





"First the stew, then the egg dish... Where did you learn such recipes?" Christina asked. "How should I put this... It's like this seasoning is familiar, yet completely new."

"I've always enjoyed cooking, and I learned a lot in my travels. Recently, I've learned a lot of recipes from Miharu. It seems like the world where Kouta and Rei are from is more advanced in food culture," Rio said, looking at Kouta and Rei.

"Are you two knowledgeable about food as well, then?" Christina looked at them in admiration.

"Haha. If I was, I would have done something about it long ago in the castle. Same with the preserved foods that we had to eat while in that basement..."

"I don't want to sound boastful, but my specialty is in eating."

Neither Kouta nor Rei seemed interested in cooking.

"Now I know why these dishes taste so familiar to me. So you know a Japanese person who specializes in cooking, huh?" Kouta nodded in understanding.

"I'm envious..." Longing filled Rei's voice.

"There were two girls who were summoned along with you, no? Do they lack cooking experience as well?" Vanessa asked Kouta and Rei.

"Ah... Yeah. I've eaten food that Akane—one of the girls—has made before... Haha." Kouta laughed dryly.

"Well, kids our age normally have their parents make all their food for them. There are more of us who can't cook than those who can, unless cooking is your hobby or something," Rei said, staring at the stew.

"At any rate, we're very grateful to be able to eat such delicious food. It has melted away our exhaustion from today. Right, Princess Christina?" Vanessa looked at Christina in content.

Christina nodded with a smile. "Indeed. All we could eat in the basement was reheated preserved foods. It's nice to have a proper meal for once."

Thus, they spent their evening peacefully, retired for the night at an early

hour in preparation for the next day, then left first thing in the morning to head east.



The day after they departed from Cleia, Rio and the rest of the party left the inn and put the city behind them as they headed down the eastern road. After walking for several hours, they were two small cities away when Rio spoke up.

"We'll be passing the town at the domain boundaries, but they may be doing thorough inspections right now, so we'll go via the forest rather than the road."

"Understood." Vanessa gave a military-like response first, the others nodding after her.

"We went through the forest yesterday by carrying those of you who couldn't run. The forest floor will slow us down and we'll be at risk of encountering monsters, so please follow my instructions. We'll move in a formation with the four of us that can fight in close combat—Sara, Alma, Vanessa, and myself—surrounding the others. I'll step away to handle any monsters or wild beasts that approach, so keep an ear out for Vanessa's orders. Orphia will cover the hole I leave in the formation and watch out for the front," Rio explained.

"Yeah, leave it to me."

"Got it."

Vanessa and Orphia replied in succession. After that, they confirmed no one else was on the road near them before finally moving into the forest. Since talking could attract monsters and beasts, a complete silence had continued between them until they discovered a small stream and decided to take a break roughly an hour later.

"Phew, I'm tired... It's completely different from walking on a road." Rei sighed as he sat down on a nearby boulder. He and Kouta had offered to carry more of their belongings so that Rio would be unhindered if any combat was initiated. That was probably the cause of his exhaustion—his backpack was filled with preserved foods.

"Yeah. It's only midday, yet it's dark and chilly. It feels kind of creepy," Kouta replied, looking around.

He didn't have the time to think of such things as he was being carried yesterday, because Rio had run too fast. The spring they stopped at right before they left the forest was in an open space as well, so it was much brighter. They had also left the forest several minutes after departing from the spring, so he was now seeing the forest in a different light.

"There's no path, so it's hard to walk and easy to get lost. There's also the risk of being attacked, as Sir Amakawa said. Those who choose to leave the road to walk through such a forest must be creepy—the only ones who would enter are those who want to avoid attention, like us," Vanessa said with a smile, having listened in on Kouta and Rei's conversation.

"Hmm... But wouldn't that make it easy for an enemy nation to sneak their army in through the forest? As long as they do something about the dangers of the forest," Rei wondered.

"That would be impossible for larger armies with inexperienced soldiers. They'd suffer greater damages from monsters and beasts than on the road, and they wouldn't be able to carry supplies via carriage without a path. I suppose a smaller-sized elite squad could pull it off, but they'd be entering an enemy kingdom with little information about the land, so charging straight into the forest would be very risky," Vanessa answered smoothly. As a knight, she had probably received plenty of command training.

"Huh, I thought most ambush attacks were done by sneaking through the forest, but I guess things don't always go as well as in fictional stories."

"No, your perspective wasn't bad. In a real battlefield against an enemy army, taking a forest detour to launch an ambush is the oldest trick in the book. As long as you have prepared thoroughly enough to make it through the forest, it's an extremely effective form of ambush. The line between a good plan and a foolish one is just extremely narrow."

"I see, I've learned something today," Rei hummed in understanding.

Come to think of it, we left the road and entered the forest during the outdoor drill at the academy, too.

Rio recalled his past after listening to their conversation. During that incident, a minotaur appeared and a false accusation was placed on him, which became

the reason for him fleeing Beltrum. It had been Duke Huguenot's son, Stewart, who put the idea of leaving the road for the forest into the commander's—Alphonse's—head.

As a result, they had gotten completely lost and were attacked by monsters, eventually falling into an uncontrollable panic that resulted in Flora being pushed off a cliff.

That was an almost perfect example of a foolish plan.

There was nothing that could be done about the past now, but Rio chuckled at the memory of it.

"...Hmm?" Sensing someone looking at him, he looked around. The end of his gaze landed on Christina, who had her water flask in hand as she was seated on a small boulder. When her eyes met Rio's, she immediately looked away.

"...I'm going to climb a tree and confirm our current position and direction. Depending on how far we are from the edge of the forest, we may end up having lunch here."

Rio looked upwards in thought for a brief moment before leaving behind those words to lightly leap up a tree.



After Rio climbed the tree and confirmed that it wasn't far to the edge of the forest even if they went around the checkpoint town, they decided to have lunch while they had the chance.

The typical nourishment one had while traveling was a packed meal—in other words, preserved foods. In exchange for being able to be stored for several weeks or months, the food tended to be salty or dried out—it never tasted that great.

"It won't taste very good like this, so let's make some simple adjustments," Rio suggested.

"That sounds good. What shall we make?" Orphia, who enjoyed cooking, asked Rio.

"We'll be moving after this, so something easy to digest. We bought barley

yesterday, so let's make that."

"Barley... Ah, you mean *that*." Orphia blinked before the meaning of Rio's words clicked.

"What are you making?"

"I'll help."

Celia, Sara, and Alma came over.

"We can only help with manual labor, but if there's anything we can do, just say the word."

Kouta and Rei, who had been sitting on some boulders, looked at each other and stood up. Christina and Vanessa also approached.

"The preparations aren't complicated, so everyone else may rest. Kouta and Rei must be tired from carrying the extra supplies. Orphia and Lady Celia's help will be enough," Rio said.

"R-Right. Sure thing. What do I have to do?"

Celia still wasn't used to being addressed as "Lady" and responded somewhat uneasily.

"I'd like you to use your magic to provide a little water and tamper with the ground."

Rio also couldn't use spirit arts in front of Christina, so he had to rely on Celia's magic.

"Oh, I see. Sure, leave it to me." Celia nodded a little proudly. She was normally surrounded by superior spirit arts users that didn't require her help as a sorcerer, so she was happy to be able to contribute for once.

"Now, Lady Celia, could you please make a working surface for food preparation?"

First was a space for cooking. They could cook without one, but having one made things much more efficient.

"Sure, one moment. Umm, Terra Murum."

Celia touched the ground nearby and chanted a spell. A magic circle appeared

on the ground before her and a rectangular block of dirt rose upwards to make a nice and flat block for a work surface.

"...Amazing. Even the blocks you make are perfect," Christina said in awe from where she watched to the side.

While there wasn't as much freedom as with spirit arts, those who could use *Terra Murum* could control their magic essence in order to adjust the size, shape, strength, and durability of the object they created. However, making something similar to what Celia had just made was harder than it looked. In fact, because the magic was typically used for battle, most wouldn't assume it could be used in such a way.

Magic and sorcery was largely limited by the phenomenon of activating the spell formula, but manipulating spells freely within that limit was possible for Celia because of her incredible magic essence control.

"Thank you. I am Princess Christina's former teacher, so I must show my strengths every now and then." Celia grinned shyly. Christina seemed interested in their work, as she remained standing beside them to watch.

In that time, Rio went over to the backpack that had been set on the ground and retrieved a pot that had been tied to it with a rope. "Now then, Lady Celia. Could you fill this pot with water next?" He brought the pot over to the side of the stream where the work counter was set up.

One would assume water could be filled from the stream, but even though it looked clear, at a glance it could have animal excrement, algae, and other unknown substances mixed in, so it was too risky to drink. This was why sterilization by boiling water was standard in order to avoid water-borne diseases, but water made by magic was guaranteed to be safe, so it was a much better idea to ask a sorcerer companion to create water.

"Sure, I can do that, but... Could you—umm, could you stop calling me Lady? It feels really embarrassing. I'm not used to being called that, so every time I hear it I get chills." Celia had a faint pout on her lips, looking unhappy.

"What would you like me to call you, then?" Rio asked with a troubled look, aware of Christina's presence.

"What..." Celia trailed off, speechless.

Rio normally addressed Celia with the title of Professor, but he couldn't call her that in front of Christina and the others.

"Y-You can call me by just my name. Like you usually do." Celia turned red as she spoke in a high-pitched voice. Since she couldn't be called Professor, she had no other option than being addressed without a title.

Until now, Rio had spoken to her without a title when he used her alias "Cecilia" in Amande and such, so there shouldn't have been a problem in having him call her "Celia" without a title as well.

There shouldn't have been a problem... But for some reason, she felt extremely embarrassed. The embarrassment grew stronger and stronger within her by the moment.

"Like... I usually do? But..."

Rio glanced at Christina and hesitated. He could understand choosing to go without a title by the process of elimination, but his serious personality made him consider the fact that it wasn't a good look for him to be addressing a noble of another kingdom without a title.

"Umm. There's no need to act all formally just because I'm here. You may act as you normally do," Christina said, guessing at Rio's thoughts.

"I understand. Then, Celia. If you could please prepare the water," Rio nodded with a small, resigned sigh.

"Uh. Y-Yeah. Got it."

Feeling embarrassed at actually being called without a title, Celia's cheeks turned red as she nodded. However, her mouth was turned upwards in a happy smile.

"...Hmph." The spirit folk girls were silent, but clearly objecting with their gazes. Christina and the others watched them with curious looks.

"H-Here's the water, then. *Creo Aqua*." Celia placed her hand over the pot and chanted the spell. This was a simple magic used in daily life that could create water. A small magic circle immediately appeared over Celia's hand and water began pouring out of her palm like a tap had been turned on.

"Please keep that up for a moment." Rio washed the pot briefly with the water before filling it up. Enough water came out to fill it up in ten seconds.

"Thank you very much. Orphia and I can handle the rest, so could you make a dining table and chairs for everyone to sit on? You may rest after doing that."

"Yup, got it!" Celia nodded cheerfully and ran off.

Rio watched her go with a smile before addressing Orphia. "Shall we begin, then?"

"Yep! You know, you could speak to me more casually too, Haruto," Orphia said with a mischievous grin.

Rio's eyes widened faintly before he chuckled. "...I'd consider it if you spoke to me as casually as Celia does."

"Ah... That might be a little too embarrassing."



Orphia imagined herself speaking so casually to Rio and laughed shyly.

"Let's get cooking."

"Right." Orphia nodded earnestly.

Then, Rio went back to the backpack and took out two thin metal sheets. Each sheet had a spell formula design on its surface. He placed them on the work table Celia had made and put the pot on top of one of them.

After placing several enchanted gems around the sheet, the spell formula absorbed the essence from the gems and started to release light and heat. This metal sheet was a magic artifact that could be used to control heat in place of a stove. Once a frying pan and some ingredients were also removed from the backpack, they were ready to start their food preparation.

First, vegetable oil and spices were added into the pan with some vegetables and mushrooms they harvested while they walked. Once the mushrooms were soft, slices of dried meat were added. After the flavor of the dried meat seeped into the mushrooms, the heat would be turned off and the contents served onto a plate. Half of this was then given to Orphia to make into soup.

Rio took the now-empty frying pan and added butter and diced onions, heating it until it was soft before adding the barley to fry it.

"Amazing. It's evident you're very skilled at this. What is it that you're making?" Christina asked in awe, having watched them as they went about their preparations.

"This is a type of food called porridge."

"Porridge, you say?" Christina cocked her head at Rio's answer.

"It isn't a type of food that nobility would come across, so I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it before. You fry the barley in oil before adding water to boil it."

"It smells good. I can't wait to try it." Christina's nose twitched as she sniffed the air before smiling.

After that, once the barley had been heated to a suitable degree, a small amount of alcohol was added to further fry it. All that was left was to add the

solid pseudo-bouillon that had been preserved in a container while making the stew at the inn last night, then boil the water in the pot and melt the bouillon for the flavor to seep in.

...It feels like she's standing oddly close.

Rio felt a little uncomfortable from Christina's gaze, who was standing at a distance neither too close nor too far to watch them. Every now and then she looked like she wanted to say something, but she didn't ask anything other than what they were making.

It doesn't seem like she's observing me, though.

If anything, it seemed like a rather hesitant gaze, as though she was gauging his expressions.

Is it because she's realized my identity after all? But if so, wouldn't she normally act more quarded...?

Rio recalled the standoffish image Christina had in his academy days.

She seems to have changed a lot—she's much softer now than she was back then.

Back then, she always seemed to be irritated and consistently distanced herself from others. So much so, they never exchanged a single conversation while he had been there. Perhaps that was why...

It feels kind of strange having her so close by.

It wasn't a bad thing, but it felt strange after having such a strong image of her past self. Just why was she standing so close and watching him so curiously?

Rio tried to think about it, but he didn't understand. Since thinking any further wouldn't help answer his question, he decided to focus silently on making the food before him instead.

The barley had absorbed the moisture well, so the heat was turned off before the contents of the frying pan began to scorch. Then, the mushroom and dried meat was added back into the pan and mixed well with salt and pepper for seasoning, before shredded cheese was finally added.

"It's done." The barley cheese risotto was completed.

"I'm done as well." Orphia finished the soup at just that moment. An appetizing smell wafted from the pot. Cheese risotto with mushroom and wild vegetable soup. It would normally be considered a treat to eat such a thing while camping outdoors.

Furthermore, while Rio had been cooking, Celia had prepared a wonderful dining space. There was a dining table and enough seats for everyone.

Everyone started gathering, drawn by the delicious scent.

"Whoa, isn't this risotto?! What grain did you use for it?!" Kouta asked, excitement in his eyes.

"It's barley."

"Barley, hmm? So that's how..."

"There's a thing called barley and rice, after all."

At Rio's answer, Kouta and Rei's eyes widened. They were just like the others that had come from Japan and missed rice too. For the record, Kouta's barley had been in the language of that world, but Rei's *barley and rice* had been in Japanese—*mugimeshi*.

"Mugimeshi?" Christina finally spoke up. She was cocking her head at the unfamiliar word.

"It's a type of grain. The main grain that's eaten in Kouta's world is called rice, and it's very similar in shape to barley. The taste and texture is different to barley, but similar dishes can be prepared," Rio explained to Christina about barley and rice.

"You're very knowledgeable... Ah, I see. You must have heard it from that Miharu person," Kouta said.

"Yes. Though limited, there are parts of Strahl where rice is cultivated. I don't have any on hand right now, but I'd be happy to treat you if there's an opportunity in the future."

"R-Really?!" Kouta jumped up eagerly.

"Yes. But for now, you'll have to make do with barley risotto. Let's dig in while it's still hot," Rio agreed with a smile, then urged them all to begin eating.

"Right, right. This is a treat! It looks really delicious, I can't wait!"

"Yup, it smells really nice."

Kouta and Rei both said excitedly.

"Y-Yum!"

"Whoa. The cheese is so thick."

Kouta and Rei—who knew what a risotto was—praised the food first. After giving their opinions on the first bite, they spent the rest of the time absorbed in eating.

Christina also carried the spoon to her mouth elegantly before blinking in surprise. "Even though the cheese is so rich in taste, it doesn't feel heavy at all. Impressive," she offered.

"In order to remove the unique scent barley produces when water is added, the barley is first fried with alcohol. After it's fried, the recommended order is to soak the barley in soup before finally adding the cheese. That way, the taste of the cheese is condensed," Rio explained.

"So you first remove the unnecessary flavors from the ingredients, then add the flavors that you want. I see... There's a lot of thought behind it. And the result is truly delicious..."

Christina hummed in awe before taking another bite of the risotto to savor the taste. Her mouth softened faintly in a bitter and fleeting way.

## Interlude: Meanwhile...

At the same time in Beltrum, but further east past where Rio and the others were, there was a small post town along the road towards the Galarc Kingdom. It had a small resident population of around 200 people and was surrounded by mountains. The road ran through the valley and made it extremely difficult to go around. There were no alternative routes to this road, making it fairly populated.

The Ricca Guild also used this route for transportation, and the town was always filled with three times the number of travelers than residents—many of them adventurers.

Many pubs and inns lined the sides of the single main street stretched through the town. Several pubs had regular adventurers which gradually turned into adventurer cliques within each pub, building upon their own influence.

"Ah, that hits the spot! There's nothing like beer after a long day of work! Hey, everyone! It's my treat today. Drink up!"

"There's nothing but cheap beer, though!"

"What are you saying? It's the cheap stuff that's good!"

"It'd be even better if there was a hot chick to go with it. There're only your ugly mugs around here."

"No doubt!"

In a pub where most veteran adventurers gathered, hearty laughter could be heard from an early hour.

"Huh?"

The door to the pub creaked open slowly, attracting the gazes of the adventurers in the pub. A man near his thirties entered, his appearance like an adventurer—it was Arein, visiting the post town on Reiss' orders. He wore a cloaked hood and leather armor, sword hanging at his waist.

