

終末なにして  
ますか？

#02

Do you have what THE END?  
May I meet you  
once again?

もう一度だけ、  
会えますか？

Akira Karenō 枯野 瑛

illustration ue



**SHUUMATSU NANI SHITEMASUKA?  
MOU ICHIDO DAKE, AEMASUKA?  
- *Sukamoka* -**

**-What Are You Doing At The End? Just One More Time, Can We Meet Again?-**

**- VOLUME 2 -**

**-AUTHOR-**

**Kareno Akira**

**-ILLUSTRATOR-**

**Ue**

**[ Orlandri Translation Company ]**



可愛い花を集めて、花冠を作る。  
どうかこの子が、今この時だけでも、  
可愛いお姫さまになれますように。

ラキシユ・ニクス・セニオリス

明るい色の花を集めて、花冠を作る。  
どうかこの子の行く道が、明るい光に  
いつも照らされていますように。

花びらの数を数えながら、花冠を作る。  
どうか、私たちという小さな花が、  
少しでも可愛く、少しでも明るく、  
そして少しでも賑やかに、  
今日も咲いていられますように――。

枯野 瑛  
Akira Kareno

Illustration  
ue

終末なにして  
ますか？  
もう一度だけ、  
会えますか？

Do you have  
what THE END?  
May I meet you  
once again?

#02



アイセア・マイゼ・ヴァルガリス

その顔をまた見れただけでも  
飛空艇に揺られまくった甲斐が  
あったってもんすねえ。





こういうのは、本当に困る。  
怒ればいいのか、笑えばいいのか、  
喜べばいいのか、悲しめばいいのか。

こいつらは、妖精だ。

妖精というのは、兵器の一種だ。

だから、いつかきつと、こいつらにも、

戦場へ行く日が来るのだ。

あのでっかい剣を持って、大好きな人たちのために、  
笑って命を捨てる日が来るのだ。

リンゴ

ママ  
ロマン

ふざけるな、と思う。

赦されるはずないだろ、と思う。

そして、罪悪感めいた後ろめたさを感じる。

何せ、いまこの二人の「大好きな人」には、

まず間違いなく、僕が含まれている。

いつかこの二人を殺すだろうバカどもの中に、  
まず間違いなく、僕の名前が入っている。

だから僕は、こういう時に――

――って、痛あつ!?

こ、こらリンゴ、やめろ、やめろって!

いま大事なことを考えてる最中なんだから、  
髪は引っ張るなって、痛い、痛いってば!?

フェオドル・ジェスマン



死んだ誰かには、もう会えない。  
来た道を振り返っても、  
そこには思い出しかない。  
顔を上げて前を向いても、  
そこには未来しかない。

それでも、ワタシの足は動いている。  
楽しかったあの日々に背を向けて。  
行き先のわからない歩みを続けている。



# CHAPTER 1

## DISTANT BACK



『遠い背中』

- lost in dark -



A town burned.

Everything that made it recognizable was devoured, engulfed by the flames' tongues.

Until recently, it was known as Elpis's upper residential area, inhabited by only those who were especially wealthy even among citizens of the affluent Mercantile Federation.

As they watched, the many gardens of the rich went up in smoke, one after another. Their mansions joined their gardens, colors of white, red, or blue all fading to the same ashy black as the buildings lost their shape and crumbled. What was once an avenue lined with evergreen trees had transformed into a path of light illuminated by a series of gigantic torches.

"...No way."

In a corner of the plaza, away from any sparks dancing errantly away from the fire, a small, petite figure wearing a hood powerlessly flopped down onto their knees.

"No way... this can't be real, can it?"

The person stared straight into the center of the fire, ignoring how its blinding light burned into their eyes. Dazedly, without a single twinkle in their dull eyes, they stared at what was being lost. As they watched, the flames began to encroach onto the plaza with tremendous force.

A Beast had been released on this Floating Island.

It was the Materno, Smothering and Enveloping Fifth Beast. A mass of high-viscosity liquid that should have been incapable of locomotion through its own power, it regardless – if slowly – moved around. Any and all living things it touched were melted, as if immersed in strong acid.

However, it was somewhere else, considerably far away from this place, and it never moved very speedily. It would likely devour the town eventually, but such a scenario wouldn't occur for a while. There was time left.

"Hey, move it!"

A Beastman shoved aside the hooded figure, huge bundles of luggage slung across his back. The figure cried out as they crashed onto the stone pavement, their finely-made

cloak quickly becoming dirtied by soot and mud.

A great deal of people were running around. With almost no exceptions, their eyes were bloodshot with fear. Incomprehensible words of prayer, assorted names, and screams flooded from their mouths. Some carried baggage, and others didn't. They shoved and pushed their way through others, always trying to get even one step ahead of someone else so that they might get to the port, to the airships, and off the Floating Island.

It is common knowledge to everyone who lived in the sky that the Seventeen Beasts cannot fly. As long as they could get into the air, the Materno would not reach them.

The mob, turned into a stampede by the chaos and excitement, didn't bother to notice what was laying under their feet. Over and over again, that small figure was kicked around like a ball, their cries swallowed up by the sounds of footsteps and angry voices.

Eventually, the number of people shrank, driven away by the ever-approaching flames, until at last they were gone from the plaza.

In their wake was the small figure, who had by now become something resembling a dirty bundle of rags. With their hands and feet planted onto the pavement, they trembled with effort to raise up their body. The hood of their cloak had been torn apart, exposing their real face.

It was the face of a child.

On her head, black triangular ears. On her cheeks, three pairs of long, thin whiskers. In families carrying mixed Beastman blood, a rarity in itself, there were cases where children might be born with small features such as these on their bodies.

The child looked up again, her glassy eyes fixed on a point beyond the flames, towards the spot where her everyday life had existed until just the other day.

"...Hey! Are you alright?!"

A Borgle wearing fireproof clothes came running up to the girl, scooping her up as if she really was the bundle of rags she resembled.

"Sorry, but I'm gonna have to touch you for a bit." He awkwardly patted down the



child's body from the top of what had been her cloak as she grimaced and let out a small, pained scream. The Borgle's face grew grim as he realized how bad her condition was. Feeling her soft, limp body, he judged that she had bones broken all over. The girl was in critical condition, and without a doubt would die unless she was given treatment immediately.

"Please... let go..." The girl batted at the Borgle's arm helplessly, trying to push him away.

"H-hey!"

"Need t'go... I know, it's impossible... but still..."

"Hey, don't go pushing yourself! That area's already done for! You shouldn't get too close!"

"It's impossible... but gotta... be there..."

She stood up. Despite her wobbliness, she started to walk, towards the growing fire. "Cuz... today's the day... I'm supposed t'meet... him..."

The girl quickly reached her limit. Her knees folded under her, and she crumbled down onto her left shoulder. "Got to... meet n'...say sorry..."

"Geez, I told you to not push yourself!" The Borgle picked up the girl again. He didn't know whether it had been pain, fatigue, something else, or all of it combined, but she had fainted. He clicked his tongue, wrapping her up in his fireproof clothes.

Of course, he'd already noticed. The Beast was still far away from this town. Naturally, that meant the fire burning it down now had no direct relation to the Beast's attack. That said, judging by how quickly the flames had grown and surrounded the town, it couldn't be considered a mere accident.

Without a doubt, the fire had been ignited by a person. Someone had caused this, with only malicious intentions in mind.

The upper residential area had been a town of the highly affluent. A non-insignificant amount of people wouldn't have looked too kindly upon those who lived there. Someone in a group of that sort probably threw a torch somewhere with shortsighted logic like, *"Everything will disappear and be devoured by the Beasts anyway, so it's just the difference between whether it's sooner or later!"* It was unfortunate, but the town

was probably also the sort of place to easily attract such sentiments.

The Borgle hacked out a harsh groan as he placed the critically injured child on his back. “Still, just thinking about the kind of person who’d set all this on fire makes me want to puke.”

“Feo... dor...” Still unconscious, the girl shifted and murmured someone’s name in her delirium. “...’m sorry... saying... such selfish things... gonna apologize, so... so, please...”

The Borgle lowered his head, trying his best to not hear the words directed towards someone who wasn’t here anymore.

He readjusted the child’s position on his back, then started back towards the port.



# **CHAPTER 2**

## **SEASON OF BUDDING FLOWERS**

『芽吹きの季節に』

- blurry border -





# PART 1

## ~ AN OLD MAN'S DEATH ~

One day, an old man living by himself died.

Deep underneath Lyell City's northernmost town block was an ancient underground water control facility. Built when the town was still young and growing itself by gathering copper sheets and screws, the small building had since been abandoned, left adrift in the gap between time and history after another facility robbed it of its original purpose and forced it to shut down.

In a corner of that aged building, the old man drew his last breath as he slept, passing from this world without a word.

A satisfied smile remained on his face; the engraved remnant of his many years existing alongside the city of Lyell. He was seated as if taking a brief rest after a long period of walking.

No one attended to him on his deathbed. The old machines that surrounded him emitted a faint *whir* as dust drifted from their rusted frames. Then they fell silent as well, never to move again.

He had once been known as Old Man Springbeard. It was likely that many who lived aboveground would remember him as Lyell's "most famous product." He had been skinny and of a small build, with an enormous white beard. He almost magically appeared in various parts of Lyell, running about soundlessly in tattered, dirty work clothes, performing maintenance on the abandoned mechanisms scattered throughout the city. Some said that he had once been a famous engineer in the distant past, but if he ever was, now he was just an ordinary eccentric.

His real name was unknown, and he had no relatives. No one calling themselves his acquaintance ever came forward. He didn't speak even a single word to anyone. Naturally, he neither requested nor accepted compensation. He simply fixed anything that could be fixed, then moved on as swiftly as he'd come.

There were many theories about what sort of existence he might be. Some saw him as just an urban legend; others suggested he might be a ghost, or perhaps a fairy. He certainly acted otherworldly enough to fit that description, yet lived and breathed like

any other citizen of Lyell.

One rumor suggested he carried the blood of the Earth Dragons who perished on the surface in a bygone era, and was their last survivor. If there was any truth to it, then the old man's death was a great tragedy indeed; a bloodline that had barely survived over five hundred years had now finally ceased for good. Of course, it was unclear whether there was any truth to the rumor or not, and now it was impossible to confirm.

The significance of that lonely old man's death remains unclear, for now.

## PART 2

### ~ CAT AND MOUSE ~

A forgotten old man once said, "To be chased by women is a honor men should wear with pride." The generations that followed after him expanded on the phrase: "But before receiving that honor, be prepared to fight for your very life."

And so, Fourth Officer Feodor Jessman found himself running through the hallways of the Fifth Division.

It must have been quite the sight to behold; he ran hurriedly but quietly, not making a single audible footstep. On occasion he passed other uniformed officers, who would be surprised at first, then recover and step aside to watch. Imps were known for being light on their feet, after all.

Every so often, Feodor spied out of the corner of his eyes the posters along the walls that said, "No running in the halls!" Somewhere deep within his heart, he felt like apologizing. *I'm sorry*, he silently told the posters. *Forgive me, but this is an emergency!*

"W-Wait up!" the girl pursuing him shouted. She was young, perhaps in her teens, and wore a military uniform like him. Her gait was filled with long strides which, combined with her outstretched and grasping hands, created quite the unsightly display. The pitter-patter of the girl's footsteps thundered against the hard floor with such force that she almost seemed to leave a cloud of dust in her wake, not unlike a horse-drawn carriage. As often occurred during this exercise, her bright-green hair bounced up and down.

"I said *wait!* Can't you hear me talking to you?!"

Of course, Feodor didn't stop when he heard her words. If he'd had any inclination to halt as asked, he'd not be fleeing for his life to begin with. But that aside, in front of him there was a steadily approaching corner.

*I've got this!* Feodor wrenched his body weight to the side and rounded the corner.

Of course, that alone wasn't enough to be a successful escape; he merely vanished from his pursuer's line of sight for a few seconds. But a few seconds were all he needed.

"You – won't – *get away!*" The girl leaped through the spot where her target had



disappeared. "...Huh?"

He wasn't there. In his place was a girl with orange hair and a very surprised expression forming on her face.

"Lakish?!"

Feodor's pursuer was none other than Tiat Shiba Ignareo, and the girl wriggling in her grasp was Lakish Nyx Seniolis.

"Hyaa! W-What's going on, Tiat?"

"Feodor was just here, wasn't he?" Tiat jerked the other girl closer. "Where'd he go?!"

"Uh, he... well, you see..." Lakish's eyes darted to the end of the hallway.

"That way, huh? Got it." Tiat nodded and started to leave – then swiftly spun, grabbed the door behind Lakish, and threw it open to reveal a storage room empty but for some supplies. A disgusting stench like muddy water filled the air.

She sighed. "...I failed."

"Um... Tiat?"

"Oh, it's just that you're really nice to everybody, Lakish, so I thought you might be covering for him, that's all. Sorry I doubted you." Tiat waved and ran off. *Tap-tap-tap-tap*. It wasn't proper for a girl her age to be making such an awful racket. Lakish watched her shrink into the distance, her mouth slightly hanging open.

When the other girl could no longer be seen and Lakish had recovered her wits, she quietly called out, "Um, Feodor? She's gone."

At the sound of her voice, Feodor opened the curtains directly opposite of her. He had been hiding in the bushes beneath the window facing the barracks courtyard. He pushed aside the curtains and dropped to the floor. "Man, that was dangerous," he said, brushing green leaves off himself. "You really saved me there."

"I-I'm glad to help... I think," Lakish said with a slightly troubled look on her face, "but really, what in the world did you say to make her so upset?"

“Oh, well... It’s kind of difficult to say... actually, it’s harder to say *which* thing it could’ve been...”

“If you won’t tell me, shall I call her back and ask her instead? I am her friend, after all.”

“Rgh...”

Lakish was usually timid, but for some reason she chose now to be assertive. Feodor scratched his head, realizing he couldn’t possibly get out of this one. “Cookies and biscuits.”

“Huh?”

“Which one would be better covered in chocolate? I’m team cookie, and she’s team biscuit.”

Lakish pressed her lips together tightly, but a small snicker still escaped her. Feodor glared at her, feeling wounded. *This is why I didn’t want to say anything.* “But still, to chase someone around over snacks? That’s pretty narrow-minded, don’t you think?”

“Doesn’t that apply to you too, Feodor? Running away means you couldn’t come to an agreement with her, right?”

“What? But cookies are plainly better.”

Lakish covered her mouth as she turned away from him, still enduring the urge to laugh.

“Tiat is my older sister,” she said abruptly. “Now that the adult fairies have left the warehouse, she’s the oldest remaining. She has barely any combat experience, but she tries to be a role model to the children anyway. Although she’s always been anxious about her abilities, she tries her best to become a reliable and wonderful person.”

“Yes...?” Feodor had already heard all this once before.

“That’s why I’ve always thought she wanted a friend she could fight with.”

“Excuse me?” He didn’t understand. “In the first place, I don’t recall becoming her friend. Besides, don’t you already disagree with your friends sometimes?”

“Well, I don’t mean fighting with friends. It’s more like wanting to have a friend to fight.”

Feodor shook his head. “I really can’t follow you sometimes...”

“Really?” Lakish thought a little. “It’s fine if you don’t understand, Feodor. The way you are right now is just fine. I’ll leave Tiat in your hands.”

“Hold on. What kind of context makes you pick that line to end with?”

“Like I said, you don’t have to understand anything.”

“I’m not going to agree to something like th–”

*“Found youuuu...”*

A shape vaguely resembling Tiat had appeared at the end of the hallway. She practically resembled a wolf hunting its prey, both in form and spirit. Even if it was only for a second, to see a girl acting like this was just...

“Oh no.”

“Don’t you *dare* move!”

Tiat ran towards Feodor as he began to take off again, and the two of them swept back through the hallway like a spring wind. Left in their wake and covering her hair as the wind whipped at it, Lakish once again had to stifle her giggles.



Anyone can remember facts.

Anyone can forget feelings.

This world has already ended once before. Even now, it continues along the path of ruination.

The origin of this absurd story can be traced back to the massacre brought about by the 17 Beasts that surfaced long ago in history.



On that day, the Emnetwyte that flourished on the surface were destroyed in the blink of an eye.

Even the Dragons and old spirits, beings known for possessing power beyond compare, were easily driven to their extinction. Those who held on to life and managed to survive were too chased from their homes and forced to flee to the floating islands.

Fortunately, the 17 Beasts cannot fly. As long as the survivors did not descend to the surface, they could mostly live without fearing the threat of the Beasts. So they named their tiny world Regul Aire, and began anew.

A long time had passed since then. The world they knew perched atop increasingly thin ice.

Although the sky was relatively safe, the threat of the Beasts was never truly forgotten. If a single mistake was committed, the great massacre might resume in the skies. Those who chose to take up arms worked themselves to death in order to build a peace riddled with cracks and holes.

Their fragile, cobbled-together facsimile of stability continued in this way for 500 years, and the people grew accustomed to peace. Somehow, Regul Aire had persisted through the centuries. Therefore, even hundreds of years from now, it would remain afloat. Such beliefs grew and lingered in an increasingly large number of minds.



A shrill, shrieking laugh cracked the air like a whip. Multiple white-faced and expressionless figures ran side by side along the street.

*A group of ghosts?* Startled, Feodor turned back his head hurriedly.

As expected, the figures persisted beneath sunlight instead of melting and vanishing like the legendary Spectrals fairy tales spoke of. They were just children walking about, indistinguishable from the average young beastman. The deathly pale face that had frozen him in place was merely a mask.

*This is reality*, he reminded himself. The sun shone through the clouds above Openhilt West Lock Street, about to set.

Feodor grumbled vaguely under his breath, adjusting his grip on the jars of milk that were about to slip from underneath his arms. It was irritating for him to be surprised by something so meager. “Is it already time for the Remembrance Festival?”

“Remembrance Festival?” Tiat asked from her position nearby him. He nodded in reply.

“You guys don’t have it on your island? All the floating islands near us participate.”

By the way, the festival’s actual name was the Undead Lunarlight Festival of Memorials and Remembrance. It was named by the great sage who created it, and as usual for such things, its proper name proved difficult to recall. Thus, everyone simply referred to it as the Remembrance Festival. The participating islands were in the general neighborhood of the 20th, and each considered it the highlight of the season.

Now, the history behind the festival. The general idea behind it was that Winter, a period of death, was followed by Spring, a period of birth... In other words, the festival fights back against this world that has already ended, proclaiming that such a relentless world refuses to give up, and that this is a wonderful thing. That is why this festival is celebrated by everyone... the original reason, at least.

“That’s an interesting mask. Is it carved from stone?” Tiat chewed on a cookie as she asked the question; a reminder of the agreement they’d come to not too long ago.

“I’ll only be convinced if you treat me to chocolate cookies,” she’d said. “And they have to be *delicious* ones.”

How was it that she could make it sound as if *he* was the one being forced to concede? Feodor had felt somehow unsatisfied with how it’d turned out, but regardless was forced to swallow any complaints.

“No, it’s just wood coated in white paint. At the end of the Remembrance Festival all the masks are thrown into a bonfire to send off the dead with a decisive farewell.”

“The dead?” Yet another question.

“It’s said that our world connects to the ‘other side’ during the time between winter and spring. The dead have lost their names and faces, so those of us on this side hide our faces and throw away our names to match them. In this way, even though the deceased can’t be reached anymore, we can celebrate the arrival of spring together.”

Feodor shrugged his shoulders, chuckling dryly. “Honestly, it’s the sort of superstition you could find anywhere. What’s important is to enjoy the festival with all your heart – that’s how they justify these frivolities.”

“Uh huh...” The girl walking next to Feodor murmured vaguely. He couldn’t tell what she might be thinking. “Where do they sell the masks?”

“Everywhere, more or less. Clothing and shoe stores usually line their shelves with these sort of masks around this time of the season. The patterns are all different and there’s masks tailored to fit many different races, so you’d need to look through a lot of places until you found one that caught your eye.”

“Uh huh...” This time Tiat sounded slightly curious.

“If you’d like, I can tell you a bunch of shops to check out.”

“Well... I think it seems interesting, but to be honest, it’d be a bit too weird.”

“Oh?”

“They’re things a living person wears ‘cuz they want to meet someone who died, right? If that’s so, I couldn’t possibly participate.”

“Again with that logic?” Feodor grumbled tiredly. Supposedly, Tiat and the girls like her were fairies. It was almost a certainty that the fairies didn’t possess life, being the souls of those who had already died. That’s why it would be odd for her to join the side of life during the festival where death and life conjoined. Something along those lines was likely what she was trying to get at.

It might not be wrong for her to think that way, either. At the same time, a purely logical argument wouldn’t satisfy everyone. For his own part, Feodor rejected it wholeheartedly as an absurd reason to be excluded from the festival.

He knew of their origin, of course. Fairies were simply natural phenomena, formed by the disembodied soul of a child who didn’t know they were dead. They fell into the same category as rain or thunderstorms that might form as a result of atmospheric pressure and changes in humidity. Like a storm, they could appear anywhere as long as the conditions were met.

But the similarities ended there. Storms didn’t eat donuts, wield swords, admire their



elders, or cry when facing near-certain death. Feodor understood the girls very well by now. That's why he couldn't possibly accept the idea that fairies weren't alive.

"You really shouldn't say things like that."

"I know, but it's not like I'm going to act interested just for you," she replied indifferently.

"Most people would want to keep their superiors happy, you know."

"Hmm, maybe, but..." Tiat paused for a minute. "I don't particularly want to see you in a good mood, and I doubt making you happy would be rewarding for me in the slightest. All in all, I think it's unnecessary." She said it honestly and without any trace of irony in her tone, as if she was discussing the weather.

"You dislike me that much, huh..."

"Yep, sure do." Tiat flashed him a bestial smile full of bared teeth, one resembling nothing less than a snarl. "I hate you."

Feodor clicked his tongue. *What's with that?*

Imps were said to be cousins of liars. Not only were they themselves experts at lying, but they could also cleverly discern the lies hidden within the words spoken by other races.

But there were no lies in Tiat's words. When she said she hated him, she was completely, unequivocally, straightforward and honest.

The phrase might also have carried sentiments of endearment, playfulness, other emotions close to her heart. Still, from deep within the depths of that same heart came the truth: "I hate you."

The boiling urge came over him to throw her words back in her face. *Same here. I absolutely, positively, hate you too.*

But if he did, he would seem like a poor loser. So Feodor held back.



Lyell is a dying city clinging to a floating island fated to perish in the all-too-near future.

The inhabitants have all fled to other islands. What was once a thriving mining center is now nothing more than a lonely ghost town, a mere shadow of what it once was.

On the other hand, while the city creeps towards death's door, it hasn't kicked the bucket yet. For now, Lyell is still a city. Although none know whether or not the appearance of a city can continue to be maintained, Lyell has not yet fallen to ruin. The population is greatly diminished, but hasn't fallen to zero just yet. The infrastructure is kept in working order by dutiful golems. Fewer airships may be moored at the harbors, but public ships continue to make their rounds, people and goods with them.

Half a month ago, an incident in Lyell resulted in the destruction of a significant portion of the Port District.

Each floating island is equipped with a harbor where airships may land and take off. Put simply, such ports can be considered the front door of the islands. Since the airships are confined, in principle, to only arriving and departing from the harbors, people and goods must naturally go through the front door. The structure established by this was vital to the island.

Now only half of the Port District remained, and it went without saying that the already tenuous connection this island had to other islands had shrunk to almost nothing.

For the other islands, losing their harbors would be a matter of life and death. However, Lyell's condition provided a silver lining. The flow of airships traveling to the island had already dried up to a trickle long ago, and its economy wasn't so healthy that a delay in the arrival of goods would harm it more than it already had been. The city, already on the verge of death, had no particular distinction whether it might be either living or dying.

Minor tragedies no longer affected the citizens of this fatally wounded city waiting for the end. They became filled with the stillness and quiet one expected from the sleeping, and today was no different.



Once again, they passed a group of people wearing white masks.

“...Hmm?” Feodor came to a stop as he turned towards them, forcing Tiat to stop as well. He wasn’t sure why; the group seemed mildly suspicious, but there wasn’t any concrete reason they might be. It was so close to the time of the festival’s beginning that it was hardly unusual to see people wearing masks. Large groups of people were rare sights in Lyell nowadays, but that was it.

The living hid their faces to get closer to the dead by wearing white masks. It hid every identifiable trait about them, making it impossible to tell one person from another. Failure to do as such would prevent the living and dead from meeting.

Feodor knew it was just a stupid superstition, and had no reason to change his mind. Still, there had to be some basis for the belief somewhere. If nothing else, those who wore the masks were undeniably impossible to identify. Downtown Lyell was currently flooded – though not enough people were on the streets for such a saying to be accurate, there were still quite a few – by aimlessly wandering masked people.

“What’s up?” Tiat asked, munching on another cookie.

“Remember that statement the military police made a while back? After the Croyance stuff destroyed part of the Port District, they went into their records to reorganize all their operational reports about movements there over the past half year up to then.”

“Oh right, they did mention something like that. But why’re you bringing it up?”

When large numbers of people entered and left the port, security naturally grew lax or insufficient in places. It’d be all too easy for smugglers to take advantage of such gaps to sneak through and traffick their illegal goods.

“They found an overwhelming amount of evidence pointing to alteration of the records. After all the errors were corrected and the numbers counted up again, it seems that they discovered an imbalance. As it turns out, more people came than left.”

“That makes sense, doesn’t it? Rumors started spreading about parts of the city falling, so of course the number of people coming here wou–hang on...” The bag of cookies Tiat carried threatened to slip from her hands. “You mean *more* people are in Lyell



now?"

"That's what I said, isn't it? They even went as far as to mess up the official records to sneak in."

"What? Does that mean this place is like a secret tourist destination?! Is Lyell the number one destination for cities you *absolutely have to visit*, even by illegal means?!"

*That's clearly impossible.*

Lyell was a city experiencing its end. For however many years, its liveliness had faded as more and more houses became abandoned. As far as Feodor was concerned, it didn't seem like the number of people living here was increasing. The familiar bakeries removed their signboards one after another, and no new stories came about to replace them. Visitors wouldn't walk down the main street, so it was unlikely for a bread shop offering donuts to be supported by their business.

That meant an unknown, faceless crowd was covertly living in this city ruled by machines.

*...My sister is involved in this too, huh.*

He remembered the woman with silvery hair he'd met the other day, his blood-related older sister. She was an Imp in the truest sense. Her personality was twisted, she excelled at lies, she was fast on her feet... and her forte was strategy and scheming. But whatever could she be hoping to accomplish in this wretched place?

"So... what's going on?"

"Never mind."

His sister aside, it was the military police's job to worry about suspicious people. Feodor had no reason to pay attention to them. A rather ominous feeling was poking at him, but it wasn't solid enough to act on. Even if he cared enough, he hardly had the free time to conduct an investigation. The situation was only that *merely* suspicious people were lurking in the city, and a group with unknown intentions *might* be moving around.

As Feodor would come to learn, that was just the case.

## PART 3

### ~ APPLE AND MARSHMALLOW ~

Recently, the wails of children have been heard coming from within the forests on the outskirts of Lyell.

Even if one tried their best to ignore them, the screams wouldn't stop. However, even if one entered the forest and searched, the aforementioned children were nowhere to be found.

"The cries are far away from here, so they aren't doing any harm. But no matter how you look at it, it's creepy... or so I hear."

His explanation finished, the Armado serving as the leader of the Winged Guard's 5th Division swept his gaze across the group gathered in the room. "How does it sound?"

"Hmm..." The girl with bright green hair – Tiat – murmured thoughtfully. "What do you guys think?" she asked.

