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Illustration ue

Shuumatsu Nani Shitemasu ka? Isogashii
desu ka? Sukutte Moratte Ii desu ka? Ex

by Akira Karenno

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Chapter 1: Those Who are Still Young

The warm spring sunshine shone upon the 68th Floating Island, where a young girl was carefully tending to a sword.

The sword was extremely large, as long as the girl was tall. From a glance, one could deduce that it was made from metal due to the way its surface reflected light. To hold it in one's hands was to feel the blade's immense weight. Even a blunted strike would cleave a solid wall in two – that was the kind of oppressive presence that this weapon carried.

But if one took a closer look, they would see what looked like cracks etched onto its surface. It wasn't that the blade was broken into fragments, but rather that it seemed to be made out of interconnected metal shards. Although solid, it appeared as if it was about to shatter into pieces. Just gazing upon the sword could fill one with unease. If this weapon was to be swung, it would shatter alongside its target – it would be unsurprising if those ignorant of its nature as a Kaliyon thought that.

The girl used her petite hands to wash clean a cloth in water drawn from the well. After wringing the cloth dry, she began wiping it across the sword's surface.

Of course, there weren't actually any stains that stood out from the blade's glinting metal; it had just accumulated a layer of dust thanks to it being stored for a time. Not caring about such details, the girl smiled as she continued her work. Wipe-wipe-wipe. The cute, squeaky sounds blended with the rustling of the trees swaying in the wind.

“Lakish.”

The young girl stopped wiping and looked behind her. Another girl, ten years old like Lakish, had approached her wearing an air of exasperation.

“What happened?”

“What ‘what happened’? It's lunchtime. You never showed up, so I came here

to call you.”

“...Ah!”

Lakish hurriedly stood up. Although she was flustered, she still finished up what she could in an orderly fashion. Unfold the white cloth, gently wrap it around Seniolis, then place it down on its side. Clean the towel and put it under the sun to dry. The water can be refilled from the well later, so for now pour it into the grass.

“Sorry, I’ll continue later.”

Lakish bowed to the sword, then turned to the person who’d come looking for her. “Thank you for calling me, Panival. Let’s go?”

“Mm.” Panival seemed to have become reluctantly interested in the sword, twirling her hair with a subtle expression. “Yeah, come on.”

She glanced for a while longer at Seniolis, now wrapped within the white fabric, then started walking.

“...I want to ask a weird question,” she said after some time, brandishing a few branches she’d picked up.

“What is it?”

“That Seniolis, don’t you think it’s rather nasty?”

“...Eh?” Lakish didn’t understand what Panival was asking.

“I didn’t mean to ask such a strange question. But isn’t it said that Seniolis brings the worst of fates upon its wielders? And weren’t Willem’s and Kutori’s lives snatched away by that dug weapon?”

Panival went on, playing idly with her branches. “So that means... the next person it’s going to swallow up... isn’t that going to be you, Lakish?”

“Hmm...” Lakish tilted her head. “I know what you mean. To say I haven’t thought about that would be a lie... but... I’m sure it must be the opposite of what you say.”

“The opposite?”

“If you look at it, I don’t think Seniolis did anything wrong. When someone is

in lots of trouble, doesn't it provide them with an immense amount of power?"

Panival stopped walking. Lakish stopped as well, turning to face her. "Panival?"

"Go on."

"Ah, um, well... I think Seniolis is both a sharp and gentle sword. When you're at your wits' end, when you're powerless, it'll offer you a slight chance..."

"...Really? You think so?"

"I do. No matter if it was Kutori, or Willem, or even our predecessors, the Emnetwyte braves five hundred years ago – when they were at their most helpless, Seniolis aided them. It's an amazing sword that deserves to be called everyone's savior."

Can you describe an inanimate object as a savior? Panival wasn't so sure.

"One day," Lakish went on, "I'm sure I'll face the biggest danger I've ever faced since I was born, and then I'll have no choice but to borrow Seniolis' strength. So to get ready for that day, I'm treating it nicely so hopefully it'll be in a good mood!" She flashed a small good-luck sign.

"Huh..."

"W-was that too much to process?"

"...Nope." Panival smiled, throwing away the branches in her hand. "It's just like you to think that way."

"R-really? Um, can I be happy about that?"

Panival laughed. "That reaction is just like you too."

"Oh, I see! You must be really confused after all that thinking!"

"It's great that you can act so grown-up!"

The two girls began to chase each other, Panival giggling and Lakish shaking her small fists as they dashed towards the fairy warehouse's cafeteria.

Behind them a gust of wind blew over the sword wrapped in white cloth. One corner came free, unwrapping to reveal the radiant Seniolis shining like tears beneath the sunlight.



Chapter 2: Princess Brave of the Fallen Kingdom

Part 1: Leila Asprey

Leila Asprey knows what emptiness is. That's because four years ago, when she was ten, she experienced it.

Leila was an obedient girl.

She listened to what adults told her and smiled when they wanted her to, which was all that they required of her.

She was the princess of the Dionne Knight Kingdom, and fourteenth heir to the throne. A small and idyllic kingdom, Dionne had no concern or care about such things as conflict or power struggles. Because of that, the kingdom existed mainly as a flawless symbol of peace.

Those who represented Dionne had to be equally pure, and so Leila was trained to be a doll who would do nothing but smile sweetly. That was a duty that the girl, quiet but intelligent, understood and accepted from childhood.

If it pleases the adults around me, then I'm fine with this, she had thought. I'll just smile as long as I can.

It would be a misunderstanding to call that life unbearable. Although her parents were busy day in and day out, they still devoted their hearts and souls to their daughter. The nobles living in the castle and the knights of the Order were all good people. Leila's smile wasn't just an act; more often than not, it was very much natural.

However, when she was nine, her world transformed completely.

There is a type of monster known as the Gloom Elf. While they resemble nothing more than rotting deadwood, their speed and ability to work in groups

make their unassuming appearance more of a bad joke. They belong to the ‘spiritual’ type of monster thanks to their high degree of knowledge and magical skill – although there’s no concrete proof that they’re capable of communication with humans. The Gloom Elves build on the past, handing down among themselves history and technology that harken back to ancient times. Consequently, within the military they have become referred to as the “Ghost Race.” They rarely venture out of their domain, the Turbid Forest, but do occasionally gather and attack human civilization in order to expand their territory.

One day, Dionne was assaulted by hundreds of the Gloom Elves.

They attacked before sunrise, swarming over the kingdom’s lands like a plague. The smoke that would usually emit from civilian houses was replaced by hot flames; the Gloom Elves used their otherworldly magics to burn the capital to the ground. Although there were militia and knights stationed throughout the city as a precaution, the soldiers who now found themselves facing an unimaginably strong enemy could hold back the monstrous Gloom Elves only as much as a rake could push water uphill.

The kingdom disappeared.

Leila was one of the few survivors, spirited through a secret passage by a loyal official.

The story of her past became quite well-known by all who heard it be told:
That was when Leila Asprey lost all that she had.

From one perspective, that wasn’t wrong. She had lost so much at that time.

But from another perspective, it was. Rather it would be better to say that after that day, Leila began to lose all that she had.

As the protagonist of a tragedy, she came to accept various things. Furthermore, as her life went on, she rose to a role that she’d never had before.

She had lost the things she loved. They had been snatched away by the wicked Gloom Elves. She very clearly saw them all, as they vanished in the flames. *Something precious. Something remarkable. Things that were irreplaceable to me, and even things which I wanted to make disappear. All of*

them burned to ash.

So she should feel sorrow.

So she should feel pain.

So she should feel despair.

So she should feel rage.

So she should feel hatred.

No matter who it was, everybody treated the princess of the destroyed kingdom like the protagonist of a tragedy and forced her into her new role: a girl to be pitied.

For them it was akin to gazing out from a warm room separated from the snow outside by a window. *Look at how unfortunate she is, and rejoice that I am still fortunate.* That was how they took their pleasure from her.

But Leila is an obedient girl.

She listens to what adults tell her and smiles when they want her to, which is all that they require of her.

To let them see my sorrow. To let them see my pain. To let them see my despair. To let them see my rage. To let them see my hatred. I'll use this long-exhausted smile of mine to show all these feelings, just as how the adults around me want me to do.

One day in the darkness, she reflected: *Do I really feel sorrow? Do I really feel pain? Do I really feel despair, rage, hatred?*

These feelings do exist inside my heart. But... where did they come from?

It must have been that day when Leila Asprey was nine years old. What had she felt when she saw the burning flames?

I can't remember.

"It *should* be like that. It *must* be like that." The people around her had kept on repeating those expectations, slowly covering up the feelings and memories she'd held.

When she finally realized it, it was too late. The girl who'd only followed the

wishes of those surrounding her had already forgotten herself.

A year passed. Leila turned ten.

Her guardian, the one who'd saved her, told her to wait in the small cottage. He then left with his companion, another old man whose age disguised his unexpected strength.

She obeyed him and remained in her room. It wasn't as if she had any other choice. Ever since she was a child, she had been good at sitting straight and staying still. The trick was to not feel bored, to clear her mind and erase her feelings. After that, she could wait for a few hours... or even a few days, if it came to that.

For whatever reason, this time her talent failed her.

Distracted by her thoughts, Leila spontaneously left the house and began walking into the forest.

If you do something you normally wouldn't, then you'll see things you might not have otherwise.

Somewhere within the forest, there was a space where the dense trees opened up. In that place, there was a boy the same age as her wielding a wooden stick.

He was surrounded by a shimmery layer of heat, one that looked like an illusion yet was very real. The boy had been vigorously exercising; although it was winter, his clothes were soaked in sweat and even the ground was damp with his perspiration.

Even if this is just playing around, he's way too serious about it. Leila hid herself in the shadows of the trees, prepared to observe him for a while.

Although his actions were light, his footfalls were deep. His center of gravity was positioned overly high, but after a blow he dropped low. It was as if the boy was playing around, trying to do the impossible. Just by observing his awkward actions, she could already understand a bit of his personality.

The boy was probably doing some pre-training exercises before learning to use different kinds of weapons; his movements were better than just playing

around, in some ways imitating swordsmanship. But when she took a closer look, there were small changes between each action. Just by shifting the position of one's grip, a simple stick could reproduce martial arts doable with all kinds of weapons – rather, that was the level of mastery the boy was trying to reach.

Unfortunately, no matter how much he tried, it was clear that the boy wasn't skilled enough.

The main purpose of this training was likely to grasp the movement of one's fingers when using different weapons. To strike a powerful blow, it was key to raise one's center of gravity while swiftly cutting down the target. However, all the effort spent on accumulating energy was put to waste in the boy's overly heavy stomps. Moreover, his body had to remain light as a feather throughout. Only then could his training even be called "slightly better than play-fighting."

The more Leila watched him, the more dissatisfied she became. The more dissatisfied she was, the angrier she got.

Even so, she didn't shift away her eyes.

Leila's vision blurred, like she was about to cry. If it continued like this then there might *really* be tears. She hated getting so emotional. Still staring at the boy, she used both her hands to wipe away the drops at the corners of her eyes.

And then – *slip* – the young boy lost his footing.

Panic showed on his face, his sandals drawing a beautiful arc as he turned a half-circle in the air. His back impacted the ground with a *boom*. It was less like he had tripped and more like he had forcefully thrown himself down. Fortunately the ground was soft, so he wouldn't be injured too much.

"That hurts!"

He complained loudly, most likely out of bitterness that he couldn't make good use of his own body. *It must be hungry for rest*. The boy laid on the ground, his hands and feet widespread, looking up at the blue sky.

"..."

He'd seen her. Their eyes locked.

The boy hadn't expected that somebody would be watching him train. Dismay flashed in his eyes, slowly turning to shame.

"You... who are you!?"

The boy flushed, as those who've just had vigorous exercise typically do. He leapt up in a hurry, sweeping the dirt from his body and snatching up the stick he'd thrown to the side, then posed as if what she had just seen had never happened. "Did – did you see that?!"

I saw it all. Leila almost told him bluntly before swallowing her words. *I can't say that. It'll probably crush his budding self-esteem.* Ten years of experience accrued from her noble birth and life as the protagonist of a tragedy had taught her that much.

But even though she wanted to remain silent, the boy gazed directly at her, as if demanding some kind of reaction.

I should say something. Suddenly anxious, Leila's judgement was thrown into disarray. Her thoughts spilled from her mouth. "Terrible."

"...Terrible?"

"Absolutely terrible."

In that moment, time stopped.

Leila sensed that the boy's self-esteem was not only beyond injured, but now thoroughly shattered to pieces.

That was the memory the girl named Leila Asprey had of her first meeting with the young man who would be her junior. Although he treats everyone kindly and patiently, Willem Kumesh has always regarded his comrade Leila as an exception. This is one of his reasons for doing so.

Part 2: The Sun Which Never Sets

A few years after that fateful encounter, Leila was trudging through snow.

“It couldn’t be helped, but what an utterly disappointing situation,” she muttered to herself. “...Even so, getting mad proves that I was correct. When one is criticized, one shouldn’t be angry. Bowing one’s head and quietly accepting it with a ‘Yes, Your Majesty’ is the right response. *Hmph.*”

Although Leila had grown used to journeying alone, her solitude had led to the annoying tendency of talking to herself.

“...Well, that’s one thing I can change. Even if I’m used to being alone, it’s better to stop mumbling... at least knowing that means I’m still self-aware. The problem with such a habit is probably that it’s abnormal... or pretty embarrassing... or maybe it diminishes the mysticism surrounding the Regal Braves? Yeah, something like that.”

Continuing to argue with herself, she looked up. All around her was a snowy white that starkly contrasted the blackness of the night sky.

It was cold. Extremely, painfully, freezing cold.

A famous poet who once visited this region had depicted it as an infinite expanse of wilderness, with only occasional withered trees breaking through the endless snow. The constantly howling winds were like the cries of the dead, damning the living to join them in frozen death. If the world had an end, it would doubtless lie here.

Naturally, such a poem was not an accurate description of reality. The wilderness wasn’t wide enough to be called boundless, and the crooked, bent trees were in actuality quite well-adapted to the local conditions. There were even a few days in the year without snowfall. According to the reports of frontier adventurers, there was supposedly an even larger region further up north.

If nothing else, Leila could at least agree with the poet’s description of the howling winds. At times blowing rapidly and at times blowing slowly, the wind

always seemed to surround her like a cacophony of rich voices all around. It was as if someone was playing an instrument behind her. Whether that was the doing of spirits, gods or elves, the wind was probably of supernatural origins—

“Achoo!”

Leila rubbed her nose, feeling the chill that sank through her wrapped layers of winter clothing. “It’s so cold...”

She squinted at the road ahead. In the center of her field of vision, through a world of feathery snowflakes, she could see numerous tea-gray tents pitched in the distance.

“That must be it!” Bolstered by the sight of her goal, Leila re-shouldered her luggage and pressed forward once more.

“The history of humankind is one of conflict with other races.” Although their past could not be entirely summed up in that manner, such conflicts certainly played a major part in it.

The races allied together in opposition to humanity were all immensely powerful. Some utilized the sheer crushing force of their enormous bodies; others camouflaged into the surroundings and set traps; yet others cast strange magics and charmed their foes. Some had the primal urge to consume humans; others took pleasure from toying with them; still more were driven by a twisted desire to kill. From time immemorial, creatures of various races had existed closely alongside humankind like this.

Humans, on the other hand, were by no means powerful. Their limbs were thin, they ran slowly, and they died easily, whether they were stabbed, burned, drowned, dropped from a height, or starved.

It could be said that humans were not lacking in one aspect: their numbers. However, one only had to observe the Orcs, who were produced en masse, to see that the difference in terms of reproductive ability was simply too large. Furthermore, as far as fighting ability went, the average civilian knew next to nothing about fighting and even the number of combat-ready personnel was not worth a glance.

Humans knew how to use weapons and arms, but lost out to other races in

terms of technique or numbers; even those weapons they depended upon were modeled after those wielded by the Earth Dragons.

Despite these factors, mankind lived in prosperity. Through the processes of eliminating danger, opening up new frontiers, and expanding their territory, humanity developed techniques which allowed them to equal the strongest of adversaries, giving rise to several groups that honed those techniques to the extreme.

The Adventurers, who sought self-improvement through relentless training. The army soldiers, guarding nations with unyielding resolve. The scholars of the Sage's Tower, studying and passing down knowledge from ancient times. The golems who acted as guardians using their ethereal bindings and their masters, the Warlocks.

Finally, those saints of steel chosen by the Church of Holy Light, the living legends destined to lead mankind to victory. The warriors known as Braves.

They fought to preserve the lives of ordinary people. Or rather, they each had their own reasons to fight, and the result of their battles saved lives. Because of them, humanity has survived into the present day.

Lately, a rumor has been spreading throughout the continent.

One of the Visitors of old has awoken from its slumber.

The Visitors were the transcendental beings that had created the world. Long ago, they had journeyed throughout the stars – but now there was only one of their kind left. It so happened that this particular Visitor had decided to go to war with humankind. Its subordinates, the three Poteau watching over the world, were carrying out its orders and preparing to attack the centers of human civilization. Naturally, such a crisis was a huge threat to the survival of humanity.

Yet although the situation sounded hopeless, those spreading the rumor did not do so in despair. So what if a bunch of powerful monsters appeared? Monsters had always appeared since ages past to threaten humanity, but the protectors of humankind always rose to the occasion. There would always be some unbelievably powerful warrior to fight for the masses.

The human race would not lose to anything – that was how it was, is, and would continue to be.

Therefore, there was no need to worry about anything at all.

The air in the command tent was grim.

A battle map of the surrounding area was laid out on a crudely made table, with red and blue-colored wooden horses laid here and there to indicate the positions of both sides' forces. Three men were seated around the table, gazing at the map. Each one wore an expression matching the bleak atmosphere.

“...If it goes on like this, we can't win.” One of the men, an advisor for the Northern Army, broke the silence. “We were too overconfident in judging the enemy's strength, and the drawn-out fighting has exhausted our soldiers. As it is now it'll be too late even if we request for reinforcements. The most practical course of action... is to seek help from the Adventurers' Guild.”

“But if we do that, the army will be utterly humiliated!” That bitter objection came from the general, who held the greatest authority among the three present.

His objection was unsurprising. Armies were, strictly speaking, systems which exercised power through force. Without their responsibilities to bind them, they would be seen as little better than violent groups of troublemakers. Because of that, most armies strove to maintain an honorable front, placing great value on preserving their dignity. The Northern Army was no exception.

“You're willing to allow the enemy to raze your lands for the sake of your pride?” The general found himself unable to challenge the advisor's question.

The silent field commander folded his hands, murmuring something indistinct.

In truth, they faced a terrible situation. The enemy they were fighting was a tribe of Elves whose elders wielded curses that gave them control over earth and soil. Their territory, corrupted by the poisonous purple substances generated by their curses, was known as the Turbid Forest.

Knowing this, one could speculate how humans viewed the Elves: fearsome adversaries who spread poison through forests, cleansing all animal and plant

life, erasing any trace of once-verdant greenery.

However, that guess would be wrong.

As a matter of fact, all humans whose lands were encroached upon understood that the curses the Elves used worked by altering reality.

A theory had it that long ago the Elves' ancestors assisted the Visitors in the creation of the world. That was the true reason behind their title as the "Ghost Race." Those ancestors, having been in close contact with the Visitors, were believed to have taken their world-creating magic for their own use.

The Elves did not require any preexisting forests on the lands they sought to occupy. Whether their target was a plain, a mountain range or even the sea, they would transform the terrain into another Turbid Forest. During their invasions, entire forests of crooked trees would tear out from the soil and grow rapidly. Swarms of insects would crawl out from nowhere and begin to build nests, stubbornly remaining on the encroached land as if they had been there for the past few millennia.

Attacking the Forests under the Elves' control meant facing a wild, unnatural danger far beyond that of any human's comprehension. Launching an assault into the deepest reaches of the Forest would be suicidal.

The advisor spoke again. "Our war is fundamentally different from territorial disputes fought among humans. Conceding defeat means allowing this piece of land to become a toxic swamp. No matter what, failure is *not* an option."

"But," the general replied, "would there even be any point to asking the Adventurers for help?"

"What do you mean?"

"Even alone a Gloom Elf is stronger than any of us, and a whole group of them are holed up in this piece of contested territory. To make matters worse, they're Elders who likely can overwhelm this entire region with the Forest. Those Adventurers are different from us. They fight only for themselves, and would never consider for a moment laying down their lives for the greater good by rushing into that deathtrap."

Both men fell silent. The field commander continued muttering. A slim arm

reached unseen for the bowl of baked pastries placed on the edge of the table.

The general continued. “Frankly, there aren’t many people with the capability to be useful on a battlefield like this, even among the Adventurers. Even if there were, would any of them be conveniently stationed this far up north?”

“Are we just going to wait until we die, then?”

“No, we need to find a way to survive for the sake of the others...”

Munching on the pastry methodically while fiddling with snow-laden winter clothing, the person sitting to the side glanced at the battle map.

“If nothing’s done, nothing will change!”

“Because we’ve done nothing, we don’t have any more energy to waste on such pointless actions! Haven’t I said that already?”

The two men went back and forth, unable to compromise. Their voices grew louder, miring the argument in confusion while the field commander kept on muttering to himself.

Another pastry disappeared.

Loud voices turned to sudden silence. The men were now all looking at a fourth person who seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

She stopped munching on the pastry and looked up. The advisor, selected as representative of those present, asked, “Who are you?”

“Thanks for the pastries,” the suspicious person spoke in a feminine voice, removing her winter gear. “Travelling all this way in that freezing weather’s made me *reeeally* hungry...”

She was a girl with a head of flaming red hair who looked to be about fifteen years old and had not come of age yet. However, she wore an inexplicably relaxed expression that made her resemble more an elderly woman than somebody of her age.

“Hello!” The girl clutched her cheeks with both arms, shivering from the cold as she greeted the three men. “I’m from the Church of Holy Light.”

The general looked skeptical. “What? Are you here to prepare our last rites?”

Sorry, but we don't need your services."

"No, it's not like that."

"This is the frontline of a hopeless war where only death awaits. It is no place for children to work for a living," the general said. He was referring to the poverty-stricken priests working in service of the Church, who were unable to make a living through the conducting of ceremonies alone. Thus, many priests who worried about making ends meet headed to dire battlefields in order to collect money from performing funeral rites. "Please leave while you can, unless you want to be buried with us."

"Aw, come on. Don't put it like that." The girl blew off the general's accusation and continued to scrutinize the battle map.

"You little—"

"Oh?" The field commander arched his eyebrows, interrupting the angry general. "Young lady, may I ask what's that heavy-looking object you're carrying?"

"It's a sword." The girl replied bluntly.

"Doesn't that look a little too large to be a sword?"

"Yes."

"Would it be, by any chance, the holy sword Seniolis?"

The girl nodded. "Yep."

The general froze, his advisor's tense countenance relaxed, and the tent was suddenly quiet. A common reaction, all in all.