"That's an unfamiliar face." A large built man with a mean look—the one who had been offering everyone drinks—muttered to himself. It wasn't strange at all to see new adventurers in town, but this pub was considered the territory of the veteran adventurers here. Adventurers like them lived in a narrow-minded society where their strength was their livelihood, so they had primitive values of the strong being superior. And so, when a newbie adventurer entered their territory—

"The hell do you want?"

There was no warm welcome to be received. Being drunk and feeling generous, the veteran adventurer first used intimidation to feel out for a reaction. If the other man responded modestly, he'd assert his dominance a bit before finding out why he was here.

The most common response was an unfortunate lack of awareness about the pub. The next most common were suck-ups who wanted to greet the local adventurers. Finally, there were the rare idiots who came to pick fights on purpose. Most people fit into these three categories, and those who visited unaware usually turned tail immediately to avoid confrontation. However—

"Barkeep—a meat dish and beer, please."

Arein boldly made his way to the counter and put in an order. In an instant, the gazes of the men in the pub grew menacing, but Arein didn't even blink as he indifferently slid into a counter seat. He carefully counted out the cost with a tip and placed three large bronze on the counter.

"Right." The store owner nodded with a sigh, sensing trouble on the horizon. As long as money was offered, the man was a customer. He began to prepare the ordered items, when—

*"…"* 

The large man that had been ordering drinks stood up silently and approached Arein from behind. The other adventurers followed him, watching on in amusement. They helped themselves to seats in the chairs surrounding Arein.

"Hey, newbie. You sure got guts, ordering without greeting us first. What's

your deal?" The large man started talking with a sneering grin, winding an arm around Arein's shoulder.

"Oh, I just heard this pub was filled with skilled and hearty adventurers," Arein replied confidently.

The large man narrowed his eyes. "Hmm... And what business do you have?" he asked.

"Nothing much. I'm in search of some criminals with a bounty on their heads." Arein took out a sheet of paper. There was no face or name mentioned, but the details of a wanted notice were written down.

"F-Five hundred gold?!"

The expressions in the men's eyes changed at the size of the bounty figure. Of course it would—that much money could buy all the booze and women they wanted. They could live extravagantly without working for the next ten years.

"Hey, was this wanted notice posted in town?!" The large adventurer completely sobered up, looking around at the others for more information.

"Was it?"

"Dunno."

Not a single person was aware of the wanted notice. If they had, they wouldn't be drinking here at such an hour anyway.

"Of course you wouldn't know. It was only posted from Cleia yesterday. It won't reach a countryside town like this for some time," Arein said smugly.

"H-Hey, hold on a minute. You said it was posted from Cleia yesterday? Cleia, the capital of that Count Claire's domain, right? That's a week's trip on foot. Why would you have such a thing?" the large man asked in suspicion.

"Ah, I'm an adventurer working for a big noble, you see. I've been lent a griffin for transport purposes," Arein answered nonchalantly.

"Ah..."

None of the adventurers present had ever rode a griffin before, so they had no idea how fast they could move—but it certainly sounded reasonable for a

griffin to fly here in one day. They must have been shaken by the large sum that was suddenly presented, as they fell silent without questioning the circumstances.

"This notice says they're wanted dead or alive, but my lord wants to apprehend the criminals alive. Apparently, he has some matters to settle with one of the wanted, which is why I was hired as a gofer..." Arein added, looking around at the adventurers. "It's obviously a far too difficult task for me alone. I've set my eye on several likely points the criminals may pass through and am procuring local personnel to help out. So, how about it? I have to head towards the cities in the north after this, but would you like to keep watch in this post town for the criminals? If you take on my request, I can make a little advance payment..."

He placed a small bag stuffed with large silver coins on the counter.

"...Large silvers, huh?"

The large man glanced at the sparkling silver peeking out of the bag. Its impact was weakened after seeing the bounty of 500 gold coins, but it was still a large amount to these men. Though it was merely pocket change to Arein...

"The job is to check if the criminals pass this town. They'll be on guard too, so don't expect them to admit to anything. There's no need to explain the situation, and no need to pursue them too far. Just inform me if you think they pass by. I'll return in several days and pay you a bonus if you spot them."

"Hmm..."

Despite that, the adventurers didn't nod immediately. They were calculating their losses and gains.

"By the way, I'm rather short on time. Please—make a decision immediately. If you refuse, I'll head to the next town and ask there instead. If you take the job, I'll hand you this notice," Arein said, folding the notice neatly. Naturally, there was no other copy of that notice in the town.

"Tch, you're a real smooth talker. Fine. We'll take it." Despite clicking his tongue lightly, the large man accepted the job in high spirits. Such an easy and profitable job rarely came knocking.

"I'm glad we could come to an agreement," Arein said, smiling contentedly.



Sakata Hiroaki, the hero of the Galarc Kingdom, was staying in a guest room of the royal castle in Galtuuk. He sat on a luxurious sofa as he was waited upon by Roanna and Flora on either side and Duke Gustav Huguenot across from him.

"You must be fatigued from attending successive days of gatherings to strengthen our friendship with the Galarc royalty and nobility," Duke Huguenot said, bowing his head deeply. Most of those gatherings had been dinner parties or tea parties that functioned simultaneously as potential marriage interviews.

"It was nothing—I was the one being treated the entire time. There were breaks in between, too, so I had fun doing it. I'm in my best condition, if anything," Hiroaki replied with a shrug.

"That is most wonderful to hear." Duke Huguenot smiled.

"Hmph. I know you, and you wouldn't come all the way here just to check up on my health. What do you want?" Hiroaki snorted in good humor.

Duke Huguenot laughed in response to Hiroaki for a while, before putting on a serious expression. "Hahaha, it seems I am no match for your sharp observations... Then if I may ask so abruptly, do you have any plans of settling down?"

"Settle down... You want me to get married?"

"Indeed."

"Marriage, huh? In the world I was from, I'd be considered far too young to get married," Hiroaki sighed a little, annoyed. To a boy born and raised in Japan, the word "marriage" sounded heavy to someone who was only nineteen.

"With regards to this topic, I respect the will of the people involved above anything, so I do not wish to rush any decisions too hastily... However, your countenance and character was spread widely after the banquet the other night, and we've received an unexpected amount of marriage proposals from Galarc's noblewomen. Many of them are fine with marriage as concubines, too. These last few dinners you have attended have been related to such offers,

but..." Duke Huguenot checked Hiroaki's expression to see his smile visibly grow more smug.

"Yeah, I figured it was something like that. Ah, I didn't want this kind of popularity..." Despite his words, Hiroaki's expression wasn't dissatisfied at all. He shook his head in an overly lamentful way.

"I apologize for my lack of assistance concerning this, but I believe your charms were simply too brilliant to ignore."

"Oh, stop. I don't need your self-interest-fueled flattery," Hiroaki huffed.

"But these are my honest thoughts, and the sheer truth." Without denying that it was in self-interest, Duke Huguenot flattered Hiroaki even further. The fact he didn't try to hide his true opinion was what made Hiroaki regard him highly.

"Heh," Hiroaki smirked smugly. "So you want me to settle down quickly. Is that it?" he guessed.

"Like I said, I will prioritize your wishes above all else, and it is the honest truth that I do not wish to rush into anything hastily. But it is also true that we will be unable to put off the topic of marriage forever if the number of proposals continue to increase, leaving me between a rock and hard place." Duke Huguenot sighed with a troubled face.

"I see... Just wondering, at what age do the royalty and nobility of this world normally get married?"

"Noblemen normally marry from around age twenty to their mid-thirties at the latest, I would say. It is most common for noblewomen to marry in their early teens at the earliest, and around twenty at latest."

"Hmm. That means I'm at an age where it would be considered normal to get married, huh?" Hiroaki hummed.

"That being said, deciding on a marriage partner here and now would be far too hasty, and similarly, selecting several wives at once would be too shameful. I'm sure you also have hesitations concerning these reasons, of course."

"Well, yeah."

"And so, I would like to make this as a suggestion: select your first wife for the time being, and form an engagement instead of marriage." Duke Huguenot finally arrived at his request.

"My first wife, huh..." Hiroaki had a slightly somber look.

"Are you not interested after all?"

"...No, there's just something about the terms 'first wife' and 'concubine.'
That's like putting your women in some kind of order, no? I'd want to connect with them equally, not bind them by something like that. Same with whatever annoying rules that come with social status and all that. It's so suffocating, I can't stand it. It's normal for regular nobles to have wives on bad terms or concubines that feel inferior, right?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that such cases are uncommon," Duke Huguenot confirmed with a strained smile.

"I hate things like that. If the women form cliques and feud with each other over the man, the one who ultimately suffers is said man. You know I'd hate that, right? It'd be so stressful."

"Of course."

"That's why I have several conditions." Hiroaki raised a finger on his right hand.

"What are they?"

"I have no problem with building a harem, but I will be the one to decide who will be my brides. Of course, I'll hear your suggestions, but I don't want to hear any nagging or commands. I understand there's a need to decide on my first wife, but I won't have an order to my concubines. I don't want to hear any complaints about how I decide to love my women. You are not to use my wives to create factional disputes. These are my absolute conditions. If you break them and any consequences fall upon me, well, I'm sure there's no need to say what'll happen," Hiroaki said, laying out the conditions. Since he was in a position to push forth his ego, he did so while making his warnings perfectly clear—anyone who disregarded them would look like a fool, was what Hiroaki was stating.

"Hahaha, you are truly a broad-minded person. However, conditions such as those were well within my consideration to begin with, so rest assured," Duke Huguenot said with confidence.

"Hmm. I can always count on you to get it. No, I suppose that much should be expected from you."

"Any nobleman has gone through similar hardships, after all." Duke Huguenot grinned in response to Hiroaki's hum of awe.

"Haha, I see. Ah, it would be more enlightening to just seek the knowledge of my precursors around this subject. Tell me more about it over drinks sometime." Hiroaki couldn't help but beam broadly as he spoke.

"Gladly. I'm sure many would love to attend, but such discussions would be better made in less company. I shall carefully screen some attendees and set a date."

"Man, I really can count on you. We have to have more man-to-man talks. Ah, by the way, who did you have in mind for my engagement?" Hiroaki asked, now in a good mood.

"A hero needs a first wife of appropriate social status, so my thoughts were on Princess Flora," Duke Huguenot answered smoothly.

"Hmm. Well, that would be reasonable. But are you all right with that, Flora?"

Hiroaki glanced at Flora seated beside him. He figured the first person he would be engaged to would be Flora or Roanna, who were usually beside him as his aides.

"Huh? Ah... Y-Yes. I'll do my best." Flora flinched. She nodded her head a little awkwardly—she had no choice but to do so.

I'll do my best, huh... Honestly, Liselotte and Roanna are more charming. They're great conversation partners and show the right degree of consideration towards men, so they score high there. Though I have no complaints about Flora's looks...

When he compared her to Liselotte and Roanna, she was unfortunately less lively in conversation. Hiroaki considered that as he stared at Flora's face.

Well, it'd be more convenient to have this kind of passive personality as the first wife of a polygynous relationship. It'd be annoying to have the first wife get jealous and meddle with the other women. In that regard, Flora would know her place and understand. Well, you can't miss out on having a princess when you're in a fantasy world like this. There's no way I'd let such a fine woman go to another man, either, so this will do.

"Sure. If Flora's fine with it, let's get engaged," Hiroaki said easily.

"Oh, you'll really do it?" Duke Huguenot smiled broadly at how things developed exactly as he wanted.

"Yeah. Shall I get engaged with Roanna while I'm at it?" Hiroaki grinned, peering at Roanna's face beside him.

"...O-Oh, don't say such silly things out of the blue." Roanna blushed shyly and turned her face away.

Haha, how adorable.



Hiroaki smiled in satisfaction, turning back to Duke Huguenot. "...So, out of the leading nobles in the Galarc Kingdom, which houses have currently sent proposals?"

"The major ones are the Galarc Kingdom's third princess, Princess Rosalie, and Duke Gregory's Lady Lisette, I believe," answered Duke Huguenot. Liselotte's name was not mentioned.

"Lisette aside, Rosalie was only twelve or thirteen, right? Ah, but I guess that's right at the start of the expected marriage age in this world."

Hiroaki recalled the girl named Rosalie he met at a tea party not long ago. For the record, she was also Charlotte's little sister.

"Indeed so."

"Hmm, I see... Anyone else?" Hiroaki asked.

"In terms of prominent ones, those two are far ahead of the others. The family status of the other ladies are a little lower in comparison."

"Hmm..." Hiroaki hummed vaguely.

So there was no proposal from Liselotte, huh? Even if Flora was my first wife, Liselotte would definitely make it to the second or third seat. But I guess she's busy—she left right after the banquet to go to work, after all.

It was still possible for a proposal from Liselotte to drop in at any time, but he still found it a little disappointing that there was no proposal from her right now.

"Will we be remaining in Galarc for much longer?"

"There are still several events to attend, but once they're done, we should be able to return to Rodania."

"Right... Ah, then let's slowly make our way back to Rodania once they're over. I'd also like to drop by Liselotte's place on our way back—I didn't get to say farewell to her properly at the banquet."

If she wouldn't show herself readily, then he'd just have to go to her. Honest to his desires, Hiroaki suggested they return just so he could meet Liselotte.

That fact was probably seen through easily by Duke Huguenot and the sharp-minded Roanna beside him.

That being said, Duke Huguenot would gladly welcome a marriage between Hiroaki and Liselotte. Honestly, Liselotte's marriage alone would overwhelmingly outweigh marrying both Rosalie and Lisette in terms of benefits.

"Understood," Duke Huguenot chuckled with a smile, bowing his head respectfully.

## **Chapter 3: Signs of the Pursuers?**

Four days had passed since Rio and the others left Cleia. Today was the third day of the three-day cycle they had decided on for using their enchanted swords to move (though it was really thanks to spirit arts).

They departed from the inn at the post town they stayed at early in the morning, walking along the road until there was no sign of other people around. They then left the road, enchanted their bodies, and picked up the others, running just fast enough not to cause suspicion in order to put as much distance behind them as possible.

After moving roughly a two-day journey's distance, they returned to the road and continued walking. By the time the sun was almost setting, the party had arrived at a post town along a road that stretched through a valley.

They came to a natural stop when the town came into view.

"Gah, we're finally here!"

"It's been tiring."

Rei and Kouta relaxed in exhaustion.

"...Phew." Celia also brought her water flask to her mouth to rehydrate herself, sighing tiredly. Christina took the chance to do the same.

With the exception of Rio, the spirit folk girls, and Vanessa the knight, none of the others were the outdoorsy type. Waking up every day before the sunrise and walking until the sunset naturally trained their legs, but the fatigue was accumulating a fair bit.

"Good work, everyone. We'll be staying here as planned, so let's find an inn and rest up," Rio said. They passed the gate of the post town with heavy footsteps. The town was located at the top of the road, so the main street passed right through the middle of the town.

The benefit of staying at towns like this while on the run was the lack of

permanently-stationed soldiers—and the few towns that had them only had a small number of personnel that slacked on their duties.

However, they also had the disadvantage of easily becoming unsafe. Because of this, there was no need to worry anxiously about the presence of officials, but—

...*Hmm?* 

The moment Rio passed the gate, he looked up.

He had been on high alert for the presence of their pursuers, so he periodically activated a giant wind barrier with a radius of several hundred meters to secretly detect any enemies. Now that they had entered the town, he was doing the same just in case. It was how he noticed a winged creature flying several hundred meters high in the sky. It was probably some kind of bird... But just as he thought that, he sensed a gaze on him from the side.

He turned to see several adventurers loitering about, one of them looking carefully between Rio's group and a piece of paper in his hand.

Adventurers, huh? Rio guessed at the background of the men ogling them.

Adventurers were practically everywhere, so it wasn't an odd sight for them to be gathered at the entrance of a city or post town at the end of a day of work. Local adventurers would obviously be curious if unfamiliar adventurer-like groups appeared in town fully armed, too.

"...What are they doing? Staring at us so closely." Sara had sensed the same gaze as Rio and pouted sullenly.

"They seem to be adventurers. It'll be a chore to get involved, so don't make eye contact. Let's head to the inn quickly," Rio said plainly and started walking swiftly in the lead, wanting to proceed quickly further into the town.

"Hey, hold on a minute there." The adventurers approached them briskly, calling out to them.

"..." Rio ignored them and continued to walk in the lead.

"Hey, I said wait. I'm talking to you guys, the group of nine in the hoods! Yeah, you, with the gray-haired kid in the lead!" He yelled out their specific features

to get them to halt.

"...What?" Rio came to a reluctant stop and responded on behalf of the group.

"Are you all adventurers?" the large man asked.

"We're just travelers. Sorry, but we're tired right now," Rio said in annoyance, wrapping up the conversation. However, the men didn't back down, quickly moving around them to block their way. They seemed to underestimate Rio for his youth, mocking grins on their faces.

"I said we were tired," Rio repeated, glaring at the adventurers coldly. The men took half a step back from the light pressure they felt, but—

"Tch... Unfortunately, our livelihoods are on the line here. We're looking for someone." Unable to stand the thought of a brat half their age looking down on them, they replied in an intimidating tone.

"Looking for someone? Then you have the wrong people. I don't recognize any of your faces."

"Hah. Yeah, we're not looking for someone we know. I said our livelihoods were on the line, no? The ones we're looking for are wanted criminals with a bounty."

"...I don't recall having a bounty placed on us."

Considering they were currently on the run, suspicion immediately ran through the back of Rio's mind, but he tried to play it off as doubtful ignorance.

"Yeah, you would say that. Especially if you were the wanted criminals." The large adventurer laughed scornfully.

"Are you saying we're criminals?"

"I called out to you to confirm that."

"And how will you confirm it?"

"It's written on the wanted notice that one of the criminals is a gray-haired boy in his mid-to late-teens. Exactly the same features as you, it seems." The large adventurer stared at Rio. "Those features are extremely commonplace." Rio shrugged without any change in his expression.

