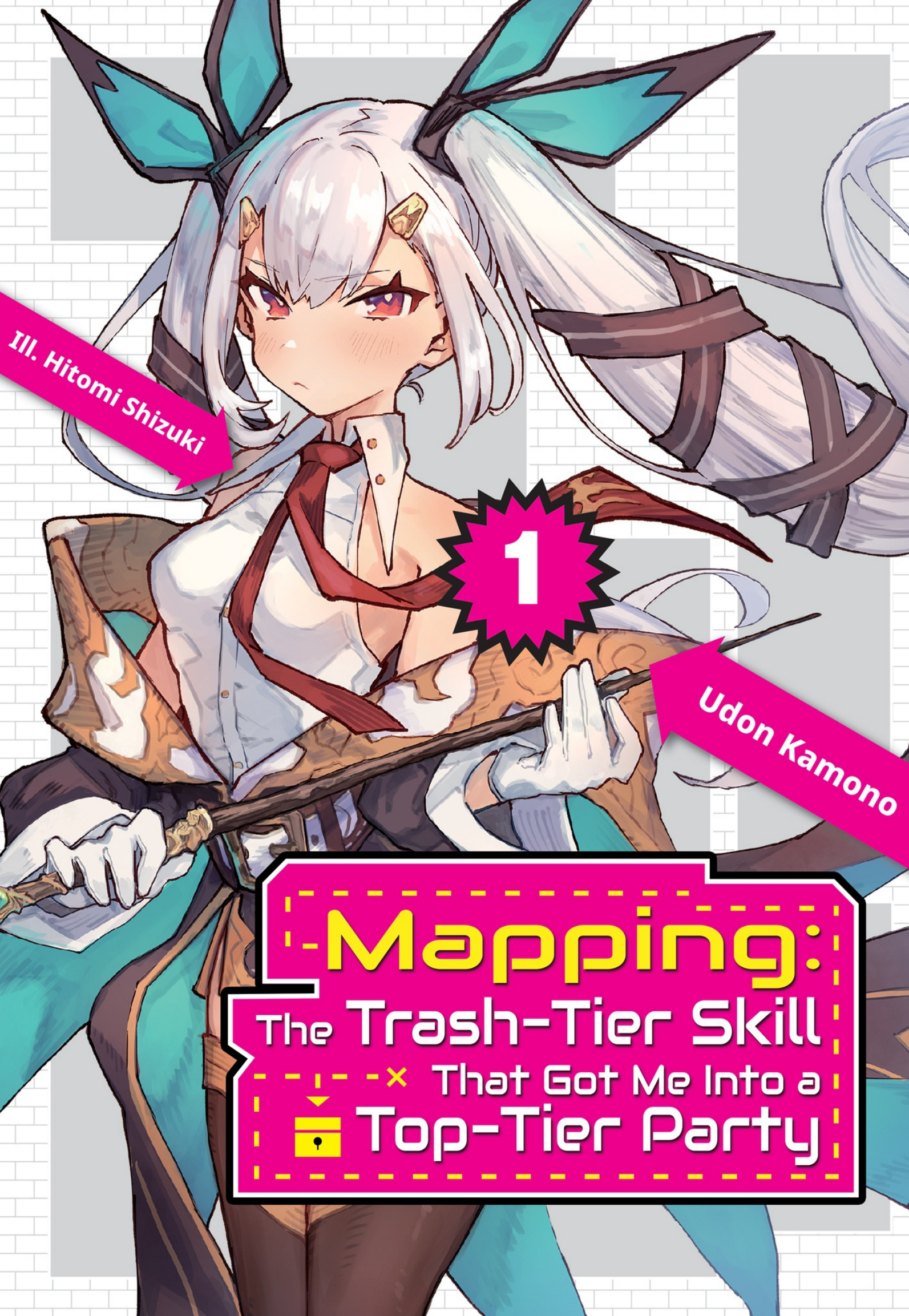
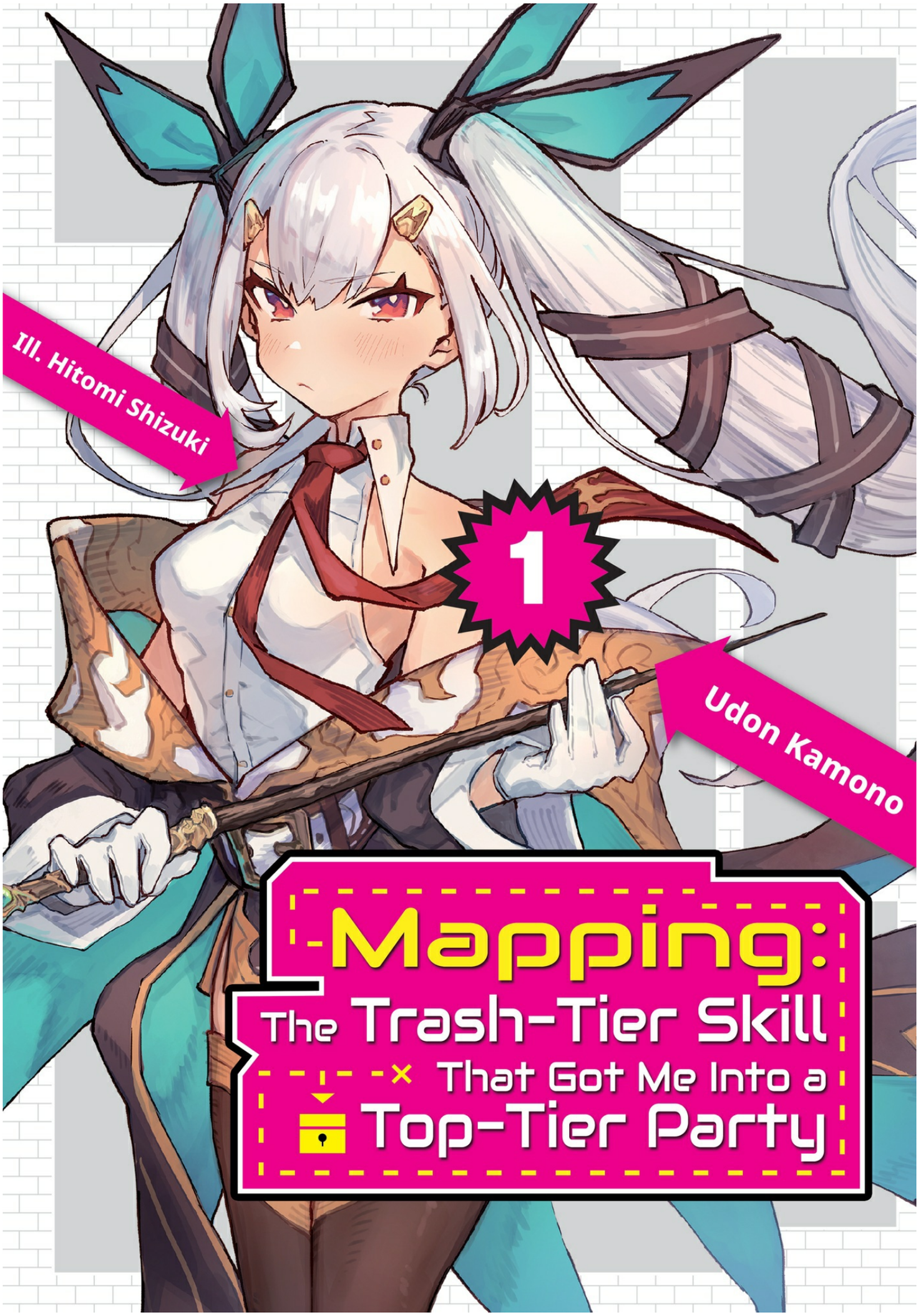

Ill. Hitomi Shizuki
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Udon Kamono
Mapping:
The Trash-Tier Skill
That Got Me Into a
Top-Tier Party


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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party

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The Day Their Fates Diverged

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

It took me a while to realize those words had come out of my own mouth. That’s just how shocked I was.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. I didn’t *want* to believe them. I wanted nothing more than to look away. But I couldn’t—reality was right there in front of me, staring me down. I could look away all I wanted, but it wouldn’t change the inevitable truth projected before me.

I had apparently fallen to my knees at some point. I had no idea how long I’d been sitting there on the cold, hard floor. A mere two or three steps away from me, my fate loomed over me in glowing letters:

Mapping

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 3

Effect: The ability to automatically map approximately a one kilometer radius around a previously traversed point and store it as knowledge.

That was it. That was the skill I’d been granted. And Mapping was known far and wide in this world... as utter trash.

That was the reason I, Note Athlon, had fallen into the depths of despair.

You see, I was currently in the middle of my presentation ceremony—a ritual that can only be undertaken after your fifteenth birthday. By offering a prayer to a divine slate, it reveals the skillset bestowed upon you. These slates exist all over the world, but no one knows anything about how they came to be. Most of

them are under the protection of the church, kept in special rooms just like this one.

Now, in this world, skills are everything. They determine our way of life. Those who obtain combat skills gain the power to fight the monsters that threaten mankind. Those who obtain farming skills are able to cultivate crops with ease. Those who obtain crafting skills are able to create things with speed and precision.

Of course, combat, farming, and crafting are all possible without the help of skills, but skills ensure a certain amount of success in these fields. People with skills improve faster than most, and they have the advantage of starting off with the inherent power granted to them by their skills. A good example of this is the Sword Mastery skill.

In a fight between two people who'd trained for the same amount of time—one with Sword Mastery and one without—the fighter with Sword Mastery would win nine times out of ten. Now, you might be inclined to say the person without Sword Mastery should just work twice as hard... But without skills, that effort would only be wasted. In the time it took a normal person to rival a Sword Master's prowess with a blade, the Sword Master could hone their physical abilities even further. Or even learn simple magic to enhance their swordfighting. The lead their skillset gave them granted them every advantage—and that couldn't be overcome just by trying harder.

That's why skills are so important in this world. Virtually everyone goes through the presentation ceremony to get theirs, and the vast majority of people go on to find employment based on the skillset they receive.

As for me... What exactly makes Mapping a trash skill, you ask? Its description looks pretty useful at a glance. It's pretty rare, too.

Nevertheless, Mapping is complete garbage. There are several reasons for this.

First, it requires three slots to use. Slot cost is, in simple terms, how much room a skill takes up. All humanoid races possess three slots, meaning they can

obtain up to three skills with a slot cost of 1. It also means that anyone who gets a three-slot skill—like Mapping—isn't getting anything else. Most obtainable skills, however, are single slot. Higher-powered, rarer, and unusual skills generally had a higher cost... as was the case with Mapping.

Nevertheless, the real reason Mapping was considered so terrible was the existence of two superior skills: World Map and Area Map. World Map was a complete upgrade that could map the entire world, including untraversed lands. Area Map, meanwhile, was a little different. It only revealed a map of the current area and couldn't store it as knowledge like Mapping and World Map, but it had the advantage of only being a two-slot skill.

Now, you might think that the ability to instantly know your surroundings could be useful. But as a matter of course, extensive maps of the world were already in circulation thanks to people with the World Map skill. In other words, Mapping is a waste of a three-slot skill with the singular benefit of keeping its user from ever getting lost.

A voice suddenly called to me from the other side of the only door in the narrow room. It was a voice I knew well.

"How did it go, Note?"

I cracked open the door without responding. Blinding light streamed in, and I squinted to see the girl standing there.

Her shining blonde hair was braided behind her with stray, silky locks falling forward over her ears. Fine, delicate eyelashes decorated her deep emerald eyes. Her skin was so white that she looked like a porcelain doll, a look only further enhanced by her thin lips and refined nose.

This beautiful half-elf girl was Miya Line, my childhood friend. Illuminated by the light streaming in the door, she looked even more radiant than normal. Okay, I'll admit it... I was in love with Miya.

"...Did you not get what you were hoping for?" Miya asked, peering into my eyes as she stepped closer.

To be honest, I had a hard time handling this little habit of hers. When she

suddenly got close and looked into my soul with those deep emerald pools of hers... the more I stared, the more I felt myself being sucked in.

“N-No...”

I took a step back in a panic, averting my eyes.

Even though we’ve been friends since we were kids, she always caught me off guard whenever she got this close. It hadn’t gotten any less flustering over the years. If anything, it was the opposite. I was finding it harder and harder to deal with as I fell more and more in love with her.

“See for yourself.”

Still flustered, I hurriedly pointed behind me in an attempt to move the conversation away from myself. The details of the skill I’d just been granted were still displayed on the slate in the middle of the narrow room.

Miya took one look at the glowing text and came to the same conclusion I did —I’d just gotten a trash skill. After blinking her long lashes several times, she finally turned away as she tried to console me.

“D-Don’t let it get you down. Mapping is a useful skill in its own right! Think of it this way: you’ll never get lost again! Besides, it could come in handy while we’re adventuring together...” she mustered.



I had my doubts about that. Being an adventurer with no combat skills would be a tough gig... Nevertheless, hearing what Miya said made me really happy.

See, Miya and I had a dream. We wanted to become adventurers together. We'd been dreaming of it ever since we were kids listening to stories from Miya's parents, who were retired adventurers themselves. But... reaching the top of the adventuring world was going to be hard with a skill like Mapping. I knew that good and well, and I knew Miya knew it too.

But even so, she'd still said we would be adventuring together. That told me she hadn't given up on our dream yet, even if I'd pulled a trash-tier skill.

I'd always loved how kind Miya was at heart. She was considerate of everyone.

"Okay, I'll go next. Just you watch, Note! I'm going to pull good adventuring skills so I can protect you myself!" Miya declared, enthusiastically clenching her hands into fists as she approached the slate.

Normally, petitioners prayed to the divine slate alone. This was a precaution to keep the details of your skills private. There were infamous stories of people treating petitioners differently after they received peculiar skills like Mind Reading, for example. So no matter how close you were with someone, you always had to think twice about revealing your skillset.

That's also why the room containing the divine slate was built for security and secrecy—thick walls, a heavy door, no windows. Yet Miya had started praying with me still in the room, which was an immense show of trust. I wasn't quite sure how I felt about it. Happy? Embarrassed? A little concerned over her lack of caution? Mostly just happy.

Miya and I were good friends, but I didn't know how she truly felt about me. Romantically, I mean. I hadn't asked, though I was curious. What did she think of me? Did she see me as a man?

At the same time, I didn't really need to know. Our relationship was fine as it was. I mean, of course, I wanted to hold her hand and go out on dates with her. I would've loved to kiss her, too. But Miya was too wonderful a girl to be

wasted on a guy like me.

Miya and I were born in the small village of Changs, where trees and fields outnumbered people. Yeah, it was *that* small. And because it was so unpopulated, Miya and I were the only kids in our age group. It was only natural that we'd spent so much time together growing up.

That's why I believed Miya would find someone better for her once we got out into the world. I always thought that would be for the best. She would be happier that way. And when the day came—when Miya found someone worthy of her—I wanted to wish her well with a smile. I wanted to be there for her as her childhood friend.

That's why I was fine leaving things as they were. There was nothing wrong with being friends. Even if we never became lovers, as long as I could stay by her side...

I looked over at Miya to see the elegant profile of her face illuminated by a gentle blue light as glowing words appeared on the slate before her.

Protection of the Forest Spirit King

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: The ability to use earth, wind, and water elemental spirit magic. Also increases magical abilities in forest areas. Elf exclusive.

Bow Mastery - Superior

Rarity: UR (Ultra Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: Obtain the maximum aptitude for bow mastery.

Physical Boost - Major

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: Greatly increases physical abilities.

"No way..." I muttered, staring at the slate in disbelief.

Miya's skills were all SR or higher. And combat skills to boot...

Each skill she'd pulled had the power potential of an entire army, and she'd gotten *three* of them. There were probably less than ten people in the entire world who'd been lucky enough to pull a combination of adventurer-worthy skills this good.

That was how incredible Miya's skillset was.

Miya finished praying and opened her eyes. She seemed to have a good feeling about what had just happened to her. The beaming smile on her face as she stared at the slate said as much.

"Yay! These skills look strong, Note!" she exclaimed, jumping up and grabbing my hand.

C'mon, Miya, they don't just look *strong...*

Feeling the warmth embracing my hand, I became aware of the conflicted emotions swirling in my chest. This was probably jealousy. Even though I should have been happy for Miya, I couldn't help the wretched bitterness welling up inside me.

If only I had gotten better skills... then I could've been happy for her...

My mind was fixated on what-ifs. A hypothetical scenario that would never be true. But Miya was so overcome with joy that she had no idea what was going through my head. She turned to me with a bright smile...

"Now we can go adventuring, Note! Let's become top-tier adventurers together!"

I couldn't help looking away, averting my eyes from her kindness and sincerity.

Why can I only think of myself...?

Even though I knew I'd never be good enough for Miya, deep in my heart, I'd always hoped I could be her equal. That's what made this cemented inferiority so frustrating. She was further out of my reach than ever. If only our skills had been reversed, then maybe I could have been worthy...

And I hated that prideful part of myself. Who was I to yap on and on about being a worthy man for Miya? No one who thought like that would *ever* be worthy of her.

Just give it up, man. Let it go. This is enough. Things are fine as they are. Just being with Miya...

I decided long ago that was enough, didn't I? And even after I'd pulled such a trash-tier skill, she said we could still adventure together. How lucky is that? Asking for too much would only be my downfall.

That's right. I told myself that this was enough. Surely. Surely it's enough.

Perhaps I was too conceited. I'd been spoiled by Miya's good will, by her kindness. And they'd both betrayed me—my pride and Miya.

Half a year after Miya and I started adventuring together...

"We should go our separate ways, Note."

With an expression on her face that I'd never seen before, Miya bid me farewell in that coldhearted voice.

Where His Fate Led

I was completely worthless. It was only natural that Miya cast me aside. She wasn't to blame.

The root of the problem was me, after all. I was the one at fault. It was all because of me. Miya had done nothing wrong. If anything, she was a saint for hanging in there for fifteen long years.

I sneered at myself as I knocked back another drink.

It had now been six months since Miya left me, so I had an entire year of adventuring experience under my belt, all told. But in spite of that, I hadn't grown one bit. Here I was, drinking away my earnings for the day again... This had become a daily ritual for me, which only made me even more hopeless.

I was currently in a pub popular among adventurers for its cheap drinks, sitting with the party I'd joined for the day's job.

You see, after parting ways with Miya, I wandered from odd job to odd job without settling in with a fixed party. It doesn't sound so bad to put it that way, but the simple truth is that there was no place for me. I don't have a combat skill to my name, just useless Mapping. No one wanted me. No one welcomed me. And in return, I hardly bothered to learn people's names.

It wasn't like I was trying to push people away. I just kept my distance and did my best to make a name for myself in the adventurer scene here in town as I moved from party to party. You never get any work with a bad rap, after all. Especially not if you're a loser like me.

Things would have been much easier for me if I hadn't chosen to become an adventurer... But I couldn't do it. I couldn't give up on my dream.

After losing Miya, I felt like I'd have nothing left if I let go of becoming an adventurer too. And that terrified me. So I choked everything back and forced myself to keep going... That's how I'd managed to get this far.

There were times I'd been cursed for my uselessness. Times I'd swallowed my

pride and taken jobs carrying luggage and gear for other parties like a pack mule. After Miya left me, I didn't have a use for dignity anymore anyway.

And that was why I chose to drown my woes in booze like this after work. Oddly enough, casually drinking and chatting with my party members du jour was a good way to make connections and score more invites on odd jobs. Telling the tale of how I'd pulled Mapping and been abandoned by my childhood friend was always a big hit over drinks, too. Everyone loves a sob story.

So before I knew it, the sad story of my life became my go-to story to share. Some people burst into laughter when they heard it. Some expressed their pity. Some even cried for me. But in truth, I didn't care how they reacted so long as they listened to me.

Because the person I really wanted to talk to was no longer around. That killed me more than anything.

What would Miya think if she saw my deadbeat ass right now?

Doubts like that filled my head every night. Would she burst into laughter too? Would she feel sorry for me? Probably neither. Why should she feel anything at all? She cut me loose long ago. She abandoned me... No, that wasn't right. I drove her away.

It was half a year ago now...

"We should go our separate ways, Note."

Miya had said she wanted to talk, and she dropped that as soon as I sat down.

"..."

Even if I'd wanted to reply, my throat didn't cooperate. I'd had a feeling that moment would come one day. I'd known deep in my heart of hearts... I had relied on Miya too much.

Pulling a trash-tier skill like Mapping was the end of the road for me. That singular thought kept me from putting effort into anything. In a sense, I'd already given up on our dream of becoming top-rate adventurers together.

For the first month or so of adventuring together, I tried to put my heart into it but quickly lost motivation. It felt like there was no point in someone like me even trying. After seeing Miya's abilities for myself, it crushed me to see her soar to heights I could never hope to reach. She worked so, so hard for my sake... and that broke me.

I tried not to let it show, but Miya had always had sharp senses. She probably realized I'd given up inside. That I was trying to fool her into thinking otherwise. I kept up the charade for five more months, and Miya kept playing along.

But no relationship like that lasts.

There wasn't any particular incident. No straw that broke the camel's back. It was just a weight we both carried. If something *had* happened, if Miya had said something... maybe I could've fixed myself. Maybe we could've saved our relationship.

But Miya was too nice. She didn't say anything. She just kept silent... until she couldn't anymore. Until she broke too.

I knew that day would come. My brain told me it would, but my heart just wouldn't listen.

I don't really remember what happened after that.

No, that's not true. I remember; I just don't want to. So I can say it's all a blur, right?

The only thing I remember clearly is that Miya was crying as she left. Probably because of the words I spat out in spite. I really am the worst. Utterly pathetic.

That's my greatest regret. If I couldn't be worthy of Miya, I at least wanted to see her off with a smile. I wanted my last memory of her to be her beautiful smiling face. But a loser like me couldn't even manage that.

I'll probably never see her again.

Miya left here—an adventuring town called Broad—as though she were fleeing. Someone of her caliber should have no trouble getting work as an adventurer, even in the highly competitive royal capital. She could honestly

reach the top of the adventuring world. She'll probably end up so famous that the entire kingdom knows her name one day.

Miya wasn't just strong; she was beautiful too. With her stunning looks, the whole world would fall in love with just one glance. Everyone would want to get to know her. Get to know her story...

A story that I won't be a part of.

*

The day started like any other. It was a perfectly normal morning. I was at the local guildhall looking to take an odd job or two with a party that needed some help.

Little did I know things were about to take a very unexpected turn...

"Hey, do you have a moment? Are you Note Athlon?" a guy called out to me.

It came out of nowhere. In surprise, I whipped around to see a young man who was slightly taller than me. He looked like he was probably in his early twenties, with short, white hair and dark, narrow eyes that made him look calm and collected. His voice was gentle, too. Easy on the ears.

But contrary to that impression, he was clad in black from head to toe. Based on his equipment, he seemed to be a thief or assassin.

"That's me... Did you need something?"

I hadn't seen this guy around the guildhall before. Wary that he already knew my name, I responded to him cautiously.

He seemed completely unfazed, however.

"Yeah, I've been looking for you. You, the guy with the Mapping skill."

To be honest, I had no idea what was going on. He was looking for me because I had Mapping? Why? Why did he want to talk to someone with such a notoriously terrible skill? Was it to make fun of me? Was this some kind of scam?

Question after question ran through my mind, and it seemed this guy could

read the confusion on my face.

“I’m serious. I’ve been looking for you because I believe Mapping can be useful.”

“You think Mapping can be useful?”

I know it doesn’t sound good coming from me, the guy with the skill, but I highly doubted that was true.

Mapping could be convenient at times, but for all intents and purposes, it was worthless. Both World Map and Area Map were better skills. Hell, any skill would have been better. I’d had Mapping for a year now, but I felt the same way about it that everyone else did—it was trash.

“Yeah, that’s right. We need your skill.”

“‘We’?”

My list of questions was only growing. How could there be other people besides this guy who needed my skill?

“Come to think of it, I haven’t introduced myself yet. I know I said ‘we,’ but the others aren’t here right now,” he said, scratching his head. “The name’s Jin, and I’m with a party called Arrivers.”

Arrivers?

Even a newbie adventurer like me knew that name. They were a famous party that specialized in dungeon diving.

Wait, what are dungeons, you ask? Dungeons are mysterious spaces that exist outside the logic of our world. Only a dozen or so have been discovered. Their entrances lay on the surface of this world, but anything beyond their gates is unbound by the laws of physics. Vast worlds unfold past them, filled with extremely powerful monsters the likes of which the surface has never seen. In short, dungeons are said to be deep hellholes that even top-tier adventurers often don’t come back from.

That’s why few adventurers are even willing to consider dungeon diving in the first place, but there are a handful who can’t help themselves. Why? Pure profit. The returns on dungeon diving are sky high thanks to materials, magic

artifacts, weapons, and other loot that can't be found anywhere else. Not to mention the rumors of the treasure that lies in the deepest depths of dungeons... A treasure that no one has yet to reach. A treasure some say was made by God.

Adventurers all like to talk a big game about dungeons, but the only ones who really went for them were elite, experienced parties. And of those elite parties, the Arrivers were said to be the closest to actually completing a dungeon.

That made what Jin was saying completely unbelievable under normal circumstances. It was hard enough to buy that I was talking to a real Arriver, much less that he needed me. For a less-than-third-rate adventurer like me, dungeons were out of the question. The thought of entering one had never even crossed my mind.

Nevertheless, Jin looked perfectly serious. He even offered his hand, reaching out as if to brush away my concerns.

"So, Note, if you're interested, will you join our party? Consider this a formal invite."

Yeah, nothing about this was normal.

I wanted to change myself. I wanted to change my life. More than anything, I wanted to be free of this unproductive misery. And that left me with no choice but to take Jin's hand...

That day, my fate took another great turn.



