



すわんぷ・ガール!

Swamp Girl!

- Part 1 -

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[bitgray]

- STORY -

A capable adventurer — becomes a young girl!?

Chris is a fine adventurer in his own right, but thanks to his own carelessness, he is forced into a life-or-death gamble.

He doesn't even have the time to think 'I survived!?', before he realizes that his body has become female.

So begins the story of his — or rather, her — suffering.

Chapter 1

The Captive Slaves

An old-fashioned horse carriage ran along the bumpy road.

From the outside, there was nothing remarkable about it, but riding inside, there was a bit of a problem.

The feeling of riding in a shaky carriage as it clattered along was the worst. In this box, which didn't even have a window to look out of, much less seat cushions, we were rolling around like cargo. No, more like we were *being* rolled around.

But looking at it rationally, it was hardly surprising. To the guys transporting us, that was exactly what we were.

In short —

The guys transporting us were slave traders, and we were the slaves.

Of course, the slave trade was now a crime under international conventions, so it depended on the place, but if they were arrested, they'd get an appropriately severe sentence. That, possibly, being the death penalty.

But unfortunately, because it could be profitable from time to time, there were many willing to commit a crime that could put their heads on the chopping block. It would definitely never die out.

So, having been kicked by the proverbial horse, these victims had no choice but to give up.

But.

"Hh... mm. Nggh... mh."

Naturally, I hadn't.

Growing frantic, I rubbed my wrists together, struggling to undo the ropes used to tie my hands behind me.

You've gotta be kidding me.

The rest of this lot looked like they'd already given up, but there was no way in hell I would. I didn't want to die a slave. I'd never accept such a ridiculous life.

Glaring at nothing in particular, I rubbed my wrists together over and over again.

It was morning on the third day of my captivity.

The name's Christopher Carson. Nickname, Chris. Incidentally, I'm a woman.

You're probably thinking, 'What a way for a woman to talk,' but there's a reason for it. See, I used to be a man.

I'll say this straight out to avoid any misunderstandings: I am not a transvestite.

I used to be one-hundred percent man, and now I'm one hundred percent woman.

You may not know what I'm talking about, but it's the truth.

My transformation into a woman was all thanks to some old... well, magic potion is my best guess.

An adventurer with a good bit of experience, even at eighteen, I tackled a certain set of ancient ruins.

In practice, an adventurer is a jack of all trades.

As long as you pay in gold, they'll be your merc, your investigator, your explorer — you name it.

But an adventurer's primary occupation has got to be ruin exploration. Well, it sounds better if you call it 'exploration', but it's basically glorified grave-robbing.

Treasures sleep in those ruins, amazing treasures you'd normally never even dream

of. Depending on the situation, it might even be so valuable that you wouldn't have to work another day for the rest of your life.

But ancient ruins are also dangerous places.

Heaps and heaps of bizarre traps. Strong monsters acting as guardians.

But there's as just much value in deliberately confronting those dangers. That was also why I challenged that nameless ruin.

It wasn't my first time taking on ancient ruins, but these were completely untouched. They hadn't been disturbed even once, and that was a first for me.

I found these unexplored ruins by sheer luck.

Well, it wouldn't be wrong to call it an unexpected windfall. I think any adventurer would want to have the experience at least once. Ruins that pristine aren't that easy to come by.

It was in a part of the Artor Ruins Cluster, a hunting ground for ancient relics that was relatively famous among the adventuring community. However, after being searched over and over because of its reputation, the well had all but run dry. Since it was basically slim pickings, famous or not, the usual adventurer would pay it no mind.

If someone were to ask me why I discovered untouched ruins in such a place, it really was nothing but good luck, as I said. To be more specific, I *happened* to pass near the area, *happened* to decide on taking the scenic route, and then *happened* to find the entrance. Even I wanted to call bullshit.

But anyway, you would've had to pry this golden opportunity from my cold, dead hands. It was *unexplored*.

It was risky, but I was going to milk first dibs for all it was worth. Alone, I stepped into the ruins.

The ruins extended underground, forming a structure popularly known as a labyrinth. At five levels, it was relatively shallow. But it didn't fall short in the traps and monsters department. Even so, I managed to hack my way through it all, and I was able to wrangle myself more treasure than I expected.

Converted into cash, it wouldn't sustain me for a lifetime, but it would definitely be enough to live the good life for ten years or so.

But... I made a minor, and I mean *tiny*, miscalculation.

I triggered a trap that poisoned me.

'Shit,' I thought, but it was too late. The poison had begun to circulate in my body with considerable speed. Unfortunately, I hadn't brought an antidote with me.

See, antidotes come in a thousand different kinds, just like poisons do. If the antidote doesn't match the poison, it's no better than snake oil. Considering I was poisoned in an ancient ruin, it probably wouldn't be commonly known. So taking an off-the-shelf antidote would've been pointless.

There are magical panaceae, but they're pricey. Still, you'd want to carry one around, but at the time I was horribly broke and couldn't afford it.

My entire body felt as if it'd caught on fire. It was so hard to breathe, it's like I'd scaled a tall mountain. My head spun around in circles, and my legs collapsed.

I was dying.

That was my instinctive thought.

But as I teetered on the brink of death, my mind seemed to clear for a moment.

Noticing a certain something, I ransacked my knapsack full of treasure and took out —

Five glass vials of medicine — probably. One red, one blue, one white, one green, and one purple. Very pretty to look at, but very suspiciously colored for medicine.

There were labels stuck to the vials, more or less, but the words on them had faded to an unreadable yellow. Since it would have been written in an ancient script anyway, I still wouldn't have been able to understand it.

At any rate, I decided to try drinking them.

See, they were from ancient times. At the time, I thought, 'One of them might be a panacea.' As for the other four, I'd just pretend they weren't there.

But that was a dangerous gamble. Items from so long ago are often hazardous, and people have died using things they couldn't identify.

But under these circumstances, I used them without hesitation. If I was going to take poison, might as well take it all.

So basically, in my desperation, I downed all five at once.

Then, I fell over unconscious.



The introduction was on the long side, but long story short, the poison was gone but I'd become female. Still, it didn't look like I was unsuited for adventuring. There are girls like this wherever you go.

It seemed that until my consciousness completely recovered from my dead faint, I'd been sleepwalking my way through the labyrinth. While I was trying to make sense of things, I was shocked to discover that I was female.

I spent a good few hours in confusion. Once I came back to my senses, I checked my equipment, but with my clearly smaller body size, it had all slipped off somehow and left me butt-naked.

I'd even lost the treasure that would have made this trip worthwhile.

In the midst of my anger, confusion, and regret, I still managed to make it out of the labyrinth. That could only be considered a stroke of good fortune. But then I was suddenly seized by a caravan of slave traders that happened to be on their way to the nearby town.

If I looked at it with a clear mind, it was a complete disaster. In the space of two or three days, I'd gone from adventurer to young girl, and from young girl to slave.

Still, I wasn't in that much of a panic, simply because I was an adventurer. Proof? Take these other captive [friends] of mine. They were crying and screaming at the

beginning, and now they just rolled around in complete dejection.

Incidentally, all my friends were female. And every one a beauty, to boot.

In short, these slave traders dealt in slaves used for [that] kind of personal use. They'd probably be sold to some millionaire or territorial lord as expensive playthings.

All in all, the only word for them was 'pitiful'. But it was the same for me. Life was cruel the world over.



Without warning, the carriage came to a halt.

So it was that time of day. In other words, I was stuck inside day in and day out, unable to even look outside to my heart's content, but I could tell the time by the state of my stomach.

"Oi. Women! Food!"

Sure enough, the door in the back opened, revealing a man whose face made for poor viewing.

He took his sweet time surveying the inside of the carriage. With a satisfied expression, he began to toss hard bread into the carriage from a box prepared outside.

"Better eat it all up! You're valuable merchandise, after all!"

At the sound of his sneering voice, everyone but me flinched. Then, they sluggishly reached their hands out toward the bread.

Because it was the third day. They had been too despondent to eat in the beginning, but perhaps they could no longer withstand their bodies' demands. One by one, they put the bread into their mouths.

They were showing a reality of surrender. No one wanted to become a slave, but was death even more undesirable?

"Oi! You!"

The man was about to shut the door once he saw the women begin to eat the tough bread when I called out to him.

“What... you again?”

The man looked me over as he replied in his hateful voice.

“What are you doing! Are you telling me to eat bread like this! It’s just a rope, friggin’ untie it!”

Actually, I was the only one whose hands had been bound by rope. The reason being that I was moving around a bit too much last night.

“Yeah, just like that. Seems to me if it’s you, it doesn’t matter. Don’t like it? Don’t eat.”

“Damn it! Are you saying that I’m not valuable merchandise! Oi! Wait! You asshole—!”

While I was in the middle of talking, the man disappeared behind the canopy of the wagon.

Damn it. I’ll beat the shit out of you. You’ll be crying like a baby before I’m through with you. That’s a promise.

“Um...”

As dark urges seethed inside my heart, one of the women spoke to me. A lovely girl, especially with her long, chestnut-brown hair... I think she said her name was Aira.

She was already in the wagon when I was captured.

Rolling my neck around, I looked in her direction. The moment our eyes met, a shiver went through her body. Apparently, I failed to shake off all the ugly feelings inside, so I ended up glaring at her.

Feeling guilty for turning my hostility on an innocent party, the nastiness rapidly

withered away.

“...What?”

I said, suppressing my emotions.

At which point Aira, the look in her eyes cowed, slowly held out her own piece of bread to me.

“...Here.”

Her voice dwindled away.

I was taken aback for a moment. Again, I moved my gaze to Aira’s face.

A pleasant smile flickered there for a moment before she tore off a bit of the bread and held it to my mouth. I should’ve been hungry, but for some reason, I suddenly didn’t feel like eating.

“...don’t want it... untie the rope for me instead.”

Hearing me speak, Aira’s expression grew troubled, and she shook her head.

I let out a huge sigh.

This was a repeat of her behavior yesterday.

To be fair, I couldn’t deny that I had zero confidence in how things would go after being untied. They were afraid that once the rope was undone, the slavers would punish them for it.

I understood how they felt. I wouldn’t be able to talk them into it.

“Okay, listen. Before long, there’s going to be a chance to untie me. Do it then.”

“A chance?”

Curious, Aira repeated the word as a question.

I was taken aback, but doing my best to maintain a composed expression, I answered her.

“Yeah. It might not be a good idea right now, but sooner or later... That’s right, sooner or later, we’ll have the chance to escape. Definitely. You should untie me at that time.”

Right. A chance was sure to present itself. Maybe I hadn’t been thinking straight. Right now, it would be useless to struggle.

“...I can’t believe such a thing...”

murmured Aira from beside me, just as I got all excited.

Those words, accompanied by a sigh, weighed heavily on my shoulders. My enthusiasm was abruptly snuffed out.

“...Why’s that?”

“Because... Because, I can’t. I have always, *always* been waiting for the time to come. But it never has... it never will.”

Suddenly, Aira rattled off a bunch of words, and on top of that, she started to wail. I didn’t even have the time to be surprised before all the chained women around us also started to sob.

For a while, I wondered what I should do, but when I looked at the crying women, a mysterious feeling of irritation boiled up within me. Their wailing voices made it worse.

“Quit crying–!”

And I finally exploded.

When I raised my voice, the women all stopped crying as they were told. They looked

at me with cowering eyes. Aira, of course, was no exception.

“Don’t just give up on everything! You got that!? Becoming a slave, you’ll die all the same! Now that it’s come to this, have the guts to put your life on the line! If you can’t, then just die right here, right now — !”

Gimme a break.

Become a slave with this bunch? Sorry, but no way in hell. I definitely don’t want to give up. If I became a slave, I really would be better off dead.

A bit of life took root inside them. They looked at me, blinking their eyes. Eyes that said they didn’t know what they should do.

Once they calmed down, they really did seem pitiful.

I hated resigning myself to the thought, but thinking about it, my mind as a man should operate in a fundamentally different way from theirs as women. From that perspective, well, maybe Aira and the others’ reactions were only natural.

I bit into the piece of bread Aira had torn off for me earlier.

“If you don’t want to die, eat. When you’re crawling on your shrunken stomach, you won’t be able to take a chance even if one presents itself.”

When I spoke, I took their feelings into consideration, even if it was just a little. Performing her earlier actions with steady hands, Aira began to pick up the scattered bread. The other women were the same; I could see some small changes in them.

“...Thank you.”

Aira smiled briefly. I was kinda tired, but it wasn’t a bad feeling.

Chapter 2

Chaos and Opportunity

“Well, this isn’t something you give up on. I’m tired now that I’ve eaten, so I’m going to sleep for a bit.”

I flopped down on my back in front of Aira.

Truth was, I might have lost my cool too.

Thinking back now that I’d calmed down, even if I got free of the rope, I hadn’t given any thought to where to go from there. In short, all that high-and-mighty stuff about chances? I got there by accident and winged it. I was a little ashamed of myself.

“Um, Chris.”

“Yeah?”

Aira addressed me shyly.

Though I was lying down, the carriage was back on the road. Irritated by the awful ride, my reply was unintentionally curt.

“Why are you this — strong?”

Strong...?

I didn’t quite understand what she was asking.

“What?”

“I mean — ”

Maybe choosing her words, Aira thought things through little by little as she spoke.

“That is, I — I already thought that I had no choice but to give up. Everyone else was the same. We told ourselves that... how should I put it, we... were unlucky. Until now, we’ve always been at their mercy... So I thought that even though I was going to be sold into slavery, there was nothing I could do. I think all of us felt that way. That it couldn’t be helped.”

“‘Couldn’t be helped’? That’s not what it is.”

I interrupted Aira.

“You’re right, there *are* things in the world that can’t be helped. But rolling over and accepting it, saying that it can’t be helped — those are words you say when you’ve done everything you can, not when you suddenly slam into a wall for the first time.”

As I spoke, I thought:

That’s how I am.

I don’t know about stuff like that, but, even if turning into a woman is just me reaping what I sow, I can’t just take it lying down. And slavery — does it even need saying?

So I won’t give up. I can’t give up. There’s no way I can say something like ‘It can’t be helped.’

I haven’t exhausted all my options yet.

First is escaping from these slavers. Then, searching for a way to restore my original body.

These things are absolutely non-negotiable.

“Here’s the gist of it. After becoming a slave like this, what will you do? Live in slavery? Before that, ask yourself: What’s out there? Are you so ready to hand over your life to someone else? Ha–, give me a break.”

In conclusion: ‘You’re going to roll over just like that? Are you idiots?’

Actually, even though slavery is illegal, I've seen people who see things that way, or live in that very situation. It wasn't a particularly unusual story.

This world, the people in it — they weren't so earnest that they'd follow the rules just because it was forbidden.

The fact was, slavers and the like built their trade on it. As long as there were buyers, there'd be sellers.

— In other words, that was how it was.

But if I told those slaves that their eyes looked dead, they'd just be a bunch who didn't know if they were dead or alive.

Well, that kind of behavior might have been drilled into them, but anyway, to put it bluntly, at least I didn't want to end up like that.

So, I wouldn't give an inch, all the same.

"...You really are strong, Big Sister."

Gatunk-gatunk-gatunk—

"Big Sister?"

I couldn't care less about the first half, but that last bit filled me with an incredible dread. I got up in a hurry.

Aira was looking at me with a smile that words couldn't describe. When I looked around, I found the other women looking at me with the same gaze.

The hell?

"Uh, wait a sec, I — "

"I mean, you're so pretty, and so cute, and you look younger too, but you're so reliable and strong... I wish I could be like you."

I'm a man, you know.

Before I could say it, Aira drew closer to me. Close. Your face is very close.

Uh, I mean, don't look at me. Don't look at me with those soft eyes.

"...I'm — cute?"

Turning my face away from those gazes, that was the best I could do.

'Pretty', 'cute' — until this moment, it was the first time in my entire life that anyone had ever said that to me. And I generally expected that after this moment, I'd never be told that again.

"That's — " As the word unintentionally slipped out, Aira nodded emphatically and moved even closer.

I found my bound hands aggravating for a different reason now.

"After all, you have such pretty silver hair, and it's surprising how lovely your skin is. Even as a woman, I think they look amazing. And yet... Big blue eyes, soft-looking lips, slender body... You look very young, but it's as if you were designed by an artist."

Eeeeeeeeeee.

[How handsome], [So manly]. I've heard that kind of empty flattery from the women in rundown saloons and brothels plenty of times before.

But although this was different, hearing my female self being appraised like that, I didn't have mixed feelings so much as an overwhelming dread.

Frankly speaking, it was having my face rubbed in it. 'You're a woman!'

"D—don't be stupid, stop it."

"—... Your face is deep red. Big Sister... You're unbelievably adorable..."

Clearly excited, Aira approached me. This was getting scarier by the second.

I retreated, slowly sliding backward with just my legs. But in that brief moment, my back struck some kind of wall in the middle of the narrow carriage. It might've be one of the barrels riding with us.

Desperate, but with nowhere to run, I backed away as much as possible, as if I could become one with the wall.

In contrast, Aira was crawling closer on all-fours like some kind of animal. Her eyes were moist. Scary.

What was she going to do to me? We hadn't spoken all that much in the first place, and it wasn't exactly the right time or place for that sort of thing either.

What? Was this the so-called suspension bridge effect? Between women? Why?

"Big Sister..."

As her face came closer and closer, those lips on their way to who-knows-where, it happened without warning.

Ga-Gaan!

"Whoa!"

"Kyaa!"

Suddenly I heard the sound of something crashing into the carriage from the outside, and the carriage jolted forcefully. Stuck in our weird poses, Aira and I went rolling across the floor.

At the same time, wood chips showered down on us from above.

A chance!

I couldn't have imagined that it would arrive right away. I'd been in dire straits just

before.

But even so, after a few moments, I got my head in order and examined the situation. The rocking of the carriage had settled down, but it seemed that all movement had come to a stop. At that very moment, a great commotion went up outside.

“W–What’s going on!?”

“Aira! It’s our chance — ! Get this rope offa me — !”

I couldn’t help but yell harshly at Aira, who’d been shaken by the unexpected turn of events. Me, I kept my eyes peeled and my ears perked up to see what I could pick up about our surroundings.

For the time being, I set aside Aira and the other women, who were scared witless, and looked up at the ceiling. I spotted the reason for the earlier rain of wood chips.

Unsurprisingly, a big hole had opened up in the ceiling. It was just that the hole could only accommodate someone’s head at best, and that wasn’t guaranteed either. As for whether we could use it to escape, it would be a bit — no, *very* difficult. And to make things worse, it was just a little too high up.

So then, why did that hole open up?

Filthy slavers those shitheads might be, but as expected, the carriage they used to transport their cargo was the sturdiest they could get.

Something had opened up a hole in *that* sort of carriage. It must have struck us from the outside. And at a high speed, too.

Of course, I had no idea what any of that was about.

Only that it was the result of a situation that even the slavers hadn’t predicted.

“Oi! Don’t space out! The rope! Get the rope! Hurry!”

“Ah, eh, y–yes.”

Irritated by Aira’s dazed dawdling, I shouted at her.

Sure took her long enough, if you ask me, but perhaps Aira finally broke out of her stupor. She sidled up to me in what was, for her, life-or-death desperation, circled around to my back, and began to untie the rope.

Meanwhile, I continued to keep tabs on our surroundings.

For now, I couldn’t see anything outside of the carriage. Any visuals I had came through the hole. All I could see was the sky.

So I strained my ears.

The area outside the carriage had been in an uproar since the earlier impact.

I could pick up the racket of the traders shouting at each other. I focused on them, but combined with the background noise, I couldn’t clearly make out what they were saying.

Other than that — a flurry of metallic hissing — the sound of swords being drawn. Or maybe armor being put on.

Putting it all together, it seemed reasonable to assume that the caravan had been attacked by some external force.

In short, after being taken completely by surprise, the slavers were rushing to meet the enemy?

But the problem was... what they took the hit from.

An order of knights tasked to arrest slave traders?

— No, based on the circumstances, I couldn’t help but find the possibility unlikely.

We were three days’ travel out of the Artor Ruins. I couldn’t say where they were headed, but I did know that they came from the direction of the imperial capital. If that was the case, what was at the other end of this journey?

Because there was no question that we’d been traveling by highway, we were at a point from which there were several divergent paths. Eliminate the small forks, and our options would generally be limited to one of two passages.

Which was it: the route that passed through the great Beres Forest on its way to the fortified city of Kakrawanga, or the one that followed the hills toward the port city of Telaberan?

“~~~~! It’s toughhh.”

“I get it, so hurry up!”

My mind continued to spin as I rushed Aira to work faster. I had no way of checking, but I assumed it would be the hill route.

First off, these were slave traders.

So their wares had to be sold somewhere. Kakrawanga, the fortress city at the end of the forest route, was an important staging point for the imperial military. In other words, entering the city would require very stringent inspection.

Slavery was usually illegal in the empire. Keeping that in mind, it was difficult to imagine that their destination would be Kakrawanga.

For the moving around illegal goods, a port city would be better.

Once my thoughts got that far, I looked up at the hole in the ceiling.

I could see the blue sky.

It seemed obvious that we weren’t in a forest. So, we had to be somewhere on the hillside route. At least three days away from the Artor Ruins by carriage.

I caught a ride with a carriage from Telaberan on my way to Artor, but that time, it took six days to arrive. In other words, we were somewhere in the middle of the route from Artor to Telaberan.

In that case —.

“It’s untied! Yay, I did it!”

“Alright! Quiet down a bit.”

I rudely silenced Aira, who was overjoyed over untying the rope. She looked immensely dissatisfied, but I couldn't do anything about that right now. Lightly massaging my freed wrists, I focused even more on my ears.

The voices of the slave traders filtered in through the hole in the ceiling.

[...But... gob..... of them.]

‘Gob-’. Goblins — I thought as much.

It was relatively well-known in adventuring circles, but , goblins had recently been staging raid after raid on merchant caravans right at the halfway point of this stretch of the highway. We were probably near that point now.

Even I had guarded the carriage I took to get to Artor as a hired hand. Fortunately, we weren't attacked back then.

To sum up, goblins were the ones currently attacking the slavers.

Speaking of goblins, they had characteristically green skin and a height of 120 centimeters at most. Based on their build, they were monsters that fell under the ‘weak’ category.

They constructed bases everywhere, choosing locations without much activity.

And as fairly well-known monsters, almost everyone knew of them. They were also famous as the villains in children's tales.

The greatest threat posed by those weak creatures was the horde.

As I said earlier, they established bases. Flocking together in one place, their numbers could grow to staggering proportions.

Even though their numbers were rarely estimated, they could swell into the thousands. It wouldn't even strange for them to hit the tens of thousands.

If the horde were to grow that large, it would be fine if they passed their days minding the fields and having fun. But there was a reason they were called ‘monsters’—they made a living by attacking people.

In other words, it wouldn't be wrong at all to call them a band of vicious thieves.

At any rate, there was a goblin colony nearby, and right now it was attacking us.

Since I didn't know what was going on outside, I couldn't say how many are attacking us. But based on my experience, even with the most conservative estimate, there'd be over fifty of them. They had some intelligence, if they attacked a caravan, they'd assemble the necessary number of troops.

In any case, they were a nasty bunch.

In the meantime, the faint sounds of swords clashing, as well as an urgent hustle and bustle, drifted down from the open hole.

I didn't know the state of the battle, but no matter which side won, staying here would only lead us to a tragic end.

But with the carriage door still tightly shut, I was short on options. For now, I moved close to the door, waiting for one of the panicking slavers to open it. In order to make my move the very moment that happens, naturally.

Aira came along too, but without any tasks or expectations for her, I left her to her own devices.

"Wh-What will we do?"

Perhaps feeling uneasy because of my lack of response, Air kept pestering me with questions.

But there wasn't actually anything to do. Right now, with nothing to do but wait, there wasn't anything that particularly needed to be said. Or maybe this was the point where I was supposed to say something comforting. [It's okay, no problem]. Like a big sister.
-Yeah right.

"Big Sisteeeeeer~"

But Aira was slowly getting teary-eyed, the pleading in her voice increasing every time. Unsurprisingly, it got on my nerves.

“I get it, so just hold on a little longer.”

/Wha-dunk-!/

As soon as I opened my mouth.

A jolt just as strong as the one that opened the hole in the ceiling — no, even stronger — rocked the entire carriage.

Even though I was on my guard, the jolt sent me tumbling to the floor.

“Uwooh-!?”

“Kyaaaa!?”

There was the sound of a crash as the swaying carriage stopped at a slanted angle. Of course, everyone, including me, had rolled towards one side, forming a heap in the corner.

“Shit! What was that!”

“Big Sister, I’m scared!”

I tried to rise, cursing, but Aira was on top of me, her limbs all tangled up with mine. Or more precisely, *getting* tangled up with mine. Peeling her off, I scanned the surroundings to find that the impact had warped the back door, leaving it hanging half-open.

“...-! Aira, move! Get outside! You guys too, hurry!”

Irritated with Aira’s reluctance to come unstuck from me, I mercilessly freed myself with brute strength and kicked open the door.

Something hit the door from the other side, prompting muffled screams from the women, but I ignored them and leapt outside.

In any case, this was all the chance we'd get. I struck the ground with my legs, falling into a crouch, and quickly scanned the surroundings.

"...Hii-!"

Behind me, Aira was looking outside just the same when she let out a small scream.

The other carriage, burning. The whinnies of the terrified horse.

Swarmed by a good number of goblins, exhausted slavers spewed out gouts of blood from where they'd been skewered by the monsters' rusted swords. Similar scenes of carnage unfolded everywhere.

The slavers were clearly at a disadvantage.

As I feared, there were too many goblins, and the slavers' defenses were too lacking for a caravan of this size. Their formation relied on agility, but their choice had obviously backfired on them. The moment they were taken by surprise, it was all over for them.

They should have run with all their strength. Under ordinary circumstances, they probably would have.

But my guess was, the surprise attack and encirclement had left the slavers with no option but to fight.

In any case, the slavers had mounted a hopeless counterattack, and now, despairing, they were on the verge of destruction.

True as it was, I didn't think, 'Serves you right.'

Because once the slavers and their token resistance were wiped out, we'd be next. And in the end, we'd be killed faster than the slavers... or should I say, annihilated.

