arm?

I glared at him like a wary beast, but he didn't press the attack. Instead, he extended a hand to me.

"You really are an interesting one. I know you can understand my convictions. I offer once more, Alia: Take my hand! Become the sword and shield that will protect this country!"

Graves saw me as a mad dog like himself. That was why he'd targeted me specifically. I had enough conviction to do anything to survive—he believed it was only natural for us to join forces.

"No."

My answer had been decided long ago. He was my enemy. Maybe

there were some similarities between us, but I felt no connection with him.

He looked at me for a moment, assessing my resolute denial, then pointed his sword in my direction.

"Very well. If that is your will, then come. Prove to me how strong your conviction is. Try and stop me, Alia!"

"That's the plan."

I took a deep breath, inhaling light-aspected mana. With my aether strengthened by Iron Rose, I filtered the mana through the aethercrystal in my heart, staunching the bleeding.

"Show me your full strength. That technique of yours has a time limit, doesn't it? How long can you keep dodging my threads?"

Threads...? Threads!

Just as I grasped what he'd meant, the plates on his prosthetic opened again, unleashing the weapon once more.

Relying on pure instinct, I leaped away but still couldn't completely avoid the attack—his unknown weapon slashed my shoulder and arm. But the blood stuck to it, revealing its form for just a moment.

"Bladed threads. I see," I said.

"Indeed. I studied your weapons and learned String Manipulation myself. These are called steel-bladed threads. They're too dangerous to wield bare-handed, but with this prosthetic..."

Steel-bladed threads...

Cere'zhula had told me about them. They were unique weapons used by a specific clan of demon assassins, and impossible to wield without special training; Graves had likely obtained them from the demons and made them work by embedding them into his prosthetic. As weapons meant for assassination, they weren't much of a threat against armored opponents, but...I had no armor. These were Graves's trump card against me.

How do I read and counter them?

As we stared each other down, I went through various strategies in my mind. But before anything could happen, a sound echoed at a distance, and Graves frowned.

"Looks like we're being interrupted."

The door in the back of the room burst open with a loud *bang*, and four demons with singed clothing came rushing in.

"Graves!!!" shouted the man at the front.

Graves's brows furrowed. "Gostaura. You look terrible."

"Ugh... We were ambushed...by that traitorous sorceress."

"Oh? She seems to have done quite a number on you and yours. I thought you were stronger than that," Graves muttered with disinterest before briefly shifting his attention back to me.

So Karla had attacked these people. For her to have held back was uncharacteristic and yet very like her.

From the subtle change in my expression, Graves seemed to grasp who the ambusher had been. His demeanor suddenly shifted, becoming much friendlier.

"This is serendipitous, then. This girl here is the greatest obstacle to your plans. And she's as skilled as your attacker," he told the demons. "If they're both here, that means there's no one left on-site to stop you."

Realization seemed to dawn upon the demon Graves had called Gostaura. He nodded as though he'd just made up his mind.

"You're right. Will you take care of this one, then?" Gostaura asked.

"I will. And I'll keep your attacker from leaving this place as well," Graves replied.

"We're counting on you, then."

I had a bad feeling about this. What "plans" were these? How was *I* the greatest obstacle to them?

As I moved to intercept the demons, Graves unleashed his steel-bladed threads once more to keep me at bay.

"Tch!"

"I'm your opponent, Alia," Graves said.

Gostaura, who had been watching me with irritation, turned to leave and spat, "Now we both get what we want, Graves. We'll be taking the princess back to our nation."

"What...?!" I exclaimed.

The princess? They were taking Elena back to the demonic nation?

As the demons disappeared into the darkness, I glared sharply at Graves, who began to speak in a completely detached tone.

"It's the kind of long game only those who live for centuries can play. They want to remove the capable princess from the picture and ensure her incompetent brother takes the throne. In a few decades, Claydale's national power will abruptly decline. It will no longer pose as great a threat to the demons. And that will be fine by me. When the time comes, I can kill the corrupt royal advisers and leave only competent people serving under the new king. You understand, don't you? A nation doesn't need a single wise ruler. What it needs is a group of wise men and their efficient little puppet."

Given the crown prince's current state, that outcome was indeed likely. And Graves, it seemed, thought that the resulting chaos was still preferable to what would happen if Elena stayed in the picture and fought her brother for the throne. Apparently, he believed a kingdom run by competent people serving under a useless king was the ideal.

"It was the nobility faction's idea to kill the crown prince. The demons were in a panic over it. But you kindly stepped in and saved the prince's life."

"What will they do with Elena?!"

"They'll let her live. When it's time to replace the king, her pedigree may be necessary. The demons wouldn't waste a valuable hostage like the princess." He paused. "So, Alia, what will it be? Without you at the princess's side, none of the weaklings at the academy will be able to stop the demons."

That plan, I imagined, was unlikely to succeed. There was a reason the demons had been striving to bolster their numbers with new pawns, after all. But Karla had dealt them a severe blow—severe enough to make them flee—and now they'd grown desperate. Attacking the academy was a reckless plan, even in the absence of Karla and myself.

"Now, show me what you're made of. If you want to protect the princess, kill me and go after the demons."

There were guards at the academy, including knights of the Royal Guard. Demons, who looked nothing like humans, were unlikely to

ever reach the academy grounds. But if even just one managed to infiltrate the academy, ordinary knights and soldiers wouldn't be able to stop them.

If I was to pursue the demons, I needed to take Graves down as fast as possible, but...I hadn't so much as figured out how to deal with the steel-bladed threads he was using to keep me in check.

"Fine."

He wanted to see my full strength. So be it. My mind had long since been made up. Until now, my motive had been to settle things with Graves, but if this was how it was going to be, I was done "fighting."

"I'll show you exactly what I'm made of when I kill you," I said.

"Interesting," he replied. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly—whether because he was enjoying the idea of fighting me at my best or due to confidence in himself, I couldn't tell. "Let's see it, then!"

I deactivated Iron Rose, took two ceramic vials from the pouch at my waist, and immediately threw one at Graves's feet.

"Hm?" He quickly stepped back, and the vial shattered against the stone floor. A thick, viscous liquid began to spread out. "What are you trying to do, Alia?"

It must've seemed strange. I'd not only deactivated my unique skill but also thrown a pale green liquid—neither water nor oil—at him. He eyed me with suspicion.

Without bothering to answer, I threw the second vial directly onto the puddle. As the liquids from the two broken vials mixed, a foul stench rose into the air.

"This is...!" Hit with the immediate realization that this was poison, Graves covered his mouth and retreated farther. "Alia, you—"

"I told you. I'm going to kill you."

The mixture was the same corrosive poison I'd once applied to my bolts when fighting the orc soldiers. Upon mixing, the two-part solvent became lethal—even just a minute amount applied to the tip of a crossbow bolt could kill a Rank 4 orc soldier instantly. The poison had to be kept unmixed because once combined, it immediately began to vaporize, and the gas was highly toxic to the human body. Its smell was so strong that using it indoors would

alert the target and give them an opportunity to escape, but in this situation, that wasn't a problem.

This poison was so potent that mixing the smallest amounts required covering one's mouth with cloth and taking extreme caution to minimize exposure. But I'd just mixed the entirety of the vials into one large dose.

"Even a room this large will be filled with toxic gas within minutes," I told Graves. "I know the poison's composition, have Poison Resistance, and am covering my mouth with a scarf soaked in the antidote—and I'll still die within fifteen minutes. How long can you last? You may be cautious, but are you immune to poison?"

Graves said nothing as he glared sharply at me, trying to gauge my true intentions.

I pointed over my shoulder. "The exit is that way. If you want to leave, you'll have to go through me. Take too long, and even if you manage to kill me, your lungs are going to wither away."

The dark room was completely silent, save for the sizzling of the poison as it corroded the stone floor. Graves quietly wrapped a cloth around his mouth and readied his single-handed sword.

"You're mad," he said. "So your true strength lies not in skill but in that mindset?"

"Don't lump me in with the likes of you or *her*."

His brows furrowed for a moment at my cryptic reference to someone else.

Let's end this.

We kicked off the ground at the same time, closing the distance in a flash and dodging the poisonous smoke. Graves's sword and my black dagger clashed with a harsh metallic sound, sending a burst of sparks flying.

Due to our differences in skill level and physique, I was at a disadvantage when it came to pure strength. Still, I maintained my stance and, flipping through the air like an acrobat, threw a knife at him.

Graves, who had been about to press the attack, hesitated for a moment.

We'd be dead in fifteen minutes at most. If he fought at full

strength, he'd likely have half that. He must've realized it too; if he let me go, I would use Cleanse on myself, then come back and kill him while he was weakened by the poison. If he fled instead, I'd recover and hunt him down.

His only option for survival was to kill me before I had the chance to use Cleanse.

"Tch!"

Perhaps realizing that clashing blades would only waste time, Graves grimaced and pulled back, then aimed his prosthetic arm at me, activating its hidden mechanism.

"I overestimated you, Alia," he said. "You're strong, yet you would lower yourself to this—serving as a royal's hound, aiming only for the kill. You're nothing but a wild dog. You'll never reach my heights."

From the mechanism in his arm, the invisible steel-bladed threads sprang forth.

"*Shield,*" I chanted. Though originally meant to block other spells, Shield offered a slight degree of physical defense, roughly equivalent to glass. "Ngh!"

An illusory sound rang out as the steel threads pierced through the shield's aether and cut into my arms and legs. But I'd deactivated Iron Rose precisely to use Shield—it allowed me to learn a few things.

Steel-bladed threads lacked the flexibility of my own spider-silk strings, and their range of control was limited. Without a weight at the end, like my pendulums had, Graves's threads had to be launched using some sort of spring mechanism. And by taking the attack with Shield, I'd also gauged the amount of aether enveloping the threads.

The stench of the poison grew stronger, making my eyes and throat sting. The more I moved, the more air I inhaled, the closer I came to death. Graves had to be feeling it too—he pressed his sleeve to his mouth and kept his breaths shallow as he aimed his prosthetic arm at me.

"This ends now, Alia!"

His steel-bladed threads flew at me once more.

He'd accused me of aiming only for the kill. Said that I'd become a hound, laying down its life for the royal family. But he was wrong. I was using poison to ensure his death, yes, but...

I also wanted to push myself into a corner.

"*Iron Rose*."

Once again, my pink hair turned a burnished gray. Motes of light scattered from my body, fluttering like wings of silver, embodying my fighting spirit. But even with triple the speed of an ordinary person, I still couldn't fully evade his attack, and an unseen blade slashed my shoulder.

"I know that technique already!" he shouted.

At that moment, I could sense aether expanding outward from Graves's prosthetic. I assumed that, instead of sending his threads out in straight lines, he was unleashing them in multiple directions to try and surround me.

But he'd yet to see what Iron Rose could *truly* do.

Iron Rose wasn't a simple technique. The reason I hadn't been able to dodge his steel-bladed threads, the reason he believed they were enough to kill me—it was all because I hadn't yet mastered the technique.

Back when I'd fought Gilgan of the Assassins' Guild in the eastern woods, I'd tried to achieve a speed that could match Iron Rose's, and for just a moment, I'd managed to re-create the flow of the technique's aether. It had left my legs in terrible shape, but it had also gotten me thinking: Maybe that same process could be used to control the technique itself.

```
▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 163/300
Health Points: 144/250
Strength: 10 (22)
Endurance: 10 (22)
Agility: 17 (36)
Dexterity: 9 (10)
```

Overall Combat Power: 1,339 (Uniquely Boosted: 2,520)
Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 163 seconds

I channeled all my strength into my legs and focused on the malice I could sense radiating from the blades, doing my best to evade them, but I still got grazed on my arm and flank.

Put your all into it, I thought to myself. *Push yourself to the brink. If you lose, you die—and who will save Elena then? This isn't enough. Go faster. Sharpen your eyes. Focus. The power to fight is already within you.*

My senses picked up on everything. The faint aether emanating from the threads. Graves's intent to kill. And the lingering aether from my blood, now coating those threads from the countless cuts they had inflicted.

All of it showed me, for just a moment, the ten-odd bladed threads coming at me from every direction.

I tore away the scarf covering my mouth, which was now in the way. To go all out, I took a deep breath—despite the poison swirling around me—and shouted a phrase in the spirit tongue.