"But there are other features that match too, y'know? The number of criminals is around ten, most likely a group of nine young men and women. There are nine of you. From what I can see under your hoods, you all seem quite young. There are women among you, too."

The large man stooped over, waving the wanted notice as though to show it off. He leered at Celia and the others to try and peer under their hoods, and the group ducked their faces in displeasure.

"Being one-sidedly accused of a crime I have no recollection of isn't something I can let pass. Show me that wanted notice," Rio said boldly, extending his right hand.

"Yeah, sure. Don't rip it up." The man handed the notice to Rio obediently.

"..." Rio read the notice silently. Interested in the contents of the notice, Christina also approached him from behind to peer at it.

The notice first detailed the appearance of the wanted criminals, and—

"The abduction of an important figure... and murder?"

That was what was written there. It also included other details about the criminals, as well as the things Rio and the others were under the suspicion of.

"...What a joke," Christina mumbled, her anger simmering.

At the same time, Rio up spoke in a calm voice. "I see. Indeed, there are a lot of similar points between us and what is written on this notice. I understand your suspicions, but you have the wrong people. I don't know anything about this." He returned the wanted notice.

"Ah..." the large adventurer hummed as he took back the notice. Rio had acknowledged how their features matched with the notice so boldly, he couldn't find the right words to say next.

"You're free to continue suspecting us, but we're free to decide not to associate with you any further. As I said in the beginning, we're tired. If we continue arguing with you here, all the inns will be occupied and we'll have to

camp outdoors. So excuse us," Rio said, starting to walk past the men that had blocked their road. Behind him, Christina and the others slowly moved their feet too. However—

"Hold on!" the large adventurer suddenly yelled.

"What now?" Rio replied in annoyance.

"The wanted notice says there are three men and six women. Remove your hoods and show me your faces," the man ordered high-handedly.

"...I don't believe that's how you ask someone a favor," Sara said sullenly.

"Indeed. I wonder what right he has to be ordering us?" Christina agreed in exasperation.

"Huh? What did you just say?" The man furrowed his brows unhappily.

"Try asking again with the word 'please," Rio ordered the man.

"...Uh?" The adventurer froze, a vein bulging at his temple.

"Isn't it infuriating being spoken to like that? There's a better way of phrasing your words when asking someone to do something. It's only natural to feel repulsion to being spoken to like that by an unknown stranger. That's what the girls are saying," Rio said, boldly presenting his logic.

"Hey, hey, are you trying to preach at me? You've got guts, brat." The large man's face twitched.

"We have no intention of arguing with you. Since you're not giving us a choice, we'll show you our faces. But this is the last of it. If you still think we're the criminals, then provide some concrete proof of it." Rio turned around and addressed the others. "Everyone, please remove your hoods."

Those wearing their hoods silently moved their hands and revealed their faces.

"Wh..." All the men had their breath taken away, because the most beautiful girls they had ever seen in their lives were standing before them.

And so, after the men had remained speechless for several seconds—

"I believe that's enough. Farewell."

Rio started walking once more. Christina and the others also covered their heads again and followed him. The adventurers watched them leave without calling for them to stop again.



After that encounter, they secured a place at the inn in town.

Rio ordered the others to wait at the inn before leaving alone to investigate the town, believing it was important to gather information calmly first.

He stopped at food stalls to buy snacks and chat with the store owners, confirmed what the wanted notices at the town bulletin board said, and then returned to the inn 30 minutes later. Everyone gathered inside one of the rooms they rented to discuss.

"First, it seems like a soldier drops by from the nearby city once a week. But today isn't that day, and it doesn't seem like the search party arrived here before us either," Rio said.

"Which leaves the problem of the wanted notice, and those rude men," Sara said with a pout.

"There's something I realized about the notice, and it bothers me. The notice the man had didn't exist on the bulletin board in town."

"...Isn't that because that man had it?" Alma cocked her head.

"That's exactly what bothers me. That wanted notice didn't have a publication stamp. A mere adventurer in a town like this shouldn't have the original copy of a wanted notice, so it was probably a transcribed copy. But if so, don't you think it's strange? There's no original in town, yet there's a copy."

"Indeed. Removing an original notice from the bulletin board is considered a serious crime for assisting criminals in avoiding arrest. The only ones allowed to be carried around are copies," Vanessa explained.

"Yes, which means there is the possibility the wanted notice is forged."

"The forgery of official documentation is a capital crime..." Vanessa said, pursing her lips solemnly.

"It's also possible that all the copies prepared were taken, so the original was

temporarily removed to make new copies. Well, there's no way to confirm that at present, so let's go through some of the other points instead."

"Do you mean the contents of the wanted notice?"

"So you noticed as well, Your Highness," said Rio. At that time, the only ones who glanced over the notice were Rio and Christina.

"Was there something strange about it?" Celia asked.

"If that wanted notice was really for us, then it was *too* well-informed about our numbers and the details of our ages and genders. Charles Arbor, the leader of the search party, shouldn't have realized that five other people have joined up to escort Her Highness."

Rio, Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma. These five had yet to be witnessed together with Christina by the search party. And yet, the wanted notice had stated there were around ten of them, most likely nine.

"Ah..." Celia understood.

"...Do you believe that wanted notice was prepared for us, Sir Amakawa?" Christina asked Rio.

"To be honest, I can't say for sure. The number of people, genders, and ages fit perfectly with us, but the names of the criminals weren't written down. The only person who had their appearance noted in detail was myself. Based on this, it seems like the notice was written by someone who didn't know the background of who they were writing about... so it could just be a coincidence. The fact the crime was listed as the abduction and murder of an important figure also bothers me," Rio answered.

"Right, that makes sense. But it bothers me how there's too much information that matches up." Christina looked a little uneasy.

"I'm also stuck on that point. There is one person I can think of who could have made such a notice, but I may just be overthinking things."

"Could that person possibly be..."

"Reiss. Not even Count Claire is aware that Sara, Orphia, and Alma are accompanying Your Highness, and Reiss is the only one who witnessed the nine

of us together after the battle in the woods. He would have been able to confirm our numbers and genders."

"D-Don't tell me... Did that man appear at that moment in order to make this wanted notice?" Vanessa stammered.

"Could Reiss be cooperating with Charles...? He's the person that may be the Proxia Empire's ambassador," Celia added. Both had anxious faces.

"Who knows? If Reiss is working with Charles, it'd be strange for there not to be more detailed descriptions of Your Highness, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei on the notice."

On top of that, if Reiss was behind this, he would have touched upon Rio's background—but he didn't say that out loud.

"I am of the same opinion as Sir Amakawa. If Charles and Reiss are collaborating, then that should make the important figure mentioned in the notice myself, but I don't believe Charles would fabricate my death even in a false crime—not unless I were actually dead, that is. If he tried something so impertinent and ran into a contradiction after, he'd be unable to explain himself," Christina said in agreement with Rio.

"...Which means Charles wasn't involved in the crafting of that wanted notice, and it was simply a forgery made by Reiss?" Celia asked in confirmation.

"Yes, that is possible. However, we have no means to confirm that at the moment, and it's still possible that this notice is completely unrelated to us. It's extremely troubling," Rio answered.

"But isn't that bad? If it's true, then we should leave this town as soon as possible..." Celia suggested with a stiff look of fear.

"I wouldn't recommend that right now. After we put the men behind us at the town gate, they ran after us and followed us here. I'm sure there are people standing watch outside the inn right this moment. Isn't that right, Sara?" Rio said.

"Yes. They aren't the people who came up to us at the gate, but there are two of them," Sara said while peering out of a gap in the curtains.

"Reiss wouldn't use such obvious men to purposefully raise our guards, so we can assume he isn't in this town for now, at least. In that regard, there's no need to leave town right away."

"Which means our present problem is the adventurers of this town who suspect us," Vanessa said with a frown.

"Indeed it does. The sun has already set, so if we leave town now, we'll be suspected for acting shady. Instead, we should just leave boldly first thing tomorrow morning," Rio suggested. Then, he added, "However, we won't leave through the east gate towards Galarc, but the west gate that we originally came through."

"W-Wait, hold on a minute. Wouldn't it cause more suspicion if we go back down the road we came?" Vanessa interrupted in a hurry.

"They have people standing watch on us outside the inn, so they already suspect us one way or another. I also want to confirm whether they're associated with Reiss, so it'd be all the better if they strike. Although I can't imagine Reiss would use anyone who made a move so easily."

But it was possible that was what they wanted him to think, too. However, once he started scrutinizing the possibilities, the limits were endless, so he made a note of it in his mind.

"What if they don't make a move?"

"In that case, we'll keep going west until we lose them, then leave the road and return east. It'll result in a time loss, but we can climb above the valley surrounding this road and go around the town instead. That way, they'll think we retreated west."

"I see... It's bold, but effective," Vanessa hummed.

"I have no objection. Let's go with that plan," Christina approved. Thus, they ended their discussion and went about preparing meals and resting for what was to come the next day.



Meanwhile, at a pub in the same town, the group of adventurers that had

called out to Rio and the others were gathered together in a group of roughly twenty people.

"Fuck that cocky grey-haired bastard!"

Among them was a large adventurer, reclining in his chair as he cursed hatefully at the memory of his encounter with Rio. He slammed his wooden mug of cheap beer against the table, causing the plates nearby to bounce slightly.

Try asking again with the word "please."

He was infuriated at how cocky the sudden command had been. Just who did that brat think he was? The man pigeonholed himself, making his unreasonable anger grow more intense.

"Calm down, dude," said a smaller adventurer who hadn't been there.

"Can't. It pisses me off."

"No use asking you." The smaller man shook his head, turning to the others who were actually there. "...So how did it actually go?"

"Well, their features matched exactly with what was written on the notice," one man said, looking rather grim.

"What, did something happen?"

"No, it's just hard to pin down whether they're the same people or not based on the information on this notice alone. We were too shocked by the bounty to notice at first, though."

"Well, yeah," the small adventurer agreed.

"It has to be them! Their age, gender, numbers... Three young men and six young women in their mid-teens? It's just too perfect! There's no way anyone else fitting the requirements so precisely will pass through!" the large man holding a grudge against Rio yelled.

"In other words, those kids are the criminals on the wanted notice?"

"Yeah, they're the dirty criminals! They should know their place! Damn it, I can't forgive them." The large man raged in a firm display of affirmation.

"You say that, but what can you do? All we have to do is report to the man that gave us this request and we'll be paid a bonus, you know? We even received a hefty advance payment."

"Those brats are no big deal! Three boys and six girls, versus the twenty of us physically adept adults! Even if we receive a bonus, it'd only be a few gold pieces at most. That's nothing once it's split between all of us. Instead of accepting such a pittance, we can tie them up and hand them over to the officials ourselves for 500 gold! It's obvious which is the better choice."

500 gold coins. The number was indeed tempting. Tempting enough to abandon reason, even.

"Right? I thought the same. If it isn't a job we have to go through the town to accept, then there won't be a penalty from the guild either."

The small adventurer seemed to be waiting for the conversation to take this direction.

"Hehe."

"The women were all fine beauties, too."

"Yeah, that was insane."

"If they're criminals, then it won't matter what we do to them."

"Right. They're just criminals."

And so on. Voices of agreement emerged loudly.

"Heh, looks like it's decided." The large man smirked in satisfaction. "Which means we need a plan. If we're gonna do this, then it obviously needs to be outside town. How about we carry this out tomorrow, once they've skipped town?" the small man suggested with a wicked grin.

"You've been planning on ditching the request from the start, haven't you?"

"Why, that goes for the both of us."

"Hmph. Let's teach those brats how scary the world can be."



The next morning, Rio and the others left the inn and headed through the

west gate as planned. Upon checking out of the inn, they spotted two adventurers standing at the dead end across the street from the building, but they feigned ignorance and headed for the west gate.

"Do you think they were standing watch there all night?" Alma asked tiredly.

"No, they were probably taking turns," Rio replied, similarly exasperated. He continued just loud enough for their party to hear. "Everyone, make sure you don't turn around."

Everyone looked at Rio.

"As we expected, they're tailing us. Several people joined up along the way, so there's quite a few of them. They probably have no intention of hiding that they're following us. I'm certain they'll try to pull something as soon as we leave town."

Everyone's faces stiffened immediately.

"Let me handle them. If we end up fighting them, I'll lead the counterattack. Everyone else should be on full guard and on the lookout for projectiles and ambushes from every direction, in case they're just a decoy for Reiss. There is absolutely no need to assist me."

"Roger that." Sara, Orphia, and Alma all nodded straight away with no hesitation. They had full trust in Rio's ability; there was no way he would be bested by people who couldn't even tail someone properly.

What was more worrying was an attack from Reiss. The scariest possibility was a surprise attack from beyond their field of vision, just like the one he fired outside Cleia. Thus, they would leave the fighting to Rio and focus completely on defense—this, they understood implicitly.

At any rate, the party finally left the post town. The adventurers followed from about fifty meters away, maintaining that distance as they walked. However, Rio and the others stayed firm to their course. Thus, after ten or so minutes had passed—

"We're going to stop at that flat area beside the road. Please head to the back of that field and pretend you're looking for something. We'll see what move they make next."

Rio pointed at a field stretching beside the road. Once they arrived, everyone began looking around the ground as though they had dropped something.

At that, the adventurers behind them became slightly confused. They had been certain that Rio and the others were the wanted criminals when they doubled back on the route they had come from yesterday, but once the party stopped to begin searching for something in such an open space, they began to question their intentions.

"What are they doing?"

"They're looking for something."

"Did they turn back to look for something they dropped?"

The questions led to confusion, slowing down the men's walking speed. Perhaps they really weren't the criminals? At least a few of them had that doubt swimming in their heads.

"Calm down! Nothing's changed in the plan! They're criminals with a bounty of 500 gold coins, wanted dead or alive," the large adventurer said, inciting the others.

"Right. We have enough of a basis—don't chicken out now." The smaller man nodded, stepping forward in high spirits.

The distance between them closed little by little, until they were close enough to overhear each other's conversations if they listened carefully. There was no turning back now that they had come this far. Whatever happened would happen. Such mass psychology was at play as the other adventurers resolved themselves, their footsteps losing their hesitation.

After that, the large and small adventurer pair in the lead stopped on the road right before where Rio and the others were pretending to search for something.

"Hey, what are you all doing there?" the large man asked.

"...We're looking for something, as you can see. One of my companions realized they dropped something last night, so we came to look at the last place we rested," Rio answered boldly. It was a very reasonable excuse to turn back down the road they came from.

"And what are you guys doing, standing over there?" Rio added calmly, as though he had seen through them.

"...You're the ones on the wanted notice, aren't you?" the large man asked back coldly.

"Even if I tell you we're not, you probably won't believe me. Since you've gone and brought all your friends with you, after all. Following us all the way here, where there's less people around." Rio sighed tiredly.

"Hah, at least you're quick on the uptake. With how perfectly you lot match the features on this wanted notice, we can't just let you pass. There's a 500-gold bounty on the line, after all. So we've decided to tie you all up. As long as you don't resist, we'll spare your lives. Just your lives." The large man looked at the women standing behind Rio with a vulgar gaze. Their faces were covered with hoods, but the glimpse of their hair and shape of their figures made them obviously women. The other men were also smiling lewdly. They probably noticed the wicked gazes being directed at them, as the women in the group all pursed their lips unhappily.

"T-That's absurd. What would you do if it turned out we weren't the criminals?" Kouta couldn't help but yell out, his voice high-pitched.

"Huh? That's why you should just turn yourselves in quietly. We can arrest you with the perfectly rational reason of suspecting you of being criminals. No one will punish us for killing you if you resist. Dead people can't speak and all that. We can make up as many excuses as we want afterwards." The larger man sneered and Kouta's objection and brushed him aside.

"No way! How can anything so barbaric be acceptable?! You could kill as many people as you wanted with a false accusation like that!" Kouta rejected the situation that completely opposed his own common sense.

"There's no point in arguing. The system that issues the wanted notices itself doesn't account for the unfortunate people who are mistakenly accused of being criminals. They're simply covered up as unlucky accidents. There's nothing we can do but solve this by force," Rio informed Kouta plainly.

"That can't be..." Kouta fell speechless.

"Hah, it seems you get it. So, which will it be? Will you turn yourself in quietly? That said—and I'm sure this feeling is mutual—but I don't like you. I'll be nice to the women, but I'll make sure you see a world of pain. If you want to blame someone, you can blame your cocky attitude yesterday." The large man was clearly trying to provoke Rio. The other men were also sneering giddily.

"I don't particularly feel any dislike towards you," Rio stated flatly.

"Uh?" The unexpected response made the men furrow their brows.

"Your lives don't matter to me. I won't harm you if you back away quietly here. But I will respond accordingly if you don't. That's all," Rio stated.

The men looked taken aback for a moment, only to follow with a howl of delighted laughter. "...Ha. Bwahaha! Hey hey, this one doesn't understand the situation at all. I've never heard such arrogance begging to be spared. Ain't that something, huh?"

"I see. Then I have no choice." Rio placed his hand on his sheath and pretended to use his enchanted sword to enhance his body before adopting a battle-ready stance with his bare fists.

"...Ah? You doing this barehanded?" The men all looked confused at how Rio grabbed his sword, but didn't draw it.

"I don't want my companions to see me kill anyone, unfortunately. Fighting with my bare hands is enough for you people. If you're going to come at me, make it quick." Perhaps he wanted to be able to claim legitimate self-defense, as Rio clearly beckoned at the adventurers with his right hand in provocation.

A vein bulged in the large man's head as he laughed dryly. "Hahaha... This bastard really doesn't know his place. Grab these brats already! Go!"

The twenty-odd adventurers on the road rushed at Rio and the others in the field. Rio, Kouta, and Rei aside, they probably wanted to apprehend the women without harming them. Because of that and the fact that Rio had no weapons drawn, none of them drew their weapons either. The most motivated of them was the hot-blooded smaller adventurer.

"Die! Haha!" He ran at full speed and leaped, meaning to punch Rio with that momentum. But before he knew it, the small man's vision was rolling in circles.

