

Ch. 2, VALLEY OF NO RETURN

Lademio Town was an unremarkable provincial city.

A fortified town built during the warring era, it closely resembled Del Solant, where Toru and the others had lived as refugees for a time. Its scale as a city was similar. If one had to note a difference from Del Solant, it would be that this town wasn't the seat of a lord.

In most cases, lords established their residences in the largest city of their domain.

Conversely, for a provincial city not directly governed by a lord to have a scale comparable to Del Solant—Lademio Town could be considered relatively prosperous.

Indeed, the town was bustling.

There was apparently a mine nearby, and it seemed to thrive moderately on the fossil fuel extracted from it.

Fossil fuel—mineral-based mana sources—was essential for magic.

Not only during the warring era, but even in peacetime, the demand for magic remained significant. In fact, with the war's end and nations discharging mages under the guise of disarmament, those mages had to seek livelihoods among the masses, leading to active use of various magics in farms and workshops.

In the town, it was common to see mages walking with gundo in hand.

“‘The Valley of No Return’...?”

Toru and the others heard that name right after entering Lademio Town.

“Yes. You'd better be careful.”

The shopkeeper at the general store, where Toru and the others stopped to buy food and supplies, said this with a slightly furrowed brow, his round face otherwise kind.

“...”

“...”

Toru and Chaika exchanged glances.

Incidentally, Akari had stayed behind on the *Svetlana* to continue her apothecary work with extra sulfur, so she wasn't here. For all her quirks, Akari was quite meticulous. Once she started compounding, she rarely responded even when spoken to.

As for Fredrika, as usual, she'd vanished abruptly—and remained gone. She'd likely reappear in a few days. Toru's group had stopped worrying about this. Whether she even counted as a “comrade” was questionable—and she wasn't some fragile creature needing concern over a day or two's absence.

Well, that aside.

“It's also called the ‘Valley of Mist.’”

The shopkeeper turned to a map pinned on the shop's wall.

It depicted Lademio Town and the surrounding region. To the east, a terrain like a gash—or a blade wound—was visible. Compared to the town's scale, it was clearly a sizable valley.

“It's always been a place prone to fog, but recently, it never clears.”

“Never?”

Toru frowned, questioning.

He wondered if it was just exaggerated speech—a kind of hyperbole.

“Yes. For years now, every day, they say—fog.”

The shopkeeper stated firmly.

“They say it's the resentment of those who died in the valley.”

“‘The Valley of No Return’—so many have died there?”

“Probably... yeah.”

The shopkeeper's reply was vague.

“Those who carelessly enter rarely return. No bodies are found... because those who go to check don't come back either.”

“That's quite a—dangerous tale.”

If true, it was a highly perilous area.

“Are there Feyra or the like around?”

Toru asked, taking a bag of food.

Incidentally, carrying loads was Toru's role; paying was Chaika's.

“No. Never heard of Feyra around here. The reason's unknown.”

“Hm...”

Come to think of it, Dominica—or rather, Fredrika—had lived in a mansion in a forest said to be one where “those who enter don't return.” In the literal sense, since the cause was a Feyra, that hadn't been widely known. Like that forest, it was possible a Feyra had settled in the valley, killing intruders in its territory.

But—

(*The fog never clearing is what bothers me.*)

Fog forming in mountainous areas wasn't unusual.

But fog that *never* cleared was abnormal.

Especially if it started at a specific point, rather than always being that way, there had to be a cause.

“When did the fog stop clearing?”

“Let's see... three, no, about four years ago?”

“Before that, did people who entered the valley return?”

“Well, yeah.”

The shopkeeper said, rummaging through a basket in the corner, likely gathering change for Chaika's high-denomination coin.

“It wasn't a place with much traffic, but people went in for mushrooms or herbs. Back then, there didn't seem to be any issues.”

Four years ago. Post-war, then.

“...”

Toru thanked the shopkeeper and left the store.
Walking beside him—

“Toru?”

Chaika called out, looking puzzled.

“Worries? Have any?”

“Worries? I'm drowning in 'em.”

There was a mountain of things to consider.

If anything, Chaika was too carefree.

Her cheerfulness, her innocence, was her charm, and since their first meeting, it had been a salvation for Toru. But this wasn't an easy journey. If Chaika constantly fretted and wore a grim face, it'd probably be insufferable.

“Well, the immediate issue is that fog-bound valley.”

Toru said.

“... ‘The Valley of No Return.’”

“Yeah. According to that Guy’s info, that mage Simon Scania was spotted four years ago, right after the war ended. And the fog that never clears started four years ago. Sure, ‘four years ago’ might have a six-month range, but... I’m thinking there’s a connection.”

“Convinced.”

Chaika nodded with a serious expression.

“Simon Scania. Missing. In fog?”

“That’s a possibility.”

Given the grandiose name “Valley of No Return”... it wasn’t just one or two people going missing. And Simon Scania might be among them.

Though little was known about Simon Scania’s character, if he’d met misfortune while holding the Gaz Emperor’s “remains,” those remains might still be in the valley for Toru’s group to recover.

Even an “emperor-slaying hero” was human. Some die of illness, others by accident. The possibility that Simon Scania died there couldn’t be ruled out.

“But...”

Toru said, struck by a thought.

“Looking into it like this... it’s kinda weird.”

“Mui?”

“No, I mean, Count Abarth, Dominica, now this Simon Scania... their names aren’t public, but they’re heroes, right? You’d think they’d live more carefree, happy lives afterward.”

Having survived brutal wars. Likely gaining immense rewards.
They should’ve been set to live leisurely—

“No, maybe the opposite.”

Toru muttered, realizing.

“They were suicide squad members who challenged the Forbidden Emperor directly... even with money or fame, maybe they couldn’t live normal lives. Their personalities, their character—”

In the warring era, Arthur Gaz was called “strongest” or “monster” as both ruler and mage. Rumored to be immortal or ageless, some even said it was “impossible for an individual to defeat him.”

To challenge such a monster... during a chaotic castle siege, tasked with assassination ahead of the main force, was near-suicidal.

They were either desperate for glory, reckless, or had some perverse urge for hopeless situations... Normal people wouldn't join such a squad. Perhaps their inherent issues were why nations hid their names, and why they didn't live the “proper” postwar lives people imagine.

“Man... and of course, *she's* not here at a time like this.”

“She” meant Fredrika.

Though she didn't enter the castle, having acted with Dominica, she might recall the faces or behaviors of other suicide squad members.

“...Speaking of which.”

Toru asked as they walked.

“What kind of person was your dad?”

“Mui? Father?”

“All I hear are these monstrous tales.”

Living three hundred years—some said a thousand—wielding three gundo at once, matching knight instructors with a sword, or having such strength he could bend multiple coins with his fingertips.

Toru almost wanted to ask, “Did such a person really exist?”

“Father—”

Chaika gazed at the sky, as if lost in distant memories—

“Father... man. Emperor. Mage.”

“I know that much!”

Toru said, shoulders slumping.

“...Toru.”

Chaika looked surprised.

“Knowledgeable.”

