

Chapter 2: Blue Rose

Translator: Sene9ty

Editors/Proofreaders: JcqC, Ferro, TaintedDream, Namorax, Skythewood, SifaV6

Part 1

Top Fire Month (Month 9), Day 3, 8:02

White, full plate armor and a sword fastened to his waist. His equipment in perfect condition, Climb stepped into Valencia palace.

Valencia palace was divided largely into three main buildings. The one Climb made his way into was the largest and where the royal family resided

Different from where he had been moments ago, the place was designed to let in as much light as possible, making it blindingly bright.

He walked down a wide hallway that was scrubbed so clean that not even a trace of dust could be found, let alone any litter. His full plate armor did not make any noises, the reason being that it was tempered with mithril and orichalcum and enchanted with magic.

The palace guards—knights, also wearing full plate armor, were standing at attention in the wide and clean hallway.

The Empire's 'knights' referred to the common folk who were part of the standing army. On the other hand, the knights of the Kingdom were those who were granted a title of nobility. As an example, there were numerous occasions where the third son of a noble household would become a knight, since they were unable to inherit his household. However, since the Kingdom paid the knights handsomely, they only accepted those who were skilled with the sword. It was impossible with only connections even if one were a noble.

The most fitting way to call them would be as the King's elite guards.

Coincidentally, 'Warrior Captain' was a newly fashioned title for Gazef since there was much opposition to granting him a knighthood.

Climb lightly greeted those same knights. As expected, only a few greeted him in response, but some did respond and even greeted him with sincerity. While they were nobles, these people swore their service to the King and carried a warrior's heart. Their loyalty unforgotten, they carried great respect for those with skill.

On the other hand, among the people Climb passed in the hallway, there were those whose hatred was obvious at a glance.

They were the maids. Most of them showed a bitter face whenever they saw Climb.

The maids who worked in the palace were different from normal maids in that they were the daughters of noble houses who came to gain experience. In a way, the maids held a higher position than Climb. Especially the ones who worked close to the royal family, most of them were daughters of high-ranking nobility. Their displeasure at the fact that they had to lower their head to a man who was less than a commoner showed itself as anger.

In terms of rank, it was true that Climb was beneath them. They probably wished to show their distaste while Renner was not around. Having thought as much, Climb did not show any anger over their behavior.

But what Climb failed to realize was that his thinking spawned a vicious cycle where the maids would misunderstand his expressionless face as him ignoring them, infuriating them further. On the other hand, if he was the type who could notice such a thing then perhaps everything else would have been handled more smoothly.

It was also true for Climb that every time he was in the palace, his nerves would wear away slightly.

Although it went without saying, Renner and Ranpossa III were not the only people living in this palace.

Ugh?!

Speak of the devil, Climb moved to the side of the hallway, straightened his back and stood at attention with his hand over his chest.

Two people were approaching. The one following from behind was a tall, thin man with blond hair brushed behind his head.

Marquis Raven, one of the six great noble families in the Kingdom.

The problem was the short, fat man walking in front of him. His name was Zanack Valurean Igana Ryle Vaiself, the second prince and second in line for the throne.

Zanack stopped his feet, his chubby face turning into a frown.

“Why, Climb. Are you on your way to show your face to that monster?”

There was only one person Prince Zanack would call a monster. Although he knew it was insolent, Climb could not let it stand.

“Your highness, I’m grateful for your words but Renner-sama is not a monster. She is kind and beautiful, some even call her the Kingdom’s treasure.”

What else could you call someone who got rid of the slave trade and proposed many policies in order to help the citizens? Although the number of them that saw light was small because of the checks in place by the nobles, Climb knew better than anyone else how much she cared for the people.

Every time a policy that would otherwise help the common folk was shot down for foolish reasons like nobles trying to save face, the kind-hearted girl would shed tears in front of him. This man, Zanack, who did not even lift a finger, had no right to say anything.

He was consumed by the desire to shout, to bring down his fist.

Even if they were only half-siblings— these weren’t words that should be said about someone who shared the same blood. However, he could not allow his anger to show.

Renner had said this:

My elder brother will try to anger you so he can hold you in contempt. He’s most likely looking for an excuse to separate us. Climb, never let him see you weak.

That sad expression— his master who was not accepted even by her own family, Climb remembered the day when he swore that at least he would never betray her.

“But I wasn’t referring specifically to Renner though? That must be what you really think... well, let’s stop stating the obvious. But treasure... was it? Is she really proposing her ideas thinking that they would work? It looks to me like she already knows that they won’t, but still acts on them.”

There was no way that was true. Just how could it? It was the ugly jealousy of a man who could only think in those terms.

“I do not think that that is the case.”

“Fufufufufu. As expected, it seems you don’t see her as a monster. Is it because you are blind? Or perhaps she’s being clever? ... Shouldn’t I be suspicious?”

“Not at all. I firmly believe that Renner-sama is the Kingdom’s treasure.”

Because he was the one who watched her the closest, he was assured that everything she did was righteous.

“Really, that’s interesting. Then can you deliver a message to that monster for me? ... Although your brother only thinks of you as a political tool, if you cooperate with me, I can rid you of your right of succession and grant you territory.”

Climb felt his displeasure rising.

“... Jokes should be kept in moderation. I did not expect for you to say such words. I will pretend that I never heard them.”

“Fufufufufufu. A pity. Let’s go, Marquis Raven.”

The man who was searchingly watching the two in silence nodded his head.

Not much was known about Marquis Raven. Although he had drawn a clear line between Climb and himself, his eyes were slightly different than the other nobles. Renner also did not give any specific instructions on how to treat Raven.

“Ah, I almost forgot. Marquis Raven also shares my opinion and thinks of her as a monster. No, you could say that we are in complete agreement on this matter.”

“—Your Highness.”

“Just one more word, Marquis Raven. Listen, Climb. If you were a bigot then I wouldn’t have even bothered to say anything. But... I’m giving you a warning since she could be tricking you. She’s a monster.”

“Your Highness, though it may be presumptuous of me, allow me a question. What part of Renner-sama do you feel that she is a monster? There is no one else who cares more about the Kingdom and its people.”

“... Almost all of her efforts end up as nothing. Her actions are too pointless. At the beginning, I thought that maybe it was because her preparations were lacking. Then, the idea came up during a conversation with the Marquis here. What if everything was calculated? That would tie all of the loose ends together. If that were true... it would mean that a girl who lives half her life inside a palace and has almost no connections to the nobles is controlling them as she sees fit. ... What do you call that if not a monster?”

“It’s a simple misunderstanding. Renner-sama is not that type of person.”

Climb was certain.

Those tears were not lies. That girl called Renner was selfless and kind. He, whose life was saved by her, knew this for a fact.

But his words did not reach the prince. He showed a bitter smile and walked away from Climb, with Marquis Raven following behind him.

Climb muttered in the empty hallway.

“Renner-sama is the most benevolent person in the world. My existence is proof. If...”

He swallowed those last words. Even so, they continued in his heart.

If Renner-sama ruled the Kingdom, it would become a great nation that stood by its people.

Of course, considering the line of succession, it was an impossible wish.

Regardless, Climb could not give it up.

Top Fire Month (Month 9), Day 3, 8:11

At last, Climb arrived in front of the room in the palace that he frequented the most often.

Having checked his surroundings several times over, he boldly turned the doorknob.

Not knocking was absurd, but this was what his master wished for. She refused to listen no matter how much Climb opposed it.

In the end, Climb was the one who relented. It couldn't be helped that a girl's tears put him at a disadvantage. Although with that said, he managed to establish a few conditions. No matter what she said, he could not enter without knocking in the presence of the King.

It was also true that entering without knocking was a source of great stress for Climb. Needless to say, every time he opened the door, Climb felt that there was no way that something like this would be permitted.

As he was about to fling the door open, his hands stopped at the sound of a heated discussion that was flowing through the small crack.

He heard two voices, both female.

The reason he stopped was because one of the voices sounded so absorbed in the discussion that it failed to notice Climb's presence, albeit he was outside of the room. He did not want to throw cold water over their enthusiasm. Climb stood still and focused his ears on the voices in the

room. Although he felt guilty about eavesdropping, he would feel even more guilty if he interrupted such a heated talk.

“—say it before? Humans only focus on the profits that are in front of them.”

“Mmmm...”

“...Renner, your plan about harvesting different crops on rotation... although I don't really think that would improve the yield... how long would people have to wait for the results to show?”

“By my calculations, at the least, it should take around six years.”

“Then what's the projected loss of profits for those six years when we cultivate different crops?”

“It depends on the crop... but if we're at a hundred now then we'll be around eighty percent. So we may have a twenty percent loss. But after six years we'll be looking at a steady thirty percent increase in harvest. If we cultivate pastures and put us on track to raise more livestock then we can expect even more.”

“...If it was just that last part then everyone would jump on it. But will people agree to the constant twenty percent hit for those six years?”

“...The Kingdom loans out the twenty percent without interest or collateral, set up a method of payment when people start to turn a profit. If the harvest doesn't improve... don't collect and if the harvest does increase, according to the plan, people will be able to pay everything back in four years.