"*Ah re!*"

▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 159/320
Health Points: 113/250
Strength: 10 (14) ▽ -8
Endurance: 10 (14) ▽ -8
Agility: 17 (52) △ +16
Dexterity: 9 (10)
Overall Combat Power: 1,339 (Uniquely Boosted: 2,520)
Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 159 seconds

Immediately, just as it had during the battle in the woods, my vision turned gray. The world seemed to move sluggishly, almost like slime, as I wove through the steel-bladed threads and closed the

distance between myself and Graves. As we passed one another, I slashed his throat with my black knife in the exact moment his widening dark-red eyes met mine.

Blood sprayed into the air. My entire body was screaming in pain.

I immediately deactivated Iron Rose and landed smoothly, locking eyes with Graves as he turned back toward me in pure shock.

"Guh..."

Blood spilled from Graves's mouth in place of the words he'd tried to say.

"Ugh..."

I, too, coughed up blood from inhaling the poison. I didn't bother wiping it away and simply raised my black knife once more.

There had never been any difference between Graves's way of life and mine. But at the final moment, his focus had shifted to his own mortality, and he'd slowed his movements, relying on his prosthetic rather than his agility.

But I'd fought on. I'd struggled to survive so I could surpass death.

We stared at each other, wordless, unmoving. Graves's right arm went slack and the tip of his sword hit the floor. His prosthetic hung limply.

Still wary, I kept my knife raised, meeting the intense and grim light in Graves's eyes with my own cold stare.

"I'll keep watching until you're dead," I told him. I wouldn't let my guard down for even an instant.

He didn't respond. What had flashed across his mind at those words, I wondered. Rage? Despair?

His life ebbed away with the blood flowing from his neck. Just as I had long ago, when I'd killed the leader of those bandits, I watched as the light and strength faded from his eyes, and kept my blade at the ready until I was certain every last bit of life had left him.

"There really was no way for us to see eye to eye, Graves," I said.

▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 121/320 △ +20
Health Points: 75/250
Strength: 10 (14)
Endurance: 10 (14)
Agility: 17 (24)
Dexterity: 9
[Dagger Mastery Lv. 4]
[Martial Mastery Lv. 4]
[Throwing Lv. 4]
[Bow Mastery Lv. 2]
[Guard Lv. 4]
[String Manipulation Lv.4]
[Light Magic Lv. 3]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 4]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 4]
[Practical Magic ×6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 5] △ +1
[Intimidation Lv. 4]
[Stealth Lv. 4]
[Night Vision Lv. 2]
[Detection Lv. 4]
[Poison Resistance Lv. 3]
[Status Resistance Lv. 1]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 1,428 (Boosted: 1,774) △ +89

Princess in Peril

"*Cleanse*..."

After making sure Graves was dead, I immediately left the poison-filled room and cast Cleanse on myself. The poison was meant to be used in liquid form and became less lethal when vaporized, but I'd inhaled far too much in order to end the fight quickly.

I leaned against the corridor wall and used Restore to cure my lungs and respiratory system, then wiped the blood from my lips and took off running down the dark passage.

Graves was an opponent I'd had a history with. Honestly, I'd have preferred to settle things in a proper battle, but he just hadn't played fair. He'd had his own ideals, but after everything he'd done, there was no longer any chance of those ideals gaining a hold over me.

As I ran, I drank two of my handmade potions, one for healing and the other for aether restoration—both my health and aether points were greatly depleted from the battle. I knew I'd pushed myself too far, but it had paid off.

Iron Rose was specialized for speed. Even before learning it, I'd always focused on speed in combat, and after pushing my body past its limit in multiple battles, I'd managed to acquire another trump card. It consumed a great deal of aether and put enormous strain on my body, but thanks to my reckless efforts, my Aether Manipulation skill had risen to Level 5—the limit for what a human could achieve, which only a chosen few ever reached. I had now dipped my toes into the territory of true power.

Using my newly improved Aether Manipulation to enhance my physical capabilities through Boost, I broke through a boarded-up window about four floors up and leaped into the dark sky—the sun had already set.

"Nero!" I shouted into the night.

"Groooooooar!"

In response, a black gale tore through the darkness, ascended the castle walls with a roar, and caught me midair on its back.

With my Night Vision, I could see the corpses of hundreds of failures scattered throughout the forest. I gently stroked Nero's back, grateful that it had drawn so many enemies away, and looked in the direction its whiskers pointed. There lay the mangled body of a demon, no doubt torn apart by Nero.

The demon was familiar to me—one of Gostaura's men, who I figured had stayed behind to stall Nero while the others escaped. It occurred to me that no one with the resolve to risk their life for the sake of their comrades would ever fall for my usual tactic of playing off my opponents' arrogance.

I braced myself for what was to come.

"Nero, we're chasing after the demons."

"Groooooooar!"

***

It usually took between three weeks and a month to reach the royal capital from the March of Kendras, but that assumed travel by carriage or on foot through settled, somewhat safe lands. By using alternate means and shortcuts through the deep forest—home to wolves and monsters—one could make the trip in about a week.

That day, in a noble's estate within the Sorcerers' Academy near the capital, a young lady's return had left her attendants and servants in a tizzy.

"Lady Karla?!"

"When did you return?!"

"Weren't you headed for Kendras?!"

"You look..."

"I've just arrived." Karla had suddenly appeared in the estate's entrance hall, her deathly pale skin still wreathed in the writhing black thorns. Ignoring her servants' flustered state, she demanded, "I want tea with honey. And I'd like a warm bath. Please begin heating the water."

"Y-Yes, my lady!"

"At once!"

The servants, recalling their duties, went about doing as Karla had requested. House Leicester was prestigious and famed for the many court sorcerers it had produced over the generations, but despite its high rank, it had few retainers. Even the number of servants was small, perhaps due to the family's strong sense of suspicion of others. Most of those servants were also disciples of the current head of the family, the chief court sorcerer, but more than half of Count Leicester's apprentices had died at the hands of a younger Karla.

Karla was feared within the Leicester household, and there was only one servant, an elderly butler, who had cared for her since she was a child. None of the others willingly attended to her. Her current servers were outsiders, all brought in by the butler, and most of them had previously been unable to get proper employment. Some had been sold off to pay their parents' debts, and some had committed crimes out of necessity. Since Karla didn't harm her servants unless they opposed her, her employ had become a sort of refuge for those with nowhere else to go.

"My, but you're all in a hurry," she remarked with a sardonic smile as she realized they'd fled in fear; not a single servant or attendant remained to help her with her clothing.

She returned to her second-floor room on her own feet, and there, she finally dispelled Soul Thorn. A small cough escaped her throat, and a thin line of blood trickled out of the corner of her lips.

Karla had managed to return so quickly thanks to the Level 6 shadow sorcery spell Teleport, fueled by the limitless mana furnished by her gift. She hadn't used it on the way to Kendras because one could only Teleport to locations one had visited previously—and also simply because she'd wanted to travel with Alia.

"Hee hee," she chuckled, sitting down on a one-seater sofa in the dark of her room as she began to reminisce.

She hadn't been able to get a look at the inside of the castle, but she'd watched the battle between the mythical coeurl and a group of demons from afar. Based on that, she'd guessed the demons would

consider several options and were most likely to try attacking the royals directly—more specifically the princess, whose defenses were much thinner now that Alia was absent.

Though Elvan, the crown prince, couldn't be called incompetent, he didn't share his younger sister Elena's resolve to bear the responsibility for the lives of the kingdom's twelve million citizens—and to cast them aside if necessary. Elena had been prepared to do so since the age of seven, and Alia and Karla understood this, even if such comprehension was highly abnormal for girls so young.

Compared to those three, Elvan was clearly too soft. In times of peace, he might have become an average king, but that wasn't the case. If the demons' goal was to chip away at the kingdom's national power, well, Karla could see why they would consider Elena a much bigger threat.

Had Alia managed to defeat that man, Karla wondered? Could Alia protect the princess? Even though Alia was Rank 4 and had toppled Rank 5 enemies before, achieving both feats would be quite difficult. Karla could lend a hand and significantly improve Alia's odds of success, but she had no intention of intervening in the other girl's fight.

"You'll win. I know you will."

It would be a hard-fought victory for Alia, but Karla didn't have a shred of a doubt that the pink-haired girl would succeed. When the battle was over, Alia would be even stronger for her death match with Karla. And that match was all Karla cared about; others' lives were irrelevant.

Karla had overexerted herself and knew she would likely fall into a comatose state for several days. A bright smile like a child's slowly spread across her sickly features.

"I wonder who's going to be dead when I wake..."

***

The vampires dashed through the dark forest like phantoms. As undead beings, they required no sleep, but as long as they existed in the material plane, their aether and health were finite resources. To

regenerate those and maintain their high-level abilities, they had to rest during the day.

Vampires maintained their immortality by resting in tombs close to soil and by drinking others' souls via their blood; those two methods allowed them to absorb mana of the shadow and earth elements, respectively. But neither was an option to these vampires.

"Lord Gostaura..."

"Your body's—"

"Do not worry, Lesteth, Gallie. This is nothing. Besides, our enemies are not to be underestimated. Focus on what you need to do."

Though they couldn't fully accept Gostaura's words, the two vampires nodded reluctantly and said in unison, "Yes, my lord."

Given adequate time and aether, the body of a vampire could regenerate from any wound. But Gostaura's right arm, which Karla had torn off, had yet to regrow. And, although he should not have been feeling any pain, his features were nevertheless twisted in agony. It was said that in the material plane, even an immaterial spirit could take about ten percent damage from an ordinary weapon because the will behind the attack—the hostility and intent to harm—was amplified by aether.

And undead, although extremely resistant to pain, could still experience agony when an attacker's cruel intent contaminated both their body and soul. Karla would come after them in time. One of their own had stayed behind to stall the black beast that had slaughtered all of the failures they'd created, but it too would catch up eventually. Moreover, there was no guarantee that Graves—a mortal man even Gostaura regarded as powerful—could stop that abnormally strong girl the humans called Lady Cinders.

There was no way Karla and Lady Cinders had arrived together by pure coincidence. Even if the royal family had sent them, someone had to have leaked information on the demons' whereabouts. Humans couldn't be trusted. Karla had already betrayed them, and other humans, even the nobles who had employed Graves and Tabatha, might've used and backstabbed Gostaura and his group as well.

They won't get away with this.

Gostaura's hatred for humanity grew deeper still.

The demonic nation was not united; there had always been conflict between the moderates and the faction that sought the extermination of other races. And though Gostaura's clan were demons by blood, they were still distrusted due to their vampiric nature. If the moderates had their way, there was a very real possibility that his clan would be purged.

Kidnapping the princess, using her to strike against the human nations, inciting a new war... Their plan was to use the princess as bait and fan the flames of conflict among the demons themselves, then prove the vampire clan's worth in the war against the humans that would inevitably follow.

Chief... I'll carve out a place for us.

Gostaura and his group could not afford even the time to regenerate—they had to ensure the sacrifices of their fallen comrades had not been in vain. They raced through the dark woods without rest, day and night, even as their vitality ebbed away with each step.

***

The Sorcerers' Academy had its own security. It was the alma mater of nearly every noble in the Kingdom of Claydale, and many of their children attended the school. Large donations were common, and they funded a dedicated group of two hundred knights.

Of course, even that many knights couldn't handle patrolling the entirety of the academy grounds, vast as the royal capital itself. But the academy was surrounded by primeval forest, which acted as a natural fortress against mounted and armored intruders. Moreover, high-ranking noble students brought along their own guards. In addition, hundreds of guardsmen were stationed on campus. Barring betrayal by the knights—as seen during the assassination attempts—the academy's security was believed to be impenetrable.

But that very certainty bred carelessness, and there were few noble families that the princess deemed trustworthy, so only a single

squad of the Royal Guard was responsible for her safety. Typically, this wouldn't have been a problem—she was also under the protection of various knights from the Order of Shadows and the pink-haired girl from the Rainbow Blade, so assassins were not considered a threat.

Currently, however, the pink-haired girl—Lady Cinders, feared far and wide in the underworld—was not at the princess's side.

"Come back safe, Alia," Elena murmured as she wandered in her nightclothes onto the terrace outside her chambers.

She looked up at the moon and gently clasped her hands together, praying for the one girl she had ever opened her heart to—and unaware that it was her own life that would soon be in great peril.

***

Through a forest of towering trees, so dense that not even daylight could pierce them, raced a black beast with a girl on its back.

There was no easy path forward, no visible horizon. Still, the two leaped over boulders several meters high, never slowing, weaving freely through the mazelike thickets. The trunks of the trees they passed were marred with claw marks, and the ground was littered with the mangled corpses of monsters, strewn about as if marking the path.

