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Illustrator: Yunagi
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Cast Out as a Weakling by My Sword Saint Father


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Gyokuto ／ ill Yunagi

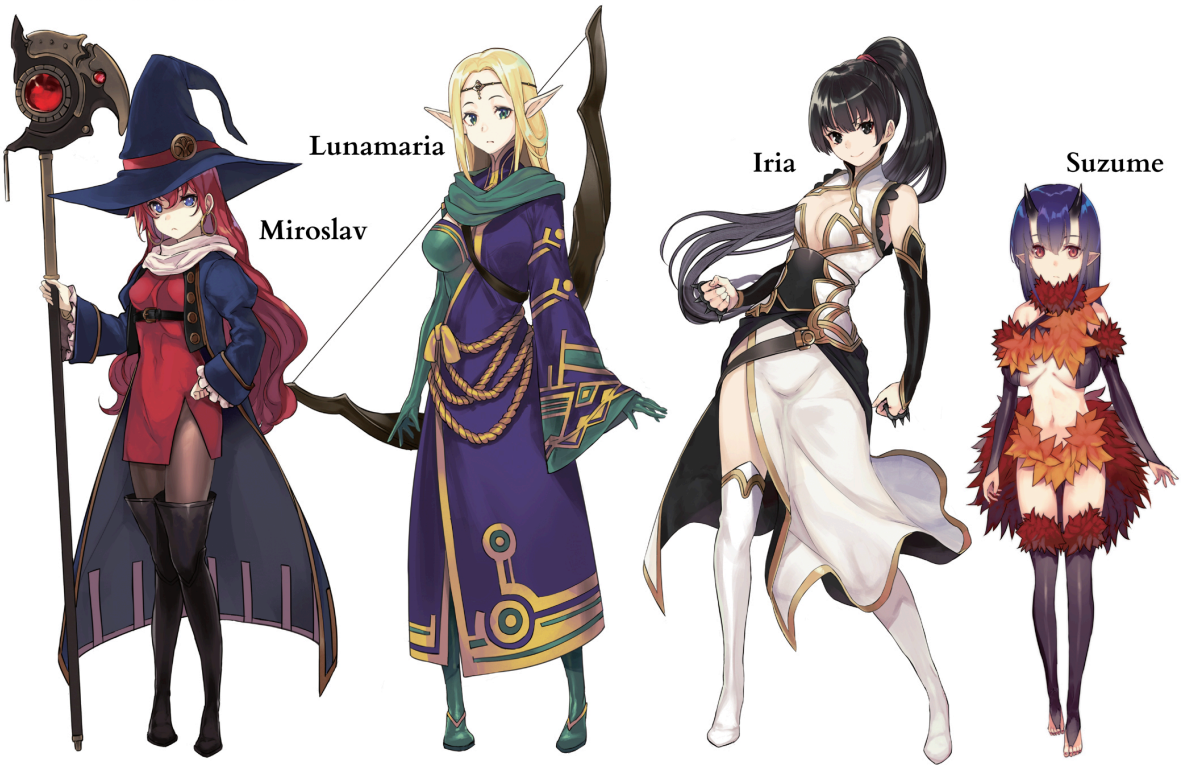


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Prologue

There was the dry sound of a wooden sword clattering against the ground.

I stared at my own empty hand, dumbfounded.

"I've seen enough."

The voice announcing the end of the battle sounded like it was coming from miles away. I had needed to win this duel no matter what. I'd staked everything I had built up for the past thirteen years on this fight, and yet I'd lost miserably. Just one blow from my opponent had sent my wooden sword tumbling across the floor.

This had been a trial for me, a rite of passage. Boys were considered young men when they reached the age of thirteen, and this was a test that any young man who dreamed of properly pursuing the path of the Illusory Blade had to overcome.

My opponent had been a Dragon Fang Soldier, a skeleton swordsman created by magic, but by no means was it a weak foe. In fact, even a soldier of the empire would likely struggle in a one-on-one fight against the creature. Normally, it would be unreasonable to ask a boy or girl who had only just come of age to defeat it. Yet no one present found it strange. Anyone studying the Illusory Blade was expected to defeat such an opponent easily enough. In fact, all seven of my peers had won their own bouts. I was the only one who'd failed.

Wordlessly, I hung my head as my father's voice sounded from above, dignified and harsh like ice.

"Sora."

"Y-Yes, father!" I responded.

"Three hundred years ago, the history of the esteemed Mitsurugi family began when the first Sword Saint sealed the Demon God away. Ever since, our family has dedicated their lives to forming and mastering the path of the Illusory Blade, the sword that crushes evil

underfoot. Dragons, giants, and spirits—aberrant illusions akin to natural disasters—have all fallen under the might of our blade as we protect the world from the evil that seeps through the Demonic Gate. Thus, the members of our family have a noble duty to ward off this evil threat to the empire. I trust you know all this?”

“Y-Yes, sir! I’m aware!”

“Those born into the Mitsurugi family have a duty to inherit the sword of their ancestors, as well as a responsibility to pass that sword on to the next generation. One who cannot fulfill those obligations has no right to remain in this family.”

“Father...”

“You have failed to overcome your trial. Thus, you are unqualified to walk the path of the Illusory Blade. One who cannot even master the blade is in no way fit to succeed the family. As of today, you are no longer a part of this bloodline and are no longer permitted to bear the surname of Mitsurugi. Gather your belongings by the end of the day and leave the island by tomorrow. We have no need for weaklings here.”



From the man's matter-of-fact tone, it was hard to believe he was announcing the disownment of his own flesh and blood. No trace of conflict or regret could be seen on the face of Shikibu Mitsurugi—the seventeenth Sword Saint—as he stared at me. He might as well have been looking at a pebble on the side of the road. As one who had devoted his entire life to the sword, those without talent were nothing more than garbage in his eyes. Even his own child was no exception.

I'd already known that for some time, of course. After all, for as long as I could remember, that was exactly how my father had seen me. He'd kept me in the family hoping that even a moronic, thickheaded son like me would eventually show some sort of promise, and I'd worked as hard as I possibly could to get him to acknowledge me at least a little, but in the end it had all been for naught. Crying, screaming, throwing a tantrum, begging for a second chance—I already knew all of that would be pointless. Nothing would change his mind now.

Moreover, my father wasn't the only one. The Sword Saint's other disciples, including his favored pupils sitting in a row on either side of him, were also staring down at me coldly, some with indifference, some with pity, and some with a hint of scorn.

Just as my father had said, the first Sword Saint had sealed the evil Demon God away long ago. But the Demon God's curse continued to leak through the Demonic Gate, encroaching upon the world even today. This island in particular was infested with more apparitions and magical beasts than the entire continent due to the gate's influence.

The island was called Onigashima. To its residents, weakness itself was a sin. Public opinion was that someone so incompetent as to drag others down didn't belong there.

After fleeing the dojo in tears, I made it back to my room and gathered my things. By the time the sun showed itself in the east the next morning, I was out of my home—or more accurately, I was being thrown out.

"This is *my* room from now on, so you're technically trespassing.

That's right, *I'm* the heir to the Mitsurugi bloodline now, making this *my* room. Father said so."

Smirking before me was my younger brother, Ragna Mitsurugi. Despite us being related, his hair was golden while mine was black. As one might guess from the difference in our appearances, Ragna had a different mother. He was thirteen, just like me, and funnily enough, we shared the same birthday. But the similarities ended there. Between the two of us, Ragna had indisputably been the one to inherit our father's skill with the blade, as well as his physique and intelligence. Plus, Ragna's mother was the daughter of one of the empire's leading aristocrats, so in that sense, his lineage was superior.

Yet despite all that, I had been the Mitsurugi family's heir, solely because I was the only son that Shikibu Mitsurugi had with his legal wife. Ragna had never found this amusing, and he made sure that I knew it whenever we saw each other. The look in his blue eyes was always filled with hatred and contempt.

"Hmph. Finally, I'm free of the embarrassment of having a talentless older brother like you. Despite having the fortune to be born to father, time and time again you've besmirched the Mitsurugi name with your hopeless incompetence. Never show your face to me again. Rest assured, I'll fulfill my duty as heir in your place—and be a fine husband to your betrothed, Ayaka."

"Ragna...you little—"

"Ha ha, from that look in your eyes, I'm guessing you want to hit me. Go right ahead and do your worst. But don't think I won't hit back. You couldn't even beat a Dragon Fang Soldier. Do you really think you could prevail against me? Shinsou Reiki!"

No sooner had he shouted than a magnificent two-handed sword, glittering gold, materialized in his hands. How many times had I laid eyes on that brilliance? How many times had it made me keenly aware of my own wretchedness?

The sword was like another Ragna made manifest. Deep within the souls of humans resided a second self called the anima. To master the path of the Illusory Blade was to master the perception, control, and embodiment of this other self. This process was called

“Shinsou,” and Ragna had learned how to do it almost immediately after turning thirteen.

It hadn’t just been Ragna either. My fiancée, Ayaka, had also learned it, as well as my father’s other five pupils. Ours was poised to be the most successful generation of any in the Illusory Blade’s history: the golden generation, it was said. Talent drew out talent, and when that talent collided, it became more polished and honed as it developed. Those on the island had placed their hopes and expectations for the future on all the young students of this promising generation—all except for one.

“Hmph. Your legs are shaking and I haven’t even made a move yet. Oh well, that’s fine. If I went any further, it’d just be bullying. The Illusory Blade is meant for crushing evil and protecting the people. As heir to the Mitsurugi family, I must be kind to the weak. So here, a parting gift.”

Ragna tossed three gold coins onto the floor. It would be enough for me to live on comfortably for three months.

“Go on, pick it up. Or not... I suppose you still have a modicum of pride, don’t you? You won’t accept a handout like this in front of me. I’ll leave you alone so you can scrabble for those coins like a beggar once I’m gone...dear brother. Ha ha ha!”

Ragna strode away, cackling. I glared at his back, fists tightly clenched, but I couldn’t do anything. I stayed rooted to the spot, watching as the coins on the floor glinted dully in the eastern sun.

After parting ways with Ragna, I trudged over to my mother’s grave. I hadn’t picked up the coins. As loath as I was to admit it, Ragna was right—I was too proud for that. Yet even as I made the trip to my mother’s resting place, I was already regretting my decision. Truly, I was pathetic.

A voice suddenly called out to me. “Sora.”

The sound grazed my ears like a cool breeze rushing along a plain. All of the gloom in my heart evaporated upon hearing it. I looked up to see a young girl, black hair fluttering in the wind, already in front of my mother’s grave. It was Ayaka Azurite, my betrothed.

"Oh, you're already here, Ayaka?"

"Yes. I felt the need to apologize to Lady Shizuya, you see."

"Apologize...to my mother?"

"Yes. I promised her I would be your strength like she asked, yet in the end, I couldn't do anything for you. So I need to apologize to her."

As she looked at me, there was sadness in her eyes. Ayaka, also thirteen years of age, was my bride-to-be. Her skill with the sword rivaled Ragna's, yet she'd never lorded it over anyone. I couldn't even count the number of times she had helped me out. When the time came for us students to pair up and hold mock duels, she had always volunteered to team up with me. Occasionally, she had helped me train until late at night and even dragged me out with her to see the town on our days off, suggesting it would be a good change of pace for me.

Ayaka had only grown stronger, more mature, and more beautiful as the years had gone on. There wasn't a soul out there who wasn't jealous of our betrothal. In fact, some, like Ragna, had acted on that jealousy over the years and blatantly hit on her anyway.

But Ayaka had never entertained any of their approaches and continued to stay by my side with the same smile as always. More than a few times, I'd had to hold myself back from shouting with joy that I was so lucky to have such a woman in my life. In fact, one of the main reasons I'd wanted to get stronger was to become a man worthy of her. Truthfully, when my father had first announced my disownment, I'd held a faint hope that she might come with me.

But then Ayaka let out a long, tired sigh, and that hope of mine wavered.

"Ayaka?"

"I've been trying so hard all this time for Lady Shizuya's sake, but I guess it was all for nothing, huh? If Lord Mitsurugi was going to disown you in the end, I wish he'd done it sooner so I wouldn't have had to waste my time."

"You think being with me was...a waste?"

"Tell me something, Sora. Were you by any chance thinking I might go with you?"

“Huh? N-No, well, I mean—”

“Based on that reaction, it looks like you were. Hee hee, I’d never do that.” Leaving absolutely no room for doubt or misunderstanding, Ayaka mercilessly sliced my hopes to pieces. “I’m destined to wed the heir of the Mitsurugi family. Now that you’ve been disowned, you’re no longer the heir. It’s true you’ve put in a great amount of effort over the years, and I don’t dislike that...but it doesn’t mean I’m interested in you.”

“What?!”

“I’m aware that what I’m saying is cruel, but it’s better for you to know the truth than to harbor any strange illusions about me holding a torch for you. Besides, you might misunderstand and think you can rely on my family once you leave here. But you can’t, and I want to make that clear.”

“W-Wait, Ayaka—”

“Sora, what I’ve been feeling for you all this time isn’t love. It’s sympathy...and now that you’ve been expelled from the family, probably disappointment as well. Sorry, but I could never love a man who can’t even beat me in a fight.”

I stared at her, stunned.

“I don’t know what your life will be like from now on. You’re a sore loser, so maybe you’re thinking you can join the ranks of the adventurers or perhaps become a soldier to prove yourself to the family and get your disownment reversed. But if I were you, I’d give up on pursuing the path of the sword entirely. Lord Mitsurugi isn’t the type of man to go back on a decision he’s already made, and above all, it’s a pipe dream to think you can make a living as a swordsman when you can’t even land a hit on a Dragon Fang Soldier. I suggest you forgo the sword and live a peaceful life somewhere else. I’m sure Lady Shizuya will understand.”

With pity in her eyes, Ayaka gave me one last farewell before turning and walking away. She didn’t hesitate once, nor did she even look back.

Some time afterward, I found myself standing on the island’s wharf, assaulted by the sea breeze and clutching a one-way ticket for a ferry to the main continent. Everything in between was such a

haze that I couldn't recall ever buying the ticket or making my way to the wharf.

A pair of siblings—a brother and a sister—were in front of me, looking mournful. The brother's name was Gozu Shiima, and he had been my tutor since childhood. His huge, bearlike body and boorish face reflected his nature as a steadfast warrior. The sister's name was Cecil Shiima, and she, too, had doted on me since he was little. Even now, I could recall trailing along behind her, crying out, "Big sis, big sis!" as vividly as if it were yesterday. She'd been something of a mother figure to me, especially after my real mother had passed away.

My heart swelled with hope. Even if Ayaka hadn't been willing, the siblings would surely accompany me. I directed a pleading look to the two standing on the wharf. But that bubble once again burst when I heard their responses.

"Your performance at the trial was disappointing, to put it mildly. It appears I failed to draw the necessary power out of you, young master— No, Sora. It is truly regrettable. I do hope that you come across a mentor on the continent who is more suited to your skill level. Hm? What do *I* plan to do now, you ask? I serve Lord Mitsurugi, so naturally, I will defer to his orders. Do not worry about me, Sora; take care of yourself first and foremost. May you have a long and healthy life."

"Here, I packed you a lunch so that you'll have something to eat on the ferry to the continent. And please don't worry; I'll watch over Lady Shizuya's grave for you. Oh, my plans from now on? W-Well...I didn't tell you this because I didn't want it to affect your results at the trial, but the other day, Lord Mitsurugi asked me to become his concubine, and, well, I plan to accept his offer..."

The warrior who'd been like a brother to me had earnestly wished for my success in the hereafter, and the woman who'd been like an older sister to me had blushed, announcing her intent to become my father's mistress. Neither of them had even considered going with me to the continent.

As the siblings saw me off, I boarded the ferry and left Onigashima behind. Then, after waving at the ferry only two, maybe

three times as it departed the wharf, the brother and sister turned away as though they had no real lingering attachment.

I stared at their backs for a long time, gripping one of my fists with my other hand. For some time now, my fist had been trembling. Perhaps I was mistaken for thinking their behavior had been cruel. Considering I'd been stripped of my position as heir, perhaps I should've been grateful they'd even bothered to come see me off. After all, no one else had. But even as I tried to rationalize it in my mind, I couldn't keep my fist steady, nor could I stop the tears from streaming down my face.

One day, I'll come back here, I thought. Once I was strong enough to hold my own, I'd be back. I'd return. Over and over again, I swore it in my heart. To the two siblings who'd walked away. To my younger brother, who'd driven me out of my home. To my fiancée, who'd announced our separation. And most of all, to my father, who hadn't even said goodbye to his own son.

I never stopped repeating those words to myself.

Chapter 1: Rock Bottom

1

Five years had passed.

"Guh...gaaah! Agh...gaaah!"

It was midday, yet the forest's depths were as dark as night. Even as I clutched my right arm—nearly torn off at the elbow—in agony, I doggedly willed myself forward. The pain from my gaping wound was so sharp, it was nearly unbearable. In fact, I would've loved to have passed out on the spot. But if I lost consciousness here, I was as good as dead. Luckily, the coarse screams issuing from my throat were as effective as a spell in helping to keep myself alert.

An enormous insect, nearly three meters tall, was hot on my tail. With glowing red compound eyes, gnarled black legs, and clear wings beating at a speed impossible for the human eye to follow, the monster had been dubbed Lord of the Flies due to the majesty of its appearance. It was a class of monster so formidable, news of its emergence would warrant the royal knights' immediate dispatch. A Rank 10 adventurer—the lowest possible rank—would normally never even attempt to approach such a creature.

Blood, sweat, tears, snot, and urine—fear turned bodily fluid—all flew from me as I ran. I knew how pathetic I must have looked, but the terror of being chased by a fly the size of a small mountain overwhelmed me. As I frantically ran to and fro in an attempt to escape, I only had one thought: *It wasn't supposed to be like this!*

Five years ago, after being exiled from my home, I had planned to become an adventurer out of spite. I'd dreamed of taking down monsters, protecting townsfolk, and building up my reputation as an adventurer until my father and the others who'd given up on me would have to acknowledge my strength at last.

Perhaps if things had gone to plan, I would have been well on my

way to mastering the Illusory Blade and fighting the Lord of the Flies on even ground right about now. But as usual, reality had reared its ugly head, and the outcome had been the exact opposite of what I'd hoped. I was too busy trying to run from danger and keep myself alive to even think about facing the monster head-on, let alone protect the townsfolk. What's more, I hadn't encountered the creature by chance—a party of adventurers had sicced it on me.

Those adventurers, whom I'd once thought of as my comrades, had used me as a decoy. The reason my right arm was torn to shreds had nothing to do with the monster—it had been my fellow adventurers' handiwork. As I recalled that fact, another emotion besides fear began to issue from the depths of my throat.

"Those bastards... Those bastards! Screw you all!" I'd certainly considered the possibility that I might die fighting a monster, but I had never dreamed my own comrades would use me as a decoy and leave me for dead!

I'd chosen the path of the adventurer to prove myself to my father and the others on the island, but that wasn't the only reason. Adventuring was the profession that most closely embodied the ideals and teachings of the Illusory Blade—namely, to protect those who needed protecting. I'd heard that adventurers used their blades to keep the populace safe, which was why I'd knocked on the door of their guild. I'd wanted to be of use to the world. I'd wanted to be someone who protected others instead of always needing to be protected. That was the mindset that had led me to the adventurer's life, and yet this was the result? The unfairness of it all, the cruelty, was just too much to bear.

But even as I broke into uncontrollable sobs, I heard a terribly ominous buzzing noise behind me. Despite myself, I turned to look. The four wings protruding from the Lord of the Flies's back were beating furiously. Apparently it had gotten tired of zigzagging through the trees to pursue its prey and decided to use force to put an end to the chase.

Since it only had four small wings to support its massive body, I couldn't imagine how the creature could fly at all. Yet it was clearly having no trouble staying in the air, because after settling on a

direction where no trees would block its path, it launched itself at me in a straight line with the speed of a cannonball. By the time it occurred to me to dodge, it was already too late. As the thunderous roar of its wings ravaged my ears like a grenade exploding in close proximity, the insect slammed into me, tossing me into the air like a rag doll.

At this point, I no longer felt fear or even humiliation. As I hung in the air with a pervading sense of weightlessness, all I felt was crushing despair. Then I hit the ground. There was an instant of nothingness in between before an unbearable, searing pain assailed my entire body, and I involuntarily cried out in agony.

I writhed on the muddy ground like a man crazed. After what felt like an eternity, the pain finally began to subside, and I realized I had a mouthful of dirt and mud. "Ptoo! Urgh...dammit!" I spat out the mud and rose to my feet.

The instant I did, a jolt of intense pain from my torn arm compromised my balance, and I toppled over right into the wad of mud I'd just spat out. I felt an uncomfortable stickiness on my cheek, and the stench of my own spit assaulted my nostrils.

"Aggghh!" I screamed. "Why?! What did I do to deserve this?! Dammit!"

