
I Surrendered
My Sword as a Mage
for a New Life
3
Shin Kouduki
Art
necömi


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I Surrendered My Sword for a New Life as a Mage: Volume 3 [Complete]

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1

Lautern, capital of the Kingdom of Ladius.

In a corner of a building at the city’s north edge, a voice sounded.

“So...the season has come again.”

It sounded cute and youthful.

No, it didn’t just sound that way—it was.

The owner of the voice appeared to be a young lady, or possibly even a little girl.

She sat in a large conference hall, taking in the gazes of the dozens of people in attendance.



But those gathered here were not deceived by her appearance. They were deeply familiar with what an awesome figure she was.

This was the headmaster of the Royal Academy, Hildegard Lindwurm.

“How many shall gather here this year...and how many shall then depart?”

Each person in the room reacted to Hildegard’s challenge-laden words. Some feigned ignorance; some met her challenge with a similarly determined expression; others appeared nerve-stricken or resigned.

Each and every one of them was a grown adult and an instructor at this academy.

So why were they making those faces? It was because of the documents that had been passed out to them—the resumes of those who were to take the instructor exams.

The Royal Academy.

As the only academy in the capital and the only recognized as royal, it was a comprehensive institute with departments specializing in each of the seven Basic Skills, including Sorcery. Because it was so unique in that respect, it was called simply the Royal Academy, and it was the most prominent academy of all; anyone in the kingdom, let alone the capital, knew its name.

Those words were no exaggeration—they were facts. That was easily understood just by looking at it...no, by the fact that it was visible from outside the city walls.

Lautern was a grand and glamorous place, worthy of being called a capital, but its buildings were less tall than one would expect. Most were two stories, the same as that one adventurer’s guild.

The buildings were wide enough to make up for their lack of height, but in a sense, it was a waste in terms of construction. There were buildings that were three stories or higher outside of the capital, and the royal castle was just as tall, so it wasn’t as if it was impossible with their technology.

But in fact, the castle itself was the reason the buildings were like that. The height of buildings in the capital was limited to preserve the castle’s imposing

appearance.

It was a simple reason, maybe even seemingly trivial, but things like that were necessary to preserve the royal family's majesty.

Especially since it had only been ten years or so since they had become the royal family.

In any case, since that restriction was made so clear as to be codified into a law, no buildings in the capital would be visible from outside the walls except for the castle.

The Royal Academy was treated as an exception, however. That was evidence of just how special it was in the eyes of the aristocracy.

Even more so when considering the large area of land it had been granted in the capital, even if it was on the northern outskirts of the city.

There were multiple reasons that the Royal Academy was known as the most prominent academy.

One was its alumni.

Nobody could argue that it was exceptional in that regard, since it had produced two of the Elite Seven. No other academy, even outside of Ladius, had ever accomplished such a feat.

Of course, they wouldn't have been able to join the Elite Seven if not for their own talent and hard work, but the academy was one of the reasons for their success.

Another was its facilities.

Since the king himself sponsored the academy, they may as well have had no budget limitations. They had the most advanced laboratory equipment, the best weapons and armor, and conducted the most cutting-edge research.

And while the land it stood on was vast in its own right, the interior had been expanded to many times its size using magic and magical tools, so it was said to be larger than the capital itself.

Nobody could argue with that either.

And the last reason was its people; in other words, the quality of its instructors.

“Their numbers are especially large this year... It shall take hard work just to review them all.”

“I imagine the mess in Veritas is behind it. I hear a lot of skilled people are leaving.”

“Hmm... The sudden death of the king and the ensuing problem of succession to the throne. They’re saying it’ll take at least five years to resolve.”

“Yes. Plenty of people have gone to the other surrounding countries too, but there are cultural differences between countries, so it makes sense that a lot are coming here, where those differences are smaller.”

“Well, this kingdom suffers from a chronic lack of man power,” Hildegard replied as she glanced over the documents. “I expect they shall be happy to have somewhat of a solution to that problem—as will we.”

The academy, which took pride in being the top school, had to have high-quality instructors as well as students.

Under that philosophy, the academy recruited new instructors every year around this time.

Employment at the academy was strenuous, but it was well-compensated, and, above all, prestigious, so people confident in their abilities would take the opportunity to apply.

But there could only be a limited number of instructors, and that included instructors already at the school. That meant that for every person newly hired, one of the current staff would have to quit.

That was the reason for the various looks on the instructors’ faces.

“Inviting even half this year would make for quite the lively gathering. Have they gotten the impression that this is a party of some sort?”

“It can’t be helped. Just being invited to take the exam gives people bragging rights.”

“I wish they would not apply to be instructors for such a reason...”

They couldn’t tell who would make a good instructor from their profiles on paper alone. They had to meet applicants in person and test their skills and knowledge, which took time, and they didn’t have enough of that to see all of them. They were selecting students at the same time, after all.

That was why they looked at these documents to eliminate anyone who was obviously not a good fit...but people apparently took it as a test of luck. They would apply without regard to whether they could realistically pass or not.

Wishing they would stop making unnecessary work for her, Hildegard reached for the next document...then furrowed her eyebrows as soon as she saw what was written there.

“I must say, this is unexpected.”

“What is it?”

“Look at this. I think you shall understand.”

“What in the world is so surprising that you would say... Huh?!”

The woman next to Hildegard suddenly let out a shout, drawing the eyes of everyone in the room at once. Realizing she was being observed intently, she blushed and cleared her throat. Once she had regained her composure, she looked back at the document in her hands...but she still couldn’t believe what she saw there.

“Is this really...”

“We at least know that this is no fake. The documents are made so that we can tell who submitted them and from where, in order to prevent being tricked. I checked to make sure they are all who they say they are.”

“It would be all too easy to play a trick on us otherwise, after all...”

There was actually no standardized format for the application. That was so the applicants could judge holistically what they could and should put on.

But this application was extremely concise.

It was concise...and decisive.

Skills: Swordsmanship (Special-Grade).

Submitting that anywhere would guarantee instant acceptance. That was just how much it meant to have a Special-Grade Skill.

However...

“I don’t know what to do with this...”

“Indeed, I, too, am at a loss.”

“It’s not often you two don’t know what to do... What is it?”

“Oh? You came at just the right time. Look at this.” Hildegard took the paper from the woman and handed it to the approaching man.

“Huh? Are you sure I can see?” He hesitated briefly, not having expected her to give it to him, but then seemed to realize she wouldn’t have done so if there had been any problem with it. Still slightly bewildered, he took it.

“Well, I’ll take a look if you say so... Hmm... Special-Grade Swordsmanship?! That’s amazing! So... What’s the issue with this? I guess it’s an issue that you might have to fire me to make room, but...”

“Look closer. At the age field in particular.”

“Age? It’s true that she doesn’t have much experience, so she might be pretty young—wait, what?”

The man’s prediction had been close to the mark. The problem that Hildegard noticed was that this person was young.

More that that...she was far too young.

“Uh... If I’m seeing this correctly, she’s not even old enough to enroll in the academy.”

“Rest assured, your eyes are not deceiving you. And therein lies the issue.”

There were no minimum qualifications to be an instructor at the academy. They employed anyone who they deemed to be a good fit, regardless of age, nationality, or rank.

Even if they weren’t old enough to attend the academy, let alone above the age of majority.

That was only in theory, however. It was possible in the sense that there was no rule against it, but it was another story whether they would actually permit such a thing.

“It would be the safest choice to reject this application...”

“But it would be a waste to reject a Special-Grade user for that reason alone.”

“Just because someone has a Special-Grade Skill doesn’t mean they’re a talented teacher. This application is proof positive of that.”

“Indeed. But, no... I have decided. We shall invite her. We can make a final decision once we have seen more.”

They didn’t have a great deal of time to think about it. Each instructor here had quite the number of applications, and Hildegard had to check them all herself at the end. If they took too long, it would be dark before they were done.

And if the headmaster said so, none of the others could object. The woman and man nodded, then went back to their documents to take care of their quotas.

For a time, all that could be heard were the sounds of pages flipping and the occasional side conversation.

And eventually...

“Well, it seems we have reached a stopping point.”

“Yes, we got a lot done today.”

“Indeed. Thank you all for your hard work.”

They’d somehow managed to look over all of the resumes. Hints of relief showed on all their faces.

The hard part, which included determining whether they themselves would stay or leave, was yet to come, but they’d finished this one job nonetheless.

In response to the appreciative words, they nodded and exhaled.

“The people applying seemed more qualified than usual, maybe because of the inflow from Veritas.”

“So we are suffering from *too* much success, as it were. But that shall mean bad news for some of you.”

Several of them smiled wryly; they understood that themselves. Even some who had been at ease before looked slightly anxious now. That was just how strong the competition was this year.

“Up-and-coming adventurers, famous people, first-rate researchers, instructors from other academies... There were a lot of people I didn’t expect to see. In particular, it’s not often that I see people with adventuring experience apply.”

“They must have their own reasons. Perhaps someone they know is applying as a student.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Who can say? We can ask them when they arrive. As for the famous one, it may invite comments from a certain someone if we hire her...but so be it. They have no reason to complain if we hire someone they fired long ago.”

In any case, this year, it looked like they would once again be able to live up to their reputation as the top academy.

As she nodded with satisfaction...

“And it seems *he* shall make it here just fine.”

Hildegard murmured quietly, a slight smile coming to her face.

2

“No way...” muttered Carine Stamitz, furrowing her brow, as soon as she saw the letter of recommendation.

Carine had been working at this academy for five years. In that time, she’d gotten used to seeing recommendation letters whether she wanted to or not...but there was a line between what she was used to and *this*.

It was true that this was a notorious school. But that was all it was—a school.

And today was the exam day for their elementary school. It was no big deal if someone didn’t get in; they could make up for it later.

So why would this kind of place get this kind of recommendation letter?

It was true that one was required to take the exam, but all one needed in order to do so was a recommendation from *someone*, be it an alumnus, some baron, or a well-known adventurer.

It certainly wasn’t a bad thing to go all-out with one’s recommendation...but only those with nothing to lose if they failed could say that.

For example, it didn’t mean much if someone who’d been recommended by a baron failed, but it would be a scandal if it was someone who’d been recommended by a duke.

This kingdom was still far from stable; there were plenty of people willing to drag you down for their own gain. So people like that couldn’t afford to show weakness...which meant that getting a recommendation from one of them had even more significance.

“Hmm? Have I made some mistake?” asked the boy standing before Carine as she was lost in thought. “I thought all I had to do was show you that.”

“Oh, no, nothing like that...”

There was nothing wrong with, but it was certainly *awkward* in the sense that it contained references from the king, a duke, a duchess, and a certain adventurer.

Those four people were even called heroes for their extraordinary efforts in founding the country. Even one of their names would have been more than adequate as a reference.

In fact, a girl with a recommendation letter from the king had just come in shortly before, which had led to a bit of a fuss...

“Well, even if there were something wrong, it isn’t anything for me to worry about,” she concluded.

The fact that he’d brought in this letter meant this boy was somebody notable. Carine was aware that she was out of touch with society, so she didn’t know for certain, but there was the chance that letting him through would cause a commotion.

But it wasn’t her job to worry about that. Her role was to check whether the applicants had recommendation letters and whether they were genuine. The rest would be taken care of by the people in charge of it.

And while this letter was unbelievable, it was real. That meant all Carine had to do was let him through.

“I’m sorry I took a minute. You can go ahead.”

“That’s okay. I came early, so I have some time to spare.”

“Good to hear! Do you know where to go next?”

“I was told to go straight ahead from here, and then we’ll split into groups based on what concentration we want.”

“That’s right. Once you get there, they’ll tell you what to do next.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

“Good luck... Oh, wait!”

“What is it?”

Normally, she would have just let him through and been done with it, but on a whim, she didn’t let it end there.

It could have been on a whim. Or it could have been because she’d seen his eyes.

That spark deep in his jet-black eyes, one that he couldn't have hidden if he'd tried... That was a spark of anticipation.

It was premature, since he hadn't passed yet...but at the same time, it was familiar.

It was nothing much.

Just that about ten years ago, when this place had just been built...

Carine had been the same way.

So she opened her mouth to say one thing.

"I don't know whether you'll be able to attend here yet...but I'll tell you anyway. Welcome to the Royal Academy."

Then she gave him a big smile, just like the one she'd been given all those years ago.

†

Once she'd seen the boy off, Carine stretched. The line that had gone on and on since morning was finally empty.

Leaning back in her chair, she sighed. "How many people did I let through...? It must have been a hundred or more."

As she said so, she couldn't help thinking about the exams, maybe because she'd once taken them herself.

No, in fact, they still affected her, since the instructor exams were going on at the same time. The results could spell the end of Carine's stint as an instructor.

At the resume stage, it hadn't seemed as though there were any especially good applicants for the position of sorcery teacher, but she couldn't be sure until it was over. She was in a better position than the swordsmanship and axemanship teachers, but she couldn't relax just yet.

There wasn't anything Carine could do about it, however. She just had to pray that nobody better than her would come along.

"Well, it would be a good thing for the academy if there were someone better than me."

In any case, thinking about it wouldn't be productive. Since she had nothing in particular to do, her thoughts drifted to the student exams.

The exams started with a skill test that weeded out a certain number of applicants. If they didn't have enough fundamental skills, they wouldn't pass.

And that was done on a first come, first served basis, since it would be inefficient and time consuming to wait until all of them arrived to start. That resulted in those applicants who came later gathering together, although it was just to wait for their turns.

Once that was over, it was time for the interview...but they were lucky if half of the applicants made it that far. Anyone who hadn't passed the skills test was informed at that stage and sent home. There was no point in advancing someone they knew didn't have enough talent, and in any case, they didn't have enough time for that.

Those who managed to pass would go into an interview, where they would be asked various questions.

The instructors made their determinations based on things like hobbies, personality, and enthusiasm...or so they said, but that was more than half false. Those things did serve as reference points, but the final decision was up to the headmaster's "eye."

Carine had only found out once she'd been hired as an instructor: the headmaster had something akin to Skill Assessment but more powerful. It revealed any and all of the target's aptitudes. She had been assured, though, that none of what the headmaster found out that way would be shared.

In any case, that was the rough outline of the exam process...but there was one part of the process that was more important than anything else.

It was that the applicants must never speak their own names.

That was especially forbidden during the skills test, and anyone who broke the rule would be immediately disqualified.

The reason for that was that the academy's philosophy was to enroll only those who were fit to study there.

It wasn’t that stating their names made them unfit. It was that it would prevent the examiners from making a fair judgment. Half the time, the instructors would recognize children by their first names, and they would definitely recognize their family names (though Carine might not, since she was out of touch with society). That was the kind of people the Royal Academy attracted.

So in order to make a fair and unbiased decision, the children were told to never say their names.

In the final judgment, however, it wouldn’t amount to much if they did, since the headmaster’s eye would reveal their true aptitude immediately. So in practice, it meant nothing more than following the bare minimum of rules.

The only thing was that that very philosophy put the academy on bad terms with the kingdom, though they received sponsorship from the king.

Another criterion of suitability was enthusiasm, so they would prioritize a particularly enthusiastic Middle-Grade Skill user over an unenthused High-Grade Skill user.

The kingdom was aware of this policy and tried to tell them to prioritize Skills, but the academy had anticipated this and made a deal upon its founding that exempted it from local laws. That meant not even the king himself could complain about the academy’s policies.

Of course, after a certain point, they wouldn’t be able to say that anymore, but there were no issues as of now...though that could have been because they ultimately aligned with the kingdom’s policies.

Those who studied at the academy had always had enthusiasm to match their Skill grade, with almost no exceptions, so ordinarily, there was no reason there would be any issues.

But this year, they couldn’t be sure there would be no issues.

Though she wasn’t well-versed in worldly affairs, Carine, as an instructor at the Royal Academy, naturally heard about events of great moment.

Events such as a certain boy defeating a black dragon.

He was the newest and strongest of the Elite Seven.

But despite being a swordsman, he didn’t even have the Swordsmanship Skill.

It was a closely guarded secret; only a select few knew about it...but if it was true, it could be the first case in which the academy would treat someone differently than the kingdom.

Well, the kingdom was apparently making an exception for him too, so they wouldn’t know for sure how exactly he would be treated until the time came.

“Oh...”

Carine suddenly had a thought.

That recommendation letter the boy from before had brought...

It would have made sense to bring that letter if he was that very boy.

But...

“No, it can’t be him.”

She concluded against the possibility because the letter had mentioned his desired concentration.

And he wanted to study sorcery.

So there was no way he was the next Elite Swordsman.

“Well, it would be interesting if he was... Hmm?”

As she thought, she heard some voices coming from outside.

“Let’s see... Is this the right place?”

“I mean, I think it is for us but not for you... Our exams are at different places, right? Shouldn’t you not come with us?”

“We can ask.”

They sounded like more people for her to greet.

She couldn’t look sloppy in front of people who might be her future juniors or students.

So Carine fixed her posture and smiled as she took in the group of three that

walked in.

3

Sylvia Heydrich Ladius gulped as she looked at what was in front of her.

It was a target enveloped in a roaring blaze.

The girl before her in line had created that during her exam, then walked out as if it were business as usual.

Sylvia didn't need to look which way the girl had gone to know that she'd passed.

That meant that to pass this exam, Sylvia would need to do at least that well with her magic... No.

"No, I'm my own person. I don't have to worry about what other people are doing... I came here because I wanted to, so I just have to do my best, right?"

Murmuring to herself wouldn't get her any reply, but it cheered Sylvia up a little.

"Here goes," she muttered, regaining her determination.

"All right, next. Number 153."

"Oh, here!"

Sylvia hurried forward the moment her number was called.

There was no need to rush, since there was nobody behind her in line, but it was a matter of her mood.

She walked up to the designated place...then turned a confused look toward the examiners.

"U-Um... The target...?"

"Yes, the target is right there."

It certainly was right there. It was right in front of her, taking up about three meters of space on the flat ground.

It was there, but...

“Um... But it’s on fire...?”

“Yes, it was set on fire in the exam just before. What about it?”

“Uh...”

Wondering why they weren’t doing anything about it, Sylvia looked around but saw nothing that would resolve the situation before her.

The exam room was about fifty meters squared, and since it was being used for exams at the moment, the only things inside it were the bare ground and the burning target.

There had been other targets when Sylvia had arrived, but all of them had been blown up or shattered by the other applicants’ magic.

So this was the last one...

“What’s wrong? The exam is on, you know? There isn’t any signal, so you can start whenever you’re ready. You know what to do, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes, but...”

As she nodded, she ruminated on the words she’d heard when she’d arrived here.

If she remembered correctly...

“Attack that target with whatever you do best and dazzle me!”

...had been the examiner’s words.

But with a target like that, she couldn’t...or could she?

“Oh, now that I think about it...”

They hadn’t told her to break or burn the target.

In that case...

“Yeah... This should work.”

And if it didn’t, she could deal with it.

She let out a breath, looked straight at the still-burning target, and thrust out her right hand as if to grasp it.

Then...

“Freeze, Ice Formation.”

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Sorcery): Magic / Ice Formation

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, the thing before her immediately froze. All of it, target and flames, was encased in ice.

“All right,” she muttered to herself, then stole a glance at the examiner’s face. She thought the magic had produced good results, but she wasn’t very confident in what she’d done.

And the verdict was...

“Yes, good magic... I would give that a passing mark. It did dazzle me, but that was unintentional, wasn’t it? You could have waited until it stopped burning; that would have been enough.”

“It would have? But then the target would...”

“If it burned up, we could just get a new one. There were a hundred and fifty-two mages who went before you, you know. We can never have too many targets.”

“Oh...”

The examiner was right. She hadn’t thought of that. She’d used her magic in haste, but there had been no need to.

“Well, you can learn things like that as you go. It’s a bonus that I got to know the extent of your magic, even if it was only the result of a misunderstanding. If it had been based on an accurate assessment of the situation on your part, I would have had nothing to say.”

“Okay... I’ll try harder.”

“I don’t know whether you’ll be able to demonstrate that kind of effort at this academy...but so far, it looks like you’re qualified to try.”

“Wait, do you mean...”

“I said that was good magic, didn’t I? You can go straight that way, not home. The instructor there will lead you to the next place.”

“Oh...”

It was clear what that meant. She’d received a passing grade on the skills test.

It didn’t sound like it was a perfect score...but as the feeling sank in, she clenched her fist a little.

“I did it...!”

“I’m sorry to interrupt your celebration, but could you make room for the next in line?”

“Oh, okay, sorry!”

Sylvia hurried to get out of the way. Someone new had just come in, apparently.

Her eyes were immediately drawn to the new person—a boy—because of his hair, such a sleek jet black that it seemed to threaten to suck her in.

Hair was said to represent one’s talents, and black meant one had talent for everything.

So even as she made to leave, Sylvia couldn’t help but stop in her tracks and watch the boy.

“Perfect timing. You’re number 154, but as you can see, there’s nobody ahead of you, so let’s begin.”

“Hmm... Well, no problem. What do I do?”

“You see that target? Attack it with whatever you do best and dazzle me. That’s all.”

She’d known they probably would, but Sylvia almost let out a noise when the examiner actually said that. She was only able to suppress her reaction because she knew it would distract the boy.

What she’d done earlier was already interfering with his exam enough, though.

His target was the same one Sylvia had just frozen. It wouldn’t be realistic to

wait for the ice to melt...and what was more, her mana was adding more cold energy even now. That was how the spell worked.

That would really hinder him if he happened to be a fire magic specialist, and it would also get in his way if he used any other kind of magic.

But they apparently had no intention of changing the target, so Sylvia just looked on, feeling apologetic.

“Whatever I do best... So I can use anything I want?”

“Of course. Seeing what decision you make is part of the exam.”

“Hmm... Understood. I’ll use this, then.”

When Sylvia saw what he took out, she once again almost made a sound.

It was a sword he had been carrying on his back—technically a wand in the shape of a sword.

The examiner didn’t stop him, so it was probably okay for him to use it...but it was rare to see a wand shaped like a sword.

Wands weren’t required for mages, but they were said to be good to have. A wand tailored for sorcery would support one’s magic.

It was up to the individual what kind of wand to use, so some would take something they used often and make that into a wand, and others would prioritize portability...but even then, almost nobody used a sword as a wand. There were stories of rare mages who did because they also had talent for swordsmanship, but Sylvia had never seen one in real life, at least.

That made her even more interested to see what kind of magic he would use. It was enough to warrant using a wand, and that wand was sword-shaped. Any mage would be curious.

As she wondered, she saw the boy get into a fighting stance.

“All right, here I go.”

Oh, I see, the spell has to do with swords since the wand is sword-shaped, she thought...

“Supernatural Blade.”

The next thing she knew, everything was white. It overwhelmed her vision in an instant, and then she heard a loud boom.

At the same time, she felt a wind shoot past her with shocking force.

“Huh...?”

When her vision cleared and she beheld the scene, Sylvia let out an amazed sound.

The reason was simple and obvious.

Just a moment ago, she’d seen a frozen target and the large wall of the exam area behind it.

But now...

“How... The instructors did everything they could to build that wall so that it wouldn’t break... And it just took one attack?”

There was no response to the examiner’s shocked comment—only a gaping hole in the wall.

On the other side, naturally, was the academy grounds outside of the exam room.

Then...

“Hmm... Could I have overdone it?”

The boy’s troubled voice reached Sylvia’s ears and the examiner’s.

4

Facing the door, Sylvia took two, then three deep breaths. Her heart was pounding and her throat was dry.

She didn’t need anyone else to make the observation for her—she knew better than anyone that she was nervous.

She gulped as if to steady her breathing. Her heart showed no signs of slowing down, but there was nothing she could do about that.

What she did when she went forward would determine whether she could attend the academy or not.

She couldn’t relax, no matter how much she told herself to. If she’d been able to shake her nerves off right then, though, she wouldn’t have been so nervous in the first place.

Sylvia looked around as if to avoid those feelings. What she saw was a stone corridor just before the interview room in the Royal Academy.

The scenery seemed vaguely familiar, and it wasn’t just her imagination. This was her first time here, but it had some commonalities with the place she was most accustomed to: the royal castle.

The Royal Academy and the castle had been built around the same time by the same construction business, so in a sense, it was only natural that they would feel similar.

Feeling her nervousness relieved slightly as she looked at her surroundings, Sylvia shifted her gaze again. It seemed more spartan than the castle, but that made sense considering that it was an academy.

Lost in thought, she swiveled her head to look around...and then made eye contact with someone.

“Oh—”

She couldn’t help but make a noise of surprise, since she’d completely forgotten the other person was there.

Whereas the skills exam took place in multiple rooms, there was only one interview area. That was evidence of how few candidates were able to move on to the interview stage, but the large number of concentrations meant enough people came that there was a wait.

Sylvia was actually waiting for the interview before hers to wrap up, so it wasn't unusual that the person after her was already here....but all the same, this was a little different.

From the time she arrived, she'd taken note of the boy, who was now giving her a puzzled look.

They'd walked here together, after all.

Yes, this boy was the one who had taken the exam after her.

What he had done had been shocking in multiple respects, but he had of course passed, and they had ended up coming here together.

So it was only natural that he was here, but that fact had slipped her mind while she was waiting for her interview.

In other words, he had seen her stand in front of the door, making no attempt to get in, then look around the area aimlessly.

It was no wonder that he was giving her that look.

Conscious of her cheeks reddening from shame, she hastily looked back toward the door and took another deep breath.

She felt like she'd embarrassed herself quite a bit, but maybe thanks to that, she'd also calmed down.

No...maybe it would be better to say that she'd remembered.

Despite all this, Sylvia had some confidence that she would get into the academy.

As was evident from her name, Sylvia was a member of the royal family. Though they ruled a still-young kingdom, she kept in mind the fact that she was royal and was proud of putting in the effort to live up to the title.

She was confident that she wouldn't come out on the bottom, even among a

gathering of the best of the best in her age group.

But that confidence had been shattered into pieces shortly before.

That was how much of a shock it had given Sylvia to witness that boy's performance.

She didn't mean to blame him; if anything, she was grateful.

It was like he'd told her off for being overconfident at her level.

That was all in her head, of course, but it had made her brace herself.

This was the Royal Academy. Ability was everything here, whether you were royal or not. She couldn't afford to overestimate her own strength.

Seeing the boy's face had made her remember that realization...which meant that this was no time to be nervous.

People like that boy had taken the same exam as her.

If she was too nervous to perform at her best, she might not be accepted, even if she would have been otherwise.

She didn't think *all* of the other examinees were like him, but she couldn't be sure. It was best to brace herself for anything.

Suddenly, she remembered what her father had told her when she'd set off to take the exam.

"This world is full of far more amazing people than we realize."

She didn't know whether those words were a fitting way to send your daughter off to take an exam, but they were definitely a warning.

She couldn't let it break her heart if she saw something that far surpassed anything she'd imagined.

And her father had probably spoken from his own experience taking the exam.

She thought so because she knew very well who had been there when her father had gone to school.

He had gone to the same academy as two of the kingdom's heroes—members

of the Elite Seven.

It wasn't the same academy but its predecessor...but that meant that her father knew well that there were people in this world who could even be called absurd.

Despite being one of them himself...or maybe because of that.

He had stood alongside two of the Elite Seven, two heroes, and a renowned adventurer to save this land and form this kingdom, so he understood that well.

And Sylvia knew that well too, having seen such people and heard stories about them from a young age.

It was actually because she'd heard those words that Sylvia's heart hadn't broken even when she'd been shocked.

She'd still gotten nervous and let it slip her mind that there would be extraordinary people at this academy...but that was proof that she still had room to grow.

In any case...

"All right," she muttered, and the nervousness vanished from her eyes.

All that remained within them was a strong spark of determination.

With one last exhale, she brought her hand to the door.

And then...

"Excuse me."

After she knocked lightly, yet hard enough that they could hear it inside, the door opened.

The light from the interior entered her eyes immediately, but she stepped in, not letting it overwhelm her.

She gently closed the door behind her, took a look around...and then couldn't help but swallow.

Reflected in her field of vision were eight figures. None of their faces were familiar, but she could guess their identities considering where she was.

They must have been instructors from each department, and probably the department heads.

But the Royal Academy had seven departments total. That meant there was one extra person...but there was no need for her to trouble herself about that.

It was easy to guess who the eighth person was too...and she may have had to make a correction to her previous thought.

One of the eight people looked familiar.

That person was a girl who looked to be about the same age as her.

However, she was no less imposing than the seven stern-looking adults.

In fact, she had such an air of dignity that she seemed worthier of being here than anyone else in the room, so much so that it seemed only natural that she should be in the very center.

No...it *was* only natural that she should be in the center.

She wasn't just a pretty face; she was there because she had definite accomplishments.

And precisely because Sylvia knew that well, seeing the familiar face didn't put her mind any more at ease.

This was Hildegard Lindwurm—the headmaster of the Royal Academy.

Though she looked like a young girl, she was actually a member of a race that lived many decades longer than humans, and she had been one of the central figures in saving the land.

Sylvia's father had told her that, and she had seen Hildegard in person a number of times.

But Hildegard was not the type to favor someone because she was acquainted with them. If she determined that someone was not capable, she would reject them even if they were royalty.

So rather than relaxing, Sylvia steeled herself further and waited patiently for a response.

She didn't start by trying to make herself sound good; she had no name to tell

them, nor any abilities to show them. There was no need for names here, and she had already demonstrated her ability.

So the correct choice was to wait for the others to respond.

She immediately received confirmation that she had made the right decision.

The instructors watched her with intrigued expressions as she stood there, making no move, and then they nodded with admiration.

In one respect, though, Sylvia was already half breaking the rules. She had come here already knowing this was the right way to present herself because her tutor had told her so. Sylvia's tutor was an alumna herself and familiar with things like that.

But she had only passed the first step. She waited for their next reaction, not letting herself lose focus, and one of them finally spoke.

"All right... Let's get right into the interview, why don't we? First of all..."

The questions that followed were conventional: why she had applied to the academy, what she wanted to accomplish here, and her plans after she graduated.

She was applying to the sorcery department, but each of the instructors interrogated her in turn, and she answered all of their questions without faltering. This was all as expected; there was no reason to be rattled.

The one thing that bothered her was that the headmaster was staring at her the whole time. She had heard from her tutor that Hildegard would just observe her and not participate in the questioning, but it was honestly more uncomfortable than Sylvia had anticipated. It felt like Hildegard was not merely observing her but gazing into the depths of her soul, but Sylvia resisted the urge to avert her eyes.

She answered several more questions after that, and just when it was starting to get tough, the questions finally stopped.

"Is that about it?" one of the interviewers asked.

"I think we've gotten through just about everything we need to ask," another replied. "Does anyone have anything else?"

The other six shook their heads, and Sylvia couldn't help but let out a breath. She'd managed to make it all the way through somehow.

But just when she finally relaxed for a moment...

"I shall ask one last thing, then."

Sylvia almost exclaimed in surprise. She hadn't heard about this from her tutor; she'd been told the headmaster didn't speak at all during the interview...but this made sense if she thought about it.

The headmaster wouldn't treat every single person the same, nor would she do the same thing every year. It would have given people like Sylvia an advantage, which would have been contrary to the academy's philosophy.

Though this was an odd way of putting it, it was actually natural for unexpected things to happen.

Sylvia could tell by the fact that none of the instructors reacted that this hadn't been a surprise to them. That meant they must have known about this in advance, and Sylvia hadn't known because they had purposefully refrained from telling her.

It wasn't out of malice. It was to encourage her growth.

Hildegard would make no special considerations for royalty, and it was that very fact that meant she could consider Sylvia deeply. She had deliberately left Sylvia room to think for herself, knowing that telling her everything wouldn't be in her best interest.

Thanks to her training, Sylvia managed not to make a noise of surprise.

It was certain that she would get a lecture for failing to realize that until the last moment...but she could think about the lecture later. Right now, she had to focus on the headmaster.

Sylvia composed her expression, having barely managed to conceal her surprise, and turned to look at the headmaster. Now that she thought about it, this was the first time she'd directly met the headmaster's eyes.

Though the headmaster had been watching her all this time, Sylvia felt like she was being observed even more deeply than before. She straightened her

posture.

Wondering what she would be asked, she half-reflexively gulped.

“Here is the question... What impressed you the most in the past week?”

“Huh...?”

This time, she hadn’t been able to hold back the inane sound.

No, she hadn’t stood a chance at holding it back when she’d been wondering what question would close off the interview and it had been about what had impressed her the most recently.

It was completely unexpected, so she couldn’t help being taken aback.

But whatever the question, she was still being interviewed. She refocused herself, but there was no need to think it over.

There was one thing that stuck out in her memory as having impressed her the most in the past year, even.

“Um, let me see... Maybe this answer is too obvious, but I would have to say that what happened today impressed me the most... Specifically, what happened during the skills exam.”

“Hmm... I do not imagine that it was because it was especially difficult or strenuous for you.”

Though she didn’t know what Hildegard saw that led her to that judgment, Sylvia didn’t hesitate to nod in confirmation. Considering that this was an interview, she might have come off better if she’d said it was the difficulty that impressed her, but those eyes would have seen through any lies she tried to tell.

She didn’t have any evidence for it, only a vague gut feeling, but she felt like honesty was the right move, and above all, there was no way she could lie after having seen something like that.

“That’s right. It wasn’t my exam that impressed me but the one after mine. It’s hard to describe, but...seeing that someone could do *that* made me realize how far I have to go.”

“We have not been told the results of the exam in detail yet...but if you are saying that, it must have been quite impressive. I imagine it was that loud noise that we heard earlier...though personally, it made me more concerned about the state of the exam area.”

“Oh, um, about that... Ha ha...”

The headmaster’s concern was spot on, seeing as the exam area was half destroyed, but Sylvia was hesitant to say that out loud, so she laughed it off. It seemed like tattling...and she didn’t feel like it would be right to make them think less of him.

They would find out eventually whether she told them or not, though, so it may have been meaningless.

“Well, regardless, I understand. That is all I would like to ask. Does anyone have any further questions?” the headmaster asked the instructors by way of a final confirmation. They all shook their heads.

Sylvia let out a sigh now that she knew it was really over. All that was left was to wait for the results to arrive.

She’d done all she could...but she honestly wasn’t confident that she’d passed. Her confidence hadn’t come back after the boy had blown it away.

But she still hoped that she’d passed. That had been her hope before she came to take the exam, and she clung to it even more fervently now.

She still remembered that scene so vividly, it felt like she would see it behind her eyelids if she closed her eyes.

There was no question that *he* would pass.

It wouldn’t make sense if he failed.

And if she was able to study here with him...she felt like she would be able to grasp her own capabilities.

She didn’t know much about him yet, not even his name, but that was a trivial matter.

She did feel as though she’d seen him somewhere before, or perhaps it was that he resembled someone she knew, but those questions, too, were trivial.

She'd already seen his ability, and that was enough.

But she had to be accepted before she could think about all that.

Her royal status wouldn't be any use to her here.

All that one needed in the Royal Academy was ability and passion.

She wasn't sure whether she'd demonstrated enough of either...but if they deemed her worthy, she would do the best she could.

As her mind ran wild with thoughts of the future, Sylvia dipped her head in thanks.

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The second the girl had finished her interview and left the room, the atmosphere seemed to subtly relax. The several near-simultaneous sighs were proof of how steeled the interviewers had all been.

"Thank goodness we managed to get through that all right."

"Yeah... Was my voice shaking at all when I asked her that question? The rule that we have to treat everyone equally is inconvenient at times like this..."

It didn't matter if the interviewee didn't state their name when the interviewers already knew their face, and how could they not know the king's little girl?

But they had to pretend not to know, and furthermore, they had to treat her the same as everyone else.

As instructors at the Royal Academy, they all agreed with that philosophy, but there were few who could naturally treat everyone equally.

While they wouldn't lose reputation or be punished as a consequence, it was another story whether they could remain calm.

Several of them sighed once again out of the resulting exhaustion.

"Thanks to your efforts, she did not seem to notice anything unnatural, so there is no problem. You can consider your most difficult interview successfully completed."

"That's a relief to hear."

Those words from the headmaster, one of the few exceptions who had no difficulty treating everyone impartially, spread relief through the room.

They knew the interviews would continue, but they were so exhausted from the one that had just concluded that they couldn't help but lose focus. That was probably why they didn't end the conversation there and start preparing for the next interview.

"I didn't expect you to ask a question, headmaster."

"Honestly... It was hard not to let my surprise show."

They said so because they truly hadn't expected the headmaster to get involved.

To be frank, the interview itself meant nothing. Only the instructors knew this, but the interview was a pretext for the headmaster to judge the interviewee's abilities.

The skills exam weeded out those who didn't meet the bare minimum requirements, and this was where the final measurements were made. In other words, the questions only served to buy time for that process and nothing more.

They did serve to measure the candidate's passion, but that was easy enough to see based on their attitude.

That meant that the interview could consist of the same questions every single time...and yet the headmaster had suddenly asked a question of her own, which had startled the instructors, regardless of whether they'd shown it or not.

"Why not do something different once in a while? It would become dull otherwise. And if I did not do something headmaster-like every so often, people would forget that I am the headmaster."

"I don't think there's any need for that. You're doing something that only you can do."

There was a small laugh in response to the casual remark.

Everyone here had faith in the headmaster; none of them doubted her

abilities. Though she could be capricious at times, it had never resulted in any big problems, and this was just one of those times.

That was part of the reason that none of them heard what she said under her breath next.

“It also told me that *he* has not changed a bit. It was a good way to prepare myself.”

“What was that you said?”

“I was only talking to myself. Pay it no mind. More importantly, we should start the next interview.”

“Oh, you’re right. We’d better keep up the pace or we won’t finish today.”

The instructors’ faces tightened in response to those words. It didn’t mean much, but they couldn’t let the examinees know that.

Once the headmaster saw that everyone was ready, she opened her mouth.

“Sorry to make you wait. You may now enter.”

Her voice must have carried clearly, as someone immediately approached the door. It wouldn’t be long before that person opened the door and came into the room.

The headmaster’s mouth faintly curved into an anticipatory smile, and she narrowed her eyes in the direction of the door as if she were trying to see through it.

5

Soma squinted as light poured in from the window. The sun before him had only just shown its face, and the light it shed was gentle.

He looked higher up. The sky was still a faint, dusky blue, showing that dawn was only just beginning.

He let out a breath and lowered his gaze to the still unlit cityscape. The shadows he saw here and there were the people of the city, and it was clear to see that they were beginning their daily lives despite the early hour.

Although not many were out and about yet, he could sense a certain vitality from them, which was to be expected.

This scene was the capital in the early morning.

As for why Soma was watching such a thing, it was simply that he had time to spare.

He hadn’t been here long enough to say that he was used to it, but it had already been ten days since he’d come to the capital.

This was no longer a sight he watched for the novelty, but he wasn’t sleepy anymore, and he had already finished his morning routine.

He was just watching the city to kill time, since he had nothing to do.

Maybe he could have gone out into the city to kill time, but unfortunately, he did have something to do during the day, so he didn’t have enough time for that... Such was his excuse, anyway.

The truth was that he wasn’t in the mood.

It wasn’t that he was depressed—much the opposite. He was in such high spirits, looking forward to what was to come, that he didn’t feel like doing anything else.

“It would be a waste to do nothing in the meantime, though. Perhaps I could head there now, just to be sure I arrive on time,” he muttered, turning his gaze to the interior.

It was an exceedingly ordinary room. It had wooden walls, a bed that would only barely escape being described as crude, and a desk with a chair.