"Screeeeee!"

Several winged humanoid figures suddenly descended from above the canopy, swooping down on the beast and the girl. These Rank 3 monsters, known as harpies, had the wings and talons of raptors but the upper bodies and faces of human women. They likely believed they had an overwhelming advantage in the thick woods, and thought only of tearing apart their pitiful prey as they grinned wickedly.

"Out of the way," the girl said, her voice carrying through the dark forest.

In the next instant, a pendulum flew out and beheaded one of

the harpies. As blood sprayed into the air, another pendulum—this one shaped like a sickle—sliced through the wings of the other harpies. As the creatures plummeted to the ground, the black beast's claws and fangs tore them apart.

Wasting no time at all, the beast and the girl continued to race through the woods.

***

"Sure is chilly tonight."

The season had turned to spring, but the nights were still cold. A man in a janitor's uniform looked up at the deepening dusk over the Sorcerers' Academy as he sloppily opened the lid of a copper flask and took a small sip of the distilled fruit liquor within.

Strictly speaking, having such a thing on one's person while on duty would've been considered unprofessional—but for a solo adventurer, distilled alcohol was an essential item. It could be used to disinfect wounds, sharpen the senses, and, in small amounts like this, even regulate body temperature.

"Better stop," the man—Viro—said to himself. Though tempted by the chill to take another sip, he refrained with a frown, knowing it would interfere with his work.

In his capacity as a member of the Rainbow Blade, the kingdom's foremost adventuring party, Viro had infiltrated the academy and was posing as a janitor to act as a bodyguard for the princess, who was currently a student there. For this mission, only two of the members of the Rainbow Blade had been assigned: Viro himself, their scout, capable of blending in just about anywhere; and Alia, who naturally fit in with the students.

Being a girl and the same age as Elena, Alia acted as the princess's personal guard, whereas Viro was responsible for outer perimeter security and intelligence gathering. Normally, when the princess returned to her estate, the Royal Guard took over security—but, since Alia had temporarily left the academy to hunt down Graves, Viro was keeping discreet watch through the nights.

The royal knights would be sufficient to handle any attackers

hired by nobles of middling rank or lower. Attacks near the capital were rare, as they posed a great risk to the attackers even in purely political terms. That said, on occasion, emotionally unstable or vengeful individuals would dispatch skilled assassins in their employ—but none of these had ever gotten close enough to run into Alia, let alone harm the princess, before either Viro or the knights from the Order of Shadows took care of them.

Still, something feels off tonight.

Viro tucked the copper flask into his coat and brought his fingers to his mithril dagger. This chill wasn't just from the cold; Viro, whose instincts had been honed by years of facing death, sensed an ominous disturbance in the air. He had already been alert; now he switched to battle readiness.

Though this sense of dread was vague, Viro reached out to the Order—which had increased its personnel after a faction of knights within the Second Division had gone rogue—through their communication network, warning them to be on alert. Then, by himself, he dashed toward the princess's estate.

***

Near the woods north of the academy, one of the mounted knights on patrol turned back to his partner, who had come to a stop.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know, just...something..."

The deep forest that surrounded the academy like a barrier was particularly dense on the north side and stayed dark even during the day. Though it was unusual, occasionally wolves or feral dogs emerged from that area, so it was regularly patrolled. The knight who'd brought his horse to a stop had felt a chill, something unnatural, coming from deeper in the woods.

Just as he turned to voice his unease, a shadow leaped from the forest and attacked his companion.

"What?!" he cried out in shock as his partner got bitten in the neck.

The bitten knight's body began to shrivel like a dead tree, and he soon crumbled to the ground, unable to even scream. The shadowy figure turned its bright red eyes toward the remaining knight, its blood-slick fangs glistening in the twilight and revealing its true identity.

At that moment, two more shadows leaped forth from the dark forest and struck down the knight, ending his life in the blink of an eye.

"Let's go," came a voice.

The two figures, who had been greedily drinking blood, raised their bloodstained faces.

They knew where their target was and, up until this point, had even refrained from feeding. But now that they'd gotten this far, there was no one left who could stop them. Certain of their advantage now that the sun had fully set, the vampires began to move like phantoms through the darkened academy grounds.

"Gah!"

Any knights the group encountered along the way were slain quickly and without hesitation by the group of demon vampires led by Gostaura. Even with their abilities slightly diminished from their grueling march, they still made quick work of the Rank 2 knights. Besides, the information they'd received from Tabatha's employer included details about the academy's security, which had greatly sped up their infiltration. The employer in question, Clara, hadn't intended for the demons to obtain that information. But Tabatha, feeling humiliated by a fellow woman's pity, had leaked it out of spite.

In the brief time it took them to cross the campus, the demons bit six knights and several unlucky students who had broken curfew and been out and about at that hour. Finally, they arrived at the princess's estate.

The princess's security consisted of ten members of the Royal Guard, several soldiers who served as their attendants, plus one maid and one steward from the Order of Shadows who guarded her more closely. This number, which was fewer than half of the crown prince's, likely reflected how few people the princess could trust

among all those who had tried to make a pawn of her.

Still, numbers alone meant little. What mattered was that the most dangerous of Elena's guards, Lady Cinders—also the most dangerous individual within the academy grounds—wasn't here right now.

At this hour, only two royal guards and two soldiers were stationed outside the estate. The wall around the building was protected by sorcery, and it would take time to break through the wards. Gostaura and his group decided to instead rely on brute force and use their abilities to push through.

"Guh!"

A middle-aged demon threw a chakram at one of the soldiers. The bladed ring split the man's forehead open, killing him instantly.

"What?!"

"W-We're under attack!"

One of the remaining soldiers ran toward the estate to warn the others, and the knights of the Royal Guard quickly raised their shields to deflect the chakram aimed at the soldier's back.

"Who are you?!"

"That black skin...these are demons!"

Gostaura bared his fangs in a bestial smile at the knights' defiance. "Don't bother standing aside. Go on, protect your princess. The afterlife awaits."

"Shut up!" a young knight snapped, raising his sword and shield. "We will not let you anywhere near Her Highness!"

"Wait!" another knight shouted as the younger one charged forward.

But the warning came too late. A demoness, wielding a pair of kukris, avoided the shield and slashed the young knight's flank.

"Augh!"

"Ah, how sweet you smell," the demoness said. "It's a pity we don't have time to feast."

"Those fangs! You—"

These demons had been handpicked from the vampire clan for this mission. All of them had been strong enough to reach Rank 4 even before turning, and now their combat power had doubled.

“Now die. We’ll join you sooner or later,” the woman said, her voice conveying a dreadful sense of resolve. She raised her kukris again before the other knight could come any closer.

But just then, a sharp metallic noise rang through the air. Gostaura, using the blade clutched in his remaining hand, had swung at and deflected a throwing knife, which embedded itself into the ground.

From the darkness, a man emerged. “You guys all right?!”

“Sir Viro!”

A spark of hope came alight in the knights’ faces at the sight of the high-ranking adventurer. Moments later, several more knights emerged from the estate, shifting the situation entirely.

The female vampire clicked her tongue in frustration. “Lord Gostaura. Gallie. Go ahead. I’ll handle them.”

“I leave it to you, then,” Gostaura said.

The older demon, Gallie, only nodded firmly in response. He and Gostaura leaped over the heads of the newly arrived knights and headed straight for the estate.

“How did they do that?!”

“Sir Viro! These may be vampires!”

“Shit!” Viro cursed.

He moved to give chase, but the female demon swung her kukris at him. Viro managed to deflect with his dagger.

“Lord Gostaura put his faith in me. You won’t pass,” she said.

“Damn it! The rest of you, after them!” Viro commanded. “Don’t let them near Her Highness!”

“Understood! Sir Viro, we leave her to you!”

“I got it!”

“You lot won’t be going anywhe—”

As the female demon moved to throw her kukris at the knights, Viro threw a knife to intercept her.

“What was it you said just now? Oh, right. ‘You won’t pass,’” Viro said.

“Human filth,” the demoness spat, baring her fangs.

Light suddenly illuminated the area, and Viro glanced over for a moment at the injured knight, who, despite his serious condition,

had cast the practical spell Shine. Though Viro could handle fighting in the dark just fine, ordinary humans would've stood no chance against a vampire in the shadows.

The female demon's form came into view, and the knights gasped. Viro, for his part, let out a sigh and clicked his tongue.

"Rotten luck," he muttered. "Of course she's beautiful. Man, I'm just so bad with women."

"You think me beautiful? Like this?" the demoness asked.

She was a young-looking woman, with dark skin and silver hair. Her once-pristine skin was now marred by gruesome burns that, even for a vampire, were too severe to fully heal. This was likely the result of having traveled during the day.

Though the group had moved through dark forests, even the slightest amounts of sunlight could be lethal to vampires. Still, she had made it this far—thanks to her incredible regenerative abilities as a greater vampire and the sheer power of will that had allowed her to overcome the agony from the burns.

Even battered as she was, her Rank 4 skills and physical abilities remained intact. In a fair fight, Viro would've been at a disadvantage.

"A couple scars can't hide real beauty," he teased lightly, as if to boost his own spirits.

"What an interesting man," the demoness remarked with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "What's your name?"

"Viro."

As he readied his knife, the demoness turned to face him fully and raised both her blades.

"I am Lesteth. You have my full attention now, Viro."

***

"Don't let them reach Her Highness!" one of the royal knights shouted as the group desperately tried to stop the two demons heading for Princess Elena.

Normally, if an assailant breached the estate, the guards would hold them off while the royal evacuated the premises. But since it

was night and the enemies were vampires, the best course of action was for the princess to hide deeper within the estate.

"Gah!"

Gostaura's single-handed sword knocked away a knight's shield, breaking his stance, and Gallie's chakrams tore through the group of soldiers. Some were dead, others barely hanging on, but Gostaura and Gallie didn't bother finishing off those who still lived. Their priority was to keep pushing forward and secure the princess.

"You shall not pass!" a knight declared.

"Your corpse will be a testament to your loyalty," Gostaura retorted.

The only knights still on their feet were those who had ventured into the dungeon to protect Elena. Having fought a Rank 5 minotaur brute before, they managed to endure the fierce assault of Gostaura and Gallie, both of whom had combat power comparable to the minotaur's. Even then, it was clear to any onlooker that their defensive wall wouldn't last long.

"Raaaah!"

"Haaaah!"

Masche, a knight captain whom Alia had once saved, clashed with Gostaura, sending a shower of sparks flying. The knight was roughly on the upper end of Rank 3, with a combat power of close to 500, but Gostaura, irrespective of his missing arm, sat close to 2,000. Unable to withstand the vampire's strike even with his shield raised, Masche was sent flying along with the knight behind him.

"Ngh..."

"Lord Gostaura!"

Gostaura, having pushed through an intense march while badly injured, also found himself dropping to one knee. After cutting down the remaining soldiers, Gallie ran over to his leader.

"I'm fine," Gostaura said. "Let's go."

"Yes, sir!"

"W-Wait," groaned a still-conscious Masche as he reached toward them from the ground.

Gallie kicked him aside, then broke through a sturdy door—the final barrier between the demons and the princess.

Elena stood at the back of the room, holding a small knife. Her steward, Yosef, stood in front of her with a sword in hand, and the knight-type guardian maid, Chloe, held a large shield as she glared fiercely at Gostaura.

The princess's knife was not for fighting. It was a last resort for suicide. As a member of the royal family, she had been raised to choose death over allowing herself to be used as leverage.

Seeing that Elena had nevertheless not yet taken her own life, Gostaura was unable to contain his admiration and exclaimed, "Oh?"

The princess's strong gaze clearly conveyed her equally strong will. Witnessing that unyielding spirit, that refusal to give in until the very end, reminded him why abducting her would throw this kingdom into disarray. Their plan had been risky, and they'd lost much, but it had been the correct decision.

Besides Yosef and Chloe, Elena's ordinary maids, despite being clearly untrained in combat, still willingly stood around the princess, forming a protective barrier even as they trembled with fear.

"Surrender quietly, princess, and we'll spare their lives," Gostaura said.

"Do not be foolish," Elena spat. "I will not allow you to mock their resolve."

"Ah. My apologies."

As Gostaura raised his sword, he narrowed his eyes as though looking at something radiant. Without a word, Gallie drew his chakrams. The untrained maids let out choked cries of fear.

Elena recalled the promise she'd made to a certain girl to never give up.

