
Udon Kamono
Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party
5
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The Journey From Here Fame, fortune, magic, wisdom... Endless treasure and bounty lay within the otherworldly depths of the land—depths yet to be conquered that beckon people with the intangible power of curiosity. Be it in the name of hopes and dreams or greed and self-interest, adventurers from all walks of life risked everything to challenge the dungeons.

One of many daring groups was the Arrivers, my former party who once held the remarkable claim of being the closest to actually clearing a dungeon. With five top-tier adventurers in their respective fields and me, our navigator with Mapping, we conquered one impenetrable floor after another. We soon broke the record for furthest floor reached in the Dungeon of Puriff... yet our smooth sailing was doomed to come to an abrupt end.

Jin, the backbone of the party, lost his life in a tragic turn of events on floor 21. Our party leader and our team mage left town afterward, halving our numbers. The Arrivers thus promptly fell apart. Even I gave up on my dream of vanquishing the dungeon. I decided to abandon adventuring altogether and left town with Roslia, our paladin, to set out for a peaceful, ordinary life in the capital.

But as the weeks passed, I found myself feeling restless. I slowly came to realize that I wanted it all back. I wanted a second chance at my glory days with the Arrivers. As it turns out, there are just some fires you can’t extinguish, no matter how hard you try to put them out.

So, it had now been over half a year since the Arrivers disbanded, and I’d finally resolved to get our former party back together again. With that goal in mind, I’d boarded a horse drawn carriage to go find everyone, but...

At present, the carriage ride was something of a precarious situation.

“Look! There’s a flock of swans over that lake!” Roslia exclaimed, pressing up against me as she eagerly pointed out the window.

Roslia was the angel who’d stuck by my side when I was in the throes of grief after Jin’s death. She’d been with me in the capital all this time, and she’d even agreed to play along with my selfish whims and get back into adventuring with me. And while her excessive physicality wasn’t anything new, she was pushing the limits even further than usual today.

“Do you think those two are a couple?” someone whispered. “They look awfully close, don’t they?”

Roslia clung to my arm, sliding from her seat over into mine. She was so close that her breath tickled my ear. I normally would’ve been flustered by her suggestive sighs and the soft sensation against my arm, but right now my heart was racing for a different reason.

“Ugh, gross. I can’t believe I have to stare at your stupid-looking faces the whole ride,” groaned the girl sitting directly across from us in abject disgust.

Her half-elven ears poked out from her silky, golden hair. This was Miya Line, my childhood friend who I’d grown up with in the small village of Changs. We’d both left town at fifteen to become adventurers together, but shortly parted ways after a fight and only recently reunited.

We’d happened to cross paths by chance at the adventurers guild in the capital. One thing led to another, and we ended up working together for a time. That dredged up the bad blood between us but, through a long series of events, allowed us to finally settle our differences.

Afterward, Miya decided to quit her party, the Raiders, and try taking on the dungeon instead. Not with us, though. In fact, she’d declared quite clearly that she would make it entirely on her own. Thanks to a strange twist of fate, however, we’d ended up sharing a carriage. I guess it wasn’t all that farfetched considering our destinations were the same, but still...

“Who looks stupid here? *You’re* the one who swore you’d have conquered the dungeon by the next time we saw each other.”

“Urk!”

“Talk about lame. You even said you were leaving, yet you’re still sitting here on the same carriage with us.”

“Th-That’s because I already paid for the ticket...”

“Oh, I know the reason. It must be because you still really want to be with Note, despite all that big talk about how much you hate him, right?”

“As if! I can’t stand him! I don’t want to talk to him! I don’t want to see him! I don’t even want to breathe the same air as him!”

“You don’t have to go that far...” I said, wincing a little.

I was just an innocent bystander taking stray fire here. I mean, I knew Miya hated me... but she didn’t have to put it like *that*. Wasn’t it kinda harsh to say you didn’t even want to breathe the same air as someone?

“I said that without thinking just now... I don’t actually hate you that much, Note! I’m fine breathing the same air, see?!” she declared, vigorously inhaling and exhaling.

“Thanks, but that doesn’t really make me feel any better...”

“I want to talk to you too! So let’s talk about something right now! Something fun!”

“See? You *do* really want to be with Note after all. That’s why you booked the same carriage, isn’t it?” Roslia interjected.

“It is not! I don’t want to be with him! I hate him!”

“Yeah, of course you do...” I sighed.

“W-Wait, no! I didn’t mean to say that...”

“Oh, so you don’t really hate him?”

“No, I do!”

“See? Told you...”

“That’s not— Argh! What am I supposed to do?!” Miya groaned, ruffling her own hair. “I can’t say I like him, and I can’t say I hate him. I’m totally backed into

a corner!”

“Why don’t you just say what you really think, then?” Roslia asked with a cold look.

“What I really think? Right...” Miya muttered to herself.

She then leaned forward, staring at me intently. I could see my face reflected clearly in her emerald eyes. I started to squirm a little under her intense gaze.



“You don’t have to stare so close,” I said to fill the awkward silence.

“I’m not staring!” she immediately snapped, turning away in a huff. I could see her pointy ears faintly turning red.

“No, you were definitely staring...”

“Was not! Getting a little full of ourselves, aren’t we?” Miya tapped her finger against the windowsill in irritation for a moment, then barked, “I’ve decided I hate you after all! You’re the worst!”

“There you have it, Note,” Roslia said definitively.

“Thanks... I already knew that.”

But still, being told so bluntly to my face was kind of upsetting. I couldn’t help the way my shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Miya waved her hands and declared in a fluster, “N-No, I didn’t mean it! It just came right out—”

“If it comes out that naturally, doesn’t that mean it’s the truth?” Roslia put forward.

“I think it does, yeah...” I replied.

“No! Why do you have to be this way, Roslia?” Miya argued. “Are you trying to make it seem like I hate Note on purpose?”

“Hmm? Whatever are you talking about?” she asked with a sly smile.

Seeing that, Miya shouted, “I hate you too, Roslia!”

“Did you hear that, Note? She said ‘too’ just now, which means—”

“Shut up! Be quiet already!”

“What? You were the one who started talking to us first.”

“Skree!”

“Wow, I’ve never actually heard anyone screech in anger before. She’s kind of like a monkey.”

“Note, I’m begging you! Please shut Roslia up!”

As I watched the commotion unfold in the carriage, I started to get the feeling our journey to gather the other Arrivers would be a tumultuous one.

“So, what’s the game plan from here?” Roslia asked. “You haven’t shared any of the details with me, you know.”

“Wait, really?”

She was right. I’d decided that we’d go collect the rest of the party, but I had yet to fill her in on anything more than that.

“Sorry, sorry,” I apologized. “I forgot I hadn’t explained.”

“You have a bad habit of getting lost in your own thoughts without consulting anyone.”

“Guilty as charged...”

The plethora of evidence against me made me lower my head in shame. Roslia had given me a similar admonishment when I’d confessed that I wanted to get back into adventuring—the memory was still fresh in my mind.

“Haha! Note’s getting scolded!” Miya butted in.

“Could the outsider mind her own business?” I snapped.

“The outsider?! That’s so mean!”

What was she so surprised for? *She* was the one who’d turned *me* down when I invited her to come dungeon diving with us. Roslia and I had party business to discuss, so Miya really had made herself the outsider here.

“I see you’ve learned to speak up for yourself,” Roslia remarked.

“She was just being so childish—”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m saying you never joked around with her like that before.”

When I stopped to think about it... I realized Roslia might be right. Back when Miya and I lived in Changs, I always did everything I could to please her. And when we reunited in the capital, I tread lightly so as not to unwittingly step on any landmines. The fact we could trade blows now was proof that our warped relationship had evolved.

“I am not childish...” Miya whined, curling up into a sad ball in her seat.

I ignored her, turning back to Roslia and the topic at hand.

“So, you were asking about the party retrieval plan, right?”

“Yeah. Who are we going for first?”

“Hmm... If we start with the closest person, that’d be Force. He’s apparently holed up in a town between here and Puriff.”

“Really?! That means we may have passed right by him on our way to the capital, huh?”

“If I’d had Enemy Search up at the time, I would’ve known the second we entered the same town, but...” Back then, I’d already decided to put adventuring behind me, so I didn’t have my arts active while we were traveling. “The next closest after that would be Neme, who’s still in Puriff. And then we’ll go pick up Erin, since it seems she headed in the opposite direction from the capital.”

“Hmm... So Neme stayed put and Erin ran as far as she could. Honestly, what a pain.”

“Don’t say that.”

As I sighed over Roslia’s banter, I noticed the half-elf sitting across from us was squirming again.

“Sounds like your party sure has a lot of girls in it...” she mumbled.

“I wouldn’t say three out of six is ‘a lot.’”

I was about to ask her if she had a problem... but thought better of it when I realized she’d just deny it.

“For the record, two of those girls are totally in love with Note—myself included.”

“Wait, two out of three?!”

Thank you, Roslia, for the unnecessary commentary.

“I really had to wonder when I first met you, Roslia, but, like... do you all have bad taste or something?”

Ouch...

Roslia's unnecessary commentary ended up coming back to bite me. I knew I wasn't Miya's type, but hearing it like that hurt. She was still my first crush, after all.

"So, what's the other girl like?" she asked curiously.

"Hot tempered. Always in a huff," Roslia replied.

"Is that because you're always provoking her too?"

"Roslia's not wrong," I threw in. "But you could have phrased it better, you know?"

"Wait, she was telling the truth?!"

I couldn't deny that Roslia's description of Erin was accurate. I was always nervous around her myself when I first joined the party since she perpetually seemed to be mad about something. I eventually got to know her, and her good sides, as I spent more time with her.

"What about the third girl, then?" Miya continued.

"She's a kid," Roslia answered.

"Yeah, totally a kid," I echoed.

"Wow, really?"

"Well, not *technically*..."

"She's actually older than us, yeah."

"Huh?! Is she a kid or not?! Which is it?!"

"I have to wonder..."

"It's kinda hard to say."

"What in the world? I'm not following *at all*."

It was surprisingly hard to describe Neme. While I was pondering over how best to explain, Miya's interest shifted to the fifth and final member of the Arrivers.

"And who is it you're going to see now?" she asked.

“He’s also a bit hard to describe in a single word...”

“Right?”

“You can use more than one word, you know!”

“Then, not to be rude, but—”

“Why do you have to be rude?! Start with his good points!”

“His good points, huh? That’s tough.”

“If I absolutely had to say, then...”

“Then what?” Miya asked.

“He’s the leader of the Arrivers,” I replied simply.

The Strongest Ally and the Strongest Enemy

“So this is where Force ended up?” Roslia muttered, stepping down from the carriage and stretching.

“Supposedly,” I replied, similarly stretching out my stiff limbs after the long ride. “If my information is good.”

Said information came from Eisha, the right-hand informant to the deadliest assassin in the country. She was a thief who specialized in intelligence—and she was so good at her job that she worked for the Headhunter himself. I’d never seen her in action outside of combat, but I trusted her and her information.

“I can see why they call it Swordmaster’s Sanctuary,” I murmured, gazing over the buildings.

The carriage station was in the heart of the tourist area, where the streets were crammed with restaurants and stores. Signs hung everywhere, advertising all kinds of swords and sword-related products. There seemed to be as many weapon shops as anything else.

The nickname “Swordmaster” had only ever belonged to one man in this country: Nexus Auring, who’d lived three hundred years ago. He was blessed with Superior Sword Mastery, just like Force, and he was still considered to be the greatest swordsman in history for his countless feats of might. This town was said to be his final resting place, which was how it had come to be known as Swordmaster’s Sanctuary. It was a mecca for tourists and aspiring swordsmen to this day.

“It’s already getting late, so let’s find an inn for the night first,” Roslia suggested.

“It looks like there are some over there,” I said, setting off walking.

It was just then that someone called to us through ragged breaths...

“Wait a minute! Don’t leave me behind!”

It was Miya, who'd belatedly caught up to us. It seemed she'd been slow to alight from the carriage.

"What? We aren't even—" Roslia started.

"You're still going to stay with us?" I cut her off.

"What do you mean?" Miya asked, cocking her head.

"Don't give me that. We're here to find Force, you know?"

"Yes, I know that."

"We've come this far together because we ended up on the same carriage by coincidence. But we'll be in this town for a while. Are you saying you're just going to stay here and wait for us?"

We'd been traveling with Miya since we were headed in the same direction, but Roslia and I were making a pit stop here in town to collect Force. There was no reason for Miya to stick around for Arrivers party business.

"That's true, but..." she mumbled.

"But what?" I asked.

"If I'm not here, you and Roslia would share a room, wouldn't you?"

"Hmm? Whatever are you talking about?" Roslia stuck her tongue out.

"I knew it," Miya said with a heavy sigh. "You're trying to get rid of the third wheel, aren't you?"

On our journey thus far, we'd been splitting our accommodations with me in one room and the girls in another. Why? It was all because Roslia had made a scene about staying with me at the first town we'd stopped in, and Miya had objected.

"I-I don't think you should do that!"

"Do what? We're just going to be sharing a room, you know?"

"But a man and a woman... um..."

"What are you so concerned about? Use your big girl words."

"L-Lewd things..."

“Oh my, how vulgar of you, Miya! The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind.”

“N-No, that’s not—”

“Then it’s decided. Innkeeper, we’d like one large bed and one single, please!”

“Wait, that’s obviously what you’re up to if you’re booking a large bed! At least get two beds instead!”

“Oh, we couldn’t do that, now could we, Note?”

“No, I’m with Miya on this one.”

“Right?! At any rate, I’ll be staying in Note’s room so you can’t try anything funny, Roslia!”

“What’s to say you *won’t try anything funny instead?”*

“I wouldn’t do that! No way! We’re childhood friends!”

“That’s no deterrent, you know?”

“Uh... Then I’ll stay with you! That works, doesn’t it?”

“Hahh, if we have to...”

They’d both made it into a pretty big deal, so I was guessing Miya wasn’t going to let this go quietly either.

“I’m sticking around to make sure you two don’t get up to anything!” she declared.

“Wait, you’re seriously sticking around? That’ll be a bother. Say something to her, Note.”

“Listen, Miya, nothing’s going to happen,” I tried to assure her.

“Sorry, Note. I just can’t trust you.”

“Why not?! I’ve never been a pervert, have I?!”

This had to be guilt by association with Roslia—every time she made some strange comment, my reputation plummeted. Granted, that was partially my fault for never stopping her.

“Well, no point in standing around here,” I said. “Let’s find somewhere to stay.”

After that, we walked down the main street until we hit an intersection. When we turned right, several inns came into view. We chose a cheaper-looking but not rundown place—a simple two-story building with a wooden sign out front.

I spoke to the woman behind the counter and secured two rooms for us: one single occupancy, and one double. I paid for both while the girls went to settle in.

“I’d like to visit a place called Swordmaster’s Hill. Is it open to the public?” I asked the innkeeper while I was waiting for my change.

“Ah, you wanna go to Swordmaster’s Hill, do ya?”

Swordmaster’s Hill was allegedly where Nexus was buried. People called it a hill, but it was more like a small mountain. Swordsmen aiming to improve their skills went there to train, so there were plenty of dojos that lined the path to the summit. According to Eisha’s information, Force was studying at one of them.

“It’s open all right. You sightseeing, sonny?” the innkeeper, who looked old enough to be my mom, asked.

“Not exactly, but...”

“You don’t seem like a swordsman... You here to storm a dojo or something?”

“I kinda look the part, don’t I?”

She seemed to have mistaken me for a dojo challenger. Was my dauntless spirit that obvious in my bearing? Okay, kidding... Like hell I radiated dauntless anything. She probably just assumed that’s what I was here for since it’s what *everyone* came here for.

“In that case, just bust through the door and yell, ‘Please!’ Make sure you do it with gusto and you’ll be good.”

“That’s all I need to do?”

“What else is there? Maybe state your name and fighting style? I don’t really know the details.”

My... fighting style? What even was my fighting style? I’d learned from Jin, so I

guess I hailed from the House of Jin? No, I didn't have the right to say that. Jin's fighting style was much more impressive. I was unaffiliated.

"One more thing... Have you heard of a swordsman named Force Granz?" I asked.

"Why, who hasn't heard of Force?" she replied, slapping me on the shoulder. "You mean the hotshot who showed up in town not long ago, right? All the swordsmen are talking about him. All the ladies too—he's a real looker! I hope my daughter gets to marry a man like him someday."

A hotshot who all the ladies are talking about?

It seemed Eisha had managed to locate a different Force Granz who coincidentally also happened to be a master swordsman. If all the ladies in town were talking about the Force I knew, it wouldn't be a good thing. They'd probably all be warning each other to stay away from his sexual harassment.

That said, no one was better with a blade. And he wasn't bad-looking if you could get past his personality. Objectively speaking, he was a better catch than me. In fact... personality was the only area I had him beat, huh?

"Yeah, that sounds like the guy I'm looking for," I acknowledged reluctantly.

"Oh, but my daughter'll never snag *him*. They say he's so dedicated to his training that he doesn't even look at women! Only makes him all the more popular, though."

Okay, never mind. It had to be a different guy after all. Seriously, who was this lady talking about?

The Force I knew had once quit the party to run off with his "soulmate." That was also partially the fault of a certain top-tier partywrecker we know, so I couldn't entirely blame him for it. I'd come frighteningly close to abandoning the party when I fell victim too.

"Jeez, I wonder if he's okay..."

Roslia had told me that I'd changed since Jin died, but it sounded like the same was true of Force. He'd known Jin much longer than any of us, so I could only imagine how much greater the shock must have been.

If he was still the same guy, he'd immediately agree to rejoin the party as long as a cute girl invited him. My original plan had been to have Roslia do the honors, but I was starting to think things wouldn't be that easy. We had Miya with us too now, however, so there was still a possibility he'd be on board.

"It'll work out somehow, I guess. Thank you for the information, ma'am."

"No worries, sonny. Here's your change."

Cash now in hand, I picked up the key to my room and headed upstairs.

*

"This is the dojo?"

"It's bigger than I expected..."

"More like an old temple than a dojo, isn't it?"

The three of us looked up at the huge stone gate to the complex along the gentle mountain slope. It wasn't well kept, to put it nicely. The white stone surface of the gate was cracked and covered in moss. There was a sign with the dojo name written on it, but it had long faded past the point of legibility.

"I can sense Force in the back of the building," I said. "Do you think we can just go in?"

"I don't see a doorbell or anything," replied Roslia.

"Why don't you just call for him? They wouldn't get mad over something like that," Miya suggested.

"I suppose not."

She was right. I already knew Force was inside; I just needed to call out to him like an old friend. Maybe I was a little nervous about seeing him again. I was hesitating for nothing. The innkeeper had already told me the dojo took guests. How was it she'd said to introduce myself? Let's see, it was...

"Please! I'm Note Athlon, of an unaffiliated style!"

"How did things end up like this...?" I asked, turning to look at Miya and Roslia.

"Because you barged in here like you were storming the place," replied my

indigo-haired companion.

“But...”

I was just doing what the innkeeper had told me to. I didn’t think she’d seriously mistaken me for a dojo challenger!

“You don’t seem like a swordsman... You here to storm a dojo or something?”

“I kinda look the part, don’t I?”

I remembered replying with a rhetorical question about how I fit the bill. Apparently that had been the wrong move. It was the only reason I could think of for the misunderstanding, anyway. Unless... I really *did* radiate dauntless spirit?

“So, what are we going to do now?” Roslia asked, looking around slowly.

We were surrounded by dojo students with wooden swords at their waists. They were all glaring at us and jeering.

“What, are we not good enough for you? That why you want Acting Master Force?” one asked.

“It’s not like that,” I replied. “We just came to speak with him about something personal.”

“Dojo challengers love to make excuses like that in hopes of seeing him.”

“I told you it’s not like that. We’re actually his friends.”

“You’re his friends, huh? Really now?”

“Really.”

“Then why don’t you tell me what kind of man the acting master is?”

“First and foremost, he’s a lech—”

“You dare insult the acting master?!” the large man at the front snapped angrily.

His henchmen immediately began echoing his disbelief.

“The acting master? A lech?”

“Impossible!”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Yeah, the acting master’s only love is training.”

To my surprise, it seemed everything the innkeeper had said about Force was true after all. I’d internally laughed it off baseless rumor, but it sounded like he really had changed his ways.

“Are you *actually* friends with this Force guy?” Even the blonde half-elf with us looked dubious. “If you’re lying, you’d better go ahead and give up the act now. I bet you just looked up some famous swordsman to try inviting into your party, didn’t you, Note?”

“Have a little faith in your childhood friend, will you?!”

The trainees all around us were glaring at me even harder now thanks to Miya’s skepticism. I was racking my brain over what to do when I heard the door behind me creak open.

“What’s going on here? Why’s everyone gathered around like this?” a familiar voice asked.

I didn’t even have to turn around to know who it was. I’d sensed him coming with Enemy Search, but actually hearing him speak was nostalgic.

“Force...” I murmured, turning around and stepping forward.

When he saw us, his amber eyes went wide in shock.

“Note...? Roslia...?”



“Hey. Long time no see, man,” I said.

“Yeah.” Confused by my warm greeting, he smiled wryly. “I never expected to see you guys here.”

“We came to find you.”

“Acting Master, do you know these people?” one of the students asked nervously.

Force waved casually and replied, “Yeah, I do, so you can tone down the hostility now.”

“Sorry! We thought they were storming the dojo...”

“No need to apologize. It was just a misunderstanding, right? I’m not mad,” Force said indifferently. His light, frank tone was the same as always, but it somehow sounded different now. “These are my guests, so you should all get back to training.”

At Force’s urging, the gaggle of trainees—including several older than him—readily dispersed. He then turned back to us.

“You must’ve come a long way, so let’s sit down and talk. By the way,” Force said, casting his glance at a certain half-elf, “who’s this?”

“Hello! My name is Miya Line!”

“H-Hi there,” Force replied, shrinking back from her overly enthusiastic introduction. He then collected himself and cleared his throat before asking, “So, what’s up? What brings you all the way here?”

Of course that was what had him the most curious. We hadn’t seen each other in nearly a year. Moreover, we were old party members that he thought he’d already parted ways with. We clearly weren’t here just to catch up. As such, I avoided beating around the bush and decided to cut straight to the chase.

“We’re getting the Arrivers back together. Will you go dungeon diving with us again?”

“Figures...” He ran his fingers through his blue hair and said, “I guessed that’s

why you were here with Roslia. It's about the only reason you would be. So, is Miya your new party member?"

"No... We were just sharing a carriage together."

"If you were just sharing a carriage, what is she doing here now?"

"Stuff happened."

"Stuff happened, huh? I guess it always does with you, Note."

Apparently that was enough to satisfy him, and the conversation shifted from Miya back to the real subject at hand.

"So you want to reform the Arrivers with Roslia and me?" he asked.

"We're going to find Erin and Neme after this too," I replied.

"You want to reform the Arrivers with the five of us, then?"

"That's the plan," I replied, looking him right in his golden eyes.

I was hoping my resolve would reach him. That my passion would show. And yet...

"It's impossible." Force promptly shot me down. "Jin's dead, you know? You didn't forget that, did you?"

"...How could I?"

I would never be able to forget. Not even if I tried. I owed Jin my life. He was my role model. Everything I aspired to be. I'd only been able to follow in his footsteps before. It took all I had to just to chase after him. But he wasn't here anymore. I had to carve out my future for myself now.

"I'll never forget Jin, and I'll never forget my time with the Arrivers. Those days were so full of life... It's the most fun I've ever had. That's why I want to give dungeoneering another shot."

"Just because you want a do-over doesn't mean you get one. Reality is harsh like that," Force stated plainly, crushing my feelings. "What you're trying to do is reckless. A fool's errand. It's absolutely groundless."

"That's not true. If we can gather everyone again—"

“You think getting the old gang back together is all it takes? That we can conquer the dungeon with five of us now, even though we couldn’t do it when we still had Jin?”

At that, I fell momentarily silent. Force was totally right.

The Arrivers had failed to clear the dungeon with six members, including Jin. And we’d only made it to floor 21 of 30. The further you went into the dungeon, the greater the danger. Conquering the whole thing with just five people was nothing short of a pipe dream.

Still, I couldn’t simply back down without a fight. If I did, my dream of reviving the Arrivers would go up in smoke.

“Of course we’ll look for a new member. It’s fine as long as we have six people, right?”

“As if it’s that easy. Where are you going to find this new member? Do you have any candidates in mind?”

“Not yet, but I’ll find someone eventually.”

“Someone stronger than Jin?”

“No... That’s impossible.”

“Exactly what I said,” Force stated decisively. “There’s no point in gathering six people if we’re still weaker than we were before.”

“That’s true, but... the five of us can get stronger than we ever were. You’ve been training all this time, haven’t you?”

“Don’t make me laugh. You want me to fill Jin’s shoes too? You realize you’re asking me to be twice the fighter, don’t you?”

Force had already perfected his craft. Asking him to get twice as strong really would be impossible. No matter how harshly he trained, there had to be a hard limit somewhere.

It was an inevitability that the Arrivers were weaker without Jin. The other five of us could get as strong as we wanted, and it would still be true. We might be able to break through floor 21, but we’d never reach floor 30.

“So I guess that means you’re opposed to getting the Arrivers back together?”

“You’re damn right. You’re free to go get yourself killed in the dungeon if you want, but I’m not obligated to play along with your death wish. I want to live, man. And more importantly, I don’t want to see any more of my friends die.”

“Hold it right there!” Roslia interjected, breaking her silence.

She was clearly enraged. She marched right up to Force, but he just looked at her blankly.

“What? The two of us are having an important conversation right now. Don’t interrupt.”

