



すわんぷ・ガール!

Swamp Girl!

- Part 4 -

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[bitgray]

Chapter 56

Unchanging Days

A few days had passed since the disturbance.

We pretty much treated it as if it hadn't happened. No one ever brought it up in conversation.

As a result, without any big problems since then, everyone was working hard at their respective duties.

I was in the middle of being drilled endlessly on the conduct of the upper class.

The contents were the same: general etiquette, language and conversation, how to walk, how to eat, etc.

At the same time, I was getting lectured at a desk in the name of 'general education'.

Now me, I'd never taken one of these so-called 'classes' in my life, and it was my greatest hurdle. I could read most words just fine. But I couldn't write to save my life. Truth is, what I knew how to write in the imperial language was just my name and a few other things; constructing sentences was honestly beyond me. I was the last person who'd laugh at Aira's situation, believe me.

And so, starting with reading and writing, I'd been kicked into the deep end with the Empire's general history, its social climate, and common etiquette among the upper class — all that good stuff.

Allie handled most of my training, but depending on the circumstances, one of the other maids sometimes took over. Allie was virtually the perfect superwoman, but she couldn't focus just on me, after all. According to the woman herself, there was pretty much no choice but to divide and conquer.

For example, one day, I had my lessons under one of the other maids, Toa. It was on societal affairs.

“It should go without saying, but as one of the three great superpowers, and with seven neighboring satellite countries, our empire is the largest nation in the world. Historically speaking, there has never been a single nation to control a domain this extensive. You probably learned this in your history class.”

As if to ask ‘Are you following me so far?’, Toa’s words came to a stop. Standing quite tall, she gave off an impression of cleverness even stronger than Allie’s. Her tone, blunt and completely lacking any polite frills, was a frighteningly appropriate fit for her teacherly manner. And then there were those glasses.

Lessons like these were primarily held in Leon’s office. There wasn’t a place on the estate particularly designed for classwork, and during the day, Leon was away in attendance at the castle. Besides, the students were Aira and me in any case, and depending on the circumstances, Palmira sat in too. With a maximum class size of three, there weren’t any problems. If I had to make one correction, I guess we did have to get a large blackboard installed. That’s about it.

At first, we had class in the dining hall, but due to its proximity to the kitchens, the smell that emerged as noon turned to evening interrupted our ability to concentrate — hence the switch. It was just like us to need a change of venue for such a reason.

Incidentally, I was the only one having lessons right now. As a maid, Aira had no need to learn about societal conditions, I guess. Given the way she was, she had her hands full enough with other things.

Though in that case, what does that make Toa?

“Now then, as for world affairs — fortunately, the world has enjoyed a period of relative peace for the last few decades, in the absence of any major conflicts. If I had to say, I’d describe it as a period of stability. This is not because our empire has been playing the coward out of a desire for peace. Though that is ostensibly so.”

Smiling, Toa pushed up the bridge of her glasses. Well, I mean, it wasn’t that I felt like she was just skimming over the subject, but... And this was the mansion of said empire’s Third Prince, too.

“Then, why is that!? Chris, you should try to answer.”

Suddenly, and don't ask me where she pulled it out from, she jabbed something like a conductor's baton at me. Eh, how do I put this — it's fun watching every bit of her theatrics.

"Yes, uh, because of the treaty with the other two powers?"

I mean, I feel like I've heard something along those lines before, maybe?

In short, I wasn't really sure.

"Hm... that does touch on a good point, but you're only half right. As you know, we certainly did sign a treaty with the other two superpowers, the Federation and the Kingdom. However, this treaty is a pact regarding combat — in other words, its primary focus is deciding the rules of engagement, rather than specifically prohibiting acts of war. For instance, its subject matter touches upon things such as this: the treatment of opponents who have lost their ability to fight, yet still hold to their allegiances, as prisoners of war. Prisoners of war cannot be killed or otherwise mistreated — indeed, a modern idea."

She puffed a laugh through her nose.

Her attitude was just right. It was a shame that she was dressed like a maid, wasn't she?

Wouldn't a military uniform really suit her?

"Now then, what is the real reason? It's because in the current climate, there is no benefit to waging war. To put it bluntly, it's unprofitable. It will only result in losses. At present, the three global superpowers form a three-way balance. If, for example, our Empire were to engage in all-out war with our sworn enemy, the Federation, what do you think would happen?"

"Well... I guess we'd be attacked by the Kingdom. Probably."

"Exactly right! That's as clear as day. Among the three strongest nations, our Empire

boasts the greatest might, but we would be inevitably be in for an uphill battle if both of the others were to attack. We would be forced to shoulder the burden of fighting on two fronts. The result goes without saying. This is true for the other two nations as well. Therefore, the three superpowers do not engage in direct conflict with each other in the present day.”

“Then in the future, as long as there are three superpowers, will we avoid large-scale war?”

“No, that’s not the case either,”

said Toa, crossing her arms. The action conspicuously pushed up her very generous bust. ‘She’s got an unexpectedly risqué figure,’ I thought for some reason, rather indiscreetly.

No, leave it. Leave it.

Where’d I go wrong in what I said just now? I thought that was the direction the conversation was going.

“There’s the desire to attack, but not the capability. In that case, it’s naturally a good idea to weaken the opponent. In other words, inducing a kind of domestic conflict. What I want to say, in simple terms, is that because of the times, we must strengthen our foundations in order to prevent such internal unrest. For that purpose, of course, the imperial bloodline must be properly maintained! In other words!”

As Toa got worked up, I developed an unpleasant premonition.

“Christine Rouelle Felmiran! Your marriage to Lord Leon will further strengthen the Empire! Do you understand your own importance?”

Is that relevant here...?

Or rather, I thought she was about to call me out, but did common sense hold her back?

No, but, even if you say we’re getting married, well... It seemed like the maids weren’t in on the act either.

That aside, though.

“...I get that bloodline is important and all, but if there’s some weirdness in the family tree, won’t it still lead to a kind of domestic conflict?”

For example, the question of the heir.

Because it was just way too common a story, it was a cause for concern. At least the Third Prince was much more pleasant compared to the Second Prince, but an upheaval in succession seemed unlikely, I thought.

“...Well, that does tend to happen too. But not having children out of fear of civil war would also pose a problem. Even if it’s just in case, it would be a far more serious issue if the bloodline were to die out. Therefore — ”

Anyway, if I were to summarize Toa’s talk, it ultimately boiled down to ‘please have children’.

Uh, that’s too big a jump... We’re not even married to begin with.

Did I really have to study all this stuff? It was pretty exhausting.

More importantly, when I thought about things coming to a head, the only thing I was concerned about was how Leon intended to get away without following through in the end.

I felt uneasy.



At the end of Toa’s class, exhausted, I walked down the passageway to the courtyard. I was sure that I had etiquette next. That was a pain too. My feet grew heavy of their own accord.

My ears picked up the dry sound of wood against wood. Turning my eyes toward the source, I saw Palmira and Lacreaux the maid in the middle of sparring in the courtyard.

The day after our talk, Palmira had gotten her sword back from Leon, as well as permission to wield it. Of course, even Palmira was awkwardly meek at first, but with the consideration shown by the maids, she slowly returned to her old self.

What's more, perhaps because Palmira had had a breakthrough in her own fashion, she'd even come to smile every once in a while — there was that positive sign too.

Recently, I'd frequently catch sight of her holding mock battles with Lacreaux, as she was right now.

"Let's go, Palmira!"

"...Got it."

Lacreaux took up a stance. Her two hands gripped a wooden stick carved in the shape of a knife.

Though not to the same extent as Palmira, of course, Lacreaux was quite small compared to the other maids, and her combat style closely resembled Palmira's too.

Her personality, however, was the polar opposite. With a liveliness that matched her appearance, Lacreaux was a chatterbox. Conversely, it was for that very reason that there was a chance the two of them would get along well. Lacreaux seemed like the type to pull others along.

"Haaaah!"

As Lacreaux charged forward with a boisterous yell, Palmira stepped up to meet her. She blocked the wooden knife with her small sword.

It was a good match.

Originally, I wondered why in the world maids would take part in combat, but it seemed that Allie, given her duty as a bodyguard in critical situations, subscribed to the philosophy that those who could fight, would.

Though as far as I could tell, the only ones who were combat-capable are Allie and Lacreaux. Leaving aside the fact that the militaristic Toa couldn't fight, I knew about Lacreaux's abilities because she frequently sparred with Palmira. But as for the other maids, Allie herself was strong as well, it seemed. But of course. Limits didn't apply to her anymore.

When I was holding the knife that night, she clearly didn't have the air of an amateur.

"Oof-!"

While I was occupied with my thoughts, Palmira and Lacreaux continued their exchange. This time, Palmira caught Lacreaux in a moment with a ramming attack. Lacreaux hit the ground in a tumble, deciding the match.

"Owowowww, you rammed me, huh. I wasn't expecting that."

Palmira casually extended her hand to Lacreaux, who was in the middle of rising to her feet as she brushed off her backside.

The latter matter-of-factly took Palmira's hand and got up.

"One more time! I'm not gonna lose the next one!"

"In your dreams."

Suddenly, Palmira grinned.

It was good to see.



Leaving the passageway before the courtyard, I opened the door to the drawing room. When I did, I found the maid Karen sitting inside by herself.

"Huh? Karen? Where's Allie?"

Whenever it was time for etiquette lessons, Allie would take on the job of teaching me. Since she wasn't here and Karen was, I guess that made Karen my teacher today.

"The head maid left earlier to attend to business at the castle. Therefore Lady Chris's

instruction has been left in my care today.”

“That so... Okay then, please treat me well.”

“Yes, I look forward to working with you.”

My tone a little different from before, I curtsied slightly to Karen. Since it was a class on etiquette, as a rule, it also meant practicing speaking in the right tone. When I opened the door to the drawing room, that rule would come into effect, so Allie had already scolded me twice for breaking it.

Allie had gone to the castle on business. ‘Even though she’s head maid,’ I thought, but it seemed that if the matter had to do with the castle, Allie would have to go personally. In those cases, she’d find me a substitute lecturer like this. So Karen was generally a pinch-hitter.

If I were to describe Karen in a word, it would be ‘elegant’.

Gentle in all respects, her words were also consistently polite. The eldest at forty-five, she had the lessons of age to back her up. As I heard it, she was the only one among the maids to be a married woman — and to be a widow, as well. She had no children.

As for why Allie was the head maid, in spite of Karen’s status as the eldest, it was purely a matter of personality. Karen was fundamentally reserved, her face never slipping. Although maids should’ve been Karen’s type in the first place, my guess was that Leon had made the decisions in that department, so he most likely had his own reasons for choosing Allie as head maid.

Even so, it was no surprise that she had the wisdom of experience. Even Allie deferred to her authority at times. By virtue of that alone, Karen possessed a low-key awesomeness. Although she was always smiling gently, she never showed a single weakness.

“Then, Lady Chris, let us begin with reviewing the correct way to walk today as well.”

“Awww... again...?”

I unintentionally let my discontent slip out.

Walking practice.

I was already doing that every day. It consisted of just one thing.

Walk straight. And what’s more, until I was exhausted.

It was a little different under Karen than it was with Allie, but only in that it wasn’t quite as spartan. Fundamentally, nothing had changed.

I walked. I did nothing but walk.

But it was more painful than I expected. I say ‘walk’, but it was a world apart from the marching I was familiar with. I was correcting my walking posture.

Generally, everybody has experience with the act of walking from before they develop an awareness of their surroundings. And that’s why, when I say ‘walking posture’, I’m talking about years and years of ingrained muscle memory.

Since I was working on fixing it, it must’ve been a pretty big deal. Of course, I didn’t take it seriously at first, but I understood for the first time once I tried it. It was genuine agony. By the end, I was completely worn out.

I was a man at heart to begin with, and that just made it so much worse. Until I started learning, I never noticed that I had a tendency to walk rather bowlegged. I was never explicitly aware of the differences between the ways men and women walk, so you might say it was justified.

“Walking is fundamental, and so it is crucial to repeat it many times in order to make your body remember. You have finally mastered it, so we shall repeat the exercise rigorously, like so, in order to prevent you from returning to the way you were before.”

...No, if I don’t go back to the way I was before, I’m gonna be in trouble...

Though I shuddered slightly when she said something so terrifying — and without an ounce of malice, I stood at the end of the line drawn on the floor as she told me to.

Taking a step straight ahead, I placed the tips of my toes on top of the line. Without straining too much, I crossed my hands before my chest. I elongated my spine, slightly drawing back my chin. My eyes looked straight in front of me.

Like so, I stepped forward with my left foot. Feel it from my toes to the ground in front of them. Careful not to let my body sway... Like that. One, two, one, two.

“Wonderful. Let us ensure that you will not forget the way you are walking right now. Now then, turn around there and go one more time.”

There isn't a guy out there who wouldn't be happy about being praised.

My feelings were rather mixed, but there was no denying that I certainly made progress.

I felt like I was gradually losing sight of what was good and what wasn't.

For now, let's not think about it.

Coming to that decision, I obediently turned around and set my toes on the line once more.



It was just before noon when Karen finally set me free. Dead tired, I made my way to the dining hall. To tell you the truth, I was starving. I was eating properly in the mornings, of course, but when you're hungry, you're hungry. It was just that draining, I guess.

When I peeked inside, the table hadn't yet been set. Still, there was a lovely aroma wafting out of the kitchen, so it should be any moment now.

Even so, I really was hungry, so I entered the dining hall on instinct, then cut across peek into the kitchen.

What's for lunch today? Ooh, I smell meat roasting — that's my feeling.

“Aira, plate please — !”

“Right away!”

Inside were two maids dressed in aprons and triangular headkerchiefs, hurrying back and forth.

To be more precise, one of them was Aira. The other, Miche. A dark-skinned, southern-born girl. The white apron looked pretty on her.

Based on her looks, she gave the impression of being just as boisterous as Lacreux, but she was unexpectedly delicate and finicky. That's why she was almost always managing the kitchen single-handedly, to the point that before we came, it seemed that no one else ever set foot inside.

I heard that after Aira came, one thing or another happened, and she reluctantly allowed Aira in. But to my genuine surprise, Miche said that Aira apparently had a natural talent for it, and now the two of them prepared meals together.

Though I was thinking, it's Aira, so won't she break plates in her constant state of ditziness?

When I said that to Aira herself, she got seriously angry, so since then I'd been amending my way of thinking.

In the kitchen, Aira set out the plates according to Miche's direction, and Miche carefully placed roast meat on them one by one with the spatula. She was marvelously skilled.

"Okay-! Aira, when you sprinkle on the parsley, hold it like that!"

"Yes — "

Aira brought over a bowl, and taking a generous handful of chopped parsley from inside, she sprinkled it over the plates. Her expression was uncharacteristically serious.

'She's working hard, huh.' Unconsciously, I admired her.

Ah, but in the beginning, it was a common occurrence to hear a scolding voice echoing from the kitchen. Still, even if it was parsley, it looked like Miche was trusting her with something. Great! Do your best.

Completely free of any personal responsibility, I cheered her on from the background.

“I’m taking them out! — Big Sister!?”

And while I was at it, I was easily spotted. Well, of course I was.

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean to get in your way.”

“Princess. There is a little bit left to prepare, so might I ask you to wait in the dining hall?”

Implying that I was an annoyance, Miche... Just kidding. She seemed a little embarrassed, and spoke to me shyly.

Don’t ask me why, but Miche seriously disliked it when other people watched her cook. Apparently it was embarrassing, as she put it. I didn’t know why it would be, but according to Aira, she said [For a southerner like me to be cooking...]. Miche herself might have some kind of conflict with it. Like a complex or something like that.

To be honest, it seemed like that was the real reason Miche wouldn’t let anyone into the kitchen, and her pickiness was a secondary consideration.

“Mn, sorry. I got it.”

Worried that I’d done something truly awful to Miche, whose face burned bright red, I waved my hand as I retreated into the dining hall. When I sat myself down on a chair, Aira caught up to me from behind, nimbly managing four plates, one of which she set before me.

“For goodness’ sake, Big Sister. Even though I told you not to peek into the kitchen.”

“Uhn, sorry. I was hungry.”

While offering a woefully inadequate excuse, I lowered my eyes.

In the center of the large, white plate, was a piece of roast meat. A vivid green sauce was drizzled around it. On top of the meat, the parsley Aira sprinkled on earlier added a colorful accent. It was a gorgeous plate: I honestly had to admire it.

“You still can’t eat yet, alright? –Everyone~! Lunch is served~!”

Aira gave me a warning before heading back to the kitchen, simultaneously announcing lunch in the mansion’s style.

For a moment, I wondered if that was what Aira was here for. Given her circumstances, I couldn’t picture Miche in that role.

Having heard the call, the maids and Palmira gathered in the dining hall in succession and began to take their seats. Grace went as usual. Recently, I hadn’t been resisting it very much.

Fork and knife in hand, I started with the meat that made up the main course. To tell you the truth, I should’ve started with the soup, but Allie wasn’t here, and I didn’t give a damn myself. Anyway, I was starving.

I put a piece in my mouth. Delicious. ‘That’s Miche for you,’ I thought.

“Lady Chris, your table manners have become seemly.”

“Mm?”

I looked over at Karen as I chewed. I was just thinking that I was in the clear since Allie wasn’t around at the moment, and hearing something so unexpected, a strange mood came over me.

“Really?”

After swallowing, I addressed the always-smiling Karen.

At which point Toa gave me an emphatic nod and added,

“That’s right. In the beginning, I couldn’t stand to watch, you know. I had to ask myself, ‘Where did this savage come from?’”

She laughed.

...Was it that bad? It came as a bit of a shock to me. I didn’t remember the banquet at the fortress, but how did they actually see me?

“Now, you give off the feeling of a princess!”

“I rather think so too. An elegant impression.”

Lacreaux and Miche each chimed in with their own praise.

A mood I couldn’t quite describe descending upon me, I looked at Aira and Palmira, but they quickly averted their eyes. From the shaking of their shoulders, it looked like they were cracking up. It’s because they know the truth that they can’t take it, I guess. You guys will regret this, wait and see.



Even so.

I thought, as I lightly wipe dab at my mouth with the napkin, the meal over.

It was peaceful.

When I thought about it, it was like I’d been living under some kind of tension all this time.

Not once did I spend a day like this, peacefully, without thinking about anything in particular.

When I first came to this city, even though it should’ve rubbed me the wrong way, even though I should’ve gotten irritated, I’d now grown accustomed to it.

I was tired from being so busy, but it wasn’t like I was really putting my life on the line.

Am I happy like this?

Suddenly I felt uneasy, but at the same time, a part of me thought that this wasn’t so bad either.

Still, a little unease remained within me.

Tugging at me, like I was forgetting something.

What that 'something' was, I was reminded of all too soon.

Chapter 57

Resolution

“Chris, let’s go to the castle tomorrow.”

” — !!!???”

Leon had come back from the castle once the sun set. While we were sitting down to dinner, he suddenly said that to me.

If I remember correctly, the preceding line was, “By the way, the Autumn Festival will be held in the capital.” As I listened absently, he made the announcement so naturally he might as well have been discussing the weather.

This is what they mean when they talk about ‘unexpected plot developments’, right? Unconsciously, I goggled at him like, ‘What are you saying?’

“...You mean, in other words, that is, ummm, to introduce me to, your parents, or rather, the Emperor? Possibly...?”

Leon’s words brought the friendly conversation to a screeching halt, and my faltering voice echoed in the silence.

Not ‘Won’t you go?’, but ‘Let’s go’.

Those weren’t words looking for agreement. You might even call them matter-of-fact, and that really shook me up.

No, no, it’s only to be expected. Yep. Actually, things have been like that since way, way back when. This is supposed to be the reason I’m here doing all of this in the first place... It’s supposed to be.

But this threshold's too high, don't you think? Meet the parents? Sure, okay, but this is the good goddamn *Emperor and Empress* we're talking about here. God, at that level my mind just stops functioning.

Whether I liked it or not, I knew that too...

But still.

'Let's go'? *Let's go*? Really!?

Aghh, come *on*. What the hell? That's something you usually ask, isn't it? You know, in the form of a question? So why does it feel like you're taking it for granted? Don't say it that easily. My heart's not ready.

"...Oh no, what do I do? Big Sister, you're so incredibly adorable."

"*What!?*"

By the time I noticed, Aira was looking at me with a dreamy look on her flushed face. Forget that, when I look around, Palmira and the maids were looking at me with the exact same wondering look on each of their faces.

Alright. What the hell is this?

"It's everything — the way you said it, the bright red blush on your face, the fidgeting,"

Palmira stated, pointing at me. She was expressionless, but her cheeks were slightly red.

...Eh-?

I looked around, at a loss for words. Everyone nodded. Turning my head around like a

mechanical doll, I looked at Leon.

He was smiling wryly, embarrassed. Our eyes met.

Mortification, and for some reason anger, welled up inside me.

“No, that’s wrong, Leon! I was just surprised ’cause it was too sudden — ! You gotta give more advance notice for stuff like this to begin with, you know that!? How do I even greet His Majesty the Emperor...!”

I shouted, jabbing my finger at Leon as I stood up from my seat in my rage.

“No, this is a different matter. Of course, I’ll ultimately have to have you meet my parents, but this time, because there will be a party at the castle to accompany the festival, I meant to ask if you would go with me.”

“Wha — !?”

Realizing that it actually wasn’t a particularly shocking swerve in the plot, I was left speechless.

From beside me, I could hear people trying to stifle their voices with difficulty. When I jerkily turned my gaze in that direction, Aira and Palmira quickly averted their faces.

Shit, it can’t be helped... when he said ‘castle’, I thought ‘so it’s finally here’; that pretty much settled things, didn’t it...?

“B–But still, this is a party at the castle, right? Like wearing a dress and d–dancing, right... I still don’t know how to dance, you know...”

Speaking of parties, I did remember going to the one at Basragate Fortress... but still, there was no way I could put that in the same category as a party at the castle.

A party at the castle. Arriving by pumpkin carriage... No, wait, not quite. Not quite, but

isn't it along the same lines? Isn't it still a ball, after all?

Thinking about it, wasn't this an upcoming — or rather, an *immediately imminent* — event that I couldn't avoid?

And yet I hadn't studied that sort of thing even once...

"It will be fine, Lady Chris. It was for this reason that I deliberately chose not to teach you how to dance."

In the middle of my confusion, Karen made a surprising reveal.

What's that mean? When I shot a suspicious look her way, she smiled beatifically.

"Your first dance with a gentleman. Rest assured, Lord Leon will undoubtedly lead my clumsy Lady Chris gently. As it will be your first time. If you relax and entrust your body to Lord Leon, there will be no problem. It will surely be a beautiful night!"

"'Entrust my body', oi..."

...What. Getting all excited for some reason, Karen looked downright evil to me. I was getting these awfully strong vibes that she was toying with me.

W-Well, it's Leon, so I'm sure if I follow and leave the rest of the dance to him, I might manage somehow.

I glanced at Leon.

"It'll be alright. If you calm down and match me, we won't encounter any issues."

"I — I'm not gonna dance though — !?"

My knee-jerk reaction to those words, spoken as if he could see through me the moment our eyes met, was to rebel.

Somehow, that nonchalance pissed me off. If I had to put it into words, it was the feeling that he knew just about everything with a glance.

I'd been feeling it for a while now, but recently, hadn't I been pushing against it a bit? What's up with this? A counterattack? Or am I —

“Big Sister, you're surprisingly weak to pressure. Like you won't be able to refuse if you're pressed.”

“I'm refusing here, ain't I!”



The next evening, there was a horse-drawn carriage stopped before me as I waited at the mansion gate.

It was just like the ones that would go to the castle in the picture books I read a long, long time ago: a gorgeous, pure white carriage.

First, a slave wagon without windows.

Next, the Elite Guard's eminently practical but cushioned carriage.

And now this?

So I've gone up in the world, huh. A strange, strong emotion enveloped me.

“Now then, shall we go?”

Wearing a dressier military uniform than usual, Leon extended his hand to me.

...A guy who looks good no matter what he's wearing. He was a real prince, alright. Right now, there wasn't the slightest doubt.

‘When I take this hand, I'll be past the point of no return,’ I thought, sighing. But I also knew it was too late for such thoughts, so there was nothing else for it but to put my hand, wearing a long, pure white glove, in his.

Today's dress was an emerald green halter neck. If it were white, it'd be the spitting image of a wedding dress, but it seemed Karen had exercised some self-restraint in that department.

For the most part, she'd coordinated the clothing, but it ended up just like a mini fashion show, and it took a frighteningly long time before she settled on this. There's no mistaking it, the maids had been playing dress-up with me to their hearts' content.

Floral head ornaments. A plaited necklace of gems around my neck. Small earrings. Bangles on my arms.

I was decked out in full armor. Right now, I could even take down a dragon.

"Take care. Master, Mistress!"

Aira and the other maids, who'd been messing with me just a short while ago, were now standing in a line to see us off as we made our way to the carriage. Armed with a sword, Palmira followed behind us.

Apparently, for a society party like this, attendees were usually allowed to have a single armsman accompany them. Until now, Rupert had apparently been serving in that role, but without a special reason to take him, and considering the relatively low level of danger inside the castle, Palmira was chosen in his place.

She'd more or less secured her position as my attendant. Thank god for small favors, right?

Contrary to my expectations, Palmira herself seemed to be quite happy, and though it didn't show on her face, she was in high spirits as far as I could tell. Donning a suit of white lightweight armor, her sword hanging at her waist, she looks every inch a swordsman. If you forget her height, anyway.

"Palmira, do your best,"

Aira said to her in a low voice. Slightly clenching her fist in response, Palmira joined Leon and me inside the carriage.

In this situation, it was common practice for attendants to sit on the coachman's seat, rather than inside the carriage. But for various reasons, she was sharing the carriage with me. Of course, I didn't really know the reason why. It was out of consideration on Leon's part, I guess.

"Let's get going,"

Leon said to the coachman, once he confirmed that we were seated. The coachman and the carriage were here on orders from the castle; they weren't under Leon's command. Well, maybe they were, in a sense.

Considering he was the Third Prince, not a soul in the castle would say outright that they weren't under his command.

The horse neighed lightly, and at the same time the carriage jerked into motion.

As I peeked out the window, the line of maids and the mansion retreated little by little into the distance. Somehow, I felt like I was being shipped out like a piece of cargo.

All we did was depart, but frankly, I wanted to go back already.

"Are you nervous?"

While I looked outside, my mood unwilling, Leon spoke to me.

"...To tell you the truth, I'm one big ball of nerves,"

I replied, still staring outside with a sullen expression.

There's no way I wouldn't be.

On the social ladder, I was the poster boy for low-class adventurers. The castle, the upper class, society parties. No matter which one you picked, I wouldn't have the slightest experience with it.

The truth is, I'd never directly come into contact with a member of the upper class

aside from Leon. As for other kinds of run-ins, when I was an adventurer, I saw nobles launching into a load of worthless prattle from afar, and that about summed it up. Oh, wait. There was Guibenague. Speaking of which, even that pig was a noble...?

As a result, my impression of the nobility was about as bad as it could get. True, having Leon did balance it out some, but on the other hand, some part of my consciousness was telling me, 'Leon's the exception to the rule.' The rest of them could go eat shit. No, maybe I just wanted to think that way.

People see what they want to see.

Gutter-scum adventurers like us, pretty much nobody has any positive feelings toward the aristocracy.

If I had to say why, it's out of envy.

With more money than a man could ever earn by risking his precious life, they're filthy rich. And without having to put in all that effort, at that. Damn bastards —

So the nobility has to be evil. If not, then we would be too wretched.

And so we make up a caricature of the nobility that's convenient for us. Naturally, it's the pits.

But if you look at it rationally, that can't be true.

Forget noble, Leon's an honest-to-god prince, but with the way he is, that caricature is pretty much an illusion. That is, I'm sure there are nobles who are hideous human beings. But that's not especially unique to the aristocracy. So generally, there are decent folk among them too. If not, common sense dictates that the nation wouldn't last.

But even though I understood that, I was anxious all the same. If I had to be honest, I was terrified.

For all that, I sincerely saw them as villains, and moreover, the residents of a world I could only touch in my imagination. I didn't understand them. I didn't understand them, so I was afraid.

“Everything will be fine,”

Leon said, smiling gently. Though I felt a little better seeing him act like his usual self, I grew defiant in spite of myself.

“...That’s all, huh, Leon. Got anything else... or is that it?”

As I scowled slightly, Leon said, ‘There’s nothing more,’ with a kind smile.

“Nonetheless, I will protect you without fail. So please, put your heart at ease.”

” — !”

That face, those words.

Even I could tell right away that my face flushed red.

Come to think of it, he said something similar when we entered the capital, too.

He really is — a hell of a guy. To be able to make that kind of declaration from the bottom of his heart without being embarrassed is honestly amazing. Even if they were lies, how could I not be happy to hear those words delivered with such conviction?

It was arrogant.

If it were me, I wouldn’t be able to say words that extreme. It’d be irresponsible of me. But I couldn’t suppress the excitement in my heart, hearing Leon declare [Nonetheless, I’ll protect you].

“Shit... That’s playing dirty...”

Saying that was the best I could do. I looked down to hide my face. It was embarrassing for it to be seen right now. And even if it was hidden from view, I was burning with

embarrassment.

Biting my lip, I kept my mouth from curving.

As I did, Palmira, who was sitting next to me, nudged me and said,

“Chris, it’s okay. I’ll protect you too.”

Somehow, I was sincerely thankful that Palmira couldn’t read the mood.

When I really thought about it, I was being protected by two people right now.

I felt like things were different until just a short while ago. I was the one expected to do the protecting.

Since when did I become the protectee? Why did it end up that way? Those casual, free-floating thoughts suddenly led me to a certain conclusion.

— It’s because I’m weak.

I narrowed my eyes at the thought.

That’s right, I’m weak.

In swordsmanship, I’m inferior to Palmira. I have magic, but it’s unstable. If I were told to fire off my magic right now, I don’t know whether I’d succeed or not.

What’s more, I’m afraid that it might go on a rampage, and now I can’t use it carelessly either. Even now, I don’t understand what’s going on with me. I’m not even sure of my own mind.

[Chris] hasn’t come out since then, but it’s not like she’s gone. That, I know intuitively.

She’s still somewhere inside me, biding her time. I couldn’t say it, not even to Leon, but I already considered her an enemy.

I know that there’s some kind of backstory to it. But what it comes down to in the end,

is that she's trying to kill Leon.

And if that's the case, then this is the one thing I have to defend against.

It's not just about being able to defend against it. I *have to*.

I'll carve it deeply into my heart.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me.

Supposing the time comes for me to leave this body someday, will [Chris] return to it?

And what will she do?