This was the inn room that Soma had been staying in for the past ten days. It was much smaller than his room at home, but he didn't do much in his room, so it was enough to satisfy him.

It may not have been suitable for a duke's son, but it wasn't as if anyone would see him here.

And Soma was more accustomed to places like this, anyway. They were friendlier to his wallet as well, so he had no problem with it.

He turned to look at the desk. There was a single sheet of paper on it—not parchment paper but pure white. It was evident that it was expensive.

And the information written on it was equal in value... At least, Soma thought so.

To get to the point, it was the results of the Royal Academy exam that he had taken the other day, and it was clear from his elation what those results were.

However...

"Honestly, I can't believe I passed," he muttered under his breath.

That was how Soma genuinely felt.

Needless to say, it was the sorcery department of the Royal Academy that Soma had been accepted into. It was a place where those who wanted to specialize in magic gathered. As far as he was concerned, there would be no point in going anywhere else.

That didn't necessarily mean that he hadn't been confident he could get in. He'd had a certain amount of confidence right up until the exam. In fact, once he heard that there was no requirement to use magic, he'd been certain that he could do it.

It was just like Camilla had once told him.

That could have meant they took it as a given that he would use magic, seeing as it was the exam for the sorcery department, but there was no reason to follow that rule if they hadn't explicitly stated it. He could just demonstrate his

ability using his skill with a sword... His only mistake had been to assume he should go a bit overboard in that case.

It was all well and good that he'd blown the target away in a dramatic flourish, but he hadn't thought he would half destroy the exam area. He'd thought it would be okay, since he'd heard it was sturdy, but apparently it hadn't been.

And it wasn't as if strength alone was enough. Strength wielded without purpose was nothing more than violence, and even with a purpose, it was little different from violence if it wasn't wielded in accordance with that purpose.

Therefore, he'd more than half given up, assuming it wouldn't work out...only to learn he'd passed.

Apparently, the objective of the exam had been to dazzle the examiner, so there had been no problem with his methods, since he'd certainly achieved that goal.

However, the half-destroyed exam area was now out of order, having been rendered unusable.

But though he had that to be sorry for, he'd been able to move on to the next step, so he'd ended up heading to the interview room with the girl before him —who had, for whatever reason, stuck around after she'd passed—and waiting for a bit.

Then, once her interview had concluded and he had been called, Soma had gone in to be interviewed.

"And I was accepted in the end, so you never know."

While he genuinely hadn't expected it, that didn't mean he wasn't happy. If anything, the fact that he had given up on it made him even happier.

"And it could be said that that's why I'm waking up at this hour."

He'd heard a lot about the Royal Academy, and between that and the interview, his hopes were higher than ever before.

And today, he would finally be enrolled in the academy—it was entrance ceremony day.

But the ceremony wouldn’t start until after noon, so he was free until then.

In any case...

“Hmm... What should I actually do, though?”

If he went now, he would certainly avoid the risk of being late, but it was early morning. The academy definitely wasn’t open, and even if it had been, he wouldn’t have been able to get in, since he wasn’t enrolled yet.

That meant he would just have been killing time in a different place...

“Well, it would be more worthwhile than doing nothing here.”

And there was the chance he would find some other way to kill time on the way. If not, then he could at least look around the academy area.

“Hmm... There should be no problem, then.”

Having decided, Soma started getting ready to leave the inn.

The Royal Academy was a boarding school, so he would have to move out soon. He had only brought the bare minimum, though, and he hadn’t taken much out of his bag. All he had to do was make sure his acceptance letter was safely in his pocket.

Carrying his sack full of luggage on his back, he looked around the room one last time.

“I’ll be on my way, then.”

With that, Soma left behind the inn he’d been staying in with no signs of lingering attachment.

†

The layout of the capital was fundamentally simple. The royal castle was in its center, and from that point, four major roads extended directly north, east, south, and west. They led to the castle walls to the gates of the city.

Various stores and businesses lined the streets, and though it was quiet compared to other countries, it still bustled, as one would expect of a capital city.

There were also side streets that split off from the major roads, of course, but

they were unique compared to those in other towns. Elsewhere, side streets were often laid out haphazardly, as if to lead newcomers astray, but the side streets here were straight and evenly spaced. If one could have looked down on the capital from above, the grid pattern would have been clear.

That meant that no matter where you were, you could start walking straight ahead and not get lost...which was why Soma appeared to be wandering aimlessly.

“Well, I’m not seeing anywhere to kill time...which I should have expected this early in the morning,” he muttered, looking around.

The shops weren’t only on the main roads, of course. There were a lot down the side streets, and in fact, more people generally frequented those. The shops on the main roads tended to be more expensive and not suitable for those looking for bargains.

The inn Soma had been staying at was one of those side-street businesses, and the atmosphere of the alleyway outside had been quite a bit more chaotic than that of the main road. That also meant it gathered more interesting things, though.

In order to look for things like that, Soma had continued down the alley instead of toward the main road...but the results were as he had muttered before.

It was too early for the shops to be open.

There was no reason for people to gather either, so inevitably, there was no way for him to kill time.

As mentioned before, the buildings in the capital were all short, except for the castle and academy. He had no fear of getting lost thanks to the grid layout and because he could always see his destination, so he’d been wandering the alleys...but in the end, it had proven fruitless.

“I suppose it’s better than getting myself involved in something troublesome...”

There was little to no need to worry about getting involved in such things in the capital, however. Soldiers were always on patrol to maintain the public

order, and there were no slums.

It was easy to patrol with the grid layout and hard for people to hide. That meant the capital was not a very good breeding ground for crime, so it was uncommon for anything troublesome to happen in the first place.

Which meant that if something did happen and Soma got caught up in it...

“It would mean I have really bad luck.”

But who would really be the unlucky one in this case?

As Soma heard the faint but distinct sound of weapons clashing in the distance, he let out a sigh. It was coming from the direction of the academy, but it didn’t sound like a training match.

“I *was* hoping for something interesting, but...”

Now that he’d noticed this, he couldn’t exactly ignore it.

And it was one way of killing time, at least.

Though he wasn’t happy about it, Soma exhaled again and started toward the sound.

6

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Sense Presence): Sense Sneak Attack.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Swordsmanship): Dodge.

It was more than half luck that she managed to avoid it.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say her body moved before she was conscious of it.

She wouldn’t have been able to avoid it if she’d had time to think.

And even as she had that thought, her body was moving toward the next best course of action.

She forced her posture back upright and took a step forward. With that momentum, she thrust her free hand—the one that wasn’t holding her sword—at the approaching figure.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Unarmed Combat): Palm of the Tiger King

The second she felt resistance against her palm, the thing before her was blasted away with a bang.

Instantly, she was ready for the next attack. She turned around to see three shady figures in all black.

As she looked at the figures, identical to the one she’d just shoved away, Sylvia exhaled as if to calm her ragged breathing.

“That startled me... I didn’t expect to be attacked out of nowhere.”

What was more, she’d been attacked from behind after those three had appeared and distracted her.

Considering that her hand still felt slightly numb, even though she’d warded him off, there was no question that they’d come to kill her.

But even knowing that, she didn’t know what to do.

Though she was acting as if this were easy for her, she was actually at her limit. The enemy before had probably been at the same skill level as her. She'd dodged him once, but she might not be able to do it again.

She didn't expect him to get right back up, based on how it had felt when she hit him, but if she dawdled here, he would get up before she knew it.

That said, if the three before her were each as skilled as him and they attacked her at once, she would be overwhelmed. The cost of one wrong move might be her life.

She let out another breath, too small for the others to hear, as she wondered what to do.

In a sense, though, she'd brought this situation on herself.

The reason she was by herself outside so early in the morning was because she hadn't been able to wait for the entrance ceremony. She'd known there was no point in going to the academy so early, yet she hadn't been able to stay still.

The scene from that day flashed through her mind—the overwhelmingly intense flash of light that the boy whose name she still didn't know had unleashed.

She hadn't started out thinking she was the best. But at the same time, she hadn't intended to let anyone beat her. At least, she had been determined that if a classmate ever surpassed her for the moment, she would catch up to and overtake them during her time at the academy.

It wasn't a given that the royal family was the best. In reality, there were more than two people in the kingdom who were far more powerful than its royalty. That made it impossible for her to be the best.

It didn't follow that she had to be content with a lower position...but in that instant, any notion of contentment on her part had been completely destroyed.

Just like the wall of the exam area.

When the light had subsided, there was nothing left...and that had made the turn of events all the more refreshing to Sylvia.

If anything, maybe she should have said she was happy.

She got to study with the real thing.

That was more meaningful than anything, even if she would never reach his level.

Which was why she'd been so impatient for today, she'd woken up before the sun.

Though she knew the ceremony wouldn't start until noon, she had been so wide awake and unable to wait patiently that she'd ended up going outside.

Since she'd left a note, they wouldn't go looking for her, but she knew that they would be very angry with her later.

She knew that, but she hadn't been able to resist.

Despite knowing that there was no point in getting there early.

She'd wanted to look at the academy from outside while she waited instead of sitting in her room...and this was the result.

That was how she'd brought this situation upon herself.

"I'd like to ask why you attacked me...but there's probably no use."

As she said so, she saw that the three were showing signs of preparing to attack, and she let out another sigh.

Right as one of them leaned forward and leapt at her, Sylvia kicked off the ground.

However, the trajectory of her jump was horizontal, toward the wall.

She sensed her opponent's shock, but by that point, she was already transitioning into her next move.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Unarmed Combat): Wall Jump.

Her feet touched the wall for just a moment before she leapt at the enemy's side, not losing any momentum, and swung her sword.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Swordsmanship): Twin Fangs

Just then, a hard sensation told her the attack had been blocked, but she'd expected that. In fact, this was a combo attack; the first phase was meant to be blocked.

She swung directly upward with the arm that had been deflected. The opponent's sword, which had just blocked her attack, now flew through the air with a clang.

She cheered internally when she saw that she'd managed exactly what she'd intended to do, but she didn't have time to celebrate right now. Stifling her joy, she took a step forward.

With her left hand in a palm-forward position, she thrust it toward his abdomen—

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Sense Presence): Sense Sneak Attack.

Just before she made contact, Sylvia dodged directly sideways.

Her hearing was captured by three sounds that cut through the air—projectile weapons.

They were probably something like throwing knives, and she'd immediately evaded once she'd heard them. If she'd continued her attack, she could have been seriously hurt. There was also the possibility that it wouldn't have been a big deal, but she wasn't brave enough to test her luck.

And she didn't have any more time to think.

The opponent whose first attack had failed was making a counterattack. He had apparently brought more than just the one weapon, because he had a new sword in his hand. He swung it down without a moment's hesitation.

"Jeez... You really...don't ask any questions!"

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Swordsmanship): Swallow in Flight.

She swung her sword up to meet it, and the sound of metal on metal rang out.

Fortunately, this attacker wasn't as skilled as the other one, so she was able to hold her own against him, but he wasn't alone. She also wasn't in a strong enough position, and she wasn't confident she could continue to dodge if they threw more knives at her.

If she took her time here, it was highly likely that she would end up at a disadvantage...so Sylvia's next move was half a gamble.

She let go of her sword and jumped backward.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Unarmed Combat): Great Leap.

She hadn't dodged—she'd literally let go. If she'd been unlucky, she could have gotten cut, but her gamble had paid off.

The enemy stumbled at the unexpected move and, carried forward by his momentum, swung at the empty air.

In that time, Sylvia had already moved out of attacking distance. The trade-off was that she was now empty handed, but that was no problem.

She already had her eye on something to use instead of a sword—a stick laying on the edge of the road.

It wasn't quite long enough to match her height, but it was enough.

At the same instant the enemy tried to attack again, she picked up the stick. She saw him swing his sword, but she deliberately stepped into its path anyway. He hastily tried to swing downward, but she was faster.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Stick Combat): Whirlwind.

She spun around on her forward foot. As she felt the sword pass her by, she took a step. Along with that motion, she tried swinging up, and the enemy's head was in just the right place.

There was a dull sound the moment she swung, and the enemy lifted off the ground slightly. Based on the resistance she felt, she'd successfully caught his chin.

His body collapsed right then—perhaps he had lost consciousness—but before she had a moment to breathe—

"Obey my will and pierce my foes."

"A chant?!"

The voice she heard was muffled, but it was clearly a magical spell.

Sylvia hesitated just then, wondering if someone was really going to use magic here.

There wasn't much space, but most importantly, they were in an alley not far from the castle.

There wasn't anyone around, since it was early morning, but there was no way people didn't live here. Depending on what spell it was, it could cause injuries in the surrounding area.

That would indicate that she was the specific target of this attack, but if she had wanted help from others, then she would have sought it from the people already nearby.

Sylvia hadn't looked for help in the first place because she was unsure of the other people's positions. A soldier might have come if she'd cried for help, but it was likely it would be a random passerby, and then she wouldn't know how to react.

After all, her attackers were the kind of people to jump her out of nowhere in a place like this. Even granting that it was early in the morning and there were few people around, it spoke to their dedication.

There were no signs of any barrier to keep people away, which meant they probably didn't pay much attention to their surroundings.

She couldn't afford to do anything unnecessary and cause more damage.

That was the same reason that Sylvia wasn't using magic, and given that, there was only one thing she could do right now.

Once she did it, she would be left truly unarmed, but she didn't have time to worry about that.

She put all her strength into the stick in her hand and held it aloft.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Toss)

But before she could swing it down, she reflexively turned to look behind her.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Sense Presence): Sense Sneak Attack.

A hard sound rang out, and she felt a heavy impact through her arm.

Seeing the attacker in front of her, she realized that the one she'd first knocked over had gotten back up, but she couldn't do anything about it immediately.

But that wasn't bad in and of itself if it had stopped the spell...Sylvia thought, but in the next moment, her face froze.

The chant showed no signs of stopping.

No, if anything...

"It's going to include him...?!"

The mana she felt told her that this was a wide-range spell. It would definitely hit the attacker in front of her along with her.

But although they probably knew that, the chanter wasn't slowing down at all as they approached the end of the chant.

Their mana grew in strength until it hit its maximum...

"Oh no—"

"...and light them ablaze, Flame—"

"That'll be a bit too unsafe."

"Wha?"

At the same time she heard those words, the attacker in front of her went limp. The force trying to hold her back disappeared, and the attacker fell to the ground.

Sylvia watched in shock...then snapped back to reality when she heard two sounds like things collapsing behind her. She spun around and saw two more black-covered figures lying on the ground.

“Um... What’s going on...?” Sylvia muttered in confusion.

“I thought you might not need me to, but I stepped in for you. I couldn’t let them damage the environs.”

Right after uttering those words, a new figure appeared before her.

Sylvia had immediately been wary, but her caution faded when she saw that it was someone she knew.

Although she didn’t know his name...

“Huh? Are you...?”

There was no mistaking it—he was the boy who had taken the skills exam after her.

†

The place was in ruins. There was no sign of anyone—except for one man, who was lying down and gazing into empty space.

But just then, the man stirred. He was still staring at nothing, but now his brow furrowed in bewilderment.

“Huh? Already taken out? I wasn’t expecting much in the first place, but that was fast... She’s better than I thought. Either that, or there was some unexpected interference...”

He muttered to himself briefly, then closed his eyes along with his mouth and let out a sigh.

“Well, whatever. It wasn’t the real thing anyway. We took the opportunity to try it out, but we didn’t set out with the expectation of succeeding. I’m sure they’d yell at me if they heard me saying that...but whatever. They can’t

complain as long as we do what we have to do.”

He opened his eyes and stood up. Then he stretched his stiff body, twisted his neck, and grabbed the weapon lying at his side.

“I guess I’ll be off. Hopefully that at least distracted her a bit. I doubt it, though, based on how fast it was over. What a pain...but if it’s what the leader wants, I guess.”

With that, he left the area.

Now that he was gone, the place he had left behind was truly deserted. Almost like a metaphor for something, it stood there, utterly hollow.

7

When he arrived at the scene of the ambush, he saw a familiar girl.

He didn't know her name, but she was the girl who had taken the skills exam before him.

That was one of the reasons that he didn't hesitate to help her.

It was also because she was obviously being attacked, of course, but only people who met a minimum standard could take the entrance exam to the Royal Academy. That alone made her trustworthy.

On the other hand, the ones attacking her were shady figures in all black. It was obvious who he should help.

And now that he'd helped her, he couldn't just ditch her.

Turning back to the girl after he'd surveyed the area, Soma opened his mouth.

"Well, the first thing we should do is to make sure we're on the same page about the situation. Do you know why you were attacked?"

"Huh? Ah, um..."

Confusion spread across her face, as if she couldn't keep up with the sudden change in the situation.

That was a completely normal reaction...but then, in the next moment, she shifted. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, then closed her eyes as if she'd realized something and took a deep breath. Once her eyes opened again, there was no more trace of confusion in them.

Soma let out an impressed exhalation. Even at her young age, she was able to stay poised in a critical situation.

"Um, I think there's something I need to say before we talk about that..."

"What would that be?"

"Thanks for helping me."

"Hmm... Yes, I suppose thanks are in order."

Soma didn’t really care either way, but it was good manners.

Nevertheless, just as Soma didn’t know much about the girl, she shouldn’t have known much about him. He imagined that she remembered meeting him at the exam, but that only guaranteed she’d have a bare minimum of trust in him.

The fact that she’d given him proper thanks despite that must have been due to either good parenting or her natural disposition.

Either way, he appreciated the thanks. That alone made helping her worth it to him, he thought as she proceeded to open her mouth again with a troubled look on her face.

“Um, so, about why I was attacked... I actually don’t know.”

“You can’t think of any possible reason?”

“Well... The opposite, actually.”

“I see... So you can think of too many possible reasons, then.”

That wasn’t especially strange. She didn’t seem like the type to earn grudges, but that in itself may have drawn people’s resentment, to say nothing of her parents or her ties to the nobility.

The same was true for people like Soma. He’d never become aware of it, having been cooped up at home and never going out in public, but he was the son of a duke. That was more than enough for people to resent him.

And there would be even more of those people if he took other countries into account as well.

Nevertheless, the fact that she could say that at such a young age limited the number of families she could be from...but there was no need to think that far ahead.

“Oh, but maybe it’s true in a sense that I can’t think of anything... I have no idea why they would suddenly attack me under these circumstances.”

“Right, because of the place, and the fact that it’s so early.”

This was a back alley, but it wasn’t far from the castle. Attacking someone in a

place like this took a lot of guts. People typically passed through here at various times of day, and there was no guarantee that the alley would be empty at the time the attackers had chosen.

And it wasn't as if there was any barrier to keep people out either.

The possibility that someone would appear at some point was far from low; in fact, Soma had appeared.

One would have to detest her a lot to attack her in those circumstances.

"Incidentally, did you plan beforehand to be here at this time today?"

"Not at all. I just happened to wake up early and got the idea to come out."

That meant the enemy had also acted spontaneously.

The simplest explanation was that they'd seen the unexpected chance to attack and taken it.

"Well, maybe if they knew my personality well, they could have predicted I'd be here."

"But if it wasn't a planned outing, that would be too unreliable. It would be quite the gamble to attack someone without more information. And they were rather sloppy."

Common sense would have had them put up a barrier to keep people away at the very least.

And if they knew her well, it was likely that she knew them well too. But she'd said she had no idea who could have done this, which made that highly unlikely.

"Well, it isn't our job to keep thinking about this. We can leave that to the professionals."

"Yeah... You're right."

Soma let out another impressed exhalation as she turned to look into the distance. That was proof that she understood exactly what Soma meant—that there was a patrolman approaching from that direction.

That was why Soma hadn't examined the collapsed attackers. If he just waited, the soldiers would appear soon enough to take care of the rest.

The problem was just that Soma couldn't exactly leave, even if he left the rest to them. Although he knew almost nothing about the situation, he would have to be interviewed, given that he was the one who had knocked over the people now lying on the ground.

Fortunately, he had plenty of time for that...but Soma gazed in the same direction as the girl and let out a sigh.

†

Soma gazed into empty space, doing nothing in particular.

His gaze fell upon an unfamiliar ceiling and walls.

This was the office of one of the patrolmen; he'd been brought here to be interviewed.

It wasn't that he was locked in here; he'd already finished his interview, so he was killing time.

He barely knew anything about what had happened in the first place. It had all been over quickly, with almost no words exchanged between the combatants.

But just to be safe, they planned not to release him until they'd heard the girl's side of the story, investigated the scene, and determined there was nothing amiss.

Well, that was probably the right decision. There was the possibility that he was lying and actually on the side of the perpetrators.

So he had no complaints about how they were treating him.

If anything, he was pleasantly surprised at how hospitable they were.

He had a hot cup of tea, and there were snacks to go with it.

They had treated him with respect when they'd brought him in too, and the fact that nobody was watching him right now went beyond hospitable to the point that it could have been called exceptional.

That was to be expected, considering that Soma was the son of a duke. The patrolmen in the capital were mostly ordinary soldiers who ranked no higher

than knights. Even with the possibility that he was the perpetrator, they couldn't disrespect him because of the sheer difference in status.

There was just one problem when it came to that point.

Soma hadn't even stated his name, let alone made his status clear.

Considering that they were patrolmen, it wasn't impossible that they'd been told what Soma looked like...but there was another, likelier possibility.

That was that the one they recognized was the girl who had come along with him, not Soma, and he was receiving this treatment by virtue of his association with her.

That seemed probable, considering how they had shifted attitudes as soon as they'd seen her face.

That left the question of who exactly this girl was...

"Hmm... Well, it doesn't matter."

On the way here, he'd heard that she'd passed the academy exam. That meant she would be going to the same classes as him, but despite that, her status didn't matter here —no, it didn't matter *because* of that.

Status wasn't binding within the academy, so it was irrelevant who she was.

"And I have a general guess as to what the answer is."

Just as he muttered those words to himself, he sensed something at the door and turned to look, furrowing his brow. It wasn't anything suspicious...but in a way, it was something that wasn't what it seemed.

The person he sensed wasn't someone who should have been here.

But they knocked on the door as if to say they didn't care about that, then entered immediately after.

What Soma saw was exactly what he'd expected—a man who looked to be in his early thirties.

"Well, that was quite the mishap. No, I suppose the first thing I should say is...thank you."

He spoke with a familiar tone and a friendly smile. Needless to say, this was

someone Soma knew.

But...

“There are a number of things I’d like to say, but first... What is the king doing here?”

The man’s name was Alexis Ladius. As was evident from his name, he was the king of this nation.

It was to be expected that he would be in the capital, given that he was the king, but it was unusual that he would come to a patrolman’s office.

Several soldiers were moving about on the other side of the open door, looking unsure of what to do, and even Soma had to shoot them a sympathetic glance.

“Why wouldn’t I come to pick up my own daughter?”

Soma couldn’t object to that, but the soldiers’ behavior betrayed that it wasn’t exactly the most natural thing in the world for the king to do.

But Soma wasn’t the king’s watchdog. He figured that someone would tell the king off if necessary and just shrugged.

“Is that so... Well, if that’s all, then I have nothing to say in particular.”

“Oh, are you sure? Don’t you have anything you’d like to ask? About my daughter, for example?”

“No, nothing especially. I had the general idea already.”

That was true. Even though he had gotten only a little information, he’d known that she was probably royalty. That was why he hadn’t been surprised to hear that she was the king’s daughter, though he had been surprised to see him here.

“That’s the reaction I get, huh... Should’ve expected it from their kid, I guess.”

With no way to respond to that, Soma just looked back at Alexis. He understood why Alexis said that, but he didn’t have anything to say in return.

It was because of Soma’s parents that Alexis was treating Soma more like family than a stranger. Not only had they helped in the founding of this country,

they'd apparently been friends with the king since long before that, when they were all in school. Alexis was supposedly just as specialized in defense as Soma's parents were in offense.

In any case, he was acting friendly with Soma because Soma was his friends' kid, and Soma wasn't being especially formal with him for the same reason.

The king could only be so casual in his personal life, of course...but it went without saying that this wasn't an official audience. His first words would have been different if it had been.

"So, have you accomplished anything by coming out here yourself?"

The position of king wasn't so trivial that he could come to a place like this just because of his daughter, of course, even if it wasn't in an official capacity. That meant that was just a cover story and he had some other objective.

Although no reason would be enough for the king to come here...he probably needed a breather, or a change of pace. Soma had heard that Alexis tended to get the short end of the stick, which was why he'd ended up as king in the first place. It was probably still a lot of stress on him, so he'd decided to take the opportunity to go out.

It was hard on the soldiers' hearts...but they would just have to bear with it. They would want that too, if it was for the good of the country.

"Well...not really, to be honest with you. The evidence is gone now, actually."

"It's gone, you say?"

"Yep. I feel bad, after what you did."

"No, it's not as if I did very much."

When Alexis said the evidence was gone, he probably meant exactly that. The culprits may have killed themselves, or worse, obliterated themselves; in either case, there was no way to get evidence from them anymore.

The soldiers had probably been careful, but they couldn't completely prevent that kind of thing no matter how vigilant they were. It was inevitable.

While Soma had also gotten involved, he was the one who'd stuck his nose into it when it wasn't his job. He was in no position to criticize how the soldiers

were doing their job.

“Well, I would be lying if I said I’m not concerned... Was there really nothing you could find out?”

“Regrettably, no. I can’t imagine that it was an indiscriminate attack, though, so we’re pretty sure that they knew who she was.”

“The other details are the most crucial, though.”

“Yeah, they are...”

As the girl had said, there were countless people who resented the royal family. This kingdom was still unstable, having been founded recently, and there was a lot of anger directed toward it from outside as well...especially from Veritas. It was no wonder that they would try to terrorize the royal family, if not commit actual terrorism.

Soma’s parents tried to prevent such things, but they weren’t perfect. There was always the possibility they would overlook something for whatever reason.

So Alexis had probably come out himself to inspect the scene of the attack...but he hadn’t had any success.

“Well, because of that, it’s hard to call this incident resolved, so I’d like to ask you something... Could you take care of my daughter at the academy, since we don’t have eyes in there?”

Alexis said it casually, but his gaze was the definition of serious.

This was probably what he had come here to say.

What an over-fond parent.

“Couldn’t you keep her from going to the academy if you’re so worried about her? That would be possible for you as the king, right?”

“I do adore my daughter more than words can say, but this and that are different. The kingdom can’t afford to let talented people play around.”

That statement might have sounded like nothing but more praise for his daughter except that his eyes weren’t smiling.

Well, the Royal Academy was the one place where people couldn’t even take

the entrance exam based on personal connections alone, even if they were royalty. The girl's talent must have truly warranted her father describing her that way.

And those words didn't seem to be intended to refer to her alone. Alexis's eyes seemed to warn Soma that he wasn't getting away either.

"Well, it must be fate that we met this way, I suppose. I can't make any promises, but I will say that I'll do as I see fit within the span I can see and reach."

"That's more than enough. Thanks...future Elite Swordsman."

In a crafty move, Alexis said the final few words quietly, so that only Soma could hear, then waved, turned around, and left. Apparently he had accomplished what he'd come to do. He would probably go to the girl now, then back to the castle.

Not that those things mattered to Soma.

"Hmm... If they have no more evidence, then I imagine they'll let me go soon."

They had no other means to ascertain whether his account to them was true, but he hadn't said anything suspicious, so there should have been no reason to keep him any longer.

And most importantly, they now knew that Soma was acquainted with the king. The patrolmen were supposed to be independent of authority, but that didn't mean they could really go against the king. Nor did they have any reason to do so in this situation.

"Perhaps it was for my own benefit that he addressed me so casually in front of them..."

If that was the case, Soma would have to repay the favor.

Well, it was possible that the king didn't really need him to protect Sylvia, but that was no reason not to.

"So, she's royalty..."

He had already intended to, but it seemed he would have to be serious about

keeping an eye on her.

It was hard to imagine that anything so dangerous would happen at the academy that Soma would have to worry about it, but...

“I suppose we’ll see how things turn out,” Soma muttered with a sigh, turning to look in the direction of the academy.

8

It ended up taking some time before he was released from the office, despite the fact that the girl was a princess... No, it was probably *because* she was a princess that they had to be as thorough as possible.

He looked around and saw that the area outside was busy, with no more signs of early morning.

It was good that the soldiers were diligent, though, and it wasn't as if he and Sylvia had missed the ceremony. They were actually just in time, which wasn't bad. All in all, it had been a good way to kill time.

"I'm sorry it took so long because of me," he heard the girl next to him say.

Needless to say, when he turned to look, he saw the princess there. They had been released at the same time, so they had been walking around together.

Apparently, she'd gotten the wrong idea based on the fact that he was looking around.

"No, it wasn't your fault. *You* were the victim."

"I mean, that's true, but...didn't you have something to do?"

"Oh, I can see why you would think so, since I was out so early, but I was just looking forward to going to the academy. I woke up early because of that and couldn't stand to stay in."

"Wait... You too?"

"Hmm, you too, huh..."

It was quite the coincidence. The two looked at each other, then exchanged an expression somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

"Well, that did mean I had to kill time somehow, so it was perfect in a way."

"Mmh..."

"Are you not convinced? I am being completely honest, you know."

"I mean, I can tell you probably are, but that's one thing... Just... Sorry it was

such a pain.”

“No, I didn’t see it that way.”

Soma wasn’t the type to be bothered by things like that, but he considered it preferable not to just brush it off either.

It was another story whether he intended to ask for anything in return, though.

“Well, you really don’t have to worry about it. Not only did it kill time, it took my mind off of school.”

“But if you were looking forward to it, why did you want to take your mind off it?”

“*Because* I was looking forward to it so much.”

No matter how excited he was for school, the only thing happening today was the entrance ceremony. Classes wouldn’t start until tomorrow, and it was the classes that Soma was looking forward to.

He definitely needed to decompress somehow, and this turn of events had come at just the right time.

“I guess I feel similarly, but...were you really *that* impatient?”

“Part of it is that I never thought I would be accepted.”

“You didn’t? Even with what you were able to do at the exam?”

“Because of that, if anything. Having power alone is of no use.”

“Power alone is of no use, huh... I wanna be able to say stuff like that someday.”

“I don’t think it was that big a deal to say. If anything, I would imagine you and your family put that saying into practice.”

“Huh? Um... Oh, I see...”

She looked baffled for a moment, but then seemed to grasp the meaning and agree. She then turned a troubled look toward him.

“You met my father, right? So you know that I’m, you know...”

“I know that you’re the princess, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Yeah, I figured...”

“Hmm... Could it be that you didn’t want anyone to know? I wouldn’t imagine it would be possible to keep hidden.”

The exam aside, they wouldn’t be called by numbers when they started going to school. Everyone was equal in the academy regardless of family status, but they would be called by their names, and it was unlikely that no one would recognize the princess’s name, even if they didn’t know her face. Even Soma had heard her name before, so the information would definitely get around once classes started.

“Well, it’s not quite that I’m trying to hide it... I do have pride as a member of the royal family, and I don’t want to escape from my duty as one. But, how do I put this... I don’t want to escape *into* being royalty.”

“Hmm... So in other words, you don’t want to be seen in a certain way because you’re royalty? For example, people thinking it’s because you’re royalty that you can or can’t do certain things.”

“Yeah... That’s it, I think.”

“In that case, I don’t think that will be a problem when it comes to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never concerned myself with such things. If I did, I would be treating and speaking to you differently now.”

“Oh...” She murmured as if to say she’d only just considered that.

Soma shrugged. While he hadn’t confirmed her identity at first, he had actually already known that she was a princess. Given that he didn’t have permission to address her casually, as he did with Alexis, he should already have begun to speak to her with greater formality. He hadn’t because he didn’t care about that.

“Well, that would make this disrespectful under ordinary circumstances, so I can be more formal if you would prefer.”

“Oh, n-no! I’m happier like this too, but... Are you sure you don’t mind?”

Soma shrugged again as she timidly searched his face.

She was probably thinking about the various things that came along with being royal. But his answer was no different than before.

“I can’t afford to let it bother me, since we’re going to go to the same school. The Royal Academy tells us not to worry about such things.”

“Yeah... I didn’t think of that. You’re right.”

She was finally convinced, it seemed. She let out a relieved sigh and her tense shoulders relaxed.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t as if Soma had just been saying that out of consideration for her. They were going to be studying together at the academy...and he got the sense that she would be interesting in multiple ways.

She would be worth forming a friendship with. It was an odd way to phrase it, but that was how he felt, even without taking Alexis into consideration.

As Soma was thinking that, the girl began to act suspiciously. She kept glancing at him like she had something to say, then opening her mouth only to close it again.

Eventually, though, words came out of her mouth.

“Um... So...”

“Yes, what is it?”

“You’re going into the sorcery department too, right?”

“I am.”

“Then, um... M-My name’s Sylvia. Glad to have you in my class!”

She introduced herself a little nervously.

Soma understood her intention in giving only her first name. She wanted a personal relationship with him, regardless of their families.

Therefore...

“Well... My name is Soma,” he responded with a small smile. “Glad to have you in my class too, Sylvia.”

With that, a smile blossomed across the girl's face, replacing the slightly anxious look she had worn before.

"Yeah, nice to meet you, Soma!"

Seeing that look on her face made Soma feel like his time at the academy would go well. Thus he thought as the two walked toward the academy together.

†

Soma and Sylvia walked through the academy with puzzled expressions. They had made it to the academy without incident this time, but their faces showed confusion and doubt.

"Hmm... I thought the ceremony was going to be in one of the lecture halls."

"Yeah, that's what I heard too... I wonder if they changed it."

As they talked, they proceeded forward, but there was nobody around.

Even with everything that had happened, they were still early, apparently.

When they'd arrived, there was already a guide there, so they weren't *too* early, but Sylvia's eyes were still darting around anxiously.

Soma didn't do the same, first because, while he had some doubts, he figured that things would work out in the end, and second simply because he recognized his surroundings.

That meant he wasn't looking around because he already knew the area...and the reason for that was simple.

He'd walked this same path just a few days ago, on the day of the exam.

So he already knew what would be at the end of this path...and sure enough, it was exactly what he'd expected.

It was the place where he and Sylvia had first met—the practice area.

"This is the place, right...?"

"Well, unless both of us misheard, the guide told us to go to the practice area."

They had no way to answer the question of why the entrance ceremony was in the practice area. He'd asked, but all the guide had said was that they would find out when it started.

He was curious, but thinking about it wouldn't get him anywhere.

He kept walking forward with the same puzzled look on his face.

The place they were headed for technically wasn't the same as the one from the other day. There were several practice areas in the academy that were all clustered around the same general location. The area in which Soma and Sylvia had taken the exam was just one of those, and they were headed toward another one now.

All they knew about it was that it was another practice area. From the outside, there were no obvious differences from the practice area in which they'd taken the exam except that it was even larger. It appeared to be several times the size of the other area, large enough to fit multiple tens of people comfortably—a size befitting the Royal Academy.

It was possible that it only *looked* large, but...

"Hmm... So it doesn't just look larger on the outside."

"Whoa... This really does feel like a royal academy. Doesn't it seem more like an arena than a practice area?"

"Definitely. There are even seats for an audience, so I would call it more of an arena."

To put it simply, it was just an open space centered on a ring of stones. There was nothing in the overly large space but the stones and some audience seating. If they had been told it was an arena initially, they would have accepted that explanation without question.

"And it looks like this is the right place."

"Huh? Oh, you're right... There are a couple people."

"The majority of them seem unsure, so I imagine they're in the same position we are."

"And they look to be around our age."

Soma nodded in agreement. His gaze skimmed over the arena. There were about ten people in addition to the two of them. Some were walking around in the ring, some were leaning against the walls, and some were sitting in the bleachers, but all of them seemed confused. Considering that there was still time before the ceremony, they must have been new students like Soma and Sylvia who had been told to come here but didn't know anything.

"Hmm... I doubt they would know anything if we tried asking them, so should we just wait patiently until it's time?"

"Yeah... This is where they told us to go, so the ceremony will probably be here. I don't know why it's here... Maybe there were so many new students this year, they couldn't fit all of us into a lecture hall?"

"That wouldn't explain what I heard earlier, though."

They could make an educated guess as to the reason for this venue, but in the end, they wouldn't know until it was time, so Soma and Sylvia decided to head for the bleachers. They figured that there was no need to stay standing just to kill time.

As they chatted and waited, people began to gather a few at a time. The majority reacted the same way the others had, and they mostly did one of two things after that. Some began to inspect the area for clues, and others decided that was pointless and moved to the bleachers. Some were even using magic to investigate, so watching them was honestly an entertaining way to kill time.

It was only in the beginning that they were able to sit back and watch, however. Nothing happened in particular; it was just that more people arrived. The space was too crowded for them to watch individual people anymore, and as the time of the ceremony came closer, that trend accelerated. Soon the arena was lively with people conversing with their friends.

"Hmm... Based on this, it looks like the people who go here are regular kids after all, even though it's the Royal Academy. Maybe that's to be expected, though, since it's the entrance ceremony."

"You should be one of those regular kids, Soma... What point of view are you speaking from? I had a feeling from the beginning, but you aren't normal, are you?"

Sylvia said that with some astonishment, but the very fact that she said it made her plenty abnormal herself. That may have been natural considering she was royalty, though.

And even if the majority was normal, this was still the Royal Academy. It was clear to see that some unusual people were mixed in.

“Anyway... Are we going to have to worry about *them*?”

“Huh? What do you... Oh, you mean *them*? Those three?”

“Exactly.”

“Yeah, we can’t see their faces through those robes. But I doubt anyone actually creepy could get in here, so I think it’ll be okay.”

“That’s certainly true, but...”

Soma squinted at the clump of three people...but he didn’t have the chance to say anything more about them.

Just then, something a bit unexpected happened.

A clear sound reached his ears through the bustle.

It was a heavy sound that resonated in the pit of his stomach...the sound of the door closing.

Yes, the one door that opened into this place had closed with no warning.

But that didn’t cause any confusion.

Two other things happened before it could.

The first was that a door at the rear of the bleachers suddenly swung open.

The second was that a person emerged from it...and what Soma had not anticipated was her identity.

He saw a slightly brownish black. Her eyes, the same color as her hair, cast a forceful gaze around the room, and an amused smile played on her lips.

She wasn’t very tall—she was close to their height, if anything—but her demeanor clearly illustrated that she wasn’t their age.

“So, I guess the first thing I should say is... Welcome to the Royal Academy,

new students. You might be surprised or confused at first...but it's nothing too hard."

As she spoke, she slowly raised the axe that had been resting on her shoulder. Then she swung it down and stopped it in midair, almost as if she was issuing a challenge.

No...

"It'd be too boring to just sit and listen to old people talk, right? And this is the Royal Academy, where those with talent study to aim for greater heights. So..."

She *was* issuing a challenge.

The young-looking woman drew up the corners of her lips in a daring smile.

And then...

"All we have to show you is that this place is fit for that purpose. So I figure I'll demonstrate it to you right now."

So show me that you all have the capability too.

So Soma heard Camilla Hennefeld say before his eyes, just as she had said to him before.

9

The shortest way to describe the emotion that spread through the room would be confusion.

It was a different kind than they had felt just a minute ago, however.

Before, they had been confused because they hadn’t understood what was going on, but now they were confused because they had realized.

As new students, they should have had no reason to recognize the instructor. They knew little about those who currently taught at the academy.

Since the Royal Academy would replace an instructor as soon as a more skilled one appeared, no matter how good the current instructors were, not even alumni could say for certain who taught there.

But that only applied to typical cases. The woman who had now appeared before them was an exception.