“Everyone knows that!”

“Name. Arthur Gaz.”

“I know that too—come on. Isn’t there anything else? Stuff only a daughter would know. His personality, hobbies, quirks, that sort of thing.”

There were countless legends and rumors about the Gaz Emperor, so many that it was hard to discern truth from fiction. As a result, only a vague “seems impressive” image prevailed, with no clear picture of the man.

“Mmu... mmu... ...mmu?”

Chaika tilted her head—continuing as if pondering deeply.

It didn’t feel like she was overwhelmed by too many memories to choose from. Rather, she seemed to be desperately searching for scant recollections.

“Muu~?”

“Wait a sec. It’s your dad, right?”

“Father is His Majesty the Emperor.”

Chaika said.

“Busy. Very. Rarely meet—never.”

“...”

Rulers—especially of a vast nation like the Gaz Empire—had to be busy to fulfill their duties properly. Even just approving documents likely piled up daily.

Even for a daughter, opportunities to meet were few—no surprise there, really.

“Very, very busy.”

Chaika repeated, as if emphasizing.
Her profile—to Toru—looked lonely.

“Memories. Few. Very few.”

“...Sorry, I asked something bad.”

In truth—Toru didn’t know his real parents’ faces.

Acura Village had children of saboteurs, but it also bought children from nearby villages facing “culling” or took in war orphans, training them as the next generation of saboteurs.

Toru was one such orphan.

By the time he was aware, he was already in Acura Village, surrounded by others like him, with adoptive parents, so he never felt lonely over his real parents' absence.

But... he knew enough common sense to understand parents were significant to most children. As a saboteur, for better or worse, Toru wasn't ignorant of human psychology—ignorance wouldn't do for a saboteur.

“No problem. Not at all.”

Chaika shook her head side to side, *puru puru*.
Her expression held no tragic air.
Toru felt relieved at that—

—‘Chaika. Are you really the Gaz Emperor’s daughter?’

Fredrika’s words suddenly crossed his mind.

No way—he thought.

To claim to be the Forbidden Emperor’s daughter and collect his remains, facing all the associated dangers—unless she was truly his daughter, no one would be so reckless.

But... what if Chaika wasn't really his daughter?

What if she understood human psychology better than Toru, and he was just being deceived? What if there was an unknown benefit to playing the Gaz Emperor’s daughter?

Her lack of memories—could it be because she'd never met him, a complete stranger?

When dealing with Chaika, who spoke little and haltingly, Toru tended to fill in the gaps, anticipating her words—but what if she was exploiting that? Was his desire to trust her creating convenient interpretations?

(*...Damn.*)

Once sparked, doubt unearthed more doubts.

Humans could only gauge others' minds through outward words and actions.

In the hot spring the other day, when Fredrika questioned him, he'd reflexively defended Chaika—

(*I...*)

It wasn't quite hesitation.

But Toru felt a wavering within himself.



Even when broadly called “mages,” there are actually various types.

As magic has developed into a vast technical system, it's only natural that specialized professions emerge in its cutting-edge fields.

For example, Zita of the Gillette Corps has low mana herself and isn't highly skilled at wielding it directly. However, her expertise in magical engineering theory allows her to efficiently handle various magical devices, as well as repair and modify them.

And—the other mage in the Gillette Corps, Mateus, is a versatile type capable of performing most standard mage tasks, but he particularly excels in communication magic and mental manipulation magic.

Using both, he can embed spell formulas into animals' brains, employing them as his “familiars.” This requires him to continuously activate the magic, rendering himself nearly immobile, but if he chooses, he can configure it to channel information captured by the animals' eyes or ears directly into his consciousness.

Thus—alongside Leonardo, the scout soldier—Mateus often serves as the eyes and ears of the Gillette Corps.

“...”

Inside the *April*, parked in Lademio Town's lot, Mateus sat with his eyes closed for some time. Sitting directly on the floor, legs crossed in a lotus position, hands folded atop them—combined with his honest-looking face and bald head—he resembled a statue of a foreign deity, exuding an oddly mystical impression.

Currently, Mateus was controlling over a dozen birds as “familiars.”

Using their eyes or ears typically places immense strain on a mage's brain, and controlling over a dozen amplifies that pressure significantly. An ordinary mage might collapse, bleeding from ears or nose.

In other words, Mateus's skill as a mage was exceptional.

“No wonder they say his brain's made of muscle.”

“It's just you saying that, Vivi, isn't it...?”

While watching Mateus, focused on controlling his “familiars,” Vivi, the Gillette Corps' girl assassin, and Zita, the girl mage, exchanged such conversation.

Incidentally, Mateus showed no reaction.

He was fully focused on controlling his “familiars.”

“He might not even notice if we wrote ‘muscle’ on his forehead.”

Vivi said.

A girl with glossy, wavy hair and sharp eyes, her features were striking.

Her dignified—almost haughty—face evoked the refined elegance of a noble's daughter. Though still youthful, her appearance held little of the fragility that might stir protective instincts.

Likely... she could blend into a noble or royal ball without seeming out of place.

Thus, her unfortunate victims would never dream she was an assassin until a blade pierced their vitals. She spoke little of her past, but her demeanor suggested training as an assassin specialized for high society.

“At least make it cat whiskers on his cheeks.”

Zita responded with a wry smile.

With round glasses perched on her nose and hair neatly cut at her shoulders, she lacked Vivi's glamour or flair—but that gave her a simple, soft charm. She'd likely look striking if dressed up, but this mage girl favored practical work clothes and boots, somewhat unrefined.

In appearance, they were opposites; in skills and personality, finding common ground was harder. Yet, perhaps due to their similar ages or good rapport, Vivi and Zita together somehow seemed like sisters.

“His head's so bare, maybe draw some hair on it. Wow—I'm so kind!”

“I think Mateus shaves his head, not that he's bald.”

“Probably just too lazy to style it, right? Hey—why not a tattoo? No need for haircuts or washing.”

“Hold on, Vivi, why are you pulling out a needle?”



Zita hurriedly stopped Vivi.

It seemed Vivi was itching to play a prank on the statue-like, motionless Mateus—specifically, to mess with his face. Trained as an assassin with a cynical streak, Vivi's childish side seemed to balance her overly mature aspects in moments like this.

And then—

“What are you two doing?”

The voice came from behind Vivi, who was about to jab Mateus's head with a needle, and Zita, who was restraining her with a chokehold.

No need to turn around.

It was the Gillette Corps' leader—Knight Alberic Gillette himself.

“Hya!?”

In her surprise, the needle slipped from Vivi's hand, spinning through the air... before grazing Alberic's nose and stabbing into the floor with a *suto*.

“...”

Even Alberic widened his eyes, looking down at the needle stuck in the floor.

“Ah, s-s-sorry!?”

Vivi said hurriedly.

This assassin girl rarely dropped her insolent attitude with most people—but Alberic was an exception. In front of this young knight, she became an obedient, well-behaved girl. The switch was so blatant it made other team members smirk, yet Alberic alone seemed oblivious to the oddity.

“Vivi...”