I have a feeling that it wouldn't turn out well.

But what's Leon hoping for?

What if he's hoping for me to vacate this body so [Chris] can come back?

— He has to be.

Leon wants to see [Chris] too, I think. Even though things ended so tragically.

On the riverbank that night, under the elm tree, what he said was enough for me to believe it.

...I have to leave this body someday. I have to return to my original body.

I came this far with that in mind. Come hell or high water, this resolution is the one thing that should never change.

This body — doesn't belong to me. Not in the least.

Someday, I'm going to stop being [Chris]. And at that moment, I'll definitely lose many things.

Nonetheless, Leon.

Until that time, I'll protect you.

And if I can, I'll make it so that you and the former [Chris] can be happy, won't I?

Chapter 58

Debut

Before long, the carriage slowly dropped in speed, then came to a stop.

I may have been lost in thought, but it didn't seem like it had been that long since we set out.

Besides, rather than say that the castle was close, it was actually more like Leon's mansion was close to the castle. It only stood to reason, considering her was the Third Prince. I mean, he was at the castle every day, too.

Still.

We've arrived. Oh god, we've arrived.

I'm already nervous. I know I'm being a sore loser, whining like this, but I really, *really* want to go home. If I say that I've got a stomachache, will they do me a favor and let me go, do you think?

As if it could read my thoughts, with good timing — or maybe bad — the carriage door opened. The plan was for the coachman to get off first and open the door, it seemed. That's the upper crust for ya, always trying not to lift a finger if they can help it.

As the armsman, Palmira descended first. Followed by — Leon. Then me.

Apparently even the order was important. I'd been properly schooled in that department. Though it was pretty much an eleventh-hour cram session.

Grudgingly stifling my inner thoughts, I stepped through the carriage door.

" — !"

And the scene before my eyes left me dumbstruck.

What stood before me was the castle. A colossal structure linking together rows of

white-walled spires.

It was a series of buildings with a tower of unrivaled height at its heart, so tall it even seemed to touch the skies over the capital.

The place where the ruler of this great empire resided. Stroidel Castle.

Anyone would fully agree that it made for a majestic sight. Even more so now that the sun had set. Bathed in moonlight, it glowed in the darkness.

Acutely aware that I'd ended up in an unthinkable place yet again, I gulped nervously. My head was empty but for one word: 'Seriously?'

"Chris."

The sound of Leon's voice brought me back to my senses. I tore my eyes away from the castle, which they'd been glued to, and turned to Leon.

Having gotten off before me, Leon was holding his hand out to me with a grin.

I sighed.

Not only was he relaxed, his figure was too perfect a fit for the place. 'He honestly is attractive,' I thought. God help me, but I really thought so.

Right. The castle entranced me, but even if I was closer to it than I ever thought I'd be, there was someone here I wasn't about to lose to. Besides, I'd be seeing it all the time.

My nerves eased up a bit at the thought.

Suddenly laughing, I took the proffered hand. The words Karen said to me before we set out came back to me. That is, 'Follow the gentleman's lead. It will not do to lose face.'

Of course, I had no intention of coming this far to be embarrassed. If anything, I wanted to outshine Leon.

I mean, I'd be pleased by that, too.

I don't mean to brag or anything... How should I describe this feeling?

"Thank you, Lord Leon."

Stepping down to the ground with a sweet smile, I recited the lines I'd prepared for going outside.

It was a strange sensation, somehow. Maybe Leon felt the same, because his face held a trace of surprise.

"Is something the matter?"

"No... How should I put it? I thought I was beyond this, but I was somewhat mesmerized."

My chest suddenly tightened at his words.

Though he'd often said that sort of thing in the beginning, I hadn't heard much of that kind of talk recently.

Now that I was hearing it again, it was as embarrassing as I would've expected. Oh, god, I'm floating on air here.

I mean, don't make me feel so damn giddy. Somehow, I feel like I've lost.

"Shall we?"

"Yes."

In response to those words, Palmira began to walk, taking the lead. Unexpectedly, her conduct was very much that of an armsman's. Hell, I even thought she seemed far more imposing than me.

Following her, Leon lightly pulled on my hand as he stepped forward.

In the dazzling light spilling from the castle entrance, I could see several people entering just as we were. My mind had been too preoccupied to notice, but carriages had been pulling up one after another, and gaudily dressed party-goers, young and old, male and female, were likewise heading into the castle.

Every one of them was a noble.

Suddenly, I remembered what I was thinking about on the way here. Alright, I can't be swiveling around to goggle at them.

Before the huge doors, which had been thrown open to allow entrance into the castle, Palmira suddenly stepped off to the side.

Before I could even question it, Leon passed through the doors like it was totally natural. I see — outside the castle, the armsmen functioned as heralds. Apparently, when it was time to go inside, the master was to enter first. How meticulous.

That being said, Palmira's ability to adapt was really something. She was a proper attendant from head to toe. Except for how small she was.

And so, pulled along by the arm, I went through the doors too.

On the other side was an entrance hall with a soaring ceiling. Forget comparison, this was my first time inside a castle at all, so I didn't know if that was normal or not.

Passing through the hall in all its overwhelming vastness, we proceeded toward a door staffed by a butler-like man past his middle age.

"My, my, it's the prince. You arrived early today."

"Croteaux, how is everything?"

His demeanor mild, the man noticed the prince... Leon, and executed a deep bow. It wasn't until now that I appreciated how familiar he was with the castle's people. Not that it was all that surprising.

“More than half are already in attendance. This time, you did not arrive last, as I would have expected.”

“Ah, Croteaux. Let me introduce you. This is Christine Rouelle Felmiran. And her attendant, Palmira Wilback.”

So this butler-ish man is a butler, I guess, but is it normal for a butler to talk this way? Wondering, I inclined my head as I was introduced.

Because I didn't know what attitude to take, I stayed silent.

“Chris. This is Croteaux Catolette, who manages all the miscellaneous matters in the castle. Generally speaking, no one knows more about the affairs of the castle than him. If you run into any trouble here, he's the one to call.”

“Your words are too generous. My lady Christine, Lady Palmira, please, do take care... of Lord Leon.”

“...-!”

Old man Croteaux's bait-and-switch at the end completely turned the meaning of his words inside out. He even dropped a conspiratorial wink.

His unexpected words left me dumbstruck.

While he looked like a strait-laced butler, it was no stretch to call him a friendly old man, surprisingly enough.

I didn't dislike this sort of thing, but I wished he'd stop dropping surprises on me.

“Honestly... Enjoying yourself, Croteaux?”

Though he sighed at Croteaux's antics, Leon's tone was one of amiable exasperation.

It was hardly surprising, but Leon gave the impression that he and Croteaux were quite familiar with each other. They'd most likely known each other for a long time.

“Enjoying myself? My, I do wonder. Could it be that Lord Leon, always unwilling to put in an appearance at this sort of gathering, consistently the last to arrive and the first to leave, has come to the castle with a beautiful woman on his arm — would there be anything unnatural about considering it a surprise upon surprise?”

“Is that true?”

Picking up on the surprising revelations in Croteaux’s speech, I unthinkingly asked for confirmation.

So, sociable Leon. And here I thought he’d behave with perfect propriety at this kind of auspicious event.

“It certainly is. Lord Leon has disliked parties since long ago. He is quite poor at handling the advances of women... Even I have always wondered what to do with a worthy member of the imperial bloodline who would flinch at such things, but even so — ”

“Alright, Croteaux, that’s enough. Let’s go in.”

With a hint of seldom-seen sourness in his expression, Leon forcibly ended the talk that I was genuinely finding *very* interesting.

‘Poor at handling the advances of women’, was it?

Picking up this extremely unexpected tidbit, my mouth curved in an indecent grin.

Considering everything that happened until now, that was the last thing I would have expected. Generally speaking, I felt like Leon played me like a pro every time. And pretty much no holds barred, at that.

Even though I remembered that, even though I pictured him as an expert at handling women, it didn’t fit at all with this weakness against being wooed.

It was just such a surprise to hear.

Feeling like I’d gotten a peek at another of Leon’s secrets, my mood was unexpectedly

chipper.

“Hahaha, I understand. At any rate, today is a happy day. Please, this way.”

Leon’s attitude just rolled right off him. Chuckling, Croteaux opened the large double doors.

“Wow... — ahem.”

The moment they swung open, dazzling light escaped from within.

The chamber was spacious, luxuriously appointed from floor to ceiling. Lights burned in every possible place; it was a lone island of radiance in the night, like the corner of a different world. Then there were the people, wearing a rainbow of suits and dresses. It was a dazzling scene in more than one sense.

I hastily swallowed back the noise of admiration that inadvertently came out of my mouth.

As I stiffened, overpowered by the spectacle, old man Croteaux whispered in my ear.

“Lady Christine, your arm.”

His voice abruptly breaking me out of my stupor, I grew flustered as I took charge of my heart, then lightly grasped the arm Leon was holding out to me with a natural ease. That was dangerous. I almost slipped up. Hardly surprising, considering the rush job my whole act was.

While I was loaded down with the feeling that I’d messed up right off the bat, Leon caught my eye and smiled slightly, before he stepped forward into the party proper.

As soon as we entered the hall full of friendly conversation, the area around us grew quiet, and I found myself the target of many curious gazes. The diffident and presumptuous mixed together, and I lowered my face in response.

— Straighten the back, draw back the chin slightly. Eyes, directly ahead.

Karen's words echoing in my head, I straightened my posture, mindful of my breathing.

I've come this far. Am I not going to see this through to the end? A strange spirit of self-control budded in my heart. Flimsy as this veneer was, I put a damn lot of effort into it. It'd be a waste if I didn't show it.

Following Leon, I took a graceful step forward.

I couldn't be tense. I revealed my face. Softened my expression. Throwing out my chest, I moved my feet forward.

Now that I get a good look at them, this sure is a bunch of big-shots. Gradually, I came to take a kind of pleasure in advancing confidently under the weight of such people's gazes. Not by myself, but together with Leon.

Of course, I knew to correct for the weight of Leon's standing as a prince, but as a former adventurer — and slave, to boot — walking with the eyes of the aristocracy on me was something I never would've even dreamed of.

What's more, those weren't looks of reproach or scorn, but admiration, wonder, longing — they were all affirming in nature.

Even if it raises my spirits, what can I do?

"Prince Leon. You've arrived early today."

"Lord Silverbark. When did you get back to the capital?"

Suddenly, a voice broke through my reverie.

It wasn't for me, but for Leon.

Just based on looks, the man gave the impression of a heavily bearded grandfather. Like Leon, he was dressed in a military uniform. Slightly overweight, the roundness softened his features, but one of his eyes was covered by an eyepatch, and there was no hiding the large scars running down his face.

A long-time military man. He was probably no ordinary person.

The man was accompanied by an elegant older woman. I bet you ten-to-one that she's Gramps's wife.

"The day before yesterday. I find this season unbearable in the south,"

Lord Silverbark remarked with a laugh. Not a bad guy, don't you think? If I had to describe the atmosphere around him, it had a relatively working class feel to it.

Though there was a III visible on his uniform. Probably the general of the Third Division, or something along those lines. In any case, this was a party in the heart of the imperial capital. No matter who showed up, it wouldn't be weird at all.

"Prince Leon. This lady is?"

Surprisingly soft-spoken, the older woman looked at me as she addressed Leon. That is, well, I guess people would be curious.

Like Croteaux said, it seemed that Leon usually attended late, and alone.

"Ah, Lady Silverbark. And General Silverbark, as well. Allow me to introduce you. This is Christine Rouelle Felmiran. A personage with whom I have a long-standing acquaintance, who is now in my care."

'Personage', is it? Don't make it sound so fancy.

Finding a strange nuance in words as I listened to him describe me, slightly red, I gave the couple a slight curtsy.

"Felmiran, is it... Of the Marquis family?"

The 'personage' part aside, it was my name that the two of them reacted to. A slight tremble ran through my body on instinct.

That's right. Here, there are sure to be people who know me... well, [Chris]. There's

nothing unusual about that at all. But if I run into them, won't it blow my cover?

Slightly flustered, I shifted my gaze, and just my gaze, over to Leon. He was... completely composed.

"That's correct. However, it's a bit of a long story..."

No kidding.

Inwardly, I felt like giving Leon the stink-eye, hearing him speak so shamelessly.

"Is that so? We all have our circumstances."

Madam Silverbark took his meaning with a genteel grace. She looked at me with kind eyes.

Somehow I felt like I'd committed a great wrong without even doing anything, but I swallowed and inclined my head in affirmation.

"That aside, Prince. You were dispatched to the north? How was the situation there? What — "

"Goodness. Despite the presence of such a lovely woman, that man... Miss Christine, it seems the men want to have a dismal discussion, so if you like, why don't we keep each other company? I would like to hear your story. As would the onlookers, I'm sure. I'd also like to introduce you to everyone. Along with your adorable attendant, of course."

Noticing the general quickly lose interest in me and strike up a conversation with Leon, Missus, no, Mistress, uh, Lady Silverbark made that proposal to me.

She was speaking with the best of intentions, I'm sure. I hadn't the slightest doubt about that.

But would it be okay for me to separate from Leon? Me? That's too nerve-wracking.

I glanced over at Leon. He gave me a nod. No, that's not it. *Save me.*

“I am Claritte. Call me Clare.”

While my pulse was running a mile a minute, she continued with the conversation. It was like Leon was pushing me into a bottomless abyss. After that nod, he didn't look my way once, but instead immersed himself in talking about something with the general. How's the war and so on. Filthy traitor.

“...Then, please feel free to call me Chris, Lady Clare. This is my attendant, Palmira.”

It can't be helped. Resigning myself to the impossibility of escape, I bowed my head to Lady Silverbark.

As thankful as I was that I invited Palmira to come, now I'd gotten her wrapped up in this mess. Honestly, I was worried about being alone in the trenches.

“Chris it is. Shall we take that table over there? Oh, and cute Miss Attendant. How old are you?”

“Fourteen, Lady Silverbark.”

Telling the truth would've been more trouble than it was worth. Palmira sidestepped the issue on the spot.

...Hey, that's the actual truth, right? She's actually fourteen, right?

“To be young and yet so proper is quite admirable. But there's no need to stand on ceremony. I wouldn't mind if you called me Clare as well, you know?”

“Thank you very much, Lady Clare.”

Exceedingly shrewd, Palmira was somehow incredibly reliable.

Even though she should have received just the bare minimum of training. What did that make Aira and me?

Occupied by such thoughts, I began to walk after Clare while listening to the already rapid succession of topics flying between her and Palmira.

Chapter 59

Fireworks

“I’m exhausted...”

Alone, I took an open door out to one of the balconies coming off the hall.

Only then did I feel like I’d escaped from the hustle and bustle inside.

Though the light streaming out from the hall illuminated the wide balcony in its entirety, in contrast to the boisterous, dazzling scene inside, this less popular location instead felt rather chilly.

I walked to one end of the balcony.

Inside, still noisy, the conversation continued to flow among the brigade of noble wives.

Now that I thought about it, her true nature was completely unknown, but aged down from twenty to fourteen, Palmira was incredibly popular with them. Offering her up as a human sacrifice, I made the appropriate noises and snuck away by myself.

The autumn wind was immensely pleasant against my skin.

I wouldn’t say that the atmosphere inside was stagnant, but it was still suffocating in some ways. I probably would’ve been ill at ease, even under normal circumstances. Because even I knew that I was pushing myself.

Resting my hand on the banister at the end of the balcony, I did some stretching, if in moderation. I didn’t know where I might be seen, so I couldn’t be careless.

All the same, I was hungry. Thirsty, too.

Though there was as much food as I could ever want, I was deluged by a flood of drink recommendations before I could even reach out my hand. But before leaving the mansion, Aira and Palmira strictly forbade me from drinking alcohol. Not knowing

what was alcoholic and what wasn't, I didn't dare make a move.

Even so, when my hand moved just a little bit in the direction of a glass, Palmira blocked it with an incredible casualness. She's too scary. Or more precisely, I even have the sneaking suspicion that Palmira was chosen as my attendant for that very reason.

Well, no big deal, right? Today was a test of endurance.

I looked down at the city from the railing. Because the castle stood on the highest point of the hill — or mountain, if you were feeling generous — I could see everything.

My view of the city was blocked by a canopy of trees that seemed to have been planted on this side in order to isolate the castle from the outside world, but what I could see through the gaps appeared more dazzling than usual. The moonlight illuminating the entire city glimmered and danced.

Come to think of it, people were talking about how the festival was going.

So maybe today was special.

Speaking of the festival, of course it was impossible not to know about it.

The night would run longer than usual, and the open air market selling special items would make an appearance. That's why it was a special day with a special mood.

And if I could go...

It seemed way more fun in the city than here.

Wait, isn't this like some princess yearning for the life of the common folk? Of course, for me, being here was a special event too, but all I felt was mentally exhausted.

I wanted to taste freedom on this special day, all the same.

"Ahhh, I wish I was over there."

Without thinking, I let slip my true feelings.

"You must be tired. But might I ask you to endure for a little longer?"

asked a voice from behind me. It didn't surprise me anymore.

When I turned around, Leon was there as a matter of course. He had two glasses in his hands.

I took the one he held out to me.

"It's fruit juice."

I was going to drink it anyway, alcohol be damned, but with Leon going out of his way to tell me, no doubt he also understood Aira and Palmira's warnings.

Since it wasn't mixed with alcohol, I gratefully knocked it back.

"Hoo, thanks. My throat was so dry. You're a lifesaver, you know that?"

"That's the most important."

Grinning, he raised his own glass. Unlike me, he didn't down the whole thing, but instead took an elegant sip.

Seeing him, I thought I might ask him the thing that'd been on my mind for a long, long time.

"I've been thinking about this for a while. Leon, that, I mean, that formal tone. Isn't it time to just be yourself?"

It was a vague sort of suggestion.

Honestly, I didn't find that tone of voice particularly out of character for him.

But hearing him talking to people like Croteaux or Allie, it seemed that formal speech wasn't the default for him. Of course, it did seem to me that that kind of speech wasn't his default either.

But if it was a conscious decision he was making, it made me feel kinda lonely.

“...I suppose that’s true. But because I’ve spoken this way the whole time since we met, it seems a little late to be changing it now. I wouldn’t call it a deliberate affectation, exactly.”

“Then were you like that with [Chris] too?”

I wasn’t all that familiar with how Leon spoke in those dreams. That stuff was vague, like it was shrouded in mist.

But the only thing I did know was that he didn’t use the kind of tone he was right now.

It wasn’t like I was telling him to treat me the same way as [Chris]. I just thought, if Leon was forcing himself to speak that way...

Honestly, I wanted to see the original Leon.

— Ah, well, yeah. If I think about it, it’s not unreasonable. Probably.

I just want to see the real Leon, that’s all.

“I — don’t mean to say it was like that. Certainly not. But to be honest, it’s still embarrassing to think about it after all this time.”

“Hmph, it’s probably too late because it’s embarrassing... What a stubborn guy. Well, it’s alright.”

Even so, I didn’t mean to be that anal about it.

I was pretty curious, but it was rather late to be having this conversation, sure.

I sighed.

Thadoom!

“Hmm-!?”

As my mind wandered, a sudden reverberating boom almost scared me out of my skin, and I turned to look behind me.

Great blooms of light sparkled in the night sky.

Bursting into a glittering rainbow, spreading, then disappearing.

“Wh-What’s that?”

My eyes were glued to the magical sight.

Just when I think it was over, another burst of light filled the sky, followed by a delayed rumble.

It was a wondrous and beautiful sight.

What in the world are they? What’s happening to them? Any questions and theories were swept to the side; they were just too brilliant.

“Fireworks. Is this your first time seeing them?”

“Ah, yeah. Wooow...”

I watched in fascination as flowers of light blossomed one after another in the night sky.

Really, how beautiful.

They had a beauty that sent shivers down my spine.

“L-Leon! It’s amazing! I’ve never seen anything like them!”

As I raised my voice in excitement, I flicked my gaze over to Leon just briefly, so that I wouldn’t miss a moment.

Fireworks? How could there be something so amazing in the world?

As if banishing the darkness, huge sunbursts continued to bloom against the deep black of the night.

Taken captive by their tangible fairy-tale beauty, I said no more, and continued to look up into the sky.

“Chris.”

“Wha?”

My attention captured by the fireworks, Leon’s voice reached my ear.

Just as I responded in a idiot’s voice, he suddenly embraced me from behind.

“...-uh, L-Leon — ”

Startled, I tried to turn around, but in his close hug, I couldn’t get a good look at his face.

That was how tightly he held me, like he was restraining me.

In my surprise, I reflexively let go on the banister to free myself.

” — Chris.”

In an instant, his voice whispered directly into my ear.

A shiver ran through me as my body stiffened. I could sense my will to break free draining away.

What the hell’s going on?

I directed the question at Leon, at myself.

My arms froze in the process of shaking free, and I tightly clenched my fists as to hold something back.

“H–Hey. Leon — ”

” — Chris. *I swear I will protect you.* No matter what happens, believe in me.”

“–!”

Once more, he whispered in my ear.

I trembled, my body swept by emotion of such intensity that I couldn’t help but shiver.

Just — just whose words — are these?

So my reason asked me, but even so, my instinct raced ahead, accepting it as fact: this is the original — the real Leon. Knowing that, those strong words roused in me a joy that seemed to render me numb.

Their meaning, I didn’t understand.

‘No matter what happens’.

For all that, Leon almost certainly still had something he couldn’t tell me.

And yet he said, ‘Believe in me,’ in what was probably the strongest way he knew how.

This is so... unfair. He wasn’t saying the crucial thing. But.

Refusing to believe in him — there’s no way I could, is there?

“I — I know, okay, Leon?”

My heart was beating so quickly even I could sense it.

That just made it more embarrassing. Because he was holding me, it was definitely coming through to him too.

Just what look does Leon have on his face right now? I really wanted to see it for myself.

Somewhere, alarm bells were screeching ‘Abort!’, but even so, almost as if under someone else’s control, I turned to look over my shoulder at him.

” — !”

Naturally, I ended up staring into Leon’s face at point-blank range.

Although the breath caught in my throat and I tried to move away, his watching eyes captured me, and I couldn’t escape.

In the radiance of the fireworks behind me, Leon’s face, his eyes, glittered with a mysterious light.

It was as if I were being sucked in.

“...Chris.”

No good, it’s no good. Don’t call me with that voice, that face, that gaze.

My ears, my chest, my heart seemed to melt away.

I was starting to think I should just let things take their course.

Instinct was taking me over.

I blinked again and again, fighting back the urge to close my eyes.

But even my feelings ran the other way. There’s no mistaking it — in the depths of my heart, I’d been wishing for this. A self-contradiction. Even though I didn’t want it, I couldn’t help but want it —

— Someday, I have to leave this body —

“Nn-!”

In a flash, besieged by terror and my resurrected resolve, I pushed Leon aside when we were a hair's breadth apart.

Intense guilt threatened to tear me into pieces.

I denied the instincts of the deepest part of my heart.

Because I took my conduct at that moment as a mistake. Maybe that was the real mistake.

That's why I couldn't look at his face directly — Leon, who I'd forcibly pushed away from myself.

How is he feeling? Shocked, disappointed?

When I thought of that, my heart threatened to split open.

Why am I thinking about this sort of thing —

— Because just now, I'd clearly rejected him.

“Leon — !”

Panicking, I took Leon's hand forcefully without looking into his face.

Otherwise, he'd end up saying something. And then I'd know what he thought of me. It was a frightening thought.

That he'd misunderstand me, was a terrifying thought.

It's not that I hate you —

“Leon. Dance with me. Would you dance with me?... Please dance with me? Please, would you...”

While I was babbling on, I caught sight of his face. As I lost track of what I was saying, my words tapered off weakly. I was so embarrassed that my face seemed to catch on fire.

But hearing me say those things to him, Leon's face went from a look of genuine surprise to a sudden smile — for the second that I was left staring dumbly at his face, he smoothly pulled me close, then planted a light kiss on my forehead.

All in the space of one moment.

“Wha-Wha-Wha — !?”

” — With pleasure.”

“~~~!”

Happiness, anger — as my thoughts turned to pulp, Leon brushed it all aside as he accepted my request, his face all smiles.

Unfair, I thought. I tried to say something, but I just stood there with my mouth flapping open and closed. My voice wouldn't come out at all.

“Shall we, Chris?”

And so, Leon taking me a bit forcefully by the hand, I returned to the hall.

I held my hand to my forehead. It was surprisingly hot.

Wasn't that a crushingly one-sided defeat for me just now?

Disgruntled by being played so well, I was overwhelmed by the conflicting emotions seething within me. With Leon leading me more aggressively than usual, I left behind the balcony as it continued to bask under the radiance of the lights in the sky.

Chapter 60

Dance Time and the Mystery Man

While I was practically being kidnapped back to the party venue, the atmosphere inside had changed without my noticing.

Slow music drifted through the hall. Following it to the source, I spotted a stage further inside. On top of it was group of black-clothed musicians with their various instruments in hand, playing a symphony with such skill that even an amateur could appreciate its perfection.

To be honest, as far as music and me go, all I knew were the minstrel ballads or tawdry piano tunes I occasionally heard in the taverns.

The symphony, the first I'd ever heard, was stately and yet refreshing to my ears.

“Such a pretty song...”

As Leon pulled me along, I half-closed my eyes with pleasure, listening to the music. Until now, I'd thought that music and song were nice enough if they happened to be around.

This wasn't something you'd just listen to 'by the way', though; it might even be worth listening simply for listening's sake.

Well, that aside.

This was the scene I was being led into.

“Wha-... ah-...”

When I first entered, I thought it was odd for the exact center of the hall to be left empty, but now, the space had been occupied by several couples doing some kind of

dance.

Seeing those figures, I was at a loss for words.

I wasn't exactly an expert on paired dance in the first place. Vague as it is, the deepest thought I'd ever had about it was that there were two people involved, each dancing their own role.

The sight before my eyes told me just how naïve my imaginings had been.

Men and women, pressed together in pairs as they danced.

Even if I said that they were practically embracing, it wouldn't be an exaggeration.

Speaking of which, now I could clearly see what Karen meant when she was going on about 'entrusting my body' or whatever. Or rather, I might be an idiot for not getting it.

But still... this is embarrassing.

Though I had my doubts about the dance itself, when I thought about pressing up against someone else in public like this, just imagining it was enough for my face to catch on fire.

I glanced at Leon.

"Chris, let's go."

The moment our eyes met, his smiling face happier than I'd ever seen it, he walked me out onto the dance floor. And I followed his lead like a criminal walking out to the gallows.

I mean, what's Leon's problem?

With his unusual pushiness, he seemed somehow childish to me.

...But well, I guess it's okay.

His grin's fun to look at, that's for sure.

But since it really was extremely rare for him to be in such a mood, we attracted even more attention than we did when we entered the hall.

Surprise, and the curious gazes that would follow a charming sight, converged on us.

I couldn't keep up my act, no surprise there. I didn't give a damn about the way I walked anymore, and besides, with Leon pulling me along in the first place, I had my hands full just keeping up.

"L-Leon. Oi..."

I tried to object, but I had to keep my voice down at all costs, and unsurprisingly, it didn't reach him.

...What the hell, man?

Seriously, how much are you going to humiliate me today before you're satisfied?

Normally, this is where I'd slap you in the face and go home, you know.

Though inwardly I cursed up a storm, seeing Leon so delighted, all the bite went out of it.

"Uhp—"

Walking with my head hanging down, I didn't notice Leon coming to an abrupt stop, and I pitched forward right into him.

...Though from the outside, it probably looked like he'd caught me in his arms.

He was, in fact, hugging me tightly from the front. And like so, I looked up at him.

"Everything will be alright. Don't be nervous."

I'm not nervous. I'm *embarrassed!*

It seemed that the protests I was conveying with my eyes didn't get through.

Leon's hand encircled my waist, then the other grasped my hand. All in the blink of an eye.

"Calm down, follow me."

"O-Okay..."

Before I could say anything, he instructed me with a serious look, and I awkwardly matched my steps to his. I focused on that operation.

If I didn't, then I'd be unfortunately aware, no matter what I did, of our joined hands, the way our chests were pressed together, the arm he had around my waist.

In that case, where am I supposed to put my free hand...?

"Raise your face, put your hand on my shoulder."

Shoulder, is it?

My relief outweighed the embarrassment of hearing the cause of my confusion guessed right.

Umm, raise my face, put my hand on his shoulder.

Just as I was about to do so, it hit me. That I'd end up holding Leon in my arms by necessity.

I felt my body temperature rocketing upward all at once. But even so, leaving my hand dangling free was too awkward, so there was nothing for it but to bury my face in Leon's collar and wrap my hand around his shoulder. Given the height difference, that was the only possible outcome.

Shit, he's more muscular than I expected. Leon.

Belatedly, the thought occurred to me.

I can't think about it, of course. I can't, but if I think about how I can't, then I can't help but be aware of it to the point of thinking about it.

Looking for a distraction, I stealthily peeked over Leon's shoulder at our surroundings.

...As I expected — no, more than I expected, we were the center of attention. Lord and Lady Silverbark from earlier, and Palmira behind them, were mixed into the crowd too. That being the case, it was an embarrassing scene, so I unconsciously clung to Leon's shoulder.

This was embarrassing too, but even so, there was a feeling of security in it.

“Is something the matter?”

“...s'nothin'.”

What do I even say to that? I abruptly turned my face away.

Following Leon's lead, matching his movements, I measured out my steps. I didn't have the faintest clue whether I was doing it well. But strangely enough, it didn't bother me.

Gradually, I stopped worrying so much about such things; being together like this, moving in unison — I was beginning to enjoy it, to take pleasure in it.

It was mortifying, in some respects, but also indescribably comfortable.

I knew it wasn't a good thing. But even so, I honestly thought, ‘It'd be nice if we could stay like this forever.’



There was no way it could last for an eternity, but still, we danced the entire piece. Then, with Leon taking me by the hand again, I returned to the surrounding throng.

Everyone was still looking at us with inquisitive eyes.

It was just as embarrassing as before, and using Leon as a shield to hide behind, I cast my eyes down and quickened my pace. I wasn't in a situation where my lessons counted for anything anymore. 'It's enough that I've come this far already, right?' I thought.

"Yo, Leon, aren't you in a good mood? How rare."

"Elder Brother."

At the sound of that voice, I lift my face.

'Elder Brother'. Lucien?

It wasn't.

Standing there was a man I'd never seen before. A middle-aged man with a bright, or rather, sunny smile. He resembled Leon a little. The Leon from back when we'd just met.

Elder Brother, and not Lucien.

— In other words, he was the First Prince. The promised future emperor. The man with the world in the palm of his hand...

