



すわんぷ・ガール!

Swamp Girl!

- Part 3 -

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[bitgray]

Chapter 38

Basragate Fortress

Constructed to protect the highway passing through the imperial capital's natural defenses to the north, the Sarcalnaa Mountains, Basragate Fortress is the empire's oldest stronghold.

Long ago, the Empire's influence extended only as far as the Sarcalnaa Mountains, its northern border. But after expanding to the south and east, it established a route heading north. This highway owed its existence to the Empire's invasion of the Sartein region north of Brellwandy.

Basragate Fortress was constructed at that time.

At the beginning of the invasion, the frontline base at Basragate Fortress also served as the bridgehead.

Because this was the only route the invasion could take, the push-and-pull, back-and-forth struggle between the two sides continued for quite a long time.

The Empire feared the possibility of the enemy defeating its advance force and launching a counter-invasion, so Basragate Fortress was upgraded and fortified repeatedly, developing into a fortress solely dedicated to military operations.

In the end, there was no counter-invasion and no opportunity for the fortress to display its defensive capabilities, but as the Empire's conquest of Sartein swept on, it turned its attention to maintaining the Sarcalnaa highway.

I've said this before, but the Sarcalnaa Mountains are also famous for the appearance of powerful monsters, so the fortress was also there to ensure safety on the road.

Incidentally, the empire's northern border currently runs along the northernmost edge of the Sartein, where the fortified city of Kakrawanga is giving the stink-eye to the Confederation, another of the three global superpowers. For this reason, it's not

wrong to say that Basragate Fortress now serves no military purpose.

“...and so we have the Basragate Fortress of today.”

My summary of Leon’s lecture, which I could hear coming from behind me: see above.

In truth, the story went on much longer, but more than half of it went in one ear and out the other. It was all about the history of the Empire, I think.

“Hmmm.”

And that was all I had to say about that. To be honest, I wasn’t really going to bother cramming that much information into my head.

More importantly, Basragate Fortress had actually come into view.

We finally made it? Thank god. Not gonna lie, I’ve had enough of carriage travel.

That was why I was hitching a ride on Leon’s horse right now.

Mostly thanks to Palmira’s willfulness, riding one of the horses had somehow become a regular thing. Not for Aira — she wasn’t all that eager to ride, but Palmira and I would go for a change of pace. However, neither I nor Palmira had any experience riding horses, so someone had to ride with us.

At first, everyone took turns on Leon’s horse, but now, Palmira mostly rode with Leopard and I went with Leon.

When I turned to the side, I could see Palmira leaning forward on Leopard’s horse, looking all war-like. Curiously enough, there was a certain charm to the sight.

No matter how I looked at it, she was out of place. With Leopard out of his full battle gear, they looked just like a grandpa out with his granddaughter.

The fortress before us was like a dam, blocking the mountain valley.

Tall ramparts completely closed off the way forward with a grave solemnity. Unsurprisingly for such an old installation, its walls were tinted so that they seemed

to melt into the terrain. They looked a bit like ruins, even, but from the flags atop the ramparts and the visible castle gate, where merchant caravans were gathered, anyone could tell that it was fully functional.

“Are we making a stop at the fortress?”

I asked, tilting my head to look up at Leon, who was closely glued to my back.

Truth be told, I want to stop. Since it’s just past noon now, I know it’ll be quick to travel the rest of the way to the capital all in one go, but it’ll still take about two days.

Given its age and the gathering of the merchant caravans, the fortress had to be equipped with the appropriate facilities.

Okay, to be blunt, I wanted to sleep somewhere other than the carriage. And I wanted a bath.

“That’s the plan, more or less. Our pace thus far has been a bit hurried, so it would be good to take a proper rest. To be honest, those taking this route on foot are much more exhausted than usual.”

True enough. Since that night, our speed had risen halfway to a forced march to get to this point.

Plus, we might’ve been taking the highway, but it was quite narrow, and we had to mind the cliff while simultaneously keeping an eye out for monsters. These guys were the Elite Guard, but that said, they’d been put under more stress than usual.

Unless there’s a need, don’t push the troops beyond their limits.

I didn’t know much about commanding, but maybe he was following that frequently shared piece of common sense.

Not that many others did.

“Gotcha. Then I should be getting back to the carriage soon.”

“No, let’s go like this.”

“Ehh?”

I’ve been lulled into a false sense of security.

Recently, I’ve gotten a little more used to being called ‘Princess’ by the soldiers. But entering a place I’ve never been before, like *this*...

It was pretty long overdue, but earlier, I was thinking: How about I get used to being called Princess?

Though I’d heard about it from Rupert in Telaberan, I asked Sieg how others really saw us. As the story goes, [Leon found his long-lost childhood friend, so he’s taking care of her]. Who the hell thought that up?

But, in terms of [Chris’s] story, I certainly wouldn’t call it a lie.

It’s all a little too neat, huh. But considering fact is stranger than fiction, you might even say that this is far more believable.

“The main point is, you’ll be my fiancée in the capital, so it’ll be hard on me if you don’t adjust,”

Leon said, shamelessly.

Oh yeah, that’s true.

So much happened on the way here that it slipped my mind, but that was half my objective in going to the capital to begin with.

The other half was to collect my compensation for the slavery sting, but that had been pushed even further to the back of my mind.

‘Get used to it.’ So I’m told, but honestly, I don’t want to get used to it any more than I already have. For me, this is already more than enough... well, the only way I see this going is with me crossing a dangerous line.

“Oh, for god’s sake... c’mon, lemme down.”

Because he had a point, my resistance didn’t have any real bite in it.

I didn't just ride with Leon, I couldn't even get down without him. Leon was holding the reins, of course, so in a sense, sitting in front of him had trapped me.

Looks like I'm not getting out of this one...

We approached the gate. I had no other choice but to give up.



It didn't take long to pass through the gates.

I'd gone through this place many times in the past for one thing or another, but making a flashy entrance on horseback was a first for me. It was a fresh experience, in a way.

This was the imperial capital's northern doorstep — naturally, entrants had to undergo inspection. But maybe they knew we were army, or maybe someone on our side had sent advance notice, because we strolled right on in. Casting a sidelong glance at the merchants undergoing inspection — southbound, like us — I went through the gates.

Leon would stand out even if he were left to his own devices, but now he was riding a horse together with a woman.

I could see why, but coming out from the mass of caravans, passing through the gate, and even after getting inside, he was naturally the center of attention.

Leon was probably used to it. Paying the stares no mind, he urged the horse forward.

I, on the other hand, had never been scrutinized by so many curious eyes in my life. It made me uncomfortable. I had no choice to but to look down and shrink down as small as possible in front of Leon.

Uh, how do I put this? I feel like it's not Leon those gazes are focusing on, but me.

"...Quit screwing around, you bastard..."

"Well, it can't be helped, you know."

I'm so embarrassed I could just drop dead. Just what kind of sick punishment is this? Leon's carefree attitude pisses me off.

I want to get to wherever we're going and take refuge in a room as soon as possible. Then, if I can, I'm wiping this moment from my memory forever. I'm gonna drink today. I wanna drink until I forget.

"Lord Leon!"

While I sat there, curled up as small as possible, someone came out. I turned my face in the direction of that voice.

There stood a big man in the prime of his life. At first glance, I thought he was a mountain bandit.

His heavily scarred face sported an eyepatch; by intuition alone, I could tell the giant had a history of [long military service]. Probably had a nickname too. From his appearance, he had to be some big shot here at the fortress.

He had several young soldiers by his side like attendants.

"Ah, Gary. Sorry to make you come all the way out here."

"No, not at all! Thank you for your hard work on the operation. The details... I only know what I've heard, but it was a sordid business, wasn't it!?"

As Leon dismounted, he offered some words of thanks to the man he called Gary. And Gary, facing him, responded with a bighearted grin.

Or should I say it's his voice that's big? And heroic, in contrast to his appearance.

Calling the slavers 'sordid', he gave me an appraising look. That said, I wasn't grossed out by it. But it did make me very uncomfortable. Well, whatever, just get me off this damn horse already.

"The operation proceeded without a hitch. She used to be an acquaintance of mine, so I'm giving her shelter."

Standing in front of me, Leon held onto me on both sides and swiftly lifted me off the

horse.

In the distance, I could see a soldier running over with something like a stepstool. He probably went to get it just for this. Man, if I'd just waited. I could feel the embarrassment all the way to the bottom of my heart.

"Is that so! Gary Crossford, at your service! I am the general in command of this fortress! This is my adjutant, Percival Belgaia. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, beautiful young lady."

Nudged forward to stand in front of Gary, I got a booming but surprisingly genteel introduction.

I wouldn't have thought so myself, but Gary was a general. The soldier beside him, his polar opposite, also offered me some light pleasantries to go with his introduction.

This was my first time receiving a warm welcome from people of such status, Leon excepted, and I had no idea what I was supposed to do.

At a loss, I looked at Leon.

"This is Christine Rouelle Felmiran,"

said Leon, under my gaze.

Though the words shocked me to the core, Leon urged me on with his eyes, so I returned the others' courtesy.

In this situation, it would be —

"Please call me Chris."

Telling myself to keep up the act, I curtsied, lightly holding the hem of my dress as I lowered my head.

I had no idea if I did it right, but that was how I imagined an upper-class lady would introduce herself.

Though, asking them to call me Chris was just me taking a little revenge on Leon.

Leon probably meant to signal me that our performance would start here, but for me, I couldn't help but have more and more complicated feelings about becoming [Chris].

"This is... I appreciate the courtesy, Chris. However—"

Did I pull it off? Or did I screw up? My heart was pounding as Gary breathed in a bit sharply, alternating his gaze between Leon and me.

The hell? Did I do something wrong...?

"However, this is the first time I've seen a woman who could stand on even footing with Lord Leon."

Hearing his unexpected words, I turned rigid in a snap.

Well, in terms of appearance, maybe? I haven't really thought about it, but I'm an unrivaled — gosh, what's the word. Uh, nope, it's not coming to me.

Because I explicitly viewed my stay in this body as a transient one before, I had objectively arrived at the same assessment, but now that I was adjusting to this body and my new circumstances, I didn't want to think of myself as beautiful. That would be grade-A embarrassment.

"At the moment, she's also tired from the long journey. Could you prepare a room for her, if possible, a bath?"

At a loss for words and deeply uncomfortable, Leon's words came as a relief to me. Frankly, wondering when I'd slip up had me on edge.

"Gary, we've got three women under our protection. Keep that in mind when you're getting things ready."

"Leopard, is that you!... You bastard, I shouldn't underestimate you either!"

"Shut it."

Without me noticing, Leopard had gotten off his horse and come over with Aira and Palmira in tow. Judging from their exchange, he and Gary were old friends.

They certainly had a tendency to act the same way.

“I am Aira.”

“Palmira.”

Aira, more convincingly than me, and Palmira, her hand resting on her sword, performed the appropriate courtesies.

I’ve got nothing to say about Aira, but just how does Palmira’s get-up come across to these guys? I might not have been worried, but I was awfully curious.

“Oh, here are more lovely young ladies! The rooms and baths have already been prepared. It won’t be much, but we plan to hold a banquet in recognition of the Elite Guard’s service, so if you like, please attend!”

Fortunately, it looked like the heat was completely off me now.

Palmira’s expression was dissatisfied, but it didn’t really matter.

Anyway, I’m getting in that bath.

Without giving much thought to the banquet coming afterward, I followed after Leon and Gary as they started walking.

Chapter 39

Reunion

“Ahhh, I’m coming back to life.”

Who’s that in the bath, sighing deep enough for his soul to come out with it? This guy.

The warmth seeping into my submerged body, and the sensation of the grime on my limbs falling away — I don’t have the words to describe just how *nice* it felt.

The baths in the fortress were surprisingly high-class. Spacious, too. They were usually used by the soldiers, probably. Although the design was completely devoted to practicality, fortunately, there were proper baths to soak in.

Early afternoon. I imagine that a little later, this room will be packed with the rough soldiers who regularly used it.

That’s why they prepared the baths ahead of time for our use, it seems.

“Ahhhh... This is bliss.”

“.....”

Yeah, *our* use’.

I expected as much, but though the baths are reserved right now, we didn’t have the luxury of going in one at a time. Plus, Leon and the Elite Guard needed to use it too. So no taking our sweet time in here either.

As a result, all three of us went in at once.

Of course, this meant that they'd be exposing their bodies before me, but first off, they didn't seem to be concerned about it at all, and I myself didn't feel particularly awkward or excited. I wasn't embarrassed either, so we happily went in together without incident.

Aira was more developed than her age would suggest — if I were a sleaze, I'd comment on her huge breasts, which floated to the surface as she soaked. Her pose left nothing to the imagination. Her carefree, childishly naïve face exposed to the air, she was busy enjoying the bath to the fullest. Palmira being Palmira, her flushed face was half-hidden underwater, maybe because of the depth of the pool. She turned her half-submerged face to me.

I'm sure she's relaxing in her own way. Probably.

But this was actually my first time taking a bath with two other people.

On Leon's estate, the maids were there, but the three of us entered separately. I'm sure that at that time, in the very awkward event that we all went in together, I might've been a little concerned too.

Even so, the three of us have already shared the same space, already spent several days together. We're past the stage where we'd care about that stuff. Or rather, at this point, it's *caring* that would be embarrassing.

"Hey, so, I wonder we should do about the banquet."

Relaxed, I decided to consult them about my current troubles.

Right, the banquet.

Maybe if I were attending as a man, I would cut loose and enjoy myself, but because Leon's already implicitly set things in motion, wouldn't I have to play a noble lady? Doubts gnawed at me.

I probably should, I think. But it shouldn't come as any surprise that I know too little to act the part.

Though I managed to get past Gary earlier, I won't be able to keep up a perfect facade this time.

What's more, the entire Elite Guard usually takes part in the recognition ceremony. They might call me 'Princess' and stuff, but I've been pretty much acting like myself in front of them until now.

It's going to be really embarrassing to put on such a weird show in front of those guys. I get the feeling that it might even send Rupert into hysterics.

"Ah, how fussy. We seemed to get along with everyone, so it'll generally be fine, won't it?"

"gurgle gurgle"

I understand. I was an idiot to ask these two. Palmira and Aira obviously weren't worried about it either way.

But Aira's ambivalent response had some merit to it.

I wonder if it'd be alright. Wouldn't it put Leon on the spot...?

Nah, screw him. Not like it's my problem.

"Well, I'll act as appropriate?"

Arriving at a conclusion, I stood up from the bath. It seemed to be gradually coming to a boil.

"Even so, Big Sister. Isn't your body lovely? I'm jealous... there isn't a single blemish."

Aira, still lazily immersed in the water, said something disturbing.

...But then, she wasn't wrong.

I looked at my hands. They had smooth skin so pale it seemed translucent; 'alabaster' captured its essence perfectly.

Although I traced my fingers along my arms to my fingertips, I wasn't sucked in at all.

This is just my opinion, but they're like a finely-crafted doll's.

But this is just temporary. Even if it's pretty much perfect, I'm going cut my ties and abandon it. Being an object of admiration did nothing but complicate my feelings.

“Ei — ”

“Dwahh!”

While I was agonizing, something suddenly leaned on me from behind.

By which I mean Aira. That remarkable duo I mentioned earlier was pushed up against my back. At the same time, two hands circled around to my front, and I found myself being hugged tightly from behind.

“Wah-h-hey! What're you doing! Let go of me!”

“Heehee, but Big Sister, you're so pretty. Hey, this is what you do when someone's troubled, right? Just like when you were with Lord Leon — !”

The terrible two glued to my back pressed against me softly. Though it would be natural, I wasn't the least bit happy. Just embarrassed. Wait, Aira should be the embarrassed one, not me.

No, I'm still embarrassed. When she reminded me that I did the same thing to Leon, I thought, 'Quit screwing around' and my eyes saw red.

“Aahhh, just as smooth as I thought... oh, I can't take it anymore...”

“~~~~-!!”

Stupid Aira's sigh brushed across my ear.

A fearful shiver ran through me. I fought tooth and nail to break out of Aira's hold, but I knew I was weaker than her. That was simple fact. It was still gut-wrenching, but it wasn't as bad as it used to be.

That's right. I completely forgot, but she pulled something similar back in the slave wagon. Too much happened after that, and it completely slipped my mind.

The hands around me slid along as if tracing the contours of my stomach, before they gradually trailed their way up to my chest.

"Big Sister, your breasts are nicely shaped, aren't they~"

"-! Idiot-! You've — got a pair — of your own, go rub *them* — ! — !"

No matter how you slice it, Aira's indecent hands were doing a fine job of violating me. Something I didn't want to identify knocked against my brain. Every time I was just about to release my voice along with my strange breathing, I grit my teeth and fought it back.

As this exchange of offense and defense unfolded, I didn't notice Palmira until her expressionless — or rather, still half-submerged face appeared before my eyes.

For a moment, I tried to get out a cry for help, but when I saw her eyes, more focused than usual, and her face, flushed a deep red that was difficult to explain by the bath alone, I swallowed back my words.

"gurgle gurgle"

'More of this — !?'

I retorted, growing desperate.

Suddenly, Palmira's hands lunged straight from the bathtub at me. As I shook, seized by a dark premonition, those two palms made for my che —

"Owowowow! They're gonna come off! Palmira! They're gonna — ! Uwah!"

Oh, there was something that looked like clothing folded up and placed on top of the shelf.

Without giving it much thought, I picked up... a dress.

A dress.

For me. To wear.

Well, come to think of it, I did wear dresses at Leon's estate.

But I didn't know how to put them on. Back then, this was handled by the maids too. I didn't learn all the ins and outs of putting them on.

There were three of them.

By what criteria were they chosen, or perhaps, by who? The question bothers me, but this frilly black and white one is Palmira's size, at least.

Then, the red one with the gaping chest definitely goes to Aira.

So by process of elimination, this rather short one in light indigo is mine?

Alright, seriously, who picked these? Leon? Seems like it could only be him.

At the very least, my gut tells me that no one in the fortress would choose these. No, before that, why does a dress like this even exist? That's the real mystery here.

As I puzzled over it, there was a knock at the dressing room door.

After a moment's thought, someone flung it open and barreled inside. Someone with a familiar face.

"Hi, long time no see!"

"Irene!"

It was none other than Irene, the person who disappeared from the estate the day

after hearing my confession. Sure, it felt like it'd been a while, but actually, it had only been ten days at most.

Apart from that, I was a bit worried about her as someone who was in on my secret, but learning that it was a completely baseless fear was an astounding let-down.

"Just what have you been up to since then?"

"Whoa, what is up with you guys? At least put on some underwear. By the way, what're you doing over there, Aira?"

Ignoring my question, Irene strolled right in.

Something about the way she only did things at her own pace put me in a nostalgic mood.

"Big Sister hates me, she... against my will..."

Aira said, still sitting on the ground. Hearing that, Irene gave me a look, like 'Seriously?'

"Are you an idiot? Quit screwing around. If anyone got manhandled, it was me."

My thoughtlessly chosen words deepened the 'Seriously?' on Irene's face.

"Uh — well — more importantly, what did you come here for?"

"Ah, right. Right now, I'm the only woman here, so Lord Leon told me to check on how things were going... so get your butts moving. Don't tell me I have to dress you? I'm not a maid, you know."

Irene World, where everything proceeds on Irene's schedule. It was comfortable, to a certain extent, but bothersome. Although she'd revised her opinion of Irene, even Palmira was now wearing the same expression she had when she called Irene 'noisy'.

“Anyway, put your underwear on yourselves, okay? I can see that it’s the dresses you’re having trouble with. Ah, and then makeup. You may be a tranny, but looks are still important.”

“.....”

“What?”

“No, nothing.”

It wasn’t nothing. Honestly, I was a little moved that someone remembered the fact that I was a man.

To tell you the truth, I felt like no one around me treated me as a man anymore, not really. In a sense, this was new for me, and unconsciously, my eyes grew hot.

“Hey, hey, hurry up. The men are coming in after this, so there’s no time to take it slow! Ah–, dry your hair properly!”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Kay.”

The two of them obediently started to towel off their hair. Irene was obviously cracking the whip, but much as I hated to admit it, she was right. So I followed suit.

“Mm, right, so I returned to the capital first with the First Platoon. A lot happened, and I got stranded here by myself. Well, I guess I was waiting for you?”

For a moment, I didn’t know what she was talking about, then it clicked: it was the answer to my first question. ‘Wasn’t I asking the questions?’ I thought, but it was Irene. I decided to ignore it as best as I could.

“Waiting — for me?”

Towel covering my head, underwear on, I turned back to Irene.

“Right, that’s right. Master... ah, my magic teacher, I mean. I saw him, but when I told him about you, he gave me something to pass on to you.”

Paying no attention to Irene roughly rubbing the towel against my head, but when she said something I couldn’t overlook, I asked her in a panic,

“You mean, you told him about me?”

“Ah, yeah. Sorry. But it’s Master, I can’t hide anything from him... I did tell him that it was a secret, and he’s also a reliable person, so I don’t think he’s told anyone.”

“Just knowing it’s [your] master is killing my confidence.”

I didn’t know what kind of person this ‘Master’ was, but as much as I didn’t want to, I raised the number of people in on my secret to six.

But this sixth person. Not only did I know nothing about his true nature, what the hell was he trying to pawn off on me?

“I said I was sorry! Look, I haven’t told anyone else. I’ll give you Master’s gift later. Forget that for now, hurry up and change. Airi and Polly, you hurry too.”

My doubts were endless, but in the end, sucked into Irene’s pace, we did as she said. Because at the end of the day, I knew very well that it was the fastest way.

Author’s Notes

Ero and guro are the flowers of entertainment...

Because it’s a rare occasion, guro aside, I put that kind of scene into the story.

I didn't think it could fall apart in barely a single chapter.

Chapter 40

The Drunk

The banquet was held in the hall after dusk.

I was surprised to find that it had one, despite being a fortress, but given its location, its lengthy history, and its constant additions, it wasn't much different from a small-scale city.

A trade center must be equipped, at minimum, with an inn and a tavern. So with everything from general stores and bakeries to a barbershop, the fortress had practically all the same facilities as a mid-size trade quarter.

What was missing was a brothel. Ah yes, the military base. Literally the defender of the final frontier.

Those structures served the public, but if I had to say, the fortress itself, despite its military roots, bore a strong resemblance to a lord's castle.

The baths were like that too. Enormous halls, spacious restaurants — hell, they even had a lounge.

Though it battled monsters on a regular basis, the fortress had no experience with large-scale engagements. As such, it seemed that the fortress evolved until it was military in name only.

I steeled my resolve and stepped inside the hall. In an instant, all eyes fell on us, and a commotion swept the room.

There were already a great number of people crammed inside. Or rather, it looked like we were the last to arrive. I felt the urge to curse whoever decided on this timing.

Unable to endure the stares, I involuntarily lowered my face, but a moment's glance was enough to tell me that everyone inside was someone I'd seen before.

Long story short, it was the appreciation banquet, as Gary said.

There were only members of the Elite Guard as far as I could see, but there would

probably be some of the fortress's people mixed in. At the very least, its general, Gary, and his aide, Percival, were naturally in attendance.

My head bowed under all the attention, I proceeded inside the hall as slowly as possible.

I couldn't even pick up the voices of Aira and Palmira, who should be following me. Maybe they found the atmosphere overwhelming, as any reasonable person would.

I was already on the brink of making a run for it by myself, but in this dress, short as it was, I was scared that my escape attempt would end in a magnificent headfirst slide.

Keeping as tight a rein on my emotions as possible, I advanced further inside the vast hall to find a row of familiar faces. Four of them: Leon, Leopard, Gary, and Percival. Must be the nobles' seating over there.

Even Leon and Leopard had switched out their usual plain uniforms for somewhat fancier clothing — probably the aristocracy's formal dress. Well, we were in dresses ourselves, so maybe that was just how things were done.

Given the atmosphere, it seemed as if it wasn't just four people waiting on us, but everyone there.

'Oh, no need to wait, just start without us,' I thought bitterly to myself, but helpless, truly helpless, I walked forward until I stood in front of Leon. As I had with Gary, I lightly picked up the hem of my dress and apologized for making them wait.

I repeated the process with Gary. I had absolutely no idea if that was the right order.

"We've kept you waiting."

'I offer you my deepest apologies for keeping you waiting'? Or, 'the impoliteness of keeping you waiting'? I wrestled with the wording, but ultimately decided to keep it simple.

When I accidentally lifted my face, I saw four pairs of eyes staring back at me. They all seemed to be taken aback. Only Leon wore a slight half-smile.

What's with this response? Did I do something weird? Or is it that? Are they disgusted

with me for doing something that doesn't suit me? Are they sneering at me?

I got a bit angry at the thought, but I decided to stay patient. Frankly, I couldn't stop just because of a little frustration. Not now.

"...How beautiful. That was what I thought when I met you earlier, but now, I don't even have the words to express my admiration..."

said Gary, sighing.

Whoa there, pops, since when were you this kind of character? Weren't you more the loud and hearty type? The kind that literally roars with laughter? Oi, what're you blushing for?

I looked at Percival, seated beside him. The moment our eyes met, he turned away.

Leopard had something like approval on his face, and when I finally looked at Leon, he gave me a wry smile, looking a bit rueful. Seems like *someone's* having fun. That kinda pisses me off.

"...With that, I thank you all for your hard work. As you all know, the banquet today is taking place because of the goodwill of this fortress's commander, General Crossford. We're still on the road home, but tonight, I want you all to make the most of his hospitality and build up your spirits for tomorrow!"

While I was grumbling inside, 'Anything'll do, just get started already!', Leon made his announcement as if he'd read my mind.

"It is my good fortune that I am able to welcome you, ladies and gentlemen of the Second Division elite, pride of the Empire, to this fortress today! It may be presumptuous of me to say so, but I am grateful to be allowed to prepare this modest banquet for you. Everyone, I want you to enjoy yourself to the fullest! And then some more!"

After him, Gary enthusiastically announced the start to the festivities. It was my first time participating in something like this, but I admired the speeches with an onlooker's detachment. I could see why they were important, setting the tone. But at the same time, I thought it was kind of a hassle.

Having received the signal to start, soldiers were popping open bottles of alcohol, and everyone reached their hands out to the spectacular spread as they pleased. The entire hall fell into a disorganized muddle all at once, and for some reason, we felt like we'd been left behind.