Sensing something, the princess turned her gaze toward the window. Just outside, a black beast cut through the night, tearing through the wind and piercing the darkness like an arrow. It skidded hard to a halt against the soil, and the figure clinging to its tail was launched forward by the recoil. The figure crashed loudly through the large second-floor window and flew into the room.

Amid the scattering shards of glass was the glint of golden hair tinged with pink. From beneath her flaring skirt, the figure threw knives toward Gostaura and Gallie to push them back.

“Alia!” Elena shouted.
“Sorry I’m late, Elena,” Alia replied.



Alia, also known as Lady Cinders—one of the most renowned adventurers in the kingdom and the most feared enemy of Gostaura and his allies, within the academy and beyond—had arrived just in time.

Her figure was fierce yet graceful even in her current state: battered, dirtied, streaked with dried blood. Perhaps it was her way of life that made others perceive her as beautiful, even like this.

At her arrival, Elena's face lit up, and the spark of hope reignited in those around her. Gostaura narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Lord Gostaura, I'll handle this one," Gallie said.

The middle-aged demon yanked Alia's throwing knife from his arm and tossed it aside. He brought his two chakrams together in an intimidating gesture, the metallic rings making a harsh, grating sound as they clashed.

"Our combat power may be diminished, but do not for a second think you can beat me in that state," Gallie taunted.

While his own combat power had dropped from the grueling march, Alia's had too—she was evidently far weaker now than she'd been when he'd last seen her at the castle. Gostaura decided to leave Alia to Gallie and turned his attention toward Elena for a moment, but...

"Gah!"

A spinning, disk-shaped blade slashed across Gallie's face, and as soon as it passed, Alia leaped through the air with inhuman speed.

Clang!

Gostaura just barely managed to intercept Alia's black dagger, the friction scattering white sparks into the air. The girl's jade-green eyes, filled not with panic but pure fighting spirit, sent a chill down Gostaura's spine. Unable to withstand the pressure, he instinctively backed away.

"Raaaaah!"

From behind Gostaura, Gallie, whose eye had been gouged out, threw a chakram at Alia. She evaded it with a graceful backflip, simultaneously kicking Gostaura's arm as he tried to retaliate, putting distance between them. Now Alia, the two demons, and Elena's group all stood equidistant from one another in a tense

standoff.

If either Gostaura or Gallie made a move toward Elena, they would be struck from the flank immediately. There was no mercy, no hesitation, no fear, no mental weakness in the girl's demeanor. Where had this girl, who still bore traces of youth, honed such powerful battle instincts?

What is this girl?

Alia's combat prowess was equal to Gostaura's and Gallie's. But Gostaura, who had lived through the ages and possessed superior physical capabilities and experience, should have had the upper hand. Yet he found himself unable to kill her. The eerie nature of her fighting style and presence reminded him of a certain demoness, once known as the Fiend, who had supposedly perished decades ago during the war with the humans.

"You think a mere human girl can take on both of us at once?!" Gallie demanded sharply as he sensed the girl's unusual presence.

"Keep your cool, Gallie," Gostaura warned. "Think of her as you think of the black-haired sorceress. Before long, Lesteth will have taken that man down and caught up with us. The three of us will defeat her together."

Gallie paused for a moment, then acquiesced, though still clearly reluctant. He raised his weapons once more and said simply, "Yes, sir."

Widening her stance, Alia held her knife and dagger at the ready.

"Your friend won't be joining us," she said quietly. "If the man you're talking about is who I think it is...well, he's one of my mentors, you see."

***

"I can't keep you company for long, you know," Lesteth said.

"Good. I'm short on time myself," Viro retorted.

Under the faint glow of magical light, the adventurer Viro and the vampire demoness Lesteth were bantering, but despite their lighthearted tone, the air between them was so tense it felt as though it might snap.

Lesteth had a reason to risk her life for her companions, and Viro had something to protect. Neither could allow the other to reach their allies—only the victor would be able to rush to their comrades' aid.

▼ Lesteth
Species: Dark Elf/Vampire♀ (Estimated Rank 4)
Aether Points: 218/245
Health Points: 221/347
Overall Combat Power: 948×1.5 (1,422)

Yikes.

Upon scanning Lesteth's combat power, Viro broke into a cold sweat. His own power under the effect of Boost was 1,281. They were both Rank 4, but the higher a vampire's rank, the stronger their base stats became.

Still, there was a silver lining. Usually, a vampire's combat power was double the base due to their regenerative abilities, but Lesteth's power boost was diminished. Based on her health points, it was likely that her regeneration had weakened because she'd spent the day traveling.

This was doable, but if Viro let his guard down, he would definitely die. As an undead, Lesteth couldn't be killed by normal means, and with dagger-type blades as his main weapons, he wouldn't be able to deal her meaningful damage.

"Oh well. Let's dance!" he shouted to psych himself up, lowering his stance.

Lesteth's expression turned somewhat exasperated.

Quickly, Viro scraped the ground with his mithril knife, sending a cloud of dust into the air toward Lesteth.

"Clever little—"

She swung both of her kukris, dispersing the dust, and stepped forward—but almost immediately her feet faltered and her knee buckled. Lesteth jerked her head back just in time to avoid Viro's mithril knife as it swept past, and the tip of the blade grazed the

dark skin of her throat.

Rolling backward to gain distance, she pulled a throwing knife from a holster at her right knee and cast it into the darkness.

"Cunning little shit," she hissed.

"Aw, thank you!" Viro replied with a sarcastic grin as he leaped forward.

Knife throws couldn't deal significant damage to a vampire, which was why Viro had concealed his throw in the dust cloud. Vampires typically didn't care much about small wounds, so he had used that carelessness to his advantage and disabled her knee, hoping to end the fight in one move.

But that trick wouldn't work twice.

Not wasting the opening, Viro unleashed a relentless flurry of attacks. Lesteth, despite her precarious situation, managed to use her superior physical abilities to parry Viro's strikes with her own blades.

"Rank 4 is something else," muttered one of the two royal knights who remained at the scene. The pair watched the duel with bated breath, unable to offer any backup.

As Rank 3 knights, they were considered seasoned elites, but those above them in rank possessed unique talents and the will to focus solely on their training. Even though both Viro and Lesteth fought with daggers—weapons typically considered weak—it would've taken immense courage for these knights to interfere with their battle.

Growing impatient, Lesteth drew on her vampiric strength. The sound of muscle fibers tearing echoed through the air as she forcefully drove Viro's knife back. "Haaah!"

"Damn!" Viro cursed. Though he was Rank 4 and far stronger than most ordinary people, Lesteth's upward strike still overpowered him.

Viro fought with only one blade. While dual wielding offered high attack power, it also came with certain weaknesses—one of which was the lack of weight behind each individual strike. Alia compensated by using two different types of blades, and Lesteth did the same with her brute vampiric strength.

Conversely, single wielding had its own weakness: defense. Daggers, by nature, weren't suited to direct, frontal combat. With Lesteth now on the offensive, Viro was forced to parry her fierce assault with only one blade. Their skill was equal, but the sheer number of strikes combined with Lesteth's physical power were slowly pushing Viro back.

"Tch!"

Viro glanced around quickly and kicked up dirt as he retreated, using his free hand to throw a knife. That was another advantage of single-handed wielding; the other hand being empty allowed for a wider variety of attacks. But...

"Predictable!"

Lesteth had fully anticipated that Viro, who was now cornered, would try something, and rather than attempting to dodge, she threw the kukri in her left hand straight at him.

"Ngh!"

The kukri stabbed into Viro's thigh as the knife he'd thrown pierced Lesteth's leg. Even with one of her eyes obscured by the dust, Lesteth charged in, aiming for Viro's heart, and he just barely managed to deflect the strike—only for the blade to dig deeply into his abdomen instead.

"Guhhh!"

"Ah, you gave me such a hard time," Lesteth taunted. "But that was fun, Viro."

She hadn't finished him off, but a gut wound like that was more than enough to stop a human. And, because this interesting human wasn't dead yet, she could still talk with him.

Lesteth smiled, her scorched features softening. Viro coughed and let out a sigh as blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

"Man, dual wielders are strong," he muttered. "But I just don't like using two blades."

"You could still learn," Lesteth said, her fangs on full display and her eyes glimmering ominously. "I could make you my minion..."

Viro shook his head. "As much as I'd be honored to serve a beauty like you, I'll have to pass."

"Then die," Lesteth said, her unwavering smile indicating she'd

expected that answer. She began to press her blade deeper into Viro's wound.

"You know," he began, making her falter slightly, "believe it or not, I'm a hell of a teacher. And there's one thing I told my student—that is, my dual-wielding student—over and over. I told her, 'Never let your guard down when going for the kill.'"

"What...?"

Lesteth's eyes widened as a steel blade burst out of her chest. One of the remaining knights had attacked her from behind.

Dual wielding was powerful, but it made one focus too much on offense and neglect one's surroundings. That was why Viro had stuck with a single blade—and why he'd warned his disciple about this weakness. It was thanks to that lesson that Alia had managed to seriously wound Gilgan from the Assassins' Guild.

When he'd pretended to retreat earlier, Viro had subtly shifted his position to give the knights an opening. Emboldened, one of the knights had pushed to his feet, clutching his wounded flank, and seized the opportunity to strike Lesteth from behind.

"Human fiiilth!" Lesteth roared, snarling like a beast as she backhanded her attacker and sent him flying. Though the blade had pierced her heart, it had missed her aethercrystal by a hair.

Bleeding from his stomach, Viro raised his knife once more as Lesteth dropped her weapon and stepped back, furiously baring her vampiric claws and fangs.

"And that's why," Viro said with a cheeky grin, "you should always mind your surroundings."

"...Duck..."

Upon hearing the sudden voice echoing in their heads, the knights instinctively crouched. A dark gale tore across Lesteth's back, slicing it open and leaving a cloud of blackened blood in its wake.

"A coeurl?!" she exclaimed. "Has that girl caught up to us already?!"

If the mythical beast was here, that had to mean the dangerous girl who had been with it had defeated Graves and given chase.

Distracted, Lesteth momentarily forgot even the pain of her wounds—and from behind her, Viro seized the moment, pulled the

kukri from his abdomen, and raised his mithril knife high.

"*Critical Edge!*"

"What?!"

Viro unleashed the combat technique at Lesteth's completely unguarded back. The demoness turned around in shock just as her head was severed and sent flying through the air. The light faded from her eyes, and in her final moments, she almost seemed to smile faintly at the scout.

"See ya, Lesteth," Viro said. All strength left him, and he collapsed onto his back. He turned his gaze toward Nero as the coeurl quietly approached. "Shit, that hurts. But hey, if you're here, that means she is too, yeah?"

"Grr..."

Viro, still on the ground, closed his eyes in relief at Nero's growl.

"Heh heh... You got this, Alia."

***

A strange three-way standoff had formed.

If Gostaura and Gallie tried to attack Elena, I would attack. If I made the first move, one of them would attack her. Still, Elena and her companions weren't just helpless observers; Elena could use magic, and her attendants Yosef and Chloe were both Rank 3. While they were no match for Gostaura—who, despite being weakened, was still almost Rank 5—they could still stall for time.

If I used Iron Rose, I might be able to break the stalemate. But if Elena was attacked during the few tens of seconds it would take me to bring one of the vampires down, there would be no point. It was possible she could hold out long enough, but that wasn't a risk I was willing to take.

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▼ Alia (Alicia)
Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)
Aether Points: 105/320
Health Points: 153/250
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Overall Combat Power: 1,428 (Boosted: 1,774)
[Affliction: Fatigue]

On top of that, I had been poisoned and hadn't slept in days, which had kept me from recovering. Considering the strain of combat techniques and Boost on the body, using Iron Rose irresponsibly would have been dangerous.

Morning was a few hours away, and that would turn the tables—but Gostaura and his ally no doubt knew this. Still, they were fixated on taking Elena, by any means necessary, even if it meant losing comrades in the process. They seemed to believe that capturing her would solve all their problems. It was so bizarre that it gave me a sense of unease.

Regardless, what I had to do remained the same. Nero and Viro had used their own bodies to buy me time. I wouldn't let their sacrifices go to waste—I would use everything I had to keep Elena safe.

"You brat...!" said the older dark elf, Gallie.

He must've lost his patience. Wielding a chakram in each hand, he charged at me, and simultaneously, the one-armed Gostaura moved toward Elena.