“It would be difficult.”

“Why?”

“I told you. People only care about profits that are in front of them — there's more who prefer stability. Even if you can guarantee a thirty percent increase after six years, there's obviously going to be people who are hesitant.”

“I... don't understand. The results from the field I tested were favorable...”

“Even if the test goes well it still isn’t absolute.”

“... Well I didn’t test it under every possible condition, so I guess it isn’t. Accounting for every geological feature of the land or climates would require a large scale experiment.”

“Then it’s going to be hard. Even not knowing if the future thirty percent increase is the maximum or an average is going to kill your argument. This means you have to be able to promise a significant profit along with profits in the short term.”

“What if we provide the twenty percent free of charge for those six years?”

“The rival nobility faction will be happy since the King will be losing power.”

“But if we can secure as much goods as we give after six years, the national power will see an increase...”

“Then the rival nobility’s power will increase as well while the King’s power falls by twenty percent. The nobles in the King’s faction will never agree to it.”

“Then we ask the merchants and...”

“You’re talking about the Great Merchants right? They have their own conflicts. Carelessly lending their strength to the King’s faction can affect their ability to conduct business properly with the other faction.”

“This is too hard... Lakyus.”

“... You can’t get much advance work done so your policies end up with a ton of weak spots. Well... I can understand that two massive factions make it incredibly difficult. ...How about working just on the issues in the palace?”

“I don’t think my brothers will allow it.”

“Ah, those idi... people who left their honor in their mother’s womb just for you.”

“We don’t even share the same mother.”

“My, so from the King’s side then. Anyways, to think that even the royal family isn’t close, so frustrating...”

As the room became quiet, she realized that the discussion was finished.

“Ah, it’s okay to come in now. Right, Renner?”

“What?”

That voice made Climb’s heart thump loudly in his chest. He was astonished that she already knew he was here and at the same time, felt that it was to be expected. Climb slowly opened the door.

“—Excuse me.”

A familiar sight entered Climb’s eyes.

Luxurious but not gaudy—in the room, two blond ladies sat around a table by the windowsill. One of them was obviously the master of the room, Renner.

And the girl opposite to her, with green pupils and pink lips that showed a healthy gleam. Her beauty fell short of Renner but overflowed with a different charm. If Renner was the brilliance of a jewel, then she was the brilliance of life.

Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra.

Although you would not think it from her light pink dress, she was the leader of one of only two adamantium rank adventurer teams in the Kingdom, as well as Renner’s closest friend.

At nineteen years old, what allowed her to achieve the countless achievements necessary to rise to such a difficult position was her overflowing talent. Climb felt the tiniest traces of envy ooze out of his heart.

“I hope you are well, Renner-sama, Aindra-sama.”

“Hello, Climb.”

“Hello.”

As Climb finished his greeting and was about to move to his designated spot — to Renner’s right, just behind her — he was interrupted.

“Climb, not there, over here.”

The place Renner was pointing at was the chair to her right.

Climb thought it odd. There were five chairs placed around the circular table, the same as always. But there were three teacups laid out in total.

One in front of Renner, Lakys, and next to Lakys— a seat different from where Renner was pointing. He looked around but could not find the third person anywhere.

Even as he thought it was strange, he turned his eyes to the chair.

The discourtesy of sharing a table with his master, royalty at that, the order to enter the room without knocking — or in Renner’s words, a request — almost all of Renner’s orders placed a burden on his conscience.

“But...”

Climb turned his eyes to the other girl, seeking help. His wordless plea to the other companion to please spare him was immediately shot down.

“I don’t mind.”

“Th-that’s... Aindra-sama...”

“Like I’ve told you already, call me Lakyus.”

Lakyus slightly peered over at Renner and continued.

“Climb is special after all.”

“...Angry.”

Renner smiled as she spoke. The sweet tone of Lakyus’ words seemed to end in a heart mark. Rather, it was difficult to call her expression a smile, where only her lips moved while her eyes were serious.

“Aindra-sama, you should stop with the jokes.”

“Alright, alright. Climb really is stubborn. How about trying to learn from her?”

“Huh? A joke?”

Seeing Renner surprised, Lakyus stopped abruptly and heaved a large sigh.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s true that Climb is special, but only because he’s ‘yours’.”

Renner blushed slightly and covered both her cheeks with her hands. Climb awkwardly looked away from her and his eyes immediately opened wide.

“What?!”

Shocked, Climb lowered his body, grabbed the sword fastened to his waist and moved to protect Renner. Lakyus let out another sigh.

“Climb got surprised because you’re like that.”

Her calm voice did not contain any caution or sense of crisis. Having understood what it meant, Climb felt the tension leave his shoulders.

“Understood, boss.”

The girl sitting in the shadows hopped up in a single breath.

“Ah, Climb, you don’t know her. This is our team member—“

“— Tina-san.”

Renner finished Lakys’ sentence.

As far as Climb knew, the adamantium ranked adventurer team ‘Blue Rose’ was composed of five women: the leader, faith based magic caster Lakys, warrior Gagan, magic caster Ivileye, and Tia and Tina who were trained in thief skills.

Climb already met Lakys, Gagan, and Ivileye but was unacquainted with the last two.

This person is... I see. She really is like the rumors say.

With slender limbs and appearance covered by the clothes that wrapped tightly around her body, she really did look like someone who would train in thief skills.

“... I apologize for my rudeness. Nice to meet you, my name is Climb.”

Climb bowed his head low to Tina.

“Hmm? Don’t worry about it.”

She answered Climb’s apology with a wave of her hand and, completely silent, like a wild animal, approached the table with smooth movements. She sat in the chair that was next to Lakys, so the teacup from before must have been hers.

Even while the number of teacups on the table meant that it was impossible, Climb looked around the room once more, carefully checking for the other girl who he wasn't acquainted with.

Lakyus saw what Climb was doing and opened her mouth, as if she immediately understood him.

"Tia didn't come. Gagaran and Ivileye both said that they hate formal stuff. This isn't even that formal though. I dressed up just in case, but it's not like I pushed the others to dress up too."

Despite what Lakyus said, her type of attire was the correct etiquette when appearing before the princess, but Climb had no intention of telling this to a person who was both Renner's friend and a distinguished noble.

"It seems that's the case. But I'm grateful to meet the famous Tina-sama. I look forward to your guidance."

"Why don't you continue your talk after you sit, Climb?"

Renner drew out a new cup and poured tea as she spoke. The tea from the magic item 'Warm Bottle' gave off steam like it was just freshly brewed. It was one of Renner's prized possessions that had the effect of maintaining the temperature and quality of the beverage inside for one hour. She used it quite liberally when receiving a particularly important guest and rarely brought it out otherwise.

With no way to refuse, Climb resigned himself and sat in his seat, drinking a sip of the tea.

"It's delicious, Renner-sama."

Renner smiled sweetly, but honestly speaking, Climb had no clue as to whether or not it was good; only that something brewed by Renner could only be delicious.

That was when, suddenly, he heard a flat, emotionless voice.

"—Tia should be collecting information today. The three of us was supposed to visit the palace today, but our evil boss suddenly ordered a job. Everything is the evil boss' fault."

Needless to say, it was Tina's voice. Climb averted his eyes away from Lakyus' frightening smile and asked.

"I see... Should there be an opportunity, next time, I would like to meet her at least once."

"Climb, Tina-san and Tia-san are twins; even the length of their hair is similar."

"So if you just see one then there's no problem."

Although whether or not there would be a problem wasn't the issue, Climb showed that he understood.

Nevertheless, Climb felt embarrassed by Tina's merciless gaze. As he was about to ignore it, the thought that she could have spotted something that he lacked prompted him to ready himself and ask.

"What is it?"

"Too big."

"...What?"

He didn't know what she was talking about. As countless question marks floated above Climb's head, Lakyus apologetically intervened.

"It's nothing. She's just talking to herself. Don't worry about it, Climb. No, really, don't worry about it. I'm serious."

"Yes..."

"...What is she talking about, Lakyus?"

Although Climb was forcing himself to agree, a confused Renner interfered. Lakyus watched Renner with a sour expression.

“Really, you, whenever it’s about Climb...”

“Ah, I meant—“

“—Shut up, Tina. The reason I didn’t bring Tia was because she was going to say something strange to Renner. Can you understand that and stop talking?”

“Got it~ evil boss.”

“...Lakyus, what was she going to tell me?”

Lakyus’ face turned stiff at Renner’s interrogation. She even looked like she was suffering.

As Climb thought about whether to intervene, Lakyus quickly turned her eyes.

“Huh... Climb, you’re using that armor.”

“Yes, it’s an incredible armor. Thank you.”

Although it was a forced change of topic, as to not embarrass the guest, Climb responded and moved his hand to the white full plate armor that he received from Renner. Forged with a great amount of mithril — with a bit of orichalcum — the armor had various magical enchants on it that made it surprisingly light, tough, and easy to move in.

The mithril for forging the splendid armor was provided by the members of Blue Rose. No matter how much he gave his thanks, it wouldn’t be enough.

As Climb was about to bow his head, Lakyus stopped him.