Panival nodded, her long purple hair fluttering. "Judging by the situation, we can probably consider it a high possibility."

"We need to hurry and go find out," Lakish added, her expression worried. "It's fine if nobody's there, but on the chance someone is, I want to meet them."

"Yep!" Collon bounced in excitement, her arms raised high. "It'll be the Great Capture Mission!"

"...Now hold on." Standing a small distance away from the four girls, Feodor hesitantly held up his hand. "I can't help but feel somehow left out here. Did you four understand something from that explanation that I didn't?"

Tiat sighed, exasperation written on her face for all to see. He'd been waiting for a reaction like that; from the start, he wasn't expecting the slightest bit of friendly treatment from her. On the other hand, Collon burst out in unreserved laughter and Panival also chuckled as she patted him on the back cheerfully.

"Oh, I forgot!"

“Sorry, I felt like you were family already.”

The treatment from those two had also been within his expectations. Lakish apologized as well, looking remorseful as she started to explain. “Um, you see, the thing is... inside the forest, there might be someone who’s the same race as us.”

This, too, had been what he’d expected – or rather, hoped for. Out of the four peculiar girls, Lakish was the only one with proper people skills. She cleaned up after the messes the other three made, and Feodor had grown to see her as the diligent communicator of the group.

Now then, regarding the details of the problem...”Same race?”

“Y-Yes, Leprechauns.”

He thought for a bit. “Sorry, I don’t think I understand. What exactly do you mean?”

“Our younger sister might’ve been born, so we want to go meet her soon.” That explanation just gave Feodor even more to think about.

*...Yeah. I don’t get it at all.*

“I see, I see... so it’s like that, is it?” The master of the room, the 5th Division’s leader who had been silent up to this point, nodded his carapace-armored head. “Normally, a certain sorcerer specialized in these things would arbitrarily arrive, arbitrarily investigate, and arbitrarily capture the target. This time, however, it’ll be up to you guys.”

His gaze landed on the girls, who nodded together.

“Yes, leaving it up to you four should be fine.” The First Officer nodded again. “Okay, Fourth Officer Jessman, I’ll entrust the responsibility of overseer to you. If a new Leprechaun is found, immediately secure it and bring it back.”

*I see, so that’s how it’s going to be.*

Feodor might not understand what to do, but he was still nominally the supervisor of the four girls. If there was a task they needed to perform, it’d be given in the form of an order for him to pass down.

“Understood.” On the inside, he was growing sick of it, but of course he didn’t let that show. As always, he buried his resentment on the other side of his carefully fabricated expression. “I, Fourth Officer Feodor Jessman, will now begin the task of overseeing the situation.”



Roughly three hours later, Feodor was sitting on a stump near the forest’s outer perimeter. Said forest was on a slightly elevated section of the island, high enough to look down upon a portion of Lyell. Only the four fairies had gone off into the deepest parts of the forest, leaving Feodor behind to send bored yawns towards the sky.

The descriptions of fairies in fairy tales often said, “Only children who are pure of heart may glimpse them.” More than mere hearsay, it appeared that was an unique characteristic of fairies. Although it defied all reason, it was apparently difficult for unformed Leprechauns to come into being near anyone except innocent children or other fairies.

“U-Um, not that we’re saying your heart is tainted or anything, of course!” a flustered Lakish had spluttered, making Tiat burst out in raucous laughter. “This is just in case, so please don’t take it the wrong way!”

Feodor was well aware of the filth within his heart, and at any rate didn’t have a solid reason to insist on participating. He was *supposed* to be supervising them and not leave them out of his sight, but all things considered, that was just a formality. And so, he was now waiting outside of the forest for them to return.

Sitting in one place and immersed in his thoughts, Feodor was surprised to find it wasn’t a bad chance of pace. *There’s actually a lot to think about, huh...*

The daily duties of the Winged Guard in the three months leading up to the decisive battle. The aftereffects of the Croyance incident, which still felt recent. Whether or not to take action against the increasing numbers of suspicious individuals in Lyell, not as an officer of the Winged Guard, but as Feodor Jessman. And of course, he couldn’t forget to check the Candy Shoppe on West Street for their new seasonal treats.

*Now then, on to planning.*

Feodor Jessman had a goal.



Even if it meant throwing away everything else, he had to seize his dream. For five years he had devoted everything towards that purpose: entering the Winged Guard, playing the role of a model soldier, climbing the ladder of promotions.

Meeting the fairies.

Although learning about the Winged Guard's so-called secret weapons had been purely accidental, it was still a necessary step towards his objective. It might be called a stroke of good fortune, greatly advancing his plans to the point where he could move on to the next stage.

The next stage... in other words, taking control of those secret weapons, and if that wasn't possible, discovering a weakness to reduce their effectiveness.

*I've still got time... but I can't let myself relax for too long.*

Feodor looked upwards to try and calm the burgeoning impatience in his heart. A white bird of unidentified species flew across his view of the pure-blue sky.

"...Feeling hungry." The mumbled words were out of his mouth before he realized how empty his stomach felt. He went through his pockets, but didn't have anything fit to put in his mouth. Normally he'd have a hard candy or two on hand to eat, but he'd forgotten to restock his supply today.

Next, Feodor tried his bag and found a single apple. "I guess it'll do," he grumped; a sweet candy would've changed his mood more, but beggars couldn't be choosers. *Just be glad you have something you can eat*, Feodor admonished himself as he took a folding knife out of his pocket and began peeling the apple. He'd become more or less accustomed to handling knives; the narrow strip of red skin hanging off the fruit quickly lengthened.

A bush near him began rustling. "Hmm?" Feodor glanced in its direction, thinking it was only a rabbit or some other small woodland creature.

A small child – seemingly lacking fangs, horns, wings, and scales, something that could be called Markless – poked their face out of the shadows of the bush, staring intently at Feodor's hands.

He froze as the child tilted its head. A strange silence passed for some time as, most likely, the child struggled between its urges of caution and curiosity. Ultimately, the

latter won out. The bush rustled once more as the child stood up on its short, stumpy legs and earnestly waddled its way towards Feodor, all the while keeping its eyes focused on the apple peel dangling from his hands.

Its untidy hair was bright and reddish-brown. If one judged its age by using Imps as a reference point, it would be around two years old – though of course different races had different lifespans and such estimations held no real meaning. The child was naked, its whole body exposed to the environment. Feodor would've expected it to be covered with cuts, appearing that way in the middle of a forest, but it didn't appear to have any. He hesitated, then quickly verified its gender. It was a girl.

"Uwaa..." As the apple peel in his hands swayed, the toddler's eyes also swayed, as if following it.

*This is definitely – probably – what they're looking for.*

"...There's no way there's a house around here with a lost child or something, right? What a terrible punchline that would be..." Feodor fell silent, not sure who he was talking to. Naturally, no sort of reply came.

The girl was still intently staring. Looking closely at her left nothing to doubt. He vaguely wondered where that story about how only pure-hearted children would be able to see fairies had gone to.

"Sorry," he said at last, "but I'm not giving this to you. It's my snack."

The girl raised her head to look Feodor in the eyes. She blinked once, as if to say "Huh?"

For a child yet to develop reasoning, there wasn't much difference between the whispers of the wind, the murmurs of a stream, or the sour grumblings of a man. *I wonder what that weird noise was* – simple curiosity directed their attention in the direction of such sounds.

*...I really am bad at dealing with kids, aren't I?*

Admitting such a thing was difficult for descendants of Imps, beings who relied on surface-level techniques and experience to function in society, but Feodor had to be honest with himself.

A child's interests ran on extremes. In the world of a child, nothing existed beyond

whatever they might like or not like, and establishing an untiring moderate relationship that satisfied both sides of the equation was impossible.

For the time being, he might be able to fake an artificial smile, and could put her in a good mood. But if he succeeded, she would inevitably become attached to him and start following him around. If that happened... he felt irritated just thinking about it.

“Go back into the forest,” he said as coldly as he could. “Your nice older sisters are searching for you. Go back and let yourself be found.”

“Uweh?”

No reaction. The girl’s eyes soon returned to the apple peel, her round pupils swaying left and right as it blew in the end.

Feodor’s smiling face twitched, then he undid it and sighed heavily. A fiendish liar’s greatest weapon was rendered ineffective against someone indifferent to words. *Now what am I to do...?*

Grumbling to nobody in particular, he resumed peeling his apple. As the peel grew longer and longer, the child’s attention became increasingly fixed upon it.

“I’m not giving it to you,” he said frostily. The apple rind fell to the ground with a *plop*, the last of the peeling finished. “Dammit, where are those four even searching?”

She’s right here. The new one was *right here*.

As he kept on complaining quietly, a small hand grabbed onto his uniform-clad leg. The young girl was trying to clamber up onto his knee. Her grasp felt strong but gentle, and her high body heat radiated through the cloth.

It would be so easy to shake her off, but if he did, the child might be hurt. Feodor hesitated, and the girl seized the opportunity to finish climbing onto his knee. She happily stretched out her short arms towards his apple–

“Hey, stop that!” Her extended hand fruitlessly swung through the air as Feodor bent backwards, raising the apple and knife in his hands skywards. “Knock it off, that’s dangerous! Stop moving around and get off me!”

The girl didn’t listen to his objections. She cried out unhappily, one hand grasping onto

Feodor's chest as the other eagerly reached up. Again and again it didn't cross the distance; again and again she refused to give up, whimpering all the while.

"Ahh... *stop*, dammit! I'm not giving it to you, so quit it already!" Feodor said once more, repeating the words that'd already failed to reach the girl, feeling as if he was talking to himself.

"We're back."

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Feodor heard Tiat's cold voice coming from behind him, followed by Lakish's flustered tones. He turned slowly, with dull movements reminiscent of a rusted gear. The girl lost her balance as he moved, almost falling off his knee before she clung on to his neck.

Standing at the forest's border was the owners of the voices he'd heard, along with their companions. And...

*Huh?*

In Lakish's arms was a sleeping girl swaddled in a blanket. She seemed to be about two years old, and her hair was sky blue.

"...It seems that something odd has occurred," Feodor could only remark.

"That girl..." Tiat squinted. "Is she... yours?" she asked awkwardly. True to form, it seemed like she'd found herself confused by the strange situation, and decided to ask a ridiculously out-of-place question that completely failed to reach the issue at hand.

"...Do I *look* that old?" Feodor answered her out-of-place question with an out-of-place answer. With both of his arms still raised and the naked toddler hanging from his neck, he could only shake his head horizontally. The girl looked up at him, her crimson eyes flickering as if asking a question.



Of course, the blue-haired girl the four had brought from the forest was a recently-born fairy. That meant the red-haired girl that'd been dangling from his neck was the

same.

One occurrence birthing two fairies wasn't something that could be considered *common*, but neither was it entirely unheard-of. Two lives were produced through the process where one would normally be born. Feodor figured it to be similar to other races giving birth to twins.

"Lantolq and Noft were born the same way," Tiat said. "But I guess you didn't know that, huh?"

Naturally. It was the first he'd ever heard either name. "There's some problem when it happens, right? It's... a story you hear often, where one person's strength is split between two when they're born, so both babies are frail, or something like that?"

"Ah, it's fine," Tiat replied airily. "There might be an effect like that, but it won't be enough for us to see any kind of individual difference."

Feodor looked back at Collon and Panival, who were carrying the two sleeping children on their backs. Lakish trailed a bit behind them, smiling gently.

"Before fairies are 'born' they don't have physical bodies and don't eat or sleep," Tiat said. "Sleeping like that is proof that they have a firm grasp on their bodies as Leprechauns. You don't need to worry about them."

*It's not like I was worried or anything. I just had a small – miniscule – interest. That's all. What I'm actually concerned about is... something else.*

"Those two... will they become like you guys before long?"

"Huh?"

"Suicidal girls swinging around big swords?"

"Ahh. That's a mean way to put it, you know." Tiat laughed, not appearing hurt at all.

He never did get an answer.



## PART 4

### ~ FWEDO ~

They couldn't go on calling them "that kid" or "this kid" forever. Both girls needed their own names.

When the issue was raised, the First Officer and four fairies had gone quiet. *What're they so worried about?* Feodor had wondered. Something like names should've been a natural topic to talk about. They were nothing more than names, after all. As long as they were easy to understand, anything would work. For example, borrowing the name of some famous person, or passing down names of family members.

That'd given Feodor an idea. "I know. How about we name one of them after that Kutori person? I might not see her as such, but wasn't she supposedly amazing and wonderful?"

The silence became unpleasant after that.

As it turned out, it was said that naming fairies after other people was taboo, and they especially never used names that had once belonged to previous fairies. Although they didn't understand the underlying reasons themselves, the girls seemed to have been taught to continue that tradition.

Naming the fairies had to be done as carefully as possible. "The oldest among the fairies at the time of a new appearance should read the past records extensively in preparation for deciding suitable names for a newborn," they said – although such matters weren't strictly enforced, and it was more of a custom.

That being the case, they'd sent a hurried communique to their home on the 68th Floating Island. Afterwards, it was decided that temporary names should be chosen for the two children until their proper names were decided; ones that would never have been given to actual people. It would be best for the names to be both sloppy and unquestionably fitting.

In front of the soldiers and fairies scratching their heads and asking each other what they should do, the red-haired child had been happily eating crispy apple slices. Meanwhile, Collon was poking the blue-haired girl's soft cheeks as said girl wiggled and squirmed in discomfort.

It was decided that the red one would be Apple, and the blue one would be Marshmallow.

*No, no, no, that's no good. Easy names are better, sure, but there should be limits to these things!*

Feodor kept his thoughts to himself. "Apple, are you okay with this?"

She smiled and giggled at his question, her face sticky with drool and fruit juice.

"How about you, Marshmallow?" The other girl looked at him and tilted her head slightly, as if saying, "Huh?"

If there were no objections from the parties involved, he supposed that he didn't have the right to say anything more. In the first place, his role was just to supervise Tiat and the others. He was nothing more but a passing stranger to these two kids, and he protected them only in the course of his duty alongside the four girls. He had no right or responsibility to butt in. *Besides...*

Feodor left the rest unsaid, preferring not to dwell on the issue too much. *It'd be better if the 68th Floating Island could reply sooner rather than later and they received proper names.* That was all he was willing to think about.

"It'd be inconvenient if we couldn't figure out what to call them," Feodor mumbled as if talking to himself. He suddenly turned, feeling someone's eyes on him, and found Panival watching him with a mysterious smirk.

*...Just a coincidence,* he thought. She hadn't heard his muttering... or so he wanted to believe.



The facility now used as a base by the 5th Division was originally a public school building. It had been shut down due to administrative issues long before the Elpis Incident five years ago. It was slated to be remodeled into an airship factory at the time, but those plans had suffered somewhat of a setback. One thing led to another, resulting in the current-day situation after the building rights had finally been transferred to the Winged Guard.

In other words, it wasn't originally intended to be a military facility.

That was probably why the military and factory sections were mismatched and poorly

intertwined. The barracks in particular stood out as terribly built. One section might be overflowing with rooms while another lacked any, and the rooms themselves could run the gamut from claustrophobically tiny to excessively spacious. Overall, the entire building resembled something like a chaotic toybox crammed full of things by overexcited and messy children.

Though the scale differed, a similarly chaotic mess existed within a certain room, left unused all this time. Although it was of a reasonable size, the room was far away from the barracks entrance and located on a high floor, and so it had been left alone to gather dust.

Roughly a month ago, two bunk beds were brought into that room, and four new residents entered to begin their lives at the facility.

Furthermore, just the other day, two small cribs were placed in the same room. Two more new residents entered, and started their lives.



“Fwedoooooooo!” As soon as Feodor entered the room, a small red missile flew at him and rammed straight into his stomach.

Putting aside the surprise element, it was actually a very effective ramming attack, with enough momentum behind it to almost make Feodor puke up everything in his stomach. He doubled over, suddenly truly and honestly grateful that he hadn’t eaten lunch before coming here.

After the initial assault, a small blue thing came tottering up to him. “Fwedoo,” she cried out, running as quickly as her tiny feet could carry her and hugging his legs. Compared to the earlier cannon blow, she was a lovely presence.

“A-Apple, you... hey...”

He had called her name intending to scold her, something along the lines of “Stop doing that! It’s dangerous!”

But when she looked up at him with her huge eyes, he completely forgot everything he was about to say. “...It’s good to be energetic,” Feodor finished lamely, “but won’t you go just a little easy on me?”

“Ei yo!” Apple fired back an insanely cheerful response, followed up by a similar cry from Marshmallow. It might be – no, definitely was the case – that neither had understood a word.

Although they were young, they were the embryos of soldiers who would one day bear the future of Regul Aire on their shoulders. At the moment, they overflowed with energy, happiness, and hope. In this situation, he felt like forgiving their positiveness. *It's not so easy to keep up with them, though...*

Feodor had little confidence in his stamina. It wasn't like he was particularly weak, but Imps didn't have much physical strength or endurance. They were creatures that lived by making full use of others and exploiting them.

Their twisted morality, their fundamental shame that came with ever needing to move their own bodies, were deeply ingrained in the blood of the Imps. Even though he could master the sword as a trump card in emergencies, Feodor couldn't quite train his heart, lungs, or muscles to save energy for said emergencies. *What a troublesome story.*

While thinking about what to say to the girls, Feodor casually threw out some words towards his blind spot. “They're both already a handful. Don't you dare join in, Panival.”

“...What, is it so bad if I do?” Panival, who'd been in the position to make a full-fledged tackle, relaxed her stance. She sounded entirely too surprised.

“I want to know why you thought I'd allow it.”

“Ahh, there it is. I had faith in your good heart, but alas...”

*Faith. I see. What a convenient word.* He laughed in his head.

“My heart aside, my body's populated enough.” Feodor couldn't quite pull off the pair of girls still tightly attached to his waist. He felt almost like he was being devoured by a snake.

“Isn't it normal for boys to show off whatever talent, however small, they possess?”

“Not if they're ordered to do it. One has to take the initiative to have pride in these things.” Feodor turned back her frivolous talk as something suddenly occurred to him.

“Say, Panival? Could it be... you’re in a bad mood today?”

“Hmm? Why might you think that?”

“Oh, nothing. Just felt like asking, that’s all.” If he had to give a reason, it was because her usual confident smile didn’t match her eyes, or because her tone seemed unusually prickly, or something like that.

Panival shook her head. “It took awhile for you to pick up on it... but yes, I just might be in a bit of a foul mood right now.”

*Oh, really?*

“Those two had just finally started listening to the story I was telling them, you see.” Panival picked up a picture book from the floor. “And as soon as you came in – well, this was the result. I’m a little jealous.”

It was probably because he was aware of her dissatisfaction, but Feodor could see her small lips pouting.

“Ah...” Feodor could accept a reason like that. He tried calling them again more sharply: “Apple, Marshmallow?”

Two cheerful voices shrieked back at him, and he abruptly felt it was better to change the subject. “Is it just you here? What about the other three?”

“Lakish felt a little sick, so I forced her into the sick bay.”

“Is she okay?”

Panival shrugged. “She said ‘you don’t need to worry about me.’”

*Don’t need to worry, huh...* He was doubtful about how much to trust that sentence when it came out of the mouth of a Leprechaun.

“There didn’t seem to be anything particularly wrong with her body, even to our eyes,” Panival said. “But just to be sure, we let her go to the sickbay so she could get a little breather. At any rate...”

She quickly glanced at Apple and Marshmallow. “She couldn’t hope to rest and recover



her strength if she was here with these two.”

As Feodor was currently in the middle of having his own strength drained to nothing, the remark seemed quite persuasive. “...What about Tiat and Collon?”

“They got called away by the First Officer.”

“Huh?”

*What sort of business does he have with only two of them? Are they being scolded for breaking something while playing around?* If that was it, he hoped he wouldn’t get caught up in the crossfire just for being their superior officer on paper.

“Fwedo! Fwedooooo!”

While they were talking, the two girls wrapped around Feodor seemed to have discovered a new game. They were now happily smacking his thighs with powerful palm strikes, holding nothing back. Despite being only small children, it hurt a lot. “Is this... how they throw tantrums when they get hungry?”

“I wonder.” Panival chuckled lightly. “If anything, it’s because their favorite toy just fell right into their grasp.”

“*You’re* the one who sees me as a toy!”

“So you don’t deny it...?”

He couldn’t. *That’s exactly right.*

Having gotten bored of slapping his thighs, the children had grabbed onto his pants and were trying to climb up his legs. It felt as if they were stretching out the fabric and they were still ignoring him, so Feodor reluctantly reached down and picked up the two of them into a hug.

“Uwaaah!” Apple swung her arms around vigorously, getting more excited than he’d expected. Marshmallow, in his other arm, grabbed at what she could reach of his hair and started pulling on it.

“Ow-owowow! Hey! Quit it, you two!”

“Shouldn’t you be glad you’re being loved so passionately by young women?”

“Don’t you think there are limits to the appeal of affectionate children?!” Feodor yelled, letting slip more than half of his true feelings. “And how many times do I need to say it? I don’t have a preference for markless children of any age – hey, my hair! H-Hey, stop! Don’t you bite me!”

Panival grinned. “You know, a woman much like our mother once said this: ‘Feeling like you want to devour someone is the highest form of affection.’ You are, without a doubt, loved.”

“Don’t talk about troll wisdom like it’s common sense!”

“Oh? You knew about her?”

“I thought it might be a lie the first time I heard it, but I can accept it after seeing your otherworldli–OW!” He writhed in genuine pain, the swinging pair giggling and chortling with every twist of his body. “My glasses are slipping – slipping – they’re falling! That’s dangerous, stop!”

It was definitely a good thing for them to be having fun. Precious, even.

Still, he’d like them to consider timing, circumstances, limits, and moderation for once.

“Like I said, it *hurts owowowowow–ARGH!*”

The room was located on the third floor of the barracks. It was rarely used, since it was a corner room with little use to begin with. Even now, a number of adjacent rooms were uninhabited storage.

In other words, even if some children were to run wild, or Feodor was to shout a few screams, it wouldn’t bother anyone.

“Ears! Ears! MY EAAAAARS!”



It could be argued that it was a good thing that the girls had grown attached to him, but they absolutely refused to listen to anything Feodor said. They struggled while he tried to change their clothes, clung to him while he tried to get them to sleep, and

refused to eat anything they disliked while he tried to stuff the food down their throats.

Taking care of them was Collon's specialty. She alone was capable of dodging their attacks with equally destructive energy, almost magically changing their clothes and sending them to bed. Perhaps it was because their mental age was similar? Or was it more like a pack of animals who couldn't disobey their alpha?

Lakish was the next best at handling the children after Collon. She – how to put it? – appeared particularly used to dealing with excessively selfish children. As for why that might be... that was a topic best avoided, for the sake of her friends' reputations.

Feodor went to the doctor's office to check up on her condition. Lakish, sitting up on her bed, appeared to be in the middle of writing something in an open notebook spread out atop her blanket.

He knocked on the open door with the back of his hand. The girl started and looked up at him, somewhat flustered. "Feodor?"

"How are you? I heard you were feeling sick."

"I'm fine. I'm only here because Panival was worried about me." She casually closed her notebook as she answered him. "The truth is, I'd be okay even if I got up now. But since I have the opportunity, I thought I might pass some time here."

She stuck out her tongue playfully.

"Lakish, you're a delinquent."

"Yep, I am."

*Why're you nodding so happily?*

"How are Marshmallow and Apple? Are they behaving properly?"

"They're *incredibly cheerful*," Feodor grumbled. "They ran wild until they got tired, so now they – Panival included – are in the middle of a nap. The three of them are pretty cute, if you're just looking at their sleeping faces." Lakish snorted at his last sentence. "...What's wrong?"

“The three of them, you said?”

“Something weird about that?”

“Oh, no no, nothing strange about it at all.”

Feodor felt oddly irritated by her overly sweet big-sister-like tone. “...By the way,” he moved on, having just remembered something. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about Apple and Marshmallow... from what I can see, they’re around two or three years old, right?”

“Eh?”

“They can stand up and walk, talk a little, and eat well.” And run, charge, cling, hit, pull, bite. “No matter how you look at them, they don’t act like newborn babies. How did they survive in that forest until we got them out?”

“Oh... I see, that’s true. But um, uh...”

Lakish thought about his question for a bit. “I think it’s true that they’re about two years old by other races’ standards. But... newborns, for us... are more or less the same size as those children.”

“Huh?”

“You know what kind of... beings... we fairies are, right? We’re born from the souls of children. That’s why, from the start, we’re born *as* children. Even so, there’s still some differences between individuals. If anything, those two are small for newborn fairies.”

“What?!”

Feodor might’ve been shocked and felt like screaming ‘What the hell’s with that?!’, but at the same time the thought ran through his head, *It makes sense*. If Leprechauns weren’t necessarily born from parents, then there was no need for them to go through the regular processes of birth from scratch.

A large, uncomfortable emotion combined with a smaller, unpleasant one began to make itself known from the depths of his heart. *Just imitating life. They really are something else*. Cursed existences insulting life itself – the girls’ masochistic thought processes seemed to only become more accurate with the more they told him.

“Well then, what about your profiles? You’re supposed to be fourteen, right?”

Their ages on paper were believed to be counted from the time of birth onwards. Therefore, if Lakish and the other fairies were born as roughly three years old, would they now be the equivalent of 17-year-olds? Given Tiat was already listed as 15, was she actually 18?

Various races were part of Regul Aire, with various lifespans to match. For example, individuals of the Bennu species could live to be over three hundred years old, while the Alle lived and died within a few years. Therefore, there wasn’t much meaning in comparing the mental and physical growth rates of other races.

That said, the various markless races tended to share lifespans and growth rates. According to one scholar’s research, the legendary Emnetwyte who once flourished on the surface were said to possess similar lifespans. For that reason, it wouldn’t be odd for an 18-year-old Leprechaun to have roughly the same physique as an 18-year-old Imp... although...

“Um, you see,” Lakish mumbled awkwardly, interrupting Feodor’s train of thought. “Naigrat... the troll who looks after us... told us once that we Leprechauns tend to grow a little slowly until we’re about to start puberty. Around the age we are now, we grow to be roughly the same as a child of similar age from your average markless race... or something like that...”

“Oh, I see, I see,” Feodor nodded, perfectly able to accept that. He felt relieved. *Though, if she’s saying their physiques are suited for being 14-or-15-year-old girls, that still leaves me with a few questions. But I won’t delve any further than that.*

Not knowing what turmoil was stirring up Feodor’s heart, Lakish smiled sadly. “I... want to become more adult-like, though—”

She slapped her hands over her mouth like she was about to throw up. Muffled sobs leaked out from behind those hands as her shoulders shook fiercely.

“Lakish?!”

“I’m... a-alright...” Lakish answered brokenly. “P-Please... don’t worry about me...”

“I don’t believe you!” Feodor snapped, quickly checking her forehead and wrists. “No fever, nothing weird in your pulse...”



“L-Like I said, I’m fine–”

“You’re sure not *looking fine!*”

When he’d fought with Tiat, he’d learned one thing about Leprechauns: they were tenacious, stubbornly enduring far past the point where doing so held any meaning. They buried any pain in their heart, hid any wounds, and went around pretending to be brave.

But their ability to lie was *horrid*. They might fool themselves, but they couldn’t ever pretend well enough to trick anyone around them. Moreover, to an Imp and professional liar like Feodor, the attempts became much more visibly painful.

Enough time passed for Lakish to take a few shallow breaths. Her violent shaking slowed as color returned to her pale complexion.

“You really... don’t need to worry about me.”

Her head still bowed and her hair hiding her eyes, Lakish spoke without looking at him. “I’m sorry for surprising you. This is... a kind of seizure unique to fairies. It doesn’t affect our physical conditions, so it’s not like we’ll die from something like this.”

