

Walking My Second Path in Life

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Walking My Second Path in Life



Characters



Fie (Heath)

The unfortunate princess from Daeman who was sent to Orstoll as a dowry gift for her sister's wedding. After being essentially imprisoned and enduring various hardships, she eventually breaks out to start a new life. She adopts the identity of Heath, disguising herself as a boy and enrolling as a squire in the Royal Knights. Has an optimistic and resilient nature.

Squires – Northern Dormitory

Queen

A squire who transferred in from the eastern dormitory. Very skilled in the art of the sword, with virtually no recorded losses. Knows that Heath is a girl.



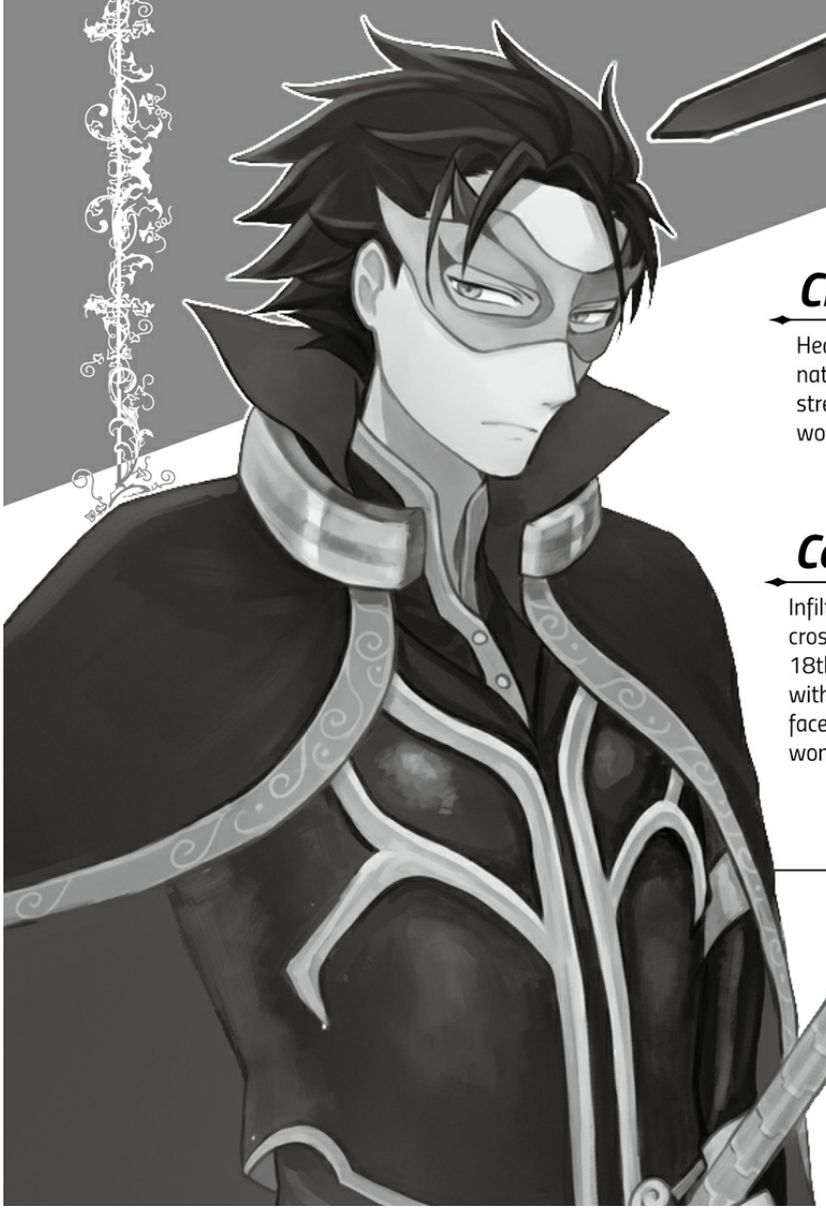
Gormus

A squire living in the same dormitory as Heath. Strongly-built with rough features and known to be sometimes scary. Also a calm strategist.



Remie

A squire living in the same dormitory as Heath. Normally kind and gentle, but gets fired up when talking about knights and such.



18th Knights

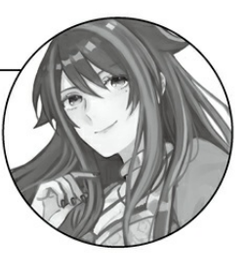
Crow

Heath's senior. Cheerful and good natured. Has many fans due to his strength, but has an unfortunate womanizing habit.



Conrad

Infiltration specialist and crossdressing disguise pro of the 18th Knights. Normally a youth with a somewhat unremarkable face, but becomes a beautiful woman once crossdressed.



Yore (Roy)

The Knight-Captain of the 18th Knights, extremely skilled at the sword, and is admired by all knights. Actually King Roy of Orstoll.

Story Summary
From Then Until Now

Fie, the first princess of the rural kingdom of Daeman, isn't much compared to her beautiful and blessed twin sister, Fielle. She was always treated as an unwanted child — until one day, Fie was married off to King Roy of the Kingdom of Orstoll.

While this should have been some form of good news, Fie was unfortunately included as a sort of dowry gift, with the King seeking her twin sister's hand in marriage. After being transported to Orstoll against her will, Fie found herself unwelcome there too, and her living conditions rapidly deteriorated.

After enduring various hardships, Fie decided to escape from the castle, instead aspiring to become a knight, just like she'd dreamed about as a child. After a fierce training regimen, Fie somehow managed to pass the squire test, disguising herself as a boy by the name of "Heath" and living on as a squire.

Fie finally began to walk her second path, and for the first time in her life was told that she was needed as a member of the 18th Knights Platoon. Making friends with her fellow squires at the northern dormitory, Fie lived a largely content life, living each fun-filled day to the fullest.

However, one day, a squire by the name of Queen who transferred in from the eastern dormitory abruptly challenged her to a duel. Without a reason to fight, Fie attempted to shake her pursuer, only for him to end up finding out that she was actually a girl. However, Queen had only just transferred in and had no friends or connections, so he was soon coerced by "Heath" to keep "his" secret. With the chain of events ending relatively well (for Fie at least), she eventually made friends with Queen, and welcomed him as a friend and fellow squire to the northern dormitory.

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Chapter 13 — Sir Crow’s Worries

Fie, the first princess of the Kingdom of Daeman, had been unceremoniously sent to the Kingdom of Orstoll as an add-on bride to her sister’s wedding to Orstoll’s king. Now, a few months had passed since she had escaped that existence and become a squire.

For the most part, she had gotten used to life in Orstoll. Fie now had many friends.

And so it came to be that Fie, on one of her visits to the 18th Knight’s headquarters...

“Unn...”

...came face to face with Sir Crow, who was seated upon the warehouse’s sofa with a troubled expression on his face.

Thinking that this was rare, especially for Crow, Fie approached her mentor.

“Is something troubling you, Sir Crow? It’s rare to see you worry about anything at all.”

Sneaking a peek at Crow from the side, Fie realized that her words had caused him to snap, resulting in Crow’s hand landing on Fie’s head in a clean chopping motion.

“Ouch!”

“You think I’m the kind of person who worries about nothing, huh... I see how it is...”

“Am I wrong? You’re always casually flirting with girls somewhere, aren’t you?”

“While I won’t deny that, you’re one to talk, with how carefree you are!”

“How mean! I’m not without troubles of my own, you know!”

“I don’t want to hear it from you!”

Upon being called “carefree” by Crow, Fie’s brow furrowed, and she said: “I’ll have you know, as of late, there probably isn’t another person in the world who has had as much to worry about as me!”

“Hmm. Is that right? Why don’t you tell me about those terrible worries of yours then?”

Fie’s declaration of herself as a troubled individual was only met with a look of disbelief from Crow. To that, however, Fie decided to share her worries with Crow, a somewhat satisfied expression on her face.

“Haha. So be it then. I shall tell you of how worrisome my worries are, and just how much they worry me! For example... what side dishes to choose for today’s dinner, if I should have my bread with or without dipping it in soup, if I should instead butter up my bread, or butter it up AND have it with soup... If I would gain weight from eating a cake for dessert at night, what to give to Queen as a reward... Stuff like that.”

“Isn’t half of that just your thoughts on food?” Crow could only offer yet another sigh upon hearing Fie’s relatively fortunate worries.

It was perhaps also worth noting that Queen’s so-called reward was, without a doubt, food. In fact, Fie’s worries were more or less entirely about food.

“Well, jokes aside,” Fie said, “if you really are worried about something, I’ll talk it out with you.”

“Even if I discuss it with you, Heath, you’re just a kid...”

Crow seemed to have no expectations of Heath whatsoever. Fie, for her part, was slightly offended by this.

“Hmph. Just let me hear it already. Maybe I could even fix it for you off the bat!”

“Well, I guess I could tell you. In a few days’ time, I have a date at a restaurant with a certain lady, you see. However, I don’t know this new place too well. I wanted to go check it out and see what it’s like, but it’s not the kind of restaurant that you can go to alone.”

“I see. I was a fool for asking. Well then, I’m going to visit Sir Cain... Guh!”

Having finally understood the nature of Crow's worries, Fie motioned to make her escape in the general direction of her other mentor. Crow, however, thought otherwise, grabbing onto her collar from behind.

"Ugh. This is why I didn't expect you to fix anything for me. I was a fool to have told you to begin with. However... your dispirited answer is offensive to say the least..."

Still trying to escape despite her collar being stuck, Fie rapidly shook her head, turning back to offer Crow her thoughts on the matter.

"But then I can't help you with this anyway! Let me go! I'd rather waste my time at Sir Cain's! I am very busy you know!"

"And there you have it. That's why I said this isn't solvable by a mere kid."

Fie's dispirited answer had apparently struck one of Crow's nerves — granted, she was the one who had offered to listen to him in the first place. As punishment, Crow slowly stood up, holding Fie up by the collar like one would hold up a cat by the scruff of its neck.

Fie, for her part, struggled with all her might to break free. For all her flexibility, however, she found it difficult to free herself from Crow's grip — being held from her collar from the back was an appropriately disadvantageous position.

Sensing that Fie had finally given up, Crow slowly lowered his right arm.

"Can't you just find someone else to go with you...?"

"You know I can't just go do something like that, right? Who invites a girl out under the pretext of reviewing an unknown restaurant? No one would feel good at such an invitation."

Upon hearing that, Fie blinked a few times in disbelief.

"Oh, so you did have a sense of decency after all, Sir Crow..."

"Who the hell did you think I was..." Rapping Fie's head with a free hand, Crow sighed once more. "Ugh... I guess I can't do anything but hope it all works out that night. I can at the very least check the menu for dishes that she might like..."

A familiar voice soon wafted through the air, directed at the troubled Crow.

“Oh, if that’s the case, I have the perfect solution...”

It was Conrad, with an eager smile on his face. If Conrad had simply crossdressed, he would be able to accompany Crow to the venue unquestioned. Upon seeing that, however, Crow’s expression twisted into one of disgust.

“Don’t tell me you think I’d go together with you, Conrad. Please, spare me.”

Raising a single finger to his lips, Conrad pursed them mischievously, his features lighting up with his trademark bewitching smile once more.

“Well, of course there’s that, but there’s one more person here who can help you...” Conrad said as he cast his glance in Fie’s general direction.

As Fie’s eyes met Conrad’s, she felt herself unwittingly cocking her head, unsure of what would happen next.

With a surprised expression, Crow’s eyes scrutinized every inch of Conrad’s face.

“Another person? Who do you mean?”

Conrad, however, did not answer, instead continuing to smile. Fie couldn’t figure out who this mystery figure was either, and turned her head this way and that, looking for another person in the room.

To the two clueless knights before him, Conrad finally revealed what he was thinking— “Don’t be silly. It’s Heathy, of course.”

Both Crow and Fie responded to Conrad’s declaration with surprised expressions. Crow’s brow furrowed.

“You know... although he has a cute face, he’s still a boy.”

“Y-Y-Yeah that’s right! I’m a boyyyy!”

Crow showed visible distaste for dating his junior, even if he did have a face like a young girl. Fie, meanwhile, was visibly shaken, and currently preoccupied with reiterating her status as a boy.

While Conrad may have proposed the solution knowing that Fie was a

woman, it would be a big problem if Crow and the others, who did not know of this fact, found out about it. Crossdressing as a girl and accompanying Crow out on his reconnaissance trip was a risk she was not prepared to take — in fact, she would never agree to do anything of the sort.

As such, Fie had decided that it was appropriate at this specific point in time to declare that she was a man. She was a man — no, not just any man, but a man amongst men.

To the two flustered individuals, Conrad smiled.

“You know, my infiltration missions sometimes do require female disguises. You can’t just be dressed up as a boy all the time for every single mission, right? Think of it as practice for such an occasion.”

Making his way to the two of them, Conrad then whispered soft words in each of their ears.

Conrad’s first target was Crow.

“After all, you don’t have any other companions for this reconnaissance trip, do you? Since you’re always playing around with women, none of them will help you when you really need them to. Then, in this case, isn’t it better to rely on your junior, whom you know so well? Since he’s a boy anyway, there won’t be any jealousy issues afterward, no?”

And then to Fie, Conrad had the following to say:

“Think of it as hiding a tree in the forest, my dear. If you crossdress in front of Crow, he won’t even think of you as a woman to begin with. Also, the place he would be bringing you to would surely serve delicious food — and you would get to eat there for free...”

The two promptly fell silent.

Although Fie was thoroughly sick of Crow’s womanizing talk, and had eventually taken to berating him for it, Crow was still Fie’s savior and her respected senior. He had helped her at various junctions of her life as a squire, and it was natural for her to want to somehow repay those favors.

So Fie changed her mind — if her status as a woman would not be discovered,

then perhaps it was all right to follow Crow on his little reconnaissance trip after all.

As an afterthought, Fie gave her lips a quick slurp with her tongue, hiding a stray line of drool that had made its way down one side of her face.

Crow, for his part, did indeed want to conduct a reconnaissance trip before his actual date. So he sighed in a poor pretense of having no other choice.

“Well, is that all right with you? Even if it is required for an assignment, men don’t normally like dressing up as women, right?”

“It’s fine with me,” Fie said, looking relatively unperturbed. After all, she was a woman to begin with.

Crow seemed lost in thought for a few moments.

“I see. I think I definitely have to check out the restaurant. Can you help me with this, Heath?”

“Yes. Please leave it to me,” Fie said, pounding her chest with a fist for effect.

With that settled, Conrad, with an eager and somewhat excited expression, picked Fie off her feet and began transporting her to a yet unknown location.

“Well then, we’ll have to doll you up really good...”

“Eh? Can’t you just take a passing stab at it?”

Upon seeing Fie being dragged away to a spare room by Conrad, Crow only had this to say: “Well, just make sure that we don’t get chased out of the restaurant, you hear?”

Crow was waiting. To be precise, he was waiting for Heath and Conrad, who were currently in another room. Conrad, however, was the first person to exit its doors.

“Eh? What happened to Heath?”

Crow, who had expected them to come out of the room at the same time, could not help but raise his question to Conrad.

“Although I’ve chosen the clothes for him, he can do the changing himself.

After all, if he doesn't do it himself, it wouldn't be much of a practice."

"He can do it himself? Aren't those women's clothes?"

"Oh it'll be fine. He is my number one disciple after all."

Conrad's mischievously bewitching smile seemed to trigger something in Crow, and he once again scrunched up his face in distaste.

"I really hope that Heath doesn't end up like you..."

"Oh, you prefer him without the makeup?"

"That's not what I mean. I mean that Heath should be brought up correctly and honestly!"

"Hmm. So you do care after all."

"Of course. He's my little brother, you know?"

To those words, Conrad smiled, the slight curl in his lips loaded with meaning.

According to Conrad's memories, Crow was indeed social, and often played around with various women. However, to fixate upon a single squire was a first — at least as far as he had observed. Even though Crow did not know of Fie's actual status as a girl, and he himself had not noticed it.

(He has a nice face, good social etiquette and knows how to treat women well — and that is why he is popular. However... he's still very conservative and rigid on the inside, isn't he?)

Shooting a sideways glance at Crow, Conrad rested his face against a free hand, smiling.

"Ufufu. Then... shall we wait for the debut of your important little brother?"

Crow and Conrad waited for the changing Heath — but not for long. Soon, faint footsteps could be heard from the other side of the door.

Upon hearing those footsteps, Crow felt strangely reassured — they were the footsteps of his junior, Heath of the 18th Knights, who could never keep still and was always jumping and pirouetting around.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

However, as the door opened, Crow’s eyes followed, opening wider than they should have.

The figure standing in the doorway was unmistakably a woman.

Fie was clad in a red, one-piece dress that gave off a slightly sophisticated aura — and a matching pair of black high-heels. Her long, brown hair was tied back into a neat bun, and her facial features were accentuated by light touches of makeup.

Bits of her immature stature did remain, but certain parts of her red dress helped to make her look taller than she was. Such was the woman that Fie presented herself as.



Looking at the stunned Crow, Conrad could not help but laugh from the bottom of his heart.

After checking her appearance with a series of strange poses to ascertain her femininity, Fie looked at Crow, who was still very much stunned.

“What do you think, Sir Crow? Does anything look out of place?”

It was only upon hearing that voice that Crow could finally identify the woman before him as the Heath he knew.

Crow frankly thought that he had let his guard down. After all, the person before him was indeed his junior squire, with his girly features and lithe body — he had made fun of the boy many times for these traits. It was reasonable to assume that even if he did dress up as a woman, the femininity of those traits would not just suddenly disappear. However...

(No matter how you look at it, he looks like a girl...)

Crow also knew of Conrad’s rule-breaking transformative techniques. A made-up Conrad could not be differentiated from any real woman.

However, Crow was aware of his existence as Conrad, so he did not think too deeply about it. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that Crow did not want to think about it at all.

Heath was different — the crossdressed Heath was nothing BUT a woman in Crow’s eyes.

(Is this also a part of the techniques that Conrad taught him...?)

Everything from his hair and the clothes he wore to the makeup on his face, seemed to alter Crow’s image of Heath. Crow, who was used to Conrad’s transformed appearance, could not help but react differently to Heath’s new look. If Conrad was indeed responsible for the latter’s transformation, he had done a great job.

Fie could only cock her head and stare at the wordless Crow.

(What’s wrong with Sir Crow? He usually makes fun of me. Maybe I look really strange dressed as a woman? Well, that can’t be right. I am a woman to begin with — I probably look the same even in this outfit. Well... there are only male

squires, so maybe some parts of squire life have latched onto my appearance? Hmm... I'm not sure if I should be happy or sad in that case...)

Checking her physical appearance with a strange series of poses once more, Fie lost herself in thought. Eventually she was happy with the result.

(In other words, I am one step closer to becoming a true knight! Yay!)

Upon seeing his silly expression, Crow finally came to terms with the fact that the person standing before him was, indeed, Heath.

"Oh, no, there's nothing out of place. For a moment there I couldn't see you as anything but a girl. So... please don't make any weird poses. If you did that outside even I would be looked at strangely..."

"Is that so! Well, if the womanizing Sir Crow has this to say, then my female disguise technique is perfect!"

Fie, seemingly unaware that half of Crow's praises were not actual praises to begin with, was very pleased with herself and flexed her muscles in yet another weird pose to celebrate.

(Yeah... no matter how you look at it, it's Heath...)

Crow was actually more relieved by the fact that Heath's personality and mannerisms had not changed very much at all.

On the other hand, Conrad, who was observing the two all this time, could only think of one thing in his mind.

(The things I taught her weren't female disguise techniques in the first place...)

What Conrad had taught Fie were normal techniques on how to emphasize certain mannerisms and behaviors so as to look girlish and cute. Conrad also taught her other factors, such as how to do her hair right, how to wear the right clothing, and how to increase her charm and appeal with the light use of makeup.

Although Conrad felt that some of her mannerisms did need work, they were mostly points that could be improved on with practice, so he was content with her progress at this point in time. However, he was still somewhat concerned about Fie letting her guard down around Crow and the other knights.

“Well then, have fun, you two.”

“Yeah, we will. Let’s go, uh... Heath.”

“Yes!”

Although Crow’s response was indicative of him not exactly being his usual self, Fie did not seem to mind at all, answering him with her usual enthusiasm.

Conrad was the only one who had picked up on this cue, and he could not help but think to himself that things had taken an interesting turn.

Conrad’s interest in this incident was half because he wanted to contribute to Fie’s training. Although he had taken great pains to teach Fie the correct ways of applying makeup, she would not have many opportunities to use it in her life as Heath. If that were the case, however, he would have wasted his time and effort teaching her those techniques.

However, even Conrad was aware that he was in for self-satisfaction — his ongoing interest in what Fie would do with her life was the other half of the equation.

(On the topic of rigid people... I should test King Roy sometime...) Conrad thought, a familiar smile creeping onto his features once more.

Crow and Heath made their way out of the castle and into town, having ended up here due to a variety of circumstances in both their lives.

The setting sun painted the town with an orange-red glow, staining the evening sky and clouds with its hue. For a while the two of them stood, gazing out at the sunset-colored streets.

(Come to think of it, this isn’t the first time I’ve been out in town with a man. Although... this time, it’s with Sir Crow...)

Although Fie had gone out to town with Gormus and the others on supply trips many times, going out with this appearance was a first for her.

For the love interests of royalty or nobility, it was normal for a few servants and bodyguards to follow them on their dates and excursions, all the while taking care to remain unseen so as not to disturb the private space of the

individuals in question.

However, Fie herself did not have any experiences of the sort. Fie, having only socially debuted for a short period of a little less than a year, was left alone and allowed to wander around as part of Fielle's entourage. Without any social experience at all, Fie was reduced to little more than a wallflower.

In addition, even at social party settings, the belle of the ball was undoubtedly Fielle. No one took the effort to speak to Fie, who was seen as nothing more than a poor-quality add-on to her more beautiful sister.

Perhaps it could be said that for Fie, that was a more painful part of her life. She had no hopes or ambitions for the future, no idea what she wanted to do. Once the party had started, she would simply find a corner and wait until it was over — those were the days.

Fie had thought that she would probably be left alone, unable to find a partner for herself. Her parents, then, would unreasonably and forcibly marry her off to some nameless noble in Daeman.

However, Fie had perhaps wished for it, just a little, in the depths of her heart. Even if they did not love her and it was a purely political marriage, at the very least, she would be living with someone who would only look at her.

As such, although the socially inexperienced Fie had agreed to help Crow out on his venture, she had no idea what she should be doing at all.

Meanwhile, Crow was considerably troubled with regards to his crossdressing junior.

(How am I supposed to treat him? Should I just treat Heath as I normally do, although he is dressed up as a woman? But then... no. If this is an exercise, one of Conrad's practice runs, shouldn't I be taking this seriously and treating him as a woman? No matter how you look at it, he really looks like a woman...)

Crow, who was still looking out at the street, snuck a sideways glance at Fie.

Those sunset-tinted cheeks and eyes, the latter of which seemed to reflect the sunset itself, looked almost translucently beautiful to Crow — although Heath was still, for all intents and purposes, Heath. If she had not said a word and continued to stand at her spot, Crow might have mistaken her for a

stranger.

Slowly, those eyes shifted in Crow's direction. For a while, the two looked at each other, neither one saying a thing.

"Sir Crow, is it okay if we go get some soap? The bar I got a while ago has been used up," Fie said to Crow.

Fie's thoughts on her date had apparently led to this conclusion.

In fact, she had never gone on a date before, and she was unsure if this was how dates usually went. The one thing she did remember was how she had used up her bar of soap in the baths a while ago.

She had thought of borrowing some from Queen, but for some reason, he seemed to intensely dislike approaching Fie when she was bathing. In the end, she borrowed a bar from Gormus, as usual.

However, Fie's soap tab had come to a point where she had to start returning some bars to Gormus — and as she was finally in town, this was a good chance.

"Ah, there is time until dinner after all. Might as well use that time buying what you need to buy."

Upon hearing Crow's response, Fie nodded her head.

Although Crow was well-versed in escorting women and improving their mood, he was unsure of how to treat a crossdressed Heath.

Perhaps Crow's hesitation should not be too aggressively faulted — after all, his junior was a boy, even when crossdressed. At least, that was what Crow thought.

For one reason or another, Crow felt strangely reassured by the squire's familiar voice.

"Yes!"

Fie responded to Crow with a smile and affirmation of her own, and the two set off into the sunset-lit town below.

Following Crow's directions, the two of them had arrived in the town's high street.

As to be expected of a place like Orstoll — its streets were filled with people in the evening. Passer-by after passer-by bumped into Fie as they went, causing her lithe body to shake and quiver.

“Whoa!”

Fie, who was still unused to high heels, looked like she was about to trip at any moment. However, a reassuring hand on her shoulder soon restored her balance — Crow had saved her from an unfortunate fall.

“Thank you very much, Sir Crow.”

“Be careful, sheesh.”

Fie, having somehow regained her balance with Crow’s help, could not help but frown.

“It’s so hard to walk in these shoes... Can I take them off?”

“Aren’t you giving up a little too quickly for a training exercise...? Also, what exactly do you intend to do by taking your shoes off? Here, walk slightly behind me. It should make things a lot easier.”

Saying so, Crow held Fie’s hand with one of his own, allowing her to follow behind him as he started walking at a somewhat slower pace.

(Oh...!)

Fie found herself genuinely grateful for Crow leading her through the crowd. Crow’s large shoulders seemed to deflect pedestrians, serving as a large shield before Fie. Now she found it a lot easier to walk, with or without high heels.

Fie could not help but be grateful for Crow’s miraculous technique.

“This is how you net women, isn’t it? I guess your womanizing reputation isn’t just for show, huh?”

Upon hearing Fie’s loaded praise, Crow’s hand swiftly landed on her head again in a familiar chopping motion.

“You fool. I’m doing this for you because you’re having a hard time!”

Crow had decided that he would treat Fie like his junior — as he usually did. After all, Fie’s attitude was more or less what it usually was.

Although Crow had doubts about if this would really count as a training exercise at all, it wasn't exactly a bad feeling.

Upon entering the local high street's provisions shop, Fie purchased three bars of soap.

One was for Gormus, as she had borrowed his soap bar on many occasions.

Suddenly, Fie became aware of a strangely-shaped cup in the shop. It appeared to be made of porcelain, but was of a somewhat bizarre design. The cup's handles were strangely elongated, tapering in a sharp end.

It would also appear that many of them have sold. Although many had been originally put on display, only a few copies remained.

Noticing that she had been looking at it for a while, the shopkeeper made his way over to Fie, calling out to her as he did so.

"You've got good eyes, little miss. This is porcelain from the Kingdom of Carand. Its shape was proposed by the Divine Maiden of Light, Lady Fielle. It is said that its shape is meant to suggest the hands of God, clasped together in prayer for world peace and prosperity. A truly fitting design from the Divine Maiden, bringing prosperity to Orstoll. It's really popular."

Fie tipped her head to the side at those words.

(Divine Maiden of Light...? Prosperity to Orstoll...?)

The religious sect in Fie's ancestral home, Daeman, focused mostly on worshiping nature. It was true that some there called Fielle a priestess, on account of her mysterious power to heal ailments. However, there was no mention of bringing prosperity at all in any of the religious sect's teachings.

Although Fielle's power to heal was a rare and useful thing to have, it wasn't remarkable to the point where an entire kingdom would expect something of her powers. In fact, such legends and traditions did not exist anywhere at all.

In fact, the religious beliefs and outlook of those in Orstoll were more or less the same — no one was expecting miracles of Queen Fielle.

In fact, mythology of a Divine Maiden that would bring prosperity to her country originated from the Holy Kingdom of Luciana, located far away from

Orstoll.

(The country isn't right... and the beliefs aren't right either...)

Fie, who had never left her ancestral home of Daeman, did not know much about the religious beliefs of the people of Orstoll.

While staring at the strangely-shaped cup in her hands, the image of her younger twin's face floated into her mind.

(I wonder if Fielle is doing well...)

"Although Queen Fielle hardly leaves the royal palace due to her work, that can also be said to be proof that the King loves her! According to the rumors of those who said they have met her, she is truly beautiful and filled with compassion. Of course the King would not want to parade her before the masses often. Oh, we are so blessed to have such a queen in our kingdom!"

The shopkeeper continued prattling on, unaware of Fie's thoughts.

(I hope she is living her new life happily...)

According to her last interaction with Lynette, everything seemed fine.

Although Fie did not have a very good opinion of Orstoll's king, she had hoped, for Fielle's sake, that the two of them got along well. After all, they had fallen in love and married each other. Fie wished only the best for her younger sister.

After staring at the cup and thinking about Fielle for a little longer, Fie set it down, walking out of the shop.

"Oh, aren't you going to buy one? Everyone has one!"

Ignoring the shopkeeper's frantic protests, Crow walked out of the shop with Fie. Crow was very good at excusing himself — after all, his title as the playboy of the Royal Knights wasn't just for show.

Leaving the fading voice of the shopkeeper behind, Fie could not help but think about one thing — that no matter how one spun it, that teacup was not exactly practical to drink from.

After her trip to the store, Crow and Fie made a trip to a crêpe shop, where Crow treated his junior to some fresh desserts. After that, the two stopped by a furniture shop, and after some window shopping, finally arrived at their destination. By then, night had enveloped the town, and it was time to head to their destination.

The place Fie had followed Crow to was what appeared to be a high-class commercial district.

Light leaking through the countless shop windows punctuated the darkness of the night sky, lighting up the street along with countless oil-lit lamps — a soft, radiant glow.

“Wow...” Fie could not help but gasp, stunned at the beautiful sight.

As she was a princess and had lived in a castle, she was used to well-lit surroundings even at night. But a sight as beautiful as this was a first for Fie.

Although Orstoll was lit by oil lamps, they were not deployed in every single area of the Kingdom. The downtown districts that Fie and Gormus were fond of frequenting, for example, did not have lamps of any kind.

In other words, this was a high-class and expensive commercial district — even amongst the other many well-off districts in the capital.

The faint lights from various shop windows leaked out and intermingled with each other, painting the street’s walls and cobblestones in a myriad display of soft, flickering light. The streams of light cast various shadows on the ground, carving patterns into the dark.

Fie, seeing this scenery for the first time in her life, was adequately stunned and at a loss for words. Seeing this, Crow smiled, ever so slightly.

“Is this your first time at a place like this?”

“Yes, my salary as a squire isn’t enough after all. But then, you don’t come here too often either, do you Sir Crow?”

“Well, I prefer casually walking past them and taking in the sights. More importantly, don’t stray far from this area. This is a relatively safe area, but you could get into trouble if you get lost.”

Saying so, Crow held Fie's hand once more, escorting her to the restaurant, and Fie sheepishly followed.

After walking side by side for a short while, the two came to a stop outside a restaurant.

A hanging lamp at the shopfront illuminated its signage — the shop's name was famous to the point where even Fie had heard of it.

"Welcome to our humble establishment." Upon entering the restaurant, they were greeted by a refined and polite waiter.

Fie started to feel nervous.

After all, a high-class restaurant like this one was probably also very expensive.

Having gotten used to living simply but comfortably with the rest of her friends, Fie was suddenly worried that her newfound peasant sensibilities would see her chased out of the restaurant. In spite of herself, her heart began beating faster, and she tightened her grip around Crow's hand without realizing it.

Sensing Fie's nervousness, Crow smiled wryly, allowing her to continue gripping his hand.

"Would you happen to have a table for two?"

"Yes, would you and the lady prefer a table with a view?"

"That will do. Much obliged."

"Then, this way, if you please."

Fie, still holding Crow's hand, walked through the calm atmosphere of the restaurant. Although she had lived in Orstoll for a fair amount of time, she had not experienced anything like this before.

(Well, not even in Daeman...)

Although it was a training exercise with Crow, she couldn't believe she had managed to enter such a place. Although there was a first for everything, Fie was undoubtedly nervous.

After leading the pair to a table with an adequately beautiful night view, the waiter left. It was only then that Fie breathed a sigh of relief, placing a hand on her chest and exhaling deeply.

Crow watched on, a gentle expression on his face.

“Sorry for making you come with me to a place like this.”

“No, you have always taken care of me, Sir Crow. And...”

Opening the menu, Fie returned to her usual self, licking her lips in anticipation.

“...You’re treating me to such delicious food, too.”

To be precise, Fie was being treated to high-class food at a famous restaurant. This was a once-in-a-lifetime event, well worth the anticipation.

(Ahh... This fillet steak seems good... The butter-roasted mutton looks delicious, too... So, so many things I have never seen before on the menu... Caviar... It’s expensive, but I would like to try it... Maybe I should ask Sir Crow...)

Peeking at the other tables around her, Fie became aware of the delicious dishes, neatly arranged for the diners’ convenience. She could barely stop herself from drooling as she continued to look at the menu.

Glancing at Crow, Fie noticed that he had an uncharacteristically serious expression and was almost glaring at the menu.

“Hmm... Would hamburger steak be good? But no, perhaps a gratin is better...” Crow mumbled.

Fie tipped her head to the side in confusion at those words. If memory served, Crow’s favorites were fish-based entrees. Fie distinctly remembered discussing it during one of their conversations, so she was confident that she did not get it wrong.

“Are you trying to predict what your date would order, and taste those dishes instead?”

“Well, something like that.” Crow scratched his head, embarrassed.

Closing the menu with a flourish, Fie smiled.

“Then I’ll help too! Please order something she would like.”

For Crow to go this far — whoever he was dating was probably quite important to him. As such, Fie felt that it was part of her duties to assist Crow in his endeavor.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

In the end, Fie ordered a hamburger steak and a pot pie. Crow, on the other hand, ordered a gratin. After waiting for a short while, their dishes were served.

Hamburger steak, served with hot demi-glace sauce and a fluffy pot pie soon filled Fie’s field of vision. Crow’s end of the table was in turn graced by the rich smell of cheese gratin, broiled to perfection.

“Wow, it looks delicious!” Fie exclaimed.

Crow could not help but smile upon seeing the twinkle in Fie’s eyes.

“I feel bad, having you eat these instead of the dishes that you really like.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it! I really love hamburger steak and pot pies too!” Fie returned Crow’s words with a wide smile of her own.

Upon seeing her satisfied expression, Crow felt reassured — this was the Heath he knew.

If it were any of the girls Crow had dated, they would probably be really upset, or feel disappointed. Some would get flat-out angry, and others would hide their distaste with a smile — Crow had seen it all.

However, Heath seemed happy from the bottom of his heart. This was a reaction that Crow had never seen in any other woman before.

However, Crow quickly shook his head, as if to correct himself.

(No, Heath is not a woman to begin with, Heath is a man...!)

However, in spite of the above observation, he had begun to compare Heath to the women he had dated — if only because Heath naturally looked feminine to a fault.

“Sir Crow! May I start eating?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

With Crow’s encouragement, Fie eagerly picked up her fork and knife, starting on her steak. Slicing a small portion of it with her fork, she placed it into her mouth.

Its taste was distinctively different than the same dish served by the dormitory canteen — a fragrant smell accompanied its soft texture. The exquisite taste of the steak’s accompanying sauce filled Fie’s mouth.

“It’s delicious!”

As expected of a famous shop.

Although Fie loved the hamburger steaks served by the canteens as well, there was indeed something different about the taste of this restaurant’s offering.

Perhaps Fie might have tasted something similar back in her party-attending days — but to her, this was the first time she had eaten such expensive, high-quality food in person. In addition, she had always been alone when she was eating at said parties in the past.

However, Crow was now seated before her.

“Is the sauce too bitter or too sweet because of the wine?” asked Crow, all the while observing Fie eating her seemingly delicious steak.

“No, it’s good!”

The sauce accompanying the steak had a small dash of alcohol mixed in — it offered a mere hint of flavor, instead of overpowering the steak’s taste.

After finishing her steak, Fie happily moved on to her pot pie. Upon breaking open the crisp and still-steaming crust, Fie’s fork exposed a delicate, milky-white stew.

Crow once again waited for Fie to start eating before asking questions.

“Are there green peppers in the stew?”

“No, none that I can see.”

“The carrots are thinly sliced, so that seems fine too.”

“Yeah. The carrots have been carefully steamed and lightly sautéed; they’re delicious!”

Crow began confirming the contents of his gratin while asking after Fie’s stew.

“Hmm... There are mussels in this, perhaps that’s no good...”

Crow’s effort, combined with this serious expression, more than adequately communicated to Fie the significance of this date.

However, Fie had her doubts.

(Is it just me, or does Sir Crow’s date seem a little... childish in her tastes?)

After all, the only customers who would order hamburger steaks and gratins in such an upmarket establishment could only be children. Adult diners would certainly prefer dishes of a more complex nature. In addition, the fact that Crow made a fuss about peas and carrots strongly indicated that his companion was, indeed, a child.

After their meal, the pair window shopped in certain expensive-looking stores, before finally setting off on their way back to the royal castle.

Soon after leaving the gas-lit streets of the high-class commercial district from before, the only light that illuminated the pair was the moon and the faint flicker of lights and lamps from residential homes.

In the distance, the various lighted areas of the royal castle seemed to be stars, floating slowly in the moonlight.

In the end, due to poor visibility, Fie once again held Crow’s hand, allowing him to escort her on her path. And so the two of them walked, side by side, through the dark, unlit streets.

With Crow and Fie acting like how they usually did, Conrad’s strange training exercise finally came to an end, and the air was filled with a strange silence.

Holding hands as they walked, with Fie occasionally talking about events back in her dormitory, the two looked like a typical couple making their way back to the royal castle.

However, their cheerful conversation soon stopped as they sensed a presence before them.

“It’s an ambush, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Whispering, the two confirmed their suspicions.

The area that they were currently walking through was somewhat close to a district notorious for its crime.

Although they were not exactly in the district, it was not uncommon for more unsavory elements to make their way out onto nearby roads under the cover of darkness.

“Hey buddy. Isn’t this cute? On a date with the little lady? I’m jealous.”

“Oh, she’s quite the looker. Thought we’d just take the money and go, but I guess we can take her too, eh?”

“So... as they said, hand the money and woman over, and we’ll let you go without hurting you... Buddy.”

Three evidently nefarious individuals stepped out before Fie and Crow, intent on blocking their path.

Without a word, Fie lowered her stance, intending to strike first with a flying kick. However, Crow’s large hands clasped themselves over her small body, holding her back.

“Sir Crow?!” Fie widened her eyes in shock.

Crow, however, smiled in response.

“You stay put this time. I can’t possibly let my princess, who has been stuck with me for this entire day, fight on my behalf, no? My knightly title would be laid to waste. Also... if you fight in those heels, you’ll probably trip and hurt yourself.”

It was as Crow said. Fie, who was not used to wearing or moving around in high heels at all, would have easily tripped.

(Ugh...)

Without much of a choice, Fie decided to stay put.

“Huh. Are you nuts? You want to fight us three on one?”

“So you got some guts, acting all cool. Don’t blame us if you get hurt.”

Upon hearing those words, Fie sighed, exasperated.

(You are the ones who are going to get hurt...)

In a flash, Crow struck the men, pummeling them into the ground.

The men, sprawled face-first on the ground, were summarily knocked out and could no longer move, let alone say anything.

Fie, who was already aware of Crow’s physical prowess, was not exactly surprised — this was more or less the expected outcome.

Even if Fie were armed with a sword and Crow not, she did not think that it was possible to win in a duel with him. Compared to that, three street punks did not have very much of a chance at all.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, my princess.”

Crow delivered his lines under the moonlight, a mischievous look on his face. However, at this point in time, Crow really looked like a knight who had stepped out of a fairy tale.

“Thank you for your hard work. In recognition of your efforts, I will permit you to continue escorting me to the royal castle, Sir Knight.”

Looking at each other, the two eventually burst into laughter, holding hands once again as they made their way back to the castle.

“It seems like going on a date with you is all sorts of trouble! Never a boring moment.”

“Is this even a date?”

“Well... to be honest it’s a bit weird. I mean, you’re a man, so.”

“That’s right. I guess men don’t date men.” Fie giggled at Crow’s answer.

And so, for the rest of the night, the two of them exchanged cheerful words as they finally returned to the castle.

In the morning of the day after the next, Fie and Conrad found themselves on the roof of a residential dwelling.

“Peeking is bad, you know? If Sir Crow finds out, he’ll be mad, right?”

Although that was what Fie said, she was also lying in wait in a hidden spot, taking care to not be spotted by passers-by. In her hands, she held a pair of binoculars that Garuge had made on her request.

“You want to know, right? After all, that man always plays around with so many women... And yet, he is taking such great lengths for this one mysterious lady — that’s a first.”

Without even attempting to hide his curiosity, Conrad remained perched on the roof, having even prepared a rug ahead of time so that he would not get dirty. In his hands he held yet another pair of binoculars.

Fortunately for the two of them, there were currently no good samaritans to stop them.

For the sake of accuracy, however, it should be noted that there was one person who saw them.

(Princess Fie. I did not teach you the ways of the Grass for such voyeuristic purposes!)

Although those were the words he had in his heart, the opportunity for him to show himself had not yet arisen, so he remained hidden for now.

Crow had exited the headquarters of the 18th Knights dressed in ceremonial garb that was usually only used for the king’s processions. To be exact, Crow was clad in official ceremonial knight attire.

Crow’s jacket, weaved from fabric of bright azure, was adorned with golden thread. He wore long pants of the same azure hue. At his waist was a ceremonial saber.

Normally, Crow would refuse to wear such fancy livery, complaining about one troublesome aspect or another. As such, seeing Crow actually dressed up in formal knight attire was a first for Fie.

If Fie had not noticed this and found it strange, she would have been the strange one — right?

Fie brought her concerns to Conrad, and this was how the two of them ended up observing Crow, who was currently waiting for his date.

“Seems like no one’s coming...”

“Yes. How boring.”

In a high-class commercial district stood Crow, who was waiting for his date by a large clock tower, his features illuminated by the sunset.

His golden hair, hazel eyes, and striking blue uniform did not fail to draw the eyes of countless passers-by. This was especially true for young women, who became so engrossed in staring at Crow that they would stop walking altogether.

Although Crow kept waiting, his date did not show up.

After watching for about thirty minutes, the bored Fie and Conrad found themselves using chalk (originally intended for silent communication on rooftops) to play games of tic-tac-toe. As the chalk in question was soluble and would be easily washed away by the rain, they continued their game in earnest.

Roughly twenty minutes after the commencement of their first game, a single horse-drawn carriage stopped at the plaza in which Crow was waiting.

With a gentle smile that was not often seen on Crow’s face, the knight began to approach the carriage. The carriage’s passenger was no doubt Crow’s date.

Fie and Conrad promptly abandoned their 121st game, craning their necks up for a better look.

“They’re here!”

“Here indeed.”

And so, Fie and Conrad finally stopped playing tic-tac-toe with the general public’s roof tiles, instead focusing their attention on the carriage.

The doors of the carriage slowly opened, and Crow’s date finally stepped out.

However, upon seeing who exited the carriage, both Conrad and Fie let out a

cry, in spite of themselves.

“S-Someone’s wife?!”

“A ch-child?!”

Fie and Conrad immediately knew from their differing observations that there was more than one passenger in the carriage.

More accurately, the carriage’s passengers were a young girl no older than the age of ten, and a woman who seemed to be the girl’s mother. The two alighted from the carriage at the same time, and their eyes promptly met Crow’s.

(W-Which one?! Don’t tell me... B-Both?!)

The same thought crossed Fie and Conrad’s minds at the same time... And then, they came to the same conclusion.

(BOTH OPTIONS ARE BAD!)

Not much had to be said about the young girl.

As for the older woman, she was either a widow, or she was already married, and was decidedly unfaithful. Adultery!

(W-W-W-What should we do? We have to stop Sir Crow!)

Crow, who was dressed as an ideal knight, was currently in danger of stepping wildly outside the knightly path. Upon realizing this, Fie flew into a panic.

However, at that point, a voice rang out from behind Fie.

“What are you two doing?”

“Hyah!” Fie, surprised by the sudden voice from behind, could not contain her shock.

It did not take long for Fie to recognize who the voice belonged to, whereupon she was unpleasantly surprised yet again.

“C-Captain Yore?!”

Turning around, Fie came face to face with Yore, who was standing on the same roof with his arms folded. From behind his familiar mask, Yore’s blue-gray

eyes were colored with a tinge of suspicion.

“Ah... Uh... Um. Captain... Why are you here...?!”

“Since no one was at headquarters, I asked one of the guardsmen, and he told me that the three of you had left the castle. After a bit of reconnaissance, I found the two of you acting suspiciously on a residential dwelling’s roof.”

It would seem that Yore possessed a particularly keen sense of perception, being able to detect the hidden Fie and Conrad so easily. A bead of sweat dropped from Fie’s forehead.

Conrad, who was standing next to Fie, was apparently trying to sneak away.

“Sir Conrad! Don’t just leave me here on my own!”

“Ahn, no, bad Heathy!”

Fie, however, had anticipated this, and held on tight to his sleeve.

If they were going to die, they would die together. Fie, for her part, did not want to face Yore’s fury alone. After all, Conrad was the one who had invited her... Although Fie was the one who suggested using Garuge’s binoculars, which had conveniently been made a while ago.

Yore looked at his knights with an exasperated expression.

“What are you two doing then... Hm?”

Yore, now apparently having seen Crow in the distance, looked past Fie and Conrad.

“That’s Persiol’s wife and daughter...” said Yore, looking at the woman, who was smiling and engaged in conversation with Crow.