Would it be bad if I joined in on the eating and drinking? I guess it would be, huh... When I glanced over at Leon, a waiter brought over a glass and offered it to me. It was filled with some kind of faint golden liquid.

I accepted it and give it a casual sniff. It had a refreshing fruitiness to it. Wine, is it...? I thought it was, but there was something different about it.

Dubious, I took a small sip.

“Mm, mm!”

The cold liquid bubbled across my tongue. I almost spat it out by reflex, but I clapped my mouth shut.

“Mm...”

No matter how long I held it in my mouth, the tingling wouldn't fade, so I could only swallow it. I could feel it fizzing as it slid down my throat. Shutting my eyes, I endured the indescribable sensation.

“Haa... –”

I sighed.

But it wasn't the relief that followed the end of an uncomfortable experience — it was surprise.

Sure, I wasn't expecting the bubbiness, but the sweet fruitiness that filled my mouth leaves me incredibly pleased.

If I had to pick a single word, I'd go with 'delicious'. One hundred percent.

“Wh... What might this be, if you’ll pardon my asking?”

I came this close to asking ‘What is this stuff’ before I hastily amended my wording. Looking more closely at the remaining liquid, I noticed the small bubbles rising from the bottom of the glass. That must be the source of the fizziness, but as a clueless first-timer, I didn’t even know what this stuff was called. What I did know was that it was something like wine. Something with alcohol in it. That’s about it.

“Hahaha! Tickled your fancy, did it!? This is a type of wine that produces bubbles, known as ‘sparkling wine’! It’s alcohol made in my hometown down in southern Belenan, but I do have a few bottles stored at the fortress. Given the occasion, I had it brought out.”

I didn’t know if it was good or bad as far as booze went, but it had to be good stuff. Gary was so proud of it. Well, I could see why.

I looked over my shoulder at Aira and Palmira just as they drank from their own glasses of sparkling wine. Wait, they were probably waiting for me to drink it first, weren’t they? Like they were using me to test for poison.

“~~~~-!”

“!!!”

Both pairs of eyes went round with surprise.

Oh, it’s kinda fun, watching them. I see, this is what Leon and Gary were doing. I smiled, mocking myself.

Well, that didn’t change the fact that this mystery booze was damn tasty. I knocked back what remained in my glass.



I should have known better. I’d learned about this body’s weakness to alcohol during my time at Leon’s estate.

Or was getting carried away and drinking too much on an empty stomach to blame?
Maybe, maybe, it's both?

I didn't know how much time had already passed.

But seeing that the banquet was still going on, it might not have been long yet.

Anyway, I was seriously wasted. Couldn't even stand without swaying.

And I was in a very, *very* good mood.

In one hand, I had a glass of sparkling wine. I took a small mouthful. Amazing how easy it is to drink, it tastes heavenly.

“Ehehehehehe — ”

Seeing Leon in front of me, looking a little concerned, I burst out laughing. No reason, I just wanted to. It was fun.

It was fun, so I took Leon's hand and walked out to the main part of the hall.

“Miss Chris?”

Since I didn't eat much, I was hungry. The soldiers were all busy drinking, so there was still food left.

It looks so good. Too good to waste. I gotta eat it.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Leon following after me with a wry smile. ‘Course he is. I'm pulling on his hand, after all.

But I don't mean to be pushy. It's just nice hanging out with Leon. He's a good guy, Leon.

“I'm staaarviiing... ahahaha.”

Pushing my way past surprised soldiers, my eyes fell on a meatloaf sitting on the table. It looked rich and so, so delicious.

“I wanna eat that. Hold on.”

I pushed the glass in my hand onto Leon and approached the meatloaf. Meat. Yeah, it’s meat. I thought so. It looks mouthwatering.

I purred and looked around for a fork or something.

Nothing.

But I found something good. It was a small piece of bread. A moment later I thought of a great idea, and with a big smile, I took it and broke it in two.

Then I stuck a slice of meatloaf between the pieces. Like this, I raised it to my mouth.

“Mmm, dewiffuff.”

I was right. As I chewed, the richness of the meat and the umami of the bread filled my mouth. This is happiness.

Swallowing, I was about to take another bite when I made eye contact with a dumbfounded Leon.

Yeah, I’ll let Leon have a taste of my amazing invention too.

“Leon, this is really good, try it.”

And right then, I take my bitten meatloaf-bread combo and put it up to Leon’s mouth.

With the food right in his face, his expression grew terribly perplexed.

What? You made me drink some weird stuff earlier, I can’t return the favor?

What a rude guy.

“C’mon, try it. It’s super good.”

“V-Very well.”

Leon reached his hand out for the bread.

Why is this guy such a pain in the ass? Can’t he just eat it like it is?

Grabbing Leon’s outstretched hand, I then shoved the bread into his mouth.

“Mm!”

“...What a pain.”

His brow furrowed, Leon gave in with a smile of surrender and bit into the bread I stuck in his face.

A commotion went up around us. I hadn’t noticed, but at some point, we’d become the center of attention. ‘What’s with you guys?’ I shot them a look, then returned my gaze to Leon.

“It’s good, right?”

“Uh, yes. It certainly is... I was surprised. It’s my first time eating this way.”

“Ahahahaha — ”

There was something hilarious about Leon saying something like that so seriously, and I burst into laughter again. I polished off the remaining half of the sandwich. Mm, that hits the spot. Everyone oughta give it a try.

My mood getting even better, I stole my glass back from Leon’s hand and downed the whole thing at once.

“Hoo~. Oh, it’s all gone...”

I ran out of sparkling wine, so I reached out for a nearby bottle.
Leon's hand came from behind me and gently restrained mine.

"Miss Chris, haven't you had too much already?"

I turned my head to look at him. His expression had grown concerned again.
He's been awfully troubled today, huh? Well, I'm the one messing with him though.

"Ehehehe~"

I looped my hands around Leon's neck above my head. For some reason, I was getting the urge to make troubled Leon even more so.

I could feel the temperature of the back of his neck through my wrists. Settling in comfortably, I exerted just a little strength to pull his face toward mine. Man, does he look flustered now.

Some sort of shiver ran through me. The part of me that knew I couldn't do this set off warning bells in my head.

But it was exactly because of that awareness that I was excited to cross that line.

"Leeeooon~"

My heart was racing. This feeling is *not* good.

The gears in my head are turning furiously. I can't think straight. My consciousness is a mess, I know that.

My vision is growing hazy. I can't even get a good look at Leon's face now.

Ah, this is bad. My consciousness is scattering in the wind.

And yet.

The sensation against my hands. The temperature. The peace of mind that comes from his presence beside me.

I knew it all. And I obediently let go of my consciousness.

Chapter 41

Attack

Gloop, gloop.

Slowly, I sink to the bottom.

In those murky depths, in that total darkness, I can't tell if my eyes are open or closed.

Water gliding, coiling, slips past my body.

Down, down.

Without struggle, without despair, without consciousness, without a heart, I descend to the bottom.

I don't know when I entered.

I don't know when I'll arrive.

Though I can only fear the unknown, without a heart, there's nothing to feel.

I just fall.

I don't know when I'll get there, but I head for the bottom.

It's the perfect balance between a moment and eternity.

Something snakes around my body, something other than water.

I have no way of knowing what it is.

But strand after strand clings to me, as if tracing the contours of my body, as if making it anew.

As if molding a heart, a blank slate.

It was a clear transformation. I —

I —.

My eyes still can't see.

My hands, my legs won't move.

But my mind screams. I have to rise from this place.

*My soul trembling, my will burning, my heart shining, I rise to the water's surface.
As naturally as going to sleep in the evening to awaken the next day.*

— *Rising from this swamp, I begin.*



I woke up.

It was perfectly normal — no, not really. I knew that from a glance around the pitch-black room.

It was still dark. Dawn hadn't broken yet.

The feel of the soft blanket wrapped around my body. I was lying in bed.

But something felt wrong. Not the waking up. It was that strange feeling.

It was a dream, but just a little earlier, it felt like something different... I couldn't remember.

My wits still scattered, I lifted my sunken body off the bed.

“Ugh-!!”

For a moment, a stabbing headache attacked me. That woke me up all the way.

What's with this headache?

I thought, but for just one moment. Hazily, I recalled what happened last night.

I was pretty sure I drank quite a lot of that mystery booze Leon recommended to me.

I didn't have a single memory of anything that happened afterwards, but look, I drank *that much*. Long story short, I was hungover. The evidence: I was feeling awfully queasy.

But what's this about, waking up this late at night?

Between the nausea and the headache, I definitely wasn't going to get any more sleep tonight.

“Ueehh.”

Even so, the pain in my head was hard to take, but more than that, my nausea was getting worse. When I opened my eyes, my insides definitely woke up too. I felt something gradually rising from the area around my stomach.

I'm going to hurl.

Clapping my hand to my mouth, I looked around the room, just barely able to see by the tiny amount of light streaming in from outside. There's no way I can throw up on the bed. Is there anything in here?

The room was surprisingly dreary, and I was the only one in it. Where did Aira and Palmira go? Are they by themselves, like me?

Aside from the bed, the window and the simple desk beside it were the only things to catch my eye. A washbasin and towel were placed on the desk. A pitcher and upside-down cup had been placed next to them.

These were definitely here so I could wash my face after getting up, right? But I couldn't care less about stuff like that. I crawled off the bed, holding my throbbing head as I tried to slowly hurry over to the washbasin.

“UeeeeEEEEeehhh.”

When I finally struggled my way there, I released the near-critical pressure surging up from my stomach.

Panting and wheezing, I went again — and again, and again. In the quiet room, there were only the sounds of my groaning and retching.

“Ughhu... uh.”

Thanks to the strain of vomiting, the headache tightened like a vise, but I still felt just a little bit better.

There was an awful pounding at my temples, but as I held my head, it eased up bit by bit.

“Hoooo... haa.”

Forcing myself to take several deep breaths, I calmed my mind and body.

Picking up the pitcher, I didn't bother with the cup, instead directly gulping down water from the spout.

The cold water washed the remaining vomit in my throat back down to my stomach. I drank too much and made myself sick again, so half of it ended up in the washbasin.

Then, I used the towel to wipe off the tears and snot and other miserable things that were sure to be all over my face.

“Phew.”

I had finally calmed down. My head still hurt, but throwing up had been the worst of it.

Even so, I wanted some fresh air. The stuff in the washbasin was turning the air in the room foul.

I went over to the window and threw open the shutters.

At that same moment, a fairly strong wind blew into the room. And it was cold. Thanks to the altitude here in the mountains, maybe?

But right now, I found that cold wind pleasant. Closing my eyes, I leaned forward and let it wash over my entire body. My headache seemed to improve along with the cooling of my body.

Opening my eyes, I surveyed my surroundings.

The room at the Brellwandy garrison couldn't even compare to this one, located so high up. Looking down, I couldn't even tell how many floors up I was.

But that was the very reason that the view here was wonderful. Beyond the walls that formed the city's perimeter, I could see mountains. And above them, a sprawling sky of stars.

There were more clouds in the sky now than there were on the way here, their pure black shadows gliding quickly along. The wind might be stronger up in the sky.

Dropping my line of sight again, I could see pretty pinpricks of light.

A sign that even at this time of night, many people were still out and about.

Fire blazed on top of the strategically placed watchtower, sentries huddled around and tending to it.

Then, the light from a tavern where merchants, or maybe off-duty soldiers, were walking around drinking. The lights of an inn.

Looking at them from above, they looked like finely crafted models. Human activity in miniature. The dancing lights. Me, looking down at them all.

If God is watching us, this is how we must look.

As I mulled it over, it certainly felt nice, and I was awfully satisfied with myself.

At least, I wanted to think that I was just another human under heaven's gaze, even now. As pleasant as it was to look down from here, I didn't want to make a habit of it.

Settling back from the window, I reached out my hand to close the shutters — and I saw it. On top of the outer walls. A black human shadow.

Well, there wasn't really anything wrong with that. A sentry? Yeah, that would make sense.

But something wasn't right. I couldn't put my finger on it, so I squinted my eyes.

“?”

I couldn't make it out very well.

It was pretty far away. Just my imagination after all. I put my hand on the window frame, about to close the window again.

Pii —

“...-!?”

At that moment, an shrill noise pierced my ears. It was grating; just listening to it threw me off-balance.

I looked outside, searching for the source.

Sure enough, it was coming from the shadow atop the wall that I'd just spotted. Even at this distance, I could tell. Because it was holding something to its mouth. This was probably the sound of a flute.

Then, the source of that wrongness became clear to me.

Big.

It was far away, and there was nothing nearby to use as a frame of reference, so I didn't realize. It was a shadow of considerable size. If it belonged to a human, it would have to be something at least two meters tall.

And it was also strange that there were no reference objects nearby.

Why? Because on top of the opposite well, I could see at least three sentries on duty.

That's right, three.

And not much earlier, that other wall had been manned by three people as well. But now it was one, and that one was blowing a strange flute.

Something's fishy here.

Even though the ear-piercing sound of the flute reached me, all the way other here, the fortress took no action.

Aren't they hearing this? Or is it that they can't?

If so, then what's with this flute? What the hell is that shadow?

Staring at it, I felt a tingling at the nape of my neck. I touched my hand to it.

The same as the sensation I'd felt when I was with Regnum that night on the mountain road.

In other words, an ugly premonition. An unpleasant presence.

But it seems like people still hadn't noticed it.

Should I leave the room and raise the alarm?

Just as the thought crossed my mind, the shadow took the flute from its mouth and looked right at me.

“!!!”

Feeling a chill running through my entire body, I took a sharp breath.

This distance, this darkness. There was no light in my room.

And yet I was convinced that the shadow had clearly detected my gaze.

Then, on that face I shouldn't even be able to see, was a smile —

“-!”

Flooded by instinctual fear, I backed away from the window and made a mad rush for the door.

Hurry, I have to tell somebody. That thing is dangerous.

Kang kang kang —

At the same time, a shrill chiming suddenly echoed from outside the window.

Its range increased by a bit.

Just what the hell was that? It was just a moment's thought.

I instantly understood what it meant.

— Attack.

What, *now!*?

Just as my hand hit the doorknob, I looked back over my shoulder.

I couldn't see the shadow on the other side of the window. Instead, something colossal roared like thunder next to the window as it passed by at high speed.

GROOORR —

The sound and shockwaves arrived on a delay.

“Waah-!?”

The window I left open was blown to smithereens, fragments scattering into the room. I hastily opened the door and tumbled out into the hallway. The room was pitch-black inside, but the hallway was lit. The radiance stopped me dead in my tracks for an instant, but it wasn't that bright to begin with, so my eyes adjusted right away.

With a heavy *koom*, the entire hallway shakes.

No. That sense of alarm didn't come from the shadow. It came from whatever flashed past the window just now.

Then what was that enormous thing?

Probably a monster. Something big that flies in the sky? Only one comes to mind — the king of monsters. A dragon.

Okay, yes, dragons were thought to dwell in the Sarcalnaa mountains.

But it was *this* shy of being a legend. Dragon sighting were just that rare.

Couldn't say why, myself. Dragons treated those who enter their territory without

mercy, but maybe they rarely left, or they have no desire to be involved with humans in the first place, or any of a number of explanations people have thought up.

My point is, it was almost impossible that a dragon like this would attack the fortress. It was a bolt from the blue for the garrison too, no doubt. I mean, this was also a first for me.

Still, the hallway shook in tandem with that thudding sound. Here and there were the sounds of creaking and groaning, and debris from the ceiling littered the floor.

But I was starting to put together a rough analysis of why a dragon would appear here. It was just a gut feeling, but I was sure that the shadow's flute summoned it here.

I couldn't even begin to imagine what its motive might've been, but I could at least say that much. This attack didn't happen by chance; someone planned it for their own ends.

"Chris!"

Just as my speculation began to wake up vague fears inside me, I heard my name being called from behind and turned around.

"Palmira! You okay!?"

The door to the next room had been thrown open. Palmira emerged from within, dressed in pajamas with only her sword tightly gripped in her hand. That's Palmira for you.

"I'm fine. But what's going on?"

Apparently she knew something was up, but she couldn't figure out the circumstances behind it. I was awake before the attack, but she'd most likely been woken up by the dragon's passage.

But if she were to understand it based only on this information, that'd make her nothing short of genius.

That aside, what about Aira?

“Big Sister~!”

“Aira! You in one piece!?”

As it turned out, I didn't need to ask. Sure enough, Aira was the source of the voice coming from behind me. She'd apparently come out from the room on the other side of me, and now she was running toward me with a terribly confused look on her face. At that moment, another tremor rumbled through the earth, the corridor shook, and Aira pitched forward.

“Look out — !”

I caught a nearly catatonic Aira in my arms, holding her as I waited for the shaking to settle. Aira simply curled up, completely unable to respond to the situation.

Though there was nothing we could do about that. Palmira and I had the appropriate experience, but although she'd been through a lot since her enslavement, Aira could still be considered an ordinary person. She was simply acting like a girl her age.

“Talk later! In any case, we're going down. It's dangerous here.”

Palmira nodded.

Though it was inside the fortress, there was a power being thrown around that could rock the structure down to its very foundations. I could only imagine that the danger of collapse was extremely high.

What's more, we were on a pretty high floor. The greater the height, the greater the danger. It's common sense.

“Aira, get it together. We're getting outta here!”

I snapped at Aira, who was huddled up to my chest, still reeling from confusion and on the verge of tears.

It might be harsh, but this wasn't the time for that kind of talk either.

“Kya!”

Aira screamed a little as I yanked on her hand and sprinted for the first hallway I saw, one I didn't recognize at all.

My head pounded painfully. The adrenaline made me forget until just now, but not long ago I'd had a violent vomiting session. I wasn't recovering from that anytime soon.

Running beside me, Palmira saw my condition and said,

“Chris, no more drinking.”

I had no words.

Author's Notes

I said the story was halfway done around Chapter 18, but we're already past 40 now.

Plus, it hasn't reached the conclusion I had in mind.

Even I can't predict how many chapters it'll end up being.

Chapter 42

Betrayal

Confused as we were, we still made it down two floors.

Maybe because it was the principal section of the fortress, the construction varied from floor to floor. For a level-by-level defense, I guess. But screw invading, we wanted to *escape* — and this set-up was one huge pain in the ass.

If someone was around, I could grab them and ask, but maybe because it was an upper floor, there wasn't a single person in sight. For a fortress of this size, its population was really small.

Isn't it awfully careless to leave all the posts unmanned in a situation like this?

Even so, we took the stairs down, and as I was trying to guess where the next flight might be, I spotted a familiar face.

"Lady Chris!"

It was the fortress's adjutant, Percival. Once he saw us, he dashed toward us as he called out.

He was alone.

I didn't know why the adjutant wasn't with his commander at a time like this, but I was thankful anyway. He was the only one around who could act as our guide.

"We owe you one..."

Percival had been bent forward, panting and out of breath, but now he straightened up. I didn't notice because there'd been too many people around me, but he was pretty tall.

I had to look up a bit to see his face.

“Well, I was searching for you as well,”

he said, smiling. A bit stiff, but it was a smile.

“Uff—”

In this situation, my relief only lasted a moment before the *n*th shock — I’ve already lost count — hit us.

The entire structure quaked and shook.

“Wh—What’s happening right now?”

Dragged all the way here without knowing why, a pallid Aira pressed Percival for answers.

Come to think of it, I said I’d explain things later and left it at that. That might’ve been a bit unkind to her.

“We haven’t been able to get a clear grasp of the situation either, but it’s a flying dragon. It seems to be launching an attack on this fortress. The shaking just now was the impact of the dragon’s direct hit on the control tower.”

Percival didn’t have time to finish before I felt a low rumbling in my bones, and the passageway — the control tower shook again.

“What about L... uh, everyone else?”

I was about to ask ‘What about Leon?’, but I quickly fixed my wording. For some reason.

“Yes, well, right now, everyone should have been evacuated underground. Given the nature of our adversary, even requesting reinforcements will be a problem... For the time being, let’s evacuate. We’ll talk on the way.”

Percival urged us on.

Yeah, with the continuous roaring and rocking, this wasn't the time for a relaxing chat. Running away came first.

With Percival taking the lead, we started to run down the hallway.

"Can you... defeat it? The dragon?"

Whether Palmira meant to ask if the fortress could withstand the attack, or if she intended to try killing it by herself at some point, I wasn't sure. But she asked a pretty basic question.

If it's the second, that's some crazy self-denial right there.

"Given the nature of this area, the fortress is stocked with anti-dragon equipment. However, because it has never weathered combat in its capacity as a fortress until now, how effective it will be... we're in the middle of testing that right now."

"Its capacity as a fortress?"

"Yes, its potential in subduing dragons. I have no experience yet myself, but there certainly are records of the subjugation of stray dragons obstructing the highways. Therefore, it is possible to defeat them. However, this dragon is quite large for a stray... Whether we can defeat it remains to be seen."

It was clear from his face that Percival was wracking his brains as he ran.

The truth is, like he said, the fortress had been prepared to oppose dragons up to this point.

And yet, now that it was forced into a bitter struggle that even had the control tower rocking on its foundations, now that a more-than-hypothetical dragon had come flying in, there was no choice but to evacuate. That had to be disappointing.

We ran down another flight of stairs. How many have we gone down by now, counting this one?

The lower we went, the more soldiers we passed. Every one of them looked grim, some among them trailing blood as they desperately stayed on the move. From what I could see, everyone here was a part of the castle garrison, without any members of the Elite Guard. They might have finished evacuating underground as Percival said.

Leon got himself down there like he was supposed to, right? Suddenly, worry sprang up my heart.

That said, Leopard and Rupert should be there, so as long as they were with him, Leon wouldn't be in any danger.

For a moment, I thought of Irene and Regnum. Sieg, too. But right now, no matter how worried I was for them, I couldn't do anything. In any case, I was in the process of meeting up with them as soon as possible.

“Are we at the bottom yet?”

The control tower shook with increasing force. It was clear to those inside that it was starting to take damage.

Visible cracks ran along the walls and ceiling. Part of the latter already had all but caved in on itself. Now that it'd reached this point, it seemed that the entire tower's collapse was only a matter of time.

Even so, why's this dragon attacking the tower so relentlessly? I'm no dragon ecologist, but they're creatures that rarely reveal themselves to humans in the first place –why is it so obsessed with this tower?

It was that shadow that called the dragon, I'm sure of it. Has it been manipulating the monster's behavior since then, too?

If so, then what's its objective?

“We're almost there — it's just up ahead.”

I had no idea how many stairs we'd already taken. We ran down a hallway littered with

debris falling from the ceiling. When I checked behind me, Aira, her face pale and desperate, seemed to be lagging behind a bit.

“Aira!”

“B–Big Sister — !”

I slowed down and grabbed her hand.

Palmira, on the other hand, was running in front. Like a herald.

Anyhow, we were all running for dear life. Since when did things turn this desperate?

I’m gonna be honest.

Being in a pinch — and this was definitely a pinch — I was just a *tiny* bit excited.

“Here it is!”

shouted Percival as he opened the large door at the end of the hallway. Palmira went through. Then Aira and I leapt inside.

“Oof!”

It was pitch-black. I had Aira’s hand in mine, but I could only vaguely make out the figure of Palmira, who should have entered before me.

Where the hell are we?

“Percival! Where is everyone!?”

I turned around, calling Percival’s name, only to meet his eyes as he shut the door we came through. His face was completely devoid of emotion.

What’s he playing at?

Before my suspicions could take shape, the door shut completely, and the room was

plunged into total darkness.

“Palmira! Palmira!?”

“It’s okay, I’m here.”

When I called out for Palmira, who I’d completely lost sight of, Palmira’s voice came from nearby. It was calmer than I thought. She was probably okay for now.

“B–Big Sisteeer~”

“Aira, it’s okay. Don’t let go of my hand.”

” — ! I — I won’t!”

I couldn’t see her, but I squeezed her hand a bit more tightly.

Hell if I know what’s going on, but at any rate, all three of us are in one piece.

So calm down, me.

I sat down cautiously, then slowly took a deep breath.

Alright, what is all this?

Percival said he was taking us to join the others, he definitely did. But this was obviously somewhere else.

Then there was his expression as he shut the door.

Putting the pieces together, I came to the logical conclusion.

“...He betrayed us, huh?”

As for what he wanted to achieve by doing so, where do I even start looking?

However, I do know that his goal was to lead us here. Then, isn’t it possible that his intention was to separate us from the Elite Guard by bringing us here?

Then there must be something here...

I strained my eyes.

Perhaps because my eyes were adjusting, our surroundings slowly but steadily began to come into view. I could see Palmira's back a few steps ahead of me. She already had her sword at the ready. That was reassuring.

I couldn't see enough to figure out what this place was.

But at least the door we came through should be behind us. Getting out of here was priority number one, so I slowly backed towards it. However, Percival's objective most likely was to shut us in here. That door probably wouldn't open.

I knew that, but without being able to see anything else, it was all I had.

"Palmira, don't get too far away from me..."

I called out to her back.

At that moment, that sensation attacked me again. An unsettling tingle at the back of my neck. I already knew exactly what it was. That presence.

"Palmira! Be careful! Something's... in here with us!"

What, I couldn't say. But there was something in this room. And it was watching us.

I called for Palmira as I searched for the presence. At least, she was the only one in here who could fight. All I could do was count on her.

"Oh? Lookin' for me...?"

"!!!"

Before I could find it, it spoke.

I faced the direction of the voice, but I couldn't see anything. But at the same time, I

heard the sound of something heavy falling to the floor.

I unconsciously pulled Aira closer to me.

It was a man's voice. One I'd never heard before.

But I did know a little something about its owner. Even now, the back of my neck tingled painfully.

I had no basis for it. But I knew for a fact that he was the shadow I saw earlier.

Whump!

“Kya!”

In the middle of things, another tremor rocked the tower. This one was quite strong. As it faded away, the walls cracked here and there, letting light stream in. It was dim, but I could now see the entire room.

A storehouse? I could see swords and armor and sacks packed with something or another piled up in the corners of the room. It was pretty roomy.

And there he was, dead center.

” — !”

In front of me, Palmira dropped into a stance, the tip of her sword pointing at it.

I took a sharp breath, stiffening.

A giant, more than two meters tall. He had a massive single-edged blade in his hands. His hair gathered up in back, a bold grin on his heavily scarred face — I know him.