Rio appeared upside down. No, not just Rio, but the other adventurers—the whole world—was upside down.

The incomprehensible floating sensation he felt was due to the fact that he was flipping through the air—Rio had probably parried him. The right fist he had thrown out was bent past the movable limit of his body, and standing before him was the boy himself.

"...Huh? Wha? Eek!!" Chaos, confusion, and fear came upon him in succession. The man witnessed Rio spinning his body before his very eyes. It was some kind of attack, but he couldn't evade it. Instead, he watched on in slow motion. It was almost like a flashback of his final moments—but it didn't go on forever.

Rio had twisted his body and used the flow of his strength from his back to his shoulder to aim a tackle and the man that was temporarily upside down in the air.

"Ugh...?!" The small man's body was sent flying towards the road behind him. He crashed into several men behind him and rolled along the ground. The cushioning of his blow meant he didn't die, but he did have difficulty breathing.

"T-Tetsuzanko...?!" Rei yelled with his eyes peeled. The attack Rio made just now was very similar to the movements he had seen in games and online videos in Japan.

"Amazing..." Christina also muttered in a daze. Part of the reason was because Rio's attack had landed so splendidly, but she was also awed by how smoothly he had moved on to his next action already. Rio used the body of the man sent flying as an obstacle to close the gap between him and the other men in the blink of an eye.

## "...Guh?"

When Rio suddenly appeared before their eyes after being several meters away, the man who unfortunately became the next target froze stiff. The point of an elbow was being stuck against his solar plexus, sending his body flying through the air.

At the same time, Rio was already attacking his next target. There was

nothing wasted in any of his movements as he rendered the adventurers incapable of action swiftly and with certainty.

One after another, adventurers fell to the ground in spans of only one to three seconds. Before long, the number of men still on their feet was down to the single digits.

"W-What?! What happened?! You bastard, what did you do?!" the large man that had been standing towards the back ranted, unable to process the situation.

"...Gah!" Rio made no move to answer the question sincerely and instead knocked out another adventurer.

"W-Wha, what are you all doing?! Surround him! Seize him before he gets you!" the large adventurer yelled at the remaining men, who stood in shock. His terrified comrades moved to surround Rio.

However, Rio had already reduced their numbers this far—he wasn't about to be defeated by an attempt like that. The difference in their power was so great, it was as though the human wall wasn't even there.

"E-Eek! Augh!" Rio approached the closest adventurer with no hesitation and easily toppled him off balance before throwing him against the ground.

"Raaargh!" The large adventurer charged at Rio from behind, swinging the sword in his hand overhead with all his might. It was clearly a strike intended to kill.

"Watch out!" Christina yelled reflexively.

Rio twisted his body, firing a roundhouse kick right into the guts of the man swinging his sword, sending him flying into the distance. "Wha?!"

That one blow was enough to obliterate their fighting spirit.

"D-Does he have eyes on the back of his head?"

"Wasn't this supposed to be an easy win against some brats?"

"This is impossible..."

"There's no way we can win in this lifetime..."

The remaining men mumbled under their breaths as they backed away, then immediately whipped around and started dashing for the road as fast as they could.

This wasn't how it was meant to go. His strength was far beyond the standards of a human—they had provoked the wrong opponent. Feelings of regret overwhelmed them.

"W-Wait! Hey!" The large man who had lost his weapon snapped back to his senses, then clumsily scrambled after his fleeing comrades.

"Did you think you could run away?" Rio's voice echoed quietly in his ear, filling him with a fear that nearly stopped his heart.

"Ugh!" The man's body trembled reflexively as he tripped over his own feet, falling spectacularly. Rio pinned down the man and poured his essence into him, using his spirit arts alone to reap the large man of his consciousness.



Rio left the unconscious man lying there and began pursuing the other men who had fled. The men were sprinting as fast as their legs would allow, but Rio could run at a speed far surpassing any human.

There was no way for the fleeing men to get away.

"Eeek!"

"S-Save me!"

They all screamed, before Rio caught up to another one from behind and knocked him unconscious.

"Gah, I'm starting to feel bad for them..." Rei watched the scene on the road from across the wild plains and gave the adventurers a pitying look.

"Don't—they brought this upon themselves. There's no need for compassion. If anything, they should be grateful to Haruto for not taking their lives."

Sara sniffed as she looked around at the men lying unconscious on the ground. Indeed, all the men scattered about were only knocked out—none were dead.

"...Indeed. Their motives for attacking us were what they were, after all." Christina had watched the events happen with a blank expression on her face, but at Sara's statement she returned to herself and agreed with a huff of laughter.

"Yes. And it seems there are some people who are still conscious as well," Sara said, looking at the small man Rio first sent flying and the two men that were caught up in that exchange.

"...?!" The three men had been feigning their unconsciousness on the ground and flinched when Sara saw through their act.

"Haruto's on his way back, so let's have a nice, long chat," Orphia said, looking at the road. There, Rio was walking along, dragging the men who had fled earlier behind him.



Several minutes later, Rio gathered all the unconscious men into one spot and

removed their weapons, then tied their feet together with rope so they couldn't run away.

Meanwhile, the three men that remained conscious had completely lost their will to fight, kneeling on the ground beside the others and huddling to themselves.

"All right, let's hear what you have to say. We were attacked for a charge we have no recollection of, so this has been quite bothersome to us," Rio stated, looking down at them.

"Of course, Sir! We'll answer any questions you have!" the small man said cooperatively, looking to win Rio's favor. The dramatic change in his attitude made the others—mainly the women—look upon him with pitying gazes.

Rio looked at the man in exasperation, but having him in fear was more convenient, so he began questioning him about the wanted notice in a flat tone. "Where did you get that notice in the first place? I checked the board in town, but I didn't see anything like that."

"Of course it wouldn't be in town—it was only issued in Cleia a few days ago. An adventurer working for a nobleman brought it here," the small man answered with a laugh.

"From Cleia... An adventurer working for a nobleman? What kind of man was he?" Was it Reiss? Rio had that suspicion in mind as he asked.

"He was around 30 or so. Confident, muscular... He had the aura of a veteran adventurer. Well, he'd still be no match for you, Sir." That was a very different impression of Reiss, whose slender build was clear even through his cloak.

"...What was his name?"

"Ah, as embarrassing as it is to admit, everyone was too blinded by the bounty to ask... Oh, but one of the criminals on the notice—who obviously isn't you, Sir—is probably related to the nobleman that hired the adventurer, I believe."

"Someone on the notice is related to the noble?" When he heard that, the first person that came to mind was Celia.

"Yes, that's what he said. The nobleman didn't want his relative to die, so he hired the adventurer to find them before the notice made its rounds in the general public. When the adventurer arrived at this post town, he asked us to report to him if anyone matching the features on the notice passed by. He said he'd be back in a few days to check. Ah, but he hasn't shown up yet, by the way."

"...And you accepted that request."

The small man laughed awkwardly. "Yep. Received a hefty advance payment for it."

"If that's the truth, then you attacking us doesn't make any sense. Your job was just to make a report, right? Wouldn't attacking us be a complete contradiction to the man's request?"

"W-Well, you see, we were blinded by the reward of 500 gold coins. You also went and made an enemy out of the big guy knocked out over there, plus you have so many pretty ladies in tow with you, Sir... Right?"

The small man turned to his two accomplices, awkwardly passing the baton to them.

"Hehe..."

Both men tried to laugh it off awkwardly as the stares of the women grew increasingly cold.

"...In other words, you attacked us out of your own self-interest?" Rio confirmed.

"Y-Yes, I guess that would be the case. We're very ashamed of ourselves, yes." The small man nodded, nodding his head over and over.

Rio thought for a few seconds. "I see... That's enough. You do what you want. We're not the people wanted on the notice, but you can report whatever you believe." He had memorized the text already, so he returned the wanted notice to them too.

"...Huh? R-Really?" The men blinked in confusion.

"I already said I don't want my companions witnessing anyone dying. That

being said, we don't want to get involved in any more trouble, so we'll be leaving now. Let's go, everyone." Rio left behind those plain words before looking around at the others and prompting their departure. He took the lead and began to walk down the road to the west, with Celia and the others in tow. They glanced at the men as they left, but no one said anything as they walked.

"...H-Have we been saved?"

The men looked on blankly as the party disappeared down the western road.



Meanwhile, as soon as Rio stepped off the field and back onto the road. He beckoned Orphia away from the others and over to him. "Orphia, do you have a moment?"

"Yes, what is it?" Orphia cocked her head and asked.

"Is Ariel watching our surroundings right now?" Christina's group didn't know about Ariel, so he asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes. Ariel's flying in physical form and watching the ground from above."

"Have there been any reports of suspicious people in this area?"

"Nothing in a one-kilometer radius. Sara and Alma have Hel and Ifrita in their material forms nearby, but they haven't reported anything either, so I think we're okay."

"...If there's nothing on the ground, what about the skies? Is there anything in the air above where Ariel is patrolling?"

"Let me ask... There's nothing resembling a person, it seems. There are some flying animals around, but it's too cloudy to see them clearly."

"...I see."

"Shall we widen our search range?" That would result in the accuracy of their search being reduced, but—

"Please do, just in case. It may just be me overthinking things, but I'm worried."

"Of course. I'll ask right away." Orphia shook her head happily and sent a

message to Ariel immediately. Rio went up to the others while she did so.

"There are some things I've realized through that conversation with them, so let's share some information before we step off the road and turn back east," he said. "I first thought the features on the wanted notice were similar to us by coincidence, but the more details I hear, the more I think it's *too* similar to be dismissed as a mere coincidence. Which is why I currently suspect either Charles or Reiss had a hand in that notice."

"...I agree," Christina said with a thoughtful look.

"If we consider either Charles or Reiss' involvement in the notice as fact, then there's three new points that we have to take note of. The first is that the wanted notice was drawn up in Cleia. The second is that someone related to nobility is included among the wanted. And the third is that the noble hired an adventurer to secure their relative as soon as possible in order to save their life." Rio folded a finger on his right hand each time he listed off a point.

"When added together, those three points seem to be pointing to Professor Celia," Christina noted truthfully.

"It does seem that way..." Celia said worriedly.

"Yes. However, I felt the third point was clearly something that Count Claire would never do."

"...May I ask why you think that?" Celia asked worriedly.

"Count Claire would have placed his bets on you running away safely. There's no way he would drag you back in front of Charles, whom he hates quite a bit," Christina stated plainly.

Indeed, he did say he'd rather see Celia spend the rest of her life single than give her to that bastard. Rio recalled Count Claire's radical remark with a huff of laughter.

Celia also chuckled happily in relief. "Yes, that's true."

"For the same reason, I cannot imagine Count Claire would leak information about us to Charles. That's why I don't believe Charles obtained the information for the second point through Count Claire. He wouldn't know about Sara and

the others either," Rio added.

"Right. If anything, it'd make more sense for Reiss to tell Charles about Professor Celia's presence. But..."

"If Charles had our information, that wouldn't explain why the wanted notice was written so vaguely, would it?"

"Indeed. As the head of the search party, there would be no reason for Charles concealing information and putting such a half-hearted charge on the notice. Which leaves only one of two possibilities."

"Either the wanted notice matches us by coincidence or Reiss fabricated it alone. Is that correct?"

"Yes, exactly."

Christina nodded, satisfied at how smoothly her opinion matched up with Rio's.

"...It's impressive how you determine that so certainly with such a small amount of information."

"Yeah, I only understood half of what was said just now," Kouta said.

"Maybe you need to try a little harder there..." Rei noted.

"Her Highness has been famed for her sharp insight and prodigious intelligence since she was young. This much is only natural," Vanessa said proudly.

Christina thought for a moment, frowning. "It's no big deal. Supposing that the wanted notice was Reiss' fabrication, there are still vital points we don't know. For example, why Reiss knew Professor Celia is accompanying us right now, when he realized this, and so on."

"...If the Reiss we know is the same person as the Proxia Empire ambassador, he may have attended the wedding where I took Celia through Charles' invitation. It wouldn't have been strange for him to witness that then," Rio guessed.

"I see. Then it wouldn't be strange for him to know that Sir Amakawa is traveling together with Professor Celia, and he could be familiar with your faces

that way. It's definitely a possibility," Christina nodded with a hum.

"Yes. The reason why the notice was so vague may be because Reiss doesn't want Charles to know that his aim is you, Your Highness. And he didn't write anything about our real names because he didn't know them. Such an explanation would make sense," Rio added.

Christina's expression twisted bitterly. "That means Reiss is aiming for my life for an unrelated reason to Charles."

"Most likely," Rio nodded.

"...But what can we do?" Vanessa asked with a look of unease. "If the possibility of Princess Christina's life being in danger has increased, then..."

"Nothing will change with what we're doing. The increased risk of being targeted by Reiss means we'll have to exercise more caution, but we have no choice but to continue moving towards our destination."

They couldn't relax and allow Reiss to catch up to them, so they didn't have the time to be standing around. As they were on the run, they could only move forwards. That was what Rio thought as he wrapped up the conversation.

"Right, of course. We can only keep moving," Vanessa agreed with a sigh.

"Then as planned, let's continue going west before making an about-turn east," Rio suggested.

Using adventurers like that and writing such a vague wanted notice... It seems rather sloppy, almost like traces of him keep coming in and out of view...

Though he'd summed up his thoughts, he still felt a strange sense of restlessness. But he didn't want to jump to conclusions based on assumptions, and thinking about it wasn't going to get him any answers. It could just be him being overly cautious.

"Yes. Let us hurry."

Christina seemed to feel a little uneasy, but she understood the need to move forwards. Her expression was tense with determination.

Thus, the group stepped off the road and headed above the valley in order to turn back towards the eastern border.

## **Interlude: Another Secret Talk**

Meanwhile, right after Rio had asked Orphia to widen Ariel's alert range...

Far above, in the skies and several kilometers away, two people observed Rio and the others. One was Arein, the man who had given the wanted notice to the adventurers, mounted upon a griffin. The other was Reiss, who had received a report from Arein the night before and made his way here. He was floating of his own accord without a griffin.

As for why the two of them were here—Arein had been hiding in the vicinity ever since he gave the adventurers the request and left, sometimes mounting his griffin to watch over who was in town and who was detouring around it. The moment he spotted Rio and the others staying overnight at the post town, he headed to Reiss to give his report.

Now, at Reiss' direction, he observed Rio's group from behind the clouds a far distance away.

"...Is there really a need to be this far away?" Arein asked dubiously, wondering if Reiss was taking this far too seriously. From this distance, the party looked like grains of rice even with his physical body enhanced through his enchanted sword. He would lose sight of them easily if he wasn't careful.

"Yes, there is," Reiss nodded without hesitation. "The bird circling above them is especially problematic. You should assume that a half kilometer radius around them is within their detection range. You'll be detected instantly if you try anything suspicious like trailing them, so you should hide yourself in the clouds and retreat as soon as that bird looks like it's coming close. Understood?"

"...Yes, I understand." Arein nodded stiffly, his tone short, as though he was bracing himself for something.

"Good—continue to monitor him. I shall call Lucci and Ven over while I'm on my way to Charles. Do you have any questions?" Reiss asked. "...It isn't really an important question, but there is something I've been curious about. Don't you think that wanted notice made them more wary of us —or rather, of you, Master Reiss?"

"Naturally. Princess Christina is a given, but that grey-haired boy also thinks quick on his feet. They'd naturally arrive at the conclusion that the notice was fabricated by me and conclude that I'm working separately from Charles. That's why I went out of my way to appear before them and attack the princess, after all," Reiss confirmed with a pleasant smile.

"Is that all right?"

"Yes. The more I instil the impression that my scheming is separate from Charles, the more their caution will be directed towards me. That's what gives my upcoming collusion with Charles meaning... It makes it easier to outsmart them."

"...I see," Arein gulped.

"The real fun starts here. Make sure you avoid their detection by all means. I'm counting on you, Arein." Reiss then departed, leaving those words behind.

"He's a terrifying ally to have, honestly," Arein muttered with a stiff face.



That night, in a guest building on the Count Claire estate, Charles was seated in the office being used as the headquarters of the search, a displeased look on his face. Before him were the knights under his command.

"5000 personnel were deployed these last few days, yet not a single clue was obtained."

"...Please excuse our failure."

The knights before Charles lowered their heads. They were the commanders of each search party.

"If you're so sorry, then show me results. The search range widens with every day that passes, after all," Charles stated with an unhappy snort.

Damn it. Where are they hiding? If they purchased several horses to increase their travel speed, they'd be traced right away. If they're moving by foot, then

we've checked every road and town within a walkable range. The aerial unit is on the lookout from the skies. There's no way a sheltered princess and two untrained boys could last long sneaking through the mountains or woods...

His impatience rose violently within him. But, just then—

Knock, knock.

"...Enter," Charles ordered with a sullen look of displeasure.

"Sir Charles. Jean Bernard, who visited the other day, has made another visit..." the security guard that entered reported nervously.

"...What?" Charles frowned reluctantly for a moment, but he soon stood up. "Guh, fine. I'll be right there. Show him to the drawing room."

"Yes, Sir!" The soldier immediately turned back around.

"The rest of you return to your positions. Report immediately if anything happens," Charles ordered the remaining knights, leaving to head for the drawing room.

"Sir Charles, Jean Bernard is here."

Reiss entered the room less than a minute later, led by a security guard. Charles stood up once the door closed, leaving the two of them alone.

"Welcome, Lord Reiss." Charles stood up, a smile pasted on his face as he offered slightly awkward words of welcome.

"Why, thank you. I'm sorry to be bothering you so frequently, Sir Charles," Reiss replied with an unreadable smile.

"No, I don't mind. Has something happened?"

"Well, like I said before, I thought the city seemed rather heavily guarded. There was a loud commotion early in the morning just the other day."

"...As I stated the other day, there were felons on the run."

"I see," Reiss said with a cheerful smile. The awkward one was Charles. After the wedding incident with Celia, it wasn't easy for him to admit Christina had escaped. Doing so could make his position even worse.