The Story of Soon-to-Be Comrades

The day after Jin approached me, we left Broad and set out for the town of Puriff. Puriff was home to the Arrivers' headquarters, as well as the only dungeon in our kingdom—simply known as the Dungeon of Puriff.

Puriff was located in the southwestern region of the kingdom, and it prospered thanks to the flourishing dungeon-diving business and the economy it generated. Really, the thriving town could more accurately be described as a city. And to be honest, this was my first time going anywhere so big. It left me feeling a little nervous. Somewhat restless.

Miya and I were born in the small village of Changs, where we lived until we were fifteen. Needless to say, Changs wasn't terribly well off. It didn't even have its own divine slate. We'd had to travel to a bigger town for our presentation ceremonies. Miya and I were the same age, but she was older than me by a month. She'd waited for me to turn fifteen too so we could set out together for Broad, where we obtained our skills and first became adventurers.

"So, what's Puriff like?"

Jin and I had a few hours to go before we hit Puriff. It wasn't all that far from Broad, but getting there still took time. And it didn't feel right to spend the whole carriage ride in silence, so I tried to strike up a conversation.

"It's a bustling place. I've only lived there for a few years myself, but I'm pretty fond of it."

Bustling, huh? I wasn't worldly enough to even imagine what that was like. But more importantly, if Jin lived in Puriff, that meant he'd gone pretty out of his way to come find me in Broad. I wondered why...

No sooner than the question popped into my head, Jin politely answered.

"That's just how badly we want a member with Mapping. When I heard an

adventurer from Broad talking about you, I came running to find you.”

I wonder who that adventurer was... I’d shared my sob story with so many people, I didn’t have a clue who Jin was talking about.

“Is that... really okay? With you gone, that must mean the Arrivers have suspended their activities for the time being, right?”

“No worries. Our tank dropped out of the party, so we can’t make any progress right now without someone to hold aggro anyway. So, we’ve been looking for a new tank while trying to track down someone with the Mapping skill.”

Yeah, that didn’t sound like things were okay at all. The Arrivers were down members...

“Why do you need someone with Mapping anyway?” I asked.

That was the question that had been bothering me the most. It’d been on my mind since yesterday morning, but I hadn’t really had a good chance to ask about it in detail until now.

“Dungeons are full of monsters so strong that people call them ‘adventurer reapers,’ but that isn’t the wall our party hit,” Jin explained.

He went on to tell me that dungeon interiors are several times larger and more complex than I could ever imagine. The early floors that had already been mapped by pioneers posed no problem, but the uncharted middle floors were a challenge to navigate. Apparently, constantly having to check their current location made dungeoneering both exhausting and inefficient—and that’s why they were searching for someone with Mapping.

That much made sense to me but begged a new question entirely.

“In that case, wouldn’t it be better to find someone with World Map or Area Map?” I asked.

I thought that much was only obvious.

While fewer people had it because it was an ultra rare skill, World Map was superior in every way to Mapping. Area Map was comparable, but took up fewer slots and therefore allowed for another useful skill in someone’s skillset.

In other words, Mapping was trash. That was the opinion of society at large, and I had to say that I agreed. Jin, however, grinned like he'd been waiting for me to ask why he was interested.

"Do you know the exact descriptors of World Map and Area, Note?"

Of course I didn't. People received their skills privately so that no one would know about them. Miya had allowed me to stay in the room when she prayed to the divine slate, but that was a standout exception. Normally, people did everything they could to safeguard the details of their skills.

As such, I shook my head in response to Jin's question.

"This is how the slate describes World Map and Area Map. I got these from cross referencing past records and descriptions from people who have the skills. Which was no small feat, mind you," he explained as he handed me two pieces of paper.

World Map

Rarity: UR (Ultra Rare)

Slot Cost: 3

Effect: The ability to map every point in this world and store it as knowledge.

Area Map

Rarity: R (Rare)

Slot Cost: 2

Effect: The ability to map a kilometer radius of this world around oneself and understand it as knowledge.

They read almost exactly as I'd expected. They really were superior versions of Mapping...

"Here's my next question for you, Note. Do you remember the precise description of Mapping?"

I couldn’t say that I did. I’d been so shocked at the time that I hadn’t even thought about writing down the description of such a crappy skill. You could check your skills again anytime you went to pray at a divine slate, so I didn’t think many people bothered to write them down in the first place.

So once again, I shook my head in response to Jin’s question.

At this, he took out another piece of paper and said, “Here’s a transcription of the Mapping skill.”

I scanned it over.

Mapping

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 3

Effect: The ability to automatically map a kilometer radius around a previously traversed point and store it as knowledge.

Yeah, that was about right. The wording seemed a little bit different, but that was probably just because it was a transcription.

“So, Note, does anything catch your eye looking at the three of these side by side?”

“Um... No, not really. Sorry.”

“That’s fair. I don’t think most people would see it, honestly.”

“Where should I be looking?”

“The key point here is the phrasing. Mapping is the only skill that doesn’t mention ‘this world.’”

I compared the three pieces of paper in my hands again.

“That’s true... But why is that important?”

“Have you ever heard that dungeons are otherworldly places?”

“Well, yeah...”

“In other words, they aren’t part of *this world*. That’s why they can’t be mapped via World Map or Area Map. But what about Mapping?”

With Jin’s prompting, I could finally see where he was going with this. But the idea that a trash-tier skill like Mapping actually had a use...

“You’re saying you think it’ll work in dungeons?” I asked.

Jin nodded in reply, and a cold chill suddenly ran through me. I got goosebumps. I felt exalted, like all the blood in my body had started pumping at once.

So there’s a way to use this garbage skill after all...

Mapping wasn’t inferior; it just had a specialized purpose. This discovery blew my mind.

“This is the first I’ve heard of this... If Mapping really has an important use like that, why do people think it’s such crap?”

“Because they don’t know any better yet. We only just discovered this by coincidence ourselves.”

“By coincidence?”

“Yeah. We were in the middle of an expedition when we came across the corpses of some adventurers. They were nothing but bones, so we could only assume they’d been there a good while. We wanted to hold a memorial, so we looked through their belongings for anything identifying... and happened to find several maps.”

He paused there to hand me one of them.

“The maps these adventurers had of the early floors are different from the ones we’ve got. They even had a map of the middle floors... And you can’t buy those anywhere. They’re not on the market. Here, look. This is a commercially available map, drawn by someone without the use of a skill.”

Jin handed me another map, and the difference was as clear as day. The dead adventurers’ map was drawn neatly with immense detail. It looked like the maps in my head did.

“And so, Note, we came up with a theory: what if this map was created with a

skill?" Jin hypothesized, pointing to the first map. "It's common knowledge among dungeon delvers that World Map and Area Map don't work, but when we looked into it, we couldn't find any records of anyone ever trying to use Mapping. It's probably never been tested because no one with Mapping is willing to go dungeoneering."

Yeah, that made sense. Mapping was notorious trash, after all. People who pulled it as a skill rarely went on to become adventurers, much less dungeon delvers. Moreover, Mapping was pointlessly rare, so not many people had it in the first place.

"That said, there presumably are some folks who *do* know, like the deceased adventurers we found and anyone else who might want to keep it a secret to maximize their profits," Jin added as a technicality.

"But from the sound of things, there's no guarantee that Mapping works in dungeons either. I mean, what if those adventurers were just really good at cartography? Or maybe they had someone with a new type of undiscovered skill," I rattled off possibility after possibility, unable to stop feeling anxious.

In response, Jin scratched at his cheek awkwardly.

"Well, I can't deny any of that. But we won't know until we try, right? Our current theory is that World Map and Area Map don't work in dungeons because of the 'in this world' clause. So I think Mapping *will* work... but I can't say for sure."

Yeah, I was kind of hoping for some surety there...

Jin and I spent the rest of our trip talking about things other than Mapping. He told me all about what the Arrivers did, and I shared my sob story with him. He didn't laugh or even crack a smile. He just listened with a serious expression on his face.

Eventually, some time later, we at last arrived at Puriff. Once we passed through the town gate, I was immediately overwhelmed by the bustle of things. There was so much I'd never seen before. Everything felt so new and different. There were rows and rows of market stalls, wide streets, and tons of people both on foot and in carriages. Captivated by everything, I followed close behind

Jin.

Before I knew it, he'd led me to a rather large building. The sign plastered across it said "Arrivers" in big, bright letters. It was... a bold statement, to say the least.

But it was here that Jin turned to me and said, "Welcome to our base of operations, Arrivers HQ!"

Seeing Jin's proud smile, I finally realized that this was really happening. I was really here on the Arrivers' doorstep. There was no turning back now.

No, I'd already known I was past the point of no return. Even if I turned back now, all that awaited me was more of the misery I'd be drowning myself in for the past six months. And I was done living like that.

This time... This time I would make it.

My short-lived adventuring career with Miya. The heartbreak that stopped me from keeping up with her... I never wanted to relive such hopeless, pathetic failures again.

Even if the Arrivers had abilities that surpassed Miya's, I'd follow them to the bitter end. I'd stick with them no matter what bloody battles lay ahead of us. If they needed me, I'd be there for them. I didn't want to let them down too.

This time, I'd work as hard as I could. I wouldn't give up. I'd do whatever it took.

That much I vowed to myself.

*

"Now that everyone's here, let's start with introductions," Jin announced.

At that, everyone in the room quieted down. I already knew Jin, of course, but three other people had gathered to greet me.

There was a guy with two swords hanging from his waist. His blue hair was styled in a flashy way that didn't really seem to suit him.

There was a girl in a black robe with long, silver hair parted into pigtails. Based

on her outfit, I was guessing she was probably a mage.

There was a little girl wearing a priestess's vestments... although it was more accurate to say *they* were wearing *her*.

And then there was plain old me, making for five of us in total. We were seated around a wooden table in the dining room of Arrivers HQ.

"So, like... Wh-What are you supposed to say in an introduction?" the little priestess stammered timidly.

Her eyes darted about as her voice trembled. I could see the faint sheen of a nervous sweat forming on her brow. I wasn't sure what was making her so anxious, but I was honestly glad she'd asked about introductions. I had no idea what to say either. I normally chose the safe route and just mirrored whatever the person before me said... Yeah, introductions were awkward encounters for people with no remarkable characteristics or skills.

"Let's see... How about everyone starts with their name, their role, and why they want to conquer dungeons? I think that's how we introduced ourselves when we first formed the party, too," Jin suggested, turning to the guy with the blue hair.

"Guess so," he replied bluntly.

The reason I want to conquer dungeons...?

A slight panic stirred in my chest. I had no problem sharing my name, and I didn't have a role in the party yet, so that wasn't an issue... But as for my motivations, I was at a loss. Why *did* I want to conquer a dungeon? Why had I agreed to join the party? Was it for money? Fame?

No. It wasn't anything like that. The reason I became an adventurer in the first place was much humbler. You see, when Miya and I were little, her parents would tell us stories of their days as adventurers. Miya would always look at me and say, "We should become adventurers when we grow up too!" And I took that seriously. That was it. That was all the motivation I'd needed. So there was no way I could come up with a respectable answer on the fly when someone asked me why I was here...

My panic must have been showing on my face. Jin stepped in and offered me

a helping hand.

“Okay, then let’s go clockwise starting from me. You can go last, Note.”

Phew... Thanks to him, I’d have time to think before it was my turn.

“I’m Jin. I don’t have a last name, so it’s just Jin. I’m the party assassin. And I’m here to make my mark on history, I guess.”

Make his mark on history? His ambitions were completely different from mine. Like, on a whole other level. I mean, he *was* a member of a top-tier party, after all. There was no way I could ever aim that high. I couldn’t mimic that for my introduction...

“Okay, I’m up next,” the guy with the blue hair said as he stood up next to Jin. “I’m Force Granz, the leader of the Arrivers. My reason for conquering dungeons is obvious! I’m in it for the fame, the fortune, and the women! ’Nuff said!”

Wow. He, uh... He really went and said that. That would have been enough to embarrass most people, but he said it with such gusto... Wait, was that even a valid reason for dungeon diving? Like, seriously? Kind of made me feel like a fool for thinking about it so hard.

I turned to the girls, who were watching Force with looks of resigned exasperation. Okay, so maybe it wasn’t a valid reason after all.

“This is precisely why you’re going to be single forever, Force,” the girl in the mage robes retorted.

She sure didn’t seem to have a problem speaking her mind...

“You just don’t get it, Erin. It’s not just me. *All* men think that way. Right, new guy? Admit it. You’re just in it for the ladies too, aren’t you?”

Please don’t put me on the spot like that...

Was I really dungeon diving... for a girl? Was it because I wanted Miya to see me in a different light? Because I wanted Miya to like me?

No, that wasn’t really it. The relationship I had with Miya was over already, and there was no undoing that. What had been broken could never truly return to its original form. Even if we reunited after I’d made a name for myself

conquering a dungeon, things would never be the same.

“I wonder...”

That was all I could mutter in response to Force’s question. Thankfully, however, the introductions quickly moved on.

“My turn next,” said the girl in the mage robes.

She was the one who’d come for Force a minute ago. I think he’d called her Erin?

The Arrivers all seemed pretty young, but this girl looked like she was the closest to me in age. The fine, silver pigtails that reached down to her waist were her most notable feature. Her face was on the cuter side, but her slanted eyes and sour expression made her seem rather stern. Maybe it was really just her sharp tongue that gave me that impression...

“My name is Erin Fortlord. For the record, I’m the party mage. I’m here to do what no man has done before to prove that I’m the best mage in the world.”

As I suspected, she seemed a little on the stony side. Proud, too. Her introduction was predicated on the idea that she was the best mage in the world, after all.

I felt a slight sense of aversion and a slight sense of jealousy. I’d never had that kind of confidence in anything. This girl was the polar opposite of a weak, cowardly guy like me. Maybe that’s why I didn’t really mind hearing her boast, honestly...

Once Erin was done, everyone turned to the young priestess who’d yet to introduce herself. The attention made her squeak and squirm in a panic.

“Go ahead, Neme. It’s your turn to introduce yourself,” Jin encouraged.

She then stood up across the table from me in a fluster, knocking her chair backwards behind her in a clatter.

“I’m Neme... Neme Pargin! I’m a p-priestess, and... um... I want to clear dungeons b-because they were said to be created by God!”

She was sweating buckets by the time she got through her introduction. Her cheeks were even redder than her auburn hair.

“Are you okay?”

I was worried about her, but...

“Y-Yes!”

All I got was that nervous response. She really didn’t *seem* okay...

“Listen, Neme’s really shy around strangers, so just be patient with her until she gets to know you,” Jin explained.

“N-Neme’s not shy! Neme’s just a little bad at meeting people for the first time!” the girl immediately refuted.

Based on how she spoke to Jin, it certainly seemed like she was comfortable with people she knew already. I guess that’s just part of being shy. What a cute little girl—

“Don’t get the wrong idea, new guy,” Force piped up. “She may look young, but she’s actually way older than us. She’s 22. Practically a grandma.”

“What?! No way!”

I couldn’t help my shocked reply. Neme, however, bashfully hung her head at my apparent surprise.

“I-It’s true. I’m a dwarf, so I look younger than I really am... Ooh, but you, Force! Neme isn’t a grandma! Neme’s a young woman!”

It was like a complete one-eighty with people she already knew. She was *definitely* shy. I decided to take the chance to apologize.

“I’m sorry I raised my voice, Miss Neme. I was just a little surprised.”

Hearing that, she suddenly started trembling with joy.

“At long last, Neme has a disciple to worship her...”

Okay, as it turned out, she was unexpectedly easy to win over. I could still feel some distance between us, but I was sure that would diminish over time.

While I was warmly watching Neme with a smile, however, Jin got the conversation back on track.

“Last is your turn, Note.”

“Uh...”

Uh oh. I’d gotten so distracted by Neme that I’d completely forgotten about introductions. I still had no idea what I was going to say. What was I supposed to do...?

Argh! Whatever! I was just gonna go with the flow and say whatever came to mind! It’d all work out somehow!

“I’m Note Athlon. Previously I was... more of a gofer than an adventurer, really. I have a sword, but I’m practically a beginner at using it, so I doubt I’ll be of much use there. As for the reason I want to conquer dungeons...”

I hadn’t planned what I was going to say, so what came out of my mouth ended up being the honest truth.

Between my dark past and my murky future, there was only one way to articulate my vague ambition. A wish I’d never fulfilled. Something I’d never been able to put into words.

“The reason why I want to conquer dungeons is... because I want to change myself.”

To anyone else, I was sure that didn’t make any sense. Yet none of the Arrivers laughed at me or mocked me. For even if we all had our different reasons, we shared the same goal.

“Great introduction, Note. Once again, welcome to the Arrivers!”

As someone who had always been searching for their place, hearing Jin say that made me truly happy.

First Time in the Dungeon

Puriff was surrounded by enchanted walls that were indestructible by normal means in order to keep wild monsters out. The magic used to maintain the enchantment was collected in small amounts from the residents of the town. Basic utilities like electricity and water were provided in much the same way. Consequently, towns with more residents were generally more secure and had better amenities.

As for Puriff, the entrance to the dungeon lay just to the right outside its southernmost gate. That made it the most popular gate among adventurers, as they all had to pass through it in order to get to the Dungeon of Puriff. And that included the Arrivers as we left town that day.

The dungeon entrance was inside a stone building overgrown with moss. The interior of it was so ancient and majestic that I couldn't even begin to imagine when it had been built. There was only one room, but it was gargantuan. In the center of it stood a perfectly transparent crystal the size of a person, and behind that along the back wall was a door made of the same stone as the rest of the building. This was the entrance to the initial floor of the dungeon, floor 1.

The crystal at the center of the room was a warp crystal that adventurers could use to teleport to any previously visited floor of the dungeon. All of the other Arrivers could get as far down as floor 15 already, but as someone who had never set foot in the dungeon before, I had to work my way there from floor 1. In other words, the Arrivers had to clear the introductory floors all over again because I'd joined the party.

Apparently, Jin and the others had decided that having a member with Mapping was worth the investment.

The door to the first floor of the dungeon opened into a fog that prevented us from seeing further in. Nervous about entering a dungeon for the first time, I

hesitated at the door... only to feel a push from behind.

“Wah!”

It knocked me off balance and I stumbled two or three steps forward. Once I regained my equilibrium, I got a good look at my surroundings. The space was dim and narrow, with what appeared to be rock walls on either side of me within arm’s reach. Looking ahead, I could see a black outline of the way forward.

My adventurer senses told me that we were in something akin to a cave. The chill against my skin and the mustiness in the air reminded me of the caves near Changs where I’d often gone to play with Miya as a kid. Those times were fun. No matter what we got into, Miya was by my side—

“Hey, Force! Will you please stop shoving me?”

“That’s what you get for just standing there. Stop being a pussy and move it already.”

Okay, so I *was* a little scared. But there was still no need to push...

“More importantly, how’s Mapping looking? Can you use it?”

“Yeah, it seems to work just fine.”

I had a clear image of our surroundings for a kilometer out in my mind. The narrow path we were currently following branched out ahead in countless directions like an ant colony.

“Good,” Force said brusquely.

The kind Jin patted me on the shoulder in celebration. Neme tried to high-five me, but chickened out halfway and pulled her hand back. It seemed we hadn’t closed the distance to being friends just yet. Erin, meanwhile, offered me nothing more than a single disinterested glance. But in spite of their different reactions, I could feel the encouragement coming from all of them. It was a warm feeling. A welcome one. Like I’d finally found a place to belong.

We’d originally come to floor 1 to test whether or not I could use Mapping in the dungeon, but we decided to stay and clear floor 1 to make progress on my

floor count while we were there. There was apparently a warp crystal at the entrance to every floor, so our goal for the day was to get me to the warp crystal on floor 2. That way, we could pick up from there next time.

We followed the dim cavern passageway with Jin in the lead, followed by Neme, Force, and me side by side. Erin was bringing up the rear. It wasn't any particular formation—just the order we'd ended up in as we were walking. Jin was navigating the shortest route possible with a market-bought map of floor 1, so it wasn't as though he didn't know where he was going, but...

This whole thing seemed a little too casual. The Arrivers were a top-tier party. That's what all the rumors said. But seeing them in action for myself... I couldn't help wondering.

Neme was happily humming to herself as she walked along, and Force had spent the entire time so far poking fun at Erin—who was whacking him with her staff in retaliation. They certainly weren't acting like we were in a deathtrap-filled dungeon. The parties I'd worked with in Broad were more serious than this.

I took another look around. Light blue crystals that I didn't know the name of were embedded in the stone wall here and there—they were what kept the cave dimly lit. It was just enough light to move forward, though I couldn't really see where we were going. As near as I could tell, nothing about this place really screamed "dungeon." There were luminescent crystals in caves on the surface too, and there wasn't anything particularly intimidating about winding pathways. All it took was a look inside of my head, however, to remind me that this was no ordinary cave.

Mapping revealed my surroundings in a kilometer radius in all directions, including vertically. That meant the maps in my head covered what was above and below us, even if it was underground. But my current map was blank in that regard. There was seemingly nothing either overhead or underfoot—not even floor 2 or the surface. It was a good reminder that dungeons existed outside of the normal world. Each floor was almost like a different plane.

"Everyone halt," Jin said, suddenly stopping and raising his hand. "Enemies are approaching from the path to the right. My Enemy Search is detecting six of

them, none of which seem to be especially strong."

Hearing this, the other Arrivers immediately drew their weapons and braced themselves for combat.

Or... At least, that's what I *thought* would happen. On the contrary, however, Neme was still humming to herself and Erin was holding back a yawn.

"Um... Shouldn't we be getting ready for a fight?" I couldn't help asking.

"It's fine. The monsters that spawn on floor 1 are no big deal," Force explained, stepping forward without hesitation. "I've got this. You guys can just sit back and watch."

He waved his hand as he passed Jin, who didn't stop him.

Ahead, figures appeared in the darkness. One at first, and then more. They looked about a head taller than me and much bulkier. The silhouettes of their arms were unnaturally long... Were they holding weapons?

As the shadowy figures approached, I got a better look at them. They... weren't people at all. They had asymmetrical horns growing out of their heads. And fangs. The look in their eyes was soulless, too. Moreover, their skin was strangely colored. It was hard to say what it really was under the blue light of the crystals, but it definitely wasn't white, tan, or black. It was more like red.

They looked like ogres. No, they *were* ogres. And they were carrying spears and axes. Yet Force continued to saunter toward them like he was on a stroll through the park—unarmed!

"...!"

I could hear myself gulp audibly. And not a second later...

Whoosh!

The six ogres launched a deft ambush, their spears and axes cutting right through Force... Or rather, where Force had just been.

As for Force, he was already on the other side of the ogres. It seemed the ogres had yet to realize it, however. They hadn't been able to keep up with his

speed. And he'd done this all without even drawing a weapon...

I would've been dead meat in his shoes. The ogres' assault was too swift. Standing there clueless, I would've gotten run through while they cracked my skull open too. I could feel a cold sweat beading on my brow.

The terror of the dungeon and Force's prowess... I'd just witnessed both firsthand. But while I was distracted by all that, Jin fell back beside me.

"That's Force's skill at work. Mind's Eye. It allows him to see through practically every attack. His other two skills are Major Magic Resistance and Superior Sword Mastery."

"Superior Sword Mastery..."

I inadvertently reacted to that word.

Superior...

Just like Miya's Bow Mastery, that was the highest rank of weapon-based skill you could get.

"Here I go!"

Of the two blades hanging from his waist, Force placed his hand over the white scabbard and drew a glittering silver blade.

After that, it was over in an instant.



A fine, elegant line cut the ogres down in the blink of an eye. All you could see was a flash of blade and six corpses falling to the ground. Honestly, I'd never witnessed anything so elite.

Force hadn't just taken down the ogres; he'd slain me too. I was floored. I knew I'd never reach his level. He was better than even Miya. If she was still developing her Superior skill, then Force had mastered his.

I was drawn in. I was envious. I was frustrated.

Dark feelings inside of me resurfaced, rearing their ugly heads just like they had when I used to watch Miya fight. But... something was different this time. Something had changed over the past year. I was used to it now. I was used to this despair. So... I didn't let it get to me.

That's right, I could still do this. I could still keep going.

*

After about an hour or so of walking, we reached the boss room of floor 1. There were countless crossroads leading up to it, but taking the most direct route possible had saved us more time than I expected.

According to Jin, the Dungeon of Puriff had been completely explored up to floor 6. Detailed maps of the early floors (drawn by adventurers without mapping skills) were readily available in town. Floors 7 and up, however, weren't so widely explored; you could only buy maps with well-known routes marked on them. Anything more comprehensive than that was produced independently by individual parties for their own use.

After the group took a bit of a breather, Force stood up and placed a firm hand on the door to the boss room, intent to proceed.

"Hold on a minute!" Erin barked, grabbing her staff and stomping over to Force.

"Hah? What gives?"

"Are you planning on defeating the boss *alone*? You're hogging all the limelight! Let us fight too."

“Hey, aren’t *you* the one trying to hog the limelight here? Trying to dibs the boss after leaving all the weak mobs to me? How sly.”

“I don’t recall ever ‘leaving anything to you.’ You jumped into all those fights of your own accord.”

“What did you just say...?”

The two of them stood there in front of the boss door, glaring daggers at each other. Neither seemed like they were going to back down.

Erin did have a point, though. Force had been quick to take care of all the monsters we’d encountered up until this point. Thanks to that, I now had a pretty good idea how strong he was... but I *was* curious about what the other Arrivers could do. Was Force carrying the party, or were they just as strong? Maybe even stronger?

“If possible, I’d like to see everyone else in action too...”

“Gragh, fine! Do whatever you want. But I ain’t helping anymore.”

Force reluctantly stepped away from the door. He then turned to Neme, the party priestess.

“I’m bored. Wanna play a word game?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, turning him down bluntly.

Force then glanced my way. I quietly shook my head.

