
Walking My Second Path in Life
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Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter 1 — Wherein My Life is Checkmated

Chapter 2 — I'll Take the Squire Test!

Chapter 3 — The First Person

Crow's Eye View

Chapter 4 — I've Become a Squire

Chapter 5 — But They Aren't All Nice Guys

Chapter 6 — Training Begins

Chapter 7 — Fellows of the 18th Platoon

Chapter 8 — Conrad

Chapter 9 — The Finishing Move and the Final Member

Chapter 10 — Sir Cain

Chapter 11 — Lynette's Incursion

Side Story — Lynette and Fie

Chapter 12 — Queen

Previously Unpublished Extra Story — Biffe

Previously Unpublished Extra Story — Queen's Uniform

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Chapter 1 — Wherein My Life is Checkmated

(My life has been checkmated.)

Fie's realization struck her as she sat in a relatively small back pavilion of an otherwise needlessly large palace, spooning cold soup into her mouth. She sat alone, with only the company of the head chef, who was known as such due to the fact that he was the only one who worked here. The head chef, in turn, had been struggling with his request of asking to resign.

Outside, the sound of fireworks filled the air, intermingling with the sounds of celebration rising from the gathered crowds, to the point where it was even audible where Fie sat.

(Seems like it's quite the celebration.)

It was an accurate observation. After all, today was the wedding day of King Roy, of one of the world's Great Kingdoms — and Princess Fielle, from the Daeman kingdom.

His Highness was good at what he did — namely situational analysis and decision-making. He was deeply involved and passionate in his political duties within the kingdom, often solving problems and engaging in foreign diplomatic affairs, even at his young age. King Roy's actions led the already great kingdom of Orstoll into an age of greater prosperity, and he was a well-loved and respected king of the people.

To top it all off, his dashing appearance reduced the princesses of surrounding kingdoms to slobbering fools. However, there was nary even a rumor of King Roy showing interest in romance — and this was a constant worry in the hearts of the people of Orstoll.

Due to his cold indifference towards women, King Roy suitably earned the moniker "Ice King."

With that being said, it was this very same Ice King's marriage to the princess of the rural Kingdom of Daeman that had led to the celebrations outside today.

The interesting thing, however, was that this wasn't a political marriage arranged by worried advisors, nor was it a marriage of convenience out of loyalty to the duties of the throne.

"I would like to take Princess Fielle of Daeman as my bride," were the very words that came from his lips.

And that is why such massive fireworks displays filled the air tonight.

Fie looked at the star-filled sky through the window, marveling at how ridiculously large said displays were. The resulting explosions resonated through the night sky like peals of thunder.

(This is more than just a typical celebration...)

It is perhaps worth mentioning that Fielle being the princess of a rural kingdom was her only imperfection. She had a good head on her shoulders, a great personality, and was beautiful to a fault. Looking at her alone, no one would think that she hailed from a rural backwater kingdom. Furthermore, Fielle seemed to be blessed with a strange power since her birth, and was also known as "The Priestess of Healing."

If one takes all those factors into consideration, it could be said that this marriage was quite the jewel in the crown for the Kingdom of Orstoll.

And that was why a portrait of the embraced, smiling couple was flying through the air, hung from the gondola of a hot-air balloon. It was certainly a large-scale, uproarious day of happiness and celebration.

On the other hand, today was also the day of Fie and King Roy's marriage, although no one was interested in that at all. It was worth mentioning that Fie was, like Fielle, a princess of Daeman. To be precise, they were twins.

In contrast to the wildly celebrating crowds in the direction of the main palace was the tiny back pavilion built next to said palace, which currently housed Fie and her cold soup, in addition to the head cook, who was currently feigning embarrassment and regret as he asked for permission to resign.

Would she actually say "Yes, go ahead?"

And that was almost like an afterthought, not even much of a consideration

— as insignificant as one's pinky finger. Such was the relative significance of Fie's circumstances, compared to her twin.

To be perfectly frank, King Roy of Orstoll's marriage proposal was completely out of left field, and was joltingly surprising.

Fielle's popularity was warranted, however. With a cute face, great personality, and smarts, there was no way she would not be treated as such, enough to attract suitor princes from all around Daeman.

However, she was after all a princess from a small rural kingdom. Put nicely, it was a somewhat large kingdom — but still backwater. The people of Daeman thought of it as nothing more than a land acquisition, or just a means to expand Orstoll's already vast territory.

Orstoll was, in more ways than one, the center of the world. To have it in one's pocket, in turn, was unthinkable for the rural Kingdom of Daeman.

"I would like Fielle's hand in marriage, come what may."

Upon receiving this letter, the King of Daeman, who was naturally the father of Fie and Fielle, wasted no time in fully exploiting the situation. Oh, and exploit it he did.

As such, a list of demands was presented to the king of one of the Great Kingdoms of the land.

"It would be a great honor for you to take Fielle as your Queen. However... Fielle is in much demand, and her popularity knows no bounds. And as such... many suitor princes from many, no, *all* countries... are all competing for her hand. So... as I'm sure you understand. There must be some... merits, to this arrangement, yes?"

In the stereotypical crude manner of a peasant, the King of Daeman produced demand after demand, mostly for gold, silver, or other precious metals, in addition to gemstones and valuable works of art. Although he had thought they would be turned down with a curt refusal, for reasons unknown, all these demands were quickly accepted.

And the one who was ironically flustered about all this, was, of course, Fie and Fielle's father, the King of Daeman.

(Are we supposed to make even bigger demands?) he wondered. The King of Daeman was truly a scoundrel — at least, he thought like one.

But since an extensive list of demands had already been met once, there was no reason to want more. Such was the mettle, or lack thereof, of the King of Daeman, who would have been blown away by a single stare from the monarchs of the Great Kingdoms.

It was then that a thought struck him.

"If you are to take Fielle as your queen, then you would have to take Fie as your bride as well."

Of course, it was a well-known tradition for marriages between royalty to bind two kingdoms together, and a single kingdom providing two brides was not unheard of in the least. To phrase it bluntly, it was a preparation for the inevitable "what if" scenario.

To actually see such a practice implemented was a rarity, however. One would question why such a practice would be dragged out at such a time, but certain questions have no answers.

Perhaps, it could be said that one reason was that Fie was hopelessly unpopular.

She was the princess of a rural kingdom, with no benefits whatsoever. To even speak of marriage was foolish. Fie had no charm to speak of, much less the required amount to land a suitor prince.

(Well, that basically means I don't have any value as a queen at all...) And that was where the King of Daeman focused his intents and efforts.

"Our kingdom shall provide two brides. If it is possible, could you please provide the dowry for both of them?"

All of the King of Daeman's unreasonable demands, including that of the extra bride, were accepted without much fuss.

One wonders exactly how much King Roy had fallen for Fielle.

Having obtained a dowry ten times of the value for two people, and an unspecified variable of riches and resources otherwise, the King of Daeman was very satisfied — almost to a point where he became full of himself.

So much so that, the very next day, a very fed up Fie drove her knee into the face of the King of Daeman, breaking his nose in a fittingly crooked manner.

And that is how Fie was caught by a bunch of peasant “knights,” captured, restricted, and brought to Orstoll as she was.

And just as if their cargo were contraband, it was treated like a hazardous substance, and then summarily deposited in a small pavilion constructed by the side of the main palace.

For the people who would confuse Fie and Fielle’s names, that is a story of another time, a story of when Fie and Fielle were still in the womb.

When the King of Daeman knew that the Queen was pregnant with twins, two names were prepared. And eventually came the moment when the twins were born.

The first child was born in a fit of cries and tears — a terribly normal and healthy child. When presented to the King of Daeman, he had claimed that she had a face most fitting.

“Although we are a small, rural kingdom, you are a most fitting heir — the first princess of Daeman. And for you, this name has been prepared. Your name is Fie—”

And right at that moment, the second child was born.

In contrast to the first child, she was far more quiet, and had a strange ability to draw in the eyes of all those around her.

“Oh... Oh! This is...”

Upon seeing this, the King of Daeman said thus, in an emotional voice:

“A child of unparalleled beauty! A child wrapped in a most mysterious light! This has to be a special child. We have to grant such a child a fitting name. Yes, we have decided! Your name is Fielle. The most honored and regal name passed

down in our royal family!”

And after that, that child, who was beautiful beyond means, exuded wisdom beyond her years, who was surrounded by a regal air, had enchanted the King of Daeman so much that he forgot about his firstborn for approximately six months. Although she was cared for appropriately by the nursemaids, and as such, never really had any dangers to her life, she had long missed the period where names would be given to heirs.

So the records officer, who really just wanted to get this over with, ended up formally writing down her name as “Fie.” And of course, as a result of the second princess Fielle’s absolute beauty, the King of Daeman had all but forgotten about Fie’s existence.

As if they were a set — one desired, and the other not, the pair of princesses were sold off.

To say that it was a devilish practice was not too far from the truth.

And this was how Fie, who had finally reached the capital, ended up in an antiquated pavilion of the main palace, trapped and destined not to meet a single person on her supposed wedding day.

Fie’s relative mistreatment, in turn, would proceed to intensify as the days passed.

Although this pavilion and its courtyard were in the main castle grounds and surrounded by four walls, all the guards avoided the single entrance to it, as if wanting to avoid a particularly foul smell. Eventually the guards posted there started viewing it as a nuisance, so during the day both of them were nowhere to be seen. They were usually gone before the changing of the guard even took place. When the shift changes did happen, the timings were always off, and not a single guard would show up for the lookout shift.

To top it all off, any present guards would just leave their post empty even if no one was there to take over — which basically meant that at this time of the night, there was literally no one left standing watch.

(They’re sleeping, aren’t they? They eat as much as they want during the day,

rest as much as they want when they feel like it, and then happily go to sleep at night. Some guards they are.)

In fact, Fie probably did a better job of keeping watch, considering that she had been looking out of the window quite intently the past few days.

Oh, of course, Fie had no servants or personal maids of any sort assigned to her, either. All of the servants and maids from Daeman had chosen to stick to Fielle instead, with the knowledge that she would become the future queen of Orstoll. It was advantageous to be a queen's personal servants — one might even be able to break into society with such a position. As such, none of them wanted to be seen with, let alone serve the "bonus" princess that had just tagged along for the ride.

And finally, even the "head chef" who had worked in the lower rungs of Daeman's kitchens seemed to have other plans for himself.

Orstoll's capital, Wienne, could be said to be center of the world in more ways than one. Culture, music, food — the capital had it all.

And with that comes the legions of those who want to better their skills and work in said capital. The chef was no different. He had just followed Fie to hitch a ride for free. After which, all he had to do was get fired, and then he'd be free to pursue his own interests.

Indeed, to get fired by a selfish princess while he was stuck in a foreign land was the perfect plan to drum up sympathy points, and maybe even let him easily land a job.

With that aim in mind, he had been preparing nothing but cold soup for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for Fie ever since they had arrived at Orstoll, hoping that she would catch a hint.

"Um... well... uh... I'd like to... um... resign..."

"Yes. Go ahead."

To think that he couldn't even say such a thing properly despite having wanted to for a while — Fie could not help but wonder how he would fare in the clutches of the capital city. In spite of herself, Fie found a modicum of concern for the chef.

With this, the charade finally ended, and the only one left inside the back pavilion was Fie.

Finishing off her cold soup, Fie looked up and out of the window, all alone in the quiet courtyard.

“Ahh. Seems like I’m just going to have to accept my father’s foolish whims and fancies. Not like he really cared about my life anyway, since he ruined it without a second thought... So then, I’ll die alone in this courtyard after some decades or so, huh...?”

The guards were clearly not outside the pavilion. In other words, Fie was the guard.

(So basically... They’re telling me to stay put in this place and never leave. Not like the Ice King would let me out of here anyway... What a wasted, empty life...)

Fie gazed at a portrait of her supposed husband, whom she had only seen in said portrait. For a moment, Fie considered angrily setting fire to the canvas, but instead was filled with an overwhelming emptiness as she burrowed into her bed.

(I wish I could throw this life away...)

Although Fie just wanted to go to bed, the celebrations outside made it impossible for her to fall asleep.

(Look, I get that they’re happy and all, but isn’t this a bit too much for this time of the night?)

It was as if, on this day, in this kingdom, the only one who felt this depressed was Fie, and Fie alone.

It was then that Fie had the idea to go for a walk. Not like there were any guards present to stop her anyway. Even if the King had wanted to keep her cooped up in this place forever, it was his responsibility to at least assign guards that were actually up to the task. She had no reason to hold back, with everything said and done.

However, it would be inconvenient if she were found wandering outside, to say the least, and as such Fie made the decision to walk around the pavilion’s

perimeter walls instead.

And this was how Fie finally stepped out of the back pavilion for the first time.

“It’s so vast... It’s... completely different than the castle in Daeman.”

Outside the walls, in the open, sprawling garden of the royal palace, were plants and trees that Fie had never seen in her homeland — deep viridians and vibrant flowers, visible even through the dark of night. The dewdrops, catching the light of the moon and faraway fireworks, glittered in a silent display of beauty.

At last, it sunk in that Fie had come to a faraway, foreign land.

In the shadows of the perimeter walls, Fie walked along silently, not wanting to be discovered by the denizens of the palace. Then she noticed that she had stepped on something, a paper of some kind.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

Holding up the piece of paper to the light of the moon, Fie squinted at it, trying to make out the words on its surface.

Seeking apprentice knights! The Orstoll Royal Knights are seeking squires! Commoners! Nobles! Travelers! Wanderers! Those of no formal identification! There will be no discrimination, come one, come all! We seek only those young and talented! Admission tests will be held soon!

Upon reading the words on this sheet of crumpled paper, a series of thoughts flashed across Fie’s mind.

“This is it!” Fie raised the paper high up into the light of the moon. “If I get accepted, I’ll—”

Walk my second path in life.



Even if they were foreigners or those of questionable identity, if one becomes a Knight of Orstoll, they would, of course, obtain a new corresponding nationality. In Fie's particular case, she had been shut away, unneeded and unwanted by this kingdom. But no more. Fie would obtain a new identity, a new name, in the Kingdom of Orstoll.

(Well, no one comes to the back pavilion anyway. And no one really knows my face.)

Honestly speaking, Fie and Fielle did not look similar in any way, shape, or form.

(So even if I disappear, it's totally fine! If only I could get out of here, and live my new life as a knight. If I do that... I'll be able to say goodbye to this empty, pointless life with no future.)

Flustered, Fie searched for the date of the test, finally settling her eyes on a number.

"Two weeks from now... That's kinda short, isn't it?"

There wasn't much time until the day of the test. It was worth noting, however, that Fie did have some degree of swordsmanship ingrained in her being. When she was younger, she had trained in the ways of knights out of admiration, and both her parents were far too enthralled by Fielle to pay any attention to her activities.

But when she came of age, her parents came to the realization that even the painfully inferior Fie had to one day be wed away, and as such finally put an end to her practice sessions. As a result, Fie remembered nothing more than the basics.

(I have to get my feel for the sword back in two weeks, somehow!)

And so, with that thought in mind and hurried feet, Fie made her way back to the pavilion.

Chapter 2 — I'll Take the Squire Test!

Two weeks later, Fie stood before the snaking line of hopefuls taking the squire test.

(There are so many people... I'd better get to the back of the line quickly...)

The line had stretched from the open doors, where members of the Royal Knights were holding their reception, all the way into the center of the castle.

Fie had left early in the morning, earlier than the first guard would rise, escaped from the back pavilion, and made her way to the middle of the castle.

Of course, all this was for the squire test.

In order to not be spotted by the denizens of the castle, Fie had looped around to the outside walls, eventually making her way into the test grounds.

As such, although Fie had to line up with people from outside the castle, she had actually come from within it. So it was important to quickly find the end of the line and stand in place.

For the last two weeks, Fie had been practicing her hand at the sword day and night.

Fie was on her own — so other forms of practice were not really very practical, but she had put her all into it, and did what she could in two weeks' worth of time.

To be frank, she wasn't in very good shape, and she hadn't really been able to eat. Upon arriving in Orstoll, Fie's status had been upgraded to that of "troublesome individual," which was slightly higher than her standing back in Daeman, where no one had noticed her at all.

No food, supplies, or amenities were provided to her. If one thinks about it, perhaps that is a given.

To the people of this country, Fie was an add-on, an unwanted being, who was only here as part of a wedding condition for her glamorous twin. Upon

arriving in Orstoll, she was regarded as little more than dust — just a nameless princess from a rural kingdom. Who would deign to look after such an individual? It was seen as imposing to even ask for the most basic of items and services required for living.

Ever since arriving at Orstoll, the only things provided for Fie had been unmotivated guards, and a pavilion that probably functioned as a sort of storage facility graced only by endless visages of walls before her arrival.

Due to the above-stated reasons, the ingredients for Fie's food so far were purchased with Fie's own funds, by her now-resigned chef. They were probably ingredients purchased from merchants who visited the castle... And although the food provided was nothing but cold and unappetizing, with the chef now gone, there was no one who would venture out to procure food for the occupant of the back pavilion, Fie.

Upon realizing this, Fie knew that she had a problem. However, there wasn't much she could do about it. It was pointless to ask the guards for assistance of any kind, and Fie had made up her mind to walk her second path in life. For that very reason, it would be foolish to reveal her face to guards who hardly knew it.

As a result, for the last two weeks, Fie had feasted upon the remaining ingredients that the chef had bought — if leaving bits and pieces for the coming days could be thought of as feasting.

How absolutely sad, to be in one of the few Great Kingdoms such as Orstoll, and even within its castle walls, only to engage in such a hand-to-mouth, survivalist lifestyle. But life isn't fair. Of that, there was no doubt.

In spite of all her efforts, Fie's food supply had run out two days prior to the test, so for the past two days she had been unable to eat. Even so, she continued practicing her swings.

(A chance like this will never come again!)

Today was the day that Fie would pursue a different life — one that was completely unlike the one she had known before.

Failure was not an option.

Fie was still in the middle of the castle. From here, she would pass the main

gates, and line up with the rest of the aspirants. This was the first hurdle to overcome.

To avoid attention, Fie had purposely taken a side path to the line — and she had reached it, when a voice behind her rang out.

“Hey, pretty little miss. Are you lost?”

(Oh no! Have I been found out!?)

Hearing the phrase “pretty little miss,” Fie’s heart sank. Cold sweat dripped from her cheek and brow.

The reason for this was simple: Fie was currently dressed as a man.

Utilizing one of the many dismal dowry gifts she had received from Daeman, she had cut her hair short with scissors, found a tattered and ragged gardener’s outfit from somewhere in the pavilion’s storage areas, and promptly put it on.

With that, Fie was applying for the squire test as a man... Or so she had thought.

Although there were no rules in the test stating that all candidates had to be male, to Fie, who lived in a rural kingdom like Daeman, female knights were rare. She had hoped that this would improve her chances. She thought that it must be easier to be accepted as a young boy, compared to a young girl. It was a simple reason.

After all, Fie’s entire life was at stake here, at this specific moment in time. No matter what happened, Fie absolutely had to make it.

(What am I going to do? There must be some way I can pull the wool over his eyes...)

In retrospect, it was fine if the stranger behind her had realized she was a woman. That wasn’t the real problem. It was the worry that if her presence were regarded as suspicious, and if the authorities found out her true status as an add-on bride from some rural kingdom, she would probably be trapped in the back pavilion once more.

And this time, they wouldn’t give her guards that practically did nothing at all.

(In any case, I have to smoothly get out of this...)

Fie needed information. Exactly how much the stranger believed that Fie was a woman... And if they had found Fie particularly suspicious in any way or form.

“Uh. Well, I’m...”

Turning around, Fie came face-to-face with a blonde, hazel-eyed knight. With his height and facial features, she thought that he must be popular with the ladies. Then she thought...

(He looks like quite the flirt.)

And that was Fie’s first impression of the knight before her.

The knight, finding Fie’s gaze somewhat interesting, laughed in a carefree manner.

“Oh, sorry. My bad. Don’t make such a surprised face. You just have a cute face, little boy — and I just had to make fun of you. So, what’s wrong? Are you lost?”

Fie was a little stunned at being called a “little boy.”

It seemed like the knight was just making fun of her, after all.

“Um. Well, I uh, want to line up. For the squire test.”

“Oh! Did you get chased out of the queue? I mean, you’re quite small, so.”

“Y-Yes! That’s right! That’s what happened!”

Although Fie had not even been in the line at all, she jumped at the knight’s misunderstanding, and was determined to use it to her advantage.

“Well I’m sorry, but in this case you’re gonna have to line up again. I’ll show you to the end of the line.” The knight smiled — and it was a broad one, at that.

The maids from Daeman would probably have flushed beet red, and eventually fainted from seeing such a smile. Fie however, was more concerned about being brought to the end of the line. She was grateful for that, even.

(With this, I won’t be treated as a suspicious person and I’ll be able to leave the castle to join the line!)

Quite good luck, if Fie could say so herself.

“Hey, you guys! Step aside! I don’t want to bump into a bunch of burly, sweaty guys like you. If anyone’s going to touch me, it’ll be a cute, naked girl in bed, all right? Step aside!”

And with that, the knight parted the crowd of aspirants, opening up a path for Fie and himself.

(Yeah... He’s a flirt all right. Just as I thought.)

Fie’s suspicions, having been more or less confirmed, cemented her first image of the knight in her mind.

Having parted the crowd, the knight waved, smiling as he motioned for Fie to follow.

“Come on, kid. Let’s go.”

“Yes!”

(But... I guess he can be a nice guy.)

Fie smiled.

And so, following the slightly flirty, but also somewhat pleasant knight, Fie was finally out of the castle gates.

“I’m Crow. I’m pretty sure you know, but I’m one of Orstoll’s knights. And what are you called?”

“I’m Heath,” Fie answered, without as much as an inkling of hesitation.

For the past two weeks, Fie had made sure to dedicate time to think of a false name for herself.

(Well no. Not a false name. That’ll be my new name from now on.)

To be honest, she had wanted a completely new name — but if she were found out to be a stowaway princess, things would get considerably more difficult. And that was why Fie chose a name that sounded vaguely similar to hers — “Fie” and “Hee-th.” At least, that was what she thought.

Upon exiting the castle gates, the line of hopefuls stretched on as far as the eye could see.

Although Fie would have been fine on her own from here on out, Crow somehow saw fit to personally escort her all the way to the back of the line.

And so the two of them walked together.

“So, Heath. Why do you want to be a knight?”

“Ah. Um...” Upon being asked that, Fie became flustered.

Although her goals were obvious from the get go, she had never really come up with a reason — a fictional motivation to go along with her false name. It wasn’t possible to just say that she wanted a new life and identity.

And so, in a panic, Fie answered: “B-Because they’re so cool!”

It was a direct, but flippant reason.

Sweat formed on Fie’s face once more. Would the knight think her reason was suspicious? However, Crow seemed to have taken positively to the response.

“Yeah, that’s right, isn’t it? Knights are cool. I’m cool too, right?”

“Yeah! You’re so cool! I want to be just like you!”

It was a bit of a stretch, but Fie really did believe in Crow’s inherent degree of “cool” — that much was true. His handsome features, blonde hair, and muscled body, plus his armor and sword all came together to form quite the image.

Fie had wanted to be a knight since a young age to begin with, and perhaps that was why she had thought of such a reason. It was a fuzzy thought in her mind — when she had to take up duties as a princess, that thought was taken away from her, all but forgotten.

Looking at Crow’s appearances alone, he was indeed the very image of a knight — knights that Fie had come to admire.

“Yes, yes. Isn’t that right? Knights have it good. We’re popular with the ladies. If you became a knight, you’d get all the ladies too. Even a whole bevy of girlfriends!”

“I don’t really need that, though...”

Fie didn't really know where to start picking apart Crow's statements.

(He's a flirt all right... Although he looks cool on the outside...)

Fie stared at Crow somewhat coldly.

Upon seeing Fie's reaction, Crow laughed.

"Hahaha, I see you're still such a kid, Heath! Hey, you have quite a strange accent... one not really heard around these parts. Where are you from anyway?"

Fie's promptly froze up at the mention of her accent. Although she had taken sufficient time over the last two weeks to think of her own profile, upon having her accent pointed out, Fie quickly lost confidence in her imaginary self.

Crow knew a lot more about Orstoll than she did. If she made any mistakes, he would think she's suspicious. And of course, she had not thought of a reason to explain her accent.

"Ah... well... that is..."

"Oh. I guess you don't want to talk about it. Well that's fine. You don't have to! Sorry about that."

Crow suddenly ceased his line of questioning upon seeing Fie become considerably shaken. He thought he knew the reason why. *(Probably the child of illegal immigrants... His clothing is in tatters too...)* Crow observed.

It was a typical story that such a child would hope to become a knight, seeking a better life.

Strictly speaking, the knights were supposed to deal with that in some capacity, but they usually turned a blind eye to those situations, providing that they were not criminals. And as such, the doors to the castle were open even to such individuals on the occasion of this test. Instead of chasing them away or arresting them, they were given a chance — a new direction in life, provided they were willing to work for it. That, too, was one of King Roy's ideas, and subsequent approaches to local laws.

As they walked side by side on the way to the back of the line, a pleasant

smell wafted by Fie's nose. Around them were food stalls targeted at the queuing applicants. Suddenly Fie was reminded of just how empty her stomach was.

(Ooh... I'm so hungry...)

But it wasn't like she could buy anything. While Fie did have some currency on her person, the coins she carried were not legal tender in Orstoll. The Daeman coins contained some degree of precious metals, and as such had some value by virtue of weight. However, a young boy from a foreign country paying for goods with gold coins was a definite beacon of suspicion.

(Bear with it... Bear with it...)

Fie walked past the stalls, decidedly fixing her stare away from the food on display.

"What is it?"

"No. No, it's nothing."

Fie did not want to arouse any more suspicion in Crow than she already had. So she tried to pretend like nothing was wrong.

Noticing this, Crow turned to Fie.

"Wait here."

"Sir Crow?"

Crow vanished into the crowd. When he returned, two kebabs of fried chicken were in his hands, which he promptly pressed into Fie's.

"Here, eat up."

"Huh? But...?"

"Well, you're hungry aren't you? Don't hold back. You aren't gonna go far in that test if you're in this state."

An impossibly delicious smell wafted up to Fie's nostrils from the chicken kebabs. She peered up at Crow slightly, holding the kebabs in her hands — and Crow nodded, matching her gaze.

Fie opened her mouth, biting down into the kebab. It was the first time in

quite a few weeks that the taste of meat had filled her mouth.

(It's... It's so delicious...!)

Once Fie had one bite, it was impossible to stop. So she wolfed down the kebabs, stuffing them down her mouth in a most un-princesslike manner.

"Haha, don't rush. It's going to get stuck in your throat. Hey, this isn't worth crying over, is it?"

Fie had only noticed upon hearing Crow's question that large tears had formed in her eyes, and were currently rolling down her face unceremoniously.

Ever since coming to this kingdom, Fie had been ignored. No one would acknowledge her presence, and she was thrust into the confines of the back pavilion, with only an unbearable loneliness for company. As such, the current situation was not one that Fie was used to at all...

And amongst all this, the first person to show her some degree of kindness was Crow.

As she bit down on the warm kebabs, an even warmer feeling filled her heart. "Sir Crow... Thank you so much..." In spite of her tears, Fie managed out some words of thanks.

To that, Crow gave her a wry smile.

"I told you not to cry, right? I'll tell you now, I won't comfort crying men. The only time I'll comfort anyone crying is if they're a woman in bed. You get that, right?"

"Yes." She couldn't help but laugh at Crow's words.

Fie felt resolved to do her absolute best. If there were such good people in the fold, the Royal Knights must be full of them. If there was any suitable place to start a new life, this would be the place. If things turned out well, maybe she would even be in the same platoon as Crow.

And so, the two of them finally reached the end of the line.

"Thank you for everything, Sir Crow."

"Don't worry about it. After all, this is part of my job too."

However, it was obvious to a certain extent that buying kebabs for wannabe squires wasn't exactly part of the job. "I should also tell you that there is no special treatment in the test. All candidates are equal. And they will be judged fairly."

"Yes, I understand."

Seeing Crow's slightly more serious expression, Fie mustered a serious face of her own with some effort.

But of course this was the case. There were this many candidates, after all. Just because she had become a little familiar with a knight didn't mean that she was going to have an easier time at the test — it simply did not work that way.

For a kingdom as large as Orstoll, it was probably incredibly difficult to enter an organization like the Royal Knights. With the sheer number of participants present, it was sure to be a strict, harsh test.

(Will I be able to see it through...? No, there is no way out but to win.)

She was going to leave behind her life as Fie in the rotten corners of the back pavilion, and live her new life as Heath. For that, she had to win.

Seeing Fie's suddenly nervous expression, Crow slapped her on the shoulder amicably, grinning his broad smile as he did so.

"I can't give you preferential treatment, but I'll cheer for you!"

Fie thought that this was a great thing to hear. After all, not even a single person had cheered for her ever since she came to this country.

"Yes! I'll work hard!"

"Yeah, give it everything you've got!"

And with those parting words, Crow waved nonchalantly as he set out in the general direction of the castle.

(A knight... I want to become a knight!)

Fueled by thoughts of leaving behind her captive, unwanted princess life, Fie's desires of achieving knighthood burned stronger than ever.

The entry procedure progressed without much of an issue. It seemed that the test would be split into two groups, one for those under 17, and one for those 17 and over. As Fie was still 16, the contents of the test were simple — a one-on-one trial by combat, courtesy of supplied wooden swords.

The bouts would be monitored by the judge, who would watch as said wooden swords clashed. Amongst them were figures clad in knightly dress, one of whom was Crow.

After a short while, Fie's name was called.

Her opponent was a thick-set boy, almost three times Fie's body size. However, if he was paired with Fie, it meant that he was around her age.

After having their names confirmed by the knights in attendance, the pair headed off into a wooden pen in preparation for their bout.

Sneering at Fie, the boy laughed, regarding Fie's stature with dismissive amusement.

"The hell is a kid like you, who doesn't even have any hair down there, doing here? This is not a place for kids to play pretend sword fighting. You'll probably get hurt, so you might as well just head home and have some of your mama's milk, huh?"

Although the match had not started yet, spectators had already begun to crowd around the pen, discussing the events of the day with enthusiasm.

"Man... That kid has it rough. To be paired up with Gormus for his first bout..."

"Yeah. Wasn't he one of the top candidates in previous tests?"

Upon hearing their words, Fie did think of herself as unlucky. But there was no choice but to win. And that was why her attitude took a sudden, unpredicted twist.

"Huh? It seems like the gorillas in Orstoll actually speak! How incredibly smart! I am so surprised. But... why is a gorilla attempting a squire test? Even for a talking gorilla, becoming a knight is a bit too much isn't it?"

Normally, Fie would not be one to bad-mouth others, let alone say such

words to them. It was a little cold and even twisted. As she had shown to Crow, she was otherwise a proverbial good kid.

However, having lived the life of one born in the shadow of another, Fie had a certain dark part in her heart that was very well-acquainted with insults and other demeaning mannerisms of speech. She had first picked it up from her nursemaid, who was swearing at Fie for causing undue work for her. At that time, Fie had wanted to cry.

Even such painful experiences had their uses, although exactly how useful they were was yet to be seen. But to live on, Fie was willing to do anything — of this, she was sure. This once in a lifetime bout, upon which her entire life hinged upon, had somehow released Fie's darker side to the world.

"Y-You! You've got some damned guts! As soon as the bout begins, I'll friggin' kill you, you hear me!"

"Man, this kid doesn't know what he's in for..."

"What's going on in that head of his?"

Yet for Fie, it was natural to behave this way. If she lost here, she would be as good as dead — or at least, would have to live a life that was worse than death.

As such, Fie held the sword with a definite sense of resolution, perhaps the most resolute since the moment she had been born.

Shortly after the test began...

(I knew this wasn't going to be easy...)

Fie felt it in her body and soul.

It was a fact that her opponent was bigger and stronger than her. However, he probably couldn't move very fast, so Fie moved around quickly in hopes of spotting an opening.

(I can't even make a dent...)

Although this was a bit of a given, Fie realized that the sword-practice she had as a child, and her recent two weeks of practice swings, could not possibly hope

to compete with one who had studied and practiced swordcraft all their life. It was impossible to match her opponent's skill with the sword.

She was unable to even swing her sword blade at her opponent — it took everything she had just to dodge his blows.

On the other hand, Gormus was also surprised at the current turn of events.

(This guy... He's so small but fast, I can't bloody hit him! I thought I'd send this punk flying in a minute, and make him grovel in front of everyone in shame!)

But then, for the past five minutes, Fie had been dodging Gormus' wild blows.

Her movements were distinctive. Her small and soft body was that of a cat's — she jumped and leaped, landing in strange stances that made it impossible for Gormus to predict where she was going to come from next. At times she would stay low, or roll away while avoiding his attacks.

(Even so... Even so, this punk is nothing to me!)

It was a definite fact that Fie's ability to dodge was astonishing. However, from the very beginning, Fie had not even taken one swing at Gormus.

(You can tell from how he moves. This punk doesn't know very much about the sword at all.)

If his opponent didn't have the power to overwhelm him, then he would win just by continuing to attack.

(There's no way I'll lose.) That was what Gormus believed.

"Ah... This match has become really one-sided, hasn't it? The poor thing."

"But then, look at him! Isn't all that dodging kind of impressive? Gormus is attacking that much, but ain't hitting him. I haven't even seen an adult move like that before."

"But if he doesn't attack, he isn't going to win. At this rate, he's just going to get tired out, and then he's done for."

Maybe it was because there were other small bouts before this one, but the hopefuls who had time on their hands found themselves spectating this particular match. And as they said, in the face of Gormus' ferocious attacks, Fie

was starting to look worn down.

Fie had always loved sports more than her sister, but a princess was a princess, and princesses were not exactly known for their stamina. In addition, there was also the issue of her not eating for the past two days, and taking all of that into consideration, it was easy to see why she did not have enough stamina.

(Just... a bit more... Wait for an opening...)

Her body became heavier and heavier, and her breathing was now a halting, raspy sound rising from the depths of her throat.

And in that moment, Fie's legs tripped over each other.

(Oh no...!)

"GOTCHA!"

And at last, a single blow from Gormus landed on Fie's body.

She raised her own sword in defense in a last-minute reaction, but the difference in power was far too great. The impact sent Fie's entire body up and away, flying and crashing into the wooden pen that surrounded their makeshift arena.

The impact jolted up Fie's spine, and for a while she stopped breathing.

Fie's body shook, and then she fell where she stood, landing on her back on the cold, hard ground.

(Quickly... I have to get up...!)

But she could not get up.

It hurt everywhere.

A ringing sound filled her ears.

(I have... have to win. I absolutely must win...)

Yet her body would not move.

(There will never be... another chance like this...! And even so...)

The notion of giving up seeped into the weakened crevices of her heart.

(Is... Is this it?)

“Are you giving up already?”

And then, a voice.

(Who...?)

Before she knew it, the face of a man filled Fie’s field of vision.

“Is this all you’ve got? Does it end here?”

Standing in front of the wooden railings, he looked down upon the fallen Fie. From behind his mask, a pair of blue-grey eyes silently bore into her.

Quiet murmurs rose up from the crowds at the sight of this man.

And so the masked man issued a straight question.

(No...)

Fie felt the strength coming back to her body, welling up from deep inside.

“No... It... It isn’t over yet!” Fie had control of her voice once again.

The sounds of her surroundings returned to her ears.

“Don’t you dare give up yet, Heath!”

She could hear Crow’s cheering.

“Oh! This one seems to still have it!”

“Yeah, but he fell over. He isn’t gonna be able to take another one of those.”

Gormus glanced in Fie’s general direction, swinging his wooden sword downwards.

Fie’s body still could not move. If she went on like this, the bout would definitely end in her loss.

With just a single moment to think, Fie decided on her next course of action.

“TAKE THIS!” Grabbing a fistful of sand with her right hand, she flung the mixture right into Gormus’ face.

“WHAT!?”

Unable to predict or defend against such an unexpected attack, the grains of

sand robbed Gormus of his vision.

“Hey, that punk blinded Gormus! What a dirty move!”

“Does this kid really want to become a knight!?”

With this opening, Fie got down on all fours, rolling past Gormus’ large body.

“Kuh, where the hell did you go?!”

In his desperate search for Fie, Gormus did not notice her crouching, and was adequately surprised by Fie taking away a shoe from his outstretched leg.

“Wha—”

And with that, Fie continued rolling on the ground, placing some distance between herself and Gormus, before finally standing up.

“Hey, that brat stole his shoe!”

“What terrible conduct!”

“Hey you, that’s not fair play!”

“Heh heh heh.” Fie was holding his removed shoe and grinning like a villain in a play. Gormus started to advance on her — when suddenly, his movements stopped.

The ground of the bout pen was covered by a fine layer of sharp gravel. Although one could get used to the painful feeling of gravel eating into one’s foot, Gormus was not prepared for it — and so for a moment, he stopped.

His missing shoe threw off his movements, and Gormus had become sluggish. He was confused. Should he take off the remaining shoe? Or should he leave it on?

Although Fie had made a snap decision to remove his shoe, it seemed to have had a much greater effect than she thought.

“Now!”

Without letting the opening go to waste, Fie swung down her sword, ignoring the waves of pain through her body.

“How naïve!”

Gormus defended against her attack, and so the two wooden swords clashed.

However, Gormus was shaken from his impaired vision and missing shoe, which slowed down the movements of his sword accordingly. As he was unable to plant his foot down onto the ground, Gormus lost the ability to send Fie flying — he was unable to muster the power required to do so with his current weakened stance.

What was once a one-sided bout was now a clash of two swords.

However, Fie was still overwhelmingly disadvantaged.

“There’s too much of a height difference. He won’t be able to hit Gormus where it counts like that.”

Fie’s height — and summarily, her reach, only allowed her to hit the lower portions of Gormus’ body. She was unable to land blows on his head or neck.

And if enough time were allowed to pass, Gormus would recover from his current state. In other words, if this dragged on, Fie would have no chance of victory left.

(It has to be now!)

Perhaps because of the time they had spent clashing, Fie had gotten a feel of Gormus’ swordplay quirks. He preferred straight, direct blows at his opponent.

So Fie lowered her stance, and Gormus responded with a downwards swing.

(Just as I thought!)

Fie rolled to the side, dodging the blow, only for it to be followed up with a horizontal swing. Although Fie would have usually evaded in a downwards fashion, she jumped up high instead, evading his swing.

Viewing it as an opening, Gormus swung his sword up where he stood.

“IT’S OVER!” he roared.

(Here it comes, this is it!)

As she jumped, Fie contracted all the muscles in her body like a tightly wound spring. Then, landing on the sword that was meant to strike her down, Fie kicked off it all of her being.

“H-Hey, that kid is using Gormus’ sword as a jumping board!”

Fie’s body rose up through the air in a great leap.

Beneath her, she could see Gormus’ head. And with all the might she could muster, Fie swung her wooden sword downwards.

(I’m going to win this... I’ll start my second path!)

And so, Fie’s blow, carrying all the strength of her small body, made contact with Gormus’ head.

And then —

Shortly after —

“The winner of this bout is... Gormus!”

The match was over.

Fie sat in a corner of the arena, crying and hugging her knees.

(I couldn’t win...)

It was true that Fie’s spirited strike had been a direct hit on Gormus.

However, that alone could not topple him, although the damage that he had suffered was great.

“Guh...” Gormus’ huge body wavered.

“Are you kidding me? Gormus is...!”

“Hey, what if that kid wins?”

The spectators were stunned with disbelief at the turn of events.

Finally recovering from her leap, Fie made contact with the ground at last.

(I didn’t get him with that one blow... I have to follow up on that now...)

Gormus was still shaking, unsteady on his legs.

Fie took a deep breath, steadying her sword, before running towards her opponent with a renewed stride.

“This victory... is mine!”



But in the next moment, the one who was sprawled on the ground was Fie.

Dazed, she tried to move her leg, but was met with a sharp pain in response.

“Guuh...!?” It was as if her leg were being torn apart.

Whispering rose from the spectators around the ring.

“Hey... You don’t think...”

“A muscle cramp huh...”

“Wow, that’s quite something...”

To begin with, when Fie had been avoiding Gormus’ blows, her body was already at its limit.

In addition to that, to create an opening, Fie had executed a series of taxing movements — the jump and landing being the final nail in the coffin for her leg.

Fie could no longer get up from the sharp pain.

Upon seeing this, the judge walked up to Fie, who immediately raised her voice in protest.

“No, I’ll keep going! I can still... keep going!” Fie tried standing up. “Ugh... Ah...”

But Fie’s legs had already reached their limit. Both of her legs cramped up, and she was no longer in any condition to stand. Attempting to do so immediately sent waves of immense pain through her body.

“I haven’t... I haven’t...! I can’t lose!”

Fie attempted to prop herself up with her sword. She did not want to give up. After all, she had come all the way here. After just a bit more, she could reach it, with her very own hands.

When the masked man had posed his question to her, Fie felt it in the very core of her being.

There would be no one else in that pavilion. No one other than Fie. And then, her life would end there, with her being alone. All alone, surrounded by those high, impenetrable walls. In a dark, dark place. Just by herself... Eternally alone.

From the day she was born in the shadow of her sister, to a place where she would disappear and die of loneliness — a last and final place.

She didn't want that. She could not accept that.

Fie wanted to walk in the light. She wanted to spend her life with someone else in such a place. A place where the sun shone.

As a child, Fie had fallen in love with stories of knights, and in their path she saw light — or so she thought. But as she came of age for marriage, she was made to put down the sword, and forget about everything she once knew.

Now, more than ever...

She had wanted to meet new people. Like Crow. Friends, comrades, senior knights, a place where she could see many people — a place where she could truly live.

"I won't lose... I... I won't give up... Agghh..."

In the face of her evident pain, Fie stood up, desperately leaning on her sword. The spectacle silenced the bout spectators.

Even Gormus, who could barely stand or attack — he, too, stared at Fie's form wordlessly.

And then a minute passed.

The knight presiding over the bout shook his head sadly.

"You... You can't go on anymore. Not in the state you're in."

And then he made his announcement.

"And the winner of this bout is... Gormus!"

Upon hearing that, all the strength Fie had mustered left her body.

(I've lost... I... I couldn't... couldn't win.)

And so cold despair sank into Fie's heart.

(These hands... Did not grasp... anything...)

Chapter 3 — The First Person

Shortly after the bout ended, Crow carried Fie to the sick bay to receive treatment for her leg. With that, Fie's squire test was over.

Although she had suffered a muscle cramp, Fie was lucky enough not to have sustained any heavier injuries. After receiving some treatment, was able to walk once more. Saying that he was needed elsewhere, Crow had left Fie as she was. After a while, she found herself in a corner of the arena, hugging her knees and crying.

(Lucky? No, that means nothing...)

Even though she was able to move her legs, she would still be trapped in that tiny pavilion. Whether her legs were healthy or not, Fie's life hadn't changed at all.

(It's over...)

Fie's battle was over. And so were her hopes and dreams.

"Ha, frustrated, aren't we?"

From above, a voice. The visage of Crow filled Fie's eyes as she lifted her head ever so slightly.

As Fie hadn't exactly announced her location, it would seem that Crow had taken the pains to locate her amongst the crowds of candidates.

"Have you come to pity me...?"

Crow could not help but smile wryly at Fie's statement as she rubbed her nose and stared up at him with an adequately dark expression. This amused Crow — to think that a few hours prior, this very youth before his eyes had been so familiar and vulnerable.

"What's the matter? Suddenly taking on that abrasive attitude."

"I don't need your pity..."

Indeed, Fie did not need anyone's pity. Crow would probably just say one of the few cliched phrases: that there were more chances in the future, or to work harder next time. Fie didn't know the frequency at which these tests occurred. Another one might not be held again until next year.

With time, even those useless, good-for-nothing guards could be fired and replaced. If they were replaced with actual guards who did their jobs, she would never be able to do anything like this ever again.

In fact, that may happen as soon as tomorrow, and she may never be able to set another foot out of the back pavilion.

That was why this had been Fie's last chance.

"It... It's over for me..."

"Ahh... You lost, and that's that. Yet you're making a face as if your life is over!"

(But that's right, Crow. It IS over... My life is over...)

"Oh, I should probably let you know that you passed."

You passed.

Fie thought she was just hearing things, for a moment. However, there was no mistake about it. Crow had clearly said, "You passed."

"H-Huh? What? W-Why..!?"

"What do you mean huh and why? No one said you would fail upon losing, right?"

(Well... I guess there is that. But normally...)

"It is true that winning is advantageous to your application... And those who win in the semifinals are guaranteed a spot in the Royal Knights. But that isn't all there is to it. Why, exactly, did you think knights like us bothered to look at the candidates of the squire's test? Did you think we were merely spectating? No, it is about searching for skills that one's own platoon needs — or to pick up talented individuals." Crow grinned at Fie. "There is one platoon captain who

wants to take you as a squire. That's what I'm saying. Congratulations, you passed. Isn't that great, Heath?"

Fie could not believe her eyes as she clutched the piece of paper Crow had handed over.