“Hey, is that actually...?”

“Yeah... Couldn’t be anyone else.”

“Her weapon, her height, and most of all...”

Amid the commotion, the students were looking intently at three things.

One was the weapon the woman was holding, another was her size, and the last was a particular feature of hers.

The last point was especially important.

Her hair was a slightly brown-tinted black.



They knew very well what that meant.

As was touched on previously, the general belief in this world was that hair color signified one's talents, and among all possible colors, black was considered special.

But that color held a different significance for the people of this kingdom.

The heroes who had saved the people of this land and been central figures in the founding of the kingdom had all worn that same black.

Iori Kanzaki—the Otherworld Hero.

Beatrice Dement—the Fruitless Hero.

And...

"The ultimate adventurer..."

"The savior of the kingdom..."

"The Silver-Black Warrioress."

"Hey, now, stop it with the embarrassing nicknames. What, are you trying to break my spirit before we start? You'd better quit for your own sake...'cause it'll work on me."

Her tone was joking, but the glare she shot them was dead serious. The ones who had been saying those names quickly shut their mouths, but her response only increased the commotion.

They had just gained proof that she was *that* Camilla Hennefeld.

Since she was a woman with brown-black hair who wielded an axe, and probably a dwarf based on her height, they had already been close to certain. Now she had acknowledged that those nicknames referred to her.

That being the case, it was only natural that they would get even more worked up.

Camilla's name was famous in Ladius. Known as the savior of the kingdom, she was one of the people who had put exceptional effort into founding Ladius and the only one to have risen to that position from being an adventurer.

And there were two factors that made her name even more well known. For one thing, she was said to have saved the most lives directly. For another, she had subjugated Special-Grade users despite not having any Special-Grade Skills herself.

She was certainly a prodigy, but not extraordinary, and yet she had taken down someone who *was* extraordinary.

That aspect was especially significant for those students who aspired to be fighters, and the fact that she rarely appeared in public was another factor in her fame. Not seeing her made people wonder and speculate as to what she was like.

Also related was the fact that the others who had founded the country had gained prestigious positions such as king and duke. The two heroes hadn't gained any such positions, but they hadn't been involved in the founding of the country in the first place. Camilla, though, had been involved, and yet she had neither shown herself in public nor been granted any special status.

It wasn't that they thought she was being treated unfairly, but it was for reasons such as those that Camilla was especially well known among the people of Ladius, and the children who were entering the academy this year were no exception. If anything, they may have looked up to her more than most, having heard stories of her from their parents over and over.

That was the meaning of the confusion and the commotion.

They got to fight their hero.

As new students of the Royal Academy, where people gathered to aim for the top, it was only natural that they would be enthusiastic about that.

"Man, I don't know whether to say this looks promising or like it was worth training for," Camilla muttered with a wry smile, exposed to their numerous gazes.

It was a good thing that they weren't shrinking back, but they seemed a bit *too* eager to go.

But in that case, she could just teach them that right here.

Narrowing her eyes, she surveyed the room...then had the thought that in the past, she wouldn't have believed she could live up to their expectations.

That wasn't to say she was certain she lived up to their expectations now. The difference was that now she figured that if she wasn't good enough, she could just become good enough.

And she couldn't afford to look pathetic here, especially if the one who'd inspired her to think that way was present.

Although that very person was blinking widened eyes at her, as if he was surprised to see her. The novel sight was oddly amusing to her.

It was natural that he would be surprised, though, since she hadn't told him that she'd been hired as an instructor at the academy.

He'd just always been so composed and aloof that she'd gotten the impression nothing perturbed him, so his reaction was a bit unexpected.

But now that she thought about it, he was also the type to suddenly say or do things that made little sense. Maybe that was normal for his age—but setting aside the question of whether that was really the case, he was only human.

Her mouth twisted slightly, as if she were laughing at herself for only realizing that just now. She reverted it to a neutral expression right away, though, thinking that this wasn't the time or the place to think about that, and that it was a good thing she'd realized now.

However strong and powerful someone was, there was no reason it would ever be impossible to beat them, as long as they were a human, the same as her. There were only higher or lower chances of winning, and the question of whether she could get close to victory.

There was just something she had to do first.

"All right, I'm glad you all seem ready to go, but I have two things to say before we get started. First, this isn't exactly you all versus me."

The students gave Camilla doubtful looks, apparently not understanding what she meant. She shrugged. It wasn't especially complicated.

"It's just what we're doing in place of an entrance ceremony. You're the stars

of the show. I'll see whether you're fit to study here, and from me, you can see whether this place is fit to study at. But this is a place to learn from each other, not just to study... You'd better see whether it's fit for that too."

As soon as the words left her mouth, tension shot through the room, and some of the students began to distance themselves from the group.

They'd understood her intent, it seemed.

In that case, there was no need to tell them the end condition.

They all knew without her saying that the fight would end when only one was left standing.

And if she'd said that out loud, it might have started right then.

That would have been a bit of a bad idea.

"And the other thing... Well, maybe this is more something I have to *do*."

As she spoke, Camilla took out a collar. What stuck out about it was the fact that it was made of metal and had a crystal embedded in it that would face inward, toward the throat, when worn.

As soon as they saw it, looks of astonishment appeared on the faces of many of the students.

"I see most of you know what this is, huh? Should've expected that from the type to get into here. So you already know what I'm gonna do with this, then."

The second Camilla put the collar on her own neck, the crowd shrieked wordlessly.

They knew exactly what that meant.

The collar had no name. It would have been pointless to give it one.

There was no need to name something that was used on criminals.

Yes, this collar was a magical tool used mainly on criminals. It suppressed the wearer's Skills with an effect called a "binding curse."

While it was used on people other than criminals, such as prisoners, it was certainly not something that the savior of the kingdom should be wearing.

That act was like besmirching her own honor...but Camilla gave the boys and girls a fearless smile.

“The effect’s a bit weakened on this one. I’ll still be able to use my Skills at a Low-Grade level. In other words...now I can beat you down just the right amount. Can’t have a ton of injuries or broken-hearted dropouts on entrance day, after all.”

The quality of the gazes pointed at Camilla suddenly shifted. They were now angered...and out for blood.

But under those gazes, Camilla turned up the corners of her mouth.

She wasn’t condescending toward them—no, she was happy.

They’d made it loud and clear that they respected her.

So she was glad that despite that, they were able to get angry when she made fun of them.

That was how they should be.

She hadn’t put on the collar for that reason, though, and she wasn’t actually trying to ridicule them. It was a simple fact that this measure was necessary.

She knew that some of them had Middle or even High-Grade Skills; even they wouldn’t have stood a chance against her unless she’d done this. They would learn that for themselves shortly.

There were a few among them who she wasn’t sure she could defeat at full strength, let alone in this state...but she knew they would take the hint and go easy on her.

No, actually, she wasn’t entirely confident in that...but she just had to trust them.

She had to trust that they would wait until she’d conveyed the lesson she wanted to, at least.

Otherwise, Camilla’s effort in planning and convening this event would go to waste.

Camilla had actually been the one to suggest doing this in place of an

entrance ceremony. The original plan had been to have some important people give welcoming yet pointless speeches. Everything they had to say would have been self-evident to the type of person who came to the Royal Academy, hence why it would have been pointless.

So she'd put forth the idea that they should instead use this time to tell the students something more important...and for some reason, it had gone through.

Yes, for *some* reason. Frankly, she'd never thought they would implement her suggestion. It would have been stranger to think they would, given that she was a new instructor. She'd just suggested it because she felt she had to...and now that they'd put it into practice, she had no choice but to go through with it.

And she genuinely believed in what she wanted to tell the students.

They *had* to know just how hard it was to get to where they were right now, and how lucky they were to be here.

Anyone would have envied them for the position they were in now if they'd known the full truth. After all, the Royal Academy currently had three Special-Grade users and one inexplicable person who surpassed even them. Anyone who said they didn't envy the opportunity to study alongside those people and learn from them would have been lying.

But they wouldn't understand just by hearing it from her mouth. That was why she'd decided to take a hands-on approach.

What she'd said to them wasn't a lie. It wasn't, but...it all amounted to nothing more than a pretext.

It would have been far too arrogant to presume to teach them. Really, Camilla was nothing but a challenger.

Not to anyone in particular—to everyone in this room.

Time to take back what I forgot, she thought to herself.

Aiming for the top and beyond had been difficult, but it should also have been enjoyable. She'd forgotten that commonplace joy somewhere along her journey, and now she was going to take it back. The students were her stepping

stone toward that goal.

Needless to say, she shouldn’t have been using her pupils for that. She was failing at her role as an instructor from day one.

But...

“How about I teach all of you that too?”

She mouthed the words to herself alone and fixed her gaze straight ahead.

They would surely realize it once this was over.

With that wish in mind, she narrowed her eyes toward the figures in her vision.

Then she tensed her whole body, and like the challenger she was, leapt toward where the opponents she was challenging were most densely gathered.

10

Not even the savior of the kingdom would have stood a chance against them if she could only have used Low-Grade Skills; they had such an extreme numerical advantage.

Or so they thought, until their hubris was shattered in the next moment.

Axemanship (High-Grade) (Binding Curse *Limit: Low-Grade)* Martial Arts *Supernatural Phenomenon* Mental Stillness: Tiger Blast

What Camilla had done wasn't complicated.

She had just jumped from the edge of the bleachers into the center of the ring and swung her axe down with the momentum of her fall.

It was a plain full-power attack with nothing unusual about it.

Naturally, they wouldn't have escaped unscathed if it had hit them directly, but everyone had read the arc of her fall as soon as she'd gone into it.

She had fallen toward the center of the ring, where the most people were gathered, but it had been easy to avoid. All they had to do now was aim for her in the moment when she landed and was briefly defenseless.

They were angry that she looked down on them, but they weren't lacking in composure. They had an accurate appraisal of the situation, so they took the best course of action according to common sense.

They weren't just up against Camilla; they were up against everyone else in the room. They would attack Camilla first not out of anger but because she would pose them the most trouble.

They were proud of their own power but not overconfident. They knew it would be bad for them if it turned into a free-for-all and Camilla could move however she wanted.

And so, taking into account the chaos that would likely ensue once they

brought Camilla down, they had decided to attack her first...and to repeat, that was the best course of action.

However...

They had forgotten one thing.

No, maybe it was more that it was unimaginable to them.

It was simple.

Nobody who had attained the title of hero could exist within the bounds of common sense.

A momentary boom rang out just as Camilla slammed her axe down into the floor of the ring. Shattered pieces of stone flew out, and the impact spread through the room.

That itself was expected...but what they hadn't expected was the scale of the shock wave.

"Huh...?"

The one who had been watching nearest by let out a dazed mutter, but it was immediately silenced as his body flew into the distance.

It wasn't just him. Everyone who had been in position, waiting for Camilla to leap at them, was thrown away.

"No way..."

"I thought she could only use Low-Grade Skills...!"

Those who witnessed it either muttered in amazement or shrieked, but that was only natural.

The spot where Camilla's axe had hit had been destroyed far past the point of shattering. It was now a hole, easily over five meters large. It wasn't something that could be made with a Low-Grade Skill.

And those who had been thrown away had been outside of it. That meant that the impact had been even larger, and they weren't even groaning now. That one hit had knocked them out completely.

That was also far from what was possible with a typical Low-Grade

Skill...which made them consider a certain possibility.

But...

“So, let me guess what you’re thinking right now: everything I told you is a lie, and this collar does nothing. But you’d be wrong. I actually can’t use anything more than the equivalent of Low-Grade Skills. I told you, didn’t I? This restrains me enough that I can beat you down the right amount.”

Everything Camilla had said was true. She could only use Low-Grade level abilities right now.

It was their common sense that was wrong.

It was certainly said that being able to use a Low-Grade Skill was what established one as fully fledged. At the level of the Royal Academy, it was standard, even fundamental to have one.

But if one polished and stacked Low-Grade Skills, they could produce effects that looked far greater.

“Can’t blame you all for not knowing. That’s what the academy’s here for. And you get it now, right?”

Camilla kicked off the ground the second she said that.

The purpose of conversations during fights was basically either to buy time or to attack a weak point after the opponent dropped their guard.

Axemanship (High-Grade) (Binding Curse *Limit: Low-Grade)* Martial Arts *Supernatural Phenomenon* Mind’s Eye: Full Swing

Camilla successfully caught several of them off guard and mowed them down...

“Hmm...?”

Her quiet murmur and the high-pitched noise sounded at the same time. Before she could finish her swing, her arm had been stopped by a sword.

A boy with slightly reddish blue hair glared at her, his eyes a bit redder than his hair. Camilla returned an amused smile.

“You’re pretty good if you can stop me in my tracks, even granting that I lost some momentum knocking them down.”

“Heh, my Swordsmanship is Middle Grade. Why shouldn’t I be able to stop you if you’re Low Grade now?”

His tone was full of bravado, but his arm was shaking and sweat was dripping down his cheek. He was obviously putting up a bold front, but that couldn’t be helped.

Camilla had just shown him that a gap in Skills didn’t necessarily mean you would come out on top.

With the difference in their weapons and physiques on top of that, it was all he could do to hold his stance.

But even so, it was a fact that he’d been able to stop Camilla’s arm.

And he wasn’t the only one here. Ten boys and girls simultaneously jumped out from behind both the boy and Camilla.

Camilla smiled in amusement.

“Each of you, give it your all and come up with a clever plan. You’re not gonna reach me otherwise. It’s another story whether you’ll reach me even if you do, though.”

Axemanship (High-Grade) (Binding Curse *Limit: Low-Grade)* Martial Arts *Supernatural Phenomenon* Mental Stillness / War Cry: Thunderclap

A blast of wind instantly consumed the area. She broke through her immobilized state and launched an attack that blew the advancing students backwards. It was incomparably more forceful than her previous attacks, sweeping away not only those who had been leaping at her but numerous others as well.

But one person wasn’t caught by the wind. He was the boy who had stopped Camilla’s attack.

In the instant before Camilla had forced the attack, he’d realized that he couldn’t stop it and immediately crouched down. He’d avoided the attack,

withstood the impact...and this was his chance.

Camilla's attack was fast, forceful, and had a long range, since she used an axe. But the fact that her weapon had a longer range would make it harder for her to deal with him if he got in close.

On top of that, his Swordsmanship was Middle Grade, and she could only use the equivalent of Low-Grade Skills right now. Considering that it was impossible to block an attack from someone of a higher Grade, she wouldn't be able to block his attack.

It was another story whether he could beat her...but there was no way he was going to let this chance go.

With barely enough time to stand back up, he dove toward Camilla's chest. At the same time, he swung his sword.

Swordsmanship (Middle-Grade) / Imitation: Mind's Eye: Sweep.

He was immediately met with a hard resistance.

"Huh...?"

A shocked noise slipped out of his mouth.

That was impossible. Camilla wasn't wearing armor.

That in itself was another reason that they'd been angered by her words, and given that, there was no reason for this resistance.

He'd been so absorbed, he hadn't looked where he was swinging his sword...but the minute he looked at where it had stopped, he lost all words.

It made no sense.

Camilla wasn't there. The axe she had been using was standing where she had been.

That meant his sword had hit that axe and stopped there.

"Not bad. The idea was pretty good. It's true that I can't block Middle-Grade attacks. But..."

Skills weren't all-powerful. It was true that it was impossible to dodge or block an attack from a higher Grade, but that was only if the attack could have hit in the first place.

"It's simple. If I can't dodge or block, then I just have to get out of range before the attack."

What Camilla had done was actually simple. Once the boy had stepped into range to attack her, she had stabbed her axe into the ground and used the momentum of the motion to thrust herself into the air. By the time he'd gone to attack her, she had been out of range.

But it was easier said than done. It was simple, yes, but it wasn't easy.

Camilla had done so knowing that, of course. She could have jumped backwards to get away. She'd done it this way to demonstrate another way of dodging attacks...and most of all, so that she wasn't running away.

The boy had certainly shown a lot of guts, but it would have wounded her honor as an instructor if she had run away now. She'd deliberately done this for that reason alone.

"That can't...!"

He never got the chance to voice the natural opinion that it shouldn't be possible, because Camilla's descent from above cut off his consciousness first.

Back on the ground, Camilla pulled her axe out and readied it. She looked around, an amused smile coming to her face as she saw that their fighting spirit hadn't waned but had only grown stronger.

"Glad to see you're motivated, but at this pace, we won't finish in the time we have. I'm gonna get more serious... Try not to lose too quickly."

It was an obvious provocation, but they knowingly took the dare. Her smile widened as their will to fight grew even more.

Camilla took one more look around, found a group that looked especially ready to fight, narrowed her eyes, and leapt directly into their midst.

†

People were flying through the air. Not jumping through it, because it wasn't

of their own volition.

They were those who had challenged Camilla and had the tables turned on them.

“Hmm... She does always send them flying,” Sylvia heard Soma mutter with amusement. He was sitting beside her and watching the fight.

The two were still in the bleachers, and they hadn’t moved a step since Camilla had appeared. Considering that it had been nearly half an hour since then, it was starting to feel like they really were just spectators.

Well, Sylvia didn’t know why Soma was staying put, but that may actually have been true in her case. She wasn’t stopping here for any purpose; she’d just found herself unable to move out of uncertainty about what to do.

The others in the bleachers, though, were going out one by one to challenge Camilla or descending toward the ring.

And they were even waiting their turns...which gave Sylvia a thought.

“I just realized they’re waiting for the others to be done before they go... I’d think they would push ahead in a situation like this.”

“Well, I’ve grasped their intention as I watched. It seems to be a coincidental byproduct of their actions rather than something someone started on purpose, though.”

“Their...intention?” Sylvia furrowed her brow, not understanding.

Looking back down, she saw Camilla in the center of the ring and new students challenging her one by one. There were also more new students waiting outside the ring for their turn to take her on.

Yes, although at first they had been fighting in groups, or else Camilla had been heading into places where a lot of them were gathered to fight them, it had turned into this at some point.

It was understandable. Camilla was especially good in group fights, after all. She was at her best in many-on-many battles, but her strength shone in one-on-many battles too.

Camilla’s attacks tended to be wide range and hit in every direction. Lumping

together was a foolish plan that only gave her a better target.

Anyone who saw her jump into groups of challengers and then send them scattering would think taking her on one-on-one might be a better idea.

It was questionable whether that logic was sound, though, seeing how they were being tossed away one after another regardless.

It was just...

“Umm... Is it so they can tire her out by going one at a time?”

Supposedly Camilla could only use Low-Grade level Skills, but her movements were superhuman. She responded to any attack they threw at her so that even when her opponent was a higher Grade, she hadn’t been hit with a single attack yet, no matter what weapons or spells they used.

She did take one hit from each weapon if the challenger was the same Grade or lower, but that was on purpose. If she didn’t, the match would have ended far too soon.

But this situation was built on her ability to read their moves so well that it almost seemed as though she could see the future. It couldn’t last forever. Her stamina and nerves would be worn down, and she would reach her limit.

“Hmm... Do you really think that will happen?”

At Soma’s question, Sylvia turned her head to look back at Camilla, who was still fighting. Her movements hadn’t slowed a bit; in fact, her breathing hadn’t even gotten any heavier.

“I don’t think so...”

But she didn’t know what he meant by that. It was the only thing she could think of, but the more she watched, the less likely it seemed.

She still couldn’t think of any other possibility, though...

“I believe you’ll notice if you keep watching. It should happen soon.”

“What will...?”

She watched intently but saw no difference from before.

Camilla was blocking the attacks thrown at her with her axe, tossing the

opponent aside, then doing the same thing as the next opponent promptly appeared.

Not a thing had changed...or so Sylvia was thinking when it happened.

The sharp sound of something cracking rang out. Then, as proof that Sylvia hadn't imagined the sound, half of the head of Camilla's axe shattered and fell apart.

Instantly, joy spread through the room. The emotion showed on the faces of the one who accomplished it and the ones who had been looking on. The sight made it evident what they had been aiming for.

Sylvia nodded; she understood now. "They destroyed her weapon."

"Quite the rudimentary plan. And I believe the one she was using was mass produced. Logically, it would break eventually if that number of people kept attacking it."

Soma was right; it made perfect sense. If they couldn't do anything about Camilla herself, their only choice was to reduce her power by doing something about her weapon. It was so logical, Sylvia wondered why she hadn't thought of it herself.

But the reason for that quickly became clear.

Camilla discarded the broken axe without hesitation, then picked up one of the swords scattered carelessly at her feet and tossed the excited boy aside just as she had the others.

It didn't matter whether she had an axe or a sword, the attack said without words, and that was the truth.

"Wha—"

The others who had had the same excitement on their faces instantly lost it.

And of course they would.

Camilla had just told them what they'd done was useless.

"Oh, I get it... That's why I didn't think of it. She could use any weapon the same way, and she has so many of them laying at her feet."

What Sylvia said was literally true. Camilla could use any weapon at a High-Grade level, be it an axe, a sword, a lance, or a staff.

That was her Martial Arts Skill. She had first-rate abilities with literally all weapons, including a bow and arrow. That was how she could be called a hero alongside Special-Grade users.

At the same time, that was why Sylvia's father wasn't called a hero, though he had fought alongside Camilla. He used High-Grade Skills but nothing more. He was a king, not a hero.

That was amazing enough in itself...but one needed something more to be called a hero, and Camilla had that something. That was all.

"But they knew that too, right?"

Camilla's name was famous, and that ability was the reason for her skill with group battles in the first place. Since she didn't have to be picky about weapons, she could respond to any situation, and in group battles, her opponents tended to supply her with extra weapons. The longer she fought, the more weapons she gained, which gave her more options and flexibility, thus increasing the number of opponents she could defeat.

Her extra capacity extended to allies too. Having more options gave her that many more ways to assist them.

Camilla couldn't use extremely wide-range destructive spells.

Camilla couldn't use ultimate techniques to cut through any opponent.

Camilla wasn't all-powerful. She couldn't heal any injury.

But, using her many different weapons, she had saved many lives.

Thus she had gained trust and respect from many people...and the students must have known about that.

So it was strange that they had tried something so futile.

"Right, I imagine they knew, but...I suppose they got tunnel vision, or perhaps I should say they clung to the hope before their eyes. Nobody said it, and nobody consciously aimed for her weapon, but the end result was that they all attacked it. And that would normally be a very effective strategy."

“So they concentrated too narrowly on that and forgot the important part?”

“It was also that it became half work. Repeating a simple task tends to make one focus only on the task, for better or for worse.”

Sylvia both did and didn’t understand, but what Soma said was probably the case given the results.

As for why Sylvia hadn’t thought the same as everyone else...it must have been because Camilla and Sylvia were similar in some ways.

That must have been why she hadn’t gotten mentally stuck on the possibility of destroying Camilla’s weapon and hadn’t thought they could figure something out.

Just as that thought occurred to her, there was a new development below.

It wasn’t that somebody had figured out an effective strategy, though. The opposite, if anything.

“Whew, didn’t think you’d break my weapon... Should’ve expected it from people who got into the Royal Academy, huh? But that just means I underestimated you. I’ll have to get even more serious now.”

As she spoke, Camilla passed the sword she was holding into her other hand and picked up a lance from the floor.

That left her with a sword in one hand and the lance in the other, which would have looked like some kind of joke normally...but not in her case.

That was actually her normal fighting style, and the stiffening faces of the people in line showed how difficult that would be for them.

It wasn’t her stance itself that was the problem.

It was the fact that she was demonstrating that she wouldn’t be choosy with her weapons anymore.

When asked her best weapon, Camilla often said it was the axe. But that was just a preference; in other words, when she was being choosy with her weapon, she used an axe. That was no different from limiting herself.

But now that she wasn’t being picky anymore, nobody knew what weapon

she would use. She could use anything.

She could switch weapons depending on who she was fighting, and her opponent wouldn't know what she was going to use, even in the middle of the fight. That would make her harder to take on than anyone.

And the results were even clearer than before. She tossed them aside faster than ever.

It was as they had worried a bit before. Without her axe, Camilla wasn't blocking attacks anymore, and she eliminated the students so quickly you might have thought they were lining up to be pushed away. No sooner had they readied their weapons or started chanting their spells than they were flung aside.

Bodies were starting to pile up outside the ring...and in time, the line stopped growing. There were only about a tenth of the original challengers left.

Sylvia half-reflexively swallowed. That meant her turn was coming up. And the match wouldn't last much longer.

Camilla had said it wouldn't be over until only one person was left standing.

But it wasn't as if everyone who entered the Royal Academy was an excellent fighter. Some should have been weak at combat. Those probably made up a lot of the remaining people, and Camilla wasn't likely to order them to fight.

That was why the match wouldn't last much longer.

Sylvia didn't think she could win , but she didn't intend to abstain from fighting either. And this might have been a good opportunity, even.

She wished she could have more time to prepare...but it was needless to say she wouldn't be getting that. A quick glance around told her that none of the people left were going to fight. She could tell whether they intended to by their body language.

The only exceptions were Soma and the group of three in robes. She wondered why those three were still wearing those robes at a time like this...and just then, it happened.

A new challenger appeared.

He was the person who had been calmly observing the fight from beside her —Soma.

“Well... I suppose I’ll go out now.”

“Huh...? You’re going, Soma?”

“You look like you didn’t expect that. I would hate it if you thought that I didn’t intend to go and take part myself.”

“No, I didn’t, but...”

She’d had a feeling that Soma would go last. But when she explained that, Soma looked toward the ring with narrowed eyes.

“Well, I did consider that, but I figured now would be the best time.”

“You did...?”

He didn’t say why he thought so, and she couldn’t deduce why, but if Soma said so, there was no particular reason to stop him.

She watched Soma do some light stretches. When he was finished, the line had just ended and the last person had been tossed aside. He gave the ring a look, then jumped in with a casual demeanor.

“May I go next?”

“Yeah, of course. No reason to turn you down. Aren’t you a bit late, actually? You gave me time to get warmed up.”

“Says the one who never agreed to a rematch after that one time.”

They knew each other, apparently. Sylvia had already gathered that much from how he had spoken about her, but it seemed like there were some special circumstances.

They exchanged smiles, but their eyes were serious.

“’Cause I said I wouldn’t do that again.”

“But this is okay?”

“Yep, ’cause I’m an instructor at the Royal Academy, and you’re a student. I have a duty to answer students’ requests, don’t I?”

“Is that so? Well, as long as I can have another try against you.”

“Time for me to beat you at your own game, then.”

The exchange was like small talk, but Sylvia could tell there were invisible sparks flying between their eyes. She reflexively swallowed again for a different reason than she had before.

“Oh, yeah... Better get this thing out of the way before we start.” Camilla lifted her hand to her throat and pulled off the collar.

That meant she was *really* going to get serious.

“Objections?”

“Of course not. I would have objected if you had kept that on.”

“I figured. Well, then... Let’s do this.”

It was said as casually as if she were inviting him to go for a stroll, but that was the starting signal.

Their figures simultaneously disappeared. Then there was a loud clang. At the same time, the two reappeared, having clashed their weapons together.

They exchanged similar smiles, then, in an instant, there was another, louder clang.

11

To be honest, she was somewhat afraid.

She wasn't afraid that she might lose, though; she was afraid of not living up to his expectations.

Disappointing someone was enough of a reason to be scared.

It could also have had something to do with the guilt she felt after she had been partially responsible for the expectations once put on another...

Lance Combat (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural Phenomenon *Mental Stillness* War Cry: Thunderclap

...but she stepped forward as if to say she didn't care about that, thrusting the lance in her right hand forward at the same time.

Instantly, it met with resistance, but Camilla tsked. It wasn't the resistance she'd been expecting, and her arm felt oddly light.

She gathered why that was as soon as she heard the sound of something breaking, though.

Without hesitation, she let go of the lance and, to replace it, kicked up a large sword and grabbed it out of the air.

Side-eyeing the broken-tipped lance, she stepped forward with her other foot.

Forcibly stopping her right arm as it started to drift away, she swung the axe in her left hand upward. At the same time she began swinging it back down, she made a sweep with her right.

It made an impact.

Axemanship (High-Grade) / Swordsmanship (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural Phenomenon *Mental Stillness* Multiweapon / Combo: Tiger Blast / Twin Fangs

There was a loud clang, and fragments of the stone that had absorbed the blow flew through the air.

What that meant was that she had missed the opponent she had been aiming for.

She immediately backed away, then tsked again as she mentally confirmed that her weapons were still in her hands.

“Man... I know that hit, since the ground under you is caved in, but that was nothing to you, huh? What is it with you?”

“I don’t know how to answer that. I merely deflected the impact.”

“There you go, spouting nonsense with a straight face.”

She kind of understood what he was saying. He’d deflected all of the force into the ground under him, so it hadn’t affected him.

But no... That didn’t make sense, actually. It was certainly possible in theory, but how was he able to do that?

He really hadn’t changed a bit.

“I really don’t know what to tell you... I would think that what you just did is even worse in that regard.”

“Huh? What’d I do that wasn’t normal?”

“Even I know that throwing your weapon in the air and switching to another one mid-attack isn’t normal.”

“Oh, you mean that? ’Twas just a stunt. Nothing to warrant someone like *you* calling it nonsense.”

It was true that Camilla had kicked a sword from the ground into the air, then grabbed it to switch weapons and prepare for her attack.

But that really didn’t go beyond the level of a stunt.

The only reason she’d come up with that idea in the first place was to increase the number of moves she could take.

While she could use all weapons with equal skill and switch between them depending on the situation, she couldn’t always carry around a ton of weapons.

There would be more and more of them on the ground as she took down enemies, but most of the time, she didn't have time to pick them up on the battlefield.

And even if she had leeway to do that, her allies might not. That stunt, then, was what she'd come up with as a solution.

But in the end, it was a stunt. It would help somewhat, but it would never work on someone above her level.

It had only fazed Soma at all because he'd never encountered it before, and because he wasn't being truly serious right now.

Not in a bad way, like he was slacking; it was most likely because he was enjoying the fight.

Camilla wasn't one to talk, though.

"Hmm... I would have to disagree."

"It sure wasn't much compared to what you can do, at least."

She felt like she heard voices from the bleachers shouting, *Both of you*, but it was probably in her head.

Although she didn't have time to look around, she knew that a lot of eyes were on her. The ones who had lost consciousness were beginning to regain it, it seemed.

However...

"All right... Not much time left, so let's get this settled."

She got back into stance, paying no mind to the students who were regaining consciousness. She'd known since long before now that she couldn't afford to think about unrelated matters while up against this opponent.

"Right...we should settle this. It did pique my interest quite a bit, but this isn't the last time I'll have the opportunity... And we can't afford to keep breaking weapons, seeing as you're using them without permission, aside from your own."

"I'm just making efficient use of what's on the ground. And it's their own fault

for dropping their weapons.”

“Well, I can’t disagree with that.”

As they exchanged light banter, their gazes never drifted apart.

They knew well that it would be over as soon as one of them left an obvious opening.

No...putting it that way was a bit misleading.

It was because Camilla knew that Soma could defeat her with no question if she showed even that much weakness. She felt convinced of that from their sparring up to this point.

She was confident that her skills had improved, but Soma’s skill with the sword was peerless.

Camilla had been able to attack him not just because of her weapon’s reach and the variety of other weapons available to her but because Soma was having fun.

She knew that well precisely because she had experience fighting opponents at a higher level than her own...which was why, in fact, she had already won in her own mind.

And she knew that the rest of this fight was meaningless.

But even so, she didn’t intend to surrender. She couldn’t.

She was here right now because of the boy in front of her.

Because of him, she’d decided to stop shutting herself away in the border regions and take another step forward.

She still couldn’t totally shake off her feelings of guilt. In order to do that, she would have to see *her.*

But before, she hadn’t even been able to work up the motivation to do that.

It was thanks to Soma that she now wanted to meet *her* and talk about what had happened back then.

She had never considered the possibility that the other woman was dead. They hadn’t seen each other in over a decade, but *she* was a hero, after all. The

one onto whom Camilla had foisted the burden.

Though she had disappeared, she wouldn't be outdone by anyone...and she most likely had *him* with her as well. There was nothing that two heroes couldn't handle together.

And most of all, Camilla had an inkling of hope.

It was something she'd only discovered recently, but... She glanced over at the three robed people for just a moment.

If her guess was correct, it wouldn't be long before she could see *them* again.

With that in mind, she marshaled her concentration anew and fixed her gaze directly ahead—toward the one to whom she owed her current life.

She didn't intend to thank him; she didn't intend to say anything at all.

Camilla had been the one who had chosen to feel guilty...but now she chose to accept Soma's words and deeds as her salvation.

She wasn't qualified to thank him for it.

But that was exactly why she wanted to take it upon herself to demonstrate that thanks to him, she was once again able to exercise her talent for someone else's sake like this.

Therefore...

"Let's go."

There was no response, and she didn't need one.

She took a step forward, and instantly, Soma was before her eyes.

Axemanship (High-Grade) / Swordsmanship (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural Phenomenon *Mental Stillness* Mind's Eye / Multiweapon: Full Swing

The clang she heard immediately was similar to the last, but in this instance, it was actually a combination of two sounds.

The axe and sword that Camilla had swung had both collided with Soma's sword and been riven into pieces.

But she had expected that. That was why she had already let go by the time she heard the sound.

She had only dropped the sword, though.

Soma seemed confused by the act, but Camilla just smiled. The real shock was yet to come.

Just as she had done before, she reached for the thing that she'd kicked up into the air, grasped it, and got into position.

Smiling as she noticed Soma's surprise at what she was holding, she drove the weapons in both her hands forward.

Stick Combat (High-Grade) / Archery (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural Phenomenon *Mental Stillness* Mind's Eye / War Cry *Multiweapon* Combo: Great Slash

"Tch... I thought I had a good shot, but I guess I came up short."

"I was plenty surprised. I never imagined you would use the handle of a broken axe as a staff *and* use a bow for a melee attack."

"'Cause you can't use a broken axe as an axe, but you can use it as a staff. And you can use even a bow for a melee attack if you put your mind to it. Not that anyone would ordinarily."

"I should think not."

The result was the wreck in her hand now. It was to be expected that the bow would end up like that; it wasn't designed for melee attacks, so almost nobody would use it for that purpose outside of an emergency.

The haft in her other hand had ended up the same way, though, so it hadn't actually mattered what she used.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Soma was asking because she was now out of weapons. All she had kicked up was the bow, and now that it was broken, she had nothing left she could use. They were too close for Soma to let her go back to the starting line.

But...

“Isn’t it obvious?”

That was exactly why Camilla took one last step.

No weapons left?

That was impossible.

She’d had a weapon from the very beginning—her own fist.

The series of stunts she’d pulled had all been leading up to this moment.

Unarmed Combat (High-Grade) *Martial Arts* Supernatural Phenomenon *Mental Stillness* Mind’s Eye / Steadfast Resolve: Hammer Crush

The second she thrust her clenched fist forward, the arena ceiling filled her vision. She felt a floating sensation and a slight pain.

A bitter smile appeared on Camilla’s face as she quickly came to understand the situation.

It was nothing.

It was just that she hadn’t been able to reach him even when she gave it everything she had.

That meant he’d succeeded in his rematch... However...

She was going to win next time.

This match had been to express her gratitude, but that was that.

She was an instructor, and Soma was a pupil.

An instructor couldn’t just accept losing to her pupil.

So as her consciousness faded, Camilla vowed to herself that she would reach him next time.

12

A relaxed atmosphere flowed through the area where Camilla and Soma had ended their battle.

So much tension had dissipated that it wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to say that the atmosphere had gone slack, but that couldn’t be helped.

This was after Camilla had done in a majority of the students and Soma had managed to overpower her.

It would have been harsh to tell the students who were still standing that they had to maintain their will to fight.

And Sylvia was one of those people. She didn’t have the courage to fight Soma—not after seeing that.

“I knew Soma was probably strong, but I never imagined that...” she muttered, her eyes closing partially.

A strength that not even heroes could approach...

Sylvia knew that kind of thing well.

“He has a Special-Grade Skill.”

There was no other explanation.

But at the same time, Sylvia got the feeling that that wasn’t quite right.

She knew two people with Special-Grade Skills, but he seemed somehow different...like he might be at an even higher level than that.

“No... That wouldn’t make sense.”

She’d never heard of anything like that.

So she chalked it up to her imagination running wild, then turned to look...but at Camilla, not Soma.

Soma was amazing, yes, but Camilla had impressed and impacted Sylvia more.

It was more a matter of Sylvia’s own goal than of thinking Camilla was better

than Soma.

The special qualities that Camilla had demonstrated were very close to Sylvia's own.

Something her father had once said came to mind. He had mentioned that he wished Camilla could have been her tutor.

He'd also said that Camilla would serve as a good example and provide accurate guidance, and other things of that nature...and after seeing that fight, Sylvia finally understood and agreed.

Certainly, if Camilla had been her tutor, Sylvia may have gone in a different direction.

But what was done was done. And she didn't regret choosing her current path.

It had been Sylvia's own idea and decision to come here. This wasn't enough to shake that determination.

"I just...want to talk to her after."

Just talking wasn't likely to change anything, but she felt like she could gain something from it.

Like she'd gained something today.

But if she spoke to Camilla, it would have to be later.

"Speaking of which... What are we doing after this?"

Camilla, the only instructor in the room, was unconscious. She would come to in time, but were they meant to just wait here until then?

They had spent an hour and some here. That was just the right amount of time, considering that the original plan had been to hold an entrance ceremony.

"Maybe another instructor will come get us when it's time?"

But just pondering the question wouldn't give her the answer.

Figuring that for now, she had no choice but to wait, she turned to look at Soma and wondered whether she should tell him of her intent to surrender first...so it was half coincidence that Sylvia noticed it.

The first color she saw was white.

But that wasn't the color of someone's hair—it was their robe.

"Huh? Is that..."

It was one of the group of three, without question. She hadn't seen anyone else dressed like that, and if she had, she wouldn't have forgotten them; those robes were so distinctive.

"But what are they doing?"

Sylvia was puzzled to see them alone, and they seemed to be acting sneaky. They were hunched over and walking around the edge of the ring.

"Wait, are they..."

It looked as if they were trying to sneak toward the center of the ring.

And it was needless to say who was there right now. That person, Soma, was standing bolt upright and glancing around as if wondering what to do now.

In other words, he was open to attack. And he didn't seem to have noticed the person sneaking up to him from behind, in his blind spot.

"Watch—"

Before Sylvia could form the word *out*, the robed person closed the distance.

It only took them a moment—

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

The next sound she heard wasn't the sound of flesh being cut but a metallic clang.

As soon as the robed person had unsheathed their sword, Soma had gone from seeming oblivious to thrusting his sword out behind him to block the attack.

"Huh...?"

An inane sound escaped Sylvia's mouth, yet the scene continued as if they

were paying her no regard (which was, in fact, the case).

“How...?”

“What is the meaning of this, Sierra?”

The robed person—Sierra—caught her breath in surprise when he addressed her by name without even looking back at her. She withdrew her blade, then jumped back some distance.

“That gives me one more question for you.”

As she spoke, she reached for her robe...then, after a brief hesitation, she pulled it off.

Everyone who was observing instantly focused on her golden hair, surprise in their eyes. Even at the Royal Academy, it was rare to see an elf.

Seeming uncomfortable with the situation, Sierra gazed at Soma, who turned around, apparently having guessed what was going on by the sound of cloth moving.

There was a touch of surprise in his eyes as well, but of a different kind than what everyone around them was feeling.

“You didn’t want to keep your robe on?”