Erin pushed open the boss door, which was emblazoned with an odd pattern. It was so massive that I’d expected her to have trouble getting it open, but it easily gave way under her hand.

Inside the boss room were over a dozen ogres like the ones we’d first encountered at the beginning of the floor; a similar ogre that was several times larger than the rest; and several winged demons, which we’d also been defeating along the way here. The first of the monsters to catch my eye was the giant ogre. He seemed like he was probably the boss. His aura was different from the other monsters’, exerting a sort of heavy pressure in the room.

While I was distracted by that, the door started to close behind Erin. We all

ran inside after her. The door then shut with an echoing thud behind us.

Meanwhile, Erin held fast at the front of the group. She stood in place as the tip of her staff began to glow.

“Black Thunderbolt!”

A roaring bolt of black lightning shot towards the demons to the right. And just as it made contact with its first target, Erin swung her staff to the left. The bolt swept left in a similar fashion, burning up anything in its path. This... This was magic.

Spells were arcane arts that relied on mana—the key fighting force of mages—otherwise known as magic. I’d wandered from party to party as an adventurer for a whole year, but I’d never seen a mage with such a grand, destructive spell before. Mages typically relied on compact, efficient spells to preserve their mana. If they went around casting wildly powerful spells all the time, they’d be out in a flash.

And yet... here Erin was, smirking as she stood before a room full of enemies. It seemed she was just as incredible as Force in that regard.

Her lightning spell danced through the room, striking the ceiling, the ground, and the walls, destroying everything in its wake. When it was finally over, dust rained down on the charred, smoking remains of the monsters.

“That should do it,” Erin declared, turning back to the group.

But when she did, a shadow appeared through the dust and smoke. No... Multiple shadows. Several demons had managed to survive Erin’s attack, and they were now headed straight for us.

“C’mon, Erin, you fire those spells of yours too willy-nilly. You totally missed the guys in the back,” Force announced as he casually folded his arms behind his head. He’d seen through her attack with his Mind’s Eye skill.

“What? No... S-Someone, stop them!” The smug expression on Erin’s face quickly changed to one of panic. “I forgot we didn’t have a tank! Th-This is bad! Do something, Force!”

Despite her fluster, however, Erin was accurately shooting down the charging

demons one by one with magic lightning. It seemed like she was getting the upper hand. At least, it did until the smoke cleared... revealing that the giant ogre was still standing too. It was singed here and there, but otherwise still looked raring for a fight. Numerous charred corpses lay at its feet—the bodies of the other ogres, I presume. They had probably shielded the giant from any serious damage.

So, yeah... I had to agree with Erin right about now. Things were looking kind of hairy. I turned to Force, who was standing beside me, but he wasn't panicked at all. Instead...

"Sorry, Erin. A man that doesn't go back on his word. And I said I ain't helping."

Instead, he seemed frustrated. He was irritatedly tapping his foot on the floor. His tough-guy talk was all clearly an act. He was just messing around with Erin.

"You want to talk about manliness?! A *real* man doesn't abandon a lady in distress!" she shouted.

Even with the demons approaching, the two of them kept up their banter. I guess they were pretty good friends after all.

Erin continued to snipe down the demons with cold precision as she shouted at Force, but she couldn't keep them all at bay. Two swooped at her, too close for comfort. She managed to incinerate one of them, but the other...

The other was torn apart by a pitch-black shadow. Its wings fell to the ground first, and its torso splattered after them in three pieces.

It all happened in a matter of seconds. And that shadow? That was Jin.

He landed gracefully after his fierce assault. He then dashed off towards the giant ogre, leaving a shadowy trail behind him like a slithering black snake. The ogre reacted immediately. It swung its club at Jin with so much force that it was practically just slamming it downward.

Jin readjusted his grip on the black dagger in his right hand, holding it backwards to parry the giant's club. The blade then... swerved? What?

"Hey... Did Jin's dagger move just now?"

I saw it. I was sure it did. That was no trick of the light—his dagger blade had *moved*. Unable to process what my own eyes had witnessed, I couldn't help asking about it.

"That's his skill," Force answered with a laugh. "It's called Mineral Shapeshifting. It allows him to manipulate the form of anything made outta minerals. See, Jin uses it to control his dagger freely when he fights."

"Is that even possible...?"

Shapeshifting skills were famous for their usefulness when it came to crafting. People with Mineral Shapeshifting became revered blacksmiths and miners. You hardly ever heard of them becoming adventurers, because Shapeshifting skills weren't particularly useful in a fight.

Yet by the time Force answered my question, the black blade that stretched from Jin's right hand had landed consecutive hits on the giant ogre. It bobbed and weaved through the ogre's attacks, slicing the monster up as it went.

It was like Jin's blade was alive. It was moving like it had a mind of its own.

"Jin doesn't have powerful skills like me, Neme, and Erin. But he has more experience than all of us put together. The bastard's cheated death countless times. That's how he was able to polish a crafting skill into a top-tier battle skill. He really is something..."

The giant ogre wasn't weak by any stretch of the imagination. But Jin made it look like it was. He finished it off in the blink of an eye, leaving only a wound-riddled corpse in his wake.

Force had said that Jin's true power came from what he'd been through. What he'd survived. If that was true... What would I have to overcome to reach Jin's level?

I had no idea what that answer would be or what lay ahead of me.

A Promise Made in the Kitchen

After I cleared the first floor with the Arrivers, we returned to the surface via the warp crystal on floor 2. The sun had set while we were in the dungeon, and the town of Puriff was filled with a different kind of bustle as night set in. We made our way through the busy streets that led back home.

Despite how big HQ was on the inside, the door wouldn't let all five of us through at once. We each waited our turn to remove our shoes and go inside.

"I'm tired... Can I take a bath first?" Neme piped up.

For the record, she hadn't done much in the dungeon today. She just followed along with the group. No one had gotten injured, you see, so the party healer spent the whole day benched. As such, I didn't know why she was so tired... But as the newest member of the party, it wasn't my place to say anything.

Neme tottered off towards the bathroom. Because she looked so young, it made everything she did appear childlike.

"I'll go organize the day's loot," Jin said, heading upstairs.

The first floor of HQ included all the common areas—the living room, the dining room, the bathroom, *etc.* The second floor of the building housed everyone's private quarters.

So, once Jin went up to his room, Force, Erin, and I were the only ones left standing in the entryway.

"All right, I'm heading up to my room too. Dinner's all up to you, Miss Erin the skilled chef!"

Force slapped Erin's shoulder as he walked past, laughing to himself all the while.

"Oh...? Are you a good cook, Erin?"

Erin grimaced when I asked her that.

"Not *good*. Just average..." she muttered, averting her eyes.

“Come to think of it, you don’t know about everyone’s skill yet, right?” Force interjected, turning back around as he was just about to go up the stairs. “This is a good opportunity to fill you in.”

“It’s true that I only know yours and Jin’s...”

“Yeah, I’m sure Jin told you already, but my skills are Superior Sword Mastery, Mind’s Eye, and Major Magic Resistance. As for Jin, I told you about Mineral Shapeshifting already, but he’s also got a skill called Shadow Runner that allows its user to dramatically increase their speed for a brief time. Shapeshifting’s a two-slotter, though, so that’s all he’s got.”

“What about Neme? I didn’t get to see her in action in the dungeon today.”

“She’s got a three-slot skill called Saint’s Authority, so she’s a one-hit-wonder like you, Note. ’Cept her skill is nuts.”

“So it’s super strong?”

“I don’t know the exact details myself, but it increases her holy powers, allows her to use original spells, and a buncha other stuff. And as for Erin—” Force stopped cold as he turned to look at the mage in question.

“Yeah, yeah. Keep flapping your jaws,” Erin muttered with a nasty look.

Force ignored her and continued, “Superior Mana Pool, Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude, and...”

“And...?”

“Minor Cooking.”

“Minor Cooking?!”

I couldn’t help raising my voice in surprise. That was a completely unexpected combination of skills.

“I know! Hilarious, innit? Cooking! C’mon! You can’t help but laugh, right, Note? I mean, how are you gonna top off two of the strongest magic skills there are with a freakin’ *cooking* skill in your last slot! And *Minor* Cooking, at that!”

“H-Hey! Don’t—pfft—make me laugh too!”

Unfortunately, Force’s unrelenting teasing was exactly my kind of humor. I

could barely catch my breath long enough to stop laughing. And if looks could kill... he and I both would've been dead on the spot. Erin was furious.

"Meet me out front, right now! I'll beat you *both* into a pulp!"

"No thanks! Forget that! I'm headed up to my room, so good luck with dinner, Miss Minor Chef!"

"Come on, Force! I said—pfft—knock it off!"

"You're both getting yesterday's cold leftovers for dinner."

"W-We're very sorry..."

Force and I apologetically hung our heads. He then made a break for it up the stairs, not wanting to make things worse. The coward...

That left me alone with Erin by the front door. Awkwardness hung in the air. Well, half of that was my fault. But the other half was definitely Force's fault. Actually, it was more like 70 percent his fault.

"Um... Can I help out with dinner, maybe?"

In an attempt to make things less awkward, I offered to lend a hand. I didn't particularly have anything to do even if I retreated to my room, and definitely did *not* want cold leftovers for dinner.

Actually... there was more to it than that. When I adventured with Miya, I always left the cooking to her. It wasn't until she left me and I started going from party to party as a glorified errand boy that I started cooking for the first time.

Basically, I'd gotten a late start... A late start caring. A late start trying. Everything.

It hadn't been long since I'd started cooking for myself, so I wasn't very confident in my skills. But it was better than nothing, compared to those days where I relied on Miya for everything. Behind my offer was a drive never to fall into that kind of failure again. But my proposal was seemingly attractive to Erin, who knew nothing of my real motives.

"Thanks... Follow me, then," she said as she turned and walked off.

I followed her into a tidy kitchen. Like the rest of HQ, it was rather roomy. Even with the two of us in it, it didn't feel cramped at all. I guess this is how a top-tier party lives... The Arrivers were known for their work in the Dungeon of Puriff, which was considered by many to be a fountain of wealth. I couldn't begin to imagine what kind of money had gone into making their party headquarters.

"Here. You can help chop these vegetables."

"Okay..."

Erin gathered some vegetables and rinsed them off before handing them over to me. After asking her where I could find a cutting board and knife, I got to chopping.

"..."

"..."

Erin and I worked away in a heavy silence that only grew louder with each echoing chop of my knife. Unable to bear it any longer, Erin finally spoke up.

"So, Note... Jin told me you're sixteen."

"Yeah, I am."

"I am too."

"Oh, so we're the same age..."

"Yeah. So, like... you don't have to act so stiff around me."

"I understand— I mean, okay. Are you sure, though?"

"Yeah. I'm more comfortable this way."

"..."

"..."

The conversation came to an end, and we fell back into awkward silence. I knew it was my turn to talk about something, but I felt like I'd gotten worse at talking to girls...

It was probably after what happened with Miya. I just felt more reluctant

around girls my age. I didn't used to be like this. I never had any trouble talking to Miya, after all.

Perhaps I was just wearing rose-tinted glasses.

Miya and I were practically the only kids in Changs. There *were* no other girls my age there. So... I didn't really have a lot of experience in that regard. Maybe Miya had just always been especially considerate of me, putting me at ease when I was talking to her.

Which meant... I was always bad at talking to girls, huh?

I continued to work away in silence, lost in my thoughts. It was Erin who finally spoke up again when she was done filling the cooking pot with water.

"You know, I was against you joining the party," she said as she set the pot on the stove. She then lit the burner underneath it and turned it to high, letting the flames lick upward. "Did you know dungeon-clearing parties usually have six members?"

I shook my head in response. My hands had already stopped moving, and it felt like my throat was frozen stiff too.

"Only six people can enter the boss room at a time. That's why dungeoneering teams tend to limit their numbers."

"I see... I had no idea..." I said, finally managing to eke out a few words.

"But we only have four, you know? Before our tank quit, there were five of us. It was when we started talking about the possibility of recruiting that Jin suggested finding someone with Mapping," Erin continued as she worked, now reaching for the vegetables I'd chopped. "I was against it. I didn't want to add any dead weight. I wanted six strong members in our party... But I understood where Jin was coming from. At present, we're having more trouble finding our way in the dungeon than we are fighting monsters."

"And so you agreed to it?"

"Yup. I was the only one who wasn't on board in the first place. Everyone else thought that, as strong as we are, carrying one person wouldn't be a problem. But that's not how I see it. Just having one person hold the party back can

poison the whole group dynamic.”

Erin was right, and I knew it painfully well. That was exactly what had happened between me and Miya. Of course, Erin had no way of knowing about that. She had no idea that hearing her say all of this was like torture for me.

“I’m sorry...”

An apology slipped my lips, though I wasn’t sure who it was really meant for. Was it Erin? Or was it Miya, who wasn’t even there?

“It’s nothing personal, just so you know,” Erin replied, brushing off my apology. “Since you’re an adventurer, you’re already way more useful than anyone else with Mapping... We’d even considered hiring a regular citizen to accompany us for a while.”

I have to admit that I wasn’t really listening to Erin anymore. Her words had stirred something inside me that I’d hoped to keep quiet.

“But I wasn’t having any of that. I couldn’t accept bringing along someone who was both useless *and* a burden. So... Jin will probably fill you in after dinner, but for the time being, we’ve all agreed on training you up. We’ll protect you for now, but there’s no guarantee we’ll be able to on future floors.”

There, Erin stopped what she was doing and turned my way.

“The training’s going to be rough. But if I ever see you resign yourself to being a burden...”

Her piercing gaze cut right through me.

“I’ll kick you out of the party myself without mercy.”

Those were her true feelings; she really, honestly meant it. I fought the urge to shrink away, and instead replied with my own feelings as honestly as I could.

“I’m not interested in riding anyone else’s coattails.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that. But I’m going to hold you to it.”

Erin’s words sounded harsh at first, but I was fairly certain they came from a place of kindness. Maybe I was expecting too much. But... surely if she really didn’t want me here, she wouldn’t have bothered to warn me like this.

“You have my word, Erin. It’s a promise.”

A promise to both of us...

The truth was that I hadn’t needed Erin’s warning. I had no interest in repeating my past mistakes. I never wanted to betray the people who believed in me, like I had with Miya. Never again.

That’s truly what I promised myself.

*

After dinner, the Arrivers all gathered in the living room to discuss future plans.

By the way, the meal Erin made was reasonably tasty. I guess that was to be expected for Minor Cooking. I thought my honest opinion would make her mad, however, so I raved about dinner to her face.

“All right, let’s get started,” Jin announced as he stood up. “Everybody other than Note has heard this before, but let’s go through it again just to make sure we’re on the same page.”

In the half-day since I’d joined the Arrivers, Jin had been the one running the show. Force had proclaimed himself to be the party leader, but it was Jin demonstrating real leadership.

“For the next six months, the Arrivers will be suspending dungeon activities. Instead, we’re going to focus on training Note up.”

“Huh?” I gasped.

And I was alone in my surprise. Looking from left to right, I could see that everyone else had indeed heard this before... leaving me the only one baffled.

“Dungeon diving is demanding on time and resources, so it’ll be difficult to juggle on top of your training,” Jin explained. “And it would be just as difficult to press on in the dungeon without you and Mapping, too. So for the next half a year, we’re all going to invest in your training.”

I had no idea I was that valuable to them. I mean, I thought I was going to be kicked out if I wasn’t of any use to them. In fact, I thought there was a chance

that was how this was going to go down.

In short, I'd come to see myself as a disposable pawn.

But the Arrivers were treating me differently. They were taking me in as a real member of the party, going as far as to invest in my training instead of jumping straight into the dungeon. That kindness weighed on me, making me feel pressure rather than happiness.

"Are you guys sure? Do you really want to spend half a year on an inexperienced stranger like me...?"

Those hesitant words that left my lips gave voice to my lack of self-confidence.

"We've calculated everything already, so you don't need to worry," Jin said with a small laugh, like he could see through me. "Besides, you're already more than we could have asked for, Note. You've got Mapping *and* you're already an adventurer."

Erin had said something similar. Mapping was rare enough that not many people had it in the first place. And as a three-slot skill, anyone who *did* have Mapping didn't possess any other skills—combat or otherwise. Because of that, Mapping users were rarely itching to embrace the dangers of becoming an adventurer.

"Moreover, you've got the ambition to go dungeon diving. We didn't want to force anyone who was reluctant to do that with us. But there's another reason too, Note..." Jin paused mid-sentence as the tone of his voice changed. "Actually, come to think of it, you haven't decided on a role yet, right?"

Roles were a simple way of classifying someone's fighting style. Adventurers and soldiers obviously relied on them, but lots of merchants and nobles dedicated themselves to certain roles too. A role, essentially, was a job.

In order to acquire spells or combat arts, you had to commit to a specific role. And that was a big deal. There were certain spells and arts that were even stronger than skills. We're talking the kind of power that easily could turn the tides of battle.

So, why hadn't I picked up a role yet? The answer was, well, because I

couldn’t.

In order to start learning a role, you had to register with the relevant guild first. And in order to do that, you needed a mentor. That was where I got stuck.

Role mentors were exemplars of their chosen fighting style. People with strong skills and good prospects for the future had no trouble finding mentors. And even people without good skills could hire a mentor, so long as they had the connections and capital for it.

But me? I had none of that. I was just a no-name kid from a little countryside village. No one was going to mentor me.

For the record, that was a problem Miya never had. With her virtually ideal skillset, it didn’t take long for her to get noticed. She’d had her choice of roles and role mentors. I doubted that I’d ever forget the frustration I felt back then.

“I’m sorry...”

I reflexively apologized to Jin, who began waving his hands in a fluster.

“No, no! We’re actually grateful for that. We would’ve felt bad asking you to change roles if you already had one. The paperwork is a nightmare.”

“Does that mean there’s a role you want me to take?”

“That’s right. Do you mind?”

“Not especially. I hadn’t decided on one for myself anyway...”

Hearing that, Jin clapped his hands together excitedly.

“We’d like you to take on the role of thief, then,” he said.

“Thief?” I repeated to be sure.

“You got it. We’re thinking of having you take a position similar to mine in the party, and the role best suited for that is thief. You could technically be an assassin like me, but considering the requirements for learning the arts, going with thief is easier for beginners.”

“A similar position...”

A scene from earlier in the dungeon flashed through my head. The battle between Jin and the giant ogre. He wanted me to do *that*?

Fortunately, Jin cleared up the misunderstanding quickly.

“Let me clarify. Specifically, I’d like you to take up a certain part of my job. See, my position in the party is twofold: using guerrilla tactics to take down our foes, plus detecting monsters and traps. It’s the latter that I’d like you to pick up, Note.”

“So you want a thief in the party for their detection arts?”

“Exactly. You’ll eventually learn combat techniques too, but for now, we’ll be focusing on the Enemy Search, Trap Detection, and Trap Dismantling arts—as well as raising your stamina, of course. Sorry, I know it’s asking a lot.”

So they didn’t even want me in combat... I mean, I’d figured as much, but actually hearing it was still kind of a shock. The whole reason I wanted to become an adventurer in the first place was all the stories I’d heard from Miya’s parents. Tales of formidable monsters and hard-fought victories...

When I saw Jin and the others fight in the dungeon, my heart soared. I was so overjoyed at the prospect of fighting alongside them. I yearned for it so, so badly.

But I understood Jin’s point all too well. Without a single combat skill, I’d never catch up to the other Arrivers even if I started training as hard as I could now.

I knew that, but I’d be lying if I told you that I’d accepted it. I knew how extraordinary the other members were. That was why I admired them, why I longed to fight like they did. But I needed to prioritize not being a burden to them before I could seriously think about that.

And so I suppressed my inner desires, steeled my nerves, and answered Jin.

“That’s fine. I’m happy to be given such an important role, honestly.”

“I really am sorry... I promise we’ll show you the combat ropes too once you get the hang of things. For now, though, let’s have you concentrate on the precision of those three specific arts. Enemy Search and Trap Detection should have great synergy with Mapping.”

It was said that Enemy Search and Trap Detection, which revealed the

positions of the monsters and traps ever-so-common in the dungeon, were compatible with mapping-type skills. If a Mapping holder used Enemy Search, for example, the position of any monsters in range would be reflected on their mental map.

“For the most part, I’ll be the one teaching you the arts. I can make lots of traps myself, but Erin will be helping out with the magical ones that are out of my league. Is that okay?” Jin asked, looking to Erin.

She snorted and curtly replied, “Fine.”

“Also, in order to build Note’s stamina... Force, could you take him along on your morning jogs?”

“Ugh, what a pain.”

Wait, was that a yes or no? I wasn’t sure...

“Eventually, Force, you’ll be the one guarding Note in the dungeon while he practices Enemy Search and Trap Detect without me.”

“Wait,” I interjected. “I’ll be practicing without you, Jin?”

“Well, yes... You see, I still need to find a member to fill the tank position.”

Of course. Jin was a busy guy. He couldn’t spend all his time babysitting me. I looked down, reflecting on my lack of consideration, when all of a sudden Force looked up as though he had a lightbulb over his head.

“Hey, why don’t *I* search for our new tank instead?” he asked.

“Absolutely not!” Jin, Erin, and Neme immediately shouted in harmony.

I had to wonder why they came down on him so hard, but Erin proceeded to make the reason quite clear.

“All you would go and do is try to recruit a cute girl for the party, wouldn’t you?”

“Hell yeah. What’s the problem with that?”

“The problem is that you’d take anyone so long as she was cute...”

“Of course I would! A cute girl’s gonna join the Arrivers, we’ll overcome all kinds of hardships together, and it’ll all lead to a bittersweet romance! Now

that's what I'm talking about!"

"You're absolutely shameless... You're why we need a new tank in the first place. It was your unrepentant sexual harassment that made Lyune quit."

Erin clutched her head in exasperation. Even the ever-smiling Jin suddenly looked exhausted. However, Force wasn't one to back down.

"That wasn't sexual harassment! It's called flirting! Y'know, the normal thing men and women do when they wanna get closer!"

"What part of checking to see what her underwear looked like in the laundry every day, trying to peep on her while she was bathing, and using *every* opportunity to touch her—*especially* her chest—is 'normal'?"

Yeah, that definitely crossed a line. My opinion of Force was diminishing rapidly.

"Okay, so *maybe* my desires got the better of me at times... But, hey, what's a guy gonna do? Y'know what I mean, right, Note?"

"No, that's disgusting."

Don't try to take me down with you, man. I never put a hand on Miya. I'm an upright, purehearted man, if I do say so myself. Even if... Even if I am a little bit of a coward.

"See? You're just a lech, Force," Erin hissed.

"Shut up! Unlike Lyune, you're just a flat-chested child with no charm!" Force shouted back.

"What was that? It sounds like you want to die today, Force!"

They continued to snarl at each other. I must have been delusional to think they were good friends...

"There, there. Calm down, Erin. Even your modest bust might mature someday. You can trust Neme, your older sister, on this one for sure!" Neme declared, raising her index finger with a smug look on her face.

Force and Erin looked down at Neme at the same time, basking in her innocent, childlike appearance. And then, in unison, they both cried...

“You’re one to talk, Neme!”

Training Begins

The following day, Jin took me to the thieves' guild to register my role. As for my mentor... Jin put down his own name.

Jin was technically an assassin, but assassins were essentially just advanced, specialized thieves. They derived all of their techniques and abilities from basic thief arts, so Jin would have no trouble teaching me.

And so, with all of that done, preparation for my training was complete. The matter of my role had troubled me for the past year, and seeing it resolved so easily left me with an unsettling feeling I couldn't describe. All I could do was shut it away in the depths of my heart.

I followed Jin along the game trail. He'd probably picked an easy route on purpose. The path was steady and well beaten, so keeping up with him was easy enough.

Jin and I were currently in the woods just north of Puriff. We'd completed my role registration that morning, then had lunch before heading out here. My eyes moved to the trees growing abundantly to our left and right, their trunks only as thick as my legs.

They call this a forest, but it's nothing like the forests I'm used to...

I grew up in Changs, which lay deep in the heart of a forest. So you'd think I'd be used to the woodlands... but the plants, the bugs, and the air here all seemed different. The forest around Changs was denser, darker, and more chaotic. In comparison, this place seemed hospitable. I guess it *was* right outside a bustling town.

Just as I was thinking that, Jin came to a stop. I followed his lead and did the same. We'd come to a clearing covered in short grass.

"All right," he said. "I'm about to teach you Enemy Search. But first, Note... what do you know about it?"

“It’s an art that thief and thief-based roles use that allows them to detect the location of monsters,” I answered honestly.

“That’s pretty much correct. To be more precise, however, it allows its user to detect not only monsters, but also humans and other harmless living creatures too.”

“Huh, really? I didn’t know that.”

“It’s not exactly common knowledge. Generally, Enemy Search is indeed primarily used to perceive hostile, malicious, or otherwise threatening creatures. Sensing harmless ones is a bit more difficult. Only people who sufficiently refine the art can do it, which is why most don’t even know it’s possible.”

“I see...”

I listened to Jin with great interest. When he was done with his explanation, he turned a keen eye on me.

“We’re going to train you up to that level, Note.”

“Huh?! That’s—”

I started to argue, but stopped myself. I was caught off guard by the words that were about to leave my own mouth.

“That’s impossible!”

That’s what I had almost said.

Damn it, what’s with me?

At this rate, I was going to be the person I hated forever. Nothing had changed from six months ago. I shook my head, and Jin consoled me gently.

“Don’t say that, Note. I’m sure it will come to you with practice.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll give it a try. So, how do I use Enemy Search?”

“You were an adventurer before, right? So you have experience facing monsters, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Now, when you were up against those monsters, did you ever feel a strange kind of premonition? Like ‘this one’s about to attack’?”

I tried thinking back. Back on my time with Miya, back when I went from party to party like a stray. As pathetic as it was, in all my days as an adventurer, I’d always been on the rear lines on standby.

