
I Surrendered
My Sword as a Mage
for a New Life
2
Shin Kouduki
Art
necömi


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I Surrendered My Sword for a New Life as a Mage: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Prologue

A roaring blaze danced before him.

And all sorts of things danced along with it.

Plants, flowers, houses...and the people of the village.

His mom, his dad, his brother, his sister—even that girl next door who he kind of liked.

All of them, engulfed in flames.

It wasn't supposed to turn out this way.

All he'd wanted was revenge on the kids who'd been picking on him.

That was why he'd helped the black-robed person he'd met after running away, something he often did.

They'd said they would help him in return.

But now...

"Your revenge has been carried out. Well, I may have gone a little too far, but no matter. They all share the guilt. In any case, this was a big help. I never thought I would need the blood of one of the sealer's relatives in order to break the seal."

He heard their voice.

But his gaze did not turn toward the voice; it remained fixed directly ahead.

Fixed on his burning village.

"In any case, this makes one... A good sign— Yes? I told you to wait, didn't I? Do you want to repeat the same thing again? If not... Yes, correct. I don't mind that... Wow, I had a feeling you would be difficult to please, but this doesn't bode well for what's coming next."

The black-robed figure sighed, seemingly unbothered by the boy's presence.

Or maybe they'd never cared what became of the boy in the first place.

They'd just talked to him to further their own plans.

"Well, I've done what I had to do. I don't know how long the rest of your life will be, but I'll pray to God on your behalf that you spend it peacefully. Goodbye."

After saying that, the figure...no, the figures left.

However, the boy didn't spare them even a glance. He just kept staring in shock.

All he could do was stand, dumbfounded, in that spot until someone from the next village noticed the disturbance and came to help.

1

Tendal, Duchy of Neumond, Kingdom of Ladius.

As Aina thought back on the place they had just left behind, she let out a sigh, looking toward their destination.

The sky was blue and the breeze was gentle.

The sunshine was warm—perfect weather for a trip.

Yet there was a little bit of gloom mixed into her mood.

“Mm... My intuition tells me that there’s something suspicious that way!”

“If my brother says so, then it must be true! I’ll accompany you!”

Needless to say, the cause of Aina’s gloom was this duo of dunces.

They’d always been a little wild, but it might have worsened since the three of them began their journey.

Thinking back on their trip up to this point, which could have been called a tour of ruins—maybe even a raid of ruins—Aina let out a sigh.

Maybe this meant that Soma had actually been inhibited before they left... Either way, all Aina knew was that this behavior was the source of her headache.

“Hey, morons! I just told you earlier, we don’t have time to go on a side trip!”

“Hm... Yes, you did tell me that, but unfortunately, I don’t recall agreeing!”

“Neither do I!”

“Quit being annoying!”

She sighed yet again, pressing a hand to her head as if to suppress the headache.

They’d had this same exchange time and time again, and Aina was usually the one to lose, but she couldn’t let that happen this time.

“I told you, we’re going to be in trouble if we don’t make it to the next

territory today! We'll lose out on more if we don't, and we don't have that much time to waste."

"Hm... You're correct, but...I still sense something suspicious over there!"

"There's never been anything any of the other times you've said that! Well, I guess sometimes there's something... But none of it has had to do with magic."

"But if we haven't had any luck so far, that means we must be coming up on the right place!" Lina chimed in.

"That mindset won't get you anywhere in life," Aina chastised her.

As Aina started walking down the correct road, Soma and Lina, who had been about to head in the other direction, reluctantly followed her.

Apparently they'd finally come to understand that they couldn't get away with it this time.

Honestly, she couldn't believe them.

Aina, Soma, and Lina.

A new year had already begun since the three of them had set out on their journey.

Despite all that time having passed, they still hadn't made it out of the duchy of Neumond as a result of exactly the kind of thing that had just happened.

Basically, Soma and Lina—mainly Soma—did whatever they felt like.

That was probably just something Aina had to put up with considering the goal of this journey, not to mention that the object of Soma's journey was something never before seen.

She had to admit that they'd never find it if they just searched in a conventional way, but...it was a little *too* reckless to just look anywhere that seemed vaguely suspicious.

And Lina was on board too, so Aina would lose the popular vote no matter how much she protested...although she was still responsible for allowing it to happen despite what she said.

If someone had told her that was just the nature of traveling, she might have

believed it.

It just wasn't the kind of journey Aina was familiar with.

"Oh, right, L-Lina..." She wasn't used to saying that name out loud, but she'd just remembered something, so she addressed the girl behind her. She lowered her voice, conscious of Soma, who'd started walking ahead of her now. "Are you really sure about not telling him?"

"I think it'll be okay. For the time being, he doesn't need to know, and if he ever does, we can tell him then."

They were talking about the fact that this was the duchy of Neumond—or, in other words, that Soma's family name was Neumond and he was the son of a duchess.

Yes, Soma was still unaware of that.

The group had checked every part of the territory on foot, but although they needed to know what town they were currently visiting, there was no need to go out of their way to find out what territory it was in, so it hadn't come up thus far.

Soma also didn't seem particularly interested, and Lina always said, as she had just now, that there was no need to tell him.

Of course, Aina could have just told him herself, but she didn't feel like that would be quite right.

Lina also seemed reluctant to tell him, not because she was shirking her own family but because she wanted to avoid burdening him with that information.

As another runaway from a family of some importance, Aina could sympathize with that.

While Aina was musing, Lina walked toward Soma as if to say that the conversation was now over.

Aina felt a vague dissatisfaction with that.

There certainly wasn't a problem with him not knowing...but it still felt a bit sad— "Hm? I see—so that conversation you two just had was about Aina feeling lonely when sleeping by herself? That certainly is a problem..."

“Hey, I didn’t say anything about that!”

Lina was probably trying to conceal what the two of them had just been talking about, but why would she have come up with a cover story like that?

Aina wished they would at least quit giving her those patronizingly sympathetic looks.

“Do you mean to say that you don’t feel that way at all?”

“I don’t—”

Before she could finish speaking, she remembered what this morning had been like.

The three of them often slept together. This was partially because they often slept outdoors, but also to save money and blankets.

Aina and Lina had always been together, at least, but stuff had happened yesterday that had resulted in them all sleeping separately.

The small room that felt so vast.

Waking up and seeing nobody there.

It had been enough to remind her of nearly two years ago, when she’d been traveling alone— “O-Of course I don’t!

“What was that long pause about?”

“You stuttered.”

“Sh-Shut up!”

Aina looked away, conscious of her cheeks reddening.

She’d been careless.

Lina probably hadn’t invented that cover story of whole cloth. The two must have realized that Aina was acting strange.

After all, journeying was suffering itself to Aina. She’d had to travel all alone on paths she didn’t know were right, not even certain she could trust the people she met.

She hadn’t even been able to relax when she slept. It was only when she’d

grown exhausted and nearly given up that she'd reached that village, wondering whether she could finally stop.

Maybe she'd only felt that way at the time because she had trouble trusting people.

But it was an undeniable fact that journeying was difficult for Aina...and yet it was fun with Soma and Lina.

The day they left, Soma had grabbed her by the hand and dragged her along with him.

Then Lina had joined them shortly after.

That had certainly been fun... No, Aina stopped herself, shaking her head.

It was still fun.

So she shook the unnecessary train of thought out of her head and resumed talking.

"Wait, but Lina, aren't you the one who doesn't like sleeping alone? I mean, when we sleep in the same room like usual, you always end up in my bed at some point."

"Oh...?"

"Hey, wait, th-that was a secret! I mean, it was a coincidence! I just mixed up the beds!"

"You keep changing your story!"

Aina sighed in disbelief.

The sky was blue and the breeze was gentle.

The sunshine was warm—perfect weather for a trip. It put smiles on the faces of all three children.

They were currently at the southern edge of the duchy of Neumond.

It would only be a short time before they reached the next territory.

2

Jaster, Barony of Abend, Kingdom of Ladius.

The town situated at the northernmost point of the barony of Abend was frankly desolate.

The reason for that was simple. It wasn't worth going out of your way to visit.

It was on the border of the duchy of Neumond—in fact, it was the only town on the border—but that meant nothing, since there was no reason to go to the duchy of Neumond either.

It may have been a duchy, but there was nothing about it that made it worth the trip, and it even bordered the devils' territory.

The only people who would go there either had unique tastes or a specific reason.

A few people came and went, of course, but not enough that it served as a waypoint, and the surrounding area was nothing but monster-infested wilderness.

So it made sense that it was desolate, or rather, that it hadn't been developed.

In spite of that fact, there was a branch of the adventurer's guild there—or maybe the town's nature was exactly the reason there was a guild there.

Again, there were monsters in the surrounding area. The town wouldn't have made it without adventurers to hunt them.

"It sure is odd how they're especially active here, though."

"What are you talking about?"

Doris Heinzel cast a discontented look around the room as she answered offhand. "Just talking to myself. I get to thinking pointless stuff when it's busy but there's nothing for me to do."

The scene before her was, as she'd just mentioned, full of adventurers who'd gathered here to chat and enjoy themselves.

Well, there were only ten of them at most, but that was plenty for a town and building of this size.

But all they were doing was eating, drinking, and making a racket.

Doris, who was sitting at the reception counter, had nothing to do with it, so she was just killing time.

"I'd be glad for the free time if I could eat and drink too."

"You're not going to?"

"I'm not rotten enough to do that sorta thing on the job. I asked if I could just in case, but nope."

"That's a surprise."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I thought you'd ignore that kind of rule."

"I would've if it weren't in the contract, but it is, sadly enough. Really got the short end of the stick."

Doris said so because even though she was sitting at the counter, she wasn't an employee of the guild. Actually, although there was a branch of the guild in this town, there were no guild employees.

"Guild employees" referred only to those who were employed by the guild headquarters. The people employed by branches didn't count as employees of the guild.

And considering the number of towns in the world and the number of branches in them, it would have been impossible to dispatch employees to all of them.

After all, there were branches operating literally everywhere in the world.

They couldn't *not* have branches either. There were many towns where adventurers were indispensable, like this one.

So the solution the guild had devised was to have adventurers fill in.

Adventurers who took requests from the guild would fulfill the role of guild employees.

Of course, they had much less authority than actual guild employees, but they had as much as they needed to manage the branch.

It wasn't a request that just anyone could take on, and that made it a source of a certain form of status among adventurers who could.

Enough so that they would make a huge fuss out of it, like the others were doing.

"Congrats, for real... Yay! Are ya drinkin', miss?"

"I can't drink while I'm sitting here, dimwit."

"Huh, you're not? That's a shame. Today's worth celebratin'."

"They wouldn't give me this position if I were the type to drink on the job, you drunkard."

So Doris said with a sigh, but there was a smile on her face.

Despite her complaints, she didn't dislike having them celebrate for her like this.

Yes, the cause of this celebration was that Doris had been assigned the role of a guild employee.

This was her first day, in fact. The adventurer who had occupied this position before today was leaving town at the same time they left the job to Doris.

They had originally come here to fill that position, though, so it could have been said that they were just going back where they came from.

Such things weren't uncommon. There weren't always enough adventurers to fill every local position, and in those cases, an adventurer would be assigned from another area.

Then, if that adventurer found someone who was qualified to take the position, they would be replaced and return to where they came from.

Some stayed where they'd been assigned, but that was rare.

Also, the role required someone trustworthy.

Even branches had rather large jurisdictions, and if an employee was dispatched to one, they would be in charge of the whole branch, which made them a de facto guild leader. It was no small responsibility.

The guild couldn't afford to have someone who would abuse that power, so trustworthiness was a strict prerequisite.

The adventurer also needed to be strong and well-liked. As someone filling in for a guild employee, they would be responsible for organizing the adventurers in the surrounding area. They would have to resolve any issues that came up, which often required strength.

Most of the people who became adventurers didn't have the best character, so it took power to keep them in check.

But the kind of person who could do that wasn't easy to find.

Naturally, there were times when there were no adventurers available who could handle the position.

In the worst cases, the branch would be dissolved due to a lack of qualified candidates to run it.

That meant the adventurers there would have to go elsewhere...so the fact that this branch could avoid that fate was the reason for the celebration.

But it was also possible that everyone present was just using that as an excuse to cut loose.

"Bummer that the guest of honor is stuck here just watching, though."

"You can go join them if you want."

"Huh? What'd you say?"

"I can stay here."

"You're telling me to go hang out with them and leave this to you?"

As she spoke, Doris turned to look at the petite figure in a hooded white robe sitting beside her.

Even at this distance, she couldn't see the other person's face, and they would have seemed suspicious if you had seen them on the street.

But Doris, being familiar with this person, just shrugged.

“I’m not mean enough to do that to you,” Doris said with a sigh. “And I’m the one who took the position. You’re just tagging along.”

“But we promised to help each other.”

“I guess that’s true...”

Doris smiled wryly, knowing that despite their promise, she was the one receiving most of the help.

Even still, she couldn’t shirk her responsibility here.

“Well, I appreciate the thought. But just because all the adventurers are in here doesn’t mean there won’t be any issues to deal with.”

“...Okay.”

“Heeey! Havin’ fun, miss?”

“How am I supposed to have fun over here? Well... It’s kinda nice watching you all.”

This is why drunks are no good, Doris thought, but she would have been one of them before today.

She would even have been leading the party...but she couldn’t do that from here on out.

Of course, she was disappointed about that.

But if taking this position meant that these idiots could enjoy themselves, then it was worth it.

“I must be really getting up there in age if I’m thinking like that...”

The figure at her side said nothing but seemed inquisitive.

“Just talking to myself. I was happy to get this position, but I’m getting more emotional than I thought I would.”

Just as Doris put on a self-deprecating smile, a voice sounded clearly through the ruckus.

“Excuse me, is this a branch of the adventurer’s guild?”

There was a customer. Her first one since she'd taken on this position.

Technically, she was already processing requests for the idiots in front of her, but that didn't count. It was too easy to feel like work.

Anyway, the fact that they'd opened by asking whether this was a guild branch meant they weren't from this town. Anyone from town would already know this was the guild building regardless of whether they'd been inside.

That meant someone had gone out of their way to come to this town, which was quite rare.

And they were likely in the same business as everyone else here...

"Yeah, it is. What brings you—wha?!"

An exclamation of surprise escaped her mouth in place of the word "here."

But she couldn't have helped it. Who would have imagined that when she turned to look at the entrance, she would have seen a monster?

Her reaction was quick, of course. The somewhat cheery feeling was gone in an instant, then replaced by questions.

The thing that had appeared at the entrance as if to block it was a boar-like monster.

She could tell it wasn't a boar because it was way too big. Its head alone was a bit over three meters—no boars of that size existed in this world.

And if Doris's memory served her well, its bloodred fur was that of a madboar. A single madboar could wipe out a town , and a party of adventurers would need at least one High-Grade member to kill it—with the rest of the party helping, of course.

Doris honestly wasn't confident she could win against a madboar, but she didn't have time to talk about that. The problem was how such a thing had suddenly appeared here.

The people in town would have freaked out if they'd seen this, even at a distance...and if she hadn't been hearing things, it had just spoken human language.

She'd never heard of such a thing...

But before she got an answer to any of the questions passing through her mind, she leapt out of her seat and drew her trusty pistols from the holsters on her hips.

By that time, her partner next to her already had a hand on their weapon. Doris smiled at the sight.

She wondered what to do now but figured she should just attack it first thing — "Wh-What are you doing?!"

"Well, first impressions are important. I wanted to make one that left a big mark."

"This is a bit *too* big a mark!"

She stopped moving her arm when she heard the voices. There was more than one, and they were clearly children's.

Her partner seemed confused as well, and the gang of idiots had apparently noticed now too.

A different kind of clamor filled the room than had just a moment ago.

"Dear brother... I can't back you up on this."

"How could you say such a thing."

"That sounded pretty calm for being surprised... You aren't surprised at all, are you?"

"Indeed, I'm not."

"Don't give me 'indeed!'"

"I think that's enough, Aina. We should explain ourselves first."

"Indeed, she's right."

"I can't believe...!"

Before Aina's anger could erupt, the monstrous figure moved away from the entrance, and all that was left were three silhouettes.

And they were, in fact, children...which sent confusion through the room.

But whether or not he was aware of that, the boy in the middle opened his mouth without hesitation.

Then...

“Oh, sorry for the trouble. That aside, I have one more thing I would like to ask... Is this the right place to register as an adventurer?”

He threw those words at her.

3

The room hadn’t warmed up to him despite his extremely witty joke.

If anything, a sense of tension had descended upon it.

Soma wore a puzzled look as he wondered where he had gone wrong.

“All of it was wrong from start to finish!”

“I can’t back you up on this either.”

“How could you say such a thing.”

“At least learn from your mistakes!”

“I do. How rude.”

He’d already reflected on his actions and was now considering what he should have done.

As he said so, the woman in front of him, who had introduced herself as Doris, smiled in amusement.

“Well, if I had to say, it was a bit extreme for us to understand... You probably shouldn’t do that again. It’s bad for the heart.”

“Hm... Thank you; your advice is helpful. As expected of a substitute guild employee, I should say.”

“Oh, stop. This isn’t my usual style. I just happen to be in this position because things lined up that way, that’s all.”

“Hm...”

Even without flattering her, she seemed suited to the position. At least, she had the right personality as far as he could tell.

She had been magnanimous enough to laugh off his earlier joke, and she clearly wasn’t there just for decoration.



“Whether I’m more than just decoration depends on how I do from now on. I just got this position.”

“You seem really confident for having just gotten it,” Aina said.

“It’s just a front. It’d be over for me if people started looking down on me.”

“I couldn’t tell it was all a front,” Lina said.

“You couldn’t? I guess I’m doing pretty well, then.”

The way she smiled as she said so was in fact fitting.

Between her reaction to Soma’s joke and what had come after, he thought it had been the right decision to appoint her as a substitute guild employee.

“Oh, and you should apologize for what you pulled. We let it go this time, but that could’ve gone really wrong.”

“Hm, but it was only a little joke...”

“Not everybody would think it was funny,” Lina said. “I don’t think you can help that.”

“Well, you probably don’t actually have to. They were a bit out of control, so it was a good way to straighten them out.”

“See?”

“Don’t give me that!”

Soma just shrugged in response to Aina’s shout. He didn’t seem remorseful, and in a sense, he wasn’t.

He was certainly sorry that the reaction had been too big, but he wasn’t sorry for what he’d done.

To be serious for a moment, there had been a purpose to his actions. He’d wanted to find out the level of the adventurers in this town.

The general atmosphere of a place, including the people’s skill and character, could be determined by how they responded to urgent situations and those who instigated them.

As it turned out, this place wasn’t bad.

Actually, relative to Soma's impression of adventurers, it was quite good.

And there was just one reason he'd wanted to find that out, of course—so he knew if this place was good enough for his group to work here as adventurers.

"So, that aside... You wanted to register as adventurers?"

As Doris said that, her eyes narrowed, scrutinizing them. Soma could see Aina and Lina tense up for a moment.

He was unbothered, though. He just started looking around, casually examining the place—including Doris herself.

To be frank, it would have been hard to call the place nice-looking even as flattery.

There were three tables, including the one they were sitting at. Each was made of wood, and together, they could seat about twenty people.

The reception counter was located in front of Soma, and the entrance was behind him.

In other words, they were still at the guild branch while having this discussion.

That was because this conversation didn't warrant adjourning a formal setting.

Actually, adventurer registration was usually done at the counter. They'd moved to the table because there were three of them, and also because Doris had taken an interest in Soma.

Incidentally, the other adventurers were gone. Doris had kicked them out, and they were probably on their way to hunt monsters in the area.

The only people present at the moment were Soma's trio and Doris.

And one more small figure who was covered completely in a white hooded robe.

Soma was curious about Doris, of course, but he was more curious about this other person.

She looked obviously suspicious, but she must not have been, since she was allowed to sit with Doris.

All he knew was that she was Doris's friend and her name was Sierra.

Well, there was one more thing he knew—that she must have been strong.

Maybe stronger than even Aina and Lina, who had Special-Grade Skills, and second strongest among all of them after Soma.

Why would someone like that be in a place like this?

That was what Soma was the most curious about right now...but this wasn't the right time to ask.

Even still, he couldn't help being curious.

Soma continued to observe Sierra, keeping Doris in the corner of his eye.

†

The jurisdiction of substitute guild employees extended to whatever was necessary to manage the guild.

That included the prerogative to register adventurers, naturally, although it essentially went unused.

The reason for that was simple.

The sort of guild that didn't have a proper guild employee was unlikely to attract many people who had gone out of their way to register as adventurers, so substitute employees would seldom use that authority on behalf of the guild.

Strictly speaking, it was precisely because some substitute employees were reluctant to use their authority that adventurers wouldn't bother trying to register with them...but the result was the same either way.

As for why the substitute wouldn't use that authority, it was because they judged they couldn't handle that responsibility.

The type of people who became adventurers usually had a reason for doing so. Many of them were good-for-nothings or jerks.

There were decent ones too, of course, but it was still a fact that many of them caused issues.

And what would the employee who registered such a person as an adventurer think of that risk, especially if the guild itself wouldn't take responsibility for the adventurer causing problems?

The adventurer's guild only acted as a mediator between registered adventurers and requests. It took responsibility for requests, but it didn't interfere with adventurers on principle, nor did it guarantee their identities.

As should be obvious with that in mind, nobody who opposed that system would be chosen as a substitute in the first place.

For that reason, substitutes would only register those they deemed trustworthy as adventurers.

Apart from that, there were no restrictions on who could become an adventurer, so those who knew that would normally go to the capital or another large town.

Actually, Doris and her partner had themselves registered at a large town about a week away by carriage.

As she reviewed that common knowledge in her mind, Doris wondered what to do with the three sitting in front of her.

They definitely looked like children at a glance, and from what they said, they really were.

But as said before, there were no qualifications necessary to become an adventurer. Even minors could register.

Of course, whether they could actually work as adventurers was another story... But Doris thought that may not have been a problem.

These three were too put together for children, after all. Even the word "precocious" didn't cut it. They may even have been more mature than some of the young adults in the area.

Their attitude made her think so even though she hadn't had much experience with them.

And Doris was certain of one thing—they must have the appropriate Skills.

It was often said that having a high-level Skill had effects on a person's mental

state. In fact, there had been research showing that people with High-Grade Skills or above matured faster.

That meant that these three should have no problem making it as adventurers.

So the problem was whether they could use that power responsibly.

That had nothing to do with maturity. It depended on their hearts.

Given that she was considering these things, Doris didn't intend to dismiss them as adventurers offhand. She didn't know if other substitutes would have made the same decision, and she herself would have responded differently to other applicants.

But after having seen and talked with these three, Doris thought they were interesting.

That was enough for her to decide it wouldn't be necessary to deny them right away.

It was another story whether they could register, however.

That judgment was yet to be made.

"Hmm... Well, it would probably be fastest just to let you try, so let's have you three take a test to see if you'll make good adventurers," Doris said with a confident smile.

4

“Okay, you’re worried about travel expenses, so you want to make some money as an adventurer. That’s as ordinary as reasons get.”

“At first I thought we could sell monster parts without becoming adventurers, but when we tried, we were turned down.”

“Oh, that can’t be helped, since the stores here have nowhere to sell materials like that, unlike in the capital.”

“Oh, so that’s why it was...” Aina mused. “I thought they just didn’t trust us.”

“Well, that’s also true, but if we ever need something around here, we get it ourselves. Outside merchants don’t come around these parts often, so we can’t afford to buy stuff we don’t know we can sell.”

“That means that even if we brought things in, the guild wouldn’t buy them from us because we’re non-adventurers, right?” Lina asked.

“Well, it’s an organization for adventurers first and foremost. Not taking responsibility for their conduct or ensuring their identities gets us in enough trouble as is, so we don’t want to take on anything else we don’t have to.”

“It’s a tough world out here.”

As they conversed, the group went outside and headed toward the training area.

Although it was small, they had one set up here.

Almost nobody used it, however, so it was mostly just a space with enough room to fight that they referred to as a training area.

That would be the best place to do what they were planning to, though.

Doris led the three there and muttered “Well, then” under her breath.

“I’m going to test you here.”

She looked at each of their faces in turn.

It was nothing more than a final check, however...

“All right... You. The name’s Soma, right? I’ll have you take the test.”

“Hm? We aren’t going to take it as a group?”

“That’d be a lot of trouble to go to, wouldn’t it? If you pass, I’ll pass your whole party, and if you fail, then your whole party fails. Simple, right?”

“I see. So this all depends on me. Quite the large responsibility.”

“You say that with a pretty calm face,” Aina interjected.

“I know you can do it!” Lina cheered. “Good luck!”

Doris nodded as she observed the exchange.

As she’d thought, the boy called Soma was the exceptional one of the three.

The two girls still acted their age in some subtle respects, such as the way they spoke at times and the way they stiffened up from nerves.

But she didn’t sense anything of that sort from Soma.

He was acting completely natural.

Despite what he’d said, he showed no sign of being perturbed.

It even made her question whether she would be able to evaluate him, but she had no choice but to try.

“So, the explanation you’ve been waiting for... I’ll have you fight me. We’ll use that as the test.”

“Hmm... Does that make this a mock battle?”

“It does, yes. But whether or not you win won’t affect the results, so you don’t have to go all out.”

This wasn’t Doris’s idea but a half-implicit rule that substitutes followed when conducting tests.

Fighting someone was the best way to find out their true nature, so it made sense that winning or losing was irrelevant to the results.

And asking someone who wasn’t even an adventurer yet to win against a substitute was as good as telling them that they wouldn’t pass.

There was a possibility that Doris would actually lose, considering that Soma

had defeated a madboar...but that would answer one of the questions that had been bothering her.

It was about Soma's skill level.

He was the only one who she couldn't get a read on.

She could tell that the two girls were insanely strong, but she didn't sense anything from Soma.

It was like he was an ordinary person with no Skills...or maybe like he was a superhuman with a type of power all his own. She'd chosen Soma in part because she'd judged him to be the leader of the three, but it was also to test the possibility that he was more than he appeared.

And even if he did, hypothetically, turn out to be weak, it wouldn't have any bearing on the results.

"All right, so let's get—"

"Doris. May I?" Sierra suddenly interjected.

She'd known that Sierra had come along, of course, but a look of surprise still flashed across Doris's face.

Sierra was a girl of few words, especially around people she wasn't familiar with.

Doris looked to her side, surprised that Sierra would speak up even though she understood the situation.

She couldn't see Sierra's face from here, though, since it was hidden under her hood.

"What's up? You don't usually speak up..."

"Can I fight?"

"Huh? You want to be the examiner, you mean?"

"Mm-hmm."

Doris was even more surprised when Sierra nodded yes.

This was hard to believe.

It was true that considering this was a test, Sierra would be the best person to fight. That would mean Doris could judge him from a bystander's perspective, and Sierra was also stronger than Doris.

Doris just hadn't suggested it because she hadn't thought in her wildest dreams that Sierra would do it.

"You're sure about this?"

"Mm-hmm."

But if she said she would, there was no reason not to take her up on the offer.

While curious about what had spurred Sierra to do this, Doris decided to leave it to her.

†

As he walked toward the center of the training area, Soma drew his own weapon from his hip.

It was the wooden stick that had become so familiar to him in this world.

The one thing that was now different about the stick and even made him feel nostalgic was that it was carved in exactly the shape of a sword.

Its appearance readily gave away that it was handmade, but it still qualified as a wooden sword.

Soma had carved it himself, thinking he couldn't keep swinging around a plain stick if he was going on a journey.

The weapon his opponent drew, on the other hand, was a golden sword.

In more technical terms, it probably shouldn't even have been called a sword.

But what was more intriguing was everything else about his opponent. She didn't look like someone about to engage in battle at all.

She was still swathed in a hooded robe.



It would have been understandable if he'd thought she was fooling around—Aina may have thought exactly that, in fact, judging by her look of displeasure.

That said, the fact that Soma had readied a wooden sword could just as easily have been taken as him fooling around, so the two of them were even, in a sense.

And Soma, at least, didn't think she was fooling around. Lina probably didn't either.

That didn't mean that Aina was unskilled, conceited, or a poor judge, however. It was simply a matter of their individual inclinations.

Soma and Lina were sword users. That meant they could, to an extent, tell how skilled an opponent was just by seeing their stance, regardless of what they were wearing.

So Soma fixed his gaze on the figure, not letting himself get too cocky.

He honestly had never expected this matchup...but in a way, it was exactly what he wanted.

Perhaps this meant that despite having abandoned the path of the sword, his soul still remembered treading it.

Knowing that she was strong intrigued him, and he was excited to be able to fight her.

A small smile came across his face despite himself.

"You may begin!"

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing: Original Style* Gale Slash

He stepped forward and swung his arm at the same time as the starting signal but was met with a hard sensation, which made him smile more.

"Hm... You're good at this. It should be hard for you to see and move, but your movements don't show any sign of that. Does that mean that you're not just skilled but have a specially made robe?"

She didn’t respond but subtly shook, maybe because she hadn’t expected him to see through her, and then she swung a powerful slash at him, but rather than resist it, he just jumped back slightly.

The fact that she didn’t follow it up with another attack suggested that his remark had had an effect.

In other words, she wasn’t wearing a cloak because she was underestimating him but because she’d wanted him to let down his guard.

He’d noticed for one simple reason. She hadn’t seemed inconvenienced at all while walking here.

It was just a shot in the dark, since there was also the chance she had a Skill that could do that...but the most important thing was that he’d managed to unsettle her instead of letting her surprise him with her ability to move unhindered as she’d planned.

This was a test. Winning or losing didn’t matter.

So he’d been told...but there was no need to restrain himself and lose.

If it seemed like there was any chance he could win, he wouldn’t hold anything back.

Even now, Soma was a bit of a sore loser.

So if she was unsettled now, there was no reason not to push forward.

He put a little strength into the arm that held the wooden sword and leapt at her.

5

Doris’s honest reaction was one of surprise.

As she watched the scene unfold before her eyes, she thought to herself...

I’m glad I left this to Sierra.

“Hmm... She seems stronger than me,” Lina remarked. “I already knew it was, but I guess the world really is big...”

“I can’t tell the difference anymore. And how can she even move dressed like that?”

Doris nodded and smiled as she overheard what the second girl, Aina, said.

The continuous clangs and the flying sparks were all Doris could process.

She couldn’t even see the flashes of their swords.

And she couldn’t excuse that just because she was in the rear guard. After all, Doris had originally been the one who was going to stand there.

With the understanding that the wooden sword attached to his hip meant that he was good at close-quarters combat.

“Mm, right there I would... No, I don’t think I actually could. She really is strong. I don’t think I would have been able to block her attack just then.”

“I wouldn’t even have gotten that far. She’d have beaten me with the first swing.”

Doris felt the same. She probably wouldn’t have been able to block Soma’s first attack if she’d been in Sierra’s position.

Even at a distance, it was all she could do to keep track of the sounds and the sparks.

If she’d been at close range, she would have been knocked down before she knew what hit her.

But while Doris was certainly surprised that Soma was this skilled, there was one other thing that she hadn’t expected.

Sierra was far more skilled than she'd ever imagined.

She'd known Sierra was stronger than her.

She'd heard as much when she'd brought Sierra along...but that had been using the same frame of reference.

Her understanding had been that she and Sierra had the same grade of skill but that Sierra was stronger because she had more experience.

But that couldn't be true. This was beyond that level. Doris could see that for herself—no, she could tell because she *couldn't* see what was happening.

Sierra's Skill was one grade higher than Doris's—it was Special-Grade.

She did wonder how she hadn't known that despite the fact that they were partners, but she didn't go so far as to assume it meant Sierra didn't trust her.

It had nothing to do with trust. It was just that it was best to keep quiet about one's Skills.

For adventurers especially, Skills were a lifeline.

It was normal to keep them to yourself just in case, and Doris had actually been the one to teach Sierra that. She couldn't complain even if she'd wanted to.

Normally, though, you would learn about someone's skills naturally after spending enough time together. Even if you didn't know the details, characteristic Skills and basic Skills tended to come out during fights.

Just as was happening with Sierra right now.

But what really shocked Doris wasn't that Sierra had managed to hide her Special-Grade Skill this long.

How much of a Skill gap was necessary to be able to do that?

Doris, at least, didn't think someone with a Middle-Grade Skill would ever be able to do something like that.

And there was one more thing that surprised her.

The sword Sierra was using.

Doris had actually seen that before too.

It was a unique single-edged sword with a slightly curved blade. It wasn't impossible to use with just the Swordsmanship Skill, but it took a specialized Skill to use it to its full potential.

Sierra probably wasn't using it just for the shock factor, and considering that she was clearly fighting differently than she would with a normal sword, she probably had that Skill.

And this was probably Sierra's real fighting style.

The fact that she had revealed that from the beginning, though, may have meant that Sierra thought there was a need to. The question was why.

It wasn't like she needed to win against Soma.

It was true that if she hadn't revealed her true style, she wouldn't have been able to trade so many blows with him, but she still would have been able to judge whether he was fit to be an adventurer.

Doris thought that much of herself, and Sierra knew that.

But if she asked that, she also had to ask why Sierra had volunteered to fight Soma in the first place.

Maybe Doris would have been taken out in one hit, but the outcome would have been equally informative when it came to her judgment of Soma.

"Hmm... She must have seen a need to do that... Or something made her want to."

Doris didn't know what it was, but she could just ask once this was over.

In any case...

"How long are they going to keep going at it?"

The number of sounds she'd heard was well into triple digits by now, so they'd exchanged at least that many blows, if not more.

Either way, they didn't have to keep going.

"Wait... It's not until one of them is defeated?"

“Of course not. We call it a mock test, but it’s really just to judge him. I’ve already seen enough to do that.”

“My brother may not realize that... No, I think he’s continuing despite realizing that, but what about Sierra?”

“I dunno... I’d have to ask her. I didn’t think she was much of a sore loser. Maybe there’s something about him that interests her.”

“That wouldn’t be odd considering that she’s up against my brother... In fact, that’s only to be expected!”

“I’m more interested in how your mind works...” Aina sighed.

The exchange of blows continued as they conversed.

The sounds and movements were intensifying, yet Soma’s face looked completely at ease, as it had since the beginning.

Doris didn’t describe it as a battle because it didn’t look like one to her.

It did in a literal sense, but it was the difference between Sora’s attitude and Sierra’s that made Doris feel that way.

She couldn’t see Sierra’s face, but she could read her body language for the most part. It wasn’t for nothing that she’d spent as many years as she had with Sierra.

And based on that experience, she could tell Sierra was at her limit.

Since Soma looked how he did, it seemed less like a battle and more like just trading blows—or like Soma was practicing on Sierra.

If anything, it should have been the other way around... The thought brought a wry smile to Doris’s face.

When it all came down to it...

What surprised Doris the most was the boy himself—Soma.

As she had the thought, there was a movement on the battlefield. Soma and Sierra had both moved far apart from each other.

“Is it finally over? Doesn’t feel like it, actually...”

“The air is so tense, it almost hurts... They’re...”

“Oh... Are they planning to end it with the next move?”

Soma had probably just sensed Sierra’s intention and matched it, but Sierra was definitely going for the final blow.

Despite probably knowing that it wouldn’t work.

Sierra sheathed her sword and got into position, the air itself vibrating with her tension. The pose was rather peculiar, with her left hand holding her sheath at her hip and one leg bent in front with the other extended behind.

Soma responded with a straight face, though. He was even smiling slightly in amusement.

She had no time to stop.

As soon as Sierra bent forward, the ground exploded, as if all the power she had built up had been released.

Instantly, her body was right next to Soma’s.

“One stroke—”

Gun Mastery (High-Grade) *Marksmanship* Mental Concentration / Quick Trigger: Rapid Shot

There was a dry sound and the ground directly in front of Soma and Sierra blew up, stopping them in their tracks.

“I can’t let you go that far. Match over,” Doris announced, holding a still-smoking gun.

Doris was a High-Grade Skill user herself, and a High-Grade adventurer too, although she’d only just become one.

Even if she couldn’t see their movements, she had been able to tell that they were about to collide and where, which had been enough information for her to stop them.

That had been really close in more ways than one, though.

Trying not to give away her awareness of that fact, she holstered her gun and continued to speak.

“I won’t stop you if you don’t feel like you’ve done enough, but the test is over now. If you want to continue, I’d prefer that you do it some other time.”

“Hm... Understood.”

“Mm-hmm. We saw enough.”

The two put away their swords and stepped apart.

Doris wished they would have done that of their own accord earlier, but she just sighed instead of voicing that thought.

“I could tell you the results here, but let’s go back first.”

She didn’t think there was any need to say it, but she did so as a formality.

Doris began to lead the group of three and Sierra, just as she had when they arrived.

6

“All right, I’m sure you already know...but you passed. That means you three are adventurers starting today. I can’t certify you at the moment, though.”

“Hm? I’m glad that we passed, but what do you mean you can’t certify us?”

Soma tilted his head quizzically at what he had been told upon his return to the guild branch.

He had heard a certain amount about adventurers, which was why he had chosen to become one. One thing he knew was that he would need a Guild Card certifying him as an adventurer.

But all it did was prove that you were an adventurer and allow you to use the Adventurers’ Guild. It didn’t serve as personal identification.

Of course, that was natural considering that the guild didn’t take responsibility for adventurers.

Therefore, even if you lived in a town as an adventurer, you were required to go through the same procedures a traveler would when entering and leaving the town.

“Oh, you know about Guild Cards? That makes this quicker. We substitutes don’t have the authority to issue them. That means you’re not official just yet. I’ll put in a word for you so you can get your cards right away once you go to a location with a guild employee.”

“Wait, so what if we go to a town without one first?” Aina asked. “We can’t prove we’re adventurers yet, right?”

“Right... You’d probably be fine in nearby towns, but if you go too far, you might have to take another test from the local substitute. There’s a limit to how many people I can get the information to.”

“Well, we can’t do anything about that, but it would be a lot of trouble to keep taking tests... What do you think, dear brother?”

“Hmm...”

To be honest, the only reason he'd become an adventurer was to make money, so as long as he could earn enough here, it wouldn't be a problem if other towns didn't recognize him as an adventurer.

And incidentally, they weren't exactly short on money at the moment. Camilla had given them a sizable sum when they set out.