“Would have had to take it off anyway.”

“Hmm... Well, that is true. If anything, I’m surprised they let you wear it so long.”

“Got special permission. But, question... How did you block that? And know it was me?”

There was clear dissatisfaction on Sierra’s face as she asked. She wasn’t very expressive, so for her displeasure to be evident at all, it must have been quite intense. Apparently, she’d been rather confident that he wouldn’t be able to block her attack or identify her.

But Soma gave her a puzzled look.

“You ask how I knew it was you...but how could I not know when you’re wearing the same robe that you always do?”

“Didn’t think of that...”

Sierra seemed dejected; apparently, she genuinely hadn’t considered that. Soma smiled wryly and added a follow-up statement.

“Well, I could sense your presence clear as day, anyway.”

“Most people wouldn’t...”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I did. And that’s the same reason that I was able to block your attack.”

“But I hid my presence as much as I could.”

“You were hiding it somewhat, but you could use some practice. Let me see... I think you’ll have trouble pulling off sneak attacks until you can get to at least Lina’s level. Right, Lina?”

“Huh?!”

An exclamation of surprise sounded from the space behind Soma, where nobody should have been. Soma turned to look and sighed in exasperation.

“Well, you have some work to do as well.”

“Mmh... How did you know?!”

With those words, a figure suddenly appeared where Soma was looking. It was like she hadn’t been there just a second ago...but a commotion started as people realized she’d been there the whole time and they just hadn’t noticed her.

But that person—Lina—didn’t seem bothered, and Soma shrugged, seeming equally unfazed.

“I just answered that same question for Sierra a moment ago.”

“Her presence? But you said if I were at Lina’s level...”

“Y-Yes! I thought I had mine completely hidden!”

“Well, that was exactly why.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s obviously suspicious when a presence that you’ve been feeling suddenly

disappears, isn't it? And even though you had your face hidden under the hood of the robe, I knew who you were, as I mentioned before."

"Oh..."

She was dumbstruck, but she seemed to understand what he meant, so Soma just shrugged.

"Well, I myself would like to ask you all why you're here...but we can save that for later."

As he spoke, Soma turned to look toward a corner of the bleachers and narrowed his eyes. There was another robed person there.

In other words, that was the third person who had been with Lina and Soma...and no hint was necessary to guess who that was.

And she knew that well herself. Resigned to this outcome, she brought her hand to her robe and flung it off.

"Jeez, you really never change... And after we went to the trouble of putting *these* on to hide... What's it supposed to mean that you could detect our presences?"

The girl who appeared from inside the robe—Aina—looked at him with scornful eyes, but Soma seemed unbothered. Maybe realizing the futility of saying that to him, Aina sighed.

"Well, whatever... That doesn't change what we're going to do. And you probably figured out what that is, didn't you?"

"It can only be one thing at this point. You want to defeat me."

There was no reply to his words. In place of an answer, Sierra just got into stance, and Lina unsheathed her sword and readied it as well.

"Hmm... I don't recall doing anything to earn such resentment."

"You know what you're doing, don't you..."

"What might I be doing, I wonder?"

Aina sighed again, turning a scornful look to Soma as he feigned ignorance, and got into stance herself.

“Well, fine. Knowing you, you probably know this too...”

“But opportunities like this are one in a million!”

“We’ll surpass you...if only this once.”

Soma didn’t respond this time. Instead, he got into stance and turned up the corners of his mouth.

That told them that he accepted their challenge.

Instantly, Aina opened her mouth.

“O fire, o flame, o blazes, obey my will and gather under my name.”

The words she spoke were a magical chant. Aina was a mage, and the stance she had taken was in preparation to cast a spell. That made it logical that she would start chanting, which meant that this wasn’t some kind of joke.

But Soma had understood that from the beginning. He didn’t need to be told that the three wouldn’t have said something like that as a joke.

But while he’d known it wasn’t a joke...to be honest, he hadn’t expected it to come to this.

He knew what spell Aina was chanting.

“I see... You’re serious about defeating me. But if you’re not careful, you could end up killing me with that.”

“I know you wouldn’t die to that, dear brother!”

“Mm-hmm. It would take more than that to kill Soma.”

“Do you actually hold a grudge against me...?”

The words Soma muttered to himself were rather somber, and that was understandable.

That was just how strong this spell was.

Naturally, Soma wasn’t invincible. Apart from a sword fight, there were several ways that he could be defeated.

For example, he could be attacked by an opponent with an equal Skill level and a longer-ranged weapon than his own, he could fall prey to a highly

powerful attack launched from far enough away that he wouldn't notice it coming until too late, or his opponent could use an attack with such a wide area of effect that he wouldn't be able to dodge or block it.

And Aina was trying to do the third of those things.

Infinite Gehenna.

It was quite the nasty spell, one that spawned extremely hot flames in the target area. Those flames would never stop burning until their target was incinerated. It was a specialty of Soma's mother Sophia, and only Special-Grade mages could use it.

Aina certainly had Special-Grade Sorcery, and Soma knew that she had learned things from Sophia, but he never would have expected that she'd learned *this*.

And it was one thing that Sophia had taught her the spell but another that Aina had wanted to learn it. What had she intended to fight, exactly?

But he didn't have time to think about that. She was directing the spell at him. And as stated before, it would be an extremely effective tactic, so he couldn't just stand there and wait.

It wasn't that this spell was technically impossible to evade. It was also especially significant that Aina was the one using it. Though she did have the same Special-Grade Skill, she wouldn't be able to target everything in her sight like Sophia could have.

At her current ability level, Aina would be able to target the area inside the ring at most. That was probably part of why she saw this as a good opportunity.

In other words, he just had to get out of the ring...but Lina and Sierra wouldn't let him do that. That was why they had been eyeing him without making any attack.

That was a big problem. To be honest, they wouldn't have been too much of a threat if they came at him, but they had immediately become a problem when they decided not to make the first attack.

Though inexperienced, they were both Special Grade. Despite their lack of

experience, it wouldn't be easy to break through once they went on the defensive. It would be possible with some time, but Aina would be able to finish her spell before then.

And once it was finished and released, it would have a binding effect, so Soma would have a hard time escaping from its area of effect. He didn't know if he could have at his peak in his past life, but he was rather weak compared to then.

Given that he was seriously facing the prospect of death, it would be best not to test that. But if he couldn't run, then his only choice was to attack.

If he took Aina down, he wouldn't have to run, but there was no question that the three were warier of that than of any other possibility. Lina and Sierra would get in the way.

But that said, there wasn't much distance between him and Aina. Even if the other two tried to get in his way, it wouldn't be impossible to attack her as long as he put his mind to it.

"No... I'm not going to do that," Soma muttered, letting his arm hang down. It would be unrefined, he thought.

"You don't mean that you surrender, do you?"

"Of course not. I am at a disadvantage, but there are things that I could do."

If anything went, he had a number of options. But he felt like that would diverge from the rules of engagement here.

Nobody had said it out loud or formally decided on it, but earlier, the students had all ended up fighting fair and square, with no dirty tactics.

Mages were at a disadvantage if they fought an opponent face to face, but even knowing that, they had attacked Camilla head on and been pushed aside.

Having defeated that very Camilla, Soma couldn't be indiscriminate with his tactics.

Even if his opponent seemed rather indiscriminate.

This was half play in the first place. It was like a test of strength, so it was only natural for the challenger to come up with an ingenious plan and for the

challenged to accept it.

And it would be no problem if he lost, in fact. Well, losing seemed like it would mean death, but he was sure they had some safeguard in mind to prevent that.

In short, he didn't really have to take this so seriously.

He was no longer on the path of the sword, after all.

It wouldn't be a problem if he lost...but in any case, that was still that.

"You see, I can be a sore loser."

"We know!"

"Mm-hmm. That's why you have to accept this."

They were exactly right.

They had come up with this whole plan just to try to defeat Soma.

To refuse the challenge would be as good as admitting defeat.

In that case...

"Give me your best, Aina...no, all three of you. I won't run or hide...and I won't lose."

"Yeah, you would do that. That's why we're doing this...but we're going to be the ones to win!"

At the same time as she shouted, Aina completed her spell. As she thrust out her right hand, a giant magic circle appeared below Soma.

And then...

"Swallow and incinerate my foes, Infinite Gehenna!"

Blue flames instantly erupted from the circle and swallowed Soma. They spread to fill the ring and stretched vertically almost to the ceiling.

Oddly, they didn't burn the ceiling, and the people in the vicinity didn't feel any heat...but nobody who saw the scene could have called it underwhelming. Sweat dripped down their cheeks and onto the ground, and not from heat.

"Whew... I know she said we would be okay, but that was scary!"

“Mm-hmm. I thought it might kill me.”

Lina and Sierra emerged from the flames as they spoke.

Since it was possible to specify a target for Infinite Gehenna, there were no burns on either of them. But their faces were still stiff from the fright of having their entire bodies engulfed in flame.

“I told you it’d be fine. You should trust me more.”

Even as she complained to them, Aina wasn’t letting her focus slip.

But that was natural, seeing as the flames hadn’t yet gone out. Since they were meant to incinerate their target, they wouldn’t go away until they did.

In other words, the fact that they were still burning meant that Soma was still going strong.

Well, it would have been an issue if he wasn’t.

“If the flames are still going, my brother must be okay... I knew he could do it!”

“Whose side are you on?!”

“I don’t think I could survive in there myself...so it really is impressive.”

“I doubt I could either. But he said he could do it, so I had faith in him!”

“Well, I certainly don’t know how he’s still alive in there...”

Even as she noted that she was impressed, Aina continued to stare intently into the flames.

They wouldn’t stop until their target was completely burned up, but that required energy—namely, Aina’s mana, which was being eaten up quickly. It wouldn’t last much longer at this rate.

But now that this was happening, there was nothing more that the three could do. This was Aina’s absolute best effort.

So if even that wasn’t good enough...

“I can’t believe him...”

As she watched the flames, a wry smile formed on Aina’s face...and it was the

next moment that a change occurred.

The blue-white flames seemed to swell from within and then burst open.

The black-haired, black-eyed boy was still in the same stance, with his sword drawn, and he didn't have a single burn on his body.

Yet another sigh fell from Aina's lips.

"You really make no sense."

"You're quite exceptional yourself, being able to use a spell like that at this stage."

"So, dear brother, how did you block the spell?"

"I wouldn't call it blocking. The flames kept coming back however much I slashed them away, so I decided to keep doing that until the spell ran out. I expected that it wouldn't last too long."

"But it should have been pretty hot in there..."

"I slashed the heat away as well."

"Mm-hmm... He makes no sense."

"I did believe in you, but I can't back you up when it comes to that!"

Soma shrugged at their gratuitous remarks, then thrust his sword forward as if to point at them.

It wasn't over yet.

"Are we going to continue?"

"Of course... We haven't lost yet, after all."

"Of course we will!"

"Mm-hmm. It's not settled yet."

Aina had used up nearly all of her mana, so it was probably difficult for her to even stand. But she wasn't letting it show at all, and Lina and Sierra seemed unafraid.

Their eyes weren't dull but filled with determination.



So Soma smiled and got into stance. In that case, he would give them a proper response.

“Flash.”

Law of the Sword / Draconic Blessing *Steadfast Resolve* Limit Break *Overdrive: Special Technique* Flash

Immediately after he muttered that word, Soma was behind the three. He let out a slow exhale and returned his sword to its sheath.

Instantly, the three began to collapse as if they’d only just remembered that his technique had struck them. They fell to the ground with a thump...and when Soma saw their faces, he smiled wryly.

Their expressions seemed very satisfied.

“So... Would anyone else like to go?”

There was nobody who would take him up on that offer.

Once he made sure that everyone had shaken their heads no, Soma looked up to the ceiling and let out a long, deep sigh.

Sylvia, who had been watching him—no, watching the four of them—sighed as well. It was out of a feeling she didn’t fully understand, but one similar to relief.

She did understand, though, that this twinge-like feeling in her chest would stick around for some time.

Naturally, Sylvia had been one of the ones to shake her head. It had been the obvious decision to make, so she didn’t regret it.

But even still...

“I wonder if I can be like that someday.”

The words that came to her mind slipped out of her mouth and resonated quietly through the room.

And though she hadn’t planned for them to be, those were the closing words of this year’s entrance ceremony at the Royal Academy.

13

Since the Royal Academy had originally been given a lavish plot, which had then been expanded using magic and magical tools, it was extremely large.

As a result, there were various buildings and facilities on the plot...and in a corner on the north side were many similar structures.

That was where those who studied or taught at the Royal Academy lived—the dorms.

The Royal Academy was a boarding school where both students and instructors lived in dorms. However, since the instructors' dorms were completely separate, people weren't very conscious of the fact that they were living in close proximity. At most, the students would be reminded that the instructors lived there too if one appeared to tell them to quiet down when they were being too noisy at night.

As is evident from that fact, the instructors rarely approached the student dorms. That wasn't because there was a rule against it or anything but because they figured if the students were too conscious of the instructors being nearby, they wouldn't be able to rest and relax well.

While the teachers had assigned dorms, they were free to leave and visit other dorms. That went for the students as well. Their freedom was predicated on them not bothering anyone, but they could go to any dorm they liked as long as they followed that rule...and that was how Soma's current group was able to gather in one place at the same time.

He was with Aina, Lina, Sierra, and Camilla.

Looking at each of their faces in turn, Soma began to speak.

"So, what to do now that everyone is here?"

"What do you mean, what to do? Didn't you want to ask us something?" Aina retorted, as she should have, seeing as they were all in Soma's assigned dorm room right now.

Every person at the Royal Academy had an assigned room, and each was far bigger than one would have expected of a single. Thus, Soma's room was large enough that it didn't feel cramped even with several people inside.

But that aside...even though Soma had been the one to gather everyone here, he was acting as if he had nothing in mind to do with them, which was bound to invite complaint.

However, Soma had a counterclaim.

"Well, that was my original intent, but I did some thinking in the time before you arrived, and I was able to make an educated guess."

Soma had invited them to his dorm room right after the test of strength/recreational activity which the academy had called an entrance ceremony. It had been just about over after he had defeated Aina's group, and once everyone had regained consciousness, it had come to an end.

But that didn't mean they had immediately dispersed—or maybe a better way to put it would be that they hadn't been able to disperse, since they hadn't heard any detailed information about the school...but the faculty had apparently taken that into consideration.

Once Camilla had called an end to the entrance ceremony—apparently it was still called that on paper—a new figure had appeared through the door from which Camilla had emerged.

She had green hair and eyes and was the same height as the children. However, everyone knew that she was not the same age as them.

That was because they had all seen her during their interviews. She was the most powerful figure at the academy—the headmaster.

She then began to speak...but it was more a concise business message than a long speech, and instead of explaining everything they needed to know, she announced that there would be a delay before they received more information. The faculty had originally planned to separate the students by concentration and talk about their plans going forward, but that had been rescheduled to tomorrow.

Their reasoning wasn't that they were out of time but that they figured

everyone must be exhausted. Even if they hadn't actually exerted themselves very much, a lot of the students had taken hard enough blows that they'd lost consciousness. Since the faculty had no particular reason to rush, the majority of the orientation had been rescheduled to tomorrow. All that the students had been told at that point was who should go to which dorm, and the extent of those instructions was that they should split up by concentration and then by gender.

Since there had been no need to explain in detail, it had been just a rough summary. After that, the headmaster had finished her speech and sent them off with the instructions to rest well tonight.

There had been instructors for each concentration waiting outside, but the headmaster had previously explained that they were only there to direct the students to their dorms and provide the bare minimum of information.

Incidentally, Soma had called everyone over when he'd heard that. He had wondered why Aina and the others were at the academy and figured it would be best to take some time to discuss it. Then each of them had headed to their own dorms, checked a few things, and, after taking a breather, regrouped here.

Quite some time had passed since then. In that time, it had been easy to pull together and organize the information he had to make an educated guess.

"Well, there are naturally certain parts that I'm not sure of, but those would mainly be your motives. I don't think it would be best to pry into those, since I imagine they're quite personal."

"Hmm, you mean you get how all of them got into the academy, even Aina?" Camilla asked. "I thought about it, but I couldn't figure it out."

"Ah... Well, I can't fault you for that."

It wasn't unusual for a child Aina's age to attend the academy; the issue was her legal status. Since this was the Royal Academy, only citizens of Ladius were eligible to apply. Sierra's case was unclear, but it was certain that Aina wouldn't be able to prove she was a citizen.

That should have meant she wouldn't have been able to get in, but...

"In apology for the fact that Aina and Sierra couldn't continue their journey

with me, my parents granted each of them one wish. I believe they used those.”

“You’re a bit *too* sharp...”

“It’s a matter of knowing it or not.”

Knowing that much, he had been able to put the pieces together. He wouldn’t have been able to if he hadn’t known. That was all.

He had originally assumed they had used those wishes to stay in the fort, but apparently they hadn’t. That must have just been a favor or something of the sort.

Nevertheless, Camilla nodded in agreement now that her question had been resolved.

“Makes sense. I can sure see how *they* of all people could get the academy to budge on one or two things. I mean, seeing as they know the headmaster personally, all they’d have to do is guarantee the statuses of the applicants.”

“Oh? They do?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess you wouldn’t know that. This goes for me too, but they’ve known her for a long time... I mean, she was involved in founding this kingdom. That’s how she got to be the headmaster.”

“I see...”

That reminded him of the look he’d gotten. Just after the headmaster had given her parting words and they had made to leave the arena, her green eyes had definitely singled him out.

That didn’t necessarily mean anything, since she’d immediately looked away...so he dismissed it as irrelevant at the moment and refocused on the subject at hand.

“I’m more surprised that you weren’t told how Aina and the others got into the academy. You must have known that they were going to attend, right?”

“What makes you say that?”

“You shouldn’t be familiar with Sierra, but you haven’t been acting as if it’s your first time meeting, to say nothing of what happened earlier.”

Sierra and the others had obviously been wearing robes so that Soma wouldn't identify them. That meant they had known beforehand that the entrance ceremony would turn out that way.

Sierra had also mentioned that they'd gotten special permission. The obvious inference was that they'd gotten it from one of the instructors, and the most likely of those was Camilla.

That had only been a guess at the time, however. He had only reached certainty after seeing the two interact.

"You're the same as ever, huh? Well, there's a simple reason that I didn't hear about how they got in. My job as an instructor is to teach classes and advise students, not to be suspicious of them. And I doubt the headmaster would let them cheat to get in, anyway."

"Hmm... That is certainly true."

"And didn't you think someone else might have told them about the entrance ceremony? Since there's one other person who could have?"

"Well, I considered it, but what happened today was what we would call a *plan*. I don't believe planning is one of her strong points... If anything, I would imagine it to be one of her stumbling blocks."

"Dear brother... Th-That's so mean!"

He hadn't addressed her by name, but she'd been able to tell who he meant.

Soma shrugged in response to Lina's anguished cry. "It wasn't an insult. I think that your honesty and straightforwardness make you unsuited to scheming."

"Oh, so it's not a problem, then!"

"Why'd you accept that so easily, Lina...? And wait, how'd you know she's an instructor here, Soma?"

"That would be the only reason for her to be here. Not even our mother could have gotten the academy to enroll Lina as a student a year early."

The age at which it was possible to enroll was determined by law. Lina would probably have been fine in terms of her skill level, but they couldn't just break the law.

Also, when they had all headed to their own rooms, he had seen Lina going toward the instructors' dorms. He had been close to certain before then, and that had confirmed it.

"The only thing was that there shouldn't have been any instructors at the ceremony other than Ms. Hennefeld, so I wondered why Lina was there."

"Oh, it wasn't like we were excluding the instructors. We left it up to them whether they came or not, and it just ended up like that."

"And it was no problem for me to be there, because it was an entrance ceremony on paper!"

"Why do you seem so proud to say that..." Aina said with an exasperated sigh.

As he observed the scene, Soma glanced in a different direction and met eyes with Sierra, who had been looking at him. She tilted her head inquiringly, and her golden hair swayed.

"Mm-hmm?"

"Well, I understand why almost everyone is here, but I found your presence unexpected."

Since everyone had gone toward their own dorms, he had seen Sierra heading toward the swordsmanship dorm. That meant she had enrolled here as a student.

But it wasn't the fact that she had enrolled that Soma was questioning; it was her motive for doing so.

He knew that Lina had probably wanted to tag along with him.

As far as he knew, Camilla had been in charge of the mansion, but he didn't think she would have just abandoned it. She had probably discussed and resolved that matter before coming here.

He hadn't heard that she was considering such a thing, but he also hadn't seen Camilla in some years. It wouldn't have been strange for her to have had a change of heart in that time.

He didn't know why Aina had enrolled either, but that didn't necessarily mean it was unexpected. He just figured she had something in mind.

“But I thought you said you had something to do, Sierra. Was that not why you were at the fort?”

He had already confirmed that it didn’t have to do with magic. Unlike Soma, who cared about magic and magic alone, Sierra had some unrelated goal.

He didn’t know any details, and he didn’t intend to ask as of now. It was personal, and he figured she would tell him in due time. He trusted her that much.

But nevertheless...

“Mm-hmm. But I haven’t given up on magic.”

“I understand that, but... Oh, is it because you can pursue both at the academy?”

“Mm-hmm. I asked Sophia. She said this would be the safest and most viable place.”

Apparently it wasn’t that she’d changed her mind or decided on a different goal but that coming to the academy was part of her plan in more ways than one.

The word “safe” did stick out to him, but it was unlikely to be an issue.

“I see... It shouldn’t be particularly dangerous, should it?”

“Don’t think so.”

“That response makes me somewhat nervous... Well, just tell me if you run into any issues. I can help you out.”

“Mm-hmm. I’ll count on you.”

“I won’t let you down.”

Soma found it new and refreshing to watch Sierra nod. Despite being inexpressive, she had always been earnest and straightforward, but now she was no longer hiding her face. The sight of her golden hair swaying instead of her white hood moving up and down was oddly novel despite how commonplace it should have been.

“Hmm... Seeing Sierra’s face uncovered may actually be the most unexpected

thing yet.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” replied Aina. “I’m honestly not used to seeing her face.”

“I understand! When I think of Sierra, I always picture her hiding her face!” Lina agreed.

“I’ll get used to it. I think.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll see each other around, since it’ll be a while before you graduate.”

“Hmm...”

Soma looked up at the ceiling as he listened. The unfamiliar sight made it sink in that he had arrived at the academy.

Given all of the familiar faces, it hadn’t felt concrete, but school had finally begun.

And classes would start tomorrow.

“Thinking of classes... I wonder how the academy runs them.”

The plan was to give them the details tomorrow, so they didn’t know much yet. All they knew was that they would go to different classrooms for every class as opposed to staying in one set room for each concentration.

Soma could picture how it might go, but...

“Ahh, well, I wouldn’t get your hopes up too much.”

“Even though this is the Royal Academy?”

“Well, I hate to say it, but in the end, you’re just a first grader. I doubt they’ll have any classes that satisfy you people. Apart from mine, that is.”

“Mmh... M-Mine too!”

“You should worry about whether you can run a proper class first,” Aina shot back. “Well, I get the feeling you can do it, though.”

“Mm-hmm... And Lina is Special Grade. Just seeing her movements would set a good example. Or...maybe not.”

“Huh?! Wh-Why not?!”

“Just demonstrating a Special-Grade Skill won’t necessarily be useful. Maybe in the sense that it’s showing the highest you can go... Oh, I should let you know, you won’t be able to take both Lina’s class and mine.”

“We won’t?”

“They’ll tell you more about it tomorrow.”

“Hmm...”

He was curious, but he didn’t mind as long as he would find out tomorrow.

Tomorrow...

Although Camilla had said not to get their hopes up, he couldn’t help anticipating it.

And...

“Well, in the worst-case scenario, I’ll be satisfied as long as I can take courses on sorcery.”

“Yeah, you of all people would say that.”

“That’s just like you!”

“It is.”

“Yep, that’s what I expected to hear.”

Soma shrugged in response to their various replies, then turned to look out the window.

“I wonder what will happen...” he muttered, a smile coming to his face as he thought about the next day and the academy life that awaited him after that.

14

As has been made clear, Sylvia was a member of the royal family.

But being a daughter of a royal concubine, she might as well have had no right to the throne.

She was in the line of succession, but her place in line would fall back with each new child or grandchild the king had. She would never rule unless every other member of the royal family suddenly died.

But that didn't mean she was persecuted or neglected. If anything, they treated her far better than one would think they would treat the daughter of a concubine.

In fact, in spite of her low place in the line of succession, they treated her no differently from the other royal children. The same went for her mother, even, and Sylvia herself felt more strongly than anyone how kindly the rest of the royal family treated her.

And that was why Sylvia had decided to attend the Royal Academy. She simply wanted to repay her family's generosity.

Needless to say, the king...her father had told her that she didn't owe him anything. But even if he genuinely felt that way, just as they were unable to treat themselves as equals in the true sense of the word due to being royalty, Sylvia didn't want to concede that precisely because she was proud of her father and mother.

Well, her servant and friend Maria had called it silly, but she had been smiling, so Sylvia didn't think it was a mistaken notion.

Incidentally, she had chosen sorcery as her concentration because she thought she could be the most useful that way.

The field of magic research was lagging behind in this kingdom compared to others, however. It was partially the fact that they overemphasized Skills, but they also tended strongly toward a results-oriented approach. They attached importance only to outcomes, not to processes, and even then only to

outcomes predicated on Skills.

Because of that, the kingdom was inhospitable to researchers. When it came to research on magic, Divinism was a big impediment as well.

The rulers wanted to do something about it but had no good ideas...which was why Sylvia wanted to help out.

However, it wasn't as if Sylvia understood all of the circumstances that had led up to the current state of affairs. All she knew was that there was no progress being made in research on magic, and she had talent for magic, so she figured there must be something she could do.

She didn't know the specifics, and her path forward was unclear, but in itself, that feeling was genuine.

Therefore...

"Hrmm..."

That feeling was the reason she was currently pouting.

She was in the middle of an arithmetic class at the Royal Academy.

It wasn't that she didn't understand the material or that she wasn't satisfied with the instruction. In fact, after having been at the academy for nearly a month, she would say all the courses she'd taken were fulfilling.

She had learned some of the content from her tutors, so it wasn't brand new to her. It was the environment that was so enriching.

There were people who reached the same answer she did but used entirely different methods to get there.

There were people who got the answer wrong, but she understood how they had reached it and enjoyed the fresh perspective.

And there were people who got the wrong answer via a process that made absolutely no sense to her, but that in itself was stimulating in a way.

None of those dynamics had existed between her and her tutor. There had only been her own thoughts and the answers the tutor showed her.

But now she had come to feel like she'd only seen the inside of a tiny box

within a much larger world... Maybe that was an exaggeration, but Sylvia genuinely felt that way, as if she'd been awakened.

And among the other students, there was a boy whom she looked up to, almost revered. He was the one who had taken the entrance exam right after her.

She had felt a small glimmer of that admiration on the day of the exam, but she hadn't nearly been aware of its full extent.

As far as Sylvia could tell, he was doing everything perfectly.

Though they were both in the sorcery concentration, not all of their classes were about sorcery. Especially since they were elementary schoolers, they did all of the fundamentals.

But he seemed to already understand all of it. While Sylvia did know most of the material, she certainly wasn't confident she knew everything.

Every time he was called on, he gave exactly the correct answer, process and all.

And one time, an instructor who was notorious for making unfair questions told them to solve a problem that they shouldn't have been able to at their level, yet he had solved it like it was nothing. They were then given another problem around middle-school level, and he even solved that with no problem. The teacher had been left with no choice but to commend him, and breaths of wonder had been heard throughout the classroom.

The other instructors had started challenging him in the same way, maybe after hearing about that incident...and he had answered all of them perfectly. And he did it all without getting a big head or thinking himself better than the others, so it was only natural that she would look up to him.

It was the one time in swordsmanship class that had shocked Sylvia the most. Martial arts were included in general education, and they would be taught one subject of their choice out of six by the instructor in that concentration. Sylvia had chosen swordsmanship, and apparently, so had he.

It happened in the first class. In order to gauge where everyone was at, the instructor had each of the students face off against her.

Although they were sorcery students, more than a few of them had fighting Skills, and most importantly, they had all been allowed entry into the Royal Academy. Some of them even had Middle-Grade Swordsmanship, so frankly, they hadn't thought the instructor would be much of a challenge.

After all, the instructor, Lina, looked to be about their age or maybe even younger. The instructor who had overpowered them all during the entrance ceremony had likewise been close to them in terms of height, but she had at least had a dignified presence to match her ability. Lina, however, did not, probably because she was beaming with enjoyment. It could also have been a factor that she hadn't displayed her skill at the entrance ceremony despite having attended for some reason.

Even Sylvia hadn't expected very much...but that perception was overturned in an instant. One of the Middle-Grade users among the students challenged her first, and they were knocked down in literally a second. They were standing one moment, and then, although no one saw Lina move, they were on the ground.

After the entrance ceremony, the students had gotten some idea of the instructors' power but not its full extent. Seeing Lina's swordplay was enough to tell them what level she was on, and nearly all of the other students proceeded to meet the same fate as the first.

Even Sylvia, though she hadn't been knocked down (maybe because she was a girl), had gotten her head hit before she knew it. As she groaned, she had thought to herself that the instructors here were really on another level.

But Lina had only knocked down *nearly* everyone. Everyone except him.

He stood across from her as everyone watched in anticipation, wondering what would become of him...and the results were exactly as they wished.

No, even better.

It was the first time anyone had blocked her sword, and then she even got hit on the head herself with a counterblow.

Naturally, that elicited more cheering than ever before. They then realized that would probably annoy the instructor and quieted down...but if anything,

she seemed the happiest of all of them.

That was the same day that Sylvia heard that what he'd demonstrated at the entrance exam was swordsmanship, not magic. The topic had happened to come up in a conversation. Wondering why she hadn't sensed any mana, she'd asked why he'd done that. Apparently it was because he'd been told to do what he was best at. The examiner hadn't specified magic, so Soma's choice had been fine.

She had been deeply impressed that he'd thought to interpret the instructions that way. According to him, it was nothing to be proud of because someone else had taught him to do so, but the very fact that he was able to say that openly was enough to impress her.

Well, between those couple things, Sylvia had come to give him admiring looks... But by that time, two weeks had gone by, and he'd started to behave differently.

"Hrmm..."

She grumbled again as she thought back on it, but there was no change in his demeanor.

He—Soma Neumond—had apparently gotten used to her noises of disapproval.

To be honest, Sylvia was the same in that she'd gotten used to the scene before her...but even so, she was deeply reluctant to accept that.

Yes, though Sylvia was currently sitting next to Soma, she felt nothing but dissatisfied. That was because he wasn't paying attention to class but to a book in his hands.

She knew he'd borrowed it from the library because he'd told her as much. But she had no idea what it was about.

Two weeks after that day, he'd started bringing a different book every day and reading it. That was the change in his behavior. For some reason, he'd suddenly stopped taking classes seriously in favor of reading books.

It would have been understandable if the books had at least been about

magic. But the first time he'd brought a book, she'd asked what it was about, and he'd responded that it was a history book.

The next day it had been a book about ancient ruins, and then a book on monsters. He'd also brought a book about adventurers and some other ones that she didn't really understand...but not a single one had been about magic.

For the past three days or so, she hadn't been asking, so there was a chance that on at least one of those days, he hadn't brought a book...but that was unlikely.

But Sylvia couldn't say anything to him about it. He was within his rights to do that, and he was still answering correctly when called on.

There was nothing she could say to him.

"Nngh..."

So the only thing she could do was make noises of disapproval. Until now, he'd reacted in one way or another, but he wasn't even doing that anymore.

She knew she was being irritating but continued because it was important to make her stance clear...but maybe there was no point in continuing.

But there was nothing else she could do; she'd run out of options.

"Hmph!"

So she flipped her head away from him to face forward and resolved not to pay him any more mind.

Not that that was really possible...but she had no other choice.

She'd thought she'd found someone she could look up to and work alongside to improve herself.

But in the end, that was just something Sylvia had made up in her own head.

It had nothing to do with Soma.

But knowing that didn't make it any easier to accept.

As Sylvia tried to concentrate on class, she quietly groaned to herself.

15

To be honest, Soma had a good idea of why the girl next to him—Sylvia—was glaring at him disapprovingly.

It meant that she didn't like his lackadaisical attitude.

But Soma had no intention of correcting it as of now.

It was true that it wasn't a good situation from a conventional perspective, but Soma wasn't exactly bored with class. It had been years, no, decades since he'd last sat in a classroom with several other people and taken a class. That alone brought back good memories and made it a fun experience.

It was even fascinating to hear the variety of ideas that people put forth...but that alone wasn't enough.

The reason Soma had come to the academy was the same as the reason for all his other actions up to this point—to use magic. That was all.

And after two weeks of classes, Soma had come to the conclusion that continuing to take them as usual wouldn't accomplish that goal.

Maybe once he got to middle school...or even next year, he could rethink that. But for the time being, he couldn't find any meaning in devoting his full attention to his lessons.

He didn't intend to hinder his classmates, so he would answer when called on, but that was all.

First and foremost, he was focusing on his own objective, and he didn't think the academy classes were the path to that goal. That was what the books were for.

As one would have expected of the Royal Academy, there were books laying around of the likes of which he had never seen at home. He didn't know which might give him clues, so for now, he was reading whatever he had at hand...which was the reason for his current behavior.

So though he felt bad for Sylvia, he had no intention of changing.

Thinking, as though to excuse himself, that it wasn't like he was doing this in every class, he flipped the page of his book.

This book was about dungeons. Dungeons were a type of ancient ruin, and according to one theory, they were even older than most ruins. What was for certain was that even less was understood about them.

That was because inside dungeons, monsters didn't die. However many times they were defeated or exterminated, they would be back before you knew it, as if they had returned to life.

That was extremely troublesome...but extremely advantageous to an adventurer. If the number of monsters never decreased however many they killed, they could take as many as they wanted for materials.

So there were some adventurers who specialized in dungeons. They made a living by delving into dungeons, hunting the monsters inside, taking the materials, and selling them.

But that came with risk. Dungeons were typically underground, so they were dimly lit and cramped, and you never knew what to expect inside. It was common to hear stories of adventurers who one day went into a dungeon as they had many times before only to vanish forever.

Adventurers ventured inside despite that risk because dungeons provided a stable income as well as a chance to get rich quick.

Just like in ancient ruins, there were hidden treasures in some dungeons—things such as magical tools or spellbooks. It was rare to actually find one, but just the possibility was plenty. Sometimes adventurers even discovered never-before-seen rarities, so it was said that any adventurer seeking an epic journey should go into dungeons.

And Soma was reading this book because he saw a possibility there.

An unknown tool that gave one abilities new abilities... It would be the most conventional method.

Hmm... Out of all the options I'm currently aware of, this seems like it would give me the best chance.

Dungeons were one of the reasons Soma had come to this academy in the first place.

There was a dungeon under the academy grounds. It wasn't that it had been discovered after the school buildings were erected; the founders of the academy had deliberately built it on top of a dungeon so that they could use it for classes. That meant that they could do hands-on practice without having to leave the campus.

And apparently, the dungeon had the perfect monsters for training. Dungeons were typically split into dozens of floors, and while stronger monsters appeared the farther down you went, the types of monsters that appeared on each floor were set. There was typically no risk of running into a powerful monster at random. That meant it was ideal for training, because you could pick the place most suited to your current skill level.

Since the dungeon beneath the academy grounds was used for practice, one might think there would have been nothing left undiscovered inside, but because those who ventured into the dungeon were, after all, students, the lower floors were apparently still untouched. The probability of encountering treasure increased the farther down you went, and so did the chance that it was valuable.

Soma couldn't help getting his hopes up. But since venturing into the dungeon was dangerous, the students wouldn't go to train there right away. It would only be possible once the students with little practice at fighting got somewhat used to it, which would be about two months after school started.

They could get permission to come and go more freely starting in middle school. It was forbidden for elementary school students to enter the dungeon except for class.

That meant that however much Soma wanted to go, he couldn't.

Perhaps I can find a way into the dungeon recorded in a book somewhere in the library...

He knew that was impossible, of course, but he was quite frustrated at being unable to enter the dungeon when it was right there.

It was for exactly that reason that he'd decided not to read any titles about dungeons among the many books available...but he'd also decided to pick the books he brought to class at random. Now that he'd taken this one, he couldn't *not* read it.

Well, I know there probably won't be anything, but there's always a small possibility. Perhaps I'll look for something of that sort in the library today.

With that thought in mind, Soma continued to read the book in his hands.

†

Although one attended many classes every day at the Royal Academy, they didn't last the entire day. Higher grades aside, elementary students would finish their classes and be let out of school well before the sun went down.

Naturally, that meant they had free time starting then, but it was unexpectedly rare for people to go outside to have fun. It wasn't against the academy rules, but it was necessary to get permission, and the process was bothersome.

Also, those who came to the Royal Academy tended to be growth oriented. Many of them prioritized training and studying over fun, which was another factor.

That didn't exclude the elementary schoolers. People like Aina often went to the training area after school. There, they could practice their magic alongside many other people doing the same. Then they could watch and learn, or they could ask questions. It was a worthwhile use of time, and that was how they passed the interval before dinner.

To be honest, Soma was jealous, enough so that he wished he could join them. But since he couldn't use magic, he would only have gotten in their way, so he decided to save that for once he could use magic.

Determined to join them one day, Soma headed to the library as he always did.

The Royal Academy's library was on the outskirts of the campus. It could easily have dwarfed a small town, so they couldn't exactly have put it near the other school buildings.

But that meant it could house a huge collection to match. It wasn't for nothing that the faculty boasted it was the biggest not only in the kingdom but in the world.

While that was certainly somewhat of an exaggeration, it made sense the second you stepped into the library. Immediately, your vision would be filled with books, books, and more books—a veritable mountain of them. The bookshelves were all over three stories tall and just as wide.

Considering that the library was the only thing on the south end of the magically expanded campus, it was needless to say how large it was.

That aside, now that Soma had arrived there as he always did, he glanced around him, ready to get started.

There were very few people, which was typical.

A lot of them were in the training area, of course, but apparently students only rarely used the library. When he first heard that, he had thought it wasteful, but once he found out why, he couldn't blame them.

The library's collection was just too big. There were so many books, the librarians couldn't grasp everything that was there; they didn't know the exact locations of about ninety percent of the books.

Apparently, the books here had been taken from the royal academy in Veritas, but in the chaos and confusion of the moment, they had been brought in a disorganized fashion, so they were all mixed up. It was only because people had actually read them that they knew the contents of even ten percent of the library's holdings.

That meant it would take a century to figure out all of them...or even longer, considering that the books that patrons needed the most frequently would have been found and read first.

But that wasn't something for Soma to think about. He was glad that they knew as much as they could, and the fact that no one had exhaustive knowledge of the library's collection meant that there may have been unknown information waiting to be found. That gave him hope for the future, so it wasn't such a bad thing, though his perspective may have been too optimistic.

Incidentally, the books Soma read in class belonged to the ninety percent of unknown books. He didn't know what they were about, so he picked them at random.

While he read during his free time as well, those books belonged to the ten percent of known books. At those times, he wasn't looking for new information but trying to find hints in what was currently known. He planned to keep doing that for the time being, although if he made no progress that way, he would switch to reading from the other ninety percent.

And today, he was heading toward the known books to find out whether there was any way to sneak into the dungeon...in other words, to find a hidden path.