There existed in the world a group of humans known as Braves, who swore loyalty to no one country, but rather fought for the survival of the human race. By any accord, they were indisputably humanity's greatest weapon against the Monstrous. The Braves wielded the most powerful Kaliyons and utilized unparalleled fighting techniques. Some were boundlessly talented, some guarded the past, some had heroes' blood, and some hailed from tragic backgrounds. Burdened by the reasons for their strength, the Braves were unquestionably the strongest warriors, their names spoken with a weight that

spoke of their status as living legends.

Of the Kaliyons created by humankind, Seniolis was considered the most powerful. Having seen countless battlefields, it stood at the top even among the five highest-tier holy swords in the world. Its current wielder was the 20th generation Regal Brave selected by the Church of Holy Light—

“Leila Asprey...?”

“How can that be?” The advisor shook his head weakly. “Leila, the Princess Brave, is said to be of unequaled beauty with blazingly red hair. She’s definitely not this arrogant-looking girl!”

“Rumors people spread are none of my business...”

“The portraits all depict her as an intensely tragic beauty!”

“It’s a bother, but I can’t really complain if people decide to make pictures of me based off that kind of mental image.”

“Those portraits were really expensive, you know!”

“Umm... Sorry for your loss, I guess...?”

Uncomfortable silence returned. The field commander kept his hands folded, murmuring quietly.

“Oh, here’s proof of my identity!” Looking as if she’d just remembered it, the girl took out a golden and copper badge from her pocket to show the three men. It was a means of protection which the Church gave out to high-ranking priests, serving as irrefutable proof of her identity.

“...Well then, Lady Asprey, what brings you to this battlefield?” the general asked grudgingly. “If you’re here to help, then I suggest you leave as soon as possible.”

“Hmm...” Swallowing what was left of her pastry, Leila scanned the battle map once again. “Since the Elves are stationed here, that means that the surrounding area got turned into a Forest, right?”

“Indeed it has.”

“You don’t need to say anything, Commander. So if that’s the case, that

means the Elder-class Elves are near here, and here as well... the situation does look rather bleak." She tilted her head between the two points on the map, shutting her eyes to think. "Now then, General, I have a favour to ask of you—"

"I'm not giving you any of my forces," the general in question interjected.

"Don't worry about that, but I *do* hope you can shift your entire army away from this camp. The snowfall will slow you down slightly, but if you march this way, from here—" Leila pushed one of the wooden pieces on the map, "—to there, would that route work?"

The advisor glanced at the new positions but a second before he smiled and scoffed. "Don't give us that nonsense."

"No, don't *you* give me that nonsense."

He dropped his smirk. "Isn't this the same as asking us to retreat from the battlefield and put some distance between our army and the Elves? If we're going in this direction, we're going to retreat back to the city..." The advisor paused. "Wait, that isn't the case either. The directions are all wrong."

"Yep." Leila nodded. "On the way here, I heard that the situation at the Dam City of Narvant is getting to be pretty critical."

"How do you mean?"

"The enemies there are mainly Orcs. Although they're not that strong alone, there's a lot of them and the frontline there is huge, so it's been difficult to put up a consistent defense. But for you all, won't the situation there be more manageable compared to fighting the Elves here?"

"Well, it's definitely..." Although the advisor seemed to be taking Leila's words more seriously, he still disagreed with her suggestion. "No, that's not the issue. It's impossible for us to give up on this fight."

"Oh, is that so? You guys have unfinished business here?"

"Not especially, but we can't abandon our mission to drive the Elves from their territory..."

"Ahh, you don't have to worry about that," Leila replied annoyedly, stretching her arms behind her. "I'll handle them. Should take me three days or so."

Three days passed.

On the way towards Narvant for rendezvous with the troops there, the Northern Army received a dispatch.

That horribly defiled Forest, the ever-expanding domain of the Elves, suddenly began to wither at a frightening speed.

The news soon spread among the soldiers, and with it came cheers: "It's Leila Asprey!" one soldier shouted. "It's Leila Asprey! The Regal Brave's done it!"

In the face of an overwhelmingly powerful enemy, there had been no end in sight to the war. Bitter, drawn-out fighting had exhausted all the soldiers. Many of them had seen their friends consumed by corrosive acids or devoured by the Elves before their very eyes, and constantly worried that they would be next. In their bleak situation, there were many who had given up all hope.

Then one girl rushed in alone and brought a swift end to the war.

Not everybody was pleased about it. "I can't find any reason to celebrate," the general complained sourly. "That girl ended the war like it was child's play. We laid down our lives one after another without coming close to achieving the same results. What meaning is there, then, to this war – nay, to our existence?"

Everyone, even the general, had some basic knowledge of the existences known as Braves. Some had gone further still and conducted investigations, the results of which proved that the Braves' unparalleled strength was not unfounded. Indeed, a correlation often arose between the strong and those who possessed a tragic past or a storylike background.

And that girl, the 20th Generation Regal Brave Leila Asprey, carried the sorrow and anger of losing her hometown. These emotions were why the young princess had thrown herself into a life of unending battle.

She had been born of tragedy, and found the strength to moving forward in spite of her sorrow, to stand tall in the face of despair, to rise above the hatred she bore. Thus, she wielded strength only granted to those who met all these criteria. All these qualities were bound within her small body, the selfsame qualities that created the weapon glorified by the Church of Holy Light – the weapon known as the Regal Brave.

The general snorted. “Hmph. Of course I can’t be happy over such a result.”

Somewhere else, the advisor confirmed that there was no one watching him. He then took out a small piece of cloth from his pocket, opening it to reveal the paper hidden inside. Depicted on it was a beauty with fiery red hair and a kind smile.

The advisor took the picture in his hands and made to tear it. He hesitated, then carefully refolded it and stuffed it back into his pocket.

“Hmph.” Wearing the face of somebody who had been badly cheated, the advisor raised his head and looked towards the sky.

There was no snow here. In the clear blue skies, a long-tailed swallow flew leisurely.

Part 3: The Imperial Capital

To speak of the Imperial Capital was to speak of its grandiose structures.

There were probably many reasons for this. As a young city with little cultural heritage to speak of, conservation of historical buildings was unneeded. As the nexus of the Empire, perhaps it was so that visitors to the Capital would be awed by its majesty and leave with an impression of the Empire's overwhelming strength. Another possibility was that the previous emperor who founded the Capital was an extremely forthright person who believed that bigger was always better and liked to initiate large-scale building projects.

Whatever the answer was, it meant the sanctuary located in the heart of the First District of the Imperial Capital was incredibly large and projected an air of extravagance. Sunlight shone through the pointlessly high stained-glass ceilings of the ceremonial hall, gave its marble interior a blinding gleam, and illuminated the mythical scenes engraved on the walls.

The grandeur of this place far surpassed those of famous tourist attractions, but mere commoners were not allowed to enter these sacred halls. Only the higher-ranking priests and those ordained by the Church, such as the Regal Brave Leila and the other Quasi Braves, were allowed inside to admire its splendor.

"It must have been tiring for you," A priest wearing an impressive-looking purple robe with a red girdle came out to receive her with a smile. "We've already received word of the battle's results. Once again, you have brought glory to the name of the Regal Brave."

The priest's smile was honest, bereft of deceit or malice. Given her experiences, Leila would have detected any such intentions easily. Here was genuine gratefulness that she continued to fulfill the Regal Brave's purpose of protecting humanity.

My, my. Leila remembered how annoyed it made her feel. *I do hate this place.*

There was not one person here who lacked faith. They believed firmly in everything they thought, felt and did. Thus they carried themselves without

doubt and their motives were pure, which to them was something to be happy about. Perhaps making that happiness a reality was what it meant to be of faith.

All who affirmed these principles would come to the conclusion that no one could follow a more correct path than they did, and refuse to listen to anyone else's opinions afterwards. The habit of thinking that way would continue as long as they were around others with the same views, and they would eventually forget how to interact normally.

"Oh? Is something bothering you, Miss Leila?"

"No – well, yes." Leila tilted her head and stealthily stuck her tongue out. "... Anyway, how's Narvant? Has the conflict there reached a conclusion? Some reinforcements should be on the way there right now."

"According to last night's report, the current situation is rather dire. Three cities have fallen already, and the soldiers are all extremely worn out. While we haven't confirmed it yet, there might be Devils among the attacking force."

Wait a second. "...Then, wouldn't it be better if I'd gone with the reinforcements?" She fought to prevent her irritation from spilling over.

"You didn't need to. The Kaliyon Seniolis can only bring out its overwhelming strength against a single foe. In a chaotic battlefield, it can't be wielded flexibly."

"That's not the *point*. Regardless of that stupid excuse, even if I went barehanded I'd still be able to keep the number of casualties to a minimum."

"Seniolis is riddled with Elven curses, so it needs maintenance. That aside, you'll have to start making preparations for a new battle. The Visitor Elq Harksten will soon be officially recognized as an enemy. When that time comes, you're the only person who can lead the group to defeat her."

I really want to beat him up. Leila used her smile to cover up her curled fists.

"Anyway, we've already sent some reinforcements there. Avgran T. Lontis, the Brave who wields Purgatrio, left the Capital last week and is heading towards that region as we speak."

"Well then..." Leila relaxed, loosening her fists.

Although only one Regal Brave could be recognized at any time, there would always be a small number of warriors who were close to that level at any given time period. These warriors hadn't been formally appointed and didn't *quite* have the recognition and strength the Regal Brave held, but their qualifications and power couldn't be ignored by the Church, which bestowed the title of Quasi Brave upon them and used them as saints likewise.

Currently, the Quasi Braves sent to various battlefields numbered around thirty. Leila wasn't sure of the exact number, and she had only met around ten of them. Avgran was one of those ten.

"That guy..."

"Worried about him?"

"Nope. There's no one more suitable to throw between two armies..."

Purgatrio wasn't a particularly high-ranking Kaliyon. Its Venenum output was mediocre, making it unsuited for fighting strong enemies like Dragons or Elder-class Elves. However, its special ability was extremely powerful when used in the right situation.

To wield it optimally, one should find a spot overlooking the battlefield, then identify and target those seen as one's enemies or sinners. Subsequently, as long as the wielder was still on the battlefield and kept burning Venenum, those targeted would be unable to escape Purgatrio's assault. One would keep fighting until one's quarries had been eliminated. On a chaotic battlefield where it was difficult to tell friend from foe, no Kaliyon was more reliable than Purgatrio.

Furthermore, Avgran was truly worthy of being called a Brave. He was outgoing, pure-hearted, valiant, and he wholeheartedly devoted himself to fighting for the weak. He acted like he had limitless reserves of strength on the battlefield and didn't have to be afraid of any threat. As long as Avgran had someone he needed to protect, he would never back down.

"You seem relieved now. Be unworried; you just need to fulfill your mission," the priest cut through Leila's thoughts with a radiant smile. "Rest well, and prepare for your next battle. That's what you must focus on at the present."

“Fine, fine...” Having no wish to prolong the conversation, Leila waved a hand and headed away.

“Where are you going?”

“Having a stroll outside.”

“Why not back to your rooms?”

The Church’s large-scale facilities were mostly composed of rooms for its saints to live in. As its foremost sanctuary in the Capital, the quarters of the Regal Brave would naturally be on its premises, and no expense would be spared on its many rooms. Thus, to them it wouldn’t make sense for the majority of the sanctuary’s rooms to lie unoccupied.

Leila knew that much, but regardless she wasn’t overly fond of any of the rooms. “I’ll go back later or something.”

She travelled between various battlefields on the continent daily and didn’t have any roots to speak of. She would normally have been grateful for a bed on which to sleep soundly, and the marble-white sanctuary of the Church, with its walls adorned in crimson and its finely decorated rooms, would have more than sufficed.

However, Leila was rather unwilling to call it home.

“Free at last!” She stretched her arms as she exited the sanctuary.

The building was located on the man-made island built in the middle of the Mercela River, apparently to separate the sacred grounds of the Church from the rest of the Capital. To enter it, you had to first cross the three bridges built on the river.

Leila didn’t like these bridges either. *This is definitely the wrong way to spend money. It was probably built on the whim of some rich idiot. A plain bridge without any embellishments would be just as charming.* She remained lost in thought, trodding over the painstakingly laid tiles.

Ah, never mind. She didn’t want to nitpick *too* much. Besides, she was in high spirits after completing her mission and being freed from the Church for a while.

“I’ll go and grab a bite or something.” She tried to think of the shops she frequented, though there weren’t really any such places.

A Regal Brave was oppressively powerful. Normal people were completely unable to render any kind of assistance, and might even be liabilities at worst. No one could keep up with the strength of the Regal Braves, so they would always fight alone.

Naturally, she was used to a life of relative solitude.

However, even if she was away from the battlefield as she now was, she still yearned to talk with those whom she knew, and if possible to a certain someone—

“Hey.” Leila’s heart skipped a beat as she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“...Willem.” She hid her surprise with inhuman self-control. “You have this really irritating way of appearing randomly, you know.”

She turned her head, wearing the same expression she always wore and speaking how she always spoke to him.

“Come on, what’d I do to deserve this? I just wanted to chat.” A boy of average height, with plain black eyes and hair, stood behind her.

The boy wasn’t overly refined, but still looked relatively proper. He wasn’t really muscular, but he wasn’t too skinny either.

If there was some feature of note, it would be his eyes, which made him look rather full of himself. However, many boys of his age did have such a look. Simply put, he could be taken for an average teenage boy found in any city.

“I just finished making my mission report,” Willem Kumesh pointed behind himself at the Church’s sanctuary. “Those baldies told me that you had just left, so I chased after you.”

“Why, so hasty to see my face again? My my, could it be that you’ve fallen in love?”

“That’s impossible.” Leila felt a bit injured by Willem’s blunt rejection. “Anyway, now’s a perfect opportunity to grab a bite together. Eating together’s better than eating alone, even if I have to eat with you.”

“Eh?” Leila narrowed her eyes unhappily. “How arrogant of you to ask a girl out like that!”

“I’ll mind my words when I’m asking a girl out next time then.”

“Hold on, who d’you think I am?”

“You’re Leila.”

She thought about Willem’s words for a moment. “...Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

Girls could be found anywhere. However, in the entire world there was only one person whom Willem treated so very annoyingly – Leila Asprey.

Even so, she didn’t really mind him treating her like that. Thinking about it, Leila felt rather helpless.

They walked for a while towards the Students’ Street, which had shops popular with the youngsters. A decent meal could be had here even if one was strapped for cash. Additionally, the both of them wouldn’t stand out too much here with their young looks.

It was natural for a Brave to feel hungry after his or her mission. Willem and Leila sat at a table meant for five, ordered a bunch of meat dishes, and helped themselves. While eating, they talked about their missions.

“What?” Willem asked, eyes bulging and a piece of grilled meat in his mouth. “You’re saying that those Elven tribes... with those Elder-class Elves amongst their numbers...were all wiped out? By *you* alone? And it only took three days?!”

“Yep.”

Hearing that, he swallowed the piece of meat and washed it down with a gulp of water, then shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s with that reaction?”

“As a fellow male, I’d like to give that general my deepest sympathies.”

And just what d’you mean by that? “Do you think that I shouldn’t have helped them?”

“Of course not. You had to help anyway, but you could’ve been a little more sensitive.”

“There wasn’t really any opportunity for that kinda thing at the time. However talented I am, you can’t expect me to take care of everyone’s feelings while fighting those Elves.”

“I didn’t mean that...” Willem muttered, biting into another piece of meat.

Willem Kumesh was Leila’s senior disciple, and a rather disrespectful one at that. They were both taught the same style of swordsmanship by the same master. Being able to master the techniques used by the most powerful Braves meant being able to wield unmatched power. Of course, Leila completed her training easily, while Willem could never reach her level no matter how hard he tried.

That boy is hopelessly untalented. Her master had once commented.

Achieving a level of mastery which surpassed that of normal fighters would have sufficed for most people. However, Willem refused to stop training.

Even if one relentlessly tried to grow stronger, they could only do so as a human. The strength that somebody wielded was bound by the limits of their own humanity. No matter how much time and effort one spent, they remained human.

If you wanted to live as a human, that would be something to feel fortunate about. However, to fully utilize the swordfighting techniques their master taught, one had to abandon their humanity. Based on that prerequisite alone, one’s humanity would be seen as a curse instead of a blessing and the reason for their own lack of talent.

“Why continue teaching him?” Leila had once asked her master.

“He doesn’t want to give up,” her master replied, as if he was talking to himself.

Ah. Leila had understood, nodding sagely. Willem would definitely not give up. Even if it seemed impossible or trivial to others, he would always continue to move forward. In spite of his hopeless circumstances or the cruel nature of reality, he would never relinquish the hope in his heart, and continue striving to

reach greater heights.

Willem would never betray his own feelings, nor lose sight of his aim even if he felt despair or regret. He fought completely to protect the things he cherished.

And it turned out that his way of life was the polar opposite of Leila's.

"Ahh, finally full! I'm satisfied now." After their meal, the two of them walked out of the Students' Street.

"I think we ate too much. The waiter even seemed a little scared when he saw us eat."

"I mean, our bodies are still growing! Besides, eating a lot is normal for kids my age, wouldn't you say? I think you've eaten too little, Willem!"

"You should apologize to all the fourteen and fifteen-year-olds in the world."

The sun continued to sink, but the flow of people in the streets never ebbed, a few horse-drawn carriages mingling among the crowd. Bumping into someone or having one's wallet stolen were common occurrences here.

"Oh?" A gust of wind came from nowhere, blowing a piece of paper towards them. Leila grabbed it before it blew into her face. "Hmph, how dangerous. Trash belongs in the garbage."

She glanced over its contents. It was a page from a news article. This method of disseminating information rapidly grew in popularity after the invention of the printing press. Its audience was the public, and it was printed and distributed en masse. Important events on the continent were usually detailed in a laughable manner on such so-called reports.

Leila's eyes settled on the headline printed in bold: "The Tragic Princess Beauty Crushes the Elves' Armies Once Again!"

Ha. She snorted.

"What's with you?"

"Come and have a look at this. It's a masterpiece!"

Willem moved closer to take a look. "There doesn't seem to be much

difference from previous ones...”

“It’s so annoying. Come on, this one’s even more exaggerated than the previous ones.”

Bumping his head against Leila’s, he glanced over the article.

“The Empire’s western borders were assaulted by the Elves, which numbered in the tens of thousands. The troops stationed there were completely helpless in the face of the Elves’ curses and were all transformed into frogs.”

“Was there really that many of them?”

“Not even a hundred.”

“All were Gloom Elves?”

“I crossed swords with some Elder-class Elves, but most were normal ones.”

“The soldiers were really turned into frogs?”

“Some people have vivid imaginations.”

They read on. *“The unparalleled Princess Beauty, Leila Asprey, went to the borderlands. From her lips blew a gentle, soothing wind which rejuvenated the soldiers and turned those affected by the Elves’ curses back into humans.”*

“What about this?”

“Even if I’m amazing, I can’t work miracles.”

“After that, she unsheathed Seniolis and raised it towards the sky and prepared to chant a legendary holy incantation. The True Bloody Crimson-Red Blood Wave of Ultimate Flaming Destruction is a most catastrophic forbidden spell capable of splitting the earth and tearing the heavens asunder, a spell so powerful that Leila’s master had forbidden its usage—”

“Hahahahaha!” Leila clutched her stomach, breaking into a fit of laughter. It was so hilarious that her eyes were beginning to water. “Oh come on, I don’t know of any spell with such a mouthful of a name! Really, it’s quite impossible that that master of mine created such a spell!”

“Is it really that funny?” Willem looked slightly pained. “Although the reports might have the intended effect of boosting morale, they’re getting more absurd

each time.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? It’s okay as long as it helps people, right?”

“Don’t go trying to act saintlike, it really doesn’t suit you...”

“You’re one to talk.” Both the Regal Brave and the Quasi Braves were akin to saints recognized by the Church of Holy Light. “Besides, it isn’t that big of a deal, so why worry about it?”

“If it remains like this, won’t your true self disappear?”

“What d’you mean?”

“To these people who spew nonsense regularly, what you do won’t really affect the news reports. They completely ignored you – the Brave who steadily cut down less than a hundred Elves over the span of three days, Leila Asprey – so that they could twist the facts.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Leila smiled, nodding her head. “However, I’ll let bygones be bygones. As Braves, our jobs are to fight so that the masses can continue their peaceful everyday lives. Isn’t that so?”

“That isn’t *your* job.”

“No, but that’s one of the duties of a Brave.”

“Even so...” Willem looked unhappy for some reason. “It isn’t your job,” he quietly but firmly protested.

“Don’t be too full of yourself, Quasi Brave.” Leila giggled to cover up the tears welling up in the corner of her eye, wiping them away without Willem noticing.

They decided to use the rare opportunity to go sightseeing through the Capital.

The Empire had grown its territory by swallowing up neighboring countries whose resources had been spent on wars against the Monstrous, and the Capital was the center of its government. It was a prosperous city where people with many different cultures and languages coexisted together. One could say that to take a walk around the Capital’s market was akin to a journey around the continent.

The Second and Fourth Districts of the Capital were known for their many sightseeing and shopping opportunities. Leila dragged Willem along with her, walking between the absurdly long Griffon Street and Salamander Street.

“Awesome! What’s this?” Leila’s eyes widened as they stopped at a shop run by merchants from North Garmond. On display were exotic garments made of a fabric so thin it was almost see-through. “Wow, do all the folks from Garmond wear such revealing clothing?” Leila lifted a corner of the fabric. “It doesn’t even cover their legs!”

“Well, Navrutri’s country is in the same region.”

“Ah! That explains it.”

Navrutri Teigozak was a male Brave born in West Garmond who the both of them knew closely. A ladies’ man, every time Leila saw him he was either chasing or being chased by women – more often than not the latter. Because of him, Leila had gotten the impression that the locals there were rather ill-mannered and had a penchant for causing minor international conflicts...but that aside.

“Hmm... if I wear this, it wouldn’t look too fitting...” Leila lifted the fabric higher, revealing the curved white leg of the stone mannequin underneath. Turning back at Willem, she shot a question: “What do you think?”

“Isn’t it pretty good? Even if it isn’t quite the right size because of some differences in body height, that’s just how it’s made,” Willem bluntly replied.

“Wow. You accepted it so easily.” She let the clothing fall. “Shouldn’t you be looking away or blushing, or screaming ‘*How shameless!*’? I was looking forward to that kind of reaction.”

“Come on,” Willem sighed. “Who do you take me for?”

“A naive simpleton of a guy who’s clueless about dealing with girls.”

“I can’t deny the second part, but you’re wrong about the first.” Willem grumbled. “Anyway, wouldn’t you feel embarrassed about wearing that? You’re a girl, after all... biologically, at least.”

“*Excuse me*, but as I am a quite excellent member of the female sex, there

won't be any issues. Watch out, I just might be preparing to use this to seduce guys in the future."

"You're going to win a guy's heart based on that?"

"Well, we'll know when the time comes. One should be serious about taking steps to ensure a promising future, y'know?"

Willem looked slightly offput. *Ha. Willem Kumesh getting unhappy over the thought of some random man getting intimate with Leila Asprey in the future? What a joke.*

"Hey."

"Yes?"

