
I Surrendered
My Sword as a Mage
for a New Life
4
Shin Kouduki
Art
necömi


I Surrendered
My Sword
for a
New Life
as a
Mage
4
Shin Kouduki
Art
necömi

I Surrendered My Sword for a New Life as a Mage: Volume 4 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11


I Surrendered
My Sword
for a
New Life
as a
Mage
4
Shin Kouduki
Art
necömi

1

Sylvia let out a huge sigh and collapsed forward into her bed.

The soft mattress cushioned her face, at which she let out a relieved breath. The beds at the academy were soft enough, but they couldn’t compete with this. It was of the highest quality, but more importantly, it was what she was used to.

“Oh, not this again! I swear, whenever I take my eyes off you... It’s bad manners, Lady Sylvia.”

“Mm?”

Sylvia could hear the lecture, but it wasn’t enough to make her move. She would need a really good reason to interrupt this sweet time.

“So, you aren’t going to get up... That leaves poor Maria with nothing to do. But look here... This could be a nice way to spend my free time. If I recall, this is the action drama you were writing last year with yourself as the heroine...”

“Yiee!”

Sylvia leapt out of bed in a panic and grabbed it from Maria’s hand. How had it ended up here, after she’d carefully stowed it away before going to the academy?!

“Hehe, you underestimate me. When I try, I can find what you’ve hidden as easily as stealing candy from a baby.”

“You don’t have to show off that way!”

Sylvia glared at her gloating personal servant, Maria, but she appeared unbothered.



In fact, she didn’t appear at all daunted before her master Sylvia.

“I used to think you were so sweet and cute...”

“What do you mean, Lady Sylvia? Aren’t I unignorably adorable?”

“No, yeah, that’s right; I’m starting to get the feeling you were always like this.”

If anything, that was why Sylvia continued to employ her.

Also, Maria was probably acting like this because she was trying to uphold the promise she’d made long ago—to be Sylvia’s friend.

Well, it could have just been her true self...but the alternative sounded better, so Sylvia would go with that.

“I’d better put this somewhere that’s really out of sight this time... Anyway, why are you here, Maria?”

She’d only dove into her bed because she was alone. She wouldn’t have if she’d known Maria was there.

“To make your bed, of course. I was told beforehand that you would be back today, but it slipped my mind.”

Sylvia could tell Maria was lying. Whatever else she said, she couldn’t deny that her friend and elder of six years was an exceptional servant. Maria wouldn’t forget something like that.

“And also...you seemed a little down, so I thought I would cheer you up.”

“Oh...”

That was another blatant lie. Nobody but Sylvia could give orders to Maria in the first place. Sylvia’s father, the king, supervised Maria when she was away, but now that she was back, nobody else could give Maria an instruction like that...other than maybe Maria herself.

As she realized Sylvia was onto her, Maria’s mouth curved slightly into something between an ironic smile and a genuine smile.

“Did something happen at the academy... Actually, that would be a silly question.”

“Yeah... I wouldn’t be here otherwise,” Sylvia muttered as she glanced around.

Needless to say, everything she saw was familiar to her, because this was her own room at home. And the reason she was here was because her family had summoned her.

Sylvia was currently suspended due to the incident in the dungeon. To be precise, she herself had asked to be suspended...but either way, she was suspended, so her family had told her to come back and explain why that had happened.

And that was to be expected. It was unprecedented for a royal to receive a suspension. It was only natural that they would be concerned, as both royalty and family, and want to know what was going on.

So, as a result, she had come here on the final day of her suspension to explain herself.

“I’m supposed to be in my room at school right now, but, well...”

“They phrased it as an order for precisely that reason, didn’t they?”

“I know, but...I just feel bad. Maybe I shouldn’t, though, since I myself asked to be suspended.”

“In Maria’s personal opinion, you may be a bit too conscientious. I like that about you, though.”

“Thanks...”

Maria nodded *you’re welcome* with a composed expression in response to Sylvia’s thanks. It put a smile on Sylvia’s own face, since it told her Maria was genuinely concerned for her, even if she was acting as if it was nothing.

Maria wasn’t concerned for Sylvia as a master, nor as a respected member of the royal family, but for Sylvia as a person.

She really was a good friend.

And that was probably why the next words slipped out, feelings Sylvia hadn’t told even her relatives about.

“So, Maria...”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Do I not have talent after all?”

“I say this as both advice and a warning... You shouldn’t say things like that in public. You’ll get your behind kicked. In fact, I feel a little bit like kicking your behind.”

With those words, Maria clenched her fist half jokingly...but the other half was serious.

And Sylvia knew that what Maria said was true. It was an undeniable fact, not flattery or exaggeration, to say that Sylvia was the most talented out of everyone currently attending the Royal Academy. Not Aina, Sierra, or even Lina could beat Sylvia in terms of raw talent. People lumped her into the sorcery department’s “top trio,” but Sylvia had by far the most practical talent of the three.

But...at the same time, that was all she had. Even if she exceeded Aina in talent, the other girl stood out as the more powerful mage. Due to the breadth of her potential, Sylvia was just a jack of all trades and master of none. She had experienced that reality anew after her second time in the dungeon.

“You want so much... May I kick your behind after all?”

“It’ll hurt whether you hit me or not, so I’d rather pass.”

Sylvia smiled wryly. She’d had a feeling Maria would say that. She’d known it was selfish of her to want more than she had from the beginning, anyway, since long before she enrolled in the academy.

But maybe she hadn’t really *understood*.

Seeing Soma’s actions in the dungeon, she’d verified that her eyes hadn’t deceived her...and at the same time, she’d learned that she couldn’t do anything on her own. Really, Soma had done the things she should have been doing. She could use a vast number of Skills, and many of them were useful for exploring a dungeon.

Seeing Helen, Sylvia had learned what a High-Grade Skill was like. It wasn’t extraordinary like a Special-Grade Skill, but it was a highly specialized inborn talent. That was what Sylvia should have been aiming for.

Seeing Lars, she had learned the gap that could exist between two Middle-Grade Skill users. They both used a sword, but Sylvia couldn't move like he did.

That was the downside of being able to do anything.

She'd noticed and understood that during her first trip into the dungeon, and she'd put in effort to bridge that ability gap.

Or she'd tried to bridge it, at least.

But she'd done no more than try.

That was why she was in such a shameful state now—referring not to what Maria was saying but to Sylvia's own presence here.

She hadn't intended to stay here overnight. But night had already fallen, so it had been decided that she should stay. They couldn't let a princess walk around alone at night, not even in the capital.

But she wasn't the one who had drawn out the conversation. It had been drawn out despite her. Her family had bought time by asking her all manner of unnecessary questions so that she would stay overnight. She knew that wasn't just a suspicion of hers because they'd stopped as soon as night fell.

Her family members were all busy with their official responsibilities. They shouldn't have had time to listen to Sylvia talk for that long, even if the situation was unprecedented. They'd done so despite lacking the time, so they must have seen a need to.

They couldn't act in a completely private capacity, but they were worried about her nevertheless.

But that concern should have been unnecessary. She should have made it unnecessary.

She'd made them do something that should have been unnecessary, all because she was immature.

If she'd done things right, she would have come back safely from the dungeon even without Soma, and there wouldn't have been all this fuss.

Those thoughts were probably selfish, like Maria said, or maybe arrogant. Here Sylvia was, thinking she wasn't good enough, when there were so many

people who couldn’t have that much talent even if they wanted it.

But at the same time...

“My goodness... In Maria’s opinion, you could settle for what you have right now. You’re good enough as you are.”

“Yeah... Maybe you’re right.”

“Well, my master has never been one to listen to what I say,” Maria said with a sigh. “You may do as you see fit.”

“Yeah... Thanks.”

This time, Maria didn’t respond to her thanks with a *you’re welcome* nod and a composed expression. But Sylvia didn’t mind; if anything, she was happy Maria was going as far as she was.

Now that Sylvia was enrolled in the academy, it was odd for the two to be conversing at all, let alone for Maria to be worrying about and coddling her.

She’d tried to fill the gaps in her ability...

But if she’d really tried as hard as she could, she wouldn’t have come back home before her next dungeon dive.

She’d been coddled all this time without realizing it.

It was Sylvia herself who was the least able to act as an equal. And she might have stayed that way if she hadn’t realized.

But now that she knew, she couldn’t let herself stay that way. She had power and talent; it was her responsibility not to stagnate.

So today, Sylvia would say farewell to her past self. She would part ways with the special treatment she’d enjoyed.

And she probably wouldn’t come home again for a while.

“I’ll be lonely...”

“You made friends, didn’t you? Then you’ll be fine. Also...I know better than anyone that there’s nothing my friend can’t do. If I say you’ll be okay, then you will be. So...do your best, okay?”

“Yeah... Thanks, Maria.”

Sylvia smiled in response to the friend who’d given her one last moment of special treatment. Then she renewed her determination.

2

Soma was acutely sensitive to the shift in the lecture hall's atmosphere in that moment. In fact, he had an idea of the cause before he even looked around.

So when he lifted his head and saw Sylvia, it was nothing he hadn't expected.

Everyone was reacting as if they'd seen a rare beast, but things would be back to normal soon enough.

Having predicted that, Soma returned to his book right away...then closed it with a sigh when he felt eyes on him from close by.

"What is it, Aina?"

"What do you mean, 'what is it?' How come *you're* acting so normal?"

"'How come,' you ask... Did something happen? Is there some reason I should be acting differently?"

"I mean, you know..." Aina faltered, her eyes darting toward Sylvia.

Soma knew what Aina wanted to say, naturally. But that was only more reason for him to shrug as if it were nothing.

"I don't know what you could be referring to. Someone who is supposed to come to class came to class. Is there some issue with that?"

He hadn't particularly raised his voice, but everyone must have been quietly observing, because those words echoed loudly through the hall. The other students looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

It wasn't like Sylvia had done nothing wrong, but she hadn't done anything deserving of blame or resentment. And most importantly, they were all at the academy to aim for greater heights. Everyone here was simultaneously an opponent and a study partner. The return of a successful student was reason to rouse themselves, but it wasn't a reason to have any other feelings.

So by the time Sylvia walked through the lecture hall, which had quickly returned to its normal atmosphere, there was no more unrest. She sat down as she always did, filling the seat next to Soma for the first time in a week.

“Morning, Soma. And...thanks.”

“I would rather not be thanked in particular. Good morning, regardless.”

“You really never change, huh... No, actually, I should reflect on my actions this time. Anyway, morning, Sylvia.”

“Yeah, morning, Aina.”

Puzzled, Soma looked at Sylvia as she greeted the other girl. Sylvia spotted his reaction out of the corner of her eye and turned a similarly puzzled look toward him.

“What’s up, Soma?”

“You just appear slightly different. Did something happen?”

“Uh, well, I guess some stuff did happen. Mostly a week ago, though.”

“Hmm...”

There was a smile on Sylvia’s face when she said that. Her tone was vaguely humorous, but probably not because she was dismissing the events of a week ago. If anything, it was proof that she’d grasped their significance on a deep level and come to terms with them.

“It seems the suspension was worth it.”

“Yeah... Only barely, though.”

Everyone makes mistakes. The important thing isn’t to avoid making mistakes but to acknowledge your mistakes and use them as fuel to grow. Sylvia seemed to comprehend that well.

And it wasn’t just Sylvia either.

“I suppose I should expect as much from someone who was admitted to the Royal Academy.”

“Where’d that come from?”

“Oh... I was simply looking forward to our next dungeon dive.”

“What? Come on, what are you... Oh, I get it.”

Once she followed Soma’s gaze and saw who he was looking at, Aina

understood what Soma meant.

It was Helen, who was just now entering the lecture hall. He spotted a slight stiffness in her face, but she only hesitated for a moment. She quickly proceeded into the hall, and once she saw no signs of anyone blaming her, the stiffness melted away. The only emotions that remained on her face were remorse and determination. It was clear that she'd gained something from her suspension, just as Sylvia had.

"You had better pick up the pace so they don't get ahead of you, Aina."

"Who do you think you're talking to? If they're going to try even harder than before, then I say bring it on. I'll teach them what being in a different league means."

"It is good to be dauntless, but let us pray that the written word cannot teach what being in a different league means."

"Guh..." Aina averted her eyes; her face said he'd hit a sensitive spot.

It wasn't that Aina was *bad* at studying per se, but she had a very uneven skill profile. That was why she was yielding the empty seat to Sylvia despite having a Special-Grade Skill.

"I don't plan to let Aina beat me—you either, Soma."

"Is that so? Then I wish you the best in your efforts."

"Mmh, you say that from a place of such superiority... I mean, maybe it's warranted in your case, but..."

"Hmm? I see... It seems there is a discrepancy in our understandings."

"A discrepancy...? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I get it..."

In contrast to Sylvia, who looked confused, Aina seemed to comprehend what he meant exactly. She side-eyed Soma, then shrugged.

"He means practical ability is the issue for him, not classes like it is for me."

"Oh... That's right, Soma can't..."

"Exactly; I can't use magic. And in the future, I don't imagine I will be able to

do what I did for the entrance exam."

"Are you going to be all right...? You might not be able to pass tests, let alone graduate..."

"I can cross that bridge when I come to it. If I can't graduate, that just means I can study here even longer, so it won't be an issue."

"No, it'll be an issue. I mean, if you're not careful, Lina could even graduate before you. Knowing her, she's going to start school here next year."

"Hmm... Yes, that would indeed bother me."

As an older brother, he couldn't accept being in the same grade as his younger sister, let alone graduating after her.

Just as he was reflecting that he would have to give some serious thought to the question of how to prevent that, he spotted a familiar face entering the lecture hall.

It was Lars. His stride was confident, with none of the hesitation that Sylvia and Helen had originally had.

But Lars was like them in that he'd gained something from the suspension. The look on his face was clearly different from when he'd last set foot here. The set of his shoulders seemed somewhat too high compared to the two girls, but that was normal; he would lose the tension soon enough.

And it wasn't just those three who were fired up. Everyone had noticed that the suspendees were different now that they were back. The other students' faces stiffened; they saw that if they weren't careful, the three would easily catch up to what they'd missed in a week and overtake the rest of them.

Seeing that, Soma smiled. It felt good to see people learning from each other and aiming for greater heights. He hoped they would keep that feeling with them going forward.

Just then, he realized...the same thing applied to him. Seeing them spurred him, which meant he had to study even harder than before.

His determination to learn magic renewed, he turned to look at Carine, who had arrived with perfect timing.

3

When Carine stepped into the lecture hall to teach class as she always did and laid eyes on her students, she was honestly surprised.

It was plain to see that the looks on their faces were different from before. Specifically, each and every one of them looked incredibly motivated.

Wondering what in the world had happened, she found herself turning toward Soma, maybe because she'd heard people talking about him. Maybe because she was in charge of the first years in the sorcery department, she heard all kinds of rumors about how he'd caused a lot of trouble at the entrance exams or how he continued to cause trouble in his usual classes.

So she'd thought maybe he'd finally done something in her own class, but all she saw was his usual motivated face. No, he actually seemed even more motivated than usual, but he was no different in terms of what direction he tended toward.

That meant it wasn't him after all.

But once she thought that far, she reminded herself that although the sudden change had surprised her, it wasn't a bad thing. Being motivated was good, so it wasn't an issue no matter who was responsible.

Just as she had that thought, she noticed that the previously empty seat next to Soma was once again filled. That reminded her that the suspension was over today. In that case, maybe it was those three who had sparked new motivation in their classmates.

She looked at each of their faces in turn and noticed that their determination was the result of serious reflection and not dejection, which put a slight smile on her face.

But whatever the reason, they were definitely motivated. If the three who had been suspended were also more determined than before, then she had to respond to them as an instructor.

Resolving to match their extra motivation, she stepped up to the platform and

looked over them again.

Some of them seemed to only have just remembered after seeing Carine's face that their first class of the morning was with her, but she was probably imagining that, she told herself as she tensed the arm in which she held her wand and smiled with motivation.

"Time to start class, everyone!"

But as soon as she announced the start of class, she suddenly felt like heaving a sigh of dejection. Some of the students looked disappointed, some were whispering to each other, and some were blatantly reading books that had nothing to do with her course.

Not only that, one even got up out of their seat and moved to the seat behind them. Others started doing the same.

Wondering where all that motivation had gone, Carine couldn't help but let out a small sigh after all.

She'd known this would happen—her class was extremely unpopular, especially within their concentration.

Situations like this weren't uncommon... Well, this was the first time anyone had moved seats after class had started, but it was usual for them to only sit in the back of the lecture hall and not seem to take class seriously.

This scenario was extremely strange from a normal perspective. Considering that she taught a sorcery course and the people before her were first years studying sorcery, they should have been putting more effort into the class.

It was unthinkable that they wouldn't be motivated, in fact. All of them had passed the stringent exam to get into the Royal Academy. They were unusually studious.

And yet things had turned out this way...because they didn't need Carine's class. At least, they didn't think they did, so they didn't pay attention.

Magic was intuitive, so given that one's own intuition was everything, they had to figure out how to use new spells on their own.

Some people meditated on learning magic, and some spent all day thinking

about what spells they wanted to use until one day, they could suddenly use them.

Some people went to temples and prayed to learn magic, and some people said hands-on learning was everything and found themselves able to use spells in the heat of the moment during a fight.

No one thing was the same for all of them. Before anything else, they had to discover the disparate methods that would enable them to use magic. Sorcery class was meant to be time for each of them to look for those methods. The instructor's role was just to share their own experience and support the students.

Or that was what people said a proper sorcery instructor should do...but Carine thought they were mistaken.

She didn't deny that many students learned to use magic that way. But she thought it was wrong, as an instructor, to tell them to figure it out on their own just because she didn't know a reliable method of teaching it.

Most of all, she thought it was wrong to conclude that just because magic was intuitive, it couldn't be explained with theory.

She had grounds for saying so. In fact, she heard that countries with more advanced magic research were beginning to arrive at the same conclusion. Magic research was classified within each nation, so the details weren't released to the general public, but the rumors were unlikely to be complete nonsense.

And Carine herself had proven a number of things through research. That meant that magic could be explained with theory.

Hence that was why she was teaching sorcery. She wanted to systematize magic, break it down theoretically, and prove it with formulas.

But that was all the more reason that the students found her class hard to accept. It went against all the common sense they'd learned. It was only natural.

In other words, it was precisely because they subscribed to that common sense that they didn't pay attention to Carine's class. It wasn't that they were

slackers. They debated each other using ways of thinking that seemed correct to them, did research, and tried to learn magic in ways that made sense to them.

So Carine couldn't admonish them. Though she thought she was right, from their perspective, it was she who was mistaken.

She could have used her authority as an instructor to make them listen...but she had no intention of doing that. Forcing them to listen to her would make her feel like she'd lost.

Maybe this was no place to be stubborn about that. Maybe she should have compelled them to listen and compelled them to understand the same way.

But Carine had pride as an instructor.

She easily could have been dismissed for continuing to teach a class in this way, but she was able to remain an instructor because the academy thought highly of her.

Hence, she didn't want her students to accept her theories based solely on her say-so.

There was no need for them to think she was right. If they just took a little interest, she was confident they would come around.

That was why she'd continued this far, and why she was teaching again today.

She may have been discouraged, but her spirit wouldn't break.

She continued to talk loudly enough that the back of the hall could hear her, making gestures with her wand.

There were only five students left in the front row...but five was enough, she decided upon reconsideration.

And the value of what she had to say didn't differ depending on how many people were listening.

The research was still in progress, but the point she was discussing now was one that she'd definitely proven. It was practical, and it was definitely valuable to people in the sorcery department.

If they understood that and acted accordingly, then they would be able to use new spells more easily; not only that, it might become easy for anyone to use magic.

“So, in other words, magic is just another type of Skill, you see. It’s like how people with Special-Grade Swordsmanship can cut space if they just picture themselves doing so. That should be impossible under normal circumstances, right? But they can do it. Simply by envisioning that concept, they can manifest it into reality. That makes them like apparitions in a sense.”

As she spoke, she noticed eyes on her from the rear of the classroom. Something she’d said had caught someone’s attention.

She looked over hopefully and saw a spark of interest for a moment...but she could see it vanish right after.

At the same time, she knew the intention behind that look, because she’d seen it many times before.

It meant, *no, I don’t know what you’re talking about*.

As Carine puzzled over how to get her idea across, she overheard a conversation.

“Hey, you cut space, didn’t you? Do you know what she’s talking about?”

“I do it using only my intuition. I can do it because I think I can, or perhaps because I know that I can... But, wait... Does that mean that if I followed that principle, I could use magic as well? I suppose I will need to use a sword...”

“Wouldn’t that just make it swordsmanship? I mean, I’ve heard some people use swords as wands, but that isn’t what you mean, is it? If you took a regular sword and tried to do something with it, it’d just be swordsmanship.”

“Impossible... How can that be?!”

“Wait, you’re actually surprised? Were...were you being serious? I want to know how *you* can be.”

The two voices were a lot clearer than the other voices rippling around them...but that was to be expected, in part because they weren’t trying very hard to hide that they were talking, but mostly because they were in the front

row. It was only natural that she would hear them better than the others.

Yet she didn't reprimand them...and a slight smile came to her face, because unlike the others, Soma and Aina were having a conversation related to what Carine had just said.

As always, they were paying attention. It was a little late for her to take notice of that, since they'd been doing the same up until now, but she might have noticed because of how she'd just seen the students blatantly turn away from her. It was like she was being told she wasn't wrong, which made her especially happy.

But she set her expression straight again—because she was in the middle of a class, but also, more importantly, because their conversation had included questions. This was no time to be pleased. She had to answer them.

"What is it, Soma, Aina? Do you need help understanding something?"

"There are more things I don't get... Oh, sorry, no, I'm fine. So, Soma? She asked if you need help understanding something."

"Hmm? Hmm... Well, I was just told that if I attempted to use magic with a sword, it would be swordsmanship. Is that true?"

"Huh? Well... That's a good question."

For a moment, she thought he might be joking, but his eyes were the definition of serious. That meant she should answer him seriously in turn.

And she came to the answer quickly once she thought about it.

The answer was no.

"So, I don't think that's necessarily true. That would mean mages couldn't hold any weapons while using spells...but wait, there's unarmed combat, so not even that would work. Considering that, logically, magic must be magic, even if you're holding a sword."

"But that's if you use a sword as a sword and spells as spells, right?" Sylvia seemed unconvinced; there was dissatisfaction on her face as she asked.

This part was certainly a bit hard to understand...but as Carine's eyes wandered and she wondered what to say, her gaze landed on Lars. She

furrowed her brow slightly; she felt like his seat had been closer to Soma's group before the suspension. It made her wonder if something had happened, but she got her train of thought back on track right away. She had to answer Sylvia's question right now, and Lars was perfect as an illustration.

"It might be hard to tell, but it's possible to use them both together! Using a sword as a sword, and spells as spells... Haven't you seen an example of that before?"

The instant Carine said that, their eyes briefly turned toward Lars. They'd known who she meant just from those words.

Sylvia nodded, apparently accepting the idea from that. "Now that you mention it, I have."

But although she accepted the idea, she wasn't quite to the point of understanding it. That may have been beyond Carine's ability to change.

"You aren't very used to wielding weapons, right, Sylvia?"

"What? Oh, yeah...if I had to say."

"So I think you'll understand once you get used to that. It's probably hard to understand now because you think of them as completely separate things."

Carine wasn't telling Sylvia to become a master, and she didn't have to tell her. Once the option of using a weapon became obvious to Sylvia during combat, she would grasp the principle Carine was describing.

"Hmm... So you're saying that my decision to take out a sword in order to use magic is not mistaken."

"No, what she's saying is that magic is magic whether you're holding a sword or not. It doesn't make sense that you want to get out a sword first for some reason."

"That's not necessarily the case."

"Huh?" Aina, who hadn't expected she would be contradicted, looked at Carine with wide eyes.

But what Carine said was true; at least, she couldn't definitively say Soma's decision was wrong.

“This isn’t something I particularly like to say, but...everyone has their own way of learning magic. If Soma says he can learn with a sword, then I think it’s possible. Not just that...I think it would be worth trying a method more suited to him.”

Carine thought the current method of teaching magic was mistaken, but she didn’t deny that it got results, and she knew that results were the first thing people needed. Studying theory meant nothing if they couldn’t get results from it. Only researchers could be satisfied with that, and these were students. And since Carine was an instructor, she couldn’t disavow any method that might get them results.

If he ended up getting anywhere that way, his group might end up losing interest in her class, but in that case, she could just try to regain their interest.

The reason Carine incorporated her research findings into class in the first place was that she thought it would serve the students best. If it was best for them, then it was no problem to bend her beliefs a little.

And she could also conclude that if they got results, they might be even more interested in what she had to say about why that was.

She didn’t know how it would turn out, but research was a process of making mistakes. That meant it wasn’t a problem at all to try different things.

“Hmm, a method more suited to me... I see. In other words, if I start by holding a sword, and then I try to learn magic as I swing it, perhaps...”

“No ‘perhaps,’ that’s definitely just swordsmanship.”

“Yeah, it is. Holding a sword is one thing, but I don’t think you can use magic while swinging it.”

“Yet I believe I saw Lars using magic as he swung a sword at the same time.”

“Um, that, that was because he was...he was just using magic... It’s, it’s different when you’re learning...”

“How can this be...?”

“Why’re you so surprised? It’s obvious...”

“Ms. Carine... Is this true?”

“Ah, well... Even if a method is well suited to a particular learner, it’s bound to have limits, you know? Like I said, a sword is a sword and spells are spells. If you tried to learn it while swinging a sword, the result might not be magic.”

“Impossible...”

Soma was being serious, and he was genuinely shocked. Carine couldn’t help but smile. While she thought his words were odd, he was taking her class seriously nevertheless.

At the same time, she wondered why he had such a bad reputation.

Soma had a reputation among the teachers, and most of what they had to say wasn’t positive.

Apparently, he read books in class and didn’t take the lectures seriously.

Apparently, he answered their questions correctly despite that, and it wasn’t cute at all.

Apparently, he’d sparred with the swordsmanship teacher on the first day, but he hadn’t done so again in all the time since, and she wasn’t happy about it!

That last story felt a bit out of place, but that was the general idea. He was a slacker who didn’t take lectures seriously and didn’t try very hard during the hands-on classes either. Dungeon diving was the one thing he took seriously, and the rest was a lost cause.

But from Carine’s point of view, he was a good, diligent student. He couldn’t use magic yet, but he definitely had enthusiasm.

And the academy’s philosophy was that those who should learn should be able to learn, so there shouldn’t have been an issue.

“Well... With that question in mind, why don’t we move on with class? It might make sense to you once you hear some more.”

“Hmm... All right. Please go on.”

At any rate, that very student was asking her to continue her class, so that was enough for Carine.

Privately, she wished that all of her students would one day be like that, but

for the time being, she resumed class.

4

Once Soma was done with sorcery class, he let out a satisfied breath and stretched slightly. He had been satisfied with today's class, but sitting still and concentrating for so long made his body stiff, which was a drawback.

"Well, I suppose I can't ask for too much," he muttered.

Just then, he felt eyes on him from the next seat. He turned his head and saw Aina giving him an exasperated look.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Nothing, really... Just wondering what would happen if you put that enthusiasm into your other classes too."

"Oh, yeah, I've wondered the same thing for a while... But I doubt that he'll change no matter what we say." Sylvia gave him a resigned look as well.

Soma could only shrug. He'd come to this academy to figure out how to use magic—that was all.

He didn't intend to skip his other classes just because they had nothing to do with it, though; that would cause trouble for his parents if he got expelled for it, and he wouldn't be able to continue his magic studies. If not for those two problems, he wouldn't even have gone to any classes except for sorcery.

Well, given that academies were places to take education seriously, he was bound to have those problems.

"I mean, if you know that, you should take education more seriously."

"I intend to do so if the need ever arises."

"I guess it's not like everyone else is doing their best in every class...although nobody else is as bad as Soma."

As Sylvia said, it wasn't uncommon for students to not listen in class or to do work for other classes during lectures.

But that wasn't because they were slackers. They were actually so studious

that when they judged that they already knew the material and didn't need to listen, they used that class time to do what they needed to do.

Especially since this was their first year of primary school, the majority of students had already learned the material before, so they didn't need to listen. Most of them paid attention anyway because they weren't confident that they knew everything perfectly, or because they were so conscientious that they couldn't bring themselves to do outside work during class.

Incidentally, the latter applied to Aina, and the former applied to Sylvia, though Sylvia was fairly confident. She just wasn't sure she had everything perfect, and as royalty, she had no choice but to seek perfection.

Regardless...

"It isn't as if I do outside work all the time."

"Don't tell me that's because you pay attention in sorcery class..."

"You lack faith in me... I mean classes other than sorcery, of course. I intend to take our next class seriously, for example."

"Wait, for real?"

"Yes, since this class sparked my motivation."

"What do you mean, it sparked... Oh, I get it."

"Huh? How do you know, Aina?"

"Remember what our next class is, Sylvia?"

"Yeah, of course, it's our martial arts... Oh, okay, I get it now."

Sylvia and Aina nodded, their narrowed eyes boring into him as if to tell him *how dare you say that*.

"What is it, you two? I haven't said anything mistaken."

"Yeah... I bet you're going to take your next class seriously, all right."

"You're going to try using magic with a sword like we talked about in class, aren't you?"

They were correct, so Soma stood up without another word. The next class

was in the practice area, so he would have to move. In fact, it was rare for classes to be held back to back in the same room, so he generally had to walk between classes.

Aina and Sylvia locked eyes and sighed in resignation.

“It doesn’t really matter, since you need swordsmanship class least of all.”

“Speaking of which, why did you pick swordsmanship, anyway? I’d think you need it less than any other class, like Aina said...”

“I didn’t especially want to learn another weapon, and I thought I’d use that time to try various things. There are some things that I can only try in a place like the practice area.”

“You put a lot of calculation into it beforehand...”

“Also, you must know that the instructor for the swordsmanship class is my sister. She told us that she would be teaching the first years herself. She asked me to join her class, and I couldn’t refuse to enroll in the first class my sister has ever taught.”

“You’re kind of a fool for your sister, huh...”

“I believe that’s typical for an older brother.”

As he spoke, he began walking. Aina gave him an exasperated glare yet stood up anyway and walked alongside him.

They were given plenty of time to walk between classes, but they couldn’t afford to dawdle or they would be late. Their school uniforms were made with sparring and fighting in mind, so they didn’t have to change, but the practice area was some distance away. Since it would take some time to get there, they had to start walking now.

“So you put a lot of thought into it... I should’ve done that,” Sylvia said with a sigh as they left the lecture hall, the few students still inside watching out of the corners of their eyes.

Soma looked at her with puzzlement when he noticed the regret in her expression. “Did you not choose swordsmanship after some consideration as well? I do recall you saying something to that effect before...”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t exactly choose it for no reason... It’s the weapon I’m most used to, so I thought it would be better than trying to pick up a new one. But now I wish I’d gone with axemanship.”

“Why the axe of all things?” Aina asked. “Isn’t that the least popular one with mages?”

“It is the least compatible with magic, after all.”

Axes required the most force out of all the weapons used in the six main forms of combat. They weren’t entirely dependent on force, but users mainly sought to increase the power behind their attacks, and of those six, the axe was the most powerful on a per-attack basis or close to it.

But that made it easier to neglect paying attention to one’s surroundings. It was a bad match for a mage who didn’t intend to make it their main weapon. It wasn’t something they would usually choose...but Soma had an idea.

“I see... You don’t want axemanship. You want Camilla.”

“Camilla...? What?”

“What gave it away?”

“For mages, martial arts classes are a time to practice defending themselves in case of emergency. When they do use weapons, they use them as checks in spur-of-the-moment situations.”

A mage’s main force, needless to say, was magic. They had no need to regret choosing the wrong weapon. That left only one possible reason for Sylvia’s regret.

“You wanted to study how Camilla carries herself as opposed to axemanship...or to go even further, you wanted to learn about how to use Skills.”

“Oh, I get it... Yeah, Camilla’s fighting style would be good for Sylvia to learn from.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it... It’s my ideal fighting style, actually. But now I don’t have many chances to talk to her...”

“Well, she is the axemanship instructor. But you two are student and

instructor nonetheless. I imagine she would make time for you if you asked, similar to how Ms. Carine was helping Sierra before."

"I'd like that, but she probably doesn't even know who I am... I know her because I saw her at the entrance ceremony, but I didn't introduce myself or anything."

"I mean, I doubt she needs to be introduced to the royal family," Aina pointed out. "She'd have heard about you anyway."

"Well, I imagine she knows your name, but it is certainly hard to ask favors from someone who you aren't personally acquainted with. Hmm... Would you like me to introduce you, in that case? Camilla was once my tutor, so we are quite well acquainted."

"Oh, I figured you knew each other... So that's how. Um, so...I'd be happy to be introduced, but...are you sure you don't mind?"

"I was already planning to go see Camilla in the near future. I could introduce you then, if that works for you."

"Yes, please...! Thanks, Soma!"

"It's no trouble at all."

If Sylvia wanted to emulate Camilla, that meant she wanted to improve herself. Since Sylvia was a member of Soma's dungeon party, he wasn't reluctant to lend her a hand in that.

"On that note, would you like the same, Lars?"

"What're you talking about?"

Soma had noticed Lars approaching out of the corner of his eye, so he'd attempted to strike up a conversation, but apparently Lars hadn't been listening. Sylvia seemed surprised, not even having noticed Lars was nearby.

"L-Lars?! It's, uh...been a while."

"Hey..."

This must have been their first meeting since their suspension. They were both acting somehow awkward. But they were both interacting normally with

Soma, so they would get back to normal soon enough. He paid it no mind and continued.

“Sylvia wants to learn from Camilla’s fighting style, so I was going to introduce them. I was wondering whether you would like to join us.”

“Yup, I bet she’d be good for Sylvia to learn from. But I’ll pass. Actually, I came to talk about something kinda like that.”

“Hmm... What do you mean?”

“Y’know how we were doing stuff after school? Just wanted to let you guys know I’m not gonna come to that anymore.”

“What? Why...?!” Sylvia shouted in surprise. Aina didn’t raise her voice, but she looked at Lars doubtfully.

However, Soma didn’t find it that unexpected. He’d gathered what Lars had to say from the way he looked at them as he approached and from his general demeanor.

“No reason. Just realized I gotta do more.”

“What do you mean by that? What we were doing wasn’t enough?”

“Nah, it was fine. It helped a lot, actually, so thanks. But I can’t settle for that kinda thing anymore... I gotta put all my energy into getting stronger. Can’t afford to waste my time on that stuff anymore.”

When he called it a waste of time, Aina and Sylvia had clearly displeased looks on their faces, which was understandable, since it could be taken as an insult to everything they’d been doing up until now.

But Soma didn’t see it that way. Although Lars had said it was a waste of time for him now, before that, he had said he was grateful for it.

Sylvia was the same way, in a sense. She’d decided to improve herself and, as a result, had chosen to look for an alternative route. Lars, too, must have thought he should choose a different path to improve himself.

And it wasn’t for Soma to argue that Lars’s way of thinking was mistaken. He just thought Lars should do what he thought best.

“So I’m not gonna be all buddy-buddy with you guys anymore. I’ll work with you guys in class, but just as a party member. I’m not gonna do anything more than I have to. That’s all.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Lars quickly left, as if he were turning his back on everything.

“He just went and said whatever he felt like, huh...” Aina muttered unhappily as she watched him go.