Things being as they were, titles related to dungeons were among the books that the librarians prioritized in their search and moved to the section for known books.

However, even if there were a hidden path into the dungeon, it would have been blocked off. If he had been serious about searching, he should have looked in the unknown books, but it would have been too reckless to pin his hopes on what was said to be centuries' worth of reading. This was preferable to gambling on a one-in-amillion chance.

Hence, Soma headed toward a corner of the library relatively close to the entrance. Since they had a lot of unused space for storage, the books they had already checked were collected in one place.

As he walked through the empty, almost lonely feeling interior...

"Hmm... Is that...?"

Soma spotted somebody familiar there.

16

Soma was initially surprised to see two people there.

It really was rare for students and faculty to frequent the library; usually he would have been lucky to pass by even one person in the time that it took him to find a book, check out, and leave, and it wasn't unusual that he would come and go without seeing anyone else inside at all. He had started visiting the library on his second day of classes, but this was the first time he'd encountered two people in one day.

And another factor in his surprise was that they were familiar faces. While he knew them, it was his first time seeing them together, which made for a novel sight.

"Imagine seeing you two here."

"Soma...?"

"Oh, what a coincidence!"

It was Sierra with one of the magic instructors, Carine.

"Strange that the first time I see you in three days should be here of all places, Sierra. You still seem to be oddly well connected. And you as well, Ms. Carine."

Although they were studying different concentrations and lived in different dorms, he saw Sierra often enough that this may have been the longest they'd gone without seeing each other since they met.

This was their first time meeting in the library, though.

"I'm looking for a spellbook."

"Ah, I see. So that's how you decided to approach it."

"Mm-hmm."

It still felt strange to see Sierra's golden hair sway as she nodded, but Soma nodded back.

There were various ways to approach magic, and a place like the Royal

Academy had a vast amount of material. It was so much that Sierra had had a hard time deciding where to start, but this meant she had finally settled on one option.

“And that would explain why Ms. Carine is showing you around.”

“Yes, that’s it! After class, Sierra asked me where to find spellbooks, but as you can see, it’s hard for a first-timer to navigate this place, isn’t it? So I thought I’d tag along, since I don’t have anything else to do right now.”

As she spoke, Carine handed a stack of books to Sierra. Soma observed and nodded in understanding.



Carine was certainly well suited to that role in multiple ways.

Spellbooks weren't exactly books about sorcery; they were more like a sort of magical tool. Just reading a spellbook would give one the ability to use a certain spell—magecraft, to be precise—with no Sorcery Skill necessary; all it took was using the book.

But because spellbooks were both highly convenient and difficult to obtain except in the rare instances in which one could find them in a dungeon, they were extremely expensive. They didn't circulate in the general population, and even a duke would have had a hard time getting his hands on one.

That meant that only a few people were knowledgeable about spellbooks.

Also, though it was magecraft and not magic that one could use with a spellbook, the two closely resembled each other in a sense. Magecraft was inevitably treated the same as magic in research, and their lectures had touched on that.

That meant that if you wanted to learn about spellbooks, it would be best to ask a sorcery instructor. And Carine, of course, taught sorcery.

Soma himself knew about spellbooks because Carine had told him about them, plus his own research.

"So, what sort of spellbooks are you looking for in particular?"

"The basics to start?"

"That would make a good start."

"Mm-hmm. I have plenty of time. I can take my time and try different things. I haven't tried spellbooks before, after all."

"It would certainly be hard to try reading a lot of spellbooks anywhere but here."

Incidentally, Sierra wasn't reading spellbooks in order to learn magecraft. As explained before, magecraft was not magic, although the two were similar. It had the same effects, but magecraft could only be learned through spellbooks.

So given that magecraft was magecraft, not magic, it wasn't what Sierra

wanted.

Soma felt the same, naturally.

But it was a fact that magecraft and magic were extremely close, so Sierra had apparently taken notice of the fact that anyone could learn magecraft by reading spellbooks. If the same principle could be applied to magic, that would mean that people like Sierra and Soma could learn magic.

But a spellbook's effect could only be activated once; once someone used it and learned the spell, it would revert to a plain old book. Not even the Royal Academy could afford to leave such valuable goods lying around haphazardly, so all of the spellbooks here had already been used.

And it was those used spellbooks that Sierra wanted to study. Even if they were useless now, they had once been able to teach someone magecraft, which made them plenty worth researching.

Well, it had been a last resort due to the difficulty of researching unused spellbooks, but it wasn't entirely meaningless. Sierra, at least, thought there was meaning in it, and Soma had no counterarguments.

He was hopeful enough that she would discover something that he would have tried it eventually if she hadn't. He'd just been putting it off because he hadn't been able to think of what to do.

"So, what in particular are you planning to do, Sierra?"

"I'll try reading first."

"Hmm... If I recall correctly, the contents are said to be meaningless."

The effect of a spellbook was activated by *using* it, so there was no need to actually read the contents. While they did have writing inside like normal books, that writing had nothing to do with the magecraft they allowed one to learn. It was said to be nothing but meaningless text.

But now that he thought about it, he had never been told what specifically was written inside. That meant there was certainly a chance that the contents included some kind of hint.

"I see. That could... Hmm?"

Soma turned a puzzled look to the side, sensing a wry smile directed at him.

Not from Sierra...from Carine.

“What is it, Ms. Carine?”

“Ah, well, I know you two are serious about this, so I wasn’t sure if I should stop you or not... I’m sure you would be fine, Soma, but as for Sierra...”

“Oh, I see what you mean.”

Sierra was enrolled in the swordsmanship concentration, but it was obvious that her passion was more than slightly oriented toward magic. That meant that as an instructor, Carine may have had a responsibility to caution her here.

However...

“I’m taking swordsmanship seriously too. So it’s fine.”

“Right... But that just made me even less sure of what to do. From what I’ve heard, you’re really good with a sword, right? You not only won against the other students but against the instructor. The new swordsmanship instructor said she expected as much, but she was upset that she’d lost face as a result of a student defeating her.”

Soma knew who that new swordsmanship instructor was but deliberately refrained from saying anything. That, and he had nothing to say, since he’d heard the same line from the person in question herself.

But despite everything she’d said, Carine ended up not cautioning Sierra. Apparently, she’d agreed to help because she was a sorcery instructor. Her job was to teach, not to reprimand; that would be the swordsmanship instructor’s job.

Reassured by that, Sierra wasted no time in opening one of the volumes in her hands. She seemed to be checking what was written inside.

But as soon as she dropped her gaze, her neat eyebrows twisted in a look of confusion.

And then...

“I can’t read this.”

Those were the next words out of her mouth.

17

Carine looked down at the text that Sierra had said she couldn't read, and she immediately grasped why.

Since she hadn't thought it would have anything to do with magic, Carine had never read a spellbook before...and it turned out that this one was written in ancient hieroglyphics.

Of course Sierra couldn't read that.

Ancient hieroglyphs were the writing system that had been used at the same time or even before most ancient ruins were built. The system was completely obsolete now, so nearly nobody could read it.

The holy scriptures were written in ancient hieroglyphics, so Divinist priests could read them to some extent...but there may or may not have been anyone at this academy who could.

Which was why...

"Read this."

It threw Carine for a loop when Sierra said that.

It would have been simple enough for Carine to say she didn't know how. But she still had pride and confidence in herself as an instructor at the Royal Academy. Even if ancient hieroglyphs seemed impossible to decipher, she was hesitant to admit as much to a student.

But she immediately realized she'd gotten the wrong idea. Sierra hadn't asked her but Soma.

"Hmm... I don't mind, but what do you plan to do in the future? It would be hard for me to read and translate every time you want to read a spellbook."

"Depends what it says. If it really doesn't mean anything, I'll think of something else. But if there's something there...I'll try to learn."

"I commend your determination, but there are no resources to learn it with."

Carine watched with a blank face as the two students conversed.

They had been speaking on the assumption that Soma could read ancient hieroglyphs just now.

So did that mean...?

“Wait, Soma, can you...read ancient hieroglyphics?”

“Yes, I can. Why?”

Carine was once again at a loss for words as the boy nodded matter-of-factly. He was even giving *her* a puzzled look that made her doubt whether he understood the gravity of this revelation.

“Uhh... It’s not that I don’t believe you, but... Could you read some for me, then?”

“I already intended on doing that, so I don’t mind, but I should keep my voice down in the library... Although I suppose we’ve been talking enough already, and there aren’t many people around.”

Soma took the spellbook from Sierra, looked inside, and then...

“‘4/3/117. Sunny. Nothing out of the ordinary happened today. I was hoping that we would have an event to celebrate one hundred years, but there have been no signs of one for some time now...’ Are you sure this is a spellbook?”

“A diary...?”

“That is what it seems to be. Could this be a fake, or perhaps some sort of joke...?”

“Spellbooks are all decorated the same way, so I think this is definitely real,” Carine answered. “And it would take a lot of work to use ancient hieroglyphs just for a joke.”

“So it’s real, but it’s like this... I skimmed the rest of the pages, and the rest of the book is the same way. Perhaps we should check another one.”

After looking at another of the books Sierra was holding, Soma sighed. Apparently, it was the same kind of thing.

“I can see why they determined these were worthless.”

“Too bad...”

“Well, you can consider it a good thing that you didn’t waste your time learning ancient hieroglyphics to read this.”

He didn’t show any signs of dishonesty. Regardless, and although Carine had only known Soma for a month, what she’d seen of his character led her to believe that he wouldn’t make up a lie like that. That meant he really could read ancient hieroglyphs.

“Wow, so you really can read ancient hieroglyphs...”

“Hmm... You seemed rather surprised about that before as well. Is it that unusual? My perception was that they were just an old writing system.”

“Yeah, that isn’t exactly wrong...but the issue is the specific time period they’re from.”

As explained before, ancient hieroglyphs were from the same time period as the ancient ruins. It wasn’t uncommon to see them carved into said ruins.

Divinist priests could read them, but only in the scriptures for the most part. They couldn’t read any characters that weren’t included in those, and the number of unique characters used in ancient hieroglyphs was known to be extremely high, in the five-digit range. Almost all of the ones used in ancient ruins were indecipherable.

That meant the ability to *truly* read ancient hieroglyphs was extremely rare and valuable. He was likely the only one in the kingdom with that ability, and that alone could qualify him for a specialized job regardless of his Skills.

However...

“Hmm... To be honest, that doesn’t matter to me.”

“I suppose it might not...”

It was amazing, yes, but at the same time, it was true that it might not matter to some people. She couldn’t blame someone who wanted to use magic for not finding any value or excitement in the prospect of becoming an archaeologist.

“But it really is amazing, you know.”

Very little was known in detail about ancient hieroglyphs; even their origins were unclear. That became obvious as soon as you tried to trace back when, where, and how they had been created. It was as if the language had suddenly appeared out of thin air.

Because of that, there were some who said it had been granted to mankind by God, some who said it was a revival of an older language, and even some who said it had come from another world.

“Another world, you say?”

“Ah, yeah, I can see how you might get stuck on that point, but that in itself actually isn’t uncommon!”

Until about a century ago, people who had come from other worlds were sometimes discovered in this one, albeit rarely. Many things were said to have involved those people, including a number of technologies that were still used to this day, such as guns. The heroes who had defeated the Archdragon were said to have come from another world, and there were records of many people from other worlds being discovered around the time that the ancient ruins were built.

Those stories were dubious, but it was at least a definite fact that people had come from other worlds to have an undeniable impact on this one.

But for the past century or so, there had been no officially confirmed cases.

“Officially confirmed...”

“That implies that there are some that *aren’t* publicly known.”

“Oh, well, about that...”

For a second, Carine wasn’t sure what to do, but then she decided it wasn’t a big deal. It was an open secret; while the official stance was that it had never happened, it was common knowledge among anyone who knew even a little about what had happened. They couldn’t have hidden it if they’d tried.

“In fact, the Kingdom of Veritas summoned some heroes from another world just a few decades ago.”

“Heroes...”

“...from another world.”

“Yeah, to defeat the Dark Lord.”

But when they’d tried to select people to accompany the heroes, they had found that there were already heroes in their own kingdom.

Then, instead of the Dark Lord’s defeat, the result had been a revolution and secession.

Due to all of the resulting scandals, they’d decided to pretend it had never happened.

However, since the result had been the formation of a new kingdom, they hadn’t been able to cover it up completely. People in most of the kingdoms involved were aware of it.

“Well, you can read more about it if you’re interested. I can’t remember where they are, but I’m pretty sure there are books about it.”

This library had more than just the books taken from Veritas; whenever new books came out, the librarians tried to get their hands on them. And since they of course knew what those books were about, they would be in this area.

“I suppose I’ll look into it when I have the time, then. I have to say, though, Ms. Carine, you seem quite knowledgeable about these things.”

“Well, I debated whether I wanted to be a sorcery teacher or an archaeologist... I was going to be an archaeologist if I didn’t get hired here, so I’ll consider it again if I’m ever let go.”

That was why she was so envious of his ability to read ancient hieroglyphs. If she had been able to do that, she wouldn’t have hesitated to pursue archaeology.

“Speaking of which, how is it that you are able to read ancient hieroglyphs?”

“I don’t know how to answer that. All I can say is, because I can.”

“Hmm...”

Carine interpreted that response as Soma not wanting to tell her.

Things being as they were, there were bound to be some truths he found hard

to tell her. Although she was his teacher, it hadn't even been a month since they'd met, so it was only natural that he wouldn't open up completely. She hoped he would eventually open up...or at least teach her how to read ancient hieroglyphs.

As she thought about it, Soma turned to look at her.

"Since you know a lot about the past, do you know about the dungeon here?"

"The dungeon? Yeah, I don't know if I'd say I know a lot about it, but I know some."

"Hmm... Then would you happen to know a way that I could sneak into the dungeon? Something like a secret passage."

"*What*...?"

She'd asked him why, and his answer made sense; that must have been why he'd come to the library. But frankly...he'd chosen the worst person to come to with that question.

"Even if I did know a way, why would I tell you?"

"Hmm... I imagine that you wouldn't."

"Right?"

She could really feel his passion, but he also seemed to be spinning his wheels.

He probably wanted to use magic so badly that he was acting without thinking too deeply about it, but...

"Well, actually, there is a way... And there's a legitimate process for making use of that entrance, too."

"Oh? There is?"

"Haven't heard that..."

"There are actually a lot of rules that aren't well known...or maybe I should say, that they don't tell you about."

It was a type of elusion.

There were things that they didn’t tell you, but that you could find out if you looked into it; things that you couldn’t find written down, but that they would tell you if you asked; and things that they wouldn’t tell you even if you asked but that you could deduce from other information.

A nicer-sounding way to put it would be that they valued students’ independence. There were quite a few rules like that in this academy.

Incidentally, Soma’s question fell into the “they’ll tell you if you ask” category.

It was just that students didn’t usually ask her for ways to sneak in, so she hadn’t thought of a way to respond...but she could throw him a bone. He would learn about it anyway when he started going into the dungeons to train.

Thinking that, she was about to open her mouth, but a familiar voice cut her off before she could.

“As an elementary student, it is against the rules for you to enter the labyrinth without permission, but there is one exception. You must be accompanied by a guide and pass a special test. Typically, only an instructor may serve as the guide, and the test differs depending on the instructor. If you wish to enter the dungeon, you must first find an instructor who will serve as your guide and pass their test.”

But that voice shouldn’t have been there.

Carine reflexively turned around to see exactly the familiar figure she’d expected.

She had green hair and eyes, and she looked like a girl of about the same age as Soma.

“H-Headmaster?!”

It was the headmaster of the Royal Academy, Hildegard Lindwurm.

18

Now that Soma knew a means of freely entering the dungeon, he made his way to the entrance the very next day.

The entrance to the dungeon was in a corner of the training area, which was appropriate considering that going into the dungeon was a part of basic training.

Although technically, the training area had been placed there *because* of the entrance to the dungeon.

“Hmm... I haven’t come around here before. So this is how it is...”

It was necessary to visit the training area as a part of courses such as swordsmanship. But those were held relatively close to the center, and the dungeon entrance was by the edge.

That was probably a precaution, considering there were monsters below.

Soma surveyed the area as he thought. It looked exceedingly normal, no different in appearance from the other buildings in the area...so the difference was what was inside.

And based on a quick glance...

“It looks like a temple...or perhaps like ruins.”

“That is how it is intended to look. It is more conducive to assuming the proper mindset than if it were to look like the training area.”

“It certainly has the right ambience.”

He nodded in agreement with the voice coming from behind him and turned around. There he saw what looked like a girl with green hair and eyes.

She was the most influential figure at the Royal Academy, and she had agreed to be Soma’s guide and examiner for his test in the dungeon.

“You must not have anything to do as headmaster if you can administer this test personally. You were in the library yesterday as well.”

“You could stand to consider your wording. I may not look it, but I am the most distinguished figure at this academy.”

“Yes, I know. What of it?”

He could concede yesterday, since she’d apparently had business at the library, but not today. If she was able to come to the dungeon after school the very next day, she must not have been busy.

They were in this situation in the first place because the other instructors had refused. First, when he’d asked on the previous day, Carine had said she was busy today, and every instructor he’d encountered today, including Camilla, had said something to the same effect.

There had been one swordsmanship instructor who had enthusiastically offered to do it without him asking, but another had reminded her that she’d promised to watch the students train today and taken her away, so she didn’t count.

Then, just as he had been pondering what to do, this person had appeared and said something like “I shall serve as your guide and examiner in your time of need.”

Only someone with nothing else to do would do that.

“Well, this was a big help, so I am grateful.”

“Oh...? Y-Yes, indeed, so long as you understand! It is thanks to me that you were able to come here today! In fact, more gratitude would be in order...”

“Don’t push it.”

As they talked, they proceeded through the corridor and soon reached a wide area. What caught Soma’s attention was not the large area itself but the slight disturbance he felt the instant he entered it.

“Hmm? Was that a barrier just now?”

“In the worst-case scenario, this entrance alone would not be adequate deterrence. We have erected a barrier so that if monsters were to leave the dungeon, it would not pose a problem. Nothing of the sort has happened thus far, but considering that this is a part of the royal capital, the utmost caution is

necessary.”

Soma nodded in understanding as he headed toward the center of the area. There he saw a hole...no, a staircase. It seemed to be made of stone, and it continued downward.

“This seems to be man made. Has it not been modified somehow?”

“It was already this way when I came here. Considering that I have not heard anything about it, I imagine that it was this way from the beginning.”

“Hmm...”

There were records showing that ancient ruins were definitely man made, but when it came to dungeons, the evidence was unclear.

But there may have been a clue here that could lead to Soma using magic. That alone was enough.

“Let’s make our way in, then. You said the test was a secret?”

“It would be meaningless if you prepared countermeasures beforehand. That is also the reason that it differs between instructors; it makes it more difficult to guess. Therefore, I will tell you just one thing: proceed to the tenth floor.”

“Hmm...”

Incidentally, the dungeon training sessions were conducted in parties of four to six. The instructors also gave each elementary school party a middle schooler with definite ability as a guide to ensure their safety as much as possible.

The important thing was that on average, the deepest a student could go by the end of their first year was the fifth floor. By the end of the second year, it was the eighth floor, and they could reach the tenth by the end of elementary school.

In other words, this girl-looking creature had told Soma to go to the maximum depth that an average student reached at the end of elementary school.

Not that he had a problem with that.

“May I ask for a time estimate?”

“Yes... I shall see that it takes less than two hours.”

“Understood.”

That gave him about ten minutes and some per floor.

Since he wouldn’t be given a map during his training time either, he would need five minutes to move between floors.

He had his sword, and there was no need to prepare anything else now.

“Let’s begin, then.”

“Yes, let us commence the test.”

With that said, Soma stepped into the darkness.

†

As soon as he took the first step down into the dungeon, Soma sighed in amazement.

He had learned some things about the dungeon, and he was impressed that it was exactly as he’d heard.

What amazed him was the fact that he saw anything at all, actually. There should have been no light source, but strangely, he was able to perceive his surroundings. It wasn’t anywhere near afternoon lighting, but it was more than enough to explore.

“Hmm... Dungeons really are mysterious.”

“They do not intend to make themselves understood. We must stay vigilant at all times and accept what must be there as it must be.”

As he listened to the headmaster’s comment (he wasn’t sure if it was meant to be advice or not), he proceeded with vigilance.

The place seemed as if it had been haphazardly dug out of the earth. Strangely, it didn’t feel like it would collapse, but with all the twists and turns, it was hard to see very far ahead.

It was practically set up for sneak attacks...

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Combat Ready / Sense Presence (Special-Grade): Negate Sneak Attack.

“Well, it’s easy if I know it’s coming.”

Law of the Sword / God-Killer / Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance: Original Style / Gale Slash.

A shadow jumped out, but the instant he perceived it, he swung his arm and decapitated it.

It was humanoid, but it was shorter than him, with a characteristic pointed nose and ears. The familiar creature was an archetypal monster.

“Hmm... A goblin, huh?”

Narrowing his eyes toward the monster as it collapsed to the ground, he returned his sword to its sheath.

Considering that all monsters on one floor of a dungeon would be the same level, and there would be no sudden jumps in their strength when one descended to the next floor, there would be no problem as long as he traveled on foot. The only problem was that he didn’t know the way, but that was a matter of luck. He had no choice but to trust his luck and keep moving forward.

“Oh, I just thought of this. What should I do if we’re attacked from behind? Should I protect you?”

“There shall be no need for that. I shall take the necessary measures. There is also no need to do anything proactively if a group of enemies attacks me at the same time they attack you.”

“Hmm... So what if an enemy has a long-range attack?”

“That would be a difficult situation. It would depend on the circumstances. The bottom line is that you have no need to worry about me.”

“Understood.”

It would have been a pain if she’d said to protect her as he went, but if he didn’t have to do that, he could make this work.

Knowing that, he didn’t hesitate to keep going deeper in, cutting down

monsters as he encountered them.

Normally, he would have been looting them as he went, but he wasn't this time. There was a limit to how much he could carry on his own, and that wasn't his objective today.

Although, since he didn't know what he was being graded on, that could have resulted in a point deduction...but there was nothing he could do about it.

He just focused on moving forward, and by the time about five minutes had passed since they'd entered the dungeon, he reached the staircase to the second floor.

"Not a bad pace."

"Indeed. I am impressed that you can keep on schedule so accurately...though I should have expected as much."

The staircase before him also seemed man made at a glance, but as she had advised, it wouldn't have done him any good to think too hard about it.

Facing forward, Soma began to descend the staircase.

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“Right... There’s one thing that I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

It was after they had reached the fifth floor that Soma began with those words out of nowhere.

It had only been about thirty minutes, so they were moving at a good pace...but Hildegard gave him a puzzled look, thinking there must be some problem.

What came out of his mouth next was entirely unexpected.

“Why do you speak so pretentiously?”

Her instant reaction was that he was the last person she wanted to hear that from, but she resisted the urge to say it out loud— “You are the last person I want to hear that from.”

—and failed.

Her response was obviously facetious, though. He was just begging for a retort.

But Soma just gave her a baffled look, as if to say that she was somehow wrong.

“I wouldn’t have said anything if you had always been that way, but you weren’t in the past, were you? Well, I also wanted to ask why you appear to be a girl. Your eyes and hair are the same color as they used to be, but...were you always female?”

Hildegard’s breath stopped for a moment. She was speechless.

That was just how shocking those words had been.

What they meant was clear as day.

She had thought it strange that he was as casual with her as he was...but it still came as a surprise.

“How did you... No, how long have you known?”

“I don’t understand what you’re referring to... If you mean the fact that you’re that dragon, then I knew the moment I first saw you. How could I not have?”

That reply put her at a loss for words again.

It also brought up some questions.

If he’d known since the very beginning...

“You have treated me rather normally, considering... I killed you, so I would imagine that you have something against me.”

“Well, if you’re going to bring that up, then I also killed you. And we didn’t kill each other out of resentment, so I would call it even.”

Soma only gave her a look and nothing else as he spoke.

But that was enough for her to tell that he was being honest.

So Hildegard let out a sigh of frustration.

“Ngh... I came this far in order to surprise you, but it seems my mission failed from the beginning.”

“Oh, so that was why. You really must not have anything to do as headmaster.”

“Give it a rest!”

It wasn’t actually because she had nothing to do that she’d been able to accompany him. She’d stayed up late and dealt with things just to clear this time.

She’d told Soma two hours because that was the most time she’d thought she could spare from her other responsibilities.

She had specified the tenth floor because she’d thought he could make it there in that time, though, and at this rate, it looked like that would be no problem.

“You haven’t answered my questions.”

“What questions do you mean?”

“Why do you look like a girl? I thought that dragons were sexless in the first place.”

Soma was correct. Dragons were neither male nor female by nature. Since they were created by human fantasies and didn’t reproduce sexually, there was no need for them to have a specific sex.

However...

“Well, my body is small because I have lived for less than five decades thus far. I shall not be especially large even when fully mature, so this is my expected size. As for the reason for that... I was quite large before, was I not?”

“I suppose so. Even for a dragon, you were quite large.”

“Hence why I chose this small body. The difference was surprising, was it not? It is all according to my plan...my plan to seduce you. It is ‘gap moe,’ in other words.”

“Oh?”

The look Soma gave her turned to one of bafflement and exasperation...but why would that be?

He was supposed to be astonished at hearing that and fall head over heels for her.

Where was the crack in her immaculate strategy?

It was inexplicable.

“I’ll ignore that last thing you said for the time being... So, what do you mean, seduce me? What do you intend to do specifically?”

“We shall procreate, of course. What else?”

“Oh...?”

His look took on even more pity.

Truly inexplicable... All she was doing was stating the obvious.

“I don’t recall gaining your affection.”

“What are you talking about? You killed me and gained my respect. It is only

natural that I would desire to bear your children.”

“Ah... So, the female form...?”

“For the same purpose. I considered reincarnating *you* as a female, but thought you might find it disagreeable.”

“Thank you for the considera... Wait, what you said just now implies something absurd.”

“What would that be?”

“You said that as if you personally reincarnated me.”

“I indeed did. There is nothing incorrect about what I said.”

He seemed surprised about that, which surprised her in turn. She had told him clearly that she would grant his wish.

“I recall you saying something at the very end... So that was what you meant. I suppose it couldn’t have been just a coincidence that we were reborn into the same world. I didn’t know you could do that, though.”

“I may not look it, but I was once a god.”

Once, because this was another world, and because she had died.

Soma wasn’t a god either. In his case, the reasons were slightly different, but they were similar.

“So, this is a genuine question. You said you wanted to bear my children. Is that really possible, even though you’re not human?”

“Hmm... It is true that in terms of race, I would not fall under the category of mankind, but there is no reason it should not be possible, given that I am flesh and blood and not an apparition.”

Dragonkin were fallen dragons that had become human—apparitional beings reborn as mortals. That required sufficient power to reincarnate as well as a strong will on the verge of death...but it made their circumstances similar to those of elves.

Elves were considered a part of mankind because they were recognized as such by the world at large, but that was the only difference between them and

dragonkin. And since elves could bear children with humans, there should have been no problem.

“The one problem is that it shall be approximately five centuries until I am mature and can bear children...but knowing you, we shall find a way.”

“No, we will not.”

Soma sighed in exasperation, but Hildegard was being serious.

He was little different from her in the sense that he had once been a higher being and had fallen to his present condition. His body was that of a human...but he could make up for that with willpower.

“Well, that doesn’t matter, since it won’t be possible... By the way, you said that you granted my wish.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Are you sure you really knew what my wish was?”

“Of course I am. You wanted to use magic.”

That was why she’d reincarnated him here—to a world as different as possible from the one in which he had previously been born, a world where magic still existed.

That statement was technically a bit misleading...but it was no big deal.

“Hmm... Well, it’s fine, I suppose. That would mean it’s a problem on my end that I can’t use magic.”

“You cannot...?”

“No, I can’t. That’s why I’m here.”

“Well, I heard that you wanted to go to the dungeon and took the opportunity to come with you, but I was unaware of the reason. However...”

Soma, not able to use magic?

That was impossible.

While Hildegard had been a god, she hadn’t been in charge of reincarnation; she hadn’t been able to interfere with the process much. All she’d done had

been to send him to this world—and one other thing.

But that second thing was giving him talent for magic. She'd promised to grant his wish, so that was an absolute.

Fortunately, magic in this world was based on physical talent, so she'd imparted that to his new body...

"I would like to take a 'look' at you."

"Do you mean the same thing you did during the entrance exam?"

"Yes, the same thing. I would like to check once more."

"Hmm... Well, I don't mind."

"Allow me, then."

Law of Harmony *Eye of the Dragon* Administrator of the World: Imitation / Omnipotence.

A massive amount of information flashed into her view, enough to entirely swallow the average person's consciousness, but she focused only on what she needed.

That was just one thing—Soma's current Skills.

Law of the Sword.

Sanctified Vessel.

God-Killer.

Dragon-Killer.

Draconic Blessing.

Absolute Severance.

Gift of Discernment.

Sword of Pandemonium.

Combat Ready.

Sense Presence (Special-Grade).

Negate Sneak Attack.

Fighting Spirit.

Warp.

Unrivaled Power.

Mental Stillness.

Steadfast Resolve.

Lightning Speed.

Limit Break.

Overdrive.

Original Style - Emulation - Iron-Cutting Sword.

Original Style - Emulation - Demon Slayer.

Original Style - Emulation - One Stroke, One Slice.

Original Style - Emulation - Supernatural Blade.

Original Style - Gale Slash.

Literary Master.

Great Blossoming.

Glint.

Brilliant Brandish.

Special Technique: Flash.

Final Gambit...

He had many Skills, both passive and active ones.

The list was no different from when she'd seen it before, and she found what she was looking for inside.

Sorcery (Special-Grade).

"Hmm..."

She grumbled, seeing it there in plain sight.

Puzzled, she watched Soma cut away a monster that suddenly appeared in her peripheral vision.

She didn’t understand what he meant when he said he couldn’t use it. Not only did he have the Skill, it was Special-Grade. He should have been able to use a spell or two even if he wasn’t doing it the right way. That was what made Special-Grade Skills exceptional.

It would have been another story if his Skill had been sealed, but she couldn’t imagine there was anyone who was capable of doing that, not even the gods of this world.

If anything could do that, it would be...

“Oh?”

That was when Hildegard spotted it as she skimmed the details.

It was in the description of his Sorcery Skill.

Sorcery (Special-Grade): Talent for sorcery. Magic acquisition boosted greatly. Spell activation boosted greatly. Mana expenditure reduced greatly. Growth bonus to intelligence and mana. Passive Skill. This Skill is disabled by the effect of a superior Skill.

“A superior Skill...?”

It clicked for her just then. On a hunch, she went to look at the description of Law of the Sword.

Authority granted by the god of swordsmanship. Swordsmanship ability acquisition boosted greatly. Sword techniques boosted greatly. Large power boost to equipped sword. Growth bonus to all abilities. Mental and physical interference disabled. Passive Skill...

“Oh, this must be why...”

Physical interference disabled.

That was why Soma’s Sorcery Skill wasn’t activating.

Hildegard had given it to him from the outside, so it had been deemed

physical interference and disabled.

What a development.

“I do not suppose you were told that you have no ability to learn Skills?”

“Yes, I was. What about it?”

“Why did you think nothing of that...?”

But it was no wonder that he would have been told that. A Skill Assessment wouldn’t pick up on all of these Skills.

It was impossible to imagine based on the name, but Skill Assessment was a type of clairvoyance; more specifically, it was a type of future sight. It deduced the target’s future Skills based on the future they were the most likely to have starting from the present moment, which was how it revealed all Skills that someone could learn and why it was unreliable at a very young age.

It was made more complicated by the fact that one could see a part of the Skill description, but that was just a bonus. The Skill user didn’t know such things; they only knew the results.

But that was exactly why it would have given people the wrong idea about Soma. Skill Assessment’s future sight was a type of mental and physical interference, so it would have been completely disabled for Soma.

Maybe they could have just barely seen Sanctified Vessel, but that didn’t mean anything. As was clear from its description, it was just a title with no effects. That would make it the only one that was possible to see without interference, but while it was proof that he had reached the realm of the gods, all it did was indicate that.

That would mean Soma’s abilities and apparent Skills were completely different... That had probably been a big issue for him and the people around him, especially in this kingdom.

But that aside, the question was whether to inform Soma of this.

She pondered it, watching Soma’s back as he proceeded forward without a care...then opened her mouth.

“Well, I have learned two things. One is that you indeed have multiple Skills—

of course you do, given how much you can do. However, one of those Skills makes it impossible to discover that fact with a Skill Assessment."

"Hmm... So they don't mean much in the end."

"I suppose they do not."

Hildegard could have told other people about Soma's skills, but it wouldn't have meant anything, given that she was the only one who could see them.

The Skills that were the bedrock of this kingdom were those which could be observed through Skill Assessments. Saying anything would either get her labeled as a liar or cause unnecessary confusion.

"Well, I am only telling you what I now know. It is your decision what to do about it. I am willing to testify on your behalf if it is necessary."

"I don't have any problem with it as of now, so I don't intend to do anything in particular. What was the second thing?"

"Well, it was the fact that you really cannot use magic...and that it may be my fault."

"That was two things."

"They related to the same thing. Pay it no mind."

"Okay, then... But what do you mean that it may be your fault?"

"Yes, about that..."

There was no way to know how strong Soma's natural talent for magic would have been without her influence. But if he would have had the ability to learn it, even at a Low-Grade level...then all Hildegard had done was to interfere with his wish.

She was a bit afraid to tell him that, but she couldn't just stay quiet. So she made it clear despite her hesitation.

"Hmm, I see... It wouldn't change a thing about my life up until now, right? So it's not a problem."

"W-Well, I would consider it a problem..."

"I knew from the beginning that I couldn't use magic. If anything, it's a step

forward now that I know the reason why. I can keep that in mind as I go forward and try new things. That means you don't have to worry about it. Reincarnating me in this world was enough."

Soma had had his back to her for some time, so she couldn't see his face as he said that.

But his voice was no different than it had been up to this point, at least not as far as she could detect.

Hildegard sighed in relief, a slight smile coming to her face.

"I see... So you are willing to procreate!"

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Well, what you said just now was clearly genuine, and it was considerate of me! Hence, procreation!"

"This is getting absurd in multiple ways... At least wait until you're physically capable of that."

"Ugh... I suppose you are right."

She cursed her dragonkin body under her breath...but her smile remained.

Hildegard followed behind Soma, and the two headed deeper into the dungeon together.

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Soma took a deep breath of fresh air as he walked under the blue sky.

It hadn't felt especially hard to breathe while he was walking, but perhaps he had only been able to stand it because he hadn't been paying attention—so he thought as he exhaled and proceeded forward.

The dungeon exam had come to an end shortly before.

It had only taken him about an hour to get to the tenth floor, since there hadn't been any monsters that had been difficult to fight.

Naturally, he had passed. Now he was on his way home—or really, just on a walk.

Since he was already in the vicinity of the practice areas, he was heading toward one of those.

He had never before visited after school, and he would have been lying if he'd said his sudden desire to visit today had nothing to do with his conversation with Hildegard.

It was true that some thoughts had gone through his mind when she'd told him that she was the reason he couldn't use magic. But at the same time, he had been honest when he told her that he didn't mind. His feelings of gratitude were far stronger.

Soma wouldn't have had any regrets if it had all been over then, in his past life. Yet she had not only reincarnated him but given him an opportunity. He couldn't jinx it by complaining.

"But, wait...perhaps I've already jinxed it."

Hildegard had apparently been an actual god in her past life. In a sense, it was predictable that Soma would have incurred bad karma for killing her.

And the result of that karma was that he couldn't use magic.

"Well, she would be mad if I said that to her."

She would surely tell him that wasn't possible, and regardless, he didn't genuinely believe it was karma. Not to mention that saying so would have been an insult to Hildegard.

But jokes aside...Soma genuinely thought this may have been for the best.

In itself, it certainly would have been fun if he had been able to use magic without working for it. But at the same time, he thought he would have felt dissatisfied.

It was his dream, so he wanted to do whatever it took to obtain magic.

There were some things that you only gained after grieving, despairing, being brought to your knees, and reaching out despite it all.

Like he had struggled and struggled in his past life, then had finally been fulfilled in the very end.

"Oh... I made it."

In the time he had been thinking to himself, he'd reached his destination.

What he saw before him was a completely ordinary training area, no different from the ones around it.

"All right..."

He didn't need permission to enter the training area, so he went straight in.

Right away, the scene filled his eyes. The first thing he heard was a boom. He saw an explosion out of the corner of his eye, probably from a practice spell, but nobody seemed to pay it any mind. They just kept talking or continued their magic experiments as if it was an everyday occurrence.

The students were separated into clumps of several people, each doing what they wanted to do... It was a somehow familiar scene.

As he smiled at the almost nostalgic atmosphere, he heard someone call out to him.

"Soma? Funny seeing you here... It's your first time, right?"

He turned to look and saw exactly the person he'd thought he would—Aina. She'd apparently been near the entrance.

“I just happened to be in the mood to come here, so I don’t have any particular errand. Is this what you always do here?”

“Yeah, I come to study and practice...mainly to practice, though.”

Aina glanced behind her as she spoke, prompting Soma to look in the same direction.

There was a girl there. Her face was vaguely familiar—probably someone in their grade.

He wasn’t confident about that. In fact, he hardly remembered anyone in his grade apart from Aina and Sylvia. He had been so focused on his own efforts that he hadn’t had time to pay attention to his surroundings.

But Aina seemed to be different in that regard—at least, based on her demeanor, she practiced with that girl.

It honestly came as a surprise.

“I knew that you were practicing...but I assumed you did it alone. It seems that’s not the case.”

“What kind of person do you think I am...?! I have friends, you know!”

Should he point out that he only saw that one girl? No, then Aina would turn it back on him. Better to keep that remark to himself.

Just then...

“Hey... What’re you doing here, huh?!”

Soma turned to look in the direction of the voice and saw a boy. There was something akin to hostility in his red-tinged blue eyes, and he was glaring directly at Soma.

But Soma just returned a puzzled look. This boy certainly seemed familiar...

“Excuse me, but who are you again?”

“What, you wanna fight?!”

“Uh, this one’s definitely on you, Soma...”

“Hmm...”

He had thought the boy might be in their grade, and based on the way Aina was acting, he seemed to be correct.

But it still wasn't clicking. He couldn't place if or where he'd seen the other boy.

Well, he'd probably seen him, but he genuinely had no memory of him.

"So I'm not good enough for you to notice, huh? Tch... Just wait and see!"

With that, the boy departed.

Soma was once again left puzzled, not understanding what the boy had come to do or what he was talking about.

"What was that all about, I wonder?"

"Knowing you, you're probably being serious right now...but I have to sympathize with him."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember when we all went one-on-one with the teacher in the first swordsmanship lesson?"

"Oh, I remember that."

It hadn't even been a month, but he felt oddly nostalgic for that time. That was just how much he had been doing every day.

Incidentally, Aina knew about that episode because she had also chosen to study swordsmanship.

"What about it?"

"Remember that kid who was really confident about going first?"

"Hmm... It rings a bell, but I can't quite recall..."

"You should at least remember *that* much... Well, that was him."

"And how does that relate to what he said just now?"

"This is just what I heard, so I can't be sure, but apparently he was pretty confident in his swordsmanship. He was even bragging that he could beat an instructor. And I bet he actually could have if we'd had a normal instructor..."