And I don't mean that vague stuff about 'the shadow'.

This was from my memories as an adventurer, when I was still a man.

The scarred figure that left terror in its wake.

“...Maddox...!”

I squeezed out the name I could never forget.

It was the stuff of nightmares. My body wouldn't move. And at the same time, my mind fled from reality, screaming 'He can't possibly be here!'

It can't be... it can't be!

“What, you know me?”

Picking up what should've been a whisper, that man — the man nicknamed 'Massacre Maddox' — confirmed my fears.

My body wouldn't move. And my voice was already gone.

Chapter 43

The Man Called 'Massacre Maddox'

Massacre Maddox.

That's what they called him.

Probably the most infamous adventurer alive today. My pick hands down, at least.

Famous adventurers got nicknames.

Historically, they were derived from appearance, like 'Hatchet', or 'One-Eye'.

Or maybe from the adventurer's actions, like 'Lucky', or 'Immortal'.

Usually it was a token of respect for accomplished adventurers. And anybody could get the ball rolling.

A nickname. Basically, you could even call them a guaranteed mark of true strength.

Of course, there was an endless parade of self-proclaimed 'famous adventurers'.

But their names would never be the subject of barroom discussion. Only the ones backed up with undeniable achievement left an impression in people's minds.

And among those, only one carried a special distinction: the ominous name of 'Massacre Maddox'.

People said that he'd single-handedly wiped out a goblin colony, trolls included; annihilated a group of ogres that normally would've taken over fifty people to defeat; and so on. You'd always find unbelievable tales of might surrounding that name.

If that was all, I would've thought, 'Whaddaya know, there are guys like that in the world too,' the end. After all, it was tavern gossip. Even though I only believed half of what I heard, I didn't have any problem with it.

But that [Massacre Maddox] was right here, in the flesh.

In a remote location some distance away from the Empire, there'd been a collection of small nations. While they were squabbling with each other, this guy showed up. As the enemy.

Yeah, I was there too, working as a mercenary. To be honest, since it was just border skirmishes, I thought I'd take it easy.

As far as I could tell, not a whole lot would change. At most, each side would throw more reinforcements at the battle as it ground to a halt. It was one of those fights that would be solved by diplomacy in the end. Or so I thought.

The battlefield had used an argument over an inch of land as a pretext — a false pretext. But the mere presence of the man catalyzed its mutation into a massive war, one that swayed the rise and fall of nations. All in a blink of an eye.

It's possible that even his employers never thought things would go so far. But as a result, the pitiful nation I served truly fell to ruin.

Of course, I'm not saying it was all [Massacre Maddox's] doing.

But in battle, he's a force of nature.

In the first engagement, the main force belonging to a rival nation fell to his blade, down to the last man.

Assuming that was the reason for the country's destruction, then yeah, even the name [Massacre Maddox] is no exaggeration.

We were there at that first encounter, and we came face-to-face with the living, breathing [Massacre Maddox].

It was too overwhelming.

Brandishing his sword at the head of the enemy troops, he literally shattered our formation, our strategies, with brute force alone.

To my eyes, he was like a tornado.

A kind of natural disaster. Every technique, every effort was thrown at him, and yet he couldn't be stopped. As soon as you encountered him for the first — and probably the last — time, you had two options: run like a bat out of hell, or find somewhere to hide. He was that kind of disaster. It would be stupid to put up a fight.

I escaped with my life. And I was lucky to have that much.

The first ten percent of the battle could've been considered one. After that, it was a one-sided bloodbath. The rest were literally massacred.

It was every man for himself. They ran around like headless chickens, and then they were slaughtered.

Out of a force of at least ten thousand, how many made it out alive? How many kept all their limbs? I don't know. I don't even know why *I'm* still alive. Maybe I was the only survivor.

The trauma carved itself so deep into my memories that I can still feel it, even now.

And it was *that* [Massacre Maddox] who stood before me now. It was an impossible situation.

My memories were three years out of date, but nothing about his imposing figure seemed to have changed. Not the martial pressure radiating from his large frame, either. Nothing, not one thing, was the slightest bit different.

My clenched teeth chattered. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. They seemed about to spill over.

I was so terrified that I found no shame in either of those things.

Back then, I'd faced him from within the ranks of an army. Now, I was confronting him directly, face-to-face.

There was nowhere to run, and if this man were so inclined, we'd be dead in an instant.

"B-Big Sister..."

Noticing my unusual lack of composure, Aira gripped my hand and anxiously called to

me.

With the sound of her voice, I was finally able to regain some equilibrium in my frozen mind and body.

That's right, you have to protect her. Pull yourself together.

Holding tightly onto her trembling hand, I turned my eyes to Maddox.

He's frightening. Terrifying.

But I have to protect her.

"Wh — What the hell are you doing here, you son of a bitch..."

"Mm, ahh, for work. Right now, I'm halfway done."

Seeming somewhat bored, Maddox tapped the giant blade in his hand against his shoulder.

Attitude aside, that was the worst possible answer.

Until the last moment, I'd hoped that running into him was sheer coincidence, that his target lay elsewhere.

That's what I told myself, but it was pretty thin. We'd been led here, after all. How could the guy before us have nothing to do with it? There's no way.

And so my final hope was snuffed out by the mouth of the man himself.

His work is half-finished [now]. In other words, meeting us is only half of it. Even thinking about what the remaining half might be made me go weak at the knees.

"Do you intend to kill us?"

Ignorant of Maddox's terror, Palmira asked without a quaver. Cautious, she kept her sword up and pointing in his direction.

Maddox's attitude was unperturbed. It said, 'You're the one baring her teeth, aren't you?'

“Us’? Nah, I’ve only got business with the silver-haired girl over there, y’know?”

There was no mistaking it — he meant me. The fact sent a shudder through my body, but knowing that I was his only target gave me some peace of mind. At least Aira and Palmira wouldn’t be involved.

“...Then what’re you going to do? Will you... kill me?”

I kept my gaze, which would move away if I let it, fixed on Maddox. If this guy had a job, I couldn’t imagine it was something other than killing.

But in response to my question, Maddox’s face blanked out for a moment, and then he started laughing.

“Uhahaha! Like I’d take such a boring job. If it was just killing you, you think I’d go to all this trouble? Besides, that’s not my thing. You’re secondary. The star of this show — ”

“Miss Chris!?”

“Oh —. The leading man takes the stage.”

As those two voices spoke, I turned to look behind me.

Leon. Rupert. Leopard. It was the three of them. No, there was Irene behind them, too.

“Leon!”

I was genuinely happy to see him.

But at the same time, something about Maddox’s words made me uneasy. The moment I realized why, my feelings became the complete opposite.

“Miss Chris! Are you alright!?”

“No, don’t! Leon, don’t come any closer! That guy — ”

What did Maddox say?

‘The leading man takes the stage.’

Didn’t that mean Leon was the target?

Why did he come here in the first place?

Percival was the only one who knew we were down here. In that case, Percival — or another traitor in the fortress — must have led Leon and the others here.

A murder plot, an assassination. Maybe the scene playing out here was the way things were done in the aristocracy.

I was the bait, and Leon was the target.

So that’s how it was.

“The door!”

By the time I realized, it was too late. The door behind Leon and the others began to swing closed again.

Before they could all turn around, *bam!* It slammed shut. It was probably locked so that it could only be opened from the outside.

Surprised, Leopard rushed the door, throwing himself bodily into it, but as I predicted, it didn’t give an inch.

I’d screwed up. If I’d realized it just a bit earlier, Leon would’ve been able to make it out. Even if he were the only one.

As I ground my teeth, the voice of Maddox, executioner, echoed out.

“Oh, will ya look at that? It’s not what I came for, but it looks like I’ve hooked a big fish... Mad Dog — no, it should be Rupert the Hound now, huh?”

“...Maddox... Why the hell are you here...!”

The sight of the man left Rupert at a rare loss for words.

But for only a moment.

Dropping into a slight crouch, he drew a dagger and shortsword and moved in front of us.

“Rupert! He’s — !”

“I know... Get back!”

To stand before Maddox — in my eyes, it was the height of insanity. I screamed at him in warning.

And Rupert said that he knew. From their exchange earlier, it seemed impossible for him not to.

Yet one of them was taking it easy. The other squared off against him, glaring.

“Miss Chris, fall back.”

“Ah, yeah... Palmira!”

Tearing my feet away from where they’d seemed stuck to the floor, I called out to Palmira as I slowly edged backward.

Warily keeping her sword up, Palmira retreated the same way. It seemed like she naturally understood that she’d be in the way.

I backed up until I was standing in front of Leon. He put his hand on my shoulder, then stepped forward a bit, so that we were shielded behind him.

I softly bit my lip. I get it, I'm the same way, but the one who's really in danger here is Leon. Even so, I honestly do find it reassuring.

I can't deny that as I am right now, I have no combat power. But I have people I want to protect.

Aira, Palmira. And Leon, too.

It's just my feelings, but they take priority.

"Chris."

As I clenched my teeth, Irene pressed two things into my hand.

One, a knife in a plain black sheath. The other — an invocation stone.

Inhaling sharply, I looked at Irene.

"The things Master told me to give you. I don't know why, but I think it's now or never..."

I didn't know the nature of the intentions behind these gifts. But I was more than happy to take them.

The invocation stone.

With this, I might be able to retaliate. Even if it turns out I can't, I might be able to defend the people here, at least.

The truth is, all I feel towards invocation stones is repulsion. But right now, I'm thankful for their existence.

The one I got from Regnum before had disappeared.

So this one's all I've got.

It's going to be my ace in the hole.

On the other hand, if Rupert takes out Maddox, those thoughts will end as baseless fears.

I riffled through my memories of fighting the two.

No matter how much I stack the deck against him, I have to declare Maddox the winner.

But I want Rupert to win all the same. Easy for me to say, right? But I can't help but hope for his victory with all my heart.

Even now, the two stared each other down without moving. Were they looking for an opening?

Whomp!

The tremor, the most violent so far, assaulted us.

"Kyaa — !"

Holding screaming, shaking Aira close to me, I still kept my eyes fixed on Rupert and Maddox.

Pieces of the collapsing ceiling started to fall. Just as a chunk was about to fall between them, they both sprang into action. That's how it looked to me.

Ching.

With a tremendous clash, sparks went flying in the space between them. It was so loud that Aira foolishly clapped her hands over her ears. Even Palmira dropped her sword to follow suit.

"GAAAH — !"

But of course, that wouldn't be enough to stop Rupert. Twisting, his body seemed to

glide across the ground as he let loose a bestial howl and closed in on Maddox.

Even Maddox had to use his sword to take him on. Again, the metallic clash of their blades rang out. Like so, Rupert twisted his body even further, his leg lashing out in a kick.

That combination, oddly enough, was the one Palmira had used against Rupert himself during that night of sparring. But it was executed with extraordinary speed and sharpness. Even my eyes could barely follow it.

” — tch!”

In the end, just like the other, that kick failed to reach Maddox. More precisely, Rupert broke away and put some distance between them before it could connect.

I couldn't even tell what had happened, but there was blood running down the leg he kicked out. At some point in time, Maddox had switched to a two-handed grip on his sword, changing his stance.

“Uhahaha! As expected of the Mad Dog, pushing me this far. Even on this boring job, I can have some fun!”

As if to return the favor, Maddox's sword flashed. He brought it down right on top of a motionless Rupert.

A direct overhead strike.

The huge blade struck the ground, raising a spectacular cloud of dust — more like a rolling surge of stone fragments— that hid Rupert's fate from me.

The small chunks of stone came flying at me. In response, Leopard stepped forward and knocked them aside with his shield.

What happened to Rupert? Had he been cut clean in two? Crushed into the ground?

Just as those ugly thoughts crossed my mind, the cloud of debris dispersed to reveal Rupert, standing on the back of the sword Maddox had slammed into the ground. He was too skilled. And the scene was beyond impossible.

“Hah-!”

Before Maddox could make a move, Rupert launched himself from the blade, rotating in the air as he flew over Maddox.

His dual blades sliced toward the back of Maddox’s head, but it was like the man had eyes back there — he ducked out of the way.

And turning to look over his shoulder, he targeted the place Rupert would land with a horizontal sweep.

I wondered if that sword would cut Rupert in two this time, but Rupert had turned in the air to take on the attack blade-first. Deflecting the recoil, he landed on the floor.

He’s strong.

I’d caught a glimpse of Rupert’s real strength during that incident at the guild, but it didn’t seem like he’d hit full power yet. At the very least, Rupert was proving the caliber of his offense and defense.

Incredible speed paired with an exceedingly tricky style of combat.

And above all else, he was facing Maddox, but he hadn’t given up an inch of ground.

At this rate, will he win?

But no matter how I try, I can’t bring myself to have faith in Rupert’s victory.

Maddox’s strength was seared that deeply into my mind.

Is my terror blowing things out of proportion?

Is that really it?

The invocation stone in my hand.

I won't have to use it if Rupert wins. My grip around it tightened.

Chapter 44

Conclusion

Rupert is strong.

Overwhelmingly so. Even outnumbered ten to one, I'd still bet on him.

At this level, you might even call his strength phenomenal. I'd expect no less from a commander in the Elite Guard.

“Uhahaha—! What's wrong! So the Mad Dog's all bark and no bite!?”

“Don't fuck with me — !”

But there's always someone better. And here's the proof.

At a glance, the two of them seemed equally matched, but little by little, the battle was swinging in Maddox's favor. Even now, they appeared to be standing on equal footing. But between the two of them, Rupert's injuries were growing in number. And Maddox was unscathed.

Sword hit sword.

Both of them unleashed their finishers. For the battle to end with a performance of this caliber, it was a clear demonstration of both combatants' absurd ability. No half-assed joker would've been able to last more than a few seconds. From the beginning, this was a serious match.

And yet Rupert didn't stop. He didn't let his deteriorating condition get in his way.

He was a tricky guy, so his style had an emphasis on mobility. And that was slowly being whittled away. It wasn't hard to imagine that before long, the balance between them would collapse catastrophically.

But I couldn't give him any assistance.

I didn't know how strong Leopard and Leon were, but this was no longer an ordinary fight, and there was no room for a third player.

At her level of strength, Palmira would be cut in two the moment she stepped in.

And Leopard, who'd been trying to wrench open the closed door for some time now, was growing desperate. Looks like he planned to let Leon get away, even if it was by himself.

However, his efforts hadn't borne fruit so far.

It wasn't much of a surprise; they'd been lured here to begin with. The lock was stubborn, and the door, sturdy.

"Irene! Can't you open this thing with magic!?"

If Rupert lost, then no doubt Maddox would live up to his title and slaughter us all.

Fighting him was out of the question. We'd have to escape somehow. Get as far away from this place as our legs could take us.

"Don't think that magic can solve everything!"

I knew that I was asking for something unreasonable.

But even so, I couldn't help but yell, grasping at that single ray of hope. She had to know it too. That if Rupert fell, we'd all die with him.

My face ghastly pale, I pounded on the door in desperation.

It was futile. To put it bluntly, it was close to madness.

But Irene was right all the same.

Truth be told, it was only thanks to Rupert that we were all still breathing.

I could see death coming ever closer. How could I possibly stay calm in this situation?

I glanced at Leon.

Although his brow was slightly furrowed, I couldn't detect any fear in him. Is he that confident of Rupert's victory? Or —

But, if I just sit on my hands like this, it's not just my life at stake here, but Leon's, Aira's, Palmira's.

Leon's a classic target. He's probably destined to die by another's hand someday.

That's the one damn thing I won't stand for.

I reassured myself with the sensation of the invocation stone in my hand. The power I fired off back then — I didn't know if I could summon it again.

But right now, that gamble was all I had.



The fight before me escalated in intensity.

Though he was hard-pressed, Rupert nonetheless counterattacked with a howl.

'Mad Dog', Maddox called him, but that's exactly what he was.

"UGGAAAAAaah!"

Rupert, his body already covered with wounds, dashed forward with superhuman agility. Sending debris flying, he seemed to teleport behind Maddox, swinging his swords.

But those swords were stopped dead by Maddox's blade. Then, sword flashing, Maddox retaliated with a slash. Though Rupert was able to avoid the worst of it, he might have underestimated Maddox's reach, because he came away with more scrapes.

"GAAaAaaAAH!"

Once out of range, 'Gahaa,' Rupert took a deep breath through his mouth. Cuts criss-crossed his body from head to toe, the clothing on his torso already in tatters. He was almost half-naked.

The dual blades he held ready were nicked all over from taking those terrifying

superhuman slashes over and over again.

It was a miracle that they hadn't snapped by now.

"What's wrong, Mad Dog! Entertain me some more!"

roared Maddox in response.

Both of them were absolute monsters.

In one corner, a fanged beast advancing on instinct, its reason blown away by a berserker rage. In the other, a barbaric brute delighting in his mad destruction.

Seeking to measure their strength, inherently driven to crush their opponents, striking with the greatest destructive forces they possessed — in that, they were pure.

The realization crept up on us, and we were paralyzed by the time we noticed.

Despite the savagery, I couldn't tear my eyes away. I even found a brutal beauty in it, the clash of powers leaving me speechless.

"Gah, haah... haah... haah—"

The battle was nearing its end, too.

Distancing himself from Maddox, Rupert stopped his continuous onslaught. His arms hung loosely as he tried to catch his breath.

Seeing that, Maddox grinned ferociously and raised his sword again in his two-handed grip.

The next exchange would be the last.

Aira clutched my arm hard.

A calm so ominous even a layman, no matter how untrained their eye, could instinctively sense it.

Unconsciously, I swallowed hard. The gulping sound lingered in my ears, terribly loud.

“AaaAAa... RUAAAaaaaAAAAHH!”

That voice was no longer human.

Roaring, with a single step, Rupert vanished from where he stood. That was all my eyes could follow.

The only evidence was the rolling cloud of dust he left behind.

In the next moment, a *crack!* sounded out from Maddox’s chest, and I found the missing Rupert there.

It was Rupert’s sword that had broken. And Maddox’s blade that did the breaking. Then Maddox’s foot smashed into Rupert’s gut, doubling him over at the point of impact. The giant’s face twisted with an animal ecstasy.

That was all I was able to catch.

“GUuAahh...”

His eyes wide open, Rupert vomited blood. I thought I heard something cracking.

And it all took place in a single moment.

Then the impact of the strike blew Rupert away like a twig, his body crashing into the wooden boxes stacked further in.

Rupert — lost.

Though I half-expected it, the despair punched me in the gut.

“Rupert!!!”

Palmira screamed.

She might be the most shocked by this conclusion to the fight. She knew from continuous experience just how strong he was. This must have been unbelievable for

her.

On the other hand, that uncharacteristic scream jolted my mind out of its paralyzed shock.

As I planned in my head, I took several steps forward, and holding out the invocation stone gripped in my hand, I shouted,

“シ!”

The invocation stone sitting on my outstretched palm began to glow red hot.

But at that moment, with a small shattering sound, the stone vanished.

“Wh...!”

With the disappearance of my trump card, my mind couldn't process what had just happened.

But a moment later, I understood. Just as it seemed to disappear from my hand, the sword-wielding figure of Maddox appeared.

“...A magus, is it. But at this distance, I don't think you'll be able to get the incantation off in time.”

Maddox's emotionless voice echoed in my ears.

This can't, this can't...!

In despair, my legs quaked and my knees gave way. Again, my teeth chattered with fear.

Though unintentional, I felt something warm wetting my inner thigh. Yet I couldn't even summon the scorn for my pathetic state. Again, my mind froze in terror.

“Chris!”

As I was about to collapse then and there, Leon supported me from behind.

My eyes wouldn't leave Maddox, like they were stuck to him. Forcing myself to tear my gaze away, I turned my head back to see Leon in my blurry vision.

His gaze was directed at me, and me alone.

Even though he was stiff, his eyes looked worried.

Ahh, why? Why is that?

...the one who's in danger here is *you*, you know...

"Ugh-... hgh-..."

My voice wouldn't come out from my throat. Instead, tears welled up in my eyes and spilled over uncontrollably.

"...So... what are your intentions?"

In my vision, pathetically distorted by tears, Leon glared at Maddox without wavering. Leopard stepped out in front, standing at the ready. He was shielding Aira, Palmira, and Irene.

...'What are your intentions' indeed. I mulled the question over in my muddled mind. Maddox. And Leon.

"Well, Rupert was just a bonus. *You're* the star of this show. I even summoned a dragon to set the stage for you. So just curse your bad luck and give up."

His words brought me back to my senses. So Leon was his target after all.

"Who... are you working for?"

Leon matched him, smile for smile.

“I’m not in the habit of doing favors for the dead. I got no reason to tell you.”

I could save him. Even now, I could support him.

“...I see. But myself aside, you can’t afford to strike down these people.”

Is he — going to kill Leon?

Is he going to kill Aira? Palmira?

I won’t let him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a blue flame burst into life. No question ‘why’. No doubt. Now, I can see everything.

I clenched my teeth.

I have to protect them. Leon, everyone, I have to protect them.

“シ!”

I shouted, shaking off my tears and fixing my glare on Maddox.

I didn’t have an invocation stone. But it appeared before me, revolving: a circular labyrinth of blue light.

And I put Maddox dead center.

“What!?”

For only a moment, Maddox faltered. He wasn’t expecting this, I bet. For me, that one moment was enough. I didn’t need the symbols.

I focused my will on the image. Destroy. Target: straight ahead. The man in front of me
-- *pulverize him.*

The circle stopped —

“AAAHH-!”

A light flashed across my eyes, along with a strangled cry.

At the same time, something was released from my body. Within the space of a moment, Maddox, his arms up to protect himself, leapt back.

How pointless. Crush him.

“GAAH-!”

Struck by a wave of my unseen power, Maddox’s large frame went flying backward.

Crush him — !

Then, he crashed his way through the wall and vanished on the other side.

“Haa-... ha...”

I glared even more savagely at the place where he disappeared. I suspected that he’d be getting up again.

But, despite my wishes, the strength drained from my body.

The circle of light melted away, and my knees gave out again.

“Chris!?”

Like before, Leon was supporting me.

But I refused to take my eyes off the hole in the wall. I didn't know if I could use that power again.

But I also couldn't imagine Maddox dying from that at all.

But the power was gone. There was something missing. Little by little, darkness ate away at my vision.

Not yet. I can't yet.

“Chris! Are you alright!?! Chris!”

My eyes could no longer see. All I could hear was Leon's voice, calling my name over and over again.

Rather than worry about me, you have to — do something about that guy —.

Ahhh, but —

It's warm.

I felt this same warmth not long ago, I think.

When was that? Before I could remember, my mind shut down.

Chapter 45

In the Hospital Room

The day drew to a close, and a veil of darkness fell on the heart of the city. I trudged my way down the road.

The thing is, I had to be home before dark. I'd promised.

But I lost track of time while I was playing, and ended up breaking my promise. My guilty conscience dragged down my feet.

The lights turned on in house after house, telling me that I should have gone home a long time ago. Even though I pretended that everything was just fine, the sun had already set, and dusk had been replaced by deep indigo, dying the distant mountains black.

I was nervous. The dark nighttime streets made it worse.

Was I going to be scolded when I got home? Was I going to get yelled at?

My mind filled with nothing else, I walked down the road to home.

Ahh, I got an earful.

After I got home, my mother gave me a terrible scolding. She hit me. I cried. But she let me inside. I ate my dinner with tears running down my cheeks. Worried, my little sister kept an eye on me and told me all sorts of stories, but in my stubbornness, I made her cry too.

...I told her 'I'm sorry', and we fell asleep together.

I watch myself walking down the nighttime streets, casting a long shadow.

I can no longer take that road. I can no longer go home.

After that, my home burned to the ground. My mother, my father, my sister, and I — we all watched, stupefied. Suddenly, the war started. Still immature, I couldn't understand what that meant.

My home was gone.

But my family was still here with me. I still had something left.

I watch myself walking down the nighttime streets, casting a long shadow.

I can no longer take that road. I can no longer see my family.

After that, I made three gravestones. My mother's, my father's, and my little sister's.

The remains of my crime. I built them without anyone's help.

I must not depend on others. I must not have expectations. I must not hope.

I swore on those three small gravestones.

I watch myself walking down the nighttime streets, casting a long shadow.

I can no longer take that road. I can no longer return to my hometown.

After that, all I had was grief.

So I departed on a ship, alone. To free myself of that grief, to forget.

But I haven't forgotten. I haven't forgotten a single thing.

Because I watched myself as I kept walking down the nighttime streets, casting a long shadow.

I took a ship. I arrived in a new land. I took up the sword. I became an adventurer. I hunted monsters. I killed people. I went to battle. I was cheated. I starved. I wandered. I betrayed. I was betrayed. Then, I entered the labyrinth.

My memories pile up, layer after layer, becoming truth.

I'm standing right now because of them; they're the reason why I exist as I am.

Memories. Memories of the past. Reminiscence. Experience. Way of life. Everything I have after coming this far.

Everything that shapes my consciousness.

With that in my heart, I will forge on.



When I came to, I was lying on a sofa.

I had a feeling that I'd had a dream. I couldn't remember it clearly.

Only that it belonged to *me*. Not [Chris].

Why, after all this time, was I having my own dreams now? I found it problematic.

But this should have been a normal thing.

Before I turned into a wo — I mean, [Chris], I frequently had dreams about my past. 'So this is normal,' I thought to myself.

Dreams are things formed from personal experiences and memories. That's what they say, pretty much, and I think so too. So, dreaming of my memories is nothing to get worked up about.

But that mundane answer made me more anxious.

Just a few days ago, I had one of [Chris's] dreams. Now that wasn't normal. Why? Because I had no memories of such things. If the commonly accepted theory were true, then that would've been impossible.

But I'm also [Chris]. And that's not normal either. 'So there,' I told myself.

In that case, though, what did this last dream mean?

Well, maybe nothing. Maybe some of [Chris] leaked into my intermittent dreams, the normal stuff. Yeah, that must be it. That's definitely it.

If I don't accept that, then there's no soothing this anxiety.

The dream inverted. I changed places with [Chris].

Something like that can't possibly happen.

I am — me.

“Chris?”

Hearing my name, I opened my eyes.

I could hazily make out someone’s face. Any more than that was obscured by the dazzling back-lighting.

To make sure, I reached out my hand and touched that face.