She didn’t seem to be entirely telling the truth. Even so, he didn’t hear any lies in her words.

## PART 5

### ~ TIAT ~

*How frustrating*, Tiat thought to herself. Every time, just as she'd begin to move on, memories of that day came flooding back to the surface.

*That day*, when she'd faced her battlefield, ready to accept her inevitable death. She'd gone without any intent of returning alive. No matter what laid ahead, she was prepared to fight as a fairy soldier until her last breath. By exchanging just one fairy's life, the Winged Guard could collect data on the Croyance.

Although it was a member of the 17 Beasts, next to nothing was known of the looming spectre. In addition to sharing the other Beasts' immortality, it eroded and assimilated everything it touched, and if it was impacted the kinetic energy would be converted into the Beast's own energy and hasten its assimilation – yet Tiat had meant to face it so that a way to fight even such an absurd foe might be found.

If she did, if her death held some meaning, then even though she couldn't live the life she had wanted, perhaps her life would hold value after all. Thoughts of that nature had filled Tiat's head as she went off to battle.

And yet, the conflict finished with Tiat standing, having been unable to die. Even after half a month had passed, she continued to live on.

*"I'll make myself a problem for all of you!"*

Now she trained diligently as a Winged Guard soldier in preparation for the military operations scheduled to begin in three months, somehow found ways to enjoy the cafeteria food despite the challenges it posed, and went shopping for sweets in town. Occasionally during her everyday routine, memories of that day – of him – surfaced.

He was clearly far weaker compared to the fairy soldiers. He knew that it had always been the Leprechauns' sacrifices that allowed everyone else to live on. Even so, he hadn't let Tiat throw her life away. He'd worn a gallant smile on his face as he admonished her and stood in her way, and...

*Right.* She'd been neither convinced nor satisfied, but regardless her chance to die passed her before she realized it.

*Fourth Officer Feodor Jessman.*

A descendant of a dishonest race that always seemed to be deceiving others and running away from something. He had extensive knowledge of what foods were delicious, was skilled in combat if overall weak, and was polite to other people yet surprisingly blunt to Tiat alone. He might possibly be a nice person after all, but didn't seem to care about other people's feelings or resolution. He was *kinda* cool when he looked like he was trying his hardest – but whenever he tried his best, it was usually to inconvenience her in some way.

Thinking about Feodor made Tiat lose her composure as all sorts of complicated emotions began to jumble up inside her. She focused, and channeled everything she felt about him into four words:

*Feodor is a scumbag.*

That was why she, Tiat Shiba Ignareo, felt nothing but hate towards him.



“What's up?”

The sound of a childish voice brought Tiat back to reality. She surveyed her surroundings – no, it was obvious where she was. Somehow, she'd ended up in the 5th Division's command room. In front of her was a brown, scaly Beastman, a military uniform stretched across his short in stature but admirably wide form. He was the Armado serving as the division's commander and First Officer, whose defining trait was the droopy eyes that made him appear half-asleep at all times.

“Oh, um... it's nothing,” Tiat said.

“...Are you not getting enough sleep?”

“That's no good, Tiat!” Collon piped up, sticking out her chest proudly. “If you wanna be a good soldier you've gotta be in shape and pay attention to your work!”

*She's as upbeat as ever. To be that enthusiastic is kinda impressive.*

Of course, *appearing* energetic and *being* energetic weren't at all similar. A wide, deep

chasm separated their natures.

“Well, it’s true that you can hardly find any work in this world without being fit.” The First Officer started rattling on about an unrelated topic, then scratched the scales on his forehead and returned to the apparent subject at hand. “I’m sorry to call both of you in here two days in a row. I understand you’re busy with other matters, but it seems as if unique situations that can’t be entrusted to anyone else keep popping up regardless.”

“No, it’s fine, but...”

*‘Can’t be entrusted to anyone else’? That worries me a bit.*

“Anyway, I called the two of you here to assign you this task,” the First Officer said. “I want you two to temporarily leave Fourth Officer Jessman’s command to participate in a special team.”

“Huh... ok, got it.” Tiat nodded quickly.

“For the time being, you’re ordered to act only within that team. There will be considerable restrictions in communication with other squads.”

“Wha–”

“Quiet, Collon!” Tiat hissed. “...Sorry, First Officer.”

Since only she and Collon had been called in, she had been expecting to hear something along those lines. As such, she wasn’t all that surprised.

*I see. As I thought, I’ll be parting ways with that guy for a while.*

She wasn’t going to say anything like ‘Oh, that’s too bad’ or ‘Guess it’ll get lonely around here’. Still, it felt like things around the division wouldn’t be as entertaining, or something like that. Even that slight admission infuriated her. *‘What a relief’ or ‘Yeah, serves you right!’ would be better options. Yeah, let’s go with that.*

“But will we really be okay like this?” Tiat asked. “We’re markless, and fairy soldiers at that. That idio... Fourth Officer Feodor aside, I don’t know if we can function properly as soldiers under a different commanding officer. Honestly, I’m not confident that we’ll be able to.”

Those who were markless tended to be detested by the general public, particularly the Beastmen. While generally accepted by the 5th Division – no doubt because it was full of social outcasts itself – the Leprechauns were still very much a source of tension.

On top of that, Leprechauns were a type of secret weapon. Information about them was generally kept secret, so few knew the truth: they were unstable lifeforms overflowing with the violent power of Venom and, upon meeting the needed conditions, could cause themselves to explode.

If anyone ever found out about them, they'd probably fear and loathe them. It only made sense. Who would ever want to work alongside a ticking time bomb?

Not to mention, they were also equivalent soldiers. Going through training was one thing, but earning camaraderie was another. *We might limit others' performance just by being in the team* – all sorts of troublesome thoughts came to mind.

"That's no problem. The officer in charge of the mission requested you two specifically."

"Huh?" Tiat tilted her head.

"Oh?" For some reason, Collon's eyes twinkled.

"The mission details are, ah..." the Armado cleared his throat. "It's like this. Illegal weapons were brought into the city by suspicious individuals, so they need to be retrieved before they can be put to use. That's about it."

"I see..." His explanation felt weak, so Tiat could only muster a half-hearted reply. It took a miniscule amount of thought to see something was wrong. "That's the responsibility of the military police, not us, no?"

"Of course, the military police will take action," the First Officer said with a nod. "Based on other suspicions, they've already started going after the ones they think are behind the suspicious activity."

"Then... we aren't going to sortie?"

"I apologize for being the bearer of bad news, but no. The police can't be seen taking action against these illegal weapons."

"I'm not quite sure I follow..." Tiat scratched her head. *If you're smuggling illegal*

*weapons, it's obvious that'd be illegal. What's wrong about police cracking down on criminal actions? Why do they need to be so roundabout and use 'other suspicions' to dance around the pretext behind their operations?*

Next to Tiat, still puzzling it out, Collon crossed her arms. "...Secret weapons?"

"Good guess." The First Officer nodded. "You hit the nail on the head."

Tiat looked between the two of them in consternation. "H-Hang on, did you figure something out from what he said?"

The other girl nodded, an oddly serious expression on her face. "Calling them illegal weapons might be kinda an understatement. Can we take them to be... different than the usual stuff that's got bans on ownership and usage and all that?"

Tiat glanced at the First Officer's face. An Armado's scales made it hard to read their expressions, but judging by how he listened to Collon silently without interrupting her, what she'd said so far was probably correct.

"Alright..." Collon continued. "I'm thinking these things are super-dangerous, more than even the regular illegal weapons. So super-dangerous you can't even say they exist. That's why the cops can't do a thing, and why you want to put us in, right?"

"Ah..." Tiat murmured with dawning comprehension. *So that's it...*

Certainly, the military police was ill-suited for tracking down something that had to be kept secret. They stood out and were known for being by-the-book, but their efficiency was accompanied by an inflexibility that meant they couldn't become involved in confidential operations. In such cases, rather than relying on the military police, the best option was to assemble a small team of people capable of operating with flexibility and in emergency situations.

*I see, I see. In other words, that's where we come in.*

Put that way, it made sense. If she had been by herself, she wouldn't have understood.

*I've never been able to read between the lines... Struggling to hold back the urge to sigh, Tiat just stood where she was. It's always like this, even after all the stuff I've learned. I know how to apply logic, but I still can't figure out the true meaning behind what other people say. I'm so lame...*



She had continually struggled towards her goal of becoming a full-grown fairy soldier – a respectable adult – and yet, in the end this was as far as she'd been able to go. Kutori's back, which she'd admired for so long, remained far out of reach. She doubted she'd ever be able to catch up.

And that wasn't all. The younger girls – Panival, Lakish, Collon – had all reached Tiat's level and then surpassed her, with the distance between them growing with every passing day.

As she thought about it, Feodor's arrogant smirk from half a month ago floated into her vision. She sniffed. *Ahh, that's enough! Thinking about him makes me sick!*

An unusual clattering sound almost like spinning wheels came from the hallway, approaching closer until it stopped just before the door. A knock came, accompanied by an bored voice: "Brought the visitor."

Tiat thought she recognized him. *His name was... Private Nax Selzel?* He served – in a layabout fashion – as a member of the Falcon Defense Squad.

"Come in," the First Officer nodded. The clattering noise entered the room.

"Huh...?"

"Oho...?"

Tiat and Collon were both flabbergasted by what they saw. For his part, the First Officer placed his cigarette into an ashtray, then started speaking in an oddly casual tone. "Ah, it's been a while. Sorry for calling you here. You must be exhausted after the long trip here."

The clattering sound had come from the wheelchair Nax was currently pushing. In it was the person the First Officer had spoken to: a girl who seemed about 20 years old. She had light golden hair, like grass faded by sunlight. Her eyes matched her pale blonde hair. She looked as if she would shatter if you touched her, and had an air like she might disappear at any second.

The girl raised one of her small hands, waved faintly, and said, "Hey, old man! Man, it's been *way* too long since I saw you! Two years really flies right by! How's it hanging?"

She had a broad grin on her face and her voice brimmed with energy.

“And you two too, Tiat, Collon! You’re both looking well as ever! Just the sight of your adorable little faces makes all the creaky, wobbly airships I had to take to get here totally worth it!”

“Ai...” Tiat struggled to understand what she was seeing. “Ai...”

The cheerful girl held a hand to her ear. “Ai...?”

“Ai... seia...?”

“Yup yup, you got it!” Aiseia chortled, seeming to delight in her own actions like a child would. “I’m everyone’s favorite, Aiseia Myse Valgalis!”

Aiseia Myse Valgalis. She was currently the oldest fairy soldier, senior to all. Having pushed her body to the brink of ruination through Venom overuse in the course of many battles, she was finally rendered unable to fight by the events of the Elpis Incident.

Aiseia was strangely knowledgeable about all kinds of things, had a mischievous nature and quick wit, and derived entirely too much amusement from pranking her juniors at the warehouse. In Tiat’s opinion, the older fairy was a quite troublesome figure. Since she was for all intents and purposes retired, she usually spent her time reading or taking care of the children – at least, that’s how it should have been.

“Um, First Officer, what exactly is going on?” Tiat asked in a small voice.

“I said it before, right? You two were requested by the officer commanding the mission. Here she is.”

“Commanding?” She parroted back his words as a question.

“Commanding.” He nodded deeply. “Well, anyway, it seems like I won’t need to bother with introductions. She’s been entrusted with full authority over this matter, and as a temporary measure, she’s also been granted equivalent authority to a Second Officer. You three are going to follow her orders from now on.”

The question of who the third person was began to fire through Tiat’s synapses before Nax sighed. “I guess I’ll be here too, after all?”

“As it turns out, Nax Selzel, yes. For reasons that escape my comprehension, Aiseia

requested you personally.”

“Hmm...” The Falcon’s eyes fell on Aiseia. “Not only are you attractive, you’ve got a good eye to boot. I’m humbled you consider me equal to so many other great and skilled soldiers. But...”

His next question came without any hint of sincerity, accompanied by a smile so thin it might’ve been drawn on by a pencil. “If you’ll pardon me asking, what made you pick me?”

“Ah, that.” Aiseia grinned. “Nyahaha... do you *really* want me to spill the beans here and now?”

“Do you need a more appropriate location to tell me?”

“Well, let’s see...” She hummed to herself, one finger on her chin. “What comes to mind if I mention the Bottomless Bucket of Orlandri?”

Nax’s superficial smile stiffened.

“Oh, oh, I know! What about the Prince of Tin Park’s Melancholy Glass Pane? You guys ever hear of that?”

“Aaack!” Nax’s smile disappeared instantly. “I getcha, ‘kay?! I getcha! I know why ya chose me, from the bottom o’ my ‘eart! Please don’t go sayin’ more, I’m beggin’ ya!”

“No problem-o,” Aiseia whistled and folded her arms behind her head, her sparkling eyes in hard contrast with Nax’s deathly pale expression. “Saves me the trouble of going on about all the rest.”

“Mm...” The First Officer calmly gazed at Nax. “This bucket story seems rather interesting... mind sharing it with me?”

“Weeeell, you see, during the Orlandri Trading Company’s accounting period four years back, this guy–”

“ACK!” No longer composed, Nax clapped his hands over Aiseia’s mouth. “I-It’s nothin’ much, really! Jus’ a boring thing! First Officer, why don’t we pick up where we left off, hey? That thing about grabbin’ a shinin’ future all fulla hope wit’ our hands?!”

“Mupletomesaoo...”

“Hmph. If you say so, I guess that’s that.” The First Officer took out a cigarette, lit it, took a long draw, and exhaled a puff. “Do try to practice *some* restraint with these side jobs of yours. If you stick your neck out too much, I’ll be forced to lop it off.”

“Don’t you think I already know that?!” Nax cried in a strangled voice, tears in his eyes as Aiseia giggled gleefully.

The Armado shook his head. “Good grief...”

Tiat, watching it all transpire, could only sigh. She didn’t entirely follow what was going on, but she did figure out that she, Collon, and Private Nax would be working under Aiseia to do... *something*.

She glanced at Collon to see her enjoying the situation unfolding in front of her. Collon was always a cheerful girl, but whether or not she knew what was happening was another story.

“Oh?” Aiseia turned to her, a grin still on her face. “Why the long face, Tiat?”

Tiat couldn’t tell whether the other girl’s ambiguous smile meant she knew what she was thinking or not. Though they both went about their day-to-day life with smiles, the intent behind Aiseia’s had always differed greatly from Collon’s. The older girl’s expression was a mask she wore to hide her true feelings.

*She hasn’t changed.*

Tiat felt nervous around Aiseia. She knew she wasn’t a bad person and that she was considerate of her juniors in her own way. Yet Tiat couldn’t truly open herself up to her – rather, it should be said that Aiseia herself gave off the impression of someone who closed herself off from others.

Nevertheless, that was just how she was.

“Alright, enough of that. Get over here, you two.” Aiseia wagged her finger, beckoning Tiat and Collon towards her. Once they came closer she waved her hands for them to bend down, and then pulled both of them into a gentle hug.

“...Really, I wonder what I’m doing right now,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “But

still, seeing that you're all safe... makes me so glad..."

"Yeah." Tiat and Collon caught each other's eye, then each circled an arm around Aiseia to return her embrace. "We're happy you're as lively as ever."

She laughed softly. "Feels like that's my only redeeming quality lately."

"It's the most important thing."

"It is, huh? That's right, I'm very fortunate!"

Tiat didn't know who was hugging the hardest: Collon, Aiseia, or herself. *I've never been good at dealing with her...* Once again, Tiat was reminded of just how good Aiseia was at keeping her off balance. *She's so sneaky, always teasing others but never revealing anything. It's only in times like this that she shows us how she really feels. To treasure us so much when we treasure her the same... it's hard to keep acting tough... geez. If you spoil us like this... it's like we're kids again...*

A sniffle escaped from Tiat. She held her breath, trying desperately to hold back her tears.



Having excused themselves from the command room, the group walked along the hallway – or rather, the two currently operational fairy soldiers did while Nax followed, pushing Aiseia's wheelchair.

"Sorry 'bout the rush, but we'll need to get going right away," Aiseia said without preamble. "There's no time to waste, plus the enemy could have eyes and ears anywhere."

*Makes sense.* Hearing Aiseia speak with so seriously tone made the scenario feel very plausible.

"Aww..." Collon groaned. "Can't we say hi to Lakish and the others?"

"Nope, sorry."

"Hmph!" The pink-haired fairy crossed her arms petulantly, but didn't make any more fuss. After all, Aiseia would be the first to admit she wanted to meet those two more than anyone else. When such orders came from her, it would be the height of

unreasonableness for them to be disobeyed.

Nax raised his hand. "How about going back to our rooms to change?"

"Also overruled. Arrangements have been made for provisioned goods to be transported to where we're headed, so you don't need to worry."

"Well, if you say so..." The Falcon drooped his shoulders in disappointment.

According to what Aiseia had told them, they'd go straight to the Port District, and from there pretend to leave the 38th Island in order to cover up their actual objective: infiltrating Lyell. As a presence that shouldn't be present in the city, their mission would proceed without raising the suspicions of the enemy organization... or so the idea went.

*I see. That means we can't afford to be careless.*

That was all there was to it. There was no reason to refuse. Tiat couldn't be as stubborn as them.

"Have you heard from the First Officer, Aiseia?" she asked. "About Apple and Marshmellow?"

"Ah..." Aiseia dipped her head, a somewhat lonely expression on her face. "The new rugrats, huh? Yeah, I heard. If we had time, I'd have liked to drop in on them, see their faces."

"They're amazingly wild, impertinent children."

The loneliness remained even as she chuckled, a smile creeping onto her face. "I wonder why you're always the one who brings up these things."

*Ouch.* It frustrated Tiat that she couldn't really deny that.

"Tiat scolds them all the time!" Collon piped up. "That's why they run away from her!"

"H-hey! *Someone* needs to tell them not to do things, or else they'll never learn anything!" Tiat snapped. "Lakish's too nice, Panival's too busy teaching them weird things, and *you* just play around with them!"

“It’s the duty of kids to play, ain’t it?”

“Why are you so *unhelpful*?!” Tiat rounded on the older fairy as Collon burst into triumphant laughter. “You should be acting more serious!”

“Anyway, those names are ridiculous,” Aiseia remarked as if she hadn’t said anything. “Who in the world thought them up?”

Tiat clammed up abruptly, not daring to answer. *If she knew it was an unanimous decision – Feodor aside – she would definitely laugh and make fun of me.*

“Oh, and on the subject of rugrats, Masha had the dream.”

The awkward smile on Tiat’s face immediately froze.

Masha, the name of a young fairy in the warehouse. She was only 12 years old.

Of course, the dream Aiseia mentioned was no ordinary dream. It was a peculiar and unique dream, the true nature of which was instantly recognized by any who experienced it.

All Leprechauns are said to have come from deceased souls with lingering wills. The dream is proof that they have begun to awaken to long-forgotten past memories or thoughts. It represents the transition from child to adult, and the right to become a fairy soldier. Any fairy to have the dream was sent to a facility on the 11th Floating Island, where they underwent a process to mature as fairies.

“How’s Almita?” Tiat asked. She was another of Tiat’s juniors in the warehouse, from the same generation as Masha. She’d had her dream a year ago.

“As far as I know, she’s doing great. The medicine she’s taking is effective.” Aiseia smiled weakly. “Still, it’s losing its strength over time, and now Masha needs to take it too. We’re fine for now, but our stockpile might start running out.”

Tiat frowned. “As far as people we can depend on go... there’s the admiral, right? What’d he have to say?”

“Ah, well, it seems like the bigshots are still fighting each other every day,” Aiseia grumbled. “If you think about it positively, we’re in the same position we’ve always been. From a more pessimistic angle, there’s been no progress at all. Geez, the Great



Sage up and vanishing sure had an effect on everybody.”

*So it's like that after all.*

Tiat sighed silently. She knew it was a problem that time wouldn't solve, and that just waiting around would only exacerbate the situation. She held no expectations, and so wasn't disappointed. She felt no despair.

But she still felt restless. Time wouldn't fix their situation. The only ones capable of remedying it was them themselves. If they could show the fairies still held value as weapons, then the children at the warehouse would be allowed to continue living. That's why—

“Hey, Tiat.”

Collon called out to her, her voice low and calm. “Don't worry so much. The others aside, I still haven't forgiven you for last month.”

“Yeah, I know. I know that already.”

Collon only ever spoke that way if she was serious. So, without turning to look back, Tiat started to give her response in a monotonous voice.

When the younger fairies had the dream, it meant they were approaching adulthood.

However, to be a fairy was to be a fundamentally unstable existence. Fairies were natural phenomena that, once born into the world, took the form of children – a result of their origin as the soul of a child who did not know they were dead (Incidentally, the reason only female fairies are born likely stems from this fact as well).

The anchoring root of their existence was their child-like body which could never develop into an adult's. As such, from the moment they had the dream, they became a walking contradiction. The contradiction would eventually kill the fairy; if something that could only exist as a child was to cease being a child, then there'd be nothing left.

But there was a loophole. The so-called “adult fairy soldier” was one who had been modified to be used as a weapon. The most relevant details of the modification included suppressing the underlying Venom output to prevent accidental loss of control and conditioning the body to extend service life as much as possible.

And yet, the obvious truth remained. Without going through that process, the fairies would never survive into even their teenage years.

“The Winged Guard only sought out our seniors because they were needed to defeat the Teimerre, and we secured our own positions by defeating Wil-” Tiat took a breath, “...the First Beast. But now, neither the First nor the Sixth Beast will attack Regul Aire again. If Almita and the others at the warehouse are to keep living, they’ll need a new enemy and evidence that fairy soldiers can be effective in defeating that new enemy.”

Tiat lowered her voice so Collon wouldn’t hear what she said next. “If Kutori was here... she’d find a way.”

*I wanted to be like her.*

Strong, brave, dazzling. If Kutori was here, there’d never be a problem to solve in the first place. She would mow down anything that dared stand in the way of the fairy warehouse’s future.

But that wasn’t how things were right now.

Tiat Shiba Ignareo could not become Kutori Nota Seniolis. Chasing after that back had, ultimately, ended in failure.

*“You’re just using the name of the older fairy you respect to stage your own dramatic suicide.”*

Someone once said those words to her.

*I hate him.*

*He’s probably right. I’m copying what Kutori did. He just saw through my laziness.*

*Even though he doesn’t know anything, doesn’t understand anything, can’t do anything.*

To be read so well by someone like that was frustratingly pathetic.

“I really do hate that guy,” Tiat mumbled, as if trying to remind herself.

# **CHAPTER 3**

## **EVERYTHING TODAY LEADS TO TOMORROW**

『全ての今日は、明日へと至る』  
- bottle of elpis -



# PART 1

## ~ A SPECIAL MISSION ~

Vision was limited.

Without turning one's head side-to-side, one would be completely unaware of their surroundings.

Tiat had said once that the masks seemed interesting, to be sure, but after trying one on all she could say was that it was extremely inconvenient. Perhaps due to her having chosen the design that placed greater value on exterior appearance, the mask's eye and nose holes were tiny. It was difficult to see out of, and she could only take in small, choked breaths through her nose. In short, it was rather bothersome.

Walking on a pathway connecting Niz Ookama Street and Winding Bell Hook Avenue, an exasperated Tiat grumbled to Nax, who was besides her, "We can't take these things off, can we?"

"They're needed for the disguise, so put up with it," the Falcon replied. "It's just right for hiding our faces when we're walkin' around, remaining all inconspicuous-like. Perfect for secret missions." His muffled mumble sounded just as irritated as Tiat felt. "Anyhow, the chance to experience festivals like this one are far 'n few between, so just chill out, enjoy it, 'kay?"

"Someone like you might be easygoing enough to have fun at a time like this, but..."

Tiat shrugged as she adjusted her overcoat to sit on her shoulders better. Like the mask, the coat was an uncomfortable article of clothing. Because it was intended to distort her outline, it fit her poorly, especially around the shoulder area. Due to the coat's thickness, it was also overly weighty and hot.

A distant bell tolled, signaling the late hour.

During the Remembrance Festival, Lyell's street lamps had been fixed up to emanate a pale violet light; a color said to symbolize the gap between life and death. It seemed as if the colors of twilight had been plastered all over Lyell, bringing forth an otherworldly ambience – an illusion like they'd fallen into a fairy tale's illustration.

They walked past numerous people on the street, each one wearing a white mask and

plain overcoat, their faces and races unknown.

“Hey, Tiat,” Nax’s bored voice called out.

“What?” Tiat answered, her eyes focused on her feet.

“That Aiseia, how old’s she?”

“...Four years older than me, so nineteen. I think.”

“Nineteen.” The Falcon didn’t say anything else for a moment, contemplating her response. Tiat could almost picture his brooding frown. “Nineteen, eh...”

“Surprised? Did you think she was older?”

“Mm... ah, something like that, I ‘ppose. That age just doesn’t feel right.”

Strangely, Tiat felt the same way he did, though the reason why was harder to place. She herself had thought before that it was difficult to accept the difference in life experience between the two of them was only four years.

“It’s because of that faraway look in her eyes, I think?” she said, uncertain. “I doubt that uneasy feeling you have would go away no matter how young or old I tell you she is.”

“Nah, not quite.” Nax scratched his cheek. “She’s got that sorta... widow’s allure, ain’t she?”

A burst of air came from underneath Tiat’s mask. “Wi-Widow?!” she spluttered.

“Er, not something to be sayin’ in front of her family, eh? Sorry.”

“Uh, um, wait, no, that’s not why...”

*What do I do?* Somehow she was in agreement. These past few years, Aiseia Myse Valgalis had begun to exhibit a mysterious dignity, born from some unique condition or another. Nax’s suggestion seemed somehow fitting – very fitting indeed.

“Mr. Selzel-”

“Aw, please don’t,” he cut her off. “Nax is fine, ‘kay? Special treatment for a cute girl!”

“Come on. You tell everyone that, don’t you?”

“Yep, in the end. It’s hard to find girls in this world who aren’t cute, after all.”

*Sure, sure. Is that so?*

Those words might be praiseworthy in a way, but anyone he might share them with wouldn’t take an interest in anything else he said, nor find any reason to further associate with him.

...For an instant, the image of a father spreading his love to all his “daughters” came to mind. It faded away as quickly as it’d arrived.

“Mr. Selzel, you know about Leprechauns, right?”

“Ah... yeah, ‘ppose so. Sort of got a general overview.”

An oddly ambiguous response.

Within the Winged Guard, only a select few knew of the Leprechauns and their strategic purposes. And, for this operation, Private First Class Nax Selzel could consider himself among their numbers. She felt a little sorry that he’d been dragged into this. He’d certainly be better off not knowing about such a disheartening story.

“Then you get it, right? Our entire race is female. Forget being a widow, stuff like marriage and love are fundamentally meaningless to us.”

“Fundamentally, huh.” She wasn’t sure if he was accepting her stance or just repeating her words as a question. “On the other hand, if an exception was to appear, that would mean the rule isn’t set in stone. And if it’s not a hard rule, there’s no need to worry over it so much.”

“I’m hearing some pretty extreme logic here,” Tiat answered, half-amazed and half-admiring. “But if you’re going to try and to seduce Aiseia or something, it won’t work unless you at least put *some* effort into it. You’re up against some very formidable memories.”

“...Wait, is she a widow after all?”



She shrugged her shoulders airily. "I wonder."



The room was rectangular and narrow.

On one wall, a door opened out into the hallway. On the opposite side was a large window with metallic shutters that hung slightly loose in their frames, showing traces of rust. Within the room itself were three beds that had seen many years of service, all in a cramped row and accompanied by a single nightstand. Although all the furniture was outdated, the bedsheets and the lone flower in the nightstand vase had the gleam of something brand-new.

