



すわんぷ・ガール!

Swamp Girl!

- Part 2 -

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[bitgray]

Chapter 19

Unexpected Words

I was eight when I knew.

It seemed I had a talent for magic.

I found out when my parents let me take the aptitude test as a joke.

Sure, why not.

I spent a week taking the aptitude test with that attitude. Then, the results shocked all the grown-ups around me.

Endowed with all six attunements.

Of course, I didn't know what those words meant.

I didn't, but from the reactions of the grown-ups, I knew that it was amazing.

After that, the world around me became hectic.

A magus? I —

I —

I didn't want to become something like that.

I loved passing my days in laughter at the mansion with Mother and Father.

I wanted to be with Big Brother forever. I wanted to play more.

I wanted to always see the view from the top of that elm tree.

I didn't want to be a magus.

Father, Mother, and everyone else. With expectant eyes, expectant words, they pushed me forward.

I didn't want this kind of power.

I —



Magic, huh...?

As I woke up from the dream, I remembered.

I sighed. I'd already gotten used to having this dream.

Unconcerned with the contents, I started to organize the new information I'd gleaned as I lay in bed.

Magic.

The invocation stone absorbed into my hand. The design that appeared, glowing blue. And the power that made an utter wreck of Guibenague's torture chamber.

It could only be magic. Nothing else could explain it.

In short, I could use magic.

And it was most certainly one of the secrets of this body. Of course, I didn't take the aptitude test when I was a man. But no matter how I tried, I couldn't imagine that I'd had this ability back then. I'd just be deluding myself.

In other words, when I turned into a woman, I got the ability to use magic.

But that was strange too.

It didn't match what Irene said, that magical talent was an inborn trait.

...Although.

A body that turned female because of ancient medicine. I couldn't say for sure, but that should be unprecedented too.

If so, maybe I was also the only person in the world to *acquire* magical ability.

Of course, it was because of the dream that I was remembering all this.

Those dreams were becoming more and more unsettling to me.

The dreams I had before were still an everyday kind of thing, sorting out the information in my head. Live long enough, and you've probably had a similar

experience. Even if it wasn't direct knowledge, it could be a fusion of overlapping experiences.

But by this point, my dreams had already crossed that line.

The week-long aptitude test.

A magical talent with six attunements.

That story, that information — of course none of it was mine. Even Irene had never heard of such things.

If so, then where in the world did these dreams come from?

Or rather, who exactly was [I] in the dream?

This body. It wouldn't take injury, it hardly tired. It could use a magic acquired after birth.

And inside it, there were the memories of another life.

Until now, I had been under the impression that it was all a product of having [a body that turned female by ancient medicine]. These two things were shaking my faith in that simple explanation.

Even now, in the extremes of my heart, I would touch upon those speculations. Each time, I would put off drawing my conclusions.

Because quite simply, it frightened me.

'It was the effect of the ancient medicine.' That explanation was easy to understand, you see.

It was because it was easy to understand that I could accept it without too much trouble. The difficulty aside, if I drank something else and dispelled the effects of those potions, wouldn't I return to normal? It was vague, sure, but I could imagine it.

Assuming I had a ray of hope, being able to see a path to the solution was critical.

But what if it wasn't the effect of the medicine?

Then why the hell did I end up with this body?

And how can I return to normal?

I'd be all the way back at square one.

What I don't know only serves to frighten me. Especially if I ever forget myself.

"...Hkk—"

I felt defeated. A few tears trickled from the corner of my eye. Even I was surprised by that. Not trying to fool anyone, I buried my face in the pillow.

It's useless. These thoughts are useless.

"...Are you crying?"

"!!!!!!!!!!!"

I wasn't expecting words to come from the side. I jumped out of bed, tumbling all the way to the end as I fled.

And with the blanket still covering me, I took a defensive posture for good measure.

There was no need to check. It was Leon.

Leon had come almost every day, but naturally, I thought he wouldn't today. So I let down my guard, and now here we are.

It was also a bit careless of me to think there was no one around.

Even so, what's wrong with this guy? Alright, I'll concede to his presence in my room, but in that case, what the hell was that yesterday?

I lowered the blanket just a fraction to check his face.

His expression was subtly tinged with worry. The moment our eyes met, it became a calm smile, with a hint of wryness. It was his usual irritating self.

Caught peeking, I reluctantly poked my head out from the blanket and faced him. Then, I pinned him with the nastiest glare I could muster.

“...Hey, you. What the hell were you doing yesterday?”

I was long past giving a damn, even about swearing to his face.

— Wait, no. I didn’t have any intention of asking that.

I only noticed after the words were out of my mouth, but didn’t that make it look like I was crying out of anxiety over yesterday’s business?

...Because he already knew I was a guy, this situation was looking pretty damn bad. Especially for my mental well-being.

“I had... something to think about.”

Leon’s response ran contrary to my worried expectations. I didn’t know if he noticed them or not, but he calmly adopted a thoughtful demeanor.

“What were you thinking so much about?”

After asking that question almost reflexively, I realized that I’d allowed myself be caught up in Leon’s pace. If I asked, I had to listen.

How would the conversation go from there?

“Just you.”

So we were going there after all.

I expected as much. It was a question of content. If a man, or possibly a woman, thought of nothing but a member of the opposite sex, it was typically *that* sort of thing.

...But it wasn’t that kind of conversation.

“Pretty calm, aren’t you. So, the verdict?”

When I thought about it, there was a high possibility that Leon knew various things about my abnormal condition by this point.

That night, he probably saw the mysterious glowing circle manifest.

At that time, he played stupid and didn’t say anything, so I thought maybe I was the only one who could see it. But remembering the incident with Guibenague, that couldn’t be true.

And now that he’d heard my confession yesterday, he was the only person who knew almost everything about me.

If there was anything left that he didn’t know, it was just those enigmatic dreams.

What’s more, Leon said he thought things over.

In that case, it wasn’t farfetched to think that he came to some sort of conclusion.

Hey Teach, won’t you share with the class?

◇ ◇ ◇

“This is getting right to the point, but would you do me the honor of marrying me?”

.....

.....

.....Huh?

I looked at him like, ‘What is this guy talking about?’ Leon’s words went round and round in my head, but I couldn’t make sense of them.

What — he — just now, what did he say? Mare-ee-ing. Marrying?

“HUUUUH?”

What the hell is he thinking?

He heard what I said yesterday to begin with. That I was a guy.

And yet, forget confessing, he shot right past that to marriage? It was like he came from an entirely alien dimension.

Wrapped up in the blanket, I inched away, little by little.

My confession yesterday should have been something likely to make people pull back. But as of just now, Leon had me beat.

In other words, *I* was the one backing away. I could say, with absolute conviction, that I had never wanted to retreat so badly in my entire life.

“Is it no good?”

“Do I even need to say it!”

When Leon asked me that with a slight unease, I yelled back at him full-force.

“Why?”

‘Why,’ you say...

Faced with too straightforward a question, I inadvertently faltered.

“Well, ’cause, because, I’m a guy.”

I had to wring out the words.

After I answered, for a moment I pictured a gross punchline — Leon saying [It’s alright, *I’m* actually a woman] — and hastily shook my head to get rid of the image.

No. Just no. I felt like my head was in chaos. This development came completely out of the blue.

Coming this far, I was a little embarrassed that I seriously expected Leon to have some kind of insight into my situation.

Maybe I should say I severely overestimated him in this case?

“But at the moment, you’re a genuine woman, right? What’s the problem?”

“Well, yeah, that’s true... but I’m telling you, inside I’m a guy! I never planned to stay a woman forever in the first place!”

“Is that so?... That’s a shame.”

When I practically screamed at him, Leon’s tone suddenly calmed, and his usual smile returned.

Seeing him withdraw so easily, I sunk even deeper into confusion.

“All joking aside, I want to ask you to take on a new request.”

...Joking?

Request?

The words left me dumbstruck for a moment. But when my mind caught up, I realized that the conversation we had just now was Leon teasing me, and I instantly exploded with rage.

“Don’t — you — *fuck* with me!”

Furious, I threw aside the blanket and savagely launched myself at Leon.

I grabbed him by the nape of the neck to yank him down —

“Wah-!?”

The moment I tried, my vision spun in a circle, and I found my body snugly settled in

Leon's arms.

For a moment, a wave of dizziness hit me and I blanked out.

Then, when I grasped what happened, Leon had me in a princess carry.

"P-Put me down-! Let go, you moron-!"

I tried to mount a resistance, flailing my arms and legs about, but with the difference in physique, Leon was completely unperturbed.

I couldn't do anything, so stuck with this set-up, I glared daggers at him.

"My apologies. Just now, I was caught up in the moment."

And then Leon lowered his head with an unexpected readiness. His expression seemed to be genuinely apologetic.

Seeing that, I felt my rage quickly cooling.

...This guy. Despite being nobility, he'd bow his head so easily to a guy like me...?

So I thought, but I felt that it was very much like him, so even though I was still pissed, my emotions settled down a bit.

"...Put me down."

"Ah, yes, of course."

Nodding obediently, Leon took care to put me down so that I was sitting on the bed.

You might be able to call him a gentleman, but a gentleman wouldn't break into a lady's room or make fun of people in the first place.

Leon went back to his usual spot and sat down in the chair. His expression seemed somewhat downcast.

I couldn't imagine the usual Leon cutting such a figure. It seemed to me that today,

he'd been openly expressing all sorts of emotions.

There was something childish about it, I guess?

.....Honestly, this guy.

"...So!? What's this goddamn request of yours?"

I snapped, turning away angrily and crossing my arms.

I snuck a quick glance at him, just with my eyes. Sure enough, when hangdog Leon heard me, a slightly apologetic smile returned to his face.

What a simple guy.

Seeing him like that, an indescribable emotion leapt inside my heart, but I did my best to ignore it.

"Will you listen to it?"

"If it's *just* listening!"

I spat back. I couldn't let him get more impudent here. So I issued him a strict warning.

"The truth is, there is a troubling matter on my hands."

...But even so, Leon started to speak without reserve.

A troubling matter.

Whatever this troubling matter was, all I got was an unpleasant premonition. Just like last time.

By the time I noticed, I was already hearing him out.

Did I have no intention of leaving this place? This wasn't something I should have

asked about, was it?

Could it be that one way or another, I was just being made to dance to his tune?

It was an unpleasant conclusion. But I was the one who brought it up. Forcing myself to accept the fact, however unwillingly, I couldn't do much besides lending him my ear.

Author's Notes

The second half? It begins.

I say 'second', but it might be more like the middle.

Chapter 20

A Far Too Dangerous Proposition

“To be honest... I find it difficult to talk about myself, but I have a marriage interview with the daughter of a certain noble.”

“What, because of that?”

Hearing that much was enough for me: my premonition got even worse than last time. Oh man, I don't want to listen anymore. My ears and brain vetoed the idea quite firmly, but since I was the one who asked, I reluctantly prodded him to continue.

“Until now, I have refused for various reasons and delayed it, but this past incident was resolved more quickly than I thought. I unfortunately sent a fairly accurate report to the imperial capital, which resulted in a more forceful appeal than any other thus far.”

I see, it's that thing. The so-called political maneuver whatsit. As expected of Mister Lord Noble, Sir. Compared to us common folk, his troubles sure are on a different level, I thought sarcastically.

His expression serious, Leon's talk was all very 'Woe is me', but whatever, just get to the point.

“However, I don't wish to marry yet. Therefore — ”

“I refuse.”

Without hearing the last of it, I slammed on the brakes right then and there.

“...Please listen to the end,”

Leon murmured, his face looking sorrowful.

“What, are you an idiot? I already know what you’re getting at. Anyway, you’re thinking of using me as a stand-in to chase off the girl, am I right?”

“How did you know?”

“How could I not!”

Is he making a fool of me? I wondered, but he was so astonished that I’d guessed right. Astounding as it was, he seemed fairly sincere.

Yeah, therefore please marry me. Won’t you? So it wasn’t completely just a joke.

I finally understood, but whether I’d agree was a different story altogether.

“Please. It’s a very troubling matter.”

Leon wore an expression of sincere distress. Strangely, my heart wavered when I saw it.

No, wait. This might just be an act. He was just making fun of me a minute ago.

A desire to help appeared from god-knows-where, but I swallowed it back.

“Go be as troubled as much as you want! For starters, I’m a guy, you know! A *guy*! Do you get that?”

“But you are female now, correct? Then that shouldn’t be an issue, should it?”

“I’m saying that I’m a guy on the inside, okay!”

After the words came out of my mouth, I realized that we were going down the same path as before.

Wait. Could he be teasing me *again*?

“No, I’m completely in earnest this time... In any case, it’s not as if I’m saying that I’m especially serious about wanting to get married. To put it bluntly, it’s the imitation I want. The appearance. In other words, I’m requesting your assistance in a performance.”

When I easily guessed the exact contents of his thoughts, it left him at a loss for words; he spilled everything as if I were interrogating him.

Request. Request.

In a sense, if it were a request, it couldn’t be helped.

Aira’s lonely ‘How long can we stay?’ resurfaced in my mind.

If I were to accept, we could continue this lifestyle for a little while longer.

Though I’d firmly deny it, the idea had an appeal that was difficult to resist.

“...look, I mean, do you hate marriage that much? Isn’t it fine if you pick up one or two of them here and there?”

Quashing my growing sense of impropriety, I deliberately switched to a completely different question.

Even if I say so myself, I think I’m talking pretty recklessly. But this guy’s nobility in the first place, so even if he gets married, isn’t it just fine for him to throw in a Concubine A or a Concubine B? Isn’t that what nobles do?

“I don’t know what you think of me, but marriage is still marriage. One for an entire lifetime. I’d like to be married for life to a woman I truly love.”

“Huh.”

A thoughtless question, a serious answer. A little embarrassed, I sighed.

Saying 'love' this honestly. Well... you might even say it's sincerity unbefitting for a noble.

Look, do I even need to bring up Guibenague? The image I've developed of 'nobles' thus far, is someone devoted to their lusts — even if he has a wife, he'll still want to build a harem of concubines, and even if he has his concubines, he'll still put his hands on the maids.

Compared to *that*, it was impossible for me not to feel a surge of goodwill toward Leon for his very reasonable view on the matter.

I don't really get it, but whoever marries this guy could become happy, I thought vaguely.

Because of that, I felt some sympathy for his partner in the marriage interview, who he wanted to avoid this badly.

"Do you know about the other person? In the marriage interview, I mean."

"Well, more or less."

A political marriage of convenience. Going without even knowing your partner's face until you meet them for the first time during the wedding.

Right? As expected.

"But is that the part that you dislike so much? Is she incredibly hideous or something?"

"No, that isn't it, you know?"

Leon fished out a sheet of parchment from somewhere and handed it to me.

On it was drawn a woman around twenty years old, who did look as if she had high social status. She was seated, wearing an expensive-looking dress and holding a folding fan in one hand. It was quite an exquisite picture — simply by looking, I could get a feel for the atmosphere.

The female lead was plenty beautiful. Of the beautiful women I knew, Aira was the most similar to her.

Only, compared to Aira's indescribably ditzzy atmosphere, the woman in the picture

was fairly neat, or perhaps demure — that was the impression I got. If we're just talking impressions, she was closer to Palmira.

"Isn't she a beautiful woman?"

"Well, that's true. But you are beautiful, you know."

My heart jumped in my chest, being fed that line so smoothly.

But almost immediately, I pulled a face.

Sure, I think I'm beautiful. I know it sounds like I'm way too full of myself, but that's an objective evaluation coming from a former man.

That said, hearing it from other people, well... it doesn't feel bad, but I'm not jumping for joy here either.

"Drop it."

I made a special effort to be brusque.

Leon grinned the way he always did.

Seeing that pissed me off, somehow.

"First off, why me? Palmira... well, even if it wasn't her, there's Aira, and if neither of them will work, then there are maids around too."

Thinking of Palmira's blunt discourtesy, and excluding Irene as well, I suggested some alternatives.

I wasn't serious when I brought it up, but honestly, wasn't Aira a suitable choice? The night Leon picked us up, she was chatting away so smoothly, putting on an act.

Well, we did get found out though...

"There is a proper reason for that."

I bet it's a total trash reason. But without any other options, I'll hear him out for now.

"The truth is, it isn't the appearance or the talent that's important, but the hair color."

"Hair color?"

Suddenly, I looked at my own hair.

Silver.

My eyes traced it from where it pooled around the top of my shoulders, to where it flowed down my back like silk.

As a matter of fact, silver hair is rare. Rare, or more precisely, I'd never seen it before now.

The closest hair color was white, but the silver of my hair was utterly different from that lifeless color.

"That's correct. I may not know the particulars of your situation, but it's reasonable to think that your past prior to the performance will only cause issues. Therefore, you need an increase in your social status. For that reason, it is necessary to act as someone who has the appropriate status... The individual I'd like for the performance is indeed silver-haired..."

In short, it was an impersonation...?

I felt as if things had become complicated all of a sudden.

Social status. Well, sure.

For a noble like Leon, even if he were to say [I'm going to marry this woman], if said woman was a former slave of mysterious origin, then it didn't matter how much the person himself might insist on it — those around him would definitely refuse to accept it. That was going to be a problem. One hundred percent, no question about it. That was just how the upper classes worked.

And so, with my questionable background, a title was a must. To that end, Leon found an individual somewhere to provide a substitute identity, but that person's hair was

silver.

As I said, silver hair is so rare it's practically nonexistent. Aira's was chestnut-colored, Leon's was blond. The maids had a variety of hair colors, but only chestnut, blond, red, and black. Hell, I was a redhead before becoming a woman.

When you get right down to it, the people in this world usually have hair in one of the four colors I just mentioned, or the white hair of the elderly. That was it.

In that respect, Leon's story made sense. However.

"Silver hair aside, is it okay for me to use this person's identity as their substitute?"

I voiced a simple doubt.

If there was a cover identity that well-defined, then Leon could just go to the person herself to get this whole thing resolved.

"Yes, that's right. It's difficult to explain, but... first of all, the woman providing your cover identity has already left this world. That's one. And officially, she is still alive. That's the other. Do you understand the gist of it?"

That was certainly convenient.

She was already dead, but she hadn't died.

As for why, there was probably some political motivation behind it.

And dead men tell no tales. If I were to replace a noble family's daughter who was, in fact, alive, there might have been loose ends to clean up afterward.

But take someone who's already dead and give their identity to some no-name, and you've pretty much cleared that hurdle.

Even if worst came to worst and the identity was lost, it wouldn't matter. The outer persona was dead to begin with. And the inner was never an individual of any consequence.

Of course, this scenario had its various challenges too. However, considering the alternatives, it probably was the least risky by a large margin.

“Please, take this.”

While I was thinking, Leon had taken out another sheet of parchment. Compared to the other, this one was quite a bit older.

Or maybe the question was, where was he pulling out all this paper from? Assuming he just had them at the ready all the time, the man brought new meaning to the phrase ‘thoroughly prepared’.

I felt like I’d been played, but I shut my mouth for once and took it.

“...This is — ”

It was the picture of a girl, similarly wearing a dress, but about ten years old and sitting idly on a chair.

Although the colors had faded quite a bit, her hair was definitely silver. And, though her youth stood out more than anything else, her facial features were adorable, just like a doll’s. She would definitely grow into a beautiful woman in the future, no question. And not just beautiful, but a beauty without peer.

— In other words, like me.

“Christine Rouelle Felmiran. If she were still alive, she would have been almost exactly your age. Nickname, Chris... What do you think?”

While I stared at the parchment, unable to take my eyes away, Leon continued blandly,

“Doesn’t it feel like destiny?”

“N-No...”

That was the best I could manage.

I mean, it certainly did feel like destiny. Well, not destiny so much as something more

suspect.

I couldn't really put it into words. But seeing her face, hearing her name, I felt as if she were connected to something important within me. On the other hand, a strong refusal emerged from somewhere inside me — 'You can't make that connection.'

This request was dangerous.

To be frank, pushing my way into the upper classes, and the aristocracy even more so, was dangerous enough in itself, but this included impersonation as a freebie. If this got out, worst case scenario, I'd be facing the death penalty. In that respect, it was definitely too risky a request.

But the uneasiness I felt now came from a different threat entirely.

If I had to put it into words, I'd say it threatened to call the nature of my existence into question. I didn't know the specific reason why. Only, my instincts were screaming at me.

"This is why you're the only one for this. Please."

Leon dipped down his head.

A noble, and he lowered his head to me again. It was that important to him.

But —

"I... can't..."

In the face of my overwhelming terror, even that wasn't enough to keep me from refusing.

I clenched my teeth. If I hadn't, they might have started chattering. The sound of my heartbeat grew too loud, threatening to drown out everything else. I realized that it was hammering away.

Why? Why am I this frightened?

That's — that's — definitely—

“...Is that so? In that case, there's nothing to be done...”

Leon readily backed off.

Before I finish thinking, ‘Eh—’, the parchment papers were swiped from me in one fluid motion.

The man himself didn't seem to be particularly shocked.

It really was a face he could turn on and off easily. Or should I say ‘completely’...

“However, might I ask you to accompany me as far as the capital?”

This time it was a negotiation. In an abrupt about-face from his earlier demeanor, he was smiling.

“...Why?”

I didn't try to hide my doubt. With the lingering effects of my earlier shock, my thoughts weren't running smoothly at all.

“I have to give you your compensation, but I'll need to deal with various processing issues first. I'm unable to give it to you at present. Therefore, I will do so upon returning to the capital.”

Compensation... Compensation?

Come to think of it, I had to go collect that money. For me, and for the other two as well.

There was no particular need to get it here. Besides, the capital might prove convenient in planning my next move.

“...Alright, I got it.”

Hearing this, Leon gave me a satisfied nod.

It didn't mean I was thinking particularly about being able to continue this life for a little while longer.

Chapter 21

Friends I Can Count On

After I had breakfast, I called Aira and Palmira out to the balcony.

It was arrogant to say this, as a guest, but this balcony was my favorite.

The pleasant feeling of the wind, and best of all, the great view.

The light blue of the sky and the indigo of the sea were a sight for sore eyes.

When I looked down, I could see the port city bustling with human activity. How luxurious. Even so, I'd be saying goodbye in a few days' time.

I gave Aira and Palmira a simple explanation of my plans from this point on.

For the time being, I kept the marriage business under wraps.

I turned it down, so talking about it would make things too complicated.

"The imperial capital! Really? I've never been there before."

Aira was openly happy. At least, that was how it looked on the outside, but she didn't have an any other 'side' to her. She was genuinely delighted with the idea.

I looked at Palmira.

Her expression seemed a touch complex.

"What is it?"

"...I don't have any good memories of the imperial capital."

From the sound of it, Palmira had been released from prison at the capital. But that didn't necessarily mean *in* the capital.

As the capital city of one of the three global superpowers, its size was on such a scale that Telaberan couldn't even compare. Naturally, it was enclosed by walls, but with

space at a premium inside, the city expanded beyond them. From there to the outer edge, the districts gradually descended deeper and deeper into poverty. Apparently, Palmira had spent a week living in the outermost edge.

According to Palmira herself, she didn't so much *live* there as *exist* there.

"I don't know how to live. But I don't want to die. So — "

She passed her days stealing and being stolen from. Finally, she herself was stolen...

"But if you're going, Chris, I'll go too. I don't mind it that much."

Well, if it's Palmira, she *would* say that, I thought.

The imperial capital.

From what I knew about it, it actually wasn't that big. If I remembered correctly, I'd only come here before while escorting merchant caravans.

Back then, I didn't venture inside the walls, so I had never seen the city inside that daunting outer shell. Just up to the districts next to the walls, at most.

That said, it was still a fairly large city. Within the outer edge, public order wasn't half bad, and the city had set up various municipal institutions.

Since the Adventurers' Guild was located there as well, it wasn't especially difficult to buy something you wanted. As you'd expect from a large city, I thought.



We spent the whole morning out on the balcony.

It was nice and comfortable here, but surprisingly, there was nothing to do. With our departure for the capital scheduled the day after tomorrow, ultimately, all we could do until then was wait.

Gazing out over the city and the sea, as far my eyes could see, relaxed me. Aira and Palmira were similar, but neither seemed more bored than me. I saw them making themselves at home on the balcony.

At some point I was inclined to strike up a conversation with them. But for some

reason, I veered off-course and ended up leaning against the hand railing, looking at the scenery visible only from where I stood.

Without anything to do, my mind ran in circles.

The marriage business with Leon was particularly inconsequential right now. What I was far more concerned about was the girl in that drawing.

I suppose I could call her the other Chris.

...Isn't that the [me] in my dreams?

Giving up on my denial, I put the pieces together.

I sighed. I'd never checked how I looked in the dreams. There was an objective part of me that said these were no more than dreams, but somehow, I knew we looked the same.

I couldn't say for sure, but even so — with images of such clarity before me, no matter how I tried, I couldn't help but suspect that it was the dream [me].

Back then, I ran. From that conclusions I drew there. Because all I felt was a primal fear.

But now, it was impossible for me *not* to think about it. I wasn't that capable. I couldn't continue to avert my eyes from the issues that were all too clear to me.

I braced myself, and came to the logical conclusion.

At that time, I didn't turn into a woman.

Most likely, my soul, and my soul alone, possessed the [Chris] Leon said was dead.

Of course, I didn't know what [Chris] was doing in the Artor Ruins Cluster. But there was probably some kind of motive behind it. It was baseless speculation, but right now, the story would fall apart without it.

I drank the medicine and pass out. Then, by some sort of mechanism, I possessed her. Now, this theory was clearly a perfect fit.

When I considered things from that angle, I could explain the parts that confused me.

The fact that I acquired the ability to use magic.

The mysterious memories within me. The dreams.

Not to mention, now that I remembered, why I was stark naked when I came back out of the ruins.

I'd thought that my things had slipped off due to the changes in my physique, but still, it was weird for me to be completely butt-naked. It wouldn't have been unusual for something to be left on me; actually, it was stranger that everything had gone missing.

I dug deeper into my memories of that day.

Thanks to some unknown influence, my awareness was hazy. I knew for a fact that I'd been in the Artor underground.

But did I start in the same place where I drank the medicine?

I didn't know for certain, but it was natural to think that that was not the case.

By this point, it was clear to me that this line of speculation was the correct one.

But in that case, I was left with one final and vitally important question.

That is:

"What's troubling you, Big Sister?"

My train of thought had gotten that far when I heard a voice from behind me.

The voice from the outside brought me out of my contemplation, and I turned around.

...Not that I had to. It was Aira. Palmira, too. I thought they were at the table on the other end of the balcony, but they had come over without me noticing.

"Ah, uhhh... no, it's nothing."

"It's not good to worry all alone,"

Palmira said flatly as she fixed me with her stare. I had tried to lie without even thinking about it.

I knew the gaze locked onto my eyes was full of strength. That look wasn't nasty, it was pleading for something.

Without lingering, I turned my eyes to Aira. But she was looking back at me in the exact same way. It was something close to indignation, reproaching me.

"I think you're strong, Big Sister. But that's also why you look like you're shouldering everything by yourself... Until now, we've left everything up to you, but — but I believe it would be better if you could rely on us more."

Aira's words were resolute, her expression unusually serious.

"Of course... Of course, I might be just be complaining about my share of the work. But, but — I want you to say things out loud. I want you to count on us. If it's just listening, we can do that anytime you need it. So... don't keep your troubles to yourself..."

"Chris. You're with us, and we're with you. I want you to know that."

Aira and Palmira were pleading with me. The words they strained to tell me were an earnest plea.

I faltered under the weight of their unwavering gazes. No one had ever looked at me with those eyes, or said those words to me.

Even though I screamed for help, no one said, 'Count on me.'

For anything, for everything, I relied on myself.

'If I don't do it myself' — that's what I thought, that's what I did.

If no one will save me, I won't count on anyone else.

That way, I'll have no regrets.

But, now, these two people said to count on them. They begged me, 'Please rely on us.'

So I didn't know what to do.

If it were Leon, what would he say? Come to think of it, I'd heard it said that the two of us were similar. It was then —

[Right? That's what I mean.]