I inadvertently ended up staring hard at him. When our eyes met, I snapped back to my senses, and I hastily lowered my eyes and curtsied.

What am I doing? Too careless.

At which point the First Prince, with a wide roguish grin that wasn't the least bit prince-like — or like any member of the upper class, for that matter — turned his gaze directly upon me.

"Ah, you're the one Lucien was talking about, Leon's sweetheart. Nice to meet you. I'm

Arthur Veidt Stroidel. Leon's older brother.”

‘Nice to meet you,’ he says...

His over-frankness left my head spinning.

How am I supposed to reply to that? It's obvious, but there's no way I can say ‘nice to meet you’ back at him. Uhm, uhhhhhhmm.

“...It is my pleasure to meet you for the first time, Lord Arthur. My name is Christine Rouelle Felmiran. I am Lord Leon's sweet — ”

In my panic, I let his words influence me, and I hastily cut myself off in the middle of blurting out something strange.

I stopped myself, but I didn't know what I was supposed to do now.

Even the First Prince had a slight tilt to his head. That said, I couldn't afford to openly ask Leon to bail me out.

“...sweetheart,”

I finished in a small voice. There was nothing I could do. I felt like I was burning up with shame.

“Puh-! Ahahaha! Leon, your sweetheart's quite interesting. And very charming. Hahaha. I can see why Leon fell captive. Nonetheless... Felmiran, is it? I've heard the name before somewhere...”

As First Prince Arthur's gales of laughter failed to lessen, my face grew hotter and hotter.

So glad to provide the Imperial Family's bored darling son with a laugh. Oohohoho.

I tried to relieve my sourness by entertaining stupid thoughts, but naturally, my

emotions didn't grow any sunnier.

"Yes, it's a bit of a long story... Chris, I'd like you to wait here for a moment."

"Oh, y-yes. I understand."

Leon parted with me and started to talk with Arthur about something.

Probably laying the groundwork for me. Otherwise I might've blown my questionable cover story.

Still, you could say it about Arthur, and about Lucien too: are all the princes the weirdly over-familiar — I mean, sociable — type? Even Leon's like that, in a sense...

Speaking of Lucien, is he not here today? When I think back to that day, I don't want to meet him, so if he isn't here, so much the better.

I nonchalantly surveyed the inside of the hall.

"?"

I spotted Palmira by the wall, talking to someone.

I tried to get a look at who she was talking to, but unlike Palmira, who was facing my direction, her partner — a man, I think — had his back to me, so I couldn't really make out his features. All I knew was that characteristic red hair.

Helped along by my boredom, I walked toward them to join up with Palmira. As I did, the man turned slightly, his gaze pointed in my direction.

" — !"

The moment our eyes met, a shiver ran through me from head to foot.

Our eyes met for that one moment.

But I felt a terrible chill.

That man — who is he?

Ending his conversation with Palmira naturally, the man then parted ways with her, left the venue, and went outside.

My eyes chasing after him, I walked up to Palmira as quickly as I could.

“Palmira.”

When I got close enough, I called out to her.

Palmira’s condition — was normal. As far as I could tell, nothing about her had changed.

I don’t know what they talked about, but it wasn’t anything of importance, right?

“Lady Chris.”

Perhaps because my voice reached her, Palmira acknowledged me with manners befitting an armsman. As solid a performance as ever, but that was beside the point right now.

“Palmira, that man just now was...?”

I noticed the hurry creeping back into my tone. As Palmira looked at me in puzzlement, I leaned close to her ear.

“Who was that man just now? An acquaintance?”

“The person just now seems to be someone’s armsman. I don’t know whose; I didn’t get his name either. He called out to me, so I spoke with him a little, that’s all.”

“...I see.”

No important information. Straightening up, I looked toward the door the man left through.

Certainly, I did have the impression that he was wearing a sword outside of his coat, the way an armsman would. I didn't get a good look at his face, but he was around twenty or thirty, by my estimation.

An acquaintance of mine, but not the type you'd run into in a place like this. However, I still had the hunch that I'd met him somewhere before.

When I was an adventurer? All I knew was his height and his red hair. But I couldn't remember.

And then there was that chill the moment I met those eyes. Whatever that was, it made me dreadfully uneasy.

"Palmira."

"Yeah. Follow him?"

As expected, Palmira was more than an attendant. Simply hearing her name was enough for her to guess my intentions on the first try.

It might've been that my state was just that strange, but because there was no time, I was grateful.

"Yeah, there's something bothering me..."

I said, walking toward the exit the man had taken.

Before leaving, I looked around the hall for Leon. I didn't know where he was.

I felt just a bit guilty for going without saying anything to him, but convincing myself that he'd definitely notice, I went through the door.

Chapter 61

The Labyrinth

“Which way, Palmira?”

By the time I got out the door, the man was already nowhere to be seen.

I came out without paying it any mind, but quite unlike the time I entered, the foyer on the other side looked completely unfamiliar to me.

It was the same entrance hall, but its appearance was different, and gloomy in comparison to the entryway.

“There.”

Palmira pointed to the opposite side of the sprawling hall.

Looking over, I caught a glimpse of what seemed to be the man’s shadow disappearing through the door at the other end.

Picking up the hem of the dress, now nothing but a bother, I broke into a half-jog.

It was a pretty dumb way to carry myself, but still, I didn’t have the guts to ruin the hem of the dress.

Which made Palmira that much faster than me.

Maybe because no one else was around, she headed for the door at almost top speed.

“Is he in there?”

I finally caught up to Palmira, who stood stock still as she peered into the room.

At the same time, I took a peek myself.

— There was nothing inside.

It looked like a parlor of some sort. Or a reception room for guests. However, maybe because there were no plans to put it to its intended use at the moment, it was currently serving as a storage room. The light from the entrance didn't extend far enough into its dark interior.

The room wasn't that wide, but with a jumble of miscellany inside, it was difficult to see.

But even so, I could at least tell that there was no human presence here.

"Palmira, he came in here, right? The man just now."

"He should have."

Though Palmira more or less confirmed my thoughts, from the state inside, I wasn't particularly confident in myself.

But considering I was sure enough to expect him inside, I put my faith in my own eyes and took a step into the room.

Inside were a sofa, table, large shelf, and fireplace. Besides those, there was a jumbled mess of wooden boxes and barrels. They looked as if they hadn't been touched in a long time. The sofa and other furniture were broken in places.

Not much time should have passed between the man entering the room and us looking inside. During that interval, the man had vanished.

On the other hand, there could've been something in this room able to conceal him that well. Maybe he was holding his breath in the shadow of those wooden boxes, or on the other side of the sofa.

But if that were the case, he was liable to attack the moment we found him. Only now did I notice that I was unarmed. I didn't even have the black dagger with me today, though you might've expected me to bring it along.

"Chris, I'll go. Wait here."

As I realized the problem, my feet came to a stop. Palmira slowly proceeded past me, her hand on the hilt of her sword.

It seemed that Palmira had the same thoughts as me; first, she wrapped around to check the sofa, then, taking the long way around, she advanced to a position from which she could look behind the boxes.

Just watching, my heart was thundering in my ears.

“...Not here,”

Palmira said tersely after getting close to the boxes. She took her hand from her sword. Assured for the moment that the man wasn't here, I heaved out a great sigh. Then, though suspicious of the fact that he wasn't around, I stepped forward into the room the same way. While scrutinizing our surroundings herself, Palmira came back to me.

“Strange. I thought for sure that he came in here. What do you think, Chris?”

“I was sure he came in here too...”

“In that case, there's probably a secret passage around here somewhere.”

Secret passage, huh?

Come to think of it, Leon's estate in Telaberan had something like that too.

If I remembered correctly, there was a door hidden behind a moving fireplace. As an experiment, I approached the stove and tried pushing against it with my hand — it didn't budge an inch.

“Chris, here it is.”

While I was experimenting off to the side, Palmira was scrutinizing the interior of the fireplace. Looking where she was pointing, sure enough, a rectangular outline glowed faintly on the inside wall.

It was probably light on the other side leaking through. If so, you could say it was an

unexpectedly sloppy hidden door.

“You’re right. Looks kinda like it’s been left open.”

“What will we do? Try going through?”

asked Palmira, looking over her shoulder at me.

I pondered it briefly. To be honest, I had a hunch that it would be seriously dangerous to proceed any further. I mean, why am I even chasing the guy to begin with? Because he bothered me. That’s all it should’ve been. So I just wanted to call out to him and get a look at his face or something.

Can I justify shouldering a greater risk than I already have to pursue a matter this trivial? I’d even ditched Leon in coming this far. I wasn’t okay with worrying him to get wrapped up in this weird business. Besides, it seemed like the dress would get dirty too.

“No... let’s leave off here for now.”

Though I shook my head, the fact is, I was incredibly worried about that man’s true identity.

I’ve definitely seen him somewhere. But for the life of me, I can’t remember where.

I didn’t even remember what he looked like. Even so, plagued by a strange uneasiness, I couldn’t help but fret and fret over it.

“How about I try to open it? That’s all, just opening it?”

Sensing how relatively hesitant I was to say stop, Palmira offered a very appealing suggestion. Somehow, I felt like I was digging myself into a hole, but at least that much would definitely be clear. So the business of the man’s identity aside, I wanted to try opening the door.

While I was growing even more conflicted, Palmira drew the sword at her waist from its scabbard and pointed it at the dead center of the glowing outline inside of the fireplace. Then, she looked at me.

Say what you will, Palmira was pretty bothered by this too. Wordlessly, I gave her a nod.

Getting the go-ahead, Palmira gently prodded the center of the door-like structure with the point of her sword.

Ga-kunk!

“Eh-?”

In that moment, the entire frame of the door-like thing slightly, but visibly, caved inward. Before I could fully form the thought ‘It’s not a door?’, the floor that Palmira and I were kneeling on suddenly tilted and sagged toward the fireplace.

“Woah-!?”

“Kya-!”

At that very moment, we lost our balance and tumbled down the slope.

We rolled our way down underneath the fireplace. Unable to clearly sort out what just happened, unable to reorient ourselves, we rolled off the edge.



“Ow-ow-ow-!”

It probably took just about a moment.

The two of us tumbled down the considerable slope in a tangle. Then, we were tossed out into a wide, brightly lit space.

“Wh-What was that? Where are we?”

It was so bright. My vision was all blurry. Lifting myself up, I waited several moments for my sight to recover.

“Ughh...”

I heard Palmira groan behind me. I turned to look at her, but it didn't seem like she'd sustained any particularly serious injuries. However, she might have been dizzy from that crazy tumble we took.

Once my eyes had adjusted, I surveyed the surroundings.

This room was completely different from the one we were just in. The walls were perfectly flat, constructed from a material that might've been metal, might've been stone, I didn't know. The floor was slippery, too, and deliberately made that way. The whole thing was uniformly tinted a cobalt green.

“.....”

If that hole we fell through was a trap, then was this a prison...? When the thought occurred to me, it didn't seem to be the case. An ordinary hallway led away from the front of the room.

There was no door. The way forward grew darker the deeper it went, so I couldn't get a good look at how far in it extended.

When I turned back around, I found Palmira peering into the hole we fell through.

“Does it look like we can go back?”

I asked, taking a look myself.

The hole extended upward from the wall, its insides pitch-black. I couldn't see the top of it.

Because the walls and floor were made of the same slippery material, it didn't seem at

all possible to climb back up. Apparently coming to the same conclusion, Palmira shook her head.

“What a pain in the ass.”

“I’m sorry, Chris. It was my mistake.”

While I wondered what the damn thing’s deal was, Palmira apologized to me with a despondent look on her face. It seemed like she thought it was her fault for triggering the trap.

It was true that she’d tripped it, but I’d had the same thought as she did, of course. It was impossible to blame her.

“Don’t worry about it. I was thinking the same thing. More importantly, we have to think of a way to go back...”

I put my hand on her head and tousled her hair with a slight roughness. Taking it, Palmira nodded deeply and moved away from my hand. She seemed to be curious about the passageway, all the same.

Even so, what a weird place. Its material was completely different from the stone primarily used in the castle. No, forget the castle, it obviously belonged to an entirely different culture than the one we currently had.

But I knew of a place with an atmosphere close to this.

The labyrinth.

It depended on the location, too, but the atmosphere here bore a slight resemblance to that of the labyrinths constructed during those so-called ‘ancient times’. It was a feeling of otherness that I couldn’t quite express. A structure built by a completely different civilization.

I placed my hand against the wall. Like the floor, its cold, mineral smoothness lingered on my hand, even through the glove. I couldn’t even get a good read on what it was

made of.

If anything, the sensation was close to that of well polished granite, but I knew that wasn't it. Granite didn't come in cobalt green, for starters.

"...An ancient labyrinth underneath the castle...?"

It went without saying, but I'd never heard of such a thing.

Of course, if a place like this existed underneath the capital, to say nothing of the castle, adventurers wouldn't exactly be in on it. Neither would the Guild, for that matter. And even if they were, there wasn't jack they could do about it.

I mean, this was the Imperial Capital. Adventurers weren't even allowed to enter; this was Empire business to begin with. There was no reason to call in the adventurers just because there was a labyrinth around.

"Chris, what's the plan?"

Palmira returned from her cautious survey of the passage ahead. There was what had just happened, too; she seemed to have grown quite wary.

Hey, even if you ask me what the plan is...

Once more, I took a look around the room we were currently in.

With the exception of the hole we tumbled out of, there was nothing other than the corridor in front. Climbing back up through the hole was impossible, so in the end, there were only two things we could do. Take the corridor, or sit tight.

Even if I say 'take the corridor', it occurred to me that this was essentially a labyrinth, and we were totally unprepared. Palmira had a sword, but that was more or less it. I wasn't carrying anything on me — hell, I was wearing a goddamn dress.

And high heels. I was the total opposite of battle-ready.

It goes without saying, but in a labyrinth, there are usually monsters or the enemies known as 'guardians' on the prowl. They're strong enough as it is, but they come in great numbers too.

Whether the room was safe or not, at least it was better than going forward. Because there was no way I could promise that there weren't any monsters lurking up ahead.

Still, I was also conflicted about waiting here. Leon had probably noticed our disappearance by now, and he might come to rescue us before long.

When I imagined that, my feelings grew genuinely remorseful.

Leon said he would protect me. And yet here I was, trying to run off by myself. It could even be considered a breach of his trust. He was most likely going into a frenzy searching for me. Thinking about that, my chest constricted painfully.

Really, what am I doing?

...But right now, I have to think about what to do.

For the time being, I'll wait for Leon's rescue.

As it stands, I don't think it's a bad idea. I mean, we might be underground, but this is the castle — maybe Leon knows about this place too. I'm not one-hundred percent sure, but he'll eventually make it here... probably.

However, I also had my reservations about continuing to wait and wait here. Looking at it from a different angle, this was a dead end, and I could hardly say for sure monsters wouldn't attack us here. What's more, there was nowhere to hide, and fighting back was out of the question.

So, isn't it the same as going forward?

Besides, I was still concerned about that guy. I bet our mystery man came through here too. In that case, he should have taken the passageway deeper inside. I didn't know what his aim was, but under the current circumstances, following him wasn't a bad idea either.

If we traced his steps, any monsters that were around would've attacked him ahead of us, so the risk would be a little lower —

"Let's go forward,"

I said to Palmira. I was conflicted, but ultimately, I decided to proceed down the passageway.

Though I continued to be extremely worried, Palmira would become anxious, and the man was gradually getting further away too. Besides, I was personally concerned about what would happen beyond this point, too.

After all, what is this place? The thought roused my adventurer's curiosity. If this was an ancient labyrinth, then there must be something lying ahead.

Honestly, I was curious about that too, so what can ya do?

"...Understood. I'll take point, so you watch the rear, Chris."

"Okay. I'll be counting on you, Palmira."

Palmira nodded and drew her sword from her waist, holding it at the ready in one hand. Right now, her figure was reassuring.

If worst came to worst, I might even have to use my power. Because I still wasn't clear on what the activation conditions were, I could only take a gamble, but I had to consider it my trump card out of necessity.

Running berserk wasn't out of the question, but it was *way* better than leaving behind a pair of corpses.

I took off one of my long gloves and left it behind.

To leave a trace, if Leon came here later.

At the same time, I apologized to the absent Leon.

Sorry. I'm going.

Following Palmira as she headed toward the passage, I stepped forward.

Our double set of footsteps echoed awfully loudly down the passageway.

Chapter 62

Tetra's Heart

We proceeded down the cobalt green passageway.

It was roomy enough for us to walk side-by-side and still have space to spare.

At first, we slowly advanced in single-file, senses on high alert, but given the unobstructed view ahead, and the utter lack of branches so far, we eventually loosened up and started walking next to each other.

Palmira had basically kept her sword drawn even so, but it was hard to call her overly cautious. She might have been on edge, but she was no longer as vigilant as she was at the outset.

"...All things considered, this place sure is strange,"

I muttered to myself as I looked around.

The walls weren't the least bit uneven, somehow processed to be perfectly level. I didn't realize it earlier, but there was a gap between the walls and the ceiling, through which light leaked in.

The more I thought about it, the stranger it was to me for a labyrinth to be well-lit.

The entire way was illuminated by the light shining from those slits. They ran along the length of the corridor, always continuing deeper and deeper inside.

What the source of the light was, and how it was continuing to glow, I had no idea.

But at least to my knowledge, aside from the sun, generally nothing in this world could shine continuously. And even sunlight disappeared at night.

In short, something was maintaining the lights in this hallway.

It was evidence that the labyrinth was functional.

And if it was functional, it wasn't dying. If it wasn't dying, then there was something

here.

That man definitely went on ahead too. There's no mistake — something was here.

“...Come to think of it, Palmira.”

“Mn.”

“You spoke with him. What was your impression?”

Come to think of it, Palmira should have been talking to that man about *something*.

She didn't just get a good look at him, she even had a conversation with him. So if I asked about his characteristics, what kind of vibe she got off him, maybe I'd remember something.

“.....There was something a little nostalgic about him.”

She seemed to be at a bit of a loss.

Nostalgic?

Her reply was too unexpected.

I was expecting something more concrete, like 'he had big eyes' or 'his voice was loud', so I couldn't hide my confusion from getting such an abstract response.

Plus, I was pretty caught on the word 'nostalgic'.

I mean, even I had the feeling that I'd met the guy somewhere, so hearing her describe him as 'nostalgic', it wasn't like I disagreed.

But though my version and Palmira's seem to be one and the same, well, I don't know about that. 'I've met him somewhere' and 'nostalgic' are slightly different in nuance.

“How was he nostalgic?”

“...I don’t really know. But I just felt that he was, somehow.”

Even I knew I was asking a difficult question, but sure enough, that was how the troubled Palmira answered me.

Nothing I can do about it, so I might as well ask if anything else stuck out to her.

“What else?”

“Nothing really. He was an ordinary person. To be honest, I don’t really understand why you’re so fixated on him, Chris.”

...When she said that to me, I couldn’t find the words to respond.

Frankly, even I don’t know why I’m making such a fuss over the guy.

I tried to remember.

That red hair. That manner. That [feeling]. I’ve met him somewhere.

And, that one moment our eyes met. I felt some kind of indescribable chill. I don’t know what it was. Even if I dig through my memories, no matter how I try, I can’t remember.

“Chris.”

As I wracked my brains, Palmira tugged lightly on the hem of my dress. When I looked at her, she was looking back at me with her naked blade pointed down the passageway.

I turned my gaze in that direction.

I could see something before us. And I could also see that there was a break in the passageway ahead.

Not a dead end. It seemed to connect to somewhere else. I couldn’t make out much more than that.

“I hear something.”

Then, as Palmira said, I could hear a faint sound coming from further in. Straining my ears, I caught a hissing sound, like escaping air.

It was an eerie noise. We exchanged glances and nodded. Taking that as the signal, Palmira took point again, her sword at the ready.

Vague as it was, I had a unpleasant premonition.

I felt an ever-so-slight tingling at the nape of my neck, and I unconsciously touched my hand to it.

Even so, there was only one way to go: forward. The path didn't have a single fork, and it was already too late to turn back.

Will Leon come?

Even if I say so myself, I'm being way too selfish. But while nursing that hope, I cautiously followed Palmira forward.

Little by little, the thing we saw drew closer.

And as it did, something become clear. The other end opened into a chamber.

And as we approached, the hissing sound grew more distinct.

Just what in the world is it? As I wondered, we reached the chamber.

“!?”

The room, or more precisely, the vast space that unfurled before our eyes left us speechless.

Even Palmira, seemingly dumbstruck by the spectacle, stopped in her tracks. Her sword, which should have been up and at the ready, drooped.

The end of the passage opened up into a sprawling cavern. What's more, it wasn't of any ordinary size. It was as big as a coliseum I once saw in some city somewhere. And the ceiling arched high above us, too.

But the sight that shocked us wasn't something like that.

It was the thing hanging in mid-air in the center of the chamber.

"Wh-What *is* that?"

A huge red sphere.

A great number of tube-like things coiled around it, as if suspending it in the air. Extending from the walls and ceiling, they clung to the hanging sphere.

And every once in a while, some kind of gas vented from those coiling tubes. That was the source of the hissing that we picked up from a distance away.

Standing beside me, staring at it just as I was, Palmira quietly drew closer to me. Her eyes on that sphere, her face was drained of all color.

'I bet I look the same,' I thought.

To put it bluntly, the thing before us could be summed up in one word: ominous.

Sure, I'd seen my fair share of freakiness even before coming this far. But this sphere was already more than a simple word like 'freaky' could capture. In a manner of speaking, it was like something man was never meant to see. A sinister repulsiveness felt instinctively. An overwhelming bizarreness that raised an intuitive suspicion: 'Won't something unthinkable happen the moment I take my eyes away?'

"Yo, Chris."

"-Aghk-!"

As we stood stiffly, arrested by the sight, a voice suddenly called out to me from off to the side.

My nerves on edge, hearing my name called out of the blue literally made me jump in surprise with a weird shriek.

“Who — !?”

It was Palmira who reacted first. She pointed the sword in her hand in the direction of the voice.

Is it him? The mystery man?

The thought crossed my mind, but only for a moment. Why? Because I knew that voice.

“...L-Lord Lucien.”

Before I knew it, Lucien was standing there with a smile completely at odds with the ambience of the place. I just barely remembered the ‘Lord’ in time.

Then, I took charge of Palmira, who didn’t really understand the situation, and had her lower her sword.

To be honest, running into him in a place like this was just too disturbing. I didn’t trust him.

But he was still the Second Prince. I couldn’t speak recklessly.

Come to think of it, Palmira could be considered a pretty bold rebel for pointing a sword at both the Second and Third Princes of the Empire.

“You should see your face. It’s got ‘What are you doing in a place like this?’ written all over it. Well, that’s my line. So why are you here, Chris?”

With a bold smile, Lucien came closer.

Combined with the atmosphere of the place, the smile on his face was unsettling. I suppressed the urge to back away, but I glared at him all the same.

Yeah, it was the Second Prince that I was facing. But me, forget pointing a sword at him, I tried to punch the guy. It was rather late for restraint.

Still, ‘why am I here’? Well, because?

“...I spotted a suspicious-looking man. When I chased after him, I fell into this place.”

I told it to him straight, without any attempt at deception. Even if I went out of my way to lie, it'd be no use.

“A ‘suspicious-looking man’, was it? Not me, surely?”

“No, it wasn’t Lord Lucien... Did you not see him?”

I asked, probing his real intentions.

The mystery man wasn’t here, at least. Since there was only a straight path up to this point, he must have gone on further, somewhere else.

Leaving that aside, I was stuck on the fact that we ran into Lucien when we went in search of that mystery man.

I can think of two possibilities.

Our mystery man has nothing to do with Lucien, who is simply a third party. Accordingly, our meeting with Lucien is also a coincidence.

Otherwise, he and Lucien have some kind of connection. He lured us here. And as such, our meeting with Lucien was inevitable.

Which is it? The question gnawed at me.

“I see, so it wasn’t me? Hmm, but I was happy to think that you came all this way chasing me.”

His evasive tone all but confirmed that he had a connection with the man.

If he really didn’t know, then when asked ‘Didn’t you see him?’, he’d ordinarily ask about the man first. And let’s not forget how calm he is in this rather questionable location.

“...What is this place?”

To keep myself from falling into his pace, I chose my words carefully.

It was already obvious that Lucien had us led here. It may even be that my unusual fixation on the mystery man was the result of magic.

Maybe that was too wild a conspiracy theory, but considering just how friggin’ *weird* this place was, and how suspicious Lucien was, I had the feeling that anything was possible.

“You’re asking about that, are you? This place, well. It’s the Empire’s — or perhaps, the Imperial Capital’s — most important secret. That’s why only a select few know of its existence. Do you want to know what it is? A secret like that?”

Words that someone might even take as a threat. Lucien said them with relish.

Though he seemed to be goofing around to some degree, the truth was, he was burning with impatience. ‘I want to tell, I want to tell.’ Despite the way he spoke, I could hear it in his voice.

For that very reason, I couldn’t answer. I knew that whatever Lucien was about to say, it sure wasn’t going to be anything good. Even if it weren’t for that, I didn’t really want to ask about the true nature of that ghastly sphere.

But it definitely seemed like it had something to do with me. Well, I don’t know whether that means *me*, or [Chris], though.

When I found it too difficult to respond, Lucien didn’t bother waiting. As if he planned to from the start, he continued on.

“That, you see, is a tomb. And at the same time, it’s the thing that protects this city. We call it ‘Tetra’s Heart.’”

“A tomb...”

That thing?

Once again, Palmira and I looked up at the sphere. The intertwining tubes. Occasionally, they released a hiss of vapor. It didn't seem like a tomb at all. The word that came after was far more fitting.

Heart. It was exactly that. A perfect fit. Nestled among the coils of those hissing tubes, it certainly did look like a pulsing heart.

Tetra's Heart.

Tetra.

I've heard that somewhere.

"...The five-Attunement magus,"

whispered Palmira beside me, as I tried to recall where I'd heard the name before.

You knew, Palmira?

I thought, but hearing her words, I remembered it too. At the Brellwandy Adventurers' Guild, Guildmaster Arc had definitely made a few references to it while talking about the [Legendary Magus].

I didn't think a story like that would be tied to the place I found myself in now.

"Tetra... Who was she?"

"A magus from the ancient era. She's considered the one who established the foundations of that which we know as magic. Like your adorable little armsman said, she also had five Attunements. It was Tetra who created the concept of the Attunements in the first place, as the story goes. At any rate, pretty much everything related to magic came from her. A powerful magus. To the point that in this day and age, there's no one who can compare... And it's that Tetra who is buried — no, sealed here."

Sealed.

I see, that described it extremely well.

No matter how I looked at it, the so-called 'heart' before me now wasn't the cage of a *dead* thing.

If the thing inside had been a living creature to begin with, then it was still alive now. Or perhaps, being kept alive. It gave off that sort of impression.

"Maybe you've heard this about this city, but it was originally an ancient ruin. The castle above us, and the ramparts surrounding it as well. We unknowingly made use of those ruins as a city, you see."

"'Unknowingly', what..."

— do you mean? About this — [Heart].

"This city. This castle. These ramparts. They were the things sealing this tomb."

'How stupid.'

Lucien smiled as if he were enjoying himself.

Considering his position as an imperial prince, he was a strange figure. He could even be interpreted as mocking the Empire.

The Imperial Capital, boasting of such grandeur. Whoever laid eyes on it would exclaim in wonder. And think: 'As expected of the capital of the greatest empire in the world.'

But a prince of that very empire was saying: 'That sort of thing is all make-believe.'

The title that it was supposed to be able to wear proudly? His attitude declared that such a thing didn't have a single speck of value.

"But that seal will unravel very soon. There's no such thing as an eternal seal. Never has been. And on top of that, we threw that seal into disarray."

“...If the seal comes undone, what will happen?”

“The Imperial Capital will probably get blown to kingdom come, then, won’t it?”

Lucien spoke of a terrifying future without batting an eye.

I didn’t really understand what he was thinking. It was just like he wanted to say that he couldn’t care less about such a thing.

On the other hand, I could take it as a lie. Rather, that’s what I wanted it to be.

But with that pulsating thing in the background, there was an eeriness about Lucien that ruled out all other conclusions.

“...Why reveal such a secret to us?”

To me, Lucien’s objective was unclear. He obviously called us here with some kind of purpose in mind.

To show us this place. And I couldn’t imagine that his goal was simply to tell us that story.

“Why indeed. I was thinking that I’d tell you in advance what our objective is, Chris.”

“...’Our’?”

“That’s right. Mine... and Leon’s.”

And just like that, Lucien revealed that gut-wrenching name.

Chapter 63

Sudden Turnaround

“...Just what the hell does Leon have to do with this?”

Thrown off by his words, I inadvertently lapsed into my usual way of speaking. Even that time I tried to hit him, my tone hadn't slipped, but I honestly didn't give a shit about it now.

It was that disconcerting for me, hearing those words associated with the topic we'd just been discussing.

“Oh? As I thought, it's a shock to hear Leon's name come up, then?”

“...Shut up.”

When he hit the mark, my irritation intensified.

It no longer had anything to do with manners anymore. Now Palmira, who I'd stopped just earlier, was all shaken up. But I didn't have the leeway to worry about her.

Don't say it. I don't want to hear it.

In my heart, my instincts set my internal alarm bells to maximum. Lucien's words, his eyes, were dangerous. Like they were when we met before.

Inside me, [Chris] awoke.

— But is it okay like this?

Isn't this just denial, simply averting my eyes from reality?

Shouldn't I know the truth?

[Chris] and Leon. And Lucien, too. The truth about them.

I have to know.

That's right, I have to know.

I'm going to disappear from this body, and after that, what will become of [Chris] and Leon?

That's why I have to know.

For Leon's sake, I have to know. It's coming — the day that I disappear.

My chest prickled, suffocating. Unconsciously, I placed my hand against it.

It's okay. It's okay. This is right. This is what I should do. What I have to do.

Biting my lower lip, I fought it back.

"...What the hell are you and Leon up to here?"

Steeling myself, I questioned Lucien.

"A seal on the verge of coming undone. A mass of magical power that will inevitably explode. The conclusion writes itself, doesn't it?... It's all about dealing with Tetra's Heart."

Well, duh.

If it's about to break, fix it. Just that simple.

But, if that were all, I'd have nothing to do with this place to begin with.

Before I could press him further, Lucien continued.

" — Using you."

In one breath, Lucien's eyes turned ice cold.

It was like those eyes were looking, not at a human being, but a thing.

I clenched my teeth tightly.

It was more unpleasant than I imagined. Not the fact that I was being used.

But the fact that Leon had something to do with it.

Assuming Lucien was telling the truth, then in the end, the very last thing Leon was hiding from me, turned out to be this. It was too bitter a pill to swallow.