In short:

"You guys! RUN!"

In other words, we had no other choice.

Chapter 3

The Obligation to Take Responsibility, and the Way How

So far, neither the slavers nor the goblins had noticed that we'd made it outside. We had a chance, but we were still in just as much danger as before. At this rate, the slavers would soon be wiped out, and if so, our fates would be sealed. Before that happened, we had to get out of here.

I checked behind me. Including Aira and myself, there were five of us.

In the gloom, with more pressing issues on my mind, I'd spent three full days with these people without noticing how young we all were.

Aira was around twenty or so, followed by a twenty-five year-old woman who looked a little slow on the uptake. Another, about eighteen, had a half-dead look in her eyes. Then — a young girl of maybe twelve or so, with an extremely ugly glint in her eye.

I'd say that everyone was a beautiful woman in their own way, or beautiful girl. Even slavers had a pretty discerning eye.

Though since they'd be exterminated before long, it didn't matter whether they were connoisseurs or not.

And of course none of us, myself included, carried a thing on them.

Even our clothes, these grimy light brown dresses — it didn't sound half-bad when you put it that way, but let's be honest: they were sacks with holes in them. Couldn't say they cut a very sexy figure.

Well, as a girl myself at the moment, I cared so little about it that it was almost sad. Or rather, I was completely naked before, so it wasn't a big deal even if I didn't have any underwear on.

Clothes aside, it was the lack of shoes that was the problem.

Though we were on the highway, it wasn't like it was being maintained *that* well. It

was no better than a ravel road. Running on it... how long would our feet hold out?
In any case, these were hardly ideal circumstances for running away at top speed. If I were by myself, maybe, but the others would definitely drag me down.

“Uh, um, B–Big Sis...”

They might have been able to read those thoughts from my eyes. Aira timidly tried to bring something to my attention, but she stumbled over her words, unable to continue.

I suppose the other women were observing me too.

Each was distinct from the others, but they all watched me with the same pleading look.

Under the weight of those eyes, I hesitated for a few moments.

But I suppressed something in my heart and addressed them all.

“~~~–! We’re escaping! All of us are going. If you fall behind, you’ll be left behind. Run with everything you’ve got! You hear me!?”

That was the compromise I came up with at the last moment.

I knew it was naïve. To be honest, even with my experience as an adventurer, my best option was to [abandon them], without a doubt.

It was just that, I also knew that I couldn’t abandon these women, who could only be described as ‘pitiful’.

Besides, Aira was alright. Somehow, after spending the last three days together, I might’ve gotten attached to her. Abandon her? What was I thinking about after all this time?

I didn’t want to think that there was nothing else I could do, but I made the decision myself. Forget it, I just wouldn’t think about it.

“Yes!”

Damn, good response.

From every one of them, in spite of their dead eyes.

But, ah, was that it?

I was the one who did it.

“Alright then, guys, you have ten minutes to pick up anything useful in this area! Don’t carry too much! Once ten minutes are up, I don’t care what it is, you leave it! Go!”

So I had to take responsibility.

For a moment, my mouth twisted in a self-deprecating smile.

Pushing it down, I gave the women orders. And I looked around too.

Right off the bat, I found one of the slavers lying face-down where he’d fallen. It was the one who’d been looking after us, in the loosest sense of the word.

From the looks of it, he had no external injuries but he’d lost consciousness. For now, I took what was probably his shortsword. It had fallen nearby.

One light swing. It was a little — no, it dragged me along considerably. An unpleasant reality, but I didn’t have the leeway to fuss over it at the moment.

Couldn’t say right now if it would prove useful, but it was better than nothing.

While I was at it, I searched his body for bags and found a pouch at his waist. After checking the contents, I grabbed it for myself.

Anyway, there was no time left. My final act was to pull out the knife stashed at his waist.

“Oi! Time’s up! Let’s go!”

“Y-Yes!”

I looked over my shoulder to see everyone holding an arbitrary collection of tools.

Axe, knife, rope, bag, saucepan — I made them lose the saucepan right away. Thinking about the way ahead, it wasn’t a bad idea, but it was big. Basically, it would slow us down.

I looked over the area one more time to get a read on the situation. Naturally, it had

gotten worse.

But our luck was still holding. No one had noticed us yet.

“Alright, this way. Run!”

I picked the direction to run in mostly by gut feeling.

Taking the highway to go forward or back would’ve been a bad idea. If they attacked caravans, the very first thing they would ordinarily do would be to set up a blockade.

The highway cut across the gently sloping hillside. So, we’d run downward. It was fast that way, and this place was pretty thin on hiding places to begin with, so the goblins would have come over the ridgeline for sure.

In that case, escaping downward was our only choice. It was process of elimination.

Of course, it was possible that they’d anticipated this and taken up position at the bottom. But the hill angled downward gently, and when I looked down at what lay ahead, I couldn’t see any enemies. It wouldn’t pose a problem. Probably.

Irresponsibility had its limits too. I knew that, but I could only trust in my instinct now.

“We’re running downward! Don’t get hurt! We’ll leave you.”

Crunch—!

“Gyaa—!”

It happened right before my eyes, before I could finish speaking.

The eighteen year-old girl. Her eyes had been half-dead, but just a little bit earlier, they’d grown a little more lively.

Something struck her in the head, and she toppled over with a short scream.

I just barely caught sight of what happened.

A boulder.

A boulder flew at her from god-knows-where and pulverized her head.

The fallen woman twitched momentarily, spraying out blood. Her eyes rolled about, lost, before she stopped moving.

To get right to the point, she died.

“KYAAAAAA-!!!!”

The shrieking voice belonged to the slow-looking girl, the next oldest.

We’ve been seen! I clicked my tongue inside, but doing my best to ignore it, I look in the direction the boulder came from.

There was a figure visible on the crest of the hill.

— Troll!

Troll. A monster roughly as well-known as the goblin.

Bodies three to four meters tall. Strong, if their appearance was anything to go by, but sadly lacking in brains. Giants, pretty much your stereotypical monster in build and so on.

However, precisely because of its low intelligence, there were other intelligent monsters who would trick them. It wasn’t especially uncommon even for the lower-ranking goblin.

Not uncommon, but right now, it was so very hateful.

Collecting myself, I realized that the things responsible for tearing open the roof and for tilting the carriage were the troll’s stone missiles. That would have been impossible in the first place, if it were only the weak goblins.

I didn’t pay as much attention to details earlier, but the wheel of the carriage we’d been riding had been smashed to splinters — small wonder it had ended up tilted.

Our only stroke of good luck, and perhaps the dead woman’s bad luck, was that the troll seemed committed to providing logistical support from the rear. Staying in

position on the ridge, it kept throwing boulders. When I thought about it charging in to block our way, our current situation was infinitely preferable.

“Oi! Don’t drag your feet! Run! Get out of here!”

I screamed at the remaining women.

Hardened to the shock of a friend’s sudden death, Aira and the girl with the ugly look in her eyes snapped out of their daze and sprinted off.

But perhaps overcome by shock, the dull-witted girl didn’t move from her spot as tears flowed down her face. And then, to make things worse, she fell to the ground with a *thump*.

“...Shit —. You guys go first! I’ll figure something out!”

Urging on the other two, I run over to the side of the dull-witted girl, who seems to have lost herself to panic.

“Oi, get it together! We’re running away!”

“Ah—... ah... — ”

She shook at the sound of my voice, but she was in such a muddle that even her voice wouldn’t come out right. Her eyes, flooded with tears, were strangely unfocused.

“Oi!”

I called her one more time. For a moment, her wavering eyes stilled and looked at me. That gaze.

Pleading.

I grit my teeth. My molars creaked.

Then I looked around. There was no time.

I sighed. Looking at her one more time, I said,

“I’m sorry,”

and I drew the knife in my hand across her throat.

“Guheugh... -!”

Fresh blood spurted out from her neck, drenching me.

As the sound of her breath escaped from her lips, her eyes looked mournful, as if to ask me [why]. But it was only for a moment. The light faded from her eyes as they rolled up into her head, and she died.

I had to take responsibility.

I at least laid the dead woman on the ground gently, my eyes squeezed shut.

But that was all.

Without hesitation, I spun on my heel and followed the other two down the slope.

And so, I left behind the bones of two people.

Chapter 4

Those Who Were Saved, Those Who Were Not

I sprinted away from the hillside highway, which had quieted down considerably, without stopping.

My feet hurt.

Because I was barefoot. Plus, this body really wasn't used to doing that sort of thing. I could feel the pressure of the ground against the soles of my feet.

Being as careful with the bottoms of my feet as possible, I angled toward the two people running ahead of me and the river below them. The river was fairly wide, and its current flowed quickly.

How convenient.

We should jump in the river and leave our escape in the hands of the current.

Gradually, I gained on the other two. They were also driven to desperation, but in spite of this body, I was an adventurer. Our levels of experience were different.

It was impossible for me to do things as I had before, of course, but my expertise could compensate for that in its own way. I found some meager comfort in that.

But I couldn't afford to rush things. From now on, I'd train myself little by little.

In order to do that — first of all, right now, I had to survive.

Roughly three steps away from them, I raised my voice.

"We're jumping into the river!"

It was important to first determine whether they could swim, but I cut that part out. The other two were startled by my voice as they ran, but even so, they turned to look

at me with clearly relieved expressions.

Then, both of their faces immediately stiffened.

“B-B-Big Sister, wh-what happened? Why do you look like that? W-Where’s the other girl?”

Well, you would worry about that first, I guess. I must have been covered in her blood when it spurted out.

So I thought, but for some reason, hearing about the subject unexpectedly pissed me off. For a moment I ground my teeth together, then I shouted at both of them.

“-!... Leave that for later! Can you do it or not!?”

“Y-Yes.”

“I can.”

It wasn’t clear, but for the time being, I judged that they’d be able to swim. In the meantime, I approached the river before us.

I turned to look behind me.

The goblins were looking at us from the direction of the highway, making a racket. Looks like we got found out in the end. In that case, we didn’t have the luxury of messing around anymore.

The riverbank rose into a slightly higher cliff. It hung three, maybe four meters above the water.

No big deal.

“Jump in just as you are!”

The moment I spoke, the young girl took the lead by a bit and leapt off the cliff without the slightest hint of hesitation.

As I expected, Aira wavered for a moment, so I came up from behind, grabbed her by

the scruff of her neck, and dragged her with me as I jumped.

“Kyaaaaa–”

Aira screamed. But only for a second.

We sank under the surface of the water, and as we floated back up, we rode the river current forward.

Poking my head out of the water, I looked up at the highway. The goblins hadn't moved from there. They saw us leap into the river and gave up, I guess.

Had we escaped our predicament for now?

The river current was faster than I thought. Honestly, simply floating along was taking a lot out of me, but in exchange, the goblins grew smaller and smaller in the distance. Even though they were bobbing up and down, the other two somehow stayed afloat too.

“...Let's go on like this for a while.”

“Guho–, y–yes...”

Before long, the goblins had vanished from sight.



“O–Oh–... going through all that was terrible...”

Coughing, Aira climbed onto the riverbank. With her long hair wrapped all around her body, she looked like a ghost, but there was also something erotic about the way her thin sack-dress clung to her figure.

Damn, is she *stacked*. I tried to come up with something vulgar.

It was erotic, but there was nothing welling up within me.

If possible, I wanted the reason to be because of everything that had just happened, or

because I was tired thanks to my long immersion in the river, but if anything, being tired, I'd usually expect to be turned on. I couldn't lie to myself.

In other words, was this caused by my transformation into a woman after all?

Or to be more specific, was it because I'd lost the part of me that would have gotten excited?

The other girl got up in a similar way. In her case, well, having a body appropriate for her age is just fine.

Along with the nasty look in her eyes, she had the sour face to match. Maybe out of exhaustion, which wouldn't have surprised me, she dragged herself forward with tired steps and dropped to her haunches.

"Hold on for a bit, I'll get a fire going right now."

I lost the sword during my stint in the river, but I still had the pouch and knife I took off the unfortunate slaver. Digging around in the pouch, I found a flint striker, so appropriately, while the others took on the labor of gathering the fallen branches in the area, I lit a fire.

"O-kay..."

And so, I took off my soaked clothing.

It wasn't like I was particularly fond of it, but because it was all I had to wear at the moment, there was nothing for it but to hold it over the fire to dry.

Gradually, the sun sank below the horizon, and the wind felt a bit cool. It may have been summer, but with our wet bodies, we could catch cold. Precisely because there was nothing else, we had to take care of the bodies. They were all that was left to us, in the end.

I had no idea how strong this body was to begin with. There was no such thing as being too careful.

Just in case, I examined the soles of my feet.

No injuries... maybe it was stronger than I expected.

“You guys come over too... You’re going to catch a cold.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Got it, thanks.”

The two of them took off their clothes too. Unlike my complete nakedness, they... it was just the bottom, but they had underwear on.

Well, even if they hadn’t been wearing it, it wouldn’t really have made a difference. Given my sorry state.

Without speaking or moving all that much, the three of us sat around the bonfire.

Even after our clothes dried and we got dressed again, we occasionally add some kindling to the fire. That was all we did. Under that strange atmosphere, night fell.

The whole time, I was thinking about where we should go from here.

For now, I thought we should head for Telaberan. The river flowed along the highway, so if we followed it, we’d ultimately end up at the port city.

However, there was first the considerable distance to travel before getting there. Though we rode the river current, one day’s worth of travel by carriage wasn’t a short distance either. Since we should’ve had three days left in the journey from the raid site, it would basically take us five days on foot — minimum.

Of course, it wasn’t an impossible distance to walk. But that was only the case with the right equipment.

Right now, all we had were the knife and pouch in my possession.

It was a stroke of luck that the pouch had a flint striker in it, but the rest of its contents were five copper coins and a weird red rock. The weird red rock was literally just that. I knew it obviously wasn’t a gemstone or anything else of value. Maybe that slaver picked it up from the roadside and held on to it because it was strange. Maybe he was torn but couldn’t bear to throw it away, on the off chance that it might be something valuable.

After that, there was the axe that the girl had kept ahold of in the river.

To be honest, I thought that was a pretty big deal. I mean, even I had dropped the sword myself.

Then there was Aira, but sure enough, she hadn't held onto anything. But that couldn't be helped, I think. Honestly speaking, that young girl was too amazing.

Anyway, that was all we had. Under these circumstances, were we going to be able to walk for five days?

Me, I'd manage somehow. The other two...

Slowly falling to exhaustion, my stomach grew hungry. Even though we took water from the river, I didn't know what to do about food. We were already fairly hungry to start with. I could still hold out, but if I didn't get anything to eat, before long, I wouldn't need to imagine passing that point anymore.

And what's more, assuming we even get to Telaberan, where would we go from there? The world wasn't so sweet that a couple of escaped slaves could live their days without trouble.

Adventuring was the family business, after all. Whether I could continue in this state... wasn't clear to me.

"Um..."

"Yeah?"

Silent Aira suddenly spoke up.

Feeling a little put out by the interruption to my thoughts, I looked at her.

Our eyes met, but she immediately turned them away to stare into the bonfire... How should I say this? It was suspicious.

"What is it?"

“Eh, ah, um... um, you know, that person. The one you stayed with when we escaped, she got left behind, right?... I wonder what happened to her...”

Ah, come to think of it, I hadn't said anything about that.

'Later,' I'd said, and forgot.

“I killed her.”

“!”

Faced with that question, I readily answered with the truth.

I could hear Aira, or maybe the young girl, lightly sucking in her breath.

“Wh... why?”

asked Aira. She trembled, but with her eyes on the bonfire. I couldn't tell if the emotion in her profile was anger or fear.

I sighed and looked up at the night sky.

“It was to save us.”

Looking at the floating moon, I spoke as if talking to myself.

The sparks from the crackling flames, dancing, rose up into the sky the same way. Finding something incomparably dignified in them, I continued with my words.

“To save me. To save you. And — to save her.”

“...– how would — why — killing her...”

I turned just my eyes to Aira. Unable to understand this time, she looked back at me in disbelief.

Hardly unexpected, is it.

“At that time, her eyes were pleading. [I want you to help me], [I want you to save me]... but that was all. Maybe she was praying, too. But that place had become too much of a killing ground. If I’d tried something, then I probably would have died too.”

There was no question about that. Slowly encouraging her, or perhaps carrying her away, none of it would’ve worked in real life.

“Because you didn’t want to die, was it?”

“Well, I suppose. First of all, no, I didn’t want to die, and I didn’t want to abandon you two either. That’s why I [saved] that woman, who had no intention of trying to survive.”

I took out the knife and held it out to the fire. Despite its dip in the river, it was still clotted with blood. It wasn’t much of a knife, but that’s life for you.

I’ll wash it later.

“Goblins, you know, can impregnate human women. The long and short of it is, even if I could have left her there, she’d either be beaten to death, or taken away to bear children until she died... It would have been hell. Even though she’d be alive.”

The truth was, I’d participated as an adventurer in the [Goblin Colony Purge] several times.

In the purge, which was essentially a military-run extermination campaign, rather than an adventurer, my position was more like a soldier’s.

Why? Because the operation is closer to being a kind of war. Even among the many kinds of adventurer commissions, it’s considered a pretty miserable task.

The goal, first and foremost, is to eliminate all the goblins in the colony. That’s about it. Though the second is the rescue of human captives, more or less, hardly any newcomers participate in it, and no one expects them to.

If you ask me why, it’s because before the extermination, and possibly during, nine out

of ten captive women die. The lone survivor, in almost all cases, will have gone insane. Chained, raped without end, and continually pregnant with a monster's child. How would anyone be able to hold on to their sanity in that situation?

If they're incredibly lucky, it might be possible to save them, but I, at least, have never seen that even once.

Of course, if we knew about the captive, if we immediately dispatched a rescue team, and if we succeeded, those women would be saved too, I think.

But goblin colonies are a kind of fortress. On a really bad day, there might even be a troll, like this time.

It isn't a place you can take on with small numbers. Retaliation is the best we can do. Because of that, it's the military that carries out the subjugation.

And every time, we're too slow.

"I knew it would be a living hell, so it was better to kill her now."

"But, but you might have been able to manage it somehow."

"There was nothing I could do."

I repeated myself to the still unconvinced Aira. Whether she agreed or not, the young girl said nothing. She stared at our exchange intently.

"In this world, there's no such thing as 'making it work somehow'. Not [succeeding] somehow. Not [doing] somehow. Especially when your own life hangs in the balance."

I paused once. I was irritated. I knew I'd lost some of my composure.

"It's fine to have those sorts of expectations when it comes to trivial things. Hey, maybe you'll [succeed] somehow. But if that doesn't happen, what then? What if that's your life, and possibly the lives of others, at stake?"

“What would you do?” I prodded Aira, staring at her. Aira turned her eyes away, but she mumbled, “But...” and “I mean”. I ignored her and went on.

“At such a time, what’s important is always the will to survive, and taking action to make that happen. That’s what they say, right? [God helps those who help themselves]... If you flip that around, then even God can’t help those who won’t try to help themselves. Understand?”

I stopped talking. Then, I took a breath and continued.

“Those without the will to survive, won’t.”

My declaration was a slap in the face to Aira.

Dusky memories revived in the flames before my eyes.

The time when I was a child, doing nothing but crying and screaming, ‘Help.’ Precisely because of that, I couldn’t protect myself or the things important to me.

Was I powerless? That wasn’t it.

I should have been able to do something.

If there was time to cry, if all I did was scream for help, there should have been more that I could have done myself.

And yet, I, and I alone, [made it work somehow].

That was a memory that I would absolutely never forgive myself for, no matter what.

“Palmira.”

“Mn?”

In the middle of brooding over my memories, the young girl, who’d remained silent until now, suddenly opened her mouth.

When I looked at her, she had her unpleasant eyes fixed on me. Our eyes met. I thought she was glaring at me, but somehow, that didn’t seem to be the case.

“My name.”

“Ah, okay.”

Her out-of-the-blue introduction startled me. The look in her eyes was nasty, but that impression seemed to falter in the face of her straightforward gaze.

However, I didn’t know what she was thinking.

“Your name is?”

And so the ball landed in my court. For some reason, Aira audibly sucked in her breath from beside me.

In other words, in order to ask me for my name, this girl... Palmira named herself first? She seemed very mature for her age, somehow.

But paired with her glare, her curt words and lack of expression were unnerving.

If she changed the look in her eyes, it would be perfectly reasonable to say she was quite a beautiful girl, but conversely, that made her all the more off-putting.

It occurred to me that her demeanor could have been the result of her former life as a slave, but when I thought about it some more, I recalled Aira’s unexpected variety of expressions. Maybe it was just a quirk of her character — well, people come in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

“It’s Chris.”

I’d considered my real name to be Christopher this whole time, but it was kind of embarrassing. So when I was asked for my name, I told them it was Chris.

Besides, it wasn’t because I’d turned into a girl. I used to go by that name a long, long time ago.

In that sense, very few people in this world right now knew my real name. I didn’t intend to go out of my way to hide it.

“Chris, nice to... it’s an honor to make your acquaintance. I would like to go with you. May I?”

Her transition to more polite speech was jarring.

Well, enough about that, it was the second half of Palmira’s statement that puzzled me. You’d expect that after coming all this way, there was no way we’d split up, right?

For the moment, we were all in the same boat. It wasn’t much, but we should work together until we reached Telaberan.

“I don’t particularly mind...”

“I see... I’ve come to like you. I look forward to accompanying you.”

With that, she bobbed her head.

Eh—?

Hearing those unexpected words, I looked over at Aira, but there wasn’t really a meaning to it.

Aira looked dumbfounded for a moment, but noticing my look, her expression became one of surprise and she hurriedly came closer to me.

“I—I’ll accompany Big Sister Chris as well! Always!”

What.

My brain unable to keep up, I looked up into the night sky.

I found nothing divine there.

Chapter 5

A Changing Trio

“There isn’t much to eat, is there?” Aira sighed.

A night had passed after what was, thinking back on it, a very action-packed yesterday. For lack of any better options, we set out for Telaberan.

On top of the river.

After rising early in the morning, I used Palmira’s axe, which she treated with the utmost devotion, to make a raft.

Without rope, we used ivy as a substitute, but even though I didn’t expect laymen to be able to do it, they made a rope that was better than I thought it would be.

But it *did* take an excessive amount of time. We started at the crack of dawn, and only finished past noon.

In the meantime, all we had to put in our stomachs was the seemingly edible wild grass that Palmira gathered.

I mean sure, they were edible.

Or rather, it’s more like most kinds of grass are probably edible if you try hard enough...

Anyway, we traveled down the river in some comfort on the raft.

We’d considered walking, of course, but we ultimately scrapped the idea. Without equipment or shoes, it didn’t seem like we’d be able to go for five days of continuous walking.

If we couldn’t walk, we’d be finished.

It would be slow going with our bodies all worn out.

On the one hand, if we were on the river, we’d flow downstream even in silence. Now,

unlike the site of the goblin attack, the river had widened to a considerable degree, and the current was slow and easy.

No mistake about it, traveling this way was faster than walking.

If we were going on foot, we'd have to stop for breaks every once in a while, but like this, we had no need for that. At night, of course, we had to pull in close to shore, but even accounting for that, it was a three... four day journey. We'd be able to arrive at a speed not all that different from the carriage's.

Besides, it was troubling, but there was a risk... should I call it that? There was a certain risk we were able to avoid.

Passerby.

The highway was well-traveled enough to merit the name, so naturally there would be [others] on it aside from us.

From a normal point of view, that might've been considered a good thing. For example, maybe we could've hitched a ride with a merchant caravan and received their protection.

But, that only applied to good people. In the first place, we'd been captured by slavers doing something similar.

Honestly, it was simply a gamble.

If we really had no option but to walk, taking a risk on our fellow travelers would've been acceptable. After all, whether we'd make it on foot was a gamble in itself.

But we could take a third option now. Then we should avoid pointless risk, I thought.

If something were to pass by on the highway, it'd be a good idea to observe first and consider things from there.

Of course, being on the open water of the river, there was still the possibility of being discovered by others.

However, in that case, if we judged the situation to be extremely dangerous, we could simply escape to the opposite bank. It was a rough thing, but we even made an oar.

"Ah-, what are you eating?"

"Tree bark."

Speaking of making things.

I studied my own two palms.

Slender white fingers. Obviously not the hands I had before. Woman's hands. Excessively smooth, without a single blemish.

...But that was strange.

Like I said before, I'd been swinging an axe around since morning. It wouldn't be unusual for someone unused to that kind of work to have blisters all over their hands. Then was I used to it? Of course not.

In other words, there was something odd about this body. It was ridiculously sturdy. The soles of my feet were dirty — no surprise there — but there wasn't a single injury on them either. Even though I'd run down a hill barefoot.

Just to be sure, I had the other two show me their feet, but while there was nothing big, they had sustained a number of small injuries. Incidentally, Aira had a lot.

Plus, this body's physical strength was abnormal.

Naturally, I felled trees for the construction of the raft, but cutting down trees with an axe is, by nature, terribly heavy labor.

Though I did get help from Aira and Palmira, the fact was, both of them were exhausted almost right away.

The work was just that tough, usually. So the second half I did almost entirely by myself. And even then I was barely panting.

By this point, I'd exceeded any sensible definition of 'strong'.

Tireless.

If I had to pick one word, that would be it.

As you might expect, I found this body unsettling.

It wouldn't get hurt, wouldn't get tired.

Though there was little I could do about it, I'd been preoccupied only with my

transformation into a woman. But I couldn't help but feel that this body had other secrets.

"Chris."

"Hm?"

Palmira tugged lightly on my clothes, bringing me to the present.

It seemed like I'd been sunk in thought for quite some time.

"Hey, the sun's setting. We should pull up to the bank soon."

As Palmira spoke, I take stock of our surroundings.

The sky was already dyed madder red. It was only a matter of time before the sun sank below the horizon.

As far as just riding the raft goes, there wasn't a particular rule saying we couldn't keep going at night, but being on the water after nightfall and capsizing, falling overboard, or destroying the raft were all frightening possibilities, so we decided go on the water only during the day and pull up to the bank at night.

"Got it, are we getting closer to shore...?"

"I'm hungry."

With my oar — which was practically just a plank of wood, but otherwise unobjectionable — I began to move the raft across the burbling water to shore.