Sylvia seemed to feel the same as she watched his back with a pout. “Yeah... I knew he didn’t need that time anymore, but he could have just said that.”



But Soma shrugged at the two girls. “His attitude was certainly not good, but I suppose that was how Lars got his closure.”

“What do you mean, closure?”

“If he did it half-heartedly, it would give him a chance to go easy on himself. He had to deliberately push us away to force himself to fully commit.”

“I get what you’re saying, but why’d he have to make us uncomfortable for that?”

“He certainly could have done better in that regard. I imagine there were other ways to do it. But it would be unfair to expect perfection.”

In fact, Soma understood what Lars meant to an extent...or maybe he should have said he was familiar with that feeling. He had gone through a phase like that himself, albeit in his past life. He’d decided that the best and fastest path would be to distance himself from everything and focus solely on improvement.

He wouldn’t say that he had been completely mistaken, and he didn’t know if Lars was now. Either way, Lars wouldn’t be dissuaded even if Soma talked to him about it, so Soma thought he should go for it. Afterward, Lars could decide for himself whether he’d made the right decision.

As long as it didn’t cause trouble for anyone else, Soma thought Lars should do as he wished. That was the only way to find some things out, just as it had been for Soma.

“I guess we can’t blame him for being immature in some ways at our age...” Aina sighed. “It’s fine, I guess. Anyway, why’d you ask him and Sylvia but not me?”

“About Camilla? Well, you already know Camilla, so what need is there for you to come see her?”

“I guess that’s true, but... I don’t know, I’m not convinced...”

Soma genuinely didn’t have any other reason, though. Turning away from Aina, whose cheeks were puffed up, he called out behind him.

“So, what would you like, Helen?”

“Ah...?!”

He heard a stifled sound of surprise behind him, as if she hadn’t expected to be spoken to. When he turned to look, he saw her looking back at him with

wide eyes.

“Helen? Come on, you should’ve said something if you were there.”

“Y-Yeah... Sorry, Aina...”

Seeing Helen there clearly put Aina in a worse mood, but that was probably because Helen hadn’t spoken to her or even approached her in the lecture hall.

Helen had apparently stayed in her room for the length of her suspension, so this was their first time seeing each other in a week, and yet Helen had avoided them. It was understandable that that would put Aina in a bad mood.

But the hint of anxiety in Aina’s eyes betrayed her state of mind. She was probably worried that Helen would say something like Lars had.

“Um... Good to see you again, Helen.”

“Yeah... Nice, nice to see you, Sylvia...”

And now Sylvia and Helen were having an exchange similar to the one between Sylvia and Lars. This wouldn’t go anywhere unless Soma intervened.

“So, as I asked before, what do you want to talk about? You must have come up to us to talk about something.”

He’d noticed her deliberately leaving the lecture hall at the same time as Soma’s group, just as Lars had. Lars probably hadn’t spoken to them in front of everyone because he’d been aware that his attitude wasn’t good.

And as for why Helen hadn’t spoken to them in front of everyone...

“Um... Well, so, um, I... Uh...”

It was clearly something that was difficult for her to say, which increased the anxiety in Aina’s eyes. Sylvia seemed nervous now too, probably thinking the same thing.

But Soma let out a sigh. He could tell that the three were imagining that this was a bigger deal than it was.

“Can I assume that you would like to continue as we have been?”

Three looks of shock were pointed in Soma’s direction at once.

Yes, unlike Lars, Helen wanted things to stay the same as they were before. She hadn't told them in front of everyone because she'd thought they might say no, and she'd had trouble saying it because she'd probably mistaken the girls' nervousness for not wanting to talk to her.

It should have been simple to deduce based on Helen's personality. Apparently, Lars wasn't the only one who was emotionally immature here.

"Yeah, that's, that's it... So, um, is that okay? I-I know I caused some trouble, so..."

"Of course it's okay! I mean, it was me who caused all the trouble... You didn't do anything wrong."

"No, I-I should have been more...more careful... It, it was my fault for not checking...if there was anything wrong..."

Soma only knew what he'd heard about the situation. Only those who had been there would know the truth, but...what Helen was saying was true.

The role of backliners, including mages, was to observe the situation at a distance and remain objective and calm. They had to maintain their composure even if everyone else was worked up. At the very least, Helen had failed to do that, so it wasn't mistaken to say that she'd caused them trouble.

"Well, I won't say more than necessary about the situation, since I wasn't involved. I can say, though, that this isn't the place to talk about that."

"Yeah, we should go into more detail about it. Also, I wasn't there either, but... I also cause issues for people because I don't have enough experience, so I wouldn't reject you for that."

"Right, and you may have made a bit of a mistake, but I'm still the one who caused the most trouble. So...how about we keep learning from each other and helping each other out as fellow newbies?"

"Um... Are, are you sure?"

Helen's eyes darted around anxiously, but the two other girls had already stated their opinions, and Soma had no objections. He shrugged in place of a reply, and Helen let out a sigh of relief, then relaxed her tense face and smiled.

“O-Okay... Thanks. I’m glad we can keep practicing together...”

Aina and Sylvia smiled back at Helen, and Soma turned to look ahead.

“I’m glad we resolved this, but we should get going. We’re running short on time.”

“Oh...!”

They’d stopped walking without realizing, but they hadn’t reached the practice area yet, and their conversation had taken a few minutes. There was nobody else around them anymore.

Aina and the others exclaimed in realization, impatience appearing on their faces.

“Y-You should have said something!”

“There was no good time to.”

“Never mind that, we have to hurry!”

“Yeah, we’re, we’re gonna be late...!”

They started walking quickly again as they talked. Their expressions were flustered, but they were also smiling a little bit.

A slight smile came to Soma’s face too as he observed that and headed toward the practice area with them.

5

Now that she had somehow managed to make it to the practice area on time, Sylvia exhaled and looked around.

It was a different practice area from the one they used after school and the one they'd used for the entrance ceremony, but it was more similar to the one they used after school. The floor was tightly-packed dirt and the space within the walls was empty and open to the sky overhead.

It was just about identical to the practice area they used after school, in fact, except for its size. That one was about twice as wide, since it was intended for magic use.

But it didn't feel cramped here because there were fewer people than there were in the practice room after school. There were only ten people here, actually, so of course there were more in the practice room.

But this was more than usual for swordsmanship class. Usually only a few people chose martial arts other than unarmed combat.

As Sylvia had mentioned during sorcery class earlier, most mages didn't think you could use a weapon and magic at the same time. Carine's response to her had honestly been enlightening...although Sylvia couldn't say she would have changed her choice of weapon if she'd known she could use magic while wielding it.

The reason for that was simple: for mages, the only purpose of learning the martial arts was self-defense. They didn't use them unless an enemy got too close, and they could use spells to preclude that possibility. It was only in true emergencies that they fought physically, and they wouldn't necessarily have a weapon ready at a time like that, so learning unarmed combat meant that they were prepared to fight back without one.

Unarmed combat was the most popular choice because it didn't affect their magic like using a weapon would, and because they could use it instantly whenever they needed to. Even absent the first reason, the second reason

alone would still have made it the logical choice.

Incidentally, swordsmanship was the second most popular because the sword was the weapon that the most students were familiar with. Spearmanship was the third most popular for similar reasons, and the others were more or less tied.

That meant that if Sylvia had chosen axemanship, she would have had only one or two other students in her class, so Camilla could have given her one-on-one instruction...

“Well, no use saying that now.”

She should just be glad she’d gotten Soma to agree to introduce her to Camilla, she thought to herself as she looked beside her.

Soma seemed somewhat excited, probably because he intended to try using magic while wielding a sword as he’d mentioned before.

During swordsmanship class, most students either did practice swings as if they were obligated to or read books, so it was unusual to see someone excited. Sylvia felt like this was normal, though, considering that this was Soma faced with something related to magic.

Possibly thinking the same thing, Aina was watching Soma with a fed-up look.

Helen, though, had split up with them once they’d reached the practice area, because she’d chosen unarmed combat.

Sylvia glanced around and spotted Lars, but he wasn’t even looking her way, perhaps trying to follow through on what he’d said earlier. She exhaled slightly at the sight.

This, too, was a result of what she’d done. She wouldn’t go as far as to say she was personally responsible, because Lars had chosen this for himself, but it was still an outcome of her actions.

That was all the more reason for her to make sure nothing like that happened again...and, to be honest, she was a little jealous that Lars had been able to make that decision.

Aina was mad at him, but Sylvia actually understood his thinking somewhat.

In fact, she had even been thinking something similar—that if she was still that inexperienced, maybe she should abandon everything else and choose to focus on improving herself.

She'd abandoned that idea for a number of reasons, but the bottom line was that she'd concluded it wasn't right for her. She thought it would just lead to something similar happening again.

And...she simply hadn't wanted to.

As she glanced beside her and thought to herself, class began, and the instructor, Lina, showed up as usual.

"Time to begin class!" she announced, which instantly sent a troubled feeling through the area.

It wasn't that they looked down on Lina... If anything, it was because they had an accurate perception of her.

With sighs of resignation, they all readied their weapons.

Lina's class emphasized hands-on practice. The first class hadn't been special; they continued to learn by sparring with Lina. The one difference now was that Lina didn't knock them down immediately.

Naturally, they wouldn't have learned much if the matches had all been over in an instant...but to be honest, it was more difficult this way. The reason for that was clear if you watched...no, listened to Lina sparring with the students.

"No, no, not like that! You have to step forward like *bam*, and then go *whoosh* with your sword, like this!"

The students' looks said they had no clue what she meant, but Lina didn't seem to mind. She probably didn't realize, actually.

Sylvia couldn't tell if Lina was too focused on teaching or if she just didn't understand what the looks on their faces meant, but either way, what she wanted to say wasn't getting across to the students.

"Not like that! You have to hold your sword and wait for an opening to attack, then go in like *bang* as soon as you see one!"

"Um, Miss Lina, how do you tell when there's an opening to attack?"

“When there’s an opening? You can see when that is, can’t you?”

For a moment, a look that said *I wouldn’t ask if I could see it* floated across the student’s face, but it quickly changed to resignation. They stepped forward, saying they understood, before being pushed away again as Lina said they were doing it wrong.

Yes...when it came down to it, Lina was extremely bad at teaching.

She clearly *wanted* to teach. But if the students didn’t understand what she was saying, they couldn’t learn from her.

But they couldn’t tell her to change her teaching style. That was left to the instructor’s discretion, and they didn’t think things would improve even if she did try to do it differently.

Not to mention that she was an instructor, so even if she was younger than them, she was an authority figure. Nobody was rash enough to complain to her face, and if they did, it was unlikely to make a difference.

She was apparently regarded quite highly among those in the swordsmanship concentration, so she was probably an exceptional example for those who had mastered the fundamentals. But people like Sylvia were still novices, even if they could use a sword to some extent. Lina was at such a high level that they couldn’t emulate her.

Incidentally, Sylvia had brought it up to Soma and Aina, but Soma’s response had been “Hmm? Isn’t it very easy to understand?” The look on his face had been serious, even puzzled, so he clearly hadn’t said it sarcastically.

And Aina had said something similar. “Sure, it’s hard to understand, but that’s the only way to explain it, and I can get it if I try.”

There was no hope. Sylvia was surrounded by people with genius-level intuition.

So she had no choice but to resign herself to that and do her best to understand.

And Lina would tell her what she was doing wrong, at least, so Sylvia had no choice but to try doing it differently.

However, since Lina spoke from the viewpoint of a Special-Grade user, there were some things they couldn't understand, like the thing about seeing openings to attack.

"I guess we have to figure it out ourselves."

The Royal Academy welcomed students with the desire to learn, but they didn't teach them every little thing. The academy just gave them an opportunity, and it was up to the students to think about what to learn and how to put it to use. That being the case, this class followed that policy perfectly.

While Sylvia was lost in thought, a commotion suddenly began to spread through the practice area. She looked over, wondering what was going on, but quickly understood.

When Lina had called for the next challenger, Soma had stepped forward.

"Are... Are you going to spar with me today, dear brother?!"

"I don't believe it's normal for you as an instructor to address me that way."

So Soma said with a wry smile, but her reaction, along with those of the others around them, was to be expected, since he hadn't sparred with her once since the first day.

It wasn't necessary to spar unless the student thought it necessary, and Soma certainly didn't need it, since he'd overpowered Lina on the first day, but that was all the more reason for everyone to be surprised. They were all familiar with Soma's behavior in his other classes as well, so they were probably wondering what had caused this change of heart.

But Lina happily readied her weapon, seemingly indifferent to the reason as long as he was willing to spar with her. Soma readied his weapon as well, still wearing a wry smile—and instantly, there was a clang.

When saw that Soma's arm was outstretched and Lina's stance had changed slightly, she realized that the sound had come from Lina blocking Soma's sword. The transition had only taken a moment, and sighs of either admiration or exasperation came from the onlookers.

But one person among them seemed baffled, or perhaps unhappy. The sound rang out for a second, then a third time, and the discontent on Lina's face increased with each clang.

Then, when it sounded for the fifth time, Lina opened her mouth with a look of conviction.

"I get the feeling that you're holding back..."

Lina certainly wasn't overestimating Soma. During their sparring session on the first day, Soma's attacks had been more precise, and Lina had been at her limit just blocking them, but this time, she was receiving them with ease. Even taking into account the possibility that Lina had improved since then, this scenario would have been hard to imagine.

Well, maybe it was possible for a Special-Grade user to improve that much in such a short time, but if that were the case, Lina wouldn't have said what she had, and she seemed to be the most confused out of anyone.

Soma shrugged as if it were nothing. "It isn't that I'm holding back. It's that I'm not putting any force into this in the first place."

"Huh? What do you mean...?"

"Well, in my sorcery class earlier, Ms. Carine told me that everyone learns magic differently, so it may be possible to learn magic while using a sword."

"What does that have to do with this?"

"I was told that it wouldn't be magic if I tried to learn it while swinging a sword. So I decided to try holding a sword without swinging it to see if I can learn magic that way."

"I see... So, what you're doing now..."

"The best way to use a sword is in a real fight. But if I used swordsmanship techniques, it wouldn't be magic."

"So you're not putting any force into your sword because you're only using it for magic... I understand!"

Lina seemed convinced, but Sylvia was confused. It honestly didn't make sense to her.

Well, she could grasp what he was saying, but it looked to her like he was swinging the sword, not just holding it.

But given that Lina understood, maybe it was one of those things that only first-rate swordsmen could understand.

If she thought of it that way, she could accept it, even if she couldn't comprehend it...but there was still one problem.

This was a swordsmanship class, and Lina was the instructor. Yet Soma had just stated that he was trying to learn magic, not swordsmanship, although he and Lina were sparring with swords.

Lina had accepted his idea, so it wasn't bad in that sense, but...

"I'll help you, then, so I'll do the best I can!"

"Yes, I should hope so. It would defeat the purpose of using a real fight for practice if you held back."

"All right! I'll start, then!"

There was nothing Sylvia could do now that they'd started moving again.

"Is this really okay, though...?"

"Well, she's the instructor, so it's okay if she says it is, right? Also..."

"Also?"

"Honestly, it doesn't make a difference whether she's here or not."

"Ha ha... That's true."

They received advice, but ultimately, it was up to them to learn by trial and error, so this time was mostly for self-study. It didn't matter what Lina and Soma were doing.

"Maybe if I were a bit better, I could learn by watching them."

"Only freaks like them could learn by watching them."

"That's not nice... I kind of feel the same, though."

As Sylvia continued to watch, she saw that Lina had gone on the offensive, as she'd declared she would, but she wasn't quite succeeding. Soma was handling

all her attacks skillfully, even while supposedly not using swordsmanship.

She couldn't tell what about that was supposed to be magical, but...

"I guess it's magical in a way to deal with Special-Grade attacks like that?"

"I couldn't do that. The only explanation is that Soma's extraordinary, magic aside."

Sylvia smiled wryly in agreement but continued to watch anyway.

Some others had been watching the two, but they must have realized it wouldn't do them any good. They had started practicing on their own, leaving only Sylvia and Aina...

No, there was one more person left.

And while Sylvia and Aina were just spectating in half-amazement, he was intently and seriously observing their movements.

It was Lars.

"Do you think Lars can tell what they're doing and learn from it?"

"I doubt it... I don't really like putting it like this, but he only has Middle-Grade Swordsmanship. Like Helen always tells me, we Special-Grade users can do things easily that don't make sense to most people."

"Oh... Yeah, I get it."

Aina often cast spells without incantations, which wasn't something people could normally do. That was considered a special privilege of Special-Grade users, and it wasn't something people with even High-Grade Sorcery could do easily.

Even Helen had to put all her energy into using simple spells, and yet Aina could use them effortlessly, without saying anything, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. But anyone who saw that and tried to copy her would be sure to fail. If they were lucky, the spell simply wouldn't activate, and if they were unlucky, it would backfire and hurt them. That was how Special-Grade Skills were.

In other words, it was likely that trying to emulate Lina or someone even

better than her, like Soma, would only backfire and hurt Lars, so it was a waste of time for him to observe them.

But Sylvia couldn't imagine that he didn't know that. His face seemed to say that he knew and was trying to get something out of it anyway.

"Well, it's up to him what he puts effort into."

"You're right..."

Nobody had a right to tell him not to, even if it was useless. If he wanted to do it despite knowing that, he had a right to.

And Sylvia saw in his face a drive to make sure this counted for something.

Whether that would really happen, only he could know.

"Oh, I think the match is over."

Soma and Lina had apparently finished while Aina and Sylvia were conversing. The verdict was...as expected, in a sense.

"How come he beat Lina even though he was trying to use magic...? He didn't even figure out how."

"He really is extraordinary...in multiple senses."

Sylvia was so stunned, all she could do was dryly laugh.

How could he win against a Special-Grade user while supposedly not even using swordsmanship?

Even though they'd seen the whole thing, it was still beyond Sylvia and Aina's understanding.

"Do you think that'll be all for today?"

"Well, now that we've seen that... We may be mainly magic users, but I don't think anyone will want to be seen losing now."

Anyone who went after Soma would look worse in comparison. Not even Sylvia was willing to do that, so they would probably all start practicing on their own...or so she thought, but then someone else stepped up to Lina.

It was the one who had been intently watching their sparring session—Lars.

“Take me on next.”

“All right, no problem.”

Lars seemed irritated when Lina responded to him with a smile, probably because of the difference from the way she’d acted toward Soma.

She was treating him as an instructor treats a student—in other words, like someone of lower standing who she was going to teach.

Lars clearly didn’t like that.

Even if it was a fact...no, especially because of that.

“You’re fighting too aggressively. Don’t rush in like this. You have to face your opponent like so, and then go *bam* at the end.”

After challenging Lina, Lars ended up getting knocked down quickly...but that wasn’t the end of it. Once he saw that nobody else was waiting to fight her, he immediately asked to go again.

“Well, I don’t mind, but...”

Lina seemed hesitant, probably because this had never happened before, but she had no reason to refuse. She accepted the rematch, sparred with him...and Lars quickly lost once again.

But...

“Is Lars really...?”

“Well, Soma did say that hands-on practice is best...and he’s up against Lina.”

This was ideal if you considered that he could keep sparring against a Special-Grade user. The students in the swordsmanship concentration would all have envied him for that...and honestly, Sylvia was jealous too.

She wasn’t jealous that he could keep fighting Lina, though, of course. She was jealous that he had as much time as he wanted to fight the opponent who he wanted to.

Sylvia wished she could do that with Camilla.

“I see how it’s going to be... Well, as an instructor, I’ll spar with you as long as you want to keep going.”

Lina had realized what Lars was thinking as well, and she accepted the challenge. That was to be expected, since she was an instructor...but it made Sylvia jealous anyway.

But it didn't change the power gap between the two. She neutralized every one of Lars's attacks; the moment he had the chance to make a single move, she took him down. He kept trying again and again, but the outcome was always the same.

Lars was panting now, but he hadn't even scratched Lina or made her breathe any faster.

And yet...

"A... Again!" he huffed.

"You're trying really hard... Well, I'll keep going with you until you're satisfied, then."

Lars kept trying to beat her, no matter how many times or how badly he was defeated.

There was probably next to no meaning to it. It was a privilege to have that time, yes...but there must have been a more effective way to learn.

But it was evident from watching Lars that that didn't matter to him.

He would single-mindedly aim higher, following the path that he thought best.

The sight communicated his will not to give that up, no matter what anyone said.

His drive was almost frightening, but it made Sylvia think one thing.

"I'm a little jealous after all."

Jealous that he could work so hard toward a single goal.

Because she'd given up and decided she couldn't do that.

But that didn't mean that one way of doing things was wrong and one was right. They just had different ways of improving themselves.

And Sylvia had decided, along with everyone else in her party, that she

wouldn’t mess up again.

So she would keep going the way she had been.

And she hoped that one day, Lars would see them and be jealous, just as she was jealous right now...

Sylvia took her eyes off of Lars and began to practice with Aina, keeping in mind what Lina had told them earlier.

6

Though Soma had failed to acquire magic using a sword, he honestly wasn't that disappointed. He'd been prepared for that possibility; in fact, he'd half-expected it from the beginning.

And he'd gotten a good hint from Carine. Now that he thought about it, it was obvious that he shouldn't apply common sense when thinking about how he could use magic. He should have started by trying different things on his own rather than relying on books or dungeons.

If he could have learned magic the common-sense way, he already would have. Given that he hadn't, the proper mindset was to start regarding that common sense with suspicion.

"It's good to have a teacher at times such as these."

However, it wouldn't do to bother others by taking drastic action, and there were limits to what he could accomplish during class. In the end, all he could do during lectures was read books, just like he had been doing all this time.

"Personally, I think it's an option to take them by surprise and start taking class seriously," Sylvia suggested.

"Taking them by surprise would neither give me the ability to use magic nor help me come upon any good ideas."

"Who'd that even surprise?" Aina retorted.

"Umm... The, the instructors?"

"Then it would be even more pointless."

"No use, huh..." Sylvia pouted.

Soma smiled crookedly at her. When they'd first started school, all she had done if she had a problem with his behavior was give him resentful looks. The fact that she was now talking to him about it meant that they'd gotten significantly closer.

However, he didn't know whether that change would be a positive for Sylvia,

Soma thought as he stood up.

All of their classes for the day were already over, so it was time to leave.

“All right... Do the three of you plan to go to the practice area as usual?”

“Yeah... I do, at least,” Aina replied.

“Me too, I guess,” agreed Sylvia.

“I’m, I’m going too... Are you not, Soma?” Helen asked with a tinge of nervousness in her voice. Her eyes were quivering in fear, and Sylvia’s, too, seemed to be questioning whether that was the case.

It was only Aina who didn’t have anything of the sort in her eyes, but that was likely for the simple reason that her situation was different. Sylvia and Helen had just come out of a suspension, and privately, they were nervous, just as they had been this morning, that things would change even if they seemed the same.

They both wanted things to go back to how they were before, but that couldn’t happen now that Lars was out, which made them even more sensitive to the possibility that something else would change—such as Soma deciding to drop out.

Soma could have been attributing too much of their anxiety to himself, but judging by their reactions, he was probably right. But even with that understanding—or perhaps precisely because he understood—he simply gave them a puzzled look.

“Well, I have some errands to attend to. I may not be able to come to the practice area for some time.”

“So...because of us...”

“Oh, no, it has nothing to do with your suspension or the precipitating events. Or perhaps it does, but in a good way.”

“A...good way?”

“You two have reflected on your actions and decided to improve yourselves proactively. So has Lars, though he’s taken a different direction, which makes me excited for our next trip into the dungeon. That’s why I won’t be able to

come to the practice room for a while.”

“I don’t get it, but knowing you, it must be *something*...” Aina sighed. “Well, do whatever you want. We’re getting together just ’cause we want to, anyway.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. Would you explain to Sierra and Lina?”

“Sure, but I’m only telling them what you just told me. If they come after you asking questions, don’t come crying to me, got it?”

“That’s fine with me.”

He had meant to tell Lina at the end of her class, but he hadn’t had a chance because she had been occupied with Lars. That said, Soma had only made up his mind shortly prior to telling the others, so he also felt like he would have ended up asking Aina to convey that message either way...but regardless.

“So...you mean you have to do something so we don’t have to hesitate to go into the dungeon again?”

“Something like that, yes. I can’t say any more than that, the circumstances being as they are.”

“O-Okay... I, I get it. So...we’ll, we’ll do our best on our own...until you get back, then.”

“Yeah, just wait... You’re gonna be shocked when you get back!”

“I have high hopes for you.”

“By the way, how long is ‘a while’?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. I believe it will be over within a month, at least.”

“Okay... Got it, then. I’ll tell the others.”

“Please do.”

Once he had told Aina what to tell them and said his goodbyes, he left the lecture hall.

He could have walked with them part of the way, but that would have put him at risk of an interrogation tomorrow, because he was headed for the instructors’ dorm in the north of campus. Although he had nothing to hide, it would be easier not to raise unnecessary suspicions, he thought to himself as he

walked.

Once he reached the instructors' dorm, he stepped inside without hesitation. He acted as if he was used to it because all of the dorms were built the same way, and also because he'd been here once before.

None of the instructors seemed to be back yet, since school had only just let out. He reached the third floor without crossing anyone's path and walked to the end of the hallway. After knocking twice on the door there, he opened it without waiting for a response.

"Pardon me."

"It would be proper to wait for a reply before entering. What would you have done, pray tell, if I were not decent?"

"I would simply have called the police to report a flasher."

"I would have you know that this is *my* room!"

"I'm aware."

Shrugging his shoulders at the shouting owner of the room—Hildegard—he entered. The door shut behind him with a click.

"You knew I was coming. If you were undressed when I got here, it would have to be on purpose."

"What you say sounds logical... How odd."

"Because it is logical."

He glanced around as he replied.

This was Hildegard's personal living space. He'd come here because the thing he had to do was related to her—she had summoned him here, in fact, although it was more like a request for assistance than a summons.

In any case, Hildegard's room was larger than Soma's, as befit a headmaster. It didn't appear that way at a glance, however, due to the piles of documents and other items scattered everywhere.

"It looks like there are more things than when I was last here."

"Ah, yes... Well, it cannot be helped. I no longer have need of a number of

them, but I am left with no time to dispose of such items.”

“That makes it sound as if you’re busy... How odd.”

“As I previously informed you, I *am* busy!”

“Disregarding your nonsense, why are you leaving work documents here?”

“It would not do to leave them in the headmaster’s office, seeing as it also serves as a drawing room. And it is not nonsense...!”

“I understand. It certainly wouldn’t be a good idea to invite someone to the room where you keep all of these lying around,” he agreed, ignoring her shout.

He did wonder whether it was all right for her to bring work documents home...but considering that this was Hildegard’s personal living space, it was probably safer than most places.

Incidentally, even as they spoke, Hildegard was still at her desk, writing something down. Apparently she’d brought work home, not just documents.

Their conversation paused, and for a minute, the only sound was that of Hildegard’s pen. Then the sound stopped as she set the pen on the desk and exhaled.

“My apologies for making you wait.”

“I don’t mind. I wasn’t in a hurry. I may be soon, though, depending on how you answer the question I’m about to ask.”

“You may be, indeed.”

He looked back at Hildegard with narrowed eyes, then asked about the reason he’d come here today.

“Here’s my question, then. What do you mean when you say you want me to help investigate the dungeon in order to break its seal?”

7

Long story short, the dungeon within the academy was currently sealed off due to high risk. Because of that, there were no dungeon dives happening in any year, and not even middle schoolers could go inside. The same applied to elementary schoolers who had passed the trial, of course.

However, nobody in the elementary school had been told about the seal. Elementary schoolers who were qualified to go into the dungeon outside of practice dives were rare, and the next one wouldn't be for at least two weeks, so the faculty hadn't wanted to cause the students unnecessary concern. Also, the seal had been scheduled to break after about a week.

But the seal hadn't broken yet, and what was more...

"You said an unforeseen incident occurred, yes?"

"It is as I informed you yesterday. I gave you only the bare minimum of information, as I did not know what you might do."

Yes, Soma had visited the day before and heard about it. That was the one other time he had been to the instructors' dorms.

But to be honest, nothing of what he'd heard yesterday had come as unexpected. He'd assumed that the dungeon would be temporarily sealed off.

Sylvia's teleportation to the fortieth floor was, in essence, an accident. Nobody could have expected that there would be a teleportation trap on the third floor, not even the instructors; not even Soma was sure that he would have noticed in time. He probably would have stopped to investigate when he saw the suspicious treasure box, although he couldn't be certain. That was how unthinkable the incident had been.

That left the academy with no choice but to shut down the dungeon for a thorough investigation. Although what happened during a dive was primarily one's own responsibility, the academy also shared some responsibility when the dungeon was being used as part of a class, so it was bad news for them if they had no idea what might happen.

So they had proceeded with the examination, the outcome of which was as Soma had said.

However, Soma hadn't been told the specifics yet. The day before, he'd been approached for help with further investigation, but he'd put it off for later because he had no particular reason to join in.

The seal meant that he couldn't enter the dungeon, and although he'd gone out of his way to pass the trial so that he would be permitted to go on his own, he hadn't had the opportunity lately, since he'd been busy visiting the library and the practice area. Considering that, he was in no rush to have the dungeon unsealed.

He'd put it off for later rather than refuse outright, though, because he'd seen how Sylvia and the others were. Their training after school was much less stimulating than hands-on practice, and as he'd said during a recent swordsmanship class, hands-on practice was number one in his mind.

So he'd decided to wait and see how their attitudes changed—would they get back up with more motivation to improve?

And the outcome, as was evident by the fact that he had come here today, was as Soma had said before—he was genuinely looking forward to their next practice dive. He was certain that they would spur him further than ever before, and in order for that to happen, the seal needed to be broken.

That was why Soma had decided to help Hildegard instead of going to the practice area today.

"It never fails to surprise me how self serving you are," Hildegard remarked.

"What do you mean? Am I not living up to the academy's philosophy?"

"Study certainly does come first and foremost here... Well, so be it. If you are to aid us, it shall surely ease our concerns regarding the dungeon."

"Hmm... Is it that serious?"

Though Hildegard looked like a young girl and was weaker than in her past life, Soma had heard that she still had Special-Grade Skills. There were also instructors who were quite strong in battle; Camilla and Lina came to mind. He

thought they could deal with most things, so if even they were concerned...

“I shall tell you the rest inside the dungeon.”

“Why inside?”

“This area is well soundproofed, but I cannot be certain that we shall not be overheard. The dungeon would be safer in that regard.”

“I see... There’s no chance of anyone else being in the dungeon right now. Why is it such a sensitive subject, though?”

“It involves nationally classified information.”

“Hmm...”

It must have been quite the large unforeseen development.

“Understood. Should we head there now?”

“Yes, that is why I finished the work I had to do. Let us proceed.” Hildegard stood up.

Soma walked out of the room beside her, then down the corridor and stairs; they still didn’t cross paths with any instructors. In fact, the dorm felt completely deserted. Maybe it was too early for the instructors to return from their classes, but that would mean that Hildegard alone had gone back early...

“I haven’t seen any instructors. Have they not come back yet?”

“Ah, no, they have not. They each have work to do, such as patrolling the academy, so they typically do not arrive home until night.”

“And yet you’re here. This is why people say you don’t seem very busy.”

“Nobody has said such a thing to me... Who is saying that?!”

“I am, of course.”

“So it *is* only you! And, as I have informed you numerous times, I am indeed busy!”

As they spoke, they exited the dorm and began heading toward the east, where the practice area and the dungeon were.

Soma looked around as they walked, but he didn’t see anybody. It had been

some time since school let out; the other students must have already reached the practice areas and dorms.

“What would we do if somebody questioned why we’re going to the dungeon?”

“I do not expect anyone to make it an issue, given that I am here. If someone does, we can simply tell them that we were going to check on the dungeon. It is one of my normal duties as a headmaster.”

“Hmm... One question regarding that. This is a personal request, right?”

“It is, yes. Seeing as your official status is first-year student at our elementary school, I could not make requests of you in an official capacity.”

“That would make it questionable that I’m cooperating with you on an official duty... Well, it’s no big deal. I can say that you abused your authority over me and forced me to accompany you.”

“Thus ruining my reputation?!”

“That would be your problem, not mine.”

But for better or for worse, they didn’t come across anyone on the way. They approached the entrance to the dungeon.

“I am getting the feeling that I shall soon be able to charge you with making false accusations...”

“They would be nothing but the truth in my mind, at least. Anyway, should we go in now?”

“Yes, I would like to see what you think upon entering without any preconceived notions.”

“That in itself gives me a preconceived notion...but all right.”

He already knew that something must be going on, so it didn’t make much difference, Soma thought as he casually stepped inside and began to walk into the darkness one step at a time along with Hildegard.

8

The instant he stepped into the dungeon, Soma muttered in understanding as he looked around through narrowed eyes.

“The seal certainly shouldn’t be broken before something is done about this.”

“I am impressed that you discerned that with one look. It gives me more confidence that we shall be able to rely on you.”

“Well, I believe it’s too early to sit back and relax. Not even I have fought the Archdevil before.”

He exhaled at the sensation on his skin. The dungeon was filled with an evil aura so strong, it felt like it could warp his vision. That was a vague description, but it was the only way to describe the feeling, which was far from vague. Although Soma only experienced it as a sensation of evil, a Middle-Grade Skill user would have fainted as soon as they entered, let alone someone faint of heart.

It would be difficult for even the middle schoolers to act as they usually would in here. That was how disastrous the dungeon’s current state was.

“I suppose I can assume that the dungeon is like this because of one of the Archdevil’s power fragments?”

“There is no other possible cause that I can imagine.”

As the name suggested, the Archdevil’s power fragments were remnants of the Archdevil’s power that he had left behind. Although they were remnants, they were extremely powerful, originating as they did from a former god, so they had proven impossible to destroy. Instead, they had been split apart and sealed away individually.

And one of them was sealed here—in the academy dungeon. Actually, that order was backwards—the dungeon had been built to contain the power fragment after it had been sealed away.

Though they were fragments, they were still very powerful, to the point that

it was obvious where one was sealed because it affected its surroundings. Their strategy to minimize those effects had been to create a dungeon above the seal.

That was also why monsters that were too strong for their floor sometimes appeared. Those that were continually influenced by the power fragment underwent sudden transformations into stronger monsters.

More specifically, the plan had been to allow the fragment to exert all of its influence on the monsters in the dungeon and use up its power that way so that it wouldn't affect anyone else. When monsters were defeated, their power fully dispersed, and that way, those responsible for creating the dungeon could minimize the effects.

But it hadn't turned out like that in reality. It had been centuries since the Archdevil's defeat and the construction of this dungeon; people had forgotten what it was made for in the first place.

Not only that, the dungeon had apparently been left unattended for decades, according to records. There was a limit to how much power monsters could absorb, and this dungeon was set up so that new monsters wouldn't be generated until some were defeated. As the monsters were left undefeated, the fragment's influence began to grow to the point that it couldn't be kept under control just by having the students fight monsters.

Hildegard hadn't left it alone knowing that. In fact, she hadn't known at all initially. She had only found out after the academy was built, and relatively recently, too. She had noticed its abnormalities compared to typical dungeons, investigated, and found out about the power fragments at that point.

Then she had informed Soma of that right after he passed the exam and gained permission to enter the dungeon.

Not only that...

"Hmm... It wasn't like this when we checked before. We even thinned out the herd some just to be safe. Well, I suppose we did go down to the fortieth floor right after that."