Alberic sighed and said,

“Your ‘needle’ is like my ‘sword,’ isn't it?”

“...Huh? Oh. Yes.”

Vivi nodded, *kokun*, almost without thinking.

A knight's sword. An assassin's needle.

In terms of user and weapon, they were indeed the same.

“Then... it's not something to draw so lightly. It's fine to wield it as an extension of your body, but as a weapon, it can save or harm. Always be mindful of when to use it.”

“...”

It was such an obvious truth, so earnest it couldn't get more so, that Vivi stared at Alberic with a puzzled expression for a moment.

“—Yes.”

She nodded, slightly bowing her head.

Her cheeks were faintly red—but, as usual, Alberic either didn't notice or didn't grasp its meaning. Zita, glancing between them, gave a small wry smile.

“By the way, do you know where Nikolai went?”

Alberic asked, his tone as if he'd completely forgotten the prior topic.

He disciplined his subordinates but didn't dwell on it unnecessarily—a sign of his clear separation of personal and professional emotions, rare for a young noble.

“Oh. I asked him to buy food supplies.”

Zita answered.

“Food supplies... Nikolai?”

“Yes. He's finally healed, so he wanted some physical work to test his arm.”

“Ah...”

Alberic nodded, looking convinced.

Nikolai had previously broken an arm fighting the saboteur hired by Chaika.

Mateus had used healing magic to mend the bone, but it was like gluing the fracture together—far from fully healed. Naturally, it took time for the bone's strength to return to normal, and until then, he shouldn't overuse the arm. Ideally.

But muscles atrophy quickly when not used.

Even for a seasoned warrior, a month of favoring an arm would rapidly weaken it. Nikolai likely wanted to regain lost strength, combining regular training with physical tasks.

“He'll probably be back soon.”

Alberic said—then.

“—Found them!!”

A voice burst out with fierce intensity.

Abruptly—without warning—Mateus, who'd been statue-still, shouted with wide eyes. Quickly undoing his meditative pose, he stood and turned to Alberic, continuing.

“They’re there, it’s them—huh?”

Mateus wore a puzzled expression.

Alberic, Vivi, and Zita, his teammates, were frozen in odd postures. Alberic was slightly leaning back, but Vivi and Zita were twisted, as if dodging or fleeing something.

“...What’s wrong?”

“You startled us!”

Vivi shouted.

“Yelling out of nowhere!”

“Hm. My apologies.”

Mateus rubbed his dark, bald head with his palm, apologizing to Vivi and the others—then turned back to Alberic.

“Lord Gillette. I found them.”

“—Chaika Gaz?”

“Indeed. The saboteur boy’s there too.”

Mateus nodded firmly.

“I couldn’t confirm the other one, the girl saboteur.”

“...We should assume she’s in the same town.”

“Indeed.”

This time—the Gillette Corps had come to Lademio Town tracking Simon Scania, one of the “heroes.” But their primary mission was to capture the girl claiming to be the Gaz Emperor’s daughter, Chaika. Since she was chasing the “heroes”—or rather, their “remains”—Alberic had figured she might be in Lademio Town and ordered Mateus and Leonardo, the scout soldier, to scout.

“Where are they?”

“The opposite side of town, the eastern edge.”

“...”

Alberic frowned, crossing his arms.

“Captain Gillette?”

Zita called out with concern.

Vivi, meanwhile, was already raring to go, checking needles and other concealed weapons in her pockets. She might look unarmed, but that was deceptive. Even stripped bare, she'd have strangling wires in her hair or needles hidden in her mouth.

But...

“With only me and Vivi capable of close combat, it's a bit tough.”

Alberic said.

“We should wait for Leonardo, who's scouting, and Nikolai, who's shopping, to return.”

“Come on, you're overestimating those saboteurs.”

Vivi said, sounding displeased.

Perhaps due to past events or mere prejudice, Vivi tended to look down on saboteurs. As assassins shared similarities with saboteurs, it might be a form of professional rivalry.

“Mages aren't suited for close combat, and Alberic-sama alone is more than enough...”

“No. I've heard saboteurs—especially from the Sennmazoku or Rokurenseishu—have a secret technique called ‘Iron-Blood Transformation.’”

Since learning the man and woman with Chaika were likely saboteurs, Alberic had researched these “war hounds.” Know your enemy and yourself to avoid peril in a hundred battles—it was natural to learn about opponents before fighting.

“It temporarily boosts physical abilities over twofold through breath control and self-suggestion. I don't know if those saboteurs can use it, but if they can... it'd be tough. That boy saboteur is already quite skilled. The other one with him is likely at the same level. If so, just me and Vivi...”

At that—Alberic gave a wry smile to the displeased Vivi.

“Killing them would be one thing, but capturing them alive is another.”

Especially against saboteurs.

He'd heard they'd even self-destruct with carried explosives if needed. Capturing a saboteur alive was extremely difficult.

“We only need Chaika Gaz alive for questioning, right?”

“As we discussed before, she might just be a puppet. We need to capture as many related parties alive as possible.”

Alberic said calmly, admonishing.

“If we can avoid killing, all the better.”

“...Alberic-sama.”

Vivi stared at her superior with wide eyes.
Alberic—as if reminding himself—added,

“The warring era is over.”

Yes. It was no longer a time when killing more raised your status.
Killing wasn't enough anymore.

For martial people—honed solely for war, down to their bloodlines—this was almost despairing. Their one specialty was sealed, a denial of their purpose.

But...

“As a knight, I'd like to face him in a fair duel.”

Alberic said, giving Vivi a wry smile.

“But for my subordinates, and even my enemies, I want as few deaths as possible. To be certain, we should all go together.”

“...Yes.”

Finally, Vivi nodded with a convinced expression.

“Mateus. Sorry, but keep tracking them. Once Nikolai and Leonardo return, we'll pursue, so don't lose sight of them.”

“Understood.”

At Alberic's order, Mateus nodded—closing his eyes, gripping his gundo, and sitting back on the floor.



It looked like a poorly healed scar.

The deep gash in the earth was the wound... and the white fog filling it was pus.

Some might praise this as a breathtaking vista.

Indeed, grand landscapes often stir awe in the viewer's heart. Especially from a high vantage point, they make one feel their own smallness, relatively broadening perspective and evoking a sense of detached clarity.

But... with the title "Valley of No Return" in mind, the sightless landscape took on an ominous air. Like darkness—until you encounter whatever threat lurks within, you know nothing.

"...I see."

Akari said, narrowing her eyes.

"So this is the 'Valley of No Return.'"

At the very edge of the earth's rift—where a misstep could send her plummeting to the valley's depths—she calmly gazed at the thick fog below.

The "Valley of No Return" lay east of Lademio Town.

The area already had rugged mountains and natural valleys... but this "Valley of No Return" was a literal fissure at the valley's base. Naturally, its deepest point was far lower than the plains where Lademio Town stood.

"Unclearing fog, huh. Strange."

She kept her gaze on the fog below... but likely saw nothing. Its depth was unimaginable just by looking. Toru tossed a pebble to gauge it—hoping to measure depth by sound—but heard nothing. Either it was too deep for sound to return, or something soft like sand or moss absorbed the pebble, making little noise. He couldn't tell.