The room was within a hotel, which in turn was within the city limits. It was also one of the designated base of operations for their current mission. By no means could it be thought of as upper-class, but none of the residents would feel the need to complain about that.

"I'm baaack."

"Oh, welcome back!"

Entering the room, Tiat handed the paper bag she was carrying to Collon, then removed her mask and overcoat before hurling them onto the bed. "The shopping mission has been safely completed."

"Heya, welcome back!" Aiseia added her voice to Collon's.

"There wasn't anything strange going on in town," Nax reported. He scratched the back of his head. "Well, that ain't rightly true, but times bein' what they are, *everything* is suspicious now."

The three people listening to Nax nodded. Aiseia, who was sitting on one of the beds, turned towards him. "By the way, is this room safe from counterespionage?"

"Our division's hidden bases in this city are pretty reliable, y'know?" Nax shrugged. "Sound's not gettin' out of here if we're talkin' the rooms below, above, or 'round us. The hallway's a straight line without any twists or turns. The view from out the window's clear, too."

As if following his words in order, Tiat checked the floor, ceiling, door, and window. She realized it was just as he'd said. It would be difficult to hear conversations within the room from outside.

"Unless we're dumb enough to let someone hang out near the window and read our lips, we won't have anything to worry 'bout."

*Oh right, we can't overlook that possibility either.* Slightly respecting him on the inside, Tiat drew the curtains closed.

"Nax, Nax, you know so many things!" Collon said admiringly while she tested the bed's hardness. "You're like a whole intelligence department!"

"An intelligence department..." Nax half-laughed awkwardly. "Well, in some ways I guess I'd seem kinda like one, but... how to put it... I just know some stuff about how those kinda guys tend to think..."

"Don't let that guy trick you," Aiseia said dryly. "He's a first-rate snooper who's got a nasty knack for fishin' up info. Did you know, just last month he went sniffing around for information about our warehouse from sources all over the place? It was *quite* impressive."

"...I don't recall using such an easy-to-track investigation technique."

"That's why I said it was impressive. It's just that we were prepared. You picked a bad time to poke around and practically gave yourself away."

Nax clicked his tongue in frustration. "You mean that stuff was bait you set up from the get-go, and your bunch was just lying in wait until someone came snooping and fell for it?"

"Atta boy." Aiseia shook her head. "We never intended it to be snatched up, though, much less as cleanly as it was. That caught us off guard for just a moment."

"I'll take that as a consolation prize, then."

An inane conversation had developed between the two of them. Nax snuck a glance at Tiat, who was looking at them with her head tilted in puzzlement, then he gave a small sigh. "Anyway, this place's good. Let's get down to business. What're we doing from now on?"

“Oh, right, right. We can’t just relax here.” Aiseia straightened up and cleared her throat. Tiat followed her lead instinctively. “Leaving the questions for later, here’s how the situation is first. Right now, at least three Beasts have been brought into Lyell.”

Silence.

“What?”

What they’d just heard was completely beyond normal comprehension.

Beasts. In other words, the Seventeen Beasts. The beings that brought ruination and death whenever they appeared; the embodiments of destruction that defied common logic. The ones that destroyed the surface, and even now served as its rulers. As a general rule, they were unable to ascend to the sky, which was the reason Regul Aire continued to exist.

There was no method of controlling them. At the very least, it wouldn’t be as simple as putting them in a suitcase and carrying them around.

“I looked at the records from last month,” Aiseia went on. “The Croyance was part of someone’s plot, right? And it took a ridiculously large airship, not to mention half the harbor district, with it.”

“Ah... yeah. Right.” Tiat nodded.

“That means someone brought the Croyance to this Island – no, more accurately the Winged Guard’s airship, and unleashed it from the inside.”

That’s exactly what happened. And, frankly, it should have been impossible.

The Croyance assimilated whatever it touched and grew endlessly. Carry it by hand, put it in a pot, transport it by an airship, it made no difference. All of it should be swallowed up by the Beast. If it wasn’t struck by some impact, the speed of assimilation wouldn’t be as fast, so transporting it in that small period of time might be possible... but that was the limit of common sense.

“Also, we mustn’t forget what happened five years ago, when that-” Aiseia jabbed her thumb over her shoulder in the vague direction of the 39th Floating Island in the distance, “island was swallowed by the Croyance transported onto it by the Elpis Mercantile Federation. You know what that means, right? By that point, the existence

of a method to bring it up from the surface had already been established.”

“Oh...”

*Right. That's how it is.*

“It's called the Bead Bottle,” Aiseia said. “A hollow ball of specialized glass, capable of containing the Eleventh Beast.”

“Glass...? But wait, in that case wouldn't the assimilation eat up the glass... wait...”

A bolt of realization shook her. Tiat blinked her eyes a number of times, furiously racking her brain. “...W-Wait... no. No way. It's that simple? That actually works?”

“It actually works.” The older fairy smiled grimly. “Putting aside the idea itself, the fact that they made it happen makes you think about how amazing those Elpis technicians must've been, right?”

“Whether or not it deserves to be called ‘amazing’ is the question...”

It was something that shouldn't have been thought of, shouldn't have been theorized about, shouldn't have been tried. From start to end, a succession of taboos.

“What's so special about glass?”

Tiat turned her head with a slow creak to look at Collon, who looked as if she didn't understand a thing. “Do you know how to make glass?”

“Um...” Collon rubbed her temples with her fingers in a fierce bout of thought. “You... melt sand... and solidify it?”

A lot of steps were missing, but she was more or less on the right track. Tiat nodded. “And what can't the Croyance assimilate?”

“Hmm... rock and sand...” Collon's eyes widened. “Oh! That's it!”

Tiat nodded again. “That black crystal shouldn't be able to assimilate glass, which is just made from sand. In theory. So they put a small piece of it in the glass and can safely transport it that way.”

Whenever they needed to use it, they just needed to break the glass. The way to break it required care and thought, however. If one were to simply stomp on it, they'd not be able to escape the result. A solution to that problem would be... right, a time bomb setup or something would work. And in the incident last month, an unknown person had done just that.

"With that alone, it becomes a weapon that can easily drop a floating island."

"Ohhhh!" Collon exclaimed admiringly.

"There'd still be one problem: how to get around the assimilation and isolate the fragment. Elpis's hard workers must have gotten over that wall somehow." Aiseia shrugged, her expression bitter. "By the way, nine Bead Bottles in total were made."

"You know the total number?" Tiat asked.

"Yeah, that's what we found in the materials that were seized. It's pretty reliable info."

Nine. Tiat idly wondered if they should be glad there were only that many, or be afraid there were so many. It was a troublesome number.

Aiseia started counting off her fingers. "One was used five years ago to ruin the 39th Floating Island. Another was used last month on this island. Annnd two of the remainders were disposed of in secret by the First Division."

"Oooh..."

"And finally, we know the whereabouts of three of the rest, along with their possessors." Like she was stroking the sky, Aiseia pointed outside the window. "It's the retrieval part that's tricky. First of all, the public *can't* learn that the Bead Bottles exist. If Regul Aire knew about them, the Winged Guard would need to acknowledge that the Elpis Incident isn't over. And what's more, if too much fuss gets kicked up over this, our targets might feel cornered and break the Bottles."

Tiat nodded in agreement.

"All in all, only a select few are in the know. We intend to take advantage of a gap in the enemy's organization and use all the skills at our disposal to obtain the weapons in their possession. That's the only possible method left to us."

“Um...” Tiat raised her hand a little, asking to speak. “By any chance, is this mission extremely dangerous, hard, and important?”

“I said so, didn’t I?” Aiseia’s face was totally calm as she answered. “Oh, but there’s one thing we can relax about, though.”

Tiat leaned forward, wanting to know what it was.

“You see, three of those island-ending ultimate weapons are gathered here. Even if they all break, the only sacrifice would be this one island.” She waved her hands lightly, laughing. “Speaking from the perspective of Regul Aire as a whole, one island for the price of three is a good deal, isn’t it?!”

Nax sidled up to Tiat as the other fairy’s laughter trailed off. “...Hey, Tiat.”

“What is it?”

“She... *did* say that to encourage us not to fail... right?”

“Please don’t ask,” Tiat groaned, pressing her hands to her face. She felt the beginnings of an oncoming headache.

## PART 2

### ~ OVERTURNED TOY BOX ~

Tiat and Collon were gone.

After telling him they'd be sent on a special mission, they had abruptly departed to another island. No one had informed him of the particulars of their mission, but it was likely something bothersome anyway.

*Will the mission go smoothly, or result in another stupidly destructive suicide attack?*

Worrying about such possibilities as if it was normal filled him with a deep sense of discontentment. In the end, all he could do was curse at the reckless fairies: *Hurry up and finish so you can return.*

In this manner, a few days passed.



On that day, the door to the fairies' room was slightly ajar.

Not being very concerned about it, Feodor grasped the knob and pushed it open. What was beyond the door was, of course, scattered toys and graffiti. The usual condition of the room.

He had a small, unnerving sensation.

In that scene he should've grown accustomed to seeing, something important felt missing. Narrowing his eyes, Feodor looked around again. A picture book left open. Collapsed building blocks. A toppled Ballman toy. It appeared that nothing was missing, but...

*...No one's here.*

Of course, Tiat and Collon weren't there, on account of their circumstances. Just the other day they had left the barracks on a special mission. He hadn't been informed about the nature of the mission, and had his worries regarding whether or not they'd be in danger, but they were probably alright. Though they were by no means rookies,



going up against the Beasts tended to make one apprehensive for multiple reasons. Still, any other situation wouldn't put them in danger... or that's what he wanted to believe.

As for Lakish and Panival, they were probably gone because of their scheduled joint training exercises. Those in the 5th Division with the ranks of First Class Equivalent Soldier had the duty of participating in a portion of the soldiers' basic training, so their absence wasn't irregular.

The problem was the remaining two. Apple and Marshmallow. It was at this juncture that Feodor noticed the room's curtains were fluttering in the wind.

"...They didn't?!" Feodor ran up to the window madly, looking down below from the third floor. No one. He surveyed the surrounding ground as best as he could, but even then didn't see them. For the time being, he felt a brief sense of relief.

Finally, Feodor turned to check the entrance. A wooden box small enough to fit around one arm laid next to the door. The room being in a state of disarray was insufficient reason to explain why such an object, which was intended to hold clothes and be placed in the corner, had moved over to the doorway. What seemed plausible, on the other hand... yes, it was quite possible that a small child lacking in height might have moved it to that spot, using it as a step stool to reach the doorknob and turn it.

"Those brats!"

Feodor closed the window, locked the door, and flew from the room.

He had underestimated the children's vigor and curiosity. If Apple and Marshmallow were left alone in that room, there was no guarantee at all that they would obediently stay put. Moreover, the building was a military facility, not a children's playground. Aside from the various armaments kept under heavy guard, there were more boorish soldiers patrolling about than one could count. Who knew what would happen if a markless child were to wander through such a place?

*Where would those two be most likely to go?* Feodor wondered while sprinting through the hallway. The roof stood out as one possibility. For one, Leprechauns were unafraid of lethal danger, and for another, young children were creatures who were equipped with that sort of fearless tendency in the first place.

*Those two factors are likely correlated with each other.* Feodor was afraid he might've

been unable to foresee Apple and Marshmallow's fearlessness.

Horrible thoughts crossed his mind. He dispelled them with a shake of his head, and then his feet came to a stop. The other side of the courtyard was strangely noisy. In that direction was the martial arts training area.

"Uuu... woahhhhhh!"

"Whaah-hahahaaaaa!"

"...Huh?"

A bout of head-pounding dizziness assailed Feodor, and he placed his hands on a nearby wall just as it seemed like he might've collapsed on the spot.

Right now, it seemed to be break time. Over twenty soldiers of various races were scattered along the wall, same as he was, resting and recovering their strength.

His eyes were drawn to Private First Class Portrick, standing in a corner of the training area. The giant Lycanthropos was almost like a small mountain, naturally drawing everybody's eyes just by being present, but that wasn't why Feodor looked at him now.

For Apple was there, clinging around Portrick's neck. Likewise, Marshmallow was dangling from his shoulders. Portrick was gently swaying his body from side to side, and the two children being swung about laughed and cried out happily with every movement.

"Heya, Fourth Officer," Portrick raised his head to meet Feodor's eyes. "I was just thinking about grabbing someone to go and find you."

"I'm so sorry, Portrick!" Coming to his senses, Feodor rushed over in a panic, rapidly fixing his glasses back into position. "Hey, Apple, Marshmallow! You two get off him!"

No matter how much he shouted, the two fairies didn't listen. The pair turned their heads toward him, their lips affixed in a dual pout. "No!"

"Hey! You two!"

Portrick chuckled almost joyfully, his normally stern face relaxed. "No worries, Feodor. It looks like they're fascinated by how my fur feels. Far as I'm concerned, that makes

me happy. To have praiseworthy fur is a matter of pride for our race, after all.”

It didn’t appear to be a lie. “Is that... really how it is?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? I thought it was fairly common knowledge that us Lycanthropos are really particular about grooming our fur, but...”

*No, I’ve heard enough of that.* Although he knew they loved their shiny coats, he had thought others touching it was something they detested. “Uh, you know they’re markless children, right? Are you okay with that?”

“Eh? It’s a given that young children of all stripes gotta be treated with tender, loving care, ain’t it? Would you have problems with hugging kids from our race, Fourth Officer?”

*The child... of a Lycanthropos...* In that moment, Feodor’s imagination dominated his mind. Fluffy, soft fur. Round gemlike eyes. The children looking up at his face, aggressively wagging their tails. And then, as he stroked beneath their chins, they would peer at him contentedly. *Not bad. Yeah, definitely not bad at all.*

Fortunately, hiding his unrest was Feodor’s forte. “This and that are different stories,” he said coolly, not allowing his expression to change.

He looked around the training area. A few stares pointed their way quickly disappeared. “Well, this is to be expected. It’s not as if they’re welcomed by everybody.”

“Looks like they got the memo, though,” Portrick growled softly. “Markless children must be protected within the premises”

Feodor had heard about the order too, of course. Still, it didn’t change the fact that a military installation was no children’s playground. Even if they were only a nuisance in the emotional sense, it wasn’t hard for him to imagine how Apple and Marshmellow’s presence would be unwelcome to many of the soldiers using the facility. “Well, since it’s clearly a mistake for them to be running around here, I really ought to be taking them back n-OW!”

Apple’s hands had shot out to yank on his hair as hard as she could. “H-Hey, quit it! You’re going to rip off all my skin!”

“Hmph!” Apple said, sounding displeased. “Fwedo, your hair isn’t shiny!”

“What in the world are you going on about?”

“Potto’s hair is really shiny!”

“Gahahaha!” Portrick laughed wholeheartedly. *So happy that your oh-so-glossy fur got praised, huh?* Vast irritation shivered through Feodor. *Why don’t I skin it off right now?*

Some time later, after Apple and Marshmallow finally calmed down and fell asleep, all tuckered out from playing, Feodor and Portrick started walking back through the hallways to the fairies’ usual room.

“...I used to be part of the 3rd Division once,” Portrick said without preamble, carrying Marshmallow underneath one of his massive arms. “Our basic mission, as you know, was to be watchdogs and intimidators against the Seventh Floating Island – the Empire, I mean. We threatened our fellow citizens so they wouldn’t cause any messed up incidents.”

Feodor wasn’t sure why he’d suddenly started talking about it. He simply nodded and offered an empty platitude as he adjusted Apple’s position on his back. “It’s an important duty.”

“Every once in a while, once or twice a year, we got sent out with these odd missions that didn’t have any relation to the Empire.”

“I see...”

“We had arrangements to protect some cargo carried in from a nearby island until it was ready to be flown to some other island, see. Every time it was stored in steel cages in advance, so only a few higher-ups knew about the contents.”

“I see...”

“One of those times, I got the chance to see the contents of a cage, just once.”

“I see...”

“It was a markless child.”

“I...” Feodor spluttered, choking halfway through his listless answer. “U-Uh... what?”

“At first I thought it was a corpse, since it was kinda lacking in the whole *living* department, you know? But somehow, that wasn’t the case. It put its regular meal in its mouth using its hands, and it reacted a bit whenever I talked to it. Whether it was watching me or not... I don’t have a clue.”

“And then...?”

“Well, our superior officer at the time referred to them as the ‘Golden Children’, and he told us to keep our mouths shut about its existence.”

*“Keep our mouths shut.” Well, that makes sense.*

Calling them ‘Golden Children’ was quite the simplistic name, but the so-called cargo Portrick was talking about had without question been a Leprechaun. As far as Feodor knew, only a handful of people within the Winged Guard knew of the Leprechauns. Although they could ignite absurd amounts of Venom, without stabilizing the output they were capable of igniting massive explosions if their Venom ran berserk. Those huge, fierce explosions might even have been capable of burning up the terrifying Teimerre.

Perhaps the steel cages were intended to guard them against accidental explosions, however unlikely they might be. No matter how he thought about it, it couldn’t have been anything but mere consolation, but he also couldn’t argue against it. When facing unfamiliar dangers, people couldn’t help but put themselves on guard. Sometimes mere consolation was necessary.

“...If you were told to keep your mouth shut, should you really be talking to me about this?”

“Probably not,” Portrick said, a calm look on his face as he uttered such outrageous words. “Though I’d like it for you to keep it a secret. That’s fine, right?”

*The hell’s with that? Why are you only now asking me this, after that one-sided conversation?*

“Don’t talk to anyone about it, huh.” Feodor rolled his eyes. “Portrick, if word got out about this, it’d be my ass getting fried as much as yours.”

The Lycanthropos laughed carefreely, then seriousness returned to his eyes. “...I understand the weight of missions, I do. Stuff like *right* and *wrong* don’t exist in them.

A mere soldier like me should never judge the morality of things. That's why I didn't do anything regarding that Golden Child on that mission either. I simply followed my orders when I carried the cage and transported the child to the airship. I shouldn't regret what I did, nor should I feel guilty about it. But..."

He scratched his scarred cheek lightly. The arm holding Marshmallow sunk, as if having trouble supporting her weight.

"This... is just an old story. It has no relation to these girls who are here now. It's just an old man talking about a memory he remembered for no reason."

"I see."

*That's how it probably should be.* Feodor nodded to himself. Portrick knew nothing about Apple and Marshmallow's origins. It needed to stay unknown, and was perhaps better off unknown.

Even if he did something for those two, it would never atone for the mysterious child he once hadn't done anything for. Additionally, bearing a sin that had to be addressed was something a mere soldier would never be permitted.

Feodor's feet stopped. They had arrived in front of the fairies' room.

"Hey, you two, it's about time you got off us." He lightly shook the children's backs, hearing a grumpy yawn in return.



"Is Lakish still not feeling well?"

That was the question Feodor posed to Panival while jogging along the gravel road, in the middle of his morning training schedule.

"Her fever came back," the purple-haired girl replied, falling in with his pace as they ran, "so I threw her back into the medical ward earlier."

"What, again? You don't suppose... might she actually have something serious?"

"In the doctor's opinion, not especially. His diagnosis has it that she simply ignited her Venom too much. It'll heal with time."

“Venom? Lakish?” As far as Feodor knew, during the past half month Lakish hadn’t done anything requiring flashy uses of Venom.

“That’s what I thought too, but...” Panival shrugged. “In any case, she’s the one who’s compatible with and wields *Seniolis*.”

*Seniolis*. Among the dug weapons wielded by Leprechauns, it was a terrifyingly mighty sword that towered high above the rest. An object once wielded by Tiat’s beloved, wonderful and attractive senior, Kutori, and now passed down to Lakish Nyx *Seniolis*. An ultimate weapon.

“True to its status, the Venom that blade throws around is completely unbelievable. It wouldn’t be weird if the burden accumulated in her body without her being consciously aware.”

“What a revolting idea.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

For a while only their quiet footsteps pierced the air, and then Feodor opened his mouth. “I wonder if Tiat and the others are doing all right.”

“Hm...” Panival became lost in thought momentarily. “There’s no need to worry, I’m sure. Despite how they might look, they’re both exceptional for the most part, you know? They wouldn’t slip up so soon into an ordinary mission.”

As their superior, Feodor *did* know that they were exceptional. He also knew very well the reality that made Pannibal use “for the most part”.

The two of them were earnest, had mastered the techniques learned from their daily training, and wielded the trump card named Venom. But he had the distinct impression that their actual combat experience was limited, and still carried doubts about their ability to handle critical situations.

And, more than anything... because of the Leprechauns’ unique quirk of being unafraid of death – or so they claimed to be – the question of whether they might throw away their lives when it wasn’t called for was absolutely on his mind. At the very least, if he was right in front of them he could slap them in the face and stop them there, but he couldn’t do that if they were somewhere else under a distant sky.



“Worried?”

“I’d hate it if they got into trouble and affected my evaluation,” he immediately replied.

Panival snorted, seeming deeply interested about something or other. “I see, I see. It’s true after all that lies are an Imp’s forte,” she said, as if accepting a fact.

The conversation ended there, but Feodor felt a nagging feeling of discontent. *What led her to that conclusion?*



He had made an enemy of Apple and Marshmallow.

They waved around toy swords and attacked him, and he responded in kind with his own toy sword in a fierce exchange of clanging blows. In a few strokes, he allowed his weapon to be sent flying and took a toy sword to the stomach, utterly defeated. “You’ve... got... me...” Feodor pretended to give a bloodcurdling scream as he toppled over, the two children laughing and shrieking.

“...Heh. If we dueled, it’s only natural that my sword skills would come out on top.”

He pretended to not hear Panival as she rocked back and forth in the corner of the room, her arms wrapped around her knees.

A while later, Feodor staggered back to his own room and collapsed on his bed without bothering to change out of his clothes. “...Phew. Today was exhausting too...”

He was completely drained, body and soul. He didn’t want to ever get up again, but rather to close his eyes right there and drift into a deep sleep.

“You must be tired. Haven’t you gotten used to taking care of children yet?”

He thought she might’ve been making fun of him – though maybe she hadn’t intended to – but regardless, he replied to her in a somewhat sharp, sullen tone. “I have some experience in taking care of children. Sadly, I happen to be inexperienced in caring for wild beasts.”

“I would suppose children of that age are no different from wild beasts.”

“Hmph.” It was hard to argue with her.

Feodor could claim experience due to a certain child he’d been partnered with: his fiancée who was just slightly three years younger than him. They’d first met seven years ago, when Feodor was ten and she was seven. Although they were both children, if he were to compare that girl with Apple and Marshmallow, there was no doubt that she had been slightly older.

She was a difficult girl. Due to her family background, she was somewhat self-deprecatory– *No*, Feodor corrected himself, she was modest to a fault. Perhaps that was why she acted so willfully around those whom she opened her heart to. In those days, although he’d constantly taken great pains to accommodate her willfulness, there had been happy moments as well.

“You should leave that talk aside for the time being, alright?” Feodor rolled his head to one side, looking up from his pillow to stare straight at his conversation partner. “Now, why are you in my room, Panival?”

“I came in after you.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Sure it isn’t,” she replied sarcastically, flopping down onto the window side chair. “Maybe I feel like chatting with you sometimes, just the two of us. Riling up each other with boring talk, y’know? Isn’t it nice to act as if we’re almost friends?”

“Who’s friends with whom?”

“Oh, how cold. Weren’t you the one who stated it first?”

“What do you...?” Feodor couldn’t remember anything he’d said to that effect. *Wait, no. I can’t say for sure. Maybe I did...?*

“Oh, so that’s it,” Panival said with dawning realization. “I wondered why you never brought it up again after that night. Seems like you forgot all about it.”

*...That night? What’s she talking about?* Something in his head was hurting.

“Let’s see... you mentioned something about the dropping of Regal Aire, didn’t you?”

Feodor shot up from his bed as if he was a snapped rubber band.

He remembered. That day, that night. As if he'd been under the spell of the purple-haired fairy, the memory that had remained vague began returning to him in fragments.

That day, Feodor had caught a cold. It'd made his awareness hazy, and in that period of time where the borders of reality and dreams became foggy, he had definitely said those words to this girl.

"...How—"

"You want to ask me how much I've guessed? I'll tell you my previous answer. I figured out you were digging into the Winged Guard's internal documents. Also, you confessed to me about seeking out Leprechauns as your trump card."

*What the hell was I thinking?! Damn you, Feodor of the past!* As much as he wanted to reprimand himself, he couldn't send his voice back in time. "...Wha—"

"You want to ask me what I'm plotting? I'll still answer you the same as I did previously. I just want to know a little more about you. Should we view you as a dangerous enemy, treat you as a dear friend, or both? Well, at the moment, leaving that question unresolved isn't a bad thing."

Feodor opened and closed his mouth, gasping for breath. Words escaped him. He couldn't quite understand what Panival was saying. Even if he knew what her words meant, he couldn't read her thoughts, nor did he have any confidence in his ability to establish communication with her.

After a brief period of silence, Panival snorted slightly. "Staring at each other isn't bad, but it feels like if we keep this up the term 'friends' won't suit us. So then, what to do now...?"

She contemplated for a few seconds, then her face lit up like she'd solved something. "I know. Sorry for asking when you're tired, but could you come and hang out with me for a bit?" She stood from her chair and headed to the door.

"Hang out, doing what?"

"It's still too early for you to be napping. Shouldn't you be moving your body a bit more?"

Panival and Feodor knelt down besides Apple and Marshmallow, borrowing their toy swords as the girls snored on obliviously. Still concealing the sound of their footsteps, they moved to a fairly open spot at the back of the barracks.

“Right, then. This will be an one-round bout. First one to strike their opponent’s body with their sword wins.”

“...No, wait, what are you saying all of a sudden?” Feodor looked quickly around the area. There wasn’t any sign of anyone at the moment, but it wasn’t guaranteed nobody would show up later. “Private duels are forbidden, and right now we can’t even get permission for a mock battle.”

“It’s not a big deal. We’re just two people playing with toys, getting along and having fun. If we made a special appeal, we’d be laughed at.” She tossed him one of the swords, which he grudgingly caught. “There’s a lot both of us want to ask, but the problem is that we can’t simply disclose our secrets to each other... that being the case, something like this isn’t so bad, is it?”

Having said that, Panival changed her stance. Standing up straight from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, she balanced her center of gravity and grasped her sword with both hands in a wavelike motion. There was an awkward appearance to it, perhaps because her sword was an overwhelmingly light toy instead of a real weapon. However, her stance was undeniably that of a practiced sword wielder.

“If you win, you’ll tell me what I want to know. On the other hand, if I win, I’ll tell you what you want to know. How do these conditions sound?”

“Got it.” Feodor lightly gripped part of the blade’s hilt – made with hard cotton – as he reviewed the conditions she offered. “Compared to staring each other down, this is more direct. But wait, if those are the conditions, then isn’t it too favorable for a sword master like you? After all, if you win, you have to answer my questions...”

Suddenly he was hit by a disturbing sensation. “Huh? If you win, you’ll answer, and if I win, I answer?”

Panival’s only reply was a small chuckle.

“Isn’t it the wrong way around? It’s unfavorable to the one who wins.”

“If that’s what you think, you better lose humbly. Not hard, right?”

“No, wait, then it’s not a match–”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Her smile transformed into a smirk as she interrupted his protest. It was the same look she always wore when saying something incomprehensible. “We’re just playing and having fun. It’ll be boring if you get hung up over small details.”

“...What logic is that?”