Sure enough, Heath's name was written on it. And next to that, the name of the platoon she had been assigned to — the 18th Knights.

(Huh...? 18th... Knights...?)

Fie cocked her head to the side.

The reason for that was that Orstoll, by right, only had 17 Knight platoons.

"Ahh, I get it. You don't know about that. Rest assured, they really exist, you know. Well, there are some special circumstances, and they don't exist in writing, but that's just how it is. The other knights treat the 18th just like any other. Of course, if the squires graduate into knighthood, they are treated the same too. Actually, I'm in the 18th too. It's... not like it's a secret, clandestine unit or anything like that. Does that bother you?"

"N-No! Nothing like that at all!" Fie shook her head vigorously.

The fact that she had become a knight was enough for Fie — platoons and the like were more of an afterthought. Above everything, she was glad to be in the same platoon as Crow. As the conversation progressed, gradual realization crept across Fie's being — she had actually passed the squire test.

"Uwaah... Sir Crow..."

With a huge burden lifted from her heart, Fie began crying even more than before as large gobs of tears fell from her eyes.

"Hey now. You're crying even *after* you've passed? You're really a handful, eh?"

Smiling, Crow held Fie's head close to his chest, patting her head as he did so.

"This is the only time I'm gonna comfort a man, you got that?"

After Fie had her fill of tears, she followed Crow to the platoon assembly point, where the other knights were gathering.

“I mean, you have to greet everyone after all. Can you walk?”

“Yes! I’m fine!”

Crow could not help but smile with amusement once more at Heath’s current attitude — following him like a vigorously tail-wagging puppy; a considerable departure from the dark, sarcastic tone he had taken earlier.

“Ho ho, so you’re prancing about now that you know you’ve passed? What happened to that sharp tongue of yours just now? Pretty honest, aren’t you?”

“That... was because I thought I had failed for sure...”

Parting with her abrasive attitude, Fie responded with an intense blush, in addition to looking pointedly in the other direction. However, Crow was glad that his charge had seen it fit to smile so happily once more.

“So I wanted to ask! Why did I pass, anyway? Did they see a hidden talent for the sword in me?”

“No, it was because you were small and made such erratic movements.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean!?” Fie sounded disappointed. After all, that was nothing like what a knight was supposed to be.

“And... because you’ve got guts. It just so happened that we were looking for someone like that. You passed because of that requirement, so don’t sit around complaining, you hear?”

With another of his wry smiles, Crow ruffled Fie’s hair, tousling it with his hands.

(Well I mean, that’s true, but...!)

Fie thought that there should be a more fitting reason for one to pass such a test.

“Our platoon seeks out and gathers specialists. Even if someone is relatively unreliable with the sword, if they have a special skill or talent, we’ll take them.”

“Unreliable... What can you do then, Sir Crow?”

“Me? Why, I can probably do a bit of everything. Kinda omnipotent, you know?”

“Huh...”

Placing a hand on his chin, Crow struck a pose to impress — and Fie could only bluntly think about how suspiciously unreliable he looked.

Eventually, the pair came to stand in front of what appeared to be a warehouse.

“We are sort of unofficial at this point in time. I mean, they can’t just build a new place for each platoon, so we’re borrowing this warehouse for now and modifying it to suit our daily needs and activities.”

Apparently, it was indeed just a warehouse.

“It’s actually pretty comfy inside, so don’t worry.”

Upon opening the sliding door, a wide central space was revealed — the contents of the warehouse were not crates, but instead a sofa and long table, smaller tables and chairs, and shelves adorned by the personal effects and weapons of the 18th’s members.

There were beautiful flowers growing in pots and planters. There were also cosmetics — why would there be beauty products in a place like this? In another corner, numerous bows and arrows rested on the shelves. Countless assembled mechanical constructs of unknown materials and springs. Hammers, screwdrivers, and a myriad of other work tools.

In addition to all that, four men were casually seated in various locations around the room.

“Huh. So you’re the fabled newcomer. Welcome.”

A normal-looking young man with no distinctive features greeted Fie, winking in the process.

“...”

A wordless and absurdly large man was next. He was even bigger than Gormus, and he sat silently in his specially-made, incredibly large chair. A single hand was raised in greeting. However, his movements were not threatening in the slightest — instead, it was a light, casual greeting, almost like a silent “Hey.”

“Hello.”

A stoic greeting from an equally stoic man was next — an eyepatch covered one side of his face as he greeted Fie without any sign of emotion.

“Well! I’ve heard the rumors but you really are kinda small aren’tcha? Welcome.”

A middle-aged man smiled and waved at Fie. Although he was a knight, he was dressed in what appeared to be work overalls.

“Um, yes. Thank you for having me.” Fie lowered her head as a sign of respect.

“The Knight-Captain will be here soon, so just wait patiently,” the plain-faced young man said, pouring a cup of tea and offering it to Fie.

It was a pleasant-smelling herbal tea.

(The Captain huh... I wonder what kind of person he is...?)

It was because of this particular person expressing an interest in Fie that she had become a knight.

Sure enough, echoing footsteps could be heard outside the warehouse. The door opened, and from beyond it came a youth — a familiar one at that.

(Ah... this person...)

With jet-black hair, blue-grey eyes, and a mask covering the upper half of his face, Fie could not quite make out his features. However, one could tell that he was a handsome youth, even with it on.

The moment that was etched into Fie’s memory — the moment when she had collapsed during the test. *Is this all you’ve got? Does it end here?* This was the person who had posed that very question to her.

The masked man looked around the warehouse slowly, before saying in a calm voice: “Good. It seems like everyone is here.”

And so it came to be that the masked man stood before five knights and a single squire.

“Since we have a newcomer, I should take the time to introduce myself. I am the platoon captain of the 18th Knights, Yore.”

(This person is the captain of my platoon...)



Looking at the masked youth, Fie could not help but wonder...

(Why does he wear a mask...?)

However, Fie could not find it in herself to ask such a question of him.

And for good reason, too — Fie was worried that if she had done so, he would have been offended and dismissed her on the spot. Indeed, this masked youth known as Yore had a somewhat unapproachable, complicated aura.

Finishing his simple and straight introduction, Yore moved on to introduce the other members.

“I’m Conrad. Welcome, newcomer!”

First, it was the plain-faced man who gave his name, once again winking while doing so. He was young and of medium build, and possessed remarkably unremarkable facial features. Conrad did have a bright personality, however, in addition to what seemed to be a touch of hospitality, as demonstrated by the herbal tea he had offered to Fie a while ago.

Otherwise he was very much normal, without any special recognizable features — plain in every sense of the word. However, upon closer inspection, Fie had a vague sense that there was more to him than meets the eye.

(There’s something strange about him...)

Next up was the large, heavily-built man.

“...”

Wordless as usual, he instead held up a piece of paper, pointing to it before directing his thumb at himself. And then he winked. *“Orbel,”* the paper said.

“Orbel can’t speak. We leave the combat and weapons transport to him though, thanks to the body he was blessed with. His hobby is plant cultivation.”

As Crow added on to his explanation, Orbel took out yet another sheet of paper. It said, in clear letters: *“Gardening.”*

“Although it was his dream to become a knight and borrow some of the castle’s large gardens for gardening, we’re an unofficial platoon, so he can’t exactly do that.”

As such, he had taken to utilizing planters to plant many flowers instead — Crow explained, while Orbel sat with a slightly dismayed expression.

“I see...”

Upon hearing that, Fie could not help but feel sorry for him.

(If only that pavilion could be used for his purposes... That would be great.)

Although it was a small back pavilion, flowerbeds had been planted in the courtyard. However, in its long periods of disuse, much of it had all but returned to the wild. It wasn’t possible for Fie to reveal who she actually was and that she was not allowed out of the back pavilion. Also, it would be impossible for it to be loaned out to someone like Heath. In the end, it was a pointless idea.

“The flowers you have planted are very pretty, Sir Orbel. I look forward to the day where you can cultivate a full flowerbed.”

Upon hearing such a compliment, Orbel gave an embarrassed, but happy smile. Fie thought that he was quite a nice person.

“Parwick. I am this platoon’s long-range fire support.”

The eye-patched man introduced himself as such, concise in his mannerisms.

“He’s quite the archer, you see. To the point where he wouldn’t miss a target 200 meters away,” Crow added.

Fie thought that this was amazing. After all, the best archer in Daeman could only hit a target that was 120 meters away about 70% of the time — or so she had heard.

After Parwick’s introduction, the last to give his name was the middle-aged man in work overalls. In fact, he seemed to be the oldest in the platoon.

“I’m Garuge. Although I was chosen to be a knight, I make weapons and perform maintenance tasks more often. I also make tools. I don’t fight very much, see... After all, I’ve got quite a few years on me. Although I do some field engineering work from time to time.”

Garuge handed Fie a sword still in its scabbard. Its length was between that of a knife and the more commonly-utilized knight’s longsword — a perfect middle ground. It felt light and sturdy.

“A present. A gift for passing the test. For someone with your build, this length is probably the best fit. I’ve also modified her in various places so that she’s lighter. Don’t worry, though, she’s got as much strength in her as an ordinary blade.”

“Wow! Thank you very much!”

Although it was still in its scabbard, Fie attempted to swing the blade. The weight of the blade was, miraculously, not too different from the wooden sword she had used in the test, to the point where even someone like Fie could properly swing it.

Regarding the blade with sparkling eyes, Fie gladly sheathed the blade into her waist-belt.

“Let me know if you want me to make anything. If it can be made, I’ll make it for you.” Garuge’s smile had a mature edge to it.

It could be fairly assumed that the unknown mechanical constructs Fie had seen on her way in were Garuge’s creations. Fie thought that she wanted to ask him about them when she had the chance.

With this, everyone in the room was introduced.

“Well actually... There’s one more person, but he’s currently away on a special assignment. You know, a bit of an outing. I’ll introduce you when you eventually meet him.”

And so according to Crow, there was one more person in the mix. Next was Fie’s turn.

“My name is Heath, and I have been accepted into the 18th as a squire! I’m still very new at this, but I’m very glad to make your acquaintance!”

Fie bowed her head deeply, with both hands placed before her in a ceremonious manner. It felt like she was giving a typical bride’s greeting before she was to be married off.

Placing a free hand on Fie’s head, Crow added on to her introduction.

“Apparently, he was born in Teornoah. Well, that’s all I guess. Let’s all get along.”

(Huh...?)

Fie hadn't revealed where she had been born to Crow. His proclamation didn't line up with where Fie was actually born — in addition to not matching her fictional profile either. To begin with, she had never heard of a place called Teornoah.

"I see."

"Understood."

"Yeah, sure!"

However, the four knights present quickly accepted Crow's statement as fact.

In reality, "Teornoah" was a code word used amongst knights to refer to children of illegal immigrants, children of the poor who had no nationality due to their circumstances, or children who had run into issues with the law. Although individuals who become knights are given an official citizenship in Orstoll, such is not the same for squires, who were technically illegally staying in Orstoll for the duration of their training.

As such, these children were widely referred to as "from Teornoah" by members of the Royal Knights, and they were not to be harassed for their nationality (or lack thereof) during their time as a squire.

Crow had assumed that Heath was the child of illegal immigrants, primarily due to the tattered clothing that Fie was wearing when they had first met, in addition to her thin, almost pallid features. And then there was the affair of Fie crying tears of joy upon biting down on a kebab — not to mention the dirty tricks she had employed during her bout with Gormus.

Crow had very much believed that his assumption was on point. However, now Crow had his doubts — that unique way Heath had mocked his opponent, for example. It was too clean for a gutter child — the blond hair and deep blue eyes too, almost as if he were royalty. It wouldn't be too strange if his original country of birth had fallen, its monarchy crushed, and he had been forced to escape to another country, whereupon he then fell into poverty. All these were plausible scenarios in Crow's mind.

(I’m sure he’s seen some stuff...)

Even Crow thought that he wasn’t quite acting like himself — to think of this pint-sized youth with such empathy. He felt that something about Heath made him want to help him.

To the Heath who was currently confused and apprehensive about this newfound nationality, Crow communicated that he would explain later, whispering in Heath’s ear.

And so Heath nodded obediently.

Fie felt overwhelmed — to Fie, all of the introduced knights so far seemed to have amazing skills or abilities. She began to question her place in this platoon, losing some confidence in herself.

“Um, I... I may not be that good with the sword, but I’ll... train hard from now on... I’ll train until I can’t anymore... And I won’t fall over again! I’ll get better in combat... So...!”

Fie had no place to belong to but here. To that end, she was trying to demonstrate her worth, somewhat desperately. To those that had saved her life, Fie swore to become an individual worth training up — her future depended on it.

“Hey, Heathy. No need to make such a hard-pressed expression, you know? Just relax.”

“That’s right. You don’t have to overdo it, you know. You’ve still got quite a while as a squire after all.”

The words of consolation came from Conrad and Crow.

(Everyone in this platoon is so nice... I’ll work hard so they don’t get rid of me!)

To Crow, it was more important to deal with the injuries Heath sustained today, as opposed to thinking about if Heath would make a good knight in the future or not. It was something he had noticed today — but he assumed that Heath had a particularly trying upbringing, and as such only seemed to think

and assume in extremes. Although the young squire was currently being calmed and consoled, it only seemed to strengthen his resolve.

If this were allowed to go on, he would definitely injure himself again.

“Hey, Hea—”

“Heath.”

Crow had thought to intervene before Heath could hurt himself through one reckless act or another, but before that, someone else had already acted on the same thoughts.

(Knight-Captain Yore...)

Yore stood before Fie, speaking in a low and quiet, but resonant voice. In those blue-grey eyes, there was no pitying smile, no rage-filled glare. They simply looked at Fie in a piercingly straight and serious way.

“I need you. That is why you have been assigned to this platoon. If that were not the case, you would not be here in the first place. So, take pride in that and stand proud.”

You are needed.

Those words resounded inside Fie’s chest.

Needed.

To most people, Fie might as well have been made of air. She was the princess who never once drew her parent’s eyes — it did not matter whether she existed or not.

Still, she did have servants. She was a princess after all. Though the ones who bad-mouthed Fie were those very servants themselves. Even so, Fie felt grateful to them, if only because it was due to their care that Fie had lived to see this day.

There were people who worried about Fie’s well-being from the bottom of their hearts. Her sister, her friends, and some of the maidservants — there were not too many of them. And Fie liked them all. However, they gained next

to nothing for taking care of Fie. It was one sided — and Fie could do nothing for them in return.

And so, eventually, there was no one who needed Fie to exist.

This was the first time.

The first time that Fie had heard that she was wanted by someone.

The first time.

In Fie's life, the first person she met who told her she was needed and wanted was...

Captain Yore.

(This person is... the first person to ever... From the day I was born, to tell me that he needed me...)

"What about it, Heath? If you understand my words, respond."

Those straight, serious eyes stared into hers — conveying that his words were the truth, and nothing but the truth.

As if to pick herself up, Fie — Heath, without much thought, gave a loud, sincere, Daeman-accented response to her platoon leader.

"Yes, Cap'n!"

And so, amongst kind individuals such as Crow, and the captain who needed her, Fie started her new life.

As Heath headed towards the squire dormitories, Crow remained behind to speak privately with Yore. The other members went back to their respective duties, training, or rest.

"So... He walked out with a huge smile plastered across his face," Crow said. "Just as you said, he seems happy."

"I only stated the truth."

Crow's words to Yore were somewhat informal — almost familiar.

Although Crow was by no means cowardly or deferential, his tone of voice

was much like that of addressing a friend of many years, not his platoon captain.

To Yore, who had proclaimed to have said the truth without so much as a shred of shame — Crow smiled mischievously, turning his head slightly to the side.

“But then, if he had known of your true identity, he would indeed be very surprised... Wouldn’t he, Your *Majesty*, King Roy?”

Crow particularly emphasized the “majesty” part of his statement, if only because he normally would never refer to Roy as such. The two had known each other for far too long for formalities like that.

“I’ve told you before to not refer to me by that name when I have this mask on, haven’t I? I don’t intend to tell Heath until he graduates from being a squire. This is a matter of national secrecy after all. I wouldn’t want to burden him any more than necessary.”

In truth, the 18th Knights Platoon was a unit that reported directly to the King.

However, no matter how one put it, it was a bit of an issue for the King to personally lead a platoon of knights. And so with a nom de guerre of “Yore” and a mask covering his face, Roy had begun to lead the platoon in an unofficial capacity.

Although this information was only known to the ranks of platoon leaders and above, Roy was a being of superb charisma. Even as Yore, he received deep admiration and respect from other knights.

There were two reasons to keep all of this from Heath — in addition to maintaining the required secrecy, there was also the need to stop Heath from somehow trying to prove himself, or from feeling belittled. Although Heath was “needed,” and hence recruited, he was still but a squire. Hence, it was important to have Heath concentrate on his training — and that was what Roy had wanted, a practical measure.

“Well, let’s change the subject. About Princess Fie... Do you think she’s innocent? Or guilty?”

Crow posed the question with a somewhat more serious expression.

“Who knows? I don’t. I have left the subject of that woman up to Cain. Both the information gathering, and any decisions from here on out. If she is guilty, I will be informed. That is all.”

“Hey hey. Are you serious?”

“I am a busy man. I have my appointments as the king, and there are many things about Princess Fielle that I have yet to investigate. To even spend a second thinking about that woman is but a waste of time. If she is guilty, I have no intentions of forgiving her. If she is innocent, I have no intention of getting involved with her. She went ahead of her sister, the true princess, to come to Orstoll on her own. Even if I were to meet her, it would just be unpleasant.”

While it was sad, this was how the people of Orstoll viewed Fie. An arrogant woman who latched onto her sister’s marriage of love. A brazen woman who placed herself between the two because she could. A pitiful wretch of a woman who arrived in Orstoll before her sister, the true princess, did — all in a bid to curry favor with the King.

However, no one could see, much less understand, Fie’s frustrations behind this entire affair — much less how her situation had nearly made her give up on living.

“Well, if that’s how you see it, I won’t say anything about it.”

“More importantly... about Heath. He certainly has usable talent — maybe even guts. But mentally he doesn’t seem all that stable. I’ll leave the follow-up on that to you.”

“I would do it even if you didn’t tell me to. Heath is like a little brother to me. You should train him sometime. It seems like he really admires you.”

“If there is time.”

To even offer his time to someone or something, under the assumption that he would have said time to spare to begin with, was a somewhat high degree of care coming from Roy. After all, it was Roy, who had both his duties as a king and a knight, offering a portion of his time to tutor Heath — in other words, Heath had at least that degree of intrinsic worth.

“I’m sure he will be very happy if you train him. Why, just a few hours ago, he was making such a depressed face — as if he were going to die, because he thought he had failed the test. And now, that same face filled with hope came bounding all the way here.”

“That boy will be one of the knights whom we entrust the future of our country to. It is a good thing.”

However, King Roy did not know...

That the supposedly arrogant, troublesome woman that he had pushed onto a subordinate had in fact taken the squire test, and had been assigned to his personal platoon.

He really had no idea...

That the Heath that had bounded in with such a hope-filled expression to this warehouse containing the headquarters of the 18th Knights Platoon, had originally been forced into depression by his very own hand... It would be quite some time before Roy would severely regret his decisions and judgments with regards to this particular event — enough to violently dash his head against the wall willfully...

Crow’s Eye View

When Crow first laid eyes upon the youth, he thought he was lost. A small-built young boy clad in strangely dirty clothing, wandering about in the palace.

However, Crow soon thought otherwise. He was a bit too conspicuous to be an unsavory element of any sort. If he really meant to harm the kingdom, then he would not have walked around in such a brazenly suspicious manner to begin with.

Although Crow had spent some time observing him from behind, the youth paid him no heed, but instead kept looking at the line of aspirants for this year’s test.

(Maybe he’s here for the test.)

However, the youth was small for a typical applicant.

Crow had wanted to call out to the youth, but from behind, his profile was impossibly cute — much like that of a girl’s.

In the end, the reason why Crow called out to this boy wasn’t out of duty, but because the boy’s movements, much like that of a lovable small animal, had roused his curiosity.

“Hey, pretty little miss. Are you lost?”

Upon hearing that, the youth, momentarily surprised, turned in Crow’s direction. Alarm and distrust was plainly visible in his eyes.

“Uh. Well. I’m...”

His panicked reaction made Crow almost regret surprising him to begin with.

Upon listening to his story, it seemed like he was an applicant, and wanted to become a knight. Crow had thought the boy a child, but his responses were oddly straightforward. They were those of a youth who had admired knights, and wanted to become one. From that angle, Crow actually felt a degree of maturity.

It seemed that his small build was the only small thing about him.

After all, the Royal Knights of Orstoll opened their doors to any individuals from all walks of life. And that was how Crow, who still felt a little bad for surprising the youth, ended up escorting him to the end of the line and buying him kebabs...

All the while not knowing that they would become platoon-mates in the near future.

Sir Crow’s Journal

Today, a new recruit joined the ranks of the 18th Knights.

Up until now, the new recruits were all brought in by Roy, and they were older knights. This is perhaps the first time I’ve had some sort of junior under my wing.

Guy’s called Heath.

He’s honest and kind of cute — my first junior. When I think of it that way, I get kind of happy.

However, although it’s good that he has guts, he’s tiny and he doesn’t really have much physical strength. I worry for his future.

Seems like he’s got a habit of overexerting himself, so Roy told me to “keep an eye” on him and all that. Guess I should do a good job with this.

I look forward to tomorrow.

Chapter 4 — I've Become a Squire

Leaving the warehouse where the 18th Knights platoon assembled, Fie headed towards the dormitories for squires.

There were four dormitories in total, existing in the four cardinal directions of Orstoll's vast royal castle. As it turned out, Fie was assigned to the northern dormitory.

In Orstoll, squires below the age of 17 did not follow their senior knights around. Instead, a room-and-board schooling system was in place. Here, instructors would drill the squires in the basics of their knightly training and studies.

These training sessions, in turn, were a Monday through Friday affair — the squires were to train with their own platoons every Saturday, attending anything from simple assignments to personalized training sessions.

Sunday was the squires' only rest day.

With that being said, a week was given to the new squires who had just passed their tests, allowing for them to acclimatize to dormitory life.

However, not every squire was adequately housed in their assigned dormitory quite yet — those of noble birth were often bogged down by time-consuming preparations, and there were those still saying their farewells to their families.

On the other hand, Fie had no place to go back to anyway, and as such, quickly found herself at the gates of her dormitory.

The northern squire's dormitory was a quiet and calm affair, made mainly out of wood, with a blue-tiled roof. Following the directions written down for her by Crow, Fie made her way to a certain room in the building.

A room with a view on the second floor. Although it was a small room, Fie was very pleased with her current circumstances, if only because she had freedom of movement, regardless of the size of her accommodations. If she were to leave the castle gates, she could even visit various places in the town

surrounding the royal castle.

Due to her not having anything in the manner of luggage other than the sword gifted to her by Garuge, Fie promptly made herself at home.

As she did so, a series of knocks rang out from the general direction of the door — visitors.

“Yes?”

“Oh, as I thought! Someone’s in here. Can we come in?”

“Oh, sure.”

The voice from beyond Fie’s door belonged to that of a young boy. If Fie had to guess, he was probably a squire of her age.

With a click, the door opened, and three young men trooped into Fie’s small room.

An energetic kid with spiky red hair was the first.

Then a youth of gentle mannerisms and soft, wavy cream-colored hair.

Lastly, a slim and tall boy with black hair, swept and parted to one side.

And all three of them sported expressions of astonishment.

“Huh...? A child!?”

“Why such a small kid?”

“This child is a... squire?”

Fie sulked a little at their simultaneous reactions.

“How rude! I’m probably the same age as you, you know. I’m 16, despite how I look.”

Sure enough, in spite of her small build, Fie was already old enough for marriage — disregarding the fact that she was actually, in fact, already married... technically.

If one were to compare Fie to individuals her age, it was difficult to deny that she was a little on the small side. However, for the average girl, Fie was probably only about 10 centimeters shorter — give or take.

On another note, her sister, Fielle, was only of average height, but was often seen as much taller than she really was, mainly because of her beauty.

“Ugh, we’re the same age!”

“Me too.”

“I’m... a year younger...”

And as such, it was established that the slim youth with the fringe was a year younger than Fie, with the other two having been born on the same year as she was. And so the three of them sincerely delivered their apologies.

“Ah, never mind. It’s fine. What did you need?”

It turned out that the youths had just wanted to welcome their newfound comrade. Of course, it wasn’t in Fie’s interests to pick fights or argue over small matters like this. And so she promptly forgave them.

More than just that, it seemed like the squires all just wanted to get along — as a commemoration for having been assigned to the same place.

“Yeah... I mean your room was close by, so I thought I’d come say hi. I’m right next to you, see.”

“And I’m opposite you on the hallway.”

“And I’m diagonally opposite!”

They were all on the same page — or at least, hallway, and had visited for a casual greeting.

It was also worth noting that each squire had a private room in the northern dormitory, and as such their rooms were crammed close to each other.

Personally, Fie was very grateful for this. It would have been difficult if it had been two or four to a room. After all, she was masquerading as a boy.

“Well it’s some fate isn’t it? We’re in adjacent rooms and all that. Let’s be pals,” said the red, spiky-haired youth.

Fie didn’t have any objections at all.

“Sure, you’re welcome anytime. I’m Heath. Nice to meet you.”

Smiling, Fie introduced herself.

“I’m Slad. Nice to meet you too!” The red-haired youth raised his hand in enthusiasm.

“I’m Remie. Good to see you too.” The quiet, cream-haired youth finally introduced himself with a slight smile.

“I’m Gees. Nice to meet you.” The black-haired youth with the fringe raised his hand in a slight wave.

After all the relevant introductions were made, the four youths set off for dinner together upon Slad’s invitation.

The squire dormitories’ first floor usually housed a canteen — and of course, ample amounts of food to be served to hungry squires. However, meals were only served at strictly-observed mealtimes.

“It’s delicious! It’s delicious!”

Upon reaching their assigned table, Fie heaped piles of food onto her plate, grateful tears of joy falling from her eyes as she ate. Her companions were no doubt surprised — while the food was of decent quality, it was hardly anything to cry over, or be so immensely touched about.

At the very least, Slad, Remie, and Gees thought so.

Other than the kebabs Crow had purchased for Fie, this was her first real meal in approximately two weeks. There was no way it wouldn’t be delicious to her.

Upon observing the hungry Heath, Slad and the other squires at the table could only come to one conclusion: *(He’s probably from Teornoah...)*

To some extent, that was true. However, they never would have guessed in a million years that they were seated with royalty — although said royalty was currently stuffing themselves full of food.

Of course, no one knew that she was Fie, the add-on bride that was treated as an interloper, the legal second wife of the King of Orstoll. They had no misgivings of their newfound friend — although they hadn’t hailed from the same circumstances.

Slad and Gees were of peasant birth, having attended the city's public facilities for an education in the sword. Remie, on the other hand, was the son of a baron who was taught the ways of the sword by a private tutor — eventually passing the test himself. In some ways, they were all aware of the circumstances of those from Teornoah, who were picked for their talents and abilities — one day becoming knights that would protect Orstoll.

As all three of them admired the Royal Knights and their philosophy, they were fiercely loyal to the knightly virtues and ways. To discriminate against one of their own, as such, was unthinkable for a knight.

Perhaps it was also because Fie was easy-going, and wasn't exactly an antagonistic individual. In fact, her bad table manner could even be seen as a kind of individualistic charisma.

"So... which platoon did you get assigned to, Heath?"

"Slad and I are in the 5th, and Gees is in the 9th." Remie duly informed Fie of their respective assigned platoons.

"Oh, I was assigned to the 18th Knights."

Answering Remie's question while wolfing down some hamburger steak, Fie was suddenly aware of a buzz spreading across the canteen. Although the canteen was far from full, the eyes of squires who were currently seated were suddenly fixated on Fie — and Fie's three companions were no exception.

"Th-The 18th!?"

"I-Is that true? Heath!"

"Yeah, what of it?" Disregarding the reactions of those around her, Fie continued to concentrate on her food, nodding as she ate. "Is that such a big deal?"

The three of them had looks of disbelief — Remie in particular had the color drain from his face as he craned his neck, leaning uncomfortably close to Fie.

"Of course it's a big deal! Everyone admires the 18th! Only the best who pass the test go to the 1st, but the 18th is even more popular! Not just amongst us squires, but even actual KNIGHTS want to get into the 18th! But only those

chosen by Master Yore can join... There has never been a squire who has been directly recruited into the 18th before, until you came along! That was why we all thought squires couldn't get in!"

"I-Is that so..."

Fie was honestly surprised at how the usually calm Remie was capable of such excitement, occasionally tripping over his words as he expounded upon the marvels of the 18th.

"How did you get chosen!?"

"Yeah! Tell us Heath! Tell us!"

Now, both Gees and Slad were making intense faces, enough for Fie to feel pressured by this sudden wave of change over her companions.

However, those were the questions that everyone in the canteen wanted to ask. They were all under the same impression — that if they had somehow discovered the reason that Fie had been chosen, they would have a chance at joining the 18th too. And thus, all the squires in the canteen were now deathly interested in what Fie had to say.

"Um. Well, the Captain picked me..."

"Captain? You mean Master Yore!?"

"Yeah..."

(Picked by Master Yore!?)

(What's that kid's secret...?)

All the squires in the canteen strained their ears, eager to learn of Heath's "secret."

"It seemed like it was because I was so small."

With those words, a sudden silence swept across the canteen.

Along with her three companions, the squires in the canteen quietly scrutinized Fie's figure, and they all came to one conclusion: she was, indeed, small. So much so that even the next smallest squire in the room was of a

significantly bigger size. In fact, in the eyes of these squires, Fie may very well have been *the* smallest squire to ever enroll in the history of the Royal Knights. And then they all had a single, united thought.

(What the hell kind of reason is that?)

And that was the one thought that simultaneously crossed their minds at that moment in time.

(We're probably too big for that...)

To the squires, it was possible to bulk up or eat more to have a bigger build, but shrinking was very much impossible. After all, no matter how much one worked, one does not somehow just become... smaller.

In the end, the squires who adored Master Yore, and had dreams of entering the 18th, realized that their dreams were just that — dreams.

"Oh... And something about being nimble. And guts."

Without noticing the expressions of the squires around her, who just had their dreams dashed, Fie continued eating, unaware that her latest statement did not reach the ears of anyone in the room. Because with the very first reason alone, it would have been impossible for anyone but Fie.

"Hey guys... What's wrong?"

Fie cocked her head slightly as the sound of many youths collapsing onto their tables in disappointment resounded across the canteen.

Chapter 5 — But They Aren’t All Nice Guys

It had been a week since Fie had become a squire.

And in that short span of time, Fie’s life was rich and fulfilling. She had made friends with her three dorm-mates, and they had set off into Orstoll’s streets together on a shopping trip.

Although they were men’s clothes, Fie was able to purchase her own garments and living supplies. She filled her narrow and tiny room with decorations of her own choosing, and was currently living a fun-filled daily life. She had been handed the funds by Crow, who had somehow heard from somewhere that Fie was going on a shopping trip, claiming that it was her salary up-front.

Fie learned on her first trip out with her friends that Remie was apparently fond of soft toys. He himself was aware of the contrast in image — claiming that a boy aiming to be a knight would find it embarrassing to indulge in such things. Fie, however, did not think so, and instead took it upon herself to buy each and every one of Remie’s choices as he stared at the soft toys through the shop window, too shy to personally interact with the shopkeeper. Ironically, the unhesitating behavior displayed by Fie only seemed to portray her in a manlier light.

It could be said that this was Fie’s very first experience — of going out with friends and having a good time, that is. Although there was a curfew upon which all squires must return to their dormitories, Fie sincerely felt that she was having an amazing experience.

A fulfilling second path for Fie.

A week has passed since then, and the northern dormitory now housed its full roster of squires. Amongst them was Gormus, who had openly taunted Fie before their bout.

And so it came to be that Fie was in the lounge of the dormitory drinking tea by her lonesome on the night before training formally started. She wasn't quite alone, however — two youths were busy gossiping in a corner.

They did not seem friendly. In fact, they peered down upon Fie condescendingly, their eyes full of contempt.

(I guess they're not all nice guys after all...)

Fie was used to the ill-intent of others. After all, she had spent her life being despised for being secondary to Fielle, and as such was not a stranger to such emotions.

"Hey, aren't you so full of yourself, just because you got into the 18th."

"You even lost in the squire test, didn't you?"

Fie, who was now somewhat famous for being the very first squire accepted into the 18th Knights, found that her reputation preceded her. She herself, however, did not seem to recognize the significance of her assignment. It was like Captain Yore had said.

(I am here because the Captain needs me, and so he recruited me. It is meaningless to compare between platoons and come to some arbitrary choice on who was better or worse.)

That reason was why Fie was very open about her results in the test — namely that she had lost her bout.

It was not as if her fellow squires made fun of Fie for her revelation. They understood why Fie was chosen for the 18th: because she was small.

For a while after that, the youthful squires, who generally considered a tall height to be a boon, started feeling envious of the much shorter Fie. The phenomenon had started with Gees, who apparently took it upon himself to squat down to about Fie's height, before mysteriously saying: "So... this is your world..." Upon witnessing that, countless other squires took to doing the same, and Fie could not help but come to the conclusion that men were somewhat silly. However, their actions were not malicious, and Fie found it all in good fun, and took part in the activity herself.

However, as word of Fie's assignment grew, so did the volume of the voices of dissent.

"I mean, aren't you from Teornoah, anyway? You're probably poor or an illegal immigrant, right? How can you even think about being a knight!"

Fie had learned the meaning of "from Teornoah" after Crow had explained it to her, and she had thanked Crow for his help. After all, ever since coming to this kingdom, Crow was the one who had helped her out the most — although Crow himself knew next to nothing about her circumstances.

And as such, although Fie did not think that highly of herself, one thing that Yore had said remained in her mind.

To take pride in herself, and stand proud.

This was why Fie matched the youths' gazes without withdrawing a single step.

"It is true that I am weak, and am an individual of indeterminable origin. However, I had abilities that were wanted — and that was why I was assigned to the 18th Knights. That's all there is to it. There's nothing good or bad about it. Also, nationality is not a deciding factor in if one can become a knight or not in Orstoll."

Although she had just arrived here, Fie had already established an unlikely reputation of being stubborn and unyielding when it came down to it — something which caught the boys off guard. They had thought that she would be easy to bully, especially with her small frame and cute, almost girlish face... In addition to having lost in the first bout of the tests.

"Ugh... Hmph, someone like you couldn't possibly get in. I bet you paid your way in with some sort of bribe!"

"Yeah, it must be something dirty like that!"

In that moment, Fie's eyes narrowed, and froze. To their obviously antagonizing and condescending expressions, she smiled, ever so slightly.

Fie was angry.

To claim that Fie was poor, or an illegal immigrant was one thing — but

claiming that she had bribed her way into the 18th was something else. The issue did not quite lie with Fie, however.

“Are you two stupid? Do you think the Captain is that kind of person?”

In the week that she had become a squire, Fie had more or less become one of Master Yore’s loyal worshipers. Although all the squires looked up to Yore, there was a particularly intensely devoted — maybe even crazed, faction within the squires.

To begin with, Yore was the first person who made Fie feel needed in her entire life. In the short week of her being a squire, her comrades in the dormitory had regaled her with tales of Yore’s exploits, and this all served to further intensify Fie’s unwavering devotion.

And this was how Fie looked up to, trusted in, and became willing to do almost anything for Knight-Captain Yore — it was the birth of Fie as a Yore groupie. To someone who loved Master Yore with all of her being, to even hear a suggestion that she had bribed a way into his personal unit was tantamount to an insult against his very person... In addition to insulting the 18th Knights, and all its incredibly skilled members.

However, Fie knew that getting angry wouldn’t reflect well on her maturity. After all, Knight-Captain Yore would not get riled up at a few verbal barbs from some squires. And that was why Fie found them pitiable, and smiled.

Finding that they were now the ones being ridiculed by Fie’s cold, demeaning smile, the squires’ faces turned red.

“Y-You! You think you’re so smart, picking at people’s words...!”

“Yeah, just like one of them poor folk!”

“Hmph.”

Fie didn’t exactly remember picking apart their words or engaging in foul play, but at the same time, she felt a little silly for engaging with the youths, who seemed to only endlessly repeat their small menagerie of insults.

“Could you please get out of the way? I feel like I’m getting stupider just talking to you.”

Although Fie had no longer wished to interact with them in any way or form, the two youths blocked her path. They stared holes into Fie's head, but they did not actually seem to have the guts to physically strike her.

Just then, an enormous silhouette surfaced from behind them.

"What the hell are you guys doing?"

The speaker had a built and muscled body that one would not think belonged to a young squire. He had a gorilla-like, strong-edged face. Gormus.

Upon seeing Gormus, the two youths' expressions transformed into one of glee.

"Hey Gormus! This little thing here is gloating about his first bout even though he lost to you! He thinks he's so great, being assigned to the 18th!"

"Yeah that's right! Please teach him a lesson!"

To come all the way here but not have the courage to raise a fist for themselves — such were the pathetic souls of these boys. Fie thought it was a miracle that people like them had managed to pass the test.

However, she was cognizant of the situation — if Gormus had joined in, there was no way she could win. If it came down to it, Fie was prepared to grit her teeth and fight them off, but Gormus was a different story. She had fought him in the bouts personally, so she knew of his strength. Although she had a wooden sword, Fie could not beat him. And if they were to engage in fisticuffs, Fie would have virtually no chance of winning.

Seeing an opportunity, the bullies moved to surround Fie — not that this intimidated her. She was prepared to make their lives difficult.

Glancing up at her opponents, Fie tried to gauge their movements, when her eyes met with Gormus'. And then Gormus grabbed the two youths by their collars, and summarily lifted them off the ground.

"Why do I have to listen to what the two of you punks are saying? I'll kick your asses."

In the face of Gormus' strong stare, the youths made their escape, crying as they did so.

Fie looked up at Gormus in spite of herself. He was grinning — the very same grin he had given her when they first met.

“Hmph. You find them anywhere, don’t you? Like weeds. Idiots who are small and insignificant, and don’t know how to pick fights.”

“Seems like I’ve heard those words somewhere before...”

Not used to Gormus’ familiar tone of speech, Fie eyed him warily.

“Don’t be stupid. That was me making fun of you because I’m strong. It wasn’t because you’re small.”

“Yeah. You’re strong, all right.”

Fie had no choice but to admit that. Through a string of coincidences, she had managed to go far in the bout, but it would not have been strange if she had fallen by his hand right away. Even with luck on her side and hard work on Fie’s end, she could not win against him.

“Hahaha. So you admit it, huh. I’m really strong. Of course I’ll win.”

Folding his arms, Gormus laughed haughtily, before pointing to a bandage stuck onto his forehead with a single finger. That was where Fie’s sword had hit him with all her might.

“But... the one who gave me the most trouble was you, even though you lost to me in the first round. Your irritating movements, stubbornness, and your little petty tricks. You’re really the worst.”

With those words, Fie suddenly understood Gormus’ acknowledgment of her skills.

“I see, so the one who gave you the most trouble was me.”

“That’s right. So don’t care about what those two idiots say.”

“Yeah.” Fie let out a happy but embarrassed laugh in spite of herself.

Sitting down in a chair next to Fie, Gormus spoke, a serious expression on his face.

“It was my bad for calling you a kid and asking you to go home. You did all you could. There’s guts in that.”

“Yeah... Don’t worry about it. Also... I’m sorry for calling you a gorilla.”

“Yeah... Maybe you could give that a rest. Don’t wanna think about that too much...”

Upon remembering the infamous gorilla incident, Gormus took on a relatively sullen expression. Although remorseful, Fie explained that she was merely returning the favor at the time, and insisted that he didn’t quite look like a gorilla at all. However, in her heart, Fie felt that even if he really did look like one, Gormus would be a cool gorilla.

Reassured by Fie, Gormus’ normal expression returned to his features, and he held out a fist in Fie’s direction.

“Well, the next time we fight it won’t be so easy or convenient, so you had best prepare yourself. The next time, I’ll blow you away with a single hit.”

“Then I’ll find new ways and tactics to mess with you. I’ll work hard and think of them every day!”

“Hmph... Punk. First, go learn how to swing your sword...”

Fie’s response, without a single shred of chivalry in it, turned Gormus’ face an unhealthy shade of blue.

“So... since you came out top in the finals of the test, does this mean you’re the strongest amongst all the squires?”

Having registered Gormus as a friend, Fie reverted back to her usual self, casually posing the question to Gormus.

“Of course! ...Is what I would like to say, but the aspirants for that test are split into many small blocks. There is no way to know. There were 11 more people who made it to the finals. Although... I’m probably the strongest.”

“I see... So you’re just in the top 12, huh?”

“Oi, you!”

Suddenly stripped of his title of strongest candidate, Gormus stared daggers at Fie intensely once more.

“Ahaha. Both you and I have to work hard, Gormus.”

“Ahh. That’s right.”

And then the two of them turned to face each other, and laughed heartily.

Sir Crow’s Journal

About Heath. Seems like he’s getting along just fine with dormitory life.

He went on a shopping trip with his friends recently, and he was kinda happy when I gave him his allowance.

How nostalgic — when I was a squire myself, I walked around the streets of the capital and picked up tons of girls— (CENSORED)

Chapter 6 — Training Begins

So it came to be that the training regimen for the squires began.

Much like a normal school, the squires sat for the earlier half of the day in a classroom, learning about various subjects such as history, mathematics, and languages. It was the principle and general direction of the Orstoll Royal Knights to not only train the body, but also hone the mind — in addition to training its squires on social etiquette and manners.

Currently, the bespectacled instructor was teaching the squires about the history of Orstoll, and how it came to be a Great Kingdom.

“Gormus... You mustn’t sleep!”

Fie shot glances at her friend, finally pinching Gormus on the cheek in a futile attempt to wake him. It had been barely ten minutes since the beginning of the lesson, and Gormus was already sprawled out on the desk before him.

“Don’t wake me... Heath... I don’t care about stuff like this... It’s boring and pointless and I don’t get it... I’m going back to sleep...”

“You can’t! Captain Yore said that to be a good knight of Orstoll, you have to familiarize yourself with its history!”

“That’s all you keep saying... Yore Yore Captain Yore, Captain, don’t you ever get tired of it?”

“What the Captain says is true!”

“Hey... Your voice is too loud...!”

“Heath, Gormus, be quiet!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Pardon us...”

In the end, the two of them were roundly reprimanded by the instructor.

“It’s all your fault, Gormus...”

“More like it’s because you didn’t shut up...”

Fie and Gormus were, once again, having a whispered conversation across the space between their seats.

For the period before noon, Fie and Gormus happened to have been assigned to adjacent seats. Fie’s small body struck a vivid contrast against Gormus’ large stature, and it seemed like it somehow made sense to position the two in such a way.

The two of them did not know this, but Fie was actually one of the few squires who was not afraid to speak to Gormus on a daily basis. With that strong-edged face and large stature, Gormus cut an intimidating figure — and it was perhaps to be expected that quite a few squires were afraid of him.

“Show me your notes later, Heath.”

“Take your own...”

Slad and his compatriots could only watch over Fie tensely as she exchanged carefree comments with Gormus.

“He pinched Gormus’ cheek... He’s quite something, that Heath...”

“Yeah... Heath is pretty awesome...”

Inevitably becoming aware of the whispers surrounding her, Fie thought to herself:

(While it is true that he has a bad mouth and can seem kind of rough... He really isn’t that scary. I guess I can’t really take the moral high ground here... After all, when I first met him, I just thought he was terribly bad-natured...)

Fie had become aware that Gormus had lived amidst the misunderstandings and misconceptions of others — her own included.

Training for the squires started at noon.

“AAALLLLLLLRIGHT! It’s time for training!”

Gormus was happy about the turn of events, but Fie was on fire.

(All right, let’s do this! I’ll catch up with everyone all at once!)

And soon noontime training began.

“I’m the one in charge of training up you guys. Name’s Heslow. I’m gonna train you up real good, so prepare yourselves.”

With his arms crossed, Heslow seemed strict and somewhat rigid, casting his gaze over the squires assembled in front of the north dormitory.

“Ugh, our instructor is Heslow, huh...”

“He’s taking the north dorm this year... We got really unlucky...”

A wave of whispers spread out amongst the gathered squires. It seemed like he had quite a reputation as an instructor. Amongst those who had aspired to become knights, it appeared to be common practice to gather information on the Royal Knights as an organization.

In the week before training had formally started, many squires spoke to their seniors, receiving insider information as a result. As such, someone like Fie, who had absolutely no idea what she was getting into, was comparatively rare.

Fie, in turn, had spent her week speaking with the various individuals of the 18th Knights. In particular, Fie sought out Knight-Captain Yore on several occasions, spending cherished time speaking with him about various matters.

Due to the fact that the 18th Knights were comprised of members specifically scouted by Yore, there were no other squires other than Fie — and as such, Fie had no opportunity to ask a more senior squire for assorted tips and tricks. On the other hand, Crow wasted no time in regaling Fie with how many cute servant girls he had dated as a squire, as well as a romance with the eldest daughter of a noble family.