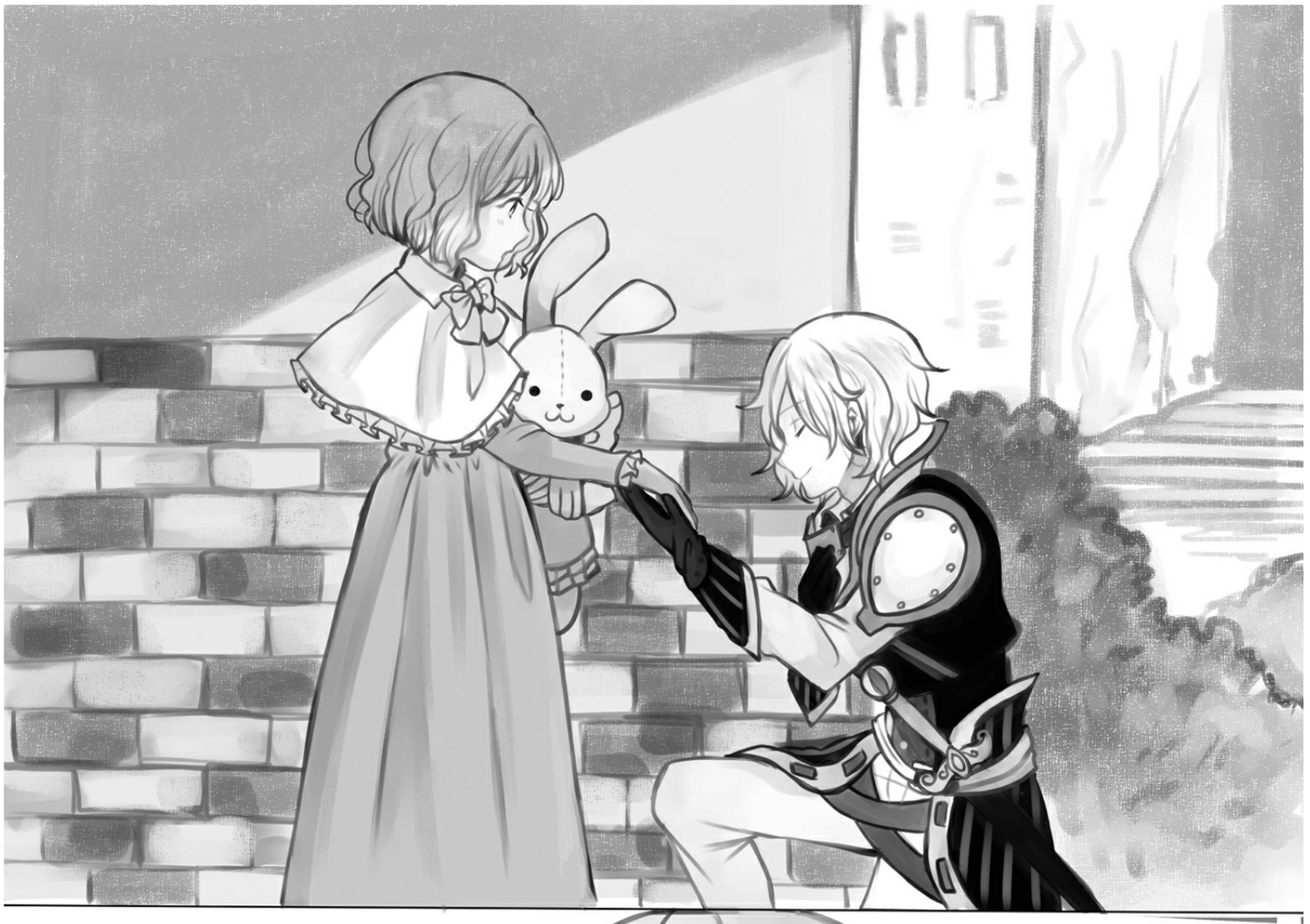
“Persiol...?” Fie couldn’t help but ask.

“A knight from the 5th Knights Platoon. He sustained heavy injuries on a recent mission, and is currently receiving treatment at the capital’s main hospital. Although his injuries are healing and he is actively engaged in rehabilitation to eventually return to his duties, his daughter has been in poor spirits ever since the incident, and has become withdrawn... That was what I have heard.”

Looking through the binoculars, the young girl did, in fact, have a relatively dark expression on her face.

After saying something to Persiol's wife, Crow took a knee and began speaking to the young girl, after which he presented her with a soft toy that he was hiding behind his back, all the while maintaining the highest standards of knightly behavior.

"Fret not, my cute princess, your father will surely recover from his wounds. So, let's put a smile back on your face. For today, I, Sir Crow, will escort you as part of my knightly calling."





Although they were at a distance where Fie could not hear her words, Fie clearly heard Crow's words in her mind.

Crow, much like a knight from a fable, promptly lit up the little girl's face with his actions.

After giving a ceremonial knight's bow to Lady Persiol, Crow gently took the young girl's hand in his own and set off in the direction of the restaurant. Lady Persiol, lowering her head to Crow in a gesture of respect, set off in the general direction of the capital's hospital.

"I see..."

(So Crow did all that investigation for this...)

If Crow had gone to one of his usual restaurants, he would surely have encountered some sort of trouble in the darkened streets, even if the restaurants themselves were not dangerous.

For an outing with a child, the lamp-lit streets of the high-class commercial districts were undoubtedly the safest.

However, in restaurants like the one Fie and Crow had been to, most of its menu offerings would have been catered towards adults.

It further goes without saying that many of these dishes used alcohol, wine, or harbored other ingredients and complexities that children would not find palatable. This was the reason why Crow had to make sure the dishes were suitable before this excursion.

And so, the little princess, led by the hand by her knight, made her way to the restaurant, amidst the glittering lights.

Crow's gentle expression seemed to shine as he continued talking to the young girl, smiling.

"Hmm... I guess it was a bit different from what we were expecting." Conrad's non-committal, but not exactly disappointed tone of voice, was equally matched by his ambivalent expression.

"I guess in the end, Sir Crow is kind of cool," said Fie, her expression promptly turning into one of respect.

It turned out that Crow really was the ideal knight — although his day-to-day habit of flirting left much to be desired.

“He’s good at following up with these things. He often helps me out as well. So, as I was saying... what were you two doing up here again?”

“...”

“...”

As the conversation shifted back to Fie and Conrad, the two looked away from Yore, remaining absolutely silent.

“Ah!” At that moment, Fie’s eyes caught something in the distance.

“What? What? What is it?” Conrad followed up on her cue perfectly.

Fie pointed at a crowd of about 15 rough-looking men, hiding in the alleyways. They were obviously looking in Crow’s direction. At least, they certainly did not look like wealthy patrons of the high-class commercial district they were in. If anything, they were terribly out of place.

“Those men are the ones who tried to attack us during my training exercise with Sir Crow! There’s no mistaking it!”

Amidst the men, Fie made out three familiar faces — namely, the three men who were beaten up by Crow that night.

“They couldn’t win with three people, and so they’ve gathered more for revenge. Hmph. Typical of small-time criminals. What shall we do?”

Even with those numbers, it was highly unlikely that Crow would lose. After all, Crow had a saber with him as it was a special occasion — a few punks could not even hope to scratch him.

However, next to Crow was a little girl, and to make matters worse, it was her date with Sir Knight. It would not be fitting to leave the little princess with fearful memories of this occasion — on account of them being knights themselves.

Fie answered with the only answer she had in mind, and the only one she knew.

“Well then, we will deal with them!”

The punks had gathered their comrades for the express purpose of revenge and roved around the alleyways searching for their target: a long, golden-haired pretty-boy.

Finally, they found their prey. Although seeing him dressed as a knight struck fear into them, the punks did not think it would be a problem. After all, they had fifteen people on their side.

Hiding in the alleyways near the high-class commercial district, they laid in wait, their minds fixed on revenge. Although they stood out somewhat, as long as they were not discovered by their target, everything would go smoothly.

The fact that he had a little girl with him also worked in their favor. If they succeeded in taking her as a hostage, they would have already won.

“Is it time?”

“Soon. I will give the signal — then we will charge out together.”

Once their target passed the alleyway they were hiding in, they would jump out all at once — all fifteen of them. With those numbers, even if that pretty-boy were a strong knight, they would surely be able to beat him up.

“Heh heh heh. I don’t care if you’re a knight or whatever, but if you go against the great Gydda, you’re gonna regret it...”

“Oh, that’s interesting. Who’s going to regret what?”

“Interesting talk indeed.”

“Did you think that the likes of you could go up against a knight?”

With those voices, the three shadows leapt down from the rooftops.

One was a beautiful woman, bewitchingly so. If they had not met in such a way, the punks would surely have stopped to look at her beauty.

The next one was a youth of small build, dressed in what appeared to be a squire uniform.

The last one was a masked knight.

As if to surround their prey, the three of them landed in the alleyway the punks had staked out in.

“W-What is up with you guys?!” wheezed the punk’s leader, going by the name of Gydda, upon witnessing the three strangely dressed individuals before him.

“We’re the 5th Knights.”

“Those who are uncouth enough to get in the way of another’s date...”

“Will be taken care of by us!”

Due to the fact that the 18th Knights were not an official platoon, they had decided to randomly pick a platoon to represent.

Yore’s expression was unchanging — a stark contrast to the smiles on Fie and Conrad’s faces.

“K-Knights?!”

“It doesn’t matter! There’s only three of them! Get them!”

“The only one who can fight is the masked man! If we take him down, we win!”

Upon Gydda’s signal, the punks all flew towards Yore.

Yore, however, simply swung his sword in a flashing arc, his weapon still sheathed. In that single moment, five of the punks fell to the ground.

Having witnessed Yore’s skill with the sword, the punks could not help but feel a deep sense of fear in their hearts.

“Th-This guy is strong...”

“We can only run, then...”

“The woman! Get the woman!”

Thinking Conrad to be an easy target, the punks converged on him, seeking an escape route. However, in the next moment, the woman was nowhere to be seen.

“Huh? She disappeared?”

“W-Where?!”

By the time they had finished uttering those words, Conrad was already behind the punks in question. Before they even noticed that he was there, Conrad effortlessly lifted one of them with a single arm.

The sight of Conrad’s thin arms holding up a large-built man was a visual joke in and of itself. Conrad promptly disposed of the man by throwing him at his compatriots, smashing three of them into the alleyway wall. Unrelenting in his assault, Conrad’s arms, darting out like twin snakes, firmly grasped the necks of two remaining punks and rendered them unconscious in seconds.

Upon seeing that, three of the punks tried to flee, but were mercilessly beaten down by flurries of palm strikes, precision attacks to the neck, and a variety of blows by Conrad. In a few moments, eight of them had fallen by Conrad’s hand.

All that was left was Gydda and one of his flunkies.

“Augh...! M-Monsters!”

“The kid! Get the kid!”

Gydda and his last flunky chose to rush the path that Fie was blocking.

From inside her robes, Fie retrieved a stringy object. The object was comprised of three knotted strings, each splitting into three ends, with each end connected to a heavy-looking rubber ball. It was a throwing weapon known as a bolas.

Upon seeing the punks running in her direction, Fie began spinning the bolas above her head, quickly picking up its speed. Even Fie, who did not have much physical strength, was able to harness a significant amount of force from the high-speed rotation of the bolas.

Sensing an opportunity, she released the bolas, aiming for the punks’ legs. The weighted weapon promptly deployed after being thrown, neatly catching the running punks by the legs, robbing them of their mobility.

“Eeee?!”

“Augh!”

The combination of the ropes and the blunt impacts from the weighted rubber balls caused the punks to fall to the ground.

“Take this!”

As if she had waited for this timing, Fie ran up to the fallen punk, giving his face a solid, merciless kick. Fie’s assault was enough to make the group’s leader pass out, the whites of his eyes clearly visible.

After this, the three of them handed their quarry over to another knight platoon.

And so, Crow and his little princess’ date finished, and the light returned to her face.

As for Persiol, he was readily participating in rehabilitation, and was on course to returning to active duty soon.

And so...

“I’m hungry. This is all Sir Conrad’s fault.”

“You’re hungry, yes... But it’s no good to blame others, you know?”

Fie and Conrad were summarily punished, once again stripped of their dinner rights.

Although it was still somewhat acceptable for the two of them to watch over Crow’s date, writing on public roofs with chalk was what did them in. Of course, they could see this coming.

They were also prohibited from having tea or snacks either. So the two of them were currently slumped over the main table at the 18th Knight’s headquarters.

Chapter 14 — The Bad Habits of Captain Yore

It had become custom for Fie, who was now a squire, to offer a monthly report to Yore.

Although Yore was typically busy and had to travel to a variety of places, he made it a point to make time for Fie and listen to her report. And so the two would speak, and Yore would offer Fie advice and praise.

“Captain, a transferee by the name of Queen has come to the northern dormitory! We are very good friends!”

“Ah. The student of Master Kaizer. I have heard rumors of him. It would seem that he could become a famous swordsman in the future.”

“Yes. He really admires you, Captain. He says he would really like to meet you one day.”

“Hmm. I see. If there is time, I should meet with him once.”

“Yes! Queen would be very happy!”

Although Fie usually met Yore in the 18th Knights’ headquarters, she was speaking with him in the back courtyard of the royal castle this time.

However, Fie felt another set of eyes on her today. Turning to the right, Fie noticed a maidservant of about her age, who was looking in her general direction timidly.

It did not take Fie long to notice that the maidservant was looking at Yore instead of her. Fie smiled at the maidservant when their eyes briefly met.

Upon seeing that, the maidservant timidly and carefully made her way across to Fie and Yore.

In her hands was what appeared to be cookies, wrapped in a colorful material. It would appear that the maidservant had made these cookies for Yore.

Her expression was very much one of a maiden in love.

“Um... Master Yore, these are my handmade cookies. Please have some if you would like...!” Averting her gaze, the maidservant held out her cookies to Yore with both her hands.

Upon seeing this, Fie was filled with a sense of admiration.

(As expected, Captain Yore is very popular with the ladies. He’s cool and strong. What an amazing person! Of course he would be popular. Sir Crow is that way, and most knights are popular, too. Ufufu. One day that’ll be me!)

Fie began to imagine a scene in which she was surrounded by maidservants, each one trying to hand her a gift.

The maidservant’s face was flushed, and she fixed her gaze on the ground, an anticipatory expression on her face. Fie smiled, thinking that she was perhaps too shy to look her recipient in the eyes.

“I don’t need it.”

Yore’s response was like a bucket of cold water over the maidservant’s head. Yore, however, did not hesitate in its delivery.

“Eh...? Captain...?”

The maidservant, upon hearing those words, lifted her face, her expression one of cold shock. Tears filled her eyes, and it looked like she was about to burst into tears. However, she persevered, continuing to speak in a shaking voice.

“Um... Perhaps you dislike cookies... I am very sorry. I... I’ll make s-something else next time...”

“As I said earlier, I don’t need it. My decision will not change whatever you make. I will never place anything you make into my mouth. It is a waste of your time.”

With a cold expression, Yore stared down the maidservant, his equally cold words washing over her being.

The shocked maidservant remained rooted to the spot.

“I’m sorry...” With that, and tears overflowing in her eyes, the maidservant turned, and quickly ran away.

Yore, for his part, acted as if nothing had happened, shifting his gaze away from the running maidservant.

“C-Captain!” Fie, now pale, cast her gaze upon the running maidservant, and then her platoon captain.

“What is it, Heath.”

“Don’t ‘what is it Heath,’ me! That was so mean! Why would you say that?”

Yore’s brow furrowed upon Fie’s protests.

“If I do not use heavy-handed words, they will surely come to me bearing gifts once more. To engage in such activities is a waste of time. Even if I do speak to them, nothing will arise from those interactions. More than anything, I would like to limit such pointless uses of time. I am very busy, after all.”

“That’s mean! How can you just say that it is a waste of time! She baked those cookies especially for you, Captain Yore!”

“I do not recall asking for such gifts. Furthermore, it is true that no matter what is made, I would not eat them. Is it not better to tell the maidservant up-front? Undoubtedly, this is better for her as well.”

It was Fie’s turn to furrow her brows as she stared at Yore, who was standing with his arms crossed.

Glancing in the direction that the maidservant had run off in, Fie promptly gave chase, despite Yore’s panicked voice calling out to her from the courtyard.

“Heath, where are you going! We have not finished discussing the contents of this month’s report!”

Turning to face Yore as she ran, Fie had the following to say: “It’s more important to comfort a crying girl, isn’t it? Captain Yore, you’re such an idiot!”

And so, Fie gave chase to the fleeing maidservant, quickly disappearing from Yore’s field of view.

Yore looked up, a stunned expression on his face, before muttering to himself in disbelief.

“I... I am... an idiot...?”

As Fie continued her chase of the running maidservant, the other maids had already gathered and began to gossip.

“What a foolish girl. It is precisely because Master Yore is like that, that none of the maidservants dare approach him.”

“That’s right! I just look at him from a distance! He looks good.”

“Even if she is new, it doesn’t excuse her from not knowing. Just because Master Yore helped her with one thing or another in the past doesn’t mean he’ll remember who she is, let alone accept her gifts! This is the result.”

Upon hearing the gossip, Fie approached the maids, placing her left hand on her waist. Mustering an angry expression, she stared at the maidservants in the face as she spoke.

“Hey, it isn’t good to speak of someone like that behind their back.”

“S-Squire Heath?!”

The maidservants seemed shocked at Fie’s sudden appearance. In their midst was one girl who was slightly red-faced.

“So, have any of you seen that maidservant? The one who ran. I lost track of her.”

“Um... She went that way...”

“Thank you! Well, I have to go, see you!” Smiling briefly at the maids, Fie waved, running in the direction they had pointed out.

“Th-The smile of an angel...”

“How cute...”

The maidservants simply stood, watching, as Fie continued running.

Fie eventually found her target — the maidservant was seated under a tree, crying and hugging her knees.

Taking a seat next to her, Fie asked after her in a gentle voice.

“Are you all right? I’m sorry that Captain Yore said such terrible things to

you.”

“Squire Heath?!”

It seemed like she had been crying somewhat intensely, to the point where she had not even noticed Fie’s approach. The maidservant looked up at her with a surprised expression, her face streaked with tears.

“No... it is all my fault. I did not think about Master Yore’s feelings, and I interrupted a conversation he was having with someone else. It’s natural that he would hate me.”

“I don’t think that’s how the Captain feels about you...” Fie said. She withdrew a handkerchief from her pocket, gently wiping away the maidservant’s tears.

“Try not to rub your eyes with your hands. They’ll become red, you know.”

“Y-Yes. I’m sorry. But... is it okay for you to be here? Weren’t you speaking with Master Yore?”

Having been reminded of her hasty exit, Fie also felt somewhat down herself.

“Yeah... I think I snapped and called the Captain an idiot...”

“I-I’m sorry! This is all my fault!”

“No, you are not at fault at all. I said what I did by my own will, after all.”

“But...”

Tears still flowed from the maidservant’s eyes. She was apparently even upset about the fact that Heath and Yore had argued because of what she did.

It occurred to Fie that, although she had chased the maidservant to offer words of comfort, her mission was not going too well.

“Hmm...”

After some time in thought, Fie pointed at the maidservant, drawing her attention. Meeting her eyes with her own, Fie slowly spoke.

“Tears don’t suit you. What I want to see is your smile... So, please stop crying.”

“Eh...” The maidservant, stunned by Fie’s words, opened her eyes wide.

Fie, for her part, could not think of a follow-up to her words and fell silent. The atmosphere became somewhat awkward.

Out of ideas, Fie took the maidservant’s hands, shaking her head and sighing.

“Ahh. I thought that copying what Sir Crow would say would make you stop crying, but it seems like I am not very good at it.”

“Th-That was a mimicry of S-Sir Crow?”

“Yeah. I know for a fact that he says this sort of thing to girls all the time.”

“I think it doesn’t really suit you, Heath...”

“Yeah... But you stopped crying, right? So it worked out in the end.”

“Ah...” With those words, the maidservant finally noticed that she had stopped crying.

Although she had mostly stopped crying out of fatigue, she felt a little bit happier — a far cry from the mental desolation she had experienced just now.

“Either way, I would really like for you to cheer up. That was all I wanted to say.” Fie smiled, and the maidservant finally nodded.

“Thank you... Heath.”

Although her eyes were still very red, a smile had returned to her face.

As the two smiled, looking at each other, a strange sound filled the air — a sound that was unmistakably a complaint from Fie’s stomach.

Fie held her stomach, slightly blushing as she did so.

“Ah, how terrible. It was a good moment, too!”

Giggling, the maidservant held out her bag of cookies.

“If you’d like, please eat these...”

“Is that really all right?”

“Yes... Well, I don’t have anyone left to give it to, so I would be happy if you ate it.”

“I see. Well, I’ll gladly have them then!” Fie accepted the maidservant’s cookies with a grin on her face.

Without any hesitation, she opened the bag, stuffing the contents into her mouth.

“Mm! They’re delicious!”

The cookies tasted of high-quality butter, in addition to good baking technique. They were perfectly baked, lightly toasted. Their flavor was controlled elegantly, a subtle sweetness lingering in Fie’s mouth.

Fie’s face naturally filled with a wide smile.

“...” The maidservant, transfixed by that smile, could only blankly stare at Fie’s face.

“Arsha! Where are you?”

“We’re sorry for being mean! We should have warned you!”

“Please, come out!”

At that moment, Fie heard voices from around the corner.

The voices had an audible note of regret to them, and perhaps a tinge of worry as well — it was the other maidservants, searching for one of their own.

“Ah, my seniors...” The maidservant reacted to those voices, turning her face in their direction.

It would seem like this particular maidservant did not seem to mind what her seniors had done. Although they fought and had arguments sometimes, they probably were still good friends. Upon seeing that, Fie’s heart was filled with relief, and she smiled once again.

“I guess they’ve come to apologize to you. So your name is Arsha... It’s a cute name.”

“Ah... Yes.”

Fie’s words caused Arsha to blush, her face a fresh shade of red.

“Everything seems all right, so I am going to go now.”

Standing up, Fie patted some mud and grass off her pants, and set off running to one place or another yet again. Turning back as she left, she smiled, waving at Arsha as she did so.

“See you, Arsha!”

“Ah... Thank you...”

Fie’s speedy movements saw her vacate the premise before Arsha even had a chance to thank her.

“Arsha! There you are!”

“Hmm? What happened?”

“Heath...”

When the senior maidservants found her, Arsha was still staring with a flustered expression in the direction that Heath had left in.

On this particular day, it was Crow’s turn to instruct junior knights on the ways of the sword.

Although Crow wasn’t exactly much of a veteran himself, his personable attitude and ability to get along with just about anyone meant that he was often tasked with such assignments.

“Well, let’s get started. Do your best today.”

“Yes sir!”

Although Crow addressed his charges with his usual casual attitude, his charges all respectfully lowered their heads.

“Although I was told to teach you about the sword, I’m not really good at teaching. So, instead... I will fight each of you one-on-one, and if I have any advice, I will give it to you. Well... as for the rest, that’s for you all to think about.”

Being an instructor apparently did little to reduce Crow’s casual outlook and manner of speech.

A line quickly formed amongst the junior knights, and soon the first in line

was up for his instructional bout with Crow.

“Ready when you are.”

Crow seemed relaxed, his stance almost unguarded as he stood, facing the younger knight.

“HA!” The younger knight, having passed his squire training, ran at Crow with the stance that he had perfected.

However, the younger knight’s sword whiffed through empty air.

Having effortlessly avoided his junior’s attack, Crow seemed to move with an agility unseen in his previous relaxed stance. Soon he was next to his opponent, bringing his sword down on the younger knight’s neck.

The junior was unable to guard against Crow’s sudden movements. Crow’s sword lightly came to rest against his target’s neck, stopping precisely against his skin.

“I-I give...” the younger knight announced, his voice shaking.

Sheathing his sword, Crow looked at his charge with a worried expression, offering guidance in his carefree manner.

“Hmm... You shouldn’t rush your attacks. Your movements are too straightforward. If your opponent doesn’t show you an opening and you just charge forward without a plan, you’re exposing yourself. Should your opponent be more skilled than you are, you would surely be on the receiving end of a vicious counterattack. When you first see your opponent, you should be gauging his strength against yours, formulating plans on how to proceed with the battle... Oh, sorry. It seems like the others want me for something.”

“S... Sir?”

“Anyway, if you are unable to fight at least slightly defensively, you will do yourself no favors if you end up fighting a more skilled opponent. For now, go practice with the others.”

Crow pointed in the general direction that the junior knight should go, before turning his gaze in the general direction of a tree — specifically, the tree from which someone had been looking at him all this time.

“What are you even doing, Heath...?”

Shifting his gaze upwards as he approached the tree, Crow found Fie sprawled out like a cat on a particularly thick branch.

There were frown marks all over Fie’s face.

Although Fie had thought to return to the headquarters, she could not bring herself to do it; she instead decided to listen to what Crow had to say when training junior knights.

“I called Captain Yore an idiot...”

“...Why did you have to go and do that?” sighed Crow, shaking his head slowly at the sulking junior squire.

Having found someone to talk to, Fie explained the previous sequence of events to Crow.

“I see...”

“Is the Captain always like that with women? Did something happen?” Fie thought that she would get some answers if she had asked Crow, who was the closest to Captain Yore.

“I guess it’s time I told you about it, too.... It was when he was about 14 years old. It was between him and the oldest daughter of a duke from a neighboring kingdom...”

Crow continued his explanation of Yore’s history, his expression suddenly becoming serious “...Actually wait, no, that’s not it. It actually started when he was a child... When he was about seven, there was some princess from a neighboring kingdom who fell for him at first sight. He made her cry. It was during a party — he ignored everything she had to say and she started bawling. The situation developed into a bit of a diplomatic crisis... If anything, I would say he was born with it...”

It sounded pathetic. Crow, who had described affairs for what they were, spoke seriously without a single hint of a joke. In fact, Crow looked somewhat depressed himself. Although Yore was a good friend and a person of good character, he was impossibly dense in certain regards, and this kind of situation

was the result of his quirks.

“I see...”

Fie figured that if Yore was indeed born this way, nothing much could be done.

So she just nodded.

“I apologize, Heath.”

Upon returning to headquarters, Fie was greeted by the sight of Yore, who lowered his head as he apologized.

The unexpected turn of events sent Fie into a panic.

“I-I should be the one who’s sorry! I even called you an idiot...”

Yore’s serious expression held fast in the face of the panicking Fie, who was now rapidly shaking her head.

“Well then, will you forgive me?”

“Yes! Of course!”

Fie had dreaded seeing Yore again, and she certainly did not expect him to be the one apologizing to her. However, Fie then realized that Yore seemed to have a relatively tolerant personality after all, and relaxed.

Having unexpectedly made up with Yore within such a short time, Fie found her mood lifting.

“Well then, you will be more gentle with girls now, right?”

“What? Why?”

Fie could only shake her head at Yore’s reaction, as he seemed genuinely confused at her words. Beads of sweat started rolling down her cheek.

“D-Didn’t you just apologize a few seconds ago...?”

“Yes, I did. However, that apology was for causing you discomfort. One’s attitude toward another offends a spectator — this is indeed a common phenomenon. As I would like to maintain a positive relationship with you, do

allow me to apologize for my actions once more.”

Upon hearing those words, a deep sense of despair rose up from within Fie.

(This person... he’s hopeless! He isn’t sorry for what he did at all!)

Fie had finally come to a realization — that Yore was only apologizing to her, and no one else.

In other words, he wasn’t exactly repentant about his behavior toward the maidservant, and was only concerned about having negatively impacted Fie’s mood.

Fie did not find this acceptable, so she decided to speak to Yore about it at length.

“Look, I am angry about how you treated the maidservant and the mean things you said to her!”

“Mean things?”

“You made that maidservant cry!”

“I did not need her gift.”

“Even if you didn’t need it, isn’t there a better way to say it?”

“No, this is the best way of expressing oneself. Empirical evidence has proven that if I phrase my words in such a manner, the woman involved would never return.”

Fie’s mouth openly gaped at Yore’s words.

“Did it even occur to you in the slightest to be nicer to that girl?!”

“Why? Even if I acted in such a way, it would not have any progressive impact on the tasks at hand. In fact, such unnecessary measures would only serve to lower my efficiency.”

“If you keep being this terrible to girls, one day it’s going to come back and bite you where it hurts!”

“Are you perhaps suggesting a scenario whereby the womenfolk in question cause a revolt? Very well. If that is the case, I shall accept their challenge with all my strength, and subjugate said revolt to the best of my ability!”

Fie could not understand how their discussion of treating women in a more gentlemanly way had progressed to one of a woman-led revolt. In addition, a strange aura started to emanate from Yore, radiating an almost menacing pressure.

(Why... did it become like this?)

Fie held her head, unable to comprehend this nonsensical turn of events.

However, she understood Yore's general argument. In other words, Yore felt that being more empathetic towards women would only slow down his work, and therefore was an unneeded measure. In addition, he also felt that them approaching him was a bother, and as such, he had wished to avoid them at all costs.

"Tell me, Captain..." Mustering a sad expression in her eyes, Fie looked straight at Yore. "If I were useless to you and did not fulfill any purpose, would you treat me terribly, too?"

Fie did not want Yore to nod — this was all she could think of as she stood before Yore, waiting for an answer.

She could hear her own heart beating, pounding in her chest. Although she was the one who asked the question in the first place, Fie was filled with uneasiness.

"Hmm... Well..." Yore stood, a single hand on his chin, considering Fie's words.

After about 30 seconds, Yore turned to Fie, his answer ready.

"Regardless of any hypothetical situation, you possess a rare talent amongst the Royal Knights. You work hard and sincerely attempt to overcome your weaknesses. Also, I know that you do all this to assist myself and your fellow knights. That is how you are. In addition, your presence harmonizes the atmosphere of the platoon. Even I feel at ease when I spend time with you. To me, you are an irreplaceable existence. I would be hard-pressed to think of you as anything else but what you currently are. As such, I am unable to answer your question meaningfully. I have no answer."

Upon hearing Yore's words, Fie's face turned an intense shade of red, and it

took every fiber of her being to prevent her mouth from uncontrollably gaping.

“Y-You won’t escape the question by praising me!” Fie attempted to hide her embarrassment with annoyance, delivering her line with aplomb.

“I-I see. I apologize.”

Yore’s expression suggested that he did not have the faintest idea as to why Fie was angry in the first place. He was, essentially, a prime living specimen of a rigid mind.

After some thought, Yore seemed to come to a certain conclusion, an enlightened “Ah” escaping his lips.

“However, if you were to become injured and as a result be unable to continue your duties as a knight, the Kingdom will dutifully offer its support to you. After all, knights give their all for their kingdom. We have no intent of being negligent with our veterans. As I have no intention of seeing you injured, I have also taken extra measures to prevent that from happening. Do not worry about such a scenario.”

“That’s not what I am talking about at all... Ugh... Never mind...” With her face still red, Fie’s shoulders slumped as she sighed, giving in at last.

Fie could feel that Yore’s words were indeed earnest. In the end, she came to the conclusion that it was a hopeless situation.

If Yore himself does not possess the capacity to understand a need to be more empathetic toward others — women in particular, then it was basically a problem that could not be resolved.

However, Fie felt that she had a moral obligation as his subordinate to at least offer him some words of advice.

“Then... Captain, take this as a request from your subordinate. Please be more gentle with girls, in any way you can.”

Upon hearing those words, Yore folded his arms, apparently in deep thought. After a while, his arms started shaking, accompanied by an equally shaky frown on his face. Finally, in a barely stable voice, Yore offered his response.

“A-As the situation calls for it...”

It occurred to Fie yet again that this wasn't quite the result she was hoping for.

(Does he hate dealing with girls that much...?)

Yore seemed to be in severe pain, his entire body shivering at the thought of Fie's request.

Realistically speaking, Yore was indeed a busy person, and Fie realized that imposing unreasonable demands of him was somewhat cruel. However, leaving him as-is wasn't exactly a good option either.

Even if one were to excuse the potential problems that Yore would run into as a knight, there was his love life to consider.

(If Captain Yore had someone he liked, perhaps his habits would change... For example, if he met someone as radiant as Fielle, he should surely be changed...)

It was perhaps worth noting that Fielle was regrettably already someone's wife. To be precise, she was the wife of King Roy, and it would be absurd to suggest that Captain Yore interacted with such a person in anything more than a professional capacity.

Finally coming to the conclusion that she had no plausible means to alter Yore's behavior at this point in time, Fie finally decided to shelve the matter.

All she had to do was wait for Captain Yore to meet the woman of his dreams — she would have plenty of time to offer her support and assistance afterward. And with that, Fie decided to let the matter rest for now.

Chapter 15 — Sir Cain's Worries

Sir Cain was worried.

To be more accurate, he had been burdened with a fair amount of worries from the start of this entire chain of events. Recent developments, however, had added on to his already heavy load.

Raising his gaze, Cain continued to worry, fixating on the silhouette of Princess Fie, who was currently stepping out from the headquarters of the 18th Knights.

As if on cue, Cain began to move. Hiding his presence, he made his way to his usual spot.

"Sir Cain, I've come to play!"

Standing in front of the tree, Princess Fie raised a hand, intent on climbing it.

Before she could begin her ascent, however, Cain leapt off his perch, landing on the ground with nary a sound.

Upon seeing Cain, the princess' face broke into a smile.

"Sir Cain, I've come to play!"

Cain could not bring himself to tell her that she had repeated her statement. After all, there was something more important that he should be saying.

"Heath, have I not informed you that climbing trees is dangerous, and that you should stop doing so?"

"Ehh? I mean, I can climb walls too, so why tell me that now?"

Cain felt those words stab at his very being.

She was right. There was little point in telling her not to climb trees — not after everything they had done. He was the one who had taught Princess Fie the climbing techniques of the Grass.

It goes without saying that climbing trees was dangerous. Yet he had also

taught her other techniques, like the correct way to fall and land from high places. They had long since passed the level of danger involved in climbing a mere tree.

“Although it is as you say, there is no harm in caution.”

“Yes, I will climb trees carefully,” said Fie, despite what Cain had said moments ago.

Cain placed a hand on his forehead.

“More importantly, Sir Cain, I’m here to play! Teach me some new techniques!”

Cain started sweating at an accelerated pace upon hearing Fie’s words, his back now soaked.

This was precisely why Cain was worried. After making his acquaintance, Princess Fie had visited him again and again, claiming to be “here to play” each time.

That in and of itself was not a huge issue, although it wasn’t a good thing to begin with.

The main problem here was the princess’ definition of “play.” The princess would demand that Cain teach her techniques on each of her visits.

“Heath, the techniques of the Grass are not toys! You cannot hope to master them with such a mindset...”

“Ah, yes. I’m sorry! I intend to seriously work hard!”

(No... It isn’t that. If possible, I don’t want you to learn any of these techniques to begin with...)

Cain’s words of caution seemed to have an opposite effect on Fie, who was now fully motivated in her pursuits.

Cain held his head in his hands once more.

To begin with, she was one of noble birth and high social standing. As such, she should not be exposed to danger at all, much less voluntarily.

If one possessed dangerous abilities, danger would inevitably find its way to

oneself — at least, that was how the saying went.

Although said saying may be nothing more than a superstition, learning dangerous techniques naturally meant that the user takes on dangerous jobs or assignments, and would naturally be more exposed to risk in their lives.

In addition, Princess Fie was originally supposed to live her life surrounded by maidservants while attending tea parties and dinners. To think that he was teaching one who was supposed to have an elegant and peaceful life such techniques was a prospect that filled him with dread.

This was why Cain had, if possible, not wanted to teach Fie any techniques of the Grass at all.

However, the princess continued approaching him, like it was something as mundane and trivial as going to the downtown shopping districts on a Sunday.

As a result of her persistence, a large portion of the Grass' techniques had been inadvertently taught to this kingdom's second queen.

Cain was now running out of techniques that he could teach Fie — at least, techniques that would be somewhat acceptable to teach. The only techniques he hadn't taught her were self-defense skills, the martial arts taught only to the Grass, and assassination techniques.

Of course, Cain knew that teaching the princess such skills was in no way acceptable.

"Sir Cain, what skills are you going to teach me today?"

Princess Fie, however, was unaware of all of this, and innocently posed her question to Cain, her eyes sparkling with eagerness. More accurately, Fie's look indicated that she had no doubts whatsoever about Cain teaching her a technique.

Due to his unique standing as a member of the Grass, Cain had no choice but to teach Princess Fie something.

(I am Grass... For the sake of this kingdom, I will execute the King's orders on the pain of death... Father, Mother... Is what I am about to do really necessary?)

However, Cain's parents did not respond. His parents were traditionally tight-

lipped, and hardly had anything much to say to begin with.

Eventually, Cain had no choice but to turn away from the mental image of his parents, turning instead to face reality.

In any case, he had to teach her something — this was the reality of the situation. But if possible, he wanted to teach the Princess a less dangerous skill.

At that moment, Cain, who had been stuck at a mental crossroads, was suddenly struck by an idea.

“Heath, what techniques would you like me to teach you?”

Although the Grass did not use it often, Cain decided to employ negotiation techniques, designed to extract information from their targets.

If he had allowed the situation to advance, it would surely fall into the pattern of him suggesting a relatively safe technique, only to have the Princess reject it. He would go on to suggest progressively more dangerous techniques, with the Princess rejecting each one until he suggested something that satisfied her requirements.

However, if he instead asked the Princess what she wanted, he would not be pushed to the point where he had no choice but to teach her a dangerous technique.

Moreover, Cain starting the negotiation gave him space to work with — if he taught the Princess a slightly modified version of the technique involved, the dangers of learning it could be significantly reduced.

Cain nodded at the ingenuity of the idea.

If her requests fell outside the general techniques used for members of the Grass, that would be a good outcome. After all, if it were a normal technique that a common soldier would learn, he would have no problems teaching it to her.

“Hmm...”

Fie paused, placing a finger on her lips as she thought of an answer to Cain’s question. After a while she turned to face Cain, her eyes glittering as she delivered her demands with a smile.

“An assassination technique would be good!”

“Guh—”

Fie’s unfiltered demand hit Cain with the force of a cannonball.

Chapter 16 — The Manliness Ranking

Quite a few days had passed since Fie and her group had become friends with Queen.

As Fie entered one of the dormitory's lounges, she became aware of a large number of squires in a group, seemingly discussing one thing or another while looking at a piece of paper pasted on the lounge's wall. Gormus, Slad, and even Remie were in the crowd, and a generally jovial atmosphere filled the air.

"What is it, what is it? What are you looking at!"

Unable to rein in her interest, Fie jumped into the crowd as well.

"Hmm? Oh, this is nothing to do with you, Heath."

"Yeah, this kinda thing is kinda pointless to you."

"You shouldn't pay it too much heed."

However, the crowd gave Fie a particularly cold reception. To be exact, it was as if they did not notice her at all.

Upon hearing that only she herself would be excluded, Fie puffed out her cheeks, sulking.

"What? So am I the only one who can't be in on this?"

Fie promptly decided to take out her frustrations on Gormus' cheeks, which were conveniently nearby.

"Ow! I didn't say anything at all!"

"Shut it! You were guilty the moment you tried to exclude me!"

"Ugh, all right, all right! If you want to look at it so badly, go ahead!"

Panicking at the sight of the rampaging Fie, one of the squires quickly handed her a piece of paper.

Taking it, Fie read its contents. On the paper were the names of various squires in the northern dormitory, with numbers listed next to them. At the

very top of the paper was what seemed to be a title.

“The... M-Man... liness Ranking...?”

“Yeah, the Manliness Ranking.”

She tilted her head to one side as she read the paper’s title, and the other squires promptly offered an explanation.

“It’s a ranking to decide which of the squires in the northern dormitory is the most manly.”

“So, the guy with the top rank is the manliest squire in the whole dorm.”

“So this affair doesn’t concern you at all, Heath.”

Upon hearing those words, however, Fie was instead motivated to prove them wrong. She had confidence in her ability to be adequately manly.

Pounding her chest, Fie made an announcement to the group.

“There is no knight in this vast kingdom who is more manly than I am! Even Captain Yore and Sir Parwick are second to me!”

“Eh...?”

“Nah...”

“No such thing...”

Although she had announced her statement in such a loud voice, the crowd hardly seemed convinced. Fie, too, was aware that her boast bordered on the ridiculous.

Fie was annoyed at being left out, but she felt that she had a good reason to say what she did. As of late, the maidservants had slowly begun to approach her. As such, Fie believed, without a single doubt, that she was manly in some way.

“Regardless, I will participate, and prove to you all how manly I am!”

“Are you sure? The lowest ranked squire gets a penalty...”

“Also, I’m the lowest ranked right now...” Remie said. He slumped his shoulders, his eyes glistening.

Perhaps it was only natural that Remie's soft personality and cute looks afflicted him with an unfortunately low rank. Even Fie felt that she would easily win over Remie in terms of ranking.

"Yeah, I probably won't lose to Remie anyway, so I can participate without any worries!"

"So heartless...!" Visibly shaken by Fie's words, Remie was left behind by the crowd, who now congregated around Fie instead.

Recognizing Fie's desire to participate, the squires responsible for explaining the event to Fie suddenly adopted supposedly manly poses, folding their arms and speaking in deliberately low voices to Fie.

"All right, we get it. Heath is going to participate in the 4th manliness ranking match of the northern dorm. Everyone fine with that?"

"Yeah!"

"No problem!"

"I'm down for that!"

And so, with adequately manly responses from each of the squires, Fie's entry into the northern dormitory's manliness contest was acknowledged.

"Well then, I will explain the rules," one of the squires said.

The contest apparently had rules. Taking a seat on one of the lounge's chairs, Fie listened to the squire's explanation.

"The time for the contest is approximately one and a half months. First, all participants have five hundred points. Within this period, those who do manly things will be awarded with more points. The one with the most points is the manliest man."

"I get it."

It was a simple explanation for a simple set of rules. In other words, although it was a contest amongst individuals, the squires of the northern dormitory as a whole offer their opinions for the supposed manliness of each squire's actions.

The squire who had explained the rules to Fie now handed her a new piece of paper. It appeared to be a different paper, with something other than rankings written on it.

On it was a column for names, and next to it, a section for one to write a reason for nominating said name. The two sections were separated by a clean line.

“When you want to award points to someone, use this paper. Although you don’t necessarily have to write a reason for awarding points, in most cases, it is best to do so.”

“Why?”

“Because the act of giving points is in and of itself a manly thing. So, if you have a manly reason for doing it, you may even receive points from everyone.”

Fie suddenly understood the principle behind this contest, coming to terms with it relatively quickly. Granting points to another was also a strategic maneuver.

Fie, however, had a question of the squire. “Can you give yourself points?” If she could do that, then she could easily avoid the penalty in question.

“There are no rules against it. However, that is seen as an un-manly thing. If you do this, no one else will give you points, which also means that you will never make it to the top.”

“Giving yourself points just because you’re afraid of the penalty is the very antithesis of manliness.”

“Giving someone else points even if there is a penalty — now THAT is a manly thing to do.”

“I see...” said the squire standing next to the one who had been explaining the rules, a proud look on his face.

To begin with, Fie thought that the rules were full of holes. However, the youths involved did not seem to see any issue with this.

“You can also give away the points that you had received from others to someone else.”

“Give away? Why would anyone do that?” Fie thought that it was pointless to just give away her points — after all, such an act was of no merit to her whatsoever.

“You don’t get it, huh. You see, giving points to someone else is also a very manly thing to do. Even if you lose points in this contest, you can anticipate receiving points for doing that in the next one.”

“In fact, giving away all your points and dropping all the way to the bottom, and then trying again the next round... That’s a manly thing!”

“I... see...”

(Isn’t that just being an idiot?)

Fie figured that this was something that only made sense to the boys.

“As expected, no one gave me points for anything, so I’m the lowest ranked right now...” Such was the situation Remie had found himself in.

Although the squires had mentioned the possibility of giving away all their points, no one had actually done it.

“Well no, you staying at the bottom for all three sessions is quite a manly thing to do. I’ll give you ten points.”

“Yeah... the fact that you can keep going in the face of a hopeless situation is admirable. I’ll also give Remie ten points.”

In a bid to comfort the sad Remie, several squires wrote his name in their point-awarding papers.

“Th-Thank you...”

Thanking his fellow squires, Remie’s eyes brimmed with tears, overwhelmed by the compassion he had been shown.

It would seem that Remie had at least managed to escape being ranked the lowest for the fourth consecutive time.

“On another note, the top scoring squire for the last three contests was Zerius.”

“Having been at the top for the past three contests, it seems like he’s going

for a big score for this fourth contest.”

Although that name was often brought up amongst the maidservants in their discussions, Zerius himself was currently not in the lounge.

“In any case, that guy’s manliness isn’t something to be underestimated.”

Looking around, Fie found the other squires nodding and folding their arms, some gritting their teeth.

“Yeah, I have no choice but to admit that guy’s manliness.” Even Gormus stood with his arms folded, nodding with a strange look of admiration on his face.

“That guy... He’s manly even when he’s just drinking milk. It’s insane...”

“If you’re gonna go there, I would even say that his way of tying his laces is manly, too.”

“Against that guy and that guy alone, I feel like I can’t possibly win.”

“Since Zerius is always at the top spot, some guys have even been saying that it makes more sense to make the second position the top spot.”

“He’s the embodiment of manliness.”

The squires were filled with nothing but praise for Zerius.

As expected, his name was the topmost entry in the ranking sheet Fie had been handed.

Zerius, who was famous to a point that even Fie knew of him, was apparently the absolute king of the manliness rankings.

This seemed to be a given — after all, this squire by the name of Zerius was supposedly so manly, if the other squires were to be believed.

He would undoubtedly be an insurmountable wall to Fie, who was also aiming for the top.

Upon closer inspection, Fie found that Gormus was ranked 5th. Gees didn’t do too badly himself, coming in behind Gormus at 6th. Slad was ranked somewhat highly as well, at 12th.

Amidst the names listed, a familiar one jumped out at Fie.

“Queen...”

Upon saying his name, a certain squire standing behind Fie began to shiver.

“Why did you go off and do this yourself without telling me anything?”

Queen’s name was listed on the previous contest’s rankings, too. It seemed that he was ranked 22nd.

Reasons provided by his peers for awarding Queen points included: “Being an idiot is also a manly thing;” “He reminds me of my dad, sticking around Heath every day;” and relatively plain comments, such as, “He’s strong.”

Although he had transferred in after Fie, he had participated in the rankings, even keeping it a secret from her.

The dark-skinned youth uncomfortably fidgeted as the smaller boy (girl) stared at him, panicking as he responded.

“No, uh, well... I thought you wouldn’t be interested in this sort of thing... I mean...”

Sensing danger in his words should he be allowed to continue, Fie promptly silenced Queen with a hard stare.

To Queen, Fie was a woman. As such, it would be logical to think that she would not be interested in participating in something like a “manliness contest.”

However, Fie did not understand Queen’s intentions.

“Are you saying that such a fun event has no place in it for me...?”

Queen’s excuse seemed to have struck a nerve with Fie. Her stare intensified, her eyes boring into Queen.

“I’ll punish you later.”

An open announcement from Fie.

“Okay...”

And then, Queen’s shoulders slumped as well.

That evening, Fie ran into a group of squires who were leaving the castle, apparently bound for the downtown shopping districts. Fie joined them upon their invitation.

“Yeah, sure.” Fie smiled and called out to Queen. “Queen, let’s go.”

“Yes.”

As Fie beckoned to Queen with her hand, the other squire was soon walking closely behind.

To those who lived in the northern dormitory, this was a sight they were already used to. No one found it strange or had anything in particular to say about it. In fact, if they had to invite either Queen or Heath, most squires preferred to invite Heath.

Upon reaching the general assembly grounds before the castle’s northern gates, Fie’s group came across some squires they did not know.

Gormus, Slad, and Remie were present as well. Gees, however, had recently injured his leg. As such, he would not be able to walk for some time.

“Seems like everyone’s here.”

It was a relatively large group of eleven squires.