For some time afterward, I continued to cry out and curse no one in particular. It would surely draw the monster's attention, but I was so distraught that it never occurred to me. Suddenly feeling a chill down my spine, I turned to look behind me and recoiled in terror. The Lord of the Flies was looming over me, looking down with its soulless compound eyes.

I shuddered from my very core. I'd finally realized the insect had never been pursuing me seriously—it had been toying with me all along. If it had really wanted to tear me to pieces, it would have done so from the very start. It hadn't because it had been waiting for its prey to wear out.

One question remained: Why would a monster deliberately choose to do that? Suddenly, I recalled something I'd read back when I'd been studying up on monsters: The Lord of the Flies's special trait, and the chief reason the guild regarded it as a disaster-

class monster, was that the insect had an astounding fertility rate. If it was left to its own devices and reached adulthood, it would produce countless larvae, destroying its habitat's ecosystem in the blink of an eye. Naturally, this would also affect the humans in that ecosystem, and indeed, there were previous instances of these insects bringing entire nations to ruin.

According to what I'd read, these creatures reproduced in a way that was similar to certain types of bees or wasps. They would sting humans or large beasts with a paralyzing poison, carry their prey back to their nest, and then feed it, still alive, to their offspring. If the Lord of the Flies caught me here, that same grisly fate would await me as well.

I moaned in despair. I wanted to make a run for it, but the monster's intimidating glare from close up kept me rooted to the spot, like a frog being stared down by a snake. And the insect must have sensed my helplessness, because it gradually started to draw closer.

I unconsciously let out a yelp. A moment later, the creature's sharp tail pierced my flank. I felt pain, but only for a second. It quickly turned to numbness, and the feeling soon spread from the wound throughout my entire body.

Where did I go wrong?

The last thing I recalled just before losing consciousness was what had happened at the Adventurer's Guild three days prior.

2

"Mr. Sora, Rank 10 adventurer, I'm sorry to say this, but effective today, you are no longer qualified for this profession."

"Er... Excuse me?"

That day, the guild's receptionist had handed down my excommunication in a tone that clearly indicated she was not sorry at all. In other words, they were firing me.

"Y-You've got to be joking...right?"

"No. This is an official notice, approved by the guildmaster

himself. Here it is in writing." She politely handed me a piece of paper.

With trembling hands, I took it. It did indeed call for the immediate expulsion of Rank 10 Adventurer Sora from the guild. It even had the guildmaster's official seal.

My heart ached. That wasn't a figure of speech—I literally felt like my heart was in a vise. *Why?* I asked myself. *What did I do to get fired out of the blue?*

I'd just returned from gathering medicinal herbs, which had become a daily task for me. I'd gathered the amount requested just like I was supposed to, so why were they getting rid of me? I couldn't recall any significant screw-ups on other missions I'd been assigned either. It seemed ridiculous and unfair, and the prim-and-proper look on the receptionist's face wasn't helping things. Her words and behavior might've been textbook and her braided hair perfect, but her eyes as she looked at me were like ice, disinterested, as one might look at a pebble on the side of the road. Just like the look my father had given me.

I had been registered with the guild for five years now and was still stuck at the lowest rank, so I could understand why others might look down on me. Still, they shouldn't have kicked me out without a concrete reason. I had half a mind to shout out that this was all bullshit.

"Um, excuse me, are you sure there hasn't been a mistake...maybe?"

The words that came out of my mouth were so pathetic that even I cringed. The receptionist, who didn't look a day over twenty, gave a small sigh, making it obvious that she considered every moment spent talking to me a waste of time.

"Rest assured, there's no mistake. The guild rules state that any adventurer who hasn't risen in rank for three years is to be expelled from the guild. In your case, sir, you were demoted from Rank 9 to Rank 10 three years ago, and your rank hasn't changed since. Therefore, you fulfill the condition for expulsion."

"O-Oh...I see. Sorry... I didn't know that. Er, if you knew that rule from the start, couldn't you have, er, warned me or something

before?”

“As I said, everything I just told you is all written in the guild’s rules. The fault lies with you, sir, for not reading them yourself. The guild is under no obligation to warn its members about such things. It is your responsibility.” For the first time since I’d walked in, the receptionist met my gaze directly. Her eyes were filled with such contempt and scorn that I unconsciously flinched. “This town, Ishka, has a variety of facilities that directly benefit adventurers. Since its position puts it under constant threat of monster attacks, the people here need the cooperation of adventurers to survive. With that in mind, all those belonging to this guild, adventurers and employees alike, are expected to work for the sake of the town.”

“Er, I already know that much.”

It wasn’t a lie; in fact, that was precisely the reason I’d chosen to settle here. A town constantly threatened by monsters would have people to save and thus opportunities to gain prestige. I’d sworn to myself that here, I would accomplish what I’d failed to do back on the island. Now, however, the fulfillment of that vow seemed even farther away than the moon in the sky.

My reply made the receptionist’s eyes glint with an even sharper coldness. “If you’re already aware, then why haven’t you bothered to raise your rank even once in the past three years? It’s not like Rank 9 is particularly difficult to achieve. You, sir, should know that better than anyone else, considering you were promoted to Rank 9 five years ago.”

“I-I understand, but I just don’t have the extra money right now to—”

“It costs one silver coin to take the qualifying exam. Do you mean to say that in a three-year span, you haven’t managed to scrounge up a single silver while helping yourself to all the privileges granted to adventurers in this town? Privileges are only given to those who do their duty and earn it. Even a child knows that.”

“Urk...”

“At any rate, rules are rules. The decision can’t be overturned, and besides, based purely on what you said just now, it sounds like your expulsion wasn’t unwarranted.”

The receptionist lined up one sound argument after another against me, leaving me with no room for rebuttal. I could only open and close my mouth uselessly like a fish gasping for air.

Likely because she thought prolonging the conversation any further would only be a waste of her time, the receptionist spoke harshly and decisively. "This is your reward for today's quest. May it help you in whatever you decide to do from here on. Next in line, please."

"Wait!" Sensing she was forcing an end to the conversation, I cried out to stop her, but she had already turned away from me.

The other adventurers in line behind me gave me impatient looks, as if urging me to hurry up and get out of the way. They were all of a higher rank and level than me, and their dangerous gazes kept my feet from moving right away. Finally, I sheepishly backed out of line with an awkward smile.

If this was how it had to be, then this frightened weasel would at least leave one last stink bomb behind. I'd spew a few parting insults and curses at the receptionist before leaving—or at least I considered as much, but she was young, pretty, and popular with all the other adventurers, and they might beat me to a pulp if I tried. In the end, I could only slink away from her and the guild, dejected.

Upon finishing a quest, I normally headed to the cafeteria with my reward money in hand to treat myself to a round of ale, but today, I wasn't in the mood.

"She didn't give me my ID back either," I muttered. "Guess that means I really am out, huh?"

My proof of identification—a silver stamp that adventurers had to present when reporting the completion of a quest—hadn't been returned to me. It had not only proved my status as an adventurer but granted me access to the town's many facilities and perks catering to guild members. Put simply, without it, I wouldn't get the usual discount.

Ishka was known as a town of adventurers and independence, but it was also constantly exposed to the threat of monsters. Naturally, the royal knights and soldiers did their part to protect it, but adventurers were a more reliable force. Therefore, local policy

gave them special treatment. It was all exactly as the receptionist had said.

What's more, that treatment included discounts on everything from weapons and armor to the daily cost of an inn. Without proper identification, the cost of living here would triple. When an adventurer reported the completion of a quest and handed the receptionist their ID, the receptionist was supposed to hand that ID back along with the reward. The fact that she hadn't returned mine proved that this was no joke or prank. The realization that I really had been fired was finally starting to sink in.

A chill ran down my spine. Without a job, I wouldn't have any income. I had hardly any savings, as even with the complimentary meals at the cafeteria and discounts at the inn, I'd barely managed to scrape by until now. Starting tomorrow, I wouldn't even have those perks to help me out.

I left the building in a daze. I'd been a member of the organization for five whole years now, but despite this being my last day, no one called out to me or told me they would miss me. I was no better off than five years ago.

A dry smile came to my lips. In times like these, sometimes the only thing one could do was laugh.

3

The next morning, I awoke in the room of a cheap inn, which I'd paid two coppers to stay in. Meals were not included. The living spaces in the cramped building did technically qualify as "rooms," as they were separated by thin wooden boards, but there were no doors, so anyone could peek in from the hallway. One could only think the place had been deliberately designed to spite the very concept of privacy.

Since the walls were paper-thin, I could clearly hear everything that was going on in the rooms to my right and left. All night, I'd been exposed to the snores of the guest to my right, as well as the moans of the prostitute in the room to my left, meaning I'd hardly

gotten any sleep. Perhaps the only saving grace was that it was currently summer. If it had been winter, I probably would've frozen to death overnight. That was how miserable my current accommodations were.

The uncomfortable way I'd woken up was enough to make me scowl. It hardly needed stating that I hadn't chosen to stay here of my own free will. Until last night, I'd been staying in a room the guild had arranged for me. While small, it had at least been clean and comfortable, run by an honest innkeeper and his cheerful, lively daughter. But both father and daughter had knocked on my door that night and demanded I move out, so now I was here.

"'We don't have any rooms for non-adventurers,' huh? Goddammit!"

Recalling the man's words, I punched the floor—or the dirt, rather, since the room had no proper floor to speak of. The innkeeper and his daughter had already known about my expulsion. The guild had probably notified them ahead of time. I could still remember the almost relieved look on the daughter's face as she'd said farewell. "Thank you for staying with us! If you ever come again, I'd appreciate it if you at least left a tip next time!"

I'd normally gotten along with her, but apparently, the feeling hadn't been mutual. All this time, she'd merely thought of me as a cheapskate guest who couldn't even be bothered to follow etiquette and tip the staff for their service. And after their kindness had been the only reason I'd stayed there as long as I had! What a fool I'd been!

In truth, I probably had no one to blame but myself. Deep down I knew it was entirely my own fault. Still, did the guild, the innkeepers, and everyone else have to look at me with such revulsion? Recalling the stares of the receptionist and the innkeeper's daughter, anger bubbled up within me, and this time, I nearly punched the wall. But I quickly stopped myself, because my fist might go through the thin board. If I destroyed the wall, I'd likely have to pay ten times or more in repairs than it cost to stay there. Losing my already meager funds over such an impulsive action would be the height of foolishness.

"The real question is, what do I do now?"

I checked how much money I had on hand. A silver and a copper, which might be enough to eke out a living for a month or so, but that was only if I stayed at the cheapest inns and ate just enough to keep myself alive. I needed to improve my living situation—and fast.

If I just wanted to earn money, there were indeed jobs available, like cleaning and maintaining the sewers. But I wouldn't get any stronger or make a name for myself no matter how long I worked in those roles, nor could I accept such a low standard for myself in the first place. I had made a living mindlessly gathering herbs every day up until now, but still, it was something the guild had requested of me. For the first time since leaving the palace, I'd finally felt like I was braving danger to help someone in need and be of use to others.

But such danger hadn't existed within the secure confines of the palace. And if I allowed myself to get acclimated to a life of safety, it would be as good as admitting that five years ago, Ayaka had been right and I was better off giving up the sword and living my days in quiet peace. I would die before giving her the satisfaction of being right.

Then it occurred to me—just because I wasn't part of the guild anymore didn't mean I couldn't kill monsters or rescue people in need. I could still take down monsters or gather herbs as a solo adventurer! Perhaps I wouldn't enjoy the discounts and special treatment I'd had before, but at least I wouldn't be slaving away in the sewers.

Adventurers who worked solo were typically called "strays" and were often lumped in with ruffians and vagabonds. I knew that, but I didn't care. Perhaps a stray adventurer rising to prominence would be interesting in its own way. I would become so famous that the guild receptionist and the innkeeper's girl would regret ever looking at me like they had! In fact, what if the guild had actually been holding *me* back all this time, and now that I was free of its shackles, I could reach my true potential at last? How foolish would they look then? I'd never been too fond of the guild anyway. I knew that the employees and adventurers there had all called me

“parasite” behind my back. Perhaps this opportunity to cut ties with them at last was a blessing in disguise.

I chuckled to himself for a while, then sighed. Even I knew I was pathetically trying to avoid reality.

“Level Display.”

I used magic to make my own skill level appear before my eyes. The number that showed up was the same one it had always been: 1. However hard I trained, however much of an effort I made to improve, however much live combat experience I gained, I never leveled up. Staring at the number in front of me, unmoving as though cursed, I couldn’t help but grimace.

A person’s level was a measure of their ability. A vessel at Level 10 could not go beyond that. Naturally, the higher a person’s level, the higher their capacity for power. There were many different ways to go about raising one’s level depending on their profession, but for those for whom combat was a calling, a key factor was to face off against opponents stronger than them. Beating hundreds of monsters wouldn’t raise your level one bit if they were all so weak that you were guaranteed to win from the start. Conversely, that meant the weaker you were, the more likely you were to level up. In that sense, it should have been easier for a Level 1 human to improve than anyone else.

Yet here was a Level 1 human who had not, either on the island or in the town, managed to raise their level even once—me. Anyone who heard that would no doubt find it bizarre, but in truth, there *was* a logical possibility for it: my ability limit. All humans had limits that capped their abilities. It was said that the Sword Saint who’d imprisoned the Demon God three hundred years ago had raised his level as far as 99 but had been unable to go any further. If even a hero of legend had an ability cap, it stood to reason that all humans would possess limits of their own. And just as everyone had different methods for raising their level, everyone’s limit was different. In other words, it was entirely possible for someone’s cap to be set at Level 1.

I had previously belonged to a party of adventurers, but the difference in level between them and me had been so significant

that they'd all cut ties with me. More accurately, they'd kicked me out of the party, not unlike the way my younger brother and former fiancée had abandoned me back on the island.

With no way of raising my level, my ability limit was, in a nutshell, the source of all of my despair. Still, I refused to give up. If I did, it would be the same as admitting that everyone else had been right to forsake me. And it wasn't like I had no hope whatsoever. Level Display, the spell I used to make my level appear before me, could only show the level I was currently at. It did not show my ability limit, my level capacity, or anything else. In other words, no one could say for sure whether my inability to level up really was due to a limit or simply a lack of combat experience.

The residents of the island were forbidden from participating in real combat until they completed their trial. But here on the continent, I could become an adventurer and get the combat experience I needed to improve. At least, that had been the thread of hope I'd clung to five years ago. But reality had been cruel to me. No matter how many monsters I'd defeated or bandits I'd killed, my level hadn't changed, and I'd watched my comrades who'd fought the same enemies and taken on the same quests climb higher and higher. In turn, the gulf between our abilities had grown wider and wider.

One's level was considered personal information and usually kept secret even from those in the same party. Yet my comrades at the time hadn't hesitated to divulge their levels to each other, leaving me the only one who wanted to keep mine secret. It would have made me stick out like a sore thumb, so to avoid raising suspicion, I'd finally chosen a day to reveal my level to the rest of the party.

Up until that point I'd been on friendly terms with everyone in the party, and our leader had been someone I could even call a friend, so I'd assumed they would understand. But all I'd received were jeers and scorn. They'd called me a fraud to my face and promptly chased me out. Weaker adventurers who wormed their way into higher-level parties by hiding their own status were known as "parasites" and were highly despised. That hadn't been my intention, of course, and I'd tried to explain that to them before things

escalated, but it hadn't mattered. From my party's perspective, my actions had been no different from that of a parasite.

That was four years and six months ago. And ever since, I'd been called a parasite by everyone around me. Things had only snowballed from there. As my deeds as a parasite became more widely known, word had also spread that I was only Level 1 and that my abilities were likely capped there. With no one wanting me in their party, I'd continued to work solo. But solo adventurers were restricted in the types of quests they could accept, and nearly all of those quests paid in coppers, the lowest level of currency. With such meager funds, I couldn't afford better weapons or armor, making the selection of quests I could take even narrower.

It was a vicious cycle. In fact, the reason I'd stepped down from Rank 9 three years earlier was because the guild's Rank 10 fee was cheaper. Until then I'd stayed at Rank 9 through sheer stubborn pride, but my funds had eventually dwindled to where I could no longer afford even that. And with my lack of motivation and financial means to reclaim my Rank 9 status, the guild had finally had enough and expelled me.

These circumstances had led me to my current predicament.

4

"Hey, you... If you're looking for a party to join, wanna join ours?"

Nearly a month after settling in Ishka as an adventurer, I had received an invitation from a boy calling himself Raz. He'd grown tired of barely making ends meet as a farmer and had chosen the adventurer life instead to gain wealth and recognition simultaneously.

"Pretty common reason, huh?" he said with a grin, seeming affable and good-hearted.

"Raz! It's rude to address someone you just met with 'hey, you'!" a girl named Iria scolded him. She was Raz's childhood friend and had learned martial arts and recovery magic from her mother, who was a warrior priestess. To Iria, wealth and recognition were

secondary, and she'd primarily struck out with Raz so that someone would be there to keep him in line. With her strong-willed, almond-shaped eyes and black hair done up in a ponytail, she looked a little like my ex-fiancée.

"Less rude than ignoring this boy we're inviting so you can have your little lover's spat?" a girl with a wizard's hat and staff said with an exasperated sigh. As one might guess from her appearance, she was a mage. Her flaming-red hair and freckles were her distinguishing characteristics, and she had introduced herself as Miroslav. She was from a well-to-do family and wore a robe made of silk, with a large, expensive-looking magic stone embedded in her wand. Her earrings and bracelets also looked extremely valuable.

"That's enough, everyone. Can't you see you're troubling the poor boy?" a long-eared girl named Lunamaria said, chiding the bickering trio with a frown. She was an elf, and she was a hunter, a spirit user, and a genius who possessed enough knowledge to qualify as a sage.

When I'd first met them five years ago, Raz and Iria had been thirteen and Miroslav fourteen—in other words, too young to succeed as a party on their own. So this older elf girl was the support pillar of their group, assisting them in a number of ways. As for *how* old she was, Lunamaria always merely giggled and said, "It's a secret."

Their four-person group was called the Falcon Blades. They were a Rank G party; in other words, a newly formed group. They said they were looking for an additional member to fill out their front line.

Truthfully, I turned down their offer at first. I was happy to be invited, but my bitter farewell with Ayaka and the others on the island was still fresh in my memory, and the idea of being around other people filled me with an emotion close to fear.

But Raz didn't back down. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be fine! We've seen you at the guild's dojo doing your practice swings for hours on end, and your form was impeccable!"

He kept buttering me up until I finally gave in. Or rather, I *pretended* to be reluctant to join, but in truth, I was thrilled to learn they wanted me so much.

I genuinely enjoyed my time adventuring with them. They drove

me out of the party not even half a year later, but even so, I can't deny that every day I spent with them was a blast. As for what led to my expulsion, it was just as I said earlier: Miroslav called me a swindler to my face, and Iria thrust harsh words of reproach at me. Raz didn't say a word, only looking sullen, but the disappointment in his eyes was unmistakable. Lunamaria was the only one who didn't criticize me, but her gaze of sympathy and pity gouged deeper into my heart than the others' words.

Afterward, the Falcon Blades began to climb dramatically in rank and prestige, almost as though their confrontation with me had relieved all the pent-up anger and frustration that had hindered their progression thus far. At present, they were Rank C. Currently there were no Rank A parties registered with Ishka's Adventurer's Guild, so Rank B parties were considered the peak—and there were only three of those so far. That fact alone should be enough to understand just how significant their rapid progression was. My former comrades had fully established themselves as top-ranking adventurers. And since they were still based in this town, I naturally ran into them from time to time.

"And just what are *you* doing here?"

Three days after being expelled from the guild—in other words, the same day the Lord of the Flies attacked me—I'd been gathering medicinal herbs in the sprawling Titus Forest north of Ishka when I heard a voice behind me. I recognized the hatred and scorn in it. When I turned around and saw the exact person I'd expected to be standing there, I couldn't help but scowl. The person in question put a hand on her hip and puffed out her chest with pride.

"Hmph. What's with that look? If you've got something you want to say, go right ahead and say it. I must admit I'm curious to hear the defense of a con man who reached the limit of his abilities long ago yet kept that little detail secret and clung to our party for nearly half a year. You parasite."

It was a woman, holding a magic staff and wearing a wizard's hat—undoubtedly a mage. The long hair spilling from beneath her hat was flaming red, and her topaz eyes glittered with contempt. It was Miroslav, the primary magic user of the Falcon Blades. The girl who'd

once been self-conscious about her freckles had blossomed into a bewitchingly beautiful woman over the past five years. And yet, no matter how pretty she was, the undisguised disdain in her words couldn't have made her seem more grotesque.

Just as I was thinking that to myself, Miroslav snorted. "Not going to speak, huh? Perhaps that's just as well. After all, what I said just now wasn't baseless slander, was it? It's the irrefutable truth." It looked like she had more to say, but before she could continue, another voice stopped her.

"That's enough, Miro."