Nevertheless, I’d felt something like that before. It wasn’t as clear as Jin described it, but it had been strong enough to get my attention several times.

When I nodded quietly, Jin continued.

“Enemy Search is like an extension of that instinct. First, you take the feeling you get from a monster that’s about to attack and project your sense for that outward. Do this repeatedly and you’ll gradually be able to detect monsters you haven’t yet found but have the potential to attack you.”

“And if I master that, I’ll eventually be able to detect harmless creatures too?”

“Exactly. A major determiner in what registers via Enemy Search is how much of a threat a particular creature poses to you. So it’s the perfect art for you to learn, Note,” Jin said with a laugh as he tossed his head to the side.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because you don’t have much combat ability right now, most monsters pose a serious threat. That should make it easier to detect them with Enemy Search and allow you to get the hang of things.”

“That doesn’t thrill me... Although when you put it that way, it makes perfect sense.”

“Sorry if I was being insensitive. But, honestly, I think it’s a wonderful advantage!”

“Anyway, can you show me how it’s done?”

I didn’t find Jin’s optimism particularly reassuring, so I changed the topic. Jin, however, answered me with a mischievous smile.

“I’ve actually activated Enemy Search already. You just can’t tell by looking at me.”

“I see. I hadn’t realized at all...”

“It’s an art that doesn’t require a particular gesture or phrase to activate. Now, let’s start with practicing by approaching a monster first.”

And so I began learning arts.

*

The next morning, I accompanied Force on his daily run in order to train up my stamina. In the dungeons, there were times even the Arrivers chose flight over fight. I needed to be able to keep up with everyone when it came down to that.

It was bright and early, and Force still looked half asleep as he started stretching. He had a major case of bedhead, too.

“We’ll be running outside of town, so stick close,” he said. “You won’t be able to defend yourself if a monster catches you straggling, right?”

We were set to do a lap around the perimeter of the town wall. That meant we’d be outside of the town’s protective barrier. Monsters were thus a very real possibility, and Force was right—I couldn’t defend myself.

I’d been an adventurer for a year now. My primary job had been “party pack mule,” so even if I didn’t have a lot of combat experience, I was at least confident in my stamina. I’d never been able to keep up with Miya and her skill-enhanced speed, of course, but I figured I was probably on par with Force.

Yeah... That delusion didn’t last for even thirty minutes.

“Wahahahaha! Damn, that’s just too funny!”

Force clutched his stomach as he rolled around cackling. He was laughing at me, of course. But I had no time to be mad right now. I was too busy rubbing my calves.

“Being attacked by a monster while you’re down with a leg cramp? *Hilarious*!”

It was no laughing matter, in my opinion. I’d really thought I was gonna die...

But in truth, I couldn't blame Force for laughing at me. I was able to keep pace with him at first, but the difference in our training became painfully clear around the ten minute mark.

Come to think of it, I'd carried plenty of heavy luggage before, but I'd never *run* while I was doing it... Too bad that realization came all too late.

When I pushed myself to keep running anyway, my leg cramped up on me. That was when a monster attacked, which Force had to drive away.

"You really are weak, Note..."

"..."

I wanted to argue, but I couldn't defend myself against the truth. It was frustrating, but I had to endure it.

"I bet you've never had a girlfriend before," Force quipped.

"Shut up! Screw you!" I shouted.

"Whoa! Note snapped!"

"So what if I've never had a girlfriend before?! What's wrong with that?! Besides, you don't have any room to talk, do you?!"

I was ranting before I knew it. There are some places you just *don't go*, dude. This was a sensitive subject.

In my case, I still hadn't gotten over losing Miya. So it wasn't that I couldn't get a girlfriend; I just didn't want one. That's what I told myself. But... somehow, the more I tried to comfort myself, the worse I felt.

"Jeez, sorry. My bad. Just calm down, man. As brothers in arms here, we should band together and form the Loveless Alliance!"

"What? I don't want anything to do with *that* alliance..."

"Join now and we'll waive the entry fee! No application required!"

"No application? That means people are accepted automatically, doesn't it?"

"You're a sharp one. The only way out of this alliance is to find love. So if you don't want anything to do with us, hurry up and get yourself a girlfriend already."

Force patted my shoulder in pity. He was a top-tier swordsman, but his real talent was pushing people's buttons. Really, it was almost impressive.

"Don't you worry! I'll find love before you do, Force!"

"Oh, you're on! I tell you what... Let's make things interesting. Whoever gets a lover last has to do whatever the winner wants."

"Fine by me. I'll hold you to that."

Honestly, I would have preferred making this kind of deal with Miya. After all, doesn't this usually play out with both parties laughing about how it turned out to be a tie when they get together in the end?

Wait, what the hell was I thinking? There was no way I was going to get a girlfriend like this.

*

After exhausting myself on a morning run with Force, a long afternoon of Trap Detection and Trap Dismantling training awaited me.

In order to practice these two arts, I was headed out of town with Erin and Jin. We were currently making our way to the south gate..

"Um, are we going to the dungeon?" I asked.

"That's right," Jin replied. "Trap Detection is similar to Enemy Search, so you learn it much the same way. That's why we're taking you into the dungeon to get some hands-on experience. Sort of like what we did yesterday."

Hearing that made my face twitch a little. Yesterday's training session, you see, was a complete bust. I hadn't picked up Enemy Search at all. I mean, I hadn't expected to learn it in a day, but it was still a bummer.

Jin, however, seemed to sense my unease.

"This should be much easier," he said reassuringly.

"How so?" I asked, unconvinced.

I couldn't help being skeptical. That was an awfully bold claim.

"Because you'll be actually setting off traps," Jin explained. "The more danger you encounter, the better you learn to protect yourself. That, in turn, makes it

easier to learn the art."

"Wait just a minute!" I shouted, waving my hands in a panic. "The traps in the dungeon would *kill* me!"

It was a well-known fact that most overconfident newbies in the dungeon fell to traps. Underconfident newbies too, actually. I wasn't interested in that.

"What are you saying?" Erin asked, rolling her eyes my way. "You'll *obviously* be setting off traps we prepared. We've made them weak enough that even you could survive them, so use this opportunity to practice your Trap Detection and Trap Dismantling. Besides, real traps don't show up until much later in the dungeon."

I wanted to ask one thing: *How was I supposed to know that?* I kept quiet, however. Asking would only start a fight. But just to be clear, I didn't back down because I was a coward. I avoided confrontation because I knew what was good for me. Trust me.

"Yeah, sorry. I may have phrased that poorly," Jin cut in, trying to defuse the situation.

I glanced over at Erin. She was staring at a banner hanging over a market stall that read, "Today only: 10% off!" She'd apparently already lost interest in me.

I was nearly about to complain, but thought better of it. See? I told you I knew what was good for me.

A Little Progress and a Long Way to Go

I took in a deep breath of cold air. It felt like my throat was on fire. Rubbing my eyes, I stared into the darkness before me. I was familiar with this darkness now. I'd been dealing with it for ten or so days back to back.

Although it was dark, the room wasn't pitch black. The walls, the ceiling, and the rock I kicked with my left foot just now all had a faint glow to them. But vision wasn't what mattered here. It was something akin to intuition. The darkness wasn't an issue when you had a sixth sense to rely on.

I came to a stop. Something was telling me I shouldn't take another step. Should I heed the warning?

I had to be wary. My instincts weren't always correct. I was wrong about a fifth of the time, but I decided to trust my gut here. It's what my intuition was telling me to do, and I listened.

I shuffled my feet to the side. There was no need to shuffle, really, but it felt safer that way. I took a step to the right and reached out my hand, making contact with damp rock. I'd hit the wall. That meant I couldn't proceed any farther to the right.

I took another deep breath to cool my burning lungs.

It's all right. I can do this.

Once I decided that, I started moving forward again.

"Tch."

"Um, why are you clicking your tongue, Erin?"

"Because I'm annoyed."

"Why are you annoyed that I avoided the trap properly?"

"I put a lot of work into making that, you know?"

What kind of a reason was that? I almost wanted to argue.

It had now been three weeks since I first began learning arts, and my Trap Detection training was proceeding smoothly.

It seemed Jin was right after all. After being caught in so many traps, I was developing a sense for them. I could generally discern their locations... although my Trap Dismantling still needed work. I would start focusing on that once I had a better handle on Trap Detection.

For now, Dismantling practice always came after Detection practice. I would take the traps I'd successfully avoided and try my hand at disarming them. At first, I'd just watched Jin work and tried to copy him. Of course, it wasn't actually that easy. I'd screwed it up almost every time, which landed me in a world of hurt.

I'd now gotten to the point where I could disarm the simplest of traps, but more complex ones were still over my head. Still, progress was progress.

"It took forever to make that Zappy Zap Electric Hell Trap. At least set it off properly."

What a terrible name...

Other traps Erin had made included the "Sticky Slime Horror Zone" and the "Rolling Boulder Everyone Dreams Of." I had to give her credit for her straightforward naming system, though. At the very least, you could always tell what the traps did.

"I guess I'll just have to use the trap I made *especially* to trip you up, Note..."

Nothing good ever happened when Erin said stuff like that. I was shaking in my boots at the calamity to come.

*

One day after spending the morning working on Enemy Search, Jin took me into the woods north of Puriff.

Exhaling a shallow breath, I started concentrating.

"I can feel three up ahead, as well as one back to my left and one straight behind me."

“Sounds right. Are you getting the hang of Enemy Search yet?”

My focus shifted back to my immediate surroundings when I heard that voice call out to me. I turned around to see Jin, who was dressed in all black as usual.

“Kind of...” I replied with uncertain honesty.

It was true I’d made a little progress, but only a little. I’d really been struggling to get a sense of enemies around me, but I finally had a vague feel for it.

Jin had casually mentioned at the start of my training that Trap Detection and Enemy Search were similar, so I couldn’t understand the disconnect. Why was Trap Detection the only art I was getting better at? Why did Enemy Search still elude me? What was the difference?

The answer suddenly came to me when I was washing my hair in the bath one night. It was fairly simple, really. The difference was that I was actually getting caught in traps. Experiencing that danger sharpened my survival instincts and awakened me to the art. That was all.

And I couldn’t say the same for Enemy Search. We were dealing with actual monsters, sure. They’d gotten close a couple of times too, but Jin always disposed of them before they posed any real danger. I suspected *that* was the key difference delaying my progress.

Once I’d figured out that much, the rest was easy.

If I wanted to progress with Enemy Search the same way, I needed to be willing to put myself in the same kind of danger. That was why I began acting like I was on my own. I ignored the fact that Jin was there and asked him to conceal his presence as much as possible. In the real world, I was dead if I missed detecting a monster. That was the kind of danger I told myself I was in.

As a result, I began to develop a sense for monster presences. I could now detect them within roughly a hundred meters. According to Jin, once I was good enough with Enemy Search, I’d easily be able to sense living beings within the kilometer radius of Mapping, whether or not they were hostile.

I knew I had a long way to go to get there, but at this rate, it was conceivable within the next six months. And that was a relief. So with that thought easing my mind, I proceeded deeper into the forest to continue training Enemy Search.

*

The bright morning sun seared my heavy eyelids. It hadn't been up long enough to warm the air, which chilled my shoulders. My whole body felt sluggish.

As for what I was doing up at this hour... More of the usual. My morning run with Force had become routine. We'd just finished our warmup exercises outside the town gate. However, there was one thing out of the ordinary today. We had an extra person with us: Neme, who was still sleepily rubbing her eyes.

"Why is Neme here again?" I asked curiously.

But I wasn't prepared for the answer Force gave me.

"Starting today, you'll be carrying Neme as you run."

"Huh?!"

"What?!"

It seemed Neme was just as surprised as I was. She looked perfectly awake all of a sudden, her wide eyes blinking in stupor.

"You remember why we're training up your stamina, right? So we can run from monsters when we need to?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, Neme's too slow to get away on her own, so Jin has to carry her. Just look at those short little legs of hers. She can run as fast as she wants, but she ain't getting anywhere on those."

"That's true..."

"How rude! I have beautiful legs!"

Yeah, beauty wasn't the issue here. Please stay on target, Neme.

Anyway, I'd finally gotten to the point where I could keep up with Force on our runs. But could I still do that while carrying a little girl?

I was uncertain, but I understood why Force was asking me to do this. I didn't put up a fuss as I kneeled down in front of Neme.

“Here you go, Miss Neme.”

I beckoned her to get on my back, but Force stopped me.

“No, not like that. You have to carry her like this,” he said, pantomiming throwing someone over his shoulder.

“Are you... being serious?” I asked.

“Dead serious,” he replied. “You think we’re gonna have time for this piggyback nonsense when we’re running from monsters?”

Fair point.

I looked down at Neme, who seemed to be used to this. She wasn’t fazed in the slightest.

But no matter what Neme looked like to me, she was still a grown woman. Was I supposed to ask her permission before I picked her up...? This was where my lack of familiarity with women really worked against me.

If I hesitated too long, however, I’d be in for some snarky comment from Force. I wanted to avoid that, so I closed my eyes and resolutely placed my hands around Neme’s waist.

Wow...

There was a gentle warmth to her that was unlike the heat you feel from a fireplace. I guess it was different for people who had lovers, but humans have surprisingly little physical contact with each other on a regular basis. In fact, in all my years of living, this was the first time I’d ever been so close to someone. It... sort of made me a little nervous. No, that was a lie. I was *really* nervous.

I put on a brave front and stood up. I staggered a little, but corrected my balance quickly. Neme was unexpectedly heavy. She was petite, but she obviously still had the heft of a person.

I was starting to worry if I could even run with her over my shoulder, but it was too late to second guess myself. Force had already turned his back to the sun and taken off running. He was considerate enough to go a little slower than normal, but I’d still have to chase him to catch up.

I steeled myself and put one foot in front of the other.



Several minutes later, we'd all come to a stop under unforeseen circumstances. I reflected on my failure as I rubbed Neme's back, trying to comfort her.

You see, carrying someone like this was a challenge. One that I had underestimated. I figured it would just be like running with a bag of flour over my shoulder, but in reality, Neme wriggled as I moved, shifting my center of balance. I'd nearly dropped her more than once.

And because I tried to treat her as a bag of flour as I ran, I'd ended up shaking her something violent. She could only take so much of being bounced up and down on my shoulder...

That was how we ended up with this tragic scene: Neme on all fours, heaving. I won't go into details for her sake.

"No more... Urgh... I still feel horrible... I never want to be carried again..."

I really felt bad. I used my handkerchief to wipe her mouth for her, but she glared at me with tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry..."

All I could do was apologize. According to Force, this never happened when Jin carried her. Another reminder of how powerless I was.

And that was just the start of my day.

At the End of a Blade

“Force? It’s time to get up!”

It was early that morning before the sun had risen. I was banging on Force’s door, trying to wake him up for our daily run... but the only response I got was a weak groan.

“...No way. Not today. Head hurts. Gonna pass...”

“What are you saying? Don’t be ridiculous, if you’re not feeling well, we can just get Neme to heal you.”

“Not the problem. I stayed up drinking, so I’m spent.”

“That’s right, you were out late last night... But you did this to yourself. So come on, let’s go already.”

“What’s a guy to do? Couldn’t turn down an invitation from a cute girl to go drinking.”

“At least try to come up with a believable excuse...”

“It’s the truth! I went drinking with a lady last night! Drinking! With a lady!”

“Don’t repeat yourself. It’s irritating.”

“Oh, is that jealousy I hear? How cute of you, Note.”

He had me there. I was a little envious, but if I let that show, he would only tease me more. I had to keep my cool and get him out of bed somehow.

“I’m going to break down this door, Force...”

“Damn, you must be *really* jealous! But I’m still not going. Take Neme and just go running in town where it’s safe.”

At this point, I had a feeling that even if I managed to get Force up, he was just going to drive me crazy talking about himself the whole time. And he had a point. If we stayed in town, we wouldn’t need him to protect us. I figured I might as well give up on him and do what he suggested...

At this juncture, I had no way of knowing that decision would end up being such a disaster.

“Nooo... I don’t wanna...” Neme complained from atop my shoulder.

I had forcefully dragged her from her room to come with me, which was why she was still in her child-sized pajamas. She had a crazy case of bedhead, too.

I’d ignored her protests and carried her out into town for my morning run.

“Force got to take the day off! I wanna take the day off too!”

She was slapping my back in protest, but her tiny hands didn’t hurt at all.

“Please, I’m counting on you. This is for my stamina training. Just hang in there for a little while.”

“No! Don’t wanna feel sick again!”

“But you said the ride’s been getting a little more comfortable recently.”

“Only a little!”

Neme whined like this whenever I carried her. My strategy was largely to ignore her. Eventually, she’d just give up and stop resisting. That was the usual pattern. Force’s laziness, however, had inspired a fire in her today.

“I wanna stay in bed like Force!”

She flailed her arms and kicked her legs, desperately trying to wriggle out of my grasp.

“Please stop moving. It just makes it harder to run.”

“No, no, no! I wanna go home!”

“No, you’re coming with me.”

“Nooo! Let me go, you pervert!”

“You can call me what you want, but I’m not letting you go.”

“Pervert, pervert, pervert! Let me go, let me go, let me go!” Neme wailed, hitting me with both her arms and legs now.

She was getting violent enough that it was actually starting to hurt.

“You there! Hold it!” someone suddenly called to me from behind.

“Huh? Can I help you?”

I turned around to see an armor-clad knight approaching. Based on the distinctive crest on his breastplate, I could tell he was part of the town guard. But... why did he look so serious? Had something happened in town?

“Unhand that child this instant.”

“What?”

The knight drew his sword and pointed it at me, lowering his posture into an attack stance. Wait, it was almost like he was about to— “You sure have some nerve, trying to abduct a little girl in broad daylight, you kidnapper!”

Oh, so *that’s* what was going on here.

I’d completely lost sight of the situation. Neme looked much younger than she actually was, and I was clearly carrying her off against her will. Moreover, I hadn’t been in town long, so no one recognized me as part of the Arrivers. So, in short, it looked like a little girl was being abducted by a stranger.

We normally ran outside of town, so I’d never really stopped to think about how this looked to anyone else. But, yeah, I had to admit that it must seem downright criminal. Neme had been kicking and screaming more than usual today, too. With how loud she was wailing, it was no wonder the town guard had come running.

A small crowd of curious onlookers had now gathered over the commotion. Other guards were approaching for backup, too.

“Wait, wait, wait. Hang on a minute. This isn’t an abduction. Right, Miss Neme?” I asked, turning my head to look at her.

Her eyes darted this way and that. Her lips trembled. With my arm around her waist, I could tell she’d broken out into a nervous sweat.

“Just look at her! She’s terrified! Release her immediately!” the guard shouted.

“No, you’ve got it all wrong!” I protested. “She gets nervous around people she doesn’t know! She’s just shy!”

“I-I-I am not shy...!” Neme stammered.

“You heard the girl! She says she’s not! Release her forthwith or I shall make you do so by force!” the guard barked.

Oh, come on, Neme! This wasn’t the time to deny being shy! It was only making things worse!

Crap... What do I do now?

I’d broken out into a nervous sweat at this point too, and all Neme could do was whine in distress. Was this the end of the road for me?

“For now, you’re coming with us. We’ll escort you to the station.”

The guard promptly seized me, tearing Neme out of my arms before handcuffing me. H-Hey! This wasn’t an escort! It was an arrest!

“Help me... Neme...”

The guards dogpiled on me, making it hard to breathe. I did my best to beg Neme for help...

“Hic...”

But all she could do now was cry. It looked like this would be the end of the road for me...

*

“All right! You can cool your head in here!” the guard announced, tossing me into a jail cell.

The handcuffs on my wrists prevented me from bracing properly for the fall, so I went crashing into the cold, hard stone floor. My elbow was screaming. Twisting my body, I looked up to see the guard walking away. He disappeared into the darkness of the corridor.

And so I, Note Athlon, 16 years old, was thrown into jail on suspicion of abducting a little girl. Who would’ve thought this is where I’d end up?

I’d been so frantically focused on my dungeon training that I’d somehow landed myself in the slammer. There really is no telling what the future holds in store for you. Pitfalls crop up when you least expect them.

As I was lamenting my fate, however, a high-spirited voice called out to me from the cell across from mine...

“Heya, kid! First time here?”

I looked over to see who it was. It was too dark for me to see him clearly, but I could make out the silhouette of a well-built man. Based on the gruffness of his voice, he was probably a fair bit older than me.

“Yeah, it is...” I admitted.

“I can tell from that nervous energy you’re giving off. Whadja do? A little bit of *this*? Or maybe some of *that*?”

He was probably making some kind of gestures, but I couldn’t make them out in the dark. Even when I squinted, I had no idea what he was doing. I was honestly a bit irritated at the overly familiar way he was talking to me, but I didn’t particularly have anything better to do. I decided to keep up the conversation.

“I was falsely accused of kidnapping a little girl...”

“Everyone who comes in here says they’re falsely accused. But you know what? Most of ’em are guilty. Really, there’s no such thing as a totally false accusation. Just be honest. If you can admit your own wrongdoing, they’ll go easy on you.”

“No, you don’t understand. I really am innocent.”

“C’mon. What’d I just tell you?”

I never should have said anything... I was filled with intense regret. I wanted to cry.

Realizing this guy would never believe I was innocent, I decided to change the subject instead.

“Why are you here, then?”

“Oh, you know, just a regular old fight. Had a scuffle with the bastard making a pass at my girl in the pub yesterday. Honestly, it’s my first offense. Who throws people in jail for that? Jeez...”

He’s only been in here since yesterday *and* he’s a first-time offender?! After carrying on the way he did, I thought he was a veteran.

“Hey, hold it right there, scumbag! I told ya she was *my* woman!” someone shouted from the cell beside mine.

I couldn’t see the guy thanks to the wall between us, but he was getting pretty heated by the sound of things.

“Uh... Who is that?” I asked the man across from me.

“The bastard I slugged,” he answered bluntly, approaching the bars of his cell.

“The hell are you on about, dumbass?! I’ll have you know Roslia is going out with *me*!” the man in the cell next to mine yelled.

The shouting made me instinctively shrink back, but the guy in the cell across from me was unfazed.

“I could ask you the same thing! Roslia’s in love with *me*, you mistaken fool!”

“What was that?! I’ll end you right here and now!”

“I’d like to see you try!”

My neighbors continued to threaten each other. I decided I didn’t want anything more to do with their dumb fight. Might as well get some sleep.

So, on that note, I reclined on the floor and closed my eyes.

*

“I’m very sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused,” I apologize, humbling myself to Erin, who had come to pick me up.

She’d apparently heard what happened from a frantic Neme once she got back to HQ, and had come rushing right over. Erin then explained what had really happened to the guards, and my name was cleared. I was a free man and oh-so grateful for it.

“You’d better get to training as soon as we get back. This idiotic blunder was such a waste of time.”

“I’m sorry...”

It was evening already, the sky painted deep red in the light of the fading sun. By now, I'd normally be off practicing Trap Detection.

"I've said it before, Note. If you don't take this seriously, I'll kick you out of the party," Erin warned.

The whole ordeal had clearly put her in a sour mood. The discontent on her face was obvious.

"But I *am* taking this seriously."

I wouldn't back down on that. Why did I deserve to be scolded, anyway? It was a little irritating.

This wasn't even my fault. If you want to blame someone, blame Neme.

"If you were really taking this seriously, you would have busted out of jail to get in your training."

"Don't be ridiculous. There's no way I could pull off a jailbreak."

"What? Are you kidding? If you can use Trap Dismantling, the advanced art Unlock makes quick work of getting out of handcuffs and a cell or two."

"Well, I didn't know that. No one ever taught me..."

"There are some things you have to learn for yourself. Besides, what else did you have to do while you were sitting around in a cell?"

Erin was right on the mark, so I lost my cool when she called me out. I couldn't just take it quietly, so I kept arguing.

"Isn't settling things peacefully better than breaking out of jail and making them worse?"

"You wasted a whole day 'settling things peacefully.' Only a fool would do that."

"We still have five months before we start dungeon diving. There's no rush to do anything so reckless—"

"What did you just say?" Erin hissed, interrupting me with a piercing glare.

I checked myself and started to regain my cool.

Did I just say something I shouldn't have?

"I've been annoyed with you recently, but now I know why. You're slacking off."

"What...?"

That was ridiculous. I was working my ass off. Even today, I only got arrested because I'd insisted on going for a run without Force. How was that slacking off? She couldn't be serious...

"You heard me. You're slacking. You said it yourself just now, didn't you? 'We still have five months before we start dungeon diving.'"

"Yeah, that's the plan—"

"So you plan on taking your sweet time for five months?! You should be trying to finish your training as fast as possible so you can get yourself in the dungeon for real!"

"Erk..."

I didn't hear the sound that unconsciously slipped my lips. I'm sure it was pathetic. Erin's scathing words had left me trembling. I finally understood why she was mad. I *was* slacking.

I just assumed everything would be cool as long as I could master the required arts within the timeframe. I'd been in a rush to learn them at the outset, but as I gradually got the hang of things, I'd stopped pushing myself as hard. I'd gotten complacent.

Erin, however, had completely seen through my laziness. And the fact that I couldn't even see it for what it was until someone pointed it out to me...

I was mortified. I'd joined the Arrivers to better myself, and here I was. The same. I was still the lazy coward I'd been with Miya. It was pathetic.

Faced with the truth—the fact that I hadn't changed, that I couldn't change—I just wanted to cry.

Whoever said people don't change... They were probably right. At the very least, I probably never would. I was still the Note Athlon I hated so much.

What am I doing, honestly...?

Erin continued to lay into me after that, but I didn't hear a word of it. It was all I could do to watch her lips as she talked.

My mind was swallowed by thoughts of what I could've done differently. What I should do in the future. It was all such a jumbled mess that I hardly knew what was what anymore.