“Well, let’s go.” Slad motioned to leave through the gates when a knight platoon showed up, making their way back into the castle.

Amongst them were Crow and Orbel.

“Hey! You all heading out to town?”

“Yes!”

“We’re going downtown!”

The squires answered Crow’s cheerfully casual greeting with one of their own.

Crow was, after all, a well-known figure within the Royal Knights. As Crow had originally climbed to knighthood after a period of time as a squire, he had been originally assigned to the 1st before making the transfer to the 18th Knights. Even now, Crow actively helped out with the tasks of other platoons.

Due to Crow being relatively famous, his junior squires often had chances to

talk to him as well. Not to mention the fact that Fie lived in the northern dormitory. As such, the other squires often had opportunities to speak with Crow whenever he came looking for Fie.

“Don’t come back too late, you hear? Also, take care of Heath! Be careful that he doesn’t wander off or something!”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m some kid!” Fie seemed irritated at being treated like a child by Crow before her peers, and narrowed her eyes at him.

Queen, who had been standing next to Fie all this time, was also adequately excited by Crow’s appearance. Although the knight he admired most was Yore, he had a healthy amount of respect for Crow as well.

Fie, however, thought Queen was simply being fickle.

However, many squires looked up to Crow — so it was not too strange for them to be happy to see him. Although he had a womanizing side to him, he cleaned up well, and often looked out for his juniors. With that in mind, it was perhaps difficult to not admire Crow in at least some capacity.

In addition, the squires paid attention to Crow’s talk about his womanizing ways even if it turned their faces red. Fie assumed that men probably viewed relentless flirting as a positive thing.

After exchanging some words with the other knights present, Fie and her friends finally set off towards the downtown shopping districts.

“Well, see you then.” Smiling, Crow waved as he saw his juniors set off.

Orbel, too, had written a neat “have fun” on his portable board, raising it to the squires as they left.

“Wow... Sir Crow is definitely cool,” Slad said, with seemingly bottomless excitement at meeting Crow.

Queen, who was also flushed with excitement at having met one of his respected seniors, nodded vigorously.

Although he got along well with everyone, Queen generally did not talk very much. He only spoke when necessary, such as when he had first transferred in. Queen did, however, speak when spoken to, offering responses when he

deemed it to be necessary.

It seemed like he was the type of person to think about what he had to say before he actually said it.

However, even though Queen did not speak very much, he often wore his heart on his sleeve — mainly through his expressions. As everyone more or less understood what he was thinking about from his facial expressions alone, it wasn't exactly hard to communicate with Queen. So the squires couldn't figure out if Queen's silence was a good or bad thing.

"I also want to be strong and popular like Sir Crow!"

"Nah... It's impossible for you."

The group of squires were fully engaged in their talk of the exploits of Sir Crow.

"I would prefer to be strong like Sir Orbel." Gormus expressed his respect for Orbel amongst the squires.

"Ho, so Gormus admires Sir Orbel..."

Although many squires and knights admired Crow, the conversation had somehow leapt to Sir Orbel, of whom even Fie was fond of.

"Yeah, he's really something. If we are talking power, he's probably the strongest in the Royal Knights, without question. Sir Orbel is also fast, and has superior technique. He is able to use a variety of equipment, and it is fitting that I would admire him the most."

It was indeed true that Gormus' body shape was similar to Orbel's. However, the biggest difference between Gormus and Orbel was their faces — although Gormus looked like a ruffian, Orbel had a particularly gentle face.

The squires seemed to admire a variety of knights. Fie, however, admired Captain Yore the most — even though she knew that she could not possibly aspire to be anything like him. As such, Fie's goals were relatively more realistic than most of the other squires'.

"For me, it would be Sir Cain."

"Sir Cain?"

“Who is that?”

Faced with a flurry of questions, Fie started answering them to the best of her ability.

“Well, you know, he’s the one who’s always hiding in the treetops. He’s always hiding his mouth for some reason, and he’s really nice. You know?”

“Hiding in the treetops?”

“He hides his face?”

“Is he really a knight?”

It would seem that Fie’s fellow squires did not know of Sir Cain at all, even though Yore, Crow, Orbel, and Parwick were all reasonably famous.

“Ugh... Well, he’s really cool you know...” Sulking at her fellow squire’s reactions, Fie puffed out her cheeks, vowing to one day tell her friends all about Sir Cain.

The squires continued their discussions as they headed off in the direction of the downtown districts, the streets now bathed in the hues of sunset.

As it was not rare for squires to be seen in or near the downtown district, shopkeepers who recognized members of Fie’s group waved cheerfully.

Of the squires present, about 30% were of noble birth, while the remainder largely hailed from peasant backgrounds. It was also worth mentioning that there was the odd squire from Teornoah — in this case, it was Fie.

On the subject of Fie’s friends, Queen and Remie were both of noble birth. Gormus, Slad, and Gees on the other hand, hailed from peasant ancestry.

Perhaps it was because of their sheer numbers, but squires in large groups were a common sight in the downtown district. As squires were given an equal amount of pay, even those of noble birth were used to mingling with their peers.

Upon becoming functioning adults like Crow, their salaries increased and their range of activity summarily grew, allowing them to visit a wider variety of shops — some adult in nature.

However, the group that had set out from the castle today was straying from their usual path. Fie, noticing this, questioned the group's motives. She had assumed that they were simply buying something from the downtown districts, but it would appear that she was mistaken.

"Hey, where are we going?"

Hearing her question, one of the squires offered Fie an answer.

"Oh, we didn't mention? We're all going to the sauna today."

"It's lonely just bathing every day, isn't it?"

"There's a new sauna in town and it's cheaper than the others, so we all want to go and check it out."

A sauna...

Fie understood that saunas were places filled with steam, where people had to remove their clothing to enter so as to be able to freely sweat, removing impurities from their bodies.

Of course, this also meant that Fie would have to enter said sauna with her peers.

Upon hearing that the group's aim was a sauna, Fie was faced with a conundrum.

Naturally, this was a problem for her. If she went to the sauna with the other squires, they would instantly find out that she was a woman.

Fie became aware of her failings in assuming that she was simply being invited on a shopping trip. She had to do something about the situation immediately.

(I'll use Queen as a reason and casually walk away...)

With that thought in mind, Fie turned to face Queen, only to find him pale-faced, his mouth once again gaping in a series of creative shapes. He was pivoting his head from left to right in a total state of panic — if anything, he looked extremely suspicious.

Fie found it strange that Queen was more nervous than she was about their predicament. He was losing his cool in the face of such a situation, and started mumbling audibly, unsure of what to do.

Jabbing Queen in the waist before anyone else could notice, Fie commanded him to be quiet, in a voice as small as she could muster.

Fie stared at Queen, visually instructing him to not panic. Although Queen was still rapidly sweating and had his eyes open a bit larger than they usually were, he was in much better shape than his absolutely panicked state a short while ago.

Fie had succeeded in calming down Queen — for now, at the very least.

From her observations of Queen's prior state, it became very clear to Fie that she could not depend on him to escape. As he was very much an honest and straightforward person, he was not much of a help in situations like these, where the ability to lie was a prerequisite.

Now that Queen had calmed down more or less, Fie decided that she had to somehow escape on her own instead.

Realistically speaking, Fie really did not wish to enter a sauna. She herself had been in saunas several times before in her life. Although she agreed that saunas felt better and aided in relaxation, she could simply go on her own at a later date. In fact, she probably would not mind going with Queen.

"Oh, yeah... actually, there was a book I wanted. Can we stop by the bookstore?" one of the squires said, looking in the general direction of said bookstore.

"Oh, sure. We still have time anyway."

It was currently 5:00 PM.

Although squires did not exactly have a curfew, they had been instructed to not return at too late of a time to their dormitories. If possible, they were to return before 9:00 PM, as that would be when the dormitory canteens closed.

Unlike most of the downtown district's roads, the side road they had taken was not tiled. The squires soon entered an alleyway flanked by rickety-looking

wooden houses.

Although it was visually similar to the dangerous district that Fie had seen during her assignment with Conrad, the atmosphere here was markedly different. Lively sounds of conversation and children playing could be heard from within the dwellings, in addition to the voices of shopkeepers advertising their wares occasionally mixed in. It was a bright place, full of life.

This was where Slad and Gees had been born.

Although those born here were used to it, a cursory look of the locale revealed a complex tapestry of unmarked streets and paths. Steadily, the group advanced through the area.

Although they were mostly used to the larger parts of the downtown district thanks to their regular excursions, Fie and Queen, not used to the back roads, stuck close to Remie instead.

The path twisted and turned, ending in a small footpath leading to an old, wooden bookstore.

The products on sale were old, dog-eared books, and simple-looking books made of basic adhesives and paper. To be precise, they were closer to booklets than actual bound books. These simple booklets were something between newspapers and actual bound books, and the children of the downtown district lovingly referred to them as “magazines.”

Although these magazines were not updated as quickly as the news was, they were popular amongst the young for the kind of information they provided.

The old books were located all the way at the back of the shop, with the front dedicated to displaying magazines.

The shopkeeper was an old man with stark white hair.

“Oh, here it is, this is it! This one right here.”

The squire who had suggested that they go by the bookstore in the first place quickly made his rounds amongst the magazines, happily picking one out.

“You and your silly magazines again. You should really pick up an actual book sometime.”

“What? You displayed it in front of your store, right? I also brought my fellow squires to this shop in the middle of nowhere selling nothing but old books. You should thank me sometime, you know?”

Such was the exchange between the soft-spoken owner and the squire, the latter sticking out his tongue to express his distaste.

It seemed like the shopkeeper was familiar with the downtown-born squires.

“Oh, welcome to my humble shop. It is small and only has old books for sale, but please, take a look around.”

Upon seeing that some squires were of noble birth, the old shopkeeper suddenly changed his attitude, warmly welcoming them into his store.

The shopkeeper had apparently mistaken Fie for a noble as well, although she was a self-declared Teornoah immigrant.

However, none of the squires sought to correct him, and neither did Fie. After all, while she wasn’t exactly nobility, she was something close to it.

“Hmph, we are the regular customers here, and yet we’re treated totally differently.”

“It is true that I only sell old books. Those who only read trashy magazines are not my customers!”

“Oh shut it! If it wasn’t for these magazines you wouldn’t be able to keep your shutters open!”

Although they seemed to be somewhat mean to each other, the squires understood that this was proof of the shopkeeper being familiar with his regulars. Before long, everyone had split up, browsing the books on display.

Although the squires did not realize it, this was the kind of place that exposed their individual preferences.

Slad and the other downtown-born squires were primarily reading the magazines. The other peasant-born squires also behaved in the same way.

Remie and Queen, however, headed to a shelf lined with old books. It would seem like the two had received a good education.

Remie seemed to have a variety of hobbies, and spent his time reading everything from fiction to cookbooks. Queen, however, mainly stuck to fiction of knightly characters.

Gormus, interestingly, read both magazines and books. Of the books that caught his interest, many of them involved war history, or the basics of training one's body.

Although Fie did not have any special interests of her own, she decided to seek out books that Captain Yore and the rest of the 18th Knights had recommended.

After about thirty minutes of browsing and speaking with the shopkeeper, the only ones who bought books in the end were the squire who first spoke with the shopkeeper, Slad, and Remie.

Although they felt somewhat embarrassed, the old shopkeeper did not seem to mind, and saw them off with a smile. Squires were apparently welcome at his establishment.

"What did you buy?"

Remie showed Fie a book on embroidery in response to her question. It was a natural purchase for Remie, who, although embarrassed while buying it, did enjoy making soft toys in his free time.

(I guess he'll be last in the manliness ranking this time around, too.)

The magazine that Slad had purchased was apparently filled with action stories. It struck Fie that there were many of such magazines in Slad's room. Although the magazines were of simple construction and would often end up crumpled and creased, Slad was careful in his reading, preserving many old magazines for future reading on his shelves.

"Is that interesting?"

"Yeah, it's really good. Do you want me to lend you the very first one?"

"Yes, that'd be great."

As for the magazine purchased by the squire who had first spoken to the shopkeeper...

“What even is this...?”

“A magazine detailing the occult beliefs of various kingdoms and countries!”

Strange-looking fonts seemed to jump out of the pages of the magazine that the squire held.

“Doubts arise in the death of the Prince of Tomash! This is not an accident, but an assassination!”

“The horror around the corner! What is the identify of the Barusumashuto Man!”

“The ghost of an unloved concubine of the King, shut away in a back pavilion, walks and haunts the streets of the capital every night!”

A cursory look was enough to discern that the stories listed within were of questionable credibility and origin. However, the squire continued reading through said magazine with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Oh, this is amazing! Confirmed sightings of a large creature living in Borden Lake!”

“Ohhh, that thing in the rumors?!”

“Wait there’s more — they’re gonna c-c-catch it! They have a plan to catch it!”

“Yeah, they seem to be searching for people to fill positions in the retrieval crew. One of their members is the legendary beast tamer, Zarvicess!”

“Ooooohhh! I want to be a part of it too!”

Peeking at the magazine in his hands, Fie could not help but feel that the squires were caught up in nothing but rumors and lies. She met their enthusiasm with an exasperated stare, and finally began to understand how the soft-spoken shopkeeper felt about these “magazines.”

Fie eventually found herself approaching the sauna without any good plan.

The problem before her was very much present and intact. At this rate, she would end up entering the sauna with everyone else.

Even Queen seemed to be at the end of his wits.

“What’s wrong, Queen? You’ve been fidgeting for a while now. Do you like saunas that much? Hah!”

“Uh... Yeah...” Queen could only answer Slad’s cheerful banter with a pale-faced nod.

Although the squires in their group were all somewhat dull, if Queen was seen by someone with sharp senses, like Sir Conrad, he would have been found out immediately.

As the group continued to advance, the squires finally made out a chimney in the distance, smoke rising steadily from its spout — they had finally made it to the sauna.

It was a large, wood-based building, and seemed to be able to house a large amount of people.

The sauna had two entrances — one for men, the other for women. A large signboard hung above each entrance. Apparently the sauna was split in half, each half for its intended audience. However, this did not benefit Fie in the slightest.

The group had finally reached the front of the sauna.

“Huh. We’re finally here.”

“I’m looking forward to it!”

The squires all had relaxed expressions, already getting into the appropriate mood for the occasion.

Meanwhile, Fie desperately searched for some way to avoid entering the sauna.

Although she had considered pretending to be sick, she realized that it would be far too troublesome to see the entire act through. It would also be difficult to suddenly pretend to have some sort of urgent matter to attend to.

At that moment, a young boy and his mother passed them by, walking into the women’s only section of the sauna.

Upon seeing that, a squire within the group was apparently struck with some sort of idea and suddenly turned to Fie.

“Hey, wouldn’t Heath be able to enter the women’s sauna? I’ve heard that boys up to 11 can get in.”

Indeed, it was true that Fie’s height was roughly similar to an 11-year-old boy’s.

In other words, if Fie had acted as a boy of a younger age, she would be able to make it into the women’s only part of the sauna. That was the idea that struck the squire in question — although he was mainly saying it as a dare, on account of Fie’s feminine features.

“Hey hey, peeking is bad.”

“No no no. He would be heading in right from the front. It isn’t peeking at all. Actually, isn’t it manly for a guy to just walk into the women’s only sauna just like that?” said the squire who suggested the idea to begin with, a hint of humor in his voice.

However, Fie answered that squire’s suggestion with a serious expression, eventually meeting his eyes with her own.

“Hmm. I guess so. I’ll go do it.”

“Eh...?” Time seemed to stop.

Gormus, Slad, and all the other squires could only stare at Fie, the confusion evident on their faces.

Leaving the stunned boys behind, Fie took off her jacket with a serious expression, handing it to one of the squires.

“I definitely can’t try to go in wearing a squire’s jacket. Hold onto it for me. Well then, I’ll be off.” With that, Fie steadily walked towards the female-only side of the sauna.

“H-Hey!”

Turning around, Fie silenced the panicking Gormus, raising a single finger to her lips. Her expression did not carry the slightest hint of humor.

Don’t make a sound. The squires clearly heard Fie’s unspoken words.

The squires thought about charging after Heath into the women’s only sauna. However, they would be easily caught. All of them knew how much of a risk that would be.

The women’s sauna.

It was the mythical door to a forbidden Eden — the door that every youth had admired, but yet could never be allowed to set foot in. A dangerous paradise.

However, as of a few moments ago, one of their own, by the name of Heath, had calmly begun walking towards those doors.

Looking at their surroundings, the squires realized that it would be a bad idea to cause any kind of fuss — a really bad idea.

However, if they did not stop him, would something even worse happen...? The resulting chaos had caused the squires to stop frozen in place. Heath, however, continued walking.

To the women’s only sauna door.

Naturally making her way towards the door without a single hint of discomfort, Heath promptly opened the door and stepped in. The squires could no longer see Heath — he was gone.

Into the mythical women’s only sauna...

With the exception of one person, the other squires were all sweating and staring, gaping at what had just transpired before their very eyes.

Their heartbeats collectively sped up. They were mentally preparing themselves for the impact of what had just happened, and the huge fuss that was undoubtedly soon about to occur.

However, the night remained silent.

To the squires, if one of them had entered the women’s only sauna, it would be a huge event — one enough to shake the very foundations of their world.

However, Heath had disappeared beyond those doors... And nothing

happened. Nothing happened.

Time continued to pass — and around them, the evening continued to flow, unaware of everything that was happening at this point in time.

“He... He went in...?!”

“That guy... is he serious...?”

“He just... walked in...”

It was like they were witnessing a collective hallucination.

However, what they had seen was undoubtedly the reality, and truth. Heath had walked into the women’s only sauna.

Calmly, from the front entrance. Without the slightest hint of panic or discomfort.

The fact that nothing had happened meant that Heath had successfully infiltrated the sauna.

The squires quickly turned their eyes away from the doors after being greeted with several suspicious stares by passers-by. They had almost gone from honorable squires to perverts.

In the end, none of the squires headed to the men’s saunas, instead staying where they were, looking at each other intensely.

They stared around, searching for a squire of a particularly small build.

And then they realized — that amongst them, the squire of a particularly small build, who was just around a short while ago... was gone.

Therefore, what they had just seen was undoubtedly, unquestionably, very much real...

Leaving the other squires behind, Fie made her way to the women’s only sauna.

Having taken off the squire’s jacket, Fie was now dressed in a simple black tee-shirt and long white pants.

By impression alone, Fie was either a boy with a girlish face, or a girl with a

boyish style.

To passers-by, since Fie was heading towards the women's only sauna, they naturally assumed that Fie was a woman. No one questioned her actions.

In reality, Fie was, in fact, a girl dressed in boyish attire. It would only be natural that she would enter the part of the sauna appropriate for her gender.

Fie opened the doors to the women's only sauna and entered calmly.

Upon entering, she was greeted with the reception desk, after which was the changing room.

Fie adjusted her hair the moment she entered, taking care to fluff out the side layers that framed her face. Although Fie had cut most of her hair off, the framing that her side bangs had offered changed her facial image drastically.

Any traces of boyishness left Fie's face, and she looked a lot more girlish.

The hair that framed Fie's face had two styles to it. The hairstyle that Fie regularly sported made use of a shorter layer that did not reach past her face, and this served to make her look boyish. Other than that, however, she also kept thin, but long strands of hair, usually blending them into the back of her neck, hiding them from view.

As these longer strands were usually held in place by a braiding technique, Fie only had to undo that to easily change her appearance.

Fie had learned this from Conrad, and cut her hair in such a way for use in certain situations. She only had to run her fingers through her hair a few times in the right directions to once again restore her girlish appearance.

The lady at the reception, not noticing anything wrong with Fie at all, handed her a towel after receiving the entry fee.

Even in the changing room, no one made any sort of fuss.

This much was natural — no one would fuss over a girl entering a women's only sauna.

Removing her clothing, Fie washed away the sweat she had worked up during her training sessions with a light stream of water, and then proceeded to enjoy her time in the sauna.

She entered the sauna without rousing suspicion from anyone. It was hot and sweaty — a truly enjoyable experience.

Upon slowly enjoying her time in the sauna, washing away her sweat, arranging her hair and finally leaving the sauna...

Fie was greeted by the sight of her fellow squires, who had been waiting for her outside for some time.

Fie could tell by their glistening hair that they, too, had entered the sauna eventually. In fact, she might have spent a bit too long inside simply because of how enjoyable it was.

Fie felt slightly sorry for the other squires, who were looking around in an evidently suspicious manner, occasionally glancing in the direction of the women's only sauna. Their faces were somewhat red.

"Kept you waiting, huh?"

Fie hastened her footsteps, returning to the group of squires, as if nothing special at all had happened. The other squires could only stare at Fie, their mouths agape. Although Queen alone understood the circumstances of the situation, a skirting glance from Fie was more than enough to encourage his silence.

Queen, for his part, nodded obediently.

After retrieving her jacket from the squire whom she had entrusted it to, Fie was bombarded with questions.

"D-Did you really go in...?!"

"Th-The women's only sauna...!"

"Yeah, I enjoyed it. Sorry I'm late."

The usage of the word "enjoy" seemed to collectively cause the other squires to blush, some gulping.

Fie did enjoy her time spent in the relaxing, sweat-inducing steam. However, the other squires evidently had a very different impression.

For a while, the squires looked at each other in silence — said silence was

finally broken by a panicked question.

“S-So... H-How was it...? Heath...! H-How was the... w-women’s only sauna...?!”

Fie was finally aware of the intent behind the squire’s question, and for a while, stood in silence.

Finally, Fie grinned theatrically and placed a single finger on her chin, all the while looking at her fellow squires.

In that instant, the other squires understood.

That today, one of their own, by the name of Heath, had reached unseen heights never reached before by any others of their number.

In reality, Fie had just entered the women’s sauna in an unremarkably ordinary way.

She was also not interested in what the other squires had wanted to see, instead slowly enjoying her time in the sauna.

However, to youths their age, Fie was a man who had reached a world yet unknown to them.

Even Queen, who knew of her circumstances, only slightly blushed and looked away, an exasperated expression on his face. Just to be sure, Fie once again silenced her friend with a quick look.

The squires’ dreams of the forbidden women’s sauna only served to fuel a formidable sense of respect and fear in their comrade — who had now apparently evolved into a being on another plane of existence.

“Well then, let’s go home.”

Having fully enjoyed herself at the sauna, Fie casually motioned to return to the royal castle, fully aware of the stares of admiration trained on her back.

After that day, Fie received more than 2000 points from the squires who were present during the sauna event, propelling her to second place in the manliness ranking contest.

Although her position was still a far cry from Zerius’ 4000 points, her sudden

ascent had become a topic of conversation between the northern dormitory.

The squires involved, however, all left their reasons for awarding said points blank — and no matter how much they were pressed, they did not reveal their reasons.

As a result, the other squires of the northern dormitory collectively assumed that Heath had once again utilized one underhanded method or another — at least, that was how the rumor went.

Chapter 17 — The East-North Inter-Dormitory Duel

Fie stood, facing Queen with an intense expression on her face.

“Ugh, Queen!”

In her hands was a wooden sword, pointed straight at Queen.

The distance between Fie and Queen was approximately five meters — too long a distance for Fie, or any of her attacks, to reach.

In the outskirts of the squires’ training grounds, a one-on-one tournament was being held. Various squires held wooden swords in their hands and were engaging in intense sparring matches.

At least, that was the case around them — for Fie and Queen, the reality could not be more different. For starters, they were not clashing at all, although Fie and Queen were currently engaged in a sparring match... with each other.

“Queen!” Fie’s angry voice was met with a troubled expression from Queen.

In fact, Fie had been angrily shouting Queen’s name for a while now.

The reason for Fie’s shouting wasn’t exactly because Queen had launched a ferocious attack against her — if anything, it was the opposite. Queen had not made to attack Fie at all.

With a vexed expression, Fie took a step forward, only for Queen to retreat three steps in response — the distance between them was wider than a jump could cover.

Fie’s brow furrowed even more than it had before.

“That’s enough, Queen! I told you to treat sparring seriously!”

Although Queen usually obeyed every single thing Fie said, sparring was an exception.

Queen’s unwillingness to participate seriously in the sparring match could not possibly be good for either party.

However...

Queen promptly jumped to the left as Fie took yet another step forward.

Queen's jump was impressive — to the point where Fie could not close the distance between them at all.

"Uggghhh!"

Stomping and cursing, Fie leveled her gaze against Queen's, oblivious to his troubled expression as the two continued staring at each other.

The wooden sword held in his hand hung limply at his side — it was plain for anyone watching to see that Queen could not raise a finger against Fie.

As Queen had demonstrated in his match against Gormus, the distance between them was more than enough for him to close in a flash.

However, Queen stayed, unmoving, where he stood. In fact, Queen had not managed to raise a single attack against Fie in any part of their sparring — not once.

In reality, there was a large gap between Queen and Fie's skill with the blade.

Fie, for her part, was more than aware of this. If Queen seriously attacked her, she would surely be defeated in a second, barely able to offer any form of resistance.

On another note, it could be said that Fie and Queen's combat styles were actually similar. Both squires used agile movements to avoid their opponent's attacks, before closing in to land their own.

However, their aptitudes for combat could not be more different. Although Fie's body was naturally flexible, her strength was that of a normal girl's. Under normal circumstances, she would find it difficult to compete with a boy her age.

One of the basic factors contributing to Fie being able to effectively engage in combat was her weight — being light allowed her to conserve stamina. Even if she continued to move, the burden upon her body would not be severe. She would then utilize her agile and unpredictable movements to provoke the opponent, all the while dodging their attacks. That was how Fie fought.

On the other hand, while Queen was of a slim build, his height was that of an

average boy his age. Compared with the other squires, Queen was by no means short. In addition, although his build was somewhat slimmer, he was actually heavier than most of his fellow squires.

This was because Queen had unbelievably dense muscles. In fact, the explosive power in Queen's muscles easily allowed him to employ the same movements as Fie, but faster.

The difference in their abilities was plain for all to see.

Put simply, Queen could move faster than Fie, who had been blessed with a naturally agile and light build. This, topped with his dense muscle mass, meant that Fie could hardly compete with him strength-or speed-wise.

With these factors combined, Queen had been able to defeat Gormus with a single strike.

It would be fair to say that Queen's combination of strength and explosive power made him a bit of a monster. So the other squires could only look on in puzzlement as Queen continued to evade Fie's attacks — despite the former's higher combat potential.

There was no way Fie could possibly win.

However, all five matches between the two had summarily resulted in five draws. The reason for that was simple — Queen had simply refused to attack Fie in any way or form.

The other squires only lasted five seconds against Queen. Even Gormus, who was known for his strength and skill, had only lasted 30 seconds. Yet Queen, who was somewhat legendary in the northern dormitory for being undefeated in combat, could not even raise his sword against Fie.

Fie had mistaken Queen's reluctance for fear — she assumed that Queen simply did not wish to incur her wrath. However, even after giving Queen a direct order to attack her, the result was the same.

Fie tried talking Queen into seriously attacking her before sparring matches — but the result was the same.

Eventually, Fie ended up snapping and yelling during her match with Queen —

and yet the result was the same.

In fact, Queen only showed a reluctant expression when matched with Fie in sparring matches, and it was with this expression on his face that he continued his evasive maneuvers.

Queen, who was faster than Fie in his bursts of speed, effortlessly outpaced her. Nothing Fie did made a difference.

In the end, sparring matches between Fie and Queen ended in a similar fashion — Queen would refuse to attack Fie, causing the latter to snap and yell, even command him to do so. Queen, continuing to refuse, would evade Fie's attacks until the match ended.

"Queeeennnn! QUEEEEEEEEEENNNNNN! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!"

On this day, too, Fie spent her strength chasing and yelling at Queen, tired and flushed from her exertions. Queen, on the other hand, did not seem tired at all. With an apologetic expression, he continued watching Fie, taking care to maintain a distance beyond the reach of her blade.

At that moment, an unfamiliar laugh rang out across the training grounds.

"Haha. This is the squire's training grounds? Is that really true? It seems more like a lame dance hall. Are you guys really training in the blade?"

"I've heard that the northern dormitory is weak and their skills low, but this is truly something else. Pfft."

As the squires collectively turned to face the source of the voices, they were greeted by the sight of five unfamiliar squires.

More accurately, one of the squires amongst the five actually seemed familiar.

(A mushroom...?)

Of the two squires who spoke, one sported a top-heavy hairstyle very much reminiscent of a brown mushroom. The other squire had blonde hair that flowed down his shoulders, and an adequately stuck-up expression on his face. The two seemed to look down on Fie and the other squires, sneering as they did so.



Fie, too, had turned to the source of the voices and was currently looking at the unfamiliar squires.

As recognition dawned on the squires, an audible murmur rose from amongst their ranks. Fie heard the ones around her whisper amongst themselves about the squire with the brown mushroom hair.

“That is the genius of the Quin-Ji dojo, Rigel!”

“He got into the top four of last year’s Youth Sword Tournament!”

The blonde-haired youth, too, provoked another wave of reactions.

“Isn’t the one next to him the runner-up for last year, Luka?!”

“You don’t mean... that one from the famous knight family, the son of Duke Coille...?!”

The other members were in turn introduced in a similar fashion.

“That one... he was the top in my dojo, Kerio!”

“Jerid... Guren... They’re all from the top eight of last year’s Sword Tournament...”

“Why are they even here...?”

It would appear that the unfamiliar squires before them were winners in the very same squire test that Fie had taken. In other words, of the twelve winners in the squire test, five now stood before them.

Upon seeing the shaken reactions of her fellow squires, Fie moved to Gormus’ side and posed a question to her large friend.

“Hey, what is this... Youth Sword Tournament?”

“It is the biggest youth tournament in Orstoll, attended by representatives of dojos from Orstoll and other kingdoms, as well as sons of noble families who pursued the way of the sword. You could say that it’s a tournament that determines national champions.”

“Wow!”

It would seem that the tournament was of considerable import. Having

understood this, Fie asked another question.

“How did you do in that tournament, Gormus?”

“My dojo prohibits competing against other schools. I wanted to go, but I couldn’t.”

“I see...”

Gormus had wanted to go, but was prevented by the rules of his dojo. It had not occurred to Fie that dojos would have varying cultures and rules.

“Was Queen in these tournaments?”

Upon hearing those words, Queen shook his head.

“I lived with my master and his other disciples in the mountains.”

It would seem that, despite being a noble, Queen had lived in somewhat rural environments. Queen’s master was himself a noble, and had lived in a mansion before taking on disciples. As such, his disciples learning noble etiquette from their master was perhaps not too strange of a thing.

The long-haired youth known as Luka sneered, staring down the squires of the northern dormitory.

“So it would seem like what Sir Carnegis said was true. The northern dormitory — where all the rejects gather.”

Following up on his comrade’s insult, mushroom-headed Rigel smiled leeringly.

“You shouldn’t just say the truth like that. They should have some shred of pride, after all.”

“Hmm. I guess that is true.” The long-haired youth swung his head back, running a free hand through his hair.

Upon witnessing that motion, Fie recalled having heard his name at least once — his name was frequently brought up in the maidservant circles for being somewhat similar to Crow.

However, Fie could only think one thing.

(No way! They’re not alike at all!)

Although her fellow squires seemed equally insulted by their words, none of them stepped forward — perhaps out of fear of incurring a noble family's wrath.

Gormus, however, folded his arms and advanced toward the front of the crowd.

"Having a good time, aren't you? Talking like you own the place."

A younger Gormus would have reacted with anger. Gormus as he was now, however, closed a single eye, staring at the offending squires with an expression of utmost calm on his face.

"So, you're Gormus of Zal-Shiq Dojo. I've heard the rumors. They say you're strong, but in the end you're just a bumpkin who hasn't even been to external tournaments. The fact that you were not chosen by our dormitory is proof," said mushroom-headed Rigel, his provocative tone matched by his equally unpleasant smile.

"Want a match, then?" Gormus' response was calm, hardly responding to Rigel's taunts.

"Yeah, someday," Rigel responded, suppressing his laughter as he did so.

Not wanting to be outdone, the long-haired Luka struck a haughty pose, pointing a single finger towards Queen.

"Also, Queen, I saw that! What was that pathetic show you put up during that battle just now? Didn't you leave us to fight someone in the northern dormitory? Look at you now, how far you have fallen! You have become a fangless, clawless wolf! No, a mere dog!"

Upon hearing those words, Fie felt anger welling up from deep inside her.

"Calling Queen a dog... your rudeness knows no bounds! Take that back at once!"

Approaching the youths, Fie violently pointed towards them, anger plain in her actions. The other squires from her dormitory, however, could only think one thing upon witnessing this scene.

(You're one to talk...)

Luka squinted his eyes at Fie's sudden interruption.

"What is it with you...?"

"I'm Queen's friend, Heath! If you ridicule Queen, I won't forgive you!" Fie found herself severely angered by the squires' comments.

Although Fie and Queen had a somewhat unusual beginning to their relationship, Fie could not think of Queen as anything other than an important friend after the time they had spent together.

To Fie, this "Luka" was nothing like Crow at all, and she found her opinion of him sinking lower than ever.

Hearing Fie's words, Luka smirked, lowering his stance.

In a flash, he was right before Fie's eyes.

(He's fast...! Although not as fast as Queen...!)

Fie could only stare blankly as the other squire closed the distance within them in mere moments — soon, his hand was on her chin. Leaning in, Luka began to speak, holding Fie's face in place as he did so.

"Acting cool and all is fine, but if you push it too much... I'm going to have to hurt that cute face of yours."

"Stop it...!"

Before Fie could register his movements, Queen was between them, motioning to shield Fie from her assailant.

"Huh. How about we fight right now? You are no match for me as you are now."

At that moment, a voice rang out from behind the two squires, who were staring daggers at each other.

"That's enough. Luka, Rigel. We did not come here to pick fights."

Parting the crowd of unfamiliar squires was a dark-haired, bespectacled youth. His appearance once again triggered a wave of audible gossiping from the stunned squires of the northern dormitory.

"Hey... isn't that the three-year consecutive winner of the Youth Sword

Tournament, Persil?!”

“Are you serious...?!”

“Then what are you here for?” Fie demanded.

Persil remained calm in the face of Fie’s stare, giving his response in a quiet, composed voice.

“I apologize for the behavior of my fellow squires. We are squires from the eastern dormitory. We come bearing a message of import.”

“Message of import...?”

The squires of the northern dormitory collectively shook their heads, confused.

Holding up a piece of paper to the members of the northern dormitory, Luka smirked.

“The official notice for the East-North Inter-Dormitory Duel!”

“East-North Inter-Dormitory Duel...?”

Persil nodded at Fie’s blank repetition of his announcement.

“Yes. In three weeks, a duel will be held between the squires of the eastern and northern dormitories. The format will be a group battle, and a total of five members are expected to participate. Do prepare yourselves.”

“Well then, try your best!”

“The captains and members of all knight platoons will be spectating. It is an important event. Let us hope that none of us bring shame to our platoons.” One of their number handed over the pamphlet, and soon the squires from the eastern dormitory were mere shadows in the distance.

It was a few days after the visit from the squires of the eastern dormitory.

The squires of the northern dormitory held their heads collectively in despair, and an equally hopeless atmosphere filled the dormitory canteen.

Upon confirming the contents of the pamphlet, the squires had realized that this duel was apparently somewhat historically significant — it was essentially a

tradition at this point. The two dormitories would choose five squires to represent them, and the two groups would show their skill with the sword under the watchful eyes of the various platoon captains.

However, as the activities of the knight platoons were restricted to a need-to-know basis, the squires of the northern dormitory did not know anything about this event — until now.

After having received the pamphlet, the atmosphere in the northern dormitory could only be described as one of oppressed fear.

“A duel with the eastern dormitory? But the difference in power...?”

“The other side has members that are basically the cream of the crop of our generation! A literal five-man dream team...”

Slumped over the canteen tables, the squires continued to complain.

“To begin with, aren’t six of the twelve tournament winners and runners-up on their side?”

“Queen was assigned there to begin with, so it was originally seven people... In comparison, we only have one person — Gormus...”

Looking at the present situation, it would almost seem like the eastern dormitory’s claims of how the northern dormitory was a gathering of rejects had some weight to it.

In the past few days, some squires had gathered information from their seniors. Although they did find what they were looking for, the answers only served to worsen their already pale expressions.

“So... they said that the northern dormitory isn’t a gathering of rejects at all. However... It seems like the knight in charge of the eastern dormitory has a severe grudge against us because of three consecutive losses against us when he was a squire... If the rumors are to be believed, he still holds a grudge to this day, and so purposely gathers strong, talented squires to his dormitory with each intake. And this year... for some reason, he managed to get the best of the best, and he’s going to use those squires to finally avenge his three consecutive losses... and make us taste his sorrow through defeat!”

“What the hell is that, even?”

“That’s some serious resentment...”

Faced with such an unreasonable explanation, the usually good-natured squires of the northern dormitory raised their voices in anger.

“What the hell did the previous dormitory head even do...?”

“Isn’t our motto ‘Work hard after being assigned!’ or something like that?”

“So, we just drew the short straw...?”

As the squires continued to talk amongst themselves, they slowly began to understand their collective situation — and the difference in power between the two dormitories.

“I mean, I get that whole train and become strong thing... But look at their members! This is impossible...”

“The only ones who can stand up to them in our dorm are Gormus and Queen...”

“Also, just so you know, the northern dormitory’s projected win percentage for the year is only about 10%...”

“Sure, it’s normal for squires to only find out about the duel after the dates have been finalized, but apparently they had insider information and knew about it as soon as they were recruited into the eastern dormitory...”

“Oh, and I heard that they did special training for this duel, too...”

As information from various squires flooded in, the very notion of hope disappeared from the minds of the northern dormitory’s youths.

“Ugh... It’s impossible... There’s no way we are winning this... I don’t want to participate...”

“I don’t want to look bad in front of the platoon captains...”

“Me neither...”

The squires now had a tinge of despair mixed with fear in their voices as they slumped over on the canteen tables.

On the other side of the canteen, Gormus folded his arms, sighing.

“Hmph. These guys are all pathetic. Getting all scared before the match has even happened.”

Remie, who was seated next to Gormus, responded with a troubled smile.

“Well... their feelings are understandable. They’ve attended the same dojos as them, attended the same tournaments, and experienced the difference in their power in person.”

Although the grumblings of the squires were indeed pathetic, they were not without basis.

The members of the eastern dormitories were either the top performers in their dojos, or were the winners or runners-up in tournaments they had participated in. If they had indeed trained in the same dojos, the difference in talent and ability would be plain for all to see — and if they had encountered these top performers in tournaments, they would surely have been defeated in mere moments.

Although they had been training as squires for over half a year now, none of the squires felt that they could catch up with the members of the eastern dormitory.

“Even so, I cannot overlook how they talked about us — as if they owned the place. I intend to win this.”

“Yeah, we’ll help too.”

Fie’s usual group of three friends expressed their support for Gormus’ views.

Although the three of them were not exactly known for their combat prowess, they were good-natured youths with a strong sense of duty.

“Yeah, thanks! It’ll be a great help if you all participate. However... the problem lies in putting together a full team.”

“Hey hey, what about me!”

“Yeah... Gees is still injured, so we’ll have an open spot.”

“I apologize for being unable to help...”

“Don’t worry, we’ll all work hard on your behalf!”

The squires, however, were drawing a blank about who should represent them in the duel.

Although they had intended to gather all the squires of the northern dormitory and field members based on their strengths and compatibility, no one wanted to participate in the duel.

The only ones who were keen on participating were Gormus and Queen. While Remie and Slad had volunteered to assist in the war effort, Gees’ injury meant that they were one member short from the start.

While Gormus and Queen were eager to participate and win, the current situation did not look very positive at all.

“Hey, hey! Gormus! What about me?”

“What about Zerius? That guy will definitely participate, right?”

“About that... Apparently the day of the duel overlaps with his grandmother’s birthday. As the celebrations are held back in his hometown, he can’t participate...”

“So he’d put family before an event that involves the favor of the platoon captains? As usual, he’s such a manly guy...”

“Gormus! What about me! What about me!”

“...”

“...”

Gormus and the others had been trying their best to ignore the persistent voice coming from the small squire standing before them, eagerly pointing his finger at himself. Next to the squire stood Queen, who was currently sweating for reasons unknown.

Prompted by the silence, Fie placed her hands on Gormus’ cheeks, pinching them to get his attention.

“You know... Do you even understand your performance in our sparring matches?”

“I haven’t lost a single match in my last ten matches! Maybe I should fight you next, Gormus!”

“What is it with you and that overly-positive outlook?! Your recent results were two wins, ten losses, and thirty-three draws! You’ve lost most of the time!”

It was worth noting that sparring in the northern dormitories was carried out in a round-robin format. Fie was the only one who had an odd streak of draws on her results list.

Her agile and unpredictable movements, along with her various tricks and tactics, made Fie a difficult opponent to fight. Nonetheless, this did not translate into wins — as the opponent could not decisively end the battle, Fie’s sessions often ended in draws.

Queen’s score, meanwhile, was forty-four wins and one draw (against Fie). Gormus was next, with forty-four wins and one loss (against Queen).

Depending on how one looked at it, Fie’s results could be considered impressive — however, her tactics and tools were not permitted in official matches. This was the reason why they did not think Fie participating was a good idea.

“Since there are no referees in our dormitory’s sparring, your tactics have been working. However, in a duel with strict rules, your repeated dodging would be seen as a lack of offensive intent, and you would be issued a warning. If you get two warnings you’re out — I think that’s a bit harsh for you, Heath...”

Remie and Gormus both carefully explained their reasoning.

Although Fie would first move to attack her opponent, she would default to evasive action if her opponent moved on the offensive. Given Fie’s build, she wasn’t likely to have much of a tactical advantage in a straight-up match.

To begin with, the rulings involved were sometimes overly technical. This simply did not work in Fie’s favor.

“It’s fine! I’ll do my best to win in the actual duel!”

“Where does that confidence of yours even come from...?” Gormus sighed as

he watched Fie pound her chest, announcing her intent to win one way or another.

However, it was also true that the squires were out of options.

“Oi! We need one more! Does anyone want to participate!” said Gormus as he held up the pamphlet and waved it around the canteen.

“Ahh! My sword... I’ve lost my sword! Where did it go?”

“Ugh, I’ve had enough... I would lose three seconds after the match starts...”

“Light... I... I see the light...”

A chorus of despair rose from the squires seated in the canteen. It would seem like mere talk of the upcoming duel was capable of inflicting severe mental trauma upon them.

Upon seeing the pathetic faces of his fellow squires, Gormus finally sighed, giving up.

“There’s no choice... Make sure you do this right, you hear!”

“Yay!” Fie, elated at having received Gormus’ approval, jumped for joy.

Having decided on the participating members, the squires decided to move on to their next topic of discussion.

Fie joined the others, who were currently all seated at her usual canteen table. Upon pulling out her chair, a metallic sound rang out across the air — although Fie was familiar with the furniture, her leg had been acting up recently.

The next thing the squires had to decide on was the order in which they would be fighting.

“It seems like those guys have kindly informed us of their member order.” Gormus waved the pamphlet before his group — indeed, written on the paper was a list of numbers and ranked names.

Luka would be the vanguard, with Jerid being his second. Kerio would be mainstay and third on the field. Fourth would be Lieutenant-General Rigel, and

finally, General Persil.

“Ahaha... Ranks...?”

“Yeah, now I definitely want to beat them to a pulp and make them say uncle.”

Remie’s shoulders slumped, a comical yet sad smile on his face. Slad, however, folded his arms angrily.

“Hmm. Even if Gormus and Queen were guaranteed to win their matches, one of the remaining three has to win theirs to decisively win the duel,” Fie said as she began thinking about the issue at hand seriously.

Taking into account the differences in their power, Fie’s group seemed to have no other options.

The remaining members were Fie (2 Wins, 10 Losses, 33 Draws), Remie (22 Wins, 18 Losses, 5 Draws), and Slad (23 Wins, 21 Losses, 1 Draw).

Even if they were to exclude Fie, who was infamous for her draw-making abilities, they were in a precarious spot.

“Queen, do you know how strong the members on the other side are?” Gormus, in yet another moment of strategic genius, decided to extract information from Queen, who once lived at the eastern dormitory.

Queen nodded thoughtfully, then gave a detailed response.

“Persil is strong. Rigel and Luka are about the same. Rigel might be a bit stronger, actually. Kerio wasn’t in the group until recently — so he may be the easiest to defeat.”

It would seem like the power rankings in the eastern dormitory were somewhat clear-cut.

“Even if he is the easiest to defeat, he is a tournament winner. Apparently he’s won some other lesser-attended tournaments as well,” said Remie with confidence.

Even if Kerio was simply filling the space that Queen had left behind, there was no mistake about him having a fair measure of skill.

“But there’s no choice. We have to do this. In any case, Queen and I will deal with their strongest and second strongest members. The rest of you just have to raise your percentages of winning. More importantly, we should decide on our member order, and think of individual strategies to increase the chance of victory.”

“I agree.”

“I guess we’re employing a clear-cut strategy as well, then.”

Gormus’ suggestion was nothing short of the logical truth. The difference in skill and power between the upper and lower echelons of Fie’s group was plain for all to see. If this distance was not at least somewhat addressed, they would have no chance of winning, no matter the matchup.

All the other squires nodded at Gormus’ suggestion, and the combat order was promptly decided.

General Queen, Lieutenant-General Gormus.

And...

“I’m the vanguard!”

Fie, who had been tasked with leading the charge, made a valiant effort to muster an intimidating expression. She was, however, not very successful.

The vanguard was, after all, an important position that determined the overall flow of battle. It was only natural that Fie felt fired up upon being entrusted with such a task.

“Oh... about that. If we were to slot you somewhere in the middle, the flow of battle could get messed up. So, we have no choice but to have you as the vanguard.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!” Such was Fie’s somewhat predictable reaction to Gormus’ explanation.

“If that isn’t the case, prove it to me in a duel.”

“Hmph. I will!”

There was, however, another reason why Fie was particularly amped up

about this — her opponent was to be Luka.

“Also, that guy made fun of Queen! If I don’t get a clean hit in, I’ll never let it go!”

Although all the squires present at the time felt that Fie of all people shouldn’t talk, Fie was, for her part, actually very much angered by this.

Regardless of the nature of their relationship, Queen was, for all intents and purposes, Fie’s friend. Whether Fie’s strange definition of friendship had its roots in her royal upbringing or simply her personal quirks remained unknown. One could even assume that Fie simply really liked large dogs.

“I don’t mind.”

“*I* mind,” Fie insisted.

Worry was written all over Queen’s face.

“But Luka is strong.”

“Don’t worry about it, Queen. Focus on your own match. After all, your opponent is the strongest of them all, right? I’ll work hard too,” Fie said, completely oblivious to the worry in Queen’s words.