(His habits with regards to women are truly terrible... If it wasn’t for that, he would be a really good guy...)

Looking at what appeared to be a truly ecstatic Crow recount his memories of youth and the women he had been with, Fie decided to just let it slide, not retaining very much of the information at all.

It was also worth noting that Crow did mention something along the lines of: “All instructors teach squires with their best interests in mind. Just listen to

what they say and it'll work out."

Yore, in turn, had advised Fie to learn as much as she could from the squires around her.

"Stop whispering amongst yourselves! From this moment on, you will be taught the ways of the sword, your body will be honed, and you will undertake various training regimens! But all that means nothing if you have no stamina. That's why you are all going to be building stamina from now on, for a solid month. Start running!"

At the mention of the word "running," the squires collectively expressed a sigh of distaste. After all, the youths readily took to swordplay training and other more flashy regimens, but balked at the idea of aimless running.

Slad, as well as the squires around him, all shared an expression of disbelief.

Unexpectedly, Remie enjoyed running — although this could perhaps be attributed to his easygoing nature.

Gees' expression, on the other hand, did not change very much at all.

"I'll be first!" was what Gormus had to say as he eagerly performed his warm-up exercises.

"I'm going to do all I can to catch up to you, Gormus!" Next to him, Fie was doing the same exercises.

Gormus poked Fie square in the forehead.

"Are you a fool? You don't have any stamina at all, to the point where it's a bit sad. You know this from the test. Run at your own pace!"

After all, Gormus had become very aware of Fie's lack of stamina after witnessing her muscle cramp during the test. It was true that Gormus had attacked her savagely, and that she had, in turn, performed a series of reckless actions. Honestly speaking, however, Fie's stamina was indeed problematic for a squire. Her ill-conditioned body and her disproportionately large courage (for her small frame) made for a particularly bad combination.

"Ugh..." Fie could not help but acknowledge Gormus' words. After all, he was right, and so Fie gave up on following in Gormus' stride. However, Fie had still

wanted to do her best for Yore, and her inner fire still raged on — so she promptly forgot her resolution to restrain herself.

The one piece of advice that both Yore and Crow had given to her: “Don’t overdo it.”

It was perhaps worth mentioning that Fie had the least amount of stamina amongst all the squires. This was to be expected, however. In comparison to the youths who had aspired to be knights from a young age and trained in the ways of the sword, in addition to martial arts; Fie, who had lived as a princess, and had up until recently been taking classes in social manners, could not hope to compare with any of her fellow squires at this point in time.

The squire’s running regimen was meant to build up their physical stamina and tolerance — it was an exacting activity even for those who were used to such exertions.

Leading the pack was Gormus. Following up close behind was, unexpectedly, Remie. In addition to him not hating running, Remie also seemed to be particularly good at covering long distances. He stayed close to Gormus, clinging to his shadow and easily matching his pace.

Gormus, on the other hand, was not very good at long-distance running at all. This was to be expected, however, given the size of his body, as considerable input was required to move his bulk.

Gormus thought to himself:

(If memory serves... this guy hangs around with Heath. He has the face of a sheep, without a care in the world. His running speed is really something else. But I won’t lose!)

Gritting his teeth, Gormus kept up the lead.

Slad, Gees, and the other squires stayed in the middle of the bunch, with Slad looking like he wasn’t exactly having a great time. Gees, however, had his usual stoic expression on.

Coming in dead last was Fie.

Panting and claiming that she would catch up between breaths, Fie kept going as far as her legs would carry her. At around the halfway point, Fie's face had turned an unpleasant shade of blue — however, nary a single complaint rose from her lips.

"Hey Heath, are you all right?"

Even the one colloquially known as the "demon coach" to the other squires continuously asked after Fie, a tinge of worry evident in his voice.

To begin with, Heslow only ever yelled at squires who could evidently do more, but were slacking off out of laziness. Perhaps it was a phase, but lazy squires were a common sight in the Royal Knights. However, the student squire before his eyes had long reached his limit — and yet still insisted on moving.

"Heath, if you feel unwell, you may stop."

"I'm... fine... I'm... sorry... can't... breathe... Can't... talk much..."

In other words, Fie had pushed herself to the point where even speaking was becoming impossible. However, she displayed no signs of wanting to stop.

Heslow didn't know if he should stop this particular squire or not. While it was true that Heslow was enthusiastic and passionate as an instructor, he was young and did not have much experience himself.

Eventually, all the squires but Fie started to approach their goal.

"Hey... is he okay?"

Gormus glanced at Fie, who was currently continuing to run even though her body was swaying from side to side. Gormus was the first squire to reach the goal in the north dormitory. Remie, who had been following Gormus all this time, was next — Gormus had shaken him off in the final moments of the course.

"It's a little worrying..." Remie, who crossed the line shortly after Gormus, made a worried observation.

As the other squires all made it to their goal, only Fie remained, struggling along.

"Don't push yourself."

“I... I can do it...” Fie had a definitive answer to Heslow’s voice. Drenched in sweat, she continued to run.

However, Fie had used up all her strength in her muscles and body — her legs could no longer move. But she felt a clearly observed gap between herself and the other squires, so she thought she should at least see through the training that was provided to her.

“If... I am taking up your time... please go ahead with the rest, instructor... I... will finish up on my own...” Fie gasped, between painful breaths.

“Heath... Do your best...” Witnessing his friend’s struggle, Remie clasped his hands, as if in prayer.

“Ahaha, told you so. That tiny runt can’t possibly become a knight.”

“Yeah that’s right! That’s what happens to peasants who try to become knights!”

The youths from last night, seeing Fie’s troubles, wasted no time in ridiculing her efforts.

“Shut up, you punks. If you don’t shut up I’ll friggin’ kill you.”

“I won’t let you get away with insulting Heath.”

“You can count me in on that.”

“Me too...”

It wasn’t just Gormus — the combined stares of Slad, Remie, and Gees promptly silenced the dissenting youths.

Although Fie was beginning to lose consciousness, her legs continued to move. She had to catch up with everyone else. The first people who needed and valued her existence since her birth. To become a useful knight to Captain Yore.

The other squires could not wait for Heath all day — and so they moved on to their strength training regimen. However, Gormus and the rest stayed behind, watching over the still-running Fie.

And eventually, Fie reached the goal, having taken more than twice the time of the slowest squire in the northern dormitory. Covered in sweat, she looked

like she was in bad shape.

“You did it, Heath...” Remie, in particular, seemed like he was ready to cry upon seeing her poor state.

The other three were also acutely aware of Fie’s pallor, and had apprehensive expressions on their faces. Unfortunately, it was as they had expected — a few seconds after reaching the goal, Fie collapsed, like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Heath!”

Heslow, Gormus, and the others rushed to Fie’s side in a panic.

Roy, the King of Orstoll, was speaking to his officials.

Crow picked that particular moment in time to show up.

“Oi, Roy!”

“What is it?”

Although they were in front of officials, Crow’s attitude hardly changed.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Marquess Harbald.”

The officials who had been speaking with Roy greeted Crow in a reverent manner.

“Haha, stop that. While it’s true that my father is quite something, I’m just an ordinary knight.”

“Oh no, no, that would not do at all...”

(It would probably take a lot more to anger these magistrate types. Well, not like I’m going to suddenly change how I act.)

Crow hailed from a noble family that wielded considerable power in the Kingdom of Orstoll, and he was also Roy’s childhood friend. He never did quite get used to the formalities showered upon him by Roy’s officials — after all, in his own eyes, he was just a knight.

However, Crow was aware that he had an informal tone with almost everyone. He eschewed formalities, even speaking with the King this way on

account of them being childhood friends. As such, no one could really complain about that part of him.

“So? Did something happen?”

“Well... you told me to watch after Heath. That boy... he immediately overdid it in training and collapsed.” Scratching his head, Crow relayed the news to Roy, sighing all the while.

“I see.” Roy nodded once, before turning to his officials without hesitation. “Something came up. I’ll be going now.”

“Y-Your Highness? There is a meeting in five minutes?”

“Yes. About that meeting, I have more or less assigned and instructed you on the direction it will take. I will now leave the rest in your capable hands.”

With that, Roy left his officials behind, making his way to the northern dormitory. Following after him was Crow, wearing his usual wry smile.

“Where is Heath?”

“Currently resting on a bed in the sick bay.”

(How pathetic... I have to do much better next time...)

That was what Fie thought as she lay on a bed in the sick bay, staring up at the ceiling.

“Ahh. Look at this guy. You have the face of someone who’s done a little too much, again.”

Out of nowhere, Crow had approached Fie’s bed.

“Huh? Sir Crow. Wah! What are you doing?!”

Crow approached Fie and promptly swept her up in a princess hold. Upon seeing Fie’s embarrassed expression, Crow could not help but laugh.

“I’ve come to deliver you to a lecture for silly platoon members who overexert themselves. Captain Yore is going to give you a hell of a scolding, just you wait.”

“The Captain is...?”

A lecture... Fie wondered if she had done something bad. Oh, it must have been because something as simple as running had caused her to fall over. It was true, after all, that her performance at training had been pathetic. Perhaps it was a given that the Knight-Captain would be angry.

That very same Fie that was stewing with worry had been scooped up by Crow with just one arm — after which Crow proceed to flick Fie on the nose with a free finger.

“Ouch!”

“You idiot. That isn’t it.”

“But I haven’t even said anything yet...”

“I can tell from your face. You are very easy to read, you know that?”

So it seemed that Fie was wrong in her assumptions about something. Then, what was the Captain upset about? Fie tilted her head to one side.

“You’re light, you know. Like a girl.”

“L-Leave me alone...”

Escorted along in Crow’s arms, Fie was delivered into a small, quiet courtyard at the back of the castle. No one else was in it or around it — except for Yore.

“So you came...” Yore observed, in his typically quiet manner, after observing Fie’s arrival. Crow motioned for Fie to sit in a chair that had been prepared for her in advance. Without a word, Yore placed a hand on the hilt of a sword sheathed at his waist.

(Eh...? He’s... going to cut me in half? Is he that angry...!?)

In the face of Yore’s serious expression, Fie realized she was being a little silly. After all, there was no precedent or reason for Yore to just slice her in half on the spot. That was obvious, but...

Around Yore were about five wooden dummies.

“Observe, Heath.” Yore drew his sword.

In a flash of silver, the wooden dummies around Yore were felled, all five

being cut down by the same single stroke.

In Fie's eyes, Yore's movements were all but invisible.

"What do you think, Heath?"

"Th-That's amazing, Captain."

It really was amazing. The speed of the sword was one thing, but the level of swordplay was notable in its own right. Although the dummies were scattered around in odd positions, they were all cut in the correct places.

(This amazing technique... Such a thing would be unthinkable in Daeman...)

Fie was silenced by the sheer show of force and skill in Yore's swordplay.

"Heath... Do you think you could copy what I just did in, say, a week...?"

"N-No... It's impossible..."

There was no way she could do something like that. Even if Fie had trained for her entire lifetime, she was unsure if she could ever do something like that.

"That's right. After all, I had trained in the ways of the sword for eighteen years."

"Eighteen years..."

(Even for someone as skilled as Captain Yore, it took that long...)

Fie gulped involuntarily, still paralyzed in awe by what she had just seen.

"This applies not only to you, but to all the squires around you. For five, ten years — all the way up until now, they had been training to condition their bodies."

(That's right... Then I have to work even harder...)

"You're wrong."

Just as Fie was about to respond, Yore interrupted her, shaking his head as he did so.

"Listen to what I said. This took eighteen years. Imagine this — if you could simply wake up one morning and have a strong body and knowledge of technique, no one would train for five to ten years. In fact, if you think you can

catch up so easily, you are making light of the efforts of those around you. Do you not remember? I told you to learn from those around you. And that means holding those around you in high esteem, while also respecting their strength."

With that, Fie suddenly came to a realization.

"Let me phrase it this way, Heath. Don't think about catching up to those around you. You'd have to train for five years to catch up — ten years once they have trained for another five. That is how much time, blood, and effort they have put into this. And as for you, aren't you doing the same, aiming to be a knight with the adequate training and process, from this point in time?"

"Y-Yes...!"

That was true. Fie was going to continue training. Even if she could not catch up with her peers, over time, she would surely walk in their footsteps over the course of her own journey.

"If you continue to overexert yourself and get injured in the process, the days where you can work to better yourself will be greatly reduced. Is that acceptable to you?"

"N-No it isn't! It's not acceptable, Captain!"

"Yes. If you push yourself too hard and overdo it, the actual time you can spend training is in fact, reduced. That isn't a good thing. Do you understand, Heath?"

"Yes, Captain! I won't overdo it ever again!"

Still seated, Fie performed a salute that she remembered from her etiquette lessons. Crow watched over her diminutive form with his usual smile.

Seemingly satisfied, Yore nodded at his charge.

"Then, I shall be going. I have matters to attend to."

"Yes! Thank you very much!"

As Yore turned to leave, Fie straightened up and bowed deeply.

Fie carved those words into her chest. Amazing swordplay aside, those were the words of guidance that Fie really needed.

(It is as I thought! The Captain really is an amazing person!)

Fie was truly grateful for having been assigned to the 18th Knights, and for becoming Knight-Captain Yore's subordinate.

From then on, Fie no longer overexerted herself. The day after collapsing, she attended her studies as usual.

"Seems like Yore has prepared a special training plan for you, Heath."

"The Captain did...?"

Without saying much more, the training plan that Crow had handed over was silently implemented the very next day. The implementation itself was left to Heslow, and as such Fie herself did not have to do very much other than follow instructions.

Fie stood out, of course, now having been separated from the rest. While there were people like the two bullies who made fun of her, Fie herself did not pay it much heed, and they were eventually silenced by Gormus and Fie's companions' stares.

The plan was full of notes and special instructions, but it mainly focused upon stretches and other flexibility exercises.

It was organized in phases, with the aim of matching Fie's bodily stamina. To build stamina, Fie was assigned certain regimens, including running, strength, assorted acrobatics, and how to adequately protect oneself when falling. The stretches and acrobatics alone filled up half the activities.

However, Fie was able to execute said stretches and acrobatics with ease, jumping straight to the highest level.

"That guy sure is something... What is he, an invertebrate?"

"Actually, that's a little disgusting..."

The strangely-dressed Fie, who was rolling around in a corner of the sporting grounds, was regarded as a strange life form by the other squires doing their running — and even Gormus and Fie's companions regarded her training with mystified expressions as they ran past.

Witnessing Fie perform these feats that they themselves could never do, without raising a single complaint, the squires who ridiculed and belittled Fie eventually thinned out, and finally disappeared altogether.

Fie always ate a lot of food at dinner time.

“It’s delicious! So delicious!”

“Is it that good, to the point where you have to announce it every time? I mean, it isn’t bad...”

“Yeah! It’s delicious!”

When Fie had lived her life as a princess, she had hardly expressed much interest in eating, but nowadays she had developed quite the appetite. Her near-starvation survival experience in the back pavilion struck quite the contrast to her current life as a squire — and perhaps that had taught her the joy of eating.

Dark recollections and unfortunate circumstances aside, it was true that Fie honestly found her food delicious. However, today Fie only had one bowl’s worth of food, and then stopped unexpectedly.

“Huh? Is that enough for you?” Remie asked.

Usually, Fie would be pining for more after the first bowl.

“Yeah, it’s because Sir Crow said that I should maintain my body shape as much as possible.”

Although she wanted to eat a lot more, Fie was willing to undergo this trial for the sake of Yore and the others.

“I see.”

“It does seem like they’re training you quite differently after all.”

After all, squires were usually encouraged to eat generously and build themselves up. Although there were some exceptions, the basic direction promoted a build centered around power — and so bigger was better. Gormus was a good example of this.

“Pretty strict, aren’t they?”

“Yeah...” Fie responded.

Slad nodded, pretending that he hadn’t seen Fie staring at his stew enviously.

Sir Crow’s Journal

That Heath has already gone and done it, so quickly too. When I heard he fell over during training, I was so worried — but also kind of stunned and at a loss of words.

Well, the important thing is that he didn’t sustain any serious injuries. Seems like he realizes he messed up, too.

However... it seems like he’s really stuck onto Roy. As his senior, I’m a little jealous of that. I mean, I take quite good care of him too, you know. But all he says is, “Is it that woman-chasing talk of yours again?” and then he stares at me with those cold eyes of his.

Why...

To begin with, if he’s at that age, shouldn’t he be more interested in talking about girls? No?

Chapter 7 — Fellows of the 18th Platoon

A month had passed since Fie's entry into the Royal Knights.

And today was Saturday. It was the day when squires received individual instruction or participated in activities with their assigned platoons.

"Good morning!"

"Welcome Heathy. I'll make some tea for you!"

The one who greeted Heath was the plain-faced Conrad, seated in the converted warehouse that housed the 18th Knights. He was brewing tea as usual, with today's feature being cinnamon tea.

Although Fie was grateful for the warm reception each time she showed up, she could not help but wonder if Conrad engaged in training or assignments at all.

Ever since Fie had been assigned to the 18th Knights, she had noticed that Conrad was always there for one reason or another.

"Authentic tea from the Kingdom of Fenam. I had it delivered, you know. How is it? Is it good?"

"Yes, it's delicious."

The cinnamon tea that Conrad had prepared gave off a sweet aroma. Its fragrance matched its taste — the tea was indeed delicious.

Seated opposite Fie, Conrad had his face propped up on one hand, observing her silently with an obvious smile. As to what Conrad was smiling about, however, Fie was not quite sure.

(He really is an unfathomable person...)

It almost seemed like Conrad had no particular traits that made him stand out. His gentle nature reminded Fie of her friend, Remie, but something about Conrad was different.

In fact, he was very, very different.

After all, Remie never had an enigmatic smile on his face — one that prevents anyone from discerning what one's intents or feelings really were.

(Come to think of it, what does Conrad specialize in again...?)

When everyone was introducing themselves, other than the mute Orbel, who required some assistance from Crow, Fie had learned all her fellow knights' fields of expertise... except for Conrad's.

"Hey Conrad, what do you specialize in again?"

"It's a secret." Conrad answered Fie's straightforward question with a wink, his index finger placed over his lip in a teasing gesture.

(This guy... He's impossible...)

And so, Fie gave up on her line of inquiry with regards to Conrad's person.

After they had finished their tea, Captain Yore and Crow promptly made their entrance from beyond the sliding doors.

"Good morning, Captain! And Sir Crow!"

Fie quickly rose from her chair, assuming a salute that had already become second nature.

"I see you are well today, Heath."

"Yes!"

"What, I'm just an add-on?"

"Well, that's because I run into you more often..."

"Hey hey, you're so blunt. You should know that I've been tasked with always looking out for you, you know?"

"I see! Thank you very much!"

"It's weird to thank me only after I pointed that out..."

Although they were in the same unit, Captain Yore's relatively busy schedule meant that Fie could not meet with him very often at all. As such, Fie assumed that Captain Yore carried out various assignments and tasks even on his off

days.

“Leave the banter at that. We’re keeping Orbel waiting.”

Sure enough, Orbel was nowhere to be seen in their headquarters. That being said, this wasn’t all that strange. After all, amongst the 18th Knights, many of them were often absent due to being tasked (and hence out on) one assignment or another.

(But... we’re keeping Orbel waiting? I wonder what he’s doing...)

Fie had thought to inquire, but then suddenly remembered Captain Yore’s recent statement on banter — and so she could not find it in her to pose the question.

With his arms folded, Yore stood in front of Fie, and she raised her head to see why.

“Heath. For today, I’m having you participate in this assignment as well.”

“An a-assignment...!?”

For the month that Fie had joined the Royal Knights as a squire, she had trained daily, but had never been offered an assignment. Actually, she had no real memories of what really happened every Saturday.

For her part, Fie had dutifully carried out her personalized training regimen. However, her Saturdays were usually spent drinking tea with Conrad, listening to Crow’s tales of romance and flirting, botany with Orbel, glancing at Parwick’s archery training, or observing what Garuge was currently making... In addition to checking every now and then to see if Captain Yore would show up.

When he did show up, Fie would give him a report of the day, and hope to speak with him for a moment or two.

The other squires, however, took part in Saturday patrols of the town, and other simpler assignments along that vein. From that angle, Fie was a little envious of her friends.

However, on this day, Fie herself had been granted an assignment.

Yore and company ended up bringing Fie to the suburbs outside the capital — particularly, to a large mansion where very rich individuals seemed to live. They made the journey by horse, but as Fie did not have any riding experience whatsoever, she was seated in the front of Crow's saddle instead. Crow and Yore's horseback skills were impressive, to say the least.

Conrad was notably absent from the expedition. He did, however, see Fie out to the door, waving and cheering her on with his ever-smiling face.

(I wonder what he really does...)

It seemed like the mystery of Conrad only deepened over time.

Around the mansion were stationed what appeared to be lookouts. Circling around to the back of the mansion under the cover of its surrounding foliage, the group came across Orbel, who had been keeping his horse and himself low to avoid detection.

Having skillfully hidden his large body in the shadows of foliage, Orbel raised his hand, to casually greet them with a silent "Hey." Crow and Yore promptly led their own steeds away by the reins, presumably to hide them in a secure spot.

After the deed was done, it was finally time for Fie to receive her assignment briefing from Crow.

"This is the villa of a certain merchant by the name of Kanzarl. It is known that he's involved in a continent-wide human trafficking organization. This villa is used as a sort of warehouse for hiding the kidnapped victims... At least, those are the rumors. If we were to conduct a regular investigation, news would no doubt reach him first, and he would hide all the evidence. And if we take too long, the victims may be sold into slavery. And that's why we're going straight in to gather evidence. We have to do this quickly."

"I see..."

However, Fie thought that this was easier said than done. If these individuals were really involved in human trafficking, and by extension, the slave trade, there would be guards on the inside of the building as well. Fie did not understand how it was possible for a few knights to sneak in undetected.

“This is where you come in.”

“Am I going to pretend that I’ve been kidnapped? Sure, I don’t mind.”

Fie had thought that she would impress Captain Yore with her quick thinking — should she pretend to be kidnapped, she would be housed with the other victims, and as such obtain the needed evidence right away.

“No.”

“That’s not it. While it’s true that we’re going to have you infiltrate the place, we’re doing so from the top.”

“Huh?” Fie cocked her head at Crow’s words.

Leaving Captain Yore and Orbel behind, Fie followed behind Crow to an area close to the back of the villa. Right next to Fie’s and Crow’s hiding spots in the shadows were three guards. Without a word, Crow leapt out of the bushes, knocking out all three guards without a sound.

(Amazing...)

Crow had displayed immense strength in his ambush. Although the squires had practiced unarmed combat as part of their training regimen, Fie had not seen such power and speed even from an instructor.

(As I thought, Sir Crow is an amazing person...)

Fie was dazzled by this amazing display.

Receiving a hand signal from Crow, Fie quietly made her way into the villa via the back door. There were no windows — it was a blind spot in the building. Perhaps that was why as many as three guards had been stationed at that particular location, although they had all been knocked out by Crow.

“Let’s see... According to the information we received from the villa’s architects... it should be somewhere around here.”

Mumbling to himself softly, Crow searched the upper sections of the walls intently, as if looking for something hidden.

“Ah, yes. Here it is. Right here,” Crow said, and he pulled on a block-shaped section of the wall. As he did so, that specific part of the wall detached itself

from its surroundings, revealing a square hole that was no more than 35 centimeters in width.

Holding Fie under the arms, Crow promptly boosted her upwards, and soon she was looking into the hole in question.

“How is it? Can you get in?” he asked.

According to Crow, this was a hole connected to a central air ventilation system, and from there one could access any ceiling across the villa.

Fie, for her part, slithered into the hole without too much effort.

Upon entering the hole, she found herself in a slightly bigger — but still somewhat cramped space. She was, however, able to turn around, and with a somewhat dissatisfied expression, stuck her head out of the ventilation hole.

“Don’t tell me that this was what I was hired to do...?”

It was indeed true that other than Fie, no member of the 18th Knights could possibly fit into this hole. The next smallest member after Fie was Conrad, but even he was of a relatively medium build, and as such would not have fit into the hole to begin with.

“Well... to tell the truth, a bit of it was that.” Crow nodded, smiling his usual wry smile.

“Well that’s all right. I can’t fight at all anyway, so if you tell me I’m needed, I can’t really complain about that,” Fie said, though she sulked while delivering that particular statement.

Fie had hoped that if she were chosen, it would be for a more impressive reason. She was dissatisfied — and thought that anyone else would have felt the same way.

“Okay then, please search for the kidnapped victims. If possible, ascertain their positions somehow. If we can find out where they’re being kept, it would be a great help.” Crow handed her what seemed to be a map and a flute. “Oh, and don’t leave the ceiling beams. You’re not allowed to fight — it’s still too soon for you. Get the relevant information and come back. Once you have the location marked, we’ll storm the place and take care of things. Also, if you make

a mistake, or if you find yourself in a pinch, blow on that flute."

"Yes, I understand."

After Crow's final briefing and warnings, Fie disappeared into the narrow ventilation shaft. She moved quickly and quietly, soon fading from Crow's field of view.

It wasn't just a small body that was needed for a feat such as this — a flexible one was required as well. Fie moved like a cat. She had perhaps not realized it, but in the entire Royal Knights of Orstoll, only she had this particular set of skills. It could be said that this was her talent.

"Roy's eyes were right after all, huh." Crow nodded as he watched the little squire disappear into the dark, feeling like he was sending off his little brother.

As Fie moved along the ventilation shaft, she could catch glimpses of rays of light from below. From there, she peeked down at one of the villa's corridors. In that corridor, a few armed men were patrolling. They had a decidedly mean look about them.

No matter what one said, this did not look like a rich merchant's holiday villa at all.

(As Crow said... this is a hideout for a human trafficking organization... I'd better find the victims quickly...)

Fie silently continued along the shaft.

To begin with, the shaft wasn't quite made for humans to pass through. To safely maneuver within it, flexible body movements were required. Fie just happened to have this sprightliness and flexibility from birth — in addition to that, Captain Yore's training had further enhanced those traits, allowing for Fie to now slink though the shaft without a sound.

Normally, people would be afraid of narrow and dark places, but Fie had been born in the shadow of her sister and lived her life in it, so she was not scared at all. Fie resolved not to think about such things — they were sad thoughts.

Above all else, Fie wanted to be useful to Captain Yore. This devotion was

what kept Fie going.

Unnoticed by anyone, Fie explored the villa from above, on the ceiling beams — and she quickly came to a conclusion.

(They're not on the first floor...)

Fie had observed suspicious-seeming rooms from the ceiling, but she was not able to find any traces of anyone being kept captive against their will.

Making a 180 degree turn within the shaft, Fie laid on her back, looking up at the map provided to her with light that streamed up from below. There was no basement.

(Then... the second floor.)

Fie had visual confirmation of where she could move up to the second floor with the aid of the map. After planning out a route, she promptly made her way up to the second floor.

However, there was an unprecedented error in this entire operation: in reality, this assignment was a bit of a trial run for Fie.

If Fie was unable to enter the ventilation shaft, then that would have been that. If she was unable to find the victims on the first floor, then that would have been that. That was what Yore and Crow had thought.

That was why they had specifically told Fie not to leave the safety of the ceiling beams. Neither Roy nor Crow had thought it was possible to enter the second floor from the ventilation shaft.

However, that was exactly what Fie did — having been born with a light body, she braced herself against the shaft with her limbs, slowly climbing up despite never having been taught how to do so.

More than anything else, strong thoughts of devotion kept Fie's body moving.

(For Captain Yore!)

Emerging from the ventilation shaft's darkness, Fie's sneezed slightly, having kicked up clouds of dust via her unorthodox form of entry. And so Fie began her search of the second floor.

(I've found them...)

Fie found it at last — a room housing the victims kidnapped by the human trafficking organization.

Peeking into the room, Fie could make out the forms of about ten women and children with their arms and legs bound. They were all dressed similarly — and they all had dark expressions on their faces. Their eyes were red from crying.

(I'll definitely save you...)

Making up her mind, Fie marked the location on her map, and began making her way back to the entrance.

However, at that moment, the room's door opened with an audible click, and two men stepped in from the corridor beyond.

One man had a somewhat merchant-like air about him. The other was presumably his bodyguard, a suitably armed man. It occurred to Fie that perhaps this was who they were looking for to begin with — the owner of this villa, the merchant Kanzarl.

The merchant-like man grinned poisonously at the kidnapped victims, nodding as he did so.

"It seems like we have some pretty good material here... And more than ten of them too. They'll fetch a good price..."

At that moment, a small shadow moved from somewhere behind the grinning merchant.

One of the kidnapped children was trying to escape. The ropes binding his limbs had either fallen off on their own, or he had somehow removed them — Fie wasn't quite sure.

It was probably because he had seen the open door, and thought to escape there and then.

(No...!)

Fie shouted out in her heart.

The armed man had the child in his sights all along, and soon, the boy was

easily caught. The man violently lifted the child off the ground by his arm.

“Uwaaaaaaaaahh!” The pain caused the child to cry out loudly.

“You fool. Did you really think you could escape? Master Kanzarl, what should we do with this one?”

Kanzarl stared at the child for about three seconds, before responding in a markedly uninterested tone.

“Make an example of him. Hurt him. I don’t care if he dies. It’s a boy, and he isn’t very good material-wise, either. He won’t sell for much.”

“Understood. Heh heh. Don’t blame me if you die, kid. This is all your fault.” The armed man raised a fist, preparing to strike the still-suspended child.

(Don’t you dare!)

A sudden heat washed over Fie’s body.

Reacting before she knew it, Fie had located a place where she could alight from the ceiling beams, and promptly launched herself at the armed man.

“W-What!?”

“Hnn...?”

Kanzarl raised his voice in alarm in response to the unidentified object descending from the ceiling.

Fie came down right above the man’s blind spot — and he had reacted too slowly.

Wielding the sword gifted to her by Garuge, Fie brought it down over the man’s head, scabbard and all. Although he shook, the man did not fall over.

(That’s fine, it’s as I planned!)

Fie had quickly readied herself for a second strike.

In her bout with Gormus, Fie had come to understand her own weakness when it came to strength. And so, to supplement that, Fie had engaged in sword training.

“HA!”

Upon the second blow, the man fell, having been cleanly knocked out.

“Wh-Who the hell are y— Ugh!?”

And so Fie bludgeoned Kanzarl with her sheathed blade before the latter could finish his sentence.

This time, it only took one blow.

Although she had defeated them both, loud sounds could be heard from outside the room.

“I heard something strange!”

“It’s coming from the room where the goods are kept!”

The sound of steadily approaching footsteps came from outside the room.

(This is bad...)

Fie quickly cut the ropes of some of the victims, pleading with them in the process.

“I’ve come to save you! Please, you must help me!”

With the combined strength of the kidnapped victims and Fie, they moved a nearby shelf to act as a barricade against the door.

“Hey, what’s this!?”

“Shit, it won’t open! Master Kanzarl!?”

The men outside began ramming on the door with all their might.

“Something’s blocking it from the inside!”

“Break it down!”

(Kuh... Is this it?)

As this was a usually unused room, the shelf was relatively light — it did not have very much stability to begin with. Those who had their ropes cut were exerting what force they could on the shelf, but Fie was light, and the women were of similar build, in addition to being deprived of their strength from being locked up for an extended period of time.

The force from the other side of the door began to increase. It seemed like

the villa's armed thugs had received reinforcements.

At that moment, the light reflected off the flute that Crow had given Fie.

(I'm sorry, Captain Yore, Sir Crow! Please save us!)

Fie brought the flute to her lips, and blew with all her might.

After hiding the unconscious guards, Crow had been monitoring the surroundings, while waiting for Heath to return.

While Crow was normally very relaxed on assignments, he could not help but be nervous — Heath had still not returned.

"Is he going to be all right...? It was just one floor, so he should have already come back."

Crow eventually became worried in spite of himself.

Perhaps it was his imagination, but the steady stomping of footsteps could be heard from within the villa. Just as Crow was about to step in to intervene...

A high-pitched sound rose from with the villa — a high and long flute note.

(The flute I gave to him!)

Crow immediately set out to find the source of the sound — it didn't take him very long to realize that it was coming from the second floor, of all places.

(That idiot...! Why the hell is he up there...!)

Roy and Orbel dashed out of the forest, with the former promptly raising a question of his own.

"Where is Heath?"

"Probably there!" Crow's finger stabbed at a room on the second floor where the note had originated from.

"The second floor..." Even Roy made a face at this revelation.

At this point, even the guards and lookouts from outside the villa had begun to stream in. If this went on any longer, Heath would be in considerable danger — and so Roy made a snap decision.

“Orbel. Springboard me up to the second floor.” Upon hearing Roy’s words, Orbel nodded, fully understanding his intent.

As Orbel positioned himself near the room that Heath was thought to be in, Roy broke into a run, promptly jumping in Orbel’s direction with all his strength, springing off Orbel’s thick arms and up into the air.

Fie, meanwhile, was holding up the barricade as best as she could. However, she was reaching her limit.

The force from the other side was slowly increasing. They appeared to have a heavy hammer of some sort — both the door and the shelf were in tatters, having absorbed one blow too many.

(They’re going to break through...!)

With a few more thumps, the door that Fie and the women had fought to keep shut was now thrown open.

Although Fie was thrown back, she was ready for it — rolling back into a standing position once more. Assessing the situation, she realized that there were now about five men in the room. It was a number that Fie had no hopes of handling on her own.

(But... I have to do this...!)

In the room, there was no one who could fight other than Fie. And so she gritted her teeth, sword in hand.

What Fie was not prepared for, however, was the sudden sound of crashing glass from a window behind her.

A single man had somehow flown into the room. A single instant was all it took for Fie to recognize him.

“Captain Yore!”

“Heath. Fall back.”

Upon making landfall and giving his orders to Fie, Yore lowered his body like that of a panther, immediately striking the five surprised men with a single

motion of his blade. The men, caught unawares, were promptly felled. Swordplay that someone could fall in love with in an instant — even in this precarious situation.

Seconds later, Crow also flew into the room by the same method.

“Hey hey! Damn it, you sure make us do some crazy things, Heath! Yore! What do we do? Do we run?”

“No. There’s the matter of Heath, along with the women and children. We won’t be able to shake them off. We’ll simply take them down right here instead.”

“Ahh, I thought you would say that!”

“Let’s go.”

Although he was a little shaken by the rough landing, Yore cut an intimidating figure with his drawn sword and unwavering expression. Crow and Yore stood a short diagonal distance away from the door, striking down the enemies the moment they entered the room in a calculated ambush.

Their swordplay was the stuff of legend.

(Amazing... I should do something to help...)

As that thought crossed her mind, Fie tried to take up a position alongside her seniors.

“HEATH! Stay where you are!!”

Without as much as a glance in her direction, the two knights shouted out their simultaneous directions to Heath. And so Fie obeyed her orders, busying herself by cutting the ropes of those still bound by them.

Although the thugs hired by Kanzarl tried their best to defeat Crow and Yore, their large numbers in the narrow surroundings worked against them. A few of the armed men had tried to break through Yore and Crow’s defenses, but even two of them couldn’t take either knight down.

“Kuh, it’s impossible! We can’t break through!”

Right then, a loud boom resonated throughout the building.

“I-Is that a CANNON? Are there other soldiers coming!?”

The armed thugs who had not been defeated by Yore and Crow began to turn tail upon hearing the sound, apparently terrified by it. Seizing their chance, Crow and Yore took one big lunge forwards.

Upon exiting the door, the two of them took down a dozen men simultaneously with their blades.

“Agh! R-Run!”

“These guys are god damn monsters!”

The first thug to turn and run away had barely made it as far as the first corner when he was promptly blown away and into the wall — by what seemed to be a lump of steel.

Slowly but steadily, Orbel emerged from the shadows of the corridor — and in his large arms was an even larger cannon.

Although some of them had gotten away, the three knights alone had taken out almost all the villa’s hired thugs. Advancing in Heath’s general direction, Orbel smiled ever so slightly, raising his thumb as he did so.

Once they had defeated all the enemies in their immediate vicinity, Crow and Yore turned to face Heath.

“Captain... Sir Crow...” Fie approached the two of them out of gratitude.

However, in the very next moment, Crow’s knuckles rapped across her head.

“HEATH! I TOLD you not to stray from the ceiling beams!” Crow was really angry. To see someone as flighty and handsome as Crow this angry was truly a fearsome sight.

“I, I’m sorry... But a child was in danger, and I had to do something about it...”

“Don’t bully him! He saved me!” The rescued children formed a small ring around Fie, as if to protect her.

However, Crow’s anger did not subside.

“What you did was go AGAINST ORDERS! Do you know what kind of a

situation you put yourself in? Obeying your superior's commands is a BASIC TENET of being in a platoon! SURELY your instructors taught you that?!"

"Yes..."

What Crow said was true. Fie's voice was now soft. Now that she had calmed down, Fie realized that she had not only put her own life in danger, but also the lives of Yore and the others who had come to her aid. With this realization, her body froze.

However, at the same time, she could not exactly just leave the child to die... What should she have done? Doubts and questions rose up from within Fie's chest.

Orbel made his way to the angered Crow's side, placing a hand on the latter's shoulder and shaking his head.

The paper he held up said: *"It is not uncommon for newbies to get ahead of themselves. You're being a bit harsh. Heath has a point too."*

However, Crow's anger still did not subside.

"But then you see! If we hadn't made it in time, he would have been KILLED!"

Crow's anger stemmed from his concern for Fie — that much was evident. In reality, it really was a dangerous situation. If Yore had been a second too late, she would undoubtedly have been killed.

Having been silent up until now, Yore stepped forward, drawing the attention and eyes of all those in the room to him.

"Heath."

"Yes..." Upon hearing Yore's call, Fie managed to respond.

"When we move as a platoon, there are times when the correct course of action is not the right thing to do. If you do not have enough strength, you have to put aside your sense of justice... And for you to obtain said strength, time is required, as I have told you before."

Fie nodded at Yore's words.

"I am sure you were troubled as to what choice to make at that point in

time.”

“Yes...”

That was the truth of the matter, whether Fie liked it or not. She had wanted to help them. That was what she had thought, but her own strength was hardly enough to do so. Instead, she had involved innocents around her, and then gotten into a situation she could not get herself out of.

“For you to have an answer, you need to know the exact measure of your own strength. With your ability as you are now, I’m afraid you don’t have the luxury of choosing to save them. Putting your own life in danger, allowing your fellow knights to shoulder risks, saving these children and these kidnapped people — all these things are the results of your actions today. Don’t forget any of it. The path ahead of you is still long. You don’t have to give yourself, or anyone, an answer today. My goal is to train you into a knight with experience and skill — you can seek out the correct answers for yourself then. Until then, we will support you and follow up on your actions as much as we can.”

“I understand.”

The question that had been posed to Fie was one that was posed to all knights of the 18th present that day. Crow, Yore, and Orbel had all had similar thoughts and worries in the past — it was from that point that they had thought about and sought out power with their own strength. To some extent, the answer to that question was personal — more often than not it was the very reason why they were knights to begin with.

Fie nodded at Yore’s words, etching them into her heart lest she would one day forget.

Crow’s rage had also finally subsided, and thus the event was brought to an end — or so it seemed. There was one thing that Captain Yore still had to say.

“However... going against orders is still an offense. You will have to be suitably punished.”

“Ehh!?”

While Fie had no issues receiving some form of punishment for her actions, she had thought that Captain Yore was done with his speech, and the following

statement caused her to emit an almost pathetic wail.

Standing next to Yore was Crow with his arms folded, nodding as he listened to every word.

“Also, the punishment will be for all knights involved. Not only Heath.”

“Ehhh!?” This time, it was Crow who had his eyes wide open in surprise. “Why!?”

“That is because we, as well, have committed a mistake this time. We underestimated Heath. We failed to adequately brief Heath on the mental preparation he would have to undertake for a rescue operation like this one. That is a shared responsibility of the platoon, and it will be shouldered as such.”

“Kuh...”

That was indeed true, however. The appropriate precautions had not been taken because the operation had been thought of as a trial run for their new squire. Looking back on it, it could be easily seen that the briefing provided to Fie was way too simple.

Although squires are taught in their studies to operate as a single platoon, the concept should have been reinforced on this occasion. It was assumed that Fie would automatically withdraw if there were signs of trouble or danger. However, precisely because it went unexpectedly well, Fie was assumed to be able to handle the entire scouting operation on her own, and this was the result.

In addition, what exacerbated this series of mistakes was that Fie had performed over and above their expectations.

Scratching his head, Crow offered an apology to Fie.

“That’s true. We were too naïve with our assumptions. I apologize for getting so angry with you, Heath.”

“No... Of course not. It isn’t your fault.” Fie shook her head at Crow.

“Then, I shall announce our collective punishment—”

“EEEEEEEEHHHHHH!?”

Although Fie had prepared herself mentally for any punishment to come, what she heard caused her to give out a truly sorrowful wail.

And so it came to be that at dinnertime, Fie had her head on the table, tears in her eyes.

“Huh? Heath, you aren’t eating?”

Remie, who had returned to his seat at the table after filling his plate, was the first to ask Fie this question. After all, it was rare for Fie, who had enjoyed eating more than anyone else, to not be having her meals.

“Apparently, he went against his platoon’s orders, and so he can’t eat dinner for three days as punishment...” Gees responded for Fie, who hardly had any energy to talk.

The punishment that Captain Yore had handed out to the platoon was indeed to not eat dinner for three days. And as she sat amongst the squires of the northern dormitory, it had hit Fie, who loved to eat the most, the hardest.

“For three days, no one in the platoon is allowed to have any dinner. In exchange, eat a hearty meal at breakfast.”

Those were Captain Yore’s words.

Fie looked at the stew that Remie was eating enviously.

“You w-want some...? Just one bite is fine, right? No one will know...”

Fie looked like she could even eat Remie himself whole. Remie slowly offered a spoon to Fie as sweat drops began to cluster on his cheek.

However, Fie shook her head.

“No, it’s fine. I can’t break a promise with Captain Yore.”

However, when Slad returned to the table and began eating his hamburger steak, Fie wore her familiar expression of envy once more, gazing upon it longingly as tears flowed freely from her eyes.

“Uwah... I’m so hungry... I’m so envious...”

(Then don’t come to the canteen...)

That was what everyone in the room thought.

On one of Orstoll's streets at night, Crow had his palms together, apologizing to a beautiful woman with a somewhat forceful aura about her.

"I'm sorry, I can't go for dinner tonight!"

"Huh!? Didn't you promise to take me to a restaurant for a delicious dinner? If you're here, doesn't that mean that you have time as well? So why!?"

The woman's face promptly turned red upon Crow's words.

"Well, I just don't have an appetite right now... The reservation has been made, maybe you could go on your own...?"

With that—

"Don't fuck with me! I'll never go on a date with you again!"

And so the woman stormed away, the steady click of her high heels fading into the distance.

To Crow, she was headstrong and beautiful, as well as a great conversationalist — she was just the kind of woman he would be interested in. However, she had her pride as well. She would probably never entertain any of Crow's requests ever again, following an incident like this.

"Well, I guess there's nothing to be done..."

Sighing as he saw her off into the distance, Crow's usual wry smile crept across his features.

Orbel was pouring water into the planters at the 18th Knights' headquarters. The flowers were blooming beautifully, and today, too, he seemed happy.

That night, Roy was still at his desk, deeply engrossed in his work, when one of his officials approached him.

"Your Highness... It will soon be time for you to have dinner with Queen

Fielle...”

Upon hearing that, Roy promptly responded.

“Ah. Apologies, I had forgotten to tell you. Please cancel dinner for tonight.”

“Sire!?” Unable to believe the King’s words, the official posed his question once again. To that specific official, Roy thought for a short while, being delivering unto him the following statement:

“You may distribute my portion of the meal today amongst the kitchen staff. Also, do send my apologies to Queen Fielle. In addition, for the next two days, please tell the kitchen not to prepare my share.”

“Y-Yes...”

Although the official was roundly confused and did not understand the King’s intent, he nodded in deference.

And so, with only those words to the official, Roy picked up his pen, and began writing once more.

Sir Crow’s Journal

Man, I really got the shit scared out of me today.

That Heath, I told him not to come down from the beams, but he did it anyway...

Well, according to Roy, I kind of messed up too huh... It was great that we managed to save him in the end...

Although I kinda snapped and yelled at him, I understand the worries and feelings he’d have at that age. It’s difficult to make a decision like that — just leave someone to die. I don’t think anyone would like to do that.

He’s reckless and does some crazy things sometimes, but as his senior I guess I should really look out for him.

...My cheek still hurts.

As expected, that particular technique was probably not the best one to use...

Chapter 8 — Conrad

A week later, the punishment of having no dinners was over, and Fie once again visited the headquarters of the 18th Knights. Upon entering the converted warehouse, Conrad was already there — as expected.

Once again, Conrad gave his usual greeting, and started brewing a new pot of tea. The brew had a sweet but calming, almost relaxing scent.

It was at that moment that Conrad, seated across from Fie, decided to speak.