Soma just hadn't been sure if he wanted to continue his journey while relying on that alone, so he'd chosen to become an adventurer. That was the only way for a child to earn money in this world.

"So where is a town nearby that could issue Guild Cards to us?"

"Let's see... Your best bet would be Lunburg. That's about a week from here by carriage."

"A week... What should we do?"

"Hm... If it's a week by carriage, it must be some distance away."

"It is, but it's worth going to even without considering the Guild Cards. The lord of this territory lives there and directly rules over the town. This may just be a barony...although he'd probably be mad if he heard me say that...but Lunburg is thriving more than any other town in the territory. There are a lot of things and information there, so it wouldn't hurt to go."

"You say it's thriving?" Lina asked. "How does it compare to here?"

"That's a hard question... This is a border town, after all. The people here would probably be mad if they heard me say this, but it'd be hard to find a more remote place than this. Maybe it'd be another story if you went to another territory or country."

"Hmm..."

The reason why Soma didn't nod was because he couldn't discern whether that was true.

After all, they had passed through several cities on their way here, but this one was clearly more prosperous than any of them.

That was probably the reason why Lina had asked such a thing.

“Anyway, why are you three on a journey? I think where you should go depends on that.”

“Yes... You’re right about that.”

“You’re right, but...I don’t have a goal or anything...” Aina sighed.

Half of her reason for coming on this journey had been to escape.

There shouldn’t have been a problem if she went back to the devils now that she could use magic...but the kidnapping had had a real impact on her.

She didn’t know who she could trust.

It was a serious issue for her, given that she’d let it slip in the past. That was why Soma hadn’t stopped Aina from coming on this journey.

“My goal? I don’t have one in particular...” Lina answered. “Oh, I guess I did have the goal of learning more about the world. That’s what I told my mother.”

What Lina said was also true. She probably had no primary goal other than to follow Soma.

But what about Soma? Why was he on a journey?

There was only one possible answer.

“I’m doing this for magic.”

“Magic? You’re a mage? You don’t look like it at all... I was actually sure you were a swordsman.”

“Well, that would be correct, essentially. I can’t use magic.”

“Then what do you mean you’re on a journey for it?”

“It’s *because* I can’t use magic that I’m on a journey to search for a way that I can.”

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, he noticed Sierra inhale. A surprised look came across Doris’s face at the same time.

Soma wore a puzzled expression. It shouldn’t have been that surprising, he thought.

It may have seemed utterly idiotic in a country like this one, which took Skills

as an absolute, but it shouldn't have been *surprising*.

But when Soma thought that far, he realized that no, maybe they'd been surprised at how idiotic it was.

They had probably never imagined someone would do such a thing.

But even if they ridiculed him or tried to tell him it was impossible, Soma had no intention of stopping.

"Hm... Well, since that's what I want, I do think it could be worth going to Lunburg."

"Are you sure? You may not have a particular destination, but I figured you would just take it slow like you have been, since you don't know what's where."

"I originally meant to do that, but my travels so far have taught me the limits of searching every nook and cranny. It would also be a good way to gather information."

Soma didn't have much time left, after all. The time would soon come for him to enter an academy.

Although he'd left on a journey...no, *because* he'd left on a journey, he was still unsure whether he should go to an academy.

He hadn't expected that it would be smooth sailing from the start, but he hadn't found a single piece of information pertaining to magic yet, so it was natural that he would wonder if he would have better luck at an academy.

He'd hoped that by taking this journey, he could learn at least the bare minimum he needed to make that decision.

Would he get results or not? Did he think he could do it or not?

Going to an academy was still an option in Soma's mind as long as he could learn more, even if it meant walking faster and overlooking some things.

"I see... Well, all I want to do is follow you, so I'll leave the decision to you."

"Well... I guess the same goes for me, so pick for yourself."

"Hm... Understood."

He just needed more information to make that call.

And right in front of him was the person he could get it from.

So Soma asked Doris to tell him more.

7

“Tell you more? It’s not like I know all that much, you know.”

“I don’t mind.” Soma nodded.

“If you say so.”

Thus Doris began to talk, but she didn’t really have anything of note to say.

How big was the city of Lunburg, and what was in the surrounding area? Anyone who had been there could tell you that much.

And Doris had only been there a few times, so she didn’t know about most things. She hadn’t needed to, and she hadn’t had the time to find out.

Embarrassingly, Doris was considered the strongest person in this area, so she had a lot of other things to do.

Yet because he’d asked, she told him what she knew to the best of her ability.

As she kept talking, Doris snuck a glance at Sierra. As usual, Sierra’s face was hidden, but if Doris wasn’t imagining it, her partner seemed quite interested in Soma.

And Doris knew exactly why.

That was what had surprised her shortly before.

She’d never thought anyone other than Sierra would be looking for a way to use magic.

“So, that’s about all.”

“Hm... It sounds rather busy from what I understand, but there are still monsters in a place like that?”

“That’s the part you’re interested in? Well, it does have more adventurers to match the population, but monsters keep popping back up just when you think you’ve gotten rid of them. That’s the same anywhere you go.”

“It is? I haven’t seen any monsters before coming here, so I imagined it depended on the location.”

“Oh, you three came from that way, right? I can see why you’d think that, but that place is actually an exception.”

The branch of the guild that Doris worked as a substitute for, the Jaster Adventurers’ Guild, was actually the northernmost branch in Ladius. That was because there was no branch in the duchy of Neumond.

The reason for that was because there was no point in an adventurer going to the duchy. There were no monsters to hunt or bandits to subdue. The ruler of the domain, Duchess Sophia Neumond, had eliminated them all as soon as she’d found them, before any adventurers had a chance to work there.

Some rare few bandits had survived, but that was only because they weren’t causing trouble anymore. If they started again, they would immediately be destroyed, so it was the same as if they weren’t there.

At any rate, while it would have been helpful to the townspeople to have a branch, bandits and monsters were the two main sources of income for adventurers. There were occasional requests from townspeople, but they were rarely worth the effort.

Some adventurers did gather materials and such, but it didn’t earn them a living, so they had to do it on the side of hunting.

Adventurers didn’t destroy monsters as an act of charity but in order to live, so they had no need to go somewhere they couldn’t make money.

And they couldn’t exactly tell the duchess to stop the extermination. It put the townspeople at ease that the duchess was doing that, and it was her job, after all.

That was why there was no guild branch there. There was no recognized need for one.

The duchess’s work made it one of the safest areas, as Soma had described. Despite that, it was said to be one of the most potentially dangerous places to live, since it bordered the Devils’ Woods, so people rarely traveled there.

“I see... Now that you mention it, that explains why I never saw a guild branch there.”

“I did think the people we met along the way were quick to accept travelers,” Aina remarked. “I guess that’s why everyone seemed nice.”

“Yep, I hear it’s nice and peaceful. Part of me is jealous, but we also need to make a living, so it sort of puts us between a rock and a hard place.”

As she was talking to the three, Doris suddenly felt a tug on her sleeve.

“Yeah, what’s up, Sierra?”

She turned to look and saw Sierra’s head turned in her direction like she had something to say. At the same time, she seemed somewhat hesitant.

Well, if she hadn’t been hesitant, she would have already said whatever she wanted to, like she had earlier.

Doris could tell that much without seeing her face.

“I’ve been wanting to ask... Are you sisters?” Lina questioned.

“Huh? We sure aren’t total strangers, but no, we’re not related.”

“Oh, you aren’t? I thought you might be, since you seem so close.”

“Well, I’m glad we seem that way to you.”

Things had been tough at first when she’d joined up with Sierra, but they’d gotten to the point where people they’d just met said things like that. It was only natural that Doris was happy about it, and it touched her deeply.

She’d felt a sense of responsibility, of course, but they’d only made it this far together because she’d enjoyed it. Maybe against her expectations.

But she might not be filling that role for much longer.

“So, Sierra?”

She had a good guess of what Sierra wanted to say. That was why she’d asked about the goal of Soma’s journey.

She thought it was what Sierra needed.

Now Sierra would have to speak up for herself, though.

Doris hadn’t been able to bring out Sierra’s full strength, to truly fight alongside her, so she didn’t have the right to butt in.

All she could do was watch over her.

Perhaps as they did.

“Mm-hmm...”

After taking plenty of time, Sierra nodded as if she were ready.

She placed her hand on the robe that concealed her figure. There was only one thing that could mean.

“Oh? Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm. I think we can trust them.”

Doris had asked just to make sure, and that was Sierra’s reply.

Doris didn’t know how Sierra had made that judgment... Maybe it was something only those who had crossed swords could understand.

And maybe it was because they had the same goal.

“I see. Well, if you think so, I won’t stop you.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Sierra nodded and flung off her robe.

Underneath was a petite female figure, familiar to Doris but completely new to Soma’s group.

Naturally, she was wearing clothes...but Soma and the girls widened their eyes in surprise. Doris chuckled, thinking, *Of course they did*.

They never would have expected what they were seeing.

The face Sierra revealed was strangely well-proportioned for a child’s, but her most distinctive feature was her ears.

They were pointed, the mark of a certain race...

“I’ll introduce myself again... Sierra Leonhardt. An elf, as you can see. I have a request... There are ruins near Lunburg. I want to go there together.”

With her golden hair swaying, also characteristic of her race, and her golden eyes pointing straight ahead, the elf girl let her wish be known.

8

To get straight to the conclusion, Soma's party decided to go to Lunburg.

The deciding factor hadn't been Sierra's request so much as the place they were going.

"Hmm... Ancient ruins, she says..." Soma muttered, remembering that moment.

When he looked up, what he saw wasn't the ceiling of the guild they had just been in. He was in a room at one of the few inns in this town.

"Sierra said there's something lying dormant in the ancient ruins that might grant the user the ability to use magic," Lina said.

"They do say magic was more advanced a long time ago," Aina commented. "That's why you were looking around those ruins in the first place, right? So it might not be a crazy idea to think there's something like that... I can't prove it's not true, at least."

Soma looked over at where Aina and Lina were sitting in chairs.

The girls were sleeping in a different room, naturally, but they'd gathered in Soma's room to talk about their plan just in case.

About thirty minutes had passed since they'd accepted Sierra's invitation to go to Lunburg and the nearby ruins, then left the guild.

Soma shrugged. "It certainly sounds suspicious, but if it were really nothing but suspicious, Doris would have stopped us."

Although they were going over something they'd already made a decision on, there was an actual purpose to the conversation.

Sometimes, time and a change of location can reveal problematic points that you overlooked before. That doesn't always happen, of course, but having the discussion was of utmost importance.

Soma had put forth all of his reasoning, but it ultimately had to be something everyone came to a conclusion on. At the very least, they had to go over what

each of them thought about it.

Otherwise, there would be no meaning to them traveling together.

“Well, I think she’s probably not trying to trick us. Her story might seem outlandish, but it didn’t seem like she was lying... And elves can’t tell lies, anyway.”

“Wait, they can’t?”

“You haven’t heard? Elves as a race have a high affinity for magic, but it’s because they’re contracted with powerful spirits, and that contract prevents them from lying... At least, that’s what I’ve heard.”

“This is the first time I’ve heard that as well, and even if it is true, I have my doubts that it would apply to Sierra.”

“Oh... Yeah, you might be right about that.”

It was definitely true that elves had a high affinity for magic. Compared to other races, a higher proportion of their Sorcery users were Middle-Grade and above, and a good number of elves even reached High-Grade.

It made sense if that was a trait of elves as a race and even more if it had something to do with otherworldly intervention.

That left the question, though, of whether an elf would have to hold up their end of the contract if they weren’t getting the promised benefits.

Because Sierra had no talent for magic despite belonging to a race that excelled at it. She couldn’t even learn Low-Grade Sorcery.

That meant that even if elves as a race couldn’t normally tell lies, Sierra may have been an exception.

“Well, there isn’t any use talking about it,” Soma stated. “We’ve already taken into account the possibility that it’s not true.”

Even if it wasn’t, they’d decided this was better than having no leads at all.

Soma didn’t think it was likely that Sierra was lying, however.

“I don’t think she was lying, either,” said Lina. “What she said seemed heartfelt.”

“She wants to use magic, right? I’ve heard that line before.”

Soma shrugged at what Aina said, conscious that he’d been somewhat biased toward Sierra in making the decision because he could relate to her.

Aina didn’t say anything to him directly, though; as she’d said before, she didn’t think Sierra was lying. And Soma felt the same even setting aside the common ground he shared with her.

At the very least, the three of them were certain that Sierra genuinely wanted to use magic, and that that was why she wanted to go to the ruins.

“Well, even if she isn’t lying, I honestly don’t understand,” said Lina. “She seems better at fighting with a sword than me. Why isn’t that enough for her?”

“I think I might get it... Like, Soma just wants to use magic for the sake of using magic, right?”

“Hm... That’s true. I have no complex argument for it.”

“But I think Sierra is different. This is just my guess, but I don’t think her skill with a sword has anything to do with it... I think she wants to use magic because she’s an elf. Or it could just be because it’s inconvenient that she can’t.”

“Hmm...”

Elves excelled at magic, but on the other hand, they couldn’t make much use of other things.

Elf sword fighters were extremely rare.

That probably wouldn’t have been much of a problem...if Sierra could have used even a little magic.

The elf way of life was said to depend on magic for most things, however. Their infrastructure was built on the assumption that all of them could use at least Low-Grade Sorcery.

That was just what people said about them, however. The reality could have been different.

It was rare to encounter elves in the first place, partly because there were few of them, but also because they seldom left their forest nation.

This kingdom was relatively diverse, but elves were still rare enough that you may or may not have come across one even in the capital.

That meant that elves weren't very well understood.

Because of that, elves were often targeted.

It was partly just because of their beauty...but regardless of the reason, it was common.

That was probably why Sierra had hidden her face and body.

She didn't know where information about her would get to, and although she probably had the skills to deal with any problems that arose as a result, it would be better to minimize those.

"Well, I imagine she'll tell us more after we've spent some time together," said Soma. "Although we don't know how long we'll stay together."

"I guess it depends on those ruins... She did say we'd go over the details later, though."

"That was what made it sound suspicious... But maybe it means she's just that confident," Lina suggested.

"Perhaps she was being cautious in case someone was eavesdropping... But we can overcome her caution gradually."

"Yeah... It'll take a week to get there, anyway, so we'll have plenty of time to talk," Aina pointed out.

"Since we're spending the week together, I hope we can talk about other things, too, and get to know each other..."

"That depends whether she's willing."

Sierra didn't give the impression that she disliked them, at least not based on the little conversation they'd had. If she did dislike them, she probably wouldn't have invited them to the ruins in the first place.

She'd gotten more talkative by the end of the conversation, so she could have just been shy.

If that were the case, then maybe they would get to the point where they

could talk to her normally.

“So, do we all agree to go to the ancient ruins?” Soma asked. “Any objections?”

“It’s not like we have anywhere else to go.”

“No objections.”

So with that, they ended the conversation for the day, having chosen to stick with what they’d already decided.

9

Impossible, thought the man.

He'd thought it was a fairy tale and this place would be nothing but old ruins.

He'd only listened to that shady man to kill time.

He hadn't gotten any big jobs lately, so he'd been spending his days doing nothing but hunting monsters. He was sick of it.

And it wasn't just him. His buddies felt the same.

That was why they'd accepted what they'd been told.

Bored as they all were, it would have made a fun story to tell their friends later—that stupid thing they'd done.

So why...

"So that's the third one... We're getting there, but it's looking like the last one will be a problem. If what I read is correct, not just any ordinary person will do. I tried to choose wisely, but maybe I should check again... I believe some of them haven't even started moving yet."

As he thought to himself, the man's gaze was drawn to the shadow-cloaked figure who kept muttering out loud as if to put their own thoughts in order.

They were completely unguarded, but for some reason, the man didn't take it as his chance to attack. He just speechlessly took in the shadow-like thing behind the figure.

He didn't pick up the sword lying on the floor...and he didn't try to avenge his friends.

"Why don't I just go? If it doesn't look like it'll work out, I can reconsider then."

The two shadows made to leave.

In the end, he hadn't been able to do anything.

"Oh, right, I'm glad I left you. It saved me some trouble. Also, I heard a little

about you lot... You wanted a good story out of this, right? Wonderful. I have one request for you, in that case. Tell everyone what happened today in detail...about me, and about this. I'm counting on you."

All he could do was stand there shaking, watching the figure's retreating back until they were gone.

†

Soma's party decided to leave town early the next day.

Early in the morning, Soma's trio, Sierra, and Doris were at the outskirts of town.

"I know it's a lot to ask, but I'm trusting you with Sierra, okay?"

"You can count on us... But are you sure about this?"

"Yeah... Maybe it's weird for one of us to bring it up, but how can you trust us that much?" Aina asked. "Didn't we just meet?"

"If I didn't have a good eye for people, I couldn't work as a guild substitute. And Sierra brought it up herself. So if you're not being honest, then we must be bad judges of character. In that case, I guess Sierra would face the consequences for it, and I'd lose my position as substitute."

"That's a lot of responsibility..." Lina said nervously.

"Mm-hmm," Sierra agreed. "Good luck."

"You say that as if it has nothing to do with you..."

Soma's party wasn't close enough to Doris that they were reluctant to part with her, and this would hardly be the last time Sierra ever saw Doris, so their parting was brief.

If anything, Soma's trio was shocked at how readily Sierra got into the carriage.

According to what the two of them said, they'd been together for the past several years, but Doris didn't seem at all bothered. Maybe that meant there was something that only the two of them understood.

Incidentally, Doris had made the arrangements for the carriage. A driver was

included, and Doris would foot the bill.

Apparently it was her farewell gift to Sierra as she set out on her journey.

Soma had thought Sierra would come back here once she was done searching the ruins in question, but maybe she had something else in mind.

And he couldn't tell whether it would be okay for him to ask...so he decided to accept the favor and not say anything.

With that, Soma's party left Jaster behind.

†

"Hmm... You say someone happened to tell you about it, so you went to look, and it was actually there?"

"Mm-hmm."

Traveling in the carriage was rather pleasant, as they maybe should have expected from a carriage that a guild substitute had ordered.

In any case, the lack of issues on the road left them with a lot of free time, so Soma's trio was asking Sierra for more information.

Unexpectedly, she was being rather frank this time.

"That kind of...makes it sound even more suspicious," said Aina.

"Can't deny that... It is suspicious, actually."

"You admit that?" asked Lina.

According to what Sierra said, she had only found out about the ruins by coincidence. She'd gone to Lunburg on assignment, and there a strange man had struck up a conversation with her over dinner at a tavern.

He had been wearing a black robe that hid his face, which made him blatantly suspicious... And he'd even waited until the moment when Doris left her seat.

Nearby were ancient ruins where the "pinnacle of mystic power" lay dormant, he said.

Though he knew of them, he wasn't able to venture very far into them, so he'd decided to talk to someone who might be able to.

“So if you successfully make it through the ruins, then in return, he tells you what really happened... He didn’t even try not to make it sound suspicious.”

“Mm-hmm... But it’s true that not many in town can handle the task.”

“So if anyone could, it’d have to be you plus someone else who’s your equal or better...”

The man had realized that as soon as he stepped into the ruins. It was intuitive, not logical, but he was convinced of it.

“I can understand him going to you because there was nobody else who could do it in Lunburg, but he could have gone to the capital...” Lina pointed out.

“That would have given him more certainty of finding someone as skilled as Sierra,” Soma agreed. “No, but if he really were eccentric enough to approach her, he could already have talked to people in the capital and gotten them on board...”

“That’s not impossible, but...”

It was suspicious no matter how you looked at it, but that very fact meant that if it was a trap, it was far too obvious.

“Well, regardless, even if it is a trap, we can handle the fallout. If it’s as important a place as he said, then there may still be some kind of clue there.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Incidentally, none of them had doubted that there was a possibility that Sierra was lying, but now they could tell by talking to her that she wasn’t. She showed no signs of it at all.

If Sierra was actually lying, then they would have to give up and accept that.

They would give in, accept that they’d misjudged her, and face the consequences.

In other words, they were going to explore the ruins regardless of whether her words were true.

“Just wondering, why couldn’t you go with Doris?”

“Not strong enough.”

“That’s really blunt... Doris seemed to understand that, though.”

Doris had certainly had a resigned look on her face when Sierra had said she was going with Soma’s party. She’d probably grasped why Sierra hadn’t asked her instead.

She could also have already known the gap in their skills, although there was no way of telling how long she’d known.

“No reason to lie. And Doris isn’t here.”

“So you’re saying there isn’t any need to sugarcoat it... That’s certainly true.”

“Oh, speaking of lies, can I ask you a question?”

“Depends what...”

Soma and Lina’s gazes met. They knew what Aina was about to ask.

There was no reason to stop her, though, and they would have been lying if they’d said they weren’t curious as well.

As they silently watched and waited, Aina said exactly what they’d expected her to.

“I heard elves can’t tell lies. Is that true? Oh, you don’t have to say anything if you can’t or don’t want to, okay? Even if it is true, I wouldn’t know the answer if you didn’t say anything.”

“It’s no problem... That’s not wrong. But not right.”

“What does that mean?” Lina asked.

“Elves don’t tell lies. But it’s just a law. Not that we can’t.”

“A law? So it’s not a contract?”

“Mm-mm.”

Soma started thinking it over when he saw Sierra shake her head in confirmation. He had time to kill, so he might as well listen; he didn’t necessarily have to do anything more.

“Hm... So you’re saying it’s not true that elves have a high affinity for magic because of a contract with spirits?” Soma asked.

“That’s not wrong either.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Lina asked.

“They say elves were once a type of spirit. Then things happened and they became elves.”

“What...? I’ve never heard that!”

“Oh. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to tell.”

“Is it okay that you already did?!”

In that way, they were able to avoid boredom on the way to the ruins, even enjoy themselves.

Periodically, the carriage fell in danger of being attacked by monsters, but Soma’s party had no problem with that.

Most people would have needed to bring guards with them, but they were able to proceed smoothly with no need to stop, and the week went by in a flash.

“Hmm... So these are the ancient ruins,” Soma remarked.

That brought them to the ruins in question.

They looked exactly as one would expect of ruins, and the gate before them, which was over five meters in height, had an air of antiquity.

Although it was some distance from town, a place like this shouldn’t have gone unnoticed, yet as far as Sierra had researched, nobody knew about these ruins...which was apparently because there was a perception-blocking barrier around them.

Nobody would have been able to find them, even using magic, unless they knew they were here.

“So... We know they’re here now, but are you sure you don’t want to take a break?” Aina asked, probably because they hadn’t stopped since they’d set off from Lunburg.

It was a reasonable suggestion, but...

“We could take a break if necessary, but are you that tired?” asked Soma.

“Tired? Well, I guess not...”

“Me neither.”

“Likewise.”

“My answer should go without saying. In that case, I think we can go without a break.”

“Well, maybe in terms of fatigue, but we haven’t gotten ready, right?”

“We don’t know what to prepare,” Sierra pointed out.

“Right, we have no idea what kind of ruins these are,” Lina agreed.

They’d prepared the bare minimum, of course, but they didn’t know what else they might need.

There were many different ways that ruins could be laid out, and different things they’d have to prepare based on that.

Since there was the possibility that nobody had stepped foot inside before, and also the possibility that it was a trap, they had to exercise the utmost caution, but they couldn’t do much without at least a little information.

“Well, we don’t have to worry. We’ll just check it out today so we can learn more.”

“Okay... As long as you get it,” Aina replied.

She’d probably understood from the beginning but still asked just to make sure.

In a place they knew nothing about, it was crucial to have a common understanding among the party. Even Soma’s trio didn’t completely understand each other, let alone Sierra, so there was nothing that wasn’t worth double-checking.

Soma was glad Aina had taken the initiative to do that.

“Thank you, Aina.”

“For what? All I did was ask what was on my mind...”

She turned away. Soma smiled.

But they wouldn’t have any time for distractions from here on out.

“Let’s be on our way, then.”

Once the other three nodded, Soma lead them into the ruins.

10

“One stroke, one slice.”

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mental Concentration *Quick Draw* Mind’s Eye: One Stroke, One Slice

The instant Sierra swung her sword, it sliced without resistance through the thing in front of her, which dispersed into the air.

Cutting through the thing like that felt odd and gave her pause, but regardless, it had been defeated, so there was no problem, she concluded as she looked around for her next target.

She then realized there was no need to do that, however.

“That was certainly a surprise, but it seems we won’t have any problems,” Soma said as he vigilantly watched their surroundings.

When Sierra had last looked, there had been three of the same type of monster, but apparently all of them had been defeated in the time it had taken her to defeat one. She nodded, impressed.

Apparently not everyone was satisfied, however.

“What do you mean, we won’t have any problems?” Aina asked.

“Does something look like a problem to you?”

“The thing right in front of us...?”

“What thing?” Lina asked. “All I see is a wall...”

“The same goes for me.”

“Likewise.”

“The problem is that we have a wall in front of us...! We were just going to take a look around, and now we’re in here fighting monsters!”

“Ah, well, there isn’t anything I can do about that...” Soma looked troubled,

which Sierra could understand.

There really was a problem right now, but Soma wasn't responsible for it.

"Not even I could have predicted there would be a trap five steps into the ruins."

"I mean, you're right, but..."

Indeed, the reason they were fighting monsters instead of looking around was because there were walls on either side of them with no visible exit. They'd ended up here immediately after they stepped into the ruins.

The entrance to the ruins had been a gate, but what lay beyond the gate was a passageway. To either side were walls five meters high and five meters thick. They had been able to see a corner to turn at the end but no other side passages.

It was more like a labyrinth or a dungeon than ruins. That impression would have been even stronger if they hadn't been able to see the sky above.

Although the way it looked had bothered them slightly, Sierra had followed Soma in...but after only five steps, as Soma had mentioned, it happened.

The ground below them had lit up—a magic circle. They'd tried to escape, but too late. Their field of view had wavered for a moment...and then, they were here.

There was a wall in front of them, with no exit in sight on the left or right.

They'd figured out it was a teleportation trap thanks to Sierra's experience with dungeons.

The fact that Soma had noticed at about the same time could have meant that he had experience with dungeons as well...but that didn't matter right now.

No sooner had they grasped that they'd been teleported somewhere else in the ruins than they'd been attacked by monsters. Then they'd defeated them, which brought them to the present moment.

"I really don't think we could have done anything about that..." said Lina.

“Mm-hmm. An accident,” Sierra agreed.

“Yeah... I get it... Um, sorry.”

“I understand why you brought it up, so I don’t mind.”

Soma had probably accepted Aina’s apology with a wry smile because he genuinely understood how she felt.

They’d been prepared, more or less, but then suddenly they’d been hit with this. It was no wonder that she would be freaked out. If anything, it was weird how calm Soma seemed.

“So what are we going to do now?” Lina asked. “I don’t see any way out.”

“Yeah, I think it’d be best to head for the exit, but I don’t see anything... Wait, no, it’s right there!”

“Do you see something?”

“Up! If we go on top of the walls, we’ll know where we are! It’s a little high, but you can get up there, right, Soma?”

“Hmm, I do think I could climb up if I tried, but...”

“What? Is there a problem?”

“Mm, wait a moment, I need something... Okay, this should work.” Soma picked up a small piece of rock from the ground.

“What about that?”

“Just watch. If I’m right about this...” Soma tossed it into the air.

“What’s that going to—huh?!”

“What?! It’s gone?!”

Aina and Lina shouted in surprise when the rock Soma tossed into the air vanished upon reaching the top of the wall. It seemed less like it had broken apart and more like it had been teleported somewhere else, or maybe just suddenly vanished from sight.

“Mm-hmm. The space above is warped.”

“You don’t seem surprised, Sierra. Were you expecting something like this?”

“Mm-hmm. Given that there’s a trap at the entrance, it would be too easy if we could get out by climbing the walls.”

“Exactly.”

“Mm, I feel like there’s some kind of understanding between you two...”

“Well, experience speaks volumes at times like these. You and Aina will be able to do the same soon enough.”

That would mean Soma had experienced something like this before... The idea Sierra had dismissed before came back.

It really didn’t matter all that much, but it definitely intrigued her.

Judging by his looks, Soma was a child like the other two.

The same would go for Sierra judging only by looks, but she was an elf. She’d been alive for around thirty years, so it wasn’t the same.

Elves matured very slowly compared to humans, though, so she would be about the same as the other three in terms of physical and mental development...but she knew that she was precocious for an elf, maybe because of her Skill.

She thought Aina and Lina were the same way...and Soma, of course.

Soma, however, was a head or two above them in that regard. He was beyond precocious—more like fully mature.

What had he experienced?

Aina and Lina probably knew, but Sierra unfortunately wasn’t assertive enough to just ask about what she wanted to know.

However, she already knew that he was trustworthy, and she knew that they had the same goal.

So that was enough.

She also wanted to ask why he wanted to use magic...but she felt like it was too early for that. It wouldn’t be fair to make him tell her without saying her own reason, and she wasn’t brave enough to tell him yet.

It wasn’t that there was any very significant reason for that, however...

“Well, let’s walk around for now. We have no other leads, after all.”

Wondering whether they would be able to talk about it someday, Sierra followed behind Soma as he resumed walking.

11

Soma couldn’t tell whether this place was ruins or a dungeon, but it was turning out to be more trouble than he’d anticipated.

As for what was causing the trouble...

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Combat Ready / Sense Presence: Negate Sneak Attack

“It seems we don’t have time to rest...”

Law of the Sword / God-Killer / Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance / Sword of Pandemonium *Gift of Discernment: Original Style* Emulation / Demon Slayer

He grumbled as he swung his arm to the side. It met with a slight resistance, then the thing that had been approaching him dissolved.

It had been a type of monster called a ghost that had phased through the wall.

Ghosts looked like skeletons wearing robes, but they had no lower half and were fully transparent. They fell into the undead category of monsters, and these were clearly that sort of monster, judging by how they were floating.

The ones that had attacked them first were the same kind, and they could apparently ignore things like walls due to being not only undead but incorporeal. They weren’t strong, so they were easy to defeat, but it was annoying that they could appear from any direction.

That part was just annoying, not troublesome, however. It was the ruins themselves that were really troublesome.

An hour had passed since they’d gone into the trap, but they still had no idea where they were.

They weren’t in a panic about it, but that didn’t change that it was trouble.

“Has this place always been this big?” Aina asked. “It didn’t look this big from the outside...”

“You’re right...” Lina replied. “It didn’t look big enough that we could walk for an hour inside. We could be going in circles, but even then, we should have reached some kind of landmark...”

“You two haven’t realized?” Soma asked.

“Huh? Realized what?”

“Space is warped here.”

“Warped... You mean it’s bigger than it looks?”

“More than that. We can’t walk in a straight line.”

“What do you mean...?”

“I think each corridor here warps somewhere else.”

“Wait, does that mean...”

“Like what happened at the beginning?”

“Something like that.”

It was technically something else, but the results were more or less the same.

However, by the looks on Aina and Lina’s faces, it was clear that the warping here was worse than that at the entrance.

“I didn’t even notice... And you should have told us if you knew!”

“I can’t tell exactly how it works yet, and I thought that if you didn’t know, you might notice something I couldn’t.”

“I couldn’t tell either... How did you and Sierra realize?”

“By the direction of the sun. I was checking it to see which way we were going, but it kept changing.”

The sun was not quite directly overhead. He’d noticed that angle changing at times, even when they were walking straight ahead like they were now.

“I’m impressed you caught that... I would’ve assumed it was in my head.”

“I thought the same thing at first, but it happened often enough that I figured something must be off. Of course, I could have noticed when we first got here. It’s a shame that I didn’t.”

“It’s good that you noticed at all... But Sierra, how did you notice?”

“I looked at Soma.”

“At me?”

Soma was puzzled, since he hadn’t thought he was making it obvious. If it had really been obvious, Aina and Lina should have noticed too.

“Mm-hmm. You were looking up too often to just be looking around normally.”

“Hmm, I was trying to be careful, but I suppose I have more practice to do...”

“Careful of what?”

“Careful not to let you and Lina notice.”

“Why?!” Aina yelled.

Soma shrugged. He hadn’t intended to be mean to them. He’d had an actual reason.

“I noticed this time, but I won’t be able to notice everything. I wanted to teach you the importance of observing your surroundings carefully. Especially you, Aina.”

“I can see that... But why me in particular?”

“Oh, I get it...”

“Wait, you do, Lina?”

“Yes, because he’s responsible for looking ahead and I’m responsible for paying attention to what’s behind us.”

“Oh, right, so that just leaves me with the chance to look around...”

It was a problem of formation. Soma was vanguard, Aina was main guard, and Lina was rearguard.

Soma was confident that he could ward off surprise attacks most of the time,

but not every single time, so he and Lina had to keep an eye out.

Since Sierra was with them now, they'd given her the role of rearguard, but Aina would usually be the only free person. That made her the best to pay attention to their surroundings.

"Also, the more people paying attention to what's around us, the higher our chances of finding something. It would be pointless if you focused so much on watching out for attacks that you didn't watch out for anything else."

"So you want me to pay more attention to what's behind us?" Lina asked.

"Exactly." Soma nodded and continued forward, alert to their surroundings.

This was a good place to learn from, he thought. There were no dangerous monsters, but it had a heinous trick built in.

It would have depended on the time of day they arrived, but if he hadn't noticed, they could have been stuck in here even longer.

That meant there were even more things to learn from this place, though. That would be useful considering what was to come.

He hadn't been able to get around to this lesson, since the two were new to traveling, so this setback may have come at the perfect time.

There was something else that bothered him, but he would get around to that in time.

"I'm a little jealous..."

"Of what, Sierra?"

"You teach them things."

"I get the sense that you know more about these things than I do."

Soma knew about these things because he'd been to dungeons while training with his sword in his past life, but since he had mainly gone for training purposes, he didn't know a lot.

He only knew about the few things he'd experienced or been told about, so there wasn't much that he could tell them.

There were probably also a number of differences between what he'd

experienced and the dungeons in this world, so he could only talk about what he thought were commonalities between the two.

While he'd visited some ruins with Aina and Lina on the way to Jaster, there hadn't been many monsters in them.

And Sierra had come to these ruins multiple times before, judging by what she'd told them, so she must have known more than him.

"Okay... So I'll teach you?"

"That would certainly be helpful."

"Okay." She nodded in agreement.

A wry smile came across Soma's face as he continued to observe their surroundings while simultaneously watching out of the corner of his eye as Aina and Lina asked Sierra to teach them things too.

"We just changed locations. Did you notice?"

"For real?!"

"I did."

"I couldn't tell at all..."

"Just pay more attention from now on. I sense something off here."

"Okay... I'll keep an eye out."

"Me too!"

The two turned intent eyes to their surroundings, probably forgetting to pay attention to other things...but he could warn them about that later. They just had to learn from experience right now.

He turned to Sierra, who nodded slightly. She apparently agreed.

"I'm starting to understand how the teleportation works, but I still don't know where to go. We may have no choice but to keep guessing until we find the exit. I'll also have to consider using my last resort."

"I get a bad feeling about it, but I'll bite... What's your last resort?"

"Slicing up the ruins entirely, of course."

“Huh? You... You’re not joking, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Soma hadn’t laid a scratch on the ruins so far, not even a wall, but he was taking care not to. Sierra had done the same, probably because she had been thinking the same thing as him.

Since these ruins interfered with space, there was no telling what would happen if the party damaged part of them. In the worst-case scenario, it could have created some crazy distortion in space that sent them somewhere completely unexpected. If it sent them high into the atmosphere, it would be hard for Soma to save everyone.

And it also would have been a problem if they damaged the thing they were looking for.

That was why they were being careful...but now probably wasn’t the time to be saying that.

“It would be a loss, but we would have no choice,” Sierra agreed.

“Dear brother...! You’re so cool!”

“It does sound cool, but what would happen to us?!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you whatever happens. As long as we’re ready for it...we can figure it out somehow.”

“Eh, uh, well... I mean, that does make me feel better... But that’s not the problem here!”

“What’s the problem, then? Sierra agrees that we would have no choice, and she asked us to come here with her.”

“Mm-hmm. Our lives are important.”

“Uh... Th-Then... What about you, Soma?”

“What *about* me?”

“If there really is something here that could give you the ability to use magic, and we break it, won’t you be upset?”

“Hmm... I certainly might be upset in that case.”

It wasn’t just a possibility; he would definitely be upset, especially if he broke it himself. There would have been no end to his regrets.

“But your life, all your lives, are irreplaceable. And if it came to breaking it myself, it would be at the point where I would die otherwise too... Even then, we could probably find something similar somewhere else. I’m rather patient, so it wouldn’t be a problem.”

As he spoke, Soma noticed how much he’d changed since his past life. He’d had this thought before...but back then, he probably wouldn’t have said the same thing. He may have even said that death was preferable to not finding whatever item was hidden here.

He didn’t think that now, though. He couldn’t.

Maybe that meant he was weaker now in a sense...but he was okay with that.

“So, there you have it... Aina?”

He noticed that Aina was looking down. And if his eyes weren’t deceiving him, her ears were red.

“I-It’s nothing... I get it, though. If you insist, I won’t argue.”

“Dear brother! You’d protect me then too, right?!”

“Yes, of course...”

“Then I agree too!”

“And me?”

“Didn’t you already agree, Sierra?”

“Don’t like being left out.”

“Hmm... Well, setting aside the question of whether I would even need to protect you, I would.”

“Good, then...”

“So we agree that we can destroy this place if it comes to it, then.”

There was also the chance that they wouldn’t be able to, or that nothing would happen when they did. One way or another, Soma was confident that

they would be okay.

Even if they weren't able to destroy the ruins, Soma just had to be ready to be sore for a few days afterward.

No ruins could hold a finger to the strongest dragon in the world.

"I hope it doesn't come to that, however."

"Mm-hmm."

Soma's party continued ahead so they could avoid that option for the time being.

12

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mental Concentration *Quick Draw* Mind's Eye: One Stroke, One Slice

Sierra sighed as she slashed the ghost that had appeared before her.

Another hour had passed, but her party was still in the ruins.

The sun was beginning to set, so while there was still some time before night fell, they didn't have enough to take it easy.

But Soma still hadn't used his last resort.

He'd apparently noticed something, so they were going to check that out first.

There was no reason in particular to rush to escape right now, and if they could handle it without destroying the ruins, Sierra would prefer that too.