The situation was already out of Hildegard's control, and the kingdom was too

busy to help. She'd had no choice but to tell a few instructors about it and have them thin out the monsters periodically, but that was only the transformed monsters above the thirtieth floor. They didn't have the capacity to kill any more than that, and it was too dangerous below the thirtieth floor, even for instructors.

She had kept it in stable condition that way...and then Soma had come along. It was too much for the instructors to handle, and it put the students at risk of unforeseen situations, so she'd wanted him to help kill more monsters...but he had only just enrolled, so she couldn't involve him in her own business with the academy.

So she'd allowed him to do as he wished for the time being and told him about the situation just to be safe...but then the situation had changed.

It wasn't actually stable like she'd thought. The effects had started to spread as far as the first floor. She'd planned to investigate then, but by that point, the first-years' first practice dive was coming up. She'd done a quick check of the first and second floors and seen no problem, so she'd allowed the practice dive to go ahead.

And also...she'd decided to investigate the lower floors with Soma on the day of the next practice dive.

Yes, on the day of the first years' second time in the dungeon, Soma had been on the lower floors with Hildegard to check out the clearly strange situation. That was when they had discovered that the fragments' influence hadn't been kept in check after all. They'd also killed any monsters they saw to help out the situation.

But it hadn't been this bad then. In fact, although they'd had to cut the investigation short to rescue Sylvia, they'd decided not to continue after that because it hadn't seemed immediately necessary, given that they'd defeated the area boss on the fortieth floor. They'd figured that would buy them some time, so Soma hadn't gone with Hildegard on her subsequent investigations.

So what was going on now?

"As I said before, it is an unforeseen incident."

“Even I didn’t expect this. How long has it been like this?”

“Since immediately after we sealed it.”

“Hmm...?”

That would have been right after they saved Sylvia, but searching his memory, he didn’t recall any warning signs.

“Well, I should specify that I was unable to examine the dungeon immediately after it was sealed,” Hildegard clarified. “Something could have happened since then...in fact, that is the only possibility.”

“And when did you look?”

“Yesterday.”

Not even Soma could help giving her a look of disapproval after hearing that. She hastily opened her mouth.

“I-It is not as if I was slacking! As I have informed you countless times, I am busy! And I deliberately looked a week later in order to ensure I would be looking under the ideal conditions.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was clear that my previous investigations were not thorough enough, so it was necessary to look everywhere and to coordinate plans so that the instructors would be available if something were to happen.”

“Now that you mention it, one of my classes was replaced with a study hall yesterday.”

“Yes, that is why. Camilla and others were involved...although not Lina.”

“Why is that?”

It was a simple fact, not his opinion of her as his younger sister, that Lina was either the strongest instructor or close to it. There was no reason not to include her if Hildegard wanted the ideal conditions.

“I would certainly have included Lina if I had sought strength alone. However, I was going into the dungeon, and I desired insurance against anything that could have gone wrong. Lina lacked the necessary experience.”

“Ah, that makes sense, then.”

Lina had plenty of skill already, but she still struggled with reacting to sudden developments. It would certainly be safest not to bring her to a place where you never knew what would happen.

“And when we waltzed into the dungeon, prepared to look everywhere we could, this was what we discovered.”

“Oh, that explains why you called for me yesterday.”

“Yes, I discerned that we could not handle it on our own in this state.”

“Hmm... I can tell that this is a very grave situation, but you made a request of me, not an order, right?”

“As I said before, you are a first-year elementary student. I could not give you an order of that nature.”

“So, what would you have done if I’d refused?”

It had already gotten bad enough that anything could happen to the surrounding environs. It wasn’t a question of whether or not to break the seal; they had to go in as soon as possible and do something about it.

“Well... By that point, I could not have afforded to be particular regarding experience, so I would have involved Lina. Other than her, only Camilla would have been able to participate.”

“Wouldn’t it have been too hard with just the three of you?”

“Yes, it would have been impossible. So I would have done whatever I had to in order to force two of the Elite Seven to participate, and perhaps some notable adventurers who were prepared for a suicide mission, and I am rather serious in calling it thus.”

“Hmm...”

Soma thought he would have ended up participating by then anyway.

She was right that it would have been literally risking their lives, though. Considering both what Hildegard had told him and the fact that this was a dungeon, it would probably be worse the farther down they went, and the first

floor was this bad already. They would have had to go in fully prepared to die in order to accomplish anything.

But that hadn't happened, so there was no use thinking about it. They had to think about the present situation.

"So, how much of the dungeon were you able to investigate?"

"None at all."

"None...? Do you mean you turned back immediately?"

"We discussed that as an option, but a certain amount of information is necessary even for a suicide mission. We walked until we encountered a monster, at which point we turned and ran."

"Turned and ran? With both you and Camilla there?"

"We could have won if we had fought, but we had brought along some dead weight...or I suppose I should not refer to them as such. Some of us were only there to investigate, and we decided that running would be the surest way to escape without injury."

"Hmm... It sounds like we'll have to be quite cautious," he muttered, steeling himself.

He had a general understanding of the situation now, so there was only one thing left to do.

"I'll see how it is for myself shortly."

"Yes, I leave it in your hands. I shall take the support role and allow you to focus solely on moving forward and slaying monsters. If necessary, I could also inform you of monsters that we encounter."

"No need. It would give me more certainty to see them for myself."

It wasn't that he didn't trust Hildegard—the opposite, in fact. He trusted her to give him accurate information, but he didn't want to be distracted by it.

The dungeon was an unpredictable place. The most important thing was to move forward with maximum caution and no preconceptions.

With an exhale, Soma began to move forward. Hildegard followed silently just

behind him.



Since the situation was so unclear, his first priority was to understand what was going on here. However, immediately after he started walking, he noticed

something.

“Hmm... The layout itself seems to be the same.”

“I myself was surprised, but we agreed that that seems to be the case. We cannot be sure, however, given what happened on the third floor.”

“I can certainly imagine hidden passages potentially being more common.”

“I shall tell you if any such thing appears.”

“Do you mean that you have the layout of the dungeon memorized?”

“Only as far as it has been mapped, but yes.”

“That’s more than enough... I’m genuinely surprised, actually.”

“I told you that you may count on me for support.”

“I see. That will certainly—”

Right before he could say it would come in handy, Soma quickly readied his weapon. He’d sensed a foe down the hallway.

Just when he was wondering what kind of monster it would be, he got an answer. It crept out from the other end of the corridor...and Soma’s eyes widened in surprise.

It looked like a goblin at first glance—it definitely was a goblin, in fact, based on its distinctive pointed ears and nose and its ghastly face.

However...

“Not even I expected a king goblin to be here.”

King goblins were the strongest type of goblin. Though they shared a name, their power level was far beyond that of a goblin, and that was evident from their appearance.

They had the features of goblins, but a king goblin was many times the size of a regular goblin. While goblins were a head shorter than Soma, the king goblin was far taller than him. Muscles bulged from its exposed flesh, wordlessly communicating its strength.

But the most troublesome thing about king goblins wasn’t their strength. As

the name implied, they were not only the strongest type of goblin but their leaders. A king goblin could not only summon goblins but power them up, and the more it powered up those goblins, the stronger it could become as well. The power boost didn't go away when you defeated the goblins, and it would summon more as soon as you did. You had to defeat a king goblin quickly, or it would power up endlessly, but hundreds of goblins would get in your way when you went for the king.

That made them quite the formidable opponent; no dungeon dive party without Soma would have stood a chance against one. Naturally, it wasn't the type of monster that should be on the first floor. And it gave him another question.

"I can understand how the hobgoblin we encountered before was a transformed goblin, but doesn't a king goblin seem like too great a jump in level? The word 'transformation' doesn't fully capture a change that large."

"Yes, and monsters that have transformed once do not transform any further, so it cannot be the result of a series of transformations."

"So you knew that this was going on, but not why."

"We shall look into that today."

"As we should."

Soma sighed and looked ahead...but the king goblin had noticed them at the same time that they had noticed it. The corridor around the king goblin was now filled with goblins—it had been summoning them as Soma and Hildegard spoke.

Soma wasn't alarmed when he saw that, though, because he'd known that the king goblin was summoning goblins. He'd known that and let it happen.

That was because it wasn't a problem.

A king goblin was certainly a monster that shouldn't be here...but that was all it was.

It was nothing worthy of caution on Soma's part.

"Sorry to end this so quickly after all the preparation you've done, but we

have a long way to go... Farewell.”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance *Lightning Speed* Mental Stillness / Wild Dance: Great Blossoming.

Instantly, there were innumerable flashes of light. Before they could even shriek, the hundreds of goblins and the king goblin were sliced into chunks of meat.

Soma landed on the ground just beyond where the king goblin had been standing—

“Soma!”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance / Mental Stillness / Sword of Pandemonium: One Stroke, One Slice.

—and sliced apart the space in front of him when it wobbled subtly.

There was a sound like breaking glass, but he looked around and saw nothing of the sort.

No...

“Below me?”

It had been reduced to scraps, but he could tell that something had been there.

It didn’t feel like something magical, though. It was probably some kind of teleportation item, and he doubted that there was a high-level goblin shaman waiting to teleport him somewhere.

Which meant...

“It seems there was a trap laid just there,” Hildegard concluded.

“A teleporter, huh...”

Traps were certainly common in corridors. Sometimes they were inside something, like the one Sylvia had encountered, but more often, there was

nothing but the trap itself.

The problem was that the trap had been so close to the king goblin that Soma had just defeated.

It was possible that it had avoided walking over the trap, either coincidentally or on purpose...but was it plausible that the trap had just happened to be where Soma landed after defeating it?

“It would ultimately come down to chance, but it must have been planned to some extent, including the positioning of the king goblin.”

“I know king goblins are intelligent, but do they typically do things like use themselves as decoys?”

“No... I would presume that someone other than the king goblin planned this, and that individual used the king goblin as a part of the trap.”

“Hmm...”

Only Soma and Hildegard were in the corridor right now. The king goblin had stopped breathing, and Soma didn’t sense any other monsters. There was nothing here that was capable of trapping the two of them...but Soma knew of something in this dungeon that would make such a trap possible.

“It must be the Archdevil’s malice.”

That was the Archdevil’s remaining power.

Since he was nothing but pure power now, he had to use other things to carry out his will, and the reason the fragment was sealed away was because it still contained his intentions, if not his consciousness.

Those intentions were to destroy all of mankind and the world, and whatever the fragment influenced would act accordingly. That was why they’d had to seal it away.

However, since it hadn’t been possible to seal it away completely, it influenced whatever was around it, be that people, monsters...or dungeons.

That was why there were malicious traps set in the dungeon.

“It’s more of a pain than I expected, especially because it doesn’t seem to

want to kill us directly.”

“Perhaps simply killing you with the trap would not be malicious enough to satisfy it.”

“What a pain...”

Incidentally, the Archdevil’s malice was also what caused the dungeon’s layout to change and create hidden passages. Not only that, but at times the hidden passage would become the right way, and the former path would lead to a trap.

And sometimes there were even genuinely valuable treasures at the end of hidden passages, which meant you couldn’t ignore them when you came across them—and then at other times, there were teleporters.

Truly a product of malice.

“Well, the Archdevil’s malice will be trouble to deal with, but we may have to worry more about the malice of people.”

“Oh? Have you found or realized something?”

“No, I have no evidence for this. I just think that given how quickly the dungeon changed, I wouldn’t be surprised if somebody was involved. That would make more sense, in fact.”

“I see... It is indeed almost too well done.”

He could have been overthinking, but true coincidences were rare. The majority of things that happened were caused by someone’s intention, and it was hard to imagine that nobody’s intention was involved in a change as striking as this.

The question was what they intended to accomplish...

“I suppose we’ll have to look into that as well.”

“Indeed. Well, our investigation has only just begun, so I suspect we shall understand once we have gone farther.”

Half-praying that that would be the case, Soma resumed walking with Hildegard.

In any case, it was true that their investigation had only just begun.

“By the way, thank you for calling out to me. I may have been a moment too slow to react otherwise.”

“Do not mention it. I told you that you could count on me for support.”

“It’s good to know I can.” Soma shrugged.

Then, neither hesitating nor dropping his guard, he fixed his narrowed eyes on the path ahead and continued.

9

Once they had defeated the area boss on the twentieth floor, Soma and Hildegard decided that was a good stopping point and left the dungeon for the time being.

Although it was clearly in an abnormal state, they were only two people. They couldn't exactly keep going all night, and they didn't have unlimited focus.

The dungeon had been filled with more hidden passages and traps than they'd anticipated, and all the monsters were ones that shouldn't have been there, like the king goblin. Although the two of them had more than enough skill for the situation, it had frayed their nerves and drained their mental energy. Considering that things were probably even worse in the deeper levels, they'd decided to continue the next day instead of overworking themselves.

"All right, then," Soma muttered and looked up at the sky. Night hadn't fallen yet, but the sun was going to begin setting soon.

The students had a rough curfew; they were told to be back to their dorms by sunset. However, there was no specific time they had to be back by, so he didn't think it would be an issue if he was a little late.

He'd get a scolding if he was too late, of course...but he had time to wrap up an errand or two first.

"Will you be going back to your room, Hildegard?"

"No, I must complete an errand beforehand. What shall you do?"

"I have something to do myself. I was just thinking of dropping by the library."

"What a coincidence... I plan to do the very same thing."

Remembering that he'd seen her in the library before, Soma turned a suspicious glare on Hildegard as soon as those words left her mouth.

"You must not have anything to do after all."

"Why do you regard me thus...?! I would have you know, I do not intend to follow you! I legitimately have my own reasons to go!"

Recognizing his doubts, she'd responded adamantly, but it honestly only made him more doubtful. What would the headmaster need to do at the library?

"Well, you're the one who will end up in trouble later, so it doesn't matter to me."

Soma didn't actually think Hildegard had that much time on her hands. She'd brought so many documents to her room; she must have had enough things to do to warrant that.

But that aside, the fact that she met with Soma and did things with him so often made her look like she didn't have much to do.

"I am telling you, I have a genuine reason to go this time!"

"The fact that you say 'this time' doesn't help your case."

They began walking toward the library as they spoke. Since they were starting from the practice area, they would have to walk all the way across the campus, but it wouldn't be a very long journey, since they could go in a straight line. It would only take a little longer than going to the dorms.

Soma and Hildegard made small talk along the way and arrived at the library shortly.

"Hmm... The quiet may be expected of a library, or even desirable, but it's strange to see it so deserted all the time."

"It cannot be helped, seeing as nobody knows where the materials are."

"Could you hire more librarians to solve that issue, at least temporarily?"

"It is costly to manage an academy. I, too, would like to alleviate this issue, but my hands are tied."

"A necessary financial decision, huh..." Soma muttered, glancing around.

If he remembered correctly...

"The books about dungeons are relatively consolidated, right?"

"Indeed, they are, as they are the titles most commonly sought out by students. As more people proactively seek them out, more have been

identified. I imagine, however, that many remain undiscovered... Did you come to the library to seek out books on dungeons, perchance? I supposed that you wished to do something magic related...”

“Well, that is generally why I come here, so it’s a safe assumption to make.”

But Soma had no intention of getting his priorities wrong, and he had to prioritize the dungeon first and foremost right now.

“The best case would be if we could simply go to the lowest floor and defeat monsters until it’s fixed, but if that failed to work, it would put us in a difficult situation.”

“You certainly have a point. Nonetheless, to my understanding, this phenomenon is unique to our dungeon.”

“The Kingdom of Veritas managed that dungeon for a long time, right? I would think there’s a nonzero chance that there’s a book about it in their top library.”

“That, too, is a good point; however, even if there were a book like that here, I doubt that it would be on the regular bookshelves. It would be in the closed stacks.”

“This library has closed stacks? This is the first I’ve heard of that.”

“Well, that is where we store items that cannot be allowed to leave the library, after all. Permission is necessary to see the books there, and I often cannot give that permission, depending on the specific item, so the closed stacks are not widely known. However, this turns out to be convenient...”

“What do you mean?”

“In fact, the reason I came here has to do with the closed stacks as well.”

“So you really did have a reason.”

“I told you that I do!” Hildegard skillfully managed to yell without raising her voice.

As Soma apologized, the two headed over to the closed stacks. When they got there, though, he was surprised at who he saw.

“Sierra? What brings you here?”

“Soma...? What about you?”

Soma blinked with genuine surprise upon seeing her familiar face. So did Sierra, and they exchanged puzzled looks.

“I came here to give Sierra permission to read a book from the closed stacks,” Hildegard explained. “As I informed you before, permission is necessary, and only I may provide it.”

“But I also recall you saying that you often can’t.”

“I also said that that depends on the specific item. Well, to be honest, this one is not something that should be made public...but I do not believe it shall be a problem in Sierra’s case.”

“What do you mean...?” Sierra asked.

“I mean that I have faith in your character, of course. Also, I do not think that you would do things such as selling off your family.”

“What do you mean?” Sierra repeated the same words, but in a distinctly different tone, her eyes sharpening in an expression of anger...or perhaps frustration.

If this elicited such a strong reaction from Sierra, who was usually expressionless and rarely showed her feelings, then...

“Hmm... I don’t understand the context here, but I gather that you’re picking a fight with Sierra, Hildegard? Then I accept.”

“Why do *you* accept?!”

“Sierra may be at a loss to handle your endurance. I can leave you half-dead for her.”

“There is no need to! I was not picking a fight in the first place! I was simply _”

Before Hildegard could finish, the door to the closed stacks opened and someone came out.

It was another familiar face—Carine.

“Strange...”

“Hmm? Ms. Carine?”

“Oh, Soma? What brings you here? Oh, and I didn’t know you were here as well, headmaster.”

“I arrived just now. Soma is here to see another book in the closed stacks.”

“As she said. So, Ms. Carine, why are you here?”

“In order to bring out the books that Sierra is asking for,” Hildegard answered in her place. “I decided beforehand that I would allow it, but it would have been time consuming to find it and bring it out after giving permission, so I asked her to look for it beforehand.”

“Hmm... Why Ms. Carine?”

“Well, she also serves as a librarian here.”

“Although I’m too busy with teaching to do much librarianship.”

“I see. So you were giving used spellbooks to Sierra because you’re a librarian as well as a sorcery instructor.”

“Right!”

“Was something wrong?” Sierra asked.

“Oh, that’s right... Headmaster, there were a few books missing from the closed stacks.”

“There were...?” A grim expression came to Hildegard’s face after hearing what Carine said. There seemed to be a hint of alarm in it as well.

“If books are going missing from the closed stacks, that would seem to indicate a management issue,” Soma commented. “But I imagine it’s a bigger problem than that.”

“There are some forbidden books in the closed stacks. Those are the ones that I cannot give students permission to read. The ones with the most potential for misuse are sealed away individually, so I am not concerned about them being taken out...”

“Oh, those were fine!”

“That is a relief to hear. But it is too soon to be fully relieved. You set up a barrier before entering, yes?”

“I did, and I didn’t see any signs that someone had broken in.”

“That leaves the possibility that... No, I will think about that later. What books were missing?”

“Well, a book on witches, a book on dungeons, a couple on elves and other ancient civilizations, and one on the Dark Ages. Oh, and one that I’m not sure about.”

“Given that all of those are missing, this is unlikely to be a mistake... What do you mean by one that you are not sure about?”

“Remember that one I mentioned—I said I couldn’t tell what it was about? It had a magic circle in it, so I figured it was probably about magic or magecraft, but I didn’t have time to look closely, so I put it in the closed stacks for the time being...”

“Ah... I do remember such a book.” Hildegard’s eyes were darting back and forth slightly, maybe because she really had forgotten.

Soma sighed. “I would think you would be more on top of things than that.”

“It is not my fault... It genuinely would have taken too much time to read. Whoever took it, however, must be able to read it... No, considering the lack of commonalities between the books they stole, they may have chosen some at random in order to obscure their objective.”

“But they really only want one?” Sierra asked.

“Right—one or two? That’s certainly plausible,” Carine agreed.

“Hmm...”

Several books had gone missing from the closed stacks...no, they’d been stolen. That was what Hildegard seemed to think, at least, and Soma couldn’t argue against it. Considering the situation, the logical conclusion was that someone had snuck in and stolen them.

But that itself wasn’t the most important thing to Soma.

“Hildegard, Carine mentioned one of the books was about dungeons. Could that be...”

“Yes, it is most likely as you suspect. There is only one book about dungeons in the closed stacks.”

“I see...”

That meant that even if there was a book with the information Soma wanted, it was already missing.

While he was disappointed, he also felt like that in itself told him what he wanted to know.

“So it’s possible that the culprit was after that.”

Hildegard’s breath caught for a moment. “I see... Yes, that is plausible.”

It was highly likely that somebody had done something to bring about the current state of the dungeon. If the cause was something written in that book, then it was probably one person behind both incidents—or maybe the culprit had accomplices, but the incidents were at least related somehow.

That theory rested on a lot of assumptions, so Soma didn’t know how much it was worth taking into consideration...but it was worth something in a situation where they had so little evidence to go on.

“In any case, we cannot allow them to escape punishment.”

“Right,” Carine agreed. “They’re all valuable books, so the financial damages are nothing to sneeze at...and we can’t ignore that they broke in either.”

“Indeed; things may have been stolen from other places as well. For the time being, we shall have to reconsider the security here. Though we were all right this time, it would have been highly concerning if one of the sealed items had been stolen. In the worst-case scenario, they could have been used to summon the Evil Spirit.”

When Hildegard went on to talk to Carine about what they would do going forward, Sierra interjected, “Headmaster.” She had the same look on her face as usual, but her eyes were subtly wavering with anxiety, perhaps because something unforeseen had happened.

Soma quickly realized why that was when he considered that Sierra might be in the same situation he was. Maybe the book she was looking for was also...

“Ah, yes... You were looking for a book on witches, but there is only one in the closed stacks,” Hildegard replied, apparently having guessed what Sierra wanted to know.

Soma nodded, his suspicions confirmed. The book Sierra was looking for had been stolen as well.

When Sierra heard that, another rare expression came across her face, this time of dejection.

“Okay...”

Looking at her out of the corner of his eye, Soma muttered under his breath, *Witches, though*... It felt both expected and unexpected to him at the same time.

And books on witches were unlikely to be kept anywhere but the closed stacks. If the academy hadn’t been careful and had left them on the library shelves like any other book, it could have led to an inquisition.

Witches were described as taboo beings. They had white hair and red eyes, and supposedly, they disrupted everything about the world. As enemies of the world, they were to be killed on sight; anyone who so much as sheltered one was inviting death.

As for who killed them, that would be people from the Holy City. It was the Saintess, leader of the Holy City, who had first begun calling them taboo beings, after all. And although that had been a past Saintess, long before the current one, that stance hadn’t changed. Witches were definite enemies to her.

And as the leader of the Holy City, which was the central location of Divinism, the Saintess was the head of the Divinist Church. Although she proclaimed neutrality, she was also the fifth of the Elite Seven, and her figure and words held power to match, no matter what she said. Whatever she willed was the consensus of all Divinists, and to defy it was tantamount to making enemies of the entire world. Therefore, witches were shunned by everybody in the world today.

There were various theories as to why witches were referred to as taboo beings and even as enemies of the world. One reason was their white hair. White meant null—witches couldn't learn any Skills. That made them unnatural beings, according to the argument.

But that was said to be an ad hoc justification, since there were others in addition to witches who couldn't learn any Skills. The second reason was more often cited, which was the power that witches held—witchcraft. It disrupted the world, which people figured made them enemies of the world.

There were other things said about witches, but most were strained justifications, and the Saintess didn't officially endorse them. Two things were certain—witches were considered enemies of the world for whatever reason, and they could use a power called witchcraft.

And witchcraft was the reason it made sense to Soma that Sierra was researching witches. It was said to be similar to magic in terms of the phenomena it caused, so it was understandable that she would look into it in order to learn how to use magic.

Soma himself intended to look into it at some point, in fact. But he didn't want to earn the enmity of the entire world in exchange for only uncertain information, so he hadn't been sure how to go about it.

The unexpected part, then, was that Sierra had been prepared to go that far. It inspired him to match her resolve...but he couldn't research witches now, because the book about them was missing.

But it was too soon to give up. Though witches were supposed to be killed on sight, there were rumors of people sheltering them.

He was sure that, at least, was true, because he never heard about witches being found, despite the self-proclaimed neutral Saintess declaring them enemies outright. That was strange however he looked at it.

It would have been one thing if it had always been like that, but in the past, there had been occasional stories of witches being found and killed. There just hadn't been any recently.

It was possible that no witches had appeared but more likely that they were

being found and sheltered *because* of their witchcraft, Soma thought. Although witchcraft was said to disrupt the world, it was also said to cause miracles in exchange for an offering of equal value.

That was treated as a tall tale...but if it was really possible, it would make sense that there were witches being sheltered somewhere.

And the people most commonly said to be sheltering witches were elves. That was nothing but a rumor, though. It was such a widespread claim that it had been investigated, and the prevailing view was that it was said out of jealousy because of how far elves' magic had progressed compared to humans', as well as because elves were rarely seen.

Soma thought at times that he would like to meet a witch one of these days...but first he would have to figure out where one was.

However, he refocused on the topic at hand, ending his mental tangent about witches. He couldn't say whether there had been a point in coming to the library, but it at least seemed he wouldn't be able to read the book about dungeons.

In that case...

"Hmm... What to do now? It couldn't hurt to check some books at random..."

Although the dungeon incident was likely related to the thief, he had to look into information on the dungeon separately from that. This was something that not even Hildegard knew much about. She would probably do some research herself, but Soma had to learn what he could.

"I have a suggestion regarding that," Hildegard interjected. "You could go into the capital, since tomorrow happens to be a day off."

"Oh, I suppose there may be some books for sale in the capital, and some may be about dungeons..."

But probably none about *this* dungeon.

He'd trailed off deliberately because he didn't know how much he could say out loud, but Hildegard seemed to understand what he meant.

She nodded. "I understand. It was that book in particular that you wished to

read. It is for that very reason that you should go to the capital."

"I don't understand what you're getting at..."

While Soma was knitting his eyebrows in confusion, Carine seemed to have caught on unexpectedly. She put her hands together and nodded in agreement.

"Oh, I see what you mean! That certainly could be your best chance."

"What do you mean...?"

Apparently, neither Sierra nor Soma understood. Seeing their puzzled looks, Carine stood up confidently as if she were giving a lecture and opened her mouth.

"Sierra, you mentioned that they may only be after one book, didn't you? What would they do with the rest that they don't need?"

"Hmm... Might they abandon them somewhere or burn them?" Soma suggested.

"All of the books here are very valuable... Do you think they would just waste them like that after going to the effort and risk of sneaking in here?"

"So...they'd sell them?" Sierra asked.

"Precisely," confirmed Hildegard. "And if they were to sell them anywhere, it would be the capital. In fact, the capital is the only place those books could possibly be sold."

"Why is that?"

"Two reasons, mainly," Carine began. "The first one is that books are expensive, although it's easy to forget that in a place like this! And these are especially valuable ones. I doubt anyone outside the capital would try to buy them. It may be different in other countries, but who would go all the way to another country just to sell a few expensive books?"

"The other reason is that it would be difficult to trace a sale here in the capital," Hildegard continued. "It would typically be simple to find out who sold a valuable book, but there are those in the capital who do business in such a way as to frustrate any investigation."

“Is that okay?”

In other words, she meant that there were resellers of stolen goods. Soma didn’t think the stores themselves were doing anything wrong, but they were certainly encouraging crime.

“It is not okay, of course...but this kingdom is still far from stable. We do not have enough manpower to handle such things... Well, it is a type of necessary evil, I suppose.”

“Mm-hmm... I see what you mean. We can look there.”

“Hmm... But what if one of the books we want is the one the thief was after? Wouldn’t they keep it in that case?”

“I wonder... Would they keep the evidence of their crime on them? Wouldn’t they memorize what they needed to know and then sell it instead? The book itself isn’t what they need, after all.”

Soma nodded, concurring with what Carine said. She made a very reasonable point. The problem with that was that it would leave them with one less way to track down the culprit, but maybe he should simply have been happy that he might be able to read the book he’d thought was lost to him.

Of course, that was only if the culprit actually sold the book...but there was no use pondering the alternative. And there was another problem to think about.

“I understand the reasoning for going to the capital, since it sounds like this book may be valuable enough for that...but I don’t know where to find those stores.”

“Hmm... Yes, indeed, I would suppose not... Well, in that case... W-Would you like my guidance?”

“You want to take me there...?”

Soma gave Hildegard a skeptical look. She was acting a little suspicious. He wasn’t exactly dissatisfied with her suggestion or suspicious of her, but...

“I recall you insisting repeatedly that you’re very busy.”

“W-Well... I simply happen to be free tomorrow! Coincidentally!”

“Coincidentally, huh...”

Soma muttered under his breath and looked at Carine, who responded with a crooked smile and a shrug. It was easy to pick up on the signal that she wasn’t going to butt in where it wasn’t necessary.

Between tracing the thought process of a criminal and knowing about stores she shouldn’t, she was apparently not an instructor he should take lightly.

But figuring it was fine if that was the case, Soma let out a sigh of exasperation and turned back to Hildegard.

“Well, I suppose I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Y-Yes...! You may count on my guidance!”

Seeing her smile from ear to ear, Soma smiled wryly.

Looking at her like this made her almost seem like the young girl she appeared to be, he thought.

“All right, then. Why don’t we head out of the library? The sun will be setting soon.”

“Indeed, it shall. We have many things to consider, and this is not the place to do so.”

“I’ll put the barrier back up before I go, so you don’t have to wait for me!”

“Bye...”

Leaving Carine behind by herself, the other three exited the library. Just as expected, the sun was nearly below the horizon. They would have made it back to the dorms before the curfew even at a leisurely pace, but they walked quickly regardless.

Along the way...

“Sierra.”

“Mm-hmm?”

“I understand how you felt about what I said before; however, seeing that you have calmed down, I presume that you understand I was merely warning you. You must act with more caution, or things will go back to square one.”

“I know... Okay. Thanks. And...sorry.”

Soma heard Hildegard and Sierra whispering to each other, but he hurried along, pretending he hadn’t heard.

Sierra probably had her own things going on, and she hadn’t come to Soma about them, so he had no right to butt in.

As he had that thought, he sighed and continued walking toward the dorms with the two.

10

Naturally, there were days off even at the academy. The students got two days off per week as well as holidays. There were also short breaks in the spring and summer between semesters...but those were a long ways away.

In any case, students did get days off, but they didn't spend them the same way the average person would. The majority never left the academy, even when they had days off.

That wasn't to say that they weren't allowed to leave. Although it was a boarding school where all students, including royalty, had to live in the dorms, they could visit home if they got permission, even for overnight stays.

The issue was that permission was rarely given for students to leave, let alone stay overnight, which was hardly allowed except for particular exceptions...but regardless, that wasn't the main reason that nobody went out. It was because they wanted to use that time for practicing and studying.

So, despite it being a day off, the campus was filled with students. That was the most apparent in the practice area; an observer would have had no idea it was a day off.

Ultimately, that meant that the students' behavior hardly changed between days they had classes and days they didn't, and the same went for Soma. If there was any difference, it was that he read the books in the library instead of in the classroom. However, he selected the books from the library shelves rather than grabbing them at random, so he may actually have been more fulfilled on days off.

Regardless, although Soma had initially spent his days off diligently collecting documents in the library, there had been somewhat of a change recently. He had begun going to the practice area more often, like he did after school. In the future, though, his final destination was likely to be different from the one used for after-school activities.

However, all of that was irrelevant on this particular day, because Soma was

doing something entirely different than usual.

“This is a nicer change of pace than expected,” he muttered as he glanced around. All around him were people coming and going down the road—old and young, men and women mixed together, wearing various kinds of clothes and not just uniforms. That last point was the most refreshing to him, since he’d seen nothing but uniforms as of late.

But that was normal for the place where he was standing, because he wasn’t at the academy but on a street in the capital.

In other words, Soma had left the academy for the first time since he’d enrolled. He’d gone out of his way to get permission to do that because of the plans he’d made with Hildegard the day before.

He’d come out to the capital in order to search for the books that had been stolen from the library.

However, he still didn’t see the other key player in the plan, Hildegard. Although she’d said she was free, she’d suddenly contacted him this morning saying she had something to do beforehand.

“Well...of course she isn’t free today.”

On top of the dungeon problem, several books had been stolen from the closed stacks at the library. As headmaster, she probably had a lot of things to take care of.

If they found some books in the capital, they might uncover clues as to who the culprit was, and if they found the book about the dungeon, they might learn more about what was happening to it right now...but those were optimistic predictions. It was unlikely that they would come to be, and even if they did, there was no reason Hildegard in particular had to do it. Someone like Carine could handle looking for books.

“She must have needed some time to force their permission to do this.”

Hildegard was headmaster, but it wasn’t like she owned the academy. There was a limit to how much she could invoke her force; she needed proper justification to do things, and the instructors had to agree.

“I don’t imagine they’re happy that she plans to run around the capital while they work.”

On paper, the instructors had the day off as well, but the students were studying and practicing as usual. None of the instructors felt comfortable taking the day off in that setting.

In a sense, you could have looked at Hildegard going to the capital as a part of her duties...but not realistically. From an outside perspective, she was just going to the capital to have fun.

That was evident from the fact that Soma was waiting in the capital. If Hildegard had something to do, there wasn’t really a reason for him to be waiting here, but when she’d come to tell him that, she’d explicitly told him to meet her here. She would have had to be lying if she’d claimed this had nothing to do with fun.

“I wonder what exactly she intends to do...”

The fact that she had asked to meet before noon meant that she was fairly confident she would be able to wrap up the conversation by then, but, being the type of people to get jobs at the Royal Academy, the instructors had their fair share of quirks that made them tricky to deal with.

Just as he was wondering how she would convince them, a familiar face appeared in his field of view.

“Hmm, speak of the devil...no, I suppose that doesn’t quite apply here.”

“What are you talking about, pray tell?”

“Nothing. I was only talking to myself.” He shrugged.

Hildegard was clearly acting strange, though. Her eyes were darting around restlessly in a way that almost made her look afraid. In fact, she was avoiding eye contact.

“It wouldn’t typically concern me how you behave, but people will think that I’m coercing you, so would you mind acting normally?”

“Wh-What do you speak of...?! I am clearly behaving normally!”

He wanted to tell her to look at herself before saying that, but decided it

would accomplish nothing and let it go.

In terms of appearance, she wasn't too different from him, and Soma was wearing an academy uniform. He doubted anyone would suspect them of being up to no good.

"R-Regardless... I took longer than expected. Did...you wait long?"

"Yes, I did, actually."

"Wh...?!"

Soma had just given her an honest answer to her question, but Hildegard goggled at him like she couldn't believe it. She opened and closed her mouth a couple times, adding to the sense of strangeness.

"You are meant to respond that you just got here!"

"No, that would be impossible. If I had just gotten here, you would have noticed me on the way."

"That is true, but... What is the point of meeting in the capital if not for that?!"

He'd figured that was what she was after; in fact, that was why he'd deliberately given her a different answer.

Seeing her begin to stamp her feet in frustration, he let out a sigh. The behavior was fitting in a way, considering her appearance alone, but she was the headmaster of an academy, not to mention a former dragon god. She seemed to have forgotten too much of her former dignity.

Soma sighed again. "For crying out loud... All right, I just got here too. Are you happy now?"

"Y... Yes! This is satisfactory!"

He'd obviously just said that to appease her, but apparently she was actually happy with it. Seeing her smile ear to ear, he chuckled wryly. She was a bit too easy to please.