It was Raz, the leader of the Rank C party the Falcon Blades and a prodigy who'd ascended to Tier 6 as an adventurer at only eighteen years of age. Both Rank C and Tier 6 typically took adventurers over ten years to attain and were usually considered veteran ranks for parties and adventurers, respectively. Yet in just five years, before he'd even turned twenty, Raz had made a name for himself as an up-and-coming adventurer. Despite us being the same age and becoming adventurers at the same time, the gulf between us had already grown hopelessly large.

Raz cast a glance in my direction, and his lip curled ever so slightly. There was no trace of the affable smile he used to regard me with. "I heard you got thrown out of the guild, Sora."

"Y-Yeah."

"Guess your level hasn't changed either, then, huh? Since you're here, I guess you're still trying to cling to adventurer work, but I'd just hang it up if I were you. It's far too late for you to make anything of yourself."

"Thanks for the tip," I muttered.

At that, the beautiful black-haired girl standing beside him scowled. "Hey, what's with that attitude?! Raz went out of his way to warn you out of the goodness of his heart! Don't you think you should act a little more grateful?!"

It was Iria, dressed in a white undershirt. She'd always had a pretty face, and much like Miroslav, she'd become shockingly gorgeous over the past five years. The fact that she only had eyes for Raz hadn't changed, though.

"I'm...sorry," I mumbled.

She hesitated, like she hadn't expected me to apologize. "Still a limp noodle of a man, I see. Though when we first met, you seemed to have a little more backbone."

"Enough, Iria. He's not one of us anymore. If he chooses not to listen and ends up dead, it's his own damn fault."

"Raz is right," Miroslav agreed. "Let's just leave this loser to his herb-gathering and go on ahead. Maybe it's my imagination, but there's a stench in the air here, like that of a stray that hasn't had a bath for three days."

"Hey now, Miro, you were the one who called out to him first!"

Raz and the two girls continued to make snide comments as they disappeared into the forest. Lunamaria alone stayed behind.

"I'm glad to see you're okay, Sora," she said with a bow. The gentle smile she wore was no different from when we first met.

On the whole, elves were considered a prideful, exclusionary race, but Lunamaria was an exception. Her attitude had always been pleasant, and she was often the one to defuse Iria and Miroslav's catfights over Raz, sometimes scolding them and sometimes soothing them. She was the oil that greased the party's wheels, so to speak.

During my time in the party, she and I had worked on logistics and business matters together, and if I'm being honest with myself, I'd even had a crush on her at one point. Once I saw the way her eyes followed Raz like the other two girls, however, I sealed those feelings up within myself for good. Still, I'd been grateful to her for never treating me any differently even though I couldn't level up and had more or less become the party's pack mule as the months went on.

Now, however, even that gratitude I had felt toward her was long gone. I overheard her talking with the rest of the party one day at the local tavern after they'd expelled me. During that conversation, I had heard the derogatory term "parasite" come from none other than this elf girl's mouth.

For that reason, I simply responded to her "concern" with "whatever" and turned my back on her, rejecting any further

conversation. I could sense her bewilderment from behind, but I didn't really care. I didn't want her pity or for her to talk to me out of some sense of obligation. I truly wanted nothing more than for her to just forget about me and go back to her precious Raz.

But my intent must have not gotten through to her, because her voice rang out from behind me like a bell. "A number of people have been reported missing in Titus Forest these past few days. You should be careful too, Sora."

"Er...missing?" The unexpected information made me look over my shoulder at her despite myself. Seeing that, Lunamaria looked slightly relieved and nodded.

Titus Forest was vast—enough to be a kingdom all its own. It was even rumored that illusory creatures lurked in its deepest depths. So it wasn't unusual to hear about adventurers setting foot in the forest and never returning. Even so, a number of adventurers disappearing in a matter of days was definitely unusual.

Lunamaria explained that some of them had belonged to Rank C parties, the same rank as the Falcon Blades. The guild had apparently dispatched several other parties to search for them, including my former party, which was why they were here today.

Lunamaria, concerned about my well-being, was trying to warn me that by being in the forest right now, I was in danger. Part of me wanted to snap back that it was none of her business, but even I recognized that it would be petty of me, so I restrained myself.

"Um...all right, I'll be careful. Thanks for the warning."

"You're welcome. Now then, I'll be off as well." With that farewell, she headed deeper into the forest to rejoin her comrades.

Relieved that the unwanted reunion was over at last, I returned to gathering herbs. Lunamaria's comment about the missing adventurers concerned me, but as long as I stayed on the outskirts of the forest, I knew I'd be safe. In fact, this could only benefit me. Fewer adventurers in the forest might increase the value of the herbs I was gathering, or at least that was my first thought, which proved how little I'd come to care about the affairs of others.

I never would have imagined that not long afterward, my old party would return to my location with the Lord of the Flies on their

tail and Miroslav would suddenly cast a spell to draw the monster's attention away from an injured Raz and onto me.

5

I hated my name, Sora. I hated what it meant: emptiness. Every time someone called my name, I felt like they were calling me "empty" or "hollow." In fact, someone had once used it with that exact intent back at the island's dojo after losing to my younger brother, Ragna. Perhaps if Ragna had been the one who'd said such a thing, I would've expected it and it wouldn't have affected me as much. But it had come from somewhere else—a snide, offhand comment from one of my classmates.

"At least they named him right, huh? He's just a hollow waste of space."

"I feel sorry for Ragna, having a wispy coward like that for an older brother. I mean, Ragna's clearly superior in every way."

It was around when I'd turned seven that my lack of ability in comparison to Ragna, Ayaka, and my classmates had grown too glaring to ignore, and the stares of everyone around me—especially my father—had started turning cold.

I remember grumbling to my mother at one point, "Why did you even give me this name?" I was only venting my frustration and anger at the time, but I couldn't help but blurt it out. Despite her son's pathetic behavior, however, she had gently embraced me and led me to the palace courtyard. She had been stricken with illness at the time—she'd had a weak constitution to begin with, but after giving birth, her weakness had become all the more apparent. For a year and a half after I was born, she was bedridden. Her room, the mansion, and the courtyard had been her entire world back then. Perhaps that was why she had come to enjoy looking at the sky so much.

She loved clear skies. She loved cloudy skies. She loved watching the sun set and rise. She loved rainy skies too, "though less so since I can't go out to the garden on rainy days," she would always joke

with a small smile. Still, just from her expression when she looked up at the rain clouds, I could tell how she truly felt.

No matter where they were, anyone could look up at the sky at any time and it would be there, displaying a variety of emotions. And even if loved ones were far away, one could always take solace in knowing they were all under the same sky. In that sense, everyone was connected, and no one was really ever alone. Her love for that sky, she'd explained, was what had made her immediately think of "Sora" for my name. She'd told me she wished for me to grow as vast as the sky, connecting people the world over.

Oh, and Sora, she'd said to me after I'd broken into a sob upon hearing the reason for my name, *remember that words like "empty" and "hollow" don't always have to be negative. If you're a blank slate, you can become anything you want. As you grow, your heart and mind will fill up with all sorts of things, and you'll be free to choose your own path. Whatever path that may be, know that as your mother, I'll be behind you every step of the way.*

"Where...am I?"

When I came to, I was lying on the ground. I had no clue where I was. Perhaps because I had just woken from a dream recounting a precious memory, my heart swelled with hope that I might've been rescued. Everything was pitch-black, and at least I couldn't make out my surroundings, but I didn't sense the Lord of the Flies' presence. Sighing in relief, I rose to a sitting position.

"Huh?"

Or at least, I tried to. My body wouldn't react. The intense numbness all over kept my limbs from responding. I could move my head freely, but that was all. Below the neck, I couldn't move a muscle. It was a horrifying sensation, the likes of which I had never experienced before. And speaking of horrifying, what were those noises that seemed to be coming from nearby?

A dry noise, like a hard object snapping in two. A pulpy, visceral noise, like something soft getting chewed up. A sticky, slurping noise.

I didn't know why, but the sounds made my blood run cold. The

fact that I couldn’t see anything around me only exacerbated my fear. I desperately tried to move, to distance myself from the source of the noises, but my paralyzed body wouldn’t respond.

Then, at that moment, light pierced the darkness—moonlight from overhead. The light illuminated my surroundings, offering me a clear view of my predicament. I was in a space large enough to fit a standard mansion inside, and the ground was rocky and uneven. There was nothing to suggest the space was man-made, which led me to suspect I was in some type of cave. Yet caves typically had some sort of tunnel to enter and exit through, and I couldn’t see anything like that. If I was to escape from here, I would have to exit from the hole that had suddenly opened up above me. I didn’t see any other option.

The hole, no more than a natural light fixture at present, seemed hopelessly tiny looking up from where I was, but that was only because of my distance from it. I suspected that the opening was actually rather large—enough for a giant monster to pass through, in fact. The hole only looked to be about the size of a fist, and it would have been difficult for me to reach it without some means of flight anyway, but conversely, it meant a monster capable of flight had needed a hole that large in order to enter and exit the cave. Meaning...

“This is the Lord of the Flies’ lair, isn’t it?” I groaned under my breath. My initial hope that I’d been rescued dissolved and spilled from my heart like sand. Actually, there was an even bigger concern: if this was the creature’s lair, then the noises I was hearing must have been...

I didn’t want to look, but I gingerly turned my head. I knew I’d regret it, but at that point, ignoring reality was no longer an option. Just as I’d thought, I immediately wished I hadn’t looked.

“Eep!”

There was an adventurer lying there, likely one of the missing people Lunamaria had spoken of, and he was in a ghastly state. Both arms were missing at the shoulder, and both legs were missing below the thigh. From the reddish-brown stumps on his body, I could see the white of bone peeking out, and countless maggots

were clinging to the exposed meat. The larvae squirming around in the open wounds ranged from the size of an ant to the size of a fist as they gnawed bone, chewed flesh, and slurped blood.

But that wasn't all. Maggots the size of grains of rice poured from his nose, mouth, and ears. Only the eyes had been left intact. I thought that was peculiar until a moment later when his eyes met mine. They were filled with fear and despair, on the verge of madness, but they were definitely looking at me. The adventurer had recognized my presence. As proof, his eyes opened wide, and his mouth opened, as though desperate to tell me something—except instead of words, a flood of maggots spilled out.

I let out a whimper. The man was alive. His limbs had been devoured, his nose, ears, and throat defiled, yet he was still conscious. The Lord of the Flies had captured its prey alive and carried him back to its lair as food for its offspring. Then the larvae had chowed down on their meal bit by bit, careful to keep their victim from perishing.

The information I'd previously read on the Lord of the Flies had been one hundred percent accurate. And seeing the scene before me, I realized it wouldn't be long before that same fate was mine. Once that sunk in...

"Aaahhh!"

I couldn't hold it in any longer and screamed at the top of my lungs in terror. As though it was the signal they'd been waiting for, the maggots around me all sprang onto me at once.

"N-No! Don't come any closer!" I frantically shook my head—the only part of my body I could freely move—to drive away the attacking insects. But they weren't even fazed and swarmed my limbs in the blink of an eye. My right arm was already barely attached thanks to Miroslav's magic, so the larvae were able to tear it off with ease. The severed limb fell to the ground, and they devoured it completely, not even leaving a single drop of blood behind.

My legs became shorter and shorter before my eyes. Before long, my left hand had been devoured up to the wrist. I could also tell they'd entered my body from the exposed stumps of my limbs,

because I could hear the clacking of their teeth chewing on my bones.

Normally, in this situation, one might writhe around in agony from the excruciating pain. Perhaps they'd even go mad. But I was still sane, and I didn't feel any pain. On the contrary, each time the maggots took a bite, I felt a tingling, almost euphoric sensation in my spine.

This was likely the maggots' handiwork. They were surely emitting some substance that was blocking my pain receptors as they chowed down on my body, like a mosquito did when it sucked human blood. That had to be the reason I was still alive when I should have long since died, and why I was currently experiencing the horror of being eaten alive. The Lord of the Flies probably instinctively knew that prey was tastier when it was still alive; otherwise, it wouldn't have had a reason to do this to me. It wouldn't have left my vitals, like my brain and torso, intact.

Despite not feeling any pain, however, I was still losing flesh and blood. Eventually, my life would peter out. Before I knew it, maggots the size of small beans had gathered around my head, occasionally advancing and retreating back and forth as if to toy with me. Because they were tinier than the others, they were likely newcomers who'd just been born. Had they been waiting until I was weaker? Or were they simply playing around with their weakened prey like a new toy?

Then it hit me. If these maggots also grew to become Lords, they could bring all of Ishka—no, the whole kingdom of Kanaria—to its knees. Then, after multiplying more, the swarm might even attack the neighboring island empire of Ad Astera. If that happened, the empire's bulwark, the Mitsurugi family and their followers—all users of the Illusory Blade—would undoubtedly wipe out the threat. The fact that I, Mitsurugi Sora, had been eaten alive by monsters would be buried in the annals of time, with no one knowing what had become of me. I could almost hear the cries of jubilation from the populace aboveground, praising my father, Ragna, and the other Illusory Blade users for their heroic achievement.

As I imagined it, I felt fear, anger, discontent, and hopelessness.

The negative emotions bubbled up from the depths of my stomach like mud. I was already wounded fatally. I didn't feel any pain, but I was about to run out of blood. Even if by some twist of fate someone were to come and rescue me, the likelihood of my survival would still practically be zero. If there was a priest in the rescue party who knew the Full Heal spell, or if one of the adventurers had an elixir on hand, sure, maybe I'd pull through. But that was it—my missing limbs wouldn't return. I'd heard the cardinal of the Holy Monarchy to the south could perform restoration miracles, but for a common adventurer—no, a stray—like myself, that possibility might as well not have existed.

I would never be able to hold a sword again. I would never be able to walk on my own two legs. My mother had told me I could be anything my heart desired, and now here I was, about to head to the afterlife to report to her that in the end, I'd become insect food. Could I have been any more pathetic? Could I have been any more disappointing?

"Aaagghh!" At rock bottom, at the depths of my despair, I screamed like a madman. "Get off me, please! I'm begging you! Don't eat any more of me! I don't want to die in a place like this! I don't want to die at all!"

I thrashed my head in all directions as I shouted, attempting to shake off the larvae devouring me. But the monster's paralysis was far too potent, and no matter how much time passed, I couldn't move anything other than my head. The maggots must have realized this as well, as they ignored my pleas and went right on feasting, giving me their undivided attention.

After ranting and raving for who knew how long, I used my last bit of strength to press my own face against the cold, hard ground. With the sensation of icy dirt on my cheek, I moaned. "Dammit...why?! Why can't I do anything right?!"

Back when I'd first been expelled from the guild, why hadn't I just given up on adventuring entirely? When I'd run into Raz and the others in the forest, why hadn't I heeded their warnings and gone back to Ishka? Hell, had becoming an adventurer five years ago been a mistake in itself? Back when I was first disowned, should I

have given up on adventuring and chosen another path, just as Ayaka had recommended? If I'd given up the sword like I was supposed to, maybe I wouldn't have wasted these past five years. Maybe I could have avoided this fate.

But then I'd have been going back on my vow. That day, while I'd been sparring in the dojo, my mother had collapsed, and by the time I'd gotten back home, panting and wheezing, she had already departed this world. Clinging to her dead body, I had made an oath that I would become vast like the sky, just as she'd wished me to.

I had originally planned on accomplishing this by becoming a man worthy of succeeding the Mitsurugi family name—to master the Illusory Blade, save the populace from magical beasts and earn the people's support and love. To become like the man my mother had fallen in love with.

Once I'd been driven from the island, however, this had meant choosing the path of the adventurer. A person with nothing was free to become anything, so I decided on the adventuring life. For five years, I'd toiled to measure up to my father so that I could visit my mother's grave one day with my head held high. And yet, *this* was the result of my efforts. Devoured by insects. It was inconceivable. Why? I hadn't worked this hard, hadn't made that vow for it to all end like this.

"If I'd known it would turn out this way, I would've killed myself long ago!"

As crushing hopelessness overwhelmed me, the words erupted from my throat. At that moment, I felt the movement of the insects within my body change. With eerie creaking noises, they headed for my face, the only part they hadn't touched yet.

"Gah! *No, not my face!* Don't come any closer!"

The larvae leaped onto my eyes, nose, mouth, and ears, one after another. I tried to shake them off, but they paid no attention to my futile resistance and continued to cling to me. I could feel them entering my ears and nose with more determination than they'd ever displayed thus far. Perhaps they'd judged that my life was already at an end—in other words, I was at my most delectable—and now, it was feeding time. I could almost feel their intent from inside me.

Finally, they tried to enter my mouth. I kept my lips clamped shut as hard as I could. A few were also attempting to eat their way through my eyeballs, so I kept my eyes squeezed shut as well. But it was futile—they tore through my lips and eyelids.

I tried to scream, but no sound came out. Was I screaming in anger, screaming for help, or screaming out for forgiveness? Even I didn't know, and there was no one who would give me the answer anyway. So I just screamed.

Then, a voice suddenly rang out. And contrary to my wildest expectations, it was replying to me.

Chapter 2: Soul Eater

1

The insects crawled throughout my body relentlessly.

They're devouring me.

As they bit, tore, chewed, and slurped, my body continued to disappear as though I were melting away.

They'll keep eating me until nothing's left.

They wouldn't stop. I couldn't stop them. No doubt the high-pitched creaking noises reverberating through the cave were the larvae chortling with joy.

YOU'RE BEING EATEN.

My arms were gone. My legs were gone. I'd never be able to pick up a sword again. I'd never even be able to walk again.

YOU'RE GOING TO DIE.

My eyes, nose, ears, and mouth were all overflowing with maggots. I knew I was a goner.

ARE YOU REALLY GOING TO GIVE UP?

Of course I am.

In truth, I'd probably already given up a long time ago and simply hadn't wanted to admit it. Deep down, I'd known for some time that I, Sora Mitsurugi, would never amount to anything.

THEN YOU'RE A FOOL.

That's right, I'm a fool. A huge fool. But what can I possibly do in this situation other than give up?

EAT.

Excuse me?

EAT THEM.

E-Eat what? These insects?

CORRECT.

What would that accomplish? I'm already done for. Crushing a

hundred or so insects between my teeth won't stop the thousands already crawling through me, and there are even more than that all over this cave. It's no use.

THEN YOU'LL JUST LET THEM CONSUME YOU?

It's not like I want them to. I don't want to die. But there's nothing I can do. Back on the islands, they always said weaklings were unnecessary. And they were right. They didn't need me on Onigashima, and they didn't need me in Ishka. Not as a swordsman, not as an adventurer, and not as Sora Mitsurugi! My father was absolutely right all along!

DOESN'T THAT INFURIATE YOU?

Infuriate me?

IF YOU DIE, YOUR FATHER WILL SMIRK WITH SATISFACTION.

No, he won't. Even if I was dying in front of him, he wouldn't bat an eye. I was dead to him the moment he disowned me, after all. But...

BUT?

Ragna will definitely be thrilled. Ayaka, Gozu, Cecil, and my father's other disciples will too. They'll laugh among themselves and say that it was a fitting end for the incompetent Sora. So would the Falcon Blades, the guild receptionist, and the innkeeper and his daughter. I'm sure of it.

AND THAT UPSETS YOU, DOESN'T IT?

Yeah. I admit it. It fills me with rage. I might already be beyond saving, but I at least don't want to be laughed at in my final moments. If dying means they'll laugh at me, then even if it's a futile effort, I'll at least wipe those smiles off their faces by putting up a fight. Even if it's just ten or twenty insects, I'll take as many of the Lord of the Flies' children with me to the grave as I can!

Fortunately, I could still move my mouth, and I still had teeth. I could crush a maggot with ease by biting down on it.

THEN EAT.

Yeah, I'll eat. If I'm going to die anyway, I might as well struggle until my last breath—OR, if I'm already going to put up a FIGHT, then why not just EAT THEM ALL? If I EAT THEM ALL, I might actually SURVIVE! Is there really that big of a difference between

eating HUNDREDS or THOUSANDS or HUNDREDS of THOUSANDS?

EAT. EAT IT ALL. EAT EVERYTHING.

If my choices are to EAT or BE EATEN, then the correct choice is OBVIOUS. Right... Why didn't I REALIZE something that SIMPLE from the START?

EAT IT ALL. THE WORLD. THE UNIVERSE. EVERYTHING.

Yeah. Not just the INSECTS. EVERYONE who MADE FUN OF ME. EVERYONE who LOOKED DOWN on ME. EVERYONE who ABANDONED me. EVERYONE... EVERYONE... I SHOULD'VE EATEN THEM ALL to BEGIN WITH.

I AM YOU.

That's right. You've felt the SAME things I've FELT all these years, haven't YOU?

AND YOU ARE ME.

SORA MITSURUGI is powerless. I'm useless in a fight, and I can't protect anyone.

YOU AND I, WE ARE ONE.

I vowed I'd make something of myself like my mother wished, and I couldn't even honor that promise. What could someone like me possibly accomplish now? What can I even do?

HERE AND NOW, OUR ANIMAS ARE ALIGNED. OUR UNION IS COMPLETE.