“Hmm...”

Even instructors at the Royal Academy didn’t tend to have high Skill Grades. That was separate from their ability to teach. Thus, it was possible that a student might simply be more capable than a given instructor.

“But he got taken down instantly...which would have been fine, since everyone else did too, but then you defeated her, so it’s been bothering him. Especially since the same kind of thing happened at the entrance ceremony.”

“I don’t particularly enjoy attracting interest from other boys.”

“Now look here...” Aina sighed in exasperation.

Soma shrugged. He was kidding, of course, but it was true that he didn’t want the attention. Regardless of how he may have felt in his past life, he wanted to focus all of his attention on magic right now.

It shouldn’t be a problem as long as the attention remained one-sided, but...

“Well, he wants to get good enough at the sword to challenge you, so I doubt he’ll go out of his way to mess with you. I’m pretty sure he’s from *that* Hofmannsthal family, so he’s probably good about that sort of thing.”

“Hmm... May I ask you a question?”

“I have a feeling I won’t like it, but I’ll bite... What is it?”

“What Hofmannsthal family do you mean by *that* Hofmannsthal family? I haven’t heard of any before, in fact.”

Aina sighed even louder than before and gave Soma a disdainful look, but he wasn’t kidding this time. Seeming to understand that, she sighed for a third time.

“Are you sure you’re from this kingdom? They may not be as important as your parents, but they were one of the most influential families in the founding of this kingdom. People call them nobles among nobles.”

“Hmm... Yet I don’t recall the name coming up in history class.”

“That’s your standard...? The only names that are in history books right now are those of your parents and the king. But if what I heard is right, then the

Hofmannsthal family will be in history books soon enough... They just got famous too recently to be in them already."

"So they're that important..."

"Yeah, they are. How did you not know when even I do...? Well, I guess it is like you. Anyway, since he's from that kind of family, I doubt he'll be too unreasonable. This was the first time he said anything to your face, right? It's not like he's come at you in swordsmanship class?"

"That's right, now that I think about it... I suppose it won't be a problem, then."

"I think it just happened because you came here even though you don't usually. Most of the time, he just swings his sword quietly like he's doing now... He sticks out, since he practices alone, unlike the rest of us."

"Hmm..."

Soma turned to look. Indeed, the boy was now some distance away, swinging a sword by himself.

His form was solid, which made sense given his confidence. But there was one thing that Soma was stuck on: he'd thought the other boy was also in the sorcery concentration.

"Given that he's a student of sorcery, is it okay for him to be here working on his swordsmanship?"

"Well, they leave that kind of thing up to the students, so I think it's fine. I guess it shows how frustrated he is... Also, I think he may have decided to study sorcery because he was already good enough with a sword."

"Ah... That sounds plausible."

Especially so in a world where Skills existed—it made learning fast, and you knew what your limits were. It was logical to reach for another method and aim higher.

If anything, it was commendable that, when shown his limits, the boy not only hadn't broken but had stood up to try again.

"But, speaking of which...can't he go to another training area if he wants to

practice with the sword? Then there would be no need to practice alone in silence. And even if he did, he would have other people around him to set examples, so I see no reason not to."

"I wonder about that too... I think he must have some reason."

"Um... Uh..."

"Yeah?"

The timid voice belonged to the girl who seemed to be Aina's friend. She opened and closed her mouth like she had something to say, but no words came out.

"What is it, Helen?"

"Um... So... You wanted to know why he's here... I-I think it's because he's in the sorcery concentration..."

"Hmm... Is there a rule that you have to use this training area if you're in the concentration, whether you're practicing magic or not?"

"Yeah... I-I think so."

"Yeah, but all they told us was to make sure we use this area... Pretty inflexible."

If that was the case, Soma could understand the boy practicing here. He dipped his head to the girl called Helen.

"Thank you for letting me know."

"No, it's, it's no big deal..."

"But it was helpful."

"Yeah, thanks, Helen."

"A-Aah..."

Apparently not used to being thanked, she shrank back and flushed red in a way befitting her age.



Since everyone else around was either an adult or mature for their age, it was kind of refreshing to see.

“So, I understand that you’re friends with Aina. Is that true?”

“Huh...? Yeah... I’m, I’m friends with Aina... Why?”

“Are you all right? Is she forcing you to say that? If so, you can tell me and I’ll take care of it.”

“Hey...! Why are you giving her the wrong idea?! And what kind of person do you think I am?!”

“Ha, ha ha... No, I’m okay... I’m, I’m really friends with Aina.”

“Ah, what a nice girl... That makes me concerned for you in a different way. Is anything bothering you? Aina can be eccentric at times, so be honest with her about it, all right?”

“Look at yourself before you call *me* eccentric!”

As he and Aina bantered back and forth, Soma regarded Helen with slightly narrowed eyes.

It wasn’t that he was suspicious of her. He’d just had the thought that this timid-seeming girl might be more than that.

While Soma had been kidding about Aina, what he’d said was also genuinely true: her talent was real and stood out, as evidenced by her original tracking spell. No average mage would be able to keep up with her.

And Aina was aware of that herself. That meant that whomever she chose to practice with must have had talent to match.

Soma was jealous, naturally. But nothing would come of saying so. The best he could do was to draw inspiration from her displays of that talent.

So Soma thought with a wry smile on his face as he watched the girl shyly size him up.

21

Finally.

This unproductive time could finally come to an end.

It wasn't technically over yet, and he had some misgivings, but now that he had reached this point, all that was left to do was to let it play out.

He'd done all he could. If it didn't work out, then he wouldn't be able to stop it. He would just have to come up with another plan.

It could have been because of his newly emboldened attitude, but the incessant chatter that surrounded him now seemed a little more tolerable than usual.

"Well, it's probably in my head..." he muttered without opening his mouth so that nobody heard him as he looked over.

Finally, he whispered once more, a slight smile appearing on his face as he thought of what was to come.

†

Many students were gathered in the corner of the training area.

There really were a lot—it was the most that Soma had seen in one place since the entrance ceremony.

But that was to be expected.

All of the first years at the Royal Academy were gathered here right now.

It was the day for dungeon exploration.

"There really are a lot of people."

"Well, there have to be," replied Aina.

"Yeah... It's, it's important to see each other's faces."

As he talked with Aina and Helen, who seemed to have warmed up to him a bit now that he had started showing up to the training area more often, Soma

looked around. He didn't know most of the people here, of course, but it was interesting to see all the variety at a glance. He was intrigued to think about who he might go into the dungeon with.

That was because all the students in a given grade took part in dungeon explorations together. The reason for this arrangement was simple: if only students in the same concentration went in together, they would effectively have been asking to be killed—sorcery students especially. A party of only backliners couldn't explore effectively, and the same could be said of a party with just frontliners. Thus, to solve that issue, the instructors assembled the whole grade.

"They all seem fired up."

"Well, the instructors said we can take the rest of the day to form parties, but it's first come, first served. Of course everyone wants to hurry."

"Yeah... The, the faster they make parties, the sooner they can enter the dungeon."

Even as they spoke, a battle was raging over which students would join which party.

Yes, class had actually started already, and the students were currently forming parties to enter the dungeon.

But Soma wasn't in a rush, because he wouldn't mind if nobody joined his group.

It wasn't that he didn't want to take part in the exploration.

So the reason he didn't mind if he didn't form a group...

"Um... Aren't you going to, to invite anyone? I think people are waiting for you to..."

"Well, they said a party should be four minimum and six maximum. Since we already have three people here, there's no need to rush."

"Three? Um, do you mean..."

"And here's our fourth."

“Mm-hmm.” Sierra nodded as she arrived.

They hadn’t been waiting for her, exactly, but they’d figured that she would come, since they knew each other. It was the obvious way to think..

Now they had two frontliners and two backliners—a balanced team.

And then...

“I can be number five!”

“All right, get back to work.”

Soma had known Lina was behind Sierra. Since an entire grade of students was gathered here, there were quite a few instructors as well, and Lina was among them.

And having predicted what she would say, he turned her down as soon as she opened her mouth.

“Why?!”

“Because you’re a teacher, obviously?” Aina retorted.

“Mm-hmm.”

Lina seemed astounded when the other two girls made that observation, but it was an obvious fact. Soma sighed, disappointed in his sister.

That aside—

“So, what did you come over to do?”

“Oh, right!”

She reverted to normal as soon as he said that, so she had probably been kidding around before.

But no...she must have been half serious; at least, he had the feeling she would have come along if he’d agreed.

“So, you want to form a party together, right?”

“Well, we know each other best.”

“I understand, but I’ve been told to separate you three.”

“Huh...?”

“Why?”

“I thought there were no restrictions on party composition.”

It was supposed to be completely up to the students’ discretion; the faculty would allow even a party of six backliners. The students had been told as much at the beginning.

So why couldn’t Soma, Aina, and Sierra form a party?

“’Cause it wouldn’t be much of a training session with you three together, obviously.” Camilla appeared with those words.

Soma had known that Camilla was here along with Lina, but...

“Oh, you came too?” Lina asked.

“I took a look around, but I haven’t spotted any trouble yet. And since I made the decision, I should be the one to explain.”

“What do you mean, you made the decision?”

“Technically I just suggested it, but since they accepted the suggestion, I basically made the decision. And I just told you why I suggested it. I’ll hear you out if you have any counterarguments, but I doubt you can deny it.”

“Yeah... I guess I can’t.”

“Mm-hmm. You’re right.”

It was certainly impossible to argue. After all, Soma had made it all the way to the tenth floor by himself. And considering the monsters that had appeared in the dungeon, Aina and Sierra could probably have done the same thing. Since Soma could have gone even farther, there was no telling how far they could go if the three of them joined forces.

That was exactly why they had tried to form a group, of course, but it wasn’t the correct move for a class environment.

But there was one issue.

“Frankly, I question whether it will make for a good training session even if you do split us up. If anything, I think it could do even more extensive damage,

although I hate to put it that way."

"Yeah, well, we did consider that maybe grouping you together would make for fewer issues, and it probably would. But this is the Royal Academy. We can't just go against its philosophy."

"So we decided to split you three up and give each of you an assignment."

"An assignment?" Aina asked. "Wait, are you making this a different activity just for us?"

"What choice do we have? You need a different activity. And there's a precedent for this."

"There is...?"

"Our mother," Lina explained. "She and our father went to the same school...well, the one that was here before this one. And when they joined the same party, it didn't serve well as training, so the faculty did the same thing then."

"And I actually suggested it 'cause I heard about it from Sophia herself."

"Hmm... I see."

He had no choice but to accept this change of plans now that he'd been told that. He hadn't really objected in the first place; he'd just had doubts.

"So, what are the assignments?"

"Right, so, you and Sierra aren't allowed to team up with any other frontliners. Aina, you're not allowed to team up with other backliners."

"Oh... So I have to form a party with just frontliners apart from me, then?"

"And only backliners for me?"

"You got it. Same reason as before—if there were anyone else occupying the same role you do, you'd do all the work for them. They wouldn't get any practice."

"I understand why you'd place that restriction on the two of them, but I'm studying sorcery," Soma pointed out.

"Can't have a mage like you, can we?"

He wanted to accuse her of discrimination, but given that he couldn't actually use magic, he had no ground to stand on.

"Mm... Understood."

"Also, you can't step in too much. The others need to have learning experiences of their own. It's another story if you think they're in danger, but stay back by default. At the same time, apply yourself fully to your own role."

"That's a lot of things to do... But I guess I have no choice. I'll look on the bright side and be grateful that you're considering us."

"Mm-hmm... I'll go, then."

"Yeah, I'd better go find my three frontliners, since I'm starting late."

With that, Aina and Sierra jumped into action.

The other students may have been waiting for that, though, since people immediately gathered around them. It didn't seem like Soma had to worry about them being left out.

Maybe he should have worried about himself instead.

"I suppose I should look as well...but it might take a bit for Sierra to finish. Who else is open...?"

"Why is nobody approaching you, anyway? I would think people would want to join my brother before anyone else!"

"Well, everyone knows that those two have Special-Grade Skills, but people don't really know about Soma. They must know from the entrance ceremony that you're strong...but maybe you're so strong that they don't think it'd be a good learning experience."

"Mmh... I can't agree with that."

"Whether you agree or not, I have to find a party. So, Helen, and can you think of anyone else?"

"Huh? Me...?"

A blank look appeared on her face before she glanced around, but she was the only person named Helen whom Soma knew.

He didn’t know why she seemed so mystified, anyway.

“I thought that you must intend to join up with me, since you stayed here. Am I wrong?”

“I-I just waited too long to seek out a party... And I’d only get in your way...”

“If I said that you would get in the way, I would have nobody else to be in a group with.”

From what he had heard, Helen had High-Grade Sorcery—the highest in the academy other than Aina. He couldn’t call someone like her a nuisance.

“And I intended to join up with you from the very beginning.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right... Um, are, are you sure?”

“I should be the one asking, if anything. Please join my party.”

“Oh... Okay... Um, glad to have you...”

“Mmh, I’m jealous...”

“Come on, we gotta get back to work. I have a feeling two things are about to cause some trouble.”

Camilla and Lina went over to where two students were having a stare down, leaving Soma and Helen alone together.

Now what should he do...

“So, back to my previous question. Do you have any ideas about who else we should invite to join us?”

“Um... I don’t know if I’d call it an idea... But, um... I-I think someone’s been watching you...”

“Ah... Yes, I noticed that. Well, I don’t mind.”

As he spoke, Soma turned around and met the eyes of the one who had been looking...no, glaring at him.

The boy’s shoulders jumped, but he held his gaze steady.

Since Soma had noticed him looking and had been wondering what to do, this was the perfect opportunity.

“Hmm, so... What was your name again?”

“Lars Hofmannsthal! Remember my name, dang it!”

“Well, this is the first time I’ve asked you to repeat it.”

Soma had seen Lars in the training area a number of times, and he’d noticed the other boy glaring at him. This was the first time he’d asked for his name, though.

“Tch... What do you want?”

“I’d like to form a party.”

“Huh, you want me? What to do... Someone else asked me already, so depends how you—”

“Oh, it’s all right if you already promised to join someone else. You can—”

“Fine, if you insist! I’ll join!”

Lars apparently had a troublesome personality, but that made him easy to understand in a sense. And although his manner of speech was rough, he didn’t seem to be malicious, so it wouldn’t be a problem.

“All right. Glad to have you.”

“Glad, glad to have you...?”

“Tch, here goes nothing!”

In contrast to his words, Lars had a smile on his face, but Soma deliberately ignored it.

That meant they had to find one more person...

“It looks like the groups are already settling. There are a couple places where people still seem to be deciding, but I think we should leave them be.”

“Yeah... There are a lot of people in three or four places... But most people are in groups already, I think...”

“What, we can’t have another frontliner?”

“Did you hear what we were talking about before? I was told not to pair up with another frontliner. That’s why I asked you. You’re a mage who can also

handle the front line.”

“Hmph, I see how it is... You’d better be thankful I wasn’t in a party already!”

“Yes, I am grateful for that, actually.”

“Tch...!”

Disregarding the boy—Lars—who was clicking his tongue and turning his head away...on to the next thing.

As Helen had said, there were a number of groups of three, but none of them seemed to be all backliners. It was easy to ascertain what roles they would be playing, since they were all equipped to enter the dungeon.

So what should Soma do? He was wondering whether he should just wait for the dispute to be resolved and then invite someone...when Lars spoke up.

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Looks like there’s someone left over... Works out well, huh?”

“Huh...? Wh-Where...?”

“Over there. There’s a kid just standing around.”

“Oh, there, there is... But I think she’s...”

“Hmm...”

Soma turned to look where Lars was pointing. There certainly was a girl standing there as if she had nowhere to go.

And she was definitely a backliner.

He had a simple reason for being so sure.

She was a classmate...no, an acquaintance.

“I see. This does work out well.”

“Right?”

“Um...”

“Yes? Are you against it, Helen?”

“I’m, I’m not, but... Well... No, I agree...”

“Good, then. Let’s ask her.”

Soma made his way toward the girl—Sylvia Heydrich Ladius, the princess of their kingdom.

22

“On that note, I would like you to join our party.”

“Huh...?”

Someone called to Sylvia out of nowhere. Nobody had been talking to her about anything, so she had no idea what “on that note” was supposed to mean.

As she blinked, stunned, the familiar boy gave her a puzzled look.

“Hmm...? Ah, I see where I went wrong. Aina isn’t here. She would usually have a snappy retort for me. I suppose the responsibility will have to fall to you, Helen.”

“Wait... What, what responsibility?”

“You can’t expect her to do that, dude.”

The other two people were also familiar, but even so...no, that was why it didn’t make sense.

Though it was sudden and she didn’t understand what he meant, she was pretty sure they had come to invite her to join their party.

But that was impossible. It wasn’t that she was looking at things pessimistically—it was simply a fact that not one person had started a conversation with Sylvia until just now.

That wasn’t because they didn’t like her...at least, she didn’t think it was. Under other circumstances, someone would usually come up and talk to her. She would’ve had to have a pretty twisted mind to assume those people were only pretending to be her friends.

So why were these three striking up a conversation now? It was because it was time to go into the dungeons to practice.

Although it was practice...no, *because* it was practice, unpredictable accidents could easily occur. People died each year, if only one or two.

Of course, everyone here today accepted that risk. Sylvia was no exception.

But that also meant they were only prepared to expose themselves to danger; no one of them could shoulder the risk borne by any of the others, especially not members of the royal family.

And Sylvia couldn't fault them for that. She might be on the fringes of the family, but she was still royalty. They couldn't allow or cause something to happen to her. If something were to happen to Sylvia, God forbid, the other party members would be in hot water.

While Sylvia didn't think her family would punish the other students, nobody in Ladius would dare to take that risk. That was why no one had approached her to talk, and Sylvia hadn't said anything to anyone either.

So of course nobody would invite her...

"Well, jokes aside, this is an invitation to join our party. What do you think? If you would rather not, or if you already have a party—"

"No, I don't mind, and I don't already have one! ...Oh..."

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she realized she'd done it.

It was true that she didn't mind joining them—in fact, she wanted to.

Soma had invited her, after all. That meant he intended to put effort into this class, even though he was still reading during their other classes.

He might have been paying attention simply because this was a hands-on class and not a lecture, but regardless, she wasn't about to object to the prospect of learning alongside Soma. It might give her the chance to see something like she'd seen at the entrance exam, or during the fight at the entrance ceremony.

So of course she didn't mind, but...

"Now that we have four, we can head into the dungeon and begin."

"Not gonna look for two more?"

"Yeah, I-I mean, Soma, I know you're strong, but..."

The three had apparently already decided that Sylvia was in, so...she had no choice.

As she resolved to just do her best not to get in their way, a slight smile came to Sylvia's face.

†

"Um... Well, glad to be on your team!"

"Yes, glad to have you."

"Yup."

"Yeah... Good to, good to have you."

When Soma had first spoken to Sylvia, she'd seemed pensive, but she'd apparently shaken it off.

He had an idea of what she had been thinking about, but rather than bring it up. he returned her cheerful greeting and continued the conversation.

"So, what are we going to do? I think that we should take the opportunity to look inside the dungeon."

"Well, about that—are you sure we should go with just the four of us? I mean, I know you're really good, Soma, but still..."

"Yeah, you think so too, huh? Are we really gonna be all right?"

"Oh? If you're asking that, does that mean that you aren't confident in your abilities?"

"So you are picking a fight...?! Of course I'm confident!"

"Um... To be, to be honest...I'm not, really..."

"I can't say either way... I'm fairly confident, but I've never been in the dungeon, so that makes me nervous, I guess."

"So two for, one against, and one abstain."

That would pass by majority vote...but he couldn't decide that way.

They were going into the dungeon. Even if the others couldn't help being anxious, forcing them to follow him against their will would only increase the risk of accidents. That went for Helen, of course, but also for Sylvia in a slightly different way.

He wished he had a magic word that would put them at ease, but sadly, there was no such thing.

That being the case...

“Well, I won’t force anyone, but I would like for the four of us to try going into the dungeon. If there comes a point when you don’t think you can go any farther, we can turn back and find more party members then.”

Typically, the party roster they decided on today would remain the same, but it wasn’t totally unchangeable. Sometimes, once a party actually tried working together, they discovered they couldn’t do it, and sometimes a member had to withdraw due to injury, so it was possible to change party composition to an extent as long as one secured the consent of all involved.

Incidentally, there was no required party size. The students had been told that four to six would be best, but they could have as many as ten or as few as one. Part of the purpose of the exercise was to hone their decision-making in practice, after all.

“At this point, though, I figure anyone else we get is gonna be a leftover. Wouldn’t make much of a difference.”

“Well, we won’t know until we’re inside, so...we can give it a try, I guess!”

“Um... Yeah, you’re right... But... You, you really won’t make us do anything we don’t want to?”

“I promise. Also, I’ve already made it as far as the tenth floor on my own, so I believe I can at least give you three a chance to escape if anything goes wrong.”

“Wha... You’ve been in the dungeon before?! I thought you have to be at least a middle schooler!”

“Apparently, they will make exceptions. That’s just what they told me, but I imagine that if you ask, they will tell you as well, so I won’t say any more on the subject.”

“Tch...”

Now that he had everyone’s assent, he started toward the dungeon.

Since they’d been given as much time for the dungeon exploration as they

would usually have spent on a whole day's classes, they would be able to make a thorough search of the first floor.

But first, they were going over to see the instructors.

It wouldn't have been a good idea to enter the dungeon without telling them, and as previously touched on, elementary schoolers like Soma would have a guide for safety's sake.

The instructors were scattered around near the building that contained the dungeon. Since there were no other classes taking place at the moment, almost all of the first grade instructors were present, but they were mostly occupied. Only two groups of students looked like they were going to be any real trouble, but between their questions and small spats, the instructors had a lot to take care of...which made sense, considering that everyone had been rounded up here for that reason.

But just as Soma was thinking it might not be possible to enter the dungeon right away, he spotted an opening. He exhaled as he watched a group of three walk in that direction after having their question answered.

They had been speaking to the instructor Soma was most familiar with—Carine. Not willing to pass up this chance, he exchanged looks with the other three and went up to talk to her.

"Ms. Carine, do you have a moment?"

"Yes? Oh, Soma! What is it? I don't get the feeling that you have a question..."

"No, in fact, we're thinking about going into the dungeon now."

"You are? Then you're the first!"

"We are? I thought other students would already be inside, since there were groups that formed before ours."

"Usually there would be, but everyone is being careful this year."

"Careful? More like scared. Man, none of these kids have guts..."

"But... It, it makes sense..."

"Oh, but personally, I think that you four have the right idea! Talking it over is

important, but there's no better way to learn than by doing it yourself. Especially in moments like these, when you know it's dangerous but you also know that chances are you'll be just fine."

"Oh... Okay..."

Helen had still looked anxious, but Carine's words seemed to put her at ease. Watching some of the tension leave her body, Soma exhaled.

He turned back to give Carine a look of gratitude. She smiled softly.

"So, you're ready to go into the dungeon, then? All right, let me see... There he is. Kurt, it's your turn!"

"All right."

A boy in the back responded to Carine's call.

There were other boys and girls next to him, but they didn't look like instructors.

Which made sense, since they weren't.

"Hi, I'm Kurt. I'm in my third year of middle school, and I'm studying spearmanship. Nice to meet you."

They were students, just like the members of Soma's party; however, they were middle-school third years as well as honor students. They were here to serve as guides, and apparently this boy named Kurt would be guiding Soma's party today.

"Indeed, nice to meet you."

"Sure, nice to meet you..."

"Nice to meet you...?"

"Nice... Nice to meet you..."

But the other three members of Soma's party seemed unconvinced as they greeted Kurt, probably because he didn't look like a middle schooler. Of the four of them, only Lars was taller than average, and Kurt was about the same height as the other three. He wouldn't have looked out of place in their grade.

Soma, though, had no doubts. It was Kurt's attitude: his composure made it

easy to believe that he was in a higher grade.

If anything, he seemed *too* composed...but such things happened sometimes.

Kurt didn't seem angry at their impoliteness, though, probably because he understood the reason for it. He just wore a subtle wry smile.

While they were uncommon, there were people like Camilla who were short despite being older than them. Kurt must simply have been one of those people.

Soma wasn't about to ask about it right after meeting him, though.

In any case...

"Let's make our way in, then."

Once the other four nodded in agreement, Soma's party headed directly into the dungeon.

23

Hofmannsthal was a rather well-known name in the Kingdom of Ladius.

They were influential figures in the kingdom, having played a part in the effort to subjugate the Dark Lord, albeit only a small one.

That was because when the kingdom had first declared its independence from the Kingdom of Veritas, the former Count Hofmannsthal and his family had been the first to support the revolt. It was thanks to them that other nobles had followed suit.

And that wasn't the only role the Hofmannsthals had played. They had fought on the front lines, just as many of the other major players had. The sight had made a lasting impact both inside and outside the kingdom, and everyone said it was thanks to the Hofmannsthals that the process of founding the new kingdom had been relatively smooth.

And that was true, in a sense. It was thanks to the Hofmannsthals that the court rank stuff had gone smoothly.

But although many nobles had taken part in the revolution, only the Neumonds had been dukes beforehand. The other individuals who were now dukes of Ladius hadn't even been nobles before, let alone dukes. They had been granted the rank based solely on their contributions during the revolution.

That measure invited opposition, of course—mostly from the nobles who had cooperated in the revolution.

A majority of those nobles had only joined the revolution after the tide turned in its favor, hoping to score higher ranks out of their defections. They had refused to accept the decision to make commoners dukes, since it benefited them little.

But their plot had met its downfall with one statement from the head of the Hofmannsthal family.

It was clear to everyone that the Hofmannsthals had contributed more than any other noble family, and yet he had told them...

He didn’t mind keeping the same rank.

In fact, he wouldn’t have minded being demoted, or even losing his rank altogether.

The royal family couldn’t do that to him, of course, but it was what he wanted. To comply with his wish, they convinced him to at least remain a count. After that, the other nobles could say no more.

Because of those factors, the Hofmannsthal family was widely known and well regarded.

However...

Lars knew the truth.

It was all an overestimation.

They had done everything for a single simple reason.

They’d been the first to offer their help because that way they could fight the longest.

They’d fought on the side of the revolution so they could participate in the most dangerous battles, and they’d fought on the front lines simply because they’d wanted to fight.

It was the same with their rank. If they had gotten a higher rank, it would have been even more difficult for them to take on fights as they wished. They would have preferred to lose their rank, if anything.

When it all came down to it, they were just obsessed with fighting.

Contrary to word on the street, they weren’t “nobles among nobles.” The people in their domain only lived better lives now because their lives had been so awful in the first place, and because of the Hofmannsthals’ capable underlings.

The Hofmannsthals’ first son, Lars, knew that better than he would have liked.

That wasn’t to say that Lars hated his parents. If anything, he respected them, so much so that he felt almost frustrated when he heard those stories. Hearing the things people said about his family just felt wrong.

And Lars himself was rather a fighting enthusiast. That was why he'd enrolled in the Royal Academy: to get stronger and to fight stronger opponents.

That was all.

So frankly, he'd been deeply disappointed when he'd first shown up for swordsmanship class and seen the instructor. That was partially because she appeared to be a girl around his same age, but mostly because he hadn't sensed any strength in her at all.

Having sparred with his parents nearly every day, Lars had a sense for an opponent's approximate power level. It wasn't precise, but he could at least tell whether they were stronger or weaker than him.

And that sense had told him that this girl had no strength at all.

He knew that strength was separate from ability to teach, and since she was an instructor at the Royal Academy, she must have been more than adequate, but he still hadn't been able to hide his disappointment.

So he'd figured he would take the opportunity to display his strength to the instructor and the other students—but then, when he'd gone up against her, he'd found himself down before he knew what hit him.

As he watched the same happen to the other students, Lars had finally remembered.

His parents had once told him that the truly powerful were so strong that you couldn't even sense it.

He'd just forgotten because he'd never met someone like that.

No...maybe he had, and he hadn't noticed.

He'd known at first glance that Camilla, the instructor whom he'd met at the entrance ceremony, was overwhelmingly strong, even stronger than his parents.

If this girl was even stronger than that, then just how powerful was she?

As he wondered to himself, each of the other students had been knocked down in turn until only one was left...

And that was when Lars saw that scene.

“Tch—”

As he recalled the memory from two months prior, Lars clicked his tongue and swung his right arm at the goblin in front of him.

Swordsmanship (Middle-Grade) / Imitation: Mind’s Eye: Sweep.

He felt a definite resistance in his arm but tsked when he saw that the cut was too shallow.

That wouldn’t usually have happened. Maybe that was a measure of just how nervous he was.

Scolding himself internally for only having mustered such a pathetic display after such bold words, he took his arm—

“Lars!”

He instantly jumped back. In the next moment, something passed through the space where his head had just been.

Breaking into a cold sweat, he looked at the ground where the object had landed. It was an arrow.

He wouldn’t have gotten away unscathed if he’d followed through with his attack.

But this was another mistake he wouldn’t usually have made. Their surroundings were dim, yes, but he could see—and yet this had happened.

Irritated with himself for having gotten tunnel vision, he stepped forward once again and swung his arm down.

Swordsmanship (Middle-Grade) / Imitation: Mind’s Eye: Overhead Slash.

As he made sure the hideous body was sliced apart, he let out a large breath. Then, after a slight hesitation, he raised his voice to the person behind him.

“Tch... Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He gritted his teeth at that response. He could only see a little of the other boy’s face, but the tone was enough that he could make out the expression on it.

Just this one thing was enough to tell Lars how inexperienced he really was.

“Darn it...”

He’d thought he was already aware that he lacked experience. But he hadn’t truly understood it.

He was good enough at the sword already, so he’d study magic next?

This was enough to make him want to punch his past self for having been so convinced of that.

But no...it was because of that thought that he was here now.

If he’d continued on the path of the sword, he wouldn’t have met this other kid.

So considering that, maybe he should have thanked his past self.

“Tch...”

He clicked his tongue again as that thought occurred to him.

It was all he could think about lately, but he couldn’t help it.

And even still, he wasn’t about to give up.

As he maintained awareness of the person behind him, he tightened his face, tensed his legs, and took aim at the goblin archer.

In order to get the slightest bit closer to that which he had seen and admired so much...

He kicked off the ground at full power.

†

Kurt squinted slightly at the scene unfolding before him.

He then exhaled, impressed, and nodded as he idly fiddled with his spear, which he’d taken out just in case.

He wouldn’t have to step in this time, it seemed.

At the same time, he thought it was admirable. This boy was standing at such an angle as to protect the two girls while also maintaining a natural wariness of his surroundings.

That was admirable, as was the warning he’d called out to the other boy earlier. It would have been bad if he had been late in calling out, of course, but also if he had been a moment too early.

The other boy clearly hadn’t noticed the goblin archer’s incoming attack, but if he’d noticed too soon, he would likely have done something unnecessary and put himself in greater danger. That moment, when the goblin was approaching, had been the only moment in which he could jump back instantly.

That meant this boy was considering not only the enemies’ attacks but his allies. Splendid observation skills.

Apparently he had also been the one to suggest going into the dungeon with this party...and he’d probably known when he’d done so that this kind of thing might happen.

After all, while they had been told that a party of four to six was ideal, four was the best number in this situation. Six would have been unsuitable, in fact.

It was another story if a party was used to the dungeon and knew how to comport themselves inside. If that were the case here, then six would have been suitable.

But according to what Kurt had heard, although these kids were in the same concentration, they weren’t all equally familiar with the dungeon. The only one who had been here before was this boy—Soma.

A party of six people who didn’t know the dungeon or each other would hardly have been able to function as a party at all. It would have been preferable even for one person to enter the dungeon alone.

But four would work. It was a balanced party, with two frontliners and two backliners, and they could act without getting in each other’s way.

That was why four was the best number in this situation.

Soma probably could have made it work with six, but he was avoiding unnecessary risks.

In fact, although the other three moved stiffly, they were nevertheless able to manage because they were still on the first level.

The earlier battle, against two goblins and three goblin archers, hadn't been good in terms of numbers, but Soma had managed it by giving precise instructions as soon as he could.

Lars had held off two goblins while Helen and the others had taken out two of the goblin archers, and then he had launched a counterattack.

After defeating the first goblin, Lars had left himself open to attack, but Soma had averted that potential disaster as well by being observant.

Soma could have handled it faster if he had shifted to the front of the party, but he was probably deliberately letting the others get some experience, and that was the best course of action, considering that this was their first day and the first floor.

The three wouldn't have struggled too much with these occasional movements and attacks in the first place, so it was the right course of action to let them get used to things like this.

But now Kurt was more curious about Soma's ability...

"I see it's over now. No enemies nearby. That means we can start moving again. Is everyone okay? I'm starting to notice some tiredness."

"Nah, it's nothing. We've only been in here for an hour."

"Mm, yeah, I am starting to get a bit tired...but I can keep going, I think."

"Yeah... I-I feel like we're getting the hang of this... I want to do some more."

"Hmm... We'll keep going, then. Remember not to push past your limits."

Now that Lars had cut down the last goblin archer, the other four sprang into action again. Soma shifted from the back to the front, and the party proceeded with two in front and two in back.

It really was admirable.

They were even making good use of Kurt, who wasn't stepping in.

Although the academy instructors referred to him as a guide, Kurt would only step in if something especially dangerous happened. He was there to help when they really needed it, so he inevitably ended up at the rear of the pack.

But that meant that if an enemy approached them from behind, Kurt would be the first to make contact. The enemies didn't care that the students were here for practice.

So in the back, Kurt had to constantly be on watch, and Soma didn't watch in that direction, entrusting it to Kurt.

Maybe it was unfair, but it was a proper strategy.

The entire reason that Kurt had assumed that position in the first place was so that the others wouldn't have to watch their backs. It would have been too much to ask of elementary schoolers.

But the others hadn't noticed that they'd ended up in this formation, so he wasn't about to say anything.

Regardless, the four proceeded forward, with Soma doing most of the observation—and just then, they encountered another enemy.

It was just...

"Oh...?"

It was a goblin.

Just one goblin—nothing more.

But compared to the goblins from before, it was ever so slightly bigger...

"Tch, just one? Whatever. I'll do it, so stay back—"

A flash.

It happened in an instant.

Before Lars could ready his sword, another sword flashed out and sliced the goblin in half.

"Hmm...? Oops, sorry about that. I thought I should contribute every so often.

It was a good opportunity, with just one."

"Geh... Well, we have been the only ones fighting, so you should help out some...but I got the next one, okay? No stepping in."

"All right. I'll hold back next time."

It had been over in an instant, before the others could ready their weapons. The two in the back quietly sighed in relief.

But that wasn't why Kurt's eyes had narrowed.

It was because that goblin hadn't really been just a goblin.

For some reason, all goblins were exactly the same size. It was impossible for one to be bigger than the others, even by a little bit.

It could have been a figment of his imagination...or it could have been that it wasn't just a goblin.

It was a hobgoblin—a stronger type of goblin.

They were difficult to tell apart, but that wasn't usually much of a problem. People paid the utmost attention whenever they saw a goblin, checking to confirm that it was just a goblin, so that if it was a hobgoblin, they wouldn't be slow to react. If they failed to pay attention, it was when they weren't yet strong enough to take on a hobgoblin.

But that was only true outside of the dungeon. They were inside the dungeon now, which made this a salient issue.

Hobgoblins didn't normally appear on the first floor.

But the mechanisms behind this dungeon weren't fully understood; there were sometimes exceptions to its known rules. This was clearly one of those times—sometimes monsters appeared on floors where they ordinarily wouldn't.

In other words, Lars had been about to fight a hobgoblin while thinking it was a goblin.

The students had been warned about those exceptions, but they wouldn't have been exceptions if they weren't rare. New students didn't normally act

with those in mind.

So that situation could easily have ended in disaster. They could probably have handled a hobgoblin in a fight if they'd known in advance what it was, but they'd been prepared to fight it thinking it was a goblin. They would quickly have noticed that something was wrong, but by that point, it would have been too late.

It was like fighting an adult who you thought was a child. It would be difficult to respond on the spur of the moment, and it took experience to regroup immediately after being thrown off. They clearly didn't have that.

Kurt would have intervened if they had been in real danger, but it wouldn't have been unusual for such a situation to end in injuries.

And Soma had killed the hobgoblin instantly because he knew all of that.

Maybe he should have let them fight it just to teach them how dangerous the dungeon was. It would have been an effective lesson.

But these students weren't used to the dungeon itself yet.

That was why Soma had decided it was too early for that lesson.

And he was right.

"Hmm, I see..."

That was probably only a fraction of Soma's ability. It was easy to see that from the way he'd taken action.

It was really admirable, Kurt thought.

And at the same time, interesting.

He'd thought this would be boring...but maybe it would be more fun than he'd thought.

The corners of Kurt's mouth turned up slightly in anticipation.

24

Sylvia reflexively let out a huge breath as soon as she saw the clear blue sky.

They had spent two whole hours in the dungeon, and now they were finally back outside.

There had been a lot of firsts for her today, so it felt like a long time had passed since she'd last seen the sky.

That was when she noticed a change in her body. The strength left her muscles, and she found herself sitting on the ground.

"Huh?"

She tilted her head, completely baffled. But when she tried to stand up, her legs wouldn't obey her, and her arms were even trembling slightly.

"What's going on...?"

"Umm... Huh...?"

She turned to look at the others and saw that Lars and Helen were in the same state. They were sitting on the ground with incredulous looks on their faces.

They heard a sigh from above.

"I guess this makes sense... We spent two whole hours on our first trip into the dungeon."

"Precisely. You were nervous, and you used a lot of unnecessary energy. You must feel as tired as if you had been running around the whole day."

It wasn't until he said that that she noticed—the cause of her inability to move was, in fact, exhaustion.

But at the same time, she was surprised that she hadn't thought she was tired until just now.

"How come? I didn't feel tired..."

"It's not that you didn't feel it. You just weren't paying attention to it. You

were too nervous and excited, I suppose. From my perspective, it was clear that your movements were slower toward the end than when you started."

"Well, this happens every year. I was the same way when I first started. Just look around you... All your classmates are here."

"Huh...?"

Sylvia followed Kurt's directions and looked across the wide area. He was right—there were others in the same state as the three of them, sitting motionless on the ground; in fact, some were even lying down.

There were a lot of familiar faces, but what surprised her the most was that almost their entire grade appeared to be here.

"Wha...? I thought... I thought we were the first in..."

"So they got that way by going in after us and coming out earlier?"

"I told you, this happens every year. New students can usually only endure half an hour to an hour their first time in a dungeon, and the guides usually carry them back. You four should be proud that you were in there for two hours and walked out yourselves."

Sylvia couldn't take those words at face value. In the end, they hadn't even realized how tired they were and yet had wound up collapsed like this. They were still inexperienced, albeit to different degrees. Kurt was just putting it nicely.

"But if you noticed, Soma, why didn't you have us turn back?"

"I considered it. But I thought it would be best to give you the chance to get as much experience as you could. In fact, although this is how I expected you would end up, it was also unexpected in another regard."

"Oh, you're right... Since we were in there for two hours, we should be even worse off than everyone else. We must have a good foundation if we only ended up this bad."

Those were genuine words of praise, but she couldn't be sincerely happy about them. It felt like she was a little kid and an adult was praising her for being able to do simple addition.

And that was how it really was. Kurt in particular seemed calm on the surface, but his eyes didn't appear to be smiling. She could almost hear him telling her it was impressive...for a kid.