The raft wasn't all that big, but since we built it without thinking about its navigational efficiency at all, even reaching the not-so-distant shore took its time.

"Big Sister, do your best—"

Listening to Aira's unmotivated encouragement, I pulled us to shore.

Then, the three of us dragged half the raft onto the bank. Without anything to anchor it with, we had to. If we were to wake up one day to find it gone, it would be no laughing matter.

Same as yesterday, we gathered fallen branches and lit a fire. Despite being on the raft, we were all a bit soaked, and having something to light up the night was soothing, after all.

Besides, the goblin threat was gone, but wild dogs and other things might've been prowling in the night. Our fire would be effective in terms of looking out for monsters. In the meantime, Palmira had picked edible-looking mushrooms from somewhere. Having collected a larger haul than expected, despite being limited in her expressions, Palmira seemed somewhat proud of herself.

...Come to think of it, I felt that Palmira was kind of amazing. At least, her survival know-how was quite a bit better than mine.

Just what kind of past did she have to end up a slave, I wondered, but that was something I would avoid digging into as much as possible.

It was also the case when I was an adventurer, but prying into another's past was a kind of taboo. Sometimes, out with friends at a bar and terribly drunk, someone might spill, but as a rule, they would develop into miserable, meaningless stories.

Though 'adventurer' doesn't sound half-bad to the ear, in the end, they're nothing but odd-jobs men, criminals who couldn't make anything of themselves and finally washed up in this vulgar profession. Take one wrong step, get too close with common thugs and gangs, and everyone around you will only see you as more of the same.

No steady income, almost never a place to stay.

Who would consider it an upright line of work?

Only, even so, the protagonists in the stories are often adventurers. When the terrible Demon King appears, if only in the legends, the one to slay him is considered to be an adventurer.

Basically, it's a profession that everyone knows about, but it's of exceedingly low social position and, in practice, full of good-for-nothings. That's why adventurers are generally half broke debtors and half daydreaming farmers' sons.

There is the Adventurers' Guild, which is more or less an organization offering adventurers assistance. Its existence serves to guarantee some standing for adventurers, who'd otherwise be much too low-class, and to act as a liaison between its members and the quest-giving general public.

Every large city is guaranteed to have one. And that includes our current destination, Telaberan.

In my current state, I was thinking of registering at the Adventurers' Guild and establishing some kind of social standing for myself after arriving in Telaberan.

The truth was, I should have been registered already, but in this form, it didn't seem like I'd be able to provide proof of my identity. If I registered, I'd be able to get my adventurer's ID and registration papers, but I had lost the all-important proof of my ranking. Thanks to the miracle of becoming a woman, of course.

Someday, someone might discover the ID I lost and turn it in to the guild. Should that happen, Christopher Carson would be officially dead. It couldn't be helped; that's just how the system works. But I wanted to return to normal and retrieve my ID before that could happen.

Well, that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

I've gotten a bit off track, but anyway, even for adventurers, the past is a touchy thing. What was even more wretched, or should I say the worst of the worst, was the past of a slave. It wasn't hard for me to imagine how miserable it must be.

That wasn't a story I wanted to hear.

"Delicious!"

At sundown, we sat around the bonfire, spitting and roasting Palmira's mushrooms before eating them.

Perhaps out of extreme hunger, Aira devoured them greedily with tears in her eyes. The least useful among us, but that's normal, I thought, and I let it pass.

Some of the mushrooms looked poisonous, but they sure were tasty.

“You’re amazing.”

When I honestly told Palmira what I thought, with her own cheeks stuffed full of mushrooms, she struck a triumphant pose.

She was a weird one, but good to have around, really.



“...that’s the plan, anyway.”

After the meal, with our bellies full for the first time in a long while, I told the others about my plans from here on. I didn’t know how things would turn out in the immediate future, but it would be a good idea to talk about what we were going to do once we arrived in Telaberan.

In short, I was going to become an adventurer.

So I asked the other two about their plans.

“If you guys have somewhere to go back to, you should. Well, even in that case, if you don’t have any acquaintances in Telaberan, you’ll still have to do something to earn money for travel expenses.”

For example, prostitution.

Though I didn’t say it.

Palmira was too skinny and too small, but if it were Aira, she’d probably be able to manage it that very day. It was a shame that she wasn’t of much use at present, but she at least had a good face and figure.

But prostitution is a harsh line of work. Just like adventuring, it’s the destination for women who weren’t able to become anything else. Of course, unlike slavery, it’s a legal existence, there’s no high or low in work, but if you didn’t particularly desire to, there was no need to go out of your way to become one.

“For now, Aira, look for a position as a barmaid.”

Something like that would work as a compromise, right?

Aira [hmmm]’d, looking troubled. Well, there was still time, so it was fine if she was hesitant.

“Palmira...”

“I’ll become an adventurer too.”

An immediate reply.

To be honest, I was worried about what to do with Palmira.

She was skinny, with an unfriendly glint in her eye, but you could say that she was a beautiful girl in her own way. I thought about finding her a job waiting tables, like Aira, but it might be pretty difficult to find work for two.

“Um, but, being an adventurer is...”

While I struggled with how to break it to her, Palmira turned and extended her hand to me.

“Knife.”

“Ah, yeah.”

I didn’t know why, but under the weight of her gaze, I obediently handed her the knife. She squeezed it several times and hefted it in her palm as if testing its weight. Then, picking up the wooden branch at her feet that she’d just used to roast mushrooms, she stood and moved a few steps away from the bonfire.

A wooden stick in her right hand, the knife in her left. She had the knife in an underhand grip.

“Ha-!”

Then, suddenly, she began to swing the wooden stick and the knife.

At first slowly, then gradually speeding up, the wooden stick, the knife, slashed through the empty air with increasing sharpness.

In front of an astounded Aira and me, at the end she grandly held her weapons aloft, and, drawing both along with her into a turn, she delivered a spinning kick to the air.

“How was that?”

She took a breath, her face devoid of expression.

I was a bit bewildered. That was a spectacle I would never have imagined.

It was unmistakably a combat technique backed by some kind of experience. At the moment, she was probably stronger than me.

It was quite possible that even back there, had there been one or two goblins, she could have pushed them back as long as she had a weapon.

What a weird girl, I thought, but that was as far as I got.

I'd become extremely interested in her background, but at the very brink, I pulled back.

She had her eyes fixed on me.

“...I got it. Then you'll be an adventurer, Palmira... Well, I look forward to working with you.”

“Likewise. I've decided to accompany you, Chris. So we'll go together.”

Tossing the stick into the bonfire, she sat back down.

“I — I — I want to be an adventurer too...”

Aira hastily piped up. No doubt that display confused her more than me. I sighed and asked, tentatively,

“Aira, do you also have... for example, are you a mage or something like that?”

“Eh? Eh, ehh-..... no...”

With that one word, her confusion dissipated, and she hung her head in dejection. Well, that’s how it is, I thought to myself.

“But, if someone as small as Palmira can be an adventurer... then I...”

Aira persisted, her voice small and subdued.

Big or small didn’t really have anything to do with it, but there was certainly some truth to it. In practice, even among adventurers, there weren’t any children this young. Besides, whether the guild would accept her registration was doubtful.

If I remembered correctly, right now there should be an age restriction.

“I’ll say this once,”

Palmira responded.

And her next words shocked me. Probably Aira too.

“I’m twenty years old.”

We both went rigid.

Once again, we looked at Palmira.

Whatever the angle, she still only looked about thirteen, maybe fourteen. Take away the evil look in her eyes and her lack of expression, and no matter how I looked at her, she had the features of a child.

Her build didn't look like it belonged to a twenty year old either.
Ask a hundred people and they'd all say the same.
Perhaps noticing our gazes, Palmira looked a bit huffy.

"B-..."

From the side, Aira squeezed out the words in a faint voice.

"...Big Sister?"

"Stop."

Palmira shut her down right on the spot.

Chapter 6

Encounter

“Ah, aaah, I can see it! Isn’t that it!?”

Two days later, at noon, Telaberan’s outer wall came into view.
Spotting it with her eagle eyes, Aira happily stood up on the raft.

“Don’t stand up, you’ll shake the raft.”

Though I chided her, I sighed with relief now that the end of our journey was finally in sight.

Thinking back, all sorts of things happened.

Truly all sorts of things. I bet there was no one else in the world who’d been through as much in less than a month.

And part of my problems still continued to plague me.

I looked at my hands, then pinched the front of my sack-dress and peered inside.

I sighed.

Not yet. It didn’t seem like it would be over with just this much, so I had no intention of throwing in the towel either.

After this.



Telaberan was a city of considerable size. Almost entirely enclosed by high walls, it was a fortress city, so to speak.

Of course, even this city was originally a small port town. Back then, its defenses consisted of a moat and some fencing at best.

But when the population grew to the tens of thousands, the nation, per standard operating procedure, sent one of those so-called territorial lords to govern the city.

Then, construction on the walls began.

A highly populated city translated into high revenue and value as a strategic military position. And so the walls went up despite the absence of any particular external threat, ultimately resulting in a fortified city.

Long story short, you might call it a question of appearances.

Before we approached the city, we got off the raft and covered the remaining distance on foot.

Since it was a fortress city, it had a gate. Anyone entering the city proper had to pass through that gate.

There were several different ways of getting inside. For instance, given that it was a port city, one side would naturally face the sea, and it wasn't like the walls would block off that section. So using the raft to sneak in at night was also a viable option.

Generally speaking, any ordinary city would require an explanation of someone's identity and business before allowing them in. In other words, inspection.

And currently, we were runaway slaves. Since slavery was pretty much against the law, we might be able to explain ourselves honestly and gain entry without too much trouble.

...Actually, I had the feeling that we'd even be welcomed in and offered shelter.

In that case, wouldn't that do the trick? Sure, but I'd have to decline.

Why? Because it would be annoying.

And I had a somewhat unpleasant premonition.

That being about the current lord of the city, a middle-aged man named Guibenague.

According to what I heard on my past visits, the public had an extremely poor opinion of him. It was attributed to his staggering rudeness, but in other words, he was apparently one of those VIP types who acted as if no one else in the world existed.

But there was nothing particularly rare about his kind of case.

The territorial lords are sent by the national government; they don't exactly govern by the will of their people.

So even his breed of, well, *failure* will show up from time to time.

Of course, the nation doesn't go out of its way to send someone who'd only drive the people to rebellion. Even so, that still ends up happening thanks to poor government or various other reasons.

For the citizens in question, it's an unparalleled pain in the ass, but without any other options, all they can do is give up.

Even if they were to demonstrate some token resistance, they'd just end up imprisoned or banished from the city for life.

Anyway, the city was home to that kind of friendly lordship.

If we took [shelter] here as runaway slaves, we were likely to become slaves again.

The truth is, slavery is illegal in name only in the upper ranks of society. It's not uncommon for this lord or that to own slaves.

And Guibenague, at the very least, had been implicated in rumors.

Rumors that he had many, many slaves.

My gaze flicked over to Aira and Palmira.

There were all kinds, but both of them could be considered beauties one way or another. I didn't really get it myself, but since Aira said so, I was one in my own way... or something. I had mixed feelings about that.

If the three of us were brought before the city lord, it wasn't that hard to imagine all that stuff from before.

At any rate, as runaway slaves, we had no identity or background. He could shelter us without reserve.

Yeah, even for a lifetime.

Of course, maybe I was just overthinking things.

But still, there was no such thing as being *too* vigilant. The worst-case scenario was no laughing matter, and I meant that from the bottom of my heart.

In other words, my aim was to slip through the inspection unnoticed and enter the city.



Which was more or less what I told the other two.

“...I see.”

Unlike Aira, who was trembling and unable to speak, Palmira nodded.

“That’s so... we’ve come all this way, and we can’t go in...”

Dejected, Aira looked bitterly at the gate.

We’d already walked to a position from which we could see it. Hiding in the grass, failing to come up with any half-way decent ideas, we examined its appearance.

Sure, I felt exactly the same as Aira. We’d suffered so many brushes with death to make it here, but at the very end, we still had to wait. How frustrating.

But it was precisely because of everything we’d been through that I didn’t want to mess up in the endgame.

As long as we could get into the city, we’d be able to make it somehow.

But I was coming up empty. Here’s where we wait for a chance to come along, I guess.

When I escaped from the slavers’ carriage, I waited too. And I’d just do it again this time.



“Hey, Chris. What’s that?”

After a while, the sun began to set. I was keeping an eye on the gate when Palmira tugged on my clothes the way she always did.

‘That’?

Wordlessly, I followed Palmira’s pointing finger.

Something was definitely coming closer from the direction we came from... in other words, from the other side of the highway.

When I looked, it was still too far away for me to recognize it. But within moments, I could clearly make out what was coming down the road.

Soldiers.

Cavalry, infantry, transport wagons.

Wearing armor and marching in step, they were military. And judging from the atmosphere, regulars from the imperial armed forces.

Even at a glance, there were roughly a hundred of them. Kicking up their legs, they came closer.

They would reach us within moments.

— Use them as cover?

After a moment's thought, I shook my head.

If they were a company of irregulars, maybe, but this was clearly a unified and equipped group of career soldiers. If we did try to hide among them, we'd only be betrayed by our slave-like appearance. They might end up arresting us.

Still, this was a change. That troop was going to enter the city, no doubt about it, so the moment they were through, maybe we could be able to slip in while the gatekeepers were occupied.

"...For now, let's wait for them to pass by."

"...Okay."

"Got it."

Each of them nodded in response to my words. It wasn't satisfying, but that couldn't be helped.

If this didn't work out, then maybe going the sea route really would be the best idea for us.

The soldiers drew closer and closer, passing by our hiding place in the thicket. Their equipment and skill were top-notch. From the crest on their shoulders, they seemed

to be part of the Second Imperial Army Corps.

But what were regulars doing all the way out here?

There was no end to my questions. Though they were just one part, they were still regular army. Under ordinary circumstances, they wouldn't have left the imperial capital that easily.

The continuing flow of troops was quite long, keeping us on edge in our hiding spot, which turned out to be relatively nearby. Aira screwed her eyes shut, her face paper-white.

Anyway, get going, quickly. All I could do was hope that they would.

As the end of the marching ranks approached, the transport wagons followed, bringing up the rear of the procession. They were being escorted by a horseman that was clearly different from the others.

...That's the commanding officer, right?

Without a helmet, the man's rich blonde hair was exposed to his surroundings.

He was young. Not even thirty yet, I bet. And a disagreeably good-looking guy. That lone figure, on his horse and in pure white armor, certainly fit the bill.

So much that I honestly admired it.

Before I knew it, I couldn't take my eyes off him. Actually, he did stand out, but it was more than that. How should I put it, he had amazing presence.

Charisma, aura, something like that?

— No, that wasn't all.

There was some sort of uneasiness inside me.

When I looked at him, for some reason, my mind fell into turmoil. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what it was.

What the hell is it? This sense of discomfort —

I dug around for the reason, my stare fixed on him as if I were possessed. Suddenly, as if he noticed my gaze, the man looked back at me.

“!”

Beside me, Palmira inhaled sharply. It seemed that she'd seen the same thing.

Sure enough, the troops' apparent commander turned his horse around and approached us.

We've been found out? We've been found out, right?

'At this distance? Impossible,' I thought, but our eyes met.

Maybe it was a mistake. But he was heading straight for us.

— What do I do? What should I do?

My heart hammered away as sweat trickled down my forehead. All sorts of thoughts flicker through my mind, but in my panic, I couldn't think straight.

Meanwhile, the distance between us steadily shrank.

He's definitely coming here. I'm sure of it.

“...-!”

Next to me in my panic, Palmira let out a small groan.

When I looked at her, she took the knife from my hand and pressed it to her ankle. Her expression was a bit pained. Blood trickled out from between her fingers.

What in the world did she do?

In front of me, as I struggled with my confusion, Palmira threw away the knife and quickly whispered something into Aira's ear.

Looking surprised, Aira's expression immediately turned serious and she nodded.

My mind couldn't keep up. In that time, the man had already reached us.

Dismounting, he parted the thicket covering our hiding place.

Our eyes met. This time there was no mistaking it, we had obviously been discovered. After an expression of slight surprise, the man approached us.

"What's wrong, miss?"

A voice addressed us from overhead, as we stayed crouched. A beautiful, gentle voice, completely in line with his appearance. It resonated in my ears. Like so, the man calmly watched us.

I didn't want to admit it, but I knew that voice, that expression, had defused the tension.

What's with this bastard? He's too perfect. Even though I cursed him in my heart, what came out of my mouth, contrary to my wishes, was a sigh of relief.

"M-My little sister, she — hurt her leg..."

While I stared blankly at him, fascinated, Aira's unexpected words reached my ears.

When I looked at the other two, startled, I saw Palmira holding her ankle in apparent pain, while Aira hovered protectively over her.

Just like she said, no matter how I looked at it, Aira was the spitting image of a big sister worrying over her injured little sister.

I was surprised.

By Palmira's quick thinking, yes, but also Aira's instant improvisation.

"...I see. The wound seems shallow, but it certainly is some cause for concern. Would you please wait for a moment?"

Crouching down beside Palmira, the man took a quick look at her injury and rose to his feet. He made each and every movement look good. His figure, his bearing, I couldn't tear my eyes away.

“Leopard! Leopard! Could you get over here!”

He directed his voice toward the soldiers.

Not long after, another mounted soldier came running over. This one also seemed to have some sort of standing in the army. An adjutant, maybe? In contrast with the gentleman commander, his hard-nosed expression was too at-home on his aggressive features.

A tough career military man. That was the impression I got.

“What is it, young master?”

‘Young master’?!

The man reflexively turned around in response to the words of the man he called ‘Leopard’.

He certainly wasn’t your run-of-the-mill gentleman; it showed in his actions. Maybe that came with being a man of high rank.

Such as a noble.

With his presence, it wouldn’t be the least bit strange.

Glancing at me as I unintentionally stared at him, he smiled gently.

“Ah, this young lady seems to be injured. I was thinking of having her ride in the coach.”

What a good guy. The fact that I’d just inadvertently thought such a thing, terrified me.

I knew that I wasn’t a particularly trusting sort of person. But when I saw this guy in front of me, I ended up trusting him unconditionally in spite of myself.

I had to wonder if it was some kind of magic. His charm was that strong.

“I see. Of course, if we were to leave a beautiful injured young lady in need, it would be a stain on the honor of our company. Are you going to call the coach?”

“No,”

the man said decisively. He took Palmira, supine, in his arms. The so-called princess carry. Even Palmira was surprised, her eyes widening.

“Leopard, I’ll leave my horse to you. You two, please come with me.”

“Y-Yes.”

With things progressing too quickly, even Aira, who’d been acting her part, trailed after the man with confusion stamped on her face.

...To tell you the truth, I thought he was dangerous.

A man who mysteriously compels others to trust him: isn’t that dangerous?

Maybe it was perverse of me, but the remaining part of my heart, which had otherwise been won over, grew all the warier.

“Come now, you as well.”

“O-O... kay.”

I remembered Aira and Palmira’s cover story, and despite my uneasiness, I agreed to his urging with an awkward response.

For some reason, it was humiliating.

Nonetheless, I no longer had any control over the situation, and so I followed after the man who was briskly walking off with Palmira in his arms.

Anyhow, now that we’d come this far, all I could do was brace myself. With Palmira’s current state, even saying something awkward from here on would be too unnatural.

Plus, as long as we could secure a spot in the coach, we’d be able to enter the city normally. In terms of results, you could say that everything was working out perfectly.

There wasn’t a single reason to refuse.

“By the way, how were you injured?”

“Actually, when we went out to find medicinal herbs, we were chased by a wild boar... We ran away, but my little sister got hurt, and we lost everything we were carrying...”

Aira smoothly fed the man lie after lie in response to his question. She'd been of no help whatsoever until now, and her transformation kind of drew me in.

Still, women are tough, aren't they?

Chapter 7

The Barbaric Dinner

I'd never seen such a room before.

A large, solemn chamber enclosed in marble.

It was full of the steam rising from the freshly drawn hot water.

As for where the water came from, there was a pillar — also marble, of course — standing in the bathtub. Carved into it was the spectacular likeness of a lion, and the water flowed from its open mouth.

The water overflowed from the bathtub, wetting my feet. That warm sensation, the feel of the smooth, hard stone under the soles of my feet — honestly, it was bliss.

Night had already fallen, but the paper lanterns installed throughout the spacious room provided enough light to see by.

Bath.

In a word, the room was a bath. No mistake about it.

In such a room, I stood stock still, naturally stark naked.

There were no words.

I was sure it was a bath, but it was nothing like the ones I knew. As I said when I first laid eyes on it, it was a ridiculously fancy affair.

I had to ask myself if such a world really existed.

“Now then, Lady Chris,”

urged the maid standing behind me.

What's she telling me to do? Just what exactly does she plan to do with me?

‘Now then,’ she said, but I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

I didn't have the slightest clue.

In my ignorance, all I felt was dread.

The knowledge I earned over the course of my adventures was of zero use here.

Succumbing to anxiety, I trembled slightly.

Then, I muttered briefly,

“How’d it end up like this?”



We were able to successfully — should I call it that? — catch a ride in the coach. And so, we passed through the gate with anticlimactic ease.

As I expected, the gatekeeper didn’t inspect military forces in general, to say nothing of the regular army, and the coach was waved through without examination.

At any rate, we were thus able to go through the gate alongside the army and enter the city proper.

While the coach rattled and shook, we traveled the darkening city streets as the sun began to sink below the horizon. In the meantime, the gentleman had gotten into the same carriage for some reason, and right now he was being jolted about along with us.

I wanted to tell him, ‘Aren’t you the commanding officer? Do your work properly’, but apparently it was all being neatly handled by his adjutant, Leopard.

Like I suspected, nobility.

“...so, where is your home?”

Because we were together, the man was too insistent on striking up a conversation... no, I heard his name earlier. Leon, seems like.

Since he didn’t give his last name, I didn’t know for sure if he was nobility or not. There was no getting out of it, so we’d also given up our names already.

Me, I wanted to come up with an appropriate reason to be let out once we got through the gate, but when he said that, it looked like he’d be sending us all the way home because of Palmira’s injury.

This was giving me a considerable headache. Obviously, we didn't have anything like a home here.

Then Leon matter-of-factly asked us about it.

"...Actually, that is, I... uh, we, don't have a home."

Think, *think*. I strung some words together as my mind kicked into high gear.

A small part of me thought that maybe, even if he did find out we were escaped slaves, it would be okay.

But it was the remnants of my distrust that moved my mouth.

"Oh?"

"...Before, we stayed at a shack in the slums..."

I sort of had the feeling that it was a lame excuse, even for me. And I couldn't tell you why, but lying to this guy made me feel a bit awkward.

That feeling might have made my mouth clumsy.

Even Aira, who'd been spinning all sorts of lies until just a bit earlier, was now deep in silence, as if saying she was leaving it to me now. Having already received medical treatment, Palmira had maintained her habitual silence from the very beginning.

"Is that so... It must have been difficult."

Leon looked like he'd given my words some serious thought.

"Th-That is, to cause Lord Leon to make such an expression... it makes us sick at heart,"

said Aira.

It was hard to tell if she was acting or not. Like so, Aira engaged Leon in conversation,

using her impressive gift for speaking to keep the discussion of our misfortunes out of unpleasant territory.

My heart was racing, but maybe it would be better to leave this to Aira. To be honest, if it were me, I would've blown our cover sooner or later. Maybe I already had.

Aira chatted skillfully with Leon, but every now and again, he would stare intently at me as I sat in silence.

He made it look relatively natural, so Aira might have continued talking without noticing, but no matter what, I couldn't help but feel uneasy as the target.

What, did I say something wrong? I tried to replay what I said in my head, but I couldn't remember a thing.

"...Our home isn't far, so I'd appreciate it if could you drop us off somewhere around here..."

Weaving herself into Aira and Leon's conversation, silent Palmira suddenly addressed Leon in a whisper, verging on rudeness.

Hearing that, Aira made a gesture as if asking [Ah, already?]

Yup. The whole day today, my internal estimation of Aira had steadily changed. Whether it was for better or for worse was a different question.

"Mm, so it seems... However, wouldn't it be terrible to leave you in such a place when you've been injured? As it would be a rare opportunity, how about staying at our estate until your injury heals, at least?"

'Estate', did he say 'estate'?

Well... it would be, wouldn't it. Even if his command was a hundred men, he was an officer of the regular army. And suspected noble. That much wouldn't be strange.

That said, being taken to the estate like this jumped my distrust toward Leon to a whole new level.

"But to trouble you to such an extent..."

"Not at all. I'd like to ask you to stay, if possible. To send an injured woman home like

this would also dishonor us as knights. This is also our request.”

When we tried to turn him down gently, he was playing so modest that he even broke out the chivalric code.

...We couldn't refuse.

Beyond being requested to stay in the name of knightly honor, further refusal would only be perceived as disrespect. Now, you might even say it was a question of Leon's honor, without anything to do with us.

Knight. Suspected noble. His honor might well be sullied.

Refusing any more would put us in seriously hot water.

“If you would go so far, then until this child's injury heals, we will be imposing on your hospitality...”

By all rights, this should have been an undeserved godsend, but for me, it only spelled defeat.



We were taken to an estate bigger than I could have imagined.

Overwhelmed by its majesty, we began to fidget as we were herded inside.

Though we'd been brought here, we still had to wonder whether it would be alright for our grimy sack-wearing figures to pass through the entryway.

The soldiers streamed to the barracks set aside for them on the grounds of the estate. In the end, the only ones who went into the entrance hall were Leon and us, as well as that middle-aged guy, Leopard.

It was just as extravagant inside as out. In the entrance hall, which gleamed with chandeliers, several maids were lined up and waiting for the master's return. The minute Leon entered, they gracefully bowed in unison.

It was a scene out of a dream.

A scene that an adventurer might dream of once, but one that would never come true.

I didn't think I would ever experience this moment myself.

Just who the hell is Leon?

Then, at Leon's prompting, the maids dragged us off to those excessively gorgeous baths.

What's more, I didn't get to go in alone; a maid scrubbed me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, leaving me exhausted. If I were ever sexually assaulted, maybe it would feel like this. Honestly, I felt utterly like someone's toy.