"Well, as long as you're happy, I suppose. On that note, you got here faster than I expected. How did you convince the instructors so quickly? That was

what you had to do, right?”

“Yes, it was. Between the dungeon and the theft, the recent incidents mean that I cannot take a day off simply because it is a weekend, so some convincing was necessary. However, that was all that it took. It is not as if they cannot accomplish anything without my presence.”

“I see... It certainly shouldn’t be a problem as long as you give them instructions. Logically, at least. But I imagine some are opposed to the headmaster doing nothing while they are hard at work.”

“What do you speak of? As you can see, I am here to search for evidence in the capital. However, my work is certainly easier than the others’... For that reason, I offered them appropriate compensation.”

“In what way?”

“I doubled all of their salaries for this month.”

Soma blinked at the unexpected statement, but at the same time, it made sense to him.

Whether or not Hildegard went to the capital, the instructors had work to do, and the amount wouldn’t change if she was there. Yet just because she was missing for a day...no, only half a day, their salaries had been doubled.

Not every problem could be resolved with money, but a relatively large number of problems could be. It was an attractive enough proposition, and it must have been highly persuasive.

“That’s quite the forceful move, like slapping them with a pile of cash. Where will the money come from, anyway? I didn’t think you were allowed to increase their salaries without permission, even as headmaster.”

“I shall simply use my own funds. I have quite a lot saved up, as I have few things I want or opportunities to spend it. I can afford the expense comfortably.”

“Right, dragons do have a tendency to hoard gold.”

“That is different. Ah, I also informed the instructors that I shall allow them full days off in the future if they request them beforehand. To ensure that they

do not have to worry about being barged in on while taking time off, I shall also inform the students."

"I imagine a lot of the instructors would appreciate that. It must be hard work, and before now, they were only allowed to take time off for extended breaks, right? I'm surprised that that system remained in place for so long."

"Well, the academy is for the students; hence, we prioritized their desire to learn. Also, the instructors enjoyed it themselves."

But even so, they had physical limitations.

Well, that was a thing of the past now. If their working environment had already improved, if only on paper, then Soma had no need to meddle any further.

"Well, as long as you convinced them successfully."

"Yes, I was successful!" Hildegard nodded, brimming with confidence.

Soma shrugged and muttered *all right, then*.

"Now that we know everything is resolved, we should get going. We don't have to stand here in order to talk."

"That is true. We shall head somewhere that the book in question is likely to be, right?"

"Where else would we go?"

"Well... We have come all the way to the capital. There are a number of other places..." Hildegard pouted.

Soma just shrugged again. But he glanced behind Hildegard for a second, then murmured in understanding.

"Well, I'm willing to consider it if we find the book quickly. We did come all the way out here, after all."

"Really...?!"

"That's only if we find it quickly, though. It may be before noon now, but it'll take time to look around."

"In that case, let us begin posthaste!"

Soma chuckled at Hildegard as she immediately began walking quickly. She could be so self serving, he thought.

Then he glanced back toward the corner he'd looked at before...

"What are you doing?! Come with me!"

"I know. You don't have to yell."

Smiling wryly at her shout and turning back toward her, Soma began to walk behind Hildegard.

†

As Soma began to walk, eyes were on him from the shadows. Someone was lurking around a corner, peeking out furtively at him.

No...there was more than one person.

“He looks like he’s having fun...”

“Mm-hmm... He’s letting his guard down. More than any of us.”

“I can’t argue with that...but what do you two think you’re up to?”

The two girls peering out—Lina and Sierra—turned to face the source of the fed up voice behind them. As Aina, standing with her hand on her hip, gave them an unimpressed look, they both tilted their heads in puzzlement.

“Observing my brother and the headmaster, as you can see!”

“What else could it be?”

“I’m asking *why* you’re doing that!”

“Because I was curious when I found out they were going on a date, of course!” Lina skillfully managed to yell while still keeping her voice down. Sierra nodded.

They were met with an exasperated sigh from Aina. “If you’re so curious, why’re you sneaking around? You could meet up and join them.”

“Oh, no, we couldn’t possibly! It wouldn’t do to disturb them!”

“Mm-hmm... Love is sacred.”

“I honestly have no idea what you’re trying to accomplish...” Aina shook her head and pressed her hands to her temples as if she had a headache.

Lina, though, looked at her intently and spoke just as seriously. “I can forgive them going on a date. After all, if I interrupted them now, she might interrupt me when it’s my turn.”

“Mm-hmm... Some compromise is necessary. But only some.”

“Exactly. Judging by how carefree she was acting, there’s no telling what the headmaster will try. We have to observe so we can stop her!”

“You two are acting just as weird...” Aina sighed again.

The other girls both had retorts, though.

“You’re talking like this has nothing to do with you, but aren’t you here for the same reason?”

“Yeah... If, if anything...you roped us into it.”

Aina averted her eyes from Sylvia and Helen, her cheeks reddening. “N-No... I was just worried about these two!”

“Really? ’Cause you seemed really into the idea yesterday,” Sylvia said with a half-lidded stare. Aina turned her head away.

Needless to say, what Sylvia said was correct. The five of them were here primarily for the reason Lina had stated before.

Soma and Hildegard had planned a date...well, not exactly a date, but something that looked just like one from an outside perspective, so the others had come to keep an eye on the two of them and see what was up.

Naturally, it had been Sierra who brought them the information. It had been nearly sunset then, but they’d decided this was important enough to disregard the curfew and had met in Aina’s room to discuss.

Incidentally, they’d picked Aina’s room because it was between the dorms for the instructors and those for students in the swordsmanship concentration.

The process of meeting up had gone smoothly, since they got together from time to time already, and that was when Sylvia and Helen had gotten involved. Being in the same concentration, the two hung out with Aina often, so they had been together at the time.

And that was how they’d gotten roped in...

“But, but Sylvia... Weren’t you also...pretty excited?”

“Helen...?!” Sylvia shouted in response to the unforeseen betrayal from within. Lina and Sierra stared at her with disapproving eyes.

“You did seem rather enthusiastic for someone who claims to have been roped in!”

“Mm-hmm... Now that you mention it...it was Sylvia who told us to hide here.”

“And you were pretty quick to assign yourself the role of scout,” Aina added, leaving Sylvia with no counterargument.

Her words caught in her throat for a second as she averted her eyes...but she still managed to force some words out.

“Well, you know... I figured it would make good practice for the next time we go into the dungeon.”

Yet Helen countered even those words. “But it’s...it’s not like we tail monsters in the dungeon...”

She was being surprisingly unrelenting, maybe out of anger that she alone had truly been roped into this against her will, although her body language suggested sulking more than it did anger.

Nevertheless, it was just teasing—although what was going on in Sylvia’s mind was another story.

“Uh, well, I mean... Oh!” Sylvia looked around nervously as if searching for an excuse somewhere nearby, then suddenly exclaimed and pointed in the direction that Soma and Hildegard had gone. “We don’t have time to talk! We’ll lose them if we don’t start moving!”

She was obviously saying that in an attempt to escape, but it was true that Soma and Hildegard were already getting farther away. With the number of people passing through, the girls certainly would risk losing them if they weren’t careful.

The four looked at each other and nodded.

“It certainly wouldn’t do to let them get away from us now!”

“Mm-mm. Then I couldn’t do the errand I made up.”

“It may be made up, but don’t *say* so out loud...”

All of them, except for Lina, were students at the academy, so they needed a good reason to leave, and observing a date was not a good one, so Sierra had made up a reason.

The reason Soma and Hildegard had come out to the capital in the first place was to look for the books that had been stolen from the library, and Sierra wanted one of those books, so she had a reason to go out as well. Hence, she'd stated that as her goal and exited the academy.

Also, it was necessary to request permission to leave from an instructor, but not just any instructor would do. They had to have years of experience as well as the academy's trust.

Thankfully, Carine met those conditions. She'd given them permission, although she'd smiled wryly as she did, since she knew the situation...although she may have given permission because she'd picked up on the truth behind Sierra's story.

In any case, they'd gotten her permission to leave.

However, while Sierra's reason was partially made up, it was also partially genuine. If she could get the book she was looking for while they were at it, all the better.

And for that reason as well, they couldn't let Soma and Hildegard out of their sight.

"Speaking of which... We got permission thanks to Sierra, but how'd you manage, Lina?"

"What do you mean, Aina? The instructors are off today as well."

"On paper, yeah. But I've never seen one actually taking the day off."

"No, I'm quite certain that the instructors are really off today. We do have a responsibility to meet with any student who comes to us, however. Nobody who would ignore a student's request would have been hired here in the first place."

"So you're saying...it's fine as long as you make yourself scarce before students show up?" Sylvia asked.

Lina shook her head. "I would never do something like that. But, you see..."

"But?"

"My only responsibility is to teach the swordsmanship concentration, so I

assembled all of the students early this morning. I told them that if one of them could give me even a tiny scratch, I would give them hands-on tutoring all day. However, if none of them could, I would leave for the day."

"I'd ask what happened, but I already know..."

"I whooped all of their butts!"

"That's kinda childish..."

"I may be a teacher, but I'm not an adult, so it's okay!"

"Must be hard for the swordsmanship students... Wait, we have to go or we'll lose them!"

They all started to move faster in response to Sylvia's words. They'd certainly spent a bit too long chatting; they were really running the risk of losing sight of the two.

"Oh, but they might notice us if we rush, so don't forget to be careful, okay?"

"So serious about this..."

"Well, we can follow up on that later."

"Yeah, I guess we should keep our voices down. I doubt he can hear us over everyone else around, but he's pretty perceptive."

"Um... About that..."

"What's up, Helen?"

"I-I think... He might have already noticed us..."

All of them froze in place momentarily. They resumed moving quickly, but their faces had stiffened slightly.

"No... That can't be. Not even my brother would have noticed."

"Yeah," Aina agreed. "I mean, he may be strong and all, but..."

"But, but he looked over here...and twice."

"It's probably a coincidence...?" Sylvia suggested.

"Mm-hmm... Probably."

They spoke without meeting eyes, as if they were trying to convince themselves.

That was all the more reason for Helen to hold her tongue, though. She understood how they felt; they probably didn't want to consider the possibility that the person they were trying to tail had already noticed them.

"So, um... Let's, let's get going, I guess..."

"R-Right... Let's go!"

"Yeah, let's try to be careful not to lose them."

"And keep our voices down. Or they'll hear us."

"But if the headmaster tries anything, we'd better stop her right away!"

Helen thought something about that sounded backwards, but she didn't speak up this time. Despite her shyness, she had enough social skills to know not to.

Exhaling to recenter herself, she met eyes with the other four and nodded. The group came out from their hiding place behind the corner and began to stealthily follow Soma and Hildegard.

11

Naturally, Soma knew that people were tailing him and who they were. He opted not to bring it up, however, because he didn't think they would pose a problem.

"I had a feeling it was something like that..."

"What do you speak of?"

"Just talking to myself. Anyway, how much longer will it be? I thought you said it wouldn't be long."

"The roads here are convoluted so that only those who know the way may find the shop. It is truly near... Ah, and here we are."

Hildegard stopped before a door with a thin layer of grime on it. The area around it was oddly dim, perhaps because of its location off of the street; it certainly was no place any decent person would think to go inside.

"This certainly seems like that sort of place."

"It would pose problems if an outsider mistakenly entered, after all. A report from a do-gooder would surely result in arrests."

"So they've deliberately made it look shady, you mean."

Now that Soma thought about it, it hadn't been long since the capital was built. It had been before he was born, at least, but not decades ago.

Also, he'd heard that they'd completely cleared the area and built it from scratch. If this place was dirty, others should have been as well, so it was unusual that this place alone seemed unclean.

"This gives me much to consider."

"It would be best if we did not have to consider such things, but alas, this kingdom is not so blessed."

As she spoke, Hildegard approached the door without hesitation. It was a plain door, with nothing on it indicating that this was a shop, which must have

been another way to keep the uninitiated from entering.

Soma followed shortly after Hildegard. They came up to the door, and Hildegard reached for it...but just then, it opened from the other side with an unexpectedly cheery sound.

A figure appeared on the other side, frozen in place as if startled to encounter other people here.

That was just how it looked to Soma, though; he could have been wrong. He couldn't know for sure because he couldn't see the other person's face—only their mouth was uncovered. They were wrapped in a black robe with a hood that hung down all the way to their mouth, clearly marking them as suspicious. All Soma could tell was that they were around the same height as him and Hildegard.

Soma didn't say anything, though, given the place...and because whatever he might say could be said of himself as well. He silently stepped aside, allowing the other person to quietly walk past once they had recovered from their shock.

For just a moment, he glimpsed a reddish-blue hue inside the hood. It was the color of the person's eyes, but before he could see any more, they walked away.

Watching their back as they left, he muttered to himself.

"I suppose the outfits do come in handy."

"Indeed. They are not strictly necessary, as it would not pose a problem for us if others saw our faces, but it is good manners."

"It certainly would be awkward to talk to someone whose face is visible while yours is covered, especially if you happen to know them."

Soma gave the cloth in front of his face a little tug. It was white, but it served the same purpose as the other that he'd just seen.

Yes, Soma and Hildegard were also wearing robes and hiding their faces in hoods. It would only have made them look suspicious out on the open streets, so they'd put them on once they entered the back alleys...and apparently, he had made the right choice by listening to her when she said to do so.

“Shall we enter?”

“Yes, let’s.”

This time, they opened the door on a dim room. Just one glance told them it was shady, but it was oddly smaller than it looked from outside. There were no items for sale visible. There was just a counter in the back, but nobody was standing behind it.

“Are you sure this is the right place? There’s nothing here.”

“Of course it is. Have you forgotten the sort of goods that they carry here? It would give them away if they left everything lying out in the open. The goods are kept in the back to prevent that.”

“Ah, I understand.”

It would certainly cause a scene if someone saw something that had been stolen from them. That was exactly the situation Soma and Hildegard were in, however.

“Is it all right for us to be here?”

“It shall be difficult to determine the provenance, but purchasing the item itself shall be simple. We are no different from any other customer in that regard. It is forbidden to ask about an item’s origins for the same reason, incidentally, but it is possible to purchase such information.”

“Hmm... And I suppose the seller is aware of that, so we shouldn’t trust that information blindly.”

“Indeed. It is preferable to having no leads, however. The question is whether we shall find what we are looking for.”

Since they had no choice but to check for themselves, Hildegard headed toward the counter in the back.

There was still nobody there, but maybe someone would come if they called...or so Soma thought before a figure appeared just as Hildegard reached the counter.

Soma registered faint surprise at seeing someone seemingly fade in from the darkness. He hadn’t been trying to, but he hadn’t sensed anyone until just now.

Given that they made a living through such underhanded means, they were probably good at using Obscure Presence.

“I am looking for a book. Do you have a catalog? A brief description of the contents in addition to the titles would be helpful.”

Hildegard, though, wasn’t at all fazed. After she confidently stated her business, the figure vanished, presumably to fetch the catalog.

“Hmm... Quite thorough.”

“That is how this place is. The people are the most dangerous thing here, in multiple respects.”

“That certainly seems to be the case.”

Soma said so because the person they’d seen exiting the shop hadn’t spoken a word, and they had been wearing a mask to hide their face. On top of that, they’d had on a robe with a hood to conceal their features. Considering that, even their height may have been disguised.

But that amount of caution was necessary when dealing with stolen goods. Given that they were being overlooked, the other people in the trade were probably more of a problem than the police. They were often dealing with valuable or important goods, so it was best to make sure nobody knew their face or identity.

And considering that people like that masked individual came in, the shopkeeper probably had even more reason to watch out.

While Soma and Hildegard were speaking, the shopkeeper returned and set several sheets of parchment on the counter. Hildegard perused them one by one.

Soma glanced at them as well. The type of item was listed, such as book or jewel, along with name, size, and weight. It was mostly general characteristics that were listed, as well as brief descriptions for the books. Each sheet had at least one book listed, so the shopkeeper had probably brought out only the ones with books.

Even so, there was quite a large number of items. Soma wondered just how

many there were...and as he had that thought, he came to an understanding. The store was clearly smaller than it looked from the outside, so the rest of the space must have been storage.

“There are more than I imagined... Would you bring me every book listed?”

The shopkeeper showed a clear expression of surprise at being asked for all of them.

Soma himself was surprised, to be honest. There were only about ten books, but some of them were clearly unrelated to the stolen ones. In fact, as far as he could tell by looking at the catalog, it didn’t seem like the stolen books were here.

So what was she thinking, buying all of them?

“Hildegard...?”

“The sellers tend to end up hoarding books like these, and not without reason —those seeking books do not often come to shops such as these. Yet we happen to have a grand library. It would be a waste to overlook these. Considering what is in it as of now, this might even be called an investment.”

“Hmm... So this was your plan all along?”

“Acquiring new materials is part of my job. Also, one of these may contain information on magic. That is typically classified information, so it does not see the light of day.”

“I see. If it’s your job, then I suppose you have to.”

He hadn’t really been opposed in the first place. It wouldn’t bother anyone, and even if the books were stolen, she wasn’t doing anything wrong, nor would any students who studied from them.

If Hildegard agreed to do this because of the possibility of acquiring more books, then Soma couldn’t argue.

“They don’t seem to have what we’re looking for, though.”

“They likely do not. Well, there are other such shops. Let us hope that they have our books.”

“I get the feeling we’ll have a big stack of books by the end of the day...but I suppose that isn’t a concern for you.”

“No, it is not.”

After a short wait, the shopkeeper returned, but with a stack of books in their arms, they couldn’t be as stealthy as before. They set everything down on the counter. Each book was thick and elaborately decorated, so it was obvious they were all rather valuable. They would be highly priced to match.

And although her face was covered, Hildegard’s height was clearly that of a child. It was only natural that the shopkeeper looked at her as if they were unsure she could afford it.

But Hildegard, disregarding the doubtful stare, looked over the books one by one and nodded. She then took a leather pouch from her pocket and placed it ostentatiously on the counter. Numerous metallic sounds echoed through the air, and a golden shine spilled from the opening.

“I believe that this should be enough. Your thoughts? If not, I am willing to add more.”

The shopkeeper was left speechless. Hildegard fished around in her pocket and took out another, similar pouch.

Seeing the shopkeeper holding their breath unconsciously, a corner of Hildegard’s mouth turned up in a smirk. That disrespectful stare had apparently gotten on her nerves.

The shopkeeper quickly refocused, however, and started taking the coins out one by one. They must have been doing that to demonstrate the total was correct.

Soma had no idea of the price, since the shopkeeper hadn’t said a word...but Hildegard seemed to know. The shopkeeper handed the pouches back to her as if to say they’d received the necessary amount. Hildegard nodded, satisfied, and returned the pouches to her pocket.

“That is all that we came here to do. Let us move on to the next. Would you mind carrying the books?”

“No, it’s no big deal.”

Soma picked up the books, of which there were about ten, and turned his back to the counter. He felt eyes on him from behind, probably a surprised look. The shopkeeper hadn’t expected him to be able to carry them all on his own.

But this was no problem for him, and he only had to carry them until they exited the shop, anyway. The problem, if anything, was that the books they’d been looking for weren’t there.

Hildegard had said there were other shops like this, but knowing her, she’d come here first because this was the one where they were most likely to find the books. Since this shop didn’t have what they were looking for, their odds of finding it elsewhere were low.

Well, the chances probably weren’t zero...but it would probably be best to assume they wouldn’t find any.

As he had that thought, Soma followed Hildegard out of the store.

†

Glaring toward a grimy door in the back of a dim alleyway, a girl sighed.

“We can’t get very close to him like this...”

The group’s sentiment was essentially as Lina had just said. There was nowhere to hide between their current hiding place and the door. They couldn’t even see inside, let alone get up close.

“Well, if that’s the store, we don’t need to look inside to know there’s only one thing they could be doing.”

“Mm-hmm... The question is...is it that kind of store? It looks shady.”

“Well, the headmaster seemed oddly happy, and that doesn’t look like a store... We can’t rule out the possibility that she convinced Soma to go inside by lying that it’s a store.”

Helen sighed, looking at the other four girls as they peered out at the door. She wanted to point out that Aina and Sylvia were, in fact, pretty into this, but she held back the urge. Putting that fact out here wouldn’t make anyone happy.

But...

“Um... Maybe we should...have more faith in the headmaster?”

“What do you mean? I absolutely have faith in her. I have faith that given the chance, she *will* pounce on my brother.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I can’t really argue against that, to be honest.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far...but this does seem suspicious.”

Though Helen had meant to cool everyone’s heads, her suggestion had only heated them up more.

No...maybe this *was* cool headed by their standards, and their natural tendencies were just out of whack.

People sometimes referred to that state as the opposite of cool headed, though.

“Um, well, another person came out before... I-I think...it’s, it’s some kind of store...”

“We did pass someone shady before... And there isn’t anywhere else like this, so I guess he probably came out of there.”

“Mm-hmm... But we didn’t see it. So we can’t be sure.”

“He was dressed so suspiciously that he would have been reported in most places, so if he came out of there, it’s likely that they sell stolen goods.”

“He was definitely acting shady. That reminds me...do we know him?”

“Huh...?”

Just when Helen thought she’d successfully redirected the conversation, the subject took an unexpected turn. She pondered what Sylvia said, thinking back on the boy and furrowing her brow.

To be honest, she’d looked away as soon as she spotted him, so nothing about his appearance rang any bells.

Aina looked puzzled as well, but her case was different. She’d gotten a good

look at him and just hadn't recognized him, except for noting that his height was close to theirs. Nobody they knew came to mind.

But Sierra nodded ever so slightly. "Mm-hmm... He might have been."

It wasn't as if she could confirm that with confidence, though. She could sense presences, but not precisely enough to know who they were, so she had merely thought, based on a gut feeling, that it could have been someone they knew, and while she had faith in her intuition, she didn't have enough to say so for sure.

And...

"Yes... I think he probably was. I think you would have been able to tell too, if you'd gotten a longer glance at him, Sierra."

"Oh... So that means..."

Lina's statement had been confident. She could assuredly declare that the person who'd walked by them was someone they knew.

Sylvia nodded in agreement and said the name out loud.

"So that really was Lars."

The rest of the group was split in half between two different reactions. Helen and Aina gasped in surprise, while Sierra and Lina nodded. Sierra also seemed somewhat relieved that she'd been right, but apart from that, her reaction was much the same as Lina's.

"That...that was Lars earlier?"

"I believe so," said Lina.

"So...what was he doing in there?" Aina wondered out loud.

"I wonder that too... He couldn't have been selling stolen goods, right?"

"Maybe he bought some," Sierra suggested.

"That seems more likely... But what?"

"Something to make him more powerful? He didn't come to practice yesterday, and he seemed like there was something on his mind."

“I did notice in our swordsmanship class yesterday that he was more fired up to improve,” Lina noted. “That also reminds me—I heard talk that an elementary school first-year was asking a middle school third-year for something. Maybe this has something to do with that.”

“A-A third-year, in middle school... Maybe Kurt? But...but Kurt uses a lance... What, what would Lars have...have been asking Kurt for?”

“Fighting tips...or maybe training advice?”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“It does sound likely... But what happened to Lars? He wasn’t like that before the suspension.”

“He did seem almost too desperate...although I don’t think being persistent is a bad thing.”

“Mm-hmm... I understand wanting to get stronger. Or wanting to do something.”

“Well, I get that—whoa!”

“What’s...what’s going on?”

Everyone’s eyes were on Sylvia after her sudden exclamation, but she didn’t have time to explain. She hurriedly looked over at the door. The others’ eyes followed, and they quickly understood.

The door was about to open.

“Oh... I was too focused on our conversation!”

“What’re we gonna do? Run?!”

“Mm-hmm... Hurry. But don’t panic.”

“That’ll be hard... But it’s over if he sees us now!”

They were so panicked about Soma emerging from the shop because the five of them were hiding in a narrow one-way street, and the next corner was at the end of another narrow one-way street, which was rather long. That meant that if they moved at the wrong time, he would spot them and know what they were doing—it couldn’t just be a coincidence that they crossed paths in a place like

this.

So they had to move, and quick. Ducking their heads down, they began to walk as fast as they could without making noise.

Helen sighed as she watched the other four, thinking about how she'd been dragged into this, but she didn't have the guts to stand up for herself and abandon the mission now. She just had to give up and go along with them.

Just when she started to move, she paused with a puzzled look on her face, having come to a realization.

When it came down to it...

"Helen? What're you standing around for?!"

"Hurry, Helen!"

But the voices urging Helen on drowned out her thought. She hadn't noticed everyone else already walking away. She hastily followed after.

"Okay, I'm, I'm sorry..."

But even as she began to move her legs, Helen wondered what exactly Lars had come to do.

12

Long story short, the search for the stolen books was in vain. They went to three other stores that carried stolen goods, but not one had any of the books they were looking for.

Well, Hildegard had bought all of the books that each store had in stock, but they hadn't gone through them yet, so there was still a small chance that they would discover one of the missing books when they checked their purchases later.

Right now, the two were in the farthest back of the back alleys, as would be expected given where they had just come from. However, the scenery didn't actually look much different from what they'd seen in the streets of the capital.

That was because the construction of the capital was similar everywhere due to the two-story limitation on buildings. They couldn't expand vertically, nor did they have enough room to build outward. Most of all, however, it was because the capital had been planned by a single person.

For those reasons, all of the buildings in the capital resembled each other, and the scenery was likewise uniform. Just lifting your head a little allowed you to see the rooftops and the vast sky overhead.

That was no different here, of course. Soma gazed out at the skyline and let out a breath.

"All right... What are we going to do now?"

"Well, now that we have failed to find any of the books, we have no choice but to give up for the time being."

"Rather quick to give up, aren't you?"

"I did not particularly expect to find them today. We do not know when they were stolen, after all; it is possible that someone bought them long ago, but it is equally possible that they have yet to be put up for sale."

"Hmm, that's certainly true."

And if they'd waited until they figured out when precisely the theft had occurred, that in itself would have increased the chances that the books had already been purchased. That was why they'd had to move quickly.

That was also related to the reason that Hildegard had said "for the time being." Depending on when the books had been stolen, there was a chance that they hadn't been sold yet and the two could recover them later.

"Nevertheless, there is nothing more that I can do today," Hildegard concluded. "I shall follow your lead going forward."

"Why is that?"

"Well, you have been assisting me in my errand thus far; although you requested one of the books we are looking for as well, this is a part of my job. It follows that I, in turn, should accompany you in doing whatever you would like to do."

"You certainly have a point."

"Naturally. Having been involved in the construction of the capital, I am more familiar with it than you may imagine, so I can show you to wherever you would like to go. Might I suggest...looking for books on magic?"

"Quite the appealing offer."

Soma really meant that. To be honest, he didn't even know what was in the capital, let alone where things were. He would be glad for the assistance if she was willing to take him somewhere that had magic-related items.

So...

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance *Unrivaled Power* Lightning Speed: Brilliant Brandish

"Why don't I clean this place up so we can do that, then?"

As he spoke, he swung his arm out. He was holding his sword, its tip pointed at the empty space in front of him.

What they next heard, though, was a high-pitched clang. The air wavered, as

did the sound, and Soma sensed alarm from the empty space.

But Soma wasn't alarmed. Instead, he sighed with annoyance.

"Why are you surprised? Did you honestly think I hadn't noticed you, given how obvious your presence is?"

The other person still wasn't visible, but Soma sensed strong determination from them, as if they'd resolved to take a stand now that it had come to this.

But Soma simply sighed again. "I hate to cut this short now that you're so determined...but what makes you think there's anything you can do now?"

"Wha...?!"

With that shocked exclamation, a figure appeared in front of Soma, but by then, it was already over. The black-robed body had a diagonal slash through it. Seeming not to comprehend what had just happened, they collapsed to the ground.

But Soma looked up rather than watch their demise. There were several figures on the roof, all of them dressed in black like the person at his feet. He had no need to ask who they were or what they were doing—not that they would have answered him if he had.

"What to do..."

He already knew that the person he'd fought was hostile. If he hadn't intercepted when he had, he would have had his head chopped off. No friends of someone like that could be friends of Soma's...and what was more, he recognized the figures.

"They do not look very amiable," Hildegard commented. "Do you know them?"

"I wouldn't say I know them; I don't know what their faces look like, after all. I have met them once before, though. You must have heard about Sylvia being attacked on the day of the entrance ceremony—these are the perpetrators."

"I did hear such a story...I grasp the situation now."

The situation was that they'd just been sneak attacked, but Soma wasn't surprised or panicked, because he'd predicted it. He'd already known that he

was being watched, and by whom. Between that and the familiar presences, how could he not have expected this?

If there was any problem, it was that...

“They do not appear willing to take you on,” Hildegard observed. “I can understand why, however, given the prowess you displayed just now... Perhaps you should have restrained yourself.”

“No, the results would have been the same either way. They aren’t after me in particular.”

“That is a good point... I can understand their unwillingness to go up against you if they are already familiar with your skill.”

“The one who attacked me was trying his hardest, but I imagine he also knew he would need luck on his side to accomplish anything. I believe their main goal was to buy time.”

And Soma didn’t need to wonder what they intended to do with that time. He looked out at them through narrowed eyes.

“Hmm... Should I take care of them now rather than hurry ahead and ignore them?”

“These types do not hesitate to use any means necessary to achieve their goals. We cannot allow them to run amok through the city.”

“That’s what I thought. Let’s get going once I wrap this up, then.”

With those words, he pointed his sword toward the rooftop. Simultaneously, the black-robed figures got into position, but Soma didn’t hesitate to leap off of the ground directly at them.

†

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

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

It wasn’t by chance that Sylvia had been able to avoid the attack.

She had been keeping a close eye out for enemies in case Soma and Hildegard

caught up to her and her friends. And although the “enemies” part had been half-joking, the longer she kept watching, the more she’d felt like she really was in the dungeon.

Also, since they were in the back alleys, she’d remembered the time not long ago when she’d been attacked in a back alley.

Lastly...she’d learned and experienced a lot at school.

Due to the combination of all those factors, Sylvia’s body knew what to do before her mind did, and she evaded the blow aimed at her head with nearly perfect form.

But...

“Huh...?”

Since her body had moved half-automatically, she needed a second to process what she was looking at.

But that left her vulnerable. And the very fact that her dodge had been perfect gave the enemy an even bigger opening to attack.

Before her was a somehow familiar black-robed figure. This one was shorter than the ones she’d seen before, however—nearly as short as her.

Once Sylvia had thought that far, her perception caught up with reality, but by then, the figure was swinging the sword in their left hand upward.



“No, you don’t!”

Instantly, Lina got between Sylvia and the sword and blocked the attack. The

blade was heavier than expected, so Lina was stuck where she was standing...but that was no problem, since the attacker was as well.

Sylvia saw Sierra step forward from behind the attacker.

“One stroke,” the elf muttered, as was usual for her, and drew her sword from its sheath in one fluid motion. Her attack was bound to follow exactly the path she had charted for it, straight into the back of the enemy’s head.

The attacker seemed more capable than Sylvia had thought, but they couldn’t be Special-Grade. It followed that Sierra’s attack would definitely land.

For a moment, Sylvia wondered about the reason for the sudden sneak attack, but then she put it aside, realizing she could think about that later. Not to mention, she could just ask—if Sierra’s attack didn’t kill them, which depended on the enemy putting in their best effort not to die. Baselessly figuring things would turn out fine, she shut down the train of thought within an instant.

Sierra’s sword plunged toward the black-robed figure’s back—

“What...?”

Just then, Sierra mumbled blankly as she didn’t meet the resistance she’d imagined, and her vision was filled with something unexpected—the sky.

She didn’t even see the ground, let alone the black-robed person, and her subsequent reaction led her to realize what state she was in: when she didn’t feel the ground under her feet, she came to the conclusion that her legs had been swept out from under her.

Sierra was left dumbfounded, not understanding how this could be. She was confident in her speed; she was more than fast enough to warrant that confidence.

At the same time, however, that speed created a weak point. It became the most obvious when she was attacking, since she focused all of her attention on the attack.

It was her legs. It was easy for an enemy to trip her if they swept her legs out from under her as she attacked.

That was only if they could get the timing just right, however, and not even Lina had managed to trip Sierra even once. Soma was able to do it easily, and Lina had begun to grasp the timing as of late, but that meant that only people as skilled as Soma or as practiced as Lina could dream of pulling it off.

So she wondered how the enemy had managed...and as if taking advantage of her momentary distraction, they reached toward her.

She was late to react, less because of her confusion and more because she didn't sense intent to kill. Maybe if the enemy had initiated an attack just then, she would have instantly reacted, but it didn't register in time because it wasn't a direct attack.

They just reached for Sierra's arm...and then there was a *click* sound, as if something had snapped into place.

Instantly, she felt as if her entire body was weighed down, which prevented her from moving the way she wanted to. She clumsily rolled over on the ground and tried to get back up, but she couldn't move very well. Unable to stand upright, she could do nothing but crouch there.

"Sierra?!"

Lina was more shocked by the sight than Sierra herself; she knew that despite her own natural talent, Sierra was far above her in terms of actual skill, and yet Sierra had been knocked over and somehow rendered unable to get back up.

Lina's shock was far from superficial...and it left her vulnerable. Maybe it would have been another story if the black-robed person had attacked, but all they did was reach toward her.

They reached out...and something clicked around Lina's arm as well. Instantly, she felt abnormally weighed down, which restricted her movement.

But that didn't leave her confused, since she'd seen what had happened to Sierra. Lina was quick to understand and come to terms with the fact that this was exactly what had put Sierra in such an unsightly state.

However, all she'd managed to do was understand and come to terms with it. She still couldn't move freely.

She didn’t panic, though, because she still had someone she could count on. Flames began to roar just then, as if responding to her faith.

“You thought you could get away with whatever you wanted, huh? Well, not anymore. I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I don’t need to. You’ll be ashes before you know what hit you.”

Aina was actually half-bluffing. Unfortunately, she didn’t yet have the precision to target her attacks at enemies while avoiding allies. If she created any more flames, they would surely engulf the other girls as well.

But fortunately, the enemy was quick to make a decision. They chose to run away immediately.

No...to be exact, this turn of events only *looked* fortunate, because just when Aina sighed in relief, all of the flames vanished at once, even though she’d done nothing to disperse them.

“What just...?!”

“Aina... My, my magic...!”

Aina realized what had happened when Helen cried out. It wasn’t just that the flames had disappeared—it was that she was suddenly unable to use magic.

She quickly realized why that was, though, because the sensation of something clinging to her skin was familiar to her. The enemy must have set up a field around them—and if she couldn’t use magic, there was only one kind of field that could be.

“No way... A magic-negating field?!”

Magic-negating fields, as the name suggested, prevented magic from being used within them. They were mainly used in prisons to prevent criminals from using magic for nefarious purposes, and they required special magical tools to set up, so not just anyone could make one. Those tools were controlled by the kingdom and shouldn’t have been available to the general public.

The same was true of the rings clipped around Sierra and Lina’s arms, though; they must have been illegal goods. They looked somewhat like the item Camilla had used during the entrance ceremony, and judging by the state the two girls

were currently in, Aina couldn't be far off in assuming they were the same thing.

The problem was that even if she knew what was going on, that didn't tell her what to do about it. If they couldn't use magic, then neither Aina nor Helen could be of use.

Lina and Sierra didn't look like they could put up much of a fight either, and it wasn't clear that they even had the fundamental ability to fight. Camilla had been able to use Low-Grade Skills because she'd used a low-quality version of the tool, so if the ones on Lina and Sierra were genuine, then it was possible that all of their Skills were completely blocked.