Although exhausted, she clenched her sore fist out of sheer frustration. She'd thought she could do better than this.

Her mother and father had taught her the basics, and she'd had some hands-on training as well.

Most of all, Sylvia had talent. That wasn't overconfidence but a simple fact.

It was just as Sylvia's Skill said.

All-Around Prodigy.

That was the only one Sylvia had.

And that was enough.

All-Around Prodigy—as the name suggested, the Skill granted her equal power in a wide variety of Skills.

The six Basic Skills—Swordsmanship, Axemanship, Archery, Staff Combat, Unarmed Combat, and Sorcery—were easy for her, as were Single-Edged Sword Mastery, Gun Mastery, Hammer Combat, Obscure Presence, and Sense Presence. She could use those and more at a Middle-Grade level without having to learn them.

Sylvia had a talent that the word "prodigy" didn't adequately describe.

And that was exactly why Sylvia and even her mother, in spite of being on the fringes of the royal family, were treated as equal to the others, and why those around them did not speak lightly of them.

But although Sylvia's talent was certainly great, she couldn't do much.

It was true that she could handle everything, but only at a Middle-Grade level.

If she had said that in front of all these people, who couldn't even reach Middle Grade, and they had gotten mad, she wouldn't have been entitled to complain, but it was an indisputable fact.

If she were to complete, she wouldn't measure up to High-Grade users, and probably not even to specialized Middle-Grade Skill users.

That was the extent of her talent.

And her experience in the dungeon today had driven that fact home.

She'd seen how Soma had moved in the dungeon and confirmed that her eyes weren't deceiving her...and at the same time, she'd learned how little she was able to do.

What Soma had done was really what she should have done. She was able to use so many Skills, she had plenty that would have been useful in the dungeon.

From watching Helen, she'd learned what a High-Grade Skill was really like. It wasn't as extraordinary as a Special-Grade Skill, but it meant that Helen had truly specialized talents in one area. That was the peak that Sylvia should have been aiming for.

And watching Lars had shown her the gap between herself and other Middle-Grade users. Sylvia couldn't move like that, even when using a sword like him.

That was the other side of being able to do anything.

It was greedy of her. She had something that many people wanted and couldn't have.

But Sylvia wasn't satisfied with that.

She was royalty.

If she was going to be treated as royalty, then she couldn't be satisfied with being just average.

And while she'd intended to do her best today...this was the end result.

She'd managed to defeat a goblin and walk back on her own legs, but that was all.

She'd managed two hours, but she wasn't proud. It was only the first floor, after all. She knew better than anyone that it hadn't been much, having experienced it herself.

And yet she was in this state.

Even though she was a prodigy. Even though she was royalty.

Looking around, she knew she was no different from anyone else.

She'd thought she could do better.

Naturally, everyone who came to the Royal Academy was talented. She could have concluded that there was no helping this outcome.

In fact, Soma aside, Lars and Helen were in the same condition. And if this happened every year, it was nothing to feel bad about.

But that was that. She couldn't just accept that as the answer.

However much she tried to think that, she'd been exhausted from spending two hours in the dungeon and hadn't even noticed it.

Sylvia had never cut corners. Ever since entering the academy, and even before then, she'd done the best she could.

And this was the result.

This meant it hadn't been good enough.

And if that was the case...she didn't have time to say that she was ashamed or didn't like it.

"So, should I assume that this means class is over for the day?"

"Right, since people come back from the dungeon at different times. We only gather at the beginning, and each party stops when they want to."

"I see."

Narrowing her eyes at the two people who were currently having a conversation, Sylvia hardened her resolve.

25

“On that note, I’d like you to teach me some things.”

It was the day after the practice trip into the dungeon. School had just concluded.

As soon as Soma walked into the training area, Sylvia had shot those words at him.

While Aina blinked in confusion, Soma gave Sylvia a quizzical look.

“Hmm... There are a couple retorts I could make, but I’ll put those aside. What do you mean, ‘on that note’?”

“Oh, yeah, I don’t mean anything in particular. It was just that you confused me by saying that before, so I thought this was the perfect chance to get back at you.”

“You’re still doing stuff like that...?” Aina turned an exasperated glare on Soma.

He shrugged. To be honest, he didn’t want to hear that from one of the people responsible for the commotion, which hadn’t settled down even by the time his party had gone into the dungeon.

All that had happened was that there had been a fight over whose parties Aina and Sierra would join, but it was the scale—there had been dozens of people all simultaneously trying to convince the two to join them. That in itself had been loud enough, and then it had turned into an argument before devolving into chaos after dozens of students joined in.

What Soma had done was child’s play in comparison.

“Well, it’s not like I could have done anything about it!”

“No...we couldn’t have,” Sierra agreed.

“That was partially my fault,” Lina said apologetically. “I should have made a rule about that in the first place...”

“Don’t, don’t get worked up... Um, so... What do you want to learn?”

“Oh, right... I should explain that part.”

To summarize what Sylvia went on to say, she wanted to be able to do more things, hence she wanted more people to teach her—not just Soma, but everyone who was there at the moment.

“Hmm...”

“Uh... So, yeah, I don’t mean to impose on you, but...”

“Well, I don’t mind, personally.”

“Yeah, I figured, but would you be willing—wait, what?”

“Yes? Is something the matter?”

Soma turned a quizzical look toward Sylvia, whose eyes were wide open in disbelief. He didn’t recall saying anything that surprising.

“You mean... Really? Are you sure?”

“I can only speak for myself, but yes. The others can decide as they see fit.”

“How are we supposed to refuse now that you said that?! Not that I wanted to in the first place...”

“Neither did I!”

“Mm-hmm. I’m willing.”

“Um... Yeah... I’ll try...”

“Oh... Okay. Thanks, you all. I really thought you would say no... I’ll do the best I can.” Sylvia dipped her head.

The others looked at each other and exchanged crooked smiles. It wasn’t that big a deal, and they didn’t think they could do much, anyway.

That was essentially what they had been doing here since the very beginning. Though they called it practice, they just got together when they felt like it, did whatever they felt like, and offered whatever ideas came to mind. They certainly weren’t slacking off, but they were taking it easy. One more person would make little difference.

But there was no reason to tell her that. She would grasp it in time.

“So, I have one question to start with, if that’s okay.”

“Well, if we can answer it, yes.”

“Yeah, this is something you’ll be able to answer... So, those two are...?”

Sylvia’s line of sight was directed past Soma. That was enough to tell him who she was talking about, because there was nobody else here whom she wouldn’t know. She couldn’t be referring to Aina or Helen after all this time, so that left...

“You don’t know them?”

“No, I do... That’s why I’m confused. This is the sorcery practice area, but they’re from the swordsmanship department...”

“My brother asked me the same thing. I guess people really don’t know... Well, I didn’t know either until I asked.”

“This is the sorcery practice area...but it’s not exclusive.”

“How are we supposed to know that? And who’d come here even if they did?”

Yes, that was why the two girls—Lina and Sierra—were here.

Setting aside Sierra, it was Soma who had asked if Lina could be there, and she’d told him she had finished her work for the day before coming here, so it was probably fine. Anyway, even if it hadn’t been, she would probably have gotten angry with him for pointing that out.

Incidentally, the two had started coming here several days after Soma. They had apparently heard about it and felt left out.

They hadn’t exactly been left out, but having more people meant that all of them could try more things together, so accepting two more people was no problem. That was another reason they’d let Sylvia join.

Regardless...

“So, what would you like to learn first?”

“Huh? I thought everyone just does what they feel like doing...”

“We typically do, yes, but we can make an exception for your first time. It was the same way with those two.”

“Oh, you’re right, it was like that...”

“Mm-hmm... It was.”

Their wish had been to spar with Soma again, so it hadn’t technically been something they wanted to learn, but the basic idea was similar.

“And it’s mostly Soma who does whatever he wants,” Aina noted.

“That’s, that’s not... Well, maybe it is true, but...”

“If you want to back me up, I would prefer a more wholehearted defense.”

He knew it was true, though, so he just smiled wryly.

Then he turned to look at Sylvia, who hesitantly yet determinedly opened her mouth.

“Okay, in that case...”

†

Aina watched the scene intently as Soma’s voice resounded through the training area.

It was quite the rare sight, as was evident from the way everyone’s eyes were glued to Soma.

Just then, his voice suddenly fell silent, and he turned to look in her direction with a sigh.

“This is just what we’re doing. You can do as you like as well.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m doing this.”

“Mm-hmm. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll watch over you, dear brother! You don’t have to worry!”

“Um, sorry... I-I was just curious, I guess...”

“I don’t mind that, but... My apologies, Sylvia. I imagine this makes it hard to concentrate, but try to ignore it.”

“Don’t worry; you’re doing me a favor, after all. And I’m pretty used to being watched.”

“I see... Let’s continue, then.”

He then resumed talking about things to keep in mind inside a dungeon.

The topic had been touched on in class, but Sylvia had asked him to explain what he paid particular attention to.

It was the first time any of them had heard Soma talk about something like that. They all associated him with swords or magic so strongly that it felt unusual, so they had all ended up listening along with Sylvia.

“Well, those are some of the things that you should look out for, but the crux of the matter is that you should always expect the worst.”

“Oh, they said that in class, right?”

“Any discussion of the topic ultimately ends up there. Everything that I’ve told you and everything we hear in class is for the purpose of making it easier to expect the worst.”

“Hmm... I’m still not sure I get it.”

“Well, you’ve only been inside the dungeon once, so that makes sense. You’ll understand once you experience it for yourself.”

“‘Experience it for yourself,’ huh... Will she really, though?”

“What do you mean by that, Aina?”

“Just think about it.”

Sylvia had Soma in her party. Between him and the other party members, their combat ability was a cut above that of any other party in their grade. Aina couldn’t imagine that they would get into a problematic situation.

“Oh... If he acts before anything happens, or fixes problems immediately, then she won’t have the chance to gain her own experience.”

“Agreed... He’d have to step back.”

“Remember that I can’t do everything. I believe that some problem of that sort will arise, although I don’t welcome such things.”

Everything that had happened up until now flashed through Aina's mind. He had actually fixed every problem that came up...although now that she thought about it, she herself did have a certain level of personal experience and understanding, so maybe that in itself wasn't an issue.

But looking back, she started to feel like there was another problem: Soma was usually the root cause of anything unexpected that happened, not just the resolutions.

"I would take issue with that statement."

"I would back you up as your sister if that were possible..."

"Mm-hmm, I have to agree."

"Um, sorry, Soma... It's not like I know you very well, but... To be honest, I feel the same..."

"Yeah... I hate to say it, since I'm learning from you, but I kind of do too."

"Argh... Nobody is on my side...?!"

"Reflect on what you've done before you moan about that!"

"Hmm... Upon reflection, I see nothing in particular that warrants reconsideration."

"There must be something...!"

Aina sighed at his audacity, but he just shrugged. The exchange had been half in jest, but the shrug told her that he was serious about what he was saying now, leaving her with no recourse but to sigh once more.

"Well, regardless, it's rare in practice that what happens is exactly what you expected."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Indeed. Typically, something even worse happens."

"Huh...?"

"Think about it. When you're going into the dungeon, or any unknown place for that matter, you don't know what may happen. It's only natural that things turn out worse than the worst-case scenario you imagine with your existing

knowledge.”

Aina understood that somewhat. She recalled several times when the real worst-case scenario had been something she hadn’t even thought of. Even if she’d tried to picture the worst that could happen, she doubted that she could have imagined she would be kidnapped and nearly killed by a familiar face.

But at the same time, neither would she have imagined that someone could have saved her from that fate.

“Um... So basically, imagining the worst thing that could happen doesn’t really mean anything?”

“Correct, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have to imagine it. Keeping the worst-case scenario in mind, along with the possibility that something even worse could happen, means that you’ll always be ready to take the best course of action in any situation. Now, this is only my pet theory, so you don’t have to adopt it as is. I’d just like you to keep it in the back of your mind in case it comes in handy.”

“All right... Thanks for telling me all this.”

“I question how much it will actually help you, if anything.” Soma smiled crookedly.

He was probably being serious when he said that, but given that *Soma* of all people was talking, Aina couldn’t possibly take it lightly. She vowed to take it to heart.

“Nevertheless, in order to take the best course of action, you’ll have to increase the number of options you’re capable of. Fortunately, we have three Special-Grade users between us, and I can tell you about more things when I’m able to. I think you’ll do well if you put in the effort.”

“Okay... Thanks. And thanks again for agreeing to this, you all.”

Aina would have been lying if she’d said she didn’t feel a pang of envy when Sylvia dipped her head.

Aina knew Soma had done plenty to accommodate her, so she didn’t have the right to say anything. That, and Soma probably sensed something from Sylvia.

Aina had noticed something different about Sylvia today too, so whatever it was, Soma must have spotted it more clearly.

But despite the thoughts running through her mind, something else came out of Aina's mouth.

"By the way, Soma..."

"What is it?"

"Isn't it about time you talk to him?"

"Ah... You're right. I was waiting for him to talk to us, but I suppose it's been long enough."

They both turned to look in the same direction, at a boy swinging his sword alone in silence.

From the way his movements faltered at times, though, they could tell something was on his mind.

When Sylvia had first approached them to talk, that boy had lost the most focus of anyone, and he had been faltering slightly while Soma spoke. It was probably his pride that stopped him from saying anything.

It wouldn't have been an issue to leave him be, but since it was so obvious that he was interested, Aina wanted to show him some grace.

They weren't such coldhearted people that they would ignore someone who kept looking over, hoping to be included.

Almost everyone sighed in something like relief when Soma started to walk over; Sylvia alone had a wondering look on her face. Aina, who found it slightly amusing, softened her expression into a smile.

26

“There was a hobgoblin encounter?”

Hildegard was thinking out loud in response to the troubling report.

Apparently, on the day the new students had first gone into the dungeon, they had encountered a hobgoblin on the first floor, where none should have been. If that was true, she would have expected casualties, but...

“It was Kurt Munchausen who reported it. I doubt that he’s lying or mistaken.”

“Mm... It certainly seems unlikely.”

Hildegard knew Kurt’s name as well. He was the top student of the middle school third year class, after all.

And she’d heard talk about Kurt. That had been especially common when he’d first become the top-ranking student. He’d stood out so little as a new student, few people had even known his name. It was natural that people would talk when he ended up top of his class by the time he was in middle school.

The majority of students at the Royal Academy were ambitious. But since everybody was motivated, differences in talent were all the more starkly apparent. Everyone’s rank would be clear by the end of the first year, and while the order of the top students would shift, nobody would rise up to the top who hadn’t been there before. That was how things worked.

And yet Kurt had suddenly jumped to the very top, which had resulted in rumors flying; some said that he had been hiding his power, that he’d happened upon a treasure in the dungeon, or even that he had connections with the devils.

The rumors were mostly borne of jealousy, but that was because of how ambitious all of the academy students were. When they’d found themselves facing an insurmountable barrier based on talent, they hadn’t been able to hide their envy at seeing someone else rise to the occasion.

Nevertheless, things had completely calmed down after a few months. Kurt hadn't entertained anything people had said; instead, he'd kept his head down and worked hard. Seeing that, people had concluded that he must have unlocked his talent through hard work and persistence.

Because of that, Kurt was well regarded among the instructors as well, hence why this one was confident that he wouldn't lie.

But while Hildegard frankly didn't trust him quite that much, she knew who he had gone into the dungeon with. It made sense that that party had handled the hobgoblin without issue, so she decided to proceed on the assumption that the report was true.

"However, if true, this report comes rather late. It has been almost a week, has it not?"

"My sincere apologies for that. It only came up at our weekly meeting today...the instructor in charge was horrified when she noticed the paper."

"As I imagine she would be. But while I understand, negligence is negligence."

The dungeon guides had a responsibility to turn in a report after each expedition. However, it was the new students' first time in the dungeon. The guides would usually have made a fuss if anything had happened, so it was understandable that the instructors would procrastinate on reading the reports if nothing seemed to be amiss.

But it was what it was.

"I suppose we shall have to dock her pay temporarily."

"She seemed to expect that, so I don't imagine she'll complain."

"Whether we do anything more shall depend on further investigation. I commend her for reporting it despite the circumstances, but this could have resulted in disaster."

The hobgoblin encounter itself wasn't actually much of a problem. It certainly could have resulted in serious injuries, but even some new students were capable of defeating them. They weren't that great a threat.

The problem was that a monster had appeared on the first floor that

shouldn’t have been there.

The dungeon was certainly an unpredictable place, so much so that people said it was less likely to explore it *without* something unexpected happening. Monsters did appear outside of the expected floors from time to time.

But in every other instance, they had appeared on the tenth floor or lower. Otherwise, the instructors wouldn’t have let elementary schoolers go dungeon diving, even with a guide.

It was good that it had been a hobgoblin this time, but it could have been a more powerful and dangerous monster. With Kurt there, not to mention Soma, they probably could have handled it, but what if a party other than Soma’s had encountered a dangerous monster?

That was the potential disaster she was referring to, and the risk remained even now.

“How troublesome... And tomorrow is the day that the new students are to enter the dungeon again.”

“Should we cancel the expedition?”

“I do not think that shall be necessary... Considering this is only their second time, it should be all right as long as you investigate the first and second floors, which you should have time to do before they enter.”

“Understood. I’ll also tell them not to go any farther than the third floor.”

“Indeed, you should tell them to be safe. Apart from that...”

We shall have to investigate below *as well.*

Hildegard narrowed her eyes and muttered without opening her mouth.

In that case...

“I shall have to pull him out of class tomorrow. I imagine there will be complaints, but I cannot do it on my own...”

“Huh? What did you just say?”

“I was only saying to myself that things will be difficult tomorrow.”

She glanced outside. Night had already fallen. Since the instructors were busy,

they had to conduct their weekly meetings after dark.

She would have had more options if it had happened during the day, but saying so meant nothing.

“I suppose it is a good thing that I shall have the opportunity to work with Soma.”

Hildegard forced herself to look on the bright side and told herself that with a sigh.

†

It took two months before the new students were permitted to enter the dungeon for the first time, but that was mainly so that they could get used to the academy. There was no reason that they needed to wait as long to do it again, but since the faculty had to set aside an entire day for dungeon diving, it wasn’t done very frequently.

In practice, they explored the dungeon once a month; however, the second time was a week after the first. The instructors did it that way every year out of consideration for the students’ feelings.

It was customary for them to exhaust themselves on their first trip into the dungeon and have to be carried back by their guides. But just because it was customary didn’t mean the students accepted it. It was only natural that anyone talented and passionate enough to get into the Royal Academy would be fired up to try again, hence the fact that the training areas tended to see increased use after their first dungeon dive.

There was nothing wrong with that in itself, but their zeal would have been left with no outlet if there had been too much time until the next session, so the instructors made an exception for the second dungeon dive and held it a week after the first.

Digression aside, the second dungeon dive was accompanied by determination and fervor. All the students had prepared themselves thoroughly after the shame of last time.

Everyone in the room had a tense expression, but no one was overly excited. As the instructors and guides observed, they nodded to each other as if to say

things would be okay this time.

The ones who were ready began to head toward the dungeon...

“What to do...”

But Sylvia just watched without doing anything.

Well, actually, her party wanted to go too, but they couldn’t. They only had three today, and the missing member was Soma. They weren’t so cocky that they would push ahead with the dungeon dive in this state.

But however long they waited, Soma didn’t appear. He wasn’t late—he was absent.

“Tch, that jerk... This was supposed to be my chance to show off how much I’ve improved.”

“It’s, it’s not his fault... I heard the headmaster pulled him out of class today...”

This morning, the headmaster had supposedly come to Soma out of nowhere with a request. That meant he wouldn’t come today, and it couldn’t be a lie, given that Carine had been the one who told them.

“Yeah, yeah, I know... That’s the irritating thing. I mean, what’d the headmaster need from him, anyway? What’s the deal?”

Lars continued to grumble, which was understandable. It wasn’t normal for the academy to ask favors from a first year elementary student. It made sense knowing Soma, but Sylvia still felt vaguely jealous.

She knew that complaining about it wouldn’t accomplish anything...but they couldn’t have done anything about it today even if they’d resolved to. It was no wonder if they let a complaint or two slip out of frustration.

“Well, complaining won’t get us anywhere... Let’s just practice for next time.”

“Yeah, you’re, you’re right... We can’t go in with just us...”

“Tch, whatever... Hey, wait a sec. Maybe we can.”

“Huh?” Sylvia turned a baffled look toward Lars, but he didn’t seem to be joking.

He looked back with a serious face. “It’d be useful to practice in the training area, but it’d be even better to practice in the dungeon, right?”

“But... We, we can’t... Not with just us three...”

“You think? Me, I bet we could handle the first floor on our own. We didn’t know much last time, but we did pretty good anyway. Shouldn’t be an issue if we don’t go too far. Everyone else is inside, anyway.”

“Mm, I guess you have a point...”

There was only one dungeon that many students entered at once. Although it was rather large, it made sense that it would be full of other students. They hadn’t encountered any the previous time, but looking back, that was probably because the others had left first. The same thing was unlikely to happen this time.

Not to mention that nobody would be dumb enough to go to the second floor before fully searching the first.

With all of the students on one floor, there would be less danger, and it would be easier to call for help if they had to.

“He did tell us what to do sometimes, but we handled other stuff on our own, didn’t we? Let’s give it a shot.”

“Umm... I don’t know... I’m, I’m kind of scared...”

“Yeah, I’m nervous without Soma too...but I do see what you’re saying...”

“I get the feeling you three could do it, but that would be a bit reckless.”

Kurt joined the discussion, which came as a surprise because he typically kept silent while they were talking, and also because they hadn’t seen him there.

It wasn’t strange that Kurt had come over to them, though. Just as the members of a party were fixed, so was their guide.

“Kurt? Where have you been?”

“I had to talk to someone about what happened last time. Anyway, are the three of you really planning to go in alone?”

“Tch, I guess it is kinda risky...”

“Yeah, don’t get the wrong idea; I think it’s reckless, but I don’t blame you. I’m in support, if anything.”

“Really? You are?”

“I think it’s a good opportunity. If you don’t mind me giving my unfiltered feedback, I think you only performed so well last time because you had Soma with you. It’s important to know how well you can do without him.”

The three exchanged glances. They hadn’t expected Kurt to support them, let alone encourage them, but he had a convincing point.

They knew after training together for the past week—their indecision had shifted, little by little, into a willingness to try.

“And you already have permission from the academy.”

“Huh?”

While they were free to choose their party members, the academy wasn’t so lenient as to let a group go that clearly couldn’t handle it. They had to get permission both their first time and any time there was an absence or change of members.

They’d just heard that for a number of reasons, it was difficult to get permission to go in with a temporary absence...

“That’s how highly they think of you. They have faith that you can handle it and you won’t go too far. Also, it’s partially in apology.”

“You mean for Soma?”

“Yeah, I think so. They did tell me to be especially careful today because of that, though.”

“Oh... Um... Sorry...”

It certainly made sense. If Soma wasn’t present, there would be more risks to their safety, which meant more work for Kurt as their guide.

“Hey, that’s what I’m here for. I mean, there wasn’t much for me to do last time, so I’m glad I get a turn. Not that having to step in is a good thing.”

Judging by his sunny smile, he wasn’t just saying that to make them feel

better.

In that case...

The three exchanged looks once more, then, despite a surge of nervousness, nodded in unison.

†

To get right to the conclusion...it was a letdown.

That was how Sylvia's party felt after walking around the second floor of the dungeon on their second time inside.

As for why they'd ended up descending as far as the second floor...the flow of events had just taken them there.

Really, they'd only intended to try the first floor. But there had been more students than they'd expected, and after wandering for about thirty minutes, the three of them had only had one fight.

And that one fight had been against just one goblin, so it had been over in an instant, leaving them dissatisfied. It had hardly sufficed as fighting practice, let alone practice at dungeon diving.

That was when Kurt had suggested that since they weren't having any trouble, they could try going down to the second floor.

They hadn't followed his suggestion immediately, of course. But it was a fact that they didn't seem likely to gain any practical experience if they didn't do something different.

So they'd headed down to the second floor to give it a try, planning to turn back if they couldn't handle it...

"And it was worth it."

"Yeah... I was honestly surprised."

Those were their thoughts upon discovering they could instantly defeat the enemies even on the second floor.

The monsters that had appeared on the second floor hadn't been much different from those on the first. However, typically, students spent their first

three trips into the dungeon walking around on the first floor and only went down to the second starting on their fourth time. It wasn't unprecedented for students to make it as far as the second floor on their second visit, but it was something.

And the fact that they had been able to defeat the monsters meant that they had optimized their actions to that extent. It was clear in hindsight how many of their movements during their first dive had been unnecessary, which was why they'd collapsed from exhaustion the second they left.

But the same wouldn't happen this time. They'd done enough reflection and practiced enough that they could move as normal, even inside the dungeon, which meant the monsters on the second floor were no match for them.

"But, but Sylvia... I think this is our hard work paying off."

"But all it means is we can do stuff we should've been able to do before."

"I guess that's true... Oh, that reminds me... Sorry, Lars."

"What're you saying sorry for?"

"For last time."

She'd realized that since she'd spent so much time moving around unnecessarily on their first dive, Lars had been acting to cover her. He had been moving unnecessarily himself, but some of his movement had been to back her up.

"So...sorry about that."

"Tch..."

He only clicked his tongue in response, but the fact that he didn't argue the point meant it was true.

The way Lars spoke was rough, but his movements were far from it. They were based on solid fundamentals. He acted with his team in mind, and if he hadn't, they would have had more trouble last time. Sylvia really felt bad for not having noticed.

But as she thought that...

“Um... Sylvia... I-I think...you, you have the wrong idea...”

“Huh...?”

Sylvia couldn’t keep her surprise from showing on her face.

She hadn’t expected Helen to contradict her. What did she mean, the wrong idea?

“You mean...like, it’s normal for party members to help each other? That’s true, but still...”

“Oh, s-sorry... That’s, that’s not... Um... I just, uh... I don’t think... Lars wanted an apology for that, so, um...”

“Oh! Yeah... Yeah, you’re right. It’s weird to say sorry when someone helps you. So, let me try that again... Thanks, Lars.”

“I just did what I should have... You don’t gotta thank me.” Lars turned away sullenly, but Sylvia could see his cheeks flushing red in the dim light.

Deliberately not touching on it, she instead turned to Helen and smiled. Lars took notice and clicked his tongue again.

“C’mon, no more chit-chat. It’s practice time.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right.”

They’d already made sure there were no more enemies around, but that was no reason to lose focus. If anything, they should have been even more vigilant, considering they were now on the second floor.

Refocusing themselves, they headed deeper into the dungeon.

†

Kurt narrowed his eyes with interest at the scene before him, involuntarily exhaling in amazement.

It had only been a week since they had first gone into the dungeon. He honestly hadn’t expected them to improve this much in that time.

He couldn’t have said, even in flattery, that their movements were good the first time,, but they had been on par for students exploring a dungeon for the first time ever.

He had thought that they would be fine this time if they improved on their first attempt, but he genuinely hadn't thought they would do this well.

Last time, Soma had ended up as the cornerstone of the party. They'd only been able to function as a party because Soma was there.

But they were functioning even better as a group now, despite the fact that Soma wasn't here. Sylvia was doing better overall, Lars's attacks in particular had improved, and while Helen had done good, if unremarkable, work before, she was cooperating more effectively with the other two now.

"Their practice is paying off, huh..."

That was his assumption based on the conversations he'd overheard. It was only natural that each of them was training after school; every year, it was typical for the first years to put in more effort after their initial failures.

Regardless, unless the members of a party knew each other well, it would usually take at least two months before they were ready to tackle training together. It could take as much as half a year. That was just how difficult and complicated dungeon diving practice was.

Everyone at the Royal Academy was especially talented and ambitious, but that also meant they tended to try doing things on their own. The more exceptional the party members were individually, the longer it took for them to coalesce into an effective unit.

Kurt had honestly expected that that would be the case for these three—that the very fact that they had done adequately the first time and that each had a grasp on how to move would become a stumbling block, especially since they were individually talented.

But now that they'd had a chance, they had increased their ability as a unit, and they even had genuine battle potential. That was evident from the way they had gotten to the second floor on their second try without exposing themselves to any real danger. And that was with their cornerstone missing. Kurt felt at once ashamed of his nearsightedness and immensely impressed.

As Kurt was thinking to himself, they continued even deeper into the dungeon. Although monsters appeared at intervals, the three weren't in any

danger at all. Lars kept the enemies in check while the two girls took them down with spells, and if a monster briefly escaped, Lars dealt the finishing blow.

And they weren't pushing past their limits at all. If one of them saw something even a little suspicious, they stopped immediately, and the others listened to what they had to say.

They knew that they were doing well, but they also knew how easily that could fall apart.

None of them lost focus, even when the fights were over...and Kurt couldn't help but smile at the fact that they hadn't paid any attention to what was behind them.

They showed no signs of looking his way, but it wasn't that they'd forgotten; he and they had an accurate mutual understanding.

Kurt was a little disappointed that they'd lost their newness, but he'd honestly never thought they would come this far.

But despite how much they could do now, they weren't acting as if they would go down another floor. The fact that none of them were talking meant that they understood what that would mean without having to say it.

The third floor had drastically different types of monsters than the second; it was a barrier of sorts, and those who thoughtlessly challenged it underwent a painful baptism. In fact, it was said that it was the floor on which students were mostly likely to be killed.

The students were told as much beforehand, but once they could traverse the second floor easily, they tended to develop a mistaken confidence. Then they would go down another floor and get into trouble. It was a guaranteed experience for most students.

But it didn't look like these three would end up that way. Since they were diligently trying to gain experience here, they would probably be able to proceed farther down without running into danger.

Unlike himself.

Or, alternatively, the same as the top students at the time.

Maybe because of those thoughts running through his mind, Kurt found himself opening his mouth to speak to them.

“So, I have a suggestion...”

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“What...? The third floor?”

Sylvia was wide eyed in response to Kurt’s sudden suggestion.

They were certainly used to the second floor and felt like they were doing fine by now, but that was one thing, and this was another.

“The third floor, huh... I’d be lying if I said I’m not interested. I mean, we’re pretty used to this area, so I figure we could handle it.”

“I-I’m kind of scared... We, we are getting used to it, but only just now... And Soma told us...”

“Oh, right... He said there’s no such thing as being overprepared when you’re challenging the unknown, right? That ideally, after the fact, you should feel like you overdid it.”

Soma had repeated that ad nauseam during their practice sessions after school as a piece of advice for when they ventured into the unknown.

And they weren’t confident that they’d prepared *that* much as of now.

“And we were told not to go to the third floor today.”

“Oh, they always say that. You don’t have to worry about it. There’s nothing special about today.”

“You think so...?”

But even so, Sylvia thought they probably shouldn’t go. If the instructors always said not to, it must have been dangerous enough to warrant the warning, and the party had no need to put themselves in that kind of danger.

“You’re overthinking it. I mean, you three may not know what the third floor is like, but I do, and I know your power level from watching you today and last time. And I suggested it knowing those things.”

“So you’re pretty sure we’ll be fine, then?”

Kurt smiled wordlessly in response. But to Sylvia, that smile seemed a more

eloquent answer than words could have been...and Helen and Lars seemed to feel the same way.

“What should we do?”

“Like I said, I wanna try if we can.”

“I’m... I’m still scared... But I guess just this once...”

Just from being around Kurt, they knew he was exceptional, so his approval was enough to soften their reluctance.

They were anxious nevertheless, but...

“So, Kurt... If something goes wrong, can you take care of it?”

“Of course. You’re not usually supposed to rely on me, but...I’m the one who instigated this, so I should take responsibility. And I don’t think I’ll have to step in, anyway. If I did, I wouldn’t have suggested this.”

Those words settled it. The three exchanged looks, nodded, and began to walk toward the staircase that led to the third floor.

A few minutes later...

“Huh...?”

Sylvia muttered in confusion as she gazed at the scene before her.

They had just finished their first battle on the third floor of the dungeon.

And it had been a far easier win than she’d expected.

She didn’t think it was because the monster had been weak. The wolflike creature’s speed, at least, had been much faster than a goblin’s. They would surely have struggled if they had anticipated a fight with an opponent similar to a goblin, since it had instantly closed the distance between them from a lower position than a goblin.

But maybe they were lucky they hadn’t fought many goblins, or maybe it was a good thing they’d been vigilant so that they could counter any foe, because they’d had the upper hand against the attacking monster.

Sylvia and Helen had blasted it with magic as Lars held off its attacks, and that had been that.

The battle had been so brief, it made her wonder whether the monster was just playing dead.

“I told you so. You’ll be just fine.”

As she watched Kurt say that to her, the reality finally began to sink in.

Their power...her power was enough to carry her through the third floor with no problem.

The realization put a smile on her face, but she hurriedly straightened it out again.

“Oops, I shouldn’t get ahead of myself... We’ve only beaten one monster, after all.”

“Yeah, and we were in a good position.”

“We, we saw it right ahead of us... And it’s narrow here...”

This corridor, so narrow that they had to walk single file, put them at an advantage. The foe hadn’t been able to sneak around behind them as long as Lars held it off, which had let them take their time using spells.

But they didn’t know what could have happened in a different scenario. It was too early to get comfortable.

“It doesn’t look like I’ll get my turn at this rate. That’s a good thing, though. So, now that you’ve finished your first fight...do you want to keep going? Or should we head back?”

They exchanged looks, but nobody concluded they should go back, probably because they all had the same gut feeling.

They couldn’t definitively declare it yet, but they felt like the three of them could handle this floor on their own.

Soma probably wouldn’t praise them for this—he’d be angry, if anything—but it was too late now. If they were going to be scolded either way, they wanted to gain more experience and confidence first.

“C’mon, let’s keep going.”

“Yeah... Just, just keep an eye out...”

Lars grinned boldly in response to Helen’s worried comment, as if to say he knew.

And proving that he wasn’t overconfident, the next three battles ended up going just as well. Sylvia and Helen also kept up their good performance, of course, and not one of them suffered any actual injuries. They couldn’t help smiling.

And that was when Sylvia noticed.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Appraisal): Sense

“Huh...? Wait a second, Lars.”

“What’s up? I don’t see any monsters... You find something?”

“I’m not sure, but...”

Something had stuck out in her mind, and she’d certainly felt like she spotted something.

Nevertheless...

“Um... The, the corridor looks the same...”

“Looks that way to me too.”

They were right that nothing about the corridor had changed in the time they’d been walking through it, and it didn’t look like anything was there.

But even knowing that, she’d sensed...

“Oh! Let me see... I think it’s here.”

It was a section of the wall at the edge of her vision. In the dim light, she’d spotted a small discolored area near the ground.

She could have written it off as a figment of her imagination or a dirty patch, but Sylvia confidently reached out and touched it.

Immediately, a door began to move before their eyes.

“Wha...?!”

“Huh? Is that...”

“No way... A hidden passage!”

Even Kurt was shocked to see the hidden passage appear before them, just wide enough for one person.

“Sylvia, you don’t... You don’t seem very surprised...”

“You’re right... Did you know there was a hidden passage?”

“No, I thought there was something here, but I didn’t expect this.”

Alternatively, she could have been numb from sheer shock.

She’d certainly heard that dungeons sometimes contained mechanisms like hidden passages. But she had never imagined that she might discover one herself...and she’d also heard that there was usually treasure inside secret passages.

This was the third floor, so it wasn’t likely that she would be the first to discover a treasure box, but the small possibility had her excited.

And she would have to check to confirm, so Sylvia stepped into the hidden passage she’d discovered.

That put Sylvia in front instead of Lars, but that was no problem.

While secret passages could be get-rich-quick opportunities, they had risks to match. Sometimes there were traps, and Sylvia was the best equipped to handle that sort of thing. That was why she was walking in the front now.

The caution was likely unnecessary, but there was no such thing as being too careful, considering the worst case scenario.

And of course, she also wanted to be the first to go inside the passage she’d found herself.

“But why is this here? It doesn’t make sense... Wait, maybe this is why they told us not to go down here...?”

“Um, Kurt...? Is... Is something the matter?”

“It’s just that nobody’s ever found a secret passage on the third floor before.”

“They haven’t? So this must be...”

“An undiscovered hidden passage.”

Luck must have been on her side today for her to have found such a thing. Suppressing her elation, she cautiously proceeded ahead.

But she didn’t discover a single trap before they reached the end of the corridor.

“Is... Is this a dead end?”

“Tch, no luck?”

“No...”

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Appraisal): Detect

At a glance, it looked like a dead end, but there was another discolored area, as there had been before.

But it was on the ground this time. It was in a strange, tricky position that she wouldn’t have noticed if she hadn’t been looking for it.

People often wondered whether the dungeon had a will of its own, and seeing this, she couldn’t blame them for thinking so.

But the important thing was what would happen when she touched it.

And the instant Sylvia touched the differently colored spot, the ground began to move. However, the area that moved was smaller and shallower than last time. A hole about the size of her head opened up.

But as soon as they saw it, the others behind her gasped.

“I sure had high hopes, but whoa...”

“Wow... I’ve never seen one before...”

“Even I never thought you would find treasure on your second dungeon dive.”

It was treasure in the literal sense of the word—a treasure box.

Yes, there was a treasure box inside the hole that had opened in the ground.

It was natural to question why there would be a treasure box in a dungeon, but it did happen on rare occasions. Most treasures discovered in dungeons were in treasure boxes.

She really wanted to ask why, but the dungeon itself wasn't well understood, so it was no wonder that things like that happened, and nobody would bring it up at this point.

So Sylvia reached out to examine the box...

"Wait, we should be careful—"

"Don't worry, I know."

Treasure boxes sometimes contained traps, since people let down their guard when they saw treasure.

But she knew that well. She gave Kurt a reassuring smile as she cut him off, as if to say she didn't need to be told.

She made contact with the box—and instantly, she felt like the room was spinning.

"Huh?" she muttered in confusion. She felt like her vision was going fuzzy.

Once she glanced around her to check, it made sense.

Her vision wasn't blurring—space itself was warping.

"Sylvia?!"

"Is, is it...warping her away? A teleporter? Why...?!"

A teleporter.

It was a well-known type of trap that forcibly warped its target to another place. Teleporters were typically found in dungeons, and since they usually moved one to a lower floor than one was currently on, they were extremely malicious.

But that shouldn't have been possible.

"A teleporter?! I know treasure boxes have them a lot, but she didn't even open it! And this is the third floor!"

Just as Lars had declared with a shout, there should have been no traps on the third floor. There were only traps on the fifth floor and lower.

But since there shouldn’t have been any hidden passages either, there was a small possibility of encountering traps here. That was why Sylvia had decided to walk in front.

So the issue was that Sylvia hadn’t opened the treasure box yet. That must have meant that the box itself was the trap, as opposed to containing a trap...but she’d never heard of such a thing.

So it shouldn’t have been possible...and yet it was happening right now.

Some thoughts she’d had just moments ago flickered through her mind.

Treasure boxes were booby trapped because people let their guard down when they saw treasure.

And the dungeon had a will of its own.

But those ideas failed to take on a clear shape.

“But it’s happening right in front of us! Sylvia! Take my hand!”

Space warped even more, as if mocking the panicked Kurt. It became difficult to perceive even her immediate surroundings, and the others’ voices faded out.

The last thing she saw was Kurt stretching out his hand toward her...but before he could reach her, her vision went black.

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“Sent to an awkward place once again, as if by design...”

Sylvia had been forcibly warped somewhere by what seemed to have been a teleporter.