And so, the squires finalized their member’s combat order.

First up was Fie against Luka. To Fie, Luka was someone she wanted to win against at any cost.

Next was Slad and Jerid, followed by the mainstays of Remie and Kerio. Disregarding the over-eager Fie, Gormus hedged his bets on Slad or Remie’s matches.

The battle of the lieutenant-generals featured Gormus and Rigel. The two large youths, who had been staring each other down during their initial meeting, seemed destined to clash on the battlefield.

Last but not least were the generals themselves — Queen versus Persil.

On the very next day, Fie set off in search of Yore, with the intent of discussing her upcoming match with Luka.

Spotting Yore at last, Fie approached him, greeting him as he turned around.

“Good morning, Captain!”

“Oh, Heath. You seem cheerful today.”

“Yes!”

Fie, sensing that she had stopped him in the middle of something important, asked if she should return later, only to be reassured that it was of no particular import. She got to the point quickly, explaining her circumstances to Yore.

“Hmm...” Upon hearing Fie’s words, Yore remained silent, brows furrowed in thought. “It is true that such a matchup is disadvantageous for one of your build. Even I have heard of Luka. He is apparently a youth of considerable talent.”

Realistically speaking, Fie’s abilities were barely able to force draws upon her fellow squires of the northern dormitory. As she had not been able to score decisive wins over them, it seemed unlikely that she had much of a chance against Luka.

However, Fie did not want to give up.

In fact, Fie was in this to win, and this was why she had approached Yore for a discussion.

“Is there any way for me to gain the upper hand?”

Fie wanted to know if there were perhaps some ways where she could win, despite the wide gap in their builds and skill levels.

“Duels are a world wherein skill reigns supreme. Just as how your innate talent does not lie with the sword, the difference in experience and skill does not bode well for your chances at victory.”

“Yes...”

Yore was strict with Fie — just as she had expected. Fie knew that a way to win despite the large gap in their skills would be too good to be true.

“However... at the same time, if you do take the duel, there may yet be a chance of victory.”

“A chance...?”

Yore nodded at Fie’s query.

“My advice: you have to observe your opponent and identify a single point or trait that can be constituted as a weakness. You will then come up with a plan of action to exploit or attack this weakness with all of your strength. With how you currently are, a 100% chance of victory is perhaps impossible. However, if you approach the duel with a winning mindset, even if you only have a 10% chance of victory, you will be a great help to your teammates.”

Indeed, it was true that Fie was not like Queen or Gormus — she wasn’t exactly being counted on for a definitive victory.

Of the three other squires, only one had to win.

Taking that into account, the best thing Fie could do was gather information on her opponent and raise her chances of victory, however slim the margin may be.

What was important was not a definitive victory — it was a chance, a possibility of victory.

Upon hearing those words, Fie steeled her resolve and mind.

“There may be instances where the weak can triumph over the strong, if they cling onto every opportunity like you did during your squire test. However, at the same time, to grasp said opportunities to begin with, one requires a certain degree of strength.”

Images of her first fight with Gormus crossed Fie’s mind. Although Fie had been blessed with a one in a thousand chance, her lack of stamina had prevented her from grasping it.

Fie could almost sense the humor on the face beyond Yore’s mask.

“I know, of all other people, what you have done and how hard you have worked to grasp the strength that you have today. I will be present at the event as well. I look forward to your feats.”

“Y... Yes!” Fie could only happily nod at Yore’s words.

After all, Captain Yore acknowledged her efforts. She had relentlessly trained

from that day to improve her stamina and skill — to the point where she could even keep up with some of the squires' standard regimen.

Once a month, Yore would ask after her, in addition to receiving reports on her growth from Crow.

Fie was somehow overcome with a warm feeling.

"Well then, I'm off to gather information on my opponent!"

"Very well. Be on your way, then."

Fie set off on her reconnaissance mission, running off in the direction of the eastern dormitory with a happy bound in her step.

Finally arriving at the eastern dormitory's training grounds, Fie proceeded to do what she did best.

"Hey... what the hell is that...?"

"Some guy from the northern dormitory. What's he doing up there...?"

Fie had promptly scaled a tree.

Standing on a particularly thick branch of the tree, Fie, very much visible, drew a fair amount of attention.

For the most part, the squires were not sure how Fie managed to climb the tree in the first place — she wasn't exactly very tall.

"Don't worry about it. Probably here for recon," Rigel said, as he continued sparring with Kerio.

"Recon...?! Shouldn't we stop him?" Kerio lost his cool upon hearing that Fie was here for the purposes of reconnaissance and was promptly disarmed by Rigel, his sword spinning out of his hands and into the air.

"I don't mind. After all, the weak can work however hard they like," Rigel responded, a confident smile on his face.

Although Kerio was treated as nothing more than a reserve member when Queen was still in this dormitory, it was without a doubt that he himself was somewhat capable. To a normal squire, Kerio would surely be an opponent that one could not hope to win against.

To Rigel, however, Kerio was not very much of a challenge at all — if the smile on his face was anything to go by. The difference in their potential was painfully evident.

Interestingly, knights from other platoons did not find Fie's presence particularly intrusive. So she was able to continue her observation without much objection from anyone present.

The training they were currently participating in was similar to what the northern dormitory did — one-on-one sparring.

However, instead of self-regulating their matches and altering match rules as they saw fit, a few squires acting as referees were present for each bout, complete with instruments for measuring elapsed match time.

It would seem that the squires of the eastern dormitory took their training very seriously.

Fie continued observing Luka.

(He's strong...)

She had to admit it.

Luka was rapidly going through opponents, with squires that were not part of the duel team functioning as training fodder.

Casually dodging an overhead swing from one of his fellow squires, Luka struck while his opponent was preparing his next strike, decisively ending the fight with a swift horizontal strike. The battle was concluded with a swift blow to the abdomen.

A basic and traditional style of swordplay.

A good balance of speed, power, and technique left no openings to exploit.

One could even say it was the strongest way of fighting — if only because it did not suffer from compatibility issues, allowing it to be employed even against opponents who specialized in certain areas.

For example, unlike Queen's explosive bursts of speed or Gormus' powerful swings, Luka's style was decidedly normal and not flashy. In exchange, it had no visible weaknesses or openings.

Fie could not see any means to break through Luka's perfect swordplay — to begin with, the weaknesses which she had been looking for hardly surfaced.

Although Luka knew that Fie was observing him, he merely continued his training, batting aside opponents with a relaxed expression on his face.

Although Fie had thought that his confidence was just for show, it would seem like Luka actually had the skill to back it up — although Fie personally thought that Queen was much stronger.

Even so, Fie continued to observe her target.

Luka, on the other hand, was now facing off against a new opponent. Striking, Luka smiled once again as his opponent barely managed to block his downward swing. Moving his face close to his opponent, Luka whispered menacingly.

"Oh, you blocked that nicely, didn't you? But... You're too naïve."

Continuing his attack, Luka twisted his sword under his opponent's, disarming him with a strong uppercut.

A week had passed since the announcement of the inter-dormitory duel.

Fie and her friends found themselves en route to the royal library within the castle's walls. Much like the squire dormitories, the library was a separate, standalone building, and all individuals who worked within the castle walls were able to use it.

In addition, there was a separate storage vault for valuable scrolls and books in the royal palace. However, only royalty, nobility or officials with permission could enter.

Upon exiting the northern dormitories, the squires would turn westward, circling the royal castle to reach the library. One could say that it was situated in a roughly south-eastern direction within the castle walls.

The pavilion that Fie once lived in was visible during their journey, a simple structure to their right.

The group made its way through one of the castle's inner walls, past the western gates and through the gardens, finally arriving at the library.

“Ah, marlettas,” Fie said, as the group passed through the gardens.

“Marlettas?”

The small flowers, sporting yellow stigma and white petals, were blooming in the warm sun. Their leaves, however, were of an odd shape — spiny and almost spear-like in appearance, they jutted out at odd intervals on the flowers’ stems.

“This...” Fie stopped herself in time — it wouldn’t make sense for her to say that this flower was from her hometown. “To think that such flowers would be blooming here...”

Fie’s resultant statement was ambivalent at best.

“Hmm. So they’re called marlettas?” responded one of the squires in a decidedly uninterested tone.

After all, although all squires were interested in the sword, few, if any, would be interested in flowers.

As such, no one in the group knew if said flower was common in Orstoll — or anywhere else for that matter. Perhaps a squire or two would say that they haven’t seen it often, and that would be the end of it, under normal circumstances.

Remie, however, was present today, and upon hearing the flower’s name, eagerly started a conversation with Fie.

“It’s a flower that blooms in Queen Fielle’s hometown in Daeman, isn’t it? I’m sure the gardeners planted it here for her. Although they’re somewhat plain, they’re very pretty flowers. Also, it would seem like marlettas are currently trending amongst gardeners in Orstoll due to how plain and simple they are!”

It would seem like Remie liked flowers very much.

Although Remie’s enthusiasm was plain for all to see, the other squires did not appear very interested at all, and Fie appreciated her friend’s unintentional assistance.

After walking for a while, the group finally arrived at the steps of the royal library.

It was a grand building, three stories tall — even its walls looked new. If

Remie's historical facts were accurate, the library had apparently been constructed a decade ago by the then king of Orstoll.

There were, however, not too many people inside said library. Although it was made with the self-betterment of the castle's workforce in mind, public reception to the library was lukewarm at best. It seemed like few people enjoyed reading books in depth — at least amongst the population of the royal castle.

It was worth noting, however, that the overall literacy ratio in Orstoll was somewhat high. Fie had been told that this was especially true amongst younger people — who could mostly read and write without issues.

In addition, various classrooms teaching simpler, shorter words had also been established. This measure positively impacted the many sword dojos scattered across Orstoll, allowing their students to be introduced to a simple curriculum of words.

Although the King himself had wanted to open large-scale schools and improve overall educational standards, a combination of factors including cultural differences and the job market made it difficult to implement anything more at this point in time.

Thinking deeper on the issue, Fie realized that even Slad and his friends, who were born in the poorer parts of the downtown district, could read magazines. In fact, the peasant classes being as well-acquainted with language as nobles and merchants was something she would probably never see in Daeman.

"It's kinda empty, isn't it?"

"Well, there are no magazines, so it's boring, you know? This is my second time here."

The lack of magazines seemed to have severely impacted public interest in the library. It was somewhat of a waste, considering the unusually high literacy rates of the kingdom.

On that note, it was also worth mentioning that Fie only received the above information after becoming a squire — specifically, information on the king that had shut her in the back pavilion in the first place.

Upon entering the building through its large front doors, Fie's group came face to face with what appeared to be a counter.

Apparently, one could even borrow books if they applied for a permit authorized by the kingdom. Although this was not common even amongst smaller libraries built for the peasantry, the risk of books going missing was somewhat low, considering that anyone who would borrow them worked on the grounds.

After securing some seats in the otherwise deserted library, Gormus turned to Fie.

"Well, bring it here. It is probably somewhere on the shelf containing knightly records."

"Okay!"

To begin with, Fie's group was visiting the library because Fie had never been in a duel before, and as such had to be acquainted with the rules.

Although Fie had just requested a simple explanation, Gormus and the rest became somewhat passionate about the process, eventually resulting in them visiting the library — and Fie running off to fetch a book detailing sword dueling rules from a certain shelf.

With clearly marked navigational plates and a logical arrangement system, the library had clearly been built with great care — one could see the extent of the king's love of education in various minor details.

As Fie walked amongst the shelves, her eyes came across a sight — one that perfectly represented the fruits of the king's labor.

She must have been in the middle of her break, or so Fie thought. Seated in a chair with her head buried in a book was a maidservant.

To be precise, it was a maidservant that she had befriended as of late, and one that she had obtained cookies from — Arsha.

According to the rumors Fie heard, Arsha was a long-term resident of the castle, having been born into a peasant family that was not particularly well-off. Originally, maidservants could only come from nobility, or were the eldest

daughters of wealthy merchant families — such was the case in Daeman as well. Although Orstoll had adopted such traditions in the past, maidservants could now be employed with a background check and an aptitude test.

Arsha was one such maidservant. In her previous life, she would not have had many opportunities to touch books, much less read them. However, she was now seated back in her chair, voraciously reading the thick tome in her hands.

Arsha's actions struck a chord of curiosity in Fie, who attempted to have a look at the book's title.

The Knight and the Maidservant's—

Fie, however, could not quite make out the rest — at least, not from her angle.

Unfortunately, Fie's intense stare had caught Arsha's attention. Suddenly blushing upon realizing she was being watched, Arsha's eyes opened wide, dropping the book with a loud thud on the table in shock.

"H-Heath?!"

Arsha, having been accidentally surprised by Fie, let out a louder and higher-pitched voice than she had intended to.

Feeling somewhat guilty that she had interrupted Arsha's passionate reading, Fie smiled, waving as she once again made her way through the numerous shelves of the library.

Finally reaching the shelf, Fie began her search.

The contents of the shelf ranged from books on knightly history, encyclopedias of famous knights, and other tomes in that vein.

Upon closer inspection, Fie discovered what appeared to be a registry and logbook for the northern dormitory — several volumes, in fact. Said registers were neatly shelved by year, and registers for other dormitories were present as well.

Fie was reminded of a similar looking book in one of the northern dormitory's rest spaces, although it was still pristine, with few signs that anyone had bothered to read it.

Looking away from the dormitory registers, Fie begun her search anew, only to immediately come across what she had been looking for.

Rules for Dueling in the Art of the Sword — For Knights

It would seem like there were many rules for duel participation. The book was somewhat thick.

Retrieving what she had come for, Fie made her way back to Gormus and the rest of the group. And so it came to be that Fie was made to copy and write out the dueling rules from the book in question.

“Go on. Write it seriously.”

“Ugh... Can’t I just read the rules?”

“No. Write it. Do it properly.”

Gormus had been strangely passionate about instilling the dueling rules into Fie’s mind.

However, the rules in the book were all rather simple — anyone with some degree of common sense could guess them. Fie could feel her motivation dropping.

Swords will be used in the duel. No other weapons are permitted.

Such was an example of the obvious rules written within the book, amongst others.

Queen, Slad, and Remie, meanwhile, all seemed preoccupied with various measures of time-wasting.

Queen, having fetched a few books on knightly stories, was happily reading. Slad was doodling on various pieces of paper. Remie was revising what he had learned during a lesson that morning.

Gormus, for his part, was reading a book on muscular training while supervising Fie.

Fie, furrowing her eyebrows, was interrupted from her rule-copying by a timely comment by Slad.

“So, from what I’ve heard, apparently people from Daeman write ‘D’ this

way...”

Perhaps it was due to King Roy’s recent marriage with Queen Fielle — the residents of Orstoll had slowly begun to become interested in Daeman culture and affairs. However, of those discussions, about 10% were on Daeman’s flowers and linguistic scripts, 90% were about Queen Fielle, and roughly five minutes of most conversations consisted of negative gossip on Fie.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of that. It looks strange. But when you look at the scrolls the Queen has written on, the words look pretty, even if they are strange.”

“Oh, you write it that way? Seems difficult.”

“‘E’ and ‘F’ are apparently written like this...”

“Oh, even the strokes are different...”

Fie could not help but gulp. After all, her fellow squires could easily discern that she was born in Daeman from her handwriting alone.

Just as that thought occurred to her, Remie took a peek at Fie’s paper, filled with the rules she had copied out.

Cold sweat begun to drip down Fie’s back.

After staring at Fie’s handwriting for what seemed to be an eternity, Remie smiled.

“Your handwriting is the Orstoll standard, Heath. It’s really neat and tidy... almost like it was written by royalty.”

Upon hearing that, Fie heaved a sigh of relief. Although she did not really understand these developments, it would seem like her handwriting did not ring any alarm bells.

(Hmm...?)

Fie’s mind, however, was immediately filled with another thought.

(Come to think of it... who taught me how to write anyway?)

Fie was sure that it was not Lynette. After all, she had learned how to write before meeting Lynette.

Although Fie tried to remember, she found herself drawing a blank.

“Oh. It seems like you’re finished. All right, one more time.”

“Eh?!”

“Those were the terms we agreed on. Go on. Make sure you do it right.”

“Uggghhhh!”

And so it came to be that Fie copied out the entirety of the dueling rules (for knights) three times that day.

With only two weeks left before the inter-dormitory duel, Fie and her friends worked hard.

Heslow, upon hearing of the upcoming competition, allowed the squires to use their free time as they saw fit, in addition to offering his support and advice.

To begin with, the main reason for Heslow being assigned to the northern dormitory was an administrative decision — he had been posted to account for the difference in strength between the squire dormitories. For his part, he was strict and carried out his duties well — if the rumors were anything to go by, he had become an instructor precisely because of these traits.

On that note, the knight-supervisor in charge of squire guidance had also become a bit of a familiar sight to Fie, having seen him from a distance on a few occasions. He was a somewhat plump knight, with small, slit-like eyes. Fie, however, remembered him for his gentle disposition.

However, their efforts were like droplets of water on hot rocks — no matter what they did, it didn’t seem quite enough.

Although the members of the duel team had already been selected, the dread of having to face off against the eastern dormitory left quite a dent in the other squires’ morale. For the most part, they were now preoccupied with drifting about aimlessly, a hollow shell of their former selves — the proverbial steam rising from said hot rocks.

Fie and her group, however, kept largely to themselves, giving their all to train for the upcoming competition.

Fie observed the enemy while Gormus and the rest engaged in training. As the days passed, it became clearer and clearer to Fie that it may be impossible

to think of a plan that exploited Luka's yet-undiscovered weakness.

Gormus and Queen's training regimen mainly consisted of duels, with Slad and Remie facing off each other, or Gormus and Queen, and so on.

Honestly speaking, they were terribly short-staffed.

After all, amongst the squires in the northern dormitory, Gormus and Queen were the only ones in their skill bracket. Although the two had wanted to help the comparatively weaker members of their group, they themselves were preoccupied with their match preparations, and could not be of much assistance.

While Slad and Remie had gained a fair amount of skill from their practice sessions, their opponents this time were strong to begin with — so the situation didn't appear to be improving. In addition, due to Fie's special combat tactics and build, she was unfortunately unable to assist the two with their training regimen either.

The group understood that appropriate training partners for Gormus and Queen were simply not present, and they now faced the worrying reality of the lack of variety in their training.

Fie found herself at the royal library once again in the afternoon — although her visit no longer had anything to do with rules or rule-copying.

Faced with a lack of weaknesses to exploit, Fie had decided to consult books on military strategy for some ideas.

While Fie had thought this would be a simple grab-and-go affair, she came across an unexpectedly familiar face.

The other squire quickly noticed Fie's presence as she approached.

"Oh? Aren't you that kid from the northern dormitory?"

The familiar face Fie had come across was none other than Luka.

"It's Heath."

Luka's expression was one of mild surprise.

"I see. So you are my opponent."

The rules of the duel dictated that the order of both teams' members be decided upon within a week. In other words, both teams were by now familiar with the names of their opponents. Neither dormitory had submitted any requests to alter their initial placements.

As if he had found the situation somewhat amusing, Luka chuckled.

"Well, well. Isn't this something? Are the squires of the northern dormitory so cowardly? To throw the match by forcing someone like you into a match against me... Ha."

"I'm the same age as you are. You seem relaxed, huh?" Fie glared at the other squire.

"Oh, is that right? I thought that there was some sort of a mistake, matching a mere child against me. I see. So that's how it is. So... with the match just around the corner, what are you even doing at the library?"

"Searching for a way to defeat you. What are *you* doing here?"

Fie decided to deliver her reason straight, without a hint of hesitation. She had no intentions of hiding anything — nor was she intimidated by her opponent.

"Well, well. Wouldn't it be nice if you found something?"

Luka looked at Fie, suppressing a laugh as he spoke. Fie's attention, however, was drawn to the book in Luka's hands. It appeared to be an instructional book on ballroom dancing.

"It is most unfortunate that I have to fight an unworthy opponent like you. As for your question — I am merely enjoying some leisure time reading. Well, I am the son of a noble family after all. It wouldn't do to while away my free time with aimless pleasures. I am somewhat envious of Rigel and Persil — after all, they have real opponents."

Luka, looking straight at Fie, had called her unworthy. He clearly did not view Fie as a threat — much less a legitimate opponent.

"Well, if you think that you can find some way to defeat me by digging around here, give it your all, won't you? Even if you lose, surely your platoon captain

will be comforted by the fact that you did what you could under the circumstances.”

With those parting words, Luka walked away from Fie.

Apparently changing his mind, however, he suddenly stopped and turned to face Fie.

“Ah. I forgot to mention. Please don’t take up too much of my time in the actual match.”

In a moment, Luka was before Fie, once again holding up her chin with a free hand.

With a smile of absolute confidence, Luka stared into Fie’s eyes.

“After all... Even if you are a man, it’d be a pity to injure that cute face of yours. Why, I might even feel guilty!”

With those words, Luka left once more, an unpleasant sneer painted across his features.

Fie stood absolutely still, looking at Luka’s back as he walked away.

At the moment, a flash of inspiration enveloped Fie’s mind, an idea rapidly forming in her head.

Upon returning to the northern dormitory, she saw a large number of squires holding wooden swords gathered at the training grounds.

For the past week, these very same squires had the look of death about them, and had returned to their dormitory after engaging in the absolute minimum amount of training.

Their expressions today, however, were very different. Somehow, for some reason or another, the life had returned to their faces.

“Everyone decided to help us out with our training!” Remie said happily to Fie, who had just returned from her excursion to the library.

“Our bad. We let ourselves get to such a miserable state.”

“But we’ve decided that enough is enough! Although we won’t be in the duel, we’ll help you guys out with all our might!”

Fie, however, delivered a relatively deadpan response to the newly-revived knights.

“Aren’t you guys saying that just because the duel members have been locked in and can no longer be changed?”

“Ugh...”

“Y-You got us...”

Fie’s blunt deduction struck the squires right in the heart, some of whom had to sit, clutching their chests from the impact.

Fie, however, giggled.

“I’m just messing around. Thanks for volunteering, it really helps!”

“O-Oh... If there’s anything you want us to do, we’ll do it! We’ll do everything we can!”

And so, the squires of the northern dormitory agreed to cooperate with the training plans and requests of Fie’s group.

Amongst them, however, Fie’s training was unique.

“Uh... are you sure you’re okay with this...?”

“Yeah, may I have another round?”

Fie was training to block her opponent’s blows.

For Fie, who spent most of her time dodging, escaping, or evading attacks just in time, this defense-focused training was a highly unusual request.

“Is it okay if you don’t do any attack training? If you get too many warnings, you’ll lose the match!”

“Don’t worry. I’m in this to win.”

Gormus, who was worried about Fie’s apparent tunnel vision into defense training, received only a smile from the latter.

The day of the duel competition arrived.

The duel was held in a purpose-built structure in the capital, which had

hosted its fair share of events. Circular and large, the structure was constructed with large-scale events in mind, complete with rings of spectator seats.

Although it was mostly deserted when no competitions were being held, a fair number of knights could be seen walking through it today.

While the event in question was called the East-North Inter-Dormitory Duel, spectating rights were not restricted to the dormitories' respective platoon leaders. Knights of other platoons were allowed to spectate as well.

Between the knights that were here to witness their juniors in combat, the members of both dormitories, and other interested parties, the number of spectators present was not exactly low.

In one corner of the structure's arena, the squires of the eastern dormitory were lined up in a row, with a single, particularly loud knight standing before them.

With a headful of blonde hair swept backwards and set in place by copious amounts of hair gel, the knight stood, laughing and shouting at the same time.

"GA HA HA HA HA! The time has come at last! Today is the day where I will make those north dorm folks pay for my three consecutive losses! This is only the first step! Come to think of it, so many terrible things have happened since then! After losing to the north, I was dumped by Elizabetta, failed in my transfer to the 1st Knights five times, failed the same amount of subsequent dates — and since I'm still single at 35, even my parents have recently begun bugging me to just get married to a random girl! This is ALL because of those accursed three chain losses! That's why... today, I will let you taste my pain! I will let you feel the shame of three back-to-back defeats! TODAY IS THE DAY I TAKE BACK MY YOUUUUUTHHH!"

"Ahh. Seems like Sir Carnegis has gone berserk again."

"Year after year. You'd think he'd get tired of it at some point?"

"You know, besides that, he's actually a very nice guy..."

"Man... seeing that makes me feel old."

The various knights passing by could only look upon their compatriot with a

variety of exasperated faces.

However, it would seem that not a single one of their voices reached Carnegis.

“ALL RIGHT! You are elites who have been assembled for one sole purpose today! Go forth and fulfill your destiny! And then make those north dorm folks PAY for the shame that they have inflicted upon me!”

Although Carnegis’ statement was delivered with many vigorous motions, none of the squires present found themselves following his instructions — even the squires of the eastern dormitory could only stand and stare blankly at the spectacle.

Luka and Rigel, however, sneered as they walked slowly towards the arena.

“Why did he bother saying all that, I wonder? After all, we’ll easily defeat them anyway.”

“There’s no way we can lose.”

Filled with confidence, the two walked ahead. Trailing a short distance behind them was Persil, silently adjusting his glasses as he headed in the same direction. Kerio, Jerid, and the other squires followed suit.

At the spectator seats, various platoon captains and knights started to assemble.

Amongst them was a masked knight. Yore, too, was present. As the true identity of Yore was an open secret to the platoon captains, the King’s presence in the stands made them somewhat nervous.

Of all the knights present, however, one in particular stood out. He appeared to be slightly over 40 — visibly older than the other platoon captains. Although his grizzled countenance and features suggested a strict attitude, his face was instead filled with a child-like grin.

“It’s been a while, Yore.”

Upon seeing this older knight, Yore and all the other knights present rose to their feet.

“It has been too long, Master Zephas.”

“Haha. Cut it with the pleasantries. We’re all captains here. Actually, I should be the one using the formalities, huh. But then, if I were too formal with you while you were dressed like that, it’d be suspicious, wouldn’t it? Forgive me.” The last part of his sentence was almost half a whisper, inaudible except to the nearby platoon captains.

“I do not mind. I find that, if anything, it helps.” Yore, for his part, continued being formal as usual.

It was worth noting that this man was the platoon captain of the 1st Knights, and was also responsible for re-establishing the Kingdom of Orstoll after the reign of the previous king. Amongst the peasantry, Sir Zephas, as he was known, was considered a hero.

He was also another student of Kaizer, who was responsible for training members of the royal family in the ways of the sword. To Yore, Zephas was his senior and mentor.

Unknown to most, Yore had felt that the training he had received as a prince was not quite enough, and ended up asking Kaizer to make him a formal apprentice instead. In addition, he had refused to be treated like royalty during his apprenticeship. Kaizer and his fellow students, in turn, accepted Yore as one of their own.

As such, to Yore, Zephas was more than just a knight under his command — he was someone who had trained with and taken care of him. A senior in the ways of the blade, and a man worthy of respect.

“Sorry for being late. Perhaps you have heard, but we’re having yet another one. I went with Melissa to the doctor’s. Seems like both mother and child are healthy.”

“I have heard the news from Finn. I am glad Melissa is in good health.”

Sir Zephas, for all his heroic past deeds, was now older, married, and had a family — one could say that he was half-retired. Most of his tasks were handled by his lieutenant, Finn.

Zephas had married his childhood sweetheart, and despite his age, had fathered his third child with his wife as of late.

“Hahaha. Marriage is good! Also, Yore, how goes it with Queen Fielle?” Zephas lowered his voice furtively, leaning in as if to make sure no one else could hear. His expression was one of slight worry.

However, Yore responded in his usual tone of voice, without a hint of hesitation.

“Yes. It is going very well.”

Upon hearing his response, however, Zephas could not help but cringe.

“Your definition of ‘really well’ is a little....” said the older knight, his voice trailing off.

However, he did not finish his sentence, instead mischievously grinning and changing the conversation topic once more.

“Come to think of it, isn’t the squire you have taken in participating in the duel today? Is he a good kid?”

Acknowledging Zephas’ question, a smile flitted across Yore’s face.

The gentle glint in Yore’s eyes threw Zephas off completely. Yore, however, did not notice the older knight’s reaction.

The kindness that Yore showed was often that of a king or leader, shown to his faithful citizens. Kindness stemming from personal feelings and intents, however, was not a common sight in Yore — unless for one he had known personally for a considerable amount of time.

“Ah. Yes. He is an individual of amazing talent, and has a chivalrous disposition. His innate aptitude makes him more suitable for Grass-related duties, and as such I have been unable to formally deploy him on anything other than covert assignments. However, I hope that he will one day take his rightful spot on the stage as one of the many knights carrying Orstoll on their backs.”

Thinking of Heath’s talents, there should have been no issue in training him in the ways of the Grass — he would work hard regardless of the nature of his training. The very fact that he remained a squire, however, was indicative of how Yore felt about Heath.

Zephas smiled upon seeing Yore’s expression.

“Well then. I guess today’s matches are worth looking forward to.”

“Yes. Very much so,” said Yore with a nod.

Having arrived at the dueling grounds at last, Fie and her group found themselves standing before a man — he was by no means unfamiliar; in fact, Fie had seen him several times before. It was the knight-supervisor in charge of squire guidance of the northern dormitory.

He did not fit the stereotypical image of a knight, however — not with his rotund body and slit-like eyes. However, he did leave an impression with his gentle disposition.

Fie struggled to remember his name. If she was right, it was Trokko.

With a slightly slouched posture, Trokko stood before Fie’s group, addressing them in a voice that was calm and soothing — there wasn’t a single strand of malice in his words. Slowly, he began speaking, albeit in an apologetic tone.

“Hello, squires. Good of you to come. Since you are standing before me, I would suppose you understand the circumstances surrounding this duel. I do apologize for this... Dragging unrelated squires such as yourself into the issue...”

Trokko’s brows furrowed deeply into his features, looking more troubled by the minute.

Regaining his composure at last, Trokko resumed speaking in his calm voice.

“As you should know, the northern dormitory’s motto of ‘Work hard after being assigned!’ is no lie. All of you are like unpolished diamonds — precisely the kind of diamond that we at the northern dormitory wish for. We trust that by the time you have graduated and taken up arms as knights, you will fare better than knights from any other dormitory.”

Trokko glanced over the squires before him.

“This inter-dormitory duel is meant to evaluate the skills you have gained in your first year of squire training. If you all work hard, you could easily catch up in your second and third years — at least, that is how it usually is.”

Trokko looked over the squires gathered before him once more, this time

without slouching or sounding apologetic. He smiled, addressing the squires as he did so.

“It would seem from the looks on your faces that words of consolation are not necessary. Your expressions tell me that you will give your all in the duel today. As an unreliable senior, here is my advice: show these people gathered here the full extent of your strength. I will be cheering for you. Well then, go forth.”

Trokko’s gentle parting words somehow inspired a loud, inspired response from the squires of the northern dormitory.

As the squires made their way to the dueling grounds, Trokko saw them off, watching from a distance.

As the last of the squires faded into the distance...

“Ahh. They are good kids. In fact, I feel ashamed for standing before them and making such an arrogant speech. To begin with, today’s situation was probably caused by me overlooking things too much. Honestly... I should never have been soft on him just because he was a friend.”

Trokko’s slit-like eyes opened ever so slightly, a sharp edge evident in his gaze. And then, in a voice stricter than the one he had used before, Trokko said, to no one in particular: “It’s about time we took responsibility as adults for our actions... Carnegis...”

With that, Trokko set off in the opposite direction that the squires had departed in.

Ten minutes had passed since Fie’s group had entered the dueling grounds.

It would seem that the duel’s preparations took up a fair amount of time.

To the left of their group, on the innermost spectator seats, sat the members of the northern dormitory. Predictably, seated on the innermost spectator seats opposite from them were the members of the eastern dormitory.

The central seats, from which one would have the best view of the duel, was in turn occupied by the platoon captains; with the other seats taken up by knights who had decided to spectate out of interest or curiosity.

Upon recognizing Yore’s figure amongst the seated captains, a surge of

happiness welled up in Fie's heart.

"Hey, Slad! We'll be watching! Do your best!"

"Seniors! You came for me?! Thank you very much!"

Slad, whose seniors had apparently turned up to cheer him on, was happily waving at them. Apparently the duel's member list was public knowledge at this point.

"Remie! Don't be scared of the likes of them!"

"Yes! Of course!"

Remie had his fair share of supporters as well — and he responded to their cheers with a gentle smile.

Fie, envious of her teammates, looked in Yore's direction, and their eyes met for a moment.

She waved, somewhat timidly. Although Yore did not wave back, he nodded — and to Fie, that was a significant response.

Yore's gesture filled Fie with happiness.

However, Fie did not know what to make of the older gentleman behind Yore, who was waving with all his might.

"All right, we will confirm the process one more time. After the knight-referees enter the grounds, all members will alight from the stands into the arena and exchange courtesy greetings. After which, they will return to their places, and the vanguards of both teams will enter the arena — then the match will begin."

With Trokko gone from the dueling grounds, Heslow took over, briefing the squires on proper procedure.

On the eastern dormitory's end, a knight with blonde, swept-back, heavily-gelled hair was currently making a huge fuss. It would seem like all of his actions were, to some extent, noisy.

Fie and her comrades, having gathered for Heslow's briefing, nodded resolutely at his words.

Chapter 18 — Breaking Through!

In the middle of the dueling grounds, ten youths stood, facing each other.

They were the representatives of the northern and eastern dormitories.

Amongst them, some were openly provoking their opponents, some smiled confidently, and others simply stood, calm amidst the waves. Their eyes met.

The spectators were all the platoon captains of Orstoll, all the members of the northern and eastern dormitories, and knights who had shown up on their own accord.

All of their eyes were focused on the youths in a sign of respect.

The duel was, at last, about to begin...

The very first match was between the vanguards of both teams — Fie and Luka.

Before the match began, Fie gathered up the squires of the northern dormitory once more. It was her way of acknowledging her fellow squire's efforts.

The one who spoke, however, was Gormus, who was involved in the team's creation from start to end, in addition to acting as its leader.

"All right! We're going to win this duel, and make those guys in the eastern dormitory cry like they've never cried before!"

"YEAH!" A steady chorus of voices joined Gormus' declaration.

Although it was simple, it fulfilled its purpose — the squires were all fired up.

On the other hand, Carnegis alone was shouting about one thing or another in the eastern dormitory's corner.

"ALL RIGHT! Luka! You're up! First, you will show the fools from the northern dormitory the difference between our strength and theirs! Go! GO FORTHHHHH!"

“Yes, yes. I get it, Sir Carnegis. Even if you get so fired up, this isn’t a fight won by loud noises, you know? Do calm down.”

Perhaps it was because of the direction that the eastern dormitory’s supervisor had taken — the eastern dormitory was now governed by an elitist mentality.

If anything, it could be attributed to the way Carnegis had trained his selected members, with winning the duel being the goal in mind. This was, however, not necessarily a bad thing. As the other squires had many chances to interact with talented individuals and engage with them in mock battles, their strength and skill had also increased.

However, to do that, motivation was needed.

Other than the five selected members, the other squires often felt like they were up against an insurmountable wall. To make things worse, each of those five members was primarily focused on self-improvement, and as such the eastern dormitory could hardly be described as “united.”

To be frank, other than one member, everyone in the northern dormitory had fun, argued, and grew up together. The atmospheres in both dormitories were markedly different.

However, the strength of the eastern dormitory’s members was plain for all to see. If one paid attention, the indicators were obvious.

Even with an excellent coach like Heslow, one could not deny this obvious fact.

No one cared about its shape — power was all that was sufficient.

This was the strength of the eastern dormitory’s organizational mindset.

“As long as Jerid and Kerio don’t mess up, we will end this with three straight wins. Well, just watch. I will prove my strength to you with my elegant swordplay.”

Saying so, Luka casually entered the duel arena.

“All right, the opponent has entered the arena. Go get ’em, Heath!”

With that, Heslow slapped Heath on the back, apparently a form of

encouragement.

Among the various matches today, Heath vs. Luka was a particularly difficult match-up. The difference in their strength was obvious.

If anything, the northern dormitory had to bank itself on a positive outcome on Slad vs. Jerid, or Remie vs. Kerio.

Even so, there was no intention to throw the match.

The battle of the vanguards decided the overall flow of battle.

If Fie just instantly lost her match, that would be equal to handing all momentum to the enemy team, which could result in Slad and Remie's instant losses as well.

The other three members had to somehow grasp the flow of combat until their two more skilled combatants, Gormus and Queen, could take over.

As Fie made preparations, swinging a wooden sword in her hands, Gormus shouted over the crowd.

"Heath! Fight to win!"

"Do your best!"

"We'll cheer for you too, so do what you can, Heath!"

"I'll cheer for you with all my might!"

Glancing at her teammates' faces, Fie nodded, climbing down from the spectator stands to the arena.

With his eyes on her back, Gormus spoke, somewhat softly.

"Oi... That Heath. He didn't even say anything back to us..."

"Is he nervous...?"

"This is Heath we're talking about! He'll be fine! W-We gotta believe in him!"

Fie's unusual behavior worried Gormus and the other squires.

With all eyes on them, Fie and Luka faced off, standing a short distance apart from each other.

"Oh, hello. It's been a week, hasn't it? Did you sleep well last night?"

“...”

Luka answered Fie’s silence with a sneer.

“By the looks of it, you haven’t slept very much at all. Don’t worry. I’ll end this in a flash. After that, you can rest as long as you like.”

“...”

“Keep unnecessary banter to a minimum! Both of you, prepare and bow!” said the referee, warning Luka against chatting.

Acknowledging him dismissively, Luka bowed condescendingly, readying his sword. Fie, for her part, lowered her head and did the same.

Despite the considerable difference in their statures, their eyes met.

“Hey hey. Is it okay to put such a small squire out there?”

“The opponent is Luka, right? This match is already over...”

Judging by the knights’ gossip, Luka’s reputation apparently preceded him.

This was exacerbated by the fact that Fie, who was facing off against Luka, was perhaps the smallest squire in all the dormitories combined.

Rather than predicting which side would win, the knights found it difficult to believe that this would even be much of a match. Luka would probably instantly defeat his opponent immediately after the match started. Such was the prediction of the crowd.

“Heath! Do your best!” Remie said, watching over his friend with his hands clasped in prayer. Queen, too, could only watch on with a worried expression, staring at Fie.

“Begin!”

As the referee’s voice echoed throughout the dueling grounds, Luka was already closing the distance between them, his sword poised to strike.

Although he was not as fast as Queen, his attack was executed with considerable speed.

“Wow!”

“Are those guys really first years?”

The spectators found themselves filled with awe at Luka’s display.

Fie, however, held up her sword with both hands, blocking his blow. A dull sound resonated throughout the arena, and Fie’s arms bent momentarily, her body pushed backwards by the force.

Despite all that, the reality of the situation was plain for all to see — Fie had blocked Luka’s first blow.

Luka’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh.”

With their blades clashed, Luka moved his face close to Fie’s.

“So it seems you have something in you after all. I didn’t think that someone like you would be able to react to the speed of my attack.”

It was then that Fie struck — in the moment that Luka had moved his face close to hers and begun speaking.

An orange-colored mist filled Luka’s face.

“Eh?”

“What is that?”

Confronted by an unbelievable sight, the eyes of everyone on the grounds widened.

In the instant that Luka had flown towards Fie, clashing their blades, Fie spat out a certain orange substance — said substance became mist and covered Luka’s face.

In mere seconds, Luka, with his head clouded in orange mist, dropped his sword, screaming.

“MY EYESSSSSSS!! MY EYESSS!!” With his hands over his eyes, Luka bent over, continuing to scream.

Staring at Luka coldly, Fie stretched back as far as she could, bringing her sword behind her head. With a solid stomp, Fie brought down her sword with all her might, swinging it down onto Luka’s face.

It was perhaps worth noting that Fie's swing was not how one would have swung a sword... but a club.

"GUH!"

The power of her swing, along with the power stored in her stretched muscles, impacted the side of Luka's head with a solid thud. With yet another thud, Luka fell, motionless on the arena.

Unrelenting, Fie slowly walked towards the fallen Luka, before rapidly hitting his body with three solid strikes of her wooden sword.

Confirming that Luka was no longer twitching or moving, Fie raised her hand in victory, unaware of the silence in the dueling grounds.

"I win."

"F-FOUUUUUUUUUUULLLLL! Contestant Luka wins!"

And so it came to be that the northern dormitory's first loss was confirmed at the speed of light.

The referee had declared Fie's actions a foul, and granted a victory to the eastern dormitory.

Hearing that, however, Fie raised an objection to the referee.

"Eh? Why?"

"Any weapons other than swords are not permitted," the referee said, stating the painfully obvious.

However, Fie responded calmly, her expression not wavering in the slightest.

"That was orange juice from my breakfast. Orange juice is not a weapon," Fie said, staring into the referee with her beautiful, shining blue eyes.

For all of Gormus' efforts in drilling the rules into her, this was the result — an unpredictable outcome.

Fie, having noticed Luka's habit of moving his face close to his opponent's, had purposely saved orange juice from her breakfast for use as a blinding mist. After Luka was blinded and could no longer move, she would attack him with all

her might.

Indeed, this was what Captain Yore had taught her — find a weakness, and exploit it with all her might.

Fie had thought that it was a perfect strategy.

The referee, in turn, panicked upon being drilled into by Fie's unwavering gaze. However, he rapidly shook his head, regaining his composure at last.

"H-How can I accept that explanation?! To begin with, there are too many issues for me to point out here! Your previous act was not chivalrous!"

Fie's supposedly obvious explanation was rejected by the referee.

Although it was clearly written in the rules that: "Weapons other than swords are not permitted," it was also written that "Unchivalrous actions are not permitted."

Fie, however, responded to that with an unsatisfied expression.

"Eh?! That rule is too vague!"

"Vague or not, you can't just go and do things like this! Knights are supposed to fight with valor and honor!"

Sulking, Fie retorted.

"I don't need your narrow definitions of knightly chivalry! Chivalry is different for everyone and it takes all sorts!"

Waving her arms, a fresh chorus of objections erupted from Fie.

However, she was interrupted by someone restraining her from behind.

"Heath, come with me for a bit. I need to talk to you."

That someone was apparently Heslow.

However, contrary to his words, Heslow firmly grasped her by the collar, pulling her away from the arena.

Fie was removed from the arena grounds by Heslow, all the while with a sulk on her face.

Upon witnessing the spectacle, the various spectating platoon captains began

whispering amongst themselves.

“Wh-What is wrong with that squire...?!”

“Whose platoon did he come from?!”

“He is one of mine. Is there something wrong...?”

As those words left Yore’s lips, the spectating platoon captains collectively froze, their expressions pale.

“One of M-Master Yore’s...”

“Haha... What a spunky kid... Haha...”

Amongst them, however, Zephas started laughing, hugging his belly as he let out a thunderous peal.

“HA HA HA! You’ve picked an interesting kid, Yore! To think he’d use poison mist in a duel!”

“In an actual fight, he would have won. That would have been a victory.”

Staring at Heath, who was currently being dragged away, Yore sighed, a tinge of regret in his voice.

“You don’t say! My Coil is like that too, mischievous brat he is!”

Zephas continued laughing — he seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself.

“Wh-What was that...? Just now...?”

An uneasy mumbling rose from the eastern dormitory’s corner.

Carnegis stood, his jaw wide open, as he observed the outcome of the match.

There was no doubt that the eastern dormitory had won. Yet the eastern dormitory, which had prepared itself for a straight series of wins, had their collective mood shattered by what had just happened to Luka. If anything, they did not feel like they had won at all.

At the northern dormitory’s seats, Gormus, with his arms folded and a stunned expression on his face, could only watch as Heath was dragged off the arena.

“Ever since I met him, and even after I continued to spend time with him...

Heath. That guy... He's drifting further and further away from what it means to be a knight..."

To begin with, Fie's dirty tactics were famous in the northern dormitory.

To make things worse, Fie had apparently learned at some point to create wooden assassination instruments, and had used them while sparring.

In said sparring matches, however, Fie would stop using them if she was told to, and the fight would be reset.

However, Gormus and a few other squires fought Heath without those rules.

Real battles were not necessarily fought between knights. In fact, the ability to fight against Fie, who often employed such instruments, was a huge merit to their actual combat experience.

Perhaps the creation of a visually identical wooden sword that could shoot out its blade was a bit too much — Fie had been reported to Heslow and had to listen to three hours' worth of lectures as a result.

It was also worth noting that of Fie's 2 wins, 10 losses and 33 draws, 3 losses were due to falling afoul of the rules.

It was plain for all to see that Fie was simply not suited to sword-based combat.

Specifically, with her build, there were limits to how strong she could make her techniques through training. However, to the vast majority of the squires in the northern dormitory, Fie's hard work to close the distance between them did not go unnoticed. Most of them decided to overlook this fact — and Fie's usage of assassination instruments was somewhat approved as a half-official fact.

So this outcome was, in some ways, unpredictably predictable.

Gormus, for his part, felt vindicated in his decision to allow Heath to stand as the team's vanguard.

Although, his feelings about Fie memorizing the rules and coming to an unpredictable conclusion were mixed at best.

That, however, was another thing altogether.

“All right, the real fight begins now! We’re leaving that idiot behind and winning three of our four matches!”

“Yeah!”

Resolving to pretend that the rule-breaking idiot wasn’t there in the first place, Gormus and his remaining team resolved to fight with new motivation.

To begin with, he had never included the unpredictable, explosive, and at times outright silly Heath into his equations. From the eastern dormitory’s stands, a single youth alighted, stepping into the arena.

It was one of their members — Jerid. Although not as famous as Heath’s opponent, Luka, Jerid was not to be taken lightly. After all, in Slad’s generation, he was somewhat famous as a squire of considerable strength.

“All right, let’s do this!”

“Do your best, Slad!”

Finishing his preparation amidst a wave of cheers, Slad swore to win, answering the hot-blooded cheers with an equally hot-blooded vow of his own, before finally alighting from the stands into the arena.

As of now, the manly hot-blooded battle of a certain squire was about to begin.

Chapter 19 — Slad's Hot-Blooded Battle

Slad had lost.

From the stands of the eastern dormitory, Carnegis, who had been unable to celebrate Luka's victory, laughed triumphantly, eager to exploit Jerid's victory.

"AHAHAHA! Well done! The first battle was a little strange, but with one more win we have this! As expected, the members I've chosen are the strongest! All right, go forth, Kerio! End them! But... at this rate, Rigel and Persil will have no opportunities to show their power! Did I pick a bit too well? Well, whatever. HAHAHA! AHAHAHAHAHA!!"

Kerio stood up without a single word.

In his heart, a storm that was brewing ever since he had become a squire erupted, violently washing over his being.