"But the biggest issue is how you got your hands on those..."

The kingdom restricted the availability of Skill-blocking items. For a second, Aina wondered if that meant the kingdom was behind this ambush, but she immediately dismissed the possibility. Sylvia's involvement had made Aina consider the possibility of a family feud, but this kingdom wasn't like that; even if it had been, Soma and Lina's parents were in the upper echelons of the government, and they wouldn't have let anyone—not even royalty—get away with attacking others.

So Aina wondered what else it could be but dismissed the question once again—for a different reason: now was not the time to be thinking about that.

It didn't matter why. If they were under attack, then their first priority was to do something to get out of the situation.

"Lina, Sierra... Can you manage something?!"

"It's hard to move..." Lina replied. "I can try, but it won't be easy."

"Mm-hmm... I might get used to it. But I can't until then."

Camilla had taken hers off easily, but that was because it was a low-quality item that she'd put on herself. It would be best if Lina and Sierra abandoned the hope that they could get the rings off of their arms.

The same went for Aina and Helen: it would have been best if they could have broken the item that was creating the field, but there was little hope of that,

given that they didn’t see it anywhere around them.

In that case...

“Sorry, Sylvia... Can you take it from here?”

“S-Sorry I can’t help...”

“I apologize...”

“Sorry.”

The other four girls each apologized to Sylvia in turn, but she shook her head. This wasn’t their fault; it didn’t warrant apologies.

“No, the other guy just had the upper hand. You did your best.”

Sylvia looked up. The black-robed person was standing on the rooftop right there, and she sensed several other presences nearby. That was probably where the magic-negating field was coming from.

If she could do something about the field, then Aina and Helen would be able to act, but she couldn’t do anything in this situation. She had no choice but to take care of that black-robed person first.

To be honest, she wasn’t confident she could. The attacker had stopped Lina, if only temporarily, then taken Sierra and then Lina by surprise. They were clearly a strong foe.

But she had no choice but to try. She resolved herself and got into position.

Just then, though, the black-robed person looked into the distance and suddenly turned around. If Sylvia’s ears weren’t deceiving her, they’d clicked their tongue.

“Um... Is something going on?”

None of them expected an answer, though. Looks of confusion floated across their faces.

But they got their answer just after that.

“I see all of you are okay.”

“Huh? Soma...?”

“It is not just Soma.”

“And the headmaster?! But why...”

“We’re here to help you, of course.”

“It is as he said.”

The two of them, who had jumped down from somewhere above, both shrugged, and upon seeing them, the girls began to grasp the situation. The black-robed figure had run because they’d noticed Soma coming.

But did that mean...?

“So, um... Did... Did you know?”

“Yes, I knew that you five were following me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Sylvia and Aina met eyes and exchanged crooked grins upon finding out that Helen had been right.

Quickly, though, Sylvia realized that it was too early to relax.

“Right, Aina, what about your magic?”

“Oh, right... Yeah, looks like I can use it again,” Aina said with relief, holding a small flame in the palm of her hand.

She’d had a concern in the back of her mind that maybe her magic had been blocked with some method other than a field, and that effect could have been permanent. That hadn’t been the case, of course...but that in itself meant that the object responsible for the field had been taken away. They couldn’t do anything about that now, though.

“You weren’t able to use magic, Aina?” Soma asked.

“Helen couldn’t either. I think it was probably a magic-negating field or something. Anyway, we’re fine now. More importantly...” Aina looked over at Lina and Sierra, who were just now regaining their ability to move.

Soma looked at the two with puzzlement. “I can see that something happened to you two as well. Does it have to do with those rings on your arms?”

“Yeah, I think they’re like the thing Camilla used at the entrance ceremony...”

“No... They are low-quality knockoffs,” Hildegard interjected. “However, they seem to be effective on those two for that very reason.”

“What do you mean?” Soma asked.

“Those bands cannot so much as limit the grade of Skills, let alone prevent their use. The most they can do is to slightly distort the senses. However, Lina and Sierra use Special-Grade Skills—the highest grade possible. It is precisely because they are always capable of the best possible techniques and can condition their bodies to the maximum that even the slightest change in sensation can feel disabling.”

“Hmm... So it affects them *because* they’re Special-Grade. Is it okay to remove these, then?”

“Because they are knockoffs, it should not be a problem to remove them by force.”

“Understood.”

As soon as Hildegard said so, Soma casually took his sword out and gave it a couple small swings. The bands around Lina and Sierra’s arms fell apart instantly, and the two returned to their normal selves.

“I don’t have that gross feeling anymore!”

“Mm-hmm... I feel fine now.”

“As I expected,” said Hildegard. “Nevertheless, those should not have been available to an ordinary person, even as knockoffs... Who put them on you?”

“They were dressed in all black, so we couldn’t see their faces,” Lina answered.

“Yeah... All we could tell was...they were about our height...and they were... They were really strong...”

“That is not a lot to go off of. Well...the fact that they were able to overpower people such as yourselves narrows down the possibilities considerably.”

“We can think about that later. For now, we should start heading back before anything else happens,” Soma stated.

“That is true.”

“You’re going back?” Sylvia asked.

“Don’t tell me you intend to stay in the capital after being attacked. Given what happened before the entrance ceremony, it’s likely that you were their target.”

“Yeah, I planned to go back, but... You said that like you’re going back too.”

Sylvia had to go back, but there was no need for Soma to accompany her, she thought.

But Soma shook his head. “I can’t exactly leave you alone. Since the academy isn’t one hundred percent safe, I’ll go back with you just in case. We’ve already done the main thing we came here to do.”

“But you came all the way out here...”

“So did all of you.”

“It is true that all Soma was able to do today was accompany me on my errand,” Hildegard conceded. “I will make it up to him later, so do not let it bother you.”

“It does bother me, and we should be the ones to make it up!” Lina exclaimed.

“Our mistake,” Sierra agreed.

“Yeah... It’s only because we couldn’t do anything that Soma says he’s coming back with us,” Aina said. “If we’d been able to fend them off, he wouldn’t be worried, so we should make it up somehow.”

“Um... At, at least...leave me out of it next time...”

Sylvia didn’t want to inconvenience him, but the conversation was proceeding on the assumption that they were all going back together, so it didn’t look like it was avoidable. She sighed. It seemed she had no choice but to accept it and head back with them.

There were a number of things on her mind...but she could think about those once she got back, or maybe on the way.

Sylvia sighed again...and then had another thought.

When her mind returned to the person who'd run away earlier, she also remembered when they'd seen Lars in the back alley. He'd been wearing that same kind of black robe.

That was probably a coincidence...but what had Lars been doing, anyway?

With that question in mind, Sylvia began to walk down the alley, starting on the way back to the academy with the group.

†

Once he made sure nobody was coming after him, he let out a breath. It was tinged with both relief and annoyance.

"Tch, thought that was my chance. I guess attacking from the front's no use."

Even still, it had been wholly unexpected that the boy had broken through so quickly. He should probably conclude that the boy was above the level of the ones who'd gone to stop him rather than concluding they were useless.

"That means I have to think of some other way..."

He wondered what to do, but his mindset was rather forward looking.

And that was to be expected, because he'd come within a single step of what he desired.

"Whatever... The test went better than I expected. We should be able to break the seal. Maybe we should use that thing for that... Might finish our plan for us if it goes right, and even if not, it should shake things up a bit. Good thing I didn't get rid of it yet."

As he stealthily went down the road back to the academy, thinking of what was to come, the corner of his mouth turned up in a smirk.

13

Soma had had to come back to the academy after that, but this turn of events hadn't left him unhappy or bored, since the academy was where he'd already been spending his days off up to this point, and anyway, now he had things to do. He had no problem with it.

The same was true of the others. From what he'd heard, they had been completely overwhelmed by the sneak attack, and they planned to train hard so that wouldn't happen again.

In terms of the outcome, things were the same as before, but the looks on their faces had changed. At the same time, they'd seemed slightly apologetic, but Soma could only shrug in response.

He did think it was too bad that he hadn't been able to look for books on magic, but it was no big deal. He wasn't in a rush, so he could just return sometime.

And maybe this had been for the best in a way. The dungeon was still on his mind, and if something happened in there, it could potentially affect others like Lina and Aina. Considering that, he needed to prioritize the dungeon above all else. Other things could wait.

Because of that, he'd ended up spending the entire rest of that day and the day after in the dungeon, but it had been worth it, because he'd managed to get to the fiftieth floor, which was the lowest.

"Frankly, that was easier than expected. I thought it would take more effort."

"You are the only one who could possibly say such a thing. Most would have had to risk their lives to make it this far."

"Is it really that bad?"

While he did think it had been easier than expected, he certainly didn't think just anyone would have been able to manage it. It did, however, strike him as an exaggeration to say, as Hildegard had before, that going in with a group including his parents would have been a suicide mission.

“That is true... If our goal was only to make it this far, we could have accomplished that with no trouble.”

“What do you mean?” Soma glanced around, wondering at the implication of Hildegard’s words.

Nothing blocked his vision. All he saw was a wall and a hole that led to the floor above.

That was because the fiftieth floor was a large, open space. There had been an area boss before, of course, but he’d already defeated it. It had been a wyvern with a ten-meter wingspan, and it had been a formidable enough monster, considering that it was a type of dragon, but it was nothing that would have given his parents any trouble. He tilted his head in puzzlement, not understanding what Hildegard meant.

“It is only natural that you would not understand. I did not tell you because I did not know what would happen. It seems that my concern was unfounded. So, here is what I mean...”

As she spoke, Hildegard approached the wall opposite the hole that led to the forty-ninth floor. She touched the wall, and instantly...

“Hmm? Another hole...? I believe I see how it is.”

“You do indeed. This dungeon is said to have fifty floors...but in fact, it has twice that number—one hundred floors in total. However, due to the extreme danger they pose, we conceal the existence of the fifty-first floor and below, and there is an anti-perception field in place to prevent anyone from entering. It is good to know that it works even on someone like you.”

“I certainly didn’t notice anything.”

That was partially because he’d thought there were only fifty floors, but he hadn’t even noticed anything off. He never would have discovered the next floor unless he’d suspected it was there from the beginning.

“Well, that’s good, but why did you tell me? There shouldn’t be any need to.”

“You are right... Now that we know that the proper kind of monsters respawn once we clear a floor, there is no need to go any farther.”

As far as they'd seen yesterday and today, there were now only regular goblins on the first floor, with no sign of any hobgoblins. They could safely say the dungeon was back to normal. They'd only come down to the fiftieth floor to be sure.

"Hmm... Well, if we want to be completely sure, we should go down to the true lowest floor."

"Precisely. Although the dungeon seems to have gone back to normal, it may only seem that way. I would like to check on the status of the seal on the hundredth floor, especially since that would be difficult to do without your help."

Apparently, that was what she'd been thinking of when she'd called it a suicide mission.

He had no choice but to help, then. He couldn't make his parents do such a thing...and to be honest, he was curious about what lay below.

"Judging by the way you talk about it, I assume you haven't been that far yourself."

"I have not. In fact, according to our records, nobody has ever been to the hundredth floor. It is possible that nobody has been there since the dungeon was constructed."

"In that case, we may find something nobody expects, so it would be worth going."

Though it was meant to serve as a seal, this was a dungeon nevertheless. It wouldn't be odd if it contained something related to magic. And he didn't currently have any higher priorities than this, so it wouldn't be a problem to go.

"I understand, then. I assumed this would take up to a month, so it's been a lot faster than I expected. I might as well keep going until the end."

"I would be grateful for the help. We must stop here for today, however. My stamina shall not allow any more."

"It must be getting late, also."

The majority of the fights had been over in an instant, including the one with

the area boss here, but they hadn't been able to overlook a single monster. They'd gone around each floor two or three times and encountered many unpleasant traps. Those had given them the most trouble, if anything, and sunset would be approaching outside of the dungeon. It was a good time to head back.

"So, are you going to open the dungeon?"

"I intend to wait a few more days, but yes, I plan to. The middle schoolers typically use the dungeon to train as opposed to the practice areas, so the academy wishes for it to be opened as soon as possible."

"Well, the upper floors look fine, and I imagine they'll be cautious if we warn them. Beyond that, they should be responsible for themselves once they're in middle school."

Should they watch and wait just to be safe, or should they go in knowing the risk that danger was still lurking?

Once a student reached middle school, they were unlikely to make the wrong decision based on their judgment of their own ability. The academy had confirmed that the dungeon met the minimum standards for safety, so the rest was the student's responsibility.

As he wondered which would be the more common decision among the middle schoolers, Soma gazed into the hole that led to the next floor.

In the end, they hadn't discovered the cause of the dungeon's transformation. Would they find it if they kept going...perhaps on the hundredth floor?

"I wonder how it will turn out."

With that in mind, Soma began the journey back to the surface with Hildegard.

†

By the time they got back, the sky was already beginning to turn indigo, as expected. It wouldn't be long before it was fully night.

Soma and Hildegard walked quickly through the deserted practice area; the students had probably all returned to their dorms by now.

They were headed for the dorms as well, but Soma was accompanying Hildegard to the staff dorms. He had a pensive look on his face.

“So, what is this about?”

“I do not know. All I have heard is that I must return as soon as possible. If it warrants using an emergency magical item, however, something quite urgent must have occurred.”

“But you don’t know what that something is.”

Soma murmured to himself and narrowed his eyes.

It had happened right after they’d gotten back to the surface. Just when they’d been ready to go back to their rooms, Hildegard had received an emergency message asking her to come back immediately. Judging that the matter must be important based on the urgency of the message, she had asked Soma to come with her, and he had consented, seeing no problem with it. Now they were hurrying toward the dorm.

“What do you think it is?”

“It seems to me that the safest assumption would be that there has been a new development regarding the library...but it would be odd to receive an emergency summons for such a thing.”

“The theft, you mean?”

Soma had heard that the instructors had conducted thorough investigations today and the day before in between their regular teaching duties. They would have to report anything they found, but that certainly wouldn’t have warranted describing as an emergency.

“Hmm... What could it be, then?”

“I do not know. I do not think it is a bad thing, at least. It did not sound that way.”

“I’d think there’s no need to worry about it in that case...”

As they conversed, they arrived at the dorm. Not hesitating to enter, they headed for Hildegard’s room, which had half-turned into an office.

And...

“You found a book, you say?”

One of the books stolen from the closed stacks had been found, according to Carine, who had been the one to report it.

“Where did you find it?” Hildegard asked.

“It was mixed in with the garbage, actually. If we’d been a day later to notice, it would have been burned!”

“Just in time, then.”

Soma had to commend Hildegard’s judgment in ordering the instructors to investigate, and the instructors’ judgment in carrying out her orders thoroughly. If they’d put it off until the next week, they would have lost a valuable item. And this might tell them a bit about the culprit.

“Did you find any others?” Soma asked.

“No, only the one about dungeons. I checked if there were any others, but I didn’t see any.”

“To be grateful that we found even one, or to question why we found only one...” Hildegard pondered. “Well, thank you for the report. This is certainly something I would like to know as soon as possible.”

“Oh, no, I’m just doing my duty. Excuse me, then.” With that, Carine left Hildegard’s room.

In her place was the book she’d brought in. Soma looked at it, then picked it up.

“This is quite thick, but apart from that, it seems to be a normal book.”

“Naturally. The contents are the important part. I am not concerned with them, however.”

“Hmm...? Why not?”

“I may have the ultimate say in whether to allow anyone to read books from the closed stacks, but it was not my decision to store that one in the closed stacks. I do not have the time to take care of such things. The librarians fulfill

that duty, and I am only familiar with the general descriptions of the books."

"Ms. Carine knows, then?"

"No, it was the librarian before her who decided that this should be in the closed stacks, and only that person knows what is inside. Many of the books in the closed stacks are disagreeable, so it is considered best that few people know the information within. That is another reason, in addition to my busy schedule, that I only know the summaries."

"Does that mean that I shouldn't read this?"

If this was one of those books, then maybe it wasn't okay for him to read, he thought, but Hildegard shook her head.

"I originally intended to allow you to read it. Most of the books may not be good, but there are some that I do not mind allowing certain people to read. This is one of them, as is the one I gave Sierra permission to read."

"Ah... I remember that now. I'm sure Sierra will be disappointed that we only found this and not the one she wanted to read."

"Such is life. We can only hope that if we have found this one, we may yet find the others. And while I would rather not put it this way, it is a good thing that we found this particular book."

"It certainly is."

They'd deemed the dungeon safe and decided to reopen it, but they still knew little about how it had ended up in that state. If this book had something inside that could potentially lead them closer to an understanding, then it was the book they needed most right now.

"If this was thrown out, though, does that mean the theft wasn't intentional? I would think if someone deliberately stole it to reference, they would just burn it to ensure it was disposed of properly."

"Who can say? Perhaps they do not fear being discovered, or perhaps they threw only this book out because they were done with it. In any case, we can think more about it once you have read it."

"That's true."

Even if this hadn’t been intentionally stolen, it could still have clues inside.

With that in mind, Soma opened the thick book and began to read.

14

A sense of restlessness hung over the academy as the middle of the week drew near.

It was mainly the middle schoolers who were responsible for the impatience and excitement in the air. At the beginning of the week, it had been announced that the dungeon would be unlocked today, so they were looking forward to going after school.

As Soma walked toward the practice area, he passed other students who he assumed were in middle school and thought to himself that maybe their excitement was exactly what he should have expected of people their age.

He wasn't going to swordsmanship class, but he had a reason to go to the practice area.

While it was a rule that students had to attend classes at the academy, their schedules weren't completely constrained. Instead of having classes all day, every day until school was over, they had two or three free periods a week in which they could choose for themselves what they wanted to do. They were allowed to go to the practice areas, study for class, chat with other students, or even just take naps if they wanted. It was completely up to them how they spent that time.

That was only possible because this was the Royal Academy, where even the younger students were relatively mature...but as long as the system worked for them, it didn't matter what the reason was.

Anyway, the point was that Soma had chosen to go to the practice area during that free period.

And he wasn't alone. Next to him was a girl with black hair like his—Sylvia. Nobody else he knew was around; the two of them were going to the practice area on their own.

But Soma smiled wryly as he looked at Sylvia. It was plain to see that she was worried stiff.

“There’s no need to be so nervous. This is only a casual meetup.”

“I mean, maybe that’s how it is for you, since you already know her...but she’s one of the greats in this kingdom, you know? I hope she doesn’t think I’m being presumptuous by just approaching her out of nowhere...”

“I don’t think a teacher would typically think that. I suppose she is referred to that way, however...”

Soma hadn’t been aware of it, given their past together, but apparently those who had contributed heavily to founding the kingdom were referred to as “the greats.” Maybe it was only natural to be nervous upon going to meet someone like that.

But now that he thought about it, he knew most of the founders: his parents, the king, and Camilla. He hadn’t met the one called “the hero,” nor did he even know the hero’s name, but he knew most of them. It was hard to reconceptualize them as “greats” after all this time.

“I would think you would be acquainted with a lot of people like that as well, though. Are you not already used to meeting greats?”

“Well, I guess I do know people like that, now that you mention it...but that’s one thing and this is another, you know? I think I’d be nervous to see someone like Sir Iori too.”

“Sir Iori? Who is that?”

“What do you mean, who is that? Sir Iori Kanzaki, the hero who saved our kingdom? Haven’t you heard of him?”

“Let me think... No, I believe this is the first time I’ve heard that name. Everyone refers to him as ‘the hero,’ not by name.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess they do. But there’s actually more than one hero, although usually people mean Sir Iori when they say ‘the hero’... But remember, I’m royalty, so I’m supposed to use their proper names.”

“Right, there are two heroes, aren’t there?”

As was evident from the fact that he didn’t know their names, Soma knew very little about the events they had been involved in; he had never been very

interested in them. He knew a few things about them, though, and he remembered what Carine had told him.

“If I recall correctly, wasn’t one of the heroes summoned from another world?”

“Oh, yeah, he was... You know about that?”

“I heard a little about it from Ms. Carine.”

“Huh, wow... I wonder if she knows a lot about that stuff? Well, what I’ve heard is that Sir Iori Kanzaki was summoned from another world. And it was my dad who told me that, so I doubt he’s mistaken, although...”

“Although what? Is there a chance that your father is mistaken?”

“Oh, no, I know for a fact that he isn’t, but... It just reminded me that I think I’ve heard the name Kanzaki somewhere else. Apart from Sir Iori, I mean.”

“Hmm... Well, Kanzaki is a relatively common name, so it wouldn’t surprise me if you had heard it somewhere before. Personally, I’ve heard it a number of times.”

“You think so? I think it’s pretty uncommon...”

Despite what Sylvia said, Soma had heard the name frequently enough in both his past and present lives.

Sylvia continued to mutter to herself in confusion over what Soma had said. He shrugged.

“At least you seem to have relaxed after some conversation.”

“Oh...”

Soma had mentioned it because he’d figured it would be okay now, but apparently not. Seeing Sylvia stiffen up with nerves again after being reminded of what was to come, he gave her a crooked smile.

“Well, I imagine you’ll understand that you don’t have to be nervous once you meet her. I suppose I’ll have to give up until then.”

“Augh... Easy for you to say...”

“It certainly is.” Soma shrugged again, still smiling crookedly.

They were almost at the practice area now. Noticing that, Sylvia tensed up even more. There was genuinely nothing Soma could do to help, it seemed.

With a wry smile, Soma led Sylvia toward the practice area.

†

Sylvia stood hunched over in discomfort in a corner of the practice area. Knowing that there were curious eyes on her made her even more uncomfortable.

Sylvia turned a look of awe and admiration toward the crowd, wondering how the person in front of her could remain so unconcerned about the similar gazes she was receiving.

And then...

“How about we get started?”

As soon as that voice sounded forth, the curious stares went away. Everyone was looking at the speaker.

Sylvia’s eyes, too, were pulled in that direction...and she smiled with a look of reverence.

There, she saw a woman holding an axe—a woman she might have assumed was a child if not for the self-assurance she exuded: Camilla Hennefeld, one of the greats of this kingdom.

Camilla was here for a class, of course, but Sylvia hadn’t come here to attend the axemanship class—no, maybe she had, in a sense. The problem was that this class was specifically for students in the axemanship concentration.

Students were *allowed* to use their two or three free periods a week to attend classes for other concentrations, but it wasn’t typically done...and yet here was Soma, doing just that as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Yes, Sylvia had been brought here by this boy who was now standing among the axemanship students like he belonged there. “As promised,” he’d said.

“I know he said he’d introduce us, but...”

She’d been looking forward to it, but who would have thought he meant he

would introduce them by having Sylvia participate in an axemanship class?

Apparently, he'd been planning to come to one for a change of pace so that he wouldn't get bored of taking the same classes all the time, and he'd only brought Sylvia along (with permission from Camilla) because he was planning to go anyway... If anything was consistent about Soma, it was how unpredictable he was.

And Camilla seemed to be thinking the same thing as she glanced at Soma standing among her students. Her exasperated look all but said, *Look who actually showed up*. At the same time, however, as one would have expected of someone like Camilla, there was an amused smirk on her face.

Camilla quickly straightened her face, though, and continued. "Glad to see you're all ready to go per usual. As you should be, since you're taking my class."

It wasn't an overstatement. Sylvia could tell, even watching from afar, that the students were brimming with motivation.

Maybe that was normal for students in the axemanship concentration...but that conclusion was questionable, considering how the sorcery students behaved in sorcery class. That was because of the culmination of some unique circumstances, of course, and it wasn't that the sorcery students were unmotivated, exactly...but even with that in mind, the students here were unusually motivated.

But that in itself was to be expected, since it was *Camilla* teaching. How could they not be motivated?

Camilla smiled with satisfaction as she looked at them...and then she added one more thing like an afterthought.

"Oh, right, don't worry about the new kid. Just pretend he's a dummy."

"May I object to being called a dummy?"

"Asking to join someone's class for a change of pace makes you one. All right, let's get on with the usual!"

Though Soma protested being treated as a dummy, he was elegantly ignored, after which class began.

He tilted his head in puzzlement, probably not because he was unhappy with how he was being treated but because he didn't know what "the usual" meant. He seemed to have decided to observe the others for the time being, though, and he quickly grasped what was going on.

"The usual," as it turned out, was quite simple. It was easy for Sylvia to guess when she saw the students pairing up and readying their weapons as they adjusted their distance from each other—they were doing mock battles.

Sylvia nodded in understanding as she watched. This was how the axemanship students did their hands-on classes, apparently. It was slightly different from her own swordsmanship class, but that could have been because she was in the sorcery concentration, or maybe because Lina's teaching style was different from Camilla's.

Well...Sylvia had a hard time picturing Lina doing anything else during her swordsmanship class, so it was probably a matter of teaching style.

As Sylvia watched with that in mind, she heard Soma muttering; he must have been thinking something similar.

"Hmm... So you first watch their movements from an outside perspective, then give advice? And you do that for over ten students at a time... This is just more evidence that you're a natural at teaching."

"Thanks for the compliment, but why're you saying that like it has nothing to do with you?" Camilla shot back.

"Well, it doesn't. I can't exactly take part in the class." Soma shrugged.

He was right, and it wasn't a question of him not being able to wield an axe. To participate in this class, it was necessary to have a partner, but all the other students had quickly paired off, leaving nobody but Soma.

In other words...

"So this is the fabled 'picked last in gym class' phenomenon... I never imagined that I would find myself in this predicament."

"What kinda fables are you hearing? Anyway, yeah, this sure does put us in a predicament... I'd tell you to just join a group, but I can't have you breaking my

students.”

“You’ve been oddly insulting to me today.”

“’Cause of the kind of things you get up to. Well... If nobody else is left, I guess that leaves me no choice.” Camilla pulled her weapon from her back and got into position.

It was Soma she was facing, naturally. He gave her a confused look.

“Ms. Hennefeld...?”

“C’mon, don’t play dumb. I’m pairing with you.”

“Don’t you have to watch the students?”

“That’s important too, but I can’t leave a student out. And I work for the Royal Academy, y’know. I can do both at the same time.”

“Hmm...”

Soma murmured and glanced toward Sylvia for a moment. He looked back at Camilla right away, but with a puzzled expression.

“Thank you for the offer, but I believe someone else would appreciate your instruction more than me.”

“Huh? Oh... Nah, I can’t. I know about her Skill, so I can guess what she wants...but this is an axemanship class. I can’t use this time to teach her.”

Camilla was in the right. In fact, that was exactly why Sylvia was watching from the sidelines rather than participating.

Sylvia wanted Camilla to teach her, but she wasn’t willing to put her own feelings first and interfere with the course. While she was grateful that Soma had thought to bring her here, she couldn’t take the class.

“Is that so... I suppose I have no choice but to accept your instruction, then. Also...if you think you can watch the other students while you spar with me, you must be underestimating me. I’ll need to set your perception straight.”

“Nah, I’m not underestimating you. I wouldn’t be able to watch if you were using a sword...but this is axemanship class. You’ll have to use an axe, and you’ve never done that before, right?”

Sylvia looked at Soma's hands. He was clutching an axe that he had been loaned just before class started.

She knew that his skill with a sword was exceptional, but axes were used in a completely different way. And he'd never used one before, according to Camilla, so he was in no position to deny what she said.

That meant that not even Soma could do anything about this...or so Sylvia thought, but as he looked at Camilla bemusedly, his demeanor was the same as it always was.

"Hmm... If that's what you think, then that works out well for me. We're currently 1-1, after all."

"Can't believe you remember that. Well, now's the time for your defeat number two. I'm taking the lead."

"We'll see which of us takes the lead."

The two exchanged fearless smiles, both seeming fully confident that they would win.

Sylvia gulped. She knew Soma was exceptional...but he was up against Camilla. While Sylvia had seen what had happened at the entrance ceremony, that had been after Camilla had fought dozens of students, so she couldn't have been in top condition, not to mention that Soma was using an axe instead of a sword now. As Sylvia wondered about the outcome, she found herself clenching her fist.

"Why don't we get started, then?"

"Yeah. Let's do this."

As soon as she finished speaking, Camilla dashed forward. Soma confidently intercepted her attack, their weapons clashing with a metallic clang.

15

Soma heard an unhappy grumble from beside him. He turned to look and saw Sylvia pouting, to which he returned a wry smile.

“Why are you still in a bad mood? I introduced you to Camilla, didn’t I?”

“I mean, you did, but that’s one thing and this is another... And I have no idea how you’re able to do things like that.”

“I don’t know how to explain. I simply did what I was capable of.”

Sylvia was bent out of shape because she hadn’t been satisfied with the instruction Soma had received from Camilla...or rather, with the result of their mock battle.

“I know you’re crazy strong, but still...”

“You’ve been becoming less and less reserved... You don’t have to follow others’ examples in that regard, you know.”

“I mean, it’s true, right? How can you win against Ms. Camilla like it’s the most normal thing in the world? And without ever having used an axe before either. Or did you lie about that?”

“No, that was true.”

As he’d told Camilla before, Soma really hadn’t used an axe before. He’d tried a number of different weapons throughout the process of mastering the sword, but the axe hadn’t been one of them, so this had been his first time picking one up.

“But since the axe is a bladed weapon, much like a sword, and besides, there are double-sided swords as well, so the two are comparable in some ways. That made me think it might be possible to use it in the same way as a sword, so I tried that, and in time I was able to use it just as I use a sword.”

Sylvia’s unhappy expression faded, but into one of bafflement, not understanding as Soma had expected.

“I don’t really get it, I guess.”

“Hmm...? You must get it, right? To some degree?”

“Not at all. I mean, they both have blades, but they’re used in completely different ways. How are you supposed to use it the same way?”

“Incomprehensible... It worked for me.”

“I should be the one saying it’s incomprehensible...” Sylvia sighed.

Soma muttered to himself in confusion. This had at least gotten Sylvia out of her bad mood, though, so he considered that a win.

“Well, that aside, you’ll be able to receive instruction from Camilla now, right? Congratulations on that.”

“Yeah... Well, that’s all thanks to you, so thank you. We can’t start until next week, though. I already have plans with Aina and the others this week.”

“I would think they would be happy to change plans for your sake... Well, it’s up to you. Keeping your promises is a good thing as well, so do as you wish.”

“Yeah, I will.” Sylvia nodded, unable to keep her joy from showing on her face. It must have been sinking in that she could finally learn from Camilla.

Soma smiled softly as he looked at her. “Next week, huh,” he muttered under his breath.

The events of a few days ago crossed his mind—when he’d read the book about dungeons in Hildegard’s room.

It had actually been more of a compilation of records than a book. It contained reports on people’s experiences in dungeons, and it must have been put together over several generations, because the number of different writing styles and postscripts made it difficult to read. It was also old enough that some parts were missing, so he hadn’t been able to understand a lot of it.

But of the material he could understand, the information that was most relevant to the current situation had been about the academy dungeon...more specifically, about the sealing of the Archdevil’s power fragment. It had apparently been done by the royal family for generations, using their blood to prevent the magical field from deteriorating or to repair it. For that reason, the barrier needed royal blood from time to time or it would weaken.

So Soma thought that might be the reason for the change in the dungeon. There hadn't been any maintenance like that ever since Hildegard was put in charge, which was decades ago, and according to her, it might not have been maintained even before that. It was highly likely that the seal had been left to deteriorate. He figured that must be behind this...until he read further.

Breaking the seal also required royal blood. There was a risk of that happening if a member of the royal family shed blood in the dungeon, so they were advised to exercise the utmost caution when venturing in.

And Soma and Hildegard knew of a time that had happened—just recently too.

The problem was that the blood had come from Sylvia...in other words, not a member of the Veritas royal family. They figured that meant it was just a coincidence until Hildegard stopped and remembered something.

The Ladius royal family had Veritas blood now. King Alexis's wife—the queen—was a direct descendant of the Veritas royal family. Alexis himself apparently had a small amount of that blood. It may not have been a significant amount, but they certainly had Veritas royal blood, so it was possible that Sylvia's blood had reacted to the seal.

Soma didn't intend to tell her that as of now. He didn't know whether it was true. He certainly had his suspicions, but it wasn't confirmed. And if she knew, she would probably stop going into the dungeon—she was that kind of girl.

The academy's policy was to make no distinction between royalty and non-royalty, as long as they desired to learn. This was no reason to revoke that policy, so they would put this matter on hold for the time being. They had to go down to the lowest floor and check the seal before anything else. If it looked bad, they would tell Sylvia and try to repair it.

If they found out it was possible to fix, they wouldn't have to worry about Sylvia shedding blood in the dungeon; they could just repair it if anything happened again. And if they couldn't fix it, they would know that Sylvia's blood wasn't enough to use on the seal, which also meant it was okay for her to go into the dungeon. Lastly, if the seal looked fine, then they would know that Sylvia's blood hadn't damaged it irreversibly (even if it may have done so

temporarily), so it had no lasting impact. They wouldn't even have to tell her in that case.

In short, it would be fine for Sylvia to go into the dungeon no matter what. The only difference was what they would do to fix it and whether they would tell Sylvia about it. That was how the academy had decided to treat the issue.

Regardless, Soma wasn't going to say anything right now. If he did, it would be later.

"Hopefully things are fixed by next week, but that will depend on the work I put in," he muttered under his breath as he walked alongside Sylvia.

†

Watching the other students, who were restless with excitement, Lars huffed. He thought to himself that they seemed pretty lackadaisical, and more than that, he didn't want people to think he was like them.

Part of the reason that he felt that way, though, was that he was secretly just as excited. He was looking forward to what was to come, and to be honest, he was feeling restless. But, figuring there was nothing he could do about that, he pushed down his impatience and looked ahead through narrowed eyes.

He saw the path toward the dungeon, which was finally open again. *Took them long enough*, he thought, his mouth curling into a smile, which made his face look similar to those of the others around him. If he didn't intentionally keep his face straight, it would soften into a smile, but he suppressed it with willpower.

The middle school kids around him were glad, saying that they could finally get some proper training again, but he was trying to do something different. He wanted glory. He wasn't like them. But if the look on his face was like theirs, it made him look like he was thinking the same thing.

Scolding himself thus, Lars tightened his face and heart as they threatened to soften.

And as he thought of what was to come, something occurred to him.

Maybe it would have been possible for him to be present here with the same

goal and the same feelings as the others.

But that was just a hypothetical; Lars hadn't chosen that path. So there wasn't any reason to get hung up on it, he reasoned, huffing again as if to expel the faint hesitance in his mind.

He'd already made his choice. There was no reason to pause or hesitate. There was only his will and his reason to keep moving forward.

The time he'd spent after school before hadn't been bad. He genuinely felt that way, and if he was being completely honest, he'd even liked it quite a bit.

But...that was over now.

"A power fragment, huh..." he muttered under his breath as he noticed Kurt coming his way.

Visualizing the future that awaited him, he turned the corners of his mouth up in a smile, this time of his own volition.

16

As she thought about the commotion that must be going on up above, Hildegard glanced around the area. She saw exposed stone and a dimly lit space. It looked like it could have been the inside of a cave, but it wasn't. The very fact that she could clearly see despite the lack of a light source proved what kind of place this was—a dungeon.

School had just let out, and Hildegard had come to the dungeon with Soma once again.

To tell the truth, her work had come to a standstill due to the repeated trips into the dungeon. She'd been coming every day except for that one day off. Although she tried to catch up on work at night, she couldn't catch up all the way.