"It's supposed to be a place prone to fog to begin with."

Toru said, standing beside Akari.

"Even if we descend, not knowing the depth makes it unsettling."

"If Chaika's magic could at least map the valley's general shape, that'd help."

Saying so, Toru glanced back.

There... Chaika was opening her ever-present coffin, taking out parts to assemble her gundo.

Chaika's gundo seemed somewhat old, its small scratches and uneven paint exuding the patina of a well-used tool. At the base of the long staff and its mechanism were parts with a spine-like, organic feel—radiating a presence beyond a mere "tool."

(*Come to think of it—*)

Toru thought, watching Chaika's gundo.

(*That's a hand-me-down, isn't it?*)

Chaika, who looked barely mid-teens, couldn't have used this antique gundo for decades. It was reasonable to assume it was passed down. Perhaps even from Arthur Gaz himself.

"...Complete!"

Chaika said, raising her gundo.

Holding the staff, nearly as tall as herself, with practiced ease, she peered into the rangefinder attached to its top.

This gundo—when tiny Chaika held it, it looked absurdly imposing.

Yet, there was no trace of instability in her stance. Her mastery of the gundo was undeniable. Her pose was as cohesive as a beast's, flawless.

"..."

Likely seeking the best position, Chaika peered through the rangefinder, stepping forward—

"Mya!?"

Her fourth step hit air.

Chaika's balance faltered. Of course, there was no lifeline. She was about to plummet into the fog-bound valley depths—

"...Hm."

—But she didn't.

Akari's iron hammer, swiftly drawn from her back, hooked Chaika's collar and yanked her back. After flailing a few steps in the air, Chaika tumbled, *koron*, to the ground at Toru and Akari's feet.

"...I always wonder."

Toru said, looking down at Chaika with exasperation.

"How did you survive before meeting us?"

She was just... too careless in daily life.

She'd nearly crash the mechanized vehicle by looking away, trip and fall while walking, cut her finger with a knife while cooking, or drop and flip dishes while washing—clumsy in everything.

It seemed her intense focus when committed balanced out by a proportional lack of attention otherwise. Come to think of it, when they first met, this girl was pointlessly lost in the mountains.

Directionless and scatterbrained.

Just walking alone could be life-threatening.

“Toru.”

Chaika sat up abruptly and said,

“Now announcing. New fact.”

“New fact? What’s that?”

Toru frowned.

Chaika, with a grand—somehow smug—*fun* snort, clenched her right fist.

“Me. Surprisingly sturdy.”

“Don’t brag about that.”

Toru said, his expression weary.

“Just hurry up and use your magic to investigate.”

“Muh...”

Chaika glanced between the cliff she nearly fell off and Toru.

“Best position. There.”

“Huh? Oh—got it.”

Toru nodded.

Magic was highly delicate.

A slight misalignment in conditions could render a spell useless. Thus, parts unaffected by the environment were handled by the gundo, while the mage constantly fine-tuned the spell’s details. Temperature. Humidity. Air pressure. Distance. Stars. Ley lines. Many factors intertwined.

The mage’s position was surprisingly critical.

To use magic to probe the “Valley of No Return,” it seemed the optimal spot was half a step off the cliff. Magic could activate from a few steps back, but with lower precision... according to Chaika.

“Even so.”

Toru said, eyeing the cliff's edge.

“You can't stand in midair. If Fredrika were here, she could dangle us, but—”

The shapeshifting dragoon girl was nowhere to be seen.

In theory, Fredrika was with them to defeat Toru, so relying on her was probably misguided...

“Toru. Support.”

Chaika said, striking an odd pose.

Crouching, hips jutting back like a duck—

“Upper body. Extend. Reach. But fall. So Toru. Support.”

Apparently, she'd lean over the valley to aim her gundo, and Toru needed to hold her to prevent a fall.

“...Like this?”

Toru approached Chaika, wrapping his arm around her waist.

“Uhya!?”

“Whoa!?”

Chaika's strange yelp made Toru yank his hand back.

“What!?”

“N-Nothing. No problem.”

“...”

Frowning, Toru wrapped his arm around Chaika's waist again to support her.

Together, they shuffled awkwardly to the cliff's edge. To an onlooker, they'd look utterly ridiculous.

But—

(*...What's with this position?*)

Toru frowned, realizing.

Chaika, hips thrust back.

Toru, leaning back for balance, hips forward.

To an outsider, it'd look like—

“Muu... As expected of Anii-sama.”

Akari said in a low, rumbling tone.

“Flawless. When it comes to embracing a lady’s rear, no one surpasses Anii-sama. Truly, I’m in awe.”

“Don’t be in awe of that!”

“Of course, I’m equally awed by your masterful technique of disrobing and exposing your lower half in an instant.”

“I haven’t mastered any such bizarre skill!”

Toru shouted.

Whether Chaika heard their sibling banter or not—

“...Efnu Heruste Ru Berguiru Fai Sebu...”

A spell flowed from Chaika’s lips.

The gundo’s mechanism, linked to her neck via a connection cable, glowed pale blue. The next moment, shapes and letters materialized in the air around the gundo, slowly rotating, interlocking, and forming a complete magic circle.

“‘The Resounding One’—Manifest.”

Chaika offered the activation spell.

A high-pitched sound rang out.

Clear and sharp, just shy of being too high to perceive... a sound in that range. It pulsed intermittently, then melted into silence.

And—

“...Hey.”

Toru asked, half-lidded.

“Mui?”

“Do we still need this position?”

“Negative. Position released.”

“...”

Toru, still supporting Chaika, stepped back two paces and let go of her waist.

Chaika sat on the spot, clutching her gundo, eyes closed. Probing magic sent results directly to the mage's mind—but “translating” and organizing them into understandable form took time.

“By the way, Akari.”

Toru turned to his sister.

“What's that about?”

“Hm? What?”

“What's with that stance!?”

Toru demanded, eyeing Akari, who stood with arms spread, poised.

It was as if she were saying, “Come here, I'll grab you,” her fingers wriggling like independent creatures. The stance was unsettling, suggesting something unpredictable if he got closer.

“This? Well.”

Akari nodded grandly.

Her arms stayed spread, fingers still twitching.

“I decided to *mofu* Anii-sama as I please.”

“...”

Toru, finding it all too tiresome, stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

“Watching Anii-sama embrace Chaika's waist made me realize.”

Akari said, inching closer to Toru.

“Come to think of it, I haven't *mofu'd* Anii-sama since we started this journey.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

Toru asked, half-lidded.

Her wriggling fingers gave a clear hint of her intent.

“I have an incurable disease where I get withdrawal symptoms if I don't *mofu* Anii-sama.”

“First I've heard of it.”

“Yep. I’m about to have my first life-threatening episode.”

“That’s obviously fake!”

Toru braced himself, determined not to let her succeed.

“Anii-sama. You’re unfair.”

“What’s unfair?”

“In short, you’re sneaky.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You just *mofu’d* Chaika, didn’t you?”