One Resolution Within

“I’m sorry about yesterday!”

Her already petite figure got even shorter when she bowed her head in apology. Neme, I mean. Our dwarf priestess with the stature of a child. We were currently in the living room early the next morning, both of us just having gotten up to go for our daily run.

“Why are you apologizing?”

I honestly wasn’t sure, so I asked her upfront. When I did, Neme raised her head and looked up at me nervously.

“...A-Aren’t you mad, Note?”

“Why would I be?”

“You got arrested because of Neme...”

Ah, right. That did happen...

Even I was surprised by my change of heart. It was true that I was angry at Neme. Or rather, I had been when I was thrown in jail yesterday. But talking to Erin after the fact was such a rude awakening that it left me a little numb to everything else. I’d completely forgotten that I was upset with Neme.

And I was only just now realizing all this.

“I’m not mad, so you don’t need to apologize,” I assured her.

“Really? You looked so grumpy when you came home yesterday... You don’t have to be nice about it. It’s all right if you’re mad at me. Neme deserves it,” she said, bowing her head deeply again.

“Really, I’m not mad!” I said, immediately waving my hands to stop her. “I was in a bad mood because of something else, so...”

In truth, I *was* mad. But I was mad at myself. I’m sure that’s why I looked grumpy. It’d probably been written all over my face, and now I felt guilty for

making Neme worry.

“R-Really? You mean it...?” she asked as she raised her head, her eyes welling with tears.

I answered her with a firm nod.

“If you feel that badly about it and want to make it up to me...” I said, scratching my head. “Could I ask you a favor?”

“Yes! E-Even if it’s something d-dirty, I’m an adult, so—” she stammered.

Rest assured. It wasn’t *that* kind of favor.

“Could you please cooperate from now on? I don’t want to go through what happened yesterday ever again, so I really want you to work with me and come without resisting,” I proposed with a chuckle.

That seemed to be a relief to Neme, who finally let out the nervous breath she’d been holding.

“I understand,” she said before gasping. “Wait... Did you mean that in a dirty way? If you want me to come without resisting, then—”

“No! That is *not* what I meant.”

And so with some ado, we set off on our morning run.

We were doing a lap outside of town today because we had Force in tow. But about five minutes into our run...

“It feels like you’re more uncomfortable than usual...” Neme said sheepishly from over my shoulder.

“I figured.”

“What?! Are you doing it on purpose out of spite?!”

“That’s not what I meant. I told you I wasn’t mad.”

But even so, Neme’s words were disheartening. There was a reason I was being a little rougher with her than usual today—

It really is hard to run while using Enemy Search, huh?

After the talk I'd had with Erin, I was trying to push myself. Thinking about everything she'd said to me, I knew she was right. I had to go harder.

For starters, I couldn't continue training at my current pace. I couldn't just leisurely use the next five months to get the hang of Enemy Search, Trap Detection, and Trap Dismantling. I was the one keeping the Arrivers—a top-tier dungeon-diving party—from actually doing their job. I was holding them back, so I needed to get my act together to get us back into the dungeon as soon as possible.

That would be my way of thanking the Arrivers for picking me up, and it would be how I changed my sorry self. This was probably my last chance. If I didn't put in the effort here, I'd end up running away from hard work for the rest of my life... and I didn't want that. I didn't want to screw up again.

I was tired of repeating the same mistakes, so I needed to make a stand here. I would push forward, no matter how reckless it was. I'd learn these arts as quickly as possible—even if it was only days or hours sooner. This was a battle against time. A fight to see how fast I could learn. And the quicker, the better.

So in order to accomplish that practically, I'd decided to keep Enemy Search active at all times. Whether it was during my daily life or during practice with other arts, I had it up. The only drawback was that concentrating on Enemy Search made me a little careless with any other tasks I was trying to juggle at the same time.

But once we were in the dungeon for real, I'd need multiple arts active simultaneously—and I'd have to be able to do that while running at the same time. That was the minimum I needed to achieve. The lowest hurdle I had to clear. So giving it a go was better than making excuses without actually trying.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean I could ignore Neme's complaint. I tightened my arm around her, snugly and securely holding her in place. I focused harder on keeping myself steady, all while maintaining Enemy Search.

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Midmorning training after that was Enemy Search practice in the forest with Jin. Having kept Enemy Search active since I woke up, I was already tired and my concentration was waning. Still, things were going fairly well.

The real problem came that afternoon when we met up with Erin for trap practice in the dungeon.

Because I was still concentrating on keeping Enemy Search up, I had less attention to devote to my Trap Detection and Trap Dismantling arts. They were commensurately less precise. I had expected as much, really.

I never thought I'd be able to multitask my arts perfectly from day one. I wasn't that conceited. No, what I hadn't seen coming was Erin's reaction.

She'd been in a foul mood ever since our encounter yesterday, but when she saw my performance was worse than usual... Her frigid glare of disappointment taught me that I could fall even lower than low.

"In the end, you're just trash that gives up as soon as you're scolded."

That's what I heard her ice-cold stare telling me. It was clear that's what she was thinking just from the look in her eyes. I couldn't blame her, though.

If someone I scolded immediately started to struggle with things that I knew they were perfectly capable of, I would think the same. I'm sure she was frustrated. But the fact that she didn't say a word to me—no warning, no complaint, no nothing—hurt. That meant she'd already written me off as a disappointment; she'd decided there wasn't a point in saying anything.

And that being the case, then as we'd promised in the kitchen, her next move would be pushing to have me removed from the party. I'd heard her whisper as much to Jin already.

I had no idea it would hurt so much to have someone come for me like this. But still, it didn't seem right to give in to that pain. If I gave up on Enemy Search to improve Trap Detection and Trap Dismantling... then I'd really be disappointing Erin's expectations. So I chose to stand my ground and keep at it.

I had the option of being honest with Erin and telling her that I couldn't help struggling while maintaining multiple arts. But I thought better of it. If I said that much out loud, I couldn't shake the feeling that it would weaken my resolve.

Moreover, I wasn't pushing myself like this for Erin's approval. I was doing it in order to get into the dungeon as soon as possible. I was training so that I wouldn't be a burden to the Arrivers. I couldn't let what someone else thought

of me stop that. I was sick and tired of being hamstrung by such petty things.

After dinner, I went up to Jin's room. I knocked on his door, the heavy sound echoing down the corridor.

"Just a second," he said from the other side of the door before opening it in his loungewear. "What's up?"

"I want to ask you something..."

"Oh? Is this about today's practice?"

Jin surely must have realized it hadn't gone well. Especially after Erin complained to him. I'd witnessed him trying to calm Erin multiple times, telling her I was just in a slump today. He'd tried to comfort me too, telling me that everyone had bad days. He probably thought I was feeling down, and that's why I'd come to see him.

But that wasn't the case. I'd come for something else, and I cut straight to the chase...

"You want me to make you traps?"

"Yes. I always have free time after dinner, so... I figure I might as well be practicing Trap Dismantling. It should be okay to use smaller traps inside the house, right?"

Traps ranged in size from large ones that could affect an entire room to smaller, palm-sized magic circles that pulsed electric currents. I was talking about the latter.

Jin looked a little troubled as he scratched his head at my request.

"Erin would be better for this— Er, I guess that might be difficult right now. I'll ask her on your behalf."

"Thank you very much."

Jin gave me a worried look as I bowed my head.

"Does this request have anything to do with this afternoon? You shouldn't let

it bother you too much. Everyone has off days...”

“It’s not that.”

“I’m concerned, Note. It seems like something happened between you and Erin... If anything’s wrong, you can come and talk to me about it, okay?”

“It’s fine. I can work this out myself.”

I forced a smile to brush away his concerns.

The sooner I could master Enemy Search while using other arts, the sooner Jin wouldn’t have to worry, and the sooner I could patch things up with Erin. That was all I could do right now. I didn’t need anyone else’s concern or pity...

But I apparently didn’t do a good job of convincing Jin. He still looked worried.

What Lay Beyond Change

“I’m getting sleepy...” a pajama-clad Neme said from atop my shoulder.

She rubbed her eyes, desperately trying to fight off drowsiness. Seeing her so relaxed, however, was honestly a relief; it was a complete one-eighty from all the kicking and screaming I used to get. I hoped that meant she was more comfortable now, which I chalked up to improving my running technique. I was ecstatic to see the results of my own growth.

Roughly four months had now passed since the abduction incident. Maybe it wasn’t my place to say so, but I really felt like I’d been improving. Simultaneously activating Enemy Search and Trap Detecting or Trap Dismantling—which I’d struggled with so much at first—was now like a second nature to me.

I could now keep Enemy Search up constantly without a problem, and I could detect small animals and people with no malicious intent. I could even discern the threat level of the creatures in my range, allowing me to identify monsters without ever seeing them.

Slowly over time, the way I saw the world had changed, and that increased what I could see on the map in my head tremendously. I’d been dubious at first about the alleged compatibility between basic thief arts and map skills, but now I understood it.

Recently, I’d started maintaining Trap Detection at all times in addition to Enemy Search. It was a struggle in the beginning too, but I grew used to it. Now I could keep it up as naturally as breathing. I was surprised at the variety of things that triggered it. Alarms and security systems apparently registered as traps too, and thanks to that, I was able to practice Trap Detection even while I was in town.

While I was pleased with my progress over the past four months, there was a

lingering issue I was still very unhappy about...

“Yo! Hard at it again, Girl Snatcher?”

“Good morning, Mr. Girl Snatcher!”

I’d earned myself the utterly disgraceful nickname “Girl Snatcher.” I hated it. I mean, I *really* hated it.

It had first started circulating months ago after I was arrested under suspicion of kidnapping a little girl. But Force had been skipping out on morning runs recently, leaving me to jog inside of town alone with Neme again. It only fanned the flames of the rumors, which now spread like wildfire.

I know you’re not really busy, Force, so stop making excuses... This is really taking a toll on me.

“I wish they’d drop the whole ‘Girl Snatcher’ thing already...”

“I know! Neme isn’t a little girl! I’m a grown woman!”

“Yes, yes, of course. You’re so mature, Miss Neme, that you just exude elegance and grace.”

I said that in a completely monotone voice, but Neme seemed to take me at my word. She was now grinning furiously. I felt a little guilty, however, so I changed the topic.

“By the way, I was wondering... Is there any way to get a new nickname?”

“I don’t really think so. Nicknames are something adventurers sort of give to each other, so they’re not really something anyone decides on. It’s hard to get people to stop calling you something.”

Come to think of it, I used to gossip about other adventurers back in Broad myself. It was pretty conventional to talk about someone you didn’t know by a nickname or title, and it was indeed hard to quash rumors that had already been started.

I’d probably be known as “Girl Snatcher” for a while. Especially since I was still running around town with a little girl...

“I guess I’ll just have to live with it. Do you have a nickname, Neme?”

While we were on the subject, I figured I'd ask. If I'm being honest, I was hoping that I wasn't the only one in the world with such an atrocious nickname. If Neme had a terrible one too, we could commiserate about it. Or does hoping she had an equally awful nickname just make me a bad person...?

"People call Neme the Sexy Saint!'"

"D-Do they? That doesn't suit you either. I was expecting something... a little cuter."

"You don't think it suits me?" she asked dejectedly. "It's true most people don't either... They actually call me the Little Saint."

She looked so sad about it, I couldn't help trying to lift her spirits.

"I-I was just kidding! I think it totally suits you!"

I knew I was digging the hole with insincerity at this point. When I nervously peeked at Neme's face, however, she was beaming again.

"Do you really think so?! You've got a good eye, Note!"

Great, now she was full of herself. What was I supposed to do? I guess this was better than her moping, but...

"A-Anyway, since we've both got nicknames we don't like, let's band together in solidarity, Miss Neme!"

"Don't lump me in with you! Little Saint is leagues better than Girl Snatcher!"

"Did I just hear you utter that taboo name?" I asked, starting to run unstably on purpose.

"I-I'm sorry! Forgive me! Neme won't do it again!" she cried.

"Very well. Then I'll forgive you just this once."

I returned to running normally, making things as comfortable as I could for Neme. When I looked over at her, she was deathly pale. Maybe even a little green.

Honestly, I'd never admit it to her, but being able to talk to Neme like this was one of the highlights of my day. In fact, Neme was the only Arriver that I could joke around with. Erin was out of the question, Force was always hassling me,

and Jin was just too kind. That left Neme, who I'd grown much closer with over the past four months, much to my own surprise.

"Neme wants a cool nickname too, though! I've heard that there's a priestess like me in town... They call her Crusher or something. I'm so jealous!"

"Crusher? I'm not sure that's appropriate for a healer, either... There's gotta be something better."

"Really? Pretty much any nickname is impressive compared to Neme's, though..."

"I guess so... Come to think of it, what's Jin's nickname?"

"People call him the Black Shadow."

"What?! That's so cool!"



“Uh-huh. We’re the only lame ones. Everyone else in the party has a cool nickname too. Want to hear them?”

“No thanks. I’ll pass...”

Hearing their awesome nicknames would just make me envious. Ignorance was bliss in this case.

“That’s probably for the best...” Neme agreed, seemingly of the same mind.

She patted me on the head with her tiny hand, a kind gesture that panged my heart. There are times where being pitied just makes things hurt more. This was one of those times.

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Underfoot. Ahead and to the right. Over there behind that rock.

As focused and as fast as possible, I broke a magic circle with my foot before drawing the knife on my belt and throwing it into the darkness. I knew it found its target with precision. My senses told me it made contact with the physical trap Jin had set.

Believing in myself, I darted forward and used my left hand to break the last magic circle.

“Enough already! Jeez!” Erin scoffed, her discontented voice echoing in the dark, narrow cavern.

“Um... Why are you mad that I successfully dismantled the traps?” I asked.

As I questioned her unreasonable attitude, I used my right foot to dismantle yet another trap I had detected. Seeing that, Jin interjected.

“It *is* a little frustrating to see your best traps defeated so easily...”

But in truth, this wasn’t easy for me. Despite how it might seem, I was pushing my concentration to its utmost limit.

As that thought passed through my mind, however, I came to a dead stop. There was one last trap in the area.

Carefully, accurately, and quickly...

Complex traps always took me time to dismantle. Just like this one. It took me two whole seconds to disarm it, but Jin could have done it so much faster.

After seeing me take apart the final trap, Erin growled a little. What was she? A dog?

In contrast, Jin showered me with applause.

“Congratulations! That was perfect, Note. I think you’ve successfully learned everything I can teach you about traps.”

I looked at Erin, who was still glowering at me from beside Jin. It was probably best to refrain from any smug comments for now.

“No, I still have a long way to go. Just because I can dismantle traps in practice doesn’t mean I’ll be able to do it while we’re actually in the dungeon.”

“That’s not true. I think you’re more than capable enough to handle the traps in the dungeon now.”

“Really...? I trust your traps and your judgment since you’re an assassin, but Erin’s just a mage, you know? Surely the magic traps in the dungeon are more complex and—”

I stopped short when I realized my mistake. Erin was glaring daggers at me. It seemed what I’d just said had upset her. I broke eye contact as quickly as I could.

Thankfully, Jin intervened.

“Actually, Erin’s traps are top-tier. She has the Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude skill, so trapmaking is nothing to her.”

“Really...?”

“You should know that much,” Erin interjected.

She always had to have the final word. It was really getting on my nerves. I somehow managed to choke back a comment about that, but in truth... What she’d said made me a little happy.

It was different from the cold, disgusted indifference she’d treated me with four months ago. She didn’t talk to me for ages after that day. Even when we

were having conversations as a party, she'd flat-out ignore me. She'd glare at me when we passed each other in the hallway, too.

And I'd be lying if I said that hadn't hurt. Every day was agony at first. Being hated by someone so close to you does things to your head. It makes you want to give up on everything. That prospect crossed my mind more than once.

Yet as I picked up the slack with my arts, things improved. Erin reconsidered her opinion of me as a lazy slacker. She also seemed to realize she'd been unduly harsh with me. But that left a lingering awkwardness between us.

The way I saw it, Erin wasn't one to offer a sincere apology. She also wasn't sociable enough to be able to act like nothing had ever happened, either. So she just kept on being angry. Her frequent nasty comments made that much clear, but at the same time, something about the way she picked fights was unnatural. It was like she was *forcing* herself to stay angry so she didn't have to take back what she'd said.

Be that as it may, I didn't like the idea of approaching her first either. Why should I have to concede to someone who'd been so hard on me? I still had my pride.

Thanks to that, we were at something of a stalemate. If one of us caved, I was sure we could go back to how things were before. No, we'd probably be even closer, but...

"Come on, Jin. Don't give Note a big head. It pisses me off. He's only just finished the first stage."

Sorry, Erin. I don't think we can be friends after all.

Suppressing my irritation, I turned to Jin. I tried to keep Erin out of my line of sight as much as possible.

"The first stage? Does that mean there's a second stage?" I asked.

"That's right. We'll be moving on to that from here," Jin replied.

"Okay. What does stage two entail?"

Training hadn't been much of a challenge recently, so I was itching to move up to something more difficult anyway. I anxiously urged Jin to continue.

“In stage two, we’ll have you learn to use Enemy Search with Trap Detection and Trap Dismantling at the same time,” he explained.

“But that’s—” I shut my mouth mid-sentence.

Crap... Did I charge ahead into the second stage before I was done with the first?

Now that I thought about it, it seemed so obvious. Of course I should master one technique before attempting multiple techniques at the same time.

But in my haste to make progress, I’d jumped ahead. And now here we were... I couldn’t keep quiet about it anymore. I figured they’d probably be mad at me for skipping steps without permission, but I owed them an explanation.

Once I explained myself, Jin was the first to speak up.

“Is that true, Note?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“He *has* to be lying. He’s just trying to show off. What a joke,” Erin said bitterly, refusing to believe me.

“I’m not lying. Look, I know it’s not proof, but do you remember when you cut me down to size, Erin? Do you remember how I started sucking with my arts after that?”

“What about it...?”

“I didn’t want to tell you because I knew it would sound like an excuse, but that was because I started practicing with two arts at once. After you told me I was slacking, I realized I couldn’t keep going the way I was. That’s why I was so bad with traps for a while, which I am sorry about, but...”

Erin seemed to realize where this was all going. She looked away awkwardly for a moment and then nervously looked me in the eye.

“What’s with you? You’re making it sound like the whole thing was a misunderstanding...”

“I mean, everything you said was true, so it wasn’t exactly a

misunderstanding. Besides, I intentionally chose not to explain myself, so I don't think you should feel bad about it, Erin."

"Why are you suddenly acting so mature?! You're making me sound like the bad guy!"

"Okay, sorry... It's all my fault."

"Hey, don't apologize! You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?!"

"If that's what you want to believe, sure. At any rate, I just wanted to apologize to you, Erin..."

"All right, fine! It was my fault! I'm sorry..."

We both lowered our heads. When I finally looked up, Erin, who was supposed to be apologizing to me, was smiling. I'm sure I had a similar grin on my face. It'd been four long months since we'd seen eye to eye like this.

Our conversation just now wouldn't have meant anything to anyone else, but it made me extremely happy. I'd been waiting for this for a long time. Perhaps Erin felt the same way. Or perhaps that was just my imagination. If it was true, however, I'd be delighted.

"I'm glad to see the two of you resolve things," Jin said, watching over us warmly.

Erin and I both snapped upright as we remembered Jin was there. Our timing was so perfectly in sync that it was a little embarrassing.

"I'm sorry for causing you trouble too, Jin," I said.

While things were tense between Erin and I, Jin had been the one to bear the brunt of it all. He was always doing what he could out of consideration for the two of us.

"It's no trouble, really," Jin replied, mussing his hair bashfully. "But now that that's settled, let's get back to business, shall we? Note, you're confident that you can use Enemy Search with the trap-related arts now, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then we'll skip the second stage and move on to the final stage of your

training.”

“What’s the final stage?” I asked.

“The hardest part of all,” Jin replied. “Learning how to keep both Enemy Search and Trap Detection active for extended periods of time while doing other things.”

“Uh, about that...”

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I was currently beset by a great problem—one I never could have prepared myself for even if I’d spent my whole life working up to it. The problem, you ask? I was out on a date. You see, at present, I was silently walking through the market district of Puriff with Erin.

For context, I’d technically gotten myself into this. It was because I’d secretly skipped the second and final stages of the training Jin had prepared for me.

Originally, the plan was for me to start training on my own while Jin went to find a new tank for the party once I hit the second stage. But because I’d already surpassed that without saying anything to anyone, I’d inadvertently landed us in a situation where we now couldn’t go dungeon diving because we didn’t have enough members.

Frankly, I was getting sick of how everything I did backfired on me.

Jin wasn’t mad at me, of course, but that sort of made it worse. I was left with nothing to do while he was out searching for a new tank, so the party decided I should go ahead and start learning the arts they were planning on teaching me once we were in the dungeon.

And so here I was, out shopping with Erin for equipment.

“You two have been fighting for a while now, so how about you go shopping together to get a little closer? It’ll be like a date! I know a lot has happened between you, but it seems like the two of you really do get along.”

...Or so Jin had said with a wink and a nod.

But me? And Erin? Get along? Yeah, right. Like hell this would be a real date.

I was hoping Jin would come shopping with us, but he'd claimed to be busy searching out a new tank and promptly disappeared. It was suspicious, to say the least.

I'll admit that Erin and I could stand to be closer as members of the same party. And Erin *was* kind of cute, if you ignored her personality. Maybe flirting wouldn't be so bad...

No, I didn't actually have any ulterior motives when I agreed to go along with Jin's suggestion. I didn't have any delusions in that regard.

And so Erin and I had set out on an innocent shopping trip, but things had been oddly quiet so far. Because Jin had gone and called it a date, it made the whole thing awkward. The more self-conscious you are, the more uncomfortable you are, you know?

What are you even supposed to talk with girls about again? Just normal conversation stuff? Wait...

It finally dawned on me that I'd never really had a normal conversation with Erin. There was nothing normal about our relationship. What on earth was I supposed to do?

My head was spinning like a whirlwind. First things first: I had to calm down.

For starters, this wasn't a real date. We were just two party members out weapon shopping together. Which meant this was totally normal. Perfect.

I know there are real playboys out there who insist that any outing with someone of the opposite sex counts as a date, but I'm putting my foot down here. If that were true, then my morning runs through town with Neme counted as dates. And as we all now knew, that was more likely to be interpreted as a kidnapping than a date.

Come on, Erin. Please say something already. Anything! I'd even take verbal abuse right now.

Why did she have to pick now of all times to get quiet? She normally had plenty to say. Was she feeling bad about what she put me through?

If this is because you're feeling guilty, then I have a deal for you! Just pick something to talk about and I'll forgive you. Please. Surely there's no way such a boring, awkwardly silent outing counts as a date...

But the distressing awkwardness continued all the way until we reached the weapon shop. I was so happy to get there... We'd been walking for nearly fifteen minutes in abject silence.

When we opened the door, we were greeted with a high-spirited welcome from the man behind the counter. He was a big, buff guy without a hair on his head. He was also the only one in the store, so I was guessing he was probably the owner.

"Yo, Erin! Long time no see! I don't recognize this young gent... You get yourself a boyfriend?"

That was one heck of a bomb to drop right out of the gate. It caught even the usually snappy Erin by surprise.

"He's not m-my b-boyfriend..." she answered falteringly.

Her lack of confidence in those words didn't make her sound particularly convincing. The awkward air between us grew three times heavier. Erin seemed to sense that, and quickly tried to change the topic.

"What's with you, shopkeep? You're in an oddly good mood today!"

I'd never heard anyone call a shopkeep that to their face before. He was even wearing a nametag that said "Gray." Come on! Call the man by his name!

Wait, was Erin just as rattled as I was...?

"You bet I am! I just sold the most expensive staff we had in stock," Gray said, proudly sticking his chest out.

Erin looked around the store, seemingly uninterested in what he'd just said until she turned around with a smug look on her face.

"You don't say? In that case, I think I'll buy the most expensive dagger you have."

"Huh?!" I couldn't help responding in shock.

“You got it!”

Ignoring my reaction, Gray turned from the counter and headed into the back room.

“Hey, Erin, I don’t have that kind of money...”

“I know that. But it doesn’t matter. I’m paying.”

“Why are *you* the one paying for *my* dagger?”

“If I say it’s an apology, will you accept it? For everything...” she said, casting her eyes downward.

Just then, the owner returned with the dagger and placed it on the counter in front of us. I wasn’t very knowledgeable about blades—pathetic, I know—but even I could tell this was one amazing weapon.

My ignorant eyes wandered to the price tag, and I’ll admit I gawked when I saw the number of zeros.

“Wait, no. Hold up, Erin. *That’s* how much it costs?”

“When you’re a top-tier adventurer like me, you can afford a little luxury.”

“But that doesn’t mean you should be paying that—”

“I said this was an apology, so just shut up and accept it!”

“No way! I can’t accept something that expensive! Besides, you can’t buy apologies. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of the price.”

“You bet I am! That number should scare anyone!”

“You know... You’re surprisingly faint of heart, aren’t you?”

“No, no, no. Don’t turn this on me. Your sense of money is just messed up.”

“This is something you need and something you’ll be using for a long time. You *should* pick something expensive. You’re just stuck thinking like a pauper.”

“Hey now, let’s not get carried away with the jokes.”

“Do I look like I’m joking to you? You must need glasses. How about we get your eyes checked while we’re out? Oh, or do you not have the money for that

either?”

“What did you just say, you dungeon-diving bourgeois?!”

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“How did you two go out on a friendly shopping trip and come back on even worse terms than before...?” Jin asked when we returned.

It was a valid question, and I didn’t have a good answer.

Thinking back on it now, even that awkward silence at the beginning of the night was better than this. At least that could be interpreted as the innocent nervosity of a first date. That is, if—and only if—I concede it was a date.