Aina and Lina agreed, so they were still exploring.

Incidentally, Soma hadn't told them what he'd noticed. Apparently he thought he could be wrong, or that it might amount to nothing.

Sierra felt like it was more to make Aina and Lina think and notice it themselves...but if that was his intention, she would just stay quiet about it.

She herself was reasonably sure she knew what he'd noticed. It was a guess based on his behavior, though, so it was kind of like cheating. It was a valid method, but nothing to be proud of.

She was more interested in how Soma had managed to notice on his own.

"Right, there's something that's been on my mind... Since the beginning, actually," Aina started out of nowhere.

Soma, who was walking in front, turned around and gave her a puzzled look. "What is it? Since you say you've been thinking about it since the beginning, does that mean you noticed what I noticed?"

"What is it?" Lina asked too.

“Well, you know, um... How come you two can just cut ghosts like that?”

Sierra, unsure what Aina was talking about, turned a confused look on her as well. “Because we can?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s what’s so weird about it! Ghosts are incorporeal! It’s supposed to take magic to defeat them, right?!”

“Hmm, is that so...?”

“Now that you mention it, I didn’t think about it because you two were defeating them the same way you would any other enemy, but I think Aina is right.”

“I’ve heard that too...”

It was Sierra’s first time fighting ghosts, or any incorporeal monsters at all, so it hadn’t stuck out to her as unusual that she could defeat them by cutting them normally, but Aina was right that in typical scenarios, monsters such as ghosts could only be defeated using magic or something like a magical sword.

But while Sierra’s sword was specially made, it didn’t have any such feature. That didn’t leave many possibilities she could think of.

“Because I’m Special Grade?”

“I’m Special Grade too, but I don’t think I could defeat them,” Lina replied. “I left it to you two partially because they didn’t come in my direction, but also because I didn’t think I could do it.”

“And Soma isn’t even Special Grade.”

“Huh...?”

Sierra stopped in her tracks and let out a sound of confusion in response to Aina’s casual remark.

She quickly went after the others and put up a good front of not having noticed, but the questions kept swirling around in her mind.

Not Special Grade?

Who?

Soma...?

“Hmm... Is it really worth the thought? It seems normal to me that I would be able to cut them as long as I know they’re there, especially since I can see them.”

“Honestly, knowing you, that could be all it takes...”

“I believe you could regardless, but if Sierra can do it too, then there must be some other reason, I’d say.”

“Wait...”

“Yes, what is it?”

“What do you mean, you’re not Special Grade?”

She had finally caught up with her train of thought and managed to voice her question.

It was her first time hearing this, and she couldn’t believe it.

Skill Grades were absolute on a fundamental level, and Special Grade was exceptional among them. A Special-Grade user would be able to hold their own even against multiple High-Grade users at once.

If there were other factors involved, such as one specializing in close-range and the other in long-distance combat, the outcome could be different, but the conditions were the same for Sierra and Soma... No, Sierra in fact had the upper hand.

And even so, Soma clearly came out on top.

Of course she couldn’t believe he wasn’t Special Grade.

“Wait, we never told Sierra?” Lina questioned.

“I don’t recall telling her, now that I think about it.”

“Me neither. I just assumed we did at some point.”

Judging by their reactions, they weren’t lying. She couldn’t wrap her head around it, but if they said so, then she had no choice but to assume it was true.

“Oh, that means she doesn’t know the other part either, right? That Soma

actually doesn’t have any Skills.”

“Huh...?”

Any? Did that mean he didn’t even have a High-Grade Skill?

Yet he was superior to her own Special-Grade Skill...?

“It’s not just that you aren’t conscious of using any?”

“Nobody is conscious of using Skills.”

He was right. People couldn’t tell when they were using Skills or what Skills they were using, let alone which ones they had.

Well, some caused your body to glow, and some martial Skills were obvious as soon as you picked up the weapon, so there were *some* ways to tell, but usually it wasn’t possible.

Skills activated automatically when you tried to do something that the Skill would have an effect on.

Technically, that was just how Skills were thought to work. Nobody was certain of the exact details.

For example, if someone made a sharp cut, they would have no way of telling whether it was thanks to their own ability or the effect of a Skill, let alone what Skill in particular they were using.

That meant that it was relatively common for someone thought to have no Skills to actually have some.

That only applied to those who hadn’t undergone a Skill Assessment, however.

“And you had a Skill Assessment?”

“Naturally. After it was done, they told me that I have no Skills and can never learn any.”

So that wasn’t it either.

The only other possibility she could think of...

“So... A blessing?”

“Knowing my brother, he might have one!”

“I can’t deny that... But a blessing alone wouldn’t let him do all that, would it?”

“You’re right...”

Blessings were said to be granted by beings from a higher dimension, such as gods or spirits. The details were unclear, but blessings were said to grant benefits equal to or greater than Skills.

The reason the details were unknown was because there was nothing like a Skill Assessment to ascertain their presence. As the name suggested, Skill Assessments only worked for Skills; they didn’t say anything about blessings.

Blessings were known to exist because there were records of people receiving them directly from gods and spirits, but nobody knew the specifics.

As far as records indicated, they could have effects such as physical strength, magical power, or special resistances, but there was such a wide variety that the specifics were unclear.

In any case, Aina was right that a blessing alone shouldn’t have put someone on par with a Special-Grade user.

“It seems more likely to me that Sierra would have one.”

“Why...?”

“Do you not recall defeating those ghosts?”

“Oh, I see...” mused Aina. “You’re saying that was because she has a blessing.”

“It does seem plausible if elves are the descendants of forest spirits like I’ve heard,” Lina pointed out.

“It’s a secret.”

It definitely seemed plausible, though, so Sierra could see where they were coming from.

The issue with that was that Soma could do the same thing.

“You too, Soma?”

“Wait, do you mean Soma could also be a descendant of... No, you said that was a secret. I hate that I can’t deny the possibility...”

“But that would make me the same thing! I think he must be something different, something greater! So it can’t be true!”

“I can’t tell whether you’re trying to compliment him or what...”

In the end, all they could conclude was that they had no idea.

Despite that, it was certain that Soma could wield a sword as well as or better than a Special-Grade user.

Not only that, he could defeat incorporeal beings with no problem.

Sierra cast a puzzled look toward Soma as he continued to investigate.

She wasn’t sure how...but he defied common sense.

Such was the impression of Soma that the conversation left Sierra with.

13

As he continued down the corridor, Soma nodded to himself.

He'd half-confirmed that his hypothesis was correct.

What he'd noticed was that the movements in the corridors—perhaps transitions—occurred at fixed time intervals and had a certain regularity with respect to where they deposited the party.

It hadn't been hard to notice the time aspect. It had become obvious once he paid attention.

He had thought it had to do with distance at first, but he'd quickly ruled out that possibility. The transition had happened even when they were standing still.

There was a small element of randomness, but it definitely had to do with time.

What was taking him longer was figuring out the rules that governed where they ended up.

He'd decided to rely on something basic to figure it out—landmarks.

All he was doing was leaving small scratches on the walls, but that was enough for him to tell.

Had the walls been able to regenerate automatically, he would have had to think of another way, but these really seemed just to be ruins, not a dungeon.

Thanks to that, he'd figured out one thing: the transitions alternated between two set points. That is, if you were at point A, you would be transported to point B, then the next transition would bring you back to point A.

Strictly speaking, they were more like sections than points. Most likely, each corridor had another corresponding corridor to which Soma's party would be transported each time the transition occurred.

Moreover, the direction they were facing would be reversed. If they were facing north when they transitioned from A to B, then they would be facing

south when they came back to A from B.

The setup made it so that if they didn't notice, they would keep walking down the same corridor forever.

That left him with one problem: he still didn't know what was where.

Which was why...

"Ah... So it was this way."

It had been mere coincidence that he found it.

Since it had taken him some time to figure out the trick, he had considered resorting to destroying the ruins, but just then, they'd happened upon this place.

"Is this... It can't be..."

"It would seem that it *can* be."

"You mean this is the deepest point of the ruins?"

"Looks like it."

This place was distinctly different from where they'd been walking up until now—it was a wide open space, not a corridor.

When they'd turned a corner, expecting to find just another corridor, they'd come upon this large area, about ten meters squared.

It was quite large, but if that had been the only remarkable thing about it, they would have assumed it was just a stopping point.

The thing before their eyes gave them enough reason to think otherwise, however.

"Is that...an altar? And that thing behind it..."

"A black dragon...?"

"So they worshiped a dragon here? But it seems a little... Wait! Dear brother!"

While the three girls seemed somewhat overwhelmed, Soma casually approached the altar. He heard Lina's startled call but paid it no mind.

Indeed, there was an altar-like thing there in front of a statue of a black dragon. He could tell it looked suspicious at a glance, but that was all he knew. It looked like it might contain something, but he would need to get closer to check it out.

Of course, he could only do that because he was confident that if something happened, he could handle it.

Like if that elaborately detailed statue started to move, for example.

Even if it were a real dragon, it couldn't possibly be as strong as the one he had fought in his past life.

Despite his caution, though, nothing happened when he reached the altar.

"Hmm... Frankly, that was a bit of a letdown."

"Come on, you didn't even check with the rest of us before you went up there! What were you gonna do if something happened?!"

"Slash through it as usual."

"I think my brother of all people could actually do that..."

"Mm-hmm. I can picture it."

"You too, Sierra? Well, I guess I can't deny it..."

As they talked, they searched the room, but in the end, they found nothing.

After he finished looking around, Soma stood with a stumped look on his face.

"Hmm... Nothing so far."

"We're not finding anything... Do you have any idea what's here, Sierra?"

"No... I don't know either."

"But you heard that you can gain the ability to use magic by coming here, right?"

"Specifically, I heard that 'that which connects with the pinnacle of mystic power lies dormant.'"

"It was that vague? I assumed you heard it more directly..." Lina commented. "So what gave you the idea that it would enable you to use magic, then?"

“He said that it would grant my wish when I used it. But it’s strange, if I think about it... I’ve never told anyone but Doris my wish.”

“Yes, that certainly sounds strange, or suspicious, rather. But we already knew that.”

“Maybe you should have asked for more information...”

“Sorry...”

“I understand how you would come to the conclusion that it would give you the ability to use magic after hearing that, though.”

After all, magic was said to work by manipulating mystic power. Using a power not of this world—an occultic power that defied the laws of nature and divine will—one could manifest one’s desires.

Anyone who knew that would notice the connection between what Sierra had heard and magic, so it made sense that when she’d been told something in these ruins would grant her wish, she had assumed it would give her the ability to use magic. Soma probably would have thought the same thing.

“You would have had to check it out after hearing that, so it makes sense that... Aina, what have you been doing?”

She hadn’t been participating in the conversation, but he noticed her shooting glances at the pedestal on the altar. As she looked at it from different places and angles, she furrowed her eyebrows.

“I don’t believe there’s anything there.”

“Well, there wasn’t, but I don’t know; something about it bothers me. It feels kind of off... I can’t figure out—huh?”

“Oh...”

To their surprise, when Aina unthinkingly touched the pedestal, it broke.

The pedestal tilted to the side.

“Aina!” Lina exclaimed. “What are you doing...?!”

“I-I didn’t...I didn’t mean to...!”

“Okay, calm down. I thought that Aina broke it at first too, but it seems it was

designed to move.”

“Looks like it.” Sierra lifted the pedestal to reveal an empty space inside.

It looked perfect for hiding something, but nothing was there except for a plate, which had lettering engraved on it.

“Uh... What is that?” Aina asked. “It looks like letters of some kind...”

“I think it’s in ancient hieroglyphics,” Sierra answered.

“That’s what they look like?! I’ve never seen them before...”

“But why would this be here? They used these hieroglyphs centuries ago, right? But the plate itself doesn’t look that old... And what does it even say, anyway?”

“I have no idea...”

“Of course not... Nearly nobody nowadays can read ancient hieroglyph—”

“‘Here lies dormant that which connects to the pinnacle of mystic power,’” Soma read aloud.

“Wait... You can read that?!” Lina exclaimed.

The other two gave him shocked looks too, but he was just as surprised.

This writing system was very familiar to him.

He was gradually forgetting it...but he could never mistake it.

This was the writing system he knew from his past life.

Yet here it was, in this world, and they called it ancient hieroglyphics.

It raised questions for him, but he put them aside for the time being. There were other things to think about right now.

“In any case, this seems to mean that what Sierra heard was the truth. But it looks like something was supposed to be hidden here, so perhaps that means that someone else took it before we got here.”

“You always pull something out of your sleeve...” Aina sighed. “But whatever. More importantly... Sierra, it’s been some time since you heard that, right?”

“Mm-hmm. About a month.”

“In that case, it would make sense if other people heard the same thing and one of them got here before us, I’d say,” Lina concluded.

“That seems likely.”

Such things were common when it came to ruins, dungeons, and the like. It could even have been that the person who told Sierra had passed the information along to her after they found it themself.

It was unfortunate, but the four of them had to accept it.

“Well, let’s look on the bright side,” Soma started. “We know that this is the place we were looking for. If we hadn’t realized that, we could have spent even longer searching.”

“That’s true...” Lina agreed. “We should be grateful to Aina, considering that.”

“It was just a coincidence, so I don’t think it’s worth being happy about...but thanks anyway.”

“Mm-hmm... This is too bad. I have a request, though.”

“Right...”

If there really had been something here, then there was a chance that it also existed somewhere else. That meant that there was still a chance she could gain the ability to use magic.

There was one thing that bothered Soma, however. It had been in the back of his mind for a while now.

This place shouldn’t have been intimidating to Sierra.

It may have had some gimmicks, but it didn’t seem impossible for Sierra to explore on her own by any means.

He didn’t think she was lying. This was just his intuition, so it was possible that he was wrong.

But if he was right...there must have been something here originally that she would have needed help with.

At least, when Sierra first came to this place.

Soma glanced at her. She shook her head slightly, though it was still covered

by her hood.

He took that to mean that she understood but he shouldn’t touch on the subject.

He had no objections. It was true that whatever had been here, it wasn’t anymore.

Pushing her on this was highly likely to be a waste of effort.

He would have been lying if he had said it didn’t bother him, but...

“Let’s start making our way back for now.”

“Yeah...”

“No objections!”

“Mm-hmm.”

For now, they had to get out of the ruins, so Soma’s party left the room.

†

In the now-empty room, a shadowy form appeared.

It was a suspicious figure cloaked in a black robe.

“Hmm, finally some people with promise... Maybe I should have made them break the seal? No... That may have interfered with the plan, so this was our best course of action. It may be a hassle, but we have no choice...for the sake of our lord and our ideals.”

The figure muttered only that, then vanished once again.

14

It was close to the border between the kingdoms of Ladius and Veritas.

A man let out a sigh as he looked ahead at the front lines of the war raging between the two kingdoms, watching the enemy soldiers retreat.

That wasn't a rare sight; battles between the two kingdoms' armies were an everyday event here.

In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it business as usual, as was his somewhat relaxed demeanor.

However...

"What has you eyeing the enemy like that? Don't tell me you're thinking about giving chase," the commander began.

Quickly noticing the other man's half-joking tone, the man turned his gaze back to the enemy soldiers as he replied.

"Well, I was debating what to do."

"Huh? You...you must be joking." For a moment, the commander struggled to get the words out, aware that the man seldom joked.

And that awareness was accurate.

"No, I really was thinking about it. Whether I intended to act on the idea is another story."

"But you were considering it, weren't you? Does something stick out to you? It looks like business as usual to me."

"It looks that way to me too. That's exactly what sticks out to me." The man narrowed his eyes as he surveyed the enemy soldiers.

Indeed, the very fact that things were as usual was the issue.

"Oh, you mean *that*... That certainly is part of the status quo, but nothing's happened, so I don't think there's anything to be concerned about."

"I'm aware that I'm overthinking it."

“Exactly. And because of it, you won’t listen to us no matter how many times we say to visit home for your kids’ birthdays, at least.”

It was true. The man hadn’t been home for three years.

He knew he was putting a heavy burden on his wife and children and had heard what had happened to his son.

But he couldn’t afford to leave this place.

He sensed that the enemy—the Kingdom of Veritas—was plotting something.

“Come on, it’s been three years. I think it’s about time to consider the possibility that they’re bluffing.”

“That’s what you’re doing for us, right? So I’ll just keep an eye out here and be ready for when it happens. It’s all I can do.”

“If that’s all the strongest in the whole world, let alone the kingdom, can do, then what the hell are we? Well, it has helped us a lot, so in hindsight, you may have been right.”

“Yes. I certainly hope I’m just overthinking it.”

Even as he said that, though, he was half convinced that it wouldn’t turn out that way.

It was just intuition, but he knew that the other kingdom wouldn’t let things end like this.

That would not change what he would ultimately do, however.

Once the enemy was fully out of sight, he turned on his heel.

“That’s all for today. Let’s make our way back.”

“Yes, let’s. I’ll accompany you.”

With that, the man—Klaus Neumond, the Elite Swordsman—returned along with the commander to the fortress that was becoming a home to him.

†

“Now, let us... Hmm... Say, what exactly should we cheer to?”

“Well, um... Why not something like, ‘Cheers to exploring the ruins’?”

“Even though we didn’t find what we were looking for?”

“But we made money.”

“Hmm, that is certainly a success from the standpoint of an adventurer...and I don’t have any other ideas, so let’s go with that. Now—”

Cheers to exploring the ruins!

The four would have clinked their glasses together as they exclaimed...if not for one issue.

They couldn’t have reached each other’s glasses, no matter how far they tried to stretch their arms.

The chairs they were sitting in, as well as the table, were meant for adults.

That meant that the length of their arms made it impossible. Their feet didn’t even touch the floor.

If they’d been determined to do it, they could have stood on the chairs...but that was out of the question, considering where they were.

So the four exchanged wry smiles and stopped short, merely raising their glasses.

Then they gulped down the contents and let out sharp exhalations in near unison.

The contents of their glasses, incidentally, were things like milk and water.

Not that there was any law forbidding minors from drinking alcohol in this country. They just couldn’t handle it physically.

Considering that fact, they may have been in the wrong place, but it was too late to worry about that.

“In hindsight, it’s hard to say whether we had good luck or bad luck today.”

“Why? Just looking at the end result, we got lucky, right?”

“It’s a matter of perspective, I’d say.”

“Mm-hmm. It was bad from ours. But good from an adventurer’s.”

“Exactly. We’ll have an easier time going forward thanks to this...and we were already rather well off. Not a bad result.”

Soma looked at the table as he spoke. A veritable feast was laid out on it along with their four glasses.

The quality wasn’t up to feast standards in the eyes of Soma’s party, but it was worthy of being called one, considering the place.

As for why they were having it there, it was because of what they’d just said.

They’d successfully explored the ruins...and they’d earned a lot of money.

Soma’s party had noticed something was off as soon as they’d left the large room.

They’d entered the room with a right turn, yet there had been another right turn in front of them where the corridor should have gone left.

At that point, though, they were used to things like that. It hadn’t been hard to figure out that the transitions would keep happening even while they were in the room.

There had been the option of staying in the room and waiting for it to transport them back, but they’d decided they didn’t have enough time to make it back going the way they came, so they’d gone ahead and turned right.

There, they had discovered another large room.

It hadn’t contained what Soma and Sierra were looking for either, but it was exactly the room an adventurer would have been looking for.

It was a storage room full of treasures like precious metals and gemstones.

The fact that it was completely untouched could have been either lucky or unlucky...but there had been no reason not to take some now that they’d found it.

They’d picked up as much as they could carry, prioritizing the items that looked the most valuable...and then as soon as they left the room, they had

found it.

There was a familiar gate that led to the outside. They had proceeded carefully, wondering if it would be another trap, but there had been no signs of anything happening.

Thus Soma's party had successfully escaped the ruins.

That had marked the end of their expedition to explore the ancient ruins. They'd made their way back to the Lunburg guild, exchanged the treasures they'd brought back for money, and decided to take the opportunity to celebrate.

"It's true, what we made in Jaster was plenty already..."

"There isn't much that we could buy and take with us, anyway."

"Yes, we could be frugal, but ten gold coins should be enough for our normal spending."

Ten gold coins.

That was what they'd received in exchange for the monsters they'd defeated in Jaster and brought with them.

Considering that one gold coin could provide a comfortable lifestyle for a whole family for about three months, ten would be more than enough for their travel expenses.

That meant they wouldn't have to stay in Jaster and work as adventurers anymore.

While they'd targeted relatively strong monsters, they had been easy to defeat, so the three of them had been shocked at first when given the quote...but Doris had no reason to artificially inflate the price, so it was most likely appropriate.

According to what they'd heard, adventuring itself cost a good bit of money. Adventurers had to buy weapons and armor, of course, as well as things like potions.

Those expenses, combined with the fact that the price of monster parts was determined by supply and demand, meant that the cost of doing business was

inevitably high.

After hearing that, Soma's party had bought some potions to take with them, but so far they hadn't been in any situation where they'd needed to use them.

"Right, Soma... You're not buying a sword?" Sierra asked as he was lost in thought.

It was true that they'd made enough money to buy a sword, and he was still using his wooden one. But Soma had no particular intention of getting a new sword.

"Hmm, well, I have no problem with this one. And I'm oddly attached to it now, having made it myself and used it for all this time."

He may not have said that in his past life. Since his sword had been almost an extension of himself, there had been no reason not to use a good one.

But now he was a swordsman and not a swordsman at once. He used a sword, but if he wasn't going down the path of the sword, then he wasn't a swordsman in the proper sense of the word.

So he'd decided to stick with this one until it broke or he needed a new one.

"Yeah, that one actually is all you need..."

"That's my brother for you!"

Incidentally, Aina was wearing her usual cloak and carrying a wooden wand.

But it wasn't like Soma's, a stick he'd picked up and carved into a makeshift sword himself. Aina's wand was a length of high-quality wood worked on by a skilled craftsman.

Her parents had apparently given it to her along with her cloak when they'd found out she had talent for magic, and she'd taken it with her when she ran away.

Speaking of running away, although Lina had followed Soma in the same way, she was well equipped, albeit lightly. She had a proper breastplate and a sharp sword that was the right size for her. Apparently they had been gifts from Sophia.

Because of that, neither of them had any particular need for new equipment.

In that sense, Soma needed it most. He didn't even have any armor. When they first met him, Doris and Sierra had asked if he was crazy because of that.

But the reason he didn't have much equipment was because he didn't need it. It had been that way since his past life. He was far beyond the need for it at this point—he could just slash any attacks away.

When he'd said that, even Lina had given him an incredulous look as well as Aina, but they'd reluctantly agreed once he'd shown them in practice.

All of this meant that Soma's party didn't need much money as adventurers.

"Incidentally, I'm surprised that nobody has said anything to us."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"They see four children doing this, don't they? It wouldn't be strange to intervene in that, given where we are."

He looked around at the seedy scene. On every side of them, muscular men were wolfing down food and beer. There were some women among them, but it was mostly men.

That may have been appropriate, considering the location, but it wasn't the kind of place your average man would want to approach.

They were in the tavern annexed to the adventurer's guild branch in the town of Lunburg, barony of Abend, kingdom of Ladius.

They'd decided it would be too much of a hassle to go somewhere else after they exchanged their treasures for money, and people might have said things to them if they'd gone to another store.

So they'd placed an order here, and while they'd received some glances between then and now, nobody had approached them.

This went against Soma's expectations, since he'd heard that adventurers tended to be crude people.

"It is odd, now that you mention it."

"Yeah... Actually, now that I look around again, they might be *avoiding* us."

“Hmm...”

Soma observed their surroundings again as well. It was true; it seemed like people were deliberately keeping their distance.

Actually, they were looking in the direction of Soma’s party and saying something...

“They’re looking at Sierra and saying something like...white demon?”

“I mean, she is all white because of the robe...but why ‘demon’?”

Naturally, Sierra had her face and body hidden. That wasn’t enough of a reason to call her a demon, though.

Soma thought there must be some reason for it...and Sierra apparently had an idea.

“Maybe because I got hit on last time I came here with Doris...”

“Do you mean you did something then?”

“Nothing much. Just fended him off.”

Even Soma could tell that more had probably happened than she was letting on. If all she’d done was fend the guy off, they wouldn’t be calling her a demon. It had probably been a big scene, especially since Doris had been there too. He could easily picture it.

And Sierra was clearly a kid, even with her face hidden. That meant it had to have been bad enough that they were calling her a demon despite that.

“Hmm... Well, as long as nobody’s bothering us.”

“Yeah.”

To be completely honest, he might have liked something to happen, since he’d expected that sort of thing would come with the territory, but it was good that Aina and the others didn’t have to be involved in a scene.

Just then, someone spoke to them.

“You four... May I have a word with you?”

15

The first thing Soma thought when he turned to look at the person speaking was that he looked shady.

And it was no wonder he thought so, since this person was completely covered in a black robe.

It would have been impossible not to be on guard.

“Are you talking to us...?” Aina asked cautiously.

Lina placed her hand at her hip in case something happened. It made Sierra’s lack of reaction conspicuous in contrast.

“You on the left,” he said to Lina. “Would you mind listening to what I have to say?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that...”

“Hmm, well, I understand you being cautious because I look suspicious, but there’s no need to be, as that young lady understands.”

The person, apparently a man based on his voice, lifted a wrinkled hand from within his robe and presented the palm toward one of them.

As expected, it was Sierra.

“Hmm, so you are acquainted.”

“Mm-hmm. He’s the one who told me about the ruins.”

“Ahh...” Aina nodded in understanding, since this person matched Sierra’s description and seemed like the type to approach her with a fishy story.

Soma felt the same. He wondered why Sierra had even believed what this person had said enough to go look for herself.

“I’m glad you seem to understand. If you all know about the ruins, I take it that you went?”

“Mm-hmm. That’s how we got all this.”

“Well, I would say that I’m glad you made good use of what I told you...but you seem dissatisfied.”

“We found treasure. But the thing I wanted wasn’t there.”

“Ah, it was already taken... I’m sorry about that.” The man dipped his head apologetically, but since his face was still hidden, it was hard to tell whether he was genuinely sorry.

The next thing he said only made that more doubtful.

“So, as an apology, would you like to know about some other ancient ruins? They’re said to contain another thing of the same kind that I told you about before.”

“Hmm, I would be glad to know, but are you sure you should be telling us so readily?” Soma asked. “These last ruins were a big deal just in terms of the money we made.”

“I have to take responsibility for having given you false hope, don’t I? Besides, as you can see, I’m an old man now... Better that someone with a future ahead of them take it than me.”

He told them what he knew about the other ruins, including where they were, and then left.

Once they’d seen him off, Soma’s party conferred.

“I guess that was all he had to say... Wait, what did he even come here for?”

“To tell us about the ruins, I’d say...”

“But he said it was to apologize...”

“Maybe he was just saying that.”

“Hmm... Sierra, what were the circumstances when he told you about the other ruins?”

“I told you about how I got hit on before. It turned into a big scene that bothered other people. He was there when I put a stop to it, and he told me in thanks.”

It made sense as a story, but it also seemed too good to be true. Aina and Lina

apparently sensed that as well.

“With how he looked and all, he seemed really shady...”

“He seemed inscrutable, I’d say. He reminded me of someone important I met at a party once.”

“Yes, I think that feeling we get is correct... We know he lied about one thing, at least.”

“He lied...?”

“Yes. He called himself an old man, but I don’t think he’s really that old.”

“Wait, but his hand...”

“I think that was an illusion of some sort. It seemed slightly off to me. If you didn’t notice, Aina, it must have been something other than magic.”

Soma didn’t know the specifics, of course. All he knew was that it seemed off.

“I’m impressed that you noticed that... Does that mean that he was trying to trick us after all?”

“I don’t know...but we know for sure that he’s hiding something.”

“So what are we gonna do? It’s not like we have to go to the other ruins just because he told us about them.”

“I want to go,” Sierra replied.

It made sense that she would. It was definitely suspicious, but there was the chance that there really would be some mystical item this time, and last time they’d at least found treasure. Of course she couldn’t pass up the opportunity if there was another place like it.

“You don’t want to go back to where Doris is?”

“She said I could go somewhere else if I feel like it when I’m done here.”

Doris had probably been expecting something else, but there was no need to point that out. Sierra intended to go, at least, which just left the other three’s decisions.

And Soma, for one, had no intention of backing out.

“Well, I’m thinking of taking advantage of this opportunity. You and Lina could wait here if you like.”

“So you’re just going to go like it’s nothing...”

“Of course I am.”

The objective of this journey was to find a way to use magic or a clue about how to do so. What reason was there not to go to a place where he could get one of those?

There was none.

“You never change...” Aina sighed. “Well, it’s not like I have anything else I want to do, so I’d just be sitting around bored if I waited for you. I’ll go too.”

“No way I wouldn’t follow my brother!”

Thus, they decided their ruin exploration journey would continue.

It was convenient for them, if anything. They hadn’t known what they were going to do next. There was no point in going back to the first ruins they’d visited, and Sierra had already researched what she could in the area, so there was nothing more to look into.

It was also good for them that Sierra would come with them. Not in any weird sense—just because it was reassuring.

Sierra had been an adventurer for a long time, and she’d already been a lot of help to them, even just during travel.

The three of them were well aware that they didn’t know a lot about the world, so it would be a big help if Sierra would keep journeying with them.

“Glad to have you still with us, then.”

“Mm-hmm. Same here.”

With that, Soma drank once again to their continued travels along with the girl who would accompany his party for a little longer.

16

Sierra Leonhardt was an elf.

The technical name for her race was “forest spirits,” because they were descended from spirits of the forest that had manifested their souls in physical form.

In other words, Sierra literally had the blood of forest spirits flowing through her veins.

But to be honest, she’d never felt like it.

She couldn’t use a single one of the spells that all the other elves could use as easily as moving a limb.

In their own sacred homeland, elves’ power became equal to that of the forest spirits. Even someone with only a Low-Grade Skill would have the same strength as High Grade.

That was the reason elves could maintain a neutral position among the other races despite being few in number.

And the fact that their power increased in their sacred lands was proof that they were descended from the spirits of the forest.

At least, that was what the elves said among themselves, and experiencing it for oneself formed the basis of one’s identity as an elf.

But Sierra, being unable to use magic, had no power to increase.

Her talent for the sword was equivalent to an ordinary elf’s talent for magic, but it didn’t increase.

That meant she couldn’t directly experience the power of the elven lands.

The thing that weighed on Sierra the most, however, was how much consideration the other gave her.

Sierra didn’t want that. She almost wished they had ostracized her instead.

Elves were insular but always tolerant and generous toward their own kind.

With one exception, it was common sense to them to lend a hand to a friend in need.

That meant that daily life for Sierra was synonymous with receiving help from those around her.

Another way to put it would be that daily life would have been difficult for her without help.

Because elves could wield immense power in their own country, they'd turned it into a comfortable place for themselves.

At designated places, they could summon water or fire using very little mana, and they were even capable of pseudo-teleportation at times.

None of their daily tasks were inconvenient, and they could get exactly what they wanted. That was something all elves could enjoy.

Except for one of them.

For Sierra alone, their country was full of inconveniences.

If she wanted water, she had to go fetch it from a stream several kilometers away, and if she wanted fire, she had to start it from tinder herself.

She had no way of getting around other than walking, which was inconvenient in their forest country.

That was because the majority of their houses were built in the treetops.

The other elves typically flew everywhere even when they didn't use teleportation.

It wasn't uncommon that places were impossible for her to get to at all.

Due to those circumstances, Sierra had no choice but to ask other elves for help.

Whoever she asked, whenever it was, they were happy to accept her requests...and Sierra hated it.

After all, she couldn't do anything for them in return.

Not even for *her*, the person who was so concerned for Sierra.

However good she was at using her sword, there was no point if she had no chances to use it.

Nobody was dumb enough to approach the elves' forest, not even monsters, and if someone did, an elf could easily chase them away with magic.

Sierra hated that one-sided relationship in which she had no choice but to receive favors, even more so because she knew the others considered it a fair and equal relationship.

Sierra herself considered the others friends...so she'd left to learn magic any way she could. Then she could call them friends in the true sense.

If only she could use magic, she could do something to help *her*, Sierra thought.

So she'd asked Doris, who'd come to the elves' forest on business, for help, although she'd gotten the sense that the other woman thought of it as taking Sierra in.

To Sierra, who had never been beyond the forest before, the outside world was one surprise after another.

The first shock was that it was no trouble to go about one's daily tasks without magic. The first time she'd seen a well, she had seriously considered building one in the forest.

Doris had told her about the majority of those unfamiliar aspects of life outside the elves' forest, so as far as Sierra was concerned, Doris had done a lot for her.

What was different about Sierra's life now, though, was that she could do things like fetch water from the well.

She still remembered how it had felt to drink the first water she'd fetched all by herself.

But even so, life with Doris was no different from life among the elves in that all Sierra did was accept favors from her.

She'd become an adventurer alongside Doris, but there were few things that warranted Sierra using her sword, and Doris was a skilled adventurer in her own

right.

Doris had told her she was a big help, but Sierra felt the opposite was true.

So in the end, she hadn't been able to do even one thing...

"I see... So if we just raise our rank, our guild cards will function as personal identification," said Soma.

"Mm-hmm. Full-fledged adventurers count as citizens."

"But ranking up takes years, right?" Lina asked. "It's not easy for adventurers."

"You say that as if we're not adventurers ourselves... Not that I disagree—it isn't easy."

"Mm-hmm. But it has to be that way."

"Right, because anyone can become one. Considering that, the chance to become a citizen with a few years of hard work actually makes it worthwhile. I originally thought that would be impossible."

"It's because adventurers accomplished a lot long ago."

"Wow, the adventurers back then must have worked hard too, I'd say..."

Sierra averted her eyes from the three others, who were listening to her intently. They shouldn't have been able to see her face, since she was still wearing her hood...but she couldn't stand to look.

Her gaze fell on the wooden wall that she'd been seeing for the past several days. It was part of their carriage.

They were traveling toward Triam, the southernmost town in the barony of Abend.

But that was just where the carriage was headed currently, not their final destination.

The party's objective was beyond there. They were going to Viotto in the barony of Jodl.

That was the closest town to the next ruins that the strange man had told them about.

The ruins apparently weren't even in the same territory, much less near the town, but that was natural in a sense considering how rare ruins were.

"There really is a lot we don't know about adventurers," Soma commented.

"Well, I think it's partially because we didn't look into it much, since we didn't set out to live as adventurers...but you'd think Doris would have explained more to us."

"Mm-hmm. Doris is nosy...but also lazy."

"Oh... This may be rude, but I think I understand."

"That does make sense, oddly."

Doris was nosy enough that she would take the initiative to do something if only she could do it, but if someone else could do it, she was lazy enough that she would leave it up to that person and do nothing herself.

Those two contradictory qualities coexisted in Doris.

"Well, anyway, it's good to have you to tell us things, Sierra," Aina commented. "It might come in handy."

"Yes, thank you. This was very interesting."

"I thought so too. Thank you very much."

"It's nothing... I was just bored."

It was the truth. It had taken a week to get to Lunburg, and a few more days had already passed since then, so they were running out of conversation topics. That was what had led to the three of them asking her to tell them about adventurers, since they had the time.

"I learned it all from Doris, anyway."

"Yet you're the one telling us."

As the others continued to thank her, Sierra's expression became even more distant. She wasn't sure how to take this.

She'd always been in a position where others were doing things for her, teaching her about things. This was her first time teaching someone about anything, and her first time receiving thanks.

Of course she had no idea what to do.

This feeling welling up in her chest, too, was unfamiliar.

But she knew what to call it, of course.

For the first time, she understood just how happy it could make one feel to do something for someone and receive thanks for it.

She had another thought at the same time.

This was probably how the other elves had felt when teaching her things.

And the same probably went for *her*.

Just learning that had made her flight from the forest meaningful, Sierra thought as she returned her gaze to the other three, then smiled.

17

Why? she thought.

Why... Why, why, why...

“Why...?!”

“Might you be addressing me?”

Who else would I be talking to?

There’s no other reason—

“If you are, you have the wrong idea. You were the one who said you wanted to kill them, weren’t you?”

“W-Well, I...”

He was right. She had said that.

But it had been nothing more than a drunken outburst, a careless remark that she’d meant seriously for a moment that had then passed.

“It’s a little late to be saying that...and it doesn’t matter to me, anyway. If that were the case, you could simply have chosen not to come. I told you I would help you, and you accepted that and came here. Then you helped me as you said you would, so I granted your wish. That’s all it was.”

She’d come here because she’d heard about some ruins. That was all.

She hadn’t thought he would take what she said at face value. All she’d thought was that his information sounded like something worth knowing.

And all she’d done to help him was explore the ruins...

“Well, my work here is done. I have things to do, so I’d better be off to the next. You can do as you wish.”

“Yeah... You’re right. I’m gonna do as I wish...whether you like it or not!”

As she yelled, she dove forward, clutching the sword—

“Gh... Agh...?!”

“Don’t push it. I need him to tell the story. Well, maybe one less person wouldn’t be a problem, but we can’t be sure all of them will do a good job of telling it. Hmph... I see. Good. I’ll be on my way, then. So this makes half... My, I have a long way to go.”

“Damn it... Wait...!”

Her body had been slammed against the wall. She tried to reach out, but she couldn’t...and just like that, they left.

†

When Soma’s party had reached Triam, they’d immediately looked for another carriage and gotten on it.

They hadn’t been especially tired, since they’d been in a carriage the whole journey, and it would still be some time before they reached their destination.

There was no reason to hurry, but nobody objected either, so off the carriage rattled again.

In the end, they’d only spent about ten minutes in Triam before leaving.

As for why they’d switched carriages, there were different carriages for traveling inside a territory and between territories.

Carriages didn’t show up at scheduled times. One just ordered them to head toward a designated location. It would cause trouble if the carriage crossed a border without permission, thus the rule.

It was Sierra who had told them that. The others hadn’t even known how to find and board a carriage.

“This is, how do I put it...quite the unique building.”

“Just call it run down... And are we even sure this is gonna be okay?”

“Mm-hmm... I hope.”

“You *hope*?!”

After they’d reached the barony of Jodl, it had been another week in the carriage. They’d decided they needed a break, so they’d rested in the town they stopped in, Viotto, before setting out again early the next morning.