I could feel a soft, warm sensation against my palm.

The anxiety in my heart dispersed, and slowly but steadily, a sense of peace took its place. Unconsciously, my mouth softened.

” — Leon. You’re here, right? In your spot by the wall.”

When I opened my eyes, he was always in that spot, wasn’t he?

I don’t know where we are, but this is business as usual for us. Gradually swimming into focus, his face looked unbearably worried.

“...Thank god. You’re alright.”

“Yeah.”

Pulling together as much of my sluggish, muddled consciousness as I could, I pretended that nothing was wrong.

It’s a little hard for me to say that I’m alright.

I know it sounds serious, but it’s not really. At least I’ve woken up, and now it’s time for the rest of me to do the same.

Well, no big deal. It feels more like I just overslept than anything else.

Umm, that is what happened, isn’t it?

“How long have I... ah—”

“-oh!”

I pulled myself out of bed, but without any strength, I stumbled. Leon was there to support me without a moment's delay.

“Ugh... Sorry.”

I'm kinda pathetic. Looks like I shouldn't be pushing myself too hard. Hanging onto Leon's arm, I suppressed my wobbling.

“Please be careful. You've slept for three days already.”

“Three days!?”

Yeah, I figured I'd overslept, but this much?

Since I was awake, I might as well sort out the current situation. Leon and I appeared to be inside some kind of hospital room. It wasn't very wide inside, and it came equipped with the simple bed that I was sitting on. Followed by a desk. Then, a cupboard stocked with some earthenware pots, all lined up.

There was a window by the desk, if not a particularly big one. The light streaming through it told me that it wasn't nighttime, at least.

I may be in a hospital room somewhere, but it was probably inside the fortress. If I remember correctly, we were supposed to stay here for one night.

They might have held off for three days because of me.

Speaking of the fortress, only now did I remember that it was attacked that night.

What happened to Maddox? Is Rupert alright? Come to think of it, weren't we even being attacked by a dragon?

Leon's here, so they must have managed to make it through for the most part.

But —

“Hey, Leon. Did everyone make it out okay?”

Let’s start here.

“I’d like to say that they did, but Rupert was gravely injured. As of right now, he’s been placed on complete bed rest...”

Oh, so that’s how it turned out.

Well, more like: Rupert’s alive? Frankly, he’s now one of the lucky few to fight Maddox head-on and survive. Of course, I don’t know how Rupert himself sees it, though.

“And the others?”

“‘Others’, you say, but the next patient in line was none other than you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. To tell you the truth, although you sustained no particular physical trauma, you were unconscious and wouldn’t wake up. Moreover, for three days. No one knew what would happen...”

‘Hahaha.’ Leon laughed hoarsely, visibly tired. It seemed that he’d been more worried for me than I’d thought.

Though if my condition was second only to Rupert’s, that must mean the others were safe. I didn’t get hurt, I was just asleep. Seems like they’re okay then.

Actually, Leon’s the one who looks like he’s about to keel over.

“Sorry, I made you worry...”

I apologized for once.

It’s this guy we’re talking about, so he might’ve stayed up to look after me this whole time.

When I took a closer look at him, I could see slight shadows under his eyes.

Oh yeah, he looked the same way that morning after I passed out in the Telaberan estate.

Something squeezed tight around my chest at the thought. Refusing to recognize what that was, I lightly bit on my lower lip.

“Af-After that, what happened to Maddox?”

My voice was unintentionally shrill and nervous. But I had to ask.

“That... I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t. He should have been on the other side of the wall you blasted him through, but afterward, the dragon came to interfere. In the end, no one knows what’s become of him.”

‘He’ and ‘him’, huh. Frankly, Leon might not want to even say his name.

But if that’s the case, is he dead or alive? No, I’m sure he’s not dead. I’m the one that blasted him through the wall, so believe me, I know.

That’s not enough to take out Massacre Maddox.

So things are just gonna get more nerve-wracking from here. Sure, he had help from an inside man, but he still got to us while we were inside the fortress.

A guy like him can attack from any angle. If he doesn't give up, you might even say that the specter of death will always loom over us.

'If he doesn't give up', huh.

To be honest, I don't know much about Maddox aside from his strength.

Is he the type to lose interest easily, or the type to sink his teeth in and never let go? It might be a good idea to check him out at the guild sometime.

Wait, we've got Leon here. Maybe he asked Regnum to launch a concurrent investigation on Maddox.

All that aside, what did he just call me? It wasn't until now that I noticed the change.

'Chris'.

'Chris', huh...?

Well, I'm okay with that. Wait, I am?

"What happened with the dragon?"

"The fortress brought it down."

"Seriously!?"

That came as an honest surprise. I was sure that it would've run away with Maddox.

"Yes, the fortress was built to face monsters, more or less. It was particularly well-equipped for anti-dragon operations. It seems they used giant crossbows to kill it... When I said a dragon came to interfere, that was the one the fortress brought down."

Thinking back, I didn't notice, not with Maddox taking up all my attention, but while we were down there, the tremors did seem to have lessened.

Speaking of which, wasn't Percival saying something about that anti-dragon stuff?

“Come to think of it, what about Percival?”

“His whereabouts are also unknown.”

...Well, you win some, you lose some.

But the enemy had even made it inside the fortress itself.

When my thoughts reached that point, it suddenly hit me.

Who is ‘the enemy’?

“H–Hey, Maddox probably used an inside man to navigate the fortress for his attack. Do you have an idea who that could be?”

“An idea? Hmmm...”

In a rare show of worry, Leon put his fingertips against his handsome chin as he considered the question.

Sooo, it occurred to me all over again, how much that gesture suited him. Or perhaps I should say he looks sexy this way?

“There’s too much going on. I have no clue.”

He gave me a sheepish smile.

‘Is that something you can smile about?’ I wondered, but maybe because I’d just thought of something really bizarre, his smile made my heart pound.

“...What’s with that?”

I hastily averted my eyes.

But, Leon. Though I think that his personality is charming, no question, he has an unexpectedly large number of enemies. Or is that just an upper-class thing?

Knock-knock.

As I was thinking about it, there was a knock at the door. Leon answered it and urged the visitor inside with a [Please].

“——!”

It wasn't one visitor, but two: Aira and Palmira.

When Aira saw me, astonishment flickered on her face for a moment, and her eyes twinkled. Palmira seemed somewhat surprised too.

In response, I lightly raised my hand to them.

At which point Aira's face just crumbled, and tears began to flow from her eyes.

“Big Sisteeeeer~~~~!”

Without even giving me a moment to be surprised, Aira ran inside and hugged me.

It was bursting with enthusiasm, and all I could get out was a choking sound. Palmira entered the room after her without any expression on her face and gave me a tight hug over Aira.

“We were worried... really worried.”

She and the wailing Aira were like night and day, but she buried her face in my chest and said those five words.

I see, so that's how it is. Leon had been that worried. And these two had undoubtedly been worried too. Gently, I stroke their heads.

“Ahh, I made you worry, huh... I’m already fine now.”

“Hmph.”

But they weren’t willing to let go.

Suddenly, I looked at Leon’s face, and I could only give him a wry smile.

Chapter 46

My Problem, Leon's Problem

I stabbed my fork into the steak in front of me and cut myself a piece with my knife. Surprisingly, the knife went through the thick slice of meat with ease. That could have been because of the knife's quality, but it was clearly one of those mass-produced knives you could find pretty much anywhere.

When I picked up a piece of meat, its juices flowed from the cut.

It looked incredibly delicious. Plus, it smelled fantastic. Add in my hunger, and I gulped audibly.

Even so, I hesitated to eat it.

It looked every inch a first-rate cut of meat. Steak came from cattle, but this didn't lose out in any way — if anything, it looked even better.

Sharing the table with me in the dining hall were Leon, Aira, and Palmira. I looked at each of them in turn.

Not one of them said anything. They watched me intently. The mood was like that of the night I was encouraged to try the sparkling wine. Well, that's how it looked to me, anyway. Those faces.

Frankly, the more they watched me with those faces, the more I hesitated.

But in appearance and smell, this was superior to first-class steak. Just looking at it filled my mouth with drool. Feelings aside, my instincts were demanding that I eat it.

Oh, who cares?

Succumbing to temptation, I sunk my teeth into the meat.

“Uh-fwah—”

The juices gushed out.

As they flooded the inside of my mouth, I savored the umami of the rich fat.

As I chewed the tender meat, its flavors overflowed again and again, putting me in a dreamy reverie. Though I wanted more of that taste, I ended up swallowing the portion in my mouth.

“Haahh—”

Tasty. No, not just tasty, *really goddamn* tasty.

I don’t even know how to describe it, but anyway, it tastes amazing. It’s impossibly delicious.

This — is dragon meat.

“How is it?”

Leon asked for my opinion, grinning.

To the side, Aira was smiling too, and even Palmira, while expressionless, looked like she was waiting for me to say something.

“...Well, it’s tasty. Gave me a surprise. It’s my first time eating this.”

And I didn’t mean dragon meat, but monster meat in general.

Hacked into massive pieces, and now it was food.

Right now, dragon had become the main dish on the fortress’s menu.



When Aira and Palmira came calling, I was a bit unsteady from oversleeping, but more than that, I was starving. So it wasn’t long before I went to get myself a meal.

The sickroom wasn’t in the half-destroyed control tower, but in a corner of the North Tower, one of the defensive constructions inside the fortress. And right now, it was Elite Guard as far as the eye could see.

The North Tower didn't sustain much damage during the dragon attack, its facilities remaining mostly in order, and so we relocated here.

I left the sickroom for the dining hall.

Although Leon would've been better off catching up on sleep — frankly, he looked worse than me — he courteously accompanied me to the dining hall.

Hanging out is great and all, but these things have limits, you know.

Then, what was placed before me was this platter of dragon steak.

The dead dragon's enormous bulk had crashed into the control tower, where it was still exposed to the elements. Removing it was proving to be a problem.

Apparently, in the middle of it all, someone said, 'Hey, can't we just eat it?'

And they gave it a shot and it turned out to be delicious, so afterward they decided to disassemble the body and put it to use as food. It was a very crude but heroic suggestion. I bet Gary came up with it.

Dragon meat.

If I think about it, isn't this an incredibly rare ingredient?

The extremely appetizing dragon meat was being used up before it went bad with substantial enthusiasm. Primarily to fill the stomachs of the fortress soldiers.

Other than that, discovering its value, lucky traders with a discerning eye were carting it off by the load.

At any rate, even though Basragate Fortress took some serious damage from the dragon, it triumphed over the beast, and there was quite a bit of festivity in the air.

I didn't realize until it was pointed out to me, but while I was taking my sweet time, my early lunchtime had turned into normal lunchtime, and the dining hall got a little crowded.

With the North Tower crammed with the Elite Guard, the soldiers streaming in one after another all looked familiar to me.

"Hello, Lord Leon! Hey, everyone. Chris, you're up too! I'm so glad!"

It was Irene, cheekily seating herself at our table.

Forget familiar, she was one of the people there that night. Nothing about her appearance suggested that she'd been injured.

I didn't say it, but it was a relief.

"What is that, Irene?"

I noticed the strange food sitting on the wooden tray she brought with her.

It was bread, but it'd been split into top and bottom, and stuck between them was a slice of meat, probably dragon. It was surprisingly bulky.

"You're asking me? It's a chrissando, right?"

Her face puzzled, Irene said something that grabbed my attention.

"What? What sort of name... Eh."

I was about to question her when I detected a odd atmosphere, and I looked at Leon.

Leon turned away, refusing to show me his face.

I looked at Aira.

Aira, still grinning, averted her eyes. Palmira absently left me with the cryptic words [No more drinking]. I don't know what that means.

"...Someone explain this to me, guys."

No one replied, and always moving at her own pace, Irene stuffed her face with the chrissando.

I didn't really get it, but the meat-stuffed bread called the chrissando seemed to be

popular in the North Tower dining hall. Even at other tables, I could see a relatively large number of soldiers eating the same thing.

And, when I made eye contact, every last one of them looked away. Seriously, what the hell is going on here?

“Well, it’s fine, isn’t it?”

His face a bit red, Leon tried to steer the conversation away from the topic.

I found it difficult to let go without getting an explanation, but for some reason, I felt like I shouldn’t poke my nose in any further, and I reluctantly shut up on the subject.

“By the way, how long are we going to be here?”

Noon had come and gone, and the dining hall had become sparsely populated.

The truth is, we’re already running three days behind schedule.

Well, even if I say that, I have no idea if we’re in a hurry or not. Being delayed doesn’t bother me much.

Though I didn’t know how extensive the dragon’s destruction was, Basragate still had quite a few city amenities despite being a fortress.

Even if we stayed here awhile, I wouldn’t particularly mind. So I was pretty casual about asking.

“Rupert can’t move, and with Maddox currently at large, it would be dangerous to leave the fortress now. I’ve called Vyde back, so we’ll await his arrival. Besides, we have an obligation to the fortress to assist in its reconstruction in whatever way we can. And, well, there wasn’t much of a rush to return to the capital in the first place.”

Vyde, huh...? I recalled the First Platoon Commander. To be honest, ‘plain’ was the only way to describe him.

Vyde’s being called back here to stand in for Rupert, but if so, then I suppose he’s just

as strong.

He hasn't displayed the slightest hint of that strength in front of me so far, so I can't imagine it no matter how hard I try.

"Then, how long will we stay here?"

"Roughly five days. That will likely be enough time for Vyde to arrive,"

Leon said, in response to Aira's question.

Five days? Well, it seemed long, but it wasn't really.

Especially for me — I wasn't looking forward to arriving in the capital, and since we'd be inviting another attack from Maddox if we moved out recklessly, I was all for Leon's plan.

For the time being, I had no reason to oppose them.

"Oh, thank god. To be honest, I don't really want to go to the capital," said Irene.

"Why's that?"

"Mmm, because when I go back, I have to drop by the Schola Magorum, and whenever I go there, I get saddled with more weird work."

Irene was too frank for a typical civilian contractor in the military; she was sharing her thoughts right in front of her boss.

The mention of the Schola's 'weird work' sparked my interest, but I had the feeling that Irene was just waiting for someone to give her an opening, and that it would be a pain to deal with. So I make a conscious decision not to take the bait.

"That aside, what about your work right now?"

Lunch was just about over, and as the soldiers in the area dispersed, the dining hall returned to its deserted state.

Based on what Leon said, the Elite Guard should be offering its support in the fortress's reconstruction, so Irene was probably here for the same thing.

Of course, she came to eat lunch too, but she was staying behind, butt firmly planted on her seat, like she had every reason to be here.

"Ah, I was the one who called her," said Leon.

"You did?"

"That's right. I'm not rude enough to sit down with Lord Leon if I hadn't been called here."

Irene threw in a cocky follow-up.

Rude or not, I couldn't help but feel that she'd still plopped herself down at the same table, and even started to eat lunch.

"Did you have some work for her?"

"Yes, I think it will be necessary to clarify something."

"Clarify what?"

Leon's statement seemed to be hinting at something. I suddenly had a bad feeling.

Calling Irene here. What for?

Points in common... they both know that I used to be a man...

But they waited until *now* to get that cleared up?

"The mysterious magic you use."

Leon looked at me, his expression serious.

...Come to think of it, he's not wrong.

I'd been too preoccupied with other things, so I thought less and less about why I could use magic.

I mean, this was never my own body to begin with, obviously, so even if my invocation process was strange, I thought, 'Mystery solved', and I stopped worrying about it.

If I think about it, I used that "magic" only twice before.

During one of them, Guibenague, the unlucky bastard, was the only witness. Plus, if I remember right, then I was the only one who knew that it had been activated unconventionally.

Apparently, I was the only one who had thought of it was perfectly normal. Virtually everyone who saw what happened that night was shocked.

"I'll be honest with you, Chris. It's strange. Even if we set aside the question of why you can use magic at all, activation without a invocation stone or incantation is completely unprecedented. On top of that, I've never seen or heard of such magic before. I don't even know which of the Six Attunements it belongs to. If I had to come up with *something*, it seems to be a fusion of light and wind... and fire, but I can't even understand how it might be put together. Just what in the world is it?"

"Even if you ask me..."

I was a bit intimidated by Irene, who'd done a total one-eighty and was now questioning me with intensity.

Look, you can ask me all you want, but I don't have any more to give you.

I'm the one who wants a clear explanation of all this.

"If you don't mind, could you tell us the details of the times you were able to use magic?"

Leon smiled pleasantly.

‘What’s with that grin? What’s there to grin about here?’ I thought, but I was completely helpless against it.

I don’t really have anything to hide, do I?

Considering the thought in a corner of my mind, I began to speak in as much detail as possible.

When was the first time?

Ah, it was that night on the estate. I was playing with the invocation stone I picked up, right?

It was absorbed into my hand, a blue pattern appeared on my body... and that was the end of it.

Come to think of it, Leon had burst into my room that time, looking completely unlike himself. He played dumb when I asked him later, but he saw it, didn’t he? The pattern.

After that, the second time was with Guibenague.

I thought I’d use his invocation stone to freak him out.

At the time, it seemed to me that I could, somehow. And then for some reason, I actually could, I mean.

The third was against Maddox.

I thought since I was able to before, couldn’t I do it again somehow? And I was desperate. I couldn’t think of anything else.

But when the invocation stone broke, I wondered, ‘What do I do?’

But I had to take him down... I mean... I thought... I thought he’d kill Leon.

Then, because the design appeared, I thought I could do it.

” — that about sums it up.”

Done talking, I took a breather.

For some reason, I recalled the time I confessed that I was a man.

This talk about “magic” felt different. It didn’t feel like that a big deal to me.

As a matter of fact, Aira and Palmira were listening to me with astonished looks on their faces. It actually was that big a deal.

But, Leon aside, my story seemed to be a considerable shock to Irene. Her face was frozen in a look of blatant disbelief.

“I see. Thank you, Chris... Irene, what do you think?”

“Ah-, uh, yes — ”

Leon’s manner finally got Irene back online.

It just occurred to me now, but when these two speak directly to each other, they have a surprisingly proper superior-subordinate relationship.

Even Irene, audacious as she is. Come to think of it, she was pretty quiet at the strategy meeting too. It’s sort of nostalgic.

“To tell you the truth, I thought it was an impossible story. Almost everything in it goes against the system of magic we’ve upheld to this day. I thought that, perhaps... it may not even be magic. But it’s at least more closely related to the fundamental system than the invocation stones. However — ”

Irene glanced at me with an unusually serious expression before continuing.

“This matter of the invocation stone being absorbed into the body. After that, the emergence of the pattern. And finally, the ability to use magic, even without a invocation stone. I believe these three are somehow related. However, in what way... it’s impossible for me to draw any conclusions...”

“...I see.”

I didn't know what there was to see in that speech just now, but Leon nodded and turned thoughtful.

Even while she kept sneaking glances at me, Irene mostly hung her head and said nothing.

“It seems much of it will have to remain a mystery for now... Let's adjourn here. I thought we might return to the capital and resume the investigation there, should Chris have a need to.”

‘How does that sound?’ Leon said, washing his hands of me.

...I realized after being dumped, but if I sat down and thought about it, this was my problem.

Though I was following Leon's pace without thinking too much about it, you could say that it was one hundred percent my problem. The weird part was having other people poke around in my own business.

Whether or not I can use magic has never been all that important to me in the first place.

Do or die, my objective is to return to my original body, which is different from unraveling the mystery of this one.

If only I could return to my body, then magic, the riddle of this body — I'll no longer have the need to know anything about them.

Yeah, if only I could return to my body.

When the thought crossed my mind, a kind of stinging thorn lodged itself in my heart.

“Chris?”

” — ! Ah, yeah, sounds good to me.”

Ducking around the true nature of that prickling, I responded in a hurry.

“?... Well then, let’s proceed like so.”

“Th-Then I’m returning to work.”

An inscrutable expression flickered across Leon’s face for a moment before he wrapped things up. Seemingly flustered, Irene seized the chance, rising from her seat and leaving as if she were fleeing.

Though I found that unnatural behavior curious, I decided not to worry about it.

That aside.

What was that stinging just now?

Not clearly understanding, or perhaps, not trying to understand, I looked at Leon.

I also have things I need to make clear.

I have to go back to how I used to be.

But somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to say that in front of Leon.

Chapter 47

The Handover

For now, the fortress remained on the lookout, but we idly continued our lives without Maddox returning for a second round.

Well, it was mostly just us three who were idle. Everyone else in the Elite Guard seemed to have their hands full.

'Keep the troops busy,' as they say, but at least Leopard, who was giving them directions, seemed to strictly adhere to the principle.

Even Irene seemed to be up to something; these last few days, I'd only seen her gazing far off in the distance. I mean, I've said it myself before, but just what kind of work is she doing?

On other fronts, Leon was the same as always, but now that I was back in a triple room, he didn't barge in as he pleased.

This is coming a bit late, but Leon has apparently decided that he'll be there when I wake up only when I'm sure to be by myself. Thing is, he came up with this rule based on his principles, so what about the part where he asks for my permission?

If I think about it, aside from me, Leon seems to have drawn a clear line between himself and other people. No matter how gentle or warm he is, there's an absolute boundary that no one else can cross. I don't know what made him that way, but maybe that's just how it is in the world of the nobility.

And yet, for some reason, I'm the only exception. Even when I think back, he's been taking liberties with me since we first met.

Is that because I'm [Chris]?

It's unclear, but I have no intention of asking him to make it clear either. Whatever the

answer might be, it would obviously be better left unsaid.

Speaking of which, that was what we fought over in Brellwandy. Well, my mouth moved faster than my brain back then, and in the end, nothing came of it. So I think it's fine not to count it.

While I had the time, I went to see the dragon.

It had rammed itself into the lowest floor of the control tower, where it died. Three or four days had passed since then, but it had already been mostly stripped down, leaving part of its body bare bone. But it was still easy to see that the dragon had been a huge creature. Its lower leg, at least, was over ten meters long. There can't be any monsters bigger than this one, right?

Several enormous arrows jutted out from the turquoise scales covering its entire body. They must have come from the giant crossbows Leon mentioned. But even if they were billed as 'anti-dragon equipment', whether they were effective was another story. In this case, power aside, targets in the sky were usually difficult to hit with conventional projectiles. Even something as big as a dragon.

And yet, even by a quick count, nearly ten of them had found their mark. Long story short, I could tell that the fortress's overall ability was something to be reckoned with.

As I was thinking about such things, Palmira thrust her sword into the dragon.

When I asked her what she was doing, she replied, [We might enter combat with a dragon one of these days, so I wanted to check how hard they are.] Her ambition was commendable, but honestly, I'd be more than happy to never have the chance.

"Oh, if it isn't the young ladies?"

Because Palmira was busy doing that sort of stuff, Aira and I couldn't really do much but stand around, observing from a distance. As we watched the repairs going up around the dragon and the control tower, a voice spoke to us from the side.

"General, how do you do?"

Aira immediately returned the greeting with her best manners.

'With the fortress in this condition, no one's doing well,' I thought, but contrary to my expectations, General Gary seemed to be in high spirits.

"Well, what perfect timing to meet you here!... The truth is, I felt that I had to apologize to you three."

Apologize? What for?

I unconsciously did a double take when I saw this mountain bandit's attitude suddenly grow meek.

"Percival caused you young ladies such trouble... That's inexcusable,"

he said, and lowered his head. He surprised me so much that I nearly jumped back.

Anyway, even though he was the one who chose to do it, he was commander of the fortress. For someone of such standing to lower his head in a place like this looked bad in all sorts of ways.

"N-No, uh, not at all, Ga — Lord Gary, I'm begging you, lift up your head, okay, please? We understand. We understand!"

Even I could tell how panicked I must have looked. And my formal speech was a mess. In hindsight, I wish I'd left it to Aira. Times like this, it was her turn to shine.

"...Then, I ask that you please forgive me."

"Yeah — uh, of course!"

"Is that so!? I'm very grateful for your words, but it is my greatest joy to receive them!"

Seeing Gary's villainous face contort into a bright smile, I let out a deep sigh. That's

bad for the heart. I can't lie, I'd like to be spared the sight.

Of course, it's not like I feel no anger toward Percival. But the time I spent with him was too short for me to feel betrayed, so I'm not especially torn up about it.

On the flip-side, wouldn't Gary have been hit a lot harder by the betrayal of his adjutant? Honestly, I sympathize with the feeling.

Though I'm not sure how I should follow up now.

"Still... why did Lord Percival do it?"

Because I thought it was a delicate subject, I was thinking of ways to get through the conversation without broaching it, but Aira asked Gary straight-out. Aira, same as always and yet suddenly so ballsy. Inside, I broke out into a cold sweat.

"To tell you the truth, as shameful as it is, I don't know... Involving you young ladies, to say nothing of Lord Leon, is on par with high treason. He was someone I personally promoted, but I never imagined in my wildest dreams that his true character could possibly be capable of such an act."

As he spoke his mind, Gary's expression was full of regret.

As a matter of fact, I'd even suspected the possibility that entire fortress was in on Percival's betrayal. Given the various factors involved, the chance was close to zero, but considering that it wasn't impossible, I'd kept my guard up for the time being.

But if that were true, then it was strange that there hadn't been any other attempts by now, three days later.

Those vague suspicions made me a little wary, but now, with Gary's words, I decided to set aside all those doubts.

It was just [for some reason], but Gary's behavior really didn't seem two-faced to me. Suddenly, I felt that my suspicions were absurd, and I stopped entertaining them.

When I considered it some more, it occurred to me that if someone like me could think of such an idea, then there was no way that Leon and Regnum — though I didn't know if he was still around — would have missed it.

And considering that we'd been allowed to move this freely, in short, Leon must have judged that that wasn't the case. In that case, even if I did stay on alert, there was no longer any point to it.

"The truth is, although Lord Leon would be fully justified in doubting every one of us, he stayed here and even offered his assistance... We are wholly indebted to him."

As it turned out, we weren't the only ones to think that way — having shared the same suspicions himself, Gary let slip a relieved smile.

Although it largely seems that way, suspicion alone doesn't make a commander. Naturally, a certain degree of thoughtfulness is also necessary, I think.



The arrival of the First Platoon, with Vyde at its head, came three days after I woke up in the sickroom. It went roughly as Leon had said earlier.