"...Have you been in Cleia this entire time, Lord Reiss? May I ask what your

business is here? I believe you previously said you were pursuing someone," Charles asked, watching Reiss' expression to probe into his true intentions.

He considered Reiss to be a dear friend, their friendship crossing kingdom borders thanks to his distinguished efforts in the revival of the Duke Arbor house. That's why he trusted him, but he was still curious when it came to matters involving his own kingdom. It was difficult to inquire into, but he decided to ask anyway in order to brush off the awkwardness.

"Oh, no. I'm here today because I had something to discuss—or rather, suggest," Reiss started.

"... A suggestion?" Charles questioned dubiously.

"I am aware of the fact that Princess Christina has disappeared," Reiss stated calmly.

"Guh... W-Where did you hear such a thing?" Charles was startled. He was nearly at a loss for words, asking his question in a high-pitched voice.

"I understand your anxiety, but did you think I wouldn't notice after all this commotion?"

"F-Forgive me. But I will definitely catch her and bring her back," Charles stammered with a panicked face.

"Indeed, it would be an inconvenience for us too if you didn't. The Arbor family is an important business partner for the future, after all."

"R-Right, I shall exert every effort. They shouldn't have gotten too far away."

"On the contrary, Princess Christina is already fairly close to Rodania now."

"...Huh?" Charles was stunned. Reiss' words just now made it sound like he was aware of Christina's current location.

"The truth is, I've managed to pin down her location. My subordinate is currently observing their movements," Reiss said smoothly.

"O-Ooh! My goodness! As expected of you... what tremendous efficiency!" Charles raved in praise of the man before him.

You're simply too incompetent, that's all. But that was what made him easy to

manipulate, Reiss thought, concealing his contempt.

"However, a slight problem has arisen. Several powerful guards have joined up with Princess Christina, making it difficult to make a move carelessly," he said sadly.

"Powerful guards, you say?"

"Think four enchanted sword wielders."

"Wha..." Charles was rendered speechless. Having four with you was considered the minimum requirement for escort personnel, but for all of them to wield enchanted swords... It was an excessive amount of combat strength to protect a single person.

"I've prepared at least three enchanted sword wielders on my side just in case, but there are differences in abilities even between fellow wielders. One of the four on their side is particularly troublesome—enough so that I wish to avoid a head-on battle at all costs."

"W-Wait! Hold on a moment!" Charles objected in a fluster from the torrent of information coming from Reiss.

"What is it?"

"Four enchanted sword wielders is impossible! That's enough power to take on an army. Where would Princess Christina gather such personnel from?!" Charles asked in a flurry.

"You should recognise the name of one of them. The other three are his companions."

"It's someone I know?"

"Haruto Amakawa. The boy who was appointed honorary knight of Galarc just the other day."

When Haruto's name came up, Charles' expression changed. "Wha... I-Indeed, I did receive reports of him interacting with Princess Christina several times during the banquet... D-Don't tell me she made the request then?!"

Not quite. He's also the person who snatched Celia Claire away from you, and she was probably the figure that tied them together. Although I'll keep that part

quiet to prevent things from getting unnecessarily complicated, Reiss thought, sneering on the inside.

"I'm not aware of the details myself, but there was the rumor he drove back a demi-dragon's breath in a single blow of his enchanted sword, no? That rumor was by no means an exaggeration. On top of that, he has three other enchanted sword wielders as companions. Because of this, the Proxia Empire has been secretly observing his movements. The person I was chasing was actually him—and my, what a surprise it was once I caught up to him. There he was, acting as Princess Christina's guard." He presented a plausible outline of events with the truth mixed in.

"I-Is that so? Hmm..." Charles hummed with a solemn look.

"He's been using the physical enhancement of his enchanted sword to travel, and will cross the border into the Galarc Kingdom in a matter of days at this rate. Once he does, your people won't be able to engage and Princess Christina will safely flee to Rodania."

"That means they've already left the search range we had predicted, huh? Tch, no wonder we couldn't find them." Charles ground his teeth.

"The situation is already more harrowing than I thought. Thus, I came to make this suggestion: shall we unite our forces? The enchanted sword wielders on my side are no match for Sir Alfred Emarle's skill, but they are powerful enough to hold their own. If we work together, we should be able to prevent Princess Christina's escape. I've prepared a plan already, too."

Reiss presented his proposal with a pleasant smile.

## **Chapter 4: Before the Border**

Three days had passed since the adventurers at the post town picked a fight with Rio and the others. They had proceeded even further east and were finally approaching the border of Galarc.

Before noon, the group had arrived at a walled city that functioned as a line of defense near the kingdom's border. However, before everyone entered the city, Rio went alone to check on the state of things. Celia and the rest of the group hid themselves in the forest off the road to the west gate of the city and waited for Rio's return. They prepared a slightly early lunch and started eating, when Rio silently appeared near them, calling out to them first so as not to scare them.

"Sorry for the wait."

For the record, Sara and Alma's contract spirits Hel and Ifrita were watching the area on the ground in their spirit forms, and Orphia's contract spirit Ariel was on alert in material form in the air, so they would have noticed Rio's approach. Ariel was the only one in material form because being in material form provided far greater physical abilities, such as the ability to see greater distances, increasing their search capabilities.

Celia ran up to Rio once she spotted him. "Welcome back, Haruto. How was it?"

"There was no wanted notice on the bulletin board of this city, either. I didn't see any search party personnel performing any searches, but it is a walled city. There are quite a few soldiers on patrol," Rio reported.

Incidentally, they had passed through numerous cities and towns on their way to this walled city, but none of them had had the same notice.

"If a walled city on the border doesn't even have the wanted notice, then there's no doubt that the notice from the post town was completely fabricated," Christina declared, sighing. It was good to get more accurate information, but said information wasn't exactly pleasant to hear.

"In other words, Reiss predicted that we would pass through that post town. He should have received information about us turning back west through the adventurers we let go, but who knows how much that can fool him..." Rio furrowed his brows solemnly.

"However, if we look at it from another angle, that means our actual enemy is Reiss alone. That much is certain after the lack of search parties in the places we've stopped at up until this point." Vanessa gave a positive analysis contrary to the pessimistic Christina and Rio. However, Christina reacted to that with a solemn look to match Rio's.

"Perhaps that may be true for Charles, but..."

The problem was Reiss. Since the incident at the post town, things had gone smoothly—too smoothly. It made Christina feel uneasy about whether they could really make it to Rodania safely.

Rio also had a bad feeling about how well things were going.

"...For now, our shortest goal is to cross the kingdom border before us. We'll head for the border through the shortest route so that we don't have to worry about the search party anymore. If we depart now, we should be able to cross the border within the day easily," he suggested to everyone. Once they passed the walled city before them, there were no more post towns or walled cities until the border.

There was only a short distance left.

No matter what happens, we'll move forward. Whatever Reiss has planned doesn't change what we need to do, Rio thought to refocus his mind.



After their discussion, Rio and the others headed for the walled city. Ever since the incident at the post town, they were wary of the possibility that Charles and the pursuit party knew how many of them there were. They usually split up into groups of two before going through the gates of the towns and cities they stopped at, but this time they chose to enter the city as a group of nine.

If they could pass through the gate like this without a problem, that would mean they had conclusive proof that the pursuit party led by Charles was still unaware that Christina was running with a group of nine people.

"We made it," Celia said in relief once they entered the city without incident.

"Well, that's only natural. Charles probably thinks we've only traveled half as far as we actually have. The fact the gatekeepers are still checking hair colors makes me think we've outsmarted them completely," Vanessa said, looking around at the city. The inside of the walls wasn't strictly guarded, bustling with people in what seemed to be the picture of serenity.

Rio walked at the head of the party with Celia close beside him, followed by Christina and Vanessa, then Kouta and Rei, and finally Sara, Orphia, and Alma in a long line as they proceeded from the west of the main street to the east. Out of caution for the presence of the pursuit party, Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei covered their faces with hoods. Everyone else had their hoods down as they walked.

Celia and the spirit folk girls' appearances did draw attention, but there were many pedestrians, so the most people could manage was a double or triple take. There were some people who bumped into others and couples that bickered briefly about it, but it was mostly uneventful.

Thus, they walked straight down the main street from the west gate to the east gate and stepped out onto the road.

After leaving the east gate, Rio stared down the road to the border and turned to the party. "All right, let's go. We should cross the border in about an hour's time on foot. Our formation will be the same as usual: I'll take the lead and Sara's group will surround Her Highness and Celia."

Rio, Sara, Orphia and Alma formed a diamond formation and walked with caution directed in every direction.

The weather was clear, so there were others leaving the east gate to head for the kingdom border just like them. Their view of their surroundings was clear, but in ten minutes' time, the city behind them could no longer be seen.

There's surprisingly few people heading from Galarc to Beltrum. Well, with the

kingdom being in the state it is, I doubt many would come here voluntarily... Rio thought to himself. When he looked around them, all he could see were the adventurers that had left the walled city at practically the same time as them.

Suddenly, four adventurers appeared in front of them, walking from the opposite direction. Three were armed with swords, and the fourth was a slender man whose face was covered by a hood.

"Everyone, please keep to the left," Rio directed the party. It was polite to stick to one side of the road so that others could pass along the other side in cases like this; it was a worldly wisdom that prevented a lot of trouble when people were traveling.

However, the slender, hooded man purposefully cut in front of them and stopped them from moving any further.

"...Please halt," Rio ordered the party without turning to look. Celia and the others behind him came to a complete stop. Meanwhile, the three remaining men on the other side started surrounding their group.

"Why, what a coincidence this is," the hooded man said. His voice was familiar.

"Reiss, huh?" Rio immediately drew the sword at his waist and glared at Reiss. Sara and the others behind him had also drawn their weapons, pointing them at the three male adventurers who similarly had their swords drawn.

"Oh? You're less surprised than I expected," Reiss said, wide-eyed.

"We knew from that wanted notice that you were trying to locate us. We tried to camouflage our route, but we were prepared to be attacked at any moment."

"Haha, I see. You really are a terrifying person."

"You don't look like you actually think that in the slightest."

"That's not true. I find you scary."

"...You showed yourself rather boldly, if that was true. Is your aim Princess Christina's life?" Rio asked flatly with a cold glare.

"Hehe." A fearless smile tugged at Reiss' mouth.

"There's something I want to ask you before I defeat you here."

There was no point in asking anything else. Rio braced his sword.

"Is it about our captain, Lucius? Or is it about your past... Oh my, that's dangerous." Reiss chuckled with scorn. However, Rio slashed at him midsentence, making him take a large leap backwards.

"There's no telling what you're scheming, after all. I'll listen to what you have to say after I beat you." Rio glared at Reiss sharply.

"Now, don't be like that. I've even gone and brought out members of the Heavenly Lions for you today. They're the subordinates of that man you're so familiar with, and they're all quite skilled. I'm sure they'll be a good match for your girls," Reiss said casually, looking at Arein, Lucci, and Ven who were all glaring at Sara and the others.

"That's right. Play with us a little, ladies," Lucci said to Alma, whom he was facing.

"Don't play around. Act seriously," Ven said, facing Orphia.

"So, you're my opponent. You sure seem strong." Arein laughed boldly as he taunted Sara.

*"…"* 

The girls didn't respond to their taunts, and instead silently watched for their opponent's first moves. The two sides were roughly five meters apart. They knew that whoever stepped forward first would mark the immediate start of the battle.

Training and ability aside, Sara and the girls are overwhelmingly lacking in combat experience against people who have intentions to kill. Their opponents are humans that will kill without hesitation. We also have to protect Professor Celia and Princess Christina on our side. Depending on their abilities, we may be forced into a tough fight.

In this situation, Rio couldn't wander too far from Celia or Christina. He put several meters distance between himself and Reiss, thinking about Sara and the others behind him.

"Four capable fighters glaring at each other. Well, a situation like this would inevitably end in a stalemate. However, what if we had more allies on our side?" Reiss said with a grin.

What...? Rio furrowed his brows dubiously. The only ones there were Rio, Reiss, and their respective parties. Other than that—

Don't tell me...

The adventurers who had left the walled city at the same time as them were still there. They had been watching when Rio and the others were suddenly caught in a tense situation on the road, but Rio anticipated that these men were the allies Reiss just mentioned. There were roughly ten of them.

"All right! Everyone, charge!" Lucci yelled.

"Augendae Corporis! Raaaah!" The men on the road all chanted a spell at once, drawing their swords and began charging toward the formation Rio's party had set up.

"Wha?!" The party was taken aback. Among them, the first one to react was Rio.

"What?!" He cut in front of the adventurers closest to him, swinging his sword to create a huge gale to blow the men away.

"Sara, Orphia, Alma! Take Celia and Her Highness through the gaps in their formation and go on ahead! I'll handle this!" he ordered.

"But..." Sara and the others hesitated.

"Like I'd let you!" Lucci yelled as he slashed at Rio.

"Silence." Rio flicked his sword horizontally towards Lucci. The two of them clashed, sword against sword.

"W-Whoa... Oh, damn!" Lucci's body was easily blown ten meters away. If he hadn't been holding an enchanted sword and had his body enhanced with sorcery, the force would have cut his sword and torso in half.

"Is this guy for real? Just what kind of body enhancement sorcery is he using?" Lucci gave a stiff smile as he shook it off. The charging adventurers who witnessed the blow came to an abrupt halt.

"Hey! What are you slacking off for?! You'll be killed!" Arein yelled suddenly. While they were standing around, Rio had already moved on to target the next adventurer, sending several men flying away with another blast of wind.

"Quickly, everyone!" Rio ordered Sara.

"E-Everyone, this way! Alma, Orphia, you two take the rear!" Sara snapped to her senses and started rushing through the gaps Rio made in the enemy circle. Celia and the others followed her.

"Lucci, Ven! Don't let your guard down. This is the guy that got the better of our leader. You'll die if you're not careful! Use everything you've got! *Augendae Corporis*!" Arein yelled, chanting a spell before charging at Rio. A physical body enhancement via spirit arts and a physical ability enchantment through magic or sorcery. Normally, it was impossible for the latter to surpass the former in terms of physical abilities, but—

"Uh..." Rio briefly gazed in wonder. Arein's speed had been dramatically increased with *Augendae Corporis*. In fact, it was a speed on par with a body strengthening spirit art that would've used up a fair amount of magic essence.

It's not just a normal Augendae Corporis? Rio thought, receiving Arein's attack.

"Blocking that with such a composed look..." Arein's expression was strained.

"Augendae Corporis!" Lucci and Ven both chanted. A geometric-patterned magic circle appeared, wrapping around their bodies.

"I hate how this makes my whole body ache!"

"It's better than dying!"

Lucci and Ven both charged at Rio from different directions.

Their speeds were equivalent to Arein. Lucci must have also enhanced his physical body with his enchanted sword earlier, as his current speed was significantly faster.

"The three of us will hold this guy back! All of you, catch the ones that got away!" Lucci ordered the remaining adventurers. They began pursuing Sara and the others.

So they've enhanced their physical abilities with magic on top of strengthening their bodies with their enchanted swords...

Rio found it to be reckless. It was a so-called double enchantment—sure, doing so would allow them to surpass the physical ability boost that the enchanted sword allowed them, but it would place a huge burden on their bodies.

However, the effect was remarkable, as it allowed Arein, Lucci, and Ven to press Rio back when they teamed up.

"Master Reiss, we can't last long over here!" Arein yelled. Rio used the faint moment of distraction from Arein and the others to slip past them, rushing over to the adventurers pursuing Celia's group in an instant. However—

"I won't let you do that." Reiss moved at an equally impressive speed, firing several high-speed balls of light towards Rio, who was closing in on the adventurers.

"Guh..." Rio swung his sword, erasing the ball of light. However, Reiss' attack didn't end there. Without even chanting a spell, he continued to freely create balls of light and fire them towards Rio. The orbs rained down like a storm, but Rio weaved between them in a zigzag trajectory to magnificently evade them all.

"Goodness me, what a tremendous reaction speed," Reiss muttered in awe. Then, Arein, Lucci, and Ven appeared.

"My apologies, Master Reiss," Arein apologized.

"This won't do. You have to hold him here properly," Reiss said in exasperation.

"The bastard started moving at a ridiculous speed," said Lucci.

"He's manipulating the wind to accelerate. From what I can see, it appears to be an application of flying spirit arts, but it is quite the reckless approach. The slightest mistake could send you hurtling into an obstacle for quite a lot of damage, so you'd need a powerful body enhancement going at the same time —it's not a technique I'd consider possible for a human to use. Let's see, if I were to try it..."

Reiss trailed off and disappeared instantly. The next moment—

"Wha?!"

Rio also disappeared.

The destination of the two who had disappeared was where Celia and the others were currently fleeing. They were over 50 meters away, but they traveled that distance in an instant.

Rio barely managed to get in front of Reiss and wedged himself before the group. Once he did, Reiss came to a sudden stop as well.

"W-When did he..."

They had been running with their physical abilities enchanted by magic. Yet, Rio and Reiss had suddenly appeared from behind them, which came as a shock to Kouta and Rei. Christina and Vanessa also stared, wide-eyed.

"Ah, it seems like I'm no match in terms of speed, as expected. That aside, are you really human?" Reiss ignored the shock of Christina and the others as he looked at Rio with a cool expression.

"What does that make you, then?" Rio asked back plainly.

"Haha." Reiss laughed eerily. Arein, Lucci, and Ven all caught up once again.

"Wouldn't it have been better for you to take on this bastard from the start, Master Reiss?" Arein asked tiredly.

"In all probability, I would have lost. But, well, I suppose that isn't a bad idea," Reiss boasted in an arrogant tone.

"..." Rio remained silent as he stared at Reiss with a sharp gaze.

"My, my. I thought I had grabbed you by surprise with my movement technique just now, but it seems we're back at square one. What a terrifying person indeed." Reiss shook his head in disappointment.

"Orphia, please take Celia and the others and go on ahead. Alma and I will remain here to support Haruto," Sara ordered as she stood alongside Rio. She held a dagger in each hand and was braced for battle.