YOU—WE—WILL SIMPLY EAT IT ALL.

FROM THIS POINT ON, WE ARE REBORN.

My conversation with someone I didn't know in a place I wasn't familiar with ended there, and my consciousness surfaced back to reality.

Just before that, however, I witnessed a peculiar scene. Amid a desolate wasteland of rocks and dirt, stretching as far as I could see, a lone majestic oak tree stood tall. And crouching in front of that tree, as if guarding it, was a creature as large as a mountain, covered in scales as black as night. It was unmistakably a dragon, known to be the strongest of all illusory beasts in the world. It must have noticed my presence, because it raised its long neck and looked in my direction.

I couldn’t tell what expression it was wearing, nor did I understand its language. Yet somehow, I knew it was grinning. Somehow, I understood what it was saying.

It was introducing itself.

Its name was...

2

If I were pressed to describe in words what that feeling was like, I’d say it was probably something similar to how it would feel to swallow the sun whole.

“Gyaaaahhh!”

The pain was so intense that all I could do was scream. *It burns. It burns. It burns it burns it burns itburnsITBURNSITBURNS!*

My entire body was engulfed in flame. My flesh was melting. I felt my blood rush from the top of my head to the tips of my toes like boiling water. I was certain that my body would burst like a water balloon pricked by a needle. If I didn’t release this heat boiling my body—this power coursing through me—in the next instant, I would explode into chunks of flesh!

Shout it. Shout it out. Declare it.

I know. I know. I know! I already knew how to release this power. I already knew how to manifest this strength. *I know how to wield the illusory power within me!*

“You and I—we are one!” With that declaration, I gave the rampaging, chaotic power within me purpose and direction. The twisted, black power rushed into my outstretched hand like a torrent, forming something narrow. Long. Sharp. Powerful.

“Shinsou Reiki.”

In my hand was the ferocious, hallowed sword of myth, a manifestation of an eclipse devouring the sun. The illusion that had single-handedly laid waste to the seventeen War Gods back during the Age of Myth—the oldest and most powerful illusion known to man.

Its name was...

"DEVOUR THEM, SOUL EATEEER!"

In that moment, a black flash engulfed the cave I was in, swallowing up the light from the night sky.

After who knows how long, I noticed moonlight shining down from above once more. The glint of black light had vanished, and I was standing alone in the middle of the cave, panting in heavy, ragged breaths.

That's right—I was standing. Even though I'd seen the larvae devour them, I had both my legs. I had all my toes, and even my toenails had been restored. Similarly, both my arms were back as well—both the left arm that had been consumed up to the shoulder and the damaged right arm that the insects had bitten off. It was a bizarre feeling to be able to freely move an arm that had once been gnawed off.

In that right hand, I was clutching a sword. The guard and pommel were dyed black as the night itself and felt shockingly familiar in my hand. The blade's body, too, was jet black, yet its edge was bloodred.

I stared intently at the blade's edge. I felt an odd pressure stinging my skin like needles and a tingling, euphoric sensation in my spine. I hadn't forgotten what I'd experienced, so I knew what that feeling meant. Even if I hadn't been able to remember, I was certain I'd have known on instinct. This was my Shinsou—my own heart made manifest.

"Soul Eater... The soul-devouring dragon, huh?"

Perhaps because we were attuned, all knowledge pertaining to the anima within flooded into my brain. No one responded to my muttering, but the black blade did briefly glint in the moonlight, almost as though approving of my understanding of my Shinsou. Perhaps the glint taking on a poisonous red hue even suggested something akin to affection.

Suddenly, something moved within my vision. A maggot, swelled to around the size of a child's head, was fleeing from me in desperation. A closer look revealed that all of the other maggots in the cave were attempting the same thing. The heat from my Shinsou

seemed to have annihilated the insects swarming my body, but many more were still inhabiting the cave. They'd normally be a significant threat if they all attacked me at once, but they didn't seem too interested now. Perhaps they instinctively understood they wouldn't win. It might have been the first time they'd encountered an outside threat that hadn't been paralyzed first.

"A creature that's targeted by others just because it lays a bunch of eggs. I see." I remembered something Lunamaria had told me a while back when we were discussing the habits of various creatures: The reason insects lay so many eggs is because most larvae don't even make it to adulthood. In that sense, perhaps the Lord of the Flies, having laid thousands of eggs, was running itself ragged here in this natural realm.

"Working hard so its children can grow, only to return and find them all wiped out... When it comes back, the Lord of the Flies will be crushed with grief, won't it?!"

A smirk unconsciously sprang to my lips. If that monster hadn't captured me, I doubt I would have ever perceived my Shinsou. In that sense, perhaps I owed my benefactor some gratitude—if you could call an insect a benefactor, that is. Not that the details really mattered, because with equal parts gratitude and indignation gushing from the depths of my heart, I planned to cut down every single one of its children until none were left. Normally I would have prioritized coming up with an escape plan, but that could wait. Right now, this was more important.

The despair I'd felt before my Shinsou awakened was still fresh in my mind. I could vividly recall the terror of being eaten alive, which was why getting my revenge would be all the sweeter. The only downside was that it was a shame I couldn't understand what the frightened insects were crying as they ran for their lives.

All right, let's start with this one nearest to me!

"Here we go! Augh?!"

However, the moment I cut into the large insect, a strange noise issued from my mouth, so idiotic-sounding that had someone else been there watching me, they doubtless would have laughed until their sides hurt. I covered my mouth in surprise and embarrassment.

What the hell was that?! The instant I'd cut into the insect, an indescribable sensation had run through me! If I was to compare it to something, it was like when I...well, pleasured myself. Put more bluntly, it was a sensation incredibly similar to sexual pleasure.

"What the...?" The sensation had caught me off guard a little, but it didn't keep me from my revenge. I took aim at the second-closest insect and swung the black blade down a second time. "Mmph!"

Since I'd expected it, I was able to suppress my moan this time. Was this the insects' doing? Were they somehow retaliating one last time before they died? If so, I'd have thought they would at least try to hurt me. Oh well.

I cut another down. "Nn!" Another. "Ooh!" A thrust this time. "Mm...all right..." Thrust. "I think I'm..." Downward slice. "Getting used to it now." The more I swung the blade, the more familiar I became with the sensation. Then I had a sudden thought. I was about to squash one of the smaller insects with my foot as a test when I realized I was barefoot. Crushing an insect underneath my foot wouldn't feel too good, though considering I'd already crushed them with my teeth, maybe it was too late to worry about that.

"In that case, I'll do this."

I picked up a rock nearby and used it to crush the insect instead. As I'd thought, I didn't feel any jolt of pleasure. Just for good measure, I crushed five more insects of varying sizes, but the result was the same. Then I killed the next one with my blade. The pleasure returned.

"So it's not something the insects are doing. It must be my Shinsou's ability, then."

In that case, it probably wasn't anything harmful. Unfortunately there was no user manual on how to control one's Shinsou, so I'd need to use trial and error to figure it out as I went. For now, though, I prioritized exacting vengeance on these maggot bastards who'd nearly done me in. I killed every last one I saw, humming to myself pleasantly as I did so.

How much time had passed now? Thirty minutes? An hour? Two hours? It didn't matter; I never stopped enjoying myself, and I didn't get tired. Finally, once I'd killed over three hundred maggots, an

intense shock ran through me, unlike anything I'd ever felt. It was a peculiar feeling, as though my body were being cleansed from within or perhaps rebuilt from the ground up. It was a sensation I'd never experienced once in my entire life, and that gave me a hunch about what it was.

My voice trembled as I spoke. "Level Display."

There, in front of my eyes, was a number I'd never seen displayed there before: 2. I blinked a few times to make sure. My eyes weren't deceiving me; that was definitely the number written there. My level had never risen before, and now, at long last, I had leveled up!

"Hell yeaaah!"

I unconsciously pumped my fist in the air. With this, my suspicions were proved correct: Using my Shinsou increased the efficiency at which I gained experience points. No, it wasn't something that simple. My Shinsou was devouring something *else*. And judging from the name "Soul Eater," that something had to be souls. It was consuming the wellspring of life, the root of a being's very existence, and converting it into experience for me to raise my level. And considering I hadn't leveled up once until now, a single soul for me was probably equivalent to around what a hundred experience points was for other adventurers. Or maybe it was closer to a thousand? Ten thousand?

I wasn't exactly sure, but the important thing was that killing enemies with my Shinsou clearly gave me far more experience than killing them normally. The sense of pleasure I'd been feeling was probably my body reacting to receiving that amount of experience for the first time. Getting hit with a flood of such potent experience all of a sudden would certainly be startling.

"And now that I know that..." I glared hungrily around me. There were still many more larvae squirming around in the cave. There would be no shortage of experience for me here!

As I gripped my Shinsou with bloodlust in my eyes, I realized that at some point both corners of my mouth had turned up in a grin.

3

"She" had no name.

The humans called her the Lord of the Flies, but she saw no worth in that title. She couldn't have cared less what they called her, since they would become her prey in the end. However, that didn't mean she took her opponents lightly.

She was always careful, at times even cowardly. But because of that, she'd succeeded in raising many of her offspring from larvae into adult insects. The Lord of the Flies ranked among the most dangerous creatures in Titus Forest. She could overpower the majority of enemies she came across, but only once her offspring were fully grown and no longer a concern. Until her children reached adulthood, she considered herself not the hunter, but the prey.

Her own prey primarily consisted of corpses, sometimes left over from other creatures' meals. They all tasted terrible, but it was necessary in order to stay alive. She couldn't risk hunting for food of her own for fear of ending up as someone else's prey. She'd once had countless siblings, but their numbers had dwindled over time, and before she knew it, she was the only one in the family left.

But it was easier for her this way. She'd nearly died a number of times in the past because her reckless siblings didn't understand the concept of danger. In that sense, being the last was probably a blessing, she thought.

Indeed, she herself had managed to survive to adulthood in the perilous Titus Forest. She'd also been fortunate enough to find the food she needed to keep herself alive, and to birth many children.

Whenever she had newborns, she needed to seek out food for them as well. She was happy to do it. It made her feel like her frustration over having to run and hide all the time wasn't entirely meaningless. Even now she was on her way back home, carrying a woman she'd spotted in the forest, captured, and injected with poison. The woman looked a little different from the other humans she'd seen, but compared to her worth as insect fodder, that was a trivial matter. One time she'd fed her children a burly man with lots of meat on his bones, and some of her pickier offspring had come to

prefer such prey, but most were partial to the soft flesh of women. Having captured this one for today's feeding, she was brimming with satisfaction.

But perhaps because she'd been so gung-ho collecting prey for the past several days, there were fewer humans entering the forest than usual. Her hunts likely wouldn't be as fruitful in the days to come. That alone was a little depressing. Her children had hit a growth spurt as of late, so procuring enough food for them was already tough enough. Perhaps it would have been much easier if the insects and beasts in the forest had satisfied them, but her children preferred humans. Rather than the taste itself, they enjoyed the reactions their prey made as they ate. She could remember feeling the same way as a child, so she couldn't scold them for their pickiness.

Plus, procuring food for her children wasn't something she felt like she should cut corners on anyway. That was because her own mother had found the task extremely bothersome, only feeding her children insects (and not even live insects—dead ones!) In fact, she could still recall one of the first thoughts she'd ever had: *If I ever become a mother, I won't be one like* her. Therefore, in her mind, going out of her way to hunt for humans to feed her children was worth the trouble.

She remained in high spirits until she made it back to the hive. The moment the entrance came into view, however, she was struck with an unpleasant sense of foreboding. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced since reaching adulthood and had nearly forgotten—the sensation of extreme danger.

Of course, she'd always listened to her innate sense for danger, or she wouldn't have survived this long in Titus Forest. But today that wasn't an option because the danger was coming from her own home.

Her hive was situated in the depths of the forest, and its entrance was above a cliff that was only slightly elevated aboveground. With the hive less accessible, her children were safer from outside threats. They were still at risk from flying enemies, so it was up to her to take those out whenever she saw one near. In fact, she'd

taken down an enemy wyvern in the vicinity just the other day. Thanks to her efforts, these days very few enemies ever even attempted to approach her hive from the sky, which was why there shouldn't have been such an intense feeling of danger anywhere near her home.

She beat her wings furiously, creating a harsh buzzing, and rubbed her eight legs together. Any human noticing her in this state would typically break out in a sweat and tremble with fear.

This is bad. This is bad. It's too dangerous in there. Her instincts were setting off alarm bells in her head, telling her she needed to get away right this instant...that if she entered, she would die.

And yet, she went in. She still had the woman—her offspring's dinner—in her clutches, and her kids were inside, no doubt anticipating their meal. Once she showed up, they'd rush over to her eagerly, demanding their food like always. She was sure of it.

So why? Why weren't they coming toward her? Why was the hive so eerily quiet? Why...*how*...was the human prey she thought she'd fed to her children standing right there?!

"Ha ha! You're pretty angry right now, aren't you?! I guess if you can understand what's happened here, you must possess a degree of intelligence after all."

Shut your mouth.

"You *do* understand the situation, don't you? If not, then I'll just say it. I killed all of your precious children. Their cries were loud and annoying, but I'm sure they were crying out for their mommy to save them."

Shut up.

"And yet, what a shame! Their mommy was too late! She was so close too! If she'd only come thirty minutes earlier, maybe she could've saved at least fifty of them!"

Enough.

"That said, you'll join them soon enough, since you're next! Ha ha ha ha! Truly, I'm grateful to you, Lord of the Flies! Thanks to you and your children, my level's risen from 1 to 4! Your hive made the perfect hunting ground!"

Enough, enough, enough, enough! You're just insect fodder! How

dare you act all high and mighty?!

After haphazardly tossing the woman she'd captured into a corner, she let out a silent scream, beating her four wings furiously, and charged toward the human like a gust of wind. Back when she'd captured this human, he'd been powerless against her attack. She'd deliberately avoided his vitals to leave him alive before, but now there was no need. This time, she would finish him!

She sped toward him like a bullet. Though her hive wasn't especially large, she didn't bother to control her speed and slammed into the wall with a crash. The oblong cavern shook violently, and crumbling debris from the wall fell onto her head. But to the Lord of the Flies, it hurt less than a mosquito bite. Her hard shell was tough enough to repel swords and arrows, as well as lower- and mid-level magic. High-level spells could wound her, but as mobility and agility in the air was her forte, she didn't make herself an easy target. If she slammed into a human with the full brunt of her tough shell, they'd instantly become mincemeat. Surely this human would be no different—or so she thought.

"Sorry, you missed!" came a taunting, unpleasant voice from behind her.

Extending the antenna on her forehead and turning around, she saw the human who should have become mincemeat standing there, unharmed.

"Ha ha, my body's so light now! It's like I've been wearing lead armor up until yesterday in comparison!"

The Lord of the Flies screamed soundlessly.

"Oh, are you frustrated? Then try again. Be my guest! It'll be good practice for me as well."

Her compound eyes glowed red with rage as she charged him once again. And again, she hit the wall with a crash. As more debris came down on her head, she was sure that this time, she'd succeeded.

But the human was still alive. Not only that, but he'd sliced deeply into her tough shell, her main weapon, even though no human weaponry had ever managed to scratch it thus far. She screamed again.

"Whoa! I didn't even put my legs or hips into that attack; it was just the strength of my arms! Yet I just cut the Lord of the Flies as easily as a slime!"

The human's expression twisted fiendishly, as though unable to repress his delight. Then, with a speed imperceptible to the eye, he came at her. He severed her shell from her body. He cut off her legs. He stabbed her in the rightmost eye. She tried to fight back but couldn't perceive his agile movements. She was helpless to resist as her body was stabbed and gouged. She even attempted to fly away and retreat, having determined she was hopelessly outmatched, but with one of her eyes gone, her vision was impaired, and with four of her eight legs missing, her balance was compromised and she couldn't fly straight. Alarm bells blared and reverberated in her head like a tempest.

This is it. I'm going to die. At this rate, she would be killed. Even her rage over her children being murdered took a backseat to her desperation to stay alive. *I must live on. I must survive.*

She writhed and thrashed around, attempting to distance herself from the human. Of course, she knew her efforts would be futile. The human wouldn't stop until she was dead...or so she thought.

"Hm? It feels like the Soul Eater's efficacy dropped all of a sudden." The human sounded puzzled and stopped attacking to mutter to himself. "Is it because the monster is nearly dead? No, she's not any closer to death than she was a bit ago. She's mostly tried to run away... Oh, could that be the reason? Maybe her soul needs to be all fired up for me to reap its full benefit. Yeah, I bet that's it. That makes sense, since it's obviously easier to eat something when it's not trying to flee. Then I guess there's no need to draw this out any longer."

The human nodded in apparent understanding, then once again raised his blade in her direction. The moment the tip was pointed at her, she was enveloped by a chill she'd never felt before. Perhaps if she'd been human, she would've even cried out in fear.

I'm going to be killed. If I stay here, this human will kill me!

She beat the wings on her back with all her might and took flight, balance be damned. She didn't care if she slammed into the wall;

she just needed to keep flying higher until she reached the cave's exit! Humans couldn't fly, so as long as she made it out, she'd be in the clear! She continued to beat her wings as hard as she could until, from behind...

"Illusory Blade Style...Gale!"

She heard a voice. Before she could even consider what it meant, a powerful shock wave struck her from below, sending her large body nearly five meters higher up into the air and even closer to the exit. Though confused by what the attack was or where it had come from, she struggled, half-unconscious, to make it to the opening. Or at least she tried to, but her wings were no longer responding. That last attack had mercilessly torn them to shreds and scattered the pieces through the air. And with no wings, she had no means of flight.

In five breaths' time, she crashed onto the cavern floor. The ground shook like an earthquake. As fluid seeped from her wounds, she felt her strength ebbing away.

The human strolled over to her with a mocking smile. "Did you like that one? That technique, Gale, is one of the fundamentals of the Illusory Blade. You imbue your blade with strength, then send it through the air in the form of a shock wave—though up until yesterday I couldn't even do that much. Now look how easily I can pull it off, and it's all thanks to you! All hail the Lord of the Flies!"

He thrust his blade forward, red as blood and black as night, pointing at her right between the eyes. From that, she could tell where he would be aiming next and tried to evade using her remaining legs, but the blade rejected her futile efforts and sliced them all off with ease. Now legless and wingless, she squirmed helplessly on the ground like a gigantic maggot.

"Give my regards to your kids when you meet them in the afterlife."

A moment later, she felt something enter her head. She tried to resist one last time, but then, something occurred to her. She didn't know where this "afterlife" the human had mentioned was, but it had sounded like she'd see her children again if she stayed here and let him take her life. If so, then perhaps it was better this way.

Those kids had to be starving right about now, so when she got back to them, she'd give them a real feast.

But maybe next time I should stay away from human males was her final thought.

4

The instant I pierced the Lord of the Flies between the eyes, I felt a massive amount of soul energy flow into me—far more than I'd gained from the maggots I'd killed. My body trembled as I reveled in the pleasurable sensation. Then, when I recalled my own words from moments ago, a smirk appeared on my lips.

"Whew, yeah, I could get used to this! Still, I do feel a little bad. I told her to send my regards to her children in the afterlife, but even if such a thing exists, mother and children alike probably aren't heading there since I ate their souls and all! Ah ha ha ha!"

As I was laughing, a jolt went through my body, causing me to shudder. Knowing what that jolt signified, I checked my level. The number 5 was displayed there. Seeing my level climb so quickly, I couldn't keep my grin from growing even wider.

Still, I couldn't just stand there smiling to myself forever. My level might have risen, but if I didn't get out of there, I'd still starve to death. After coming this far, I didn't even want to think about that possibility. Back when I'd been exterminating the maggots one by one, I'd confirmed that there were no side entrances or exits. The only way out was through the hole above me.

"Not that it's an issue for me as I am now." When I'd attacked the Lord of the Flies just a little while ago, I'd imbued my entire body with vigor, enhancing my physical strength. In a nutshell, vigor was the mana produced inside one's body, although mages tended to call the same thing "od." Incidentally, mana out in the natural world was just called "mana."

Normally, mana users were stronger than those who channeled their od, which was natural, since it was the power of nature versus the power of man. But the Illusory Blade style worked a little

differently. It was a secret technique that manifested one's anima, and there was much more anima in the human body than there was od. When an Illusory Blade user perceived their Shinsou, they obtained more mana than an entire group of professional mages. They also instinctively learned how to harness and control their vigor in the form of techniques.

Mastering the use of vigor was vital to mastering the Illusory Blade, so of course I already knew the basic principles. Up until now my vigor had been so weak that I couldn't even pull off the basic strengthening technique, but with this newfound perception of my Shinsou, the amount of vigor in my body had skyrocketed. It felt like my body was overflowing with it, in fact.

Since my physical parameters had risen from leveling up and I'd fortified my body with what felt like an endless supply of vigor, none of the Lord of the Flies' attacks had so much as scratched me. Plus, I had enough strength to scale the wall without any climbing tools.