But Erin and I got into an argument at the weapon shop. We decided we might as well have dinner while we were out, and ended up fighting again over where to eat. We then continued fighting in the restaurant, and then fought some more on the way home.

Yeah, there was just no way a disaster like this could be called a date.

Erin and I simply weren’t meant to be. We were polar opposites and repelled each other like magnets...

Which is really just a fancy way of saying that I blew a date because I’m so awkward. A common story, I know.

At the end of the day, however, things were still better than how they’d been over the past four months. So, optimistically, this was an improvement. Erin and I may have argued several times today, but at least we were talking. That had to mean something, right?

Our clash in the weapon shop had concluded with Erin buying an older model dagger for me. Just because it was older, however, didn’t mean it wasn’t outrageously expensive too. I was grateful Erin was willing to buy it for me.

That’s why I’d offered to pay for dinner. But when I did, I was insulted with, “It’s so sad to see the pauper putting on airs. I’ll treat you this time.” Just recalling it was enough to make me angry.

In the end, we ended up splitting the bill. She really was good at pissing me off, damn...

But that’s not to say I couldn’t appreciate her kindness underneath it all. Her personality just made it hard to express that honestly. I was finally able to realize that tonight, so you could say our little shopping trip elevated my opinion of her. That’s why I wasn’t even mad after all our fighting, but...

Even though I was only thinking nice things about her, Erin was still glaring daggers at me. I wasn’t going to back down, so I glared right back at her. Neme, who had no idea what was going on, watched the sparks fly in a fluster.

Yet sadly, tragedy always occurs when you least expect it.

Actually, this wasn’t a complete surprise. There were moments of foreshadowing in hindsight, but there was nothing we could do by the time it all came to light. The tragedy ahead of us would have me screaming in frustration before I knew it.

My fight with Erin was interrupted by a loud bang—the sound of the living room door bursting open. It was Force, and the first words out of his mouth were utterly unthinkable.

“I’m quitting Arrivers.”

Where the Trouble Started

Jin, Erin, Neme, and I all stood in the living room, staring at Force.

I had no idea what he was saying. Glancing over at the other Arrivers for some kind of clue, I could see that none of them had any idea what Force was going on about either. Everyone looked utterly confounded.

“Wh-What on earth happened?” Jin asked with a deep breath.

I could tell he was trying to keep his cool, but his usually calm voice was trembling. I’d never seen or heard Jin shaken like this. Force clearly wasn’t joking around. His eyes said he was dead serious.

“I’ve fallen in love with someone,” he began. “It’s a bit embarrassing to say this all out loud, but I think I met my soulmate. I’m as happy as I’ve ever been, and I want that happiness to continue forever. So I’m gonna quit this dangerous dungeon diving gig and devote myself to making her happy.”

“So, what? You’re getting married?” Erin asked.

“That’s still a ways off. We haven’t even technically started dating yet, but... There’s no mistaking what we have between us.”

“Uh, isn’t it a little early to start talking about soulmates then?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Shut up. What would you know about love when you’ve never even had a girlfriend before? Just sit there and stay quiet.”

Jeez, why was he only mean to me? I mean, he had a point, and I couldn’t exactly argue, but still... Damn.

“Who’s the lucky lady?” Neme asked, cocking her head curiously.

“This cute priestess named Roslia. And I’m not just sayin’ that either. She’s *really* cute,” Force declared with extra emphasis.

I wished he’d stop glancing over at me like he was bragging.

But... Roslia, huh? I felt like I'd heard that name before. Where was it again?

I looked to the other Arrivers once more and saw Erin standing there aghast. Jin and Neme looked similarly shocked.

"Who's Roslia? It seems like you all know her..." I asked Erin in a small, nervous voice.

Erin silently opened and closed her mouth several times before she could find her voice to answer.

"Roslia Minkgott," she said. "She's notorious here in Puriff for indiscriminately charming multiple men into falling for her at once, causing all kinds of trouble. The number of parties she's broken up that way is well into the double digits, so she's earned a nickname for herself: Crusher."

Wait, Crusher? That rang a bell too. Ah, that's right. Neme had told me there was a priestess in Puriff known as "Crusher." When I first heard that nickname, I'd assumed it was because she had an aggressive fighting style or something... but apparently she was crushing parties, not monsters.

Force, however, was none too pleased to hear Erin's assessment of his alleged girlfriend-to-be.

"Hey, stop slandering Roslia! It's true there are rumors about her, but you can't judge a person based on rumors alone! That just ain't right! Have you ever even met Roslia yourself?" he argued passionately. "Well, I have! That's how I know she's not the bad person all those rumors make her out to be! She's just cute and nice to everyone, so she's misunderstood. Some jealous girls probably started those rumors about her! Yeah, I bet that's what started this all! So I won't be taken in by rumors! I believe in Roslia! Those nasty rumors have hurt her, you know! She told me all about it in tears! So I won't stand for this, and I won't forgive anyone who keeps slandering her like that!"

Force defended her until he was blue in the face. By the time he was done, he was practically panting for breath. He wore a smug grin, like he'd just accomplished something. It almost made him look cool.

"I've met her before," Jin said in a rueful tone, his eyes closed. "Back when an acquaintance of mine got wrapped up in her troublemaking. In my opinion,

she's as guilty as the rumors say. She had the eyes of an experienced liar. I won't say any more, but I really think you should give up on her."

"Are you for real? Damn, I didn't know you'd met her... I mean, I know you're a good judge of character, b-but, like, what if you're wrong about her?"

"Let me ask you this instead, Force: from your point of view, was there really nothing suspicious about her at all?"

"Ugh, I guess I can't say there weren't *any* red flags... The first time we met, Roslia was the center of a fight at the pub. There were two guys fighting over her, see. But when I saved her, she had an explanation for everything! It was all perfectly reasonable, so I'm going to keep believing in Roslia no matter what!"

I suddenly remembered where I'd heard Roslia's name before. It was in jail. When I'd gotten arrested on suspicion of abducting a little girl, my cell neighbors spent the day arguing over a woman named Roslia. They both claimed they were in the slammer because of a fight they'd gotten into the night before. Was that the fight Force had broken up?

Thinking back on it, the only reason I was arrested in the first place was because I was carrying Neme around town that day. Force had refused to come running with us because he said he'd had too much to drink the night before... and he'd put undue emphasis on the fact that he'd been drinking with a woman. Perhaps that was Roslia? Maybe she was the reason he'd been skipping out on morning runs so frequently as of late.

Everything was falling into place.

When I was in jail, my neighbors had both insisted that they loved Roslia and that the feelings were mutual. Just like Force was doing now. Maybe he was... No, he was *definitely* being deceived. That's what it looked like.

"People say Roslia's a gold digger. You'd better not let her swindle you," Erin said, her eyes narrowed in disgust.

In response, Force confidently puffed up his chest.

"I'm not being swindled! I am spoiling her, though. Just the other day, I bought her the most expensive staff in the—"

“That’s what they call being swindled!” I couldn’t help interjecting.

When I raised my voice like that, however, Force sneered mockingly.

“Ha! People who’ve been single their whole lives are just so... clueless. I bet you’re the type of dolt who lets the woman pay on a first date. I can tell just by looking at ya. Good-for-nothings should just keep their good-for-nothing mouths shut.”

Force’s sharp words pierced right through me. I couldn’t say a word in my own defense either, considering I’d let exactly that happen just earlier this evening. It felt like he was coming down on me harder than normal. He was just that much cockier now that he thought he’d found love...

I made up my mind. I couldn’t take any more damage, so I decided to hold my tongue.

After half an hour of Jin, Erin, and Neme desperately trying to dissuade Force, he broke down and left the house yelling...

“I believe in Roslia!”

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When Force stormed out, the four of us left in the living room let out a collective sigh. Jin, Erin, and Neme were all somewhere between worried and exasperated. I, meanwhile, was still reeling from the emotional damage I’d taken.

But once I decided I couldn’t stay silent any longer, I tried to get a better handle on the situation.

“Does this happen often, or...?” I asked.

“No. Force is an idiot, but this is the first time he’s threatened to leave the party,” Erin replied, clearly irritated.

“This Roslia girl must be a real pro at deceiving men...” Jin said.

“The rumors say she has really big breasts!” Neme piped up.

“Neme, please don’t joke around when people are talking seriously.”

“Sorry... That wasn’t my intention...”

Neme shrunk back when Erin and I both shot critical looks her way. With her non sequitur comment, the conversation had taken a rather awkward turn.

With a heavy sigh, Erin lounged across the sofa.

“At any rate,” she said. “We have to figure out how to get Force to come to his senses.”

“It sure doesn’t seem like he’s willing to listen to us right now, though,” I replied.

“Is there any chance Roslia has really fallen for Force?” Neme asked, looking even tinier than usual with her knees hugged to her chest as she sat on the floor.

“I doubt it,” Jin said, shaking his head.

“How come...?”

“According to the stories, Roslia never actually settles down with anyone. She likes approaching multiple men so they can fawn over her and compete for her attention. In other words, she always wants to be the princess of the party. That’s why most adventurers in town are pretty wary of her. Though there are still some gullible fools like Force...”

“Exactly! Just think about it! This is Force we’re talking about! As if some seductress would seriously fall for him!” Erin clamored.

And that was the most compelling argument yet. We all nodded unanimously in agreement. I felt a little sorry for Force as a fellow member of the Loveless Alliance, but even I couldn’t defend him after being called out like that.

“That said, our best strategy is getting Force to realize that he’s being deceived,” mused Erin.

“But how do we do that?” Neme replied before clapping her hands together in exclamation. “Oh, I know! Why don’t we just ask Roslia to stop deceiving Force?!”

“I don’t think that would work, exactly,” said Jin with a strained smile. “Again, this is just hearsay, but an adventurer once gave Roslia a warning about cozying

up to a man in their party. Not only did she not listen, she spun the tale of what happened in such a way that the whole party turned against said adventurer and beat them up."

Everyone fell silent upon hearing such an outrageous story. I was honestly surprised. Roslia was really starting to sound like a dangerous character. An insatiable seductress who eliminated her enemies by using her men-turned-henchmen. Yeah, she was bad news.

But in spite of the desperate situation, we were all having trouble coming up with a plan to save Force. We were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"It's impossible..." Erin muttered.

While I wanted nothing more than to argue, I had no ammunition to fight with. Everyone else stayed silent, too. But the most frustrating thing of all...

I'd spent the past several months training hard to work my way up to dungeon diving. I kept Enemy Search active all day, every day. It was exhausting. With my guard up constantly, I never had a minute to relax. Worse yet, Erin hated my guts. Nevertheless, I still did what I'd set out to do.

I worked hard. I'd busted ass like never before, if I do say so myself. There were so many times the pain just made me want to cry. On the days training didn't go well, I burned with regrets. It was so, so hard.

There was no reprieve, either. Moments of hope were scarce. Every day was difficult. Yet I struggled as best I could, inching forward in hopes of changing. And this is how it was all going to end...?

My heart grew dark, overcome with discontent, displeasure, and disapproval —all of which were directed at that damn idiot. I was ready to slug Force and give him a taste of the misery I'd been through.

But I knew it wouldn't make a difference when he was on cloud nine. My weak fists couldn't touch him with his all-seeing skill, anyway. That meant there was only one way for me to get my revenge on him...

"Oh."

An idea suddenly came to me. I seized it, carefully shaping it into a plan

before the inspiration was gone. Yeah... Yeah, this could work.

“Guys, I think I just thought of a way to get Force to come to his senses,” I said.

“Really?!” Erin asked, sitting up excitedly.

Yeah, I’ll get Force to come to his senses... and get my revenge while I’m at it.

Indeed, courtesy of my terrible personality, I’d come up with a way to turn the tables on Force. Just think about it. If you had a sweetheart, what would you hate to see the most? Them stolen from you, obviously. All we needed was a love triangle.

Ordinarily, there was no way I’d agree to a plan like this. I certainly wasn’t capable of making a normal girl fall for me. But in Roslia’s case... it might just work.

I took a deep breath and calmly started to explain things to the group.

“Roslia will go after any man, right? So why don’t we use that to our advantage?”

“What? How?”

“I just need to get close to Roslia and be deceived. Or pretend to be, I mean. If Force sees Roslia flirting with me too, won’t he finally realize he’s being duped?”

Imagine seeing your soulmate hitting on someone else. Now, imagine that “someone else” is me, the little dweeb you look down on so much. There was no way Force couldn’t put two and two together in that situation. Okay, maybe there was some wishful thinking at play here...

But the best part of this strategy was that it wouldn’t make an enemy out of Roslia. If everything went as I planned, she’d still get what she wanted—two men fighting over her. The only person who’d really be paying the price was Force.

“Hey, that sounds like it could work! I think it’s a good idea!” Neme said, her fists clenched and her eyes alight.

In stark contrast, however, Erin looked uneasy.

“And what if you fall for her during this little act of yours? You’ll be in real trouble if she charms you too. Maybe it’d be better to send Jin, who’s not such a sucker.”

“Jin, are you good at playing the fool?” I asked.

“Playing the fool, huh? Can’t say I’m confident about that...” he replied.

“See, Erin? Just in terms of the act itself, wouldn’t I be better than Jin? I’m awkward around women and look like an easy target, after all.”

“Wow... You’d say that about yourself?”

“Note, it sounds like you’re pretty intent to carry this out personally,” Jin interjected.

He’d apparently seen through me. Now that I’d been exposed, I might as well come clean.

“Yeah. As Force’s punching bag, why wouldn’t I want to give him a taste of his own medicine?”

Girl Snatcher vs. Crusher

I glanced out the window to my left. The sky was painted over with clouds, putting a damper on the sunlight streaming into the pub. I then looked behind me at the clock on the pillar in the back. The short hand was lying horizontal, pointing to the right.

It was only early afternoon, so there weren't many customers around yet. It was also too early for the lamps to be lit, so the whole place was rather dim. A gloomy air hung over the pub.

"It's already meetup time..." Erin muttered from across the round table where we were sitting. She narrowed her eyes and looked around.

"She'll be here soon," I said with no basis at all.

Erin and I had come to the pub together today, but we weren't exactly here for fun. It was all part of the plan—my plan to fall in with Roslia and get Force back. The first step was making contact with Roslia, which was why we were waiting around at the pub now.

The bell above the door suddenly jingled.

At the entrance stood a woman dressed in white vestments. I guess it was more accurate to say "a girl," as she only looked slightly older than me.

She looked around the pub. Our eyes met.

"Sorry I'm late!" she said, hurrying over to our table and bowing her head.

When she looked up, her soft, indigo hair swept to the sides and revealed her face. Our eyes met again, and I reflexively gulped.

Her glittering eyes were bewitching, her glossy lips simply carnal. The glimpse of skin her collar revealed was just as porcelain white as her robes. And when I beheld her figure, her voluptuous chest was perfectly accented by her fitted dress.

Her surprising purity, her storied beauty, and her sizable assets captivated

me. My senses were all telling me that she was a formidable opponent. I shook my head in a fluster.

Calm down. Chill. Remember your goal.

I exchanged a look with Erin. She seemed to understand my unspoken request and nodded lightly.

See, there was a reason I'd brought Erin along. You would normally think it'd be easier to get close to Roslia by meeting with her alone. However, we purposefully chose not to take that approach. We were playing a different angle here.

"Listen, you! Who do you think you are, stealing Force away from our party?!"

Erin slammed her hands against the table and stood up with such a clatter that it got the whole pub's attention. Roslia shrunk back.

This was all part of the plan, mind you. We'd summoned Roslia to the pub to call her out about Force. It was about the worst move we could possibly make, but it was my idea.

I just didn't see any way around it. Really, I couldn't think of any other way to arrange a meeting with Roslia on such short notice. She was constantly surrounded by men who waited on her hand and foot, so approaching her was difficult. There was no way I could just walk up to her out of the blue.

Besides, Force had already told us that she was aware of the rumors about her. She'd be wary of anyone who seemed suspicious, and it wouldn't take long for her to figure out Force and I were members of the same party. As much as I hated it, the Girl Snatcher was pretty infamous around town. I couldn't exactly hide my identity.

If I pretended to be someone else or used some concocted cover story, one slip-up could blow the whole operation. So if it was going to be that difficult to lie to her, I decided it would just be easier to tell the truth.

I already knew about Force's relationship with Roslia. That should be enough to make her want to toy around with me. And I would pretend to take the bait. That was our plan.

“Calm down, Erin. We came here to discuss things peacefully...”

As part of the act, I tried to soothe the heated Erin.

“I know that! But...”

Erin glared at me. She knew good and well, however, that all the other customers and the employees were staring at her right now. She acquiesced and sat back down, her fists clenched in frustration.

It was a pretty believable act. I hadn’t expected Erin to be so convincing. Maybe she really was angry. If she was blowing off steam at Roslia... I prayed that she hadn’t forgotten the scenario we planned.

Erin and I were essentially playing good cop, bad cop. Erin would give Roslia the third degree while I tried to act as a mediator and rein her in. Her fire would make me look like a nice guy, and hopefully win me Roslia’s interest. That was really why I’d brought Erin along.

“That wasn’t my intention at all...” Roslia squeaked.

“Shut up. Stop feigning innocence and show your true colors already!” Erin continued to berate the quivering priestess. “We all know you’re a hussy!”

“Hey, that’s going too far!” I shouted, trying to stop Erin in a panic.

Don’t forget Jin’s warning, Erin: “If you’re too hostile with Roslia, she’ll summon her henchmen on you. Use caution and tread lightly.”

I couldn’t see them, but Enemy Search told me there were two men observing us from the shadows. Strong men, at that.

Fortunately, they weren’t showing any hostility yet. So since we weren’t in immediate danger, I decided just to keep an eye on things for now. The second I felt malicious intent, we’d withdraw at full speed.

Well into the argument...

“I’ve had enough!” Erin declared, bringing the conversation to an abrupt halt as she stood up. Her face was twisted with rage. “I can’t believe you’d take this slut’s side, Note! What do you see in a woman like her?!”

“I’m not taking sides. I just think you’re getting a little too fired up, Erin...”



Yeah, she'd totally gone off the rails.

Erin sticking around any longer at this point was dangerous, so I figured it would be best if she simply left.

"If you're not interested in advancing the discussion, Erin, you can just go home! I'll talk things out with Roslia myself."

I ushered her over to the door, but she still wasn't done yet.

"You just want to be alone with her, don't you?! You couldn't be more obvious, pervert!"

Yes, that's right! That was the whole plan, remember?!

I wished she'd just leave already. Quietly.

"All right, all right. Calm down already. Remember why we're here," I said as I shoved Erin outside.

At this point, the whole thing was such a farce that I didn't even care how it looked anymore.

"I won't forget this, Note! How dare you get so high and mighty with me?! I'll make sure you don't forget it either!"

She was one to talk about forgetting things! I'd have to give her a piece of my mind for abandoning the plan later.

Anyway, I shooed Erin away and promptly returned to the table where Roslia was waiting. Finally... We were alone together. Erin had ranted and raved for ten whole minutes. I'd been a nervous wreck the entire time, but now things were coming together. The stage was at last set for my battle with Roslia.

It wasn't easy getting here.

When I had explained my plan to the party, everyone told me there was no need for such an elaborate setup. But they were oh-so mistaken. Our opponent was a decorated veteran in the war called love. She was man's greatest enemy.

And I was going up against her as a total rookie with no experience whatsoever. This was the minimum preparation I needed to go through in order to stand a chance against her.

This is how the weak have to survive—using every little opportunity to their advantage. That was something the other Arrivers, who were each so unique and so strong, couldn't understand. This was my way of fighting.

I'd spent my days as an adventurer clinging to my title by playing pack mule for random parties. Then I upgraded to learning real skills at the cost of a party member hating me. But nevertheless, I kept clinging.

Doggedness in the face of adversity was the one virtue I truly possessed, and it had served me well even after joining up with the Arrivers. So even if I had to cast aside my pride in order to reach a goal, I would get there no matter what it took. I would hang in there.

Game on, Roslia.

She probably had no idea she was being challenged to such a battle. But that was fine. I had no intent of spelling it out for her. Trying to seize victory before your opponent even realizes what hit them...

Up against a foe like Roslia, I needed to play dirty in order to win.

*

"There, there. It's okay, Note. You didn't do anything wrong."

Roslia reached out and gently patted my head. The warm sensation of her hand made my eyes droop shut.

"So you don't need to take it out on yourself. If you need someone to talk to, I'll gladly hear you out."

She wrapped her arms around my head and pulled me close. I leaned in to the comforting invitation. If I let her pull me any closer, I'd end up smothered in her enormous bosom... Not that I'd mind.

She continued to draw me in. Just a little bit more now and I'd be at peace. I lifted myself a little out of my chair, entrusting my weight to Roslia— *Wait, wait, wait!*

I had to hold my ground here. My face was a mere three centimeters from Roslia's breasts, leaving me in a very awkward half-sitting, half-standing position.

“Is something the matter?” she asked in a gentle voice.

“No, I just feel bad about imposing when we only just met...”

I bit down on my lip and somehow managed to pull myself together. I gently pulled away from her and took my seat again.

Roslia looked somewhat disappointed.

“There’s no need to be shy. Although I do think that’s very gentlemanly of you,” she said with a bright smile.

Her radiance outshone even the lights overhead. All I could do was muster a strained smile in response.

She defies all expectation. She’s even more of a threat than I thought.

I’d nearly fallen for her. I was on the verge of defeat. If I’d buried my face in her breasts and allowed her to console me, that would have been it. I’d just be another one of her captives with no chance of escape.

I was honestly a little impressed that I’d been able to hold myself back in the nick of time. And... I was honestly a little frightened that I was sitting here praising such a formidable foe. Roslia really was something.

While I calm my racing heart, let’s look back on how this happened.

After I chased a raging Erin out of the pub, Roslia and I finally got a chance to talk. I had no idea how to start the conversation, however. As I was contemplating my options...

“I’m a little hungry. Do you mind if I order something?” Roslia asked.

“Sure. The menu here looks delicious, so let’s get something to eat.”

Roslia clearly had her sights set on me and readily agreed to settle in for a meal with me. This was a great development. It had been easy enough to lure her here on the pretext of talking about Force, but I wanted to change the subject now that I’d gotten her to stay. Fortunately, she didn’t show any reluctance in that regard.

“Do you have any recommendations?” she asked casually, looking over the

menu.

Perfect. I'd go along with this.

"It's my first time here... But by the look of the menu, they specialize in meat dishes."

"You're right. I think I'll order some meat, then. What would you like, Note?"

"I think I'll get something similar."

"Oh, this one looks good. Ah, and this one too."

"Then I guess I'll get this?"

"Sounds good. I think that looks delicious as well."

"Really?"

"Of course. Want to share when we get our dishes?"

"Sure, if you're okay with that..."

"I told you that you don't have to be so shy. You can be comfortable around me."

"I don't want to be rude. You're clearly older than me."

"*That* was rude!" she gasped, her cheeks puffed out indignantly.

"S-Sorry."

"If you're really sorry, you can stop treating me like such a stranger. Go ahead. Try calling me by my name," she said with a mischievous grin.

"Okay... Okay, Roslia."

"Teehee! See? It's not so bad. I am kind of embarrassed, though."

"I'm the one embarrassed..."

"Then let's order some alcohol and drink away our embarrassment!" she declared, looking over the drink menu. "What should I pick? Maybe I'll go with this one... What about you, Note?"

"Hmm, maybe this one?"

Wait, huh? Drinking with her wasn't part of the plan... When did she start

running the show?

I had a bad feeling for a moment, but it vanished as Roslia called a waiter over.

"Umm... Are you okay?"

Roslia was waving her hand in front of my eyes. I'd apparently gotten lost in thought going over what had happened in my head.

"Sorry, I was just thinking."

"What about?"

"Oh, er, nothing much..."

I nearly lost my composure when Roslia leaned in, bringing her face close to mine. Way too close, in fact. She'd even reached out and taken my hand.

"I'm even more curious now."

"Really, it's nothing! Anyway, what were we talking about?"

"Did you forget? You were telling me about your childhood friend."

That's right. I'd defaulted to the sob story of my early days: the tale of how I'd been abandoned by Miya. Thanks to that, Roslia was now comforting me by stroking my head. I wasn't quite sure how exactly it had come to this, though.

It happened before I knew it, just like earlier. One wrong move here and I'd be wrapped around her finger. If I let her console me for all my hardship, I'd fall hook, line, and sinker. But... when I started to talk about Miya, I realized something.

Miya...

For the past few days— No, for the past several months, that name hadn't once crossed my mind.

The idea that I could forget Miya, that there would come a day when I didn't think of her... That was unthinkable for me six months ago. But now, I no longer saw flickers of her in everything I did. I no longer choked up with that strange pain between my heart and throat.

It was probably because I'd finally started to make amends. In other words, I was changing. I was no longer the sorry bastard I used to be, bogged down by the past. I was different now. I had a goal and I was diligently moving forward as I worked toward it.

Perhaps that's why Roslia's honeyed, devilish whispers of forgiveness rang hollow for me. Roslia was forgiving my past self. She didn't see me for who I was now, and that gave me no joy.

If I were still the loser I used to be, wallowing in the past and self-pity, then I would have fallen for Roslia's temptation. But the fact that I didn't told me I really had changed, and that made me happier than any of the sweet whispers in my ear. I was growing, even if it was only a little, tiny bit. All my hard work wasn't in vain.

After that, I avoided talking about the Arrivers with Roslia. I didn't need her approval for growing. For becoming a better person. If things went that route... I might still give in to her.

"Let's do this again! We can talk even more next time!" Roslia said, waving happily.

We were currently on the street outside the pub. The sun had fallen before I knew it, and the sky seemed to have cleared up.

"Sure thing. I had lots of fun today. Thanks."

I endured Roslia's temptations. Until the very end. Me, Note Athlon.

I waved back to her and walked away, ignoring the fact that she was staring a hole into my back.