"Got it." With a nod, Alma held her mace in her hand at the ready and stood

beside Rio, too.

"Sara..." Rio frowned apologetically.

"Reiss' power seems to be equal to the higher-ranked warriors of our village. And those three men over there can put up a fair fight against Haruto. It only makes sense for us to remain here, in case all four of them try to attack at the same time," Sara said firmly.

"...Thank you. Could the two of you lend me your strength, then? I'll take on Reiss," Rio said gratefully to them, lifting his sword.

"Of course. Alma and I will handle the rest," Sara said. Arein and the others furrowed their brows at being lumped together with the group of adventurers.

"Orphia, I entrust Celia and Her Highness to you. Cross the border if you can."

"Yes, leave it to me! Let's go, everyone!" Orphia said, urging Celia and Christina and the others to depart again. Celia turned back for a brief moment.

"Haruto, Sara, Alma! Win!" she said.

"Of course."

"Yes!"

The three shouted back. At that, Celia turned and ran after Orphia, with Kouta and Rei in tow. Christina stopped to say something to them, but—

"Princess Christina, hurry!" Vanessa urged.

"...Right." Christina began running with a somewhat pained expression.

"Good grief," Reiss said, smiling for some reason. "Arein, Lucci, Ven, and everyone else. Please entertain those ladies over there. It's irritating, but I shall take on the boy," he said.

"Right. Now that we've been treated as the accessories, our reputation is on the line," Arein said with a hostile expression.

"Let's teach them some manners," Lucci agreed.

"I'm relying on you, then," Reiss said, before suddenly disappearing once again. Immediately afterwards—

Above.

Rio followed Reiss's movements and leaped up into the sky. One beat later, a violent exchange of blows began in the air, rumbling with a tremendous sound.

"Wow, he's one outrageous monster. I can see why the captain was seriously wounded." Lucci looked up at the sky in exasperation.

"I've always thought we hadn't seen Master Reiss' true potential, but to think it was this much..." Ven muttered in reverence.

"Don't tell me you two are on par with that monster, too." Arein looked at Sara and Alma.

"Rest assured, the two of us are weaker than Rio," Sara noted.

"Indeed," Alma agreed.

"However, we're not weak enough to lose to you," Sara added, provoking Arein and his group.

"Hmm..."

"Let's see, then..."

Without any signal at all, Arein and Lucci leaped at Sara and Alma simultaneously. They closed the distance in one bound and slashed at the two of them.

"Hah!" Sara used her two daggers while Alma used her mace to parry the attacks.

"Ha, so you CAN put up a fight!" Lucci smiled with hostility.

"Do you have the leisure to be smiling?" Alma asked plainly, putting her weight into her mace.

The clash of their weapons sent Lucci flying. He soared several meters through the air and landed on the ground, wincing as he yelled. "W-What?! Whoa there... H-Hey hey, this tiny brat has just as much brute strength as that bastard!"

Elder dwarves were born with musculature that differed from humans. Even the petite and dainty Alma had enough hidden strength to far surpass the largeframed Lucci.

"How savage." Alma gripped her mace and went to pursue Lucci, but—

"I won't let you! Ngh!" Ven intervened to stop Alma's advance. However, after seeing the brute strength that she displayed with Lucci earlier, he decided to parry the heavy blow by leaping backwards. Even then, he grimaced at the burden placed on his arms.

"You don't seem to have as much power as that tiny one," Arein analyzed while exchanging blows with Sara.

"That's right. My strength is in my speed, so." Sara nodded without showing any vexation and stepped back. Then, she stepped to the right.

"Hah, I can see you clearly, though! ... What?!"

Arein responded to Sara's movements and tried to cut around her with a smug smile. But before he knew it, Sara had stepped to the left, luring Arein's body into reflexively heading left. Using that brief opening, Sara stepped right once again and slashed at Arein.



"Even if you can see me, that means nothing if your reactions are delayed." As a silver wolf werebeast, Sara's natural body surpassed that of a human's in flexibility and agility.

Tch, so annoying. Shit!

Arein suddenly braced his sword and retreated while sticking to defensive tactics. He fell back further, unable to handle all the blows.

"Whoa! Guh!"

Sara released a blow with the pommel of the dagger, catching him in the left arm as she used power surpassing that of a physical body enchantment. He tried to step sideways to parry the blow, but failed and landed on the ground, rolling onto his knees.

"Hey, Lucci! Ven! Facing them one-on-one isn't working in our favor. Let's switch this up into a three-on-two!" Arein said.

"I was just thinking the same!" Lucci and Ven promptly ran towards him.

"All of you! Stop standing around and surround the brats! Back us up!" Arein called out to the adventurers around them; they immediately began surrounding Sara and Alma.

"As disgraceful as it is, the moment they knew they couldn't win alone, they relied on their surroundings," Alma said, half-impressed and half-exasperated.

"We're mercenaries, after all. We're fine with a bit of shame here and there in the name of money. Our lives are precious to us, you see. We don't take on battles we can't win fair and square," Lucci said with a snort.

"Anyway, our weapons are unfortunately enchanted sword knock-offs. We can only use them for physical body enhancement, and the collateral of using double enhancements is wearing on us. I can see your weapons are quite sharp. You're still hiding more abilities, aren't you? Just like that bastard above." Arein glanced up while he spoke. Blasts of wind were whipping about the skies above, crossing paths with countless balls of light.

"Even if we did, we wouldn't need to use them against you people," Sara stated plainly.

"Hmm. Arrogant brat." Arein frowned hatefully.

"Let's go! Dragging this out is only going to hurt us in the end, since we're suffering the effects of the double enhancement! Cheat as much as you need to!"

With that order, the group charged at Sara and Alma.



Meanwhile, as the fight continued on between Rio, Reiss, and the others...

"Hah, hah!" Celia, Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei were running after Orphia with the border of the kingdom almost within their sights. Their view was blocked, but once they crossed the hill before them, they would reach the tranquil mountains that served as the kingdom's border.

## However-

What is this bad feeling I'm getting...? Orphia felt nervous for some reason. Reiss was being kept occupied by Rio, and Ariel was flying in the skies above, searching for any other weird enemies nearby, so there was no need for her to feel as such.

There were no enemies pursuing them from behind, and there were no signs of the enemy to their sides, either. Ariel decided to go on ahead to make sure there were no threats ahead of them.

"...Stop!" Orphia immediately came to a screeching halt as Ariel crossed over the hill; Celia and the others behind her naturally did the same.

"W-What's wrong, Orphia?" Celia asked, panting for breath.

"We have to turn back..." Orphia said with a rare look of panic in her eyes.

"T-Turn back? But Reiss and the others are behind us... What's over there?" Celia asked in confusion.

"It's..."

An outrageous number of soldiers was waiting on the other side of the hill. A thousand—no, two thousand, three thousand? Or more? There were too many to count, and they were marching right towards them.

"The enemy is over the hill—a lot of them," Orphia said.

"How can you tell?" Vanessa asked in confusion.

"Umm, it's the ability of my bow." She couldn't explain that it was her contract spirit flying around scouting for enemies, so she tried to explain it away as an ability of her enchanted bow. There was no time for a proper explanation; they had to get away immediately.

Then, from far above in the skies, a high pitched call of a bird could be heard. Orphia sensed something was off and looked up.

"This cry..."

It wasn't Ariel's familiar cry. Or rather, there were too many of them.

But she had heard this somewhere before...

As she was thinking, the sound of flapping wings also reached her ears. Over fifty griffins descended from the skies to form a semi-circle behind Christina and the others.

"Wha..."

Celia, Christina, Vanessa, Kouta, and Rei were rendered speechless.

"...Everyone, please fall back towards the hill," Orphia said to them, ordering them in the direction where there were no griffins. She knew there was a huge army waiting in that direction, but she had no other choice.

Ariel, tell Haruto and the others about this situation.

Orphia was able to handle fifty or so of the average knight by herself, but there was nothing she could do against a rush of thousands of soldiers. Even if she summoned Ariel back to the ground, she knew they'd just be subjected to concentrated fire.

That's why, in order to survive this situation, they needed Rio and the others. If Rio came, he'd be able to buy them some time.

"It's no use. My army of 5,000 is waiting that way. There's no escape," the man who dismounted from his griffin said triumphantly. It was Charles Arbor—Celia's former fiance. Furthermore, standing beside him was the kingdom's

strongest swordsman, Alfred Emarle—Vanessa's older brother.

When Vanessa spotted her brother, she glared at him resentfully from underneath her hood. Alfred ignored her with a cool expression.

"Guh..." When Celia spotted Charles, she hurriedly pulled her hood lower over her head. Christina noticed, and for some reason, removed her own hood and stepped forward.

"Stand down. What do you think you're doing, Charles Arbor?" she questioned using her position as royalty.

"You've played around enough, Princess Christina. You don't need me to spell it out for you, do you? Your father has ordered for your return, so I've come to retrieve you," Charles replied with a surface-thin air of respect.

"Father did?" Christina asked with a scornful smile. She knew that the order was given by none other than the Arbor family itself.

"Indeed. He wants you to return what you took."

"...What is he going on about?"

"Well, if you claim you know nothing, we'll just have to ask your friends. Oh, don't worry—interrogation is my forte. I'll dote upon them carefully until they feel like being honest." With a sadistic smile, Charles looked around at the people beside Christina.

"What a disgusting man..." Christina glared at Charles detestfully.

"What kind of interrogation do you intend on doing? Do you plan on doing the same to my friends?" A pretty blonde boy—the hero, Shigekura Rui, stepped forward and asked Charles.

"Oh, no. Of course, Sir Rui's friends will be exempted from the interrogation. They wouldn't know anything about the item Her Highness took off with anyway," Charles explained to Rui in a slight fluster.

Rui breathed a quiet sigh and called out the names of his friend and upperclassman from the same world. "...Hey, Kouta. Rei, too."

"Rui..." Kouta grimaced, clenching his fists.

"Why... Why did you come after us?! Why are you here?!" he asked Rui in a pained, irritated voice.

"...I'm here because you two left the castle without a word. As your friend, I was worried. Akane and the others are worried too. That's why I came." Rui had a pained look on his face as he answered.

"Friend?" At that word, Kouta frowned.

"I consider you a friend... Do you not feel the same?"

"...I do, I suppose," Kouta agreed bitterly.

"Then, will you return?" Rui asked anxiously.

Kouta hesitated for a moment, then shook his head firmly. "...No."

Rui hesitated. "...Then I'll have to bring you back myself," he said resolutely.

"H-Huh? Why?" Kouta was taken aback.

"You left the castle without a word out of desperation, even when that meant we might have never met again. I'm worried about you. I also promised Akane I'd bring you back. So, that's what I'll do... Then, we can all have a proper conversation about it all," Rui said eloquently.

"...Then there's even less of a reason for me to return to the castle. My resolve won't be hindered by a talk," Kouta refused bitterly.

"...Is that so?" A dark look lit Rui's expression.

"Sir Rui was filled with terrible grief when his friends suddenly disappeared. That is another result of your selfish actions, Your Highness. Your father has also been terribly worried since you left the castle. Your departure has caused considerable repercussions, influencing our kingdom in a negative way. For the sake of the kingdom, won't you return to the castle with me immediately?" Charles said with exaggerated sorrow.

"I refuse." Christina shook her head bluntly.

"...There's still time to lessen the punishment of those who have deceived you. Vanessa Emarle and the others... the identity of whom, I do not know."

Charles flashed the implication that the fate of Christina's accomplices would

be decided by her own response. In explaining so, he looked around at the party's faces and fixed his gaze on Orphia's exposed face. The lecherous look in his eyes was probably due to the elf's beauty.

*""* 

Hesitation flashed across Christina's face. If she dauntlessly stood up against Charles here, Celia, Orphia, and Vanessa's situation would be worse. That thought caused her to become indecisive.

"Princess Christina, hinting at the use of hostages is an old trick of Charles'," Celia said.

"Haruto and the others will definitely come. I'll buy as much time as I can, but everyone should be on the defense," Orphia said, stepping forward to protect them. She held her bow in her hand, ready to deal with whatever happened.

Vanessa also drew the sword at her waist. "I don't know how much use I will be, but I shall fight, too. The swordsman standing there may be difficult even for Lady Orphia. It may be a challenge, but don't let him get close to you. *Augendae Corporis*—" She stared at her brother, before strengthening her physical abilities with magic.

"Princess Christina, Kouta, Rei—you should get behind me," Celia said, before standing behind Orphia and Vanessa herself. Then, she braced herself in preparation to use magic at any moment.

"...I don't want to believe this, but are you saying you have no intention of returning?" Charles looked at their battle-ready stances and sneered at Christina in contempt. Sure enough, Christina took a deep breath.

"...Yes, I have no intention of returning to the castle. Feel free to return by yourself," she said resolutely.

"What a shame. His Majesty has ordered me to bring you back by force if you are uncooperative. I hope you don't end up regretting this... Hey, don't hurt Her Highness and Sir Rui's two friends. And the woman with the bow, too."

Charles shook his head sadly, then gave orders to Alfred and the knights and sorcerers around him.

Thus, the fierce battle made its spectacular beginning.



Meanwhile, a little further west of the point where Christina and the others were, Sara and Alma were locked in combat with Reiss' men.

Arein, Lucci, and Ven were proving to be a problem. However, the other adventurers also had their physical abilities enchanted with magic, so they couldn't be underestimated. In fact, they weren't just hired adventurers—they were soldiers Reiss had summoned from a mercenary group precisely for this plan. They had the combat strength of the average knight, not to mention their astonishing teamwork.

"Photon Projectilis!"

They were currently using rapid-fire magic to focus their attacks on Alma.

"How annoying." Alma evaded the bullets of light and swung her mace, muttering in annoyance. A barrage of this caliber was nothing to her, but it was unpleasant in that it made it difficult for her to move and attack with precision.

"Great—keep that tiny brat in check with magic! We'll take the silver-haired one in the meantime." Arein rattled off orders at the adventurers and attacked Sara, whereas Lucci and Ven had gone around the left and right sides in a fierce attack. Chasing Sara, who took a step back to gain distance, the three of them closed in.

These three are slower than me, and yet...

When they attacked all at once, she wasn't able to be on the offensive. Because she was faster than them, she was able to deal with them if she concentrated on simply evading the men. Sara would definitely have the advantage in a one-on-one battle, but their natural abilities weren't that different. If she tried to cross swords with them properly in a three-on-one, she'd almost certainly lose. Even two-on-one was a little risky.

She felt just a little bit vexed at that. She still lacked in training, she thought.

"Hah, what a cute face for such a frightening little lady. Aiming for the timing of our counters. But we won't let things go your way without a fight, you

know?" Lucci stared at Sara's movements, observing her every action.

"...Hm, I wonder about that. I pretty much understand all of your moves now," Sara objected, pouting her lips.

There's no helping it. I'll use spirit arts.

She poured essence into the daggers in her hand. Though she was going to use spirit arts, she was limited by the need to make it look like she was activating the abilities of her enchanted sword. But if she didn't fuss over using her daggers alone, there was plenty of room for victory.

Sara stepped extra hard against the ground and made the biggest leap backwards yet. Since she had to travel a greater distance, the time that she was in the air was longer. Arein and the other men noticed.

"Uh oh, feeling hasty?" They each held their swords ready and closed in, aiming for the moment Sara landed.

...Now!

The moment Sara landed, she released the essence she had poured into the dagger and thrust her right hand forward.

"W-What?!"

A large sphere of water several meters wide formed in front of Arein and the others. If it collided into their bodies, it was sure to do enough damage to knock them unconscious.

However, the three men reacted immediately, leaping high and twisting themselves to change direction. Once they barely managed to avoid the sphere of water, they used their remaining momentum to run left and right, away from Sara's side.

"Whoaaa!"

"Is it the unique sorcery of that enchanted sword?!"

"Didn't it have some kind of speed-related unique sorcery...?"

They all yelled out in relief as they broke out in a cold sweat. For the record, the unique sorcery of an enchanted sword was special combat sorcery

embedded within an enchanted sword, separate to its standard physical body enhancing sorcery.

"You let your guard down." Sara looked at Arein and the others cheerfully, lifting the dagger in her left hand up as she spoke.

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"...Huh?"
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For a moment, her opponents looked doubtful. No sooner than they did, a shadow was cast over them, drawing their gazes upwards. There were three spheres of water roughly one meter in diameter.

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"Ugh, shit...!"
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The spheres fell smoothly down over their heads. With a splash, the water burst, directly hitting the three of them.

"So the one from the front was bait...?"

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"Ngh..."
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"How can you drop something with such accuracy..."

The three of them weren't knocked unconscious, but they had taken enough damage to prevent them from moving any further.

"Any fully-fledged warrior should be able to freely control the trajectory of the projectiles they create. It's because you relied on the sorcery in your swords to fight that you were late in detecting the spell that was being used in my left dagger."

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"Shit..."
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"This is the end. All that's left is to assist Alma... but it looks like there's no need." Sara glanced over at Alma, who had been evading the essence bullets with ease.

Sara used spirits arts. I have no choice—I guess I will too.

In the next moment, she poured magic essence into her mace and slammed it down on the ground with all her might. The ground instantly split and rose up.

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"Wh...?!"
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The adventurers that had been volleying the barrage of light at Alma all

swallowed their breath. They could no longer see her due to the wall that had risen out of the earth—or so they thought, when Alma suddenly came swooping down over their heads. She landed in the middle of the formation the men had taken with about a two-meter gap and once again slammed the ground.

This time, the earth didn't rise. Instead, a crater was formed, sinking into the ground and sending a shockwave throughout their surroundings.

"Whoa!" The men were caught in the impact and sent helplessly flying.

"Looks like it's over," Alma said coolly. She picked up her mace, which was embedded in the ground, and walked over to Sara.

"That tiny brat really has ridiculous strength..." Lucci muttered from where he lay face-down.

"That's a rude thing to say to a lady." Alma huffed in offense. Then, she spotted Ariel flying towards them in the distance.