"The *real* problem here is her." I directed my gaze to the young girl lying on the ground. Like me, she'd been one of the Lord of the Flies' victims. By my guess, she was probably either thirteen or fourteen—or at least, that would've been her approximate age in human years. She had two horns growing on either side of her head, large and prominent enough to be clearly visible even from a distance.

Humans weren't the only race that existed in this world. Lunamaria the elf was the only nonhuman I personally knew, but it wasn't uncommon to see dwarves and beastmen out and about in Ishka. There were also lizardmen and mermen in certain regions, and according to some rumors, dragonewts existed as well.

This girl clearly fell into the nonhuman category. What was more, she belonged to the race that had the most history with humans.

"A demonkin, huh? This is the first time I've seen one in person," I mused. The founder of the Illusory Blade style had sealed the Demon God into the Demonic Gate, and demonkin were beings who revered that god. In fact, their affinity with the Demon God was so deep that some even theorized the god himself was a fully grown demonkin. No one knew whether that was actually true, but history

did show that there had been a war between humans and demonkin over three hundred years ago.

After the Demon God was imprisoned, demonkin had gradually started to die out as they were replaced by humanity. Today, there were so few that they were practically extinct. Even so, the typical reaction for a human upon seeing one was to form a group with other humans and attack—not because they still struck fear in the hearts of humans after three hundred years, but because their horns were prized as incredibly high-quality magic catalysts. They could be boiled to make medicine, crushed into powder for smithing higher-grade arms, or hollowed out to make cups that negated the effects of poisoned alcohol when poured inside. It was said that if you got your hands on a demonkin horn, you'd be set financially for the rest of your life. This all led me to recall another rumor I'd once heard.

"So it's true, then—illusory races really do live deep within Titus Forest."

Muttering to myself, I walked toward the girl. Put bluntly, she was a mess. She must have tried to scramble away from the Lord of the Flies in desperation, because her face, limbs, and long blue hair were all caked in mud, as were her clothes. Or could what she was wearing even count as clothing? It looked to me like she'd just tied some large leaves together with vines. Perhaps that was standard demonkin garb, but since she was lying down, there were some parts exposed that she probably didn't want me to see. Her chest, for one, was too big for me to ignore.

Wow, those are awfully large for someone who looks so young... No, now's not the time to get distracted. There are more pressing matters at hand.

"Well, what should I do with her?" Lying before my eyes was an opportunity to strike it rich—two demon horns. If I played my cards right, I'd never have to work another day in my life. For someone who'd been made fun of by an innkeeper's daughter for not even having enough money to leave a tip, the prospect of big money was sorely tempting.

That wasn't all that was tempting about her, though. Her face was filthy, but after I got a closer look, she wasn't bad-looking

underneath all the mud. Perhaps I'd even say she was cute. A few more years and she'd no doubt grow to be beautiful. More enticing, however, was her soul—full-bodied and rich. If I ate her, I was sure I'd level up at least three times in one go.

Before I knew it, my hand had automatically reached out for her. But the moment I touched her body, I was shocked by how slender her frame was, enough that I came to my senses. What the hell had I been about to do to this frail, injured, unconscious girl?!

"Gah!" I yanked my hand back in a panic with such force that I ended up punching myself in the cheek. The impact rattled my brain, and countless stars danced in my vision. While rubbing my smarting cheek, I expelled a large sigh.

I realized that ever since awakening to my Shinsou, I'd changed. My first thought upon encountering the girl had been to eat her soul. Now that I'd become aware of that fact, I'd also become aware of how far removed that behavior was from my old self, whose personal golden rule had been to help or save anyone in need. What was more, it didn't bother me one bit. In fact, upon realizing, I felt like a weight had lifted. Was this transformation of mine due to the Soul Eater, my anima, dragging me into its mindset? Or had this been my true self all along, and it had just been buried under memories of my mother and all the days spent on Onigashima? I didn't know, and if I was being perfectly honest, I didn't really care. Whichever the case, it didn't change the fact that I was me, but that was precisely why I needed to draw on this power, even if it changed me.

If I couldn't help but devour, though, then I ought to at least decide for myself who or what I should consume. And right now, the idea of eating the soul of a demonkin girl who hadn't hurt me in any way seemed beyond the pale. So I would resist. If something didn't sit right with me, I would hold back. I wanted to do things in a way I could be proud of so that if anyone asked, I could throw out my chest with pride and proclaim my way of life.

As I was thinking to myself, a small moan issued from the girl's mouth. I turned to look. She was shaking her head back and forth, grimacing in pain. It looked like she was about to wake up, and just

as I'd guessed, she opened her eyes several seconds later.

5

The girl's large, round eyes blinked several times. At first, her gaze was vacant, like she was still dreaming, but when her eyes finally found me, she snapped awake with a jolt, letting out a wordless cry that didn't sound human. A moment later, her expression contorted in terror. Perhaps she realized that she couldn't move from the neck down. As she thrashed her head back and forth, I called out to her as calmly and carefully as I could.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?"

The girl didn't reply, but her expression definitely stiffened, and she pressed her lips together. That probably meant she understood.



“Do you remember?” I asked. “You—and me too—were attacked by the Lord of the Flies and brought here to her lair.”

She didn’t say anything, but she shut her eyes tight. It looked like she remembered being attacked but didn’t want to. I decided to ease her fears.

“Don’t worry. I killed the monster. Its corpse is over there.”

I pointed at the legless, wingless Lord of the Flies with its head impaled. When the girl saw it, her eyes went wide, and she froze.

“I think we’re probably inside a mountain somewhere,” I said, “but there are no side exits. The only way out is up, through that opening.”

I pointed above us. She looked up to where I was indicating and squinted, likely due to the daylight streaming through the opening. Dawn had already broken while I was exterminating the maggots, so it had been light out for some time now. Fear came over her face once more. Perhaps she’d realized how high up the opening was. I couldn’t blame her; it wasn’t a height that normal humans could reach, so the same was probably true of demonkin.

“I’m getting out of here,” I told her.

The girl looked shocked as her gaze snapped back to me.

“Do you have any way of escaping this place on your own?” I asked.

She frowned as though to say “Of course not; don’t be ridiculous.”

“If you want, I’ll put you on my back and carry you out of here. But if you’d rather not have help from a human, this is where we part ways. Which will it be?”

She looked away as if unsure.

“Oh, and by the way, just based on my own experience, that paralysis won’t fade within the day, though it might be different for demonkin.”

The moment she heard the word “demonkin,” she glared at me with suspicion. I understood how she felt and reached out toward her. That way she could decide for herself whether or not to take my hand.

“At any rate, I’m gonna try to climb that wall, so watch me. After

climbing halfway up, I'll drop back down, and then you can decide if you want to trust me."

I distanced myself from the girl, and after a few light stretches, I took hold of the wall. It went straight up, but there were a number of protrusions I could use as handholds and footholds. The only potential issue was that some of them protruded at an inconvenient angle, so I'd have to hoist myself up with my own arm strength for those. However much vigor I imbued myself with, I couldn't climb up walls at a negative angle like an insect.

Still, I was determined, and I began to climb, feeling the girl's intense stare on my back all the while.

Around an hour later, I escaped from the cave with the girl on my back. It was such a simple escape that I don't even need to explain it. Emerging outside, we found ourselves atop a slightly elevated cliff. Below, I could see the entirety of the vast Titus Forest. The strong wind felt cool against my face. And in the midst of that wind, I heard a tiny voice.

"Um...th-thank you..."

"No problem," I replied casually to the voice coming from my back.

This was the first time I'd heard her speak. Even when I'd approached her to confirm her decision earlier, she'd only looked at me with wide eyes, likely from the shock of seeing me hop up the wall with ease, and nodded.

"By the way, is there anywhere you want me to drop you off? If you tell me where you live, for instance, I'll take you there."

"Er..." She seemed hesitant to say. Not that I blamed her. Even if I'd helped her escape, she'd be understandably hesitant to give her address to a stranger.

"If you'd rather not say, you can just tell me if you see a place where you want me to let you off. 'This mountain,' 'that tree,' 'this boulder,' like that."

"In that case...if you look to the left, the third-largest camphor tree you can see."

"Er, sorry, as far as I can tell, these all look like they're the same

size."

The girl fell silent, as if considering that for a moment, before trying a different approach.

"Er...Jirai Ao Ochs."

"Um...Jirai...what now? Sorry, I have no clue what that is."

"I'll explain it once we get off this cliff."

"Sorry for being so difficult," I said glumly, hanging my head.

The girl seemed to find that amusing, because I heard her snicker. "Why would you apologize to someone you just saved?"

"Hmm, come to think of it, why *did* I? Well, regardless, I'm about to race down this cliff, so take care not to bite your tongue."

After that casual warning, I began to hop down the cliff with her still on my back. Along the way, I heard several cries in my ear resembling shrieks, but I paid them no mind. As we got closer to the ground, I thought I even heard those shrieks become cries of joy like a kid riding playground equipment, but I paid that no mind either.

We soon arrived at the "Jirai Ao Ochs." According to the girl, this wasn't some marker to point her home. It was actually a tree whose fruit had the power to neutralize toxins. Apparently, the fruit was too sour to be used in cooking, but the extreme acidity was effective against poisons. In fact, the fruit was so sour that her mouth pursed like crazy when she bit into it, but she was finally able to move freely within the hour. It was like magic.

This "Jirai Ao Ochs" is something else, I marveled.

"Um...once again, thank you very much," the girl said, bowing her head deeply. I assumed she was thanking me for rescuing her from the monster's lair and protecting her from the forest's monsters until she could overcome her paralysis. It seemed bowing in gratitude was a gesture that humans and demonkin shared.

I gestured for her to raise her head. "Don't mention it. It's been a while since I got to do anything adventurer-like, so I'm more than happy."

After all, I'd been doing nothing but gathering herbs for the past few years. I figured defeating a tough monster and rescuing a girl in

need was a pretty decent first step for a stray adventurer. It wasn't a quest, so I wouldn't get any money for it, but I'd awakened to my Shinsou as a result, which was far more valuable. Just as I'd said, I was very happy.

"Now then, it's time for me to get out of this forest. You take care now," I told her.

I'd announced my intent to leave because I sensed that she wouldn't move on until I was gone. She probably didn't want to be the first to leave because she knew that once she turned to go home, I could just watch and find out which direction she lived in. Although I didn't doubt her words of gratitude, I wasn't naive enough to think she trusted me completely after saving her only once or twice. Girls showing kindness and affection to the adventurers who rescued them... Well, things like that only happened in the world of fiction. If it ever *did* happen, it would surely only be for the most renowned adventurers. I was neither fictitious nor renowned, meaning she was likely still wary of me. I'd decided to leave first out of consideration for her.

And yet...

"Excuse me!"

"Whoa!"

The girl had spoken much louder than I'd heard her speak yet, making me jump. I turned back around to face her.

"What is it?!"

"Um...well, you know!"

"Yes?"

"I... I really am grateful to you! Truly!" She bowed a second time, giving it her all.

"Er...you're welcome?" I wasn't sure what she was getting at, and my puzzlement must have showed on my face because she suddenly looked flustered.

She spoke her next words quickly. "Um...I'm...Suzume!"

"Suzume? Er, that's your name?"

She nodded vigorously. I'd assumed she was still wary of me, but it seemed she trusted me enough to give me her name. That made me a little happy.

“I see. Then you can call me Sora.” When someone introduced themselves, it was only proper to give your own name in return.

“Sora...” Suzume muttered, as though rolling my name around her tongue. It was strangely adorable, and despite her unkempt appearance, I found myself captivated by her.

6

Once we parted ways, I headed back to Ishka by following a nearby river downstream. Suzume had informed me that this was the quickest way back to town, and she knew that because her parents were always warning her never to go down the river since the humans lived there. In other words, she’d said, I could get back to my kind by following it.

I knew that there was a large body of water near the village called the Kale River, and that it led upstream into the forest. If I kept following this river, it would probably run into the Kale River sooner or later—or at least, that was my plan, but the path wasn’t so easy to traverse. The forest hadn’t been maintained by human hands, so my route was uneven and obstacle-laden. The water also snaked this way and that, making it harder to navigate. If I’d done this yesterday, no doubt I would’ve been hopelessly lost within the first hour or perhaps even become monster food first. The water was too cloudy to see to the bottom, so any number of aquatic beasts could’ve been lurking beneath.

But now it was different. In my new form, I didn’t feel threatened or frightened in the least as I made my way along the river. I could reinforce my body with vigor, bound across the water with tremendous strength, and race along the precarious riverside as smoothly as a bird in flight. I could sprint continuously for hours without getting tired, and I didn’t need to worry about my vigor running out. When I thought about how this, too, was a product of my anima’s strength, I couldn’t help but grin.

As I continued down the river, the scenery around me gradually began to change. Before I knew it, the sun had set and the forest

was dyed in crimson. It wouldn't be much longer before the trees would begin to take on shades of night. I considered making camp, but I didn't have any camping gear, and more importantly, there was no point camping if I wasn't the least bit tired. I was confident I could run all night with energy to spare and decided it would be a good opportunity to test the limits of my strength.

With that in mind, I increased my speed. But just then...

"Don't let your guard down! Pay more attention to your surroundings!"

A voice, clearly human, reached my ears. I crouched down on the spot and strained my ears to listen. Indeed, it sounded like a large group of people were making their way through the forest nearby. Regular people didn't usually venture this far into the forest, so they were probably adventurers.

Now then, what should I do? I'd been expelled from the guild, but it wasn't like I was a fugitive, so I didn't have any reason to hide from them. At the same time, my reputation as a "parasite" was well-known among Ishka's adventurers, so I doubted they'd regard me warmly. In fact, they would probably find it extremely suspicious that a Level 1 adventurer had even made it this far into the forest. So I was leaning toward ignoring them and heading on my way until the next voice I heard made me stop in my tracks.

"If we allow the Lord of the Flies to keep breeding, it's not only Ishka but the royal capital of Horus that will be in danger. The entirety of Kanaria! To protect our beloved kingdom, we must eradicate the monster at all costs before it's too late! Everyone, make haste!"

The voice, which sounded like it belonged to the leader of the group, was met with spirited replies of affirmation. I cocked my head in puzzlement. For a group of adventurers, they seemed awfully disciplined. Then a suspicion came to me, and I chose to hide myself. I ducked behind a tree and looked on from the shadows. My hunch was confirmed: A group of men wearing the Kanaria Royal Army uniform came into view.

"I knew it; they're not adventurers after all," I muttered. "They're soldiers of Kanaria."

As for why the royal army knew the Lord of the Flies had appeared, I didn't even have to think about it: After using me as bait and fleeing to safety, the Falcon Blades had reported to the guild, and the guild had reported the threat to the kingdom, who had dispatched the royal army. How did I know that? Because mixed in with the soldiers in front was a face I recognized: a woman with golden hair and long ears. Her features were so distinct that I could identify her from a mile away—Lunamaria of the Falcon Blades.

"Oh, good, it looks like Raz and the others made it out safe and sound," I said, my lip curling in a sneer. My elation at having awakened to my Shinsou faded, and in its place, a dark, roiling emotion bubbled up from the depths of my stomach. I recalled how my encounter with the Lord of the Flies had started. I couldn't forgive what they'd done to me. I'd been so thrilled with my Shinsou and happy with myself for rescuing Suzume that the thought of revenge hadn't even crossed my mind, but seeing one of the Falcon Blades right in front of me, I felt the same despair and anger as when maggots were eating me alive.

My body trembled. My eyes narrowed. I wanted to unleash my Shinsou right there and tear Lunamaria and the other members of my former party to shreds. No, I didn't just want it—I *craved* it.

Before I knew it, I'd already taken a step forward. But just before breaking into a run, I stopped myself. It wasn't a hesitance to kill the Falcon Blades, of course. If I attacked now, I would make an enemy of the royal army and be branded a criminal. I certainly wasn't about to become a fugitive for my old comrades' sakes. Plus, considering all the suffering I'd gone through in that cave, merely consuming them wouldn't be enough to quell my anger. If I truly wanted my revenge to feel worthwhile, I needed to utterly ruin them first.

"And I know just how to do it. Heeey! Over heeere! Save me!" I stepped out of hiding and called out loudly to the soldiers for help. Naturally, I didn't forget to adopt a look of terror and distress. I wanted it to look like I'd barely escaped from the Lord of the Flies' clutches.

My plan was as follows: First, I doubted Raz's group had included the part about using me as a decoy in their report to the guild.

People knew me as a parasite, but if the guild knew they'd sacrificed their former party member—especially now that I was no longer an adventurer but a regular citizen—so they could save themselves, the scandal would be a fatal blow to their status. I planned to ruin their reputation further by spreading the word that Miroslav had sicced the monster on me knowing that I was Level 1 and couldn't escape, and that the Falcon Blades had twisted the facts in their favor during their report to the guild.

Even if they *had* reported the whole truth, that was fine too, because as the victim, I would officially have the right to denounce them for unjust treatment. In Ishka, people settled their disputes and disagreements with duels, so I'd have the option to challenge Raz to a fight. He would assume I was still Level 1, and I could crush and humiliate him in front of everyone, which would be enjoyable in itself. At any rate, I was living proof of the Falcon Blades' transgression. They'd probably thought they'd gotten rid of me, and I couldn't wait to see the looks on their faces when I proved them all wrong.

As though confirming my guess, at that moment Lunamaria spotted me, and when she did, her face went pale.

Chapter 3: Guilty

1

The next day, I found myself sitting in a chair in one of the rooms of the Adventurer's Guild. The seats were arranged in a square, with four members of the Falcon Blades sitting in front of me and the guild receptionist sitting to the side. The room was in the very back of the guild's assembly hall, so the commotion from the adventurers outside could hardly be heard. This was probably used for meetings of guild VIPs. My old self probably would've been shaking like a leaf upon being led there, but today I was sitting with my legs crossed, cool and confident. After all, I was the victim, and the perpetrators were right in front of me. What reason did I have to be afraid?

"Now then, Mr. Sora," the receptionist said, "you claim that the members of the Falcon Blades here deliberately attacked you. And you have no intention of rescinding this claim, correct?"

"I've been telling you that all along," I replied with a snort. "Don't make me say it over and over again." I pointed across the stately oak table at the four facing me. "These Falcon Blades used me as a decoy so they could save their own skin. They even graciously made sure to wound me with magic so that I couldn't escape. I fully intend to pursue this claim, and to begin with, why would I back down? They're not even denying it."

"That may be true, but as there are some discrepancies between each side's testimonies, we just needed that confirmation from you."

"Then you should be confirming the accuracy of our testimonies, not whether I want to rescind mine."

The receptionist didn't reply. As it happened, it was the same receptionist with the braided hair who'd informed me of my firing the other day.

Instead, Raz piped up. "Sora..."

"What?" I said harshly.

"Do you really believe that Miro hit you with that spell on purpose? I just don't think she'd do that." He stared at me, looking doubtful. During the incident, the Lord of the Flies had knocked Raz unconscious, and the warrior priest Iria had carried him on her back, so he hadn't witnessed the event himself.

I shrugged in response. "It doesn't matter if you believe it or not. Instead of asking me, why don't you just ask the culprit herself?"

"Miro admitted that she used an attack spell. But she also told me she didn't mean to hit you with it. Isn't it possible she was aiming at the Lord of the Flies and you were unlucky enough to get hit instead?"

I couldn't help but burst out in laughter. "Oh, I was just unlucky, was I?! A masterful deduction, as expected from Raz, the leader of the C Rank Falcon Blades!"

As I brought my hands together in mock applause, his face turned scarlet. Beside him, Miroslav and Iria glared daggers at me, but I dismissed their reactions with another laugh.

"Here's a question for you, Mr. Leader. At the time, the Lord of the Flies was chasing *your* party. And I was standing in the way of *your* escape." In other words, from Miroslav's perspective, the monster was behind her and I was in front. "From her position, how could she possibly have hit me by mistake? You're telling me a spell she aimed behind her somehow accidentally hit something ahead?! Bullshit! Not even a child who'd just learned magic would make such a mistake!"

As I cackled in triumph, Raz pursed his lips in vexation. Then the receptionist, who'd been frowning as she listened, finally spoke up.

"Mr. Sora, this is not a place for criticism. This is a place for confirming each party's claims, and if possible, reaching a peaceful solution to the dispute. Please refrain from making deliberately hurtful remarks."

"Oh, I apologize. I wasn't aware that this organization had any interest in fairness. And here I was thinking the guild would do whatever it took to dismiss my accusation and preserve the reputation of their precious high-ranking adventurers. Silly me."

"Oh? Now you insult the guild as well?"

"Am I wrong? If not, hurry up and decide on the punishment for these four. Judging by the fact that you haven't even suggested they might be guilty and have repeatedly tried to get me to rescind my claim and warned me to watch what I say, I'm sure you understand my skepticism." Just the other day, this very woman had announced my expulsion looking all cool and composed, so I really wanted her to know how I felt.