When Leon told me, all I thought was 'You don't say?', but the truth is, they mobilized with terrifying speed. By my calculations, the platoon — as it was called, despite its fifty members — was moving with barely any time lag at all. Ordinarily, that would be impossible. The Elite Guard's responsiveness was really something. They didn't disappoint the impression I had of their ability.

Anyway, we ended up receiving that First Platoon Commander Vyde in Rupert's hospital room.

Though he'd been defeated, it didn't change the fact that Rupert had put his life on the line to protect us. Aira, Palmira, and I went to visit him every day. All wrapped up in bandages, he seemed subtly annoyed on the outside, but it wasn't like we were strangers anymore. And I, at least, felt like taking some petty revenge, so against his will we crowded into his room every day. To tell you straight out, I had the time, and at least with Rupert, I could be myself, so it was actually pretty fun.

Spending almost every day drilling with her sword by herself, Palmira in particular actively wanted to go see him.

And it wasn't because she was worried about him, but because, ever pragmatic, she

was asking him for pointers on sword techniques. Though he seemed fed up with it, he went along with it surprisingly often. Actually, if anyone was worried, it was Aira. Every time she visited, she'd bring him some kind of fruit — probably swiped from somewhere. And typical of Rupert, it seemed to make him genuinely happy.

“You seem to be doing surprisingly well.”

“Yo, Vyde. Thanks for coming all the way out here.”

Seeing Rupert upon entering the sickroom, Vyde skipped the greetings for a brief, astonished observation. Rupert casually raised a hand to him.

Vyde had his usual grimace on, but I could kinda tell.

Although Rupert was lying in bed, drowning in bandages, Palmira was squeezed in close to his bedside, and beside her was Aira, personally peeling an apple for him to eat. I wasn't doing anything but sitting in a chair behind them, but it was Rupert and three women crammed into a room that was narrow to begin with. Even if we looked like a harem to Vyde, well, what can you do?

As serious as his injuries were, they certainly hadn't slowed him down. He had at least five bone fractures that I knew of. Plus he took countless blows and abrasions. You could even say that the only way he could be in worse condition was if his life or limbs were in danger. But he needed to be on complete bed rest all the same. Just bundled up in bandages.

“Good morning, Mister Vyde.”

“...Morning.”

“Been a while, huh?”

As a group of three, we also said hello, more or less. Though we'd made his acquaintance during the Guibenague incident, we'd hardly spoken to him since.

It was a byproduct of his personality, but as a result, I put him down as a man whose thoughts I couldn't read.

“Now that he’s been reduced to such a pathetic state, I’ll be assuming his duties starting today. It won’t be for long, but I look forward to working with you.”

Though business-like, there was a bitter edge in Vyde’s voice. A paper-thin veneer of courtesy over rudeness. Unable to fully pick apart what he said, we stiffened right on the spot.

“Wh–What is that supposed to mean! Mister Rupert shielded us...!”

“Whoa, Airi, hold your horses.”

The quickest to reboot and respond was Aira. Apple in hand, she was about to step up to Vyde when Rupert pulled on her clothes to stop her.

Although she didn’t approach Vyde, even Palmira was glaring at him with a fairly angry expression. The glint in her eye was sharper than usual.

The effect of being menaced by beautiful women was quite impressive, but Vyde, as expressionless as always, faced it head-on.

“But — ! It’s our fault that you ended up like this, Mister Rupert!”

Looks like the excitement’s over. Even with Rupert holding her back, Aira was still vigorously trying to shake him off in her anger, though.

“It was his duty.”

Standing in the doorway, Vyde spoke without a single change in expression, his voice subdued.

“...Eh — ”

“It was his duty to serve as a guard. This was the only possible outcome. There’s no

need for you to concern yourself with it. But what I can say is that he opted to fight back then, isn't that right? Look at the big picture. Wasn't it more appropriate to withdraw, rather than initiate hostilities? If you consider that he lost as a result, and ultimately contributed nothing, it's obvious."

By the time he came here, he must have heard the full story from Leon or Leopard. That was what his words seemed to imply.

And those words were exceedingly ruthless, but they certainly weren't wrong.

"You talk like you've heard all about it. Then, would *you* have been able to beat Maddox?"

But take it from me, Rupert picked the best option he could under the circumstances. Sure, he lost, but even so, laying all the responsibility at Rupert's feet was a mistake. Actually, we were the ones who couldn't make the right choice back then.

Now that I think about it, since Rupert was buying us time, we should have put all our efforts into escaping.

Even I could have — *should* have used magic on the door to secure a path of retreat. In hindsight, there was no need to purposely take the huge risk of casting it on Maddox.

"No. But I could have gotten everyone to safety."

"Right?"

Vyde flatly declared that he wouldn't be able to win, and Rupert chimed in after.

From the beginning, it was surprisingly the target of the insults himself, Rupert, who stayed calmer than anyone else in the room.

"Alright, everyone calm down. He's always like this, you know? Besides, it's a fact that Maddox kicked my ass, and it was Chris who somehow got rid of him in the end, right? So that's that. Well, anyway, Vyde."

“The rest is my responsibility.”

“Understood.”

In the end, that was their entire conversation.

There wasn't even a 'Watch out for Maddox' or a 'How'd you end up like this'.

Long story short, Rupert just trusted Vyde that much. Taking on the assignment, Vyde said nothing more either and curtly acknowledged the handover. Even though his words said otherwise, Vyde approved of Rupert too. Looks like what we have here is just a difference in personality.

An angry Aira and Palmira could only stand there, dumbfounded by the speed of the process.

Anyway, since the two in question didn't care, it would only be tasteless for us third, fourth, and fifth wheels to get any angrier.

“Ahhh, still, that's the end of my harem, huh... I'll be so lonely.”

With that, Rupert flopped back onto the bed, sinking deep into it.

I felt that following up with those words was a bit too quick of a turnaround.

“...Rupert.”

In an uncharacteristic move, Palmira took the initiative to speak.

Even her expression had grown somewhat uneasy — anxious, even. It was a side of her that she rarely showed, and she looked like nothing so much as a cute girl.

“Don't make that face... Ah, that's right. Vyde.”

“What?”

“I want you to take care of this kid’s training. I’ve been doing it until now, but this is a good chance — I want you to teach her your straight sword.”

With Rupert’s hand resting on her head, Palmira was surprised by his words.

Looking back and forth between Vyde and Rupert, she seemed to be in quiet confusion.

“...That okay?”

Vyde’s curt response was just as unexpected.

I didn’t know who he was asking, but those two words alone somewhat improved my opinion of him.

In a surprising twist, he might be the type to worry for others.

“Yeah, ‘preciate it.”

“Got it.”

In the end, it was settled without Palmira’s input. Whether it was because Rupert didn’t care or if Vyde came to a clean decision, I couldn’t tell.

However, Rupert had fulfilled his responsibility, and Vyde had thought it through.

Though she wasn’t completely satisfied, Palmira glanced at Rupert before lowering her head to Vyde.

“Please take care of me.”

“Okay then! You guys are leaving tomorrow, right? Vyde, go away. My harem’s full today! Airi, apple!”

“Y-Yessir!”

“That’s not how you ask for an apple.”

What I had to applaud was that it really only took one moment for Rupert to fall into the role of a spoiled noble. I couldn’t help but interject. And I wanted to tell Aira not to indulge his whims with such enthusiasm.

As Aira held out the apple, I swiped it from her and stuck it in my own mouth.

“Ah–, Chris, what’re you doing? You’re a pest too! Go hang out at the boss’s place, will ya!”

“Are you stupid? If I leave these two behind, they’ll be in danger!”

“the hell can I even do!? Can’t you tell what condition I’m in just by looking!?”

Despite what Vyde said, one way or another, it didn’t change the fact that this guy protected us.

I’m sure we won’t be able to see him for a while.

In that case, maybe it’ll be okay to be nice to him, just for today.

Chapter 48

A Place I Can Come Home To

The next day, we were inside the horse-carriage on our way to the imperial capital. Look, I've gotta be honest, I've just about had it with this carriage. But when I remember that we'll reach the capital in three days, I feel like I can still manage.

Even so, I'm a bit depressed.

When this journey by carriage ends, so will these carefree days.

After so much — too much — happened along the way, it completely slipped my mind, but my objective in going to the capital has never been the same as the Elite Guard's.

They're simply coming home.

My goal, or else Leon's, is —

“Big Sister, you don't know when to give up.”

With an affirmative ‘mm-hmm’, Aira delivered the final blow.

Yeah, I know. I know.

Alright, so right now I'm being pretty girly — girly, huh? That's rich, given my current condition.

“No... but, you know? When we arrive in the capital, look, I'm going to be married, even if it is an act...”

I groaned.

Why, for the love of god, did I agree to this?

For the *n*th time — ah, I've lost count of how many times since I accepted the commission — the thought spun around and around in my head.

When I sat down and really thought about it, I remembered that Leon hadn't told me

the details of the arrangements following our arrival in the capital. Yeah, so, are we pretending to be married, or engaged, or...? Speaking of which, wasn't I stressing out over this very same question before? I felt a harsh déjà vu.

Basically, that was a place I didn't want my thoughts to go, and I'd been actively avoiding the topic until now. At any rate, I did have several opportunities to talk to Leon about it, but there was so much going on, I couldn't ask him any questions in the end. And incidentally speaking, I also pretty much forgot.

"Aira, be gentle with Chris. It's definitely... that thing you get before marriage... um, cold feet."

"Ahh, I see..."

"No, hold it right there. That's not something you're supposed to agree with, Aira. And Palmira, don't act like you just dropped some profound wisdom."

So basically, you guys, even though I told you that I turned into a woman only a short while ago, you're going to treat it like it's a done deal? How about you guys stop screwing around? Thanks.

"But Big Sister, you've already come this far. All you can do now is give in and hold your head high, right? Like 'Bring it on!'"

"Easy for you to say, when you don't have to deal with the fallout afterwards..."

There's a limit to messing around, Aira. But her sort-of advice is right on the money. I know. I know, but I just can't bring myself to accept it. At a time like this, is it possible to separate reason from emotion?

"But you have no intention of running away, right? In that case, there's nothing you can do even if you worry, is there?"

“I think so too. Chris, the moment you agreed to his request, it was checkmate. Give up.”

Their attitudes pleasant, they kept dealing fatal blows to me from point-blank range. I didn't even have the words to respond.

For some reason, I felt like they cornered me into giving in this way all the time. What's going on...

“Alright, alright, enough already. I get it. What will be, will be.”

Sulking, I flopped down onto the long seat.

As I did, the jouncing of the carriage wheels was transmitted directly into my body. From the clouds in the patch of sky visible through the window, I could tell that the carriage was moving at a good clip.

It didn't matter what I did anymore; sooner or later, I'd arrive in the capital. And as soon as I got there, I'd have to carry out the request.

Yeah, it's like Aira said: I can't run away or cancel the request now, not after all this time.

I had no clue what I should say to Leon, and even if I did, or possibly just ran for the hills, what would he think of me then? I didn't want to imagine it at all.

I was well and truly screwed.

I couldn't help feeling averse to the idea, but I had an obligation to see it through to the end. I let out a huge sigh.

“...Oh come on, Big Sister. Please keep your chin up. We'll be there to help you with everything we have.”

“That's right. Chris, you're not alone. We're right here with you.”

Their follow-up came a bit late, but I was a little grateful for it. Still, my uneasiness didn't disappear, and I sighed again.



In complete disregard of my will, we proceeded to the capital with no problems whatsoever.

We were about a day out from the mountainous region of Basragate Fortress, and the scenery had turned back into rolling plains.

I say 'plains', but unlike the Sarcalnaa wastelands around Brellwandy, this area had considerable greenery.

What's more, sparse as they were, I began to catch sight of the homes near the highway.

On the way here, public order had differed quite a bit from place to place. Now that this area was under the protection of the capital, there was, of course, no room for monsters or bandits to conduct their activities here. If they did appear, they were crushed in the blink of an eye.

As a side effect, the flow of traffic on the highway increased slightly.

Until now, we wouldn't know whether we'd come across even one caravan during the whole day. Now we were constantly passing by them, big and small. You might even say that on this side of the Sarcalnaa mountains, the culture was markedly different from that of the other imperial territories.

Though the empire boasts of great holdings, when split down the Sarcalnaa Mountain Range, the area we'd traveled through would be the northern territories, and the southern part would be the heartland.

Of course, because the core territories have been parceled out to regional lords to rule, even finer distinctions are possible, but in terms of atmosphere, only the north stands apart from the other domains within the Empire's borders.

If I had to say, there's a lot about the northern territories that seems uncivilized from the southern point of view. The culture and population density are that different.

The presence of the Sarcalnaa Mountain Range has a lot to do with how recently the northern territories fell under imperial rule.

Though right now there's a lull, that doesn't change the fact that the northern

territories are the frontier of the empire, with the effect of strengthening the tension among the general populace.

“Somehow, it seems so lively.”

Aira let her thoughts slip out as she kept peeping out the window.

This was already the third day. We were expected to arrive in the capital in the evening. Our surroundings could already be considered the outskirts of the city, so there were a fair number of homes, and we even had a clear view of the comings and goings of the residents.

Inside the carriage, it was just Aira and me.

Palmira should be outside riding with Leopard as usual.

“Come to think of it, where are you from, Aira?”

When I really thought about it, unlike Palmira, who spoke of her past in very clear terms, Aira had breezed by hers too easily. In the end, I realized, I didn't really know where she came from.

Sure, she did say it was a farming village, but I didn't know which one. That about summed it up.

“...To be honest, I don't really know myself. Until I was sold into slavery, I'd never left the village, so I know nothing about the area outside. However, I never crossed those mountains after being sold, so I think it's likely somewhere to the north.”

Her response came easily, like she was talking about someone else's problems. So I asked her the things I'd been conflicted over asking her about.

“Aira... you don't want to return to your hometown?”

Palmira and I no longer had a place to call home. And yet in contrast, Aira's was still there.

I couldn't speak for Palmira, but I felt a certain nostalgia for mine. The truth is, I'd dragged Aira along without giving much thought to it. Now that we'd just about reached our destination, I could only ask this late in the game. But if she wanted to go back, if she wished to, then even if I couldn't right now, I wanted to take her home someday.

Because mine was lost.

If you have a place to go home to, then you should go back someday.

"I don't."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all."

Aira didn't hesitate in the least. She even smiled.

"Because I'm sure that village isn't the place I was born. As I said before, I was picked up from the roadside. I have no idea what my parents' faces look like. Though it was the place where I was raised, though I naturally believe I owe a little to the people who raised me, they sold me. I think that my debt has been paid in full. So I don't really understand the idea of a 'hometown.'"

Aira's tone was indifferent.

Palmira's past was daring, but Aira's background was plenty weird too. Even though she didn't think anything of it herself, I felt my chest getting stuffy.

I amended my view.

Palmira and I had lost our hometowns, but Aira never had one to lose in the first place. Of course, I knew from experience that such cases weren't rare. Even if I sympathized, it was a common story. But still, that was definitely not normal.

A place to come home to someday. Wherever I might be, even if I can't return, it

remains inside my heart as my foundation. It's proof of my personal journey; I can find some peace of mind when I look over my shoulder and make sure it's there.

Through losing it, I've come to understand that whether I want to or not, shouldering my self-awareness, acceptance, resignation — I have no choice but to keep moving forward. All the same, I think — I hope that I might go back across the sea someday. Even if there's nothing there.

But Aira didn't even have that much.

“Big Sister.”

Concerned by my silence, Aira continued with a smile.

“Until that day, I lived without thinking a thing. I had nothing, no will of my own, no freedom either. Because there was no need to think. Why do I live? Why was I born into this world? I'm hollow, with no worth and no future. Why am I here, I wondered. Of course, I had no chance of ever finding the answer, so I didn't think about it. It's a bitter thing, thinking. It's so much easier not to. That way, it doesn't hurt.”

As she looked out the window, a smiling Aira spooled out her words like a song.

As if it didn't matter at all.

As if it were a fact of life.

“But Big Sister, you saved me, didn't you? You fought desperately to keep my worthless skin alive, didn't you? You told me that I was worth something, that even this life of mine had meaning, didn't you? So I started to think. About myself, about the future, about living, so many things. If — ”

She cut short her words, then looked at me for the first time. She stared straight into my eyes.

” — If thinking is what it means to live, then I was born at that moment. So my home is here. Right here. That's why — ”

Aira lowered her head to me very deeply,

” — please, let me stay with you. Please.”

Though she was quiet, her plea was like a cry.

Suddenly, I understood her.

Aira always acts like there’s nothing wrong.

It might be the product of her fear.

If she’s refused. If her feelings aren’t understood.

Hiding her innermost thoughts, fearing rejection, and so protecting herself, she worries endlessly about the people she comes into contact with. That’s why she pretends that there’s nothing wrong with her own affairs.

To avoid being hurt, to avoid hurting others.

And maybe, to avoid a break in her thoughts and feelings, even in the face of rejection — she talks and laughs.

That’s why I know full well how sincere they are, the words she spoke so clearly with her head bowed down.

Thinking back, Aira did express these thoughts to me before.

The first time we met, in that slave wagon.

If I had rejected those feelings back then.

If I hadn’t listened.

Aira wouldn’t be like this now.

“Got it. Aira, let’s go on together.”

I hugged her head to my chest.

It was something of a kind lie.

The time for us to part ways would definitely come someday. We couldn’t be together

forever. The only question was whether that will be sooner, or later.

Even so, I didn't push Aira away right now. What happened after this wasn't important.

Call me irresponsible, but right now, this is what matters.

In the past, I wouldn't have done it.

I was always cautious about responsibility. I always worried about whether I was making a mistake or not. I was afraid of regret.

I might be making a mistake. I might come to regret it.

And yet.

And yet — at this very moment, this is right.

Holding onto Aira's trembling body, I hugged her a little tighter.

Chapter 49

The Other Side of the Wall

The imperial capital of Granadas.

Just as the Empire isn't referred to by its official name, the [Greya Stroidel Empire], the imperial capital of Granadas is usually called 'the Imperial Capital'.

Of course, there are plenty of 'empires' all over the world. If a nation is ruled by an 'emperor', then big or small, it can certainly be considered an empire.

But still, almost every time 'the Empire' is mentioned, it's in reference to the Greya Stroidel Empire.

If I had to guess, I'd say it's because its might and storied history are overwhelming, such that the other 'empires' can't even compare. Considered one of the three global superpowers, it's an indisputable fact that the Empire possesses the strength to be the greatest of them all.

As a result, the Imperial Capital commands the same degree of recognition.

At least, the more nationalistic citizens simply call it [the Imperial Capital]. It's an arrogance that refuses to acknowledge the existence of any other imperial capital.

But, in keeping with the stature of the nation, this capital boasts of great majesty.

Population, five hundred sixty thousand. This megacity, said to be the pinnacle of wealth and culture, now appeared before our eyes.

"Wow, that's amazing!"

exclaimed Aira, leaning out of the carriage.

Her reaction was understandable. Still, since I'd visited several times in the past, I

wasn't quite as floored by it as she was. But no matter how many times I saw it, its dignity filled me with awe.

The tall castle walls loomed above, exerting an overwhelming pressure. Even from far away, they dwarfed the surrounding structures, which looked like toys in comparison. Forming the outer perimeter of the enormous metropolis, they extended so far out that they disappeared into the distance.

And they weren't the only things visible from the outside.

I'd heard that the city was built at the very top of a gently sloping hill.

For that reason, with the foot of the hill serving as its outer perimeter, its interior rose in elevation toward the center of the city. That's why the castles inside were visible over the ramparts at this distance, and the closer to the center, the higher they soared.

Vaguely visible at the very heart of the city was Stroidel Castle, the Emperor's residence and supposedly the greatest castle in the world. Though it appeared hazy, it rose conspicuously high. I couldn't even begin to guess how tall it was.

At least, the city left an equally deep impression on everybody who saw it for the first time.

The symbol of the Empire's might. That was the Imperial Capital.

"It's dangerous to lean too far out, you know?"

Leon, who rarely brought his horse over to the carriage, cautioned a still spellbound Aira. Though he said that, he seemed to be in a pleasant mood all the same. There was a smile on his face.

Truth is, there isn't a person out there who isn't astounded by the sight. And seeing people surprised is unexpectedly fun.

"Palmira, this isn't your first time in the capital, is it."

As I looked outside through the window Aira was leaning out of, I spoke to Palmira. She stayed inside the carriage, fixed in place.

Sitting with her sword in her lap, Palmira was hanging her head slightly like she wasn't all there.

“Right.”

And she responded tersely.

She'd said before that she didn't really want to come to the capital.

But I didn't think it would dampen her spirits this much. It was too much of a contrast with Aira, who was still cheery even after Leon's warning.

Well, different strokes for different folks.

I made a note to treat Palmira gently.

We still had a ways to go before we reached the city walls, but gradually, the number of family dwellings grew. In terms of density, it wasn't a stretch to say that the outskirts were practically a city in themselves.

The 'original capital' was within the walls, of course, but for reasons of size and convenience, the city had expanded outward from the outside of the walls too.

The carriage was already passing through such an area. Usually, a working class visitor's experience of the Imperial Capital was limited to the districts outside of the walls, which can be considered the downtown part of the city.

That was the Imperial Capital in my memories. I'd never gone inside the walls, not once. Palmira probably hadn't either.

Though it didn't pose a particular inconvenience either. It might only be the outlying districts, but the Imperial Capital was huge. It was certainly prosperous enough, and vastly more convenient compared to a city of lesser size and wealth. As I mentioned before, the Adventurers' Guild was located in the outlying districts too. Adventurers generally had no need to enter the inner city.

That said, if you *did* need to go inside, tough luck.

The gates to the outer wall were monitored around the clock by dozens of men, and unless you had some incredible reason, it was impossible to pass through. There was a good chance that even the residents who'd set up homes in the outlying districts had

never once laid eyes on the inner city, I thought.

They say that the inner city is for the privileged and those of singular talent. Aside from them, no one is allowed to even go inside, much less live there.

Still, I didn't actually have a particular desire to go inside. When I heard that kind of talk in the tavern, I'd just grunt and ignore it.

...Of course, it looked like I'd going inside...

About to experience the inner capital for the first time, in an unexpected turn of events, I sighed out of some deep, mysterious emotion.

The inner capital.

A place almost all the outlying residents, or possibly even the entire imperial citizenry, yearned for.

Around here, it was common to hear people saying, 'I want to go there someday.' At any rate, those living on the outskirts had those soaring walls immediately in front of them, and they at least had some small idea of what lies on the other side.

It was indeed cruel for this little to be known.

We didn't have the clearest view from our current vantage point, but as frustrating as the knowledge was, it was at least evident that the world inside the walls was magnificent.

For that reason, the residents outside the walls longed to look inside, and almost all of them would go their entire lives without seeing it even once.

In that case, it was ultimately human nature to hope for a glimpse of what lay within.

'Just once in my life, I want to see inside.' 'I want to go inside.' 'Someday, I want to live inside.'

Such wishes were only natural.

But still.

When I was an adventurer, such things held little fascination for me. So now that I was

about to cross the wall without even trying, I was keenly aware of fate's ironic sense of humor. On the one hand, there were those who thirsted for such an opportunity from the bottom of their hearts, and then there were people like me, able to waltz right in without any fuss.

If that isn't irony, what is?

The carriage passed through the lower city, drawing closer to those walls.

From up close, the ramparts gradually loomed over us. They were so tall I already had to crane my neck to get a look at them. It was an oppressive feeling.

They sure were amazing, but too much of that made them seem vaguely threatening. That's what it felt like.

In the outlying districts, practically all the houses stood in haphazard rows; only along the road to the castle gates were they all uniformly set up in a dense but organized arrangement.

It was a peculiar sight. It even looked as if the city had been divided along a line.

The Elite Guard marched down the very center of that imposing road.

It wasn't as if there was no other traffic.

However, even so, I felt a strange isolation from the wide berth given us by our surroundings. I'm sure Leon and the rest usually come and go along this road, but if I were to get used to it, would I inevitably stop feeling that way?

"There's something — frightening about them."

As we got closer, Aira must have thought the same thing. Pushing away from the window, she settled back into the carriage.

Her expression vacant, Palmira sat quietly to the side.

I instead poked my head out the window and looked outside.

They certainly were frightening.

They were way too big, and we were headed for whatever was on the other side.

A formless uneasiness gnawed at me. 'Once we cross those walls, won't we be stuck

for good?' and other wild ideas popped up in my mind for some reason.

"What's wrong?"

Leon asked me, walking his horse in line with the carriage.

The fact that he was wearing his usual clothing was honestly a relief to me. 'It's okay for now.' It filled me with that kind of reassurance.

"No, it's nothing... I was just thinking, we'll be at the gate really soon."

Under normal circumstances, I might have settled the question with a curt response. But plagued by that indescribable anxiety, I elaborated somewhat.

"Are you anxious?"

He saw through me right away. My heart jumped, but it wasn't a bad feeling. Rather, my mood lightened, and I smiled slightly.

"...Uh, well. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't."

"Haha-, I'll protect you in there, so please, put your mind at ease."

— A declaration that wasn't at all like him. His expression was unruffled as he spoke. The breath caught in my throat, just a bit, and I bit my lower lip. Otherwise my mouth might have broken into a smile.

"O... Obviously. You better do a good job..."

My voice, initially full of bravado, tapered off weakly. Embarrassed, I turned my face away.

What the hell am I saying? I was full of chagrin.

“But of course.”

Don't go spouting such irresponsible things.

Even though I grumbled inwardly, I can't lie: I found reassurance in those strong words. When I averted my gaze, my eyes fell on the ranks of the Elite Guard marching alongside us. They were watching our exchange with grins on their faces.

I hastily ducked back inside the carriage to hide myself.

When I secretly peeked outside, Leon gave me a grin before assuming a serious expression and walking his horse toward the front. I found myself helpless to tear my eyes away from his profile.

— Seriously, this guy makes a perfect picture.

I sighed deeply before pulling my gaze away with considerable effort, meekly returning to inside the carriage as the ramparts drew closer and closer.

“Big Sister, even your ears are bright red, you know?”

“Were you enchanted?”

“Shaddap you guys! Leave me alone!”

I found even less mercy inside than outside.

Or rather, precisely because I would've been aware of it myself if I calmed down, I grit my teeth. In the first place, Palmira was looking all depressed earlier, so what the hell is this now?