(Persil... Rigel... Luka. That's all they talk about. I'm a tournament winner too. But then they treat me like I'm not even here, and with Queen gone, I get selected, only to end up here...)

Kerio's grip around his wooden sword tightened.

(It's true that I can't beat them. But I, too, was a strong contestant in the youth sword tournament. With this showing, I'll make them all think twice about me!)

Ending his mental monologue, Kerio left from the stands and stepped into the arena.

In the northern dormitory's stands, Remie was preparing for combat.

A strip of fabric was wrapped around his hands, strengthening his grip against sweat. In that same hand, Remie held his personal wooden sword.

"Kerio is a master of counters. Be careful."

Remie nodded at Queen's advice.

“Fight to win!”

“Of course.”

Nodding at Gormus’ words, Remie turned towards the arena.

The northern dormitory had already suffered two losses. As such, the fate of the dormitory rested on Remie’s shoulders — hope hanging from a thin string. Those very shoulders were now lowering him into the arena.

Remie slowly walked towards the center of the arena.

Kerio, who had arrived before him, was waiting — and the two wordlessly exchanged glances, each gripping their swords.

“Begin!” announced the referee loudly, after confirming the status of both participants.

The match had begun.

As the round started, Kerio immediately began observing his opponent.

Kerio had no intentions of rushing in, closing the distance, and ending the match in a few strikes.

He would instead observe and understand his opponent as they exchanged blows.

To begin with, the north-east inter-dormitory duel should have been an easy matchup for Kerio and his fellow squires.

Persil, Luka, and Rigel were squires who were all talented, and were famous names in their generation. With these members, there was no way the eastern dormitory could lose.

Even if Kerio were to lose for whatever reason, Rigel would probably instantly win his match, ending the duel in the process.

(That’s why I won’t lose!)

To Kerio, this wasn’t about the team anymore — this was personal, and it was a fight he could not lose.

If he lost here, the distance in strength and fame that separated Kerio and those three would surely only increase.

This was a match that he wouldn’t, and couldn’t, lose.

After all, his opponent was some nobody whose name had not even been heard of in any youth sword tournaments. Even so, Kerio decided to be cautious just in case — and started observing his opponent intently instead.

(Remie, huh... His skill with the sword is not bad. Not too bad at all. Pretty fast, too. However... his steps are large. Too many unnecessary movements.)

Kerio’s opponent, Remie, was by no means unskilled at the sword.

In fact, Remie would probably be able to defeat the average eastern dormitory squire. By this fact alone, Kerio knew that he had the upper hand.

Remie’s slim build meant that he was a reasonably fast opponent.

However, his speed did not come close to matching the monstrous levels of Luka’s and the rest. He should have no trouble dealing with Remie at all.

In addition, his steps were pointlessly wide and long, moving him more than a normal walking step would. As such, Remie’s position significantly changed with one step alone.

Evasive steps were, by and large, small but fast maneuvers. Said steps were used to adjust distance, facing, and to put oneself in an advantageous position — all of these could be accomplished with a small, precise movement.

However, small steps alone often used up one’s stamina, in addition to not being particularly fast. For this purpose, larger steps were often mixed into one’s footwork for flexibility. So the timing and mix of steps to use in actual combat were both situational and preferential.

However, Remie was only taking large steps as Kerio advanced and retreated.

(Seems like he’s quite the show-off... Then...!)

Rushing in, Kerio’s sword clashed with Remie’s. As they broke contact, however, Kerio purposely left himself open.

(Since he’s a show-off, he’ll definitely attack me here... with that large step. I’ll counter him then and there!)

With those thoughts in his mind, Kerio waited for Remie’s attack.

However, what Remie did next went completely against Kerio's expectations. Upon seeing the opening that Kerio left, Remie immediately jumped backwards, once again entering a neutral stance.

(What...?! Was my trap too obvious? Did he know about my counters...?!)

Kerio hesitated, struggling to understand Remie's actions.

Remie, however, struck out with a large movement immediately after recovering.

It would seem that Kerio's opponent, Remie, utilized large steps to close the distance between them. As their blades clashed, Remie would then be able to judge the situation. If it were advantageous, he would press the attack — if not, he would withdraw.

As they clashed again, Kerio once more left an obvious opening, albeit in a fashion more natural than his previous attempt. Perhaps his opponent would think that this opening was created by his attack instead — and then he would go in for the kill with a solid counter.

However, upon seeing the opening, Remie took one large step backwards again, retreating into a safe range.

(Again...?!)

Kerio knew that Remie was aware of his reactive counter tactics.

He was, to a certain extent, famous for employing said tactics in his fights. Kerio assumed that the northern dormitory had squires who participated in the same tournaments as he did — Queen was there, after all.

It eventually occurred to Kerio that even this Remie, whose name he had never heard of, could have participated in those very same tournaments.

It was then fair to assume that his opponents had sufficient information on his fighting style.

Kerio was confused, however; an enemy not taking advantage of an opening to attack was almost unheard of — especially in a duel setting.

To crush one's opponent's defenses and strike at them with one's sword: a basic tenet of victory. To give up on those actions would be tantamount to

giving up victory itself.

Kerio had assumed that his opponent would swing at his provided openings even with the knowledge that it could be a trap — this was the only way anyone could win. He would then counter with a clean riposte, and his opponent would lose the match.

In fact, the only squires capable of winning against Kerio were those who could break his counters with a more ferocious attack of their own, such as Luka or Rigel. Persil, who could easily differentiate between a real and fake opening, would also easily win in a match between the two.

(Are you telling me this guy is perfectly reading my movements? No... that can't be.)

Although Kerio's first attempt at laying a counter-trap was somewhat obvious, the second opening was somewhat natural — at least, Kerio felt that way. As long as his opponent refused to exploit any openings that arose, there would be no way he would win the match.

Even as his mind was clouded by doubt, Kerio realized that as soon as he stopped moving, his opponent would attack, causing their blades to clash once more.

After a few similar clashes, Kerio's opponent, a nobody known as Remie, once again made a large step backwards, retreating from combat range.

(Again — WHAT?!)

Something flashed in the back of Kerio's mind.

Stepping aggressively towards Remie, Kerio planted his foot down on the spot where his opponent was just seconds ago, swinging his sword down.

However, his attack was intercepted by Remie almost immediately.

It was an attack that he had thrown with all his speed immediately after closing the distance between them.

Under normal circumstances, his opponent should have been caught unawares by his sudden change in speed. In this case, though, Remie had intercepted his attack in a flash.

The only deduction Kerio could draw from this was that his opponent had his mind focused on defense from the very beginning.

It could not have been anything else.

In fact, it had been this way for quite a while now, right from the beginning, when their swords had clashed for the first time.

“You don’t mean...!”

Kerio finally understood.

Although his opponent had made it look like he was being cautious while still attacking, the reality was somewhat different — Remie only had defense on his mind. Even if an opening was shown to him, he would only retreat — an action that suggested he was ready to give up on victory.

As such, Kerio was unable to use his counters at all.

At this point in time, all the pieces fell into place, and Kerio finally made sense of it all.

“You... You’re trying to make this a draw!”

Kerio shouted out his realization as their swords ground against each other. Remie’s only response was a mocking smile.

Chapter 20 — On the Strengths of Remie

On the subject of group-based duels, it was worth noting that a particular rule decreed that each match was allocated twenty minutes. If neither party received a warning and the match could not be decisively ended, it would then be extended for another ten minutes. If the match still could not be concluded at that point in time, the outcome would be declared a draw.

Although the northern dormitory had originally aimed for three wins, a single draw would also serve a similar purpose, given their current score. If both dormitories had similar scores, the general's win is used to decide which party ultimately wins.

Although Kerio's opponent made several clear attempts to swing at him, Remie never did exploit or follow-up on any openings shown.

It was the same as giving up on victory. Remie himself, however, seemed fine with the idea — in fact, he was still continuing the battle, a calm expression on his face.

The reason was obvious.

As their swords continued to grind against each other, the two squires stared at each other.

"I see. You realize that you can't win, so you want to make this a draw instead... A rational strategy."

To begin with, Kerio specialized in counter tactics. If his opponent was in the fight to win, he would have benefited from this to a certain extent. Under normal circumstances, his opponent, having put a considerable amount of force into his strike, would not have much room left for defense.

However, with Remie pretending to attack while mainly focusing on defense, things were not quite as simple.

"I'll say that you are too naïve, though!" Kerio struck out at Remie with a fast side sweep.

Remie moved promptly, but barely managed to block his attack.

“It’s true that I am the most skilled at counters, but don’t think that I have issues attacking first!”

Kerio unleashed a vicious rush of attacks unto Remie, who defended against them as if his life depended upon it.

“Blame yourself for being foolish, thinking that you can force a draw by just focusing on defense!”

Kerio moved to seal Remie’s movements. Even if he was unable to use his counter tactics, he would not lose to such an opponent.

Even if he could not catch up with Rigel and the others right now, he would catch up with them sooner or later — such was his pride.

However, even with such intentions, Kerio found the match being slowly drawn out.

(Ugh... He’s tough! It’s difficult to hit him, too... All because of those long steps of his... The distance between us keeps shifting!)

Although it seemed for a moment that Kerio had Remie in a disadvantageous spot, he could not land a decisive blow on his opponent. Just when it seemed like he could get his opponent with the next blow, Remie stepped away with a long movement, preventing Kerio from pressing the attack.

Kerio himself was by no means weak or slow — he was a strong contender, having proven himself in tournaments before. However, there wasn’t much of a gap between his speed and that of Remie’s.

Although Kerio took rapid, short steps in attempts to keep his opponent within range, Remie’s continued evasive steps made him a more difficult opponent than Kerio had imagined.

More than anything else, however, Kerio underestimated the strength of Remie’s defensive tactics.

Although Remie was supposed to have been some no-name contestant he could have easily stepped over, he was somehow managing to block all of Kerio’s blows.

The moment he stopped swinging, Remie would step inwards with a savage attack of his own, with Kerio promptly blocking the blow.

(Kuh... Again!)

Remie's attacks came without warning, aiming for the gaps between Kerio's attacks, without allowing for the latter to move into a counter stance.

Remie's blows, however, were not swung with victory in mind. As such, it was not difficult to defend against them.

However, this stalemate was one Kerio also faced, with Remie immediately going back on the defensive after his attack — with said attack being nothing more than a formality he showed to the referee.

It became evident that Remie had not just come up with this plan of action on the spot — if anything, it was premeditated and properly planned.

It was at this point that Kerio finally noticed the loud boasts coming from the stands housing the squires of the northern dormitory.

"We practiced with Remie for all that time! Even against Kerio, he wouldn't go down that easily!"

"Man, it was tough. We really went at it hard, two minutes per person!"

"Well, that was probably harder on Remie, wasn't it?"

Each of voices belonged to squires who were much weaker than Kerio.

However, they were the very same squires who participated in that specifically planned training program with Remie — one which saw the squires attack Remie at several times their normal power and speed for two minutes. With a rotating roster of ten squires, Remie trained against them with all his being, all in preparation for the eventual showdown with a stronger opponent — one such as Kerio.

As a result, in that short frame of time, Remie's defensive capabilities skyrocketed.

His sudden attacks that allowed him to strike while defending were also polished during this time. To recreate a blow from someone like Kerio, the squires involved had to attack Remie with all their strength, hardly having the

ability to focus on defense. These squires were, in turn, struck countless times by Remie's wooden sword as he launched his sudden attacks, with Remie looking somewhat remorseful each time a blow landed on one of his comrades. The squires, however, did not mind, and encouraged Remie as they practiced.

The bruises on their arms and shoulders, in turn, were badges of valor they proudly wore — a testament to their dedication toward the duel.

The spectating knights could not hide their surprise at such a development. Although Kerio was not as famous as Rigel and the rest, he was considered a significant name to watch. Put against Kerio, his nameless opponent should have been defeated a long time ago — or so they thought.

Against the expectations of all present, the match had stretched out to a long battle of endurance. Although Kerio was the more skilled squire, he could not land a single decisive blow to seal his victory.

"It's quite the hot blooded battle isn't it..."

"That... Remie, was it? He's giving it his all too."

The comments came from the members of a knight platoon who just happened to be on their break. Although they did not intend to cheer for either party, the unexpected developments had thoroughly surprised them.

As the knights discussed their individual opinions of the match amongst themselves, one of their number raised a question with a somewhat suspicious expression on his face.

"Hey... Isn't this duel a little too mobile?"

"Eh?"

Pointing his finger out at the position of the two dueling squires, the knight offered an explanation, perhaps to the benefit of his clueless compatriots.

"They were on the right side of the arena just now. But look! They're already on the left side."

It was then that the other knights noticed.

The two squires, who had just been clashing towards the right of the platoon leader's spectator stands, were now firmly on the left of the structure. As they

continued watching, the two continued to move once more, clashing and stepping towards the right side of the arena. To make matters more confusing, the pair moved not in a straight line, but in a haphazard zig-zag.

“What the hell is this?” “Why are the two of them moving so much...?”

Question after question filled the minds of the knights present.

The duel, however, continued to be dragged out, until it was finally stopped by a call from the referee.

It would seem that twenty minutes had passed since the start of their bout. The duel now entered its ten minute extension time.

With both contestants returning to the start point, the duel began anew with an announcement from the referee.

(Damn... How did this even enter extended time? But that’s enough... I’ll end this here and now.)

With those thoughts in mind, Kerio immediately rushed towards his opponent on the referee’s signal.

However, his legs buckled, and he almost fell over.

(Wh-What’s going on...?!)

Without understanding the developments, Kerio could only raise his unresponsive leg, stomping down on it repeatedly.

At that moment, however, Remie swung savagely at Kerio.

“Kuh...!”

It was a heavy blow, one that carried all of his opponent’s weight in it, unlike the attacks that Remie had effortlessly fended off before the extension. Kerio’s arms shook.

Remie, however, did not let up, repeatedly striking at the weakened Kerio.

(Impossible...! I’m the one who’s slowing down...?!)

The blocked blows became heavier and heavier, with his faltering defense slowly ushering Remie’s blade to his body.

The difference in weight was caused by a very simple reason — Remie's intent had changed.

Kerio could feel his body getting heavier. It was no longer moving as he wanted it to — it was painfully obvious that his body's overall performance was falling.

(It can't be... My stamina?! But the extension has just begun...! To begin with, I've never lost a match just because I got tired!)

Kerio was a strong contestant. He had also invested a considerable amount of time and effort into his training. His stamina was above that of a normal person's — to the point where he could easily fight for more than thirty minutes, extensions or otherwise. And yet...

There seemed to be no explanation for the situation at hand.

Taking advantage of his opponent's weakening stance, Remie continued pressing the attack, landing blow after blow on Kerio's crumbling defense, smiling as he did so.

"You've run several laps around the arena ever since the start of our duel... Tiring, isn't it...?"

"Don't tell me...!"

With those words, Kerio finally understood the purpose of Remie's long steps.

A larger step naturally meant a longer distance covered. This also meant that Kerio, who had to close the distance while attacking, had to put in extra effort.

Ultimately, Remie's continued stepping caused Kerio to expend his stamina at a rate much higher than that of a typical duel.

Frustrated that he had been paired with a supposed nobody, Kerio lost himself in fantasies of a straight and simple victory. He did not for a single moment even notice the amount of distance he had been made to cover.

In other words, Kerio had fallen for Remie's stamina-depletion strategy — hook, line, and sinker.

However, while he understood all this, Kerio could not come to terms with one thing — Remie's current movements. After all, Remie had been forced to

cover the same amount of distance as he did. More accurately, Remie was the one leading him along — as such, logic dictated that Remie should be the more tired one of the two.

Remie, for his part, was drenched with sweat — just as his opponent was. He had obviously spent a considerable amount of stamina on his strategy. However, the strength that still remained in his sword was made painfully obvious to Kerio.

Kerio’s question was soon answered by the smiling Remie.

“It just so happens that I’m good at long-distance running... If it’s a fight over stamina, I will never lose...!”



It was worth noting that the current champion of long-distance running in the northern dormitory was, in fact, Remie.

Although Gormus had tried to keep up at first, he could not keep his large body active for such a long period of time, and eventually handed over the top spot to Remie.

Since then, Remie's skill at long-distance running only increased, and he ended up leaving Gormus behind in the dust.

In other words, the squire with the largest amount of stamina in the northern dormitory was none other than Remie.

This was precisely why Remie had come up with such a strategy. Utilizing his relative invisibility in terms of reputation, Remie had successfully baited his opponent into matching the pace of his long steps during the match. Focusing on defense so he would not be caught unaware by Kerio's counters, he aimed for the gaps between Kerio's attacks, striking out without warning. In addition, Remie burned as much time as possible, literally running Kerio in circles as they clashed.

Thinking that Remie was intending to push for a draw, Kerio took that as an insult, deciding to utilize their difference in strength as an advantage.

However, Kerio, having used up most of his stamina, was now being pushed into a corner by Remie, whose stamina translated into the heavy blows he now had to defend against.

"Guh... Damn! It's impossible! How can I be the one forced to defend...?!" Kerio shouted as he blocked Remie's blows, his words tinged with disbelief.

"Let me correct one thing that you said during the match." Maintaining his speed, Remie struck out at Kerio, smiling as his blade pushed closer and closer to his target. "From the very beginning... I was fighting to win!"

It was a perfect turnabout.

Kerio's movements were sluggish at best, as he had used up all of his stamina. Remie, having used even more stamina than his opponent, was still moving at the speed he'd maintained before the extension.

At a glance, no one would have guessed that Remie had run the same amount of distance Kerio did. Striking out at Kerio again and again with his blows, Remie was now completely on the offensive.

“Dammit...! As if I would lose here...!”

Mustering the last bits of his strength, Kerio’s sword clashed with his opponent’s once more.

And so unfolded an even more hot-blooded battle between the two squires during the match’s extension.

This would, however, end in the next ten minutes.

“Draw!”

In the end, neither side was able to score a decisive victory.

As the results were announced, both Kerio and Remie were gasping for breath.

Their expressions, however, could not be more different. Kerio was pale — looking almost relieved that the match had ended. Remie, on the other hand, looked somewhat disappointed, confident that he could have won with a little more time.

In reality, that may very well have been the case if the extension were any longer than ten minutes.

After all, Kerio was barely managing to hang on, having used up all his stamina. His technique was what saved him from certain defeat. Remie, however, did not let up until the very last second.

The two wordlessly bowed and shook hands before returning to their respective spectator stands.

With his familiar, warm smile, Remie apologized to his fellow squires, a tinge of disappointment on his features.

“I’m sorry... I needed a little more time.”

“No, not at all! You were awesome!”

“Yeah! To think that you could go up against Kerio like that...! You’ve done

more than enough!”

Perhaps it would go without saying, but there wasn’t a single soul in the northern dormitory who blamed Remie, who gave his all while fighting in his match.

Everyone around Remie was filled with bright, warm smiles. After all, a draw was advantageous to their dormitory’s current score.

And so it came to be that the third match of the duel ended, with Remie brilliantly passing the baton to Gormus.

Chapter 21 — Genius vs. Muscle

Riding on the momentum created by Remie's draw in his match with Kerio, the squires of the northern dormitory were in good spirits.

All eyes were now focused on the two contestants standing in the arena.

At last, the two squires were evenly matched, as opposed to the clearly lopsided matchups of the previous three matches.

"Ugh... This is impossible... How could Kerio draw against an opponent like that... B-But! Next up is Rigel, the genius squire! Yes, that's it! The match just now hardly matters! Our score is still superior! Our victory has not been threatened at all! That's how it is! THAT'S HOW IT IS! AHAHAHAH! Hahaha...."

Despite his loud declarations, Carnegis was clearly shaken by the unexpected turn of events, and Kerio's draw. Although he tried to laugh out loud to fix his mood, he could not hide his insecurity.

It would seem that Carnegis, while seeming confident, was actually mentally fragile — at least, if his feud against the northern dormitory, now having been drawn out for more than a decade, was anything to go by.

On the other side of the spectator stands, the squires of the northern dormitory, in turn, entrusted their hopes to Gormus and Queen.

The two were strong — this much the squires understood, drawing from their experiences and daily interactions with them.

However, the enemy was also undeniably strong, being a known contestant who had participated in various sword tournaments to the point of becoming famous.

In a strange twist of fate, the two strongest of the northern dormitory had never participated in such tournaments before.

Gormus was forbidden from participating in such tournaments due to the teachings of his Dojo. It was probably the same for Queen, in addition to

geographical difficulties caused by him training on a faraway mountain. Queen's teacher, who himself was of considerable repute, had apparently become a hermit at some point in time, teaching students in his mountain residence.

The contrast between the two contestants could not be more stark — after all, the eastern dormitory's contestant was an up-and-rising star of various tournaments.

Unlike the opponents of the second and third matches, who could have been beaten with some degree of hard work, the remaining contestants in the eastern dormitory's corner were undoubtedly monsters.

Amongst them, Luka, Rigel, and Persil were special.

In the tournaments those three had participated in, they advanced to the finals without fail each and every time, always securing high positions and scores.

Although Kerio and Jerid were somewhat strong in their own class, Rigel and the rest were at least a few levels above that in terms of strength. They were truly fearsome opponents.

It was, however, worth noting that a certain idiot from the northern dormitory did cause one of the three to grovel on the ground, in addition to pummeling him several times... Although she was promptly removed from the field for foul play.

To the squires of the northern dormitory, they were not quite sure if Gormus or Queen was the stronger of the two. However, they believed in them — to be more precise, they believed that Gormus and Queen would be the ones to grasp glory and victory for the northern dormitory.

In the middle of the arena, Gormus and Rigel stared at each other.

One had a rough-cut, intimidating face. The other, while possessing a certain degree of beauty, chose to portray a uniquely detestable expression on his face.

"Kerio is truly a pathetic individual. To think that he would draw with someone like that."

"That's Remie's strategy for you. Those guys trained for two weeks with the

goal of defeating their opponents in mind.”

“Hmph. Pointless struggles of the weak. The truly strong are fated to win. Kerio, who ruined our winning streak, was nothing more than a weakling in the end.”

“Have you never heard about the weak defeating the strong?”

“Oh. So you’re saying you’re the weak one?”

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough.”

Gormus responded to Rigel’s provocations with a single closed eye, his expression deadpan and serious.

“Mind the chatter, you two!”

Upon hearing the referee’s warning, Gormus apologized politely. Rigel, on the other hand, responded in a casual and dismissive way.

Then, like the squires who came before them, the two raised their wooden swords, entering a ready stance.

Gormus, for his part, adopted a relatively normal stance. However, anyone looking upon his giant body could not help but feel intimidated.

Rigel, on the other hand, turned the left side of his body towards Gormus, holding up his sword as if he were wielding a rapier — a unique stance. As most knights primarily utilized slashing attacks with longswords, Rigel’s form was very strange.

“Begin!”

Just as the referee’s voice rang out, Rigel dashed towards his opponent, quickly closing the distance between them. Without breaking his stance, Rigel unleashed a series of rapid stabs at Gormus, his actions strikingly similar to that of a fencer.

Holding his sword before him horizontally, Gormus defended against the stabs and thrusts.

Without warning, Rigel changed his stance once again, this time holding his sword with both hands like a knight normally would. He swung his sword up

from the ground in an arc, his blade almost touching the ground as he did so.

(Shallow... No power. A feint?)

Although it seemed like the blow was targeted at Gormus' chin, it did not take more than a single look for any spectator to realize that it did not have enough reach.

Deciding not to dodge as a result, Gormus was unceremoniously surprised by the sword's sudden change in trajectory and reach. It would seem that Rigel had stretched out his body, and without Gormus noticing, changed to a single-handed stance, changing the path of his attack.

(Tch!)

The blow nearly missed Gormus, almost scraping past his skin as he bent back to dodge it. A normal human being would have lost most of their attacking power and momentum, having undertaken such unorthodox movements.

However, Rigel's attack had significant speed and power to it, and the blade narrowly missed his opponent's face.

Utilizing the weight and momentum of his sword, Rigel did a pirouette, almost as if he were dancing, launching a horizontal slash at Gormus as he did so.

Gormus' balance and stance, having been compromised by his dodging, made it seem like the large squire wavered.

To the spectators present, it would seem like this was the end for Gormus — however, he instead swung his sword arm, deflecting Rigel's blade with his own. A near-impossible feat, given that Gormus was not in a stance or position to muster any strength in his swing.

As the two blades clashed, the much lighter Rigel flew backwards, once again placing considerable distance between the two contestants.

Rigel, however, did not seem too worried at all.

"Heh. So you've got some power to you... And you're not as slow as I thought. How odd — I assumed you were just a brawny idiot obsessed with strength. Allow me to offer you some praise. Alas, your skills are nothing more than that of a commoner."

Rigel's "praise" was nothing short of condescending — Gormus was very much aware of this.

"Well, I have to deal with a particular nimble idiot during training every day. Even if I hate it, I'm going to learn to move fast eventually."

Readying himself once more, Gormus held his sword in his hands.

Regarding Gormus with a predatory gaze, Rigel smiled, much as a cat would smile at a captive rat.

"Ha. Fine then. Let me show it to you. My finishing technique... Dance of Illusions!"

With that announcement, Rigel's steps were energized with a strange motion.

As if he were dancing, Rigel moved from left to right. His strange movements confused the viewer — quick movements appeared slow, and what appeared to be rapid motions were in fact slow and deliberate.

Rigel's movements, which had become hard to observe, were also unpredictable — in fact, there now appeared to be two of him, his series of movements and dance steps apparently causing an optical illusion.

"Th-That's the Dance of Illusions!!" said one of the squires from the northern dormitory.

"D-Dance of Illusions?!"

"Yeah. It's Rigel's trump card. With his hypnotizing steps and rhythm, Rigel confuses his opponent, dodging his attacks. Normally, there's no way you can move like that, but that guy's a genius, so..."

The squire had apparently attended the same dojo as Rigel did, hence his familiarity with the maneuver.

"I've been hit with that once before... I couldn't land a single blow on him. More accurately... I didn't even think I could land a single blow..."

As the youth said, Gormus had completely stopped, and was not even attacking.

Assuming that even Gormus could not stand up to this special move, the

squire’s hearts were filled with despair.

“Dammit! Gormus, you have to win! Do something!”

“Yeah... When in doubt, attack! Attack! Hit him in the face!”

As if they were trying to shake off their own despair, the squires cheered irresponsibly, trying to goad Gormus into attacking.

“They’re cheering for you, aren’t they? Well? Are you not going to attack?” said Rigel as he continued his dance steps. The steps were by no means simple — in fact, if a normal person had attempted those movements, they would have tripped over themselves a long time ago.

“Let me warn you... Random swings won’t hit me. Don’t even think about getting lucky. These steps you see are merely a subconscious movement... It isn’t difficult for me to change the direction I’m dodging instantly. Also, this technique... Everyone misunderstands, thinking it’s defensive—” With a single breath, Rigel closed the distance between them, all the while maintaining his illusory steps with a condescending smile splashed across his features. “But it can be used to attack as well!”

With a series of unpredictable movements and speed, Rigel moved right, then left, then up and down — almost simultaneously, before swinging his sword at his target.

It seemed like four copies of Rigel had attacked Gormus all at once, with the latter being forced into focusing on defense.

“G-Gormus...”

“Is it over...?”

Even the rowdy cheering squires had now fallen quiet, their faces pale.

Remie, whom Gormus had watched over during his match, could only clasp his hands together and whisper, as if in prayer.

“Gormus... Don’t give up!”

As he continued his multi-directional assault, Rigel could not help but laugh.

“In the end, you are nothing more than a brute, winning against equally lousy,

third-rate opponents with power alone! Technique! Talent! Intuition! Speed! You cannot hope to match up to me in all those traits, for I am a genius! You will never win!!”

Suddenly realizing that he could receive a warning for too much chatter, Rigel changed up the rhythm of his steps even more, this time silencing his steps, becoming quiet to a point where he could easily erase his presence.

“I will put you out of your misery here and now!”

Gormus, who had been forced into defense, had unwittingly created a blind spot. Noticing this, Rigel struck out, aiming for Gormus’ lower right torso. Gormus did not seem to have noticed Rigel’s movements — his eyes were hardly keeping up with Rigel’s steps. It was the perfect place to end it.

After all, Rigel’s instinct was never mistaken.

Guiding his steps into a perfect axis, Rigel thrust his sword into the unguarded blind spot that Gormus himself seemed unaware of, and unleashed a fatal stab at his opponent — or at least, he thought he did.

Rigel could not believe what he was seeing — a wooden sword was slowly but surely advancing in his direction.

Moving his right leg on pure reflexes alone, Rigel barely dodged the blow.

“Kuh!”

The unreasonable dodging maneuver that Rigel was forced to take messed up his rhythm, causing him to retreat in a panic.

(What...?!)

Rigel did not understand what had just happened.

It was too strange. He had perfectly launched a stab into Gormus’ blind spot. There was no way Gormus could possibly guard against his attack — much less launch one of his own.

Maintaining his distance, he continued looking at Gormus, stunned.

Gormus’ eyes, however, were locked onto Rigel.

“Why the surprised face? We’re evenly matched, aren’t we? It’s a simple

misdirection, misleading your opponent with your gaze. Nothing more than basic strategy."

With the same calm expression he had at the beginning of the match, Gormus delivered his lines.

"Frankly speaking, you're not all that, are you."

"What?!" Rigel flew into a rage at Gormus' words.

After all, he had been touted as a genius since a young age — he was nothing like the peasants around him.

Gormus, however, had just simply announced that he wasn't "all that."

Determined to not let the muscle-bound idiot before him return to the stands unharmed, Rigel once again started his dance steps, aiming to go on the offensive.

With his misleading movements, Rigel attempted to close the distance between them, before landing a solid slash on his opponent.

Gormus' sword, however, had something else in mind — his blade was already snaking towards Rigel's position. Panicked, Rigel jumped backwards, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

(Impossible... How can his attacks come close to hitting me?!)

In all his matches up to this point, Rigel had not experienced anything like it. More precisely, however, he had experienced it once — during the Orstoll Youth Sword Tournament Finals.

"You don't have the monstrous strength of Queen. If anything, taking account for your basics and personal strength, you are right about where I am. However... your fighting style is far too smug. You have no room to observe your opponent, let alone come up with tactics for victory."

Saying so, Gormus rushed his opponent, swinging his sword as he did so.

Rigel avoided the attack with his usual dance-like steps. After all, he would not be hit with such a haphazard attack — however, Gormus swung his sword once more, this time on the spot where Rigel had landed on after evading his first blow.

Panicking once more, Rigel stopped Gormus' blade with his own.

"Kuh... Why...?! How...?"

His movements were supposed to be unreadable. No opponent should be able to stop him. However, Gormus' attacks fully suggested that his movements were being perfectly read.

With an exasperated expression, Gormus responded.

"Why? What do you mean, 'Why?' Did you think that just because I would miss, I wouldn't attack? That's the complete opposite. I was only wary about your attacks. My friends gave their all in their matches to hand their momentum to me. I don't want to irresponsibly take risks and lose. I was nervous, all right. But then... I've discovered that I can defend against your attacks just fine."

With a few decisive steps, Gormus was before his opponent once more, leveling a second blow at Rigel. This attack, too, was aimed at where Rigel would dodge to.

Rigel, now drenched in sweat, could only block Gormus' attacks with all his strength.

"If you're asking about me reading your movements... I've read them from the very beginning. Now that I'm not worried about losing to you at all... I can attack without holding back."

As if to prove his point, Gormus' next attack once again accurately predicted where Rigel would dodge.

"I'll have you know that in our dormitory, there's a guy who's even better than you at dodging... Although he's also an idiot who got dragged off the field for foul play during a duel spectated by all the knight-captains."

Rigel did not understand Gormus' words at all. However, he did understand the brute force behind Gormus' strangely accurate attacks, pinning him down as he frantically blocked it with his sword.

The heavy blow caused Rigel's feet to move backwards. Rigel, who was now thoroughly intimidated by Gormus' power, was obviously trying to escape.

To the escaping Rigel, Gormus swung, landing yet another attack on Rigel's sword. The impact of the blow destabilized Rigel's evasive stepping, creating an opening in his defenses.

Having figured out the trick behind Rigel's movements, Gormus aimed not for Rigel, but for a spot a little to his side, with the aim of crushing Rigel's balance once and for all.

"N-No...!" Having lost all confidence in his evasive abilities, Rigel guarded Gormus' feint, the impact finally breaking his stance.

Gormus was not kind enough to let this opportunity slide.

"Too bad for you, 'genius!'"

For a second, Gormus' rough features lit up with a truly threatening grin.

Tensing every muscle in his body, Gormus, calculating for Rigel's intended trajectory, swung his blade, much like the trunk of a great, savage tree.

"The thing is... I'M JUST THIS STRONGGGGGGGGGGG!"

Gormus' attack, carrying the entire weight of his giant body, smashed into Rigel.

In that split second, a dull sound could be heard — and then with that one simple strike, Rigel's body soared up and above into the air.

The launched Rigel, having lost his consciousness halfway through his unfortunate flight, landed with a thud, unable to get up.

Refusing to rest on his laurels, Gormus walked up to the unconscious Rigel, checking for signs of life. Satisfied, he pointed his sword up skywards, flexing his other arm in a muscle-man pose.

"The winner of this match is... Gormus!"

After this announcement, the fading echo of the referee's voice was drowned out by a huge wave of cheers from the northern dormitory's spectator stands.

"I-Impossible..." Carnegis could only stare blankly at the duel results. "Rigel... THE Rigel... lost?!"

Rigel, having been sent flying by Gormus' single blow, was lying on the ground of the arena, unmoving.

The referee, announcing that Gormus had won the match, awarded the match point to the northern dormitory.

It was a scene that beggared belief.

Persil, Rigel, and Luka were all the cream of the crop of this year's members, and Carnegis had chosen them personally. Their combined results and strength both pointed towards them being the strongest three squires of their generation.

Before becoming a squire, Rigel was in the best four of his class, and Luka was the second runner-up. They had both lost to their opponents — and they were by no means weak.

Luka had been defeated by foul play, and despite the match point having been awarded to them, Luka had lost. Rigel, however, had been defeated by Gormus fair and square.

Gormus...

Although he had heard of Gormus' strength, he was not picked due to a lack of tournament results. In fact, he was at a risk of looking bad due to the other side not having a single tournament winner.

To Carnegis, Gormus, whose performance and movements at the Squire Test were unsatisfactory, was judged to be a power-only contestant.

However, upon seeing today's match, Carnegis realized this could not be further from the truth. He had been able to put up a spirited defense, and then shifted fully into attack as Rigel lost his confidence, ending the match with a solid power blow.

In terms of basics, he was by no means weaker than Rigel. While Gormus had more power, Rigel had more speed and better technique.

However, their match resulted in Gormus' one-sided victory. Of his three champions, Persil, Rigel, and Luka, one of them had been defeated.

Before he knew it, the score was 2 wins, 1 loss, 1 draw. Looking at the results

alone, the two dormitories were almost evenly matched. If the results for the final match were taken into account, it would seem like the eastern dormitory could only manage a stalemate at best.

“Why... Why did it come to this...!” Carnegis’ nightmare had once again come back to life.

Ever since that incident, he had been plagued by bad luck, unable to advance in his career or find a girlfriend he could keep for more than a few days. In fact, he had even taken to drowning his sorrows in alcohol.

Although he had joined the eastern dormitory’s staff with revenge in mind, even if his team did win in the first year, it would lose in the second or third year as the other squires caught up.

This was why he had done everything in his power to assemble the strongest members he could this year.

Even so... He was now forced to bank it all on the final match between the generals. Should the northern dormitory win that match, it would all end.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this... Why?! What is this...?!” Carnegis, terrified by the prospect of losing to the northern dormitory, began shaking.

After all, this entire duel was supposed to have been guaranteed.

To begin with, the other side only had two strong members — he had five. If he were to pair his champions with the opposing dormitory’s three no-name squires, it would definitely result in three wins.

Even if something had happened then and there, he had three aces in his sleeve — the supposed three strongest squires in their generation. They should have no trouble winning even when matched with a strong opponent — at least, that was what he thought.

However, Rigel had lost.

The next match...

To Carnegis, Queen was an unknown.

He was the student of master swordsman Zeiness, who was once said to be the strongest swordsman in Orstoll. In more recent days, he had been tasked

with teaching the royal family the way of the sword. Although that did catch Carnegis' eye, Queen had no tournament results.

Even so, he had arranged for Queen's transfer into the eastern dormitory.

Matching him up with Luka for an entrance test, Carnegis was pleased that Queen was able to defeat him in an instant — his judgment had not failed him.

However, the very same Queen soon requested to transfer to the northern dormitory. Although he had tried to stop him, Queen made repeated requests to the squire affairs department and eventually received approval for his transfer.

Carnegis did not know who would come out on top in a fight between Persil and Queen.

In other words, there was no guarantee of victory in this final battle between the generals of both sides.

"No... it should be fine. Persil is the third consecutive winner of the Orstoll Youth Sword Tournament. Amongst the three, he is the strongest! It's fine! It's totally f-fine!" Carnegis, now pale and terrified at the prospect of losing, was now trying to mask his fear by shouting, albeit somewhat incoherently.

"Yes! We can win! With these members, I will definitely win! I'll definitely break that triple defeat nightmare! I'm going to live my second life, full of color and vibrance! GO! GO FORTH, PERSIL! Defeat those fools from the northern dormitory... Eh? Persil?"

By the time Carnegis had started instructing Persil, the latter was already gone from the spectator stands. The other squires, not saying a thing to Carnegis, could only look on as Persil walked out onto the arena grounds.

"Finally... it's their side's general..."

The youths of the northern dormitory collectively whispered to each other upon the sight of Persil.

Queen, having had his back slapped by all of his comrades, was slowly walking out to the arena himself.

"Hey... who do you think is the stronger of the two, Queen or Persil?"

“H-How am I supposed to know...?”

The squires did want to know, however — to them, this was perhaps more important than the outcome of the duel itself.

Persil — the squire said to be the strongest in their generation, and the same squire that won every single tournament he had participated in.

Queen — the squire who was once the disciple of Orstoll’s strongest swordsman, Zeiness, and the same squire who had caused a stir when he enrolled into the Royal Knights.

Under normal circumstances, the two, said to be the absolute strongest amongst all the squires, would have had no opportunity to fight.

To a certain extent, that was also the eastern dormitory’s goal. With their first aim being the defeat of the northern dormitory, there was no meaning in Persil fighting Queen in the first place.

This was also evident in the eastern dormitory’s training curriculum — when Queen was still at the eastern dormitory, tournament winners would usually engage in mock battles with each other, albeit not at a very high frequency. The reason for this was simple: the other side’s only strong contender was Gormus.

Queen, however, announced that Persil was the strongest amongst them during his time there, having felt his strength one way or another.

“Is this Persil that strong?” asked Gormus, who did not have much knowledge of Persil.

“Yes, if I had to say, he’s probably the strongest defense-type contestant in our entire generation of squires,” Remie answered.

“Of course, he also excels at counter tactics and other maneuvers, making him a well-rounded opponent... But what really stands out is his defensive capability. It makes you feel like he can’t lose — similarly... It makes you feel like no matter what you do, he would win.”

“So... the exact opposite of Queen, huh.”

The last match of the inter-dormitory duel was a focal point for all youths who had aspirations in the sword. It was a match they could not miss — a battle

amongst the two strongest squires of their generation, and the decisive battle between the northern and eastern dormitories.

All the youths could do was swallow their breaths and watch on in silence.

Their eyes converged on the standoff between a brown-skinned, blonde-haired youth, and his opponent, a bespectacled youth with black hair.

One was serious. The other was also serious, but above all else, seemed emotionless.

Queen may have been a little shorter than his opponent. However, Persil wasn’t exactly much taller.

The two youths of somewhat similar height held up their swords and stood facing each other.

At last, the final, decisive match in the inter-dormitory duel was about to begin.

Chapter 22 — Emperor

Upon the referee's announcement, the first one who started moving was none other than Queen.

With nary a sound, Queen dashed towards his opponent, his feet seeming to lightly graze the ground as he propelled himself forwards. What seemed to be a small movement for Queen, however, rapidly accelerated his entire body.

"Ha—?!"

"What the hell is that?!"

The spectating knights could only gape and stare in wonderment.

Although Luka's attack was fast, Queen's movements were in a class of their own. As such, while the knights were surprised by the speed of the squires who had participated in the matches thus far, Queen's movements amazed them on another level — specifically, that of what was humanly possible.

Even more astounding was that the amount of distance that Queen covered was by no means small.

In a normal swordplay tournament, participants typically closed the distance between them with a few steps before beginning their attack.

Queen, who had made the first move, was now dashing towards Persil with an almost horrifying speed and force.

Persil, however, dodged to the side, avoiding Queen's assault.

If he had taken Queen's dashing blow head on, the force and momentum may have very well sent him flying to the other side of the arena. Queen's attack would have effortlessly connected with most of the squires present — but he was far from done.

Hypothetically speaking, the more famous squires, such as Luka and Gormus, would probably not have been done in with a single strike.

Although his first attack did not connect, Queen immediately kicked down

upon the ground with his left foot, turning to the right at that same monstrous speed. At the very next moment, however, Queen slammed his right foot down, suddenly canceling out his right-bound inertia. Turning in mid-air, Queen effortlessly accelerated in a direction completely opposite to his previous bearings mere moments ago.

Like a flash of lightning, Queen bore down upon Persil from his flank.

To begin with, the opponent's flank would typically not be exposed in a one-to-one duel. After all, both contestants would be facing each other at all times. Queen, however, was not bound by this rule — he had successfully flanked his opponent, primarily owing to his explosive speed and power.

With yet another seemingly impossible maneuver, Queen swung his blade at his target, the instrument moving with unbelievable speed and power. The spectators could only continue to stare and gasp, looking upon Queen's movements with nothing short of disbelief.

Persil, however, maintained his cool, his cold eyes looking at Queen from behind the lenses of his glasses. With a calm movement, Persil once again dodged Queen's onslaught.

However, Queen continued to press the attack. With a single step, he accelerated and struck from another direction. He showed no signs of stopping or slowing down.

Queen's movements were like that of an animal's — strong, fast, and unpredictable to the point where each rush and strike seemed to slice into the opponent's perception of him. He would then place all of his momentum into his sword, before dealing his opponent a fatal strike that was too fast to defend against.

This series of maneuvers was the true nature of Queen's attacks, the speed and power of his movements making it a truly terrifying technique.

Although something like this would usually have been a finishing strike of some sort, Queen's blows were like rain — continuous and unrelenting. To make things worse, Queen did not launch his attacks from a stationary direction, but from a multitude of angles and directions as he continued his assault. All it took was a single mistake or miscalculation — that was enough to

give Queen a chance to strike at his opponent's back. Normally, this was not a technique that could be trivially guarded against.

This was why even famous squires such as Gormus and Luka were easily defeated.

Queen's show of power on the day he transferred into the northern dormitory had been nothing short of a one-sided display.

It was perhaps fair to say that none in the royal knights were able to emulate Queen's movements and attacks — at the very least, not a single squire was able to do so.

Queen was, for all intents and purposes, the strongest squire when it came to attacking capability. In fact, if one were to account for the kingdom's knights as well, the only ones that had more attacking power than Queen were those who were well above the average.

"A-As expected, Queen is really something else..."

The squires could only look on in awe as they were once again reminded of Queen's strength. The squires of the northern dormitory, in particular, seemed to collectively swallow their breaths as the match went on.

"But Persil's really strong too. Did you see him block that strike just now...?"

It was as the squire said — in the last few moments, Persil had switched from dodging to blocking Queen's blows.

With a deft movement of his blade, Persil deflected Queen's blows to the left, and then to the right, all the while moving his body to counter Queen's directional advantage. As Queen's attacks continued, so did Persil's defense — the bespectacled squire perfectly blocked the former's blows, which seemed to strike from all directions at once.

Persil was, for his part, apparently famous for his defensive techniques ever since his first swordplay tournament.

The very fact that he could keep up with and defend against the lightning-like Queen was a testament to his power.

"That's nothing! Okay, so he DID guard it, but only barely! He won't be able to

guard against Queen's next blow... Not even if it's *the* Persil we're talking about! If he keeps defending, he'll be given a warning and we'll eventually win!"

The squire's faces were filled with hope.

The squires, however, were deeply surprised that Persil could defend against Queen at all — they had no choice but to accept that Persil's defensive techniques were the real deal.

However, as long as Queen kept up his assault, he could not possibly lose.

In addition, if the match continued in this fashion, Queen would eventually win by his opponent receiving warnings. To prevent this, Persil had to attack one way or another, and Queen would surely use this chance to strike — thereby sealing the victory.

Persil, focusing on blocking Queen's attacks, barely deflected them with each strike. This was, however, the exact scene that the spectators had continued to stare at, even as time continued to pass.

Although time-based warnings were decided by the referee, the exchange between Queen and Persil had continued on for far more than a minute — a warning could now be given at any moment.

The expressions of the northern dormitory's squires were suitably cheerful, as they were convinced of their impending victory.

However, amongst them, one squire alone did not have such an expression — said squire being Gormus.

"This... is bad..."

Persil was issued a warning shortly after the match had begun.

The justification for this was simple — he had been unable to attack for the entire duration of Queen's attacks.

"Yeah! Go get him Queen!"

"Keep it up!"

The squires of the northern dormitory cheered loudly, convinced that victory was now firmly in their grasp.

To win, Persil could not rely on defense alone — he had to attack Queen, or suffer the consequences.

Any more warnings issued would result in Persil's loss — in addition to any draws or losses now defaulting to a loss due to said warning. If anything, the situation seemed to strongly be in Queen's favor — or so the squires thought.

With the referee's next announcement, the match begun anew.

Queen accelerated once more, dashing towards his opponent while unleashing a series of rapid, intense strikes. There was, however, a single difference in the way Persil responded — to be precise, he was now swinging his sword against Queen after deflecting his blows.

"He's attacking because he received a warning!"

"If he keeps this up, there's bound to be an opening! Queen's going to seal the deal!"

To the squires of the northern dormitory, this was nothing short of a good turn of events.

However, the situation was, in fact, very different. The reason why Persil was able to start attacking was not because he had decided to move onto offense — but because Queen was starting to slow down.

The only squires who noticed this were those who were particularly skilled themselves — notably, Gormus and others like him.

Queen had indeed begun to slow down. As time passed, the amount of strikes Persil managed to squeeze into the gap between defending against Queen's attacks increased — first a strike, then two, before his stance fully changed into one of offense. Seeing this, Queen immediately retreated, placing a considerable distance between the two contestants.

Persil, however, did not give chase, instead opting to speak, his voice calm and soft.

"It is as I suspected..."

Persil's calm gaze was a sharp contrast to Queen's almost twisted expression — the latter was covered in sweat, his breathing punctuated with irregular gasps.