The receptionist pursed her lips like she didn't have any rebuttal. When I saw that, the corners of my mouth turned up in a grin. Frankly, I couldn't have been more pleased with myself!

I'd been expelled from the guild because I hadn't adhered to the rules, and the fault for that lay with me. But I would never forget the receptionist's attitude, and being able to shut her up with a sound argument felt better than words could describe.

Iria had been staring at me for a while, and she finally chimed in. "You keep saying punishment this, punishment that, but what do you want from us? If we all get down on the floor and bow so low our heads touch the ground, would that satisfy you?"

"Hey now, what's with that defiant tone? What do I look like, a statue at a shrine? Or maybe you'd prefer if I filed a complaint with your little Temple of Law and Order instead? 'One of your priests here tried to use me as a decoy to save herself.' How does that sound?" I crossed my arms exaggeratedly, feigning thought. "Hmm...come to think of it, maybe that'd be better. The priests at the Temple of Law and Order can probably use the miracle Sense Lie, so they'll know I'm telling the truth. That'd be a lot quicker than whatever farce is going on here."

Upon hearing that, Iria's expression suddenly changed. As I rose from my chair with a wan smile on my face, she looked like she wanted to say something, but before she could speak, Miroslav cut in.

"Hold on! I was the one who hit you! The others had nothing to do with it!"

"Nothing to do with it? Really? Not only did they *not* try to help me after their companion attacked me for no reason, but they ran

off and left me as monster food like they were perfectly fine with it! They're not responsible? Don't make me laugh, 'murderer.'"

Since they were so keen on calling me "parasite," I decided I'd give them a pet name of my own as a gift: murderers. Realizing my intent, Miroslav's pretty face twisted in anger. Naturally, I didn't care one bit and doubled down.

"Now that I think about it, even after you attacked me, you all stayed thick as thieves and kept your mouths shut about it. What was in your report again? 'Regrettably, one civilian on the scene did draw the Lord of the Flies' attention'? Ha! So, a mage, an elf, and a priest all conspired to use duplicity magic?"

"Th-That's not... I-I mean, aren't adventurers allowed to retreat in the case of an emergency?! Two people can't grab on to the same plank!"

Miroslav was alluding to an old story. One day, a ship sank in the middle of a storm, and one of the passengers was struggling to keep his head above water. Then a plank from the ship floated by. Thinking he was saved, he grabbed hold of the plank only for another passenger to swim over. The other man asked if he could grab on as well, but the plank was small and could only support a single person. If both had held on, both would have drowned. The man who'd found the plank first had no choice but to turn the second passenger away, and in the end, that other man had drowned. Afterward, the rescued passenger had reported the situation and was subsequently tried for murder, but he was judged to be innocent. In other words, Miroslav was likening her own actions to the rescued passenger in the story.

I snorted with laughter. "Are you hearing this, Raz? She's claiming she did it because it was an emergency. In other words, she's admitting she deliberately attacked me. This must be what they call shooting yourself in the foot, huh?"

"Agh?!" Miroslav looked shocked by her own slipup.

"Miro?" Raz narrowed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Raz! I really am! I was just desperate to save you somehow, and I couldn't think of any other way!" Miroslav buried her face in her hands and wept.

Seeing his comrade in tears, Raz immediately put a hand on her shoulder, leaned into her ear, and spoke gently. "I understand, Miro. You're not the kind of girl to hurt people. And if you went that far to save me, it's my own fault for being so incompetent. This is my responsibility too. So Miro and I will atone."

"Oh, Raz! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" she wailed, embracing him as though unable to contain herself. In response, he gently rubbed her back.

Meanwhile, I regarded the drama with a sour expression. *What the hell is this?* If she was going to apologize, she should've apologized to me first. And yet not once since returning to Ishka could I recall her ever saying she was sorry.

Even Lunamaria, the one with the most common sense, hadn't said a word. In fact, she hadn't said anything for a while now. When I turned to look at her, her face was pale and she was hanging her head. Maybe it was just my imagination, but it looked like she was shaking. She'd looked that way ever since she'd seen me in the forest. I doubted she was suddenly wracked with guilt after all this time, so what was that about?

Iria, for her part, was watching Raz and Miroslav as they hugged. She seemed to be debating whether to pull them apart or continue watching.

Every one of them had flowerpots for brains. It was like none of them understood the significance of what Miroslav had done. Unconsciously, I let out a sigh, causing Raz to speak again. He didn't release Miroslav, though.

"Sora, as you just heard, Miro isn't the only one responsible for this. I'm guilty too."

"Then Mr. Leader's finally decided to take some responsibility?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"How commendable. And how exactly do you plan to do that?"

"Well, obviously I'll do whatever you want until you feel I've atoned. If you ask me to bow to you or whatever, I'll do it. I don't mind."

"I see. In other words, you won't bow to me unless you're told to. I don't think you understand just what kind of situation you're in

right now, Raz."

"Excuse me?"

"You'll do whatever I want until I'm satisfied? Perfect, then I'll take you up on that. Move out of the way, Raz. I'm going to strangle that girl to death. Then we'll call it even."

As I made that declaration, I pointed at the red-haired mage with tears in her eyes.

2

"You must be joking! Like hell I'll let you do that!"

After hearing my intent to kill Miroslav, Raz bellowed with such fury that the room's walls shook. His right hand automatically moved to his hip, where the hilt of his sword normally was. The old me would've likely trembled in fear at the wrath of a Rank 6 adventurer, but now his anger felt no more intimidating than a light breeze.

"Is there a problem?" I replied. "You just said it yourself, didn't you? You'd do whatever I wanted until I felt satisfied."

"Y-Yeah, but there's obviously a limit to that! Why does Miro have to die?!"

"Why? Because she tried to kill me, of course."

"But she *didn't* kill you! You're still alive! You survived in the end, so there's no reason for you to kill her!"

"You're such a fool."

"Excuse me?!"

"You're saying that just because I didn't die in the end, I'm supposed to forgive this murderer? She, you, and the others had absolutely nothing to do with my survival; it was luck and my own strength that got me through. How does the fact that I'm alive make any of you less guilty?"

"Don't call Miro a murderer! How many times do I have to say it?! You're not dead! Miro didn't kill anyone!"

I unconsciously let out a sigh. Then I broke it down for the furious Raz like he was five years old. "Looks like you need an example. Let's say one day I stab you in the heart from behind."

"What kind of example is that?!"

"Just shut up and listen. You die as a result, of course. But then a priest who just happens to be nearby walks up and uses the miracle Revive to bring you back to life. Wouldn't you want me to atone for what I did? You'd call me a murderer too, wouldn't you? Yet, in my defense, let's say I responded with 'You didn't die in the end, so I didn't kill anyone!' Now then, when you heard that, what would you think? Would you accept that logic?"

"Well..."

"Now do you understand what an outrageous thing you just said?"

After I spelled it out for him, Raz had no rebuttal, only silently shaking his fist. So Iria spoke up in his stead.

"Mere sophistry. Raz, don't let him fool you. Remember, Miro didn't stab him through the heart from behind; she only hit his arm. Of course, that in itself was wrong, but it shouldn't be treated on the same level as taking a life."

Raz, who'd looked perplexed by my reasoning, latched on to Iria's defense and regained his color. "Right! Miro's magic only hit your arm! You said it yourself, right, Sora?!"

"If you ask me, I think you're just twisting the facts to suit your argument," Iria finished, glaring at me as though challenging me to deny it.

I sighed for what had to be the umpteenth time. In short, I was dealing with two idiots. How was this going over their heads? Lunamaria still hadn't said a word, and Miroslav was still behind Raz, so I couldn't tell what she was thinking either. But it didn't matter. I was getting tired of the conversation going nowhere, so I decided it was time to wrap it up.

"Iria, you just said she didn't stab me in the back and just hit my arm. You *do* realize how that's far crueler than simply killing me, right? Don't tell me that a C Rank party isn't aware of what the Lord of the Flies does to its prey? Well, I was. Thanks to Lunamaria here, I was able to read up on it a little."

Raz frowned in puzzlement at that. Iria didn't respond, but she looked like she'd swallowed vinegar. In the corner of my vision, I

saw Lunamaria's shoulders jolt upward.

"What are you trying to say?" Raz growled.

"Seriously? Well, you *were* always the dunce of the group. Go on, Iria, explain it to him like always. Slowly, so that he'll understand."

"Well..."

"I-Iria?" he said, sounding shocked. "What does he mean?"

"The Lord of the Flies injects its captured prey with a paralyzing poison and carries it back to its hive alive...as food for its offspring."

"H-Huh?! Then, Sora, you..."

"Correct, Raz," I said. "I was being devoured alive. I managed to survive and make it back here, obviously, but I experienced fear and despair in that cave the likes of which none of you could ever imagine. Which is why I'd like to share even a hundredth of that fear and despair with all of you so you can experience it for yourself!" I let out a cackle. "Now then, Iria. You said attacking my arm was a crime but not on the level of taking my life, correct? Go on, try telling Raz again that leaving me as bait for the Lord of the Flies' offspring wasn't a worse crime than killing me outright!"

Iria didn't say anything.

"Oh, so you stay silent only when it's convenient for you, huh? Asserting your right to remain silent as a priest of law and order? A murderer and a mute—as allies, you complement each other well!"

"Stop it, Sora! I won't let you make fun of my comrades any longer!" Forgetting his etiquette, Raz lost his temper and screamed at me.

I only shrugged in response. "And now we have Grumpy, our fearless leader. By the way, Raz, you didn't seriously think it was a coincidence that your party ran over to me when you were escaping, did you?"

"Huh?! What do you—"

"Iria knew about the monster, as you just heard. Miroslav's a mage, so I'm sure she knew as well. They both realized the party didn't have a chance and knew what would happen to them if the monster caught up. They also knew you were in the most danger, being unconscious. All three of you were only thinking of your precious leader. As long as you could save him, nothing else

mattered. Of course, you wanted to save yourselves too, if possible—and then you remembered meeting me outside the forest and hit upon the idea. None of it was a coincidence. You deliberately lured the monster in my direction."

Several of their shoulders tightened this time. Raz's glare stayed on me as I continued.

"Miroslav's speciality is fire magic, correct? So why would she randomly choose to use a wind spell? Because her fire magic was too powerful, of course. She knew the monster's traits and that it was only interested in live prey. She couldn't risk accidentally killing me and wasting the bait, so she used a wind spell, which she knew would be weaker. She decided to wound me instead, so that I would make a more enticing target."

"Bullshit!"

"Hmph, don't be so sure. After all, to you Falcon Blades, the fact that you had a parasite like me in your party is a black mark on your record. Not to mention Miroslav hated me the most out of all of you. She hurled insults at me, made sure no one was on my side, and even nearly chased me out of town. But I didn't leave, even after getting expelled from the guild. She couldn't get rid of me. And then, as luck would have it, you all ran into that monster."

"Wait, Sora, you can't be suggesting—"

"It was the perfect opportunity, wasn't it? She could even use the excuse that she was doing it to protect you. And even if someone called her out on her bullshit, she could just say it was an emergency measure and she had no choice. To be honest, when that actually came out of her mouth earlier, I was astounded at her shamelessness. The truth is plain to see—the monster pursuing you all was her chance to get rid of a pesky nuisance for good."

Raz jumped from his seat, his face red with rage. If there had been a sword at his hip, he surely would have drawn it right then. "B-Bullshit! That's all fiction! Even if you're a former comrade, I won't stand here and let you—"

"'Comrade?' Didn't you say we no longer have anything to do with each other back when we met at the forest entrance?"

"Guh!" He ground his teeth, knowing he had no rebuttal. I

continued in a low voice. “To be fair, I have no proof Iria and Lunamaria were in on it. But I’m certain Miroslav thought it all through. I bet she was the first one to suggest running from the monster too. Right, Iria? Lunamaria?”

Neither of them responded. They didn’t confirm my suspicions, but they didn’t deny them either. As a priestess, Iria couldn’t lie, and elves naturally despised lying to begin with. Raz had been unconscious at the time, so he had no basis to deny my claim either.

He turned around to face Miroslav in a panic. The mage was shaking her head so furiously that the red hair she was so proud of looked like the wings of a bird. “L-Lies! It’s not true! He’s lying! Please believe me, Raz! Yes, it’s true I attacked him, and I did it so we could escape! But it was a spur-of-the-moment thing, I swear! I didn’t deliberately try to kill him out of malice! You know I would never do anything like that!” Miroslav clung to Raz in desperation. It was a tired retread of the scene from a short while ago.

I put all of my hatred and resentment from the past several years into a scoff. “Of course you would say that. What woman would admit that she deliberately tried to get rid of a thorn in her side with the man she loves right in front of her?”

“Shut up, you boor! You’ve got an awful lot of nerve running your mouth off at me like that! Mark my words, you’ll rue the day you made an enemy of the scion of the Sauzaar company!” The light in her eyes burned with a heat that could kill. I’d heard some mages had evil or enchanted eyes, so perhaps that had awakened inside Miroslav as well.

I opened my arms wide dramatically, then turned my gaze to the guild receptionist, who’d been busy recording the entire exchange. “And there you have it—the esteemed Sauzaar scion has said her piece. Yet I have no intention of rescinding my own claim. So to resolve this, I have a suggestion.”

“A suggestion?” the receptionist said, sounding wary.

“That’s right. Call for a priest who can use Sense Lie and evaluate whether Miroslav’s telling the truth. Then there won’t be any more doubts. If my suspicion is completely off the mark, I’ll back off. I’ll also accept the consequences for slandering an innocent woman as

a murderer, and I swear I'll never show my face in this guild or town again. It's also in the Falcon Blades' best interest to resolve this as quickly as possible, so they shouldn't have a reason to refuse—*if* they're telling the truth."

I gave the mage a deliberate look. If I'd been completely off the mark, she would have immediately agreed to my offer. But I saw the look in her eyes—hesitation. And the receptionist had to have noticed as well, because her tone was somewhat mechanical as she spoke her next words.

3

"As you're no doubt aware, there is a certain amount that must be donated to the temple before its priests will perform miracle-based services on request. For a miracle as eminently virtuous as Sense Lie, even twenty silver coins wouldn't cover it. Are you able to prepare such a sum?" The receptionist stared at me hard, waiting for my answer.

As mentioned, this was the same receptionist who had announced my expulsion from the guild. In other words, she knew I hadn't even been able to scrounge up a single silver to raise my adventuring rank with. The intent of the guild here was crystal clear: They were determined to stop me in my tracks so that the Falcon Blades would come out smelling like roses.

"Wouldn't the guild put up the fee in this case?" I said, narrowing my eyes.

"If the guild felt it was a necessary expense, then yes. But the suggestion was yours, so financing it would be your responsibility."

"So even after all you've heard, the miracle doesn't seem like a necessary measure to you?"

"With each party's testimonies, we now have a clearer picture of what happened. But your claim that it was done with ill intent is suspect. You could be letting your past experiences twist your perception of events."

"In other words, to you, it looks like I'm just trying to get revenge

on them for kicking me out. But wouldn't that make Sense Lie even *more* necessary? Then you'd be able to tell immediately whether *I* was telling the truth."

"And I'm saying that for that to happen, you will need to pay the fee."

I clicked my tongue. "Hey, scion of Sauzaar, you're up. Open those coffers of yours and pay. I could ask Raz, but this is a prime opportunity for you to prove your innocence once and for all. You should be jumping at the chance."

"She doesn't need to do that," Raz piped up. "I believe Miro. I don't need to rely on a miracle to have faith in my friends."

"As long as Raz believes me, that's all I need. I couldn't care less what a boor like you thinks."

I sighed once more. "I see. Then I suppose I have no choice."

The receptionist spoke up. "Can I take that to mean you'll rescind your—"

"I'll pay the fee."

"Huh?" She looked dumbstruck.

I pulled a gold coin out of my pocket and set it on the table. Her mouth dropped open when she saw it. Since it was the first time I'd ever seen a reaction like that from her, my lips automatically curled up into a grin.

"Earlier, you said even twenty silver coins wouldn't cover it. So how much are we talking, exactly? Would a gold coin not be enough?"

"Er..."

"Well then, what about two gold coins? Or three? Or if even that's not enough, look, here's a fourth. You're not about to tell me four gold coins won't cover it, right?" Humming to myself, I stacked the coins on top of one another.

By now, Raz's and the others' jaws were also on the floor. No doubt they were wondering how someone who had made their living gathering herbs had come into such money. As it happened, I had found all of these coins strewn around the Lord of the Flies' hive, all money that her previous victims had left behind after being served up as prey. The dead didn't need it, of course, so I'd helped myself

as a kind of posthumous payment for avenging their deaths.

Acting like I was completely unaware of what they were all thinking, I pressed the receptionist for a decision. "Hey, what are you spacing out for? I said I'd pay, so call the priest here already."

"Wh-Where exactly did you get that kind of money, sir?"

"Why does that matter?"

"Well, for such a large sum, we'll need to check and make sure the money was gained through legitimate means—"

"You're automatically assuming I *stole* this money?!" I bellowed. "Just how far do you intend to make a fool of me?!"

In my outburst, I kicked the table in front of me with all my might, scattering the coins all over the room. The receptionist let out a yelp and shrank back in fear.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Were you certain a dirt-poor ex-adventurer would never be able to pay such a sum? Were you confident it would shut me up so the guild could sweep all this under the rug? Well, too bad! There's no way this much money won't be enough. Go to the Temple of Law and Order and summon one of their priests! You can even use Sense Lie on *me* if you want proof the money's clean!"

The receptionist now looked meek. Since they had to deal with rowdy adventurers daily, guild receptionists generally weren't just pretty faces. Many of them possessed a considerable amount of courage and grit, including some who put actual adventurers to shame. The woman in front of me was one such example. If I'd raised my voice without a justifiable reason, she likely would have treated me no differently than before, with her usual prim-and-proper composure. But for once, she must have realized her side was in the wrong, because her usual backbone was nowhere to be seen. People tended to act differently once they realized they were wrong, even more so if they possessed a degree of morality.

In truth, I knew she was only speaking on behalf of the guild that employed her, and none of this was her fault. Perhaps it wasn't a good look for me to browbeat someone who was honest and hardworking, but the deck was stacked against me so unfairly here that I knew the moment I let up on the reins, I'd be at a disadvantage. I was just about to continue arguing my case, when a

new voice entered the room.

"Could I ask you to not bully our staff members any further?"

A man had entered, probably in his forties, judging by appearance. His bushy, virile eyebrows, resembling a bird of prey spreading its wings, were his defining characteristic. The light in his eyes was calm, suggesting a wealth of experience, intelligence, and wisdom. His gray hair was slicked back, and a faint musky odor exuded from him. An elegant and refined individual in every sense of the word, he was the only adventurer in Ishka to reach Level 35 and was one of the five first-class adventurers in the entirety of Kanaria: Elgart Quis.

"Guildmaster?! You're back already?"

"Yes, the meeting went more smoothly than I expected, though I apologize for causing you trouble as a result, Ms. Ridelle."

"No, it was no trouble at all! More importantly, er, we have a situation."

"Yes, I got the gist from Ms. Parfait, and indeed, I couldn't help but overhear some of it just now while in front of the door. I'll take over from here."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much." The receptionist, apparently named Ridelle, rose from her seat, and the master of Ishka's Adventurer's Guild sat down in her place. I expected Ridelle to leave the room, but she stood behind Elgart like some sort of secretary. The composure had returned to her face as she stared at me. Apparently Elgart's appearance had been enough to dispel her trepidation.

"Now then, I don't think we need to waste time introducing ourselves, so let's get right to the point," he said, looking straight at me as he delivered his judgment. "Your request for Sense Lie is denied. On my authority as guildmaster, that's my final decision."

I was too stunned to speak.

He chuckled. "That look in your eyes says you want to argue. Of course, that's not all. In regard to this incident, the Falcon Blades are found to be guilty and will be penalized appropriately. Of course, that penalty will include suitable compensation to the victim. And it goes without saying, but any extreme demands, like taking their

lives, will not be entertained. The Falcon Blades are talented, promising members of our guild, and as such, we can't afford to lose them. I recognize that neither party will be completely satisfied with this verdict, but I hope you all understand our organization has a duty to save face in this incident as well. What do you think, Raz?"

"Naturally, I'll defer to whatever you decide. But if he demands anything else unreasonable instead of my life, like wanting to cut off my arm or blind me, I'm at least going to fight back."

"I would expect as much," Elgart said, nodding, then turned his gaze to me. "Sora, the fact that Miroslav attacked you with magic is unconscionable and unforgivable. But the way she used your presence to distract the Lord of the Flies so they could escape actually does fall within the bounds of emergency measures. The Falcon Blades will be held accountable for injuring you, so would it be too much to ask you to back down on the rest of your claim?"

I thought for a moment. "When you say 'held accountable,' what exactly will that entail? You're at least going to make it public that they attacked me, right?"