“Just so you know, Note’s given this a lot of thought! He agonized over it for ages before making his decision! Don’t you think calling it a death wish is going too far?!”

“What do you want me to say? I’m just calling it like I see it.”

“I had no idea you were such an ass!”

I’d never seen Roslia go off on Force like this. He’d always been such a pushover when it came to women. If he wasn’t caving even for her, then there was no way I could change his mind.

“I can’t believe you, Force! I really misjudged you.”

“Oh yeah? If you don’t want to die either, Roslia, you should ditch him too.”

“So that’s what you really think... I’ve had enough, Note. Let’s get out of here.”

Roslia tugged at my arm and tried to leave, but I didn’t budge.

Instead, I looked into Force’s eyes and said, “In that case, what is it you think we’re missing? What do the Arrivers need to conquer the dungeon?”

It was fair to say there would be no Arrivers without Force. Not only did we need his strength, we needed his leadership. The Arrivers just wouldn’t be the Arrivers without either of its founding members. Furthermore, Force hadn’t yet said he *didn’t* want to get back in the dungeon. He’d just challenged me for being reckless about it. And in that case, all we needed was a plan.

“What do I have to do to get you to come back?”

“Find a new member. That’s my minimum requirement.”

I knew it. Force hadn’t given up on dungeoneering after all. That’s why he was able to give me a concrete goal.

“If that’s the minimum, then there’s more, right?”

“Yeah. If anything, this next thing is the big one.” Force paused for a moment. “It’s you, Note. You’ve gotta get stronger before I even consider coming back.”

“You want me to get stronger...?”

“Way stronger. Strong enough to rival me. Strong enough to take Jin’s place.”

That’s ridiculous...

“What makes you say that?” I asked, trying to confirm his intentions.

“Isn’t it obvious? With Jin gone, the Arrivers are down some serious fighting power. It won’t be easy to find someone who can pick up Jin’s slack. We need someone to replace him.”

“And that someone has to be me?”

“Yeah. That’s a lot more realistic than asking me to get twice as strong, isn’t it?”

Becoming as strong as Jin, replacing him... Force sure made it sound easy. The whole idea was absurd. Irresponsible, even. Downright unthinkable. And yet, it might just be simpler than conquering the dungeon. We were trying to do the unthinkable, after all. We’d be exploring uncharted territory no one had ever set foot upon before, chasing a lofty goal no one had ever actually managed to achieve—and we were going to do it all with just six people.

“If you can act as Jin’s replacement, the Arrivers can overcome the weakness of carrying two battle styles unsuitable for dungeoneering. That’ll open up our options for our sixth member.”

Force had already given this serious thought. It was clear he’d always had the future of the Arrivers in mind. There was no denying him as the true leader of our party.

“Fine. So if I become strong enough to replace Jin, you’ll join us?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. Replacing Jin means becoming my equal, you know?” he said, smirking as he rested his sword against his shoulder.

I recalled the story he’d once told me about the first time they’d met. Jin was trying to assassinate him, but Force fought back. He extended his would-be killer an invitation in the middle of their evenly matched duel, and that was how the Arrivers came to be. It marked their acknowledgment of each other as equals. There was no power dynamic or difference in superiority between them. They stood tall, side by side. That relationship was special, even among top-tier parties.

“I’m not saying I think it’ll be easy. I know painfully well how strong you and Jin were.”

I’d never won a single fight against either one of them. In fact, I’d never so much as landed a single blow, and I’d sparred with Jin hundreds of times.

“But I have no other choice, right? If I can’t get the Arrivers back together unless I get stronger, then I’ll do just that.”

“Big talk. But it doesn’t mean much if you don’t back it up,” he scoffed. He then turned to one of the trainees who was watching on from the side and called, “Hey, you over there. Are there any training rooms free right now?”

“S-Sir! If the acting master so desires, we’ll free up every room this instant!”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll find a suitable location myself,” Force replied politely before turning back to me. “Well, no point in just standing around. Let’s put you to the test, Note.”

And so began my trial to get Force back into the Arrivers.

“Will this do?” Force asked.

“Looks spacious enough to me,” I replied.

“I wasn’t expecting you to want to fight outdoors, though,” he remarked, looking around.

We were currently halfway up Swordmaster’s Hill, in a patch of wilderness not far from Force’s dojo. Roslia, Miya, and quite a few of the dojo students had

come along to watch. The latter were apparently quite interested to see the fight between the strongest swordsman in town and the stranger who'd shown up. They all stood around the edge of the clearing, surrounding our battlefield.

"There some reason we couldn't do this at the dojo?"

"We fought outside back when we were in Puriff, remember? I wanted to recreate that."

Of course, that was a lie. I was aiming to use Stealth to land a surprise attack, just like I had in my duel with Miya. If we threw down somewhere I couldn't make use of my specialties, I wouldn't stand a chance against Force. Miya seemed to have picked up on my plan—she furrowed her brow as she watched me and Force square off.

"Well, whatever," he said. "No matter what you try, you can't win against me."

If he was onto me too, he sure wasn't acting like it. He probably thought he had no reason to be afraid of whatever petty tricks I had up my sleeve. Plain and simple, he was that much stronger than me.

"I guess we'll see," I replied with all the courage I could muster, drawing my dagger.

I readied myself for combat, training all of my senses on the swordsman in front of me. He glared at me with a sharp glint in his eye. He was ready to cut me down. His left hand gripped his sword sheath, and his right rested on the handle—this was his drawing stance.

"Here I come," I declared.

"Spare me," he replied. "Just come and get it."

I could tell his posture was relaxed even from this distance. He was probably waiting to counter whatever move I threw at him. That being the case, I decided to give him exactly what he wanted.

"Pseudo Shadow Runner!"

I started running at full speed—straight backward to hide among our crowd of spectators.

“Oh? You wouldn’t run away, Note... which I guess means you’re going for an ambush.”

Despite the fact that his opponent had disappeared right before his eyes, Force remained perfectly calm. It was a stark contrast to the way Miya had panicked on the spot—a difference of experience, I suppose.

“Hey, here’s a question,” Force suddenly called out, seemingly to no one in particular. “Why do you think Jin was unable to kill me?”

That’s only obvious. It’s because you were just as strong as him.

As I silently answered the question in my head, I took off running. I charged straight forward like a bullet. I thrust my blade out at Force with all of my weight behind it.

“The answer is because surprise attacks don’t work on me,” he said.

And with that, he effortlessly stopped me. He didn’t even draw his sword. He simply lifted his sheath at an angle, blocking my surprise attack from behind without batting an eye. He didn’t so much as look my way, in fact.

“Did you forget, Note? I’ve got Mind’s Eye. There’s no point in using lame tactics like surprise attacks against me. You’ll have to do better than that,” he said, lashing out with a kick.

I was nearly frozen on the spot, but managed to cross my arms defensively at the last second and retreat backward.

“That’s practically cheating...” I gasped unwittingly.

Mind’s Eye was an overwhelmingly powerful combat skill that gave its user a sixth sense for incoming attacks. As long as Force had it, he could counter ambushes and otherwise invisible attacks. It was the bane of thieves and assassins. With that skill and his exceptional reflex speed, Force could casually parry any surprise I could mount. This must have been how he’d kept up with Jin in the past.

But if cheap tricks weren’t going to work, I decided I’d just have to do things the legitimate way—by charging Force with the fastest Pseudo Shadow Runner I could manage. Building energy in my legs, I prepared to spring forward with

Blink. As soon as I was poised, I leaped.

“You’re too slow. Way slower than Jin.”

By the time I heard Force mutter those words, my dagger crossed his sword and a metallic clang echoed through the air. Force restrained himself, using nothing more than the power he needed to stop me. The difference in the way we handled our blades was night and day.

And when he put his true strength behind his, it sent me flying.

“Not good enough. Try again.”

I still couldn’t reach him. Not yet. I was hardly strong enough to rival Jin.

“Here I go!”

With a shout, I activated Pseudo Shadow Runner once more. I concentrated every fiber of my being on moving as fast as possible.

“Even if you manage to hit me with an attack like that, it won’t do any damage.”

Force still didn’t draw his blade, for he had no need to do so. He saw right through me and simply used his free hand to deflect my dagger. It fell from my grasp blade first and impaled itself in the ground.

I was still a long way from perfecting my Critical art. Though I’d gotten better at using it, I couldn’t always activate it—and even when I did, it didn’t have much power. I should’ve known such a half-hearted attack wouldn’t work on Force.

I’d been able to hide my underdeveloped attack power from Miya by getting my dagger to her neck, but I would never get that close to Force as long as he had Mind’s Eye. He could instantly peg all of my inept attacks. I’d gotten by on such tricks before now, yet each and every one was laid bare before Force.

“Hahh, that’s enough... Stop, stop. This is pointless,” he sighed, his shoulders drooping. He gave me a sharp look. “You haven’t changed at all, Note. You haven’t gotten one bit stronger. It’s been a whole year since we parted ways. What have you been doing all this time?”

“I...”

I couldn’t answer him. I’d done nothing, after all.

After Jin died, I’d washed my hands of the dangers of adventuring. I’d fled to the capital to live a safe, lukewarm life with Roslia. And all the while, Force was training. Burning with regret over losing a cherished partner, he’d seriously endeavored to improve his sword arm.

The difference between us was painful—our fight just now made that much clear.

“You’re not dumb, Note, so you should understand. There’s no way you can win against me right now. You don’t compare to Jin.”

“...Yeah...”

He didn’t need to say any more. I could challenge him as many times as I wanted, but it wouldn’t change the results. Besides, the recoil of Pseudo Shadow Runner was already starting to catch up to me. It was pathetic and frustrating, but that was reality for me.

“I’ll be back, Force...”

“Sure. If that’s what you want.”

And with that, he turned to walk away. Roslia immediately came running over to me.

“Are you okay, Note?”

She put her hand on my shoulder and watched Force go with tears in her eyes, but he didn’t look back. Just like that, I thought my dream of reuniting the Arrivers was crushed. But then an unexpected voice piped up...

“Hold on a minute,” someone said. It was Miya. “You’re Force, right?”

“That’s right. You need something from me?”

“I heard you used to be the leader of the Arrivers. That means you’re really strong, right?”

“Well, yeah...”

With no regard for Force’s obvious confusion, Miya boldly continued, “In that case, you should join my party! Just so you know, I’m a lot stronger than Note!”

Force was stunned into silence. The look on his face screamed one word—dumbfounded. His jaw had gone completely slack. If I'd looked in a mirror, though, I probably would've seen a similar expression.

"Wait, Miya," I said. "Force is an Arriver—"

"He's not joining you, though. You got rejected!"

"For now, but in the future..."

"First come, first served, right?"

"Maybe, but..."

How was that allowed? Force was a founder of the Arrivers! I'd never even considered the possibility of him joining another dungeon-diving party...

"Why are you trying to steal Force?"

"'Cause I'm going to conquer the dungeon before you! And I need strong party members to do it!"

That much was true. Force was a top-tier dungeoneer. He wasn't just one of the strongest swordsmen in the country—he had more first-hand experience in the dungeon than nearly anyone. Any adventurer seriously aiming to clear the dungeon would want him in their party.

"On top of that, if he ditches you, I bet your chances of conquering the dungeon go up in smoke," Miya declared.

"Please don't admit to such petty tactics so proudly..." I sighed.

"She's really twisted, isn't she?" Roslia added.

Even *she* was disappointed. And it was a pretty big deal for Roslia, of all people, to call someone else twisted.

"Listen," Force said, still thrown by the odd turn of events. "This party business is between me and Note, so..."

Yet Miya refused to back down. She continued, "But based on what I've heard so far, you're not joining him because there's no way he can clear the dungeon, right? So join me instead!"

"I see what you're saying, but I still can't..."

“Why not?”

“Because... I’d feel bad for Note and all...”

“If you really feel sorry for him, then just rejoin the Arrivers already.”

“That’s a different matter entirely... Anyways, there’s no guarantee you and your party can clear the dungeon either, right?”

“Oh, I see. You’re hesitant to join me because you don’t know how strong I am yet.” Miya’s eyes sparkled as she clapped her hands together. “In that case, I just need to show you, right? How about I make the same wager Note did? If I can beat you, you have to join my party!”

Jeez, Miya! Do you ever listen to a word anyone says?!

Things were taking another troublesome turn... I hadn’t anticipated this side effect of bringing Miya with us. No way was Force going to turn down a challenge like that.

“In other words, I just have to win, right? Interesting. I’ll make you regret picking a fight with me.”

Thus began a second match that no one could have predicted: Force versus Miya.

“How...? This wasn’t supposed to happen...” Miya whined from where she sat slumped on the floor.

I watched her grieve as I recalled her fight with Force. To start with the conclusion, he’d crushed her in a landslide victory. In the end, she wasn’t able to land a single arrow.

My original expectation was that they’d be evenly matched. They had skills of a similar caliber. Actually, Miya’s various buffs should have given her the upper hand... but not even her peerless skill set allowed her to go one better than Force.

Hypothetically, Superior Sword Mastery and Superior Bow Mastery existed in perfect parity. But in a one-on-one fight at close range, Force had an overwhelming advantage with his blade. Miya had tried to counter him at range, but with Mind’s Eye, he’d cut down every single arrow she fired. She had

the boon of Major Physical Boost to help her in close quarters, but even that was meaningless against Force's sword.

Miya's spirit magic was her last resort. Yet any spell she could cast via Protection of the Forest Spirit King was weakened by Force's Magic Resistance. She might have been able to take him with a high-tier one, but Force never gave her the chance to cast any.

If Miya's skill set made her the perfect all-arounder, Force was the perfect close-range fighter. The results of their match might have changed under different circumstances, but there was no denying Force's supremacy in a one-on-one duel.

Besides, Miya was essentially out of practice. Whereas I'd taken a genuine hiatus from adventuring, she'd kept at it while holding herself back under the pretense of being weaker than she really was. So when a swordsman hardened by the dungeon went up against a hunter who'd never given adventuring her all... it was only obvious who would win.

That was how Miya had gotten her butt kicked, which was why she was pouting on the floor now.

"Am I... actually weak?"

Her pride was dashed by the humiliation of losing after issuing such a bold challenge. Perhaps our fight the other day had something to do with it too. I couldn't stand to see her so down on herself, so I decided to say something supportive.

"Of course not, Miya. Force is just super strong. It could have been anyone's _"

"Right?! I knew it!"

"Hmm, I have to wonder," Roslia interrupted. "You lost to Note as well, so maybe you really *are* weak."

"What..."

"I mean, if *I* got my butt handed to me after talking such a big game, I'd *never* be able to show my face in town again."

“Waaah! I’m going home! I don’t know anything about dungeon diving! I’ll just go back to Changs!”

Don’t rub salt in the wound, Roslia... That was savage, even for you.

“Leave it be, okay? You’re making me feel bad for her,” I said, trying to mitigate things for Miya’s sake.

But somehow, that only seemed to make it worse...

“I don’t want your pity, Note!”

What? I thought I was helping...

“Yeah, Note! Go for the coup de grâce!”

Stop cheering, Roslia! You’re making me look like the bad guy!

“No, Roslia, no coup de nothing. And you, Miya—go be depressed *inside*, please. Pouting in the hall is a nuisance to others.”

Miya was currently crumpled in the hallway back at the inn where we were staying. Her HP had been on a steady drain since she’d lost to Force, and it hit rock bottom before she made it into her room.

“I’m a nuisance? That’s so mean...”

It seemed like no matter what I said, the already depleted Miya was still taking damage. I’d only recently realized it after all these years... but she was actually pretty fussy, huh?

“Hahh, okay... Help me carry her inside, Roslia.”

“Ugh. Stand up and walk for yourself, Miya.”

“What do we do now, Note?” Roslia asked.

We’d managed to get Miya inside the room I’d rented for the girls, and Roslia and I were taking a breather after the fact. As for Miya, she was the blob in the corner of the room. The one wrapped in a blanket with a dead, empty look in her eyes. I ignored her, turning to face Roslia so that I wouldn’t have to see her.

“Well, I was thinking we should head back to Puriff. I can’t beat Force as I am now, so we should track down Erin and Neme before they have a chance to relocate.”

I figured Force would stay in Swordmaster's Sanctuary for the foreseeable future to continue polishing his abilities. He knew that we'd lose contact with him if he left town, and he now knew I was trying to get the Arrivers back together. If he still cared for the party, he wouldn't do anything like disappear without a word—that would be the end of us for sure. And so I decided to prioritize finding the other members while Eisha's information was still current.

"Neme's in Puriff, right?" Roslia asked.

"According to my intel."

"That means she stayed after we all left."

"Yeah. I was a little surprised," I agreed with a hum.

"So, what about Erin?" Roslia asked. "We're going to replace her with a new mage, right?"

"No way. She's still one of us. Why are you making it sound like I'm trying to leave her out?"

"I should have known..." Roslia mumbled in disappointment.

I knew the two of them didn't get along, but she *was* kidding, right? No way was I cutting Erin from the Arrivers. I mean, there was no guarantee she'd agree to come back after my half-hearted rejection almost a year ago...

"Where is Erin, anyway?" Roslia asked.

"The magic city, apparently. It's in the opposite direction of the capital from Puriff, so we'll stop and find Neme on our way there."

"The magic city's so far... If she was going to hide, she could've done it somewhere closer."

"Don't be like that. Though it will be an exhausting journey..."

How many days would it take to get there? It was going to be costly, both in terms of time and expense. I had to wonder if I had enough cash on hand... In the worst case scenario, we'd get Neme to spot us.

"Okay, okay," said Roslia. "I'll trust your plan for the girls, but what are you going to do about Force?"

That was indeed my greatest concern right now.

“What *should* I do about Force...?”

I wasn’t sure. I couldn’t see myself ever being a match for him in a fight, much less winning against him. At least Miya hadn’t been able to steal him from us, but conversely, that also meant not even the almighty Miya could best him. I was kind of screwed either way.

“Based on how he was acting, Note, you’ll have to win his approval before he agrees to join us.”

“Yeah...”

I had to be as good as Jin. That was Force’s condition for helping us reform the Arrivers. But Jin, rest his soul, was no longer with us. It broke my heart, but I’d never be able to spar with him again. I would never be his better, meaning I had to come up with a specific plan to match Force. And for that, I needed three things.

First was the ability to fight close quarters without backing down. I needed to be strong enough to meet Force’s sword head-on. Second was a way to beat Mind’s Eye. I needed to be able to overcome his godlike ability to read my moves. Third was some kind of new attack art. I needed a way to deal damage if and when I actually got to him. Since his Mind’s Eye could see through all of my current attacks, none of the tricks I’d used so far would work.

“There’s just so much I need to take care of...”

It was like everything I’d been putting off had suddenly caught up with me at all at once. Why was my life always like this...?

“Do your best, Note. I’m cheering for you. I’ll be doing my best too,” Roslia declared, her fists clenched. “You’re not the only one who needs to get stronger. I’m the one who’s been slacking off since the Arrivers disbanded. I don’t ever want to go through what happened again, so I’m going to challenge the dungeon with everything I’ve got.”

Roslia looked straight at me with her agate eyes. They were perfectly clear, with none of the joking veneer she usually hid behind.

“Thanks, Roslia. That’s really reassuring.”

“I have high hopes for you too, Note.”

Force had put a damper on our plan to reunite the Arrivers, but we were now working toward the same goal from a different angle.

Two Parties

“I guess this is goodbye for now, then.”

“Yup.”

We decided to part ways with Miya as soon as we hit the station in Puriff. She’d basically been a tagalong this entire journey, but now that we’d finally reached our destination, there was no longer a reason for her to stick with us.

“What will you do from here, Miya?”

“I’ll find somewhere to stay first, then start looking for a party capable of vanquishing the dungeon.”

“You’ll find the inns over that way, unless you want to room with us until you find a party to join.”

“No thanks. I told you I wouldn’t see you again until I conquered the dungeon, so this is it for us.”

“Suit yourself.”

It was a little sad knowing we wouldn’t see each other again, but Miya and I had already been through this. We’d originally said our farewells in Broad. We’d reunited in the capital, and now we were just going our separate ways again. This parting had been delayed by the strange machinations of fate, but our time was up. It was sad, though strangely enough, it wasn’t painful.

“It’s a shame we won’t see each other anymore,” Roslia said with a similar twinge in her voice. She sounded quiet and dispirited.

“It’s fine! Note’s the only one I promised not to see. You and I can meet up whenever we want,” Miya replied.

“Really? The idea of never getting to tease you again is just killing me...”

“Er, never mind! I’ll see you once I clear the dungeon! Yup!”

I knew it... There was no way Roslia was genuinely repentant, even for a goodbye.

“I’ll be on my way, then! Bye, Note! Bye, Roslia!”

“Later, Miya.”

“See you again someday!”

With that, we waved to each other one last time.



Once Miya disappeared around the corner, Roslia said to me, “Let’s go home. Back to Arrivers HQ.”

“Yeah. How long has it been?”

We thus headed for our dearly missed house while chatting casually about this and that.

“Aren’t we going inside, Note?” Roslia asked, looking at me curiously when I froze at the front door.

“Yeah, I’d like to, but...” I was in the process of finding the right words to explain. “This is still Arrivers HQ, right?”

“I mean, yeah? The sign’s still here, and it still looks the same.”

“Then why,” I asked, voicing my concern, “are there people I don’t know inside?”

Courtesy of Enemy Search, I detected strangers in the building. There were two of them, and they were hanging out in the living room.

“People you don’t know?” Roslia asked.

“Uh-huh. And they seem to be lazing around...”

“Are they burglars?”

“Burglars who laze around?”

“Maybe they made themselves at home after robbing the place.”

“What kind of burglar would do that?”

“Or maybe... it’s not impossible that they’re squatters.”

“That sounds a lot more likely.”

Neme was the only Arriver who’d remained in Puriff after Roslia and I left. She very well may have moved out of HQ. Eisha’s information said she was still in the city, but it wasn’t any more detailed than that.

“Let’s head inside for now and see if we can oust the squatters.”

“Yeah, you’re right. In order for us to feel like the Arrivers again, we need our headquarters back.”

And so I stuck my old key in the doorknob and gave it a twist. It seemed the lock was still the same, as the door opened readily for me. I immediately spied a line of shoes in the entryway and various other belongings strewn down the hall. Someone had definitely been living here.

"All right, come on out. We know you're in here," I shouted through the house.

A figure immediately appeared at the doorway at the back of the hall.

"Bwuh?! Who're you?!"

That's my line, dude.

It was a young boy I'd never seen before, and a young girl quickly stuck her head out from the living room behind him.

"What's wrong, Nacht?" she asked.

"Some strangers barged in!" he yelped.

"What are you saying? That isn't possib—"

"Look for yourself!"

"Whoa! They must be robbers! Go call the town guard! Hurry!"

"They're standing right in the doorway! We can't get out!"

"Then chase them off, Nacht! You're an adventurer, aren't you?"

"You are too, Fourie!"

"Just hurry!"

"Argh, whatever! Take this!" the boy—Nacht, apparently—yelled as he charged at us. He grabbed a stick leaning up against the wall in the corridor as he got closer. "Hraaagh!"

And damn if he didn't swing it with all his might. I wasn't expecting the sudden outburst of violence.

"Hey, that's dangerous!"

Roslia was right behind me. While I could easily evade the incoming blow, I didn't want her to end up taking it for me. Instead, I used Blink to advance right

up to the kid and sweep his feet out from under him. I grabbed his arm as he fell and twisted it behind his back, pinning him underneath it on the floor.

“Wah!” he squealed.

“Nacht!” the girl shouted.

Now that I’d dealt with the boy, I turned my attention to her. She stood stock-still, shrinking at the sudden turn of events.

“A-Are you okay, Nacht?”

“Do I look okay?! Hurry up and help me!”

“B-But...!”

“Use! Your! Magic!”

“Oh, right!” The girl, Fourie, grabbed the wand at her waist and began channeling magical energy. “Flame Arrow!”

Fire magic inside the house? Really?

I didn’t even get the chance to complain before the arrow-shaped flame came flying straight at my face.

“Ros—”

“I’m on it! Protect!”

A wall of light appeared in front of me before I’d even finished speaking. The flame arrow struck it and dispersed into the air harmlessly.

Thank you, Roslia...

It was her defensive spell that had diffused the attack. I could have simply dodged it, but that would have risked setting the whole house aflame if it’d hit the wrong thing. I was grateful Roslia had known just what to do.

“Huh?! What now...?”

Fourie froze up. She apparently hadn’t expected her spell to fail. Roslia took the opportunity to summon Blades of Light around her.

“You shouldn’t put up any more of a fight if you value your lives,” she threatened.

Realizing she couldn't win against us, Fourie dropped her wand and sank to the floor. It seemed she'd lost the will to resist.

"We're sorry. Please spare us. You can take all the money you want..."

Wait, so they think we're *the burglars here?*

After that, we explained to Nacht and Fourie why we were there. Once everybody had calmed down from our initial encounter, we gathered in the living room to talk things out.

"So, you guys said you're adventurers, right?" I asked hesitantly.

"That's right! We're the Ultimate Invincible Partyz!"

What kind of name was that? It was seriously the lamest thing I'd ever heard... I know it's not nice to rag on other parties' names, but this one deserved it.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason... I was just thinking, uh, that's a unique name. Have you ever wanted to change it?"

"We get that all the time... But the boss picked it herself, so it stays."

"The boss, huh?" I exchanged a look with Roslia before continuing, "Is this boss the one who let you stay here?"

"That's right! This is the boss's house!"

"And what's your boss's name?"

"That'd be Neme Pargin!"

All right, so to summarize what we'd now learned...