...That's what you mean, huh?

"...That's right."

Smiling wryly, I gently patted both of them on the head.

Friends, huh.

To rely on, to trust.

So I can rely on them.

Even if I do, it'll be okay.

Something inside me smoothly faded away. Something like a curse.

A curse that was born inside me in the distant past.

Of course, I didn't think that all of it had been resolved.

But, just a little.

I felt that just a little, it grew lighter.

"That's right, really... yeah, I'm sorry. Then, could I ask you to listen to something, just for a bit?"

A slight pause, then I asked them.

They nodded happily.

“Yeah, so that’s what happened.”

From the very beginning, I’d never gotten used to relying on others.

Yesterday, I was keeping my promise as was only just, but today was different. I didn’t have much faith in whether I could convey things well.

But, for now, I said everything I could.

And I thought I might as well tell them about finding Leon in my room almost every morning. It would be hard to explain things without it.

“This is really blunt, but isn’t Lord Leon fairly seriously concerned about you, Big Sister?”

I took Aira’s sudden observation like a sucker punch to the face.

On reflex, I turned to her with an expression of disbelief. She looked perfectly serious.

“After all, he has never come to either of our rooms, and, um, even if you leave that aside, I feel like he’s been giving you special treatment pretty much from the beginning, you know?”

When I turned to Palmira, she nodded silently.

Eh–? Are you serious?

...I said, while I fumbled around for any knowledge I might have. I mean, sure, even when we met, I sensed that he kept glancing over at me even though Aira was the one talking to him.

Plus, Leon almost always had a smile on, but I did feel like he tended to show a wider variety of expressions when he was facing me.

“Furthermore, Big Sister, when you said you were a man yesterday, wasn’t he quite flustered? That seals it, don’t you think?”

“No, but this morning he showed up in my room like usual, you know?”

“As for that, couldn’t it be that Lord Leon ultimately decided that even if you used to be a man, it isn’t a problem?”

Aira said such terrifying things. And to make things worse, I couldn’t come up with any clear-cut rebuttal.

There are no words.

I might never be able to face Leon directly again.

I mean, now that I think about it, Aira’s information isn’t wrong — and does nothing in particular to resolve my worries. If anything, she’s simply added another headache to the pile.

Well, what about it?

In this case, should I take it as a sort of warning?

For my chastity or something?

“I think Lord Leon knows something.”

While I was working through the shock of my new worry, Palmira, who had been silent thus far, opened her mouth.

God, what in the world is it going to be next? I was instinctively concerned.

“I can’t really put it into words. But it’s because he knew something that he panicked yesterday, and today, he had that strange conversation with Chris in order to verify something... That’s what I think.”

Palmira chose her words carefully, speaking with a rare ambiguity.

Then, she seemed to be thinking very hard about something. Wordlessly, I waited for her to continue.

Even Aira, who'd been acting however she pleased until just now, was keeping quiet.

"...For example, today Lord Leon showed you a woman that matched the person in your dreams. I think that's too much to be a coincidence."

"...In other words?"

"Lord Leon realized there was some connection between you and that woman, and he tried to verify it... I think... Though I don't know what his intention is."

Even Palmira didn't seem to have much confidence in her ambiguous comment, but when she put it that way, it did have a ring of truth to it.

I didn't notice at all this morning when he opened with the marriage talk and segued into discussing the request.

But, through the lens of Palmira's observations, the marriage business and the request were actually groundwork, arranged solely for the purpose of showing me that picture. Yeah, I can buy that.

And that might be exactly why, after he showed me the picture, he immediately retracted his request.

That certainly was unnatural.

But even so, I didn't have the slightest clue about what Leon was after.

"Intention... aim, huh..."

"Later... if, for example, it isn't Big Sister but the substituted Miss Chris that has what he needs, or something — "

"So he actually needs her for the marriage interview?"

Sensing Aira's discomfort as she began to talk about something mysterious, I prodded her to clarify.

"Not the marriage interview, something else."

"Something else... like what?"

"That I don't know, but..."

What was Aira thinking, saying something like that? I found it difficult to understand, but I could sense that the information so far had tipped off her intuition.

Something else, huh?

I pondered Aira's words.

As a result, we ended up heading to the capital. Our secondary objective was to collect our compensation.

But thinking about rationally, something wasn't right.

One and a half million was definitely big money. But that was from our point of view. Based on how easily Guibenague offered that same sum, it wasn't that much for a noble, was it?

Though it was on the smaller side, Leon was a noble that in command of a military force. Was it possible that he'd be unable to produce even that amount of money?

Long story short, Leon wanted to take us — no, me — to the capital, one way or another. Why?

For the marriage interview?

Was that it?

Had I fully trusted him, that would've been my conclusion.

But was it really like that?

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was definitely fishy.

...I should probably remain vigilant.

“Anyway, good talk, guys.”

I had a feeling.

“Was it helpful?”

If I were to answer honestly, I couldn’t really tell.

But sure, I was able to hear views I might not have been able to think of myself, and in that respect, it was pretty productive.

And... I felt a little more at ease.

I’ll take what help I can get.

In this case, it might be for the best.

“Yeah, thanks.”

I gave them my honest gratitude.

The two of them smiled, looking happy.

Chapter 22

To Town

“Give me one silver.”

The next morning, when I abruptly got up from bed and verified that Leon was in the room, that was the first thing out of my mouth.

“...If I could, then I’d like to start the morning from the customary exchange of greetings.”

Leon’s expression was slightly dissatisfied. Hey, that’s a privilege, not a right.

“Well, after all, you’re already in my room all the time without permission. Besides, the unexpected doesn’t always start with a greeting, you know... Now then, good morning.”

Generally, Leon began by making me jump out of my skin, thereby dragging me into his pace. So today, I beat him to it.

I jumped out of bed and really streeetched out my body. Then, I gave him an unnatural, stilted greeting. I even forgot to make a cursory bob of my head.

I was able to sleep well last night. I didn’t dream, either.

“...Good morning. In any case, why one silver?”

Moving at my own pace, I did some light stretches. Even if I didn’t, this body was in fairly good shape, but on the other hand, my growing familiarity with it was frightening prospect. *Knk-knk*, I twisted my waist, and then, while stretching out my arms, I answered Leon’s question.

“Mmm, call it an advance on my compensation? You’ve got at least one silver on you, right? This is our last day in Telaberan, so I want to take Aira and Palmira on a tour of the city.”

It was something I decided yesterday, before I went to bed.

I kinda made the decision by myself again, but fact is, I couldn’t bring myself to give the two false hope. What if I told Leon and he refused for one reason or another?

Besides, we were more or less Leon’s guests. So if he turned out to be against it, I figured I’d just have to give up.

“I see, that’s a good idea... Well, I should have thought of it myself, perhaps. My apologies.”

Unexpectedly, Leon readily agreed.

To be honest, I figured the odds to be about fifty-fifty.

“However, during the transition to the new lord, the streets are a little unruly. Therefore, I am somewhat apprehensive about sending three exceedingly beautiful women outside. Would you mind allowing a one-man escort to accompany you?”

I gave his proposal some consideration.

If possible, just the three of us would’ve been nice. We’d be able to take it easy, then.

But since what Leon was saying was reasonable too, I didn’t reject it out of hand.

“Hmmm... I understand. That’s... wait, you’re not going to turn around and say that *you’ll* be the chaperone, right?”

Well, that would’ve been fine too, but considering that we decided in our talk yesterday to be on guard against him, it would be a little awkward.

Though you could also say that even if it didn’t end up being Leon himself, it would still be one of his people. So there wasn’t much meaning to it.

“It really is a shame, but it won’t be me. Truly, I would have liked to go with you if I could, but if I did, the atmosphere downtown would probably be strange. Moreover, I must see to the final adjustments for our departure tomorrow.”

Yup, a man who could read between the lines, Leon.

Sure, if he came along, he might be enough of a celebrity that people would make a fuss, and that would no doubt make for a weird atmosphere.

If so, we wouldn’t be able to have fun.

“That being the case, I will take care of personnel selection, so... you’ll be going to breakfast, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, let’s have breakfast first.”

With that, Leon rose from the chair. Finishing up my stretches, I found this state of affairs somehow unsatisfactory.

“...What did you have planned for today?”

I asked tentatively.

His expression unruffled, Leon lightly spread apart his hands.

“Nothing in particular. Well, think of it as the usual morning routine.”

...Like I’d be satisfied with just that.



As we took our usual seats for breakfast, I pitched the trip to Aira and Palmira.

“Why don’t we go into town?”

Leon had an 'Oh?' sort of look on his face, but I ignored him. At which point the other two chimed in unison that they wanted to go.

Once we finish eating breakfast, we assembled in the foyer.

Aira and Palmira were in trimmed, cheap-looking dresses made of thin cloth. They had straw hats in their hands. Pleasantly commoner-like. Palmira looked just like a local kid. That, Leon might have arranged in secret.

As a result of throwing a full-bore tantrum at the maid who brought me my clothes, I ended up in a short dress of white lace and dark red trousers.

I didn't care about the top, but I was glad I got trousers.

Around the estate, alright, I did wear skirts, and dresses, and whatever else was provided to me, but I didn't want to wear a skirt if I was going into town. Anyway, it'd make me anxious. About all sorts of stuff.

I also received a straw hat, which I popped on my head. Though summer was nearing its end, the sunlight was still pretty strong.

When I looked outside from the courtyard, I saw huge cumulonimbus clouds floating over the horizon. It looked like another hot day today.

"...Now all that's left is our chaperone. Who's coming along?"

I asked Leon, who had come specially to see us off.

Thinking about it some more, I hadn't heard who would be coming with us. Maybe Irene?

"Mmm, I think he'll be along shortly. For now, here."

He handed me three small leather pouches. They were heavier than they looked.

Peeking inside, I saw that one pouch held ten iron coins. Sure enough, one silver.

Leon took care to give us iron coins out of consideration. Practically speaking, if we

weren't buying anything that big, silver would be too large a denomination and too difficult to use.

I honestly expressed my gratitude to Leon for that.

"Yooo, ladies, let's have a good time today!"

When I was thanking Leon, a voice came from the direction of the barracks. The person who appeared was...

Geh-... Rupert...?

He should have been in uniform, more or less, but this time, he was dressed casually. Ocher trousers and suspenders, a white dress shirt. He had a hunting cap pushed back on his head. The artfully disheveled style of a gutless townie.

Frankly, even if you said he was a military man, nine out of ten people wouldn't believe it.

As Leon saw us on our way, the four of us began to descend the hill. For a while, we followed an ordinary gravel road with nothing of interest. When we arrived at the edge of the edge of the streets, the city was visible on the other side of a low wall rising out of the dark green undergrowth.

Ambling along, we gradually had to raise our heads to see the roofs of the city's neatly lined houses. When I looked up, I saw the gate at the end of the hill road, with two gatekeepers on duty.

When we passed through, they hailed Rupert with a "Thanks for your hard work." When they recognized him, they straightened their postures and saluted him.

...They actually paid proper respects to him. I didn't see that coming.

"So, where to?"

Once we were past the gate, we were on the main thoroughfare.

If I recalled correctly, there were three major streets in the city. The Great North Gate... the gate we went through on our first day here, led to the trade district. Heading to the harbor from there would take us down the main road to the warehouses on the docks. Then, there was the somewhat smaller East Gate, which opened onto the road to the residential quarter.

And we were currently in the residential quarter. Even when I looked around, all I saw were rows upon rows of very ordinary homes. Nothing to write home about, no reason to go over for a look.

“Wooow, these houses are so *big*, aren’t they?”

But to Aira, it seemed, they were worth taking a look at. She repeatedly raised her voice in wonder as she looked at the buildings on the streets.

Oh, Aira was born in a farming village, wasn’t she? She said she was just like a slave, so this might be her first time in a city like Telaberan to begin with.

From that point of view, the houses looking out onto the large thoroughfare were certainly impressive. For the most part, they stood two to three stories tall.

But that was because they faced the main street.

In other words, you could call this place, where the houses all look out onto a major street, the best neighborhood in town. Of course, that was excluding the mansion of the city lord and Leon’s estate.

That was why the wealthier classes lived here, and why the homes were so big, too.

But from this road to the secluded inner areas of the district, that gradually changed. The homes rapidly grew shabbier and shabbier... ultimately, you’d arrive in a slum where it was impossible to tell if a given building was a home or a ruin.

This layout fundamentally didn’t change at all, no matter the city. In terms of public safety and the like, Telaberan is still one of the better places, but going into those slums was usually asking for trouble. On the flip side, walking on the big streets wasn’t much of a problem.

“C’mon, let’s hit up... shall we go to the North Gate, Mister Rupert?”

I was about to speak as I usually do, and come to think of it, he didn’t strike me as the stuffy sort, but I changed my mind. This was our first time speaking, so I polished my tone some.

“Haha, it’s fine if you talk to me that way, you know? And you can drop the ‘mister’, sweet lady.”

With a nauseating wink, Rupert put a stop to that with a few self-important words. Well, he *would* say something like that. I mean, I did use my usual tone at the meeting.

“Alright, Rupert. And don’t call me ‘lady’. Chris is fine.”

“...Hearing that tone of voice again gives me a thrill.”

Rupert’s expression was a little excited. Is he a pervert? Is that it?
I put a little distance between us.

“Please call me Aira, Mister Rupert.”

“Palmira. Regards.”

Perhaps getting no danger signals from the perv, the other two made their simple self-introductions at this critical moment.

Rupert happily pumped both his fists in the air and said,

“How great is this? Today’s my lucky day. Come on, why don’t we head over to the North Gate?”

“Excuse me, Mister Rupert, what’s that?”

“Mmm... That’s a water fountain. There’s plenty of water in this city. Is this your first time seeing one, Airi?”

“Yes! It’s my first time! The water’s shooting up, it’s so pretty.”

We walked through the residential quarter to the center of the city. Along the way, country mouse Aira found things she’d never seen before and asked about them. And in response, Rupert diligently answered each of her questions. Before I knew it, Aira and Rupert had gotten excessively close.

Even so, it didn’t necessarily mean he had other things in mind.

By this point, actually, my opinion of Rupert had improved considerably.

Sure, he didn’t seem to take things seriously, based on the way he spoke and behaved, but as walked along leisurely with his hands stuffed in his pockets, he took care to match his pace to ours. The main road, being what it was, was packed with carriages coming and going, but from our point of view, we naturally found ourselves walking along the side of the road. And despite all that, I could tell that he was keeping a close eye on our surroundings without breaking from his fairly natural demeanor.

And what’s more, there were no gaps in his defenses.

He looked unarmed to the casual observer, but he had two daggers at his waist and kept his hands stuck in his pockets, almost never moving them away.

Even his ambling walk was a calculated movement in itself.

Was he merely the Second Platoon Commander in spite of all that?

“From here, we’ll be in the trade district. So, where do you want to go, Chris?”

Somehow, Rupert had lost a fair amount of his diffidence towards me too.

Thanks to my tone and attitude, he no longer considered me a target of the opposite

sex, right? Well, that was for the best.

The trade district.

Generally, this was the image a city had in the eyes of its outside visitors. By day, stalls upon stalls lined the streets; by night, the taverns filled with hustle and bustle, the lights in the brothels would never go out.

Even when I came here before, it was the same. The first time, it was also when I first set foot on this continent. The second came a few years later. As a result, it was a kind of nostalgic place for me.

And there was the place in this city that I wanted to go to, no matter what.

While showing Aira and Palmira around the city was my primary objective, there was somewhere I personally wanted to go.

“The Adventurers’ Guild,”

I crisply informed Rupert.

Chapter 23

Arms, Regret, and Resolve

The Adventurers' Guild.

The place had been bustling with people since morning. It was, as the name implied, a gathering place for the world's adventurers.

Naturally, most of the people inside were coarse and out of place against the city scenery, but on the other hand, plenty of merchants and ordinary townsfolk were crammed inside too.

Considering the guild's goal, it made sense.

The Adventurers' Guild's primary objective was pretty much to manage jobs for the jacks-of-all-trades known as 'adventurers'. Adventurers accepting work would naturally gather, and of course, so would the parties with work to be done.

And they usually weren't adventurers themselves.

So it was a gathering of various professions and social classes.

Even leaving all that out, the Adventurers' Guild also functioned as a source of local information.

Adventurers with work inside the city, or possibly outside, were always returning with all kinds of intel. For example, 'Take care near so-and-so because this or that monster has appeared there', or 'The highway bridge at whatever location was half-destroyed by the bad weather the other day, take that into consideration when you set out'.

Adventurers aside, these tidbits were also valuable to the traders. Of course, the Adventurers' Guild didn't release all the information it received, so misinformation would occasionally surface too.

Still, that information was precious, and worth a lot of money to people.

As a result, even more people gathered.

And in most cases, they did so in the morning.

See, the standard day for an adventurer would go something like this: take a request in the morning, finish it during the day, return in the evening. And because traders usually departed in the morning, they would stop by the Adventurers' Guild in order to get the most up-to-date information.

Aira murmured, "There's an amazing number of people..."

Which I completely forgot.

While I stared at the scene before me, thinking, 'Oh yeah, it was like this', Aira and Palmira watched the same scene in blank amazement.

The Adventurers' Guild in front of me was so packed with people that even 'an amazing number of people' could barely describe it.

The building was of considerable size, as an Adventurers' Guild of Telaberan's class, but it was full as far as the eye can see. Even the outside teemed with people. Inside, I bet it was a scene out of hell.

Well, even so, although the Telaberan branch I recalled was certainly crowded, I didn't remember it being *this* bad.

Did something happen?

"Sure did. You should know that better than anyone else."

Somehow, my eyes landed on Rupert while I was pondering my doubts, and he looked back at me with eyes that said, 'Come on, you don't know?'

He was treating me more and more casually.

"Why?"

"Mm, I'll explain. It's the change in administration. In this transition period, the city's

gotten a bit disorderly. This is the city lord we're talking about, after all. And the Guild was suppressed somewhat under his rule. Throw in the elimination of the goblin colony on the highways, and trade will get moving too, won't it?"

In response to Palmira's artless question, Rupert neatly laid everything out.

It seemed that in Rupert's internal pecking order, I ranked the lowest. I'd have to re-educate him sooner or later.

That aside, he was right.

When the Lord changed, so did the city's power structure. Leon had said it too, but in the middle of the transition, it was chaos. It really was the key moment of the change-over.

And so, the odd-jobs men, the adventurers, had gotten busier.

Things that had been lying dormant until now, things that would usher in the shift to the new city framework.

They were converging.

When I was an adventurer, I would definitely have considered it a good time for business.

Since I thought so, no doubt everyone else had the same idea.

The result: ta-da.

"So what now? Wait?"

"Nah, it'll probably be like this until noon. Let's come again in the afternoon."

"Anywhere else you want to go?"

"No, this is it for me."

My conversation with Rupert was quite simple. I didn't much care, so I was fine with leaving the decision up to Rupert. Well, hopefully it wouldn't be anything tiring.

While we were talking, a commotion erupted from the direction of the guild. In the next moment, a man flew out, smashing open the door on his way. His body was folded in a >.

Even so, the man roared as he rose to his feet and charged once more into the guild.

“It’s a fight. C’mon.”

Aira was surprised by the sight. Giving her a sidelong glance, I nudged Rupert. With a crowd that dense, one or two fights were bound to happen.

“You’re kidding. I’m off-duty today. If it’s that bad, someone from Vyde’s end will come sort it out.”

“You were supposed to be on break?”

“Well, yeah. But it’s because I’m on break that I have the luck to go on a date with beautiful women like this. Seriously, it’s like I’ve got my own harem.”

Rupert responded to an apologetic Aira with heartfelt happiness.

Listening to him talk like he was on top of the world, I simply felt exasperated.

“Alright then, we’ll handle Chris’s errand later. Airi, Polly, anywhere you want to go?”

“I want to go to the weapons shop.”

Sure enough, it was Palmira who spoke up, her voice without inflection. Of course, even Rupert was momentarily taken aback.

“Okay. Weapons shop it is. Airi, what about you?”

But he recovered immediately.

However, Rupert's pecking order had become Aira → Palmira → me. Well, whatever.

"I don't have..."

Even as she spoke, Aira seemed most worried about the fight, her eyes flickering in the direction of the guild.

"Like I said, it's alright. Now then, shall we be on our way to the weapons shop?"

"Both of them got thrown out just now. There's no problem."

"Ehh-?!"

Sure enough, two people flew out, curled up like balls.

Well, that's the Adventurers' Guild for you. Something like that was an everyday occurrence. They could handle things just fine by themselves.



The weapons shop!

There was hardly a boy out there whose heart wouldn't race at those three words.

Weapons. Symbols of strength.

Lump all bladed objects together, and a fairly familiar example would be the kitchen knife. After all, a kitchen knife could become a weapon. Mostly in the hands of a housewife. When raging at her husband for sleeping around.

Though it did have potential as a weapon, the usual application of a kitchen knife was more peaceful. Its blade was used on vegetables, meat, and fish.

In other words, although a kitchen knife had a blade, it was just a tool.

But its bladed cousin, the sword, was different.

The sword was forged solely for the purpose of repelling foreign invaders. Its purpose was to bring about the end of its own violence, and nothing more.

So it generally held a special place in the hearts of the boys who pursued or admired power. In other words, it had a certain romance.

And the weapon store had them arranged in neat lines. Naturally, the air was full of romance. Any red-blooded male should feel an irrepressible surge of emotion at the sight.

Such was the romance of the weapons shop, but in my current ball-free state, I didn't feel particularly emotional.

No, I don't mean to peg this on my transformation into a woman.

Basically: I just got used to seeing them. But I'll say this once — the first time I laid eyes on a sword, it was an especially moving experience for me.

But the adventurers' trade was just as indebted to these weapons shops as it did to the guild. Reasons aside, if a guy gets that emotional every time he steps into a shop he's visited several hundred — or even thousand — times, all I can say is, 'Wow, what an unimaginable guy.'

I didn't know if Palmira, who insisted that she wanted to come here, felt moved by all that.

Or rather, I didn't know why she wanted to come here.

Of course, I knew Palmira wasn't the type to say [I want to see the sea from the harbor], or [I want eat something swee~t].

If anyone, that was Aira. Well, maybe Irene was an even better example?

Anyway, people visited to a weapons store with some goal in mind. It was a bit intense for a spot of window-shopping.

That was why most weapons stores had rules against that sort of thing.

Like this one. What was Palmira looking for?

"Why did you want to come to the weapons shop, Polly?"

"I wanted a weapon."

I couldn't say if he was thinking the same thing as me, but in front of the weapons store, Rupert asked and Palmira readily answered.

I wanted a weapon, so I came to the weapons shop.

Yeah, that checks out. Or maybe I should say it's the universe's greatest truth?

But —.

"Why do you want a weapon all of a sudden?"

I asked, but Palmira ignored me and entered the shop. Was it a secret?

Quickly catching up to her, I heard the shopkeeper's incredibly apathetic voice saying [Welcome]. But seeing us startled him.

That seemed about right. There was a bunch of girls standing there who didn't seem to have any business handling weapons — plus one.

There were a sparse number of other customers, but they all stared at us the same way when they noticed. I could only imagine that they were curious.

In that bizarre atmosphere, even country mouse Aira was silent. Incidentally, Rupert was also standing around with an indescribable expression. Oh, so *that's* what it is. It felt like a playboy just swaggered in like he owned the place, pretty women in tow. The shopkeeper and the others turned eyes that said as much on Rupert. Yeah, can't be helped. He's our chaperone.

Completely ignoring the atmosphere, twenty-year-old Palmira rummaged through the small swords, looking for all the world like a twelve-year-old girl. Before long, she was going to be told that they weren't things for children to look at.

In fact, I heard the same on my first time in here.

Well, let's just leave her to it for now.

The Telaberan weapons shop, Talwall.

As this place was known.

There was a reason I was specially mentioning the name. Basically, this shop had taken good care of me many times in the past.

The first was when I crossed over to this continent at ten years old.

At the time, there was no age limit, but the people at the guild were still unwilling. I forcibly talked them into making me an adventurer, and then I came here, to Talwall.

I was practically broke. Plus, I was a ten-year-old brat. So of course I was turned away, but what with this and that, I was eventually able to buy a small dagger.

I think I spent about three years in Telaberan after that.

Talwall, the guild. Then, my lodgings. These were the places I visited over and over.

Honestly, even the shopkeeper was still the same. He got older, but he was just as grumpy as he was then.

By the end, we'd become friendly enough to joke around quite a bit, but, well, I bet he didn't remember. Even if he did, it was impossible for him to recognize me as I was now.

I didn't have any particular intention of buying anything, but feeling nostalgic, I took the chance to look around at the weapons. The shopkeeper glanced at me from time to time, but since he hadn't said anything so far, I didn't pay it any mind.

By virtue of being in a fairly large city like Telaberan, Talwall's selection was quite good. Most of the weapons in stock were available in complete product lines.

The most common, swords. Then spears, and bludgeons. There were lines of swords in all shapes and sizes. Starting with knives, then shortswords, longswords, and two-handers. Perhaps because of their high quality, I could see them gleam with the shine of well-polished steel.

But practically speaking, their cutting ability wasn't anything to write home about. In terms of sharpness, kitchen knives blew them out of the water. It wasn't much of a consideration when forging swords.

There wasn't any particularly outlandish reason for it. Swords were specialized for the

battlefield. In such a place, the primary focus was durability. Not sharpness.

In the ever-shifting conditions on the battlefield, the sword wasn't used directly. It served many different purposes. What does that mean? Basically, a sword whose selling point was its ability to cut down others in the blink of an eye, was not fit for use.

Kitchen knives did emphasize sharpness, but unless they were honed at regular intervals, they would lose it. Then, for instance, how would that play out on the battlefield? In battles without a foreseeable end? There was no time to meticulously sharpen each and every blade.

After cutting down three of the enemy, a sword would lose its edge, blunted by the blood and fat. Eventually, it would warp. Before long, it was less like cutting the enemy down with a sword, and more like bludgeoning them to death with it.

For that reason, a sword's primary quality was durability. That the second would be sharpness was common sense. In practice, if it couldn't slice through the enemy, then it would be used to beat them down.

So, in terms of killing ability, or perhaps destructive power, axes and hammers were far and away the superior weapons.

However, using them was difficult. Even the hammer, sure to kill with one well-aimed blow, would be worthless if its head didn't strike the target.

Besides, in comparison, swords were better in general purpose utility and user friendliness. That was why even now, the sword was the most popular among the weapons.

"Hn, this one."

When it seemed that the shopkeeper would say something at any moment, Palmira brought over a sheathed sword. A shortsword with a thin blade, fifty centimeters long. Usually, it wouldn't be chosen as a primary weapon, but for someone Palmira's size, it might be just right. I couldn't speak for its durability, but it wasn't that heavy.

"This is fine, right?"

Tentative, I showed it to Rupert too. In my current state, there was a possibility that my perception had dulled.

Rupert took the sword from me. Sliding it halfway out of its sheath, he examined the blade from multiple angles before handing it back.

“Well, the workmanship is relatively good quality. It’s not half-bad, is it? But what will you use it for?”

Now that he’d mentioned it, that was a good question. I didn’t know what it would be used for.

While returning the sword to Palmira, I asked her.

“...To protect you, Chris.”

Palmira spoke briefly, in a whisper.

Protect? Me?

While I was still astonished by her unexpected words, Palmira continued.

“In the room that city lord trapped us in, I couldn’t do anything. You tried to fight, but I only let myself be thrown down on the ground, helpless, and then sent away... That’s why I want the power to fight.”

Holding the sword reverently in both hands, Palmira turned her earnest gaze toward me.

...It was like that?

Those words woke a feeling in me I didn’t know how to express. There was regret in it. And resolve.

That day, I charged Guibenague without thinking about anything. As a result, I was treated ruthlessly, and at that time, Palmira tried to save me.

Her attempt literally ended with a single kick, but she probably regretted it this whole

time.

Of course, I didn't know how things would have turned out if she'd had a sword.