After giving it thought, Feodor raised his sword. As far as proper swordplay went, he had learned a thing or two about it. He couldn’t call it his specialty, but he was familiar enough with it that he could use it to hide his true sword-fighting style. Deciding that to be his first course of action, Feodor planned to cooperate in order to grasp the situation. While being careful to not win or lose, he would probe into the mind of the one who’d challenged him to this game – no, farcical match – and ascertain her true intentions.

“Fine. I’ll play along with you.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

There wasn’t a signal to start; it was unnecessary. Panival almost seemed to glide over the ground as she closed in on him and her raised sword immediately swung down. It was an exemplary strike, with clearly defined movements perfected enough to be used in a textbook for traditional sword-fighting.

Which is why it was easy to predict. An exemplary attack could be answered by an exemplary defense. His sword repelled hers with a dull clanging noise.

“Hmph...”

Ignoring Panival’s oddly accepting nod, Feodor flipped his hand and struck out with the blade. Again, textbook movements. A righteous yet elegant reversal. Ceding the initiative to him, the girl focused on her handle and made a half-rotation, taking his sweeping stroke on the back of her blade. “You’re not half bad.”

Feodor smirked without intending to. As it turned out, Panival was weak when it came

to lies and compliments. Her compliments were easily seen through as mere talk, while the regular clash of their blades revealed the dissatisfaction she felt.

*If that's so, maybe I should up the ante a little.* Something like an urge to tease her gushed up from Feodor's heart and, entrusting his body to that impulse, he shifted the position of his fingers on the hilt ever so slightly.

"Wha...?!" Confusion entered Panival's expression as her guard reflexively shifted back her center of gravity. Having moved back half a step, she inevitably went slightly off-balance.

Feodor put more power behind his still-locked sword. He had never been known for his body mass nor for having a large build, but – while he dared not mention her weight – Panival was even smaller than him. What's more, she hadn't ignited her Venom, so her strength was probably approximately equal to his own. Naturally, that meant Feodor would be the victor if it came down to a pure contest of strength.

The toy sword, which he couldn't ever say was a fine piece of work, swerved away with a recognizable noise. "I see," Panival mumbled softly, relaxing her stance and loosening the grip on her sword. Feodor's body stumbled forward and, tracing a trajectory more breezy than rough, her sword shot forward towards his chest.

*So it's come to this?* Feodor didn't have the time to slip in any frivolous chatter. *It'll be dangerous to parry with one hand,* he judged swiftly as he grabbed his sword's blade and blocked the oncoming attack head-on.

If he had been holding a real sword, his fingers would obviously have been cut badly by grabbing the blade. Had this been a mock battle with presumably real swords, his tactics would be ruled as an instant defeat and he would have nobody to blame but himself.

However, they were playing a game using toy swords, and there was no real blade on one. Because of that, no one could disqualify him no matter how he held the sword. Besides, the victory condition for the match was "the one who hits the other's body first is the winner." In that case, whatever way he chose to hold his sword wouldn't lead to his defeat.

"Phew." Feodor relaxed with a sigh. Crouching his body, he lightly swung his sword to pin down Panival's attacks, at the same time slipping an arm behind his back to hide

the movements of his fingers.

“Hmm?” Her gaze followed his arm with seeming interest. The strike he sent at that chink in her armor missed, almost brushing her bangs as she narrowly dodged. *Nearly.*

Panival's eyes shone with excitement. *She's formidable*, Feodor confirmed again. He'd known that since before starting, but Panival's reflexes and guarding capabilities were far out of his league. On top of that, his method of fighting with trickery and deception was essentially useless against this kind of opponent; no matter how many feints he set up, it'd be pointless if she saw through and avoided all of them.

In order to catch their breath, the two of them made some distance between each other at the same time.

“Give up yet?” Panival asked him, smoothing out her bangs.

*She's got to be dripping with sweat by now*, Feodor thought. “You're joking, right? Aren't you the one nearing your limits?”

“Now that's a bad joke.”

“Mwahahahaha!” Feodor laughed melodramatically. “It feels good to be forced to use my full power. After all, I wouldn't want such a significant battle to end in such a boring fashion!”

“You sure do love to play the drama queen.”

Although he could understand how she felt, he didn't entirely want to play along with her either. Feodor bent his knees and dropped his stance. Hiding his sword behind his back, he showed Panival his open right hand with fingers spread wide.

“...Wow, that's pretty creative. What sort of stance is that?”

“Oh, this? Probably something like one of those things,” Feodor said vaguely. “An art of swordplay that's obscure even among secret arts, said to be secretly invented by a legendary master swordsman deep in the mountains of a remote Floating Island, or something.”

“Oho?” Panival seemed impressed with his sloppy, haphazard speech. “I'll look forward to witnessing it then.”

*Come on. It's all made up!*

“Now then, it'd be rude if I didn't respond with a secret technique of my own, wouldn't it?”

*Oh, for the love of...*

Completely disregarding any suspicions Feodor was beginning to have, Panival tightened both of her hands around her sword's handle. She raised the tip straight up in front of herself, then settled into her stance with her blade above her head, ready to cleave downward

*...What sort of stance is that?* Feodor's confusion grew. Panival's stance was full of holes. Since she had raised her sword so defenselessly, she would have no way to guard if he went for her torso. Also, because Panival had raised her center of gravity along with her sword, her balance would easily crumble if he targeted her feet. No matter how he looked at her, she had the stance of a complete amateur.

“You look rather wobbly,” he said. “Is that really a secret technique?”

Panival laughed fiendishly. “Don't look down on me. This is without a doubt the secret sword technique that outstrips all other secret techniques, which can topple any opponent in one move.”

Feodor narrowed his eyes. Despite the oddities of her statement, he couldn't sense any attempt at muddying the waters that would give away a lie. That meant the real threat, as she said, laid hidden in that absurd stance.

“Now *that* would be scary,” he mumbled as he dropped his stance a little more. Though it was supposed to be some obscure technique, judging by her stance her attack would doubtless approach him from above. Besides, her weapon was just a toy, so it shouldn't be unnecessarily fast or powerful. As long as he remained aware of those facts, it shouldn't be too difficult to deal with.

“Hi-yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!” Panival leapt at him, an idiotic yell spilling from her mouth. Her movements were sloppy and her center of gravity was a mess, leaving her full of openings. Nor did she move at any considerable speed, allowing Feodor to dodge or sneak in an opportunistic stab all too easily.

*What, that's it?* Feodor stared at his assailant, sixty percent cautious and forty percent



disappointed, and then he noticed it.

Her center of gravity was blurring, and her body was being swung around by the arm holding her sword. It was because she'd leapt at him in such a state that her stance was falling apart.

If he were to dodge her charge, then she'd certainly fall over, perhaps rolling along the ground once or twice with her remaining momentum. Her entire body might be scratched up and cut, not to mention the serious injuries she could get... particularly if, for instance, she were to fly into the bushes right behind Feodor.

"What th-the hell!"

There wasn't a choice. His body moved as if on reflex.

Throwing away his sword, Feodor reached out for the incoming girl with both arms. As he slid directly into the arc of her weapon, he caught her entire body as if to hold her in an embrace.

Except he hadn't at all. The physical strength of an Imp, whose forte wasn't manual labor, couldn't support the weight of a girl pushed forward by momentum.

Feodor fell over backwards, his back slamming heavily against the ground.

"And that's the match."

*Tap.* He felt a gentle smack on his forehead. Straddled on his stomach, his opponent snorted triumphantly.

"How is this possible...?"

"I can only use this technique when dealing with someone abysmally kind. I've now taken down an opponent this way twice."

"Oh, so that's it. I guess there was only one victim before me."

"Naturally, there aren't many chances to cross swords with an abysmally kind person."

He couldn't accept it. Still collapsed onto the ground, a resentful Feodor looked at her.

“The first time this sort of thing happened, I didn’t really do it on purpose either, you know? I charged at that guy with a sword in my hands from the edge of that swamp, and he willingly extended his arms to cushion my fall... It wasn’t until later that I found out how outrageously skilled he was, so there really wasn’t any reason for little ol’ me to have scored a direct hit, was there?”

“Oh, so that’s it. I see, I see.”

Of course, he didn’t intend to criticize Panival for her despicable sneak attack. Rather, he had to blame his natural Imp traits for that, given that trickery and deception were an Imp’s forte. It was frustrating – not to mention pathetic – to so thoroughly fall victim to his own tricks.

“Anyway, it was actually a fun match,” Panival said cheerfully, rolling off to rest next to him.

“...Your clothes will get dirty.”

“Oh? That happens a lot,” she said softly, raising one of her hands up high. It was like she was trying to touch the stars. “But you know, one match is better than a hundred conversations in your case, Feodor. I’ve more or less gotten your measure.”

“What are you going on about now?”

“At first, you only used finely-honed regular sword techniques. You came at me without showing off any unique quirks, talking to me as you tried to figure out my personality and goals.”

Feodor didn’t say anything in response.

“But then it became kind of a pain, didn’t it? So when you saw the extent of what I had to offer, you changed tack and began using your own techniques. You’re the kind of guy who goes all-in when you don’t have anything else to gain, aren’t you?”

Again, no response.

“On first glance your swordplay seems devious and underhanded, but that’s not actually the case, is it? Although you weave fancy webs of feints, your actual attacks are typical and honest to a fault. You always try to settle the match using a frontal assault, probably since you’re self-conscious about your lack of strength. You take all

these twists and turns to reach the final step, yet still choose the most honest way to end the match. Besides that, your approach lacks conviction, maybe because you reserve energy for thinking ahead while you charge forward. That's probably why you're so cautious—"

Feodor hit his breaking point. "Alright, I get it! You've seen through everything, so cut it out already!"

Her words were so thoroughly true that he couldn't keep up a neutral expression. Not just regarding the parts of himself Feodor was aware of, but perhaps even parts he didn't know about.

"Duels are nice after all, aren't they?" Panival grinned. "Rather than having a hundred conversations, it's much easier to understand one another using swords."

He groaned weakly. "I'd like you to consider how lopsided the understanding is here..."

"Anyway, that's how it is. The loser of that battle just now has already had many things revealed about them. Therefore, as the winner, it's only fair that I answer your questions. What would you like to ask me?"

*That's right, those were the stakes we discussed.* She couldn't ask any questions, and Feodor had plenty to ask her. In other words, this was a development in his favor.

"...Ugh, this is so irritating..."

"Then come challenge me again when you've gotten stronger. I won't be able to wait for too long, so you'd better hurry up."

"Still, I can't accept it after all..." Feodor moaned, still looking up at the sky. "How you girls are... the Winged Guard's secret weapons."

"That's right. We are."

"Using Venom, a force that acts as an opposite of your life force, and combining it with the condition of your limited vitality, you Leprechauns are able to ignite power unimaginable to other races. If you burn up all of your life force in one go, you can make that unbelievable power explode even further."

"Right."

“Then this is my question. Why do you go to such lengths to expend yourselves for the Winged Guard? Don’t you have any desire to continue living?”

“Hmph, as expected of you. You sure do ask some harsh questions.”

He felt her move closer, until their warm bodies were huddled together.

“Up until Kutori’s generation five years ago, we had to, otherwise Regul Aire would be destroyed... I guess. The Teimerre would ride the wind up and multiply if left alone. Weapons besides us were ineffective against them. That’s why we had to immediately annihilate any Teimerre that reached the islands.”

“That’s...”

The reason military weapons aside from the Leprechauns were ineffective against the Teimerre was because the Winged Guard had monopolized the development and ownership of anti-Beast weapons. Pretending to be guardians, they closed everyone’s eyes to the truth. By keeping people away from the battlefield, they stole their ability to fight.

Doing so was wrong – at least, that had been the belief of the former Elpis Mercantile Federation. It was a view shared by Feodor’s brother-in-law, a corps commander in the Elpis National Defense Force.

“...Something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Elpis and his brother-in-law had been mistaken in their methods. That was why they became covered in the worst stigmas imaginable and were destroyed.

However, Feodor didn’t think Elpis’ judgment or his brother-in-law’s beliefs were incorrect. The people had been too protected. Too soft. As a result, they were no longer worth protecting. Even now, he believed that bizarre logic was absolutely correct.

The girl before his eyes now was the main cause of their overprotection, along with her race.

As he thought about it, somewhat complex emotions naturally began welling up in him.

“You said that was the case five years ago. Does that mean your situation changed after then?”

“Yes. After the Teimerre disappeared from the skies, we lost our *raison d’être* as military weapons. Some bigshots in the Winged Guard started going on about how we troublesome beings ought to be let go while the time was ripe. Or, well, the majority of them shared that opinion.”

“Then—”

“If we left the Winged Guard, we would’ve been sold to the merchants of Elpis.”

That was the first he’d heard of it. “...What?”

“You should know that we were originally considered dangerous goods, right? The Winged Guard kept us in their possession because we were useful. Just because the threat was gone didn’t mean we could simply be released. Chopping off all our necks in one go was the best way to ensure Regul Aire’s safety.

“But then this merchant came along with his fat stacks of cash, and he said they could hand us over to him if they didn’t need us anymore. The Winged Guard’s generals went along with him.”

“That merchant...”

“I don’t know his name, but he seemed to be planning to burn us in a furnace as the power source for one of their giant weapons. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that we were treated like incinerable trash.” Panival laughed. “But then the Elpis Incident occurred.”

“...Ah.” *I see.*

Of course, Feodor knew about the incident. He might even be a little more informed about it than the general public.

The Elpis Mercantile Federation was once a commercial nation, where merchants held the strongest and most influential voices in state affairs. A few such merchants had distorted the plan to “make everyone remember the threat of the Beasts for Regul Aire’s safety,” a plan Feodor’s brother-in-law once shaped. It caused unnecessary damage, threatened a large city along with all its inhabitants, and the ideal they stood

for came to be called terrorism.

“I’m not aware of what weapons Elpis had at the time, but they were ineffective in dealing with the disaster at Collinadiluche.”

*Right.* Feodor also didn’t know what the merchants had prepared. All he knew was that they were supposedly powerful weapons, but had been unexpectedly destroyed by a sudden encounter with a Beast.

“The ones who repelled them were the older fairies... and Tiat, who was already a soldier at the time. Lakish as well, who’d just become one.”

“...This story happened five years ago?”

“At the time Tiat was ten and Lakish was nine. Those two came of age early.”

He felt speechless. “Because of this,” Panival continued, “we reclaimed our position as the ultimate weapons against possible Beast threats, just in case anything like Collinadiluche happened again. As long as we have that position, we can keep on having a place with the Winged Guard military. That’s the gist of it.”

“That’s...” The inside of Feodor’s mouth was dry. “That’s not the right answer. I wanted to ask why you bunch kept on expending yourselves for the Winged Guard, not how you found a place to call home.”

“Hmm? Oh, you’re right. My bad, I changed the subject.” Panival’s voice never left its calm tone.

“Fairies are the souls of young children. Even our artificial bodies are that of a small child. As we grow older and lose our youth, our bodies begin to destabilize. Using Tiat and Lakish as examples, whatever life force their physical bodies held had been long spent by the time they reached ten.

“However, the Winged Guard has technology capable of delaying that collapse. Fairies who rely on it can live somewhat longer, and inch closer to becoming adults. It’s then, during the short time when we’re on the border between childhood and adulthood, that we can stand on the battlefield as mature fairy soldiers. So, as I said...”

“That’s...” His voice couldn’t quite come out. “Do you need to take regular treatments? Is it that sort of thing?”

“No, one’s enough. One older fairy took it twice, but it’s usually unnecessary.”

“If that’s so, then those of you who’ve already become adults can probably survive by yourselves. You just need to escape, then you’d be able to live by your own means and find some secret place somewhere to settle down. That’s what you should be doing.”

“...Heh.” Something warm touched his hand. “You’re a terrible liar, you know.”

“What...?”

“You yourself don’t believe your own words, do you? Aren’t you already aware of the replies I’m giving, right down to the reasons I’d use to reject your opinion?”

Panival’s fingers lightly grabbed onto his own. “We, all of us, love our family. I want to create a home for the younger fairies and protect them, as our seniors did before me. To do that, I need to stick around and put myself on display as a weapon for the Winged Guard. If it’s necessary, it’s worth doing.” Her grip was firm. “That’s all there is to it.”

*“...There’s not many things you’d find to be more valuable than your own life.”*

Those were the words of his brother-in-law. He had said something like that, found something more valuable than his own life, and truly threw it away for that thing.

*“...Tiat says she wants to be like our big sister. Even now, she still does.”*

Those... were the words of criticism that had been levelled at Tiat. By staking her life, she tried to chase after the back of the person she admired. She had truly wanted to throw her life away.

She wanted to be like Kutori. Did that mean she similarly wanted to clear a path for the young fairies whose place she used to be in? Her little sisters on the 68th Floating Island? Did she consider her fleetingly short-lived family more valuable than her own life?

Feodor had dismissed her resolve as a dramatic suicide. What feelings did she hold when she accepted that criticism?

“I—”

“Whoops, seems like I’ve said too much.”

The warmth left his fingers, and Panival rose up. "I should be getting back now. What're you gonna do?"

"...I haven't said anything yet. About my identity, or my goals..."

"Ah, can't be helped. I won our earlier match. It's a winner's privilege to be talkative and a loser's obligation to be quiet. Don't you think it's weird for the side who got cut by a sword to be chattering away endlessly?"

*No, your logic is stranger.*

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about this. You might be dangerous, but you're also my dear friend."

Saying that, Panival started to take her leave.

"Regul Aire is too vast," Feodor called out after her back.

Her footsteps stopped.

"The Floating Islands number over a hundred. That's too many. If there's this many of them, the ideology of the people living on each one will be divided like so many grains of loose sand. They'll forget who's protecting them and remain ignorant about how many sacrifices are made for their sake. It'll become a society where everyone lives without a care in the world."

He took in a breath. "That's why... I want to cull the Floating Islands."

"What you're saying... ought to be the privilege of the victor."

"I *will* drop a majority of the islands of Regul Aire. To do that, I want you and the others to lend me your power."

"...Just as I thought, you're thinking about something twisted." Panival sighed as if he disgusted her. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that. If you want an answer from me, you'll have to find another chance."

She started walking again. Still lying on his back, Feodor listened to the small sounds of her footsteps growing fainter.



Above him was a whole starry sky, studded with enough gleaming points of light that he felt like squinting.

He drew in a breath, then sighed. It was a strange sensation, like the inside of his head was becoming numb. There was a lot he had to think about, but his thoughts weren't assembling well.

"I guess... I should be heading back too."

He sluggishly raised his upper body. Just as he was about to stand and walk away, he suddenly realized something: rolling against his feet were two toy swords.

They had been sturdily-built products, but evidently it wasn't enough to withstand his fight with Panival. Both swords had snapped and broken straight through the middle.

"...Oh."

Apple's crying face floated up into his mind.

## PART 3

### ~ SPECIAL DUTY TEAM ~

Three days had passed since the investigation began.

Within a place shrouded in darkness, Tiat Shiba Ignareo held her breath.

The air was full of dust, to the point that every breath she took made her nose seize up as if she was about to sneeze. It felt like a muddy lump of saliva and anxiety was imprisoned in her stomach, threatening to bubble up into her throat.

She was currently squeezed into a narrow crack between two buildings, her attention focused on the opening in front of her. If she breathed in a little too much, her chest and back would touch the surrounding walls.

This situation really made her heart race. Tiat remembered how, when she was much smaller than now, she had once been locked crying in a drawer. Ever since then, she'd always been bad with extremely tight spaces.

*...If I were a little taller, would this be more dangerous?*

When she'd been impatient to become an adult, her body's slow growth was a constant source of worry for her. But right now, she was thankful for her compact physique.

"Coming here means we won't be spotted by anyone, right?"

There were six figures in the dark room.

Each wore masks and overcoats to conceal their faces and body shapes. The suspicious characters' clothing didn't appear out of place during the festival season and simultaneously served as the best tools to conceal their identities.

"This deal is way more significant – and different – than what we usually do," continued the seemingly leader of the five, whose voice and build suggested he was a man. He sounded irritated.

"...That's my line," the sixth figure, facing the other five, replied in a stifled and hoarse voice. Such a voice made it difficult to figure out their age and gender. Their physique was small, but that was all Tiat could figure out. Whether that was due to the person

being young, or a feature of their race... she couldn't judge. In other words, she knew nothing.

The small figure spoke again. "Bringing... these numbers... to this transaction. Supposed to... be low-profile. Is this not... careless?"

"It's 'cause we need to be on guard that I brought so many. It's just a difference of opinion." The masked man shook his head with exaggerated motions.

"Difference of opinion." The smaller figure hardly moved, but a tinge of exasperation entered their voice. "How *convenient*, is... it not? Picking a deserted island for this... does it not have... other meanings?"

"Well, might be, might not be. Anyway, what's it got to do with you?"

"I have... not heard... the reason you will use this." The smaller person's head dipped, their tone detached again.

"Didn't think I had to tell you. How 'bout I say it's for peace? That enough?"

"...Fine. Now, the point. Where is it?"

The masked man jerked his jaw to the four behind him. One of them stepped forward with a bag and placed it at the small figure's feet.

"Gonna check what's in there?"

The small figure opened the bag. Tiat couldn't see the contents from her position. *A... bundle of documents, maybe...?*

She shifted her focus towards observation, losing her concentration. Unconsciously, her body leaned forward and the tips of her nails lightly scratched the wall, generating a small noise.

The small figure shook and their movements paused.

*Oh...*

"Kay, your turn. Bring out what you promised."

“No.” The small figure took half a step back. “Strangely, it is... as I said earlier. This deal cannot... continue, it seems.”

“Eh?”

“Until... both our groups are safe... farewell.” The smaller figure spun around and ran, turning over the hem of their overcoat as they approached a closed window.

*Wha-?!*

In front of a stunned audience, the mysterious person opened the window and threw their body out of it. Although the room was on the third floor, there was no sound of a crash, or even a landing.

In the blink of an eye, that person had disappeared from sight.



“So that’s how it turned out, huh? Must’ve been hard.” Aiseia crossed her arms, grumbling. “That little one... I dunno if it’s their hearing or their wits, but looks like we can’t nab ‘em so easily. Been playing havoc with the other islands’ intelligence departments too.”

Tiat had surmised as much. She’d seen it firsthand, after all. The mysterious figure’s sense of danger couldn’t be defined as simply *sensitive* or *jumpy*. It was the sort of honed edge that could probably only be reached by a naturally sharp person driven by cowardice bordering on obsession.

In addition, their physical adeptness was quite impressive.

*Hmm. It won’t be easy for just a few people to capture that person. If a large-scale encirclement could be laid out, maybe it’d be surprisingly easy to get them... but it’s because that isn’t an option that’s why we’re here right now.* No use asking for the impossible.

“And there was that hoarse voice too, right? They probably used some weird drug to mess up their throat temporarily. All that trouble to hide their identity, geez.”

*Wow.* Tiat was amazed. Stray musings flitted through her mind about whether or not

they would really go that far. Of course, it might just be a matter of course within their line of work.

“Hey, even if it was just the other guys left, was it fine to not catch them?” Collon asked, swaying back and forth atop a stool.

“They’d just be clients. Catching ‘em wouldn’t do us any good. We’d just give ourselves away for nothing.” Aiseia frowned, scrunching up her eyebrows. Putting aside how it’d been when she was younger, even now that she’d become an adult with a mature aura, the expression didn’t suit her at all. “They’re baddies, obviously, so I don’t like letting ‘em go either, but our goal’s securing the Bead Bottle. We need to avoid big risks as much as possible.”

“Mmm...”

“Well, that’s not to say we need to leave ‘em be either.” Aiseia turned her wheelchair to face Nax by the wall. “How about it, Private Selzel? Found their background?”

“...I followed them back to where they were hiding out and recognized one of them,” the Falcon muttered. “He used to be registered as one of Elpis’s merchants, involved in some of the shadier businesses. The other four seem like his bodyguards.”

“Ohh, nice going. Hey, go ahead and calculate the next ambush point for me like that too, okay?”

“...You know, Aiseia...” Nax scratched his head, about to raise a protest. “I’ll do it if you insist, but I’m here as a soldier, you know? Calling in all the favors from my side job is, how do I put it... kinda troublesome?”

“Whaaat?” Aiseia widened her eyes as hugely as possible. “Come on, pleeeeeease? There won’t be a thing left on the records anyway, so rest easy! Pull as many as you want!”

“That’s not the issue here... no, that’s good, but...”

He sighed and drooped his shoulders.

Tiat didn’t quite understand what Nax referred to as his ‘side job’, but it seemed to help him meet all sorts of people and gather information. Maybe he was something like a reporter or detective? If so, that was just a little cool, even if the person himself

wasn't so cool. She wouldn't say that last part, though.

"Seems like a big deal." As Tiat handed a cup of coffee to everyone, she put an extra sugar cube next to Nax's cup. "You seem worn out, Mr. Selzel, so here's some special treatment."

"What a good girl," he said, strangely serious. "Could I ask you out in two years?"

"No, thanks," she replied immediately without knowing exactly why.



The investigation continued steadily.

She had no clue how they did it, but Aiseia and Nax gathered information from all kinds of places. As a result, it came to light that Lyell, although its residents were abandoning it in droves, had a surprising number of illegal inhabitants. Most of them were involved in the development and production of illicit weapons and drugs.

If one thought about it, that was a logical conclusion. When doing such things, certain problems are inevitable. They would need to secure a site with enough space, have ways to power the machinery, cover up the noise, and assuage the suspicion of neighboring residents.

Lyell solved all those problems at once. Machines were operating everywhere with power arbitrarily supplied, the city was filled with the ceaseless noise of running machinery no matter where one might be, and the best part – there were hardly any residents to be suspicious.

Of course, in a few months it would collide with the 39th Floating Island and might be swallowed up by the Croyance. However, looking at it another way, that meant after then all the evidence would be erased by itself.

Because of that, a group that wouldn't be seen on the main roads ended up forming. And so, no matter how many of these characters came into town, the streets remained as desolate as ever.

"...I wonder what it's like."

Only a few people walked around now, always wearing masks and overcoats.

There was a bread shop near their hotel with relatively tasty food. The ham and bacon sandwiches were especially good. There were hardly any sweets sold there, though, the only such offering being small packs of barely sweet, dried-out cookies.

Tiat wished she could have more of Lakish's donuts. And the ones Feodor ate, too. He'd said they tasted really good once dipped in milk. She wanted to try it just once.

It felt as if it'd been a long time since they had all been together. She wondered why.

"Marshmallow and Apple... are they being good?"

She thought of their small faces, then three more faces popped into her head in succession. Panival, Lakish, Feodor.

Lakish was probably the only one having a hard time right now. She was nice so the children loved her, but because she was so nice, she had trouble scolding them.

"I want to-"

*I want to see them.* She barely managed to swallow those words.

Whining was forbidden for fairy soldiers. She was in the middle of an important mission. Idle thoughts were absolutely forbidden.

Still reprimanding herself, she took out a small package of dried-out cookies from her bag and raised it to her mouth beneath her mask.

*Crunch. Crunch.*

Definitely not sweet. Definitely not tasty.

## PART 4

### ~ TINY FAMILY ~

Recently, the machinery forming Lyell City had fallen into poor condition.

Their mechanical movements grew more sluggish everywhere with every passing day, some areas already having stopped functioning entirely. Consequently, circulation of steam and electrical energy ground to a halt, and there were even small explosions or leak incidents.

The cityscape of Lyell was built up of old machinery. These complicated, intricately intertwined mechanisms worked together as one massive device that behaved almost as if it were alive. No one person understood its full complexity, yet they could go on living in the city with peace of mind exactly because of their faith in the machines that had functioned without pause ever since ancient times.