“We're already passing through the gates, so I must ask that you behave a little,”

said Leon, drawing his horse over to the carriage. Maybe quite a bit of my shout had leaked outside.

Even he might have appearances to keep up here.

“O-Okay... Sorry.”

“Big Sister, you really are weak against Lord Leon, aren't you?”

“You should have some self-awareness.”

“.....”

You'll regret this, you two. Just you wait.

Doing my best to keep silent, all I could do was glare at them a little.

Before long, the carriage crossed the wall.

There was no turning back anymore.

Chapter 50

A World All Too Different

With an anticlimactic ease, the carriage passed the ramparts and advanced down the stone-paved road.

By this time, the sun was already setting, dying the surroundings sunset red.

Under blue skies, the stores and houses on the streets of the inner capital would surely have been an eye-catching white. Now, illuminated by the red evening sun, every last one was weltering in blood.

The world inside the walls, in a word, was 'strange'.

Almost every building was three, maybe four stories high, clustered so tightly together that I wasn't sure if I was supposed to distinguish where one ended and the next began.

Our carriage rolled through what you might call a gap, or maybe a valley, between the buildings.

Though the road was certainly well-maintained, over the course of our journey from the gates to our current position, I'd already lost track of where we were going.

Again and again, we turned at intersections, passed under archways; when I tried to pay attention, we were running on top of the walls, or slipping through tunnels. I could no longer picture the city as anything other than a labyrinth.

I can say with absolute confidence that if I were ordered to get off the carriage and return to the gate, I wouldn't be able to make it.

For starters, I thought that we'd reach our destination immediately after crossing the wall, like at Leon's estate. But that wasn't the case. It was obvious when I really thought about it, but the inner capital was a city itself, of course. Or rather, it was the true substance of the Imperial Capital.

If I had to explain why I was so off the mark, I guess it'd be because I only ever spent

time outside the wall.

That's why I never gave much thought to the world inside. My entire impression of the city came from the outlying districts, not the inside of the ramparts. Hence my mistaken expectations.

"Somehow... it's a different world..."

whispered Aira as she looked outside.

As dusk fell over the city, there was definitely something different about the residents. Their world was shifted out of alignment with ours. It was a sense of displacement I knew from experience.

Young women leading their children. Elderly men out for a stroll in their suits. A quartet of girls chattering energetically as they walked by — everyone was somehow relaxed, and at the same time, if I had to describe it... yeah, that's right.

Completely free of desperation.

"H-Huh?"

Watching them, tears tumbled from Aira's eyes as she made a sound of dismay.

A troubled half-smile on her face, she pressed her hands against her eyes, but she couldn't hold back the overflowing tears. It was like that.

I could understand it, a little. Why she felt that way.

Palmira too, I bet.

Perhaps, Palmira might have seen this once.

"Mn."

As a flustered Aira continued to cry for reasons she couldn't understand, Palmira gave her a light hug and pulled her down to sit on the seat.

Then, gently holding the crying girl's head, she softly and wordlessly stroked it.

It was too painful to watch.

A world all too different.

Aira, Palmira. And me too. We saw that.

For us, living meant fighting tooth and nail to survive. Or perhaps becoming slaves, driven to the brink of death.

And none of it was all that special. At least, not where we came from.

If you let your mind wander, it was very easy to die, to lose everything. A fleeting existence, living each day, each moment in desperation.

That was the world we lived in.

But things weren't like that here.

Relaxed, without struggle — happily, even. Comfortably.

Privileges granted only to a special handful of people, I thought. So I endured. I resigned myself.

But even if everyone were afforded such privileges, in this world enclosed by the city walls, that would probably be seen as a matter of course. So, bitter as it was, it couldn't be helped.

Driven to desperation over living, fighting for dear life in order to eat. Though that was a natural part of the world, here, we were heretics for it.

It seemed so terribly wretched.

Being forced to turn to such things to live — what the hell did that make us?

The truth is, even when we were at the mansion, that feeling had been there, tucked into a corner. 'This isn't a place where we should be.'

Even so, as I see it now, that was still part of our world. Because it was still possible to recognize that such ideals only held true in the mansion.

But this place was different. It was that kind of world.

A world encircled by towering walls, isolated from the outside.

That's why, right now, I was conscious of the world's absurdity again.

The emotions born within me as a result were misery, and grief, and perhaps — anger.



As my spirits took a thorough beating, the carriage finally came to a stop.

We seemed to have gone quite a distance. The sun had already sunk below the horizon, and our surroundings were quite dark.

“You must be exhausted. Today, please take your time to rest here.”

We’ve reached our destination, I guess. Honestly, I don’t remember being this tired before, even on the road. Even hearing Leon’s worried voice coming from the front of the carriage, I couldn’t find it in me to give him a proper reply.

Leon was as composed as usual, but I could tell that our visible exhaustion really did concern him.

But he probably didn’t know anything about the emotional breakdown we’d had in the carriage after getting past the castle walls.

And that might be for the best.

This was probably Leon’s hometown. Ordinarily, it would’ve been a place to brag about.

The fact we couldn’t sincerely think of it as amazing was definitely our problem. Besides, as someone who was born and raised here... that was probably something Leon wouldn’t be able to understand, I suppose.

“-ah-”

“! Are you alright?”

As I stepped down from the carriage, I stumbled.

I didn’t think that I was physically exhausted, but mentally seemed to be a different story.

Standing to the side, Leon immediately helped support me.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine. Just a bit tired, that’s all.”

Doing my best to camouflage my innermost thoughts, I smiled foolishly. All the same, his expression remained concerned, and I felt a little apologetic.

Averting my eyes, I looked at the building that seemed to be our lodgings for the night.

An white-walled mansion, unexpectedly cozy but not out-of-place in this city. At least, it was considerably smaller than the Telaberan estate.

If I were to compare them, it was almost more appropriate to call it a house rather than an estate. However, if I had to describe it, I’d call it ‘very elegant’.

“What a wonderful home, isn’t it?”

I heard Aira’s voice as she descended the carriage after me.

When I turned around, Aira’s face was unexpectedly bright. I could’ve asked her, in all seriousness, ‘Where did all your gloom from just now go?’ As expected of Aira. She bounced back fast.

After her came Palmira, her face empty of emotion. So, the usual.

“Welcome back, Master.”

While I was looking at them, another voice sounded, this time from the direction of the mansion.

I hastily turned my eyes to the source.

I hadn’t detected any sign of her at all, but there stood a tall maid, who presumably had come out of the mansion.

A maid uniform, black in overall tone, and evenly bobbed hair held back by a headband. Her eyes, slightly sharp, gave her a clever air. As I stared at her, transfixed, I felt as if I’d seen her somewhere before — somehow, she reminded me of Palmira. The air about her, that is.

I had the feeling that the moment those eyes perceived me, they jumped.

“Ah, Allie. Sorry to put you through the trouble of welcoming us. I’ll go through the introductions. We’ll have some guests for a while — this is Chris. Followed by Aira and Palmira.”

As he introduced us, we hurriedly inclined our heads.

Be that as it may, before I noticed, he was calling Aira and Palmira just by name...? It wasn’t just me. For some reason, my feelings were complicated.

“...I see. I am the head maid of this mansion, Allie Kietel. Please call me Allie if you like. Lady Chris, Lady Aira, Lady Palmira.”

Elegant and reserved, Allie welcomed us with impeccable manners.

Her form was overwhelming in its perfection, without a gap to be seen. First-class. For some reason, that word came to mind.

“For the time being, you must be tired. Allie — show them to their rooms. Supper?”

“Right away.”

“Yeah, something light would be great. Thanks.”

“Understood. Well then, if you would come this way — ”

While I was taken aback watching the perfect master-servant exchange before me, their talk finished. Going with the self-proclaimed head maid Allie’s urging, we turned our feet toward the open foyer, which was leaking light outside.

For a single moment, I looked back over my shoulder.

The mansion seemed to be located in a higher part of the city. I wouldn’t say it was all of it, but I could look out over half of the city from here.

Though night had already fallen, lights were shining here and there, and the city

appeared prosperous indeed.

Will I get used to it before long? Even scenery like this?

The thought frightened me, just a little.



Even inside the mansion, it wasn't particularly extravagant. Though I don't really get the subtleties of design, if I had to say, it seemed to have a calming atmosphere instead.

Based on the fact that Allie was head maid, I expected there to be other maids. And as it happened, while we were walking down the passageway, other maids did pass by us from time to time.

'The head of the household didn't come out to welcome us?' I thought, but because they seemed busy enough as it was, maybe Allie received guests as a rule here.

"How many other maids are there?"

I kept my phrasing rough on purpose. Although I did consider what to do about my tone, it would honestly be a real hassle to pretend the whole time if I ended up staying here long-term. And I'd slip up somewhere no matter how hard I tried, so I went with my original way of speaking.

"...There are five, including myself. We manage the entire mansion."

"Woow, really?"

Allie's cool response elicited a deeply admiring sigh from Aira. Something like respect surfaced in her eyes.

Come to think of it, Aira said something about wanting to become a maid.

Leon might have heard it from Aira herself already, but shall I ask him about it later?

...That said, just maids, huh.

The mansion in Telaberan was like that too, but there were still the soldiers coming and going, so it didn't give off that impression. However, the feeling was more distinct

here.

Don't tell me — Leon unexpectedly has a thing for maids, doesn't he?

Well, not so much a fondness for maids, but rather, for women?

Thinking about it rationally, with us added into the mix, the only man here was still Leon. One to eight, that's a hell of a ratio.

At that point, I suddenly felt anxious, and I asked Allie,

“Aside from the maids, is Leon the only one who lives in this mansion?”

“...Usually, that is the case.”

When I referred to Leon without any title, Allie's eyebrow twitched for a moment, but her answer was still composed.

Origins aside, was it bad for me to call Leon just by his name?

That aside, so this mansion really was Leon's alone.

To be honest, I did think the mansion was on the small side for housing an entire noble family.

In that case, where exactly are Leon's parents?

The thoughts followed one after another: aside from the fact that he seemed to have two older brothers, I'd barely heard anything about him. Relatively speaking, I didn't really know much of his affairs.

As I struggled over whether I should ask about such things, Allie, who'd been walking ahead of me, abruptly stopped in her tracks. Then, she opened the door she was standing in front of.

“Now then, this is Lady Chris's room. The next two are Lady Aira and Lady Palmira's, so please take a look for yourselves.”

The room I was led to was neither spacious nor cramped, and simply furnished. It had

a calming atmosphere, just as the entire mansion did.

The bed was a bit larger, but it was a normal one without a canopy. Further in was a desk. On this side, a shelf of clothing. Then a single chest.

It was a corner room shaped like a shallow U, with windows set in two of its walls, giving it an open sort of feeling. Because it was nighttime, the curtains were drawn, but it might have a great view once dawn broke.

...That said, a single?

“If there is anything not to your satisfaction, then please speak freely.”

As I was in the middle of considering what to do, Allie’s sharp eyes put a stop to that as she spoke emotionlessly. This fastidious attention to detail, no wonder she was the head maid.

Still, as an outsider, I wasn’t so bold in making my request.

“Ah, hmmm... um, Miss Allie. Along that wall — ”

“Understood. I ask that you call me Allie.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll leave it to you then... Allie.”

Still a little hesitant, I thanked her.

A smile bloomed on her face, so fleeting I thought it might be an illusion. As if to hide it, she bowed her head deeply.

Chapter 51

The First Step to Nobility

The gentle wind caressed my cheek.

Flickers of light danced over my eyes, just enough for my consciousness to gradually come to the fore.

“Mn,... mm.”

I wanted to sleep just a little more.

But the sweet scent carried on the wind beckoned me to wakefulness.

The aroma of baking bread. Someone was making breakfast.

As a guest, I couldn't be lying in bed like this. I had to at least make it in time for breakfast...

“Hwah-ah. Morning, Leon.”

Lifting my body off the bed, rubbing my eyes, I greeted Leon.

I turned my sleepy eyes toward the wall.

Leon wasn't there.

“...Huh.”

Missing its master, the chair I'd asked Allie for yesterday sat all by its lonesome next to the wall.

First thing after getting up, I felt a somehow unspeakable loneliness.

The lace curtains swayed in the wind that drifted in through the open windows, rays of morning sunlight dappling the chair.

They were the only things in motion. The freshness of morning, the gentle sunlight — their presence was natural and invigorating. And for that very reason, they served to underline the absence of what should have been there.

“Ah... hmm...”

Just slightly, my throat felt blocked up, and I sighed deeply in an attempt to gloss over it. I scratched my head and gave my cheeks a brisk slap.

And so, doing my best to ignore the chair, I got out of bed. After a round of big stretches, I looked at the open windows.

Drawing closer, I carelessly brushed the swaying curtains aside.

The second floor of the estate.

The view from here was of the white townscape unfurling below. Illuminated by the sun, it seemed to sparkle.

Beyond it stood the castle walls, giving off a strange presence.

Putting together what I'd heard from Leon on the way here, and from Allie after arriving, the city's strange outer wall predated the founding of the empire. The city had been constructed in what seemed to be a historical ruin.

They weren't just walls.

Although no one had a clear understanding of what they were, a mysterious power was protecting the entire city. Under its protection, the Empire had amassed its current territory.

Though I'd frankly just nodded indifferently in the past, now looking at them, I certainly could see that, somehow.

The existence of those walls. The city protected from the world outside.

Just like they were safeguarding the city's prosperity.

However, just as it was unlikely to know the situation inside from without, it might also be difficult to know the situation outside from within.

It could be rare for people to take the initiative to go outside like Leon had, couldn't it?

If that was the case, the inhabitants of this city lived in ignorance of the reality outside, in a sense. And maybe, they died that way too.

Is that happiness? Somehow, I had to wonder.

“Huh?”

A sound, just slightly audible over the wind, drew my eyes downward.

Directly below the room was the estate's courtyard, where Palmira was. And she was wordlessly but wholeheartedly wielding her sword.

Assuming a stance that would allow her to aim for the eye, she brought her sword down before her.

That was the posture that Vyde had been teaching her night after night since we left the fortress.

Unlike Rupert, who focused completely on practical combat forms, Vyde's sword style, which Rupert himself had aptly referred to as 'the straight sword', strictly followed some kind of organized system. Even his method of teaching began with bearing.

For having her mentor arbitrarily changed on her without any personal input, Palmira was going along rather obediently. I asked her about it indirectly, but she said, [Rupert decided to leave it in his hands, so there's probably no mistake], and left it at that. When it came to that stuff, Palmira was awfully deferential.

And even now, she was following through.

Vyde had probably told her it was something she couldn't slack off on, even for a day.

At any rate, Palmira was earnestly putting in the effort. Since buying the sword, she hadn't wavered even once.

'That's genuinely amazing,' I thought to myself.

As I absentmindedly looked on, I heard two knocks at the door.

“Yeah?”

For some reason, I was sure it wasn't Leon, and I answer vaguely.

“Please pardon my intrusion — good morning, my lady.”

It was Allie who opened the door and came inside. Lowering her head deeply, she made a new addition to the end.

“My... lady?”

Who? Me?... Really, me?

Whether I liked it or not, I normally would have been [Lady Chris], like I had been until yesterday. What's with the change of heart?

“Last night, the Master roughly apprised me of the situation. My lady is an important personage to the Master, I hear. Henceforth, I will address my lady as such instead of 'Lady Chris'. Once again, I offer you my best regards.”

She was courteous about it, but there was no reluctance or acceptance in her tone. It was a declaration. Completely and utterly set in stone.

...Okay, what's the deal?

First question on my mind: what has Allie heard from Leon?

What I'm here to do in the first place is to put on an act. Then, if she's heard, does she know what kind of act it'll be?

“Just... just checking, but — ”

“Yes.”

“What, uh, am I? To Leon?”

“A special person.”

I’d heard that just now.

I had, but hearing it again, my heart thumped.

No, it’s not like that. It’s not.

“Uh, no, aside from that?”

“Yes. In the near future, he intends for you to meet his parents, so he wants me to teach you etiquette, I was told.”

“I — I see...”

I see.

Cleverly said. Not a single lie.

His goal was to avoid engagement, so sooner or later, I’d have to meet his parents. But Leon probably hadn’t said anything to Allie about whether it was all pretend.

Because of that, when it comes to a ‘special person’ who’s going to ‘meet the parents’, there’s only one conclusion anyone would draw.

Hence, ‘my lady’.

“Uh, so... what about Leon?”

For now, it looked like I still needed to grill him personally.

Steeling my resolve, I asked where he was.

And in a general sense, what he was doing. Since he... wasn’t here this morning.

“Today, the Master was in attendance at the castle to submit his report on the campaign. He had already departed early this morning along with Lord Leopard. I haven’t yet heard whether he will be able to return today.”

Have we — been thrown aside?

...No, well, it’s court service. It’s normal for that to take precedence over keeping us company.

I can understand that. I can, but —

“...That so?”

“For now, please have a change in clothes. Breakfast will be ready momentarily.”

“Ah, okay.”

“Now then.”

My spirits dampened for some reason, I gave her a half-hearted reply. Allie bowed slightly before coming closer.

Absently, I wondered what she was up to, when all of a sudden, her slender hands reached out toward my chest —

“Eh — wait! Wait! I can change by myself! I mean, I can undress by myself, at least!”

I’d gone through the same thing at the Telaberan estate, but undressing — the right to do that by myself was the one thing I would fight to the death to defend.

Truth is, I was planning to dress myself too, but since I didn’t know how, I gave up on that.

In any case, there was no way in hell I was going to stand there and let myself be stripped down.

Covering my chest, I put some distance between Allie and myself.

As I did, Allie’s expression grew a bit thoughtful, then turned stern as she stared at me.

Under the intensity of her eyes, I quailed slightly.

“My lady. While this may be presumptuous of me, I have been ordered by the Master to instruct my lady in matters of etiquette [and so on]. Therefore, if you refuse adjust, even to this, I will be troubled.”

Her voice was firm. And she was putting a lot of emphasis on that [and so on].

Did she say [and so on] earlier? I couldn't remember that much...

“No, but — look, that isn't really related, is it?”

“Certainly, this part does not necessarily impinge upon others. However, etiquette is culture. Therefore, my lady will first master the cultural norms in this area, after which it will be fine to allow my lady to choose what is necessary, I believe.”

It's fine, so do as I say, you amateur.

In summary, that was basically what she was saying. But it was hard to object. Because what she said was a pretty sound argument.

“Now then, if you'll pardon me.”

While I was lost in thought, Allie's hands reached out again and touched the nape of my neck.

“Weh!”

Because I was all tensed up in anticipation, the moment she made contact, I was startled into a strange yelp. How completely embarrassing.

“Please do not move. There is no choice but to grow accustomed to it.”

Forcibly, the buttons running down my chest were undone.

I have no choice but to get used to it? No. For the time being, all I could do was endure.



By the time I arrived at the dining table after changing, or more precisely, playing a dress-up doll, I was completely worn out. And no, I don't care how early in the morning it still was.

Anyway, in the name of changing clothes, Allie touched me. All over:

That already felt so incredibly natural that it was unnatural.

Even I thought I was saying something strange, but anyway, that's how I felt. 'That's Aira's domain,' I thought, but if it were to go down the same path, Allie seemed like she'd be a cut or two above.

Anyway, since her expression didn't change in the slightest, I couldn't find fault with her at all.

Because she did it as if it were perfectly normal, I was even starting to think that maybe the upper classes just did all their changing this way. I didn't have the faintest idea of how it did work, in fact.

"Please, my lady."

While I was doubting her, Allie pulled out a chair as if nothing had happened and urged me to take a seat. Sighing, I plopped down.

Before I knew it, the maids were sitting in a line along the large table. Five of them.

First of all, the question 'Is the dining table shared together with the maids?' popped up, but since that was other people's business, I put it from my mind for now. It's Leon we're talking about here, so maybe it's just like that.

But suddenly I realized that it was odd that there were five of them. 'Cause you see, Allie hadn't sat down yet. I was sure she said yesterday that there were five maids including herself. But there were six here.

When I took a good look, the maid at the foot of the table — was Aira.

Obviously, she was bundled up in the maid uniform, and she looked even more tired than me.

...Maid training already?

I didn't realize it, but she must have asked Leon herself. Even so, I didn't think she'd be doing it the day after our arrival.

Still, even Palmira, who was sitting beside me, had already been working hard since morning. So maybe it was just fine that way. She might look like she was dying right now, but I'd be working hard too, so I wanted us to do our best together.

"Now then, I will give you a simple explanation before the meal is served. Naturally, it would usually be impossible for maids such as us to sit at the same table like this. But at this mansion, we are permitted to eat at the same table by the Master's will, so please do not misunderstand."

Taking her seat at the opposite end, Allie answered my unspoken question succinctly. I'd guessed as much.

However, for some reason, I found myself questioning her anal-retentive attention to detail.

"I will take this opportunity to introduce the other five maids to you. In order, Karen, Toa, Miche, Lacreaux. And Aira."

As they were introduced, the first four lowered their heads simultaneously. Only Aira had a late start. She hurriedly fell in line with the others. Do your best.

"Aira is here as my lady's friend, but I'd appreciate being allowed to deliberately treat her the same as any maid-in-training. I realize it is discourteous of me, but I ask for your understanding."

That was inevitable. If the person in question agreed, it wasn't my place to say anything. Rather, I wanted them to be strict.

"Got it."

“In addition, in the Master’s absence, the head of this mansion will be my lady. To that end, I have received permission from the Master to treat it as part of your education, so please prepare yourself.”

...She started saying something harsh.

I don’t want you to be that strict with *me*.

“Ummm, in that case, how about Palmira?”

“We will continue to treat Lady Palmira as a guest.”

Well, that sounds about right.

I looked to the side to see Palmira, who looked a bit proud. Like she hadn’t necessarily expected to have that kind of standing.

Meanwhile, Aira, from her spot at the end, had a shocked look on her face. It can’t be helped, I guess...

“Now, my lady. As the head, we await your grace,”

Allie said, all of a sudden.

...? Grace?

Grace what?

Confused, I glanced around, only to find everyone watching me. Even Palmira, with a docile expression, waited for me to speak.

I don’t get it. What the hell am I suppose to say about breakfast —

“Ah...”

Suddenly, it hit me.

Breakfast. Everyone was waiting for me to say the [usual words].

But calling it 'grace' was too arrogant.

Why? Because I wasn't doing anything. I couldn't do anything. All I did was wake up, get my clothes changed, and sit down here.

Despite not lifting a finger, I had to say it so shamelessly?

I looked at Allie. From the look she was directing at me, it seemed like she was testing me.

"...I offer my thanks to Leon... Let's eat,"

I said, doing my best to find a compromise with myself.

"We offer our thanks to the Master. Let us eat."

Everyone repeated the words in succession. And with that, grace was over and done with.

Solemnly, breakfast began. Conflicted, I picked up a piece of bread.

Was it okay with this?

I had some misgivings. Misgivings toward the upper class — no, the privileged class.

If I were to think of privilege as normal, then most likely, normally, it would've been better if I said [Let's eat]. I didn't do anything; I couldn't do anything. But I could make pronouncements.

If I were to think of it as normal.

It wasn't much right now. The breakfast grace. But that was like swooping in from the side and stealing away what someone else had prepared.

The words I heard one day on the battlefield, from the mouth of a noble from god-knows-where.

[If you run, you die.]

It didn't amount to much. At the root, there wasn't much difference between that and what I just said, was there?

Not to give, but to steal.

If that was the true face of the nobility, I didn't want to be anything like them.

That was why I deliberately expressed my gratitude toward Leon.

Because at least, Leon was providing for us. So it was normal to offer thanks.

At least, to me, it was more just to do that than to make self-important declarations. Definitely.

“Haa...”

Changing my clothes, eating breakfast.

With just these two things, I was somehow incredibly exhausted.

I had a hunch that today was going to be an awfully long day.

And it sure didn't seem like today would be the end of it.

I'm not up to this.

I hadn't even imagined how bitter this was going to be until just now, and boy did I have a bone to pick with that past me.

Chapter 52

The Turning Point

“S-So tired...”

I thought back on my day: after breakfast, it was lunch, and going into the afternoon after lunch, it was the torture called [training].

Starting with how to talk, then how to walk, how to curtsy. The dining etiquette I'd been spared during breakfast came in full force during lunch. Manners. Etc.

It wasn't just limited to the short-term, like special occasions, but included general conduct that was necessary as a natural part of daily life.

The basics. Apparently.

When you're talking about how to *walk*, it's pretty much the most basic of the basics. 'Before long, won't I even be practicing how to breathe?' I thought, joking... I was pretty put out when I realized that it wasn't so much a joke after all.

Most of the training took place under Allie's direction. While speaking with her usual courtesy, her firm insistence brooked no argument, preventing me from voicing any objections. And as for the resulting training, I couldn't think of anything to call it but 'severe'.

By one thing or another, Aira took part in training along with me, but as reluctant as I was to admit it, she picked things up fast. It was humiliating.

No no, that's natural. I was a man to start with. If I learned quickly with this handicap, Aira would be pretty miserable, and me being me, I'd have complicated feelings about the whole thing, I think.

Still, if I think about it, I can't help but feel that when I return to being a man, all these skills I'm being made to acquire with all my effort will be meaningless. Sure, they'd be

essential for the act, and I did think that in those terms, they were more or less necessary. But I never imagined that I'd have to be this serious about studying them. Putting on a sham love affair for the upper classes. The whole thing was just too ridiculous, so frankly, I underestimated it. What a bullshit story.

"...I wanna stop already..."

My honest feelings slipped out.

It wasn't like there was anyone around to hear. The words vanished into the high blue skies of autumn.

Then, with a sloppy appearance that Allie would've been sure to scold me for, had she seen it, I slumped back in my chair.

It was break time right now. That's how Allie put it.

I was sitting alone at a table set in the mansion's courtyard.

There was tea placed on the table. From the looks of it, I'd also be having tea party training in the near future, but apparently, I'd been spared for today. This half-killed feeling was something else. Allie did a splendid job of preventing me from exploding. What a terrifying woman.

I realized it over the course of yesterday and today, but you see, she was flawless.

Her bearing as a maid. Language. Work. All beyond reproach. Under those conditions, she [ordered] me about, all the while holding back at least a little for professionalism's sake.

A woman like that was addressing me as 'my lady' and treating me like the head of the house. It was almost like she was fashioning a doll, in a way. And yet it didn't make me feel all that uncomfortable.