But still, I was sure it gnawed at her: what if she had more strength?

So I thought of this sword as the manifestation of her resolve.

"Got it. I'm counting on you."

I gave her just a short reply.

If this were before, I might have told her, 'Leave it to me, you're fine.'

But that wouldn't do any good. She told me, 'Rely on me,' so I answered her back, 'I will.'

We should stand together.

"Thank you."

For a moment, Palmira smiled at me bashfully. Then, with both hands, she handed the sword back to me.

.....

I'm confused.

...What is she telling me to do?

No, could it be...? Is she telling me to touch the blade to her shoulder and say, [Arise, my knight something something]?

As I puzzled over it, Palmira simply said,

"I don't have money. You buy it."

...Oh yeah, I forgot to hand out the money I got.

The sword cost four iron coins.

Chapter 24

At the Guild

Leaving the weapons shop behind us, we killed time until noon by browsing the trade district.

As before, country mouse Aira looked every which way, asking all kinds of questions, while Rupert went along with her and answered all of them properly.

Palmira carried her newly-purchased, cloth-wrapped shortsword in both hands, looking content. At first, she said she would wear it at her hip, but after being persuaded that her dress lacked the necessary features, this was the result.

When I looked up, the sun was just about midway through the sky. Timewise, it'd be fine to go to the guild now, but first, food.

Because it was exactly the right time, delicious smells wafted into the air from down the street.

"Rupert, let's grab something to eat soon,"

I said to Rupert, who was being dragged ahead by Aira.

"Ah, that time already...? You're right."

As if I were interrupting his happy date, Rupert looked suspiciously up into the sky.

You haven't forgotten about escorting us, have you?

Well, it's alright.

"You guys have anything you want to eat? Me, I recommend the fish around here."

“In that case, fish sounds good to me.”

“Me too.”

“Fish it is, then.”

Oi, what about my opinion?

Maybe Rupert already had a place in mind, because he turned around before I could finish my thought.

I’ll go along with fish for now, but he’d better get a good grip on where he stands.



“After all, it’s not your first time here, is it? First-timers get priority.”

Rupert took us to a stylish restaurant that made me wonder, “There was a place like this around here?” After we took our seats, Rupert responded decisively to my criticism.

...And —

“...how did you know that this wasn’t my first time?”

The waitress came over to take our orders. As Rupert rattled off whatever he felt like, I looked at him warily. I could tell that next to me, Palmira had similarly turned rigid.

“Great, thanks... now. There’s no way I’d miss it. It’s in the way you walk, y’know?”

I thought he was just enjoying a date with Aira, but it appeared that he’d kept his eyes peeled, surprisingly. Sure, now that he’d mentioned it, I might have been walking like I knew where I was going. I was careless.

That said, I knew Telaberan like the back of my hand. Even if I’d put on an act, I

probably would've been found out in the end. I was lousy at that sort of play-acting to begin with.

But, while some people already knew, I wasn't too eager to reveal my real identity. It might be a good idea to be a little more careful.

"And to start with, nothing's gonna come out of giving special treatment to a girl who already has a man."

Before I could finish processing his last statement, Rupert said something I wouldn't let slide without a fight.

"Huuuh?!"

What the hell is he talking about?

I looked at Aira and Palmira. Both of them looked down, unable to say anything. Their eyes glanced over at me from time to time.

What's with this mood? It's like I'm the only one in the dark.

"I mean, sure, you are pretty easy on the eyes. Even the boss wants to take you back to the capital."

"Wait. Are you referring to Leon, maybe?"

There were two people who had the qualifications to be the 'boss', but since Leopard seemed way too unlikely, that left just the one. I cut Rupert off to ask.

Now it was Rupert's turn to gape in disbelief, and he turned to face me.

"Just who else is there?"

'And don't throw the boss's name around,' he added. Well, didn't you just call him 'boss', all casual-like? What about all the times you called him 'boss' earlier? Isn't he a noble?

Even so, for some reason I place my hands on the table and lean forward to quietly mount my defense.

“...Why would you think something like that?”

Rupert also put his hands on the table and leaned forward. We were opposing each other face-to-face over the table. What the hell is this?

“I mean, everyone in the estate knows about it.”

“*What?* What the hell are you talking about?”

“‘What I’m talking about’ is how the boss goes to your bedroom every day. What’s more, whenever he talks to you, he looks like he’s in a *really* good mood. Like people didn’t even know he could make that expression.”

...I was left at a loss for words.

Strangely enough, Aira said something almost identical yesterday.

What the hell? How did we even get here?

“Thank you for waiting.”

While I was still leaning forward, distressed, the waitress’s voice reached my ears. I couldn’t get out of her way, so I straightened up and prompted her to serve the food.

“Oh my, everyone at this table is so good-looking. Is this your first time in Telaberan?”

With that timing, the waitress said something rather excessive. Looking at my unconsciously sullen expression, Aira hurriedly played along with a [Yes, that’s right].

The dishes lined up before my eyes weren’t as polished as those at the estate, but they

still looked mouth-watering. While I stared, I turned over Rupert's words in my mind. Shit. It's all true.

"Wooooow, it looks so delicious!"

"Well then, please take your time."

"Thanks."

By the time I noticed, the waitress had finished laying out the food, and Rupert was tipping her with a sort of familiarity.

"Well, let's eat. Even my guys think this place has great food... If you're not careful, Chris, your face will get stuck that way."

"Uh — right."

At his prompting, I picked up my fork with a feeling of contentment. It really did look tasty.

In the center was some kind of fish pie. Followed by grilled fish fillet. Piccata. Simmered tomatoes.

"Hey, lend me your plate."

I passed my plate over as instructed, and Rupert deftly cut and served me a slice of pie. Then it was Aira's turn, followed by Palmira.

"Th-Thank you, Mister Rupert."

"Thanks."

“Of course. How is it?”

Taking his own portion last, he started eating. Seeing him, we dug in with our forks too.

“Sooo delicious.”

Immediately, Aira spoke up in admiration, with an expression of heartfelt happiness. I had the same thought every time, but Aira devoured her meals like they really were delicious. She seemed so carefree, I was envious.

Encouraged by her reaction, I took a mouthful of pie too.

...Oooh yeah, that’s goddamn good.

“Oh yeah, and today, the boss stops by my place and says, [Really, it’s a pity that I can’t go, but I need you to show Miss Chris and the others around]. With this look like he’s disappointed from the bottom of his heart, y’know.”

“‘Miss Chris and the others’, was it?”

...Are we *still* on this topic? Even Aira was talking like there was some deeper meaning.

“Rumor even has it that he’s taking you back to the capital with him so you can make your debut before the wedding. It’s the hottest topic around the estate right now.”

‘No, I refused, so — ‘...I couldn’t say that. It was pretty complicated business. Not exactly something I could blurt out on the spur of the moment.

But why did the rumors turn out that way? The source was Irene, wasn’t it. Had to be.

“If you didn’t have those kinds of feelings in the first place, all I can say is that the boss is just too pitiful. I won’t come right out and ask you how it happened, but if you haven’t noticed after all that, how heartless are you?”

Rupert said, apparently astounded.

It seemed like the only thing he didn't know was that I was a man. Even Irene would've kept that a secret, I guess.

That was just fine by me, but conversely, wasn't it because she kept it secret that such rumors got started? Wouldn't I be better off, maybe, shouting 'I'm a man!' from the rooftops?

As I sank into thought, I felt a tug on the hem of my dress.

I saw Palmira, her cheeks stuffed with some kind of food, looking at me and shaking her head.

I could read what she wanted to say in her eyes.

'It's hopeless.'



"Pheeew. I'm full, I'm full."

"That was delicious, wasn't it?"

"I'm satisfied."

Three people, three expressions of satisfaction. Leaving me to my complex feelings and lost appetite, they walked out of the restaurant with content looks on their faces.

In the end, Rupert covered the bill.

[Today, it'll be~my~treat~], he said. Gross. But for now, I'd make ruthless use of his hospitality.

Let's have dinner too. On you.

"Well, we're going back before sunset, y'know?"

Perhaps sensing my thoughts, Rupert made a preemptive strike.

“Once the sun sets, it’ll get quite a bit more dangerous. Much as I’d like to, if something did happen and we returned after staying out all night, the boss’ll beat me to death.”

...Well, I can see that.

‘Much as he’d like to’, huh? Yeah, he did seem like that kind of guy, but it looked like he knew the difference between right and wrong. Though it *was* common sense.

“Well, let’s go to the guild for now. It’ll empty out before long, won’t it?”

“Probably.”

Walking toward the guild during the exchange, we arrived relatively quickly.

As far as I could tell, the morning chaos had already subsided. From what I could see from the outside, it even seemed kind of deserted. I mean, relatively speaking — there were still several people inside.

We opened the door and entered.

Just like the weapons shop, it was a nostalgic place for me.

The tables and counters in the sprawling hall. At a glance, it even looked a bit like a tavern, but there was hardly any foot traffic in the afternoon. Later in the day, it actually did do business as a tavern.

At the moment, a few men — adventurers, looks like — were sitting at a table. Perhaps failing to find work, they were day-drinking and rolling themselves some smokes. Though it seemed that those men were now staring at us, these out-of-place intruders who just suddenly appeared.

On the other side, it wasn’t a bartender behind the counter, but a single clerk.

It was for adventurers coming back after finishing their commissions. The clerk handled the business end of things afterward.

On the opposite wall hung a large board, a few slips of paper pinned to it.

Requests. When you wanted to take on a request, you would take the paper for the commission you've chosen and bring it to the counter, and a contract would be made. Right now, because it was already the afternoon, there were few papers left. All the valuable jobs had already been taken.

Of the ones that were left, they either had a deadly high level of difficulty, or offered too little in compensation.

Of course, I hadn't come here to accept requests, so they had nothing to do with me. Today, I'd wanted to come for a different reason.

"Hello."

"Ahh? Ahh."

I hailed the old man behind the counter, who was working on something business-related task.

Maybe he'd been concentrating very hard. The pen in his hand stopped as he looked at me a second time. Then, he adjusted his glasses, which were slightly askew, and turned to face me.

"What is it?"

"I want to register. These two behind me, too."

I pointed at Aira and Palmira, who were standing behind me, as I spoke.

With the abrupt shift in attention, the two of them went [Eh-?]

"Hmmm. Age?"

"I'm eighteen. Behind me, nineteen, and the small one's twenty, believe it or not."

“Oh?”

The old man pushed up his glasses, scrutinizing us.

“Do you know the guild regulations?”

“Yeah, no problem. Everything’s at your own risk. Right?”

Of course, there were a bunch of other rules. But the most fundamental one was being responsible for yourself.

As I said before, the guild operated as a work listing and information broker.

But the ones who chose the work listed were the adventurers themselves.

So if you got hurt doing the commission you chose, or if you suffered losses because you relied on false information, it would all be on you. It was the principle of self-accountability.

In short, the guild itself ducked any responsibility, but if not, things wouldn’t work. So everyone had no choice but to agree.

“If you understand, that’s fine. Three iron for three people.”

“Here.”

I immediately tossed the three coins on the counter.

It was to emphasize my familiarity. If I really did know my way around, I wouldn’t bother him with unnecessary conversation.

“...Hm.”

After checking the coins’ authenticity, the old man took three small leather-bound books from near his feet and sets them in a pile on the counter. Then, he pulled out

one more book, this one large and thick. Placing it on the counter as well, he flipped through its pages with a rustling sound. On the pages was an endless stream of names — it was the register.

“Write your name here. Then here too.”

Finally, I called Aira and Palmira over. Without me noticing, Rupert had moved to stand by the wall, watching us with a disappointed look.

“We’re putting our names down here.”

In a bit of a rush, I passed one of the pens handed to me over to Aira. One to Palmira, too.

Palmira, not hesitant at all, wrote her name down on the notebook and the register.

“Um, that’s, I — ”

But Aira looked flustered with the pen in her hand.

“It’s okay, just hurry up.”

“...I can’t write.”

Aira’s voice spilled out on the brink of tears.

At that moment, suddenly the sound of laughter echoed around us. Those drunks. I could predict this happening. That was why I wanted to get this over with quickly.

“Ahahaha, I thought we got a couple weird ones in, but you can’t even write?”

“Hey, liddle laaaady. If it were me, I’d’ve got it done quick even if I didn’t know my letters.”

Vulgar jeering came from all around the room. The target of their malice, Aira hung her head as if she were trying to endure something. What that something was, went without saying.

Seeing her like that, I hurriedly turned to the old man and took the pen.

“Oi! I can write it for her, right?!”

“Ah, yeah.”

I quickly filled Aira’s name in on the notebook and the register. Then, my name... I hesitated a little, but I wrote ‘Chris’.

“We’re all done here, right? No need to explain the numbers.”

While mockery filled the hall, I showed the old man our three signed notebooks. The old man compared them to the register by eye, then nodded. Alright, that’s the end of that.

I whirled violently towards those drunk shits and

Thud—!

That yelling asshole just had his face slammed into the floor.

“...shut up, you sacks of shit.”

As I thought, it was Rupert.

And at the same time, I saw him holding down a man by the back of the head, pressing his face into the floor. It was probably the one who’d been hurling the vilest insults. He wasn’t wearing the irresponsible grin he’d had until now, but rather an expression so filled with rage that I unconsciously went rigid.

...If I had to pick a single word, it would be ‘demonic’.

Confronted with this figure, a radical change from the side of him that we knew, neither Aira, nor I, nor even Palmira, could make a sound.

“What are you doing, bastard!”

“I’m gonna beat the shit outta you!”

Given a moment to process the situation, the other drunk adventurers stood up one after another. One of them even had his sword drawn.

Even so, I didn’t worry about Rupert, nor did I feel like backing him up.

Rather, I couldn’t even move.

Rupert slowly drew his hand away from the head of the unfortunate man on the floor. The grin on his face was so gruesome that it gave me chills.



“Look, Airi, it’s okay — ”

The main thoroughfare, dusk. As Aira trudged along, it was also Rupert who was joking around with her to cheer her up.

Palmira and I were there, unable to say a thing.

The truth is, this man is terrifying.

That was my honest impression of him.

As if it were perfectly reasonable, Rupert gleefully beat every one of the drunks half-dead in the blink of an eye. *Barehanded*.

If asked about the words ‘Know your place’, he would easily and thoroughly explain the feeling with a hands-on demonstration.

Rupert’s strength was in a league of its own. Even with my former body, I probably would have been finished in an instant.

What's more, after he literally annihilated all of them with extreme ease, he said something about feeling amazingly refreshed, as if nothing had happened.

The guild itself was wrecked, but Rupert probably paid the old man some hush money. How much, I didn't know.

"Oiii, Chris. You say something too."

Then, just now, he spoke to me with his idiotic expression completely unchanged. His reaction made it seem like what happened earlier was a lie. Rather than comforting, that made the disparity more terrifying.

However.

It was a fact that Rupert saved us. And the fault for that, in a certain sense, lay with me.

"...No, sorry. It would've been better if I had explained things properly earlier."

Since that was my objective, I handed Aira one of the notebooks I was carrying.

12-68776. It was written on the notebook's front cover. Palmira was 68775. I was 68777.

"...This is?"

"Well... It's like insurance. In the future, if you can't get into town, as long as you remember this number, it'll act as a substitute for your social standing."

That was based on my prior experiences of being unable to enter the city. Right now, being at Leon's side certainly guaranteed our social status. But I didn't know how long that guarantee would last. So, as insurance, I had us register with the guild. Even Aira. It really was just insurance. It might not have much meaning in terms of results. But I just wanted to do what I could right now.

However, I ended up getting Aira hurt. Because I didn't put enough thought into it.

When I did something, it would come after a discussion. I failed, and now I simply regretted it.

“That’s true.”

Hearing me, Rupert looked as if he’d figured something out.

It seemed like Rupert, seeing me suddenly register the three of us as adventurers, was wondering if I had plans to run away.

Only now it occurred to me — was that why he was disappointed earlier? Should I have explained things properly to him too?

Well, say I did explain. The results wouldn’t have been much different, I think.

“.....”

Staring at the notebook, Aira seemed to be thinking about something.

It was unlike the usual Aira. When I thought about it being my fault, I couldn’t help but feel concerned.

But there was hardly anything I could say to her about it.

Coward. That’s all I was.

In the end, the atmosphere heavy, we continued to climb up the hill to the estate.

Chapter 25

A Confused Pair

The next day, we departed from Telaberan as scheduled, starting our journey to the imperial capital.

Though this time we were going by carriage. It was a far cry from our trip here. Though we remained silent, the carriage rolled on, and there was nothing we had to do in particular.

To put it bluntly, it was a lot of spare time.

With nothing to do, I ended up thinking about a lot of things.

Calling our path to Telaberan a 'journey' would be rather generous. It was more like panicked flight.

We couldn't even guarantee there'd be anything to eat, or anywhere to sleep.

Days of nothing but enduring the fear and anxiety.

It already seemed unbelievable that that was our reality only a few days ago.

Thinking about it, quite a lot had happened since we arrived in Telaberan.

Meeting Leon, and being taken to the estate.

Eating food the average person would definitely never have the chance to touch.

Sleeping under a roof.

...Becoming a slave again.

Guibenague.

Going sightseeing through the city.

Thinking about it, those days, those times — if Leon hadn't found us, that future would never have been.

I didn't have a clear idea of just what, exactly, happiness was. But if someone were to ask me, I might say that it was those few days I spent at the estate.

That was how gray my world was until the day I met Leon.

To live for living's sake. Days of that, and nothing else.

Running forward in desperation today, knowing nothing of tomorrow. I couldn't admit I was tired, but neither could I bring myself to say 'Help me.'

Now, I thought — that was truly a bitter way to spend each and every day.

Ahh, I didn't want to go back to those days anymore.

— Is that really how it is?

In the middle of my thoughts, something that rejected the idea bubbled up from the depths of my heart.

Is that *really* how it is? Was every day full of bitterness, and nothing else?

Did I hate it that much? Desperately clinging to life every day?

No, not at all. I liked living that way.

Never knowing what tomorrow would bring, putting everything on the line, and living in the moment.

Yeah, I enjoyed those days of excitement.

I didn't hate them, not in the least.

But now, I was experiencing of a different way of life, one that wasn't all bad either.

It was difficult to leave, but I probably wasn't cut out for this life.

Even if it wasn't so bad now, I would definitely fester.

“.....”

I suspended my train of thought.

For some reason, my thoughts were rather incoherent. I sighed heavily.

And so I threw myself down on the seat of the carriage, which even came with cushions.

In front of me, I saw Palmira, dozing off with the precious shortsword she bought in her hands; and Aira, who was awake but with her mind elsewhere, leaning against the wall.

Aira had been in this state ever since the incident yesterday.

She was thinking about something with a single-minded earnestness. I mean, with that look, there was obviously something troubling her.

During lunch yesterday, she seemed to be without a care in the world, but she'd been like this since last night. She wouldn't eat, not even dinner.

Compared to the usual Aira, there was something rather unsettling about her now. To cut straight to the point, she was close to the way she was when the slavers had her.

However, what I saw in her eyes wasn't the lifelessness they had then, but a strong sense of purpose.

What that was, I had no idea.

Naturally, I spoke to her.

Her response was [Could I ask you to wait a little while longer?].

It wasn't like she wasn't talking to me. She wasn't rejecting me either. 'Wait'. Not until when, just 'wait'.

If she had refused, I would've gotten angry with her. Like she and Palmira told me that day, 'Rely on me'.

But Aira said to wait.

Then I would wait. Because that, too, was a sign of her trust in me.

The carriage rolled to a stop, and there was a knock at the door.

I didn't know for sure, but it was probably Leon. 'Yes,' I replied, opening the door, and surprise, surprise, it was Leon.

"We'll be making camp here today. You must be tired after your journey here. There's dinner, so feel free to come outside."

Smiling as always, he politely invited us outside. 'You must be tired' — is there anyone here *less* tired than us? I wondered, but I suppose it was just like him to say that.

Like the day we met, Leon was on horseback, but that should at least be more exhausting than being jolted about in a carriage. Leopard may have been here, but Leon was the company commander.

However, on the other hand, I knew for a fact there were people even more worn out. The soldiers, naturally. They got here on foot. And each of them carrying their own equipment, to boot.

When I thought about that, I felt genuinely apologetic.

No matter how I looked at it, we were pretty much being treated like princesses. But unlike princesses, we didn't take it for granted at all.

That said, if they told us to walk, we'd be just as screwed. I knew that today, in just one day, the company marched a distance that surpassed the bounds of common sense. They'd definitely march off without us in the blink of an eye.

I got out of the carriage, but as quickly and inconspicuously as possible.

Palmira and a troubled Aira seemed to share my feelings, quietly setting foot on the ground outside. Well, Leon had attendants waiting at the side, so it was all for nothing.

Unlike my time in that windowless slave wagon, I already knew it was evening.

When we disembarked from the carriage, the sun was already on the verge of sinking below the hill on the other side of the river. Before long, the curtain of night would fall.

It was the same view we saw when we came here, but, precisely because of that, it pulled at something deep inside.

When the thought occurred to me — 'We floated down that river' — I nearly burst out laughing without thinking.

What were we thinking?

"By the way, dinner today is the same as everyone else's."

Everyone was milling about busily, setting up camp, preparing dinner, and so on. Leon invited us to sit on the chairs around the fire, which his people had seen to first.

“You wanna show off outside, huh.”

Leon responded to my slight jab with an [I do like that sort of thing]. He honestly seemed a bit embarrassed.

The unexpected thump in my heart plunged me into wordless worry.



Dinner was modest, but everything was filling and richly seasoned. So this is what army rations are like? But Aira thought they were a little on the heavy side.

After dinner ended, a somewhat casual atmosphere settled over the camp. I stood from my seat and made my way alone to the dry river bank. Aira had said earlier that she would go rest before returning to the carriage. Palmira had already vanished somewhere after finishing her food.

Right now, each of them had their own things to think about. So I decided to leave them alone.

Still, the river wasn't all that far from the highway. Before long, the bank gradually began to increase in height, and in the end it was still a bit of a walk.

Despite the distant hustle and bustle at my back, I felt the tranquility of the night breeze as I stepped out onto the riverbank.

Looking across the river from where I stood, I could see the stars twinkling above the hill on the opposite side.

A overwhelming brilliance of stars, reflected in my eyes.

If I crossed the river, maybe I'd able to go to that world full of stars. They seemed that close.

The fantastical sight seemed to draw in my soul.

“...Hmm.”

I cleared out those uncharacteristically poetic sentiments with a sigh. Then, I sat myself down on one of the slightly larger rocks on the riverbank and looked up at the stars. They beckoned me, twinkling as they always did.

As I watched them, I began to speak to the empty sky.

“Honestly, there’s a lot of stuff I don’t know.”

Or rather, there wasn’t a single thing I was sure of.

“But for that very reason, I end up imagining all sorts of things. For instance, that this body of mine isn’t my own. Among other things. Like the idea that my body didn’t turn into a woman’s, *I* became something else.”

I’d told Aira and Palmira about it, this theory born from my gut instinct.

But still, even that was no more than ambiguous conjecture.

Come to think of it, the Aira back then had her usual strange thoughts about it, huh.

Remembering it made me giggle.

But she also said something I hadn’t thought of.

Recently, Aira hadn’t been herself.

I decided to wait, so that was what I intended to do. But honestly speaking, I hoped she would return quickly to the way she used to be.

I didn’t much like the alternative.

Of course I thought it was selfish of me.

“Isn’t that actually [Chris]?... Just who in the world is she? When I think about it, I don’t

know a thing about her.”

I didn’t know a single thing.

And that was the truth. Even if I became her in my dreams, in the end, I still didn’t know who she was.

I could, of course, speculate as much as I liked.

For instance, she was at least a child of status. She was well off — that was a fact.

Considering that estate, and the fact that she was examined for magical aptitude, that alone I could say for sure.

Then, there was the fact that she could use magic. Or she had the aptitude for it. She was probably really gifted.

She might have hated it, but the fact that she could use magic was important.

Why? I wasn’t clear on that either, but I could do it too.

From that point of view, the hypothesis that I was hijacking her body took on an increasing sense of reality.

...However, in that case, something wasn’t quite right.

I still didn’t have a clear understanding of what magic is, but absorbing the invocation stone, the appearance of that circle — my body definitely wasn’t normal.

If I had to say... yeah, it was almost inhuman.

Right now, those dream-memories had reached the moment when she learned of her magical aptitude. Whether she pursued the magus’s path or not, I didn’t know.

But I believed something happened between then and the point at which I possessed her.

I didn’t know what, but it was probably something *big*.

Right now, though, I couldn’t even begin to guess what it might be.

But I *did* have an idea about who would know.

“Hey, just who exactly is Chris? — Leon.”



I didn't turn around to ask.

If I turned around and he wasn't there, I'd be pretty embarrassed. But I was confident that the presence behind me was Leon's. No rhyme or reason to it.

” — Aren't you Chris?”

After a few seconds' silence, I heard Leon's voice come from behind me — matter-of-fact, without his usual humor.

That was too obvious an answer.

Yeah, I was Chris. But I was [Chris], too.

“Having fun playing word games, Leon?”

“That wasn't my intention.”

With the sound of footsteps, the presence behind me grew larger, and he fell into line beside me. He placed his hand on my shoulder.

His behavior made me uncomfortable.

Apart from the time I snapped and attacked him, Leon had never once taken the initiative to touch me. He was very much grounded in the gentleman's, or knight's, code of conduct, so I thought of it as part of his character.

Strange as I found it, I didn't brush him off. Because I could feel a slight shiver from the hand he had on my shoulder.

So it wasn't that I was asking if there was something wrong. It was just that matters concerning him were weighing heavily on my mind, so I decided to tolerate it.

Hmph, I snorted, and stared into space. Leon did the same.

Somehow, I knew even without looking.

“.....”

Time passed without a word.

At times, Leon drew in his breath to say something, then shut up again.

Though I was naturally suspicious of Leon’s unusual behavior, I didn’t say anything either, just looked up at the stars with him.

Somewhere in my heart, I wanted to do so, and there was something comfortable about following those feelings.

“...Mind telling me sometime soon?”

Difficult as it was, I shook myself free of that impulse and spoke with deliberate brusqueness.

As if those words had brought him back to his senses, Leon removed his hand from my shoulder.

“I suppose...”

Leon seemed to be considering something as he lightly shook his head.

Concealing that fearful vulnerability was all it took to restore his original attitude. Something about it made me feel lonely, but I ignored it as best I could and looked up at Leon.

“I’m fine with telling you, but it will prove troublesome, you know?”

Leon’s old smile was back on his lips.

It was like he’d thrown a switch. In that case, there was hope.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I said before that she’s [dead, but hasn’t died]. Ordinarily, that would be impossible,

but it is possible for the world I'm in. In other words, if you come to know more than this, you'll be putting one foot in that world... That's what I mean."

Cleverly said. At the same time, I thought it certainly did seem like trouble.

What Leon was saying, in other words, was that I wanted to talk about confidential matters regarding the nobility, or possibly the nation itself.

Sure, there were things in this world better left unknown. Knowledge, in the hands of those unqualified to possess it, had occasionally strangled the careless.

On the flip side, [Chris] was a person who was better left unknown.

But still.

"I... should have the right to know."

It was long past overdue.

I was sure this business with [Chris] wasn't something people should know. Ordinary people, that is. I had no doubt that if I were simply an adventurer, I would be better off dropping it on the spot.

But now, I *was* [Chris].

I wanted to know about myself. Who had any greater right?

"True, you may have the qualifications. However — "

Grinning widely, Leon seemed to be enjoying himself as he went on.

"I have no obligation to tell you."

"What the hell did you just say!"

He really seemed to be having fun. That very fact infuriated me, and I advanced on him.

His tone was cheery, his words could only be described as ‘dickish’, and there was no way in hell I’d let him get away with it.

At the crucial moment, he shut his mouth out of some bullshit reason.

Thoroughly pissed me off, I moved to grab him. I reached out for his chest.