So Soma had heard as soon as he and Hildegard arrived.

“I suppose it’s a good thing that we came back quickly.”

“Heheh, laud my judgment in deciding to return as soon as we were notified...or so I would say if it were the appropriate time.”

“And yet you did just say it.”

Soma looked around. He saw a number of white-faced instructors, as well as Lars, Helen, and Kurt, looking down as if bracing themselves.

Hildegard’s nonsense aside, it had certainly been the right decision to turn back immediately. With that thought, Soma exhaled.

Hildegard had taken him to a secret place within the academy today. They had been planning to investigate it, but when Hildegard had received an urgent transmission, they had turned back.

However, since transmissions could only communicate general information, all they’d heard was to come back immediately.

What he and Hildegard had been doing was quite important. But she had been able to tell this was no small matter, so she’d decided to go back.

And this was the outcome...so he could say for sure that it had been the right decision.

Thankfully, the two had gotten back right after Kurt’s group, so they had been able to hear what happened at the same time as the instructors and coordinate how they would handle it together. Otherwise, it would have been more difficult, since they wouldn’t have known where Sylvia had been taken.

Yes, they already knew exactly where Sylvia had been teleported. Based on

what they'd heard, they couldn't be sure whether Sylvia had really been caught in a teleporter, but they knew with near certainty where she had been warped to based on the circumstances. And with that knowledge, it was possible for Hildegard to trace her.

But nobody's face showed any relief, because there would be two problems in rescuing Sylvia.

One was the location. The dungeon here had an area boss every ten floors—a powerful monster that protected the floor and blocked people from proceeding to the next. They were often more powerful than the monsters that appeared ten floors below them, which made the area bosses like walls that appeared every ten floors.

According to the academy's official records, people had managed to reach the thirtieth floor before, but none had ever defeated the area boss there.

And therein lay the problem.

The place where Sylvia had been teleported was...

...the fortieth floor.

The second problem was that, according to Hildegard's research, the fortieth floor was set up so that as soon as someone entered, the space was closed off, making it impossible to summon outside help. That meant the only way to get out was to defeat the area boss.

And although it was because of a teleporter, Sylvia had entered the floor all the same, so it was now closed off.

That meant Sylvia would have to figure out a way out on her own, but if that had been possible, nobody would have gone so pale.

They didn't have enough fighting strength to make it to where Sylvia was, and they couldn't have helped her even if they had.

It was no wonder that looks of resignation appeared on the instructors' faces as soon as they had heard the news from Hildegard.

But Soma's feelings were another story.

"Well... Now that I have all the information available, it's time for me to head

down," he muttered.

Everyone shot him shocked glances simultaneously. Helen reflexively lifted her head and opened her mouth, eyes wide.

"Head down...where?"

"To the fortieth floor, naturally."

His declaration drew even more obvious looks of shock, but he ignored them. He understood why they'd responded that way, but playing along with them would have taken time, which was in short supply right now.

He turned to Hildegard. "May I ask you to guide me? Knowing you, you must be capable of taking the shortest path there."

"I have no reason to refuse. In fact, I would typically be asking the same of you."

"So, other than her..." he muttered, glancing around.

Helen and Lars had stunned looks on their faces, just like the instructors, and Kurt was eyeing Soma as if trying to judge whether he was serious.

Among the instructors, Camilla had an exasperated look on her face, and Lina was nodding and grinning as if to say she would have expected no less.

And while they weren't part of the group, the students coming back from the dungeon were watching and waiting; they seemed to grasp the gravity of the situation. He met eyes with Aina, who was standing among them, and she sighed and shrugged as if to say she understood.

"Aina, Lina, would you come with me?"

"It would be my pleasure!"

"I mean, sure, but...do you really need us?"

"I may not, but it would be helpful to have you."

"Okay... Got it."

If he had only wanted speed, it would have been best to go with just Hildegard. But there was something inexplicable going on. Given that he didn't know all the details, it would be best to take more.

“Left out...”

He turned toward the dissatisfied voice and saw Sierra. Her usually inexpressive face had a clear look of discontent on it, so she must have been quite unhappy.

But although Soma had known Sierra was there, he hadn’t deliberately excluded her, of course. He just had something else he wanted her to do.

“Sierra, I’d like you to be on patrol...or act as a guard, I should say.”

“A guard? For who?”

“For the teachers, and for the students who are still in the dungeon.”

“You expect us to go round up the kids who are still in there?” Camilla interjected, rightly, in the middle of his explanation to Sierra.

Hildegard had told Soma that she had surveyed the first and second floors, but something that should have been impossible had occurred, albeit on a floor she hadn’t surveyed. And she hadn’t done an especially thorough check, so better safe than sorry.

“Precisely. I imagine they will be fine...but there’s a small risk.”

“Hmm, yeah, I guess we should, given the possibility. And it’s not like we have anything else to do, since we’d just get in your way if we went with you. So you’re leaving Sierra just in case, then.”

“Understood...but it doesn’t have to be me.”

“I want you in particular to do it, Sierra.”

He was telling the truth. He understood what Sierra meant—in terms of raw strength and reaction time, Sierra had Lina beat. If he wanted to be as well prepared as possible, it was irrational to bring Lina and leave Sierra.

But that was exactly why he wanted to leave Sierra here. She could act the fastest if another unexpected situation came about.

“I get it, then... I’ll do my best.”

Once he had explained his reasoning to her, the discontent vanished from Sierra’s face, leaving her usual lack of expression. Judging by the glint in her

eyes, though, she was rather motivated, which was reassuring.

“I know how you feel, since you’re better than me in a few ways,” Lina remarked. “But this means I get to go with my brother, so I have no problem with it!”

“If you’re okay with that, then I have nothing to say,” Aina added.

Now that the conversation was over, Soma looked around once more, wondering whether he’d forgotten to mention anything, but things would most likely be fine this way.

This was a battle against time. The faster he acted, the more likely he was to rescue Sylvia.

So he figured he should get moving now—but just then, two other people raised their voices.

“You’re gonna go to the fortieth floor? Are you for real?”

“He’s right; I think that’s a bit too reckless.”

He’d wanted to head out quickly because he’d seen this coming, but Lars and Carine had apparently recovered from their shock already. He couldn’t exactly ignore them, so he sighed.

“Are you telling me to abandon Sylvia?”

“I’m not...!”

“Well, personally, I have mixed feelings, since Sylvia is important in a lot of ways... But from an instructor’s perspective, there isn’t much difference between you and her. Since you could lose your lives as well, I have no choice but to object.”

Carine had come back with a proper objection, unlike Lars, who was at a loss for words. And what she said was logically sound.

Nevertheless...

“Hmm... I don’t know if we have time to argue back and forth. Hildegard?”

“Yes, well... I see almost no one who supports your suggestion, but the few who do are also the only ones who fully understand the situation.”

A look around showed that most of the instructors disagreed with his plan, although they weren't voicing it. And their skepticism was appropriate for instructors.

However...

"As headmaster, I am glad to see that. Her situation seems hopeless, after all. I am grateful that you have disregarded her relationship with the royal family to make that judgment. However, to be frank, your concern is unnecessary. I am willing to swear, not just as headmaster but on my name as Hildegard Lindwurm, that these three are capable of bringing Sylvia back safely."

Everyone, even Soma, was shocked at her declaration. He honestly hadn't expected her to go so far as to say that.

"I may be rather confident, but I never thought you would swear on your name."

"I have the utmost confidence that you shall not force me to take extraordinary measures in order to deliver on that vow."

Soma shrugged in response to her fearless smile. He had never intended to do any less, but this meant he had to make sure he brought Sylvia back safely no matter what.

"Does that convince you?" he asked the other members of the party with which he'd previously explored the dungeon. The instructors had backed down, but the three were still looking at him with discontent, probably out of a sense of responsibility.

"I mean, yeah, I figure you of all people can do it, but in that case... Take me! It's my fault she got trapped too—"

"Rejected."

"You...!"

"To be blunt, you would get in the way. A certain someone made it so that we have to bear this responsibility, so we can't afford to bring someone who would hold us back."

Soma held his gaze on Lars, who found himself at a loss for words and took a

step back. He opened and closed his mouth as if he wanted to say something but finally averted his eyes as if resigned.

“Tch, fine... Take care of my share of the work, then.”

“I will.”

“I-I think I’d get in the way too... So, so take care of my part too... If I’d just stopped her, then...”

“Well, if you put it like that, then it’s my fault in the first place. If I hadn’t suggested it, we wouldn’t have gone to the third floor.”

“I don’t think it’s anyone’s fault...or perhaps I should say that it’s everyone’s fault. It was irresponsible to go down to the second floor, let alone the third. Anything could have happened after you did that.”

“I can’t argue with that. But if I can make an excuse... I wanted to build up their confidence in themselves. They were so underconfident for their skill level. But because of that, I ended up forgetting that you never know what might happen in the dungeon.”

“You can give me your excuses later. We don’t have time now.”

“Right... So, should I come with you?”

“As I told Lars, I can’t afford to take anyone who would get in the way.”

“I thought so. Well...take care of my job for me.”

Soma nodded to Kurt and glanced around once more. Nobody else had any more objections.

With a sigh, he turned to look at Aina and the others and nodded. Once they nodded back, the group hurried back toward the dungeon.

†

To be honest, he hadn’t expected this development at all.

He’d certainly thought it was a good opportunity. But since there were some things he hadn’t completely worked out, he hadn’t planned to do anything today. He’d wanted to observe more first.

“Well, I hope this is a success...but what to do...”

It was unclear whether even three Special-Grade Skill users could reach the fortieth floor. It was an unprecedented feat for a reason.

Not all Special-Grade users were equal, anyway. This would have been a heavy burden even for two of the Elite Seven, let alone those three. It might have been different if he could have gone along, but that was a meaningless hypothetical now that he'd been turned down.

So it all rested on just how much power that one unpredictable character was hiding.

Things could get tricky depending on its extent...but that in itself was something to look forward to.

Regardless, it all depended on the outcome.

"So what I should do now is play my cards in such a way that things will be okay even if we fail... What to do?"

He narrowed his eyes toward their receding backs as if trying to see through them.

29

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance *Unrivaled Power* Lightning Speed: Brilliant Brandish

Instant kill.

Soma cut down the monster the instant it appeared, and he didn't pause there. He continued to run without a moment's hesitation.

That was possible because of the overwhelming power difference between him and the monster, but also because he wasn't running as fast as he possibly could.

With his leftover energy, he could take care of enemies, which allowed him to keep running at the same time.

He wasn't doing that because it would get him to his destination faster in the long run, though; it was out of consideration for Aina. She wouldn't have been able to keep up if he had run as fast as he could, which would have defeated the purpose of bringing her along.

And he'd judged that it wouldn't be an issue, since they were clearing a floor per minute.

"Once again, you make no sense..." Aina, the very person he'd been thinking about, commented with exasperation in her voice. He glanced over and saw it on her face as well. She also seemed somewhat fatigued, but not enough for it to be a problem.

Once he'd confirmed that, he turned forward again and furrowed his brow in puzzlement.

"I can't fathom what you're talking about."

"Yeah, I can't blame you... I'm not sure what I'm talking about myself."

"Aina... Have you finally lost the plot?"

"You have, Aina?! What pushed you over the edge?!"

“We cannot afford to accompany one who has lost the plot... However, it would leave an unpleasant taste in my mouth to abandon her for that reason alone.”

“All I meant was I couldn’t pick just one thing! And why are you all playing along?!”

Since she had the capacity to yell, she must have been doing fine. He knew she would be mad at him for the way he’d confirmed that, though, so he opted not to say anything.

“Hmm... I actually can’t think of anything.”

“Says the one who’s clearing a floor every minute...”

“But so are you. All you have to do is find the shortest path, move quickly, and take down enemies without losing speed. Anyone who can do those three things can do it.”

“Most people can’t do those, you know. Neither can I. I couldn’t cast a spell while moving at this speed.”

“I think I could do it until about the twentieth floor, but I’m not sure about down here...especially since the monsters seem resistant to physical attacks.”

“I believe that I would be capable, but it is apparent that not just anybody would.”

“Hmm... Bizarre.”

“I’m telling you, it’s you that’s bizarre! Do you realize what floor we’re on?”

He didn’t know why she was asking that, but he knew the answer, naturally. They were on the thirtieth floor.

“Exactly! And I’m pretty sure that monster you one-shotted was the area boss. Do you have anything to say about that?”

“Hmm... I would like to congratulate myself on the new record.”

“So you do know...!”

To be serious for a moment, he did understand. But he didn’t think it was anything to be proud of.

“The only reason that nobody has defeated it until now must be that there have been no Special-Grade users.”

“Indeed, we have been lucky to have even one High-Grade user every few years. Special-Grade users are exceedingly rare. This year is an exception.”

“As she said. And as for you and Lina, you only mean that you couldn’t kill it instantly, right?”

“I can’t say for sure, since you killed it immediately, but I think I could beat it. I would have more trouble with the monsters on the way.”

“I don’t think I could defeat it instantly or otherwise. I could handle the ones on the way, I think, but not the area boss. Whoever made this dungeon was a jerk to make the minor monsters resist physical attacks and the boss resist magic.”

“But I think you will be able to do it by the time you graduate middle school, at least.”

“It would depend on what my other party members were like, but I think I could!”

“Yeah... I think I could do it too.”

That was what he meant; if it would be possible for them in the future, then it was no wonder he could do it now.

“I guess... But wait, it’s still weird that you can do it now! And even if we could, we couldn’t do it like you just did!”

“Oh, so you realized.”

“I believed we would be able to fool them, but alas...”

“How come you keep playing along?!”

They made their way toward the stairway as they conversed, and a smile came across Soma’s face.

It was out of gratitude. Due to the circumstances, he couldn’t help but be in a hurry, but panicking wouldn’t improve anything. He was grateful for the reminder of everyday life in the midst of this.

It wasn’t for that purpose that he’d brought Aina along, but it was enough for him to be glad he’d invited her.

Although he didn’t feel like telling her so.

Just then...

“Oh?”

Once they descended to the thirtieth floor and followed Hildegard’s directions, they came across a wide area where monsters were gathered. This phenomenon in which monsters happened to gather in one place was called a monster house.

“Ah, what bad luck... The monsters are crowded together. The shortest path would be this way, however...”

A monster house was never a welcome sight, but typically a party would either avoid it or pick off the monsters one by one...

“Well, no problem.”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance *Lightning Speed* Mental Stillness / Wild Dance: Great Blossoming

Before anyone had time to breathe, a sword flashed throughout the room countless times.

Then Soma continued to run through what could have been likened to a storm of flower petals fluttering through the air.

A sigh slipped from Aina’s mouth. “It’s no longer even strong enough to say you make no sense.”

“Perhaps the fact that he is this unbothered is evidence of how concerned he is for Sylvia... It makes me jealous. But perhaps he would also save me if I were in danger...”

“It bothers me too! Or so I wanted to say...but I realized he’s already saved me once.”

“Now that you mention it, the same goes for me...”

“Have I been left out...?!”

“Out of the two of us, yes, but I don’t think he’s saved Sierra yet, so you’re not alone!”

“You make it sound like he’s going to. Well, I guess I wouldn’t be surprised if he did at some point.”

“All right, all right, let’s keep going.”

As they exchanged such nonsense, they continued forward...and just then, something occurred to Soma.

He turned to look at Hildegard.

“That reminds me, Hildegard.”

“Oh? Have you taken notice of my charm and decided to procreate? I am willing whenever you are.”

“Save the sleep talk for when you’re asleep. Anyway, I was thinking that you must have maps of the floors below the thirtieth.”

“Oh, you’re right, since we’re taking the shortest possible path!”

“Yeah, makes sense... But wait, I thought nobody’s been past the thirtieth floor, and don’t you have to go in person to make the maps?”

“Ah, yes, there are many such mysteries...”

When Hildegard proved unable to play dumb, all of their eyes fell on her, but she seemed intent on not talking.

But Soma hadn’t expected her to. He’d just wanted to check. He’d had a feeling that might be the case from the start, after all.

She’d agreed, with no hesitation, to give him directions, and it was also strange that she knew about the fortieth floor. She’d said that she’d conducted research, but if what he’d heard was true, her abilities didn’t just let her find out anything she wanted to. She couldn’t learn details of a place even when she was there, let alone from a distance.

But knowing that didn’t change anything.

“I’ll force the information out of you one way or another if I ever need to, but

it doesn’t matter for now.”

“I shall pray that that time never comes.”

It allowed them to proceed smoothly as they were now, and there was no need for anything more at the moment.

So as Soma kept moving forward, he decided that he could leave the matter as it was.

30

Why did things turn out this way?

Sylvia wondered, breathing heavily and listening to her heart pound violently in her chest...but then immediately smiled in self-derision.

It was obvious why. She'd brought this on herself.

It was a fundamental rule not to touch things in the dungeon carelessly. Inconspicuous objects could actually be traps or even monsters.

She knew that, and yet she'd touched it—she must have ended up letting down her guard.

And letting your guard down in the dungeon was risking your life. It was common for people to lose their lives that way.

It was the third floor.

She'd defeated the monsters easily.

It was a treasure box.

Those were no excuses.

If anything, there was ample reason to blame her.

It may have been the third floor, but it was still an unfamiliar place to her. She should have been as careful as possible; there had been no reason not to be.

And what did it matter that she'd defeated monsters easily? That was thanks to her party. It was no reason not to watch out for traps.

In the end, things had gone too well, and she'd gotten overconfident.

She'd thought she had gained confidence, but it had actually been arrogance.

It was beyond laughable.

"I'm no good at all..."

She'd studied magic and enrolled in the Royal Academy because she wanted to do something for her kingdom, for the people who had called her family.

But now that she was here, she found that there were people far, far more useful than her.

Honestly, what did...

“I even come here to—”

Instantly, she stopped talking to herself, suppressed her breathing, and shrank down. She’d felt a familiar vibration in the ground.

The reason she was here in the first place was to hide from *that* thing. What a fool she had been to forget such an important thing in the midst of her reflection.

But she quickly lost even the capacity to scold herself. She felt a larger vibration than ever before from just next to her.

Desperately suppressing a reflexive cry and forcing her body not to shake, she fervently prayed.

Please let it go away.

Please let it not notice me.

From far deeper in her heart than her usual prayers, she prayed.

I don’t want to die.

Please help me, God.



And maybe God was listening, because the vibrations lessened little by little and got farther away. Once they seemed distant enough, she let out a long, deep breath.

The strength left her tense body, and a cold sweat dripped from every inch of her skin.

For a brief instant, she peeked out of her hiding place to watch its back as it headed off somewhere. Then she hastily pulled back.

That was the second time she'd seen it.

Both times had only been for a second and from afar...but that was enough for her to tell what it was.

It was unmistakably either an area boss or a monster equivalent in power to one. The kind that would kill her in an instant if she dared to challenge it.

While she'd already known, that was proof she'd been sent a long way down.

Sylvia had realized she was on a different floor the moment she'd landed here. Once her vision returned, she saw that the scenery around her wasn't much different from where she had just been...but she was the only one there. That made it an easy conclusion that she had really been forcibly teleported.

But what happened immediately afterward had made her forget all about that.

She'd felt the ground shake, just like she had moments ago. In a panic, she'd jumped into a nearby side path, which she had to admit was a good decision.

She'd gone as deep as she could, suppressed her breathing...and then it had walked past through the corner of her narrow field of view.

It was ten meters tall, and though humanoid, it was definitely not a biological creature.

She could tell because its whole body was made of a dully shining gold.

A golem—and a golden one, at that.

Half instinctually and half intellectually, she'd immediately known she would die if she fought it.

Golems had different characteristics depending on what material they were made of, and gold was the worst of all. It gave them resistance to both physical and magical attacks.

And moreover, she had seen how huge it was. She didn't have to wonder what would happen if it used that mass of gold in an attack.

It looked like it might have been slow because of its size, but her instincts said otherwise. It had probably just been walking slowly at that moment and would be even faster than her in a fight.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Appraisal): Detect.

So she had let the golem pass by...but she hadn't continued to hide there, because she'd gotten a sense that it was a bad idea. The reason for her feeling hadn't been clear even to her; she'd just felt like it would end badly.

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Clairvoyance / Future Sight): Spider Sense.

Since this was an extreme situation, the golem could have been doing something outside of her awareness, but the important thing was that she'd felt a strong compulsion to move.

So, once the golem was far enough away, she'd quietly slipped out of her hiding place and first tried to escape via the staircase.

It might have been better to hide somewhere, but there was no guarantee help would come, and even if it did, it would have been over if the golem had found her before then. So she'd attempted to escape first.

But she'd realized immediately that it was impossible.

It wasn't that she couldn't find a way out. The stairs to the floor above were actually relatively close.

However, she'd been unable to go up them for some reason. There was an empty space acting as a barrier, as if this area was isolated, with anyone inside forbidden from going into the next area.

And even Sylvia knew what that meant.

She was trapped in here.

There was probably only one way out.

She had to defeat that golem.

But she knew she couldn't do that, so naturally, she'd changed plans and decided to wait for help after all.

She would need a hiding place for that, so she'd looked for one with the utmost caution...and as she was searching, she'd noticed something.

There were no monsters there. Apart from the golem, of course.

That had made her think there may be hope for her after all...which was probably why it had come to this.

She'd found a hiding spot...then, once she was safe inside, she'd forgotten the situation and started thinking back on her own actions.

Alternatively, it could have been because she had nothing else to do, but that was hardly an excuse.

However, she'd somehow managed to escape its notice.

If she'd made it this far, maybe she could—

"Huh?"

All-Around Prodigy (Middle-Grade) (Imitation: Sense Presence): Sense Sneak Attack.

Sylvia was already moving before she had time to think. She instinctively knew she would die that very instant if she paused to think.

Regardless...

It was another story whether she'd accomplished anything even then.

"Oh... Huh?"

She didn't know what had happened.

She didn't know what was happening to her body.

Why there was pain shooting through every inch of her, or why she'd been slammed against the wall of the dungeon.

She didn't know the reason for any of it.

She only knew two things.

She had no more place to hide...and when she reflexively lifted her head, she saw herself reflected in the dull surface of the figure.

"No... How?"

Forgetting her pain, she muttered incredulously.

Based on this, she knew one thing.

She'd been mistaken to think it had turned around without noticing her.

How had it noticed?

Why had it pretended to turn back?

She didn't know.

She didn't know, but...

"Oh..."

One thing was clear: her death was quickly approaching.

Once she was conscious of that...

In that instant, many things flashed through her mind.

Her mother.

Her father.

Her mothers-in-law.

Her half-siblings.

Her kingdom.

And the mixed feelings that she'd had toward all of them.

No...the mixed feelings she still had.

The academy.

Sorcery.

Her teachers.

Her friends.

All the other things she'd wanted to do.

How really, deep down, she hardly thought about her kingdom at all.

It was just a means.

She wanted everyone to smile.

She wanted to smile with them.

That was all she wanted.

That was all she needed.

But just then, she realized.

The people at the academy were part of her "everyone" now.

She'd made more friends than just Maria.

So she thought, just a little...

They must be worried about me.

I guess I won't be able to say sorry.

And...

I wonder if they'll all miss me.

Though she understood the situation, she didn't think to change it, because she knew she couldn't.

All she felt was resignation. Whatever thoughts went through her mind, that remained the same.

So many things went through her mind at once—a vast number, including things that didn't rise to the level of her conscious mind.

And the last thought Sylvia had was an awfully selfish one.

"Huh... So, I'm going to die here... This sucks."

Those words alone slipped out of her mouth—

“Well, you’re not going to die quite yet, so rest assured.”

Just before the death that had been approaching shattered into little pieces.

31

She found herself laughing; it was so sudden and quick.

Soma, who had appeared out of nowhere, stood there looking like it was the most normal thing in the world...but then turned a puzzled look into the distance.

“Hmm... Was that all? That ended quickly... I assumed it would revive.”

Familiar voices responded to those words. Three more figures appeared, just as suddenly and casually as Soma.

“It doesn’t seem strange to me, considering what the way here was like... Why’d you assume that, anyway?”

“Well, since I was told that the area boss is the only monster here, I assumed it would be strong enough to make up for the absence of other monsters.”

“The area boss may be the only enemy here, but it is impossible to escape, so it would have been excessive to make it any stronger.”

“Oh, right, you usually have to fight it as soon as you come down here. I guess it makes sense in that case.”

A moment ago, the room had been filled with the tension of coming face to face with death. But now, it already felt like she was back in a corner of the training area after school, which automatically put a smile on her face.

She rubbed her eyes to unblur her vision, then exhaled.

Finally, she finally opened her mouth.

“Um... Thanks for saving me? Is that what I should say?”

“Hmm... I suppose I should say, you’re welcome. There are a number of other things I’d like to say, though.”

“Oh, yeah... I bet.”

There was no way he’d just happened to show up; he’d clearly come to save her. That meant he knew how this situation had come to be...

Well, she had no choice but to sit quietly and accept the scolding.

...She got to hear him scold her.

That shouldn't have made her happy, but she was unable to suppress her smile.

"To be glad that someone is angry with you... I did not wish to know that the students at my academy are masochists."

"No, that's not... Wait, Headmaster?"

She'd been aware that two of the three who had appeared were Aina and Lina. But it was so unexpected that the third would be the headmaster, Hildegard, and Sylvia had been so preoccupied, she'd only just noticed.

"Indeed, it is me."

"Wait, so... Even you came to help me, Headmaster?"

The head of the Royal Academy had come in person to help a single student. That could have been a moving story depending on how one looked at it, but Sylvia wasn't naive enough to think of it that way.

What that meant was...

"Oh, well, you don't have to pay that much mind. I only brought her because that was the fastest way for me to get here. She served as a guide, or a map, I should say. A map that tells us the most efficient way to get from one point to another using words." Soma turned to Hildegard. "Now that I think of it that way... You're rather convenient."

"Yes, it is right that you should praise me... But why is it that your words of praise do not make me feel as if I am being praised?"

"No reason."

Soma shrugged, playing dumb, and Hildegard shot him a glare.

They seemed very friendly with each other. But at the same time, that was no way for a student to talk to another student, let alone the headmaster.

"Um... Are you friends with the headmaster, Soma? Or have you known each other a long time or something?"

“Oh, that was on my mind too. You’ve been weirdly casual with her.”

“I don’t recall meeting her before coming to the academy, so I don’t think our family knew her before... Maybe something happened when he took the test, or during the interview? That reminds me, he’s been going to the library and going places with someone on his days off... Could it be?”

Under three sets of questioning and curious eyes, Soma and Hildegard turned to look at each other, then both shrugged.

“A lot has been going on.”

“Yes, it is a secret.”

“Mmh, I’m suspicious...”

“Yeah, that’s fishy...”

“This isn’t the time to be talking about that, anyway. People are worried, so we should head back.”

“Oh... Yeah, you’re right.”

She’d lost focus from the relief of being saved, but there were other people who were still worried, and she had to set them at ease. It seemed like other people must be aware... She had to show her face to those other three, especially.

“There’s a lecture waiting for you as well.”

“Please go easy on me...”

With that, Sylvia and the others began to walk back up.

†

“Wait... What’s this?”

Sylvia suddenly stopped when they approached the staircase to exit the fortieth floor.

And it was clear what she was talking about.

There was a crack in the empty space.

One that had been forcefully cut into it.

“This wasn’t here when I came before... Did you...?”

“There’s only one person here who can do that.”

“I figured...”

Soma shrugged in response to the glance Sylvia shot him.

Yes, he’d done it, but it was nothing unusual. If a space was closed off, all he had to do was cut into it to enter. That option had been preferable to destroying the entire wall around the area.

“I’m not sure this is much better... I was partly aware already, but between this and healing me instantly, Soma is really something, huh? But that aside... Is this...okay?”

“We all came through it, so I can guarantee it’s okay in that sense!”

“Cuts in space heal themselves given time, so it is no problem in that sense either.”

“But the space should be unlocked now that the area boss is defeated,” Aina added. “Do we really have to go through that thing again?”

“We don’t necessarily have to, but it won’t cause any problems if we do. We can go through if you’re interested, Sylvia.”

“I mean, I’m interested, but... I think I’ll pass.”

“All right, then.”

In fact, it would be no different from passing through a normal space now. So, accepting Sylvia’s decision, Soma deliberately walked around and past the gash in space.

The group began to ascend the staircase just as they normally would have.

But Soma, narrowing his eyes, thought to himself...

If a trick was going to be played on them, it would be right now.

But he saw no signs of anything happening, nor did he when they reached the thirty-ninth floor.

Glancing at his surroundings, he turned to look at Hildegard and asked, “What

do you think?”

“I do not want to think so, but it seems likely that this was not the work of a human.”

He felt the same. Otherwise, this situation was inexplicable.

Yes, both Soma and Hildegard thought it likely that someone had plotted this incident. It was just too much of a coincidence. The princess, Sylvia, had happened to find a never-before-seen hidden passage, discovered a treasure box, and been teleported to the fortieth floor by a trap that shouldn’t have been there.

Moreover, the place was usually impossible to escape or be rescued from. The obvious conclusion was that someone had set this up.

But if that wasn’t the case...

“This is turning out to be a lot of trouble.”

“Indeed. I did not imagine that it would be as bad as this. Perhaps we should investigate more quickly and carefully.”

“We have no choice. There’s no telling what will happen if we don’t do anything.”

As they conversed quietly, Soma sighed.

It had to do with the reason he had accompanied Hildegard earlier today. This told them their efforts hadn’t been for nothing, but naturally, he wasn’t happy about that.

Regardless...

“Well, we’ve rescued her successfully, so we can think about what comes next later.”

“Indeed.”

No matter the cause, once a life was lost, that was that. They should be satisfied for the time being that they’d saved Sylvia, then.

There was a chance that something else would happen for the same reason, but they would cross that bridge when they got to it.

All of that could wait until they returned safely, Soma thought as they hurried back.

†

A fervent reception awaited Soma's group when they returned from the dungeon. There was such a commotion, it was as if a miracle had occurred.

However, it was mainly the instructors who were happy; the majority of the students didn't seem to know what was going on.

"I get the sense that everyone who was in the dungeon today is here, though... Why are things like this?"

Judging by the mood, the students had been recovered without issue, but if they didn't know what was going on, that meant they hadn't been told any details. That meant there was no reason for them to stay here or to be kept here. He would've expected them to disperse.

"Well, I think they just felt like they should... I can only imagine what the mood has been like until now."

"Oh... Right, since the instructors had to stay here, things must have been so tense that the students didn't feel like they should leave."

"So that's my fault, then... I'd better apologize."

A few may have left, but considering the number of people in their vision, this was probably almost everyone.

Soma looked around and saw various faces. Camilla smiled wryly when he met her eyes, and Helen looked relieved.

Kurt and Helen had similar expressions on their faces, and the others who seemed relieved must have been the ones who knew what was going on.

Lars seemed to have mixed feelings, and apart from those three, there were some who seemed to grasp what was happening and some who seemed confused. Some were also starting to filter away, so it was a rather disorderly scene.

Some of the people starting to leave were instructors, and they seemed to be in a hurry, so they probably had other things to do.

As Soma stood there thinking, he spotted Sierra approaching him. Once she came near, she stopped and looked straight at him.

“I did my best.”

Her expression was the same as always, but her chest was high and there was a hint of pride in her tone. She wasn’t the type to bluff, so she must really have done her best.

“I can see that. Good job.”

He replied with a crooked smile, and Sierra smiled back slightly. He apparently hadn’t been mistaken to think that she wanted to be praised.

But even as he did that, he looked around again...

“Hmm... Hildegard?”

“I have not found anything particularly strange. This means...”

“Chances really are high that this wasn’t a person’s doing.”

Soma and Hildegard alone watched the joyful scene from afar, then turned to look behind them, toward the place they had just emerged from—the dungeon.

“So, the dungeon...no, the Archdevil is behind this.”

Soma muttered about the core of the issue, narrowing his eyes as if to fix his gaze on what was before him.

32

The instructor’s voice echoed through the lecture hall.

Numbers were written on the blackboard in the front, and the voice was explaining them.

It was a math class.

But while Soma was sitting in the lecture hall, and as usual, he wasn’t listening to the instructor. He flipped through the book in his hands, letting the information he already knew go in one ear and out the other.

Everyone was used to seeing this by now. But one thing was different from normal.

The seat next to Soma, which had always been occupied until a week ago, was empty.

But everyone knew the reason for that, so nobody questioned it.

They had all heard what the girl who should have been there had done.

That girl—Sylvia—hadn’t technically broken any rule. She’d ignored safety guidelines, but guidelines were just guidelines. There was no punishment for breaking them, so all Sylvia had done was make a careless, reckless mistake.

However, needless to say, that wasn’t a good thing. Understanding that, she...her whole group, in fact, had requested that they be suspended.

And that was desirable for the academy as well. Although there was no established punishment, they couldn’t let students off lightly for ignoring a caution given with good reason. It was only luck that Sylvia had ended up all right this time.

Since the headmaster herself had acted as well, the academy had ordered a weeklong in-room suspension for the four of them, including Kurt.

That was why Sylvia wasn’t sitting next to Soma like she usually did...but that actually wasn’t the only reason there was nobody sitting next to Soma.

It was because he was sitting in the middle of the front row.

It was inconceivable that the highly ambitious students at the Royal Academy would leave an empty seat in the front row. In fact, the rest of the front row was filled, as was the second row.

But there was a reason they didn't sit there...no, they couldn't sit there.

They'd decided the seating arrangement based on grades.

Yes, the students had decided that themselves—it served as motivation to aim higher.

That same logic was the reason they didn't say anything about Soma's behavior during class. They wanted to take his place using their own abilities alone.

So they said nothing, and they didn't sit in the conveniently open seat either. They would only be able to sit there once they had earned it themselves.

It was with that in mind that they focused hard on the lecture, as they always did.

Moreover, Soma was in the front row despite not taking classes seriously because he knew that himself.

Soma often deliberately ignored social cues, but it wasn't that he couldn't read them.

So, smirking at the glinting eyes of his challengers, Soma confidently read a book unrelated to class in the middle of the front row.

Incidentally, today's book was another one about dungeons. However, the previous book he'd read had touched on everything about dungeons in a broad and shallow manner, whereas this one went narrow and deep into a particular subject.

It was about research into the will of the dungeon.

He'd picked this book out at random like he always did, but considering that, it was very on point. He was involved in that very thing right now.

However, the contents of this book were technically somewhat different from

his own situation...

“Well, I suppose this will serve as somewhat of a reference anyway.”

After all, there were many things about the dungeon that even Hildegard didn’t understand. That meant that he couldn’t afford to dismiss any information that might be of use, no matter what it was.

Those were his thoughts as he continued reading...until the question of what would happen after school came to his mind.

Soma hadn’t gone to the training area since Sylvia and her party had been suspended. It was partially because he didn’t feel like it and partially because he had other things to do.

But their suspension would be over the next day.

Would he go back to doing this and that in the training area, or would he prioritize the thing he had to do? He hadn’t decided yet.

That would depend on Sylvia and her party...and it would also depend on today.

“I wonder how things will turn out...” he muttered without opening his mouth, referring to multiple things at once.

Then Soma returned his attention to his book and turned another page.

†

The fortieth floor of the dungeon.

The area, which had been unexplored until just the other day, was once again filled with silence.

And the area boss that should usually have been there was nowhere to be seen.

Like the other monsters, area bosses regenerated after some time, but in this case, the process was said to take about ten days. Only a week had passed since the area boss had been defeated, so it hadn’t come back yet.

But ten days was only an average, so in theory, it could have come back by now...

“Well, this is thanks to what I always do, I guess,” he boasted to himself as he walked forward.

He moved without hesitation, not because he had a destination in mind, but because there was no reason to hesitate.

As a rule, the dungeon got larger and more complicated the farther down one went, but the fortieth floor was an exception. This floor, with no monsters or any area boss, was about ten meters high but not that wide. If you weren’t sure where to go, it would be faster to pick a direction at random and walk, which was why there was no reason to hesitate.

“The issue’s just that the thing we’re after got left behind... It’s already been a week, after all. Wouldn’t be surprised if everything’s gone back to how it was before.”

The walls and floors of the dungeon were sturdy, but they weren’t indestructible. However, just as monsters regenerated over time, so did the walls and floor. Even if broken, they would come back shortly. The time it took depended on how they had been broken, but most things would be fixed within a week.

He looked around to confirm that fact and clicked his tongue.

“Tch, not even a scratch. I heard the area boss broke part of the wall...but it’s not looking like I’ll be able to find it based on that. Should’ve come earlier... But I couldn’t come right after I got suspended. Well, I guess considering I only got this far ’cause I’m still suspended...”

He muttered as he walked and looked around, then stopped when he approached a certain place. His gaze dropped to his feet, and he narrowed his eyes and smirked.

“Ha... What I’ve been doing really did pay off. Didn’t think I’d really find it.”

He crouched down and scraped the thing off the wall—a dark red lump. Then he took a jar from his pocket, put the lump in it, and smiled with satisfaction.

“Not quite enough...but plenty to try. I’ll think about what comes next after I give it a try.”

He stood up...but put his hand back in his pocket as if he'd remembered something.

He took out a book.

"Well, don't need this anymore, so might as well get rid of it here. Already sent him the information he needs out of it."

The book was an extravagantly decorated, expensive-looking one, but he tossed it on the ground and set it on fire without hesitation. It only took a moment to turn to ashes, which he then stomped on.

"All right, no more evidence. Nobody'll suspect I stole it now that the original's gone. But I'll have to look into where the others are and get rid of those too."

He ground his foot into the floor as he muttered. Then he kicked, and what had been a book flew everywhere, leaving no evidence that it had ever been there.

He looked at his work, satisfied, then put a lid on the jar and returned it to his pocket.

"Time to get back. Don't want anyone catching me breaking my suspension... Got a lot to do after this."

As he walked, his mouth twisted.

"I'm gonna get my hands on that Archdevil's power, I swear."

So he declared to himself in a murmur before disappearing from the area.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Shin Kouduki.

This is my first afterword since Volume 1; the last volume had no afterword because it was too long. But this one is too long as well, so I don't have much room to write.

Strange, since this was only part of what I originally intended to be one volume.

Oh, right, it's because I got carried away with adding original material since I had the extra room.

In any case, I'd like to put the most important things first. The first volume of the manga adaptation is being released at the same time as this volume, so whoever hasn't purchased it already, go buy it.

I mentioned it on the inside cover as well, but Aina is adorable, so buy it.

Forget the marketing pitch. Just buy it. You won't regret it.

Thank you to everyone who's already purchased the manga, and if anyone bought the light novel after buying it, thank you as well.

I don't know how long I'll be able to keep going, but I want to put in my best work so that the manga version doesn't beat me, so I hope you'll come along for the ride.

I digress, but this volume is the first half of what I originally intended to be one volume, as I mentioned before. That means the conflict isn't resolved, but it will be in the next volume, so I hope you don't mind waiting a bit for it.

There isn't enough content for a whole volume yet, so the majority will be new. I'll try to make it so that anyone who has already read the web novel can still enjoy it as well.

Finally, my gratitude.

To my editor I., thank you for handling all the work I make for you.

To necömi, thank you for the wonderful illustrations. They've somehow gotten even better than before.

Thank you to the proofreaders, salespeople, designers, and everyone else involved in the publication of this book.

And most of all, thank you to everyone who's supported me all this time, and to everyone who picked up this book and purchased it.

I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

With that, may we meet again in Volume 4.