I took a look at myself.

The clothes I'd been dressed in this morning, just like that very doll. A pale blue pullover. Below that, not a skirt, but a pair of crop pants. Thinking about it now, that must've been for the sake of training. All morning, I was forced to do mysterious exercises that involved walking with a board clamped between my legs. Thanks to

which my legs took a good battering.

I had light makeup on my face. Also Allie's technique.

It was obvious, but I didn't have the slightest idea how to do it by myself. My hair had been neatly done up too.

In other words, my appearance should've been perfect. All that's left is what's inside, I guess.

If I end up like this both inside and out, will I turn into a woman completely? It was long past time to be saying this, but I found the idea rather terrifying. Will I really be able to turn back into a man?

...Though even if I complain now, there's nothing I can do.

I'll put up with it for now, then return to being a man. To that end, I have to etch it deeply into my mind. That I'm a man.

"Still..."

It's depressing. I heaved a large sigh for the umpteenth time.

"Ahaha-, it looks like you're pretty worn out. You alright?"

As I slacked off, a voice suddenly came from outside. It was a man's voice.

My consciousness returned with a snap, and I looked around for the source.

The owner of the voice was sitting on the wall at the end of the courtyard. The wall wasn't all that high, but it was still about two meters tall. The man was perched on top of it, looking down at me with a deeply interested grin.

Age-wise, he was in his twenties, maybe? It was hard to say. Besides, his smile was like that of a mischievous boy. Then there was his impoliteness and his cheeky gaze. He gave off a strong impression of thoughtlessness, but it was making his age harder to figure out.

"Who might you be?"

Casually straightening my sitting posture, I glared at the intruder as I issued a sharp challenge.

Considering things so far, even I was surprised to hear myself suddenly break out into polite speech. Could this be the result of my training? If so, that's kinda scary.

"A-ha, sorry, sorry. I really should introduce myself first, shouldn't I! Right. My name is Lucien. And you are?"

Half-stuck in his own little world, the man introduced himself with excessive enthusiasm. Then, without any warning, he hopped off the wall and landed in the courtyard.

Wrong. That's not it.

It's not your name I want to know. I was asking, who are you and where did you get the balls to peek into someone else's mansion? And one with walls to boot?

Showing no sign of having recognized my real intention, the rude man in the courtyard — whose name I now knew, as much as I didn't want to — Lucien came up to me. Without the least bit of restraint, he placed his hands on the table and peered into my face with a smile.

Ever heard of personal space? The hell's with this guy?

Should I play the aristocrat? Say [You insolent wretch!] and hit him?

"...What is it? This is impolite, don't you think?"

But because I had no idea who this guy was, I refrained from hitting him. Still, glaring, I pointed out his discourtesy. Generally speaking, I found his excessive pushiness off-putting.

"Ah, name. I want you to tell me."

He conveniently ignored the second half of my words, asking for my name with a calm expression.

Though his aggressiveness was unpleasant, to be honest, there was a charm to that smile of his. For some reason, I felt myself being drawn in.

“...Chris,”

I muttered, turning my eyes away.

I knew he was the type of person I couldn't afford to play games with directly.

Even so, he'd named himself first, and his mysterious charm tugged at me. Before I knew it, I'd inadvertently given him my name. Why, I didn't know.

“Chris. A name as just as lovely as you are.”

His voice wasn't the same strongly-worded, overbearing tone it had been until now, but something gently refreshing that caressed my ears.

I shivered.

For some reason, that voice rattled me.

Was it my name being called that did it?

Or was it being told I was pretty?

Or —

— was it the very way he spoke?

I don't know.

However, the prickling sensation at the back of my neck, the uneasiness that had multiplied several times over, those I felt for sure.

Unconsciously, I turned toward Lucien — and I met his eyes.

Black eyes that seemed to suck me in.

I'd seen these eyes before, somewhere. Eyes that were dear to me. But, eyes that seemed to have been stolen from elsewhere.

I could tell that my pulse had sped up, but when?

What is this? Regardless of my will, various feelings stirred within me one after another.

I was getting flustered. I was getting sucked in. Worked up. Pulled away. Torn free.

Just who in the world — ?

Before my eyes. Lucien's face drew closer.

I —

I —

I —

I —

I —

I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-

— Leon!

Crack —

At the back of my head, I heard something splitting apart.

“Lord Lucien!”

A voice reached my ears at the same time, snapping me back to my senses. In the space of a moment, I threw my body backward to get away from Lucien.

Even I could tell how much of a mess my mind was in. I blinked several times as I put my thoughts in order. Then, I looked in the direction of the voice.

“Yo, Allie. Pretty as always.”

It was Lucien who spoke up first. His voice was aloof, without a trace of that bizarre atmosphere that had surrounded him earlier.

Without knowing why, I turned my face away from Allie and lightly bit my lip.

What was all that just now? I couldn't find the right words to express it.

A bunch of different feelings enveloped me all at once, leaving me awfully shaken up.

Was it — danger? Even that, I don't really know.

I can't make sense of it. And my intuition is telling me that I shouldn't.

“If you're going to pay a visit, please use the entrance!”

“Ahaha, sorry about that. It was an accident. This way is shorter, you see.”

“It was no accident. This happens every time.”

Allie and Lucien's back and forth echoed in my ears.

So that was normal. Just now, was that all in my head?

It was tough to distinguish whether Lucien had something to do with it.

“In any event, what is your business here today? Lord Lucien.”

“I heard Leon got back. When I came over to see his face, there was an incredibly beautiful girl I didn’t recognize. I was just thinking to deepen our friendship a bit.”

“...My lady is Lord Leon’s significant other. If anyone attempts to lay a finger on her, I will not permit it. Even if it is you, Lord Lucien.”

When Leon’s name came up, I looked at Allie with a start.

Well, considering the flow of the conversation, it wasn’t weird for it to pop up.

But it reminded me that in the earlier confusion, I’d glimpsed Leon’s face.

At that moment, I’d felt two conflicting emotions.

One was purely a wish. Desire.

...The other —

“Hehhh, no kidding! Leon, huh. And here I thought he had no interest in women at all. Wow, I’m kinda moved. But still — ”

Amid the disorder, Lucien’s hand suddenly reached out toward my face.

Caught completely off-guard, I felt his fingers touch my chin.

” — it’s kind of a waste.”

Those eyes looking down at me sent a shiver through my body.

For a moment, the sensation broke my train of thought.

Immediately thinking of the reason, I took a shock.

Because it felt almost pleasant.

“~~~~~!!!!!!”

In that moment, I jumped to my feet and reflexively took a swing at Lucien’s head.

“Hup—”

“My lady!”

My fist couldn't connect with the target. Shaking his head, Lucien avoided it with relative ease.

And that was why I took another swing, only to be stopped bodily by Allie.

” — ! You insolent — !”

The words I didn't say earlier now burst out of my mouth.

In any case, I had to do something about Lucien. Something painful.

I had to deny that feeling as soon as possible.

“You mustn't! My lady!”

Even with Allie holding me back, I thrashed and writhed, still trying to grab at Lucien.

Right in front of me, Lucien was smiling as if genuinely enjoying himself.

“Aha—! Chris. You really are wasted on Leon, don't you think? You're very much to my taste.”

He spoke without shame, like he was really just talking about the weather.

— With an amiable smile on his face.

“—... Uh—”

Seeing that, I stopped moving.

Why? Why am I — ?

“Brother!”

Leon’s voice echoed like an auditory hallucination.

The voice that, at that moment, I most — and least — wanted to hear.

— ‘Brother’?

“Ah, Leon. I was just visiting.”

“What’s going on! Why weren’t you at the castle!”

His voice was violent, as if he were enraged.

Generally, when Leon sounded like that, it had something to do with me.

His voice drew closer from behind, and then, passing Allie and me, he interposed himself between Lucien and us. All I could see was his back.

“Cause it doesn’t really have anything to do with me. Going to war and whatnot.”

“We both know that’s not the reason, not even for a — !”

There, Leon’s voice unnaturally broke off.

So unnaturally that even with his back to me, I could tell he was flustered.

“Oh? Leon. Could it be, you didn’t tell Chris?”

Tell me what?

The way the conversation was going, I didn’t know why my name would come up.

“...Well, okay then. I’ve offended both of you, so let’s do this again some other day. Chris — ”

Leaving Leon frozen in place, Lucien stepped around him and walked over to me, passed by me.

“As for who I am... no, who Leon is, you should ask him properly. Well, 'til next time.”

Cool to the end, Lucien made his exit, leaving just those parting words in his wake. Same as when he came, his high-handed behavior only perplexed me.

“Leon...?”

I timidly called out to the motionless Leon.

Just what kind of face does he have on right now? I'm pretty curious. Why did Leon get that angry with his older brother(?)?

And what is Leon's identity? The only thing on my mind was, 'What does it all mean?'

At the sound of my voice, Leon sighed deeply and finally turned to look at me.

“I apologize. I behaved disgracefully in front of you.”

When he turned around, his face was like usual.

Did he rearrange his expression with that sigh?

For some reason, I thought so.

“No, it's okay, but... umm, was that your brother just now?”

“As reluctant as I am to admit it... yes.”

Leon pulled an exasperated face.

No, I felt like something wasn't right. I had a hunch that inside, his feelings were something else.

It seemed to me that he was smoothing things over. Why it seemed like that to me, I

couldn't really explain.

"...At present, I imagine you have many things you want to ask, but I'll give you a proper explanation later, so..."

Leon said, his face still troubled.

That's not it, right? That's not how it is between us, right?

Even though it would be better if he were to tell me clearly.

What is he so afraid of?

"Later, then. Allie. I'll get changed. Give me a hand."

...Why?

I can understand. It's because Allie's here.

Then, when it's just the two of us, will he come clean with me? No, my instincts aren't saying that.

Why won't he talk to me now?

I felt uneasy. Dissatisfied.

I thought back.

That glimpse of Leon's face, when Lucien looked at me.

The other emotion inside me at that moment.

There's no mistake. It was loathing.

Chapter 53

Rampage

Before dinner, Leon called all three of us to the dining hall.

Although she was wearing the maid uniform, Aira sat with us all the same. She had probably been busy with dinner like the other maids before being pulled out.

Well, if it had been just Palmira and me, I would've gotten mad.

Though the maid training was Aira's own proposal, if Palmira was going to be at the same table, then so should she.

However, I was a bit taken aback that this talk wasn't for me alone, but all three of us. So far, Leon had rarely gathered the three of us together to begin with.

The last time matters indisputably concerned all three of us was that meeting on the day we became slaves again.

Aside from that, he spoke to me alone almost every time something came up.

And yet he purposely called the three of us together. We must be deeply connected somehow this time.

That was the theory I decided to run with.

Although that was how it seemed to me, Allie was with us too, for some reason. And just her.

Did Leon summon her? Or was this normal?

She stood behind Leon's seat, slightly off to the side. It was no more than that, but I felt strangely distant from Leon.

How should I put it — like I was talking with some big-shot.

That's what it felt like. It was different from how I'd felt until now; there was a sense of distance, just like the first time we met.

“.....”

Despite being the one to summon us here, Leon seemed to be fairly close-mouthed, as if he had to choose his words somehow. Aira was fidgeting, but because of that sense of distance, I also chose to keep my mouth shut.

It seemed like he was hesitant to reveal something he'd been hiding from us, but I made no move to press him.

To tell you the truth, I was a little pissed off by the fact. I wasn't happy with the feeling of alienation right now, either. And my earlier uneasiness robbed me of the friendliness that would have encouraged me to address him as familiarly as before.

"...Chris encountered a man earlier. Did either of you see him?"

There was a long silence after Leon spoke to the other two. Aira and Palmira ultimately shook their heads at the same time. Come to think of it, the two weren't aware of the earlier quarrel, much less why they were here.

Setting aside the almost-always calm Palmira, Aira was nervous too. No doubt her mind was filled with anxiety.

"As a matter of fact, a visitor came by earlier... As Chris already knows, that was my older brother."

I nodded.

Actually, Leon had mentioned before that he had two older brothers. So Lucien is one of them, I suppose.

Considering the connection, their looks, at least, didn't resemble each other at all.

Leon had blonde hair and blue eyes. But Lucien had black hair and black eyes. So I guess there are siblings who differ that way?

"His name is Lucien — Lucien Clay Stroidel."

A clatter echoed through the dining hall, which had been silent save for Leon's voice.

It wasn't much of anything. Just the sound of my chair. Upon hearing that name, I'd shot up from my seat.

It wasn't a joke. It wasn't like he was joking around.

I looked to my side. Aira was looking at me in surprise. She probably didn't understand.

On the other hand, there was at least a crack in Palmira's usual mask. As I expected — she made the connection.

— As to who the person in front of us was.

As to just who Leon — who had been traveling with us all this time, who had been so unrestrained in keeping us company — was.

“He is the Second Prince of the Greya Stroidel Empire.”

And so, Leon sealed it.

Lucien's identity as the Second Prince of this renowned empire, as he said, was enough of a shock on its own.

But what was really important was the conclusion that could easily be drawn from that fact.

“...Why — didn't you say...”

I thought almost nothing would knock me off-balance, but unsurprisingly, this was too great a shock.

At a loss for words, I somehow managed to squeeze something out.

It went without saying.

Leon, the man before me, was the Third Prince of this colossal nation.

I'd had him pegged as nobility, but this was just absurd. How could I imagine that he was a prince? It was just too improbable.

As those thoughts ran through my head, I felt — sitting in the seat of honor with Allie waiting on him, even in a mere dining hall, Leon seemed to grow even more distant.

If I might say something presumptuous, I was able to hang out with him normally

because I thought he was about the level of a noble.

Sure, I was an adventurer, and so a class below than your average citizen, but the nobility was still an existence I could rub elbows with.

But a prince? Not a chance. What's more, we're not talking a small to medium country here, but the world's foremost mega-empire!

Even how I ought to address him had completely flown from my head.

“~~~~~!”

While my brain was overloading, Palmira suddenly and forcefully jumped to her feet beside me.

Her two hands balled into fists, shaking. Her eyes fixed on Leon — glaring at the Imperial Prince.

Unable to keep up with her bloodcurdling abnormality, my stupefied mind froze. And before my eyes, Palmira's hand reached down to her waist —

“Palmira! Don't — !”

It was Aira in the seat next to her who stopped her as she clearly went for her sword.

As Palmira attempted an act of national treason with a desperate look on her face, Aira hurled herself at the smaller girl and pulled her to the floor.

” — ! Aira! Move!”

“You can't do this! You definitely can't!”

Dumbly, I watched the two of them struggling in a tangle on the floor. ‘I have to stop them,’ I said to myself, but for some reason, my body wouldn't move.

Instead, for reasons I couldn't explain myself, I turned to Leon.

He was looking at me, his expression sorrowful. And Allie had a knife at the ready, standing protectively in front of him.

What I saw when my eyes met hers was pure, unadulterated hostility. Only a few hours earlier, she had treated me kindly, if strictly. Now, without a shred of that gentleness left, she was watching us without the slightest pang of conscience.

The sight of the two of them was an unspeakable punch to the gut. Suddenly, I felt like they'd gone so far away.

The person I thought of as my friend was an illusion.

We were former slaves, after all, and Leon was a high and mighty prince.

We'd never stood on equal ground with each other. Not once since the very beginning.

And our presence here, that was because of a necessary pretense.

That 'special person' business, that was just pretend too.

I've lost track of where the truth ends and the act begins.

Maybe everything —

Suddenly, I noticed the tears spilling from my eyes.

In my distorted vision, Leon rose from his chair and came toward me. I couldn't see his expression.

Though I thought to myself, 'It's no good', I knew that my feelings inside were the opposite. I couldn't stop.

The rational part of me turned channeled my shrieking disbelief through that emotional inversion.

That's impossible. It's not a big deal. All Leon did was keep quiet about his own rank, didn't he? And Allie, I mean, look at the current situation. It can't be helped. Isn't that obvious?

On the other hand, my emotions were boiling up, smashing those thoughts to pieces.
Betrayed.

Betrayed again.

I was betrayed again.

A grief sliced through me, engulfing my heart.

The tears overflowed without end. I hate it. I hate it —

“Chris!”

” — Don’t touch me — !”

As he drew closer, Leon reached his hand out to me. The motion completely unconscious, my hands batted it aside.

“?!”

He was close to me, so I could tell, even through my blurry eyes. Leon’s face was steeped in shock.

I did that. Personally. Intense guilt assaulted my heart. Why? Why am I doing something like this?

There’s something inside me.

Something that definitely isn’t me.

I flashed back to Lucien’s face. But that wasn’t the face I saw earlier.

Leon’s face surfaced in my mind.

And it wasn’t the one I saw before me now.

*Betrayed! Betrayed! Betrayed betrayed betrayed **I was betrayed.***

“THAT’S WRONG!!!!!!”

Like a hammer blow, I screamed back at the thing screaming inside me.

I — !

— haven't been betrayed!

Frantic, I shook off the unfamiliar memories slowly but steadily encroaching upon my mind.

Don't you enter my memories.

Don't you interfere with my mind, my will.

“Chris!? What on earth is the matter!?”

Again, Leon reached his hands out to me.

He grabbed me by the shoulders. Startled, I trembled. Right in front of me was Leon's serious face. I ground my teeth. An ugliness close to hatred rattled my body.

Help me. Leon. Help. I'm losing myself.

My voice wouldn't come out. My body trembling, the tears tumbled down.

I hate hate hate *hate* —.

What the hell? [Chris], what the hell are you? How did you end up like this?

“AAHH-!”

At the edge of my vision, a blue flame burst into life. Quaking in fear, I screamed from the depths of my soul.

The blue flame burning against my will. I couldn't control it myself at all. The thought repulsed me, but for the first time, I was genuinely afraid of my own body.

The powerful force that had even crushed Maddox.

It was trying to move of its own volition. In front of me, Leon still hadn't noticed the danger. His expression desperate, he continued to call my name. I don't want it. I fear it.

At this rate, Leon will —. I'll — Leon —.

Against my will, the blue flames began to trace a circle before my eyes. Once, twice. Standing my ground in the depths of despair, I grit my teeth, praying desperately, 'Stop' — a third time. It won't stop!

"Ugghhh-!"

Mustering all my strength, I thrust Leon away.

I was supposed to have given it everything I had, but Leon and I only staggered a bit. Even so, I broke free of his hold. Stumbling a few steps back, I tripped over my feet and fell on my backside on the floor.

Shit, Leon was coming over to me again. The fourth! I'm out of time. The circle's starting to turn. Once it gets going, it'll all be over.

So.

"Lord Leon!"

As I pulled it from my waist, Allie shielded Leon as I'd predicted, forcing him to fall back.

In my hands, I kept a tight grip on the black knife I received from Irene, holding it out in front of my chest. That's right, if I do this, Allie will shield Leon. Just like she did when Palmira tried to draw her sword.

But in that bit of time I bought myself, I didn't even have time to catch my breath before the circle grew even further, to five rings.

I shook, my eyes widening. Last time, and the time before that, it had stopped at three,

then four. I knew it instinctively — an even greater destructive force was on the verge of manifesting.

The protective Allie, not to mention Leon, and the two immediately to my side, Aira and Palmira — all of them were already in danger. It wouldn't be strange if the damage inflicted ended up greater than before. The sixth! The circle grew larger and larger.

“Ugh—... UUU—!”

The scene before me completely crushed my heart. All I could do was tremble.

I had a premonition that once this was released, I would only feel a deep regret.

I didn't have the leeway to look after Palmira. Aira. I wanted to protect Leon at least, even if it were just him alone. But what should I do? How can I —

“Chris!”

Leon pushed Allie aside. Dropping to one knee, he approached me again. In the dead center of the circle, which had finally reached its seventh ring. His expression was frantic. Worrying like that for me —

“Ugh-, Le-o-nn—-!!”

My tongue all tangled up, I fought to call out his name. My eyes dropped to the knife. I had no time to hesitate.

I'm — an idiot. But, Leon. Aira. Palmira.

For the sake of protecting everything I wanted to protect, I couldn't think of anything else.

I turned the point of the knife toward myself and plunged it into my chest.

At that moment, with a conspicuously loud *crack*, I felt something burst open. I sensed something from my entire body gathering at the point where the knife penetrated me, buried up to its hilt. And at the same time, all my strength rapidly bled out of me,

withering away.

“Chris — !”

Leon’s eyes widened in shock.

Ah, so he can make that kind of expression too.

The hatred in my heart vanished, as did the circular pattern. A sense of relief enfolded me. In exchange, my vision began to fade to black. Leon’s face, which should have been in front of me, disappeared from sight.

It was frightening. And suffocating. But even so, I was satisfied that I could protect myself, and Leon too.

Smiling, I let my hands fall away from the hilt of the knife. I mustered my failing strength to reach out in front of me. In my last moments, I wanted to touch Leon.

“Chris!!!”

Before my hand could make contact, my consciousness flickered out.

Chapter 54

New Memories

I can't use magic.

Eventually, I came to that conclusion about myself.

And those people who were so full of praise, of ecstatic flattery, when I was initially judged to possess all six Attunements — when my magic eventually failed to manifest, they puzzled over it, then began to turn on me.

It might have been inevitable.

What would have been a grand miracle if it had come to pass, never did.

The goose that they all knew could lay golden eggs, failed to.

That was me. No doubt all the adults were grinding their teeth out of intense frustration.

In simple terms, whether a person had magical aptitude, and whether they could use magic, were two separate matters.

Certainly, as long as magical aptitude — the Attunements — could be verified, it was possible to use magic. Although it was quite a journey to go from one to the other, the end result generally was the ability to use magic. In almost every case.

That's right, in almost every case.

But as the keyword here was 'almost', there were a rare few who, in spite of having the aptitude, would never be able to cast magic.

I was one such case.

I didn't know why. I studied under all sorts of experts at the Schola Magorum, I received instruction in every method known to man, but my magic never manifested.

Under those circumstances, they would usually conclude that the person in question didn't have the ability to invoke their own magic, and so close the books. And that unfortunately soul would be returned to the streets.

But things didn't turn out that way for me. You see, I was in the virtually impossible situation of having all six Attunements. Some of the adults refused to give up, and the remaining majority screamed about the danger of returning someone like me from whence I came.

Even though my magic wouldn't manifest at all, it might someday.

And what if that were to happen when I was in another country? What if that country were to snap me up?

That, they insisted, was dangerous.

And so I was locked up inside the Schola Magorum. It wasn't as if they expected my magic to activate anymore, but fearing that it would, they all but imprisoned me.

What in the world did I do to deserve this?

My aptitude wasn't something of my own making. It was there from the start.

It had nothing to do with me.

My parents probably had my aptitude examined on a whim, and it wasn't like I had hopes for it myself.

It had nothing to do with me.

As a result, the adults saw it and developed expectations.

It had nothing to do with me.

Then, angry when it failed to appear, they ranted and raved.

It had nothing to do with me.

It had nothing to do with me.

It had absolutely nothing to do with me.

And yet, at first I blamed myself for its failure to manifest. I thought I was at fault for being unable to work hard enough. I was in the wrong for being unable to meet the expectations of those around me.

Since then, Big Brother wouldn't come to see me anymore.

He wouldn't come to see me because I couldn't work hard enough. That had to be it.

What would happen to the goose that wouldn't lay golden eggs?

Even so, the person who refused to abandon me ultimately came to that conclusion.

He said it. 'I'll make it so you can use magic.'

However, that was all he said.

I leapt at the offer.

If I could just use magic, everyone would acknowledge me. I'd be able to leave this place — and I'd be able to see Big Brother, too.

And so I obtained the magic I craved so much.

In exchange for becoming something other than human.



I woke up.

My dozing awareness kicked into gear. My hearing, my sense of smell returned. Then my sight. I opened my eyes.

I blinked several times.

— I did.

My first thought wasn't 'Why am I alive?'

It was to confirm that I was myself. That was vastly more important than the fact that I woke up.

I seemed to be me.

Upon waking up, I found myself lying in bed in my assigned room at the mansion. I didn't have the faintest idea what had happened after I blacked out or why I was here. But considering that I wasn't in jail, apparently things had settled without getting too serious, in various senses of the word.

Leon was — I turned my head to the side. There was the chair I asked for, and sitting on that chair — was Leon, asleep. At the sight of him, an indescribable emotion welled up within me.

Leon's okay. And he's right there.

I felt my eyes grow hot as it tore at my heart, but I bit my lip and endured. It's not that I feel like I've gotten easily moved to tears recently, but... I'm pretty damn sure it's [Chris's] influence.

Looking at Leon's sleeping face, I sighed in relief.

But what now? At that moment, I was about to be consumed by [Chris's] memories, that's for sure. In the future, that possibility would still remain. Would I be able to resist when the time came?

Speaking of [Chris], it'd been a long time since I'd dreamed of her.

It was the continuation of a dream I had before. Did I dream of it again just now? Why? Was it the effect of [Chris's] consciousness eroding my own?

The new dream revealed all sorts of facts to me.

[Chris] couldn't use magic. Because of that, she was filled with bitterness. And she wanted to see her big brother — Leon.

And, in order to make that possible, she sacrificed her humanity.

That solved two riddles.

The first wasn't a big deal, but it was about how [Chris], the only of her kind, was so little-known. Guildmaster Arc had said it too. That he'd only heard rumors.

That was because her magic ultimately didn't manifest.

She got magic after that, but even so, knowing as much as I did about the story, I could predict that that fact, too, had been suppressed.

Then, the other. And this one was important.

It had to do with the mystery behind this body. I was only able to pick up bits and pieces in the dream, but it seemed like [Chris's] body underwent some sort of alteration.

As a rule, alteration isn't something performed on the human body. But, a body that wouldn't take injury. Its tirelessness. And the form of its invoked magic, which even stumped Irene.

With all that in mind, if [Chris's] words about losing her humanity were to be believed, it was evident that she had been changed in some way by an external power.

Even though I say 'alteration', it hasn't been a hindrance, I guess.

The particulars aside, the result was that she finally managed to get her hands on the magic she longed for.

Then she was — betrayed.

That part, I couldn't fill in right now.

But I knew Leon, and Lucien, were involved somehow.

Especially Leon.

The hatred I felt was too intense.

In her mind, at least, Leon had betrayed her.

And yet in the dream, she'd wanted to see him.