"Have the Gloom Elves which attacked Dionne's territory all been wiped out?"

Leila was unsurprised; it wouldn't be the first time that immensely irritating senior disciple of hers had randomly changed the topic in the middle of a conversation. After the Elves in control of Dionne's former territory had been exterminated, the area belonged to the Empire. It was quite far from the Capital, but not by much.

"Don't you feel like going back?" Willem asked.

"I visited last year. The grass grew really fast near the old castle. It's horrible."

"That's not what I mean. You know what I'm talking about."

Leila did know. Willem was referring to restoring Dionne to its former glory by calling for people to resettle there. Taking back Leila Asprey's birthplace, breaking away from a life of constant battle. Laying down Seniolis, reclaiming her status as royalty, and becoming a princess once more.

What Willem spoke of sounded like a fanciful dream. However, if she really wished to do so, it could probably become a reality. Although it wouldn't quite be the same, she could rebuild the Dionne Knight Kingdom.

"Well..." Leila reached into her pockets, bringing out the article from before. On it were written many flowery, poetic lines. *Leila Asprey fights for her home. She fights to reclaim the territory, the citizens, the glory of Dionne – all these things that were snatched away from her. Peering into those sorrowful eyes,*

one can only see—

“I probably don’t have those sentiments,” she replied truthfully, closing her eyes. “All my enemies have already been defeated someplace else. Besides, isn’t that the Empire’s territory now? And one of the frontlines in the war against the Orcs, no less.”

She scratched her cheek. “Also, I don’t really want to be a princess again...”

“You’re so shallow.”

“Hah, maybe...”

Leila’s sentiments *were* rather shallow. Besides, she hadn’t really gotten the better of her emotions yet. Anger, hate, frustration— she wasn’t really sure that she truly felt these emotions in her heart.

I must be missing something very important as a person. But what? “... Anyway, it’s because I have such shallow feelings that I don’t have that much interest towards the past!” Leila laughed it off. *I must be lacking in some way to feel like laughing it off.*

Leila started walking from shirt to shirt, looking at each one. “This one’s also decent, I think I can wear it pretty easily. It looks perfect for formal occasions—” A memory flashed in her mind. “Oh! By the way, I received an invitation to the Emperor’s winter celebration. I can’t believe I completely forgot! It’s about time to think about what to wear.”

“Come on. Can’t you make use of His Majesty’s lavish wardrobes? Just ask nicely or something.”

“Yeah, I did that last year. But then word got out, and what I wore last year became really trendy. Everyone wanted to wear the same style as whatever the great Regal Brave wore.”

“Delusions are that scary, huh...”

“Let’s not talk about it. Shouldn’t they have invited you too?”

Willem shrugged. “I refused. I’ll be spending the night of the Winter Festival with my family.”

“Family? You mean Aly and the other kids? So you’re going back to Gomag?”

Gomag was Willem's hometown, where the orphanage he had once lived was located, and it was on the Empire's borders. Setting out from the Capital, it took a long time to travel there and back.

"I've already arranged to take all my available time off in one go. So, I'll be going on missions non-stop starting from tomorrow."

"Really?"

The Monstrous were attacking more and more frequently. The Church definitely wouldn't permit a Quasi Brave like Willem to travel that far so easily. But knowing Willem, he would have insisted, and they would have taxed him with many more missions in exchange.

"If you're tired of His Majesty's celebrations, why don't you tag along with me?"

Hearing Willem extend an invitation so naturally to her, Leila could only reply with bemusement. "Huh? What, me?"

"Yep. I'm sure Aly and the little ones will be delighted to meet you."

"Uh..." *What the heck is he saying?* The Quasi Brave Willem Kumesh and the Regal Brave Leila Asprey leaving the Capital at the same time would surely cause an uproar. If such a thing really happened, it would likely cause quite a few priests at the Church of Holy Light to lose their marbles. *He's gotta be kidding me.*

...Willem sincerely invited me to his family reunion. What's more, he understands full well the implications of his invitation. The two of them leaving the Capital would equate to a noticeable drop in power of its defending force. In response, the Church would likely call for their return and try to get them back at all costs. Taking all these things in mind, Willem still casually threw the invitation out to her.

"Forget it," Leila said. "Even if I'm not a princess anymore, I haven't lost my taste for lavish parties!"

It would be easy for her to agree to Willem's request. But doing so would place all sorts of extra burdens on him, and she couldn't accept that.

“So it’s like that...” Looking at Willem’s face, Leila thought she saw a flash of disappointment. Willem had probably hoped that she’d agree to his invitation.

She recalled that fateful winter when she’d first seen Willem practicing in that forest. Looking at his clumsy, unpolished movements, Leila had felt incensed. In that moment, she had paid no attention to her words, and her thoughts had spilled from her mouth.

Although Leila couldn’t see it then, she could guess now. Willem strove with all his might to become stronger. He had his reasons. Hoping to become stronger, he stood back up every time he collapsed from exhaustion. Leila could see it quite clearly from observing his practice sessions.

And then she had thought, *Can I really do the same thing?*

It would have been easy for Leila to copy Willem’s training methods. It would have been easy for her to wish to become stronger. So she became confused.

What if I, Leila Asprey, kept experiencing constant failure but fought on? What would’ve become of me when I became strong? Even if I kept falling and stumbling, would I be able to stand back up and continue on? Would I?

...That would have been impossible.

She had lost her home and her family. In that instant, Leila Asprey – the girl who’d only followed the wishes of those surrounding her, telling her to feel sorrow and hate – had first realized that she was a hollow shell.

Leila had been furious, her envy and jealousy swelling up. As a young girl, she was unable to control these feelings very well, and so–

“Absolutely terrible,” she had spat.

And so, from that moment onward, the relationship between Leila Asprey and her senior disciple Willem Kumesh had been rather complicated.

Part 4: This Must Be Love

The Church of Holy Light was neither understanding nor sympathetic towards Willem Kumesh. The wayward Quasi Brave had requested for a long period of leave from his official duties at an important time, thus he had been saddled with a bunch of missions in exchange.

“Give me a break!” he shouted, sprinting out of the Capital.

Sometimes headed east and sometimes west, he travelled between various battlefields day in and day out. Normally such an arrangement would’ve been absurd to accept, but he couldn’t pass up an opportunity to spend the night of the Winter Festival with his loved ones.

Even if it’s like that... whatever. Leila didn’t care about whatever her blockheaded senior disciple did. The Willem she knew would overcome any difficulty to reunite with his loved ones on that special night. *I’ll let him be. Worrying about him is pointless anyway.*

She turned her attention to the problem with Seniolis. Because she’d fought a bunch of Elves who shielded their bodies with protective curses, the Kaliyon’s spell lines had gotten slightly damaged.

Of course, it wasn’t so weak that it would break from a few curses, but it couldn’t be left alone either. Unlike Mourunen, which was impossible to stop once it began killing, or Zermelfiore, which gradually consumed its wielder, Seniolis remained humanity’s finest trump card. As the greatest of all elite Kaliyons, it had to maintain its good condition at all times so it could be used in any unexpected situation. Therefore, Seniolis had been sent to the workshops for a full maintenance.

Leila opened the door of the workshop a crack, peeking into a windowless, spacious room with complex diagrams inscribed on the walls using what seemed like an iron powder-based paint. A bunch of familiar-looking Talismans were floating in the air, and about twenty sorcerers stood around the room chanting. The myriad Talismans continuously switched positions, faint lines of light darting between pairs of matching Talismans and connecting them for an

instant.

That's some strange ritual they're performing.

"Can't the maintenance be finished in one night?" Leila asked a nearby sorcerer she knew, one who sported an impressive beard.

"It's delicate enough as it is already," the young sorcerer replied seriously, wiping his sweat away. "You know full well that these Kaliyons are made like intricate works of art."

For her part, Leila was aware that they were made up of many different metal shards known as Talismans bound together by a network of spell lines. Their power mixed and melded in intricate ways, eventually stabilizing to form the sword known as the Kaliyon. Because of the stellar craftsmanship that formed each Kaliyon, there was a near-miraculous balance between the various Talismans. The whole system could collapse if it was tampered with even slightly, resulting in the sword losing much of its power.

On the other hand, the processes involved in the crafting and maintenance of the Kaliyons were pretty much alien to her. However, she recalled once seeing—

"Hasn't Willem done it before, though? He just splits the Talismans with a *whoosh*, finishes the maintenance in a jiffy, and the Kaliyon's as good as new after a few flourishes."

"That's just how abnormal he is..."

Oh, so that's it. I'd thought it might be that kind of thing.

"No human could do what that guy's capable of."

Yep, figured as much.

"Anyway, that's just a quick emergency maintenance. It can't deal with some of the finer issues that a Kaliyon may have, nor can it repair already-damaged Kaliyons..." the sorcerer rambled on and on. "...and using any old Talisman to piece together a Kaliyon definitely won't work! Those troublesome antics of his might prove useful on a battlefield, but really he's just partially fixing it up and adding some of his weird habits into the mix!"

"Oh?" Although Leila heard nothing but complaints about Willem from the

sorcerer, she saw that he spoke with warm eyes.

She'd heard that Willem's so-called *antics* had been polished over long hours of practice in the workshop. Willem was the kind of person who'd get everyone around him caught up pursuing his goals, so the sorcerers here would've taken good care of him. He'd probably honed his skills as much as possible, learned all he could, and then refused to join their numbers in the end and gone straight for the battlefield. Thus, he was ultimately seen as a rather irreverent apprentice whom they still remembered fondly.

Though Willem was an outstanding apprentice, and they treated him with affection, they couldn't praise him genuinely. *My goodness, they're all so dishonest with themselves.*

"Well then, how long till it's finished?" Leila asked, peeking into the workshop once more.

"At least ten days," the sorcerer replied.

Being unable to wield Seniolis wouldn't cause Leila too much trouble, as it didn't need to be used very often. In fact, humanity would have been wiped out long ago if enemies which only Seniolis could defeat kept appearing. The problem now was that, as the Regal Brave, she didn't generally receive any long-distance missions while Seniolis was undergoing maintenance.

"What a pain..."

Without any hobbies, Leila wasn't sure what to do with all the free time she suddenly had, so she found herself taking a stroll on Griffon Street again.

This time, there were more stalls lining the sides of the road, with a greater selection of items on display. Leila found herself taking a passing interest in the exotic wares on sale, but soon became bored. After a while, she no longer found herself drawn to the novelty of the various cute trinkets, exotic garments and decorations of various colours that she kept on seeing.

As the Regal Brave, she was accustomed to living alone. However, she wasn't in the habit of shopping by herself and didn't bother to act cheerful. *No point in doing that if there's no one around.*

“Hmph...” she sighed to herself, stopping under a tree to rest. “I’m sooo bored...”

Maybe I should have a go at counting the number of clouds in the sky. Or I could try counting the bricks that line the streets, check the official records to see if they match? Whatever. Leila was confident that she could come up with a whole bunch of pointless activities to do.

What are all my fellow Braves doing right now? Are they fighting on some faraway battlefield, or have they reunited with their loved ones? Some are probably fighting alongside their comrades, some happily alongside their family, some searching for love—

“Achoo!” A random sneeze snapped Leila out of her thoughts. “It’s so cold...”

Even if I’m back at the Capital, I’ve been a bit careless lately. I should’ve worn an extra layer or something when I headed out.

In the evening, Leila went to an eatery near the Students’ Street.

“I’ll be going labyrinth-diving again tomorrow!” Kaiya Kaltran declared, draining her mug of beer in one swig.

“Really? Didn’t you just come back up yesterday?” Leila asked, setting down her juice-filled copper cup.

A lean woman in her thirties with a huge, muscular frame, Kaiya was an adventurer. The so-called adventures that they went on were usually just jobs where they dealt with moderately dangerous situations, like when the threat posed by monsters wasn’t so high that a Brave was needed on the scene. However, they didn’t have a stable income. Monsters didn’t pop up all the time to threaten humanity, the adventurers weren’t always able to defeat them, and once a monster was killed it was impossible to encounter the exact same one again.

To stabilize their income, the adventurers resorted to the labyrinths: mostly unexplored underground structures teeming with dangerous monsters and rare treasures. The deeper one went, the more – and better – treasures one would find.

“Are you sure it’s okay to go labyrinth-diving repeatedly like that?” Lelia asked. “Oh, and are you really descending into the deepest layer? I hear it’s chock-full of some *really* horrible curses, y’know?”

The deepest layer of a labyrinth contained many natural layers of curses, and remaining inside for a prolonged period of time would cause one’s body to slowly rot away. To prevent that, one had to wear Talismans providing protection against nine layers of curses. It was best not to stay underground too long if possible, to head to the surface periodically for rest and to cleanse the curses that had settled onto one’s body.

“I don’t really want to go,” Kaiya replied. “I’ll have to buy a few more defensive Talismans, which can be *very* expensive, and I don’t have much energy left either.”

“Despite all that you’re still headed back, huh?”

“Sure am. Something came up recently, so I’ve gotta earn more money instead of taking the usual break.”

“I think personal health is more important than work...”

“A colony of saber-toothed rabbits popped up near my hometown.”

“Ugh!” Leila exclaimed in disgust.

Saber-toothed rabbits were a type of low-class monster that sported abnormally long teeth capable of piercing armor. Going by the level system that adventurers were sorted by, those dangerous critters would be around level 11; an equal amount of adventurers averaging that level would be needed to deal with them smoothly. However, their threat didn’t lie in their strength alone.

“If we don’t completely wipe those things out, they’ll start breeding again and pop up from another exit of the den, so I need to gather some adventurers and deal with them quickly.”

“Can’t you get rid of them on your own, Miss Kaiya?”

“Maybe if it was a big monster, but we’re talking about rabbits. I’ll need about twenty decently powerful adventurers to help. Even then, we’ll have to prepare ourselves for a month-long slog, or worse... So if that’s what we’re doing, it’ll

cost some money.” Kaiya rubbed her thumb and index fingers together.

Killing one rabbit was easy. Killing ten was still doable. However, exterminating hundreds of saber-toothed rabbits who were continuously reproducing and trying to escape required large amounts of manpower and resources. In that regard, the rabbits were more irritating than Elves. At least Elves could be dealt with in a simple and elegant fashion, by using overwhelming force to drive them away.

“To think that I’m going underground for the sake of a mere city when humanity’s being threatened by the Monstrous! It does feel awkward to be discussing such trifles with you, Leila.”

Combat proficiency, usually quite difficult to quantify, was measured by the adventurers using the level system. Most civilians would be considered level 2 or 3, while trained soldiers were roughly level 10. The highest level most humans could normally reach was 30 or thereabouts. Kaiya, considered a seasoned, battle-hardened ace by her guild, was level 39.

“Do many others think the same way?”

“More and more lately.” Kaiya smiled faintly. “*If we’d just go and raise hell at the frontlines, fewer soldiers would have to die!* – or something like that.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

Oh well. I shouldn’t be too surprised. After all, there were many kinds of people in the world. Some people could only justify the tragic lives they led by denouncing those around them as wrongdoers of some sort. They often complained the loudest, criticizing whoever they wanted in the name of the people.

“That’s totally unreasonable of them! Don’t they know the Talismans we use are mostly made from those gray shards that adventurers like you bring up from underground? In a sense, you’re all contributing to the war effort too!”

Curses were akin to powerful, reality-warping concepts. For example, if a child was told repeatedly that he was an imbecile, he would surely grow up to become a fool. Conversely, a girl would become a more beautiful person if she was told repeatedly that she was pretty. Once an outcome was pictured, it

could affect and change material objects.

However, the numerous curses present in the deeper layers of a labyrinth occurred naturally. Being stored underground for a long time without any targets to affect invariably altered the nature of such curses, distorting their original qualities. To put it another way, a labyrinth curse was like a stained canvas that had been bleached clean, allowing one to easily add new paint. This particular trait allowed humans to utilize the fundamentals of curses to synthesize Talismans. Thus, the ancient gray shards used as Talisman ingredients sold for high prices on the surface.

Kaiya smiled weakly, her cheeks flushed from heavy drinking. “It’s nice to hear that from the person at the forefront of humanity’s battles.”

As an adventurer who primarily explored underground, she didn’t have any opportunity to receive words of praise from others, so naturally she would take notice of Leila’s offhand comment. *That’s not a bad thing, though...*

“Anyway, does that city...” Leila paused, readying herself to ask an unpleasant question, “...really need your help?”

“What do you mean?”

“They can fight on their own or muster up the money to hire some soldiers, can’t they? If they can’t even do that... well, they won’t last long against those saber-toothed rabbits.”

“Yeah. I think so too.”

“Then why—”

“That city’s my home,” Kaiya answered matter-of-factly, almost talking to herself. “It’s my husband and children’s hometown. For me it’s a place with lots of memories, so of course I can’t leave it alone.”

Although Lelia had expected that kind of answer, hearing it made her feel slightly lonely.

“Don’t you think the same way?” Kaiya asked. “If something happened at Gomag – Willem’s hometown – you wouldn’t sit by and watch either.”

Lelia laughed. “That’s a funny question.”

“Oh? Was I wrong?”

“Not only were you wrong, it seems you’ve thoroughly misunderstood our relationship.”

“Ah, well. Such a pity.” They both smiled coyly, raising their glasses to each other.

Five minutes later, a voice rang out. “I’ve had enough! I’m breaking up with him!” Emissa Hodwin slammed a palm on their table, rattling the plates and cups and immediately focusing the attention of everybody in the eatery onto them. “Since they’ve gotten like *that* already, I don’t care anymore!”

Although Emissa was an adventurer, she was fundamentally different from most normal ones; her appearance as a well-educated woman in her twenties belied her speciality as a hunter of powerful monsters.

“Again?” Kaiya asked nonchalantly. “How many days before you decide to head back?”

“It’s for real this time! I won’t forgive him, no matter what!” Emissa snapped, downing her glass of fruit beer in one gulp.

“Uhh...”

“Oh, sorry. You aren’t used to this, right?”

Emissa had gone straight for their table after bursting into the eatery, throwing herself into the seat beside Leila and immediately ordering what looked to be some very strong distilled beer. She had then gone on a drunken rant, leaving Leila somewhat dumbfounded while Kaiya silently refilled her mug.

“It’s business as usual. Her boyfriend’s good-looking and has the personality to match, so he attracts girls easily.”

“I see...”

Leila had heard that Emissa was born into a family of landowners. Thanks to the overflowing Venom she possessed, she was prone to sending everything around her flying in her tantrums. Because of that, she had been locked away in an underground dungeon, unable to see or touch anything during her adolescent years.

Eventually, Emissa was rescued by a teenage adventurer who was in the vicinity for his own reasons. At the time he was only level 9, so his guild would've placed restrictions on the areas he could venture into or the kind of missions he could undertake, forbidding him from fighting overly powerful monsters. He had sensed the girl locked up in a nearby dungeon, found her, and taken her out into the daylight.

Of course, it hadn't solved any of the issues Emissa had. Only after going through unimaginable hardship and with great effort was she able to control her own power. The two of them had supported each other through those trying times, vowing to forge a future as adventurers together...or so they had hoped.

“There's a huge difference in power between Emissa and her boyfriend, isn't there? He's only level 17, but she's already level 61.”

Being a level 17 adventurer wasn't bad; it could even be said to be slightly above average. He could accept missions to take down more powerful monsters and was permitted to delve down to the fifth layer of a labyrinth. It was a phenomenal level increase for someone who had only been level 9 a few years ago. However, Emissa held the second highest level out of all active adventurers at Level 61 – a designation signifying that she was capable of destroying an army by herself.

The reality was that the difference in power between them was simply too large. If Emissa brought her boyfriend along on the missions she usually took, he'd die almost immediately. On the other hand, her boyfriend couldn't take her on a level 17 Adventurer's jobs, since she freely used her power regardless of the destruction it unleashed, to the point where surrounding landscapes were completely altered. Thus, the two of them were unable to go on missions together, instead naturally gravitating towards battlefields more suited to their individual abilities.

“He saved some random damsel in distress *again!* What's more, she fell in love with him!”

Come on, that's bound to happen. “That's not... such a big deal, is it?” Lelia asked, realizing why Kaiya had been so quiet. Starting to laugh helplessly, she

joked, "If he's so bothersome, why don't you try locking *him* away then?"

"I *really* want to!" Emissa screamed as Kaiya grinned at Leila. "And on top of everything, the woman's pretty too!"

"Your jealousy's making you imagine stuff." Leila grabbed a piece of fried fish from her plate and stuffed it into her mouth. *Delicious.*

"There's no need to worry about Emissa, you know," Kaiya whispered softly to her. "Since she spent her childhood in the dark, she acts like a kid and wants all of her boyfriend's attention. It's because her knight in shining armor isn't by her side that she's so ticked off."

I guess she's making up for the healthy development her childhood lacked, Leila thought, nodding and chewing on her food. "Ah, I see."

"Don't you empathize with her?"

"Why do you say that?" She decided to ignore Kaiya's jibe.

Those who weren't adventurers could still have their combat ability assessed by an adventurer's guild by arranging to fight alongside their members. Leila was level 77, a number far surpassing earthly limits. Most people would be so surprised by the Regal Brave's power that they'd give up before trying to challenge her. Willem had also gotten his level assessed, further stunning everyone when they found out he was level 69.

Whatever the case, Leila wasn't particularly close to Emissa and even found her rather annoying.

And so, five more minutes went by.

"...that's why... hey, Leila, what's with that look on your face? How're you and Willem these days, eh?" Emissa abruptly asked, her eyes beginning to lose focus.

"I'd like to know as well," Kaiya butted in, her eyes gleaming.

"Whatever ideas you guys might have, we don't really have anything between us," Leila replied bluntly. "He's always been and will always be just an annoying senior disciple."

"Why say it like that?" Kaiya asked. "I thought you didn't hate him."

“To tell the truth, I really do.”

“For crying out loud, why are you like that? It’s unbearable for everyone to watch the both of you, you know! If you really hate him, why don’t you... *attack* him, then?!”

Oh. That’s what she means.

“You’re stronger than Willem, after all, so you should easily be able to steal him away, eh?”

“Well... I can’t say that I’m not confident about that...”

Leila didn’t really care about the mythical image of her that had been spread by the wild tales of the legendary Regal Brave. Still, those stories had to have *some* basis in reality, so her looks couldn’t be that bad. While she wasn’t the stunning beauty she was portrayed as, she didn’t look too shabby either. Her figure was far from filled out, but she still had plenty of time to grow more curves. *I’m still going through puberty, so I should be able to make up for whatever I’m lacking now, right?* Most importantly, Leila was extremely confident that her figure still fell into the range that Willem liked.

Even though Willem Kumesh possessed a frankly incomprehensible amount of self-restraint, he was still a teenage boy, so he must surely fantasize about girls his age. Furthermore, Leila could hear the conflict in Willem’s voice during their conversations. If one were to destroy the existing relationship between them and rebuild it anew, Willem would definitely treat her like a proper girl. Leila was sure of that. *But...*

“It’s okay,” Emissa encouraged. “I’m telling you, if you just push him down, he won’t resist!”

“I wouldn’t assume that, y’know...”