It was an unwavering belief, not unlike how one might view rain falling from the sky or the movements of the seasons. They were able to arrange their daily lives around the idea that such things had been around and would always be. Since the large city was too-quickly welded together with springs and steel plates, no one could grasp the entire story. But even if they couldn't understand it, at least the machines would keep on diligently and steadfastly working.

These assumptions were now beginning to break down.

Probably due to the fact that people were swiftly abandoning the city, there weren't enough remaining to maintain the machines, or so the theory of the city government went.

No one could understand the entire city, but they could at least grasp the scope of nearby mechanisms, and it was a fact that at one time there was a great number of people who were able to repair them. The city was able to remain in good health precisely because the citizens of Lyell had spent so many days living alongside it. Conversely, when the citizens vanished from the city, it began to lose not only individual machines that had been maintained by them, but its vitality as a whole.

That alone had been predicted for some time. However, the situation quickly worsened within the last few days. It was rumored a great many number of skillful mechanics



had disappeared all at once, but Feodor didn't know how truthful the statement might be, and there was little reason to confirm it.

As Lyell's government proceeded with their city-spanning investigation, they hardened their policies, systematically shutting down facilities. Power to several high-risk areas had already been severed and a complete ban placed on public entrance to those same areas. But even if the government could temporarily recover Lyell's functions by pouring vast amounts of money into them, the former inhabitants wouldn't return. Whether time was wasted on it or not, the same result would occur... which seemed to be the government's judgment as well.

After hearing the story, Feodor saw it as an apt decision. The city would die anyway, and soon it would vanish through contact with the 39th Floating Island. They, the Winged Guard, were in the middle of preparations now to increase their fighting strength and attempt to prevent the island's destruction, but the situation had already reached its absolute nadir.

*This city, this world, is about to end.*

No one could avert their eyes from those facts.



"Fourth Officer Feodor Jessman entering."

"Hey there."

In the Division Chief's office, which he'd entered after waiting for approval, there was already a guest. A markless woman with faded gold hair, seated in a wheelchair.

*...Who's that?* She wasn't wearing a military uniform, and he couldn't match her face to anyone in the 5th Division. *I don't remember seeing her in town before, either.*

As he mused, the woman with a calm air about her caught his eye. "Afternoon," she said simply, greeting him with a gentle smile.

"Oh..." Feodor snapped back to reality, adjusting his glasses. "My apologies. I see you have another guest. Allow me to return and present my report at another time."

“H-hey, hold your horses!” The Division Chief spoke up, sounding drowsy as usual. “That report is... ah yes, I see, the complaint settlement from City Hall. Leave it on the desk, I’ll throw it away later.”

“...Don’t throw it away. Please deal with it appropriately, First Officer.”

“I can’t handle all their whining. What do you want from me, Jessman? They’re telling *the army* to write up a list of the trash cans that fell from the Port District, you know? What’s next, sending someone to the surface to dissect the Croyance?”

*Of course no one wants to handle it. However, we still...* “Regardless, it’s an official request. Please do your job and stop grumbling.”

“Ahh, so annoying... I hate having to deal with all these principled people... Whatever. Let’s put that aside for now.”

The First Officer’s beady eyes shifted between Feodor and the woman. “Ithea, Whitey here is the loverboy I told you about before.”

“Huh?”

“Ohh?” The woman wheeled around to face Feodor again, a slightly surprised grin on her face. “I see. You’re more delicate than I thought you’d be. Mm, but then...? Yup, it’s a little surprising, but I can see how those girls have gotten fond of you alright.”

“Eh, no, um...”

She was staring at him unreservedly. It was a rare experience for him to be affixed in such a way by a woman who was – perhaps – older than himself, and especially when it was a markless who looked so similar. His heart was jolting all on its own. He felt strangely nervous.

“T-those girls, ma’am?” From the flow of the conversation, he could figure out enough about whom those words referred to. On top of that, he felt like there was a deep misunderstanding at work. “Are you perhaps... a relative of Equivalent Soldier Tiat and the others?”

“Yup yup, got it in one!” she said, her expression and tone oddly childish.

“Ahh, then could you be...” *I’ve heard this before, I remember the names of the residents*

*of the 68th Floating Island. We talked about a Troll living there who was like a big sister to all of them. Her name was– “...Are you perchance Miss Naigrat?”*

The woman burst into full-voiced laughter, doubling over and clutching her stomach. The Division Chief followed her lead in both regards.

“...Guess I was wrong.”

They couldn't even catch enough breath to answer him, but their reactions were enough.

“Nyahahaha... I'm honored, in a sense, but sorry. You couldn't be more wrong.” The woman wiped tears from her eyes and flapped her hand at him. “Well, I'm not important right now, but you... yep, you're really the rumored young man, ain'tcha? I thought about checking you out, but this works just fine.”

It seemed as if she wanted to familiarly slap him on the back, but didn't have enough height, so settled for smacking his elbow with her palm.

“Oh...” Feodor didn't quite know how he should react.

“Say, now that we've met, I've got a request for you. Listen to it, 'kay?”

“Huh? Ah, erm...” He sent a pleading look at the First Officer. The Armado was still rolling around with laughter, probably not even listening. *He's so useless! Well, since I have no choice...* Feodor forced out a polite reply. “If it's within the range of my abilities.”

“Yep,” the girl nodded slightly. “...No matter what happens, please don't blame those girls.”

“Huh?”

“That's all I'm asking for. Please do your best to take care of them within the range of your abilities.” She smiled.

*Why... Even though she's smiling, why does she look like she's going to cry?*

Lakish Nyx Seniolis had recovered.

“S-s-sorry for making trouble and worrying you!” was the first thing out of her mouth upon returning to the Fairy Room from the sickbay, however unnecessary it was.

Over the past few days, Apple and Marshmallow had rampaged around the room endlessly, and Panival lived as she pleased. Inevitably, the room became an enormous mess and had to be cleaned up. Feodor himself had something of a personality inclined towards messiness, however much he might talk and act like someone orderly, and on top of that the room belonged to girls for the time being. As a result, he was loath to interfere in the cleaning.

“Fwedooo!”

“Dooo.”

The kids clambered up his shoulders and stomach, acting as if it was their natural right to do so. Feodor weakly laughed, knowing he likely looked as much as the squashed frog he felt like.

“I’ll clean this up right now, so Mister Feodor, please w-wai... H-h-hey! Panival?! Why are you tossing your u-unmentionables?!”

Feodor chuckled thinly, turning away. If he’d begun cleaning up on his own, he just might’ve encountered those panties. It was good that he hadn’t decided to lend them a hand.

“Chill out, Lakish. Feodor doesn’t lust after markless girls, so it’s not like he’ll care if I drop my undies. No biggie.”

“It’s not ‘no biggie’ at all! It’s not a question of his interests, geez!”

*Fight on, Lakish*, he cheered her on silently. As for Panival – while he wouldn’t go as far as to say she was mistaken, he at least wished she wouldn’t talk about him as if there was something wrong about him as a living being.

Later in the conversation, the question of going outside to get some air came up. It had not only Lakish's support but also that of Apple and Marshmallow, who for the most part weren't allowed to leave their room. It was impossible for them to exhaust the endlessly overflowing energy emanating from their tiny bodies while stuck beneath a small roof.

And so, the five of them walked through streets dyed purple, a phenomenon not even the slightest bit strange during this festive time.

No, to correct that, the three of them walked while two others ran around.

"Marshmallow, over here! Over here!"

"Apple, wait! Wait!"

Feodor watched the pair recklessly scamper about with unbelievable energy, feeling a little anxiety.

"You two, you can't run too far away from us, all right?"

"Yeah!"

"Got it!"

Their replies were wonderfully delivered. Their replies...

"I wonder..." Feodor mused to himself. "Perhaps I should keep them on leashes or something? I suppose that would make me a dog walker... what's the matter, you two?"

Beside him, Lakish and Panival were giggling. "Sorry, we just felt that you really looked like their father just now."

"...I'm not that old."

"Guess not, sorry." Lakish stuck out her tongue, wearing a smile that wasn't the least bit apologetic. Though she had always struck him as more shy and endearing compared to the other three, she was still a Leprechaun at heart. She was almost playful at times, and showed other impish expressions as well. She still didn't stand

out much, though, so those qualities weren't usually apparent.

Panival sidled in, volunteering her own explanation. "We can't imagine fathers being that old compared to us. We didn't have any real ones to begin with, and Willem wasn't so old either."

He wasn't sure how to accept her logic. "Good grief. Why are you all so attached to someone like me?"

The complaint didn't have any particularly deep meaning, but as the words left his mouth, he started thinking it might be an important question. Their races were different, as were their genders. Even their differences in age weren't enough for their relationship to be called "father and daughter." Feodor had neither the skill nor the enthusiasm for keeping children company. What's more, when it came to qualities that children would love, not a single one of his came to mind.

"That's easy." Lakish raised her finger. "Kids their age will love people who dote on them."

"...You mean people who are kind and gentle, right?"

"That's wrong, isn't it? They're kids. How can they tell whether someone is kind or not? "

*Really?* He didn't quite understand all of that. *It just sounds like she's playing with words.*

"Well, I didn't intend to dote on those two."

"It depends on how kids receive it, here." She held her hand to her chest. "The answer's in each of our hearts."

"Yeah, I don't get it at all."

*To dote on someone? That means to wholeheartedly try and make someone happy, right? Maybe like bringing sugary sweets to them every day or something.*

"I still think you're doting on them..." Lakish murmured. Although she still didn't understand what sort of person Feodor was, he didn't take her words too hard.

"Fweeeedoooooooo!"

“Shakeeeeyyy!”

The two suddenly charged them down, two small bodies slamming into Feodor and Lakish at full power. Feodor wheezed sharply, taking the attack fully in his gut. With sheer force of will, he barely managed to keep his shaking knees from collapsing beneath him. Next to him, he could see Lakish’s figure handling the assault without trouble, even managing to lightly catch Apple in her arms. *That’s amazing. Is it some kind of extreme martial art or something? Maybe a super famous ultimate technique of some sort that’s been lost in the mists of distant history, like the kind used by the masters of old to nullify any sort of damage or vanish in a puff of smoke?*

“Ghost! Ghost! Ghost!”

“A g-g-g-g-ghooooooooooooost!”

The frantic pair babbled on, trying to bring something to their attention. They pointed, and at the end of their fingers was the figure of someone wearing a cloak and familiar mask.

“...Ah.”

It was the time of the festival. Dyed in purple, the town was an imitation of the crossroads at the boundaries of life and death. Right here, the living and dead could supposedly interact with one another. The living who wanted to dress themselves up like the dead went around concealing their faces and names.

That’s why someone was there, wearing the costume of someone who wasn’t anyone. They had just coincidentally passed one another in this place, no more and no less. That person was probably an ordinary citizen of Lyell.

“Sorry for frightening you,” Feodor called out. The masked person nodded slightly, then vanished into a nearby street. He was somewhat impressed by her thoroughness.

It was apparently proper manners for someone to refrain from speaking as much as possible while they wore a mask and costume. Besides, the dead didn’t speak, and speaking could also give their identity away. For someone who wasn’t anyone to exist, they had to abandon their own voice first.

*Now then...*

No matter the island, the port was always an important location for trade. Ports took in goods from different islands transported by airships, and conversely sold produce from that island to departing merchants. Because of that, it was common for a gigantic plaza packed to the brim with goods and crowds to spring up next to any port.

Naturally, Lyell was no exception. Although it was beginning to look like an abandoned ruin now, it had once been an extraordinary city that prospered through its own unique industry. The plaza, kept open through the momentum of trade from days long past, never fell behind the other neighboring cities.

“...Oho.”

First he heard the joyful music played by bands as they moved from street to street. It was followed by the tumultuous noise that could only come from massive crowds of people. Countless lamps hung on the ropes above them, strung from right to left and from left to right to illuminate the plaza a vivid purple. Beneath the dim lighting, those wearing masks modeled after dead people mingled with those who didn't. At the rows of tents that doubled as festival stalls, all sorts of peculiar souvenirs were already being lined up for sale.

All together, a view that straddled the border between realistic and fantastic. Still, Feodor could sense how lively it was.

“Wow...” Next to him Lakish issued a small, astounded cry, one he couldn't help but emulate. “How amazing. This town still has so many people living in it.”

Despite being on the verge of destruction, a city was a city after all. The masses of people that had inconceivably materialized from the usually quiet cityscape blended together to form a lively atmosphere for the festive celebrations. There were those wearing masks, those with real faces (among some races, real faces which were virtually indistinguishable from masks), tourists, and stall owners.

“I wonder what Tiat and Collon are doing right now...”

The story was that they'd gone on a mission to a nearby island, but after that there hadn't been much word on their situation. Of course, Feodor understood that it wasn't very likely for regular status reports to be sent in while they were on a secret mission. Even so, he was growing a bit worried.

Panival overheard his muttering. “From the conversation I overheard before, they



don't seem to have gone to a distant island," she said, calm as always. "It wouldn't be a surprise if they're in the middle of enjoying themselves during this same festival in a different town."

"If only that were the case." Feodor grimaced. *That line of thinking's way too optimistic.*

"Maybe that's true, or maybe it's not." She lightly clapped him on the back. "No point thinking about it too much. Let's forget the small stuff and enjoy this to the fullest, alright?"

*Is she trying to be optimistic or not?* Although he didn't entirely understand what Panival meant, as usual, he somehow felt like his mood was improving.

"Hey, if it ain't our usual lad!"

He turned his head at the familiar voice. Inside a stall lined with all manner of masks, the boss of the bakery was waving at him. He had grown spectacularly long hair at some point and he was wearing one of his masks, the upper half of which was split down the middle. "What a coincidence running into you in a place like this!" the owner said cheerfully. "Wanna drop by to try out my newest donut creation... H-hey!"

He saw the five of them holding hands. A wide grin crossed his face. "Welp, seems like this ain't a good time to stop and chat. Out celebrating with your family?"

"A ghost!" Apple screamed, plunging her head into Feodor's pant leg. Even without accounting for the suspicious mask on the top half of the owner's face, it was scarily impressive for his current appearance to make sobbing children cry even harder.

"You're full of life today too, Sir," Feodor said, shaking Apple off his pant leg. Near his knee, a string of drool remained connected to the side of her mouth.

"Gahahaha!" The bakery owner smacked his large biceps, laughing uproariously. "I sure am, kiddo! I'll be right in the pink of health as long as the bakery remains open!"

Though it was a time when the dead intermingled with the living in this city, some people were just full of life no matter how you looked at them. Such were traditions and customs; merely ideas which stoked emotion in order to make everyone feel happy. No matter what sort of mask they wore, no matter what sort of costume they put on, there was always someone alive at the core. There were no dead people. Anywhere.

“By the by, lad.”

The shop owner beckoned him closer, bending his head near Feodor’s ear. He shot a meaningful glance at Lakish. “Always playing ‘round with different girls even though you’ve got such a cute wife already? Ain’t my place to comment about other races’ culture, but you’ve gotta treat ya wife with more care. Things’ll get bloody otherwise, ya know.”

“Like I said, it’s not like that!” The bakery owner’s deathly mask meshed oddly with his casual, knowing smile. Feodor secretly sighed to himself.



A puppet show was being performed atop a small stage.

The programme was... Feodor didn’t know the title, but it was probably some kind of fairy tale. A story of adventure and romance, set in ancient times on the surface. The Beastman survivors, escaping slaughter by the wicked Emnetwyte braves, traveled to a new land under the guidance of the divine Visitors and their Poteau. It was that sort of plot.

It made him slightly disgusted. After hearing that sort of story, audience members with their ire stroked tended to turn aggressive towards various races who resembled the Emnetwyte – particularly the markless. Even if that wasn’t an issue here, given Feodor and the four with him were markless, it was hard to guarantee that they wouldn’t attract unwanted trouble.

Just as he was about to suggest they go somewhere else, he noticed Apple wasn’t next to him. Neither were Marshmallow and Panival.

“Huh?”

“Sorry... they’re over there...”

In the direction Lakish apologetically pointed towards, the wayward three were seated in the front row that practically touched the stage, leaning forward and excitedly watching the play for some reason. Putting aside the newborns, why on earth was Panival – supposedly older than them – so resolutely glued to her seat?

“...Can’t be helped.” Feodor shrugged. “Shall we wait for them?” Though Lakish looked despondent, she had a small happy smile.

“Yah! Tah! Hyaaaaah!” Swords in hand, the puppets acted out a violent fight sequence. What’s more, the stage machinery clanked and spun as they changed scenes. All in all, it was surprisingly impressive to watch, which made Feodor slightly annoyed. The story’s theme appeared to be love, courage, and friendship. The Beastman protagonists worked hand in hand with their comrades, overcoming seemingly impossible odds one after the other.

*What an invigorating fantasy*, Feodor thought. Packed with beautiful developments topped off by an uplifting ending, the show was obviously engineered to make audiences feel happy and contented after watching it. *As if that’d ever happen in real life.*

Catching himself, Feodor realized that such opposing viewpoints were the kind of things said by people with a twisted view of reality. The real world was more complex than that. To be true, there *did* exist fairytale-like situations where the power of love, courage and friendship led towards a beautiful, brilliant resolution. At the same time, there were just as many quagmires with no hope of that ever happening.

“U-Um...” From a distance of about one step away, Lakish called out to him in a low voice. “Do you remember... what we talked about before? My request about Tiat?”

“Well...” he mumbled. “Somewhat.”

“Is it okay for me to ask about something similar one more time?” Slightly surprised, Feodor couldn’t help but stare vacantly at Lakish’s face. “I won’t ask you to act the part of her boyfriend anymore. But from now on, I hope that you can keep staying by her side as you’ve always done.”

“What’s with this sudden change of heart?”

“Recently you’ve been together a lot... you look so happy together.”

*Look happy? I’m either chasing her or getting chased around just to eat our favorite sweets together. Is that the kind of relationship you call happy?*

“That’s debatable...” Feodor tilted his head. “In the first place, that troublesome girl tried to entrust you to me. She said you’re kind, honest, good at cooking and could fry

up delicious donuts. Wouldn't you say that makes you a good deal, dear customer? The particulars of their conversation might have differed slightly, but it wasn't important. Moreover, at the time his heart might have wavered at the mention of delicious donuts, but *that* point was better left unsaid.

"I-I..." Slowly tensing up, Lakish shook her head. "I'm... fine. I'm fine on my own. I can still find happiness that way."

*Dammit, this again?* Now he was getting irritated. "I think all of you Leprechauns had better go relearn Regul Aire's common language one more time."

"Eh?" She looked puzzled.

In a state where she didn't appear to be the least bit fine, Lakish claimed that she was fine while wearing an expression that was as far removed as possible from the conventional definition of "fine". *Maybe these girls don't properly grasp the meaning of the word*, he thought. He wholeheartedly believed it was because they didn't know the proper usage nor the meaning of the word "fine." *Yes, that's it*. He wanted to believe that.

"Do you know the most effective way to cause misfortune for someone?"

Probably never having given it thought, Lakish wrinkled her eyebrows and answered simply while continuing to mull over it. "You mean like... punching someone, or stealing away something that's important to them?"

"That might work too, but it's not so effective. You'd probably meet with resistance, and you'd become a villain even if you succeeded."

"Becoming a villain... wait, if you're going to cause misfortune to others, wouldn't the best way be to do bad things right from the start?"

Her answer was stunningly innocent. *She's a really honest girl*, he thought with astonishment.

"It's simple. Just tell them 'You're unhappy.'" Feodor waved his hands. "I can already hear you trying to make it sound like a good thing, 'You can be more happy', or 'I'll make you happy', but they're all in the same vein. Though that might sound good, you'd just be claiming that all their happiness is fake, and *your* brand of happiness is the real deal. However happy someone was before, once they've believed those words, they'll start thinking that they might not have attained happiness yet. *"Bam!"*

He slammed his fist into the palm of his hand explosively. "If you start to feel annoyed about not holding real happiness in your hands, it's over. You'll start to see all the things you once possessed as trash and feel jealous of others. If it gets like that, you've already lost sight of your own happiness. You start to rely on that person who's willing to feed your happiness. Far from thinking of them as a villain, you'll even feel grateful towards them. It's a trick used all the time by casanovas, swindlers, or politicians to swindle others."

In other words, it was something which the Imps, Feodor's race, specialized in as their *modus operandi*. Of course, he would stop short of mentioning that. "Earlier, you said that you could find happiness on your own. It's exactly as I said. To me, you just seem to be wishing misfortune upon yourself."

"Tha..."

*That's not true*, Lakish probably wanted to say. However, she trailed off into a mumble. In other words, something in Feodor's words – which should've sounded rather forced – had resonated with her. What's more, this girl was so overwhelmingly honest that she lacked the shrewdness to conceal her true feelings.

Feodor sighed in his mind. *Good grief. She really is the easily gullible type, whether it's to swindlers or casanovas. She should thank her lucky stars that I'm neither of those.* "It's not necessarily bad. It can feel good to get drunk on misfortune. There are people who need it to live on. But..."

He paused, searching for the right words to describe how he felt.

Feodor Jessman was an Imp; a descendant of twisted bastards who lived to trick and use others, so to intentionally and deliberately explain those tricks was an act akin to strangling his own neck. *Why am I doing this?* Emotion must have gotten the better of him, reason playing second fiddle in his mind.

He arrived at something of an answer. He didn't want to accept it – the fact that the girl named Lakish Nyx Seniolis, who stubbornly kept wishing for her sisters' happiness wherever they happened to be, was trying to treat herself as the only exception. If he were to sum it up in one phrase, then...

"...It doesn't suit you."

"Wha-?!" Lakish squeaked, strangely surprised.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“O-Oh, no, no no no, it’s nothing! I’m not thinking about how those cool words came out of your mouth so naturally!”

It took Lakish pointing it out for Feodor to finally realize what he was saying. If his words had been taken as an attempt to sweet-talk her, it would’ve been hard to deny the charge. Of course, the conversation hadn’t been flowing that way in the first place, so it was probably self-evident that he hadn’t done it on purpose.

“But I get it. You’re probably right. That was really convincing.” The violet lights illuminated her cheeks, dying them a light red. “Maybe I am wishing for misfortune. Since... losing that must be much easier than losing happiness.”

“...I don’t understand.”

Those were the words he’d intended to throw at her. But Lakish only gave an ambiguous smile, not intending to elaborate any further. Her smile was gentle, even somewhat frail, yet for some reason he saw in it a curious strength that made him think she wouldn’t shrink away from any of his questions.

“So, you see,” Lakish said, “about Tiat... no, and Panival, Marshmallow, Apple, even Collon too... I want to leave all my friends in your care, Feodor.”

*Why’d you bring them up all of a sudden?* “You shouldn’t put much faith in Imps,” Feodor said, feeling both fed up and a tight, painful sensation in his chest.

He vaguely heard cheers around him. There was a gigantic evil dragon on stage attacking the Beastmen who’d just finished their journey and arrived at a promised land of some sort. Against an overwhelmingly powerful enemy that should’ve been impossible to defeat, the Beastmen soldiers still mustered up their courage and fought valiantly. Just then, a dazzling light covered everything as the Visitors’ divine protection granted power to the righteous ones. Hundreds of swords, wielded by hundreds of soldiers, tore the scales off the evil dragon which should have been impervious to all attacks.

“In the first place, I’m not the good guy you think I am–”

There was a short scream, followed a moment later by a cacophony of loud, strange, grating sounds, like a mass of metal objects grinding and striking and scraping against

each other. Feodor whipped his head around as though he'd just been given an electric shock. Similarly, regardless of their race or whether they were wearing any masks, everyone in the plaza turned their faces as one to the source of the noise.

Although the plaza was near the Port District, it remained a part of Lyell City. Most of the cityscape was built out of copper and steel sheets, springs, screws, power lines, steam pipes, and various other parts... in short, the city was comprised of mechanical installations.

One such installation, now embedded in a wall, had been rammed full force by a partially destroyed golem. Beneath it, the shattered pieces of several dashboards that shouldn't have been so easy to destroy rolled around on the ground.

A curiously eerie hush fell over the area. Although a dangerous incident had just occurred, no one said a word as they gazed at the carnage. In the purple hours where the border between life and death grew vague, they silently stared at the metallic mass. It laid still, as if the machines that made it up had crossed over the border into death.

Today, as well, Lyell City quietly and slowly approached its death.

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **MY MOST LOVED THINGS, MY MOST HATED THINGS**



『大好きなもの、大嫌いなもの』

- reasons to live -



# PART 1

## ~ TIAT ~

Looking down at a spread-out memo pad on her desk, Aiseia made a complicated face.

She grumbled and held her head, a pen dangling precariously between her nose and lips. The woman turned her eyes up at the ceiling, emitting otherworldly sounds, then collapsed on her desk as pieces of paper scattered all over. The gap between her adult appearance and her childish behavior was amazing to behold.

"...What are you doing?" Tiat's question was half out of bewilderment and half out of a sense of duty, with just a little of her own concern mixed in.

"Mmph... ahhhh..." Aiseia raised her head. "There's something I've wanted to know for a while now, so I secretly nabbed these papers back from the First Officer yesterday, see? But the number of things I don't get just keep getting bigger and bigger..."

She sighed, then swiveled her whole chair. It made a horrible squeaky noise. "Though I've not met the kiddies yet, I *did* run into that boy by chance. Y'know, the one we talked about back then. Feodor? Seems like a nice guy, doesn't he?"

"...Just on the outside. His actual personality is beyond terrible."

"That so? Well, if you're buddies then you'd know."

"No, we don't get along. We're always at each other's throats." Tiat shook her head. "But how did it go? Did he seem fine?"

"Hmm? Maybe a bit tired, but he looked like he was doing alright?"

"I see." Tiat turned away. *Feodor's fine. That means Lakish, Panival, Marshmallow, and Apple are all fine too. If even one of them was feeling sick, he would've gotten all down about it. In that regard, he's strangely easy to understand. Even though he's a liar, he's really easy to figure out...*

"HMMMMMMMM...?"

*...Aiseia is looking at me with her irritating smile. I'll need to change the subject. "So what was the information you got?"*

“Oh, that. About the big fuss last month – you know, when you guys dropped the Port District.”

Tiat winced. *Did I dig my own grave? No, this feeling... it's more like I plunged in at terminal velocity...*

Aiseia tapped her pen to her lips. “Because a Beast got into that annoyingly big airship, the whole island would’ve been doomed if we dilly-dallied too long. That’s why there was no choice but to have everyone work together and drop the ship... Geh, it was already a strange incident from the get-go, but, as I look at these documents it’s like the stuff I can and can’t figure out is piling up more and more, y’know?”

“Um...” Somehow, it didn’t seem as if the subject of her fight with Feodor was going to come up. “What do you mean?”

“What... mmm... let’s see... first off, after eliminating the possibility of the Beast somehow building a nest within the airship under its own power, I can start by assuming it was a crime committed with the use of a Bottle.” Aiseia seemed deep in thought for a bit. “Hey, Collon.”

“Huh? What’s up?” Collon peeked over from the top of the bed, where she’d been amusing herself by bending herself into odd shapes.

“Let’s say you wanted to destroy this Island by using this particular Bottle. Where’d you think you’d plant it?”

“What?! U-uhh...” Collon was obviously flustered from having such an unimaginable question thrown at her. “I’d... I’d break it at... the middle of the island! I guess?”

*Not bad*, Tiat thought. After all, the Croyance was what the Bottle had contained. A product out of the deepest and darkest nightmares, which couldn’t be destroyed nor burned. Once released, only one solution existed – to sever all places or things it had spread to and dump them onto the surface.

In other words, if its encroachment began somewhere that couldn’t be broken off, the Beast’s victory would be decided in that moment.