I immediately threw my knife, and a sharp metallic sound rang out as it collided with Gallie's chakram. Using my left hand, I manipulated my weighted pendulum—which I'd initially launched as a distraction—with my left hand, aiming it at the back of Gostaura's head as he turned away.

"Ngh!"

"*Air Bullet!*"

Gostaura barely dodged the pendulum, but Elena exploited the opening to cast a wind spell, forcing him to retreat to his original position. Gallie's chakram flew past me, keeping me in check and preventing me from repositioning closer to Elena.

"Tch." Gostaura glared at Elena and me, clearly frustrated.

The feeling was mutual—he was just as irritating to me as I was to him. Plus, he was grossly underestimating Elena. She wasn't a

dainty damsel in distress.

"Raaaaagh!"

Clang!

Gallie threw his chakram, and I instinctively swung my weighted pendulum to knock the circular blade out of the air. Not long ago, this would've been impossible—but the experience I'd gained during my battle with Graves, when I'd had to read the movements of threads I couldn't see, had changed that.

I was stronger today than yesterday, and tomorrow I would be stronger than today. Bit by bit, my power was increasing. Both Cere'zhula and Viro had taught me that combat power numbers were just guidelines, a quotient of one's combined stats and skills. In battles between elite combatants, what mattered were experience, willpower, and other such things that went beyond mere numbers.

Clang!

I dodged Gallie's powerful chakram strike by mere centimeters without averting my gaze. In the same motion, I spun my whole body and drove my black dagger into his forehead, right between his brows.

"Augh!" he screamed.

"Gallie!" Gostaura shouted.

Still, Gallie didn't perish. At that moment, sensing the danger his comrade was in, Gostaura swung his sword at me, aiming at my neck. Since we were both Rank 4, I could block or dodge the swing—but if I could do those things, I could do even more.

"What the...?!"

I struck the flat of his sword from below with a hand chop. Had I hesitated even slightly, I would've died—but I had no doubts at all.

"Curse you!"

Gallie's chakram came flying at me from the opposite side. Still holding my dagger, I leaped up, slammed my hand down to deflect the chakram, and used that momentum to flip my posture midair.

"You...!" Gallie exclaimed, his eyes growing wide with shock. "That martial technique...!"

"*Cyclone!*" I chanted, sending the sorcery-type area-of-effect combat technique howling through the air.

As Cyclone tore through both Gostaura and Gallie, I felt my perception shift. The world around me seemed to change as I took another step toward true strength, further sharpening my focus.

***

This girl is a monster!

Alia's combat power was around the same as the demons', and it was obvious that she was barely a teenager. And yet the two powerful vampires working together couldn't kill her. It made no sense. Gostaura and Gallie had gone without rest and lost their regenerative powers, but this girl was fatigued too.

Is this the potential of a human who can still grow...?

By giving up their humanity, Gostaura and his comrades had gained considerable strength but had also lost the capacity for growth. This girl was different. It wasn't about effort or talent. Hers was the potential of humanity. That princess showed it too, by refusing to give up even in the depths of despair. Every human possessed that potential, though most were too weak to realize it.

Seeing these two, Gostaura felt as though he was once again seeing the brilliance of life itself.

"Lord Gostaura..." Gallie called out, his eye crushed and a dagger stuck between his brows.

Hearing Gallie's voice snapped Gostaura out of his reverie.

The combat technique the girl had used earlier, Cyclone, had low raw power and wasn't meant for single combat. Still, it had done damage, draining their aether—the life force of a vampire—and Gallie's wound, which normally wouldn't have been threatening, wasn't regenerating. It was clear that his vitality was ebbing away.

Alia wasn't just buying time or stalling. She was aiming to kill them, with no hesitation. She likely knew, instinctively, that passivity in the face of a powerful enemy meant spiritual defeat.

Gallie had to have sensed that too. His remaining eye, now clouding like a corpse's, stared at Gostaura in a silent demand for renewed resolve. They'd made it this far thanks to the sacrifices and devotion of their comrades. A dozen of them had come to this

foreign land, where they had no other allies, and fought to ensure the survival of their clan.

Perhaps if they'd been willing to sacrifice everything from the start, they could've achieved their goal. But to the very end, Gostaura had been unable to abandon his comrades.

Faced with the strong will of his last remaining ally, Gallie, Gostaura gave a firm, resolute nod.

"I ask you to die, Gallie."

"And I will," Gallie replied. "Survive, my lord, and ensure our clan's future!"

Gallie's body twisted violently, taking on a beastly form. He shed his restraint as a warrior and revealed his true nature as a vampire, unleashing all of his power. With his body in its current battered state, this decision sealed his fate—but he was willing to throw everything away for his clan, his fallen comrades, and the future.

Watching Gallie transform, Alia repositioned herself to shield Elena, but the now beastly demon, having discarded his chakrams, lunged to stop her.

"Graaaaaaah!"

Alia stood her ground, her eyes fixed on the oncoming beast. She narrowly avoided Gallie's claws, deflecting his arms with one fluid motion. Taking advantage of that slim opening, she drove her knee into Gallie's face.

"Groooar!" he roared, a spray of black blood bursting forth as his shattered fangs flew through the air.

The battlefield seemed to move in slow motion as all combatants focused to the extreme. Seizing the moment when Alia's focus shifted to Gallie, Gostaura leaped toward Elena. As soon as Alia moved to stop him, Gallie charged at her with his arms spread wide, not bothering with defense.

"You will not get past me!" he bellowed in a display of sheer willpower despite his bloodied, crushed face.

"*Gale Cutter!*"

"*Fire Arrow!*"

Gostaura didn't even attempt to dodge Elena's and Yosef's spells. Even with his neck sliced open and his face burned, he charged

forward, ramming into Chloe's shield and sending her along with Yosef and the other maids scattering. Hanging by a thread, he made it to Elena.

"Elena!"

At that moment, Alia threw a knife, piercing the back of Gostaura's head—but even that didn't stop him. Elena reflexively tried to cast a spell, but the demon kicked her down and stomped on her, then pulled a gem the size of a fist from his cloak.

"Too late!" he hissed.

He crushed the gem in his palm, releasing an explosive surge of magic that sent Chloe, Yosef, and the maids flying.

Gostaura laughed, and tears of blood seemed to well in his eyes as he whispered triumphantly, "I did it, my friends... Gallie...Lesteth...everyone!"

He glared at Alia, who had plunged a dagger into Gallie's heart from behind.

"It's too late, humans. Do you know what I just used?"

It was the same type of item Graves had once used to drive off Nero, and that Viro had used in the dungeon: a magical relic with a spell sealed within.

"A Teleport gem," Gostaura said.

His friend and clan leader had entrusted him with the treasure for this grueling mission. Only a few of these gems, which contained Level 6 spells, had ever been officially accounted for in the history of the continent. Authentic ones were extremely rare, and though Gostaura had been deeply grateful to have been entrusted with such a valuable treasure, he'd had no intention of deploying it unless absolutely necessary. But after obtaining new intel from Graves and others, he and his group had come up with a plan to use the gem in the princess's abduction.

Even Gostaura thought Elena had the qualities of a future queen. Originally, they'd considered kidnapping or assassinating the crown prince to weaken the nation, but the boy had shown no signs of growth. Meanwhile, the supposedly frail princess had begun to show signs of improved strength and health, eventually becoming more politically valuable than her brother.

Thus, the demons had changed their plan. They would allow the incompetent prince to ascend the throne and abduct the competent princess instead. If they were to throw Claydale into chaos, they needed the princess alive, but absent from the kingdom.

If the prince became king, those who were familiar with the princess's capabilities would grow discontent. But if the princess were dead, they'd be likelier to accept the flawed ruler—with her gone instead, the discontent was much likelier to cause an internal split. And, with the kingdom's ruler lacking the ability to handle a fractured nation, that split would cause a collapse.

Would the crown prince be able to govern while nobles demanded the return of the missing princess? Could he ever grow into a proper king while resenting the dissenters? All it would take was a little push behind the scenes to stir unrest, thus causing the kingdom's power to wane. Even without direct intervention from the demons, neighboring nations would move to take action on their own.

This was a long-term plan, the kind only long-lived dark elves could conceive. Other factions, each driven by its own agenda, had even gotten them to consider assassinating the crown prince, but in the end, the demons had managed to achieve their goal this way.

With the princess taken hostage, no one could make a move. Intuiting the demons' plan from the bits and pieces of their conversation, Elena reached for her knife, aiming to take her own life—but Gostaura stomped on her hand.

"Ngh!"

"Your Highness...!" a prone Chloe groaned, desperately trying to reach for the princess.

Gostaura only sneered as a sphere of dark mana enveloped him and the princess, now pinned beneath him. "Resistance is futile, human. Kill me if you want, but the spell has been activated. Princess, you will witness your kingdom's downfall from our nation __"

"*Iron Rose,*" came a voice just then, flowing through the air like the wind.

The instant Gostaura took his eyes off of Alia, she leaped forward

like a shooting star, her pink hair now a burnished gray, light trailing behind her like wings of silver. She thrust her black dagger forward, driving it straight into his heart.

"I'm not letting you leave alive."

***

Gostaura's eyes widened in disbelief as my dagger pierced the aethercrystal in his heart. His pupils trembled for a moment, then grew dull.

I had misjudged the dark elves' strength of will.

Elena was still on the ground, and I tried to drag her out of the spell's range, but as Gostaura had said, there was no stopping the teleportation. She and I were both swallowed by the sphere of shadow mana. Outside its boundaries, I could tell Chloe and Yosef were shouting something, but their voices could no longer reach us.

Looking at them, I mouthed, *Leave this to me,* and waved.

As I cradled Elena to shield her, she murmured, "Alia..."

"It's okay, Elena. I'm here with you."

The darkness engulfed us completely, and we could see nothing but each other. Elena clung to me with a shaky smile, anxiety plain on her features.

Gostaura's corpse vanished into some unknown space, and the two of us were also transported away. I couldn't tell how much time passed. Minutes? Hours? My sense of time became hazy in the void of spatial transfer.

Suddenly, light returned. The sky opened above us as the moon and stars came into view. With Elena still in my arms, I landed as softly as I could on the ground below, absorbing the impact of the fall of a few meters. The faint scent of greenery and soil hung in the air. The atmosphere was cold and dry, and I could tell immediately that we were no longer in Claydale.

I lowered Elena to the ground and steadied her carefully, helping her stand.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "But...where are we?"

“I’m not sure.”

There was no sign of an ambush, and no trace of demons or even animals nearby. Around us was just a withered forest. I pulled a cloak and a pair of loafers out of Shadow Storage, then dressed Elena, who was still barefoot and wearing nothing but thin nightclothes.

We started walking.

When dawn came and the sky turned a pale indigo, we finally emerged from the strange forest. From atop a hill, we saw something. Elena gasped, covering her mouth with one hand, her blue eyes wide with shock.