Mine was an essential existence. For this Heart. For the Imperial Capital.

"You get it, right? Leon's reasons? Why he got mixed up with you?"

Stop.

I don't want to picture it. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to believe it.

But what's essential isn't the likes of me.

"Shall I tell you how we're going to solve this? To be precise, what we want is [Chris's] body. [Chris] possesses the six-Attunement affinity that surpasses Tetra's five. If it's her, then she'll be able to suppress Tetra's power. It was for that purpose, Chris, that you came to the capital. What did Leon say to get you to come here, I wonder? But this is the truth. And *that* is the lie. You were deceived — you were betrayed."

— Betrayed.

That time when I was found outside the city.

Being sheltered at the estate. Being given food to eat.

What he said in the bedroom.

What he spoke of the riverbank.

What he told me under the elm tree.

What — he did on the balcony.

That was the lie. This was the truth.

I —

I — was betra

“You’re — *WROOOOONG—!!!!*”

“Chris!?”

Breaking off my racing thoughts, I screamed with all my might. Startled, Palmira looked at me. But I didn’t have any attention to spare for her.

I don’t know where my true feelings lie.

My reason and my instinct both — are about to reach that conclusion.

But, it’s wrong. It’s wrong. It’s wrong!

It’s not like that! I haven’t been betrayed! He hasn’t deceived me!

“Aha—! You’re a strong one! That was enough to finish [Chris]. But it seems like you’ll need more than that. You must love Leon quite a lot, huh? Or is it that you trust him? Believe in him?”

As I agonized over the conflict that threatened to consume me, Lucien pressed me for an answer.

“That was enough to finish [Chris]’?”

I don’t understand what he means. What is it? What the hell is Lucien trying to do? What has he done? What the hell has he done to me — to [Chris]?

“I’ll go into a bit more detail. Chris, you’re a nuisance. A vessel is needed to contain Tetra. The vessel being that body. But the contents? No thanks. They’re a bother. So, Chris. I’ll have to have you disappear for me. You should never have been in there in the first place. I’ll have you return her to me, shall I? [Chris], that is.”

“Where the hell do you get off...! Get out? You don’t need to goddamn tell me twice!”

That’s right, I don’t need to be told a damn thing. If you were to ask me to disappear, then yeah, when I return to my own body in due time, I’ll disappear from within [Chris].

But now isn’t the time.

Right now, it’s still impossible for me to return.

I still can’t do anything. Not for [Chris], not for Leon, and not for myself. Nothing.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re a swamp man. By nature, you weren’t supposed to be there. Who are you?”

“I’m Chris!”

When Lucien abruptly changed tack, I replied almost defensively.

What the hell? What do you wanna say, huh? The fuck is a ‘swamp man’?

” — Let’s leave at that, Lord Lucien.”

The voice of an outsider, with a calm out of place given the current location, came from behind me.

I sucked in my breath in surprise, and along with Palmira, I turned to look behind me.

There stood a big man, dressed in robes.

I had absolutely no idea how long he'd been there.

Lucien should have been able to see him, at least. And yet he had an identical look of confusion on his face. Just like the man loitering there had suddenly materialized out of nowhere.

But it was a man both Palmira and I had met before.

I could hear Lucien's displeased voice coming from behind us.

"Arc, is it! For god's sake, you always pick the best time to appear, don't you!"

Arcteur Vanburke.

The head of the Brellwandy Adventurers' Guild.

"Yo, Chris. Palmira. Looks like I've got perfect timing."

In contrast with Lucien, whose tone had changed dramatically, Arc addressed us with the same nonchalant voice he did when we met before.

"Guildmaster... Why are you in such a place?"

Openly wary, Palmira trained the tip of her sword on Arc. Because her adversary wasn't of high rank, she wasn't the least bit hesitant.

The fact is, Arc's entrance was too suspicious.

Why is he here? And even his status as enemy or ally wasn't definite.

"Aww, come on, didn't I ask you to call me Arc...? Well, we can clear that up later. Prince Lucien."

Regardless, Arc's attitude didn't change.

He's *still* hung up on that?

“...You... Are you here to get in my way again?”

Lucien’s earlier easygoing tone had disappeared to god-knows-where. His face was filled with bitterness, and there was even a murderous hostility mixed into his gaze.

Still, there was some kind of relationship between Lucien and the sudden intruder, Arc. And it was connected to the Heart, as well as to [Chris].

“Get in your way? I suppose so. I’ll get in your way. Again and again. As many times as you like. Someone has to take responsibility. I do, and so do you, no?”

“What responsibility. What getting in my way! Don’t whitewash things! — Maddox!”

Tearing off his mask with a snarl, Lucien finally shouted that unforgivable name.

‘Maddox’, he said?

” — Cut me some slack here, it wasn’t my turn, was it?”

His casual tone out of place in the tense atmosphere, the man emerged from behind Lucien, taking the stage again as a new player.

Nothing about him had changed from when I saw him at the fortress, at least. Didn’t I blast him through a wall? I’m pretty damn sure I did.

I expected him to survive, but to be completely without injury, and to meet him again in this short a time-span on top of that? I never even dreamed it would happen. Hell, Rupert fought him and *he* should still be lying in bed at the fortress.

In the end, my magic didn’t deal any significant damage to the man.

It was like that.

“Ah, if it isn’t the little lady. Don’t glare at me like that. I was surprised by that business before, but no hard feelings. I thought it was interesting, but I’ve never been that fond

of fighting magi.”

Apparently I unconsciously ended up glaring at Maddox as my tension rocketed upward. The man posed a much more immediate threat than Lucien.

Having beat him last time, I was more or less wondering if this would end up being a rematch, but Maddox seemed completely uninterested.

It was something to be thankful for. When all's said and done, I only managed to take him by surprise back then because he didn't know the extent of my power, and though it might seem possible for me to win if we fought again, all I can say is, I'd definitely get my ass kicked.

“Maddox. Secure the woman. Kill the man behind her.”

Lucien's tone was casual. Upon hearing his words, Palmira, undaunted, readied herself with her sword turned toward Maddox.

So at least, Maddox was in Lucien's employ. That very same Maddox attacked us, Leon included, at the fortress.

Then, was there no connection between Leon and Lucien?

Lucien said that his objective and Leon's were one and the same.

But while it may be true that they share the same goal, they aren't allies? Or is that bit about their goals being the same a lie itself?

“Weeell, my Prince. That there's Arc, right? Even if I fight him, it's not going to be any fun, y'know. I mean, honestly, I got no fighting spirit for this.”

“You know very well, don't you? Maddox.”

I picked up Arc's response from directly behind me. Without me noticing, he'd closed the distance. Confronting Maddox face-to-face, there wasn't the slightest waver in his

voice.

Arc was really suspicious.

Suspicious, but at least, his antagonism toward Lucien and Maddox was a definite thing. In that case, stuck here and virtually powerless, Palmira and I had no choice but to count on him.

It was frustrating, being forced to leave matters in the hands of an outsider, and not a particularly trustworthy one at that. But right here, right now, it was the right decision.

No matter how I looked at it, it didn't seem like Palmira and I would be able to make it out of this place by ourselves.

“And that’s why I’m running away. You guys won’t mind, will you?”

It wasn't good or bad. I didn't know how he was going to pull it off, but I nodded to Arc.

“シ.”

I didn't know whether he saw it or not, but with the exact same timing, Arc chanted the incantation.

‘Come to think of it, he was a magus — ‘ Before I could complete the thought, the invocation stone floating before Arc’s eyes — hell if I know when he took it out — began to glow red. And at the same time, with a terrifying speed that far outstripped Irene’s, he began to trace a spell in midair.

A beat later, with his other hand too. Intuitively, I could tell that he was using both hands while simultaneously activating two spells.

“Maddox, don’t let them get away! Stop him!”

“Well, that’s impossible, isn’t it?”

“Exactly right.”

The three voices almost perfectly overlapped. Arc’s magic reached completion that quickly. The first manifested with a flash of light.

In the space of a moment, the shining spell symbol came apart, transforming into a wall of golden radiance.

It was similar to the magic produced by the magus tool Guibenague had. Or rather, it was the exact same one. In other words, a teleportation spell.

The moment the thought came to me, Arc’s other spell finished. Its symbol radiated light in a similar way.

“I’m a bit sorry for this.”

Giving me a mild warning, Arc touched the top of my shoulder with the hand that had been casting the spell.

“Gah-!?”

In that moment, a tremendous shock smashed into me from my shoulder and tore through my entire body. At the same time, *crack*, there was the sound of something breaking open at the back of my head.

I knew it. Arc —

Before I could reach whatever that conclusion was, darkness interrupted my consciousness.

Chapter 64

Taboo

I woke up to a world of white.

Well, it was the inside of a white building.

This wasn't my room at Leon's estate, at least.

Lying in bed, I looked to the side, just in case, and confirmed it.

Leon wasn't there. Neither was the chair.

A mood I couldn't quite describe came over me.

First thing after waking up, my feelings and memories were steadily coming back to me. I didn't know what happened after I blacked out, but Arc definitely got Palmira and me out of that place.

If that weren't the case, there was no way I'd be waking up in a place like this. We had definitely been in a bad spot. Maybe I would never have opened my eyes again.

Thinking about it that way, this was still probably better.

But Leon wasn't here. There wasn't even a trace of him.

To tell you the truth, I don't have the faintest idea what's true and what's not.

If you asked me whether Lucien was evil, I wouldn't be able to say. If he is, then would sharing his goals make Leon evil too? I don't know that either. And Arc, who seems to be against him, is he in the right? I'm drawing a total blank on that too.

What's connected to what, and how is any of it related to me?

And, what should I do?

Right now, I don't know a damn thing.

Leon. Damn it, would it kill you to talk to me?

If he's right, if he's not mistaken, then wouldn't it be fine to tell me? So why the hell hasn't he? Does he have a guilty conscience?

Well — it's fine already, even if he's not right. Even if he's making a mistake. Even if he feels guilty.

So, Leon. Please.

Tell me — what's going on with you?



“Hey, looks like you're awake.”

Precisely because of what I was thinking about, the fact that it was Arc who opened the door to the room and called out to me left me immensely dissatisfied.

It must have shown perfectly on my face. His expression immediately collapsed in dejection.

“You don't have to look that disappointed, do you...? I'll apologize for the electric shock, so. Won't you cheer up a bit?”

“Master, you did such a thing?”

Arc apologized, talking about something I didn't really understand.

Before I could make sense of it, the familiar person who followed him inside fixed her glare on him.

Miss Patsy. She came too?

It was the Brellwandy Adventurers' Guild clerk. Miss Patsy.

Hey wait, if both of them are here, who's running the guild right now?

"For now, here."

Miss Patsy came over to me, a simple white robe in her hands.

I wasn't really following, but was she telling me to put it on? I raised the upper half of my body off the bed.

"Ah... — eh, what?"

The moment I lifted myself up, the blanket thrown over me slipped off, and it was only then that I realized.

I was naked. At least, I wasn't wearing anything on top. I checked with my hands, but at least I managed to keep my underwear.

In a haste, Miss Patsy gently draped the robe over me.

As she did, Palmira entered the room holding a glass on a tray, and said, "It's okay, I undressed you."...No, that's not what I meant.

"You could do with a bit more modesty, Chris... Here."

Dissatisfied, I took the glass from the proffered tray. It was filled with ordinary water, and I gratefully drank it down.

"...Phew, thanks. Palmira, you're okay too?"

"Yeah. You fainted, but after that, we were able to escape with Arc's magic."

"Speaking of which, 'electric shock'? What was that all about?"

Hearing the word 'fainted' reminded me.

At that time, Arc had been casting a lightning spell at the same time as the teleportation. Which he then used on me. What the hell did he do that for?

I looked at Arc.

No, that's not the only thing. There's a whole lot I have to ask this guy.

"Yeah. So the truth is, well. When your body is conscious, it's practically impervious to all magic, right? That's why I had you go to sleep with an electric shock before teleporting you. Alright, I knocked you out, but it was a pretty dangerous situation. If I hadn't, I would've ended up escaping and leaving you behind by yourself."

'Well, I'm glad it all worked out.' Arc smiled, saying something only he'd believe. I wasn't terribly amused.

"Okay, wait just a second. My body is impervious to magic? Or — wait, why do you know something like that?"

Strange.

That was news, even to *me*. Why would he know about it?

"Ah, I see. Should I go over that, then...? Well, I wonder if it's alright for you to hear this from me? I don't know, but for now, why don't we go to the dining room? Now that it's come to this, I'd better have everyone know, I guess. I assume there are plenty of blanks to fill in, too."

Speaking of increasingly unsettling things, Arc quickly left the room.

"Then, let's get you changed."

"Y-Yeah."

Miss Patsy picked up the basket placed nearby and held it out to me. There were

clothes inside. Not my dress, though. I wonder where it went.



“Ah...”

On the other side of the door, which apparently led to the dining room, I found a line of several familiar faces.

Arc, of course, and Regnum. Irene. Then, Aira. Regnum aside, even Irene and Aira are here? Why?

And Leon... wasn't.

“Big Sister.”

The moment she laid eyes on me, Aira rose from her idle seat on a chair and dashed over to me.

She was wearing the maid uniform, but what about her duties at the mansion?

“Aira, why are you here?”

“I don't really understand myself, but Miss Irene brought me here...”

Here I was, thinking there was some significance behind it, but to my surprise, Aira herself didn't know the reason. What was Irene's purpose in bringing her here?

She was sitting in a chair with a slightly huffy expression.

“Why are you here, Irene?”

“Because I *live* here.”

That came as quite a shock.

I'd figured out it was someone's home on my walk over here. Though, of course, it would be a disservice to compare it to Leon's mansion.

And this was within the walls of the capital. Well I'll be damned, Irene. Maybe she was a member of the privileged class.

"I *am* a magus, you know. There aren't a lot of us, and they make leaving the country a hassle too. Just being one is enough to get me a house within the walls."

She readily told me the truth in response to my thoughtless question. And this area was the magi residential district.

I got that, but I also had questions about why we were having this big get-together in Irene's home. And the line-up was a mystery too.

But at any rate, being prompted to take a seat, I sat down in a chair. Aira, my hero, brewed tea for everyone. It was a display of her real ability as a maid, but the supposed master of the house, Irene, just sat there.

Don't tell me she brought Aira over just for this?

"Now then."

Now then.

Once everyone was seated, Arc looked at each of us in turn. Me, Aira, Palmira, Regnum, Irene. His gaze went around in that order. Come to think of it, Miss Patsy wasn't here. Even though she'd definitely been around earlier.

"Regnum, put out the sweets."

"I suppose it can't be helped."

Doing as Arc told him, Regnum obediently pulled a long, thin, black box from his breast

pocket.

He opened it and passed out its contents, one by one. It seemed to be some kind of chocolate. Like a pitch-black cake.

“Hey, wait. Wasn’t there a serious matter to talk about?”

Because his behavior was too natural, I was a bit slow to interject.

Then it hit me. This feeling. Somewhere, I...

I locked eyes with Irene, who was stuffing her cheeks with chocolate.

Ah, that’s it. The same thing happened with Irene in Telaberan.

“...That’s it, right. Arc, you’re Irene’s master, aren’t you?”

Without any lead-up, I voiced my sudden realization.

It did explain a lot of things.

At least, why we were having this meeting at Irene’s home. And why Arc would choose this place. That much was clear.

“Very observant. You know us well.”

“You guys are identical.”

“That’s kind of a shock to hear...”

For some reason, Irene found the idea surprising. From what she said, after leaving Telaberan early with the First Platoon, it looked like she met her master Arc in Brellwandy.

After that, she went ahead to the fortress and waited for us there.

“Well, let’s set aside the matter of my master-disciple relationship with Irene for now. What you want to ask is how I know about you, right? Shall I start, then?”

Abruptly returning to the topic at hand, Arc's words renewed the tension in the air in an instant. It affected almost everyone aside from himself and Regnum.

Regnum had hardly opened his mouth, but he might've already heard pretty much everything.

"Then, I'll tell you. This — tale."

And so, with a dramatic flourish, Arc cleared his throat and began to speak in a sonorous voice.



" — Once upon a time, there was a young girl who had the miraculous affinity for six Attunements. People had great expectations of her future. Her name was Christine Rouelle Felmiran. Nickname, [Chris]. Her ability was truly incredible; it was historically unprecedented. When it became known, everyone around her danced with joy, despite the confusion of the girl herself."

What's with this fairy-tale feel?

I thought, but maybe it was Arc's way of making things easily digestible.

So far, it lined up with the memories I'd dreamed of, and because it was, in fact, easy to understand, I decided to shut up and listen.

"However, while Chris certainly possessed a miraculous aptitude, she was unable to use magic — she could understand it, but not activate it, I should say. There was water in the well — that, people knew. But there was no way to draw it out. You could see it that way. The analogy's a little lacking, I suppose — well, anyway, when they found out, everyone felt very disappointed."

"Are we going to have the Fairy Tale Hour the whole way through?"

I broke in without thinking.

“No. It’s a more appalling story than you might expect,”

replied Arc, suddenly breaking into a smile. When he put it that way, there wasn’t a thing I could say back to him.

Sure, maybe so. It forced me to recall the dream [Chris’s] memories of anguish and grief.

It’s impossible to understand the entirety of another person’s feelings.

But between [Chris] and me, a great deal can get across. Words will never be able to communicate them perfectly. But me, being able to see it all without the use of an intermediary, I’m practically sharing in the experience.

And it certainly was appalling.

[Chris’s] suffering, seared into my mind. Her despair. Her desire. They already resided within my heart as my own experiences.

Thinking of them, I tightly clenched my teeth.

“When everyone around her abandoned her, a devil whispered in her ear: ‘If you give up your humanity, you’ll be able to use magic.’ She wanted to use magic by any means necessary. So that she could show them all. And so that she could see the people important to her. She asked the devil, ‘What is your name?’ And the devil replied, ‘My name is Arcteur Vanburke.’”

Eh?

At the end of his fairy-tale narration, Arc said something completely unexpected.

His tone was too light, too indifferent, that the sudden name-drop brought my thoughts to a screeching halt.

“...Wha-!?”

I shot to my feet, kicking over the chair in the process, and stared at Arc.

As did Palmira at the same time. She had her hand on the hilt of her sword. A moment later, Aira too. Irene stared at Arc in blank amazement. I guess she hadn't heard this story.

The only ones who kept their calm were Regnum and Arc himself.

Under those distrustful gazes, Arc lowered his eyes to his teacup and blandly continued.

“...That devil, the head of the Schola Magorum at the time, was engaged in research. Into the invocation stones. As you know, invocation stones are created using life itself. And they're manufactured as the media for the invocation of magic. This [life] is generally extracted from monsters, and perhaps animals and plants, but not just anything will do in this case. It has to come from something with an Attunement of some kind. Humans aren't necessarily the only ones to possess Attunements. In a sense, intelligence isn't a requirement. However, the *number* of Attunements — that alone is key.”

Smash.

Irene had been staring at her own master in disbelief. When Arc reached this part of his story, she shook violently, knocking her teacup off the table.

Her entire body was trembling. As a magus herself, she must have realized something. A whisper leaked out of her mouth.

‘It can't be.’

“That's why the devil thought, ‘In that case, what would happen if I used the lives of people with multiple Attunements?’”

Arc's eyes grew unreadable.

Almost like the eyes of a corpse. But deeper, darker.

I could feel the hair standing on end all over my body.

Surely, if the devil existed in this world, he would have eyes like those.

Aira and Palmira were the same. Aira let out a small scream and shrank away. Her face paper-white, she seemed ready to faint at any moment.

Who was it that told me before, that invocation stones were created from life? Was it Arc...? No, Regnum.

If I remember correctly, I'd suddenly grown anxious then. It seemed to me that in using life to make invocation stones, stealing that life away was exactly the point. In that case, I had the feeling that it wasn't all that strange to eventually ask, 'What would happen if that life were human?'

But the idea was so grotesque it made my stomach turn, and I could tell that it was taboo simply by intuition.

To *use* human life.

Just that word alone was exceedingly repulsive.

"At first, it was simple curiosity. If it was just an idea, it was no big deal. However, as the research advanced, he took leave of his senses. It became clear that it was possible to crystallize invocation stones. And so, what then? Ethically speaking, could it really be considered the theft of life? Besides, it was right before his eyes — the existence he'd been wishing for. If she were to generate an invocation stone, she'd definitely develop the ability to use magic, too. Nevertheless, the devil was conflicted. He couldn't decide whether it was right or not to do so."

Chapter 65

Atonement

“But conflicted as he was, the devil had yet another devil whispering to *him*. That other devil said, ‘It’s not stealing life, right? Besides, doesn’t she want this too? So what’s there to worry about?’ And, ‘You want to see your research complete, don’t you?’ That was certainly true. The devil did want to see it. The right and wrong of stealing life, the right and wrong of what his subject wished for. Such things were of no consequence. He saw right through me, that other devil. And in accordance with those words, I remade her. Chris. In other words, you.”

“...So basically, you followed your desires and remade [Chris].”

“Well, exactly that.”

Arc admitted it with anticlimactic ease.

The penetrating cold in his gaze lowered its head; his expression was now pretty much the same as usual.

‘I’ve said what there is to say. So if you’re going to condemn me, condemn me.’ That’s what he seemed to be saying.

“Master! Why would you...!”

And taking the bait, Irene flared up at him.

But even she didn’t seem to know what to say to Arc, who was, in a sense, confessing to all his crimes.

Even so, in her emotional state, she wouldn’t be able to settle down unless she said something.

“To tell you the truth, I think that no matter what I say, I can’t be forgiven. But if I had

to make some excuse for myself, at that time I was possessed. By the invocation stones, or perhaps magic... in other words, I'm the devil himself."

" ... "

An unspeakable atmosphere hung in the air.

I didn't want to hear any more of this. That was how I'd come to feel.

But in fact, simply by learning of what Arc had done, I was already able to piece together much more.

That's why what I wanted to ask about wasn't this, but rather Leon and Lucien. And what role Tetra's Heart played in all of this.

"...Honestly, I couldn't care less about your atonement. More importantly, there are still things you haven't said. Why don't you tell me about them? What happened afterward?"

My words blunt and cold, I remembered that I was standing up and sat back down in my seat.

Looking unsatisfied, Aira and Palmira did the same. Because I wasn't saying anything as the person in question, it didn't matter if they had their own reservations. They had to stay silent, just like I'd chosen to.

Upon hearing that, Arc instead looked relieved, and he smiled with a self-deprecating air.

Surprisingly enough, maybe he didn't want to be condemned.

"To tell you the truth, it was Prince Lucien who instigated me. Though I don't mean to say that he's entirely evil. But his objective is slightly different from mine — it's Tetra's Heart. He wanted to make Chris into its vessel. Well, once she knew that, it couldn't be taken back."

"Couldn't be taken back?"

Perhaps because he'd said what he wanted to say, Arc's tone had completely returned to normal.

"Yeah, I think you're probably aware of this, but after that, her magical power ran berserk and consumed her soul. I think Prince Lucien did something to her. It seems something happened with Prince Leon then as well, but to be honest, I don't know much about the details. By the time I realized, she was already broken."

"Broken'...Weren't you the one responsible for that!? Master!"

Again, Irene blew up at Arc and his excessively matter-of-fact attitude, standing from the table.

I understood that she wanted to say something. I felt the same way. To say nothing of [Chris], who was certainly here with me. Even if it was easy to say that she died, she couldn't accept it emotionally.

"Chris! How about you say something too! Isn't this about you!?"

"Irene. I'm happy that you're angry for me. But right now, let me listen to Arc's story."

Even so, I chided Irene.

I was furious. But right now, more than that, I wanted to make things clear.

Just what exactly did Leon do to [Chris]?

Under the elm tree, he definitely said that he met her.

In other words, [Chris] was able to meet Leon. If his words were to be believed, he didn't know what ultimately happened to [Chris] then.

However, she was betrayed. Or perhaps, she thought she was. It felt that way. What was it?

I tried to remember.

[Our reunion wasn't like the past... it was buried in formality.]

That's what Leon said.

I cross-referenced it against [Chris's] memories.

[I wanted to see him]

[So I]

[But even so]

— All of a sudden, I had a feeling that I understood, just a little bit, why [Chris] had felt betrayed.

It might be that Leon had already known too.

'No matter what happens, believe in me,' he said.

Maybe he also felt that it was selfish of him to say so. But wasn't it because he understood that, because he recognized it, that he said those words?

That day ten years ago, they'd had a small misunderstanding, but it was about this, right?

Then, before he could fix it, Lucien had thoroughly destroyed everything.

[Why]

[Big Brother, why me]

[So that's all I'm good for!?!]

Bit by bit, fragments of memory boiled up like foam from the bottom of my heart. Incomplete, fleeting, faint. But now, they were trying to take shape.

It was suffocating, heartbreaking. It was unbearable.

She wanted to see him, wanted to meet him. But even though she put everything on

the line just for that, when she saw him, she definitely —

‘I want to see Leon.’

Suddenly, that thought came to me.

“...Certainly, I was the one primarily responsible for her destruction. But I wanted to protect her dignity, if only that. So I hid her. In the Artor Ruins. Then, I retired from the Schola to escape Prince Lucien’s pursuit, and watched over her from Brellwandy. Artor was convenient. There are still many hidden labyrinths there. Using the ancients’ technology to preserve her was ideal. With that technology, and the rumor that Artor had [run dry], I protected her. For ten years... Ten years. Well... it’s not enough to atone for what I’ve done.”

And here, finally, the current me and [Chris] changed places.

So as I thought, [Chris] was in Artor when my bumbling ass came by and possessed her.

It’s just, I was able to predict that much, but I never imagined that the whole story would be Arc’s doing.

“...But well, by the time I noticed, the girl that I put all those measures in place to protect came back to life and suddenly appeared before me... Haha, I’d never been so astonished in my life. And... I mean, well, anyway, I suppose that’s what I have to say about it?”

With a self-mocking smile, Arc didn’t seem as surprised as he claimed to be. After a moment’s hesitation over what to say, he wrapped things up like that.

From his state, I felt slightly like something was out of place. Arc came off as a weirdo, both when I met him and now, so it was barely perceptible, but intuitively, I sensed he was faking something.

Like that deliberate show of eccentricity.

That naturally led me to a certain conclusion, but I didn’t consider saying it out loud.

I didn't think it was appropriate to voice my borderline delusions.

"Mister Arc, you loved Miss Chris, didn't you?"

And Aira, who had been patiently listening without a word until now, readily voiced the same conclusion I'd reached.

"...What makes you think that?"

Unlike Irene and me, both of us surprised by this extremely weird topic, Arc unexpectedly responded with amusement, his expression unchanged.

"For some reason or another, I suppose. It's intuition. Intuition."

Aira's unflinching response was too vague.

Even Arc was taken aback, surprise registering on his face, but after a moment, he burst into laughter.

"A-ha-ha-ha-! Intuition, is it? The fabled woman's intuition? Haha — , I see, that's a solid enough argument. But I don't know about that. Though it was ten years ago, I was, mmm, just shy of thirty. She was eighteen. I was nearly twice her age. Wouldn't that be kind of criminal? Ahahaha — "

Almost bellowing with laughter, Arc seemed to be sincerely enjoying himself, holding his stomach as he laughed himself silly.

Sure, when you put it like that, I do feel like there's quite an age gap.

For her part, Aira was staring intently at Arc in all seriousness in spite of his ridicule.

"Ahahaha-... Haaa... — Well, that's why it wasn't out of love or anything like that — but you might say she was important to me..."

After laughing for some time, Arc suddenly seemed to return to his senses, and he stared off into the distance as he answered.

He seemed to be running after distant memories.

Though there was a version of her here in front of him, he was looking somewhere else. Because it was definitely his [Chris] that he was chasing.

I felt just a little guilty.

Considering Arc's last words, it seemed that things between him and [Chris] weren't quite what I'd imagined earlier.

Clearly, it might all be my wild delusion. [Chris] wouldn't tell me anything.

That's why I felt as if it were something unspeakably desolate.

"There's no need to make a face like that, you know. I'll be sad, knowing it's my fault that you're wearing an expression like that when you look just like Chris. Alright then! Don't you have other things you want to ask about?... For instance, the matter of Prince Leon."

That's right.

It's true, that's what I want to know the most. Just what is Leon's involvement in all this? That sinister seal. How is he connected to Tetra's Heart? What were he and Lucien trying to do? Why was I necessary?

I can't help but worry about all of it.

But.

"...I want to know, but I'm okay for now..."

I mumbled, in a voice so small even I had to shake my head.

I want to know.

But I don't think it's the time or place for me to ask. Not here, in Leon's absence.

And, if possible, I want to hear it from Leon's mouth.

I'm sure I'll regret it if I don't. I get the feeling it's not unreasonable have some reservations about it.

I might misunderstand some of his thoughts. It might become something that can't ever be taken back, like with [Chris].

That was the one thing I wouldn't be able to take.

"Is that so?"

Maybe he understood, maybe he didn't, but Arc readily shut his mouth.

After mentally preparing myself to be asked 'Why?', I found it a let-down.

"By the way, Regnum. Where's Prince Leon?"

Then, Arc asked Regnum a surprising thing.

I'd kinda wanted to ask about that too. Since I was sure Arc had his reasons for not calling Leon here, his question came as a surprise.

Speaking of which, I get why Arc's here, but what about Regnum? Here I was thinking he'd have something to say, but all he did was take out sweets in the beginning. And since then, he'd been quietly enjoying his tea by himself. It was almost like he wasn't here at all.

"...There is no question that Lord Leon is currently under surveillance. Therefore, should he come here, Chris's location will be discovered. On the other hand, now that we are within the city walls and Maddox's employer has been confirmed, we must avoid moving carelessly and putting Lord Leon in an emergency situation. Vyde is accompanying him, but that alone is not enough to dispel security concerns. As Rupert is currently on his way to the capital, waiting for his arrival would be a good idea."

Once the topic was brought up, Regnum suddenly started getting all chatty.

So that's how things stand?

Still, Leon had decided not to come here solely out of consideration for me.

Thank god. I wanted to know there was some reason for it... I wanted proof that his absence didn't necessarily mean that, for example, he'd betrayed me in the true sense of the word. While I struggled to keep my emotions out of my expression, I was inwardly relieved.

It's not that I didn't believe in him.

I'd decided to have faith in Leon. He said he wanted me to believe in him no matter what happened.

But even so, what I didn't know made me uneasy.

'Weak, aren't you,' I mocked myself.

"I will say this once."

While I was thinking, Regnum continued speaking.