"No, we can't do that. It would not only affect the reputation of the Falcon Blades, but all adventurers in this town. Considering how integral adventurers are to Ishka, we absolutely have to steer clear of anything that might give regular citizens a negative impression of us." Elgart folded his arms in thought. "How about this? We'll announce that the Falcon Blades were on a mandatory quest to exterminate the Lord of the Flies in Titus Forest within the month. Then the Falcon Blades will hand the reward for that 'quest' over to you. Since it would be offered to a Rank C party, the reward would be substantial enough that you wouldn't need to gather herbs in the forest ever again."

"In other words, we're settling this privately with hush money?"

He laughed. "Put bluntly, yes, I suppose. And that's not all. The guild is also prepared to help reconcile this dispute. Look at this." Elgart reached into his pocket and took out a silver guild identification card engraved with a familiar name.

"That's my—"

"That's right. It's your ID card. Sora, from this point on, the Ishka

guild will welcome you as a Rank 9 adventurer. We'll also waive your monthly fee for the next three years. How does that sound?" He wore a calm smile as he offered to give my ID back. Of course, there wasn't just gentleness in that smile. There was also a hint of pressure, as if to suggest, "You understand what will happen if you refuse, right?"

I took the ID from him, and the guildmaster nodded in satisfaction.

"Excellent. Then on behalf of the guild, we expect even greater growth from you in the future—"

I threw the card across the room. It landed with a clink in the wastebasket in the corner, just where I'd aimed.

Elgart's eyes narrowed. "May I take that to mean you do not accept my proposal?"

I nodded, my lips curling into a sneer. I'd been regarding him politely up until now since he was the guildmaster, but no longer. "You really think I'd feel grateful to have that scrap of metal back after all this? You've been prattling on for a while now, old man, but in the end, you've denied every one of my requests and still made sure that the Falcon Blades come out on top no matter what. You talk a lot, but you don't give a damn about fairness. If you did, you'd have already called a priest here."

"I believe I told you I won't allow that."

"On your authority as guildmaster, was it? But I'm not a member of your guild anymore. What power do you have over me now? Your lackey behind you told me I could call a priest if I had the money, and yet the moment I called her bluff, you came in here and told me I couldn't do it. That's bullshit. Either you call the priest as I originally requested or you charge that mage with the crime of using a monster to kill me. Those are your only options."

"Watch your tone, Sora," the man warned. "This isn't how an adventurer of Ishka should act. Right now your victim complex is preventing you from viewing the situation clearly. I understand that what happened to you was unfortunate, and I do sympathize. But if you continue to make and spread around such rash remarks, I'll have no choice but to take the appropriate measures."

"'Appropriate measures,' he says! Oooh, how scary. Then before you take those measures or whatever, let me save you the trouble and cut our ties myself. I know now that talking with the guild is a waste of time, and that's all the information I need."

I rose from my seat, but Elgart held out a hand to stop me.

"Wait, Sora. We're not finished here."

"Oh, so you didn't listen to any of my demands, but you expect me to sit down and listen to yours? Sounds like someone's awfully full of himself."

I ignored him and headed for the door, but the receptionist moved to the exit to block my path.

"The guildmaster ordered you to wait. Return to your seat right now."

"Get the hell out of my way. Otherwise I'll have no choice but to take 'appropriate measures,'" I said, mimicking Elgart's tone and voice.

The receptionist's face went scarlet. "Mr. Sora, for quite a while now you have been utterly disrespectful! As a citizen of Ishka and a member of this guild for five whole years, you should already know just how much the guildmaster does for this town!"

"Oh? So he's allowed to dismiss a murderer's crimes if it's for the sake of the town, is he? Indeed, what a righteous and upstanding position he holds. Truly worthy of respect."

"You!" Shaking with rage, she took a step forward. Perhaps she couldn't stand anyone disparaging her precious guildmaster any longer.

But before I knew it, Elgart was on his feet and had taken hold of her shoulder. "Stand down, Ms. Ridelle."

"But, Guildmaster!"

"There's no need for you to resort to physical measures. Sora, you're free to refuse my offer, of course. But the guild has no reason to move in the best interests of someone unwilling to compromise with us. If you leave, the conditions I mentioned in the offer will all be null and void."

"Go right ahead. I couldn't care less about such a half-assed compromise."

"Then let me issue a warning instead. In the event you say or do anything that might put the guild or any of its members at a disadvantage—"

"Ha!" I laughed out loud. "Let me guess, you'll 'take appropriate measures?' That's what you wanted all along, right? The Falcon Blades won't need to answer for their crime, and they'll be indebted to the guild for letting them off the hook. It's a win-win for both of you. Maybe once I'm out of the picture, you'll celebrate and raise a toast to each other for a job well done."

I shoved the receptionist aside and opened the door, but before I left, I glanced back one last time over my shoulder. Both the party who'd tried to kill me and the guild who'd tried to sweep it under the rug were now my enemies. I thought about letting them know but reconsidered. They didn't deserve a warning.

"Then this is goodbye—once and for all," I said, and with only that ominous parting remark, I left them all behind.

4

My discussion with the guild was over, and ninety-nine percent of it had gone exactly how I'd imagined. I wasn't surprised that my claim hadn't gone through; in fact, I'd never expected it to in the first place. I would've been more surprised if they'd actually fessed up to their crime.

Still, that didn't mean I wasn't disappointed by the result. Ninety-nine percent of it had gone according to my predictions, but the other one percent had given me hope. Hope that they might actually listen.

In truth, there was something I'd wanted to say to Raz and the others had I gotten the chance. In the end, I hadn't, but to be entirely honest, I had a lot to be grateful to them for. I was genuinely glad they'd invited me into their party five years ago. It had ended painfully, but for those first few months, I'd really had fun. Back then, we'd all been on the same level, sharing our successes and failures and building up experience together. That was

something I'd never gotten to enjoy back on Onigashima, and if it hadn't been for the Falcon Blades, I probably never would have. So if they'd just come clean from the beginning and admitted they were trying to get rid of me, I would've been willing to let it all go out of gratitude for that time.

But after what I'd witnessed in that room, I was now more sure than ever. I was grateful to the Falcon Blades of five years ago, not the Falcon Blades of today. Same for the guild—they were no longer anything but my enemy. Not only had they taken Miroslav's side, but they'd tried to erase her crime of murder entirely. They'd even threatened me with "appropriate measures" if I didn't shut up. That was why I'd curled my lip and left. I'd tried to be civil, tried to settle things peacefully, but at this point, I had no choice but to eliminate them all.

Now that I'd decided on my course of action, the next order of business was deciding *how* to carry out my revenge. Devour the souls of everyone who'd been in that room, perhaps? Was it even possible to do that on command? I'd awakened to my Shinsou, raised my level, and definitely become much stronger than before, but I wasn't the strongest in the world either. In other words, I wasn't a match for Elgart Quis. Against a top-class adventurer like him, I held no delusions of victory.

Raz and the others were no pushovers either. While I'd been out gathering herbs all those years, the Falcon Blades had taken on hundreds of quests and built up their strength. I didn't know their individual levels (in fact, the only reason I knew Elgart's was because he wasn't shy about announcing it publicly) but since Raz was a Rank 6 adventurer, he had to be over Level 10 at least, probably somewhere between 15 and 20.

Iria and Miroslav were probably around the same level as him. Lunamaria was likely slightly higher than the other three. It didn't really matter; the important thing was that I likely wouldn't stand a chance against them as I was now. Not to mention they were a Rank C party, so facing them all together would no doubt be more dangerous than facing them individually. I might have defeated the

Lord of the Flies on my own, but I still couldn't afford to underestimate the Falcon Blades.

"So I need to separate them and take them out one at a time."

If possible, I wanted to lure them into the depths of Titus Forest somehow and pick them off one by one. That way I'd be free from the guild's prying eyes, and I wouldn't have to worry about getting innocent bystanders involved. Most importantly, I could continue to keep my trump card, my Shinsou, secret from others.

The problem was *how* to lure them, but I had a vague idea. I'd use the Lord of the Flies' hive. More specifically, I'd kidnap Miroslav, toss her into the hive, then let Raz and the others know her location. They'd be forced to enter the forest depths to save her, and that's when I would make my move.

The reason for making Miroslav my first target was obvious. Whatever I did to that murderer or whatever happened to her, I wouldn't feel one bit guilty. Considering her personality, she might think that by capturing her I was trying to defile her and choose to end her own life instead, but even in that instance, I wouldn't mind at all.

"Then I'll need some equipment to camp out. Food, water, clothes...right, and a blanket in case it's cold. It's spring right now so it'll probably only be cold at night, but still." Depending on how things turned out, I could be in Titus Forest for quite a while, so I would need to be prepared. In order to convert that cave into a livable space, however, I would need some things. And whatever I bought here in Ishka, the guild would know about it. They probably wouldn't immediately figure out what I was up to, but I still didn't want to give them any clues.

I folded my arms in thought. Indeed, it would be best to gather what I needed in towns and villages closer to Titus Forest so as not to arouse suspicion. And leaving the town temporarily would make the Falcon Blades and the guild less cognizant of me as well. Of course, they probably thought I was still Level 1 and couldn't do much to them anyway.

Fortunately, I had plenty of money, so I could leave immediately —or so I thought, but then I remembered something, let out a yelp,

and buried my head in my hands.

Shit, I left all my money back at the guild!

I thought about going back to retrieve it, but it'd be too embarrassing to go back after all that. I sighed. There was no other choice, it seemed. I still had some silver coins left, and there was some equipment left behind from dead adventurers back at the hive. While stealing from the dead wasn't exactly praiseworthy, I told myself it was for a good cause and walked toward the town's exit.

But at that moment...

"Er, Sora?"

I heard someone call my name from behind. Scowling, I turned to face the owner of the voice. There before me was the golden-haired elf Lunamaria, so pale she looked like she was about to faint on the spot.

5

"Then this is goodbye—once and for all."

The moment the door slammed shut, Lunamaria wrapped her arms around her body to keep herself from trembling. It was no use. Sweat from her brow traveled down her cheek and dripped off her chin, the droplets staining her bright green outfit.

Iria, having noticed Lunamaria's sickly pallor for some time now, ran to her in shock and said something to her, but though the elf's ears recognized sound, Iria's words failed to reach her brain. Apparently realizing Lunamaria had lost her cool, Iria used the miracle Invigoration to try to revive her spirit, but even the priestess's magic couldn't quell the elf's inner turmoil.

It wasn't because Iria's magic was weak. Lunamaria was so terrified that even the most capable priest in the Temple of Law and Order wouldn't have been able to calm her down. Within the tempest of fear and anxiety consuming her, there was a single core doubt gnawing at her mind: *Who in the world was that young man who left the room just now?*

Of course, she knew his name was Sora, and though now

estranged, he was once one of her companions. She even remembered his favorite and least favorite dishes. She even knew the kanji he spelled his name with—the empire of Ad Astera's language used an oriental alphabet unfamiliar to the rest of Kanaria, so Sora had registered under the guild using the kingdom's alphabet to make it easier on everyone. She remembered him laughing about it as he explained his reasoning to the rest of the party.

During his time in the party, she had paired up with him often. Whenever it was time for them to split up, Raz, Iria, and Miro would always form a group, leaving him alone with the elf. On top of that, they were usually the ones in charge of preparing for each adventure and taking care of the cleanup afterward. Because of that, she'd been more familiar with Sora than anyone else in the party.

But that young man just now...that wasn't the Sora she knew. Nor was she familiar with that power she'd sensed from him. The Sora reflected in the spirit user Lunamaria's eyes hadn't looked human. It was like a formless, bottomless darkness. An aberration that spirits would be afraid to go near. Something ferocious, powerful, despairing. Just looking at it had made her knees buckle and her body tremble. She was convinced that if Sora had decided to kill everyone in the room at that moment, he could have easily done it. And to her knowledge, there was only one type of being that fit the bill.

"A dragon," she mumbled under her breath.

That day she'd talked to him in Titus Forest, he hadn't looked like that. What in the world had happened to him in the past few days? Was that truly Sora? She wondered if some terrible monster had somehow wormed its way into his body to possess him.

As she was thinking, Raz's angry voice reached her ears. "Guildmaster, since that bastard refused your offer, that means we get out of this incident with no penalty, right?"

"Absolutely not. Sora's refusal is a completely different matter from your misdeed."

"Wait, what?" Raz looked confused.

"Don't think that this means your attack was justified. Normally you would be seriously punished for such an offense. One of your

members used magic to harm someone else and lure a monster to them. With such disgraceful behavior, it's no wonder he thought you were trying to kill him."

"Huh? But when he was in here, you said—"

"I only stood up for you four because Sora's actions were threatening the stability of the guild. Make no mistake, in no way do I believe what you did was right."

The first-class adventurer looked Raz sharply in the eye. Intimidated by the intensity of his gaze, Raz took half a step backward, then nodded meekly. Elgart's eyes narrowed slightly as he continued.

"Good, it seems you understand. Now then, Ms. Ridelle?"

"Yes, guildmaster?"

"When Sora was talking to you, what exactly did he say regarding the Lord of the Flies? I read Ms. Parfait's report once I first heard about the situation, but in his original testimony, there were only three responses recorded: 'I don't know, I don't understand, and I don't remember.'"

"While he was talking to Raz and the others, he mentioned something preposterous like the monster's offspring had been eating him alive. And a threat: He said he wanted all of us to experience even a hundredth of the fear and despair he did back then."

"I see. Then that at least confirms the monster carried him to its hive. I'd like to pinpoint where that is first... Hmm, judging from the time Sora made contact with the extermination party, it's likely the hive isn't deep in the forest, but somewhere closer to the outskirts. That means the town could be in imminent danger of attack if we don't hurry and take care of the monster." Elgart frowned and thought for a moment.

With a sharp glint in her eye, Ridelle spoke up. "Perhaps it'd be better to hear the details from Sora after all?"

"Perhaps so. For one, I'd like to know how a Level 1 adventurer managed to withstand the monster's poison and shake off the monsters in the forest on the way back. I wanted to ask him while he was here, but, well...you know." He smiled wryly, recalling Sora's earlier words. "At any rate, he was right. We didn't listen to his

request, so it'd be too much to ask him to listen to ours."

The guildmaster didn't seem particularly offended by Sora's attitude. Meanwhile, to Lunamaria, at least, the answer to his question was crystal clear. No magical creature out there could stand up to Sora as he was now. Or rather, it was precisely because they were magical creatures that they were powerless against him. Naturally, their poisons would be ineffective as well. Because Sora was now a dragon, an illusory creature himself.

The fact that she alone could see the aberration made her feel isolated from the rest of them. Of course, she didn't give voice to her thoughts, because this was all still conjecture for now. The only thing she had to base her theory on was that Sora had, for some reason, appeared as a dragon to her. Even while enrolled in the Sage's Academy, she'd never heard of an illusory beast's power living inside a human. Nothing like that was described in any of the countless texts she'd pored over.

Now that she thought about it, Lunamaria was the only one who'd felt fear toward Sora. None of her friends looked like they'd noticed, nor had the guildmaster, the receptionist, or the knights and soldiers in the extermination party for that matter. If she were to pipe up here and assert that Sora was a dragon, she doubted anyone would take her seriously. They'd probably think she was just tired and maybe even recommend she lie down to clear her head. With that thought, the elf dropped her gaze to the floor—and for the first time noticed the gold coins glinting dully there.

"Er, Sora?"

Now, Lunamaria was in front of him. Having chased after him and called out to him, what should she do? What should she say? She'd wanted to apologize first and foremost, of course. But when he turned to face her, her mouth wouldn't move, as though it were frozen solid. Her whole body went stiff, like she was a frog being stared down by a snake. Seeing him face-to-face like this, she was certain. The entity she could see superimposed over Sora ever since encountering him in Titus Forest for the second time had been no hallucination or trick of the mind.

"Um...I wanted...to give these back to you." After some time, her mouth finally managed to form words, and she presented a drawstring pouch to him.

Hearing the metallic clink of the coins inside, Sora blinked in surprise. "What, you went out of your way to give them back?"

"Yes. And...I also came to apologize. For earlier." The elf bowed her head deeply. Her long, golden hair, reminiscent of the moonlight, cascaded down her shoulder. "For hurting you and for abandoning you. I'm truly sorry."

The streets of Ishka were just as busy today as any other day, and a beautiful elf was bowing her head deeply in the middle of the road. Naturally, she was starting to draw attention from passersby. Normally she would've paid a little more attention to her surroundings and chosen to apologize somewhere more private, but in this case, it didn't even cross her mind. She felt like she needed to hurry and apologize as soon as possible, because if she didn't make things right in time, it would be too late. How and for whom, exactly, she didn't know, but she could somehow sense something terrible would happen.

Looking at Lunamaria, Sora sounded displeased. "I suppose I should thank you for handing these back to me, at least. But apologizing won't do any good. In fact, your words disgust me."

"Huh?"

"If you were going to apologize, you should've done it from the start. Well, that's what I'd like to say, but I do understand that apologies probably weren't the first thing on your mind with a monster pursuing you. If I was in your position, I probably would've done the same thing. But when you were in your seat back there, why didn't you say anything then?"

"W-Well..." *Because I was terrified of you.* Naturally, she couldn't say that, so she fell silent.

In response, Sora curled his lip. "No, don't tell me, I already know. Because if you'd apologized back there, it would have been acknowledging that the Falcon Blades were responsible. You were in front of the others, so you couldn't be the only one apologizing. In other words, you didn't want to damage your relationship with your

comrades at the expense of apologizing to me. Fair enough; that's a reasonable decision. But if so, why are you apologizing to me now, right here?"

"Er..."

"Hmph. You were thinking that if you could apologize at the last minute and I forgave you, everything might turn out all right. And even if I didn't forgive you, just by apologizing you could clear your conscience. You could absolve yourself of guilt without getting into it with your comrades. Just what I'd expect of a sage! You really were the brains of the group, you know. But as the one on the receiving end of your plan, it just pisses me off. If you want to apologize to make yourself feel better, go do it in front of a mirror, hypocrite."

"N-No, that's not..." Lunamaria tried to deny it, to set things straight, but Sora had already turned on his heel and disappeared into the bustling crowd.

She was about to follow him, but he turned around and glared at her over his shoulder. The iciness in that glare stopped her in her tracks. Seeing that, Sora smirked one last time in ridicule and turned away. The spirit-user elf watched his retreating figure, helpless.

Chapter 4: A New Way to Devour

1

The mage of the Falcon Blades, Miroslav Sauzaar, was in a bad mood. For almost an entire month now, she hadn't been able to go outside. The guild had requested (or rather forced) her to stay indoors for her own safety.

For the past month, Sora had disappeared from Ishka completely. Concerned he might be plotting something and knowing he held a grudge toward Miroslav in particular, the guild had confined her to a residence they themselves had prepared.

Miroslav was Level 15, so she could easily defend herself against a Level 1 adventurer. The guild, well aware of that, had nonetheless forbidden her from leaving this place. She was clearly being punished for attacking Sora with magic back in the forest.

"Honestly, how unfair! What did I even do wrong?!" she complained to the empty room. She was about to bite her fingernail but quickly stopped herself. After all the care she'd put into her nails, it'd be foolish of her to ruin them with her own teeth.

Her living space had been supplied with plenty of food and water, as well as a number of magic and academic texts she could read to pass the time. At first, she'd planned to treat her confinement period as a vacation and had taken the extra time to catch up on caring for her hair, nails, and skin. Going on adventures every day had left her with little time to maintain her appearance, so in that sense, this time to herself was actually a boon.

But after a month of solitary confinement, she was seriously getting bored. Never before in her life had she experienced the suffocating feeling of being monitored. Raz and the others were continuing their adventuring work in the meantime, and she couldn't even go out to see them. Not knowing how much longer she'd have

to live like this also left her on edge. Inevitably, she directed her anger and dissatisfaction at the individual who'd caused it all.

"Grr...this is all that boor Sora's fault! What good is keeping someone like him alive, anyway?! He never even advanced in rank in his last five years of being an adventurer! Rather, he ought to be grateful that I gave him the honor of serving as a sacrificial pawn for someone as great as Raz!"

She felt that rather than criticizing her, Sora ought to be thanking her. It was clear from the hatred in her voice that she didn't regret attacking him one bit.

Naturally, since she didn't feel what she did was wrong. She did recognize that others might frown upon her actions, but even if she could do it all over again, she was sure she would've done the same thing.

"Other than Raz, I couldn't care less what happens to *any* man," she declared.

This time the resentment in her voice was directed at the entire opposite sex. Her father had amassed many concubines using his wealth and power. Her male classmates at the Sage Academy had picked on her because she kept beating them despite being younger. Countless men had invited her to join their party under the guise of kindness, offering to help her because she was so young, only to lead her straight to their own bedrooms.

Raz was the only man she didn't associate with bad memories. So Sora joining the Falcon Blades had tormented her to no end. If Raz hadn't invited him, she would have vehemently opposed it. Fortunately, Sora had been incompetent, and she'd only had to put up with him for half a year, but there were more than a few times in that span that she'd wished he would just disappear. What was more, after he'd left, she'd wanted to strike his stay in the party from the record entirely, because she felt having had someone so incompetent in the Falcon Blades was a blemish on their reputation. Thus she had continued to regard him with hostility, even after he was out of the party.