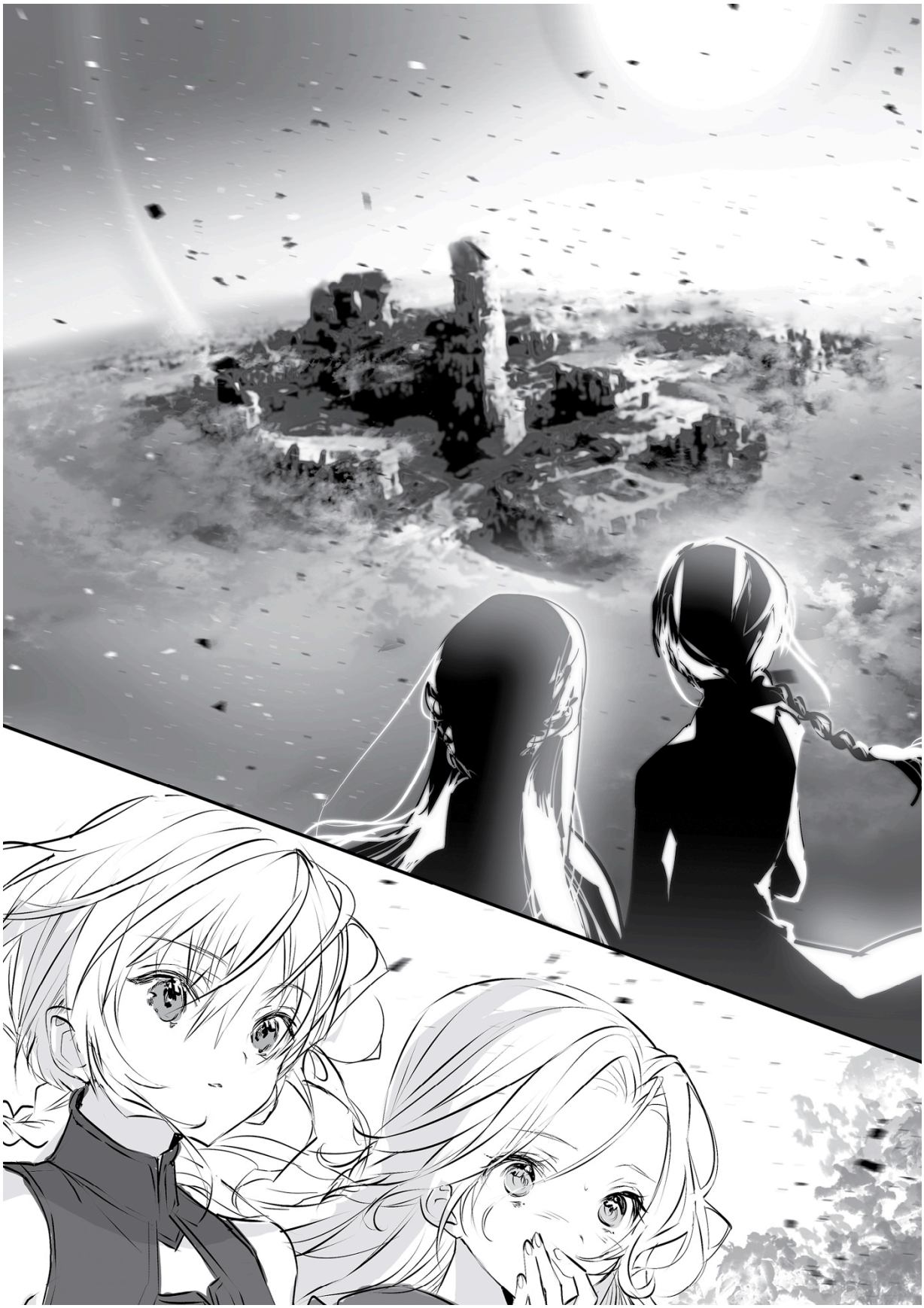
“Do you know this place?” I asked.

“Yes. This is...”

The sky was pale and cloudless, and a vast desert stretched endlessly beyond the horizon. At its heart lay a massive ruined city veiled in sand, blending in with the landscape itself.

Elena inhaled sharply, clutching my arm, and whispered:

“The ancient desert ruins of Reisveil...”



A Day Off in the Capital

"What a pain," Alia muttered.

"Huh? What's the matter?" Theo asked.

Theo had been summoned back to House Leighton's secondary residence in the royal capital to check on how well Alia was recovering from the injuries she'd sustained during the field training incident—and to help her train in holding back against her sparring partners. Now the two were standing in the estate's courtyard, in the midst of their special practice, and he couldn't help but wonder why she was grumbling.

"Got you," Alia said.

"Ack!"

Without so much as a flutter of her long uniform, Alia closed the distance between them using special footwork and lightly kicked the back of Theo's knee, making him stumble. Still dressed in his steward's uniform, Theo landed flat on his back.

"Oww..."

He couldn't exactly ask her to go easy on him. Though Alia was a foster, she was nevertheless his older sister—and a formidable fighter capable of clearing dungeons and fending off Rank 5 assassins. But to Theo, she was nevertheless a girl he wanted to surpass in many ways and, eventually, confess his feelings to.

"Don't lose focus. If you let your guard down like that surrounded by ogres, you'll die."

"No one's gonna survive being surrounded by a bunch of ogres!"

Theo felt faint when he considered the sheer distance he still had to cross before he caught up to Alia. Though the two had grown closer since Alia had been taken into House Leighton, she still looked at Theo like a sister looks at her troublemaking little brother, and that frustrated him.

He took Alia's offered hand and stood, noting how he'd almost

caught up to her in height. That thought, at least, was encouraging.

"So, why were you complaining?" he asked. "Isn't it easier for you to justify being Her Highness's guard if you're with a barony and not a baronetcy?"

"I don't want to get involved with nobles at all," Alia explained.

House Leighton had been elevated from a baronetcy—a low-ranking noble house—to a barony, which was considered mid-ranking. Even as a lower-ranked noble, Alia had been a target because of her position as Princess Elena's sole close aide. And, while it was possible for a noble to be elevated due to their achievements, upward mobility between ranks was rare. The traditional mid-ranked noble houses were likely displeased by House Leighton's promotion into their midst.

The Leightons were part of the kingdom's Order of Shadows, and long before Alia's arrival, Sera had already been held in high esteem as a guard at the royal palace. But, to noble families unaware of the circumstances surrounding the incident that had prompted House Leighton's promotion, it appeared as though Alia had improved her standing due to royal favoritism.

But the worst part was...

"Sera said she's received a few marriage proposals for me," Alia muttered.

"What?!"

Had Alia been a low-ranking noble girl serving as a royal maid, this wouldn't have been such a big deal. As a foster daughter with low standing, Alia wouldn't have been used as a political pawn. But now that she belonged to a barony, it was only natural that families hoping to form connections with the upper echelons of the nobility would set their sights on her.

Elena could protect Alia from marriage, but the proposals themselves weren't the issue. What bothered Alia was the fact that House Leighton's promotion had been granted as a direct reward from His Majesty himself, meaning it wouldn't be easy for Alia to renounce her nobility now.

"I don't want you to get engaged to some other noble!" Theo protested.

"I don't plan on it," Alia retorted.

If anything, Theo was the one in more trouble now that he was the heir to a barony. With his good looks and kind nature, he would likely be swarmed by female students once he entered the academy next year. Alia had heard from Chloe that, although Theo hadn't enrolled yet, he'd already caught the eye of a few senior girls. Distracted as she'd been by her own proposals, Alia hadn't really noticed.

Chloe, meanwhile, was probably sighing to herself at Alia's complete obliviousness toward Theo's feelings.

"Anyway, I'm gonna talk to my mom about that!" Theo said. "And Alia, try not to push yourself too hard. I have to go back to the academy now, but if you go into town, make sure you take someone with you!"

"Okay."

***

"So that's why I'm here?" Feld asked.

"Yeah."

Alia had taken Theo's advice. Since she had virtually no friends and was under constant threat of attack, she couldn't exactly be escorted by any of the ordinary maids in House Leighton's employ. Because of that, Feld, who had been idling about in the Adventurers' Guild, had been called upon instead.

Miranda, meanwhile, who had also been idling, had gone off to tour the dessert shops in the royal capital, and her whereabouts were anyone's guess.

"Well, all right," Feld mumbled. "But you know, you look like a proper lady for once."

"Do I?"

Alia, perhaps feeling relaxed, tilted her head in a cute way that was starkly different from her usual demeanor as an adventurer. Feld's gaze wavered slightly. Part of it was undoubtedly the fact that the maids had made her up lightly, but perhaps another part was the realization that if she was this relaxed in his presence, she must

have come to trust him.

"Anyway, where are we going?" he asked.

"Gelf's shop," Alia replied.

"Again?"

The only places in the capital Alia ever went were the weapon shop, the Adventurers' Guild, and Gelf's shop. And the dwarven armorer was someone the men of the Rainbow Blade found mildly traumatic to deal with. At Alia's casual mention of the shop, Feld had to suppress a sigh.

"All right. Fine..."

Though it wasn't immediately apparent, Alia's legs hadn't fully healed yet, so it was definitely a good idea for her to have an escort who could carry her things. Alia didn't know many people, but there would undoubtedly be a small crowd of men willing to accompany her if she only asked. At the same time, it could be assumed none of them would be without ulterior motives.

And that's why she asked me, Feld figured.

With the two being party members, Feld was biased, of course, but it seemed plain to him that Alia had grown into an exceptional-looking young woman by anyone's standards.

"Right. Gelf's shop it is. Let's go," he said.

"Okay."

Oh well. I can do this for her, he thought.

And just as he turned around to lead the way, Alia lifted herself onto his back and leaned her upper body against his shoulders.

"Hey!"

"My legs are injured," she reminded him.

"Right, right..."

It occurred to him that if she was capable of climbing onto his shoulders without so much as a grunt of pain, she had to be capable of walking just fine, and regardless, she could always have taken a carriage. But there was no point in objecting, really, and so he let her do as she pleased.

Feld didn't dislike carrying Alia on his shoulders. Rather, it gave him complicated feelings—due to his complicated circumstances. Feld wasn't a commoner; he was of noble birth and hailed from a

territory far southeast of the capital, in the easternmost part of the country. His family had once been known for their martial prowess, but not anymore, and his relatives all worked as civil officials. Feld was the only one who'd shown exceptional talent in martial arts and swordsmanship.

His older brother had already been chosen as the heir to their domain, but those old enough to remember the family's past glory had begun to voice their support for Feld, urging that he be made heir instead. Because of this, he'd volunteered to be placed under the care of Dalton, an adventurer his father had been close with.

By the time he'd reached adulthood, Feld had already attained Rank 4, which made him clearly abnormal in the eyes of others. The other members of the Rainbow Blade had all been more capable than Feld at the time, but their strength had been honed over long years of training and real combat. Someone like Feld—capable of taking out soldiers while still in his teens—was unusual. He'd always been the target of strange, envious gazes.

And then he'd met Alia, though at the time she'd been a child and posing as a boy. But the next time they'd met, she'd completely blown his first impression of her out of the water. Alia was now a beautiful girl of Rank 4 who looked like a young adult, and witnessing her prodigious strength—so like his own—Feld had felt, for the first time in his life, a sense of kinship.

But who could have imagined that she'd actually been just a child of about ten?

His impression of her as a peer had been wrong. He should've realized it upon seeing that Viro—a known womanizer—treated Alia not as a young woman but as a little girl. Still, though he knew she was a child, that first impression coupled with her overwhelming strength had prevented him from seeing her as one. And then she seemed to alternate between acting as a young woman and acting as a child, further bewildering Feld.

Since she was objectively a child, he tried to treat her as such. But while Alia never let her guard down around Viro, despite him being her mentor, she would be completely unguarded around Feld, casually stepping into his personal space with an innocent

expression on her face.

When she'd explained it away, saying she felt safe around him because she saw him as a father figure, Feld had simultaneously felt relieved and even more deeply conflicted about the way Alia had continued to grow on him.

"Oh my! Welcome back, Alia dear! You've gotten even prettier! Oh, and hello, Feld! Your muscles are more fabulous than ever!" called Gelf—a crag dwarf wearing a glossy, formfitting leather dress—as he came out to greet Alia and Feld, who had just arrived at the store.

"Th-Thanks," Feld stammered, a bit overwhelmed.

"My tights absorbed quite a bit of blood, so I'd like to get some maintenance done," Alia said. "Also, I got a reward from the kingdom, so I'd like to order a spare pair. And are the shoes I requested ready?"

"You continue to be all business, I see," Gelf remarked.

Feld nodded, mentally agreeing.

Despondent, like a clown whose antics had been ignored by a child, Gelf took the delicate sheer tights from Alia, but as he began to inspect them, his expression instantly shifted to that of a serious craftsman.

"You were reckless again, weren't you?" he asked. "This is mithril fiber, but it'll still get discolored and lose strength if it soaks up too much blood, so be careful, dear. As for the academy-approved loafers you ordered, I embedded magic steel plates inside them and added mechanisms in the heels and toes with hidden blades. But they're not as sturdy as your old boots, so choose your battles carefully. As for a spare set of tights..."

Gelf paused, thought for a moment, then clapped his hands.

"Ah, I do have something! A prototype made from a blend of mithril fiber and black magic-steel fiber. The magic resistance is slightly lower, but they offer better physical defense. There's also a matching bustier made from the same material, so come to the back and try it on. See if it fits. And...since these are black, let's get you matching underwear too. I have some unused black silk items you can try."

"All right."

This was a conversation no man should ever have been privy to. Feld broke into a cold sweat and quietly averted his gaze. Though she looked like a refined beauty, Alia was still a child in terms of emotional development. These topics filled the upstanding Feld with a strange sense of guilt and unease.

Gelf seemed to be a sort of motherly figure who helped supplement Alia's deficient sense of femininity. Despite being male, a dwarf, and...well, like that. Feld could look past that, he supposed. With Gelf's help, Alia, who seemed to know only battle, was sure to grow into a fine woman.