“We’re on an assignment together. I hope we’ll make a good team, Heathy!” This statement was followed up by one of Conrad’s trademark winks.

“Eh...?” Fie responded blankly.

Upon witnessing Fie’s reaction, Conrad’s enigmatic expression flitted across his features once more. Feigning surprise, he moved to prop up his face with an arm, looking upwards at the still-confused Fie.

“You’re terrible, Heathy. You’re making that, ‘Oh, I thought this person never did assignments!’ face. It’s like you just think I’m a slacker, you know?”

(H-He read my mind!?)

The hair on the back of Fie’s neck inevitably stood up as she wondered if Conrad could, indeed, read minds.

“I-I’m sorry. But... you’re always around when I visit, so...”

“It’s because I wanted to have tea with you, Heathy.”

Conrad smiled as he delivered those words, and Fie thought that perhaps she hadn’t been too far off the mark after all — maybe Conrad really did just slack off. Unlike Crow, who was always looking out for her, or the other members of the platoon who were at times absent from the headquarters, Conrad alone had achieved a sort of perfect attendance record for being there without fail.

“So... what is this assignment?”

“Oh, we’re just going out to the city. There’s still tea left in the pot, so take your time and drink it all before we get going.”

The current atmosphere was far too relaxed and without tension for Fie to think of it as a moment before an assignment.

(Are we just... going shopping or something?)

While Fie thought that this couldn’t be true, she could not help but consider the possibility.

So the two of them, having finished their tea in a leisurely manner, left for the town from the castle gates.

Although the heart of the capital was filled with neatly-arranged stone buildings, the place Conrad took Fie to was slightly away from that — a place where wooden structures were haphazardly arranged, in contrast. This place was different from the downtown area where she had gone shopping with Slad and the rest. It exuded a decidedly dangerous aura.

Seeing the visibly unsettled Fie, who had preoccupied herself by looking around at her surroundings, Conrad smiled.

“Don’t stare so much. That’s no good, you know? You’re going to attract dangerous people.”

Heeding Conrad’s warning, Fie decided to stop looking around altogether. It really did seem like a dangerous place.

The house Conrad had brought her to was dingy at best. It was a two-story wooden structure, and spots here and there in the walls had changed color. It was indeed a derelict wreck. As its appearance would suggest, there did not seem to be much traffic in the way of inhabitants.

Upon opening the door and entering, an old man was visible, seated at what appeared to be a reception counter.

A glance at his eyes revealed that the old man was, in fact, blind. Without a word or greeting, Conrad left some money on the counter, and made his way into the depths of the building.

(Wah!)

For a single night's stay at such a run-down place, it was an unimaginably huge sum of money. In fact, it was perhaps an even greater sum than three months' worth of Fie's squire allowance.

The old receptionist, for his part, took the money quickly and in an equally wordless manner.

Influenced by this deathly silent atmosphere, Fie decided to follow after Conrad without asking a single question.

At the top of the stairs they were greeted with a corridor lined with rooms on either side. There were about six rooms in all, and not a single one of them seemed to have inhabitants.

It was here that Conrad handed some clothing to Fie — to be precise, what appeared to be a butler outfit, cut to a youth's size.

A smallish white shirt, vest, and a black necktie with an accompanying pair of black pants — the outfit had no jacket.

"Change in this room. I'll go change too." Pointing out a room to Fie, Conrad promptly entered the room next to it.

(What's this all about...?)

Without understanding much of the situation, Fie entered the room and changed into the outfit as instructed — the size fit her just right.

Fie could not help but wonder "why?" But it was pointless to think about it — she couldn't figure it out either way. Exiting the room, Fie found that Conrad was still nowhere to be seen.

After waiting for what seemed to be quite a while, the door to the room that Conrad had entered swung open — and there stood an impossibly beautiful young woman.

Her long red hair seemed to radiate the fragrance of passion itself — her large and almond-shaped eyes were complimented by long, soft eyelashes. Her white skin, like porcelain, struck a sharp contrast with her hair — like a single drop of red in an ocean of white, much like a piece of fine art. Her daring dress exposed

part of her bosom, seemingly wrapping around her slim and well-balanced body. Above all, the charm that emanated from her set even Fie’s heart aflutter, despite being a girl herself.

Most importantly, however, she smelled incredibly good. Without thinking, Fie began to sniff the fragrance that was currently filling the air.



Looking upon Fie's slightly sorry state, a bewitching but beautiful smile flitted across the young woman's face. With a flourish, she brought a luxurious feather fan up to her lips, finally parting them to deliver a few words unto the enraptured Fie.

"Kept you waiting, huh? Heathy."

It was... Conrad's voice...

"Y-You were a woman all along, Conrad?!"

Faced with the impossibly beautiful young woman that Conrad had seemingly morphed into before her, Fie could not help but raise her voice. With his usual enigmatic smile and easygoing tone, Conrad responded.

"Oh, you. Don't be like that. I'm a man — a man. You can tell from my voice, can't you?"

It was as Conrad said — a man's voice. However, more than anything else, Conrad's voice was one thing — ambiguous. It did not have many identifying traits, such as how masculine it was, or how "Conrad-like" it sounded. In that specific aspect, its ambiguity was perhaps its only notable trait, and that in particular made it difficult to discern. That was the only way Fie could think to describe it.

If Conrad were to speak while dressed like that, it was easy for the mind to play tricks on itself and hear an actual woman speak, instead.

However...

As if on cue, Fie fixated her gaze on a specific part of Conrad's attire.

The bosom that was currently very daringly peeking out of Conrad's dress seemed to be the real thing. That which beguiles not only men, but equally draws in the stares of women — the bewitching valley of Conrad's impossible cleavage.

(How... How did he even do that...?)

Conrad, on the other hand, looked upon Fie's fixated stare with amusement.

“I could teach you if you wanted to try it out?”

“No, that’s all right.” Fie shook her head.

Looking over Fie’s appearance from head to toe, Conrad, nodded, as if to give his approval.

“Yes, this is good. It is very cute. Now all that’s left is a few touch-ups...”

Conrad took out a makeup kit from seemingly nowhere, and began working on Fie’s face and hair.

“Well, how is it?”

Looking into the hand mirror that Conrad had given her, Fie could not help but be surprised. After all, Conrad had only performed some small actions here and there, but Fie’s face seemed to be that of another person.

Although her face was usually bright and shiny, she now had the appearance of a fragile-looking, quiet youth. Her hair was combed to look more dry and fine — as if to reinforce a certain image. The hue of her hair was different as well. Although Fie was usually blonde, it was now streaked with red.

“If the base is of a lighter color, it becomes easier to work with, you see. Don’t worry, it’ll come off right away if you shower — so be careful to not let it come into contact with water during the assignment.”

And so, by Conrad’s hand, Fie underwent a complete transformation.

“With this, the preparations are complete,” Conrad said, as he put on an expensive-looking hat with a veil that concealed part of his face.

One would think that Conrad was a noble lady eager to conceal her identity, albeit suspiciously. To top it all off, the fleetingly visible dainty jawline and red lipstick gave off strong hints of hidden beauty beneath the veil.

With all preparations apparently complete, Conrad deployed the feathered fan once more, coquettishly bringing the tip of it up to his lips.

“Well, shall we go?”

The voice Fie heard next was the real thing — a voice that seemingly belonged to a beautiful and seductive woman.

Upon exiting the building, Fie followed Conrad to what appeared to be an even stranger establishment than the first. It clearly stood out from its peers in the neighborhood — for starters, it was sturdily built, and its windows were all blocked, so as to prevent its contents from being known to the world. Several rough-looking men stood guard outside the building. No matter how one spun it, this was yet another place with a markedly dangerous aroma.

It was this very building, however, that Conrad had advanced towards, without a shred of hesitation.

Upon seeing Conrad, who was currently dressed as a member of the aristocracy, unfitting smiles crossed the intimidating faces of the guards.

“Well, well. If it isn’t Mistress Meynue. Do you have business with Master Ruboella?”

“Yes, I have come to look at the goods again. Would you kindly let us in?”

“Yes, Master Ruboella has instructed that Mistress Meynue is always welcome. Please, do come in.”

Bowing his head in deference, the man escorted Conrad into the building. At that point in time, the man finally noticed Fie following after Conrad, dressed in her butler’s attire.

“Mistress Meynue, this child is...?”

Upon seeing Fie, the man took on a slightly defensive body position. He lowered his stance slightly, and moved his right hand to the back of his waist, taking care to not show the palm of his hand. Judging by his actions, there was probably some sort of weapon hidden behind his back.

As if he had not noticed any of these actions, however, Conrad spoke to the man in a markedly slow drawl.

“Oh, he’s just my butler. Isn’t that right, Sorshia.”

Sorshia. That was the false name Conrad had given her during the assignment briefing.

Upon hearing that name, Fie lowered her head ever so slightly, as if to portray

an image of shyness and introversion, before nodding firmly. The character of “Sorshia” was apparently mute.

“Oh, I’m sorry. This boy cannot speak.”

“Your... butler.”

“Yes. He’s a very good boy, you know?”

“Oh, yes. You have good taste, Missus.”

The man assumed an insincere smile after hearing Mistress Meynue’s words. After all, there was no way such a youth could possibly perform the duties required of a butler — he couldn’t even speak. Although the man had read the circumstances and was smiling to himself as a result, Conrad continued acting like the air-headed Meynue, pretending to not notice the man’s slights at all.

“Heheheh, it’s okay if I bring this boy in, right? It’ll be so sad if I leave him outside, the poor thing.”

“Yes, of course.”

Having received permission from the lookout, Conrad entered the shop, with Fie trailing not far behind.

The first floor of the building was what appeared to be a bar of sorts. In the dark room, curtains blotted out the sunlight — in its place, red and blue lamps faintly illuminated the darkness. There were guests present even at this time of day, scattered across and seated at the tables, drinking their fill.

However, to the eyes of the establishment’s regular patrons, Fie and company were definitely not ordinary guests — if anything, they were probably people who were related to the operation, somehow.

Fie and Conrad, however, were not headed to the pub.

As if receiving some sort of direction from the guards outside, a guide promptly appeared before Conrad and Fie, bowing as a sign of respect.

“Welcome to our humble establishment, Mistress Meynue. I shall guide you to Master Ruboella at once.”

The place they were led to was towards the back of the store. They passed

through a painfully undecorated corridor — all the way up to the second floor. Although there were sparsely-hung paintings and flower vases displayed here and there, one could not in good faith say that they were displayed in good taste. The vases were also placed in precarious locations — so much so that even the guide himself nearly knocked one over.

Finally the group reached their destination — a pair of doors at the end of a long corridor. Before those doors stood two thick-set men. By their appearances, this was probably where the master of this particular establishment resided.

Leading Fie and Conrad up to the door, the guide opened it, politely offering the group entry.

Upon entering the room, the two lookouts followed close behind, entering with them — and soon, the door closed with an audible thud.

“Welcome, Mistress Meynue! It is a great honor for you to visit my humble establishment once more!”

Complimenting his overly flowery language with over-the-top hand gestures, a small, round man sat in the middle of the room, sporting an equally small mustache. His hair, trailing behind him, reeked of excess hair products. It did not take long for an unpleasant odor to waft by Fie’s nose.

It seemed like this man, Ruboella, was the proprietor.

“Heheheh. I have been to other shops, but nothing really interests me. That’s why I’ve come to your shop again, Ruboella.”

As if to emphasize his sex appeal, Conrad brought his closed feathered fan up to his lips, lightly tapping it against his cheek. The slight breeze from that action lifted Conrad’s veil, offering a peek of the young woman’s seductive and beautiful face — the lower half, at least. Graced with that particular sight, Fie saw Ruboella’s jaw almost hit the ground as he leered at Conrad.

“We pride ourselves in our offerings and selection. We will definitely find you a slave that matches your tastes, Missus. Please, have a seat.”

Ruboella motioned to a table before seating himself down on the opposite end of it.

Fie began to slowly understand the situation. This was a place where slaves were sold — in particular, slaves from the warehouse that they had raided a while ago.

“What kind of slave do you wish for today, Mistress Meynue?”

“Hmm... Let’s see. We’ll have a black-haired child this time.”

“If that’s the case, what do you think of this one that carries royal blood from the faraway land of Baharat?”

Ruboella busied himself with scattering information about various slaves in front of Conrad — however, he was taking various chances while doing so to stare down the open cleavage displayed by Conrad’s daring dress, and to sneak peeks at his face under the veil. Conrad himself, however, acted like he noticed nothing.

“Well... it is difficult to tell just from portraits, you know? Could you let me see the real thing?”

“The trade has been... difficult recently. We have had some difficulties moving slaves around... It was easier in the days of the old king’s reign...”

“How terrible.”

“Our thoughts exactly. You are like how a real noble should be, Missus. Not afraid to have... good and bad hobbies. The current king is far too rigid.”

“Heheheh. It is as you say.”

“But rest assured, Missus. After all, we have been selling slaves to the hands of various nobles in Orstoll for generations — it’s a tradition for us. Unlike Firem, who just has a big operation and name, we don’t sell in that sort of complicated manner. We leave the portraits to very skilled artists as well, what you see is what you get!”

Upon hearing Ruboella’s words, Fie felt angry at the situation.

(What a tradition... You even kidnap people...)

Fie was angry enough to kick Ruboella and send him flying. However, doing so would put Conrad in danger, and so she held her temper.

After all, the two well-built guards that had entered the room with them were still standing behind Conrad — if anything happened here, they would have no chance at winning.

Meanwhile Conrad, who was still acting the part of the aristocratic missus, pretended to be lost in thought, eventually choosing a slave from the sheath of papers that he had been given.

“Well, let’s go with this one.”

“This one, yes... As usual, Missus, you have a good eye...”

“How much is it?”

“Yes. Hmm. This one would go for about five million merks.”

“Oh, did the price go up yet again?”

“Well, as I mentioned, Missus, the trade has been difficult recently. Although it wasn’t one of ours, there was a warehouse recently that got destroyed... If we don’t charge this much, we’ll be out of business!”

Upon hearing those words, Conrad allowed a slight frown to cross his features, purposely taking a slightly pouty pose with his body.

“What am I to do? After all, I spent some money on dresses and gems. Hey... could you give me a discount?”

Ruboella’s jaw dropped once more as Conrad’s seductive voice caressed his ears.

“E-Even so, I’m afraid...”

Seizing the opportunity, Conrad moved his body close to Ruboella’s in a naturally sashaying way. The sweet smell of perfume promptly took control of Ruboella’s nose.

“Well... how about this. I will pay four million merks. And as for the rest... you can have... me.”

Conrad was now leaning against Ruboella, before casually lifting his veil to show off his beautiful face.

“Um... well Missus... weren’t you only interested in... young boys...?”

“I like all cute boys... But I also like older, more tempered men... like you. Is that strange?”

“N-No... It is not strange at all...”

As Ruboella’s jaw continued hitting the ground at continuously accelerated levels, it was obvious that he had fallen for Conrad’s honeypot trap. He no longer resisted Conrad’s advances.

“Hey... them watching... it’s embarrassing.”

“Huh?”

Conrad pointed to the two guards in the room, still standing in front of the door.

“They will just get in the way. Surely you can dismiss them, right? After all, it’s going to be time just for the two of us...”

“Hey, you two. That’s enough, leave us.”

Ruboella quickly agreed to Mistress Meynue’s request — and so the two guards left, returning to their posts outside the door. At that moment in time, Ruboella finally noticed a young boy in a butler outfit standing in the room with them.

“Missus, what about that...?”

Anticipating the question, Conrad instead placed both his hands on Ruboella’s face, showing a bewitchingly seductive smile to her newfound prey.

“That boy is going to watch us. You might grow to like it, you know?”

The youth who was dressed in a butler outfit, watching over the pair, was currently preoccupied with intensely blushing. However, Fie’s blush wasn’t an act — specifically, she was blushing at Conrad’s terribly seductive voice, and the entire scene set before her.

“Yes, you have great taste...” And so, the unsuspecting Ruboella promptly agreed, and their faces gradually drew closer to each other.

Fie’s eyes were spinning in their sockets.

“Well then. Let’s make you feel really, really good.”

Conrad’s bewitchingly luscious voice continued ringing in Fie’s ears.

“Urgh!” A strange sound escaped Ruboella’s lips, and then his head lolled limply to on side.

Raising her gaze, which was up until a moment ago firmly fixated on the floor, Fie realized that Ruboella was now unconscious — and Conrad’s fingers were on his throat.

Placing Ruboella’s body onto the ground and confirming that he was indeed knocked out, Conrad stood up, looking in Fie’s direction.

“Well. It’s time for work. Make sure not to speak too loud.” Offering his usual wink, Conrad placed a single finger against his lips.

“Did you... choke him?”

“Yes.”

(Doing that in a single moment... How impossibly quick...)

Looking at the cross-dressed Conrad’s slim and lithe fingers, Fie had a hard time believing that they were capable of doing such a thing.

Confirming Ruboella’s pulse with her own hands, Fie spoke softly.

“Hey... is he going to be okay...?”

“Oh he’ll be fine. He was choked slowly while inhaling this perfume with aphrodisiac properties. It probably felt good — and he’s probably having a nice dream right about now.” Conrad smiled as he casually delivered his statement.

Sure enough, the prone Ruboella lying down on the ground was making a perversely happy face, with occasional groans of “Mistress Meynue... Eheheh...” escaping from his half-open mouth.

After that, Fie and Conrad searched and gathered various documents in Ruboella’s room — primarily letters and papers on where other slaves were being kept, and locations of other similar establishments.

“As expected, it’s more fun with another person around. However... even for

a fool like him, he wouldn't leave something like a client list lying around, huh... What a pity," said Conrad, crossing his legs as he continued arranging the scattered documents.

It seemed that the client list was the most desired piece of intel for this assignment. While stopping the sale of human slaves was not too difficult a thing to do, the problem lay more with the buyers in question.

Many customers of such establishments were from noble families who wielded ancient privileges and power in Orstoll. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for the kingdom's soldiers to obtain a search warrant for their properties. The slaves themselves were also often disguised as live-in servants, or went by different names and backgrounds.

"But... several people will basically be done in with this." Conrad withdrew a few missives from within Ruboella's letters as he said so, waving the papers with a slight smile. "Well, we got what we came for. Let's go home."

Conrad stood up from his chair, and Fie followed soon after.

The two of them returned the missives and letters back to their proper positions, while Conrad placed his veiled hat back on, exiting the room with an indifferent expression. Sensing the gaze of the two guards on him, Conrad turned around, looking at the pair so that they could only see his lips.

"Tell Ruboella it was... very good. Oh, and he said to not come in for a while."

Upon looking at Conrad's almost whispered smile, the guard's faces turned red. Conrad then proceeded to leave the same way they came, with the same elegant movements. Fie followed closely behind him.

At that point in time, Fie let go of some of the tension in her mind — perhaps it was because she thought that they were already out of the woods. Unfortunately, Fie's relaxed shoulder knocked into a familiar, badly-placed vase.

With a dramatic spin, the long-necked flower vase tilted on its side, threatening to fall down onto Fie. Although she tried to catch it before it fell, water from the vase's mouth poured over Fie's head, having been tilted in an angle it wasn't designed to be in.

"Wah!!" Without thinking, the panicked Fie let the sound slip out of her

mouth.

(I was not supposed to be able to speak...!)

Fie's heart started to pound.

"Are you all right!?"

The two guards began advancing in their direction without a single hint of suspicion. It would seem that the guard at the front door did not relay to his compatriots the entire description of Fie's transformed self — specifically the part where she was mute. Fie gave a sigh of relief.

However...

Drops of water started dripping from Fie's hair, the droplets having visibly been dyed red. Fie's original blonde hair showed through in places where the dye had been washed away.

"You... Why did you dye your hair...? Could you come with us for a moment...?"

With those words, the guards began advancing on Fie, motioning to bring her into Ruboella's room.

(This is bad...!)

The panicked Fie evaded the guard's arms on instinct. She thought to defeat both the guards without alerting her immediate surroundings.

However, she had no weapon...

As this was an infiltration assignment, she had left her sword back at headquarters. Without some sort of weapon, there was no way Fie would be able to face the two burly men on her own.

(What do I do...?)

"Hey! Are you resisting?"

"This one's suspicious! Get him!"

Determining Fie's evasive movements as suspicious, the two guards advanced upon Fie with the intent to kill. Panicking, Fie barely managed to avoid the guard's knives as they swung down in large arcs.

(What do I do...!?)

A single moment of carelessness had now forced Fie into yet another inescapable predicament. Her mind was filled with anxiety, and she was unable to think about anything else. In addition, her failure would implicate Conrad and put him in danger as well.

She had to think of some way to get out of this situation — if she had stayed where she was, and the commotion attracted the attention of the other guards, it would all end here.

Suddenly, Conrad, whom Fie had not noticed until just now, weaved in between her and the guards with a few elegant movements. In a series of steps not befitting the currently tense atmosphere, Conrad's silhouette was like that of a belle at a ball, immediately drawing both Fie and the guards' attention.

Conrad had removed the veiled hat at some point, and was now smiling as he looked up at the two guards — a dazzling, beaming smile, like that of an angel's. For a moment, the guard's eyes were drawn in to her impossibly beautiful smiling face.

At that point, Conrad's arms, which had snaked up on their victims from their blind spots, closed around their throats, lifting both men off the ground. The two men, who were taller than Conrad to begin with, were now being held up by those two slender arms, their feet no longer touching the ground.

A few blunt sounds rang out through the air.

The two guards were now appropriately unconscious and blowing foam bubbles. Fie could only stammer at the series of events that had happened in what appeared to be the blink of an eye.

"Conrad..."

Turning around to face her, Conrad's face was now filled with his usual gentle, but enigmatic smile.

"It was a good experience, wasn't it Heathy? In infiltration assignments... a single moment of carelessness will cost you your life."

"I'm sorry, I..."

“It’s all right. There are times when things do not go as planned. At times like that, it’s important that we offer what support we can. I’ll deal with it this time, so you can stay right here and wait for me, Heathy.”

With that, Conrad descended the stairs with yet another series of elegant steps. Staff members of the establishment, who had heard some of the noise, rushed up to Conrad, asking if anything was amiss.

“Mistress Meynue... what were those sounds just now...?”

“Heheheh. It’s nothing. My silly butler just knocked over some water from one of the tall vases.”

Blunt sounds of straining sinew and bone punctuated Conrad’s otherwise peaceful conversations with the guards and staff members.

A few minutes later.

“I’m done!” Returning to Fie’s side in the same elegant way was Conrad, without a single droplet of sweat on his brow. “Well, I’ve basically taken out most of them. Let’s go home.”

“Um... I’m really sorry...”

This assignment had been a huge failure, much like the one before it. Fie looked decidedly depressed.

“Oh, no. It’s fine. I wanted to play with them for a little longer, but I was going to report them to the relevant authorities either way. It won’t affect future jobs. More importantly...”

Suddenly, Conrad moved his face close to Fie’s.

There was apparently a small, slight cut there — apparently the shaken Fie had not managed to completely evade the guard’s knives.

“You have to be careful with facial injuries, you know? You’re a girl after all.”

“Oh... Yes...”

In that moment, Fie realized what she had just heard, and began rapidly shaking her head in denial.

“No, wait, that’s not it! I’m a boy!”

Conrad's response to the flustered Fie was a mischievous smile.

"I'm an expert in cross-dressing. Do you think that half-assed boy disguise could fool me? Well, at least the other blockheads haven't noticed."

It seems that Fie's secret had been found out a long time ago — and Fie greeted this fact with genuine surprise. However, she was also filled with relief at the fact that the other members hadn't noticed.

"Um... Is it okay if you keep it a secret...?"

"Sure. It's more interesting that way, you know." Conrad agreed surprisingly quickly.

But... interesting? It was an answer that filled Fie with uneasiness in all sorts of other ways.

Upon following Conrad out of the shop, Fie realized that all the members of the staff had been knocked out cold by Conrad.

(This many people... with no weapons!?)

It was an unbelievable sight. Fie could feel a drop of sweat trickling down her back.

Upon finally exiting the building, a single guard was still on the lookout, apparently unaware of what had happened in the shop — in fact, it was the same guard who had greeted them on the way in.

"Well, if it isn't Mistress Meynu—"

The moment the guard turned around to face Fie and Conrad, the latter's hands were already around his throat, and in an instant, he too was unconscious.

Without much of a thought, Conrad walked along with the man held up in that particular fashion, traveling a short distance before throwing him into a small, dark alley.

"Well, all that's left is to send word to the Royal Knights, and then all these goons will be rounded up," Conrad said, clapping his hands together in apparent glee as he turned to face Fie.

“Yes...” Fie could only force a smile, nodding as cold sweat dripped down her face.

On this day, Fie learned three things.

The first was that the seemingly harmless Conrad was apparently someone to be feared.

Second, that he actually was a very busy person. Fie learned that firsthand upon accompanying Conrad back to the royal castle, upon which a report was summarily delivered to the Royal Knights. Apparently, it was standard fare for Conrad to cross-dress and infiltrate various locations to gather intelligence on criminal organizations.

Amongst the knights of the 18th, he was actually the one who spent the least time at headquarters — in fact, he had actually adjusted his schedule so he could welcome Fie on each and every one of her visits... And the reason for Conrad doing all that was supposedly because he enjoyed Fie’s visits.

The third thing was —

“So, how was today?”

“There were many surprises, and I’m nervous and tired... Also, I failed again...”

“Heheheh. Is that so? Don’t be too hung up over the failures, though. The main thing I wanted you to take away from this was how it felt to be on an infiltration assignment.”

“Yes.”

On the way back to the royal castle, Fie could feel an immense number of stares on her being. That was a given, however. After all, a stunningly beautiful young woman was walking by her side.

Fie had already finished changing, once more assuming her form as a youthful squire. Conrad, however, did not remove his disguise — instead deciding to parade next to her, dress, cleavage, and all.

With his veil removed, the men of the town were all fixated on Conrad’s bewitching form — enough to stare holes through him. Yet Conrad seemed at

least twice as vibrant and happy as his usual self, being on the receiving end of these gazes.

Witnessing this, Fie came to one conclusion.

(This person definitely likes cross-dressing regardless of if an assignment calls for it or not...)

And so it came to be that Fie learned much about Conrad on this particular day.

Sir Crow's Journal

Seems like Heath went on an assignment with Conrad today. You never really know what Conrad's thinking, so I find him pretty hard to deal with. Come to think of it, he actually walked all the way back here while still dressed up as a woman.

I have no idea what goes on in his head.

I mean, I know he looks amazingly beautiful in that outfit, but there's something off-putting about that presence of his, you know. I have zero interest in someone like that.

Actually, why not have Heath dress up as a girl? That's a lot better. Maybe I'll buy a dress for him next time... Or maybe that's a bit much and he'll get mad?

Hmm.

Chapter 9 — The Finishing Move and the Final Member

Training had ended — as had the scheduled events for the day. It was one such afternoon.

Seated on a slightly elevated earthen mound on the training grounds was Fie. She, in turn, was looking at the squires on the training grounds. They were currently gathered around, seemingly to demonstrate something to each other.

With large, elaborate movements, wooden swords were swung left and right as the squires stood, their faces filled with satisfied, even proud expressions.

“Hey. What are they doing?” Fie, who had no idea what was going on, posed the question to a passing Gormus.

“Ah. That. Something about a finishing move.”

Gormus’ stoic response was accompanied by an exasperated expression.

“Finishing move...”

Upon hearing that, Fie once again began observing the squires.

“It... doesn’t seem very useful,” she said, as if uninterested.

“Of course it isn’t.” Gormus nodded, agreeing.

However, a week later, Fie found herself enviously watching her fellow squires in the northern dormitory.

“I’ve finally learned one, too! It’s called the Five-Count Stab!”

“What are you even talking about? Clearly my Horizontal-Vertical Spinning Stab is cooler!”

“No, you guys are both nothing compared to the 12th Knights Special!”

Apparently, the discussion of “finishing moves” or “finishers” was all the rage

amongst the squires of the northern dormitory. It would seem like some of the squires were taught said moves by their seniors this week, and as a result, the squires had been busy pitting these so-called finishing moves against each other, in a bid to ascertain one's superiority.

Upon seeing the sparkles and fulfilled expressions on the squire's faces, Fie's eyes also began to fill with an admiring gleam of their own.

"They have it good... I want to try practicing too..."

However, Fie could do nothing but enviously watch with her desire for a move of her own plain in her features.

After all, Fie had been relatively late to the whole finisher party. None of her seniors in the 18th Knights had decided to teach her something like that — as such, it was only natural that the others couldn't discuss the matter much with Fie.

Gormus on the other hand, who had been standing next to Fie the entire time she was staring enviously, turned his exasperation upon her.

"So you want to participate in that after all? That stuff isn't going to be useful in actual combat. If you want to get stronger, practice your sword swings instead."

Upon hearing Gormus' words, Fie began practicing swinging next to her friend, as if having come to some sort of realization. However, Fie could not get her mind off finishing moves after all.

"Gormus! I'm going to learn a finisher tomorrow!"

"Hey... are you even listening to me...? That stuff isn't going to help. To begin with, you yourself said a week ago that it was pointless."

Now drenched in sweat from her swings, Fie closed her hand into a fist, her face filled with an incomprehensible determination. To all that, Gormus responded with a slightly irritated expression.

Gormus had observed that the so-called finishing moves that were exhibited at the beginning of this boom were simple, and it was doubtful that they served a purpose in actual combat. However, the trend had now worsened to moves

that took close to ten seconds or so to execute, in addition to using purposely long and flamboyant actions.

If anyone tried using one of those moves during a squire test or live combat, they would surely be defeated almost instantly.

(The ones teaching them must be in on the joke as well...)

The above was, summarily, Gormus' thoughts on the matter.

"But that's why I'm envious! I want to do it!"

Fie, on the other hand, had already made up her mind. Although she had decided that it was all relatively pointless a week ago, the sight of her fellow squires having fun had caught Fie unawares, moving her heart in the process — and that was the magic of social movements. It was Fie's first brush with such power.

To Fie, they all seemed like they were having fun — and so she was naturally envious. On top of that, she felt a sense of camaraderie between the squires and their seniors as they practiced said moves. She was so envious.

"I'll learn it tomorrow... The 18th Knights special..."

"Don't just make up move names on your own... Ugh... Do whatever you like... I'm telling you now, though, don't involve me in it."

Fie, who had been enveloped by the waves of the finisher boom, was promptly thrown aside by Gormus. He was fully content to abandon his friend to her own devices, as if not wanting to be drawn into the spiral of silliness, for fear of it being contagious.

"All right, then! Then I'll show you the move I've learned next week, Gormus!"

"I said I want nothing to do with it! Listen to what people say goddammit! Also don't 'all right then' me!"

Fie was content to drag Gormus down with her into the depths of her delusions — but Gormus, having none of it, raised his voice in disgust.

That was how Fie ended up standing before Crow the next day.

Although he was merely a flirt at first sight, Fie had personally witnessed and hence understood the measure of Crow's prowess. In addition, Crow was always looking out for her, and seemed to show her a fair degree of care.

Due to the above reasons, Fie thought that Crow would definitely teach her a finishing move of some sort.

"Sir Crow! Please teach me a finishing move!"

Fie made her earnest request with a fist before her chest. Seeing this, Crow placed a hand on his chin, a nostalgic expression crossing his face.

"Ah, that. It's still going around? It was popular about three years ago too."

"Is that so?"

According to Crow's account, the finisher boom was something that happened amongst squires every once in a while. The senior knights would then pass down the moves they had learned, in addition to moves that they had thought up themselves.

"Th-Then..."

If Crow had known about this, then surely he would have a finishing move of his own. Fie's expectations began to steadily rise.

"Ah. I'll teach you. My special finisher." Crow smiled wryly, nodding.

As per Crow's instructions, Fie was now standing with her back against a wall.

In front of her stood Crow.

(I wonder what it is! It must be something for escaping when cornered up against a wall! Or is it a technique for defeating an enemy pushed up against a wall?)

Fie's heartbeat pounded with anticipation.

"Heath, this is a special finisher I thought up on my own. I'm going to make an exception and teach it to you."

"Wow! Thank you very much!"

It was good that she had discussed this with Crow — or so Fie thought, contentedly. She was sure that Crow was going to show her an amazing move.

“Well then, let’s go.”

“Yes!”

On Fie’s word, Crow’s expression suddenly became serious.

(As expected, one needs a serious face when executing finishing moves!)

Fie’s internal tension began to rise.

First, Crow placed his left arm right beside Fie’s face, against the wall.

(Is he sealing off a route of escape?)

Crow’s right hand soon followed.

(It’s not a sword move...?)

Although Fie had originally wanted some sort of sword move, she was currently content to settle for some other kind of technique. Crow’s pretty face, however, was gradually moving close to Fie’s.

(Eh... Eh...?)

Fie had no idea what was happening. Soon, Crow’s face was too close for comfort.

Just as Crow was about to come into contact with Fie, he instead moved his face over to one side, whispering straight into Fie’s ear in a low voice.

“You’re the only one I’ll ever love.”

“HYAAAAH!”

At that moment, a shiver ran down Fie’s spine, and she promptly let out a scream. Upon hearing that, Crow covered his mouth, trying to suppress the shaking currently breaking out through his body.

“Hu... Haha... Ha...”

Crow was laughing. To be more precise, Crow was trying not to laugh — and Fie had finally noticed.

Crow had pranked Fie. Big time.

“Hah! Ahahahahahahaha!”

In the end, Crow could not hide his laughter any longer, and erupted into a loud, rumbling guffaw from his stomach.

“Sir Crow, you lied to me! You said you’d teach me a finishing move!” Fie’s face was red — a mixture of embarrassment and anger.

“No, no, it’s true! That’s what I use to net the girls, you know? I’m only teaching it to you.”

“I don’t need something like that! I don’t need it!”

Fie balled up her fists and started pummeling Crow with all her might. Crow, however, continued laughing — Fie’s attempts at violence had no impact on his muscled body.

“Haha, it worked, right? You let out a scream just like a girl! Hey! Hey that hurts! W-Wait, don’t hit me there! Stop it!”

Upon seeing that her assault had no effect on Crow, Fie decided to go for his more sensitive regions instead. She aimed for gaps in the muscles, just as Conrad had taught her.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I was wrong!” Crow quickly repented upon being punished in the appropriate areas, and apologized to Fie in turn.

Red-faced, Fie’s words came out in between pants, as she finally stopped her assault.

“Ugh! You’re impossible, Sir Crow!”

“Well, it’s my fault for messing with you, but swordplay is something that you train for day after day. It’d be bad if you picked up any strange habits. Stop trying to mess with your sword technique.”

Although Crow had played a prank on Fie, it would seem that he was trying to offer her some advice as well.

“Then, is it okay if my finisher is not a sword technique?”

“Hmm... Maybe. In any case, go ask the rest.”

Crow nodded at Fie’s question — and so Fie set out to find a finishing move of some kind that did not involve using a sword.

The person who Fie decided to visit next was Conrad. She had heard that he was the most well-versed in unarmed combat.

Ever since Conrad's assignment with Fie, he had been in lady's attire whenever Fie visited. Today, he was dressed in a luxurious, bright red dress, with gold thread running through its fabric. No one said anything about this, however. Fie, for her part, decided not to either.

"Sir Conrad! I've come to learn your techniques! Please teach them to me!"

"Oh, if it's makeup techniques you want, I'll teach them all to you!"

Upon hearing Fie's request, the made up and beautifully dressed Conrad propped his face up with a hand, lazily cocking his head to one side.

Fie, however, shook her head at the suggestion.

"That's not it. I don't want to learn that. I want to learn your unarmed techniques, Sir. Please teach me."

The very same techniques that had felled those guards instantaneously. If Fie learned those, she would be able to surprise the other squires without a doubt.

"Hmm..."

After thinking for a short while, Conrad picked up an apple that was conveniently on the table, holding it in the free hand that was not propping up his face.

"Do this."

"...?" This time, it was Fie who cocked her head at Conrad, apparently confused.

"This."

In that moment, Conrad gave Fie a faint smile — and the apple in his hands promptly exploded.

The apple had exploded as if it were loaded with gunpowder. Its broken pieces flew in all directions, and that which was once an apple lay crushed in Conrad's left hand, trace drops of juice dripping onto the table.

Still maintaining his faint smile, Conrad asked Fie a question.

“Would you like to try it?”

“It’s impossible...” She quickly shook her head from side to side.

And so, Fie decided to ask Orbel as well.

“Sir Orbel, do you have a finishing move?”

Orbel smiled slightly, holding out a piece of paper.

Not really, no.

“I see...” Fie returned the gesture with a slight smile of her own.

After that, the two took care of Orbel’s planters as usual, and then Fie went elsewhere in her quest for a finishing move.

This time, Fie decided to visit Parwick, who was found practicing archery once again at the practice grounds.

“Sir Parwick, could you teach me a bit about the bow?”

“Oh, it’s you, Heath. I can teach you the basics of the bow, yes.”

Parwick’s answer came as he casually shot an arrow straight into the target’s bullseye, without once turning to face Fie.

Although there were some squires who found him difficult to approach, and hence found him frightening, Fie found out that he was actually a very caring person.

Fie explained to Parwick the circumstances and reason for her visit. Upon hearing her explanation, Parwick responded to Fie in his usual, calm voice.

“In that case, it is the same as the sword. There are no finishing moves. I will instead tell you to train on a regular basis. If you pick up any strange habits, you would not only have issues learning the sword, but other weapons, too,” Parwick told her.

Fie had just started training, so she really shouldn’t have been engaging in any activities that would negatively affect her stance — that was a given.

(But...)

Parwick's arrow once again hit the target's bullseye, in the exact same position as the previous arrow that he had since been removed. There wasn't a single millimeter of difference.

(This is already a finisher in and of itself...) Fie thought to herself as she observed Parwick's skill with the bow.

Fie visited Garuge next, who was in his personal workshop within the castle. Garuge apparently made simple tools and objects at the workbench in the 18th's headquarters, but larger projects required an actual furnace and a strong fire. It would not have made much sense to put such facilities in the wooden warehouse — and as such, this workshop had been made for that purpose.

In addition, Garuge didn't just make arms for the 18th, but also supplied various weapons to other platoons as well.

"A finishing move huh... Well, I don't really participate in combat, you know..." Garuge listened to Fie's explanation while rubbing his stubbled chin.

"I... see..."

Fie had also thought that it was a little strange to ask Garuge of all people, but with this, the only member of the 18th she hadn't spoken to was Captain Yore.

However, he was a busy individual, and would probably give Fie the same answer that Crow and the rest had — even Fie was able to predict as much.

To begin with, Captain Yore and Crow's level of swordplay were already finishing moves themselves, but there was no way Fie could learn something like that so quickly.

"Hmm, but I DO have something like this."

Just as Fie was going to give up on learning a finisher of her own, Garuge withdrew a sword from the depths of his workshop.

"What is it!?" Fie's eyes were once again filled with the rekindled sparkle of expectation.

Holding the sword in his hands, Garuge aimed it at a wooden panel mounted within the workshop, depressing the upper part of its grip with a thumb.

Immediately, with the sound of moving machinery and springs, the sword's

blade shot out, promptly impaling itself deep within the board.

Upon seeing this, Fie could not help but cheer out loud.

“Th-That’s awesome!” However, she quickly calmed down after that. “But... I don’t think this is quite it.”

Fie thought that modifying one’s weapon was probably against the rules. Garuge, laughing in spite of himself, responded with a “Haha, thought so.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you out. Well, if you want anything made, tell me and I’ll make it for you.”

“Yes, thank you very much.”

With that, Fie parted ways with Garuge, wondering if she perhaps did want that sword after all.

Upon returning to headquarters, Fie saw the silhouette of a familiar masked knight.

“Captain!” Fie frantically waved, quickly making her way to his side.

“Heath. You seem well, and energetic as usual.”

“Yes, I’m well!” Fie could not help but smile and nod at Yore’s words.

Deciding she had nothing to lose, Fie decided to ask Yore the question she had asked all the others.

“Captain, do you have a finishing move? I want to learn one!”

“A... finishing move?” Yore repeated, in a tone that suggested he had no idea what Fie was asking.

Upon listening to Fie’s explanation, Yore gave a single nod.

“Hmm. Is that how it is?” Yore paused to think about Fie’s words. “In that case, Cain would be suitable. His skills might even benefit you in the future. If you are interested, you could ask him to teach you.”

Hearing the unfamiliar name of “Cain,” Fie was reminded of the fact that she had not yet met the final member of the 18th knights.

“I have not met Sir Cain. Can I meet him?”

Fie had assumed from Yore’s manner of speech that there was probably a way to meet Cain. Curious about this mysterious last member, Fie decided to ask Yore if she could meet him herself.

“I see. You haven’t met. He’s probably somewhere over there.”

Yore was pointing to a single tree within the castle grounds.

Chapter 10 — Sir Cain

Cain was in the middle of an identity crisis.

He was a special kind of soldier, part of the “Grass” Unit. Under orders from the King, he was charged with gathering gossip, intel, and other important information. Depending on the situation, he would also carry out assassinations or similar dirty work. With that being said, however, the current king had not tasked him with any such tasks — and in addition, he had been constantly worried as of late.

(Should I say it...? But... But then... I am a Grass Soldier...)

Hiding up on the treetops, Cain observed his target, reminiscing about a previous interaction he had with the King.

He had snuck into the King’s office without being seen by anyone, and reported on the achievements of his fellow Grass Soldiers. Upon finishing his report, however, Cain was unsure if he should report on one other matter or not.

“Your Highness, about Princess Fie...”

“What is it? Does she have ill intentions after all?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then there is no need to report anything.”

“Understood...”

After receiving the information he desired, Cain’s master began moving his pen once more, cutting Cain’s explanation off halfway. Roy did not notice that Cain’s “No, that’s not it” was slightly more curt than usual. In fact, he didn’t notice a single thing at all. This was in part due to the fact that Cain had received training to never show emotion. However...

Cain had really wanted to say it. He was bursting to say it.

(“Princess Fie is actually working really hard in your private platoon right now!

And you're the one who hired her!")

But then.

Even so, he could not say it... For he had received an order.

"Observe Princess Fie. If she displays ill-intent, report it to me. Other than that, nothing is necessary."

To him, "Nothing is necessary" equated to "As it is unnecessary, don't do it."

To begin with, King Roy was the one who had arranged for the guard shifts at Princess Fie's back pavilion to eventually thin out.

His orders to the guards were: "Don't let Princess Fie leave the back pavilion via its entrance," "No matter who comes knocking, don't let them in," and "If she has any wishes, grant them in the most basic way you can."

As long as the guards didn't suddenly gain an amazingly good work ethic, any intruders would surely be able to make their way into the building — especially once the guards were gone. That was the setup that King Roy had thought of.

On the other hand, Cain himself was told specifically to "Watch over Princess Fie's movements in this environment, and if she displays ill-intent, report it. Other than that, nothing is necessary."

If she did indeed have ill-intent, individuals connected to that specific incident would surely show up once the guards left their posts.

After a few days of his monitoring Princess Fie, only one thing of note had happened.

The cook had exited the back pavilion. Thinking that he was an agent for external contact, he and the other Grass Soldiers had followed him. However, the cook simply exited the castle through its main gates, never returning to the pavilion. Instead he had apparently found a job as a janitor in a run-down inn somewhere in a corner of the capital.

On the same day, Princess Fie, who had gone out for a late-night stroll outside the walls of the pavilion, was duly monitored for any potential illicit activities. However, all she did was leisurely stroll about, eventually stepping on a piece of paper, whereupon she held it up against the moonlight and then pirouetted

around in glee, before running back all the way to the pavilion.

No matter how one looked at it, those were not the movements of a suspicious person, although they were suspicious in another way altogether.

Just to make sure that the paper was not a means of external contact, Cain had checked the discarded paper — but it was merely an advertisement for the squire test.

The very next day, Princess Fie's extreme survival experience began.

Taking care not to alert the guards, Princess Fie started to sneak around. In that back pavilion where procuring food was otherwise impossible, she began to ration out ingredients that the cook had left behind — and had nothing but a portion of that for meals.

Upon seeing this, beads of sweat formed on Cain's forehead.

(Why did it come to this...? What is going on? Should I report this to His Majesty? No, but he specifically said to only report to him if she had engaged in illegal activities... Maybe I could give her some food... No, I can't. After all, all His Majesty ordered me to do was spy on her. To protect her well-being... That's the guards' responsibility!)

With that expectation in his mind, Cain flashed a glance at the guards, but they seemed to have noticed nothing amiss. They did not even question the absence of the cook, who had once ventured out on a regular basis to purchase food.

Cain suddenly remembered the criteria that King Roy had set for the selection of these guards. They were specifically supposed to be men of poor character, who would not question unfilled holes in shifts. People with a markedly poor work ethic.

The men His Majesty chose were a great fit. They never questioned a thing, and were content to leave their posts even if no one replaced them — to them, they were enjoying an incredibly easy and relaxed assignment.

(If... it ever comes to it... But that has to be the absolute last measure...)

Cain had smuggled some nutrient-rich foods on his person just in case.

However, using them would be going against his orders to only conduct surveillance on his target.