“Yup, that’s the best way to do it. If that was the objective, even I’d do that. Speeding up the encroachment by shocking it with an explosion was excessive in of itself. Even if you didn’t bother to do that, the island would certainly be devoured before long if it

was left alone.”

“...So in other words... their objective wasn’t to destroy the whole island?”

“Bingo.” Aiseia nodded firmly. “At least, it’s a strong chance that wasn’t their main objective.”

“But then what did they want to do?” Tiat mused. *Could their aim have been the Utica? Dropping the greatest, most powerful airship owned by the Winged Guard?*

*...No, if that was the case, they could just get in and fill it with explosives. There’s no point in using an ultimate trump card like a Beast for that sort of purpose...*

Aiseia cleared her throat. “There’s two things that are key. First, whoever it was took control of the Port District. Second, the explosion set a time limit for resolving the incident.” Tiat nodded, her arms crossed. “So then, was it an experiment... or maybe they were collecting data?”

She blinked. “What do you mean?”

“On the day of the incident, the Winged Guard pursued an almost perfect course of action and kept the damage to a minimum, all thanks to that Feodor guy.”

*Yeah.* It frustrated her to admit it.

“Now try thinking about a situation where that didn’t happen, where our unseen enemy’s plan progressed favorably for them. How do you think it’d go?”

Tiat did as she was told; she closed her eyes, trying to recall the sequence of events from then.

First there had been chaotic explosions, a disturbance serving as a smokescreen intended to delay the discovery of the Croyance. If Feodor, who claimed subterfuge like that were his forte, hadn’t figured out the truth of the smoke and mirrors, the Winged Guard’s response would’ve been delayed for roughly half an hour.

Thirty minutes. With so much time, how much would the damage be magnified? Given time, the Beast’s encroachment would certainly progress. In that situation, it was likely for the whole Port District, not to mention part of the adjacent Factory District to be abandoned and dropped...

“Wait...”

“Got something, Tiat?”

“The island... won’t fall?”

“That’s right.” Aiseia shrugged. “It’d be a close call, but if the 5th Division exhausted its full might as expected, then the island would live. That’s probably what the mastermind’s aim was.”

“But then why did he go and do something like that...?”

“I see. So that’s what happened.” Having entered unnoticed at some point, Nax Selzel was there all of a sudden, standing with his back to the wall.

“Nax?”

“I had a real bad feeling back then, y’know. Even after all that setup for the first blasts and that other bomb which blew up later, the enemy still failed at capturing one key city. How should I say this... it’s kinda like they tried to tick off the Winged Guard, yeah?”

He plucked off a brightly-colored hair and looked at it idly. “Yeah, that’s it, then. They really wanted the Winged Guard to go after ‘em. Their aim was to set up a crisis where the whole island would sink unless the Guard threw everything they had at it. They wanted to see how the Winged Guard would move when facing an emergency situation.”

“...Well, that’s probably right.” Aiseia sighed. “My thoughts are the same on that point.”

*What... what...*

“What the *hell?*!” Tiat spluttered loudly, having forgotten about her position during the crisis. *No... no, that can’t be! If that’s what they wanted, then I – I–*

“Could be that they were watching you guys fight from a distance,” the older fairy said. “We’re lucky Tiat was able to finish it off without needing to open the Fairy Gate.”

*What? What’s with that? Seriously, what the hell’s with that?!*

*Even though – even though I really was prepared to die there! Even though I thought I needed to use all of my life-threatening power to save (almost) everyone around me – the people on the 38th Floating Island, my little sisters at the warehouse!*

*Was that... what our enemy hoped would happen?*

“Maybe they didn’t have enough info ‘bout the Bottle and the Beast inside,” Nax was saying. “So they needed field data on how well they could use both?”

“It’s likely.” Aiseia grumbled to herself a bit. “Although, if they were securing the Bottle with at least some part of another explosion in the same area... then if you consider our enemy’s twisted logic so far, they must’ve wanted us to not even suspect it was just a bluff, huh?”

She looked back at Tiat and Collon. “Did that guy say something like this too? We have calculations and guesses, but actual impressions would be nice too.”

“Huh?” Even if she were to be asked, nothing in particular came to her mind. Tiat looked at Collon, who shook her head.

Aiseia glanced at Nax, the Falcon who was Feodor’s personal friend. He shrugged his shoulders, a bitter smile on his face.

The older fairy rocked back in her chair, making it squeak again. *Bad manners.* “If his insights were the same as what the materials say, then it wouldn’t be a surprise if he presented the same conclusion we’ve just come to as well. But there wasn’t anything of the sort on that day. Is it possible that he’s hiding some deep secrets, I wonder–?”

“Aiseia,” Collon said strongly as she performing her off-putting calisthenics, “Feodor’s a good guy.”

“Hm.” Aiseia’s smirk had a sharp edge to it. “I suppose.”

Looking at her toothy expression, Tiat remembered something from that day.

That moment, when the two of them confronted each other alone and crossed swords.

That guy, who removed his glasses and abandoned his mask of a weak person.

*“You know, my big brother said something to me once. ‘You shouldn’t give up on this*

*world yet.”*

*“When the world murdered my brother, I decided to abandon it anyway.”*

That’s right. Feodor... had said that.

Was he angry? Delusional? Full of hatred? Or was it something else? He had screamed something like a promise, his voice full to overflowing with intense, complex, entangled emotions.

Honestly, at the time she hadn’t listened. Her head had only been full of stuff about herself, and she hadn’t bothered herself with what he thought about. However, if his words back then was the exposure of a passion he had hidden up until then...

*“If you say you want to stage your inspiring tale with all the races making appearances and holding hands, if you say you’ll protect the bastards who shouldn’t be protected, then all of you are my enemy!”*

*“I’ll make myself a problem for all of you!”*

At the time, he had been angry. Angry at Tiat, ready to die. Angry at everything she’d decided to protect through her death. And angry at the world itself, for allowing such an exchange of life. If that was his real face, with nothing to hide, then...?

*Is it something like a great cause he supports?*

*Is it something like justice he believes in?*

*Or is it something like a future he seeks?*

*In pursuit of those things, the way of life he chooses is somehow–*

“Tiaaaaaat? You home?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry.” Tiat gently pushed back Collon’s hands. The other fairy had been waving them in front of her eyes. “It’s nothing.”

“Ahh, my bad, my bad. It’s not as if I want to doubt him, y’know? He’s your dear friend, after all.” Aiseia’s eyes were kind as she said it, even though she definitely wasn’t smiling anymore. “But geez, from the start, we were supposed to be beings who only

fought against the Teimerre. We were all raised for that purpose and died for it. That's what was natural for us. Now here we are, before we even knew it, fighting on a completely different battlefield against a completely different and invisible enemy."

Her next words came softly, like a whisper. "But I'm planning on doing something to bring it all to an end... so I'm not going to die so easily, 'kay?"



## PART 2

### ~ FEODOR ~

On the other side of the window, the sun was setting.

“Ah,” the First Officer remarked as he sorted out some documents on his desk. A sense of foreboding crept up Feodor’s spine.

“I screwed up. Postie’s already gone off.”

Postie was their pet name for the mail collection golem. In Lyell, many essential services had already been automated, with the postal service being one of them. It was staffed by golems which ran around town everyday to collect, sort and deliver mail. They were highly reliable, with an accident rate lower than even that of normal postal services in other cities. Even with Lyell’s other services grinding to a halt, the mail golems were still running smoothly.

Although the mail golem service was convenient, it was, however, not without drawbacks. For one, it was too rigid and uncompromising. They went to fixed locations at fixed times to collect and deliver mail. Outside of those times, they neither collected nor delivered anything.

“Ah... Ahem. Fourth Officer Feodor Jessman, do you have a moment?”

“Apologies, First Officer. After this I’ve got some business that I absolutely must attend to.”

“Come now, what kind of cliché excuse is that?”

“It’s not, I’m telling the truth. Um, you see... I’ve got plans to go shopping with Apple and the others.”

There were indeed a lot of essential items Feodor needed to buy, such as changes of clothing, new books, and toys. Needles, threads and cotton for patching up the stuffed animal Apple tore while playing; cleaning supplies for the walls and floors Marshmallow randomly covered with scribbles. He couldn’t only rely on the army’s stores to provide everything he needed.

“You’re almost like their father, eh?”

A natural-sounding reply spilled out of Feodor's mouth. "I don't remember taking on that responsibility. If doting on young children was all it took to earn that title, I couldn't face all the other fathers of the world."

"Well, since that's what you'll be doing, mind if I ask something of you as well?"

Feodor replied with silence.

"That's a really unwilling face you've got there."

"What? No, it's nothing like that. It's just, all the shopping I've got to do is part of my mission, you see."

"Don't worry, you can do this on the way. Just help me out and deliver this document to City Hall." The First Officer waved an envelope at Feodor. "It's about those malfunctioning machines. Three facilities have to be urgently closed down, and there's a list of engineers and material we need for emergency repairs."

"How'd you forget to mail such an important document?"

The First Officer averted his eyes. "Had a lot of paperwork to get through today," he grumbled vaguely.

*To be honest, it's quite a chore, but if I don't do it all sorts of problems will start springing up.*

"By the way, First Officer, since we're entrusting our futures to those would-be fairy soldiers, I'd like to provide them with some extra nourishment every once in a while. Not that the Winged Guard's provisions are lacking in nutritional value, of course."

"Y'know, you push that goody-two-shoes act of yours a bit too far sometimes..." the First Officer let out a heavy, resigned sigh. "Just remember to keep the receipt."

"Of course."

Since it was part of the Winged Guard's official duties to look after Apple and the others, any expenses incurred in the process could be placed on their tab. Feodor couldn't do that if he went overboard with his spending, so he was prepared to lean on his superiors in order to get away with it.

“Didn’t know you were the type to dote on your daughters so much.”

“I have no intention of doing that, nor am I trying to become their father. It’s merely as I said.”

“Sure, whatever. Bit of spare change ain’t too much to spend if you get the errand done. But in return–” A round fingertip beckoned. Frowning, Feodor leaned in closer to listen. “–I’ve got another thing for you. Use those eyes of yours to take a look-see around town.”

*I don’t understand.* “If you’re worried about anything, I’m sure you can rely on the military police to take care of it.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. My boy, I need you to watch the streets using your eyes.”

Feodor Jessman’s... Imp eyes.

*He’s not asking me to use my special ability. The power of an Imp’s eyes isn’t particularly well-understood, and it’s useless in that situation anyway. No, it’s my perspective he wants me to use – the perspective of a race of master tricksters, knowledgeable in all manner of deceptions, intrigues, conspiracies, and lies – to figure out if there’s anything suspicious happening in town.*

“Do you believe something’s going on?”

“Dunno. Might be worried ‘bout nothing, but I’d like you to look around all the same.”

*He can’t be sure, so he needs a pair of reliable eyes to gather information... It’s probably that kind of reason. That’s understandable. It’s a sound request, and I can’t imagine any reason to refuse anyway. So...*

Feodor smiled. “Oh, that reminds me. The other day, I was at a street corner when I saw some clothes that would’ve been perfect for Apple...”

“Whatever suits your fancy.”

Once again, Feodor bullied his superior and got away with it.

“Ugoo, ga, goo.”

The roads in this district were some distance away from the main street. In Lyell, outlying roads like this were never level. They were dotted with uneven patches, exposed pipes and all sorts of debris, making them extremely bumpy.

“Don’t take off your gloves. The oil spills here are really bad and it’ll be troublesome if you touch them barehanded.”

“Ugoo!” Apple cheerily answered while bouncing around, as though she was unable to properly pronounce “yes”.

“Akesh, pweaseee?”

“All right, all right.”

On the other hand, Marshmallow couldn’t run around very well and had already given up on various ideas of hers, instead pestering Lakish to piggyback her.

*It’s not a good idea to spoil the girls so much, you know. Ah well, guess it can’t be helped. I’m already used to pampering them myself.*

“Before we go shopping, is it alright to drop by City Hall?”

“Yep, that’s fine.”

After that short exchange, the two of them fell silent.

Following their talk on the day of the festival, the atmosphere between Feodor and Lakish had changed subtly. It wasn’t anything like affection or disgust, nor was it something which would dissipate if they were further apart from each other. The best word to describe it would be...

Awkward.

“Are you feeling better?” Feodor attempted to carry on the conversation.

“Ah, yes. Um... I’m sorry if I caused you to worry,” Lakish replied as she shifted her

arms to make sure Marshmallow wouldn't fall off. "That kind of thing happens every once in a while to us fairy soldiers. When we ignite Venom too strong for our bodies to handle, our already short-lived personalities become even more unstable... or so I'm told. It's not so much a sickness of the body as an affliction of the mind, you see."

By reassuring him that she wasn't suffering from some unknown illness, she probably wanted Feodor not to worry about her. Still, her words had the opposite effect. He felt more anxious than ever.

"Um, you know... In my case, uh... it seems like I have a talent for using Venom. Even in my normal everyday life, sometimes I accidentally ignite my Venom and it roars to life like a huge inferno. The days when I need to wield Seniolis are especially scary, since it's a sword with an unlimited capacity to use and amplify Venom. I can barely handle the strain from activating it even just a tiny bit." Lakish's words came out faster than normal and her smile was slightly more forced than her usual one.

*That's no laughing matter. Though there's no need to point that out, seeing as the person in question would know better than anyone else.*

"It's not like I'm trying to sound like Tiat, but... It's no surprise that I still haven't been able to wield Seniolis like Kutori did."

*That name again?*

The fairy soldiers' legendary senior. Previous wielder of the strongest Dug Weapon, Seniolis. She once slaughtered countless Teimerre, and even fell in love – *forbidden* love – with a Second Enchanted Weapons Technician named Willem. Quite the storied fairy.

"There's no need to imitate her, is there? After all, you're you."

Frankly speaking, Feodor was amazed at how cliched he sounded. Hackneyed, empty words that served no purpose other than to provide affirmation to someone else.

*Now that I think about it, I said something like that to Tiat when we fought back then. But I wasn't trying to trick or manipulate her. My most sincere words just happened to come out sounding like lies. Is my nature this shallow? Good grief.*

"That's... You're right. I *am* me."

“You’ll be fine if you refrain from using weapons like Seniolis. If you’re afraid your Venom could flare up in your daily life, you’ll just have to tread carefully from now on.”

“But–”

“At the least, I’d hate to lose you from something like that.”

“...Eh?” Lakish’s face was dyed scarlet.

“Huh? Oh, um...”

Seeing her reaction, Feodor realized he’d chosen the wrong words. *No, it’s not like that. I’m not trying to spit out some misunderstood declaration of love! I’m trying to say something more sensible, more timely... That’s right, I’m trying to impart some common sense here, come on.*

“Akesh? Fwedo?” Marshmallow gazed at their faces in turn, and the two of them hung their heads, becoming quiet all of a sudden.

“Hey–”

“So–”

Both of them raised their heads at the same time, unexpectedly meeting each other’s eyes. Then–

“Ahaha...”

“...Heh.”

They laughed. It wasn’t a particularly fun or happy situation, but rather one of those times where one couldn’t do anything besides laugh.

“So...” Feodor continued their conversation, moving his feet forward after having stopped unconsciously. “I’m going to say something weird, but please listen.”

“Something... weird?”

“Yes. I’m going to tell you something so ridiculous we might end up getting chased by the military police, which is why I’m giving you fair warning first.” Taking a breath,

Feodor gathered his thoughts.

*This isn't something I should say in public. But then, I can't keep it under wraps forever either. I'll need to explain it honestly to the girls, sooner or later. And I've decided – I'll tell them sooner. That's all there is to it.*

He steeled his resolve. "I am–"

The moment Feodor started speaking, he felt a peculiar tremor underfoot.

## PART 3

### ~ MARGO MEDICIS ~

By the time they reached the tower, it was already dead.

The machinery embedded within its walls and floors had powered down. The pipes through which steam and electricity would normally run were cut, halting any power from the outside. The doors and windows had all been tightly shut, papered over with the coat of arms that was Lyell's emblem as well as "Trespassing Strictly Forbidden" signs. Below those signs were others that detailed, to the tiniest detail, the various penalties incurred for violating that prohibition.

"This place is a pain, but at the same time it's pretty convenient, isn't it?"

The group had gathered up in a room on the thirteenth floor, standing by a window that granted a nearly unobstructed view of Lyell. The one who'd spoken looked out over the scenery, his emotions hidden behind his mask as he muttered to himself in a tone neither joyful nor sullen. "If we don't fire up the machines, this door won't budge an inch..."

A low hum resounded from underfoot as the inert emergency power reactor deep underground was forcibly restarted.

In order to quickly supply what would've been a normal amount of power, the machine had been pushed to operate at a dangerous level. Its lifespan doubtlessly shortened as a result, but that was of no concern to the group. It'd be fine as long as the reactor held on until they were done.

As a result, the tower's machinery recovered its functionality, though only temporarily. The process took precious time and weighed them down with useless risk, but it was the only way of proceeding into the tower's innermost depths. There was no avoiding it.

"Still, since nobody's allowed to sneak in here, we don't gotta worry 'bout prying outsiders. That's a great thing, don't you think, Margo Medicis?"

The small masked person shook slightly, turning to face the taller man. "I don't... recall giving you... my name."



“Naturally, I checked you out. Knowing where our trade partners come from is a matter of life and death for us, after all.”

“...Really. As expected of the foremost... *former* foremost... Elpis slaver. Knowing you’re... operating outside the law... makes you careful?”

The slaver laughed in a low tone. “Same to you, I don’t remember letting my past slip.”

“Naturally... I investigated. The origin of my... trade partner is–”

“Trade partner? Heh heh heh, your acting’s pretty good, though you’ll always sound out of character no matter how nicely you dress up your talk.”

Silence filled the space between them.



Tiat Shiba Ignareo had barely managed to hear the conversation.

It seemed the trader had chosen this tower to reconduct the Bead Bottle transaction that had previously fallen through. It was probably a smart plan. All the doors were locked shut until the reactor was restarted, so there wasn’t any way to get into the tower beforehand. Because each floor was tight and cramped, they didn’t need many guards on the 13th floor. One only needed to watch the floors directly above and below to render security flawless. And there wasn’t anywhere within the tower for someone to spy on the trade from a hiding spot.

Also, while Tiat wasn’t sure if the traders knew, the small masked person – Margo, it seemed – had extremely sharp senses. If any Venom was activated nearby, they’d notice and escape immediately. In other words, hiding by way of magic was also impossible.

However, Tiat’s hiding spot used none of these methods.

*...It’s cold.*

Tiat shivered as she pressed her back closer to the outer wall of the tower. The whooshing wind was cold. She chanced a glance downwards, and frost ran through her spine as well.

Of course, even if she lost her footing, the tower's height was enough that she could ignite wings of Venom. There was more than enough time to do that before crashing into the ground. She knew that, of course, but... she just couldn't seem to calm her nerves.

"Acting... out of character. What is... your meaning?" the diminutive Margo asked, their caution on full display.

"Just what I said. You've already shown us your real goal." The slaver declared victoriously, snapping his hairy fingers. His guards moved as if to surround Margo.

"What do... you intend to do... by this?"

"Oh, just a bit of self-defense, is all. I was thinking I might catch a certain assassin who's been aiming for my head." Margo didn't reply. The slaver smirked. "I said I checked you out, yeah? A number of former Elpis-registered merchants lost their lives recently. Strangest thing is, they all happened to die while in the middle of some odd deal..."

Now surrounded by five men, Margo warily looked left and right.

"Well!" The slaver clapped his hands together. "Let's continue the deal! How about you go right ahead and hand over all those Bead Bottles you're carrying?"

*What should I do?* Tiat thought, shivering from the cold. She wasn't following the conversation very well, but there was one thing she could tell.

That small masked person, Margo M... Me... Margo Whatchamacallit, was still a child. Compared to her fifteen-year-old self, Margo was a few years younger. Their small build wasn't a racial feature – at least, it wasn't as simple as that. Their voice was modulated not only so that it'd be hard to identify, but also so it wouldn't give away any clues about Margo's age.

*But... even if we know that, so what?*

Their mission was to secure all the Bead Bottles that Margo had. It was *possible* to just jump in and arrest everyone there. If they launched a surprise attack with this kind of timing, Margo probably wouldn't get away like last time.

But in that case, they'd only be able to get ahold of the Bottles brought by Margo. They couldn't move carelessly on the chance that Margo had divided some of them among

her comrades.

*Collon.* Tiat turned her gaze and saw her pink-haired friend, similarly clinging to the wall, give her a pained look.

“...Achoo.” Alongside that expression, a small sneeze escaped her mouth. Tiat hurriedly peeked back inside, relieved to find that it’d gone unnoticed amidst the howl of the wind.

“I don’t... know anything... about that. Though... you would not believe me... I suppose?”

“You get it, huh.”

“I brought only... one Bead Bottle. Now, the... agreed payment.”

“Hah! That deal’s dead and buried already. What you should have on your mind now is a different one. Give us all your Bead Bottles – and your life too.”

One of the guards moved to rush forward at Margo’s back, an unsheathed knife in his hand gleaming dully.

Of course, given how Margo had evaded the Winged Guard’s pursuit up to now, their cautiousness was nowhere near average. Margo had likely considered the possibility that she would be attacked, and without any trace of surprise, would deftly dodge with one twist. The knife’s tip would vanish into Margo’s cloak and the guard, his posture broken, would collapse to the floor.

Everyone there thought as much. Tiat, Collon, Margo, even the knife-wielding guard and the other masked men. They all expected the same outcome.

There was something none of them knew. The reason the tower was powered down and disconnected from external power. The reason entry was deemed forbidden, and all doors firmly shut.

The machines that composed the tower had been worn out far beyond their limits. The pressure valves were rusted, the steam pipes were warped, and the emergency alarms were broken. Once, after a small explosion, City Hall sent an engineer to investigate the tower. It was judged an extreme danger, isolated and shut down before the end of the day. That had been three days ago, and was why the tower was already

dead when the masked group arrived.

Of course, starting the emergency power generator without having conducted any maintenance or repairs had only made the situation drastically worse. Having no means of release for over more than thirty minutes, a destructively high amount of pressure slowly built up, until at last–

The generator exploded with a thunderous roar, bursting into countless iron scraps.



The tower swayed violently and the windows shattered one by one. The sudden vibrations also threw off the observers who had been clinging to the outer wall.

Margo's posture crumbled. They fell, almost as if on purpose, towards the knife heading into their back.

A dirty steel blade scythed into young flesh. Margo's voice distorted into an anguished scream.

The tower began to tilt. The walls creaked loudly and broke into numerous fragments, crumbling down from the thirteenth floor. As the guards started to understand what was happening and the merchant curled into a panicked ball, several things spilled out from the fallen Margo's chest to drop to the floor and bounce lightly with clear chimes.

Palm-sized spheres, an indescribable blackness enclosed within.

The merchant's mouth dropped open, as if to say "That's it!"

Terror lit up Margo's eyes as they swiveled towards the fallen glass spheres. The floor was already so slanted that standing was impossible. Naturally, that meant the glass spheres were rolling downward – in other words, from the thirteenth floor and into empty space.

The man with the knife let go, stretching his hand out. It didn't reach.

Then two girls flew in over the broken outer walls, looked around for an instant, and reached for the rolling glass spheres without a moment's hesitation.

*Got them!* Tiat thought triumphantly. There were three Bottles in total, which they

could confirm because Margo was about to scoop up the last one. According to Aiseia's information, the Bead Bottles brought onto the island totaled three.

In other words, if they could secure the last Bottle it'd all be over. There were still a few obstacles – the armed men – but they weren't likely to be much of a problem.

"Hey, you bunch! Stop moving and surrender, okay?" Collon shouted, her voice somewhat lacking in vigor. "We'll hear your stories later, so stay put for now!"

No one saw.

No one realized.

Four glass spheres had spilled from Margo Medicis's chest.

Four Bead Bottles needed to be collected.

The last one rolled silently down the inclined floor, picking up speed and rushing over the side of the broken wall.

Far below the tilted tower, somewhere no one saw, so quietly no one heard, a glass sphere broke.

## PART 4

### ~ INTO THE DARKNESS ~

“Ugh...”

Feodor slowly opened his eyes.

*It's dark.*

A thick fog clouded his mind. For a moment, Feodor hadn't the faintest idea what'd happened to him. He'd been walking through town with Lakish, Apple, and Marshmallow. They'd taken a shortcut towards City Hall, going through an area just off the main streets. Just as he and Lakish were about to discuss something important, his feet had stopped. After that...

Ah, yes. After that, he'd noticed a trembling underneath his feet. It was a realization that came far too late.

A roaring sound that split his ears and rattled his brain. An earthquake that threw his whole body up. A floating sensation, like the ground was a rug that'd suddenly been jerked out from under him. A pressure like the sky itself was collapsing.

If he'd noticed the danger even a few seconds sooner, maybe he could've taken a completely different course of action. As it was, Feodor had only been able to do two things in the chaos: push away Lakish, who was holding Marshmallow, and grab the nearby Apple to hug close to his chest with all his strength.

“...Ow. Heavy!”

He heard a whining voice pipe up from somewhere around his arms. So he'd been able to protect Apple, at the very least. Amidst labored breaths, Feodor sighed with relief.

*Ack.* A jolt of pain ran through him.

It looked as if they'd landed on a maintenance tunnel stretching underneath and around Lyell City. Designed for Golems and other diminutive races, it wasn't what one would call a comfortable place to be. The faint glow of wall-mounted dashboards illuminated their surroundings, allowing Feodor to get a good look about the place.

His lower half was pinned underneath something – wall or roof, he didn't know. Maybe it was because he'd landed in a rather cramped space, but he wasn't completely crushed yet. That said, it wouldn't be easy to get out of his predicament either.

He couldn't see the source of his pain, but he knew it was somewhere along his left femur. Judging by what little he *could* see as well as the peculiar dizziness that washed over him, it seemed he was bleeding quite a lot.

“...Guh.”

He couldn't muster enough energy to push forward with his feet, let alone move the wall-or-roof. *Crap, this might actually be bad*, he thought to himself; the more time passed, the more blood he lost. Much more and it'd be difficult for them to escape. Death drew near.

*Death?*

To meet that thing so soon after arriving in this world? Would his life really end *here*?

...No. He understood. Death wasn't dramatic or special. It might immediately swoop down upon someone one day out of nowhere, for a reason the person themselves hadn't known about or decided on. That day when his homeland was destroyed, too, he'd seen great crowds of people swallowed up by just that kind of abrupt death.

Somehow, he'd escaped death back then. Even so, death was back for him here, and this time it didn't appear that he'd be so lucky again.

“I-I'm okay! But are you alright?!”

Just as Feodor's consciousness had started fading, he heard a voice. In the next moment, the pressure on his body vanished. Opening his eyes again, he looked up over his shoulder.

Lakish was there lifting up the large stone with both of her arms. It was a strange sight for such a timid, frail-looking girl to be hefting with her slender arms a weight that countless musclemen would be unable to lift. As Feodor twisted in pain, he said something that seemed like it had to be said.

“You shouldn't... be u-using Venom. Isn't it... burdening your body...?”

“T-T-This isn’t the time to say something like that!” Lakish half-sobbed, tossing away with an impossibly light motion what had turned out to be a ceiling. It crashed into the wall with a loud, earthshaking *bang* and shattered altogether, scattering its pieces around the area.



Given how severe Feodor’s pain was, his bleeding was likely also pronounced. His bones were badly damaged as well, judging by the heat radiating from them. The one thing Feodor could count himself lucky on was that his arteries were safe. If he borrowed Lakish’s shoulder, he’d be able to somehow stagger upright and walk.

“Guess me climbing up to the ceiling is out of the question, huh...?”