“You don’t have to worry about it. We just gave you the leftovers from when we made our own mithril armor.”

Even if it were just leftovers, mithril was a very expensive material. One would be able to afford a mithril full plate armor once they reach orichalcum rank. A mithril rank might be able to afford a mithril weapon. Only a person in the adamantium rank would be able to just give it away.

“I just can’t say no to Renner, after all.”

“—You didn’t accept payment back then. I saved up my allowance...”

“... Isn’t it odd for a princess to call it an allowance?”

“Funds from the demesne are counted separately. I wanted to make Climb’s armor with my own money.”

“Of course you did~. It’s Climb’s so I’m sure you wanted to pay for it~.”

“... If you knew then you didn’t have to give it to him for free. Stupid Lakyus.”

“Stupid? Why you...”

The sulking Renner and grinning Lakyus, the two bantered playfully.

Seeing such a scene, Climb concentrated so that his expressionless face would not crumble.

Even the fact that he was able to witness such a kind, gentle scene was all thanks to the master who accepted him under her wing. However, he could not allow his feelings to show.

Although a feeling of gratitude was fine, he could not show what lay beyond it, his strong feelings for Renner.

His love.

He grabbed his feelings and suppressed it. Instead, he said the words that he had repeated countless time before.

“Thank you. Renner-sama.”

His message was clear. There was a firm line drawn between them — the position of master and servant — ever so slightly, Climb saw it— because he had watched over her for so long, the smallest trace of sadness in Renner’s smile.

“Not at all. Anyhow, we’ve digressed. Shall we return to the main topic?”

“It’s about the Eight Fingers. I stopped at the part where we broke into three of their villages for growing drugs and set fire to the fields, right?”

Hearing that name, Climb’s expressionless face frowned slightly.

‘Eight Fingers’, a criminal organization that operated in the dark side of the Kingdom. His esteemed master was acting in order to do something about that group.

As for the fields that were burned, one could only imagine the worst case scenario for the villages that depended on growing the drug for a living. However, the lives of those villagers were a necessary sacrifice in order to eradicate the drug that was eating away at the Kingdom.

If she possessed absolute authority, then any measure could be taken. But even as the princess, she had no backing. The only option was to make the cold-hearted decision of saving whoever she could save and to cut away the rest.

Supposing she petitioned her father, the King, then it may be possible for her to attack with military or political might. But as long as it was certain that Eight Fingers had ties to the nobility, there was no doubt that the information would be leaked and the evidence erased in advance.

That was why Renner chose to personally request Lakyus and her party.

Climb knew well that this was a dangerous move. Normally, an adventurer accepted requests through the guild and did not acknowledge personal requests. To do so was a violation of the rules.

Of course, the guild could not impose punishment or expel the highest ranked adamantium class adventurers . Nevertheless, their reputation within the guild would suffer and there would be negative consequences in the future. The reason that her request was accepted despite all of this was because Blue Rose loved the Kingdom and considered Renner their friend.

Climb felt his gratitude toward Lakyus rise, the one who accepted the job even at her own risk.

Lakyus decided that it was about time to bring up a certain topic. She opened the bag Tina had brought and pulled out a single parchment.

It was a writing that the Blue Rose members, including Lakyus, could not decipher. But if it was Renner, the best brains out of everyone that Lakyus knew, then perhaps something could be done about it.

“We found this when we were burning the village’s drugs. It seemed to be some kind of written orders so we brought it back... do you know what it is?”

The open parchment contained symbols that were not part of any country’s written language. Renner glanced at it and replied immediately.

“...It’s a substitution cipher.”

A substitution cipher was a type of code where a word or several words together was switched for a different word or symbol. If ‘1’ indicated ‘a’ and ‘2’ was ‘b’, then ‘11221’ became ‘aabba’.

“That’s what I think too. We looked hard for a substitution chart but couldn’t find one unfortunately. There’s a chance that it was memorized so we captured someone who looked to be in charge. Our option here should be to ask the captive with charm magic, but as you already know, charm magic loses its effectiveness when repeatedly cast by the same person on the same target. The first time has to count. I didn’t want to go ahead with it without consulting you first.”

“I see... the reason this message was left behind... a trap... or is it for a different reason? Then they wouldn’t have made it too difficult. Yes, I think I can crack this code pretty easily.”

Lakyus’ eyes went wide at Renner’s words. In spite of herself, her eyes met with Tina who sat next to her.

She couldn’t believe it. But on the other hand, she felt that it was to be expected.

“Let’s see. The first letter of the Kingdom’s alphabet is either the male article or female article; it should be one of the syllables so... wait one moment.”

Renner muttered as she stood with the parchment in hand and returned with a pen and paper.

She began to write.

“This code switches out one letter per symbol so it’s easy. And thank goodness that it uses the Kingdom’s alphabet. If it used the empire’s or if we needed to translate it first then it would’ve been almost impossible. This is... first, if you figure out just one letter then you can just fill out the rest. Anybody could do it if they tried.”

“No no, you just make it sound easy. Wouldn’t it be impossible without knowing tens of thousands of words?”

“But this is an order written in code. The instructions wouldn’t be hidden behind a metaphor and the chance of them using difficult words is very small. The messages are probably written clearly so that even children can understand it. That’s why their scale is so large.”

Lakyus inwardly broke out in cold sweats.

Although her friend called it simple, that was absolutely not the case.

If it’s her then it’s possible... really, her ability is ridiculous.

Every time they met, every time they spoke, she was surprised. Lakyus didn’t know anyone who better fit the term ‘genius.’

In contrast to Lakyus who was trembling on the inside, Renner lightly held out the paper in her hand.

“I’m finished. It wasn’t orders though.”

Various locations outside the Kingdom were listed on the paper. Seven were within the Kingdom’s lands.

“Could these be where they store the drugs? Important bases maybe?”

“Such important information wouldn’t be written down and just left in a production facility. Isn’t this bait?”

“A bait? You mean it’s a trap?”

“Mmm... No, I don’t think so. Even though Eight Fingers is one organization, isn’t it more like the eight groups that make it up are cooperating with one another?”

Lakyus nodded her head.

“Then this is probably about the other seven groups. The organization that’s in charge of drugs leaked this information on purpose so they could spin it into an advantage.”

“So they prepared information on all the organizations besides their own... I knew that they weren’t close, but to think that it was this bad...”

As an adventurer, the thought of betraying one’s allies filled her with aversion.

“As I thought, it’ll be bad if we don’t move quickly.”

To her friend who was nodding her head, Lakyus repeated her question.

“Then what should we do about the brothel? It’s a very vile place so supposedly you can experience anything there.”

Even when she said so herself, Lakyus felt her insides boil in anger.

Damn it. Trash that only thinks about their lust can all die!

Remembering the information she received about the brothel, separate from the daughter of a noble, her adventurer side that endured all kinds of hardships raged inside of her. There was no need to ponder what ‘anything’ implied. No doubt that countless people— regardless of gender— were murdered there for entertainment.

In the past when the slave trade still existed, brothels like that had been plentiful in the underworld, but thanks to the active role of her friend in front of her, the slave trade was outlawed and those days were long gone. This was probably the last such brothel remaining in the capital, perhaps in the Kingdom.

That was why removing it wasn't so simple. No doubt that they would be met with strong opposition. It was the last depraved paradise for those with fetishes so vulgar, they could never tell other people about them.

"Say, Renner. Since we can't rely on the government to investigate, how about we break in there by force and raze it? There's no problem as long as we find evidence, no? If the slave trade is running the brothel, destroying it will be huge. And depending on the evidence we find, we could deal a big blow to the nobles who are involved."

"You might be right, Lakyus. But if we do that, it'll hurt your family's, the Alvein name. That's why it's difficult. It'll be the same if we used the Blue Rose members... though with that said, it's impossible for Climb to take care of it by himself."

"I apologize for my lack of ability."

As he bowed his head, Renner stretched out her hand and grabbed Climb's hand with a gentle smile.

"I'm sorry, Climb. That's not what I meant. It's the last underworld brothel in the Kingdom. It's impossible for anyone to do it alone. Listen Climb, whom I trust the most. I know how hard you work for me, but don't do anything reckless. This is an order and not a request, understand? If anything were to happen to you..."

Watching from the side, even to Lakyus, who was the same gender, there was something in the eyes of the beauty welling with tears that moved the heart. Then what about Climb?

Although he desperately tried to keep his face still, the bright red cheeks said everything that needed to be said.

If a bard were to give it a title, it would be The Princess and the Knight. In the face of such an emotional scene, Lakyus felt a tiny sliver of terror. Although it was impossible, if Renner's actions were all calculated, just how much of a master schemer was—.

Just what am I thinking about my good friend? It's obvious she doesn't have such a bad personality by looking at everything she's done so far. She's worked to help others. If I can't believe in someone who's earned the nickname of Golden, just who can I trust?

As if she was trying to rid herself of these terrible thoughts, Lakyus shook her head and spoke.

“Now that I remember, Tina and her friends managed to uncover the names of a number of nobles involved with Cocodoll—the leader of the slave trade. But we don't know whether or not the information is accurate so acting on it would be jumping to conclusions.”