Now they were finally standing before the ruins, having a hesitant exchange as they looked at them.

While these ruins had a barrier similar to that of the ruins they'd previously visited, the first one had been well-made, if antiquated.

These were, frankly, run down, as Aina had put it.

Not only that...

"It's a tower, of all things..."

"I feel like the walls are going to fall apart...or maybe the ground."

"It won't if we're lucky..."

"All we can do is hope it won't."

They were just judging by looks. It was possible that the ruins weren't quite as unsafe as they appeared.

Even still, the barrier looked like it could crumble at any second, so deep down, they didn't want to step inside if they could help it.

"Talking will get us nowhere. Let's head inside."

"Yeah... We can decide what to do after that."

"No objections."

"Understood... I'll prepare myself."

They fearfully proceeded into the tower-shaped building.

A quick walk around proved that it wasn't very spacious. It had only half as much room as the first ruins.

If there were no weird gimmicks like there had been the first time, it shouldn't take much time to look around.

The problem would be the vertical rather than the horizontal distance. The ruins stretched up quite high, as one would expect of a tower.

They couldn't tell exactly how tall it was by looking, but it certainly wasn't just two or three levels. There had to be five at the very least.

That confirmed that the tower had more space inside than the first ruins...but

they'd already known these were no normal ruins.

Steeling themselves, they stepped inside.

"This can't be...!"

"You say that like there's some big surprise, but it's just pitch black in here..."

"We are in an old tower, after all... Maybe there were lamps a long time ago, but it's only natural that it would be dark inside now."

"Mm-hmm. But we can't explore like this."

"Hmm, I could have sworn we brought a lantern..."

"Oh, don't worry, I can handle that. O, light."

As soon as Aina spoke the words, light shone into the area around them. She'd used an illumination spell. A ball of light about the size of a fist floated above their heads, lighting their surroundings.

"Ngh..."

"What's the groan for? Do you see something weird?"

"I just envy how casually you can use magic."

"Mm-hmm. Same here."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do about that..."

"You can prostrate yourself in apology."

"Lina...?!"

As they exchanged such jokes...

"You were joking, right, Lina?! You had a straight face..."

They surveyed the place, but there was nothing of note, as one would expect from the very entrance.

The light didn't reach to the back, but surveying the immediate surroundings would be enough for the moment.

The corridor was about five meters across and three meters tall, and it continued farther into the tower. It was made of stone, just as the exterior was.

The only difference was that it looked less suspect than the exterior.

“Hmm... Well, it doesn’t look like the ground will crumble or the walls will fall over right away, but we still need to be careful.”

He gave the wall a light knock. It didn’t crack, but the way it felt was frankly frightening. He wasn’t going to try, but it seemed like it would be easy to crack it if he put a little force into it with his wooden sword. They would need to be careful while walking around, or while fighting, in the event that they had to do that.

That meant offensive magic would be off-limits for Aina. As a Special-Grade mage, Aina’s magic could easily affect her surroundings. They were bound to end up buried in rubble if she used it here.

“Yeah, I know. I’m not careless enough to use magic in a place like this.”

“Hmm... That works out in our favor, though, I must say.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s a good thing.”

“Huh...? Why?”

“Well, if you used very many spells, there would be the risk of my hand slipping out of envy.”

“Watch out.”

“What? Why?!”

“Hmm, but wait... If I think about it, this light is magic just the same... Sorry, Aina, but my hand may slip a little. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Same here.”

“What’s your deal?! And of course I mind!”

“I feel a little left out... Should I be swinging my sword at Aina too?”

“Please don’t! And why do you keep talking to me like that, Lina?!”

“I’m joking, obviously. I’ve just discovered as of late that it’s fun to tease you, so I’m playing off the others.”

“Lina?!”

As they played out the roles they so easily fell into when conversing, they finished their survey of the surroundings.

For the time being, it looked like they would proceed despite their apprehension.

“So we’re going in, then?”

“Mm-hmm. We can’t afford not to if it might lead us to a way to use magic.”

“As she said.”

“And I have to stick by my brother!”

“Yeah, no objections here either.”

What awaited them ahead?

Soma had a bad feeling about it, but it wasn’t an option not to keep going.

If there was a path to their objective beyond the hardships, then he would just have to clear whatever lay in their way.

Eyes fixed on the darkness ahead, Soma continued farther into the tower.

18

There were two major types of ancient ruins: those that were merely old, and those that had some kind of magical gimmick.

The former requires no further explanation, but in the case of the latter, the word “magical” was often used in the sense that the mechanism behind the gimmick was not understood. The ruins that Sierra’s party had explored before were an example of the latter type—traps aside, it would have been difficult to analyze the spatial warping mechanism, even if they had discovered the device that caused it, which probably existed somewhere.

Incidentally, dungeons were also technically classified as ancient ruins in that sense, although they were typically treated as a separate category. They were too complex in multiple ways to be called ancient ruins. Including them in the category of “ruins” would broaden its scope too much.

As for what was considered ancient, the cutoff was about five hundred years before the present. That was approximately when the latter type was said to have been the most prevalent. The former type was only included in the category of “ancient ruins” by extension.

Both researchers and adventurers typically neglected ruins of the former type, because exploring them yielded little of value.

With the latter type, it was common to find treasure inside, and if one was lucky enough to discover the workings of the magical mechanism, one could make a killing, since there were countless researchers who poured large sums of money into researching these unknown phenomena.

Both types, however, were dangerous, since most had monsters inside.

Like this tower did.

“One stroke, one slice.”

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mental Concentration *Quick Draw* Mind’s Eye: One Stroke, One Slice

As soon as the thing entered her view out of the darkness, Sierra slashed at it.

Its head was instantly separated from its torso, but she didn't stop there. She swung her arm back the other way.

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mental Concentration / Combo: Bilunar Blade

Sierra swung her right arm, which held her sword...then bit her lip, realizing that the attack hadn't cut deep enough.

She hopped backward to dodge the enemy's clumsy swing, giving Lina room to step in front of her. As the other girl stepped forward, she sliced its torso in two, then followed up with a slash in the shape of a cross.

The enemy showed no sign of movement anymore, seeing as it was scattered in pieces on the ground.

"Thanks."

"I thought it might be unnecessary, but I'm glad if it helped. I've been thinking, though... These enemies seem kind of tough."

"It doesn't look that way from the sidelines... Wait, now that I think about it, you were defeating the monsters on the way here in one or two hits, so I guess these are taking you more effort."

Needless to reiterate, one ran the risk of encountering monsters almost everywhere except for in towns. That included while traveling in a carriage, as well as inside ruins such as these.

Because of that, they knew each other's strength to an extent, and as Aina had said, the majority of the monsters they'd encountered so far had gone down in one hit each, two at most.

This last one, though, had taken four hits in total.

Lina's last attack had probably been just for good measure, but even still...

"Mm-hmm... They look like regular skeletons, but they must be especially

strong ones.”

Skeletons.

They were often treated as the representative example of an undead monster, since it was easy to tell that they were undead by looking at them. The one they’d just fought was now lying in a pile of bones on the floor as if to illustrate that.

Just based on that, it looked like a regular skeleton...but they didn’t simply conclude that was what it was, since it had been so tough.

While skeletons were monsters, they were as physically fragile as they looked. The catch was that since they were undead, they wouldn’t die when decapitated. To kill them, one had to either destroy the core that was somewhere in their body or cut them into enough pieces.

One attack from Sierra should have taken down a regular skeleton, if not broken its core. Since that hadn’t happened, it meant this was no ordinary skeleton.

“Its movements definitely seemed a bit quick...but I’ve never fought a regular skeleton, so I can’t say for sure.”

“I don’t know how it compares to the typical skeleton, but it was certainly stronger than the monsters we’ve fought so far.”

“That’s probably true, but it’s not very convincing coming from you.”

“Agreed.”

“Why is that?”

Soma didn’t appear to be struggling at all was why. He had defeated each skeleton in one hit, as he had every other monster he’d fought so far. That meant it wasn’t very persuasive when he said they were tough.

Maybe that was even more reason to believe it if Soma of all people said so, however.

“I guess that means we should be cautious going forward...not that we didn’t know that already.”

“Exactly. The fact that we haven’t seen anything so far makes me even more suspicious.”

Lina meant that exactly as she said it. They had been attacked by monsters periodically, but all of them had been skeletons (?) like the one they’d just fought, which weren’t hard to beat despite being a bit tougher than normal. Nothing had happened other than that.

They’d been in the tower for nearly an hour. They’d found and climbed two staircases leading up, but there were no signs of any gimmick here, despite their caution.

Yes, in other words, these ruins appeared to be nothing more than old.

That diminished the credibility of what the strange man said.

It wasn’t that there were never gimmicks of that sort hidden in ruins that were just old, but typically they were protected by magical mechanisms.

If there weren’t any, that certainly made it easier...but it also made it feel more ominous.

There was one other thing that stuck out to Sierra about this place, actually.

She’d noticed the same thing about the last ruins they’d been to...and if the two places were connected, she couldn’t chalk it up to a coincidence.

When they’d reached the large room at the end of exploring the last ruins...

There had been a black dragon.

That had been on Sierra’s mind.

Black dragons were symbols of bad luck to elves due to events long ago and lore that had been passed down to this day.

According to the legend, black dragons would appear as harbingers of doom. It was said that at that time, a girl would descend to save the elves.

Irrespective of the fact that it wasn’t certain whether that prophecy was true, black dragons had in fact wrought havoc on this world in the past.

Having heard the stories from a young age, she couldn’t help being conscious of it.

It must have been a coincidence, though. This place was too far from the elves' forest.

For one thing, it was nothing but a statue, and there must have been more than a few places where dragons were worshipped. The color just happened to be the same.

Regardless, this place definitely required caution.

"Let's assume something is there as we go."

"That would be safest, yes."

They proceeded ahead, but still, nothing much changed about the scenery.

By the light of Aina's spell, they saw a stone corridor that curved slightly to the right.

This tower was apparently set up so that one would loop around the interior, then go around the outside. That was how it had been on the last two floors, so they expected it to be the same on this one.

Soma had been the one to notice that, though.

"Right, Soma... Have you been to ruins before?"

"Hmm? Why do you ask?"

"You may not have adventuring know-how...but you seemed used to exploring ruins."

"I see... Well, as I mentioned while we were in the carriage, I've been to a number of places before coming to Jaster. Some of those were ruins. I wouldn't say I explored them, however, because I encountered few, if any monsters."

"There was one place...no, maybe two places that were kind of like ruins, right?"

"Ah, I remember that, now that you mention it... But that was..."

"What do you mean?"

"You mean the place where the bandits lived with the teleporter in the back, right?"

The other three went on to tell Sierra that they'd once been teleported from one set of ruins to another. They'd realized they were in a different place because the location was familiar to them—they'd explored the very same ruins before.

"It was a big surprise when we walked out and it really was the same place from before..."

"The teleporter was either one-way or broken, so we couldn't go back the other way. We ended up wasting a lot of time."

"That really was a pain..."

Sierra had heard that such things happened on occasion, but mostly by accident. Sometimes people would make a wrong move or go overboard in ruins with a spatial gimmick and end up being thrown somewhere else, for example.

This teleporter apparently connected two sets of ruins, though, which was likely intentional.

"I see..."

Sierra nodded because she'd understood what they'd told her, of course...but it also left her with even more questions.

She didn't understand where the obvious skill gap between the other three came from.

Soma clearly had some sort of experience, as she could tell by the fact that he'd been the first to grasp the layout of this tower. She didn't think it was just knowledge; she could tell he was speaking from experience. Book knowledge alone wouldn't allow him to speak with such weight.

Sierra was certainly on top in terms of experience as an adventurer, as well as knowledge. But even from her perspective, Soma clearly had more experience in a number of ways.

She didn't sense the same from Aina and Lina, though, and they should have had the same experiences he had.

She puzzled over it, not coming any closer to an answer.

“Well, it looks like I should be able to handle things by myself for the time being. We should be careful, though.”

“Mm-hmm.”

She nodded without any question at his sudden statement; she was used to it now. Soma didn’t use any more words than he needed to, either, since he understood that.

Immediately after, Soma lowered himself slightly and dove into the darkness. At the same time, a monster of bone appeared from the other side of the corridor.

One flash.

Paying no mind to the monster he’d just sliced in half, he turned to look farther into the darkness and swung again.

The one that had leapt out from the depths was sliced in two, making four pieces in total...no, there were countless pieces scattered on the ground.

Soma glanced at them just to make sure they weren’t moving anymore, then let out a small sigh. “They aren’t any stronger or weaker, but they seem to be appearing more and more frequently.”

“You’re right. We barely came across any at first.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine how there could be more of them the farther in we go, but that tells us there’s something here, so I guess it’s not all bad.”

Sierra sighed too, watching the others converse as normal.

That meant that they weren’t at all surprised by what Soma was doing.

He’d noticed the monsters approaching before anyone else and sliced them cleanly in half in a combo attack. That in itself was worthy of surprise.

The other two were accepting it as if it were ordinary...and Sierra’s sigh had mainly been because she realized that she too was getting used to it and barely felt surprised anymore.

Suddenly, something the other two had said came to mind—that they couldn’t afford to be bothered by each and every absurd thing Soma did, since

common sense didn’t apply to him.

At the time, she’d thought it was an exaggeration, but now she thought they may even have been understating it.

It made him useful to have around...but what was he, exactly?

Sierra let out another small sigh as she followed behind Soma, who had resumed exploring.

19

As they proceeded farther into the ruins, Soma's party naturally began speaking less.

It was partially because monsters had begun attacking more often...but mostly, it was something they felt in their bones.

Something no good was waiting for them inside.

And that sense came to a peak when they saw the fourth staircase.

"All right... We'll have to go up there now. Is everyone ready?"

"Absolutely!"

"Mm-hmm."

"Not like there's anything more we can do at this point..."

"That's true. I just wanted to make sure. And honestly, I didn't expect you to be so composed, Aina."

"What's that supposed to mean? I've been traveling with you all this time, haven't I? I'm used to it...not to mention that whatever happens, it should work out with you around."

"In other words, you feel safe because he's here?"

"I never said that! But, well...you're not wrong."

"Quite the large responsibility."

"Mm-hmm."

A slight smile came across Soma's face as they chatted.

In all likelihood, Soma would have fared just fine on his own against whatever awaited them.

The fact that he could sense its power from a distance meant that he could make an educated guess about it. It was definitely weaker than Albert, at least, so it shouldn't be a problem.

If there was any problem, it was that he didn't know how he would fare with Aina and Lina alongside him. They may have been extremely talented, but they sorely lacked experience. It was a possibility that they could slip up and leave an opening, even against an opponent weaker than themselves.

If they understood that fact and weren't discouraged by it, though, everything would work out. Even if worst came to worst, Soma could figure something out, and it would be a learning experience.

After one last check, Soma's party began to climb the staircase.

It was no different from the ones they'd climbed before...but that only lasted until they took the final step.

As soon as they stepped out, they saw an entirely different scene.

"Hmm... I did expect this, I must say."

"Yeah, I figured..."

"Mm-hmm. It was about time, with how far we walked."

"We're finally here."

The four weren't looking at a stone ceiling.

It wasn't lit by Aina's spell but by another light—the sun.

They'd made it to the top of the tower.

"And I expected to see *that* as well."

"Mm-hmm... A black dragon... I thought so."

It was a wide-open space with no unnecessary walls. In front of them sat a familiar altar, with a likewise familiar statue of a black dragon behind it.

It was the same as the other ruins.

That wasn't strange, though, if the man had been telling the truth. Soma had actually been expecting this, and so had the others.

So they weren't very surprised...but nobody approached the altar, knowing there was probably something there.

"This is fine and all, but...what else is there?"

“There’s no way this is all...”

Aina and Lina in particular were even strangely nervous...but it was clear what was making them feel that way.

As they’d noted, there was nothing here besides the altar and the statue.

Yet they still felt the bone-chilling sensation.

Soma let out a small sigh as he watched the two survey the area cautiously. He noticed Sierra giving them a seemingly exasperated look as well, although her face was hidden by her hood.

The reason was simple. They may have been alert and cautious...but they were overlooking the one place that required the most caution here.

“I understand why it’s hard to notice, since we’ve been fine up until this point...”

“Mm-hmm... But you have to realize... If you overlook this because of your preconceptions, then you need to be more careful.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“What preconceptions?”

“It’s simple.”

“She means to say... In an open space like this, what direction would be the worst for us to be attacked from?”

“Which direction would be...”

“...the worst to be attacked from?”

“Oh—” the two exclaimed almost in unison as they turned to look the same way.

Straight up.

At the same time, the thing appeared as if it had been waiting for that moment.

It fell from the sky, then slammed into the ground.

No, it wasn’t just one thing—it was tens, maybe hundreds of things, all

connected to form one object.

First, two legs. Then a pelvis, then a rib cage, then two arms. And finally, a head.

The individual bones were all at least half as tall as each of the children, if not equal in height.

Yes...it all came together in the form of a gigantic skeleton.

“Hmm... I certainly didn’t expect this.”

“Me neither...and I don’t think it’s a monster.”

“Probably not.”

Its immense size was an issue, but the biggest problem was how it had made its appearance. No monster would do such an unnecessary thing. It would make more sense if a person had a hand in this. That made it more likely that this was some kind of living weapon rather than a monster.

It was absurd to think of a skeleton as a living weapon, but it was an unavoidable oxymoron.

In any case, it made sense now that there had been no gimmick in these ruins. This itself was the gimmick, and it would do the job just fine on its own.

“Well, it is a rather dumb gimmick...”

“But you see this often in ruins.”

“They do say genius and stupidity are a hair apart...”

Apparently that never changed across worlds and eras.

“H-Hey...!”

“Yes, Aina? What has you so panicked?”

“Why wouldn’t I be panicked after that thing showed up?! How are you so calm?!”

“Well, we knew what was going to show up. It’s just bigger than we expected.”

“Mm-hmm. These are common.”

“Ancient ruins are scary, but I’m impressed you figured it out...!”

“Well, it’s certainly large, but that’s all it is.”

It was very imposing, to be sure, but that also meant it was a larger target. Soma, for one, saw its size as nothing but a weakness.

“Looking at you makes me feel like I’m dumb for freaking out,” Aina said with a sigh.

“I’m glad that you seem calmer now.”

He’d also experienced this kind of thing before.

It was definitely big...but after his last fight in his past life, he felt like he could handle most things.

Aina and Lina would come to feel the same in time.

“I’d say not to lump me in with you, but...Sierra seems calm too.”

“Mm-hmm. I’ve seen a lot.”

“That probably means doing a lot of hard work over and over...but if that’s what it takes to reach my brother’s level, I’ll just have to prepare myself. Actually, I’ve been prepared for a long time!”

“Yeah... That makes sense.”

“Well, you all seem to be back to normal now...but it’s going to start moving.”

Its head slowly tilted down with a creak.

They could tell it was looking at them...and then its arm immediately started to move.

At almost the same moment, Soma kicked off the ground to intercept it.

20

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) *Blessing of the Forest Spirits* Mental Concentration *Quick Draw* Mind’s Eye: One Stroke, One Slice

While Soma jumped in front of the enemy to block its initial attack, Sierra approached it to slash its leg. Right away, she realized it felt strange to cut.

It felt oddly soft—more like cutting into a ghost, contrary to its appearance. The apparent lack of substance, or the fact that it seemed to give no resistance to being cut, added to that feeling.

It was good if it was easily cuttable, though. That would mean it really was just big, nothing to worry about.

Naturally, however, things didn’t go so easily.

Sierra realized that immediately after.

It hadn’t seemed to be in any pain after she’d slashed its leg, so she reasoned that she would have to do the same thing many times to hinder its movement...when she noticed that the cut she’d just made had already vanished.

Then...

“It keeps happening every time.”

“So each attack that we make heals within moments...and we can’t attack fast enough to outspeed its recovery time.”

“It’s too big for that.”

“That it is...”

They didn’t ease up on the attacks even as they conversed.

Soma was focusing on blocking the enemy’s attacks, while Sierra was trying to figure out some strategy to gain the upper hand.

Up to this point, all of their attacks had been healing instantly, as they’d just

discussed.

She didn’t think it would be impossible for them to win, however. There was no way it had infinite, unconditional recovery—it had to be consuming energy at the very least.

If they continued, they would eventually push it to a point where it could no longer recover.

Aina and Lina were acting on the same assumption.

Aina in particular had been restraining her magic out of concern that the tower would collapse, but there was no need to worry about that here.

Especially since there was a gigantic target above her.

“Flame Bullet!”

Aina shot off a magical attack that exploded part of the skeleton’s body, scattering it in pieces.

Those pieces didn’t reach them below, however. They somehow vanished in midair.

That was helpful since it meant they didn’t have to worry about falling objects...but it was another point of concern.

In any case, it was healing automatically either way. The magical attacks were probably wearing it down more than simply cutting it, considering the attack range, but...

“I’m starting to feel like I’m practicing magic more than fighting a battle...”

“I understand. We don’t have to worry about its attacks since we have my brother to block them, so it does feel like I’m practicing attacks on a huge target.”

Soma was most likely working to give her that opening. Knowing him, it should have been easy for him to attack while blocking the enemy, but he didn’t seem to be doing so. He was completely focused on defending, probably so the two could gain some experience attacking.

Soma had done such things periodically in the past. He must have seen this as

a good opportunity.

And Sierra felt the same. Aina and Lina were talented, but they clearly lacked experience. That was normal, considering their ages...but if they were going on a journey, they could never get too much experience.

Especially considering what was to come.

They had to gain experience whenever they could, and this was a good time for that. They wouldn't have many chances to fight enemies like this, and Soma was able to prevent any danger to them.

Having attacks blocked for them meant they would only be able to gain so much experience, but they could raise the bar when the time came.

Sierra understood and agreed, so she wasn't being too aggressive either. She was looking for a strategy, although she could have done so more efficiently if she'd put her mind to it. She wasn't doing that because she was cooperating with Soma...but that wasn't the only reason.

There was one other thing that she couldn't help but be bothered by—the enemy's movements.

They were far too simple. Its only attack was to swing its arms.

It could have been that that was all it could do because of its size...but even so, she felt like there must have been something more it could do.

It was barely using its legs either. It would lift one leg to mimic stepping forward with the attack, but that was the only time it moved its legs. The impact shook the ground, which was slightly annoying when it came to moving around but not enough to be a hindrance.

It would have been more effective for the skeleton to move around a bit more. The area was huge, so there were multiple ways it could have gone about protecting the altar.

She was watching it closely, thinking there must have been some reason it didn't move more...which resulted in her own movements being more reserved.

Soma suddenly spoke up as he deflected the skeleton's attacks. "Hmm... I believe I have an idea of what it's trying to do."

Sierra turned an amazed look to him. “Huh...?”

It stood to reason that if Sierra had sensed it, Soma would also be aware...but he hadn’t shown any signs of observing it closely.

But Sierra corrected herself; she’d just had the thought herself that he would be able to attack and defend at the same time if he wanted to.

She’d thought he was holding back for Aina and Lina’s sake...but it made sense if he was also trying to observe the enemy.

Regardless, it came as a surprise.

“What it’s trying to do? You mean it has a plan? It just looks like it’s attacking over and over to me...”

“It looks the same way to me... Is it doing something?”

“Here’s a question for you, Aina. What would happen if you aimed a spell directly at the ground?”

“I mean, nothing would happen, I think... Well, I guess I’d be kind of scared, since this place is worn down...”

Sierra nodded in agreement as she added an attack of her own. The floor here was just as worn down as the floor they’d been walking on through the rest of the tower, but one or two magical attacks shouldn’t do anything to it.

But she couldn’t say what would happen if the attacks kept coming...

“Do you mean...”

“Wait, what’d you figure out, Sierra?”

“Is it actually doing something? But what could it be...?”

“I’ll get to the point, since it seems we won’t have much time. It’s using its legs to accomplish its goal. The attacks are to keep us from getting too close.”

“Its legs...? But all it’s doing is picking them up and putting them down.”

“That would be the end of it for us...but it’s big and heavy. What happens if it keeps doing that? This place is run down.”

“Wait, do you mean...it’s trying to step through the floor?! But that would...”

“No, it’s trying to go a step farther than that. This entire tower is fragile, not just the floor here. If you look closely, you can see each of its steps shaking the whole building.”

In other words, its goal was to destroy the tower itself.

Sierra was taken aback by the absurd idea, but she tried stepping away from the enemy. Indeed, it stopped attacking and made no attempt to chase her. It just kept stomping on the ground, and she could feel the impacts reverberating through the entire tower.

“I wanna say ‘no way,’ but I know you’re right... Why is it trying to do that, though? If it wants to destroy the tower, can’t it just go wild and break everything?”

“I thought it was here to protect the altar.”

“I believe the only reason it isn’t wildly breaking things is because it can’t destroy the entire tower that way. This place is probably designed to break if it takes repeated impacts here. As for why it wants to destroy the tower, it’s probably to protect the altar. More specifically, whoever set this up decided it would be preferable to destroy everything rather than let anyone take the item.”

“What the heck...? That’s so dumb! It’s annoying and it doesn’t even protect the altar!”

“It is common with ancient ruins...”

“The ancients must have been dumb, then...”

It really was common enough that they couldn’t deny that.

When it came to ancient ruins designed to protect something, there were some that protected it directly and others that protected it by roundabout means. These ruins were likely the latter disguised as the former.

Considering that alone, this tower was rather well-designed. Anyone who saw it would try to defeat the skeleton, but the tower would be destroyed in the meantime. It was quite an effective design if the goal was to prevent the object from being taken.

“I wonder what they would go so far to protect.”

“I had my doubts, but it looks increasingly likely that it’s something significant.”

“That’s all well and good, but what are we going to do? We can’t stop it, right? I don’t think we can destroy its legs even if we go all out.”

“Could we go up to the altar and look for the thing before the tower falls apart?”

“It’s hard to imagine it’s empty, given the excessive security. But I would assume we have to do something about the skeleton first.”

“Agreed.”

That was how ancient ruins worked. You had to conquer the gimmick to obtain the prize.

Sierra got the sense that Soma could have managed anyway, though, depending on what the gimmick was...

“Well, this will be a waste of a perfectly good training opportunity, but I suppose I have no choice.”

Soma approached the skeleton on his own. The others took a second to react, since he acted so casual about it.

“Wait! What are you doing?!”

“It should be obvious. I get the feeling that it would be possible to find a proper solution, but in any case, we don’t have time to look for it.”

The skeleton resumed attacking as Soma approached it. When it simultaneously stepped down with its foot and swung both its arms at him—

“Flash.”

There was a soft murmur and a single flash of his sword.

No...it was something else that *looked* like that, because the skeleton’s movement immediately stopped.

Soma paid it no mind as he kept walking, eventually reaching its feet, then continuing past them.

The skeleton started to move again as if it had remembered to—when its entire body split into countless pieces and crumbled to the ground, so quickly and easily it was like all the trouble they'd gone through had been for nothing.

Soma finally reached the altar, then turned around and gave the others a puzzled look as if to ask why they weren't coming.

"You always have something crazy up your sleeve..."

"Mm-hmm. It makes no sense."

"I never expected any less!"

Sierra and the others exchanged comments and crooked smiles as they walked up to the altar.

†

Shortly after the boy's party left, a black-robed figure appeared in the deserted space. He approached the altar to check that the thing was gone, then nodded.

"They took it... Good, this means we can proceed with the plan. They really exceeded my expectations. So did the others, but not as much as these kids. I could have them destroy the other place if I get lucky, but maybe that's asking too much. Anyway, since things are finally going well, I should go carry out the final steps. I may have gone overboard with that performance...but no matter. All is for our lord and our ideal."

So he muttered, then vanished into thin air in the same way that he had appeared.

21

Sophia furrowed her neat eyebrows as she looked at the report in her hands. Its contents were extremely unsettling.

It was in another territory, not her own...but apparently, something thought to be a dragon had been spotted.

She would have chalked it up to an active imagination on the part of the observer, but this was the seventh time. It couldn't possibly be that *everyone* was just imagining it.

And that wasn't the only thing that was amiss. She had also received reports of suspicious activity from the Kingdom of Veritas.

She had heard such things for some time, but never such obvious actions until now.

"Perhaps I should let him know...though it may be overthinking to assume these two are related."

But it would still be for the best to inform him just in case. Even if worst didn't come to worst, there was no guarantee that whatever it was wouldn't show up over there too. That would cause too much damage to ignore.

The problem, though, was that if she sent an official report, it would be made public. That would be a bad idea considering that it was still nothing more than a wild rumor.

Which meant...

"It would be best to go to him in person, then."

She would have been lying if she'd said she wasn't glad, but at the same time, she felt reluctant to do so.

There were certain topics she wouldn't be able to avoid forever...and as much as she looked forward to talking about them, it weighed heavily on her.

"I suppose I had better go regardless."

She'd just come to a stopping point in her work, and Camilla could take care of the rest within a day. Once that was settled, the rest would be quick.

As she thought about what she would do first, Sophia stood up and left the room.

†

After returning safely to Viotto, Soma's party headed toward the local branch of the adventurer's guild.

Although they had nothing to report and nothing to exchange for cash, it was a basic rule for adventurers to go to the guild if they had any questions.

The guild was the place where the most adventurers gathered, which meant it was also the place where the most information was gathered. Anything that one couldn't learn there was either unknown to anybody or being kept secret. There was no reason not to go.

The guild branch in Viotto was centrally located, but slightly removed from the main street. As was the case in Jaster and Lunburg, adventurers were treated as useful to have around, but not if they made their presence felt too strongly, which made sense considering that most of them were thugs and lowlifes.

The building itself was large, though, as if to represent the major role it played. It was even larger than the trading company facing the main street just nearby, so one could imagine how much of an impact it had on the area.

When they got there and opened the door, they saw it was somewhat occupied. There were many tables and chairs lined up by the bar, but there were only adventurers in about thirty percent of them. Not too empty, not too full.

"Hmm, I thought it might be too early, but it seems I was wrong."

"I think the people here are getting back a bit early."

"Maybe it's a regional thing."

"It could be, since seeing everyone around you doing something tends to make you feel like you should too."

The sun was setting, but it was still some time before night fell. Sierra thought adventurers would typically stay out longer than that, but whether it was coincidence or a regional thing, a good number of adventurers had already returned from the field.

Whatever the reason, it was a good chance to ask some questions. It would be easier to talk since there weren't too many people around and they hadn't drunk too much yet. The small amount of alcohol they'd already had should make the conversation flow better, so it was the perfect occasion to get some information.

The one problem was that they were plainly children...but they would just have to deal with that somehow.

"Let's ask around, then."

"Mm-hmm."

With that, they decided to split up for the time being.

Soma's party had been able to find what they were looking for very quickly after examining the altar. It had opened in the same way as the last one, and the object had been inside.

They'd checked in case there were any traps, but they'd been able to pick it up with no problem.

It was black, made of an unknown material, and the right size to fit in one's palm.

The color was the same as that of the dragon statue, but it wasn't the same thing. It was a small sphere.

And that was all that had been inside the altar when they opened it. There was no explanation of what it was.

Here lies dormant that which connects to the pinnacle of mystic power, the engraving had read, but that was hardly enough to tell them what this thing was.

All they knew was that just picking it up hadn't given Soma the ability to use

magic.

They'd definitely found the thing they'd been looking for, at least. They'd checked if there was anything else but found nothing.

So they'd left the ruins hoping to find more information about this little black sphere, which had led them here.

And the conversations went easier than they'd expected. The reason, though, was that some rumors were spreading about Sierra.

They'd actually been to this guild once before on the way to the ruins. They had gone straight to the ruins from Lunburg because Sierra had gathered information about them beforehand, but the same didn't go for this place. They'd come here to find out information about the ruins and whether there would be other dangers on the way there.

But morning had already come around, so there had hardly been any adventurers. Adventurers started moving early in the morning to fulfill their jobs, and the guild started moving around the same time. Since they hadn't been able to talk to the adventurers, they'd had no choice but to ask the guild personnel, so they'd gone up to the receptionist at the guild counter.

Doris had fulfilled just about all the roles in the Jaster guild by herself, but this branch was larger in scale. That meant that the guild had dispatched official employees here in addition to hiring a receptionist, who was the first person that adventurers made contact with.

Given who they were working with, guild receptionists tended to be former adventurers themselves so they could stay calm if things got rough. Many were also pretty girls, however, so they didn't seem much like adventurers.

That could have been deliberate. Not many people could say they weren't motivated by seeing a gorgeous woman, so if it led to adventurers being more successful, that worked out well for the guild. It was one way they tried to make adventurers feel good about using the service.

In any case, they'd gone to talk to the receptionist only to find her attitude left much to be desired. She had been smiling, but they could tell at a glance she wasn't taking them seriously.

From her perspective, though, the party was a strange group of kids that she wasn't even sure were adventurers, so she couldn't know what mess they might stir up. Soma's party had been fortunate enough not to meet any adventurers who were that troublesome, but the majority of them probably were.

The receptionist changed her tune, however, as soon as she saw the Guild Card that Sierra flashed at her.

Huh? Rank 5?! Soma remembered the woman shouting.

One's rank indicated one's status as an adventurer. It didn't correspond directly to strength, but rather to how reliable one was overall. If someone was deemed unreliable as an adventurer for whatever reason, their rank would be low.

Adventurer ranks went from 1 at the lowest to 10 at the highest. Rank 3 and above indicated a fully fledged adventurer, and 5 and above were first class.

The receptionist had been so surprised because a town of this size should have had one or two Rank 5 adventurers at most, if any at all.

And Sierra was a child, moreover. It would have been hard not to be surprised.

It amused Soma to see the receptionist's attitude turn on a dime, though.

Anyway, they'd gotten the information they needed from the receptionist—she didn't know anything about the ruins, but there was nothing especially dangerous on the way—and headed straight there.

There had also been a few adventurers hanging around at the time. They had probably spread the knowledge that Sierra was Rank 5. With how she looked, she was a prime topic of conversation.

And no adventurer, however ignorant or arrogant they were, would oppose a Rank 5 one. Flatter them and try to receive favors, maybe, but no good could come of picking a fight with one. They weren't called first class for nothing.

That meant Soma's party was able to gather information with no problem.

"To get straight to the point...we found no new information."

"Well, that's about what I expected."

“It makes sense that they would be confused when we ask if they know a way to acquire magic using an item we found in the ruins...”

“One of them did say a village near the ruins was destroyed recently, but nobody said anything else about the ruins.”

“And it’s not as if we have any other questions or ways to ask.”

Once they had reconvened, they sat down at a table and shared their results, if you could call them that.

“Mm-hmm. I showed them this and asked if anyone knows what it’s for, but nobody did,” Sierra added, taking out the black sphere.

They had left it with Sierra, since she had been the one who had requested to go find it in the first place, but she hadn’t found any leads on it.

They’d expected as much, though, and this gave them a direction to go in.

If nobody knew, that meant it wasn’t possible to find out with normal methods.

That meant they either had to use abnormal methods...

“Or get the information from somebody who knows.”

“Oh, did you notice me? What a shame... I thought I might surprise you given the chance.”

They turned around. There stood the black-robed figure they’d met before.

22

“Huh?!” Aina exclaimed as soon as she spotted him.

Apparently, she’d had no idea he was there.

As she widened her eyes in shock, Soma shrugged. “As Lina told you before, you should pay more attention to your surroundings.”

“How’d *you* notice him? Wait... Am I the only one who didn’t?”

“I didn’t notice either, actually.”

“Me neither.”

“So it’s not just me!”

“Well, just because you weren’t the only one doesn’t mean you shouldn’t pay better attention.”

As they talked among themselves, the black-robed figure approached. Between his unmistakable appearance and the timing of his arrival, it was needless to say why he’d come to them.

“I imagine that you’ve come to share another hint. Is that correct?”

“Hmm, that certainly makes this faster, but it frightens me that you knew before I said anything.”

There was a shade of amusement in his tone, making it unclear how much he really meant it. Soma shrugged.

“So you’ve come to tell us how to use this?”

“Indeed. You need to know, don’t you?”

“We do, but the timing’s a bit too convenient... And how’d you even get here? We came straight here in a carriage...”

Aina was clearly cautious of him, and rightly so. There was no way she wouldn’t be.

It was just too good to be true.

“Well, I have experience to match my years... I can handle such stunts.”

Nobody would have taken him at his word, but they had no better leads at the moment. The difference would just be who they got the information from and where, and how suspicious that information was. Since they didn’t know anyone here, everyone was equally suspect unless they were with the guild, so it wouldn’t be a bad idea to listen if someone seemed to know something.

Even if that person was clearly up to something.

“May I speak, then?”

“Please do.”

“Splendid.”

With that, the man told them with a smile that what they had couldn’t be used on its own. It was like a key, and the truly useful object was what it went with.

“A key, huh... It does look kind of like one, now that you mention it.”

“So where would this thing that it goes with be? I can make a guess...”

“This was in ancient ruins, so...”

“Heh, this really speeds things up... You’re exactly right.”

In other words, it was another set of ancient ruins. It didn’t look like these would be close, though.

“So we have to travel again...” Aina sighed. “I mean, we *are* on a journey, so it makes sense, but that’s all we’ve been doing lately.”

“We just have to accept that...and it sounds like this should wrap things up, right?”

“I can guarantee that, but I can’t be sure that what awaits you is what you desire.”

The stranger told them the location and how to get to it, then swiftly turned on his heel and left.

At the same time, the chatter around them resumed as if people had forgotten to speak until now.

“Hmm, well, this determines our next destination.”

“Really looking on the bright side, huh?”

“It’s true, though. Oh, by the way...”

“What is it, Lina?”

“It’s just that you didn’t talk much, so I wondered if something was wrong.”

“Yeah, now that I think about it, you stopped talking at some point in the middle...”

“Well, I was just thinking about something. Pay it no mind.” Soma shrugged.

The two girls gave him quizzical looks but seemed to accept the answer.

Sierra alone kept her gaze steady on him. He gave her a crooked smile in response.

“Well, we don’t have to set out again right away. What say we celebrate tonight, find a place to stay, and leave in the morning?”

“Celebrate? But we didn’t make any money this time.”

“That may constitute failure for us as adventurers, but it’s a step forward.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I guess you’re right...”

“I guess I’ll order some things, then... Excuse me, waiter!”