Seeing this, Persil merely continued speaking in his calm, emotionless voice.

"I have been thinking about it for some time. In matches against you, any opponent would fall in a minute or less. The reason for that is simple — no one can withstand your attacks for that long. However, was that really true? Of course, that is undeniably part of the reason. In the end, I concluded that you had a reason to end your matches within a minute... That was my deduction."

Persil's pitch-black eyes continued to scrutinize Queen from behind his glasses.

"About a minute into the match, your speed had fallen to approximately 95% of what it had been. Around the time the warning was issued, it had fallen to about 90%... And then 80% as the match resumed. In other words, that weapon-like speed of yours will only dull with the passing of time, perhaps due to you employing such explosive technique and power with an average build. It would unfortunately seem like stamina is your biggest weakness — you are unable to sustain your attack and assaults in an extended battle."

As if to confirm Persil's analysis, Queen's only response was to continue panting where he stood.

With that, however, Persil took a small step forwards.

"Kuh...!"

Accelerating once more, Queen dashed towards his opponent. His blow, however, was promptly blocked by Persil, who did not seem to employ as much strength as the two blades clashed.

"It has fallen by another 2%. It would seem that your stamina does not recover very quickly. No, perhaps you have to expend quite a bit more energy to even move...?"

The one who backed off from their clash was Queen.

Lowering his stance as he widened the distance between them, Queen could

only stare at Persil. He was unable to hide the panic and doubt in his gaze.

Even the rowdy squires of the northern dormitory had noticed the irregularities at this point, slowly stopping their cheers.

Gormus, who had noticed this from the start, watched on with a sour expression.

In reality, Gormus and a few other skilled squires had realized that stamina was Queen's biggest weakness.

Queen's rank and results in running were markedly low. Although Queen possessed such explosive power, he did not fare well in other training regimens either.

In addition, the almost unreasonable power he had displayed while sparring had convinced most of the squires that Queen was good at what he did.

However, to a select few, including Gormus and Heslow, Queen's weakness was apparent — namely that Queen's body would not be able to keep up with the techniques and power he employed.

With that being said, it wasn't exactly easy to exploit this weakness — after all, his opponent would have to defend against Queen's attacks for a full minute.

Although Gormus and the others had attempted to do this, Queen's common-sense-defying rapid attacks were seemingly impossible to defend against.

"Hmph. Yet another crazy one has showed up..."

Persil, however, had achieved this — to be precise, he had defended against Queen's flurry of attacks, which had felled many a lesser opponent.

Gormus, realizing that Persil was even stronger than the rumors had made him out to be, found himself at a loss for words.

Warnings and the like no longer mattered — the one who was in trouble now was Queen. Persil, who had deflected and defended against a minute of Queen's strikes, was a formidable opponent. To make things worse, Queen now had to fight him for another twenty minutes — assuming he had the stamina to do so.

With a pained expression on his face, Queen dramatically lowered his stance, thrusting his sword towards Persil. Compared to his usual attacks, it was a thrust with decidedly less power, but one that was aimed at striking the opponent's blind spot — a technique that Queen occasionally employed.

With an almost beast-like, lower stance, Queen accelerated once more, maneuvering to Persil's back before swinging his sword upwards — a perfect sneak attack.

However, as if he had expected it, Persil abruptly turned, narrowly dodging Queen's strike, sweeping his own blade up in a counterattack as he did so.

Rolling backwards in a sudden snap movement, Queen narrowly avoided Persil's strike.

"It is pointless. I have memorized your attack patterns."

"Memorized...?" Finishing his animal-like retreat roll, Queen promptly stood up, answering Persil with a question.

"It is as I said. When I first saw your fully-powered attacks, I realized that it was statistically impossible to defend against. Regardless of the area that I had focused my defense on, there was a 40% chance that I would have been unable to defend against that particular blow. As such, I had memorized 78 of your attack patterns in preparation for the match. Your movements before your attack, such as the posture of your first strike, the movement of your shoulders, the direction of your gaze... All of these factors allow me to perfectly predict your next attack. From this alone, the 40% risk factor has been successfully reduced to 10%, as you have seen."

Persil's words were nothing short of unbelievable. To begin with, even Queen himself had never thought of his attack patterns as something that could be quantified with numbers.

Persil, however, merely continued his calm analysis with his dark eyes fixated upon Queen.

"Your friends and compatriots were not the only ones who conducted surveillance and scouting. Over the five months that I spent with you in the eastern dormitory and the three weeks before the tournament, I have been

observing and analyzing you. You are indeed strong — preparations had to be made to ensure a guaranteed victory."

Persil had prepared himself for this moment — for the day where he would face Queen, long before the tournament was announced.

Queen desperately continued to attack.

However, none of his blows reached Persil. Even Queen's full-powered attacks from the start of the match had been successfully guarded against. Queen, who had expended most of his stamina, could not hope to pierce Persil's defenses.

Even the spectators felt a sense of despair permeate their being.

"Emperor..." A lone voice rose from the stands of the northern dormitory squires.

"Emperor...?" Another voice rose in response.

"It's his nickname... That guy... in addition to being impossibly good at defense, he's also strong in his own right... Rumor has it that no one has managed to beat him in any mock battles. But then... in tournaments, this all changes. He perfectly formulates a strategy against his opponent, perfectly executes it, and then wins without compromise. Even Rigel and Luka could not do anything against him in last year's finals matches. Ever since his debut three years ago, no one has defeated Persil in a duel... That's why he's called that. Persil, the Emperor..."

At the other end of the squire's gazes stood Queen, standing in the middle of the arena, his breathing raspy and short. No matter how he attacked Persil, his attacks were defended against. However, his expression was not one of someone who had given up.

From this, one point was apparent — although Queen was still in the fight, he was unable to find a way to win against his opponent.

Persil simply started advancing upon Queen, his stoic expression unchanging.

"It has been three minutes since the start of the match. Your abilities are 70% of what they were at your peak. Everything is within data parameters. In this

situation, the chance of your attacks breaking my percent is 0%. In other words, Queen, you have no chance of securing a victory in this match," said the dark-eyed "emperor," adjusting his glasses as he announced his deductions to Queen.

To the spectators, the sight before them was tantamount to despair itself.

Queen, who had been panting and out of breath since the match resumed; Persil, who did not seem tired in the slightest.

With his face not betraying a single shred of emotion, Persil struck out against Queen, raining blow after blow onto his opponent as he struggled to block each one. In a short span of time, their roles had been reversed.

Large droplets of sweat formed on Queen's dark skin.

Queen, however, refused to give up, continuing to attack where he could, all the while wearing a pained expression on his face.

However, the squires of the northern dormitory had already started giving in to despair — after all, there did not seem to be any way Queen could win.

Queen's weapon, namely his explosive power and attacks, was now nowhere to be seen.

As the match went on, Queen's speed continued to fall, now matching Persil's.

His remaining strength was now directed to evasive maneuvers — Queen was somehow managing to hang on.

Persil's technique, which had managed to defend against Queen's full-powered attacks for a minute, now formed a shield that Queen had no hopes of piercing.

Even in this situation, however, Queen continued to stare straight at his opponent, his gaze never wavering.

He was already out of stamina. The very act of breathing itself hurt. His body no longer moved as he had willed it to, and yet— *(I won't lose... I don't want to*

lose... Everyone worked so hard to hand the torch to me...!)

No sound rose from Queen's throat. Only raspy breaths.

Even so, Queen continued to repeat those words over and over again in his heart.

Queen had originally transferred over to the northern dormitory in hopes of winning in a duel with Heath, who was the 18th Knight's squire.

That dream had, eventually, disappeared in a relatively strange way.

Even so, Queen did not regret transferring — his memories of his days at the northern dormitory were filled with joy.

His parents, having passed away in an unfortunate accident when Queen was only ten, caused him to inherit their social position at an impossibly young age. However, Queen was far too young to take care of himself.

As a result, Master Zeiness, who happened to be Queen's distant relative, took him in, training him in various martial arts in the process.

Although the time he had spent with Master Zeiness and his fellow disciples were filled with warm memories, everyone present was older than he was, so Queen had no experience with others of his age.

Even after he had entered the eastern dormitory, Queen realized that each squire had their own personal agenda. This was further exacerbated by the fact that a wall of sorts existed between selected tournament members and the other squires — Queen made no friends there.

However, the squires at the northern dormitory had accepted him as one of their own, often going out on excursions together, in addition to getting caught up in one silly thing or another.

Those days were filled with happiness.

For a moment, the image of a blonde-haired girl slowly surfaced in Queen's mind.

The situation was hopeless. Even Queen himself knew this.

If he somehow won this match, everyone in the northern dormitory would be

happy — and this was why Queen continued to defend against Persil's attacks. Even if his chances at victory were close to zero, he would not give up.

Persil, for his part, maintained a perfect defense as he continued to attack Queen.

Although he was famous as a defensive contestant, Persil's attacks were by no means weak — his strikes could easily defeat the likes of Rigel and Luka.

Queen, who continued to defend against Persil's blade, actually possessed impressive defensive technique himself. After all, he had been taught by the strongest swordsman in Orstoll since he was ten — Queen's technique wasn't to be taken lightly either. While Queen had used up much of his stamina on his full-power attacks, he was more than capable of holding out against Persil while maintaining some semblance of offense.

At the same time, however, the teachings of Master Zeiness resurfaced in Queen's mind. At one point, Master Zeiness had observed that Queen would have a high chance of losing against an opponent in his current state should he be unable to defeat them in a minute or less — and that he should not give up even if this were the case.

Just as Master Zeiness had taught him, Queen continued holding on. He would hold on for as long as he possibly could.

At that moment, Persil did something he had not done up until this point, transitioning from merely attacking to an offensive advance. Up until now, Persil had kept Queen at arm's length even while he was attacking, if only to ensure a safe and perfect victory by staying at a distance where Queen's sword could not reach him.

"It is time to end this."

Saying so, Persil took yet another step forward, closing the distance between them. He intended to finish the match then and there.

Queen, however, had something else in mind, kicking down on the ground and accelerating, his speed close to what it had been when he was at his prime.

Even the spectators opened their eyes wide.

“Wha...!”

“He still has some stamina left...?!”

Frankly speaking, Queen was at his limit. Any more than this, and he would collapse — he had been saving his strength for this moment, hoping to unleash one last attack at the right time.

Just as his opponent shifts to defense, he would utilize his last bits of stamina to launch a high-speed attack, catching them unawares.

This was the final technique that his master had taught him — the final technique to use in the event of him being unable to defeat his opponent in one minute.

However —

Queen’s final attack swept through the air, missing its target.

Persil, who avoided the attack without as much as losing his balance, did not appear the slightest bit surprised as he watched on — almost as if he had predicted what Queen would do.

“As I suspected. You would attempt to draw me in by pretending to be more tired than you really were... and then conserve strength for one final attack. It is as I predicted.”

Persil adopted an attacking stance, drawing his wooden sword from his waist in a strong sideways arc.

“Guh!”

Drawing on the last vestiges of his stamina, Queen held out his own sword to block the blow.

With a dull thud, Queen’s body was sent flying, hitting the ground rolling some distance away.

However, Queen stood up once more, readying his sword.

“However, I did not expect that you would still continue to fight. Tell me, Queen. Why do you still fight?”

Queen did not answer. His breath was more rugged than ever, and he had

used his final tactic. Although he had somehow managed to block Persil's counter, he no longer had any other tricks up his sleeve.

The spectators on the stands seemed to share Queen's pain — their hearts were collectively plunged into the depths of despair.

(Won't give up...? Why...?)

Between his aching muscles and clouded mind, Queen did not manage to come up with an answer. It seemed like he could lose the match at any moment.

(Even if that's how it is... I won't just lose here...!)

Queen, readying his sword, lowered and steadied his stance once more.

This was truly the last of his strength — he had nothing left for dodging or defense. However, the distance between them was far too great — it was insufficient for a sudden, quick attack. Queen's stance was one of desperation — it was his last stand.

To Queen, however, this was a much better alternative to endlessly defending and eventually losing.

At this point, both Persil and Queen knew that the next attack was truly the very last one of the match. Persil readied himself, adopting a countering stance.

The distance between them was five meters.

Queen, readying his final attack, begun accelerating, running over those five meters. However, he could not muster the speed to do what he needed to do. He was already at his physical and mental limits.

"N... No...! Queen...!"

The squires of the northern dormitory could only watch on, their gasps and words tinged with despair and defeat.

If Queen continued moving forward, Persil would catch him with a simple counter and everything would end.

At that moment, a voice rang out —

"Queen! Do your best!"

The source of the voice was a blonde-haired squire of a somewhat small build, who seemed to be cheering for Queen.

Fie, having finally sat through the last parts of Heslow's lecture, had finally returned to the arena.

As if he could not believe his eyes, Queen turned to look in the direction of the voice — but only for a single moment.

"Don't lose to him, Queen!!"



When Queen returned his gaze to his opponent, his body once again began accelerating.

Persil, for his part, was a little surprised. With Queen's stamina at its limits, his final charge should not have achieved more than about 50% of his initial speed. As such, Persil assumed that it would be easy to defend against such a blow. The match would have ended then and there.

However, Queen's body seemed to continue accelerating as he headed for Persil.

(This... It is equivalent to the speed he started the match with... It is simple, then. I will defend against it like I did at the start...)

Persil, who had been surprised for a second, immediately began his mental calculations once more.

It was not unreasonable for Persil to be surprised — after all, Queen had somehow managed to achieve his initial speeds after all this time. However, even if he could not counter an attack at that speed, he could defend against it. Queen, having used the last of his stamina, would surely be unable to guard against any subsequent attacks. It was a perfect calculation.

There was no room for mistakes or overestimation.

Persil recalled his opponent's attack patterns once more, taking a defensive stance.

In that moment, however, Queen vanished.

(... What?!)

Persil's surprise at this was very much real. His emotionless eyes, which usually regarded his opponent calmly behind his spectacles, was now opened wide in disbelief.

Persil had completely lost track of Queen. He immediately turned around — it was something uncharacteristic for him, a movement caused by pure instinct.

He was there —

Queen was there.

Persil, who had lost all traces of his defensive stance, became aware of Queen's gaze — now seemingly recovered and very much alive.

His feet, pounding upon the ground, caused him to accelerate at an even faster speed — to Persil, it seemed like Queen would disappear if he so much as rubbed his eyes.

(He's faster than he was before the match began...! I have... no data on this...!!)

Before Persil could raise his sword and complete his defensive stance, Queen's blade was already past that point. It thrust into Persil's body with the force of a cyclone.

For a while, the two stood, their backs against each other, unmoving. The spectator stands froze, and the entire arena fell quiet.

A few seconds later, Persil's body collapsed and hit the ground.

"Th-The winner of this match is... Queen!!"

The referee's announcement was drowned out by the cheers of the crowd.

Amidst it all, Queen stood, unable to process what had just happened.

(I didn't think I could win...)

Persil was strong. He possessed a high level of defensive techniques and barely had any gaps in his defense. In addition, he had obtained information on Queen, and formulated various strategies to win.

Turning his exhausted body around, Queen came face to face with Persil, who was holding his side as he stood up. He had been struck by Queen's attack head-on and was swaying where he stood.

Panicking, Queen motioned to support him, but was stopped by Persil, motioning with a raised hand.

"No, I am fine. I can walk on my own. Are you not tired as well?"

Although he had received such a ferocious attack, Persil remained calm,

instead questioning Queen.

“More importantly... allow me to ask you a question. At that point, you were physically and mentally exhausted. You were at your limit. Why, then, were you able to move in such a way?”

Queen’s last riposte — it was faster than any series of actions he had taken in this match.

With such a question posed to him, Queen could not help but think. And then...

Queen’s face promptly turned red, and he started fidgeting, acting in an increasingly suspicious way.

“Eh...? Uh... no... well... that is... it’s... something...”

Persil could only look upon his fellow squire with a curious gaze, not understanding Queen’s behavior.

“Queeeeeeeen!”

Someone had flown into his body — it was a face that even Persil knew. To be precise, it was the face of the vanguard who had led the northern dormitory’s side — a young squire by the name of Heath.

Having somehow alighted from the spectator stands once more, Fie had flown into Queen, holding him tight as she cheered.

“Queen! That was so cooooool! You did so weeeeeell!!”

“H-Heath...?!”

Her small hands ran through Queen’s sweat-drenched hair. Although Queen’s face started becoming even more red, Fie, who was touched and overcome by his victory, did not seem to notice.

(S-Soft...! Also, she smells good...!)

Beleaguered from his match, Queen was desperately trying not to fall over, swaying this way and that for various reasons. Fie, however, did not notice this and continued ruffling Queen’s hair.

It did not take long for the other squires of the northern dormitory to rush

down from the stands, surrounding the pair.

“Queen! You were awesome!”

“You did so well maaaan! Queeeeen!!!”

“You’re the hero of the day, Queen!”

One by one, Queen’s fellow squires piled onto him, their weight adding onto his burden.

Queen, unable to bear the weight any longer, promptly fell over with the other squires piling up over him. It was worth noting, however, that Fie had made a hasty retreat, narrowly escaping from the dogpile of squires on the arena grounds.

The squires, emotionally worn out from witnessing the match, hugged him, shook his hand, and slapped him on the back — but throughout all this, Queen looked very much content and happy.

Watching from the sidelines, Persil adjusted his glasses as he always did.

“I see. The strength of the bond between you and your comrades... Indeed, I did not calculate or plan for that.”

As he spoke, the formerly emotionless Persil allowed the corner of his lips to curl up, smiling quietly as he left the arena.

Back at the eastern dormitory’s spectator stands, however, Carnegis could only gape, staring at the match results in disbelief.

“No...! This is impossible... How can it come to this...!”

Due to the fact that a previous match had ended in a draw, Queen’s victory translated into the northern dormitory’s win.

In the end, the eastern dormitory had lost... even with the elite members at its disposal. Even with the harsh, specifically-tailored training regimen that was designed to perfectly defeat the northern dormitory’s contestants.

Carnegis could only look on in a daze, his eyes moving from the overjoyed squires of the northern dormitory to the silhouette of the returning Persil.

“I was going to win here... Win thrice in a row and win back my youth...!

Ugh...!”

“Did you really think such selfish thoughts and actions would make your dream come true? There was never any way that could have worked. Actually, even if it did work out, there would be much left to be desired.”

The voice that Carnegis heard as he was holding his head in despair seemed to be one of an older woman — but one that was oddly familiar.

Turning around in surprise, Carnegis could only stare at the sight of Trokko and the woman standing before him. Upon recognizing her, however, Carnegis exclaimed loudly once more, unable to contain his bewilderment.

“E-Elizabetta!!”

The woman in question seemed to be in her late thirties, with a head full of long, flaxen hair. Although Elizabetta’s age did show on her features, she was still very much a beautiful woman, and was no doubt dazzling in her younger days. She was dressed in all-white clothing — a rare style for a woman.

Standing absolutely still, she stared at Carnegis, her cold gaze carrying a slight tinge of anger.

“Wh-What are you doing here? Why are you here?!”

“I divorced my husband last year and returned to Orstoll about half a year ago. I now work for His Majesty the King as a member of Orstoll’s medical institution, having received a personal invitation.”

Carnegis, upon witnessing Elizabetta’s casually delivered statement, immediately turned to Trokko.

“Trokko! Y-You knew?! Why didn’t you say anything to me?!”

“Oh, but I did. I tried to, quite a few times. But then, this year, all you could tell me was, ‘I will not speak to any members of the northern dormitory until the duel is over!’ Don’t you remember?”

Carnegis could only stand still, rooted to the spot. He had, in fact, said those words. Those very exact words.

Abruptly turning to Carnegis, Elizabetta spoke, her voice loud and clear.

“After I had returned, you said nothing to me — not even bothering to contact me. If anything, I thought you had long forgotten about me. And yet, here I am, discovering that you still hold such a grudge about what happened decades ago, and now you are involving children in your schemes...”

“N-No! It’s not like that, Elizabetta!”

“What do you mean by ‘no’? That’s exactly what it is!”

“It... It’s true...”

Elizabetta wasn’t wrong. In fact, it was exactly as she described.

Carnegis’ face began turning a slow shade of pale as Elizabetta’s exasperated stare drilled into him, beads of sweat beginning to flow down his back. Slowly, Carnegis’ shoulders slumped.

Trokko, who had been silent all this time, continued his explanation, his voice carrying a slight hint of pity.

“The trouble began when you split up with Elizabetta, didn’t it? It was since then that you started undertaking actions that were plainly driven by hatred towards the northern dormitory. I thought you would eventually recover, but year after year, you just seemed to get worse. Although those around you, and even myself, advised you of the error of your ways, you found some way to justify your actions. I’m sorry, but Elizabetta wasn’t the only one I reported this to. The knight-captains have been informed as well.”

“I-Is that so...”

Although Carnegis had become even paler from the revelations, he slowly nodded.

As if to deal the finishing blow, Elizabetta spoke once more.

“Sir Carnegis. It seems like you have become quite the pathetic knight, after all this time. What happened this time was truly disappointing. It seems like I have misjudged you. I hope you find it in yourself to apologize to all those that you have inconvenienced. As for me, I do not even wish to see your face — I will be taking my leave.”

With that, Elizabetta turned, motioning to leave.

Carnegis, panicking, tried to stop her.

“W-Wait! Elizabetta!”

As if forgetting something, Elizabetta turned, facing Carnegis once more.

“Which reminds me... There is something I intended to say after returning to Orstoll. Seventeen years ago, you suffered three consecutive losses. However, your spirit and efforts were admirable. I was a fool back then — young and childish. I reprimanded you for losing, and I apologize for that.”

“E-Elizabetta...” Carnegis’ eyes opened wide, disbelief written all over his face.

However, Elizabetta’s eyes were cold.

“But look at you now. What have you been doing? Your actions are pathetic. Truly. Goodbye.”

And with that, Elizabetta turned, walking away from the stands rapidly.

“E-ELIZABETTAAAAAAAAAA!”

Carnegis’ wail echoed throughout the tournament grounds, his outstretched hand grasping nothing but thin air.

“For unfairly modifying dormitory assignments due to personal grudges... For manipulating and creating a scenario in which the eastern dormitory would be at an advantage during the inter-dormitory duel... I have caused all of you much suffering. I apologize with all of my being!”

Carnegis genuflected in front of Fie and the others, who had been preparing to leave after the tournament. His heavily gelled hair touched the ground as he lowered his head. Although a fair amount of gel had been applied to his hair, it was now somewhat messy.

“I have to apologize too. I did not take the situation seriously because Carnegis was a friend. I am responsible for what led to this unreasonable escalation and state of affairs. Carnegis and I have caused all of you much trouble. We apologize.”

Trokko joined his friend, adopting a similar pose with his head touching the ground.

Fie and the other squires could not help but panic at the sight of this.

“W-We’re not in trouble at all! Right! Right?!”

“Y-Yeah! I mean, those eastern dormitory guys sure pissed us off when they came and said all that, but it was just a spat!”

“It is pretty common, isn’t it? Trash-talking your opponent and all that.”

“I am completely satisfied with my dormitory assignment.”

To be honest, the squires were not fond of the likes of Rigel or Luka at all, but could not bring themselves to say anything at the sight of the apologetic Carnegis and Trokko. They kept their complaints to themselves.

“I’m sorry... all of you... I am so, so sorry...” Upon hearing the squires’ gentle words, Carnegis, unable to keep his feelings in check any longer, began crying with his forehead still on the arena grounds.

From a distance, the group looked like they were having fun and celebrating, but the current mood was heavy — whatever had possessed and driven Carnegis in his schemes had clearly left him.

Although Carnegis was responsible for the entire chain of events, Fie and the rest did not feel like it was severe enough to be apologized for in this fashion.

They had fun at the event, and did not really know how to respond to the scene laid out before them.

In their confusion, the squires of the northern dormitory looked at each other, then eventually nodded collectively.

“Please raise your head, Sir Carnegis.”

“We really enjoy our time at the northern dormitory!”

“I’ve made friends, and I enjoy every single day!”

“That’s why we’re grateful to Sir Trokko for recruiting us... and we don’t bear any grudges against you either, Sir Carnegis.”

“So... you haven’t really done anything bad at all.”

At those words, Carnegis finally raised his head.

His face, tear-streaked, seemed to compliment his now intensely messy hair.

“Y-You guys...”

Carnegis, apparently too moved to say any more, could only listen as Trokko calmly spoke in his stead.

“Although I do not show my face often due to my workload, I am very glad that all of you have decided to join the Royal Knights, and subsequently the northern dormitory. Thank you. As for Carnegis and myself... we will be punished for our actions and inactions. While I do know what will become of us, we hope that we can one day accompany you and enrich your lives as squires once more. Well then, let’s get going, Carnegis.”

“Yes... Let us go.”

With those words, Trokko and Carnegis were gone, fading into the crowds.

As Fie and her group left the arena grounds, they were confronted by the squires of the eastern dormitory, albeit without Carnegis in tow. They all had somewhat relaxed, good-natured expressions — perhaps this was how they had originally been, without the incitements and misguided directions of Sir Carnegis.

Running a hand through his hair, Luka adopted yet another condescending pose.

“I won’t deny that we lost to you all this time. But, who would have known? It was a big learning experience for me. I’m glad we fought. I’ll be back for our revenge match next year, though.”

Although Luka’s condescending and somewhat annoying tone of voice was still present, he no longer invaded the personal spaces of those he spoke with, nor did he put his hands on anyone’s chin.

In particular, Luka seemed to avoid Fie, apparently having been traumatized from his experience.

“Well, I AM a genius either way. But I guess I’ve been working in the wrong direction. I’ll be back next year after some hard work... And I’ll show you the

true power of a genius!”

Rigel was confident, as usual, still touting himself as a genius.

However, neither of them carried ridicule in their words, a stark contrast to their earlier attitudes.

The squires of both dormitories, no longer feeling the rivalry they felt during the tournament, started to mingle, speaking with each other about various topics.

Although they were rivals over the course of the tournament, many of them hailed from the same dojos, or were from similar levels of aristocracy.

Fie, who did not have any connections with the Orstoll-born squires, decided to approach her previous opponent instead.

“W-Wait! Y-You there... Could you p-please keep your distance...?” Luka waved his arms comically, trying to illustrate a two-meter distance between him and Fie.

Fie however, disregarded his gestures, moving closer with each step. Although Luka attempted to intimidate Fie with his condescending-as-usual laughter, sweat was dripping down the back of his neck.

Fie chasing Luka around in circles would eventually become a highlight of the day.

Kerio and Remie, standing a considerable distance away from the crowds, faced each other as they spoke.

“You’ve won this time. If I am selected as a duel member next year, let’s settle our fight then and there.”

“Yes! I’ll train hard to face you head on next year!”

The two squires nodded.

In another corner were Persil and Queen.

“Queen. You have showed your strength, and the power of the bonds between you and your friends. I will account for this with revised strategies and a new training regimen. Let us fight again sometime in the future.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Upon hearing Persil speak of bonds, Queen blushed once more, nodding as he acknowledged Persil’s words.

For a while, the squires of both dormitories spoke — barring two, who seemed to be running in circles. Eventually, the two groups went their separate ways, and Fie and her friends walked back to their dormitory.

They were in high spirits — the tournament was won, and it seemed like the squires of the eastern dormitory were not so bad after all. Although Fie was filled with satisfaction, she seemed to recall a particularly unsatisfying detail as she recalled the events of the day.

“Come to think of it... I didn’t really see your matches! I wanted to spectate everyone’s matches...”

Fie had, after all, been listening to yet another lecture from Heslow, and by the time she had returned, Queen and Persil were already well into their match. She had decided to cheer where she stood, and was disappointed that the match immediately ended after that.

“I’ve heard that both Gormus and Remie’s matches were cool! If only I had seen them...”

“Well, my match was too straightforward. There was no need to watch.”

“I’m happy you would say that even though my match was a draw!”

Gormus spoke with confidence evident in his hard features, while Remie simply smiled.

“Oh, but I saw Queen’s final attack, too! That was so cool, Queen! Did you hear my cheering?” asked Fie, raising her head to look at Queen, who had been walking next to her all this time.

“Ah... uh... well... yeah.”

Fie, however, did not seem bothered.

“It’s fine if you didn’t hear it! Everyone else was cheering for you too.”

“No... I heard it! I definitely heard it!”

“Really?”

“Yeah...”

Fie could not help but smile at Queen’s furious nodding.

“Well. That’s good, then!”

Although Fie was unable to spectate most of her friend’s matches, it would appear that she had managed to cheer one of them on — and that was enough for her.

However, Fie could not help but take note of how easily embarrassed Queen was. After all, he had performed very well — Fie felt that Queen should be proud of that fact.

With that thought in mind, Fie continued walking, only to see a familiar figure in the distance.

Fie wasted no time running towards the figure.

“Captain Yore! Did you see my match?”

Although Yore had been in the stands all this time, Fie did not think much of her question, running towards her platoon captain in joy.

“Yes, of course. Although you lost in a duel setting, it was an admirable effort at breaking your opponent’s defenses. It would be wise to fully understand the rules before coming up with a strategy next time, however,” Yore said as he placed a single hand on Fie’s head, ruffling her hair in praise.

Surprised, Fie opened her eyes wide, but quickly allowed the praise to wash over her being.

“Heh heh!”

Announcing that he still had work to do, Fie parted ways with Yore, returning to her group with a light jog.

“Ah. You should have met Captain Yore too, Queen! Sorry, I didn’t think about that...”

“No, it’s fine.” Queen shook his head at Fie’s words.

Although Queen had been obsessed with meeting Yore some time ago, this

no longer appeared to be the case. Even so, Fie made a mental note to arrange a meeting between the two.

However, Fie did not understand the rambunctious atmosphere that was currently in the air — although they were happy from winning the tournament, this appeared to be something else altogether.

Apparently, Sir Trokko had given Gormus a small sum of money so that the squires could all celebrate.

“Wah! I’m looking forward to it! Queen, you’re coming too, right?”

“Yes.”

It had been more than half a year since Queen had transferred in — he was more or less already an irreplaceable member of the northern dormitory.

The dormitory canteen’s staff had apparently been informed that the squires were going out, so there were no issues with that night’s culinary arrangements. And so, Fie and the squires of the northern dormitory enjoyed a fun-filled night at the downtown district.

Carnegis and Trokko, for their punishment, were assigned to a six-month long expedition, along with having their salary reduced. However, upon the petition and overall opinion of the other knights and squires, their punishment was reduced to a four-month expedition instead.

Amongst the members who organized the petition were also those who had graduated from the northern dormitory in the past. It would seem like the two were well-respected amongst the squires, now knights, who had graduated from their dormitories.

It was perhaps worth noting that amongst the other names in the petition were some familiar entries — specifically, the names of Fie and the rest of her friends.

Side Story: Studying for the Test

Thinking that the job of a knight is to fight, for one cause or another, was a common misconception.

After all, knights engage in all sorts of civic duties, from assisting individuals involved in unfortunate accidents, ceremonial attendance of public functions, and even tending to scripts and other literary duties.

However, if one was incapable of combat, then perhaps it would be fair to say that such an individual would not be very knightly at all.

No matter how one spun it, strength was of an undeniable importance to any knight worth their salt.

It is because of this belief that the squires of the Royal Knights continued to train and work hard, all the while aspiring to be just like their seniors.

These very squires, however, were currently stuck in a particularly daunting stage of their journey — instead of their usual training regimen today, the squires were learning about history, language, and mathematics, with a dash of scientific studies on the side. Such was how their afternoon was spent, under the watchful eye of an instructor.

Squires, for their part, had to excel in their studies as well — this was the direction that Orstoll had decided to take with regards to education in general.

To ensure that the squires were keeping up with their studies, a test was administered every few months.

The test was fair, if not thorough — they would be tested on everything that they had learned so far. Squires who scored below a certain threshold would be required to attend remedial lessons on their rest days.

In a certain corner of the northern dormitory, a single piece of paper was hung up. Slad, who had been staring at the paper for a while, had turned decidedly pale.

“Guh... What is this? What do you mean there’s only one more week until the test...?”

“You are aware that the notice has been up for the past ten days, right...?” Such were the words of Gees, who was currently looking at his friend with a considerably exasperated expression.

Slad, who was lively and more physically-oriented, did not have a history of good grades. Perhaps it was because Slad also had a tendency to skip classes — his grades in history, language, mathematics, and the natural sciences were all bad.

On the other hand, Gees’ grades could be said to be somewhat average. Considering that Gees was actually younger than Slad, Slad could not help but feel a little pathetic.

“I mean... There’s been a lot of events up until now, right? The inter-dormitory duel... and all that, you know? There’s hardly any time for something like studying!”

“So you say, but... there’s been nothing between the time of the notice being posted and now, right? That’s just an excuse, Slad...”

“Ugh...”

A somewhat pathetic sound escaped Slad’s lips upon Gees’ mercilessly accurate reasoning.

“Ahh. Don’t worry about it too much. You can always ask me if you don’t understand something. We should work hard.” Witnessing their exchange, Remie could only smile apologetically as he offered his friends some words of encouragement.

Slad, touched by Remie’s caring nature, hugged his friend with watery eyes.

“Remie! You’re such a nice guy... You’re like... the goddess of the northern dormitory!”

“Ah... Ah... Haha...”

Although Remie’s features darkened for a moment upon being addressed as a “goddess,” he was soon back to his old self, smiling warmly at Slad. He was,

after all, third from the bottom with regards to the manliness ranking contest. Unknown to Slad, his words of gratitude had accidentally ended up hitting a nerve.

“You’re always like this... Well, I guess I’ll help too...”

Placing his hands on his hips, Gees sighed, eventually deciding to tag along. This was as mundane and regular as daily life in the northern dormitory could get.

“What about you, Heath?”

With the boisterous atmosphere somewhat settling, Gees and his group decided to ask after Fie instead.

“Heh heh.” The grinning Fie handed Slad a slip of paper.

“Wh-What do you mean by you’re fifth from the top in the dorm?!” Slad couldn’t help but be surprised at what was written on the slip of paper.

“Who would have thought... Heath, of all people, had good grades all along?”

“Well, I did study for it, you know.”

Although Fie was the northern dormitory’s problem child, it would seem like she had reasonably good grades. In addition, Fie also attended lessons regularly and handed in assigned homework on time. It occurred to the other squires that Fie was actually a model student in this specific regard.

“So Heath is a good student after all!”

“Actually, why do you even carry that slip of paper with you? Don’t tell me you have it on you at all times...?”

It was perhaps worth noting that Remie, who had just praised Fie, was ranked 7th from the top — it would seem like Remie excelled in his studies as well. Gees, however, was in 15th place. Slad, whose grades were at the bottom of the barrel, never did reveal his exact ranking.

“Hmph. Tests. What a pain. If I don’t do well on them, though, everything I have done until now would mean nothing. Got no choice but to do them.”

Gormus, as expected, found his studies difficult.

However, his position was far better than Slad's. Although he displayed little interest in history and language, often sleeping in those classes, Gormus' unexpected interest in mathematics and the sciences ensured that he scored better in those subjects. It would appear that Gormus was the kind of squire who would put his heart to something if it interested him.

In Gormus' case, all he had to do was ensure that he scored a minimally acceptable grade in history and language — that much was enough for him to stay beyond the reach of remedial lessons.

"Seems like you guys are fine this time round too, huh..."

Fie nodded at Gees' words.

"Yeah, I guess. You're fine too, right, Queen? Eh...? Queen...?" Fie trailed off mid-sentence as she turned to look at Queen.

Fie could not help but feel a tinge of doubt as her eyes swept across Queen, who was currently pale-faced, shivering where he stood.

"Queen... Don't tell me you're... Not good at..."

"N-No... I'm f-fine..."

Despite his assurances, Queen did not appear to be fine at all.

"...Show me your history quiz from today."

"Eh..."

Staring hard at Queen, Fie repeated her request.

"Show it to me..."

"Uhh...."

Although Queen clearly had apprehensions about showing Fie his test results, Fie was not so forgiving.

Slowly and fearfully, Queen took out a slip of paper and handed it to Fie with shaking hands.

"Wh-What is this?!"

A variety of crosses adorned Queen's answer sheet, and his results were

terrible to say the least — even for a quiz. Academic knowledge was, after all, attained by an ongoing, daily effort. With Queen's current marks being the way they were, there was no doubt that he would do poorly on the upcoming test as well.

"You didn't get a single one of these right? What exactly have you been doing in class?!"

"..." Queen could not answer.

To be specific, he could not bring himself to say that he had spent the entire lesson staring at someone he liked, although such was more than common for youth their age.

"I mean... I never even thought that it was possible for your grades to be this bad..." Fie returned her gaze to the test sheet.

Amongst the squires of the northern dormitory, those of noble birth commonly had higher grades — it was common practice for noble families to begin educating their children from a young age.

Conversely, those born in the downtown and slum districts, such as Slad, commonly disliked schoolwork of any kind, and avoided studying as much as they could.

Fie had not worried about Queen much due to him being of noble birth — this development was unexpected, to say the least.

"What exactly has been going on?"

Although it was his first test in the northern dormitory, it went without saying that Queen had taken similar tests during his time at the eastern dormitory as well. However, Fie did not think it was possible for Queen to have transferred in with such poor grades.

Wiping away considerable amounts of sweat from his brow, Queen finally offered an explanation with a defeated look on his face.

"I was never good at studying to begin with... And those with martial ability in the eastern dormitory were told that it was fine to not study. Sir Carnegis would do something about it and convince the higher-ups, or so we were told..."

“UGHHH! That stupid dormitoryyy!”

Such was Fie’s opinion of the eastern dormitory. If the east-north inter-dormitory duel had not taken place, none of this would have happened — although nothing much could be done about it now.

It would seem that Queen, who had been raised in a relatively rural part of Orstoll, in addition to not being very apt at his studies, had been transferred in from the eastern dormitory without much effort to remedy the problem.

Upon witnessing Fie’s rage, Queen could not help but take several steps backwards.

“I-In any case, we still have a week! We can all work hard. It’ll be fine as long as you don’t fail. I’ll help!” said Remie, panic evident in his voice as he attempted to smooth over the situation.

Although Fie had initially assumed Queen could take care of himself one way or another, she was now obviously unsettled over his poor grades.

Slad and Queen. Taking their poor grades into account, it was decided that Fie and Remie’s groups would both offer their assistance.

As if to reinforce her point, Fie’s stare continued to drill into Queen.

“You don’t want to fail your test, Queen.”

“Yes...”

Although Fie could seem excessively strict with Queen, she did genuinely worry about his well-being.

That was just how it was, and it was a fact that would not change anytime soon.

And so it came to be that the six squires all ended up assembling in Remie’s room.

Perhaps it was due to his noble upbringing — Remie’s room was adequately furnished and cleaned, making for a good study environment.

“So... why am I here? Could you not have picked someone else...?” Gormus,

who had been strung along as usual, appeared somewhat dissatisfied.

“Your grades in history and language are just barely passing, Gormus.”

“I know. I planned for it to be that way.”

Although no one knew if Gormus’ claims were true, it was true that Gormus never failed his tests.

“Don’t be like that. It’s not too bad to stray off the well-worn path, right?” said Slad, who had wasted no time in going back to his cheerful self and was now giving the thumbs up.

“To begin with, the reason why all of this happened is because of you two.”

“Ugh...” Slad, robbed of his words once more, could only groan in despair.

“Quit dallying. Open your textbooks; we’ll start by going through what we’ve learned up until now.”

“Yes...”

Fie began teaching Queen what she knew, rapidly rattling off concepts and facts. It would seem that Fie was taking this seriously, and fully intended for Queen to score well on the upcoming test.

“Well then, I will teach Slad history and language. I’m unexpectedly good at them.”

“Then... I will help with mathematics and the sciences...”

“Thanks for the help you guys!” With that, Slad began his study session.

As for Gormus...

“Ah. Gormus, you can just copy these and make some notes of your own.” Fie handed her notes on history to her fellow squire.

Fie wanted to ensure that Gormus got something out of the study session.

“Hmph. I guess I have no choice.”

Although Gormus wanted to start studying after the others had gotten started, he ended up doing as he was told, perhaps out of respect for Fie’s efforts.

The study session progressed, somewhat quietly.

“Ughh... I... I’m fading...”

“Everyone is helping, you know. Pick yourself up...”

Although complaints periodically rose from Slad, Gees was quick to put him back on track. The seating arrangement was quite straightforward — Fie and Queen borrowed Remie’s table, while Slad, Gees, and Remie were crowded around a low table on the ground.

Gormus, unfortunately, had to sit on the bed, his large build not allowing him to do his note-taking anywhere else.

Fie, who had taken on the role of Queen’s teacher, decided to issue a small test of her own to analyze Queen’s overall academic level. The results, however, left much to be desired.

“Hmm... You aren’t too bad at language, but you’ve basically failed everything else...”

Queen’s reading habit had apparently translated into a good grade for language. However, Queen’s score in history, mathematics, and the natural sciences were by no means acceptable.

“Since you can take history notes and memorize facts on your own, let’s work on mathematics and science instead.”

“Okay.”

“I guess you need help with everything, so I’ll have to condense the information into just the main points somehow...”

Although Fie had wanted to teach Queen from the very basics up, they did not currently have that much time to spare. Strategically, Fie planned to teach Queen the topics most likely to appear on the upcoming test. However, as it was impossible to predict the nature of every single question, Fie could only do so much and taught Queen to the best of her ability.

“I’m sorry...” said Queen, turning to Fie with an apologetic expression. Fie, however, only smiled in acknowledgment.

“Let’s just work hard and do what we can. I’m sure the work we put in here won’t be for nothing.”

“Yes.”

Queen studied relatively hard on that day.

Fie and her friends continued studying for the upcoming test.

Queen, for his part, was not faring too badly — he was not illiterate to begin with, and was quick to understand concepts.

In fact, other than the times where he was engaged in battle, Queen’s personality was somewhat docile. On a sunny day, he was prone to losing focus in class; and instead of studying, he would read his favorite books. If anything, Queen’s current results were directly caused by these factors.

Queen’s ambiguous dog-like personality did, perhaps, have a part to play in it as well.

However, Fie was encouraged by Queen’s progress, and was now raising her expectations.

As today was a rest day, Fie saw it as a good opportunity for studying.

“If we are going to do it, we might as well head to the library. I would rather not be squeezed in such a small space with six people again.” This was Gormus’ suggestion, as he had been cramped in the relatively small space last time.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“All right, let’s head there after finishing lunch.”

There were no objections.

The six squires promptly headed over to the library after finishing their lunch. The library was quiet, as usual, and characteristically empty. Fie and her group quickly secured some seats and began yet another study session.

Fie, who had historically scored well on her tests, had the liberty of walking around and looking at various books as she tutored Queen. This particular library featured many reference materials and academic scriptures, and as such

was a good environment for studying.

However, its lack of popular fiction and recreational magazines meant that it was not too popular amongst the castle's general populace.

Upon retrieving several reference books for herself and Queen, Fie returned to her seat to begin her studies anew.

For a while, the squires silently carried on with their task, until a few voices interrupted them, their mocking laughter all too familiar.

"Hahaha. Look at these commoners. I feel so sad for them!"

Turning around curiously, the squires came face to face with Rigel and Luka.

"What are you guys doing?"

Luka responded to Fie's question with yet another exaggerated pose, brushing his hair back theatrically.

"We saw you and your group head to the library. We had free time on our hands, so we decided to follow you."

It would seem like the two were telling the truth.

"To think that you would be studying, of all things! Even a genius like me could not possibly have thought of such an outcome."

As if to emphasize the pity he felt for them, Rigel shook his head, waving his mushroom-shaped haircut this way and that.

It was almost as if the two had expected Fie and her group to do something other than studying at the library.

"Aren't you quite the busybodies... Doesn't the eastern dormitory have tests, too? Are you sure you two are fine without studying, Rigel, Luka?"

Fie was under the impression that the two of them were more academically inclined than they let on. However, Rigel and Luka only continued shaking their heads in response to Fie's question.

"We're strong, you know. Strong amongst the strong. People like that don't have to study. Those around us do not wish for us to be academically strong — but to be strong in combat."

“Yes, exactly. The rights of geniuses, you know? Oh, don’t misunderstand. We are not geniuses and overflowing with talent by choice, you know. In fact, we sometimes envy commoners like you, who have to study so hard for their goals!”

Fie was uncertain of where to start pointing out the contradictions in their boasts, especially considering that the eastern dormitory had lost in the recent tournament.

“Well... that’s what Sir Carnegis decided, right? Since he has been removed from his position now, won’t that change soon?”

At those words, Rigel and Luka froze, rooted to the spot.

Fie reflected that the two were a little bit too silly for their own good.

“Hahaha.... How can that be...?”

“Yes... to think that we would need remedial lessons? Us...?”

As the two stood with pale faces and shivering voices, a familiar silhouette passed behind them, joining in on the conversation.

“It is as they say. Have you not been aware of the notice pasted on the dormitory’s boards?”

Persil, having overheard the conversation, offered his succinct observations on the matter.

It would seem that Rigel and Luka, having been too absorbed in their recreational activities, did not see the test notice at all. After all, this was all they knew ever since joining the eastern dormitory. They too were victims to a certain extent.

“Eh...?”

The light in their eyes, which had been so bright mere moments ago, was now fully faded, their features overcome by apprehension and fear. Upon seeing this, Persil could only apologize with an equally apologetic expression on his face.

“I see... You have not read the notice. Perhaps I should have informed you two of it as well... I apologize. Even if you only start now, I pray that you work

hard.”

With a pat to both their backs, Persil left with a few books he had borrowed under his arm.

Luka and Rigel, however, continued standing where they were, their pale faces staring into thin air.

If Fie had to make an educated guess, those two were beyond saving. After all, only three days remained until the start of the test.

Perhaps it was a day where Fie and her friends were fated to meet squires of the eastern dormitory — the coincidences continued, with Kerio being the next squire to appear, his familiar form walking through the library entrance.

“Remie. You were studying here?”

Upon seeing Remie, Kerio approached the group, addressing the other squire warmly. It would seem like the two had become friends after their match.

“Yes. Are you studying too, Kerio?”

“Yeah. Although it’s not because I’ve been slacking off. Lack of academic focus is a problem in our dormitory as well, and so I thought I’d actually put some effort in and work hard for this test.” As he spoke, Kerio snuck a peek at Remie’s neatly-written equations and mathematics notes.

“You’re smart, Remie. There are some things about this math question here I don’t get... If it’s all right, could you teach me how to solve it?”

“Yes, of course!” Remie said, his usual happy smile on his face.

As a result, Kerio, who had originally been a passerby, ended up joining their study group. After all, he was now a friend of Remie’s, and the group accepted him readily.

Fie pointed at Rigel and Luka, still frozen as they witnessed the exchange between Kerio and Remie.