As Lakyus went through the names one by one, both Renner and Climb reacted to one name in particular.

“That noble's daughter is working as my maid.”

“What? I doubt that he planted her as a spy to watch you but... I guess there's no guarantee that she's just working as a maid for the experience either.”

“Right. I should be more careful with how I handle information. You keep it in mind as well, Climb.”

“Then shall we discuss how to deal with the locations from the cipher? And Renner, do you think I could borrow Climb? I want him to tell Gagaran and the others to be ready to move immediately.”

Part 2

Top Fire Month (Month 9), Day 3, 9:49

Climb walked down the Kingdom's main street. With nothing noticeable about his outer appearance, Climb completely blended into the crowd.

Needless to say, he was not wearing his eye-catching full plate armor. Using a special alchemy item would allow him to change the color of the armor, but he didn't feel the need to go so far just to have it on with him.

That was why his gear was light; a chain mail beneath his clothes and a longsword at his waist to set him apart from the average citizen.

His current equipment was similar to those of patrolmen and mercenaries, the kind one could find anywhere. It was somewhat enough for others to keep a respectable distance, but not so heavily armed that the crowd would part before him.

A person who was heavily armed would no doubt be an adventurer. They armed themselves to be noticeable rather than out of necessity. Adventurers who wore gear that made them stand out were not uncommon. It served as a form of advertisement for their services. There were those among them who went for an especially novel appearance so that they would leave a strong impression and spread rumors to sell their name. It was the trademark of an adventurer.

But the people that Climb was on his way to meet had no need for such antics. The members of Blue Rose spread rumors simply by walking down the street.

Eventually, an inn for adventurers could be seen by the side of the main street. The place had lodgings, a stable, and a yard large enough to swing a sword in. Behind its splendid outward appearance was an equally beautiful, decorated interior. The rooms were even fitted with windows made of clear glass.

As the highest class inn in the Kingdom, it was a place where adventurers who were confident in their skill and could afford the expensive lodging costs gathered.

Climb ignored the guard standing at the side and opened the door to the inn.

The first floor doubled as a pub and a restaurant. Compared to the large parlour, there were only a few adventurers. High class adventurers were as rare to see as they were skilled.

The faint chatter in the room died down for an instant and eyes filled with curiosity focused on him. Climb ignored them and looked around.

There were only strong adventurers everywhere he looked. Every one of them could easily beat Climb in a fight. Whenever he came to such a place, he clearly realized just how small he really was.

Climb stopped himself from being disheartened and moved his eyes on a certain spot in the inn.

In the farthest corner of the room, his eyes rested on the two figures sitting around a circular table.

One of them had a small stature and was wrapped in a jet-black robe.

The face was hidden not because of the lighting, instead it was entirely covered by a strange mask with a red jewel embedded in its forehead. The area around the eyes had a thin crack so that it was impossible to even tell the color of the pupils.

And the other figure...

Although the person before had a small body, the other possessed an overwhelmingly huge physique. Enough to make one think of a huge rock. In a way, the body could be described as plump, but not because it was fat. First, the arms were as thick as tree trunks. In order to support the head, the neck was as thick as an average woman's thighs, and the head resting on top of that neck was a square. The chin was wide as to better clench the teeth for power, the eyes for scanning the surroundings looked like the eyes belonging to a carnivore. The blond hair was cut short strictly for functionality.

The chest hidden behind her clothes was conspicuously bloated by muscles trained over and over. It was no longer the chest of a woman.

The female-only adamantium rank adventurer team— Blue Rose.

They were two of its members, magic caster Ivileye and warrior Gaganan.

Climb headed in their direction. The person whom he needed to speak to nodded her head and shouted in a husky voice.

“Yo, cherry boy!”

Once more, the stares focused on Climb, but there were no sounds of jeering. As if they had suddenly lost their interest, they turned away instead, with something akin to sympathy filling their eyes.

There was a reason for the cold treatment from the other adventurers. They knew that even for orichalcum or mithril rank adventurers, showing discourtesy to Gaganan's guest wasn't courage, only reckless bravado.

Even while he was being made fun of, Climb calmly walked forward. Since Gaganan wouldn't change her nickname for him no matter how often he asked, the most effective method was to pretend that he gave up and no longer cared.

“It has been a long time, Gaganan-sam—san, Ivileye-sama.”

He approached the two and bowed his head.

“Yeah, long time no see. What, did you come here because you wanted to be embraced by me?”

While motioning with her chin to take a seat, Gaganan asked him with a beast-like grin across her face. But Climb shook his head with a blank expression.

This was also part of Gaganan's usual banter. Although it was a greeting, it did not mean that she was joking. If Climb ever replied in the affirmative, even in jest, Gaganan would immediately drag him to a room on the 2nd floor with overwhelming strength, without any chance for retaliation.

Gagaran, who would openly proclaim that plucking a ‘fresh cherry’ was her hobby, was that type of person.

Different from Gagaran, Ivileye stared directly in front of her and showed no sign of turning her face. You could not even tell which direction the eyes beneath the mask were pointing.

“No. I’m here because of a request from Aindra-sama.”

“Huh? From the leader?”

“Yes. I will deliver her message. 『It seems we’ll have to move soon. I will explain the details when I return. Be ready for battle immediately.』 ”

“I got it. Hmm, you’re sure going through a lot of trouble for something so trivial.”

Climb remembered that he had something else to say to Gagaran who wore a wide grin.

“I had the fortune of being instructed in the sword by Stronoff-sama today. He praised the high vertical strike that you taught me in the past.”

He had learned that move from her in this inn’s backyard. Gagaran smiled brightly.

“Oh, that! Not bad at all. But...”

“Yes. I will not be satisfied and train harder.”

“That’s good and all, but assume that move will be blocked and start working on a skill to come after it.”

Whether it was a coincidence or just common sense to first rate warriors, Gagaran’s advice was very similar to Gazef’s. Apparently misunderstanding Climb’s surprised face, Gagaran continued to speak with a chuckle.

“Obviously, that vertical slash is meant to be a one-hit-kill. Normally, the correct way to go about it is to choose from a wide repertoire of moves depending on the situation. But the thing is, that’s impossible for you.”

She was implying that it was because he had no talent.

“So work on a combination that consists of at least three attacks. Make it so that even if they’re blocked, your opponent can’t switch to the offensive.”

Climb nodded.

“Well, if you’re against monsters that have eight arms and such, it may not work. But it should be fine against humans. Even though having a pattern will be the end of you if it gets found out,

it's still pretty effective against opponents that you meet for the first time. Think of something that will let you push forward over and over and over."

"I understand."

Climb earnestly nodded his head.

This morning, only once could he push forward into Gazef like that. Everything else was blocked and countered.

But did that shake his confidence? No.

Did he fall into despair? No.

The opposite.

It was the opposite.

An ordinary person was able to get that close to the strongest warrior in the Kingdom, no, the surrounding countries. He also knew very well that his opponent had not been fighting seriously. But to Climb, who was walking a pitch black road completely devoid of light, it was more than enough of an encouragement.

It told him that that his efforts were not in vain.

When he remembered that, what Gaganan was trying to say touched his heart.

Even though he wasn't confident about whether or not he could successfully come up with a combination of attacks, the burning urge to do it still rose up from the bottom of his stomach. The next time he fought the Warrior Captain, he wanted to be strong enough to make him a bit more serious.

"...Now that I remember, didn't you ask Ivileye for something awhile back? Was it magic training?"

"Yes."

Climb glanced over at Ivileye. Back then, it was turned down by a scoff from inside the mask. No doubt that bringing up the same topic when nothing has changed will have the same result.

However—

"Kid."

He heard a voice that was difficult to read.

Even disregarding the fact that it was through a mask, it held a very mysterious tone. Even with a mask, as long as the sound was not too thick, it should be possible to somewhat make out the timber of the voice. However, you could make out neither the age nor emotion behind Ivileye's voice. It was barely enough to just recognize the voice as female. It sounded like both an old woman and a young girl, flat and emotionless.

It was because Ivileye's mask was a magic item, but why did she go that far in order to hide her voice?

"You don't have the talent. Try something else."

A crude remark, as if that was all that she needed to say.

Climb himself knew at least that much better than anyone.

He did not have any talent for magic. No, not only magic.

No matter how much he swung his sword, no matter how much he bled and hard his hands became from the blisters, he could not reach the level that he wanted. The wall that those with talent would easily overcome, even that became an absolute obstacle that he could not traverse.

Even so, that was not a reason for him to be lazy with his efforts to cross over that wall. As long as he was talentless, the only thing he could do was believe that his efforts will allow him to take at least one step forward.

"It seems you can't accept it."

As if she read Climb's emotions beneath his expressionless iron mask, Ivileye continued to speak.

"Those who possess talent have it from the very beginning... Some claim that talent is simply a bud that has yet to bloom and that everyone has it... Hmph. I see it as nothing more than envy. Words like that are so the inferior can console themselves. The leader of those famous thirteen heroes was the same."

The leader of the thirteen heroes; there was a legend that in the beginning, the hero was just an ordinary person. Although that person was weaker than anyone, the hero became the strongest by endlessly swinging a sword despite being covered in wounds. The hero possessed a power that could rise without end.