“That was necessary!”

He hadn’t done anything like her “I’ll rub you down” finger-wiggling nonsense.

“It’s necessary for me too. Oh no, the episode’s coming.”

Akari said expressionlessly, feigning a stagger, though no urgency was apparent.

“Anii-sama. If you think your sister’s even a little cute, resign yourself to being *mofu’d*.”

“What kind of threat is that!?”

As they bickered—like bears sizing each other up, circling warily—

“—Done.”

Chaika said, exhaling with a *ho* and clutching her gundo.

“How’d it go?”

Toru asked, catching Akari’s outstretched hands with both of his, *gakki*.

“...And what’s the logic behind that magic anyway?”

“Investigate. Valley. State. ‘The Resounding One.’”

According to Chaika... it was fundamentally similar to Toru's pebble toss to gauge depth. But her magic was far more complex and advanced—using sound echoes and reverberations to map objects and terrain beyond darkness or fog.

“And...?”

Be it the “Valley of No Return” or anything else... if someone with the “remains” entered this valley, Toru's group had to follow to find them. But with unnatural facts like “those who enter don't return” and “the fog never clears,” entering without a plan wasn't wise.

They wanted at least a rough grasp of the valley's interior...

“...Don't know.”

Chaika said, pouting her lips sulkily.

“Huh? What's that?”

“Probing magic. Didn't work.”

She shook her head.

It seemed “The Resounding One” failed to pierce the fog. Toru, still grappling with Akari, frowned.

“Come on... we're not fighting right now, but this is a life-or-death moment. If you're gonna do it, focus.”

“Negative. Not a mistake.”

Chaika said, puffing her cheeks, slightly miffed.

“What? You didn't mess up?”

“Magic. No problem. Problem—valley. No. Fog.”

“...What?”

“Probably... magic.”

Chaika said, pointing at the valley—or rather, the fog filling it.

“Magic? You mean this is?”

Toru stared, stunned, at the vast fog.

Now that she mentioned it, the fog seemed faintly blue—

“Yeah. Could be, when you think about it.”

Toru quickly reconsidered.

People often think of “water” as what’s in a cup, but from a morning dew drop to rain, rivers, or seas, it’s all “water.” Similarly, magic spans a vast range.

Toru tended to think of Chaika’s magic first, but large-scale magic—cast by multiple mages or large gundo—existed.

Toru only knew from hearsay, but wartime sky fortresses or large-scale annihilation magic were said to be natural disasters in themselves.

Compared to those, filling a valley with fog was trivial.

Moreover...

“Precise term. Material substance. For magic.”

Chaika explained, raising her index finger.

“Material substance?”

“Magic creates. Reacts to magic. Various applications.”

Using stone, wood, or other existing materials, processed to react readily to magic.

This produced what mages called “material substance.”

Some large-scale annihilation magic used material substances to rain down “striking bodies” like iron hammers. A senior saboteur once told Toru such magic was so destructive, “if you encounter it, just give up.”

“...Wait.”

Toru muttered, struck by a thought.

Filling an entire valley with material substance.

No second- or third-rate mage could manage that. It’d also require a significant mana source. Creating material substance needed magic, and sustaining control required a mana source.

In other words—

“Maybe that Simon Scania, like Count Abarth...”

“Oui. Possible.”

Chaika nodded.

If Simon Scania didn’t just possess the “remains” but integrated them into a large gundo like Abarth, such large-scale magic was feasible. Especially since this area produced fossil fuel, mana sources might be plentiful.

“Then—”

Akari said, crossing her arms and looking at the valley.

“This fog itself could be Simon Scania’s ‘castle’?”

“—Possible.”

Chaika nodded.

“Makes it even riskier to barge in.”

Toru muttered, frowning.

If the reason “those who enter don’t return” was because Simon Scania had fortified the valley... that was trouble. Even Lademio’s citizens were likely deemed “intruders” and eliminated. Chaika’s group, aiming for the “remains,” would surely be seen as “enemies.”

And what attacks Simon Scania might launch against “enemies” or “intruders” was, for now, unknown.

“We need to head back and prepare.”

Toru said, turning from the valley.

If possible... they should wait for Fredrika to show up.

Her cooperation was uncertain, but her dragoon transformation magic—and its healing abilities—made a big difference. Though, as seen when they defeated her, dragoon magic could only heal “parts”—useless against pervasive poisons or diseases.

“Got antidotes ready?”

“Most types.”

Akari nodded.

Not that they covered every poison. But poisons required specific handling. In certain conditions, usable poisons were limited. Unless Simon Scania used something highly unusual, standard antidotes should suffice.

“Let’s go—Chaika.”

“Muh, wait, time.”

Chaika hurriedly began disassembling her gundo.

As Toru glanced back at her—

“Back to the *Svetlana* for now—”

He stopped mid-sentence.

“...”

His face hardened, stopping in place.
His hands were already on the two short swords at his back.
Likewise, Akari crouched slightly, reaching for the iron hammer on her back.

“Mui?”

Chaika, puzzled by her retainers’ sudden reactions, blinked wide-eyed.
Both were clearly in combat stance. Even Chaika could tell.
But—where was the enemy?
No one suspicious was visible nearby.

“Toru? Akari?”

“—Chaika.”

Without overtly bracing—too obvious a stance could let the enemy predict their moves—Toru called to Chaika, his gaze fixed in one direction.

“Don’t disassemble the gundo. Prepare attack magic if you can.”

“...U... Oui.”

Chaika nodded, her expression tensing.

“Come out!”

Toru shouted.
His voice echoed off the surrounding cliffs—then faded.

“You didn’t think you could slit our throats at this range, did you?”

The next moment...

“...Impressive.”

Ripples formed in the scenery.
Not a metaphor—literally.
As if the landscape were reflected on water, concentric distortions rippled through the air.
A dull mechanical hum spread—and from the ripples’ center, a large white mechanized vehicle emerged.
Likely magic.
It had hidden its presence by manipulating sound and light, approaching stealthily. The sudden appearance of a massive object where nothing had been felt unreal, like a stage backdrop revealed as fake.

“...Caught up, huh.”

Toru muttered in a low voice.
He recognized the “wolf” emblem on the vehicle’s front.
Though larger, it matched the design on the sword scabbard of that knight chasing
Chaika—Alberic Gillette.

“Detected even at this distance, huh.”

A woman’s voice spoke.
Toru recognized it.

(*That voice...*)

It was likely the girl with Gillette before.
Not a mage but an engineer—someone skilled with gundo or short swords.

“We thought we’d masked sight and sound.”

“There are five senses.”

Toru said.

“Hiding two doesn’t mean you’re invisible.”

Stealth and surprise were saboteur specialties.
Naturally, they had expertise in techniques to blend into surroundings, erasing presence,
sound, and aura.
A large object like a mechanized vehicle couldn’t fully mask ground vibrations unless it
floated.
Above all, a sharp presence was directed at Toru’s group. Not pure killing intent—but
focused enough to evoke threat.

“...”