In that case, something must have happened between them after that.

Under the elm tree, Leon said that he met her. But if I remember correctly, he didn't go into detail.

What happened?

I looked at Leon, breathing softly in his sleep.

I couldn't gather anything from his face.

The empire's Third Prince, Leon Stroidel. Asleep in the room of a transsexual former slave who might not even be human, none of that background was anywhere in evidence. It was the usual Leon.

Isn't that enough?

The shocking revelation, the discord that lingered within me, melted away before his sleeping face.

Slowly lifting myself up, I got out of bed.

When I gave myself a once-over, I found myself wearing a thin lace dress. It wasn't unexpectedly suggestive or anything. Then, I gently touched my chest. There was no sign at all of the knife wound that should have been there.

But I wasn't surprised. The fact that I was even alive to begin with was a greater mystery. And if I wasn't human, then I guess it was even less of a mystery. Or maybe there was something special about that knife?

I sat down on the bed in front of Leon.

'The tables have turned,' I thought. Peering at the sleeping Leon, my elbows on my knees, I rested my chin on my hands.

When he wakes up, I'll tell him 'good morning'.

He'll be surprised for sure.

Imagining it, my lips curved into a smile.



As I expected, or rather, more than I expected, Leon was wonderstruck when he woke up. He hugged me, lifting me up into the air before turning a somersault and pushing me down onto the bed.

With this and that, it got awkward in a different way than the argument, but he was happy, that's for sure.

Leon. His true identity, the Third Prince of the Greya Stroidel Empire. Leon Tyrell Stroidel.

But his true identity was also just Leon.

Right now, he was showing me a new side of himself yet again. Laughing with the innocent face of a child, he was delighted that I'd woken up.

Seeing that, I felt like the distance I sensed back then had shrunk back to how it was before.

On the other hand, I couldn't say anything to him about the contents of my dream.

Me aside — I was only possessing [Chris] — I had a hunch that Leon, rather, would find it painful to know that she wasn't human.

And then there were those details, and the conclusion Leon would definitely end up coming to — I was afraid to even imagine what kind of emotional damage it would do to him.

I wanted to ask, but I couldn't.

That night I first spoke of my dreams, I thought in passing that I would tell him if I had another, but now I was aware that it wasn't something I could talk about.

If not for the night of the rampage, I might have spoken about the business of her humanity.

But knowing what I did now, there was no way telling Leon about it seemed like a good idea.

It couldn't be helped, so I decided to shelve it for now and ask about something else.

From what Leon told me, I'd collapsed and stayed unconscious for five days.

I was surprised, but when I thought about it, I had the feeling that this pattern was increasing. When I fainted after the crest appeared during my time at the Telaberan estate, I woke up the next day. When I cast magic during the fight with Maddox, it took three days for the shock to wear off. And this time, it was five.

Could it be that I naturally passed out when I used magic? Well, even if that were the case, I didn't have a particular fainting spell that time with Guibenague, and I wasn't invoking magic this time to begin with.

But even so, there was something like magic involved here. I'd have to be careful from now on.

...More importantly, what frightened me was the magic activating of its own accord.

Even calling it a 'rampage' wouldn't be an exaggeration. It was stopped this time because I died... well, not actually. Considering I was alive right now, something about

that knife held the key. Probably.

Yeah, and it was something Irene's master had me hold on to. Could it be that her master had foreseen this, and so had it delivered to me...? Am I overthinking things?

In any case, I wanted to meet this master sometime and ask about it.

And there was no need to ask where the knife was now. It was sitting on the table in my room.

I didn't think too deeply about it when I got it, but looking at it again, it was a knife of mysterious craftsmanship.

A glossy black knife. When I pulled it from its sheath, it was a unified whole from blade to handle, without a single seam. The whole thing was black. I didn't have the slightest idea just what kind of mineral it was made from. Not metal, I knew that much.

Lightly touching my finger to the tip of the blade, it was unexpectedly blunt, the edge running harmlessly over my skin.

I stabbed myself with a blade like this. It was a delayed reaction, but I shivered thinking about my own actions in that moment.

Though at the time, there was nothing else I could do. I didn't die in the end, but still, I didn't think I was wrong to do it. If I hadn't, then other than myself, the root cause, Leon, Aira, Palmira, and Allie, too, would have died. I was sure of it.

"Come to think of it — "

"What is it?"

Suddenly remembering, I turned the conversation to Leon, who'd resumed his seat on the chair.

"What happened with Palmira?"

Setting Aira aside, Palmira had turned her sword against the Third Prince, Leon, amid the turmoil. What's she doing now? Normally, it would be impossible for her actions to lead to anything other than the death penalty, but this is Leon. I want to believe that

that definitely wouldn't be the case.

But Allie was there too, and there's a problem of position. It didn't seem to me like she'd be considered innocent, either.

“Right now, Miss Palmira is — ”

Author's Notes

It was easy to finish the scene after Leon woke up.

In order to write this scene, switching to Leon's first-person POV would have been optimal, but due to the story being first-person, I didn't really want to switch POVs.

Putting together a side story is a separate matter, but in the original story, at least [Chris's] POV won't be changed, I expect.

Chapter 55

Lamentation

When I exited the room, accompanied by Leon, I found Aira outside. She was dressed as an ordinary maid.

The moment she saw me, her eyes went wide with shock.

“Big Sister! You woke up!”

“Mn, I’m sorry. I keep causing you worry.”

When Aira threw herself at me, just as she had last time, I could only catch her in my arms as I spoke.

For now, it looked like Aira was alright. As I absently stroked her head, I felt a sense of relief. Though the truth is, the one who worried her was me, so even shamelessness had its limits.

After burying her head in my chest and rubbing it for a time, Aira lifted her face as if she suddenly recalled something.

“B–Big Sister. Palmira is — ”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve got the gist of it.”

We’d had our rooms assigned at the very beginning. Me, Palmira, and Aira, in that order.

And right now, Palmira was in hers.

In other words, the fact that she drew a sword on Leon had almost been swept under the rug. ‘Almost’ being the keyword. Unsurprisingly, her sword, at least, seemed to have been confiscated at Allie’s suggestion.

That night, following the disturbance, Palmira had been in hideously low spirits and

would not leave the room. It was a shock, but even so, Aira, who was in relatively better shape, had been checking up on her several times a day.

“I see... it’s like you’re the only one who’s being burdened with all the worry. I’m sorry.”

“Not at all. It’s fine. More importantly, Big Sister. Palmira...”

“I know. I’ll take it from here.”

When she learned of Leon’s true identity, Palmira was not her usual self. I never expected that she could possibly have had such a violent response.

In other words, she couldn’t forgive the ones responsible for destroying her country in the past.

To be honest, it’s not like I don’t understand.

When I think about the fact that my own hometown no longer exists, I’m not sure whether I’d be able to control myself either, if the prince of the Holy Kingdom were to stand before me.

“Sorry, Leon. I’m going by myself from here.”

“I understand.”

Even as he sighed, Leon smiled gently.

Seeing that, I suddenly reached my hand out to him, touching his cheek.

“Wha... Is something the matter?”

“Ah, no. It’s okay. I’m off.”

I pulled back my hand right away.

I simply remembered, for some reason, that I wasn’t able to touch Leon before I

blacked out that night. Leaving Leon behind in his discomposure, satisfied with the warmth I felt against my palm, I knocked on the door to Palmira's room.

"Palmira, I'm coming in."

My tone deliberately nonchalant, I turned the knob.

The door wasn't locked. Not from the outside either, of course. It opened easily with just a turn of the knob.

It was pitch-black on the other side of the door.

Well, it was just that the curtains inside were drawn. Faint sunlight came in through a gap between them. Dim as it was, it kept the room from sinking into total darkness.

Palmira was sitting on the bed.

She was completely hollow, the life leeching out of her. Her head hung slightly. Though her eyes were open, their usual penetrating gleam was gone, and they stared dully at the joint between wall and floor.

Her hair was a mess, her clothes in disarray, but without a single shiver, she was like a broken doll. She even seemed slightly emaciated.

"__."

The scene, too painful to look at, made the breath catch in my throat. Even now she looked so unstable, like she would crumble at a touch.

This is dangerous. So my intuition told me.

After shooting Leon and Aira a brief glance and a nod, I stepped inside. I closed the door behind me. The room fell into darkness again, but I paid it no mind. Right now, it was better to avoid strong stimuli.

I slowly walked over to Palmira, who still showed no reaction at all. And so, without speaking, I smoothly sat down beside her.

“Palmira.”

Softly, I called out to her profile.

No response.

” — Palmira.”

Once more, I gently speak up. This time, her eyebrow twitched. Her gaze, its focus indefinite, pulled together and slowly turned to me.

“...Chris?”

Our eyes met. Nodding, I smiled and replied,

“Yeah. Morning, Palmira.”

Palmira’s figure back then, her sword drawn. The emotions she couldn’t afford to harbor, even in her chaos. But she might have nursed a grudge against the Empire, even so.

‘I don’t want to go to the capital.’

Palmira had said so. Though she still said she would come with me, she had probably been forcing herself.

She secluded herself in the carriage without looking at the city. Though I’d thought that it was as she said, that she didn’t want to go, maybe a greater emotion was brewing inside her that her behavior was meant to suppress.

Would I have been able to figure it out?

Well, I didn’t. Taking her curt words at face value, I intended to just leave it at that.

That wasn’t it, though.

I never even imagined the other side of that rugged honesty.

“Chris, I...”

“Yeah.”

“I...”

Palmira was trying to tell me something. But perhaps unable to express it well, she didn't say another word.

Her eyes were conflicted.

She must've been full of things she wanted to say. She wanted to communicate, but there were so many things she wanted me to know.

Too many, or perhaps she was scared about whether they would get across to me. She hesitated on her next words.

That's how it seemed to me.

The long silence flowed on.

Palmira's gaze busily jumped between the inside and outside.

She couldn't help but be anxious. It was in her expression.

So.

“Palmira. It's okay. Say whatever you like. I'll listen. No matter what, I'll listen.”

Even if I say so myself, wow, how's that for empty platitudes? But I wanted to hear what Palmira was trying to tell me. I wanted to know. I wanted to understand.

I get it. I can't say for sure that I'll understand it all.

But still.

But still, I want you to talk to me.

Because I'll definitely be able to understand far more than if you were to say nothing at all.

“I — ”



” — I had a big sister. I never knew my parents. So she was all the family I had. By the time we understood the world around us, we were in the middle of war, and as a matter of course, we picked up our swords and fought the enemy.”

Maybe my words flipped a switch, but making up her mind, Palmira slowly began to speak.

Those were her memories of the war. She was fleshing out the story she'd shared before.

All the same, I wordlessly gave her my ear.

“It was a fact of life, so that was the only thing we could think about. We had nothing other than ourselves. For laughter, for comfort. For understanding. But — my big sister died. Before my eyes, just like that. Because she protected me. Because I was unprepared. Because I was reckless. She died because of me. She was kind. Strong. My aspiration. She was everything to me... Her face is already hazy. I can't remember it anymore.”

She had an older sister?

I was hearing it for a second time, but Palmira's past truly was brutal.

War as a fact of life. It was everything. She witnessed the human struggle between life and death as an everyday occurrence.

That's why her one and only older sister would have been her precious refuge.

But reality stole that away from her along with everything else.

I know that.

I've gone to war myself many times.

I remember it clearly, the first time I killed a man.

A middle-aged man in his thirties or forties, who looked like a veteran.

Against my expectations, he went down easily. I swung my sword; the man died. That was all.

But those thirty years he'd lived until then. Maybe forty. Then, the decades he should have lived from then on. I stole them. Because he was the enemy, and so on. Drawing that line didn't come easily to me.

That life probably was no different than the years I'd weathered myself.

The day that man was born.

The things that made him happy. That made him sad. That troubled him. That made him laugh. He might have had a lover. He might have been married. He might have had children. He might have had people he cared about, and people who cared about him.

Everything he built up, I stole from him. With ease.

That was extraordinarily terrifying.

I knew what it was to be stolen from. But the horror of doing the stealing was unknown to me.

By the second time, the third, I stopped thinking about those feelings.

It wasn't a question of right and wrong. If I didn't kill, I wouldn't be able to live.

Now, I thought of them again.

They died so easily, the people I killed.

Some of them must have been like Palmira. Or maybe like her older sister. There were many of them, to be sure.

But I couldn't think about them. I couldn't afford to consider their lives.

They fell, like it was only natural. That was war.

"Suddenly, I lost everything. No more laughter. No more comfort. No more understanding. But still...!"

Her words stopped.

For a moment, a shiver wracked her body. As if she were holding something back.

"I can't complain. People die, and die, and die. Even so, even so, I wanted them to know. The grief, the anguish, the pain. I wanted them to understand. So I worked hard. I

spoke words of devotion, displayed the right attitude, but no one noticed. No one understood. No one had that luxury, and then they died. I hated war. I hated the Empire. My big sister, the most important person in the world to me, who understood me; opportunity; freedom; emotion; they all disappeared. I lost everything. No one would see me. No one would understand me. So I mustn't try to be understood. I mustn't try to be found. All I can do is grow more bitter, more sorrowful. I am alone. As someone no one will understand, I don't know what I should do. I can't even ask."

The words spilled over, one after another.

It was completely unlike her, this incoherent rambling.

But it was for that very reason that it was dreadful.

At the end of the war, her family lost, her home gone, she was left adrift.

Just like me. Those memories had left deep scars in me.

I'd lost. I'd grieved. I'd regretted.

They couldn't be conveyed to another by words alone. It was utterly impossible to share with another the entirety of what lay in the heart. Not with words alone.

It was the same for Palmira. That's probably why she'd ended her words so quickly during Irene's tea party.

"And yet, I thought I'd lost something again. Because of my selfish feelings, because of my emotions. And mine alone. I thought I'd lost you, Chris. I —. I — didn't want to. Even though I didn't want to lose anything anymore. The things that matter to me — *why!?*"

"Palmira."

As she trembled, faltering and fragile, Palmira screamed.

And yet her face was still emotionless. Gently, I held her close.

I might not be able to follow it all.

I might not be able to understand everything.

I might be mistaken.

But there are things I *do* know.

That what I need to do now is accept her.

That I need to feel her. And just a little but mostly, that I need to remember it within.

“It’s alright, Palmira. I know. I know, so. It’s okay.”

“I-I-I... I-!”

“I know. I know.”

So.

I’ll teach you more, Palmira.

Coaxing, I peered into her eyes. Her frightened eyes.

— The color of those eyes — changed.

“If I look bitter, will you worry for me!?”

If I’m sad, will you show me compassion!?”

If I’m in pain, will you give me your sympathy!?”

If I cry — will you forgive me!?”

Uwa-ah-ah-uwaaaaah! Aahh! AAAAAAAHHH!”

Her mask collapsing on a grand scale for the first time, big drops of tears flowed from Palmira’s eyes. Tumbling and shaking, along with her sobbing wails, they spilled out without stopping.

But that’s okay. It’s fine that way.

When she’s happy, she should laugh. When she’s sad, she should cry.

Bottling it up inside, holding on to it tightly, is definitely too heavy a burden for a person to carry alone.

“I’m so sorry, big sis! I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry! Chris! Uwaaa! Aaaaaaaahh!”

I hugged Palmira tightly as she apologized between her continuing sobs.
Palmira was strong. She was more determined than others. And she was a coward.
Wanting to be understood, and fearing that she wouldn't be.
So, to avoid being understood from the very start, she stuck to her poker face and didn't let a hint of emotion escape outside.
But she wanted others to know.
She wanted others to understand.
Because it's lonely to be by yourself. It's sad.



Though it might seem like I could understand everything about Palmira in the end, I think it's more likely that I'll never be able to.
Even if I think I do, I might be mistaken.
But right now, I *can* hold her as she cries.
Without a word, I hugged her and stroked her head.
Just for now, even though I'm definitely treating her like a kid, she won't get angry.
Right now, that was definitely the thing I understood the best.



Softly, I opened the door and came out.
Leon and Aira were still standing outside.

“Big Sister!?! Palmira — ”

Surprised by the sight of me, Aira started to cry out, but I swiftly covered her mouth with my hand.
Then, with the other, I lifted a finger to my lips.

“Mn.”

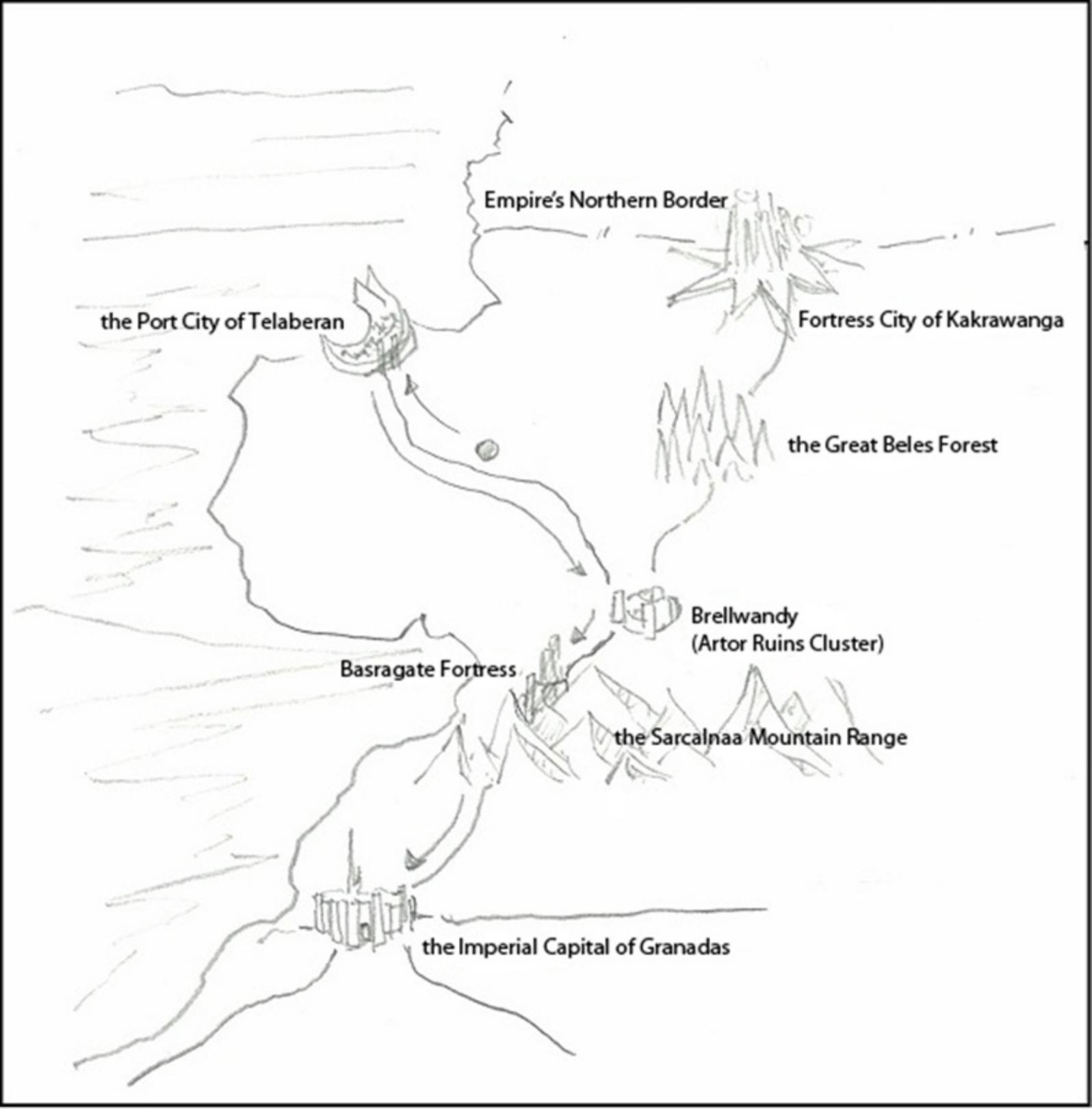
Seeing Aira shut up, I removed my hand and pull the door closed. For that one moment, Palmira was visible through the gap, asleep on the bed inside.

Good night.

Click. The door shut behind me.

Cast List (as of Chapter 55)

The journey so far...



Empire's Northern Border

the Port City of Telaberan

Fortress City of Kakrawanga

the Great Beles Forest

Brellwandy
(Artor Ruins Cluster)

Basragate Fortress

the Sarcalnaa Mountain Range

the Imperial Capital of Granadas

Chris Update!

Protagonist of the main story.

A former adventurer who thought he turned female thanks to some ancient medicine. Confirmed to be, in fact, possessing the body of a girl named [Christine Rouelle Felmiran].

Outwardly appears to be sixteen to eighteen. The person himself says eighteen when asked.

A beautiful silver-haired girl whose looks would turn anyone's head.

Should be male inside, but as the following two characters point out, is growing more feminine in personality. The person in question isn't particularly aware of the change.

Currently training to be a [fake] bride at Leon's mansion in the Imperial Capital.

Aira Update!

A rather unfortunate girl who lived like a slave and ended up becoming one for real. No given surname. Nineteen years old.

Fell into depression just after becoming a slave, but because of her (quite frankly) slow personality, her ability to adapt, conversely, is high. Not a deep thinker.

A normal beauty with a good figure, as long as she stays quiet. Relatively busty.

Became emotionally attached to Chris after her rescue, referring to Chris as 'Big Sister'.

Right in the middle of maid training at Leon's mansion in the Imperial Capital.

Seems to be aiming to serve as Chris's attendant maid in the future, but hasn't given any thought to life after the act is over.

Palmira Wilback (Palmira)

Former soldier of the fallen nation of Caidorusse. Became a slave after being taken as a prisoner of war.

After becoming aware of her surroundings, she lived in the midst of the war's final battles, so she was raised without knowing how to live.

Becoming a slave, then taking Chris's words to heart, she has a strong desire to stay with Chris.

Brusque because of her upbringing, she has an unexpectedly thoughtful personality.

Appears to be a twelve to thirteen year old girl with a nasty glint in her eye, but she's

actually twenty.

Though she should have the highest combat power among the three, right now she isn't putting it to use.

Leon Tyrell Stroidel (Leon) *Update!*

Man who saved the slave trio. Around twenty-five years old.

With blond hair, blue eyes, and a gentle demeanor, a man who's very much like a prince, and, in fact, actually is one. His true identity is the Third Prince of the Greya Stroidel Empire, one of the three global superpowers.

Interacts with people with gentleness and composure, but draws a line between himself and others; inside, he's a surprisingly normal person. That side of himself fundamentally isn't shown to anyone aside from Chris.

Currently being compelled to attend a marriage interview by his parents, and enlisted Chris's assistance as an excuse to get out of it.

At least, that's the official story...

Irene Barnest (Irene)

A magus affiliated with the national government. Adept with enchantment magic. Nineteen years old.

One of the select few in the world to become a magus, but the person herself is a normal girl, with a keen interest in other people's business and a thoughtless outspokenness.

Fundamentally friendly, and yet quite sharp-tongued.

Leopard Galles (Leopard)

Nominally the company commander, but is in fact a soldier serving as Leon's adjutant. Settles business for the current First and Second Platoons, but ultimately, his own position is unclear.

A very rough military man with a serious appearance. Estimated to be around fifty years old.

Vyde Rouche (Vyde)

Commander of the First Platoon.

An intensely serious and taciturn soldier. Barely says a word more than necessary. A loyal man whose first thought is performing his duty.

Rupert Belgraf (Rupert) *Update!*

Commander of the Second Platoon.

In contrast to Vyde, the type of person who'd run off his mouth to unnecessary lengths. Frivolous in style and doesn't carry himself like a military man, but an unexpectedly conscientious type. Nicknamed 'Mad Dog'.

Took Maddox on in combat at Basragate Fortress. Defeated, currently recuperating on-site.

Regnum Bransheria (Regnum) *Update!*

Officer of the Imperial Intelligence Bureau.

Has a tall, lanky body. According to Chris, a [gloomy guy]. Palmira's appraisal: [unhealthy guy].

Nocturnal due to the nature of his work, which is the reason for his unhealthy look.

Actually has a sweet tooth.

Guibenague Acaratrium (Guibenague)

Lord of the port city Telaberan.

Does a perfect impression of a fat baldy, except he's experienced in combat.

Enriched his wardrobe by dealing in slaves; as a result, he was taken down by Leon's forces.

Siegfried Chiriaux (Sieg) *New!*

As head cook of Leon's Elite Guard (popular name), saddled with the duty of keeping Chris and the others fed on the road.

A young member of the Elite Guard, even Chris calls him by a nickname, [Sieg].

Arcteur Vanburke (Arc) *New!*

Guildmaster of the Brellwandy Adventurers' Guild.

Seems to be past forty from his appearance, but tall and sturdily built. Also a high-ranking magus.

Fond of pranks, he's always causing trouble for the clerk, Miss Patsy.

Patsy Kylandia (Miss Patsy) *New!*

For some reason, the only character referred to as [Miss] by everyone in-universe, the clerk in charge of the counter at the same guild.

A person of polite bearing, but primarily being put through hardship by Arc, turns fairly sharp-tongued when it comes to reining him in.

Gary Crossford (Gary) *New!*

Commander of Basragate Fortress.

A celebrity in the Imperial Army, 'bighearted' fits him perfectly. Loud voice. Surprisingly gentlemanly.

Percival Belgaia (Percival) *New!*

Gary's adjutant. His commander's polar opposite, a calm and serious man.

Though the reason is unclear, lured Chris and Leon into a trap.

Maddox ??? (Maddox) *New!*

A legendary adventurer with the nickname 'Massacre'. The strongest character in the current story.

Targeted Chris and Leon at the bidding of his employer, but was repulsed by Chris's magic in the end.

Allie Keitel (Allie) *New!*

The head maid in charge of Leon's mansion in the Imperial Capital. Conducts herself with high professionalism and barely reveals her feelings. Gives off the impression of cleverness.

Though courteous and modest, she is, on the other hand, blunt and merciless. As a

result, she takes action to make the other party do as she says.

Her subordinates are Karen, Toa, Miche, and Lacreaux.

Lucien Clay Stroidel (Lucien) *New!*

As Leon's older brother, the Empire's Second Prince. With black hair and eyes, doesn't resemble Leon in appearance.

Unlike the princely Leon, displays a rather frivolous personality unbecoming his station.



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