“...I’m sorry.”

His voice spilled from his mouth.

And for a moment, it distracted me. In the next, I found myself caught in Leon’s grip.



“Wh–What’re you...”

This was too much; my thoughts couldn’t keep up. What is this? What’s he doing to me?

I looked up at Leon, but with the moon directly at his back, I couldn’t see his expression.

What does he want to do, no, what’s wrong with him? More than angry or embarrassed, I was confused by his bizarre behavior.

“Let’s — move on to negotiations here.”

Leon said, his voice devoid of emotions, his arms still restraining me.

Those were the same words he said back then, when he asked me to become a slave. He knowingly used the exact same words. Exactly the words calculated to push me away.

It was a contradiction. Deliberately driving me away with his words, it felt like he was trying to preserve his balance.

Having slipped so far from control, he was protecting himself.

For the first time, I feared Leon.

He was on the very edge.

If I pushed him over it, what would become of me?

I should shove him away right here, right now.

But, for some reason... for some reason, I also felt like I couldn't do that to him. He seemed so frail.

I was contradicting myself, too. Filled with emotions I neither expected nor wanted, I bit my lower lip.

"I've made this request before, but... I want you to act as a substitute."

'Substitute'. For a moment, I was confused. Before I could ask myself what the hell he was talking about, I remembered the talk about the sham marriage.

I thought that was just a lead-in to something else, but apparently not.

Even so, 'substitute'. Deliberately, 'substitute'.

Compared to that day, when he just came right out and said, 'Please marry me', it felt awfully half-assed.

"If you accept, I'll tell you about her."

What he called a negotiation, his tone made it sound like a plea. The words belonged the usual Leon. But like an actor who couldn't get into character, his emotions faded in and out as he spoke.

"Will you — accept?"

In the end, just a little, even his voice trembled.

—!

Suppressing the emotions seething within me, I struggled to break free of Leon's arms. I wrenched myself free with unexpected ease and immediately put some distance between us.

“~~~~~!!!!!”

I opened my mouth to shout at him... When the words wouldn't come, I shut it, trembling all over.

Rage. That was rage, without a doubt.

But unable to figure out just what made me so angry, I kicked at the ground. The rocks on the riverbank scattered, clacking more loudly than I expected.

” — Alright already!”

Even I didn't know what I was saying.

But I yelled, a confusion of emotion.

“...Eh?”

“I *said* ‘alright already’! That substitute thing!”

I swung my arm down to point at Leon. Taking a deep breath, I spat out,

“I'll be your goddamn substitute!”

I felt like there was more to be said.

Like ‘Protect me from this world of nobles I don't really understand’.

‘While that's going on, take care of Aira and Palmira’.

No, more importantly, ‘teach me properly’.

And yet, *that* was what I emphasized.

When it came to myself, I didn't know what was what anymore.

"I'm going to sleep!"

Right now, I didn't want to see Leon's face.

I immediately turned on my heel and climbed up the riverbank, leaving him behind.

There was no way I'd look back.

I knew that if I did, no matter what expression he had, I wouldn't be able to keep a lid on my emotions.

Chapter 26

Aira's Worries

By the time I woke up the next day, the carriage was already on its way.

I'd simply overslept. The morning usually began with breaking down the camp, followed by breakfast. After that, back on the road. Since that was the program, I basically missed out on my chance to eat.

"...Morning."

Naturally, Aira and Palmira were up.

A little embarrassed and not yet fully conscious, I awkwardly said hello.

"Good morning, Big Sister."

"Morning."

As each of them greeted me in turn, I looked at the carriage's small window, through which I could see the soldiers walking with a relatively sluggish feeling.

I caught sight of Leon, mounted on horseback, so I turned my eyes away from the window.

Yesterday, I returned to the carriage and tried to sleep, but I couldn't. Worrying endlessly, I ended up staying awake all night.

I knew why I couldn't fall asleep.

Yesterday, on the riverbank, why did I agree to Leon's request?

Why did it feel like I was forced into it?

Why did I get angry?

Even though I was the one who did all of those things, it was too baffling.

No matter how much I thought about it, the reason wouldn't come to me.

Sure, the business with [Chris] interested me. She was the original owner of this body that I'd somehow come to possess. So if I understood [Chris], I might be able to understand the details of how I ended up possessing her body.

I had to know, for the sake of returning to normal.

...Though it seemed that way at the time, it also seemed that I had no particular need to listen to Leon's request.

Leon discussed the substitution with that information as a bargaining chip. So I couldn't do anything but accept.

It didn't sound half bad when I put it that way.

But did I really accept Leon's because of that bargaining chip?

Couldn't it be that I was simply searching for a reason to want to accept?

Worried by the fact that I couldn't shake the idea, no matter how I tried, the sky was already beginning to brighten by the time I finally fell asleep.

In the end, although I woke up this late, even I could tell I was sleep-deprived.

Yawning widely, I stretched out my body.

Anyway, since we were traveling by carriage again today, there shouldn't be a problem if I were to go back to sleep. But for some reason, I didn't feel like it. With a sigh, I sat up, leaning against the wall of the carriage.

I felt gloomy. There wasn't anything to do, either.

When I looked over at Aira, I found her facing the small window, lost in thought just as she had been yesterday.

Holding her sword, Palmira sat motionlessly.

As I watched them, I remembered suddenly that I hadn't told them about accepting Leon's request yesterday.

...What do I do? Should I tell them?

Yeah, I should. It concerns them too.

“Um—”

“...When it's like this — ”

When I hesitantly opened my mouth, Aira, her gaze still pointed out the window, suddenly began to speak.

I was already faltering, and now that the wind had been taken out of my sails, I helplessly closed my mouth.

“When it's like this, I remember the time I spent as a slave, somehow.”

“...Yeah.”

I didn't know what Aira was thinking about, to say such words. But when she put it like that, our current situation, being rocked back and forth in a carriage, was the same as when we were slaves.

Or rather, I didn't want to remember that at all now. Even though Aira surely felt the same way, she said those words on purpose. I couldn't figure out what her intention was.

“I became a slave, and Big Sister saved me... I feel that a lot has happened since then. When we couldn't get into the city, and were discovered by Lord Leon, I thought we were in serious trouble; we became slaves again, and Big Sister was even grabbed by the city lord; I had fun walking around the city, but, those idiots at the guild — ”

As she spoke in fragments about her memories, a thin smile curved her lips.

I didn't know what she wanted to say. I looked over at Palmira, but she seemed as mystified by Aira as I was.

Meanwhile, the end of Aira's monologue came haltingly.

"...Even so, I can't do anything... I'm just dead weight, aren't I..."

Aira's gaze slowly turned to me. Still wearing that thin smile, her eyes were bright with tears. Her body trembled.

I inhaled sharply.

I finally understood the reason behind Aira's distress the past two days, as well as the meaning of that smile she had on right now.

It was a sneer. Aira was sneering at her own powerlessness.

"I've been thinking constantly since the day before yesterday. About what I can do. Even Palmira bought a sword by herself; isn't she trying to do what she can on her own? Isn't she trying to do something? So I want to do that too. I don't want to be the tag-along who can't pull her own weight. But what's possible for me? What *can* I do? I've been asking myself this whole time. I can't use a sword, and magic is out. And I'm illiterate, too, you know? What can someone like me possibly achieve? But I thought about it as hard as I could, and I couldn't — think of a single thing..."

The tears spilled from Aira's eyes.

Ahhh, so that was it?

I had genuinely thought that Aira's melancholy following the incident at the guild was caused by the shocking reveal of Rupert's violent side. Because the truth is, I'd found it shocking to a certain degree.

However, considering it now, I felt that by chalking her behavior up to that reason, I was looking down on her a bit. Even Aira herself had gotten over it more than two days ago.

Ultimately, Aira realized it herself. That she couldn't do anything.

In a way, I understood that too. If I looked at any of the events leading up to this point,

it would be difficult to say that Aira had been all that helpful.

As she said herself — the time when we floated down the river on a raft, when Leon caught us at the city gates, when we became slaves a second time, when those assholes at the guild were hassling us. Her presence there did nothing to help.

At least, on the surface.

“It’s not that you’re useless or anything like that.”

So I immediately jumped in with a rebuttal.

“...eh?”

“If you ask me, you *have* been helpful, you know? To put it bluntly, aren’t there people who value the fact that you’re here? Sure, you might not be doing anything now. But if that’s being powerless, then what about me?”

“But Big Sister, you’re — ”

Talking over Aira’s attempt to object, I continued.

“I can’t really do anything. If you think I can, then we’ve got quite a misunderstanding here. Take a look at my body. I’m just a small girl. I can’t use a sword or anything right now. I’m weaker than Palmira, you know. For sure.”

I looked at Palmira. With a somewhat proud look on her face, she suddenly drew her sword.

A gesture to say ‘I’m strong’? Since it was probably true, I couldn’t say anything.

Wait, huh?

We bought that sword two days ago in the weapons shop. It should have been brand-new, but it showed some signs of wear. Come to think of it, where did Palmira go after

dinner? She was using her sword for something... tonight, maybe I'll go see?

"But you two can rely on me for certain things. I should have some value, right? If so, then you two, who I rely on, have value too. You help me."

"I — I..."

I looked her right in the eyes, my voice firm.

Shaking, tears rolling down her face, Aira stared at me.

To be honest, I was constantly worried. Since taking on this form, strange and inexplicable things had been coming at me one after another.

But even so.

I'll say it straight-out: these two are my lifeline.

Until now, I did whatever I wanted, all by myself. But now, I could say it loud and clear: Rather than carry the weight alone, sharing it between two people, or three, or more, is better. It's a good thing to lighten the load like that.

Yeah, it's too simple, it's clichéd, it's trite, but it's all those things because it's *true*.

So don't say you aren't helpful, Aira.

Palmira, too. Both of you are essential to me.

...And I wasn't good enough with words, so I just gave it to them straight.

Well, even so.

Even so.

Looking at Aira, who'd stopped crying and swapped out her thin smile for one that was awkward but sincere, I believed that something had gotten across.

Hmph, seriously. Hey, you. It's that simple.

"But still, if you aren't satisfied with things as they are now, it won't hurt to think about it some more, I think. What can you do, what should you do? If you consider it, then

sooner or later, you should find something you're capable of. I might depend on you too, for some things... but, well, there's no need to be impatient right now."

As we talked, the carriage rolled on as it pleased. It was just like we were riding the current again.

So we should take our time thinking while this current swept us along.

There was no need to rush.

Worrying as much as we need to, thinking as much as we need to. We should find our respective answers.

Both Aira and me.

Palmira... I got the feeling she'd already found hers.

'I have to think properly about this too,' I thought as I looked at her.

"By the way, I have something to tell you right now."



"You're getting married?!!!!!!!"

Apparently, Aira had only absorbed part of what I said. Right away, her expression turned to shock, and then, with a smile I simply couldn't describe, she screamed those words at me.

What is with you? Even though you had such profound worries just now.

"Huuhhh... Congratulations?"

Palmira, looking somewhat surprised herself, reddened slightly. Cut it out, you two.

"I *said*, it's only for show,"

I replied, dismayed.

Even though I said it, even though it was a sham, I was seriously regretting that I ended

up accepting a request like this.

That's right. Normally, this wouldn't happen... I mean, in the first place, I'm a man...

"Anyway, I didn't have a choice... Well, that's the long and short of it. I'll be asking some weird stuff of you once we get there, but please take care of me."

Before they could ask why I accepted, I quickly babbled on.

After speaking, it hit me.

Thinking about it more carefully, was I going to behave like I was married? Like I was going to be married? Like I was engaged, or like I was his lover?

I hadn't heard anything along those lines.

I hadn't, but it was essentially a problem of degree. In my opinion, none of it changed the story all that much, and that was pretty depressing. None of these options sounded good to me.

"So that's the story, then. As Lord Leon is nobility, you'll be a member of the nobility as well, Big Sister."

"Well, it'll be fake, but it's... something like that, huh."

I knew that the [Chris] I'm going to play was likely the member of a distinguished family.

She was probably a noble herself, wasn't she? In that case, even her impersonator would be a noble during that time. Maybe. Not gonna lie, I didn't want to think too deeply about it.

"Understood! Then I will do my best as your maid, Big Sister!"

...Oi.

Even though I just said to think about things more, Aira easily found what she would do. What's more, she'd taken it in a weird direction.

Eh, well, what can you do? It would give me some peace of mind, I guess?

“Oh, I’m glad. The truth is, when I was at the estate, I heard all sorts of things from the maids. This is a guess — just a guess, but I think that knowledge will help. Yay!”

Going that far on a ‘guess’, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy. So no, not ‘yay’.

But, well, if it kept Aira nearby, her ability as a maid aside, I found the idea a little reassuring.

“Then I’ll be your guard.”

Palmira being Palmira, she added to the chaos. Holding her naked blade, she was already in a stance that said, ‘No matter what you say, it won’t work.’

No, but — you. Do you think you’ll pass with the way you look?

“Calm down. I’m twenty years old.”

...Don’t try to settle everything with being twenty years old.

Though, to tell you the truth, I was worried about what I should do with them while everything else was going on.

In the blink of an eye, both of them ended up carving out their own niches, but I was grateful for it. Of course, I’d have to get Leon’s agreement, but I was pretty confident that he wouldn’t refuse.

“Well, I’ll be counting on you. Aira, Palmira.”

I was sure we’d face our share of troubles after our arrival.

Even so, I felt my anxiety lighten ever so slightly, and in my heart, I thanked them for it.

Chapter 27

Palmira's Efforts

While we spoke, the carriage stopped for a long rest — in other words, it was time for lunch.

Same as yesterday, lunch consisted of bread, bacon, sausage, and cheese. Followed by some sort of pickle.

We received reasonable portions, but as three women, we had a relatively large amount left over.

If this were before, I probably wouldn't have had a problem putting away that much food, but perhaps my stomach shrank, because I ended up eating a very small amount of it. This is long overdue, but since the food served at Leon's estate was too luxurious, I didn't notice the change.

Even so, the meals for Leon's forces were on the richer side. When I was a mercenary, it was a good day if I got cheese and bread. Not a lot, either. However, I found something nostalgic and soothing in this more ordinary fare.

Feeling guilty, I gave the leftover food to the soldier who came on delivery duty each time. He was genuinely grateful. He was going on foot, so I wanted to cheer him on.

Past the long noontime break, the troops steadily advanced.

Yesterday and today, I became familiar with the routine Leon's forces — let's call them the Leon Corps — went through every day.

In the morning, things would kick into gear pretty much at dawn.

At this time of year, the days were still long, so they would rise quite early. Maybe the cooks got up earlier than anyone else, since breakfast would be ready not long after waking up.

The breakfast menu was bread and soup. Cheese too. Nothing excessive; the bread was pretty tough, and the soup was quite rich in flavor.

Naturally, no one was baking bread on the road. It was made to have a longer shelf-

life.

The time allotted for breakfast was relatively short. Everyone would wolf down their food and prepare for departure at the same time. By the way, the three of us would have breakfast in the carriage. In the middle of the hustle and bustle, there wasn't anything we could do. Even if we went outside, at most, we'd stretch our bodies and that'd be it.

Lately, perhaps because everyone was so busy, our acquaintances had barely stopped by to see us. The unit had four carriages, placed at sensible positions in the procession. In the mornings, I would usually spot Rupert making his rounds. No idea where Leon was.

Once everyone finished their hasty breakfast, they would march.

After that, there was one short break before lunch, but otherwise, the march continued on.

At noon, lunch went the way I described earlier. We would take this meal in the carriage too. There was nothing in particular keeping us from going out, but given the sausage fest outside, Rupert cautioned us on the first day to stay inside as much as possible.

However, it seemed that someone was assigned to bring us lunch; we saw the same face every morning and afternoon. He was a soldier, but he primarily worked as the head of the kitchen. He was young, and unlike the others, he wore an apron over his light armor. His bizarre get-up cracked me up.

Incidentally, he was the one I gave my food to, and when I expressly asked his name, he said it was Sieg. Then, eating my lunch, he talked a little.

The topic: so what is the Leon Corps anyway?

"Ummm, when Lord Leon sets out on a campaign, this unit is assembled from the troops in the Second Army Corps. We're referred to as the Elite Guard."

Ohhh, the Elite Guard. Yeah, I feel like that suits them perfectly.

Upon asking for more information, it seemed that the Second Army Corps consisted of roughly twelve thousand soldiers, divided into three battalions, plus a force of magi.

Vyde and Rupert were called platoon commanders, but they were essentially the battalion and company commanders, respectively.

Then, what did that make Irene? Apparently, she was just rank and file, but thanks to the convenient flexibility of her magic, she was pulled from the magi every time. Thank god. She couldn't pull off being a battalion commander.

There was one short break in the afternoon, and then, around the time that the setting sun dyed the sky bloody red, the corps would stop for the day.

The carriage would roll to a stop amidst the clatter of soldiers setting up camp. This part hadn't changed since day one.

Then, only in the evening, Leon would make an appearance to invite us to dinner.



"How is it, traveling by carriage?"

asked Leon, as we all sat around a bonfire with our food.

He was his usual self; there wasn't a trace of the mood at the river bank yesterday. Instead, I might've been the one acting strange. I guess I expected as much?

Well, I'd be better off not making a big deal out of it.

"Ah, it's comfortable. It's a carriage, same as before, but naturally, it's different from the slave wagon."

I took a slightly sarcastic jab at Leon for making us slaves again.

I wanted to say this much.

"Miss Aira, Miss Palmira, how has the journey been for you? If there's something, then please, don't hold back."

Perhaps catching my drift, Leon smiled wryly as he prompted the other two for their opinions.

I had the same feeling yesterday, but recently, it seemed like they were more reserved

in conversation when Leon was around. I wish they wouldn't be so oddly concerned.

"The seats are soft, and even when I sleep, my body doesn't hurt anywhere. It's very nice."

"It's too nice. Kinda boring."

"That's..."

Devouring the heavy stew with enthusiasm, Palmira really didn't sugarcoat her words. Maybe he didn't think that she really would do as he said, but even Leon looked a little daunted.

When I saw him like that, I grinned a bit maliciously. It's, hmm, gratifying? Though, Palmira's complaint seemed pretty difficult to resolve.

"Thank you for the food."

And Palmira, perhaps having no particular expectations of a response, quickly went through the customary niceties. She stood from her seat with her sword in hand.

Where's she thinking of going like that?

"Hm—"

"Is something the matter?"

"Yesterday, it was the same thing. It's like she's up to something after dinner. Makes me wonder."

I quickly rose from my seat too. I was curious about what Palmira was doing.

I lost sight of Palmira because of Aira's question. Sweeping my gaze around, I gave Aira a brief reply.

“Peeping isn’t very admirable, you know?”

Leon’s words were common sense, but he was already getting up, just like me. Look, if you’re curious, then you should just say so.

“Ah, me too.”

Aira also got to her feet so that we wouldn’t leave her behind.

With the three of us together, it wasn’t peeping anymore, alright?

It wasn’t like Palmira was going out of her way to hide, either, so we followed after her in quick succession.



“Then, I beg you.”

Ahead of us was Palmira, holding her naked blade in one hand, and Rupert, looking terribly unmotivated with a meter-long wooden sword resting against his shoulder.

“You said that yesterday too, Polly.”

A ring of keenly interested soldiers already surrounded them, leaving them enough space to move around.

The sun had set a long time ago, but the area was illuminated by lanterns to excess, the two figures casting several shadows on the ground. Basically, the peanut gallery got a good view.

Of course, since we came to satisfy our own curiosity, we were the same.

“If it’s the sword, Vyde or Commander Leopard can do it, you know? Teaching’s not my thing.”

“You’re the one for me.”

Palmira’s frank words sent a resounding ‘Ooohhh’ through the crowd.

Well, subtract the sword, add in a blush, and that might’ve been the normal response. But instead, Palmira stood at the ready, full of determination. I’d gotten used to it recently, so it didn’t bother me, but facing off against Rupert with a nasty glint in her eye, she even seemed to radiate bloodlust.

Only, it’s kinda sad: given her actual appearance, all I could see was Rupert bullying a child.

“Well, if you’re gonna go that far, I don’t have much of a choice, do I? I’m ready anytime, Palmira.”

Rupert faced Palmira, still holding the wooden sword in one hand. The air around them grew heavy.

“...Hey, how strong is Rupert?”

I whispered to Leon, watching the two motionless figures. Leon, who’d been watching them with admiration, suddenly snapped back to reality and crossed his arms.

“Hmmm, well... I haven’t gauged Miss Palmira’s strength, but if I had to say, he’s strong enough that I can’t guarantee Miss Palmira will make it through unscathed.”

It seemed that even Leon had confidence in Rupert’s strength.

Because Aira looked worried upon hearing those words, his expression turned complicated.

But Palmira was twenty years old. She was probably the strongest out of the three of us. I wanted her to kick ass.

“Oh, isn’t that the Princess?”

When I silently cheered Palmira on from the back of the ring, one of the nearby soldiers noticed and called out to me.

And like that, it seemed to travel through the crowd: 'It's the Princess.' 'It's true.' 'The Princess, it's the Princess.' 'Oh? Even Lord Leon's here.' And so on. The sound of murmuring spread outward.

...What's that? 'Princess'? Who in the world could they *possibly* be talking about?

...I don't know why I even try. Alright, so I'm already being treated like a princess...? Come to think of it, Rupert did say something like [Everyone on the estate knows about it].

"Ha-!"

While I was sulking, Palmira lunged at Rupert.

I had a feeling that in the middle of the 'Princess' stuff, Rupert's focus shifted over here for a moment. And she seized it.

A step into a sideways sweep with the sword in one hand. She aimed for the right side of Rupert's abdomen.

Ooh, nice arc. Rupert had his sword in his right hand too, so it would be hard for him to intercept her.

"-Hm!"

Hard, but without seeming to ward off her sword, Rupert backstepped out of danger. However, it seemed Palmira had read this far too, and she thrust her sword forward. She swung her left hand.

Before I could finish my thought — 'Huh?' — I realized that it held a dagger.

My dagger. Which reminds me, I never got it back. But does Palmira see it as something she received from me? That's really nice, but —.

Anyway, that dagger also headed for his right abdomen. Considering the height difference, I had the impression that aiming for anything above the neck would be a lost cause to begin with.

But from her opponent's perspective, that made it easy to identify her target, which only put her at a disadvantage.

As I expected, Rupert was able to avoid her easily with a turn of his body.

"Rrruah-!"

But from there, Palmira attacked yet again. As if to hide, her evaded left hand and upper torso twisted toward the ground.

A moment later, Palmira's leg lashed upward like a whip. Target: Rupert's head, or possibly his collarbone.

I breathed in sharply. It was a clever combo. Diverting her opponent's attention to the right abdomen, setting up the illusion that she could only aim for the midbody, and then a kick from overhead... There was no avoiding this. Unconsciously, I gulped and clenched my two fists tightly.

"Oops, whoa."

And yet, the kick I considered the finisher of a perfect combo, Rupert body-blocked it with ease.

When he avoided her attack, he'd fallen back. But in tandem with Palmira unleashing her kick, he moved forward and caught her.

Palmira's spin focused on her foot as the point of action. How do you stop a spin? ... Pin the axis.

As a result, a bewildered Palmira got swept into a princess carry by Rupert.

Seeing that somehow reminded me of something.

"Hey, don't tell me — isn't that *your* sure-kill move?"

Back when I jumped at Leon, I'd also ended up like that before I knew it. Feeling a trace of kinship with Palmira, I fixed Leon with my stare.

"How could it be? It's a coincidence, of course. A coincidence."

Leon laughed. Judging from the lack of dry humor, his smile was the real thing for once.

Rupert instructed Palmira fairly precisely after that, his voice unenthusiastic. How to move the body, where and how to step, and the like.

In my opinion, Rupert's fighting style was probably a good match for Palmira. No doubt she chose him because she knew that herself.

I didn't have to ask why she was doing things like this.

Palmira being Palmira, she found something to do, and then devoted all her effort to it.

And that made her genuinely happy.

Chapter 28

The Brellwandy Highway Junction

Author's Notes

I didn't copy and paste the first chapter here...

And so five days went by.

Generally speaking, it was a journey, but I wasn't walking on my own two feet. Being constantly rocked side-to-side by the carriage was pretty tiresome.

Backtracking through the hilly countryside, our plotted course would take us through Artor to the capital, roughly two weeks' journey by carriage.

Today, the fifth day, we still had more than half the distance to go.

However, thinking of the marching speed of the Leon Corps — uh, I mean the Elite Guard, they might be able to make it in twelve.

I asked Leon once, and he said it would take thirteen days. Since we weren't in that much of a hurry, we'll be stopping for a night in a town near the Artor Ruins Cluster, Brellwandy.

I was familiar with Brellwandy too. After all, it wasn't that long ago in my pre-female past that I stayed in town for a month in order to take on Artor. Plus, it was conveniently located near the upper junction of the highway running from the capital to Telaberan and Kakrawanga. Even before my recent stay, I'd visited the town many times.

We arrived a day later. Bored out of our minds, we were looking forward to it.

I'd be lying if I said nothing happened over the course of the last five days.

Every day, Palmira seriously sparred with Rupert, but I didn't know much about the

results of her work. At the moment, the difference in strength between her and Rupert was too great. It was pretty difficult to judge whether she was strong or weak.

But I did know that she was stronger than I was right now, at least. Enough that even in my original body, I might've lost if she caught me off-guard.

Anyway, Palmira gave it her all, and after grumbling on and on about how bored she was, she got to ride Leon's horse yesterday, much to her delight. Aira and I took advantage of the opportunity to go for a ride too.

What else did we do? Well, not much.

Aira being Aira, she seemed to be feeling a bit impatient, but now that she'd said she would do her best once we arrived, she wasn't doing anything.

Well, she did say she'd become a maid. There really wasn't anything for her to do. You could say that it wasn't time for her to take the stage yet.

Me, I didn't do anything in particular.

More or less, the one time I borrowed Palmira's sword and challenged Rupert resulted in an instant KO. Of course, I had zero expectations of beating him even in my original body, but look, this body didn't move right.

I didn't have the strength. My speed wasn't up to snuff either. Even with Palmira's small, light sword, my body just ended up flopping about.

Leveraging the recoil to move, Palmira's style of movement had that covered, but for someone who used to use a sword, my experience conversely got in my way, and I couldn't swing a sword normally. Too much of my style relied on brute strength.

Then, how about studying a new style of combat? I had a sneaking suspicion that it would be an uphill battle. Frankly, the image of becoming strong and holding a sword didn't do anything for me now.

Then, what about magic?

Given my current state, it would be the most pragmatic choice. But I couldn't meet up with my go-to, Irene.

My gut told me that I needed to learn how to use magic to prepare for the inevitable future. But before I got to that, I wanted to ask more about magic itself. I thought it would shed some light on the mystery of this body, too.

Although I'd heard Irene talk about magic before, I realized that it was nowhere near

enough in practical terms. Irene might have believed that she taught us, but she didn't touch on the key points at all.

So I'd been searching for her for these past few days, but she was nowhere to be found. Throwing up my hands and asking Leon would probably drag me into another negotiation, so I asked Sieg instead.

"Now that you mention it, she isn't here. She might have gone ahead with the First Platoon."

Hey, Sieg, I would've appreciated a heads-up when you heard about it earlier.

Or rather, the First Platoon wasn't around either? I didn't notice at all. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen Vyde around at all.

And that was why I didn't do anything either. If I had to come up with an excuse, I'd say that Aira couldn't do anything even though she wanted to, and *I* was just keeping her company out of worry. I'd be lying, though.

Shaken back and forth by the carriage, I spent every day staring out at the unchanging landscape in a sort of stupor. The scenery in the hills was surprisingly nice, but after seeing it every day without end, it began to grate on me.

Even a change in the weather would break the monotony, but unfortunately, every day was accompanied by clear autumn skies.

If anything was different, I guess it would be when we passed by the site of the goblin attack?