The white vehicle stopped about a hundred paces from Toru’s group.
Its side doors opened, and two figures emerged from each side.

(*One more, huh.*)

Toru narrowed his eyes, observing the “enemy.”
Three of the four were familiar.
Knight Alberic.
Mercenary Nikolai.
Assassin Vivi.
He recalled them calling each other by those names.

The last—a boy with beast-like ears and tail, likely a demi-human—was unfamiliar. But he was no less a threat. Despite his delicate frame, magical enhancements meant he wasn't powerless. He could even be the most troublesome, depending on his fighting style.

And they weren't the only enemies.

At least one mage remained inside the vehicle.

(*—This is bad.*)

Unlike last time, Alberic's group wouldn't be careless. Nikolai's arm seemed healed, and an unknown opponent added risk.

Toru's group was underpowered and underprepared for a fight with Alberic's team.

Winning head-on was near impossible.

“Akari.”

Toru said, eyes fixed on Alberic's group without letting his guard down.

“I'll leave the two on the left to you. Can you handle it?”

Mercenary Nikolai—and the demi-human boy.

The burly Nikolai and the unknown demi-human soldier.

It might look like Toru was dumping the tougher foes on Akari.

But...

“...Anii-sama.”

Akari said in a strangely heartfelt tone.

“You really are kind.”

Apparently, she'd reached the same conclusion as him. No surprise, given they trained in the same village under the same master.

“You could trust me a bit more.”

“It's not about doubting your skill.”

“I know, but... no time to dwell on your kindness. I'll take them.”

“Thanks.”

Toru said curtly.

The imposing Nikolai was, in truth, recovering.

Sure, his broken arm was likely mended with magic... but he couldn't have done heavy work for a while. Overusing it before full recovery risked re-breaking it. Repeated breaks could weaken the bone permanently.

Naturally... unused muscles weaken daily.
Though highly skilled, Nikolai's overall combat ability was likely lower than during their first clash.

And—the demi-human boy.

He appeared unarmed.

At least, no large weapons were visible. He might hide a dagger under his clothes, but his slender frame suggested limited physical strength.

Short reach, light attacks.

Thus—Akari, with her long-reach weapon, should find Nikolai and the demi-human easier than facing Alberic and Vivi.

“Chaika.”

Toru said in a hushed, urgent whisper.

“If their vehicle moves, don't hesitate—blast it, regardless of us. Use the most powerful spell you've got.”

“U... Oui.”

Chaika swallowed hard and nodded.

And—

“—Toru, and Akari, was it?”

Alberic called out in a clear, resonant voice.

Neither Toru nor Akari had given their names. Likely, they'd investigated in Del Solant . But... they probably hadn't traced their clan or village. In the refugee district, neither used the Acura name.

“Just to be clear. Surrender. I don't want pointless fighting.”

“Save your sleep-talk for bed.”

Toru said, drawing his two short swords from his waist.

“You're set on fighting, then?”

The voice carried a hint of exasperation.

It seemed surprising that saboteurs wouldn't surrender despite the odds.

Unlike nobles or royals bearing the weight of citizens, national prestige, or religious beliefs, saboteurs had nothing they'd die to protect. Even “family” bonds could be cut if needed.

But—

“No principles, no faith, hired by anyone, wagging our tails—you probably see saboteurs as less than dogs. But that's exactly why we have a final line we won't cross.”

Toru aligned the seals on his palms with those on the sword hilts.

His ki flowed, making the short swords extensions of his body. Less flashy than a mage's gundo, but the heightened senses sharpened his technique. A short sword user could tie a thread with the blade's tip.

“Saboteurs don't betray their master out of fear.”

Though despised on the battlefield, saboteurs' loyalty to their employer was ironclad. They didn't easily abandon or betray their chosen lord. Or rather, they couldn't. Without that integrity, a saboteur would be no warrior—just a lawless thug.

For saboteurs, with few taboos or attachments, this was tied to their very existence.

“How pompous.”

The mocking laugh came from the assassin girl—Vivi.

“Deception and trickery are a saboteur's trade, right?”

“Assassins too.”

“...”

Vivi fell silent.

In truth... there was little difference between saboteurs and assassins.

Both were outcasts, handling the dark, dirty work others shunned.

Saboteurs leaned toward versatile skills, assassins toward specialized ones. The main difference was their stage: the front lines for saboteurs, civilian society for assassins.

“Understood.”

Alberic's voice cut between Toru and Vivi.

“I thought I'd studied saboteurs, but my understanding was shallow. I apologize for the rude surrender demand.”

Drawing his sword, Alberic stepped forward.

With a gaze unwavering and clear, he looked at Toru and said,

“Small-scale, but this is war. Let us settle this with all our might. I, Knight Alberic Gillette, declare war on you.”

It was a refreshingly clear call to battle.



In a situation clearly outnumbered, a prolonged or endurance battle was the height of folly.

If surrounded and dragged into a war of attrition, victory was impossible. The standard tactic was to seize the initiative at maximum speed, pulling the flow to your side. Confounding and outmaneuvering the enemy with “speed” was a saboteur’s forte.

However...

“I am steel.”

Akari, locking eyes on the approaching enemies, murmured the key phrase of the secret technique *Iron-Blood Transformation*.

“As steel, I do not fear.’ ‘As steel, I do not waver.’ ‘Once I face the enemy, with no hesitation whatsoever,’ ‘I am the weapon that destroys them.’”

It was literally the act of unlocking a key.

The process of unleashing the ferocious beast sealed within her. With each recited verse, she could feel it—chained deep inside—breaking free and rising to the surface.

A dull gray beast, raised solely for battle.

Not savage. Not cruel.

But like fire, like a blade—menacing.

“...Fu.”

Akari’s lips twisted slightly—she licked them.

Blood surged fiercely, her muscles kicking into full gear. Sensations flooded her brain like a torrent, amplified by *Iron-Blood Transformation*. Her awareness sharpened, making her feel as if she’d grown a size larger in every sense.

That’s why this technique—though a secret art—was a double-edged sword.

Without proper control, it could leave her wide open.

“...”

Fully in combat mode, Akari glared at the two approaching foes.

They were complete opposites.

One, a muscular, burly middle-aged man.

The other, a short, wiry demi-human boy.

The first to watch was the middle-aged man—Nikolai—wielding a large sword.

Of course, the boy wasn’t to be underestimated. But judging from his slight frame, his strength was likely limited. His limbs didn’t have a warrior’s bulk.

He probably carried some weapon, likely small, aimed at vital points—concealed weapons. That restricted his attack range and opportunities. Guarding vital points against needle-like strikes should suffice.

In contrast, Nikolai—with his strength and large sword—could likely smash through petty defenses with brute force. A single touch could tear flesh and break bones. Even with *Iron-Blood Transformation*, Akari’s physical durability didn’t increase, so with her build, clashing head-on was to be avoided.

“What’s wrong?”

Nikolai asked with a faint smile.

“Not coming?”

He was referring to the aforementioned “standard tactic.”

For Akari, outnumbered, to stand back and observe went against reason. She should have launched a swift attack without waiting for their move.