A little earlier in time, when Sara and Alma were fighting Arein's group, Rio and Reiss were exchanging fierce blows in the skies above.

Rio was flying at a high speed to cut down Reiss. Reiss manipulated nearly a hundred balls of light to keep Rio in check and prevent him from approaching. Each time Rio accelerated to close the distance between them, multiple balls of light would fill Rio's vision. However, Rio would track what was in front of him and seize each approaching ball of light without missing a single one. With his incredible reaction time, he evaded every last ball before him.

"Splendid," Reiss praised while maintaining a safe distance. Rio swung his sword at him, firing a blast of wind, but Reiss dodged the attack easily. This exchange repeated for a minute or so.

"...You don't actually intend on fighting, do you?" Rio furrowed his brow and asked suspiciously.

"If I didn't, I would have attacked you in the first place." Reiss shrugged his shoulders.

"Yet I can't imagine this as you fighting seriously."

"No, no. Honestly, this is my current limit. I don't even remember the last time I had to use this much power. If anything, I'd say you're the one who isn't fighting seriously right now, no? That humanoid spirit girl is nowhere to be seen either."

... How does he know about Aishia? Rio thought, but—

"...I wanted to ask you about Lucius, but if you're going to move that fast it makes it harder to hold back," he stated.

"I see. So you wanted to know more about him..." Reiss chuckled.

"I heard you're the ambassador of the Proxia Empire," he jabbed.

"Who knows? I've also heard that you used to attend the Beltrum Royal Academy," Reiss countered with a sharp hook.

"..." Shock lit Rio's eyes.

"Are you wondering how I know that?" Reiss guessed.

"Who knows?"

"All things considered, you're quite the whimsical one, heading on a journey to save the princess of the kingdom that falsely accused you. I even hinted at your past before Princess Christina back at Cleia, hoping your relationship would sour so we wouldn't have to fight."

"I have no idea what you're going on about. More importantly, if you're the Proxia Empire's ambassador, then that means it wouldn't be strange for Lucius to be in Proxia as well." Rio feigned ignorance with a poker face, then tried to probe further.

"I wonder about that," Reiss boasted lightly.

...As expected. Drawing information from this guy will be tough. Rio had no idea what was true and what was a lie.

"...Enough. I'm giving up on seizing you alive," Rio said, readying his sword.

"Hahaha, that's some impressive bloodlust. You were more amazing when you faced him in Amande, but this is also quite considerable... It's like the

sleeping dragon has finally woken. I do not wish to die, so I'll be resisting." Reiss' expression turned the most serious it had been yet. He created countless balls of light at a smaller size than they had been until now, and fired them at Rio.

Rio covered himself in a barrier of wind and did a vigorous barrel roll towards Reiss, knocking all the balls of light away.

"Haha, what a terrible torrent of essence. How violent indeed..."

By making use of his tremendous magic essence capacity, he rushed forward at a speed too fast to follow with the eyes to overwhelm the opponent with pure power. Charging forward for only that purpose. How else could this be described if not violent?

In order to escape Rio, who had closed in on him in an instant, Reiss tried to fly swiftly. However, Rio's speed surpassed Reiss'.

Rio kicked Reiss with all his might. The bones of the arm he had kicked creaked.

"Ngah!" A groan slipped from Reiss' mouth, his body blown towards the ground with the force of the kick. He proceeded to crash into and roll along the ground.

Rio moved in to add a merciless follow-up attack, lowering his altitude. At that, Reiss summoned three of the largest balls of light yet around him, bombarding them at Rio.

The first one was evaded by a twist of Rio's body. The one following that was mowed down with an essence-filled swing of his sword. As for the final ball, a blast of wind was released from the tip of his sword, blowing it back and towards Reiss, who had fallen against the ground.

The rebounded ball of light crashed into the spot where Reiss was and opened a hole in the floor. If Reiss hadn't moved, his whole body would've been disintegrated.

However, Reiss had evaded towards the side just before the ball came down, then proceeded in his counter charge towards Rio. He gathered magic essence in his right hand, raising it like a sword to challenge Rio head-on. The next

moment, the two crossed each other mid air, and the result—

"...See? I knew I would lose, in all probability."

Reiss' detached arm went soaring through the air. Reiss grabbed his sliced off arm and immediately distanced himself from Rio. The damage from being kicked against the ground and having his arm sliced off meant he was in quite a state right now.

And yet, there wasn't a glimpse of pain in his expression. His flippant smile hadn't wavered at all. He was a truly unnerving man.

"How about you surrender already? Your men over there have been cleaned up by my comrades. If you want to reattach your arm, you should probably do that soon. I can save you in exchange for information." Rio glanced at Sara and Alma as he spoke. Their battle had just ended, the men Reiss had brought along all lying battered on the ground.

"Information, is it? Then how about this: your friends that left first are running in the direction of thousands of soldiers, led by Charles," Reiss said, chuckling eerily.

"...No way." Instead of treating those words as a bluff to get out of this situation, Rio had a bad feeling. Just then, Sara and Alma came running over.

"Haruto! Orphia and the others are...!" they yelled with terribly panicked faces.

"I'll go ahead! You two come as soon as possible!"

Rio abandoned Reiss immediately and used wind spirit arts to accelerate himself towards Celia and the others. Sara and Alma exchanged looks and nodded, then followed him.

"Now, I've bought as much time as I could. Who knows how things will end up." Reiss' utterly exhausted voice echoed vacantly.

# **Chapter 5: Ruler of the Battlefield**

A little earlier in time, at Celia's location...

"Arrest them, Alfred!" Charles ordered, signaling the start of the battle. Alfred charged head-on at the group, his expression somewhat unenthusiastic.

"Everyone, please hold back the others and leave him to me!" Orphia directed, firing her bow at speeds too fast to follow with the naked eyes.

"!" The speed exceeded Alfred's expectations, lighting his eyes with a faint look of shock. But he was able to respond to the attack itself without much difficulty, mowing it down with his sword.

However, Orphia wasn't surprised by something like that—she readied her bow and fired her next arrow of light at Alfred.

Alfred yet again saw through the attack and cut it down. From that point onwards, Orphia started rapid-firing her arrows of light faster than before, but each arrow was aimed so perfectly, it made her attack just slightly docile. On top of that, she aimed for areas that wouldn't result in his instant demise—something which Alfred had noticed within intercepting ten of those light arrows.

Meanwhile, Orphia fixed her gaze on Alfred as he blocked her arrows.

This man... He really is strong. She stared at him with reverence for his strength.

"Your arrows are fast, and your aim is frighteningly accurate, but you are too soft," Alfred said, shooting Orphia a conflicted look.

"Hey, Alfred! What are you dallying around for?" Charles scolded.

Alfred sighed. "I do not wish to harm women and children. As long as you don't resist, no harm will come to you."

"I'm sorry, but we will be resisting," Orphia apologized sincerely.

"It's futile. No matter how accurately you fire those light arrows towards me

with your enchanted bow, I will surely close the distance between us. An archer of your skill must be able to comprehend that, no?" Alfred said, attempting to wear down Orphia's will to fight.

Orphia giggled cutely. "I shall stop firing straight, then. It seems I have misjudged your strength..."

Alfred furrowed his brow in confusion, but Orphia immediately took aim in the opposite direction and fired her arrows of light.

"What ...?!"

The arrows that Orphia fired drew an arc through the air, swooping down on Alfred with unmatched precision. Alfred reacted instantly and cut the arrows down, but he was more surprised than he'd been before.



"Here goes nothing!" Orphia said, and fired at a speed even greater than before.

"Guh..." Alfred had been cutting down the light arrows one-by-one at first, but the more he cut the more arrows approached from all possible angles. Eventually, his processing speed fell behind, and he decided that it would be faster to evade them instead of cutting them down. He waited for the right moment, then began dashing to the side, but—

"What ...?"

The arrows of light he should have evaded came homing in after him. As a result, he was given no choice but to deal with every last arrow.

"ALFRED! Are you even trying?!" Charles yelled harshly, seeing Alfred take the defensive side of the fight.

Alfred frowned in annoyance. "It seems I misjudged your abilities, too. I suppose I have no choice, then," he said, then began charging straight at Orphia.

"..." Orphia watched Alfred carefully, aiming for the exact moment he began his approach to pour magic essence into her bow and fire a thick arrow of light. Alfred tried to cut the arrow that was headed straight for him, but the single arrow of light split into countless smaller arrows, scattering like a shotgun.

"A-Aah!" For a moment, Alfred's eyes were blown wide open. But his body didn't freeze—he released a slash of light from his sword to erase the entire shotgun of arrows instead.

"So that attack didn't work either," Orphia said with a wry smile.

"And you can fire multiple arrows at once... How troubling," Alfred said a little awkwardly.

"Are you really that concerned?" If he was, then she could probably manage to hold him back by herself. That was what Orphia was wondering as she asked her question, when—

"I am. I can no longer hold back in order to arrest you. So, here goes nothing." No sooner had Alfred said that, he resumed charging straight for Orphia.

"U... Urgh...!" Orphia immediately countered, but Alfred was faster than before. The moment Orphia had released her arrows, he was already right before her eyes. A heavy fist drove into Orphia's stomach.

"Orphia?!" Celia yelled in horror as she watched Orphia fall.

"Ugh... That hurts." Orphia pressed down on her stomach to endure the pain.

"I intended to knock you unconscious with that single blow, but it seems that bow has physical body enchantments in it. Forgive me—I'll put you to rest with the next strike." Alfred reached for Orphia with a look of indifference.

"B-Brother!" Vanessa slashed at Alfred from close range with all her strength. She took a large leap, throwing all her weight into her sword to push it forward. However, Alfred deflected her attack easily using the shield equipped on his left arm.

"Guh!"

Vanessa continued to slash away at Alfred with determination, but this time, Alfred swung back. Swords clashed together, and Vanessa was blown backwards with the recoil.

Vanessa slowly peeled back her hood.

"You're... What is that hair?" Alfred's eyes widened faintly at the unfamiliar sight of his little sister's hair.

"That doesn't matter right now!" Vanessa charged at Alfred, who easily parried her attack with his sword. But, after a brief moment of being locked sword-to-sword, he took a light step back.

"When you strain all your strength, this is what happens."

Vanessa staggered forward faintly. Alfred used that chance to sweep her feet out from underneath her, sending her rolling.

"Doesn't matter, huh? Well, that may be true. Now that things have come to this, I will have to punish you," Alfred said, slightly bitter, but swallowing back his words. He flicked away the sword in Vanessa's grip and sent it rolling.

"Nngh..." Vanessa was now laying on the floor unarmed, but she grit her teeth and lashed out at Alfred with detestment. "Why?! Why would you do

this?!"

"Do what?"

"Why are you here?! Forget Charles! You're the King's Sword!"

"...It was by the order of His Majesty."

"That's not what I mean! No, do you truly believe that to be His Majesty's will?! Brother!"

"I have nothing to say to you right now. This is all the compassion I can show —go to sleep," Alfred said, crouching down to chop his hand at Vanessa's neck.

"Ugh..." The world spun. The light in Vanessa's eyes went out as she fainted.

"Everyone, move back..." Celia retreated while holding her hands at the ready to activate her magic at a moment's notice. It was evident that at this distance, Alfred's attack would hit her before she could fire any magic. Sorcerers were meant to fight without letting their opponents get close.

"Well done, Alfred. Hmph..." Charles smiled, approaching in satisfaction. He walked over to where Orphia was lying on the ground and snapped an essence-sealing collar around her neck, lifting her head.

"Urgh..."

She had been secretly treating herself with spirit arts, but now her magic essence was sealed. Her stomach must have hurt, still, as her face twisted in pain as it was lifted.

"I can't say I'm impressed by the rough way you're handling the lady." Rui came over belatedly, addressing Charles with a faint frown on his face.

"Unfortunately, we would be no match for her if she used magic. I will ensure her abdomen gets healed properly." Charles chuckled pleasantly as he gazed at Orphia's face. Then, he pointed at Celia. "Hey, Alfred. Remove that small woman's hood."

"Uh..." Celia backed away slowly.

"Photon Projectilis!" From behind Celia, Christina chanted a spell and rapidly fired magic essence bullets towards Charles.

She's good.

They were finally aiming at Charles, Alfred thought. He was the real burden here.

"Wha..." Charles froze, as he hadn't expected to become the target himself. Alfred had no choice but to move before Charles and protect him.

"Don't let your guard down."

"I-I know that! I knew you would protect me, so I didn't react. That's all. But to have the guts to aim for me..."

Charles grit his teeth. If it hadn't been Christina who had fired the shot, he would have approached her and beaten her up.

"T-Terra Carcerem!" In order to trap both Alfred and Charles, Celia placed her hand against the ground and chanted a spell. In reaction to the earth prison spell, a magic circle appeared by the feet of the men.

"It's pointless. This sword can absorb magic essence." Alfred stabbed his sword into the ground and extinguished the magic circle.

"Princess Christina, Kouta, Rei! Please run away..."

Celia tried to urge the three of them to run while she bought time, but she found herself at a loss for words. There was nowhere to run. Knights riding griffins were circling in the sky. Alfred was in front of them. There were several other knights that had landed on the ground as well.

She glanced behind herself to see the army of thousands had closed in at some point and felt her heart nearly fracturing.

"Hmph, as if I'd prepare an opening for you to run. The plan was perfect. All this useless resistance was for nothing. Psh..."

Charles marched right up to Celia and slapped her face with all his might. He knew *Terra Carcerem* was an earth prison magic and not used with the intention to cause harm, but he was still angry that Christina aimed her attack magic at him earlier, so he took it out on her instead.

"Aah!" Celia was blown back and tumbled across the ground. The hood fluttered off her face.

"...Hm?" Charles narrowed his eyes at the sight of Celia's face. He had assumed she was some plain brat, but she had an appearance on par with Orphia's—the thought that he shouldn't have been so rough crossed his mind. Because of her different hair color, he didn't notice at first glance that the one he had hit was his former fiancee, to whom he had once whispered sweet words.

"Huh? Is she perhaps...?" Alfred had a suspicious expression after seeing Celia's face, which eventually turned into a look of realization. But just at that moment...

"S-Sir Charles! Someone is approaching at a tremendous speed!" one of the griffin knights keeping watch from the skies suddenly yelled out a warning.

"What...?" Charles looked doubtful for a moment, but his expression soon changed with a gasp. "I-Is it the one Lord Reiss spoke of?! He couldn't hold him back?! Ugh, fire all your magic at once and intercept him!"

At his shocked order, the ten griffin knights in the sky all started chanting their spells.

"Ignis lecit!" Magic circles appeared at their hands, from which they shot a ball of fire aimed at the rapidly approaching black shadow.

"G-Ground team! Make a wall with your shields and recite your magic to drive him back if he approaches!" Charles yelled his panicked orders to the knights surrounding them, and the army approaching from the hill. The knights beside him reacted promptly, thrusting their shields into the ground to protect Charles with a wall.

"That's... him."

Rui watched the figure approach at an inhuman speed and glanced over at Kouta and Rei once, hesitating slightly. Then, he moved to stand behind the wall of knights and aimed his bow towards the sky.



Rio was running at full speed in Celia's direction. The area was hilly with a clear outlook, making it easy to spot the huge army of soldiers roughly one kilometer away. He charged towards their direction without hesitation.

The knights riding the griffins in the skies seemed to have focused their guard on the direction Rio came from, as they discovered him immediately. Rio watched from afar as one of them hurriedly descended to the ground. A few seconds later, dozens of one-meter-wide fireballs came hurtling towards him; there was 500 meters between them.

At this distance, they should have just fired those to keep me in check.

Their aim was all over the place. If he continued closing in at his current speed, the first wave would land far behind him. Rio glanced once at the rain of fire, then directed his attention to the ground.

That's...

Just before the knights formed their wall of shields, Rio spotted Orphia pressing down on her stomach and Celia rolling on the ground. His expression immediately turned ice cold. At the same time, the first wave of *Ignis lecit* landed far behind Rio. Now he was 200 meters away.

"Magicae Displodo!"

"Photon Projectilis!"

The knights forming the wall before Charles fired their attack magic. One beat later, a thick arrow of lightning shot into the sky. It was Rui's attack.

"Ignis lecit!"

The griffin knights also fired their second wave of fireballs. This time, their aim was adjusted for Rio's movement speed.

"…"

Rio watched the barrage of attack magic without emotion. Normally, one would choose to leap to the side to evade it, but Rio purposefully charged forward instead, accelerating.

What the knights holding their shields up witnessed was the sight of their attack magic catching Rio one after another. *Photon Projectilis* were photon bullets that had enough force to blow back an unguarded person, while *Magicae Displodo* was a magic cannon that had enough force to wipe out a group of people. And yet—

"Wha..."

The knights were rendered speechless. Their attack magic veered away from Rio the moment before they should have made contact. It was like there was an invisible wall or path rerouting them—they just wouldn't hit. The lightning rain that fell at a slight delay also fell as though it was avoiding contact with Rio.

Thus, Rio charged into the wall of knights with no hesitation whatsoever.

"Aagh!!"

He cut them down as though he was batting away flies—it was enough to send the knights flying sideways.

At that point, Rio paused. His eyes met Rui's, who had been standing behind the knights. But Rio paid him no mind, his gaze instead moving towards Orphia, Celia, and Vanessa, who were laying on the ground.

"...Are they alive?" he asked no one in particular.

"Y-Yes. They're just knocked out," Christina answered nervously. She understood that at this moment, Haruto Amakawa—who had only shown his gentle side until now—was angry. She was overwhelmed by his presence and shuddered.

"...You did this?" Rio looked at Charles and walked towards him slowly.



"Wha... N-No! He did it!" Charles flinched, pointing at Alfred as he backed away.

"You ordered it."

Rio continued to approach, then held his sword ready and swung it.

"Eek...!" Overwhelmed, Charles was unable to move. However, Alfred stepped in front of him and stopped the blow of Rio's sword.

"Charles, retreat if you do not want to die," Alfred said with a stern expression.