Soma’s party ate an early dinner, then went to bed.

After a good night’s sleep, they awoke early in the morning.

Just as the town began to stir, they left in a carriage once again.

†

It was a forest. The trees grew more thickly than in the Devils’ Woods, which made it seem to fit that name better than the forest that actually bore it.

But at the same time, it was a complex of ancient ruins.

The forest seemed to be taking over these ruins... No, they existed within the forest that was taking them over, to be precise.

It was the afternoon of the fifth day since Soma's party had left Viotto.

The vast forest before their eyes was the set of ruins they were headed for.

"I feel like I've gotten accustomed to coming to ancient ruins."

"Me too. I remember having more thoughts about it in the beginning, but now all I'm thinking is, we're finally here."

"That's only natural, since we've done this twice before."

"Mm-hmm. I've never done so much at once either."

They hadn't left the barony of Jodl this time, although they were in a rather remote place.

The town nearby was about the same size as Jaster, they estimated, but the guild in Jaster was better... Actually, even comparing the two would be an insult to Doris.

This guild had a substitute, but one who had seemed especially unmotivated. They had to wonder whether things would be okay if something happened...but that wasn't their problem to worry about.

In any case, they'd ended up here without managing to gather much information.

"This is the first time I've seen ruins quite like these, though."

"Well, all of them have been firsts in different ways...but these are definitely a different style than the first two. And how did nobody notice them? There may be a barrier, but someone should have realized..."

"I don't think anyone would come near unless they knew there were ruins."

"It does seem creepy, so I can see why people wouldn't want to get close."

"Even still, some adventurer would probably try it... I guess it just went unnoticed because it's remote and because of the barrier."

The party conversed as they observed the ruins.

Since the ruins were being consumed by forest, however, there was little the party could glean from looking at the outside.

“We can’t gauge its size like this...but I suppose that’s how ruins are.”

“Mm-hmm. Some are different inside than they look.”

“I doubt this is one of those, so that’s a good thing, I think...”

“All there is to do now is go in.”

“Right, since we won’t find anything out by looking at it. Let’s head in, then.”

The other three nodded in response to Soma, and the party of four stepped into the ruins.

23

The second the man spotted the shadow-like thing, he slashed at it with all his might. No hesitation—only fury.

His entire body, his basest instincts, screamed that he couldn't let it continue to exist.

His friends probably felt the same.

Despite shaking with fear, they thrust forth their spears, shot their arrows, and cast their spells.

Having trained together for so long, they were perfectly in sync...

"No... How?!"

"Not a bad judgment... Perhaps I should have expected as much from you. You realized what it was you had revived and struck right away, the only moment you had a chance of victory. Not bad, indeed. But unfortunately, your attacks won't be landing on him."

"Tch...!"

"And as soon as you realize your mistake, you aim at me... Impressive, honestly. Not quite as much power as I hoped for, but we can work with that. If it's all right with you, I'd like to add you to our ranks, in thanks for what you've done for us. What do you say?"

"Hell no!"

"I thought so... That's too bad. Yes... Go ahead and eat him."

Just then, the man felt a searing heat in his right arm.

He quickly realized it was all in his head, though...

...Since there was nothing where his right arm had once been.

"Ah— Aaah, aaaaaaaaahh! My...my arm!"

"Oh, it won't kill you, so long as you heal it right away. I'll excuse myself, since I have something to do. This leaves one more... Oh, right. Clean up after him,

would you? He seems to be quite the picky eater. They didn't suit his palate."

The man was confused for a moment but then grasped what the other was referring to.

Writhing in agony, he lifted his head and saw...the corpses of his friends, the top halves of their bodies all torn off.

"Aaaaaaaaaaahhh!"

In a mixture of pain, fear, and rage, all he could do was scream.

†

The interior of the ruins had an uncanny air to it, just as the exterior did.

It was constructed mainly of stone, but in some places, the forest was consuming and fusing with it.

In a sense, that was what made it really feel like ruins, but it felt exaggerated all the same.

It didn't faze Sierra, though, because she was used to this.

It wasn't rare for adventurers to go to places like this, and Sierra in particular had seen more forest in her life than anything else. It wouldn't make sense for her to be surprised or put off at this point.

She was walking at the tail end of the party, the position she'd been assigned sometime along the way, and observing their surroundings.

While watching out for surprise attacks from the rear, she looked for anything that might be a hint.

It could have been called unnecessary, to be honest, since Soma would be the first to notice anything that was there. He even noticed attacks from the rear before she did.

It shouldn't have been a problem if she'd just walked behind him like the other two were doing.

They couldn't be sure that even Soma would notice everything, though, so they needed to be ready just in case.

That was what the other two were doing, since they knew that looking for

clues and enemies wasn't their forte. They were focusing on their own roles, not slacking.

That meant that Sierra couldn't shirk her role as the most experienced adventurer in the group.

So far, she hadn't found anything or even noticed any signs of monsters nearby...but that was no reason to let up her caution. If anything, it was all the more reason to be on the lookout.

"Hmm... Odd," Soma muttered.

Sierra's gaze naturally shifted from the surroundings to his back.

"What do you mean, odd?" Aina asked. "I mean, things do look weird, but it's a little late to mention that."

"It's hard to explain... Something like the atmosphere. That, and the fact that we haven't seen a single monster."

"You're right, I haven't spotted one since we entered... Is that normal?"

"It almost never happens," Sierra responded. "Sometimes they're locked away, or they can't get in from outside. But usually monsters live in outdoor ruins."

Ancient ruins, whether they had magical traps inside or not, typically had barriers that prevented them from being noticed. According to one theory, these barriers also served to preserve the interior, which was how so many ancient ruins had survived to this day.

Monsters still lived inside them, though, because such barriers didn't work perfectly on all of them. One example was undead monsters. Other monsters tended to follow their lead and take up residence.

That meant that it was normal for some kind of monster to live in ruins if they were out in the open. It was commonplace enough that sometimes ruins were discovered when an adventurer spotted a monster exiting them.

That made it very unusual that they hadn't seen any monsters, which put Sierra on edge.

"I get it... So we actually have to be extra careful."

“Exactly. You’ve gotten rather used to this, Aina.”

“I think so too, which is surprising even to me. It’d be hard not to get used to it with you around, though.”

“Hmm? Why is that?”

“Why is that strange to you?!”

“Dear brother! I think I’m getting used to it too!”

“Yes, good job, Lina.”

“Hee hee, yay, I did a good job!”

“Honestly, you two... And we were just saying we need to be careful...” Aina sighed.

Sierra wanted to express her agreement, but Soma’s attitude didn’t necessarily mean he was letting his guard down.

He could afford not to be too cautious due to his strength...and he probably had a reason for projecting that image, too.

It was so the others looking on would feel less nervous.

While vigilance was certainly necessary, it would be impossible for anyone to remain vigilant at all times, however hard they tried.

If someone wasn’t aware of that in a situation like this, they would keep bracing themself constantly and potentially be too exhausted to show their strength where it really counted.

Soma was able to relax his guard a bit when he had the opportunity, and Lina was able to follow his lead, but Aina wasn’t as good at that, so she needed an example set for her.

And he wasn’t telling her so that she wouldn’t be self-conscious about it and unable to relax as well.

“...Good job.”

Soma really was observant. He picked up not only on items and enemies but on things like that.

Sierra wouldn’t have been able to do that, frankly.

That fact didn’t frustrate her because she recognized his ability. From their first match all throughout their journey together, he had come to seem more observant.

Likewise, his strength had become all the more evident, of course...but that aspect of him made little sense to her.

Not in a bad way—it just seemed inscrutable.

That impression, too, had only grown stronger over the course of their journey.

She’d once asked him why he kept using a wooden sword. If he could do as much as he did with a wooden sword, then he should have been even better with a metal one, and he had more than enough money for one.

But Soma had answered that there was no point in using a metal sword.

Apparently he’d once bought a better-quality sword, but when he’d given it a proper swing, it had fallen apart. It hadn’t been able to stand up to his sword technique.

That wouldn’t have been an issue if he’d restrained himself, but then it would offer no advantage over a wooden sword.

So between that and the ease of maintenance, he was still using a wooden sword.

Sierra honestly hadn’t understood when she’d first heard that. She understood how a sword might not withstand his technique, but it didn’t make sense that a metal sword wouldn’t give him any advantage over a wooden one.

How did one even get to that point?

The one thing she did know, however, was that Soma wasn’t lying.

Although she couldn’t comprehend it, Sierra could accept both logically and instinctually that it was possible in Soma’s case.

Incidentally, he’d mentioned that the single-edged sword Sierra was using might withstand his technique, but she wasn’t about to let him borrow it.

This sword held the few memories she'd kept from the forest. It was the only sword in the world that was just for her, born from and forged by the power of the forest and her friends' feelings.

She couldn't let someone else use it so easily, not even Soma.

And there was no need to. Soma was far stronger than her, even using a wooden sword.

There would be no situation in which he needed something better.

"Oh—"

"What's up? Why did you stop?"

"Did you find something?"

"I did, but..."

"Soma?"

Sierra looked at him in confusion, since he seemed unsure for once.

What could he have found that would make even him unsure?

"Is it the thing we're looking for or what?"

"It's at least related to it. It's just..."

"I think you should do what you want to. I'll follow you no matter what."

"I'm not sure what's going on, but yeah... I'll come along for whatever you decide, like I have been."

"Mm-hmm. Up to you."

"Understood. We'll keep going, then... Stay alert, everyone."

She wondered what he'd found, or maybe realized, but if he hadn't already told them, either he thought it would be faster to show them or they had to see it themselves to understand.

Knowing that, Sierra just nodded. Aina also nodded, probably sensing the same.

And then...

A few meters farther, when they turned a corner, they saw it.

24

To digress for a moment, humanoid monsters were not rare by any means.

The archetypal example would be goblins, but at the same time, it was plain to see that they were monsters, not humans. There were also beings like demonkin, but they too could be easily distinguished from humans by their appearance.

That was why Soma was puzzled at first.

“Is that a person? But something feels off...”

“Why would there be another person here?”

“For the same reason we are, maybe?”

Standing about ten meters ahead of Soma’s party was something that at least looked human at first glance. It was facing them, and they couldn’t see its face since its head was turned down, but they could tell that much.

This person (?) was about 1.6 meters tall, with slender limbs and golden hair. They held a sword in their right hand, a shield in their left, and wore a breastplate over a subtly rounded chest.

Their equipment was light, but Soma’s party didn’t have much in the way of equipment either.

It was unclear why they would be here, but it wasn’t inconceivable that this was another person who’d gotten here before Soma’s party.

“No, that’s not a human, actually.”

“Mm-mm, it’s not.”

Sierra immediately agreed with Soma for two reasons. She’d noticed before the other two girls because of them.

One was their hair color. In this world, the color of one’s hair was said to be determined by one’s talent, but there were two exceptions: white and gold. Only elves could have golden hair in particular, no other race. That was why

Sierra kept her head covered by a hood.

But if this had been an elf, their ears should have been pointed.

This one's weren't, however, which made it clearly abnormal.

As for the other reason...

"What do you mean, that's not a human? It looks like one to me."

"Actually, now that I look closer, something feels off about them..."

"Agreed... Wait, I think it might be—"

Soma's sentence was cut off as the thing started to move.

Its face came into view as it lifted its head—that of a human, and a good-looking one at that.

But...

The pair of pure white wings that immediately sprouted from its back proved it was something other than human.



That was the second reason it hadn't seemed human to them, despite looking like one at a glance.

"Wings?! So it really isn't human!"

"A winged humanoid... But it doesn't seem like a harpy."

"Mm-hmm. Harpies have wings instead of arms."

"Hmm? I assumed it was an angel, but is it not?"

"An angel? Never heard of it... I guess I don't know much about monsters, though."

"I've never heard of it either."

"Me neither."

"Hmm..." Soma furrowed his eyebrows at the fact that the others had no reaction to the word "angel" and were instead assuming it was a type of monster.

It was certainly hard to imagine that it was a human, what with the wings...but Soma still couldn't see it as anything but an angel.

Not that Soma had ever seen an angel in the flesh, of course.

"I have a question for you three... You really don't know what angels are?"

"I've never heard of them before... What, are they well known?"

"I don't know either... Are they a dangerous kind of monster?"

"I just said I don't."

"Hmm..."

Hearing that was a strong reminder to Soma that he was in another world.

A lot of his knowledge had been transferable, such as the names of monsters, so he'd assumed this would be the same...but apparently there were no such things as angels in this world. At least, that seemed more likely than these three happening not to have heard of them.

As he watched the figure, its wings now visible, remain motionless so as not to alarm them, he thought to himself...

This meant it couldn’t possibly be an apparition either.

He’d assumed it was an apparition taking the form of an angel, but apparently it wasn’t.

Apparitions were astral beings that took forms based on concepts from the human imagination—in short, they were fantasy creatures. Dragons were one example of such entities. All beings called apparitions were unnatural in one way or another.

There were multiple theories about the mechanism by which they came to be, but all experts agreed that apparitions were the result of mankind’s collective imagination taking physical form. Dragons, for example, were an amalgamation of what humans imagined the strongest possible being would be. The stars, or the world, took that image and threw it into the outside world, creating dragons.

In other words, apparitions were the result of human fantasies influencing the physical world.

It was impossible for just one person to generate an apparition, of course, but it was made possible by all of mankind’s imagination coalescing. The process was also impossible to control, since it happened on an unconscious level.

That meant that the collective unconscious was the entity responsible for bringing apparitions to life.

To simplify it, dragons were the strongest beings because they were created as a result of humans conceiving of them as the strongest. They probably wouldn’t have been able to hurt anyone if they were in human form.

In any case, Soma had thought this was an apparition based on the concept of an angel. But apparitions were fantasy creatures with their origins in the human imagination. Considering that it was the collective unconscious at work, the majority of people had to know about a creature for it to take on physical form, which didn’t seem to be the case here. That made it likely that this wasn’t an apparition.

In that case...

“Hmm... It would make the most sense if it was a living weapon.”

“That’s when people artificially modify existing creatures or monsters, right?”

“Right, and then they’re used as weapons, as the name suggests, if I recall correctly.”

“Mm-hmm. And they take after the base creature’s appearance.”

“Yeah... So does that mean this is...?”

“No, I would guess that it’s taken that form for the purpose of imitation.”

There were multiple ways that living weapons were created, although they all looked the same in the end and were lumped together under the one term “living weapon.”

In Soma’s past life, there had been living weapons that imitated dragons, but imitative living weapons were developed with a different design philosophy than typical ones.

Regular living weapons were created by grafting two creatures, or a creature and something else, to increase their power. On the other hand, imitative living weapons attempted to approach the power of the base creature by mimicking its form.

Those typically imitated apparitions, however, because there was no way they could approach an existing creature’s power by mimicking it. It was possible in the case of apparitions because they were conceptual...although that was just something Soma had heard in his past life, and it may only have been true on paper.

If his basic knowledge mostly applied to this new world, though, then there was probably no major difference in what this creature was trying to do.

That left the question of why they had chosen that form. It was hard to imagine that it was a coincidence, because there was no need to add wings to a human.

In other words, it was possible that whoever had made this thing knew about angels.

Either there was somewhere in this world where people told stories of angels that these three hadn’t heard, or angels had existed at some point in the past.

Or maybe...

“Well, whatever it is, we know it’s in our way.”

“Yeah... And it’s being pretty wary of us.”

“The fact that this appeared out of nowhere even though there haven’t been any monsters so far means it probably has to do with the thing we’re looking for.”

“Mm-hmm. And if it gets in our way, we just defeat it.”

There were a few things on Soma’s mind, but this wasn’t the time to think about them. He would have plenty of time for that after defeating this thing.

He wanted to at least try talking to it, but this didn’t seem like a good time for that.

It didn’t show any signs of coming at them, at least...which meant he had to make the first move.

Soma drew his wooden sword, then kicked off the ground toward the angel-like thing.

25

Aina didn’t know what it was, but she didn’t think there was any need to worry.

Soma had charged straight at it, after all. This fight would end the same way it always did with him...

“No way,” she muttered in momentary disbelief at what she was seeing.

A high-pitched sound had just rung out.

Yes, the thing had blocked Soma’s attack with its shield, but Aina had barely been able to perceive it.

And it didn’t end there, of course. Twice, four times, eight times...the sounds kept coming, each accompanied by a swing of its sword.

Soma was dodging each one, of course, but Aina was shocked that the enemy was even managing to keep up with him.

She’d seen him spar with Sierra and Lina, of course, and although those had not been real battles, the two had Special-Grade Skills.

That meant that this enemy must have been Special-Grade level or higher.

She didn’t want to believe it...but the fact that Sierra and Lina were with her was further evidence.

“You two aren’t going to help defend him?”

“I want to say there’s no need...but I don’t want to hold him back.”

“Same. I’d just get in the way.”

“Got it... That bad, huh?”

To be honest, Aina couldn’t tell whether Sierra or Lina was stronger. To hear the other three talk, it was definitely Sierra, but both were so strong that Aina couldn’t see the difference herself.

The same went for the fight she was watching now.

Both of them were out of the bounds of Aina's common sense, so she couldn't tell how strong the enemy was. All she knew was that the sounds continued to this moment.

And if it was bad enough that the other two couldn't intervene, that was all she needed to know...

It was her time to step in.

Finally, she thought. It brought a slight smile to her face.

She'd hardly done anything as of late, especially in the ruins. Soma and Sierra had killed almost all the monsters instantly, so the most she'd done was use magic to light up the tower.

She had used offensive magic on the giant monster from before, but she didn't think it had really accomplished anything, so it was the same as if she'd done nothing.

Things had been easy for her, but that had also led to a growing dissatisfaction.

In this scenario, though, there should be no problem if she used an offensive spell to back Soma up. She *had* to, actually.

She doubted that he would tell her to watch out for his hand slipping out of envy at a time like this...not that she wanted him to thank her for helping or anything.

Tossing aside the unnecessary thought, she lifted her right hand and thrust it out as if to set the enemy in her crosshair, then began to speak her appeal to the mystical laws.

"O, inferno, become as a spear, that you may strike my foe like lightning."

She glanced at Soma's back for just a moment. She still couldn't keep track of his repeated attacks; all she heard were the sounds of their impact.

But there was no need for her to perceive them—the likes of Aina had no need to pay them any mind.

She didn't even have to coordinate with him. Soma would know what to do.

“Firebolt!”

Sorcery (Special-Grade) *Dark Lord’s Guardianship* Persistent Buildup / Magic: Firebolt

The instant she yelled, her mana burst forth into a surge of flames that then converged and rushed directly forward.

Like a lightning strike, they only took a moment to reach the back of Soma’s head—which he tilted slightly just then.

The firebolt rushed past the side of his face at the same time his sword flashed.

I did it, Aina thought, clenching her fist—just before two sounds rang out.

“Huh...?”

There was a glaring reason for her surprise.

One of the sounds had been made when the enemy’s sword blocked Soma’s...and the other had been Aina’s firebolt bouncing off its shield, directly back at Soma.

What ensued was inevitable, and the impact sent Soma’s body flying backward.

“S-Soma?!”

Aina, the blood draining from her face, rushed to where she expected him to fall, but before she could get there, his body spun around in midair and he landed as if nothing had happened.

“Soma...?”

“Hmm... I didn’t expect it to bounce back, so I couldn’t react in time. I managed to block the damage, but not the momentum.”

“Are... Are you okay?”

“Well, you can see for yourself. It burned my left hand a bit, but it may as well be nothing.” He shook his left hand lightly; it had in fact turned slightly red.

Seeing that, Aina hung her head.

“Sorry...”

“For what?”

“I butted in where I shouldn’t have and hurt you...”

“I just told you that a burn this small doesn’t count as being hurt.”

“B-But...”

“No buts. I’m responsible for this, if anything. It would be out of the question to make the one who tried to help feel responsible.”

So Soma said, but Aina knew this was her responsibility. She should have expected that a Special-Grade level enemy would be prepared to block magic, but she’d gotten ahead of herself in her excitement that she’d finally been able to do something.

“It’s good to reflect on your actions...but this isn’t the time for that. We can think about what we’ve done together later.”

“Huh...?”

The inane sound escaped her because Soma had placed his hand on top of her head.

Then he started petting her.

Don’t treat me like a kid, she wanted to say, but she kept her mouth shut.

If she opened it now, she wouldn’t have been able to help smiling.

It was all she could do to suppress it.

She herself thought she must be pretty easy to please, but she couldn’t help that either.

So since she couldn’t help it, Aina reluctantly accepted it.

“Okay... I’ll forget about it for now.”

“Just you and my brother, reflecting together... Maybe I should make a mistake too...”

“Okay, no dumb comments. Let’s just talk now that we have the chance. That’s why you’re not going back to the fight, right, Soma?”

“Also because that thing shows no sign of moving.”

Aina looked over as if drawn by his words. He was right; it didn’t look like it was going to come after him. It still looked ready for battle, but it didn’t seem like it would go on the offensive.

“Is it hard to beat?” Sierra asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t be too hard just to defeat it, but it may take us a while if we continue this way.”

“But it seemed like the fight was easy for you.”

“That’s true, but the fight was also easy for it. It seems to be defense-oriented, so it’ll take some time to get past that. I can defeat it with some time, but if there are more things like this ahead, I would rather not spend that time here.”

“What if we look for a way to get around it, then?” suggested Lina. “We could destroy the wall if it comes to that.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” cautioned Aina. “I doubt this thing would be here if there were a way around it, and we don’t know what’ll happen if we destroy the wall.”

“Agreed.”

These ruins were the type that consisted of walls and corridors. One room might connect to another room, or there might be a corridor connecting two rooms, or sometimes a corridor might go on forever.

They hadn’t come across any gimmick yet, but with an enemy like that here, they couldn’t assume these ruins were just old.

And it wasn’t likely that they’d be given a shortcut so easily.

These ruins were also being encroached on by the forest. They couldn’t predict what would happen if they destroyed part of it.

“You’re right... There would be no point in putting ourselves in danger to avoid danger.”

“It looks like we have to pass through here to get anywhere else.”

“Yes. I think it’s likely that what we’re looking for is past this thing.”

“So we can’t stop here, can we?”

At once, both Soma and Sierra’s eyes were on Aina. She flashed a crooked smile back.

These two would push forward without a care even if she tried to retreat.

Lina would follow them...and so would Aina in the end.

That meant there was no other option but to defeat that thing somehow.

“No other choice... And I can’t just rely on you. I’ll play my card.”

“Sierra... Are you sure?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Aina knew what Sierra meant. She was going to use a trump card that she’d kept hidden until now.

That didn’t necessarily mean Sierra didn’t trust them. It was normal for an adventurer not to reveal their whole hand. There was the risk of betrayal, as well as the possibility that two adventurers would compete in future work. It had nothing to do with whether she trusted the other three.

It would have been easy to get the wrong idea after they’d been together for so long, but Sierra wasn’t a member of their group yet. They had just joined forces for the sake of a common goal.

But there would be no point in saying that if they couldn’t accomplish that goal.

So Sierra had decided after some deliberation.

“I think I can at least give you an opening.”

“Understood. I’ll wait for it and attack.”

“Mm-hmm. Leave it to me.”

Sierra took a step forward.

She reached for the sword at her hip and leaned forward, gripping the hilt.

That was always the first thing Sierra did when attacking an enemy at a

distance.

The difference this time was the words she muttered after that.

They seemed to be trigger words to unleash the technique, but less like a magic spell and more like a kind of self-suggestion.

“Dissipate.”

She vanished instantly. It was different from moving too fast to be seen. Aina couldn’t see even a trace of her...but Soma started to run at the same time, as if he understood that.

Just before Soma closed the distance between himself and the enemy, Sierra suddenly appeared behind it. Her sword was already drawn, and Soma leapt up and swung his own at the same time.

The enemy moved to block, one with its sword and the other with its shield...but then it broke its stance.

Sierra had somehow phased through its body, along with her sword.

Soma didn’t miss that chance, of course. He sent the body before him flying through the air, scattering its birdlike feathers. Before it could land, he caught its chin in midair with his foot.

The enemy was surprised, not expecting a kick, but Soma continued to move without losing any speed.

He twisted in midair, taking advantage of the opening, and swung his wooden sword.

But just before it hit, Aina caught a glimpse of something.

The creature’s human-like mouth was wide open in midair.

That shouldn’t have been anything to worry about.

It shouldn’t have meant anything.

But for some reason, it sent an awful chill down her back.

“Brother?!”

“Tch—”

Lina’s shout and Soma’s tut overlapped as if they’d both noticed at once.

Sierra had turned around and backed away, and even looking at her back, Aina could tell that she seemed shaken.

I must know her pretty well now if I can tell with her hood on, Aina thought as if to avoid the current reality.

“RaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAA!”

“Mine is the sword that slays evil.”

The enemy’s singing voice and Soma’s murmur sounded at the same time...

Just before Soma was blown away and the wooden sword he had been holding shattered in his place.

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“Oh...”

Sierra may have been the most shocked out of all of them.

She understood all too well that it was the fault of the other three that Soma’s sword had broken.

It hadn’t broken because it had taken an attack from that weird thing. It hadn’t been able to withstand Soma’s swing.

And the reason he’d swung it so hard was plain to see.

If he hadn’t, they would all be dead right now.

“And I said I didn’t want to get in his way...”

“What are you talking about...?”

Before Sierra could respond to Aina’s confused question, Lina interjected as she realized.

“Oh, I see what happened... That thing didn’t break his sword. It broke on its own.”

“You mean...Soma broke it?”

“Mm-hmm...at least, that’s how it ended up.”

“And the only reason he would do something like that is if that attack warranted it.”

“Mm-hmm...”

Sierra didn’t completely understand herself, but the enemy had probably tried to use its trump card.

It couldn’t have been singing for no reason.

It was probably something on the conceptual level...the kind of power one had to train past the Special-Grade level to unleash.

It wouldn’t just have caused an impact or unleashed some kind of effect.

It was the kind of song that propagated the very concept of destruction.

Sierra understood now why Soma had said it was an apparition.

That would have been difficult for even them to block immediately. If they'd known about it from the beginning, they could have prepared, but at that point in the battle, it would have meant certain death.

Understanding that, Soma had had no other choice if he wanted to save the others.

Not only that...

"Wait, is it *alive*?!"

"Because he prioritized saving us..."

"Mm-hmm. It would be dead otherwise."

At the same time Soma was blown away, his blow had made contact, and the thing had crumpled to the ground, but now it was slowly getting back up.

Although there was a slash mark on its chest that was dripping blood, it seemed to be far from a fatal wound.

It was clearly too shallow despite how far Soma had gone, because he'd put the others first.

Soma had already gotten back into position in midair and seemed fine, though, which was good to see.

Apart from the fact that all he was holding was the hilt of what had been his wooden sword.

"Should we retreat?"

"Maybe we should for now. Not even Soma could—"

Aina stopped mid-sentence as she noticed how the thing was moving.

Sierra, too, couldn't help but freeze up in disbelief.

After it had stood up, it had opened its mouth wide.

It wasn't hard to guess what that meant.

Sierra's eyes immediately jumped over to Soma.

She wasn’t looking for his help. The opposite, in fact.

He hadn’t landed yet, and he wouldn’t make it in time at this rate.

That meant he wouldn’t be able to dodge, and he was a distance away from the others too. They wouldn’t make it in time if they went to help.

The same was true for the other three: they wouldn’t be able to move out of range with the time they had.

Sierra quickly searched her mind for the best solution...but just then, Soma turned to look at her.

She instantly grasped what it meant and nodded.

Then she turned to the other two.

“Aina, Lina, can you do something?”

“I’m not that confident, but I’ll do what I can. I can’t just stand back and let him protect me forever.”

“Me too. I couldn’t forgive myself if all I did was drag him down.”

“Mm-hmm.”

That meant Sierra could focus on protecting herself.

She concentrated all her nerves and strength, waiting for the moment it unleashed its attack.

She may not have been able to see the sound waves...

“RaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAA!”

But if she knew they were coming in her direction, it wouldn’t be hard to cut them.

“One stroke, one slice.”

Single-Edged Sword Mastery (Special-Grade) / Blessing of the Forest Spirits *Mental Concentration* Steadfast Resolve *Quick Draw* Mind’s Eye: One Stroke, One Slice

She swung her arm, obeying her own senses, and although she didn’t feel any

resistance, she was certain she'd cut something.

She looked to her side, confirming that the other two were unhurt, then let out a small sigh.

Then she turned to look at Soma...

"So he can figure something out as long as he's holding something, huh? He never makes sense..."

"I'm impressed, but it's hard to keep up, so I wish he'd show some discretion."

Soma was in his post-swing position again, pieces crumbling out of his hands. That was probably the price he paid for forcing the sword technique with only the hilt.

It was definitely strange that he could hold the enemy off using only that, though.

Before they could think about that, however, there was something else they had to worry about.

The enemy hadn't closed its mouth after it had finished singing.

Everyone immediately realized what that meant.

"No way... It's doing it again?!"

"It'll be hard to handle one more..."

Sierra felt the same.

She thought she would be able to deal with it easier once she got the hang of it, but only if given time. It wouldn't be possible to keep blocking the attacks at this pace.

Sierra bit her lip, unsure if they could get away in time—and then her eyes met Soma's.

Strangely, she didn't feel any uncertainty.

She knew that this was the most certain way, and that it would guarantee their safety.

Or maybe it was because...

“Wait... Sierra, what are you—”

Aina was saying something about how Sierra hadn’t put away her sword, but Sierra had no time to respond.

She swung it down and threw it forward.

Directly at Soma, of course.

“Hmm... Impressive.”

Somehow she heard his mutter clearly as he snatched the sword out of the air, then brought his arm to his hip.

He was ready to strike.



He had no sheath, but it was the same movement as Sierra’s.

At the same time, the enemy prepared its next move. A song began to sound from its open mouth.

“Ra—”

“One stroke, one slice.”

Even the murmur that interrupted it was the same as Sierra’s.

That was where the similarities ended, though.

A line ran down the enemy’s middle, as if tracing the sword’s arc. Its body began to slide apart along it, until it finally fell onto the ground.

It let out two small noises...and then it was all over.

“So if he has a proper weapon, it’s that easy for him... That’s my brother for you.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I can’t argue with that, but that was kind of weird...”

“What about it...?”

“Well... The way you threw the sword at Soma like you were trying to stab him, and the way he caught it easily?”

“Isn’t that normal...?”

“They wouldn’t have made it in time if they hadn’t gone that fast, and it shouldn’t have been that hard to catch, since he knew it was coming.”

“Yeah... I guess I’m the only normal one here, huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just that I’m surrounded by weirdos.”

Sierra wasn’t sure what Aina was trying to say, but she herself had something she wanted to say to Soma first.

As she took her sword back from him, she pouted slightly, though she knew he couldn’t see it.

“That was my technique.”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, I thought it would come in handy just then, so I decided to copy it. It’s an excellent technique.”

“Is that a compliment...?”

That was the technique Sierra was the best at and the one she’d used the most.

And not only had he copied it, he’d made it work at a long distance and defeated the enemy in one hit.

She wasn’t able to take a compliment at face value from someone who’d just done that with her technique.

“Anyway, it’s good that you managed to beat it, but...what do we do now? Go back?”

“There’s no need for that. You three are fine, and I managed to protect myself just in time.”

“But your sword... You didn’t bring a spare.”

“There’s a perfectly good spare just over there. I can use that.” Soma pointed at the sword lying on the ground, the one the enemy had just been using.

It was in fact quite the quality sword... It may even have been better than Sierra’s.

“Are you sure?”

“It doesn’t seem to be cursed, and it can be just for today.”

If Soma was okay with it, there was no problem, so Sierra nodded.

He walked over to the sword, picked it up, and gave it a few swings to see how it felt.

“This could be even more useful than I thought. The issue is that it has no sheath...but it should be okay if I hold it in my hands.”

Sighing in response to Soma’s satisfied-seeming statement, Sierra and the others headed deeper into the ruins.

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After what they'd just come across, Soma's party proceeded with caution, but nothing else like the angel-like creature appeared.

Incidentally, its body had vanished without a trace once they'd let it be for a moment, so maybe it had actually been an apparition or something close to one.

What they found in its place was an iron door—no, more like an iron wall, since it had no visible seams or gaps, let alone any handle to open it.

It looked like someone had just left a slab of iron standing there...but this was the only path forward.

"A dead end? No, it's hard to imagine that it is, given what we just encountered..."

"I doubt we can pick it up and move it... What is it, anyway? Another gimmick?"

"That sounds plausible, but in that case..."

"We might have to go somewhere else to find a way to open it."

In other words, they'd mixed up the order of where to go. They were supposed to have unlocked this path somewhere else before coming here. That could have been why the enemy before had been so strong.

"That means we have to go back, then."

"Mm-hmm, since we can't go forward."

"No... I think there may be a way."

"Dear brother?" Lina gave Soma a confused look. In place of a response, he gave his sword a few practice swings.

The sword he was holding was the one the angel-like enemy had been using. It seemed like he would be able to use it rather well.

That meant this plan would work.

“Um, Soma? I get a bad feeling about this...”

“The thing we’re looking for must be past here. So we don’t have to go back. We can just move whatever’s in our way.”

“Wait—”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance *Gift of Discernment: Original Style* Emulation / Iron-Cutting Sword

Before Aina could finish, he swung his arm at the wall.

Bottom to top.

It carved a slash in the ground, cut straight from the lower edge of the wall all the way to the top, and even left a slight mark on the ceiling...but that was within allowable limits.

He relaxed out of his swinging stance with a sigh and gave the wall another look. It was just an iron slab with a line running down the middle.

He gave it a strong kick, and it fell over toward the other side.

“There we go. An entrance.”

“Don’t give me ‘there we go!’ It’s always something else that makes no sense with you...!”

“But he was right... We didn’t have to go back.”

“Exactly! I knew he could do it!”

“Don’t praise him that much! He gets carried away!”

He had put some thought into it, but mostly, he hadn’t wanted to spend the effort to turn back, and he’d wanted to check how well this sword worked, so he couldn’t deny he’d gotten carried away.

But he just shrugged, not showing his thoughts on his face.

“Well, what’s done is done. Let’s get going.”

“You say as if you’re not the one who did it! Well...it’d be dumb to turn back now, I guess. Are you sure we can just force our way in, though? Nothing bad’s

gonna happen?”

“I certainly hope not.”

“Wait a second...!”

He had no way of knowing for sure, so that was the best answer he could give. He thought it would be okay, but that wasn’t definitive.

“We can worry when something happens.”

“We know there’s no point in standing around and thinking about it before we go in, at least.”

“I mean, yeah, but... Fine, I get it.”

Aina began to walk forward, perhaps resigning herself to her fate.

It would have been dangerous to let Aina walk in front, though, so Soma ran up in front of her, putting her in the middle.

“Hmm, I see where we are...”

What he then saw was a sizable space.

It could only be described as a space because of how empty it was. It was made of stone, as the other places had been, but it was unnecessarily wide and tall. It was well over ten meters in width and depth, and while it wasn’t quite that tall, it was close to it.

And in its center, there it was.

“A dragon statue... Of course there’s one here.”

“But I don’t see any altar.”

“And the statue is different...”

Indeed, there was a black dragon statue, similar to the ones they’d seen before, but it was missing its right eye. And there was no altar—that was all there was.

“Well, this just leaves one thing for us to do.”

“Mm-hmm.” Sierra nodded and took out the sphere they’d found in the tower.

It looked like nothing more than a sphere...but it made sense to think of it as an eye. They were probably supposed to put it in the statue.

They knew that, but...

“It’s too tall, though...”

“It must be around five meters.”

Aina and Lina were talking about the statue’s height.

Yes, it was the same type of statue, but it was taller than the previous ones. It looked to be about five meters tall, and naturally, its eyes were near the top.

They could reach it with no problem, but it raised the question of why it was set up like this.

“Let’s just try putting it in.”

“Yes, if anything happens, it’ll most likely be after we do that.”

Sierra approached it cautiously, making sure nothing was there, then bent her legs slightly. She kicked off the ground and leapt into the air, reaching the head of the statue easily.

She placed the black sphere where the dragon’s missing right eye should have been, and it clicked into place as if to say that was the right choice.

Their expectation that something would happen as a result was betrayed, however.

Nothing happened, and gravity pulled Sierra back down to the ground...and still, nothing happened.

No...

“Hmm?”

They heard a clapping sound. The sound of applause.

It was coming from behind the dragon statue.

“Good work, indeed. I never thought you would force your way in without solving the gimmick.”

The black-robed man then appeared. His hands were unwrinkled, though, and

the way he spoke was different.

But Soma didn't assume this was someone else because he'd expected something like this.

So he wasn't even surprised. He just sighed.

"I must give you my thanks along with my praise. This was a big help, you know. From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

"Hmm... We did this for ourselves. I don't think we did anything worthy of thanks."

"Oh, don't be so modest. You did that much for me."

"For you, you say... May I ask you a question in place of accepting your thanks, then?"

"Ask as much as you like, and accept my thanks too. I'm feeling generous enough for that."

"I'll ask, then. What *was* all of this?"

Hints of both surprise and amusement showed in the man's body language. His shoulders then shook slightly, probably with laughter.

"I see... So you realized. Or you were aware of the possibility, at least."

"The latter, if I had to choose. We thought of the worst-case scenario, but we had to do it regardless."

"Wait, uh... I don't get it... What's going on here? Why is he here?"

"Basically...we were tricked."

"Well, he seemed suspicious, and it did sound too good to be true."

"Wait... Am I the only one who believed him?"

"No, we all believed it. We just had doubts at the same time."

Aina was probably the same in that regard. She had just leaned toward believing him, despite everything she said. It was probably a matter of personal values.

That aside...

“You haven’t told us what it really was.”

“Hmm... Well, you have a right to know. Soon there will be no meaning to it...but why not? I’ll give you the surprise of your lives.”

The man spread his arms, dramatically holding his hands aloft like an actor in a play.

“What you see here is no mere statue. This is the Archdragon after being split into pieces and sealed away! The sphere you four found was the key. In other words...you have undone the Archdragon’s seal!”

What had previously looked like a statue stirred slightly as if in reply.

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Sierra immediately backed up toward Soma and stared at the thing called the Archdragon through narrowed eyes.