Finishing first-aid on his leg wounds, Feodor once again surveyed the area. There was quite a bit of rubble everywhere. Still, the underground pathway didn’t seem *totally* blocked-off; there was enough room for him to walk around. On the other hand, it was as he’d said; the hole they’d fallen through wasn’t just high and out of reach, it was also blocked by several layers of debris.

“H-Hey. I can fly up there for you if you h-have some rope–”

Feodor flicked the forehead of the one who insisted he continue to exist.

“Oww?!”

“How many times do I need to tell you? You shouldn’t be using Venom. It’d be one thing if there wasn’t anything in the way, but won’t it be a burden to fly around moving all that rubble while trying not to cause another cave-in?”

Lakish fell silent. Although as a non-Venom user he hadn’t been confident that he could convince her to rule out magical measures, it seemed that both of them had somehow reached mutual agreement. “...But we can’t stay here forever...”

“Naturally. There’s danger in that too. That’s why we’re going to look for a way out... over there.” He pointed towards the underground road vanishing into darkness.

“Do you know a way out?”



“Beats me. But there’s got to be an exit *somewhere*.”

“But... your leg–”

“Oh, this?” Feodor drew himself up boldly, wiping away the cold sweat his movement caused. “It hurts like hell, but I won’t be done in that easily.”



The underground tunnels were intricate, almost labyrinthian. Combined with their narrow breadth and low ceilings, the passages seemed longer and wider than they actually were. Simply walking around made them feel more and more depressed.

Under these circumstances, Apple and Marshmallow’s existence became their salvation. It was said that young fairies had no concept of death, so perhaps that was why this dangerous situation was like an exciting little incident to them, a brief departure from the mundanity of everyday life. Whatever the case, they seemed to enjoy slowly moving through a gloomy tunnel. Their delighted smiles were even bigger than they’d ever been before.

“To continue the conversation we were having earlier...” Feeling that he must’ve looked rather miserable, Feodor had taken to borrowing Lakish’s shoulder as he walked. “I wanted to finish what I was about to say before we fell.”

“Oh... yes?”

“You see, I... believe Regul Aire as we know it should be destroyed, just once.”

“Huh?”

A brief pause. He could hear Marshmallow’s out-of-tune humming.

“E-Eeh?”

“It’s too peaceful, you see. Too decadent.” Feodor turned his eyes forward. “Everyone forgets about the risk of being destroyed. How many sacrifices have been made to stave off destruction that we never think or know about?”

“Um, b-but that’s...”

“It’s probably because of the numbers,” he continued heedlessly. “Even now, there’s close to a hundred islands still floating in this archipelago. That’s too many for us to live while remembering how modest our conditions are.”

These were Feodor’s true feelings. The hope that the individual called Feodor Jessman, someone who once desired to save the world just like his older brother-in-law, could only express after throwing away his pretense of being an upstanding honor student. The belief he’d carried within his chest all along.

“Maybe... ten islands, or even less. We can leave just those and sink all the other islands. If we do, the inhabitants of those ten islands would live on wholeheartedly. They’d be grateful for surviving, and would surely be thankful to everything that allowed them to keep on living.”

The sparkling worth of those who existed at the world’s end could only be understood during the end of the world. The dignity of those with the power to protect could only be kept alive in the hearts of those who were properly protected.

“If we do that, everyone will value your existence.”

“We... don’t want that...”

“You girls are responsible for that attitude as well.” Feodor flicked Lakish’s forehead again. “If the side being exploited doesn’t say anything, the exploiters will descend to the level of monsters who squeeze everything from others until they die. After all, being forever spoiled is enough to corrupt anyone.”

“...Okay?” Lakish was at a loss for words. “W-Why are you telling me all this? If I talk about this to those military police guys, won’t you get in big trouble?”

“You won’t tell them.”

“W-Well, that’s... that’s right, I guess. But why do you think I’d believe you?”

Her short answer made Feodor hesitate. *Why* was he spilling out everything again? Unlike with Panival, he wasn’t being forced to this time.

“*Believe* isn’t the right word.” Feodor put his body weight on the wrong leg, and his face twisted as intense pain shot through it. “My original plan was to get ahold of the secret weapons hidden by the Winged Guard. That’s the reason I became a soldier. If

the true form of those weapons are you girls, then I'd never be able to get started without getting your cooperation first. I'd need to talk to you about it someday anyway. That's why I'm telling you now."

*That's right, that's what the plan was.* Feodor wove together his after-the-matter excuse, as if trying to convince himself as well.

"You need us..."

"That's right. We still have time, so there's no need to answer right now. As for what you should tell the others..." Feodor shrugged. "Well, I'll trust you to not say anything."

"...Feodor," Lakish said with a downcast expression. "...You two are clearly nothing alike, yet you're very much the same..."

*What's she going on about? Is she comparing me with someone?* Rather than have doubts floating around in his head, it'd be quicker for him to just say it—

"Fwedo, Akesh! Exit! Exit!"

Marshmallow came running up to Feodor and tugged on the hem of his military uniform. The wounds he'd just treated came to life with bloody spasms. All the words he'd prepared vanished amid the raw howling scream that gushed out from within his throat.

"Fwedo, too loud."

"Arrrrggghhhh... Marshmallow, *you*—!"

"Fwedo mad?"

"Yes! I'm mad!" Feodor grit his teeth painfully at the intense throbbing pain, feeling tears well up in the corners of his eyes. His anger only increased the longer Marshmallow looked up at him with her blank face. Even if they didn't understand the value of life, he found himself caring little in the moment. At the very least, he had to raise the kids to properly understand others' pain. *At least there's still time left for that.*

"...If we get back safely I'm going to scold you, geez."

"Scolding? Lecture?!"

“Why are you so happy...?” He suddenly noticed Apple in the distance. There was a door – probably an exit – in front of her. She was vaguely gazing through it.

“...Apple?” he called her name, snapping her back to reality. She turned her head.

“Fwedo?”

“What’s the matter? Did something happen?”

“Hm.” Apple thought for a moment. “Blacky.”

He didn’t understand. *Is there a cat there?* There were a lot of black-colored things in the world, but with how young Apple was, her vocabulary was very limited. If she’d found some strange object, it wouldn’t be odd for her to be unable to find the right words to describe it.

Well, that was fine. She could take this chance to learn a new word. Her world spread through everything she touched or saw – something natural for all people. That naturalness was important, especially for a child who possessed a very small world to begin with. Feodor plodded towards the exit as he wondered what she was looking at, his left foot slightly dragging. As he approached the doorway, he looked through it and outside.

“That’s–”

Pure white rushed through his head.

There was – definitely – *something* black there. It was probably a mountain of rubble until a few minutes ago; its shape was something like that. But it wasn’t such a simple thing anymore. It had ceased to become merely rubble.

Now it was a beautiful crystal, shining blackly.

“Fwedo.” Apple tugged on his sleeve. “That. What that?”

He had no response. Of course, he knew very well what that thing was. He could teach her. But his words didn’t come out. If he did that, said that, it was tantamount to acknowledging the reality of the scene before his eyes.

In front of Feodor’s unfolding bewilderment and shock–

The Croyance, which had broken free of the rubble, quietly continued its encroachment of the 38th Floating Island.



*“Run for it!”* Feodor screamed. “Lakish, contact the Winged Guard! Evacuate as many civilians as possible, and don’t waste even a second!”

The situation was way different from the incident at the Port District. In a place like this, he had no way of dropping the encroaching Beast down to the surface. That meant its encroachment wouldn’t stop until it had finished transforming the entire Island into black crystal.

Right now the Beast wasn’t particularly large. That and that alone made this encounter better than the enemy faced at the Port District. Nevertheless, that only bought them some time; the Island’s fate was already sealed.

Lyell City, which had slowly been approaching death, was now on the brink. There was just one thing they could do now –struggle to minimize the damage that would only grow from now on.

Of course, Feodor understood how contradictory his actions seemed. That he, who planned on dropping countless Islands as the enemy of Regul Aire, should now have no choice but to worry about a small number of lives!

*No, there’s no contradiction here.* Feodor forced down the voice in his mind. His decision was purely logical. After the earlier conversation, his plans had already begun to move forward in earnest. Already at this stage, he had to start thinking about protecting his social status. It was all just part of his act as an excellent Fourth Officer in the Winged Guard.

“Lakish, take the girls! Head to the First Officer right now!”

“Feodor?!”

“We can’t go together, not with my leg! So we’ll act separately and I’ll contact you once I get to City Hall–”

*No, no good. It’s probably hopeless for me now,* Feodor thought secretly.

His hunch was that he was already doomed. While the Croyance's natural encroachment was slow, that was only when it wasn't given any extra impact. It was unlikely that all of the people in Lyell would go quietly without offering up any resistance to that pitch-black terror. And with his feet... well, he couldn't be particularly optimistic.

So, at the very least, even if he was to die here, he didn't want to get these three involved. That was his decision.

He wanted these girls, who seemed to cherish others more than themselves, to live. He'd use all of himself to forge a world where those ideals could flourish. He wouldn't permit anyone else to die on his watch like – like his older brother-in-law – or perhaps like that man named Willem, and that great senior fairy, Kutori Whatever.

That's why he wished for them to live even a little longer. Lakish, Apple, Marshmallow, Tiat, Panival, Collon. If it was for their sakes, then–!

"Hey, Fwedo?"

A voice without tension. Apple's voice.

"Fwedo, you hate that?"

"Yes, I really hate it!" Answering her on reflex, he hurriedly glanced around the area. The more he looked, the more he was at a loss. There was a tall tower that appeared to be composed entirely out of machines, and it was teetering dangerously from its base. The rubble pouring down probably originated from the same tower. He couldn't see any figures in the surrounding area. Was it better to be grateful a panic wouldn't be caused right away, or to be annoyed by how it'd delay information from spreading?

*What could have caused such a huge disaster?* He had no way of knowing.

"Fwedo hates it..." Apple was mumbling something.

Figuring out their current position, Feodor recalled one thing about the tower. It was the municipal weather observation tower, one of the municipal facilities that had been shut down just the other day because of its danger. *For it to be in such a terrible condition now... were the shutdown measures too late? Or was there another factor to it?*

"Kay. Apple hates it too."

Because of his thought process, he didn't notice. His response was fatally late.

He didn't see the small figure smoothly slip from his side and start running.

"You idi-!"

Apple was running, waving a small metal pipe she'd picked up from who knows where.

His body wouldn't move. The moment seemed to drag on forever, as if the world itself had stopped, with only Apple's small back steadily fading away.

Lakish, looking as if she was about to cry, was shouting something. There was no sound in this frozen world, so her words escaped him. But he roughly knew their contents. And, definitely, at this moment, he must also have been shouting the same things.

*Clang.*

The metal pipe smacked the black crystal.

The Croyance transformed the additional impact into momentum for its encroachment. A small crackling noise shrilled, and what was once a metal pipe instantly transformed into black crystal.

Like the crystal, Apple's right hand shone blackly.

*You idiot! Stop this!*

*I can still fix this! I just need to cut off your right hand! Then your life will be saved!*

He wanted to shout it, to scream it, but his voice wouldn't come out.

Apple looked mystified at her strange new hand. As if losing interest in it, she turned back to the Croyance and stamped on it with her feet.

Again, the encroachment was instant. Her shoes, her heels, her lower legs – the Beast greedily devoured them all. Feodor's consciousness smeared over with utter despair.

Apple lost her balance and was about to tumble. Her flailing left hand touched the nearby rubble, and just like that, it became part of the black crystal too.

“Uuugg!” Now Apple seemed irritated. Despite wanting to pummel that loathsome thing, she no longer had any means to do it. Her right hand, still gripping what had been a metal pipe, was hardening. The pipe didn’t give an inch, still stuck in the precise place it had impacted. Her left hand was tightly stuck, as well as both of her feet.

At the least, that’s what he believed Apple must have been thinking.

And then... she seemed to realize something. Even if her hands and feet couldn’t move, she had just one more method to get rid of that bothersome, annoying Beast.

Feodor had no convenient Venom-discerning eyes. In other words, he didn’t have a convenient skill on hand to sense Venom as it was ignited. Even so, he knew.

*What’s enveloping Apple’s body now?*

Her small body was being wrapped in some sort of energy overflowing from within herself.

For some reason, he remembered his fight with Tiat the other day.

To save someone by throwing away your life – that logic was unacceptable to Feodor. If his life couldn’t survive without someone else’s life being sacrificed, then it might as well disappear. That’s why he needed Apple to–

“Please! Stop!”

Even as he prayed – even as he wished–

“*STO–*”

White.

White, white, white.

Overwhelmingly pure whiteness flooded his entire vision, his entire consciousness.

He knew what it was. The original purpose of the fairy soldiers, once heavily used in battles with the Teimerre.

A magical technique only possible for those who lacked true life.



Venom, a substance running counter to life, can be harshly and powerfully ignited by those with limited lifeforce. Therefore, if someone had no natural lifeforce, there would theoretically be no limit to the power they could ignite. Of course, since there was no way to control such phenomenal power, there existed only one way to use it.

Explosively ignite the Venom, blowing not only their physical body to smithereens but everyone and everything around them. Only that.

The hand he extended didn't reach anyone, didn't touch anyone, didn't grab onto anyone. And–

The light–

Swallowed everything–

◇ ◇ ◇

...How much time passed?

◇ ◇ ◇

Blue sky.

Silently gazing upwards, Feodor could suddenly feel again. His wounds ached painfully.

Meaning... he was still alive.

Those who were at ground zero when the Fairy Gate opened should've been eradicated without a trace. Even so, he was standing here without having vanished. What on earth happened?

There was one possibility. The Fairy Gate didn't open. Apple didn't throw away her life.

Hope awoke in Feodor's mind. Abandoning all logic, he desperately clung to his fantasy. *That's right, I made it! Apple's still here! I didn't lose anything. That girl is still lively as ever. Surely, surely, if I just call her name then our eyes will meet, and she'll come charging at me, calling me 'Fwedo' again!*

He slowly lowered his gaze.

A large abyss gaped up from the earth. It was gigantic enough to swallow several three-story or even four-story buildings. Everything within it had been obliterated. Many things outside it had also been melted, burned, twisted, or otherwise devastated.

"Ah..." Someone's voice, weak and pathetic, leaked out.

"...You... you're awake?"

He heard another frail voice, and now realized he along with Marshmallow were being held tightly by a girl.

"Wha..."

A girl with blazingly red hair. For a moment, he didn't know who she was.

"I'm... glad... so glad..."

Even so, he knew that voice. He could never mistake the voice of that girl who was timid, gentle, kind, and – even now – loved her family.

"La... kish...?"

The girl's arms grew weak. Slipping – no, as if she was slipping – she collapsed there.



Feodor finally grasped what had happened.

Apple opened her Fairy Gate.

She released the white atrocity that annihilated everything.

Feodor and the others should never have escaped that horrible maelstrom. However, Lakish had shielded them. She, who held the greatest capabilities of Venom among the four fairy soldiers, ignited her Venom as much as possible and protected the two held in her arms.

As for the consequences of her decision...

What was it she said?

*"When we ignite Venom too strong for our bodies to handle, our already short-lived personalities become even more unstable..."*

Most likely, that was just what had happened. To protect both Feodor and Marshmallow, Lakish had literally burned out her own mind.

Apple and Lakish.

For the sake of their loved ones, for the sake of someone they considered more precious than their own lives, they threw away those same lives.

*"You know, I detest characters in inspiring stories."*

*"They do whatever it takes for others, even the world. They'll protect those sorts of people who – well, anyway, ever since a long time ago, I've always hated anyone who says they'll just go die to make other people happy."*

Feodor screamed.

A wild, unnatural howl, alien and incomprehensible even to himself. He screamed until his voice exploded through its limits. He screamed until he had no voice at all.

Even so, the boy continued to soundlessly scream.

## PART 5

### ~ IN THE DEPTHS OF DARKNESS ~

Day came, then night came, then day again, over and over in their eternal, unceasing cycle.

Tiat and Collon returned from their mission.

Ever since it happened, Lakish had been in a deep sleep. Although she had no external injuries, she remained unconscious. Calling her name, squeezing her hand, slapping her cheeks – no matter what they did, nothing could interrupt her slumber. It was as if her soul had left her.

“Do you remember when we talked about their names?”

Feodor tilted his head up from a nearby hospital bed. The injury to his left leg hadn’t healed yet, and the anesthesia had worn off sometime overnight, leaving him in such pain that he wanted to scream.

“Eh?”

“Apple and Marshmallow’s official names. Didn’t we contact the fairy warehouse about it?”

He considered Tiat’s words, digging through his memories until a certain conversation returned to him. *Yeah, we talked about something like that. Using the name of a past fairy is taboo, so their nicknames have to be short and simple until they’re given official names.*

“Yeah, I remember,” Feodor said easily, wearing a smile on his face. Because he was an Imp, he was confident he could hide even a double suicide behind a smile. “What’re you getting at?”

“They finally got their names. Lantolq came up with them.”

“Ah...”

*Of course. That’s normal. If something’s bound to arrive sooner or later, it’s only natural it could arrive at any time.*

The nicknames they'd used until now had been full of inconveniences. Feodor was sure that Lan-something must've rushed things because of that. Even so, she hadn't made it in time. Only one recipient was left to accept those names.

"So from now on, we'll call Apple--"

"I don't care." Feodor shook his head. "I'd rather you not tell me. She'll always be Apple to me."

"I-I understand, but--"

"Change your names however you want. I'm not going to keep up with all that."

"...All right," Tiat said with downcast eyes.

Apple disappeared with the Croyance. Lakish Nyx Seniolis remained in an unwaking slumber. These two pieces of news brought both hope and despair to the 5th Division. Being unable to utilize Seniolis' top-class combat power during crucial battles was definitely a reason for despair. Yet, hope remained in the fact that the 11th Beast, normally impervious to all conventional attacks, had been destroyed by a Leprechaun opening her Fairy Gate.

Apple's tiny body had been able to blow away the Beast even without a Dug Weapon at her disposal. If she could do that, then by comparison Tiat, Collon, and Panival, fully fledged fairy soldiers, could wipe anything out. The grand honor of this discovery belonged to Feodor, in First Officer Talmareet's sardonic words, so he'd surely be due for a promotion any day now.

"Fine... I'll just tell you Marshmallow's new name."

"She'll be taken away to the warehouse soon, won't she? What good does it do me to hear it if I won't see her anymore?"

"You're not serious, are you? Stop being stubborn. You suck at telling stupid lies like that."

Feodor didn't have a response ready for that comeback.

"The way it's spelled is R-I-E-L. You say it like *Ryehl*."

“What a pain.”

Tiat rolled her eyes. “That’s just how it is, okay? We get our names by taking the old alphabet and lining up letters until we get something that sounds good. It’s a hugely complicated process... or so I’ve been told.”

“Huh.”

Certainly, the names Feodor had heard up to now were unique enough to have come from another species. He could understand that there was meaning in their names based on that.

...That said, there wasn’t much of an upside to knowing random trivia like this. “That *Ry* part is weird. How do you say it again? Rell? Rye-Hell?”

“It’s pronounced *Ryehl*, but you spell it like *Riel*.” Tiat traced the individual letters in the air as she spoke. “Marshmallow’s name from now on is Riel. Make sure you remember it.”

# **CHAPTER 5**

## **DREAMS OF THE DEAD**



『死者の夢』

- fragile reunion -



She finally figured out she was in a restless sleep.

There'd never been someone to rely on. After all, that was what her mother, as matriarch of the house, had decided for her. In that household, not a single soul dared object to the matriarch's decision. Not her father. Not her grandparents. Not her brother. Not her sister. All of them smiled, nodded and obeyed her mother.

*Good job. Now you can be happy.* Those words of encouragement dropped from the lips of her family members. After all, this was a marriage of convenience between a seven-year-old girl and a ten-year-old boy.

The girl's arms and legs were covered with dense fur-like hair. She had two delicate triangular ears atop her skull and six inconspicuous whiskers on her face. An incomplete Ayrantrobos, a half-breed – with a flat snout and small eyes, she was no beastman, yet remained far from being markless.

She led a lonely life from the moment of her birth. To be born neither markless nor Beastman into a markless family with a long and illustrious lineage was to know no love. For seven years she'd been neglected and treated like damaged goods. As she couldn't be loved, her marriage was one of convenience alone.

Of course, a young girl like her had no idea what that meant. She wasn't even given the details. All she knew was that she was to meet a stranger that day and be forced to live with them for a while.

She was terrified. She was resentful. After all, anyone who looked her way was disgusted by her. Depending on their moods, sometimes she was hit or kicked. She'd always tried to hide in the shadows because of that. It was for the best – if nobody saw her, they wouldn't do anything. So why was she being dragged out into the spotlight? Who was she being dragged towards?

Carrying those worries in her heart and without a single shred of courage to cling to, she walked ever closer to her marriage. In such a manner, she met a certain boy.

To cut straight to the chase, she fell for him at first sight.

The boy kept his composure pretty well. From his perspective, he was looking at a markless who didn't look like a markness, a Beastman who wasn't quite a Beastman. Even so, he didn't show her scorn or contempt. Neither did he show the smallest hint of curiosity, treating her like any other kid her age.

That was enough. Or perhaps – that was just what she needed. For the first time in her life, she could laugh, cry, and rely on someone else like a normal girl. She was happy just knowing she could do so.

Her mother was glad to hear they got along as well. “Those Imps really do enjoy coddling cats and dogs,” she once said happily. The girl didn’t entirely understand, but she could figure out her mother was pleased.

She knew marriage was a promise to always be together. Engagements, therefore, were promises to promise to always be together. A child’s childish comprehension.

In truth, the girl’s family wished to tactfully offload a troublesome burden by “giving” their daughter to the boy’s family, whereas the boy’s family aimed to establish connections with them through marriage. In short, a mutually beneficial transaction using the girl as a bargaining chip.

However, young children cared not for the affairs of adults. To the girl, the important thing was that she was able to meet the boy she was fond of once every week. Her family (notwithstanding their feelings) at least recognized that much, and even gave their support.

He was a kind boy who allowed her to say what made her happy and accepted all her tantrums with a smile. He knew all sorts of random trivia and would teach her fresh and exciting things every time they met. She thought that if she was together with someone like him, she could have an amazing and fortunate life, or something like that. For once, the clouds of her life had parted to allow rays of hope to shine down. That was the start of a very happy time for her.



Once again, she realized she’d dozed off. She was standing in a splendid gazebo surrounded by vibrant flowers next to a beautiful lake that mirrored the sunshine. This place no longer existed in the world. Yet once again she saw this scenery.

*This is definitely a dream. It always is.*

Underneath the gazebo were two children. One was a young girl around eight years old. She took off her hooded cardigan, allowing the sun to hit her exposed arms. She was almost like an Ayrantrobos except for her ears or arms, covered by hair rather

than fur. The other child was a silver-haired boy who seemed about three years older – eleven years old. His seemingly-sincere eyes were purple and slitted, and his other characteristics were, as he'd informed her, typical of the renowned liars known as Imps. It'd be best to be cautious around him.

*This was around when... when he told me that. I laughed and called him a liar... I think. I remember how he looked back then.*

Then and now, he had a complex expression like a mix of frustration and relief at the same time, typical of an Imp with a little too much pride in himself. With a poker face like that, he'd never be able to tell a lie and get away with it.

From the point she stood, she could only see each child's side profile. They were seated facing each other across a stone table. On the table were shogi pieces lined up halfheartedly.

*Ah, how nostalgic.*

It was a game that simulated the battlefields of legend. He'd claimed he was 'pretty good' at it and wanted to play with her. Wanting to spend a little more time together, she'd agreed and listened to him explaining all the rules, painstakingly studying them afterwards to make him happy. Bit by bit, her near-zero winrate slowly climbed till they were evenly matched. Before she knew it, her skills had surpassed his.

On that day she had played exceptionally well and crushed her opponent with ease, securing an overwhelming victory. At first overjoyed, she then became a little flustered and apologized to him. The boy rocked back in surprise, then laughed suddenly. He was glad to see her skill at the game. Of course, due to his pride, he didn't want to lose again. He vowed to become stronger and snatch victory away from her—

*Yeah. That's what the liars called Imps do. He lied over and over again.*

He never had the chance to win again.

Soon after that day, their time together ended when the Elpis Incident occurred. That terrible Beast, the Materno or whatever it was called, abruptly cut short the future she wished for.

The boy who lived back then laughed, and the young girl laughed too. They shone like the sun.

*I can't approach those two. My legs won't take me any closer. These memories are too bright for me. I want them to stay bright forever. I shouldn't reach out or get closer. I can't let it reach out to me. I mustn't tarnish it.*

The boy raised his head and glanced about as if he'd noticed something.

*He's looking this way.*

He had a puzzled look on his face. He opened his mouth. He said her name—

◇ ◇ ◇

The pain was back.

Margo Medicis slowly opened her eyes. There was a light glaring down at her.

“This place...”

Her own sleepwalking had woken her up. She was in a room of metal and stone, characteristic of Lyell architecture. When worst came to worst, this was the last, most desperate, hiding spot she had available. She'd just barely managed to escape, slipping through alleyways while dodging her pursuers before finally losing consciousness.

Margo's side twitched with pain. She twisted her face, propping herself up. “Am I... still alive?”

She looked at her wound. While she couldn't do anything beyond basic first-aid, at least she could staunch the bleeding. If nothing else, it didn't seem immediately life-threatening. She moved to the window and peeked through the curtains. Usually there were few people outside, so it was difficult to tell, but currently everything appeared to be calm and peaceful. At the least, there wasn't any sign of that dreadful black form anywhere.

“The Bottle certainly broke...”

The glass sphere holding the 11th Beast had shattered and it'd been released. The worst had happened. There couldn't be anything done to hold it back. It was impossible.

“Maybe... the Winged Guard did something?”

She couldn't think of anything else. She shook her head, trying to dispel the anxiety in her heart.

*The Winged Guard has a way to defeat the Croyance.*

She hadn't expected that to be true, nor had she even thought it was possible. After all, the Winged Guard had failed to save the 39th Floating Island. They failed to save the things and people they were supposed to save.

*It can't be helped.* That was what she'd believed then. No conceivable way to repel the Beasts existed. Whether it was the Winged Guard or anyone else, no one could have prevented that tragedy.

But...

*Maybe that wasn't true.*

If the Winged Guard already had some way of fighting the Croyance, then maybe – just maybe – that meant they'd purposefully abandoned an entire island? The mere thought of such a possibility kindled her fury, burning like a smoldering ember in her chest.

*...Let's stop. This is nothing more than venting.*

Margo sighed, stepping away from the window. She picked up a mask off the nearby table. It was wooden and painted white, from the Undead... Lunarlight... the Remembrance Festival. A tool to bring the living and the dead closer together. Wearing the mask allowed you to become anyone. By being neither dead nor alive, you were an existence that was neither here nor there. But *being* something meant you could meet anyone you wished to meet, or so the legend went.

Although it'd just served as a convenient tool that allowed her to hide in the city, right now she was glad the legend existed.

The earlier dream returned to her.

She'd met the person she wanted so dearly to meet. She'd gotten to see the face of her betrothed once again and seen the smile of that boy she loved so much, who'd tragically lost his life on that day back then.

“...Thank you, Feodor,” Margo murmured. She put on her mask, shouldered her cape and stepped out of the room.

*I’m still alive. As long as I’m still alive, there’s something I’ve got to do.*

“Even if it was in a dream, I’m glad I got to see you again...”

せ  
た  
め  
に

『冬末にはしてありますか？  
忙しいですか？  
救ってほしいって  
いっていいですか？』  
コミカライズも、

よろしく  
お願いいたします。





PDF by: traitor#ZEN