As the Regal Brave, Leila knew several techniques primarily used to subdue an opponent, one of which could render them completely paralyzed for a period of time. If she used her full strength, she was sure that she’d be able to immobilize even the steadfast Willem. *I could toy with him as long as I like. That’s quite a tantalizing idea... Wait, what am I thinking?!*

“Being able to do something and actually carrying it out are completely

different things,” Lelia said, trying to get her thoughts off a weird track. “If he knew I was going to do something like that, our battle would probably end up destroying the Capital...”

“Wow, that’s kinda a scary analogy.”

“How should I put it, then?!” She was getting flustered. Trying to sort out her mess of feelings, she said, “I guess it’s more like... a flower growing on a really high mountain.”

“I see.” Emissa nodded.

“If you stood from afar and looked at that lone flower swaying on the wind, you’d probably think ‘That’s so beautiful’ or something like that, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And then, you’d want to pluck that flower and cup it in your hand, wouldn’t you?”

“Huh?” Emissa tilted her head, looking puzzled. “What sort of comparison is that?”

Ah, that’s a normal reaction, isn’t it? I guess it was a bad analogy, although that can’t be helped. I can’t really find a name for what I’m feeling right now...

“Ah, geez! Stop spouting that puzzling nonsense, Lelia! Can’t I listen to some juicy gossip not involving myself for once?!”

You’re talking to the wrong person, Leila thought silently.

Kaiya poured some beer into Lelia’s glass. “You’re fourteen this year, aren’t you?”

“Wha– yeah, I am.”

“And Willem’s fifteen, isn’t he?”

“Yup.”

“Well, well... I’m pretty sure you kids aren’t old enough to understand each other’s feelings. You should know that us adults can see how you really feel, eh?”

“Miss Kaiya...” Leila sighed. “Are you *that* drunk?”

“Oh, you noticed?” Kaiya giggled like a little child.

Does Leila Asprey like Willem Kumesh?

Yep. I can't deny it.

Even though she would never confess it, she liked him in her own way. She found his strength of heart reassuring, admired the way he lived, and envied the depth of his love. All these feelings, roiling in her heart, were the sum of her affection for him.

Does Leila Asprey hate Willem Kumesh?

Yep. Absolutely.

She had decided not to hide it. She thought that he lived way too dangerously, envied his determination, and hated how he loved so deeply. All these feelings, roiling in her heart, were the sum of her hatred for him.

Someone once said that love and hate were two sides of the same coin. Currently, the coin in Leila's heart wasn't spinning, and laid with hate facing upwards.

Part 5: Esteemed Blood

Seven days passed.

Leila's situation hadn't changed. Seniolis was still lying in pieces all over the maintenance workshop, and Willem was still running around the continent on missions. From the reports coming in from the various battlefields, it didn't appear that the war's course had shifted either for the better or worse.

The weather was so pleasant that one might forget that it was midwinter. The warm rays of the sun shone in Leila's eyes. The gentle wind, smelling faintly of hay, caressed her skin.

"You're after my head, aren't you?"

The question, so suddenly posed to her, sent a palpable wave of discomfort coursing through the audience of grim-looking knights.

"Hmm..." Leila shook her head. "I don't get what you mean. If I took some sad old geezer's life, I couldn't display it or eat it. There wouldn't be any benefit in killing Your Majesty, would there? *Although...*"

She sensed the audience's mood shift again. "If you have some other benefit in mind which I'm unaware of, I might consider it depending on what you're asking for."

One of the elderly knights flushed angrily and made to step out of line, but was forestalled by his lord's gaze.

"I see. And is your answer serious?"

"I don't have any reason to lie," Leila lifted her sword and swung it about, testing the blade's feel. It was the type of weapon typically used for duelling; a blunted rapier, thick as a finger, with a ball-shaped tip that made it look almost comical. *Too light as a weapon, but it'll suffice for a toy.*

"Your homeland, Dionne, was destroyed under suspicious circumstances. There have been rumors going around that the kingdom of Dionne met its end rather... unnaturally, so to speak."

Leila stepped closer to the edge of the arena, raising her head.

“The Dionne Knight Kingdom was created by Abel Melkera, one of the foremost Regal Braves who bore unequalled combat prowess. Even if they were attacked by those horrible Gloom Elves, it shouldn’t have been toppled so easily – at least, that’s what the people say.”

“So someone plotted Dionne’s collapse, is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s what many believe. Furthermore, among those who stood to benefit the most from Dionne’s destruction, one would naturally think of the Empire that is currently assimilating Dionne’s former territory. More specifically, its leader...”

The emperor spread his arms, his cape fluttering in the air. “Me.”

There was a certain silly air about the entire situation, which gave Leila a moment’s pause. She exhaled slightly, rubbing the back of her head. “Isn’t that a rather bold claim?”

“The masses will best accept what’s easiest to understand. That’s why audacious actions can bring about quite interesting rumors.”

“I feel like I’m in a biased Imperial Studies class. You’re suspecting that I’ve been persuaded by those rumors as well, aren’t you?”

“Leila Asprey, current Regal Brave... I do apologize if your mood has been spoilt.” The emperor narrowed his eyes slightly. Given a broadsword blunted in a way similar to Leila’s own weapon, he took a fighting stance.

I see. So he didn’t deny it, after all. Under the emperor’s gaze, Leila raised her blade as well. She shifted her body to one side, lowering the blade’s point slightly. An acute wave of nervousness passed through the surrounding knights, some of them reaching for the hilts of their swords.

“What next? Did you summon me to confirm my true objectives after hearing that the Regal Brave with murderous intentions towards the emperor was back in the Capital? And even though the winter celebrations are nearing, you decided to set up this duel with the pretext of sparring a few rounds?”

“That would be the heart of the matter, yes.”

The two duelers each assumed the Thunder Core, a widely-known traditional fencing stance. The left foot positioned slightly ahead of the right, while the upper body and the point of the blade faced directly forward. It wasn't just a practical position suited for both offense and defense, but also a way to show respect for one's opponent in the context of a duel.

What a pain.

"Begin!" The presiding referee flourished a hand.

Leila strode forward, taking into account a grown man's larger footsteps. She lifted the slightly-too-light sword, whipping it towards the right side of the emperor's stomach.

I really can't stand this.

Her opponent replied to her move, taking his own step forward. No novice when it came to swordfighting, he delivered a practiced stroke directly aimed at Leila's neck. She dodged nimbly to the left, and they ended up exchanging positions.

Leila grumbled internally. The emperor's first attack had been reasonable for a duel, but it was unsuited for fighting real opponents. Although the best way to score a hit on somebody who lacked killing intent, it was reckless if one wanted to protect one's own life.

Had she attacked seriously, the battle would already be over. While the emperor's skill wasn't *bad*, it remained within the boundaries achievable by normal humans. If he took a killing blow from the incomparably powerful Regal Brave, he would die almost immediately.

However, or perhaps *because* of that, the emperor had decided to gamble his life in such a duel in front of the assembled lords and knights..

What an irritating trial...

If her intention was to kill the emperor, she couldn't pass up this chance. If she allowed the duel to remain a simple fencing match, she would be able to prove that she had no such motives. On the other hand, if she just plain refused to play along, she'd be unable to show that the Regal Brave's immense might was no threat to the Empire.

These controlling types are sooo annoying. Everything they do is so troublesome.

Leila's rapier and the emperor's broadsword clashed noisily. A circular slash was met with a sweeping strike, the following stab was parried with a rightward blow, turning into a sudden, flashing lunge that was immediately countered with an almost identical thrust. Both duelers' blades danced through the air, producing discordant *clangs* whenever their weapons struck. The whole event almost seemed scripted.

Come on, really? What a joke.

Their blades met once more. A leftward slash bouncing off a double circular curve, two rapid sword blows, a flashing thrust deflected by a rising cut. Leila's petite figure danced around her opponent's larger silhouette, raining down precise blows again and again.

In total, they exchanged eighty-seven blows until Leila's final parry knocked the emperor's heavy broadsword backwards and unbalanced him. She played along, imitating his wild flail with her rapier. Sensing that he was at a disadvantage, the emperor stepped back, and she did the same.

"Well done." Sweat ran down the emperor's head. As he stepped down, his mouth broke into an almost boyish grin. "Truly an impressive upbringing. I hope my own family can look up to you as a role model."

"Oh, you flatter me." Leila went along with his act, wiping sweat off her forehead and stepping down as well. The surrounding knights relaxed.

"You must understand, that wasn't simply courtesy. I do think it would be a most terrible waste for you to remain merely a Brave... ah, I know! Leila Asprey, would you like me to adopt you as my daughter?"

The knights all did a double-take, having thought themselves free of more worries until their emperor's newest bombshell.

Leila looked at all those oh-so-virtuous knights tripping over themselves out of the corner of her eye, then shook her head slightly. "Your Majesty, I accept your compliments. Do forgive me, however, as I cannot agree to your request."

The emperor lowered his voice. "I'm not joking, you know?"

“I figured as much.” Leila sighed. “If I were to formally become your daughter, you could put a complete stop to those rumors about the Empire seizing Dionne’s territory with dirty tricks. It’d be better for both of us, and since Your Majesty had enough reason to propose it seriously, it’d be understandable for us to speak more graciously.”

“Indeed.”

“But anyway, I don’t need to be adopted.” Leila casually tossed her rapier. It sailed through the air in a perfect arc, landing precisely in a leather scabbard erected at the corner of the arena.

It’s finally over.

She turned away from the emperor, deciding to return to the Church. It might not be anything worth calling *home*, nor was it *that* comfortable, but it was still a sanctuary of sorts, as well as a pretty decent place to stay. “All the plotting aside, I do appreciate Your Majesty’s sentiments. And...”

Leila looked over her shoulder, smiling slightly. “Your suggestion did make me slightly happy. So thank you, Uncle.”

Fencing techniques used in duels differed from those used in actual combat. In combat, the aim was to effectively subdue one’s opponent without hurting oneself. Conversely, in dueling the aim was to showcase a dueler’s superior swordsmanship; techniques used in dueling pursued elegance and beauty in form over practicality.

The techniques of past duels as well as the sequences in which they were utilized had been recorded in dueling manuals. These records held detailed descriptions of the duelists: their stances, movements, and sword techniques. While there generally were few accounts of private duels, official or larger-scale duels were easier to document. Copies of the better-written and understandable manuals could be purchased from well-known bookstores for two or three silver coins each.

“...Truly, an impressive upbringing.” The emperor sighed softly, wiping sweat off his forehead. Despite the intense exercise he’d just had, the water that dripped down his face felt ice-cold.

“What do you mean, Your Majesty?” one of his ministers asked. The emperor shook his head. It was futile to explain that enigmatic exchange of intentions, or the revelation of feelings welling up from the bottom of their hearts.

The emperor thought back to the first move, reliving their exchange of blades in his mind. *A leftward stab towards the neck. Three rapid slashes, followed by a parry. Striking out after retreating half a step, then withdrawing afterwards. Next a forward lunge into a downward slash and then an upward arc in quick succession.* That series of moves had harkened back to a famous sequence from a duel between Jakomo Niereto and Memeto Zeigan at the Alvarian Duelling Festival twenty-three years ago. At the time Zeigan had been a knight who’d lost his territory while Nieroto was, by all accounts, the noble who had seized it. In a sense, a few parts of that story paralleled the connection between Leila and the emperor.

A series of connecting upward arcs, followed by a fleeting slash, a few steps back and then three close-range strikes, one after the other. Their sequence had deviated at this point, imitating the moves exchanged by Norman Romanin and Benvenut Zaxoto during their duel. After eleven moves, the match had started to draw from yet another past duel, and again several moves after.

Only those who understood their true motives would know that the emperor had approached the duel with a jesting mentality. Leila could have responded well enough. However, she went a step further by countering the emperor’s intentions with her own. Spectators familiar with their techniques would probably have noticed the two duelists speaking to each other through their attacks, and perhaps even discerned the true meaning behind Leila’s words.

Through her moves, the Regal Brave had conveyed this: “I don’t hold the Empire responsible for the loss of my homeland... however, I doubt that there’s zero connection between the two. I understand that the Empire originally plotted to take over Dionne’s territory without carnage, but many coincidences combined to produce that day’s tragedy. I can’t recover what I’ve lost, but I don’t blame the Empire for what has happened. My current position is the most suitable one for Your Majesty, isn’t it? I only ask one thing of Your Majesty... that you rule over that territory and its people properly.”

Pah, I’ve had enough of this. What a fickle mistress Fate is. That girl has the

blood of a ruler. She lost her country and her people, has nothing to rely on, and yet she wields the temperance of a king. She truly was born to become a ruler.

The emperor wanted her. If he could just bring that girl into his own bloodline, the Empire's future would be much more stable, and could even usher in a new age of order in human history. Even with the threat posed by the encroaching monsters, humanity would be able to enjoy an unshakeable age of prosperity. With the help of his new daughter, perhaps he could even ensure the survival of the largest family of all – the human race.

He shook his head ruefully. "What a pity."

"...So thank you, Uncle."

His lips curled as he looked towards the sky. "...Uncle, was it?"

Leila had refused the invitation to join his family, and thus he'd been unable to fulfill his wish of getting her to call him "Father." However, her parting words were surprisingly warm for a farewell message.

As if speaking only to the pleasant winter sky, the emperor murmured softly to prevent the surrounding knights from hearing him. "That wasn't too bad... I suppose I shall let it be, then."

Leila had intended to return to the Church after buying some souvenirs for those pasty-faced priests on the way. She thought for a little while, then remembered. *Oh, right. That one's not bad.* While shopping in the bazaar the previous day, she had seen steamed buns being sold by a child on a street corner.

Before returning to the Church, Leila took a stop to buy some souvenirs for those pasty-faced priests. She'd thought for a little while about what to get them, then recalled the steamed buns from yesterday. *Oh yeah, those should work out just fine.*

While shopping in the bazaar, she had seen a child selling the buns, and out of curiosity tried one. She'd immediately regretted it: not only was the bun at once bitter and spicy, it stunk so much that she thought it might be better called a poison than food. *Better to just ban the damned things outright.*

And therefore, she was going to buy a whole bunch of those steamed buns and force one down the throat of every priest at the Church. As the Regal Brave she was *technically* a living saint, so those stolid priests couldn't possibly refuse alms from her, right? She would then watch from the Regal Brave's special seat as their precious serenity, cultivated through years of spiritual refinement, instantly shattered.

Heheheheh... Leila laughed creepily – in her heart only, of course – as she walked through the castle. She abruptly stopped at a corridor overlooking the central courtyard. “Hmm?”

To call it a mere central courtyard was an understatement. It possessed a huge, magnificent garden with its own fountain, streams, miniature forest, blooming flowers of all colours, and also a matching couple facing each other profoundly.

Leila furrowed her eyebrows, recognizing their faces. “Hmm...? What's going on?”

She reflexively concealed her presence, hiding behind a nearby pillar. *What's he doing here? Didn't he accept a bunch of missions from the Church? Shouldn't he be running around the Continent? Could've said hi to me at least, let me know he was back.*

Even straining her ears, Leila wasn't able to make out the conversation clearly and could only hear the rustling of leaves. She decided to get closer.

Most stealth techniques wouldn't work on Willem Kumesh. The boy was used to traveling between battlefields unsuited to a warrior of his talent. Consequently, he had come to develop the ability to perceive hostility around him, and honed that talent to such an absurd degree that all the assassins in the world would fiercely condemn his life choices.

However, the first-rate techniques of the Regal Brave's considerable arsenal included a move which allowed its wielder to practically melt into the background. It didn't merely erase all traces of the wielder's breath, but also diluted the wielder's very existence to the absolute limit. Such a technique was extremely taxing, and the wielder risked their infinitesimal existence disappearing altogether if they lost control. Leila would've preferred not to play

that card, but there was no other choice. She took a deep breath and held it.

“...Perhaps it’s a little impolite to ask you like this,” said a pure voice, sounding like the chime of silver bells. “Master Willem, is there anyone whom you like?” The girl who’d asked the question had her head lowered slightly and her cheeks flushed. She looked as if an artist had painted a perfect portrait of an innocent, honest, charmingly delicate maiden on a blank canvas. One could tell that she’d had an excellent upbringing. There was a certain fantastical air about her, and she had a shapely body to boot. In short, she had the sort of appearance that many men would find attractive.

She was the emperor’s niece, and if Leila remembered correctly, she was nineteen years old. By all appearances she was a beautiful, gentle, queenly lady with an amiable side to her. Occasionally she showed up in the city, gaining popularity amongst the people. Her title was “Her Highness the Princess.”

That wasn’t her real name, of course, but it was the common method of referring to her in the Capital. His Majesty the emperor had no daughters, and amongst his relatives there was only his niece who had yet to marry. Regardless of her status, though, her appearance and stature befit that of a princess, a title which no one else in the whole Capital held.

“...Come on, spare me.” Willem was his usual self. He could be called normal, ordinary, shabby – or a mix of all three, his face looking as if it’d been made by shoving all three descriptors into a pot, cooking it over a hot flame, and then baking the results in an oven. When seen alongside the princess, they were a textbook example of the mismatched couple. “Lately, everyone’s been asking me the same thing. I’ve got quite a few missions to take care of on top of my daily practice, so I don’t have time to think about that.”

“Everyone... To whom might you be referring to?”

“The Bulgates from the bookshop. Emissa and Kaiya. Mijishiron and the three musketeers from the guild. Oh, and that fat priest whose name I can’t recall. Besides that, there’s also Navrutri... and His Majesty the emperor, I suppose.”

What a crowd.

The young woman smiled. “My, you’ve even been asked by His Majesty? You seem to be quite popular.”

“Jeez, it’s more like I’m someone’s plaything...”

As expected of the one at the center of all this trouble. He’s all too familiar with this.

“So many people being concerned about you just means you’re receiving lots of attention. It must mean they’re smart and have good eyes.”

Willem sighed. “Come on, they’re just making fun of me.”

“That’s impossible,” the princess replied firmly. “After all, you’re a young Quasi Brave, Master Willem Kumesh. Even though you haven’t been in the spotlight for long, your combat mastery isn’t any worse than Lady Asprey, the Regal Brave herself. You know, Master Willem, you shouldn’t sell yourself short.”

I suppose she’s not royalty for nothing. She’s quite familiar with the ways of the world as well.

“So,” the princess continued, “how did you answer those people?”

“...Please, how could I have a special someone?” Willem’s voice wavered slightly. Leila couldn’t blame him for that. He was still a teenage boy, so those beautiful, older-sisterly types would naturally be his favorite.

“Then, what if... I’m just supposing that...” the princess clutched both fists to her chests, about to ask an earnest question. “When the time comes, and you’re about to choose the one who’s closest to your heart... could you think of me, then?”

Leila’s eyes widened. *What’s she saying?!*

Willem’s voice cracked. “C-closest?”

“Yes. I’ll be waiting eagerly for that moment.”

“Wait, that can’t be right! Is this a joke?”

“C’mon. Do you think I’m joking?”

“W-well... Not really. It’s just a bit sudden...” Looking flustered, Willem ran his hand through his hair while averting his face. Though she couldn’t see it clearly, Leila was pretty sure that his face was bright red.

Aside from that, Leila was sure of one other thing. Willem would never accept the confession.

“Time isn’t the issue here. Hmm, how should I put it? I’m sorry, but it’s no use. I can’t return your expectations.”

Told you so! Leila rejoiced silently.

“Is it some failing of mine?”

“It’s not like that. But, uh...” Willem bowed his head. “Sorry, I guess.”

Leila sighed. *Hmph. ‘Course he’d be like that.* She remained behind the pillar, not daring to draw breath. *That was a well-done honey trap. The way her voice wavered, the slightly upward-looking gaze, the way she closed the distance between herself and Willem – all that was acted out perfectly. There probably aren’t many guys in this world who can brush that off so easily. However I think about it, she’s the one at fault.*

Willem left the garden, leaving the princess alone in the courtyard. Leila watched as his shadow receded into the distance.

“That didn’t go too well,” the princess mumbled once he was gone, her tone shifting and her elegant facade suddenly dropping. She fell down dejectedly on a white bench, her shoulders sagged. “I really thought I could catch him. He’s still a young boy in the middle of puberty, after all.”

“He isn’t as dense as you think, y’know. You couldn’t have stolen his heart so easily.”

“Oh?” The princess turned her head. “...Lady Asprey. How naughty of you to spy on us.”

Leila nonchalantly waved a hand, leaning against a tree and shaking off the aftereffects of the technique she’d used. “That reaction was kinda unimpressive. Aren’t you surprised?”

“Yes. However, I take care to moderate my reactions when I’m around others.”

“Ah, so it’s like that.” As a princess, she had to maintain the image of her that people held in their hearts, so she needed to maintain her poise at all times.

She couldn't be poised if her first reaction at someone appearing unexpectedly behind her was to scream, and so she had to always show restraint. Leila could understand that kind of thinking, having once been a princess herself.

"So why are you here, Lady Asprey?"

"Well... your uncle invited me here to play. I sparred with him for a while, and now I'm headed back to the Church."

"...I see. He did mention that he would be having an interesting guest over, but to think that he actually invited such a disgusting voyeur." Now the unhappy princess was behaving completely at odds with her pure, graceful facade from before, spitting insults unbecoming of her unofficial title.

"Ha, you're one to talk," Leila laughed. "Since we're such good pals already, pray tell. What did you intend to do to that idiot?"

"Hmm? I don't recall anyone going by the name of 'that idiot'."

"Oh, stop playing dumb." Leila's voice hardened. "I'll ask again. What did you intend to do to that idiotic, stubborn, talentless, hopelessly dense senior disciple of mine? Were you going to seduce him with your looks, and then toss him aside like a used pawn afterwards?"

"How rude. I certainly wouldn't treat him like some used pawn."

Ah, so she didn't deny the first bit.

"He's quite a valuable talent. If I don't cherish that kind of person after getting ahold of him, he'd waste away."

She didn't deny that she wanted him either.

"People with talent just have more intrinsic value. For example, His Majesty and I were born to rule. And you, Lady Asprey – you were born to live and fight on the battlefield."

"All that stuff's what you really think?"

"Well, it's what I've gathered through years of experience." The princess' tone changed. "Humans' lives are shaped by their destinies. What's more, those who are destined for different things can never live together, because over time they'll end up drifting apart."

“Is that from experience too?”

She smiled mysteriously. “Think what you want.”

Perhaps I should praise her. Even like this, she's suppressed her own emotions and put on that fake smile of hers without a second thought.

“That’s why I’m after that boy. What keeps him going isn’t talent or luck, but rather his own will and determination, as well as the strong bonds of kinship supporting him.”

Wow. Leila almost felt admiration. *To think that you were watching him that closely.*

“It’s exactly because he isn’t led around by fate that he’s able to freely choose his own battles... and to choose who his other half is as well. If he was in my life, he would become my best supporter... no, my best companion. To get all of that, I’m willing to pay any price. If wealth or status won’t make him budge, I wouldn’t mind offering even myself to him.”

“My, how flowery.”

“That’s why I must win his heart at all costs. Even if you, the one standing alongside him, might be opposed to that.”