She'd heard that name before.

It was something her people, the elves, tried their hardest to avoid.

Her kin had once given their lives to seal it away.

And now that seal had been undone...

By her own hand.

"No way..."

"Ha ha ha, but there *is* a way! The proof is right before your eyes! So you realized you were being tricked, but you didn't think it would go this far... You assumed that if I was so obviously suspicious, I wouldn't be hiding something so big?"

He was right. That was why Sierra had taken him up on it, at least.

As Soma had said, there had been the chance of the worst-case scenario coming to pass...but they would be able to handle it if something happened. That wasn't pride or overconfidence—it was a fact.

She was capable enough on her own, so if she had Lina, Aina, and especially Soma, she would be able to handle whatever came her way.

As long as it wasn't a dragon.

Dragons—the most powerful apparitional species and a symbol of doom.

In terms of classification, they were close to a natural disaster. When they appeared, people couldn't do anything but wait for the destruction to pass.

It wasn't technically impossible to drive away a dragon if it was young, or if you gathered the forces of an entire country.

But that was just to drive them away. You could make them leave, but you couldn't defeat them.

That was why the best they had been able to do against the Archdragon was seal it away.

“I can’t say I’ve ever heard of this Archdragon, but it sounds like nothing good. May I ask what your intentions are in reviving it, then?”

“I told you to ask as much as you like. I don’t mind. It’s nothing much, though—I just want it to wreak some havoc on this world.”

“I see. Quite typical. Will that be possible, though?”

“Why do you ask?”

“The fact that it was sealed away means it was subdued once. I would think it would just be sealed away again if it tried to wreak havoc.”

“Logical. There’s no need for that concern, however. The Archdragon was locked away because it was on its own. If there are more along with it, there won’t be enough people to stop it. And according to records, it was only because the heroes of the time joined forces that they were able to stop the Archdragon. The world of today may have those who are titled the Elite Seven...but can they live up to the heroes of the past? And even if they do, they won’t be able to seal it away.”

“So you’re saying they could bring it to the verge of sealing it away, but not complete the task... Does that mean the sealing method hasn’t been passed down?”

“Close. It won’t be possible to recreate. The Archdragon was split into twelve parts and sealed away last time, but the sealers had to trade their lives for it—elves, and royal high elves at that. They haven’t regained their former numbers after losing twelve. If I recall correctly, there are only six high elves remaining. So they can’t seal it away, however hard they try.”

It was true. There were only six high elves in the elves’ nation—no, only five currently in it. That was all. And four of them had very little high elf blood.

Even if they used all of their lives, they would only be able to seal away half of the Archdragon, if they were able to seal it at all.

“That’s a problem, then. So the fastest way would be to do something about

the people trying to undo the seals.”

“I thought you would end up there, but there’s no need to worry about that. This is the last one.”

“Oh...? The others have been undone, then?”

“Precisely. I’ve seen how you all fight, after all—I wouldn’t show myself to you if it ran that risk. This was also the strongest seal.”

Soma’s surfacing hope that he could stop the dragon from being released that way was instantly shot down.

Of course.

Someone who’d thought of such a grand plan wouldn’t leave an opening like that.

“Okay, back to what you said before—why do you want it to wreak havoc on the world?”

“Oh, no reason in particular. I want chaos for its own sake. Our god desires death and destruction, after all.”

“I knew it... You’re an Archdevil worshipper!”

“I honestly don’t like that term, but I can accept it for the time being. The definition of heresy is about to change, anyway.”

“You must be really confident in this. I don’t think releasing the Archdragon would be enough to lead to that.”

“Oh, of course it isn’t. This is only the first step. My allies are making their own moves right about now. One of them failed, I hear, but these things happen. One or two failures won’t be enough to hinder our plan.”

“Hmm... This all makes sense. May I ask one last thing?”

“It doesn’t have to be the last; ask as much as you want.”

“Why are you telling us all this?”

“Heh heh heh... Isn’t it obvious? Because you’re going to die!”

The man snapped his fingers as he spoke.

The dragon, which had only been stirring slightly until now, opened its eyes.

It was as if a great power had awakened from its doze—their bodies wouldn't obey them, as if the dragon's gaze alone had their hearts in a vice grip.

"What's going on...?!"

"I...can't move!"

"That's what happens when you look into the Archdragon's eyes. Do you understand now? Everything I've told you is true. Not everything went according to my plan, however. I honestly never expected you to come here. The plan was to learn more about how to defeat that living weapon by pitting multiple parties against it, including yours. It was a lucky mistake, though. It's forced us to move our plans up a bit, but that's even better. Ah, right... Why don't I reward you for that?"

"A reward...? I don't want one."

Sierra desperately tried to move, but she couldn't.

She knew certain death awaited her...but that wasn't why she was desperate.

If this went on, her kin's sacrifices would mean nothing.

She would render them meaningless.

And this was only one of twelve pieces.

How much destruction would result if it regained its original power and went on a rampage?

Doris would probably be affected...and even the forest wouldn't be able to stay uninvolved.

If that happened...even then, *that* person might be able to do something.

But that was all the more reason...

...That Sierra couldn't let it come to that.

"Just accept it. I've given a reward to everyone who's cooperated with me. Only to the one person who I originally spoke to, however. Let's see... Since you were especially helpful, you can choose which member of your party gets the reward. I'll save whoever you choose."

“How’s that supposed to be a reward?!” Aina protested.

“You all face certain death otherwise. What could be a better reward than letting one of you escape with their life?”

“Screw you!” Lina yelled.

Sierra focused all her mental effort on her own body, ignoring the chatter.

She still couldn’t move a finger, but she wasn’t going to give up.

She kept going, thinking of nothing but moving.

It wasn’t that she thought she could handle the dragon if she could move. The result would be the same regardless.

She would face a horrible death either way.

So it was just for her own gratification.

She just wanted to be able to say she had put up a fight, that she hadn’t just laid down and accepted what she’d done.

But still...

Even if it meant sacrificing herself...

“I may believe in taking what’s offered to me on principle, but I have to decline. So it looks like this is as far as we go, then.”

“That’s too bad. But there’s no need to grieve. Our plans moved forward thanks to you. I’ll make sure to spread the word of your accomplishment. Are you sure you won’t decide who to save, though? We can’t stop the Archdragon once it’s started. If you don’t decide, nobody will be left in the end.”

“Don’t worry. There won’t be any need to choose.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Soma’s arm move.

Light glinted off his sword—

“One stroke, one slice.”

It was the attack that had defeated the angel-like enemy from before—Sierra’s own technique.

She looked at its result with sorrow.

It was worthy of admiration that he'd done that much in this scenario...but it was meaningless all the same.

They were up against a dragon, after all.

It was true that Soma had defeated the enemy from before that way. But the same technique wouldn't work on a dragon.

"Ha ha ha... What was that? You thought that would do the trick for this dragon? It may be just one piece, but this is the Archdragon that once terrorized the world! There's nothing you can do!"

The words hurt to hear, but they were true. The four of them couldn't do anything.

She'd tried to resist, yes, but she'd done so knowing it was futile.

Soma might have swung his sword with the same knowledge...but part of her wished that he'd just run away instead of making her face the reality that even Soma couldn't— "Hmph, I thought you seemed more promising than that, but my judgment must have been clouded. I didn't think you were this foolish...or perhaps you've gone mad from fear. If you'd only obey me, I would let you work with me, since you seem rather use...ful...?"

"Huh...?"

Just when Sierra had that thought, she noticed something happening that she didn't understand.

And of course she wouldn't.

There was a line running down the center of the statue that the man had called a piece of the Archdragon.

Almost as if it had been cut.

"Huh...?"

The dragon's body began to slide apart as if prompted by the robed man's murmur of surprise.

The halves slid vertically along the cut, then began to split sideways.

It seemed to happen oddly slowly in Sierra's eyes.

With a thump, the dragon collapsed to the ground, causing a small tremor.

And it wasn't over with that.

The dragon's body began to unravel bit by bit, as if it were melting into the air...and before she knew it, it had vanished without a trace.

Sierra knew of this phenomenon. The same thing had happened to the thing Soma had called an "angel" before.

The death of an apparition.

Beings that came from the stars based on the human imagination would return to the stars upon death.

In other words...

A dragon—something which was supposed to be immortal, to be unkillable—had died.

"No.... No, no, no, no, no, no, no! How...?!"

Speechless, Sierra turned to look in the direction of the voice. The robed man was shouting.

It had looked like the dragon had crushed him as it fell, but apparently it hadn't.

She didn't know how much that meant, though...

"But...that was a dragon! Maybe only a piece of one, but that was the Archdragon, and you killed it! That shouldn't be possible...!"

"I don't know on what basis you say that, but it doesn't seem that strange to me. A dragon, when it comes down to it, is a type of apparition—a being given life. It should have no choice but to disappear if attacked enough that it can't sustain that life. It's basic logic; it shouldn't even be up for debate."

She understood the logic. It was correct.

There was just one problem.

A human being shouldn't be able to make that attack.

"That's what makes it impossible...! But so be it... Right, logic doesn't matter.

The important thing is results. And the result of this is that we lost one of twelve pieces. That may be a serious blow, but it's a small price to pay to know what a threat we face. Tch, we'll have to change our plans..."

"Hmm... That sounds difficult. Luckily for you, you won't have to worry about that. I'm not merciful enough to let you go after hearing what you just told us."

"Hmph, that's only natural, but I'm not careless enough to come here in the flesh— Gah?!"

The man suddenly coughed up blood.

No, worse than that—he'd begun to split into two along a line through his torso.

His upper half fell onto the floor with a look of horror stuck on his face.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot to mention—I already cut you as well. You seem to have realized that now, though."

"It can't be... I was showing you a false image! I was distorting space to make it look like I was there... So how could you cut me?!"

"I can see you like this, so I can cut you. It doesn't matter where your original body is."

"Ah... Heh... I see. It was I who was truly foolish. But my role is nearly over, so this will do... All that is left...is to let the others...do their jobs."

With that, he stopped moving. Before long, his form disappeared.

According to what he'd said, it had been a shadow of him that was here, so he hadn't been able to maintain it after he died.

It wouldn't have been odd if it had disappeared as soon as he'd realized he'd been cut, but he'd kept it going until the last moment, maybe out of stubbornness.

Regardless, Soma softly exhaled, seeing that it was over now.

"I feel like I should have more to say at a time like this...but all I can think of is, you did it again."

"I knew you could do it!"

It was true that what Soma had just done was impossible for a number of reasons, but Sierra had either exceeded her capacity for surprise or gotten used to it, so the only impression that ultimately occurred to her was, *good job.*

Maybe she would think something else once she'd had time to calm down...but she didn't have the energy for that at the moment.

"So... What now?"

"Hmm, well, I thought that if he's tricking us anyway, it would be best to get as much information out of him as possible before crushing him, but it seems we've stumbled on something unexpected."

"Yeah, we can't exactly leave this be. Not that I think any of us can do much about it...except for Soma."

"Well, if it's possible that he can do something, then it's our duty to support him!"

"I can't say things will be easy against a dragon, though. It's not often that they let down their guard that much. But we'll manage anyway."

He said it pretty casually, but what had just happened made it seem like that could indeed be the case, which was strange.

"Where should we go, though?"

"He didn't mention any specific places...so we should gather information first, I'd say."

"That would be a safe choice...but also delay us."

"You're right... We don't have time to dawdle, especially since it'll take time to get from place to place."

"Hmm... Actually, we don't have to think about where to go."

"Wait, do you have a lead?"

"Yes. The man from before likely planned to make something happen right after this. That means he was probably close to where he wanted to do that."

"That's true...but we have no way of knowing that for certain now."

"We don't have to. If what he said was true, then the space right there should

have been connected, although indirectly, to where he was.”

“Um, why are you getting into attack position while you say that? I really don’t like where this is going...”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s be on our way.”

“Hey, wai—”

Before Aina could finish her protest, Soma’s swing tore open the space in front of them.

And then...

29

It stood calmly in an unknown place with nothing around it.

Nothing entered its vision; it wasn't even looking in the first place.

What it should have seen had been lost long ago.

A regret appeared in its mind that perhaps it should have disappeared along with it...when it noticed.

"Hmm? What's this... A piece of my power has been lost?"

It had been split into twelve parts, but it was originally one being.

That was no trouble for it, apart from feeling the remnants.

But now one of those had suddenly disappeared.

It groaned slightly at the impossible occurrence.

"How peculiar... I would not think there is anyone who can vanquish even a piece of one called the Archdragon. But no matter. Something unforeseen must have occurred."

But once it had groaned, it left it at that.

Having eleven pieces together was more than enough. One going missing would pose no issue.

"He has not yet returned...but it is time. There is no reason to wait any longer."

Thus the Archdragon looked into the distance and spread its wings, lifting its pitch-black body into the air.

"It is time to continue where I left off, then... Time to avenge him."

With one last bellow, it took off toward its destination.

†

There were very few nobles in the Kingdom of Ladius who held multiple territories.

That was because of a lack of man power. They wouldn't be able to manage multiple territories at once.

Understanding that, the kingdom typically did not assign multiple territories to have the same ownership...with a few exceptions.

Senfurt, Duchy of Neumond, Kingdom of Ladius.

Senfurt was the second territory under the duchy of Neumond, and it bordered the kingdom of Veritas.

That meant that the duchy of Neumond contained two territories on the border...which was because there was nobody else they could trust with the border.

It was left to the two strongest people in the country—no, in the whole world.

That was the best course of action for the kingdom of Ladius.

It was unthinkable according to common sense, especially when it came to the kingdom of Veritas, with which they were engaged in an ongoing war, let alone the devils, with whom they were in a half-truce.

That was because Special-Grade users never came onto the battlefield.

It was true that if one did, it could change the entire flow of the battle, but that meant that in that case, the opponent would also send out a Special-Grade user.

All that awaited them after that was a quagmire. High-Grade users, let alone the average soldier, would be blown away in the aftermath of a fight between Special-Grade users. That wasn't a battle anymore; it was something else altogether.

This kingdom used that to its own advantage, though. They deliberately put Special-Grade users in battle, even on the front lines.

That meant that Veritas had no choice but to send out Special-Grade users, but they couldn't. They would be giving other nations an opening to take advantage of.

That was how Ladius exploited the weak point of Veritas: it had hostile relations with all its bordering nations.

Depending on who they'd sent out, their Special-Grade user could have been defeated promptly. Unfortunately for Veritas, though, their Special-Grade user was number one of the Elite Seven—the Elite Swordsman.

From Veritas's perspective, they were likely to lose if they slipped up at all, and Ladius was unlikely to attack if left alone. Being a major kingdom, Veritas wasn't able to just ignore provocation, but they would also get burned if they stuck a hand in.

The result was that it had become routine to have repeated minor skirmishes at this border that did little damage.

Needless to repeat, though, that was thanks to the devotion and sacrifices of one person—Klaus.

He had had to be on the front lines nearly every day as a result.

If he fought at full power, though, the enemy would have no choice but to put up a serious resistance, so about all he did was glare at them menacingly. He would add an attack on occasion, but that was all.

That made it rather easy for him, but it also hindered both his public and private life. He continued to stay there despite that because he saw signs that the enemy was plotting something.

That meant that Klaus wasn't surprised when it happened.

If anything, he thought, *Finally*.

It was nothing out of the ordinary to him, since he'd expected it...but what made him furrow his brows was that it had exceeded his expectations.

"And you're sure this is true?"

"Yes, sir, there is no doubt! We have received reports of both physical sightings and examinations by mages. There is no possibility that we mistook it or that it's an illusion."

"Hmm... All armies on the offensive at this point, though?"

Yes, all the armies they had been observing near the border of Veritas had gone on the offensive.

It was unprecedented. No mass, however large, could amount to anything as long as Klaus was here.

It was only about an hour since he had last intimidated them, although he wasn't foolish enough to think that had made them retreat.

"And you don't see any reinforcements or troops waiting in ambush?"

"No, sir! There are no signs of reinforcements, and nowhere for troops to ambush from!"

"I suppose that was a foolish question."

They had had nothing but skirmishes so far, partly because of Klaus's presence, but also because of the location. It was nothing but plain fields as far as the eye could see, which made it impossible to carry out complex strategies in the open. The only place left to attack from would be the sky.

"And nothing but good targets too..."

Even if they sent out a High-Grade mage, Klaus would be able to take them down with ease. He'd done it before, in fact.

If the enemy had been foolish enough to keep doing that, Klaus would have already been able to go back and see his family.

They couldn't be trying to die before they surrendered either.

It was pointless.

There had to be some meaning to this...but Klaus shook his head once he had thought that far.

"There's no use in thinking about this any further. The officers have heard about this, yes?"

"Yes, sir! They said they can't read the enemy's objective, so the final judgment is up to you!"

"I thought so. All right... I'll go out."

"Are you sure?"

“It’s the best course of action, and it’s why I’m here in the first place. And I’m not heartless enough to send my subordinates out to die for nothing.”

“Yes, sir! I will let them know! Excuse me!”

“Leave this to me.”

“Yes, sir!”

Klaus watched his subordinate salute and leave, then turned to look out the window.

It was a cloudless blue sky. It would have been pleasantly sunny if he’d gone outside.

But for some reason, that seemed oddly ominous right now.

“Even so, there’s only one thing for me to do.”

If he was a brute who had put his kingdom above his family...

...then he was good for nothing if he didn’t protect that kingdom.

So Klaus grabbed his trusty sword, which had been propped up beside him, and promptly left the room.

†

There were two reactions when Klaus appeared.

One side cheered; the other let out a war cry.

It was premature, since the two sides hadn’t clashed yet.

“What’s the situation?” he asked, leaning toward the man in command of the front lines.

Instead of a response, though, he got a pair of binoculars. That probably meant it would be faster to see for himself.

That was true, since there would be some time before they made contact with the enemy.

So he took them, looked through them...and then furrowed his brows.

“I could tell from the war cry, but their morale seems oddly high. You haven’t seen any reinforcements, have you?”

“I can be sure that nobody who’s a match for you has come, at least.”

“Hmm...”

Special-Grade users stood out, for better or for worse. They could serve as deterrents, so it was almost unheard of for their faces not to be recognized widely.

The monitors were unlikely to overlook one...and while it wouldn’t be strange for Veritas in particular to be hiding one or two, they probably wouldn’t send one out in this scenario. Even if they did, they would make their enemy let down their guard first. It would be ineffective after all but screaming for the enemy to take notice.

“I thought I would know once I got a look at them...but so be it. It would be faster to stop sitting around thinking about it and go get a hit in.”

“I would stop anyone else, but in your case, that would be pointless in multiple senses. Just give us a turn too, will you?”

“We’ll see... That depends on them.”

Klaus crouched down slightly as he spoke, tensing his legs.

“See you, then.”

“Take care out there.”

As he accepted his subordinate’s wishes, he kicked off the ground and leapt into the air.

About thirty meters up.

He reached the apex of his jump about halfway to the opposing army before gravity pulled him down.

“H-He’s here!”

“That reckless bastard!”

“No Special-Grader is gonna get the first move on my watch!”

The enemies rushed to counter him once they spotted him, but he’d expected that too.

Making sure that he had landed in the middle of the enemy's front lines, he unsheathed the sword he was carrying.

The sword was about four-fifths of his height, which was quite long, since he was two meters tall, but that made it easier for Klaus to use.

Gripping it with both hands, he swung it above his head. The ground and the enemy were right there.

"I won't hit you on purpose, but it's not my fault if you get hit. Try to stay away."

"How're we supposed to do that?" one of the enemies yelled, but it didn't matter to him.

He firmly gripped his sword again, then slammed it into the ground with the force of its fall.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) / First Sword *Kingdom's Blessing* Martial Arts *Unrivaled Power* Vow of Commitment: Meteor Strike

The ground sank in for a moment, then blasted apart, sending out a huge shock. Once everyone was blown away, there was a giant crater left, about ten meters in diameter and three meters deep.

Klaus checked to make sure there were no chunks of enemy flesh laying around, then jumped out of the crater.

Once he landed outside of the newly created hole, he looked around and nodded.

"I don't see any casualties. Impressive as ever."

"Shut up! It wasn't our choice to get used to this!"

The enemy yelling was about fifty meters away. They'd probably been blown there by the impact as opposed to running away.

It was impressive that there appeared to be no casualties, even if there were injuries. However, that was also because the other side was used to it, as they had just said.

Yes, this was just the usual charade, a thrice-daily occurrence.

However...

“I doubt I need to repeat this, but I will as a matter of courtesy. I won’t pursue you if you run, and I’m prepared to take prisoners if you choose to surrender—especially since you seem to be plotting something. I promise to treat you with respect if you tell me what it is.”

“You already know what we’re going to do!”

Usually they turned tail and ran despite saying that...but it didn’t look like that was going to happen today.

The collapsed enemies stood up as well, ready to fight.

They seemed like a nice group, just like when he’d been there. Just because the top was rotten didn’t mean the whole thing was.

But despite knowing that, or maybe because he knew that, Klaus took up his sword again.

“Then I have nothing more to say. I’ll hold back, but I’m not confident I won’t kill you. Do your best to survive.”

It wasn’t out of mercy that he was trying to refrain from killing them.

He certainly didn’t begrudge them, but this was war. Killing and being killed, resentment and bitterness were constants on the battlefield.

But strategically speaking, it would be effective to leave more wounded men than dead ones. If they took prisoners, they could obtain information about the other side. That was the point.

It would be useless to ask a mere foot soldier about their plans this time, however.

So Klaus wouldn’t ask the people before him. It was the officers that he had to ask.

He would make a beeline for them and capture them.

He would kill two birds with one stone by learning more about the situation and breaking their morale.

With that thought, Klaus dropped his hips again.

The enemies were resuming their movement.

As he scattered them, he tensed his legs, searching for the officers—when a shadow suddenly fell over him.

Klaus instantly looked up at the sky, grasping that this was unusual. He'd just confirmed that there were no clouds in the sky.

That had to mean that something had appeared there.

"Wha—"

The unexpected figure rendered him motionless in shock for a moment.

It seemed to be completely open to attack, but the enemies didn't take advantage of the opportunity.

They too were plainly astonished, maybe even more so than Klaus.

"H-Hey, is that..."

"No way... This can't be happening!"

There was nobody present who didn't understand what it was when they saw it.

Few of them had seen one in person, but its appearance was so imposing that people immediately knew it when they saw it.

It was about fifty meters tall. Its entire body was coated in pitch black scales, making it look as if night had fallen.

It would have sounded believable if someone had said a giant hole had opened in the sky just then.

If not for the single red eye, glaring down at all below as if to say they were worthless.

It was the strongest of the strong—not within the narrow bounds of mankind, but in the framework of the entire world.

And at the same time, its name meant evil.

"A dragon..."

Someone’s murmur echoed through the battlefield, spreading fear through it.

30

As soon as Klaus realized he was looking at a black dragon, the word “Archdragon” came into his mind.

The Archdragon was a dragon that had been the Archdevil’s partner centuries ago. It had gone berserk with grief after the Archdevil’s defeat and been sealed away at the hands of heroes and elves...so the fairy tale went.

But Klaus knew that it wasn’t just a fairy tale. He had been told that it was a true story.

And that the twelfth seal was in his own kingdom.

But at the same time, it was utterly impossible to release. The method had been lost long ago.

Paying the place conspicuous attention would be as good as announcing that something was up with it, so they’d deliberately left it alone and unwatched, but now...

“Maybe it just looks like it... No, that would be even less likely.”

Dragons were apparitions based on the human imagination, so each one differed in form depending on the archetype it was based on. There should not have been any other black dragon.

That meant it made the most sense to assume that the seal had been broken.

Regardless...

“It doesn’t change what I’ll do.”

He was afraid, of course.

Klaus had once repelled a mature dragon, but that had only been possible because he’d had allies, including four of the Elite Seven. He knew all too well what would happen if he went up against a dragon on his own.

But...

“Aaaaaaaaahh!”

Yelling as if to drown out his own fear, he unleashed all the strength in his body.

He didn't wait and see what would happen next, and he didn't even think about it. The only thought in his mind was to kill it.

Mustering all of his strength, he leapt at it with the force of an arrow. The distance between him and the giant creature closed in an instant.

Swordsmanship (Special-Grade) *First Sword* Kingdom's Blessing *Martial Arts* Unrivaled Power *Vow of Commitment* War Cry / Desperate Sacrifice: Dead End

He instantly recognized that his trusty sword had shattered into tiny pieces.

He didn't know what had happened.

No...he hadn't been able to perceive what had happened.

The sword had shattered as soon as its tip touched the dragon.

"Tch!"

He clicked his tongue, bringing his mind back to the present. Even if he knew what had happened, he wouldn't be able to do anything about having lost his sword.

Twisting his body, he unleashed a kick at the figure looming before him.

Unarmed Combat (High-Grade) / Kingdom's Blessing / Unrivaled Power *Vow of Commitment* War Cry / Desperate Sacrifice: Roundhouse Kick

As he used the momentum of his kick to descend through the air, he nodded to himself.

He understood what had just happened.

It wasn't especially complicated.

It had simply deflected his attack—and perhaps amplified it, judging by this sensation.

So Klaus concluded as he looked at the worn-out rag that his foot had

become. He wondered what to do now.

That had been his strongest possible attack, and though he had replacement swords, he had nothing better than the one he'd lost.

And now he was down to one functioning leg. It was a good thing that he'd kicked with his non-dominant leg, but that wasn't much consolation.

He could have called a mage to heal him, but he didn't have time to wait.

Things looked hopeless.

"But I can't just give up... Tch, of course it does this."

He looked up to see the dragon slightly bending its body.

It wasn't because Klaus had done any damage with his attacks. He wasn't even sure if the dragon had noticed them.

What he saw next answered the question of what its next move would be.

Flames were beginning to leak out of its mouth.

Dragonbreath.

"Run! It's about to breathe fire! Don't try to block it! Just scatter and get away!"

Everyone on the ground immediately complied with Klaus's shout from above.

Klaus had trained them himself. They could handle this much...

But it was too late.

As if to say his orders were meaningless, the fiery breath burnt the soldiers to a crisp.

They had taken the best course of action.

They just hadn't been able to avoid it because the dragonbreath's span was too wide.

It was only because he was in midair that Klaus hadn't been hit. If he had been at even a slightly different angle, it could have been a direct hit.

But just because it wasn't a direct hit didn't mean that he had gotten away

unscathed.

Even the heat radiating off the flames could apparently affect him despite his armor and Fire Resistance Skill.

He covered his face with his arms, and as he felt the heat through them, he finally landed on the ground.

With one broken foot and the flames still burning around him, though, it felt more like he'd landed in hell.

"Ugh...!"

He felt the impact through his whole body, and the ground below him sank in slightly.

It hurt, of course, but he'd only get burned if he stood still. He forced himself upright on one leg.

"Good to see you're all right, sir."

A commander was there to greet Klaus, along with tens...no, hundreds of foot soldiers. From his own side, of course.

"You all... Why are you here? Didn't you run away?"

"We were on the front lines. As soon as we saw the dragonbreath, we decided it would give us the best chance of survival to run this way. We also had mages casting defensive spells as we ran, so it was half luck."

"I see..."

It made sense. The dragon would aim its breath at the spot with the most people, and the majority of the soldiers had retreated when Klaus arrived on the front line.

He'd intended to decide his next step based on the information he gathered, but...

"Do you know how many injuries there were?"

"Well, we only just managed to get here after running away..."

"That makes sense..."

“But in my personal opinion, they’ve most likely been decimated.”

Klaus nodded in agreement. Although he’d been close to the ground, he’d seen enough from above to confirm that.

“Well, let’s get you healed. Is there anything else you need?”

Klaus smiled when he heard those words, since they confirmed that the men hadn’t given up despite the scenario.

He’d always been proud of his subordinates, and this proved that his pride hadn’t been misplaced.

“Let’s see... First, get me a sword, any sword. I can’t put up a fight against the Archdragon without one.”

He wasn’t sure whether he could put up a fight *with* a sword, but he knew he couldn’t possibly do anything without one.

Just when he was wondering what else he could use, someone called out to him.

“Do you have need of a skilled mage, perhaps? I happen to be proficient in attack, defense, and healing magic.”

“Wha... Sophia?! What are you doing here?!”

He turned toward the familiar voice to see his wife, Sophia.

Not even Klaus could hide his surprise at seeing her where she shouldn’t have been.



“I came to tell you about some bad news I heard, and it seems I was right...albeit a little late.”

“No, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything about this even if I’d known. As for how you got here... You came alone? You were reckless again, I see.”

“It’s no big deal. It did give me a fright when this happened the second I got here, though. I thought I would see what was going on here first, so I jumped outside the fort...and it looks like that was the right decision.”

“That’s just as reckless.”

Sophia lived in the other Neumond territory, the most remote location in the kingdom. It wasn’t the kind of place she could come from and return to in a day, and she was serving as the head of the family while Klaus was away, so she wasn’t in a position to leave.

Even if she had been able to leave for half a day, this country wasn’t small that she could get here in that time.

It would be another story if she had some means of getting here without spending any time traveling.

And there was a way to do that: teleportation.

But it—

“I have a report!”

“Klaus is in the middle of a conversation!”

“My apologies, sir, but this is urgent!”

“I don’t mind. We don’t have time for a long conversation right now, anyway. Will you help me, Sophia?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’m counting on you. That’s all I need to know for the time being. I doubt there’s more we need to do right now other than deal with that thing, but...what happened?”

“The Veritas army has begun advancing on us, sir!”

“Wha...?!”

That wasn’t possible.

There was a dragon.

And they were restarting the war at this moment?

It was crazy. Suicidal, even.

“But wait... Could these two events be related?”

There were a lot of strange things about this scenario. The sudden mobilization of troops, the dragon that had appeared at exactly the same time, and the fact that the dragon had aimed for the Ladius troops despite the other side having greater numbers on the field.

The logical conclusion based on those facts was that...

“Tch, it’s not giving us time to think things over!”

Klaus lifted his head to see the dragon preparing to breathe for a second time. If he dawdled here, he would surely end up getting burned this time.

“Sorry, but come with me, Sophia. Heal my foot and then hold it off with all you have!”

“Will do. I don’t have a good grasp on the situation yet, but I’ll figure it out.”

“What about the Veritas troops?!”

“That’s the only way to escape! Fend them off as you go!”

“There you go, being reckless again... But that does seem to be the only option. Understood. Did you all hear that? Retreat to the front!”

Once the commander shouted, the soldiers began to yell and charge toward the front.

He really was proud of his subordinates.

“I’d say we should go with them, but you need healing first.”

“We can do it as we go. Lend me your shoulder.”

“You can go ahead of us too.”

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t taught to run away and abandon my superiors.”

“I see. There’s no helping that, then. Let’s go.”

“I’d better include that in my orders in the future.”

As they spoke, the dragon continued to prepare to release its breath in the sky above.

The three scurried out of the area as they watched it out of the corners of their eyes.

31

A Veritas soldier watched with mixed feelings as the dragon mowed down the enemy troops.

He'd thought the officer who had said the dragon was on their side was out of his mind, but judging by this, it was true. The other side had suffered serious injuries, but everyone on their side was unhurt.

He couldn't simply be happy about it, though, because he and his comrades hadn't accomplished this themselves.

Some of them were happy about it, however.

"Hmph, those thieving traitors deserve it! It's too bad that I won't be able to kill them myself...but this is quite the satisfying sight to see!"

The soldier sighed and looked over at the man who was speaking. It was the officer who he'd thought had gone mad earlier. Things might have been easier if he really had been out of his mind.

"What a sorry sight... They keep resisting when they've already lost. Tch, and what are they doing on the front lines? Might as well kill off the ones that are almost dead!"

The officer said that in response to the troops who had survived the dragonbreath coming this way and knocking down the Veritas soldiers.

That was the strong Ladius army the soldier knew. He wasn't in a position to praise them, but he'd been seeing their faces for years now.

They were meant to kill each other, but there had been no casualties for the past several years. He felt a kind of kinship with them despite knowing that they were at war, which was probably the reason for his mixed feelings.

But the biggest reason was probably that it was the jerk of an officer who had said that line.

He wanted to retort that if the officer thought so, maybe he should go out in front and kill them himself.

But officers were officers, even if they were jerks. The soldier couldn't give voice to his thoughts.

The asshole—*whoops*, the officer did have a reason for saying that, however.

He was from a noble family that had once ruled this area. He'd planned to serve in the army only briefly and then return to his domain after achieving a certain level of success.

But before he succeeded, the revolution had happened and this domain had seceded. Since it was part of a different kingdom now, that left the officer's family with a noble title but no land.

Then they'd had fingers pointed at them, people calling them nobles who couldn't protect their land, so he'd been left with no choice but to stay in the army.

The soldier knew that about the officer from listening to his constant complaints...and he knew one other thing.

The officer always said that if he'd been in his domain when the revolution had happened, he would have been able to protect it...but he actually had been there.

And yet when the people rebelled, he'd fled for his life.

The soldier knew that.

And that was why he hated the asshole.

He had the thought that he could slip into the chaos and punch the man, but he didn't have the guts.

The enemy troops were putting up a good fight, but they probably wouldn't make it this far into the Veritas lines.

And if they did, the soldier would have to fight, which would be an issue for him.

"Not even they can stand up to that thing," the man muttered, looking at the dragon and the two people standing before it.

After the dragon had breathed a second time, it had descended to the ground

and started rampaging there. There were two people standing in its way.

He knew their names and faces, of course. He'd been here as long as this had been a battleground between the two kingdoms, and of those two, he'd seen the man nearly every day since he'd joined the army.

There was no way he wouldn't know who the man was... In fact, he'd known since even before then.

The youngest to ever be admitted into the Elite Seven.

One of the strongest in the world—the strongest swordsman.

The Elite Swordsman, first of the Elite Seven.

Klaus Neumond.

And the soldier knew the woman next to Klaus too.

The one who had been admitted to the Elite Seven after defeating the fourth Dark Commander.

One of the strongest in the world—the strongest mage.

The Elite Mage, seventh of the Elite Seven.

Sophia Neumond.

Those were the two people standing there.

The army fell into a state of half panic when they spotted not only Klaus, who they couldn't even come close to matching up to, but Sophia as well.

The officer started to run away...but what shattered their despair was an even greater despair.

The black dragon had easily mowed both of them down.

There were no cheers from the Veritas side when they saw it, however.

All it did was tell them all over again how terrifying the dragon was.

And despite knowing that better than anyone, the two were still standing. They weren't giving in, however many times they were knocked down.

It almost made the soldier want to cheer them on...but he couldn't do that.

“Ha, it got them again! They never learn! They oughta just give up and beg for their lives. Not that I’d forgive them!”

The soldier sighed and screwed up his face at the grating yell.

The troops were enveloped in vermilion flame, as were the two of the world’s strongest warriors who were standing in the dragon’s way.

It was almost like a play...but its conclusion wasn’t going to be pretty.

The two who he’d secretly looked up to would be killed by the dragon soon.

That was just how the world worked; things didn’t go your way. He let out another big sigh.

†

Klaus didn’t have to be told that dragons made formidable opponents.

But as he looked at the imposing figure before him, he sighed, thinking maybe he hadn’t truly understood that until now.

“I didn’t expect this to be such a one-sided fight.”

“Me neither... I didn’t think I was underestimating it, but I suppose I only *thought* that.”

Even knowing that, though, they didn’t have the choice to retreat.

It wasn’t a question of what would happen to this battlefield.

The dragon was clearly on the side of Veritas. That was evident by the fact that the advancing troops took no notice of it.

If they did nothing, the Archdragon would take over their kingdom.

That was the one thing the two of them couldn’t let happen.

“Sophia... You’ve done enough here. Go report this to the capital. I don’t know how much it’ll mean, or how much longer I can hold out...but it’ll be far better than doing nothing.”

“But I...”

He knew it was cruel to say to her. Just over a year ago, she’d had to abandon her son for the sake of her kingdom, and now he was telling her to abandon her

husband as well. It was nothing but cruel.

But...

“I’m sorry... None of this is fair to you. I wish I’d been there to do something when Soma...”

“No... It would have been the same if you had been there. I wouldn’t have let you do whatever you tried.”

That was probably true.

No, Klaus probably wouldn’t have been able to do anything in the first place.

Although it would have been the right thing to do as a person to try to do something about Soma, they’d had no choice but to forsake him.

The right thing to do as a man, as a husband, and as a parent.

But it was the wrong thing to do as the Duke of Neumond, and that was everything.

So being there would have been a meaningless consolation.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I already know you’re awkward like that. And I’m not qualified to speak on it. Anyway... I’ll be going, then.”

“Yes...”

As they spoke, the dragon was there. They didn’t really have time for such a drawn-out conversation.

But for some reason, the dragon wasn’t making any move toward them.

It could have had some ulterior motive...or it could have been because of the enemy troops approaching.

Before they noticed, the troops were right there.

Not even the subordinates he was so proud of could do anything against such overwhelming numbers.

When he’d left them, he’d told them to put their lives above all else...but how many would survive?

And he couldn’t say whether they would be kept alive if they were taken as prisoners of war. Some of the enemy soldiers would be willing to hear them out, but others deeply resented them.

There were laws governing the treatment of captives, but everyone knew there were many times when they weren’t upheld on the battlefield.

Whatever the case, he would put his soldiers to good use for the time being.

Sophia took a small white sphere from her pocket. Then she crushed it in her fist.

Klaus had never seen it before, but it was clearly a magical tool—one for teleportation.

There was a clear and simple reason that she’d used such a thing. Sophia couldn’t use teleportation magic.

Mages couldn’t necessarily use all types of magic, even if their grade was high.

The most striking examples were spatial and temporal spells—they were said to depend entirely on inborn talent.

In other words, if someone could cast the most basic of those spells, they could cast all of them, but if they couldn’t do that, they couldn’t cast any of them. It was very easy to understand, in a sense.

So although Sophia had Special-Grade Sorcery, she couldn’t use spatial magic. That meant that if she wanted to teleport, she had to use a magical item for it. She’d probably used the same kind of thing to get here.

“Two teleportation devices, huh? That’ll tip the balance in our checkbooks.”

“Oh, I used something else to get here, but this is a warp portal I got recently. It’s not as versatile as what I’ve used in the past, but it’s more economical.”

“Is that so? I didn’t know.”