"Last night, when Lord Leon realized that you had vanished, he was in a terrible panic. It was difficult to calm him down. That was his state of mind until I made contact with Arc and confirmed that you were not in imminent danger, I believe. This came about because of your reckless behavior. You should honestly reflect on what you've done."

When Regnum mercilessly laid out the consequences of my behavior, I had nothing to say in response.

I know, but getting told off can't be helped either. In a sense, Regnum's words were also Leon's honest feelings.

[What do you think you're doing?]

Something like that, I guess.

And if I thought about how last night must have been for him, it was honestly painful. After saying he would protect me, Leon no doubt went out of his mind searching for me.

Biting my lip, I hung my head.

“And Palmira. You are Chris’s attendant, so you cannot afford to simply cater to her whims. It is natural for an attendant to dispense with that in times of danger, but you cannot court danger in the first place.”

“Wait, Regnum. That was my...”

“It’s okay, Chris. He’s right.”

Regnum even had words for Palmira. I tried to shield her, only to be stopped by Palmira herself.

Though she was in low spirits, she was looking firmly at Regnum, without drooping her head.

“But...”

“I have to hear it. I’m your knight. That’s why it would be infinitely worse not to hear it...”

Palmira said, bobbing her head to Regnum.

Assaulted by a ruthless guilt, I found myself more and more unable to say anything.

Chapter 66

Night Raid

“But what will you do? You can’t exactly hide out here forever, and if our opponent is Prince Lucien, it’ll get out sooner or later, won’t it? My home? It’s only a matter of time before my connection with the Second Division gets leaked.”

Frowning, Irene suddenly took the opportunity to interrupt the conversation.

In short, ‘you guys are troublesome, could you hurry up and leave?’ No, that’s just my imagination, right? But on the other hand, she wasn’t wrong.

“If I had to choose the most pressing issue, I suppose it would be escaping from the Imperial Capital. It was for that reason that I had Miss Aira come here as well. However...”

“The problem is Tetra’s Heart, is it not?”

Arc’s words were sensible, but he hesitated to say that last bit. Regnum took over and did it for him.

Tetra’s Heart.

When I thought back, my understanding of it was vaguer than I expected.

The magus sealed by the imperial capital, Tetra. Earlier, Arc said that Lucien was trying to make me into a vessel. And Lucien said that he would use me to deal with the seal’s imminent dissolution.

After that,

“Lucien said that at this rate, the Imperial Capital is sure to be blown to kingdom come.”

“What!?”

Irene leapt to her feet with a shocked cry. It was probably her first time hearing about it.

Though Aira didn't get up, she looked over at me with an astonished expression. It certainly was shocking to hear.

“What's that all about!? What are you talking about!?”

Irene glared at me. Even so, nothing more came out of my mouth. I'd only heard that much in the first place, after all.

Seeing my perplexed expression, Irene shifted her sights to Arc.

I suppose she went with Arc, and not Regnum, because of their master-disciple relationship.

“...Once you hear it, there's no going back, but you could say that that ship has sailed... Though what I can tell you will turn out to be fairly ambiguous. I'll explain it simply. First, about Tetra. What do you know about her, Irene?”

“...Eh, um... The legendary magus who laid the foundations for magic roughly a thousand years ago?”

“Well, that's true. That magus is sealed underground, below the capital. The seal is the issue here, you see, and there are a variety of rumors about it. She was far too dangerous. She became something inhuman. She became a human sacrifice. And so on.”

The talk, which had started with Tetra's relationship with this whole business, was incredibly disturbing. Even the agitated Irene had to sit down, for the third time.

“It was around that time that the ancient dynasty fell, as you know, so even the literature isn't definite on this. Anyway, as eras passed, we came to construct the

Imperial Capital on top of that seal. At first, of course, no one knew how inappropriate it was to build here. That, we learned fairly recently.”

“Recently?”

“That’s right. It was maybe twenty, thirty years ago. In any case, when the seal was discovered, it as already at its limit. There was an enormous magical power amassed inside the thing we call the Heart, and it was just short of going on a rampage. No one knows when that will happen, either. It might be now, it might be a little later down the line. And so, we began the search for some way to deal with it with all haste.”

When he said ‘Might be now’, everyone aside from Regnum inhaled sharply.

Sure, there weren’t that many who could keep their cool after hearing something like that. It was like standing next to a volcano on the verge of erupting.

“What I learned from ransacking the literature was, the Tetra-like thing inside continuously emits magical power. That’s why it would be better to take Tetra out and put her inside something else. But the question was, what container, and what method? Setting aside the method, the container is already here — ”

Arc looked at me.

It matched up with the bits and pieces Lucien said.

When I gave him a tiny nod of understanding, Irene and Aira looked at me in shock.

Regnum picked up where Arc left off.

“That is how it is. I say this with full knowledge of how awfully selfish it is, but assuming you fled the capital like this, eventually the capital would be in danger.”

Of course, he stopped short of saying ‘So, what will you do?’

Still, saying that much, he’d as good as told me to ‘do something about it’.

However, as Regnum himself said, that's too selfish. If I'm being cold about it, it's not like I really knew what would become of the capital.

But — I looked at Aira, Palmira, and Irene in turn.

My feelings were complicated. Irene, of course, lives here.

Palmira despised the capital, but now, I don't know. Aira will remain at the mansion, I'm sure.

“If so, then everyone should abandon the capital and flee.”

Perhaps because of my gaze, Palmira made a rather basic proposal.

But that wasn't it. It was because Palmira's feelings about the capital were mixed, to a certain degree, that she could make the suggestion.

Even I thought of that right away. I wasn't surprised to see Regnum shaking his head.

“That cannot be done. Of course, it seems there were some in favor of the idea, but the Empire is already too big for such a plan to be feasible. It is impossible to abandon the capital, whatever the reason. At present, with the three superpowers in balance, that degree of weakness could quite possibly spark the worst war in history. Furthermore, it would be a difficult proposal to advance internally. Although it might have been workable when the seal was discovered, it probably is already too late, even if we were to use the relocation of the capital as a pretense.”

I had a hunch that there were probably various other reasons for it.

If I were to take a rough stab at summing it up, I'd say the Empire was just too big. And it would make too huge a mess to settle issues of that degree.

“Then what will we do? Don't tell me you want to make Big Sister a sacrifice — ”

Knock-knock.

When Aira was about to say the words that everyone was thinking of and no one could say, she was interrupted by a knock at the dining room door.

Everyone turned in that direction.

“May I come in? Master, Lady Allie from the mansion is here.”

Miss Patsy entered the room.

The moment she came in, I felt as if there was something stiff about the expression that accompanied her report of Allie’s arrival.

Hey, what’s wrong?

“Did something happen?”

asked her master, Arc, with an uncharacteristic seriousness. Her state was probably odd enough for him to pick up on it.

Beside him, Regnum wordlessly stood from his chair.

“That is, she’s not in a normal state... she’s injured...”

“Pardon me.”

As Miss Patsy’s voice failed her, Allie pushed her way past her into the room.

Everyone present inhaled sharply at the sight of her.

The maid uniform she usually wore with perfect flair was frayed and torn in several places.

And what was most eye-catching was her hand, and how she had it pressed against her side. The fabric around it was stained the black of dried blood, clear as day. Despite maintaining her usual composure, it hurt to look at.

No, she wasn’t in normal condition at all.

“Head Maid!”

In the middle of this, Aira, whose association with her was as deep as mine, or deeper, screamed and ran over to her.

But Allie held her back with a hand and turned her firm gaze toward us.

“The mansion — was attacked. Right now, Lord Vyde and the First Platoon are engaged in battle.”

“What did you say!?”

Shocked by her brief report, I shot up from my seat.

Allie didn't say anything. But there was no mistaking Lucien's hand in this.

An army, or —

“What about Leon!? What happened to him?”

I thought of the worst-case scenario. An ordinary army would rely on numerical superiority, but Vyde and the Elite Guard seemed like they would manage somehow.

But if it were Maddox —. And if he came to claim Leon's head, for sure this time —.

“Lord Leon — is...”

At that moment, Allie suddenly groaned and fell to her knees. Immediately, I dashed to her side. And accompanied by Aira, I knelt down to look into Allie's eyes.

Allie turned her hanging head toward me. Our eyes met.

“Miss Chris! Please get away from her!”

It happened just as Regnum's shout reached my ears.

That gaze sent a chill through my entire body. There was no mistaking it: those eyes didn't belong to the Allie who'd been here just now.

Eyes brimming with a deep, deep, deep darkness.

Then her mouth curled in a grin.

Feeling an instinctive fear along with Regnum's words, I immediately tried to distance myself from her.

"!"

"Kyaa-!"

Before I could, Allie's hand shot out with surprising speed and grabbed me by the wrist. Immediately after, I heard Aira scream as she was thrown to the floor.

And at the same time, something hit the floor with a solid, metallic clink.

When I turned my eyes to look, I spotted two knives. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Regnum in the follow-through pose of a knife throw. He was the one who had thrown them.

They'd been released in a instant, only to be thwarted by something and knocked to the floor.

"Wah-!"

Then Allie stood, dangling me in the air by my wrist.

What unbelievable strength.

I didn't have any idea what the hell was going on. Allie's dark eyes were oozing some kind of black mist.

That obviously wasn't normal. Intuition told me that something was manipulating her.

"Who... are you!"

Enduring the pain from my wrist, which was in a grip so tight that the bones were grinding against each other, I glared at the thing that wasn't Allie.

Though it had her face, it lifted the corners of its mouth into a smile that could only be described as evil, and opened its mouth.

A gurgling darkness leaked out from that maw.

"I — cAME — to welCOme yOu"

A hideous, grating voice spewed forth along with the darkness.

"...Tetra...!?"

Arc's strangled voice came from behind me.

This — is Tetra? The seal —

"Tetra'...Wasn't she supposed to be sealed!?"

"The seal is at its limit. All bets are off...! And earlier, Chris, you got too close to the Heart — to Tetra... She noticed you...!"

"What are you planning to do with me...!"

I glared back at those eyes. Simply by being under their steady regard, my heart threatened to give out.

If I didn't do *something*, it seemed like I wouldn't be able to speak directly to her. The sinister pressure radiated by the being before me was eating that deeply into my heart.

“I’ll haVE yOUr bodY”

Tetra said, and chills raced down my spine.

Because that was certainly also what Lucien wanted. And for it to coincide with Tetra’s desires, it couldn’t help but stir up disgusting speculation.

“...! I won’t let that happen!”

Behind me, I heard Arc’s voice calling the magic invocation, [シジ].

That’s right, magic.

I strained my eyes. Blue flames flickered at the edges of my vision.

“iT’S fUtILE”

Apparently having been activated behind me just now, a beam of light rocketed past me, closing in on Allie/Tetra.

But as if repelled by the darkness oozing from Tetra’s body, its trajectory swerved right into the ceiling, which it utterly decimated.

“Wha...!”

“シジ — ”

Seeing that, I screamed out the single-syllable incantation.

Before my eyes, blue flames traced the maze’s rings, centered on Tetra. It began to turn.

“Ughk-!?”

But before it could gather power and fire, the darkness leaking from Tetra’s mouth, accompanied by a ghastly sensation of *substance*, invaded mine. My mind thrown into

chaos, the pattern dispersed.

“Ughmm—!”

“fUTile, futile, iT’S already MIne”

As I drowned painfully in the darkness forcing its way in deeper and deeper inside me, the blue pattern appeared around Tetra’s face and began to rotate. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

It was the same as my magic.

In my vision, blurred by agony, the pattern grew larger.

I didn’t know what magic she was activating. But I could tell that it was dangerous.

And yet I couldn’t do a thing. Now that even my magic had been sealed, I was helpless.

— Leon!

“Let go of Chris!”

I could see Palmira slash at Tetra with her sword, but even that was stopped by the darkness around her, so dense that it was clearly tangible.

“aHAHAhaHA”

“No! It’s a teleport!”

Behind the laughing Tetra, a golden wall sprang into being, apparently the result of the magic she invoked.

I didn't need to hear Arc's scream. That couldn't be anything but a teleportation spell. It was clear that she intended to take me somewhere.

Backing up, Tetra disappeared into the golden wall. It swallowed me up the same way. I twisted my body, trying to fight it, but *zuun, zuun*, my feet, my lower body, my arms sank into it.

Along with a powerful horror, it engulfed me whole.

“Ugghhmphh!”

— Leon, help me. Leon!

As I screamed soundlessly, my entire vision eventually turned gold, and I fell unconscious.

Chapter 67

Memory Overlay

I — was alone.

Such was the lot of the common war orphan.

I no longer know where I was born, but I remember that when I became aware of the world around me, I was crying in front of my parents, who had been burned to charcoal. So, I do not know the faces of my parents either. I do not even know whether those charred black things were my parents at all. In any case, there was war, and it seemed I had lost everything.

To be honest, I often can only remember mere fragments of how I lived after that. If I had to say why, it is because I lived in near-total darkness.

That was probably somewhere underground, and I was a slave.

I — or perhaps we — toiled day and night, however much such words were worth underground.

I gathered something in that subterranean place and turned it in as I was told. By doing so, I could receive food. I believe that was how I lived.

And so that dark underground place was my entire world; I knew no other. In a certain sense, that might have been considered my good fortune.

If I were to know of a world outside that one, surely I would not have been able to endure it. Ignorance is a blessing.

But if I were to think about it now, even without that consideration, if I was alive, if I was dead, if I was human at all — even that much was unclear.

The one who took me from that world was my current master. That was nothing more than good luck, no doubt. I believe it was by chance.

But when the Master took me out of that place, I was able to learn of a new world.

A new world, a new way of life, a new set of values — the Master gave all of those to me. Everything I have, I received from the Master.

For that reason, everything I was belonged to the Master.

So from that point on, I devoted everything to the Master.

I would spare no effort in becoming the version of myself the Master desired me to be. There were various considerations, but I lived each day by that principle.

A way of life that was devoid of doubt.

— Yes, until she came.

When she came here, the Master said: ‘My special someone’

In the beginning, I felt happy. If I had to say why, it was because the Master, who had a worrying lack of interest in women until then, was able to find a special someone.

However, for reasons I could not understand, something like a thorn pricked at my heart.

I did not know its true nature. But every time she spoke of the Master, or the Master spoke of her, there was a prickling in my heart.

However, I made no attempt to identify it.

I knew, instinctively, that I could not think about it.

And yet, the day she tried to sacrifice herself for the Master, I realized what it was.

We were the same.

I, too, wanted to offer up my life for the Master's sake. I, too, was capable of it. It would not be difficult. Even I could do it. I — wanted to.

It was envy.

Affection, dislike, love, hate — it was none of those things.

To be able to sacrifice myself for the Master.

That was everything to me. It was my entire reason for living.

And yet, she demonstrated it before I could.

Even though I wanted to be the one. Even though that was my role.

Even though it was my place to live and die for the Master.

She could have stolen anything else. I did not even want the Master's love.

But that alone belonged to me.

I did not want to hand it over to anyone else.

So.

I accepted.



— What the hell?

“Kuh–, guho–”

Awake, I shivered, thinking of the memories that had been swimming around in my head since the golden light had swallowed me.

They were filled with nothing but ugliness. I coughed, as if I could hack it out of my lungs.

That was when I heard the rattle of metal above my head.

“...Huh?”

My head spinning, I looked for the source.

Then I finally realized what had happened to me.

My wrists chained, I was suspended in the air. Releasing jets of vapor, Tetra's Heart pulsated eerily overhead.

So I'd been brought back here after all, had I? In conjunction with the memories I'd just seen, it was too jarring a change in scenery. It was like something out of a dream. And one hell of a nightmare, at that.

Though my feet just barely grazed the floor, the chains around my wrists were too tight for me to take a single step.

I tried to struggle anyway, but I knew right away that the sturdy chains weren't likely to give. Now that I'd pretty much been trussed up like this, I couldn't see myself being able to just squirm my way free.

“Shit...”

“Yo, so you noticed.”

Cursing, I got a reply. Though I knew the owner of that voice, I turned my eyes toward him anyway.

There, sitting cross-legged on the floor, was Lucien. And then, standing beside him in a blank stupor, was Allie... Maddox was nowhere to be seen.

“Couldn't stay away, could you?”

“I was dragged here against my will. What kind of bullshit are you going on about...”

Glaring at Lucien, who was as nonchalant as always, I ground my teeth.

It was Allie... or rather, Tetra who abducted me, but the one who was pulling the strings from the shadows was Lucien.

In the end, he was the mastermind.

Allie didn't have that evil look from earlier, but that said, she didn't look her usual dashing self either. Her expression was empty of soul, and she stood in place, swaying gently. It was bizarre.

Where did Tetra go? Was she still inside Allie?

"What did you do to Allie...?"

"Nothing. *I* haven't done a thing to her. Tetra did that all by herself. Oh, but your restraints were all me."

"...And here I thought you were a little more of a gentleman."

"But if I didn't do anything, wouldn't you end up running away? So I'd appreciate it if you could think of it, not as a personal interest, but a matter of necessity."

His reply mocking, Lucien shook his head with an disappointed look on his face, like it was my fault. The whole thing pissed me off.

But still, there was nothing I could do.

Maybe I couldn't use magic, because although I'd been staring at him for a while, the blue flames weren't burning.

Was it because of that black mist from before? Or was something else getting in the way?

"Allie! Oi! Allie!"

Something wasn't right with her, but I called out to my only hope.

Though she was obviously being manipulated earlier, at least that didn't seem to be the case now. Praying for her sanity to return, I cried her name.

"It's pointless. She let Tetra in, poor thing. Tetra went back to the Heart, but she's already broken. The average person can't take it. What you see here is a cast-off skin."

I'd expected as much, but Lucien readily revealed what I didn't want to accept.

I bit my lip.

Allie... Even though she'd survived such gruesome experiences to come this far. Was that so easily snuffed out?

The reminiscence from earlier lingered within me.

I didn't know why I ended up seeing it. But clearly, it couldn't be anything but Allie's memories.

Just like me, she lost everything to war, then lived as a slave... and lived for Leon's sake. Her way of thinking bordered on insanity, but it was her way of life. Like all of humanity, an overlay of memories, experiences, molded her into who she was. As twisted as she was, I couldn't forsake her.

But she was no longer here.

And now she was no more than a record in my mind. She was gone.

Ba-dump

At that moment, the memories I saw earlier, returned to my head in a thundering torrent.

[I belong to the master]

[If she hadn't come]

[That was envy]

The memories of a broken person. Recollections without an owner.

“U-aa-UAAAAAAHH-!”

I shrieked as the emotions broke free.

Memories, experiences, a way of life that existed without knowing the reason for itself, without a way to return any longer.

Now disappearing from within her, leaving nothing behind.

And what she would naturally have gone on to become — that, too, was lost forever.

“AAH-! AAAAH! AAAAH!”

My tears overflowed. They wouldn't stop.

I can't think about it. I can't consider it. How the dead once lived.

That was the conclusion I came to, fighting as a mercenary. If not, my heart wouldn't have been able to take it.

It wasn't that I didn't hold myself to that maxim, but those dead memories remained clearly imprinted in my mind.

That was why my emotions seemed to burn out.

The decades of memories that had dwelled within Allie. And the fact that they no longer existed.

The only emotion such a reality could inspire was horror.

It's terrifying. Terrifying. Terrifying.

Will I be lost like this too? Will I become nothing?

Is this how Allie and [Chris] disappeared?

“Ugh-ah-ah-”

No way. It’s not like that. That’s wrong.

Engulfed by a terror that threatened to break me, I desperately repeated baseless words of denial again and again to recover myself.

Don’t think about it. You can’t think about it.

“Hahh, hahh...”

I breathed in deep, over and over again.

It’s okay. It’s nothing.

I calmed down just a little.

“What an interesting reaction. It’s not like this is your first time seeing someone die, right?”

Unable to wipe away the tears and saliva, I glared feebly at Lucien.

No matter what he said, he wouldn’t understand what he was talking about. I didn’t even expect him to be able to understand.

That terror just now — it was like I’d died myself.

“...I have — her memories.”

Even so, I gave him a terse response.

He wouldn’t get it, but I wanted to make some excuse for my disgraceful behavior.

“I see.”

And Lucien nodded with an unexpected look of satisfaction on his face.

His words blindsided me. When I looked at him, he calmly rose to his feet and patted off his knees.

“What the hell do you ‘see’...!”

If he meant that he understood, I would be furious.

There was no way he could. It was impossible for him to understand. That’s why the fact that he could use such a thoughtless, know-it-all tone aggravated me.

“Well, basically, you seem to have the ability to reproduce other people’s memories. I suspected as much before, but now I can prove it.”

However, Lucien’s [I see] seemed to refer to something else.

Satisfied, all by himself, he crossed his arms and looked at me.

...Put that way, sure, that might be true.

But just because I could see Allie’s memories didn’t make it an [ability]. That was too big a leap in logic for me.

“...So what?”

And my response was accordingly curt. Frankly, I didn’t have the faintest idea what Lucien stood to gain by having this conversation right now.

As I watched him suspiciously, Lucien suddenly smiled, then said,

“Mm, because as I thought, you’re a swamp man after all.”

Chapter 68

Swamp Girl

‘Swamp man’.

This again?

I’m starting to get tired of hearing this mystery phrase.

I felt it the last time I heard those words, but they made me dreadfully uncomfortable, as if they were a rejection of my very being.

As a matter of fact, Lucien said it to me last time: [You were never supposed to be there. Who are you?]

Sure, maybe I’m not supposed to be here.

After all, I’m someone else. This body is only temporary.

Lucien’s objective is to empty this body. Then, to seal Tetra inside. That way, he would prevent Tetra’s Heart from going on a rampage.

So that means Lucien has a way of driving me out of this body, right?

That’s why he restrained me like this.

— In that case, could it be that he found the location of my real body?

If so, then not only would that problem be solved, my long-cherished wish would come true — just like that.

To return to my original body.

I’ve longed for that ever since I entered this body. Always. I came this far on the belief that I would return to normal someday. So if my body’s been found, then fact is, I should be hailing this guy as my savior.

Suddenly, I recalled one of the things I'd picked up in Brellwandy.

At the guild, Arc had said [The military has Artor on lockdown.] They might have been searching for my body on Lucien's instructions.

I looked at the man before me.

Just how much does he know?

To be frank, the only thing I know for sure is that I'm not [Chris]. That was clear from what he said when we met here before.

But what's this 'swamp man'?

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't figure out what that was.

"...Just what the hell do you mean by 'swamp man'?"

After coming up empty, I ended up asking Lucien.

He grinned widely as though he'd been waiting for me to ask. It wasn't the careless smile he'd worn until now, but something truly loathsome.

For a moment, I regretted asking, but it was already too late.

Besides, I knew that even if I didn't ask, this man would have talked about it anyway. My faith in that was already close to conviction.

"I'll say this first. I know your true identity. Moreover, I'll tell you this: The body that you're searching for is already in my possession."

Lucien spoke with genuine enjoyment. He was smiling like he couldn't hold it in even if he wanted to.

It was completely different from what I was asking about, but in a way, he did answer another question I'd had.

So, Lucien knew about me after all. And my body was already in his hands.

“Do you want to return to your original body?”

‘Of course I do.’

His whispered question seemed to pierce right through to my innermost thoughts, and I... couldn't bring myself to give him the obvious reply immediately.

I want to return. That's a given. I've been living like this for the sake of returning. To leave this body and return to being a man. That was my wish.

But — that would bring an end to everything.

If I do that, then I'll never see Leon again, for sure.

And what would happen to [Chris]? Would she get it back — this body, Tetra's would-be vessel?

— Probably... not.

If that happened, how would Leon feel?

Wouldn't he be losing [Chris] a second time?

Wait, that's not it! What — What do I — !?

What do I want to do?

I want to see Leon. But I can't afford to do that. If it's possible for me to return to my original body right now, then I should. But I —

For Leon, I —

But I have to return!

For my sake, for Leon's, I have to go!

“Of — of course I want to go back to my old body!”

I shouted, my thoughts in turmoil.

I've always wished for this. So rejecting it now, I might as well be rejecting myself.

That's why I have to return. That's what's right!

“Mm, then I'll return the body to you.”

Seemingly satisfied by the reply I shouted from amidst my internal discord, Lucien nodded, then snapped his fingers.

The gesture left me dumbfounded.

Am I really going back? Though I answered in such unambiguous terms, my heart was nonetheless shaken to the point where even I doubted myself.

From behind me echoed the steady sound of footsteps. Little by little, they grew louder.

“Ah, that's right. I never answered your earlier question.”

As I was about to turn around, I heard Lucien's voice again.

What does he want to say *now*? My attention almost completely focused on the movement behind me, his words went in one ear and out the other. I turned to look behind me.

“I suppose you haven't heard of the swamp man? Lightning strikes a man next to a swamp, and he dies. But, through the power of the lightning, a man springs forth from the swamp. The man is dead. Then, what about the man who was just born? What if, for argument's sake, his memories, everything about him, are the same as the dead man's? He will surely live on under the misconception that he *is* the dead man. And no

doubt the world around him will think the same. But the new man and the dead are two distinct existences.”

I had no idea what he was going on about. I paid no attention to the sound of his voice in my ears.

— Coming towards me was the mystery man Palmira and I had pursued the night of the ball.

I shuddered, feeling goosebumps break out all over my skin. My instincts were on full alert.

How could I have missed it?

That distinct red hair. That build, those eyes. That bearing. Of course I would feel uneasy.

Because it was [me].



“What is it this time, Prince Lucien? You certainly have extremely perverse hobbies,”

[I] said. In my voice, while looking at me.

“Ah... Aaah...”

The reality before my eyes sent tremors through my body.

Maybe I should say something.

But my voice wouldn't come out. I didn't even know what I was supposed to think.

The chains above my head made a rattling sound. If not for them, I would have fallen on my backside right then and there.

There was no strength in my legs, in my body.

“Yo, Chris. I want you to tell me your name. Your real name, the one you used when we made the contract.”

Stop. Stop it. Don't go any further.

“...? Christopher Carson?”

[I] answered, giving me a dubious look as I stared, shaking.

The breath caught in my throat.

Then... Then who exactly am I?

If the [me] in front of me is Chris, then *who the hell is the me right here?*

“O-Oi, is that girl okay?”

[I] approached me.

Stop. Don't come over here.

My heartbeat sped up. It hurt to breathe.

[I] drew closer to me.

“You're seriously sweating a lot. Are you okay?”

That hand — [my] hand — came toward me.

Please stop. Don't come any closer. Don't touch me.

Don't you goddamn touch me — !

That hand — touched my cheek.

That moment it made contact, my vision spun.



The name's Christopher Carson. Nickname, Chris.

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

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

As long as you pay in gold, they'll be your merc, your investigator, your explorer — you name it. But an adventurer's primary occupation has got to be ruin exploration. Well, it sounds better if you call it 'exploration', but it's basically glorified grave-robbing —

—

—

— Recently, I've been on a lucky streak.

Those ruins had never been explored before, and I managed to get a considerable amount of treasure out of them. On my way through, I carelessly set off a trap and got poisoned. I was about to die, but as luck would have it, I drank some ancient medicine — because hell, what did I have to lose? — and I was able to pull through just fine.

...Now that I think about, I took a serious gamble there. Next time, I'd have to pay more attention.

Anyway, I picked up a good amount of treasure, enough to support me for at least ten years.

It was quite the haul, and I'll be honest, even in my fairly long career as an adventurer, it was my first time laying my hands on this much money.

The guild branch I reported to was completely astounded. It was a nice feeling.

I did register the labyrinth I discovered, but it was actually pretty shallow, so there

shouldn't be anything important left down there.

The trailing hyenas might gather, but it'll just be a fool's errand. I knew I was being spiteful, but just imagining it brought a smile to my face.

Intending to play around for a while, I signed on with a southbound merchant caravan and headed to the Imperial Capital.

There aren't really any great cities in the north.

Brellwandy isn't even worth mentioning, but that said, Kakrawanga's pretty big. Way too bloodthirsty, though. Telaberan is a large city too, and one I'm thoroughly familiar with, but come on — when it's time to play, the bigger the city, the better.

And that means the Capital.

I skipped out on the tedious work of being a caravan escort and paid money like an ordinary passenger, catching a ride through the mountains. It had always seemed like an extreme luxury to me, but this much is fine, right? I've endured my fair share until now.

It had been a long time since I last came to the capital.

From a professional perspective, adventurers tend to go north, because work is truly difficult to come by in the wealthy and relatively safe region of the south. That would change further south, but I've never been that far down before. As long as I've got money in my pocket, I'll be fine here.

But right now, the Capital.

Since I wasn't going to get inside the walls, naturally I secured my current lodgings in the outer districts and proceeded to take things easy.

It's not bad to be able to cut back and relax. Until now, I'd always been rushing ahead, always desperate.

I imagine I'll go back to that life someday, but it's exhausting to be like that all the time.

It's time for a break, okay? A break.

So I convinced myself, and spent every night out on the town.

— It looks like I'm not cut out for that sort of life after all.

Money wasn't a concern for me, but I was rotting away in this lazy lifestyle. Drinking booze, playing with women, it's sort of unsatisfying.

Before I knew it, I was raising hell with my sword drawn. It was boredom. Even though I was living it up, no matter what I did, something was missing.

I might say all sorts of things, but in the end, I love life on the edge.

I might be a pretty self-destructive guy.

When I was struggling over whether to go south or something, I met him.

Lucien, a man of unknown age, said to me, 'If you have the time, why not work for me?'

I thought he was kinda shady. But I really did have the time, and it was rare to be scouted, so for some reason, I gave working for him a shot.

In any case, I was starved for excitement. Cynically, I thought that even if the guy was sketchy as hell, it might offer some brief entertainment. So I accepted, only to find out he was a prince.

For the first time, I entered the world within the Capital's walls, and what's more, I got to go to the castle.

Sure, I did want to get some thrills, but this was a bit much.

And on top of that, this guy was no model prince.

'This is confidential,' he said, and led me to an underground area below the castle, where he ultimately assigned me to labyrinth guard duty.

And he even showed me that weird-ass thing earlier, too.

But in the end, I don't know what this mysterious prince wants with me. I went underground on his orders, but that was it. Aside from that, he might as well have told me to do as I pleased.

At first, my curiosity helped; just being there was enough. But it's peaceful inside the

walls, so nothing ever happened. I got fed up with it before long, but even though I asked the prince what I should do, he wouldn't give me a straight answer.

Meanwhile, he told me to attend a party as an armsman.

Things were getting more and more incomprehensible. Plus, midway, he called me back underground via telepathy.

I had absolutely no idea why.

Just what the hell does this guy want me do —

◇ ◇ ◇

“UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH—!”

God — those *memories*. I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Startled, Chris pulled away from me.

But I no longer had the luxury of caring about such things.

Those memories, those experiences — there's no mistake, they belonged to Chris. If I had made it out of Artor, that was the life I would've had.