"But that person's talent had simply not bloomed at that time. You're different, even with effort you're still only at that level. Talent undoubtedly exists. There are those who have it and those who do not. So... I won't tell you to give up but at least know where you stand."

Ivileye's cold words brought a curtain of silence. And it was she herself who broke that silence.

“Gazef Stronoff... now that one is a good example of a human with talent. Climb... do you believe that you can fill the difference between the two of you with hard work?”

His words wouldn't come out. It was only this morning that he experienced the distance between them which couldn't be overcome with training.

“Actually, he might not be a fair comparison. The only ones I know of who can rival his talent with the sword are the thirteen heroes. Gagaran here is fairly skilled but still can't beat him.”

“...Don't ask for the impossible. Gazef-ojisan is someone with one foot in the realm of heroes.”

Gagaran replied to Ivileye's words with a laugh.

“Hey, hey, Ivileye. Weren't the heroes considered to be monsters with talent that was in a different league—the type transcending the realm of humans?”

“... I won't deny it.”

“And I'm only human. It's impossible for me to reach the level of those heroes.”

“... But you still possess talent. You're different from a human like Climb. Climb, don't try to reach for the stars.”

Climb knew that very well. But it was true that being told that he had no talent so repeatedly would make him feel disappointed. Even so, he had no intention of changing his ways.

—It was because his body was for the princess—

Sensing something akin to martyrdom from Climb, Ivileye clicked her tongue behind her mask.

“...I guess you won't stop even if I say it like this.”

“No.”

“You are foolish, truly foolish.”

She shook her head, unable to understand him.

“Moving forward with an unreachable wish will definitely ruin your body. I'm repeating myself, but know where you stand.”

“I understand what you are trying to say.”

“But I see you have no intention of listening. You are beyond foolish. It will lead to an early grave. ... Won't there be someone who will cry if you were to die?”

“Huh? What’s this, Ivileye? Were you bullying Climb because you were worried about him?”

Ivileye’s shoulders slumped at these words. She grabbed Gaganan by the collar with her gloved hand and shouted as she stared at her.

“The meathead needs to shut her mouth!”

“But I’m right though, aren’t I?”

Ivileye could not say a word to Gaganan who remained calm even when she had her by the collar. She leaned deeply into her chair and, trying to change the topic, turned her arrow to Climb.

“First, master your knowledge of magic. If your knowledge improves then you may be able to predict the moves of your enemies who use magic. Then you will be able to respond appropriately.”

“Hey, you know how many different spells there are and you’re telling him to study all of that? Aren’t you being too cruel?”

“That’s not true. There is a common pool of spells that a magic caster typically focuses on. He can start by studying those.”

Ivileye implied that if he couldn’t even manage that, he should give up.

“No matter how many there are, he’ll probably be able to manage if he can study the spells up to the 3rd tier.”

“...Hey Ivileye, you said magic goes up to the 10th tier and that no one’s managed to master them. But there’s information on those? Why is that?”

“Hmm...”

With the air of a teacher instructing a student, Ivileye moved around in her robe. As she did so, suddenly, the noise from their surroundings fell distant. It was like a thin curtain had been draped over them and the table.

“Don’t be alarmed. I merely activated a trivial item.”

Just how cautious was she of others listening in? Realising that Ivileye’s answer to Gaganan’s question was important enough to warrant using an item, Climb fixed his posture in anticipation.

“In an old legend— one of the stories passed down, there exist a group called the Eight Greed Kings. Some call them beings who stole the power of God and ruled this world using their absolute strength.”

Climb knew the story. As a fairytale, it was quite unpopular, but anyone who was somewhat educated knew about it.

To sum it up, the Eight Greed Kings appeared 500 years ago. Taller than the sky, the likeness of a dragon, the Eight Greed Kings destroyed numerous countries and ruled the world with their overwhelming strength. But in the end, their greed pitted them against one another and resulted in their demise.

Although the story was obviously unpopular, there were differing opinions on whether it was fact or fiction. Climb himself felt that the story was overly exaggerated. However, there were many among the adventurers who felt that they did, in fact, once exist; with power greater than any that currently exist in present time.

The basis for their belief was the existence of the desert city far to the south. It is said that the city was built to be the capital back when the Eight Greed Kings ruled the continent.

While Climb was deep in his own thoughts, Ivileye continued to speak.

“It is said that the Eight Greed Kings had a countless number of powerful items. And the greatest among them was an item called the ‘Nameless Spellbook’... A grimoire by that name exists. There is your answer.”

“What? So you’re saying that the spells are in that book?”

“Right. That magic item holds power beyond comprehension. They say that all magic is recorded in that grimoire. I have no idea what kind of magic it uses, there is a rumor that even newly created magic gets automatically recorded.”

He knew about the legend of the Eight Greed Kings but it was the first time that Climb had heard about such a book. He vaguely understood just how rare such an item was and remained silent while listening carefully.

“With it as the foundation, we were able to discover the existence of 10th tier spells. Of course, there are only a few who know of this story and the ‘Nameless Spellbook’.”

Climb gulped loudly.

“Y-you do not have any plans to obtain that ‘Nameless Spellbook’?”

It was a question he wondered because they were the highest class adventurers.

But Ivileye snorted back a laugh, as if he had said something idiotic.

“Hmph. According to the person who’s actually seen it, the strong magic guarding the grimoire prevents anyone without a strong sense of justice from touching it. An item that’s worth a

country will carry with it dangers to match. I know what I can and can't do, and I would rather not die a fool's death like the Eight Greed Kings."

"It's impossible even for the party whose leader possesses a weapon of the thirteen heroes?"

"... In a different league, that one. Well, this is something I heard offhand as well so I can't be certain. The talk has gone off topic. Anyhow, there's your answer, Gagan. Do you understand?"

And for some reason, Ivileye showed a brief moment of hesitation before opening her mouth.

"Climb. Even if you desire power, don't give up your humanity."

"Give up on my humanity...? Are you speaking of the likes of demons that appear in stories?"

"That and others like turning into an undead or magic life forms."

"A normal human cannot do something like that."

"That's true... but turning into an undead will often twist your heart as well. Desiring perfection, becoming an undead to achieve one's ideal... the heart will be tempted by the changing flesh and the resulting transformation will be terrifying."

A tinge of pity could be felt from the voice behind the emotionless mask. Ivileye looked as if she was staring far off into the distance. Gagan watched her and spoke out cheerfully.

"Won't the princess be surprised if she wakes up one day and Climb became an ogre?"

As if she understood what was hidden behind Gagan's comment, Ivileye reverted back to her unreadable voice.

"... Well, that's also another method. Transformation magic can be made so that its effects are only temporary. To put it simply, it's one way of raising your physical strength."

"I would like to pass on that."

"In regards to becoming stronger, it's quite effective. The physical capabilities of the human body are not very impressive. With the same talent, a stronger body would be more advantageous."

That was obvious. If the skills were the same, the side with more power would have the upper hand.

"In reality, there were many among the thirteen heroes who were not human. Even if they are called the thirteen heroes, they numbered far more. It just so happens that only thirteen had legends attached to them. ... The battle against the Demon God was one that transcended the

racial barrier. Those who wanted to put the focus on humans would be rather hesitant to perpetuate a legend where those of other races played an active role.”

Ivileye spoke with a cynical edge to her voice. The atmosphere then immediately shifted and she continued on, her tone heavy with nostalgia.

“The wielder of the cyclone axe was the Warrior Captain of the Air Giants. If any members of the elf royal family who possessed traits of the old elves were there... it would be Dark Knight, the original owner of Kilineyram— our leader’s demonic sword. The Knight shared the blood of demons, a mixed blood.”

“The Four Swords of Darkness...”

It is said that one of the thirteen heroes, the Dark Knight, wielded four swords: evil sword Hyumilis, demon sword Kilineyram, necrotic sword Colocudabar, and death sword Sufiz. The leader of Blue Rose, Lakyus, possessed one of them.

“Demon sword Kilineyram... the strongest Sword of Darkness that is said to be created from condensing endless dark energy. Hey, Ivileye. Is it true that if you unleash its full power, it can shoot out enough darkness to swallow a country whole?”

“What are you talking about?”

Ivileye seemed perplexed.

“Our leader said so awhile back when we were alone. She was grabbing her right hand pretty hard and said something about how only a woman of faith like her can suppress its power.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that...”

Ivileye tilted her head, thinking it odd.

“If the owner says so then it could be true.”

“Then the thing about dark Lakyus who was born from her dark consciousness must be true too?”

“What?”

“When was it, she was muttering that to herself while she was alone. I don’t think she knew that I was there so I eavesdropped a bit. ‘I, the source of the darkness will take over your body once you let your guard down and release the demon sword’s power.’ Or something like that, it sounded pretty dangerous.”

“That’s... not impossible I guess. Some cursed items do take over their owners. ...If that happens to Lakyus then it won’t be a laughing matter.”

“She told me to keep it a secret, but that’s a little… you know? I asked her about it personally but her face got really red and told me to not worry about it.”