After Roslia and I left Puriff, Neme had continued living at HQ alone. She then formed a party called the Ultimate Invincible Partyz, which consisted of her, Nacht, and Fourie, as well as another thief and a warrior for a total of five members. They were, apparently, a dungeon-diving group.

Neme was allowing them to live at HQ, which was what had resulted in the whole confused kerfuffle upon my and Roslia's return. And by the time we'd all managed to calm down and hash things out, the front door creaked open. It

sounded like Neme and the rest of the party had returned home.

“Welcome back!” a bright and cheery voice called from the entryway.

It was unmistakably Neme. No one else would say “welcome back” instead of “I’m home” upon returning to their own house. And, sure enough, a petite figure soon appeared in the living room doorway.

“We got pudding—” The second the little redhead spotted us, her eyes went wide. “N-Note and Roslia?!”

She then leaped back like she’d seen a ghost. Her new party members had to help her up from where she collapsed on the floor.



“Who are these people...?” a girl dressed like a thief asked.

Neme answered as she struggled to her feet, “My old party members. From the Arrivers.”

“Hi, I’m Note Athlon.”

“And I’m his wife, Roslia Minkgott.”

“Huh?! When did you two get married?!” Neme shrieked. “Did you come to tell Neme about the big news?!”

“Watch it, Roslia. Don’t make jokes that are just going to give people the wrong idea. You’re confusing Neme.”

“Fine. I’ll save it for when we find Erin, then.”

“Please don’t. That’d be even worse.”

This was our first reunion in ages, and we were already off to a rocky start...

“Well, if it isn’t that, then what is it?” Neme asked. “Did something happen?”

“Not exactly,” I started.

This was my chance. Chatting casually with Neme after so long was kind of nice, but I decided to cut straight to the chase.

“We’re here to get the Arrivers back together. So, Miss Neme, would you like to rejoin the Arrivers with us?” I said as earnestly as I could to the wide-eyed little dwarf looking up at me.

“I’m happy you’d invite Neme,” she said. She then looked around at her new party members and shook her head. “But I’m already in a party, so I can’t join you.”

Just like that, my invitation was promptly shot down.

I tried to hide my disappointment and said, “I guess not, huh?”

“I’m sorry. Neme would like to try adventuring with you and Roslia again, but I already have four party members.”

I’d foreseen this issue the moment we’d found out Neme had formed a new party, so I wasn’t terribly surprised.

“After you two left, Neme couldn’t go dungeon diving alone. But these four joined me when I was in need,” she continued, looking around at her Ultimate Invincible Partyz crew.

Neme was the only one of us who hadn’t given up on dungeon diving after Jin’s death and the disbanding of the Arrivers. I’d had no idea. This was the first I was learning of it.

“I won’t abandon my comrades,” Neme stated firmly.

Seeing the look of determination in her eyes convinced me to give up trying to persuade her. I wanted Neme back, but this wouldn’t go the way it had with Force. He’d refused us because he thought we weren’t capable of clearing the dungeon as we were.

Neme, however, had already found a new party to dive with, and she wasn’t willing to give them up to come back to us. I didn’t blame her for that. Just because we were trying to get our old party back together didn’t mean she could walk away from her new one. Of course she’d choose to stick with them.

Frankly, she didn’t owe me and Roslia anything. We’d ditched her and left town together, completely ignoring how she felt and her desire to keep dungeoneering. We’d abandoned *her*. And now here we were, asking for it all back. Easy for us to say, right? We were just plain being selfish.

“I’m sorry... We shouldn’t have dropped by without warning and put you on the spot like this.”

“It’s fine! Neme’s happy to see you both again! Would you like to stay for dinner? We just bought a ton of food!” Neme turned to the other Ultimate Invincible Partyz members and asked, “Is that okay with everyone?”

“Anything you say, Boss,” Nacht assented.

“This is a great opportunity to talk to the former members of the Arrivers. No way would we miss a chance like this!” Fourie agreed enthusiastically.

The other two members likewise nodded, and so it was decided that we’d be staying for dinner with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz... whose name I was still cringing at.

After the table was set, everyone took their seats and gave thanks for the meal. And with that, we dug in. As the Ultimate Invincible Partyz members reached for their food, I poked my chopsticks into the steamed dish in front of me.

The night's dinner had been prepared by the thief girl, whose name was Lila. It was steeped with a rich flavor that was wholly different from Erin's cooking. It felt strange to see the unfamiliar food on the familiar table, but it tasted so good that I quickly adjusted.

"Both of you were Arrivers, weren't you? I'd like to ask some questions!" Nacht put forward while sipping on his soup.

"Sure. I'd like to hear about your party more, though. How did you guys get together?" I asked in turn.

How had Neme gotten by after we all left? How had she come to form this new party? I didn't know any of the story.

"Well, the four of us got together on account of a recruitment poster at the dungeon guild. Ain't that right?" Nacht asked, looking around the table.

Fourie answered, "Yup. Nacht and I knew each other because we're childhood friends, but we met Lila and Leys here."

The taciturn warrior, Leys, nodded in response.

"We only just became adventurers, honestly," Nacht added.

I could kind of tell. Nacht and the others looked young—either my age or younger. They all had the gung-ho aura of new blood.

"I admit I'm a little surprised," I confessed. "I never thought someone as shy as Neme would form a party with people she didn't know."

"Neme's not shy anymore! Neme can talk to anyone now!"

"If you say 'not anymore,' that's a blatant acknowledgment that you used to be."

"Nuh-uh! Neme was never shy to begin with!"

Just how stubborn could she be? If she wasn't shy anymore, what did it

matter if she was in the past?

“What? The boss is plenty shy...”

Okay, scratch that. She was still shy after all.

Way to expose her, Fourie. Your party is betraying you*, Neme.*

“Neme isn’t shy! Neme’s just a little tiny bit bad with strangers!”

No matter how long we continued this back and forth, there was no changing the fact that Neme was shy. End of story. So I decided to ignore her and change the topic.

“Still, I’m surprised to hear you went to the guild to form a party, Miss Neme. I would’ve thought someone like you would get invitations from all over the place.”

Despite how young she looked, Neme was a top-tier priestess. She had an overwhelmingly powerful skill, high-level holy arts, and the prestige of being a former member of the Arrivers, one of the leading dungeon-diving parties in town. With all that in her favor, she should’ve been highly sought after. There must’ve been a reason she went to the guild to form her own party instead.

“Neme got lots of invitations at first!” she declared, sticking her chest out proudly. Seemed I was right on the mark. “But Neme couldn’t accept them! It’s too difficult adjusting to a group of strangers!”

“So you *are* shy!”

“I am not! Neme is—”

“All right, I get it. Miss Neme isn’t shy.”

“That’s right.”

“So, how come you were okay with this party? These four were strangers to you too, no?”

“It’s even worse when you’re trying to join a group of people who already know each other! Neme thought it’d be easier if everyone in the party was new!”

Oh, that was relatable. It really was hard to break your way into an

established community. I'd always felt that way when I was joining up with random parties back in Broad, and I'd felt it doubly so when I'd come to join the Arrivers. It was even worse then because I didn't get along with Erin in the beginning... Those were tough times.

"And everyone here's younger, so it's easier to talk to them!"

Yeah, I could understand that too. When you're shy, you always feel a barrier between you and people who are older or of higher standing. Actually, when I stopped to think about it, Neme had been the first Arriver to really open up to me... Perhaps it was because I was younger than her.

"It helps that they're all so nice. Neme's so grateful. Thank you guys for adventuring with me!"

"We're the ones who're grateful, Boss," Nacht said bashfully. "I can't believe such an amazing adventurer's willing to go dungeon diving with newbies like us!"

The other three members nodded too. It seemed they all felt the same way.

"We've been nothing but trouble, but please keep helping us out, Boss!" Nacht begged.

"You guys are the ones helping Neme out! Without you guys, I wouldn't have been able to continue dungeon diving. Thank you."

"Aw, shucks," replied Nacht.

"Hearing you say that makes me so happy!" squeaked Fourie.

"We're the ones who should be thanking you, Boss," said Lila.

"Agreed," added Leys.

Each of her new party members expressed their gratitude for Neme in turn. It seemed she'd earned a lot of trust with them. It was incredible to see... Neme was the proud leader of this party. She'd pulled these people together and she commanded their respect. She was basically living her dream.

As sad as it was, there wasn't any room for her old comrades here.

"Sooo... can I ask something?" Roslia interjected on the emotional moment as

she hesitantly raised her hand.

Her eyes still glittering, Neme cocked her head and replied, “What is it?”

“Why ‘Boss’?”

I’d honestly been wondering that myself. I could’ve understood “Leader” or something...

“Boss told us to call her that!” Nacht put forward.

“That’s right. ‘From now on, I’m the boss!’ she said,” Fourie explained.

“She said the Arrivers used to call her that...” Lila added.

And Leys just nodded again.

“You don’t say...” I mumbled.

Lila’s statement in particular jumped out at me, but I couldn’t bring myself to completely destroy the nice dinner atmosphere by calling Neme on it. Instead, I just ignored it.

“So, is it true that the boss used to be the pillar of the Arrivers?”

“She said she was super popular with the guys in the party. Did that include you, Note?”

“She was like an elder sister to the girls too. Always giving them advice about love and helping them out with things...”

“I heard that as well.”

Okay, now it was *all* sounding fishy. There was one comment in there I just couldn’t ignore, either—it was too personal. But then again, these were Neme’s juniors. They looked up to her and respected her as the boss, so how could I destroy her reputation? I just had to swallow my pride and go along with it...

“Yup, yup, it’s all true.”

“So you really were in love with the boss?!”

“Yup. Head over heels. I spent my every waking moment longing for her, or something?”

“Note...”

The look of pity Roslia was giving me nearly killed me. I was about ready to give up the ghost as it was, so I really wished she'd knock it off. As for how Neme reacted to the lie I told through my teeth...

"Oh, what? You were in love with me too, Note? You should have said something—"

Something inside me audibly snapped.

"As if I was! Here I am, being kind enough to play along with your stupid made-up story, but you just had to go and take it too far!"

I mean, everyone has their limits.

What are you doing, lying about people like that? Just because we weren't here doesn't mean you can say whatever you want about us! That is not *how you earn respect! In fact, I'll teach you a thing or two about respect! No more Mr. Nice Note!*

"You were never the backbone of the party, and you weren't popular at all!"

"Auuugh..."

"You have zero experience in dating! You just liked to make up love stories and pretend to be some romance guru!"

"I-I'm sorry! Neme was wrong! Please stop!"

"On top of that—"

Neme needed a good lesson in what happened when you pushed someone too far. Thus our dinner party with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz turned into a real roast.

The Ultimate Invincible Partyz

Since we were in town anyway, Roslia and I decided to go dungeon diving the day after we had dinner with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz. Of course, since it would be too dangerous with just the two of us, we invited them along.

The Ultimate Invincible Partyz had currently cleared through floor 4, but they were having a hard time progressing any further. Since their group consisted of four rookie adventurers, we agreed to give them some pointers as veterans. And so the seven of us set out for floor 5 together.

Floor 5 was a vast wasteland. While the terrain was nice and flat, the open view meant it was easy to draw the attention of mobs in large groups. The monsters were also quite varied, including nimble-footed beasts, birds that attacked from the skies, and humanoid creatures with high combat abilities.

The floor took some serious teamwork to overcome. It had been easy enough with the strength of the Arrivers, but it was a reasonable challenge for any normal party.

“Nacht, one’s coming at you,” warned Leys, the tank of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz, who was equipped with armor and a large broadsword.

Right on cue, a hound dashed out from behind him.

“I don’t have a hand to spare right now!” Nacht shouted.

He was in the middle of exchanging blows with a skeleton soldier. They were evenly matched in terms of sword skills and seemed like they’d be at it for a while.

“Lila, support Nacht!” Neme called loudly.

Lila made a beeline for Nacht on command, abandoning the wolf demon she’d been engaged with. It then rushed at Fourie, who was charging her staff with magical energy.

“I-It’s after me!” she shrieked.

“Leave it to Neme! Protect!” the party leader proudly incanted.

A wall of light appeared before the gray wolf, forcing it to a halt.

“Encircle!”

Now that the wolf had been stopped, Neme conjured a ring of light around its torso. It quickly closed in to bind the beast.

“Got ’em! It’s your turn, Fourie! Go for the armored warrior! Magic Plus!”

With Neme’s magic enhancement buff, Fourie shot a ball of fire from her staff. The flames sped toward the armored monster, scorching its gigantic body.

“Bash!”

Leys took the opportunity to land a heavy, fatal blow. The armored warrior slumped over, falling to the ground lifelessly.

“Nice one! Leys, get on the wolf demon now! And Fourie, you support Nacht!”

Neme cast a healing spell on Nacht while continuing to give instructions. When she saw the hound was about to hit Lila with a lightning attack, she immediately cast Protect to block it.

“We’re almost there! Let’s do our best!” she cheered in encouragement.

“Yeah!” Nacht shouted back, swinging his sword enthusiastically.

Fourie finished charging another spell and burned the skeleton soldier, giving Nacht a chance to hack away at it and lop off its head. With it out of the way, they both turned their attention on the hound Lila was facing.

Things came to a quick close afterward. The three of them promptly trounced the hound and then helped Leys defeat the final monster. Once the fight was over, we retreated before the next wave of enemies arrived. We then found ourselves somewhere to sit down and take a breather.

“Well? What did you think?” Neme asked.

In the battle just now, Roslia and I had been observing how the Ultimate Invincible Partyz fought. They wanted to know if we had any advice for them.

“Is there anything that Neme should fix?”

It seemed Neme was serious about wanting to conquer the dungeon with this party. I could tell as much from the fire in her eyes, and the way she’d carried

herself in the fight.

“Are you sure you want advice from me? I’m not that experienced as an adventurer myself, so I dunno if I have anything useful for you...”

“Neme believes in you, Note!”

“In that case...” I glanced at Roslia to see if she had anything to say first, then shared my honest thoughts with Neme. “I think you’re doing pretty well. You’re providing thorough support, and you’re taking command of the situation. I think you’re doing exactly what you need to be as a priestess.”

“Really...?”

“Yeah. You’re making a serious contribution to the party. Really, I wish you’d been like that with the Arrivers.”

“Neme’s sorry...”

Her combat strategy had completely changed from the old days, when she’d just cast high-level buffs and healing spells as needed. That was all there was to her fighting style. If any other priestess were that noncommittal, they’d get kicked from the party instantly. Neme could only get away with it because of how insanely powerful her buffs were.

“I’m just teasing you. No one thought you were lacking.”

“That’s good...”

“Still, I’m curious about what made you change your fighting style.”

“Neme wanted to study how to clear the dungeon, so I asked lots of adventurers for advice!”

Shy Miss Neme had asked total strangers for advice? I guess she’d changed too after Jin’s death. She was still a little liar, but she’d clearly matured as an adventurer—not only as a priestess, but as a party member too.

She was now leading this group of newbies all by herself. It was no exaggeration to say she really was the pillar of the party now—a night and day difference from how she used to be. Roslia and I had nothing on her in terms of growth. This was what she’d achieved as the only Arriver who hadn’t given up on the dungeon.

“But I still think there’s more Neme can do!” she insisted. “Do you have any suggestions? We want to make it further in the dungeon!”

“Well...” When I thought about it, there *was* something I’d been wondering about. “Why didn’t you use any of your stronger buffs?”

“There’s a good reason for that,” Neme responded proudly. “I run out of magic energy if I cast lots of spells at once. We nearly wiped once because of that.”

The other members nodded solemnly, as if recalling the incident.

Neme’s answer made sense, though. Unlike Erin, she had a finite supply of magic energy. She probably had more than the average caster, but not so much that she could be reckless with it.

The Arrivers had been strong enough that combat was always over in a flash—but that wasn’t the case for the Ultimate Invincible Partyz. Their lack of offensive power forced them into prolonged fights, and that meant Neme had to pick and choose her magic carefully.

She was keeping abreast of fights and casting the right spell at the right time for maximum efficiency. That was how most priestesses fought, so there wasn’t anything particularly unusual about it. In fact, it was more unusual that it had taken her this long to pick it up.

“If this is the style you’ve come up with after thinking long and hard about it, then I encourage it. I don’t know much about being a priestess though, so I don’t really have any particular insight.”

Roslia was a different story, however. Before joining the Arrivers, she’d made a name for herself as Crusher, a pretend priestess.

“Do you have anything to add, Roslia? You gave being a priestess a run, right?”

“Me?” Roslia tapped her finger on her cheek pensively. After a moment, she blinked innocently and said, “I never really did my job, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Huh?”

“Buffs were too much of a pain to cast, and I always slacked off with the

healing magic. The most I ever did was act scared when monsters showed up. I was moral support, I guess?”

I was suddenly sorry I’d asked. Of course Roslia had been a terrible priestess back when her main goal was to be a top-tier partywrecker. No wonder every group she’d ever run with had disbanded... I could only imagine the clash between members who seriously wanted to adventure and members who just wanted to protect Roslia.

“Roslia is the worst!”

See? Even Neme agreed.

“That’s all in the past now... And no one died on my watch, so it’s fine!”

Neme was more than pulling her weight as a priestess now, so Roslia didn’t have much ammunition there. She just pouted quietly and twirled her hair around her finger.

“That wasn’t very helpful at all...” Neme muttered, sounding troubled. “What more should I be doing?”

She genuinely wanted to know how else to help the Ultimate Invincible Partyz make progress in the dungeon. Honestly, I didn’t think she was the one who needed improvement, though. She was already doing great—that much was clear even to a third party like me.

She had room to grow, sure, but that was only natural and experience would come with time. But even once she got there, the overall power of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz wouldn’t increase much. Parties are made of multiple members, and a single person can only carry the group but so far.

Nacht, Fourie, Lila, and Leys were the ones who needed to shape up. And I couldn’t see them getting strong enough to progress much further than this. After all, Force, Jin, Erin, Neme, and Roslia had all been at the top of their respective battle styles... and even together, they hadn’t been enough to conquer the end floors of the dungeon.

Nacht and the others were doing okay for themselves. They were probably a cut above your average adventurers and their teamwork was good. Moreover, they were serious about the dungeon.

But that just wasn't enough to be able to conquer it. Accomplishing that unreal dream would take skill beyond belief, well honed abilities, and a whole lot of luck at the bare minimum. And these four kids were lacking in that regard. Same for me, who wasn't even strong enough to cross blades with Force.

Neme, meanwhile, had grown as a priestess since forming the Ultimate Invincible Partyz. She'd had no choice *but* to get stronger in order to make it this far. She was the linchpin of the group, who needed her healing spells and buffs to make it through a fight. And even then, their battles dragged on so long that she couldn't use her superpowered buffs.

The other members were just too weak.

I knew that firsthand. Roslia and I had easily subdued Nacht and Fourie when we "broke into" HQ. If they wanted to get further in the dungeon than the Arrivers had, they at least needed to be as strong as we were. They needed to match us on an individual level before they could ever surpass us as a group.

Neme had grown tremendously. But she was only a healer. No matter how incredible her support was, the other members would be the ones on the front line. The whole exercise was pointless if they couldn't defeat monsters.

Things would've been different if it had been Force who'd stayed behind and formed his own party. He could probably clear up to floor 10 by himself. But as for Neme... it wasn't enough for her alone to be strong.

I couldn't say that to her face after how much she'd grown, though. It would just be too cruel.

Nacht and the others looked up to her. But they were exactly what was holding her back. If she really wanted to stick with them, she'd realistically have to give up on clearing the dungeon. Conversely, if she really wanted to clear the dungeon, she'd have to give up on her comrades.

It was one or the other. She'd have to decide between them—a choice she would have been spared if Roslia and I hadn't shown up with the intent of reforming the Arrivers. Without that option, she'd be stuck with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz.

But now that we were here, she'd started thinking about what it would take

to get further in the dungeon. And surely she'd already realized what that meant. As the leader of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz, she'd be the first to see it.

Nevertheless, it was an impossible choice for her. She couldn't abandon the comrades who'd helped her out when she couldn't go dungeon diving with anyone else. That's why she was now desperately racking her brain about how to help the Ultimate Invincible Partyz conquer the dungeon.

And I wasn't about to heartlessly crush that dream.

"Shall we help them out a little, Roslia?" I asked.

We'd come to give advice, but now that we'd gotten a taste of the life-or-death danger of the dungeon again, it was hard to resist. I'd missed this. Moreover, I wanted to see what I could do in a fight.

"Sounds good to me!" Roslia agreed, stretching her arms in anticipation. "I'm excited!"

"Leave all the support to Neme!"

It seemed Neme was raring to go too. Although she was the leader of Ultimate Invincible Partyz now, she would forever be an Arriver at heart.

This would be the Arrivers' first show in a while, actually... We only had three of us, but I was still ecstatic. And I was sure Neme felt the same way.

"Let's go, team."

And so we continued our floor 5 run.

*

"Man, the two of you were amazing!" Nacht said on our way back to Puriff. "Roslia's holy sword thing? That was nuts! It cut through those monsters like paper!"

"Yeah, totally! Her spells were wonderful too! They were stronger than mine, and I'm a mage!" Fourie agreed.

"She's quick on her feet as well," piped up Lila. "It was a fascinating fight to watch, even as a thief."

“No wonder she was the paladin of the Arrivers,” added Leys stoically.

Roslia was currently being showered with praise from the Ultimate Invincible Partyz. Not that that was a surprise. As Leys had said, she was the paladin of the Arrivers. Unlike Neme who played a support role, she was a front-line star who went toe to toe with monsters.

And that’s not to mention that the monsters on floor 5 were all trash mobs to her. The sight of her hacking and slashing her way through them with ease really did make an impression. I’d gotten goosebumps the first time I saw it for myself.

“Aww, you guys are flattering me. I still have a long way to go myself!”

Roslia was desperately trying to remain humble, but there was a faint smile on her lips. Maybe she was feeling bashful. She didn’t often get complimented to her face like this—outside of when she was trying to seduce someone, that is.

“You all saw me get hit, right?”

“Wasn’t that because Neme slipped up?”

It was true Roslia had gotten hit earlier, and it was true that was rare. But for some context, Roslia had baited an enemy attack and waited until the last second to counter. Neme had panicked and tossed up a Protect spell that blocked Roslia’s sword. It threw off her parry and left her vulnerable to the monster’s onslaught. It was a light wound, however, and Neme had instantly healed it. Not a big deal.

“Neme’s sorry...” she said apologetically. She’d acted with good intention, but it had backfired.

Neme’s techniques had certainly improved with a party that was dependent upon her support. But Roslia was no member of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz—she was light-years ahead of them and Neme simply couldn’t keep up. Trying to watch over her was a totally different game from watching over Nacht and the others.

Roslia wasn’t particularly bothered by the incident, however. She knew perfectly well Neme hadn’t meant any harm.

“Don’t worry about it. It was kinda my fault too. I guess getting back into the groove of things isn’t so easy,” she offered with a bright smile.

“Note was awesome too!” started Nacht again. “But he was so fast that I couldn’t really tell what he was doing.”

“And he doesn’t even have any combat skills... You should try a little harder, Nacht,” scolded Fourie.

“Why me?! Tell that to Lila! She’s our thief!” he argued.

“No way. Note’s some kind of monster,” Lila objected.

Wasn’t that kinda mean? There had to be a nicer way to put it...

“How did you learn to fight like that without any combat skills?” Fourie asked with eager eyes.

How I fought without combat skills, huh? As someone who was currently trying to figure out how to best Force, that question kind of stung. Roslia and I had started sparring together since leaving Swordmaster’s Sanctuary, but I didn’t yet have anything to show for it. I’d hoped I might find some inspiration in the dungeon today, but no such luck there either.

“Nah, I’m no big deal. Neme, Roslia, and the other three Arrivers were much, much stronger. I was easily the weakest of the team.”

“You’re kidding! That can’t be. You’re so amazing. The monsters couldn’t even hit you once.”

“Well, my evasive arts aren’t bad, but my attack arts really suck. I can barely deal any damage at all.”

I had Critical, an art I’d been practicing for a while now, and Shot, which I’d picked up from training with Eisha. I’d whipped both out on floor 5, but neither was strong enough to finish off a monster. I wasn’t any better than a greenhorn adventurer in that regard. I could activate both arts reliably now, but they were still far beneath what an Arriver should be capable of. I’d never be able to lay a finger on Force this way.

“That’s not true at all! Your attack arts were good too!” Fourie exclaimed, furiously shaking her head.

She was just trying to make me feel better. From what I'd seen, in terms of weapon mastery, Lila was a higher-tier thief than me. I had to wonder why. Was it a difference in skill, or a difference in effort? Maybe I just didn't have the knack for handling a dagger.

"But your evasion arts were honestly amazing. How did you get so good with those?" Lila asked.

"That's thanks to the living hell I went through on floor 20..."

It was under those extreme conditions that I'd acquired Pseudo Shadow Runner. It was a lucky result from an unlucky tragedy—one I'd barely survived. The feat was unrepeatable given the circumstances, so there wasn't much I could teach Lila from it.

"Huh! I remember hearing some adventurers got stranded on floor 20... I didn't realize that was you guys!" Fourie raised her voice in surprise, then turned to Nacht. "Hey, we should get into a predicament too! Maybe we'll get stronger that way!"

"We'd die before we get any stronger..." Nacht retorted flatly.

I'd heard these two were childhood friends, but their relationship seemed entirely different from me and Miya's. Nacht kept the airheaded Fourie tethered to reality, and they were evenly matched as adventurers. They were doing well, really. Watching them made me feel a little nostalgic, and a little jealous.

"You two sure get along well. It's nice to see."

"Isn't it?! Right, Nacht?"

"Yep! We're childhood friends, after all!"