At this rate, I probably couldn't hold out against her for much longer. Today's mission, however, was over. I'd even say it was a success. I'd made contact with Roslia and gotten pretty close with her. Now all I had left to do was make sure Force saw it. But we could save that for next time.

"Next time, huh?"

I sighed. If there was a "next time," I'd have to endure her all over again.

Tormented by a vague sense of gloom, I headed back to the house.

*

Something had completely slipped my mind—how should I put it? What's that thing that goes with gloom? Doom. Yeah, that's it.

What to do...?

For now, I pulled to the door I'd just cracked open. I needed a minute to compose myself.

The door in question, of course, was the front door of the communal party house. The second I stepped inside, a great trial awaited me. A mental one. And a physical one.

"Hey! Don't just pretend you didn't see me and close the door!"

The door in front of me flew open, an angry voice ringing out from inside. Its owner stomped right up to me.

"Who wouldn't close the door with you looming there like some villain waiting in the shadows?! It's just too much!"

I did my best to defend myself in the face of the pigtailed girl now standing in the doorway, arms folded and glaring at me. Her voice was practically trembling with rage.

Just how long has she been waiting...?

"Too much, huh? Is that guilt taking over after you abandoned me to make nice with that slut?!"

"Oh, speaking of! I'm the one who should be pissed off here, Erin! You completely ruined the plan!"

"Why are *you* snapping at *me*— Wait, what plan?"

"Huh? Did you forget?"

"Of course not!"

"Okay, then, you know... The plan where I take Roslia's side and pretend to fall for her?"

“Oh, right... Come to think of it, you did say something about that...”

Erin was now looking away, clearly avoiding eye contact as she twirled one of her silver pigtails around her finger.

“Come on, Erin! You nearly ruined everything!”

“I can’t help it! You know I lose sight of things when I’m mad!”

“That’s not something you should declare so proudly!”



“Gosh... I’m just glad my own party member didn’t turn on me...”

“Erin...”

When she hung her head like that, she looked much smaller and more delicate than usual. I couldn’t see the look on her face in the dark, which was actually a little disappointing.

Based on what Erin had just said, it sounded like she actually recognized me as a fellow party member now. I really wanted to see her expression when she said it, but trying to peek at her face so obviously would just piss her off.

“Well, thanks to you being mad for real, Roslia had no idea it was a setup. So I guess things worked out for the best?”

“That’s right! It was actually part of my plan—”

“I take it all back. Don’t get full of yourself.”

“What?! You can at least give me that much!”

I wanted to ask exactly how much “that much” was; but I refrained, knowing it would only lead to more shouting. I had seen her in a better light for a brief moment there, but putting a sour spin on things was true to form for Erin, I guess.

“Things were pretty dicey back there, you know? If you’d yelled at her any more, her henchmen would’ve come after you.”

It hadn’t really thought we were in serious danger at the pub, but I needed to get the point across here.

“Oh yeah, you said something about that too... But, ugh, listening to you talk about that woman is pissing me off all over again. We should have just blown her and her stupid henchmen away with my magic!”

“No, no violence! You’ll ruin everything I’ve worked so hard to set up!”

“It was all futile anyway! Now let’s go take them out in their sleep, Note!”

“That would make us criminals...”

“No worries! I’ll blow up any witnesses too!”

“Now I’m *definitely* worried! Anyway, that plan probably wouldn’t work. Her henchmen seemed pretty strong.”

“Hmm... Stronger than me?”

“No, but you’re a mage, right? Aren’t you weak in close combat?”

“Well, that’s true.”

“And also—”

Just as I was about to say something, Jin stuck his head out of a window on the second floor.

“Listen, I’m glad the two of you are getting along so well, but could you bring your flirting inside? You’re disturbing the neighbors.”

Now that I thought about it, we *were* being pretty loud... But wait! There was a more important matter at hand here!

“We’re not flirting!”

“Ew! Why would I flirt with *him*?!”

“Like I said, bring it inside, you two!”

*

Now, as I’ve said before, there are playboys in this world who insist that any outing with a member of the opposite sex counts as a date. By that logic, I was about to go out on a date... But the reality wasn’t so sweet.

This was more like going to war.

Several days after I first made contact with Roslia, we made plans to go out together. Today was the fated day, and I was presently on my way to our designated meetup spot.

Now that I’d finally met Roslia for myself, however, I was painfully aware of how commanding her powers of seduction were. Going to see her was just plain dangerous. So in order to minimize my contact with her, I’d decided to put an end to things today. In other words, I was proceeding to the final stage of the plan: making sure Force saw me on a date with Roslia and getting him to come

to his senses.

Jin and the others had already taken Force out for the day. They set to end up at a predetermined location, so all I had to do was take Roslia to the same place on our so-called date. It was a simple job on paper, but for someone like me who had no experience with women... it was a herculean task.

Granted, this is a trap of my own making...

As I was contemplating my fate, I arrived at the fountain on the outskirts of town where we were supposed to meet. I spotted a lone girl waiting in the deserted square. Her beauty was mysteriously magnified with no one else around.

“Oh, Note!” Roslia called, waving as she ran over to me.

Instead of her vestments, today she wore a white dress that was absolutely stunning. No, that wasn’t quite right. That made it sound like her vestments *weren’t* stunning, which definitely wasn’t the case. But this dress... It was really something. I mean, it was just plain devious. It confounded me with all kinds of thoughts: “Wow, so this is how she normally dresses”; “She’s so pure and radiant”; and worst of all, “H-Her breasts are j-jiggling.”

The unexpected attack left me unable to respond with anything other than a super lame...

“H-Hey.”

My right hand, half extended awkwardly into the air, now had nowhere to go. This was the typical behavior of someone uncomfortable around women, though that hurts to admit. While I was wincing, however, Roslia closed the distance between us.

“I was waiting for you,” she pouted.

“But there’s still time before we were supposed to meet...”

“Heehee, I know. I was just so excited that I came early. That’s why I was here waiting for you,” she said, linking her arm with mine as she smiled. “I’m expecting a lot from you today, you know?”

No, no, no. No way. There’s literally no way I can hold out against this.

What was she, some kind of angel?! It was all too cute, too perfect. Her fluttering eyelashes, the way she leaned her head on my arm, the sensation of her chest pressing against me... This was the stuff dreams were made of. The most any man could ask for. Paradise manifested.

Now, I know there are those of you out there wondering, “Does it really count as a date if you’re not actually dating?” But trust me, you’d change your tune if you could see how close we were.

As I tried to calm my racing heart, however, Roslia put the final nail in the coffin herself.

“What’s wrong? Let’s go somewhere already! This is gonna be a great date!”

S-So this really is a date after all? G-Good for you, Note.

“It’s so beautiful,” Roslia said in wonder from beside me.

“Yeah, really beautiful.”

It was a cliché comment to begin with, but I was frankly so captivated by Roslia that a cliché response was the best I could manage myself.

We were currently at the forest spring, a famous attraction just to the north of town. It was so beloved by the locals that it ranked number four on a list of “best date spots” in one of Neme’s magazines. In fact, you could tell how popular the place was just based on the number of people here. There were couples, families, couples, and more couples. Yeah, actually, there were *a lot* of couples...

For a moment, I doubted if I should really be here with Roslia; but when my downcast eyes saw her arm wrapped around mine, my doubts disappeared. No matter how you looked at it, we were acting like a couple ourselves right now. But that was okay. It was all part of the plan. There was only one thing bothering me, keeping my anxious heart racing.



As I watched Roslia's expressive face, listened to her gentle voice, and felt her soft skin against mine, a sense of melancholic euphoria rose within me. Even I didn't know whether my "really beautiful" line earlier was about the spring or her...

"Why don't we go over there? There're fewer people," I suggested.

"Sounds good. Let's go!" she agreed, gently tugging on my arm.

From there, we walked around the spring to a less crowded area.

"Ta-dah!" Roslia exclaimed as she pulled a folded picnic blanket from her bag. "I'm going to lay this out for us."

I took a look around at all the other couples sitting on blankets and flirting.

I see. So this is what you're supposed to do at a date spot...

To be honest, I thought all we'd be doing was admiring the spring. I felt like I was gaining experience in dating know-how.

Roslia and I sat down on the blanket she'd brought. It wasn't very big, so we were practically shoulder to shoulder.

"It's so beautiful."

"Didn't you say that earlier?"

"I can't help it! It's just so pretty!"

"Yeah, it is..."

From there, we fell into silence. Normally I would have felt awkward about it, but for some reason, I was comfortable sitting next to Roslia with nothing more than the sound of the wind between us.

"Are you still in love with that childhood friend of yours, Note?" she asked, eventually breaking the silence.

"Why do you ask?" I replied.

"Because I want to know."

"That's not much of an answer..."

"Then answer me first and I'll tell you."

“What? Don’t try to change the topic...”

“You’re the one trying to change the topic, Note.”

Guess she saw through me... Oh well. I decided to confess the truth.

“I don’t think I am. But, I mean, it’s not like I hate her or anything. Hmm, how can I describe it...?”

“Describe what?”

“Perhaps it’s best to say that I no longer have romantic feelings for her.”

Roslia was clever. She was trying to get me to confront my true feelings by giving voice to them. Even though I knew I shouldn’t say another word, my mouth just kept moving.

“Actually, I’m not even sure that what I felt for Miya was romantic in the first place anymore.”

“How come?”

“I’ve started to think that, rather than love, it was closer to admiration or appreciation. Something precious like that.”

“Then... What do you think true love feels like?”

This conversation could only be going in one direction: I was going to end up telling Roslia that I loved her. Even I, completely inexperienced in the ways romance, could see the writing on the wall. No, wait... This was a trap. Roslia was doing this on purpose. She’d set me up.

She was playing the part of the fair maiden waiting to be swept off her feet. She was making it all too easy to open up to her. To say those dreaded three words, even though I’d never said them to anyone in my life...

But the moment they left my mouth, I’d be done for. If I said those words out loud, it would mean acknowledging this pounding in my heart really was love.

And I couldn’t accept that. That would mean defeat. The whole plan would be ruined.

“I don’t think I can say. But I answered your question, so how about you answer mine now?” I said, forcefully bringing an end to her little interrogation.

Roslia, however, showed no sign of relenting.

“You wanted to know why I asked, right? But isn’t the answer obvious? It’s because I would’ve hated it if you were still in love with her.”

“Wh-What? Why?”

“That’s a secret! I won’t tell you anything more unless you spill the beans first!” she declared in a pout.

C-Could this be it? Where Roslia and I confess our mutual feelings for each other?

Calm down, Note. Th-There’s no reason to think that...

I did my best to keep myself in check.

“Let’s stop talking about this! It’s embarrassing!” Roslia exclaimed, her face a little red. “Oh, that’s right! I brought lunch. Care to eat together?”

Th-That sweet look in her eyes... I-It’s too powerful...

Okay, I’ll admit it. Roslia had me under her spell. I was well on my way to falling for her. But what’s a guy to do?! Anybody in their right mind would just eat this up! Actually, it did look really good. Roslia’s homemade lunch, I mean.

“Sure!”

I just hoped I wasn’t digging my own grave...

*

“All right, let’s head back to town,” Roslia suggested as she folded up the picnic blanket.

“Yeah,” I replied weakly as I watched her.

She put the blanket back in her bag and walked over to me. Her right hand nudged mine before taking hold of it. We headed off like that, her hand gently in mine until our fingers eventually intertwined. I-It was like we were lovers walking home together.

I’d really been dreading seeing Roslia this morning, but all of that anxiety was gone now. I felt a sense of relief that she was near, like I’d be sad if she wasn’t there. You could say I’d had a change of heart after spending some time with

her.

I knew that wasn't a good thing. But I couldn't help it. I was having fun.

The time I spent with Roslia was truly pleasant. I was happy, and I wanted that to continue forever. Her homemade lunch was delicious. Her expressive face was dazzling. She made me laugh even at jokes that had no punchline.

And so... I squeezed Roslia's hand tightly.

"Say, I know we agreed to go shopping once we got back to town, but... can we not? Why don't we do something else instead?"

"Huh?" Roslia cocked her head quizzically. "I don't mind... I just assumed you wanted to since you suggested it."

I knew what I was saying probably sounded crazy, but I couldn't tell her the truth. I couldn't just come out and say: "Can we go anywhere but where Force is waiting?" She wouldn't even know what that meant.

See, the final phase of my plan was to take Roslia shopping. We were supposed to go to the store where the other Arrivers had taken Force, and our confrontation would ensue. Roslia, however, was none the wiser, so she didn't understand the reason for my hesitance.

In fact, if I did anything to make her suspicious of me at this point, I could blow the whole thing. The plan would be a disastrous failure, but... that would be okay with me right now. I could betray the Arrivers and elope with Roslia. Instead of throwing myself back into long, hard, grueling days of training, I could just keep living blissfully like this. Who cares if I didn't accomplish anything? Who could blame me for wanting to choose happiness? Wasn't this a fitting end for an adventurer who never stood a chance in the first place?

Once those thoughts entered my mind, I was overrun. Everything flooded to the surface in the form of a single question...

"Say, Roslia, what do you think of me? Compared to the other guys, like Force."

A question to confirm her feelings.

If she evaded me here, I'd accept the fact that I'd been played and head to

the meeting point as promised. But if she said something else—if she gave me the answer I was hoping for—then I would choose Roslia. This was it. Right here and now was the point of no return.

“You’re still concerned about Force? I told you, I don’t see him in a romantic way at—”

“This isn’t about Force; it’s about you. I’m worried you see me the same way you do him.”

“Not at all! I’m enjoying our date so much that I never want it to end,” she assured me. “I’m having more fun with you than I ever have anyone before! You’re my number one, Note!”

Ah, yes. The perfect answer.

Whether or not she’d known what I was thinking, she said exactly what I’d needed to hear. It really was the perfect answer. And so, I...

“Forget what I said. Let’s go shopping after all.”

I chose my future with the Arrivers.

Your answer was just too *perfect, Roslia...*

She sounded like a sly villainess who’d used that line countless times before. Like she was used to it. Used to deceiving people. I mean, maybe there was a chance that she’d genuinely fallen for me... No, that was just a pipe dream.

Since the moment we’d met, I hadn’t done a single cool or dependable thing to impress her. All I’d done was whine. I’d been too embarrassed and flustered to do anything right. I wasn’t especially good-looking, either. My face was pretty plain. Roslia had no reason to adore me over any other guy she knew.

“There’s this one store I really like. Why don’t we go there?”

But now, my eyes were open. I’d awoken from the dream. Things would be okay from here. I’d stay the course and see my plan through to the end.

I took Roslia by the hand and continued down the lonely stretch of road towards town.

About ten minutes later, I started to get a bad feeling. Like I'd made some sort of terrible mistake. Something was definitely wrong.

And no, I wasn't talking about how I'd handled things with Roslia. I was talking about Enemy Search, which I still kept active at all times. Courtesy of that, I'd detected five men nearby.

They'd been watching us since the start of our date. At least, two of them had. The other three had joined up at the spring, but their hostility was rapidly increasing now. They were likely on the verge of attack.

I racked my brain trying to figure out why. The first two men I'd detected were the same guys from the pub the other night. So what were Roslia's henchmen doing coming after us?

The first possibility I had to consider was that they were on to my plan... But try as I might, I couldn't think anything I'd done to blow my cover. I was safe in that regard, which meant something else was going on here.

The second possibility was jealousy. Perhaps Roslia's henchman were just so overcome with jealous rage that they were going to attack me in broad daylight. While I couldn't totally dismiss that theory, it wasn't exactly reasonable. If I were one of her henchman, I'd wait to get the guy alone. Attacking the object of Roslia's affection in front of her would surely make a bad impression.

Humans were emotional beings, however, so there was no guarantee that these guys were behaving rationally right now. After what I'd just been through, I knew it was all too easy to lose sight of reason around Roslia. So even if the jealousy theory didn't exactly make perfect sense, it was still the most plausible.

Really, I couldn't think of anything else.

While I was cautiously turning things over in my head, however, one of the men made his move. The others quickly followed. They seemed like an experienced team.

Of course, I was powerless to do anything against them. I stood there frozen as they surrounded us in the blink of an eye. When I saw the person standing in front of me, however, I couldn't help my reaction...

“Huh?!”

I’d made one tremendously foolish oversight.

“You’re coming with us, Roslia!”

The person in front of me, you see, wasn’t a man... but a woman. Actually, all five of them were women. And that was my mistake. Enemy Search could perceive the strength and hostility of a target, but couldn’t determine someone’s gender. Lesson learned.

I’d just assumed that the people following us all along were the henchmen Jin had mentioned. But no... these women were quite the opposite. They were ready to take Roslia down—their drawn weapons made that point rather clear.

“Give it up, Roslia. We’ve waited all this time to catch you alone.”

The woman directly in front of us inched closer, her weapon at the ready. Her four companions followed suit.

“I’m scared... Save me, Note...”

Even in danger, Roslia kept up her cunning act. She cowered behind me, trembling. She was doing her best to get me to protect her. But...

“Sorry, not happening. I don’t have any combat abilities. Moreover, these ladies are way stronger than me, so there’s really nothing I can do. Sorry, Roslia. You’ll have to handle this yourself.”

After assessing the strength of our foes via Enemy Search, I boldly declared my surrender and pushed Roslia forward.

“Huh?! How could you abandon a helpless girl in a situation like this?!”

“A *real* helpless girl would never say that! Besides, isn’t this your fault for pissing them off in the first place? I imagine they’ve got something to say about the way you’ve been leading men on.”

“How could you switch sides so quickly?! You’re the worst man I’ve ever met!”

Careful there, Roslia. Your true colors are showing.

I guess everything before now was just an act... I mean, I knew that already,

but it was still a shock to see her flip like this. Granted, I might've deserved it for flipping on her first.

"What a terrible man..."

Even the women surrounding us looked completely disgusted by my betrayal.

Hey, I'm on your side, you know?! I'm trying to hand Roslia over, just like you want!

"Like you said, we've got something against this woman. The gang of bandits we belonged to was torn apart when this woman seduced all the men."

"I'm very sorry to hear that. See, Roslia? This is your fault," I said, turning to her.

But she still looked unhappy.

"Fine, I'll accept that it's my fault. B-But still! Who abandons a cute girl like that?!"

"Counter question: Why should I save you?"

"Because I'm *cute*, like I said! Doesn't it make you want to show off a little?"

"Even if it did, I don't have anything to show. I'm weak."

"You could still throw yourself in harm's way in hopes of a reward—"

"The thought never crossed my mind."

"I'm actually so disgusted right now. I'm just speechless, Note."

What a coincidence, Roslia. Likewise.

Honestly, I'd had enough. In reality, Force would come crawling back the minute Roslia was out of the picture, which would put a nice little bow on this whole affair. That was why I'd decided to hand her over to the bandit women. I mean, it was also for my own safety, but...

"Hey, put a lid on it and listen to the rest of our story!" the woman in front shouted.

Oops, yeah. She was *in the middle of talking, huh?*

With their weapons trained on us, we weren't in any position to argue. Roslia

and I thus both listened quietly.

“After what she did, we reformed the gang with just us women. Our numbers were smaller that way, but without all the shitty men around, we were a tighter team than ever before.”

“A party without any men? Are you crazy?”

“You’ve gotta be the crazy one for interrupting right now, Roslia...”

“I told you two to put a lid on it!”

“See? You made them mad all over again, Roslia.”

“You’re blaming me for this too?! I’m honestly impressed by how horrible you are, Note...”

“Yeah, really!” the bandit woman chimed in. “What’s your name, boy? Note?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! What can I do for you?”

“We came to fight this Roslia bitch, but you... Ugh! Men who cast women aside for their own gain are the worst! You’re scum! You’re just as guilty as the men who fall for this slut! We were gonna let you go if you cooperated, but not anymore! You’re coming with us too!”

Seriously? I guess I chose the wrong answer... Wait, what should I have done instead?! If I couldn’t fight them and I couldn’t surrender to them, that meant there was no right answer!

“Serves you right!” Roslia declared with a clenched fist and the biggest grin I’d ever seen on her face.

I won’t forget this...

While I was distracted by Roslia, however, the bandit woman out in front sprung forward. She closed the distance between us in an instant, knocking my feet out from under me before I knew what was happening. It was all so sudden that I hit the ground without even bracing myself properly. The next thing I knew, she had my left arm twisted upward and handcuffed.

This was bad. If only I had one second... No, even half a second!

“Jin!” I screamed towards the treeline behind me.

Everyone whipped around to look. But moments passed in silence, nothing happening.

“He’s bluffing!”

The woman holding me down proceeded to hit me in the back of the head with the hilt of her sword.

Guess they saw through that too...

Before I could even admit defeat, everything went dark.

Outcome

My name is Roslia Minkgott. I was born in a small country neighboring the kingdom where Puriff lies. I really shouldn't be the one to say so myself, but there's no two ways about it: I was raised in the lap of luxury.

How could I *not* have been? I'm the second princess of the royal family, after all.

This may come as a surprise to anyone who knows me by my reputation, but I'm actually aware of, understand, and accept my own twisted personality—actually, it's fair to say it's simply my nature. I just can't help seducing men. Why, you ask? Well, I believe that came about for several reasons.

Perhaps the Charm skill I received during my presentation ceremony had something to do with it, but that certainly wasn't what started it. You see, I'd already made a hobby of toying with men by the age of fifteen. The biggest influence on me, then, was most likely my parents.

I'm not saying my mother and father are bad people, mind you. Even as an impressionable child, I thought they were wonderful. They were beloved by the people, revered as a splendid king and queen who stood up against nobles who tried to abuse their power. They were also devout followers of the state religion, Cecinaism.

And because my parents were Cecinaists, I began learning its teachings at a young age. It wasn't anything sketchy, however. In fact, it was quite the opposite. It espoused ideals like, "Thou shalt love only one soul as a mate throughout thy life." At least, I *think* that's what they said. My memory's a little vague, but that was the general idea. And so it should come as no surprise that my parents married with absolute devotion to one another.

As a child, I dreamed of marrying the same way. I believed it was my destiny. However, unlike my mother and father... you could say I had a lot of love to give. Really, I had a wandering eye—contrary to the teachings of my faith and

my beloved parents.

This broke my heart as well as theirs. I was rebuked countless times for my ways. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't restrain myself. It was hopeless. I just couldn't help the love that welled up within me. What was I supposed to do? Love was something you fell in and out of, not something you could turn on and off.

As young as I was, however, I was loath to let down my parents. I tried straightening myself out and scorned a boy who told me he loved me, knowing in my heart that I would be over him soon... And when I did, it was like I unsealed the lid on something dark inside of me.

I indulged myself in lust in an attempt to escape the heartbreak of being unable to date the men I loved. I charmed victim after victim before casting them aside. I knew it was a fruitless endeavor, but it was the only outlet I had. It made me feel better... and then worse. And so I continued to seduce men in a vicious cycle.

I was a real piece of work, honestly. I ultimately betrayed the very teachings and expectations I was trying to uphold. But by the time I realized what I'd done, I was in too deep. The vicious cycle only continued.

I heard the whispers about me. My parents tried to intervene and help me. I felt like I was being crushed by the weight of the guilt... but nothing changed. The way I continued to deceive men to distract myself from my own wrongdoing was laughable, even to me.

So I bitterly perfected my craft, making man after man fall for me out of resentment. And somewhere along the line, I abandoned the idea of "love." Men only wanted me for my flirtatious facade; they told me they loved me, but they never truly saw *me*. I wanted so desperately to be loved, but these superficial men only adored my superficial mask...

And so I gave up. I gave up on finding true love—what I'd wanted all along. But without love, my heart was empty. I needed something to fill the void, so I filled it with more men. That's right. I just couldn't help myself. Even if I'd given up on true love, I still wanted to *be* loved.

Superficial love was better than no love at all, so I sought out the affection of

as many men as possible, and they offered it freely. It was the only way I knew to fill the void... even though I knew it would never give me the one thing I truly wanted.

When I turned fifteen, I received a powerful skill during my presentation ceremony. Between the envy that generated, domestic power struggles between nobles, the scheming of neighboring countries, and my own maneating nature, my homeland was on the verge of ruin before I knew it. The entire conflict earned me an unseemly nickname: “Crusher.”

Unable to stand the discord at home any longer, I had my parents fake my death and secretly departed the country.

I traveled until I reached the town of Puriff, breaking up a gang of bandits with my bad habits along the way. I got a reputation for it, but continued to do as I pleased until I made a name for myself. People started calling me “Crusher” after the infamous princess of a neighboring country.

I guess people never change much, do they?

But at last, my wanton ways caught up with me. I was eventually tracked down and taken prisoner by the remnants of the bandit gang I’d broken up.

That brings us to the present, where I find myself in an underground jail that stinks of iron and dirt. My arms have been restrained with magical handcuffs that prevent the activation of skills, arts, and spells—an unexpected setback. You can’t buy handcuffs like this just anywhere.

If those women have such powerful magic items... then I may be in more trouble than I thought. I should have resisted before they got the cuffs on me.

Worse yet, I’d been captured with a boy named Note, who turned out to be a worthless piece of good-for-nothing trash. He was weak, cowardly, and only ever opened his mouth to whine. His eyes were always fixated on my chest, which was especially irksome given he wasn’t much to look at himself. And can you believe it? The second he felt he was in danger, he tried to sell me out to the bandit women only to end up getting knocked out with one blow.

Objectively speaking, he didn't have a single redeeming quality. Why had I ever bothered going out on a date with a guy like him? I had to wonder.

What irritated me the most was how he'd had the nerve to ask me how he compared to other men. I'd given him an answer I was certain would make him fall for me for good, but he was oh-so casual about it. He should have been the easiest target on the planet, yet those lovestruck puppy eyes of his—at least for a brief moment—looked like they saw through me.

I almost felt like I'd been discovered by some loser who clearly had no experience with women. But no—that wasn't possible. I denied it to myself over and over...