“Don’t end up like them, Queen. You hear?”

Nodding with a somewhat mysterious expression, Queen promptly agreed.

The very next moment, however...

“Please teach us as well!”

“Please!”

Rigel and Luka both begged, suddenly on their knees, their previous attitudes and boasts of being supposedly strong geniuses now evaporating into thin air.



The day of the test finally came.

Fie and her friends were seated in a classroom of the northern dormitory, each one writing their answers down on the test sheet before them.

On this day, the squire's usual training was suspended, allowing them to sit for the test in relative peace.

Fie was doing well. The time she had spent teaching Queen ended up being a good review for her, and ultimately benefited them both. Fie had no issues answering most of the test's questions.

Meanwhile, Queen wasn't doing too badly either. Although he had a previous history of terrible grades and didn't listen during lectures, him being of noble birth, and his habit of reading ended up working out in his favor. All he had to do was to memorize the relevant facts.

As Fie had spent time teaching Queen mathematics, he was now somewhat proficient. While Queen did not have any trouble understanding the concepts at first, his lack of long-term study meant that he had been unable to solve basic equations. However, with some practice, that problem had been solved.

As for the natural sciences, Fie had done what she could to teach Queen the more easily-memorized parts, under the assumption that Queen would score enough points in those sections to avoid failing at the very least.

As for Gormus, who had started his studies much earlier than he usually did, the test did not prove to be much of a challenge. Most of Gormus' problems with academics would have been solved if he had approached it in this manner to begin with — the reason for him not doing so thus far could perhaps be attributed to his personality.

Remie, who had a habit of daily revision, did not have any issues with the test at all. However, he did have an enjoyable time studying with his fellow squires.

Gees in particular benefited from the sessions, and now found it easier to answer questions on the test. Perhaps all those study sessions were worth something after all.

Slad, however, had launched an all-nighter before the test — with a number

of bags under his eyes to attest to that fact. While his friends had worried about him as he entered the classroom with a pronounced sway in his walk, they all hoped that it would work out one way or another.

The test results were handed out a few days later.

Heslow, standing at the front of the class, called up each squire individually and handed them their test results.

The squires, in turn, walked to the front of the class when called.

“Heath.”

Fie walked up to the front of the class without any hesitation.

Heslow, however, looked at Fie, and then back at her results, before sighing in resignation.

“I wish you were this serious in your actual combat training, Heath...”

Fie had apparently moved up a rank and was now 4th from the top, scoring 86 in language, 87 in mathematics, 92 in history, and 85 in the natural sciences.

“Eh heh heh.” Laughing with some degree of satisfaction, Fie returned to her seat.

Soon after, Gormus, Gees, Queen, and Remie were called.

Judging by Heslow’s facial expressions, it would seem that they had all passed the test.

Slad, however, was called after the main group.

The five squires who had been studying with Slad all this time collectively swallowed in anticipation.

Heslow looked at Slad’s results, then turned to face the squire, handing him his test results as he did so.

“Slad... you barely passed. Make sure you review on a regular basis from here on out.”

“Yes...”

Slad, returning to his seat, slumped down like a puppet with its strings cut. It would seem like a great burden had left him. Fie, for her part, was relieved as well.

All the squires received their results, and with that, lessons for that day were over.

Queen immediately approached Fie, a happy expression on his face.

“I somehow managed to pass all my subjects!”

“Yeah. That’s great!” Fie could not help but feel a sense of fulfillment upon seeing Queen’s satisfied smile.

“What were your scores?” inquired Fie, and she went through Queen’s test papers out of curiosity.

Queen had scored 48 points in the natural sciences. Perhaps that much was to be expected — Fie could only teach him the main points of the subject due to time constraints.

Language, at 75 points, was not too bad of a showing at all, thanks to Queen’s reading habit. However, Queen could do with some work on the trivia sections of the paper.

As for history, Queen scored 50 points — although he had been taught the relevant material, he had made a number of careless mistakes. Fie made a mental note to correct this in future study sessions — after all, he could have scored much better.

Lastly, Queen had apparently scored 88 points in mathematics.

“Hmm...?”

Upon seeing this, Fie turned to look at her own paper, comparing their grades.

She had scored 87 — Queen, at 88, was one mark higher. She had somehow ended up losing to Queen in mathematics.

Queen, however, continued to smile and was now positively beaming.

“I worked hard! It’s because of you that I got such grades. Thank you very

much!”

Queen almost seemed like a happy dog, wagging its tail and asking for praise — at least, that was Fie’s current impression of him.

However, Fie’s response was swift — her hand was heading towards Queen’s head the very next moment, swung in a familiar chopping fashion.

“Ouch?!”

Not expecting the unprecedented attack, Queen did not move to dodge, and Fie’s hand landed squarely on his head.

“Wh-Why?!” said Queen, unable to comprehend this development.

“You don’t have to score THAT well! Hmph!”

Although Queen had only scored higher than Fie in one subject by exactly one mark, Fie suddenly did not feel like teaching her fellow squire any more. Perhaps because she had lived in the shadow of Fielle all her life, Fie was oddly competitive in certain aspects of her life as a result.

“What? Why? I... I worked hard! I did!” Queen, now teary-eyed, could only watch on as Fie continued rampaging for a while, lost in the negative side of her nature.

After a while, however, Fie did calm down and apologize to Queen for her behavior.

It was also perhaps worth noting that Persil ranked first in the eastern dormitory, and Kerio had received reasonably good grades as well.

Rigel and Luka, on the other hand, barely passed their tests.

With all of them having worked hard in some way or another, the squires all passed. The test, having come and gone, soon passed into their collective memories.

Chapter 23 — Thinking About the Future

With the east-north inter-dormitory duel over, and the recent test results released, Fie found herself rolling around on the floor of Queen's room one evening.

The tournament, being a large event, and the test, being an important part of their squire education, had taken their toll on the squires of the northern dormitory. Although the above-mentioned events had them all on edge, some squires found themselves more energized than ever, running around the dormitory with seemingly limitless energy. Another group of squires, however, found themselves worn out and lethargic instead.

Fie belonged to the former group. As such, she found herself invading Queen's room and reading all his books on knightly fiction. Fie had decided that between that and chatting with Queen, this was how she would pass the time.

The book Fie found herself reading today was "The King of Knights, Kaiser." It was apparently a story about how a king, who was at the same time a knight, showed up at various battlefields and scenes of conflict to save the day.

Fie, however, had her doubts about how someone could be a king and a knight at the same time.

Despite that, it would appear that this particular book was one of Queen's favorites. In its defense, the book was reasonably interesting, and Fie had found herself halfway through the book before long.

Next to Fie was a piece of paper detailing the latest manliness rankings of the northern dormitory — it would seem that she was currently ranked third. Although she had scored a large amount of points during the sauna incident, she had not been awarded any points since. Although Fie had wanted to catch up with Zerius, who was still in the top position, she could not think of any ideas. She tossed the paper away as an afterthought and began reading through the book once more.

“Um. I’m going to make some tea.”

Although Fie had suddenly invaded Queen’s room and personal space (in addition to rolling on the ground as she continued to read), Queen treated his unannounced guest with exceptional hospitality.

“Thanks!” Fie accepted Queen’s hospitality without much thought.

As Queen left the room, Fie, having decided that she was now bored of the book in her hands, decided to inspect the interior of Queen’s room instead.

Something was bothering her. She only had this feeling because of the information retrieval techniques taught to her by Conrad. To begin with, Fie did possess some degree of ability to read people, although it could simply be said that she was a little more situationally aware than the average person.

This trait of hers, however, enabled Fie to notice a particularly strange reaction in Queen.

It had to do with minor changes in Queen’s expression as she rolled around the floor of Queen’s room.

Upon rolling over a specific spot, Queen would become strangely nervous. Although he had consciously tried to hide it, Queen’s reaction was readily apparent to Fie. This was what had piqued Fie’s interest.

To be precise, Queen always seemed nervous when Fie rolled close to his bed.

(I wonder what’s near his bed...?)

Seizing the opportunity to investigate, Fie moved near the bed, peeking under it for good measure.

Fie soon discovered three books, neatly stacked atop each other. According to their covers, they were nothing more than the knightly fiction books that Queen was so fond of.

However, something was off.

Fie did not understand why there would be books under the bed.

In addition, they had not simply fallen beneath the bed, but had clearly been stacked. Queen was tidy by nature — the relative tidiness of his room was

enough proof of that.

There wasn't a single speck of dust under his bed. Fie's confusion regarding the placement of the books only rose upon noticing this fact, and she eventually came to the conclusion that they had been purposely placed there.

This was strange. After all, there were shelves in the room.

Without hesitating, Fie promptly crawled under the bed to retrieve the three books.

It did not take her long to notice a few pieces of paper under them.

(And these are...?)

Fie concluded that these papers were the reason for Queen's nervousness.

"Let's see here..."

Stretching out her body, Fie reached for the papers and retrieved them without much difficulty.

Upon inspecting them under the room's lamp, Fie saw that the papers were illustrations of a blonde girl who was wearing relatively skimpy clothing. There appeared to be five papers in all.

Fie looked through them.

"Hmm. I guess Queen does look at these."

Although the papers were not what Fie was expecting, she wasn't exactly surprised.

After all, she knew that such illustrations were common amongst youth her age. In fact, she had even been to such a store before, accompanying her fellow squires — although she did not buy a single illustration.

"Hmm. I guess these are the ones he likes..."

Fie had witnessed youths from the downtown and slum districts passionately discussing these illustrations on one of her outings. It would seem like hair color and body curvature was a selling point to these youths.

Upon further inspecting the papers, Fie inevitably found points of similarity amongst them. She reasoned that these were the traits that appealed to

Queen.

Fie had no ill intent — she was simply trying to better understand the hobbies of her friend. She continued inspecting the pictures, adopting an almost scientific approach.

“Hmm. They’re all blonde.” Fie stared some more. “They all have blue eyes.”

True enough, the illustrations that Queen had purchased all featured blonde-haired, blue-eyed girls. Fie’s thoughts on the matter were relatively straightforward.

“I guess this is the most popular trend, huh...”

Apparently blonde-haired, blue-eyed girls were extremely popular amongst contemporary youth. It was worth noting that Fie’s sister, Fielle, had a fair share of admirers simply because of these traits. The color of Fielle’s hair and eyes were considered treasures, even amongst other women of similar appearance.

However, to Fie, pursuing popular trends was not exactly the most interesting thing to do. It occurred to Fie that there were perhaps more interesting factors at play. She continued scrutinizing the illustrations intently.

“Hmm. They all have short hair. Does he like that? That’s strange...”

It was more common in both men and women to prefer long hair — at least, as far as Orstoll’s fashion scene went. Noble women, specifically, often grew out their hair. Fielle did the same, and even Fie herself had a similar hairstyle in the past. Conversely, maids like Arsha were only allowed to keep a certain length of hair — primarily due to concerns that it could interfere with their work.

With those thoughts in mind, Fie concluded that these five pictures perfectly represented the sort of woman that Queen liked.

“...Does he like younger women, too?”

If the word on the street was to be believed, most youths preferred adequately curvaceous, older women. However, although Queen was the same age as Fie, it would appear that he preferred younger girls, if the illustrations’ lack of curves was anything to go by.

“And the fashion he likes...”

Deciding to identify Queen’s fashion sense, Fie continued staring, but soon stopped. The illustrations all featured girls dressed in only their underwear, in the process of removing their underwear, and in some cases they wore nothing at all. As such, it was impossible for Fie to discern Queen’s fashion sense.

“Hmm...”

After staring at the illustrations for a while longer, Fie returned them to their original position and placed the books over them.

Although Fie was worried that Queen, who had grown up in a rural location, would be left out of hobby circles, she was somewhat reassured by the discovery of his picture-collecting hobby.

Fie had even made a mental note to introduce such a girl to Queen should she ever have the chance. Unfortunately, Fie could not think of any girl who matched Queen’s preferences at this point in time.

Rolling around on the ground once more, Fie began reading her previously abandoned book, only to find that Queen had returned from his tea expedition.

“Ah. Welcome back, Queen.”

“Sorry I took so long... I passed by Slad and the rest on my way there, and we talked for a bit.”

Without knowing what had transpired in this room during his absence, Queen happily handed a cup of tea over to Fie.

“Oh, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Thanks!” Fie, saying nothing about her previous discoveries, accepted the tea readily. “Mm, this is good.”

As if to reward him, Fie poured some cookies out into a bowl from a bag and pushed the bowl towards Queen.

“This is...”

“Handmade.”

Upon hearing those words, Queen’s face seemed to light up.

“It’s from Arsha and the rest.”

Queen seemed disappointed at that revelation. Fie, noticing his disappointment, thought that Queen could have been a little more appreciative.

Holding her tea with one hand and her book in another, Fie cast her eyes upon the manliness ranking sheet once more. Zerius, with about 4000 points, was first. Fie, with 2000 points, was third.

“Hmm...”

Fie once again began thinking of potential ways to win the contest and overtake Zerius.

“Ugh... I’m drawing a blank.”

In the end, Fie did not manage to come up with any ideas.

Fie, who had awoken in the middle of the night, was suddenly struck by a thought.

“Oh... I left my cookies in Queen’s room...”

After offering her cookies to Queen, Fie had apparently forgotten to retrieve the bag they were in.

“What am I going to do? It’s already night...”

Peeking out at the moon shining in the sky, Fie realized that it was considerably late. Surely Queen and the rest would be fast asleep.

Fie was troubled.

“Hm... I’ll just go get them tomorrow... Oh, but the humidity will get to them...”

Fie had forgotten to close the cookie bag after becoming engrossed in her book again. This bothered Fie. She had wanted to sleep, but thoughts of the cookie bag flooded her mind. Sleep was, after all, a fickle thing.

After worrying about the state of her cookies for a short while, Fie decided to retrieve the bag from Queen’s room.

With the moon as her only light, Fie opened her door and made a beeline for

Queen’s room through the corridors. Perhaps because she had spent some time worrying, Fie’s eyes were now used to the dark, allowing her to set off on her journey without too much trouble. It would seem that Fie was good at moving around in the dark.

Fie soon found herself standing in front of Queen’s door. However, she could not determine her next course of action.

(It would be better if I went in after knocking... But I don’t want to wake Queen.)

Although Fie had usually knocked and waited for Queen to open the door, it was now in the depths of night. The usually boisterous and noisy dormitory was all but silent.

If she entered with her usual knocks, she would surely wake Queen.

(Well... I’ll quietly go in, get the cookies, and come back out...)

Fie decided that this was the best thing to do.

Utilizing yet another technique that Sir Conrad had taught her, Fie silently opened the door. Like a cat, she slunk in, her footsteps making nary a sound.

Standing up while maintaining her silence, Fie quietly closed the door and turned around.

(Eh...?)

Something was off.

There appeared to be a light near Queen’s bed — something she was not used to seeing.

The light apparently originated from a lamp placed on the bed’s side table. In the darkness of the room, the lamp’s soft glow illuminated the room in a shroud of orange.

(Maybe Queen is awake...?)

From her angle, Fie could not see anything but Queen’s back. It would appear that Queen commonly slept on his side, with his back facing the door.

Fie was once again at a loss.

After all, if Queen were awake, it would be best for her to say something — after all, she had entered without permission and planned to make off with something in the room without Queen noticing. In addition, Fie had a good mind to tell Queen off for reading books at such an hour — such behavior did no favors for his eyes.

If he was indeed sleeping, it would be a waste to continue leaving the lamp lighted — in which case Fie would simply extinguish it for him.

With those thoughts in mind, Fie silently crept up to Queen, not wanting to wake her fellow squire if he were indeed asleep.

Upon approaching him, however, Fie noticed that there were small movements in Queen's back.

(I guess he's awake after all. Is he reading maybe? It's bad for your eyes you know...)

Thinking so, Fie walked a few steps closer to Queen's bed.

(Eh...?)

However, what Fie saw was not a book — but instead the illustrations that she had found underneath Queen's bed earlier in the day. Queen was holding said illustrations in his left hand.

Fie did not understand why Queen would be looking at such illustrations at this time of the night. Fie craned her neck for a better view.

As she continued her stealthy approach, Fie began to notice that Queen's breathing was strained. Staring at the illuminated picture in his hand with an expression of yearning on his face, Queen muttered under his breath.

"Heath... Heath..."

It seemed like Queen was calling for Fie.

Fie, however, did not understand why Queen would be calling for her at this time of the night, so she did what she would naturally do when called.

"What's up, Queen? Did you need me for something?"

Queen's body seemed to stiffen at Fie's question, freezing on the spot. Slowly,

he turned around, glancing over his shoulder in fear. Standing in the darkness before him was none other than Fie.

“A-Aah...?! Wh-Why...? Why are you... Heath...?” Queen, shocked by what he had seen, flew up from his bed like a startled cat.

“Eh? Oh, I forgot some cookies in your room... So I came to get them. Then, when I walked close to where they were, I heard you calling my name... So.”

Queen could only stare at Fie as his mouth opened and closed rapidly, his usual goldfish tendencies surfacing once more. Yet he appeared to be even more shocked than usual.

However, Fie did not understand the situation at all. Noticing yet another odd point, Fie pointed her finger at Queen and posed an innocent question.

“Hey, Queen. Why did you take off your pants?”

Queen, now positively red, appeared to be on the verge of tears. With shaking hands, he stretched out the sleeves on his shirt, as if to hide the lower half of his body.

“Ah... Aah...?!”

His beet-red face, combined with his intense shaking, was a first for Fie — even she understood that, for one reason or another, Queen was in an intense state of shock.

“I’m sorry... I don’t really get it. But if you need me to help with something, I’ll hear you out.”

With a somewhat remorseful tone, Fie offered an apology. She assumed that Queen had wanted something — after all, he had been calling her name repeatedly up until a short while ago.

“Ge...”

“Ge...?” Fie tilted her head to one side.

“PLEASE GET OUT OF MY ROOOOOOOOOM!”

In an explosive burst of speed, Queen ran forth with the force of a black cyclone. In a swift movement, he pushed Fie out of his room and into the

corridor.

“Eh? W-Wait! Q-Queen...?”

Immediately after Fie had been adequately relocated, Queen slammed the door behind her. A solid thud reverberated through the darkness.

“Queen? Queen? Hey, what’s going on?”

Fie, now very much confused, continued knocking on Queen’s door — however, there was no answer.

On an afternoon two days after the event, Fie approached Queen in the canteen in attempts to speak to him.

“Queen—”

Upon hearing Fie’s voice, however, Queen promptly stood up, turned his back to Fie, and abruptly walked off. Although she attempted to catch up, Queen’s movements were far too fast.

Gormus, who had been watching from the sidelines, posed a simple question to Fie.

“Did you two fight?”

“No... At least, I don’t think so.”

Fie did not understand the situation at all. Sneaking into Queen’s room to retrieve a bag of cookies two nights ago, Fie had witnessed Queen calling her name — but that was all there was to it.

In fact, Queen had been this way for a while.

Although Fie had tried talking to him the very next day during their training regimens and mealtimes, Queen only turned away, refusing to speak. If pursued, he would escape, eventually disappearing into one hidden corner or another.

“Then I suppose you did something terrible to Queen?”

“Don’t be silly. Why would I do something like that?” Fie thought that Gormus was being particularly unfair in his assessment.

“No. Look at him. It is plain that you did something.”

“Ugh...”

Although a string of complaints and dissatisfaction arose from Gormus’ perceived persecution of her, Fie could not dismiss the possibility that she could have indeed been part of the reason for Queen’s current behavior — if only because of the overall timing and chain of events thus far. However, Fie still did not understand much of the situation at hand.

Cocking her head to one side as she remained lost in thought, Fie ate her meal, the seat next to her decidedly empty.

That very evening, Fie was approached by none other than Remie, who wore a worried expression on his face.

“Heath, what happened with you and Queen? You two have been somewhat distant recently...”

It would seem like Remie, ever-aware of his friends, had noticed the rift between Fie and Queen. It was, however, true that Fie and Queen were often inseparable — in fact, Queen had only acted this way when she had first met him.

“That’s the thing... I don’t know. I know he’s upset about something, but I have no idea why he’s avoiding me like that... I can’t think of any reasons at all.”

After all, Queen had even refused to speak to her during training — there was no way she could glean any information with regards to the current situation.

“Well... if there’s anything recent at all that is of note, maybe you could discuss it with me? An outsider’s perspective might help.”

Fie nodded and agreed with his suggestion. Appreciating Remie’s gentle nature and kind offer, she slowly recounted the events of that night.

Specifically, Fie described in detail Queen’s strange behavior that night, and as her explanation continued, Remie’s expression changed from that of worry to shock, his eyes opened wide as beads of sweat flowed down from his forehead.

Finally, Remie decided to stop Fie mid-way through her explanation.

“Oh, have you found the reason? What is it? Go on, tell me.”

With a somewhat elusive expression, Remie furtively looked around, before opening and closing his mouth rapidly in a series of gapes reminiscent of Queen.

“H-Heath... You... You know. That’s....”

Leaning in closer, Fie placed her ear close to Remie’s lips, eagerly listening to his explanation.

“Oh, I see. So it’s that.” Fie nodded at Remie’s words.

Fie, after all, had some degree of knowledge with regards to what Remie had just told her. After all, healthcare-centric lessons were also part of the squire curriculum — and that was where Fie had gained her knowledge about the topic at hand.

“So Queen does stuff like that too...”

Fie was somewhat surprised. Although Fie had known of it from books and lessons, she had never seen someone actually executing the process.

Remie, who was now positively flushed, continued to fidget, a stark contrast to Fie, who did not seem shaken in the slightest.

“Um... You can’t tell anyone about this. About what you saw, I mean. It’d be really shameful if anyone found out...”

Finally reaching the end of Remie’s explanation, Fie connected the dots at last, satisfied that she had solved the mystery of Queen’s strange behavior. She thought that this was all pretty sudden, but at the same time assumed that Queen had his reasons for doing so.

If anything, Fie was grateful to Remie for offering his help.

As if to wrap up the discussion, Fie turned to Remie suddenly, innocently asking a question.

“So... do you do it too, Remie?”

“Eh...?” Remie immediately froze upon hearing Fie’s question.

Evidently failing to understand the sensitivities behind the topic, Fie stared

straight at Remie, who was blushing intensely, tears swimming around in his eyes. Perhaps it was because of his personality, or because they were friends, Remie eventually answered, albeit somewhat haltingly.

“Well... Um... I think everyone... does it, so... You know, while... thinking of someone they like... I’m around that age after all, you... you know...”

Once again obtaining yet another precious piece of knowledge with regards to the male psyche, Fie felt that she had finally understood the reason for Queen’s behavior. Satisfied, she thanked Remie before immediately turning around and motioning to leave.

Remie, however, stopped her, his voice still shaking.

“Um... It’s a delicate matter so... I hope you approach it with some sensitivity...”

“Yeah, I get it. Thanks for the help, Remie!”

Remie, hiding his unsettled expression, could only nod as Fie walked away.

Fie, for her part, seemed to immediately forget about Remie’s warning and decided to locate and apologize to Queen right away. She only realized at this point that it was perhaps inconsiderate of her to sneak into his room at night, even if she had done so with good intentions at heart.

However, Fie could not let the matter rest — her theoretical knowledge and what she had witnessed that night continued swirling around in her inquisitive mind.

“Hmm... So Queen does stuff like that too...” said Fie, with the tone of one who had just made a groundbreaking discovery, patting herself on the back for her astute observations.

Fie summarily deduced that the pictures Queen had so carefully hidden under his bed were for that particular purpose.

However, at that moment, Remie’s words resurfaced in Fie’s mind.

“Thinking of someone they like.”

A new line of inquiry emerged from the murky depths of Fie’s mind.

“Oh, yeah... Queen was saying my name as he did that, wasn’t he?”

It was then that Fie realized that Queen had been “thinking of someone he liked,” while saying her name.

“Oh...?” Such was the only sound that escaped Fie’s lips as she tilted her head to one side.

Shortly after, Fie and Queen’s dramatic chase scenes played out throughout the halls of the northern dormitory.

To the other squires, it was a somewhat familiar sight.

“Queen... I need to talk... Ugh, already gone?!”

However, Queen was not to be easily caught. Perhaps it went without saying, but Queen was after all the faster of the two of them.

(I wanted to apologize, but if he keeps dashing around like that it’s impossible...!!)

As their game of cat and mouse continued over the next three days, Fie found herself increasingly dissatisfied.

“Hey, Queen. Wait up, Queen!!”

Fie, who was currently chasing Queen around behind the dormitory building, could not close the distance between them. Although she had called out to Queen numerous times, the other squire showed no signs of stopping.

Even if she did accelerate, Queen would merely do so himself — and there the gap in their physical abilities was evident.

(How long do you want to keep doing this?!)

Fie was frustrated — all she wanted to do was to apologize to Queen.

In addition, she attempted to approach the subject in a sensitive manner — as per Remie’s advice, she did not attempt to speak to Queen in crowded places. However, in relatively deserted locations, Fie could not catch Queen, let alone speak to him.

It occurred to Fie that if this went on, they would never be friends again.

Her dissatisfaction with the current chain of events finally reaching its peak, Fie finally shouted, as if to stop Queen in his tracks: “Do you like me, Queen?!”

Immediately, Queen stopped, freezing where he stood.

Turning around, Queen’s eyes were filled with tears, and his face was flushed beet-red — just like it had been back then. The intense shade of red on Queen’s face was visible even to one as dense as Fie.

(I-It’s true, huh...)

With teary eyes and an increasingly red face, Queen shouted his response.

“YES! I DO! I-IS THAT A BAD THING?!”

“N-No... Well, I don’t think it’s a bad thing...”

Fie thought that love wasn’t exactly something that could be right or wrong. But now being confronted with the reality of the situation, she could only stand in place, thoroughly shocked. She had finally gained a semblance of understanding, she now knew the reason for Queen’s anger.



As if having finally steeled his resolve, Queen, with his red face and teary eyes, stared straight at Fie.

“W-Well... What do you th-think about it...?”

“Th-Think...? What do you mean... think?”

“I... I like... I like you so... So... How about it...?”

Queen, still sniveling, continued staring at Fie, a serious expression on his face.

Queen’s question, however, seemed to have caused Fie to grasp the magnitude of the situation.

“Ah...”

With an apologetic voice and similarly apologetic expression, Fie looked at Queen.

“Um... I’m sorry, I haven’t thought about it at all...”

“@#&$!!”

Queen’s reaction was far too jumbled to make sense of. His face only continued to redden, hints of anger now mixed with shame. Although Queen could not speak coherently, it was plain to see that he was upset.

Fie, however, understood at last. Even she did not find her behavior up until now acceptable.

“Um... I’m sorry. Really. I’ll think about it properly... So could you give me some time? Um... Sorry...” said Fie, clasping her hands in a desperate apology.

Queen, wound up and tense during his confession, felt the strength and anger leave his body upon hearing Fie’s response. With his eyes half-closed and teary, Queen responded, traces of resentment evident in his voice.

“Well... then... I hope you... manage to think it over...”

“Um... Yes. Yes, I will...”

Fie could not help but wonder if it was the norm for confessions to be such sad affairs.

Queen, for his part, had imagined becoming a knight for the person he liked, helping and protecting her, and then finally proposing in a romantic manner — the reality, however, could not be further than that. In fact, Queen felt that the distance between his dream and his current reality was basically that of heaven and the deepest depths of hell.

However, there was nothing either one of them could do — Queen had confessed, and that was that.

And so it came to be that Queen's hidden feelings were finally confessed to Fie.

Fie returned alone to her room. She closed the door and sat on her chair, hugging her knees as she did so.

"How... surprising. Unexpected."

Such were Fie's feelings about the matter at hand. After all, she hadn't noticed that Queen liked her at all — not in the slightest.

To begin with, it did not even occur to Fie that she could be anyone's love interest.

"What am I going to do...?"

Fie, however, decided to think about the matter calmly. She understood that she was not in a circumstance where she could be someone's lover, much less go out on dates and the like.

However, she told Queen that she would "think about it."

It occurred to Fie that it would be terribly irresponsible for her to simply dismiss and reject Queen.

As such, Fie decided to continue thinking — even though she was sure that she would come to the same conclusion.

After a while of not making any significant progress, Fie found herself at a loss. Up until this point, it never occurred to Fie that she had the freedom of choosing who she would be married to.

Even girls from noble families did not simply fall in love and get married to

any man on the street. There were courtship procedures, getting the approval of her parents, with it all resulting in marriage after a long period of time.

Although Fie did not think about it much, she had actually already undergone a similar process.

In her case, however, she did not have anyone she liked, and her parents did not have to do anything more than deciding who she would marry, and then summarily marrying her off without as much as a question. Due to this, Fie's knowledge with regards to marriage was somewhat lacking.

In the beginning, Fie had had some hopes that she would get along with this yet-unknown partner. But she'd ended up being shipped to another kingdom, tacked onto her sister's marriage as a dowry gift. It wasn't what she was expecting — and she remembered giving her father, the King of Daeman, a good kick in the chin.

No one had asked for her hand in social circles, but if she had not gotten married, bad rumors would have spread. This was how Fie ended up in Daeman — without a single shred of love or relations, and this was summarily how she imagined her future to be.

As such, it was perhaps natural for Fie to assume that she would never fall in love, much less become the target for someone else's affections.

It was perhaps worth noting that the people of Orstoll held somewhat liberal perceptions of love. While Fie had originally assumed that individuals of noble birth would only be allowed to marry others of similar social standing, this was not the case in Orstoll. From what she had heard, nobles were known to marry knights, maidservants, and in some cases even members of the local peasantry.

It would appear that the concept of love in Orstoll transcended the boundaries of social class, amongst other things.

This was particularly evident to Fie as she recalled the exploits of Crow. If anything, Fie felt that Crow had embraced the concept of freedom a little too liberally — if he wasn't just a flirt to begin with. Fie shook her head. She could not approve of Sir Crow's activities after all.

Bringing her mind back to the matter at hand, Fie realized that she had been

looking at the entire issue as an outsider — at least up until Queen had confessed to her. Fie, now no longer an outsider, felt that she had been suddenly dragged onto a stage without warning.

“Free love, huh...”

Fie was apprehensive of the strange obstacle that had somehow rolled into her path. This strange object, of indeterminate shape and texture, was foreign to Fie. As such, she had no idea what to do with it.

Out of respect for Queen’s sincerity, however, Fie allowed the object to stay, even as it weighed heavily in her mind. Perhaps she would approach it from a different angle occasionally. Or perhaps she would stare at the situation and think.

Although it was an impossible thought, Fie decided to entertain a hypothetical for the sake of it.

“In that case... wouldn’t Queen and I become lovers?”

Fie assumed that this would be the case. It was a strange feeling.

In the end, Fie found herself staring out at the night sky, with nary an answer in her mind.

She eventually decided that she would go to bed, and then attempt getting up the next morning and living normally, like nothing had happened.

On her way down to the canteen, Fie came across a familiar silhouette — it was none other than Queen. She greeted him as she always did, with a casual “good morning.”

“Ah, H-Heath?! Oh... good morning...”

Fie thought that Queen’s evidently suspicious attitude was a testament to how the latter wore his heart on his sleeve.

“It’s better if you calm down, you know. People around you are going to notice, see.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Fie waited a while for Queen to calm down.

Looking around to ensure that no one was around, Fie quietly spoke.

“Um... About my response, could I have a bit more time to think about it...?”

“Yeah... Um, I would be glad if you... thought about it...” Although that was not how Queen really felt, this was all he could muster the courage to say at this point.

Due to Queen’s confession, the relationship between them had changed once more. Under normal circumstances, Fie would have simply commanded Queen to settle down if he appeared suspicious for one reason or another.

Queen, for his part, was a little different in his mannerisms as well. In fact, the carefully cultivated relationship between Fie and her dog-like friend, Queen, might very well have been reset to what it was before.

Fie, noticing that, could not help but feel that something was off between them.

“Let’s go to the canteen.”

“Okay.”

However, being with Queen, like the way things had been before, brought some peace to Fie’s heart.

To Fie, Queen was an important friend. To Queen, however, Fie was someone he liked.

The two entered the canteen, queued up, and walked to their seats, before sitting down at the same seats they had sat at for the past half a year — a silent understanding evident in their actions.

Fie and Queen had sat at their regular places, and were eating together once more, as they always had. To Gormus, however, that was why this entire scene was suspicious.

“You two seem quieter than usual today. Did something happen?”

“Not really... aren’t we always like this?” Fie answered Gormus without as

much as a blink. Queen, who was aware that he would be easily found out should he speak, decided to keep quiet instead, nodding to signal his approval.

However, the changes were evident to those who knew the pair well.

Normally, Fie would be particularly animated, talking about one thing or another with Queen boisterously. However, they were now seated calmly and were instead eating their meals without a single word. The changes were too obvious to Gormus and the rest of Fie's close friends.

As Fie was usually active, loud, and particularly good at lying, the changes she displayed were perhaps a little bit too obvious.

Fie herself was troubled by this sudden change in her own behavior. After all, she could not discuss this with anyone else — but then, being treated with suspicion by those around her was not a desirable outcome as well.

Continuing to think, Fie realized that Queen could easily give himself away due to his earnest personality. Fie, however, did realize that her past relationship with Queen was a major factor in shaping how he currently behaved.

Fie recalled how Queen had first challenged her to a duel when they initially met. Although Fie had casually dismissed and refused to entertain Queen's requests back then, he was now a friend, and someone close to her heart. Had Queen confessed to her back then, she would have dismissed him without any doubt or hesitation.

Fie could not help but smile at the irony of her current situation. It would seem like the two of them had gotten too close without her even noticing.

As if sensing Fie's thoughts, Remie interjected, eager to help.

"But it's good you two made up!"

"Yeah, it's thanks to your advice, Remie. Thanks."

"Y-Yes... Of course..." Remie adopted a somewhat strange expression as Fie thanked him.

"Come to think of it... it'll only be a short while until the manliness ranking contest ends! As usual, Zerius is at the top with no signs of stopping! Yesterday,

some of our guys saw him feeding a bunch of stray dogs... That was a ton of points!”

“As expected...”

Not sensing the odd atmosphere, Slad burst out on the latest contest developments. Gees, meanwhile, decided to entertain his friend, despite being aware of the developments on the other end of the table.

“I should work hard this time too...” said Remie, once again helping to move the conversation along.

Remie had performed unexpectedly well during the inter-dormitory duel, and was even poised to win. Unfortunately, he got no points for his showing at all, with Gormus’ flashy victory and Queen’s dramatic finish etched into the squires’ minds instead. Remie, unfortunately, was right at the bottom of the rankings.

(The manliness ranking contest... Ugh...)

Up until just a few days ago, Fie had been busy brainstorming various ideas to somehow beat Zerius and come out on top of the rankings.

(I guess it’s pointless... I can’t think of anything but the issue with Queen now either way...)

In the end, no meaningful conversation was conducted at the canteen table that day.

Fie found herself spending the day as she usually would, and returned to her room at night. Unlike how she usually spent the night, however, Fie started to worry.

With each passing day, every single line of thought ended in a negative answer.

However, it was not because she disliked Queen, nor that it was impossible to like him.

The reason for her coming to that conclusion was simple — based on her current circumstances and social standings, a relationship was difficult, if not impossible.

(Actually... if I think about it, wouldn't dating Queen be... infidelity? Or is it cheating? Hmm...)

At least, Fie had thought this must be the case — she was, after all, already married. The act of going out with Queen alone would be a risk, if not a problem.

Having thought this far, Fie finally noticed something — to be exact, she had finally realized that she had been constantly escaping from the reality of her life.

Particularly about how she was simply included as a dowry gift when her sister had married King Roy after falling in love. She had been seen as nothing but a troublemaker, and was destined to never see the light of day. Fie, however, had escaped and worked hard to be where she was now, only for all of it to be thrown into chaos with Queen's confession.

If she really wanted to escape her fate as the second queen of Orstoll, however, all she had to do was accept Queen's confession. In her heart, however, Fie did not have any immediate, concrete plans for the future. This was precisely why she could not offer a proper answer.

Thus far, she has masqueraded as a man, became a squire, and was aiming to become a knight — but Fie did not know what would come next, or where she would go from then on.

It was then that Fie had realized a simple fact — in her desperation to escape her previous life, she had not thought much about the future at all. Now, faced with a choice that concerned that very future, Fie found herself at a loss.

(What am I going to do with myself from here on out...?)

Fie had originally intended to continue masquerading as a man for as long as she could.

Her thoughts, however, remained clouded with new questions, worries, and doubts.

Time continued to pass and Fie found herself unable to come up with a plan. The sense of distance between the two squires only continued to grow as

Queen continued waiting.

As it was a Saturday, Fie made her way to the 18th Knight's headquarters.

Fie soon found herself in the storehouse's familiar confines. It would seem, however, that no other knights were present, and Fie soon found herself silently preparing a pot of tea.

Fie sighed as the kettle started to rattle slowly.

"Aah..."

"What's got you all worried, Heathy?"

"Whoa!" Fie jumped at hearing her name, letting out a squeal as a voice rang out from the previously uninhabited storehouse.

Turning around, Fie stared at the source of the voice, resentment clear in her gaze.

"Sir Conrad..."

"Ufufu. It's been a while, Heathy. I'm so happy to see you."

Conrad, who had been out and busy on various assignments as of late, had silently appeared behind Fie without warning. According to Fie's memory, it had been at least three weeks since their last meeting.

"What... are you even doing?"

Although Conrad could have greeted Fie normally, he instead chose to employ his skills at concealing his presence to their full potential, choosing to sneak up on Fie for one reason or another.

"Oh, don't be like that. I'm only checking up on my junior, to see if you've gotten into any trouble. It would seem like you're worried about something after all, Heathy."

"I'm not worried about anything."

"That's a lie isn't it?"

"W-Well, I suppose it is..." Unable to fool Conrad's senses, Fie nodded, having little other choice.

Conrad had apparently picked up on this from the moment Fie had sighed while preparing her tea, and summarily felt some degree of remorse for having snuck up on his junior.

“You can discuss it with me, Heathy. I’ll fix it all up in a flash.”

“I think I’ll pass...” Fie, feeling nothing but a deep sense of apprehension about a potential discussion with Conrad, decided to turn down the offer.

However, it would seem like Conrad once again read Fie’s thoughts.

“So... if you’re not discussing it with me, it would mean that it’s a somewhat private matter... Hmm. In this case, it would be no one in the 18th... So it would be some other party... And if you’re hiding it so intently, you must be worrying about none other than love, am I right?”

Fie could not help but react to Conrad’s prying deductions. Conrad’s eyes seemed to sparkle as he continued.

“So? Who is it, who is it? Who confessed to you?”

“Why do you know that much...?”

Although Fie had wished that Conrad would leave her alone, Conrad had instead successfully pinpointed the issue.

“Women’s intuition.”

“That’s a lie, isn’t it...”

Even Fie understood that Conrad was a man to begin with. Waving his fan silently, Conrad only smiled at Fie’s accusation.

“You are much more of a child than you think, you know? It seems like you will need some more growth before you can fully understand your own feelings and propose.”

Fie did not understand what the heck Conrad was going on about.

Suddenly adopting a saint-like expression, Conrad continued his speech.

“It’s all right. Regardless of the magnitude of your love problems, I will help you with all of my power!”

“I’ll pass.” Fie, who felt that Conrad’s saintly expression was too suspicious,

turned down her senior's offer yet again.

However, Conrad merely continued dispensing his advice.

"I'll give you some advice, Heathy... If you want to wrap him around your little finger, you're going to have to throw some degree of seduction into it..."

"I never said I wanted to do anything like that..."

"So in other words... it is someone you actually think about. Someone... important to you."

At those words, Fie started sweating. She felt like Conrad had somehow extracted information from her without her noticing.

In truth, Fie herself was very worried about the issue at hand. Fie had been thinking about ways to reject Queen, but at the same time, she had been attempting to somehow justify his confession — but found it impossible to do so.

Conrad's words seemed to pinpoint the latter part of the issue, however.

"It would seem like you are worried about many things... But have you thought about your own feelings?"

"My own... feelings...?"

Looking up, Fie came face to face with Conrad, who had an expression she had never seen before. Conrad was gently smiling.

"You'll get your priorities all mixed up if you don't think about how you feel in all this, you know?"

"..."

Smiling once more as he usually did to the now silent Fie, Conrad moved to leave.

"Well then... since you want to think about it yourself, I will get going. Ufufufu."

And with that, Conrad was gone.

(What did he want to say in the end...?)

Lifting her head to see Conrad off, Fie saw that he was now at the entrance of the storehouse, his face half hidden by his fancy fan.

“Oh, do tell me what happens. All right then, see you Heathy!”

This time, Conrad was gone for good.

“Aah...” Fie sighed once more, somehow sounding more tired than she did a few minutes ago. Sitting where she was, Fie began pouring tea into her cup, all the while not saying a word.

After their meeting, Fie decided to take Conrad’s advice to heart, and started thinking about how she felt in the whole affair.

It was then that Fie noticed how she felt — she just wanted to cheer Queen on in his quest for love.

After all, Fie’s feelings with regards to Queen were not that of love. On this point she was very clear — she loved him dearly as an important friend.

If possible, she would like for Queen’s love to result in a positive outcome — such were her true feelings.

If Queen’s love interest had not been her, she would have been able to cheer him on without any worries at all, and even help him with various issues along the way. She could imagine such a situation unfolding.

Unfortunately, this did little to change the fact that the person Queen loved was none other than Fie herself.

She realized at this point that the possibilities and answers merely appeared to shrink. And she realized how complex and unpredictable love was — specifically in how it rarely went according to plan.

After thinking about the issue for a little longer, Fie made up her mind — she had to reject Queen after all.

No matter how she spun it, she would be cheating on the King, to whom she was legally married. If she were somehow found out, it would bring about unprecedented amounts of trouble... Especially to Queen.

Fie found herself unable to shake off her circumstances — however, simply rejecting Queen did not seem like a morally correct thing to do. As such, she made up her mind on a separate matter and began making the appropriate preparations.

“Heath... why did you call me out to this place...?”

On that very Sunday, Queen followed Heath to a certain spot in the Royal Castle, all the while with an uneasy feeling in his heart.

After all, he had thought about Heath all this time, finally managed to offer an unfortunate confession, and had been waiting for her answer from that day on.

Queen, for his part, was worried that she would probably reject him — however, he still held hope in his heart that she would reciprocate his feelings. If he was rejected, however, then the two of them would simply go back to how they used to be — and this was acceptable to Queen, although it might be difficult to execute in practice.

“Isn’t this the place where... that second queen lives...?”

Heath had apparently summoned Queen to an isolated corner of the castle.

Queen knew that this was where the sister of Queen Fielle, who was also born in Daeman, lived. According to the rumors he had heard, she had come to this Kingdom, and then attempted to get in the way of King Roy and Queen Fielle’s romance. As a result, she had been locked up in this back garden pavilion — at least, if said rumors were to be believed.

In addition, Queen had heard that she had a terrible personality, with an equally terrible appearance to match.

However, the place that Heath had called Queen to was none other than the back wall of this isolated pavilion.

On one hand, Queen understood the need for privacy — but there seemed to be little reason to choose this spot of all places. In fact, Queen thought it would have made more sense for the two of them to talk in one of their rooms.

As Queen continued looking around nervously, a rope suddenly descended

from above, followed by a familiar voice.

“Queen, over here!”

Looking up, Queen was greeted with the sight of Heath, who had apparently scaled the back pavilion’s walls.

“Wh-What are you doing, Heath?!”

Heath, however, quickly shushed Queen with a finger to her lips, motioning for him to remain silent.

Queen was hesitant. No matter how bad the opinion of the general public was with regards to the other queen who lived here, they would certainly get in trouble for sneaking into such a place. After all, the inhabitant was once a princess and was now one of King Roy’s spouses.

“The specifics can wait. For now, climb up. Oh, make sure you keep the rope after you’re done...”

Heath’s face then disappeared from behind the top of the wall.

Queen continued to remain hesitant.

However, even if they were to get into trouble, Queen did not want to leave Heath behind, so he soon began his unwilling ascent.

Having finally completed the climb, Queen was surprised to find that there were no guards by the back pavilion’s entrance. Heath, too, was nowhere to be found.

However, traces of Heath’s rope descent could be seen.

Finally steeling his resolve, Queen descended into the back pavilion, a place where the supposedly ill-intentioned other queen of Orstoll lived. As his feet touched the ground, Queen heard Heath’s voice again — this time from an open window of a small building, from which Heath was waving.

Panicking, Queen quickly ran in that direction.

“What are you doing, Heath?! We’re going to be in so much trouble if anyone finds us here!”

However, Queen’s attempts at forcibly removing Heath from the building

were soon stopped.

“Don’t worry, this is where I am supposed to live, you know.”

“Eh?” Not understanding Heath’s words, a strange sound escaped Queen’s lips.

Upon inspecting his friend closely, Queen realized that Heath looked very different from how she usually did. She was clothed in a dress of white and blue, and the sides of her hair now framed her face, giving her a cute appearance. Queen finally noticed — Heath was dressed up as a girl.

To the stunned Queen, Heath smiled and continued her explanation.

“Actually... ‘Heath’ is a false name I use. My real name is ‘Fie.’ It’s nice to finally meet you, Queen.”

“H-Huh...?”

Although Queen had expected an answer for his confession, he had instead witnessed a completely different kind of confession from Fie. For a while, Queen stood still, unable to process the situation.

This was the answer that Fie had arrived at.

If she was going to reject Queen, she would have to tell him about herself, and summarily her circumstances.

This was how much Fie trusted Queen — it simply did not feel right for her to reject him without an explanation. As she realized that Queen’s confession arose from the depths of his heart, she herself felt that this much had to be done.

This was why Fie had invited Queen into her own home, although she didn’t really consider it much of a home to begin with.

She had arrived beforehand and made the necessary preparations, before waiting in the unfamiliar, usually uninhabited room for Queen’s arrival. Without knowing exactly why, she had even prepared tea.

As expected, Queen was swaying to and fro, still stunned by the revelations.

Fie began thinking to herself as she slowly poured a cup of tea.

(But then... Queen climbed all the way up in a single breath... Sigh. You have it good, Queen...)

Fie could not help but feel jealous about Queen's talent and physical abilities — she soon put those thoughts aside, however.

Finally finishing her tea preparations, Fie returned to her room, whereupon she was greeted by the sight of Queen, who had been nervously awaiting her return.

Fie handed a cup of tea to Queen and sat down on her bed.

There was only a single table and chair in her room, much like how the rooms were in the northern dormitory. In fact, it almost felt like nothing had changed.

The first one to speak was Queen.

"Um... Is... Is what you said true? If you live here... then isn't that other queen..."