They replied with beaming smiles so bright that it was hard to look at them directly.

"You should treasure your childhood friends," I sighed.

"That's awfully heavy coming from you, Note..."

"And you should refrain from butting in, Roslia," I said, brushing her off.

If I hadn’t screwed things up, maybe Miya and I would’ve ended up like that... No, I couldn’t follow that train of thought.

“The five of you really do make a good party,” I said. “You have a great dynamic.”

I watched the members of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz as we made our way down the road. Nacht and Fourie walked side by side, and Lila and Leys were both happily talking to Neme in the back.

It was totally different from how things had been with the Arrivers, where the atmosphere was more prickly. It wasn’t that we were unfriendly with each other; we just had a lot of strong personalities in the group. There was never really any harmony.

“I know, right?!” Fourie exclaimed giddily.

In stark contrast, Nacht worriedly said, “Well... I suppose...”

“What, do you guys secretly fight or something?” I asked.

“That’s not it! We’re good friends, really! That much is for sure!” Nacht said, waving his hands in a fluster.

“So what are you unsure about?”

“Sometimes, I wonder to myself if the five of us can really clear the dungeon... I was just thinking harder about that after seeing you guys fight.”

“What are you chickening out for, Nacht?! Cheer up! With the boss on our side, we can do anything!” Fourie assured him with a friendly slap on the shoulder.

She didn’t seem to think it was a serious issue, but it was genuinely bothering Nacht. He turned my way with an earnest look and asked...

“What do you think, Note? Can this party really conquer the dungeon?”

I had a hard time answering him.

Onward to the Magic City of Izaar “See you guys later!” Neme called, frantically waving both her hands.

Roslia and I waved back.

“Bye for now.”

“See you, Neme.”

And with that, our carriage took off. The petite redhead still waving outside the window gradually grew smaller and smaller.

“Say hi to Erin for Neme when you see her!” she yelled just before her figure completely disappeared from sight.

“We will!” Roslia and I shouted back.

We then began muttering to each other as we continued to stare out of the window.

“It was our first time back in Puriff in so long, yet here we are leaving again.”

“It’s fine. We’ll be back soon.”

Negotiations with Neme had failed, so we were moving on to the next phase of our plan—finding Erin. Our destination was Izaar, the nation’s magical think tank with the absurd prestige of having six different magic academies. Of all the information Eisha had managed to collect for me, she’d been able to provide the most details on Erin. So I was sure of her location, but there was something else in the report that troubled me.

“Hahh... Say, Roslia, after what Neme said to us, do you really think we’ll really be able to recruit Erin?”

“Of course! She’ll definitely join us!”

“You don’t know that for sure...”

I was currently boasting a 100 percent failure rate on our mission. After being turned down by both Force and Neme, I’d basically lost all confidence.

Reuniting the Arrivers seemed impossible at this point. Even if I managed to win in a fight against Force, I had no means of poaching Neme from her new party. There was also a serious problem concerning Erin...

Just thinking about it was depressing. Even on the bright side—even if we *did* manage to get our mage back—we'd still only have a party of three. How the heck were we supposed to go dungeon diving with half a team?

"I mean, sure, it might be next to impossible to convince Erin to come with us," Roslia said. "But if anyone can do it, Note, it's you. She's got a soft spot for you, remember? Has she ever said no to anything you asked?"

I wasn't sure what to say to that. Roslia knew Erin had already rejected me once before. It was the day she'd told me that Force had left the Arrivers—and that she was planning to do the same. Back then, I desperately tried to stop her. I shamelessly told her I'd quit adventuring to live with her, that we could date and eventually marry. But she turned me down in favor of pursuing her own path as a mage. I still remember the last thing she said to me...

"I love you, Note. Let's meet again."

Who knew if she meant it, if she still felt anything for me, or if we ever really would meet again? I had no way of knowing.

"Do we really have to go...?" I mumbled.

Perhaps it was because of the way we'd said goodbye, but part of me was afraid of seeing Erin again. What if she rejected me a second time? There was also a part of me that didn't believe her parting words.

"Nope!" Roslia quickly answered. "Let's turn right back around."

"Huh?"

Roslia continued in her usual carefree tone, unaware of my inner turmoil, "Erin's always batting her eyes at you, which I find problematic. Constantly lusting after your fellow party members is inappropriate. The Arrivers are serious about dungeon conquest, after all."

"She wouldn't want to hear that coming from you."

"At any rate, let's revive the Arrivers without Erin! It'd be much better that

way—trust me!”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Once we’ve cleared the dungeon, Erin’s bound to hear the big news somewhere. Imagine when she comes bursting into HQ, all like, ‘Why did you do it without me?!’ Wouldn’t that just be hilarious?”

“That’s funny to you?”

This wasn’t any laughing matter as far as I was concerned. Despite how she came off, Erin was surprisingly sensitive. She also had some baggage about being ostracized... Rather than have some hilarious reaction, she was more likely to just silently beat herself up over it.

“So, Note, with that decided, let’s head to the magic city to collect a replacement mage!”

“To collect Erin, you mean.”

Yeah, leaving Erin out was never an option, bar the possibility of her turning us down. Thus we made our way to the magic city of Izaar.

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Beyond a huge silver gate opened up a city with streets flanked by unnaturally green trees. Our carriage pulled in on the main avenue and creaked slowly forward. The roads and footpaths all looked well maintained, and the boxy houses and shops that were spaced evenly along the road spoke to a high level of urban development.

This was Izaar, our destination.

The city itself had flourished hand in hand with magical advancement. It was split into seven districts, six of which were home to research academies that represented them locally. Meanwhile, the seventh district—situated at the heart of all the others—represented Izaar as a whole. Each district had a huge tower at its center that stretched to the sky and, with the exception of District 7, each tower was a self-governing educational institute.

Presently, we were in District 4 at the south of the city. Erin was apparently in District 1 to the north, directly across town from us. That meant we’d have to

pass through District 7 in the center of the city to get there. The sun was already setting, however, so Roslia and decided to find an inn in District 7 for the night and head into District 1 tomorrow.

“There sure are a lot of people here,” she commented as she watched the throngs of people pass by.

The streets were so crowded that the carriage was moving at a snail’s pace. Walking would have been faster.

“Must be spectators here for the Seventh Sage Selection,” I said.

That’s right. An extremely important event was about to go down in Izaar. Known as the Seventh Sage Selection, it was basically a competition to decide the top mage in the country.

“I keep hearing people say that, but is this Whatever Selection really that big a deal?” she asked.

“Are you being serious right now?” I asked right back.

“Well, I’m not kidding...”

Roslia cocked her head, apparently oblivious to the significance of the occasion.

For starters, the Seven Sages were an elite group of the best mages in the land. Joining their ranks was akin to becoming a general on a national level. They were admired far and wide by everyone who knew anything about magic.

And, just last year, one of the Seven Sages had passed away from old age—opening the first vacancy in seven years. The opportunity threw the city into a festive uproar. Spectators gathered from all over to get a glimpse of history in the making. From what I could tell, most of the people on the street had staffs, but there were also plenty of normal folks dotted amongst the crowd. Roslia and I probably just looked like more tourists.

“I haven’t been in the country for all that long, so I’m unfamiliar with what things are like outside Puriff and the capital,” Roslia offered.

“I grew up in the countryside, so I’m not that informed myself,” I countered. “Wait, you’re from another country, Roslia?”

“Er, yeah...” she replied vaguely. She looked a little nervous as she averted her eyes, but maybe that was just my imagination. “Did I, uh, never tell you?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it. So, where are you from?”

“We can talk about that later! You were telling me about the Seventh Sage Selection, remember?”

“But we’ve been friends for ages now. It feels weird that I don’t even know where you’re from...”

“Wow, I’m just dying to know about the Seventh Sage Selection! You said it’s really important, right? Right?!”

Her adamant insistence had me reflexively shrinking back. It seemed like her hometown was a taboo topic, but I could understand that. Everyone has a part of their past that they don’t want to share. Still, I had to wonder what had happened that made her aversion so extreme.

“Well, yeah. It’s basically an investiture ceremony, only more exciting because we don’t know who’s receiving the honor yet. It’ll be a big spectacle.”

“I see. That might make it harder to find an inn.”

“Good point. I hadn’t thought about that... There are a ton of out-of-towners here right now.”

Assuming everyone on the road was a tourist, the total tally was mind-boggling. Of course, not *everyone* was actually a visitor. At least some of these people had to be local residents. But even so, Roslia was right. Finding a place to stay could be difficult.

“Well, we’ll figure it out...”

My lack of planning would come back to bite me.

“I’m sorry. We only have one room available,” said the receptionist in the lobby as she apologetically bowed her head.

We’d been through the motions several times already. All the lodgings along the major roads were packed full. I knew the Seventh Sage Selection was a big deal, but I hadn’t anticipated this kind of crowding. After trying five different inns with no vacancies, we’d finally managed to find this back-alley place thanks

to Mapping—but they apparently only had a single room.

“Aww, if there’s only the one room, then I guess we’ll just have to make do! I’m a little shy about staying with a man, but considering the circumstances... we don’t have a choice! Looks like we’re sharing a room, Note!”

“My apologies, miss,” I said to the receptionist. “My companion is against sharing a room, so we’ll find another inn—”

“Wait! How did you reach that conclusion?!” Roslia demanded, grabbing my hand as I turned to leave. Her comical demeanor was suddenly replaced by her former persona—a priestess pressing close with a glint in her eye. “I never said I was against it! That was all just a preamble! The classic formula is to make a big show of being bashful about it when you’re secretly pleased on the inside, you know?!”

“I’ve never heard of this so-called formula, but please lower your voice,” said the receptionist through a strained smile. “The other guests can hear you.”

I had to sigh. Roslia really didn’t know when to lay off the jokes.

“We’ll take the room,” I said reluctantly.

“Very well,” the bewildered receptionist agreed. She then grabbed a key from below the counter and handed it to us. “You’ll be in room 301. It’s the farthest door at the back, up those stairs.”

“Thank you.”

“I have you down for a single night. If you wish to extend your stay, just come to me for the updated rate.”

I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was treating us a little differently now thanks to Roslia’s outburst, but there was no point in dwelling on it. I accepted the key and walked upstairs with Roslia.

“I have to say I’m a little surprised,” she admitted. “I didn’t think you’d agree to sharing a room so readily.”

“Really?”

“You’d normally find some excuse to avoid it, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t feel like camping outside tonight.”

“I suppose that’s fair...”

As Roslia had said, we really didn’t have a choice about sharing a room this time. One room was better than no room at all. Without a place to stay, moving around the city would be much harder. That said, I still happily would have booked two rooms if they’d been available.

“Maybe you’re actually secretly pleased after all!” Roslia teased.

“Nah. It’s just that I trust you.”

I’d known Roslia for nearly two years, six months of which we’d spent making a life together in the unfamiliar capital. I could say with confidence I knew what kind of person she was now. She didn’t make good on half the strange things she threatened to do, and she more or less had decent morals. I was pretty sure, anyway.

“You won’t do anything weird, right? We’ve known each other for long enough that I trust you at least that much.”

“Ugh... What’s with that? I can’t get away with anything once you bring pesky things like trust into the equation!”

I decided not to ask what she’d been planning on “getting away with.”

“How have you gotten better at brushing me off, Note?”

“Like I said, we’ve known each other for a while now.”

“You could at least humor me!”

I turned my back on Roslia’s temper tantrum as I opened the door to room 301.

*

Roslia and I went out to grab some local Izaar fare for dinner before returning to the inn. After we spent some time lazing around, Roslia offered to let me use the bathroom first, so I took her up on that.

She went in after me, but the room was so small I could hear the sounds of her showering even when I sat by the window farthest away from the

bathroom. I stared out at the cityscape to distract myself, but I honestly couldn't help feeling overly conscious of the noise.

"I wonder which bed I should use," I muttered, glancing at the beds in the room.

While I was grateful we at least had two beds, the room was cramped and the beds were awfully close together. I tried to push them as far apart as possible, but even all the way against the walls of the tiny room, they were still close enough that I'd be able to see Roslia's face in detail if I rolled over in bed.

Then again, I *had* known Roslia for a good while now. Surely I'd be better at keeping myself together than I was when we first met. Surely... Surely?

"I'm all done!" she called as the bathroom door swung open. It seemed she'd finished bathing while I was lost in thought.

I reflexively looked her way when I heard her voice... only to find her standing there in nothing but a bath towel.

"Huwah?!" A strange noise of surprise slipped my lips. "Wh-What?!"

My eyes were instantly drawn to her figure, which was one layer away from being completely naked. Her skin was faintly flushed after her shower, and her ample breasts stood out even more than usual with the white fabric pulled tight around her chest. Her thick thighs were exposed up to a dangerous line too.

Jeez, I take it all back. Like hell I was any better at keeping myself together. Roslia was just way too sexy. I was peak flustered right now.

"Don't look at me like that, Note... It's embarrassing."

"No, er, that's not what I..."

When I realized I was staring, I hurriedly turned away. Part of me was reluctant to give up the gorgeous view, but I focused all my willpower on beating back the lust in my head.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's fine," Roslia replied. "I actually don't mind as long as it's you, Note."

With that, I heard the sound of slippers walking my way across the floor. I

defensively curled up a little, but Roslia walked right past me and over to her trunk.

“What are you doing...?”

“What do you mean? I’m looking for a change of clothes.”

Roslia then proceeded to rummage through her belongings. When she bent over, her bath towel revealed even more of her legs, right up to the tops of her thighs... But she paid that no mind as she picked out clothes and underwear. Once she had an entire set, she stood back up.

“What are you getting so flustered for?” she asked, turning my way with a grin. “I just forgot my clothes, so I came out in a bath towel. That’s all.”

“Of course...”

“Don’t tell me you thought I was going to attack you naked.”

“...”

“An innocent maiden like me would *never* behave with such impropriety!”

Yeah, my bad. I couldn’t help blushing bashfully at the misunderstanding. If I’d looked in the mirror, my face probably would’ve been a hilarious sight.

“Besides, you’re the one who said you trusted me. Own up to that!” she kept going with renewed vigor.

Ah, of course. It all made sense now. She was just messing with me.

“Isn’t it kind of hypocritical of you to say I won’t do anything, then expect me to make a move?”

This was probably payback for the cold way I’d brushed her off during our little exchange in the lobby.

“You’re such a pervert, Note!”

“I’m truly sorry...”

I couldn’t see a way to dig myself out of this hole, so I decided to apologize in earnest. I really shouldn’t have underestimated a veteran partywrecker... Her wrath was not to be trifled with. She seemed to be having even more fun than usual tormenting me. I could now appreciate the true depth of her inner

darkness.

“As long as you understand, it’s fine,” she concluded. “Now that you’ve learned your lesson, I expect you to treat me a bit better.”

“Understood, Lady Roslia.”

“You don’t have to go that far...” she said with an exasperated glare.

After having just gotten a taste of her ire, I couldn’t afford to make the wrong move here.

“I promise I’ll think long and hard about what I did,” I assured her. “So could you please refrain from this kind of teasing in the future? It’s bad for my heart...”

“Don’t look at me like some kicked puppy! I was just messing with you! You don’t have to be scared of me!”

“Girls are freakin’ terrifying...”

“Note? Hellooo, Note? You still in there?”

Roslia leaned forward to wave her hand in front of my face, putting her cleavage right about eye level. My gaze was instantly drawn to her breasts swaying gently alongside her hand, and I had to look away in a renewed fluster.

“Put on some clothes first...”

“Oh... Come to think of it, I *am* still in my towel.” Roslia looked between herself and the clothes in her hand. “I’m starting to get a little chilly, so I’ll go get changed now. Happy hour’s over!”

She then disappeared into the bathroom, teasing me right up until the bitter end. I sighed as I watched her go.

“Remind me never to make her mad again...”

I didn’t think her maneating instincts were still so strong. She left me shaking in my boots, but I heard one last mumble coming from the bathroom...

“Ah... Being seen naked really is embarrassing...”

Dang it, I call foul play! She didn’t actually say that loud enough for me to hear it on purpose... did she?

The Seventh Sage Selection Despite the, uh, exciting events of the evening, Roslia and I were both exhausted by our long journey. We slept soundly through the otherwise uneventful night, and it was morning before I knew it. We stepped out for breakfast, then set off for District 1 as planned.

The roads were still congested thanks to the Seventh Sage Selection fervor, so it was almost noon by the time we actually arrived at the academy. When I projected Enemy Search around us, I could tell that Erin was up in the tower somewhere. All that was left now was getting to her. I was scared of being shot down again, but that didn't mean I could just walk away.

Thus Roslia and I entered the campus through a grand stone gate. On the other side was an immaculate flower garden complete with a fountain that spouted water in an arc. You could barely see the cobblestone walkway hidden beneath the mass of young men and women in distinctive robes—students of this academy, presumably. Some were carrying textbooks and staffs while chatting with their friends, while others were performing magic tricks for spectators.

I saw a bubble weave around, under, and above people as it made its way through the crowd. I could only assume it was a Water Ball. I knew the spell because it was common among mage adventurers, but this was the first time I'd ever seen it controlled so precisely. As expected of the mecca of magic, I suppose. Every mage here was extremely talented.

Anyway, Roslia and I passed through the courtyard toward the spiraling tower. It was one of seven in the city, and it had been visible all the way from the road as we approached by carriage. This was the central school building of District 1.

As we tried to enter, someone called out to us, “Hold it, you two.”

Roslia and I both cocked our heads, but stopped as requested.

A robed man then walked up to us and asked, “Are you tourists?”

“Yeah... I guess you could say that,” I replied.

“In that case, this place is off limits,” he informed me.

“Huh?” If the tower was restricted, how were we supposed to see Erin? “Then how do we get in?”

“You would normally be allowed inside, but access to the tower is currently limited to students and faculty due to the influx of tourists for the Seventh Sage Selection. Just a precaution.”

I glanced down and spotted a saber on the man’s hip, so I took the liberty of assuming he was a security guard. There were others like him at the entrance, checking for student IDs before admitting anyone to the tower. None of the general public was getting in.

“Seriously...?”

This was a rather unforeseen obstacle. I hadn’t anticipated gated access to the place.

“What should we do?” Roslia asked.

We could wait until Erin came out, but that was kind of stalkerish.

“Um, I’m sorry, sir,” I said to the guard. “But would it be possible for you to summon someone for us? We’re here to see a friend.”

“That’s fine. Can you give me their name and department?” he replied rather politely as he pulled out a notepad and pen.

“Her name’s Erin Fortlord, and I’m not sure about her department.”

The guard frowned when he heard this. He cleared his throat and studied us rather closely. “Are you two really friends of Erin Fortlord’s?” he asked.

“We are, but by the sound of things, I’m guessing that’s kind of hard to believe?”

“I’m afraid so, considering the situation.”

Alas, that went over about as well as I could have hoped. It would’ve been great if we could just talk to Erin ourselves, but we were clearly going to need some third-party intervention.

“We’re really friends! Please believe us!” Roslia continued to protest, still not understanding the situation. “Why can’t we see Erin?”

“You claim to know Erin Fortlord, but you’re actually just fans of hers, aren’t you?” the guard asked bluntly.

“I’m not a fan!” Roslia objected. “If anything, I’m an antifan!”

“That’s even more of a problem...” he said, scratching at his head.

If this kept up, Roslia was probably going to open her big mouth and say something she shouldn’t—so I quickly decided to spell it all out for her.

“We’re gonna get kicked out of here if you say anything weird, so can you not? You’re talking about a candidate for the Seventh Sage Selection, you know?” I said.

“What? We’re talking about *Erin* here,” she replied.

Last night over dinner, I’d explained to Roslia who the Seven Sages were and why the selection process was so important. With that information, she should hopefully catch my drift now.

“The Seven Sages are supposed to be the seven strongest mages in the country, right?” she asked.

“Yup.”

“On par with generals or something, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And *Erin* is a candidate for the position?”

“Seems that way.”

“But aren’t there, like, tons of other people to choose from?”

“Nope. I think the shortlist was maybe only ten people—”

“It was five,” interjected an unfamiliar voice.

I jumped a little and looked up to see a man who’d appeared next to us without anyone noticing. He had swept-back blond hair and a sharp look in his eyes. He was also wearing a robe of the same fashion as most everyone else around, so I imagined he was a student.

“This is why commoners are so troublesome,” he continued. “You know nothing about the Seventh Sage Selection, yet act so interested in it. It’s pathetic.”

“Who’s this guy?” Roslia asked in confusion over the sudden intruder.

I was honestly wondering the same thing.

“Who am I? Ewell Hupperin, a fourth-year student in the academy’s higher education department.”

“Uh-huh...”

Didn’t ring a bell. I mean, this was our first time in this city. If he wasn’t someone of national renown, expecting me to know his name was kind of a big ask.

I looked around, unsure of how to respond—and accidentally made eye contact with the security guard. He was wearing the same puzzled expression I was, however, so it seemed this mage guy wasn’t famous after all.

“What’s with that reaction? The Hupperin family heir just introduced himself, you know? Show a little more respect,” he demanded.

“Uh, we’re new in town, so pardon our ignorance,” I begged, deciding to take the polite approach for now.

Based on the way this dude was talking, he sounded like some kind of aristocrat. Who else called normal people “commoners”? I’d never heard of the Hupperin family, but I could only assume they were some kind of mage bigwigs in Izaar. Then again, probably pretty small bigwigs if the security guard didn’t even know them.

“Ah, so you’re just yokels. I suppose you wouldn’t know any better, then.” He closed his eyes and nodded, seeming to accept that. “From what I can tell, you

two are a country couple here to watch the Seventh Sage Selection out of curiosity. I swear, rabble like you who come to the academy with no foreknowledge are the most bothersome of all.”

If nothing else, this dude had an attitude. I had to give him that much. He was impressively arrogant with people he’d never met before.

But I didn’t have time to entertain some weirdo. For now, I figured the best thing we could do was wrap this up and come back to try again another day. I looked at Roslia to give her a signal and— “Did you hear that, Note?! He thinks we’re a couple!”

Yeah, okay. She wasn’t gonna be any help here. I quickly grabbed her hand and nodded politely toward Ewell.

“Sorry for the trouble. We’ll be going now,” I said and turned to leave.

“Hey, hold it,” he unexpectedly called to stop us. When I fearfully turned back, he continued, “I overheard your conversation with the guard earlier, and it’s obvious you two know nothing about the Seventh Sage Selection.”

“Yeah, like I said... Please pardon our ignorance.”

“All right, all right. Fine. You leave me no choice—I’ll teach you about the Seventh Sage Selection myself.”

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly trouble you more...”

“I understand your reservation about wasting my precious time. But you’re tourists, no? You won’t be able to enjoy the Seventh Sage Selection with no knowledge of the candidates.”

“Well, that much is true.”

“I’m sure you paid a small fortune to travel all this way to Izaar, didn’t you? That money must have been important to you—it’d be a waste if you didn’t enjoy the Seventh Sage Selection to the fullest, no?”

Huh? Was he actually offering to help us out of the goodness of his heart? I mean, his tone was still incredibly condescending, but was he a decent guy underneath it all?

“Still, I’d feel bad...”

His offer was indeed kind, but we weren't any regular tourists. We weren't here on vacation. No, we were here on a mission to get Erin back. So while I *was* curious about the Seven Sage System and the candidates, it wasn't enough to trouble anyone for the full rundown.

"Modesty is a virtue, but you can overdo it, you know? I'm offering to share my great wisdom with you. You should just gratefully accept it."

"Right..."

Apparently, we didn't have the option to refuse.

There was no doubt in my mind that this Ewell dude was actually a nice guy, but he did *not* listen. I'd never really known the type before, so I wasn't really sure how to handle him.

At any rate, it didn't seem like Roslia and I would be able to see Erin even if we continued pestering the security guard. Our only chance to catch her would be on her way out of the building, but there was no telling when she'd be leaving. I could keep tabs on her with Mapping and Enemy Search, but since there was no sign of her coming out any time soon, I figured we might as well hear Ewell out while we waited.

"All right," I said. "Thanks for enlightening us, then."

"That's much better," he huffed smugly—and unnecessarily, I might add.

"Yes, thank you," Roslia added, holding her hands together and bowing lightly. "Can I ask some questions about the Seventh Sage Selection first? Namely, if there are five candidates, how were they decided?"

This was what had prompted Ewell to strike up a conversation with us in the first place. All I'd really been able to glean from Eisha's report was that Erin was a candidate herself—I didn't know anything about how the selection process actually worked. I was still in Changs back during the last Seventh Sage Selection, so this was my first time experiencing any of this.

"The candidates are nominated through a simple referral system," Ewell explained.

"How does that work?" I asked.

“Referrals are generally given out by the heads of Izaar’s six self-governed districts, although the decision to nominate someone is made by the entire organization rather than any individual. The referral is just issued by the headmaster.”

In other words, you needed an academy referral to be a Seventh Sage Selection candidate. I’d mistakenly assumed the nominees were chosen based on ability.

“There are no restrictions on who the academy refers—it can be a student, a non-student, or even the headmaster themselves. Anyone can be nominated so long as the academy deems them worthy and they have the right connections. In fact, two of the five candidates this time are academy students.”

“And *Erin* is one of them?” Roslia gawked.

“That’s right. The other is a mage employed by the country.”

“I see... But if there are six academies, how come there are only five candidates? Isn’t that odd?” she asked, tapping her finger against her cheek pensively.

“No, nothing odd about that. District 3 simply declined to refer anyone,” Ewell explained. “Each academy has their own reputation to consider. If they nominate someone unfit, it reflects poorly on the institution. So in order to avoid embarrassing themselves, District 3 chose not to send a candidate at all this time.”

“Interesting...”