Even after getting out of the bath, it was all maids, from wiping me dry to dressing me up. Skillfully sidestepping my protests that I could take care of myself, their manhandling went even that far.

As for clothes, of course they provided me a dress. I wasn't surprised that the sack-dress wouldn't cut it, but I didn't think they would be this mercilessly thorough.

Or more accurately, that was the first time I wore female underwear... Compared to the time I spent without them until now, it should have fortified my defenses, but an indescribable anxiety left me disheartened.

And so, I wore the dress that I definitely would've been unable to put on if I'd been left to my own devices. By that point, I'd lost any will to fight, and I resigned myself in despair to whatever was to come.

"How is it?"

But in the end, I was dragged in front of a large full-length mirror. When I saw the results, it was a greater shock to me than anything else from these past few days.

"...Eh?"

Reflected in the mirror, wearing a light dress, was a girl of unmistakable beauty.

[...such pretty silver hair, and it's surprising how lovely your skin is. Even as a woman, I think they look amazing. And yet... Big blue eyes, soft-looking lips, slender body...]

Aira's past words came back to me now.

With every turn of my head, glimmering silver hair cascaded down to my shoulders, and when I blinked, sure, light seemed to overflow from those big blue eyes. Below them was a straight nose and lips like flowers in bloom. Perfectly arranged features. Coupled with its delicate build, though it wasn't yet a full-fledged beauty, this body would undoubtedly become one in the future.

"H-Huh?"

Tears were tumbling from the eyes of the surprised-looking girl in the mirror. Taken aback, I pressed a hand to my own eyes.

I was crying.

Until this moment, although I'd seen my body and realized that it had become female, the fact was somehow disconnected from my sense of reality. I couldn't bring myself to see it clearly.

That was why I so easily resolved myself to return to normal, why I was able to be so optimistic in the face of such a serious matter.

But now, facing myself straight-on like this — I see, I couldn't avoid my absurd reality anymore. I'd become a [woman among women], so to speak, and it was just a fact I could never escape.

If this was how it had to be, I would have been happier ugly.

Then, I still might have been able to hold on to that same perception.

"I-Is something the matter?"

The maid behind me, who had looked satisfied, noticed my tears and immediately became flustered.

In her mind, she must have felt as if she'd finished a once in a lifetime piece of art.

I understand.

It's because I understand that it feels so bitter.

Helplessly, I used my hands to wipe away my tears.

“Nah, s’alright. Don’t worry.”

Deliberately using a rougher form of speech, I threw her world for a bit more of a loop.



“Wow, Big Sister, you look amazing!”

After that came dinner.

Because it was already well into the night, dinner would be a simple affair. That was what Leon said, but I couldn’t believe that anymore.

When I descended to the dining hall under the maid’s guidance, sure enough, the large candle-lit table was overflowing with rows upon rows of dishes.

Aira and Palmira had similarly changed into dresses, and they were waiting for me, along with Leon in his uniform.

When her eyes fell on me, Aira said roughly what I predicted she would, and I felt even more depressed.

I’ll say this once: dressed up, both Aira and Palmira are both more than beautiful enough.

But... not that I had the slightest intention of saying so, but I probably ranked higher...

“...Ha, I did have some expectations, but this is...”

Leon, also with an interested look, left that comment hanging in the air.

Gee, thanks. You’re looking mighty fine yourself.

I kept my sarcastic gratitude to myself. On the outside, I executed a slight bow.

“Well, for now, please help yourselves to dinner. There’s no need to stand on ceremony, just relax and eat, please.”

We were ushered to our seats, with Leon at the head of the table, naturally.

So he said, but honestly, I didn't know where to start. For now, should I drink the soup in front of me?

Picking up what seemed to be a spoon, I dipped it into the soup. Timidly, I raised it to my mouth.

"That's da... d-delicious."

'Damn good,' I was about to say, when I corrected myself in the nick of time. I put my hand to my lips.

I couldn't believe it.

It was my first time having soup this damn good. I hastily helped myself to a second spoonful.

Good. So goddamn good. I can't believe it.

For the average adventurer, what typically passes for soup in the public taverns on the outskirts of town is boiled vegetable soup stock. Reputedly.

The day's stock is made all at once in one big cauldron. After it's done, it's taken off the fire, so it cools off. But if you ask for it, you can have it served with a heated rock dropped inside. Using a rock to reheat food is an awfully crude approach to cuisine.

Usually, it's the cheapest food around. The ones who order it are clearly in poverty.

Its nickname? Rock soup.

That's why penniless novice adventurers are known as 'pebbles'.

Of course, the difference between this soup and that was like night and day. Calling both of them 'soup' would be an insult.

When I looked over, the other two were drinking the soup the same way. Frankly, compared to Leon, who was watching with a wry smile, it was the most unsightly thing, but what can you do? Besides, all of us were more than hungry enough.

We finished the soup in the space of a breath, all with the same greedy expression. There was no helping it, so I reached out for the nearby bread.

“Hoo–”

Palmira, who had reached over to the bread just as I did, let slip a surprising sound. To get that much out of her, this couldn't be the bread I knew.

It had a touch of sweetness to it, and more than anything else, it was soft.

We reached out for one dish after another, and each time we were surprised. Each and every one was so tasty it was hard to believe.

Though I'd had etiquette in mind at the very beginning, partway in those thoughts were wiped clean away.

Smiling, Leon didn't really speak to us, but he watched our savagery from beginning to end.

What was this guy thinking?

If he was doing this completely out of the goodness of his heart, I couldn't help but think of how barbaric we were being.

After that, I got carried away and drank quite a bit of the wine he recommended. I was pretty much wasted when I left the dining hall.

This body seemed to be weak to alcohol, at least.

Before I knew it, I was changed into nightclothes and asleep in the canopy bed in the room set aside for me.

I'd been sleeping outside as recently as yesterday, but it felt like a distant memory now.

That sensation, rather, tormented me with a powerful uneasiness.

Chapter 8

Wheeling and Dealing

I had a dream.

It might've been because I got drunk and fell asleep in an unfamiliar place.

I was in a grassy plain. The blowing wind felt pleasant as it tugged at my hair. The sky was the bluest, the highest, the clearest I'd ever seen it.

From where I stood on a slope, I could see far out over the plains, beyond which there was a city.

I wanted to go there someday.

That was my modest dream.

“■■■■■■■”

From behind me, someone called my name. A voice I knew intimately. I turned around, and I could see my ■■■■■■■ in the distance, at the back of the mansion. I loved ■■■■■■■. I broke into a run, heading toward that kindly smiling figure.

“■■■■■■■■?”

When I got close, I realized there was a boy just like me beside ■■■■■■■, who was waiting for me. Confused, my steps faltered as I got closer.

I didn't know this boy.

Only, that dignified bearing. That gleaming golden hair left an impression on me.

“■■■■■■■■”

I asked who he was.

“■■■■■■■■”

■■■■■■■■, *he replied.*

◇ ◇ ◇

“...Who?”

I woke up in a bed with a wonderful snugness I wasn't accustomed to. Looking up at the canopy, that was the first thing out of my mouth.

‘Who’.

Every person in that dream, including me.

I didn't have any memories like that. At least, I'd never been to that place, never met those other two people.

And naturally, I'd never been the [me] in that dream.

What is all this?

Should I just explain it away as a ‘dream’?

Considering it, something tugged at me. I had a feeling it was something important.

I had a feeling. I had a feeling, but I didn't know what it was. Maybe it was because of the process of waking up, or the booze I had yesterday, that my head was still in a daze.

Even though I tried to put it together, nothing fell into place. Damn it.

“Ugh, come *on*, what's going on here?”

“What is it?”

“Well, I had this dre... -!”

As I absently answered that natural question, it hit me: something's not right. I jumped out of bed and turned toward the source of the voice.

"Ah, good morning."

Leon greeted me mildly, sitting on a chair placed against the wall of the large room. He was cheerful, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be there. While that may be true, there was no way I could just smile and play along. My mouth opening and closing dumbly in the face of this overstep, I somehow squeezed out,

"Wh-why are you — here, L-Leon..... milord?"

Even I had to admit my response was a mess. In the end, I managed to remember to tack on a 'milord'.

What is this, I'm so embarrassed I could die. I was shaking too much, my heart thundering in my chest.

Wait, why did I have to feel like this first thing in the morning?

First of all, master of the estate or not, what the hell is he thinking, barging into a lady's room in the early morning?

Or is this normal for nobility or something? If so, then why *my* room?

I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Mmm... There's no need to maintain an awkward pretense, you know? You and I are the only ones here, so just speak as you usually do."

...This guy.

Despite the impact of his nonchalant words, at the same time, a sort of 'I mean, right?' resignation emerged inside me.

To tell you the truth, I was always wondering when we'd be exposed. So if it had to be now, I was fine with it, mentally speaking.

“...When did you figure it out?”

However, whether he knew the whole story was another problem entirely.

Returning to my usual tone, I chose my words carefully.

I still had no idea what this man was thinking.

“From the beginning, essentially,”

Leon declared shamelessly. I was more than surprised: I was dumbstruck.

“...You’re more of a bully than I thought.”

I didn’t know what part of the ‘beginning’ gave us away, specifically, but if it really was from the very beginning, then Palmira’s dedication to the act, to the point that she even hurt herself, and Aira’s storytelling — he’d seen through all of it.

Palmira aside, when I thought about how Aira’s smooth lies had been for nothing, she seemed incredibly pitiful to me.

“Well, everyone was desperate, after all. I thought that maybe if I went along for the time being, if I had a talk with you, I might understand the situation.”

Leon laughed, his tone slightly apologetic. He was surprisingly frank.

His words weren’t entirely unkind. But as a result, what followed grew harsher in comparison.

“But that’s beside the point.”

When I smiled wryly in response to his words, his tone dropped abruptly.

I braced myself for what was to come, raising my guard inside.

“We’ve sounded each other out, so I’ll get right to the point... You three are runaway slaves, am I correct?”

His smile persistent, Leon said it straight out.

Sitting in the chair with his arms crossed, there was an intensity in the eyes he turned in my direction. But even without it, I couldn’t talk my way out now. Not with so much already in the open.

“...That’s right. How did you know?”

Asking ‘how’ after all that had happened felt really crass, but he heard me out anyway.

“Well, we’ve been on the lookout for illegal trading... ah, to put it simply, we were hunting slavers. But during the course of our pursuit, we found our targets destroyed by a goblin raid. That’s fine by us, but upon investigation, the number of slaves was too low. So I thought that you might be those missing slaves.”

No mistakes so far.

That was some coincidence, but his troops had moved with truly good timing.

“...And the goblins?”

“We were already on scene, so we took the opportunity to eradicate them. We’ve had reports on the damage they were causing,”

Leon said offhandedly.

I thought back to yesterday’s march. If he wasn’t lying, then they must have already ended the fight by that point.

But there wasn’t a hint of that in the atmosphere about them, and as far as I could tell, they hadn’t taken a single loss.

In other words, Leon was either lying, or the strength of those troops was no joke.

And thinking about it, there was no need for him to lie with that timing. Then that left

one answer.

But assuming that it was as he said, then I had just one thought.

It was the slow-witted girl I killed back then.

Considering the timing, Leon must have made contact with the goblins within a day of our escape.

It might even have been right after.

If that was the case, then maybe, even if I'd left her alone, she might have survived. Even we might have been able to [manage somehow] just by sitting tight.

...No, that's just a possibility. At the end of the day, results are everything.

Same goes for killing people who might have survived. Even if I thought about what happened, I couldn't do anything about it.

But, like a small thorn, it stabbed into my heart.

"...So does that wrap things up for now?"

They might have been destroyed, but he did catch the slavers he was chasing. The goblins had been exterminated too.

And they all lived happily ever after. The end.

I smacked my hands together as if to say "That's that'.

At which point Leon laced his fingers together with a frown.

"No, now that it's come to this... we're left with one problem."

"What's that?"

"The truth is, the objective of our mission isn't to capture slavers in particular. Well, it is in a sense."

Leon continued in the same tone as before. Looking at him, I had a bad feeling.

Like I'd better not hear anything beyond this point.

"We're aiming for a bigger prize. The head of the slavers. Who do you think that is?"

"You had a guess in the first place?"

I can't hear any more of this.

Alarm bells were going off in my head. But to my dismay, I ended up hearing it anyway.

"It's Guibenague."

I drew a sharp breath. It was none other than the lord of this city.

Although, a city lord *would* be the head of a slaver ring. Figures.

But thinking about it calmly, it did explain everything.

Where were those slavers headed?

Sure, I guessed that they would've had an easier time here than in Kakrawanga, but based on what we saw, this city conducted inspections too. In that case, how were the slavers planning to get through the door?

And then there were the rumors about Guibenague.

[He has many, many slaves.]

...And he didn't just own slaves, he sold them too.

What's more, this was a port town. Ideal conditions for shipping out those slaves.

"...So that's what's going on?"

"Yes. That's why we tried to capture the slavers and arrest him with irrefutable evidence, but... Before we could, it burned to ashes. All of it."

Now that you mention it, yeah.

At the time, there certainly was a carriage that was rather noticeably on fire. That was probably where they kept the contracts.

“And that puts us in a dilemma.”

Leon spread open his hands as he concluded his story.

“Why? If you know that much already, shouldn’t you just barge into his estate or castle or whatever to investigate?”

The continuing alarm bells drove me to speak. Unconsciously, my hands squeezed the blanket.

“The worst option, but workable nevertheless. However, because our adversary is essentially nobility, if by some chance we failed to turn up evidence, it would be inexcusable.”

Sure, that might be true.

I didn’t know Leon’s rank, but perhaps under those circumstances, even the emperor would find it rather difficult.

Nobles were a powerful bunch.

“Therefore — ”

“No way.”

When Leon tried to advance the conversation again, I immediately responded.

“...I haven’t said anything yet, have I?”

“No, but I have a fair idea. Anyway, you want us to infiltrate that middle-aged lord’s place as slaves, right?”

I glared at him.

Finally understanding what the alarm bells were for, I bluntly threw what he wanted to say back at him.

That was all it took to ease the pressure in my chest. He wasn’t an unlikeable bastard, but like hell I was going to dance to his tune.

“That’s right. Having these talks progress quickly is a great help.”

“Who’s helping you! It sure as hell won’t be us! You’re saying we have to become slaves again!”

Common sense dictated that I refrain from following up with ‘Are you an idiot!’

But I was bursting with feelings I wanted to express.

“Hmm, mmm, then I have a problem on my hands. I would’ve been glad if I could’ve had my request fulfilled, but perhaps I should notify Guibenague that I have runaway slaves in my care instead? It’s true, after all.”

“Is that what you’re saying?”

A threat.

Leon, gentleman. I thought he was no ordinary person, but did that just mean that he didn’t have an ordinary person’s kindness?

...The image I had just a minute earlier fell to pieces.

“Well, take it as a joke. Let’s move on to negotiations here. Should you cooperate with me in this matter, you will receive this much in compensation per person,”

said Leon, raising three fingers.

...Three?

Three can mean very different things, depending on whether you're talking copper, silver, or gold. So, the unit.

I considered it for a bit. Let's assume it's three gold coins.

Three gold coins comes out to thirty thousand coppers, a substantial amount for us adventurers.

Because a day's living expenses come out to about fifty coppers, that much will last for about two years, if you don't go on a spending spree. I was willing to continue this stalled conversation if there was involved.

Slavery, though.

Slavery, again.

I found the idea repulsive from the bottom of my heart.

And to go voluntarily to boot. While I'm on the topic, Aira and Palmira are sure to refuse as well.

Besides, before our escape, we were treated like cargo at worst because we hadn't yet been sold. But in front of that old pig Guibenague, if we were unlucky, we were liable to be suddenly attacked. Much as I hate to say it, I believe in my looks.

In other words, we'd be treated as female slaves, completely. That was truly repulsive.

"No way."

I shook my head decisively.

"Then, this much."

Leon raised another finger. Forty thousand. Two years and change. But.

"No means no."

Shaking my head, I turned away.

...For some reason, I felt like I was being kinda girly right now.

Leon sighed. "Very well then, this much. Listen, I can't go any higher than this, you know?"

And then there were five fingers. I glanced at them.

Fifty thousand. Enough for three years. Or perhaps I should say, with fifty thousand, I could buy all sorts of things. I'd exercised self-control during my stint as an adventurer. A new sword, new armor —

Guh-, I can't.

Scolding myself for slipping into those dreams, I shook my head.

"I refuse! It's not a question of money!"

Feeling an attachment to the hair on the back of my head, I still spoke decisively.

In response, Leon, with a face full of heartfelt dejection, looked at his palm and simply said,

"Is that so... Even for fifty?"

Clatter-

"Fifty!?"

Those murmured words hit me so hard I just about fell off the bed.

"Yes, fifty."

Fifty!? What?

Five hundred thousand, umm, that makes it thirty years... No, god, even that conversion is absurd.

With five hundred thousand, I could even afford to stop being an adventurer and take up a different trade. And I had to hire a mage to return me to normal, didn't I?

What's more, he said it was per person.

If the three of us could live together, that meant one and a half million!

"If there's nothing else for it, then I'll find another way."

"W-Wait a minute."

Please wait.

I desperately stopped Leon as he started to get up.

Even so, I was still a bit conflicted. But it was five hundred thousand.

Even if I were to work as an adventurer after this, I probably wouldn't even make a tenth of that. Of course, with insane levels of luck, it *was* possible.

But just barely. Those were astronomical odds.

I was torn.

"What is it?"

Leon sat back down in the chair. If he so much as cracked a smile, I might have refused.

I didn't know what was going on inside his head, but he looked at me with his head tilted to the side. Ahh, I'm getting pissed.

"I got it, alright-!? I'll do it! I'll be a goddamn slave or whatever!"

I spat out the words. It was like spitting up blood.

"Perfect."

As expected, Leon smiled sweetly, without the slightest hint of sarcasm.

Chapter 9

War Council (1)

“...and there you have it.”

A little later, after having breakfast — a fancy one, of course — with everyone, I brought the three of us to my room and gave them a simple explanation of my exchange and agreement with Leon.

“I understand. I’ll go with whatever you decide, Chris.”

I thought I might meet some kind of opposition, but Palmira nodded so easily it was kind of a letdown.

But the problem was the one burying her head in the bed in agony: Aira.

“Oi oi, Aira, did you hear everything I said?”

“I heard you, okay-!? Ahh, jeez, wuuuh—”

Like I thought, learning that her tale-spinning didn’t fool Leon in the least seemed to have dealt a blow to her delicate heart.

‘Should I keep quiet about that?’ I wondered, but since I couldn’t explain things well, I had to walk them through the whole thing. And this was the result.

She looked pitiful, honestly. How should I put it? Aira is who she is. Will she be alright if I bring her along on this job?

While I mulled it over, she suddenly got up from the bed and came over to me.

“Be that as it may, Big Sister, for lying to Lord Leon... I won’t get the death penalty for disrespecting him, will I? I’ll be okay, right?”

“Well, I think so. I’ve already gone way, way past disrespect, and Palmira didn’t address him properly either.”

‘We’ll all be dead together,’ I said as I gently comforted Aira. Even so, she seemed to have come to terms with it and sat on the bed without a word.

“So, Aira, are you alright with what I just said?”

“Y-Yes. To be honest, I hate the idea of becoming a slave again, but I want the money... Besides, I’m not Palmira, but you saved me, Big Sister. If that’s what you’ve decided, I’m fine with it.”

The sincerity in her words moved me, just a little.

Then, at the same time, I thought,

It’s heavy.

Should I leave both of them behind and go by myself after all?



“Well, I suppose if you went alone, it would work. However — ”

I asked Leon about it after lunch.

The two of us went out onto the balcony off the dining hall to talk.

Or rather, the dining hall changed depending on whether it was morning, noon, or evening. Lunch was served in a room that looked out onto a balcony. It, too, was spacious. But of course.

I didn’t realize it at all, since we arrived by carriage in the night, but the estate was built on high ground. From the balcony, I had an unbroken view of the entire crescent-shaped city and the walls encircling it.

The empty space in the crescent was the harbor, where two large ships were docked, even now.

From there, sweeping my gaze across the view, I could see the ocean and the horizon.

Perhaps because of today's clear weather, there was no haze, so I could see far into the distance.

...I came from the other side of that ocean.

Would I return there someday?

"Miss Chris?"

Although I was the one who'd asked to talk, I'd lost myself in the view. Leon's voice brought me back to the present.

When I turned in a hurry, Leon was looking at me with a peculiar expression on his face.

"Ah, yeah. My bad."

I apologized for my impoliteness. At which point, it was Leon, his expression still odd, who stiffened for a moment before he quickly continued speaking. What was that?

"Let me see... about what I wanted to say. Those two agreed so readily to go with you. I wonder if it isn't a little pitiful for their feelings to be set aside?"

'I'm saying this as the requester, however,' he added with a wry smile.

"Is it like that, I wonder."

"Isn't it? Then let me put it this way... Would it be fine for the two of them to go without you?"

"No way."

Flustered, I quickly shot down his unexpected suggestion.

Leon smiled knowingly and said,

“Right? That’s what I mean.”



In the end, though I was still conflicted, I accepted for all three of us.

It’s not like I was provoked by Leon’s smooth talk, alright?

When I met with the other two later, they were full of a strange kind of fighting spirit, and I didn’t have the heart to tell them I would go alone.

Of course, if I *had* made up my mind, I would have told them clearly that I was going alone regardless of how they felt.

But I was conflicted.

And this, in particular, wasn’t because Leon’s words had influenced me.

This time, I felt quite intensely that I’d dragged them into it.

If I was going to go alone, I should never have spoken with them in the first place.

Looking back on it now, it seemed like a regretful mistake. The way I discussed it with them, it was vaguely like I was offering them a consultation. Carelessly, before coming to a decision myself.

Frankly, it wasn’t like me. I wasn’t the type who didn’t give a shit about taking responsibility.

But on the other hand, I’d be leaving behind two people who’d fought for their lives alongside me. If I went alone, my heart still wouldn’t stay quiet.

...It’s not particularly because of what Leon said.

That afternoon, an explanation of the strategy was presented at the army barracks.

Compared to the estate that was sickeningly opulent everywhere you looked, the barracks had an appropriate simplicity to their interior design. For some reason, I found it a relief.

Led by Leon, Aira, Palmira, and I passed one by one through the foyer, followed by a hall that doubled as a training area. The soldiers engaged in mock swordfights, the soldiers silently training their muscles, practically every one of them was staring at us.

After we got past them, I whispered to Leon,

“Oi, no matter how you look at it, isn’t that rude? Even though you’re the one taking us,”

and he replied,

“Well, everyone here is like part of the family.

“That’s the way it is.”

That’s the way it is?

I mean, suspected noble Leon was definitely an actual noble, but were they people like this?

Instead, my first impression the moment I met him was that he was part of the aristocracy, but his informal manner was really conspicuous this morning. It was because the man himself looked like a stereotypical noble that his behavior left an even stronger impression.

Then again, of course, I’d never been this close to the nobility before either.

Or more precisely, I could count how many times on the fingers of one hand.

My most recent memory was when I participated in an insurrection as a mercenary. Before the entire army sallied forth, there was one guy who just oozed discipline and total self-importance. A noble — Sir What’s-his-face, if I remember correctly.

I'd barely heard any of the actual content, but I felt like he said something along the lines of "If you run, you die."

It wasn't necessarily something to get angry over. I figured, 'Nobles are just like that.' So I never intended to follow his orders anyway.

My gaze flicked over to Leon.

If it's this guy, will he tell us to die?

Well, at least he isn't saying to go die [there]. Or [here], for that matter.

...What'll it be?

I don't think he'll say it. That's just a hunch, though.

But what about when he has something more important to protect?

Will he tell us, 'Die'?

Will he kill us?

Proceeding down the passageway from the hall led us to the room at the very end.

The war council chamber.

I see, it's that kind of room.

In the very center of the fairly large room sat a stately table, with big blackboards hanging from the walls. Half of them were already being used to display a map of the city, which was marked with two red circles.

When we entered, there were already several people there ahead of us.

One of them was old man Leopard. I hadn't seen him around the estate at all, but what had he been up to?

Then, two soldiers... the platoon commanders, maybe? They were already seated and waiting.

Based on my first impressions, one man was the stoic type, and the other, frivolous. See, the frivolous one gave us an appraising sort of look when we came in, which he naturally followed up with a silent wolf whistle. My opinion of him plummeted like a rock.

That left two others.

One of them was a thin, tall man with black hair. Even though it was summer, he was dressed in dark robes.

He looked like a priest. But because of that thin build and the unhealthy cast to his features, the only words that came to mind were 'ominous' and 'gloomy'.

The last person was a woman around twenty years old, sitting idly in her seat. I wondered if she might be a soldier, but unlike the supposed platoon commanders in armor, she was wearing robes inscribed with an insignia.

She might have been a civilian contractor or something. She didn't seem like a normal girl, and I didn't get the impression of a soldier from her at all.

But if she was a civilian contractor, why would she be in that seat? It puzzled me.

"Ah, my apologies for keeping you waiting."

"Everyone has assembled, young master."

Leon addressed his subordinates with a natural ease.

He did just declare them all a family earlier. That was probably why.

"Well then, shall we begin? Ah, could you three take a seat in some of those empty chairs?"

At his urging, I sat down. As far away as possible from the frivolous-looking guy.

As I did so, Aira and Palmira took their seats in turn. Considering how they'd been silent this whole time, they seemed to be nervous.

There was an obvious stiffness to Aira's expression. Palmira was as expressionless as always, but her movements were a little awkward all the same.

It probably wasn't something I could help them with. When I think about it, it must be their first time receiving an assignment in a place like this. You might say that the imposing atmosphere is affecting them.

"Now, first of all, Regnum. I'll let you handle the briefing."

Leon took the seat next to me.

Old man Leopard and the gloomy beanpole stood from their seats. Leopard's Leopard, so the gloomy guy must be Regnum.

"Very well. I will now explain the current situation."

Accepting his orders with a bow, Regnum began his explanation. He sounded as glum as he looked.

"Sections Three and Five are currently engaged in active operations. Each of them has ten agents in the field. Section Three is primarily focused on gathering information on the city. Section Five has operatives in place investigating the target. At present, the target does not appear to have discovered us, but his vigilance has increased slightly due to Lord Leon's arrival. The situation has been deemed dangerous, and therefore part of Section Five has pulled out."