“Well, I won’t resist or object to you, that’s for sure. You all can do as you like.” Choosing her next words with careful indifference, Leila added, “...You still belong to the bunch who would pick the flower on the peak and keep it by their side.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Go on. Give it a try if you can.” Leila turned and started walking. Hiding a crooked smile, she left behind her last words. *“After wedding the noble princess, the country bumpkin remained by her side, supporting her throughout her life.* Oh my, such glamor. If you do manage to succeed, then I give you my sincere congratulations. Don’t forget to invite me to the wedding!”

Part 6: The Flower Wavering on the Peak

On the day the Winter Festival celebration was held, two pieces of news arrived at the same time. The Northern Army was completely destroyed, and the Dam City of Narvant had fallen to the Orcs.

Originally, the chances of winning the war had been high. The Quasi Brave Avgran along with Purgatrio, the Kaliyon that he carried with him, should have had enough combat power to make that a reality. However, a few words sent that fate spinning out of control.

En route to the battlefield, Avgran came across a village being ravaged by Orc squadrons and teetering on the brink of destruction. One of the survivors, a young girl, cried and begged before him, *“Please save us! Please save us!”*

Upon hearing the girl’s plea, Avgran said without a second thought, *“Someone who can’t even save a village couldn’t ever save a country, could he?”*

Avgran was a man of integrity, bravery, and purity of heart, possessing but a hint of short-sightedness. On his way to a battle to save the country, he paused and dedicated himself to saving a small village he’d only just discovered. After some time, the Orcs were driven off and thirty or so villagers were rescued.

During the skirmish, Avgran unleashed Purgatrio’s talent.

The Kaliyon Purgatrio had enough strength to utterly dominate a battlefield, but its talent could only be used once before being sealed for a month. In other words, because Avgran blindly focused on saving the people he met, Purgatrio could not be used to its utmost potential on the battlefield where he should’ve given his all.

Avgran died in combat within a day of reaching the frontlines. Some said he spent his last moments with a content smile on his face. Of course he did. Up to his last day, Avgran never gave up on anyone who begged to be saved in front of him. Because he held on to what he considered most important – the justice he so firmly believed in – even in his last moments, he remained a true paragon

of the Braves' ideal of fighting for the masses.

Now, let us look at a few statistics. The villagers Avgran saved numbered around thirty. To save these thirty people, Avgran forsook an entire city and the soldiers which protected it – two thousand lives in total.

Individually, Orcs weren't very fearsome creatures. Their average level was 5, and trained soldiers with proper equipment could easily defeat an Orc in single combat.

However, it was a different story when they gathered in large numbers. As an extremely homogeneous race, Orcs were surprisingly suited to working in groups. If a single Orc was provoked, the horde would share its anger, and a single Orc rejoicing was followed by the rest of them doing so as well.

Acting in this way as if the concept of individuality did not exist for them, Orcs could express the same emotion together, and that collective emotion would swell up as an explosive wave. Compared to humans, who held different views, Orcs did not have a strong fear of death. Furthermore, they would not falter even if their comrades' morale dropped. Thus, the Orcs were able to form strong armies, large to the point where their low individual strength wasn't a problem.

Leila hadn't thought she would return to her homeland under these circumstances.

From the Empire, the journey took around two days by horse-drawn carriage. She crossed the rapids of the Mernie River, rode through the wilds with their legends of the Singing Maiden, and travelled a little farther.

The Dam City of Narvant was recently built on a part of the former Dionne Knight Kingdom's territory. After the Gloom Elves were driven off, people were called in to settle in the region. They began redeveloping the once-desolate lands, and after continuous cultivation it slowly began to resemble a place humans lived again. Narvant's main industries had been tourism and perfume. During spring a sea of orange flowers bloomed on the nearby plateau, and quite a few nobles from the Empire would visit to sightsee and boast to each other about their sophisticated taste. Or at least, that's how it used to be.

At present, Narvant was no more.

Leila had acted immediately upon hearing the Narvant warfront was in danger of being overwhelmed. She'd grabbed Seniolis, just sent back from the workshops, boarded a military horse carriage setting out from the Capital, and sped towards the battlefield.

She was too late.

It was evidently no longer a warzone suited to the Regal Brave. All trace of the once-thriving city, as well as any glory or honor to be won, was gone. Nothing remained to be protected or reclaimed.

Leila gazed dejectedly around her surroundings. Only scorched ruins were left where the Dam City of Narvant once stood. The whole area had probably been recently destroyed; her nostrils were assaulted by the mingling smells of charred stone, leather, trees, flesh, and other things.

The soldiers fought well. She saw practically no Orcs left. It looked as if the war had ended with almost all forces on both sides annihilated, and because of that, the Orcs retreated to their own territory after razing Narvant and the surrounding regions. Only scattered troops who hadn't gotten their fill of pillaging the ruins remained.

"Jeez, how nasty." *Tap.*

Leila took a half-step forward, crossing seventeen paces' distance in a moment. Clutching Seniolis, she lightly flicked her wrist as she landed behind a pack of Orcs. A single deep slash raked through all six of their throats, and fatal amounts of blood gushed out.

There were no screams, nor prolonged agony. They probably had no idea what happened to them. Some of them had their eyes wide open, others were curled up on the ground, and yet others were about to scan their surroundings. Wearing varying expressions of confusion, the Orcs all fell to the ground as their knees gave out.

The most Leila could do here was to take out her anger by dissecting all the Orcs which had just keenly crept up from her blind spot. Even then, she could've left them to the soldiers coming on clean-up duty. As the Regal Brave,

there was no need for her to take action.

How will my form be described in the next article, I wonder?

Leila casually thought about it while letting herself fall into some emotion she was unsure of, whether it was anger, sorrow, or something else. As long as she could find more Orcs, she would bury them amidst a hail of crimson blood.

Suddenly a light flashed, and her field of vision wavered.

“...Ah.”

Leila realized that she had blundered. In that brief instant, she'd become slightly dizzy and her awareness was disrupted. It was a tiny sense of unease that'd be difficult for her to miss even while concentrating on the battlefield.

Because of that, the attack succeeded.

Leila stopped and looked around. The former ruins of Narvant – no, there were no ruins there anymore. The scorched and blackened tiles, the abandoned corpses of civilians, the broken spears left scattered on the ground, even the Orcs she'd just killed, were gone.

There were grassy plains all around.

When she recovered her senses – no, when she figured out what had happened – the bitter scent permeating the air was gone too. Replacing it was the sweet smell of grass in springtime, tickling her nose and fitting what she saw.

“This is...”

Leila tried calming herself down to perceive the flow of time. Supposedly, it was an observation technique that could only be used by those with certain qualifications. Leila and Willem had both begged her master to learn it, but only she had succeeded. More than martial arts, it almost drifted into the intangible realm of magic.

Likely for that reason, even when she wasn't face-to-face with the enemy, Leila could still use it to predict the future.

It's like a calm lake surface. That meant she wouldn't be in danger of dying anytime soon.

“This is...”

Although the scenery had suddenly changed, Leila didn't sense any movement in her location. Besides, she hadn't felt any wind or force pushing her. She didn't feel any painful headaches either, so it was even more unlikely that spatial manipulation magic was at work. Other than any of those possibilities, the only remaining one was...

An attack of the illusionary kind.

“I completely fell for it...”

Leila relaxed her posture, then extended her hands to smooth out her bangs. After thinking for a while, she touched the tip of Seniolis to the ground and roughly scraped the Kaliyon through the dirt, attempting to draw a simple thaumaturgic seal.

Nothing happened.

Thaumaturgy could almost be described as a world-reshaping technique. It was an Emnetwyte recreation of the many miracles wrought by the Visitors when they had created the world in the distant past; shallow, modified imitations of the invaluable originals. Thus, thaumaturgy could only function in the real world. Like how water wheels couldn't turn in a world without water, or furnaces couldn't smelt lead in a world without fire, thaumaturgic seals were merely wobbly lines of graffiti in a world without the elements they needed to produce any effect.

It meant the location Leila was currently in was also a different world from where she had been before. She'd had previous experiences only twice.

“The dream world of a Devil,” she muttered to herself, as if confirming it.

It was a dream created with hostile intent; an artificial, illusionary world imitatively created after reading into the exterior layer of an ensnared target's soul. When the prey's spirit was sufficiently weakened and their will to escape broken, they would become an eternal denizen of the illusionary world. Meanwhile, their physical bodies in reality would sleep forever.

“The Orcs probably brought a Devil along and left it behind as a trap on their way out. If that's the case, I fell right into it...”

They could be practically immortal, but even the strongest warrior was nothing once their spirit was broken. So-called Devils were spirit-like beings who were skilled at corrupting humans and specialized in manipulating dream worlds like this one. In a certain sense, they could be considered the natural enemies of the Braves.

Perhaps this is the one who finished off Avgran. But... “This world’s rather sloppily built. Can’t be a particularly high-level Devil, then.”

Leila wasn’t without options. In humankind’s long history, methods to deal with that type of psychological attack, as well as the numerous methods that Devils employed against their prey, had been devised and put to use.

Somewhere in this artificial world, there was a core sustaining it. As long as that core was destroyed before one’s spirit yielded, one could successfully escape.

“Hmm?”

In the blink of an eye, the scenery had changed once again while she was distracted. Now she was on a dark, dull road paved with gravel, lined by several houses built from brightly colored wood beside gray mud walls.

The dream world had reproduced the place she missed. It was no longer Narvant, nor the grassy plains. She was in the streets of Dionne, which were, geographically speaking, quite far from Narvant.

Leila braced herself, scanning her surroundings vigilantly. The enemy would probably attack soon, but she wasn’t sure what form that attack might take. As there were so many different kinds of Devils, they naturally used a variety of tactics to force their target’s spirit into submission.

There was the Bufas, which assumed the form of someone dear to their prey to attack them. The Aeshma, which showed its prey the death of those they were close to one after another. The Immemoratio, which tortured its prey in endless suffering through being ignored by their loved ones while they themselves were helpless. The Mammon, which induced a sense of detachment from reality by tempting its prey with power or wealth. Or perhaps—

“Leila.”

Her heart skipped a beat at the voice which spoke behind her. Hot emotion flooded her, followed by cold logic. *Of course it would use him.*

Obviously, it was a voice extremely familiar to Leila. She should have gotten tired of hearing him by now, but somehow she felt she never would. It was extremely kind; an annoying sort of voice and yet one that made her feel cherished at the same time.

“Willem.”

Leila slowly turned her head as she called his name. As expected, the person standing there was Willem Kumesh. At least, it didn't look like someone different. No one else in their surroundings, the teenage boy and the teenage girl faced each other within the illusionary setting of one of Dionne's towns.

Leila calmly analyzed the situation. *That Willem said my name, so the creator of this dream can't be an Immemoratio. Only one person appeared, so the Aeshma can also be ruled out...*

“I want to tell you something.”

“What?” Refusing to relax even a little, Leila glared at Willem. “I can hear you. What is it?”

“Uh...” Willem stopped talking and started towards her. She didn't change her stance, only lowering her center of gravity to guard against the possibility of the Willem in front of her suddenly revealing himself to be a Bufas and attacking.

She couldn't tell if he had noticed her wariness. As he approached to an arm's length away from her, his footsteps stopped.

“I want you.”

...Hmm?

That was an unexpected development. Leila's mind went blank.

“Huh?”

In an instant, all of Leila's vigilance evaporated. Trying to keep control over herself, she slowly got a grip on the situation.

So it's a dream world created by a Succubus!

Succubi were a type of Devil that broke their prey's attachment to reality by satisfying sexual desires. In that sense, they exemplified the existence of Devils as beings that corrupted humans. To put it another way, the Devil she was facing was borne of the sexual desire that she harbored for Willem.

As she thought about it, Leila realized that Willem's face somehow looked more handsome than usual. After staring at it for a while, she felt rather strange. *Ahh, I think my mind's stalled or something. This could be pretty bad.*

She had to resist. If she accepted the temptation, she would be finished. She knew that much. But...

I kinda want to wait and see what happens.

Against a Devil, as long as the spirit didn't yield – if one didn't lose their grip on reality – it was impossible to lose. Even when subjected to various temptations, it wouldn't be a problem as long as one didn't give in, and one could even afford to wait for the enemy to make their move.

Braves were humans as well. For her part, Leila had no intention of giving up her human heart. Even if her manner of accumulating life experience was more violent, it didn't really matter. Maybe she did have a stronger heart than most, but it was still riddled with scars.

That's why, no matter what, there were still words Leila wished to hear.

"D-don't say that line, it doesn't suit you." Leila found herself unable to reply as forcefully as she'd have liked. "Saying that kinda thing isn't your style, right?"

"You're rejecting me?"

"Humph, of course. Anyway..." Leila thought for a bit, then asked probingly: "Assuming I didn't reject your words, what were you planning to do with me?"

"Oh, this."

Moving like a bolt of lightning, Willem reached out and wrapped his hand around her waist so quickly she couldn't react in time, then in a single flawless move hugged her to his chest.

"Aah!"

Hesitation shot through Leila, slowing her movements. As he lifted her cheek

so their gazes could meet, a faint squeak escaped her mouth. It was a sound she'd never heard herself make before. *Wh-what's going on? Why's Willem being so overbearing?!*

Leila's confusion forced her to stop and concentrate. *Remember, Devils pluck out scenes that their prey wish to see from their hearts. Wait, that means... is that's what this is? This is what I, Leila Asprey actually want? Really? Is this all I am? Just a girl pining for love?*

"H-hey... where're you touching..." Leila couldn't even put in any strength into her protests. Willem's face moved closer, and his lips neared hers.

W-what's this? I've never looked at Willem's face this closely before. Also – also – what I haven't seen shouldn't appear inside the dream world, so is this my own imagination? I'm fantasizing about this sort of thing without a single shred of self-awareness and even wondering about where such a situation would go? I don't recall having any experience with what happens afterwards, so what's gonna happen in this case then?

Leila could feel her face radiating heat. The turmoil in her heart was sending blood pumping through her cheeks until they turned red and swollen.

To land the final blow, Willem declared passionately: "You're the most important thing to me!"

All the warmth she felt disappeared in an instant, as if her heart had frozen solid. At the same time, her body moved.

Seniolis swung out forcefully, biting into Willem Kumesh's left waist and ripping through all the organs in its path as it tore out of his right shoulder.

The air squeezed out by Willem's ruptured lungs whistled as it leaked out through his mouth in a *whoosh*. He couldn't speak anymore, and it was impossible even if he wanted to. As he twitched, he teenage boy's surprise and curiosity could only show itself through his bulging eyes.

"Devils will pull out the wishes that their victims have hidden from inside their hearts, won't they? It's a clever move, but it also shows the limitations of your kind."

Leila wore a disappointed expression as she turned away from the remnants

of Willem's illusion. "What I want is that guy who values Aly and his family the most, and he'll never give up that number one spot in his heart no matter what happens."

She did feel a tiny bit of regret, but that was a different matter. Besides, even she had limits of her own.

"Whatever my wishes might be, if Willem changed his priorities so easily, there wouldn't be any value to speak of in it."

The world broke apart like a thin sheet of ice that had been stepped on. It seemed that her previous strike had easily destroyed the dream's core; not just her hometown's artificial scenery, but the Succubus's entire illusion was slowly dissolving.

"Well, even so..."

Leila stood amidst the disintegrating and crumbling world, pouting with a sense of disappointment, and quietly muttered to herself.

"You did... give me a good dream."

Part 7: The Most Important Thing

Looking at the results, it was yet another victory for the Regal Brave.

There'll probably be a bunch of tall tales in the newspapers again...

Thinking nonchalantly about it, Leila headed back to the Capital.

Willem laid dead, his corpse slumped onto the table.

No, wait. On closer inspection, he was just near the brink of death. In other words, he was so tired that his unmoving, lifeless state could easily be mistaken for a corpse.

A boy with a white cape noticed Leila as she came into the room, and closed the book he was reading. "I heard he ran into a Rust Dragon cub that woke up and started rampaging near Fistilas Lake on the way back from Gomag," he offered as explanation. "It could've been a disaster if he'd waited for reinforcements, and he didn't take a Kaliyon with him on leave, so it seems that he defeated the Dragon with his fists alone."

Defeating a Rust Dragon with one's fists alone. Leila didn't know whether to call it an act defying common sense or to just call it absurd. Or maybe just plain stupid. No one, not even the Regal Brave, would do such a thing. *He was probably just trying to act strong or fooling around, same as he always does, with that expression that says, "It's only natural; anyone who passed by would have done the same."*

"The mayor said that due to Willem's efforts, Fistilas Lake's beautiful scenery was preserved, and even awarded him a certificate of appreciation."

"All in all, he leads a pretty heroic life, huh..."

Regardless of what she might wish, her reality as the Regal Brave was an existence inseparable from desperate battle. She had already given up on many things regarding her life. As humanity's representative, she would get dragged to all sorts of fierce battles, throw herself into them and fight in them, eventually dying on some unknown battlefield.

On the other hand, Willem wasn't a Regal Brave. As a Quasi Brave, he shouldn't have had anything to do with that way of life. Even so, or perhaps because of that, he tended to take the initiative and fight with his life on the line in dangerous situations. It was like he had to keep fighting and giving everything he had in order to protect something dear to his heart.

Willem's fingers twitched. Slowly, defying his immobile body, he raised his head.

"Oh, you're still alive?"

"Don't write me off that quickly." His fingers trembling with effort, Willem reached into his bag and brought out a small leather bundle. He handed it to Leila.

"What's this?"

"A present from the Winter Festival."

Leila fell silent.

"...What's gotten into you?" she asked after a little while.

"There's no harm in it, is there?" Willem said tiredly. "Too many presents were made, so it's natural for some to be left over."

No matter how long she waited, he showed no signs of taking back the bundle. Leila meekly took it, all the while feeling butterflies in her stomach. She took a look into the bag's contents.

Inside the bundle was a Talisman. It looked like some indescribably ugly, terrifying creature, or perhaps a small dog.

"So weird..."

"Well, at least Wendell and Horace really like that kind of stuff."

The names sounded slightly familiar to Leila. They were lively children who lived together with Willem in the orphanage. "So would this by any chance be the same present you gave them?"

"That's right."

"You made it yourself?"

“Can’t I do that?”

“Well, I didn’t say you couldn’t, but if I were to describe it...”

Oh no, Leila thought. My face feels like it’s about to explode in joy.

“Absolutely terrible,” she remarked, smirking cruelly to mask her happiness.

Willem’s face fell back on the table, ringing out with a *bam*.

*

That day, Leila went back to the Regal Brave’s room in the Church’s quarters. She fell onto her bed, then rolled around on it unbecomingly, making a lot of noise.

“Haha... Ahahaha!”

She had received the same present that Willem had given to his family. She had been treated like *family*.

How significant was that? How valuable was that treatment? *“Her Highness the Princess” probably wouldn’t even begin to imagine such a thing, would she? That Incubus would never be able to recreate this experience, would it now? Ha, serves it right!*

It was the *best*. It was what getting first place felt like!

Leila rolled left, then right. However she rolled, she wouldn’t fall from the luxurious, extra-large bed. Bubbling with delight, she kept rolling and rolling from one side to the other.

Leila Asprey knows what emptiness is.

It wasn’t through knowledge of what the word “emptiness” meant, but rather through experience.

That time four years ago, the ten year-old Leila had experienced emptiness.

Do I really feel sorrow? Do I really feel pain? Do I really feel despair, rage, hatred?

“You *should* act this way. You *must* be that way.” The people around her had kept on repeating those expectations, slowly covering up the feelings and memories she’d held. When she finally realized it, it was too late. The girl who’d

only followed the wishes of those surrounding her and defined herself by those wishes had already forgotten her former self.

However—

Thud.

“Aaah!”

Even when the girl fell from her bed, the grin never left her face. The feelings she held were neither feelings that anyone would expect of her, nor know about.

Leila laughed.

From the bottom of her heart, she felt true happiness.

The flickering candlelight danced and threw off shadows. Leaned against a wall beneath them, Seniolis reflected a slight flash of light, its gleam appearing almost to be a smile.



Chapter 3: A Troll's Recollections

There were several people sitting in the cafeteria of the fairy warehouse.

That day's lunch had been mashed potatoes, fried pork, and vegetable soup, with oranges for dessert. Most of the fairies had already finished eating and rushed outside. The weather wasn't bad, making it a pleasant day to throw balls around.

"The past wielders of Seniolis..." A woman with light red hair held one finger to her chin and thought to herself for a while. "Willem once told me just a tiny bit of information about them. Would you all like to hear it?"

"Yes!" Lakish leaned forward eagerly, gravy from her unfinished lunch still clinging to the corners of her mouth. She then straightened abruptly and giggled nervously as Panival tugged her shirt, murmuring something about manners. Although one of the most coolheaded fairies, Lakish was still young. It wasn't uncommon for her to forget self-control if something very interesting happened to end up in front of her.

"Right, so!" The troll cleared her throat. "Way before Kutori, Willem used to know two wielders of that sword. One of them was his master, who taught him how to fight with a sword. While his master was exceptionally skilled at combat, he had a terrible personality, knew almost nothing of life skills, and looked like the shabbiest guy you could imagine! It sounds like he was also an impressively, ridiculously, powerful old man."

Belying Naigrat's description was something like a combination of deeply intimate understanding and a complete lack of comprehension. Both Lakish and Panival had confused looks as they stared at her.

"...Really." Panival broke the silence first. "He said that."

"Uh... yeah?"

Neither of them would have guessed.

"Anyway, the other wielder was his fellow junior disciple, he said. Like their master, she was exceedingly skilled in combat, had a horrendous personality,

and was overwhelmingly spiteful and capricious. She seems to have been a very impressive girl as well.”

Much like her previous description, all indications suggested that Naigrat both thoroughly knew yet was completely clueless about the words coming out of her mouth.

“Hey, come on, you guys! I’m not lying, you know!”

“Um...”

Lakish and Panival looked at each other, both wearing expressions of utter disappointment.

“The two of them,” Naigrat continued, “were so strong that they never once fell in battle, yet they were both helpless puppets of their tragic fate. When Willem brought them up, he talked with a lot of regret. He’d been by their sides the entire time, wanted to help them all the while, but ultimately wasn’t able to do a single thing... or that’s how he put it, at least.”

“...So that means Kutori was the third such person?” Panival swallowed some of her sandwich, crossing her arms. “If it’s like that, it makes sense that he gave his all to help her. It was his way of making up for how he failed before – even if it wasn’t the same person, he still wanted to let go of his regrets, huh?”

“Is that... *really* how he feels?” Lakish’s eyes dropped downwards. She could understand Panival’s reasoning, but to her it still seemed like a far too lonesome way to think. She wanted to believe that the person Willem Kumesh wanted to save wasn’t someone way back in the past whose name or face she didn’t even know, but rather *Kutori Nota Seniolis*, the one right there at his side.

And besides... Kutori was always so happy, back then, and Willem was so kind...

“Helpless puppets of their tragic fate, huh?” Noft, a girl slightly older than Lakish and her friends, gnawed casually on an unpeeled orange. “I dunno who came up with that sorta fancy wording, but the Kutori we knew being treated like some special person through no fault of her own *really* doesn’t sit well with me.” She grimaced. “Her or Lakish.”