As they had the idle conversation, the space around Sophia had begun to warp. The teleportation was starting.

The distortion grew larger until her form became indistinct.

They didn’t need to say goodbye. Klaus just watched her intently.

And then...

“Huh...?”

“Wha—”

There was a sound like glass shattering, and then he saw Sophia still standing there as she had been.

32

Impossible, Klaus thought.

Teleportation was supposed to be impossible to interfere with once it had started.

Failure should have been impossible unless one was using spatial magic on a much larger scale...

“Why the surprise? Don’t tell me you thought you could escape me so easily?”

“Wha?!” Klaus shouted. The fear he’d felt before didn’t even compare to what was filling him now.

He didn’t have to guess where the voice had come from.

It was the black dragon in front of them.

But that itself was so impossible as to make him forget about the failed teleportation.

He wasn’t shocked that a dragon had spoken. They were intelligent, so that was normal.

It was just that...

“No... Do you intend to die?!”

Sophia’s words were no exaggeration—they were an undeniable fact.

When a dragon spoke, that meant it planned to face its death.

Dragons were apparitions; they were fantasy creatures. They shouldn’t have existed in this world.

The reason apparitions could exist despite that was because of the human consciousness. They could be born and continue to exist because of the large number of people who believed in them.

That was the opposite of how the world normally worked, but that was just how much power human consciousness and will had.

Skills and magic were good examples. A simple way to put it would be that they temporarily rewrote the world according to human will. Just one person's will could have that much influence over the world.

So it wasn't strange if one or two impossible things happened when you increased the scale to all of mankind.

What was certain was that dragons were born of human consciousness, and they should not have existed in this world.

That meant that the world couldn't take notice of them, or it would erase them, taking something that shouldn't exist and making it really not exist.

It was the resolution of a contradiction.

If it was a law of the world that human will could influence it, then this, too, was a law—and it stood to reason that the world's consciousness would be stronger than a human's.

That meant that apparitions tried not to stand out. Fantasy creatures or not, anything that was alive would try not to die.

In order not to die, they couldn't remain completely hidden, however. As explained before, they existed due to the human consciousness, so they had to demonstrate to humans that they existed.

That was why dragons attacked human towns at times, and also why they didn't attack *too* viciously. It was essential for the former's existence that the latter didn't die.

That was the same reason that dragons didn't speak. They were more than imposing enough just flying around and burning down towns.

If they spoke, it would strengthen people's awareness of their existence. That meant exerting a stronger influence on the world, which increased the likelihood of them being noticed. In other words, it was risking death.

It was something that a normal dragon would never do, especially with the army of Veritas here.

Even if it had just been Klaus and Sophia, what it was doing meant...

"Hmph, you're about to be killed, and yet you're concerned for the one about

to kill you? Or don't tell me that you think you won't be killed? I did nothing because I thought you were trying to do something interesting. In the end, however, it was nothing worth my time."

"All right, finally done with them... Hey, idiots! What's taking you so long against these people? Well, I guess they're the only ones left... Huh? Prisoners? Just leave them! We'll kill them later anyway! More importantly... Hey, dragon!"

One of the enemy soldiers shouted over the dragon.

His face was familiar to Klaus. He was one of the commanding officers.

Klaus remembered him because this officer had been oddly hostile.

As Klaus wondered what he intended to do at this point, the officer continued to shout.

"You get it! You're leaving those two for me to kill! Hold them right there, okay?! Don't let them cause us any trouble!"

He was ordering the dragon around like a servant, as if he saw himself as above it. A lot of the nobles in that kingdom had been the same way.

That man was probably from a noble family himself.

It was hard to believe that he would behave that way toward a dragon, but his behavior presented an opportunity.

Maybe Klaus could do something right now...

"You presume that you can command me? Don't push your luck, human."

A gust of wind brushed against Klaus's skin.

He immediately grasped what had happened because it was a familiar experience.

A roaring sound followed, then the sound of something being crushed.

Along with moaning and screaming.

"Wh... What?!"

"Hmph... Remember this. I am Fafnir, the ancient dragon bearing the name of

terror and despair!”

“You’re even stating your name... And I thought you were on the side of Veritas.”

“I don’t know how they see it...but I only promised to leave them be in exchange for them unlocking my seal. It is of no concern to me if they decide to come down and insult me themselves.”

As he listened, Klaus turned to look behind him and saw a terrible scene.

It was a massacre.

What the dragon had just done was to sweep its tail at them.

The average soldier would die instantly if hit with it.

And since it was gigantic, its range was also wide.

That meant that that attack alone had created this scene.

But this was clearly overkill.

It was true that the officer had insulted the dragon. It could be said that it was natural that the dragon would be angry...but that probably wasn’t the reason.

That wasn’t why the dragon had unleashed that attack. The officer who’d made the problematic statement was still alive. Its tail had passed in front of him, barely missing him...but that was probably intentional on the dragon’s part, not luck.

“Do you really intend to die?” Sophia asked again.

She’d probably thought the same thing as Klaus.

If what it had said before was true, this dragon was based in the concepts of terror and despair. Those feelings directed toward it as the strongest possible being were the source of its power. That meant that the more humans feared it, the more powerful it became.

Considering that, this way of doing things wasn’t wrong, in a sense. It could incite an abundance of terror and despair in them and gain a lot of power that way.

But at the same time, it was clearly overkill.

The same went for the fact that it had stopped Sophia's teleportation earlier. It was true that it wasn't strange that a dragon could do that, but they usually didn't even if they could.

If they did, it would lead to this.

"Damn it, they said it was on our side...!"

"It hurts! No! I don't wanna die...!"

Shouts of resentment and despair filled the air. Anger had long been forgotten. They all knew it would amount to nothing.

All of their conceptions, directed at the dragon, amplified its power...and brought it that much closer to death. It could have been erased from existence at any second.

It wasn't that Klaus had ever seen it happen with his own eyes.

But he was a Giftholder. He knew intuitively how much power it was appropriate for a living being to have.

And what he saw here far exceeded that.

"Why would you go that far? You may have been created by the world, but now you're a living thing... Shouldn't you want to avoid death?"

"The likes of you would not understand, but I will tell you anyway... It is what my lord...or the one who was once my lord...desires."

"Your lord... Do you mean the Archdevil?"

"Indeed... The one who you people gave that name and then destroyed!"

They felt a clear anger radiating from the dragon, unlike anything they'd felt before. Bloodlust burned for the first time in its almost inorganic eyes.

"I'm sorry... Maybe I shouldn't have asked."

"It's fine. It'll turn out the same in the end."

Escape was impossible. Klaus had made that judgment.

And resistance had been meaningless from the start.

The two stood alone, and the sword Klaus held was so mangled it could have

fallen apart at any moment.

The same went for his body...it was impressive that he'd managed to endure this long.

But that meant he wouldn't be able to take the next attack.

Especially not if it was colored with rage and made with the intent to kill.

"Thus it is even better if I perish! He was the lord of death and destruction...if I am to perish after bringing it about, that is to be desired, not begrudged!"

It all made sense for Klaus once he heard those words.

The dragon just wanted to destroy everything.

Including itself.

That was why it sought power, so it had no reason to hesitate.

"I suppose it would get angry if I said it sounds like a child screaming...although maybe I shouldn't be saying that as a failure of a mother in the first place."

"I thought the same thing...but I guess I'm a failed parent too."

It had mentioned a few things that were on Klaus's mind—an ancient dragon, a seal, the Archdevil.

But it wouldn't answer even if he asked, and thinking about it was pointless if he was only going to die.

But even so...

Though he knew it would all amount to nothing...

Klaus wasn't going to give up until the end.

And the same went for Sophia.

It wasn't that he thought they wouldn't die.

They faced a certain death after this.

A quick, merciless, and pointless one.

But if all this dragon sought was destruction, if it didn't care about dying

itself...

Then if they could buy a minute, even a second, of time, it would save someone else.

That was their duty, their responsibility.

They had cut away all else to fulfill that duty until their deaths, so it wouldn't make sense to give up now, nor would it be allowed.

Other people may have forgiven them, but Klaus and Sophia would never have forgiven themselves.

And then there was that issue...

This wouldn't redeem them for their abandonment.

But they thought just maybe, doing this would help.

"I wish I could have told you a lot more than I did."

"Then I'll look forward to hearing about it on the other side."

Klaus squeezed Sophia's hand. She squeezed his back and smiled.

Klaus nodded back...then glared ahead, although it wasn't as if he could do anything.

And then...

"May all perish, as my lord desired...!"

"That's what you want? Then you perish first, you damn reptile."

In the next moment, the giant's body was blasted away.

33

The next thing they knew, Soma's party was standing somewhere unfamiliar.

They immediately knew where it was, though, because of the thing on the ground.

It was a dead body. And a familiar one, at that.

But that came as no surprise.

It was the one Soma had created himself, after all.

The color black spread across the floor—the color of the robe that the suspicious man they'd just seen had been wearing.

"Hmm... So we were spot on."

"Mm-hmm. But that was reckless."

Soma turned to look at Sierra. She seemed rather exasperated.

He just shrugged in response. Even he was aware that he'd been rash this time, but it had been the fastest way.

"But people don't normally do that...or think of it."

"Well, it was also because I have prior experience with teleportation."

"At the ruins you mentioned before?"

"Yes, those."

That was, in fact, why he had thought to do this. He'd remembered it when he'd asked himself what would be the fastest way to get somewhere else.

It had been half a gamble, to be honest, but what mattered in the end was that it had gone well.

Just then...

"Lina?! Are you okay?!"

"Hmm? Is something the matter?"

“Lina’s been staring into space, and she won’t answer me. I heard some people get sick from teleportation, so maybe that’s why. If it weren’t for a certain someone going overboard...!”

He had no way to defend himself, so he looked away from Aina. Just then, Lina, who was now in his line of sight, twitched.

“Oh...”

“Lina! Are you okay?!”

“Oh, uh... Yeah... Yes, I am.”

“Are you sure? You’re acting kind of weird... You know you don’t have to hold back for that dummy’s sake, right?”

“No, I’m fine, really... I think I just got kinda, uh, teleportation-sick?”



“You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Lina, you can tell me if something is wrong.”

“No, I’m... I’m fine.”

“Hmm...”

If she said so herself, she probably was fine.

For now, even as he thought about what he’d done, he had something else he needed to do.

“So, it seems we’ve come to the place we wanted to...but there’s still a problem.”

“Mm-hmm...the problem of where we are.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

They could tell they were inside a room based on the things around them, but that was all they could tell.

It would have been nice if there were a map in there...but that was unlikely.

“Well, I suppose we should go outside for now.”

“Yeah, I doubt we’ll find any clues in here.”

“I just hope we’re not somewhere random, like in the mountains.”

“We could actually be.”

“I would like to think that’s not the case...”

But if the robed man was able to manipulate space, it was possible that he’d made a hideout in a place like that and tried to teleport from there. That would make what Soma had done useless.

But they wouldn’t know until they checked, so as they conversed, they left the room to discover that they’d been in a room within an empty mansion.

And when they left that mansion...

They immediately saw a gigantic black mass in the sky above.

†

Soma clicked his tongue as he looked at the figure he'd blown away.

He'd thought he had it, but the dragon had moved slightly out of the way. It had given him a bit of a shock, which meant it was good enough to call itself a dragon, even if it was corrupt.

Once he'd landed, he put that thought aside and surveyed the area. It was a terrible state of affairs, but Soma exhaled slightly, seeing that he'd saved the bare minimum of people he'd wanted to save.

That wasn't much to be proud of, though, since it was only the bare minimum.

He had a grasp on the situation, albeit a tenuous one.

The party had rushed directly over as soon as they'd seen the dragon, but they'd seen a lot of things on the way whether they wanted to or not.

"You..."

Soma responded to Sophia with a shrug. "They say to see what is right and not do it is to lack courage, do they not? I'm just a swordsman passing by. No need to pay me any mind."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, perhaps because she was wary.

He couldn't blame her for that.

After all...

"I can't let such a suspicious passerby go unnoticed."

"Hmm... You certainly have a point there."

Soma nodded in response to Klaus because it was indeed an undeniable fact.

Who wouldn't be suspicious at the sight of a stranger with their face hidden in a white robe?

Yes, Soma had deliberately hidden his face before coming out here. And he wasn't just doing it for fun—he had a proper reason.

Soma wasn't supposed to be here. Technically, no one was supposed to know

that he existed. That was an absolute rule, since the official records said he didn't exist.

Nothing would happen immediately if he showed himself, but they were in the middle of a war, so he couldn't take the small risk of people talking about his connection with his parents.

So he'd borrowed Sierra's robe before he came.

He couldn't exactly explain that to them, though.

"Well, all I can do is ask you to trust me."

"All right... I will, then."

"Hmm? Are you sure?"

He hadn't actually thought she would trust him when he'd said that. He'd figured he would have to act on his own initiative despite them not believing him, even.

"Well, you may be suspicious, but you saved us. It would be shameful not to trust someone after that."

"Hmm...?"

Soma was honestly taken aback that even Klaus would concur with Sophia.

It was probably true that they felt indebted to him after he'd helped them, but he'd never thought they would trust him just based on that, especially since they were in positions of authority. They would know better than anyone that they couldn't afford to make friendly with others on the battlefield.

But if they said they would trust him, it would be weird to reject it.

They could also have been planning to observe him after saying that, but he had nothing to feel guilty about.

He just had to defeat that thing...

"Watch out—"

"Then I can resume my journey."

Before Sophia could finish, he swung his arm without even a glance, blasting away the thing that had been approaching.

Its heat didn't even reach him. He sighed at how weak it was.

"I was a little nervous when I saw what I thought was the original body of the dragon...but maybe I had no need to rush."

As he murmured, the memory of the dragon he'd fought at the end of his past life crossed his mind.

It might have been harsh to compare this one to it, but the current Soma wouldn't have been able to blow away the breath of that dragon of dragons.

It would probably have taken everything he could do to just barely block it.

And while it would only have been an issue if he'd really been faced with that sort of attack, he couldn't hide his slight disappointment.

"Well, I suppose I should be glad that I can set out sooner."

"Impossible... Not only did you toss me aside, you blew away my fire...? What *are* you?!"

"I said that I'm a swordsman passing by. Do I have to repeat myself?"

He looked over to see the giant dragon trying to stand up. Seeing that he hadn't damaged it much, he sighed.

It seemed he wasn't one to talk about not being strong enough. Back in his past life, he could have easily sliced this dragon in half.

Not that saying so meant anything.

"All right, I'll take care of this one, so may I leave the troops behind us to you? They seem afraid right now, but we can't be sure they won't resume attacking. That would pose a problem."

"Well... That's true, but... We—"

"It's okay. We can leave this to him. The troops are important too...and I think we would only get in his way."

“You’re...right. Okay, then.”

“So we’ll take care of the back. I take it that you can handle this.”

“Naturally.”

“I see.”

Soma nodded confidently, seeing as he’d said himself that he could, and Klaus gave him a slight smile in return.

Something seemed off about it, but Klaus had already turned around before Soma could express his puzzlement.

It bothered him a little...but this was more important.

The dragon’s size made it look nearby, but in fact, it was rather far off. It would pose a problem for him if it started flying around or firing off attacks indiscriminately.

It would be better if he put a stop to it before then.

“I get the sense that I could handle whatever you might do, though.”

“Lowly human... Don’t get too full of yourself!”

“I don’t mean to, since I understand my own limits...but it’s easier said than done. Frankly, you look like a mere reptile with wings to me.”

“You cheeky bastard...!”

Soma narrowed his eyes at the furious dragon.

That had been a needless provocation, yet he’d done it anyway.

He knew it would have been more efficient to say nothing before defeating it, but he hadn’t been able to keep from saying it.

He glanced behind him for a moment, then let out yet another sigh.

As he thought of how he’d grown weaker in mind as well as body since his past life, a slight smile came to his face.

“You can roar as much as you like, but it doesn’t change that you’re a reptile. So make like a reptile—crawl in the dirt and die.”

With that, Soma kicked off the ground at it.

34

Sophia thought she must be dreaming when she saw him.

This is quite convenient for me, she thought self-deprecatingly.

But she wasn't waking up—and the warmth of the hand she was holding told her this was real.

Even though this shouldn't have been happening.

There was no reason for him to help her.

He'd probably understood, maybe even accepted it.

But that was no reason not to have hard feelings.

It didn't make sense for him to forgive her.

No amount of confidence on his part could add up to make amends for what she'd done.

It was incoherent.

There was no way it could *be* coherent.

Only if he abandoned her to face a cruel death.

But it didn't go away, however she tried to deny it.

So Sophia just watched the scene.

†

Klaus and Sophia had been facing toward the rear, but soon enough they found themselves looking forward at the scene.

It was partly because the Veritas troops seemed discouraged and were making no move to attack...but mostly because the two of them just wanted to see.

See their son fighting the dragon.

"He's...amazing."

“Yes... He really is,” Klaus agreed, a hint of admiration in his voice.

The sword flashes racing through his field of view seemed to vanish as soon as they appeared. It was all he could do to keep track of their afterimages.

And it was only because he was at a distance that he could grasp them at all. If he’d been hit with one close up, he would have been sliced apart before he knew what happened.

He’d been called the Elite Swordsman for ten years already. He’d never imagined that he would meet someone who he couldn’t possibly measure up to.

No...that wasn’t true.

Klaus had been vaguely aware that this day would eventually come.

He had just never thought it would be today.

“I honestly never imagined he would come this far... Fighting a dragon solo, of all things?”

“You didn’t know about this?”

That was unexpected. He’d thought Sophia had a grasp on most things, even if she claimed otherwise.

“No, I didn’t. I wasn’t meant to know. I did hear that he defeated a Dark Commander, but I never expected that either.”

“What? A Dark Commander? This is the first I’m hearing about it.”

“Right, because it didn’t officially happen. There was no way I could announce it. The reason I came here in the first place was to tell you that.”

“Hmm, I see.”

Defeated a Dark Commander. That was quite the big announcement.

Its impact on the world, let alone the kingdom, would be impossible to ignore. That act alone would mark the one who had done it as exceptional even if he had no Skills.

But at the same time, to announce that would be to allow a large-scale war with the devils.

So it was needless to say what they'd had to prioritize.

And Sophia had done exactly that.

Once again, she'd prioritized her kingdom over putting her son in center stage.

She probably deserved to be blamed for that.

No, she *had* to be blamed.

But Klaus was the last person who could pass that judgment.

"That's too bad. I'd rather have taken our time talking about that. But I suppose this works, since I have no need to doubt that it's true anymore."

"Oh, you know you would have believed it whether you saw this or not."

Klaus shrugged. That was in fact likely.

He probably would have believed it without a doubt even if this had never happened.

Because Klaus knew that Soma was just that talented. That hadn't changed when Klaus found out about his son's lack of Skills.

Klaus knew that Soma was far stronger than himself despite supposedly having no Skills.

So there was no reason for him to hold doubts.

And with that knowledge, Klaus had agreed to erase Soma's existence officially.

It wasn't because he was Sophia's husband.

Nor was it because he'd decided it was appropriate.

It was because he had an obligation to do so.

Actual ability and talent were irrelevant.

Whether or not Soma had Skills was everything.

Klaus wasn't in a position to deny that, at least, being one of the people who'd founded this kingdom and shaped it to concentrate on Skills.

He didn’t intend to excuse himself. It had been he and Sophia who had decided it was necessary and right.

He had to take responsibility for that.

Even if it meant he had to feign foisting that responsibility onto his children...

Even if he grieved over it...

He wasn’t allowed to run away from it.

“I think you still beat me, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“You knew who he was the instant you saw him, didn’t you? I only knew because I saw how you reacted.”

Indeed, Klaus was aware that the person with the suspicious outfit was his own son...and he knew that because he’d seen how Sophia reacted.

In that moment, before he’d noticed who it was, Klaus had questioned why he didn’t feel wary, but he’d put reason first and had gone on guard.

But then he’d realized that Sophia wasn’t being cautious at all...and he’d understood everything once he saw her eyes.

There was no need to wonder who she would look at like that.

“Ah, well, that’s because I knew him longer, isn’t it? You only spent three years with him.”

“That’s true, but...”

Klaus shut his mouth before he could finish. It would be meaningless to say the rest.

That Sophia had been a good mother.

But saying so would only hurt her now that she could no longer do that.

“But?”

“It’s nothing.”

“I see...”

She probably had an idea of what he'd been about to say.

Sophia turned forward without a word, and Klaus followed suit.

Soma seemed to be winning the ongoing fight.

Klaus couldn't declare that for sure because although Soma was pressuring it, he was up against a dragon.

Needless to say, a dragon was not the kind of enemy you could typically defeat solo.

The first issue was the difference in size. If that had been all, it would just have made a larger target, but dragons had more to them. They had resilience, attack power, and defensive ability to match their size.

An army of ten thousand all attacking together couldn't even scratch its scales, and one attack from the dragon could kill that entire army.

Even if they managed to endure the attack and harm the dragon, it would heal itself in an instant, and that would be the same however many times they tried.

This was because humans couldn't kill dragons. To kill a dragon would be to kill a part of their collective imagination.

It wasn't even comparable to cutting space itself.

It wasn't possible for a human.

Or it shouldn't have been possible...

"It seems to me like he could just defeat it like any other enemy."

"I've been thinking the same thing."

Each of Soma's attacks pierced the dragon's tough scales, cutting through its skin and wounding its flesh. Even its fiery breath was being sliced apart, and it was gaining more and more wounds that it couldn't entirely heal.

Soma, on the other hand, was still unhurt.

That didn't mean he wasn't having a hard time...but his movements hadn't changed since he'd started.

He swung his sword precisely, cutting the dragon and cornering it.

Klaus wouldn't have thought Sophia was lying if she'd told him Soma had defeated a Dark Commander...but he could hardly believe what he was seeing right now with his own eyes.

"Grr... Impossible... None of my attacks land...and you cut my flesh? This should not be...!"

"Well, that's what's happening right now, whether you think it should be or not. I would recommend accepting defeat."

"Never... I shall never accept it! Not this, nor the sense I get from you!"

The dragon roared and its attacks grew more violent, but Soma continued how he had been. He sliced at it like any other enemy, bringing the dragon closer to a supposedly impossible death.

"I get this feeling at times like this..."

"What feeling?"

"It makes me wonder if I'm dreaming. It's just too good to be true."

"It really is..."

A dragon was close to being killed.

That was enough to make them think they were dreaming...but above all, it was the son they'd abandoned who was making it happen.

After he'd saved them, moreover.

In a sense, it was only natural that they would think it was a dream.

"Oh, I know that feeling," Klaus heard a girl say. "I thought the same thing back then."

"Oh, you mean when my brother saved you? I was unconscious, so I don't remember... Mm, no fair!"

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?!"

"I'm a bit jealous too..." a third voice added. "Share?"

"How?!"

“I’ll try using magic!”

“That sounds like something Soma would say...”

Klaus turned to look because he’d heard his son’s name...and also because one of the voices was familiar.

And what came into his sight was exactly what he’d expected.

That was...

“Lina...?”

“Oh, mother, father! It’s been a long time.”

“It certainly has been...but why are you here? Based on what I heard, you...”

“Umm, about that... Right, we just happened to cross paths on our journeys!”

“I told everyone you were recovering from an illness.”

“Oh, you did? Well, then, you know... My latent power awakened to heal me when my kingdom was in crisis!”

“At least try to hide it...”

“Too hard... No helping it.”

“I guess that’s not wrong, in a sense...”

As he listened, Klaus remembered.

Klaus had heard that Lina had followed Soma, and Soma was here.

That meant it wasn’t surprising that Lina was here as well.

“But you had no need to come here, did you? You must be able to tell how dangerous it is at a glance.”

“Um, well, he told us to wait here, but...”

“We couldn’t just wait somewhere safe while he was in danger. Well, maybe Lina could have.”

“I told you, I was just teleportation-sick! I’m fine now, see? And it doesn’t make a difference what situation we’re in, anyway.”

“Mm-hmm. Coming here doesn’t mean we can do anything. But we came

knowing that.”

“Hmm...”

Klaus turned to look at the two other girls who had replied in place of Lina, narrowing his eyes.

Neither of them was familiar to him. One of them seemed to be an elf, which was a bit of a surprise, but they’d probably come along with Soma and Lina.

He wondered why, but if that was the case, there was no need to be wary of them.

Keeping aware of the area behind him, he turned his back to the three girls and looked at the dragon.

“Well, now that you’re here, try not to stray too far from us. We wouldn’t be able to show our faces to him if we failed to keep you safe. Not that we’re capable now...but it’d be best not to make it worse.”

“Yeah...”

“Um, I’d rather you not say things like that... I don’t know how to respond.”

“Is that so? That makes sense...”

It would only trouble her to hear her parents complain.

Klaus smiled self-deprecatingly at the three girls with indescribable looks on their faces.

Maybe he was further gone than he’d thought, if he was saying things like that to children.

“Even with you protecting us, I doubt we can do much if that dragon attacks.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“There’s no way he’s going to lose.”

“Mm-hmm. So we won’t be attacked here, which is why we came.”

“I see...”

A crooked smile crossed Klaus’s face. He wasn’t sure if it was okay for him to

think he'd always known his son would have such things said about him.

"So he's living up to our faith, I see."

"Did you say something?"

"Well, we're not qualified to say so, but...I'm proud of him, is all."

"Yes, of course!"

As if in response to Lina's smile, Soma's next attack sliced the dragon's tail off.

The giant tail flew through the sky, and the dragon roared its fury.

"No... I will not allow this! For his sake, I cannot let this be the end...!"

"Well, I understand you have your own circumstances. Unfortunately, they mean nothing to me. You did something unforgivable. That's the one thing that matters to me. Therefore..."

"Not yet... I can keep going...!"

"Fall already."

The dragon roared and swiped its paw in rage as it launched another attack, but Soma dodged it with ease.

With one step, he slipped directly under the dragon's head.

He muttered something that the wind swept away.

But the other thing that happened stayed visible... Just like the tail, something even larger was flying through the air.

It was the dragon's head.

Its body slowly tilted to the side as if to match the fact that it had been cut away despite its immortality.

And then...

Its defeat was announced throughout the battlefield by an impact that shook the earth.

At the same time, it served as the signal that the battle was now over.

35

To go into what happened after that...

The Veritas side collapsed immediately, with Soma's defeat of the dragon as a turning point.

With two of the Elite Seven present, as well as someone who had defeated a dragon, it was only logical that the opposing side would think they couldn't win.

But a very few thought differently. Somehow, they saw an opportunity to attack with the dragon down.

Klaus recalled a familiar figure shouting, "This is our chance! Charge!"

And that had been the last time Klaus had seen the man alive.

There are some of those types on every battlefield—those who can't read the situation, those who try reckless things.

And those who happen to die in battle when those types are leading them.

In this case especially, there was no question that some of the soldiers had been unlucky enough to get caught up in the dragon attack. Klaus just hadn't seen them.

Times like these always strengthened Klaus's determination to be a good leader...but today, his efforts had been in vain.

The subordinates to whom he was meant to show that determination were gone.

In the end, less than a hundred soldiers had survived on his side.

Everyone who had remained in the fort had been annihilated; the only ones left alive were those captured by Veritas.

Normally, they would have been taken away as prisoners, but the enemy had prioritized escaping. The captives had been left behind by Veritas and were being healed now.

Just like his soldiers, Klaus had taken heavy damage.

He would have no choice but to rebuild the fort...but that would require time as well as money.

To be honest, it was an extremely bad situation...but the good news was that he didn't have to worry about it.

That was because chances were high that they would enter a truce with the Kingdom of Veritas.

He didn't know whether there would be a formal agreement...but he was sure that these little skirmishes would stop, at least.

He could guess that their suspicious actions over the past few years had to do with the dragon.

He couldn't imagine that they would try anything else now that it had been defeated...and most importantly, it was clear to Veritas now that the other side had not only two of the Elite Seven but someone who could defeat a dragon.

And that all of them were connected to the Neumond family.

No matter how much he boasted of the size of his kingdom, the king of Veritas wouldn't be foolish enough to mess with them.

"There's something I'd like to check... Would you mind?"

"Not at all. I was just reading the information we've collected about what's happened."

Klaus lifted his face from the documents to see exactly the person he'd known the voice belonged to—Sophia.

Normally, she would have returned home, but he was in need of man power, since not only soldiers but civil officials had been injured.

They had asked the national government and received word that their priority was to remain here, so Sophia was helping until things calmed down.

"So what was it that you wanted to talk about? I suppose there's only one thing I've left up to you that you would want my judgment on..."

"Yes... It's about Soma."

Klaus nodded knowingly and looked at the paper she handed him.

It contained a falsified report about how the aforementioned Soma would be treated by the Neumond family.

As you can gather from their conversation, Soma now officially existed when he hadn't before.

This didn't mean that things would go back to the way they had been before his parents had found out about his Skills, however.

It was easy to erase someone's existence but impossible to reverse that decision.

Since they'd already announced it to everyone, Lina would remain the heir of the family.

That meant Soma would be newly added to that picture, thus the falsified report.

As for what form that addition would take specifically...

"Hmm, so we're saying he was an accident from a momentary mistake I made... Well, that would be the easiest choice."

The story was that they'd decided to go meet Soma's family in thanks for him helping them.

That would make him an illegitimate child, considering the timeline, but they couldn't help that.

They could have falsified Soma's age to make Lina the older sibling, but they'd left that as-is, since it would make little difference.

"But this will bring dishonor on your name."

"Hmph... A bit of dishonor is nothing compared to what we've put Soma through for our own convenience."

They both already knew that, of course. There would be no actual damage except to Klaus's image. It was nothing to worry about.

So why was it that Soma could now be called a Neumond again?

No...why did he *have* to be called a Neumond?

It was all because he'd defeated the dragon.

The fact that the Veritas side had seen him was the final nail in the coffin. That meant there were witnesses.

They would have spread the story whether the Neumonds had addressed it or not...which meant that Klaus, as someone affiliated with the Kingdom of Ladius, couldn't afford to leave it alone.

It wasn't a question of whether the people around them knew it was Soma.

Klaus and those close to him knew it was Soma, which automatically determined how they would act.

Ignoring him was not an option.

It was the best they could do to move before the kingdom of Veritas did.

Although it would be nothing but negative for Soma himself.

"Has Soma heard about this?"

"Of course. He said something like... 'I suppose that's how it would turn out.'"

"I see... We really owe him."

A part of him—one especially beyond saving—was glad that he could treat Soma as his child again.

And as far as he could tell, Sophia felt the same.

They were hopeless.

"But we have to do what we have to do, however low we must sink."

"Right... We have no choice to stop now, no matter what Soma and Lina think of us."

But despite knowing that, they couldn't help thinking about it.

His next thought might have come into his head because he was tired.

Or maybe...

"Maybe things would have been different if *they* were still in the kingdom."

It was utter nonsense, not even fit to be called a moment of weakness, but Sophia seemed to grasp exactly what it meant.

The words that followed her nod were exactly what he had been thinking.

“If he and she were here... You’re right; things may have been different. No, they most likely would have been. He wouldn’t have allowed the kingdom to end up like this, and neither would she. But that...”

“Yes, I know. It never could have come to be.”

The central figures of the rebellion that had once taken place in this land.

The two who had led the way to stand up and set out to defeat the Dark Lord.

The boy and girl who had once been called heroes.

They had gone away instead of staying to see the founding of this kingdom.

Regardless of what their circumstances were now...that was a fact.

So it was an impossibility.

“We only played a supporting role...but now we’ve ended up in the vanguard. That means we have to do the best we can.”

“You’re right... Regardless of how many we have to abandon along the way. Our hands aren’t big enough to hold everything.”

“Yes... Or maybe...”

Soma could, he thought, but he didn’t say it out loud.

It would have been wrong as a person, as a man, as a husband, as a parent...and most of all, as the Duke of Neumond.

It would have been beyond brazen to ask the son he’d abandoned twice to clean up his mess.

Sophia said nothing, perhaps because she was thinking the same thing.

But deliberately not touching on it, he stood up.

“Well, then.”

“Oh, are you done with the report?”

“I’ve looked over what I have to. I have to get on to my next task.”

“I doubt this will be over in just a month or two...”

“I hope things will settle down before the new year, but who can tell? Maybe not the entire kingdom, but a lot of places are seeing commotion right now.”

“Ah, about that...”

They had already received reports of sightings of the Archdragon, Fafnir, throughout the kingdom.

Apparently, the cause of this was that the seals had been broken almost simultaneously.

That had resulted in the destruction of nearby villages and devastating injuries to talented adventurers...but the motive was unclear.

Because of that, though, there was a bit of a stir among the kingdom’s important figures.

Since they’d never expected such a thing in this kingdom, they’d started checking whether there was anything else and investigating whether their domains were really okay, so they had no hands to spare.

It would calm down in time, according to what they’d heard from Soma...but that was estimated to happen no sooner than the new year.

As for Soma’s party, his parents were having them stay here for the moment. They couldn’t let the party resume traveling for a number of reasons.

They would probably send Soma to an academy soon.

Unfortunately, they couldn’t let Soma do whatever he wanted anymore.

Fortunately for them, though, Soma had said that was his plan anyway.

“We should also make this place more presentable.”

“Right... We may not be able to make it as good as the old fort, but this is hardly fit to be seen.”

They were in a hastily constructed wooden building, the bare minimum to serve as a shelter.

It was an improvised structure made for emergency purposes.

There was no need to build anything luxurious, but this wouldn’t do.

“We have a lot of work to do.”

“We do... But this is better than what could have been.”

“It is.”

If the dragon had continued its rampage, the entire kingdom would have received severe damage, not just this one place. At the worst, it could have even faced complete destruction.

And it was needless to repeat who had prevented that.

“It pains me that I can’t say I always knew he had it in him.”

“And that pain is far from enough punishment, given the burden we’ve placed on him.”

But that didn’t change what they had to do.

Klaus started walking as if to shake off that moment of weakness, and Sophia followed behind.

The two then left the room.

36

It was a sunny day.

The sky was clear and blue—perfect weather for a trip.

Under that sky, Soma hoisted his bag onto his back again.

He'd already checked what was inside enough times. There was no need to check again.

And yet he couldn't help but look back, maybe out of a lingering attachment.

He gave a crooked smile at the still-new fort that he saw.

It had been erected only a short time after the new year.

But even that was so recent, Soma hadn't had much time to look around inside.

So the fort wasn't what he felt attached to, of course.

"Hmm... So it's been a year."

A year.

That was how long he'd stayed.

He hadn't originally planned to stay so long. The party had planned to go back to the other mansion before the new year.

Things had dragged on, which brought them to today...but it wasn't a bad thing in Soma's personal opinion.

After all, though they had been so busy they had hardly had time to see each other, the entire family had been together again.

Considering what things had been like before, it was more than enough to be able to see them once a day.

Of course he would have enjoyed that.

And it was this life that Soma was attached to now.

He couldn't do anything about that now, though...and he wouldn't have

wanted it to continue anyway.

They were contradictory, but Soma genuinely felt both of those things.

Just then...

“What, am I the only one here to send you off?”

“Father...?”

His father, Klaus, appeared.

Soma’s eyes went wide at seeing him here despite all of the things he was still busy with.

This was unexpected, to be honest.

“I thought it would be mother who came, if anyone.”

“No, I don’t think she would have come even if she could... She hasn’t been able to put the past behind her.”

“I’ve told her time and time again not to worry about it.”

“I may have actually been bolder in that sense. Well, either way, she was too busy to make it. I’m not saying it was in her place, but that’s why I came here, since I had some room in my schedule.”

“I see.”

Soma nodded, understanding the circumstances...and the conversation stopped there.

It wasn’t that they didn’t get along. Klaus was simply a man of few words, and Soma had nothing in particular to say.

They’d already said their goodbyes the day before, so that was all they had to talk about.

But the fact that Klaus had come here must have meant that he had something else to bring up...

“So... How about the girls? I assumed they would be here.”

“Each of them had her own things to do today, so they didn’t come. I let them know yesterday, so I would have left already if you hadn’t come when you did.”

“You would have? I got here just in time, then.”

Klaus shut his mouth again, but that couldn’t be the only thing he’d come to ask. Unsure what he wanted to say, Soma gave him an inquiring look.

“Father...?”

“Hmm... Ah, no... Sorry. I was debating what to say...but I’m no good. I have no way to tell you other than this.”

Klaus shook his head, then brought his hand to his back and pulled out his sword.

Giving Soma a serious look, he got into position.

“Draw your sword, Soma.”

Soma took his sword from his back and got into position without a word, understanding what Klaus wanted to do.

Sometimes, a single crossing of swords can communicate more than a thousand words.

Soma knew that well.

“We don’t have much time, but we don’t need it. One attack. Give me everything you have.”

“Understood.”

Soma could tell Klaus was serious without even seeing his eyes.

And to not respond in kind would be to insult him.

So with his sword pointed toward Klaus’s eyes, Soma took a deep breath, then let it out.

With his mind concentrated to its greatest extreme, the flow of time itself slowed down.

“Haaaaahh...!”

“Flash.”

Soma muttered in response to the yell.

Their swords flashed for an instant, sending out a high-pitched clang.

With that, a dull sword flew through the air.

Klaus began as he followed the sword's trajectory with his eyes.

"Ever since you first held a sword, I knew you had more natural talent for using it than me. Everyone told me I was biased as your father, though."



Soma returned his sword to his back as he listened and nodded.

“Well, that certainly does seem biased to me.”

“I would have thought the same thing if anyone else had told me that...but this proves me right.”

With that, Klaus dropped his gaze. Then he looked directly at Soma.

“You will be the next Elite Swordsman. The greatest swordsman in the world, who none can stand next to... You deserve that title.”

Soma wasn’t especially surprised to hear that. He’d already expected that this would happen.

If anything, it was surprising that Klaus hadn’t told him until today.

“Hmm... I don’t suppose I can decline, so this is fine with me, but will this give me any responsibilities?”

“No... It’s not like that. It’s just a title. Oh, but there will be an entitlement ceremony.”

“A ceremony... That sounds like a pain.”

“Because it is. Well, it won’t happen until you’re an adult. I’ll be the official Elite Swordsman until then.”

“Is it a rule that it must happen once I’m an adult?”

“More because of our circumstances. Political reasons, in other words. I should...” Klaus started to apologize, then stopped and shook his head. “Ah, never mind.”