His report was apparently meant for people in the know. Since we knew nothing, most of it just went over our heads.

Filling in the gaps with my own speculation, this man called Regnum was some kind of spy, and his role was to investigate the current state of the city and Guibenague.

And now that Leon had arrived with so much fanfare, the target — Guibenague, in other words — was getting nervous?

"There are continuing signs, but when we trace them back over the last several months, it appears that a wagon loaded with the marks arrives roughly once every three months. However, because this is only a general rule, there are considerable gaps between shipments. Moreover, the group managing the wagon is different each time. But based on the information we have at present, we estimate that there are four or five groups operating on a rotating basis... Though one of them recently met with an unfortunate accident and was completely destroyed."

Regnum's cheerless gaze flicked toward us for a moment. Beside me, Aira clearly flinched. I wanted to tell him not to be such a party pooper.

The marks he was talking about were the slaves, basically.

And Guibenague had four or five slaver crews working for him. One of them was the group that captured us... He wasn't wrong, they certainly had been wiped out in a tragic incident.

"Now, there is the location of the marks in question, but this has not been made clear. First, the carriage transporting the marks enters the target's estate, but according to Section Five's investigation, its whereabouts are unknown after that. The obvious hypothesis is that they're being kept underground, but as far as we know, there have been no indications of such confinement. Second, there are no traces of the marks being taken out of the estate. We have, of course, considered the possibility that they have been shipped out by sea, but even though we have assigned surveillance to the ships, we have found no signs of cargo being loaded."

"That is all," Regnum concluded gloomily.

He really was depressing.

I didn't know how capable this Regnum guy's subordinates were, but in conclusion, they still hadn't found any evidence, nothing other than that.

...Well, that's what we're here for, isn't it.

"Any questions up to this point?"

Leopard, who had been listening in silence, swept his gaze around the room.

Chapter 10

War Council (2)

“Yes.”

The frivolous man raised his hand with a flippancy that clashed with the room’s solemnity. No surprise there. What, couldn’t he read the mood?

“*What*, Rupert?”

Leopard’s expression had ‘What, you again?’ stamped all over it.

It’s always like that, I bet. Yeah, I can totally see that.

“Well, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make such a face. I mean, I should know what there is to know, right? This being an important task and all, I want to get things straight in my head.”

“I get it already. So what is it?”

Even Rupert’s tone was flippant. Looking fed up, Leopard stopped his frivolous request in its tracks. That said, he didn’t dismiss the comment out of hand.

Rupert’s request might not have been made in all seriousness, but it did have some logic to it.

It was probably only his tone that sounded bored. Leopard and Rupert. The names were similar, but their personalities couldn’t be more different. Maybe they were completely incapable of getting along.

Like they understood but irritated each other.

Paying no particular attention to the exasperated Leopard, Rupert lazily leaned back in his chair with a creaking sound.

“I was just thinking, if you already know this much, shouldn’t you make a move on the ships? In the end, it’ll be obvious what cargo they’re being loaded with.”

Tone and attitude aside, it was a relatively sensible opinion.

It was certainly like he said. I was stuck on it too. If the estate wouldn’t work, then they should just search the ships.

However, since Rupert and I had thought things out that far, there was no way this gloomy guy hadn’t already.

If he wasn’t doing it, then there had to be some kind of reason behind it.

“Regarding that, I have something to add.”

As I thought, or rather, Regnum followed up before Leopard could say anything.

“While the Telaberan harbor sees a considerable number of trading vessels going in and out, most of them are bound for domestic destinations. The inspection of all these vessels has been completed, and they have subsequently been cleared. In other words, the culprit is an ocean-going ship.”

Cutting off his words here, Regnum pulled a piece of paper from his breast pocket and stuck it to one of the blackboards.

On it was a six-row list labelled [Date] and [Name]. Beside those were [Lumber], [Fish], and so on. And even further along... there was the name of the country.

Among them, the first and last entries bore the same name.

“This is the record of all inbound and outbound foreign vessels for the last five months. As you can see, there are six such vessels. The bottom two are currently docked — in other words, the question is which of them we want. According to our analysis, it’s this one.”

Taking a pen out of his breast pocket, Regnum circled the first and last entries.

“Belgars. Nationality, the Holy Kingdom of Lugaldi. We have concluded that this is the guilty party.”

“Well, if I’m understanding it so far — ”

Rupert cut in again. Leopard stopped him: ‘Shut up and listen.’

But it was true that Rupert’s question hadn’t been answered yet.

Actually, Aira and Palmira looked like they couldn’t follow at all. Which parts and how much, I didn’t know.

But I had a general idea of the answer.

The Holy Kingdom of Lugaldi. The *Holy Kingdom*.

Secretly, I grit my teeth so hard they creaked. That was a name I didn’t want to get tangled up with a second time.

“Then shall I explain?”

It was Leon, who had been sitting in patient silence until that point, who spoke.

Leisurely leaning forward in his chair, he planted both elbows on the table and linked his fingers together, looking around at everyone in the room.

“In essence, the problem here is that this ship’s destination and nationality are both the Holy Kingdom. We haven’t conducted a compulsory search of the estate for a similar reason, but this ship not only belongs to another country, it’s a government vessel. That makes it even nastier to approach.”

Ending there, he turned his gaze to Rupert, then each of us, in turn.

Apparently we were the only ones who didn’t know.

“If we don’t turn up anything at the end of the search, at worst it may spark a war between the Holy Kingdom and us. Of course, that’s inevitable, but as the Empire, we want to avoid a conflict of that appearance if possible.”

A light shiver ran through me when Leon casually dropped the word ‘inevitable’.

But considering the gap between the two countries’ power, it might be a natural remark to make. The Empire, one of the world’s three superpowers, and the small, remote nation known as the Holy Kingdom of Lugaldi. In terms of national and military power, they differed by orders of magnitude.

“Of course, it’s a prediction that there might be war. However, in this case, we have the initiative. There’s a huge discrepancy between us. To put it bluntly, we can choose to do as we please. Right.”

Leon grinned broadly.

Unlike the gentle smile he’d worn until now, it was a grin of terrifying ferocity.

“Like whether or not to send them all to hell.”

When his speech took a turn for the vulgar, I felt the air instantly freeze.

Aira, who took it at basically point-blank range, had gone completely rigid. Palmira looked a little pale too.

So the man wasn’t lax after all. He wasn’t, but conversely, I felt relieved.

Until now, it was because of his ever-gentle expression that I harbored a distrust toward him I didn’t quite understand. Just a little, but enough.

For that very reason, seeing Leon show a new side of himself put me at ease.

Our upcoming mission to return to slavery would be extremely brutal. At its heart was the fundamental premise that we depended on our collaborators, that we trusted them.

Even though I didn’t know whether everything was out in the open, still, I felt that Leon deserved to be trusted after revealing a different side of himself to us.

“Any more questions?”



Seeing as no one had any outstanding questions, the discussion of strategy began in earnest.

Or rather, I would have been amazed if anyone had raised another question in that atmosphere.

Anyway, it was mostly Leopard who explained the plan.

Perhaps thinking that his turn was pretty much done, Regnum sat back down in his chair.

Right, after this, it would our turn to take the stage.

“Now then, I’ll explain.”

Leopard’s explanation could be summed up like this:

First, we would follow part of the First Platoon through a secret passageway leading from the estate and emerge outside the city at the other end.

Disguised as slavers, the First Platoon would once again pass through the gate and deliver us to the lord.

After that, we would look for other slaves and ascertain their location.

As soon as we discovered where they were being held, the soldiers would break in. Liberate the marks. Apprehend the target.

...Something along those lines. As plans go, it was relatively simple.

“Hey, wait a sec. Mind if I ask something?”

It was because it was simple that several things had been left out. Once the explanation seemed to be over, I couldn’t take it anymore and stood to ask a question.

After I spoke, I realized that my words and behavior are informal, but there was no point crying over spilled milk.

“Wh–What is it?”

It wasn't just old man Leopard, Rupert and the inconspicuous platoon commander next to him, and even the robed woman were drawn in... You know what? I don't care.

"When we've been delivered to the lord as slaves, we should be taken to the same place as the others, but how are you going to keep track of us once we're inside? And we should know what to do after that, too."

Actually, I had other questions too — we'd be disguised as slaves, but what were they going to do about the contracts? And before that, wouldn't it be better to capture the next caravan? But since those issues weren't directly related to us, my complaint focused on the very rough explanation of [what we would do after being captured].

"Ah, it's true that we haven't explained that part yet. Irene."

"Yes."

It was Leon who responded, but he called on the bored-looking robed woman who'd been simply sitting quietly.

Apparently, she didn't expect to be brought into the discussion right now. Hearing her name all of a sudden, Irene all but jumped out of her chair in surprise.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Irene Barnest. I'm an enchantment magus."

Irene bobbed her head to us.

On the other hand, we only looked at her, taken aback.

...Magus. In basic terms, a magic-user.

A rare sight in real life.

I don't know much about the details myself, but the first step in becoming a magic-user is apparently some kind of foundation.

Foundation.

Talent, to put it another way.

A natural gift. It can't be acquired, so the number of people able to become magi is limited. Rumor has it that even at this stage, the probability is just one in ten thousand. It's clear just how few of these people there are.

Plus, it's difficult to determine whether or not someone has a mage's foundation.

Not much is known about the method, but identifying a foundation through artificial means appears to require an appropriately complex process. The only other way is to manifest it yourself by chance.

What this 'by chance' really means is that there are those who have the ability, but for various reasons, never realize it.

Actually, there have even been people who only manifested their magic after the age of sixty.

On the other hand, artificial identification is a method anyone can use.

As long as they have the money.

In a city of this scale, the local adventurers' guild will perform the service on very rare occasions. And if not the adventurers' guild, then there are some national organizations a person can go to as well.

Though their doors are open, as I said earlier, the identification is pretty complicated. Because of this, the expenses are paid in the form of money.

And a *lot* of it.

So, assuming you were that one among ten thousand, unless you spontaneously manifested your magic, or had the fortune of being a merchant or noble with too much money on your hands, then you wouldn't be able to get past the first hurdle.

That's why the number of magi just keeps decreasing.

Who would have thought that the idle girl sitting there would be one of these seldom-seen magic-users, no, magi?

Frankly, even I had only ever met one magus during my life as an adventurer. It was a old man past his fifties.

But considering the circumstances, that might not be all that rare.

As long as your talent can be identified, it doesn't particularly matter if you're under ten or over sixty. You'll still have a chance to become a magus.

“She’ll be in charge of communications and identifying the location. Please check in with her later. Oh, and come to think of it, we still haven’t introduced the other members yet.”

...You’re saying this now? But I obediently perked up my ears anyway.

First, Leopard. Full name, Leopard Galles.

Apparently the commander of this entire company. Then what does that make Leon... well, he’s the young master, I guess.

Next up, Regnum. Regnum Bransheria.

He seemed to be an officer from the Imperial Intelligence Bureau. I thought as much. You could say that it was the right place for him.

Vyde Rouche.

...An unobtrusive guy who hadn’t said a thing for the entire meeting. Commander of the First Platoon.

To sum up, we were going to stick with him until we entered Guibenague’s residence. He wasn’t much of a talker. Even when he was introduced, he simply gave a bow. By the end of the meeting, I never got to hear his voice once.

Then there was that frivolous man, Rupert Belgraf.

Commander of the Second Platoon. Were they going to be okay with someone like this at the top? It seemed like he was in charge of final decisions. Seriously, would they be okay?

“Let’s call it here. You three, be sure to listen well to Irene after this.”

Leopard wrapped things up. Tomorrow, the operation would commence.

Chapter 11

Girls' Talk/Heavy Conversation

“Hahhh, I was so nervous — ”

When we left the meeting room, Aira finally went back to normal, patting her chest with genuine relief.

Palmira, for her part, followed after with a somewhat pensive look on her face.

If pushed, I'd say Palmira's reaction was pretty normal. After all, things had yet to begin. Did Aira really understand the contents of the discussion?

I'd have to check in with her later.

After the end of the meeting, the three of us were still in the barracks, along with our chaperone Irene. We were retracing our steps from the meeting room.

While being eyeballed by the soldiers in the training hall again, we went through the foyer and into another passageway.

“Come on, this way.”

So we were headed to the room at the end of the passageway after all.

Three people, three appearances, we went inside together.

The room was no different from the previous meeting room in size, but instead of a large table at its center, there was a small round table stacked with books, along with three chairs.

Against the walls on both sides were large bookcases filled with books big and small. There was a window, but even that was hidden behind a desk with a veritable mountain of books piled on it.

There was a chest in front of it on the floor. It was overflowing, its lid half-open.

The wall before us, of course, was occupied by the doorway, but to the side of the door

hung a small blackboard covered in complex diagrams.

“..Uh.”

Unconsciously, I made a sound of dismay.

Although they didn't say anything, Aira and Palmira wore the same frown on their faces as they looked inside.

“Ahhh, please wait a moment.”

Maybe she noticed my quiet exclamation, maybe she didn't, but Irene pushed past us into the room as we stood frozen in place.

Picking up the bundle of books on the round table in one smooth motion, she dropped them with a thud on the desk further inside. Not even a bookshelf, but the desk.

No, please *actually* clean up.

I wanted to interject, but on the off chance that this was some magus thing, I held my tongue.

“Pardon me. Well, don't just stand there, come in!”

“Ah, okay.”

At her urging, we filed in one by one.

Behind me, Aira seemed to be muttering, [Huh, I wonder if it'd be too much to clean up once in a while.] It wasn't like she was showing an unexpected side to herself, but I cautioned her to stop in a low voice.

“Now please, sit down, sit down.”

Irene rather forcefully seated us on the only three chairs.

Somehow the atmosphere was completely different from the earlier tension. The meeting room had a palpably serious character itself, but here, not so much.

At least, right now there was a considerable energy in the air, but at the same time, there was something very pleasant about it.

I didn't really get it myself, but this woman here was the reason.

"Hm, mm, oka-y. Now then, please wait for just a little bit. I'll be back right away."

And swept along in her momentum, she left the room. Or would it be more accurate to say she hadn't the slightest intention of listening to our responses? It was rather bracing.

"...Noisy."

Palmira had been silent the whole time, but now she frowned and spoke sourly under her breath.

I couldn't exactly disagree.



"Sorry for the wait — !"

About three minutes later, Irene returned. She had a tray with a teapot and several cups in one hand, and a mountain of a cake in the other.

With both her hands full, she nimbly shut the door with her foot, and laid her cargo on the table with a smile.

I grew a bit worried. This wasn't a follow-up to the war council?

Ignorant of my uneasiness, Irene went around pouring tea into the tall cups. The pleasant scent of black tea wafted into the air. It looked like she used good tea leaves.

After that, she passed around the plates and used a pair of tongs to place a slice of cake

on each one.

In the blink of an eye, we were the very picture of teatime.

To finish, she pulled a small chair away from the desk and set it in the gap around the table. Seating herself, and perhaps finally calming down, she let out a small sigh.

“Then, shall we eat?”

“No, hold on.”

Though I spoke up right away, Irene was already holding a cup.

She looked at me with what seems to be genuine curiosity. Seeing it, even I started to suspect that I was the one being strange.

I shook off the feeling before continuing.

“...So, magic?”

My tone was matter-of-fact. Naturally, this was something she could tell me about while we were taking care of business.

“Ahh, okay. But aren’t you tired from the meeting we just had? All of you. I was thinking we could take a break first and take care of that after. So I got this from the kitchen in the main building. It’s delicious, isn’t it? Eat up, eat up.”

To be honest, I was surprised by how considerate Irene was.

More precisely, she wasn’t exactly using formal speech anymore, and her tone was extremely friendly. I began to think, ‘Somehow, I’m the weird one here, aren’t I?’

“...Ah, delicious.”

Just as the thought occurred to me, Aira had already taken a sip of the black tea, even sharing her thoughts on it.

No, *not* 'delicious'. But even Palmira next to me was stuffing her face with cake. And in a pretty single-minded way.

"Thanks! How is it? And how's the cake?"

"...You're a good person."

That was what Palmira said in response to Irene. More than half her cake had already been demolished.

...Weren't you calling her noisy just now?

Sensing my gaze on her, Palmira suddenly averted her face. You...

"Oh, um, you too. Mm, I'm glad. See, it's all guys around here. The maids are around, but still, it's hard to invite them to this sort of thing. I've been wanting to do this for a while!"

Irene's face was full of smiles.

Ah. That's it. Girls.

It was this indescribable feeling of alienation, or maybe the sense that I was the only one out of sync with everyone else. In my days as an adventurer, if there were only female adventurers gathered in a tavern, there'd be this same mysterious atmosphere.

In other words, at least right now, I was the one who was out of step. I vaguely perceived that.

And then I stopped going any deeper into thought. I knew for a fact that even if I thought about it more, it would just tire me out.

Still, I was conflicted. I sluggishly reached out for the tea cup and had a taste.

Damn, it really was tasty.

My faint surprise didn't escape Irene's notice. She smiled happily. And I felt huffy. I felt huffy, but somewhere in my heart, I felt that this wasn't half-bad either.

"It's damn good."

"Right!? By the way, how did all of you become slaves?"

At those words, I almost spewed out the black tea I just drank. It was a close thing. Did she just ask that? Without the least bit of hesitation? I look at Irene in disbelief.

"The hell? Don't ask about that kind of heavy stuff here like it's nothing."

"But I'm curious,"

Irene immediately replied, looking puzzled.

...No, but, I mean. Look.

"Come to think of it, I don't even know your names. "

"I'm Aira. I have no surname."

"I'm Palmira Wilback."

While I was feeling troubled, the conversation shifted to self-introductions for some reason. What's more, holding their tea and cake, Aira and Palmira both answered as if nothing happened.

Of course, it was my first time hearing Palmira's surname. It was an unexpectedly solid name.

"And you are?"

...Right, which reminds me, only the people on Leon's side finished their introductions. Is he inept? I'll have to ask the next time I see him.

"Chris. No surname."

At her prompting, I shared my name.

Naturally, I avoided saying my real name. Even if I said my male name, it would only make things more complicated. They'd definitely pester me endlessly about it, and that would be annoying to deal with.

"Okay, I got it! Airi, Polly, and Chrissy, right! My best regards! And I'm — "

Quit with the 'Chrissy'.

"We know. Irene Barnest."

"I see! Polly, you're so great!"

It couldn't be helped, but still. Palmira was being treated just like a kid.

"Don't treat me like a child. I'm twenty years old."

"Ehhh — seriously? You're older than me?"

Firmly rebutted, Irene grew excited.

Yeah, I'm gradually starting to think that this is Palmira's go-to icebreaker.

By the way, Irene was apparently nineteen. Not all that different.

"Ah, I'm nineteen as well."

Aira, catch. “We’re the same age!” Irene got even more enthusiastic.

I really don’t care.

Since the question was posed to me too, I dutifully answered that I was eighteen.

“So then, how did you guys become slaves?”

Without any logical segue, the conversation returned to its starting point.

I thought that topic was dead and buried, so it caught me off-guard.

“I used to be a foster child in a farming village, so... I was like a slave pretty much from the beginning, you know? Then, the harvest was poor last year, and it seems like the slavers happened to pass through this year. That was when I was sold...”

Aira related her all-too-heavy past with relative nonchalance. Even though she was that downtrodden in the carriage...

As common stories went, hers was one of them, but if I were in her place, it would’ve been pretty rough.

“So that’s it... that must have been terrible.”

“No, now I already have Big Sister, so it’s nothing to worry about, I think?”

Aira’s expression seemed liberated, somehow. What’s past is past, huh?

She’s strong. That’s what I think. If the person in question is in a good place, is that enough?

...But did you forget? Tomorrow, you’ll be a slave again.

“Whoa, what, ‘Big Sister’? You’re making me super curious.”

“As a matter of fact — ”

“Wait, stop right there. Seriously.”

I hastily stopped Aira. It really isn’t such a good idea to talk about this, I think. Yeah.

“I — ”

Irene grumbled, ‘Ehhh–’ ‘Why not’ ‘Tell me’ ‘Stingy’ and so on. As I was refuting her, Palmira finished her cake and said that one word.

“Hm?”

“Originally, I was a Caidorussean soldier.”

When we quieted down to listen, she abruptly made a surprising confession.

Caidorusse. A small country that no longer existed.

Located to the north, it went to war with the Empire for reasons even I didn’t really understand. I was sure it had destroyed three years ago.

In the Empire, the war was known as the Caidorussean Campaign. A fairly long-running conflict, if I remember correctly.

The alpine nation of Caidorusse fought a defensive war in its mountainous territory. Its power was less than a tenth of the Empire’s, but it held out against its superior foe for several years. In the end, however, it was overwhelmed and its capital fell to ruin.

Ultimately, I didn’t participate in that campaign, but the day the capital fell — in other words, the day of the Empire’s victory — I happened to be in the Empire, so all I remembered was the grand festival they held in celebration.

“As the survivors of a defeated nation, they took almost all of us as prisoners of war, but they only held us for about a year. After that, they released us. They told us to live as we wanted.”

A long time ago, it was common practice to sell all prisoners of war into slavery.

Now, because of the pact signed by the three superpowers, slavery had been abolished.

It was part of a plan to deter the escalation of military conflict: create a situation in which, win or lose, all parties take a hit. That's what people say.

'Course, I don't know how it holds up in practice.

In reality, even today, there's always some war happening somewhere.

"But I didn't know what it meant to live as I wanted. What should I do? How should I live? The means, the purpose — I didn't have either."

The story unfolding was a heavy one; it seemed like it would cave in on itself with a splintering sound.

It might have been at home in a bar, but for a tea party in the dazzling sunlight, no matter how you slice it, it was a bit too heavy.

Palmira told her story in her usual indifferent tone, but even so, the old unpleasant look in her eyes was tied in some way to this, and it caused her terrible pain.

"W-Well, Palmira, it's okay if you can't talk about it."

Unable to take it, I interrupted Palmira against my better judgement.

At which point her gaze turned quickly to me, and she laid her hand on my arm.

"No, actually, I'd like you hear it."

A trace of sorrow in her eyes, Palmira's tone was pleading. Based on her usual behavior, I had the feeling that that was the best she could do to express her emotions, and I sucked in my breath.

"Got it. We'll listen, so tell us all of it."

Maybe Palmira did want me to hear it.

Rather, *I* was the one who wanted to come up with some excuse and run away.

But now, we'd already become companions who would stick together through thick and thin. Without a doubt. I didn't know when our relationship took that turn, but now, if I had to put it into words, I'd say that I had a duty to listen.

"That's why I became a slave."

...Oi, isn't that a little short?

I felt like she'd skipped most of it.

"Ehhh, then, you mean you became a slave voluntarily?"

"Wrong. I became a slave by coincidence. But I thought, if I've become a slave, that's just how it is. And maybe that's just fine."

Irene got Palmira to supplement her story. Sort of.

...This was my guess, but for Palmira, who had been in war as a soldier pretty much from childhood, that might have been the only way she knew how to live. In the army, following orders.

To receive orders, and to carry them out. That was her life. A twisted world that crushed the individual and valued the devoted.

War was her whole reality. And for better or worse, it abruptly vanished from her life.

After being in the midst of war only to have it suddenly end, she couldn't live with her freedom.

"What's different now?"

"You told me how to live. How to live for myself. How to think for myself."

Then, Palmira looked at me as she spoke.

“Those who who don’t try to survive, won’t.”

...Isn’t that too big of a leap, idiot?

I didn’t believe in the slightest that I said anything as ambitious as how to live.

It’s just that it’s important to about what to do on your own, how to act. That’s all I wanted to say. Not a big deal.

It shouldn’t have been.

But, even so.

Even so, someone felt something from my words, found an answer within them.

There’s no greater honor, I thought.

For some reason, I put my hand on Palmira’s head and stroked it.

“...Don’t treat me like a child, I’m twenty years old.”

Palmira scowled a bit, but my hand wasn’t brushed aside.

Chapter 12

Magic Manifestation

“So that’s how it is, everyone’s really gone through so much... I’m sorry I asked so lightly.”

Isn’t that way overdue! ‘Sorry’ ain’t gonna cut it. But for some reason, I thought it was good for me to hear about their pasts.

Knowing.

It was a heavy thing.

Knowing gave birth to chains, and chains made it hard to leave.

For those of us in the adventuring profession, that was a source of considerable fear.

Today we meet, tomorrow we part.

Maybe one of us will die. An immediate farewell.

In such a world, getting to know someone too well would bring nothing but pain. That was common knowledge.

So I tried to acquaint myself with the two of them as little as possible, for whatever reason I could come up with.

But, they wanted me to listen.

They wanted me to understand.

I guess that’s how they felt.

None of us knew what tomorrow would bring. That was why they wanted to be heard today.

Avoiding such thoughts was bad faith on my part.

“Then, last but not least, we have Chrissy!”

“Stop calling me ‘Chrissy.’”

She was just apologizing for asking lightly, and now she’s bouncing up and down to ask me? I don’t get this chick.

This was already way past girl talk.

“Ehh, isn’t it okay? Even when it’s that cute?”

“Don’t call it cute. ‘Chris’ will do, *‘Chris’*.”

While I shut down a wilting Irene, I popped a bite of cake in my mouth. Damn, that’s good.

“Chris, then. Tell us. Honestly, I’m the most curious about your story. How should I put it — there’s something different, I can feel it.”

She was sharp.

Was that what I should be thinking?

Right now, I had a secret I wouldn’t tell anyone.

The truth is, I used to be a guy... yada yada. Just who the hell’s going to believe that?

Then, I was worried about what would happen if someone *did* believe me. That made me hesitant to say anything regardless of the circumstances.

Irene aside, Aira, Palmira, or possibly Leon.

If I told them, would they forgive me in the end?

“I’m super curious about that too.”

“Me too.”

Even those two were watching me with gushing enthusiasm.

I guess — I should say it?

I've already heard the other two's stories. So then.

"...Well, if that's how it's gonna be. Tomorrow, if we make it out safely, I'll tell you."

In the end, I dodged the question.

"Ehhhh... but if something happens tomorrow, we'll never know."

Aira pressed me, dissatisfied. She was right, so maybe I should.