“Mm...” Naigrat tilted her head slightly. “It probably isn’t like that.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I don’t think there’s any sort of fate that’s ‘bland’ or ‘average’. You don’t have to be selected by some sword to be special, because every single person in this world has an unique, precious fate. Kutori, all the people who existed in the past, and of course Lakish, all just happened to end up with the same kind of fate.”

“Hey, I didn’t mean it in that way-” Noft protested.

“But what we’re discussing is precisely that topic, isn’t it?” Naigrat smiled sweetly. “I’ll have you know right now, I’m absolutely opposed to treating the children under this roof unfairly or unequally, thank you very much.”

“I wasn’t talking about that kinda thing either... Bah, darn it! I’m all confused now!”

Naigrat poured them all gurgling tea, one cup for each person present.

“Something like fate is still just fate in the end. It can only provide a stage. Even if your choices are limited, however you want to perform on that stage is still up to you. Everyone has the right to hold their head up high and proclaim, ‘This is my own life, and the path I choose for myself.’”

She smiled. “Regardless of whatever fate you’re born with, your life belongs to yourself. Otherwise, wouldn’t you all have been cornered from the moment you were born and ended up as beings only worth pitying?”

“...Wow.” Noft frowned. “All that stuff you just said sounded like it came right out of Lan’s mouth.”

“As expected of someone who’s lived longer than us, her words must come from experience,” Panival nodded emotionally. “Because our lot in life is already predetermined, what’s important is knowing how to walk the path without feeling ashamed.”

A life with a predetermined endpoint... Lakish pondered the idea. Limited choices that should come up before me and those by my sides, sooner or later. How should I – Lakish Nyx Seniolis, newly minted fairy solder – live from now on? What will I have to face? What choices will I need to make?

Truth be told, she didn’t have any idea of what “tragic fate” she might have to

face eventually. It wasn't something she could sit down and think about so easily, anyway.

For example... just to fantasize for a little bit... what if I, like Kutori, met a man as handsome as Willem? What would happen then?

Her ideal person would be kind, yet possess great fortitude. He'd also have some weakness that couldn't be ignored, something that would make others want to stay by his side and support him.

Would I fight for that person? Even with fear slowly wearing away my very sense at self, could I still head towards the battlefield smiling?

I don't know. I still feel like it's not really supposed to be like that...

Well, whether it has anything to do with fate or not, Kutori's just special.

In the end, that was the conclusion she came to in order to avoid the question. Kutori had been a truly impressive, steadfast, person. Even when faced with a battle in which she had no choice but to throw away her life, she never lost herself to fear, and continued to live her daily life normally.

Kutori had never displayed a single hint of weakness, at least not in front of the children, so Lakish was unable to understand her.

She couldn't imagine what Kutori had been thinking when she'd needed to face her fate, nor her feelings at the time—

Her hands tightened around her small teacup forcefully. A small ripple appeared on the surface of the sweet milk tea.



Chapter 4: The Leprechaun of the Blue Sky

Part 1: Kutori Nota Seniolis

What am I? Kutori thought to herself. The question had frequented her mind recently.

She was a Leprechaun, a spirit who had failed to die properly, a form of unliving life, a weapon created to sacrifice everything and protect those who still lived.

She was attuned to the Dug Weapon Seniolis, fifteen years old, and born in the forest of the 94th Floating Island.

Last but not least, she began experiencing her first unrequited love a few days ago.

This is a story of that day.

“Can I really become stronger?”

“Even if you don’t want to, I’ll make sure that you do. I am your manager, after all.”

After Kutori Nota Seniolis woke up, she couldn’t leave her bed for some time. She twisted and turned, and even tried to faceplant into her pillow.

That wasn’t a dream, was it?

Kutori asked herself that over and over, at the same time repeatedly telling herself to calm down.

Yesterday – even though it felt like a long time had passed since then – under the starry sky, surrounded by glowing talismans on that hill, she made a promise with that person. She was going to win the battle and return home alive. Also, she was going to eat butter cake.

Now that she thought of it again, she had felt that it was quite romantic at the time; an extremely surreal experience. The subject of their conversation,

however...

Kutori sighed. It hadn't been romantic or surreal at all. Still, she had come away from it with the clear understanding that she was precious to him. Reminiscing on what had transpired, she couldn't help but grin widely.

"...Hee hee..."

Someone knocked on her door. "Hey," Willem's voice rang out from outside.

"Eh? Ahh?! What?!"

"Oh, you're up. Come on out then, let's do some morning exercise."

"...Huh?"

Kutori hugged her pillow tight, feeling confused.

Then she jumped down from her bed in a hurry and pulled on a cardigan sweater over her pajamas. Alarmed by her bed hair after a glance at the mirror, she quickly brushed it down with her hands. She tidied herself to look as decent as possible, all the while compromising here and there.

Alright, this should do, she told herself finally, opening the door slightly.

Willem stood there wearing plain-looking workout clothes, a few wooden sticks that he seemed to have picked up somewhere carried under his arm.

"Hey. Morning."

"G... Good morning. So, what did you mean by morning exercise?"

Willem looked at her with disbelief. "Didn't I mention it yesterday? Even if you don't want to, I'll make sure that you can become stronger."

"Eh... huh?"

"Anyway, go change into something more convenient and meet me behind the warehouse. Even if this isn't something worth hiding, it'll be hard to explain if we put it on display too much."

"Eh... huh... huh? Huh?"

Thwack. Thwack, thwack.

The crisp sounds of two dry wooden sticks smacking into each other echoed

through the clearing.

To a casual observer, this might be considered a slightly elegant afternoon orchestra. For the musicians themselves, however, it wasn't anything so pleasant. They were working hard.

Right, lower-right, diagonal upper-left, above-right, curving around then approaching from below – no wait, it's the right side again.

The oncoming stick would attack her from all sides. She had to use the stick in her hands to sweep aside, hit, parry or dodge the attack. It wasn't easy. Immediately after dealing with one attack, she had to pay attention to the next. She had to maintain her stance; swinging her arms wildly would not do. She had to keep moving her body, and more importantly, avoid disrupting the series of motions her body was going through.

It was hard to master the right time to breathe, to maintain her fluidity, to distribute her focus. In other words, it was hard in many ways to control her body. There was too much to process and not nearly enough time to think about it all, so she had to move by instinct rather than coherent thoughts. Even then Willem's attacks were coming faster and harder and it was taking all of her energy to keep up with him or maybe it'd be better to say she already hit her limits but really she couldn't think at all – *Ahh, ahhhh!*

Thwack thwack. Thwack!

"Agh!" Her exhausted legs buckled. There was a brief sensation of weightlessness. Her vision wavered, and she couldn't keep herself balanced. The stick approached her, the world spun, and after that-

"Waaah!"

Kutori fell solidly to the ground. Even though it was soft, it still hurt to land flat on her back.

"Your body movements weren't bad, but you need way more practice to maintain your body's overall balance," the young man's voice came, sounding to Kutori very much as if he was playing dumb.

Willem Kumesh stood outlined by the blue sky. He tapped his own shoulder with the stick he'd used just now, looking down at Kutori. He didn't seem tired

at all. “Your arms and legs were moving wildly, messing up your body’s movements. First you’ll need to learn how to tighten and loosen up your balance at different times.”

“Wha...” Kutori forced her ragged breathing back to a more regular pattern. “I really don’t understand what you’re talking about, you know.”

“Mm, really? Hmm...” Willem sighed. “Even if you don’t get it, I’ll make your body remember anyway.”

“You’re saying more things I don’t understand.” She felt bewildered. *Anyway, I need to get back up.*

Just as she’d propped herself up and was about to stand again, her body screamed at her in protest, her legs collapsed beneath her, and she fell back onto the ground. “...Huh? What happened...?”

Of course, she knew she was tired. But she *only* felt tired, so she hadn’t thought much of it, and certainly had *not* expected her body to outright refuse to obey her. “I-is this some sort of ancient magic?”

“Nope. I just made you move in an efficient way.”

Willem stretched out his hand, and Kutori obediently took it. “What I did just now to make you move efficiently contains the trick to spreading physical stress evenly across your body. Since you’ve been using muscles you normally wouldn’t use when moving around recklessly, you’re feeling a completely different kind of exhaustion that you haven’t felt before during normal training, right?”

He pulled her straight up onto her feet. “Fortunately the foundation of your physical strength is already well-developed, so we can boost your abilities to a certain level just by training areas where you need help in like what we did just now. Your Venom output while wielding the Kaliyons will increase exponentially once you’ve increased your own strength. This is a good sign,” Willem finished happily.

Kutori realized that he was acting very differently than how he was yesterday.

Willem Kumesh was a person from five hundred years ago, when the Emnetwyte were still around. In other words, he wasn’t supposed to exist in

this time, in this world that floated through the sky. His family, his friends, his lover that he might or might not have, had all been left behind in the long-gone past, and now he lived in this world as a hollow shell. It was possible that he'd been weighed down by that emptiness within his heart. Yesterday, his eyes had rippled with an indescribable dark glow.

Today, on the other hand...

"So you were actually serious when you said you were going to 'make me strong'..."

"Huh? Could it be that you don't trust me?"

"It's not like I don't trust you... But back then I didn't think you were for real..."

Though it was just barely there, today his eyes shone with hope for the future. She could sense the energy of somebody with the desire to live, who had decided to seize hold of the present because he had hope within himself.

"But geez, barely a full day's gone by since yesterday night until this morning, you know? This is way too abrupt. Isn't there a limit to your lack of romance?!"

"Of course," Willem replied bluntly. "Romance or fantasy are just ideas that place dreams over rationality. Besides, considering our aim is to defeat a powerful enemy in real life, we should always be in pursuit of rationality. The most effective way to make the impossible possible is to prove that 'it wasn't as impossible as we thought'."

"That's not what I wanted to hear..."

Kutori felt bewildered again, but also a little glad.

Willem was serious. He really wanted Kutori and the other fairies to overcome the huge Teimerre and return home alive. What's more, he was using every possible method he had in mind for her.

"Alright, now then..." Willem raised his head to look towards the edge of the training square. "Hey, you two over there!"

"Hmm?"

Aiseia, who had been sitting on a bench with her legs swinging to and fro,

darted a look in their direction with an expression akin to a cat just splashed by water. After a moment Nephren, who had been sitting beside her and looking at the clouds blankly, also slightly tilted her head at them with a small murmur.

“This chance is hard to come by,” Willem said. “Do you guys want to join us?”

They both looked at each other. “Are you talking to us?”

“There isn’t anyone else here, is there? If you’re interested, I can use this opportunity to teach you guys from the beginning.”

“I see... this does sound like something we should be grateful for.” Aiseia scurried over to them, shooting a look at Kutori. “But is it really okay? It’s a bit late for me to ask now after spying on you two, but is this some sort of secret Emnetwyte training method?”

Willem turned away from her and chuckled.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. Well, it’s true this was passed down to me from my master, so I can confirm that it’s not common knowledge.”

He rubbed his eyes lightly and grinned. “Let’s put it this way. Even if it was a secret art, as long as I choose the person to pass it down to, nobody has the right to say anything. If you three can get stronger in a team, then the chances of any one of you returning alive will increase too. How does that sound?”

Aiseia looked at Nephren, who nodded with an expression that probably meant that she was pumped up, and then they both looked at Kutori.

Well, it’s very important and asking him to help us will of course be better than not, but while that’s one matter, if our time together alone would decrease then it’d be really disappointing, so... to be honest I don’t want them to butt in, but if I said that out loud they’d tease me. I can’t say anything, so... Kutori nodded, wearing that kind of conflict on her face. “Yeah, he’s right. In that case, please teach us.”

Aiseia nodded as well, after seeming to weigh multiple things in her mind.

“Alright. We’ll start with simple warm-ups and that way get to know the strengths and weaknesses each one of you have.”

William picked up several sticks on the ground and tossed one each to them with a declaration:

“All of you, attack me together. It’ll be fine. Hit me with everything you’ve got.”

Part 2: Five Hundred Years

As befit its number, the 68th Island was located near the outer rim of Regul Aire.

Contrary to what one might think, its distance was not the reason it lacked any large cities that could be named. Instead of buildings, the island's surface was almost completely covered by vast forests. There were clear patches here and there, as well as various swamps hidden within the trees. The beastfolk calling this island their home had built small towns and villages, clinging to the edges of the massive forest.

One such village was located just a short walk away from the fairy warehouse perched at the edge of the floating island. Normally prohibited from free movement by the military, the Leprechauns were allowed to travel anywhere they wanted within the area of the 68th Island.

And if on occasion Naigrat was to slip them some money to buy snacks from the village's eateries... well, that too could be overlooked.

"What the heck is he made of?"

Aiseia slumped, letting her forehead bang into the table as she moaned.

"Don't ask me..." Kutori mumbled with her head hung low, exhausted beyond belief.

Nephren merely sat limply, almost like a lifeless doll. Her neck resting against her chair, she stared aimlessly at the ceiling. "...Ow..."

The three fairies gathered at the table stayed like that, their conversation paused for a moment.

Aiseia slowly raised her head. "He didn't even seem serious while he was dodging all three of us."

"Yeah..."

That was the truth. The attacks of three Leprechauns defending Regul Aire – Kutori Nota Seniolis, Aiseia Myse Valgalis, and Nephren Ruq Insania – had been

effortlessly deflected by that man. They had tried attacking one by one, simultaneously, or coordinating to launch staggered assaults.

None of it worked on Willem.

“He didn’t just find our weak points, he attacked them ruthlessly. What’s more, he fine-tuned every attack he made to drill the right way to dodge into us, didn’t he?”

“Yeah...”

That, too, was true. If the slightest weakness surfaced in their movements, Willem’s weapon would immediately lash out and strike them like a snake. It was easy enough to avoid the attacks as they came one by one, but if they lost a little balance or focus from dodging, they would be battered by the next attack. Through the entire training session, Willem had unerringly maintained that frustrating style and rhythm of attacks. As such, they had been forced to respond to every attack in a manner that wouldn’t affect their ability to dodge future attacks, again and again until the movements were burned into each fairy’s respective muscle memory.

These skills will come in handy against enemies who move quickly, Willem had told them.

“That guy said the other day that he’s almost dead, didn’t he? That he’s ridiculously injured and using even a little Venom might push him over the brink?”

“Yeah...”

That, of course, was also true. As a matter of fact, that very scenario had indeed happened yesterday morning and Willem had ended up teetering between life and death.

Naturally, he had managed to recover completely after just over twenty-four hours... although *recover* was perhaps the wrong term. Willem’s body remained the same as it had been: bones riddled with fractures, degenerated muscles wracked by atrophy, and barely-functioning inner organs. By all accounts, he should have been long dead by now.

“Seriously, what the *heck* is he made of?”

“Yeah...”

After her fourth fatigue-laden response, Kutori slightly raised her head. “I heard his injuries actually don’t have anything to do with using Venom, and whatever happened was so serious he wasn’t supposed to be able to move. It’s only because his body remembers all the martial arts training he had that he’s been able to avoid further straining his bones or muscles. He said that knowing how to move in the most efficient possible ways is how he’s even able to stand or walk at all.”

“Even though he’s that messed up, he’s still capable of training us like yesterday?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” It depressed Kutori to admit it.

“The most important things when fighting other people is skill and experience. You girls are specialized in killing Beasts, so it’s not a big deal for you to have that as a weakness,” Willem had said once. However true that might be, the reality of their situation made the three feel as if their ability to call themselves weapons had suddenly become very tenuous.

Aiseia grumbled. “I gotta say, it just might be impossible to actually kill Mr. Technician.”

“...No, that’s wrong.” Nephren suddenly returned to life, turning her face to Aiseia. “He probably broke down already, long ago.”

The other two fairies both blinked, taken aback by her outrageous statement. “He understands what happened to him, at least,” Nephren went on, “so he won’t break down further so quickly. But even he must have some limit. For now, it’s probably because of us that he’s—”

“Oho, you three? And already tired, too? That’s a rare sight!”

The apron-wearing Lycanthropos probably hadn’t intended to interrupt their conversation when he poked his head out from behind the counter at that exact time, but nevertheless that was just what he had done. “Oh, an overly excitable and hotblooded drill sergeant came to the warehouse, that’s all,” Aiseia replied, grinning into table wood.

“Huh? I don’t really get it, but seems like you guys have had it rough,” the

Lycanthropos said, striding over from behind the counter. Glasses filled with juice clonked as they landed, one after the other, on the Leprechauns' table.

"Eh?" Kutori looked at the three glasses. "But we hadn't ordered anything yet."

"You guys looked like you'd been working hard, so I snuck these out for you," he replied cheerfully. "Don't tell my boss, okay?"

"Oh?!" Aiseia jerked her head up as Kutori's shoulders jumped and Nephren's blank face shone brilliantly. "Don't mind if we do, then! Thanks, big guy! You're a real man!"

The door to the shop opened as the Lycanthropos chuckled, his fangs bared in a broad smile. "I'll leave those for you three to enjoy, then." He turned to welcome the new customers.

By the way, this particular shop might hang a sign outside suggesting it to be an "eatery," but as not many other stores were in business around these parts, it offered more than just food. In daytime hours some customers treated it as a coffee shop; when night rolled in, alcohol was served. Right now, just after midday, several tables were already filled by customers. Some had come to eat, others to drink tea and converse. It wasn't crowded, but neither was it empty. In other words, at this specific time of day, business was (subtly) booming.

"Oh?" Aiseia, who had shifted in her seat to look at the door, made a surprised exclamation. Kutori, her interest piqued, craned her tired neck to follow her friend's gaze.

"...Eh?"

Willem was there.

"Heeeeey, Tech—"

"W-wait!" Kutori hastily stopped Aiseia as she started to shout and wave Willem over. "He mustn't see us! We're all worn out and yet we're here eating stuff – what if he gets the wrong impression?!"

"What're you on about?" Aiseia raised an eyebrow. "He's why we're like this to begin with, isn't he?"

“What you’re saying might be right! Actually, it is! But, but...!” Kutori protested, shrinking into her chair and trying to make herself inconspicuous.

“Geez, how annoying. It’s important for him to see your real self, got it? Don’t be so worried. He’s like the silly father all silly fathers want to be someday, so you won’t disappoint him so easily.”

“Y-you might be right, but you didn’t have to say *silly father* twice... and why should he act like a father?! I’m not a little kid!”

“Ahhh, okay, okay, okay, I see now.” Aiseia smirked, one eye closed. “You’re a real mature, model fairy soldier, right? You don’t eat sweet food, or put sugar in your coffee, or read any kiddy books, huh?”

“I—” Kutori couldn’t find the words. “...That’s right, I am! You got a problem with that?”

“Noooooope. Even if you want to start acting like that’s true, I won’t get in your way, kay?”

“It’s not what you think it is—”

Just as Kutori was about to object further, her mouth was covered by Nephren’s small hand. “Ren?”

“Quiet.” The other fairy put a finger to her lips, motioning Kutori to look in the direction of the shop door. She turned just in time to see Willem walk to an empty table, accompanied by an Ayrantropos.

“Who’s that?”

The Ayrantropos was dressed handsomely in a white shirt with a rouge-colored suit vest. Going off his fur, he wasn’t young anymore, but instead might be over thirty years old – speaking in terms of the race’s relative age, he was just past his prime and entering old age.

“He...” Kutori searched her memory. “He doesn’t look like someone I’ve seen before.” That in itself wasn’t so unusual. The village might not be a large one, but regardless it wasn’t so small that everyone in it would be familiar. But...

“He doesn’t look like someone from around these parts,” Ren mumbled.

Kutori couldn’t help but agree. The 68th Island could be considered rural, and

none of the people living there would normally be dressed in so refined of a way... or at least, Kutori wasn't aware of anyone who was. Some occasionally did, but almost all of them were visitors from other Islands, typically merchants from some guild or another there to trade merchandise or renew contracts.

A merchant... from another Island? Insecurity jolted through Kutori. *If someone like that was looking for Willem, what would they want from him?*

"What are they talking about?"

"Er..." Aiseia shrugged helplessly. "Dunno?"

Kutori strained to hear the conversation, but the shop was just noisy enough and the distance far away enough that she could barely catch anything. If there was anything she learned, it was that the same reasons were why Willem didn't seem to have noticed them either.

"It's useless," she sighed. "I can't hear anything."

"What about Ren?"

"Give me a minute." Nephren closed her eyes, edging her body as close to the direction Willem was as her chair would permit. "...Only a little," she said, blinking.

"Alrighty, we'll just have to make do with what we've got." Aiseia prompted Nephren to continue. "Go on, what're they saying?"

"Mm... Understood." Her eyes closed again, Nephren tried her hardest to focus on the farther conversation. Kutori imitated her, straining her ears as much as she could. Trying to locate Willem and the Ayrantrobos in the midst of all the other voices was like searching for coins scattered at the bottom of a dark swamp.

An explosion of laughter erupted from a nearby table hosting a gaggle of drunk beastmen. The barrage of sound assaulted Kutori, leaving her dazed with ringing ears. Her heart boiled with rage, and she felt the almost irresistible urge to yell at the top of her lungs for everybody in the room to *shut up*. She grudgingly suppressed the impulse as Nephren began talking.

"...Heard...the 48th Island...rare technology...appreciate...?"

She kept her voice low, only saying the few phrases she heard. Kutori's burgeoning sensation of anxiety continued to grow.

"Ancient...easily...your..."

"Eugh, I can't make heads or tails of it," Aiseia sighed, scratching her head.

In the end, they weren't able to hear the entire conversation. Nevertheless, by putting together what Nephren had heard and filling in the blanks, they could imagine what it had been about.

"As I thought... he's headhunting, huh?" Aiseia murmured.

"No wonder." Kutori had come to the same conclusion. It was logical: Willem Kmetsch, the last living survivor of the Emnetwyte that had been wiped out along with the surface five hundred years ago. He was the practitioner of countless lost ancient arts, familiar with the culture back then – and, to Trolls, the best delicacy in their ancestors' diet. To someone who knew their goods, Willem would be the most valuable asset in existence.

"Well, I dunno where Mr. Ayrantrobos got his info from, but it's not like he was supposed to be taking care of kids in this kinda place anyway," Aiseia remarked.

"He mentioned rare technology, right?" Kutori asked. "Does that mean he's from a research center on another Island?"

"Good chance he is, yeah."

"B-but..."

She couldn't accept it. If Willem was taken somewhere else, that would naturally mean he wouldn't be with them anymore. If that was the case, she wouldn't accept it or believe it.

"He'll definitely reject the offer!" Kutori exclaimed. "After all, he's the Second Enchanted Weapons Technical Officer of the military, and the caretaker of the warehouse!"

"Eh, that might not be true. Mr. Technician's a sentimental guy, but if you think about the price his abilities could get him, it wouldn't be strange if he changed his mind, would it? Maybe the other guy pulls out a pile of money as

tall as a mountain and drops it in front of him, *boom—*” Aiseia made an exploding gesture with her hands, “—and that’s that.”

“That’s not going to happen! He won’t leave me – us – behind!”