This was more political than I’d thought. I’d never engaged in anything like it, so the whole concept of institutional reputation was kinda beyond me.

“So how do they choose the new sage from among the candidates?” I asked. “What exactly do the nominees have to do?”

“You came all this way without knowing that much? Unbelievable.” Ewell sighed in exasperation, though it didn’t keep him from explaining, “The head of the central district—District 7, that is—makes the decision alongside the city executives... In other words, the headmasters of the academies. It basically comes down to a majority vote.”

“If everyone’s shilling their own candidate, doesn’t that leave a lot of room for bias?”

“The headmasters of each district are all top mages themselves. They are most sincere in their approach to magic, so they wouldn’t be swayed by favor for their own nominees. I suppose that kind of propriety is too much for commoners like you to comprehend.”

“Huh...”

“There are also measures in place to prevent such bias from influencing the vote. I’m talking about the Decafights, of course.”

“The Decafights?” I asked. That was yet another unfamiliar term, so Roslia and I both cocked our heads.

“Yes. It’s essentially a magic duel to demonstrate the nominees’ abilities for all to see. Of course, the candidates’ past achievements are also factored into the ultimate decision, but public opinion of the potential sages is largely determined by the results of the Decafights.”

“So is it fair to say everything really comes down to this duel?”

“As far as the public is concerned. That’s what all the tourists come to see, after all. Or are you telling me you came here without even knowing *that*?”

“Actually, yeah...”

And so I explained to Ewell why we were really here to see Erin—that she was a former party member of ours, and that we were looking to recruit her again. I was hoping I could convince him to help us set up an appointment with her somehow. I figured he could get us into the academy since he was a student, but he shook his head slowly.

“Not even someone as important as myself can see Erin Fortlord right now. The Seventh Sage Selection is reaching its climax, and she’s a high-profile candidate. The security around her is flawless.”

“Really? Damn...”

What were we supposed to do then? We might not be able to see her at all like this... I hadn’t thought getting to meet her would be the hard part, but the

state of affairs here was more complicated than I'd imagined.

"Can't we just wait until the Seventh Sage Selection is over?" Roslia asked.

"But what if she's chosen to be the new sage? How would we get her back then?" I fretted.

"I'm afraid it'd be impossible," Ewell interjected. "One of the Seven Sages would never be allowed to join a common adventuring party. The nation vests them with a great deal of responsibility, which is rather restrictive on their personal lives. It's not easy to walk away from, either."

Go figure the country wouldn't want to let go of someone who'd proven themselves worthy of a rank equivalent to that of a military general. The moment Erin joined the Seven Sages, reforming the Arrivers would be impossible.

"That means we have to convince her to give up on the Seventh Sage Selection somehow..." I mumbled.

Just what was Erin trying to do, anyway? Had she lied when she'd said we'd meet again? When she said she loved me...? She was moving further and further out of my reach. Maybe I didn't matter to her anymore. Maybe she'd already forgotten about me. The thought of her casting aside the Arrivers and dungeon diving to pursue greater heights alone as a mage inflicted an indescribable sense of loneliness on me.

"You needn't worry," Ewell continued with little regard for the tension of the situation. "Erin Fortlord's defeat in the Seventh Sage Selection is assured."

Roslia, of all people, flared up at this. "What are you saying? Her personality might be lacking, but she's an incredible mage, you know? Even if her personality is lacking."

"Why did you repeat that part?" I had to ask.

"Because it's important. If there was a personality test, she'd definitely fail."

I didn't really think Erin was that bad... I mean, she could stand to be a little nicer, but still.

"Her personality is irrelevant," said Ewell. "She simply doesn't have the ability

as a mage to join the ranks of the Seven Sages.”

That certainly wasn’t the reply I was expecting...

“You don’t think Erin has what it takes?”

“Certainty not. The Seventh Sage Selection isn’t some playground for adventurer mages.”

“So you’re saying academy mages are superior?”

“Obviously. It needn’t even be said. Their dedication to their training is on a completely different level,” Ewell stated as though it were undeniable fact. “Mages have a saying, you know? ‘There are no shortcuts in the path to magic.’ And your progress on that path is determined by your dedication to walking it, plain and simple. All that time adventurer mages spend adventuring? Academy mages spend it mastering their magic. There’s no way they’d lose in a contest of ability.”

“I’ll have you know that Erin’s defeated a ton of monsters with her magic. She might put up a good fight—”

“You just don’t get it. An adventurer mage may be good at fighting monsters, but fighting another mage is a different story altogether. Academy mages specialize in one-on-one fights, while adventurer mages only know how to fight in a team. Their activation speed is slow and their magic control is sloppy. A mage who only knows how to overpower a monster with brute force doesn’t stand a chance in a duel against a finely trained caster.”

Adventurer mages only knew how to fight in teams, huh? I guess that much was true. There were always frontliners to protect them while they cast spells from the rear. That was the ideal party formation for a team with a powerful mage, and Erin fit that bill to a T. She was top tier.

But as for whether she could handle herself in a duel, not even I knew the answer. Her spells were all super strong, but they took time to activate. Anyone who was light on their feet could evade them. I’d done as much myself with Pseudo Shadow Runner whenever one came flying at me in the dungeon, after all. If Erin and I faced off one-on-one, it wouldn’t be too hard for me to win. She just wasn’t built to shine when she was fighting solo.

“All the mages who come from the capital and elsewhere always lose to our local academy mages. Erin Fortlord has only gotten this far in the selection process because she’s been lucky in the matchups, although her next match won’t be so easy.”

“Is her next opponent strong or something?”

“But of course. He’s the favorite to win right now. That said, it’s more accurate to call him her *current* opponent rather than her *next* one.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It would be easier just to show you. So, how about it? Would you like to go witness a Decafight for yourself?”

The sudden offer took me by surprise. After hearing so much about it, I definitely wanted to see it. I exchanged a look with Roslia, who nodded.

“That’d be great,” I said to Ewell.

“But we can’t really get in, can we?” Roslia asked. “If there are so many spectators here to see it, I imagine getting tickets is going to be a challenge.”

Ewell replied smugly, “That won’t be a problem. I have connections.”

That made it sound kind of shady, but if it meant we could get our hands on tickets, then I would count my blessings.

“Really?! Thank you oh-so much!” Roslia cheered.

“That would be a huge help,” I said, likewise expressing my gratitude.

“Consider yourselves fortunate to have met me,” Ewell snorted.

“So... how much are these tickets going to cost?” I asked warily. Our travel expenses thus far had already set us back pretty significantly. I had to make sure we wouldn’t be bleeding our coffers completely dry.

“What are you on about?” Ewell frowned. “I couldn’t take money from a penniless commoner.”

He really was a nice guy deep down, huh?



*

The Decafight match wasn't scheduled until the next day. It didn't seem like we had a chance of running into Erin before then, so Roslia and I found ourselves with some free time on our hands. With it, we returned to the inn and asked for permission to use the inner courtyard to spar. Ever since I'd lost to Force at Swordmaster's Sanctuary, this had become a part of our daily routine.

First Jin, then Eisha, then Roslia... I'd really been blessed with the best training partners. They were all top-tier fighters. I could learn more in one bout with them than your average adventurer could ever dream of.

In fact, it was only thanks to the support I'd been getting all this time that I'd ever made it so far in the dungeon. That was why, this time, I wanted to be the one to lead everyone. And in order to do that, I had to take this opportunity to grow into Jin's equal.

I held my dagger ready and glanced around. The inner courtyard was shaped like an angular U. One end led to the outside entrance, and the yard wrapped around the guest rooms. Since this was a back-alley inn, the lawn was pretty small. Ten square meters at most. It was covered in weeds and didn't appear particularly well kept. The ends of the grass prickled my legs.

I looked at Roslia standing across from me. She held her holy sword at the ready, braced for battle. She had her armor on, but she wasn't using her shield. My attack power was so weak that her armor was more than enough to protect her. Her biggest concern was countering my speed, so she'd sacrificed the shield for more mobility.

Now, how to attack?

As things stood between us, I had an astonishing win ratio of 10 percent. I wasn't stronger than her by any means. Overall, I didn't hold a candle. Weapon mastery, movement, magic... She was my better in every regard.

I'd only been able to best her with Pseudo Shadow Runner. All my victories had been claimed using my speed to toy with Roslia and then getting her with a surprise attack. She'd started to catch on to me lately, however, which was making it harder to attack.

She stood calmly on guard, waiting for me to come to her. It was next to impossible to shake a paladin on the defensive—especially Roslia. My win rate had been plummeting since we first started training together, but this was a brand new location. That left me a few tricks up my sleeve.

Pseudo Shadow Runner.

I activated my go-to art and darted forward in a beeline. Not for Roslia, but for the wall diagonally to my right. After reaching it in a single breath, I used Climb to run straight up it before coming to a stop.

The moment Roslia turned to me, I started running along the wall again. It was like gravity had no effect on me—my body just kept hurtling forward. No matter which direction I leaped, I didn't fall.

But it was too difficult to follow my sporadic movements in the tiny courtyard. Roslia craned her neck as she watched me, continuing to stand fast.

Now!

I suddenly changed my trajectory and made for Roslia. I saw her indigo hair swish as she whipped around.

"Not so fast!"

Our eyes met. Her holy sword, Fractus, was already headed my way. It was a superb swing selected from her vast repertoire of sword techniques. Even if she couldn't see her opponent clearly, Fractus would counter with the perfect move. All Roslia had to do was follow its lead.

"Rgh..."

I bent my knees and twisted my body. The shining sword passed over top of me. I could feel my jerky dodge throw me off balance. My shoes skidded along the ground as I lost momentum. By the time I came to a full stop, I was on my backside with Roslia's sword pointed at my brow.

"...I surrender..."

No way could I come back from that. No matter how I looked at it, this was defeat.

"One point for me then," she said with a grin.

She then withdrew Fractus and stabbed the holy sword into the ground, offering me her free hand. I wiped my dirty hands on my pants before taking it and letting her pull me up.

“Thanks,” I said, walking several steps back before sighing. “One loss already, huh?”

I’d tried using the environment to my advantage, but Roslia had shut me down completely. I was pretty powerless against Fractus. It was all I could do to play mind games with Roslia with my speed, but the holy sword could see through my tricks—it was almost like facing Force with Mind’s Eye. Fractus was so strong that it basically negated all other combat abilities, including Pseudo Shadow Runner.

The only chance I had of winning was to bait Roslia into an attack so she couldn’t make a follow-up swing. But I’d preyed on that weakness so many times before that she was now particularly guarded against it. That was why she’d adopted this “wait and watch” strategy.

“You surprised me though, Note. That was a close one.”

“Really? I actually had you?”

“I mean, it wasn’t like I couldn’t handle it. But I would’ve been toast if I were any slower.”

“In other words, you’ll never lose as long as you don’t slip up?”

“I guess so...”

It seemed I still had a long way to go. I’d never reach Jin’s level at this rate—and Force certainly wouldn’t accept it.

How the heck was I supposed to beat Roslia’s Fractus and Force’s Mind’s Eye? One possibility was breaking through with pure strength. If it was inevitable that we’d cross blades, then I just had to overpower their swings. That was how Force and Roslia had always tackled dungeon bosses.

Granted, rationally speaking, there was no way I was going to outmatch either one of them when I couldn’t even use attack arts to a satisfactory degree. Force had me beat in terms of sheer strength, not to mention skill. Yeah, it was best

just to go ahead and give up on that plan.

There *had* to be some other way, though. Jin had been able to go toe to toe with Force before. He was an ace with a blade even if he wasn't that strong physically. He'd gotten past Mind's Eye somehow. So what was it? What was I missing? Was it a difference in our skill sets? Or something else? I had a feeling that answer would be the key to defeating Force.

"Mind if we go for another round, Roslia?"

"Sure. I'm willing to go as many as you want."

It was an answer I knew I wouldn't find by thinking about it. Since I had the chance, I figured it was best to learn by doing.

"Here I come!"

Roslia and I thus continued to spar until the sun set.

*

The next day, we met up with Ewell at the promised location. We thanked him profusely again for the opportunity and then headed for the venue—a huge dome in District 7. They apparently used it to host large events, and it was serving as the arena for the Seventh Sage Selection Decafights.

We got in without an issue thanks to the tickets Ewell had secured for us. We walked up a set of stairs and down a corridor to get to our seats, which were incredible. They were apparently the best in the house, as we were seated just below the area reserved for national VIPs. We had a sweeping view of the whole stadium. I could see the other stands were mostly full already, and there was a continuous stream of people frenetically filing in.

"What a crowd," I couldn't help remarking.

"Naturally. The favorites are slated to fight today."

"Really?"

"Indeed. Who *wouldn't* want a chance to see the newest of the Seven Sages fight?"

"I can see the draw, yeah."

I nodded and turned my attention from the audience around us to the square at the center of the field. Inside it were two castles that had caught my eye. Both were white with simple exteriors, and they stood facing each other at a good distance. They were only a few meters tall though, so they were more like miniature structures. The part that I found most curious of all, however, was how thick their front walls seemed to be.

"What are those castles for?" I asked. "Aren't they going to get in the way of the match?"

"You really don't know anything about Decafighting, do you?" Ewell sighed. "Those castles are magical artifacts central to the sport. In layman's terms, the Decafight is a race to destroy your opponent's castle. The first one to do it wins the round, and this is repeated ten times across two days—the first and second halves, as we call them."

"Huh, so that's how this works. They're not just having a no-holds-barred fight."

"Indeed. It's a nuanced game that requires a balance of offense and defense. Competitors must attack the enemy castle while protecting their own. This complexity allows for all kinds of tactics, which is also what makes it fun to watch."

Makes sense. This is really a contest of strategy rather than a simple mage duel.

While Ewell and I were discussing the rules, a dull roar erupted through the venue. It seemed the match was getting ready to start.

"The second half of the seventh match of the Seventh Sage Selection Decafights is about to commence!" the announcer declared.

At that, the entire audience broke into a collective cheer. Enthusiasm to see the newest of the Seven Sages crowned was reaching a fever pitch.

"Please welcome our contestants to the arena!" the announcer continued. The thunderous cheering reply from the crowd made my ears ring. "In the first corner, we have our current leader who swept the first halves of the seventh and eighth matches the other day! It's the undefeated favorite to win,

professional spatial mage Eskar Burnout!”

When his name was called, a middle-aged man with glasses appeared from the corridor leading to the square. He smiled at the audience while descending onto the balcony of his miniature castle.

“Wait, this is the seventh match, right?” I had to ask. “So how have they already held the eighth?”

“I told you the first and second halves take place across two days, which allows two matches to take place in succession. That’s also why I corrected myself yesterday and said it was more accurate to refer to Eskar Burnout as Erin Fortlord’s current opponent.”

“You mean Erin’s lost to this Eskar guy five times already?”

“That’s right. She was powerless against his spatial magic.”

“You mean Erin got owned?” Roslia asked, covering her mouth in surprise.

I was honestly having a hard time believing it myself.

“Now, in the second corner... With three defeats from three matches, can she make a comeback today? It’s the assassin from the capital, sword dancer Mille Gundak!”

The second mage to appear was a woman about ten years Eskar’s junior. She looked deathly pale as she descended to her balcony across from her opponent.

“Her defeat is a foregone conclusion, yet she still hasn’t forfeited,” Ewell muttered, his nose wrinkled.

“You’re allowed to forfeit in the middle of a Seventh Sage Selection match?”

“Of course. The candidate from District 5 realized he couldn’t win early on and has already withdrawn. Knowing when to bow out is far wiser than putting on a disgraceful show.”

“You don’t say...”

“I suppose Mille Gundak has her reasons. She was sent by the capital, so the decision to forfeit likely isn’t up to her.”

“Sounds complicated.”

This politics stuff really didn't click for me. Maybe because I was just a commoner from the countryside.

"Both our contestants are now in place!" the announcer continued.

Eskar held a wand in one hand and a staff in the other, while Mille had a single swordstaff. The two mages stared each other down from across the field. Silence fell over the arena before the built-up energy exploded all at once.

"Let the first of the second half rounds for match seven commence!"

With that, both sides readied their weapons and began pooling their magic energy.

"Do you know the basic tactics of Decafighting?" Ewell asked.

I shook my head without taking my eyes off the candidates.

"It's most conventional to open with a doublecast—one spell to defend your castle and one to attack your opponent's."

"What? I didn't think that many people could doublecast."

I remembered hearing it was a difficult technique from the mages in random parties I'd teamed up with back during my pack mule days in Broad. They'd said only a handful of mages could doublecast. Some got lucky and could do it thanks to a skill, but the skill was incredibly rare and getting it was like hitting the jackpot for anyone in the mage business. Not even Erin had been able to doublecast.

"Exactly. It's a technique that only a handful of standout mages can obtain via years of intensive study. That's why it's exceptionally uncommon among the adventuring ilk." Ewell cleared his throat before continuing. "So, what do mages do if they cannot doublecast? They have to compensate by casting a single spell that covers both offense and defense."

There, he paused for a moment and pointed to the candidate in the second corner.

"Mille Gundak from the capital is one such mage. Her forte is a spell called Magic Sword Dance, which allows her to freely control her magical energy in the form of swords. She can use those to attack her opponent or defend

herself.”

Countless swords of magical energy had appeared around Mille, each one several meters in length and marked with a strange emblem glowing in a faint green light. They rotated around her in the air, not unlike Roslia’s Blades of Light—just on a far grander scale. Each sword looked like it had enough power to rival the Holy Sword Fractus.

I guess that’s a mage from the capital for you...

It seemed she hadn’t accomplished much in the Decafights, but she easily would’ve been considered a top-tier mage in Puriff. Her casting time was impressively swift, and it was clear she had perfect control over the magical blades circling her. She might even be able to hold her own in a swordfight with a melee adventurer.

“But because of the rise of single-spell fighters like Mille Gundak, doublecasters like Eskar Burnout have changed their strategy to adapt. He uses his wand to cast similar twofold spells, while simultaneously doublecasting offensive and defensive magic as needed with his staff. This so-called twofold doublecast strategy has trumped the single-spell version, rendering it inferior, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

Ewell looked over at Eskar’s castle walls, where black circles were appearing all over the place. The sinister-looking spots rippled with instability, distorting their shape while somehow managing to maintain their position. When I looked closer, I could see a similar circle floating above Eskar’s staff.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“One of Eskar’s spatial magic spells, Gate.”

“What does it do?”

“Simply put, Gate connects distant portals on the same plane. Anything that enters one of those black circles will come out another. Eskar uses this to effectively warp spells from his staff and attack from unpredictable angles. He uses the same technique to warp dangerous spells away from his castle.”

“Is that even legal?”

“It is, which means there’s nothing that can be done about it. Spatial magic isn’t even something normal humans can use. It requires the Spatial Magic Aptitude skill.”

“But why isn’t that Mille lady doing anything? If her opponent has such amazing magic, her only chance to win is with a surprise attack, right?” Roslia asked, having thoroughly analyzed the situation.

Ewell nodded before replying, “I am of the same opinion. Unless she does something unexpected, Mille has no chance at victory. During the first half rounds, however, Mille’s magic swords were snapped the moment they came into contact with Eskar’s Gate. That may be why she’s being so reserved with her attacks now.”

While Ewell was talking, the duel began. Eskar was the first to make a move. He fired several powerful spells in succession from his staff, which were sucked into one portal and shot out another closer to Mille’s castle. They flew in every direction, forcing Mille to devote herself entirely to defending.

Her magic swords came together in front of her castle like a shield. It wasn’t enough to block all of the incoming spells, however. A few still got through, cracking the surface of the castle wall. Mille stuck to the defensive while waiting for her chance to retaliate, but Eskar pressed his attack and continued to chip away at her castle.

So this is what a fight between some of the best mages in the country looks like...

The sheer spectacle of it all made my heart pound. It was no wonder people had come from far and wide to see it. I’d seen all kinds of fights in the dungeon before, but I’d never witnessed anything like this. The clashing of spells made for a much better show than the clashing of swords. And more impressive still, these mages could cast one spell after another without pause—something you’d never see from an adventurer mage.

“It kinda looks like Magic Sword Dance is weak against Gate...” I muttered while watching the match play out.

Mille definitely wasn’t weak by any means. This was just a poor matchup for her. Her opponent was overwhelming her with spatial magic and various attack

spells.

“Can’t she cast anything else?” I continued to mumble.

“If she did, she’d lose her means of defending herself,” said Ewell, who’d apparently heard me. “It’s generally unwise to use a spell outside of your expertise in a mage duel. Casting time is the most critical factor in magic fights, followed by the power of your spells, your mana management, and your magical control. As for casting speed, the rate at which a mage activates their spells can be shortened with long years of intense dedication to a single incantation. It’s not something a mage can pick up overnight.”

“I see...”

“I told you before that there are no shortcuts in magic, right? They say a mage must cast a spell over ten thousand times in order to perfect it. That’s not too difficult to do with elementary magic that takes next to no mana. But the spells these candidates are using take massive stores of magical energy to cast. They can only be used a few times in a day, meaning mastering them can easily take several years.”

“That long?”

“That’s why an adventurer mage will never win against an academy mage. It’s impossible to devote yourself to your spells when you’re fighting monsters. Skills are important in magehood, but they’re not everything. One must dedicate themselves to the path of magic, and in the end, true strength is measured by how far one has walked.”

There was an undeniable gravitas to Ewell’s words. It was true Erin hadn’t spent much time walking her path—there was no denying that. She’d gotten fed up with school for personal reasons and fled the best possible environment to learn magic. She’d even stopped studying altogether until the tragedy on floor 20. That was time she’d never get back, no matter how good she was.

“And that’s why you think Erin can’t win?”

“That’s right. She’s strong. Blessed with great skills. But she’s too young. Maybe in another decade she’ll be able to compete with Eskar, but not right now. Simply being nominated at her age is an honor. Unprecedented, even.”

Mages were considered late bloomers compared to most combat battle styles. I knew that much already. Adventuring required stamina, so there weren't a lot of elderly adventurers out there. Decafighting was different, however. It was purely a contest of magic. The more experience you had, the greater your advantage. And in reality, Eskar had at least a decade on Mille and even more on Erin.

A loud buzzer suddenly went off in the arena. Mille's castle had been destroyed before I knew it. She just wasn't able to stand up to Eskar's onslaught. And so the first round of the second half was decided. Six losses guaranteed this match would go to Eskar, but it seemed they'd be going the full rounds. Mille's miniature castle was repaired in the blink of an eye.

"Did Erin lose like that too?" I asked, watching the aftermath of Mille's helpless defeat.

It must have been hard to face an opponent you knew you didn't stand a chance against in front of so many people. I finally understood why other candidates had forfeited without fighting.

"No, actually," Ewell replied. "She made a surprisingly good showing."

"Really?"

"Yes. In spite of the odds, she beat her first two opponents and the third forfeited before their match. So apart from her match with Eskar, which is only half over, she's won all her fights."

"But earlier, you said she'd never win..."

"In theory. Yet somehow, she defeated both Mille and Azotte from District 4. She's on a lucky streak, you could say. Her spells were just especially effective against her opponents. Minor spells, mind you. Ones you don't often see in Decafights. Thanks to that, the people of Izaar have taken to calling her a giant-killer."

Phew. That was a relief to hear. It would've killed me if Erin had suffered the same humiliating defeat. Even if she was ultimately eliminated from the Seventh Sage Selection, as long as she put up a good fight, I knew she'd be able to hold her head high afterward.

“But Eskar still trounced her in the first half of their match, right?” asked Roslia. The announcer had revealed as much in Eskar’s introduction earlier.

“That’s right. She started the match smart, using spells effective against Gate. It even seemed like she might win until Eskar pulled the rug out from under her.”

“How so?”

“He has an ace up his sleeve. Maybe you’ll get to see it next.”

As with the first round, the announcer signaled the start of the second. Mille immediately activated her Magic Sword Dance again, but Eskar started chanting a spell that wasn’t Gate.

“Speak of the devil,” remarked Ewell. “Mille probably means to drag the fight out and exhaust him, but Eskar has no intention of letting that happen. Watch carefully. This round will be decided in an instant.”

A glowing transparent cube appeared before Eskar.

“There it is! Eskar Burnout’s Transfer Zone!” the announcer bellowed.

Cubes the size of people were now multiplying around Eskar. They flew at Mille, who tried to block them with her swords, but they passed right through and disappeared into her castle.

“What just—”

Before I could even finish asking, Eskar clapped his hands together loud enough for the audience to hear.

“Transfer!”

With that incantation, Mille’s castle collapsed with a rumbling crash. I could hardly keep up with what was happening. It wasn’t until I heard the sound of the buzzer and the crowd cheering that I realized the round was over.

“Transfer Zone is an original spell developed by Eskar. It forcibly warps everything within its field to another location. Eskar used it to teleport the foundation of Mille’s castle—and without it, the whole structure collapses. Simple as that,” Ewell explained calmly.

As he talked, the fallen castle was restored to its original condition for the next round.

“What’s terrifying about this spell, first and foremost, is that it can destroy without regard to an object’s physical properties. These castles are reinforced with their fighter’s magical energy, so they’re several times sturdier than any ordinary building. Yet nevertheless, Eskar was able to eliminate Mille’s foundation like it was nothing.”

The third round to follow was a replay of the second. As soon as it began, Eskar cast Transfer Zone. Mille tried to defend with her magic swords, but Eskar bypassed them to destroy her castle.

“Its second terrifying feature is that it cannot be interfered with by physical means. There’s no way to stop it. As such, it essentially bypasses all defenses.”

“And this is what Erin lost to?”

“Indeed. There’s no way she could have foreseen such a deadly attack. She tested all kinds of spells at first in an attempt to discover a way to counter it, but the instant she realized it was impossible, she stopped casting altogether and froze.”