"No, it's not like that. I'd rather come back safe and sound tomorrow and tell you my story then."

I smiled widely and gave her a wink that even I could tell was awkward.

...Even if I say so myself, I thought that was well-said.

For some reason, my heart ached dully, but I needed resolve. I'd have to say it. But if so, I wanted to choose the timing.

"We get it. Promise us."

Palmira made a gallant display of understanding. When I looked at the other two, they nodded the same way.

"Of course. We'll come back after a job well done."

Still, with this timing, I couldn't tell them what I really wanted to say: [Don't die].

"There's nothing we can do about it, so we'll hold onto Chrissy's story until tomorrow."

It's 'cause I don't feel like telling you! I couldn't help but think that if this loudmouth

woman were to find out, I wouldn't like the consequences.

I decided that if she pushed me tomorrow, I'd make up a fake story just for her.

"Okay, let's talk about magic now, shall we?"

Irene got down to business as if she'd been itching to do so for a while.

Really, is she alright?

Somehow, my personal estimation of Irene was sinking to the same level as the frivolous man from earlier. Too unsettling.

"Anyway, I'll first give you a simple explanation of magic before we get to the application."

Finally...?

Given the way Irene was, there were no nerves or dancing around, but being able to listen to a talk on magic was quite a rare opportunity. It was considered a secret among secrets, after all.

I was more worried about whether it was alright to be doing this in such a casual setting.

Among the ordinary folk who took up adventuring, there was a strong perception that magic is a secret, incomprehensible art separate from everyday reality.

They sincerely believed that people would die as soon as they saw it manifest, and the magi who wield it were subjects of awe.

Like sages peering into the mysteries of the universe.

...Or so they expect. And hey, if you peel back the facade in reality, maybe they really are something like that.

When I asked for a refill, Irene poured me some more black tea as I stared at her in amazement, thinking such thoughts.

"Ahem, then, about magic. First of all, everyone, what do you think magic is?"

Clearing her throat in an effort to create the right mood, Irene began her talk with an unexpectedly philosophical topic.

For some reason, I had the feeling that this wasn't going to end with "Magic = amazing power!". It was a little disappointing.

What is magic?

...Alright, now that I was thinking about it, I didn't really know what it is either. It's not 'Amazing power!', is it?

"Amazing power."

"Amazing power?"

"Amazing power."

"You guys are breaking my heart here!"

When we were three for three on 'amazing power', Irene hit the desk in exasperation. Huh, I might have been expecting a slightly different reaction.

"But we can't help it. To be frank, even I've hardly seen magic before. Normally, when you say 'magic', that's the only image that pops up."

"...Well, so that's it. Okay then, I guess there's no helping it..."

The excitement drained out of her. With a vaguely downtrodden air, she took something from her breast pocket and placed it on the table.

A smooth red stone. It was roughly the size of the ring formed by pinching the index finger and thumb together. It didn't exactly look like a worthless rock, but wasn't it a little lacking in dazzle to be a jewel...?

It wasn't ringing any bells, but I had the feeling I'd seen it before.

“What’s this?”

“It’s called a ‘invocation stone’. Essentially, the source of magic.”

Irene took the stone in her hand again. She opened her hand and recited a brief syllable.

“...シ.”

“Wah, wahwah!”

At that moment, the red rock rose slightly into the air, emitting a dim light as it began to spin round and round.

Suddenly seeing a logic-defying power in person, Aira’s eyes widened with surprise. Of course I was surprised too. And in a rare instance, even Palmira’s face was stiff with shock.

“Now, I’ve entered a state in which I can use magic. Therefore...”

Working toward some arcane purpose, Irene swiftly moved her left index finger as if inscribing something in the air. A small light burned at her fingertip, leaving behind a trail. The trail of light stayed suspended in the air, forming shapes like characters.

As if that wasn’t strange enough, once Irene finished the second character in the string, she let out an “Ei” and stuck her finger directly into a stupefied Aira’s mouth.

“Mmggh!?”

Aira’s eyes snapped open in response to the unexpected event. It was too much for her — she didn’t know how to react.

At which point Irene grinned and immediately pulled her finger out of Aira’s mouth.

“Okay, application complete.”

Upon hearing her voice, dumbfounded Aira suddenly clapped her hands over her ears. At the same time, her face became incredibly agitated.

“O-Oi, Aira, are you okay?”

“That voice...”

When I called out to Aira, who didn’t seem like her usual self, that was all she said. Her face was pale.

“That voice?... Or maybe I should be asking what you’ve done to her.”

I closed in on Irene, just about ready to chew her out.

Irene took the floating red stone in her grasp again and raised both hands apologetically.

“Whoa there, whoa. I’ll explain right now, so calm down, okay?”

Even Irene looked uncomfortable before my menacing attitude, and she began to explain right away.

“Just now, I cast magic on Airi to... That’s right, you heard my voice double, didn’t you? So, umm—”

This time touching the tip of her finger to her own mouth, Irene looked at Aira without a word. As I watched, Aira, still pale and with her hands over her ears, nodded in agreement.

“...Uh-uhm. Yes, I did.”

At this point, Irene used the fingers of her other hand to cover Aira's mouth. Her eyes near tears, Aira nodded several times and squeezed her eyes shut.

The hell?

I'd been watching them like that for a while, when, as if something had come to an end, Aira opened her eyes. Trembling all over, she broke into a half-confused smile.

"Yep, just now, I used my magic to talk to Airi telepathically, without using our voices."

Eh-?

Surprised, I look at Aira. Still smiling in confusion, she returned my look and gave me an emphatic nod.

"Big Sister, it looks, um, it looks like I've become a mage..."

"By the way, the content of our earlier conversation was [The color of Chris's underwear today is blue]."

"What the hell is with your choice of topic, you two."

Don't tarnish the dignity of magic by using it for that sort of shameful conversation. Wait, were they blue today? No, more importantly, why would Aira know that? Or rather, forget that, Aira's a mage? As of just now?

"Mm, to be more precise, you might say I used magic to make it possible for her? Basically..."

Based on what she was saying, although we use the catch-all term 'magic', the range of magic a magus could use varied from person to person.

Come to think of it, she mentioned it earlier, but she was apparently a magus

specializing in enchantment.

Enchantment, in simple terms, was magic that can confer magical power onto something else. In this case, she gave Aira the ability of telepathy.

Incidentally, it seemed to only work on objects. In the beginning, when she stuck her finger in Aira's mouth, she enchanted Aira's molars.

"The accepted theory is that this type of magic anchors itself in the molars when cast on a person."

When she put it that way, all I could do was agree with a 'So that's how it works.'

At the edge of my vision, Palmira was delicately consoling Aira, who was disappointed to learn that she hadn't exactly become a mage herself. Well, if it were that easy, the world would be overflowing with mages, I think.

"Anyway, you get it? With this, even if your voice doesn't reach far enough, you can still talk to someone over a distance."

Ah, come to think of it, that was the point of this talk. I remembered.

Basically, if we received this enchantment, then even if we were caught as slaves tomorrow, we'd be able to communicate without giving ourselves away.

Plus, it was quite reassuring. I didn't know the finer points of what we were supposed to do after making it inside. If we were in constant communication, then even in irregular situations, there was a high chance they'd be able to give us support.

I was struck by how amazing magic was all over again.

And besides, I had a feeling that this magic had even more possibilities to offer.

"By the way, the effects wear off over the course of a day, so I'll be recasting it on you before we set out tomorrow."

At those words, Aira took even more of a shock.

Seems like she thought that, becoming a mage aside, at least this ability would be permanent.

Yeah, that's too good to be true.



In the end, by the time I realized that Irene had barely explained anything about magic, dinner was over and I was lying in bed.

For example, if there's such a thing as specialization, there must be specializations other than enchantment, right?

If there are, then what are they?

What's the source of magical power? Reasonably speaking.

And what, ultimately, was that invocation stone?

It was at that point that I suddenly remembered.

Getting up from the bed, I picked up the tattered pouch I left on top of the chest. Then I took that mysterious red stone out from it.

This was an invocation stone.

I felt it when I saw Irene's. Was this the truth behind my feeling of déjà vu? I didn't remember at the time because the shapes were so different. Compared to that smooth stone, this one was pretty jagged and irregular.

But that smooth crimson, that alone was unquestionably the same.

"Hmmm."

With only the moonlight illuminating the room, I examined the red stone from different angles. Where did that slaver get his hands on it?

Where does this red stone come from in the first place?

Irene called it a 'source of magic', but when I thought about it some more, I realized that I didn't know anything other than that. Just that it was related to the use of magic.

Just for fun, I placed it in the palm of my hand the way Irene did.

...Nothing happened. Well, duh.

No no, come to think of it, Irene chanted something briefly back then.
I'm sure it was a single syllable,

“シ.”

I tried making a sound along those lines.

...Nothing happened.

Well, that's life. I suddenly felt embarrassed. Just as I was about to put the stone back onto the chest, I squeezed it.

In that moment, my vision jolted.

“Eh...?”

Surprised, I opened my hand.

The red stone was shining. The same way as before.

Unable to grasp what was happening, I stared at the stone in my hand.

“-!!”

Again, my vision shook.

Before I could finish thinking ‘What?’, the red stone didn't rise into the air and spin, but rather began to sink into the palm of my hand.

“Woah-!?”

Flustered, I swung my hand around in an attempt to throw the stone away. No matter

how frantic I became, the stone continued to steadily sink into my hand. It didn't hurt. But that made it even more repulsive.

“Uh-uaahh!?”

While I panicked, unable to do a thing, the stone vanished into my palm. It didn't leave a single mark. Even the light was gone.

“Haahh-, haahh-”

Not even a few moments after that hair-raising experience, I suddenly broke into a sweat, and my breath grew rough.

What the hell? This feels disgusting.

I tried rubbing the palm that had absorbed the invocation stone. At least I didn't feel the rock sitting inside.

“...?”

But something felt out of place. Something wasn't right-!

“Gaha-!?”

The moment I turned my hand over, my vision jolted once more.

Unconsciously, I covered my eyes with the other hand. From the cracks between my fingers, I saw it.

The back of my hand.

Some kind of pattern had appeared on it, radiating blue light. Round, and labyrinthine.

What is this?

The changes occurring in my body one after another sent shudders running through me.

“Guh–!”

My vision doubled.

The intervals were getting shorter.

Before I could finish forming the thought, *zuu–*, a blue line emerged from the circle and began to snake up my arm, past my elbow, to my shoulder.

“Uwa–uwaaaahh–?!!”

Half-distracted, my eyes followed after it, but when the blue light reached my shoulder, it drew yet another copy of the pattern and then disappeared toward my back.

“Aahh–??!!”

My vision blurred, much worse than before.

This time, it didn’t stop there, but projected the same blue pattern onto my field of vision. It spun round and round before my eyes, a mutating puzzle.

“Uyaaaahhhh!?”

Screaming, I pressed both my hands against my eyes. But it didn’t go away.

An overwhelming terror seized my heart.

“AAAAAAHHH!”

My consciousness scattering to the four winds, I collapsed where I stood.

At the very end, for a single moment, I glimpsed the door to the room slam open and Leon burst inside.

Chapter 13

Slaves Once More

A dream.

Again.



There was an elm tree growing in the back garden.

A huge, majestic tree.

I loved that tree, and ■■■■■ would get mad at me for it, but I would often climb up and play in its branches.

Even though I got scolded, I climbed because I liked the scenery from up there.

To be honest, I could see the same view from the second story of the house, but when I gazed out from that high perch all by myself, I could imagine that it belonged to me alone, and it looked even more wonderful.

The wind blew, and the foliage shook. A rustling sound. Motes of sunlight filtering through the leaves.

Far in the distance, I could see a mountain range. It would change from green, to yellow, to white, colors to match the season.

The sky was all sorts of colors too. Soaring blue, distant red, sprawling indigo.

Deep inside, I felt that I would never tire of it.

One day, ■■■■■ came.

At first, I found ■■■■■ hard to deal with. He might have felt the same way. The first time we met, I didn't know how to act around a boy who was roughly the same age as me.

Nervous, but curious, I snuck peeks from behind. I didn't know what ■■■■■ thought of me, acting like that. ■■■■■ would steal glances at me too, but only to look at me in bewilderment.

In the end, I inched closer little by little, and took ■■■■■■'s hand.

“■■■■■”

I said.

■■■■■, confused, nodded.

I was happy. Me, and ■■■■■ too. We probably both wanted to get along, I think.

And so we became friends. Not friends. Brother and sister.

■■■■■ was Big Brother. I was the little sister. Because I was younger.

But even so, I was glad. If I could be together with ■■■■■, if I could call him family, I'd be happy. I loved ■■■■■, and ■■■■■ always pulled on my hand.

But that elm was the only exception.

I climbed the elm less frequently than before. Playing with ■■■■■ was important to me.

Besides, ■■■■■ wouldn't climb the elm. No matter how many times I asked, he wouldn't do it. So every time I gave up, helpless, and secretly climbed it by myself. But I was found out every time, and he'd look up at me and yell that it was dangerous.

Even though it would be better to climb it together. Even though I wanted to look together. Even though the view that belonged solely to me, would be even better if the two of us could share it.

And yet, ■■■■■ wouldn't come.

But I wanted both of us to see it someday, for sure.

That would definitely be even more wonderful. I just knew it.

◇ ◇ ◇

“.....”

Collecting my dazed consciousness, I awakened as myself.

When I opened my eyes, I could see the bed canopy.

Ah, I'm here.

Maybe it was because that weird dream, but it was a relief to find myself in the same place as yesterday.

Dream?

Was that really a dream? Aren't dreams usually more abstract and bizarre?

Not to mention, the contents of my dreams were worrying me more and more. Even when I dug through my memories, I couldn't find a single trace of that place or those children.

It wasn't as if I'd never dreamed of places and people I didn't know until now. So in that respect, there was nothing particularly mysterious about it.

That was how it should be, but these strangely vivid and *not*-irrational dreams gave me a sense of discomfort I couldn't put into words. If I had to say something, I'd go with:

Mystery dreams.

...that's it in a nutshell.

In conclusion, I suddenly felt foolish, and I decided not to pay too much attention to them.

"Hahh."

"Oh, you're awake?"

...Again?

With a slightly fed-up look on my face, I sat up in bed and turned toward the source of the voice.

There was Leon, sitting on the chair next to the wall just as he had been yesterday. When our eyes met, he raised a hand in greeting, his expression calm.

...But if there was something different from yesterday, it was the hint of dark shadows under his eyes. They were only slightly darker, but given Leon's originally chiseled good looks, they stood out even more.

"What's with the bags under your eyes?"

So, I asked him straight out.

Frankly speaking, I didn't see a reason to be delicate with Leon. I mean, the guy goes into people's rooms whenever he feels like it all the time — well, for a second time, anyway.

"...Do you remember what happened yesterday?"

Leon's expression grew dubious.

Yesterday..... -!

How could I forget?

I hurriedly checked both sides of my right hand.

Sure enough, there was nothing there.

Not on my palm, of course, nor on the back of my hand. That strange floating pattern was completely gone without a trace. I rubbed my right hand with my left to make sure, but as I thought, there was no sense of discomfort.

"What... was that?"

I was confused.

I was happy that there was nothing there, sure.

The truth is, if that glowing pattern *had* been floating there, I would've been even more confused. But its absence was unsettling too. There was no doubt in my mind that something happened yesterday.

I recalled last night.

The rock that I thought was a invocation stone was absorbed into my palm.

A merciless dizziness assaulted me, the pattern appeared on the back of my hand, and lines radiated from it, running up my arm and disappearing toward my back. At the same time, a large version of the pattern imprinted itself on my vision.

...Speaking of which.

“Hey, Leon. What happened to me yesterday?”

Thinking back, at the end, Leon came flying into the room with a completely unfamiliar expression on his face. I even remembered thinking, ‘Huh, so even Leon can make a face like that.’

“Well, you see, I heard you screaming at the time so I thought something happened and rushed over. I should have knocked, but your voice didn’t sound normal.”

“No, uh, that’s not what I meant.”

The problem was what came after that.

Or rather, since I was continuing to wake up to this situation with Leon, I was surprised he could talk about knocking with a straight face.

“Then the moment I came in, and you were collapsed on the floor, holding your head? I’d like to know what happened myself.”

“...The pattern.”

“Pattern?”

“...No...”

When Leon repeated the word, looking curious, my words became muddled.

He didn't see it?

I could see that glowing blue circle so clearly.

But maybe only I could see it.

In that case, if I started talking about it right here, right now, I'd ultimately have no choice but to reveal my secret.

I... still wasn't mentally prepared for that. Right now, I still didn't want to talk about it.

"...No, so many things happened, I think I was still half-asleep."

So I made up a suitable lie instead.

Hearing that, Leon turned a bit pensive, but for now he said,

"...Is that so?"

with an expression that could be taken as either agreement or doubt.

Which one?

Well, whichever it was, I was going to have to come clean today or tomorrow.

"I understand. But the issue with your physical condition... No."

With a rare flicker of bewilderment, Leon cut himself off.

What?

Before I had the time to wonder, his smile returned.

"I would like to start the operation. The other two are already ready and waiting, so you're the only one left. After you've changed, please join us in the conference room we used yesterday."

As if he'd said what there was to say, Leon got up and left the room.

...It wasn't like I was expecting to be escorted or anything, but somehow I felt unsatisfied, or maybe disappointed. Like it betrayed my expectations.

Well, maybe it was something like that.

Anyway, I wasn't a guest here anymore.

After this, it was all about the job.

'If that's the case, then that's normal, right?' I decided.



By the time I entered the meeting room, Palmira and Aira were already waiting, just as Leon had said. And they had even changed into the slightly grimy sack-dresses, too.

Speaking of which, I get it. Still, changing back into these clothes for a second time...

Though I understood that we were becoming slaves, it was enough to dampen my mood considerably.

"Somehow, this makes me feel like everything up until now was a dream."

While maids applied make-up, Aira said this with a half-smile. The make-up seemed to be for the purpose of making our eyes look sickly, but unconcerned about the intention, the two maids went to work with zeal.

"Now then, would you please change into this as well?"

Another maid handed me clothing. She'd been the one to dress me the day before yesterday. Perhaps drawing a clear line, she maintained a stoic expression.

It felt lonely, somehow, but it couldn't be helped. I accepted the sack-dress in silence.



It was gloomy, and to make things worse, the passage we were walking down was narrow and damp.

Ahead of us, holding a light, was Commander Vyde of the First Platoon.

His silent figure, striding along, was an oddly good fit for this place. Wearing the sack clothing, Aira, Palmira, and I followed behind him. The mood being what it was, no one said anything.

Behind us was Irene. It seemed that because her enchantment magic had a time limit, she was coming along in order to cast it at the last possible moment. Even she kept her mouth shut, unsurprisingly.

Following her were around ten soldiers.

Well, I say that, but — and this applied to Vyde too — they'd changed their earlier armored look. If anything, they looked like a ragtag band of adventurers. Slavers being the idea here.

After that, Leopard and the local troops arrived to commence operations.

Like so, we moved to what they said was the main building. Pushing aside the stove at the back of the hall, Leopard saw us off as we descended the staircase that appeared.

It was just like a noble's mansion to have a secret escape route like this. I bet they come standard. From the slight surprise on Irene's face, this one must have been kept top secret. If not, then it wouldn't work as a normal escape route either.

In the end, Leon never showed his face.

'At least see us off. That's not too much to ask, is it?' I thought, but... I ended up telling myself, 'Well, I'm sure he's busy.'

All the same, walking down this dark underground passageway, it was like we were being taken to some heathen ritual to be offered up as sacrifices.

And in a sense, that might be true. In that we were being offered up.

The reality is, we're women. Since the old days, it's been a young woman's lot to be made a sacrifice.

Wait, but I'm a young man. The heathen god will have some pretty complicated feelings about that, I'm sure.

It looked like we'd reached the end while I was thinking about all that useless junk. Vyde suddenly came to a stop.

I stumbled forward, but manage to keep from running into him.

It was a dead end with a small iron door set in the wall. Without a word, Vyde took a key out from somewhere and slid it into the keyhole.

Kachink. Vyde pushed against the door from the inside, opening it with a creak. Sunlight shone through the gap.

The brightness was dazzling, but when my eyes adjusted, I realized we were in a deep forest.

“This way.”

Hearing Vyde’s voice for the first time, I timidly stepped outside at his urging.

We were in a deep forest after all, as it turned out. Looking around, I saw that the door I had just come out of was set into some kind of stone monument, twisted and covered in ivy.

I see, the exit was hidden too. I approved of the choice.

“We’ll walk a little further. Watch out for undergrowth.”

Vyde told us to pay attention in a subdued voice. He really kept his words down to the minimum, didn’t he?



Once we left the forest, which didn’t even have an animal trail running through it, we emerged onto a highway.

At the same time, as if they’d been waiting nearby, two wagons pulled up to us.

This operation was like a well-oiled machine.

One was an extremely unremarkable covered wagon, but the other was that sealed wooden box from before.

That was our ride. It was just as depressing as wearing the sack.

Aira and Palmira were also looking at it with rather complicated expressions.

“Well then, I’ll cast the enchantment inside.”

Irene spoke with as little emotion on her face as possible and got into the box. When I looked at the other two again, our eyes met. Seeing their lost looks, I braced myself and got in. Then, the other two followed.

“...Okay, let’s go in turns.”

As soon as we were all inside, the casting began.

The invocation stone and the light of the spell illuminated the wagon’s dim interior. It was a more wondrous sight than yesterday’s.

First up, Aira.

Same as before, Irene stuck her finger in Aira’s mouth. Then Palmira’s.

“Last but not least, Chris. Open your mouth, okay?”

Having gone through it twice before, Aira was still calm, but Palmira had her hands clapped over her ears just as Aira had.

My turn came up while I was watching them, and I turned to Irene.

“...I trust you’ll be gentle.”

I put on a face of bravado over my slight dread.

Irene gave me a tiny nod and wrote the symbols in the air a third time. That done, she stuck her finger in my mouth as she had with the others.

Snap–

There was a popping sound toward the back of my head. Irene withdrew her finger.

(H–Huh?)

Irene's voice echoed in my head. When I looked over at her, she was staring at the tip of her finger with a perplexed expression.

Whaddya mean, 'huh'? You're making me nervous.

(Ah, it looks like the enchantment took hold properly... I thought it felt a little different than usual, for some reason.)

What? Could she hear my thoughts just now?

It was amazing, but it was scary to think that someone was listening in.

(Once you get used to it, you'll be able to transmit only what you want to.)

(Big Sister, it's okay. Even I can do it.)

(...How very unnerving.)

Following Irene, I could hear Aira and Palmira's voices.

Anyway, it seemed like everything was okay. I mean, it was still a weird feeling, and I couldn't suppress my disorientation, but I thought I'd get used to it sooner or later.

(Well, everyone, do your best. Chris, I haven't forgotten what you promised.)

With that, Irene gave us a little thumbs-up and got out.

The door shut behind her.

More and more, I felt strongly that we'd rolled back to being slaves. Unsurprisingly, I grew uneasy.

After a short while, I could feel the wagon start to move.

"...Snff."

Aira sniffled, on the verge of tears.

(It's okay.)

The only thing I could do was pray that would hold true.

Chapter 14

The Torture Chamber

“Ooohh, I thought the number was low this time, but aren’t they just marvelous!”

In front of me, a fat man quivered with his hands spread.

Even though it was my first time seeing him, he had to be the current city lord of Telaberan, Guibenague.

Honestly, I was deeply amazed by how much he looked the way I pictured him.

The word ‘greasy’ fit him like a glove, with his fat figure and receding hairline.

Clad in excessively gaudy clothes, his neck, his arms, his every finger dripped with extravagant accessories that exceeded the bounds of good taste. He was the very picture of nouveau riche, completely succumbing to the draw of finery.

Though I was sure the man himself had no idea at all.

“Hooohooohoo.”

Hooting like an owl, Guibenague breathed wildly through his nose as he came closer to us. He caught my chin in those pudgy fingers and forced me to face him.

I wanted to resist, but by the time those two hands came for me, I was already cuffed and chained.

His glittering eyes drew close.

Involuntarily, the urge to kick him in the groin ran through me, but I quashed it with some effort. It wouldn’t be hard to do it. But then we wouldn’t be able to complete our objective.

Instead, I swore by every power I knew that I would absolutely beat him to death.

(Big Sister, you have to endure~~~!)

As a result of my fervent wishing, it seemed that those thoughts leaked out. Beside me, Aira cautioned me with a pale face.

(I *know*, damn it.)

While I struggled to keep my emotions from my face, I let myself be manhandled. Guibenague turned my face left and right, appraising me with a satisfied look.

His face was close. His breathing was rough. His breath stunk.

“Mmm~! The prettiest woman I’ve seen in a long time, no, that I’ve *ever* seen. Why, I could even say she’s a miracle! The body is still immature, but it’s more than enough.”

“Much obliged.”

I could hear slaver boss Vyde’s voice from behind him.

Not that it counted for squat right now, but knowing there was an ally nearby — sort of — calmed me down a little.

Meanwhile, Guibenague’s hands were touching my shoulders, chest, waist, butt, and legs, in that order.

“~~~!”

Every touch fanned the flames of my rage to new heights.

It was the first time my body had been touched like this. And by a man, to boot. All I could feel was disgust.

The impulse to twist his arms off immediately ran through me, but nevertheless, I managed to force it back.

(I’ll kill him! Kill him! *Kill him!*)

(Big Sister, you can't!)

(Patience.)

“Good. The other two are high enough quality, so shall we say one-fifty this time?”

Perhaps satisfied after forcing me to endure his inspection until my guts were twisted in knots, Guibenague moved his gaze to Aira and Palmira, before he turned his back to us as he spoke.

One-fifty. This is just too rich. It was exactly the amount we'd be compensated for this. In other words, the sum that left me stunned at first was surprisingly appropriate. That clearly showed me just how different a noble's sense of money was from a commoner's.

“Much obliged.”

Vyde's voice came from behind him again.

‘His limited vocabulary is the actual reason he got this role, right?’ I thought, for some reason.



Once we were on board, the carriage didn't waste a moment before easily rolling through the gate, cutting through the city to the Lord's mansion.