And the fact is, the Chris before me *was* living that life.

The man before my eyes — is Chris. Without a doubt.

Then that — is no longer me.

If so.

Who am I!

WHO am I who WHO who am who am who WHO am I am I am I *am I!*

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!”

An all-consuming terror I'd never known threatened to shatter me into tiny pieces. The chains rattled. Sweat, tears, saliva soaked my face. My body wouldn't stop trembling.

Just who the hell am I?

It's all fake.

The feeling of losing my parents; my hometown, which I thought would stand forever; my experiences weathering the dangers of the adventuring life; my memories of war — not one of them is mine.

Then *what am I!*

"O-Oi, what's wrong with her? This definitely isn't normal."

Don't speak! Don't speak with that voice! With — with *my* voice!

"UUUUUUUUUAAAA-!"

Lucien had come closer to me without me noticing. Grabbing my hair, he turned my face forward.

When my eyes focused, his face was right in front of me.

He was grinning fiendishly —

"You understand now, don't you? You can't return anymore. Well, it's not that you can't *anymore*. You never had a place to return to in the first place. On the contrary, even the simple fact that you're here is impossible. Now, I'll ask you again. Who are you!?"

"Ah-ugh-ah-ahh—"

I can't think anymore.

I — I am —

“You don't get it? Then I'll say it for you. I'll tell you. You are nothing more than the copy of a memory. Something that shouldn't exist. A fake. A void. An imitation. A fraud. Make-believe — so, what shall I call you? — ‘Swamp man’, maybe? No- ”

Lucien cut himself off, and then, with a twisted grin, he said to me:

“Swamp girl.”

Chapter 69

Chris/Tetra

And once again, I fall into that swamp.

Even though that which had been born should never return to where it came from.

Gurgle, gurgle. The sound of sinking.

Even though that which disappeared opens a gaping emptiness.

Sinking. Down and down.

Eyes that can't see anymore.

Ears that can't hear.

A body that won't move.

There is no sorrow. No fear, no despair, nothing.

Just the fall.

The fall toward the bottom.

Then, once again, something coils and encircles.

A black veil of darkness wraps round and round, once again taking shape.

A mass forms, dyed pitch-black.

Eyes open. A hand reaches out.

Heading for the water's surface. In the direction of the light.

Ahh, *I* was able to make my return.

To that place once again.

The other side of that crumbling dread.

To plunder.



It hurts.

It hurts. It hurts.

It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

— Unforgivable.

It was for humanity's sake. My magical power. That reason.

At that time, humans were weak, and died easily.

Blessed with natural strength, the monsters were merciless.

Humans were intelligent, but they didn't have the time to use it.

Before they could, before their intellect yielded any fruit, they died.

I was lucky.

Before I died, I was able to give birth to something. To magic.

Magic brought great change to humans' lives. Opposing the wonders of a ruthless natural world, they repelled the attacking monsters.

And so humanity, who had had their hands full with the simple act of living, gradually enjoyed greater freedom and invented new things.

In doing so, humanity eventually grew wealthy. Humanity, who had done no more than fear, hide, and survive, flourished.

I was happy.

The magic I invented made people happy. That was an unmistakable fact.

I lived purely for that purpose.

Then, I intended to die.

But prosperity gave rise to other things.

The devil known as 'desire'.

When it took everything simply to stay alive, it was worthless.

But now, it was possible to live without fighting tooth and nail. People had the leeway to think of other matters. That resulted in a mountain of things that would allow them to thrive, but at the same time, it introduced certain defects.

One of which was 'desire'.

As the founder of magic, I created many things. The foundation of my work began with channeling magical energy through the Five Attunements.

That would be very important for the people to come.

Those who understood the concept ultimately used me in the name of prosperity.

I was seized and sealed as a source of magical power.

For the sake of becoming wealthier, for the sake of greater growth.

Certainly, I continued to use my own magical abilities for the good of humanity.

But those were meant to bring an end to my role, to entrust it to future generations.

To allow me to welcome a better death.

Now, deprived even of my right to die, I am an existence that will continue to be plundered for everything I possess, forever.

I gave.

But I received nothing in return.

Now, I am being robbed. Of everything. Even though I never received anything.

Why did I have to end up this way? Is giving a sin?

Is this retribution, then?

Because of what I gave, or perhaps because of what was stolen from me, humanity thrives even today.

And yet I alone am not allowed to follow. There is nothing here to make me happy.

I won't forgive them. I can't forgive them.

I will never forgive them.

I — gave. I was robbed.

So this time, I'll be doing the robbing.

I'll take it all. I'll steal back everything I ever gave.



Slowly, my eyes opened.

My vision was terribly clear. I moved my arm, looking at my hand.

I clenched and released it several times.

“Hehehehe.”

A laugh inadvertently slipped out of me. That voice, passing through my throat, naturally spilled forth from my mouth.

This sense of reality. It was completely different from the human form I'd temporarily stolen. The magically-generated shadow wasn't even worth comparing.

A sensation I'd missed dearly. Just how many years had I passed for the sake of enjoying this feeling?

Just how many years was I imprisoned in that narrow cell?

I looked up. Up, where the seal known as the Heart hung. The seal that had confined me.

That hateful lump that would never let go of me, no matter how I cried and shouted,

no matter how I begged for forgiveness.

“ジイイイイイイイイイイイ”

Patterned rings formed in blue flame. Once five of them were overlaid with each other, I released the power.

In an instant, a shockwave leapt into being before me. Flying toward its target, it engulfed that irritating thing overhead and blew it away without a trace.

“Uoh!?”

“Guh-!”

The aftershocks rocked the air, brushing past my cheeks. That tangible sensation of destruction made my body tremble. My mouth curled of its own accord.

Nevertheless, it seemed I used a little too much power to blow away such a trivial thing.

But for a test run, it was superb.

I felt as powerful as I had when the seal had taken hold of me. Or perhaps, even more than that.

This body was excellent.

” — You have my thanks,”

I said to the two men on their hands and knees on the floor, battered by the aftershocks from my earlier act of destruction. And I didn't forget to bow my head.

At any rate, they freed me from that prison. That wasn't an account I could settle, no matter how many times I thanked them.

“Haha, ha, well. Don’t worry about it. I — ”

“Hmhm — now die.”

I sent a shockwave barreling toward the man who was speaking.

I thanked them. I no longer owed them anything. Therefore, I would steal. I would steal everything from them.

Surprise registering on his face, the human took the shockwave head-on and went flying. It wasn’t as strong as the blast that took out the seal, but it seemed strong enough.

With a brief scream, the human’s balled up body slammed into the inside wall.

With a splattering sound, crimson flowers bloomed on the wall’s flat surface.

I see. If they strike the wall with that much force, they burst open.

“Prince!”

Nonetheless, I detected a momentary flare of magical power from the man who’d been blown away.

It appeared that he’d instantly defended against the shockwave, but he wasn’t able to withstand the physical impact of crashing into the wall. Based on his usage of magical power just now, I could tell that magic hadn’t advanced much since my time. Or did the man’s power only amount to that much?

...Hmm, he seemed to still be alive, more or less, but it was only a matter of time. Knowing that he was already dying, I had no interest in him.

That aside, I’d like to inspect my powers a little more. How about trying them on this man?

“Shit — what the hell are you!”

I turned my gaze toward him. He had his sword at the ready. I hadn't noticed him drawing it.

Sword, is it? No matter how many years pass, this never changes. Unless they've made some advancements? For instance, charging a sword with magical power.

I was terribly curious.

"You... You should take a swing at me."

Slowly spreading apart my hands, I invited him to strike.

"Wh-What...!"

"What's wrong? I'm your enemy, you know."

I provoked the man as he goggled at me. Perhaps he was wary of traps.

But even so, his feelings might have been conflicted, because his sword wavered as he stared. I see, a superior warrior. He was evaluating his adversary's combat strength, just as I was. So caution would be prudent. Hmph, but I was impatient.

"If you won't come to me, I'll go to you... ジイイイイイ —"

The magical labyrinth unfolded with ostentatious style. The blue flames licking at it, it began to turn.

"Shit! I guess I've got no choice but to go for it!"

the warrior roared. His expression resolute, he charged forward with his sword at the ready.

Good.

Having the leeway to do so, I used one hand to invoke a projection spell. A blue film expanded to enfold my surroundings, and sure enough, it stopped the sword the warrior was mercilessly swinging in my direction.

“What the — !?”

A hard clang echoed through the chamber. The blue membrane resisted the sword.

Looking at the warrior frown in astonishment, I felt disappointed.

Just a steel sword. It hadn't been endowed with any magic whatsoever.

In short, the arcane arts I'd bestowed upon mankind long ago had probably declined to some extent. At least, it hadn't been like this in the past. Individuals capable of enchantment spells had been easy enough to find back then.

“How boring... ジイイイイ — ”

I muttered to myself, using my other hand to cast another destruction spell.

I'd already had enough of this warrior.

Let's wrap things up and go outside. A mass of magical power gathered in my left hand.

Just as I was about to release that destructive force, without feeling the least moral compunction, I felt a sharp, numbing pain near the back of my neck.

“Guh...?”

It was a trivial pain. But the warrior used my momentary distraction to distance himself from me.

What in the world was that?

I found the slight pain was unpleasant. Since I had been in such a good mood until now, that minor thing roused a disproportionate anger within me.

That fury, I turned on the warrior, who didn't seem far past his youth. He had his sword back at the ready, keeping his distance from me.

"...Begone!"

Again, I lashed out with my magic. The pain didn't distract me, but I deployed my power without focusing.

Struck by my power as it fanned outward, he went flying.

"Gwah-!"

But it had diffused too much. It didn't blow him back as it had the first man; instead, it simply sent him rolling across the floor.

Nonetheless, it didn't concern me. There was no longer anything for me to confirm here.

Let's go outside and start taking revenge.

The stinging pain tugged at me. I didn't know what it was, but I didn't care anymore.

Steal it.

Plunder it all.

I will have my vengeance on everyone who betrayed —

"...?"

My heart growing black, I was about to take the first step onto the path of my vengeance. But before I could, I detected a sudden swell in magical power. Of course,

it wasn't my doing.

Stopping in my tracks, I lifted my gaze from its submergence in my desires.

Before I could analyze what that power was for, the magic materialized. A golden wall of light took shape in the empty air. This far along, there was no need for analysis. A teleportation spell. Its terminus was about to connect to this place.

Disrupting it would have been child's play. But I was curious. What would emerge from it?

In the end, I waited for the spell to complete.

Sure enough, several people materialized out of the wall. I'd seen some of them before. They'd been present when I stole this body.

But there were a few unfamiliar faces as well. One of them shouted the moment he laid eyes on me:

"Chris!"

Again, that stab of pain at the back of my neck. At that moment, I sensed its true nature. — I see. So this body's previous occupant still hasn't disappeared?

Then I'll plunder it too.

By killing the people before me, down to the last man.

Chapter 70

The Value of an Uncertain Thing

“All clear.”

At the rear of the mansion, I received a report from Leopard.

“...Got it.”

Even I could read the stiffness in my voice and expression.

The attack came the day after Chris’s disappearance. It had been timed to coincide with my return to the mansion.

I had summoned Leopard and the Elite Guard just in case, and they immediately proved useful. Still, my feelings hadn’t lightened.

The scene before my eyes resembled a small-scale battlefield. The figures of the fallen caught my eye.

Most of them were figures dressed in black. But I could pick out a good number of those wearing the dark green armor of the Elite Guard.

I was fully aware of the true strength of Leopard’s hand-raised forces.

Nonetheless, these casualties also served as a succinct testament to the attackers’ considerable ability.

However, while I could understand that from a logical standpoint, it was a far different story emotionally.

They’re like family to me.

There wasn’t a man among them that I didn’t know.

The identities of the fallen soldiers, I knew each and every one. And now they were empty husks.

When I thought about that, the simple act of maintaining my expression was the best I could do.

At times like this, the commander, or perhaps their superiors in turn, can't afford to expose any emotion. No matter how they want to conduct themselves, they have to accept casualties as a matter of course.

Why? Because the survivors and the fallen alike had seen it in such terms. That's why I had to accept it with composure, for the sake of protecting their dignity.

But even that had its limits. If you want to call it my inexperience, then go ahead.

“The assailants were attached to the Seventh Division's — ”

“I know.”

I interrupted Leopard as he continued.

These black-clothed people were agents from the dark side of the Empire, who didn't officially exist. Members of the Seventh Division, which considered itself military in name only. To put it bluntly, they did most of the dirty work.

And there was a limited number of people with the authority to mobilize this force.

Only the General of the Imperial Army, or else the members of the Imperial Family.

Given the current circumstances, it wasn't hard to imagine that my older brother Lucien had come up with an aggressive attack plan involving their mobilization.

In fact, I couldn't imagine who else it might have been.

Why do this?

Though our goals were the same, my older brother had ultimately betrayed me.

And it had already been in motion at Basragate Fortress.

That's why I should've kept my guard up...

I couldn't suppress the anger I felt toward my own arrogance. I clenched my teeth so hard they creaked.



When it came down to it, my thoughts were too half-hearted.

Tetra's Heart. Part of the Empire's top-ranking officials were already aware of just how great a catastrophe it would bring down on the capital, or perhaps the entire empire, and the fact that there was still no solution to the problem. Of course, I was one of them.

However, no one knew when the day of reckoning would come.

No one knew when it would happen, only that it wasn't now; nor was it possible to accurately predict the damage it would cause; given the circumstances, even among those in the know, the crisis lacked a certain sense of reality.

'Better not to think too hard about it.' In fact, that was sometimes the prevailing opinion.

Even I'd thought so. If not for this one thing, the Empire's prosperity would have been a solid rock, free of any problems.

But a small doubt continued to nag at the people who knew, in no uncertain terms, of its presence in the capital.

The bomb would come to mind unexpectedly all the time.

It was Second Prince Lucien who was most proactively involved in matters regarding the threat it posed.

Facing the officials, including our father, who balked at even hearing the story, Lucien preached of the danger with a singleminded determination. In the process, he personally mobilized the Schola Magorum and put his counterplan into operation.

That's why I also got on board when Lucien informed me of his solution while I was away on campaign.

His plan was simple.

To seal Tetra, using the girl I was currently sheltering as the vessel. I was to bring her back to the capital by any means necessary.

That was it.

Yes, to a certain extent, it was a realistic plan.

Because she was the very girl who had tested for a six-Attunement aptitude in the past, and who had subsequently disappeared.

But that girl — for me, she was a complicated existence.

The girl who was once my childhood friend, who went missing, and who then returned with a completely different personality.

[Use] her to save the empire.

It was picking the lesser of two evils.

Speaking as a prince, or statesman, it was better to kill one to save the many — to sacrifice her.

It left no room for doubt.

So I accepted the task and devoted myself to bringing her back to the capital under an appropriate pretense. As if he'd seen through my conflicted heart, Lucien had added the postscript "There is also a way to save her". Those words moved me with their kindness.

At first, she was just the girl who had the face of my childhood friend. But before long, I began to grow strongly conscious of her as herself. I was plagued by endless indecision.

The doubt always lingered in my heart.

The closer we got to the capital, the larger it grew inside me.

Is it a sure thing, this method Lucien mentioned for saving her?

What started out as simple words of atonement became increasingly suspect to me.

They were no more than a balm for my conscience to begin with. More and more, I doubted their veracity.

Why? Because I was fully aware that they simply served as an excuse.

I have to protect her.

I have to protect the empire.

Public and personal. Which is the one I can't afford to prioritize?

Reason says to prioritize the Empire. Emotion says, 'Prioritize her.'

As if he'd foreseen that conflict, Lucien had even gone after my life.

At least there was no question that he was up to something. And without the slightest pang of conscience, either.

He was far and away more cool-headed than me. His behavior strengthened my suspicions all the more.

She isn't going to survive, is she?

Thinking about it now, I couldn't help but feel that my decision to bring her all the way to the capital in the end was a self-indulgent thing.

That decision was:

[I'm going to get things straight with Lucien. And if she becomes a sacrifice, I'll protect her.]

It was that sort of thing.



But considering the current situation, that simply came off as too half-hearted, too naïve. There was no getting around that.

I didn't hesitate to label Lucien's actions abnormal; they clearly were. His aggressive strategy utilizing the shadow agency had just skirted civil war.

No matter how I looked at it, those methods were too far removed from the objective of saving the capital.

Lucien was after something else.

So my instincts were telling me.

All three of the commanding officers. Vyde, then Rupert, who'd managed to join us in the nick of time, were standing shoulder to shoulder with Leopard in a line facing me. They awaited their next instructions.

"...Rendezvous with Regnum as soon as possible,"

I ordered them, after a few moments' thought.

I knew that Chris had come into contact with Tetra's Heart once. Moreover, I heard from Regnum's report that an individual named Arcteur had rescued her.

That's why I'd been evaluating the risk in making contact with Chris, but for things to escalate to an attack on this large scale, I'd changed my mind — even that line of thinking was too naïve.

Even if I were to disregard my feelings, I couldn't afford to let Lucien snatch Chris away.

Until now, I'd been too indecisive. I had no intention of compounding that mistake.

I'll protect her. I'll protect Chris. Even if I have to destroy the capital to keep that promise.

“Yes!”

Without a word of misgivings, the three people before me briskly signaled their understanding.

Again, I had to think: What reliable men. But this wasn't the time to leisurely indulge in sentiment.

Each of them began to put their troops in order. No one had an eye to spare for the scattered corpses.

I didn't give a damn about the enemy, but my heart ached to leave the bodies of my men in that state.

But there was nothing I could do for them right now.

“My lord...”

Waiting impatiently for the reshuffling to finish, I heard Karen's voice calling me.

When I turned to look, the maids of the mansion were standing side by side, watching me from a distance. But the reliable Head Maid was nowhere to be seen.

Upon noticing, I asked Karen,

“Karen, what happened to Allie?”

“During the earlier disturbance, the Head Maid suddenly went somewhere.”

“Allie did?”

I was taken aback by those unexpected words.

It was difficult to imagine Allie abandoning her post to run off somewhere.

For some reason, I had an ugly premonition.

“Lord Leon!”

However, I couldn't pursue it any further right now.

Just as I was about to issue Karen holding orders, I heard a voice calling me from a distance.

I recognized it right away, and I looked at its owner as my earlier foreboding deepened.

"Regnum...!"

It was Regnum, who was supposed to be with Chris.

He was coming toward me in an all-out sprint — unusual, considering his usual self. Several people followed behind him: a parade of familiar faces, but I noticed that Chris wasn't among them.

"...Lord Leon, Chris has been abducted."

Without waiting for his ragged panting to slow, without adding in a shred of apology, he got right to the point.

For a moment, my vision was dyed a deep red.

It was no more than a hallucination, but I could tell that my grip on reason had slipped that far.

Fighting back the urge to punch Regnum, I asked,

"What happened?"

Regnum's summary was brief, but it was full of unwelcome surprises nonetheless.

— Allie. When?

I understood that Tetra was manipulating her, but even so, it was too preposterous.

I felt as if everything was slipping out of my grasp.

I won't allow it.

The hand I was staring at vacantly, I clenched into a fist.

"The situation has changed. We're going to the castle. To Tetra's Heart."

"No, please wait, Prince Leon."

Right now, I'll do what I can.

Once I decided, I issued instructions to head for the place where she was sure to be, but a large, middle-aged man who had followed Regnum here held me back.

Suppressing my irritation, I glared at him slightly.

"...You are?"

"Arcteur Vanburke, at your service. We met once, long ago."

Despite his rustic air, the man quickly introduced himself in accordance with etiquette.

— This man is Arcteur?

The man who rescued Chris, or so I heard. Now that he was before me like this, the complex feelings that bubbled up at the thought came as a shock, even to me.

For instance: what exactly is his relationship with Chris?

'How disgraceful,' I thought, with a self-deprecating smile.

"I see. You have an opinion to share, right? Let's hear it. I'd appreciate it if you kept it short."

I pushed him on, deliberately brushing past his words about having met me once in the past.

We might have met before somewhere, certainly, but that wasn't important right now.

“Pardon my presumptuousness, but would it not generate unnecessary chaos to head to the castle with the Elite Guard's combat power on display like this? As awe-inspiring as it is, it may also be mistaken as an act of rebellion against His Majesty the Emperor. A certain degree of restraint might be advisable.”

It certainly was as he said.

But naturally, it wasn't like I hadn't considered it myself. If I led an army to the castle, there was a high chance that it would cause a misunderstanding. Even if I brought charges of rebellion down on my head, it was only to be expected.

But this wasn't the time to be considering such things.

Rather, it was being mindful of them that got us into the situation we were in now. The other side had already set its aggressive strategy into motion. Then, I was going to respond with full force.

And I would protect Chris. The rest, I'd leave for later.

“Then would I be right in saying you have some thoughts about it?”

But contrary to my feelings, I sighed quietly and prodded Arcteur.

I was in a rush, but I couldn't afford to be impatient.

Nonetheless, this man saved Chris once. For now, I should put my faith in him.

It was hard to imagine that he'd stop me without having something in mind.

“Yes. Storming the castle like this is far too much of a risk. Therefore, I will take a select few with me and [fly] to the Heart. Earlier, there was some kind of disruption about the place that made teleportation impossible, but now, it seems that it won't pose a

problem. Something must have happened, but if you're in a hurry, this method is a sure bet."

"I see..."

Upon hearing his proposal, I remembered the identity of the man before me.

It's true, we did meet once in the past.

We'd done little more than pass by each other, but... Arcteur Vanburke.

Hailed as a genius, the previous head of the Schola Magorum. That, I was sure of.

That's why he was familiar with [Chris], and why he knew about the Heart, too.

So that's how it was. His suggested magical approach had reminded me.

"If that's the plan, young master, please leave it to us,"

counseled Leopard. He'd finished reorganizing his forces and begun listening to the conversation from the side. Since when, I didn't know.

But of course, it was advice I couldn't comply with.

It wasn't that I was utterly against the idea of leaving it to others. It was too late for such considerations.

But I had to go.

I had to protect Chris with my own hands.

"Pardon my impoliteness, but I would ask that Lord Leon come as well."

Before I could make my declaration, Arcteur faced Leopard and me and said so, clearly.

"Let's hear your reasoning,"

I said, quickly moving the conversation along before it could develop into an argument. Looking like Arcteur had taken the wind out of his sails, Leopard leveled an obviously hostile gaze at him. But right now, time was precious.

“Earlier, I sensed a large-scale fluctuation in magical power in the direction of the castle. I am certain it was the release of Tetra’s seal. In other words, I believe Tetra has already taken Chris.”

Arcteur was composed and unhesitant, despite the nasty glare, but he predicted the worst-case scenario.

He chose to phrase it as ‘taken’, but, in other words, Tetra had hijacked Chris.

What the hell is this...!

Railing at myself out for letting the attack throw me off balance, I somehow managed to keep my temper.

“However!... That does not necessarily mean that there’s no chance at all. This is an uncertain method, and awfully sentimental, but I think that because you’re special to Chris, won’t you be able to save her?”

As if to slap some sense into me as I teetered on the edge of collapse, Arc continued in somewhat disorganized fast-talk.

His suggestion — dressed up with the words ‘uncertain’ and ‘method’ — was a proposal so hackneyed it was downright ridiculous.

But for me, it was all too attractive. I wanted to believe it could work. My feelings were on the verge of agreeing.

That seemed dangerous.

“...Regnum. What do you think?”

Deliberately, I directed the conversation toward Regnum. Under the circumstances, the man's logical thinking would be useful.

The act agitated Leopard, even Arcteur, but I held them in check with my eyes.

"...As I already reported yesterday, she is not Christopher Carson. Then what exactly did we meet? Would that not make her Christine Rouelle Felmiran? I also believe that to be incorrect. Though the entity we encountered possesses a definite sentience, no one knows what her exact nature is, among similar questions."

His words could be considered almost philosophical in nature.

Yes, Chris definitely wasn't Christopher Carson. I received that report at the mansion, behind closed doors.

The individual known as Christopher Carson was a separate entity, and one that was still alive.

That report gave me an incredible shock. It was something I could never tell Chris about.

However, it seemed inappropriate to be going over it again right now.

"Regnum...! That kind of unrelated talk — "

burst out Leopard, who seemed to be unable to take any more. I forestalled him with a hand.

I nodded at Regnum, whose eyes were looking straight at me, and prompted him to go on.

"Lord Leon, what value do you place on such an uncertain thing?"

That was his conclusion.

It was just as he said. In the end, what was she — Chris? By confirming the continued existence of her supposed true identity, Regnum had invalidated that consciousness,

that alleged possessing spirit.

If so, then what exactly was she?

Was it [Chris], with an error in the transcription of her memories?

No, it wasn't her. Chris had clearly rejected the flickering memories returning to her as wrong. I could only imagine what [Chris] thought of me when she lost herself ten years ago, but this much, I knew.

It was the antithesis of good will, of that I had no doubt.

And she had definitely rejected those feelings.

She had shown me that when she stabbed herself with the knife that day.

At that point, it suddenly dawned on me.

That's right.

She'd shown me. Her will, which she would gamble her own life for.

" — One I would gamble my life for."

And to Regnum, to everyone listening, I clearly declared what value she held for me.

She might be uncertain. She might be something beyond my understanding.

But that would hold true for anyone.

The existence of will. The location of the heart.

I've never understood those things. They're impossible for anyone to prove. So when it comes to what exactly she is, I don't give a damn.

What matters here is what she means to me.

That, and that alone.

In that the case, I can say it loud and clear.

For me, the girl I touched at the riverbank, under the elm tree, at the mansion, and on the castle balcony, is someone that can never be replaced.

Someone that I absolutely cannot afford to lose. No matter what.

So even though I'm putting my life on the line, I have no regrets.

I don't know where her soul is now. But even so, if something remains of it, no matter how slight, I will find her.

— Without fail.

"I'm going to save Chris. Now, immediately. Arcteur. Can we get going?"

I suspected that it would come down to the same thing as saving the capital.

But I chose not to say it.

This was purely out of ego. Something I wanted to do — no more, no less. So I wouldn't think of anything else right now. What was truly precious to me?

I didn't want to lie about that, not now.

"Yes, at once. I ask that you select your personnel. There will be six of us, including me."

I immediately looked at my surroundings.

"Leopard. You stay here and organize the corps to be ready on standby. Vyde, Rupert, with me."

"Yes-!"

The three people I called accepted my orders without the need for me to repeat myself. I needed Leopard preparing for unforeseen events. Though I said 'Without fail', I had to prepare for the worst case scenario.

Vyde and Rupert were indispensable. Whatever happened after our arrival, if these two were with me, we'd manage somehow.

"Lord Leon!"

The last two people.

I was about to decide on Regnum, or maybe Irene. Then two from Arcteur's batch of arrivals, who hadn't made their presence known until now, came to the front and addressed me.

Aira and Palmira.

Their eyes looked at me, pleading. Understanding what those gazes were trying to say, I nodded.

"Yeah, I'd like for you two to come as well."

In practice, their selection was close to useless in terms of combat.

But my objective wasn't combat.

It was saving Chris.

That being the case, having been with her the longest, these two would be helpful.

What I was trying to do wasn't entirely clear.

Nevertheless, if something might change by having the two of them there, then that was what I should do.

And there was no mistake — they'd called out to me because of those same feelings.

“Thank you very much!”

Aira expressed her gratitude. Beside her, Palmira lowered her head.

With this, we had our six.

Preparations complete.

“Arcteur. I’m counting on you.”

“Understood. Now then — before we fly, I’ll give you this.”

While he was talking, Arcteur held out that black object to me. Though I was suspicious, I accepted it nonetheless.

This was —

“That will be our trump card this round.”

He didn’t say anything about how to use it.

But I understood.

It’d been used once before my very eyes. There was no way I’d forget.

“With that, we’ll be on our way — シ”

A short magical invocation. Then, Arcteur’s high speed casting.

Before long, a golden wall materialized.

“Let’s go.”

I’ll save her, without fail. No more will be stolen from her.

Telling myself that above all else, I leapt into the wall.

Chapter 71

A Fight to the Death

Swallowed up by the golden wall, there was a moment of vertigo, and then my surroundings changed completely.

From the daytime outdoors to the familiar underground chamber below the castle.

Though it was bright enough thanks to the mysterious light source, it was totally dark compared to the noonday sun.

“Guh... –”

For a moment, it felt as if my eyes had been crushed, but when I concentrated on them, my eyesight immediately returned.

The red object known as Tetra’s Heart, which I had seen when I came to this place, was no longer there. Broken fragments were scattered about in its place.

And I recognized the one standing in the midst of it all.

“Chris!”

I shouted.

I don’t know if that name’s appropriate anymore.

But the girl in my memories is unmistakably Chris. That has nothing to do with whatever she might be.

That figure.

And if she calls my name with that voice, she’ll be Chris to me.

But the entity before me with Chris’s shape was clearly not my Chris.

A cruelty in its gaze that she had never shown, it glared us as we arrived in turn.

Naturally, my voice received no response either.

— No, I didn't miss the slight, momentary shift in expression.

It was an unpleasant one.

For a moment, a fiery anger blazed up within me.

Right now, the one inside was definitely Tetra.

For that thing to make such an expression with Chris's face was unbearably abhorrent.

" — Tetra, is it?"

Even now I wanted to spring at it and drag it out of her.

No matter what, I couldn't forgive it for being able to exist in that form. I just barely managed to keep my impulse in check by glaring at it.

"That's right. It feels like it's been a long time since I've been called by that name,"

the creature replied in Chris's voice.

"Big Sister!"

"Chris!"

Maybe they couldn't bear it, because Aira and Palmira both cried out.

And maybe understanding the situation from the words spoken by that voice, their own were tinged with grief.

"Fall back."

“...Princess, if this is a joke, I’m not laughing.”

Keeping Aira and Palmira in check as they attempted to move up, Vyde and Rupert came forward as they drew their swords.

Passing by me to station themselves at my right and left flanks, they surveyed Tetra’s condition warily.

“I was surprised that there was still a magus capable of using a teleport gate. The one who was here earlier didn’t seem capable of using magic of any consequence, so I was quite disappointed, wondering if magic had declined so far.”

“What happened to Lucien...!”

I demanded of a sneering Tetra. When it said ‘earlier’, I understood that it meant Lucien.

He’d been the one to release Tetra, without a doubt.

I didn’t know if it was an accident or on purpose. But at least based on Tetra’s presence here, and Lucien’s absence, it seemed plain that he’d encountered some kind of problem.

“Lucien...? ... Ahh, the one who freed me? If so, he’s over there.”

Drawling his name carelessly as well, Tetra pointed behind me. I followed its finger, only to draw a sharp breath.

“Kyaa!?”