And coming to the dungeon actually gave her more things to do. Nobody had passed through here in possibly over a century; she was discovering numerous facts and items that required reports. She was so busy that she found herself wishing they could take a break once they went down to the next floor.

But despite that, she couldn't stop coming to the dungeon. It was her current top priority...and what was more, it guaranteed that she could be alone with Soma. Whatever she had to sacrifice to come here, she would.

Needless to say, the time they spent there was far from elegant, however.

"It seems I have reached an impasse..." she muttered to herself.

"What is it?"

Apparently, Soma had returned.

There was an open space around the corner, but monsters were using it as a hideout, so Hildegard had been waiting here to be safe.

They were currently on the eighty-first floor. The monsters were now far beyond what Hildegard could handle. But Soma, as usual, had gone up to the horde from the front and come back without a single scratch.

“It is nothing. I am simply impressed that you continue to achieve such things.” She sighed wearily.

Her expression of resignation was genuine. She considered herself more capable than average, even among Special-Grade users, and that was an objective fact. She had once been one of the Elite Seven, although she had given up the position, and depending on the situation, she could have overpowered Lina or Aina in a fair fight. But this floor was full of monsters that not even Hildegard could hope to defeat, even with significant effort.

She’d previously said to Soma that coming down this far would be a suicide mission, but that was an understatement. Even if she’d been prepared to die, she wasn’t sure that she could have cleared this floor, let alone reach the lowest.

And yet Soma was nonchalantly hunting monsters here as if it were the most normal thing in the world. She couldn’t help feeling some weariness, even though she knew how Soma was.

“In fact, you seem to be drawing closer to your peak condition with every battle.”

“You think so? As far as I’m concerned, I have yet to get anywhere near where I was in my prime...although I do seem to be in good condition today.”

“Why do you not realize...?”

Maybe this really was far from his best, though. It was true that his ability now was like that of an infant compared to what it had been in his past life. He was getting closer, but if his power level had been one-thousandth of his peak when they’d first reunited, it was about one out of nine hundred and ninety-nine now.

Hildegard was rather sensitive to such things, given what she presided over...but maybe that was within the margin of error by Soma’s standards.

Regardless, Soma had reached godhood himself. He should have been more sensitive to that fact...but it would have been harsh to say so when he clearly had no idea.

Well, Hildegard thought he would understand if she did tell him...but that

wouldn’t have been very interesting.

Though he was from a higher world, he had nevertheless accomplished the feat of going from human to divine. It would have been tactless for her to interfere with that process even a little. It would only be meaningful if he realized it for himself.

“That brings us back to where we started, then. The monsters pose no problem as long as you are here to eliminate them, but this will take some time simply because of the increasing distance.”

Once she resumed walking and crossed the open space, that made one complete circuit of this floor. She glanced at the paper in her hands to make sure. They had indeed conquered the eighty-first floor.

“The floors do seem to be getting bigger as we go down, and the paths are getting more numerous,” Soma agreed. “In fact, I’m impressed that you can make accurate maps despite that. I could have mapped the first ten floors or so, but certainly not this one.” He peered at the paper she held as well.

This was nothing to Hildegard, though. It was easy with her Skills, which was exactly why she’d taken it upon herself to make the maps.

“It is a talent which I developed long ago. This is my first time personally creating maps, but I have a perfect sense of direction, so all that I need to do is to count my steps.”

“That isn’t as easy as you make it sound. I’m sure people would be surprised to learn that you’re a mapper.”

“That could certainly be said.”

She was a former dragon and a former god, but what was she doing in the dungeon? Not fighting at all, but single-mindedly focusing on recording the path she took. If she did say so herself, anyone who heard that would probably think whoever told them was crazy.

Although they were still in her past world...she wondered how her old acquaintances would react if they knew what she was doing now.

“So you developed a perfect sense of direction long ago? Does that mean that

when you were a dragon, you always knew what cardinal direction you were facing?”

“Yes, it does. It is one of my Skills now.”

“That makes you kind of like a bird.”

“A *bird*?! I am a dragon!” Hildegard roared.

Soma blinked, apparently not having expected such a strong reaction. Hildegard had no intention of backtracking, however. She knew he’d only been making a casual comment, but she refused to back down on this.

“I know that... It isn’t as if I called you a reptile, though, so I wouldn’t think it would be such a big deal.”

“If you had said such a thing, I would have risked my very existence to force you to rescind it.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re joking... It’s that important to you?”

“Of course. We dragons have pride and dignity regarding our dragonhood.”

Dragons were apparitional beings born of the human imagination. That involved a certain idealism, and dragons were, in a way, manifestations of those ideals. It was only natural that they would be proud of that, and be willing to risk their very souls to oppose anyone who denied it.

“So it’s that important...”

“It is that important. It would thus be in your best interest not to say such things. We would prefer not to die as well.”

“I would be more worried about you than myself.”

“Naturally. Not even a former god such as myself could overpower you, let alone another dragon.”

He may have been at only a thousandth of his original power, but that original value was too large. Anyone who wanted to stand a chance against Soma would have to bring a piece of a god’s power to the table—and even then, they may not have won.

“All right, it looks like we’re done with this floor.”

“Indeed.”

They’d gone around the upper floors two or three times each, but there was no need to be so thorough at these levels. In fact, they didn’t even really have to go all the way around repeatedly. They were doing their checks thoroughly enough the first time that there was no need to do any more.

“Nineteen floors left, then... We have a long way to go.”

“Yes, since each floor is large and complex. Traversing just one of these floors must take as long as going from the first floor to the tenth.”

“It must. I think our speed is going up as we get used to it, though. Regardless, we should be done by next week if we don’t take any days off.”

“Next week? Is something happening then?”

“No, nothing in particular. I just think it would be best to finish this as soon as possible.”

“That is true...”

The faster they finished, the faster she could catch up on her backlog of work. It would also mean less time with Soma...but she could make up some other excuse to be with him when the time came.

“Yes, I suppose there is no problem with that.”

“I get the sense you’re thinking something I wouldn’t like...but all right. I hope we find something useful for after we’re done here, though.”

“We cannot hope for much, given the nature of this place.”

Soma was lamenting the items they’d found in the dungeon. They’d found several things, but all of them had disappointed Soma.

Magical tools only appeared in dungeons as either bait or rewards, anyway. In some dungeons, things like that automatically regenerated at set intervals, but those were set up during construction of the dungeon, and this dungeon was first and foremost a place to seal something. Nothing like that should have been here, especially considering people weren’t supposed to come down this far.

Considering that they’d periodically found such things anyway, though,

maybe the creators of the dungeon had had some kind of aesthetic in mind...

“Well, we found a spellbook recently, so can you not use that?”

“I can’t say I’m not interested, but it’s magic that I want to use. It wouldn’t be the same to use magecraft or a magical tool with magiclike effects.”

“And yet you would be okay with using a magical tool that allowed you to learn magic... You are rather complicated.”

“I can’t be picky about how I learn it if I can’t learn it the normal way. In that sense, I’m incredibly jealous of you.”

“I am not sure how to respond to that...”

She took the spellbook they’d found on this floor out of thin air. She and Soma were nearly empty handed because Hildegard was able to interfere with space in order to store and retrieve things.

That was a kind of storage magic, but Hildegard actually didn’t have any sorcery-related Skills. She could do things like that because she had once been a dragon, and dragons could use magic like another limb by virtue of being dragons. That was true of all apparitional beings. Since they were made of pure fantasy, it followed that they could use fantastical powers like miracles and magic.

Incidentally, that was why she’d had no issue carrying back all of those thick books she’d bought in the capital. She hadn’t used her storage magic inside the stores, though, because it was relatively rare, so showing it off could have resulted in trouble. She didn’t really have a good reason for showing it off now either.

Smirking as Soma glared at her, she stored the spellbook in thin air once again.

“I suggest you pray that my hand doesn’t accidentally slip...”

“Please do not! That is nothing to joke about!”

They had no reason to keep talking on this floor, however. They had plenty of time for one more.

Hildegard looked at the completed map in her hands, traced the shortest path

from their current location to the next floor, and began to lead the way.

†

The sun was still somewhat high in the sky when they exited the dungeon. It was earlier than they usually got back, but they'd come back now because they didn't have time for another floor. It would have been night by the time they finished that, so they'd returned as soon as they finished with the eighty-second floor.

As soon as they returned, though, Soma slightly furrowed his brow. There was an unusual commotion in the area in front of the dungeon.

He'd known that it would be busy here, since today was the day that the dungeon was being opened, but...

"Did something happen in the dungeon?" he wondered out loud.

"It may have."

Hildegard's voice stiffened, probably because of the possibility that the dungeon wasn't actually safe yet. Maybe the wrong kind of monster had appeared and a student had gotten hurt. Soma had had that thought, so Hildegard must have as well.

And it seemed that someone had in fact been hurt in the dungeon. From the conversations they overheard, they gathered that someone had been carried out of the dungeon with injuries.

"It was okay when we last checked..."

"Perhaps something happened after we left, or perhaps we overlooked something... Either way, we must collect information about it."

And just as they were discussing that...

"Oh, headmaster...! Big trouble!"

"Oh, Ms. Carine? What are you doing here?"

"I thought that you were otherwise occupied today... Someone must have summoned you, however. This seems to be grave enough to warrant that."

That was evident from Carine's panic.

It must have been the wrong kind of monster after all, Soma thought...but that thought was quickly replaced with more questions when he heard what Carine said next.

“Um, well...!”

Without a trace of her usual laid-back demeanor, Carine told them that Kurt Munchausen had been found severely injured on the third floor of the dungeon. He’d been unconscious...and what was more, his injuries looked like they had been inflicted not by a monster but by a person.

And Lars, who had gone into the dungeon with Kurt as training to go in on his own, was nowhere to be found. Based on that information, Lars was considered a primary suspect in the case, and they were urgently searching for him.

“Kurt... And Lars too?”

Soma turned to look at Hildegard in shock, narrowing his eyes as he wondered just what could have happened.

17

Kurt had been found severely injured in the dungeon.

That in itself wasn't a big deal, frankly. It was one of those things that happened often at the academy; it was nothing worth making a fuss over.

But there were a few reasons that a fuss was made nevertheless, the first being the place where he'd been found: the third floor.

It would have made sense if he'd been an elementary schooler and a backliner, but Kurt was a lance wielder in his final year of middle school, and the top of his class at that. He should have been able to clear the third floor with his eyes closed.

Another issue was the condition he'd been found in. Though his injuries were severe, they were concentrated in just three places: his right arm, his throat, and his face.

His arm had been completely crushed; it was a wonder it was still attached. It would never work the same again, and they weren't sure whether he would regain the ability to move it.

`But his face was in even worse shape. It had been mutilated beyond recognition, as had his throat. The tooth marks on his face showed that it had been eaten by monsters, and he hadn't shown any signs of waking up the next day, possibly due to fear and shock.

They'd only been able to tell it was Kurt because his lance had been lying on the ground near him, and because he'd had his student identification card on him. Upon enrolling in the academy, each student received a palm-sized card that served to prove their identity, and they were used, for example, when a dead body couldn't be identified. If not for that, it would have taken time to narrow down who he was, because his entire face and even his scalp had been eaten. Between his card and his other physical features, though, they knew it was Kurt.

And it was the fact that he'd been found in *that* state that was the biggest

problem—especially his destroyed arm and throat. Examiners had concluded that those injuries had most likely been caused not by monsters but by a human. Especially given that his throat had been completely crushed, their supposition was that Kurt had witnessed something that someone hadn't wanted witnesses for. It was unclear why he hadn't been killed outright, but the strongest theory was that the suspect had felt bad, since said suspect had been seen talking to Kurt often.

That suspect was Lars Hofmannsthal—the very same Lars whom Soma knew so well.

Lars had been seen going into the dungeon with Kurt the day before, and nobody had seen him since. The circumstances made it likely that Lars at least knew something even if this hadn't been his doing.

Lars had gone into the dungeon with Kurt because decided to take the same exam that Soma had taken to be able to enter the dungeon freely. Kurt had been put in charge of that because the people appointed as dungeon guides for the elementary schoolers were half-treated as instructors, so they could fill that role if no instructor was available, although few were willing to shoulder that responsibility.

Nevertheless, while they suspected Lars, they had yet to find any proof. There was nothing but circumstantial evidence.

They had discovered one thing that reinforced the suspicion against Lars, however. Several of the books that had been stolen from the closed stacks of the library had been found hidden in Lars's room. That meant Lars probably knew the thief or had committed the theft himself, so people were saying maybe he was the culprit in Kurt's case as well.

In fact, the academy staff were considering whether the attack was related to the theft. Maybe Kurt had figured something out, questioned Lars, and been attacked as a result.

It was questionable whether a first-year in elementary school like Lars could have won against Kurt, however. Ultimately, there was nothing more than circumstantial evidence. They would learn more once Kurt woke up and they could ask him about what had happened.

And there was one more theory: people were saying that maybe Lars had had something to do with what had happened to Sylvia. He had been with her at the time, after all. Sylvia and Helen had put a stop to those rumors, though, because they said that was unlikely.

In any case, they were currently tracking down Lars, and even if they hadn't assumed he was the culprit, he would still have been a suspect.

And the academy had held a meeting about those matters the day before. It seemed they were taking the incident very seriously.

They'd decided two things. The first was that finding Lars was their top priority. They didn't know for sure whether he had something to do with it, but either way, he was currently missing; he hadn't been seen in or out of the academy. They couldn't ignore that, so the instructors had been told to search both the dungeon and other places, in case he had gone into hiding somewhere.

The second was to increase security at the academy. If Lars was really behind this, they had to prevent anything that might happen next. His actions could have been spontaneous, but if not, he was likely plotting something, and the purpose of stealing the books from the library had probably been to prepare for that. Therefore, teachers were instructed to stand guard whenever they had free time in order to stop those plans before they started.

That meant that the instructors had to both search for Lars and guard the academy at once...but they'd apparently agreed to that, so it was fine. It didn't concern Soma, at least.

What did concern Soma was the heavy mood currently hanging over the classroom. It hadn't exactly been happy go lucky before, but it had become so serious that it was completely unlike how the mood had been before.

But that wasn't any one person's fault. It was almost all of them.

There was no rule that they couldn't talk about the meeting or what had happened to Kurt, so the story had spread around the academy at lightning speed. People were saying that someone with an evil plot might be lurking in their midst.

Also, the teachers had been seen patrolling and searching since early this morning, which naturally put the students on edge.

That was the reason for the current atmosphere in the classroom.

“I imagine this will be difficult to handle...”

“You mean for the teachers?” Aina asked. “Or for everyone?”

“I mean both. But that’s inevitable.” Soma looked around the classroom and shrugged.

He meant that in two ways. The students knew the story, so they should have known that the teachers were doing the right thing, and they must have known the teachers had no choice. That didn’t mean the students could act as usual, though. They couldn’t help being wary and anxious.

“You seem pretty calm for someone who’s saying that, though...”

“I could say the same of you.”

“Well, like... I’m used to things feeling like this, you know? From where I grew up.”

“My environment was similar in that way.”

The difference was that Soma had deliberately placed himself in such situations. It had been necessary to master the sword and reach the pinnacle.

And in the end, it was just a matter of getting used to it. That meant that anyone could do it.

The question was which would come first: everyone getting used to it, or things going back to normal.

“I can only hope things go back to normal first. I might be used to it, but that doesn’t mean I like dealing with this kind of thing.”

“I feel the same.” Soma nodded and glanced at Sylvia, who was sitting next to him, then at Helen, who was sitting just behind Sylvia.

They were acting differently than usual as well, but they weren’t wary and on edge like everyone else. It was hard to sum up their pensive, downcast looks in one word...but if he had to, he would have called it regret.

That, too, was inevitable. Just when someone they'd practiced and studied with until recently had distanced himself from them, all this had happened. They must have been wondering whether they should have done something more. At the same time, they probably knew those thoughts wouldn't accomplish anything, but they couldn't stop thinking about it anyway.

"Well, the one thing we can know for sure is that there's nothing we can do. All we can do is to respect our teachers for continuing to give lectures despite the circumstances and take class seriously."

"That kind of sounds wise, but you're only saying that 'cause this is magic class, aren't you?"

Aina was right, so he shrugged again. It wasn't that he didn't respect the other teachers, but that didn't necessarily mean he felt like listening in their classes.

But regardless, it was true that he couldn't do anything right now. He'd gathered what was going on, but that alone didn't give him any ability to help.

Soma's essence was the sword itself, through and through. He could cut injuries away if he could see them, but he couldn't do anything about them if he didn't know where they were, even if he knew they were there. He only became useful once he saw them with his own eyes.

So all he could do right now was to hone his blade in preparation, Soma thought to himself with a faint smile as he listened to the lecture on magic.

18

Two days had gone by with no further developments. The week was over now, and the students' long-awaited day off was finally here.

Normally, they would have been celebrating the day off, but that couldn't happen this time, unfortunately. The heavy mood had still been hanging in the air the day before, and it hadn't gone away even when they didn't have classes. Whereas previously it had been contained in the classrooms, it had since dispersed throughout the entire academy, since the students and instructors were scattered now.

It followed that it was hard to spend their day off as usual when there was tension in the air wherever they went. That was no different in the practice areas, it seemed, where there was something in the air that couldn't be explained by the fact that they were training.

"Hmm... I may not be the type to be very concerned by this, but it certainly doesn't put me in a good mood. If only someone would get this fixed..."

"Do not guilt me...! I am doing the best that I can!"

"Well, I know you are, but doing the best you can isn't going to fix this. We need results, and immediately."

"Ugh... You are correct to say that..."

Soma and Hildegard left the practice area as they exchanged those words.

They hadn't gone there to do anything in particular today—well, they had in a way, but they'd accomplished it with one glance.

"That was the last place, right?"

"Yes. I decided the order in which we would look to save us any unnecessary labor."

As Hildegard had just confirmed, they'd just gone and looked everywhere in the academy. They were simply patrolling, not investigating, and patrolling was especially important on a day off like this. Martial law hadn't been imposed, but

the academy was in a state close to it.

They had to look around periodically because there were students scattered everywhere. That wasn't Soma's job, however; it was Hildegard's, and Soma was just tagging along. He shouldn't have had to go along in the first place.

Nevertheless...

"It may be of no use to repeat this now that we have finished, but this is our responsibility. You did not have to accompany me."

"Well, it didn't take much time. All I could have done before you were finished was to find one paper in the library. It hardly made a difference."

Of course, that would have been a more meaningful way to spend his time...but Soma couldn't do anything right now, and he genuinely knew how hard Hildegard was trying, so he wouldn't have felt right doing his own thing.

"Is this what I think it is...? Has your so-called *dere* side come out?!"

"I've wondered this for a while... Why do you know so much useless trivia like that?"

"Heh heh, well, I have Imitation: Omnipotence. It is easy for me."

"The gods of this world must have had no idea you would use the knowledge of your source domain like this."

As the two had that pointless exchange, they headed for the entrance to the dungeon. Soma had accompanied Hildegard because they had planned to go there as usual once she was done looking around.

It may have seemed wrong to explore the dungeon at a time like this, but the opposite was true. A normal dungeon dive would have been one thing, but that wasn't what Soma and Hildegard were doing. They had to eliminate as many uncertain factors as they could right now.

So they entered the dungeon as they usually did, but Soma paused once he had walked some distance.

"I see nobody is here despite the day off. I suppose that should have been apparent from the fact that the practice area was full of people, though."

“Yes, since things are how they are. We have not blocked off the dungeon this time, but they must be afraid that someone could be lurking inside. Exploring the dungeon always comes with risks, but this is a different kind of risk altogether.”

The middle schoolers should have had plenty of experience in the dungeon, but that was one thing and this was another, it seemed. It would certainly have taken a different kind of resolve to set foot into a place where a murderer might have been hiding than it would have taken to go somewhere that there might be monsters, and the students weren’t adults yet. It would have been harsh to expect them to be prepared to kill or be killed.

As a result, the dungeon was deserted today. That was a good thing for Soma and Hildegard, however.

“Let’s get going, then. The monsters are definitely stronger now, so we can’t be sure things will go smoothly today.”

“I have a feeling that they shall, knowing you...but I agree that we do not have time to waste. Let us go.”

From her pocket, Hildegard produced a white sphere about the size of her fist. As she held it up in her right hand, Soma took hold of her left.

“Transport,” she muttered, and the space around them wavered slightly.

It was only for a moment, however, and when the wavering subsided, the scenery around them had changed completely.

“Hmm... I’ve gotten used to it now, but it still feels rather odd.”

“I imagine so, given that we are teleporting within the dungeon.”

They had just teleported, as was obvious, which meant that the sphere was a teleportation item. This particular one was extremely rare, however; it wasn’t typically possible to teleport inside dungeons. Teleporters were the only exception, and this item had been made based on analysis of teleporters. It had two drawbacks, though: it could only be used to teleport within a single dungeon, and only between two set points, an entrance and an exit. That was why they hadn’t been able to use it to rescue Sylvia.

That was why it was lucky for them that there had been nobody around: they'd been able to use this device. They hadn't wanted anyone else to get involved in what they were doing, and this was a rare item. However, the biggest reason they didn't want to teleport in front of the students or faculty was in case someone learned their destination.

Regardless...

"Let's be on our way, then," Soma said with ease, looking at the hole that led to the next floor.

They'd stopped their last dungeon dive after thoroughly checking this floor: the eighty-ninth. That meant the next floor, the ninetieth, would have an area boss.

But Soma approached it calmly, albeit with heightened senses, and he reached the next floor in less than a minute.

But just then—

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Combat Ready / Sense Presence (Special-Grade): Negate Sneak Attack.

There was a metallic clang. As a dark gray blade came within thirty centimeters of his face, Soma parried it with his own blade and let out a sigh.

"Now this is just mean spirited."

"You say that having parried it just now...but I agree."

It was a large space—so large that they couldn't see its edges, which were shrouded in darkness. It must have been many tens of meters wide. The same was true of its vertical dimension; in place of a ceiling, there was a gaping hole that extended up into darkness.

Regardless of the height, though, this was most likely the only space on this floor. It was the same type of floor as the fiftieth.

And while an adventurer was processing that, this thing would immediately close the distance and get them. It was not only mean spirited but downright cruel.

"This tells me exactly what kind of people made this place," Soma muttered

as he kicked the thing away.

He hadn't kicked it very hard, but it obediently fell back, perhaps having decided for itself to put some distance between them. Its form was visible now, and Soma murmured to himself as he took it in.

"Rather small, I would say."

"Your senses must have dulled if you are capable of calling that small...although I must admit that I thought the same thing."

That was understandable, though, because it was only about three meters tall.

Monsters' sizes usually corresponded to their power levels. There were some exceptions, and some cases in which you had to compare monsters of the same size by other standards, but that was the rule, and the monsters in this dungeon adhered to it, getting bigger the lower one went. It wasn't uncommon to see monsters over ten meters tall on the eightieth floor and below. The floors also got taller to match, so it would have been natural to assume that the area boss here would be very tall.

Yet the monster before them was only three meters tall, so it was natural that it would seem small.

"This is the area boss, then? I'm a little disappointed."

"I do not sense any other monsters on this floor, so this must in fact be the area boss. It would have been quite the jump in difficulty if this floor were full of such monsters."

"That's certainly true."

That meant this area boss was the same type as the one on the fortieth floor, although the space here didn't seem to be closed off like that one.

"What do you think? I can prepare a retreat if necessary."

"Let me see..." Soma scrutinized it as he replied.

To sum it up in one word, it was a skeleton. However, it was covered in gratuitous accessories. It even had a cape, as if it were a noble...which didn't look good on it, to be honest. Between its face being fully exposed bone and

the weapon it was holding, the cape was a complete mismatch.

That weapon was a roughly made sword of about five meters in length, longer than its own body. Soma had to wonder for multiple reasons why it was equipped like that.

“No, just prepare for us to go to the next floor.”

Deciding its appearance didn’t matter, Soma kicked off the ground.

Law of the Sword *Draconic Blessing* Divine Speed: Warp.

He closed the ten-meter gap in an instant, just as the skeleton had before. Simultaneously, he swung his right arm, his sword flashing out.

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance / Lightning Speed: Glint.

It moved immediately, meeting Soma’s attack as if in revenge. Just then, there was a clang—and as a corner of Soma’s mouth turned up in a smirk, a gray flash flew through the air.

While the skeleton’s face was nothing but exposed bone with empty eye sockets, its surprise was still clearly evident...and it wouldn’t have made sense to wait for it to recover from its shock. Soma took another step, and it hastily moved as well.

“Too slow.”

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Absolute Severance *Sword of Pandemonium* Unrivaled Power: Sage.

There were six flashes. Its limbs and head were severed from its torso, and then the torso itself was slashed in half. It all happened in an instant, the pieces falling down just as Soma’s accelerated perception returned. The seven pieces of bone hit the ground—but just before that, Soma thought he saw its mouth open. No sound came from it, though, except the sound of bones clattering.

Soma exhaled as if pushing away the exhaustion that had come over him.

“Phew... Well, it looks like this floor won’t be any problem, so let’s go to the next... Is something wrong?”

Soma was puzzled just then because Hildegard was giving him a weary look, and he didn’t recall doing anything to deserve one.

“I certainly did not expect it to pose a problem for you, but neither did I expect you to kill it so swiftly...”

“Is that so? Well, it wasn’t exactly weak, but...”

It was one of the stronger enemies he’d fought in this world. It was definitely weaker than that dragon Fafnir, though, and Soma had gained a lot of experience since then, so this result was inevitable.

“Your standards, I tell you... Well, so be it. Speaking of which, why is it that you are so often telling me, a former dragon god, what is right? It is typically the other way around.”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

He thought that it might just be that this former dragon god had gotten too used to the common sense of normal humans, but saying that wouldn’t accomplish anything, so he just shrugged. Then he looked ahead.

“We should move on, anyway. We don’t have time to waste.”

“You are right. Given that you cleared this floor without trouble, however, we should not struggle with the rest. As you know, area bosses are a grade or two stronger than the monsters that appear on subsequent floors. That was most likely the strongest monster in this dungeon.”

“Isn’t there a boss on the lowest floor?”

“I do not believe so. Normal dungeons have bosses which guard their cores, but this dungeon serves as a seal. The hundredth floor should contain nothing but the Archdevil’s power fragment.”

“Hmm... Understood.”

In that case, he thought they could reach the core tomorrow, although it

would be difficult to do by the end of the day today.

He also got the sense that his job wouldn’t be over once he got there—that something new would come up...but he could cross that bridge when he came to it.

With that in mind, Soma began to walk toward the next floor.

19

“Hmph, thought so.”

The boy huffed upon being met with the scene he’d expected. He saw a wide space, but no matter how hard he strained his eyes or how long he waited, there was no sign of any area boss.

He doubted that it was because he’d fully hidden his presence. He knew very well that while High-Grade Obscure Presence was a powerful Skill, it wasn’t perfect. There were some who could nullify its effect, and area bosses often could. He couldn’t imagine that a boss on a lower level like this wasn’t capable of that, and when he didn’t sense any sign of attack even upon seeing the hole that led to the next floor, he gained certainty in his guess.

It was simple—the boss wasn’t appearing because it’d been defeated recently.

“But no sign of a fight either, huh?”

It was true that the dungeon repaired damage without fail, but it took time. The more damage there was, the longer it took to regenerate.

But he didn’t see any marks, even though the area boss that should have been here was quite powerful. He could hardly imagine how strong it must have been, considering that it had been influenced by the Archdevil’s power fragment.

To be honest, this was the one place where he’d been anticipating something...but this was all he got. He let out a disappointed, weary exhalation.

“Ha... Well, it’d be nothing compared to the Archdragon anyway, of course.”

He knew that someone had already gone farther down into the dungeon than him. He hadn’t seen a single trace of a fight, but he could tell by looking at the monsters that they hadn’t been influenced by the Archdevil’s power fragment for very long. Considering that he’d turned a goblin into a king goblin when he’d tried that thing out on the first floor, it would have been strange not to see any monsters far stronger than that.

In fact, considering that he'd previously seen monsters that were clearly out of place on occasion, it was strange that he hadn't seen any wandering around. That had to mean that someone had hunted down all the monsters on the way and replaced them with uninfluenced ones.

And he was convinced of that theory now that he was here. He even had a good idea of who was lurking ahead.

"Well, couldn't be anyone else, right?"

There were several people in the academy with Special-Grade Skills, the most prominent being the headmaster, but none of them could have pulled off this feat. It was questionable whether they would have been able to reach this floor in a group, let alone by themselves.

But if it was *him*, the one who'd defeated the Archdragon, it would have been easy.

The boy had only recently confirmed that this was the very person who'd subjugated the Archdragon. He'd understood as soon as he'd seen how easily the guy had rescued the princess.

It was mostly a gut feeling, but once he understood that, it had all made sense. It was only natural that he couldn't read *his* power level.

"I doubt I could even beat the Archdragon."

Let alone someone who had beaten the Archdragon.

Nevertheless...

"Not yet, at least."

That would change very soon. At this rate, he would get there by the end of the day tomorrow.

The question was what he would do about the final key. He'd already used most of what he had. It would be hard to get his hands on more, and in fact, he'd left the book where he had in order to get some...

"I have a good feeling about that, but certain other people are probably gonna tag along. I took that into account, but maybe I should do one more thing just in case..."

Once he got the Archdevil's power fragment, the person in question might even be a perfect target to test his powers on, but if they were together or he was interrupted along the way, he'd probably be done for before he could get the fragment. He couldn't hope that someone like *him* would hesitate or be caught off guard.

"This has gone better than I thought, but almost too good to be true... Maybe I should think of another way to win? Brains aren't my forte, though..."

The actual brains of his group had been done in along with the Archdragon, though. He couldn't afford to complain that he wasn't good at planning.

"What was it, anyway... Oh, I know. I could get two birds with one stone that way. Even if I mess up bringing it back, I can just go get it later. Then they won't get in my way."

The idea had come to him out of nowhere, but it actually seemed usable. Laughing to himself that he had some brains after all, he turned on his heel.

In that case, he didn't have to go any farther. He had to focus on getting ready.

He already had a direction in mind, and it shouldn't be too difficult to pull off in practice. All that remained was to make a couple tweaks to put his idea into practice.

"Seems pretty workable to me. Maybe I'll check that kind of thing out once this is over," he joked to himself as he left.

†

As soon as Sylvia got back to her room, she flopped onto her bed. Exhaustion and her still-muddled thoughts drew a meaningless groan out of her.

"Nngh..."

Long story short, Sylvia was worried.

No, maybe it would have been better to say she felt guilty. Even knowing it was arrogant of her to think so, she couldn't help wondering if there was anything else she could or should have done.

A friend of hers—she didn't know if he felt the same, but she considered him

a friend—had gone missing under mysterious circumstances, and he was suspected of multiple misdeeds.

There wasn't anything Sylvia could do, frankly, but she kept thinking about it.

Thinking that maybe if she hadn't let him be alone, things would have been different.

She didn't know what had caused this or why, but she had some sense of the root of the matter: he'd wanted power. That had been clear from his words and actions, and he'd always had that tendency. It was why he'd started practicing with them in the first place.

And that gut feeling of hers had grown stronger after the trap incident...more specifically, when Soma had solved it so quickly.

That was because she'd felt the same when she'd been saved. She wanted more power, too—enough that other people would no longer have to fix her messes.

Helen felt the same, and they had made the same decision—they would reflect on their actions and redouble their efforts.

But Lars had come to a different conclusion—that he couldn't achieve that if he was with her group, or at least, that it would take longer. That was why he'd decided to go off on his own.

In other words, she'd let him down. She hadn't been skilled enough. She hadn't been able to make him see the value of staying with her over acting alone.

And above all...she hadn't been able to convince him not to go.

She'd thought it might be best for him that way, but now this had happened. That meant she must have made the wrong choice.

That was why she kept wondering...what had been the right choice? What was she supposed to have done?

She knew it was self-centered of her, but she couldn't let go of the idea because that would have been giving up.

She'd decided to move forward. That meant that she had to keep thinking so

that she could make the best choice next time.

But if she could have figured it out just by thinking, it wouldn't have been so hard. She'd thought so hard that her head was all jumbled now, so she'd tried moving her body as hard as she could in the training area for a change of pace, but...

"Ugh... It makes sense, though. Training doesn't accomplish anything if you're not thinking either..."

She'd cleared her mind and focused fully on training...or anyway, that was the nice way to put it, but really, she'd just run around mindlessly. The outcome was that she'd tired herself out without accomplishing any actual training, and she hadn't come to any conclusion in her mind, either.

In other words, she'd just wasted time.

"What am I even doing..."

She was way off track. If Soma knew, he'd be mad...or maybe just disappointed. Either way, he'd react negatively.

Sylvia definitely didn't want that...but if she'd known the right thing to do, she would already have been doing it.

"What am I go—?!"

Sylvia suddenly flinched at a sound from behind her. She'd already made sure nobody but her was in her room...and when she slowly turned around, she in fact didn't see anything or anyone.

She breathed a sigh of relief at that, but it also meant she didn't know what that sound had been. Realizing she couldn't just ignore it, she timidly yet determinedly turned toward the window.

Sylvia's room was on the second floor, but it had a balcony. The noise had sounded like it was coming from there.

She peeked around...and was confused at what she saw. It was definitely something, but she couldn't tell what it was.

"What's this... A box?"

It was hard to tell in the darkness, but it was definitely some kind of box, and a small one. It was bigger than her hand but not too big to pick up.

“That sound must have been...someone throwing it up here?”

She had a bad feeling about it, but she couldn’t ignore it. Swallowing nervously, she stepped outside, but nobody was there. That only gave her a worse feeling about it, though.

“I guess I can’t tell just by touching it...”

She cautiously touched the box, but there was no sign of anything happening. Steeling herself, she picked it up, to the same result. She gave it a shake, but she couldn’t tell what was inside by the noise. It didn’t feel very heavy, though, so the contents must have been light.

“I just have to open it, I guess...”

A part of her scolded herself for her lack of caution, but there was no way something like this would do anything to her.

“Yeah... Considering the size and sound, it’s hard to imagine whatever’s in here will be an immediate problem,” she muttered as if trying to convince herself.

After a moment’s hesitation, she shook her head and put her hands on the box. There was no wrapping on it, so it was easy to open.

And inside it was...

“Huh...? Why’s this...?”

There were two things inside.

One was a letter. While paper was becoming easier to find, it was still somewhat expensive.

But that at least made some sense... A letter was the easiest way to communicate one’s intentions.

The issue was the second thing. It looked like a headband—the kind girls wore as hair accessories.

“Why would someone send... Wait... Is this...”

Just then, she noticed.

“I think...I’ve seen this before...”

She had.

Of course she had.

It was the one she’d picked out for her friend.

She hurriedly spread it out and checked the bottom right corner. There, in clumsy handwriting...

“For...Maria.”

That was the best handwriting she’d been capable of at the time. Something had been pasted over it since to prevent it from rubbing off, but it was the very same writing.

This was the headband Sylvia had given Maria. The one she’d been wearing ever since, that she’d half-joked was a pain to take off and wash every day...

“Right, the letter...!”

It must have said something. Nobody would have done this if they hadn’t had something to say or some intention. She didn’t know what it meant...and maybe she didn’t want to know, but...

“What... What is this?”

Sylvia furrowed her brow when she saw it. She understood what the words meant, but what had they meant by this...and who was it?

Could it have been...

“No, that doesn’t matter... Knowing who it is won’t help anything. I just have to think of what to *do*...”