(It's fine... Just holding the food is safe. It doesn't amount to going against orders yet...!)

Cain repeated those words again and again in his heart.

And so, Princess Fie's survival experience continued. In fact, she had been practicing sword swings out of sight of the guards, again and again.

(Exercising while you have nothing in your stomach is bad for you...! You won't gain any muscle that way...!)

Cain's stomach had started to hurt just watching her.

Eventually, the remaining ingredients in the pavilion ran out... Yet Princess Fie continued her practice sessions, all the while bearing the hunger in her stomach. In addition, she seemed to be taking care to conserve her strength.

(What... What should I do...?)

His master's orders and Princess Fie's rapidly deteriorating condition spun his head in circles. If he could just place this smuggled high-nutrient food where she would notice it... No, he could simply buy some food and leave it there. If he did that, she would be saved.

However, in doing so, he would have failed as a member of the Grass.

The Grass Unit contained only specialized kinds of soldiers. Although they were from common peasant families and were just soldiers, they came into contact with sensitive secrets of the kingdom, and reported right to the top. He was, in more ways than one, the closest to the King's side, and even kept tabs on more private domains and affairs. If these sensitive secrets were ever leaked, the reputation of the kingdom could be damaged beyond repair — he knew that well.

In this way, they were different than the regular royal officials, who wore their hearts on their sleeves. A normal court official would offer advice if the King ever committed mistakes, and suggest potential solutions and

amendments.

However, the Grass Soldiers could not be allowed such avenues. Just as how the act of giving advice can breed dissent, dissent breeds rebellion. This is not an uncommon occurrence across the histories of various kingdoms.

It was worth noting that if a Grass Soldier suddenly decided to turn against the kingdom, it would be entirely possible for them to assassinate the sitting king, given the ample opportunities presented to them in their line of work.

This was the reason why those of the Grass were taught and raised to be as loyal to their master as humanly possible. Actions motivated by personal reasons should, in turn, keep within the reasonable boundaries of any given command.

While it was the official's job to deal with their king's potential folly, even if it meant resorting to more forceful means, the Grass were the opposite — they were to obey their master's exact orders, no matter how foolish or strange they may seem.

(I am Grass... I am Grass... I am Grass...)

Cain repeated those words in his head at least several hundred times.

In the end, he was powerless to do anything until Princess Fie left the back pavilion for good.

He then witnessed her take the squire test, watched her struggle during the bout and pass it, before finally enjoying her life as a squire. Of course, the one who hired her was King Roy himself, although he had apparently noticed nothing the entire time.

To begin with, this entire affair can be traced to one of His Majesty's bad habits. To be specific, it was his habit of taking matters into his own hands whenever they piqued his interest or when he thought something was particularly important.

To that end, he was always searching for places where he could shave time off his packed schedule. More often than not, time was siphoned from important

events until the very last minute.

For cases where a certain task absolutely had to be done, but otherwise was judged to be of low priority, the King would put together a one-order-solves-all plan of sorts, and then utilize the appropriate staff members to execute the scenario — particularly, in cases such as that of Princess Fie. In such cases, even reports were to be kept at an absolute minimum.

The staff chosen for these plans were usually the best suited to the task at hand. So if the operation was performed as required, the overall result would be satisfactory, in addition to taking a task off the King's hands. However, for this specific case, the result was undoubtedly a failure.

The reason for that was simple: His Majesty had apparently completely misread and misunderstood Princess Fie's character. Cain understood this now.

If Princess Fie had been a common spoiled princess, she would have immediately complained to the guards, and at least would have been able to maintain a basic standard of living — although these would have been standards set by King Roy, not the princess in question.

Even a more run-of-the-mill princess would have reached her limit within a few days, and at least sent along a message or two.

However, Princess Fie was the complete opposite of all expectations. She never raised a single complaint, accepted everything that was given to her, and sought to solve problems with her own ability.

The information gathered from his surveillance, even after being stripped of personal opinion, presented Princess Fie as a generally hardworking and healthy person of good character.

In addition, she was a person who took action. In the end, Princess Fie escaped the back pavilion, taking the squire test with the aim of bettering her life. She then magnificently passed it, and secured a spot for herself in the northern dormitory.

Of all the people involved, the only one who possessed knowledge of the terrible failure of this plan was Cain himself — who was also unfortunately a member of the Grass.

The Grass knew for a fact that they were not exactly flexible soldiers. If a wrong order was given, the Grass Soldiers would obediently deliver a wrong result.

With regards to this spectacular failure, Princess Fie was left to her own devices as she spent her days training as a squire. Despite her failures, Cain had decided to watch over her progress as she embarked upon a journey of personal growth as a knight.

From the beginning, and even more so now, there were certain things that Cain yearned to discuss. In particular, he really wanted to talk to His Majesty about the outcome of this particular issue, failures and all.

(The only part of this whole situation that has been executed correctly is the surveillance! What are you going to do about her life and well-being? What about things like fashion or socializing? Aren't these things that she needs in her life? She's a girl right!?)

Though to be fair, Cain had only noticed the flaws and overall issues with this particular plan after engaging in prolonged surveillance — as such, he was not really in a position to put the blame on others.

It was a known fact that King Roy's one big flaw was how he treated women. This was a known fact amongst the Grass Unit, the officials, and anyone who served him. Cain, of course, was aware of this as well.

In fact, His Majesty had basically refused to accept any updates from the guards with regards to this issue — that was how disinterested he was in the matter of Princess Fie.

The reason for this was simple — King Roy had deduced several facts based on his initial assumptions on the matter: if Princess Fie were indeed guilty of something, or had intent to take part in illicit activities, surveillance would eventually reveal that. And then, information extracted from her contacts would surely lead them to the next part of the puzzle.

Now seated at his desk and working on some documents regarding the current anti-flood measures being undertaken at the southern riverbanks, it was reasonable to assume that not a single letter of Princess Fie's name even remained in His Majesty's mind.

His Majesty also seemed blissfully oblivious to the dramatically colder stares of Nena, who was currently the only female member of the Grass Unit. She had stood in for the guards a few times on this surveillance mission.

As Cain realized that the only one who could do anything about the current situation was him and him alone, he decided to try to say something.

(It's a simple affair... "Princess Fie is currently in your employ as a squire in your personal platoon." All I have to do is say that...)

Immediately after Cain had parted his lips to speak to His Majesty, who was currently still drafting a document on flood control, various thoughts filled his mind. To be precise, they were thoughts such as "Report to me if she has any ill-intent," "Anything else isn't necessary," "It is the duty of the Grass to carry out their master's exact orders to the best of their abilities," "Giving the king advice is a job for the officials," and "It is the job of us Grass to be His Majesty's hands and feet." Those words and more flooded Cain's mind.

(Why... Why can I not say something so simple... Why...)

That day, Cain questioned himself.

(Why am I a member of the Grass!?)

Cain had reached a stage of self-doubt, eventually culminating in an identity crisis.

But of course, Cain was a Grass Soldier — just like his parents before him. They had raised him to be one of their own. However, this wasn't quite about that.

King Roy continued manipulating his pen against the documents before him, oblivious to Cain's distress. It seemed like His Majesty had come up with a plan to approach the problem of flood control for this year.

(If only you had given Princess Fie even 1% of the care you take towards public affairs...)

In the end, the doctrine of the Grass won yet again, and another day went by with Cain not reporting Princess Fie's true identity to King Roy.

(I am Grass... I simply exist to follow and execute orders. I am Grass... I am

Grass...)

Repeating that phrase to himself in his heart hundreds of times, Cain departed the King's chambers without being seen by anyone.

Cain's internal struggle only intensified after that. On one hand, it wasn't too late to tell the King — on the other, he did not wish to think too deeply on the matter.

This was the chain of events that had occurred the night before.

Today, Cain was once again perched on a tree, continuing his surveillance of Princess Fie. Up until just now, she had been happily speaking with King Roy.

(No, no! I mustn't get distracted!)

Cain became aware of the fact that he had been lost in thought, and had momentarily stopped watching over his target. Panicking, he quickly returned his gaze to the position where he had seen them last, but neither the Princess nor the King was to be found.

(Hm, they've already moved. I must search for Princess Fie...)

It was a considerable failure for a Grass Soldier. In fact, Cain was beginning to wonder if he was cut out to remain a member of the Grass at all.

Despite his misgivings, Cain was about to loyally continue his surveillance mission, only to realize that someone had begun climbing the tree where he was perched. To make matters worse, they were already considerably close to his position.

A mere moment after Cain had noticed the presence, a young girl's face popped out suddenly from behind some branches.

It was a cute, feminine face, framed with a boyish, short haircut. In other words, it was Princess Fie's face.

Upon seeing Cain hidden amongst the branches, Princess Fie broke into a familiar and friendly smile, greeting him wholeheartedly.

"Are you Sir Cain, by any chance!? I'm Heath! Hello!"

(I've made contact with the surveillance target! What do I do Your Majesty!!!)

Cain screamed in his heart.

"Captain Yore told me of your hiding place, and so I searched around everywhere, until I finally found you here!"

(On top of that he also told the surveillance target all of my observation points!!!)



“The Captain said you could teach me some moves, Sir Cain! That’s why I came to look for you.”

Apparently the situation was just as Princess Fie had described. Although it was a scribble, Fie bore an official decree bearing Yore’s name. To a member of the Grass, that was as good as a direct order from King Roy himself.

The two eventually climbed down from the tree after Cain informed the Princess that it was dangerous to stay in an elevated position for long periods of time.

“That’s awesome! I would have never noticed someone hiding in such a place! What were you doing?”

“...”

(I was watching you this whole time...)

However, Cain could not possibly tell Princess Fie that. Mistaking Cain’s silence for something else altogether, Fie came to some sort of conclusion on her own.

“Ah, I’m sorry. It must be a secret assignment!” For some reason, her eyes sparkled upon uttering those words.

“Yes...”

In reality, it was a secret — but only to Princess Fie. In fact, it probably was not as awe-inspiring an assignment as she might believe.

“So, what are you going to teach me today?” Princess Fie had promptly gotten herself into a learning mood — the glitter of expectation in her eyes was plain for all to see.

(But... is this really okay...?)

Cain once again ran over the commands that his master had issued in his mind.

“Observe Princess Fie,” “Report to me if she displays any ill-intent,” and “Teach Heath (Princess Fie) your techniques.”

There appeared to be no significant contradiction.

If Cain did not report anything to His Majesty, he could easily teach Princess Fie the relevant techniques while keeping an eye on her in the name of surveillance. This was the scenario that was apparently unfolding before him.

There were no contradictions.

None at all.

(No matter how you spin it, this is a messed-up situation! From a common sense angle it's definitely bizarre!)

Cain wanted to hold his head in his hands. In fact, he already was holding his head in his hands.

Cain pummeled the ground with one hand, holding his head with another. To protect what it meant to be a member of the Grass and to remain loyal to his orders — the contrasting thoughts pushed Cain even deeper into a labyrinth of cognitive dissonance.

"Sir Cain? Sir Cain!? Are you all right!?" Princess Fie asked after him, worry evident in her voice.

And so Cain made up his mind, standing up in the process.

"No, I am fine. I apologize for worrying you."

(I am Grass... Orders are to be loyally executed...)

Although that was what he thought, all that was left inside Cain's heart now was his sense of despair.

"Is that so? I'm glad... You're my last hope, Sir Cain. So... what are you going to teach me?"

Upon hearing that, Cain became wracked with worry once more.

(Although I could teach her some techniques, isn't it dangerous? This is a princess we are talking about — in fact, she's more or less the second queen of this kingdom! Dangerous moves are out of the question then... So, no attack-type techniques. Evasive moves also have the risk of injury...)

"How about this, you brace yoursel—"

"I'd rather do something flashier."

Cain's suggestion of a relatively more harmless and simple technique was interrupted by Princess Fie's retort, the latter now puffing out her cheeks and sulking.

(Oh... she's... unexpectedly bratty?)

Cain could not help but feel that the princess before him was somewhat different than the impression he'd had during surveillance.

"How about a defensive technique to break free from your opponent's grasp _"

"I've already learned that in basic squire training."

After that, each of Cain's selected techniques were batted aside one by one by Her Highness.

"I want something more flashy. If it isn't something I can show off to everyone, there's no meaning in it. I believe in you, Sir Cain!"

Although it was the first time meeting him, Princess Fie delivered her statement with an utmost sense of sureness.

At this point, Fie was desperate. After all, Cain was her last bastion of hope for learning a finishing move.

In Fie's eyes, Cain radiated a sort of aura that suggested that he was capable of all sorts of superhuman feats.

(This is troubling... I can no longer guarantee her safety with these remaining techniques... There's no choice, perhaps, except an evasive technique of some sort...)

In the end, Cain struck a compromise with himself, bringing along Princess Fie to a courtyard at the back regions of the castle. As a member of the Grass, he was generally not supposed to be in places where he could be seen by other individuals.

"It's like a kind of secret training!" Fie said, looking at Cain with eyes filled with excitement and anticipation.

The place they had moved to apparently hosted a wall of sorts that was lower than the internal walls of the castle.

Cain retrieved a rope with a hooked implement at one end from somewhere on his person. Holding the hooked end in his right hand, Cain tossed it forcefully up the wall, whereupon the hook caught upon an edge and stabilized itself. Cain clambered up the rope without a sound thereafter, reaching the top of the wall in a few seconds.

(H-How will she take this suggestion...?)

Princess Fie's eyes, however, had an unmistakable sparkle in them as she witnessed Cain scale the wall.

"Th-That's amazing...!"

It seemed like he had somehow met her expectations. With a sigh of relief, Cain descended the wall as Princess Fie watched on.

After Cain's display, it was time for Princess Fie to practice the maneuver herself.

"Hah! Huh...? Hng...!"

No matter how many times Princess Fie threw the hook, it didn't come close to reaching the top of the wall.

"This is difficult..."

In reality, this was precisely what Cain was aiming for. Although there were various difficulties to this particular technique, the most difficult part of it was actually getting the hook to catch onto a part of the wall successfully.

Although it was overall a relatively dangerous technique, as long as one did not scale to too high of a place, it was otherwise safe to a certain extent.

After wrestling for about 20 minutes with the hooked rope, Fie finally handed the item back to Cain.

(Whew...)

Cain was certain that the Princess had given up. He heaved another sigh of relief — with this, his assignment was finally over. At least he thought so, for a moment.

"Please throw it, Sir Cain. I want to practice climbing too. I can practice

throwing it later.”

(I see... A fair assessment... But wait. Why didn’t I foresee this...?)

Cain placed a single hand against his forehead, and then went along with it because there was fundamentally nothing wrong with Princess Fie’s suggestion.

And so he tossed the hook over the upper part of the inner wall, taking pains to ensure that the hook was more secure than usual.

Princess Fie, for her part, quickly grasped the rope, and began her climbing practice. Cain nervously followed behind, preparing to catch her if she fell.

On her first climb up, Princess Fie’s body swayed side to side violently, almost causing Cain’s heart to stop. However, she quickly regained her bearings, and began climbing straight up the wall.

(What an unbelievable thing she’s doing...)

Normally, this technique wasn’t exactly the kind that could be accomplished in one try. Various factors, such as one’s balance while climbing, the difficulty of supporting one’s weight with a rope, and a fear of heights were common factors in cases of failure.

However, although Princess Fie swayed here and there several times during her ascent, she safely made it all the way to the top. In addition, she became more and more stable as she continued climbing. Her light body weight, mobility, and above all, a fearless heart were all core factors in her success.

Cain thought that parts of her technique could still use improvement, but for what it was worth, Fie had succeeded in climbing the wall under Cain’s tutelage.

(She is great material for a potential member of the Grass... No, what am I thinking? This person is the second queen of this kingdom...)

Cain quickly dismissed the thoughts currently going through his mind.

It was Fie’s first attempt at wall-climbing, and she made it all the way to the top.

“I did it, Sir Cain!”

Standing on the top of the wall, Princess Fie waved to Cain energetically —

perhaps too energetically. In the midst of her happy waving, the Princess had forgotten that she was on top of a wall, and her body began swaying precariously.

“Woah! H-Huh?”

Before Cain’s eyes, the Princess’ body fell from the top of the wall.

(Princess!? Woaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!)

Instinctively running forwards, Cain caught her in his arms. He then promptly proceeded to reprimand her — with as loud and as severe a tone of voice as was permissible for a member of the Grass.

“You can’t let your guard down just because you’ve succeeded! Don’t lose your focus until you actually get down from the wall!”

“I’m sorry.”

Perhaps because Princess Fie also knew that she was at fault, she was currently curled up like a cat, and simply nodded at Cain’s lecture.

“Then... I’ll try to not mess up this time. Oh, please teach me how to climb down.”

Although she had nearly fallen to her death already, Princess Fie showed no fear, and immediately began her practice motions once more.

Eventually, Fie succeeded in learning how to climb and descend from a wall within the day.

“Thank you for teaching me such an incredible technique, Sir Cain!”

Having finished her training session, a content expression was written all over Princess Fie’s face.

However, Fie was now biting her thumb, and was enviously staring at Cain’s chest region — to be precise, she was staring at the hooked rope implement that was kept in that region of Cain’s outfit.

(Don’t tell me... she wants this? No, I can’t. I only have one of these. It’s a required tool for any Grass Soldier... I can’t just give it to her...)

“Hmm...” Cain was deep in thought.

“Please send a request to Garuge... I’m sure he can make one for you...”

“Yes!” Princess Fie nodded gladly at Cain’s words.

A few days later, Fie stood in front of Slad and company, looking very proud of herself.

“I too, have finally learned a finisher!”

Having practiced the appropriate throwing and hooking method for the past few days, Fie had finally mastered the technique.

First, she would show it to Slad, Gees, and Remie. As for Gormus, he had made himself scarce upon hearing the words “finishing move.” Fie made up her mind to track him down and show it to him after her initial display.

So, her three friends had the privilege of seeing it first.

“Huh, really? What kind of move is it?”

“Everyone kind of ran out of ideas though... They aren’t really doing it anymore.”

“Well I’m looking forward to seeing it.”

Slad seemed to be genuinely interested, while Gees watched on observantly. Remie simply stood in front of Fie with his two friends, a smile on his face.

As Fie took out her hooked rope, however, her three friends all made a somewhat incredulous expression.

“Heath, you...”

“That’s a bit...”

“That’s against the regulations, you know...”

The three squires looked upon their friend with a mix of pity and confusion.

“Huh?” Fie simply stood there, blinking, not really understanding the situation.

Apparently, a set of rules had emerged amongst the squire’s finisher boom recently.

The regulations were as follows:

A sword move gains 1.5x more points (because swords are the knightliest weapon). A lance or bow move would score normally — however, all other kinds of moves were prohibited.

The time taken to perform said move must not exceed 10 seconds.

If one moves for over two meters from the start of the performance, they are disqualified.

The maximum number of swords one may use is three.

The squires had collectively come up with this set of regulations after the finisher boom had led to an uncontrolled expression of move variations in all sorts of directions.

However, Fie, who had spent the last few days practicing how to throw her hook, was unaware of this.

As Remie explained the rules to Fie, her face slowly began to turn white. In the end, the so-called finisher Cain had taught her was of no use at all.

“Well... try harder next time, I guess?”

“Eeeeeehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

That was all Remie could say to console his friend as Fie’s wail of sadness echoed throughout the training grounds.

Sir Crow’s Journal

Ugh... That hurts. My solar plexus still hurts.

That Heath, he really went for it, didn’t he? When did he even learn something like that...?

And to think I showed him one of my killer moves too, you know? What’s so wrong about that? I mean, it’s a technique that really makes the girls fall for you... Most of the time.

Is he not interested in women because he’s still so young? Well... that’s not it. When I was around his height, I was already picking up girls! (Not to mention that I was already well known as a playboy at his age.)

Hmph. That Heath. He’s still just a kid.

One day he’ll grow up and be interested in women, then maybe he’ll see just how great I am. He’s gonna be staring in awe at how popular with the ladies I am.

Just like when he looks at Roy!

Chapter 11 — Lynette's Incursion

On one of her rest days, Fie had decided to take a leisurely stroll around the royal castle. Her stroll, however, was soon interrupted by what seemed to be voices arguing in the distance.

To be precise, said voices were coming from the back pavilion where Fie once used to live.

"Why would you not let me see Mistress Fie!?"

"As I said... it's because that's what King Roy has ordered..."

"Why would such an order be issued!!"

"You would have to ask King Roy to find out..."

Suddenly recognizing a familiar voice, Fie hid behind some trees, peeping out from behind them. What seemed to be a servant girl with a distinct bob haircut was currently staring daggers at the guards.

(L... Lynette...!?)

The shock from seeing someone familiar to her nearly caused Fie to bolt up from her hiding place.

Lynette was the maidservant who had always served Fie — she was also Fie's friend. She was supposedly busy tending to Queen Fielle's needs, and hence no longer had time for Fie. However, for reasons unknown, said maidservant was now standing before the pavilion where Fie was supposed to be, and was currently engaged in a staring match with the guards.

Upon closer inspection, Fie was surprised to find that it was Lynette who was one-sidedly intimidating the guards. Somehow, they were cowed by her presence.

"W-Well... we can't let you pass..."

(This is bad... This is bad...!)

Fie could not help but panic, suppressing her gasps with a well-placed hand over her mouth.

If Lynette entered the back pavilion now, Fie's escape and subsequent disappearance would be plain for all to see. Fie was not keen on losing the squire's life that she had carved out for herself for the past few months.

(This is bad... This is so, so bad...!)

The guards, although visibly uncomfortable, were admirably standing in place. After maintaining her stare for an indeterminate amount of time, Lynette sighed, as if to relent.

"I understand..."

(Crisis averted...!)

Upon hearing those words, both the guards and Fie felt a heavy weight lift from their chests. However, no sooner had they relaxed than Lynette once again stared straight at the guards, speaking as she did so.

"Then I shall obtain permission from His Majesty tomorrow! I will ensure that he allows me to pass!" With that, and a sharp turn of the heel, Lynette began quickly retracing her steps back to the royal castle.

In the shade of some nearby trees, Fie sat down, hugging her knees in despair.

(Lynette's going to come back tomorrow!? What do I do? If they find out I've escaped, they'll be really angry for sure! Maybe I'll even get expelled from the Royal Knights! I have to do something!!)

Lynette's sudden visitation caused Fie to involuntarily shiver while continuing to hug her knees.

The very next morning, Fie was staying in bed.

"Are you all right? How is your fever?"

"I don't... feel so good... But I should be okay..."

Remie was asking after his friend in a worried tone of voice, as Fie was currently coughing somewhat violently. A small washbasin filled with water sat

next to a stack of towels, neatly positioned by Fie's bed.

(I'm faking it... Sorry...)

Doing what she could to make her face appear red and act completely miserable, Fie made a heartfelt apology to the worried Remie in her mind.

"We'll let the instructor know... so get some rest. I guess I'd better head off to training now."

"Yeah. Thank you, Remie."

To the Remie who had prepared a series of cold medications and towels for Fie first thing in the morning, Fie internally apologized once more, and waved goodbye as the squire made his way to his morning training routines.

Once she could no longer sense the presence of anyone else in the northern dormitory, Fie flew out of her bed.

"I have to hurry... before Lynette makes it to the pavilion!"

The squire's rooms were located on the second floor of the dormitory. So, withdrawing her trusty hooked rope from her room, Fie attached the hooked end to her window. She then launched herself out and down with one breath, holding the rope to adjust her descent speed, finally adopting a rolling position to cancel out her momentum. After which, Fie took pains to move under the shadows of foliage, so as not to be seen by anyone from the castle.

Although she was employing methods of secretive movement she had learned from Cain, within the castle, it was kind of overkill. Cain had specifically taught her methods of movement that would not alert potential enemies in dangerous situations, but in the royal castle, where squires were commonplace, Fie's covert movements ironically made her stand out more than usual.

Moving at a relatively fast speed, and yet not making a sound, Fie looped around to areas of the castle where there were no people present before finally approaching the pavilion.

The guards were already in front of the building, so Fie concluded that she would not be able to enter from that direction. However, the unmotivated guards only bothered to look straight ahead.

Taking care to erase her presence, Fie quietly crept up to the back of the palace, tossing her hooked rope upwards into the one of the pavilion's walls — and then went all the way up and over it. Although Fie had made some degree of noise during her ascent, it seemed that the guards hadn't noticed anything at all.

(I guess they really don't care about their job, huh...)

Fie could not help but be disgusted at what she saw, occasionally pausing during her ascent to stare at the guards.

After making her way up, Fie utilized the same means of descent that she had used while escaping from her dormitory — and soon, she had successfully infiltrated the back pavilion.

Fie quickly entered the building, and into the room where she had left her dress. Withdrawing the dress frantically, Fie changed into it without too much trouble.

Lynette showed up approximately two hours after Fie had changed — at least, it took that long for Fie to finally sense another human presence in the pavilion.

"Mistress Fie, are you in? It is Lynette." Lynette's voice rang out clearly throughout the building.

"Hello Lynette. I'm glad you came. It's been a while."

Fie poked her head out of the door to her room, greeting Lynette with an innocent expression.

"Mistress Fie!" Upon seeing Fie's face, Lynette's eyes filled with tears, and she quickly rushed to Fie's side — but then the maidservant's eyes opened wide in apparent shock. "Mistress Fie... your hair..."

"Ah, yeah. Long hair is troublesome after all, so I cut it! Ah ha ha."

Fie's heart started beating a little louder than it should after having her short hair pointed out immediately by her visitor.

(She doesn't think it's suspicious, right...?)

For her part, Fie had not intended to keep her recent activities a secret from Lynette forever. She had thought about explaining her situation to Lynette one day, as she had always been kind to her during her time in Daeman. However, she had intended to do this after some more time had passed.

Lynette would probably raise some objections with regards to her being a knight, saying that it was dangerous. Currently, Fie's career was rife with what she thought to be failures, and she could not in good faith claim that she was a model squire. With this thought in mind, Fie had intended to explain her circumstances only after she had grown to a certain extent. In which case, even if Lynette did have objections, she would be summarily convinced by Fie's achievements.

It was also worth noting that Lynette was now currently supposed to be serving Queen Fielle instead, and must have been busy. So Fie did not want to worry her friend with unnecessary thoughts.

Furrowing her brows slightly, Lynette stared long and hard at Fie.

(Is... Is she suspicions of me?)

Beads of cold sweat begun forming on Fie's forehead.

After staring at Fie's face for an extended period of time, the frown on Lynette's brow deepened, after which she promptly asked after Fie's recent circumstances.

"Do you ever feel like living here is restrictive? Have they by any chance been ill-treating you?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Every day is really fu... I mean, living here is fine!" Fie struck an enthusiastic pose, attempting to convince her friend.

Fie had realized that it would sound strange for her daily life in such a confined place to be "really fun" on a daily basis at the very last minute, changing her statement as she did so.

In reality, however, Fie was greatly pleased and satisfied with her current life in Orstoll — although that was her life as a squire, not as Princess Fie.

She had encountered people who needed her, and she had come to like

everyone in the 18th knights. On top of all that, Fie had even made friends with her fellow squires in the dormitories, and was living her life to the fullest. Her training sessions and other new experiences gave Fie a strange sense of fulfillment.

Fie thought that coming to Orstoll was one of the best things that had ever happened to her.

“Is that really true...? If there is anything you are not satisfied with, I will raise a formal complaint with his Majesty King Roy—”

“No, no! I’m fine! I’m really fine!”

Upon hearing that Lynette intended to complain to King Roy, Fie started panicking once more. After all if Lynette really did such a thing, her new life as a squire, which she had worked so hard to achieve, could all disappear in a puff of smoke.

In addition, Fie did not want to endanger Lynette’s social position — she had finally become one of Queen Fielle’s personal servants, and Fie did not want Lynette to somehow incur the wrath of her husband, the King.

“Ahh, don’t you worry, about old Heath, I can take care—”

“Heath...?”

(Eek!!)

Accidentally using her fake name, Fie nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Eh... Eheheh. I mean. I am absolutely fine. Don’t worry.” Fie hoped from the bottom of her heart that Lynette wouldn’t see her behavior as suspicious.

Leaning in to inspect Fie’s face, Lynette looked unconvinced, touching her face and observing Fie closely.

“It seems like... you have been having your meals, as you should...”

That was true as Fie did have a hearty meal yesterday — although it was in the dormitory canteen.

“There seems to be... a good color to your cheeks...”

That would also be true as Fie had been decidedly healthy ever since she last

collapsed from overexertion.

Moving her gaze from Fie's face to her clothing, Lynette frowned once more.

"There is a crease on the sleeve of your dress. I have mentioned multiple times that you must not rush when putting clothing on, Mistress Fie..." Lynette reached for the creased sleeve in Fie's dress, and moved to fix it with her hands.

Seeing this, Fie could not help but smile to herself.

"This takes me back... You really cared about things like this even back in Daeman."

Lynette, however, broke into a slight pout upon hearing Fie's statement.

"You make it sound like I was always hassling and nagging at you back then, Mistress Fie."

"Haha. Sorry, sorry."



Fie however, was aware that Lynette had always looked out for her in various ways, even if she did indeed hassle and nag at times.

“I am really grateful to you, Lynette. After all, no one else really cared about me.”

Back in Daeman, the absolute minimum in terms of servants were granted to Fie — and they did, for their part, do the absolute minimum. That is to say, they basically did not teach Fie a single thing. In fact, Fie realized that it was perhaps Lynette who taught her everything she knew — from the correct way of wearing a dress to her table manners.

“Thanks for everything.” Fie earnestly and sincerely smiled, thanking the maidservant who had made such a difference in her life. Lynette, however, quickly turned red upon receiving this praise.

“It... It’s nothing to make such a fuss over. I-I’m going to make some tea. I won’t be long.”

“You don’t have to overexert yourself if you’re busy with other things...”

“I am not overexerting myself!” said Lynette. She quickly made her way to the food preparation area, attempting to hide her embarrassment.

Heaving a sigh of relief at somehow having managed to hide the truth, Fie found herself looking forward to Lynette’s tea. In the past, Lynette had prepared tea for her when she was with her sister, Fielle, or when Lynette had time in her schedule. Although Lynette was a maidservant who was skilled in many fields, and thus served the royal family well, Lynette’s tea was a specialty even amongst her many skills.

After her preparations, the two of them sat, drinking the tea that Lynette had brewed. Lynette had initially refused to sit opposite Fie, but eventually relented after Fie had stated it would be lonely sitting alone.

“Maidservants are not permitted to sit at the same table as their betters, you know.”

Lynette reluctantly took a seat opposite, facing Fie. The nostalgic and familiar smell of the tea Lynette brewed wafted past Fie’s nose, reminding her of how

much she had liked it in the past.

“How is Fielle doing...?”

For one reason or another, Fie decided to ask after her sister.

“Y-Yes. She has mentioned wanting to come see you, Mistress Fie!”

“I see... But I guess she’s busy, so she never really visits after all.”

“Yes...” Lynette’s eyes took on a sad gaze at Fie’s words.

Fie guessed that her sister was busy after taking on the formal duties and appointments of the Queen of Orstoll. She thought it reasonable to assume that Fielle would be busy for at least a year after becoming Queen, and not even have personal time for herself, let alone time to visit her sister.

In fact, Fie was perhaps the most surprised at how Fielle’s closest maidservant, Lynette, had taken the time to journey all the way to where she was. However, above all else, Fie noticed that Lynette’s demeanor seemed to change, becoming more sullen upon talk of Fielle.

“Did something happen? You can always talk to me. I can’t do very much but I can listen, you know?”

Lynette, however, shook her head.

“No, I am fine. You too, Mistress Fie. If there is anything at all that is bothering you, do feel free to speak to me.”

Lynette was fussing over Fie, even now. To Fie, Lynette was a great person and friend. Even back when they were together in Daeman, Lynette would often worry about Fie one way or another.

This was exactly why Fie had no intention of telling Lynette or Fielle about her situation right now. She wouldn’t have even said anything even if she had stayed cooped up in the back pavilion. After all, Fielle was King Roy’s lover and partner, and Lynette was her closest maidservant and lady-in-waiting. Fie did not want to drag down both her sister and friend with talk of her circumstances. In fact, doing so would just make her feel bad...

Fie had become a squire and was working at improving various facets of her life and person in hopes of one day becoming a model knight — and then, when

both Fielle and Lynette's situation had stabilized, she would tell them both.

Fie and Lynette had a peaceful and enjoyable tea session. As expected, however, Lynette was indeed busy, and after having their tea together, was already making preparations to return.

"I had originally wanted to stay for much longer than this..."

"No, that's quite all right. Don't worry about me, please take care of Fielle."

"Yes, Mistress..." Lynette could only nod at Fie's words. "I'll come again when I can find the time..."

Sweat began to form on Fie's brow once more.

(I-If possible... you shouldn't visit too often at all...)

Fie didn't dislike Lynette. In fact, she was happy that Lynette cared about her well-being. To be absolutely frank, however, Lynette visiting her posed a real problem as she was currently living as a squire.

"In that case... could you do this for me, Lynette? On the afternoon of the day before you decide to visit, please hang a scarf on a castle balcony — one that is visible from where I am."

"A... scarf? Why such a thing...?"

Fie had expected that Lynette would find such a request strange.

"Well, think about it this way... It's fun if you visit me, but if you tell me the day before, I can spend more time anticipating your visit, right...?"

"...I understand."

Fie herself thought that her request was too outlandish — but Lynette simply accepted her request with a nod, without questioning her further.

(I'm glad it worked out... Hiding my actual situation from Lynette wasn't easy, but I did it...)

Now armed with a means of entry to the back pavilion, Fie thought that she could somehow make things work out if she knew when Lynette would show up. On top of that, Lynette did seem busy, and so she probably wouldn't visit too often.

Much like the strategy she had employed today, Fie thought that future occurrences of unprecedented colds should help her keep up the charade adequately.

“Well, Mistress Fie... I must go, but I will definitely come back to see you again.”

“All right, Lynette. See you!”

With a look of longing, Lynette turned around and waved one last time at Fie. It would seem that Lynette was in fact very busy, as she quickly departed through the gates after waving goodbye. It was obvious that Lynette had done a lot to even make time to visit in the first place.

Fie heaved a final sigh of relief upon having successfully fended off Lynette’s curiosity on her first visit. However, she also felt grateful that Lynette had made time for her on such a busy schedule.

Upon leaving the palace, Lynette quickened her pace, making her way to her Mistress, Fielle.

However, Lynette’s heart was instead filled with thoughts of Mistress Fie.

(She pretends she’s fine... But the matter of that scarf... She must be so terribly lonely...!)

Although she had been adequately fed, there was nary a servant nor decoration in the back pavilion, and it was dusty and unkempt. Fie’s room itself looked like it hadn’t been cleaned, and the guards did not really seem to care for the sole inhabitant of the building they were guarding. Lynette came to the conclusion that if anything, Fie had been treated coldly.

However, Fie had obviously pretended to be doing well to not make her worry — Lynette noticed that much.

(At least... if those girls were sent to Mistress Fie’s side... they would be able to provide her with a very basic level of support...)

Lynette bit down on the nail of her thumb in frustration. Images of the numerous maidservants who had flat-out refused to serve Fie filled her mind.

Although there was no work to be done today, those good-for-nothing maidservants would do anything but serve Fie, even if it meant hiding themselves in one room of the royal castle or another, pretending that they were doing work to pass the time.

(But... No... I can't possibly leave the care of Mistress Fie to those kinds of people...)

In addition, the maidservants of this country, despite not knowing anything about Fie's background, had seen it fit to bad-mouth her. If she were by Fie's side, she would never have let Fie experience such things — and to begin with, she had wanted to work for Mistress Fie in the first place.

Standing still, Lynette laughed at herself, amidst her own thoughts on the situation.

(But then... to Mistress Fie, I am probably no different than the other maidservants... In the end, I could not be by her side...)

Lynette had, after all, chosen to follow Fielle instead.

King Roy's visage floated into Lynette's mind. Rumors had spread across the kingdom that King Roy was not particularly fond of, and had actually given the cold shoulder to his second queen. Lynette, however, understood why this was a given.

(The King of Orstoll wishes to protect Mistress Fielle. And for that, I am grateful... But... the way that he treats Mistress Fie is not something I can accept.)

The King had flat-out misunderstood Fie's true nature. If only they would meet once, he would understand. However, he did not try to do so, not even once. In fact, the people of Orstoll, too, had never actually bothered finding out more about Fie.

Lynette eventually found herself shaking her head at her own thoughts.

(No... Although I can't accept that, we are indebted to His Majesty with regards to the matter of Mistress Fielle. We cannot possibly wish for or ask for any more. At the very least, not from the King. I have to do something about this situation — to let them all see how wonderful of a person Mistress Fie is,

without all these preconceived notions and views.)

(But... I currently do not have the time to move freely... However... Somehow, I will find the time... And I will show the people of this country just how wonderful and kind Mistress Fie is. If I do that... She will no longer be treated in that terrible way.)

With those thoughts burning bright in her heart, Lynette finally departed the back pavilion.

Sir Crow’s Journal

Seems like Heath caught a cold... so I went to see him.

The weather hasn’t even been that cold recently. Has he been overdoing it again? I brought him some medicines and herbs to deal with his cold, but he just ended up looking very apologetic.

I mean, he is my junior, he shouldn’t have to hold back on accepting stuff like this. Anyway, I went back before I infected him with any new illnesses or something. I hope he gets better soon.

Side Story — Lynette and Fie

This is a story of when Lynette was still a child, from a time when she had just begun serving Fielle.

“Why is a child wearing the uniform of a maidservant?”

“Oh, her. She’s from a ‘Distinguished Servant Family.’”

“Oh, that?”

The maidservants gossiping about Lynette as she walked by were at least ten years older than she was.

“Isn’t she the same age as Mistress Fielle? It’s a little mean to dump so much on her, isn’t it?”

“Also... it’s a little worrying for the care of Mistress Fielle to be left to a mere child. Wouldn’t it have been better to assign her an adult maidservant in this case?”

Naturally, their words reached Lynette’s ears.

(Hmph. An adult like you? You cannot even remember the steps for brewing an adequate pot of tea.)

To Lynette, who had received all sorts of education appropriate for a maidservant from a young age, the laziness of this country’s maidservants was something she could not bear to witness. They did not perform their tasks well at all — from cleaning to taking care of clothing, their work left much to be desired.

In particular, the methodology they employed in brewing tea was severely lacking. They knew little about steeping times, or the importance of warming up a cup before using it to serve tea. The tea that they brewed had no fragrance, and the temperature they used was below what was optimal for the leaves. In short — they utterly failed to coax the appropriate flavors out of the leaves.

However, neither His Majesty the King, nor Her Highness the Queen really

cared about these failings. As such, the quality of maidservants employed in Daeman began to steadily fall.

Lynette had been appalled when she first came to the palace.

Most of its inhabitants did their work in a remarkably slipshod manner. Occasionally, there would be a few individuals who went about their work with more care, but they often did so with scowls on their faces. It was plain to see that they would rather be elsewhere.

Although they were her seniors of the same profession, Lynette could not find anyone to look up to as a role model. In fact, the only fortunate thing to befall Lynette since her coming to the palace was being assigned to take care of Mistress Fielle.

Perhaps it was a rude way to say it, but both the King and Queen of Daeman were very much clueless about the concept of “quality.” They drank the tea that Lynette had poured her heart into making without noticing a thing — they drank it as if it were the usual kind of sub-par tea offered to them.

In fact, Lynette had not been hired because of her abilities or personality — she was instead hired because she was said to come from a “Distinguished Servant Family,” and because she was around the same age as Fielle.

However, amidst all that, only Mistress Fielle commented on Lynette’s Tea. She smiled and said, “It was very delicious. It’s the first time I’ve had such delicious tea!”

Although she was around the same age as Lynette, it was clear that Fielle was wise beyond her years, and easily understood concepts such as the inherent worth of things, both tangible and intangible. As such, Lynette could see the value of serving Fielle as a maidservant. If anything, she was glad that she had been assigned to work under such a person.

With these thoughts filling her mind, Lynette made her way to a nearby watering hole.

Other than taking care of her charge, she also had to keep up personal standards of cleanliness and grooming. However, Lynette, who was busy tending to Mistress Fielle’s needs, hardly had time to do her own laundry. As

such, Lynette left her laundry to the other servants, and all she had to do was remember to collect it after it had been washed.

Upon reaching the watering hole, Lynette came face-to-face with a pile of disorganized clothing that had been washed and dried — to be precise, her pile.

(My tie is gone...)

Lynette immediately noticed this, and quickly understood that it was a form of bullying by the other servants.

The reason for this was simple — the maidservants of this country had all wanted to serve Mistress Fielle, and it was only natural that they would dislike the young girl who had been chosen over them.

Lynette's tie, in particular, was granted to her in recognition of her service to the Princess, and was made of a special fabric. Although she had a spare available for use, Lynette did not want to lose such an important item.

(They probably did not have the guts to throw it away... Instead, they have probably hidden it where I would not think to look.)

Coming to that conclusion after accurately analyzing the cowardly and petty natures of the maidservants, Lynette began searching for her tie.

However, she could not calm her heart.

(Ugh! I hardly have time to spare to do this!)

Being Princess Fielle's personal maidservant meant that Lynette had very little, if any time for herself at all. If Lynette was not timely about her duties, it would amount to causing trouble for her Mistress.

"And that's why those girls are third-rate, nothing more..." Lynette's poisonously spiteful comment was made to no one in particular.

However, at that moment, she felt a rhythmic tapping on her shoulder.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

The tie that Lynette had been looking for was grasped in the person's hands.

"Ah, yes. Thank you very much."

Lynette moved to receive the tie from her unknown benefactor, who

promptly handed it over. It was at this moment that Lynette noticed her hands — hands that belonged to a girl around her age.

Raising her head, Lynette was greeted by a shock of blonde hair — the exact same shade of blonde that the royalty of this kingdom sported.

Lynette knew this girl. She was the other princess of Daeman, Fie — Mistress Fielle's twin sister.

Before Lynette had arrived at the palace, her mother had thought it wise to show her a portrait of her — however, it was relatively shoddy and messily-drawn, and looked nothing like the actual person that currently stood in front of her.

Lynette reasoned that other than her Mistress and herself, the only other girl around her age who resided in the royal castle could be no one other than Princess Fie.

Although Lynette knew of Fie's existence as "the other princess," she was normally nowhere to be found. When the King and Queen had tea with Fielle, Fie was not present. When the royal family had dinner, she was also missing — nor was she present at the balls and dances that Princess Fielle attended.

Instead, the place where Lynette had first set eyes on Fie was at this dark watering hole, which the other maidservants were keen to leave behind once they had finished their work.

Lynette's first impression of Fie wasn't exactly positive — to begin with, her mannerisms were somewhat crude. In addition, she was decidedly un-princesslike.

For starters, although Fie was indeed wearing a dress, it was of a considerably dated design. Normally, it would be common for princesses to have the latest fashion trends in their wardrobe.

The King, Queen, and Princess Fielle all had numerous dresses and robes — gifts from the royal families of nearby kingdoms. However, Fie's dress alone looked old and weathered, as if it were a hand-me-down from someone who had outgrown it a long time ago.

On top of all that, she was poorly groomed. Normally, the dresses of royalty were separately maintained and laundered with a strict eye for detail — to the point where even the half-hearted maidservants of Daeman did an acceptable job of it. However, the clothing that this princess wore was probably just thrown into the laundry pile containing the servants' clothing — that was how shabby the garment was.

To make matters worse, the princess in question wore it without a shred of elegance. Unlike her Mistress, Princess Fielle, who could wear and present an otherwise typical dress for royalty with an air of unparalleled elegance, this other princess could not be more different.

Fie cocked her head to one side, becoming aware that she was the subject of Lynette's intense stare. Without thinking, Lynette reached out and straightened a crease on her sleeve.

"Please wear your dress properly. You, too, are a princess, after all."

Upon hearing Lynette's words, the other princess seemed a little surprised, before she turned to face the maidservant, smiling as she did so.

"Thank you. I'll be more careful."

Advice had to be given sometimes. Even if it would hurt the pride of another individual, it was for their own good. Although Lynette was still a child, her sense of social understanding was well-developed.

Although she never had to warn her Mistress about matters like this, Princess Fielle would always humbly accept Lynette's advice on other matters. However, with the King and Queen, similar advice was often rewarded with a visible frown of distaste — although Princess Fielle would always intervene to defuse the situation in such cases.

Indeed, a person like Princess Fielle was exceedingly rare. That was why Lynette would have assumed that the other princess had taken offense to her words. A slight blush crossed her features as she realized that her blunt nature had shown itself once again. Fie, however, had just smiled and thanked her for her advice and actions.

"It's all right, as long as you understand. I'll be going now..."

Unable to honestly apologize for her etiquette (or lack thereof), Lynette quickly retrieved her tie and departed the watering hole.

Filled with a strange feeling in her heart, Lynette made her way down the hallways and corridors of the castle, intending to return to Princess Fielle.

She was, however, stopped by a man's voice.

"Hey Lynette. Seems like you're working hard and doing a good job, even though you're just a child."