Well, to the extent that a windowless wagon could be considered a carriage. Shaking from side to side, I had to content myself with speculating about the noises leaking in from outside.

But the door opened and we were taken outside. It didn't take me long to realize that, as I expected, we were in the Lord's mansion.

We emerged into a dimly-lit place, but in the room we were then shuffled off to, I could hear Irene's voice loud and clear.

It seemed like she was using a tracer to accurately determine our position. That's a relief.

The route used to bring in the slaves appeared to be in the mansion. Vyde and two men, probably from the Lord's private army, led us through a passageway invisible to the outside.

Then, at last, we arrived at the other end. In the room we entered, a man that seemed to be Guibenague was already waiting there as if impatient to get started.

Well, he was.

"Nevertheless, eheeheehee, what fine goods, no? This time fortune truly smiled upon me."

Once Vyde was made to leave, it was just us, Guibenague, and his two private soldiers left in the room as we went through another round of evaluation.

Or rather, it was pretty much just me, with heartfelt unwillingness.

Considering Aira and Palmira would be spared, it was alright like this, but my feelings were all jumbled up.

(...Still, I'm a bit displeased.)

(Me too.)

Feeling dissatisfied by something, the two of them looked at me, along with the excited Guibenague.

It wasn't like their feelings were a complete mystery to me, but since this wasn't especially my idea of a good time, I'd like it if they pardoned me.

Frankly, I was starting to feel fine with the idea of switching out.

"This time, the client should be pleased as well. Now then, please take them to the usual room... you mustn't injure them, understand?"

"Yes sir!"

Client?

After giving his instructions, Guibenague separated from me with a slightly regretful expression.

His two lackeys came to stand in front of us. After saying [Come along] without any emotion, they started walking.

After hesitating slightly, we followed after them.

We'd probably be able to meet up with the other slaves, right? Once we did that, our job should be over.

(Irene, Irene, can you hear me?)

As we exited the room and walk down the dim corridor again, I called out to Irene.

(...Chrissy. Did you make it through okay?)

At which point I got an instant reply from her. She must've been on standby.

Thank god things are going properly, more or less.

(No problem. Stop calling me Chrissy. For now, we've started moving. Can you pinpoint our location?)

(Uh-huh, uh-huh, okay. I can confirm that you are still in the mansion!)

I didn't really understand how she could confirm that, but it seemed like she could keep track of us just fine.

But how accurately? Could she figure out even what part of the mansion we were in?

...Well, worrying about it now wouldn't solve anything. I'd just have to put my faith in her.

(For now, if we can meet up with the other slaves, we'll get in touch again.)

(Okay, got it.)

I terminated the conversation on my end. At the moment, we were doing fine.

At exactly which point, we ran into a downward flight of stairs. The soldier leading us began to descend.

So it was underground after all? When I hesitated, the soldier at the rear moved forward and said [Get going. Hurry up.]

Feeling that I didn't have any other options, I took the stone stairs down step by step. Unlike the orderly passageway we'd been in until now, these stairs were roughly hewn, and increasingly so as we went on.

Though the candles here and there offered some light, it wasn't enough. Our footing was rather unreliable.

How should I put it, there was something in the air.

(Scary...)

Aira's thoughts flowed over. She was right. Even I found it eerie.

About three stories down, we hit a door.

It wasn't iron, but completely utilitarian wood. It was stained in places, giving off an extremely unnerving atmosphere.

The guide soldier took out a key, unlocking it with a loud *gachunk*.

Then, he pushed it open with a heavy sound.

"Go in."

The guide stood there, prodding us inside. This is the last stop, huh? If we go inside, we can't escape, huh?

After the expected moment of serious doubt, I steeled myself and went through the door.

(.....-!)

It was — a torture chamber.

A fairly large space, it was packed with all sorts of tools and machinery for torture.

The delicate light of the candles unveiled the ghastliness of those brutal devices.

An X-shaped stand for crucifixion.

Spike-covered chairs fitted with restraints.

A bed with a roller attached for god-knows-what.

Several sets of handcuffs, chains dangling from the ceiling. A water tank. A wood horse shaped like a triangle.

There were similar traces of some dark substances on all the machines. It was easy to imagine just what had happened there.

The various ropes and other obscure objects hanging on the wall were also worn with use.

As could only be expected, the chamber's overwhelming abnormality stopped me dead in my tracks.

“Hiii-!”

(...-!)

Coming in after me, Aira unsurprisingly screamed. Palmira's leaked thoughts echoed in my head.

“Hurry up and get inside!”

Along with the voice, something pushed heavily against my back. Turning on reflex, I saw the soldier watching us with an irrepressible grin.

There was no question that these guys had brought many, many slaves like us down

here and watched them shudder or freeze in fear.

I bet it fed their sense of superiority.

(...Scumbags.)

For a moment, I glared at the private soldiers. I thought I wouldn't be seen in the dim light, but one of them met my eyes at that moment.

"What's this, making such a cute face. You've really got guts."

He drew closer to me with that detestable smile plastered on his face.

Damn it...

This has gotten out of hand.

But I still took this opportunity to glare at him with all the venom I could muster.

"Just seeing this place, most women brought here break down crying or wailing."

The soldier casually approaching me grabbed my cuffed arm and twisted it upward.

"Piss —... *off* — !"

I put up a fight, but my strength really didn't compare.

Frustrating as it was, that was a fact. Even so, I grit my teeth and glared at him hard enough to punch a hole through his head. In my current state, that was the best I could do.

(Big Sister—!)

"Oi, don't get so rough with her. You heard it from the master himself, right!?"

Along with Aira's scream, the other private soldier came in to restrain him. Even so,

the one in front of me didn't move as we glared at each other.

"Oi!"

"Tch-!"

Told off a second time, the soldier finally released me and thrust me away from him.
It was humiliating.

That this garbage could do anything he wanted to me, even if it was for just a moment.
That was unbearably mortifying.

(Chris, I'm begging you, please endure it.)

With a rare entreaty from Palmira, my blood finally cooled down.
That's right. What will I do if they get into a pinch because of me?
I have to take it, for their sake...!

"Well, wait there for now. Things should get fun soon!"

Leaving that parting line, the soldiers shut the door again, locked it, and went upstairs.
For all that, I was still furious.
I carved that guy's face onto my kill list, right after Guibenague.

"Big Sister, are you okay?"

After the soldiers' footsteps faded far enough away, Aira edged up to me. Her eyes were on the verge of tears. I got the feeling that I did wrong.

"...Sorry, I'm okay. Sorry for worrying you too, Palmira."

“It’s fine if you’re okay.”

With that, Palmira abruptly turned her face away... I’m really sorry.

I used my cuffed hands to stroke her head. Her expression was still sullen. But since she didn’t seem to be in a bad mood, I kept stroking her head for a while.

I took another look around the room.

“...What’s that?”

I didn’t notice earlier, but there were two things in the room that now caught my eye.

One was the iron bars further inside. It was dark, so I couldn’t say for sure, but the inner part of the chamber seemed to be a prison.

‘In that case,’ I thought, straining my eyes. But there was no one inside. Instead, a few skulls had been left inside.

— Could it be?

My mind jumped to the worst-case scenario.

Say Guibenague, out of some inescapable kind of perversion, buys slaves — not to sell them, but to fuel his torture fetish.

That would explain why no slave had ever come out of the mansion. The imperial ship was actually a red herring.

— I considered the hypothesis.

It stood to reason, more or less.

At any rate, though all that was left was white bone, those were corpses in there.

Since this was the last stop, no wonder no slaves were ever found leaving the mansion.

...No, that’s not right.

After reaching that point, I cleared the scenario from my head.

Looking at one machine after another, the torture devices here didn't have signs of much use.

At least, they didn't seem to have been used recently. On the whole, they were covered in dust.

The skulls further in, too. Thinking with a level head, quite some time would have passed for them to reach such a state. If my hypothesis were true, it normally wouldn't be skulls, but bodies.

Besides, Guibenague said it too.

[The client should be pleased.]

...In other words, there was still more to come.

As I reached that conclusion, I spotted the second thing.

It was a door.

The door wasn't fixed to a wall, but rather a room sectioned off by a partition. It made for an odd sight. Lined up with all the torture tools, it looks horribly out of place.

First off, I didn't know why it was in a place like this.

Second, I didn't really understand what purpose it might serve.

(B-Big Sister!)

While I scrutinized the mystery door, I got a panicked transmission from Aira.

I turned to find her staring at the door we came through with a look of terror.

Before I could ask myself 'What's she looking at?', I heard the footsteps of someone laboriously descending the stairs.

Instantly alert, I partially shielded the unwilling other two as I pulled a distance away

from the door.

Domp... Domp...

The footsteps grew steadily louder, then stopped before the door.

The sound of the key turning that came immediately after was all too loud, followed by the door creaking open.

Light from outside streamed in through the open door.

It came from the lantern in the invader's hand.

Then, the lantern light revealing the invader's face,

“Guhoho–, it looks like I surprised you, hmm?”

It was none other than Guibenague himself.

Chapter 15

The Power Called Forth

I'd been thinking about who would come through that door, but I didn't expect the man himself to make a special appearance.

No, this makes sense under the circumstances, doesn't it?

Us being important merchandise and all.

Guibenague looked us over. Nodding in satisfaction, he put the lantern down and slowly approached.

I could sense Aira trembling right behind me.

"...What do you intend to do with us?"

Because now that we've come to this point, it's stupid to keep up appearances, said my tone. I fixed my glare on him.

Don't come any closer, it warned.

"...Hmm, in all my experience, you are the highest in quality, but that tone will not do."

"Ha-, no one asked you."

(Big Sister?!)

(Chris, you can't!)

Their two voices tried to restrain me. But having come this far, I couldn't back down.

Leaving the clean-up to someone else wasn't my style in the first place.

In the meeting, no one gave any instructions on what we should do after getting inside. Didn't even want to say something as vague as 'play it by ear'. That was clear.

But that was exactly why I decided to do as I liked.

Earlier, I still held myself in check because of the soldiers. But now, it was just one guy. Easy.

“Hohhoh, it seems you are the only one in need of education.”

Guibenague came closer, wearing his habitual smirk. I slowly lowered my hips, waiting for him.

When he was within one step of me, I sprung into action.

“Eat shit!”

Whatever my strength, I knew how to move from experience. If so, by aiming it correctly, I could knock down this bald asshole.

Even though I’ve ended up like this, I’m an adventurer, and I’ve walked paths just as deadly as this one. I’m doing it. I’ll think about the rest later.

Twisting my upper body with all my might, using my left leg as the pivot, I swept my right leg toward Guibenague.

Target: his head. If he recoils, the family jewels.

My body moved perfectly.

Like a whip, my right foot,

Bap–

failed to connect with Guibenague’s head.

“Wha-?!”

In the end, Guibenague casually protected himself from my leg with his hand.

Thanks to my surprise, my reaction came a moment too late.

Before I could change my posture, Guibenague grabbed my ankle and yanked me over

with a strength I couldn't believe. Then, he dangled me upside down like a chicken. With just one arm.

(Chris!)

Hanging in midair, I could see Palmira running toward me in the corner of my vision. I didn't even have time to tell her it wouldn't work before Guibenague's quick, casual kick sent her flying backward.

"Palmira-!"

"Ohoho. Good grief... I'd appreciate it if you could refrain from making extra work for me... It's tiresome. Shall I have the two of you go first?"

With an infuriating ease, Guibenague held onto me with one hand and pointed the other at the mystery door.

"シ."

(What!?)

Then, he said that word. The incantation to activate magic.

Irene had recited it, and so had I.

To my surprise, one of the innumerable rings on his fingers emitted a red light.

"...Aira! Palmira! Get away from that do-guh-"

My instincts screaming that the door was dangerous, I tried to warn the two people behind me, but Guibenague driving his knee into my stomach interrupted me partway.

"Hold your tongue."

(God — damn it...)

Before my eyes, Guibenague's fingertip started to shine too. With it, he sketched a symbol in the air, in far less time than Irene.

Vomiting, I saw the door behind the other two swing inward with great force.

On the other side of the door wasn't the opposite wall, but rather some wave-like thing with a yellow glow that filled the room.

"Kyaaaa-!?"

"Chris...!"

Without even the time to turn around, they were absorbed into the light, leaving behind only their voices.

A moment later, the door closed.

It all happened within the space of a breath. I couldn't even cry out. All I could do was reach out with my bound hands.

With no time to spare for shock, I immediately fired off a telepathic message.

(Irene! Aira and Palmira were sent away somewhere!)

From my memories as an adventurer, I recognized it right away.

That was a sorcerous vessel. It had to be. An ancient relic activated with magical power.

Kickstarted by Guibenague's magic, it teleported the pair away from here.

Seeing it with my own eyes just now, it dawned on me. Of course no one could figure out Guibenague's method of transport. It was this device at work.

(Wait! I'll have their posi-)

(...?! Irene?!)

Irene's response came back as quickly as I expected, but it cut off midway.

The cut clearly unnatural, I quickly called out to Irene again, but there was no reply.

Why? What's going on?

"Now then, let's train you *thoroughly*."

While my mind was spinning, Guibenague, still holding me upside down, took a step in a different direction.

Light as I was, for Guibenague to carry me with one hand, this bald slob wasn't just any ordinary guy.

Expecting to be underestimated as just a young girl, I had conversely underestimated my opponent as just a fat bald man. It was too bitter a pill to swallow.

However, from his behavior, I knew that Guibenague wasn't necessarily the reason I lost communications with Irene. Just that much.

I didn't know why our connection got cut, but had Guibenague been responsible, it would have been beyond the worst-case scenario.

(Irene! Irene–!)

I called out to Irene again as I was being carried along, but I got nothing back. I expected as much. Did the magic just wear off by itself? Wasn't it supposed to last for a full day?

While I was wracking my brains, I found myself suspended from one of the chains attached to the ceiling in the middle of the room.

So by this point, the hem on my one article of clothing — the sack-dress — had rolled down, stopping just short of my waist. The only saving grace was that unlike before, I had underwear on, but that didn't change how humiliating it was to be in this state.

"Shit–! Let me go! You bald bastard!"

Guibenague had moved away from me, so I cursed at his back.

The truth is, with the restraints still on, I couldn't do anything other than wiggle my body around. This had no effect other than hurting my bound wrists, but even though I knew it wouldn't do any good, I couldn't help but put up a fight. I could imagine the future implied by the word [training] all too easily.

"Now, I don't want to injure my merchandise too much, so I'll go easy."

Guibenague returned with something in his hand.

...A cat o' nine tails.

At the end of the handle, it split into several individual tails of hide. It seemed vastly preferable to the other torture devices, but even so, the sight of that vicious black whip made me take a sharp breath.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that he intended to give me a solid strike with that thing.

But I didn't have the slightest idea of how much damage it would do. It went without saying, but I didn't have any experience in this area.

"Well then."

Without waiting for me to respond, Guibenague wielded it carelessly. It whistled through the air.

The next moment, he swung it down on my rear.

Wuh-pash!

"Gyahaah-!"

I screamed in pain, without regard for shame or honor.

It hurts...! It hurts! It hurts!

The moment it hit, I felt as if my skin were being stripped away. A heavy pain that dug under my skin followed after. It shot through my head, making me arch my hanging

body.

Gritting my teeth against the lingering pain, I shut my eyes. I knew that slowly but steadily, they were filling with tears.

I didn't find myself pathetic. It just hurt that much.

"Oh my, it's only been one so far, you know? For you to yield to me after only this much... I'm embarrassed."

"W-Wait! *Wait!*"

Seeing Guibenague mercilessly raise up the whip, I screamed for him to stop. I screamed with everything I had. And yet...!

Wuh-pash!

"Gyaaa-!"

With the new pain over the old, my back arched again. The restraints on my legs clattered.

It hurtsithurtshurtshurts-!

As the pain seeped deeper, I bit my lip.

I can't.

I've never experienced this kind of pain, even in my time as an adventurer.

I can't take th

Wuh-pash!

"Agahh-!"

With one blow, my consciousness seemed about ready to fly away.
And I thought, 'It probably will, very soon.'
And I wished from the bottom of my heart that it would. As soon as possible.



Splash!

"Uh... aahh... ggh-!"

My consciousness re-emerged from pitch-black darkness. The pain returned at the same time, and I moaned.

I'd been splashed with water. The droplets trailed down my body, my face, my arms, and dripped onto the floor. *Plip plop. Plip plop.*

"Have you woken up?"

"Ah... aaaah..."

At the sound of that voice, talons of fear seized my heart.

I'd blacked out, and yet it still wasn't over. Nothing had changed.

"To have you faint that quickly, I'll be troubled... this is still just the fifth."

Those words had an authority that left no room for hope, as if they came from the Devil himself.

Then, *fwap*, he hit his palm with the whip.

Again... it's coming again.

"P... please."

Just let me go.

My mouth tried to speak on its own.

But even so.

Even so, some part of me stopped it.

A small part that seemed on the brink of disappearing, even now.

But it was definitely there.

I took heart in that, in spite of myself.

Aira.

Palmira.

My thoughts turned to them.

I have to keep my promise.

Leon.

Next time we meet, I have to list off all my complaints.

My willpower returned.

Burn. Burn higher.

Now!

“Uaaaaaah–”

Flipping my torso up, I grabbed the hands of a surprised Guibenague.

“Wha-!?”

When I didn’t immediately steal the whip from him, Guibenague pulled it back.

But that wasn’t what I was aiming for. I grabbed the tip of Guibenague’s finger and pulled my target off it in one smooth motion.

“シ!”

Gripping the ring I took, I wasted no time reciting the monosyllabic incantation. Sure enough, a red light began to shine from inside my hand.

“Magic!?”

The spectacle shocked Guibenague. Seeing this, I grinned triumphantly.

Of course I couldn't use something like magic.

But I wanted to scare the shit out of him. I wanted to see that sorry look of shock on his face.

That's all.

In my hand, the ring's invocation stone linked up with the one absorbed inside me. And, when light radiating from between my fingers disappeared, I knew it was done.

“...What did... no, I was surprised...”

Guibenague, ready for *something* to happen, calmed down once the light disappeared, and he relaxed his guard.

But I wasn't done.

I was far from done.

“!?”

A moment later, a blue light ignited on the back of my left hand. The design I saw that night emerged again.

Seeing this shocked Guibenague even more, and he hastily raised his guard again.

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

I might not have anything lined up after this, but right now, I'm going to make him shit his pants.

Light flowed out from the design. Just as it had before, it ran up my arm, to my shoulder, then my back.

Then, it appeared before my eyes.

A large labyrinthine design. Turning round and round.

So.

Now what? What does this mean?

My mind raced as I watched the spinning circle.

Does it have some kind of power?

If so, what should I do with it?

Power, that's right, power.

The power to break out of this situation. The power to protect. That's —.

“U-U-aaaaahh-!”

An image forming in my mind, I howled.

The circle stilled, from its center toward its outer edge.

Then, the outermost ring stopped.

“Aaaaahh-!”

Crash-!

“Guhoh-!?”

I could tell that something was being released from my body.

At that moment, I heard a loud smashing sound, coupled with Guibenague's scream.

At the same time, I suddenly dropped to the floor.

“Ow-!”

Though I instantly covered my head, the forceful impact of my back against the floor left me fainting in agony.

There was no question that this was my doing, but I didn't know what exactly had happened. After groaning in pain for a short while, holding my head in a daze, I slowly got to my feet and surveyed the area.

The chamber was in shambles.

Relying on the light of a candle that just barely managed to survive, I scanned my surroundings.

The tightly packed torture devices had been flung against the wall and destroyed. Not a single one had been spared.

Guibenague had been thrown into the wall in the same way. Now, he was keeled over on the floor, blood flowing out. I didn't know if he was still alive.

Though the iron bars further in hadn't been torn from their sockets, everything inside the cell had been dashed to pieces.

“...Did I — ”

Did I — do that?

Dazed as I was, I could see the remains of terrible devastation.

The light had already disappeared from my body. And the design from my vision.

But the marks of destruction, radiating outward from me at their center, were irrefutable proof that this was my doing.

This power, or possibly, this body. What was it?

This body of mine was the result of drinking those five colorful mystery liquids.

The result: I turned female.

Those were definitely substances imbued with ancient magic.

But was that really the case?

Was that enough to explain everything?

I turned into a woman.

If that were all, I might have been able to agree. To be honest, I'd thought that way.

But now, more of the truth was emerging.

It doesn't tire.

It's stronger than it should be.

It absorbs invocation stones.

It bears that circular design.

It manifests a mysterious power.

Aren't these things too strange to be explained away by just a few magical potions?

...Right now, I still don't know.

But it looked like I'd need to sit down and think about it some more.

(...Chris, Chris!? Can you hear me?)

While I was at a loss for how to proceed, Irene's voice suddenly echoed in my ear.

Why had it cut off? And why had it reconnected? I had questions, but first, now that her voice had reminded me of the situation, I answered in a hurry.

(Irene, is that you!?)

(...Thank goodness. I suddenly couldn't reach you, I didn't know what to do... Are you

okay?)

(No problems on my end. But Aira and Palmira —)

That's right, the location of the two who disappeared through the door was far more important. Assaulted by the same power as the rest of the chamber, said door was now in a rather sorry state.

(They're alright. You were the only one I couldn't reach, and I could track them, so... They're already back under our protection.)

(Is that so...)

That's a relief. I didn't have the faintest clue where they went, but at any rate, they were safe.

(For the time being, I've pinpointed your location, so sit tight for just a little longer. I'll be there soon.)

(Got it.)

Once I ended the link, I realized I could hear a commotion coming from outside the door.

That was probably my ride coming to pick me up.

A lot happened, but right now, I was sincerely happy that everyone made it out safely.

The other stuff, I'd leave for after my rescue.

That aside.

"Man, what a pain."

Perhaps because of that power, I was left without a stitch of clothing, not even

underwear.

I felt that somehow, I'd become more prone to ending up naked.

Being seen in my birthday suit wasn't a big deal, but given the kind of room I was in, I wasn't too thrilled by the idea of people drawing the wrong conclusions.

Left with no other choice, I reluctantly stripped the clothes off Guibenague's fallen body.

Chapter 16

Tying Up Loose Ends

After a little bit of this, a little bit of that, I was rescued and returned to Leon's estate. Having arrived earlier, Aira and Palmira were waiting for me, alongside the slaves who had probably been rescued with them.

When the two of them saw me, they ran up to me and pulled me into a hug.

"B-Big Sisteeeeeeeer!"

"I'm glad you're safe."

Welcoming me back in their respective fashions, they buried their faces against my chest and stomach.

Aira was clearly crying, and even Palmira had something of a quaver in her voice.

Well, it couldn't be helped.

I gently stroked their heads.

Still, where were they found?

I looked around, but for the time being, there were only a few soldiers around. I didn't catch sight of any familiar faces. Just when I was about to contact Irene telepathically, it occurred to me that she might be busy at the moment and stopped myself.

Sure, our part of the work was done.

But there was still the post-operation cleanup. And as far as I could tell, there weren't many soldiers on duty here. Maybe they were right in the middle of wrapping up.

Now that Aira and Palmira had calmed down, I asked them, "So where'd you end up?"

"By the time we noticed, we were in a completely unfamiliar room..."

“Looking around, it was full of slaves.”

To summarize, it seemed they were teleported into a holding pen prepared ahead of time on the suspect ship.

I was surprised. I hadn't expected the door to be a one-way trip straight into the holding pen. How should I put it, that operation really stressed efficiency.

Anyway, while they were panicking because I'd been left behind and they couldn't reach me, they contacted Irene with their position. Apparently waiting in the area on standby, Rupert and the Second Platoon quickly stormed the ship. That was how they were rescued.

In other words, at least that part went according to plan. And then some.

I thought back calmly. If I hadn't resisted so conspicuously back then, I might have been sent with them and saved myself some pain.

...What's done is done. I decided not to dwell too much on it.

“Oh yeah, have you guys seen Leon? Leon — ”

The other slaves were clearly in a weaker state than us, their expressions half joyful, half anxious. Watching the soldiers and maids lead them into the mansion in groups, I suddenly remembered about Leon, and I turned to the other two.

My rescue from the mansion had been the work of Vyde and the First Platoon.

And that was all, so in the end, I didn't see Leon either.

Now that I thought about it, it wasn't just Leon, but Leopard and Regnum too. Contact with Irene had been voice-only; she wasn't around either.

“I don't see him around here.”

Palmira shook her head.

“But with all the commotion going on, he might have been here.”

Basically, she was saying she didn't really know.

Just what exactly is that guy doing? Even though I thought he would protect me when push came to shove.

...Nah, well, what can you do, right?

"You three, please come inside too!"

Before I knew it, the transfer of the other slaves was basically finished.

A maid called to us from the other side.

For now, it was all over... A lot had happened.

"Well... I did my best. You guys too. With this, our work here is done."

Bap. I settled my hands on their shoulders as I spoke.

The two looked relieved by my words, and they both gave me small nods.

"Okay then, shall we?"

I didn't know how long I'd stay, but even though I hadn't spent more than two days here, I felt that it was a place I could go home to.

And so, when I passed through the foyer at the maid's urging, the thought came to me. 'I managed to come home safely.' I felt it from the bottom of my heart.



Herded into the baths with the other slaves, I scrubbed myself clean again.

By the time I finished changing into the plain clothing provided by the mansion, the sun had already set. So, in the spacious dining hall of a different barracks than before, I had my meal together with the slaves. It wasn't as sumptuous as yesterday's, but modest, like everyone else's.

Nothing I could do about that.

Unlike us, the other slaves were in a weak enough state that maybe they couldn't stomach richer food. Of course, the usual concern of money might've been the restricting factor here.

After all, the lavish spread we had was meant for guests. So considering our social position, rather than modest, this was a luxurious feast.

Given the lives we, too, had led until yesterday, it wasn't as if I thought of this as a step down. So the meal, perfectly appetizing by normal standards, I finished without complaint.

After that, bedtime.

Because there was no space, each person received one thin blanket, and then everyone huddled together in the barracks.

Unsurprisingly, it was nowhere near as comfortable as the bed I slept in yesterday, but even so, it was no problem at all.

There was something nostalgic about it. When I was an adventurer, I almost always slept like this. Actually, just having a roof was an improvement.

About that — I'd probably be leaving this place tomorrow, or possibly the day after, and get back to my life.