But unfortunately, Chaika was behind her.

Leaving the near-defenseless Chaika to charge forward would play right into the enemy’s hands.

“If you’re not coming, I will.”

Nikolai muttered, shouldering his large sword.

“Fighting a woman’s a bit tricky, but...”

The next moment—someone vanished.

Not Nikolai.

The other—the demi-human boy.

“—!”

It was true that Nikolai’s words briefly drew her attention. But she’d definitely kept the boy in her field of vision. Yet—she lost him in an instant. That meant the boy moved so fast he left no afterimage.

However...

(*Should I thank that Guy?*)

Akari thought fleetingly.

Having seen Guy’s appearing and disappearing act, her surprise was lessened.

The boy’s movement differed from Guy’s. Though she lost sight of him, she could track his trail to an extent. With *Iron-Blood Transformation*, Akari could at least grasp which direction he moved.

The demi-human boy leaped right, then left, closing in.

She couldn’t track him with her eyes. The ground bursting with each kick was his trace.

Right? Left? Or above?

Instinctively, Akari judged and raised her iron hammer for defense. Smaller foes often used motion to amplify attack power—like the circular swing of Akari’s hammer, a slashing leap with falling momentum, or a thrusting charge.

She bet the boy would come from above.

But...

“...!?”

No attack came.

No—worse, the boy landed to Akari’s right, outside her hammer’s reach. He’d leaped, but he didn’t attack her directly.

Why?

The reason became clear the next moment.

As instinct drove her to lower her hammer—a shock hit. Nikolai, closing the gap in the instant her attention and gaze shifted, swung his sword down.

“—!!”

Gatsun, the sword clashed with her hammer.

If she’d been a moment slower—or hadn’t used *Iron-Blood Transformation*—Akari would have been cleaved deeply through the chest.

Nikolai—terrifying. His agility belied his bulk.

She’d heard from Toru about Nikolai’s skill and was on guard... but he exploited the split-second she focused on the boy.

Gigigigi! Sparks flew as the blade slid across her hammer.

The hammer’s sturdy build was her saving grace.

A thinner sword would likely have snapped.

“Ngh—”

Akari, not resisting his force, tilted her hammer to deflect it, pivoting her left foot to aim at Nikolai’s side. A large sword typically required both hands. Naturally—swinging it up left both flanks open, and swinging down left the opposite side exposed.

Chin! A small blade slid from her boot’s toe.

If she could gouge Nikolai’s side, through his armor’s gap, it might not be fatal but would sap his fighting strength.

That was her intent—

“—!?”

At the edge of her vision, the demi-human boy moved.

Right toward her standing leg—her pivot.

“...!”

If her pivot leg was swept, causing her to fall, victory would be lost.

Akari hesitated, awkwardly retracting her left leg aimed at Nikolai's side, destabilizing her stance.

“Heh—”

A grin flashed across Nikolai's lips.

“—Kuh!?”

Nikolai suddenly shifted his sword's trajectory—or rather, the direction of force. The blade, sliding across her hammer, now pressed her sideways. With her left leg raised, she couldn't withstand the abrupt change, and her balance broke.

She barely avoided falling... but ended up on one knee.

(*So nimble...!*)

Akari groaned, catching the demi-human boy at her vision's edge—or rather, being forced to.

These two were coordinated—frighteningly so.

The boy didn't attack directly. But he constantly darted at her vision's edge. She couldn't ignore him. And the moment she focused on him, Nikolai struck.

Moreover, Nikolai's speed and dexterity defied his size.

Changing a blade's path mid-swing—especially with a large sword—was extraordinarily difficult. His appearance suggested a brute-force fighter, but he was the opposite. Unswayed by raw strength, he honed technique—a true master.

“Kuh...”

Akari groaned.

On one knee, her swift footwork was gone. Half the advantage of *Iron-Blood Transformation* was lost.

No time to stand and reset. She had to fend off Nikolai and the boy with upper-body movements alone.

“Fu!”

As if returning the favor, Nikolai's kick came flying.

Worse—it carried the momentum of his sword swing, a ferocious strike. Unlike Akari's, his steel-clad toe wasn't bladed but served as a blunt weapon.

“Guh—”

She blocked it with her hammer on reflex.

But Nikolai didn't linger on the kick. Using the recoil, he withdrew his leg and swung his large sword again.

“Muh... Kuh...”

Akari barely parried with her hammer—

“Kuh...”

“No time to look away.”

Nikolai’s sword strikes were relentless, seamless—Akari, stuck on one knee, was forced into pure defense. She tried to force an opening, but each time, the boy moved meaningfully at her vision’s edge, breaking her focus.

One-on-one, she could manage.

But like this—

“Don’t worry.”

Nikolai said, swinging his sword like a storm.

“We’re not told to kill. Though, if it hits wrong, you might lose an arm or leg. You’re a saboteur woman—you’re prepared for that, right?”

His tone and voice held no pretense—a veteran’s words.

Even surviving didn’t guarantee staying whole. Trading an arm for an enemy’s life was a good deal in real combat.

“...”

Akari stayed silent.

Even with *Iron-Blood Transformation*—she had no leeway to retort.



Meanwhile—Toru was also hard-pressed.

His main opponent, needless to say, was Alberic.

“...!”

Sharp, unhesitating thrusts and slashes rained down on Toru.

Terrifyingly straightforward, but for that reason, fast.

The orthodox swordsmanship of knights, compared to that of saboteurs or mercenaries, often relied on simple techniques without flair... but when mastered beyond a certain level, they were refined into flawless moves. It wasn't just about fast or heavy slashes; perfected techniques were themselves lethal with every strike.

Moreover, the transition from one move to the next was unnervingly swift.

It wasn't that Alberic's movements were particularly fast. In raw speed, Toru had the edge. But Alberic's actions had no waste, using minimal motion. As a result, his sword tip moved so quickly that even Toru struggled to track it.

“Damn it...!”

Like Akari, Toru was using **Iron-Blood Transformation**, but it barely gave him any leeway.

Rather, it was precisely because of **Iron-Blood Transformation** that he could just manage to parry Alberic's attacks. In his natural state, this knight's combat prowess equaled a saboteur using **Iron-Blood Transformation**.

As expected of a true martial lineage—a bloodline of war.

Toru tried several times to force an opening, but each time, Vivi's restraining attacks intervened. Her throwing needles, launched intermittently from behind Alberic, restricted Toru's movements.

(*This is bad...*)

Toru felt a surge of anxiety.

Indeed, **Iron-Blood Transformation** enhanced senses, strength, and reflexes.

In a one-on-one fight—against a single opponent with limited actions—he could forcefully disrupt their rhythm. But against two, even boosting speed and strength, he was overwhelmed by their coordinated numbers, pinned down.

In this situation, **Iron-Blood Transformation**'s time limit could become a shackle.

(*I've got to disrupt their flow somehow.*)

Perhaps his anxiety created an opening.

“—!”

The next moment, with a spirited cry, Alberic's thrust—pierced Toru's side.

“Guh...”

First, the impact. Then, a moment later, searing pain erupted.