An opponent who could make even Erin give up on victory... This was the favorite to win the Seventh Sage Selection, Eskar Burnout. When the buzzer for the third round blared, the crowd erupted in celebration of his unstoppable rampage.

“Eskar and Erin are set to fight again in five days’ time. I cannot fathom that she’ll manage to come up with a counter for Transfer Zone by then. Even if she thinks of a way to handle it, it will be for naught unless it’s a spell that’s already in her repertoire. It takes years to train a spell to viable levels for Decafighting.”

“In other words, Erin really has no way to win...”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you. Losing all five rounds of the first half is practically a death sentence. See for yourself,” Ewell said, casting a cold look down upon the arena square.

Mille was desperately trying to get her magic swords to Eskar’s castle, but her own castle was destroyed before even one made it. It seemed her Magic Sword

Dance was utterly powerless against Eskar’s defense-defying Transfer Zone.

As I watched her lose all five rounds back to back, I was worried I was catching a glimpse of Erin’s future.

Inevitable Reality “Hahh... No sign of her today either.”

After several hours of waiting outside the District 1 academy, I shrugged in disappointment. We’d gone another day without seeing Erin. She hadn’t left the tower once all this time. I thought we’d be able to catch her on her way home, but she was apparently staying at the school. Our chances of getting to see her before the Seventh Sage Selection visitation restrictions were lifted were looking slim.

“Guess not. I wonder what she’s doing holed up in the academy like this...” Roslia mumbled.

“Who knows? Maybe it’s just hard for a celebrity to go out in public.”

“Erin’s a celebrity, huh? Times sure have changed.”

“They really have, and Erin’s changing with them... She’s a candidate for the Seven Sages now and everything.”

Erin was fairly revered as a mage when she was with the Arrivers, but that was primarily for her role in the best-known dungeon party. Now she was being acknowledged as a spellcaster in her own right—by the entire country, no less. While I was happy for her, it was also kinda sad. It felt like the Erin I used to know was gone. As her friend, I should’ve been happy for her... but I just couldn’t see it as cause to celebrate.

“What should we do?” Roslia asked. “What if she actually gets selected for the Seven Sages?”

“If she does, then that’ll be the end of the Arrivers...”

If Erin became one of the Seven Sages, she’d never rejoin us. The Seven Sages bore national responsibility, so partying up with civilian adventurers would be out of the question. Force and Neme had already turned us down, too. If it was just going to be me and Roslia reforming the Arrivers, we wouldn’t be the Arrivers at all. We’d be a completely different party.

And if that happened, what then? If I couldn’t get the Arrivers back together,

what would I do from here on out? Should Roslia and I try to form our own dungeon crew, or should we give up dungeon diving after all? I'd be forced to make a tough decision.

"Erin's out of our reach, and Force and Neme turned us away. When you think about it, things *are* looking pretty grim."

"There's still hope, so don't go getting depressed yet!" Roslia declared, balling her hands into determined fists. "Did you forget Erin's next opponent is that Eskar guy? You really think she's gonna beat him?"

"There is that..."

Eskar Burnout, a rare spatial magic user and the current undefeated favorite to win, was the biggest obstacle in the way of Erin joining the Seven Sages. She hadn't been able to score a single victory against him in the first half of their Decafight.

"Ewell said so himself, remember? It's a lost cause," Roslia continued. "She got trounced in the first five rounds, so she'd have to win all five rounds of the second half to even stand a chance."

"Yeah..."

As Roslia implied, Erin would have to win all five remaining fights to come out in a draw. Her overall score was lower than Eskar's, so she'd have to put on a damn good show to convince the judges that she was the better fit for the job. And, frankly, it was hard to imagine her upstaging an opponent who could cast a completely overpowered spell like Transfer Zone. As a former party member of Erin's, I should've had more faith in her... but it was hard after seeing what Eskar could do.

"We should be rooting for Erin, but we also don't want her to be selected for the Seven Sages," I sighed. "This is so awkward."

"Yeah, I'm conflicted. I want her to come out on top, but that would mean she can't adventure with us anymore."

"It'd actually be easier for us if Eskar wins..."

"Wow, Note, you're the worst. I can't believe you *want* Erin to lose."

“I didn’t say that! I want her to win! It sounds like she’s been working really hard for this! But it’s also true that her winning isn’t exactly good...”

“I know how you feel. I was just joking.”

“Good.”

Despite what I said, deep down, I didn’t really want Erin to win. Granted, if things played out like Ewell said they would, then it was kind of a moot point anyway. Perhaps there was no need for me to be so worried about the future.

“So, what’ll we do now?” Roslia asked. “Wanna wait for Erin a little longer?”

“I doubt she’d come out even if we do.”

“Wanna start training early, then?”

Unfortunately, I’d hit a wall in my training with Roslia recently too. I was putting in the sweat, but I knew I wasn’t going to net a victory over Force on hard work alone.

“There’s somewhere I’d like to go,” I told her.

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“No. I just figure since we’re in Izaar, we should go check out some magic items.”

“Ooh, this place is famous for those! But why the sudden interest in artifacts?”

“I was hoping to make up for my lack of ability with them...”

“Oh, I see.”

Artifacts were hard to explain and classify, but generally speaking, they were items that used magical energy. Some were activated with it and some contained it within, so you didn’t even necessarily have to be a mage to use one. More broadly, lots of household products and security devices worked via magical energy.

It wasn’t uncommon to see adventurers use magic items in a fight, either. Erin and Neme’s staffs were artifacts, as well as the rings and sound bombs Eisha used. Even Purgatory—Force’s cursed sword—created black flames of magical

energy, so you could call that an artifact too.

It was also perfectly commonplace for adventurers to make up for their weaknesses with tools. The reason I'd never picked up any myself is that I had a *lot* of weaknesses to make up for. I'd need a stupidly powerful item to help me, and I'd never had the funds or opportunity to find the right one. Many an artifact could be found in the Dungeon of Puriff, but dungeon-born items went for absurdly high prices in the local shops. So given both my budget and the scores of items available here in Izaar, I figured it was high time for a little shopping spree.

"I think that's a good idea," Roslia agreed. "I've always wanted to scope out Izaar's artifact scene for myself."

"Great, then let's get going."

"Did you have any shops in particular in mind?"

"I hear there's a famous artifact store in District 3."

"Huh... It's a little far, but let's go check it out."

Thus with Roslia on board, we made our way to District 3.

One carriage change later, we arrived at a booming marketplace. The street extending from the station was packed with shoulder-to-shoulder crowds and vendors hawking their wares. I found lots of simple, everyday magic items for sale at the stalls lining the street, though nothing of the caliber I'd need for dungeon diving.

Word had it that the high-performance artifacts were exclusively sold at the arcade down the lane. I was sure they'd have price tags to match their quality, but we decided to go have a look anyway. And so Roslia and I made our way to the elliptical, domed building in question. We were immediately overwhelmed.

"Whoa, this place is really something else."

Inside, tiered floors surrounded a central atrium. Storefronts on each level were visible from the entrance, where Roslia and I stood in front of a grand staircase leading upward.

"Yeah, this is nothing like what we were seeing before."

The magic items at the stalls outside were mostly meant for regular civilians, but this arcade was catered to specialty shoppers. At a glance, most of the shops inside were meant for mages. There were specific stores for magic gems, grimoires, staffs, and so on. We entered a catalyst shop nearby, where a piece of fabric in a display case caught my eye.

“Why is this cloth so expensive?” I muttered.

“We could buy a whole house with that kind of money,” Roslia likewise remarked.

As we stood there gawking, a friendly clerk approached and explained, “That’s one of our bestsellers. It’s highly valuable, and highly recommended.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s a rare fabric catalyst. You won’t find anything with better affinity for magic and spells, not to mention this kind of durability.”

“This is a catalyst?” That meant it was something like Erin’s staff and Eisha’s rings. This was my first time ever seeing one in cloth form. “Can you activate magic with it, then?”

“That’d be difficult to do as it is, but what’s nice about cloth is that you can easily fashion it into something else. This isn’t enough to make a robe, but not having to hold a staff can be incredibly convenient.”

“I see...”

I had no idea there were so many different kinds of magic items, but a catalyst cloth wasn’t going to help a thief like me much... Or would it? Could I process it into something I *could* use? That was an interesting question to puzzle over, but I was also anxious to see what else the arcade had. Maybe there would be something better for me at a different shop.

And so, after thanking the clerk, Roslia and I moved on to a store specializing in artifacts for adventurers. Unlike the shops with nothing but magic swords or bows, this place had weapons and items for all kinds of roles.

“Hey, they’ve got daggers,” I couldn’t help remarking when I found the corner for thieves.

They had various small blades on display, and upon closer inspection, I realized they were meant to cast spells when the user channeled magical energy into them. They had one for all manner of simple spells, including Light, Blazing Strike, and plenty of others.

“Are these magical daggers?” Roslia asked. “You don’t see those very often.”

“Right? I’ve seen people with magical swords before, but never really daggers.”

“Actually, there’s a reason for that,” the store clerk—who’d found us browsing the aisles—explained.

Apparently it was harder to embed spell formulas into daggers simply because they were smaller than swords. Magical daggers, like the ones on sale at the store, were thus enchanted with less powerful spells to accommodate. You still needed mana to use them, however. According to the clerk, you could use magical gems like batteries if you didn’t have mana of your own, but that still wasn’t going to help me on the power front.

Daggers just couldn’t carry the type of powerful spells I’d need to take out dungeon mobs on the end floors. An enchanted dagger that powerful would be like a weapon of mass destruction. No one would sell anything so dangerous at a local shop like this. The state would keep it under lock and key.

I looked around for a while at other types of items, but there was nothing tempting enough for me to purchase. The magic boots that could fly with Steam Jet were interesting, but a few moments in the air wasn’t going to increase my offensive potential. They were out of my price range anyway, so I couldn’t justify the expense.

In the end, it was fun to shop around, but I just couldn’t find that magic something to up my combat power. I guess if a few artifacts were all it took to clear the dungeon, someone would have done it ages ago. Nothing in life is ever that easy.

The Seventh Sage Selection Finals

At last, the fateful day of the second half of the eighth match was upon us. The contenders were Erin Fortlord, our former party member, and Eskar Burnout, the spatial mage who'd dominated the seventh match. Now that Mille had lost all her matches and the other two candidates had forfeited, Erin and Eskar were the only two competitors left in the fight.

And that fight was about to enter its climax with the final rounds of the Seventh Sage Selection. With this, the winner would inevitably be crowned the next member of the Seven Sages. We were about to watch history in the making.

"Come along, you two. If we don't get going soon, the match will begin without us."

Once again, Ewell had procured tickets for us. It couldn't have been easy given the hype surrounding this fight. For him to use his connections to get tickets for two strangers he'd met on the street... He really was a generous guy.

"This is why I can't stand commoners..."

His manners could use some work, sure, but there was just something about him that made him impossible to hate.

"Sorry," I said, hurrying along after him.

We entered the venue to find it even more jam-packed than it had been for the culmination of the seventh match. I could even see some of our national leaders with their bodyguards in the audience. They were probably here to witness the rise of the newest of the Seven Sages with their own eyes.

By the time we made it to our seats and settled in, I was starting to get swept up in the excitement for myself. Roslia, who was sitting next to me, seemed to be feeling it too.

"Ah, I'm so nervous!" she said, patting her cheeks. "It's been, what, a year since we last saw Erin?"

"Yeah. I hope she's been doing well for herself."

“She must be if she’s participating in the Seventh Sage Selection, right? More importantly, should I be cheering for her right now? Or should I be cheering for Eskar?”

“I’m wondering myself.”

We were really on the horns of a dilemma. We wanted Erin to win, but we also didn’t want her to join the Seven Sages. It was so contradictory that I didn’t know what to think anymore.

“Don’t worry about that. There’s no way for Erin to clinch this,” Ewell assured me. “You saw Eskar’s abilities for yourself the other day.”

“I did, but...”

“So don’t sweat it. Cheer for Erin all you want from the bottom of your heart. It won’t change anything.”

“You don’t think there’s even a tiny chance she could bag this?”

“Ninety percent of the public is betting on Eskar. Even if Erin manages to win a few rounds today, she still lost their first five fights. Even combined with her score from her other matches, it would take an outright miracle for her to push ahead of Eskar as the favorite.”

“Hmm...”

If Ewell was so sure, then I’d take his word for it. Roslia and I were still new to the mage scene and this whole Decafighting business, so I decided to defer to his experience.

“All right, then I’ll cheer for her without holding back.”

“Aww, I wanted to boo her...” Roslia grumbled.

“Please don’t,” I quipped.

She’s sure acting like her usual self. Is she really as nervous as she said she was?

While we were joking around, a screeching buzzer resounded through the venue.

“And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for! The second half of the

eighth match of the Seventh Sage Selection Decafights is about to commence!”

This fight would decide both the future of the country and the future of the Arrivers, and it all rested on Erin’s shoulders.

The Pinnacle of Magehood I took a deep breath to calm myself.

It's okay, Erin. You've done everything you could to prepare.

If I said I wasn't worried, I'd be lying. My chest ached with anxiety.

What if I messed this up? What if there was something I hadn't accounted for? What would I do then? If people who knew me saw me like this, they'd be rolling with laughter. They'd peg me as a hypocrite for always boasting about myself the way I did.

But I wasn't nearly as strong as everyone thought. No, I was pathetically weak. I ran off at the mouth about myself, in truth, because I didn't have any confidence in myself. I was weak and I knew it, but the thought of anyone else finding out terrified me. I didn't want them to know.

That's why I behaved like a petulant child, refusing to confront reality. The truly strong face their own weakness and work to overcome them. That's right. People like Note.

What was he up to these days? Was he doing well? I wouldn't know. I hadn't seen him since leaving Puriff. But still, I wished the best for him.

I fought back my sentimentality and my desire to see him by slapping my cheeks. This was no time to be getting wistful. I had to focus on the monumental task in front of me.

I sat on the bench trying to pull myself together when I heard footsteps approaching.

"There you are, big sis. What're you doing?"

I looked up to see a familiar face—Marin Fortlord, my younger sister by two years. Her facial features were slightly rounder than mine and her locks were softer, but we shared the same color hair and eyes. When I looked at her like this, even I could see we were related.

"What are you doing out here in the hall?" she asked.

“I just needed a minute to calm down.”

“You have a waiting room, so why not use it? Your eyes are bloodshot and you have bags under your eyes. Did you not sleep well?”

“I haven’t slept at all.”

How could I? I was too restless, and I needed every second I could spare before the second half of the match. I’d spent the past three days polishing my spells without rest. In all honesty, I was spent. I probably wasn’t in any condition to be Decafighting. I felt both dizzy and nauseous.

“I knew it. You should’ve come home last night. Your hair’s a mess and everything... Are you planning on going out in front of the audience looking like that?”

“It’s okay. I won’t lose.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Half the crowd will be men, you know? There could be some real cuties out there!”

“There you go again...”

It’d always been a wonder to me how we could look so similar and be so different. Even though we were sisters, we were like polar opposites. Marin was a social butterfly and had tons of friends, not to mention boyfriends. Unlike me, she was carefree and noncommittal. Yet somehow, she was still living her best life. At one point, I’d even been jealous of her.

“You should take this more seriously, big sis. You’re only two years older than me, but you’re already past your prime.”

“I am not. I’m just focused on my magic right now.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say,” she said, brushing me off.

How infuriating. Was I really related to her after all?

“But seriously, sis, if you’re gonna be in the spotlight, you should clean yourself up a little. You never know, you know? Your soulmate could be watching today.”

“My soulmate? I don’t—”

I didn’t need a soulmate. I couldn’t imagine anyone better than Note, and he wasn’t here right now. I was in this fight alone.

“Never say never! Anything can happen. Fate works in mysterious ways, you know?”

“Regardless, I don’t have time before the match to—”

“You have ten minutes, don’t you? That’s plenty.”

“You mean I *only* have ten minutes.”

“Who do you take me for? I’m Marin Fortlord, the darling of this academy! Ten minutes is more than enough time for me to transform you.”

“I don’t need a full-on transformation, Marin. You don’t have to go to that kind of trouble for me...”

“Spare me the modesty and get back to your waiting room already. This is a race against the clock.”

Marin forced me to my feet and started pushing me toward my room. I didn’t have the strength to fight back or resist, so I just sleepily shuffled in that direction. As I did, something occurred to me.

“Seriously, why are you doing all this for me, Marin?”

My little sister blinked a few times in puzzlement, then replied, “Are you kidding? This is my big sister’s big moment. Of course I’m going to do everything I can to help you.”

Her reply left me smiling in amusement.

“What are you grinning for?”

“It’s just funny to hear you say that.”

We used to be on terrible terms. Marin looked down on me for causing problems, and I hated her for that. I wonder when that had all changed...

Have I grown even a little over this past year?

As I sat in front of the mirror watching Marin comb my hair, I found myself thinking about everything that had happened since I’d left the Arrivers.

*

Here I am again...

After my long journey to Izaar, that was my first thought upon entering the city. There were more bad memories than good for me here. I was bullied at school when I was younger, and then I had a falling out with my parents when I dropped out. We'd never made up. And I'd never intended on returning...

I didn't actually want to be here, but after deciding to relearn magic from scratch, Izaar was really the only place I *could* go. There was nowhere better in the entire country to study. So if I wanted to get better as a mage, I had to put my personal baggage aside. And so, after more than three years, I finally returned home.

Once I was in the city, I headed to my family's residence first. I considered just renting a room at an inn and not showing my face, but I knew better than to underestimate gossip in this town. My parents would hear I was back in no time flat. So if we were going to get into it one way or another, I figured I might as well go ahead and get it over with.

The part I *hadn't* foreseen was that my parents would be happy to see their prodigal daughter again. They didn't ask what had happened. They just said they were glad to see me well. They even cooked all my favorite foods for me. The welcome I got was so warm that it brought me to tears. I'd never realized how much my parents loved me.

My little sister was the only one who gave me the icy treatment. She called me shameless for crawling back home after storming off, which led to an instant fight. I was normally the one who got reprimanded when we had sisterly spats, but my parents took my side this time. It was kind of funny to see Marin cry over being scolded for once.

The day after that, I headed to the academy I used to attend in District 4. My parents offered to handle the paperwork to renew my enrollment, but I declined. I was ready to pick up my studies again, but what I was really after most was the shortest, most efficient way to learn magic.

I figured the fastest way to grow would be to corner one of the star mages at school and have them instruct me personally. I had superior skills on my side, so

I was confident I'd be able to find a professor-class tutor with ease. Yet in the end, everyone turned me away at the door.

Mages like to say there are no shortcuts in magic, and for a good reason. Magic is a time-intensive craft. Hardly anything matters more than the hours you devote to it. So the fact that I'd abandoned my education for years was a serious strike against me—a flaw too great to ignore, despite my incredible skill set.

It was frustrating. If I hadn't run away back then, I wouldn't have found myself in such a bind in the present. If only I'd stuck with it, if only I'd tried harder, if only I'd done better... I wouldn't have had to lose a dear friend and teammate. I was so full of unending regret that I thought I might burst at the seams.

Unable to give up, I returned to the academy again and again, but the result was the same every time. Instead of learning magic, I spent my days begging people to teach me. I'd said I'd become the best when I left Note and the Arrivers, yet I hadn't managed to improve any since then. I was so miserable and ashamed that it put tears in my eyes.

Then one day, something unbelievable happened. As I was on my way to the academy like usual, a man approached me. He introduced himself as Andoy Sharion.

Everyone in Izaar knew that name—he was the headmaster of the District 1 academy and a member of the Seven Sages. He was an elderly sorcerer who could use a wide range of elemental magic, earning him the nickname "Standalone."

"How can I help you?" I asked warily.

I couldn't imagine what a Seven Sage wanted from me, the laughingstock being turned down by professor after professor. Needless to say, what he proposed next both shocked and delighted me.

"You're in search of a mentor, aren't you? Care to study under me?"

Andoy Sharion was even more renowned for rearing mages than he was for being one. In fact, he'd already mentored one other Seven Sages inductee. Any mage in their right mind would jump at the chance to learn under his wing. I

was so blindsided by the offer, however, that my wariness exceeded my excitement.

“Why me, though?” I had to ask.

“Because you have what it takes to reach the top.”

“How do you know that? We’re total strangers.”

“We are indeed. I’m just now learning that you’re so bold as to not be timid with me.”

“So, why me?”

“I don’t know how serious you’ve been about your studies in the past, but I do know about your skills. With those, the pinnacle of magehood is within your reach.”

“You sure make it sound so easy. Even if I can use all kinds of elemental magic, the skill’s not all it’s cracked up to be. It’s not like it makes me a better mage.”

Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude only gave me the ability to use magic of any element. I still had to study spells to learn them the old-fashioned way. In fact, it didn’t even give me the knack for any element that a more specialized aptitude would have. I would’ve had a much easier time mastering a single element with different skills. But...

“I know as much, child,” he said. “I’m not talking about that. The key to reaching the pinnacle of magehood lies in another skill.”

“Another skill? You mean—”

“Superior Mana Pool, the best skill a mage could ask for and one I’ve always coveted. And you even have Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude to go along with it. Candidly, I envy you.”

“I don’t think any of the revered Seven Sages has anything to be envious of...”

“What are you saying? With your skill set, you could easily surpass me. Though I find you foolish for not having realized your potential yourself.”

“If I become your pupil, will you show me my potential?”

“And then some. If you can steel yourself to go through hell, I can train you up to my level within a year.”

“That fast?”

There was no substitute for time when it came to studying magic, yet he was telling me that I could achieve more in a single year than most mages ever would in a lifetime. My disbelief kept me from accepting right away. It just sounded too good to be true.

“Does such a shortcut really exist?” I asked.

“What are you saying? You learned yourself that there are no shortcuts in magic, didn’t you?”

“Are you mocking me?”

“Hardly. What I’m offering you is no shortcut. In fact, it’s the opposite. You won’t be taking a shortcut on the endlessly long, tedious path to magic—you’ll just be on a forced march to get through it much faster.”

At the time, I had no idea what kind of brutal training I was in for.



*

The task I received from Master Andoy was remarkably simple. I was to continuously cast the spells he taught me—grand spells that normal mages could only use a few times per day. With my virtually limitless mana, I was able to cast them nonstop. It took ten thousand castings to master a single spell, and I could manage that over the course of a few days. It was draconian, but effective.

Indeed, Master Andoy's training allowed me to grow and improve several hundred times faster than the average person. But casting magic without end was mentally exhausting, even more so with intricate spell formulas required of grand magic. But Master Andoy ignored it in favor of pushing me to the brink of what was theoretically possible. If I powered through my fatigue and kept casting spells nonstop, then I would indeed become a mage on par with the Seven Sages within a year.

All his brutal training really saved me, however, was time. I was still traveling the long path to success—just running down it instead of going at my own pace. It made the exercise all the more grueling, but that was the price I had to pay after spending years fleeing in the other direction.

Other than eating and sleeping, I spent every minute of every day on my magic. I could feel my mind creaking under the mental strain, but I just kept going. It was hard. It was painful. It made me forget why I even bothered trying in the first place. Who knew casting spells nonstop was so taxing? It made me want to give up and just take it easy. I wanted to be free.

Yet every time those thoughts took hold of me, Note's face came to mind. When he first joined the Arrivers, I was unhappy and took it out on him. I told him that he was slacking in hopes he would quit. But afterward, he redoubled his efforts and threw himself into his training with everything he had. He practiced his arts around the clock and showed immense improvement for it. And... that was all my fault. I was the one who pushed him into the same hell I was experiencing right now.

I was the worst. I'd never realized how cruel I was to him back then. And I'd be even more pathetic if I couldn't hack it now that it was my turn. I'd never be

able to forgive myself.

I was getting my just deserts. I was reaping what I'd sown. I was just experiencing the same pain I'd inflicted on someone else. That was what I told myself as I charged single-mindedly through living hell. My abilities improved with blinding speed. Even Master Andoy was shocked at my growth time and time again. And one day, he came to me with a proposal...

"The Seventh Sage Selection will be held in the near future. I'm thinking of nominating you as District 1's candidate," he said.

I was so immersed in my training and withdrawn from the rest of the world that I'd had no idea the Seven Sages were down a member until Master Andoy told me the tournament was coming up. It would be a once in a lifetime opportunity to see how I measured up as a mage. And so I accepted the nomination to represent District 1 in the Seventh Sage Selection.

I was a complete novice when it came to Decafighting, however. No matter how great a mage I'd become, I couldn't win on that alone. I would shame Master Andoy's great name if I was defeated early on, so he did his best to prepare me for the fights. He lectured me on strategy, my opponents, and particularly useful spells to use against them.

And with his insight, I was easily able to win my first and second matchups. As far as the rest of the world could tell, I'd achieved miraculous victories with simple spells that just so happened to be effective against my opponents. Little did they know how much forethought and planning had gone into those matches. Really, my victory was only natural.

No way was I going to lose when I was aiming for the top.

And that's precisely why my match with Eskar Burnout came as such a devastating shock. I had a counter prepared for Gate, but I was helpless against the ace up his sleeve—Transfer Zone. I'd never seen a spell like it before, and though I tried everything I could think of on the spot, it was in vain. In the end, all I could do was what Master Andoy taught me to do in the face of an overwhelming opponent. That is, to observe things carefully in preparation for the second half.

"Okay, all done!" said Marin.

I lifted my head when I heard her cheerful voice behind me. It was hard to believe the girl I saw in the mirror was really the same person as ten minutes ago.

“Well?” she asked. “I could’ve done better with more time, but don’t you think you look a little cuter now?”

“Yeah, this is great, Marin. Thank you,” I said graciously.