It would be a little lonely, but that was fine.

Rather, it was better this way; it meant leaving no attachments behind.

It's just, I want to see Leon one more time so I can tell him all my grievances against him.

Well, I'll be able to sooner or later. I haven't collected my pay yet.

Not worrying about it too much, I covered myself with the blanket and slipped into darkness.

◇ ◇ ◇

"...Alright, what the hell."

Waking up, that was the first thing out of my mouth.

I was lying in, you guessed it, the bed I'd been using until yesterday. I could see the usual canopy above me.

When my thoughts got that far, I sat up in the bed.

Then, I turned to look *there*.

"Good morning."

"...Yeah, mornin'."

As I should probably have expected, Leon was sitting in his usual seat as if his presence was totally normal. Looking a little tired, he greeted me brightly.

I gave him the proper greeting back. More or less.

Then, I sat cross-legged, turned to Leon, and began to interrogate him.

"...First of all, how about you kindly explain to me why I'm sleeping here?"

I wasn't going to ask him the dumb question 'Why are you here?' anymore.

But even so, Leon had a slightly surprised look on his face, as if my question came out of nowhere.

"Oh. I was so sure that you'd ask why you were left to sleep in a place like that."

In other words, it was like this:

It seemed that yesterday, the maids simply made a mistake and treated us like the other slaves. Then, as a result of increasing miscommunications, things played out the way they did.

In particular, he wanted to make it up to us, but it wasn't like we got a cold reception. From that point of view, you could even say that we were the ones taking unfair advantage.

“You three played the most crucial roles in this operation in the first place. There’s no reason to treat you that way.”

“You say that, but the fact is, we got treated that way. So it couldn’t be helped, I guess.”

“I certainly owe you an apology for that... However, it wouldn’t hurt to have a little more faith in me.”

It wasn’t as if I didn’t understand the feeling, but it would take a lot of guts to be the only ones there who would ask a ridiculous question like ‘Why are you treating us like this’, I think.

The other slaves were there, and they didn’t know our situation in the first place.

“When you put it that way, I see your point... You truly have my deepest apologies. I didn’t show enough forethought.”

Leon honestly apologized.

Well, that might have been unavoidable too. Considering how busy yesterday must have been for him, even he would lose track of a few arrangements here and there.

“It’s not really that big a deal. The food was tasty too.”

Since it really didn’t bother me, I said that for now.

About that last bit I tacked on — honestly, half of it *was* good. The meat half. I can say that much, can’t I?

“No, I am truly sorry. As breakfast has already been prepared, why don’t we go together?”

‘With the other two, of course,’ he added.

I figured that for now, even if I bullied Leon some more, it wouldn’t accomplish anything. So I obediently nodded and got out of bed.

“Ahh, somehow, it seems like we won’t be able to go back to how things used to be.”

Because ‘the weather’s good’ and other assorted reasons, we had breakfast on the terrace.

Bread and soup. All kinds of eggs. Bacon. Cheese.

And of course they were all first-class, worlds away from the food I had the night before. After Aira ate more than her fill, her musings slipped out.

Her expression all but said ‘I’m satisfied!’, and there wasn’t a trace of anxiety on her face.

“If you can eat, eat. It’s principle.”

Palmira turned completely serious, still chewing away.

She certainly had a point.

In the end, it was better not to think too deeply about it.

Actually, the other slaves were on the opposite side of the terrace, eating the same food as yesterday. When my thoughts drifted in their direction, I lost a good chunk of my appetite.

All of this could simply be chalked up to luck.

If we’d arrived a little later, perhaps we would have been over there right now, eating with the other slaves. And let’s not forget the decidedly nonzero probability of the sting operation failing to make it in time, which would have then doomed us to set sail for some distant country.

Of course, even if I thought about such things, there was nothing I could do about it; even if I worried, it couldn’t be helped.

Rising from my seat, I leaned against the terrace railing and looked down at the city.

Today, there was only one ship in port. The suspect ship would be my guess.

I could see tiny soldiers busily boarding and disembarking.

“Hey, what’re you going to do with that?”

Sensing a presence behind me, I posed the question without turning my face.

“Mm, well... For the time being, we’ll recover all the evidence on board, seize the ship, and get her back out on the water. We’ll deal with the crew over time.”

Leon’s voice came from behind me.

Though I was the one who asked, I responded with a disinterested grunt.

Because honestly, I didn’t have much interest. I just wanted to ask because it had some relation to me, more or less.

Still, thinking it through, it could be considered quite severe treatment.

“And the lord of the city?”

Turning my gaze, I saw the mansion where we had been held yesterday.

I wasn’t surprised to find that from this distance, I couldn’t see what was going on over there. But I was sure, all the same, that either Vyde or Rupert was leading the men in a similar task.

“At present, Guibenague has been summoned to the imperial capital. His status as a noble has been revoked. For now, that’s the extent of his punishment. How the rest will go depends on his home country.”

So Guibenague didn’t die...?

Afterward, I was whisked out of that room in the blink of an eye, so I had no idea what became of the man.

Was it a good thing that he didn’t die, or would it have been better if he had? That was up to the person in question. Frankly, I didn’t care either way.

Although I certainly had been humiliated to death, I didn’t bear much of a grudge, oddly enough. I just didn’t care.

Not even particularly for my rear end, which was still swollen today. It simply made

me realize how sturdy this body was all over again.

If I didn't tell anyone these things, not one person would know. And I had no intention of telling anyone.

"A support force of three thousand from the capital will be arriving in the next few days. The city lord's private army has been placed under restrictions, so for the time being, the support force will maintain public order. The new lord will come after."

"And those slaves?"

Ignoring Leon's unsolicited information, I looked last at the barracks and asked about how the slaves would be handled.

Because we'd shared the same lot with each other, however briefly, their fate weighed on my mind.

"Ah, that's right. If they have a place to return to, we will make the necessary arrangements. If not, we may assist them in finding employment in this city. The Lord's mansion is short-staffed, so it might be good to place them there for a while."

"Oh? You're handling it pretty well."

"Having rescued them, we'll take responsibility for their welfare."

At those words, I finally turned around to face Leon.

As I thought, he was someone worth trusting.

Even if it were a lie, there weren't many out there who could declare that they'd take responsibility.

The higher the position, the greater the weight of those words.

So I made my decision.

"So, right now — "

Leon, Aira, Palmira. I looked at each of them in turn.

” — as I promised, how about I tell you my story?”

Chapter 17

Confession

I took a seat.

Aira, Palmira, and Leon were lined up before me, similarly seated.

It was Irene I promised, not Leon, but oh well, I'll tell her some other time.

Though whether or not it'll be the truth is a different question.

But at least these three, I thought, should hear the truth.

Aira.

Palmira.

Now, after walking the same line between life and death so many times, they were companions no one could replace.

And they had told me about their own pasts. That was why I should tell them my own now.

It wasn't a debt I owed them. I was just telling them because I wanted to.

I wanted to share that connection with them.

Leon.

He was a mystery.

He was still hiding parts of himself behind courtesy. Even now, he addressed me formally.

Still, he was cheeky to a strange degree, so I ended up saying whatever I felt like to him.

Objectively speaking, only a few days had passed since we met, but I'd come to rely on him against my better judgement.

I shouldn't have been the trusting type in the first place. But why, in spite of that, had I ended up having this much faith in him?

The more I thought about it, the less I understood.

I didn't understand, but to put it bluntly —
If I didn't talk about myself now, I'd probably regret it.

“...Though I wonder where I should start...”

Looking at Aira, her expression slightly tense, and Palmira, I traced my past upriver.

The day I became a woman.

Further back.

The day I became an adventurer.

The day I left that country with my tail between my legs.

The day I swore I would never rely on anyone.

I looked at Leon. Instead of his usual smile, he watched me with sincerity.

Alright. All of it, from the very beginning.

Let's have them hear it from the very beginning.



I was born on the continent across the sea from the Empire. Even in the confederation of small nation-states it belonged to, the country of my birth was especially small.

Not that I came from a particularly distinguished pedigree or anything like that.

I wasn't poor, but I wasn't rich either. I was raised as the eldest son of a small merchant family.

I don't remember much from my childhood.

Only that my parents were kind, and my little sister, who had joined us before I knew it, was adorable.

I wasn't particularly unfortunate, but on the other hand, I wasn't generously blessed with happiness either. I was one of those kids you could find anywhere, just living a normal life.

One day, when I came home with my sister in tow, my parents were in the dining room discussing something. The mood was extremely serious, and my sister and I were a bit scared as we stared at them. I remember that with horrible clarity.

Now, if I think about it, they were talking about the unrest in the neighboring country.

Then, my country, which should have been at peace, witnessed the horrors of war.

— Do you understand what it was like?

The sight of the world that you believed would never change — suddenly painted red?
The despair of losing the everyday life that should have been unshakeable?

What should never have disappeared, did. What should never have been, was.

My home crumbled, and the familiar faces disappeared.

Before I knew it, the war was over, but that only marked the beginning of more miserable days to come.

Nowhere to live.

Nothing to eat.

During those days, I lost everything.

My parents, my sister. They disappeared while I stood by and did nothing.

Of course, I shouted for help.

It's just, thinking back on it now, everyone was desperate.

But the reality was, no one came to save us. Everyone pretended not to see. My desperate screams went unanswered.

In the time I spent screaming, I lost everything.

I don't really remember what I did after that.

When I came to, I was on a ship crossing the sea. Maybe I wanted to run away from that disaster-stricken land.

I'm sure it's already been close to eight years since then. Since I disembarked here, and then began my career as an adventurer.

"Eight... years ago?"

Aira's eyes were wide with amazement. I tipped her a small nod in response.

"Yeah, I'm sure that when I crossed the sea, I was ten years old. After that, as an adventurer... well, there was no age limit at the time, but I still got into a fight with the guild..."

With a wry smile, I recalled what had happened.

Unsurprisingly, the guild clerks were rather perplexed, and ultimately, I had to go again and again and again until I got my registration.

Thinking on it now, I was being pretty unreasonable, but I was desperate.

...There's a chance it's my fault that there's an age limit now... well, maybe I'm giving myself too much credit, but it might have been one of the main reasons.

"Then how old are you now, Big Sister?"

"Eighteen. Probably."

To be honest, I might be off by a year or so. My age didn't matter that much to me.

"Well, setting that aside, I scraped by day to day taking on various jobs as an adventurer. And when I say various, I'm really not kidding. Often it was monster extermination, caravan escort, bandit hunting... I've gone into combat as a mercenary too."

"That reminds me, you said you would go back to being an adventurer."

"Good memory."

“Of course. I said I’d be one too.”

‘So you did, now that I think about it,’ I smiled wryly. By what twist of fate did I go from there to end up here?

Life is beyond my ability to understand, I think.

“However, in practice, the core of adventuring is still ruin exploration. So one day, I...”

Now I got down to business.

I told them that I found a new set of ruins in the Artor Ruins Cluster.

That I surveyed it by myself, even though it was reckless.

That even so, I discovered its final treasure.

That I triggered a trap and got poisoned.

That I did make a decision that I now genuinely considered rash, and chugged the vials of mystery medicine.

And that... I then turned female.

These things I dramatized as little as possible, speaking with indifference.

“So, then I got myself caught by slavers like an idiot, and became a slave.”

And there you have it.

Now that I’d spit out what I wanted to tell but couldn’t, I felt an indescribable sense of freedom and contentment.

My black tea had cooled quickly. I downed the entire cup in one go.

The rest of it can go to hell for all I care. There was some of that hopelessness in the mix too.

“...So what you’re saying, is that you’re actually Big Brother?”

Aira was the first to speak. And what’s more, she came out with this crazy gem.

And of course, I hadn’t expected a question like that. To tell you the truth, I thought that even if they pulled back from me, it couldn’t be helped, but... I mean, if our positions were reversed, I’m sure I would have.

And how do I even answer Aira’s question in the first place?

“I get it. Chris is Chris. I don’t care either way.”

Next up was Palmira. She answered quite easily, but those probably were the words I wanted to hear the most.

It moved me, a little.

Honestly, I was afraid. Wouldn’t they reject me?

Brushing aside my insecurity with ease, Palmira accepted me. Hearing those words, I’d never been happier than I was at that moment. They came as such a relief to me that I had to let out a sigh.

Beside Palmira, who had little reaction once she finished talking, Aira was muttering on about how ‘Big Brother sounds strange, though’ and other weird things, as always.

In that case, it seemed she’d accepted me too... I think. Honestly, I was nervous, but that would be just like her.

Leaving Aira for now, the last one... I turned my gaze to Leon.

“...Frankly speaking, I was surprised. I expected there to be something, but...”

Leon wasn’t his usual self. He was talking like he was choosing his words with care.

‘Huh?’

...pretty much summed it up.

Well, looking at it calmly, ‘Huh?’ would be weird.

So what is this?

On the other hand, Leon seemed to be having a rare moment of hesitation, his expression somehow pensive.

No... this is how things would normally go, I think. Yeah, being told that the person you’d been treating as a woman was actually a man, it’s absolutely normal to have correspondingly complicated feelings.

...This is normal...

It was normal, but, for some reason, the way it made me feel — call it disappointment, or perhaps a feeling of being betrayed.

Okay, what the hell is this?

“...Would you give me a little time to think?”

‘Excuse me,’

he said tersely, as he rose from his seat and left at a quick pace.

Somehow, he seemed flustered.

It was my first time seeing him like that. Or rather, it wasn’t part of my image of him.

Even so.

“Well, that’s that...”

Leaning back in the chair in resignation, I looked at the sky. I let out a heavy sigh.

What the hell.

For some dumb reason, Leon was the only one I didn't want to get that response from.

A strange trust.

It was all in my head after all. Things weren't really like that. When the thought occurred to me, I couldn't help but condemn Leon.

No, I misplaced my trust to begin with.

"Big Sister, don't worry about it..."

Aira, who seemed the most flustered by the present scene, followed up with some words of comfort.

I'm grateful, don't get me wrong, but I want to be left alone for a little while. Right now, my feelings are terribly complicated...

"Um, I mean, is it okay to call you Big Sister?"

Somehow, it felt like rubbing salt in the wound. Holding myself still, I turned just my head and gave her the most repulsive smile I could muster.

"For now, calling me Big Sister's juuust fine. 'Cause right now, I actually *am* a girl."

Even so, as if saying 'I don't give a shit,' I claimed it just like that.

For some reason, I suddenly found my answer hilarious, and I inadvertently burst into laughter.

"Ah-hah-haha, oh man, what the hell?"

Is this okay? You two.

The thing in front of you is a tranny, you know.

If it were me, I'd be grossed out, you know? I'm serious.

It's normal, not knowing what to say. Just like Leon earlier.

“Jeez, what’s so funny?”

“Aira.”

As Aira openly expressed her indignation, Palmira tugged on her sleeve and shook her head. Like she’d sensed something.

Forget it, there’s no need to be all considerate and shit. It’s stupid.

The woman before your eyes is actually a man, a slave, a war orphan. No more, no less. Even if you don’t trust me all that much, it’s all good.

...But, well.

I’m glad you are who you are.

“Haha... well, thanks. Again — I’ll be in your care, you guys.”

Leaning back again, but not quite as far, I looked at the sky as I spoke.

I kept my face out of view.

But I knew they would definitely say it.

“”Same here.””

Chapter 18

Somewhere We Don't Belong

And so night fell.

In the end, Leon didn't show himself after he left. At least, not to me.

It might've been that much of a shock to him.

But when I tried to imagine what the reason why, I felt some sympathy. That served to offset my own undefinable feelings toward him.

It wasn't like I went out of my way to deceive him.

It wasn't, but when I thought about it, I got the feeling I did something horrible to him.

...No, I deceived him — or more precisely, I lied. From the very beginning.

Only, Leon had already known the truth. So there was a part of me that thought that maybe this confession, too, would end with a simple [I know].

But the result: Leon got flustered like it was outside his wildest predictions...

When I thought about it, I felt like I'd done something awful all the same.

Thinking back, there was that request between us, sure, but it wasn't that both parties had an even mutual understanding, and all that was left was the debt Leon owed us, I realized.

He sheltered us, the runaway slaves.

He let us eat delicious things.

He gave us a place to sleep.

We owed him more than enough for that.

You might even say that in the end, we would be paying back his kindness with evil.

Like it or not, reality was reality. Let's say I didn't make that confession and instead passed myself off as a woman. Based on my speculations so far, it didn't seem like I would've had a bright future waiting for me.

For example, well, Leon might've confessed to me.

That... would be trouble.

I couldn't think of another word for it.

From that perspective, coming clean about myself was for my sake, as well as Leon's.

Yeah, so, I'm not sorry.

Somehow, I feel like I've been letting my imagination run too wild, but I should have nothing to be sorry about.

"...Chris?"

Palmira's voice interrupted my reverie, and I looked at her blankly.

"Ah?"

"The soup will get cold."

Palmira looked a little concerned by my idiot response. I pondered her meaning for a few moments before coming back to my senses.

"Y-Yeah."

And I hastily dipped my spoon into the soup served for dinner.

I slurped up a mouthful. Delicious.

It's delicious, but...

"What's wrong with Lord Leon?"

murmured Aira.

Leon wasn't at dinner either.

That was why I ended up thinking about all that stuff.

"I wonder, did we do something bad after all...?"

"That's right."

Sitting in his seat for some reason, Irene cut in decisively.

The loose ends all tied up, maybe, Irene returned to the estate in the afternoon. Though it would have been better if she forgot, she remembered the promise I made. So she made a bee-line for us as we sat dumbly on the veranda, asking for my story.

In the very beginning, I was dead set on being vague and using that as a smoke screen, but it was tiresome to balance that and the business with Leon too, so I told Irene the truth.

For the time being, I set aside the matter of my birth and told her the part about becoming a woman.

She pulled away from me.

Well, I mean, that's normal. I think. I completely felt that way myself; if it were me, I'd back the hell away too.

But in a slight change of course, Irene summed it up, in words that could be taken as abuse or disparagement, as: [It's unfair for a guy who turned into a girl to be that beautiful.]

Hey, don't look at me. Well, it wasn't like I wanted to turn into a woman in the first place, so I didn't take it personally.

But it seemed that she understood but wouldn't settle down unless she said something. It was a relief, even, to be spoken to so bluntly.

And so she left.

It felt a little lonely, but since I'd be saying goodbye to her soon, making a clean cut was probably for the best.

"S'what I'm sayin', I just can't believe a beautiful girl like this used t'be a guy. Lord Leon was shocked too, 'm I right?"

But for some reason, she was at dinner too. I didn't understand why.

She was saying whatever she felt like while eating the same things we were.

And if that weren't enough, she was now helping herself to the wine and gulping it down, glug glug. Real classy.

"That aside, why are you here? You're on the opposite side, aren't you?"

"The opposite side's fulla rescued slaves righ' now, C'manner Leopard said I could eat here."

I didn't know what her position was right now, but setting us, the guests, aside, I suspected that Leopard's 'here' probably didn't mean *here*.

Speaking of which, she brought a massive cake over for that self-styled tea party, but where exactly did she get it?

Is she, by any chance, an immense annoyance to the serving maids and the cook here? I can't say she doesn't seem the type.

"Ahhh, damn iiiit. Lord Leon, don't fall for someone like that, fall for me."

When I heard her speaking so frankly, I suddenly started to question my earlier

conclusions. Did Leon actually fall for me?

Somehow, from his reaction, I wondered if that was the case, but let's look at it rationally. I might be very pretty, but like she said, I'm [someone like that] on the inside. I talk like a guy almost all the time.

Come to think of it, if it isn't actually the case that [he fell for me], then honestly, I've been pretty embarrassing. Or should I say 'extremely self-conscious'? In this case.

But if that's not it, then what was going on with Leon's attitude back then?

If there's some other reason —

...I'm coming up empty. Hmm.

"I mean, c'moooooon, even if it isn't me, Airi and Polly are here too, aren't they? Even if they're just pretty faces. Whyzit you? I'm not okay with this."

"...Ahaha."

"I don't care."

Unable to say anything, Aira responded with a strained laugh. Palmira tossed in a few blunt words, like saying she wasn't interested. Or more accurately, she was still eating. How could she eat like this but look like that? Palmira was twenty years old. In that respect, I felt like she was just as much a mystery as this transformed body of mine. Her eyes met mine as I stared at her, making her testy. She's sharp. Those glaring eyes are scary.

"...Don't you know? In the first place, feelings or not, there's a difference in our social standing. And we were always going to have to leave sooner or later,"

I said, turning my eyes away from Palmira.

Seriously, don't you know that?

To be honest, thinking about it was starting to get on my nerves.

“...How long will we be able to stay here...”

Uneasy, Aira let those words slip.

...Yeah.

At the moment, we were more or less guests. If I remembered correctly, according to what Leon said in the very beginning, it should have been until Palmira’s injury healed. Of course, that should have gone out the window when he saw through our lies. Even if it hadn’t, Palmira’s ‘injury’ wasn’t a big deal to begin with, so it was already nearly healed.

It was his later request that kept us here, and now that was over too.

We didn’t have any reason to be here anymore.

All that remained was collecting our pay.

Right, our pay.

“Yeah, that’s right! Our pay!”

I forgot the most important reason for coming back to this comfy place.

Five hundred thousand!

Even if we were leaving, we had to get that money.

Hey, I even powered through yesterday’s near-death experience for it.

Five hundred thousand? With five hundred thousand —

...what would I do?

I had a feeling that I thought of so many things when he made the offer.

But now that I was thinking about it again, it was baffling how nothing would come to mind.

Leave this place, five hundred thousand coins richer, and then what?

I felt like I could do *something*. For now, money wouldn’t a concern.

But what would I do?

“.....”

I looked at Aira and Palmira.

Then, just as I was about to ask them what they wanted to do, I shut my mouth.

Somehow, I found it ridiculous to leave the decision I couldn't make in someone else's hands. And in front of Irene, it was tasteless.

Well, look, why not think about it *after* getting the money?

In the end, I might regret leaving.

It certainly was comfortable here. Leon's present state aside.

The food was tasty, and best of all, I could sleep without worry.

That might be why Aira felt uneasy too.

How long could we stay here?

But fact is, we couldn't afford to think about that.

We had to leave someday.

And that probably wouldn't be too far off in the future.

Just when I noticed how quiet it was, Irene fell over onto the table, asleep. She was wearing an expression of pure bliss.

When I saw that, I somehow envied her.

“...Going to sleep?”

I asked, rising from my seat.

Aira followed me with her anxious eyes.

But I couldn't say anything against that either.

Palmira rose from her seat along with me.

She might be the only one among us capable of great resolve.

I didn't know what tomorrow would bring.

I had always lived that way. It was normal. I liked living that way.

But now, it made me uneasy.

We had to leave, and quickly.

After all, this was somewhere we didn't belong.

Cast List (as of Chapter 18)

Author's Notes

Primarily for my own use.

Christopher Carson (Chris)

Protagonist of the main story.

A former adventurer who turned female thanks to some ancient medicine.

Outwardly appears to be sixteen to eighteen. The person himself says eighteen when asked.

A beautiful silver-haired girl whose looks would turn anyone's head, but inside is a fairly ordinary guy who hopes to return to being a man someday. Became a slave, then became a slave *again*. Things really don't go well for him.

Currently freeloading at Leon's estate.

Aira

A rather unfortunate girl who lived like a slave and ended up becoming one for real. No given surname. Nineteen years old.

Fell into depression just after becoming a slave, but because of her (quite frankly) slow personality, her ability to adapt, conversely, is high. Not a deep thinker.

A normal beauty with a good figure, as long as she stays quiet. Relatively busty.

Became emotionally attached to Chris after her rescue, referring to Chris as 'Big Sister'.

Palmira Wilback (Palmira)

Former soldier of the fallen nation of Caidorusse. Became a slave after being taken as a prisoner of war.

After becoming aware of her surroundings, she lived in the midst of the war's final battles, so she was raised without knowing how to live.

Becoming a slave, then taking Chris's words to heart, she has a strong desire to stay

with Chris.

Brusque because of her upbringing, she has an unexpectedly thoughtful personality. Appears to be a twelve to thirteen year old girl with a nasty glint in her eye, but she's actually twenty.

Though she should have the highest combat power among the three, right now she isn't putting it to use.

Leon ??? (Leon)

Suspected noble who saved the slave trio. Around twenty-five years old.

Indeed much like an aristocrat, but with a gentle demeanor, and looks that even Chris admires. In a sense, the perfect person.

But he also has the nerve to pop up in Chris's bedroom almost every morning as if he has every right to be there.

Although he divulges almost nothing about himself, he has an appeal that somehow gets others to trust him. Even Chris, who only met him a few days ago, pays an undue amount of attention to him (albeit unconsciously).

Irene Barnest (Irene)

A magus affiliated with the national government. Adept with enchantment magic. Nineteen years old.

One of the select few in the world to become a magus, but the person herself is a normal girl, with a keen interest in other people's business and a thoughtless outspokenness.

Fundamentally friendly, and yet quite sharp-tongued.

Leopard Galles (Leopard)

Nominally the company commander, but is in fact a soldier serving as Leon's adjutant. Settles business for the current First and Second Platoons, but ultimately, his own position is unclear.

A very rough military man with a serious appearance. Estimated to be around fifty years old.

Vyde Rouche (Vyde)

Commander of the First Platoon.

An intensely serious and taciturn soldier. Barely says a word more than necessary. A loyal man whose first thought is performing his duty.

Rupert Belgraf (Rupert)

Commander of the Second Platoon.

In contrast to Vyde, the type of person who'd run off his mouth to unnecessary lengths. To put it bluntly, he's a good-time Charlie*. Nothing at all like a military man.

* T/N: I've never heard this term before, but apparently it means a carefree guy who's a blast to party with but will probably amount to nothing in life. Ouch.

Regnum Bransheria (Regnum)

Officer of the Imperial Intelligence Bureau.

Has a tall, lanky body. According to Chris, a [gloomy guy].

Presents intelligence reports with clinical detachment and business-like practicality.

Guibenague Acaratrium (Guibenague)

Lord of the port city Telaberan.

Does a perfect impression of a fat baldy, except he's experienced in combat.

Enriched his wardrobe by dealing in slaves; as a result, he was taken down by Leon's forces.



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