Lynette immediately felt revulsion and some degree of fear in response to the owner of this greasy, unpleasant voice.

"Thank you for your words of praise, Count Jaruge."

Fighting to hide her disgust, Lynette turned to face the Count, lowering her head as she recited her line, almost machine-like in her movements.

"How about it? I've just had the maidservants prepare tea. Do you want to have some with me?"

"I am sorry, but I have to return to Princess Fielle's side."

"Just a bit is fine. You have to rest after all, right?"

"I am terribly sorry, but I must not keep Princess Fielle waiting for long..."

"I see... You are indeed busy. If you have time in the future, do prepare some tea for me as well. Let's spend some... elegant time together."

"Yes, if time permits." Saying only that, Lynette bowed her head once more, turning to leave the hallway.

Count Jaruge was a relative of the Queen, and was a constant but unwelcome visitor at the palace, neglecting his own territories as a result.

The count's reputation amongst his servants was not exactly stellar either, and he was particularly known for causing trouble for his servants with selfish commands. As he was a relative of the Queen, there was no one to admonish him in the royal castle.

However, Lynette's reason for disliking and fearing him had nothing to do with how he treated his servants — but because he, a man over 30 years of age,

looked at her with lustful eyes.

Although Lynette had first thought that it was just her imagination, as time passed, she became increasingly sure of her suspicions.

“I’m looking forward to it.” The count nonchalantly placed a hand on Lynette’s lower back — and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

“Yes...”

Although Lynette had thought to at least give a response, her voice had given out. Determined to not stay in that location, she pressed forward, moving one foot ahead of the other.

It was then that Lynette decided to discuss this issue with her mother.

However, her mother’s response was thus:

“It has to be your imagination. You finally got assigned as Mistress Fielle’s personal maid! You must not cause any problems. Just bear with it for now.”

(I have to bear with it...)

As Lynette continued walking, tears welled up in her eyes, and she fought to contain them. She could not possibly show Mistress Fielle her crying face — she would definitely be worried for her.

After all, it was impossible for her to discuss this with Princess Fielle.

(It’s all right... It’s true that I am Mistress Fielle’s personal maid and am very busy... I’ll be fine as long as I reject all his advances...)

Lynette repeated her thoughts in her mind over and over again.

A certain amount of time had passed since that incident. Lynette had spent busy but peaceful days serving Princess Fielle.

However, certain rumors had begun to spread amongst the other maidservants.

To this, Lynette paid no heed. After all, she had received training as a maidservant from a young age, and possessed a variety of knowledge and skills. As long as she had confidence in her skills, she did not intend to try to make

friends with the other maidservants, who seemed content to gossip about her.

The other maidservants, for their part, looked down on Lynette for being younger than they were. And because none of them knew more than Lynette did about being a maidservant in the first place, their collective jealously continued to grow.

In spite of this dissonance in her heart, Lynette continued to serve Princess Fielle with all her being as the days passed.

On a certain day, a party was held in the royal castle. It was not exactly a special day, but instead just an event for the proud parents of Princess Fielle to show her off to visiting nobles from surrounding kingdoms, in hopes of forging some form of ties with them for the future.

In fact, to the maidservants, who had to prepare everything behind the scenes, it was hardly an occasion to be happy about.

Princess Fielle, although tired by her constant engagements, appropriately entertained her guests late into the night, her smile never once fading from her face.

And so, on top of being worried about her Mistress for most of the event, Lynette was displeased about how the King and Queen of Daeman did not seem to care much about Princess Fielle's condition.

Although she was the Princess' personal maidservant, the party was extremely short-staffed, so Lynette had to leave Princess Fielle's side midway through the party to assist in the transport of large amounts of food and drink, in addition to other duties behind the scenes.

About an hour into the party, it was discovered that there was not enough wine to go around.

"There isn't enough wine. I don't remember seeing where it is... Where is it stored?"

"Oh, that would be the third room down from the central basement passageway."

A nearby maidservant, upon hearing Lynette's question, answered

accordingly. Lynette, however, furrowed her brow in response.

“Isn’t that just a normal room...?”

The room in question was also somewhat far away.

“No one is using it right now, and so it was decided that for the duration of the party, it would be used as a store room.”

“You just got hired, so you probably don’t know, but we’ve always done this.”

Although the maidservant’s response was clearly meant to mock her, this was par the course for them — and although Lynette usually did not trust anything they said, this particular answer did not seem suspicions to her.

“Can’t you fetch it?”

Lynette had thought that the maidservant would simply retrieve it herself — but instead, she smiled, shaking her head.

“That will not do. We can’t exactly leave our posts.”

However, it did not seem that way at all. If anything, the maidservants present seemed to have a lot of time on their hands. Still, Lynette was not one for arguments when time was of the essence. And she didn’t want to depend on her lazy colleagues in any case.

“I understand. I will go fetch the wine instead.”

Lynette decided to retrieve the wine on her own. Preparing a small box and cart, Lynette headed towards the room where the wine was stored.

However, Lynette misunderstood the truly diabolical intentions of her co-workers.

She had thought that they were simply slacking off and pushing their duties onto her, like they always did, simply because they disliked her — on the account of her having the most skill and ability as a maidservant, although she was a mere child.

Lynette had mistaken the maidservants’ behavior as a sort of herd mentality, manifesting in nothing more than petty acts of harassment and mild acts of mischief. As such, she did not know just how deep and twisted their jealousy of

her was.

This was why Lynette entered the specified room without a second thought, all the while thinking to herself how the other maidservants lacked a sense of responsibility. The room was pitch-black.

(Why are the lights out...?)

If this was indeed a storeroom for wine, it should have been adequately lit — no work could be conducted otherwise.

Lynette stood in the middle of the dark room, momentarily confused, when the door suddenly shut behind her.

Almost immediately, an unknown presence wrapped its arms around her body.

“We’re finally alone now... I’m so glad, Lynette.”

Upon hearing that voice, Lynette’s entire body froze, a shattering wave of chills traveling up from her feet up her spine.

That was Count Jaruge’s voice.

Right next to her ears, was Count Jaruge’s voice.

Lynette’s knees began to shake, and she could no longer scream.

(Why... Why...?)

Her thoughts were a muddled mess. Lynette did not understand this turn of events — more accurately, she could not process any of it at all.

However, deep down inside, she knew. While she understood, she chose not to accept it. The smiles that the other maidservants had shown her as they told her where the wine was kept flashed repeatedly through her mind.

She could not believe it. She had thought that they simply didn’t like her — and had never thought that they would do such a thing.

She did not want to believe it — that she was currently now in the embrace of the Count in a pitch-black room, far away from the party venue.

However, no matter how much she had denied it in her heart, the current situation would not change.

(I have to escape...)

Although Lynette thought of escaping, her body merely remained shaking, and she could not muster the strength to do anything.

(Anyone please! Help! Mother...!)

Lynette thought of her mother's face, and the words "Just bear with it" surfaced in her mind. It was not the face of a mother who was worried about her daughter — but instead one that was purely concerned with Lynette's social standing.

Lynette wondered if her mother would even help her in this situation.

That question alone was one that she did not wish to answer, for it filled her heart with dread.

(Mistress Fielle...)

For a moment, Princess Fielle's visage filled Lynette's mind. However, she was also the host of this party, and hence would be preoccupied. There was no way she would show up to save her.

At that moment, it finally occurred to Lynette that no one would come to her rescue at all. Tears of despair flowed down her cheeks.

"Yes, that's a good girl. Stay still and don't make a sound."

With something between a smile and a sneer, Count Jaruge's hands began to move across Lynette's body.

"NOOOOOOOO!!"

In that moment, Lynette began flailing her arms in the darkness wildly, hoping to grasp something, anything, with her small hands.

A dull gonging sound filled the air, along with the sound of what seemed to be someone falling to the ground. The arms that had entrapped Lynette released their grip.

In the darkness, Lynette desperately searched for the room's door, feeling

around the walls for the doorknob. Finding it at last, Lynette turned it with trembling hands — and the door opened. It was apparently unlocked.

Lynette ran out into the bright corridor, whereupon her knees promptly gave way.

However, there was no one in the corridor. Lynette wasn't sure if it was a mere coincidence, or if it was the work of the Count.

(I... I have to get away...)

Although that was what Lynette had thought, there was no strength left in her legs to stand.

"How dare you... Lynette..."

From beyond the darkness of the door emerged Count Jaruge — and upon seeing his face, Lynette's heart almost came to a stop.

His usual lustful stare was now clearly intermingled with the color of anger. A single steak of blood dripped from his forehead.

"You've really gone and done something bad, haven't you? To think that a mere maidservant like you would dare to injure a relative of the Queen, a count..."

"But... But that's because you..."

"I just wanted to get along with you — that was all. But then you went and misunderstood, didn't you? And then you exerted violence upon me. This injury, and the thing you're holding in your hands, are more than enough proof."

In her hands was a bronze ornament of sorts — along with a healthy amount of the Count's blood on its surface.

Lynette couldn't believe she was in this situation. Yet whether she believed it or not, she couldn't deny that she was now in an extremely disadvantaged position.

She did not have any proof of the Count assaulting her in the dark room. The evidence that was available now, in addition to the difference in social standing between the two, clearly illustrated the outcome of this event.

She was certain that no one would believe what she had to say. To the denizens of this castle, if the guilty party shoves its sins onto one of weaker social standing, then that was that.

Lynette already knew that her fellow maidservants would never admit to any wrongdoing — much less stick up for her or defend her character. In fact, getting rid of her would be advantageous for them.

Princess Fielle may vouch for her, but the thought of her Mistress arguing with her parents filled Lynette's heart with an unimaginable pain. There was no way she could do something like that to Princess Fielle.

"I don't think such a dangerous person like yourself could possibly be Princess Fielle's personal maidservant... I have to report this to the Queen. You are fine with that, yes?"

Lynette froze upon hearing those words. Her mother's face surfaced in her mind once more.

"You must not cause any problems."

That was what Lynette's mother had told her when she had been chosen as Princess Fielle's personal maidservant.

"Never let go of your position. You are the star of hope for our 'Distinguished Servant Family.' No matter what happens, you must do your job well."

Lynette's mother knew that, should she cause any problems for anyone, she would be removed from that coveted role.

"No... anything but that... Please don't tell the Queen..." Lynette earnestly begged the Count — despite how aberrant it was to do so.

Why did something like this happen to her? Why did she have to obey someone like this? However, Lynette could not betray her mother's expectations.

Upon hearing Lynette's words, Count Jaruge's perverted smile returned to his face. That smile rooted Lynette to the ground.

"Oh, don't worry. I won't do anything bad... You just have to do exactly as I tell you. If you do that, I'll forget all about this matter."

Lynette nodded unwillingly, swallowing hard as she did so. With a single hand on his injury, the Count seemed to be emphasizing his wound as he slowly approached his prey.

Lynette no longer had a means of escape from this situation. Although she had escaped to a place of light, an inescapable darkness began to invade her vision. The Count's voice began to fade far into the distance. If she could not physically escape, at the very least, she wanted her mind to run somewhere far, far away.

"What are you doing?"

To Lynette, who was determined to seal away her mind, that particular voice seemed strange and curious. There wasn't supposed to be anyone here but the Count and herself.

"P-Princess Fie!"

The Count's panicked voice finally drew Lynette's attention.

In the corridor, the familiar silhouette of a girl began walking towards them. She had blonde hair like Princess Fielle, and the same old, worn dress as before — indeed, it was the kingdom's other princess.

(Oh... she's wearing the dress a little better now...)

The dress that Princess Fie was wearing had its sleeves properly pulled down, with no creases. The fear, loathing, and hatred Lynette had felt in response to the Count suddenly evaporated upon seeing Princess Fie's form — instead, all she could think about was how her dress sense had improved.

Slowly but surely, Princess Fie made her way towards them. Casting a glance at Lynette, who was still on the ground, and then the Count, Princess Fie parted her lips once more.

"So. What are you doing?"

The one who responded first was Count Jaruge.

"This child exerted violence upon me! Look, I have proof. By doing something like this, she loses her right to remain a servant... And that's a little sad, so we

agreed that if I teach her a lesson I'll forgive it all... Isn't that right, Lynette?"

The Count was quick to think of an excuse to mislead Princess Fie.

Lynette had no choice but to nod — such was her position in this entire affair. She was the one who was at an overwhelming disadvantage. Even if it was plain for an observer to see what had happened, the scar on the Count would still remain, and could potentially endanger her position as Princess Fielle's personal maidservant. Although all this was the Count's fault, the entire incident could easily backfire unto her.

Lynette did not want to lose her position — for her mother, and her family. Even if the Count was obviously the one at fault.

"Yes..." Lynette nodded, a hollow expression on her face.

"Then we'll be on our way. Come, Lynette."

As the Count made to leave, Lynette followed after him.

"Hmm. Evidence, huh. Show me."

However, Princess Fie stretched out a single hand towards Lynette, demanding to see the object in question. It seemed that the Princess wanted to inspect the item.

In response to this, Lynette fearfully looked at the Count — but the latter seemed to express no objections whatsoever, and so Lynette handed the object over to Fie obediently.

"See? My blood is on it," the Count said.

Princess Fie looked closely at the statue a few times, turning it around in her hands, before finally deciding to address the Count.

"Count, let me see your injury as well."

(What does she think to do...? This girl...) Lynette thought, confused.

Upon inflicting an injury upon the Count, Lynette's life and social standing were already over. Even if it was the other party at fault, as long as they were of noble birth, Lynette would be severely punished for going against anything they said. In addition, the Count had evidence in his hands.

Lynette thought that it was all over. All she had to do was bear it for a little bit. Yes, bear it for a bit. Then it would be over.

With that, she would be able to protect the position that her mother held in such high esteem. And that was why Lynette had just wanted to get it over with — for fear of her heart sinking into darkness forever.

“Ha... Ha? What?”

The Count, confused by the Princess’ demands, knelt down to show the girl his injury.

“Hmm... So you’re saying this is proof of the maid having hit you?”

“Yes, it is as you see.”

Without warning, Princess Fie raised the bronze statue over her head, and then with all her might, swung it down upon the Count’s head.

“Guh!”

Fie had swung with considerable force. Blood spattered out from his wound, and the Count now sat on the ground, holding his head in pain.

Lynette could not believe the sequence of events playing out before her eyes.

Still pressing down on the wound on his head, the Count finally got up, staring menacingly at Princess Fie and Lynette.

“What are you doing?! Don’t think you’ll get away with this! Both of you! Once I tell the Queen that you’ve been violent with me, you’ll be fired from your position as Princess Fielle’s personal maidservant!”

“Is that so?”

Upon hearing those words, Princess Fie smiled.

“But... you know. There’s proof that I hit you, but where is the proof that Lynette did too?”

The Count’s eyes went wide upon this realization.

The injury that Lynette had supposedly caused was now overwritten by the much larger wound caused by Princess Fie. It was plain for all to see that Princess Fie was currently holding a very blood-stained bronze statue.

Anyone would have come to the same conclusion after looking at this scene.

“Well, if you still haven’t had enough, you can have one more!”

Swinging the statue once again, Fie promptly renewed her attack on the Count. The princess’ merciless swing sank the statue into the Count’s large head.

“Eeeeee! Stop! Guhhh!”

Lynette could only stare at what was happening before her in disbelief.

Upon hearing his screams, maidservants and soldiers quickly converged upon their location. What greeted them was the sight of Princess Fie exerting a considerable amount of violence upon Count Jaruge.

“This is terrible!”

“Stop her!”

The panicked soldiers pulled Princess Fie and the Count apart.

The bloody Count swayed side to side as he desperately held his wound, his words dripping with hatred.

“I’ll get you for this... I’ll make you pay for doing this to me...”

Princess Fie’s riposte was quick and cold.

“Pay? Pay how? I’m a princess, you know.”

In the castle, her position was somewhat strange. By other royalty and nobles, she was a princess that was not seen nor treated like a princess. Without the love of the King and Queen, she also had no support from anyone else.

However, it was as she said — Fie was indeed a princess of this kingdom.

She was not treated as a princess should be — this much could not be denied. While her basic needs were handled by some maidservants, the clothing she wore was old and unkempt, and she was never once educated on social formalities.

Even so, she was an heiress of royal blood — in terms of social standing, she was still rightfully a princess. Even the citizens and magistrates of Daeman had to do her bidding as soon as she insisted upon her status as a princess.

It was then that Lynette finally noticed — if Fie had really wanted to be treated more like a princess should be, she could very easily demand such treatment.

In fact, it would have been exceedingly simple to do so. All she had to do was complain and be selfish. If she did that, then servants, magistrates, and even the nobility would have to bow down to her words.

Fie could have been treated a lot better. If she had demanded beautiful dresses, she would at the very least be able to obtain a fair amount of them for daily use. However, Fie did not wish to be treated as a princess by those around her.

To Fie, that would simply be causing trouble for her the people around her — so she didn't say anything, no matter how terribly she was treated.

However, at this point in time, Princess Fie had finally used and declared her standing as a princess.

(It's... It's for me...)

"Don't you know... that between a princess and a count, one is a much bigger deal? I don't like how this man's face looks. It displeases me. Throw him out of here! Also, I never want to see him in this castle ever again! This is an order from your princess!"

Princess Fie's words were arrogant, but filled with power. It was plain for all to see that between a princess and a count, the former had more power. A count or duke would be powerless — much like how the Count had used his social standing to lord over Lynette.

Yet it was not quite so simple.

In terms of standing, it was true that Fie had more power. However, to blatantly use her social power without the trust of those around her meant that Fie would have to pay the price — namely, the resentment of others.

The soldiers followed Fie's orders and dragged the Count away. However, their eyes were cold.

"She must be crazy to do something like this..."

“She must have developed a twisted personality because the King doesn’t love her... It’s scary...”

“What an arrogant princess... Totally unlike Princess Fielle.”

The soldiers were gossiping about Fie as they slowly left the corridor.

(No...)

However, Lynette understood.

Princess Fie, for her part, also knew that this would happen. She knew that if she took the blame for this, and used her social standing to get away with it, her reputation would further decrease.

Even so, she had done it in hopes of helping Lynette.

“Leave us. You’re blocking the way with your shuffling.”

Despite the audible gossiping around her, Princess Fie maintained her expression — her mask of being an arrogant princess. Slowly, the gathered servants and soldiers began to disperse.

After a while, only Princess Fie and Lynette remained.

Kneeling down before Lynette, Fie smiled gently — to Lynette, it was the most gentle smile she had ever seen.

“Sorry you had to go through that in this castle... Should we go back to where Fielle is?”

Her smile was as kind as Princess Fielle’s, and her warm hands grasped Lynette’s as they both left that corridor behind.

Fie escorted Lynette all the way to the party venue, and soon the maidservant was reunited with her Mistress once more.

“Fielle is probably tired from this party as well. You’re her personal maidservant, so stay by her side and support her. I’m sure Fielle will be happier that way too.”

Saying so, Fie gave Lynette’s back a light push — and then, markedly deciding to not enter the party venue herself, Fie turned to leave.

All Lynette could do was frantically lower her head in Fie’s direction.

“Um, Mistress Fie... Thank you very much!”

Princess Fie seemed a little stunned, just as she had been back in the watering hole. Then, with a “Yeah, you’re welcome,” she nodded at Lynette.

Deep in the venue was the star of the party, Princess Fielle, and her mother the Queen. Surrounded by other nobles, they were bathed in the warm glow of a luxurious dinner party.

Their eyes did not seem to register Princess Fie’s presence — and Fie did not make any efforts to be noticed by the Queen either.

Upon delivering Lynette to the venue, she silently turned and left.

Perhaps it was out of fear of Princess Fie, but after this incident, the Count had never showed his face at the palace again.

A year later, he had tried to do something similar once more — this time he was exposed for his actions and stripped of his title of count. It seemed like his so-called connection to the Queen wasn’t very significant after all.

The maidservants who had set Lynette up were never good at what they did to begin with, and they eventually began to disappear from the palace.

More importantly, however, one thing above all hurt Lynette’s heart — and that was Fie’s rapidly dropping reputation amongst the denizens of the castle. Although Lynette had tried her best to defend Fie, the Princess had merely shaken her head and stopped her from doing so.

To begin with, Fie’s existence was an obscure one. Lynette wasn’t quite sure if it was a good thing or not, but the negative rumors about her soon stopped, and faded into nothing.

However, even with the Count’s sins exposed, Fie’s actions were never vindicated — and Lynette could only clench her teeth at this injustice.

After this event, Lynette only had one wish.

(I wish to serve Mistress Fie.)

After this incident, Lynette had expressed her wishes to her mother, but she only had the same kind of words to say.

“What are you even thinking? If you serve that kind of princess, I’ll never forgive you! You are the hope of our ‘Distinguished Servant Family!’ Princess Fielle is the best person you can serve! She will certainly be married off to a king from a great kingdom, and when that happens, you will be promoted to head maid! That is why we have raised and educated you, and now you finally have this chance! Don’t say stupid things, and do everything you can to protect your position!”

(But Princess Fie is not a bad person...)

For the first time in her life, Lynette began to feel a small surge of rebellion against her mother.

(To begin with... what is the value in being a member of a “Distinguished Servant Family?”)

Indeed, her “Distinguished Servant Family” wasn’t very “distinguished” at all.

If they really had been distinguished, there wouldn’t be a need for her to become a maidservant in the first place. There would also have been no need for them to spend many hours of her childhood on maidservant etiquette training, or techniques in tea brewing.

There was no need for her to participate in such discriminatory, antiquated methods of training — all it had brought her was threats by someone like the Count, and susceptibility to unreasonable, demeaning orders.

The truth was, the so-called “Distinguished Servant Family” was nothing more than a baron’s family. It was a family of noble standing that simply provided trained servants to royalty, or other nobility of higher standing.

And so it was with pride that Lynette embraced her value as a personal maidservant.

While it was true that Princess Fielle was a caring and wonderful person, Lynette had no doubts that she would simply keep on shining even without her services. After all, Princess Fielle looked beautiful in any dress, and was heavily guarded by many people around her.

Lynette felt that Princess Fie was also a caring and wonderful person. However, not a single person stood beside her to offer support. There was no one to wash her clothing, manage her wardrobe, or offer any support or help so that she could shine like the princess she rightfully was.

In fact, the techniques that Lynette had been taught would surely be of use to Princess Fie. It was with these thoughts that she had asked to be transferred over to her service. However, her wish was never granted.

Apparently the King and Queen had finally come to understand Lynette's value, and refused to take her off Princess Fielle's maidservant roster. Upon hearing of the incident, Lynette's mother nearly went mad with rage — to think that the child she had so painstakingly raised was now strong enough to bite the hand that fed her.

Even so, Lynette kept that one wish in her heart.

(One day, I wish to become Princess Fie's personal maidservant.)

And so, to this day, that had remained Lynette's dream.

Chapter 12 — Queen

“Hmm... Who do you think looks promising this year?”

In the gardens of the royal castle, a few maids were talking amongst themselves — predictably, their chatter was not about work, but about the new hires this year.

“It seems like we’re spoiled for choice this year.”

However, they were not talking about newly-hired maids. Instead, they were talking about the newly-recruited squires.

“It has to be Persil from the eastern dormitory. His glasses make him look so intelligent and cool!”

“Queen is quite the looker too. That wavy, white-blonde hair of his... Oh, and his exotic face! He’s very charming.”

“If you want to talk about lookers, isn’t Rigel up there too, with his chiseled features?”

“But, his hairstyle leaves quite a bit to be desired...”

“That... is true.”

“Luca is quite something as well. Isn’t he a bit of a flirt? Reminds you of Master Crow, doesn’t he?”

“Don’t associate Master Crow with the likes of him!”

One maidservant, having taken particular offense to that statement, began arguing with the maids next to her.

“Be careful of what you say! Kiria is a fan of Master Crow. She’ll definitely argue with you if you compare him to Luca.”

“Ehh... But to me they are kind of similar...”

“Well, they are somewhat similar, but at the same time they are very different. At least with Master Crow, you know he’s really just flirting... But Luca

definitely has ulterior motives.”

“That’s not the same at all, right!?”

“Even I can’t deal with this anymore... Ugh. It’s all your fault, Sarya.”

“Ehh?! My fault?”

Kiria, who was apparently not usually this headstrong, had unfortunately caused the discussion to veer off into a strange direction. As if sensing this, one of the maidservants skillfully led the two back into the conversation with a question clearly meant to change the topic.

“Well then, how about the northern dormitory?”

“I think Gees is pretty good.”

“Yeah... he has that whole stoic aura thing going, doesn’t he?”

“What about Zerius?”

“He’s in great shape... and has a manly face.”

“How about G-Gormus...!”

One particular maidservant tripped over her own words as she said Gormus’ name, blushing the whole time. The other maidservants, however, looked upon their compatriot with confusion.

“Uh... that’s a bit...”

“You know... that’s...”

“Well it’s not like I don’t get where you’re coming from, but he’s completely different from all of the others we’ve mentioned so far. Pass.”

“Ehhhh!!”

It would later turn out that the one maidservant who fancied Gormus had her secret leaked by the maid who was taking notes for everyone during the discussion.

“What about Remie?”

“Yeah, he’s cute. I’ve also heard that he’s actually a really nice person.”

“He even smiles when he’s speaking to us!”

“Speaking of cuties... then how about Heath?”

“Heath? What Heath?”

“Oh come on. You know, the tiny one!”

“Oh yeah, him. He’s definitely the cutest.”

“I don’t know how I feel about guys who are shorter than me though...”

“But he’s really cute when he laughs!”

“Yes, I know. They say it’s like the smile of an angel!”

“The smile of an angel, huh. There’s certainly some weight behind that image.”

Unaware of the gossip that was flying between the royal castle’s maidservants, the squires of the northern dormitory were, as usual, conducting their afternoon training.

However, their eyes all settled on the silhouette of an unfamiliar person standing next to Heslow — a youth that even Fie did not know.

The youth’s white-blonde hair struck a sharp contrast to his dark colored skin, and it was obvious that he hailed from a faraway country. Foreign blood flowed through his veins, further adding on to his exotic visage.

He was robed with expensive-looking clothing cut from purple cloth, and from his posture, one could sense the traces of a refined upbringing.

The youth stood with his hands behind his back, standing at attention with a serious expression next to Heslow.

Upon seeing his form, many squires wondered aloud who he was — and soon an audible cloud of gossip had risen from those present.

Fie, however, didn’t have much of a reaction to the newcomer. Perhaps this was to be a given, as she had only been here for less than a year.

With this in mind, Fie decided to prod Gormus for answers.

“Hey, Gormus. Is that person famous or something?”

Gormus nodded, his trademark serious expression once again plastered across his face.

“Yes — he is one of the victors of this year’s squire test.”

Standing in front of the gossiping squires, Heslow promptly introduced the newcomer to the squires of the northern dormitory.

“Quiet! Today I’m going to introduce you guys to someone new. With respect to his strong wishes, he has been transferred from the eastern dormitory to the northern dormitory. His name is Queen, and he’s with the 1st Knights. He is also the disciple of Master Kaizer, who once instructed King Roy in the art of the sword. Queen was personally instructed by Master Kaizer as well. I’m sure you squires can learn a lot from him. Now Queen, say hello to your fellow squires.”

Upon being introduced as such, Queen took a step forward.

Fie had assumed that Queen would simply introduce himself — and from the looks of it, the other squires assumed the same.

However, the first thing that came out of Queen’s lips was not exactly an introduction.

“Where is the squire known as Heath?”

“Eh...”

Fie’s eyes opened wide upon suddenly hearing her name. She felt the gazes of all the squires turn to her — and Queen identified her without too much trouble. His purple eyes instantly darted in her direction, fixating on the small squire.

Queen blinked twice at Fie’s small stature, as if wondering if he had the right person. However, Queen quickly regained his composure, and then promptly pointed his wooden sword at her.

“Heath! I challenge you to a duel. A one-on-one duel between men. If I win, you shall hand over the position of the squire of the 18th Knights!”



Upon hearing this sudden challenge, whispers rose up between the squires once more.

“Hey hey... suddenly a duel?”

“With Heath?”

“Isn’t that guy super strong? Will Heath be okay?”

“You don’t think he transferred here just to snatch the position in the 18th away from Heath, do you?”

Queen and Fie’s eyes finally met.

Queen’s purple eyes peered out at Fie from behind his white-gold fringe.

“If you too are a knight, you would not think of fleeing.”

“Hey, hold on.” The one who responded to Queen’s provocation was Gormus. “You suddenly show up and say all this! You’ve got some nerve.”

“And you must be the Zal-Shiq Dojo’s Gormus.”

“Huh. Am I that famous?”

Upon being addressed in that way, Gormus stared down at Queen, a wry smile on his face.

“This matter has nothing to do with you. Could you please keep your words to yourself?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Pointing his thumb back at Heath, Gormus proceeded to say, without blinking, “This guy here... he’s like a little brother to me.”

(Little brother...!)

Fie herself, however, had no intention of letting Gormus fight her battles for her.

“If you’re going to mess with him, I won’t take it sitting down.”

“I see. Then what would you have us do?”

The two squires continued staring at each other during the exchange of words.

Upon seeing this, Fie finally spoke up.

“Gormus! Don’t friends treat each other as equals!? I object to this!”

Fie had apparently risen her hand in objection upon hearing that she was suddenly Gormus’ flunky.

“Slad, make this fool shut up.”

Fie, who had butted in at the wrong moment, was promptly booted from the conversation by Gormus.

“Yeah... I think it’s best to stay quiet for now, Heath.”

“Yep. Don’t say anything for a while.”

“It’s as they said, Heath... Let’s just keep quiet for a while...”

And so the three friends agreed, and Slad promptly silenced Fie, placing his hand over her mouth.

“Ummf! Ummf! Wumph!”

Although it seemed like Fie still had more to say, her friends were determined to not let her go on, and thus ended Fie’s impassioned speech.

Now that Fie had been deposited at a location where she would not interrupt the atmosphere of manly combat between the two, Gormus once again turned to Queen.

“That fool... Well, he isn’t here anymore. If you want to duel Heath, you’ll have to go through me first.” Gormus raised his wooden sword at Queen, smiling confidently.

Queen, however, did not respond to the provocation at all, and with a serious expression, nodded at Gormus’ words.

“Very well. I shall accept that challenge.”

“Oi, you guys. We’re still in training here!”

Just as it seemed like Queen and Gormus’ duel was about to begin, Heslow finally decided to intervene. Although Heslow could have stopped them earlier, the fact that he did not showed that he was well aware of the atmosphere.

Duels were the romance of squire life — one could say that they were compulsory events. Heslow's seniors in the past had also engaged in duels for a multitude of reasons — some of which did not make much sense at all.

"I understand. Gormus, we shall have our duel after training."

"Got it. You had better not run away with your tail between your legs!"

"There will be no such thing."

Upon seeing the two squires exchanging heated glances, Heslow could not help but shake his head in a mixture of exasperation and nostalgia.

After that, afternoon training began.

During the training session, all the squires could talk about was the upcoming duel between Gormus and Queen.

"Hey, who do you think will win?"

"Didn't Master Kaizer train King Roy AND the Captain of the 1st Knights, Zephas? If he's Master Kaizer's disciple, he must be really strong."

"Well no, Gormus is pretty awesome too. He has never lost to anyone in the northern dormitory."

It was true that the strongest in the northern dormitory was Gormus. Recently, inter-squire mock bouts had begun, but even in those, Gormus never lost. His build, power, and knowledge of the sword combined to make him a fearsome force.

However, Gormus had more than that — he was able to come up with stratagems for counterattacks while watching his opponent's movements. Contrary to common belief, he wasn't just all muscle — there was brain in him too.

"I was in the same dojo as Gormus... Back then, he mostly relied on his power, but ever since he entered the Royal Knights, he has begun incorporating strategy into his fights."

"If he thinks on top of having that build... We can't possibly beat him, huh."

The squires knew of Gormus' power, having faced him in person before.

However, Queen didn't exactly come off as weak either — his position as a squire of the 1st knights was testament to that.

On paper, all the knight platoons were said to be equal, with no major differences between them — but in reality, the 1st and 18th Knights housed members of the highest caliber within their ranks.

The platoon captain of the 1st, Zephas, was known to have King Roy's trust. Knights under Zephas' command were also known for their skill and character — indeed, the 1st was made up of individuals who were the very paragon of knighthood. Although entering the 18th Knights and serving under Master Yore was every squire's dream, the realistic target was instead aiming to be assigned to the 1st Knights.

In fact, Queen, who was a squire in the 1st Knights, was proof of that — he was a top-class candidate amongst this year's pool of squires.

It was also worth noting that Gormus was assigned to the 2nd Knights. There were rumors that to get into the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd platoons, one must have a certain degree of strength — and the squires were in unanimous agreement that Gormus was testament to that.

"In any case, let's just see how Queen is in training."

"Yeah, I bet he runs really fast!"

Queen, however, was found at the back of the line during running training, much to the confusion of the squires searching for the sudden transferee.

He was, if anything, slow. Although the group of curious squires had purposely slowed their pace, Queen had somehow managed to be even slower than that.

"W-Well... maybe he's conserving his strength for the match later?"

"Yeah, that's definitely it."

Gormus, on the other hand, was in the middle of the pack, which was led right at the top end by Remie — and no one else. The squires were unsure if the two of them were simply conserving their strength, and were a little disappointed

by the sight.

Next to Gormus was Fie, who was breathless as usual.

Fie had apparently built up some degree of stamina as of late, and was able to join her fellow squires for running, although she was usually right at the back of the pack.

On this particular day, however, Fie was running at a reckless pace, if only to catch up with Gormus.

“Gormus, will you be all right? Isn’t that guy really strong?”

“Oh, are you worried about me?”

“Yeah, I’m your friend, right?” Fie strongly emphasized “friend” in her statement. She was apparently still upset about having been treated as Gormus’ little brother.

“Ugh. You take everything at face value, don’t you? It’s true I called you that, but that was just so I could take on the duel for you. You have no chance of winning against someone like that...”

“Oh, I see. Thanks!”

Fie, now no longer upset about the whole “brother” affair, promptly thanked Gormus with a wide smile. In his heart, however, Gormus thought that taking on such a troublesome “brother” was a bit more trouble than it was worth. However, he kept that thought to himself.

“Yeah, I totally knew what you meant the whole time, Gormus. Heh heh.”

“Don’t lie, you were taken by it hook line and sinker!”

“Also, Heath... are you going to be all right running at that pace?”

The middle of the pack was usually populated by Fie’s friends — namely Gees and Slad — so naturally, they were nearby. Slad in particular was worried about Fie’s running pace. Although she had gained some stamina since the time she collapsed, Fie was definitely over-pacing herself.

Fie responded with a slightly strained smile.

“Well... it’s just the beginning for now, so this should be okay...”

Fie herself realized that if she had kept this pace, her body would soon be unable to keep up. She cast a slightly troubled look towards the tail end of the pack.

Upon doing so, Fie's eyes met with Queen's — who had apparently been staring at her all this time.

Slad, too, was aware of this.

"He's completely locked onto you, huh?"

"I don't even know what I did to him!" Fie furrowed her brows, sighing. With that stare upon her back, Fie found it difficult to return to the tail end.

"It's because you're in the 18th..." Gees' declaration was sudden, but true and to the point.

"Does he admire the 18th so much?"

To Fie, she really enjoyed being in the 18th, but she honestly did not understand why all the other squires made a huge deal about it. Although there were some who became knights for social positions, Fie was in the 18th simply because she enjoyed it — nothing more, nothing less.

"Well... I mean, most people do admire that, but to go that far is little bit strange..."

That much was true — no squires in the northern dormitory had thought of challenging Fie for her position.

"To begin with, it seems like he transferred in just to do that."

Although Slad and the rest of Fie's friends did admire the 18th, they could not help but find Queen's obsession with it abnormal.

"Well, rest assured. I'll beat him up and send him flying." Gormus flexed his arms.

So it came to be that after the end of the training session, Gormus and Queen stood before each other on the training ground, wooden swords in hand.

"Hey, transfer squire. Said your prayers?"

“If you mean to ask about my preparedness for battle, then yes, I am prepared.”

Gormus had his usual sneering smile on his face, but Fie and the others knew that Gormus was serious — they saw it in his eyes. Queen’s expression, however, hardly changed. He returned Gormus’ provocations with a quiet and serious expression.

Around them were countless squires — all squeezed in to get a view of the bout that was about to take place.

Instructor Heslow, on the other hand, had some sort of work to attend to, and was absent from the grounds. Although he was strict with squires who slacked off during training, he was surprisingly lax with regards to duels — although he did get angry if squires crossed the line. Such duels were apparently thought of as learning experiences, and as such, Heslow did not intervene. On another note, Heslow apparently dueled a lot in his day, if the words of their seniors and knights from Heslow’s squire class were to be believed.

The role of referee was left to Remie — although he merely witnessed the two parties agree to a set list of rules before beginning. Although the exact reason for Remie having been chosen for the role was unknown, the squires stipulated that it had to do with his famously good character.

Gormus and Queen readied their wooden swords, standing about five meters apart from each other.

In between the two stood Remie — soon, the battle would finally begin.

The squires in the audience collectively gulped in anticipation.

“Begin!”

As Remie’s voice rang out, Fie and her friends witnessed a shocking sight.

At the exact moment Remie announced the beginning of the bout, Queen dashed forward immediately, rushing towards Gormus.

He was fast. In fact, he was incredibly fast. Everything, from his movements to his swordplay, was incredibly fast.

Five meters was usually a distance in which normal attacks would not

connect. However in a single moment, Gormus, who had thought of studying his opponent's movements, was already in the latter's range.

It was like a dark hurricane.

"What!?"

Although Gormus was caught unawares, he quickly made to dodge the incoming blow.

However, Queen's stab moved at a much faster speed than Gormus' attempts at evasion. The wooden sword was thrust into Gormus' stomach.

"Guh!"

Having taken a hit from the front, Gormus' body seemed to bend in two. Losing his balance, Gormus fell and did not get up — he had been knocked unconscious from the blow.

Queen looked down upon the fallen Gormus with the same quiet expression he had before the bout began.

"He... He felled Gormus with a single strike!?"

Fie and her friends were cowed by Queen's display of power.

When Gormus woke up, he found himself face to face with a cute girl.

"Uwo!?" Jumping up in shock, he heard the girl say, "Oh, you've come to!"

It was then that Gormus recognized Heath's voice.

(That was dangerous. If you only look at his face, he really seems like a girl. What a mistake to make after waking up...)

Gormus calmed his beating heart with a few deep breaths. It seemed that he had been knocked unconscious — after all, he found himself in the sick bay. The one who had brought him into the room, and bed, was apparently Heath.

It was then that Gormus recalled his misadventure.

"Ugh... He got me..."

"Yeah... It sucks..."

Gormus scrunched up his face as he remembered his defeat. Heath looked on, with an expression of genuine sadness on his face.

“Well, about that... Although he did catch me off guard, it’s strange that I could not dodge that thrust although I knew it was coming. Also... he had an air of superiority about him... Almost as if he could have made a follow-up attack had I dodged his first thrust.”

Gormus saw Heath jump in surprise at this statement.

“You’re oddly calm. I thought you would be upset because you were defeated!”

If anything, Heath looked like he himself had lost. To Gormus, the overly empathetic Heath seemed to be a very busy individual indeed, worrying about others so much.

“Dummy. Even I have lost before, if only a few times. No one gets upset over something like that.”

“Oh... I see. You were so confident, I didn’t even think you could lose.”

In reality, however, it was perhaps the first time Gormus had lost to someone his age. Although he had lost to his teachers at the dojo, or seniors in his platoon, he had no memory of losing to someone his age.

Although he had expected to take it a lot harder, Gormus was strangely calm about the entire affair. In fact, Heath still seemed more upset about the loss than he did.

In response to Heath’s downtrodden expression, Gormus smiled.

“Being confident can’t hurt, right? You just feel a little embarrassed if you lose. More importantly, it is to make your opponent think you are strong, and that they can’t win. Although, I actually am strong to begin with.”

“You have a pretty cool way of thinking, Gormus. I respect that,” Heath said, and smiled again.

Upon seeing Heath go back to his old self, Gormus turned to his friend, a serious expression etched across his features once more.

“However... I won’t be able to win against that. Not for a while. I’d have to fix

up my training routines so I can keep up with his speed."

Those were Gormus' honest thoughts, having faced Queen in actual combat — he could not envision winning against such an opponent at this point in time.

The sudden explosive power, combined with a fearsome speed, made Queen a formidable foe. His blows were difficult to dodge, so it was difficult to take the flow of the fight away from him. Short-term solutions would not work on someone like Queen — one would first have to be able to match his speed through purposeful training.

The Gormus of old would have been fundamentally offended and challenged Queen repeatedly, but now, he was able to calmly analyze his reasons for losing.

Upon looking at Heath, Gormus suddenly remembered the reason for him developing such a mindset.

(Come to think of it... the reason why I started thinking like this was because this guy gave me so much trouble.)

Up until then, Gormus had focused on closing the distance between him and his opponent with minimal movement. He had believed that this was a sure-fire way of winning — he had superior power and reach over the other squires, and hence the flow of battle was naturally his. To Gormus, all that mattered was defeating the opponent.

However, the difficulties and near-loss encounter he had with Heath, who was much smaller and weaker compared to himself, led Gormus to think more deeply about strategy. He also came face-to-face with the power of a desperate opponent who did not give up despite overwhelming odds.

To Gormus, who had simply thought that intimidation and sheer force were required to win a fight, the bout with Heath had brought about a huge change in his mindset.

"It seems like you'll have to give up the top spot of the northern dormitory for a while..." Heath said sadly, as if it was he who had to give up said spot.

However, Gormus simply responded with a confident smile.

“Well, I’ll let it go for a while. Eventually I’ll just take it back again.”

“Yeah... that’s like you, Gormus.” Heath smiled at Gormus’ expression. “Well, I’ll be heading back now. You should have a quiet day of rest.”

“Hmph. I had wanted to start training right away, too.”

“You can’t overdo it, you know.”

Gormus could only sit in resignation as Heath delivered the doctor’s care instructions.

“Sorry, Heath. I couldn’t help in the end.”

“Hmm? Oh, that’s quite all right.” Heath shook his head at first, but then slowly started nodding as he seemingly understood what Gormus meant.

Heath’s relative slowness invoked a sense of uneasiness in Gormus. He thought of reminding Heath that he was the one being targeted by the new transfer.

“Well then Gormus, let’s try hard again tomorrow.”

However, before Gormus could say anything, Heath had left.

The sound of gossip filled the canteen.

“To think that Gormus would lose...”

“In one hit too!”

Although they were just discussing the strength of the two a while earlier, none of them had expected this lopsided outcome.

“What will we do? Heath is up next...”

“There’s no way Heath can win against that...”

The strongest squire in the north dormitory, Gormus, had fallen in a split second. Heath, whose name ranked among the bottom of the dormitory’s roster, could not possibly win against Queen.

“Then... will the position of the 18th Knights squire just go to Queen?”

“There’s no way that can be allowed. Squires can’t decide that kind of thing

on our own.”

“Guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

Although Queen’s challenge was accepted in the heat of the moment, none of the squires had any administrative power to begin with, and changing a platoon’s squires was unheard of. The right to actually enforce Queen’s terms — that was the question at hand.

“Well, Queen was that serious about it. Surely he’s given it some thought?”

“Well... there’s that. He purposely transferred just to do this, too.”

The one thing all squires were in agreement of, however, was that Queen’s obsession with the 18th was not normal. They felt that there had to be some underlying reason behind it.

“Hey, Heath is here.”

The gossip in the canteen intensified once more. Fie had brought Gormus to the sick bay, and now returned.

Upon hearing the cacophony of voices, Queen made his move — he had been waiting all this time, standing against a wall in the canteen with his arms folded. At his waist was his wooden sword, although training had long since ended.

Queen advanced towards Fie, who was currently making her way down the corridor.

The squires collectively gulped. Even Remie’s group watched Fie worriedly.

At the moment Fie stepped into the canteen, Queen drew his wooden sword, pointing it at her.

“Now, it is your turn, Heath. Face me, with your seat on the 18th Knights on the line!”

Fie, upon hearing those words, had the following to say:

“Who the hell would accept terms like that? Are you a dumbass?”

With that curt refusal, Fie promptly walked past Queen, making for her seat at her usual table.

The duel that all the squires had been awaiting with bated breath was promptly dismissed by Fie.

Having reached her seat, Fie sat down at the table with Slad and the rest as if nothing had happened, before starting calmly on dinner.

For a while, Queen remained stuck in his pose, his wooden sword still pointed at the entrance where Fie was moments ago. When he was finally able to move, Queen made his way to Fie's table, stating his claim once more with a flustered expression.

"F-Face me in honorable combat!"

"No. I refused just now, didn't you hear?"

"Why? Why do you refuse!?"

"What do you mean why? What would I even gain from accepting those kinds of terms?"

Upon hearing that response, all the squires in the canteen were simultaneously reminded of Heath's character.

Although Heath looked small, cute, and summarily weak from the outside, he had a rebellious spirit, fearing no one and always speaking his mind. In addition, while Heath seemed to be somewhat silly on a day-to-day basis, they knew he was actually a realist at heart.