“Who knows? Even if you can’t buy a guy’s heart with money, you can still change his mind with it, y’know?”

“That won’t... happen.”

She wanted to say it was impossible, wanted to believe that. After all, they’d just made a promise to each other. If he was to leave just as they’d connected with each other... she didn’t want to think that the time they’d spent together last night, the thoughts they talked to each other about, were all things he could abandon for money.

That’s right. That’s why she didn’t deny the theory that the Ayrantrobos was here to headhunt Willem. Truth be told, he *was* incredible. No matter how high the price they offered him, it would be more than worth it.

Even so, he won’t accept that. He’ll definitely reject it!

“After all, I already made a promise with him—*Mmf—*”

“Shh,” Nephren breathed softly, her tiny hands covering Kutori’s mouth.

There was movement at the table near the door, Willem and the Ayrantrobos were standing and smiling, shaking hands with each other.

“Does that mean... the deal went through?” Kutori asked.

How could it have?

“No...” She’d stopped breathing. “No way...”

She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t speak. Right in front of them, the two men left the shop. Willem’s tall silhouette shrunk and disappeared off the other side of the door, the distance between him and the girls growing ever greater.

“Um...” Aiseia coughed. “You could call this an accident, but... you could also say it’s what we expected, huh?”

She sounded as if she was trying to make fun of the situation, or maybe her incredulous voice meant she was simply dumbfounded. Nephren just frowned

slightly, not saying anything. And Kutori...

“This... isn’t true... is it...?”

Kutori fell into a trance by herself.

That evening, Tiat, one of the younger Leprechauns in the warehouse, saw something incredible in the kitchen.

The person she revered and the ideal adult soldier in her eyes, Kutori Nota Seniolis, was doing something strange to her black tea.

“...Kutori?”

Kutori was an adult, and being an adult meant being able to swallow bitter drinks nonchalantly. At least, that was what Tiat believed, and as a matter of fact, she had never before seen Kutori adding sugar or milk when she was drinking coffee or black tea.

But now, she’d just slipped something into her black tea.

What’s going on? Tiat wondered, intending to take a closer look. Just then, she realized that Kutori wasn’t holding a jar of sugar. Instead, the label stuck to the jar had one word written in a child’s lively handwriting: *Mustard*.

“K-Kutori!”

In front of a surprised Tiat, Kutori made to raise the teacup to her lips, but suddenly stopped and flashed a quick look around. When she noticed Tiat in the corner of her eye, her hands shook. By the expression on her face, one could see an indescribably tragic realization.

Then she drank the entire cup of tea in a single gulp.

“W...woah...”

Tiat’s eyes shone brightly as her exclamation left her lips. Her fists, which she had unknowingly clenched tightly, were sweating. *So that’s another way to drink black tea!*

She was just a kid, so she didn’t know adults also drank it like that. But since Kutori had done it, then it must be so – that was the conclusion Tiat came to, based on what she’d just seen.

Kutori didn't scream, nor did she roll on the ground. She simply, gracefully – at least, in Tiat's eyes – got up, taking the teacup and kettle to the sink.

“That's so mature...”

Tiat saw her off with admiration and respect.

Really, Kutori didn't mistrust Willem.

She understood him as a person. At least, she thought she did.

He might have weird thoughts, or plan something strange, but in the end he was an honest person. He wouldn't break a promise easily, and it was difficult to imagine that he might betray or abandon them.

Even with her concerns, Kutori knew that much. *I just have to trust him, and not be worried about anything. I understand that.*

It was late at night. The fairy children had gone to sleep long ago. Kutori was slouched over a table, negative emotions running through her. Self-disgust, powerlessness, shame, regret–

“Is anything troubling you?”

She raised her head.

“Black tea. The kind that won't keep you up even if you drink it just before you sleep. Do you want some?”

Naigrat was standing next to her, a tray in her hands. Kutori looked up at her face in a daze as the troll winked at her.

“...Yeah...”

Her throat was still tingling from the earlier mustard's impact. Making sure her voice didn't sound weird, Kutori nodded slightly. As she watched Naigrat pour light amber liquid into the teacup, she thought it seemed very much like something that was happening in a world far, far away.

“There's cake, too. I baked it during the day. Of course, some was saved for you.”

“...I don't want it.”

“Really? It might not be appropriate to praise myself, but the cakes I’ve baked taste really good, you know! I’m not going to surrender the stomachs of you children to Willem just yet.” Naigrat put plates on the table as she spoke, slices of the aforementioned cake atop them. A sweet fragrance wafted out, spreading slowly and lightly tickling Kutori’s nose.

It looks delicious. Her stomach grumbled, which must have merely been due to the spicy black tea she drank earlier. “I’m not a kid,” she protested weakly.

“Saying stuff like that means you’re still a kid, you know?”

“...No way. Then when do I start becoming an adult?”

“Mm, let me think. Maybe it’s when you say ‘I want to be a kid again’ seriously?”

What kind of reasoning is that? When she wants to be an adult, she’s still a kid. When she wants her childhood back, then she would be an adult. Didn’t that mean that no matter how much time went by, she could never become the person she wanted to be?

“What’s wrong? Go on, eat while you have the chance and nobody’s around to see. You’re still young, so you should act your age every once in a while, or else it’ll be too late, you know?”

“...I guess.” Kutori dropped her face into her crossed arms, not quite sure how to feel.

“Kutori,” Naigrat said after a moment, sitting at the table. “Do you remember Tuca?”

“Huh?” *What’s this all of a sudden?* “Of course... yes, I still remember her.”

Tuca Cog Rosaurem. A fairy soldier who once lived at the warehouse. As her name showed, she was attuned to the Dug Weapon Rosaurem.

She was three years older than Kutori, her hair was the same dark green color as her irises, and her lips were wide. Her laughs were overflowing with vigor. She was tall, and back then Kutori felt like she always had to start at her feet and work her way upwards to look at her face.

Two years ago, while fighting the Timere at the 96th Floating Island, Tuca

opened the fairy gate. She let her Venom go berserk on purpose, and died in battle.

“What about Orko?” Naigrat asked.

“Yes.”

Orko Ross Ignareo. A fairy soldier who was a year older than Tuca. She was attuned to the Dug Weapon Ignareo. Just around a month before Tuca, on another battlefield, she lost her life in a battle with the Beasts.

“Claquia, Ahor, and Catariela?”

“...Yes.”

Three names, mentioned one after the other. They were all the same. Fairy soldiers who once lived at the warehouse and left one day to never return.

“They were all good children.” Naigrat poured black tea into her own cup. “To tell the truth, I never once wanted to send any of them out. It’s my job, I know, and nothing will come of my willfulness. The fate of Regul Aire and the lives of a few girls can’t be compared at all...”

She took a long drink. “...That’s what I try to tell myself. But it’s never been very convincing.”

“Naigrat...”

“I don’t know if it’s because of how long I’ve been doing this, but I’ve started to accept having to send you children away, even though I haven’t convinced myself it’s right.”

Naigrat shrugged, stuck out her tongue, and put on an embarrassed smile. *Smiling for me*, Kutori realized. “I understand the way you feel, you know. Because you’re all battling the Beasts, I wanted to act like a grown-up woman who understood what’s right and what’s wrong, who can smile as she sends you guys off. My feelings of wanting to cry out and protect you have to be hidden from the younger children. When I can’t take it anymore, I go find a bear to eat and try to get over it.”

“...A bear?” Kutori felt like she’d heard something strange just then.

“Yup. I tried a lot of stuff, but bears are the best. I can forget about the things

I hate while hunting, seasoning it is quite challenging, and it's filling on top of that!"

"What do you mean?"

"Nutrition for the body and soul can be found in delicious food, you know?"

"Hey, wait a minute..."

Kutori felt as if the conversation had just changed topics.

"Actually, what I really wanted to eat were you guys, but that would kind of be missing the point, right? And what I *really really* want to eat are humans, but I haven't gotten *his* permission yet..."

Kutori was beginning to get the distinct impression that what they had been talking about wasn't related to this at all. "S-seriously, wait a minute."

"...Now that I talk about this, I'm feeling hungry."

"Let's just put that aside..." With a certain degree of force, Kutori returned to the original topic. "What were you talking about before, Naigrat? Do you mean you don't want us to fight anymore?"

"Hmm..." Naigrat skillfully added milk to her cup of black tea. She spun the teaspoon around and around, mixing white and amber into a spiral of colors. "That would be correct, but it isn't the whole story. To tell the truth, I haven't made up my mind yet. Is the hope Willem gave you all something I can believe? You may still need to open the gate, or perhaps you can win the battle without needing to open the gate. I still don't know what might happen in the end..."

She took out the teaspoon. "If I hoped so easily for a happy ending, it would be devastating if I was let down. In which case, giving up hope and going to hunt a bear instead means I might be less upset about it, don't you think?"

The way you put it, that does seem like a good point. The part about bears aside, Kutori could agree with everything Naigrat had said.

"Want some?" the troll asked abruptly.

"Huh?"

"Milk and sugar."

“...No, I don’t.” Kutori looked away.

Naigrat sighed disappointedly, then returned to the topic at hand. “That kind of thing is what’s been on my mind lately. I’m not used to being offered such hope, so I can’t help but feel afraid.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And then I realized something – the fear you’re feeling, as someone directly involved in all this, must be much stronger than mine. Right?”

Kutori fell silent. “That’s because it’s not an easy thing to open your heart,” Naigrat went on. “Even if you’ve decided to believe him, any tiny little thing that might occur would shake you. The most insignificant thing might stick in your mind, and you wouldn’t be able to forget it no matter what.”

She remained silent, unable to find any words to answer with.

“Did anything happen?”

And there was the main topic they had been approaching. “...It’s nothing,” Kutori replied, still unable to meet Naigrat’s eyes. “There’s nothing... nothing worth thinking about.”

“Oh, so something not worth thinking about happened, did it?”

Bullseye. “...That’s not what I said.”

“You do care about it, don’t you?”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t have to get mad about it, you know.”

“I’m not mad.”

“Someone once said that wanting to believe something and not believing in something from the bottom of your heart are two sides of the same coin,” Naigrat said. “But you should know, that’s not something to be ashamed of. Because you’re worried about something, you want to understand more about it, and that’s why your heart keeps beating. Or so they say, anyway.”

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“Do you want to know more about Willem?”

“I don’t—” Kutori forced herself to stop. “...Naigrat, do you know something I don’t?”

“Hmm, who knows?” She could almost see the troll’s grin. “If I don’t know what happened, I don’t think I could say anything one way or the other.”

Ah, geez.

It wouldn’t work. No matter what Kutori said, she wouldn’t be able to outtalk Naigrat. A child pretending to be mature, versus an actual adult. The victor in this battle was decided from the outset.

“Well, for example,” she began as a preface. “This is just an analogy, okay? For example, hypothetically, let’s say someone from another floating island offered Willem a job.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Do you think... Willem would accept it? The job?”

“Hmm...” Naigrat thought it over. “You mean abandon this warehouse and go somewhere else?”

“Yeah.”

“I think that wouldn’t happen even if Ballmen started falling over.”

She wasn’t wrong. Kutori, who had asked the question to start with, thought the same way. But even if that was true... “If they offered him good conditions, there might be a chance he’d accept, right?”

“Ohh? Such as?”

Kutori thought. “A sign-on bonus!”

“How would that be possible?” Naigrat giggled. “You know it as well as I do, don’t you? He’s not someone who would be tempted by money.”

“Well...” Kutori sighed. She couldn’t deny that.

“It isn’t as if he has *no* materialistic needs, but it seems like he just doesn’t see them as important. I heard he gave Grick quite a hard time because of that.”

She didn’t know who that was, but Kutori still had to agree with her. “Well, well... then how about beautiful girls?!”

“Ah? Doesn’t that mean it’s impossible for our warehouse to lose?”

Kutori didn’t feel as if she could judge that. “Past friends, then! Or a past lover!”

“I don’t think he can be any more alone in this world, you know? And even if he had someone like that in the, let’s say 28th Island, would he decide to abandon his beloved daughters to see them?”

Kutori found that hard to imagine as well, and she was beginning to come up short on ideas. “I wonder, why don’t you ask him yourself?” Naigrat asked. “Like you just did. I’m sure he’d tell you everything, you know?”

“I...”

Maybe that’s what I should do. It did seem like the right course of action. But even so, she didn’t think she’d be able to talk to Willem so directly.

What she was afraid of wasn’t her feelings of insecurity, but rather that those feelings would transform into reality. Because of that, she wasn’t able to tackle the matter straight on, nor was she able to move forward.

After a while, Naigrat spoke again. “Do you want milk with your tea?”

“Yeah.”

“And sugar?”

“Yeah.”

“Cake, too?”

“Yeah.”

Kutori’s new cup of tea was extremely sweet, and a little warm.

“...Hey, can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Naigrat, have you ever thought about becoming a child again?”

“Ha ha,” Naigrat laughed awkwardly. “That’s not something you just ask, you know,” she said, dodging her question with a vague answer.

Adults are so cunning, Kutori grumbled inwardly. Her thought was

accompanied by a significantly depressing realization. *If I'm thinking that way, it probably means I'm still a child after all.*"

She breathed a long sigh, jabbing her fork into a slice of cake and slipping it into her mouth. It was a baked cheesecake with a strong, sweet taste. A blissful sensation spread across her tongue.

Part 3: That Nameless Feeling

It was cloudy the second time they trained. Though the sky looked as if it might burst into rainfall with just a tiny push, it ultimately didn't hinder their session.

In her own way, Kutori had tried to give it her all. Her thoughts on the brink of disarray, her limbs on the verge of collapsing, her concentration in pieces – she gathered it all up, doing her very best to maintain her control and composure. In that regard, her training continued reasonably well.

However, as Willem pushed them to their limits, it became clear that “reasonably well” wasn't good enough at all. Unable to dodge his wooden stick, Kutori got whacked on her shoulder, waist, lower abdomen, inner thighs – painless hits so expertly aimed that she wondered how Willem could possibly be holding back his strength. Though the impacts didn't hurt, over time they disrupted her careful balance. Unable to recover, she helplessly tumbled onto the ground.

“That'll be all for today,” Willem said at last, tapping his stick on his shoulder. “You guys should get some rest now. And, Kutori...”

‘What happened to you?’ seemed to be the unsaid question as he looked at her. “You clearly put a lot of effort in today, but at crucial moments mistakes kept emerging in your movements. Weren't you fine yesterday?”

Kutori shifted and looked away, unable to meet his eyes. She understood the meaning behind his question.

Willem's “most efficient way of moving” could only be put to use after her body had learnt it to the point where it was a reflexive action. In order to get to that stage, she had to practice moving the same way consciously so that her body would become accustomed to it. However, in her current condition her feelings were so chaotic and unbalanced that she didn't even understand what she was thinking about, and therefore her movements were those of someone who didn't understand what they were doing.

“Did something happen to bother you after yesterday's training?”

Such a clueless question made Kutori's blood turn hot and heavy as it rushed to her head. "Sh..."

"Sh...?"

Shut up, shut up, shut up! Who are you to even ask that?! Do you even have any sense of shame? Yeah, of course, of course something's bothering me and it's your fault! If you're so aware then don't stop halfway and figure out you're the problem here! Or – or is it like what I thought – you're really going to leave this place so you don't even care?!

She couldn't get the words out. Her thoughts, unable to escape, repeatedly banged and echoed off the sides of her mind, filling her head until it was fit to explode.

My face must be completely red right about now. It was only natural for that flash of unneeded self-awareness to come to her.

"Oh? What's wrong?" Willem stretched his free hand down towards her. "Can't you stand up—"

Her emotions finally burst out. "*Shuhmorodiot!*" Kutori yelled, not even understanding what kind of sound had just left her. She leapt up and made a run for it as fast as she could.

No sooner than she'd left him in the dust, her silhouette vanished into the forest. Willem stared bewilderedly after her rapidly diminishing shape.

"...What the heck was that about?"

"Oh, Mr. Technician, don't you realize?" Aiseia, still lying facedown at his feet, laughed like a teacher indulging her foolish student. "There are bizarre and strange things in this world that you're better off not understanding."

"A troublesome age," Nephren mumbled, flat on her back.

Willem tilted his head, going over each word they'd said, until he arrived at a single solid conclusion. "I really don't understand young women."

"Haaaaah... that's so typical of you." Aiseia shook her head in wonderment, then pushed herself up with a *heave-ho!* "Anyway, you probably don't need to go after her."

“Hmm?” Willem, who was about to go after Kutori, stopped and turned. “Er, isn’t it bad to leave things as they are now?”

“Nah. That girl’s the type who bottles up her frustrations by herself, y’know?” Aiseia’s eyes went past him to the trees. “She’s a hard worker, so even if she keeps on like that, she’d eventually figure out her problems with some strength of will and perseverance. Still, if something comes along that’s too much for her mind to handle, she’ll scream all *Waaaaah!* and take off like that.”

“...I see. Going *Waaaaah!* and taking off, is it?” Willem nodded as if he’d understood perfectly and was fully enlightened.

Aiseia sighed. “Okay, basically, she’s a smart one, ‘right? She’ll calm down sooner or later and come back. If nothing else, she’ll realize acting silly isn’t gonna help anything.”

“I see. That’s pretty logical...” Willem narrowed his eyes. “Hang on. Who’s supposed to be the eldest out of you guys, again?”

“Yahaha, don’t you realize that’s impolite? But anyway, Mr. Technician...” Aiseia slowly got up. “Instead of chasing that girl, I was hoping you might handle our little problem here first. How about that?”

“The problem?”

“In other words, reveal the answer to the riddle. After all...”

She lowered her voice. “It won’t be as fun if we just drag this on and on, right? It’s too bad Kutori ran away before asking anything. How would you resolve that little bit of foreshadowing from yesterday?”

“Huh? What foreshadowing?” Willem frowned, not understanding.

As for Nephren, it was hard to know if she was listening to their conversation or ignoring them. Having already given up on getting to her feet, she just stared at the gloomy sky alone.

Deep in the forest, Kutori finally stopped running and looked behind her. Even though she’d secretly hoped he would, Willem hadn’t chased after her.

Maybe he abandoned me. That scary thought attacked her mind. *Willem would never take care of a troublesome and weird little kid like me forever.*

What if that's what he's thinking?

No, that's impossible.

But who knows? That could be it.

Kutori knew that fear would pour into her heart and she wouldn't be able to stop it. No matter how flawless her sensibilities and rationality were, it didn't affect fear. At best, it could diminish or briefly halt the anxiety she already felt.

She thought about how she had first met Willem at the Market Medlei. Their reunion when Willem had been ambushed by Panival, fallen, and ended up dripping wet. How he looked when he played with the little ones, and how he wore an apron while preparing desserts in the kitchen. The time she had vented all her feelings to him while she was in the medical bay. *And after that... A—after th—that...*

It was too embarrassing for her to even think about it. *T—the time he... touched me all over... my body... and then, um, and then there was, there was— ...When did I start having these feelings?*

She'd probably had a favorable impression of Willem ever since their first meeting. After that, as she learned more of his character and past, she had felt empathy, respect, sympathy, and admiration towards him.

But when did she start having deeper feelings towards him? That wasn't as easy to figure out. She couldn't find one clear incident that triggered those feelings.

Kutori tried to think about it, but no matter what, the answer refused to reveal itself.

In a book she had read once, one passage had declared, *Love is like a bottomless swamp. By the time you become aware of it, you've already sunken into it. No matter how much you struggle, you will never be able to escape it.*

...Ah. So that's what it is?

If one were to ask her when it started, she wouldn't be able to answer. By the time she'd become aware of it, it was already this way.

When she was being embarrassed by Aiseia and Nephren in the study room.

When she woke up from Venom poisoning and cried at him. When she was about to kiss him but he ran away instead.

The feelings she'd always had from the beginning had changed bit by bit every day. While they changed, they also grew, even up to today, even when it might already be too late.

If I told the others about this, maybe they would be shocked.

Kutori Nota Seniolis was in love.

The girl finally named that nameless feeling in her heart.

Part 4: The Gray-Haired Leprechaun's Case

Now, let us take a brief digression from Kutori's story so that we may delve into the girl named Nephren Ruq Insania.

Leprechauns, or rather fairies in general, are a sort of natural phenomenon. Strictly speaking, they are nonliving beings, and as such they do not have parents. Leprechauns appear naturally in unpopulated areas such as forests. Afterwards, should the Winged Guard successfully find and safeguard them, they will be taken to the fairy warehouse and undergo training to become weapons.

Most Leprechauns remember their birth. That moment when *nothing* becomes *something* and the very first memories of their existence, when they only knew primitive urges just before they developed a mind of their own. Perhaps these instincts originated from the vital ingredient in creating a Leprechaun: the last feelings in the heart of a young child's soul.

In Nephren's case, what lingered in her heart was a strong, innate feeling of nothingness. It was the discomfoting understanding that this world was on the brink of destruction, that everything and anything could vanish at any given opportunity, that things that existed now might be gone in the blink of an eye, that your foothold might dissolve in an instant and you would fall into darkness, and most importantly, that the person known as Nephren Ruq Insania might shatter to pieces, becoming one with the wind and disappearing into the sky.

Of course, only the newborn Leprechaun acts based on these thoughts. As their mind and body matures and their heart learns to rationalize, their original impulses slowly dissolve.

However, Nephren's memories of the fear she had felt didn't vanish so easily. It remained engraved into the depths of her soul, tormenting her mind endlessly.

I can't enjoy anything in this world, because it could all be lost without warning at any moment.

I can't love anything in this world, because it could disappear without warning

at any moment.

Nephren did not care about herself, nor her place in the world. While one could argue this particular trait was common among most Leprechauns, it was especially true in her case. She felt so hollow, so empty of substance, that the idea that she existed was in itself a contradiction.

A man named Willem Kumesh came to the warehouse.

At first, Nephren wasn't interested in him. Even though he professed his desire to remain at the warehouse, he was ultimately just another errand boy for the military. Her thoughts on the matter were simple: *He probably won't accomplish much, and he'll get bored quickly.*

After a few days, she began to realize that she might have been wrong. *Only an errand boy for the military.* Going off what the documents said, that should have been correct. But the aforementioned errand boy didn't seem to care about such things. He displayed no interest nor responsibility regarding his original job, and showed strangely gentle treatment towards the fairy children. She wasn't sure what to make of it all.

There was something else. Whenever Kutori happened to glance at him, a strange glint was always in her eyes, one that Leprechauns probably shouldn't have. It wasn't difficult for Nephren to notice.

"Are you interested in him too, Ren?"

"Not really. I just thought he was kind of a mysterious person."

What she'd told Aiseia was her honest thoughts at the time. It was clear that his presence would somehow cause the fairy warehouse to start changing. More than just that, when she was near him, Nephren had begun experiencing an odd sensation that made it impossible to take her eyes off him.

All of these incidents led up to what Nephren was currently doing on the roof of the fairy warehouse. Night had fallen, and silence blanketed the usually bustling warehouse. Her arms resting on the rooftop railing, she gazed blankly up at the stars.