Yet I couldn't shake the faint feeling of defeat in my heart. It was oddly vexing.

Ugh, just remembering the whole encounter was infuriating. I decided to take it out on Note while he was still out cold. I had no intention of waking him up, however, so my vengeful kick was no more than a weak tap to his feet.

"Hmph!"

"Hey... What was that for, Roslia?"

"Hweh?!"

I couldn't help the strange noise that came out of my mouth in surprise. I hadn't realized he was awake.

"Oh, sorry. That was an accident."

"I distinctly heard you humph when you kicked me, though."

Guess he saw through me... But if he was awake, he should have said so sooner! Then I wouldn't have kicked him. Since I'd already exposed myself, however, I dropped the act.

"How long have you been awake?" I asked, annoyed.

"For a while now, I guess? There's no clock in this cell, so I can't say exactly."

"If you were awake, you should have spoken up. I've been bored."

So bored, in fact, that I'd had nothing better to do than sit and reflect on my

past. Note was useless, but he could have at least entertained me.

“Sorry. I was focusing.”

“On what?”

“Searching out the presences in this base.”

Oh, great. That blow to the head had knocked a few marbles loose. Poor guy... Even *I* felt bad for him.

“Hey, were you thinking something rude just now?” he asked skeptically.

“N-Not at all!” I stammered.

“That’s a suspicious reply if I ever heard one...”

See, that was where Note had the wrong idea. I’d been thinking rude things about him since the day we met.

“Well, whatever. Care to make a deal, Roslia?”

“A deal? What kind of deal?”

I had a bad feeling about making a deal with a pervert like Note. It was probably something dirty.

“If I get you out of this jail, will you leave Force alone?” he asked, much to my surprise.

“If you can really get me out of here, then fine,” I replied.

Pity, though. Deals only worked out when both parties could make good on their end of the bargain. In my case, tossing Force would be a joke. But poor Note had absolutely no way of getting us out of here.

Wait, why did he bring up Force all of a sudden anyway?

“Then we have an agreement. No going back on your word later, okay?”

With that... Note held up his bare hands, his restraints falling to the floor in a clatter.

“Your handcuffs...” I muttered.

While I stood there bewildered, he removed mine as well.

“Is that the Unlock art?” I asked.

Something was strange. The handcuffs the bandits used on us were supposed to suppress the use of arts.

“Close. It’s an art called Trap Dismantling,” he replied.

“I don’t understand. Those bandit women said the cuffs were enchanted to keep us from activating any arts.”

“Oh, well... I actually dismantled the enchantment before I was cuffed, so...”

Before he was cuffed? Then, back then...

When Note had yelled out for one of the Arrivers—Jin, I think—it was just a distraction to get everyone to look away. That might have given him the opportunity he needed, but the bandit women handcuffed him immediately after that. Did he really have enough time to use an art? Was that really possible?

I mean, it had to be. Here I was with my hands uncuffed, thanks to Note. I had no choice but to accept it.

“All right, enough standing around, Roslia. Let’s get out of here.”

The next thing I knew, Note even had the door to our cell unlocked.

Fortunately there was no one on guard just outside, but we could have been in real trouble if there were watchmen lurking out of view. I felt the need to admonish his carelessness.

“Can you be a little more discreet? There may be a guard around the corner —”

“No worries. I’ve got an eye on everyone in the vicinity via Enemy Search. I’ve also found a route straight to the exit with Mapping, so I think we’ll be fine. It was worth waiting until this late hour, since it seems like everyone’s gone to sleep.”

“How can you tell they’re asleep...?”

There were no windows here in the underground jail, so we had no way of telling what time it really was. How could he possibly know that the bandits had

gone to bed?

“A target’s threat level registers differently with Enemy Search when they’re asleep.”

“You can use Enemy Search like that? I’ve never heard of this before...”

To be honest, I had no idea what was happening anymore.

Enemy Search primarily allowed its user to detect monsters. Only advanced users could just barely detect other humans with it. So to be able to tell if someone was sleeping or not via Enemy Search... That was incredible.

How many thieves had I dated? The answer was so many that I’d lost count. It was enough that I’d learned a thing or two about their arts. Oh, but don’t get the wrong idea. I knew about *every* battle style, not just thieves. I shouldn’t have to explain why.

Note didn’t seem to pick up on my surprise, however. Honestly, I was getting a little tired of it myself, so I simply decided to follow along and crept after Note as he pressed forward.

This bandits’ base was built inside of a complex cave system. (I figured we were in the mountains about half an hour north of town.) It was spacious enough that it was easy to slip around, but the bandits operating on a skeleton crew was helpful too. Note said there were about twenty of them all told—a disproportionately small number given the size of their hideout.

Anyway, I continued to follow Note as he silently navigated with the help of Enemy Search and Mapping. Seeing him like this, he actually seemed like a member of the famous Arrivers. I barely recognized him as the useless stooge I’d gone on a date with.

Feeling somewhat relieved, I decided to ask something that had been bothering me for a while now.

“When we made our deal earlier, what did you mean by asking me to leave Force alone?”

“That I want you to leave him alone?”

“No, I’m asking *why*.”

“So Force will come to his senses and come back to the party.”

“Wait, *that’s* why? You’ve never said anything about that before...”

“No, I guess not. My plan was to get him to come back on his own, which I was going to accomplish by pretending to fall in love with you and making sure he saw us on a date together. But that’s obviously not happening now, so whatever.”

“Wait, huh?! Seriously?!”

“What, you didn’t realize? Guess that means the plan was going well until the bandits showed up... Damn it.”

“Hold on just a minute! I want to hear more about this so-called plan!”

“You don’t. Trust me. It’ll only make you feel worse.”

“But being left out of the loop is the absolute *worst*! Please tell me! At this rate, I’ll never sleep at night again!”

“Good. Maybe it’ll give you some time to reflect on your behavior.”

“You are *so* insensitive! But fine! I’ll reflect and repent and whatever! But not knowing... I could just scream!”

“You’re basically just threatening to start yelling if I don’t tell you, aren’t you? You have no remorse at all.”

“Oops, you got me.”

“Fine. I’ll fill you in, so pipe down.”

“Hmph!”

“People who are genuinely mad don’t go around humphing, you know?”

“You have no idea how mad I am right now! Hmph!”

“Sure, sure. Sorry.”

There, Note explained to me everything that had happened. How should I put this...?

Even though I’d acted like I was joking around about being mad, I was

honestly rather pissed. Partly at Note, but also at myself for falling for his little plot. I was so frustrated that I unconsciously dug my fingers into my thigh. *That* was definitely going to leave a mark.

Letting Note see my frustration would only feel like defeat, however, so I kept a cheery tone in my voice. I was glad I was walking behind him, though. I probably wasn't capable of controlling my facial expression right now.

At this rate, I needed to reassess my valuation of the boy in front of me. He was a sleeper threat. He was the first man to pull one over on me, a self-proclaimed maneater. Like he'd said, if the bandits hadn't shown up, I wouldn't have been any the wiser about his little ploy.

I still found it hard to believe his infatuation with me was all an act. I thought he'd seriously fallen for me while we were out on our date this afternoon. Perhaps I was just having difficulty coming to terms with the truth. Since the day I was born nineteen years ago, my entire life had been devoted to toying with men. And with the tiny bit of pride I'd built up in my craft...

I just couldn't admit defeat. It should have been impossible for someone like Note to get the better of me. Men are just easily fooled idiots, after all. Him being the exception was just too unthinkable to be true.

I'd long given up on hoping someone would ever see me for me, in all my twisted glory. Getting your hopes up only leads to disappointment. I could get through this as long as I remained calm. Be still, my wildly beating heart.

Deception is our specialty, after all.

At last, we could finally see the exit. It had been a long journey to get there. Not in terms of distance or time, but in terms of the sheer mental drain I'd undergone along the way.

I sighed in relief to see we'd finally reached our destination. Note, however, looked unhappy.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Kind of," he replied. "There are two guards on the other side of the door. We won't be able to avoid them if we want to leave this way."

“Just go out there and do your stuff! Knock ’em dead!”

Now that I knew Note was a top-tier thief, I figured two guards should be a piece of cake for him. I cheered him on with encouragement, but for some reason, that only made him look more apprehensive.

“I know I’ve said it before, but I’m not good in a fight.”

“Yeah, right! I saw how amazing you were with Trap Dismantling. I know you’re actually a super cool thief, Note.”

“Let me be clear. The only arts I can use are Enemy Search, Trap Detection, and Trap Dismantling.”

“Aww, come on! There’s no need to be shy!”

“...”

I thought he was joking around with me at first, but he looked dead serious.

“Wow... Your face really says it all...”

“I’ve been trying to tell you this whole time! Stop looking so disappointed!”

“You come through just when I think you’re worthless, and you totally drop the ball just when I start thinking you’re cool... How disappointing.”

“Look, I’m not thrilled about it either. But from what I can tell via Enemy Search, I’m the weakest person here.”

I didn’t understand this boy at all. Why on earth would he spend so much time mastering arts with no combat value? How ridiculous can you get? But while I would have loved nothing more than to give him the third degree about it, escape came first.

“So, just how were you planning on getting us out of here?”

My thoughtless question was met with an answer I never saw coming...

“Why don’t you defeat them, Roslia?”

“What are you saying to a delicate priestess like me?! I’m a healer, not a fighter!”

I fervently tried to shoot down the idea, but the boy before me just grinned

wickedly. He then dropped an even bigger bombshell.

“What are *you* saying, Roslia? Aren’t you the strongest person here?”

“Wh-Why would you say that?! Wh-What nonsense are you talking?!”

“Based on that panicked reaction... I guess you were hiding your true strength.”

“...”

“If you want to know how I know, the answer is Enemy Search. I can use it to detect the relative threat levels of people around me. Moreover...”

“Moreover... what?”

“The biggest tell of all is that you don’t have a single scratch to show for how many people you’ve pissed off. Not to mention you didn’t so much as bat an eye when those bandit women came after us and handcuffed us.”

He... really did see through everything...

I couldn’t help it. I burst out into laughter, scattering all the irritation and frustration I’d felt before. In that moment, there was only one thing on my mind.

I, Roslia Minkgott, have completely and utterly lost to this boy.

It was the first time in my life I had ever conceded that. Note was just different from the other rabble. He’d seen straight through me. He was the man I’d been waiting for all this time—the man who could make me feel alive again.

There was no mistaking it: this thundering in my chest must be love. I’d fooled myself into thinking I was in love before. But never again, for now I was wiser. I now knew what real love felt like.

Note could be the one. And even if he wasn’t... I was still sure he could see me for who I was, who I *really* was. More than just my flirtatious mask, he would see my true self. It didn’t even matter if he accepted me or not. As long as he could acknowledge my ugliness and face it without looking away...

Note Athlon, I’ll love you from the bottom of my heart.

Thus shaken, I decided to do something I *never* did.

“I suppose you leave me no choice... Since you’re so desperate, I’ll help you out. Watch this.”

I decided to use the skill I so hated.

It was the peerless skill I’d been granted that was the envy of all. It was the skill that had spawned endless power struggles in my homeland. It was a skill powerful enough to bring an entire country to ruin. It was the skill that had earned me the nickname Crusher.

It was the skill a legendary hero had once used to establish the kingdoms, and it was the only other skill I had besides Charm: “Guide of the Holy Sword.”

Riding high on my elation, I summoned forth its power in a voice so loud that my throat burned.

“Come, Holy Sword Fractus!”

The Final Piece

“Come, Holy Sword Fractus!” Roslia cried.

She poured her heart and soul into her voice, and dazzling beams of light appeared at her call. They gathered in her hand, manifesting as a sword. The very air trembled as a surge of magical energy whirled around us. Holy light poured forth from the blade as if to divide the world in two.

And Roslia... hardly seemed like herself. She didn’t look like the cunning woman who lived to manipulate men. Right now, she looked like she was born to hold that sword in her hands.

“This’ll be my first fight in a long while, so I’m going all out!”



The next thing I knew, Roslia was no longer standing beside me. She advanced forward in a rush and cut down the door in front of us. The two women on the other side simply stood there in shock. They had no idea what was happening.

I couldn't blame them. Despite witnessing the whole thing myself, I hardly knew what was going on either. It was like I was watching a dream or something.

But reality set in quickly. This was it. Escape was nigh. After we took care of these two guards, we'd be scot-free. Or so I thought.

As it turned out, Roslia had a different idea.

"Hello there!" she said politely to the guards. "We're about to defeat you ladies and bust out of here. Why don't you call your friends over while you still can?"

The two guards finally snapped to their senses and sounded the alarm. Courtesy of Enemy Search, I could tell everyone in the hideout was now headed this way.

"What are you doing, Roslia?! We could have done this quietly! Now they're all coming after us!"

"So? That'll make things easier. We can round them up in one fell swoop."

Oh, I get it. Roslia was just that confident. She was completely assured of her victory, even against an entire bandit gang.

It instilled me with a little confidence too. That she could really pull it off, I mean. Her presence, her threat level, and her expression... They all said she was a force to be reckoned with. There was just one little thing bothering me.

"Don't forget about me, okay? Please don't abandon me," I begged.

"You really are pathetic, Note," Roslia replied in exasperation. "You've got some nerve saying that after trying to abandon *me*."

"I know..."

"You're so hopeless, you leave me no choice. In order to save you, I shall become your sword and shield. So just stand back and relax."

Hearing those words put me at ease. Roslia was all I had to rely on right now, so I decided not to think about what it said about me that I was just going to hide behind her and let her handle the fighting.

It was only a matter of minutes before we were surrounded. However, despite their advantage in numbers, the bandit women seemed intimidated by Roslia's overwhelming aura. They were virtually frozen in a circle around us.

The first to try and break the standoff was the bandit leader.

"There's nothing to be scared of, ladies! It's just Roslia! She can't put up much of a fight, so we can overpower her if we surround her!"

It was clear she was chickening out. Not one of her comrades moved forward. They would have been fools to rush Roslia.

"Are you kidding? There's no way you can overpower me," she declared confidently.

"Liar! I don't know what kind of skill you're using, but that's one flashy sword! I mean, it doesn't matter how flashy the sword is if you don't have combat experience..."

The bandit leader tripped over her own words in her panic, but Roslia gave her no quarter.

"You think I don't have combat experience? You're dead wrong. I've been learning under the knight commander since I was a little girl."

"Th-The knight commander...? Now you're just making stuff up! Besides, even if that were true, I know you're out of practice! We've been tailing you this whole time, see!"

"It's true that I haven't had a good fight in a while... but skills are everything in this world. Even veteran soldiers cower before almighty power!"

There was an audible gasp in the room, both from me and from the bandits. Roslia had pronounced the cold, hard truth of this world. No one could deny it.

"Behold! If I will it, Fractus will cut open a path for me. Do you really think you can win against me, the chosen guide of the holy sword?"

The battle was decided before it even began. The look on the bandits' faces said they knew as much.

What happened next could be described in a single word: brutal. The crumbling watchtower, the falling bandits, and the girl who caused it all with one swing...

I was entranced as I watched the destruction unfold in Roslia's wake. This must really be why they called her "Crusher." It was all over in the blink of an eye, but I was sure the memory of it would be burned into me forever.

When everything was said and done, I realized how badly my legs were shaking. It was a wonder I was still standing. I couldn't have stopped it even if I wanted to. My whole body was pulsing with excited heat. The last time I had a rush like this was when I saw the Arrivers fight in the dungeon for the first time. I was in admiring awe back then... and I felt the same way about Roslia right now.

Once she confirmed that all the bandits were incapacitated, she let go of her holy sword. Just before it hit the ground, it shattered into particles of light and disappeared like an ethereal being not of this world.

"Well? What did you think?" Roslia asked with a curiously sad smile.

She looked like she was nearly on the verge of tears, so I answered her sincerely.

"You were great. You've never been more enchanting."

"You make it sound like I'm not normally enchanting..." Roslia mumbled as she turned and walked away.

I panicked for a moment thinking that I'd said the wrong thing, but the pep in her step told me otherwise.

*

"I'm really sorry for causing so much trouble! Please let me back into the party!"

Force was prostrate on the living room floor, groveling in front Jin, Neme,

Erin, and me. He'd said he wanted to talk, and the first thing he did was throw himself before us. We all looked at each other, unsure what to do.

The first one to speak up was Erin.

"Oh? I thought you were going to run off and live happily ever after with that Roslia woman."

"A-About that... It's a bit embarrassing, b-but she dumped me..."

"You got dumped?! Pfft!"

"Force..."

"This is just..."

"It's *hilarious*!"

Since we all knew the full story, we couldn't help laughing. Not a single one of us was able to hold it in.

"Sh-Shut up! I'm real bummed about this, you know?! Don't laugh at a man's heartbreak!"

"Sorry, not sorry."

"Yeah, that's a tall order..."

"It's not happening."

"I just—pfft! I can't stop laughing!"

"Well, I'm glad you all perfected your teamwork while I was gone! I can't tell you how infuriating it is to have all of you gang up on me like this! Did you practice beforehand or something?"

They say misery loves company, so I really and truly couldn't help having a good laugh at Force's expense. This is coming from a guy who used to wallow in his own heartache: laughter would do Force good. Besides, we were really all just happy to have him back.

"I-It really is a shaaame you got dumped, Force. It seemed like things were going sooo well, too. I wooonder what happened."

"Why are you talking like that? Wait, don't tell me you did something behind

my back!”

“Of course not!”

“Yeah, of course not... Truth is, I got dumped ’cause she found another guy.”

“That so?”

It seemed like Roslia had kept her word and cut Force loose. I was glad, considering I had nothing binding to hold her to. If she’d decided to dig her claws into him, I would have been powerless to stop her.

Thank you, Roslia... even though this was your fault to begin with.

“So, are you guys gonna let me back into the party or not?” Force asked, raising his head fearfully.

“What do you think, Jin?” I queried.

“Don’t ask me. Erin?”

“I say it’s up to Neme.”

“N-Neme has to decide?! N-No way! You do it, Note!”

“It’s against the rules to defer to someone who’s already deferred, Miss Neme.”

“I’ve never heard of a rule like that! U-Umm... then I’ll pass to Force!”

“I get to decide?! Woohoo! I’m back in the game!”

“Look what you did, Neme...”

“D-Don’t get mad at me! That’s unfair!”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be glad to have Force around again, so it all works out,” Jin said encouragingly.

He had a point, especially considering how hard we’d all worked to get Force back. Mediating the argument between Roslia and Erin, going out on a date with Roslia, being captured by a gang of bandits... Actually, it felt like I’d done all the work, but I decided to let that slide.

“I really am glad,” I said. “Now we can finally go dungeon diving.”

“Not just yet,” Jin interjected. “We still haven’t found a new tank.”

“Oh, right...”

I’d completely forgotten about that. But while I stood there at a loss, there came a knock at the front door.

“Neme will get it!” she volunteered.

Neme was the closest to the door anyway, and she didn’t hesitate to jump up and dash off. I watched her go and then turned back to Jin.

“Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Unfortunately not. Strong soldiers are a dime a dozen, but as for what it takes to go dungeon diving...”

“What about you, Erin? Know anyone?”

“I’m not proud of it, but I’m not well known in adventurer circles. I don’t have any connections, so don’t ask me.”

“If you’re not proud of it, then don’t act like it. Jeez... What about you, Force?”

“I’d personally like a cute girl to join!”

“I’m not asking who you *want* to join. But if you can go get a strong, cute girl, then go for it.”

“Riddle me this, Note: If I could just go do that, don’t you think I’d have a girlfriend by now?”

“...Sorry.”

While Force and I had our little back-and-forth, Erin turned toward the hallway.

“Neme sure is taking a while... Did something happen?” she asked.

A good question, actually. Neme still hadn’t come back from answering the door. Curious, we all turned to look the same way.

Just then, the door to the living room flew open, and Neme burst in.

“H-Help! I-It’s *her*!”

“What are you so terrified for—”

I started to ask, but stopped myself short when the answer stepped into view—a guest I hadn't expected. Her long, indigo hair fell gently over her shoulders. Her large, bright eyes glittered with light. Her tight clothes silhouetted her magnificent figure.

"Roslia! Were you looking for me?!" Force shouted, running at her to embrace her.

Roslia, however, sidestepped him like it was nothing...

"Note! I came to see you!"

...And hugged me instead.

WHAT?!

A cold wind swept through the living room. Not literally, but figuratively.

"..."

I pushed Roslia away from me in a hurry. I was a little sorry to let her go so soon, but I had to do something about this awkward situation.

I pulled myself together and asked, "Why did you come to see me, exactly?"

"Why would a young lady come to see a man? Why else? It's because I'm in love!"

I didn't have the wherewithal to point out there were plenty of other potential reasons. Because—more importantly—she said she loved me! Isn't that crazy?! Me, Note Athlon! Wow, being the object of someone's affection... It's amazing!

No, no, no! Now that I know Roslia's true nature, I won't get pulled in by her again.

"You shouldn't have come here. You promised to stay out of our way."

"Hmm? When did I promise that?"

"Don't play dumb..."

"I'm not. I'm quite certain I only promised to leave Force alone."

"Then—"

“I never said anything about leaving *you* alone, Note.”

“Wait, don’t play games with me!”

“I don’t intend on getting in your way at all. I came to offer a hand, in fact. A little birdy told me that the Arrivers are only five strong. Doesn’t that mean you’re down a member?”

“What are you saying?” Erin asked, glaring at Roslia.

“I’m saying that I, Roslia Minkgott, will help you out and join your party,” she replied.

“Wh-What are you on about? You can’t be serious,” Erin balked.

“I’m dead serious. And I don’t think you’ll find a better person to fill your sixth slot.”

“W-We already have a priestess! Me, Neme!” the little dwarf chimed in.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll be joining under my real role: paladin.”

“A paladin? *You*?” Erin asked, the confusion obvious in her voice.

“But of course. Now, Note, you’ll accept my invitation, won’t you?” Roslia asked, turning her brilliant smile on me.

I played the scene of the wreckage at the bandit camp back in my head. Knowing what she could do, I...

“There’s no way I’d refuse such a strong paladin.”

“You believe her, Note?!”

“You’re going to accept her?!”

“Listen, Erin, Neme... I understand your objections, but I can vouch for her. Her abilities are the real deal, even if her personality leaves a lot to be desired.”

“Hey! That’s a very rude thing to say about me when I’m right here!”

“When did you get so cozy with Roslia, Note? Ugh.”

“I guess if Note says so, then I believe him...”

“Great! If everyone’s in agreement, then I’ll be joining the party!”

“Who said anything about agreeing?!”

Wow, things were very quickly getting out of hand. What was I supposed to do...?

First, I needed explain myself to Force, then persuade Erin and Neme, then—

Gah, it was too much! Just thinking about it was a pain. I could feel a headache coming on.

Was it really okay to have such a ridiculous party? I was starting to worry for the future... But, at the same time, I could feel it. That this liveliness was because Force had returned to us safely, that this chaos would become the norm after Roslia joined. And that this was where I belonged.

I had high hopes. I was sure I’d go somewhere, and I was sure I’d do it with these people. I’d folded and failed once before, hurting someone precious to me. But I was learning from my mistakes. I was sure I’d butt heads with the other Arrivers from time to time, but we would achieve something great. Together.

It wasn’t the dream I’d started out with. My days of adventuring with Miya were long gone. But I had a new goal now. I was going to grow. I was going to change myself. And I was going to clear the dungeon with the Arrivers.

This time, I was ready.



Afterword

Hello, it's nice to meet you. I'm Udon Kamono.

Thanks to the people at Overlap Bunko, I've now published my first light novel. I'm grateful to everyone who had a hand in the process. I picked up my first light novel three years ago. As I continued buying one after the other, I gradually became more and more entranced by them until I eventually started writing them myself! There's no telling where life will lead you. Really.

For me, there were several reasons I wanted to write light novels. The first reason was because I wanted to write an afterword. I think that was roughly 20 percent of why I became an author. I mean, don't *you* want to write an afterword too?

I know I'm the type to jam my principles and viewpoints into the story, but the afterword is the only place where authors can freely express themselves outside the framework of the story. Although, I suppose that notion's a bit outdated with the advent of social media... (By the way, I have no intention of getting on social media because I'm scared of being attacked.) I'm so passionate about afterwords, I've already planned one out for volume 2! (A rough draft for an afterword?!)

Speaking of, I've had a rough draft for this afterword since I first started writing half a year ago... but it's already come to an end. Now for the acknowledgments.

To the illustrator, Hitomi Shizuki, thank you for your wonderful artwork. When the editor first told me you'd be working on the series, I could hardly believe it. I'll do my best to make sure the story lives up to readers' expectations when they see the amazing cover! To Editor Soyama, thank you for patiently teaching me about the publishing process. And lastly, to my readers, thank you for picking up this book. I hope we meet again in the next volume.

-Udon Kamono

Note Athlon

Nickname Girl Snatcher

Gear Dagger



Party Arrivers

Role Thief

Skills

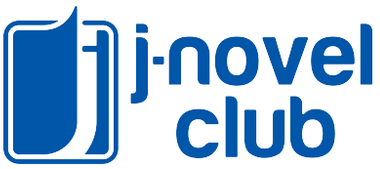
Mapping
Rarity: SR (Super Rare)
Slot Cost: 3
Effect: The ability to automatically map a radius of approximately one kilometer around a previously traversed point and store it as knowledge.

Arts

Enemy Search
A thief art. The ability to detect and locate monsters. Can be used on targets other than monsters and can be used to determine the threat level of targets with enough training.

Trap Detection
A thief art. The ability to detect and locate inanimate threats such as traps.

Trap Dismantling
A thief art. The ability to disarm physical, magical, and hybrid traps. An advanced form of the Unlock art.



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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party: Volume 1

by Udon Kamono

Translated by Mana Z.

Edited by Megan Denton

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