The carriage attacked by the goblins should've been there on the highway, but thanks to the Elite Guard, perhaps, the wreckage had been piled up by the side of the road. Broken apart and burned to a cinder, it was no longer clear it was once a carriage. It was because I spotted fragments of what seemed to be carriage wheels littered here and there that I just barely made the connection.

At that time, we didn't take a short rest or a long one, so we passed by as if nothing had really happened. Even the three of us did no more than stare at it through the carriage window. Without a word, we watched until the wreckage disappeared from sight.

However, near the destroyed carriage, I saw two stones planted in two dirt mounds. They were probably graves. And judging from the number, I guessed that they were for the two people I failed to save.

Silently, I apologized to them in my heart. Then, I briefly prayed for them.

It was definitely the Elite Guard who did this. I wanted to say thanks.

But when dinner came around, I didn't ask Leon about it. I didn't have the words.

Three days later, we arrived in Brellwandy. It was afternoon on the sixth day since our departure from Telaberan.



The city of Brellwandy was pretty small compared to Telaberan.

However, it was still a mid-size city, and although low, there were walls along its outer perimeter.

By this point, we'd gone from hill country to a low mountain plain. After crossing two more mountains, we'd reach the capital.

Like I said before, the city was very conveniently located at the highway crossroads, so its prosperity primarily relied on its role as stopover.

Because its location also made it a convenient tradeport, it attracted a certain amount of trade as well. What's more, thanks to its location at the highway crossroads, it was fairly important in terms of strategic value, and part of the imperial army was always stationed there.

On the other hand, there was a good reason it never expanded beyond a mid-size city despite such qualities.

That reason? Every city leading from this one was too big.

To the north, the port city of Telaberan. To the east, the fortress city of Kakrawanga. And to the south, the greatest city in the empire: the imperial capital, Granadas. In terms of location and role, they did everything Brellwandy did, but way better. That was why Brellwandy ended up kinda half-assed as a military and trade post.

Still, historically, it thrived as a city thanks to the Artor Ruins Cluster. But as the ruins were scoured clean, it gradually shrank until it settled at its current size.

However, because of that connection, the Adventurers' Guild in this city was long-established — and huge. The capital's was considered the largest, but while this city had a history of decline, it was the nature of the Adventurers' Guild to stand outside national authority. In a mid-size city, there were less likely to be conflicts over governance.

Even so, for the time being, we were tangled up with the army. Not to mention, the Adventurers' Guild had very little to do with the part of town that catered to travelers. We didn't enter the city just like that. Instead, we circled around to the north and from there, headed straight into the imperial army garrison. I could only find nostalgia in the outside of the city. We wouldn't even go into town.

"We will stay here for today. There's still a stretch before us, but for now, this is enough."

Leon took us to one of the rooms in a relatively nice building on the garrison grounds. Of course, we wouldn't be getting individual rooms, but aside from that, it was nicer than I expected.

"Oh, wow, thank you so much."

Maybe after having to stay overnight in the carriage all the time, Aira seemed to be genuinely in high spirits.

On the other hand, I had other matters on my mind.

It wasn't a single, so Leon wasn't going to show up in the morning as he usually did, right?

To tell the truth, I had a lot to ask him. After all, I hadn't heard anything about [Chris] since then.

I wanted to keep that conversation just between the two of us, if I could.

But for all that, that night by the riverbank made me hesitate. When I recalled how strange the mood had been — to be honest, I was pretty nervous about what might

happen to me. So ultimately, I'd dragged things out this far without being able to ask. Well, still, that's alright...?

I'd leave it at that for now. Personally, I was in considerable violation of my motto — [People who don't do it today, won't do it tomorrow] — but actually, there was still quite a distance to go before the capital, and I'd be free during that time anyway, so I was sure I'd find a chance somewhere. Yep, sounds good to me.

"I'll come again to call you for dinner, but I ask that you refrain from going into town."

Why?

Before I could ask, Leon was gone. Even if it would be until dinner, there was still quite a lot of time left over, in my opinion.

I crossed the room to open the window.

As it had been at the estate, the room was on the third story of the barracks. From there, I could take in the entire city at a glance.

"Wow, what a lovely view."

Following after me, Aira's voice full of wonder. From the side, Palmira poked her face out too, with a similar expression.

In the unbroken panorama of the city, even though the sunset pretty far along by now, there were still quite a number of carriages coming and going. As you might expect of the highway junction, the streets running through the city were quite broad. Even carriages moving away from us were clearly visible. The people walking down there, too.

It wouldn't be a stretch to call Brellwandy a lively city. While it was on the small side, plenty of merchant caravans stopped by on their way to — or possibly from — the imperial capital in the south.

My eyes shifted to the heart of the city, falling on a relatively large building around three stories tall. Its outer appearance plain and old, it was the local Adventurers' Guild. If I could, I wanted to drop by while I was in town. Then I'd deal with Leon.

“What’s that?”

When I looked in the direction Palmira was pointing, I saw the sprawling ocher-stained stone maze outside the city. It was hard to see from here, but even though I said ‘maze’, it was one in appearance only. In truth, it was a half-destroyed city.

So the part aboveground wasn’t actually all that important.

For adventurers, it was the extensive underground labyrinths that made it famous. No one has a clue what it was built for, but the number of labyrinths had been verified. There were twelve, one of them being the maze I discovered. That should probably be all of them.

“That’s the Artor Ruins Cluster.”

Even I could tell my expression was complicated.

“Big Sister, that’s where you...”

“That’s right.”

Nicely remembered, Aira. But I had no good memories of the place, so I promptly confirmed it and nipped that conversation in the bud.

The twelfth labyrinth of the ruins cluster. I didn’t even know its name.

Inside it, I became a woman and was captured by slavers immediately upon leaving. I didn’t remember much about the time I was captured, so I couldn’t say for sure where it was.

However, what concerned me was its current status.

Maybe my original body was there even now.

To be honest, I’d been trying not to think about it, but I imagined that it was highly

likely.

Then, if it hadn't been specially preserved, it would definitely be decaying already... In that case, I'd never be able to go back to how I used to be.

But there was also the chance that that wasn't the case. It was possible that *something* was preserving my body. What that 'something' might be, I couldn't even begin to imagine. But possession was also pretty outlandish to begin with, so I couldn't say for sure that preservation was impossible.

Then right now, all I could do is pin my hopes on that possibility.

That was the very reason I wanted to get information from the Adventurers' Guild.

There were two things I wanted to confirm there.

First, whether they knew of the twelfth labyrinth's existence.

Second, assuming they did know, whether my body had been found there.

The twelfth labyrinth was my discovery, so I went in alone without a word to anyone else. So maybe the guild's current tally was eleven mazes. If so, end of story.

But if they did know, I knew for a fact that the guild would have already issued a request for adventurers to search it.

Depending on the timing, that day might already be past.

At least, you could make a trip through the maze on foot, so the reinvestigation didn't seem like it'd take that much time. Then maybe, if it were there, they should have discovered a single corpse unnaturally draped in treasure.

If they hadn't found it yet, I still had a chance to return...

On the other hand, there was a much simpler way.

I could go to the twelfth labyrinth and verify it personally.

Yeah, if I could, I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

But that would be impossible in my current state. It was alright to rely on Leon, but somehow, I had the sneaking suspicion that the truth had been obscured.

Because Leon was still hiding something from me. Definitely.

Once my thoughts reached that point, I itched to do something.

Although I did say I had time to deal with Leon later, if the trip was thirteen days long, simple calculation told me that we'd be setting out tomorrow. In short, today was my only chance.

"Aira, Palmira."

My eyes studying the guild from the window, I called out to the two of them.

"...Won't you go into town with me?"

And without waiting for their reply, I made my proposal.

Chapter 29

An Unremarkable Escape

“They’re going to be mad at us for doing this, aren’t they? They’re definitely going to be mad, aren’t they?”

I was on all fours. In a similar position behind me, Aira appealed to me in a small voice with tears in her eyes. Honestly, what a chatterbox.

Exasperated, I looked over my shoulder and whispered back,

“If you hate it that much, there’s no need to push yourself so hard to come along, you know?”

“I don’t want to be left behind by myseeelf~”

“Then no complaining. No chatter. Keep your mouth shut. What will you do if they find us?”

Replying to Aira’s complaints without mercy, I kept inching forward.

Palmira was in front. On all fours, same as me, she silently advanced forward. I wished Aira would follow her example a little.

The garrison was separated from the city proper by a wall. Other than the gate we came in through, there was only one entrance to the city.

As far as I could tell from my vantage point in the room, there was one soldier manning the gate. Probably one of the local troops originally stationed here. He wasn’t Elite Guard, but he’d stop us if we went into the city from there.

As far as my hunt for other avenues of escape went, it finally occurred to me that, hey, it’s not a bad idea to keep things simple and just scale the wall, right?

It was the same in town, but the Brellwandy garrison, lacking much tactical value, was separated from the city by a fairly low wall. Two meters at best. And maybe maintenance was slacking, because it seemed to have cracks running here and there that hadn't been repaired.

And on top of this piece of good luck, there were trees way taller growing on the garrison side of the wall, hiding the interior from prying eyes. There were gaps, of course, but the long underbrush was enough to hide behind as we made a break for it.

After sneaking our way out of the building, we headed for the trees and underbrush growing along the wall. Finding a cracked spot, we somehow successfully made it outside. No one should have noticed. Probably.



Thump. Aira fell off the wall, landing on her butt.

“Gyah! Ow ow owwww — ”

Wouldn't someone notice the noise? I scanned our surroundings.

...Luckily, there wasn't anyone around.

Since Aira was the last, a wave of relief washed over me. For once, I sympathized with Aira while she rubbed her lower back as if it hurt.

“You okay?”

“Owow... Yes~”

Not looking very okay at all, Aira nonetheless got to her feet. Well, if she's standing, she'll be fine.

I turned back to look at the wall, but there weren't any trees in particular planted on this side. Not a lot of cracks, either. It looked like we'd have to go through the gate on our way back. Leon might chew us out, but as long as I could finish my business in town, I could put up with it.

From the setting sun, it didn't seem to be late enough to be evening. I knew I was doing a bad thing, so I wanted to at least return in time for dinner.

"Let's go."

Aira rallied her spirits somehow, and Palmira, who'd gone over the wall first, was keeping a tight watch on the surroundings. Calling the both of them, I started to walk down the main thoroughfare leading to the guild.



"The city's so lively, isn't it?"

At this time of day, there were a large number of people walking along the road. Almost all of them were dressed like traders. Perhaps staying at some lodging house tonight, they were searching for a place to eat beforehand.

In response, the road was lined with inns with posts for horses and open restaurants. There were already several customers chatting away. On the whole, it was a city of outsiders: there were few locally produced goods, and the residents of Brellwandy itself were unexpectedly low in number.

"...That's what it feels like."

I told them about it as we walked.

"You know this city very well, don't you?"

Aira's expression was openly amazed. It was extremely rewarding.

Maybe she was a pretty good listener. Back in Telaberan, Rupert seemed really awfully proud of himself too.

On the other hand, Palmira was her polar opposite. Fundamentally untalkative and unexpressive. You might wonder whether she was listening, but you couldn't look down on her because she actually was. More than that, when needed, she would ask

for a precise repeat explanation, so you'd have to change your mind: Oh, she really was listening back then?

"Well, I've been around for a surprisingly long time. I've come here a lot."

Truth is, I knew this city better than I did Telaberan. I'd never stayed long enough to see the entire city, but it was smaller compared to other cities anyway, so it was easy to grasp.

Besides, I recently had an extended stay here.

"There are only merchants around here."

"You could say that."

It was clear from the fact that almost every person we saw was a merchant, that adventurers fundamentally had no place here.

The star attraction of the Artor Ruins had run its course, and not only that, but there hadn't been any reports of monsters appearing in the neighborhood either.

And caravan escort requests were a rare sight here.

The roads to Telaberan and Kakrawanga were dangerous enough to warrant such services, but it was customary to accept those requests in the capital, where the caravans usually originated. In the reverse direction, traveling from here to the capital, the roads were practically risk-free, so naturally, there was no call for that kind of thing.

Basically, good luck picking up a commission here.

That's why there were adventurers around, but just like the traders, they were only passing through. If Artor didn't have any problems, there would be people willing to settle here...

"In that case, we aren't seeing any adventurers around because no one knows about the twelfth labyrinth you found, Chris?"

Palmira suddenly brought up a good point.

That's possible, sure. A new labyrinth was like a gold mine: the moment news of its discovery got out, a horde of money-hungry prospectors — I mean, adventurers, would descend on it from god-knows-where.

So you could say that Palmira's insight was a pretty good one.

"That might be it, but with things as they are, I wonder if it's already being cleaned out... It's not that difficult to tackle — it was deep vertically, but it wasn't all that wide..."

Coming from the guy who ransacked the place, you can bet that's the truth. Even though I was reckless enough about it, I did somehow manage to get through the maze by myself. It was nothing large-scale, after all.

Adventurers usually formed parties of four or more to tackle mazes. Of course, some people went solo like me, but that was a club that stayed at low membership. In the first place, I only challenged the twelfth labyrinth solo because it was virgin soil. Normally, I'd find a party somewhere and slip in.

Labyrinths were, by nature, that dangerous.

"So it might be common knowledge that it's been scoured clean, and that's why no one's gathering here."

Perhaps unable to agree with that conclusion, Palmira had a pensive look on her face. Well, I could pry all I wanted right now and I'd still come up empty. Besides, I was just about to get a clear answer.

Looking at the hall of Adventurers' Guild before my eyes, I swallowed hard.



The Brellwandy guild was different from Telaberan's, starting with its appearance. The Telaberan guild had an open sort of atmosphere, maybe because it was remodeled

into a tavern, but the Brellwandy guild here — if I had to describe it, I'd say it was like a mansion.

Four stories tall and rather antiquated, the brick and mortar building ended up shooting itself in the foot. Rather than welcoming, it gave people the impression that they weren't allowed to enter. If not for the signboard by the entrance, no one would think this was a guild, I guarantee it.

The entrance was the usual set of large double-doors, and when opened, it was obvious that the doors were made from some kind of heavy wood.

With these design choices, wasn't it operating on the assumption that hardly any adventurers would come here? Thanks to that, it wouldn't be getting a makeover.

Because it wouldn't be flooded with people upon opening, like in Telaberan, it was built from a crime-deterrent standpoint, hence the difficulty of entry — or so the clerk said when I submitted a complaint during one of my previous visits.

So anyway, I opened the doors and went inside. They felt heavier than they used to, simply by virtue of my weak strength. It also reminded me that I'd turned into a woman, and my mood soured.

Palmira and Aira followed me inside.

Aira was tense — or more precisely, she nervously snuck inside. That had to be the trauma from her experience in Telaberan.

“Oooh.”

It was Aira, but still, when she went inside, she exclaimed in awe upon seeing the scene.

Its immediate impression was ‘wide’. The hall spread out to a bizarre degree — I wouldn't be surprised if this one story had enough space for two. The stonework interior had a temple-like austerity, so much so that it gave the hall an air of gravitas. It was overwhelming.

Even ignoring the sprawling size it boasted, because there wasn't a single person here, the atmosphere was full of even more oppressive stillness.

I bet first-timers were overwhelmed by the atmosphere and ended up frozen in place. I was like that too, my first time.

But I knew better this time, so while the sound of my shoes tapping the stone-tiled floor echoes, I approached the counter further inside.

It was being manned by a single female clerk. Though her job probably involved a lot of sitting around doing nothing, she quietly welcomed us as we walked toward her.

“...Hello.”

“Yes. Hello. Welcome to the Brellwandy Adventurers’ Guild.”

A courteous response, executed with a beautiful smile.

Another thing completely different from other guilds. It had history, it was headquarters, and more than anything, it had free time. All those elements were part of the interaction.

I was thrown off by her straightforward manner, but even so, I went up to her, relatively close, and she still didn’t mind. When I came here in the past, neither she nor her response were any different in the first place.

Of course, assuming she did remember me, she wouldn’t know it.

As for Aira and Palmira, their only experience with the Adventurers’ Guild was in Telaberan. With a change in location, they might’ve be thinking that all of the guild branches were like this.

Later, I might need to tell them that it was just this place.

Leave that for later. Anyway, I set the notebooks we received in Telaberan on the counter.

“There’s something I want to ask — has there recently been talk about a newly discovered labyrinth in Artor?”

She looked slightly surprised. Before she could say anything, I reluctantly asked her point-blank, trying to word it delicately to avoid suspicion.

She was probably surprised because she didn’t imagine the three of us were adventurers, only for me to whip out our cards.

But when I continued with the rest of the question, a strange comprehension dawned on her face.

It was that look: ‘Ahh, again?’

“Yes. There certainly was one discovered roughly half a month ago. However — ”

Half a month ago.

I could sense Aira’s sharp intake of breath behind me. I was about to react the same way, but I narrowly suppressed the impulse.

What’s this ‘however’?

“Because it wasn’t very large in size, we have been notified that the investigation has already been completed.”

She lowered her head, looking apologetic.

Based on her initial reaction, she must have had a similar conversation with a similar visitor recently. But our objective was something else. We didn’t exactly want to go to the labyrinth.

In fact, we were already halfway home. All that was left was the one follow-up.

“Is that so? What a shame. Since we’re already here, I might as well ask — if you know what was found there, I’d appreciate it if you could tell me. That’s all.”

Straining to keep my calm veneer, and cranking up the ‘yup, *totally* ordinary adventurer here’ vibes, I asked her the next question, the real heart of the matter.

“I cannot speak in detail, but it was confirmed that a reasonable amount of treasure was brought out.”

That’s that, huh. They found the stuff on the floor halfway down, no doubt.

Good for them. It wasn’t treasure that was at stake here.

“No waaay, I’m so jealous — haven’t you heard anything else? Was there something strange, for example? Anything you were curious about?”

I knew I was being a bit pushy, throwing more questions at her.

Contrary to my inner thoughts, the clerk seemed to lapse into thought for a little while, before she crisply replied,

“– I haven’t heard anything in particular.”

Haven’t. Heard.

Was she left out of the loop, or was there really nothing? Which was it?

I couldn’t make a judgement based on this answer. If it were, for instance, [There was treasure and a strange corpse], then that would be the end of it, but if it was [I haven’t heard], then either was possible.

“...How many people went down to begin with?”

While my mind went around and around, I added an unimportant question to the conversation.

“Let me see... Three parties have traversed the maze, but I believe only the first person to enter had a fruitful trip.”

So basically, only that first person had a clear idea of what was down there. In short, I had to hear it from whoever that is.

“The name?”

” — Sorry. She can’t tell you.”

The response to my impatient question didn’t come from the clerk, but rather a male voice from above.

Looking up in surprise, I saw a hooded man in deep indigo robes watching me as he descended the hall's enormous staircase.

A smile on his gentle face, he took his time coming down.

Maybe it was his considerable height or his fairly solid build, but he projected a strange presence. For a moment, I felt like he resembled Leon.

"...Who are you?"

"Master?"

I challenged him at the same time as the clerk, looking back at the stairs in the same way, spoke.

Master.

In other words —

"A pleasure to meet you. I am the current guild head, Arcteur Vanburke."

Stepping off the last stair to stand before us, his manner mild, he lowered his head and so named himself.

Chapter 30

Guildmaster Arc

“...-!”

We were just about to get to the heart of the matter when that man’s appearance interrupted. Anger boiling inside me, I shot him a venomous look.

What little remained of my reason just barely managed to suppress my desire to lay into him.

Guildmaster.

That was what the man called himself.

Slowly lifting his head from a respectful bow, his gaze pierced through me. Middle-aged, in his forties. But with that height, that build, and above all, those eyes, he gave off a strong feeling of vigor.

He wasn’t doing a thing, but under his pressure, I grit my teeth and intensified my glare. Looking down at me with that bold smile, he was clearly trying to force me into submission.

The closer the hostility I detected from him came, the more it set me on edge.

“...Master.”

In the middle of this powder keg, the clerk’s voice echoed, disproportionately icy.

“I believe I said it before, but please refrain from [testing] the clients.”

At the sound of her voice, the man’s pressure suddenly eased up. As if some blockage had disappeared, the strength I’d built up flowed out of me. And yet, while I kept a wary eye on the man, the change in mood threw me off a bit.

The man removed the hood hanging low over his eyes, the hard expression underneath softening into a broad grin.

“My bad, Miss Patsy, my bad. It was an accident, okay?”

...Where did it go, that menacing attitude from just now? His tone doing a complete one-eighty, the man lowered his head to the clerk like he felt embarrassed and remorseful.

What the hell is with this guy?

His incomprehensible behavior only deepened my confusion.

Palmira, her guard up and her hand on the sword by her side, also seemed to be exhausted. She removed her hand. Aira, her expression confused, was still helplessly collapsed on the floor.

“Might I ask that you put an end to your irresponsible antics? Any more than this, our clientele will dwindle, and *I* will be out of a job.”

“Uh, I’m sorry, I really am. I’ll do a proper welcome next.”

“I would rather that you did nothing at all. It is an incessant annoyance.”

The big man bowed and scraped as he apologized to the clerk coolly reprimanding him. Not a hint of that earlier atmosphere remained; the scene only made me feel even more drained.

What the hell is going on here?

“Oh yeah, I apologize to you guys too. Ah, uhm, ahem. Welcome! Welcome to the Brellwandy Adventurers’ Guild! I am — ”

“...Guildmaster Arcteur Vanburke, right?”

Maybe because of the clerk's scolding, Arcteur started a do-over of his self-introduction — this time, for some reason, with exaggerated enthusiasm. I cut him off in a completely frigid voice.

“...If possible, call me Arc.”

The man, bent at the waist, pulled his hood back up. Then, his face completely transformed by a bashful, charming smile, he shamelessly dropped that line.

Even if he was suddenly all friendly, I was worried about responding. There was that huge gap between his first appearance and now, for one. And precisely because I knew of his position as Guildmaster, I couldn't help but sweat over how I should reply.

“My sincere apologies. As you can see, few people come to this guild. Due to the overabundance of free time on his hands, the master pulls strange pranks like this.”

Bowing her head to us, the clerk, Miss Patsy, offered an especially blunt explanation to clear up our bewilderment.

Judging from her slightly tired expression, she was used to it.

“It's impolite to call it a prank, Miss Patsy. When I see such promising adventurers, I simply want to tri... I mean, cheer them on.”

Letting slip his true intentions the moment he changed to a formal tone — why, I don't know — the furrows in Miss Patsy's brow, and ours, deepened. She put her hand against her forehead and let out a magnificent sigh.

I can honestly say that this Guildmaster is a real pain in the ass.

Maybe it was irresponsible of me to say, since it wasn't my job to deal with him, but I wished Miss Patsy the best.

“For goodness' sake. It isn't as though the guild has the funds to support such frivolous use of the invocation stones.”

Disgruntled, Miss Patsy said something I couldn't just overlook.

“...Invocation stones?”

Her attention caught by the words, just like me, Palmira tilted her head.

“You’re — a, a magic-user...?”

I goggled at the person before me in disbelief.

Sure, those hooded robes could belong to a textbook magus. I think Irene wore something similar.

But with his superior build, his image was nowhere near that of a magus. Despite his concealing long robe, his heavily muscled physique was obvious.

If one word could describe the air around him, it would be ‘commanding’.

To be blunt, it seemed like he’d be far more at home swinging an axe around topless.

“The master may look like this, but he is one of the leading magi in the empire.”

I could read the disappointment in Miss Patsy’s barely audible words of praise.

“A magus, huh.”

“Surprising, isn’t it?”

I looked at the proud Guildmaster with an indescribable expression.

I couldn’t say how, but the man reached the position of Guildmaster, and yet he also had a history of long military service. Primarily in melee combat.

I felt like all my vague suppositions had been betrayed.

Irene, sure; Guildmaster, great; but this kind of headcase, a magus?

“About the frivolous use of invocation stones — do you mean that was magic, just

now?”

Aira said something unexpectedly sharp. When you put it that way, it sure looked like it.

“Yeah, that was [Coercion].”

“[Coercion]?”

“The first of the attunements, light, and the sixth, darkness. It’s a magic that combines the two.”

I almost missed the information the Guildmaster so readily revealed, but couldn’t this be a relatively fundamental principle of magic?

What’s more, the [attunements]. That’s right, the [Six Attunements].

The two words that, in that dream, were a mystery to [me].

“...Guildmaster, can I ask you for a — a lesson on — magic?”

I asked hesitantly.

Magic, the mysterious power. A large part of me wondered if I could even get him to teach me.

But even so, I wanted to know about magic. ‘Attunements’, the keyword the Guildmaster let slip without batting an eye. And then, magic.

If I could understand them just a little more, I might solve the mystery of this body.

Plus, Irene wasn’t around. This was a chance to understand the system of magic; I didn’t want to just let it slip through my fingers.

“Mm, ahhh, okay. I want you to call me Arc from here on.”

And whaddaya know, as though what people call him was vastly more important than

magic, Guildmaster Arc agreed with disappointing ease.



“Okay, how about we start with the Six Attunements? Know them?”

“Uh, I don’t.”

I honestly shook my head.

Thankfully we weren’t going to start with ‘What is magic?’ It seemed like [Amazing power] would end the lesson right then and there.

“Okay, the Six Attunements are the six categories of magical power, corresponding respectively to light, fire, wind, water, earth, and darkness. These are connected to the composition of the matter in this world, representing the [attuned power] that we also call the ‘source’. Um, hmm. It’ll take a long time to go into detail, so let’s just say that, generally speaking, it’s the [power of existence].”

Arc was probably explaining things in an insanely simplified way, but even at this level, it already took everything I had to keep up.

Ummm, in summary... There are six forces in this world. And magic is based on those six forces... I think.

“This power is everywhere. For example, when you breathe out, there’s wind. It’s kinda like that. Why was there wind? Because you breathed out. This is a tremendous oversimplification, but when you follow such an ordinary phenomenon into its logical conclusion, that’s magic.”

Beside me, I could hear Palmira blowing out a small breath.

When I turned my eyes to her unconsciously, she looked away in a huff. She had an interest in magic? So cute.

“But you must be able to understand the [power of existence]. This is where things

suddenly get difficult. Ordinarily, we can't grasp the mechanism of this [power]. If you ask why, all I can say is that the human mind just isn't wired that way. But on rare occasions, there will be people gifted with an [intuitive understanding]. Those are the magi. They have the 'aptitude' people often speak of."

For magic, aptitude was necessary.

That I already knew. It was common knowledge — almost every adventurer knew about it.

I didn't get what it meant to have an [intuitive understanding]. As Arc said, it couldn't be fully explained.

"Then, what are the Six Attunements?"

"The Six Attunements, as I said before, are the composite forces that give form to this world. Aptitude usually skews toward one of these six. Just because one is a magus, it doesn't mean that they have a grasp on all of them. Most are suitable for about two. Three or four would be quite amazing."

"You have — ?"

"Three."

While he was saying how awesome it was, Arc readily revealed he had three.

But the way he was speaking just now, what about all six?

"Is it possible to have all six?"

"...Hmmm... I've only heard about that in rumors, but there was a story like that going around a few years back. However, since it's a truly amazing occurrence, the fact that I don't hear anything about it now suggests that it might have been misinformation. In the first place, not a soul had ever heard of having all six until then. Even the legendary magus Tetra had five."

Endowed with all Six Attunements.

The dream [me] said that.

Then, what happened to her after that?

“The legendary magus.”

Suddenly, Palmira spoke up.

Linking her hands together with a slight excitement, her eyes seemed to brighten.

To be honest, with my mind on other things, I’d completely missed the last part. But Palmira hadn’t — if anything, it was the other way around.

From her unusual interest, maybe she had an unexpected fondness for heroic legends.

“You want to know?”

Smiling, Arc egged on interest.

In response, Palmira looked at me as if to ask what to do. Helpless under her gaze, I gave Arc a small nod.

“The short version,”

said Palmira, perhaps out of consideration for me.

“Hm, Tetra is the person considered to be the creator of magic. At least two thousand years ago, before the advent of magic, it seems the world was full of monsters, and mankind led a dreadfully frail existence. In a sense, that period marked the beginning of human history.”