The night sky, black and cloudless, resembled a bottomless hole. Just by

looking at it, one could imagine themselves falling into endless darkness.

Nephren thought that times like this were suitable for thinking deeply on certain subjects. It was also a good opportunity to pass the time without thinking about anything at all.

“You’ll catch a cold if you stay out here, you know.”

A scarf was draped around Nephren’s shoulders with care. She looked back over her shoulder. A tall woman stood there, smiling gracefully.

“Is there something troubling you?” Naigrat asked.

A complicated question. “Does it seem like there is?”

“Maybe,” the troll hummed. “I’m always paying attention to you girls. My instincts started sounding the alarm loud and clear, so I came here right away. If I had to guess...”

She cracked the triumphant grin of someone who’d just solved a mystery. “Given you’re stargazing, I suppose it might have something to do with the worries you used to have when you were younger? You used to say the world was approaching its end.”

“...Your guess is good, but it’s not that.” *How can I explain?* Nephren turned her head back to the sky. “It’s about Willem.”

“Oh?”

“I think he has an unbelievable pair of eyes. Even though it’s the first time we’ve met each other, it’s as if I already know him well.”

“Oooh, is that so?” Naigrat seemed oddly happy. “Could it be that you also fell for him at first sight-”

“No,” she said without hesitating. “It’s not that. I think... he’s probably the same as me.”

“...Ah.”

She heard footsteps as Naigrat walked up besides her. The rooftop railings were designed for fairies. Next to the troll’s tall stature, they looked miniscule, almost dainty.

After a short period of silence, Nephren explained, “Willem understands that the world isn’t at all stable. He’s experienced it himself, the feeling of having everything vanish after taking your eyes off them for just a moment. He’s lost his sense of self, and hasn’t found it even now.”

In comparison to Nephren, whose feelings were merely baggage brought over from her previous life, Willem’s burden must be much more bitterly heavy. He had actually lost the world he once lived in. He once closed his eyes, and by the time they opened again, everything he knew had disappeared.

“Despite that, he’s laughing. He hasn’t forgotten or overcome his own uncertainties. He’s still taking it all on himself, faking happiness all the while. Not just his body, but his heart is devastated. It wouldn’t be surprising if he were to break down in the next moment.”

She shook her head slowly. “I... don’t know how to act around him.”

“Really?” Naigrat asked. Nephren nodded. “So then, Ren, what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Oh, no, I don’t mean what you’re *going* to do. I mean what you *want* to do?”

“...I’m not sure.”

Nephren never quite got used to the idea of having desires. While she could follow instructions and obey orders, the instant she was expected to do something based on her own will or urges, she immediately started hesitating.

“Ren, do you like Willem?”

“I told you before. It’s not like that.”

“No, I don’t mean *that* that. Instead of thinking of it from the perspective of a girl towards a boy, treat it in a more general way. Do you like him?”

“I... at the very least...” Nephren struggled for an answer. “...I don’t dislike him.”

“Okay!” Naigrat clapped her hands abruptly. “Then why don’t you be his companion?”

It was an incomprehensible request. Nephren looked up at Naigrat's completely serious face. "What do you mean?"

"Two individuals accompanying one another would naturally be more at ease than if they lived alone. If they share the same feelings, then they'll be able to lean on and support one another, even as just friends."

"Is that how it works?"

"It is."

A memory came to Nephren, of what had happened in the reference room just a few days ago. *Why couldn't I leave Willem struggling with mountains of files alone? Why did I actively start a conversation with him, and end up helping him? What was my reason for doing unfamiliar work to the point of completely exhausting myself and falling asleep in his lap – and why did I feel comfortable all the while?*

Naigrat had said that if two individuals felt the same way, they could support each other. *Does that mean by staying at his side, I could gain emotional support as well?*

"Though I'll never give up trying, I can't give Willem that level of emotional care," Naigrat sighed. "If you're willing to help, Ren, you'll have my deepest gratitude."

"I..."

Nephren looked at the starry sky. From her position on one rooftop of one floating island, she watched the vast, overwhelming emptiness that accompanied this world at all times.

"I understand. I'll give it the best of my capabilities and learn from the mistakes I make."

"Thank you."

Naigrat's gentle voice almost sounded like a whisper in her ear.

Nephren discovered Willem in the game room. He was playing with Tiat and a few other fairies, gathered around an colorful board game.

Try to be at his side...

Obeying Naigrat's suggestion, she nestled up against his back.

Willem stiffened, then slowly turned his head. "What is it?"

"I'm doing an experiment. Don't worry."

"...Really."

Nephren wasn't sure how he felt about it, but Willem only nodded and didn't pry.

She took the opportunity to examine her feelings in her new state. *Hmm. Indeed, it's not a bad sensation. In fact, if the person I'm staying close to also feels comfortable with this, isn't it actually quite efficient when you think about it?*

"Hii-yah!"

"Here I come!"

Collon pounced on them, probably because she found their positions funny. Pannival jumped after her, likely just to add to the commotion. After that, the situation escalated quickly as the other fairies – Kanna, Almita, Jeanette – followed, letting out happy and bizarre-sounding cries as they joined the ever-growing pile.

Being little kids, they naturally weren't heavy by themselves. However, as the numbers added up, it starting becoming unbearable for Willem. He exclaimed in surprise and pain, tilting forward under the fairies' weight.

Nephren suddenly felt someone's eyes on them, and shot her gaze towards the hallway to see Kutori standing there.

"I really don't know what to do with you all."

"What in the world are you doing?"

"Geez! It'll be bad for their education if you mess around with the kids so much!"

In her mind, some things she could imagine Kutori saying emerged. Instead, after noticing she'd been seen, Kutori turned silently and hurried off towards

another room.

“...Hm.” *I guess Kutori is still dealing with her own complicated feelings as well.* Ordinarily Nephren would have gone after her to smooth things over. However, as one of the two people making up the foundation of this fairy tower, she couldn't move her body.

“Woaaaaah!”

“Ohhhh!”

“Wooooow! We're sooo high up!”

Even though his entire body shook uncontrollably, Willem refused to give in. Despite the fact that he'd been pushed far past his physical and mental limits, he forced himself to hold up the small Leprechauns with his back and shoulders alone. He pretended to be calm, even flashing a joking smile, when he should have been rolling around in pain.

I don't want him to break down. Nephren closed her eyes and made up her mind. *So I'll try my best to stay by his side and support him.*

“Oh? Ohhhhhhh? You guys seem to be having a great time!”

Nephren's eyes opened. This time, it was Naigrat who stood in the hallway.

She slowly approached them, her fingers wiggling maniacally. “I'll have to join the fun too!”

“N-No, wait, think about this, will you? I won't be able to handle that!”

Willem's near-serious pleas were gleefully ignored. “Here I cooooooome!”

“Stop!”

Time seemed to slow down. Nephren observed it all: Willem's tearful shout, the happily shrieking mountain of fairies, and Naigrat leaping through the air with her arms outstretched.

I have to try my best to stay and support Willem. Otherwise, who knows when or how he'll fall apart.

As Nephren and Willem collapsed amid a flurry of colors, becoming cushions for all the children (and a troll) atop them, she etched her determination into

her heart.

Part 5: The Ayrantrobos Man

The third morning since the start of her training with Willem found Kutori washing her face with cold water.

Calm down, she told herself. Just calm down, alright?

She could acknowledge that recognizing her feelings were those of love was a huge step forward for herself. On the other hand, if it meant she started following Willem everywhere and got in other people's way, that wouldn't be so good of a thing. What's more, Aiseia or Naigrat would probably be watching her fondly as she trailed after Willem. Just thinking of the look on their faces was enough to make Kutori bristle with resentment.

Willem floated through her mind briefly. She felt her cheeks growing hot, and hurriedly splashed more cold water onto her face to drive away the heat by force. *As for the matter of Willem possibly being headhunted by merchants from other islands and leaving the warehouse because of it...*

She'd had ample time to calmly think it through, and formed a definite plan of action. *Naigrat's right. I just need to ask him about it.* She felt brave enough to take that step now.

"Collon! Wash your face properly!"

"I don't wanna! It's coooold!"

"I'm in complete agreement. I don't wish to touch such cold water when it's also cold outside."

"Hey! Y-you two! Don't run away!"

Noisy footsteps came from the hallway behind her, accompanied by familiar voices shouting. *Those children, messing around as usual. It's probably about time for me to step in.*

First, Kutori would turn her head around and shout after Tiat and her group. Taking advantage of the fact that they'd frozen in their tracks, she would put both of her hands on her waist, and strike a threatening pose. *"Don't run in the hallways. Wash your face and brush your teeth carefully. You guys have to be*

good role models for the little ones."

That's right. Kutori nodded to herself. *If I act like I normally would, I can take back my normal self.* She finished wiping her face with a towel, and was about to turn around when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the figure of Willem Kumesh. He was wearing his usual army uniform, a coat he used whenever he had to go out draped over it.

"...Oh..." How handsome.

The thought had instantly materialized in Kutori's mind. *Love really is scary. Could it be that easy for it to blind you once it's there in your heart?* She'd seen the clothes Willem wore when he went out a few times before, should be used to it by now, and yet there was a moment when she lost herself looking at him.

"...Huh?" A peculiar sensation gripped her heart. *Something's not right.*

It was almost time for their daily swordfighting practice. Judging by the routine of the last two days, Willem wore plain clothes when training.

Could it be...

What Willem wore when he went out was completely different from the clothes he trained in. Was he planning to go somewhere? Do something? *Could it be... C-could it be...?*

The anxious feeling, which should've been extinguished just a few seconds earlier, raised its ugly head once again. All thought left Kutori's mind as she ran down the hallway in a full sprint, her hands squeezing the towel she'd just used to wash her face.

"Oh, Kutori." Willem looked up, smiling. "Good timing, I had something to tell you. Today's training is postponed, so take a rest and build up some muscle..."

Kutori refused to hear him. Coming to an abrupt stop in front of Willem, she raised her head in complete seriousness, a tight expression on her face.

"...Don't train by yourself, and don't use Venom no matter what. That would mess with your natural healing-"

"Where are you going?" Kutori asked, her voice a tiny whisper that sounded like it'd risen up from the inner depths of hell.

“There’s some things I’ve got to take care of. I’ll be gone for a while.”

Willem glanced his head towards the door as he spoke. She followed his look to see a familiar-looking Ayrantrobos man standing there. Sensing their gaze fixed on him, the man removed his hat in a simple greeting.

“No...”

Kutori’s body moved against her will again. She dashed between the two men and turned to block Willem’s path, her arms stretched out. “No! Don’t go!”

“Wha-”

“Please don’t go! We made a promise! You said you’d wait for me! I’ll work hard, and return safely! So...!”

While it may be somewhat redundant to mention it, this event unfolded in the morning. As one may know, morning is the time of day when everyone runs out of their rooms in a hurry to prepare for the rest of the day.

“I can’t do without you! Without you, I won’t be able to fight, or win, and I won’t be able to return home! I... I can’t live without you!”

The dam shattered as Kutori’s emotions flowed freely. All around them, the Leprechauns who had been washing their faces or running down the hallway, as well as a troll carrying a laundry basket, all stopped to stare at her.

“...Er...”

Willem’s eyes darted back and forth. He scratched his face. Pure confusion colored his expression.

“What in the world are you talking about?”

As it turned out, that cat – *no*, Kutori corrected herself. That man’s name was Lamkeldi Rimashenka. Apparently he was born on this very floating island, but left some twenty years ago to make a living by himself and follow his dream of big city life. Just as Kutori and the others had thought, he became a tobacco merchant on the 13th Island. Thanks to a combination of business skill and luck, he seemed to have had a successful career. When his mother passed away a month ago, he took the opportunity to hand his well-off business to a younger fellow, then used public airships and private ferries to return to the 68th

Floating Island.

In the home that he was away from for twenty years, a wall clock had stopped working.

All things have expiration dates; that is a law of nature. To forget about one's home and family for a long time and only insist on remembering them in one's old age might seem somewhat shameless. Even so, Lamkeldi said the clock was a precious heirloom brimming with memories from him and his family, and hoped to listen to its chime once more.

Now, they were in the living room of the Ayrantrobos man's house.

"As you can see," Willem said, "Even if it's just a wall clock, there's still plenty of complicated mechanisms inside."

He opened up the clock with a *snap*, revealing just what he'd said would be there: an overcrowded mess of winding devices, screws, and gears. "Not to mention, it's powered by anachronistic machinery instead of crystals. No amateur could fix this thing."

Willem started skillfully removing pieces one by one. Out came rusted gears, crooked axles, and a sound comb missing a corner. Kutori stayed silent, watching him work.

"All the same, he still wanted to fix it, and I guess Naigrat jumped at the chance to mention my name. 'He seems talented in all sorts of ways, so I bet he'd even be able to fix mechanical equipment!'" Willem shook his head. "Pretty ridiculous logic."

Of course her reasoning was absurd, but the man actually fixing the clock in front of everyone seemed just as absurd. Wasn't it supposedly something amateurs couldn't fix. And yet, in his own words, "It's like a kid's toy compared to dug weapons."

How I wish all the technicians in the world could hear that. It'd be even better if they were all holding rocks perfectly suited for throwing.

"...Anyway, that's what I told Aiseia and Nephren."

"Huh?"

“You didn’t know? They forced me to spill the beans after yesterday’s training.”

“No... I didn’t.” Kutori shot Aiseia a menacing glare. The other fairy looked away, snickering. “This is the first I’ve heard about it. Why would that be, I wonder?”

“Heh heh.” Aiseia smirked. “I figured if we kept it a secret from you, it might just lead to some *very interesting* developments...”

“What?!”

Aiseia raised her hands defensively. “Hey, it did, didn’t it? Thanks to you not knowing, you became so much more honest with yourself! That confession you made before sounded pretty nice, dontcha think? I was hoping you’d go even further, though, like maybe hugging him... or pushing him down? Either way it’d probably go well, and your feelings have been made clear to Mr. Technician too, so it’s a happy ending for everyone, ain’t it?”

“Heck no!”

“Aw *man*, and I was so sure too...” she dropped her hands, the picture of mournful sorrow.

“Even if you hadn’t done anything, I’ve always been honest! My feelings are always clear!”

“Yahahahaha, don’t get mad, don’t get mad! It all worked out fine in the end! Besides, you look more appealing when you try to smile, y’know?”

“Who’s the one with the nerve to smile right now?!”

Still laughing, Aiseia fled as Kutori chased after her.

“Hey, hey, don’t get so rowdy in another person’s house,” Willem absentmindedly scolded them, his attention never leaving the mechanical device. Standing beside him, Nephren sighed softly. “Sorry, for all the fuss, Mr. Lam.”

“Oh, it’s quite fine, my dear boy, it’s fine. This place has been quiet for far too long. It’s happier to be livened up so.” The Ayrantrobos narrowed his gentle amber eyes. “I must ask, are the girls all your daughters?”

“Er, you could say that,” Willem said, rubbing the side of his head. “We aren’t related by blood, but they’re all precious family to me.”

The Ayrantrobos nodded cheerfully. “I see, I see!”

Nephren gazed at the side of Willem’s face she could see while Aiseia and Kutori ran around.

Willem worked meticulously, removing all the broken parts he found and replacing them with new parts they had to order, until at last the repair work finished at exactly two in the afternoon.

Kutori grumbled, bright red from embarrassment. Aiseia sat besides her, ruffling her own hair. “It’s all my fault, all my fault,” she said happily, no trace of guilt whatsoever in her countenance.

“Alright, if everything works as it should, this last one should do it...”

The clock’s second and hour hands overlapped at the top of its face. There was a slight clunking noise. After a while, rich tones spilled forth from the device.

Willem nodded firmly. “Good.”

“Oh? It’s actually a pretty nice tune, isn’t it?” Aiseia said, her messier-than-usual hair ill befitting her suddenly somber expression.

“I remember this song.” Kutori had heard it before. A nursery rhyme passed down by the Floating Islands ever since ancient times. In the common language, it was called...

“...Place of Desired Return.”

She had the lyrics memorized by heart. A singularly ancient song of war, it told the story of a soldier on a battlefield far from home writing a letter to his family. Its contents included gratitude towards his parents, love towards his brothers and sisters, and deep feelings towards the people he grew up with.

There are many things I want to do in my hometown. Therefore, though it might take some time, I will definitely return alive. The letter ended in that way.

Ultimately, was it sent? Did that soldier successfully return home? None of

this was mentioned in the song.

“...Thank... thank you...” Lamkeldi murmured. Large teardrops welled up in the corners of his eyes, then began flowing down his face. “Ah...”

He wiped them clean. “I do apologize for making a fool of myself. I recalled a great number of things from long ago. My, tears sure do become difficult to hold back once you get to be my age...”

Willem chuckled quietly. Kutori couldn't tell what he was thinking, but she felt as if the way he laughed held a strange kind of sadness.

Part 6: Place of Desired Return

“We don’t have much time left,” Willem said without preamble.

He and Kutori were the only two people in the clearing they’d taken to calling their training grounds. Nephren and Aiseia had been told to repeat their exercises from previous days for today instead of joining them. In Willem’s hands was the stick he always wielded, but Kutori held something different this time: the dug weapon whose invincibility and strength exceeded all others, Seniolis.

“Today, you’ll be going through a bit of special training,” Willem’s expression was more serious than usual. “A way to wield your Kaliyon to its fullest potential in an intense battle, executing powerful techniques you can only use in that sort of situation. If I couldn’t give you my undivided attention, I wouldn’t have the confidence to properly teach you how to pull it off.”

“It’s that difficult to use?”

“In terms of power level? Very. It’s such a ridiculously overpowered technique that I can’t demonstrate it for you.”

...*Huh?* “What do you mean by that...?”

“It has some absurd requirements. They say you need to have the blood of a legendary swordmaster, or be born with a curse running through your veins, or have your loved one brutally murdered, in order to use the technique.” Willem sighed. “I was born a normal person, without any ability to obtain those qualifications. Unreasonable, don’t you think?”

“Um...” The things Willem bitterly talked about were starting to fly over her head.

“Five hundred years ago, I tried to pull it off by copying what I’d need to do, step by step. In the end, I couldn’t activate it completely and only managed to flatten half a mountain, plus the backlash from forcing it through despite not meeting the requirements nearly killed me. If I hadn’t been petrified first, I’d probably have died right there and then.”

Is he joking? Can anyone even laugh at that? “...You want me to try and use something like that?” Kutori asked weakly.

“Yep. You just happen to fulfill the requirements perfectly. Even though I can’t really grasp the complexities of the technique, as long as I can teach you Venom control and basic sword techniques, you should be able to master it completely.”

...Willem’s strong. Not just in terms of fighting, but as a person as well. Listening to him, Kutori came to that conclusion.

This is something not even he’s able to do fully, but he’s letting me inherit it and use it.

“...That being the case,” Willem said, “as we’re running low on time, you’ll have to try and learn everything I’m about to teach you in one sitting.”

“Alright.” Kutori nodded, filled with determination.

“If you lose focus for even a moment, there’ll be someone dead right here, right now, before the actual battle. That someone being me.”

“Alr... what?” She didn’t need to know that part.

“Get ready.” Willem dropped into his combat stance, raising his stick.

“I-I understand!” Kutori angled Seniolis at him, releasing some Venom into the dug weapon. As if it was waking from a deep slumber, light gradually began to leak through the fissures running through its blade.

“...Lemme ask you something,” Kutori said, appreciative of the opportunity to be spawled limp on the ground. Willem grunted in curiosity, leaning against a nearby tree with his shoulders sagged in exhaustion. “In the past, did you have... any kind of girlfriend?”

“What? Why are you asking all of a sudden?”

“I want to know, since it’ll affect my plans for the future.”

“How would...” Willem ran a hand through his hair. “Well, I didn’t have that sort of free time. After qualifying as a quasi brave, all I did every day was practice, train, fight, and then go off to war.” There was an inexplicable

nostalgia in his voice.

“Okay, then... after this, are you planning to go anywhere?”

“After this? What do you mean?”

“You were hired as a caretaker for our warehouse, but the contract never said the job would continue forever, right? There’ll be a day eventually when you reach the limit of your term or lose your job, won’t there?”

“Ah... you’re right.” He didn’t speak for a short while. “I haven’t made any decisions, nor given it much thought. If I went and talked to Grick, he’d probably come up with a bunch more jobs that’d make some difference in my life.”

That unfamiliar name she’d heard before had popped up again. Just who was this Grick?

“At the least, I’ll stay here for a while longer. If it was possible, I’d like to go and give the Beasts a beating personally. But as I am now, I’d only be holding you all back.” Willem’s mouth twisted into a displeased grimace. “So instead, I’ll stay and do what I can manage right now. I’ll take care of the little ones while waiting for you guys to return, and give you all a grand welcome when you do.”

“...Okay.”

“I promised, after all. I’ll make butter cake, and you’ll eat enough to give you a stomachache.”

“Mm-hmm...” She nodded, smiling. “...Wait. Did the amount of butter cake just go up?”

What am I? Kutori thought to herself. The question had frequented her mind recently.

She was a Leprechaun, a spirit who had failed to die properly, a form of unliving life, a weapon created to sacrifice everything and protect those who still lived.

She was attuned to the Dug Weapon Seniolis, fifteen years old, and born in the forest of the 94th Floating Island.

Last but not least, she was going to take her first unrequited love to a

hopeless battlefield.

But, now she had a place to return to. Someone to hear the words, “I’m back.” He would wait for her, right here.

So she must – no, she definitely would return. She’d laugh with happiness on her face, gorging on butter cake until her stomach hurt–

Kutori heard the person she loved make a puzzled noise. Even though her body couldn’t move, she tried to turn her head and look at his expression. “Is something wrong?”

“That last clash just now... do you remember it?”

“Yeah, when I parried your piercing-cut something-or-other upwards, right? No problem at all, just teach me it once and I’ll never forget it.”

“It’s called the Piercing Crane Strike. It’s a technique you normally use while empty-handed, but after it’s been tweaked slightly and applied to swordfighting that takes place in... Ugh, never mind, you don’t need to remember that part.”

“Gotcha.”

“What I meant to ask was if you remembered the other thing. Seniolis.”

“...Huh?”

“When you were deflecting the force of the Piercing Crane Strike, your sword got flicked out of your hands, right? The direction it flew off towards... do you remember where it went?”

“Um...” A bead of sweat trickled down Kutori’s face.

As one may recall, the 68th Floating Island is almost completely covered by forests and swamps. This includes the area around the fairy warehouse. Trees within the property have been cut down, of course, but beyond that the forest becomes difficult to look through and filled with strange black swamps of all sizes and shapes.

“T-this is bad!”

Now wasn’t the time to lazily say *I still can’t move my body*. Kutori forced her numb and crackling limbs to move, jumping up on the spot.

Everything depends on this!

After it was found and fished up, Seniolis, covered up to the hilt in foul-smelling mud, seemed to emanate displeasure until it was scrubbed clean.

Before closing this chapter, there is one final detail to mention.

For some time after the story of these past few days transpired, Tiat could be observed performing the eccentric act of putting mustard in her black tea, and then gulping it all in one sitting with a rather undignified shriek. That is all that will be said on this subject.