Unable to decide right away, she picked up the letter, headband, and box, went back to her bed, and dove onto it again. She’d stretched her arms out so that the letter she was holding wouldn’t get crumpled, but as a result, her clothes ended up getting wrinkled instead.

Thinking about how Maria would scold her for her manners if she saw this brought Sylvia to a decision on what she had to do.

“Yeah... Of course.”

Sylvia nodded with conviction, thinking that she could never have chosen any differently.

20

At the start of the new week, the atmosphere at the academy felt somewhat less tense.

That wasn't because anything had changed, however. Everyone had simply become accustomed to the tension.

"I must say, I'm impressed by the students at this academy."

"But it's only the middle schoolers and up, right?" Aina asked. "The elementary schoolers are still pretty worked up."

"No, I wouldn't say so."

Soma wasn't just saying that to be nice. It was true that while the middle schoolers he passed seemed to have returned to business as usual, the elementary schoolers still couldn't hide their wariness. They were definitely getting back to normal, however. He expected that everyone would have fully adapted by next week, and that was more than impressive enough for elementary schoolers.

"Huh... So what would you say about Sylvia and Helen, then? I don't think 'impressive' can cover them."

"Yes, good point... I would describe them as incredibly impressive, I suppose."

"What kind of answer is that..." Aina gave him a weary look.

There was no other way he could put it, though. He shrugged and glanced around.

School had just let out. There were more kids than usual staying after school, which was because of the incident. The more anxious people get, the more they want to be around others—and the more others, the better. The places in the academy that fulfilled that condition were the lecture halls, the dorms, and the practice areas. The lecture halls in particular were where the students naturally ended up if they didn't go anywhere else, so recently, a lot of them had been seen staying there after school. For similar reasons, more students than usual

had been using the practice areas and hanging out in the common areas of the dorms.

When Soma looked around, he saw some students staying in the lecture hall, but he also saw some here and there who were preparing to go elsewhere shortly. That was a sign that things were returning to normal.

But the two girls whom Aina had mentioned—Sylvia and Helen—were nowhere to be seen. They had left the lecture hall as soon as school had ended, just as they always did. That was what Soma considered incredibly impressive.

“Speaking of which, Aina, are you just going to stay here now that they’ve left?”

“Yeah, it’s not like they ditched me. I’m the one waiting for them.”

“You mean they plan to come back here?”

“That’s what I heard, at least. Apparently Helen wanted to ask Ms. Carine a question, and Sylvia said she had something to do.”

“Something to do, huh...”

The two had seemed somehow determined or resolved today. Soma wondered if this had something to do with that. Helen must have either had a question about class or wanted advice on how to improve, but...

“What about you, though?”

“What do you mean?” Soma paused his train of thought and gave Aina a puzzled look. He had no reason to hurry out of the lecture hall today.

“Well, lately, you’ve been going off somewhere right after school ends. I meant to ask if you have to do that today.”

“Oh, I see. I certainly have been, but I have today off.”

In fact, Hildegard had told him at the end of their investigation yesterday that they would take today off because she had important plans.

“Huh, o-okay... Wanna come to the practice area, then...?”

“Hmm... To be honest, I was debating what to do.”

“Yeah... Debating, huh...” Aina muttered, staring at him through half-lidded

eyes.

Soma looked back at her in confusion. “Is something the matter?”

“No... I was just venting. Don’t worry about it. Anyway, that means you’re not coming, right?”

“Yes, it does... How did you know?”

Aina just shrugged without responding, cocking her head as if to ask why she *wouldn’t* know. Soma figured that just meant he had been easy to read—and in fact, he had been.

“I believe I’ll be able to show up in the near future, however.”

“Fine. I won’t get my hopes up too high, then. *You* should get your hopes up for when you do, though.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean I’ll show you some magic that’ll blow your mind.”

“Oh...? I’ll certainly be looking forward.”

Aina wasn’t the type to say something like that with no merit. That meant she must have had confidence to match her statement, which gave Soma high expectations.

“In that case, I’ll finish what I have to do quickly.”

“I thought you were off today?”

“I am, but that doesn’t mean there’s nothing I can do.”

It ultimately depended on Hildegard, but Soma was confident that it would turn out fine, so he began walking away to put his plan into action.

“On that note, I’ll be going now.”

“Okay, I don’t know what you’re doing, but be safe...or I guess you don’t need me to tell you that. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, see you tomorrow.”

Waving to Aina over his shoulder, Soma left the lecture hall.

†

Once he left the lecture hall, Soma headed straight toward the headmaster's office. He didn't expect an answer to his knock, though, and he didn't get one.

"Hmm... Unlocked? How careless of her..."

He certainly hadn't expected the door to open when he tried the handle, however.

The room on the other side of the door was neatly organized, unlike Hildegard's personal room. By that very fact, he could tell that she wasn't there, but the door had been open, so he stepped inside regardless. Hildegard made her occasional blunders, but she wouldn't have forgotten to lock her office, which meant she'd left it unlocked on purpose. He didn't know why, but he entered anyway.

Few people would have visited the headmaster's office today, and she would have told them that she would be out. She must have left the door open because she'd known someone would drop by anyway, and she had something to tell that person.

"Well, perhaps she just forgot to close the door and I'll have to bear the shame of my self-centeredness..."

Thankfully, that didn't seem to be the case. There was a book sitting on the desk, the first place anyone would look in the room, as if inviting someone to open it.

And Soma knew that book. He'd read it a few days ago; it was the book about dungeons that was supposed to be in the closed stacks.

The fact that it was here wasn't odd in itself. It was normal that Hildegard, as headmaster, was able to take it with her.

"And that would be necessary if she needed to check it," he muttered as he picked up the book.

He flipped through it; it was as difficult to read as he remembered. It seemed to have been someone's research log originally, so it hadn't been written with readers in mind, and some of the letters were faded with age, which didn't help.

And it would have been fine if those had been the only problems, but a lot of it was subjective, and there were quite a few mistakes. Those were crossed out with corrections written above them...and that process seemed to have gone on for several generations. That was how Soma knew this had been written by multiple people.

“It might have been faster to make a separate book, honestly... Well, books are expensive right now, so maybe that wasn’t possible for them.”

Alternatively, since it was something like a notebook, maybe the writers had decided it didn’t matter as long as the contents made sense to them. Neither possibility made it any easier to read, however.

The fact that it was hard to read wasn’t an issue, anyway, since he’d already read it through once. It had taken him some time to understand, but that was all. There was no need to make that into an issue now.

The question was why the book was here. Hildegard knew he’d read it, and her memory wasn’t so bad that she would have forgotten.

The possibility he’d considered earlier answered that question, though; she may have remembered but left it here just to make completely sure.

However...

“If that were all, she wouldn’t have to leave this here.”

Hildegard had most likely gone into the dungeon to check the seal and repair it if necessary.

Yes, she and Soma had made it to the ninety-ninth floor the day before. They’d turned back then, however, because night had been approaching, and for one more reason: according to this book, one had to go to the final floor on one’s own.

Specifically, it said that the sealing ritual was very intricate and that having other people around created a risk that the seal might be broken by any small misstep, so it was preferable to conduct the ritual alone. She’d gone by herself because she expected to carry out the ritual today.

She hadn’t actually told Soma that, however. All he’d heard was that they

wouldn’t be investigating today.

There was something off about that way of putting it, though. They’d already finished investigating the day before. This book noted that there were no monsters on the final floor, only the sealed fragment of the Archdevil’s power. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have gone alone...which meant that their investigation itself was over. Soma had nothing more to do.

Yet she had told him that they were taking a day off, and she hadn’t told him she was going to the hundredth floor.

On the other hand, she’d left this book here. In other words, Hildegard was acting as if she was hiding something from Soma, but she actually wanted him to know. She was even giving him clues like this.

Soma didn’t think there was any need for her to do that, however...

“She must know that she doesn’t have to do this... Oh? What’s this...”

As Soma continued to flip through the book, he noticed something off. When he turned the next page, he discovered a loose sheet of paper folded up and tucked between the pages.

After reading the paper, Soma crumpled it in his hand and muttered to himself, “I see... This is the real reason this book was left here.”

He knew what Hildegard wanted to say and do now. It had largely been as he’d expected, but it was good to have confirmation.

“That tells me what I need to do...but it looks like I should finish some minor business first.”

Thinking about what was to come, Soma returned the book to its place and turned on his heel. Then he walked directly out of the headmaster’s office to do what he needed to do.

21

Hildegard walked down a dim path through an expanse of exposed stone. She could see despite the lack of light, which was normal for this place: the hundredth floor of the Royal Academy's dungeon.

At long last, she had reached the final floor.

"Hmm, I expected to be deeply moved by this, yet I am not... I suppose that makes sense, however."

She'd barely done anything, after all. She'd made the maps, but those had not been strictly necessary; Soma could have handled it even without maps. Hildegard wasn't shameless enough to feel personally accomplished now.

She would have been lying if she'd said that wasn't part of the reason she'd come by herself, though. Part of her had thought that Soma had worked hard enough, so she should handle the end. But the bigger reason was that she was considering the worst-case scenario.

Hildegard knew some about the being called the Archdevil, but only some. Its main body had long since been destroyed, and she didn't know how powerful it had been.

She could make an educated guess, however. Its power had lingered after its death, and sealing it away, even in pieces, had been all the heroes could do. That said something about how powerful it was.

Divine power depended on the number of gods ruling a given world. The more gods there were, the less power each one had, because there was no need for each individual god to be so powerful if they had numbers.

That only determined the minimum power of each god, and a god of war, for example, would still be stronger than other gods. That was only in comparison with other gods from the same world, though. If you had a world with one hundred gods and a world with ten, the god of war in the world with ten gods would be far more powerful than the god of war in the other world. The scale of the world and the strength of people's faith also affected the gods' power

levels, so that rule wasn't absolute, but it was true in the majority of cases.

And in this world, there had only been two gods: the Divinist god and the Archdevil. Not only that, the scale of the world was almost identical to that of Hildegard's past world, where she had been a god. Therefore, the gods of this world must have power incomparably greater than her own.

And she gained certainty in that hypothesis when she reached the final floor. She sensed an immense power, even though it was only a fragment and still sealed away. The Archdevil must have been far stronger than her.

"It makes sense that subduing him required several heroes with power rivaling that of the gods... And I also sense a powerful resentment."

According to legend, the Archdevil had deeply resented mankind. Hildegard thought that maybe that was why it was recommended that one conduct the sealing ritual alone. What he resented was not any one human but mankind as a whole, so a single person would seem so insignificant to him that he would be less likely to catch them.

In fact, now that she was walking alone, she hadn't run into any of the traps that she usually would have.

"Well, perhaps that is because this is a special place...or because I am dragonkin."

While dragonkin appeared human, they were dragons in essence. Naturally, the fact that the world didn't recognize them as such made them even further from human. Dragonkin were what dragons became when they clung to such strong regrets at death that they did not fully perish—grotesque illusions created when a dragon wanted something so badly it was willing to sink to the level of man.

Well, in Hildegard's case, she had actually wanted to become human...but the difference was insignificant.

"Regardless, I am glad that I came alone."

She trusted Soma, of course, but he had only regained a fraction of his peak power. She didn't want to imagine what might happen if this force she sensed were to attack him in his present condition.

Naturally, it was possible that he could fend it off with no problem, but this force was too great for her to believe that unquestioningly...and its resentment was immense. Even Hildegard, faced with this turbulence, couldn't help but consider the worst.

"Most importantly, it is only right that I ultimately take full responsibility and do something about this... Do you agree?"

Hildegard stepped into a wide open area. It wasn't as big as the ninetieth floor, but it was large enough that she couldn't see the far wall. It extended into a vast darkness, just in front of which she saw the individual she was addressing.

"Oh, you don't seem surprised... Don't tell me you expected me to be here." The boy gave Hildegard a look of puzzlement.

She shrugged. All she could say in response to that was that she had, in fact, expected it.

"Why did you think that I would not?"

"I guess my little trick was too obvious, then. I had a feeling that people like Sylvia would fall for it, so I figured I'd try and see if it would confuse them a bit, but I can't fool you."

"Well, in fact, many still believe it. It was clumsy work, yes, but it did cause confusion and disorder, and that is for the best. It would cause even more panic if the truth were to get out."

"I get it... That makes sense. So I could have had an even greater impact if I hadn't done that... I guess I should have spent more time thinking through my plan. I thought it would work at the time."

"That is how most plots work; they are ruined when you try to do more than you need to. In fact, I have heard from your teachers that your one weakness is that you tend to get a big head at times...Kurt."

As soon as Hildegard said his name, the boy—Kurt—widened his eyes as if to say he hadn't expected to hear that word.



“Why are you surprised? Did you really think that I would not know your name?”

“I expected you to know my name, but not what the teachers say about me.”

“You underestimated me in that regard as well, then. I am the headmaster, and what kind of headmaster would I be if I did not know about those who attend my academy? So you may cease the act. I imagine it takes a lot of effort to maintain.”

Kurt’s eyes instantly got even wider. After that instant, though, a smile came to his face. While he seemed genuinely amused, he suddenly looked like a completely different person, although his features remained the same.

“Heh... I can’t believe it. Never thought you’d actually figure it out.”

“That is because I have life experience, whippersnapper. You could never hope to deceive me with such a clumsy facade.”

“Yeah? Well, my bad, grandma. What a relief, though. I don’t know where I ever got off acting like a goody two-shoes. Not like I care anyway.”

Kurt was acting completely different now, but this seemed truer to his real self, if anything. Although he gave the impression of being a whole other person from the one who had been there a moment before, Hildegard wasn’t fazed. As she’d said, she’d already seen through him.

However, despite her posturing, she actually hadn’t noticed Kurt’s true self until she’d come here. He’d managed to fool her this whole time. It made her want to let out a sigh at how gullible she’d been.

But now wasn’t the time for reflection. Even as they had what seemed like a casual exchange, each was focusing intently on the other’s eyes. They both knew that they couldn’t afford to let their guard down in a situation like this.

“Well, I would normally have to ask why you did such a thing to Lars...but the answer is of no importance.”

“Huh... You sure? I thought ahead to how I’d give you the story, so you can go ahead and ask.”

“I have already deduced most of it. You are after *this*, yes?” Hildegard produced a small vial of dark red liquid from her pocket.

Kurt’s mouth curved into a smirk. There was a feral look in his eyes. “You

actually brought it? But that means you heard, right? So shouldn't you be asking why I'm by myself?"

"I assume you want me to ask why the girl named Maria is not here...but as I said, I have already deduced your plans for the most part. You simply knocked her out and hid her somewhere, yes? I told Sylvia as much, so she has likely found her by now."

"Damn, no luck, huh... I totally figured she'd come alone, but I guess she went to you first. She must've figured it out. How'd Albert always come up with the best plans... I guess I'm not cut out for this."

"Hence why I told you, you are far too prone to getting a big head. I imagine your purpose in sending such a vague letter was to make Sylvia panic, but she has reflected deeply on her recent mistakes, so she would not make such a major oversight again. Also, bringing Maria here would have posed a large risk with no benefit to you. It is not as easy to hide a body as you may imagine. It is plain to see if you think about it."

"Gotcha. I didn't plan far enough ahead. Why'd you bring that stuff, though...the royal blood?"

"Simple—I do not know how much of that book is true, but I judged the description of the seal to be true. It followed that I should take some of Sylvia's blood in case the seal was weakened and I needed to fix it."

"Damn, you even figured out I messed with the book... No big deal, though. This still helps me a lot."

"So your plan really is to use royal blood to break the seal."

"Yeah, exactly what you're thinking. So it doesn't matter if you figured out my plan, since all I have to do is get my hands on that and I'm all set."

"That would certainly be true...if not for *me*, you little brat."

Law of Harmony *Unarmed Combat (Special-Grade)* Combat Ready / Mental Stillness: Dragon Palm.

As soon as she finished speaking, there was a loud boom. Hildegard had closed the gap between her and Kurt instantly, striking his stomach with the

heel of her hand. His body flew back and slammed into the wall.

“Guh...! Where’d that come from... Wasn’t that a pretty harsh way to treat one of your students?”

“I must be harsh *because* you are my student... It is my duty to put a stop to any sinister plans a student of mine is attempting.”

“Heh, is that right? Well, you’re a failure, then...since you couldn’t stop me.”

“What do you... Wait...!”

Hildegard’s eyes went wide once she looked closely at him to figure out what he meant. He hadn’t actually been slammed into a wall—it was some kind of pedestal that she hadn’t seen in the darkness. Although it was far away, she could see complex writing on it, as well as a black sphere embedded in its center. She sensed both divinity and evil from it, and she could tell at a glance that it was the core device used to seal the fragment of the Archdevil’s power.

Kurt had a pleased smile on his face as he approached it, and he was holding a familiar vial. Hildegard hastily searched her pockets, but the vial she’d brought wasn’t there.

“I thought that hit seemed a little too perfect... So you only wanted to steal that the entire time...!”

“I mean, I couldn’t have done it if I’d paid attention to anything else. I pulled it off, though, didn’t I? You didn’t even notice. Well, I guess if you had, you wouldn’t have thrown me all the way over here.”

He was right. If she’d known he was going to steal it, she would have pushed him to the ground instead of throwing him away. She’d actually intended to do that, in fact. She’d ended up throwing him away because the attack had landed too perfectly.

A Special-Grade attack could easily take a life. Just one attack could kill a Middle-Grade Skill user if they were caught off guard, and the only reason that wasn’t true of High-Grade users was because their Skills allowed them to subconsciously defend themselves from sneak attacks. If they couldn’t for any reason, even a High-Grade user could lose their life to one Special-Grade attack.

And that was exactly the state Kurt had just been in. All of the force of her attack had hit him, and it could easily have killed him if it hadn't thrown him away.

She honestly wouldn't have minded him dying, but she had a lot of questions for him first. She hadn't asked yet, partially because she'd figured out most of it already, but also because she'd thought she could wait until she'd captured him to interrogate him. She didn't want to kill him before she got answers.

That was why she'd opted to push him away, so that he wouldn't absorb the full force of her attack...but apparently that was exactly what he'd wanted.

"I might've messed up a lot, but looks like I got the most important part right."

"It does seem so... That was careless of you, however. That could easily have killed you."

"You think I'd risk that? And wait, have you seriously not noticed? You should've noticed a lot more of the Archdevil's power when you showed up...and some of it's coming from me. Maybe it's too faint to notice, but it's enough that I won't die in one hit, at least."

"Did you...?!"

Kurt was implying that he'd broken the seal and absorbed the Archdevil's power. The seal was only slightly cracked, so he'd only absorbed a small amount of power...but even so, this was hard to believe. It may have been just a fragment, but it was a god's power; humans weren't supposed to be able to absorb it. It risked overloading and blowing up their very souls, to say nothing of their bodies—it was tantamount to suicide.

But this answered one of her questions.

"I wondered why you wanted to break the seal... So you intended to absorb this power."

"What would I want a god's power for, if not to get some for myself?"

"If you must commit suicide, I wish you would choose a less disruptive method..."

“Talk all you want, but I’m gonna get that power...the ultimate power of the Archdevil!”

As Kurt shouted, he crushed the vial in his hand. Dark red liquid dripped from his fist onto the black sphere.

The change began instantly. At first, a small waver, so small it was nearly unnoticeable. Then it began to grow and intensify, as if something were awakening with a scream.

“Heh, ha ha ha...! I thought this stuff might be fake, but it’s real! That means I can really get the Archdevil’s power this time...! I only got to use a drop before, since I used up the rest experimenting!”

“Of course it is real, since I planned to use it on the seal, and I did not think you would steal it... How gullible of me. Nevertheless...you must perish now.”

As Kurt laughed, Hildegard instantly closed the gap between them, aiming her fist directly at him.

She’d only spoken for so long because she was waiting for this moment. She could have attacked while they were talking, but she didn’t know what Kurt would have done then, so she’d waited for him to get cocky once he was sure he’d succeeded.

She could think about the seal later. It wasn’t worth prolonging this situation just to get more information. First, she had to eliminate the one who was certain to cause harm.

With that in mind, she clenched her fist with intent to kill.

Law of Harmony *Unarmed Combat (Special-Grade)* Combat Ready / Mental Stillness / Steadfast Resolve—

Just when Hildegard threw her punch, she found herself on the ground.

“Wha...?”

She didn’t know what had happened or why. The dull pain shooting through her body told her that she’d taken a hit...but that shouldn’t have been possible.

“Ha ha ha...! Awesome! Looks like not even a Special-Grader is a match for the Archdevil’s power!”

“You... You absorbed his power? Impossible...”

There were two reasons she didn’t think it was possible: the aforementioned risk from absorbing a god’s power, and the short time in which he’d done so.

The Archdevil’s power retained his will—his will to destroy mankind. It shouldn’t have been easy to absorb a force imbued with that will; anyone who tried was likely to be destroyed from the inside out. That was what made it tantamount to suicide.

Yet it had only been a few seconds since the seal had been broken. He shouldn’t have been able to absorb the Archdevil’s power *and* attack Hildegard in that time.

“Heh, you look pretty confused. Is it that surprising that I can absorb the Archdevil’s power? It did take me a while at first, and I felt like I was gonna die even from a little...but I got used to it after that, so of course I can absorb it just fine now.”

It wasn’t supposed to be as easy as Kurt made it sound. Hildegard honestly didn’t think she would be able to absorb even the amount of power leaking out of him right now. Maybe Kurt had been able to adapt to it because his personality was compatible with the Archdevil’s.

But Hildegard shook her head. It didn’t matter why. The important thing right now was that he’d absorbed the Archdevil’s power, and he certainly wasn’t going to use it for good considering what he’d done and how he was acting now. She had to stop him, so she forced herself to her feet.

“Whoa, I just hit you at full power and you’re standing up already? You’ve got guts... Nah, maybe I just can’t use this power right yet. I can tell I have a lot more I could be using. So I’m glad you stood up, actually. The best subjects to experiment on are the ones that struggle and scream.”

“That is some big talk considering who you are up against...”

“You’re blind if you seriously think that. No... There’s no way you can’t sense my power. You’re just too scared to admit it.”

“You little brat... You are nothing but another power addict.”

“Heh, you think so? Then come on, prove I’m nothing but an addict!”

Kurt vanished as soon as he finished talking. Not even Hildegard could make out his movements, and before she knew it, she was on the ground again.

But she’d predicted that. Rolling over based on nothing but a gut feeling, she heard something crunch on the ground next to her ear, but that was no problem.

She swiftly stood up and took a step. She didn’t see Kurt anymore, but that was fine. He could hide his body, but he couldn’t hide the power seeping from it.

She pivoted around on her forward foot and timed a punch into the seemingly empty air.

Law of Harmony *Unarmed Combat (Special-Grade)* Combat Ready / Mental Stillness: Dragon Palm.

“Guh...!”

She felt her fist make contact with his arm, but she was the one who got pushed back. She slammed into the wall, dark red droplets flying from her mouth.

“You couldn’t see me and you still tried to fight me? Yeah, you’ve got guts, all right. Doesn’t mean anything to me now, though. I’m just glad my arm isn’t broken.”

“Do not look down on... Ugh!”

“Hey, I’m not looking down on you, I’m just stating...facts!”

He punctuated the gap between his words with a punch to Hildegard’s stomach, sending her flying again. Tumbling hard enough to leave scrapes in the ground, she finally came to a stop in the middle of the open space. Pain shot through her whole body...but she tried to stand up nevertheless.

“Gah...!”

“Hey, now, you’re still trying to get up? I’m surprised you can even breathe.”

“You...bastard...”

She glared at him as he stepped on her torso, but he just smirked down at her, so she tensed her arm to crush that foot of his...

...before she realized she didn’t have enough strength left.

“Ha... You’ve got the spirit but not the strength. Well, I’m impressed you can even breathe after all those attacks, so that’s plenty.”

“Talk all that you want... I shall be sure to... Ah...!”

“You’ve got a lot of fight in you, huh? Maybe I’d change my tune if you begged for your life. It’s not like I have anything against you in particular. Sure, you attacked me, but I’d say we’re even. So? Wanna beg?”

“I told you...to not look down on me, you brat...!” Hildegard roared, but her body wouldn’t obey her.

Kurt stared down at her with a sadistic smirk. “Honestly, it’d be fun to keep beating you and see how you react, but I have other plans. If only that other guy hadn’t bitten the dust, I could’ve had my fun... Well, whatever. I can’t leave it all up to the other guy,” he muttered to himself, slowly raising his left arm as if flaunting it.

Hildegard could tell there was a powerful force in that arm, and not even she could withstand a hit from it. Kurt seemed to know that she knew that, and there was a sadistic, voracious gleam in his eye.

But that was all the more reason for Hildegard to glare back at him, showing that she refused to yield, even in death.

Kurt huffed in disappointment, narrowing his eyes as if to say he had no more use for her, before swinging his arm down—

“Hmm. It looks almost as if I’ve walked in on a child abuse incident. I suppose you two appear rather close in age, though, so perhaps I can’t look at it as such.”

“Huh?”

There was a momentary pause—less than a second, but just long enough that Hildegard registered what was happening. Then a light flashed in the corner of

her eye as if closing the gap in time.

Hildegard couldn’t look to see what it was, but she didn’t need to. She already knew what had happened.

And the result was obvious—Kurt’s left arm had been severed from his shoulder.

“Carelessness is the great enemy. You must exercise the greatest caution after any success. That can be said about anything and anyone. That said...stand back, scoundrel.”

“Guh?!”

Kurt instantly disappeared. Judging by the bang Hildegard heard a second later, he had probably been slammed into a wall.

But she wasn’t worried about Kurt anymore. She didn’t need to be.

As Hildegard watched the boy calmly walk over to her, a crooked smile came to her face.

“I’m sorry I was late. Did you wait long?”

Hildegard had heard those words before, so she knew exactly what to say. She couldn’t help but smile.

“No... I just arrived.”

“Is that so? That’s good to hear.”

So Soma said to her with a shrug.

22

“It is always the same with you... One would think you planned to show up at exactly this moment.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

Soma hadn’t actually planned it, of course. If anything, his timing was Hildegard’s fault.

“Why is it my fault...? I suppose I must admit that I have imagined being saved in a moment of need, but...”

“What are you talking about? I took this long because you took the teleporter and I had to make my way down here through my own efforts.”

“Well, it belongs to me, and I cannot reach this floor without... Wait, did you just say that you came here...through your own efforts?”

“Yes, why?”

He could have arrived in an instant with the teleportation tool, but unfortunately, Soma’s sword techniques couldn’t accomplish that much. He’d had to make his way down by cutting through space to descend ten floors at a time. It had taken a lot of focus, and since he’d had to do that ten times, it had taken him a while.

“You are truly unfathomable... In fact, I feel like there is no need for you to learn to use magic.”

“Hmm... Strangely, a lot of people tell me that, but magic and swordsmanship are completely different things, so I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I do not know what *you* are talking about.” Hildegard sighed wearily in response to what Soma had thought was a commonsense statement.

Soma thought that if anyone should be sighing, it was *him*, but he didn’t have time for that debate.

Without even looking, he slashed the thing flying at him from behind, and just afterward, he heard the voice.

“Heh, ha ha ha...! Man, I may have let my guard down, but I didn’t even know what hit me! And how’d you manage to respond to that sneak attack without even looking?”

Soma turned to look. *Something* was slowly walking toward him from the darkness—literally some *thing*, because while it had had a human form until a moment ago, it was struggling to maintain that form now. Soma’s intuition informed him that thing was no longer a person; its voice alone was that of one.

“So, I got one question for you.”

“What is it?”

“You don’t seem surprised. How much you got figured out?”

“That’s such an abstract question that I’m not sure what you’re referring to... I suppose I understand about as much as Hildegard does.”

The thing that had once been Kurt scoffed. “Tch... Looks like I really do suck at using my head. Whatever, though. I’m not gonna need to from now on!”

As it yelled, its silhouette became even more distorted. It looked like a jet black beast, its entire body veiled in darkness and its remaining hand taking on a clawlike shape. Its legs were similar; to be honest, Soma was thinking that it looked like it would have a hard time leading a normal life in that shape.

Its size had changed as well, after all; its height had doubled, but its arm had grown even more proportionally, to the point that it was nearly touching the ground. Its eyes had grown eerily large, and its mouth had taken on a beaklike form. Soma spotted what looked like fangs inside, and it didn’t look like they would be easy to eat with.

But eeriest of all were the things growing out of where its left arm had once been. What could only be described as tendrils of darkness dangled there, as if the darkness itself was filling in the gap.

Soma murmured to himself as he observed it. To be completely honest, he

didn’t understand why Kurt had transformed into this thing, since he’d only just arrived...but he could make a guess.

Based on the intense presence he felt in this room—probably that of the Archdevil’s power fragment—and the similar energy he sensed coming from Kurt, he could only come to one conclusion.

“I suppose I can assume this form came about when you absorbed a piece of the Archdevil’s power. But at the same time, it seems to be obeying your will, so you must have wanted this... I see... You have poor artistic taste, in that case.”

“Ha ha... That’s what you say after seeing this? Don’t you got anything else to add? I guess you must be too focused on acting tough right now... Can’t blame you!”

It was true that Soma didn’t want to look directly at it, so maybe he was acting tough in a sense. He genuinely meant what he’d said, however. He thought Kurt could have done better than this.

But it would be no use bringing that up. Kurt was now the very image of one drunk on power. Perhaps its consciousness was being influenced by its physical transformation; either way, it didn’t seem to want to stand around and talk for long.

“Ha... This is awesome, though! I can finally grasp all that excess power... So *this* is the Archdevil’s power! I can finally feel it for myself! For real, it’s awesome... I could do anything I want!”

“Hmm... So, just to make sure, you came here to take that for yourself, correct?”

“Yeah, what else? Didn’t think it’d go so well, though. I wasn’t sure what I was gonna do about the area bosses, but you killed them for me, right? That made it a lot easier. I guess I was the one who led you to do it, though.”

It probably meant that book. Considering that just one of the books about dungeons had been found under mysterious circumstances, there was nothing else it could mean.

However...

“I had an idea that that was the case.”

“Indeed,” Hildegard agreed. “We acted on that very assumption.”

“If you needed something from the dungeon, it would have been on the lowest floor. So we decided to let you go there rather than trying anything rash beforehand. Then we could deal with you here.”

They’d had to check on the seal regardless. If someone was planning something on top of that, then they could take care of it along the way.

“Heh... Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha...! Ha... Gotcha. So you had it all figured out. Just more proof I’m no good at using my head.”

There was a hint of lucidity there as Kurt said that with a laugh, but it only lasted for a moment. The thing’s face was instantly rage tinged again, and the darkness around it grew thicker as if in reaction.

“But you got one thing wrong... You didn’t expect enough from me and this power fragment!”

The force swelling from it certainly warranted that statement. Seeing Hildegard’s condition, Soma knew that this thing wasn’t an enemy he could afford to underestimate. The sensation on his skin told him it was more than just sheer power.

Nevertheless...

“Hmm... The Archdevil was the god of death and destruction, right?” Soma asked Hildegard.

“That is what I have heard. Specifically, he ruled over more forces than those two, but he displayed a preference for using those after falling to the dark side. Regardless, while it should not be possible to rule those forces using a power fragment...it may be able to use concepts that specialize in them.”

“So that’s what I’m sensing right now.”

“Precisely, and that is why I am in such a state. If it were nothing but strong, I could have put up more resistance... You do not seem to be wary of it, however.”

“That isn’t true. I’m not entirely disregarding it, at least. But I certainly believe

that I can handle it," Soma said with a shrug.

Just then, there was a loud boom, the sound of a powerful impact. Soma turned to look and saw that Kurt had punched the ground.

"Shut the hell up...!"

The look in its eyes said exactly what it was thinking: *Quit brushing me off already!*

But despite understanding that, Soma shrugged again, then met eyes with Hildegard and subtly nodded. Kurt was probably approaching his limit.

Soma wasn't brushing Kurt off in the slightest, in fact, and he wasn't letting his guard down either. This was the power of a god, albeit only a remnant of it—a god that sowed death and destruction. He couldn't let his guard down in the presence of an enemy like that, especially not when it had reduced Hildegard to this state, he thought as he glanced at her through narrowed eyes. This was no time to relax.

And that was exactly why he was provoking Kurt. A mere human couldn't use a former god's power except by forcing it; Kurt seemed to be using it at the moment, but he was almost certain to self-destruct sooner or later. However, Soma didn't know whether it would be sooner or later, so he couldn't be too cautious.

That was only if the enemy was composed, though. If they were power-drunk and enraged, Soma could handle them.

He got into stance with the sword in his right hand. "I can't afford to spend too much time here. I have to heal Hildegard, after all. Let's make this quick."

"You're gonna regret not taking me seriously...!" Kurt yelled, shaking in rage.

In response, Soma stepped forward, then rushed directly toward Kurt.

23

Hildegard still dreamed of the time she'd first seen Soma's soul. Soma never would have imagined it, but it was truly Hildegard's hope itself.

While Hildegard was a former dragon god, she hadn't always been one. Once upon a time, she'd been nothing but one of many dragons.

However, she may never have been a normal dragon, because she had been a dragon who represented harmony.

As the most powerful of all living beings, dragons were thought to bring harmony due to their overwhelming strength. Any creatures that were fighting among themselves would become equals in their weakness before a dragon. Whatever their reason for fighting had been, it would become meaningless when a dragon appeared.

Thus, harmony was part of the fantasy that dragons consisted of, and Hildegard had represented and exemplified that aspect in particular. When Hildegard made an appearance, all had been granted equality under the name of harmony.

She'd served as a mediator in a sense, including for her fellow dragons, and because dragons fundamentally obeyed those who were powerful, it followed that Hildegard had to be the strongest of all the dragons.

But Hildegard had gained nothing but boredom from those circumstances. Everything she did had been allowed under the name of harmony, no matter how absurd, and none would dare try to punish or criticize her, since she was the very strongest.

The gods alone could have gone against her, but most of them had avoided interfering with the world. They'd decided that as managers of the world, it was best not to influence it directly.

A few gods had continued to interfere with the world in order to make it a better place...but unfortunately for Hildegard, they had all been weaker than her. Yes, as the strongest of the dragons, her power had been greater than that

of some minor gods.

Perhaps because of that, it hadn't taken Hildegard long to reach godhood. What she'd done after that, though, was no different from what she'd done before. She had been the god of harmony, but the power to bring equality to all had only brought her further boredom.

Motivated by her pride as a dragon god, she'd nevertheless done the bare minimum for many years...decades, maybe even centuries. The world had changed, but she'd continued to do the same thing.

But just when she'd grown tired of her role and begun to consider stepping back and simply watching both the world and herself...she found Soma's soul.

She'd been idly looking on when its intense brilliance captivated her at first glance.

And from the bottom of her heart, she'd thought...

I want that.

That may have been the first time she'd ever had that feeling. She'd been given everything before she could even want for it, because she had the power to obtain anything.

As was a custom of dragons, she'd kept a hoard of gold and jewels...but in that moment, all of it transformed into junk in her eyes. Next to that soul, it looked like nothing but dull trash.

But at the same time, wanting something so badly filled her world with color. The radiance she saw was so wonderful, she felt as if maybe that was the moment she'd truly been born into the world.

She hesitated to reach for it, however. Partially because she was afraid she would break it if she touched it, but more because she could tell that its radiance wasn't fully developed. It would shine brighter the more it was refined.

But Hildegard didn't have the power to do that. She had more sheer power than she could ever want, but only the power to bring harmony, and harmony couldn't refine a soul. Though frustrated, all she could do was watch.