"W-What?! You dare order your commander...?!"

"Hurry! Did you not witness how fast he got here?!"

Even at a time like this, Charles snapped back reflexively, but Alfred shot down his objection forcibly.

"Guh...!" Rio swung his sword fully and sent Alfred's body flying back, colliding with Charles along the way.

"H-How dare you! K-Kill him! Someone! Anyone! Hurry and kill that man!" Charles rolled along the ground and remained there as he wailed his orders. The griffin knights in the air immediately moved in response, but Rio thrust his sword upwards. Just as he did, a tornado-like blast of wind burst forth. In a single strike of his sword, he sent all the knights in the sky scattering.

"Wha..." Charles was wide-eyed and speechless.

"Do you understand, now? Numbers and tactics will no longer decide the outcome of this fight," Alfred said to Charles as he faced Rio.

"Then you do something about him! Use that sword of yours! Flash Judgment, wasn't it?"

"I would have done so already if I could... I'll buy you time. Take the soldiers and retreat."

"...Guh!" Charles whipped around and started running towards the soldiers on the hill.

"Haruto!" Sara and Alma had finally caught up and were calling Rio's name

from behind him.

"Can I leave this to you? I need to capture the enemy's commander." Rio fixed his eyes on Alfred, who stood in the way of the fleeing Charles.

"Yes!" came the reply from behind, and Rio rushed forward, but was intercepted by Alfred.

Alfred's sword immediately began glowing, then shot out light to mow down the area as he slashed with it. However, Rio released a tornado-like blast of wind to offset Alfred's strike. Alfred continued firing slashes of light one after another. Rio did the same with his wind. It was an exchange of light and wind from the two warriors.

The slashes of light consumed a lot of magic essence, so it wasn't something that one normally used recklessly—but this was Alfred's last resort after he sensed the gap in their abilities with his first attack. If he faced Rio with only his sword, he would lose.

However, there was no change to the fact Rio's physical abilities far surpassed his. Alfred was gradually being pushed back towards the hill.

"Ugh..."

At some point, Rui had made his way around to the hill where Charles had fled. He fired a lightning arrow towards Rio.

Rio took a step back and cut down the arrow, then paused and looked at Rui. "...Are you going to get in my way?"

"Long time no see, Haruto—I haven't seen you since the Galarc royal castle, I believe?" Rui greeted Rio.

"Indeed," Rio replied shortly.

"I didn't want to see you again like this, if possible..." Rui admitted a little awkwardly.

"Neither did I. If you don't get in my way, I won't need to attack you."

Rui gave a pained smile and shook his head slowly. "Unfortunately, I cannot allow that. I'm the hero of their kingdom, after all."

"...Then I shall do my best not to kill you," Rio said with a sigh, his aggression waning.

"Haha. I don't want to kill you either, but I don't think I can stop you with weak attacks."

"The attacks you've fired until now haven't been a problem."

"Is that so? Then..."

Rio and Rui both readied their weapons. Alfred also adjusted his grip on his sword, ready to face Rio once again.

Rio closed in on Alfred, but Rui's lightning arrow interrupted him. His aim was truly precise—it wouldn't have been fatal if it had made contact, but it was able to limit Rio's movements for a brief moment. Alfred wouldn't let that moment go to waste.

Now that it had come to this, Rio had to change his fighting style as well, as it was difficult to force his way through with his strength alone.

"Hah!"

He decided to overwhelm them with speed. Accelerating his body with wind spirit arts, he closed in on Alfred.

Rio's method of moving so quickly involved a combination of martial arts that minimized his own movements and wind spirit arts—it was a technique of Rio's own making. The greatest merit to using it was that the excess movements of the body were practically nonexistent, which made one faster. Thanks to that, it was possible to move in a way that was almost like teleportation.

"Guh..." His many long years of experience allowed Alfred to see through the faint, faint omen of an attack and respond instantaneously. But even as he stopped the attack, he was pushed backwards.

So he was able to react to that just now...

Rio stopped, his eyes widening faintly. Without the intent to kill, he had suppressed his acceleration a little, but even then he had charged with a considerable amount of speed. It was a speed that even elite warriors like the spirit folk village's head warrior Uzuma or veteran warrior Gouki would have

trouble reacting to.

In other words, Alfred was in a league of his own.

"So fast!"

Rio sensed another attack from Rui and sped up again. He disappeared in an instant, surprising Rui, who had just fired another lightning arrow. But even then, the physical body enhancement from his Divine Arms adapted accordingly, firing an arrow of lightning at Rio as he moved. However, Rio moved too fast for the attacks to hit. He would disappear from his position the moment the shots were fired; he was moving too fast for Rui to fire predictively as well.

When he's this close, his speed makes it hard for me to do anything. Guh...

Rui distanced himself from Rio a little to gain an advantage, then tried to snipe him. But Rio predicted that and drew closer to Rui to knock him out first.

"Haaah!" However, Alfred charged at Rio to protect Rui. He still had some fight left in him after all.

Rio raised his sword to engage Alfred, whose sword started glowing once again. Rio also poured magic essence into his sword to cover it with wind. Then, the two of them swung at each other, creating a tremendous shockwave. The recoil nearly knocked them backwards, but Rio remained standing where he was through the use of his ultra-enhanced physical abilities. Then, he went chasing after Alfred—who had been blown backwards—and swung his sword vertically upwards.

"Guh..." Alfred was able to counter the sudden attack with his sword, but the tremendous physical strength and wind pushed him back, instantly sending him flying upwards into the air.

Rui had aimed for the timing that Rio swung his sword upwards to fire his sniping shot, but his arrow was unable to find its target. No sooner had Rio swung his sword had he chased Alfred into the skies with a giant leap, using the wind from his sword to propel himself and accelerate.

"What the..." Alfred watched Rio flying towards him from the ground in amazement.

Does he plan on finishing this in the air? Then I have no choice.

Alfred sensed that this was to be the final blow and poured the entirety of his remaining magic essence into his enchanted sword. The more essence this sword absorbed, the more powerful of a strike it could release. Thus, Alfred's sword began glowing the brightest it had yet.

Rio's expression was stern as Alfred's eyes focused solely on him.

In that case, I'll force him into submission. He had planned on ending things in the next attack anyway.

Meanwhile Rio also poured an extraordinary amount of essence into his sword, compressing the energy into a tremendous blast of wind. The two of them gripped their swords and took aim, then released the essence in their swords. A stream of light rushed out of Alfred's sword, while Rio's sword released a violent tornado. Their attacks collided.

"Aah!"

Light illuminated the entire area as the windstorm caused a huge explosion. Christina and the others on the ground were nearly blown away.

"S-Sir Amakawa defeated Alfred..." Christina witnessed the sight of Rio holding his sword in the air and a limp, unconscious Alfred. Rio was looking down at the hill, his sword tightly in his grasp. At the end of his line of sight was Charles, who had fled into the army on the hill.

"Huh?!" Charles noticed Rio was staring straight at him from above and flinched.

"Now!" From the ground below, Rui took aim at Rio and fired a thick arrow of lightning—which was really more like a cannon than an arrow. However, Rio was able to move freely in mid-air and evaded the attack. He moved over to where Alfred was passed out and grabbed him.

"Ngh..." Unable to shoot with Alfred in the way, Rui lowered his bow. Rio descended slowly and lowered Alfred to the ground.

"...Huh?" Everyone present on the battlefield watched on as he yet again disappeared without a trace. Rui had a bad feeling and lifted his bow, when

suddenly, Rio was standing right before his eyes.

"Tch..."

It was already too late. A palm was thrust into his abdomen and he fell to his knees.

"It's over," Rio said.

"Indeed. You really are an amazing person... But, it may have been better to lose here." Rui chuckled after muttering that, then let himself fall unconscious. With that, there was no one left on this battlefield that could face Rio.

"..." Rio peered at the thousands beyond the hill and slowly began walking.

"A-All of you! Stop him!" Charles yelled frantically, seeing Rio approaching from afar. But the soldiers' movements lagged, and no one tried to obstruct Rio's way. In fact, as Rio eventually reached the hill, the soldiers parted like a wave to allow him to pass.

"H-Hey!" Charles looked around at the soldiers, seeking salvation, but reality was cruel indeed.

"Eek!" Charles cowered at the sight of Rio drawing near. He didn't even think to run away, understanding that attempting to do so would be futile, whether he liked it or not.

"Marching here so brazenly was your mistake," Rio said once he reached Charles.

"W-What... What are you...?" Charles fell backwards onto his rear, forgetting all his anger.

"Just a regular human."

"H-Human? You, a human? Hahaha. Bwahahaha..." Rio's answer made Charles break down with laughter.

"Come with me." Rio grabbed Charles by the scruff of his neck and forcibly started dragging him back towards Christina and the others.

Unsurprisingly, there was no one who could stop Rio.





An army of five thousand had been driven away by a single boy.

On this day, the events that unfolded proved a single truth: That the overwhelming power of a single individual could sometimes overthrow a violent force of great numbers and tactics and decide the outcome of a battlefield.

At the same time, something else was made known—that there existed someone who possessed enough power to do exactly that. That person's name was Haruto Amakawa—an honorary knight whose name was still on the rise.

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, it would create a great ripple in the nations of the Strahl region.

Ten days later, Rio and the others arrived in Rodania.

# **Epilogue: Yearning to be Special**

There was no use crying over spilt milk.

In the near future, every force in the lands would become frantic to win over Haruto Amakawa.

This wasn't a hunch.

It wasn't a belief, either—

It was a prophecy.

He was special.

He was one like no other.

Special, and worthy of standing above all others.

In reality, an army of five thousand had fallen helplessly before him.

And yet...

How foolish.

He had once stood below everyone else.

They were the ones who had once placed him there.

Fierce regret surged forth.

Intense guilt welled up.

Violent rage formed from regret.

And above all the regret, guilt, and rage...

Was a strong sense of admiration and curiosity.

It piqued countless times across this journey and subsided every time...

It was a burning sense of yearning.

What if...

What if he had been born of Beltrum royalty instead? The Beltrum Kingdom would have surely ended up different from the way it was now.

What if... What if he lent his power to them...?

She started hallucinating such possibilities.

Because she only possessed a fake kind of "special."

She clung to it...

All the while yearning for something genuine.

What if, what if...? she wondered.

The genuine kind of "special" was dazzling.

She was powerless—it was pathetic.

And yet, that genuine power shone so brightly...

But such "what-if"s did not exist.

Because she was calm...

Because she berated herself in an effort to be calmer than anyone else...

She was quick to return to her senses.

It was why the intense guilt and regret returned quickly, too.

It told her that she was too late to change anything now.

Strangely enough, there was no rage.

Even if there was to be conflict over Haruto Amakawa, they would never be allowed to join in.

That was the penalty their kingdom had to pay for the crimes they committed.

That's why this yearning...

It had to be sealed away after all.

As she watched Rio walk towards her, dragging Charles by the scruff of his neck...

Christina Beltrum berated herself in a calmer manner than anyone else.

#### **Afterword**

Hello, everyone. This is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles 12: Battlefield Symphony*.

Three years and two months have passed so quickly since my debut, and now Volume 12 of *Seirei Gensouki* is being published. Furthermore, a drama CD version was also made, at last. This is all thanks to everyone who has given this series their love, the illustrator Riv, editor N, and a great many other people who have shown concern. I give you all my sincere gratitude. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

The drama CD can be listened to by purchasing *Seirei Gensouki 12: Battlefield Symphony* - Drama CD edition.

Rio is played by Yoshitsugu Matsuoka, Miharu is played by Sayaka Harada, Aishia is played by Yuuki Kuwahara, Professor Celia is played by Akane Fujita, Latifa is played by Tomori Kusunoki, Liselotte is played by Nao Toyama, and Satsuki is played by Haruka Tomatsu. The seven lavish cast members played their characters in a 70-minute-long performance. In addition—and some of you may have already listened to it—the script is filled with instances that will be sure to make you grin. (My editor told me that character interactions are important in drama CDs, so I paid extra attention to that while writing a script of side-story-like content that I wanted to fit into the main story, but couldn't. You may be in danger of grinning openly if you listen in public. Hehe.)

I visited the recording studio as the original author and scriptwriter, and after greeting the staff and cast members, I was able to watch the recording take place live. They breathed life into the characters as though they were really there—it was so moving! Thank you to all the staff and cast!

Listening to a script that I wrote myself is a little embarrassing, but I can say with confidence that the content is interesting, so please give it a listen if you can. (If the sales of the first drama CD do well, a second drama CD could also be a possibility, so if anyone has any stories they'd like to hear, please tweet about

it on Twitter... I may be looking... Maybe!)

By the way, the contents of the drama CD take place after the story of volume 12, so while it isn't absolute, it may be better to read Volume 12 before listening to the CD (the content of the main story is fairly serious, so it could serve as a good breather afterwards, too. Haha).

Furthermore, I plan on touching upon something mentioned in the story of the drama CD in a future volume of the main story, so drama CD listeners can enjoy connecting that moment in the future with a grin on their faces.

Now, let's wrap up the drama CD talk here and talk about Volume 12! Unlike the drama CD filled with smile-inducing content, the Volume 12 story focuses on the complicated state of Princess Christina's heart—something which can also be seen from the regular edition cover.

The story in this volume was something I wanted to show since Princess Christina first appeared in Volume 1. The things she was thinking in Volume 1, what she thinks now—it would be nice if you could consider not only what was depicted in Volume 12, but what was left unsaid in between the lines too. Flora's also engaged to Sakata now, so who knows what may happen in the future? *evil grin* Things that couldn't happen in the web novel have happened, and I've put in lots of foreshadowing about things that didn't happen in future volumes seemingly likely to happen here, so the web novel readers can look forward to the future too!

Now, I shall wrap up around here. I'm sorry Volume 12 had another intense cliffhanger of an ending, but I hope we can meet in Volume 13 as well (the preview will be on the next page).

Early November 2018

Yuri Kitayama

### **Bonus Short Stories**

## **One Particular Morning**

Early one morning, at a time when most people would normally be asleep...

"Good morning, Onii-chan."

Rio woke up to Latifa clinging onto him from above.

"Good morning... Is it already time to get up?" Rio asked sleepily with a slight yawn.

"Nope! It's still a little early, but..." Latifa shook her head nervously. She looked like she wanted to say something, which Rio found to be a little strange.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that until I hear what it is..."

Latifa pouted. "Mmrgh... Promise you won't laugh!" she insisted. It seemed she wasn't going to answer until he agreed.

Rio folded to her demands and nodded. "All right. I won't laugh."

"I had a scary dream, so I didn't want to be awake by myself..."

Which was why she woke Rio up. Latifa looked a little embarrassed as she explained herself.

"I see..." Rio chuckled.

"Ah, you laughed!" Latifa whined unhappily.

"I'm not laughing," Rio denied, petting Latifa's head as it rested on his chest.

"Hmph..." Latifa puffed up her cheeks in objection, but she didn't resist the head pats from her beloved adopted brother, obediently surrendering herself to him.

"What kind of dream was it?" Rio asked as he continued to pet her head.

"It was a dream about the past. We were traveling together, but you suddenly disappeared."

"Don't worry--I'm right here."

"Yeah..." Latifa's reply was a little uneasy. She tightened her grip around Rio.

"Would you like to sleep together?" Rio looked up and asked.

"Yeah." The reply this time was much more assured.

"Then you should get off me first. Sleeping like this will make you catch a cold."

"Okay!" Latifa obeyed and happily relocated next to him.

"Here, come under the blankets."

"Okay!" Latifa immediately crawled into the bed and snuggled up to Rio, beaming with happiness. "Ehehe--it's warm. And it smells like you. So cozy."

"Let's go to sleep, then." Since he'd been roused at such an early hour, his body was still yearning for sleep. Rio yawned once again.

"Yup. Good night, Onii-chan," Latifa replied obediently, hugging Rio's side and closing her eyes.

"Good night," Rio said gently.

It seemed Latifa was still sleepy herself, as she fell asleep in no time at all.

She must've forgotten about the dream already.

Relieved by the sight of Latifa's peaceful sleeping face, Rio also let himself drift off. Less than a minute later, the two of them were both sleeping soundly.

However, when Rio woke up an hour later and tried to get them both up...

"Nooo, I want to sleep with Onii-chan more!"

Latifa's insistent clinging and refusal to release Rio resulted in the two of them settling down for their third round of sleep.

## A New Way of Calling

It happened on the way from Cleia to Rodania, while they were preparing lunch in a clearing off the road.

"Celia."

Certain circumstances had led to Rio addressing Celia without a title. There had been an awkward bashfulness at first, but he was gradually growing used to it after continuously doing so over the span of a few days.

"Yes, Haruto?" Celia was now completely used to it, as she showed no embarrassment in her reaction.

"Could you produce some water with magic for me?"

"Sure, I can do that."

Rio summoned Celia over to the food preparation bench and had her prepare some water.

"We've been walking for consecutive days now. How are you holding up?" Rio asked while she filled a pot with water.

"I'm fine. It'd be a lie if I said I wasn't tired, but I'm not in any pain. I've never had the chance to travel so much on foot before, so I'm actually finding it pretty fun," Celia replied with a giggle.

"Is that so?"

"What about you, Haruto? Are you tired? I know it's not every day, but you've been carrying us as you run every three days."

"It's not that big of a deal. I'm also finding it fun traveling with you, Celia," Rio said with a soft smile.

"R-Really, now...?" A faint pink tinted Celia's cheeks.

"Thankfully, our trip has been going smoothly. Let's pray that nothing happens before we reach Rodania."

"It's a little saddening to have the journey come to and end, but... You're right." Celia nodded, a faraway look in her eyes.

"Speaking of which, once we part ways with Her Highness and return to our regular lives, should I go back to calling you what I used to?" Rio asked.

"Well... No, it's okay. You can keep doing what you're doing now. It'd get too confusing otherwise."

She finally got him to call her by her name... was the reason Celia didn't voice out loud, and her cheeks reddened once more.





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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 12

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