The subject of his story was grander in scale than I thought.

Now *that* was a hero. I ‘ooh’ed in genuine admiration.

“Then, what kind of power did Tetra have?”

Drawn in, Palmira encouraged him to continue.

She was surprisingly engaged. It was really unexpected.

Appearances aside, she seemed to have pretty odd taste, considering that inside she was a twenty-year-old woman. In fact, Aira simply looked as stunned as me.

Well, it was Palmira, so what was a little quirkiness after all this time?

“That’s right. Because even five is beyond the realm of imagination, it’s become no more than hearsay. But this was two thousand years ago. I wonder if all that remains is the impression of tearing open the heavens and shattering the earth.”

Tearing open the heavens, shattering the earth.

Suddenly, I looked at my own two hands.

If that dream was true, then this [Chris] I was possessing was the master of not five, but *six* Attunements. In that case, was it possible that if I wanted, I could do the same? I couldn’t imagine something that unrealistic at all. And I didn’t particularly want to, either.

A power so absurdly strong —

“Do you want that kind of power?”

Taken aback by those words, I raised my face. My eyes met Arc’s as he looked down at me.

Do I want power?

While I struggled to get my head around it, his gaze turned to Palmira.

“I do. Maybe.”

Palmira only thought for a little bit before she opened her mouth. She added an

unconvincing ‘maybe’ to the end.

“I don’t think I do. It’s frightening.”

Aira seemed unenthusiastic about the idea.

That’s right, it is frightening.

That’s what it means to have power beyond reason. That’s all it means.

If I did have it, just what exactly would be the right thing to do?

“I... don’t want something like that.”

After Palmira and Aira responded, for some reason, I opened my mouth too.

I glanced over at Arc, and our eyes met again. His seemed to be observing me, or possibly checking for something within me.

At the very least, they weren’t smiling.

Suddenly, I felt like his gaze was piercing straight through me. It set my nerves on edge.

My mystery-riddled self. Like he could see right through it —

Snap

“—!”

There was a popping sound from the back of my neck.

“? Big Sister, is something wrong?”

“N-No...”

Touching my hand to the nape of my neck, I dodged Aira’s question for some reason.

What is this?

I'm pretty sure that something like this has happened before.

Twisting my neck, I looked over at Arc. Our eyes met for a moment. I immediately broke eye contact.

For that moment, Arc's expression was extremely complex.

What the hell is that?

"Now then, setting that aside — that's the general idea, I guess? Anything else you want to ask?"

"Ah, then, tell us what invocation stones are."

Without even the time to wonder just what that was all about, Arc's words effectively ended the conversation, so I hastily pressed him on a different topic.

"Ahh, that, now, is the final key to magic."

"Final — key?"

Arc produced the red stone from his breast pocket and showed it to us.

I retreated a little out of reflex. Though I had voluntarily done it myself once, the feeling of the stone burying itself in my body was immensely unpleasant, after all.

"Mm, the truth is, even though magi understand the mechanism of the [power of existence], that alone isn't enough to use magic. Understanding, and then materializing. The latter is done through the invocation stone. In simple terms, let's say you want to grab something. If you only think about it in your head, that isn't enough. In the real world, the stone is the hand doing the actual grabbing, based on the head's instructions."

'Something like that, I guess,' Arc finished.

That last bit was a bit easier to understand.

In other words, perhaps because I was able to understand that jam-packed rundown on magic, I felt rather dubious.

When I casually turned to look, Aira had the face of someone who'd just heard a load of incomprehensible jargon, and Palmira was also deep in thought, brow furrowed.

Thanks to the unpleasant look in her eyes, her expression looked murderous.

But I felt that Arc's version was much better organized than Irene's.

Honestly, there were plenty of other things I was curious about, but at this point, I was struggling just to keep my head above water, so it might be better to call it a day here.

I'd have to go back over this later and review what I'd learned.

"Ah, by the way, why won't you tell us?... That is, the name of the person who returned from the labyrinth."

I'd completely forgotten because of the lecture on magic, but Aira, suddenly remembering, asked Arc about it.

To be honest, that was the real issue at hand, but I gave up on the investigation when Arc stopped me.

It was like getting doused with cold water, but the guild wouldn't really give out that kind of information in the first place.

Even so, Aira and Palmira didn't know that, and I didn't stop them from asking him straight-out.

"Ahh, hmm. The truth is, it's a matter of regulations. Divulging the identity of a source of profitable information is taboo. Especially if they returned with treasure."

'You get it, right?' Arc looked at me as he closed with that last bit.

Yeah, I do. That's why I gave up.

It was practically one of the most fundamental rules of the guild. One that almost every

participating adventurer knew.

If I had to say why, it was because the rule existed to protect guild members.

“For example, Aira, let’s say you had a hundred gold coins on you. Would you want other people to know that?”

Aira didn’t seem like she can understand it, so what else could I do but turn to her and clarify?

“Eh—... That’s... Ummm.”

“What about you, Palmira?”

“I’d hide it.”

Leaving Aira to wrestle with her thoughts, I turned to Palmira, who immediately and definitively replied.

I could say that it was just as you’d expect from Palmira, but this was pretty much a no-brainer.

Though I didn’t have much choice but to explain it to Aira, who was still struggling.

“Picking up where we left off, let’s say you walked around showing off your hundred gold. What do you think would happen?”

“...I’d be attacked, wouldn’t I. I see...”

It looked like even Aira had realized it. Her face sank, her posture asking ‘Why didn’t I see that?’

Keeping such information confidential was the most basic safeguard in place to protect the guild members.

To say nothing of the fact for the guild, releasing their sources’ identities — especially those who reported exclusively to them — would be like killing their golden goose.

That was why the guild would not, under any circumstances share that information.

I got that, so I could understand why they couldn't afford to do so.

It was because of that understanding that I had no choice but to give up. In other words, I wouldn't be getting any more information out of the guild. I let out a heavy sigh.

"In that case, we should go check the labyrinth,"

proposed Palmira, her eyes completely serious.

Sure, it's an attractive proposition, but while the labyrinth may have been cleaned out, going with the three of us wasn't just crazy, it was downright suicidal. Palmira aside, Aira and I didn't have anything that could even be called a weapon. Not to mention that even if we did, we were so weak that it would be pointless.

...That was a bit depressing.

And even before that, we'd snuck out of the garrison.

Common sense dictated that we make various preparations before setting out on any future adventures.

However, taking the risks into account, I still found Palmira's suggestion appealing.

To see it, to verify it with my own two eyes. I want to do that if I can.

I want to know. And here's a way to find out.

Though I knew just how difficult that would be, I was torn between safety and a desire that was difficult to resist.

"Well, there's no use in that now."

In the midst of that maddening indecision, the words Arc spoke with shocking ease put an end to my internal conflict.

Of course, I looked at him in surprise.

"...Why's that?"

I glared at him without bothering to hide my foul mood.

“Well, the military’s been squatting in the ruins since yesterday, and they aren’t letting anyone in.”

“...The military?”

“Guess we can kiss work goodbye again,” sighed Arc.

Military. The army.

If they didn’t have a damn good reason, the military wouldn’t be acting like this in the first place.

In other words, there was some objective that was extremely important to the army, and possibly to the nation.

What could be the reason?

The ruins cluster that should’ve been picked clean. The labyrinth that should’ve been empty.

If those two facts were true, then no matter how I looked at it, they wouldn’t lead to an army occupation. Why? Because there’d be nothing of value there.

In that case, let’s consider the opposite scenario: if the army really was there right now, then —

— there was still something in the ruins.

It wasn’t a leap to think so. There was something in there that merited a military quarantine.

What was it?

No, that wasn't the question here.

What was more important was whether it had anything to do with me.

That was the key point here, but I honestly couldn't predict which it'd be.

For a moment, I turned to Arc, but I changed my mind and looked away. Even if I asked him the reason, he'd definitely claim not to know.

He might have a hunch, but for some strange reason — for some *really* strange reason, I couldn't bring myself to trust the man.

Suddenly I looked at Arc.

And at the same time, Arc turned to me. His face was smiling, but it didn't reach his eyes.

— 'For some strange reason'? No, to hell with that.

This guy knew something. That was my conclusion.

But I had no idea what his goal is.

He was one fishy bastard, but all I could do right now was keep my mouth shut.

Besides, it wasn't like he'd done anything. For now.

Looking only at the results, we asked to teach us, and he kindly did. That was all.

That's right —

— He was just being kind.

That conclusion disturbed me intensely.

Why? Because right now, *he* was certainly doing the same.

And I wasn't talking about Arc.

He's hiding something. He's hiding something. He's —

Arc's smile is replaced with Leon's.

My chest seemed to tighten up at the sight.

— Definitely.

Leon was hiding something too, definitely.

But that didn't mean that he was deceiving us, did it?

All of a sudden, I wanted to see him.

Though it was too late to be remembering this, we'd slipped out of the compound without saying a word to him.

Let's go back quickly.

We should go back quickly.

Suspicion seethed inside me.

Turning my head, I started on the way back, as if fleeing from the thought.

Chapter 31

Discord

Holding on to my murky suspicions, I left the guild and set out on the way back along with Aira and Palmira.

When we got outside, the sun had already dipped fairly low to the horizon, dying the sky a vivid crimson.

It looked like I ended up spending more time at the guild than I thought. Leon already knew that we weren't there, didn't he?

"We ended up staying out quite late..."

Aira trudged along, also looking uneasy.

Though it was hardly enough, we were able to achieve some results at the guild.

I was able to get the answers to the questions I wanted to ask, more or less. I couldn't call them satisfying, but it was still worth it to sneak out.

However, to a certain degree, that was an excuse.

To tell you the truth, when I was wrapping things up, same as Aira, I grew nervous about what would happen upon our return.

That is, would Leon be angry?

Still, aside from that particular worry, I harbored some distrust toward Leon.

Because of what Arc had said earlier about the military.

The military.

Of course, they come in all shapes and sizes. Considering the imperial military as a whole, it should be a standing army of close to a million troops.

From that perspective, the force known simply as the 'Elite Guard' didn't make up even one percent of the total. So while I still called it an 'army', it was weird to think of it alongside the entire imperial military.

However, I couldn't imagine them separate entities. Why? It was none other than Leon that I told about the Artor Ruins, and that was the exact reason why the military presence there made sense.

That was just my opinion, though. Of course, it was also possible that some other army was there for some other purpose.

But there needed to be an appropriate reason to mobilize the military.

And right now, I couldn't think of any other reasons. No matter how I looked at it, Leon had to be involved somehow.

"Hahh..."

A sigh escaped my lips.

Could be worse, right?

I mean, even if Leon finds something in Artor, it isn't necessarily a bad thing.

It would be strange for me to poke my nose in, asking 'What were you doing?'

So it was no big deal.

While I mulled things over, the garrison gate came into view.

I suddenly thought, 'Ah, I ended up coming back here.'

Dusk on my heels, a feeling washed over me that I'd missed dearly, all these years.

I felt much like I did when, as a child, I'd come home after running off to play against my parents' wishes.

How did it go, back then?

If I remember right, my mother would be waiting in front of the house, and I —

There was someone standing by the door.

No, not someone.

It was far, but I knew that it was Leon. I could see Leopard beside him.

I could hear a sharp intake of breath behind me. Aira, I bet.

I was getting pretty uncomfortable myself, but with an air of resignation, I slowly walked forward.

Leon's figure grew clearer and clearer. He was watching us, his arms crossed. And he wasn't smiling.

Is he pissed? Yeah, he's pissed alright.

My heartbeat sped up so much I had to wonder, why am I getting this anxious?

Ahh, I don't want to go. But I kept my thoughts inside, and my feet steadily brought me closer to Leon. It wasn't like I could escape somewhere else at this point. Say what you like, there was no running for me now. And so I moved my feet forward by force of will.

And, like so, I stood in front of Leon.

He stared at me fixedly, his expression hard. What — should I say here? I abruptly averted my eyes from the awkwardness.

"...Um, Leon, the truth is — "

Not knowing the right words to say, I began to speak in a subdued murmur — when for a moment my cheek flashed hot, and my vision swung to the side.

A *slap* sound hit my ears.

"...-?"

Huh?

Unable to process what had happened, I touched my hand to my stinging, burning cheek.

Huh?

Timidly, I slowly turned my eyes to look in front of me.

— That day, when I stood in front of my mother —

Standing there, his expression fury mingled with despair, his raised hand trembling, was Leon.

◇ ◇ ◇

“...You — !”

Leon shouted at me as I looked up at him in blank amazement. My body quivered unexpectedly from the shock.

It was my first time seeing Leon with that kind of look on his face. Is he angry? The rational part of me stood by, observing nonchalantly.

When I looked at Leopard standing off to the side, he'd gone stiff with a look of surprise.

Ah, so even Leopard could make such a face. Was it that rare for Leon to be like this...?

“What in the world were you doing!? I should have told you that you weren't to go into the city, right!? And yet you — !”

For a moment, Leon's furious tirade faltered.

And my wits came back to me.

What?

What the hell?

Why do I have to get chewed out? Why do I have to eat a hit to the face?

My heart filled with a boiling rage.

In front of me, Leon glared at me. He seemed to be searching for his next words.

That state of his strengthened my conviction that he had something to hide.

When that thought came into contact my existing distrust, everything ignited.

“Do you understand!?”

“—! *Shut* — the — *fuck* — up!”

I yelled over Leon’s voice, my emotions blazing.

I heard a pair of gasps come from behind me, but I ignored them.

“What the hell! You — ! Who the hell do you think you are! Yeah, I owe you for helping me! But I don’t remember ever making you my goddamn mother — ! Don’t barge into my business! I am *me*!”

I spat out a rapid stream of unimaginable invective.

His face stiffening at my words, Leon stared at me.

“After all, you’re just lying to yourself, seeing me as someone I’m not! I’m no one’s goddamn replacement — ! Don’t fuck with me! I — am *me* — ! No one else!”

It might have been smoldering inside me all this time.

I am me.

Woman, man, I don’t care.

The [me] here is all that I am. Christopher Carson, not some Christine chick.

Not once have I ever thought of myself as her. And even if it seemed to be true, I wouldn’t give a shit. That’s something I don’t need to think twice about. I don’t know what point there is in getting mad.

But this guy is hiding something. He won't say it.

It gets me thinking. I have to.

All of those things rattled around inside me, becoming ugly, transforming into rage.

In the end, telling me some things and withholding others, he played me like a pro, trying to mold me into [something] that suited his purposes. No more than that.

He's making a fool out of me...! He's fucking around with me!

"Big Sister!"

"You can't!"

Suddenly, Aira hugged me from behind.

I felt something gripping my right hand. Palmira?

But my eyes were fixed on Leon's, refusing to move away.

He watched me, his expression stiff. I could read a medley of emotions in his eyes.

Then, before they could clearly resolve into one, Leon averted his gaze to the side.

"Young master..."

Perhaps sensing the shift in the mood, Leopard addressed Leon with a worried look on his face.

Leon's eyes were turned away, his body and face following suit. For a little while, he just stood there.

"Leopard."

His voice was so calm that it inadvertently startled me. Leopard, his expression growing even more rigid, stood ramrod straight.

“Take them to their room. After that, station a soldier outside the door.”

The first half aside, I didn’t need to ask what he meant by the second.

Confinement.

I grit my teeth.

“Y... Yes!”

Slightly delayed, Leopard’s brief, firm acknowledgement rang out.

Then, keeping his face turned away from us, Leon left.

Leopard was efficient. After glancing at us with a complex expression, full of feelings he couldn’t completely disguise, he slightly inclined his head.

‘Come with me.’ That’s what it meant.

I looked at Leon. I couldn’t even begin to guess what he was thinking from the sight of his retreating back.

“...I am *Chris*! Not [Chris], you got that!?”

I hurled my final words at his back.

In the end, for just a moment, he turned to look at me.

It wasn’t anger that was on his face.

Not sadness, either.

It was fear.



“Ahhh, I’ve really done it now...”

I was already full of regret by the time Leopard escorted us back to our room.

Groaning, I flopped back on the bed.

Thinking back, I felt that I'd gone too far. I didn't need to say those things.

Truth is, it shouldn't matter how Leon saw me.

Even if he considered me [Chris's] replacement, there was no real need to get worked up about it. I should have understood from all that marriage business that I was acting as a substitute in the first place.

That night, shouldn't I have kept my mouth shut instead of saying those things? That I'd be willing to be a substitute and all.

Besides, if I looked at it rationally, wasn't Leon's anger only to be expected?

It wasn't like we made a promise, but he did tell us not to go out. And we were the ones who didn't listen.

...Still, I didn't think it warranted getting pissed to the point of slapping me.

But it wasn't like I didn't know how it felt to worry helplessly.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt like I was the one to blame.

"...Our life here is over, isn't it..."

Sitting at the end of the bed, Aira kept her dazed face facing the opposite direction as she mumbled those words.

Guh —...!

I froze right in the middle of rolling about.

"Chris, you were in the wrong earlier,"

said Palmira, reading a book she borrowed from the guild beside Aira.

To make things worse, she didn't even look up.

Guh — x2...!

” — tch! I get it, okay! It’s my fault!”

Rather than bottle up my feelings, I sprang off the bed with a shout.

The two others turned to look at me.

“You need to say that to Lord Leon.”

“That’s right. Even if you say it to us, there is no meaning to it, is there?”

Sure, they had a point.

“Alright, I give, but I’ve got no idea what to say. Besides, how am I supposed to meet up with him anyway?”

Sneak out of the room and go see him?

No, there should be some poor soldier working hard in front of the door. Sorry, man.

“Hmm, let me think. For this, the sooner you do it, the better... We set out tomorrow. It seems that the opportunity to do so will disappear.”

“Sneak out.”

“If I could, this wouldn’t be such a pain...”

Having just been thinking the same thing as Palmira’s frank proposal, I ruled it out right away.

Though, to be honest, that was the only thing I’d thought of.

Like Aira said, it looked like I’d miss my chance once tomorrow rolled around, and it

would just get harder and harder for me to talk to him. Time might smooth things over, but I hated the thought of waiting around with my mouth shut.

Besides, Leon's expression at the end worried me.

That insecurity, possibly fear.

What was he thinking, what was he afraid of?

"Aaahhh, what do I do?"

I collapsed back onto the bed and suddenly looked over at the wall.

— Back then, Leon was always there when I woke up.

I saw him, against that bare wall.

He would always be smiling. Make fun of me like some kid. Get an awkward look on his face. Give me a wry smile. Look like he was having fun.

...He never wore an expression like *that*.

"...Going?"

Reason be damned, I decided, and jumped off the bed.

Leon shouldn't wear an expression like that.

And without a doubt, I was the one who made him. That was why I had to see him, had to talk to him.

I didn't know if it would be enough for him to forgive me.

"What do you intend to do?" asked Aira.

Putting my two dubious companions out of my mind, I went over to the window and opened it.

Night had already fallen outside. Here and there in the city, the lights were burning brightly. The night was still young.

I leaned out the window, looking around in a circle.

We were in a corner room on the third, and top, floor. To my left, light spilled out of a window set not far away.

There was little distance from here to there, so I'd be better off assuming that there was also someone inside.

I looked down.

I could see the window on the second floor. The lights were out.

"Alright."

"Big Sister, what do you mean by 'alright'...?"

They were worried about what I was planning to do, I guess. I looked over my shoulder at them and said,

"Won't you give me a hand?"

Palmira earnestly nodded at me as I gave them a wide grin.

On the other hand, Aira didn't look enthusiastic at all.

Chapter 32

Moonlight Rappelling

The three of us tore the bedsheets to pieces.

Palmira, expressionless, and Aira, resigned, silently went about their respective jobs. It was two or three meters to the window below, so two sheets would do it.

“Uuuh, wuuh... we’ll definitely be scolded again tomorrow...”

Aira whined mournfully, apparently having abandoned all hope. Even so, she was helping me. I guess you could say she’s got a good sense of fellowship?

“That depends on Chris.”

Well, it’s okay. Like Palmira says, it does depend on me, to a certain degree.

I might catch hell tomorrow morning, but it’s better if I worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. Right now, I should be doing what I can.

“Mm, that’s enough.”

I twisted the torn sheets into three lengths of rope and tied the ends together. I gave my new rope a few tugs to check its strength.

I couldn’t say for sure, but it would probably do the trick.

It might have been dangerous for my male self, but the way I was right now, it should be okay.

I fastened one end of the rope to the leg of the bed nearest to the window.

But it wasn’t time to go down yet. Sure, the lights were off, but if I went in and found someone there, it was going to be a problem. If someone spotted me before I got to

Leon because of my carelessness, I wouldn't be able to come up with an excuse.

I took the other end of the rope with me to the side of the window.

Once I'd tested the strength of the rope I made out of the curtains, I clutched the remaining length to me and stood at the edge of the window.

"Okay then, I'm heading out."

My tone breezy, I called back to the two staying behind in the room: Aira, looking genuinely worried, and Palmira, not looking particularly worried at all.

"T-Take care?"

"Go for it."

I nodded in response to their lackluster encouragement and looked down.

Third floors are pretty high up, huh. Let me rephrase. The impression you get from the room sure is different from the one you get when your heels are dangling over the edge of the windowsill. The gentle breeze, which would normally be nothing to worry about, was a huge pain in the ass now.

I suddenly realized something. I went back inside the room just one more time, in order to tear the hem of the long dress I was wearing up to a point above my knee. It was a quality piece of clothing, but I tried to think about it as little as possible. If I was doing this, I was gonna do it right.

"Hooo-... kay."

See ya. I lifted my hand again to the other two and stepped onto the windowsill once more. Gripping the rope, I turned my back to the outside.

From inside the room, Aira, her expression complicated, and Palmira, her face devoid of expression, waved their own hands back at me.

And so, as carefully as I could, I began to descend the rope hand over hand.

Honestly, being this high up was pretty terrifying. All the more so because I was holding onto a rope made of bedsheets. *And* my only source of light was the moon.

It might be romantic, a girl in a dress climbing down a rope on a moonlit night, but as the party in question, I was desperate to get it over with.

Anyway, I managed to make it to the room below. As I made a laborious detour around the window to avoid being seen from within, I caught my foot on the slight protrusion of the windowsill.

“Phew.”

One floor down. It didn’t take much time, but my entire body was soaked with sweat. I was panting, too.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my waist. One at a time, of course.

“Okay, now — ”

Once I’d calmed down a bit, I slowly peeked into the room. There were thin curtains hung over the window, but I could scan the room inside through a small gap.

It was a fairly spacious room.

It looked like someone’s living room, not all that different from ours. There was a single bed, its sheets in a mess, but there didn’t seem to be anyone sleeping in it.

Shifting my body, I changed my angle of view as I surveyed the inside of the room.

Empty?

Of course there were blind spots, but for the time being, I couldn’t detect any signs of someone hiding inside.

Slowly hooking my fingers onto the frame, I gently opened the window.

At that moment, I realized for the first time that the window might have been locked, but my concern was misplaced. It opened easily.

Then I nimbly slid into the room through the open window. To avoid making any sound, I landed on the floor on all fours.

In that position, I swept my gaze across the room.

Yup, no one's here.

" — Nice."

"What's 'nice'?"

"Wahyaah-!?"

Before I could even take a breath of relief, I heard a voice coming from behind me. The sound of it literally made me jump straight up from my hands and knees in surprise.

I spun around in a hurry, looking for the source.

Hanging over the window I'd left open, the curtains swayed in the breeze. Moonlight streamed into the room, illuminating the person standing beside the window.

Leopard.

His expression as grim as always, he looked down at me with his arms crossed.

"It may be romantic to break into a man's room through the window in the night, but it's not very admirable."

"I wouldn't say stuff like 'romantic', not with that face."

Breaking out into a cold sweat and cursing inwardly, I stood with as much calm as I could muster.

'This is the worst', 'Why is Leopard here', those thoughts swirled around in my heart. I'll say it straight-out: This is the last person I want to see right now. Here was Leon's adjutant, his close associate — the same Leon I'd thoroughly showered with verbal

abuse not too long ago.

He was going take me back to the room like this... or, worst case, maybe even a jail cell. Then, hearing the story from Leopard, Leon's attitude would only harden more. Jail aside, I couldn't stand for my relationship with Leon to deteriorate any further.

But then, what should I do? Nothing was coming to me.

Since Leopard was standing by the window, I might be able to shake him if I made a dash for the door, but no matter how I looked at it, it'd be a bad move. Hell, I wasn't even sure I could shake him.

Leopard's vigilance was airtight.

"And? What did you escape from your room to do?"

said Leopard point-blank, without a single change in expression.

He had no intention of cursing at me. After a moment's hesitation, I threw aside my reservations.

I'd already hit the worst-case scenario. It wasn't like it would get any worse than this. I was done.

"...To see Leon."

Still, fearing punishment, I turned my eyes away as I squeezed out the words.

Is it too late? What do I do if I see him in the first place? The truth is, those feelings of guilt were gnawing away, even at me.

It wasn't until now that I realized — I wasn't thinking of anything but needing to see him, to talk to him.

I am beyond stupid.

"Hmm... Understood. I'll take you to him."

After letting out the mother of all sighs, Leopard unfolded his arms. I couldn't help but

doubt my ears.

“...Eh-?”

“At any rate, even I can see that right now that the young master... Lord Leon needs this. It did invalidate Lord Leon’s orders, but I expected you to pull something like this. Though, I didn’t think you’d escape through the window.”

“Ah, uh...”

His expression still a bit exasperated, Leopard glared at me.

Though his unexpected words promised just what I wanted, I trembled, my doubt seeping into my speech and behavior. Trying to force it down, I lightly slapped my cheeks.

“There’s a soldier stationed outside your room, but I told him that, in the event that you attempted to leave, he was to report to me without forcibly detaining you.”

Maybe having fun watching me shake, Leopard’s tone softened ever so slightly.

Shit, this is embarrassing.

“Still. To report, huh.”

“Of course. If you escaped to search for Lord Leon, that would’ve been fine, but if it was to desert again, it would be a headache for me.”

...Wow, he really didn’t trust me. But, well, of course he wouldn’t. I’d do the same in his shoes.

Besides, Leopard was *this* close to being in violation of his orders.

“Eh, it’s fine. If we’re going, then let’s get going quickly... after you do something about that suggestive appearance of yours.”

After looking at me from top to bottom, Leopard turned his back to me. Given his words and behavior, I looked myself over too.

The hem of my dress, which I'd torn to keep it from getting in my way, was split all the way up to my waist. It should've been above my knee, like it was before I went down, but it seemed it tore further in the middle of my descent. Even my underwear was visible.

Yeah, it might be a... stimulating sort of appearance.

If I were to scream right now, Leopard would be in a really questionable position.

That thought popped into my head all of a sudden.



Just when I thought we were on our way, we stopped by a room crammed with servants not far from Leopard's room. There, I got a change of clothes.

This being a military facility, there wasn't much call for maid uniforms or showy clothing like at the estate. I promptly changed into what was handed to me: a jacket that wasn't plain so much as a bit conspicuous in its tatteredness; and a thin pair of breeches.

The crowd of female servants were startled by the sudden intrusion, but perhaps because of Leopard's presence, they surrounded me from a distance and said nothing. For Leopard to come with a girl wearing ripped clothing in tow, the situation had all the makings of a scandal. He didn't say a word, though, so I decided not to worry about it either.

"Let's get going. Quickly."

Estimating that I'd finished dressing, Leopard called me from outside the room. As you might expect, he waited outside while I was in the middle of changing. If it were Rupert, he might have waited inside without batting an eyelid, but in this area, Leopard revealed a frank indifference.

"Let's go now."

When I came out, Leopard wasted no time taking the lead, and started walking off. I followed after him at a sort of half-jog.

When I thought about it, , I realized

that although I'd run into Leopard every now and again, this was the first time we'd had such a close conversation.

Leon was always the face, and according to my intuition, it seemed that Leopard usually followed along in the shadows.