So nobody else could have understood how she felt when she found out that Soma, that very soul, was aiming for her—how desperately she awaited that day, how glad she was when he finally appeared before her...and what went through her mind when his radiance surpassed her wildest imagination and grown stronger than her own.

But she didn't need anyone else to understand. All she wanted was to hold on to that feeling and remain by Soma's side.

So she sighed as she took in the scene before her. Seeing this, she knew that she hadn't been mistaken about that radiance that she'd longed for after all.

"No way... I got a piece of the Archdevil's power...so how come you can push me back?!"

The voice was filled with anger, fear, and frustration as several flashes cut through the darkness enveloping it. As Kurt shouted, the sword slashes cut through the tendrils growing where his left arm had once been.

But that shouldn't have happened. Each one of those tendrils must have contained considerable power; it would have been hard for Hildegard to fight even one of them off.

Yet Soma cut through them like they were nothing, his slashes reaching Kurt's body itself, who screamed as the darkness, which should have been even thicker than the tendrils, was torn apart.

"Dammit... How... Why?! I thought I got the power to do anything!"

"All I can say is that I suppose it was nothing but a fragment in the end, then. And a fragment of power that doesn't even belong to you, at that."

"Quit screwing with me...!"

The cuts and severed tendrils regenerated as if responding to Kurt's yell. His body might already have transformed into the same thing as those tendrils; it was pure blackness, not blood, that flew from him when he was wounded. Most of his body must have degenerated into something less than human.

But Soma wasn't fazed facing an enemy like that. Even as the darkness surrounding Kurt intensified and several of those tendrils and clawlike arms

attacked him at once, he calmly intercepted them with flashes of his sword. Too fast for even Hildegard to see, the slashes severed each one in turn, leaving only remnants of the tendrils as their afterimages.

The slashes danced through the scattered pieces, but perhaps due to the stubbornness of the Archdevil's power, the tendrils regenerated where they were cut off. Soma persevered in cutting them away while they regrew just as fast.

Amid the dance of slashes and debris, Kurt and Soma's faces were directly opposite each other, as were their emotional states—Kurt simultaneously enraged and panicked, Soma calm to no end. The light and dark sides of the battle were apparent at that point.

At a glance, the match appeared even, but it was unmistakably not so. Kurt wasn't actually able to stop Soma's slashes. With each one, a wound was opened in his body, and it only didn't appear that way because they were regenerating each time. Kurt was just being one-sidedly pressured by Soma.

No matter how much Kurt's tendrils wriggled and swirled, no matter how much they increased in number and density, no matter how much he used his own body to attack, Soma was on top of it all. His overwhelming swordsmanship kept away anything Kurt could throw at him, and Kurt's body and mind were slowly but surely being chipped away.

It almost made Kurt look weak, but Hildegard had experienced for herself that that wasn't the case. He could have destroyed an entire nation as he was now, whether or not the Elite Seven were there.

"Or so I would have thought... Just how far shall you go?"

Hildegard's tone was weary, but the light in her eyes showed that she wasn't.

It was a light of envy and admiration—the look of someone witnessing something dazzling that they know they can't reach.

It was as if the radiance of Soma's soul had manifested in this scene.

"In terms of strength alone, you were far more powerful before..."

As she'd said previously, Soma hadn't reached his former strength yet.

But that was only speaking of strength. The radiance of his soul was much more intense now.

Although he'd already reached the pinnacle once, or perhaps because of that, his soul grew more radiant by the day. It was dazzling to Hildegard, and it made her happy to see.

Although she knew she could never reach it, it proved to her that this world wasn't a lost cause—that there were things that were far beyond even her.

"Well, perhaps he still leaves some to be desired... In the past, he would not have had to wait and see like this."

Soma wasn't going all out right now, even though he had the upper hand.

He wasn't holding back or failing to take Kurt seriously, though. Rather, he was exercising the utmost caution.

Kurt had only just obtained the Archdevil's power; Soma didn't know how much force he could use. Kurt probably didn't even know himself. He'd said before that he could finally grasp it, but he seemed to be getting accustomed to it with time, so he probably still didn't have a total grasp on it. If he could use more power than Soma, then Soma would have to think of another strategy, so he had to figure that out.

Of course, Soma could have simply taken Kurt down before he could get used to the power. Knowing Soma, he wouldn't have hesitated just because he knew Kurt. He was deliberately choosing not to end the fight now.

"He probably would, if it were not the Archdevil's power..."

The Archdevil primarily exercised power over death and destruction. His power was still deeply tinged with that will, and treating it carelessly could have resulted in disaster. It was possible that the power currently running rampant would suddenly swell in the moment Soma tried to shut it down, spreading death and destruction throughout the area. Even far underground as it was, that power could easily have destroyed an entire nation. Soma had to keep that in mind.

"But it seems we were worried for nothing. I believe we have seen the extent of its capability by now," Hildegard muttered, narrowing her emerald eyes.

She couldn’t follow the details of the fight, but she could judge Kurt’s current condition.

Just then, Soma’s movements changed, as if he’d heard what she’d said. He was done observing now.

As countless sword flashes cut off the tendrils, Soma stepped forward sharply. At the same time, he swung his arm out, putting a diagonal slash through Kurt’s body.

“Gah...! Did you just...?!”

“Sorry, but I think I’ve seen enough. It’s time to end this.”

“I’ll... I’ll show you...!”

The slashed body didn’t bleed; something jet-black emerged instead. But just as that blackness shot into the air, it rushed at Soma all at once. The tendrils also grew in number and momentum, and the claws were swinging...but none of that affected Soma. He didn’t stop at cutting away the blackness and tendrils but also severed Kurt’s remaining arm.



The slash continued forward, wide and deep, cutting through Kurt’s left leg and torso, leaving his body in pieces.

“Ugh... Bullshit...! I got all this power...at long last...but you just come in and...!”

“I understand wanting to seek power...but your methods were wrong. Borrowed power is only borrowed in the end. Any strength you gain from it is ultimately meaningless.”

“Shut the hell up...!”

As Kurt yelled, darkness flowed out from him until it nearly covered the entire area...but instantly, all of it vanished without a trace.

It hadn’t just been slashed away. It had disappeared as if nothing had been there in the first place. All that was left was a still-calm Soma and an astounded Kurt.

“I honestly thought the way you carried yourself wasn’t bad, so if only you’d kept up the work... It’s too bad. Well, either way, you deceived and hurt Lars and Hildegard...my friends. I have no intention of forgiving you after that.”

“Screw you...! I needed power... Power...!”

Kurt still wasn’t accepting it. He tried to move, to do something, but his efforts became meaningless in the next moment. Each of his four limbs was severed from his torso, and his torso itself was cut in half. It happened in an instant, too quickly for the darkness to pour out from him.

And then...

“It’s over.”

“Damn you...!”

There was one final flash, with which his head was chopped off. The scream faded away as his body was turned into countless remnants. No longer able to regenerate in that state, they lay scattered, never to move again.

Soma watched that process to its conclusion, then exhaled as if to signal the end of the battle.

24

Once it was all over, Hildegard couldn't help but let out a sigh. Because of that, she realized she'd actually been quite worried despite what she'd said. She smiled wryly.

She grimaced immediately afterward, though, as she became aware of the intense pain shooting through her body again and remembered that she needed Soma to heal her soon...then noticed that Soma was still on guard and straightened her face again. In fact, he seemed even tenser than when he'd been fighting Kurt.

"Soma? Is something wrong?"

"Hildegard, there was only one fragment of the Archdevil's power sealed here, right?"

"Yes, there was, but... Ah!"

She realized just then. Kurt had absorbed the power fragment...or so she'd thought, but it should have disappeared along with him, and yet...

"I can still sense the Archdevil's power...?!"

"It seems to have grown even stronger, in fact. That means..."

"The power fragment has not been destroyed... I understand. Kurt only absorbed a small piece of the fragment."

That made sense of a lot of things—how he'd been able to absorb it, and why he'd gained such a small amount of the Archdevil's power. If he had absorbed the entire fragment, his soul and body most likely would have blown up, unable to withstand the strain.

"I did think it seemed oddly weak... So he only absorbed a small piece of it. I most likely couldn't have won if he had absorbed all of it."

"Kurt could not have withstood it in that case. It seems we cannot relax yet, however. The fact that he was able to absorb even some means that the seal is certainly damaged, and this increasing sensation of power is not a good sign. I

shall check the seal...”

The second she tried to stand up, pain shot through her. It hurt even when she lay still, so naturally, it hurt even worse when she tried to move, but she gritted her teeth through the pain. She couldn’t let Soma see her looking pitiful any more than he already had.

But Soma seemed to see right through her. As he approached her, he sighed.

“Why are you carrying on like that... I suppose it’s my fault for being late to heal you, though.”

“Silence...! I have my pride!”

“Pride is important, but what meaningful pride is there in enduring pain to no end?”

Soma readied his sword. It didn’t look at all like he was about to heal her, but she knew what he was about to do, so she relaxed and waited.

A moment later, Soma’s sword pierced her body, but she felt no pain. In fact, it felt rather pleasant, and the pain began to subside.

“Ahh... Such bliss.”

“I hope you aren’t getting the wrong idea. I’m healing you right now, nothing more.”

“Of course I am not.”

She really wasn’t. In fact, it felt pleasant precisely because she knew what he was doing.

Secret Technique: Blade of Devotion.

It was a technique Soma used to heal injuries, and it was actually different from all of his other techniques. Others didn’t seem to realize that, since he could do things like cut through space; not even he realized. The difference, though, was that it hadn’t originally been a sword technique.

According to him, he’d gone through a phase in which he tried a lot of things in pursuit of mastering the sword and had emulated this technique with his

sword...but the original version hadn't been so easy. Hildegard could say that because she knew about its source: the power of compassion.

The god of compassion was an unusual god; they had hidden their godhood and traveled the world, healing those who needed it along the way, in the course of which they had come across Soma at some point. In other words, Soma was using his sword to emulate a divine power without realizing it. It was precisely because he could do things like that that he'd reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship in a human body.

Hildegard hadn't told Soma, and she didn't intend to. It would surely cause issues down the line if he knew that he could emulate divine powers.

Emulating divine powers meant transgressing on divine territory. She didn't think Soma would use them for evil, but there was only one god left in this world, so it wouldn't lead to anything good, and Soma had a tendency to get involved in complicated situations. Even if he had still been on the path of the sword, he would have had no need for powers like that, which was why Hildegard wasn't going to tell him.

Regardless, that meant that this technique of Soma's came from feelings of benevolence. Knowing that she was receiving compassion was a pleasant feeling, and it was natural that she would yield herself to it.

But that good fortune wouldn't last long; that moment would be over once the healing process was complete. While she was reluctant to part with it, there was something else she had to prioritize right now.

As soon as he pulled the sword out of her, she stood up.

"I must go check the seal now."

"Right, that should come before anything else we do. I don't know enough about the seal, so I'm counting on you."

"You are in good hands."

She went over to the device and squinted. It looked like it should still be in working order, but...

As an immense amount of information flooded her vision, she focused on the parts she needed...and once she understood the current situation, she let out a sigh.

“I take it the seal isn’t looking good.”

“To be honest, it is almost as bad as it could get. The seal is still present, but it is nearly meaningless now. It is approaching maximum damage and shall soon burst.”

“Can we reseal it?”

“Perhaps if I had my previous power, but it is beyond my help now. We could not repair the seal, even with Sylvia’s blood. Furthermore, because the circumstances differ from those of the original sealing, when the seal breaks, the power shall not simply be there. It has been stimulated by Kurt.”

“That sounds like bad news.”

“It certainly does. When the seal breaks, the power shall surge out all at once, becoming a pure destructive force and spreading death and destruction throughout the area.”

That was no pessimistic prediction but what she was almost certain would happen based on the information at hand. When Kurt had taken out a small piece of the power, it had awakened. After that, when the seal broke, the power would try to fulfill its true nature as a force. Since it would be pure force, it wouldn’t be actively malicious, but it was highly likely to spread destruction.

“And the fact that the seal is still intact makes this even worse.”

“Why is that?”

“It is trying to hold in the power, though it is soon to fail. There shall be a rebound effect when it breaks, which shall worsen the destruction. It could even blow the capital away.”

That was an optimistic prediction, in fact. It would almost definitely blow the capital away, if not completely annihilate it.

Soma’s expression became even more severe now that he understood the

gravity of the situation.

“We should act now...but I imagine it’s too late.”

“Indeed. I do not know how far we should evacuate. It would be even less effective to try to shield everyone from it. If we enlisted powerful mages such as Sophia, Aina, and Helen, they would only be blasted away.”

“Hmm... How long do we have until it goes critical?”

“We have an hour at best. Ah, and because it shall be released as pure force, it shall eliminate the Archdevil’s power once and for all. That is no consolation to us, however.”

Those who weren’t involved would be glad, but that would mean nothing to the ones who were destroyed then. The two of them might be able to save a few lives if they tried...but that would be a lot to ask for. Hildegard had to take responsibility for this, so she couldn’t just run away, but maybe she could save Soma—

“I suppose I have no choice,” Soma said with a sigh.

“Soma?”

She lifted her head in response to Soma’s resigned murmur. When she turned to look at him, she saw a defeated smile on his face. He met her eyes and gave her a shrug.

“Sorry, but I’m leaving what comes next up to you.”

“You cannot...”

Instantly grasping what he was about to do, she glared at him, but he just shrugged again like it was nothing.

“I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I don’t intend to die. But I have an idea of what will happen. Thus, I’m leaving it up to you so that things will be okay no matter what.”

“There is no reason it has to be you.”

“I’m at least half responsible, I think. If there were someone else who could do it, I would gladly trace places, but there isn’t, unfortunately.”

“But...”

“Hildegard.”

Soma looked directly into her eyes as he said her name. It wasn’t a forceful gaze, but it was a look of resolve, that of someone who had determined what they must do.

It was the radiance Hildegard had yearned for.

There was only one thing she could do now.

Once again, she let out a resigned sigh.

“I understand. I refuse to clean up your messes for you, however. So make sure you come back and explain yourself...to me too, of course.”

“I don’t know if I can promise...but I’ll do my best,” Soma replied in a joking tone.

Hildegard couldn’t bear to look him in the eye. She knew that if she did, she would say something she shouldn’t, which would trouble Soma, and that wasn’t what she wanted.

So she turned her back to him.

“Goodbye, then...”

“Until we meet again.”

Without knowing what look was on his face in that final moment, Hildegard left Soma behind in the dungeon.

†

Once he sensed that there was nobody behind him anymore, Soma let out a breath.

To be honest, he wondered if this would turn out all right. He’d been honest with Hildegard; he didn’t intend to die. He wouldn’t know what would happen until he tried, however.

But it wouldn’t change anything to put it off. He’d already decided what he would do.

So...

“All that’s left is to do it.”

He eyed the device before him. He didn’t know where exactly the power was stored inside, but it must have been somewhere in there. Even now, he sensed it, a bona fide divine power—the power of death and destruction. Not even he could escape unscathed after making direct contact with it.

Once more, he wondered how it would turn out...but his decision didn’t change.

“Now, then...” he muttered, as if to psych himself up.

Then he lifted his sword high above his head. He took a deep breath, then exhaled.

There was nothing else to think about. He just had one thing to do.

Everything that was to come, everything that crossed his mind, he had to put aside...

“We’ll see what comes of this.”

Yet he couldn’t help but mutter one last thing before he brought his arm down.

And then...

Law of the Sword *God-Killer* Dragon-Killer *Draconic Blessing* Sword of Pandemonium / Steadfast Resolve *Mental Stillness* Limit Break / Overdrive: Final Gambit...

25

On the hundredth floor of the Royal Academy dungeon, a young girl entered the deepest area and furrowed her brow at what she saw there.

The first thing she noticed was the large hole at her feet. It was around ten meters deep; the bottom was barely visible, and it would probably be possible to climb out, but nobody would want to fall inside it.

“Well, that’s probably partly because of this aura of death! I’m surprised it’s still like this after a whole day.”

She meant that in two ways: it was surprising that the aura of death hadn’t weakened and that the hole hadn’t closed up. Maybe the sense of death had been even stronger before, but that would have been surprising in itself. Just how strong had it been? It was no wonder the being responsible had been called the Archdevil if just a fragment of his power could cause this.

The labyrinth itself was supposed to be indestructible, after all. Its walls, floors, and ceilings couldn’t be cracked with any amount of power. That was for the simple reason that it was protected by a conceptual force; its structure had been granted the concept of indestructibility itself, and, being an intangible concept, it couldn’t be damaged by physical means.

Consequently, dungeon divers had no choice but to follow the directions. A Special-Grade force could potentially chip the walls, but that would ultimately have been meaningless, since the labyrinth had been granted regeneration as well as indestructibility. The result was that it would return to its original form no matter how much it was damaged or destroyed.

That was why this hole was so surprising. The regeneration process only took seconds, so it should have closed by now.

“I guess that’s just how powerful the Archdevil was! It makes sense, since he was one of only two gods who ruled this world... Yeah, no, I know that, but what harm does it do? It was barely even a compliment!”

The girl pouted to herself and began to walk around the edge of the hole. It

was enormous, nearly as big as the space that contained it. There were several holes in the walls as well, and there would have been holes in the ceiling if it had been lower. She didn't know whether or not it was a good thing that the ceiling was so high.

The center of the explosion seemed to have been at the far end of the space; the hole grew bigger as it went on. It seemed rather shallow near the entrance, but it didn't take long before the bottom faded from view.

"Blegh, the sense of death is even stronger now. It wouldn't be pretty to fall into this. I don't even know how deep it goes, after all... And the headmaster examined all of this? I might have to respect her for that."

She made a face but continued to walk until she reached the other end. She couldn't see the bottom, and she had no idea what was down there.

"I can't tell what's down there... You don't expect me to go down and look, do you? Good... I wasn't sure what I would do if you asked me to... I mean, I'm curious too, but other people already looked, and I doubt they missed anything!"

She looked away from the hole with a newfound determination and began to go back the way she came...but what was the meaning of the small exhale she let out?

"You're supposed to let things like that slide, you know? Anyway, we still don't know why I awakened... It's been so long that it can't have been because of the Archdevil. As long as it's not an omen of bad things to come, I guess... Well, you're right about that..."

She didn't stop moving as she spoke. Regardless of what she knew or didn't know, she would do the same thing, although she couldn't know yet whether it would fulfill her intended role.

"Brother... You're alive, right?"

The wishful whisper spilled from her lips as if to express the uncertainty in her heart, only to dissolve into the darkness.

†

The area was lush and green, far from gloomy; there was even an invigorating feeling to it.

It didn't seem that way, though, because of the people who were there. No hint of tenderness was apparent between the man and woman, only a sense of apprehension.

"So this is true?"

"I went to a lot of trouble to get this information, and now you're questioning it? I'm not gonna let that slide, mister."

The man gave the woman a stern look as he questioned her, and she responded with a similar gaze. He was rather imposing, which was amplified by his handsome features, but she was unfazed. That remained unchanged even when his gaze sharpened further at her words.

He glared at her for a moment, then turned away and huffed as if he was out of patience. "Hmph... That attitude is the reason I can't trust you."

"Not my problem. I mean, how about your attitude, if you can't trust a business partner?"

"Hmph... Well, fine. So I take it that you're telling the truth?"

"My answer isn't gonna change. And it's not like I'd know, anyway. I just brought it."

He huffed for a third time as if to say he knew what she said was true, then turned his gaze to the thing she'd brought—the parchment with the information he'd wanted. It seemed quite aged...but considering what he wanted, that was more like it.

Once he reread the paper, though, he looked back toward the woman, suppressing the urge to crush it in his hand.

"With all due respect, that look isn't gonna change the truth."

"Quiet. Well...I suppose I can't find out whether this is correct by asking you. Is this truly written about the forest god, however? I cannot believe this...!"

"Again, not my problem."

“Wha... You’re the one who brought this here!”

“Sure, but you elves are the only ones who say there’s any such thing as a forest god. If I don’t even think such a thing exists, how should I know what’s true about it?”

“Did you come here to insult us?!”

“Hey, I’m just telling it how it is. There are only two gods in this world: the Archdevil and the Goddess. You’re the only people who say there’s a god of the forest.”

“Well...!”

He was at a loss for words because he knew she was right; at the very least, it was an undeniable fact that nobody but the elves considered the forest god to be a god.

However...

“The forest god is real...! That is why I’m looking for a way to put it back to sleep now that it is about to awaken!”

“I mean, I’m not saying it doesn’t exist. I know there’s something you *call* a forest god. The question is whether that’s actually a god.”

“How disrespectful can you be?!”

“Why should I be respectful? I mean, you guys are disrespecting it yourselves. If you want to put it to sleep, you’re basically trying to seal it away, right? Even though you call it a god? Are you sure you actually believe that?”

“You...!”

“Sorry, sir, I went too far there.”

He silently clenched a fist, holding back the urge to punch her. If he did, that would be tantamount to admitting she was right...which he didn’t want to do even if she really was.

“Well, anyway, it says right there how to seal this ‘forest god’ away. You have to sacrifice one of your own, basically.”

“But...!”

“Why so unwilling? I figured you planned that from the beginning. That’s kind of a specialty with you elves, after all. That’s how you sealed the Archdragon away all those years ago.”

“How do you know about that?!”

It was supposed to be a secret among his clan; only a small portion of the method had been shared with outsiders. And only a descendant of someone involved could possibly know about it...

“Oh, was that supposed to be a secret? Didn’t do a very good job of keeping it, huh?”

“Just answer me!”

“Sorry, but I have my own secrets to keep.”

“Do you think I can just accept—”

“Well, that was my mistake, though. I’ll tell you one useful thing to make up for it.”

“What is it?”

His anger subsided instantly when she said she’d tell him something useful. Whenever she said that, it meant bad news, but it would also be very important information...so he looked at her intently, albeit skeptically.

“All right... I can pretend you never said that, depending on what you say next.”

“That works for me, since I know you won’t be able to ignore this.”

“Just tell me what it is.”

“Well...it’s about the witch you guys are sheltering.”

“Wha...?!”

His eyes widened in disbelief. This shock was incomparably greater than the previous one.

That was something that absolutely nobody else should have known. Others had spread rumors about it out of ill will, but she had just stated it with conviction.

“It’d be a big issue if it got out that you’re sheltering an enemy of the world, right?”

“You...”

His hand reflexively went to his hip and gripped the knife there. It was clear what that meant.

Obeying the violent urge that arose, he went to thrust his arm out—

“I get why you’re reacting that way, but maybe you should think a little first. I couldn’t reveal that if it weren’t pretty widely known, so killing me isn’t going to help. It’d only confirm that it’s true.”

“The same would be true if I let you go.”

“Well, I’d be willing to spread some false info for you. It’d be bad for business to let you get destroyed. Buying time is all I can do...but that should be enough for you, right? I mean, you just happen to need a sacrifice pretty soon, and a witch would be perfect for that. Two birds, one stone.”

“Quiet.”

“I get wanting to keep a witch around, though. It’s useful, especially if something were to happen to you guys. But you’d need another sacrifice in that case. And royalty couldn’t exactly volunteer to go, could they? Then the seal would get weaker and you’d need sacrifices on a regular basis... Is that what you want? Doesn’t seem like a good choice for the ruler of a clan to make.”

“Quiet...”

“I think you should fix the issue in front of you instead of preparing for some unknown future disaster. You don’t know if you can keep it totally hidden, after all. It could lead to your downfall. It seems obvious to me what you should put first: all of your lives, or—”

“Quiet!”

As he shouted, he thrust the knife at her. The cutting edge approached her neck; it would slice into her throat with only a little additional force.

But she acted as if she didn’t care. Not trying to dodge, not even moving, she simply stared him down.

“I think everyone would prefer a meaningful death to a meaningless one. You, and you alone, have the right and the duty to make that choice.”

It was as if she was saying she didn’t care if he killed her. He drew back slightly under the pressure of such madness.

“But that’s none of my business, I guess. My mistake bringing it up. Can we call it even?”

“Hmph...”

He hesitated for a moment as he looked back at her, then withdrew his knife and put it away. Then he turned his back on her and began to walk.

“Oh, you’re done already? What’s the plan?”

“I paid my dues and got what I needed. We have no more business with each other, and I have no obligation to tell you what I’ll do.”

“That’s true... I’ll be seeing you, then.”

He left without replying to her. She silently watched him go, then shrugged to herself once he was out of sight.

“Wow, I just said some stuff I don’t believe in spite of myself... Who am I to say what’s meaningful or not? They’re beyond saving, anyway. So, a witch’s curse, or a demigod who’s been cultivating power... Which one will come out on top? Not that it matters to me.”

The result would be the same either way. Nothing would change about the wider world. Someone somewhere would die, and someone else would remain alive in their place; that was all.

“So we couldn’t summon the Dark Lord, we revived the Archdragon only to have it defeated immediately, and it seems like he failed to get the power fragment... And the same guy foiled our plans all three times. It’d almost be funny if it weren’t such a pain. Well, I figure we’re all set this time...but we’ll just have to see.”

And yet the woman who looked like a girl—or the girl who looked like a woman—laughed.

She laughed at the world. At everyone who lived in it.

And most of all, at herself.

“Now, where is the death that will befall me? It came to those three, so my turn should be soon. Well, I guess I’ll do what I can in the meantime.”

So she pridefully declared as she looked up to the sky through eyes narrowed in frustration, contorting her mouth in a snide laugh.

26

“Mmgh... I am out of motivation...”

Hildegard muttered to herself as she slumped listlessly on her office desk. The sight was far from dignified, but she rationalized it by telling herself that she had no choice right now and slumped further.

She had a pile of documents that only she could take care of, but unfortunately, she had no desire to look at them right now. She couldn’t possibly muster it in these circumstances.

Although she knew she would be in hot water in a week or so, once they had piled up, she couldn’t do what she couldn’t do.

“If only I knew where he was...”

But she didn’t know, so she couldn’t do anything. If she had, she would have abandoned her work to go to him.

It had already been a week since that day...the day Hildegard had left Soma behind, after which he had gone missing.

She had gone back to the floor immediately, sensing that the power fragment had been destroyed. When she got there, however, all she saw was that the space had completely changed. No matter where she looked, she found no trace of Soma.

Well, there may have been one trace—she’d found a slight distortion of space at the far end, where the center of the explosion had been. She didn’t know if Soma had made it or if it had occurred as a result of the explosion, but Soma had probably been transported somewhere through that distortion—in other words, he was alive somewhere.

That wasn’t her only basis for believing so, of course; if anything, she had used that evidence as a basis to connect the current situation to Soma’s present state. She could sense his existence; even if she didn’t know where he was, she knew he was alive. It wasn’t because she was a former dragon god that she could do that but because she’d been the one to reincarnate him into this

world. As a result, she'd gained a connection to him as well as a related Skill, so she was able to tell whether or not he existed in this world.

So she knew he was alive, at least. That was one thing she didn't have to worry about.

"If only I had my past body, I could have gone to find him easily... But then I would not be able to procreate with him, so it would defeat the purpose... Ugh..."

But that was one thing, and her work was another. It seemed it would take some time before she regained her productivity.

†

In a monochrome white room, a boy looked up at the ceiling. That, too, was white; he didn't know why that was, but it was apparently one of the things that carried over from the other world.

He thrust his hand toward the ceiling and tightened a fist as if to grasp something there.

"Tch... Should've at least let me say thanks."

The feeling of closing his fist was as he remembered it. He opened his hand and brought it to his face—another familiar sensation.

It was almost as if that day had been a dream...but he knew better than anyone that it hadn't been. He could never forget that pain and fear.

But all of it was gone without a trace now. It had been funny, in a sense, to see the fuss immediately afterward.

"Man, the stuff you do is way more magiclike than my actual magic."

What was really funny was how serious the other boy was about wanting to use magic despite that, he thought to himself as he took his other hand and touched his face and hand with it—the very face the doctor had said would never be the same again, even with the use of magic. And yet a swordsman of all people had fixed it... It was ridiculous.

The most ridiculous thing, though, was that in his pursuit of power, he'd thrown everything else away.

“You better get back here. I don’t wanna owe you forever. I’m gonna pay you back, just wait.”

As Lars muttered to himself, he looked out of the ward window.

†

Sylvia looked to the right and the left of where she was sitting and let out a sigh.

She was in the front row of a sorcery lecture. It had never been very well attended, but now she was the only one there.

Helen was sitting behind her, but she had a mournful face, and Sylvia wasn’t doing much better. She couldn’t help letting out a sigh or two at a time like this.

Things had been this way for some time. Even the teacher, Carine, seemed lonely.

It had only been a week, but the atmosphere of the sorcery department had changed considerably. While it had been somewhat somber before, there had also been a sense of quiet assurance—a feeling that while things were uncertain, they would turn out okay in the end.

But the boy responsible for that wasn’t here anymore.

As she thought about that, she let out another sigh, replaying the events of that fateful day in her mind.

She’d decided that acting on her own would only make things worse and brought the letter to the headmaster. Then the headmaster had taken her blood for reasons she didn’t understand and told her that Maria was probably trapped somewhere people were unlikely to check...and after some searching, Sylvia had found Maria.

But that problem had just been replaced with this one. She’d thought she was working within her limits...but she wondered if there’d been anything more she could do.

At that thought, feelings of guilt and powerlessness welled up inside her...but she faced them directly and lifted her head.

She’d already had this dialogue with herself, after she’d failed and been

rescued by Soma. She was done feeling bad over her powerlessness. It was true that she hadn't been good enough, but ruminating on it wouldn't accomplish anything. And since she knew that, she didn't have time to be down.

"All right," she muttered, turning her attention to the lecture.

If something happened again someday, she would make sure not to end up with any regrets.

And in order to do that, she would do her best at what she could do right now.

†

Aina gazed blankly at the scene before her.



While it shifted from time to time, it was mostly a repetition of the same things—familiar sounds and sights.

And as she stood and watched them go by...

“Aina?”

She turned to look when she heard the familiar voice. A blonde girl she knew well—Sierra—was giving her a look as if asking what she was doing.

“I’m not doing anything in particular. If I had to say, I guess I just wanted a change of pace.”

“In the swordsmanship department?”

“Well, if I were in the sorcery department, I wouldn’t be able to get him off my mind.”

“But that’s the same here.”

“Yeah... It is.”

When she attended sorcery class, she couldn’t help but remember Soma, who always sat in the front row. But when she saw a sword, that, too, always reminded her of him. This wasn’t actually a change of pace at all.

“Well, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine sooner or later.”

She found it hard to work up the motivation to do things right now, but the time would surely come when she could shake off this emptiness she felt in her chest.

That didn’t mean she would forget about Soma. No, if anything, this was an opportunity—now that he wasn’t around, she could work on herself with Soma unaware. Then she’d get to see him completely amazed. Just the thought filled her with anticipation.

But right now...she couldn’t muster the willpower to take action.

So she hoped, just for a little bit, she could be allowed to store up her energy somewhere removed from Soma...but not too far.

“Well, we have a break coming up. I’ll figure something out then at the latest.”

“Mm-hmm...”

The Royal Academy had month-long breaks in spring and summer. The

students were truly free then; they could go out and even stay out overnight without getting permission. They had to submit notices if they would be staying away overnight, but they were allowed to as long as they did that. Many students used those breaks to visit home.

“Speaking of which, what are you doing over break, Sierra? I had some ideas...but it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to act on most of them.”

“I might go home.”

“Home... You mean that one town?”

The first place that came to mind for Aina was Jaster, the town where she’d met Sierra.

Sierra shook her head. “The forest.”

“Wait, you mean the place you grew up?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Aina was surprised when Sierra nodded because she’d said she wouldn’t return until she could use magic. Sierra was rather stubborn, so Aina hadn’t thought she would go back on her word.

“What happened made me think. I want to reconsider some things.”

“Oh, okay...”

Hearing that made Aina realize that she wasn’t the only one who was reeling...in fact, Sierra may have been in even greater shock.

Both of them were still in shock that Soma had gone missing, but, even more than that, in shock that they’d been completely left behind. They hadn’t heard a word from him.

They’d known what he was planning but thought he would tell them about it when the time came, so they hadn’t asked...but he’d just disappeared. He hadn’t said anything, not even in the end.

It was probably for their own sakes. They knew that. But it didn’t mean they were happy about him making that choice for them.

And Sierra, who was especially skilled, was probably even more shocked than

Aina.

“And I’m going to train. I won’t let him leave me behind again.”

“Got it...”

Aina had had the right idea, apparently. Although Sierra’s face was as expressionless as always, determination burned in her eyes.

Sierra’s goal was to learn magic, but at the same time, she was proud of the swordsmanship that she’d developed. Both were important parts of her.

“That reminds me... I wonder what our instructor who’s also proud of her skill with a sword is up to?”

“Not sure...”

Aina was talking about Lina, of course. She was supposed to be teaching swordsmanship class, but she wasn’t there right now. Recently, she’d been disappearing from time to time, which might have been a problem if her classes hadn’t mostly been self-study anyway. The swordsmanship students were ambitious as well, so they were working hard, as if they wanted to make her regret leaving them.

“Well, I’m sure she has a lot to think about too.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Camilla had seemed rather unconcerned when she’d heard that Soma was missing, but Aina couldn’t reach that state of mind easily, even though she agreed that there was no way he was dead.

“I really wonder what he’s up to right now...”

“Mm-hmm...”

The two girls looked up at the sky almost simultaneously, thinking the same thing.

“I can’t believe he went and made us worry like this on top of all the ridiculous stuff he’s done... Come back soon, you dummy.”

Aina muttered in a subtly wavering voice.

†

A girl walked through a verdant area. With no sign of any creature other than herself, it was peaceful as usual, though also vaguely eerie.

However, that impression may have been due to the name that people had given that place: the Witch’s Woods.

But the girl walked swiftly and decisively. These woods were as familiar to her as a backyard; she had no reason to be afraid anymore.

Just then, however, she paused. She’d noticed a disturbance. Casting a curious gaze around but not grasping what it was, she knit her neat eyebrows.

Deciding it was probably in her head, she resumed walking...but in the next moment, she noticed the thing at her feet.

She reflexively leapt back from it...and finally figured out what it was.

If her eyes or mind weren’t deceiving her...

“A person? And a young boy at that... But why here?”

The witch’s pure white hair swayed as her red eyes opened wide in surprise at the sight of the unexpected visitor.

Afterword

Sorry for making you wait a whole year after leaving the plot unfinished last volume. I made good use of that time, though...or so I would like to think. I can definitely say that I added a lot of original content, so I hope you enjoyed it.

Well, this volume also ends on a sort of cliffhanger...but the main plot is resolved, so it's not as bad as last time...I think.

I also don't think it will take as much time before the next volume as it did this time, so I hope you don't mind the brief wait. I plan to write plenty of original content for it, although not as much as this time.

Incidentally, the amount I added in this volume doesn't leave me with much room to write the afterword, but I want to make sure to include the marketing pitch.

With that said, the manga adaptation is as amazing as ever. The second volume is on sale now, and I think the third volume should be released any day now, so I hope anyone who hasn't read it yet gives it a try. I'm going to do my best on the novel version so the manga doesn't outshine it.

Lastly, my thanks.

To my editor I., and to K., who joined the team this volume, thank you for all your hard work.

To necömi, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to create such wonderful illustrations.

Thank you again to everyone involved in the proofreading, sales, design, and other aspects of the publication for your help and support.

And most of all, thank you to everyone who picked up and purchased this book. I'm deeply grateful to you.

With that, may we meet again in Volume 5.