Until then, Feld would watch over her as a father of sorts. And she had a "younger brother" who cared for her in his own way too. Just as Feld had begun to come to terms with that and feel a sense of relief, Gelf's panicked voice suddenly rose from the back of the shop, behind a curtain.

"Alia, honey! Wait!"

"Feld," Alia called out as she pulled back the curtain.

At the sound of his name, Feld turned around—and froze.

"I think the waist is a little loose, and something easier to move in would be better," she said. "What do you think?"

Standing there was Alia, twisting at the waist, dressed in a black bustier, black underwear, and black tights held up by a black garter belt. Behind her, Gelf was frantically searching for fabric.

Feld dropped the bags he'd been holding and, feeling all sorts of emotions, shouted, "Go get dressed right nooooooooow!!!"

The struggles of the men surrounding Alia—Feld included—were far from over.

A Boy from a Barony and His Troubles

One of the second-year students at the Sorcerers' Academy was a boy from a barony.

Rody was a scion of the Barony of Sayles, located near the northern border. Though he'd been born a mid-ranking noble with tens of thousands of subjects, he'd come of age far from the royal capital and had a very provincial mindset. It wasn't until he'd come to the capital and started studying at the academy that he'd been exposed, for the first time, to the gaps in status among the nobility.

Manners, martial arts, sorcery—he was expected to know so much that he'd never been taught before. Still, things hadn't been so bad when he'd first enrolled. His older sister, Maria, had been two years ahead of him, and she'd helped him with matters of etiquette and showing deference to higher-ranked nobles.

Crown Prince Elvan was in the same year as Rody, but the prince was on a whole other level; even the close aides who surrounded him were exclusively high-ranked nobles. Rody couldn't even come close to the royal—another stark reminder of the harshness of the status divide.

The following year, his sister Maria had graduated. She'd caught the attention of a viscountcy allied to their father's house and was spending her days merrily preparing for her upcoming wedding. Rody, now a second-year student himself, had heard that the royal princess would be enrolling this year, so he and a group of friends had decided to sneak a peek at her.

At the academy, all students were nominally equal, but that only truly applied between lower and middle-ranked nobles. There was still a vast chasm separating that group from the true upper class. Unless he were to somehow secure employment at the castle,

Rody's time at the academy would be his only chance to see the princess up close.

Elena looked every bit a princess, with her flowing golden hair and captivating blue eyes. She was both beautiful and cute, and although word had it that she had a frail constitution, her dignified and regal demeanor was undeniable. From their hiding spot, his friends were all dumbstruck by her presence.

But Rody Sayles's breath had been taken away not by the beautiful princess but by the pink-haired girl escorting her. A name slipped from his lips before he could stop himself.

"Alia?"

Rody had been nine years old when he and Alia first met nearly five years ago. At the time, strange rumors of a mysterious assailant had been spreading throughout the Barony of Sayles, and the figure had been terrorizing his older sister Maria. The Margravate of Dandorl had dispatched Alia to the barony to pose as a maid and assist with the issue.

At first, she'd stuck out like a sore thumb; her uniform and mannerisms had been completely different from those of the servants he was accustomed to. Rody, wanting to put the girl in her place, had picked a fight with her—only to be quickly subdued and turned into her underling.

Alia had been a shock in all kinds of ways.

She'd looked to be a cute maid around his age, so at first, Rody had just wanted to mess with her a little bit. After all, who could have believed that a girl like that had been sent to deal with their mystery assailant? At the time, Rody had asked his father about Alia, but the baron's only response had been to smile smugly at the boy without offering an explanation, as though mockingly saying, *I know what's up. Too bad you don't.*

Rody had joined Alia in investigating the mysterious figure, and he'd been ready to fight, but...in the end, he'd only been interrogated and bossed around. Still, his gloomy days had brightened with the excitement of something new.

But one night, the figure had disappeared—and Alia along with it. There had been signs of a struggle in the estate's garden and the

nearby streets, so Alia had evidently fought the mysterious creature, but her whereabouts had remained unknown.

Rody had never forgotten her, though.

He didn't know if what he'd felt was love. Maybe he'd just mistaken the thrill of the situation for something deeper. But Alia had remained unforgettable. It wasn't that he wanted her to trap him against the wall and glare at him again, though—it was more a young boy's admiration for a cool older girl.

"What? Alia's younger than me?!" The realization was a huge shock. "Wait, no, I mean... I don't even know if that's actually her..."

All this time, Rody had thought Alia was older, which was why he'd consented to be her minion. And the idea that this girl had suddenly vanished one day only to reappear as the royal princess's handmaiden made no sense. She'd been pretty before, but now she was this unbelievably cool beauty. Rody wasn't sure of anything anymore.

He figured maybe his father or sister knew something, so he took three silver from his allowance to send them each a message—not a telegram but a brief long-distance message transmitted by a low-level magical tool. A letter through the Traders' Guild would take who knew how many weeks, and using the academy's magical communication devices would cost a full gold—far beyond what Rody could afford.

The next day, he received replies from both his sister and father.

His sister rambled at length about her engagement, telling Rody about the fun she'd had meeting her fiancé and the delicious food they'd shared at a restaurant. Only at the very end did she say, "So you've found Alia, then? I'd love to see her again too."

"Oh, come on! That's not even what I was asking!" he protested, fuming.

Despite his frustration with his sister's letter, Rody recognized that she'd never doubted for a minute that Alia was still alive. The realization that Maria had believed in Alia when Rody himself hadn't made him feel a bit down.

His father's reply, meanwhile, was an endless string of complaints about how his daughter, newly turned fifteen, was acting all giddy

and wanting to marry her fiancé as soon as possible. It ended with, "Don't worry about her."

"What does he mean, 'Don't worry about her'?!" Rody yelled.

Rody figured maybe his father had gotten in touch with Dandorl or some other place after Alia had gone missing and learned something. Since Alia now seemed to be directly involved with the royal princess, maybe even Rody's spineless father had the presence of mind to be vague about what he knew.

Left with no recourse, Rody decided to take matters into his own hands and investigate the royal princess's handmaiden—but before long, he realized just how monumental an undertaking it would be.

"No one knows anything," he muttered.

There were few facts he could glean: She was a first-year student who'd enrolled alongside the princess, and she was younger than him. He'd also learned her name—confirming it was indeed Alia—and that she was the foster daughter of a baronet. The matching name was a big lead, but beyond that, he couldn't find anything meaningful.

Why was a girl from a low-ranking noble house the princess's handmaiden? Why had a girl from a low-ranking noble house been entrusted with investigating and killing a strange, potentially dangerous figure? Were the Alia he'd known and this Alia really the same person?

There were thousands of low-ranking noble families in the kingdom. Still, someone remarkable enough to have been chosen as the princess's handmaiden couldn't have been a complete unknown. But in Rody's entire network of acquaintances, no one had any idea who this girl was.

She was from a low-ranking noble house, so Rody, a middle-ranking noble, could have simply gone and asked her himself. But there was this strange forbidden zone around Alia and the princess, both of whom were constantly surrounded by nobles all eyeing one another warily and trying to get closer to the princess. Rody couldn't get anywhere near.

"Never mind that, Rody," said one of his friends. "Let's go check out the new girls."

"Yeah! This could be our chance to get close to them," another added.

Rody's friends told him to stop aiming for the unattainable and go for what was within reach. This was around the time the outdoor training exercise for first-years had been canceled, and to compensate, the academy had made arrangements to hold the summer ball earlier than usual. The new students were all very excited.

But, since the ball had been moved up, many of the newer students hadn't yet learned how to dance. And, since the dance was only for first-years, Rody and his fellow second-years weren't supposed to be involved. Still, they had one option.

"You just go up to one of them and offer to teach her how to dance," his friend explained.

"Ohh, I see."

It wasn't that Rody wanted to teach a random girl to dance, though—he'd simply figured that Alia, as a low-ranking noble and first-year student, probably wasn't good at dancing either. This could be his chance to talk to her. But...

"I can't find an opening at all..."

Ultimately, unless he could break through the walls surrounding the princess, he still wouldn't be able to reach Alia. Not only that, but Alia herself didn't leave any openings either, *and* there was an atmosphere around her that kept boys away.

Rody could've never imagined that the princess was deliberately shielding her low-ranked aide by using her royal authority to keep them at a distance. Still, he waited patiently for a chance, knowing that in the vast academy grounds, without the excitement surrounding the upcoming ball and the excuse of dance practice, it would be nearly impossible to find Alia.

In the end, his persistence bore fruit in an unexpected way.

"Rody? Is that you? What are you doing?"

He hadn't managed to approach Alia—rather, Alia had spotted him lurking near the princess and cornered him in a secluded area.

"Alia! You're the Alia I know, right?!"

Just as when they'd first met, Alia had grabbed him by the collar

and pinned him against the wall. She hadn't recognized him immediately, but maybe being in this familiar pose after slamming him against the wall had jolted her memory.

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be? And you didn't answer my question," Alia retorted.

She didn't seem like she wanted to kill him and she wasn't threatening him with a knife, so maybe she was at least showing him some consideration as an old acquaintance. Faced with her beautiful features and point-blank glare, Rody instinctively turned his face away, blushing.

Alia narrowed her eyes sharply. "You're suspicious."

"Am not!" Rody protested.

"Then why were you spying on Princess Elena?"

"I-I wasn't!" he blurted out. "I just, um... I wanted to see you..."

Rody couldn't help but be honest. Perhaps he'd been subconsciously conditioned since their first meeting to not defy her.

He'd run through countless scenarios in his head for the day he finally got to talk to her. They hadn't spent much time together, but still, he felt as though it wouldn't be odd for him to call her a childhood friend. They'd both grown up, and he'd figured that if he could pull off even a modestly dramatic reunion, maybe something might spark between them.

But even with those plans out the window and their reunion being, well, *this*...perhaps he could still leave an impression on Alia by dropping all pretense?

"Right," Alia said. "Well, good timing, then. I don't have a dance partner of the proper height, so come practice with me."

"Huh...?"

Satisfied with his "answer," Alia dragged him off by the collar to the practice hall, her expression unchanged. She appreciated having someone with whom she didn't need to worry about niceties.

As for Rody, he'd achieved his goal—not in the way he'd intended, but at least he'd managed to talk to her.

***

“So you’re a noble, huh, Alia...”

Their first day of practice had also been their last, as Alia was a quick learner and had picked up on the fundamentals of the female dancer’s role within a few hours. Still, they’d connected, in a way.

Alia had now been adopted by a baronetcy, and...according to a few well-informed sources, there was talk of her noble house being elevated to a barony. People speculated that it had something to do with her position as the princess’s close aide. If that happened, it’d make Rody and Alia equal in rank, and he figured that might make things less awkward between them.

But then it hit him: If they were both of the same rank, there would be no true obstacles.

“N-No, I mean... Alia and I are just friends, right? It’s not like I care about her like that...”

Before he knew it, Rody had spent the last of his allowance sending another message to his father, asking about the Leighton girl’s engagement status. Had he *really* not cared, a regular letter sent using a student’s discount would have sufficed, but for some reason, that option hadn’t even occurred to him.

He waited with bated breath for a reply from his father, which finally arrived two days later.

It contained just one line: “Forget it.”

“What the heck!” Rody protested.

The young noble’s woes were far from over.

Afterword

Hello if we've never met! And if we have, welcome back! I'm Harunohi Biyori.

Volume 5 is here, and with it, Act Two has finally begun. We've now entered the academy arc, central to the otome game!

Well, in my stories, "academy arcs" tend to make people go, "Wait, *this* is an academy arc?!" so I honestly debated until the last minute whether to even call it that. But since the draft for the preview had "academy arc" written on it, I decided to go ahead!

That said, I imagine many of you, now that you've finished reading this volume, may very well be going, "Wait, *this* is an academy arc?!" so...yeah.

I mentioned this in the afterword for the previous volume, but I'd originally added more content set within the academy itself for this exact reason. However, once I started writing and revising the web version to fix parts that were heavy on exposition and difficult to read, rearranging content for smoother flow, we ended up with...a blindingly fast pace instead! And the extra lighthearted academy life content? Well, it...kind of got in the way, so it got cut in the end...

Instead, I've fit more of that content into the short stories at the end, along with a brand-new story focused on Alia's life at the academy, so I hope you all can forgive me.

With the main story now converging on the otome game's plot, the fake heroine has begun scheming in earnest. Well, not that everyone else isn't *also* scheming, but Alia's story thus far had been a gritty narrative of survival in combat, and now all the tangled webs of drama I'd foreshadowed are rushing to the surface. And the romance subplot is...trudging along. Kind of, lol.