That was the right move.

He’d already gotten enough from that one attack.

It probably had to do with many things.

What he’d said just now, what had happened already, what would come to be.

Including things he couldn’t speak of...knowing that they were the result of his own egoistic feelings.

Klaus had sent all those things to Soma.

And Soma had already sent his response:

He didn't need any of that.

Now and in the past, Soma's course in life resulted from what he did of his own volition.

That meant there was the risk that there would eventually be trouble or things worth apologizing for, but he had to take that risk.

The same went for what was to come—Soma heading off to an academy.

Klaus seemed to feel that he'd handed down that decision with no outside input, but he was mistaken.

Soma had decided long ago to end his journey and go to an academy—when he'd defeated the black dragon.

He'd realized that he wouldn't find any leads if he kept looking around aimlessly.

In fact, he'd known that since before he went to help his parents, though he'd intended to continue traveling a bit longer.

So he had no complaints about it.

He did feel bad for Aina...but maybe it was for the best.

When she'd asked about his plans, he'd been clear that he had something he wanted to do.

That had been just yesterday, though.

Yes, Aina had actually been staying with Soma's family. Lina too, of course...and even Sierra, for some reason. He'd asked why, but she'd sidestepped the question.

They'd apparently spoken with Klaus and Sophia, though, so they hadn't just decided to stay without asking anyone's permission.

Klaus and Sophia had promised to do one thing for each of the girls in apology for the fact that their party was unable to continue their journey, so the three of them may have called in those favors. Considering that Sierra had received

the same promise, that seemed likely.

He didn't know what they'd asked for...but as long as it was what each of them wanted, it was nothing for Soma to worry about.

"Is that all you wanted, Father?"

"It is. Sorry to take up your time."

"It was no big deal. Don't worry about it."

It actually hadn't even been ten minutes. A delay that small was hardly an issue.

The reason he was going to the academy in the first place was to take the exam. There was wiggle room with respect to the date as well as the time, so there was no problem.

"Did you forget anything?"

"Hmm..."

As mentioned before, he'd checked his luggage multiple times, so there was no need for that concern.

If he had to think of something, he was a bit nervous about leaving Aina behind...but there was nothing he could do about that. He couldn't exactly take her with him, and regardless, it was unlikely that anyone would find out she was a devil unless she told them herself.

There wasn't anything to worry about when it came to Sierra or his parents either, and other than that...

"Well, it'll be fine."

"I see... Take care, then."

"Yes... I'll see you."

Soma raised a hand, looked back at the fort one last time, then turned ahead and began to walk.

It was an unceremonious parting, but that was only natural.

It wasn't as if death was parting them. He could see his parents any time he

wanted.

Soma walked ahead, feeling Klaus’s gaze on his back and squinting from the sunbeams pouring down from the blue sky.

He was headed toward the center of the kingdom.

The capital.

That was where the royal academy was.

37

The girl watched from just next to the window as the boy left.

Running a finger along the glass as if reaching out after his shrinking figure, she sighed.

“I still didn’t get a chance to talk to him much... Well, it’s true that it’s my fault that I didn’t take the chances I had. But what could I have done? I didn’t know what to talk about... Hey, give me a break! I *am* just a kid, after all!”

She muttered her excuse with a pout...and soon, the boy was completely out of sight.

Once she’d made sure of that, she sighed once again.

“How many times have I woken up now? It wasn’t like there was anything I couldn’t leave him alone for, was there? Well... Yeah, it’s true that we can’t leave him to his own devices, but that’s no reason to wake me up, is it? You don’t know? Well, I know even less!”

Though she puffed up her cheeks as she said that, she was actually the only one who could possibly know.

After all—

“Oh, somebody’s here! I guess that’s all the time I get today. I can’t handle both at once, and it’s obvious which I should put first, so... No other choice!”

Although she said she had no choice, there was a slight smile on her face.

But what she said was true.

If she had been in the middle of fulfilling her original role, she couldn’t have said that, but it was unclear why she’d woken up this time. There was no need to cause unnecessary discord.

Just then...

“Lina? What are you doing here?”

Aina approached the window, directing a puzzled look at the girl gazing out of

it.

In response...

“Oh, Aina? What might you be doing here?”

The air around the girl changed all at once.

It was a brilliant disguise, a brilliant emulation.

Impressive, though it was an emulation of herself.

“I asked first... But fine. I can’t find something, so I came to ask if you know where it is.”

“Is that going to be okay? My brother already left.”

“No, it’s not, so hurry—wait, how did you know... Oh, you were watching from there.”

“I was.”

Nobody who saw her nod and turn to look could think she was anyone but Lina Neumond.

Her performance could only be called brilliant.

“You seem pretty relaxed... You’re all ready, then?”

“No, I also realized I was missing something, so I was on my way to get it.”

“You’re not?!”

It sounded like a spur-of-the-moment lie, but it was actually true. She’d stopped on her way when she’d spotted him out of the window.

“Jeez... Hurry up, then. We don’t have time to dawdle if Soma’s already left.”

“All right!”

The girl stepped away from the window and started after Aina. She gave one last look out the window, then turned back around.

She followed slightly behind Aina, and the two girls walked toward the other end of the hall.

†

A dull, violent noise shook the room.

It was the sound of a man sitting on a throne slamming his fist against its armrest.

“Say that again!”

“Eek...! I told you... This incident has crushed our troops’ morale... So we...we propose a truce!”

“You suggest that our kingdom yield to those traitors?!”

“W-We hate to suggest it as well...but we see no other option...!”

The man gritted his teeth, making another dull, violent sound.

But he didn’t react any further, since he understood that as well.

Not even he was that dim witted.

“Understood. We have no choice. Proceed in that direction.”

“Yes, my liege!”

Without sparing the figure a glance as it backed away, the man clenched his teeth and his fist.

Finally, he heard the door shut...then slammed his fist down three times.

“Damn it, those good-for-nothings!”

He should have been drunk on celebratory wine right now, and yet...

And yet...!

“Those devils are the most useless of them all! After we gave them what they needed from the treasury...!”

“Hey, now, we did what we could. Sure, we failed, but we caused some commotion, like we said we would. Don’t blame us for not being able to pull off the attack.”

“Wha— Who’s there?!” the man—Veritas XIII—exclaimed at the sudden voice.

And of course he would. The throne room was one of the most strictly guarded places in the kingdom.

Who could suddenly show up there?

“Oh, you must be... That devil! You have some nerve, showing yourself again...!”

“Huh? Nope, I’ve never seen you before. Can’t you tell by my voice? You must be as dim witted as they say.”

“What did you just...? Who told you that?! No, where are you?! Show yourself!”

“Nah, too much work. Not like I came here to talk to you anyway.”

“Then what did you...?! Oh, I see... You came to apologize? Hmph, an unexpectedly admirable attitude for a devil to have...though it’s exactly what I’m owed.”

Regaining his calm, Veritas XIII leaned back and puffed out his chest.

All he got in reply, however, was an exasperated sigh.

“I just said, not our fault. This is the problem with dimwits.”

“Did you just call...?!”

“What’s wrong with calling a dimwit a dimwit? Anyway, I came here to settle things once and for all. This was supposed to be *his* job, but he kicked the bucket, apparently. Now it’s me or nobody.”

“Settle things...? What do you—”

“What else could it mean? I’m gonna kill you.”

“Guh...?!”

The next thing Veritas XIII knew, he had suddenly grown another arm from his chest.

It was sticking out of his back too, which meant it had stabbed through him and his throne, he realized, but by that point, he was incapable of forming words.

All he could do was spew deep red liquid and foam from his mouth.

“I’m not gonna say no hard feelings...but this is what you get for dealing with

devils. We can't let word of this get out, y'know? Everyone knows you gotta get rid of the witnesses."

"Agh, gack...!"

"No clue what you're saying. Well, no point in letting you suffer, and I said what I wanted to. See ya."

"Guh... Agh?!"

The other arm connected to the one piercing his chest flashed out, sending his crowned head flying.

The person quickly retreated to avoid the spray of blood.

If Veritas XIII had been able to recognize them, he would surely have been shocked.

Because the figure looked like a small child—a boy.

"He's got the same blood in his veins as us, huh? Not that that matters... Anyway. I could make some noise in this castle and then leave it half-destroyed if I wanted...but I'll pass. This kingdom's not worth destroying."

Despite what he said, part of him seemed to want to, since as soon as he was sure the bleeding was slowing down, the boy gave the former king a kick.

He nodded, satisfied, then swiveled his head.

"So that's all for that. Now, for the next thing... What to do? They said to do something about the guy who killed the Archdragon? I don't even know who it is, and they expect me to figure that out *and* kill him? And it's not like we made any plan for the Archdragon not only dying some other way than self-destruction but being *killed*."

He looked up at the ceiling as he muttered to himself.

Not that he would gain any information by looking there—it was just a habit.

He continued to mutter, hemming and hawing.

"Can't believe someone else showed up to get in our way other than the Dark Lord...or the former hero, should I call him? Wait, maybe this is the same guy who killed Albert? He was corrupt, sure, but he made it to Fourth Dark

Commander, so I did think it was weird that he got destroyed without any trace...”

As soon as he got that far, though, he lowered his gaze and shook his head. There was no use thinking about it anymore.

“Well, good thing we found a clue, at least. He’ll show himself sooner or later, so I can cross that bridge when I get to it. I got other things to do now. Gotta go there first... Wish I didn’t have to go to the academy now, but no choice. And no point hanging around here any longer, so time to get going.”

Now that he’d done everything he’d wanted to, he disappeared just as he’d appeared, leaving only those words.

As well as a demolished throne...

And the corpse that had once been a king.

Intermission (or the Usual Prologue)

There was darkness spreading.

Dripping water sounded at intervals—maybe a leak.

And through this eerie place, multiple sets of footsteps were moving.

Small silhouettes.

They looked to be children—three of them.

It looked as if some kids had gone out to play and gotten lost.

One reason for that was the thing the boy in front held at his hip.

It was shaped like a sword but clearly made of wood.

Seeing that would make anyone think a local child had gone out to play adventurer.

And in a sense, that wasn't wrong.

"Hmm... I was hoping that we would finally find something, but no luck here either," sighed the boy—Soma—as he surveyed the area.

His whole body showed signs of discouragement, and his footsteps seemed to be slowing down.

No, they didn't just seem to—they actually were, as if to express his loss of motivation.

But a voice immediately scolded Soma.

"Don't be losing motivation now! We already knew this would happen, and it's not what we came here for, anyway!"

Soma's only response to the girl walking behind him—Aina—was to shrug.

He understood, but whether he would be motivated was another story. So his body language said.

The one in the right here, though, was Aina.

They were in nameless ruins—or perhaps their name had just been forgotten.

While they were dim, they were recognizable as a series of stone corridors.

The three of them had heard in a nearby village that suspicious figures had been seen in the area. Nobody had been hurt, but it made the villagers uncomfortable, and nobody in the village would be capable of fighting if they had to while investigating. They'd offered to help, which was why the party was now walking around here.

They had their own reasons for being on a journey, of course, but they had no reason to hurry. Soma's motivation in particular was like grasping at clouds.

He was looking for a way to use magic.

As is natural when one is looking for something without knowing for certain that it even exists, he had no choice but to look around haphazardly.

So he'd decided to accept the task, figuring it wouldn't be a bad idea to help others along their journey.

Soma alone, however, had been hopeful that these ruins contained something related to magic, as was evident from his earlier disappointment.

It had already been nearly half a year since their journey had started, after all, and they hadn't found a single lead.

It was clear to see that these were ancient ruins, and it was common for ancient ruins to contain lost magical items, so he couldn't be blamed for having hopes.

But while she couldn't say she didn't understand how he felt, Aina sighed as she looked at Soma.

"I mean, there might be shady people lurking here, right? The villagers said there aren't any other places around here that they could be. We have to look for them first so they don't find us while we're distracted by something else. Well...maybe *you'd* be okay if that happened."

Aina was well aware of how non-standard Soma's existence was. She and Lina weren't so nonsensical, though. They were confident in their abilities, but they couldn't be confident they would be okay no matter what.

And it was on the villagers' request that they'd come here today. Even if

Soma's party themselves were okay, they wouldn't be able to show their faces if the suspicious people got away and something happened to the village.

So they had to hurry to look for those people first...but while Aina thought about it, Soma turned a puzzled look toward her.

"Yes, I've already sensed signs of what I believe to be those people, in fact."

"You *what*?"

"I haven't noticed anything yet... When did you realize?!"

Aina was stunned at how he said that as if it were nothing special, and the girl walking behind her—Soma's younger sister, Lina—also let out a hysterical exclamation.

"When we first stepped foot into these ruins. They don't seem to be trying to hide. If anything, I'm surprised that you two haven't noticed."

Soma was dead serious in saying so. In other words, he thought it was normal to be able to detect them so easily.

Aina couldn't help but sigh, realizing the extent of his nonsensicalness. "I don't know what to say except that you never change..."

"That's my brother for you!"

"Hmm... This may actually be the perfect opportunity."

"Huh? For what?"

"Well, you see..."

†

As she had been before, Aina proceeded through the dim ruins, warily watching her surroundings.

What was different now, though, was that the one walking in front of her was Lina.

And when she turned around, she saw nobody else there.

In other words, Aina and Lina were going through the ruins by themselves.

As for why this was the case, Soma had been the one to suggest it.

“I can’t believe he told us to search down this corridor on our own just because there was a fork in the path...”

“But it’s true that we haven’t sensed any signs of anyone else, so we can’t deny it if he says we weren’t alert enough with him there.”

“I mean, that’s true...”

Soma hadn’t actually said all that, but he had told them to try their best on their own.

And Aina herself had felt that because Soma was present, she hadn’t been trying hard enough to sense the presence of others.

So it was true that she had been depending on Soma.

But in any case...

“Seems to me like he just prioritized what he was interested in...”

“Th-That can’t be true! My brother would never!”

“But doesn’t it sound exactly like something Soma would do?”

“W-Well... Aah...”

Lina couldn’t deny it, apparently. But she didn’t want to admit it either, so she just made wordless noises. Aina smiled wryly at her.

This was nothing out of the ordinary when it came to Soma, but she didn’t want to trouble Lina either. If Aina had complaints, she should tell him directly.

More importantly...

“So, notice anything?”

“Oh, no... Nothing at all so far.”

“Me neither... Are they even really there, I wonder? I haven’t picked up on anything.”

“I think we may just be inexperienced...”

“Well, yeah, we probably are...”

But she couldn’t help that she really couldn’t sense anything.

This wasn't Aina's forte in the first place. She didn't have Sense Presence, so she was searching with magic, but Aina's magical abilities tended towards the offensive. She could barely use support magic like that, even just to grasp an enemy's overall presence.

And Lina was similar. As a sword user, she could use Sense Presence, but its range was restricted. She was better at hiding her own presence and not so good at sensing over a wide area.

"Well, we can't just get good at this right away, so we can take it slow. He already picked up on them, so there's no need to rush."

"That may be true...but I want to do whatever I can to catch up with him!"

Aina smiled wryly at Lina again as the other girl moved ahead intently.

Maybe it was a type of talent in itself to try to catch up with him while knowing how nonsensical he was.

Moreover, Lina was a sword user like Soma, and Aina thought it would be impossible to catch up to him even in the completely different field that was magic...or maybe Lina felt that way *because* they both used the sword.

Either way, what Aina had said was what she really felt.

There would be no point in trying hard here.

There wouldn't, but...she couldn't slack off while the younger girl in front of her was working so hard.

No, she hadn't planned to slack off in the first place...but that was the only reason she was trying.

There was no other reason... It wasn't like she wanted to be of help to a certain someone— "Oh, Aina, look at this."

"Wh-What, it's true, I swear!"

"Yes...? What is?"

"Oh... *Ahem*. Sorry, I was thinking to myself. Don't worry about it. What did you want?"

"Right, so, over here..."

Trying not to think about what she'd just let slip out, Aina cleared her throat and turned to look where Lina was pointing.

She then furrowed her eyebrows when all she saw there was a wall.

That meant it was a stopping point...but if that had been all it was, Lina wouldn't have told Aina to look. She would have told her the facts and made to go back.

If she hadn't done that, that meant...

"This looks like a wall, and it feels like one, but it isn't. It's a barrier made to seem like one...or at least, it was."

"What do you mean, it was?"

"I think they put this up a long time ago. It's deteriorated so much, it only functions as a wall now."

In other words, it was there to keep intruders from progressing.

There were traces of what seemed to be other functions, but they had deteriorated to the point that it was impossible to tell what they'd been.

It seemed as though a strong force would break it, so it was really no different from a normal wall now.

"But that must mean..."

"Yeah... There's something past here that they needed to put a barrier in front of."

She wasn't sure if it had anything to do with their task or if it was something Soma would have been happy to find...but she wouldn't find out unless she moved ahead.

That left the problem of whether they would wait for Soma before going in...

"Why don't we check it out ourselves first?"

"Yes! He said to look around on our own, and this is part of looking around!"

That was right.

That was all it was—no other reason.

It wasn’t at all that she was thinking that she might find something Soma wanted, and then he would be happy when she told him.

Lina met Aina’s gaze, nodded, and let out a breath.

It didn’t look like she’d done anything, but in the next moment, the wall in front of them crumbled away.

“How to put this... I already knew you were, but you’re something special yourself, huh?”

“Oh, no, I have a long way to go compared to my brother...”

It sounded like she was just being modest, but the scary thing was that it was completely true.

And she was speaking from the heart. Her tone had some pride in it...and some frustration mixed in too.

So, Aina wouldn’t say that was *why*, but...

“Let’s go ahead, then. That way we can surprise Soma.”

“Okay...!”

The two girls exchanged fearless smiles, then stepped into the newly appeared corridor.

†

In the depths of the ruins...

In the clearing just before the deepest point, the men lounged about as they wished.

The majority of them were whining that they were bored, or they wanted booze or chicks, but that, too, was business as usual.

These men were what people called bandits—typical scoundrels.

But since they knew that, they never stayed in one place.

If they went too far, they would be retaliated against.

Being aware of that piece of scoundrel logic, they did their deeds in moderation and moved on before they attracted too much attention.

So it was unusual for them to have so many uneventful days in a row.

For the past week or so, they hadn't been stealing, killing, nor moving around in particular.

But they went no further than whining because all of them understood just what kind of place this was.

The Duchy of Neumond was hell to scoundrels like them.

That was because a witch lived here.

Not a real witch, of course. Witches were wicked enough to be called the enemy of the world—an evil incomparable to scoundrels like these men. Even kingdoms at war would join hands to kill a witch if they became aware of one.

But while it was nothing but a metaphor, there was definitely a witch here from these men's perspectives, since they would be burned to death immediately if they tried to do anything bad.

They didn't know how she did it, but that much was certain, which was why men like them weren't supposed to come anywhere near here. It was suicidal.

These men hadn't come here out of a death wish, however. They'd thought of a way to live here without being killed.

Scoundrels like them were killed in the first place because they did bad things. It wasn't because of who they were, it was because of what they did. In other words, they could have lived if they hadn't done anything bad.

That didn't mean they were going to get proper jobs, though. If they could have done that, they wouldn't have been bandits in the first place.

Which was why...

"C'mon, Boss, I'm bored. Can't we start moving soon?"

The head of the bandit gang clicked his tongue in response to the sudden interjection. He turned a glare toward the blank-faced subordinate who'd spoken.

"It's too soon, idiot! Wait five...no, at least two days."

"What's the difference between today and two days from now?"

“We gotta freak them out more first!”

“Ya think so? Not doubting you, Boss, but...are you sure this is gonna work?”

“Of course it will. Who d’you think kept us alive all this time?”

“You did, Boss, but...”

The boss grunted in response to the doubtful gaze turned his way.

It irritated him, but they’d see he was right once they pulled this off. That was how it always went, so there was no use in getting angry about it.

He grunted again, imagining how his underlings would react when it happened.

His plan was as follows.

They couldn’t commit any crimes, but they had no intention of getting real jobs either. They had managed to live here off of food supplies that they’d stolen previously, but it was only a matter of time until they would run out.

That meant it was simple—they just had to get some kind people to share food with them.

Luckily, there was a village nearby, and one with no inhabitants who could fight. They’d already scouted the village out to make sure of that.

If they went to the village now, the people would probably be afraid. They might give them food without being asked, but that would be tantamount to looting, which would get the men burned to death.

That was why they’d decided to wait. They would show themselves at times, impressing their existence on the village people. Once the villagers knew there were almost thirty of them, they would share their food out of the kindness of their hearts. They would share their women too, once they found out the bandits had none.

And it would all be out of goodwill. No looting, so no burning to death.

“I hope this actually works...”

“Yeah, say that all you want. Not gonna share the chicks with you, though.”

“C’mon, no fair!”

“What’s no fair is that you always complain and then try to get the better part of the deal. You don’t get to have your cake and—”

He stopped short and shot a sharp glare toward the entrance. Holding his gaze there, he clicked his tongue.

“Dammit, you weren’t paying attention! Not that I’m one to talk...”

“Boss? What’s going on?”

Ignoring the grunt giving him a questioning look, the man grabbed the nearest weapon and slowly stood up. Eyeing their surroundings warily, he swallowed.

Based on that, the underlings seemed to notice that this was something out of the ordinary. They hurriedly grabbed their respective weapons and turned nervous looks toward the entrance.

That was when they saw it.

“I guess this is something, but not what we wanted...” they heard a voice say. “You always end up finding what you’re not looking for in life, don’t you?”

“Wha...?”

It wasn’t clear whose mouth it had come out of, but their first reaction was one of astonishment.

To articulate it better, this was nothing like they’d expected.

And they had to look *down* to see it...because it was a girl of about ten years old.

The grunts let out huge sighs in unison.

“C’mon, don’t scare us like that, Boss... It’s true that we didn’t notice, though.”

“What’s this kid doing here, anyway? Lost or something?”

“Probably. What does it matter? We gotta figure out what to do with her... Usually we could just off her, but no getting away with that here.”

“That’d be a pain to clean up after, anyway. But if we throw her outside, she might get in the way of our plans... How about we just tie her up and toss her somewhere?”

“Sure. Wish it was a chick and not some kid so we could have some fun... Maybe she’d be fun for you, though, huh? Just about the right size for your tiny thing.”

“Who’re you calling tiny? Have you seen your own?”

“Hey, quit bickering! You’re both tiny!”

Amidst the sound of crude laughter, the man was quietly breaking out in a cold sweat.

He was barely hearing what his underlings were talking about.

His attention was captured by the girl who had appeared, and alarm bells were going off in his head.

This is bad. This is not good*.*

There were two main reasons he’d managed to survive this long.

One was that he knew that information could be used as a weapon. Just knowing could help one avoid most misfortune in the world. He’d made sure his underlings remembered that, which was how the gang of bandits had managed to go on existing.

But even then, there was some amount of misfortune that couldn’t be avoided. It was the second reason that allowed him to make it through.

He had a number of Skills, and one of those was Middle-Grade.

In other words, he’d brute forced his way through problems that he couldn’t solve with just information.

That didn’t just mean physical force, though. Being able to determine his opponents’ power levels was one of his greatest strengths. He avoided approaching ones that he couldn’t beat and ran away as soon as he encountered one. He was here today because he’d been so consistent about that.

That rule, too, he’d made sure to teach his underlings, and they usually followed it closely...but they didn’t seem to be doing that right now.

That was when he realized why that was: the power gap was too big.

He'd heard that when the power gap between two opponents was too large, one wouldn't sense anything from the other. They would seem like an ordinary person.

That was probably why his underlings weren't on guard at all.

Maybe if this had been an adult woman and not a girl, they would have taken notice...but there was no use in saying it.

To be frank, he had already half given up upon feeling this unprecedented power gap.

As he pathetically began to wonder if she would let them go...their eyes met.

"Oh..."

Instantly, he understood.

Seeing her bloodred eyes looking at him told him exactly what future awaited them.

So...

"Everyone, get out of here!" he screamed as he turned on his heel and started to run as fast as he could.

"Wait... B-Boss? What is it?!"

He heard the confused voice, but he couldn't afford to worry about his underlings.

He knew if he gave her that opening, she would kill him.

"W-Wait for us, Boss!"

As screams and shouts began to sound behind him, the man ran for the deepest part of the ruins without looking back.

†

"I guess that's why they call him Boss, huh?" Aina muttered with a hint of admiration as she watched the man who had been the first to run.

But the scene would have looked bizarre to a bystander.

She looked like nothing but a normal girl, but everything around her was

ablaze, with men screaming and crying out on the ground.

Without paying any mind to said men, she let out a sigh.

“I was wondering what I’d have to do if there were decent people using this place. It’s a good thing we found *these* guys instead so I didn’t have to hold back. But wait... Maybe if they were decent people, we could have just talked it out instead, so that may have been better.”

She got the feeling her train of thought was tending in a dangerous direction, or she was being influenced by Soma or something, but she put aside the thought for the moment.

As she did so, she was scattering magic around her.

“It wouldn’t be fair to let the leader get away. He made the right decision...but I’m not letting him go.”

She thrust her left hand forward and concentrated her magic to extend it toward the back of the fleeing man.

Just then, seeing an opening, one of the men who’d hesitated to escape slashed at Aina.

She just continued chanting, however, not even sparing him a glance.

The unobstructed blade continued its path toward Aina...but it wouldn’t reach its mark.

Just before then, the man’s body tumbled over, as if it had been hanging by a thread that had been cut.

And Aina paid that no mind either.

“Assemble and seize him, Flame—”

But just as she was almost done, the man took an action that he must have been preparing for.

“Wha?!”

It was an attack.

And it wasn’t at her but at the wall.

The ruins that Aina's group was currently in were worn out in places.

And the question of what would happen if someone made an impact in one of those places was answered by what happened next.

"I can't see...!"

The attack had collapsed not the wall but the ceiling, which obscured the man from view.

The spell Aina had been trying to use was meant to capture enemies. Once she activated it, it would catch them no matter how far they tried to run.

But in order to do that, she had to be able to see the enemy she wanted to catch...which she couldn't now.

The spell dissipated, its conditions unmet, and Aina clenched her teeth.

She should have been able to cast it with no problem based on the terrain and the enemy's speed... She'd never thought she'd be blocked like that.

And based on the man's lack of hesitation, that was what he'd been after.

She'd thought this would give her a much better chance of catching them than firing flame arrows, but...

"Sorry, Lina... I let two of them get away, even though I had your support."

"No, I misjudged too... I thought it would be best distance-wise to let you take care of it with your magic, but I should have jumped in while they were focused on you." Lina sighed as she came out of hiding, surveying the area.

There were men lying in heaps all around. Only the men who had run weren't there. They'd apparently headed deeper into the ruins, and Aina hadn't been able to see them since.

It was inexcusable that she'd let the boss go despite clearly being far above them in power.

Nevertheless, Lina had genuinely meant what she said.

Aina had shown herself first because Lina was better at hiding. Aina could hardly do that at all, so their only two choices had been for both of them to come out at once or for Lina to hide...and the end result had been that Lina had

supported Aina from the shadows.

As for which was the worse choice...neither was good.

They had power but not experience.

This fight had made the negative side of that—their immaturity—more evident than ever before.

“But this isn’t over yet!”

“You’re right... We can reflect later.”

The fact that they’d run that way meant they actually had an escape plan. If Aina and Lina dawdled here, the men might actually get away.

But instead of immediately giving chase, Aina turned to look around her, since the men lying there were still alive.

Some of them were unconscious, groaning, or writhing in pain, but not one of them was dead.

She hadn’t spared them out of mercy; she just hadn’t been able to decide whether it was okay to kill them.

The treatment of bandits differed between countries and territories, and Lina didn’t know what to do here either.

That was why she’d tried to capture that man.

In any case, the men around here were still alive, but...

“We can’t exactly leave them and go on, can we?”

“They might run away, so I think it would be best to restrain them somehow, but I don’t have a rope...”

“Hmm, it might take more time, but we could bundle them all up and restrain them with magic... Actually, that sounds like the best idea. I’m not the best at it, but I think it’ll work.”

“Understood. Let’s get them all in one place, then!”

They divided their roles to speed up the process. Lina immediately started gathering the men into one place, and Aina began to chant her spell. They

understood each other well enough by now to make that decision without exchanging words.

“Something seems odd about this cut... Actually, I don’t remember you hitting this person...?”

“Lina, I’m just about ready over here...”

“Oh, okay! I’ll be done after I carry this person over!”

Though she’d noticed that something was off during the process, Lina finished gathering the men at about the same time as Aina was done chanting, so Aina cast her spell.

“Stone Coffin.”

It lifted the stone floor up to engulf the men and trap them. With over half their bodies encased in stone, the men could hardly move, let alone escape.

Aina nodded with satisfaction once she’d made sure it had worked. “I figured this would be better than tying them up, but I didn’t expect it to go this well.”

“It did work really well. They’ll never get away now.”

They nodded to acknowledge their work but then refocused. There were still the ones who had gotten away.

Once they had checked the area just to make sure nothing was amiss, the two headed into the depths.

“This is...”

“...not what I expected.”

Beyond the clearing was a small room. They didn’t see any other paths connecting to it, but they didn’t see the men either.

But they didn’t think there was a hidden passage either, because of the other thing in the room.

It looked like a simple pedestal at first glance, but there was a glass sphere inside. At about thirty centimeters in diameter, it wasn’t especially big, but...

“This must be a magic tool or something.”

“I had a feeling... I sensed a strange power here, so I thought it might be.”

“So we really did find something Soma would like...”

But Aina let out a sigh then, because while she had an idea of what this was used for, she wouldn’t have the time to tell Soma about it.

“This must be used to teleport away from here, right?”

“I imagine so. We can’t explain how they disappeared otherwise. But that means we need to use this to go after them.”

Otherwise they wouldn’t be able to find them again, and it could be dangerous to let them go, depending on where this connected to.

They’d never intended not to go after them, but...

“Well, I think we should be able to use this with no problem. And things like this usually connect to the same place, so we might be able to catch up with them quickly.”

“In that case, it would be faster to let Soma find these himself than to go back and tell him. We don’t even know if we can get back here once we use this in the first place, though...”

But they had no time to hesitate. They wouldn’t be able to show their faces to Soma if the escaped men did something bad.

They’d come out here to gain experience, so they couldn’t let it end by just exposing their immaturity.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Yes!”

So, pushing down their misgivings, the two placed their hands on the sphere together.

And then...

†

The men were running as fast as they could.

And of course they would.

Certain death awaited them if they were caught.

How could they *not* be desperate?

Just as Aina and Lina had guessed, the thing in that room was a teleportation device. It connected to separate but similar ruins.

This was the first time the men had been here, but they ran ahead through the darkness without a second thought.

“Huh, huh... B-Boss... What was that thing?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?! You tell me!”

“She was burning everyone alive... Was that the witch, you think?”

“Looked pretty damn young to be a witch... Tch, right, you let down your guard cause it was a kid, didn’t you? I told you not to judge by appearances!”

“Y-You’re right, but... How were we supposed to know that was coming?”

“’Cause I always tell you to expect it! More of us could’ve gotten away if you did...”

The man clicked his tongue thinking of the underlings who hadn’t listened when he’d said to run.

It could have been said that they’d risked their lives to buy him time. But it wasn’t actually such a good thing. They’d just given up once they’d realized they couldn’t escape, and that had resulted in them risking their lives.

It was true that without that, the other two wouldn’t have been able to pull off that last maneuver and get away, but it would have been easier if everyone had run.

Of course, most of them would have met the same fate anyway...but that had nothing to do with the man at the head of the charge.

It had been a needless sacrifice.

“Tch, now we’re down to two... What’re we supposed to do now, dammit?!”

“Hah, hah... Why don’t we try going to the Devils’ Woods?”

“Huh... That might be a good idea.”

That may actually have been their only choice now.

Villains and devils were alike, anyway. Maybe they could find new comrades there...

“No, that could actually be really good... If we joined forces with devils...”

His underlings had all been useless, barely able to use Low-Grade Skills, but people strong enough to be called devils must be able to use more.

As he thought of how much he would be able to do with them under his command, his mouth curved into a smile.

“D-Devils?! Sounds scary... But as long as you’re in charge, it’ll be fine!”

“Of course it will. But that leaves me with some problems...”

The biggest problem was what to do with this useless guy. He could discard him before he got in the way, use him as an offering to the devils, or use him as a decoy here... There were a number of options.

“Huff, huff... Hey, Boss! There’s an exit! We can get out that way!”

He turned to look. It was true; he saw light there, and the vague outline of a forest. It seemed to really be an exit.

“Yep, looks like it. We haven’t had much luck today, but it’s a good thing we were living there.”

“Good thing we helped that guy, even though he seemed shady! He’s the one who let us live there in exchange.”

“But he said it didn’t work out, so all he ended up doing was wasting our time. If he hadn’t let us live there and told us all that stuff, I would’ve just killed him.”

“Well, anyway, we’re free now! We get to do whatever we want again! I can go hook up with some chicks, right?!”

“After we get to the Devils’ Woods, idiot. There’s a lot to do... I’d better teach the new guys not to judge a book by its cover.”

“I would agree. That’s important in multiple senses.”

“Huh...?”

Just as his underling joyfully took a step toward the exit, his body flew through the air at ridiculous speed.

“Wha?”

The man’s thoughts went blank for a moment; he had no idea what had happened.

But it was only for a moment.

He realized that they’d been caught—and that was the last thought he was able to have.

“I suppose there’s no need to show mercy. The bits and pieces I’ve heard you say tell me that you’re up to no good.”

The impact that hit him at the same time as those words knocked him out of consciousness.

†

“All right, then...” Soma muttered with a sigh, surveying what was around him.

He wasn’t sure what to do with the two men lying on the ground. They were unconscious but alive.

Just as Aina and Lina had, Soma understood that he couldn’t dispose of them however he wished. But it would be a pain to take them with him, and they might starve to death if he just tied them up and left them.

But frankly, it wasn’t that big of a problem.

“There’s no need for me to think about it much. The person in charge will take care of it,” he concluded, deciding not to give it any further thought. He would just restrain them on the ground and consider it taken care of.

“I never thought these two places would be connected... Could this place have originally been just an empty ruin too? Well, thinking about it doesn’t change anything.”

Soma sighed as he said that, because the ruins before him were familiar.

He’d just been here a few months ago.

The interior was exactly as he remembered it, and so was the scenery he saw now.

He'd been surprised when he'd first realized, but there was no mistaking it.

He'd thought these ruins were a miss when he'd first come, though. There had been a pedestal in their deepest point, but he hadn't sensed anything there and nothing had happened, so he'd figured it was just for decoration.

Considering the ruins he'd been in shortly before, though, these must have been connected to each other originally. But this side had broken, leaving it as a one-way teleporter.

He'd wanted to take a good look around those other ruins this time...but it wasn't looking like that would be easy.

And it would be a bit much to go all the way back there now...

"But I wasn't really able to prioritize investigating this time, regardless."

He'd made Aina and Lina think he had gone the other way, but he had actually been secretly following them.

Though inexperienced, both were Special-Grade. He hadn't thought they would have too much trouble...but still, neither had he felt like he could just leave them and casually explore the ruins.

In any case, that was why he had been able to get ahead of the men.

But even Soma had found it hard to make it to the room at the end without them noticing.

"Well, it may have been worth it in the end despite that."

If he hadn't, the men probably would have gotten away.

They probably wouldn't have been able to make it to the Devils' Forest...but the girls would have been worried about it. Having prevented that made it meaningful enough.

If there was anything to worry about, it would be the stuff they'd left behind in the other ruins, or reporting back to the village.

"But I'm sure someone will take good care of it, so there's no need for

concern.”

As he muttered to himself, two figures came into view from deep within the ruins. He headed toward the familiar girls, raising a hand to greet them.

“Aina, Lina. You’re a little late.”

“Dear brother?! Why are you here?!”

“Ahh, I think I see what’s going on here... Jeez, you really never change.”

Soma responded to Lina’s earnest surprise and Aina’s exasperated sigh with a crooked grin and a shrug.

†

Almbach, Duchy of Neumond, Kingdom of Ladius.

In a room of a mansion that was remote, yet in a sense central, stood a woman. She turned toward another woman, who was sitting in a chair, and sighed.

“So, there you have it... How’d you manage, though? And is that stack of documents just for decoration? Doesn’t seem like you have time to be snooping around like this...”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to say that, having been a part of it. And this is part of my job. If I don’t keep an eye on how each area is doing, things like this may happen.”

“Well, I sure would be scared in multiple ways if you didn’t check up on them every now and again...” said the woman—Camilla—with a sigh, knowing it had been more than half a facade.

She was so awkward in so many ways.

“You seem to have the wrong idea; this really is part of my job. It was nothing this time, but there have been some odd developments as of late.”

“Odd developments?”

“Yes... No definitive proof yet, but there have been a number of actual reports.”

“Hmm...”

It was probably true. There was no reason for her to lie about that.

But at the same time, Camilla couldn't help thinking it was just a pretext to check up on them.

And that having herself attend was meant to reinforce that pretext.

The other woman wouldn't confirm that if she mentioned it, though, so she wouldn't go to the trouble.

"All right, that being said, may I ask you a favor?"

"Huh? What kind? That came out of nowhere."

She replied like that because it was how she really felt. She had just about no idea what she was being asked.

No, "just about" would be a lie...

"It isn't out of nowhere. I have things to do, as you know, but we can't afford to ignore what we've found out now. And would you look at that... I happen to have someone with time on her hands right here."

"This isn't a joke, is it..."

She sighed as the what-if that had briefly crossed her mind became real.

Sure, it was *possible*, but Camilla was a former tutor and a Skill Assessor. Just because she had no work at the moment— "You've been training again recently, haven't you? I imagine that serves as a good substitute for rehabilitation."

"Tch, you knew about that? I was just doing that 'cause I was bored...but it's true I don't want to be any more of a leech than I already have been."

"I see; that's helpful. Can I count on you for this, then?"

"I wasn't sure where you were going with this, but you were well prepared, huh? So it's all according to your plan... Well, I'll get it done, now that I've agreed to it."

Camilla shrugged as she looked at her friend, who had a content expression on her face.

As she took the piece of parchment the other woman handed to her, she let

out a huge sigh, thinking, *I can't win against her.*