“Hmm. She must have been embarrassed that a cleric like her was controlled by a cursed item. They’re the ones who lift those curses, after all. Maybe she didn’t want to worry us? That girl, she’s been worrying about it alone.”

“I haven’t seen her do that since then but… just think about it, ever since she got that sword, didn’t she start wearing those pointless armor rings on all five of her fingers?”

“I thought it was fashion, are you saying that those are sealing magic items or possibly a catalyst?”

Climb could not maintain his poker face and frowned.

The current conversation drove him to think that Lakys was possibly being slowly dominated by an evil item. Thinking of where she was just recently only served to increase his restlessness.

“…Renner-sama might be in danger.”

Ivileye stopped Climb who was about to run off.

“Don’t worry. It’s not as if something is going to happen immediately. Even if she were to fall under that dark power, there is no way that it could happen before the person herself noticed it. If she didn’t want us to know then she most likely judged that she can keep it in check. I don’t doubt her willpower, but… to think that sword had such an ability… I had no idea.”

“Should we send word to Azuth-san just in case?”

“It’s a bit frustrating to seek help from a rival… but since it’s a problem about his niece then I guess it would be for the best.”

“Ok, then should we get moving? I need to find out where he is.”

“Yes. We have to be prepared to support Lakys at any time.”

“Only adamantium can stop adamantium, after all.”

“—Hmm?! Ah! I just remembered, Gagan. A third adamantium rank adventurer team is supposed to be residing in E-Rantel.”

“What, really? That’s new to me… Did you hear it at the adventurer’s guild this morning?”

“No, that’s… Oh, right. I apologize. I forgot to tell you. From what I hear, their color is black.”

“Black? We have red and blue so I thought the next one would be brown or green.”

“Black is a color used in the faith of the Six Gods so there is nothing strange about it. The next team might be white.”

“I’m not really a fan of the Slane Theocracy though. Because of that one incident, we fought those guys who looked like they were from some secret unit.”

Despite Climb feeling that he had heard something incredibly dangerous, the conversation ignored him and continued on.

“You do not like them, Gaganan? ...Although this may seem ironic, I can sympathize with their policy. Well, it’s more like I feel that the role of the guardian of the human race that they impose on themselves is just, at least from a human’s perspective.”

“What? So it’s okay for them to kill innocent elves and demi-humans?”

The disgust was apparent on Gaganan’s face. Her eyes burned with an intense hatred. Ivileye answered her animosity with a mere shrug.

“Around here, there are several human countries like the Kingdom, the Holy Kingdom, and the Empire. Gaganan, did you know? The farther you venture out, there are less and less countries that are made up of humans. Depending on the location, there are countries where humans are used as slaves. One of the biggest reasons none of them are near us is due to the Slane Theocracy hunting down the demi-humans.”

With her anger cooled by Ivileye’s words, Gaganan sullenly muttered to herself.

“Well, demi-humans are stronger than humans after all. Humans won’t be able to do anything if they unite and advance their civilization.”

“If you are human, you must evaluate those from the Theocracy highly. Of course, they may have a cruel side, but there are none who are more beneficial to humanity. ...Well, it would be a different story if you were to ask the same of the minorities that are being purged. Not only that, there’s a very good chance they were the ones who formed the original adventurer guild.”

“Really?”

“Maybe. The truth is unknown but there is still a high possibility. The adventurer guild was formed after the battle against the Demon God and in those days, humans were weak. They preserved their strength and, as to not cause friction between them and the kingdom, formed the guild so they could provide support.”

When she finished talking, a peculiar silence covered the table. Climb could not endure the atmosphere and opened his mouth.

“Forgive me for interrupting, Ivileye-sama. You said that new adamantium rank adventurers had appeared. What are their names?”

“Hmm? Ah, right. It was— Momon. The leader is a warrior who’s called the hero in black and apparently the name of the team hasn’t been decided yet. It seems they’re just called Black.”

“Heh~ and the other members?”

“I hear it’s a two-man team with the other member being called Beauty Nabel, a magic caster.”

“What? Just two? What’re you saying? They must be idiots overconfident in their skill... No, that’s why they’re adamantium. They must be hiding something amazing. So? What kind of feats did they achieve?”

“Apparently it only took them around two months. First they took care of the incident in E-Rantel regarding the thousands of undead that spawned. Then they exterminated the coalition of goblin tribes from the north, gathered an incredibly rare herb from the Tove Mountains, subjugated a Gigant Basilisk, and exterminated a group of undead that spilled over from the Karche plains. I also heard that they defeated a powerful vampire.”

“Gigant Basilisk...”

Climb groaned.

With characteristics of both a lizard and a snake, the Gigant Basilisk was a giant monster measuring ten meters. It possessed a petrifying gaze with deadly poison coursing through its veins. What was worse was that its thick skin was as hard as mithril. It was truly a terrifying existence. If they were really able to defeat a monster that could destroy a small town, then it would not have been strange for them to rise to adamantium.

However, there was a problem. That was—

“That’s... incredible. But did they really beat a Gigant Basilisk with only two people? Isn’t that impossible with just a warrior and a magic caster? Not a chance.”

—Indeed. With only two people, it was close to impossible, especially if it was only a warrior and a magic caster. They did not have anyone to heal them. Not only would there have been no way for them to defend against its petrifying gaze and poison, but also the variety of other attacks at the monster’s disposal.

“Ah! I apologize; I don’t think you can classify them as only two. From what I heard, they tamed the Virtuous King of the Forest by force.”

“...Virtuous King? What kind of monster is that?”

Climb remembered hearing that name in one of legends. However, interrupting here would have been the height of discourtesy.

“I’m not exactly sure either. According to the legend that’s been passed down, it is a demon that has been living in the Tove Mountains. It’s supposed to be strong beyond comparison. In the past, an acquaintance... right, apparently it hadn’t been there 200 years ago when that person visited the mountains.”

Ivileye shrugged as she said the number 200.

Although it was an age possible for an elf, by her behavior, it may have just been a joke.

“Heh~. So, how much of that is actually true? Rumors usually come with a bit of an oomph, don’t they?.”

That’s how it was. While telling the story to others, the person doesn’t even notice that they are exaggerating the facts. Bodies that have been chopped to pieces makes it difficult to get an exact head count. At times, the adventurers themselves spread rumors to promote their name.

But Ivileye raised one finger and waved it side-to-side in a dismissive gesture.

“At least this incident is most likely true. According to the first rumor that came from E-Rantel, he exterminated an undead giant with his sword and broke through thousands of undead. This is from the reports of the sentries who managed to survive. Their reports were all nearly identical so they shouldn’t be exaggerated. Apparently it was confirmed that they defeated the two responsible for the incident from their corpses farther in. What’s more, it was after they defeated two Skeletal Dragons.”

Seeing Gagan’s mouth hanging open, Climb asked.

“Is that difficult even for you, Gagan-san?”

“If there were thousands of zombies or skeletons, then they wouldn’t be a problem. It’s possible to break through them. Probably could have done something about the two Skeletal Dragons too. But I’m not too sure about the two masterminds behind such a huge incident. I’m not confident I could win when I don’t even know their abilities.”

“There were even some remarks that they may have been from Zuranon.”

“Really, Ivileye? Man~ if they were the Disciples of Zuranon then it would’ve been over right there. Beating them after breaking through the swarm would be hard. And if you make even a small mistake and get poisoned or paralyzed, then it’s over. What did those guys do for healing? Did they rely on potions? This Momon warrior guy could be using faith magic like our leader. Or maybe it’s the Beauty?”

“I can’t deny the possibility.”

Ivileye nodded her head with an umu umu motion.

“But still, a Gigant Basilisk... that’s still impossible. For a warrior... that’s the worst enemy for someone who fights in close range. Even if I can use Gaze Bane, it’s still hard without backup.”

“Did you hear, Climb? It’s impossible for Gagaran alone. In other words, it depends on the skills of that woman Nabel. If they fight together then it would be possible... maybe?”

“Ah~ it would be easy if that Nabel person was as strong as you, Ivileye. Wouldn’t it be simple for you to solo it if you just fight from afar?”

“That’s asking too much. I would have to fight seriously.”

“If you were there in the same two incidents with me, then the best I could take on would be... the Skeletal Dragon. But then I would be relying on you too much, Ivileye. If I paired up with an orichalcum rank magic caster and it was just us two... then that’d be impossible.”

Climb had a strange thought.

Just how strong of a magic caster was Ivileye? A normal team would be made up of members with similar strength and experience. Was there that big of a difference between them?

“That is not true. I know how strong you are, Gagaran-san. You would not fall behind a group of newcomers.”

“Wow~ thanks for the praise. Okay, wanna do it?”

“No, I will have to decline.”

“And that’s why you’re still a virgin. Didn’t you hear that it’s disgraceful for a man to refuse a meal that’s been laid out in front of him? Why are you still carrying it around like it’s something good? What’re you going to do when you actually do it with a girl that you like? Do you want to be told that you’re clumsy? Is that what you’re into? Are you an M?”

Digging into Climb without even giving him a chance to respond, Gagaran let out a big sigh.