In this world of intrigue, Karla truly shines. Of course, Clara and Elena are deeply entrenched in trying to ensure their survival as well.

This may sound misleading, but Act One was really all about setting Alia up to grow stronger. Starting in Act Two, she'll be facing more groups and organizations, and the strength she's built up so far will finally come into play.

Does that mean fewer thrills? Absolutely not! There will be formidable enemies in her path. The difference is that now, along with the danger and suspense, there's a bit of "overpowered protagonist" mixed in. I know this may be just me, but I've always hated shounen manga arcs where the protagonist, having grown stronger, suddenly becomes weak and helpless all over again. Like, what was the point of their growth, then? I can't stand that kind of thing.

This is a story about Alia's growth as a warrior and as a young girl, so I hope you're enjoying following her journey.

Hitaki Yuu-sensei continues to amaze with gorgeous illustrations. The art style, starting with Act Two, has evolved beautifully!

The manga adaptation is heading into the part of the story where Alia begins to fight one enemy after another, and thanks to Wakasa Kobato-sensei's lovely artwork, even amid the intensity there are moments that make you smile.

See you in volume 6! To all readers, the bookstores selling this series, and everyone involved in its publication, my deepest thanks!



Alia (Real Name: Alicia Melrose)

The story's protagonist and the original heroine of the otome game *Silver Wings of Love*. After a reincarnator tried to kill her, she acquired special "knowledge." Doesn't hesitate to kill to survive.



Elena

Princess of the Kingdom of Claydale. Though she's a villainess in the otome game, she sees Alia as a kindred spirit. Prideful and deeply values friendship.



Clara

A reincarnator and the princess of the Margravate of Dandorl. One of the villainesses of the otome game. Wary of Alia.



Karla

A noble lady hailing from the Countdom of Leicester. The worst of the villainesses from the otome game. She wants to kill Alia and be killed by her in turn.

characters



Feld

A friendly, highly skilled adventurer who taught a young Alia her very first battle skills.



Viro

An adventurer and highly skilled scout. He took an interest in Alia and brought her to Sera, a knight of the Order of Shadows.



Sera

A combat handmaiden and high-ranking knight of the Order of Shadows, operating under the Margravate of Melrose. Trained Alia in the ways of combat maids.



Samantha

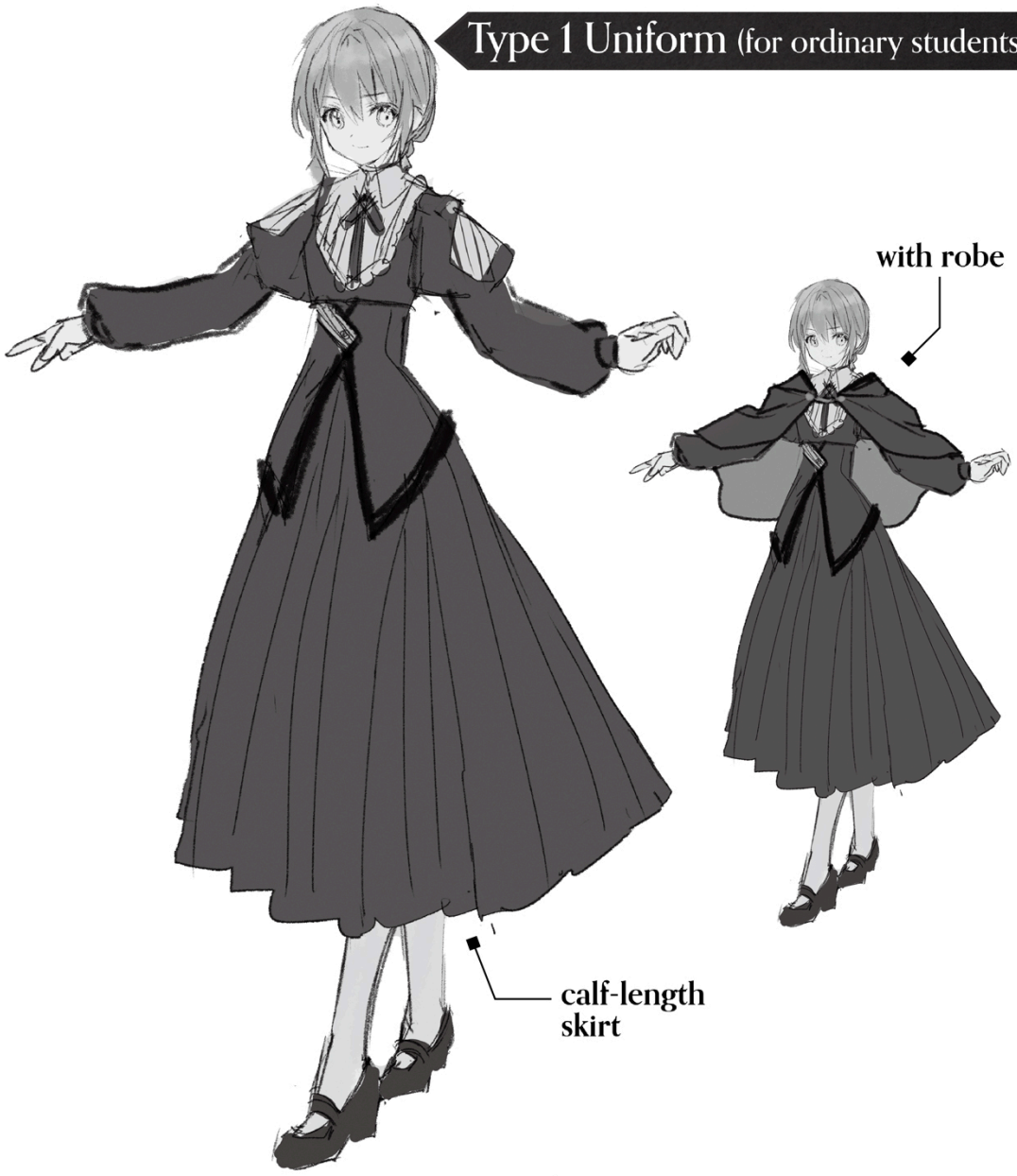
An exceptionally skilled sorceress and a founding member of the Rainbow Blade. It's uncertain just how senile she really is.



Graves

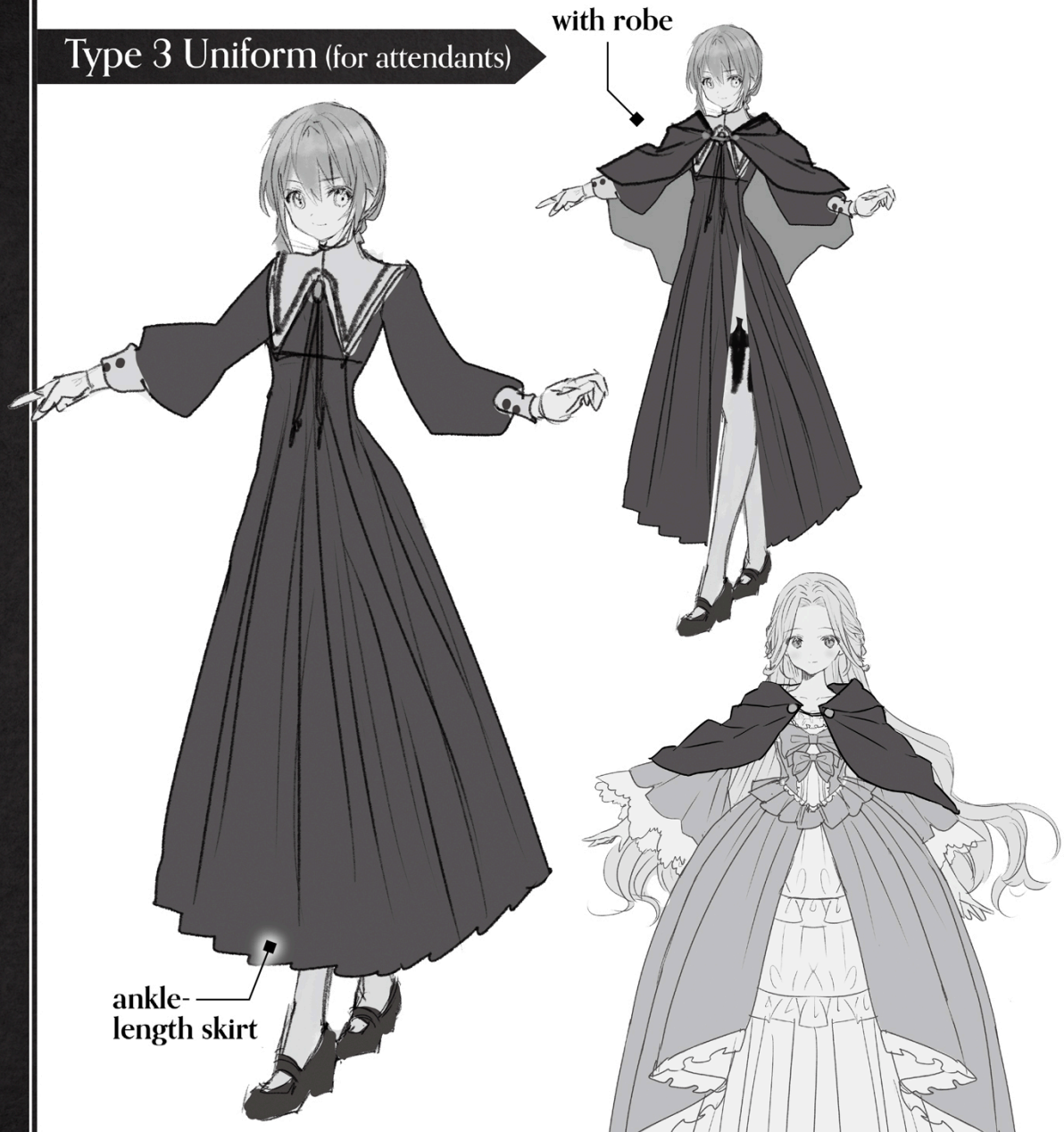
Formerly a senior steward of the Order of Shadows, he's a fanatic who would do anything for the royal family's stability. Current whereabouts unknown.

Type 1 Uniform (for ordinary students)



The uniforms of the Royal Sorcerers' Academy are primarily a burgundy color and are divided into three types: Type 1 (for ordinary students); Type 2 (for high-ranking nobles); and Type 3 (for attendants). Alia owns both Type 1 and Type 3 uniforms, and she wears the latter when acting as Elena's attendant.

Type 3 Uniform (for attendants)



Type 2 Uniform (high-ranking nobles; robe only)

To better understand the system, this list roughly compares the powers and roles of this story's aristocracy to modern-day Japanese equivalents.
Please note that this is unique to the story and doesn't match actual historical titles.

High-Ranking Nobles

Nobles who own territory and have middle-ranking and lower-ranking noble houses as vassals

Royal Family	Old, traditional families; zaibatsu Prime minister and the cabinet Supreme commanders of the military
Duke	Old, traditional families Prefectural governor Members of parliament holding ministerial positions Chiefs of police and court officials
Margrave	The same nominal status as a marquis Members of parliament holding ministerial positions The Margravates of Dandorl and Melrose have economic power and influence comparable to that of the governors of Tokyo and Osaka.
Marquis	Governors of prefectures with ordinance-designated cities or international airports Chiefs of police and court officials Members of parliament
Count	Prefectural governors Chiefs of police and judges Members of parliament

Middle-Ranking Nobles

Nobles who own territory and have lower-ranking noble houses as vassals

Viscount	Mayors of ordinance-designated cities Chiefs of police and judges
Baron	City mayors, chiefs of police, and judges

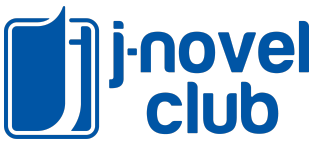
Low-Ranking Nobles

Officials and knights serving the crown and higher-ranked noble houses Individuals recognized for distinguished service to the nation

Baronet	Town mayors, chiefs of police, city council members, and summary court judges.
Life Peer (Honorary Noble)	Owners of well-known local businesses Town council members
Knight Bachelor	Village chiefs and landowners Town council members and local police officers







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The Otome Heroine's Fight for Survival: Volume 5
by Harunohi Biyori

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Edited by Shakuzan

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Illustrations by Hitaki Yuu

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by TO Books
This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2025