"Well... If I wasn't, we wouldn't have had to sneak in here... Although you would have been arrested if you just walked in."

"I guess so..."

Fie had earlier taken a quick walk in the confined courtyard of the back pavilion, before entering her room again.

Queen could not help but believe that what Fie said was true — that she was one of the two queens of Orstoll. However, it was a difficult thing to process.

After all, Fie was completely different from how the rumors had painted her — the Fie that Queen knew was always smiling and gentle, although she did get into mischief and other forms of trouble from time to time. However, this did not change the fact that Fie, in all his time of knowing her, was a good person at heart.

It occurred to Queen that this was probably why he had fallen for her in the first place.

Deciding to explain her circumstances fully so that Queen would give up once

and for all, Fie started talking about her past — about how she had been ill-treated in Orstoll, about how no one had wanted to take her hand in marriage, and about how everyone around her treated her poorly.

With the finalization of Princess Fielle's marriage, she had eventually been roped along, included as nothing more than a dowry gift — and that was how she ended up in the Kingdom of Orstoll.

"My father simply wanted money, and so with that deal he sent me away... and I was treated like a troublesome individual here too, so they shut me away in this place... I do cause trouble sometimes, so maybe they had no choice. But then... it was cramped here, and I didn't have anything to eat, so I eventually escaped... And since I admired knights from a young age, I thought I could be like the knights from those stories too — if I didn't do something my future would have basically ended then and there..."

As if to gloss over the entire confession incident, Fie explained her past in great detail.

She did, however, feel that her time in the Royal Knights up until now had been worth every second. She had met the knights of the 18th, and become friends with Gormus, Remie, Slad, and Gees. Of course, she didn't forget about Queen either.

Having finally reached the end of her explanation, Fie took a deep breath, preparing to announce her rejection of Queen's confession.

Fie assumed that, after hearing all that, Queen would surely give up — at least, that was what she believed.

"So you see... according to all this, I am already married... And married to the King of Orstoll, at that. You have to inherit your family name too, Queen. It won't do you any good associating yourself with the likes of me, right? So..."

As she was about to reject Queen, Fie felt a pair of hands on her shoulders — the hands were hot, pushing down on her heavily. Fie could not help but lean back from the force.

Although that in and of itself was alarming, Fie had something else to worry about — she still held a cup of tea in her right hand. If she had spilled it, it

would surely leave a stain on the sheets.

Looking up, Fie came face to face with Queen, who had stood up at some point in time, and was now pinning her to her bed.

“You... I had no idea... you had such circumstances...” Queen, now very clearly emotional, stared straight at Fie.

“Eh? Ehh?? Wait, Q-Queen!”

Fie, finding it difficult to maintain her grip on her cup of tea, continued to panic. It was hot enough to burn them both should it spill. With all her strength, Fie bent her arm at a strange angle, attempting to support the precariously positioned teacup.

“I... I’ll definitely save you, Heath. Although I’m just a squire now... You probably wouldn’t believe me. But one day... one day I’ll save you from all this, Heath! So... So...!!”

It would seem that Fie had made a miscalculation.

She had attempted to showcase her negative traits and unfortunate past in attempts to change Queen’s feelings for her. Fie, not having any experience in love and relations, had planned all this out in hopes that Queen would give up — perhaps in part due to her calculating personality.

In fact, Fie had no idea that inviting another person into her private quarters and speaking to them at length about her misfortunes was a common and effective way of intensifying the other party’s sympathy.

Although she had assumed that Queen would simply turn and leave, the very opposite had happened. Her explanation, originally intended to be water over a fire, had instead turned to oil at some point without her noticing.

That very same Queen, who often escaped from uncomfortable situations at the speed of light, was now overcome with emotion and holding her down — somewhat literally.

Fie felt like she had been pinned down by a particularly large dog.

“Maybe... You may think I am unreliable. And maybe I actually am unreliable. But I am going to work hard... I am going to work hard, Heath! I’ll become a

knight you can count on! Until then... can you... keep thinking about me?”

Fie’s arm was at its limit — and so was the balance of the teacup.

“I get it! All right, I get it!”

Fie, now swept along by Queen’s outburst of strength and emotion, gave her response.

Fie’s shoulders were almost touching the surface of her bed. The tea, however, had miraculously still not spilled.

Queen, upon hearing her answer, heaved a sigh of relief. Fie’s words, however, quickly brought Queen back to reality.

“Um... If it’s all right with you, could you please move...?”

Queen had, at some point, apparently pushed Fie down onto her bed.

“A-Ah! S-Sorry!”

Having noticed that at last, Queen went back to his usual self, his red face accompanying his flailing arms as he panicked at the realization of what he had just done.

Heaving a sigh of relief herself, Fie finally propped herself up.

Having played her best cards, Fie was not expecting that this incident would evolve into a drawn-out battle of wills.

Although she had been swept along with the flow a few moments ago, Fie, now calm once more, realized that her answer still remained the same. Fie’s trump card was her inevitable circumstances — she thought that Queen would have given up by now. Had Queen given up then and there, this all would have ended.

Calming down slightly, the still red-faced Queen began to speak.

“Well... my father traveled a lot. He met a woman from a foreign land on one of his travels and married her — although those around him did not approve at all. That woman was my mother. Although the two of them are gone now, when they still lived, they taught me one thing. That I should never give up if there was someone I truly loved... So... I really like you, Heath. Although you

spoke about my family and my social standing, I'd like to hear your answer without all those considerations..."

Upon hearing those words, Fie realized that she no longer had any cards left to play. She had done everything she could, even employing her secret weapon.

Even so, she found herself unable to deliver the rejection she should have delivered a while ago. Fie felt that no meaningful answers would come from waiting any longer — but at the same time could not bring herself to say "no."

(How did it become like this...?)

Fie, surprised at the turn of events, sat still for a while, not saying a single word.

The following week passed in the blink of an eye.

During that time, Fie constantly kept Queen in her thoughts.

(I guess this is what it's like to like someone... Enough to keep thinking about them, at least...)

Laughing at herself softly, Fie could not help but arrive at that conclusion. In reality, Fie had fallen for Queen's seemingly unbreakable will, regardless of gender.

However, the thoughts of not wanting to hurt him, or to see Queen sad, was a kind of love to begin with.

In addition, Queen had readily accepted Fie's circumstances — including her living as a squire by the name of Heath. That pleased Fie greatly. Although she still had doubts about what defined love and the general direction of her feelings, she was glad that Queen accepted her for who she was.

While Fie could have just accepted Queen from the get-go, her circumstances proved to be a large barrier that had to be surmounted first. Even if Queen declared that he was fully accepting of her circumstances (and even proposed to her regardless), he would be implicated if her true identity were somehow found out.

The second queen of Orstoll cheating on the King with a squire of the Royal Knights seemed to be a sure-fire tabloid scandal.

If she did manage to stay hidden, however, the thoughts of marrying Queen while still being a knight herself was not a thought she could properly process — it simply made no sense. From an outsider's view, the two were both male knights — strange rumors could easily arise from their interactions if she wasn't careful.

Deciding that such responsibilities were too much for her to bear, Fie returned to her earlier and only conclusion, and once again began thinking about how to reject Queen. She could not help but feel like she was wronging her fellow squire.

Walking in the gardens of the royal castle as she continued her thoughts, Fie was stopped by a familiar voice, calling out from behind her cheerfully.

"Hey, troubled youth! Are you perhaps troubled about love?"

A clearly oblivious voice — it was none other than Sir Crow.

With his usual charming looks and flirty smile, Crow looked as if he were always ready to receive praise from his admirers. Fie could not help but wonder where Crow usually kept his more serious expressions when he wasn't busy saving someone or tending to an emergency.

Although Fie was normally fond of Crow's bright, if not silly nature, she now felt some resentment towards her carefree senior.

"Yeah. What about it?" Such was Fie's exasperated response.

"A-Are you serious?!"

Although Crow himself had suggested the notion, Fie's confirmation brought an expression of shock unto his face. After remaining shocked for a considerable amount of time, Crow went back to his usual self, smiling wryly as he placed a hand on his chin.

"I see... So the day I take you under my wing has come, my disciple..."

"Unlike you, Sir Crow, this is a serious affair between myself and another person."

Fie quickly corrected Crow's misconceptions.

"Hey now, I only go out with one lady at a time! At least, while we're actually

out on a date together...”

To Fie, however, that sounded like nothing more than an excuse.

“Perhaps you are troubled about how to express your feelings well? Never fear, I shall impart unto you one of your senior’s secret techniques—”

“Actually, I was confessed to, and I’m wondering about how to reject them...”

Fie had no idea how she’d ended up discussing the situation with Sir Crow, of all people. Even with such thoughts in her mind, she began selectively describing the situation, hiding certain parts so she would not be found out. After all, Fie did trust Crow to a certain extent.

“Is that so...?” Crow seemed somewhat stunned.

Fie, assuming that Crow would talk about how much of a waste it was to reject a lady, did her best to shake off such thoughts.

However, Crow, eventually regaining his calm, said something completely unexpected to Fie.

“If you’re worrying so much about how to reject them, then they aren’t someone you dislike, right?”

“Well, yeah...” Fie groaned at Crow’s strangely accurate deduction. “But you see... there are so many problems. Familial circumstances, the fact that I’m a squire of uncertain means... And although the other person tells me they like me, I don’t know if I feel the same way...”

“I see. So it’s a relationship with differences in social class... Is that what you were worried about?” Crow laughed after listening to Fie’s worries.

“It’s not just that!”

To Fie, this was an important topic, and she couldn’t help but worry about the issue.

“Haha, I guess so. But then, you’re taking on too much, don’t you think? Love isn’t something you take on yourself. What did the other person say? I bet they didn’t mind your circumstances at all, and they probably said as much, right?”

“Well... yeah...”

“Love is about two people shouldering both the good and the bad. If you’re attempting to shoulder all the burden by yourself, it won’t be much of a relationship. In other words, you won’t be popular amongst the ladies!”

“I never asked to be popular amongst the ladies in the first place...”

Although Fie had wanted to be more popular with the maidservants so she would receive more cookies, she decided to keep that fact to herself for now.

As the conversation headed in a variety of directions, Crow suddenly pointed his finger straight at Fie’s nose.

“You are still a squire. Not a knight, mind you, but a young fellow learning about life. So it’s all right, you know? To let other people take care of you from time to time, or to try your hand at many things. You’re at that time in your life where failure is okay, and even encouraged. Even love is that way. It’ll be fine. If anything happens, you leave it to us. We’ll be sure to protect you with our all.”

Looking straight at Fie, Crow smiled gently, as if to calm her down. It was the very same smile that Fie had seen when she had taken the squire test, and her heart was filled with an inexplicable sense of calm.

It was as Crow said — Fie was a squire. She did not know how to handle Queen’s feelings, let alone the current situation. Her previous life as a daughter of nobility had probably robbed her of that part of her life. Now she had escaped, and for the first time in her life, could actually worry about such matters.

Crow’s promise that he would protect her should any problems arose soothed the worries in Fie’s heart. However, such problems would probably be beyond the scope of Crow’s wildest thoughts and predictions.

“But... is it really fine? I don’t really like them in the same way... But to go out with them...”

“You’re thinking too much on that front again. Even if both people love each other equally and come together, they may split up later because they couldn’t get along. In fact, going out with someone you don’t feel as strongly for can sometimes result in a positive outcome.”

Crow’s advice continued.

“In fact, there are cases where both people feel strongly for each other and it all works out, or cases where they didn’t like each other very much to begin with and it all ends in tragedy.”

“Doesn’t that mean that all those choices are bad...?”

Crow’s four long-winded examples did not seem to serve any functional purpose as far as words of advice went. To Fie, they were all bad endings for all parties involved.

“Exactly. There are no ways to achieve absolute happiness. What’s important is how you feel about it at the end of the day, right? It isn’t about the shape of the relationship. It’s about how you shape it.”

Fie found herself agreeing with what Crow had to say, although she could not help but feel that Crow was glossing over certain details.

“The most important thing in love is...”

“The most important thing...?”

With a smile and a serious tone of voice, Crow imparted his final piece of advice to Fie: “Guts. And dependability.”

“Ha...?” Fie, not expecting such an answer, let a dejected sound escape from her lips.

“Yes, what men need the most are GUTS. And being dependable. If you think it’ll work out, then take responsibility for it. Being dependable is very important.” Ignoring the dejected Fie, Crow continued on.

Fie, however, was not willing to let a certain point slide.

“Then... doesn’t that directly contradict what you just said about not shouldering everything?”

“Ah... yes. I suppose it does. But that’s not everything, you see. In your case, you have us behind you — and so you can depend on us. We’ll support you in whatever way we can.”

Upon hearing those words, however, Fie burst into laughter. It felt like a heavy weight had been lifted off her.

“So this... ‘guts’ thing, is what’s important for men?”

“Exactly. Guts.”

Although Fie had been worried all this time, she felt like she could finally let go. She had been trying to shoulder everything alone all this time — but as Sir Crow said, it was perhaps important to be able to rely on others when walking her path in life.

Fie, now once again sporting her usual smile, looked up at Crow.

“Well then, I’m going to go off and apply my guts to the problem now.”

Crow smiled in response.

“I see. Tell me what happens, you hear?”

Fie, already running off into the distance, turned around to wave at Crow, a mischievous smirk on her face.

“I’ll tell everyone but you, Sir Crow.”

“Oi! What is that supposed to mean! Heath! You’ve got to make it worthwhile for me to dispense my advice, you know!”

“It’s fine! You have guts after all, right?”

Turning her back to Crow’s voice, Fie began running earnestly in the direction of the northern dormitory.

Fie finally managed to locate Queen at dinnertime.

Walking towards him from behind, she leaned in close. Although there were other squires around them, they were sufficiently out of earshot.

“Ah, Heath.”

Before she knew it, Queen had turned around, and was looking straight at her. Leaning in and placing her head next to Queen’s ear, Fie whispered a single line: “Hey... you know, about your proposal... my answer is a ‘yes.’”

After doing so, Fie immediately leaned back and quickly strode towards the canteen.

“Eh...?”

As if unable to believe what he had just heard, Queen turned to look at Fie, now in the distance.

Fie, apparently having one more thing to say to Queen, turned around with a mischievous smile.

“I’m counting on you, Queen.”

Chapter 24 — Crossdressing About Town

Amidst their complicated circumstances, Fie and Queen had started “dating.”

However, their relationship didn’t seem to change much at all.

Fie was, as usual, reading books in Queen’s room. Rolling around as she always did, Fie was painfully oblivious of Queen’s quick glimpses at her exposed skin and bellybutton.

Queen, for his part, was fidgeting nervously. However, this behavior was not exactly new — he had been acting this way before. After all, his feelings for Fie had finally been made clear.

If anything had changed, it would be where Queen had hidden his pictures — there was no longer anything under his bed.

Fie, noticing the changes, assumed that the pictures in question had been moved to somewhere next to Queen’s desk.

As such, although the two had started dating, nothing in particular happened, and the two simply continued doing what they had been doing all along. After all, Fie and Queen had often spent time together with no one else but them present.

The only thing that changed was what they understood of each other — particularly how Queen no longer had to hide his feelings for Fie.

For the past few days, Queen was satisfied with this. On this day, however, Queen had decided to go one step further.

“Um... would you... like to go on a date? In the future, I mean...”

Upon hearing Queen’s words, Fie lifted her head from her book, staring straight at Queen. With a somewhat stoic expression, Fie gave her answer.

“A date?”

“Yes...”

Fie responded bluntly to the nervous Queen.

“It’s probably impossible.”

“Wh-What?!” Stunned and surprised by Fie’s rapid refusal, Queen let a single word slip from his lips.

“I mean, we’re squires, you know. No matter where we go in the capital, there would be knights and squires that we know, people who know them, and shopkeepers who know those people. Right?”

If the two of them had wanted to go out on a fun outing, that could be easily done. However, even Fie understood what Queen had in mind — if anything, it would be along the lines of holding hands and acting in a suitably loving manner.

Although the capital was a big place, the possibility of running into someone who knew either of them was too great. Fie didn’t want to risk any rumors being spread, and the sight of two male squires holding hands would certainly generate quite a few strange rumors.

It was perhaps worth noting that one more thing had changed — at Queen’s request, Fie began using her natural, feminine-sounding voice when they were alone, rather than deepening it intentionally to pass as a man. It would seem like Fie’s appearance and mannerisms while at the back pavilion had made quite an impression on Queen. Although Fie did not really understand it, she was glad that Queen seemed satisfied.

“Ugh...”

Queen could not think of any way to refute Fie’s logic. After all, their relationship was, for the lack of a better word, a secret from all those around them.

“Can’t we go and buy things in the downtown district? As friends I mean.”

“...”

It would seem that Queen wasn’t satisfied with Fie’s suggestion. It occurred to Fie that the hearts of men were complicated things indeed.

“I will think of some way to make it work...”

“Yeah. Do your best.”

Although Fie thought that it was mostly hopeless, she did not mind entrusting the task to Queen, as long as he was satisfied with the result.

Fie had been told, after all, that “guts” were the most important thing to men. Guts.

When Fie next made her way down to the canteen for dinner, she was handed a slip of paper by the youths of the northern dormitory.

“What’s this...?”

Glancing at the piece of paper, Fie saw the words “Penalty Suggestions” scrawled onto its surface.

“The manliness ranking has been decided. Although the penalty for the lowest-ranked squire was supposed to be decided by the guy at the top, Zerius was like, ‘I don’t need something like this.’ And then left. That’s why we decided to draw lots and see who would get the privilege... And congratulations! It’s you, Heath.”

“Ooohhh...”

Fie finally remembered her initial enthusiasm for the contest. Fie and Queen, who had been busy with their own affairs, were now both in the top ten.

The one at the bottom of the ranking, as expected, was Remie.

“Well then, it’s in your hands, Heath.” Saying so, the youths left, leaving Fie alone to stare at the piece of paper.

“Ah...! This...!”

Clapping her hands together suddenly, Fie smiled as a familiar sparkle filled her eyes.

“Oi! Queen! Stay still! You’re gonna mess it up!”

Two days later, Fie found herself holding Queen down, as she readily and happily applied lipstick onto his lips. Queen, who always had a somewhat

healthy complexion, now found that his lips were colored a bright, shining red.

“Hm... next up is the eyeliner...”

Although Queen had scrunched up his face in a strange expression, Fie pinched and pulled on her fellow squire’s face readily, returning it to a normal expression before applying the relevant cosmetics onto Queen.

Remie, who was seated next to them, seemed ready to cry, hanging his head dejectedly. It would appear that Remie had already been put through Fie’s cosmetic processes, and now sported a perfectly made-up face.

“Ah, you can’t cry, Remie. The makeup will come off if you do,” Fie said, continuing her procedures on the unwitting Queen.

“Heath... where did you even... learn something like this...?” Remie asked in a somewhat dark and depressed voice. Fie, however, was too absorbed in Queen’s makeup session, and did not respond.

“Why me...”

Although Queen started complaining, teary-eyed, Fie soon put a stop to that, continuing her painstaking makeup process.

And so it came to be that the two squires, now perfectly sporting elaborately made-up faces, witnessed Fie opening a chest containing what appeared to be women’s clothing.

“Where did you even get something like that...”

“Where did you get those clothes from...?”

The two squires stood, the stoic expressions on their faces doing little to ruin the makeup Fie had applied on them.

“Hmm... I guess it doesn’t have to be a perfect fit. But maybe the coordination is more important...”

As Fie continued pulling dresses out of the clothing chest, the two squires could only watch on, an uneasy sense of worry filling their hearts.

A crowd of squires had gathered at the doorway of Heath’s room.

They were all here for one express purpose — to witness and summarily appraise the results of Heath's penalty. Under normal circumstances, the penalties in question were simple, such as one hundred flicks to the forehead, or drinking a giant glass of orange juice all at once.

However, Heath's chosen penalty was dramatically different.

"The two of you will crossdress and go out with me on a date for a day."

Such were the conditions of Heath's penalty. So detailed was the entry, that Heath had even planned out the destinations they were going to visit; then came back with a box full of dresses, feminine accessories, and a fully-loaded makeup kit.

Although Queen was nowhere near the bottom of the rankings, Heath, who was apparently still annoyed at the fact that Queen had participated in the contest without telling him, used that as a reason to rope him into it as well. It would seem like Heath bore grudges for a surprisingly long time.

Although the other squires pitied Queen and Remie's situation, they decided to leave Heath to his own devices, primarily on account of how much fun he seemed to be having. It would seem that the other squires approved of the dedication Heath had put into the penalty.

This was how Queen and Remie ended up being dragged into Heath's room, where they had remained imprisoned for the past hour.

This, in particular, was why the other squires, who were now a little worried for their compatriots, decided to stake out in front of Heath's door.

"How do you think it'll turn out?"

"I mean... it'll probably suit Remie. But Queen is... you know."

Although most of the gathered squires were united in their opinion of Remie's supposed femininity, they had difficulty imagining Queen dressed in girl's clothing. The latter's strength and showing at the swordplay tournament had deeply influenced their views.

"Heh. Those guys gave us a lot of trouble. Let's laugh our hearts out when we see them!"

It would appear that there were some amongst the squires who had showed up just for a good laugh.

Right then and there, the doorknob to Heath's room turned with a soft click.

"Oh, they're coming!"

While most of the squires present were here just to laugh at the unfortunate Remie and Queen, nothing could have prepared them for what they saw.

The first one to step out was what appeared to be a beautiful young girl clad in an orange dress, her face framed with a crop of cream-colored, wavy hair. Her droopy, somewhat cute eyes were a little teary, and she nervously looked up at the gathered squires apprehensively, her timid movements strangely endearing. The squires who had made eye contact with this mysterious girl found their faces turning various shades of red.

Before they knew it, another girl stepped out from the confines of Fie's room.

With her platinum-white hair and dark skin, she was the very picture of a foreign beauty. The contrast between her exotic skin color and long, white hair crafted a tense balance of girlish cuteness and a more adult sense of beauty. Her somewhat aggressively slanted eyes imparted a strong impression on her features, as she stared out at the gathered crowd. The squires, feeling like a beautiful woman was staring right into their souls, continued looking on, trapped in spite of themselves.

The last one to exit the room was a noticeably tired Heath, carrying a variety of makeup tools.

"Ah... I did some good work!"

With that, the squires were jolted back to reality.

"Dammit! It's just Remie and Queen isn't it...?!"

"If only they were real girls... If only... Ughhhhh!!"

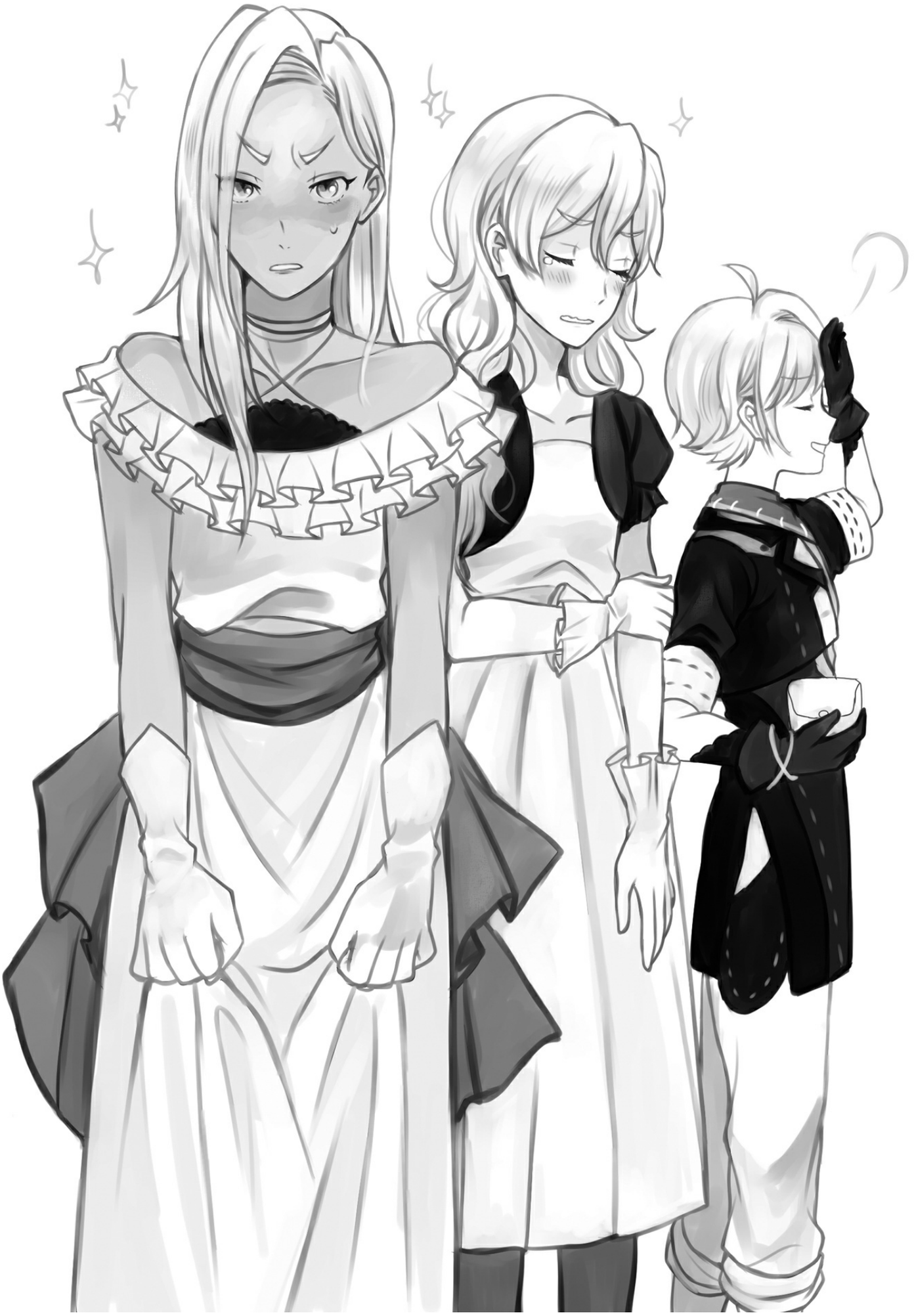
"I thought Queen really fit the image Heath was going for there..."

As only three people had gone into the room to begin with, the squires were forced to realize the reality of the situation.

However, in their prior dreamlike state, the squires had no choice but to admit that the two “girls” they had seen were incredibly cute. Some of the squires, now shedding tears over their loss, were summarily stared at by Queen, and gazed at timidly by a terrified Remie.

“Wh-What’s w-wrong, everyone...?”

“What is it with you people?”



Much to the dismay of the squires present, the cuteness of their two crossdressed comrades did not seem to decrease.

“Well! Since Queen and Remie’s preparations are done, I’m going to get ready myself.”

Heath closed the door to his room, leaving Remie and Queen stranded outside. Various strange sounds could be heard from beyond the door.

“Hey... you don’t think...”

The assembled squires began gossiping amongst themselves.

Although they were surprised at the crossdressing results of Queen and Remie, the squires came to a collective realization that amongst their entire number, Heath was the most girlish — apart from his occasionally problematic character.

After all, he was short, had narrow shoulders, a slim build, and a somewhat cute face.

The squires came to the conclusion that Heath, who was already girlish, would probably crossdress better than the two already present.

With the results of Queen and Remie already stunning, the squires could not help but wonder what would happen should Heath try his hand at it. Slowly, this thought began permeating the minds of the squires present.

Even Queen was nervous, occasionally shooting glances towards the closed door.

Finally, the strange sounds stopped, and a presence was felt from beyond the closed doors.

The crowd collectively swallowed.

The very next moment, the door opened with a loud thud.

“Well, let’s go.”

Those were the first words that Heath said to Queen and Remie.

The figure that stepped out from Heath’s room was clad in a strangely long and large coat, and was wearing a pair of tinted glasses. A strangely large and

garish gold ring sat on their hand.

To top it all off, what appeared to be a cigar fashioned from candy materials sat in the figure's mouth — if anything, they looked more like an alchemist of questionable means.

(What the hell is that supposed to be...?!)

The squires who bore witness to Heath's exaggerated image collectively felt a deep, piercing feeling of disappointment in their hearts that day.

The two youths fearfully gazed out at the open streets of the capital before them.

Still dressed up as women, they trailed behind the suspiciously dressed Fie, as if attempting to hide in her silhouette.

"A-Are we really going...?"

"Yep, it's a penalty after all." Such was Fie's response to the tear-filled Remie. "Don't worry, everything today is my treat."

The two youths, however, found quite a lot to be worried about.

Having been assured that no one would recognize them, the two youths could only continue on, praying that Fie's statement held true.

As expected, the party soon drew the curious stares of passers-by.

"W-We're being looked at... Isn't this too suspicious...?"

"It's fine. They're just drawn to you two. You know, for obvious reasons."

Even Fie could not help but think of Queen and Remie as beautiful girls at this point in time — to the point where she would have gladly given them tens if she had to judge their appearance.

It did not take much effort to see that the stares directed at Queen and Remie were mostly well-meaning. Fie, on the other hand, was seen as incredibly suspicious.

Fie announced her next plan of action.

"All right, we'll be going to that popular parfait store that just opened up this

month!”

However, the two did not move, in spite of Fie’s considerably audible announcement.

“We’re going!” Pulling on their skirts, Fie began making a beeline for their destination.

“Kyaa!”

“S-Stop it!”

The threat of having their skirts flipped up was too much for Queen and Remie.

Evidently, Fie had no intentions of showing mercy to her ever-suffering companions.

As she made her way down the streets, Fie and her party continued drawing stares from passers-by — Fie greatly enjoyed this.

She did, after all, stand out conspicuously; although the main reason for the stares were Queen and Remie, who were currently still trailing behind her.

To top it all off, what seemed to be a youth with a heavy interest in alchemy was leading the two — it was almost impossible to not stare at the party.

Fie, in particular, thought that her tinted glasses were incredibly convenient — even if she were to shift her gaze, no one would notice.

Happily looking around at the amazed citizens of Orstoll, Fie continued making her way down the street, acting as if this was all perfectly within the norm.

To complete the image, Fie was even playing with a solid gold coin, turning the object this way and that in her hands. It was perhaps worth noting that none of her party had any idea where Fie had gotten said coin from in the first place — nor did they have any inkling if it was real.

Queen and Remie could only look on in exasperation as Fie continued her parade. It occurred to them that they occasionally had no idea what exactly transpired in Fie’s mind.

However, fearing the stares of curious onlookers, the two continued hiding behind Fie, giving off a dainty and somewhat cute impression.

Eventually, as per Fie's announcement, the three of them arrived at a particularly popular parfait house.

"Reservation under the name of Fernando. You have seats for us, yes?" Fie asked, speaking to a female member of staff with a hilariously exaggerated voice.

"Ah, Master Fernando. We have been waiting for you."

It would appear that Fie had actually placed a reservation and was taking this entire affair very seriously.

As expected of a professional, the staffer in question did not bat a single eyelid at Fie's strange appearance, instead calmly leading them to their reserved seats.

"Please, this way. Here is our deluxe couple seating."

"Eh...?"

"Whoa...?"

The seats the three squires had been led to could accommodate more than three people easily — a large sofa and table arrangement greeted their eyes. Queen and Remie could only stare on, dumbstruck. Leaving the two of them as they were, Fie handed over a tip to the staff member, thanking her for her efforts in her dramatic voice.

Immediately after doing that, however, Fie quickly and firmly planted herself in the middle of the sofa, slapping both her hands on either side of her as she did so.

"Come here, come here! Sit down, the two of you."

Remie and Queen no longer knew what Fie was up to, or thinking about — although it did occur to the two that it had been this way from the very beginning of the day.

It was ten minutes after they were seated that the two of them finally

understood Fie's intentions.

The parfaits, finally ready, were placed on the table before them by attentive wait staff. With obviously strained faces, the two took turns feeding Fie spoons of the various parfaits laid out before them.

"Here, Master Fernando, say 'aah'..."

Who was Fernando anyway? At least, those were Remie's thoughts as he obediently delivered the parfait-containing spoon straight into Fie's mouth. Lounging back on the sofa, Fie happily opened her mouth, chomping down upon the parfait.

"Hahaha. Yes, yes. Go on. No problem here at all."

"Yes... M-Master Fernando..."

Next up was Queen, who quickly scooped up a bit from another parfait and then promptly fed it to Fie.

"Yeah... that's delicious!"

It would seem like being hand-fed parfaits was Fie's entire goal.

Remie and Queen could not help but wonder where Fie had picked up such ideas or notions, however.

After all, Fie's performance likened her to a stereotypical villain — in particular, the kind that strung along pretty ladies and had the ladies feed them food by hand. Of course, said villain would eventually face some sort of punishment — at least, that was how the stories went.

Fie, however, seemed more than eager to play the part — if anything, she was clearly enjoying it.

"Did you want to do this all along? Heath..." asked Remie, who could not put up with the stares from the other patrons of the parfait house any longer. Their stares hurt — but perhaps being out in public while crossdressed hurt more.

"Yeah, this is fun! Really fun!"

It would seem that Fie had found a deep sense of life fulfillment from this event — which implied that it might be a good idea for her to go home and

rethink her life.

“There are... other aspects to it too, you know.” Although Fie went on for quite a while after that, she did not reveal any in-depth details to her two suffering companions.

“The parfaits here are delicious! You two should have some fun too. It’s my treat!”

Although that was what Fie said, the two squires present thought that there was no way they could have any fun at all — especially not while dressed as women in public. And that was how the two squires felt in the parfait house that day.

After finally having finished their meals and exiting the parfait house, both Remie and Queen were swaying, seemingly on their last legs.

Fie, however, looked perfectly fine.

“Ugh... That was painful...” said Remie, teary eyed. Fie, however, turned to him with a smile.

“Good job! you can go back now.”

“Really?!”

Remie’s face was immediately filled with a happy glow. It would seem like being stared at while crossdressed was particularly trying for Remie’s mental well-being.

Fie, however, felt that it suited him very well.

“Yeah, Queen and I are going to walk around town a little bit more.”

At those words, Queen, whose face had earlier lit up in an equally bright glow, was now a dull shade of despair.

“All right... Then I’ll be going back now. Bye bye!”

Although Remie was usually gentle and kind, he was, after all, only human. Perhaps this was why he immediately abandoned Queen to his fate, walking back in the general direction of the castle with a relieved smile on his face —

although he would still be dressed as a girl on the way back.

Fie, concerned that it would crush his brief sense of relief, decided to keep that point to herself.

To the disappointed and distressed Queen, however, Fie gestured mischievously with her hands, an equally mischievous expression on her face.

“Queen. See? It’s a date now.”

“Eh...?”

“If you and I are dressed like this, I can go out with you on a date, right? I even disguised it as a penalty, so...”

This was, apparently, Fie’s true goal all along. By roping Queen into the penalty and letting Remie go back to the dormitory early, she would be free to go on a date with Queen.

Upon hearing her explanation, Queen finally connected the dots in his mind. But just as his depressed expression began to light up, Queen started sulking again. After fluctuating between the two expressions for a while, he eventually settled for a sulk, looking decidedly miserable as he stood in place.

“This... I don’t like it when I am dressed like this...”

Fie could not help but laugh at his reaction.

“Now, don’t be selfish! Should we go back then?”

“N-No... I’ll stay...”

It would seem like Queen was determined to go on a date even while dressed as a girl — and eventually decided that he would continue on as such for the rest of the day.

Having to go on his first date crossdressed, Queen continued to sulk. Fie, however, decided to cheer him up.

“Well? Are we holding hands? Yes? No? Maybe?”

“I’ll... I’ll hold hands!” Queen’s response was swift.

Smiling, Queen grasped Fie’s outstretched hand with his own, the warmth from his hand slowly seeping into Fie’s.

“Well then, let’s go.” Fie continued walking down the street, Queen in tow.

Queen was closer to Fie than usual. Unlike when Fie was walking with her fellow squires or friends, this was a sweetheart’s distance — their shoulders touched, hands clasped.

Feeling the firm grasp of Fie’s hands on his own, Queen’s expression slowly began to brighten.

Upon seeing Queen’s reaction, Fie felt a gush of happiness from deep within her own heart. Although their feelings were not yet a deep, intense love, Fie felt that they would both eventually come to understand their feelings as the time passed.

“Um...”

Queen leaned in to say something to Fie. Fie felt her ear tingle — perhaps because it was because they were closer to each other than usual.

“What is it?”

Queen continued, encouraged by Fie’s question.

“Um... I’d like you to at least take off your tinted eyeglasses...”

It would seem like Queen was still not satisfied with certain aspects of the date.

“Eh? But it’s cool...”

Queen, however, thought that it was neither cool nor cute — and was sure that everyone else probably thought so as well. Everyone except for Fie, at the very least.

Feeling like she had no other choice, Fie removed her tinted eyeglasses.

It was at that point that Queen noticed something — Fie had apparently taken off the heavy-gauge gold ring she’d had on earlier, probably when they had left the parfait house. This was perhaps done out of consideration for Queen, who she was currently holding hands with.

After removing her eyeglasses, Fie and Queen visited a wide variety of shops together — they went shopping, watched a theatre show, ate dinner at a

restaurant, and finally returned to the dormitory.

And so it came to be that their first date ended, with mildly satisfactory results for both sides.

Although their thoughts were not yet as one, they both felt a little closer to each other than before.

Afterword

When he woke up, he was greeted by a strange space — there were white walls and floating black words lined the air.

“Are you awake, Eyus?”

The voice came from where his friend, Rutas, was standing.

“Rutas... What is this place?”

“Beats me...”

Rutas shook his head at Eyus’ question.

“I, too, was in this space when I woke up... But it feels like while I was sleeping, I had a pretty strange dream... It was like you were a protagonist someplace, and I was your partner. I stood out quite a bit, too... It was so real... But, no. There was no way that could have been real.”

“Are you stupid? There’s no way that could have happened.”

Eyus was exasperated by Rutas’ unrealistic talk of dreams and the like. After he listened to Rutas go on about his strange dream, he continued to speak, to no one in particular.

“Come to think of it... I’ve heard of it, you know. This space.”

“What?”

“So... It seems like, aside from the ‘main story’ part of this world, there’s what’s called an *atogaki* in Japanese, or ‘afterword’ in English... What appears in the afterword are events and persons that, while usually not portrayed as much in the main story, are given screen time in the afterword. Perhaps this space is connected to that ‘afterword’ in some way...!!”

“What...?! What are you even talking about? You’ve lost me since the start...”

Rutas’ claims were absurd. It was just far too unrealistic. Even if there was some element of truth in his words, it was all too convenient.

However, as if possessed, Rutas continued speaking, ignoring Eyus' complaints. Placing a hand on his companion's shoulder, Rutas kept talking, a mysterious sense of passion behind his words.

"Eyus! We have to somehow escape from this space and reach the 'afterword!' We have to be portrayed in the publication that way! That way, we will be popular with the ladies AND popular at tea parties!"

"O-Oh..."

Eyus, now compelled by the mysterious force possessing his friend, had no choice but to nod.

However...

"If we were going to leave... would we go through that door?"

Eyus was looking at a faraway door — its surface was covered by long passages and walls of text.

"Ohh! Good work, Eyus!"

Immediately running to the door, Rutas grabbed hold of its knob, pulling with all his might in attempts to open it.

"Ugh... Kuh! It won't open... Why?!"

"Calm down, Rutas, look above us."

There was a clear line of words above the door — and as luck would have it, it was in a language that the two of them could read.

"If you wish to open this door, say the name of this world."

"I am the beginning of all forests. **I** am the beginning of all hearts of man. *I* am the beginning of the lives of men and their families. "I" am the beginning of all words."

"This place is..."

"It would seem that the door will open if we solve this puzzle."

"AUGGHHHH!!! I HAVE NO IDEAAAAA! What the hell does that even mean?!" Rutas quickly grasped his head, shouting in frustration.

“Calm down, Rutas. The answer is actually deceptively simple.” said Eyus, trying to calm his panicked friend.

“Y-You get it, Eyus?!”

“Yeah. These sorts of questions require the reader to pick up hints from its text. However, this question in particular uses different ways of saying ‘I’ for each part. In other words, it isn’t about finding similarities. This question is much more simple, as long as we fill in the blanks with the appropriate answers, we’re fine. There are four blanks in place anyway — just as there are four lines of questions.”

“Ohhh...”

“I am the beginning of all forests. That must be the kanji character for ‘wood,’ which is read as ‘ki.’ The characters for wood, when tripled, become the character for ‘forest.’”

“I see!”

“I am the beginning of all hearts of man — that would be the word for ‘self,’ which is pronounced ‘ga.’ Man obtains a heart when he first develops a sense of self.”

“Ohh! I see!”

“I am the beginning of the lives of man and their families. That would be the character for ‘entrance,’ called ‘to.’ No matter the kind of home, you would first need an entrance so that people can go into it and live in it.”

“I SEEEEEEEEE!”

“I am the beginning of all words. That would be the letter ‘A.’ After all, the alphabet starts from...”

“You’re wide opeeen!”

“Guh!”

Rutas’ fist suddenly connected with Eyus’ solar plexus, causing him to fall over onto the ground in pain.

“Ru-Rutas... What... are you...”

With a face twisted in malice, Rutas smiled wickedly.

“In other words, the correct answer is ‘KI-GA-TO-A’... With this, I have everything I need. I don’t need you around anymore,” said Rutas, looking down at the fallen Eyus.

“After all, the afterword is limited in the amount of words it can use. If two characters were portrayed in it, they would both receive less screen time. However, if I crush you here and now, the afterword will only belong to me! It’s practically guaranteed that I will be popular with the ladies now. The only one needed in the afterword is me!”

“W-Wait...! Rutas!”

“I won’t wait! Goodbye, my friend! With your sacrifice, I will now be super popular with the ladies!”

Without checking to see what lay beyond the door, Rutas pulled it open and jumped into the great beyond.

“Hey everyone, It’s everyone’s favorite nice guy of the northern dormitory, Rutas... Huh? Eh...? What is... What is this? GYAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

Rutas fell, and continued falling, into what seemed to be a great abyss. With the last of his wails echoing upwards, he finally disappeared.

The fallen Eyus, still in pain, could only manage a few words.

“That idiot... The alphabet begins with A... So you naturally read it backwards... The answer is not KI-GA-TO-A... It’s... A-TO-GA-KI... This... This *is* the afterword... The *atogaki*... Guh...”

And with those last words, Eyus passed out.

* * *

Thank you very much for reading this far!

Eyus and Rutas are characters that appear in the web version of the novel — I am very sorry that the publication does not include them. To begin with, they were never important characters and were more of just sticklers in the background, and I had never really thought much of them other than deciding their names.

With changes made to the published version, the two of them didn't appear. However, it wasn't like they were erased — they just became background characters with no names.

As you may have discovered from reading through the afterword, Eyus is particularly good at deductions and inferences. Rutas, however, is a scumbag.

Although I asked Kurodeko-sama to design them (I am really sorry for asking you to do this), the two of them ended up sadly not having any screen time, and so I decided to make up for it by putting them in the afterword.

In subtle ways like this, the web version has some changes compared to the published version — perhaps you may be surprised, having read this far.

As for the reason for the changes... To be honest, I just really wanted to work on the main story instead — that was the main driving factor. I wanted to see Queen's wishes come to fruition ever so slightly, and for Fie to continue living her own life. Although their feelings for each other are still somewhat childish, if you think about it, that in and of itself could lead to large developments. However, I wanted to portray them taking small steps, occasionally stopping along the way.

Realistically, I don't think there are many people who try to take everything upon themselves. Fie and Queen, both being teens, perhaps try to think that way, and certain choices might be born from that immaturity. They will have to live with the choices they make.

This book chronicles the east-north inter-dormitory duel — this is perhaps my favorite section of the work.

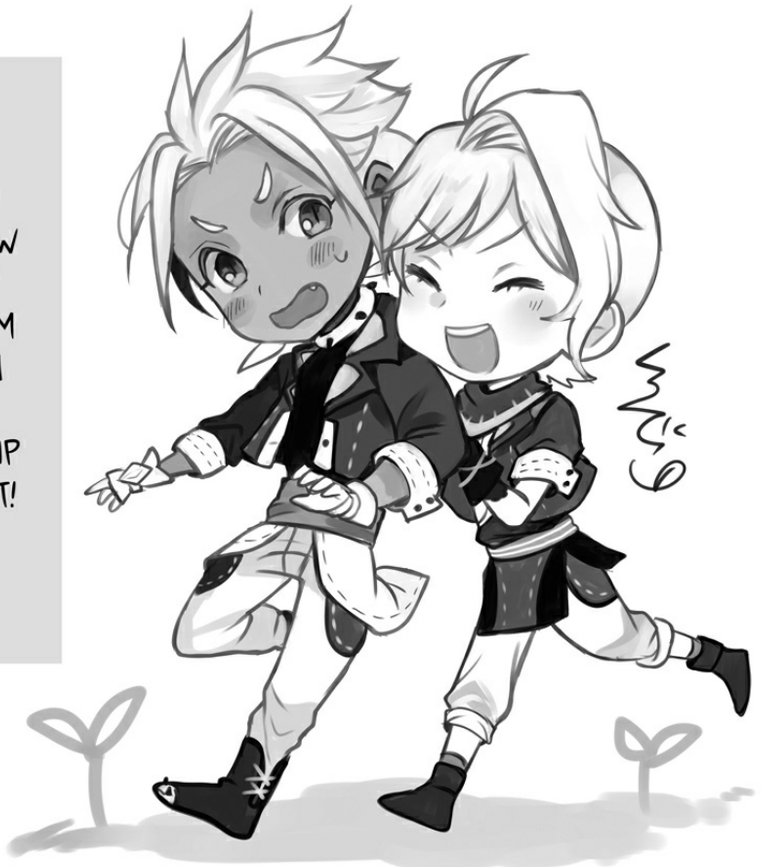
About that, I also asked Kurodeko-sama to draw some of the characters that showed up in that part — and they did! I was very happy about their portrayal. I hope that readers found the performances of Fie, Queen, Gormus, Remie, and even Slad (...) enjoyable to read!

I would really like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to those who made the publishing of this book possible.


Eyus


Rutas

CELEBRATING THE
RELEASE OF THE SECOND VOLUME!
I AM HONORED TO BE ABLE TO DRAW
FIE AND HER FRIENDS AGAIN. I SAY
THIS A LOT, BUT I FEEL REALLY WARM
THINKING ABOUT HOW THE KIDS IN
THE DORM ALL GET ALONG.
PERSONALLY, I LIKE THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN FIE AND QUEEN THE MOST!
WHAT ABOUT EVERYONE ELSE?







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Walking My Second Path in Life: Volume 2

by Otaku de Neet

Translated by Shirley Yeung Edited by Aimee Zink

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