I didn't know if this guy, who was 'Commander' to Rupert and Irene, was an adjutant or a close confidant to Leon. But it was clear that he was Leon's man, through and through.

So it seemed to me that seeing Leon in such a state earlier was connected to his current behavior. In his own way, he was looking out for Leon.

It was unquestionable, impossible to misunderstand.

He wasn't doing this for our sake, but for Leon's alone.

You might even say that we'd pretty much become pests, but his candor left a favorable impression on me.

I didn't know what he was thinking, to go this far, but on the flip side, for Leon to inspire that level of loyalty, it was a bit —...

We went down the corridor and descended a flight of stairs. Without the faintest idea where Leon was, I obediently walked after him. Leopard was silent from start to finish, but sometimes, he would nonchalantly look over his shoulder at me, making sure I was still there.

Look, I didn't come this far just to make a break for it now.

So I thought, but, well, I suppose it was in his nature. It wasn't like I was in any position to complain, so I decided to leave it alone.

Even so, he moved at a brisk pace. I remembered going into town with Rupert back in Telaberan, but he and Leopard really were polar opposites, I thought. Fondly, even.

“Here it is.”

What he pointed out to me was the opposite side of an entryway, which led to a gate. We were probably before the door that opened out to the back of the building.

I was a bit conflicted. Of course, I’d had no idea at all where Leon was right now, but I didn’t expect him to be outside.

“Is it — okay, here?”

“Yeah. You’re on your own after this... got it? I’m not doing a thing.”

Leopard nodded. And tacked on a warning.

“Got it.”

Given Leopard’s position, he couldn’t help but say that. Even without his participation, the fact that I was here right now at all would only put him in a tight spot.

I gave him a small wave, and then opened the door.

As I expected, on the other side of the door was what you could call a rear garden. It wasn’t like it was all that spacious.

The walls surrounding the garrison passed quite close by. Precisely because of that, the space wasn’t so much drab as quietly refined. Even the moonlight didn’t reach between the building and the walls. There was only starlight, providing the barest of illumination.

At its heart stood a magnificent tree. Unlike the side with the gate, the tree stood there alone. That emptiness under the starlight — it was just that spot, but it was like something out of a fairy tale.

And standing there, looking up at that tree, was Leon.

Chapter 33

Memories

He looked ephemeral, so much so that it seemed dangerous to touch him.

His back was to me. But even then, it gave me the impression of a transparent fragility.

Do I — call out to him?

I swallowed hard.

It seemed to me like he was a house built on sand, that he would collapse with a single push.

In that atmosphere, my chest tightened painfully for reasons I didn't understand. An indescribable oppression seized my heart.

Just how much of himself did he intend to show me?

When I thought of him, I could picture him with his usual gentle smile. That was how he was normally. On the other hand, I'd fallen into the delusion that this captured all that he was, to the point that I couldn't imagine him any other way.

That was impossible.

Obviously. He was a living person, his own person.

The world wasn't so kind that someone, whoever they were, wherever they stood, could smile all the time.

Sometimes, it was supposed to be cruel, sorrowful, painful.

Even though it would drive them to tears, or make them want to rant and rave.

But while all that was true —

Even so, that look didn't suit him. Maybe that was arrogant of me. Maybe I wanted to

think that way.

But to be honest, because he was Leon, I didn't want him to bear feelings that would bring him to his knees like this.

By the time I noticed, I'd walked close enough to Leon that I could touch him if I reached out my hand.

'I want to do something.' That thought grew stronger inside me.

But I didn't know what I should do.

I should call out to him. But at the same time, I didn't think I should.

In that case, what could I do?

What could I do for him?

Nervously, I reached my hands out to his back. When they were about to make contact, I hesitated.

What am I trying to do here? Staring at my hands, I opened and closed them several times as my mind wandered aimlessly.

What was wrong with Leon that night?

What was wrong with this similarly unusual Leon?

When I remembered, I bit my lower lip, fighting something back. Then, I hugged Leon from behind.

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" — !"

Leon's surprised trembling was transmitted to me through my hands, my face pressed into his back, my body.

He really didn't notice me? Dumbass. Inside, I deliberately insulted him.

"—! Don't — don't move — !"

While I did my best not to think about anything, I squeezed my eyes shut. My voice was low and curt.

That alone was enough for Leon to realize it was me. I felt the tension draining from his body.

Then, his hands gently touched the ones I had around him.

Tormented by the sound of my heartbeat going wild, my breath caught at the sensation. Completely contrary to my wishes, I could feel the blood rushing to my face, heating it up.

Why, I don't want to know.

If I do this, you'll be happy, right?

If I do this, you'll calm down, right?

Those were the only thoughts in my head as I tightened my hold a bit.

"...What — were you doing?"

Trying to stave off the hammering in my constricted chest and the flush on my face, I somehow strung together a coherent sentence before he could say anything.

".....Ah, well."

"Don't look this way, moron!"

When I sensed Leon turning his head after a pause, I flew into a panic. Immediately, mercilessly — I stopped him with words that left no room for argument.

For now, I didn't want Leon to move. I didn't want him to do anything. I was at my absolute limit.

Perhaps sensing that, Leon let out just a small sigh of amusement, and turning back to the tree again, he began to speak.

“I was remembering the old days.”

The tree he was looking up at was an an elm.

I knew what he meant. He was definitely remembering [me].

The present and the dream meshed together.

I’d suspected it for quite some time, but now I was sure of it.

That is, Big Brother, the boy that [I] liked so much — was Leon.

“There was this one elm tree that [Chris] was fond of. She often climbed up and made trouble for me. This isn’t the one from the past, but when I see a similar tree, it unconsciously comes back to me.”

“...It wasn’t the tree that [Chris] liked. It was just the view from the top of it.”

” — !”

Leon’s words got me thinking.

He didn’t know. That was unexpected.

So, there were things even Leon didn’t know. I felt a bit pleased. With a slight desire for revenge, I started to tell him.

“No matter how many times [I] invited you, you wouldn’t come up. It’s kinda surprising, but are you bad with heights?”

I could tell that the hands resting on mine were slowly but steadily growing warmer. Pressed against his back, I had the feeling that I heard his heartbeat speeding up, just a little.

“Even though [I] wanted to see the view from the top of the tree with you.”

Unable to hold it in, I chuckled.

Alright, even I had to admit that for revenge, this was a bit mean. Still, I couldn't help but enjoy seeing Leon in such obvious turmoil.

"...Is — Is that so?"

In the midst of his agitation, Leon finally managed to get a few words out. I could sense the small tremor in his hands. Just as I thought his state had changed a little, something slipped past his fingers and pattered onto my hands.

"Ah..."

Before I could figure out what it was, Leon gripped my hands tightly and continued.

"I have a question to ask you... Did you meet her?"

"Mm, you could say that. I saw her in my dreams a couple times. You too."

"...You're more of a bully than I thought, too."

"I guess that makes us even, huh?"

His face still looking the other way, his voice escaped in what could be interpreted as a snicker or a wry laugh. Drawn in, I smiled too.

◇ ◇ ◇

"About earlier, I... um... I'm sorry."

Both of us were sitting on the ground, looking up into space.

I was filled with an exquisite sensation of peace. Without meeting Leon's eyes, I put on an air of nonchalance and got to the real issue at hand.

After looking at me for a moment, surprised, he suddenly smiled.

“No, I also... How did I become so angry? It was truly a blunder.”

“Well, if you put it like that, same goes for me. I wonder why I got so pissed off.”

“Why indeed.”

Even as he spoke, Leon couldn't stifle his laughter.

He really seemed to be enjoying himself. I felt like he'd finally gone back to normal.

“...I was afraid.”

After laughing for a short while, the seriousness returned to his expression, and he said those three short words.

“That I would lose [Chris] again.”

As if following her as she climbed, Leon lifted his eyes to the elm tree.

His eyes narrowed, as if he could see a trace of the girl waiting for him.

Then, the words came out of him like a torrent.

” — I believe I was eight when I first met her. At her father's invitation, I met her during a summer trip. [Chris] was two years younger than me, so she must have been six at the time.”

It roughly corresponded the contents of the dreams.

It was simple exposition, but the scene emerged before my eyes, as if I'd seen the real thing.

No, in a sense, I really had.

“At first, she avoided me, so I avoided her too. I was quite shy. But we were children, so it didn’t take long for us to become friends. And like me, she had few opportunities to play with other children her age.”

“You didn’t have any brothers or sisters?”

“I had two older brothers, but they played around too much.”

Well, it was the world of the aristocracy. Just because they were siblings, it didn’t mean that they’d be able to get along well.

“However, she seemed to consider me her older brother, for some reason. She’d call me ‘Big Brother’, ‘Big Bro’...Might you know anything about that?”

“That’s... it’s just, [Chris] thought of you as family, so of course she called you ‘Big Brother’...”

“Family, is it? I see, she was an only child, so she may have seen things that way.”

“Maybe,”

I responded vaguely. It was pretty much how a kid would think.

“After that, I began to go see her in the summer, and then the winter. There might have been something between our parents, but personally, I looked forward to our meetings. Maybe she did too.”

“She actually did look forward to them, I think.”

‘Think’ was putting it mildly. [Chris] clearly adored him. So much that she declared him family. Make no mistake — she loved Leon like she did her own parents.

“However, that lasted for two years... I found this out after the fact, but it seems that her magical aptitude had been revealed, and I could no longer see her. As for her parents, her six-Attunement aptitude — in other words — ”

“She was the kind of genius you’d never see, not even in a thousand years.”

I dug back up the information I’d learned at the guild today.

From the looks of things, even if I hadn’t gone out of my way to question Arc and Irene about magic, I might’ve been able to ask Leon. Recalling the talk I’d had at the guild, it didn’t seem to be any particular secret.

Maybe it was general knowledge among the upper classes, as such things tended to be.

“Yes. In truth, that talent of hers was unbelievable. When I found out, she was already at the Schola Magorum, it seems... I was never able to meet her after that.”

“The Schola Magorum is in the capital, isn’t it?”

“It is, but the Schola Magorum is a very special institution. Moreover, an individual in possession of all Six Attunements presents a political issue by virtue of their existence alone.”

Meaning there was no seeing her at the drop of a hat, then?

My information on [Chris] ended here. I might have another dream eventually, but the gist of it was, she’d gotten caught up in worthless matters against her wishes, that’s for sure.

The truth is, she, too, grieved over being sent to such a place at the age of eight. In her heart, she earnestly wanted to ask to see Leon. But there were circumstances barring her way, all thanks to that one word: ‘politics’. What those circumstances were, only the person herself knew.

That’s why I made a conscious decision not to touch on the topic.

“After that, I couldn’t see her for a time. In some respects, I was left behind, but... After

I reached the age of ten, I also became quite busy. In the end, six years would pass before I saw her again.”

“...That’s a big jump.”

“She had become an excellent magus. Our reunion was unlike the past... it was buried in formality.”

Leon’s narrowed eyes grew grim. As if it were terribly difficult for him to discuss, he was choosing his words carefully.

“...A few days later, she — was involved in an incident.”

— In an incident? What’s the matter? — I didn’t have to ask any of that.

Leon probably had something he regretted. A few days after their first meeting in years, his childhood friend died in an incident. Maybe I was seeing a connection between the two.

“What was it... How did she...?”

Leon looked at me, his eyes pleading.

I couldn’t do anything but shake my head.

“No, I don’t know that much either.”

“Is that so...”

Upon hearing that, Leon sighed in disappointment.

It must have been torturing him this whole time.

Maybe someday, I’d dream again.

At that time, would it be okay to tell him?

“It was a case of magical power running berserk. At least, that’s what I heard. What kind of situation that specifically refers to, I don’t know. It was unprecedented. At any rate, it... consumed her soul.”

“Her soul was — consumed?”

“That’s right. Her contents vanished, so to speak. Her body was warm. Her heart, still beating. But she didn’t move at all. She wouldn’t open her eyes... Is that death, or is it life? It wasn’t clear to me either. However... the Schola Magorum confirmed that her soul had disappeared. ‘A vortex of magical power scattered her soul’, they said.”

I’d certainly seen such cases myself.

God only knew where their souls had gone, but it was common knowledge that head trauma was usually the cause.

Alive, but never to wake up again.

Among those of us in the adventuring business, at least, such people — were considered dead.

“Nevertheless, she wasn’t allowed to die in peace. Her heart was still beating. And from a national standpoint, they had lost an individual that they couldn’t afford to lose. That fact couldn’t be released to the public. She was dead, but placed in a state of limbo they called ‘life’. This — ”

Leon took a breath after his long speech, then spat out the last of it.

” — was ten years ago.”

Chapter 34

Under the Elm Tree

Ten years?

No, just from looking at Leon, it wasn't all that out there.

By my calculations, that would put Leon's current age at twenty-eight, but that did match his appearance, so.

So, Leon was twenty-eight, huh. He was quite a bit older. Like a ten year difference?

That aside, if what he said was true, there was one problem. My current appearance. Soul or not, as long as the body was alive, its appearance would mature. Based on the discussion, this body of mine was twenty-six years old, but at the very least, it didn't look it.

...I got that far before suddenly remembering that Palmira was twenty, so I took a step back and admitted that it wasn't impossible. But I bet a gap between looks and age as big as Palmira's was quite rare. It wasn't an everyday thing.

"Ten years... Yes, ten years. And yet, your appearance is no different. You look almost — no, exactly the same as the last time I saw her, ten years ago."

My heart thumped in my chest, seeing Leon looking at me with such a serious face, but I was thinking the exact same thing.

So that meant Leon didn't know much about what happened after he saw [Chris] ten years ago?

"You mean, you don't know what happened to [Chris] for those ten years?"

“Do you?”

He turned the question back on me.

So he didn't know. Of course, neither did I. I shook my head by way of reply.

“...The only thing I do know is that afterward, someone... took her body away.”

“Took her body away?”

On reflex, I parroted those disturbing words back at him.

Not ‘stolen’, but ‘taken away’. At the same time, the indifferent coolness I sensed in Leon gave me a bit of a shock.

...Well, it did happen ten years ago. Leon might have compartmentalized it.

Because he was currently looking at a version of her.

“Yes, the body should have been secured in the Schola Magorum. But one day, according to a report from the Schola, it had been [taken away]. As things stand, it was a strange case. Earlier, I said it was a special institution, but it's for that very reason that stealing from it is close to impossible in the first place. However, such a situation deliberately went unquestioned at the time. If I had to say why, my guess would be that handling the body would have been difficult, given its connection to the loss of the six-Attunement magus.”

“It would have drawn attention to the loss of something troublesome.”

‘As you say.’

His head hanging slightly, Leon answered as if he took it personally.

“Still, I searched for her, as far as my reach could take me. Though it has become a mere excuse, I think of it as my atonement. But I couldn't find a single lead on her whereabouts. For what purpose was her body taken? Even the motive was a mystery — and so ten years went by. Just as she was fading from my mind, she suddenly

appeared before me. In other words — you.”

Leon turned to look at me. That pair of eyes pierced through me with their strong determination.

Suddenly, the story had come to me. The breath caught in my throat.

“The truth is, I was surprised. I was genuinely surprised. For you see, the figure before me looked just like the one I had seen ten years earlier. On the other hand, I thought it was impossible. Because you were completely different in terms of personality. Moreover, the state you were in.”

Leon chuckled. He was remembering what happened back then, I guess.

For some reason, I abruptly grew embarrassed and turned away.

“Not like I could help it. Quit laughing.”

” — My apologies. In any case, I couldn’t believe it at first. It was something like that, I suppose. The same physical appearance, but from ten years ago. And everything else was completely different. But normally, you’d think of it as an uncanny resemblance. Nevertheless, you resembled her too closely. Especially with that silver hair.”

This?

Pulling on my bangs, I brought some of that hair down to my eyes.

Sure, if it were just the face, then whatever. But when even the hair color was a match, it wasn’t exactly easy to dismiss. I mean, this color was impossible to begin with.

“Had it not been for that hair, I suppose I would have kept my distance without issue. And yet, when we first met, I was fighting to maintain that boundary, you know? For that reason, I even exposed you to considerable danger.”

“Now that you mention it, I *was* ruthlessly forced to play a slave.”

Well, it wasn't like I was dragged into it kicking and screaming. It was a job to me, plain and simple.

I didn't feel all that resentful about it either.

"Ah, I do apologize for that. But... at any rate, your confession that day changed my way of thinking. It was when you said you [became a woman]. Hearing your story, I developed a theory, one that verged on conviction. Right now, you're thinking the same thing, aren't you — that [you] are possessing [Chris's] body."

I remembered Leon's behavior upon hearing my confession, as well as the series of exchanges we had when he showed me [Chris's] portrait the next day.

I suppose he'd been thinking about the possibility of possession since he heard my story. From that perspective, his actions since then all made sense.

Even what happened that night on the river bank... I can't say that it's a complete mystery to me.

"However, this is all I currently have. At present, I'm in the process of re-examining my findings, but regretfully, much remains shrouded in mystery."

"By 'examining', you mean the business with Artor?"

What I heard earlier today at the guild came back to me.

The military had the Artor Ruins in quarantine while they worked on something.

So that was on Leon's orders, I guess.

"True, that's also an area that requires investigation. However, it would be difficult with our current personnel, so it will wait until after we assemble a specialized task force for the investigation of the labyrinth."

Huh?

From the sound of it, Leon hadn't made a move on Artor yet.

A bit confused, I checked with him.

“Then you aren’t investigating Artor right now?”

“As of yet, no,”

he said, like it was no big deal. It didn’t seem like he was lying.

In that case, who has Artor on lock-down right now?

...Wait, is Artor *really* on lock-down?

The distrust I felt toward Arc back then.

Again, it tugged at my mind.

“...Actually, I went to the guild today. I want to know how things were going at Artor — well, more precisely, where my original body was... Anyway, I heard about it there — the military occupation of Artor.”

Leon fell deep into thought.

From the looks of it, it was probably fair to say this was news to him.

In that case, I understood less and less about what it meant.

“Assuming that’s true, it may have been a mistake to postpone matters concerning Artor... I don’t know who those forces answer to, but it seems necessary to investigate their affiliations. It’s difficult to say whether we share the same objective or not... I’ll have Regnum look into it.”

Ah, that gloomy guy?

Wait, did he come with us? I hadn’t seen him around at all.

“Considering the various possibilities, he’s qualified to lead the general investigation.”

“Oh, okay then.”

I gave Leon the rundown on the information I’d gleaned from the guild.

In addition, I told him about the several adventurers who had gone through the twelfth labyrinth since I left it and suggested that he look into them while he was at it.

“There certainly seems to be a need to investigate them concurrently. I’ll see to it.”

Phew. My information proved useful, more or less.

Well, that said, it did nothing for the guilt I felt for basically piggybacking off him.

“But the guild, is it...”

For the *n*th time, Leon lapsed into deep thought.

“What, something on your mind?”

“At the moment, nothing worth mentioning, no.”

He shook his head.

It worried me all the more to be dismissed like that. But I figured that it would be rude to ask him over and over now that he was back to thinking again, so I decided not to mind it.

And so silence prevailed.

Looking at Leon, he’d been lost in his thoughts the whole time.

I probably needed to put my thoughts in order too. But so much had happened today that I couldn’t get my brain working.

Suddenly, I turned my face upward. The elm’s many branches were black silhouettes against the backdrop of the starry sky.

Here and there, starlight filtered through the criss-cross of those dark shadows.

— I wonder if the stars look pretty from the top of this tree?

As if influenced by the dreams I'd had again and again, the thought suddenly popped into my head, with no rhyme or reason.

I stood up.

I knew Leon had noticed and was looking up at me, but ignoring him, I jumped at the lowest branch.

"Ufh-... kuh—"

And so, before he could say anything, I clambered up the branches like a madman.

Hey, wait. [Chris] aside, this is my first time climbing a tree. *Now* I remember, huh? Great.

I still had a little higher to go until I could see the sky. I looked down at Leon from my perch.

He was looking up at me with a dumbfounded look on his face. The sight of it made me grin.

"Come on, Leon! I bet the stars a—!"

"!!!"

The moment I called down to him in triumph, the branch under my feet snapped and sent me tumbling down.

For a moment, I was suspended in the air. And in the next, I found my body settled

firmly in Leon's arms.

Not again. I mean, if I could die from embarrassment —.

I got caught up in the moment, following a whim just because it was a long-awaited opportunity. Now look at me. So, *so* awkward.

Unable to say a word, I curled up into a small ball in Leon's arms.

"Seriously... You surprised me."

"Ahhh... can it, idiot..."

Leon's surprised expression melted into a gentle smile. It just made me even more embarrassed, and I hid my definitely blushing face behind my hands.

I could hear him chuckling.

Don't laugh. I brought this on myself, though.

"...I'm sure [Chris] has forgotten, but the truth is, something similar happened once before."

Leon looked up at the tree as he spoke. From between my fingers, I trailed his gaze up.

"She fell from the top of the tree. That time, I wasn't able to catch her, and she was injured as a result. Since then, I began to wait below her."

His unexpected confession drew a sigh from me.

I sensed an inexplicable emotion filling my heart. Trying to quash it, I said,

"Leon."

"Yes?"

"...Umm... thanks."

My hands were still covering my face.

Maybe, by some chance, it was the memories of [Chris] inside me that drove me say so.

Chapter 35

Warning

When Leon took me back to my room, I thought I would find Aira and Palmira asleep, but they were in the middle of eating dinner instead.

By the way, the sheets had been replaced.

Apparently, Leopard told a maid to replace them after he left me. The rope was confiscated, of course.

Starving, the two of them took the opportunity to ask for food, which didn't take long to arrive. So they were having a late dinner.

Which reminded me — in the middle of all those shenanigans, I'd clean forgotten about dinner. Reasoning that [Chris will come back here], they thoughtfully asked the maid to prepare enough for three.

From what I saw, they didn't wait for me, but I appreciated it.

Looking at the two of them, it hit me that I was hungry too, and I gratefully dug in.

"...and then I came back here."

As I stuffed my mouth with bread, I gave Aira and Palmira a summary of what had happened after I went out the window.

To be honest, the whole thing was such a headache.

It made sense to give them a full report on what happened, I guess.

"....."

"....."

...And yet, once I finished the story, the two of them stared at me in silence, mouths agape.

While I grew suspicious, the two of them exchanged glances in perfect sync. Some kind of understanding passed between them.

Alright, what the hell? Is this some kind of telepathy?

Drinking my cold soup, I pondered the meaning of their enigmatic behavior.

Nope, not a clue.

“Um... Big Sister??”

“What?”

“Big Sister, you’re, umm... Big Brother, right?”

Sorry, what?

I couldn’t tell what she was getting at.

Aira was saying something weirder than usual. Wrinkling my brow, I slurped down the soup.

Her expression inscrutable, this time Palmira stared steadily at me and said,

“Chris, even your brain is turning into a girl’s.”

Pu–.

Palmira’s blunt words nearly made me spit out my soup.

I held it in, but it went down the wrong pipe, and I managed to choke myself in magnificent fashion.

“Go–guho–, guho–”

“B–Big Sister, are you alright?”

“N-No, guho-ngh- more importantly, guho- what’re you — talking about — ”

Gently waving off Aira, who hastily reached out her hand, I pressed Palmira on those shocking words.

“It’s weird that you haven’t noticed it yourself.”

Palmira’s face was quite serious.

Or more precisely, Aira was impossible to understand, and Palmira only ever cut right to the chase. I was tired of trying to wrap my head around things.

For now, I nudged Aira.

I’d already learned my lesson: in this sort of situation, letting them tag-team the explanation was the right thing.

“So, umm, besides hugging Lord Leon to comfort him, you were happy to be held in a princess carry, correct?”

The result? Aira dropped a bombshell that left me speechless.

The beginning, the end, and everything in between — her words snuffed my cheer out like a light, but they weren’t patently false themselves.

Even so, I tried to come up with an excuse to refute them, but nothing helpful came to mind.

“...N-No. Look, about the princess carry, it just happened that way because I fell out of the tree...”

That’s why — , the explanation that sounded convincing in my head dissolved into incoherent mumbling.

“When you were talking about it, you seemed quite happy.”

Palmira immediately shot it out of the sky.

She shut me down so briskly I could all but hear the slam. If I hadn't been on the receiving end, I would've been full of admiration.

"Not only that, you held Lord Leon and comforted him. That fact alone is already enough to seal it."

"Seal it?"

"It'd be weirder if it didn't."

Palmira was merciless.

Words couldn't describe just how serious her face was as she spoke to me. My will to object withered away.

"I especially thought that there was something going on, but for example! For example, let's say you're in your original form. When you think back to what you did, how do you feel?"

Aira uncharacteristically provided an example, her words possessing a strange persuasive power. Even if I ignored the first part for now.

I tried to imagine it, just a little.

"...No. Just no."

My mood genuinely took a turn for the worse. I could tell that my face was all twisted up.

"Right? So the way I see it, Big Sister, is that you're starting to get used to being a Big Sister."

Isn't it because you keep calling me 'Big Sister, Big Sister'? But...

Even if I set that aside, the words [starting to get used to] sparked a fair amount of resistance in me.

I mean, sure, it didn't throw me off as much as it did in the beginning.

"The way things are going, you might not be able to return to being a man."

Refusing to let up, Palmira dealt me a fatal blow. I lost all strength, my head drooping down.

That completely gutted me.

Until now, I'd only been pursuing a way to return myself to male form. Beyond that, whether I'd be able to turn back or not. but these two shoved a problem in my face that lay in a totally different direction.

Getting used to it. Getting used to it, huh...?

But that was the only way to describe it.

Even if I worry myself sick over being stuck this way forever, it would be no use. Even if I cry about how things turned out this way, there's nothing I can do about it. If I don't draw a clear line between the little things and what really matters, I honestly wouldn't be able to go on.

Then, even if I've gotten used to this body, it should be okay to close my eyes to a few inconveniences now, as long as I keep my eye on turning back to normal someday.

So there's nothing especially wrong with adapting. But —

— am I really *just* adapting?

Sure, I'm not as torn up as I was.

That I can definitely chalk up to adapting. But is that what drove me to hug Leon, as Aira and Palmira say? And can I say with one hundred percent confidence that they're wrong?

I honestly don't know.

In a case like this, probably the first of its kind, my guess is as good as the next guy's.

But what if my behavior, like the way I suddenly felt in the rear garden, was coming from [Chris] inside me?

Isn't it possible that even my own will is trying to change on me?

"Still. If Big Sister stays Big Sister, I don't especially mind either."

As I groaned, Aira, as usual, said something pretty weird and rose from her seat. While I struggled to piece together what she meant, Palmira stood too.

"We're saying this because you want to return to how you used to be. Neither of us cares if you don't turn back. Because you're you."

Unusually wordy, Palmira added her own two cents before making her way to the bed with Aira, both of them flopping down onto it like the closest of friends.

...Man, these two.

Well, they're looking out for me.

Even if, perhaps, I don't turn back. Even if I don't.

I've been reluctant to consider it, but it's quite possible.

Anyhow, I still don't have a clear path back to my original form.

Besides, now, what I can say without a doubt is, if my old body no longer exists, then at this time, there really is no turning back for me.

Really — will I be able to go back to my old body?

The next morning, I welcomed the sunrise without sleeping a single wink. Holding my head, I unsteadily rolled out of bed.

Aira and Palmira seemed worried upon seeing my face, but only that much was out of my control. I fluttered my hand at them, telling them there was nothing wrong.

Even though I said that myself, it wasn't exactly true.

"Waahh... Those're some serious bags under my eyes."

I groaned, looking at the mirror.

Palmira brought over a bucket of water for me, and, after thanking her, I scrubbed under my eyes as best I could.

Even so, though I thought this body was stupidly resilient, it seemed that I'd have to tough out sleep deprivation the normal way. I didn't really understand what the criteria was for all this.

After a diligent scrubbing, I felt as if they'd faded a bit. It was a bit embarrassing like this.

"How about it, I look weird, right?"

I looked to Aira for confirmation.

'Not weird, but I am a little worried,' she delicately responded. I decided not to dwell on her ambiguous answer any more than that.