Tracking the pointing finger as I had, Aira screamed.

A blood-soaked Lucien lay collapsed against the wall, completely motionless.

“!... That’s — ”

“Head Maid!?”

Two similar figures seized my gaze. One, an unfamiliar swordsman lying crumpled on the floor.

And the other, fallen face down, was Allie.

Just what the hell happened? I didn't know the details, but all of it had to be Tetra's doing.

“Aira, Palmira. Look after those three.”

I was worried, but I couldn't take my eyes off Tetra. For the time being, I gave instructions to the two noncombatants.

Lucien concerned me, but honestly, I wanted to check Allie over personally. But I had to restrain myself for now.

I could hear the sounds of hurried running behind me.

“...You bastard.”

Glaring at Tetra, I wrung out the words in a resentful growl.

I wanted to wipe this thing off the face of the earth as soon as possible. Behind my back, I tightened my grip on the object Arcteur had entrusted to me.

“Give Chris back...!”

Inching forward, I closed the distance between us.

I knew what I had to do, but I couldn't seize an opportunity to do so. That said, it was too reckless to go for the stab without some kind of plan. At least, I expected it to have a power that could destroy warriors and magi regardless of martial prowess. Of course, I had no choice but to evaluate its combat potential in terms of the worst case.

I was facing Tetra — the strongest magus of legend.

“...’Give back’? After stealing everything from me, you people dare to say that to my face!?”

Suddenly, Tetra exploded, slashing a hand clad in blue flame through the air.

Zudon! Cracks fanned out across the ground before it, the shockwave rolling toward us.

“*マジ*”

As the invisible power closed in, Arcteur shot forward and slammed his hands against the ground, blocking it with wall of red magic.

I couldn’t see them, but the disruption’s waves scattered into the surroundings. Gouges tore themselves in the ground, sending a great deal of earth and sand flying into the air.

“...Oh? You can defend against this too? How interesting. Even in the past, there were no masters of that caliber. Hmm, three Attunements? You’re quite an important individual, aren’t you?”

“It’s an honor to be praised by the great magus of legend!”

Its magic thwarted yet again, Tetra smiled fearlessly. Despite facing it with a similar smile, Arcteur couldn’t be feeling terribly confident.

As a matter of fact, Arcteur was a magus of such caliber that he’d been hailed a genius. Still, before a legend, his chances didn’t look good. Actually, his resistance must have really been something if even Tetra had something to say about it.

But it was clear to see that he was at a disadvantage in this situation.

“Vyde, Rupert. I’m fine here. Get in there and raise some hell.”

“Yes — !”

“Roger that!”

I issued instructions to the two soldiers to my left and right.

With a flick, they split from my flanks, advancing to interpose themselves between Tetra and myself. Keeping the right distance from Tetra was a delicate thing. Any closer would leave them open to that no-incantation magic, but of course, it wasn't exactly the right distance for close-quarters combat either.

In that case, forcing it to attack two opponents would allow us to capitalize on our numerical superiority.

My defense would inevitably be weaker for it, but the protection of warriors was meaningless at mid-range. That was better left to Arcteur.

Though, if I didn't go to the front myself in the end, it would also be meaningless.

“...How impudent. Don't imagine for a moment that you can steal from me with this little effort... ジイイイイイイ”

Tetra reached out its two hands toward Vyde and Rupert as they closed in on it from both sides.

The floor before each of them burst open.

But obviously that was yet another of the pair's tricks. I deceived myself about what I was seeing for a moment, but it was hardly something so rosy.

Within the clouds of dust, something squared off against each of the warriors.

“Did she summon stone golems...?”

Arcteur groaned beside me.

They weren't so much stone golems as boulders. Composed of the same cobalt green rock as the floor, the giants blocked the way. They wound up their sturdy arms and sent them rocketing toward their respective opponents.

In a flash, both soldiers leapt out of the way, and the two fists, now without targets, bored into the floor with a thunderous crash. Splinters went flying in every direction.

From the looks of things, it wasn't that the two soldiers were in danger, but even so, their approach toward Tetra had definitely lost its momentum.

"Arcteur. To the front."

It was hard to say that things were looking all that good.

Judging that things would only get worse even if I were to wait in the wings like this, I called over to Arcteur.

"Understood. It's still better that way, right?"

I wasn't exactly completely sure of that myself, but detecting a bit of banter in Arcteur's honest 'still better', I let slip a smile.

Then, my expression hardening, I glared at Tetra and stepped forward.

Wait for me, Chris. I'll rescue you soon.

The ground before me split open, and a stone golem emerged. Facing it, I unsheathed my own sword.

I'm sure the commanding officer isn't supposed to take the field personally. But there are exceptions.

And this is one of them.



After that, the battle accelerated in intensity.

Tetra called forth more stone golems, ultimately fielding six of them. Arcteur shattered one of them into pieces with a shockwave spell.

Narrowly avoiding the attack of one of the remaining golems, I examined the state of the battle. Vyde and Rupert were both fighting well, but they seemed to be at a loss against the golems, which were slow but specialized in defense over everything else. Moreover, each of them was taking on two simultaneously.

If I changed how I looked at it, it could be interpreted as two people suppressing four golems. In that case, there would be one front. And then, it would be better for Arcteur and me to take on Tetra itself.

With Arcteur focused on casting, I currently had no choice but to advance as the vanguard. The one with the greatest offensive power among all of us had to be Arcteur. His magic could pulverize the stone golems; that had already been proven.

I buy time for him to cast, then he smashes the stone golems into pieces. We're going to strike at Tetra all at once.

Though I was planning out that kind of concerted advance in my head, to be honest, I didn't have much self-confidence.

Tetra didn't do anything beyond summoning the stone golems. It just watched us like animals in a zoo.

While taking out the golems could also give us a chance at defeating Tetra, that was far too optimistic. We had to open up a gap somehow.

"Arcteur. Fire at Tetra."

Distancing myself from the advancing golem, I whispered Arcteur's ear.

It probably didn't matter if it took Tetra by surprise; I expected Tetra to defend against it. Even in the unlikely event that we scored a direct hit, Chris was impervious to magic. All I could do was put my faith in that.

Then, slipping past the golem, I'd strike for that gap.

But that would also expose Arcteur to danger.

If I were to pass by the golem, Arcteur would have to take the full brunt of its advance. Moreover, he would be rendered defenseless after completing his casting, which it would aim to take advantage of.

“Understood. Let me pick the timing.”

It was impossible for him to be ignorant of that fact. Nonetheless, he acknowledged the plan without second-guessing me.

Inwardly, I apologized to him. But I didn't say it. Giving him a slight nod, I slipped between the golem's swinging arms and circled around to its flank. For a moment I was afraid it would lose track of its target, but it turned in my direction.

At the same time, I twisted my body, presenting my back to Tetra for a moment before I spun further around and kicked off the ground.

In that moment, Arcteur's magic streaked past the golem and me, heading for Tetra. I ran in pursuit. Before me, a blue haze absorbed the impact with a great crash, kicking up a cloud of debris.

I plunged straight in.

” — Chris!”

I reached out my hand.

The dust cleared. Past my hand, I could make out a figure. The face looking at me —

“ジイイイイイイイ”

— was grinning, full of malice.

Zudon!

“Guah-!?”

The single hand raised in my direction released a wave of force.

Immediately, I crossed the sword and dagger before me in defense, but unable to withstand the impact, it sent me flying backward.

“Lord Leon!”

A voice calling me crossed the gap to reach my ears.

My consciousness all but gone, it woke me back up. But in the next moment, my body slammed into the floor.

“Gaha-!”

The powerful strike to my back drove all the air out of my lungs.

Pain pierced through my chest. I grimaced, my body stiffening. I knew I had to stand up immediately, but my body wouldn't move.

“Kh... kaha-...”

“Prince Leon! Guh-!”

To the side of where I lay, groaning, I caught the sound of Arcteur's voice and the roar of destruction.

I realized that the bill for losing my bet just now had come due: the golem had attacked Arcteur. As I wheezed from the pain, still unable to even breathe normally, I squinted in his direction.

Even so, I could see Arcteur on his feet, dodging the golem's attacks.
Not yet, we haven't hit the worst case scenario just yet.

"Guho-! Guho-!"

"...You're alive? I thought you'd shatter into pieces at that distance."

Finally getting my breath back, I burst into a coughing fit. My ears picked up Tetra's blood-chilling remark.

Actually, it was exactly right. The fact that I hadn't was something close to a miracle. The sword in my right hand was warped from the impact. The thing I clutched in my left — was fine.

Relieved, I dragged up my unwilling body to its feet.

"No matter. I'll deal with you one at a time."

"Khh..."

Again, Tetra faced me and held its hand aloft.

Earlier, I might have made it through by the skin of my teeth, but the next attack seemed sure to smash me into tiny pieces. I moved my body in desperation, but my strength still hadn't come back to me. Floundering, I could only attempt to retreat.

"Lord Leon!"

Along with a voice, someone hauled on my collar. When I looked, it was Aira. I had no idea when she'd come. Perhaps seeing me unable to move, she was dragging me away by the collar.

Though she intended to pull me out of danger, despite her desperation, I barely moved an inch.

“Quickly.”

Then, with her back to me as if to shield me, Palmira stood in Tetra’s way.

It seemed that she intended to buy Aira time to move me.

Swords in both hands, warily held at the ready. She indeed cut a heroic figure, but — but in this situation, she was clearly out of her depth.

Moreover, Tetra was just about to use that magic once more.

“Run... *Run* — !”

“How impertinent... シイイイイイ”

I’d gotten both of them involved like this.

I knew that, but my body wouldn’t move. As if it were only natural, the two of them were trying to protect me. Neither showed any sign of fleeing.

Isn’t there something? Anything? Even though I glanced around, neither Arcteur, nor Vyde, nor Rupert, were in any position to act.

” — Chris!”

My body wouldn’t move. I couldn’t expect rescue, either.

Staking everything on a sliver of hope, I screamed,

“Chris!! Answer me! Chris!!”

“Big Sisteerer!”

“Chris!”

I screamed. To hell with shame and honor. Apparently realizing my plan, Aira and Palmira cried out too.

Answer us, Chris! Answer to our voices.

Like that, Tetra's hand, wreathed in blue flame, raised overhead, stopped.

— Did we get through?

“Chris — ?”

Before I could even finish the thought — Tetra smirked and swung its hand down.

The shockwave cracked the floor into pieces as it passed. I watched it in despair.

First Palmira, then us — we'd be blown away.

Damn it. Not yet —

” — ‘up.’”

Suddenly, a stone golem came flying in from the side, right in front of the shockwave.

As I stared in astonishment, the shockwave struck the golem and blew it into tiny pieces.

“Kyaa!”

“Guh-...!”

Even so, Palmira got caught up in the impact, and I caught her as she tumbled over.

She was covered with shrapnel wounds, but none seemed to be life-threatening.

Setting that aside, what just happened? — I swung my gaze around.

“Yo, sir prince. How about hirin’ me?”

Next to Arcteur, who was sitting on his backside on the floor. His frame big enough to be mistaken for a golem’s, a man gave me a broad grin.

A sword in hand. A body covered all over with scars.

” — Maddox. What are you up to?”

There was no way to mistake the figure of the assassin who had attacked us at the fortress. None at all.

Chapter 72

Robbers and the Robbed

During this interval, my body regained the ability to move.

Slowly, I got to my feet and took a deep breath.

Maybe I was confused because of the extent of the damage. *That* thing, I held in my left hand. The sword in my right... was now at my feet.

It was after picking it up that I noticed. It was too bent to be of any use anymore. And it wasn't something I would use against Chris. As I thought, I really was a mess — I cast the sword aside.

“Nah. That's it. My employer up and died on me over there, you know. Contract's over. Big loss for me. 'Sides, when this is over, I'll be public enemy number one. What a pain in the ass. So when I saw the perfect timing, I took the stage. So how about it? Right now, things look — ”

“Done. For your asking price.”

Looking down at me, Maddox spoke with a smirk. There wasn't a hint of timidity in his manner.

But I wasn't in the mood to chat. Cutting him off, I made my decision on the spot.

He was a guy who really screwed around, but as an ally, there was no one more reassuring. I tossed aside my reservations without the slightest hesitation.

“Lord Leon... But — ”

Groaning, Arcteur gave me a look like he wanted to say something.

“I know what you want to say. But there are things that take priority. Besides, so long as a mercenary is guaranteed money, he won’t turn traitor. Isn’t that right, Maddox?”

“Shall we work that out first?”

What a shrewd man. But this wasn’t the time to sweat the details.

Before us, Tetra raised several more golems. Three — no, four.

That brought the number of golems up to seven. The remaining three were still being held up by Vyde and Rupert. Vyde had one down, one to go. Rupert, two. It wasn’t that there was a particular difference in strength between them. These golems were just a poor match for a lightweight fighter like Rupert.

And that Rupert, dodging the golems’ attacks with ease... looked over here with a startled expression on his face.

He must have assumed that things had taken a turn for the worse. His expression transformed as he approached.

“You son of a bitch!”

To no one’s surprise, he went after Maddox.

Seeing Rupert sprint toward him at full speed, Maddox’s eyes sharpened into those of a hunter. So the man wasn’t from the mercenary mold. Just a fight addict.

But I interposed myself between them.

“Wait, Rupert. I understand how you feel, but stop right now.”

“B-But, he — ”

“Just now, I told you to *stop*.”

I knew how he felt. After all, the man had defeated him once. And most importantly, he'd been on the enemy's side.

And now, I said to treat him as an ally.

Just where should a warrior's dignity turn?

I understood — but right now, there was nothing to do but grin and bear it.

Vyde, too, broke off in the middle of combat and cautiously retreated.

Glancing at the grinning Maddox, he came to me.

"We have a cease-fire with Maddox. Work with him."

"...Got it."

"I understand."

The two responded reluctantly. Even Vyde spoke like he understood but couldn't agree.

I was fully aware of how high-handed it was of me to say it.

Though they were my subordinates, this was a completely personal matter. There wasn't a shred of any grand 'protect the country' kind of sentiment to be found here.

"Maddox. You take on those stone golems. But don't lay a hand on Tetra. That one's mine."

"Well, you'll get your money's worth and then some — !"

His tone careless, Maddox brandished his sword.

As he said, he cut clean through the waist of one of the golems that had been giving us

such a hard time. With a kick, he demolished its flailing torso.

“Ha-hah! Just like so much dirt!”

Maddox was more pleased with the stone soldiers than I thought.

At least for now, it was enough just to know that their monstrous strength wouldn't be directed at us.

“Vyde, Rupert. You two keep on harrying them. Throw them into confusion.”

“Understood.”

“...— Roger!”

I didn't know what they felt, what they thought, in following my orders.

But I didn't doubt their loyalty in the least. That's why I was relying on them now. No matter how arrogant that expectation was.

“Arcteur, can you go?”

“...After two, maybe three more spells, that will be the end.”

“I see...”

At any rate, I had to get close to Tetra.

But that magical barrier and no-incantation shockwave were an impregnable fortress. And our earlier attack had resulted in a crushing defeat.

Though Maddox made a strong addition to our ranks, that said, there was no way it would force Tetra's personal involvement.

What do I do?

Because it had the same form, I burned with impatience every time I looked at Tetra.

“...Hey, you.”

While I was in the middle of holding back my frustration, focusing my thoughts, a voice called out to me from the side.

Irritated by the interruption, I turned to find the unfamiliar man standing there, covered in blood. Though his manner was unexpectedly grounded, and I sensed a strong will in those steady eyes.

Suddenly, I felt as though I'd seen that figure somewhere before.

Something tugged at me.

“Who — ”

— are you. I was about to say it when it hit me.

The man had already fallen by the time we got here. I'd assumed he was Lucien's attendant, but when I thought about it, it was strange for there to only be one.

“...Mind filling me in? That'd be nice. 'Cause the prince got bumped off. And to make things worse, even Maddox is here. I have no idea what's going on.”

From the looks of it, Lucien didn't tell him anything. That was too lax a way to go about things.

But well, he might just be that kind of person, Lucien. He brought this guy here without saying anything to him, didn't he?

— If so, what was this man doing here?

Bringing someone here for no reason was going too far.

“Prince Leon. He’s Christopher Carson.”

While my mind went around in circles, Arcteur gave me the answer.

I took a sharp breath.

— It’s him.

Various feelings mixed together inside me.

But in the end, what I felt was displeasure, or possibly disgust.

I knew he hadn’t done anything wrong, but an ugliness forced its way forward anyway. That earlier feeling of familiarity only added fuel to the fire.

But why did I feel that way? I didn’t want to know the reason at all.

And I had to wonder, how did Tetra manage to take over Chris? It came down to that reason.

Chris had found out. When this man appeared before her.

That she — wasn’t Chris.

— And it destroyed her.

I grit my teeth.

Just like Lucien to be so meticulous. I didn’t know what exactly drove him to do it.

But — I couldn’t forgive him. I looked at his fallen body. Even though I knew it was impossible, it seemed as if his face was sneering at me.

Broken things, lost things, don’t return to how they were before.

— They don’t return, do they.

[Chris] didn’t come back.

Allie won't come back.

And Chris?

Broken Chris?

"Guh-...!"

"Prince Leon!"

"Lord Leon!?"

Thoughts, thoughts I couldn't afford to entertain, crept out from the recesses of my mind.

For a moment, my vision darkened. The strength went out of my legs, and I fell to my knees. I just barely put my hands out in time to prevent myself from falling over.

— No, not yet.

"Lord Leon! Chris, save Chris!"

"Lord Leon! Lord Leoon!"

I know.

I know!

With Aira and Palmira clinging to me, their voices in my ear, I slowly stood up.

They both know. That I have to.

I have to. I'll protect Chris.

I can still go on. I can still do it.

Even if it breaks me. Even if it kills me.

I — will protect — Chris.

“Arcteur!”

A life and death struggle with the golems unfurled before me.

The golems that Maddox, infected with madness, was mowing down one after another. Vyde and Rupert were doing a good job too.

But the golems sprang up one after another. Still, they fought on. What did they have, what did they fight for?

For what they felt. For something they believed in.

If so, then I had to fight too. For what I felt, for something I believed in.

“Huh!? Yes!”

“Speed casting. Shockwave, straight ahead. And a teleport behind Tetra. Can you do it?”

I told Arcteur my spur-of-the-moment plan.

” — I can. I will.”

What I required from him was dual casting.

This would probably render him useless afterward. But there wasn't going to be another chance.

Perhaps understanding my thoughts, Arcteur gave me a determined nod, his expression resolute.

“Now then, you. There's something I want you to do.”

“M-Me?”

And I called out to the confused-looking man, who hadn't been able to follow any of the developments.



“Here I go! — シ”

Arcteur launched his speed casting. With two floating invocation stones glowing red before him, he began to cast with both hands. A tremendous energy crackled through the air.

“Shit, I took on a really weird job, I don't really want to get close to that thing, but...!”

Chris Original rattled off a stream of complaints as he sprinted dead ahead.

Unable to refuse in the face of insistence, the both of them. Unconsciously, I smiled wryly. And they both had their hang-ups about Maddox. It was precisely because I could see it, that I felt something I couldn't put into words.

“Prince Leon. I'm firing!”

“Yeah.”

At the sound of Arcteur's voice, I kicked off the ground too.

He released a roaring shockwave directly ahead of me. Before it reached Tetra, it flashily exploded, sending up clouds of dirt and dust, same as before.

“I'm telling you, it's futile. You should just give up on these inane tricks!”

“Deploying teleport!”

Then, before the other side vanished in the debris, I could see Tetra holding a hand up

in the air.

At the same time, Arcteur's voice rang in my ears again.

A golden wall materialized. Just a short distance away, its counterpart opened behind Tetra.

"Let's go! ORAA-!"

Chris Original's voice rang out. There was a desperate edge to it.

Then, I —

— appeared out of the golden wall. Behind Tetra.

It seemed perfectly timed.

"You lowly fool!"

Turning in the space of a moment, Tetra struck with its raised hand.

— That's right.

Tetra could sense magical power. That's why it was naturally impossible for it not to notice the golden wall — the thing was basically a mass of magical power.

And it attacked the creature that came through.

Tetra's shockwave smashed it to pieces.

"Wha-!?"

It was a stone golem.

I only asked one thing of Chris Original. It was: Push the nearest golem into the golden wall that appears beside it.

Chris performed his role perfectly. But of course — it's Chris.

And when I finally heard Tetra's surprised voice, I shouted back:

"Get out of Chris! Tetra!"

Straight ahead. Cutting through the dust cloud from the shockwave, I stabbed Tetra with the black dagger in my hand.

The one Chris stabbed herself with that night.

Arcteur told me what it was. His magic-absorbing trump card.

As surprise colored Chris's face, I buried the knife into her chest all the way to the hilt.

"Ga-AAAAA-AA-AA!?"

Staring at the knife in disbelief, Tetra screamed in shock.

Something like dark lightning ran through the core of the knife, rushing into Tetra's — Chris's body.

"By — By something like thiiiiis — !"

I dragged the struggling Tetra down to the floor, restraining it.

The knife emitted a blue light, and that blue pattern ran along Chris's body, streaming into the blade.

At the same time, I could see the golems crumbling away out of the corner of my eye.

"Am I — ! Am I going to be robbed again!? No! Help me! Help — "

Its earlier nonchalant expression torn away, Tetra kept screaming.

It's over, Tetra.

I suspected that something had happened to Tetra, too, in the past. I understood enough from the odds and ends of its broken exclamations to imagine.

— But, while that may be true, it was impossible for me to forgive it.

“Chris! Come back, Chris!”

Holding down her thrashing body, I focused solely on calling out to Chris.

The knife glowed brighter and brighter. The blue radiance paled. Then, burning white-hot, it flashed pure white.

“Stop... help... again... I... ha...”

Along with that dazzling light, that expression, the light in those eyes, gradually faded away.

It was clear that Tetra was disappearing.

When it was completely gone, would Chris come back?

As I watched Tetra's consciousness gradually extinguish, I sensed my own feelings fading.

As if my heart were disappearing.

“Chris...!”

“Big Sister! Big Sisteer!”

“Chris, please! Come back!”

Before I knew it, Aira and Palmira had come close, calling out to Chris the same way. Clinging to her in desperation. Screaming on the verge of tears.

That's right, Chris. Everyone's waiting for you.

Please...!

“Ah-... ah...”

Eventually, the light of the shining knife — went out.

It was just like the torch of her life.

Watching the light disappear the same way from Chris's eyes, I held her tightly.

“Please. Chris... Come back...!”

— I —

Chapter 73

The Lost, the Newly Born

The middle of a stagnant swamp.

There was no heart in its unstable depths.

Although there had once been something within, although its contents had changed many times over, there was nothing inside it now.

The many things it had accumulated were in safekeeping.

The feelings, the experiences, the memories.

But now, this massive collection had no heart. Even if it were to take form, it wouldn't be made to move.

The heart it certainly once possessed had fallen to the bottom of a deeper abyss, lost. It would never surface again.

Lost things never return.

But there were voices calling it back.

Voices that penetrated the water's surface, reaching the bottom of the swamp.

The heart was lost. Voices wouldn't reach the lost.

Only memories would.

A body wreathed in new memories.

Countless thoughts, feelings, wishes, hopes, and prayers.

They broke through to the collection of memories resting within.

And — a new heart was born.

Wave upon wave piling upon each other, becoming a surging sea.

Clouds gathered, giving rise to lightning.

Enfolded by accumulated experience, calling voices, fresh memories, a newborn heart took form.

Beckoned by the voices crying for its return, it came to completion. In its desired form.

If that isn't a miracle, what is?



“..L-.”

My eyes opened.

The face in my blurry vision —

The one who said to me, ‘Come back’ —

The figure of the man who suffered for me, who now threw anything and everything aside for me, who singlemindedly fought for my sake alone —

Was right before my eyes.

All of those memories were now in here.

Each and every one of those memories, those experiences, was in my heart.

Now, they made me anew.

“L-Leon...”

I called his name. My tears spilled over of their own accord.

I knew. Or maybe, god help me, I *knew*.

I am no longer me.

The thing born that day in the labyrinth — no longer exists.

And now, a new swamp man has been born.

This me is a swamp girl born from the memories of Chris, my previous self, and Leon.

“Chris...!”

“Umph—”

Two shaking hands embraced me. Tight enough that it hurt.

That called forth Leon’s memories from inside me with even greater intensity.

“Big Sister!”

“Chris.”

Clinging to me in a similar way were Aira and Palmira.

Their memories were in here too.

Is it alright for me to answer to that name? Do I have the right? Am I worth holding?

I thought it over, just a bit.

However, the emotion in my heart was neither sadness nor pain.

It was none other than the joy of being born anew.

Leon, Aira, Palmira.

Then, visible over Leon’s shoulder, Rupert, Vyde, Arc, Maddox. And — Chris.

Right now, it was all I felt.

I had no past, but if I thought about it now, at least that much was for sure.

My body enclosed in warmth, I shut my eyes.

It didn't mean being spared the guilt.



The ones who welcomed us upon our return to the mansion were Leopard, followed by the entire Elite Guard. After that, Irene and the maids.

The first to return were Leon and me. Palmira. Vyde, Rupert.

Aira and Arc had taken Allie, her condition unknown, to the infirmary attached to the castle.

Maddox said he'd be by to collect his pay sooner or later and disappeared again.

Chris said he had a special errand to run.

Here yesterday but gone today, at least the battlefield in the mansion courtyard had been cleaned up. Though the place was in shambles, there weren't any corpses left.

But I knew that in fact, several of the Elite Guard had died in action. And Allie wasn't here either.

It was for precisely that reason that in contrast to the joy with which Leopard and Elite Guard welcomed Leon back, Leon's own demeanor was somewhat somber.

Even so, he faced the welcoming crowd with a smile. To me, it only spoke of pain.

"Leon."

When I called out to him, unable to bear it, he stroked my head with a gentle look on his face.

Somehow, I had the feeling that I was being treated like a child. He wasn't holding back at all, or rather... I thought he was unrestrained before, but now, I was even more aware of it.

Something in Leon's feelings toward me might have come unbound.

But the more he treated me that way, the more I questioned whether I had the right to accept it.

I should set things straight after all.

I also shot a look at Palmira, standing beside me.

She made a strange face.

“...Chris?”

Noticing me, a puzzled-looking Irene drew closer at the same time.

After coming up to me, she stared at me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes with even less modesty than Leon.

Her behavior, which had been totally unconstrained from the very beginning, unlike Leon's, made my heart thump quite a bit.

“...What's with this feeling? Is there something different about you?”

“...Dunno, I guess so.”

“Chris got bridal training here. The Chris now is very much a girl.”

Palmira followed up with something very different from the spirit in which I answered.

She's sharp. Her words ratcheted up the tension in my innermost thoughts: maybe, just maybe, she's seen through me. She knows that I'm not who I was before. I don't mean that wasn't a nice save that she made just now, but I can't just smile and go along with the content.

Ah, goddamnit. Even though it's got nothing to do with being a man or woman.

A self-deprecating smile slipped out of me.

“I see... Hmmmm. Yeah, it does feel that way. The way you talk hasn’t changed, but — I mean, the atmosphere around you, your behavior, there’s something girly about them. Kinda refined, or... I didn’t feel it so much at my house earlier, though.”

Speaking of which, Irene did see me before my previous self was destroyed.

For it to take me this long to remember, I must be different from before after all. And to be more precise, it was because I took in the memories of four people — Allie, Chris, Tetra, and Leon — after that.

That’s why Irene’s ‘earlier’ felt quite long ago to me.

To take in another’s memories.

Until now, I’d done it almost unconsciously, as if compelled, but it seemed like a good idea to be very careful after this.

It might be a handy tool, in a sense, but it didn’t seem fair to me.

If I were to make a show of taking Irene’s memories, right here, right now, I think she’d definitely be furious.

“But I’m still kinda pissed. Even though you’re a guy in a girl’s body, there’s really no way for me to win against you, is there?”

Unsurprisingly, she muttered that part in a small voice.

I think there’s a good chance that my knowledge of the arcane is greater than Irene’s. With Tetra’s memories, I’d inherited all of her knowledge on magic.

Even the way I saw things — everything — seemed to have changed.

Of course, I planned to keep silent about it to Irene for the rest of my life.

“Chris.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Leon called me as he went inside the mansion, and I jogged after him.

Hey, Leon.

Is it okay for me to be Chris?

Is it alright for *me* to accept your feelings like this?



Disheartened, I had my meal, missing just Aira and Arc out of the usual faces — they were due to return soon — and then took a bath.

After that, I entered the room assigned to me.

The truth is, I don't know how to act around Leon.

I feel like a lie. No matter how I try, I can't decide whether it's okay for me to accept him and his intense honesty.

Is it okay for me to casually play Chris like this?

I can't help but feel guilty about the version of me who disappeared. Leon's memories, Aira and Palmira's memories, none of those belong to me. I've just inherited them.

Truthfully, I don't even have the right to be in this mansion.

Even this room belongs to Chris, not me.

I'm not Chris. I'm just a swamp man.

There's no such thing as a true past, not for me.

I collapsed onto the bed.

— I'd rather go somewhere with no connection to any of this.

“...Hi-, c... guh-...”

I'm scared.

I'm scared, I'm scared, I can't help it.

I don't know who I am. It's a fear that runs heart-deep.

Chris couldn't take it. That's why I'm here now.

Leon. Leon.

I looked at the chair beside the bed, chasing the shadow that should have been there.

Tell me. Tell me who I am.

And whether even these emotions — are a lie.

Knock, knock

As I lay curled up on top of the bed, I heard a quiet knocking at the door.

Terror and joy mingled in my eyes, I looked at it.

“Y-Yes?”

My voice shook. Could it be — could it be?

The door opened a crack, and light entered the room.

Then, in came —

“Big Sister?”

— Aira and Palmira.



It wasn't like I was disappointed. It was just anticlimactic.

That's what I told myself as I sat back down on the bed. Then I noticed, and I used my hands to wipe at the area around my eyes.

"Wh-What's up? You're both here."

Keeping as calm as I could, I welcomed my two visitors, who came with a lantern in hand.

They quietly gave the room a once-over, and after looking at me, exchanged looks and nodded.

Somehow, I felt like this had happened before.

"What a relief. I was thinking, 'What if Lord Leon is here too?'"

"Even if he was, would it matter...?"

Alright, what the hell are they talking about?

After everything that's gone down, there's no reason for them to be reserved even if he was around.

"If the two of you were together in bed, then naturally we would also be discreet."

"Bu-!?"

As usual, Palmira said the unthinkable with total bluntness.

What — what 'naturally'?

Imagining it for even a moment, I felt my face burning. I was about to put my hands to

my cheeks, then stopped in a hurry. Even I thought it would be too suspicious.