To begin with, while everyone was sucked into the heat of the moment when a mysterious challenger transferred into their dormitory, Heath alone was oddly calm. It soon occurred to the squires that nothing would happen at all if he simply turned the duel down.

With Heath's personality as it was, Queen had practically no hope of getting him to agree to any kind of duel — much less one that would cost Heath his seat on the 18th.

And so, the squires realized that there had to be some other way out of the situation.

The squires thought of knighthood as more than a title. They could not exactly

explain what being a knight entailed, other than the fact that it was “cool.” But they knew that if they were challenged to a duel, they would have to accept, and they would have to fight in it with all their might — to the squires, this had to be what a knight was.

With Queen’s arrival, that collective vision filled the squire’s minds.

However...

To accept terms which had no benefit to the other party was indeed silly. Even so...

(His vision of what a knight is isn’t quite the same as ours, is it...)

Looking upon Heath, who was calmly eating as the flustered Queen stood next to him, the squires could not help but scratch their heads in puzzlement.

“G... Gain...?”

Upon hearing that Fie would not accept the terms due to them being of no use to her whatsoever, Queen started thinking once more, getting more flustered as he went on.

“Then... Then! I offer up tomorrow’s dinner...”

“What, are you really that stupid?”

“Then... I offer my family’s treasured heirloom saber...”

“I don’t need that.”

“What is it you wish for?! L-Land...?”

“What, exactly, am I going to do with a random plot of land?”

Although Queen desperately tried to think of reward after reward, Fie turned all of those suggestions down. It almost seemed like he was ready to cry. However, Fie’s reaction to that was predictably cold.

“E-Even if there’s nothing to gain! Surely you can stake your pride as a knight and face me in honorable combat!?”

“Hey... If I lose, I lose my path to becoming a knight, you know? That’s

important to you isn't it? The pride of a knight? To begin with, the members of the 18th Knights are the only ones who need me. If I lose my seat in the 18th, I lose my pride and livelihood as a knight. There's no way in hell I can accept crazy terms like that. You get it? Good. Now go somewhere else. I can't concentrate on my dinner with you pestering me."

Saying so, Fie made a shooing motion with her hands, as if she were getting rid of a wild mongrel — after which she decidedly looked away from Queen, concentrating on her food instead.

Although there was no duel between knights, in the duel of words, Fie had overwhelmingly won.

Queen, who had become wordless at this point, stood unmoving at his spot for a while, completely ignored by Fie. And so for the rest of that day, Queen was absent from his seat.

It definitely seemed like he was close to tears.

After this incident, Queen continued to challenge Fie to duels.

"Heath. T-Today. I challenge you to a duel with me...!"

"I told you I'm not doing it."

Queen knew it was pointless — Fie would definitely not agree. Perhaps because Queen himself already knew this, his voice tapered off towards the end of the sentence.

However, he could not think of anything else — and so Queen tried again and again to challenge Fie, but even the other squires knew that she would never agree to a duel.

"Face me!"

"No."

"Once this is over, you shall face me!"

"I refuse."

"Face me..."

“You’re annoying.”

With the repeated refusals, it soon became evident that the process was taking quite the mental toll on Queen.

Perhaps it was because Queen felt like he was being backed into a corner — after all, he had even gone through the effort of transferring to this dormitory in hopes of dueling Fie. As a result, Queen would repeatedly harass her with duel requests for over a week.

“Queen, I understand your feelings of wanting to reach your own goals... I understand it very well... There is passion in it. That in and of itself is a good thing, however... If you cause trouble for others around you, well... That’s not very good, you understand? Part of the squire training is also fostering a sense of camaraderie with others. Heath is saying that you’re starting to bother him.”

“Y-Yes...”

Apparently, Heath had mercilessly reported Queen to the instructor.

After receiving Heslow’s lukewarm but well-intended lecture for about an hour, Queen finally left the instructor’s office, drained.

The northern dormitory had a bath hall for the squires to use.

There was a beautiful spring on the first floor of the dormitory, and said hall was constructed around it, allowing for squires to wash away the sweat and dirt accumulated on their being across the course of their training sessions.

The bath hall was set up with a line of individual cubicles, each separated with a partition of wooden planks. Each cubicle was also equipped with a curtain, so that the squires in question could bathe in private. In addition, the cubicles were also unexpectedly wide, and hence made for a changing room of sorts if necessary.

The reason for this strange architecture was simple. At first, the assumption had been made that all knights were men, and hence no cubicles were needed. Even the changing rooms were similarly public.

However, at some point one particularly serious knight had made the claim

that regardless of gender, walking around each other fully naked wasn't very knightly at all — and the solution was apparently the cubicles in place today.

Fie in particular was extremely grateful to that knight.

With these cubicles, Fie did not have to time her baths differently than the other squires, and was able to clean herself without any issues.

After all, Fie was a girl. She naturally did enjoy bathing. It felt good to clean one's body, and she especially relished washing away the sweat after a training session. She found the water calming.

"Hmm~ hmm~ ♪" Fie hummed a tune, enjoying her bath. "Ah! Gormus! I've lost my soap! Lend me some!"

Gormus, who was apparently in the cubicle next to Fie's, was the subject of this loud request.

"Again? Here, you owe me one."

"Thanks! I'll buy you a new one the next time I go shopping."

From above the planks, a bar of soap fell. Fie caught it in her hands, lathering up her body with a layer of bubbles. After a short period of washing, Fie sensed that Gormus had left his cubicle.

"Oh, you're leaving, Gormus?"

"You take far too long with this."

"Ehh, but bathing feels so good!"

Gormus, who had washed himself for the minimal amount of time, left Fie behind as he exited the bath hall.

To Fie, there was no point in rushing, and so she took her time with her bath.

Queen, on the other hand, was pouring cold water on himself, thinking hard about one thing or another.

(What am I to do...)

The instructor's words were right. He could not raise valid counterpoints to

Heath's argument.

However, he did not want to give up — because Queen admired *him.* The platoon captain of the 18th Knights, Yore.

Yore was apparently the disciple of Queen's master, Kaizer. In other words, he was someone akin to a senior in the same school of sword fighting. In addition, Kaizer mentioned that he "possessed the highest amount of latent ability" amongst all his disciples.

Four years ago, Queen had witnessed Yore's prowess with the sword at a martial arts tournament — and was struck by it. His opponent had been a famous knight, but Yore had closed the distance between himself and his opponent instantly, cutting him down in one strike — like a flash of black lightning.

From then, Queen had looked up to Yore — to the point where he one day wanted to work for him.

And so, Queen strived to become a squire — before hearing an unbelievable rumor that involved a certain youth being recruited into the 18th Knights.

He had heard that members of the 18th were all scouted by Yore. To become a member of the 18th, an individual had to have a certain talent or value to Yore's eyes.

That was why Queen had worked hard to become a squire, with the intent of performing well as a knight, and finally attracting Yore's attention.

However, this particular squire had been assigned to the 18th immediately after passing the test — this was the first time in history anything like that had happened.

Queen could not accept this at all.

This was why he had submitted applications to transfer to the northern dormitory, where this particular squire was, time and time again — and his persistence eventually culminated in his success.

Upon finally meeting squire Heath, however, Queen was surprised at his small stature and build.

Even so, Queen had defeated Gormus, who had blocked his path to Heath — only for Heath to repeatedly deny his requests for a duel.

He had never even considered that his request would be rejected. Although there wasn't any specific proof behind it, Queen had thought that as long as he challenged the relevant squire to a duel and then won, he would make it. If he lost, then perhaps he would learn something.

However, he did not expect to be in a losing battle of words — one where his challenges ended up being rejected over and over again. If this continued to be the case, there would have been no point in him transferring in at all.

(What should I do about this situation...?)

Queen was troubled. And then he came to a conclusion.

(As I thought, there is no other means to settle this than a duel...!)

However, as of late, he had apparently challenged Heath to one duel too many, and upon seeing him, Heath would frequently escape. He could not get a hold of his opponent at all.

And then Queen came to a realization.

(If I challenge him here, he won't have a means of escape!)

Queen looked in the general direction of the cubicle that Heath was currently bathing in. It didn't seem like he was coming out any time soon.

In this location, he would be able to stop Heath from escaping. In other words, he would be able to challenge Heath without him running away.

Making up his mind, Queen quickly washed and dried himself off, putting on his clothes and leaving his cubicle.

Now, he was standing before Heath's cubicle.

Queen opened the curtains with a flourish, aiming to challenge Heath to yet another duel.

"Heath! As I thought, there is no other way but to challenge... Oh."

"Huh?"

Queen found himself at a loss of words.

As he vigorously opened the cubicle curtains, his eyes were filled with the visage of a naked blonde girl.



Fie turned around, coming face-to-face with Queen, who was standing in front of her with the cubicle curtain open.

(Well, now he knows, I guess?)

That was a given — Queen had seen Fie naked.

Queen's face became a vivid shade of red — not too different from that of a tomato. His mouth opened and closed in a series of gapes, much like a goldfish. A beet-red goldfish.

However, Fie was strangely calm. Although she was somewhat embarrassed, Queen was definitely the one who was more shaken. In fact, he was so shaken that he had stopped moving and was frozen on the spot. Fie, sensing the opportunity, decided to be as calm and open about the issue as possible.

In other words — hiding her body would be detrimental. If she attempted to hide it, Queen would know that her being a woman was something that the other squires did not know.

Although there were no rules against women being in the Royal Knights of Orstoll, no women had ever tried to enter in the first place. The squire system was also something that was constructed around the assumption that there would only be male squires. In the worst case, Fie could get fired and lose her position.

Fie remembered an important thing that Conrad had taught her a while ago. It was a lesson about the art of negotiation — particularly a lesson on human emotion.

Simply put, humans possessed two kinds of emotions: emotions that came from within, and emotions that were received from external stimuli.

For example, if someone laughs, there would be cases where they laugh because they find something funny, or cases where they laugh because everyone else is laughing.

In the latter case, the individual in question would sense that it is an appropriate time to laugh due to the responses of those around them. In other words, they would be influenced into laughing as well.

To put it in another way — one's emotions were often dictated by the situation at hand. In interpersonal relationships, this simple fact sometimes generates interesting results.

For example, when someone does something wrong, they can then either show regret or act unabashed. It goes without saying that one side would be more likely to be blamed by the public. In most cases, the unremorseful party would bear the brunt of the blame.

However, this was not true in all cases. An individual who displays remorse tells others that they have "done a bad thing." As such, the others around them would pick up in that fact, and be appropriately angry at said individual. So sometimes, it is the remorseful person who comes under fire. It's like turning a chessboard around.

If a wrong-doer shows no shame, the wronged party can be caught off guard and not know how to respond. Or they might not realize that they had been wronged at all — at least, not until they thought about it later. In the moment, it can be difficult to tell if it's appropriate to become angry.

To summarize, it is possible to use this technique to avoid someone's immediate anger at any given situation. However, this is not always successful.

If a wronged person's anger has exceeded a certain point, using this particular technique on them would only serve to fuel their rage, and as such, would backfire. After that, apologizing would do nothing to repair a relationship — precisely because of the unremorseful attitude shown in the beginning.

As such, using this technique for unethical purposes will likely backfire at one point or another.

In the end, it all comes down to if the offender is able to read the other person appropriately — to tell if the anger threshold has reached a certain point, and they would do better to apologize and defuse the situation.

However, in this case, Fie decided to act as if she had done nothing wrong at all.

If Fie were to show her fear and hide her body, Queen would realize that she was "doing something wrong." In a life-or-death situation like this, that would

have been a disadvantageous move.

However, Queen was the one who was currently flustered and panicked. He wasn't exactly in a state to question or denounce Fie's legitimacy as a squire.

If Fie wanted to close the deal, it had to be now.

Without hiding any part of her at all, Fie stood openly before Queen, looking at him as if there were no problems with this situation at all.

"What do you want, suddenly opening the curtain like that? Did you come here just to peek at me or something?"

Upon hearing those words, Queen shook his head violently from side to side, getting redder by the moment.

"Ah... No... This is not..."

"Hmph. Then close the curtain, won't you? How much longer are you going to stare at me?"

"Agh! S-S-S-Sorry!"

Queen promptly pulled the curtain shut in a panic in response to Fie's words.

After that, Queen's unsteady footsteps could be heard, following the sounds of him colliding with a wall. Eventually, his footsteps faded far into the distance.

At the very least, Fie had gotten out of a dangerous situation for now. If she had panicked and made a fuss here, the resulting chain reaction would have summoned the entire dormitory.

All that remained now was Queen.

As he had just arrived at this dormitory, he had no friends at all. So Fie figured that Queen would hesitate in spreading the word that Fie was actually a woman.

(And before he does anything about that, I have to nip the issue in the bud...)

And so Fie dried herself off, put on her squire garments, and silently left the bath hall.

On that day, a strange sight was observed in the northern dormitory.

Although Queen usually chasing Fie around, now Queen was the one who was avoiding Fie.

Queen wondered to himself:

(Does everyone... Does everyone know of this...? About... that...)

As Queen began to replay that scene in his mind again, he shook his head violently, as if to dispel the vision.

No. He should not be imagining it.

Queen's faced turned red once more.

(W-W-W-Why? Why is there a woman in the Royal Knights?)

And to think that Heath, of all people, was a woman. However, there was no mistaking it.

Queen's mind was filled with the bath hall incident again, causing him to violently shake his head once more. In fact, his heart had been beating intensely for a while now.

Also, now that Queen was aware of this fact, no matter how he looked at it, Heath was a girl in every aspect.

Her lithe figure, much unlike the other squires, her relatively low height... Her features were girlish, if nothing else. Although there was a marked lack of certain protrusions in her silhouette.

As such, with the assumption that there were no women enrolled in the Royal Knights, she would simply appear to be a small-sized youth to onlookers.

It wasn't that there were rules prohibiting the presence of women in the Royal Knights, but there had been no women in the Kingdom of Orstoll who had harbored such ambitions thus far — it was an outlandish concept that wasn't even thought of.

(What should I do...?)

Queen had no idea what the appropriate course of action was.

He wondered if the other members of the northern dormitory knew of the

fact that Heath was, in fact, a woman — or if it had been a secret all this time. Having just transferred into the northern dormitory, Queen had no friends or informants whatsoever. This naturally meant that he knew nothing of Heath's interpersonal relations either.

Queen assumed that one would usually hide such a fact, based on the line of thought that having a woman in the Royal Knights was nothing short of impossible.

However, Heath had acted like nothing was wrong at all — and that convinced Queen that perhaps nothing was out of the ordinary.

Being unable to discuss the matter with anyone else, Queen made the decision to avoid Heath instead.

What Queen did not expect, however, was to hear a familiar voice behind him as he passed through a relatively quiet break room in the dormitory.

"Seems like you have something to say to me, don't you Queen?"

Turning around in surprise, Queen came face to face with Heath, who was currently seated comfortably on a sofa and enthusiastically chomping down on what appeared to be cookies from the local bakery. Although Heath leaned against the sofa in a relaxed manner, her eyes were fixed upon Queen's. She had been waiting for him there all this time.

Unknown to Queen, Fie had already heard from her friends that Queen had been wandering around various locales in the dormitory today. It was with that assumption that Fie had planned to wait for Queen at this isolated break room — and there he was.

Although it was a given that Queen would keep his newfound knowledge of her a secret — things were not quite that simple.

Ensuring that she was able to meet with Queen alone in an isolated location was of utmost importance. However, Fie could not let this show.

After all, the one who had done something socially unacceptable in this case was Queen — and the one on the offensive was Fie. This was why she worked

particularly hard to suggest such an atmosphere.

“Well? Sit.” Fie offered a chair to Queen, all the while giving him an ambiguous look.

Not resisting Fie’s stare and offer, he promptly took a seat opposite Fie.

“Uh... That...”

“So. I should ask — did you peek because you thought I was a man? Or did you peek because you knew I was a woman?”

Sensing that Queen was about to say something, Fie lashed out with a quick verbal attack of her own. With this single action, Fie took control of the conversation.

“N-No... That’s not it at all...!”

“Well, whatever. It doesn’t change that you were peeping at me.”

It was good that he had not asked any other questions. Fie was advancing the conversation on her own terms — and making her opponent answer her questions. Her goal was to weaken the opponent’s resolve, and it appeared to be working.

“N-N-No! No that’s not it... Not it at all...”

Queen vigorously shook his head, his face now a bright shade of red. He was so nervous that his words were delivered in a shakier voice than usual. Fie’s tactics appeared to be working... exceptionally well. Perhaps even better than Fie had anticipated.

From her past interactions with Queen, Fie had gathered that he was particularly easy to manipulate — for her, at the very least. Although his skill with the sword was formidable, he was not well-versed in communication at all.

When unexpected events occurred, Queen had a tendency to panic, and was easily flustered. Although he usually kept up a cool façade with his serious expression, the reality was quite opposite. Regardless of whether Queen was calm or flustered, he simply had difficulty expressing how he felt, and as such often just looked serious.

In fact, Queen was easily influenced by the atmosphere around him, simply

because he was far too honest with his feelings — so much so that he could no longer keep up with his rapidly pirouetting emotions, let alone control them.

Fie believed that her plan was going to work — it had to.

“This means that you’re a pervert, doesn’t it? You’re a pervert if you peep at a woman bathing, but you’re STILL a pervert if you peep at a man bathing. If anyone finds out about this, I’m sure they would remove you from your platoon.”

Fie had rephrased the entire situation to make it sound as if Queen was entirely at fault, even though the situation would be a lot more dire for Fie should her status as a woman be discovered.

However, Queen misunderstood — or rather, he was made to misunderstand. The combination of Fie’s self-righteous attitude, in addition to the constant barrage of words reinforcing an atmosphere which suggested him being at fault, slowly started to change Queen’s views.

Before he knew it, Queen had started sweating — sweat pouring forth from his body like a spring.

“If it were made known that you were a peeping tom, it would surely hurt the reputation of the 1st Knights. And that would also be your fault... I wonder what they’d do in such an event? Oh, strip you of your knighthood, maybe...”

“What they’d do...? No... W-What do I do...?”

However, that was not a question that could be answered. Although Queen had posed such a question, he was fully aware of the fact that it was currently Fie who could decide his fate with a single declaration. As such, he dared not go against her at all.

In reality, however, even that was a misunderstanding. To begin with, if the circumstances of the situation were to be revealed, the facts would be to Queen’s advantage, with Fie being forced on the defensive. However, Fie’s attitude and her relentless assault on Queen’s mindset had caused him to think the exact opposite instead.

Queen was now completely in a state of panic. Peeping, perverts, dishonor, and the loss of one’s knighthood...

The impossibly heavy mental strain thrown unto Queen by Fie, who seemed to hold the reins to his existence, caused him to inadvertently look upon Fie with guilty eyes — eyes of the accused.

Upon seeing those eyes, Fie knew that she had won.

“Well, don’t worry about it. I’ll make an exception and let you off this time.”

“R-Really...!?”

Queen had fallen for her tactics entirely, perceiving her words as benevolence. To the grateful Queen, Fie nodded, smiling.

“In exchange, I demand your absolute obedience, Queen.”

“Eh...?” Queen opened his mouth, as if to question the meaning of the words he had just heard from Fie’s lips.

“Absolute. Obedience.” Fie repeated herself, slowly and precisely, as if to let Queen hear every syllable.

“Eh...? Why...?” Queen’s response suggested more confusion than resistance.

“Don’t you get it? If you still want to keep living here as a squire, Queen, then you have to listen to me. After all, I could decide the future of your knightly career in an instant... Just like—”

Fie withdrew a single cookie from the packet that she had been snacking on just now, and placed it on her palm, ensuring that Queen could see it clearly.

“This.”

To suggest to Queen the result of his potential disobedience, Fie’s fingers closed around the cookie, crushing it slowly.

“That’s why you can’t go against anything I say from here on out, Queen.”

In that moment, the smile that had been described as the smile of an angel by the maidservants, seemed to Queen like the smile of a devil instead.

To begin with, Queen was never good at negotiation, and hence could never stand up to Fie — that, on top of the mental strain, all contributed to him slowly nodding, as if he had no choice.

“I understand...”

That day in the canteen, a strange sight unfolded before the eyes of all squires present.

“Queen, bring me my dinner. Also, some sausages, salad, and corn soup would be nice.”

“Yes.”

Upon Heath’s order, Queen proceeded to enter the dinner line without a word of protest.

Although Heath acted like what just happened was the norm, all the squires seated nearby could not help but view this as strange.

Until yesterday, Queen had been chasing Heath around, shouting about one duel or another. Heath, meanwhile, had been cold towards him, avoiding Queen at every turn — this was the status of their relationship.

No one was quite sure what had happened.

Upon seeing Heath, who was leisurely seated at his table, and Queen, who was busy returning with food on his tray, the squires could not help but ask a single, common question.

(What the hell did you do, Heath...?)

It was a common point of gossip in the north dormitory that Heath possessed a somewhat shady disposition.

Heath had a bright personality, made friends easily, and would not hesitate to help those in need. and yet despite being such a gentle youth, he also did not hesitate to use dirty tactics in combat.

Heath did not hesitate to step on feet, or bait opponents into being careless by pretending to drop his blade, then viciously counterattacking by throwing swords, and even kicks in tight spaces. His small body did not have much power, and technically he was weak — but Heath was by far one of the most annoying individuals to fight in the dormitory.

Although he was usually pleasant, one would become quickly acquainted with his darker side during a practice bout. That was the Heath that the squires

knew.

Now they observed that, in a single day, Queen and Heath's positions had more or less reversed.

The squires understood this readily — and made the assumption that Heath had employed some kind of dirty tactic outside of combat to make the current situation occur. As none of the squires wanted Heath's wrath upon them, they collectively decided to not say a word.

Only one person spoke up. It was the resident good samaritan of the dormitory, Remie, who attempted to convince Fie of the negativity of her actions.

Remie desperately tried to explain to Fie the problems with what she was doing — all the while hosting an increasingly pale expression on his face.

"W-Wait up Heath. This is going too far. It's true that he was chasing you around and annoying you, but..."

"No. With things like this, the beginning is the most important, you see?" Fie replied to Remie's protest, raising a single finger with a serious expression on her face.

After all, Fie's response to this particular event was an emergency maneuver. Saying "Don't tell anyone I am a woman" was not acceptable, as that would be showing that her supposed secret was a source of weakness.

Unless she did something to completely control and dominate Queen's actions, she had no guarantee that the risks would be mitigated.

To that end, Fie had to pin down Queen's weak point, and make him promise to be absolutely obedient to her. As such, for a time, a structure of social hierarchy must be established between them.

"I'll say now that I have no intentions of treating him this way forever. I'm only going to be doing this for a while, to make sure he properly listens to me in the future."

Fie did indeed intend to stop treating Queen this way after ensuring that he

would not reveal that she was a woman. Although it was a troublesome event overall, Queen was a member of the northern dormitory and a fellow squire.

However, those who had overheard the conversation could only think of one thing...

(Isn't that how you discipline dogs...?)

The squires collectively held their faces in shock. Although they had come to expect these dirty tactics, the fact that the mysterious transferee who had caused such a stir was now socially nothing more than a dog, struck fear into their hearts.

However, Fie looked peaceful, nary a hint of malice in her features. She turned to smile at Queen, who had returned with enough food for them both.

"Also, I don't mean to just make him obey me for free!"

Pulling back a chair next to her, Fie motioned for Queen to sit — and then with an expression of sad but elegant determination, pierced through three sausages at once with her fork.

"As a reward for doing as I said, I'll give you my favorite sausages as a reward!"

Although the squires were usually free to go for seconds in the canteen, sausages in particular were limited to a number per squire. To Fie, who loved food, a single sausage was worth its weight in about ten pints of blood.

However, those around her did not think this way.

To be given food because instructions were obeyed — no matter how one thought of it, that was how one trained a dog...

"Here, open wide..."

Without nary a care for the stunned expressions of those around them, Fie held out her sausage-impaled fork, stopping right before Queen's lips.

"N-No, I'll eat it by myself..."

Flustered once more, Queen could only offer a meek line of protest. However, Fie persisted.

“Say ahh!”

Fie was very clearly encouraging Queen to open his mouth. Seeming defeated, Queen opened his mouth at last, blushing as he did so.

Fie promptly inserted the sausage, fork and all, into Queen’s mouth, whereupon the latter had no choice but to begin chewing.

Upon seeing Queen obediently eating, Fie patted his head, evidently pleased.

“That’s it. Good boy!”

No matter how one looked at it, Queen had completely, absolutely become a pet dog.

Fie, on the other hand, remembered certain memories from her childhood — specifically about how she had always wanted to have a dog, but was not allowed to have one.

The squires in the canteen, although unfamiliar with Queen, could not help but shed tears for him — the contrast between his social status then and now was too great to bear.

However, Queen, for his part, seemed a little bit pleased.

Perhaps that was a given — Queen had spent all his life training and honing his skill with the sword, and was not used to receiving attention from a woman.

Sir Crow's Journal

According to my information network, an interesting event is happening in the north dormitory.

Some sort of squire's bout?

Good for them, you know? We did it when we were squires too. Here's to hoping that this year, the spirit of the Orstoll Royal Knights will be passed on to the new squires. It's a great occasion.

So I asked Heath about this, but all he had to say was, "It's no big deal." Maybe he's trying to be all adult about it, but it comes off as a little cold, see.

Fights! Women! Messing around!

That's the life of a knight.

Oh, also, it seems like Heath made a friend. Someone called Queen? If I recall, he was quite famous before he even joined, and is a rising star in their batch right now.

Well, it's good that Heath is making more friends. As his senior, I'm glad that he's getting along with everyone.

Previously Unpublished Extra Story — Biffe

(How... did it come to this?)

In a corner of a run-down inn, situated in a relatively lawless district in the Kingdom of Orstoll, was an individual who used to be Princess Fie's head chef. Now Biffe was working as a janitor in said run-down inn and holding his head in exasperation.

Biffe had thought that everything would somehow work out once he arrived in Orstoll.

It was said to be the capital of culinary arts, and famous chefs from various countries gathered there. If he trained under one famous chef or another in Orstoll, and then returned to Daeman to open a shop of his own, he would surely have a bright future ahead of him.

Although that was supposed to be the case, Biffe was currently holding documentation detailing his dismissal as an intern from a certain establishment in the capital after having worked there for a month.

As an intern, he had peeled potatoes and carrots every day, until he was finally called by the assistant head chef on his last day.

Those gathered there were other interns who had been taken on at around the same time, under similar circumstances — there were simply many hopefuls working at Orstoll's restaurants.

The assistant head chef had this to say: "Make a meal with these ingredients that you see before you."

Biffe was somewhat shocked. After all, he had learned absolutely nothing with regards to cooking from his seniors at all.

However, he calmed himself down with some effort. He had originally started working in Daeman simply because of his connections — but to his credit, Biffe was self-taught and could cook to a certain extent. In that, he had faith in himself.

At least — that was what he thought. As soon as his peers started cooking, Biffe found himself turning pale.

The other interns, despite being interns, began preparing the ingredients with visible skill. With flowing movements of the knife, vegetables were sliced and fried, sauce was made, meat was roasted, and the ingredients were perfectly sautéed.

Amongst them, there were even some who blended Orstoll's traditional culinary techniques with their own. Upon seeing this, the assistant head chef had nothing but praise for those particular youths.

Every other intern who had signed up at around the same time as Biffe was better at cooking than he was — in fact, these individuals vastly outstripped the culinary prowess of the cooks who worked at the royal castle of Daeman.

Panicked, Biffe spent a considerable amount of time looking around, unaware that the assistant head chef's eyes were now locked upon him.

"What are you doing, exactly?" With a doubtful and somewhat apprehensive look, the assistant head chef peered into Biffe's frying pan.

As opposed to the works of those around him, Biffe's ingredients simply lay limply in the pan. In fact, so paltry was his performance, that one would be hard-pressed to call Biffe's creation "food" of any sort.

The assistant head chef's face began to become sterner by the minute.

"Did you really think you could work at Orstoll with this amount of skill? Someone like you has no right to be in the kitchens of this great country. Get out of my kitchen this instant!"

In a single moment, Biffe was exposed, and summarily fired.

It was then that Biffe finally understood the exacting standards expected of Orstoll's culinarians. Even those who had started at the intern level had levels of skill that rivaled a typical restaurant chef in Daeman.

Although Biffe had gone on several rounds to various restaurants after this incident in search of gainful employment, information moved quickly in Orstoll. Biffe was rejected at each and every turn, and eventually his heart, much like

his resolve, cleanly snapped in two.

Eventually Biffe, who was unable to find a new employer, used up the money that he had brought from Daeman, as well as the severance issued to him from Princess Fie's accounts. With no other choice, Biffe had to work as a janitor in a run-down inn in an ill-kept corner of the capital.

Today, much like other days, saw Biffe cleaning a mostly unoccupied inn. After receiving a negligibly small sum as payment, Biffe sighed, stepping out of the building he had been cleaning.

"How did it come to this...?" There was nothing in Biffe's voice other than regret. "If I had known it would be like this, I would have continued working for Princess Fie instead..."

Thinking back on it, Biffe now realized how fortunate he had been.

He did not have to sleep in a shabby hut at night, battered by crosswinds, and his bed actually had sheets on it. In addition, he was also paid on time, and was able to cook to a certain extent, even if he wasn't very good at it. Although he had purposely made her meals badly, Princess Fie had never once raised her voice against him.

Biffe finally realized how fortunate he had been to be in said position — and although he had wanted to turn back time, such a thing was impossible.

In fact, his current tiny hut, much like the run-down inn it was attached to, had three other occupants in addition to himself.

"Hey Biffe. Again with the pathetic face, eh?"

The man who had called out to Biffe had a particularly rough look about him. He was called Giarmo — a hooligan and gangster who terrorized the district with his subordinates.

"M-Mister Giarmo..."

"Right, it's time to pay today's interest. Out with it!"

"B-But I need this to live..."

“Hey, you should return money you owe, right? Don’t tell me you’ve suddenly decided to not pay, eh?”

“N-No... Nothing like that at all... H-Here you go...”

The tiny sum he had received as pay mere moments ago was thus taken away from him by Giarmo.

Living in the city had taken a toll on Biffe’s finances, and against his better judgment, he had borrowed money from Giarmo. Unfortunately, the interest rates of gangsters were never exactly fair. Biffe’s interest rose every day. There was no way he could pay it off by working as a janitor — and his debt simply continued to grow.

Placing Biffe’s hard-earned pay into his pouch, Giarmo shook it, a disgusted expression on his face.

“Oi Biffe. If you keep working at this trashy place, you ain’t gonna be able to pay us back, eh?”

That was the truth. As a janitor of a run-down inn, Biffe’s interest would only continue rising.

“If your debt keeps getting bigger, soon you won’t be able to pay the interest either. Even if I let you off, I have to answer to higher ups, see? I can’t go against what they say, see. If you still don’t clear your debts, they might just have you sleeping with the fishes, eh?”

Those words filled Biffe with fear.

“Even I don’t wanna do something like that, see. So Biffe... Here is where the good news comes in. I could find you... a job.”

It was plain from the way Giarmo said it that the job was illegal.

“If you take this job, you’ll be paid good. So good, you’ll be able to pay back your debt, eh? It’ll be at midnight, three days from now.”

Biffe, terrified and shaking, could not raise a single objection to Giarmo, who sneered at him before walking away.

“W-W-W-What am I going to do... How did it come to this...?”

Biffe started crying.

For those three days, Biffe could hardly do a single thing. The creeping deadline that Giarmo had imposed on him caused him to shake all day.

Finally, at the end of three days, Biffe stood before Giarmo, who, as usual, had two of his lackeys with him.

“Well then, it’s all on you now eh?”

A bundle of objects was handed to Biffe — amongst them were what appeared to be flammable planks, papers, and a yellow, wax-like clump. By pure coincidence, Biffe was able to recognize the wax-like clump.

It was a substance known as phosphorus, and it was highly flammable, although it also functioned well as fuel. For a time, high-class restaurants had considered adopting it for use over coal. However, phosphorus was apparently toxic to the human body, and its use was immediately outlawed — now classified as a dangerous substance.

He had used it in Daeman’s kitchens for about a month until the rumors had reached him, whereupon the kitchens had finally decided to stop using it.

Looking at the clump, Giarmo whispered into Biffe’s ear.

“You know how to use it, right? Just set this alight at the back of that store. That’s all you have to do.” Giarmo pointed at a restaurant facing a small footpath. “I’m not asking you to burn the place down, eh? Just a small fire to spread them rumors, see? It makes our jobs a lot easier, eh?”

Biffe started shivering.

In other words, Giarmo had wanted Biffe to commit arson — with the aim of helping him extend his sphere of influence in the district. Specifically, he wanted Biffe to help him intimidate this small restaurant.

Biffe thought that perhaps a small fire would have been all right, but with these materials on hand, there was no guarantee that the fire would be small, let alone controllable. In fact, there was a very high possibility that the entire shop could go up in flames, taking with it nearby homes and buildings.

“Uh, um...”

Biffe’s stammering objections were silenced by an overly-friendly pat to the shoulder by Giarmo.

“Don’t tell me you’re not going to do it. If you keep working as a janitor, your debt is only going to keep going up, eh? It may be fine for now, but if it keeps rising, you’ll eventually pay with your life, see? But if you do this, just a little fire to scare them silly, your debt is paid. Not only that, you get a bit extra too, eh? It’s not a bad deal, see? You win either way, see?”

Sneering, Giarmo whispered once more in Biffe’s ear.

“Didn’t you come to Orstoll to become a cook? But then you got fired by them foreigners, and they’ve gotten you into this mess, see. The target is the place that fired you to begin with. It’s a chance for revenge, see? Give those uppity Orstoll cooks a piece of your mind, eh?”

“...”

Giarmo’s words seemed to have struck a chord in Biffe. For a while he stood, silently. And then...

“I... I can’t do it.”

“Eh?”

“I c-can’t. I can’t do this. I can’t do something like this...” Biffe said, shaking his head as tears flowed freely from his eyes.

To set fire to someone’s home was an incredibly frightening thing. If he was found out, it would be a grave crime — and if anyone perished in the fire, he would be guilty of murder.

Although he was a failure of a cook and was haunted by his failures, Biffe fully understood how fearsome fire could be. It did not really matter if it was a small or big fire — fires spread. The slightest mistake could lead to the entire district being burned down. He was not prepared to do something like this — if anything, he was terrified.

Terrified for his safety, the consequences of his actions, the consequences for rejecting the task. All these thoughts flooded Biffe’s mind. However, he could

only come to one conclusion — what Giarmo asked of him was very much impossible.

Once again, Biffe was filled with regret — regret that he had left the back pavilion and Princess Fie's employ. In fact, someone like him, who had only become a chef due to his connections, should never have come to Orstoll in the first place.

Biffe, who had been sucked into a vortex of regret, was knocked back to reality by a rough pull on his collar. Opening his eyes ever so slightly, Biffe came face to face with Giarmo.

"What? What the hell do you mean you 'can't do it' after coming all this way?"

Although Giarmo was the one who had told him to show up, rough coercion and intimidation were also part of his arsenal.

"N-No matter what you say, I can't do it, I can't...!" Biffe, with snot and tears flowing from his face, defied Giarmo's orders while somehow looking even more pathetic than he had before.

"Then what will you do, eh! What about your debt? Are you not going to pay it back? Don't take that attitude with me, see! Or I'll gut you now and send you to the fishes, eh!" Saying so, Giarmo drew his knife, and upon seeing that, Biffe's vision started swimming more intensely than ever.

"Eeeeeee! H-Help!" Biffe let out a scream from the bottom of his lungs, and then—

"Hiya!"

Distracted by the strange sound, Biffe barely saw someone descend from the roof from the corner of his eye.

They were of a small build, a boy, perhaps. Utilizing momentum and gravity, the youth latched onto one of Giarmo's subordinates with their legs, sending him face-first into the ground.

With a crunching sound, the floored henchman was knocked out.

Giarmo's other henchman, unable to grasp what had just happened, stood

rooted to the spot.

Not letting this chance go, the youth drew what appeared to be a stretchable fabric from his pocket and promptly swung it at the other subordinate's face. With a dull sound, he fell — the fabric was apparently weighted with a blunt object.

"Wha—?!"

Just as Giarmo had finally begun to move, the youth contracted his body, and then released all of the tension within it into a single kick to Giarmo's midsection. Although his small build prevented him from knocking Giarmo out instantly, he succeeded in knocking him off-balance, causing the gangster to unceremoniously crash to the ground.

"W-What is it with you, eh? W-Wait! Sto-STOP! AUGHHHH!!"

Drawing another weighted flail from his waist, the youth did not waste any time in bringing his weapons to bear on Giarmo's fallen body, pummeling him with a flail in each hand.

After a few seconds, Giarmo blacked out, his body sprawled on the ground.

(W-What is it... This boy...?)

Biffe could only stare blankly at his savior, finally realizing that he wore the uniform of one of Orstoll's Royal Knights squires.

"Are you all right?"

The squire turned around.

(Huh...?)

Upon seeing the squire's face, Biffe was shocked.

"Huh...?" The youth seemed surprised by Biffe's appearance as well.

The youth had flowing blonde hair and blue eyes. Princess Fie, who was supposed to be in the back pavilion of the royal castle, was standing before him.

That was how Biffe and Fie ended up at a nearby restaurant, both individuals staring at each other.

Fie placed an order for hamburger steak and orange juice. Biffe, on the other hand, claimed to not have an appetite, and as such Fie had seen it fit to order a random drink for him.

Silently sipping on her juice, Fie observed her former head chef intently. He had slimmed down significantly ever since his days in the back pavilion. He did not seem at home or comfortable at all, fidgeting repeatedly in his chair.

“What were you doing there? Who were those people?”

Biffe had been surrounded, beaten up, and was carrying a dangerous substance. If anything, it would have made sense for Fie to simply turn him over to the city guards.

However, Fie was instead asking him how he had gotten involved with such individuals. Although she had been observing the entire incident from the rooftops, Fie showed no signs of blaming Biffe for his involvement with the gangsters.

Biffe opened his mouth, as if he was about to be ill.

“A-Actually... I borrowed some money from those people... and... to pay off my debt, they wanted me to assist them in their crimes...”

“Ahh... Why would you borrow money from people like that?”

Fie’s reaction was one of exasperation and disbelief. She had a right to feel that way — after all, the gangsters themselves evidently looked like they were trouble. In fact, Fie felt that it was common sense to assume that one would be seeking trouble by taking loans from such individuals.

“I’m such a fool...” Biffe slumped over, suddenly looking very small in his seat. “Also, I was wondering, Princess Fie... Why are you dressed like that...?”

Eager to move the conversation away from himself, Biffe tried to change the subject to Fie’s state of being instead. Now having the time to take a good, long look at his benefactor, he realized that the Princess had cut her hair, and her clothes were undoubtedly those of the Orstoll Royal Knights.

Upon closer inspection, she was even carrying a sword — in addition to a variety of other weapons. Biffe shuddered, remembering the violence that she

had inflicted upon the gangsters mere moments ago, although she had not drawn her sword on them.

Biffe could not quite wrap his head around why royalty like Princess Fie would be dressed in such a fashion — or better yet, what she was doing here in the first place.

Upon hearing his query, Fie proudly grasped her sleeve, before happily displaying the crest of the Royal Knights on her uniform.

“Oh, that? I became a squire. Do you know of the 18th Knights?”

“Y-Yes...”

Even Biffe had heard rumors of the 18th Knights. They were led by a mysterious masked knight, and its members were made up of only the best in Orstoll.

“And I’m that platoon’s squire, you see?”

Biffe could not believe what he was hearing. It was unthinkable for a princess to be accepted into an elite military unit. Yet she did not seem to be lying at all — her uniform and tone of voice were very much the real thing.

However, Fie’s innocent smile soon gave way to a rapidly narrowing stare, her blue eyes boring into Biffe.

“Also, the fact that I am a princess is a national secret. You cannot tell anyone about this. I’ve been using ‘Heath’ as a name. You may not know this, but the 18th Knights are under direct command of the King himself. It was the King who chose to take me on as a squire, so if you tell anyone about this, it would be high treason.”

Biffe could clearly see the glinting daggers in her eyes — and somehow, they were even more frightening than the threats Giarmo had been leveling upon him. Biffe nodded immediately.

Although Fie had been reasonably pleasant to Biffe, she had made sure to be threatening as well.

“Oh? So you understand. Good.”

Biffe, still pale from his earlier encounters, continued nodding. Fie, on the

other hand, licked her lips and proceeded to enjoy her hamburger steak with a satisfied expression, fork and knife in hand.

Fie would eventually invite Biffe to restaurants in Orstoll for a grand total of three times.

During their first outing, she was simply genuinely curious about Biffe's circumstances.

On their second visit to a restaurant, Fie made it a point to threaten Biffe with high treason once more — for good measure, perhaps. After all, she had worked so hard to maintain her current life as a squire. It would be most unbecoming if Biffe somehow ruined it.

Although Fie had mentioned that the 18th Knights were under direct command of the King, and that she had been chosen by the King himself, Biffe had no way of ascertaining if that was the truth or not. This was why Fie made it a point for her lie to seem like it was important, and thus, seal Biffe's lips on the matter. As far as Biffe's reactions went, Fie's plan seemed to have worked well.

And as for the third visit —

Fie was simply hungry.

Orstoll's restaurants were all known for their high standards, and Fie thought that the hamburger steak at this restaurant in particular tasted very good indeed. She was satisfied.

After finishing her meal, Fie burped, before staring at Biffe, who was seated opposite to her. As usual, Biffe looked completely miserable.

"Oh yeah... what happened to your cooking job again? And why did you borrow money anyway? I paid you quite well with your severance package, didn't I? Was that still not enough?"

Biffe seemed to withdraw as Fie craned her neck, curious to hear his response.

It was true that Princess Fie had given him a very generous severance

package. In fact, thinking about the attitude he had taken back at the pavilion, it was perhaps fair to say that the package was unreasonably generous.

However, Biffe had wasted his money on foolish pursuits, drunken with the thoughts of having finally “made it” in the capital. As such, his severance package was all but used up within a month. He was then fired from his intern position, and had all his janitor pay stolen by Giarmo.

In contrast, Fie, who had been shut away in the back pavilion, seemed equally hopeless — and yet she was now a squire in the Royal Knights, hand-picked by the King himself.

The contrast between their existences was too much for Biffe. He was too embarrassed to even speak.

However, Fie’s intense gaze did not shift from him at all, and Biffe eventually found himself telling her everything that had happened. If anything, Biffe wished that the Princess would take pity on him, and perhaps even help him.

Although Fie was faced with overwhelming hardship, she had still managed to get herself out of it. Surely she would see fit to assist him — at least, that was what Biffe hoped.

Having heard the entire story, Fie turned to face Biffe. She looked like she had predicted the entire story from the beginning, and sighed.

“To be frank, I thought it was something like that,” Fie said, chewing down on her sauce-covered hamburger and crunching the fresh vegetables between her teeth.

Fie’s statement was particularly painful for Biffe to hear.

“But then, doesn’t this mean everything worked out? Those gangsters have been arrested, and they won’t be harassing you anymore. Why not pursue your dream of becoming a chef once more?”

Biffe, however, lowered his head upon hearing those words. Perhaps it was because he already knew in his heart that it was naive to expect help from the Princess. Although the gangsters harassing him had been arrested, he wasn’t exactly free from his debt.

“It’s true that the person who lent me the money was Giarmo, but he has to answer to his higher-ups too. They’re terrible gangsters who harass this entire district... If you go against them, really bad things will happen to you. That’s why I can’t go back to being a cook...”

Fie, however, only gave Biffe a cursory glance, despite how sad and defeated he sounded — and Biffe realized that Fie probably would not help him after all.

Biffe’s intentions were for Fie to somehow pay off his debt, and then once again hire him to work at the back pavilion. However, Biffe himself knew that this was an unreasonable request.

Biffe’s thought process was suddenly interrupted by Fie, who had stuck her fork out towards him without warning.

“Then... all we have to do is the arrest those higher-ups, right?”

“H-Huh?”

“As I said. If I arrest the higher-ups that hold your debt, your debt would be cleared right away, yes?”

“Well... Th-That’s true, but...”

Although that was the truth, the higher-ups in question were infinitely more terrifying than Giarmo — as were their subordinates, both in strength and numbers.

Although Fie had beaten three gangsters on her own, Biffe could not imagine a way for her to take down an entire gang.

Fie however, did not seem to be bothered by the notion, cleanly finishing everything on her hamburger plate, all the while completely ignoring Biffe’s anxious protests.

“Well then. Bring me to their leader,” Fie said, as she stood up from her seat.

About ten minutes later, Fie and Biffe found themselves a short distance away from a large three-story building.

“That’s the place Giarmo and his boss are hiding in. They have many guards...

And hand out loans with incredibly high interest rates. They commit crimes without a care in the world... Recently, they have even started smuggling illegal pharmaceuticals...”

“I see.”

A few rough-looking individuals, much like Giarmo, entered and exited the building. There were many times more gangsters here than were in Giarmo’s small group.