Without anything else to do, I undressed to change into the clothes prepared for me for the day. Come to think of it, I didn't get to take a bath yesterday.

Or more accurately, I hadn't had one in a long time. I occasionally bathed in the river when we were traveling alongside it, but there were only soldiers around, mostly, so it wasn't long before I stopped.

I kinda stunk. I didn't really get it, but since I even had a bucket of water just for this, I wiped myself down with a towel. Bothered by the bedhead from my sleepless night, I

borrow a comb to untangle and neaten my hair while I was at it.

After, I changed into fresh underwear and slipped my arms into my new clothes. Even though there was little I could do about it while traveling, I wanted to change my underwear as much as I could.

Today, it was a tunic that only went to my knees? Yellow-green in color, I found it a little on the flashy side, but I silently wound the sash around my waist and adjusted it. It didn't come with pants. Even though the nights had been chilly lately...

Still, I was sleepy.

Well, we were setting out today, so I could sleep in the carriage... Covering my mouth with one hand, I stifled a yawn.

I was hungry. Was someone going to bring breakfast up to the room?

While I thought about it, Palmira came over to me. She fixed her steady stare on me and said,

“Chris, you're pretty girly already.”

...Hey, what the hell is that supposed to mean?



In the end, it was past noon by the time we departed the city.

Reeling from Palmira's critical hit on top of my lack of a sleep, I was laid out in the carriage. During that interval, Leon was pretty concerned, but I told him I was fine and pushed him out rather coldly.

He looked immensely perplexed, but I was sleepy, so I wasn't going to think too deeply about it.

To be honest, if we picked up from where we left off yesterday, I would wind up going loopy, so I was deliberately putting some distance between us.

That's —. It was just like pulling away on approach, and approaching on the pull-away.

No, then will I have to approach when he pulls away?

“What a wicked woman.”

“Vixen.”

These two had been merciless since yesterday. To be honest, I wanted to think that they were saying this stuff on purpose to cheer me up.

Suddenly, I looked out the carriage window at the city of Brellwandy as we left it behind.

Ultimately, we only stayed there for a night, but I felt like quite a lot happened while we were there. Frankly, I even felt a bit regretful that we were leaving in such a hurry.

Then, a bit further in the distance, I could see the Artor Ruins. The army that should’ve had it on lockdown was nowhere to be seen. I didn’t know if it was simply too far away or if it actually wasn’t there.

Now, the question was nagging at my mind: is it alright to leave the ruins? The labyrinth? The truth is, I couldn’t shake the sneaking suspicion that I should go see for myself, even if I had to split from everyone else, no matter how dangerous it may be.

Even so, my only option right now was to believe that Leon would investigate as he said he would.

Even though I was being cold, in the end, I couldn’t bring myself to think badly of him, not when he was doing all this for my sake. And besides, he probably wasn’t hiding anything from me anymore.

Let’s draw a clear line here: what’s past is past. I’ll turn my gaze to what lies ahead.

I could see steep mountaintops rising over the soldiers’ advancing ranks. The Sarcalnaa Mountain Range. Part of the vast mountain system that split the capital into north and south.

From what I could see of the road, we’d have a gentle climb for a while, until we

emerged from the mountain peaks. When approaching the imperial capital from the north, this way was closest, but also the harshest.

Although the road was maintained, it sloped steeply, and it was essential to keep an eye out for mountain-dwelling monsters.

It took roughly six days to travel from Brellwandy to the capital. Because it was usually dangerous, it was standard practice for caravans making the run between the two to form convoys at their departure point and bulldoze their way through on foot.

Of course, since the Elite Guard was inherently a pure combat force, there was no such need. Right now, it was marching forward independently. As long as we didn't run into any monsters as strong as a flying dragon, we'd be fine.

Besides, about halfway down, the imperial capital constructed Basragate Fortress, which serves not only as a checkpoint but also maintains order on the highway.

No problem at all.

It would be just as uneventful as the stretch leading up to Brellwandy, I'm sure.

In dire need of sleep, I turned away from the window and laid myself down on the seat cushions.

Chapter 36

Stars I Can See, Peace I Can Hear

By the time I opened my eyes, the sun had already set.

The window to the carriage had been left open. Gentle golden light fell on the floor in a glowing square, the same shape as the window.

It was silent within the carriage and without, to the point that I'd rather be blasted with noise 'til my ears hurt. Nothing moved — the moonlight filtering in from outside seemed to be all I could see.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. The blanket I'd apparently covered myself with slid to the floor.

I slept well. So well I had no dreams.

So I had this illogical expectation I would have new dreams soon, but recently, I hadn't had any at all.

It could be that I just didn't remember them. Even if I was following along with [Chris's] memories, dreams were just dreams, after all. And those would unravel and disappear in the daze that followed waking up.

I got off the shallow seat that had been doubling as my bed.

Looking around the interior of the carriage, I found Aira and Palmira sleeping on the floor and the opposite seat, respectively. They were fast asleep, so even if I got up, I wouldn't be bothering either of them.

When we started traveling by carriage, it was tough on Aira, being unable to fall asleep no matter how she tried. She might've gotten used to it, though, because right now, she was sleeping peacefully on the floor. Her figure, wrapped up in a single blanket, somehow looked cold to me, so I draped my own over her.

Trying to muffle my footsteps as much as possible, I softly stepped over her and moved to the back of the carriage. Then, as slowly as I could manage, I opened the door.

Moonlight streamed in through the crack. At first, it was just a trickle. Then, as the door opened wider, it began to flood the interior of the carriage.

It fell on Palmira's sleeping body lying on the seat. Before it could spread over her face, I slipped out through the gap.

Freezing... —.

When I got outside, the chilly air raised goosebumps on my skin, and I wrapped my arms around myself.

There wasn't much longer to go before autumn came. Still, for the temperature to fall this much, we must have climbed quite high up.

In fact, when I looked around at my surroundings, I realized that I was now among those distant mountain peaks I'd seen before I fell asleep. We were on a road that must have taken great effort to carve into the rather steep slope here.

Looking up at the other end of the slope, I saw it rise into a very precipitous cliff. It was high enough that falling from there would no doubt be a death sentence. And yet the width of the road wasn't what I'd call 'wide'. It was maybe enough to fit two carriages. I couldn't say whether it'd be a tight fit or just impossible.

Naturally, we'd come to the mountainside with all four, but a half-asleep passenger would take a tumble off the cliff within thirty steps of the carriage.

Of course, this wasn't my first time taking this road. And yet every time I passed through, I thought:

What genius put a road in a place like this?

It was just that dangerous.

When I looked at the road before us and the way we came, I saw soldiers scattered about, wrapped up in blankets and huddled as closely as possible to the side of the mountain. I didn't know what time it was right now, but judging from how little they were moving, it seemed to be very late at night.

But beyond the soldiers before and behind me, I could pick out the glow of what seemed to be bonfires. Probably for the night watch.

After a short debate over which of the fires to go to, I started to walk to the one behind to escape the chill.

To the back of the carriage, there was a small tent and a hitched horse. Probably Leon's sleeping quarters.

Suddenly, I had a thought. Maybe... it's just a possibility, but, couldn't he be at the bonfire?

The sleeping soldiers were crowded tightly against the mountainside, so I had no choice but to gingerly pick my way along the side of the road closer to the cliff.

Under the over-bright illumination of the moonlight, I could see the road ahead with perfect clarity. But by that same token, when I looked in the direction of the cliff, I could see it falling away into pitch-black darkness.

It was so dark, I wouldn't be surprised if the phrase 'abyss of death' was coined just to describe it.

But using all my strength to haul my gaze up and away, I could see the lushly forested mountains soaring over the other side of the cliff against a backdrop of stars.

Now *that* was a view.

A place that should never have been despoiled by humans.

Coupled with the stillness around me, it was a sight that seemed even divine.

I stared at it, mesmerized, before I slowly started to walk forward, nervously checking my footing over and over again.

Before long, I was close enough to hear the crackling and popping of the bonfire.

Red, unlike the moon and stars, the light danced back and forth, casting the long shadow of the night watchman on the ground.

It was just one guy. His back facing me, he didn't so much as twitch. For the fifty-man Elite Guard, isn't one sentry a little, I don't know, low? I mean, this guy could be napping right now, right? I felt a touch of uneasiness, looking at the man's back.

Of course, at the same time, I dismissed the idea. Even I had faith in the ability of the Elite Guard.

While I pondered how to address the lone watchman, I drew closer to the fire.
As I neared, some sort of pleasant fragrance permeated the air.

...Something's weird.

Wrinkling my brow, I walked unsteadily forward as if hooked by the scent.
Come to think of it, I'd missed dinner. When I remembered, I suddenly noticed my hunger. What's this smell? It's sweet.

"Evening. I'll be taking a seat next to you, if that's alright."

Still debating with myself, I eventually, and without the least bit of grace, stepped past the figure and plopped down next to him. I held my hands out toward the flames.
Now, let's see what you're eating. I look at the sentry.

"Yes, good evening."

...What are *you* doing here?

Sitting there, calm as can be, was none other than the gloomy man from the strategy meeting for that slaver sting operation.

His name's not coming to me. I feel like I heard Leon say it quite recently, but... right, it should be Regnum.

And Regnum, without looking at me at all, was holding a thin stick over the flames. There was some kind of white thing skewered on the other end.

That was the source of the sweet smell, but I didn't have a clue what that white thing was.

At a glance, it looked like some kind of silken insect cocoon. And size-wise, it was just like a small bird egg.

Not gonna lie, once I thought of it as a cocoon, I didn't much feel like eating it.

But with the gnawing in my stomach and the indescribably sweet scent it gave off, I couldn't bring tear my eyes away.

While I stared, transfixed, the white thing burnt to a dark char, its surface bubbling and cracking.

"Ah."

It's burned. And at that very moment, Regnum took the burnt white thing and popped it into his mouth. In one mouthful. I thought it was pretty big, but his gloomy face, similarly large, was pulled and squeezed by the process of chewing. Once that was done, he swallowed it down in one gulp and sighed contentedly. And all of that without a single flicker of emotion.

I gulped as I watched. Even though he was expressionless, or maybe because of it, it seemed to be incredibly delicious.

Just what is that white thing? I was absurdly invested in the answer.

"Please, feel free."

I might have been staring at it with greed in my eyes.

From where, I couldn't care less, but Regnum took out another one and stuck it on a small branch, which he then handed to me.

"Ah, okay..."

His movements were so natural, I just casually accepted it.

I was exceedingly curious, so I timidly touched the white thing on the end of the stick.

...Soft.

Or more precisely, squishy. And I still have no idea what it is. I'm looking at it, it's right in front of my eyes, but I'm not even sure if I can eat it or not.

While I was examining it, the man took out a new twig and stuck another of the white things onto the end of it, then held the spit over the fire.

So that's how it's done. Copying him, I held mine over the fire too.

The two of us, roasting those white things in the crackling blaze.

Time passed, mysterious and wonderful. The white things emitted a sweet smell. I swallowed, salivating. It started to burn, bubbles popping on its surface, so I pulled it from the fire and gave it a good look-over.

...Its fragrance tickled my nose. But can I eat it?

When I looked to my side, Regnum was already eating up his second one. Seeing him, I steeled myself and put it in my mouth.

"Iff hawh-!"

As soon as I bit through the crisp exterior, something hot stuck onto the inside of my mouth.

Tearing up a little, I huffed desperately to cool off the stuff in my mouth. As I did, a sweetness I'd never tasted before spread over my tongue.

"Fwahh-"

Okay, even I thought I sounded stupid just now.

But it was just that sweet and delicious. I chewed before swallowing it down.

I sighed. A light feeling of satisfaction, followed by regret that I'd gulped it down so quickly.

"Wh-What is this?"

"A kind of sweet known as a marshmallow. It tastes great roasted. Though even I don't know how it's made."

As he spoke, he stuck another one on the end of the small stick I held.

Mystified by this somehow casually nice man, I thanked him and held my stick over the fire again.

Beside me, with a rustling sound, Regnum pulled out a plain, slightly dirty cup — also from god-knows-where — and handed it to me. It was filled with some kind of steaming blackish liquid.

“Be careful, it’s hot.”

Watching my marshmallow out of the corner of my eye, I took a sip.

...Sweet. This was sweet too.

Still, I recognized this slightly bitter drink.

Chocolate. My face unconsciously relaxed as I felt its warmth. Because of the cold, the sensation of the liquid gradually spreading through my body gave me an indescribable feeling of happiness. I let out a great sigh.

“Haah-...”

A river of stars glittering in the clear sky overhead.

The incredible bliss of drinking something warm and sweet below. It was an irresistible happiness. Even the words themselves seemed stale in comparison.

The stars in my sight, the peace I can hear, the sweetness on my tongue, the sense of indulgence in my heart grew by a thousand-fold.

...I’d been lulled into relaxing, but honestly, what this guy was doing here in the first place, how he ended up on watch, and why he had these kinds of sweets on him — those were all quite a mystery.

It did make me wonder, but overwhelmed by a sense of contentment, I couldn’t bring myself to care all that much.

Though once I calmed down, I still wanted to know. Besides, from what Leon said yesterday, this guy should be out investigating all sorts of things. *Should* being the operative word here.

“Hey, what’re you doing here anyway?”

I looked to my side to see Regnum tilting a similar steaming cup.

Looking more closely, I found a rather grimy kettle sitting next to the bonfire. Ahh, so that’s what he used to heat it up…?

“Well, it was cold.”

Gazing at the fire, he answered me absentmindedly.

No, that’s not what I meant.

But somehow I expected that answer out of him. So I changed tacks.

“Hmm, then, what are you doing here on night watch? Leon didn’t ask you to do anything later?”

“As for the night watch, anyone will do. In this company, at least. I’m a nocturnal creature myself, so when I dropped by, I was asked to take the sentry’s post. In exchange, I’m allowed to sleep during the day. Later, certainly, I will receive my orders from Lord Leon, but as the reason for my presence is a separate matter, I will forego the details. Oh, and I love sweets.”

He just said all of that in one breath!

And his gaze, which had been dreamily watching the flames until now, turned to me.

And yet, I felt like he sidestepped the important parts.

Plus, out of everything he just said, the only part that stuck with me was that little tidbit about his sweet tooth. It didn’t really matter, but its impact was subject to discussion. And I wasn’t even asking about it, to boot.

“Um, what does he want you to do?”

“That’s a secret. To hear about it in detail, I recommend asking directly.”

Although I’d worked my hardest to dig up what I wanted to know, I was ignored so easily.

In summary: If you want to know, ask the man himself.

I felt a bit huffy, being refused so bluntly, but it made sense: Regnum was an officer of the intelligence service. Generally speaking, he’d never let that kind of information slip. Even though the contents of that request had to do with me.

From that perspective, asking directly might still be the best option.

And speaking of which, I think I get the gist of it already.

“Leaving that aside, there is something I want to give you.”

“—!”

I unconsciously accepted it from Regnum’s outstretched hand.

— An invocation stone.

Never thought I’d see one of those again, not here. Surprised, I nearly dropped it.

I managed to keep my composure, but even so, I didn’t grip it too tightly. It half-slid off my palm before I brought it back to my chest.

It was about the size of a chicken egg. Quite a bit bigger than the one Irene had.

That just made me even more uneasy.

I mean, sure, these things have saved me before. But that's not all they did. Every time, the invocation stones are proof that I'm something that defies human logic. Or rather, my body is.

I know if I don't say the magic word, I'll be alright. But even now, I can't help but feel repulsed by the invocation stone before me, like it would be absorbed into my palm.

If I could simply dismiss it as just magic, maybe I'd feel more at ease.

But at least what I can say is, the magic that Irene and Guibenague used is very different in form from what I have.

I don't think it's just a difference in type, either. My intuition is telling me that there's a crucial difference between them.

"Hey, what are invocation stones... Uh—"

If I asked like that, Regnum would give me the same answer as Arc. [Magic activators]. That wasn't what I wanted to ask. I was after something more fundamental. Just what in the world sank into my body and became a part of me?

How would I get him to tell me that?

I wracked my brains, but I came up empty. Casually, I looked over at Regnum. Staring at me without moving, he said,

"In a manner of speaking, [life]."

Chapter 37

Signs of Unrest

Life.

When he suddenly introduced such a heavy concept, things grew even more ominous, and I stared at the thing in my hand.

Just a rock, smooth and red.

‘Life’, he said. I couldn’t help but see blood in its red hue.

And the size.

My knowledge didn’t amount to much, but I did know, for starters, that these stones came in different sizes. In that case, what about life determines how big the stone is?

Trying to imagine it made me feel like I was peering into a deep abyss, one that man was never meant to comprehend. I shivered.

“Life. Or, perhaps, the soul. As for what exactly those are, let us leave that to the philosophers for now. It’s unclear whether the method of refinement numbers among the mysteries of the Schola Magorum, but it’s well-known among authorities in the field that it’s the life force of flora and fauna.”

“Life force... So they’re made with something like that.”

Using life as a component.

I think that might be verging on a universal taboo. If such a thing exists.

“It might seem that way, but don’t we usually live by consuming the lives of other creatures? For an easy comparison, think of the meat on the dinner table. Some animal was robbed of its life to put that there.”

Regnum's eyes stared at me without moving, something like exasperation flickering in their depths. Or, perhaps, contempt.

Come to think of it, that's certainly true. It's almost too obvious, but we've always lived by stealing the lives of others. It's impossible to live in the first place without doing so. I don't think there's anything especially sinful about it. It's just how the world works.

But while I agree with that, I find the thought of using life like an ingredient for a recipe unsettling.

We take lives so that we can eat. But if it were possible to feed ourselves without killing, then maybe we would have no need to kill.

Especially because taking lives isn't the point.

However, 'using life as an ingredient' sounds like taking lives *is* the point. Is it fine for me to just write this off as wordplay?

I looked at the invocation stone. This [life] — just what kind of life is it?

"And? Why are you giving this to me?"

Fuzzy as it was, I did know a little about invocation stones.

But I couldn't see what purpose it served to give it to me. With this in his possession, what is Regnum telling me to do?

"Well... If I had to say, it's just a precaution. You are capable of using magic, aren't you?"

If I had to say.

Upon hearing the words following that stilted phrase, I sucked in a sharp breath.

...At the very least, he knew I could use something akin to magic.

The source of his information —

"As for why I know you can use magic, it was obvious from my inspection of Guibenague's mansion, that's all. That damage could not have been the result of

anything other than magic, no?”

“.....”

When Regnum practically nailed what I was thinking, my face stiffened.

He continued, his stare fixed on me.

“If I had to say, you tend to be overly conscious about it. From what I said just now, you’re no doubt considering where I acquired this information, and whether it’s reached Lord Leon, isn’t that so? In that case, you are worried to have one of these in your possession again. That will surely have consequences that wouldn’t make Lord Leon too happy, no...? Well, it’s a small issue, but I will tell you this once.”

Not one word out of line.

So what? What’s he saying? What —

“What do you want to say?”

Feeling unpleasantly like he was looking right at the inside of my brain, I managed to squeeze out my question.

“That I would like it if you would believe in Lord Leon.”

“...Something like that...”

You’re saying this *now*?

I swallowed the words back just before they could spill out.

It wasn’t like I didn’t believe in him. But it was pretty embarrassing for this man — this man who seemed to have seen through everything — to say it to me so bluntly.

Yeah, it was a little late to say something like that.

I've already doubted Leon so many times. I doubted him and doubted him, and now, here I am.

From that point of view, the time to say it is long past. Now, I all but trust him unconditionally. If he's fooling me, I have to give it to him: it's a masterpiece of deception. But even though that can't be helped, I've already been swayed.

Leon had revealed so much of his feelings to me that I'd been convinced.

So I, too, have to answer in kind.

"...Well, okay? I'll take care of it. Anyway, thanks for the marshmallows. My day-night cycle's going to get all messed up, so I'm going to do my best to sleep."

Forcing an end to our conversation, I stood up from my seat by the bonfire.

It wasn't a problem for me to stay up until morning,

but I basically had nothing to do but be jolted around in the carriage. I had a feeling that if I flipped my days and nights around, I'd never go back to normal. Right now, I'd been given this much slack already; I didn't want to get any lazier.

"...That's fine. People should sleep at night. Besides, they say a good night's sleep is important for a woman's skin."

"That's none of your business, you know."

I didn't know if Regnum knew *everything* about my true nature.

Well, he probably already did. If not, I couldn't think of a way to [investigate] it.

I imagine that the contents of the investigation would come close to the entire truth about my identity, so based on that assumption, it didn't seem like his assignment could possibly end before he uncovered the fact that I used to be different.

At least, if I were to take that request, it would be impossible for me to complete it without that information coming to light.

Even if I found a way, wouldn't the investigation only turn up ambiguous results from that point on? I could easily imagine it. So it seemed impossible to me that Leon hadn't taken that into account.

Come to think of it, there were now five people who knew my true nature. Leon, Aira, Palmira, Irene, and Regnum.

I didn't think it was a bad thing that they knew. But even if I put aside my shame for the time being, now that I was going to get involved with high society, I'd be in deep shit if it spread.

I looked at Regnum. Perhaps losing interest in me once I stood up, he stayed by the fire, motionless.

Since he was an officer of the intelligence service, he wouldn't let slip any other information he had so easily. I didn't trust him personally, but I could count on that.

Besides, Leon was fully aware of the fact when he made the request, so I had no reason to worry.

Even though Regnum was a separate matter, it seemed that from here on, I should exercise as much discretion as possible when it came to telling people about my true nature. If I were to blab about it like I did with Irene, then I, as well as whoever I told, could be in danger.

At that point, I thought about Irene. Where did she run off to now? She wasn't with this group, I knew at least that much.

I should talk to Leon about it, I think.

—?

Suddenly, I felt a tingling on the back of my neck. Touching the spot with my hand, I scanned the surroundings.

The feeling was faint, and it wouldn't bother me under normal circumstances.

But at the same time, Regnum, who hadn't made a move until this point, looked around

in just the same way. Seeing that, I couldn't simply overlook what I otherwise would have dismissed as my imagination.

What the hell was that?

"Something wrong?"

I asked Regnum, unable to identify the source of my unease.

Maybe it was the sound of my voice, but Regnum stopped looking around. He fixed me with his stare before lapsing into thought.

"You don't know?"

"What?"

Ask me all you like, but I asked you because I don't know. That's all I got for you.

"Just now, I detected a presence. What, I don't know, of course, but someone was watching us... I'm repeating myself, but you truly didn't know?"

As he spoke, Regnum got to his feet and went to rouse the soldiers sleeping nearby. Several of them woke up with just a light shake. When they asked, "Is something wrong?", Regnum told them it was just in case.

While I watched them, I pondered the meaning of Regnum's words.

'You didn't know?'

I know. There's no way I wouldn't.

If there's something out there, it's impossible for me not to know.

Why? Because countless times on the battlefield, in the labyrinths, I've felt that [presence].

In simple terms, a [bad feeling].

The intuition that's saved me time and time again, I expect.

I felt it, yet I didn't realize until Regnum pointed it out to me.

Have my senses dulled? Has getting used to the safety of being under Leon's protection made me careless?

It's easy to think so. It has the ring of truth.

But is that really all there is to it?

"For now, I believe it best for you to return to the carriage... Keyes. Warren. Escort the Princess back to the carriage. After that, tell Rupert at the vanguard to be on the alert."

While I was deep in thought, Regnum issued orders to two of the soldiers he woke up, leaving me no room to argue.

I thought he was going to excessive lengths 'just in case', but given the lapse in my awareness earlier, I wasn't qualified to object.

"Well then, Princess, shall we?"

"Ah, alright..."

Urged on by the two soldiers, who were already armed with swords despite having just woken up, I started to walk while still feeling perplexed. I took a look around me, but I couldn't sense anything anymore. Is it just that I'm unable detect it? Or —

I had the feeling that I'd lost my edge, but ultimately, what was that presence? Thinking back on it now, it was a gaze. I realize that the sensation I felt was that of being watched.

The monsters living in these mountains, or something else?

...Well, thinking about it now isn't going to do me any good.

Once I reached the carriage, I sincerely thanked the soldiers and parted ways with them.

For some reason, I found their reaction to being thanked rather strange, but when I opened the door and saw Aira and Palmira sleeping like logs, I decided to do my best to forget about it.

In the end, nothing happened that day.



“What is that! What is that — ! Big Sister, that sweet smell!”

Perhaps because I forgot my hunger, when I returned to the carriage and lay down, it wasn't long before I fell asleep.

Then, in the morning, I woke up to Aira pestering me.

Palmira didn't say anything, but she silently turned up the pressure on me. 'Confess'. The message in her eyes was clear.

A smell. A sweet smell.

...I knew exactly where it came from.

“Well, I went on a little walk last night...”

What else could I do but tell them what happened?

But that aroma, huh. I probably smelled of marshmallows and chocolate. Let's have a good gargle after this.

“Mister Regnum, was he at the meeting?”

“The unhealthy-looking one.”

Seems like Aira remembered his name correctly. Compared to me and my shoddy memory, she was surprisingly put together. And unlike my assessment of him — 'gloomy' — Palmira came up with 'unhealthy' instead. It didn't matter which one you picked, neither of them sounded very good.

That said, there wasn't any particular need to protect him, so I nodded in agreement.

"Oh...? He likes sweet things, that's unexpected."

"Going by yourself, that's cheating."

"Even if you say something like that, well..."

Palmira was startlingly obstinate.

She might have a surprising fondness for sweets. Speaking of which, her opinion of Irene did a one-eighty when she got cake.

Think she might change her evaluation of Regnum too if he gives her marshmallows?

"Well, if we run into him again, we'll ask for some."

"Definitely."

I gave the serious Palmira a noncommittal reply.

All things considered, I slept great. When I think about it, even though I woke up in the middle of it, I reckon I've slept over half a day.

Usually, sleeping more than I needed to would tire me out, but for some reason, I feel crazy good. Like I'm bubbling with energy or something.

Is it because of the chocolate I had yesterday?

I mean sure, it should've had that kind of effect.

"Pardon me. I've brought your breakfast."

"Wow — thanks, Sieg."

There was a knock at the door, followed by the appearance of Sieg's now-familiar face. In his hands were a basket and a pitcher. Aira accepted them from him gleefully.

“There are boiled eggs today,”

said Palmira, surprised, as she rooted through the contents of the basket. She pulled out a boiled egg from inside.

“We restocked in Brellwandy. We have the portions for today and tomorrow.”

As he spoke, Sieg sat down by the entrance of the carriage and spread out his own share, which he’d wrapped up in cloth.

Watching him, I thought he was being overly familiar with us, but the truth is, I was the one who brought it up. To be honest, it seemed troublesome for him come out here to collect the basket every time, with leftover food inside, so I made the suggestion.

In the beginning he was terribly reserved, but now, he went along with little resistance.

“By the way, Sieg, how long will it take to get to the capital from here?”

“Let me think. About five days. We’ll be passing through the fortress midway, but the plan is to arrive there tomorrow,”

Sieg said, in response to Aira’s question. That sounded about right from what I remembered.

We’re passing through Basragate Fortress tomorrow? Will we stop there for a night? If so, I want to take a proper bath this time.

Taking the basket from Palmira, I peered inside.

Yep, those’re eggs alright.

“Huh?”

Speaking of eggs, where did that invocation stone I got yesterday go?

Somehow, the similarity in size reminded me. I stood up and patted down my waist and chest.

— Not here.

“Weird.”

“What’s wrong?”

I tried to think back. Yesterday, I should’ve been holding it in my hand when I got into the carriage. I didn’t specially put it into my pocket or anything... I think.

“Uh, I got a invocation stone from Regnum, but... well, s’alright. Maybe it’s hiding around here somewhere. I’ll look for it later.”

It fell down the gap between the cushions when I was sleeping, right?

Let’s go with that. Peeling an egg, I started on the breakfast in front of me.

Suddenly, I remembered.

[Life.]

Well sure, this wasn’t any different from life either, I thought.

But I bit into my peeled egg without any particularly strong feelings.



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