“Well, it’s not like I’m pressuring you. I’m okay with it whenever so just tell me if you want it. ... But Beauty, huh. That’s a pretty embarrassing nickname. Isn’t the name just for show?”

“She’s supposed to be quite beautiful. According to my information, she—“

Climb thought that Ivileye’s gaze stopped on him for a brief instant, then soon understood that he was right.

“—rivals the Golden Princess.”

Gagaran looked at Climb playfully. He predicted what she was going to say next and made the first move.

“What is beautiful and what is ugly is different for everyone. And to me, there is no one who is more beautiful than Renner-sama.”

“Yes~ Yes~.”

A voice of obvious disappointment.

“Hmm, we’ve went off topic quite a bit. I’m sorry for having you take part in needless chatter. We will start with our preparations like Lakyus instructed.”

Gagaran and Ivileye stood from their seats. Climb also followed suit.

“Sorry, Climb. There’s a lot I want us to do together, but I don’t think now’s the time.”

“Not at all, Gagaran-san. Please don’t worry about it. And Ivileye-sama as well, thank you for your advice.”

Gagaran silently stared at Climb then let out a tired laugh.

“Fine, you’re going back right? Look after the leader, will you? Bye bye, virgin. ...And make sure you keep your items secure. That weapon at your waist isn’t what you normally use, no?”

“Right. This is in case for emergencies.”

“You don’t know what’s going to happen so even if you don’t wear your armor, at least always carry your sword with you. That’s what it means to be an adventurer, especially a warrior. Also, do you have the item that I gave you?”

“The bell? I have it right here.”

Climb tapped the pouch tied to his belt.

“I see. Then it’s fine. Remember, as warriors, the only thing we can do is swing our weapons. But that’s dangerous. Magic items are what lets us prepare for those dangers. Get a lot of items and hold onto them. And keep at least three bottles of potions with you. It’s what saved me in the past.”

He had three potions but only brought two with him. Climb responded that he understood.

“... You’re surprisingly considerate of others.”

“You making fun of me, Ivileye? ... Sorry for keeping you, Climb. Basically, what I want to say is to always be prepared beforehand.”

“I understand.”

Gagaran nodded deeply.

Part 3

Top Fire Month (Month 9), Day 6, 6:15

Nine men and women sat around the circular table.

Despite the leaders who commanded each section of the Eight Fingers gathering in one place, none of them made the effort to meet each other's eyes. They simply looked over the documents in front of them or talked with their own subordinates.

It was like a gathering of completely separate organizations. Although the situation wasn't so bad as to call it explosive, the guarded caution they had for one another was apparent, like one between enemies. However, from each of their respective points of view, this was the obvious response. Even if they were one group and working together, in reality, they would often steal assets from one another and rarely joined forces.

For instance, the drug trade manages and operates everything from a drug's production to the moment it hits the market. Something the smuggling group had no part to play in. The groups did not openly interfere with one another, but it was common to see them attempt sabotage while the other had their backs turned.

Such actions held absolutely zero merit for an organization as a whole. This was one of the pitfalls of multiple criminal groups banding together to form a larger one.

These people attended the routine division meeting of the Eight Fingers despite having such terrible relations as they had a good reason to do so.

The reason was: any who did not attend was considered to be a possible traitor and targeted for purging. That was why even those who had no business in the Kingdom went out of their way to attend the meeting.

Even those who normally secluded themselves in safety stepped out onto the spotlight. Needless to say, their fear of being assassinated meant that they brought bodyguards with them. These were two of their most skilled men that they were allowed to bring to the meeting, selected carefully from their own group.

—All except for one person.

“Everyone is present. Let’s begin our regular meeting.”

The chairs creaked loudly as the man’s voice caused everyone to sit up straight.

The one who opened his mouth was the speaker for this meeting and also the leader of the Eight Fingers. Adorned with the mark of the Water God, the man who looked to be in his fifties wore a gentle expression on his face, the type who did not seem to belong in the underworld.

“There are a number of topics for discussion, but the first that needs to be sorted— Hilma.”

“Yes~?”

The one who responded was a woman in white.

Her skin was sickly pale and her clothes were white as well. A tattoo of a snake crawled down her right arm, starting from her shoulder blades and reaching to her hand holding a pipe that gave off poisonous, purple fumes. Wearing purple mascara and lipstick, the thin garments that hung loosely around her body gave her the decadent aura of a high class prostitute.

She yawned deliberately.

“Can’t you start a bit earlier?”

“... I heard that your drug cultivation facility was attacked.”

“Yep, it’s true, a village that was used as a production plant. Cost me a pretty penny too. I might cut down on distribution.”

“Were you able to find information on the ones responsible?”

“Nope, it was perfect ... Well, it’s not like I don’t have any leads.”

“Their color?”

Everyone knew what he meant by that question.

“Don’t know. It’s just starting to become clear; I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“I see. As you’ve all just heard, this is the current situation. Raise your hand if any of you have any information.”

There was no response. It was unclear whether they didn’t know, or simply had no desire to answer.

“Then next is—.”

“—Hey.”

The man’s voice rang low, holding an incredible amount of power.

All of the eyes in the room gathered in one spot. In that place was a bald man with half of his face covered in tattoos of beasts. Everything about him was large; the outlines of his muscular figure obvious even through his clothes. The cold glint of his eyes belonged to that of a warrior.

Although the other group leaders had brought bodyguards with them, the man had no one standing behind him. It would be meaningless to bring along people who would be of no use. That much was obvious.

The man glared at Hilma, the leader of the drug trade. No, he probably did not intend to glare at her, but his knife-like eyes made it appear that way.

For a moment, the bodyguards behind the woman drew in their breaths. They could feel the overwhelming difference in power between them.

They knew that the man was a monster capable of killing everyone in the room.

“How about employing our services? It’ll be hard for you to protect your assets with those small fries of yours.”

Zero. He was the representative of the security division that accepted a wide range of jobs, from bouncers to bodyguards for nobility. What made him even more famous was that he was the strongest member of the Eight Fingers. But the offer from a man of his caliber—

“No.”

—was rejected.

“It’s fine. I can’t reveal my key positions.”

That was the end of it. As if he had lost interest, Zero closed his eyes, making it seem as if he had turned into a boulder.

“Then I’d like to take you up on that offer.”

A skinny man opened his mouth. His soft demeanor contrasted harshly against Zero.

“Zero, I want to hire your guys.”

“What’s this, Cocco Doll. Can you afford it?”

While Hilma’s drug trade was on the rise, Cocco Doll’s slave trade was on the decline. With the slave market outlawed by the efforts of the Golden Princess, he and his group were forced to hide deeper underground.

“Don’t worry about it, Zero. And while we’re at it, I want you to lend me the best of the best, someone from the Six Arms.”

“Oh?”

Zero reopened his eyes, his interest piqued for the first time.

He wasn’t the only one who was surprised. Almost everyone present shared his sentiment.

The name ‘Six Arms’ originated from the sibling god of the God of Theft, one who was said to possess six arms. They were the six strongest members of the security division.

Needless to say, the most powerful among them was Zero, but the remaining five did not fall very far behind. One with the ability to cut space, one who controls illusions, and among them was even an Elder Lich, a powerful undead.

If Gazef Stronoff or adamantium rank adventurers were the strongest on the surface, then the Six Arms were the strongest of the underground. Employing someone of such caliber could only mean one thing.

“You must be in quite a bind. Alright, just sit tight and wait. My strongest subordinates will ensure the safety of your goods.”

“Sorry~. I ran into a bit of trouble with a girl that was supposed to be disposed of. This much preparation is probably a bit excessive but if that store goes under then it puts me in a sticky spot. Let’s save the talk about the payment for later, okay?”

“Fine.”

“Since the discussion is over, can you start immediately? There’s actually something that I need handled as soon as possible.”

“Alright. I’ll lend you the guy who I brought with me.”

“... Then we can move on to the next topic. Those who know about the new adamantium rank adventurer ‘Momon of Team Black’, any thoughts?”

Interlude

Clang clang. One could hear the sound of precious metals banging against one another.

Having confirmed that there was no longer anything in the upside-down sack, Ainz spread the glinting coins on top of the table.

He counted the gold and silver coins in stacks of ten pieces each.

Despite having already counted it numerous times, Ainz picked up the sack and peered inside.

Needless to say, it was empty— after checking it a second time, Ainz tossed aside the sack and grabbed his head.

“Not enough... This is nowhere near enough...”

His human face that was created with an illusion became undone. Of course, the mountain of coins in front of him was a small fortune. It was an amount that an average person from this world would not be able to earn even after several decades. But from the perspective of the Supreme Ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the only one who could earn foreign currency, it was severely lacking and a great cause for concern.

Ainz’ mind was forcibly calmed whenever an emotion he experienced exceeded a certain threshold. For example, if he was hit by the panic of only having a single silver coin left remaining, his mind would immediately regain its composure. Currently however, that response failed to activate because at the back of his mind, he knew that there were still some gold coins in the coffers. This left him with a feeling of anxiety that burned through his body.

Ainz shook his head and proceeded to divide the gold coins in front of him based on how they would be spent.