It went in. Deeply.

“—Muh.”

Alberic's sword was pulled back as swiftly as it entered—to avoid being caught in muscle—and a wet, damp sensation spread through Toru's side along with the pain.

“Toru!?”

Chaika's scream-like voice rang out.

But Toru had no leeway to turn and reassure her with “I'm fine.”

The pain was there, but neither Alberic nor Vivi showed any openings. Turning away could easily cost him his head.

No...

(*This is seriously bad. What do I do...*)

Pain could be ignored with willpower, but blood loss would steadily weaken him. He could clench muscles to slow the bleeding somewhat... but stopping it completely was impossible.

In a contest of near-equal skill, this wound was practically fatal.

“You've lost. Surrender quietly.”

Likely reaching the same conclusion, Alberic spoke in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, without a hint of gloating, simply stating reality.

(*Pretend to surrender, then strike at an opening?*)

The thought flashed through Toru's mind... but it was likely futile.

Alberic might fall for it, but Vivi wouldn't. She'd probably suggest “breaking his limbs before talking.” Toru would propose the same in her position.

(*Think. Think. There's got to be a way—*)

Toru desperately racked his brain.

Above his head—

“—Huh?”

A terribly out-of-place, utterly tensionless voice rang out.

“What's with this situation?”

“—!?”

Stepping back to distance himself from Toru, Alberic turned.

Behind them—on top of the large white mechanized vehicle—a figure stood that definitely hadn't been there before.

A petite girl.

Her golden hair and red eyes stood out vividly. Despite her almost childlike appearance, she showed no fear in this tense situation, gazing down at Toru and the others with a puzzled, relaxed expression.

“Oh... the smell of blood?”

The girl frowned and said,

“Toru? Huh? What? Toru, you’re hurt?”

“... You can see that, can’t you?”

Toru, grimacing, responded to the visibly flustered girl—Fredrika. Fredrika stood on the vehicle’s roof, looking indignant, pointing at Toru and shouting.

“That’s not fair, Toru!?”

“...”

Her words made no sense—Alberic and his team paused their fighting, looking at Fredrika with confusion. That they showed no exploitable openings was almost admirable.

“Why’d you get hurt without telling me! You’re supposed to be *my* kill!”

“Shut up! What’s unfair, you stray cat! Disappearing and popping up like that!”

Despite feeling faint from blood loss, Toru shouted.

This girl—or rather, this abandoned beast—wasn’t someone he could rely on as an ally, but an Dragoon’s presence was too significant. Whatever stance she took, she was a wildly unpredictable factor.

Whether she realized this or not—

“I’m not a cat!”

Fredrika laughed innocently, then turned her blood-red eyes to Alberic and his team.

“Hey, you guys. This is a problem.”

Her tone was as casual as if she were complaining to a friend—utterly light.

“...”

Alberic and his team fell silent.

They were likely struggling to grasp the identity of this girl who appeared out of nowhere.

“Toru’s *my* target to defeat. If you guys come in and do this, it’s a problem. Got it?”

By any logic, Fredrika was the one interfering here.

“—Who are you?”

Alberic asked, narrowing his eyes.

“You seem acquainted with this saboteur.”

“Yup.”

Fredrika nodded firmly.

Her gesture was so pure and innocent that, without knowing her true nature, one might smile at her charm.

“We’re acquaintances. And Toru’s *mine* to defeat. So, you guys need to back off.”

As Fredrika said this—on her shoulder.

“Hey... what’s that?”

The next moment, a needle sprouted.

A small, deadly weapon, matte-finished to avoid reflecting light. It lacked raw destructive power, but coated with poison, it could be lethal. Clearly an assassin’s tool.

“No idea who you are, but you’re too noisy.”

Vivi said, frowning.

“Shut up and sleep. That meridian point works better than a sleeping drug.”

“Huh? Really?”

Fredrika said, wide-eyed, then casually plucked the needle out and snapped it, *pekin*, with her pale fingertips.

“...!?”

Vivi was stunned.

Fredrika looked between the broken needle and Vivi with curiosity.

“Oh, I get it. Humans would sleep from that, right?”

She nodded repeatedly, delighted, as if understanding.

“But it’s useless. I’m not human.”

“You’re...?”

Even Alberic, shocked, let out a stunned voice.
Fredrika flashed a bright smile at the young knight—

“Ei!”

A single, carefree shout.
The next moment... a sudden gust erupted atop the vehicle.

“What!?”

Alberic and his team braced themselves.
It was a dramatic scene.

The air roared, swirling in a vortex. No—it was likely the scream of air violently displaced. Rapid changes in air density created heat-haze-like distortions everywhere. Masses of dirt and sand were swept up from the ground, spiraling toward a single point.

Pale blue light flashed like lightning within the tornado.

And—

“Do—”

Even Nikolai and his team stopped, turning to look.
Atop the vehicle sat a massive silver—Dragoon.



“An Dragoon!?”

“Impossible—in a place like this!?”

Vivi and Nikolai shouted in shock.

As the Dragoon shifted slightly, the vehicle beneath groaned, creaking under its weight. No illusion or trick—a real, heavy monster was there.

And—

“Mateus! Zita!”

Alberic’s reaction was the swiftest.

“There’s an Dragoon on the vehicle! Shake it off!!”

At his words, the white vehicle lurched backward—as if snapped. The Dragoon Fredrika, unconcerned with staying put, lightly hopped off.

Her massive body landed with a ground-shaking *thud*.

“Anyway,”

Fredrika said, moving her fanged, inhuman mouth.

The sight of a clearly non-human creature speaking fluently in a casual tone carried an odd, almost comical air. Some might even call it cute.

“Toru’s my enemy to defeat. If you’re trying to steal that, I’ll have to take you out first, okay?”

“Such an ambush...”

Alberic turned to Toru, stunned.

“Who are you, exactly...?”

“Look, it’s not some grand ambush.”

Toru said, clutching his side.

“—What now?”

Fredrika asked.

In truth, her appearance flipped the battle.

Or rather—complicated it.

For Toru's group, Fredrika wasn't someone they could fully rely on. But a legendary Dragoon, speaking in their favor and seemingly opposing Alberic's team, forced Alberic to regroup and reassess. Naturally, they had to be cautious...

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, the dragoon-form Fredrika tilted her long neck.

As if triggered by her movement, a sound—like hard objects scraping—came from below Toru's group, or deeper still.

In other words—

"What's that?"

"—Bad!"

Alberic's face changed as he shouted.

"Everyone, run! It's collapsing!!"

They were already at the literal cliff's edge.

The Dragoon's landing—and the air and soil displacement from her "transformation"—caused pressure changes and weakened the ground.

And so...

"Chaika! Akari!"

Seizing the moment of Alberic's group's disarray, Toru kicked the ground and ran toward Chaika.

Akari, closer by position, reached Chaika first, grabbing her collar and the coffin's handle—and the next moment.

"—!"

The sensation of solid ground beneath them vanished.

A sudden cliff collapse swept Toru, Chaika, Akari, and even Alberic's group into the roaring white fog of the valley's depths.