After observing the building for a short amount of time, Fie promptly turned around, walking away.

“W-What is it...?” Biffe thought that the sheer numbers involved had made her give up.

Fie offered a casual answer to Biffe’s panicked question.

“I’m reporting them.”

“R-Reporting?!”

The surprised Biffe could not make any sense of Fie’s attitude — she had responded like it was a given that these criminals should be reported to the authorities, all the while wearing an exasperated expression.

“From what you’ve told me, these people are not exactly perfect at their crimes. In fact, it’s stranger to me that they have not been reported for their crimes until now.”

“W-Well, that is...”

There were many reasons for Biffe being unable to report these men to the authorities, such as him being afraid of Giarmo, amongst other things. Biffe was worried that had he said anything about them, the authorities would simply ignore him, and then the gangsters would surely exact their vengeance upon him.

Fie, however, began taking one step after another.

And so, after 30 minutes, the building was surrounded by a platoon of knights, armed with a search warrant. The knights quickly stormed the building, arresting the criminals as they went.

“You did well, reporting this to us.”

“Yes, sir!”

The commanding knight at the scene praised Fie for her actions, and she returned the compliment with a salute of her own.

The local residents had been afraid of the gangsters and hence did not report them to the authorities, but a simple search of the premises turned up more than enough proof of their wrongdoing.

The gangsters were used to being unopposed, and did not bother hiding the evidence of their crimes at all. In fact, said evidence was scattered everywhere in the building.

From this investigation, it was revealed that the knights had an agreement with the gangsters in the time of the previous king, and this had led to the local residents no longer trusting the Royal Knights. Those knights, in turn, were summarily fired after King Roy took the throne, reforming the Royal Knights in the process.

And this was how the problem plaguing Biffe’s district was suddenly solved.

Having done her job, Princess Fie wore a satisfied smile on her face as she walked back to where Biffe was standing.

“With this, the problem is solved. You can go back to working as a cook again!”

Although Fie had announced the good news with a smile, Biffe’s reaction to it was underwhelming at best.

“W-Well... about that...”

“What is it? Is there still a problem?”

Although it was indeed true that all obstacles to Biffe working as a cook once more were removed, Biffe himself did not feel that way.

“It’s impossible for someone like me to be a cook... I finally realized it, after coming to the capital... I don’t have any talent. In fact, I know so little, I can’t

even compete with those who are around my age. My cooking techniques were largely self-taught — not like the rest. I'm not even at their level. I was a fool to think that I could become a chef... Especially in a place as wonderful as Orstoll. I never had a chance in the first place... No matter how I think about it, it's impossible... I understand now."

Biffe had finally realized it — although he was still reeling from the shock of being fired and did not understand at first, he had eventually noticed it over time: the fact that his talents, diligence, and knowledge were all lacking compared to the other candidates around him. He did not have a single advantage.

Upon noticing that, Biffe's heart sunk, and broke. He was now just a fool who did not know the extent of his own abilities — a fool who held an impossible dream, and had been punished for it.

Even if his debts were cleared, Biffe's life would not change one bit. He would live hand-to-mouth in Orstoll doing one odd job or another, never able to fulfill his dreams of becoming a chef.

It had suddenly occurred to Biffe that his life was, in fact, pathetic.

"Um... Princess Fie... if you could find it in your heart to do so, please hire me to work at the back pavilion again..."

Biffe had known of the difficulties of city life ever since he had lost his job — especially the high costs of living and other financial hurdles.

This was why Biffe, in spite of his own shame and regret, posed the question to Fie.

Upon raising his head, however, he found that Princess Fie was gone. She had apparently left without saying even a single word to him.

(Of course she left...)

For a moment, Biffe was exasperated by his own shamelessness.

Although Princess Fie had been trapped in the back pavilion, she had found a way out for herself, and now was working hard as a squire. Biffe, in contrast, had no talents or desire to fight on. It would seem like Biffe was doomed to live

in the dregs of society.

It finally occurred to Biffe that these circumstances would not change, no matter how much time had passed.

And so he sighed, slowly walking back to his rented hut.

About two days after this incident, however, a series of knocks interrupted Biffe's thoughts as he sat in his run-down hut.

"Y-Yes?"

For a moment, Biffe thought that Giarmo and his subordinates had broken free, and were waiting for him outside that door. However, his visitor was instead none other than Princess Fie.

"P-Princess Fie! Why are you here...!?" Biffe did not recall giving her his address.

"I asked some of the locals, and they told me, so here I am," Princess Fie said, and handed Biffe what appeared to be a pamphlet of sorts.

Written on the pamphlet in big letters were the words "Orstoll School of Culinary Arts."

However, that was not all — Princess Fie handed him another bundle of documents, one of which was a letter of acceptance from the school, with Biffe's name written on it. The other was a writ of lease for an apartment near the school — and both appeared to have been fully paid for.

"Th-This is..." Unable to speak, Biffe could only gape as Fie cast her exasperated gaze upon him once more.

"So you've finally come to the capital, you've learned the reason for your failures, and that's great and all, but you can't remain like this forever, right? If you're bad at cooking, then study! Study to be better. If you don't have any knowledge of cooking, then learn! If you work hard at that school, it may not be too late for you yet. I've already paid all the fees off for you, so just try again, one more time."

After the incident, Fie had snuck into the back pavilion, grabbed something

that seemed to be princess-like and hence worth money, pawned it, and paid off Biffe's fees and expenses with the proceeds. In addition, she had also personally showed up at the school, registered for a course under Biffe's name, and finished the registration process.

That particular school was apparently known for offering various levels of guidance to its students, even if they had no experience whatsoever in cooking. The school also had a positive reputation amongst the culinary scenes of Orstoll — its graduating students did not have difficulty finding work. In fact, even someone as hopeless as Biffe could reach greater heights at this institution.

"..."

Biffe could only open his eyes wide and stare at the pamphlet. He could not believe it — to think that Princess Fie would go so far for someone like him.

Thinking back on what he had done, Biffe thought that it would be more natural for the Princess to completely abandon him — after all, Fie's reputation in Daeman was particularly bad. She was supposedly worse-off in every way compared to her sister, Fielle.

This was why Biffe had seen it fit to mistreat her as well, under the assumption that an individual of bad reputation probably possessed bad character. He had hoped that she would randomly fire him, hence allowing him to pursue his dreams in Orstoll.

However, after meeting her in person, Biffe had been surprised — she was nothing like what the rumors had painted her to be. Instead of changing his attitude, however, he had continued to serve her cold soup — and was generally terrible to the Princess.

Even so, she had given him a proper sum when he had deigned to resign, in the form of a severance package which he foolishly spent, before running his life into the gutter and deciding that everything was over for him. In the midst of all this, a mere coincidence had saved him — honestly, Princess Fie should have been reprimanding him for his actions.

However, the Princess did not abandon him, instead offering Biffe a new chance after thinking about his life on his behalf.

Biffe finally realized — the Princess before his eyes was not worse off than Princess Fielle at all. She had a gentle heart — perhaps more so than anyone he had ever met. And thus Biffe finally understood.

Slowly, tears fell from his eyes. And with his face contorted in a mixture of gratitude and sorrow, Biffe wept.

“Thank you so much... I’ll do my best... This time for sure, I’ll give it everything I’ve got...!”

In between sobs, Biffe thanked Fie again and again, hugging the pamphlet close to his chest as if it were some sort of treasure. Watching over him, Fie smiled — ever so slightly.

And so it came to be that Biffe stood before the gates of the Orstoll School of Culinary Arts, two weeks after receiving the pamphlet from Fie.

The shining, eager faces of people from all walks of life — young or old, aristocratic or otherwise, all passed under its ornate, historic gates.

Biffe was reminded of how he had looked when he had aspired to come to the capital. However, he had been a fool, not working an ounce for his dreams, and he had miserably failed. Now, he had a second chance. Biffe tried to remember how he had felt when he had first aspired to become a good cook.

With a slightly nervous expression, Biffe joined the stream of students, passing under those same gates. His eyes, much like those of his fellow students, sparkled with renewed purpose.

In this institute, Biffe would do everything to pursue his dreams — to be exact, he would work hard, graduate, become a famous chef, and serve Princess Fie the delicious, warm soup she deserved.

Previously Unpublished Extra Story — Queen's Uniform

It had been about three weeks since Fie had become "friends" with Queen.

After finishing their meal of pasta with meat sauce at the canteen, Fie and her companions were engaged in their typical discussion when something about Queen caught Fie's eye, causing her to stare at him intently.

"Hmm..."

Upon becoming aware of Fie's intense stare, Queen's face turned a slight shade of red as he fidgeted uncomfortably.

"What is it, Heath?" Remie asked, having noticed Fie's stare. He peered over at her while enjoying some tea after his meal. Turning over to her friend, Fie answered his question without hesitation.

"Don't you think Queen is being a bit distant?"

"Eh?" Queen himself appeared shocked at Fie's observation.

"Y-You think so...?" Remie's polite laugh was not enough to hide the awkwardness of the conversation. From the beads of sweat on Queen's brow, it wasn't hard for Remie to understand how he felt.

"Really? It seems like he's really used to being around you though!" As usual, Slad spoke without much thought. The reality was, in fact, the exact opposite — Queen did not seem very used to his new arrangements at all.

However, it was perhaps expected for Slad, who had a very surface-level personality, to not notice this.

"No comment..." Such a statement from Gees, on the other hand, was more of an affirmation than a denial.

"Why do you care if he is being distant or not? Is this something to be concerned about?" Gormus' statement was delivered with a clearly

uninterested tone.

“See? Everyone thinks it’s fine...” Queen, who appeared to cheer up a little from the statements of those around him, was rudely interrupted by the sound of Fie’s fist hitting the table.

“I’m CONCERNED about you here!” Fie’s sudden exclamation nearly caused Queen to jump out of his seat.

With narrowed eyes, Fie posed a series of questions to Queen, all the while staring into his eyes.

“Queen. Where did you go after training yesterday?”

“Uh... we went to town for shopping and leisure, Heath.”

“Then, what about the day before?”

“We went to see some newborn kittens in a nearby platoon barracks.”

“What about this last Sunday?”

“I went on a picnic to the mountains with you and your friends.”

“After the training session on the Sunday before last?”

“The Roof.”

“Who went with you?”

“You and your friends, Heath.”

“Did you interact with or spend time with anyone else on any other days?”

Queen shook his head at the question.

“None whatsoever. I was reading in my room.”

“Ahh...” Fie sighed at Queen’s response.

Fie did not mean to complain about Queen’s presence at all of her outings and activities — after all, it was she who had invited Queen to come along in the first place, and for his part, Queen had readily agreed. Fie thought that his eagerness and happiness at being invited was lovable to a certain extent.

However, other than instances where Fie had invited him, it would seem that Queen did not interact with any other squires at all. Although the squires of the

northern dormitory were known for being easy-going and readily made friends with others, none of them had grown particularly close to Queen, even after a few group excursions and activities.

Personally, Fie wanted Queen to live happily as a member of the northern dormitory — as long as he did not let her secret out of the bag. Although his continued obedience reassured Fie, she could not help but be worried about his future social prospects.

After all, Fie was happy to have made friends with Queen, but she thought that he needed some steadfast friends of his own. In fact, it was perhaps strange that Queen didn't already have many friends, objectively speaking.

"Why...?"

It was commonly observed that those who excelled in a one aspect or another were likely to become popular: the academically inclined, the musically talented, social butterflies.

Queen's skill with the sword was obvious — in fact, it was a skill that all knights must possess. Hence, it was natural to assume that he would be looked up to. Even Fie thought the same way — she admired Queen's strength and ability with the sword.

His looks sat comfortably in a middle ground between "cool" and "cute" — and his exotic appearance only exacerbated how much he already stood out. "That which is beautiful is good" is a thought commonly shared amongst the young and old, men and women. Even Fie admired Crow's good looks, for example — although his playboy personality was a minus, reducing his overall attractiveness by about twenty percent.

Queen's personality was relatively pleasant as well. Although he had made quite a splash when he first showed up, he had been oddly calm as of late. This, however, was why Fie was so concerned — she had realized that Queen was the type to fixate upon his own goals and develop tunnel vision, eventually forgetting about those around him.

Even Gormus, who was also strong in combat but easily misunderstood due to his character, had many friends whom he got along with.

After having settled matters with Fie and no longer wildly issuing challenges to her, it would have made sense for Queen's popularity to explode overnight.

Instead, he was leisurely seated in his chair, albeit now with a surprised expression. Looking at him, Fie finally noticed something. In fact, she found it strange that she had not noticed this until now.

"Actually, Queen... why are you not wearing the squire uniform...?"

"Huh?"

"Ah..."

As a collective realization spread throughout the squires at Fie's table, their eyes suddenly all came to rest on Queen.

All squires had to wear a uniform.

The uniform consisted of a brown wool jacket, and was completed by a pair of white pants, made from strong, durable fabric. Although squires were not official knights in any capacity, they did occasionally participate in peacekeeping activities, even apprehending criminals should the need arise. To allow the public to identify who they were, a uniform of sorts was necessary.

Their uniform was sufficiently mobile and durable — well-suited to their movement-intensive training activities.

However, Queen had not worn this uniform, not even once.

Thinking back on it, Fie realized that he had not been wearing it ever since he first set foot in the northern dormitory.

Although she had found it odd the first time she set eyes on him, this fact was not readily evident to her during the first week, when Queen had been chasing her around. On the second week, after Fie had befriended him, he still did not wear the uniform — and eventually that had finally culminated in Fie's current realization.

Queen, still seated with the same surprised expression and cocked head, answered Fie's query with a simple statement.

“I don’t have a uniform.”

“What!?”

Squire uniforms were usually provided shortly after the individual in question enters a dormitory. If the size of the provided uniform was off, it could easily be amended if the squire provided their measurements — the uniforms were tailored to fit each squire. The squires didn’t even have to pay for these specially made uniforms.

The fact that Queen did not own a uniform indicated that he probably hadn’t taken his own measurements.

“When you were still in your old dormitory, did anyone say anything about the uniform?”

“Not particularly, no.”

Upon hearing Queen’s response, Fie groaned in exasperation. Although they, too, had gotten used to Queen not wearing a uniform, it was common courtesy to at least tell their fellow squire that he should be wearing one.

It was worth noting that while there were no rules that insisted upon the usage of a uniform, it was important to have a fresh set of clothing to change into when laundry schedules inevitably fell behind.

This was why it was recommended that squires wear a uniform — and keep a few spares on hand. Squires without uniforms were a thing of past generations, and Fie could not help but wonder what the culture was like over in the eastern dormitory.

“Am I doing something wrong by not wearing a uniform...?” Queen asked, looking confused.

Queen’s query worried Fie. No one had said a word about it until now — or even noticed anything out of the ordinary. However...

“Don’t you think it’s easier to get along with everyone else if you wear the same thing?”

Fie’s observation was correct — appearances were, after all, an important part in social interactions. Humans in particular often regard those who look

different with suspicion. In contrast, those who look similar to them invoke feelings of camaraderie.

Internally confirming her suspicions that Queen was in fact distant and somewhat isolated from his peers, Fie made up her mind — she would obtain a uniform for Queen. In fact, it sounded like fun.

Currently, Queen was wearing clothes cut from a purple fabric. The fabric in question was expensive-looking, and had an aristocratic air to it. If anything, it complimented his exotic appearance and platinum-blonde hair well. However...

“Where did you buy your clothes from?”

“I brought them over with me from my home country.”

It did not seem like Queen was overly attached to his current garments — this was a good sign.

“Well, why don’t you just try a uniform out? I’ll lend you a spare of mine,” Slad said, readily joining the conversation.

As Slad and Queen were similar in build, that was probably a good approach.

Fie nodded.

“Yep, go try it out.”

“Oh... but the laundry just went out. How about tomorrow?”

“That’s true. You should also see if you move well in it — why not try it out after tomorrow’s training session?”

At one point of time or another, the conversation had fully shifted over to equipping Queen with a uniform of his own.

Everyone agreed with Fie’s conviction — although no one had asked for Queen’s input on the matter at all.

At the end of the next day’s training session, Fie and company gathered on top of a small hill near the training grounds.

“Here, I’ve brought it with me.” In Slad’s hands was a freshly laundered jacket, which he promptly handed over to Fie.

“Thanks!” Accepting the garment with a smile, Fie unfurled it before Queen. “Well, try this on first. Take off your shirt and I’ll put it on you.”

“I-I’ll put it on myself...”

“Nah, nah, let me do it.”

Fie seemed to be enjoying herself by dressing up Queen like a doll — perhaps because she was a girl.

Queen, eventually realizing the futility of his complaints, eventually took off his purple top. It would appear that he wore a tight-fitting, black singlet underneath.

Spreading out his arms, Fie happily fitted Queen’s arms through the jacket. Suddenly, an involuntarily strong shudder spread throughout Queen’s body.

Queen possessed immense explosive power in his muscles — after all, he had closed the distance between him and Gormus almost instantly during their bout. His reflexes and mobility were close to that of a wild animal.

Due to Fie brushing against a ticklish spot as she was fitting the jacket onto him, Queen shivered and flinched a little too hard, all the while not realizing his strength — and so Fie’s small body was promptly launched away.

Although she did not travel too far, Fie’s particularly bad luck today meant that she had landed on the slope of the hill they were on, and promptly proceeded to roll all the way down.

“Gyaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!”

That was how Fie ended up rolling down the hill.

“H-Heath!”

Panicking, Queen gave chase to the rolling Fie. The jacket, now airborne as well, was duly caught by Remie.

Queen finally caught up to the grass-covered Fie, who came to a stop at the foot of the hill. Although she was not exactly angry, her face was decidedly pale.

“What the heck happened...?”

“I’m sorry... The clothes were tickling me, so...” Queen said, with a somewhat

deflated expression.

“Well I’m not mad, so don’t worry about it... Let’s go back.”

After Queen helped Fie up from the ground, the two squires made their way back up the hill.

As it turned out, the problem was quickly identified — it seemed like Queen’s skin did not react very well to the materials used in the squire jacket.

“Yeah, some people are a little allergic to wool-based materials. The wool used isn’t exactly high quality, so if your skin is sensitive, it might hurt...” Remie said, running his hands over the jacket.

For what it was worth, Queen’s skin was indeed smooth — one could even say it was delicate.

“So... something like the clothes you normally wear is fine?”

“He’s always wearing them after all...”

Such were Slad and Gees’ observations as they gazed upon Queen, who was once again clad in his purple clothes.

“It’s made of considerably high-quality materials... The person who chose this for Queen really had his welfare in mind. It feels nice to the touch, too,” Remie observed.

Fie herself decided to try touching the fabric after Remie had sung such high praises of it.

“Wow, it’s true! It’s so smooth.”

Without warning, Fie put her face against Queen’s chest, rubbing her cheeks across its surface.

Indeed, it was smooth and felt good to the touch. In fact, it even seemed to regulate Queen’s body heat well, with the surface warm and—

“Uwah!?”

With her mind lost in the evaluation of Queen’s clothing, Fie did not anticipate what was about to happen until it was too late. A great shiver crept

into Queen’s body once more, causing him to involuntarily flinch.

Just as before, Fie’s small body was launched into the air and down the hill.

“GYAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

And so it came to be that Fie, once again, rolled down the hill.

“Heath!”

Queen nervously gave chase, and helped Fie up when he finally caught up with her.

“M-My apologies...”

“No, don’t worry about it, I’m not mad...”

Saying so, Fie took Queen’s cheeks in her hands, and pinched them. Queen’s face contorted into a strange shape.

“I’m sowwy...” Queen apologized once more, now closer to tears than ever.

Gormus could only watch over the two with an exasperated gaze.

With the two back on the hill once more, discussions began again in earnest.

“Well, what are we going to do about the prickly wool? Thoughts?”

“Well, we could easily get around this issue by using high-quality materials. Alternatively, we could have Queen wear a sleeved inner garment of some kind, so that his skin does not come into contact with the wool...” Remie, who seemed to have extensive knowledge of clothing, gave his detailed advice.

“I see,” said Fie, nodding as she looked Queen over slowly from head to toe. “That being said... you’re quite an exhibitionist, aren’t you Queen?”

“E-Exhibitionist!?” Queen looked like he had been struck by lightning. He had apparently not thought that way about his appearance at all.

However, there was some truth to Fie’s words. Queen’s clothing did expose a fair amount of skin — at least more so than his fellow squires. However, it wasn’t to a point where he could be considered a pervert — for the most part, the exposed skin was within the parameters of common sense.

“Maybe his core temperature is just high?” Gormus suggested, and Fie nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, come to think of it, he is quite warm,” Fie said, still feeling traces of warmth on her cheek despite having rolled down the grassy hill.

Queen’s face once again turned a light shade of red.

“Well, let’s go with the undershirt suggestion first.”

“I have just the thing!”

Slad’s suggestion was duly carried out by Heath, who promptly set off in the general direction of the northern dormitory.

“Y-Your undershirt!?”

Fie gave the surprised Queen a casual smile, not thinking too much of his response.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get you the biggest one I have.”

“Come to think of it, Heath’s clothes are always a bit bigger than they are supposed to be...” Gees had finally spoken. To this, Fie pointed a thumb at her own chest, laughing it off.

“Haha. Maybe I’ll get bigger one day!”

The true reason for Fie wearing bigger sizes than usual was so that she could hide the lines of her body.

As Queen was the only one there who knew of her circumstances, the other squires merely nodded and saw Fie off. Queen did not say very much, and instead paced around, somewhat unnerved.

After Fie returned with her clothes at last, the discussions began once more. Without hesitating, Fie thrust the garment that she had brought into Queen’s hands.

“Here, put this on, and then the jacket over that.”

It was a white, long-sleeved top. As Fie had said, it was slightly too big for her, but would fit Queen relatively well.

“Uh... well...”

Although Queen was nervous, he had no choice but to accept the garment, rapidly gaping like a fish as he did so. It appeared that he was trying to say something.

“Queen...?”

Fie, who looked somewhat confused, was joined in her confusion by the other squires around her. Unable to handle the pressure, Queen gave up, removing his black singlet and putting on Fie’s white garment.

Nervously, he put his arms through the garment.

Although the white undershirt was a reasonable fit, it seemed to be a little on the tight side — but Fie didn’t think it was a problem.

“All right, then. Try putting the jacket on.”

Fie assisted Queen with the squire jacket. This time, Queen managed to put it on without any major incident, and Fie did not tumble down the hill. Finally, she adjusted his sleeves and collar.

“Yeah, it suits you!”

“Yeah, he looks a lot more like a squire now.”

Slad and Remie nodded.

Upon seeing Queen dressed in the squire uniform, Fie felt a sense of satisfaction. Although his usual clothes suited him fine, the squire uniform also looked good on him.

However, a moment later, Queen’s body was covered in sweat.

“Is that too hot for you...?”

Queen nodded vigorously.

It appeared that Gormus’ assumptions about Queen’s body temperature were correct after all. In contrast, Fie had a lower body temperature and often had to wear multiple layers of clothing to compensate.

“His face is red...”

Indeed, Queen's face had turned an unhealthy shade of red from the accumulated heat.

"Well... I guess this isn't going to work. Take it off then." Fie retrieved the garment that she had loaned Queen after he had taken it off.

"I-I'll wash it for you..."

Fie shook her head at Queen's offer.

"Don't worry about it. I'm going to wear it now anyway."

Saying so, Fie took off her grass-covered squire jacket, putting the white garment on instead — specifically, the garment that Queen had been wearing up until a short while ago. Although it was a little wet to the touch, it did not smell.

Upon seeing this, however, Queen started gaping once more, his face now redder than ever.

In the end, the squires came to the conclusion that a drastic solution of sorts was required to remedy Queen's uniform problem.

"It seems like we can't solve this without actually getting a custom-made uniform for Queen."

Although they were not sure if it could be done, the squires decided to find out.

"Well then, I will search for a fabric that will not agitate Queen's skin."

With Remie's cooperation, the group saw a bit of hope in the situation.

"Oh, I'll come with you then!"

"As will I..."

As usual, Slad and Gees accompanied their friend, and soon the three were gone.

"I am not really interested in any of this, so I am going to rest. If you need any help carrying heavy things, I will help."

Gormus' views on the situation remained unchanged. To begin with, he did not really agree with forcing Queen into a uniform, and he had simply gone along with the group.

As an afterthought, Gormus gave Queen some advice, the exasperation clear in his voice.

"Well... I suppose this one time is fine, Queen. However, don't listen to what this fool says too much... or you'll really get into a bothersome situation," Gormus said, and lightly rapped the top of Fie's head.

"What!? I am not a bomb, you know!" Fie raised her hands in protest.

As there was nothing of note that the squires had to do today, Remie and friends returned to the dormitory. Gormus had something to attend to back at his platoon, and eventually only Fie and Queen were left.

Suddenly, Fie seemed to realize something.

"Oh! Right, try putting just the pants on. The material isn't wool, so it should be fine, right?"

Fie handed over a pair of pants to Queen, which apparently had been borrowed from Slad as well.

"Well Queen, go on. Take off your pants."

"Eh...?" Queen's mouth opened, and remained open.

"If you don't take them off you can't put the uniform's pants on, right?"

"B-But." Queen looked at Fie apprehensively.

It was then that Fie had finally realized.

"Are you, by any chance, embarrassed...?"

Fie somehow found it strange that a man would be embarrassed — although he was outdoors, alone with a member of the opposite sex, in only his underwear.

Queen nodded rapidly.

Seeing his response, Fie had the following to say:

“Don’t worry about it. Other than me, no one is looking.”

For Queen, that was precisely the problem.

However, Queen was too embarrassed to tell Fie how he felt directly. He was acutely aware of Fie’s status as a woman, and above all else, he was, like many other squires, going through puberty. It was a sensitive time for him.

On the other hand, Fie herself was guilty of being somewhat dense in this situation.

“Come on, if you take this long, the sun will set. Take them off, quickly! Actually never mind, I’ll take them off for you.”

With a flash, Fie’s hands were firmly latched onto the sides of Queen’s pants.

“W-Wait! Ahh...!”

Closing his eyes, Queen desperately held onto his pants with all of his might.

“Ugh, don’t mess around!”

“No! Stop it! Stop it!”



For a while, the two of them remained in a stalemate. On one hand, Queen was desperate. After all, if Fie succeeded in taking off his pants, she would see his underwear — and the prospect of that drove him close to tears.

Fie, for her part, got more irritated by the second, becoming increasingly determined to take off Queen's pants.

After a few skirmishes over the status of Queen's pants, Fie's fingertips inadvertently slipped, and came into contact with warm skin.

In other words, Fie's fingertips had somehow found their way beneath his underwear amongst the struggle.

Queen's entire body tensed up. However, Fie did not notice this, and continued her crusade of pants removal. And so, ever so slightly, both Queen's pants and underwear began to fall below his waistline.

"Eeee! N-No...!"

In the very next moment, Queen had promptly launched Fie away and up into the air once more.

"I TOLD you to STOOOOP!"

"Gah!"

Fie's small body easily flew up and away into the air.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

And so, Fie came into contact with a familiar grassy hillside and rolled down its slope for the third time that day. Fie, however, probably deserved her most recent flight.

Although she had braced herself for the fall and thus was not injured, unlike the other two instances, Queen did not rush down to check on her.

Casting her gaze towards the top of the hill, Fie came across a pitiable sight — Queen was bent over and holding onto his underwear with both hands, his pants having finally been successfully removed. His face was flustered, and he looked upon Fie with tear-filled eyes.

With that sight, Fie finally realized that she had gone too far.

“I went overboard. I apologize.” Fie got down on her knees and placed her head against the grassy hillside, apologizing in the general direction of the hilltop.

After that, Queen tried on the squire uniform’s pants while Fie was looking in a different direction — and yet for some reason it did not occur to Fie that it would have been a lot faster if they had done this in the first place.

On Sunday of that week, the group decided to go on a material-sourcing trip in the capital, per Remie’s suggestion.

A variety of shops existed in Orstoll, from high-class marketplaces to the downtown streets often frequented by Slad and the rest. Of course, one could not leave out the hole-in-the-wall shops as well.

As Remie’s hobby was stitching soft toys, he happened to have the relevant knowledge to recommend a place.

About fifty paces from the royal castle, Fie and company arrived at the shop in question — it was a small store located in a back alleyway, and various textiles hung from its displays.

With an eager expression, Remie entered the shop, the others following close behind him.

The members for this excursion were Queen, Fie, and Remie. Gormus had excused himself, apparently busy with one thing or another. Slad and Gees, on the other hand, had not finished their homework, and were studying together to finish their work on time.

Fie, for her part, had spent considerable time assisting Queen with his studies last night. Although he gave off the impression of being a very capable individual, Queen was not very good at academic affairs — which came as a surprise to Fie, as he was supposedly well-read.

“If it’s wool you want, you’d want some high quality, smooth woven material... Specifically, I would recommend Ingria sheep wool, imported from the Northern Kingdoms. Its smoothness is legendary — it is even used to make clothing for royalty. Although you won’t find such expensive, high-quality

material in shops, you can easily find wool a grade or two lower — they would still be smooth to the touch and fair to the skin.”

Perhaps it was because Remie had come to a shop that he liked, but he was markedly more talkative than usual. Even Fie was somewhat taken aback.

“You really like sewing, don’t you Remie?”

Upon hearing those words, Remie became aware of his talkativeness, and promptly nodded, his face becoming a little flushed in the process.

“There aren’t many customers who come to this shop, so I don’t feel too embarrassed to come in here, even though I’m a man.”

Although he was evidently blushing, Remie looked very at home and pleased with all the textiles displayed in the shop.

Apparently, shops on the main street were often patronized by aristocratic ladies and other womenfolk, and as such Remie stood out.

Fie, however, thought that Remie should simply cross-dress to get around this problem — better a cute Remie than an ugly woman.

“Then we’ll have a look at Remie’s recommended materials!”

Fie held up a beautiful white textile in her hands — and then promptly froze as her eyes came into contact with the price tag. Fie could not believe her eyes.

“2800 merks...”

It was expensive — prohibitively expensive.

For squires like Fie, their monthly salary was roughly 900 merks. In other words, the material she held in her hands was worth three whole months of her salary.

Fie’s financial perspective was, after all, determined and scaled with her salary as the primary point of comparison. Although Fie had felt it justified to use her salary to purchase snacks, goods, or to go on the occasional excursion, in comparison, this textile cost a bit too much.

Queen, who had been standing next to Fie, placed a hand on the textile in question, nodding.

“It seems like this material works on my skin,” Queen said. Then his eyes, too, came in contact with the price tag in question — and to that, he nodded. “It seems to be a fitting price as well. Very well, we shall go with this.”

It was worth remembering that Queen was, after all, of noble birth. Having been born to a viscount, Queen had already inherited the estate from his parents. Although he did not show his wealth at all in his day-to-day interactions with the other squires, he was in fact very well-off.

As he had enrolled with the hopes of making it as a knight through his own efforts, Queen usually lived within a normal squire’s means. However, he did not hesitate to use his wealth if the need for it arose — particularly in this kind of situation.

“I see. Well, I’m glad we found you something suitable!”

Remie, as well, was of noble birth — his mannerisms and conduct were an obvious indicator of him being born to a well-respected noble house.

As such, their monetary views were decidedly different from someone like Fie. And so she suddenly stopped them from bringing the textile in question over to the shopkeeper.

“What is it?”

“What’s wrong?”

Turning their heads, the two came face to face with a pale and sweaty Fie.

“L-Let’s look around a bit more. We may find something cheaper but still of a good quality...”

Although it was Fie’s idea to dress Queen up in a uniform to begin with, the incredibly high price of the material sent shivers up her spine.

Fie was particularly excited for Queen’s new uniform, and was looking forward to helping him into it. However, the unexpectedly high price of the textile had changed her eagerness into guilt.

“Ehh? I don’t think we’re going to find anything this high quality at any cheaper price. I don’t mind looking around at all, but what about you, Queen?”

“I do not mind.” Queen nodded.

However, no matter how hard they looked, they could not find a fabric that suited Queen. The many fabrics that Queen did try out often provoked a negative reaction from him — as one could tell from his expression. In addition, almost every fabric that met Queen's requirements was equally expensive.

In the end, Queen purchased the very first material that they had tried, placing a deposit. The rest was to be paid at a later date on account of Queen issuing an invoice to the name of his noble family.

Upon exiting the shop, Remie and Queen asked after Fie, who was being oddly quiet.

"What's wrong Heath? You don't seem to be doing very well."

"Are you all right?"

"No, it's nothing..."

Although neither Remie nor Queen noticed it, Fie's impulsive suggestion for Queen to get a uniform had resulted in an unnecessary expenditure, and her heart was pierced with guilt.

"Oh, did you buy some materials as well, Heath?"

Fie was hugging a small bundle of materials close to her chest.

"Yeah... just a bit..."

Unable to say what she wanted to say, Fie held the bundle closer than ever, finally returning to the northern dormitory with Queen and Remie.

Queen, having handed the newly-bought materials to the uniform procurement department, soon received a uniform of his own.

To witness this occasion, everyone gathered on the hilltop.

"So you finally finished it. Took you a while."

"You didn't even do anything, Gormus," Fie said, squinting her eyes at him. He merely sneered, albeit in a good-natured way.

"Not doing anything unnecessary is also a means of helping, you know. If one does something unnecessary just because they think they should, they will end

up regretting it soon enough.” Gormus looked at Fie, his eyes seemingly conveying a deeper meaning.

“Ugh...”

From the way he had said it, it seemed like Gormus had already figured out the overall flow of the situation.

Amidst the chatter, Queen finally arrived — and he already had his uniform’s pants on. It seemed that Queen had learned from his past experience.

In fact, he had already put on his entire uniform before this. But he had taken off his top just for the occasion, leaving only his undershirt.

“Well then, Queen will now officially put on his uniform!”

Fie stood next to Queen as if she were presenting someone at a formal event. Spreading out his arms, Queen displayed the completed uniform to those who were gathered — Gormus, Remie, Slad, and Gees.

“Ooooohhh. You look cool in it!”

“It looks good on you.”

“Yes... unmistakably a uniform.”

“I don’t get what is so special about it. Well, it’s a uniform.”

Thus were the opinions of the four who were gathered around for the ceremony — and to round it off, they clapped.

“Well then Queen, raise your arms.”

Raising his arms as he had done before, Fie helped Queen put on the outer jacket of his uniform by guiding him through the arms and shoulders, and finally buttoning up the garment from the front.

This time, Queen did not flinch, and Fie was not launched down the hill. He had finally put on a uniform safely and without incident.

“It suits you, Queen!”

“Yep, it’s cool.”

Slad and Remie praised their fellow squire once more, clapping as they did so.

Gees and Gormus also started clapping, if only out of politeness. Queen blushed from all the attention, and it was quite a festive atmosphere.

With this, the episode of Queen's uniform came to an end. As the squires made to return to their dormitory, Fie called out to Queen.

"Queen...!"

Fie, with a rare expression of nervousness, prompted Queen to pause and ask what was wrong, tilting his head at the situation.

Then, Fie finally showed Queen the object that she had been hiding behind her back this entire time.

"Um... this is something small to celebrate you getting your uniform... And an apology for last time... Something like that..."

The item Fie held out in her hands was a small pouch, made from a familiar white textile.

It appeared to be the product of the materials that Fie had bought that day.

Queen's eyes widened.

"Did you make this by yourself...?"

"Yeah..." Fie turned red in spite of herself, and turned her face away from Queen.

In reality, the fact that Queen's uniform had cost him 2800 merks weighed heavily on her heart — she hadn't thought that a mere whim on her part would translate into such a high expense for her fellow squire.

The fact remained that Fie could not have possibly paid for the materials with her squire salary — and although her assets as a princess could probably have funded it, that would have appeared too suspicious to the others. Although Fie was aware that her gift could not replace the original expenditure, she had bought some of the high-quality material with her own salary, and had turned it into a small pouch.

It was made of sturdy textile and felt smooth to the skin — with this, Queen could use it easily.

“Also, the base is stitched. I’d meant it to be ornamental, but Sir Garuge added a non-slip coating to it...”

Between the time of Queen delivering the materials and receiving his uniform, Fie had received instruction from Garuge and worked hard at sewing the base of the pouch. Although she had kept it a secret from Queen and company, Gormus had happened to be at Garuge’s workshop on an appointment to make custom-sized equipment, and as such had found out about Fie’s endeavor.

As it was her first time sewing items of any kind, Fie had a hard time with her project.

“It’s probably not very well made, sorry...”

Upon hearing Fie’s dejected words, Queen shook his head.

“No... I am very happy that you would make something for me!”

On his face was a smile, much akin to that of a happy puppy. He held Fie’s gift close to his chest, treasuring it.

Fie, seeing Queen’s smile, finally felt the guilt lift from her heart — even if her gift did not solve any problems to begin with. Although it was an effort on her own part, it was worth it.

“Well, then put that on too!”

Following Slad’s suggestion, Queen promptly attached the pouch to his pants. Now armed with a jacket, black inner garment, his white pants and pouch, Queen was the very picture of a squire.

“Yeah, the pouch really suits you.”

As Fie had obtained the design of the pouch from Garuge in the first place, it fit in well with Queen’s squire uniform. Queen, for his part, seemed happy to receive a gift from Fie.

And so, after some time was spent admiring Queen’s new uniform, the squires’ meeting was over.

While the other squires in the dormitory were surprised by Queen’s new uniform (and pouch) the next day, they eventually got used to his new

appearance.

Perhaps it was due to the uniform, but eventually Queen began making friends with the other squires in the dormitory — and to that, Fie could not help but feel a little jealous.

In particular, it seemed like Queen had made friends with some of the more quiet squires in the dormitory, happily discussing with them books that Fie had never heard of.

And so it came to be that Fie would invade Queen's room the very next day to borrow some of the above-mentioned books to read — but that is a secret, and a story for another time.

Afterword

Thank you for buying “Walking My Second Path in Life!”

This book was written as part of my journey to become a light novelist. It was originally a web novel. With various corrections, modifications, and the addition of some extra side stories, it has finally become a collected book.

For those who are filled with a feeling of apprehension after reading the main story, please do not worry — Fie and Queen will get along well as the chapters go by.

It’s true... My project supervisor, Saitou-san, insisted on Queen being released no matter what, and so we had to leave the story hanging at that point.

I never did expect this light novel to actually make its way into being a printed book — I have my readers who supported me from the web novel days to thank. Thank you very much.

Also, I would like to thank Kurodeko-san for their amazing character designs and illustrations, Saitou-san for supporting me and offering me words of encouragement; and although I didn’t speak with them personally, Kousei-san and the various bookstore staff who helped promote this book. Although I don’t know much about the process that goes into bookmaking, I am deeply appreciative to those who have helped this book see the light of day.

I am also grateful to my family, as well as the readers reading this now. Thank you very much.

From this point, I will talk about the various points in the process of the web novel becoming a book.

First, I’ll talk about Kurodeko-sama, who was tasked with the illustrations in the books.

For authors who first start off with web novels, the one thing they look forward to the most is when their characters are brought to life through illustration. When I had first heard that Kurodeko-sama was going to illustrate my characters, I marveled at how far they had come as an illustrator. However, after a few days, they sent me a rough sketch of Queen, and I was blown away by it.

“What the hell is this? He’s cute and cool... Is this design a miracle...!?” was my reaction.

It totally exceeded my expectations. Queen is so cute.

And although I did not imagine it to be so, even Gormus’ design was that way.

To tell the truth, I had thought that he’d end up looking like some haggard muscle-bound old guy, but Kurodeko-sama’s illustrations once again blew away my expectations, successfully bringing to life the menacing but strong Gormus that we have seen thus far. Although it was not what I expected, he was cool. And very Gormus. It was amazing.

How do I say this? The unformed, vague images in my mind were torn apart.

After that, as the design phase went on, the rough sketches and backgrounds were equally impressive. I felt like I had been transported to the world of “Walking My Second Path in Life!”, vibrant with beauty and color.

In any case... it was a shock.

Although I had just left the whole illustrator thing to Saitou-san, and then went “Oh great we got a nice person!” when Kurodeko-sama was selected, I ended up getting put in my place by their godly skills. Even now, I respect them very much.

Just talking about one thing uses up so much text!

(Editor’s note: In the following section of the afterword, the author refers to “i-nuki,” meaning “without i.” This is a contraction in Japanese where the “i” sound is dropped from between two words, which is used in casual speech.)

The other thing that left an impression in my mind was receiving the original draft back from Kousei-san and seeing many “i” characters in the edit.

Readers who have already gone through the text may have noticed that this light novel features a lot of i-nuki phrases. As a light novel, it goes against some fundamental rules of the Japanese language.

To be honest, I had received similar feedback from when the book was still a web novel. However, I prioritized ease of reading over all else, and as a result left things as they were.

Now that the work has finally become a book, this issue has surfaced again, in a variety of forms.

I was also worried about it — I did look up opinions on this around the net after all...

If we think about it from a common sense angle, removing the “i” character is probably okay when characters are speaking. This phenomenon is also frequently seen in the narrative sections. It was a methodology of wording required of light novels and narration.

Although I was worried about it, in the end, I came to the conclusion that this wasn’t a story that had to rigidly follow literary rules, and hoped that it would work itself out.

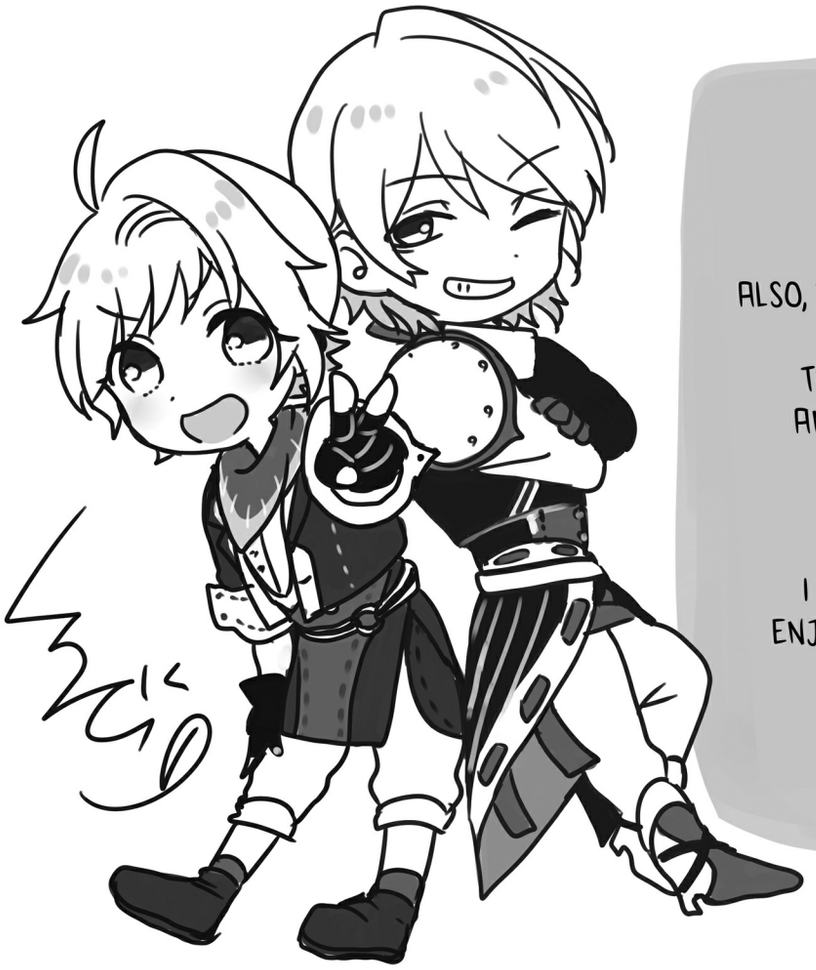
Also, some readers have asked me if I would correct the wordings and present them in their correct style if I got serious about it. To which I said that I wouldn’t at all.

And so the draft that I sent to Kousei-san had many involuntary i-nuki words.

If you would ask why I had all these silly things to say right at the end, it was because my project supervisor told me to explain the situation clearly and to clarify that Kousei-san had done his job properly — the i-nuki words are all my own doing.

Lastly, the web novel can be read here: (http://ncode.syosetu.com/n7590cy/). I'll be happy if you read my work.

Also, I had intended to use Saitou-san as inspiration for the afterword, something along the lines of "My supervisor makes things difficult for me!" However, perhaps I'm the one that somehow turns normal business procedures into difficult problems time and time again. Saitou-san is a nice person. Well then! Until next time!



CONGRATULATIONS ON THE
PUBLISHING OF "WATAFUTA!"

ALSO, THANK YOU FOR BUYING THIS BOOK!

THE STORY HAS TONS OF UNIQUE
AND ENTERTAINING CHARACTERS.
I ENJOYED READING IT. I EVEN
SQUEALED AT THE EVENTS!

I WOULD BE VERY HAPPY IF YOU
ENJOYED THE STORY TOGETHER WITH
MY ILLUSTRATIONS!

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!





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Walking My Second Path in Life: Volume 1

by Otaku de Neet

Translated by Shirley Yeung Edited by Aimee Zink

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2017