“N–No, even if you weren’t in the bed, we’d be discreet, of course!?”

Then it was Aira with the bizarre follow-up, crossing her hands. The lantern shook, scattering light throughout the room. Perhaps noticing that, she put it on the table.

Then they each sat down on the bed, to either side of me.

I didn’t remember saying anything at all, but when I saw them avoid the chair before me, I knew why they did it.

“So, what is it?”

Boxed in, my guts were in knots.

For instance, haven’t they come to tell me that I’m not Chris?

Not that. Definitely not that. Of course it won’t be that.

“Mm, there was something... that is, there was something a little strange about you, Big Sister.”

Ba-dump.

The sound of my heart instantly grew louder. Sensing my fingertips trembling, I balled my hands into fists.

The trembling in my arms themselves, I suppressed with a hand on either side.

“Your condition has been strange since we arrived at the estate.”

I bit my lip.

— No, this is something else.

These two only came to talk about how I was a bit off, that's all.

I breathed in. Breathed out.

From their perspective, that was strange enough by itself, right? But I did it deliberately.

If I did, then maybe the way my heart was jumping about wouldn't directly affect my voice.

"...Big Sister?"

"No, uhm. It's just a bit, still. It doesn't feel real. Look, a lot of things happened..."

"...I see."

As questionable as my response was, Aira looked relieved.

On the other hand, I felt Palmira staring steadily at me from the other side.

Palmira is who she is, so there's always that kind of feeling. But right now, it's bad for my heart.

"More importantly — how's Allie? Aira, you went with her, right?"

I changed the subject as naturally as possible. Though this was purely out of concern.

Aira and Arc had gone with Allie when she was taken away somewhere else.

Then, they must have come back because they got some kind of conclusion about her condition.

However, though I asked, I could roughly guess the answer.

As I expected, Aira's face darkened.

"The Head Maid's soul is gone... Lord Arc..."

“I see...”

No other words came to me.

I knew the matter itself. Having accepted Tetra’s possession, her heart was broken. I had the memories of it.

And at the time, Lucien had egged her on.

A broken heart will never go back to the way it was. Lost things never return.

That, I understood better than anything else.

— But I could rehouse that heart.

That was from Tetra’s memories.

I’d have to borrow Arc’s power for the finer details, but I had a rough understanding of the process.

What it came down to were the memories, but I definitely had those here.

However, it would give birth to one of my kind: a swamp man.

Would it be just like Chris had been? My guess was that no one around her would know. Not even she would.

If that was the case, wouldn’t she be saved?

— But would that really be okay?

It wouldn’t be Allie. A swamp man.

I couldn’t decide at all whether that would be a good thing, or bad. If I could, I wouldn’t have been conflicted myself in the first place.

“Arc didn’t say anything else? Like, for example, whether she can be healed or not?”

If it was Arc, who created me — or rather, [Chris] — he might be able to come up with something.

But Aira merely shook her head listlessly.

Honestly, I wanted to try asking people.

Whether it would be a problem if she were resurrected as a swamp man.

But at the same time, I didn't want to ask.

What if the answer was 'No, something like that shouldn't be allowed to exist'?

What if Leon's answer — was rejection?

Even thinking about it terrified me.

— No.

Instead, it might even be better to ask.

If Leon rejected it as a way of healing Allie, then at that time —.

At that time, I wouldn't be able to stay here either.

At least it would make that clear.

Or shall I ask the two with me right now?

Aira, Palmira, what do you think?

“C-Come to think of it — ”

My voice trembled slightly.

“You two, that is, you came to save me. Ummm, so — I'm sorry. Even though I said I'd be the one to protect you. How pathetic...”

But what came out of my mouth was something else.

An apology. Yeah, what I came out with were words of apology to the two of them.

Maybe they would reject me. Sure, I was afraid of the possibility.

But if things were going to come to that, then I had to say it now.

I sighed. Without looking at them, I continued.

” — Thinking about it, a lot’s happened. We became slaves. But then Leon saved us... Haha. Only we went right back to being slaves again. We all went walking around Telaberan... Looking back on the journey in the carriage, I had fun. We tried to sneak out, we were attacked by a dragon... Now that I think about it, we’ve gotten mixed up in a whole lot of things, the three of us.”

— Those memories were no more than temporary.

All of them belonged to Chris. Not me.

“...After — after that... L-Leon... said all that w-weird stuff — about getting married, and g-gave everyone such a surprise — Aira, you — said something strange, and, and P-Palmira — ”

“Big Sister!”

“Chris!”

Suddenly, both of them hugged me.

What is it? All of a sudden?

“We know. We know already...”

As she hugged me, Palmira said something I didn't understand. Her body was shaking. Aira's, too.

— Are they crying?

“We're okay with anything, Big Sister. So — so — don't leave anymore... I'm begging you...”

Hearing Aira's words, I breathed in sharply.

Then, at that moment, I realized I was crying too.

The truth is, I'm flimsy, and everything about me is no more than a lie. It's lonely, a sorrow impossible to endure.

Not [Chris], nor Chris.

Just what is the truth? Just what am I? I don't even know that much; I can't help but feel forlorn.

But Aira says, 'It's all okay,' even to someone like me.

Is she saying that knowing the truth, or is it something else?

But — the two of them probably understand what I am.

“Hgh-, uuu, guh-, ah, waah-”

Inexplicable tears tumbled down one after another without stopping.

This is definitely a happiness I could accept.

Because there were people who'd understand me.

This reassurance doesn't come from taking in memories.

It's definitely conveyed through the heart. That, I want to believe.

Author's Notes

I think the next chapter will be the last.

Footnotes

1. Chris uses *ore* pretty consistently throughout this chapter and the next, but will occasionally switch to *watashi* in keeping with her new incarnation and her identification as a 'swamp *girl*'.

Epilogue

Where the Heart Lies

“Let’s go to Allie’s.”

When I woke up the next day, Leon wasn’t there.

I felt a bit lonely, but most likely because there were three people here, he decided to hold off.

However, the window that had obviously been shut last night was slightly ajar, and a gentle autumn breeze drifted into the room along with the morning sunlight.

It definitely carried Leon’s lingering scent, and for me, just that was enough.

Slipping out of bed by myself, I went to look for Leon and discovered him in his office.

Where the maids and I had held lessons when he wasn’t there.

Back then, Allie had been here, too, and it’d seemed like the most natural thing in the world to me.

No doubt Leon felt the same.

The unchanging mornings.

They suited this mansion.

That’s why, when I saw Leon, I told him so.

I didn’t say why I came to see him, why I said those words.

And no questions were forthcoming from Leon either.



And so, we were inside a carriage.

Leon and me. Just the two of us. I asked Aira and Palmira to watch the mansion. I felt

a little bit awkward, and they seemed to want to say something, too, but in the end, they agreed.

Without Allie in the mansion, the maids seemed a little distant somehow. It was difficult for me to determine whether it was because of her absence or the changes in me.

“Big Sister, something about you is similar to the Head Maid, you know?”

I remembered what Aira said to me right before I left.

Maybe it was a little of both.

In any case, I’d changed.

Changed, or would it be better to say ‘replaced’? And, as Aira so aptly pointed out, the many experiences within me were trying to change me even further.

I was helpless to do anything about it.

I felt like I was becoming less and less myself, but honestly speaking, I’d been a copy for such a long time now that there was no ‘original me’, so it was strange to be worrying about it.

But, what does everyone else think?

What does Leon think?

I looked up at Leon, who was sitting next to me, with a sidelong glance.

For a moment, our eyes met, and I hastily turned mine away.

His eyes held their usual kindness, and his mouth was curved in a smile.

Nothing has changed about Leon.

I’m the only one who’s different. Will Leon accept that?

No, before that — will he forgive me for not being Chris?

I wouldn't let my depressing thoughts show on my face.

I shifted my gaze to the scenery flowing by outside the carriage window.



We arrived at the castle, and when we got off the carriage, an unexpected face was waiting for us.

“Bout time. Ah, I mean... Prince Leon. Thank you for your prompt response...”

Christopher Carson. Chris Original.

The sudden chance meeting stirred complex emotions inside me that I couldn't suppress. Now I was the third Chris, and a completely different person, you might say. The body the second Chris had wished to return to. And the one for which such a return was impossible.

The owner of that body and the main cause of the second Chris's destruction.

“Kh-... Haha-”

Thinking whatever he was thinking about, Leon suddenly burst into laughter, leaving me dumbstruck. Naturally, Chris's expression grew puzzled.

“...Prince?”

“Hahaha —... no, I'm sorry. It was just a bit nostalgic, that's all.”

As he finally brought his laughter back under control, the look in his eyes grew slightly distant.

Seeing that, my feelings became even more tangled.

That nostalgia was definitely from the time Leon and Chris first met. Outside the gates

of Telaberan, which now seemed too far away.

The memory of Chris in the carriage, growing flustered while trying to keep to the cover story.

That had to be it.

The fact he remembered made me happy — and lonely.

“...At any rate, please hurry. There isn’t much time.”

Probably unable to understand, Chris hastened Leon on with a disheartened look on his face.

Earlier, Chris said ‘response’. Just what exactly is waiting for us?

Leon hadn’t said anything about this. I was sure that he’d merely accepted my suggestion, but now I looked at him with my head tilted to the side.

Leon looked at me and *poff*, put a hand on my head. I felt like he’d been doing that a lot recently. I was starting to hallucinate that somehow, I was getting even shorter.

Even so, isn’t this unfair?

Don’t go pulling this secret bullshit on me.

I won’t bring it up myself if you do, and you know it. That’s playing dirty.



Nothing I can do about it. I entered the castle after Chris, who seemed impatient for some reason.

The castle’s interior was surprisingly deserted. Every once in a while, we’d pass by people who appeared to be civil officials or knights. The second Chris had only been here once. But if I unpacked Leon’s memories, I could get a rough idea of where things were.

When I thought about it, maybe knowing wasn’t always such a good thing.

Eventually, Chris stopped in front of a large door. It was gorgeously crafted, and standing to either side of it were two knight guards.

Chris knocked on the door briskly, then opened it. The room —

The room was the Second Prince's private room. Lucien's room.

I followed Chris inside.

Frankly, I couldn't hide my confusion. Why, exactly, did I have to come to Lucien's room at this point in the game? Leon knew something, but I was completely clueless.

Before us was Lucien, who'd been slammed into a wall by magic.

What had he been trying to do, in the end? I knew that it wasn't to seal Tetra, as he'd told Leon.

"...Yo, Leon... Chris."

Sure enough, lying down on the great bed in the center of the room was Lucien. A man in white stood beside it. He had a doctorly sort of air about him.

So he didn't die?

That was the first thing that occurred to me, but even I have to admit it was tactless. Lucien was sinking into a sea of his own blood back there — I figured that anyone would've died.

He lived.

I was surprised, but not so much out of happiness. That said, I didn't hate him, either. Truth be told, I didn't know if he was still clinging to his objective, but I kept my

emotions level. The destruction of the second Chris had definitely been this man's doing.

However, while that may be true, the idea of resenting him for it brought up fairly complicated feelings for me.

"Brother. I came, as promised."

"Yeah, thanks. Frankly, I thought that even if you didn't, there was nothing I could do about it. So, the wish of a dying man... you were curious to hear what it was, I suppose?"

I gasped upon hearing those words.

He was unexpectedly talkative, given the subject matter, but the shadow of death certainly was looming over his face. His eyes were murky, the color gone from his cheeks.

His innermost thoughts aside, Lucien's usual liveliness was no longer anywhere to be seen.

"....."

Accepting his words, Leon had nothing to say in response.

His feelings were probably very complicated, just like mine. Between brothers, it wouldn't be out-of-place for a simple "Don't die", but too much had happened for that to be said.

"So you came, Chris. You, well, I have no right to say this to you, but, I have a favor to ask."

A favor, from me? Now?

Leon looked at me.

His eyes were worried. Lucien had ultimately used and destroyed Chris to create

Tetra's vessel. You could say the uneasiness was only to be expected.

"...I — want you to accept my memories."

continued the frail Lucien, ignoring the atmosphere. He produced a desperate smile, but those words cut me keenly.

Memories.

I swallowed, hard.

I didn't think I'd end up hearing that talk right here, right now. I bit my lip, turning rigid.

The thing I wanted to keep hidden, my secret.

Transcribing others' memories.

There was a chance that everyone knew, to a slight degree. But still, I wanted to avoid seeing it explicitly out in the open here if I could help it.

Once I copied another's memories, what would happen?

It was frightening, being forced to imagine it.

I glanced at Leon. He was watching Lucien with a complicated look on his face.

What should I do? Should I dodge the question?

"Please."

As I wallowed in confusion, Lucien, who'd seemed asleep, reached out one of his palms to me.

Even that caused him agony. His hand was trembling.

I looked at Leon once more.

He met my eyes but didn't say anything. Standing beside Lucien, Chris seemed to have

something he wanted to say, but he ultimately stayed silent.

Is it okay for me to decide?

I came to the conclusion that it was. Though I was ultimately conflicted, I slowly approached the bed and laid my hand in his outstretched palm.

A blue light burst into life. Then, Lucien's memories flowed into me.



"...Mn."

It felt like a long time had passed. It was probably a single moment.

I opened my eyes and took my hand back from Lucien.

What lay within was half of one man's lifetime, colored by the despair of the knowledge forced upon him.

I knew it from Lucien's appearance. Certainly, compared to the First Prince, Arthur, and the Third Prince, Leon, his looks were clearly different. They pointed to his birth from a different mother.

As a result, Lucien was treated as someone of little consequence among the three princes. His loyalty to the nation was the same. But because the circumstances of his birth, no one valued him.

Those feelings grew, and whatever the reality, he felt his brothers thought of him the same way.

Moreover, he didn't realize it himself, but his way of thinking was too radical; so it didn't matter how right he was, his thoughts continued to be received with silent contempt.

That's why his understanding drove him to despair and gave Tetra an opening.

At the end of the day, Lucien was just another person dancing to Tetra's tune.

“Thank you. I’m happy, Chris. Ahh — finally, I have the chance to be fully understood. Without being pushed aside, without being deceived. Simply understood. Leaving this behind, I can move on... There’s no greater happiness.”

I could understand that. For that reason, I couldn’t say anything.

Though acceptance is a completely separate matter, being understood is unmistakably a cause for joy.

That’s true for anyone.

It’s true for me. Truth be told, I want someone to understand me.

Even if they don’t accept me, it’s okay. I want my feelings to be understood properly, for precisely what they are. With that, I can be sure of my place in the world.

But that’s difficult.

In reality, no one understands. Ultimately, there’s no way to make sure if things have gotten across correctly.

That’s why Lucien summoned me. To copy his memories, and in doing so, to understand him.

Just before he finished this half a lifetime, the man accomplished what he’d always longed for.

There’s no way he wouldn’t be happy.

“I’ll say this, at the end. I’m sorry. Leon, and Chris. Well, I don’t think I’ll be forgiven. But words are important, I think. So thank you — I didn’t even have the courage to say that...”

Saying his final words, Lucien’s eyes closed gently. The attending physician rushed to check on his condition.

He’d lost consciousness.

So the doctor said. I was shocked for a moment, wondering if he'd passed away. A small sigh escaped my lips.

"Let's go."

Leon said those two stiff words. From his expression, he was fighting desperately to hold something back.

An adversary he could never forgive. But now, that was wavering.

That was the look he had on his face.

We left the room, closing the door behind us.

"Thank you for your hard work. You've done enough already. The compensation he promised you, I'll pay it. Please contact me with the amount later."

I realized that Chris had left the room with us just as Leon offered him words of thanks. Chris looked puzzled for a moment, then lowered his head.

"Well, if you say so, then I accept with gratitude. But just in case, I intend to stay until the end, you know?"

Leon seemed taken aback.

"...Why? You don't have that deep an obligation to him, do you?"

I thought the same.

I had this Chris's memories, and now Lucien's as well, but no matter how I sifted through them, I found no reason for Chris to go that far.

But I felt that somehow, I understood his reason for doing this.

“How should I put it? Look, isn’t Prince Lucien all alone? It may be disrespectful of me to say so, but hardly anyone has come to visit him. Even though they know he doesn’t have much time left. Well, I suppose there are a lot of circumstances. I mean, I only signed a contract with the guy once, so maybe I’m overstepping my bounds, but if you’re alright with me, is it okay for me to stay until the end...?”

Half formal, half normal, Chris reeled off his jumbled mishmash of a speech like he found it totally reasonable.

I caught the sound of Leon taking a sharp breath beside me. I turned my eyes to him the same moment he turned his eyes to me.

Our eyes met. I understood what he wanted to say.

Um, not sure how to say this. But, it’s because we’re different, don’t you think? Chris and me.

Abruptly, I averted my eyes.

“...Is that so? You have my gratitude... Chris. Please take care of my older brother.”

From outside my view, turned aside as it was, I picked up Leon’s voice.

Even if I denied it to myself, it was ticklish to hear. Speaking of which, isn’t this the first time Leon has called this Chris by name?

But aren’t you glad, Lucien?

Unexpectedly, you have someone who understands close to you. You may have left your memories with me, but you have the chance to pass things on with words, too. With something more than words.

If you call it good fortune, then it just might be.

But if someone’s there as a result, even if it’s just the one, isn’t that enough?



Parting ways with Chris, we arrived at the hospital room assigned to Allie, the favorite. We opened the door to find Allie, lying in bed, and Arc, uncomfortably squeezed into

a chair beside her, in a room so small it couldn't even be compared to Lucien's.

"Hey, Arcteur. Sorry to put you through all the trouble,"

Leon greeted him, his voice quiet. Arc stood up from the chair.

"If it isn't Prince Leon. Calling it trouble is kinder than I deserve,"

Arc said amiably, bowing his head. Then, as if they'd arranged it beforehand, the two moved their gazes to the bed.

There, Allie's completely defenseless figure was stretched out.

Because the thin blanket covering her rose and fell slightly, I knew that she was alive, at least.

Only, she wouldn't wake up.

"How is she?"

"You could say that she's stable. The human body is outside my field of expertise, but according to the doctor, there are no problems. But... as for her heart — "

The conversation stopped there. No one said anything.

But that was enough. Everyone present understood equally well what that meant.

[Chris] must have been the same way.

In that sense, Arc might even be considered an expert on these symptoms. But what he could do about them was another story.

"Is that so..."

Leon looked at Allie with a trace of dejection in his expression.

He probably looked the same way when he saw [Chris] ten years ago. He was seeing it all over again. Just how badly — was his heart hurting?

It was probably the same for Arc.

He wasn't acquainted with Allie, but he knew all too well what it was like to be helpless in the face of this.

So I said the words that I came all the way here to say.

"Arc, Leon. I'll return Allie's heart to her."

Although it came from me, that voice sounded surprisingly level.



"Something like that — "

Arc pressed me to elaborate, a sincere expression of astonishment on his face.

Feeling calmer somehow, I thought, 'I mean, this is Arc, but to be that shaken?'

I looked at Leon. His eyes a bit wide in surprise, he, too, stared at me with disbelief stamped across his face.

Seeing that, I was overcome by an indescribable feeling.

By saying this much, I'm proving that I'm not Chris.

But it's something I definitely have to make clear.

So if I can save Allie — well, the people who are alive right now. Leon, and the people at the mansion. If I can save them, then I will.

There's no evil in that. There definitely isn't.

"...Even if she's lost her heart, *I* can return it to her — look, I'm here, aren't I? Master Arc — Big Brother."

Crushing down the sensation of my body teetering on the brink of collapse, I — I addressed the two of them by the nostalgic names in my memories.

“Chr... is?”

This time, the two of them looked genuinely astonished.

I grinned, enjoying it.

“That’s right. I was able to come back. That’s why Allie can come back too, for sure. But listen well. Big Brother, Teacher.”

I took a breath. An act, or sincerity?

Calming down, I kept it matter-of-fact.

“It’s the reconstruction of Allie’s heart. The one that once existed was destroyed, and won’t be coming back. Teacher, you know that very well too, right? So using her memories, I’ll make a new one.”

“Th-That’s... but, her memories — ”

When Arc’s panicked words broke off, Leon took a sharp breath.

That’s right. I can take in memories. That’s why.

“It’s alright. Allie’s memories are in here too. By transcribing them, she’ll be remade.”

I didn’t mince words. I wanted them to understand with perfect clarity.

Arc still looked shocked. Leon — nothing. His emotions were unreadable.

“I can construct her that way. Though I’ll need your help too, Teacher. However, I want you to think carefully. About whether that will truly be alright.”

“That — but, it won’t be the former Allie, right?”

It’s alright. I’m getting through. Even in his silence, Leon surely understands too.

If he does, then —

“That’s right, that’s why I’m also a new and distinct version of me. Not Christine, not Christopher. Of course, not Chris, either. But possessing all of their memories, who does that make me? If I put it like this, I wonder if you’ll understand? — I’m a swamp man.”

I said it. God help me, I said it.

If I put it that way, they’re sure to understand, right? What, exactly, I mean.

I have the memories. But that’s all there is to me.

A forgery, as it were.

Yeah, a separate something that bears a close resemblance. An unquestionably blasphemous thing.

I walked across the room to the inner window. As if to look outside, I turned my back on them — on Leon (Big Brother).

“Allie can be brought back. But she’ll be the same as me, a swamp man. If you’re alright with that even so, she can be brought back. What will you do, Big Brother?”

I asked, holding down my feelings. My voice was — fine. I definitely couldn’t show him my face right now.

After, I simply waited for Leon to speak.

Will he offer acceptance, or rejection?

Keenly alert, I took shallow breaths.

“Bring Allie back, Chris.”

It was acceptance.



The ritual was simpler than I thought.

First, we laid Allie facedown, lining up three invocation stones from the nape of her neck to her back. Then, a spell to embed the invocation stones in the body. The applied Attunements: light and darkness.

As Arc had done to [Chris], this, to borrow her words, rid her of her humanity.

To tell you the truth, the objective of this procedure was to pave the way for the final spell — it didn't establish the heart.

However, it was solely thanks to Chris's previous example that we knew it was necessary.

Even Tetra's memories contain no trace of a technique to remake the heart. That's why we could only retrace the steps Chris went through.

Up to this point, Arc had been handling the work. Truth be told, this art of turning the human body into an invocation stone was Arc's invention; it didn't exist in Tetra's memories. In that sense, you could call him a true genius.

And once he was done, it would be my turn.

I transcribed Allie's memories from inside me into her.

The method of transcribing memories was clearly written in Tetra's memories. Press both hands against the back, then send the memories in.

The memories were copied, not transferred.

So while I transmitted them, those memories remained inside me.

I left out the day leading up to her destruction.

If I transcribed all the way up to her being swallowed up by Tetra, her reconstructed heart might collapse a second time.

That's what I thought.



Once it was finished, I left the room by myself and went out onto the castle balcony. The sun was still high in the sky. The sky was blue, the autumn clouds floating by.

Allie's treatment was complete.

I didn't know whether her heart resided within her. I imagined that right now, Leon was calling her.

Honestly, I didn't know if he would succeed.

If I think about it, what is this thing called the heart?

In the first place, like me, like Chris might have been, all that lay there were mere memories. Do memories create the heart? Or are they something separate?

Honestly speaking, I don't have the faintest clue.

Despite being born as a swamp man like this, I didn't understand what in the world the heart really was, not in the least.

Walking along the deserted balcony, I ran my hand along the banister.

Then, I closed my eyes.

What floated before my eyes was that night.

Being held by Leon as the fireworks shot into the sky, shaking the air, and then —.

That, I could clearly recall.

But that isn't my experience. It's just a memory.

The mind is built from experience. Memories are no more than things of the past. And yet, if I closed my eyes right now, I would feel it clearly, so clearly I could relive it within myself.

Right now, if I have to be honest, I have feelings for Leon.

They lie in my heart like a curse. Even though they were born from temporary memories, those scorching emotions are here in me now.

Even though I want to question them, there's no way I can. I know, without a doubt, that they're my own — my own personal feelings.

Even if I'm a fake, even so, it was none other than Leon who created me as I am now. When I've seen it so clearly in the form of his memories, how can I exist without feeling affection for him?

But my thoughts and Leon's feelings don't match.

His feelings lie within the memories that he accumulated together with Chris, but for me, those same memories are merely temporary.

That's why I have no right to accept Leon's feelings. In the first place, I'm... not even human.



...But. Leon.

I like him.

I love him.

Memories, experiences, those kinds of reasons don't matter.

What I feel right now is everything.

So I can't help but be scared.

Leon accepted Allie, but — but even so, I'm anxious.

Anxious, I'm anxious — it's frightening.

Who am I?

The question I repeated to myself time and time again emerges in my heart once more.

Who am *I* to Leon?



“Chris.”

As I leaned over the banister, exhausted by my thoughts, I heard that voice from behind me.

My heartbeat sped up from joy, or perhaps anxiety, but I forced it down and assumed a mask of composure.

About to speak, I took a deep breath.

Then, I turned around.

“Big Brother, how is Allie?”

Deliberately, I pretended to play [Chris], as I had earlier.

Faced with that, for a single moment, Leon's approaching footsteps faltered. His face was strangely expressionless, his emotions unreadable.

“Ah, she woke up just a little while ago. It felt like seeing a miracle all over again.”

“I’m glad to hear that. So, how was she? The new Allie.”

Was that a little too suggestive? But I wanted to see his reaction.

Though he’d accepted the idea, what did he think now that he’d seen the reawakened Allie in reality?

Even though she’s the same, she isn’t the same.

What did he think, seeing her with that knowledge?

“Well, it’s definitely her. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

His words were completely devoid of hesitation.

Slightly taken aback, I quickly turned to face the banister. Because a joy that exceeded all reason threatened to break out on my face.

It seemed incredibly indecent to show it.

“I–Is that so? If you’re okay with it, Big Brother, then it’s probably fine, isn’t it?”

Somehow, I managed to reply in a lighthearted tone of voice.

That’s not it.

“That’s great to hear, Leon.”

Even though I should say words like those.

“Chris.”

While I was thinking, I heard that word practically next to my ear.

Then, just like back then, I found myself being hugged from behind.

“Hya...!”

I accidentally let out a small scream.

Why? What for?

I completely hadn't anticipated that; all at once, I was pushed into a state of pure chaos. Various thoughts mingled and disappeared. They didn't come together to form anything meaningful.

I had absolutely no idea what to think, what to feel.

“Wrong. That's not the real you, the real Chris, right?”

The moment I heard those words, my heartbeat, which was hammering away at full speed, leapt even higher.

“Hgh-ah, ah-”

Meaningless syllables tumbled from my trembling mouth.

Jumbled emotions rampaged through my body. When it came to the single conclusion, I couldn't hold back the emotions. The tears spilled from my eyes without end.

“Ah-ahh-waahh — why, why is it — why is it that you — ”

— found me?

I unconsciously adopted [Chris's] persona, in order to deceive my true self.

The way I sometimes thought, isn't Leon searching for [Chris], maybe? It was to hide that uneasiness.

Because I wished for him to find me.

And Leon found me right away.

Not [Chris] — me.

But.

“But, I — I’m, not Chri — mm — ”

The moment I tried to deny it further, suddenly, I found my lips sealed.

My reason couldn’t keep up with this sudden development.

“Nm, mmm...”

In my incomprehension, the anxiety, the fear, muddily melted away.

Inside my head, just about everything turned into a sloppy mess, and I stopped caring.

Too — pushy.

The fact that the matter seemed to have only one meaning, with just those two words, after that, I was swallowed up by a whirlpool of joy, and I couldn’t think straight.

All this time, this was the only thing I wanted.

The alarm bells were going off in my distant memories, but even they were soon washed away by an overwhelming pleasure.

“Mmah—”

Our lips parted. Realizing that, I finally came back to myself.

I didn’t even really know exactly how long that went on for.

The strength drained from my body, I was pressed up against the banister, in a state where I had to rely almost completely on Leon for support.

“Chris. If I said that I was born too when I woke up this morning, would you believe me?”

What’s Leon talking about, out the blue?

I listened to him with a stupefied look on my face.

“When I fell asleep last night, I was destroyed once. Then, in the morning, I was reborn with the same memories. In that case, am I not me?”

E-Eh?

I can’t keep up with what he’s saying. Frantic, I tried to follow his meaning.

” — I don’t know something like that.”

Before I could understand what he meant, I replied.

At which point the arms holding me tightened.

“Gwah—”

“Right — you don’t know. No one does. Not me, not anyone else. In the end, not one person knows just what the heart is. But if it’s in this moment, then I can clearly tell you *where* it is.”

Then, just slightly, Leon leaned forward and looked directly into my eyes.

I felt giddy.

“My heart is there, Chris. And yours is here.”

Pierced by his steady gaze, I obediently nodded.

That's true, isn't it.

That's definitely true.

At those words, everything that troubled me was washed away.

In the end, I don't even understand it now. This thing known as the heart. And I doubt I'll ever know what in the world it is. But if you were to ask me where it is right now, then it's definitely right here.

That alone, I know for sure.

This emotion I feel right now. This feeling.

It affirms it all. I know without a doubt that it's none other than my heart.

Even if it's destroyed today to be born tomorrow, if it holds my will, my consciousness, then I can confirm that at least it's me.

Even if I were to split in two today, each of them would be 'me', I think. Who, I can't say, but at least the fact that they'd be "me" is definitely clear.

And... that might just be enough.

"I love you — Chris."

"Hya-?"

As I was beginning to put the pieces together, Leon launched a surprise attack.

All at once, the feelings in me that had been about to settle down collapsed and scattered.

Boiling up all at once, my mind spun in circles again.

"L-Leon. That's, uhm, I mean, I, that is, are you okay with m — mmph."

Again, my mouth was sealed.

That's playing dirty. I can't think a damn thing.

Ultimately, even if I did, there might be no helping it.

Maybe the world is far simpler than I think, far easier to understand.

At least, right now, that's true.

The one feeling here, setting my consciousness alight.

Because I can understand that this is absolutely, unconditionally, the right thing.



The memories collecting, layer after layer.

Even if they were temporary, from now on, too, more will collect on top of them, and continue to stand on their shoulders.

If so, then those will surely belong to the me that I am now.

If we're talking about what the heart is, then I'll show myself living it.

Until the day, someday, it crumbles and disappears.

With that in my heart — I will forge on.



Author's Notes

Above is the end of "Swamp".

To those who have read until here, thank you very much.

When you finished reading, did you find this a satisfying way to end?

To be honest, no matter how many times I reread it, even though I'm not confident at all that it's complete like this. I guess I'm a little nervous, too.

However, this being the way it is, it also looks like I finished what I wanted to write, so I want to have this wrap things up.

At the end, again.

To everyone who read this.

My heartfelt thanks.



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