Marin and I had argued a lot when I first returned to Izaar, but we’d opened up to each other since. It happened one day not long after I agreed to enter the Seventh Sage Selection. We were chatting, and she said something that left a deep impression on me: *“I really respect you.”*

That was the first time I could truly say I was glad that Marin was my sister. She’d always been clever. People always needed her, and she was much more capable than I was. It made me happy to hear that she respected me, and at the same time, it made me realize that I respected her too. I appreciated her sociability, her willingness to love a sister she used to hate, and her humanity for being able to admit that out loud.

“You’d better win now that I’ve gone to all the trouble of prettying you up, you know?” she said.

“Don’t worry,” I said back.

If the sister I respected was rooting for me, I couldn’t let her down.

It’s okay. I’ve done what I can.

In the ten days since my first half defeat at Eskar’s hands, I’d been preparing a counterattack with practically no sleep. I’d changed my ways and practiced more magic than ever since meeting my master a year ago. It was true that I’d once fled from magic, but I now had the confidence to say I’d worked harder at it than anyone. And so, rather than my usual blustering, I could say with all my heart...

“You can count on your big sis. I’ll be done before you know it.”

*

“She surprised us all by winning her first two matches with ease, and despite

five straight losses in the first half of the eighth match, she could still make a comeback here in the second half! It's the giant-killer, Erin Fortlord!"

The venue cheered loudly as the announcer introduced me over the speakers. I took one last deep breath and started walking. When I stepped out into the arena, the lighting seared my retinas. It was so bright. The attention, the honor on the line, everything... I felt unworthy.

I shook off the nerves, then ascended the stairs of my castle with my head held high. Once I reached the balcony, I looked out and spotted my opponent, Eskar Burnout, on his own balcony across the arena. He was a bespectacled man with noticeable laugh lines and a stern expression.

"Hey, you over there," I called out. "I bet you're feeling pretty self-assured right now, aren't you?"

His furrowed brow twitched. Looked like he heard me.

"I just want to make this clear—*I'm* going to win the second half. If you don't want to face defeat, I recommend forfeiting now."

"Whoa! What a bold declaration of war from the giant-killer!" the announcer wailed, riling up the crowd.

Good. If I couldn't make a big show of the second half, not even claiming all five rounds would secure me a seat in the Seven Sages. I needed to build as much hype as possible.

"Oh? So you still haven't given up?" Eskar replied.

He wasn't so witless as to be shaken by petty provocation. This was the cunning mage who'd kept a deadly spell like Transfer Zone up his sleeve just for the Seventh Sage Selection. There was no telling how much he'd prepared for this tournament, but I was certain he wouldn't get cocky and careless just for winning the first half.

"Why would I give up when I'm going to win?" I purposefully pulled one side of my mouth up in a smirk. "Your Transfer Zone is indeed amazing. When it comes to Decafighting, it may even be the strongest spell there is. But it has its weaknesses too, doesn't it?"

“Weaknesses, you say...?”

Eskar’s gaze wavered for an instant. It appeared he was already wise to this.

“That’s right. Do you recall how I froze in the first half? It just looked that way. I was actually using Analysis to study your Transfer Zone.”

Analysis was a spell mostly used by magic researchers. It revealed the functions of a spell and the formula used to activate it. Normal attack spells weren’t all that difficult to decipher, but grand spells—especially original ones—took a substantial amount of experience to break down.

That, or a plethora of Analysis powered by Superior Mana Pool.

“I’m sure you know, but Transfer Zone has two weaknesses.” With that, I held up two demonstrative fingers. “First, Transfer Zone cannot be used with Gate. Spatial magic is surprisingly delicate, isn’t it? Spatial distortions interfere with each other, so there’s very little compatibility.”

That was likely why Eskar hadn’t bothered casting Gate with Transfer Zone in any of his earlier fights. Transfer Zone was strong, but it would’ve just been too overwhelmingly powerful if it could be warped in any direction with Gate. It had to have *some* drawbacks, and that was one.

“As for the second... that’ll be easier to show than tell. So let’s get this fight started, shall we?”

“O-Of course!” the announcer said in a fluster.

I had the venue wrapped around my finger at this point. The spectators who now doubted Eskar’s victory were hanging on my every movement. I could feel their stares on me.

“Now, let the second half rounds of match eight commence!”

When I heard those words, I cast my first spell: “Beetle March.”

Black mist appeared from the magic circle at the end of my staff. It wriggled and undulated as it surrounded my castle.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “That’s not an attack. I just summoned a horde of beetles.”

At that, Eskar grimaced and halted his hand, raised to cast a spell. The clear cube of Transfer Zone simply floated in space in front of him.

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you going to attack?” I pressed. “Or have you realized that you can’t use Transfer Zone anymore?”

There, I flashed a bold grin. I was now certain of my victory.

“Weakness number two: Transfer Zone can’t warp living things. It’s actually a surprisingly limited spell, isn’t it?” I scoffed.

Transfer Zone was fearsome, but it wasn’t perfect. Since it was an original spell, it had several restrictions—including that it couldn’t affect animate creatures. That’s right. The strongest spell in all Decafighting would be absolutely useless in actual combat.

That was probably the real reason Eskar had never used Transfer Zone before the Seventh Sage Selection. It was extremely limited in application, so he’d simply never had the occasion to use it. And right now, both the interior and exterior of my castle were absolutely plastered in beetles I’d summoned. That meant there was no way for Eskar to get to it with Transfer Zone.

“Then I’ll just fight as I have been,” Eskar declared.

With that, he dismissed Transfer Zone and cast Gate around his castle instead. He was switching from his trump card back to his regular hand. It was a smart play considering the formidability of his Gate strategy. There was just one little problem.

“Did you already forget about weakness number one?” I asked.

Eskar looked at me with trembling eyes, clearly not comprehending the full extent of the situation. I was going to have to spell it out for him.

“Gate can’t be used on Transfer Zone.”

Beetle March was summoning magic. The beetles it called forth remained for a finite period of time after they were summoned. That meant I was free to lift my staff and cast another spell once they were in place...

“Transfer Zone!”

A transparent cube appeared at the end of my staff. The whole venue fell

silent. It was quiet enough for me to hear Eskar gulp.

“And since Gate doesn’t work on Transfer Zone, you can’t use it to block this, can you?”

The color immediately drained from Eskar’s face. It seemed he’d finally caught on.



“You’re about to lose to a grand spell of your own creation,” I said. “How does it feel?”

“This can’t be...”

His surprise was perfectly understandable. He’d spent years developing Transfer Zone and just as long training it into usable condition—yet I’d stolen it from under his nose in ten days. It was a nightmare for any mage, especially one who believed all that mattered on the path to magic was time.

With the years I’d saved thanks to Superior Mana Pool, the ability to use spatial magic through Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude, and what I’d learned through repeated castings of Analysis... this victory was mine.

“Go forth!”

The magical cubes of my Transfer Zone flew into Eskar’s castle in an instant.

“Transfer!”

And in the next, the whole structure collapsed.

“Thanks for teaching me a surefire way to win a Decafight. That was a whole lot easier than combating your Gate head-on.”

If Eskar had kept a second ace up his sleeve, I would’ve been in trouble. But it seemed Transfer Zone was all he had.

The robed man quietly fell to his knees across the arena.

One Last Chance

“W-Wait... Erin won?”

At the end of the third round, Eskar Burnout surrendered. Every spectator in the audience watched this incredible development unfold, mouths agape.

“What do we do now?” I gawked.

Of all the possible scenarios we’d imagined, Eskar forfeiting wasn’t among them. There was no way Erin wouldn’t be chosen to join the Seven Sages now.

“Hey, Ewell! You said Erin would never win!” Roslia bellowed. “How are you going to take responsibility for this?!”

“T-Take responsibility?!” Ewell spluttered, flustered by her unreasonable demand.

This wasn’t actually his fault...

“Seriously, what are we going to do?”

But the situation couldn’t be worse. If Erin became one of the Seven Sages, there would be no more Arrivers.

“Ewell! When will Erin officially be appointed as the newest sage?” I asked in desperation.

“The ceremony should follow immediately. The district heads should be discussing things backstage as we speak, so it won’t take them long to announce their decision.”

“Then we don’t have any time to waste.”

I was hoping to talk to Erin beforehand and persuade her not to take the position, but things were moving too fast. I didn’t have the leisure of going through official channels to get to her any longer.

“Hey, Roslia. When I give the signal, can you activate Beacon?”

“What the heck are you up to, Note?”

“I’m going to see Erin.”

Now that things had come down to this, my only option was to force my way forward. I needed to talk to Erin no matter what it took. Really, I should've just done this from the beginning.

"What are you two thinking?" Ewell asked nervously. "There's security everywhere."

He then placed a hand on my shoulder as if to hold me back, but I shook my head slowly.

"Don't worry. I can outrun the guards."

"That's not the point..."

"I'm counting on you, Roslia."

"I feel like this is going to end with an arrest, but whatever. I got your back."

"Thank you."

I shook Ewell off, stood up from my seat, and headed down the stairs. I reached the ground floor with Stealth, then flashed Bloodlust at Roslia. In response, she activated her Beacon art. The entire arena looked her way, and while they were distracted...

"Pseudo Shadow Runner!"

I slipped past security and leaped out of the stands, landing in front of Erin as she turned to exit the field. Her eyes widened when she saw me. I didn't waste a second.

"Hey, Erin. It's been a while."

Maybe I should've given my opening line a little more thought. The first words out of my mouth were a simple casual greeting, just like back in the old days.

"Note...? What are you doing here?"

It seemed she still remembered me. Thank goodness. If she'd asked me who I was, I never would've recovered.

"First things first, congrats on your victory."

"Thanks. Did you come just to say that?"

“Nope. There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Security mages started to surround me. Erin raised a hand, gesturing for them to stop.

“He’s a friend of mine. Stand down.”

To my relief, she at least seemed willing to listen—which was more than I could say for the last time we talked. The hurt of being rejected was still fresh in my mind, so I was wary of being shot down again. But if I missed this opportunity, Erin would be out of my reach for good. This was my last chance to adventure with her. I couldn’t lose heart now.

“Say, Erin, do you want to try dungeon diving together again?” I resolved to lay everything bare. “I know you’ve worked hard to earn a position in the Seven Sages. On one hand, I think that’s awesome and I want to encourage you, but on the other, I still want to adventure with you. I want to go back to the thrill of what we used to have. Will you join me?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, bowed my head, and extended my right hand. The crowd was probably in a tizzy over this odd turn of events. There might’ve even been people booing, but I couldn’t hear any of that in the moment. I only had ears for Erin’s answer.

And without missing a beat, she replied, “Sure.”

“Huh? Does that mean...” I fearfully raised my head, only to be met with a bittersweet smile.

“I’m saying yes, obviously,” she clarified. “There’s no way I could turn down such an attractive proposal.”

“But you did last time...”

“I couldn’t say yes last time because I lacked the strength. But I’ve learned everything I can here in Izaar. I’m ready to return to Puriff.”

“Are you sure? What about the Seven Sages?”

“What about them? I entered this tournament to see how I measured up. I wasn’t really interested in becoming one myself,” Erin revealed like it was no big deal. She then turned to face the crowd and loudly proclaimed, “You heard

it, folks. Before the final results are announced, I hereby withdraw from the Seventh Sage Selection."

The venue erupted into chaos with that abrupt declaration from the would-be sage.

"Well, looks like this has taken an ugly turn," Erin began chattering. "I can't believe how loud they're booing. Great, now they're throwing stuff too... Oh, hey, look. Those are all the district heads. Master's with them and, uh-oh, he looks pretty steamed."

Personally, I was more afraid of the security mages who had their staffs trained on me. They looked ready to fire at any moment.

"This seems like an opportune time to make a break for it, Note."

"I couldn't agree more."

With that, Erin leaped into my arms. I held her fast, firmly putting one arm across her back and sliding my other under her knees in the so-called bridal carry.

"Hold on tight," I said.

"You'd better not drop me," she replied.

We made eye contact with each other and smiled. I pulled her close, feeling the warmth of her body against my arms and chest. I then calculated the shortest route out of the arena with Mapping and activated Pseudo Shadow Runner, making a beeline down the passageway Erin had appeared from.

"Marin was right in the end... I'm glad I cleaned up some. There's really no telling what the future has in store, huh?"

"What?"

"Nothing you need to worry about."

And so Erin and I ran away together, shaking off any and everyone who tried to hold us back.



Unexpected Influence “Wow, get a load of those piercing stares,” Roslia whistled as she took a look around us. “Congrats on becoming celebrities, you two. You even made it into the paper.”

There, she spread out the local newspaper in the cramped carriage. There was a big article with a big picture of me carrying Erin, captioned: “A runaway love?! Seven Sage candidate Erin Fortlord elopes!”

“Hahh... I should’ve seen this coming.”

As Roslia had said, Erin and I were indeed the people of the hour in Izaar. Naturally, of course. There was no way the would-be winner of the national Seventh Sage Selection *wouldn’t* be a hot topic. Someone had captured our likenesses with a rare magical artifact and put the image in the papers, meaning basically the whole city recognized us now. We couldn’t even go shopping in peace anymore.

As for the Seventh Sage Selection itself, no one actually objected to Erin’s withdrawal and thus it was formally accepted. With that, the tournament was a done deal. We had Erin back and all was well, although the stares we were getting *did* make it a little hard to relax.

“It’s a nice photo. Romantic, even,” Erin remarked, gazing at the paper dreamily. She seemed to have slipped into her own little world as she stared at the image, her eyes hazy and her mouth half open.

“She’s been like that this whole time. What are we going to do with such a loopy mage, Note?”

“Like I know...”

“Welp, we certainly can’t go dungeon diving with her like this. I vote to kick her from the Arrivers!”

“Hold it!” Erin protested, suddenly coming to life. “What are you trying to kick me out for?! I turned the Seven Sages down for you guys! If you give me the boot, I’ll have nowhere to go!”

“Oh, people will *really* start talking about you then. Wouldn’t that be great?” Roslia continued. “You might even get into the paper again with a headline like, ‘Former Seventh Sage Selection candidate gets dumped?!’”

“I don’t want to be in the paper! Especially not for a reason like that!” Erin yelped, slapping her thighs with both hands.

It had been a long time since I’d seen her and Roslia go at it. I couldn’t help chuckling at the oddly touching sight, but Erin shot me a sharp glare when she heard it.

“What are you laughing for? Knock it off and defend me already,” she demanded.

“Don’t be silly. Note’s obviously on my side,” Roslia threw in.

“Not after he came to rescue me in such a romantic fashion!”

“He was only inviting you back to the party. Gosh, women who jump to conclusions are a real pain, aren’t they, Note?”

“Listen here, Note! You still owe me, remember?”

“Sorry, Roslia. I have to take Erin’s side on this one.”

“Ooh, that was dirty, Erin! Fight me fair and square!”

“Any verbal argument *is* a fair fight! And victory is victory!”

Erin and Roslia had been like this ever since we’d reunited. It’d been nonstop bickering, and I’m not kidding. Now that we were finally back together again, I was hoping for some peaceful conversation...

So with that in mind, I tried changing the topic: “Come to think of it, Erin, did you get to say goodbye to everyone?”

“Yup, it’s all good. I’m not close with that many people, so it didn’t take long to go down the list.”

“Really?”

“The only people I had regular contact with after coming to the city were my family and my master. My master flipped out and expelled me, and I ended up getting into a fight with my parents when I told them I was leaving again... The whole thing was a mess.”

“That doesn’t sound ‘all good’ at all...”

“It doesn’t bother me, so it’s fine. Besides, I have my sister’s support.”

“You have a sister?”

“A younger one, yeah. Did you two have anyone to say goodbye to in Izaar?”

“One person. But we already had our farewell, so we’re all good too.”

Ewell had been extremely amused to have a front-row seat to such a commotion. After everything he’d helped us out with, I felt bad for stirring up trouble, but he wasn’t the slightest bit miffed about it. Incidentally, Mille Gundak was ultimately declared the winner of the Seventh Sage Selection. Although she’d lost to all her opponents, in the end, she was the only candidate who didn’t withdraw. It was an unprecedented victory.

“So, what are we going to do once we get back to Puriff?” Erin asked out of the blue.

“I haven’t thought that far yet...” I lamented.

Getting Erin back was cause for celebration, but we were still a long way from reviving the Arrivers. We still needed to persuade Neme and Force, who’d both already turned us down once. But now that Erin had chosen us over the Seven Sages, I couldn’t let her down.

“I guess we’ll start with going to see Neme again. You want to see her too, right?”

“Yeah. How’s she been? Anything new with her?”

“You could say she’s more popular,” Roslia murmured.

“What do you mean by that?” Erin asked, her curiosity piqued.

Roslia lifted a finger and explained, “She formed a new party on her own, so she’s been playing party leader all this time—and doing a good job, I might add.

Everyone looks up to her. I know, right? I was shocked too."

"Wow, yeah... I kinda can't wait to see that," Erin replied.

I'm sure it was hard for her to imagine based on the Neme she'd known a year ago. Erin herself had made great strides in the time we'd been apart; the same was just as true of Neme and Force. I'd only realized that for myself when I'd met them again.

"Look forward to it," I said confidently.

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When we returned to Arrivers' HQ—or rather, Arrivers' former HQ—Neme welcomed us cheerfully.

"Wow, Erin! Long time no see!"

"Yeah," Erin said with a sigh of relief, raising her right hand in a wave as she smiled. "It's been a whole year, but you sure haven't changed much."

"That's not true! Neme's grown lots!"

"Really? Have you gotten taller or something? I really couldn't tell..."

"I wasn't talking about my height..."

I was a bit surprised Erin had the same reaction I did to seeing Neme again, but she really did look exactly the same as always. Granted, I now knew that her true growth was on the inside.

"Hey, Note and Roslia are back! And is that..." Nacht remarked when he saw us.

Apparently he and the rest of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz were at HQ too. Of the familiar faces that popped out of the living room one after another, one seemed particularly excited.

"Oh my gosh! You're Erin, right? I'm a huge fan! Please shake my hand!" a blushing Fourie asked as she approached.

Erin was taken aback by the sudden request, but accepted the handshake firmly.

"This one converted to camp Erin after seeing that article in the paper,"

sighed Nacht. “Honestly, she’s such a bandwagon chaser.”

“Wait, what article in the paper?” I asked.

“You don’t know about it? The one with the picture of you stealing Erin away at the Seventh Sage Selection.”

“That’s going around here too?”

“Of course it is! A scandalous story like that is going to rock the whole nation!”

“Seriously...?”

It seemed word of my rash actions had reached Puriff faster than I had. Nothing I could do about it, but it did make me squirm a little.

“The people in this town have started calling you the Seventh Sage Snatcher.”

That was an upgrade from “Girl Snatcher” at the very least, but as far as titles were concerned, I still wasn’t exactly proud of it. I was kinda conflicted, actually. Neme seemed pretty bummed too...

“They don’t call you by the nickname Neme helped you earn anymore...”

Uh... If you don’t like being referred to as a little girl, isn’t the “Girl Snatcher” moniker disappearing for good, well, a good thing?

“But this is amazing!” Fourie continued in excitement. “I can’t believe you’re going to have one of the Seven Sages in your party! Isn’t that, like, normally impossible?!”

“I’m not one of the Seven Sages,” Erin replied. “I withdrew from the selection tournament.”

“The world knows you would’ve made it, though! You’re definitely the real deal!”

“I won’t deny that much. Honestly, I can hardly believe it myself.”

“I’m starting to think Note’s party might really have what it takes to conquer the dungeon!”

“Who knows? We want to, but given our current state...” I sighed.

Unlike Nacht and the others, we knew how formidable the end floors of the dungeon could be. After losing one of our own there, we'd never underestimate it again.

"The dungeon is a harsh place—and the further in you go, the worse it gets," I reminded everyone. "No matter how amazing Erin is, it's naive to assume we can make it through on her strength alone."

"Wow, so even you're worried about it, Note?" Nacht asked in humbled awe.

"Of course. We don't even have a full party right now. It'd be nothing short of reckless to try the dungeon with just three people."

After saying it out loud, I was forced to confront the grim reality of our situation. We only had half a party. And even if we managed to get a full house, we'd just be at the starting line. Conquering the dungeon was the real task at hand, and actually accomplishing it was starting to sound more and more like a pipe dream. It was almost laughable. I smirked in self-mockery at the hopelessness of it all, then caught sight of Nacht looking my way with a rather serious expression.

"Note, do you have a moment later? There's something I'd like to ask you."

Huh? What's wrong with right now?

"I've got time now," I offered.

"Right now is kinda... It's not something I want the boss to hear."

Ah, so he didn't want Neme to know. I guess asking to meet later made sense if this was something he didn't want the rest of his party in on, but what in the world did he want to ask an outsider like me about? The thought made me a little nervous. I was hoping we were just planning a surprise party or something, but I had a feeling it was going to be a little more serious than that.

"Got it," I said quietly. "Should I come alone? Or should I bring Roslia and Erin too?"

"Please bring Roslia. As for Erin... Fourie might talk her ear off for a while, so let's just leave them be."

"Okay. I'll grab Roslia, then."

It was easy enough to get Roslia's attention without tipping off Neme. She was so engrossed in her conversation with Erin and Fourie that she didn't notice us sneak out of the House with Nacht. The rest of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz stayed behind to avoid any suspicion. It seemed they already knew what Nacht had to tell us.

"So, what's all this about?" I asked.

"Well, you see..." he mumbled vaguely while scratching his head.

Whatever it was, it seemed he was having a hard time finding the words. Roslia and I exchanged a look and waited patiently for him to continue. He took a moment to nerve himself before finally opening his mouth again.

"The truth is, we were thinking of disbanding the Ultimate Invincible Partyz..."

"Huh?"

I was blindsided by this unexpected confession. I turned to look at Roslia, who clearly felt the same way. Her eyes were wide open in shock.

"And why were you thinking about that?" I asked, hoping for an explanation before we got any further.

It was difficult for outsiders to understand the nuanced inner workings of party affairs, but I hadn't sensed one hint of discord in the Ultimate Invincible Partyz during the several days we'd spent together. They got along so well, in fact, that I thought they had a better dynamic than the Arrivers.

Nacht, however, responded to my question with one of his own: "Do you honestly think we have a shot at clearing the dungeon?"

"Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?" I countered in confusion. "Did something happen?"

"You didn't say yes right away... I guess that's your answer."

"What?"

"You already know it, don't you? Our party doesn't have what it takes to do it." Nacht was staring straight at me, but his gaze wavered for a moment when he said those words. He tried to cover it up in a fluster, though he seemed to realize it was too late for that. "So that's why we're thinking of disbanding.

We’re not stupid—we know we can’t handle the dungeon. Conquering it is out of the question.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Frankly speaking,” he continued, “as adventurers, we don’t hold a candle to you two. The only reason we’ve cleared as many floors as we have is because of the boss. You understand, right?”

“Nacht...”

I couldn’t say anything at all. The truth was far too cruel. It wasn’t like Nacht and the others lacked for effort. They were each giving dungeoneering their all. But their skills, their experience, their initiative... It all fell short of the benchmarks they needed to hit.

And so I tried to offer Nacht the most honest consolation I could: “But you don’t know any of that for sure yet, do you? You guys practically just formed this party. You still have plenty of room to grow.”

“Even if we grow, there’s still no guarantee we’d be able to clear the dungeon. Right?”

“That applies to every party, though...”

The same was even true of the Arrivers and the other top-tier dungeon parties in Puriff. There was no guarantee anyone ever would be able to clear the dungeon.

“Listen, you don’t have to disband the party just because dungeon conquest isn’t right for you. You can limit your activities to the early floors you’re familiar with, or even try adventuring on the surface instead.”

“That won’t cut it. Boss formed the Ultimate Invincible Partyz so she could conquer the dungeon,” Nacht said firmly. “After the Arrivers disbanded and you all left, she kept going all by herself. She’s more serious about clearing the dungeon than anyone.”

He was right. We’d all abandoned our goal so easily while Neme stubbornly pursued it on her own. Perhaps she was the strongest member of the Arrivers in her own passionate way.

“And in spite of her dreams, she picked us up when we were lost and searching for a place to belong. She stepped up for everything we lacked. She carried us all.” Teary eyed, Nacht clenched his fists. “We owe the boss more than we can ever repay her. We’ve all been working so desperately in hopes we might be able to give something back... That’s why I was secretly unhappy when you two first showed up. I thought, ‘How dare you come crawling back after you dumped the boss like that that?’”

I had no idea. I hadn’t picked up on his resentment at all, but it made sense. We deserved criticism from Nacht and his fellow party members for what we’d done. We’d abandoned Neme. Without any consideration for her or her feelings, we’d all followed our own hearts and disbanded the party.

“But then after seeing you two fight in the dungeon, and after hearing that Erin earned the right to join the Seven Sages just to throw it all away for your party, it hit me. What the boss needs most isn’t us. It’s the Arrivers.”

So as not to cut short the adventuring careers of Nacht and the others, Roslia and I had given up early on recruiting Neme. Or at least, that was what we’d agreed. But it seemed our determination to keep the Arrivers together had shone through, at least enough to get Nacht’s attention. That was why he and the rest of their party had discussed breaking up. We’d stymied them without even realizing it.

“You don’t need to do this because of us, Nacht,” I assured him.

“We’re not doing it because of you. We’re doing it for the boss. She’s far too sweet to ever suggest disbanding herself. That’s why we have to be the ones to broach the subject—for the boss’s sake,” he said. “Fourie, Lila, Leys, and me all talked about this and made up our minds! You can’t talk us out of it! We’re disbanding the party no matter what, so you’d better take care of the boss from now on!” There, Nacht bowed deeply. His voice was straining under the weight of his emotions. “We weren’t able to fulfill her dream, so please do it on our behalf.”