“First, this is the additional funding for Sebas.”

Ainz’ face stiffened as he saw how the pile was reduced in an instant.

“Next is... costs for the restoration of the Lizardmen village that Cocytus requested as well as the necessary tools...”

Although it wasn’t as large as the one before, another significant chunk of the pile also became separated and only a few gold coins remained.

“... About the supplies for the Lizardmen village, I can use my connections with the guild as an adamantium adventurer. It’ll cover a bit of the costs so... about this much?”

He took back a few gold coins from Cocytus’ pile.

“...Maybe I should find a merchant and get a sponsorship. It would be a way to earn a regular income aside from adventuring.”

Including Ainz, there were only three parties of adamantium rank adventurers in the Kingdom. For this reason, there were instances where they would receive commissions from merchants. Ainz dearly wanted to accept those kinds of jobs because for him, they were easy and paid extremely well. However, he had hesitated to do so up until now.

He feared that it would paint his Momon persona as greedy, that the people and other adventurers would see him as someone who would accept any job for money.

Ainz was planning to elevate ‘Momon’ to an adventurer who was praised by all and when the time came, credit all of his fame to Ainz Ooal Gown. In order for this plan to succeed, it was necessary that he pay close attention to how the masses saw him.

“But still... I have no money. Maybe I shouldn’t have stayed in an inn like this.”

Ainz looked around the magnificent room.

This was the most splendid room of the best inn in E-Rantel. The money to rent such a place was exorbitant. Since it was useless to Ainz who had no need for sleep, he wanted to use the funds for the rent elsewhere.

It was the same for meals. Even if he were served luxurious food, all of it was useless to him since he could not eat. It would be smarter to refuse them and save on food expenses.

However, Ainz knew very well that he could do no such thing.

Ainz was, no, Momon was the sole adamantium rank adventurer of this city. Such a person could not make a cheap inn his residence.

The necessities of life were one of the easier ways of comparing oneself to others. An adamantium rank adventurer must dress and live befitting of his status.

He had to show such vanity for the sake of maintaining appearances.

That was why Ainz could not lower the quality of his inn even if he knew that it was a needless expense.

“If the adventurer guild thinks I’m so valuable then they could at least pay for my room... Haa... I guess they would do it if I were to ask.”

But he did not want to owe any favors. Until now, he took on urgent job requests and worked so that people would be indebted to him. He wanted to save it for later to use as a bit of intimidation. Spending it on such a trivial matter would interfere with his plans.

“Ah~ I’m broke. What should I do? Should I accept some requests, after all...? But there aren’t any that pay well these days. And if I take on too much then the other adventurers will resent me...”

He had to make Ainz Ooal Gown a lasting legend, a good one rather than bad, if possible. Ainz imitated a sigh and counted his spending money in his head from the coins that remained.

“Speaking of money, what should I do about the Guardians’ salaries?”

Ainz pondered as he leaned back in his chair and looked to the ceiling.

The Guardians insisted that they did not need something like wages, claiming how they could possibly desire compensation on top of serving the Supreme Being which is their greatest joy. But from Ainz’ perspective, he questioned whether it was alright for him to simply accept their good will. Work must be met with fair compensation.

Even if the Guardians insisted that pledging their loyalty to the Supreme Being was in itself the reward, it was difficult for Ainz to be convinced.

It may just be his self-righteousness, having experienced working in a company for pay. However, he could not abandon the notion that work had to be rewarded.

He did fear the possibility that a salary might corrupt his children who did not know any better. Even so, there was merit in introducing it as an experiment.

“The question is what I’m going to reward them with.”

His eyes moved from the ceiling back to the few remaining gold coins on the table.

“If I consider the Guardians as department heads of a listed company, then they would need at least 15 million yen annually... Shalltear, Cocytus, Aura, Mare, Demiurge... Albedo would need

a bit more, right? So multiply by six and... Hmm, yep that's impossible. I can't raise that much money."

Ainz pulled at his head and suddenly opened his eyes wide.

"That's it! I can substitute it with something else! Currency that can only be used in Nazarick—make something like notes for children and have one equal a hundred thousand yen!"

Having shouted as much, Ainz frowned once more.

But what could they spend that currency on?

All of the facilities in Nazarick were free. Even if he thought of minting coin, he could not think of what to spend it on.

"Maybe use it to buy items from this world?"

Ainz compared the common goods of this world with those of Nazarick and doubted whether any of the Guardians would actually want them.

"But if I start charging for the stuff that was free up until now, that would be counterproductive... what should I do..."

After thinking it over for a while, Ainz came up with a great idea.

"Right! I'll just ask the Guardians to think about it. I can ask them if they have anything that they want badly enough to pay money for!"

As Ainz muttered happily to himself about his nice idea, his smile suddenly turned bitter.

"With that said..."

He realized that he was talking to himself more and more often.

He knew that it started back when the game was nearing its end, the loneliness from his guild mates no longer showing up. But why was it that his muttering did not die down even after the NPCs gained sentience and moved about on their own?

Perhaps it became a habit, or—

"Because I'm still alone..."

Ainz gave a lonely smile.

Of course, saying that he was alone even with the self-aware NPCs by his side was rude to them. But he also had this thought; in order to act as Ainz Ooal Gown, the leader of the 41 Supreme Beings that the Guardians wanted, it was possible that he was killing Suzuki Satoru.

Ainz heaved a sigh and turned his gaze back on to the coins on the table. That was when he heard a knock on his door.

After a brief respite, the door opened. Confirming that the person who entered was the one he was expecting— Narberal Gamma, Ainz deliberately fixed his expression so that one corner of his lips curled upwards, into a face that looked as if he were looking down on someone.

The low rank illusion that Ainz was able to cast plainly showed his emotions on the surface. As such, there was a chance that he would show a face ill-fitting of Nazarick's ruler. That was why he practiced a countless different expressions in front of the mirror so that whenever he was in the presence of others, especially Narberal, he could seem more dignified. He had a great deal of trouble choosing an expression out of the many he practiced.

“What is it, Nabel.”

He questioned her with an equally decorated voice.

“Yes, Momon-sa... san.”

“... It seems the ‘sama’ appears occasionally. No choice but to leave it as an old habit. Regardless, at least you fix it when I give a warning, albeit temporarily. I guess I must give up on that endeavor. Ah, there is no need for you to bow your head, I am not angry. And the respectable way you address me... well, it should be fine since it seems other people including the guild leader have come to some misunderstanding about us. So, what is it?”

“Yes, the iron ore that you demanded of the merchant has arrived.”

It wasn't a demand I just bought it normally....

Thinking so in his head, his dignified expression remained unmoving.

“I see... where was the iron ore from? Was it gathered from all eight locations?”

“I apologize. I was not told.”

“...It's fine. I have plenty of money. Although I do not know how many places it was gathered from, there should be more than enough money to purchase all of it.”

Ainz confidently filled the sack with the coins that were stacked on top of the table and tossed it at Narberal's feet. He watched as she courteously picked up the bag.

“Understood, but may I ask you a question?”

“Is it regarding the reason why I am buying iron ore from different locations?”

Ainz explained it to Narberal who nodded her head.

“It is so that I may toss them into the Exchange Box. In other words, I wish to test whether or not the amount of gold differs based on where the ore was mined.”

The Exchange Box was not influenced by the appearance of the original object. For example, regarding a detailed stone statue, it would ignore any workmanship and calculate its worth to be equal to a stone of the same weight. Then the test was to see how it handles the difference in components— in the actual material. That was the reason why he was buying iron ore from various locations.

“As you already know, Nabel, it works even if you were to put in something like barley.”

Although I inserted in bulk and only got one gold coin from it— Ainz added on in his head.

That was what spawned the plan to build barley fields outside of Nazarick, to grow them in bulk. Using Golems and Undead would allow them to create a vast field. Of course, there were countless obstacles before reaching that point.

“I understand. Then I will proceed to buy them as soon as possible.”

“Right, but maintain your vigilance. There is no guarantee that you will not be attacked. If something happens... you understand what to do, correct?”

“Use Shadow Demon as a shield, abandon the notion of gathering information, prioritize my safety above all else and focus entirely on retreating. I will then move to the fake Nazarick built by Aura-sama, delivering false information to the enemy.”

“Correct. Prioritize your safety. Never take the roads that are easily assaulted or where there are no crowds. And even if humans talk to you or provoke you, do not cause them severe harm. I was quite shocked when that man begged me for help while crying, saying how he was only trying to hit on you. You must also control your bloodlust. I will not go so far as to tell you not to beat a pickpocket should you happen to run into one, but don’t take it too far. Also, refrain from calling humans insects. In other words, try not to injure or kill humans. We are the greatest adventurers, Momon and Nabel of Black, after all.”

While watching Narberal who seemed to show that she understood, Ainz thought over any other precautions that he may have missed then nodded his head.

“...Hmm. This should be enough. Then go, Nabel.”

Narberal bowed her head and left the room, the leather sack in tow. Ainz watched her back as she left and, despite not having lungs, sighed heavily.

“... The expenses only pop up when I don't have any money. Damn it all.”