I was yet again at a loss for words. I knew it’d be wrong to say anything insincere. It wouldn’t be right to give a halfhearted response. That’s all I could think. And so I decided to lay my heart bare.

“We hear you loud and clear, so I’ll be honest with you. There’s nothing we want more than to have Neme back. If your party is willing to let her go, we’ll whisk her away without a second thought. Dungeon conquest is a dream we all share, and I’m chasing it with all my heart, so putting you out is a small price to pay as far as I’m concerned.”

“Er...”

“But on the other hand, Neme is a precious teammate of ours. She was, anyway. I don’t want to do anything that would upset her. So if you’re going to disband, I want you to discuss things with her properly as a team so that she doesn’t have any regrets. I refuse to stand by and let another party disband on a sour note like we did. I want you all to face your new futures with a smile. That’s my condition.”

“Note...”

“Now, I’m sorry to force your hand here, but consider it remorseful guidance from someone who’s failed before. Can you do it?”

“Yes!” Nacht replied eagerly.

“That’s all from me. Is there anything you wanna add?” I asked, looking to Roslia beside me.

She’d been silent this whole time, and even now, she shook her head as she replied, “I also think this is the right way to do things. If Neme agrees to it all, then I’d be delighted to have her back too.”

“You guys don’t have any mercy, do you? Did you even consider throwing us a bone here?” Nacht joked with a smile, wiping the tears that threatened to roll down his cheeks.

“I can’t go feeling guilty over every single party I break up, now can I?”

Yeah, uh, that’s not the way to feel about it either. Have some *shame, Miss Crusher.*

Unaware of Roslia’s bad reputation, Nacht looked confused at Roslia’s comment. Yet she ignored him and continued, “You can rest assured, though. We won’t do anything to make Neme unhappy.”

“That’s right. We’re going to clear the dungeon for her—and for you guys too, Nacht.”

All along, we’d only been dungeon diving for ourselves. But from now on, things would be different. The dream was no longer ours alone.

“It’s a promise then! Take the boss all the way to the end of the dungeon!” Nacht ordered, entrusting us with hopes and wishes too.

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“How could you say that...?” Neme muttered tearfully.

Nacht had just finished telling her about the decision he and the other members of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz had come to. He still had his head hung low.

“We all promised to clear the dungeon together! So why are you talking about breaking up?!” Neme wailed.

“You see...”

“I know we can do it if we all work hard! You can’t give up now!”

Nacht simply stood there in silence.

“I’ll work harder too! Neme will support everyone, so please don’t say we’re disbanding!”

“You’re already working hard enough, Boss,” Nacht muttered quietly. “You’ve done more than enough for newbie adventurers like us. We couldn’t be more grateful.”

“That’s not true! You’re the ones who helped me when I couldn’t find anyone to party up with! You’re the ones who saved Neme!”

“From the bottom of my heart, thank you, Boss. That means the world to me.”

“Then—”

Before she could say any more, Nacht interrupted, “But just because you feel like you owe us something doesn’t mean you should throw away your own dream. We’ve fought by your side all this time and know how badly you want to

clear the dungeon. Do you really think it's more important to stay with us? If that's what you want, then we don't have to disband, Boss."

"But I can't give up on the dungeon," Neme said, quietly but firmly. Her passion for dungeoneering was real.

"That's what I'm saying, Boss. So go chase your dream and don't worry about us."

Neme gasped at those words. She must have been aware of the dilemma that was holding her back. She didn't want to part ways with her precious new friends, but she also couldn't walk away from the dungeon. And inevitably, the shortest path to conquest was rejoining the Arrivers. It would take a solid group of top-tier adventurers to clear the dungeon, meaning Neme couldn't have her cake and eat it too. Not with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz. Not in this world where skills were everything.

"Do you hate us, Boss?" Fourie asked with a gentle smile.

"Absolutely not! Neme loves you all!" Neme declared, shaking her head adamantly.

Fourie took one of Neme's small hands in her own and continued softly, "The same goes for us. We love you, Boss."

"Fourie..."

"That's why we want to see you make your dreams come true."

The next person to speak was Lila the thief: "Disbanding the party doesn't mean we can't be friends anymore. We'll still be here in Puriff."

"That's right!" Fourie jumped back in. "We can all go dungeon diving together whenever you're free! Then you won't be lonely, right?"

"She's right, you know?" added Lila.

"Indeed," Leys agreed with a stoic nod.

It was a great compromise to reach. This way, there would be no goodbyes. It was always sad to dissolve a party, but this had to be the best way to do it. I couldn't think of anything better.

Neme looked hesitantly at everyone and asked, “Really? You’ll keep adventuring with Neme even if we’re not in the same party?”

Naturally, all four of them replied with beaming smiles.

“Of course! We’ll be counting on you when we hit the dungeon!”

“You bet! We’d love to keep adventuring with you, Boss!”

“Yup, I still haven’t had enough.”

“This isn’t the end of the Ultimate Invincible Partyz.”

“Thank you, everyone...” Neme bowed her head, her eyes overflowing with tears of gratitude.

Watching the heartwarming scene unfold, I realized how loved Neme had been the past year. She’d been surrounded by people who deeply, profoundly cared about her. And that wouldn’t come to an end today. No, it would continue from now on—that much, I could promise.

Rematch

With Erin and Neme secured, we were now down to retrieving our final party member—Force Granz, our leader and ace attacker. He was the strongest swordsman in the land and the founder of the crew alongside Jin, who was no longer with us. We couldn't reform the party without him. We just wouldn't be the Arrivers without Force.

"That fact you're showing your face here again means what I think it means, doesn't it?" he asked, his sharp gaze piercing right through me.

"Yeah." I fought back the instinct to cower and stated, "I'm here to change your mind."

Indeed, this wasn't the first time I'd been to see Force since the Arrivers had disbanded. When Roslia and I had come before to suggest reforming the party, he'd turned us down cold. He said there was no way we could clear the dungeon like we were—that I didn't have the stuff for it. He shoved that reality right in my face.

But then he gave me a way out. A condition. He said that if I could get strong enough to rival Jin—to be his replacement—then and only then would he rejoin the party. As for what that meant in practical terms, I had to beat Force in a fight.

"You seem confident, at least," he remarked.

"I've got more than just confidence," I assured him.

I'd fleshed out my plans for victory on the journey here. That wasn't all, of course. There would be no point to this if I was only capable of a single win. I couldn't be a hindrance in the dungeon any longer. I had to become a member that the others could lean on. Someone who could fight solo. And to that end, I'd trained and acquired techniques specifically for this fight. I'd prepared gear for it too.

"I'm here to win," I said.

"A bold declaration. I've sparred with you several times now, but this is the

first you've come at me dead set on beating me, isn't it?"

"Maybe. I've dropped some sentimental dead weight."

"I see. Do you have somewhere in mind you'd like to fight?"

"Not particularly. But I intend on going all-out, so I'd prefer somewhere with plenty of space."

I had no intention of using the same trick I had in my fight against Miya. I would be challenging Force head on with the combat techniques I'd learned for the dungeon.

"I see. Then here should be fine."

"Works for me."

We were currently on the mountainside outside the dojo, exactly where we'd fought before. Roslia, Erin, and Neme were watching us from the sidelines. Some of Force's pupils were spectating too, but there were far fewer than last time.

"You need Neme to cast any support spells? I won't mind," Force offered.

"Don't worry. She's just on standby for healing after the fact. I'm counting on you, Miss Neme."

She proudly thumped her chest and declared, "Leave it to Neme!"

Really and truly, she was back to being our party priestess. I cannot tell you how reassuring it was to have her around. Having a healer present made a world of difference.

"Then let's get down to business, shall we?" said Force.

"Yeah, let's do this."

"All right!" he called, drawing Gleaming Beast and pointing it my way. The silver blade sparkled in the sunlight.

I clapped my hands together to get a feel for my new gloves, clenching my fists a few times before taking up a fighting stance.

"What's this? No dagger?" he asked.

“Nope. I tried lots of things, but I decided it wasn’t for me in the end. I’ve been practicing with one all this time and it just never felt right. I figured there was no point in forcing myself to use one, so I set about learning to fight my own way.”

Force was the strongest swordsman in the land—out of my league by every account. The techniques I’d hastily acquired over the past few months were nothing compared to his. The only way I stood a chance against him was to capitalize on talents I’d already honed and polished.

First things first, my skill with a blade was nonexistent. I’d learned that long before I ever joined the Arrivers. I’d tried using a sword back in my party-hopping days, and I can safely say that I did not, in fact, have a knack for it. I’d tried my hand at using a dagger later on thanks to Jin’s influence, but that wasn’t the only way thieves could fight. Riece used thrown weapons, and Eisha specialized in martial arts. There were as many fighting styles as there were thieves. I’d been lucky enough to witness a small part of that and broaden my horizons.

“I’m ready when you are, Force.”

“Come at me any time.”

With that exchange, a heavy silence fell over the field. That was our cue. The fight had begun.

But before I could do anything, I had to deal with Force’s pesky Mind’s Eye. He could see through all of my attacks with it, making it impossible for me to get a hit in. That said, Mind’s Eye might’ve been all seeing, but it wasn’t all powerful. Jin had successfully tangled with Force on even terms. And so...

“Shadow Runner.”

I started running at a speed that rivaled the fastest man in Arrivers’ history. Faster, sleeker, swifter than light. I carefully retraced the steps of the shadow that had once beaten me over and over again. Jin’s Shadow Runner was still burned into my eyes. It was carved into my heart. I would never forget fighting him.

But this time, I wasn’t using some cheap imitation. It was the real deal.

Force's face contorted in surprise. I couldn't see it, but I was sure of it. I was moving so fast with Shadow Runner that I couldn't rely on my physical vision. All I had to go on were the senses I'd sharpened with Enemy Search.

Force should be shaken right now. Probably. Hopefully. If not, victory was out of my hands.

Jin had once gone toe to toe with Force. That was fact. So how had he done it? There was only one way I could think of, and that was Jin's best weapon—his speed. Even if Force could see through every attack coming at him, what did it matter if he couldn't react in time? I just had to land a strike before his reflexes caught up with me.

"I'll end this with a single blow!"

I closed the distance in one leap. I was now in range of Force's blade. If Jin had held his own against Force, the opposite was also true—Force had kept up with Jin's Shadow Runner. I sensed the moment he raised his sword overhead. He'd given up on dodging me and was moving straight to counter, just like I was hoping. As long as he didn't evade me, I could land this hit.

"Hah!"

I exhaled while moving my left foot forward, shifting my weight back on my right leg. I then twisted my torso and thrust my right palm out in front of me. I was going to put all of my strength into this strike. I was going for Shot, an art I'd learned by sparring with Eisha. That alone wouldn't be enough to snare Force, however. I had more confidence in it than Critical, for example, but I was a long way from mastering it after only a few months of training.

My real expertise lay with Enemy Search, Trap Detection, and Trap Dismantling, followed by Stealth and my evasive maneuvers. Attack arts were way down at the bottom of the list, which was also reflective of the order in which I'd learned them. The simple fact of the matter was that the longer I'd spent with an art, the greater my skill with it. That's why I went with one of the first I'd ever learned.

Trap Dismantling!

With that, the magic circle in my palm activated. To be more precise, it was

on the surface of my glove, which was made of a fabric catalyst. It released the Protect spell Erin had set up for me with her trap magic, and the ensuing result was the giant explosion it had been keeping under wraps.

This all happened in a fraction of a second as I fired it at Force. The explosive trap spell rocketed forward with both the momentum of Shadow Runner and my newest trick...

“Spell Shot!”

That’s right. The spells of a would-be sage fired at point-blank range with the force of the Shot art. This was the new way of fighting I’d settled on. Essentially mock spellcasting via the power of magic items and my fellow party members. This would be my thief style for the new Arrivers.

“Rgh!”

A flash of light whited out everything in front of me. That was the result of Erin’s tailor-made ultra-high-powered trap—might and efficiency guaranteed. With her affinity for all magic and her limitless supply of mana, trap magic was a cakewalk for her. She could generate a blast far more powerful than any magic item.



Trap magic had the con of being weaker than regular magic, but releasing it point-blank more than made up for that. I was confident I could train Spell Shot into something usable against the monsters of the dungeon. But since I was only fighting a human today, I'd asked Erin to tone down the firepower. Still, the blast was insane. I would've been worried for Force's life if he didn't have Major Magic Resistance.

I braced myself through the shockwave of the aftermath. Not only had the spell from my palm sent Force flying, it had also mowed down all the trees behind him. The ground before me was torn up like a crater. A billowing cloud of dust danced in the air. I couldn't even see where Force had landed.

Did I, uh, go too far?

I'd asked for a spell with enough juice to really damage Force, but I hadn't expected anything of this magnitude. I didn't just kill the guy... did I? I nervously glanced back at Erin, who clenched her right fist in a triumphant pump. Okay, so there hadn't been any miscommunication here. The mage responsible was just an idiot.

"It looks like a natural disaster blew through... Where is Force? Is he still alive?" I made eye contact with Neme, who seemed to get the message.

"Does he need healing? Leave it to Neme!"

But just as she raised her staff, another voice reached my ears from an unexpected direction.

"Hey now, the battle isn't over yet..."

A chill ran up my spine.

"That was a good hit. It would've taken me out in the past..."

"Urk..."

I hurriedly turned my head to see a lone shadow lurking in the dust cloud, emanating a most terrifying aura as it approached. The threat level registering via Enemy Search told me my opponent had yet to be defeated.

"What the heck...?"

I gulped to see him now. The man standing before me wasn't the guy I knew from the Arrivers, but a dangerous-looking swordsman clad in armor of black smoke.

"This is my Purgatory Shroud," he said. "I wasn't just sitting around while you were out getting stronger, you know? I've gotten stronger too."

"Yeah, I can see that..."

Crap. I hadn't accounted for this in any of my plans. It was looking like those were all out the window now.

I'd started with one spell on each glove, so after expending the right one, all I had was the left. It wasn't any stronger than the first, however, which Force had just successfully blocked. If anything, it was actually less reliable since I'd be shooting with my nondominant hand. Force had effectively trumped my trump card with this armor from his cursed sword.

Getting a different spell from Erin might have saved me, but pausing mid-fight for powerups wasn't exactly fair. The fact that I was using her spells in the first place was questionable enough as it was...

"Time for round two, Note!"

With no consideration for my current state of panic, the shrouded swordsman ruthlessly declared war.

*

After the battle, Force and I were engaged in a deep talk. The topic of our conversation was none other than the duel we'd just had.

"So you could buy a whole house for what these gloves are worth?" he asked. "Sure don't look it."

"Right? Those used to be a plain piece of fabric, but I had it made into gloves. So you could probably get a whole *furnished* house for them."

"Huh, you don't say..."

"Hey! Don't go pulling and tugging on them! What if you rip one?"

Force had my gloves in his hands, curiously examining my new weapon of

choice. Just the sight of it had me nervous.

“If they rip that easily, you can’t use ’em in the dungeon anyway.”

“That’s true, but...”

“Well, they seem pretty sturdy. It’d take more than that to damage them.”

With that, Force lost interest in the gloves and tossed them back to me. I caught them in a fluster and glared at him in protest.

“Don’t throw them around either.”

“What does it matter? No harm, no foul. Just because they’re expensive doesn’t mean you need to treat them like your children.”

“Yes, it does! I had to borrow money from Erin to buy these, so if something happens to them, I’m in the hole!”

“Ah, so you didn’t even buy ’em yourself. Typical Note, huh?”

“Are you kidding? There’s no way I could’ve afforded these.”

My funds already were running dry by the time Roslia and I hit Izaar. I had to make ends meet on living expenses, so there wasn’t much of anything left over to splurge on magic items. Fortunately, Erin had managed to earn a hefty sum while studying and, combined with what she’d saved up from working with the Arrivers, she was pretty well bankrolled. That was why I’d asked her to lend me the money.

But what was that “typical Note” comment supposed to mean? Did people really think of me as a mooch? I mean, sure, Erin had bought my last dagger for me too and the Arrivers’ coffers had covered my other equipment... Wait, had I ever once paid for any of my own gear?

“What’s that weird face for?” Force asked.

“Nothing. I think I just realized something I would’ve preferred not to...”

“Whatever you say, man.” There, he shook his head and changed the subject. “Anyway, I think it’s a good idea. Using trap magic, that is.”

“Really?”

“Your lack of offensive skills is a pretty huge drawback. You wouldn’t survive

on the front line without borrowing power *somehow*. This makes you a lot more of a threat than if you tried to fight on your own."

"But I still lost."

In the end, our second round had ended in my defeat. Thanks to Shadow Runner, it wasn't instant, but Force had obtained incredible power over the past year. He didn't even have to go all out against me. No wonder this guy was the Arrivers' ace.

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise, Force. I've gotten stronger, but I just couldn't beat you. Guess I'm a long way from convincing you to join us..."

"Er... Did we make a promise like that?" Force asked, scratching his head. "I'm pretty sure I said that you needed to be strong enough to rival Jin, and now you're at least good enough to have destroyed me in the past."

"Does that mean—"

"Yeah, you pass. Though you still need to figure out a way to keep up a fight without stopping to have someone cast spells for you. In that respect, Jin was way stronger. But in terms of spontaneous damage output, you're as good as he was. In fact, you probably even have more firepower than he did."

That wasn't the evaluation I'd been expecting, but my heart leaped at the thought of reuniting the Arrivers.

"Does this mean you'll come back to us?!"

"Yup."

"Thank God! Now we can go dungeon diving together again!"

"It's still a little early to celebrate. We don't have any leads for our sixth member yet. There's still a ton of work to be done, and it's not going to be easy."

"That's true... Just getting the five of us together was a monumental task."

Regaining my lost desire to take on the dungeon. Confessing the truth to Roslia, and her accepting it. Crashing the Seventh Sage Selection and stealing Erin away. Talking things out with Nacht and the others, and getting Neme back. Fighting with Force and successfully winning him over. All of it had led up

to this moment. The five of us, at long last, were finally together again. Though Jin was gone, the party he'd treasured so much lived on.

"Are you done hashing things out?" Erin asked.

I looked up to see her and the other two girls approaching.

"Yeah, pretty much. Force has agreed to come back."

"That's great! If you'd failed, the Ultimate Invincible Partyz would've disbanded for nothing and Neme would've demanded you take responsibility!"

"Could you not phrase it in such a slanderous way? It's not like I forced anyone to disband..."

"If you hadn't come back, we'd still be together right now!"

"Are you holding a grudge or something? If so, don't forget that Roslia showed up with me too."

"You're shifting the blame to me?! In that case, shouldn't we say that Erin dealt the finishing blow? It was her victory in the Seventh Sage Selection that made Nacht and the others feel so inferior."

"Why are you coming for me now?! Go on, Note. Defend me."

"Huh? What for?"

"The cost of the gloves."

"Yes, Master Erin. Please allow me the honor of defending you."

Ever since I'd borrowed money from her, Erin had me wrapped around her finger. But I was stuck. The sooner we resumed dungeon diving, the sooner I'd be able to score some loot and repay her.

"You guys haven't changed at all, huh?" Force remarked.

"Really? I think everyone's changed in their own way."

"That's right! Neme's more mature now!"

"Miss Neme really has grown a lot. She's much more of an adult than she was before."

"Note..." Force said with a dubious look my way. "Is Neme blackmailing you or

something?”

C’mon, it wasn’t like that. You just had to see Neme’s leadership firsthand to believe it—especially since she wasn’t any different appearance or behavior-wise. It was genuinely difficult to put her growth into words.

“That aside, I hear you did some pretty crazy stuff yourself, Erin,” Force continued. “You won the Seventh Sage Selection, right?”

“Even you know about that, Force?”

“Who doesn’t? With the commotion you caused, the whole country’s talking.”

“Does this mean I’m famous or something?”

“Duh.”

“Is that a good thing...?”

“Who knows? Public opinion’s about a 7:3 split when it comes to praise versus thinking you’re an idiot for dropping out the way you did.”

“I’ll take it! A 70 percent approval rating is a new record for me!”

Well, Erin’s reputation for being bullish had indeed spoken louder than her accomplishments before now... but wasn’t this news a little too sad to celebrate?

“We can only hope the world realizes soon enough that Erin’s actually an idiot.”

“What was that, Roslia?”

“Nothing. I was just saying you’re a shorty with no boobs and a nasty look in your eyes. Oh, and that you have no feminine charm whatsoever.”

“That’s even worse than before! Why’d you just get harsher?!”

“Hey, don’t hate on her for speaking the truth.”

“You stay out of this, Force!” Erin snapped.

I personally didn’t think it was true at all. At the very least, not that last part.

“Heehee! Erin’s a shorty with no boobs!”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from, Neme! Go look in the

mirror!”

“Ack! You’re so mean, Erin... Hic...”

“How could you, Erin? You made Neme cry!”

“You tell her, Roslia!”

“Why are you making *me* out to be the bad guy?! Neme was the one who started it!”

Erin was shaking with rage. Roslia teased her all the while. Force was only adding fuel to the fire, and Neme was jumping in with her usual off-the-cuff comments. It had been a year since we were together like this, but it suddenly felt like it hadn’t been long at all. The familiar warmth washed over me. This was what I’d wanted so badly, and what I’d worked so hard to win back.

These were the Arrivers, and this would be the first page of our new story.

Jin, I’m going to challenge the dungeon again without you. I’m going to chase down the dream we couldn’t achieve together. There’s a mountain of work to be done first, but with the five of us together, I think we can do anything. You handpicked each one of us, after all. I know we can do it.

So please watch over us. We’re going to be the first party to conquer the dungeon, and when we do, the whole world will know it. They’ll know you too. That the Arrivers were once carried by the greatest assassin that ever lived, and we couldn’t have done anything without you.

You said you wanted to leave a legacy behind, right? So let me repay everything you did for me now. I’m going to take the dream you gave me and run with it—all the way to the finish line. I promise you.



Afterword

It’s been a while. Udon Kamono here.

It’s been around six months since the last time we met like this. I always start thinking about what to write in the afterword months in advance, but this time I had a surprising lack of stuff to talk about! So I’m now here with no plan at all. Of course it’s times like these that I end up with space to spare. I was even told I could write three pages of afterword if I wanted. I normally struggle to keep it down to two, so how did this happen?

At any rate, that’s why there’s two character profiles at the end of this volume. The reason why there were spare pages in the first place is actually my fault. Despite being asked to make the book either 256 or 288 pages (multiples of 32), I wrote it how I wanted without any regard for the page count. During my meeting with my editor, I asked “It’s not like other authors really pay attention to the page numbers while they’re writing, do they?” To this, my editor replied, “Everyone pays attention to the page numbers.” I didn’t know how to respond to that... I shouldn’t have asked.

Now for the acknowledgments. Shizuki, thank you for another volume of wonderful illustrations. The cover image with everyone together was superb. Editor Soyama, thank you for all your help despite your busy schedule. I promise I’ll stick to the page count next time.

And finally, to my readers, thank you for picking up this book. For this being a series about dungeon diving, the dungeon sure didn’t get a lot of screen time this volume. But we did have a brief excursion with Neme, so that counts! Volume 1 was kind of the same way, so I guess it’s really just the norm for this series. Incidentally, there aren’t any plans to hit the dungeon next time either. Hope to see you then!

-Udon Kamono

Force Granz

Nickname Leader of the Arrivers

Gear Gleaming Beast, Purgatory

Party Arrivers



Role Swordsman

Skills

Sword Mastery - Superior
Rarity: UR (Ultra Rare)
Slot Cost: 1
Effect: Grants the maximum aptitude for sword mastery.

Magic Resistance - Major
Rarity: SR (Super Rare)
Slot Cost: 1
Effect: Grants great resistance to magic.

Mind's Eye
Rarity: SR (Super Rare)
Slot Cost: 1
Effect: The ability to see through objects and detect movement.

Arts

Flash Draw
Instantly draw a weapon.

Broken Blade
An attack art that unleashes a frontal strike. Its range is proportionate to the user's proficiency.

Neme Pargin



Nickname Little Saint

Party Arrivers

Gear Staff

Role Priestess

Skills

Saint's Authority
Rarity: UR (Ultra Rare)
Slot Cost: 3
Effect: ???

Arts

Regenerate Plus
A superior version of the Regenerate spell. Applies a continuous regenerative effect on multiple targets.

Rise Up
Bestows the protection of the war god on all targets within range, granting them increased combat prowess and luck.

Full Attack
A multi-target boon that provides a boost to mood and offensive capabilities.

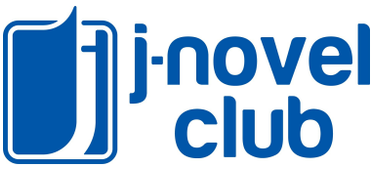
Guardian's Protection
Bestows the protection of the preserver god on all targets within range, granting them a ward against injury and death.

Fortress
A multi-target boon that provides a boost to fortitude and defensive capabilities.


Mapping:
The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party
5
Udon Kamono
Ill. Hitomi Shizuki


Force Granz
"A BOLD DECLARATION."
"I'M HERE TO WIN."
Note Athlon


"DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT, NOTE... IT'S EMBARRASSING."
Her skin was faintly flushed after her shower, and her ample breasts stood out even more than usual with the white fabric pulled tight around her chest. Her thick thighs were exposed up to a dangerous line, too.



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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party: Volume 5

by Udon Kamono

Translated by Mana Z.

Edited by Megan Denton

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Illustrations by Hitomi Shizuki

Cover illustration by Hitomi Shizuki

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2021


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5
Ill. Hitomi Shizuki