If she was being completely honest, she'd *wanted* to eliminate him for good, but of course she couldn't go that far. So she had

settled for chasing him out of town. As long as she never saw him again, she'd thought, it would be no different than if he'd died.

First she'd spread rumors and criticism all over town in order to corner him, taking extra care to make sure they couldn't be traced back to her. She'd been successful for the most part, but out of all those deeds, she was most proud of how well the nickname "parasite" had spread. She was reminded of how crushed Sora had looked as he'd fled from the bar that day, and she chortled with joy.

"Heh heh...the look on his face that day was priceless!"

It was that incident that had caused Sora to regard Lunamaria as just as much of an enemy as the others. However, it had all been a setup. Miroslav had used the influence her father's company held to stage everything. First she'd instructed the bar's employees to invite Sora inside and seat him in a room in the back, beyond a wall partition. Then, after inviting Iria and Lunamaria to the same bar for lunch, she'd nonchalantly selected the table next to Sora's. Once that was done, she'd only needed to make it sound like Lunamaria had called Sora a parasite where he could hear.

In fact, when Lunamaria had said the word, she hadn't been referring to Sora at all, but the actual insect. But Miroslav had then brought up parasitism regarding adventuring parties, then mentioned Sora. The mage had tied the two meanings together, and as a result, she'd made it sound like Lunamaria had insulted Sora.

The elf had looked bewildered by Miroslav's abrupt change of topic, but Miroslav, acting like she was tipsy, had then made a snide comment to Iria about how fitting that nickname was for Sora, and the two had shared a laugh. Lunamaria had frowned at their comment, but figuring it must have been the alcohol's influence making them act out, she hadn't scolded them. She'd had no idea that Sora was next to them and had heard the entire thing. In the end, everything had gone exactly as Miroslav had intended.

As for the reason she'd gone that far, it was simple: She'd wanted to destroy Sora and Lunamaria's friendship. Back when Sora was in the party, he had always been closer to the elf than any other member. She'd known that if he heard *her* call him a parasite, his last thread of hope would snap. And by creating a rift between

them, she'd no longer have to worry about Lunamaria sympathizing with Sora and plotting to bring him back into the party. Miroslav had always hated that do-gooder elf anyway, so it had been the perfect opportunity to get back at her.

Back at the Sage Academy, Miroslav had been a loner, but Lunamaria's status as an elf princess had made her the most popular girl there, and the mage had burned with jealousy. Worse, while Miroslav had dropped out, Lunamaria had gone on to graduate and become a genuine sage. The only reason Miroslav hadn't made the town turn on Lunamaria like she'd done with Sora was that the woman was too skilled an adventurer for it to work.

At any rate, Miroslav's plan had mostly gone off without a hitch—save for one oversight, and it was a major one. She hadn't counted on Sora remaining in Ishka. This had frustrated her. Although she would've loved to continue breaking his heart until he gave up and left, someone else might catch on to her actions if she went any further. Lunamaria, for one, was infuriatingly perceptive. Miroslav could only continue to spread negative impressions around town, hoping it would eventually get him to leave.

"But now that it's come to this, I wish I'd done more," she said with a hint of regret.

Still, if she'd chased Sora away from Ishka, she wouldn't have been able to use him as a decoy to save Raz. So perhaps she'd made the right decision after all, she thought. If only the Lord of the Flies had killed him afterward, everything would've been perfect.

Just as Miroslav thought that, the door opened with a creak. She scowled, thinking it was yet another guild member entering without so much as a knock. Maybe she wouldn't have minded so much if the guildmaster had only assigned women to monitor her, but he'd included men in the mix as well. And despite her multiple protests, he hadn't made a move to change it. According to him, female guild members were in such short supply that he couldn't afford to keep them on surveillance for days on end. To Miroslav, however, it just felt like a display of how little he valued her opinion.

She directed that pent-up ire toward her unwanted interloper, about to shout out in anger. But before she knew it, the intruder was

standing behind her.

Her eyes went wide with shock. *When did they get behind me?* They moved with such speed that they had to have used magic. In the next instant, a fist struck her hard in the abdomen, so powerfully that it lifted her off the ground. The blow was strong enough to instantly rob her of consciousness. But just before the limp red-haired mage crashed to the floor, the intruder grabbed her and carried her out.

Only thirty seconds had passed since the intruder had entered.

2

"Where...am I?" Miroslav said once she came to. She rose to a sitting position and ran a hand through her disheveled hair, looking around at her surroundings in a daze.

She'd always treated me with such toxic behavior that it was refreshing to see the confused look on her face. I continued to watch her silently until her wandering gaze turned in my direction. Perhaps finally realizing there was someone else nearby, she raised her head somewhat listlessly.

"Raz? Is that you?"

It was the first time I'd ever seen her look so out of it. However, I could tell her eyes were gradually coming into focus, and shortly afterward, she regained her senses completely. "No, you're not Raz! You're...Sora?!"

She let out a yelp of shock and sprang to her feet. She looked around in confusion at her environment again, so I decided to let her know where she was.

"This is the Lord of the Flies' cave. Or more accurately, it *was*. You're deep within Titus Forest right now."

"You think I was born yesterday? A Level 1 adventurer like you couldn't possibly enter the forest depths. This is probably somewhere near the outskirts. Were you hoping that if I believed I was in the Lord of the Flies' habitat or the forest depths, I might think escaping was hopeless? Well, too bad."

Despite her smart mouth, she looked wary of me. It seemed that even in this brief span of time, she'd managed to grasp the kind of situation she was in. That was fortunate for me, since it saved me the trouble of having to explain.

"You can doubt me all you want, but it won't change reality," I said.

"And you think I'll just stand here after all you've done?!" Her shout tore through the silence of the cave and reverberated off its walls.

"That's my line, Miroslav Sauzaar," I said with a sneer. "By the time I'm satisfied, the guild and the Falcon Blades will be finished. And you'll be the first."

"You're talking nonsense. Watch what you say, boor, or you might end up squandering that life you only barely managed to hang on to."

"Thanks for the warning. By the way, did no other doubts ever occur to you? Like how someone at Level 1 could have possibly carried your unconscious body all the way here?"

Hearing that, the anger drained from her face, and a look of bafflement rose up in its stead. It was the look of a scholar confronted with a difficult problem. "You're saying you carried me all the way from that house to Titus Forest? Impossible. Right, in fact, this probably isn't even Titus like you claim—you just want me to think it is. But then, where am I really? No, first, how did you carry me out of Ishka without anyone noticing? What were those lazy guild staff and the guards at the town gate doing, anyway? Napping on the job?"

Miroslav continued to mumble to herself. To answer her question, the guild staff guarding her had been extremely lax, and it was no wonder the guards hadn't seen me, since I hadn't used the town gate. I'd left by scaling the walls instead. Entering and exiting the city by going over the castle walls was a serious crime, of course, but no one could charge me if they didn't see me do it. Of course, I didn't bother to explain any of that to Miroslav.

"Take some time to think about it, and if you can't figure it out on your own, I'll give you the answer," I said. "We'll be living together

here for some time, after all."

"Is there no end to your nonsense?! I'd rather die than live with you!" She quickly backed away from me then, glaring at me as though I were a magical beast.

"Let mine enemies be wrapped in the sweet embrace of death! Princess Blaze!"

She prepared a magic spell without warning. Streams of flame resembling a woman's arms spilled from her palm and rushed toward me at an undodgeable speed, engulfed my body in an instant, and exploded, causing the cave's walls to tremble violently. Clouds of dust rose, and a curtain of debris obscured her from my vision.

Beyond the rubble, I heard her chortle. "How do you like the taste of a Category 5 fire spell? To a Level 1 like you, I bet it was awe-inspiring! But that was only the abbreviated version. You probably thought that by confiscating my wand, you'd be safe, but that's just the kind of shallow thinking I'd expect from a low-leveler like you. I've got magic stones embedded in my rings, bracelets, and even my earrings. I can fight just as easily without my wand."

Her voice was full of confidence and scorn. She was certain she'd defeated me, and I couldn't help but snicker at that. After all, her attack hadn't harmed me in the least. I'd used my vigor to defend myself and repel her spell entirely.

"Shallow thinking from a low-leveler like me, eh?" I said, mocking her confidence. "I think you're misunderstanding. I didn't take your jewelry off because I knew that even with it on, it wouldn't make a difference."

"Huh?" Miroslav sounded stunned to hear my voice.

As the dust obscuring my vision subsided, I could see that the mage's eyes were wide with disbelief.

"H-How are you still alive?!"

"Because your magic was half-assed, I'd expect. Maybe you ought to try the full incantation next time?"

"You! Take this! Pierce through—Flame Arrow!"

Her glare angrier than ever, she fired another spell at me. The flame, with a sharp edge like an arrow, headed straight for my face.

The flame arrow—or no, considering its length, it was more like a flame spear—was a Category 2 fire spell. That made it weaker than the last one, but it could still blow my head off if I let it hit me. As I thought, Miroslav really was a skilled mage.

Just before the projectile reached my head, I opened my mouth. "Yah!"

With a single shout, I neutralized the spear in midair. Seeing the spell she was so proud of dissipate before her eyes, the red-haired mage's eyes went wide as saucers, and she took several steps backward.

"No way... You're only Level 1! What did you do?!"

"Oh, that? That was a Vigor Cannon."

"Vigor...Cannon?" She looked baffled.

"A type of magic from my hometown. In terms a mage would use, I used my od to cancel out your spell."

"Impossible! I used mana from the environment to conjure that spell! How could you possibly cancel it out with your own mana?! How could someone at Level 1 cancel out the spell of a Level 15 mage?!" Her expression went past mere shock or anger as she squeezed out those words.

"If you don't want to acknowledge the reality before your eyes, that's your choice," I said with a snort. "It doesn't matter if you're satisfied with my explanation or not."

No sooner had I finished speaking than I instantly closed the distance between us and swept her legs out from under her. She landed hard on the floor. Ignoring her moan of pain, I pinned her to the ground with the weight of my own body. She hadn't had time to react to any of it.

"Get away from me, you boor!"

Upon realizing what had happened to her, she writhed and struggled to free herself. But I'd enhanced my body with vigor, so her resistance was like that of a child's. I didn't even budge as I used all four of my limbs to hold her down. Even as she was pinned down helplessly on the hard cave floor, however, there was plenty of fight in her glare.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked.

"I doubt you're an innocent maiden, so I think you can figure it out," I said.

It must have been enough of a hint for her, because her face instantly went pale. Enjoying her reaction, I chuckled. This was the very spot the maggots had nearly eaten me alive. The very spot I'd sobbed and pissed myself, snot dripping down my face as I cried out that I didn't want to die. I could remember it all like it was yesterday, and I wanted Miroslav to feel that same humiliation and terror in that very same spot. The desire for revenge that had lain dormant inside me up into now all welled up at once, and my lips automatically curled up into a grin.

Seeing my expression up close, her eyes lit up with clear hostility despite her pallid complexion. Apparently, her anger and resentment toward me surpassed her fear.

"Mana Dischar—" she shrieked, likely trying to cast her most powerful spell, but naturally, I didn't let her finish. In order to shut her up, I covered her lips with my own.

At first, Miroslav didn't seem to comprehend what was happening—she just fell still with her eyes wide. But when the realization hit her, she let out a muffled scream and began resisting me like a cat trying to avoid a bath. Smirking, I continued holding her down and was about to proceed to the next phase.

Then, "it" came.

Thump.

My heart gave a jolt, and an impulse like a sexual urge coursed through my body. Before I knew it, I was embracing Miroslav's body with all my might. She screamed, but I paid her no mind. More forcefully than before, I used my own mouth to pry her lips open—and ate her soul.

In the next moment, her body gave a jolt in my arms. I had no way of knowing what it felt like to have your soul eaten, but from her reaction, it had to be a sensation she'd never felt before. Shaking her head frantically, she tried to break away from me, but I ignored her. Or rather, I didn't even notice her attempts to escape because I was far too drunk with pleasure. It was the same feeling as when I'd cut down the Lord of the Flies' offspring, and the longer

I sucked Miroslav's soul from her, the more intense it became.

That wasn't all. There was a delectable sweetness in my mouth, like I was dining on the finest honey imaginable. I wanted to keep tasting it forever.



Drink it forever. *Slurp, slurp, slurp.* Meanwhile, Miroslav's face grew redder and redder as though she had a fever, and her body started to go limp, as if in resignation. Something was clearly wrong with her, but driven on by impulse, I continued drinking, drinking, drinking—and when I came to my senses, I had become Level 6.

3

I now knew I could devour the souls of those I kissed. It was a new way to apply my ability. And that newfound knowledge greatly changed the course of my plan for revenge.

My original plan had been to lure Raz and the others to the forest depths using the kidnapped Miroslav. The Falcon Blades' levels had all reached the double digits, so I'd already expected their souls would be quite fulfilling to devour. However, I'd been hesitating a little. It went without saying, but if I killed them, I'd only be able to devour their souls once. I'd sworn to myself not to use that power on just anyone, so it was an enticing prospect to have a stock of souls I could dine on whenever I wanted.

With that in mind, I'd reconsidered and decided I should let them gain even more experience first, allowing their souls to ripen even more. Plus, if I cut them down outright, they'd never know the fear and despair I had felt in this cave. I wanted to force the ones who threw me into that hell to tread water in its poisonous swamps as long as possible—such were the dark thoughts that had been residing in the depths of my heart all this time.

This was why I was all the more thrilled to discover a new application for my ability. Now I could make the Falcon Blades suffer much longer than if I simply killed them, and I'd gain more levels in the process, so it was a win-win situation. Of course, using carnal acts to devour others' souls might make others lump me in with the likes of the monster known as the vampire, so I had to be careful. But here in the forest depths I could do whatever I wanted without being seen or feeling guilty, and I honestly didn't care whether Miroslav died, so I'd used her to experiment.

This was what I discovered: First, much like one's stamina or mana, a human's soul recovers over time. In other words, even if I devoured a soul, it would regenerate a little by the next day. It seemed that the more of a soul I devoured, the longer it took to regenerate; for example, if I devoured one hundred percent of a soul, by the next day it would only have regenerated by ten percent. However, if I devoured fifty percent of it, it would recover by twenty percent the next day. And if I only devoured thirty percent, it would recover in that same period. Those were only rough estimates based on my own intuition, of course, but I was at least certain that the amount of regeneration of the soul depended on how much of the soul I consumed. In other words, I could eat, wait for the soul to recover some, then eat again, squeezing each soul for every last drop of goodness I possibly could.

Now that I'd realized that, I decided to hold back on tormenting Miroslav so excessively. As a result, I was able to notice a subtle change in her behavior. At first she'd vehemently resisted each time I'd approached her, even attacking me with her magic on occasion, but over the past few days she'd stopped struggling, reluctantly but obediently giving up her body. Her expression was still filled with hatred, of course, and each time I was done she'd immediately run to the water cask and rinse her mouth out numerous times, but she'd at least stopped resisting whenever I was in front of her. Perhaps she was afraid I might start torturing her day in, day out again if she decided to put up a fight.

Not only that, but upon observing her more closely, I realized that now, whenever I chowed down on her soul, she seemed to be feeling pleasure or something close to it. It was probably a defense mechanism her body had cooked up, similar to how virgins experienced sexual pleasure when a vampire sucked their blood. What was more, Miroslav was clearly cautious of her body's own response. Of course, pleasure was supposed to be a temporary, enjoyable sensation, so when experienced for long periods of time against her will, it probably felt like a different kind of torture. That had probably also contributed to her shift in attitude.

With all that in mind, it was time to move to the next phase of my

plan. I now knew how to consume Miroslav's soul efficiently, but in the end, it would still only earn me the value of one soul. In other words, phase two was to gather more. Fortunately, there were still two more women in the Falcon Blades—Lunamaria and Iria—so they would be my next targets.

Still, it would be far too risky to drag them here like I had Miroslav. For one, now that their mage was missing Raz and the others would be on guard, and so would the guild. There was no guarantee I'd go unnoticed this time, and even if I did make it here without anyone seeing, it would mean I'd have to live here in the depths even longer. I didn't want that.

Ideally, I'd want all three of them—Miroslav, Lunamaria, and Iria—to yield to me unconditionally. But they would never do so of their own will, so I'd need a plan—and one was already forming in my mind. To carry it out, though, I'd first need to get Miroslav on my side. Naturally, she would never agree to join me in laying a trap for her comrades, not even if heaven and earth were flipped upside down. But over the past several days, I had gathered the information I needed to make it happen.

One morning, when Miroslav exited the tent I had set up for her, reluctantly awaiting the daily soul-eating ritual, I had asked her a question. It didn't have a shred of delicacy, but I couldn't care less. "Come to think of it, why *are* you still a virgin? I'd figured Raz had long since bedded you by now."

"Huh?!" She looked stunned at the abruptness of my question, but then her eyebrows slanted in anger. "That's none of your business!"

It was just the response I'd expected, so I smirked at her, reached out, and grabbed her shirt. "If it's none of my business, then I guess you won't mind if I take your virginity first."

"Unhand me!" she shrieked, knocking my hand away before dropping her gaze in vexation. After being with me for half a month now, she must have realized I'd really do it if she didn't answer. "I-I don't ever want to be someone's mistress or concubine. Not even Raz's."

"So you won't let anyone but your future husband touch you," I

said, sensing what she wanted to say. I crossed my arms in thought. Here in Kanaria, commoners were restricted to monogamy, but nobles could have multiple wives. More accurately, lower-class nobles like knights and barons were limited to two wives, while the upper class like counts and lords could take up to three. These rules applied to the rest of the continent as well, including the empire of Ad Astera. In general, all women within that limit were considered legal wives, and concubines were lovers who existed outside of those bounds. Miroslav was saying she didn't want to lay with anyone except her legal husband, even Raz.

"So if Raz chose Iria instead, you'd obediently withdraw?"

"Hmph! Raz will be a knight before long. He recently received a recommendation, you know. If it comes to that, I'll use the Sauzaar family's influence to wed him!"

"I see." Even if she was his second wife, she'd still be a legal wife, satisfying her pride. Apparently imagining that future, Miroslav's mouth turned up into a syrupy sweet grin. But she must have remembered I was in front of her, as her smile immediately vanished. Considering I'd made no attempt to hide myself as I attacked her with my ability, she must have long since realized I'd never intended to let her leave here alive, so it no longer mattered whether she remained a virgin or not.

"I see. Now I know how to make you suffer," I said.

The next morning, acting as nonchalant as possible, I once again grabbed her shirt. Miroslav tried to resist again, but I didn't care. I ripped her shirt off in one fluid motion, exposing her bra and modest chest.

Sensing that I was behaving quite differently from the previous day, she tensed up and resisted even more. Ignoring her, I pushed her down on the floor. My hand traveled down her breasts, her stomach, and just as I was about to go lower, she screamed, unable to endure it any longer.

"No! I won't let you!" She thrashed around to try to throw me off, big tears welling up in her eyes. "I decided...my first time...would be with Raz! Please, stop... I'm begging you... I'm sorry! I'm sorry for everything! I'll apologize however you want; just don't do this!"

It was the first time since coming here that I'd seen her shed tears. The way her speech became fragmented as she sobbed couldn't have been an act. To Miroslav, my defiling her was tantamount to the agony of death. Perhaps if I'd expressed the intent to go on, she would have killed herself first. Overwhelmed by a sudden wave of compassion and guilt, I removed my hand...

Yeah, right. Of course I didn't.

"Ha! What right do *you* have to beg for mercy, murderer?!" I spat and instead moved my hand up to her defenseless throat. As I squeezed, she coughed desperately for air, but I didn't loosen my grip. Naturally, I didn't actually intend to kill her, but it was true that Miroslav's crocodile tears had infuriated me. Looking down at her, I'd seen my own bawling figure back when the maggots were about to eat me alive. I'd wanted to erase that image for good, so I'd reached out for her throat on impulse.

I'd considered stealing her virginity too, of course. But thinking about my plan from here on out, it would've been a bad move. Miroslav's personality, as irritating as it was, would benefit me more in the long run if I left it intact.

With that thought, I managed to resist the urge to take my revenge right away. Then, bringing my mouth close to the weeping red-haired mage's ear, I offered her a lifeline.

4

Several days later, I headed outside the cave for a change of scenery. As the brilliant sun beat down on me, I spotted fragrant herbs on the ground. They were a kind commonly used as a cooking ingredient because they served as a refreshing counterbalance to greasy, salty foods. They were also quite rare, and the guild offered decent rewards for them. Since they tended to grow freely in dense areas, I wasn't surprised to find them in this section of Titus Forest.

Nearby, I spotted even more vegetation I was familiar with. All were valuable plants that I would have been jumping for joy to come across a month ago. Now that I was no longer gathering plants for a

living, I no longer had any reason to care, but old habits die hard, and I couldn't just ignore them without a second thought. As I picked them one at a time, silently and in peace, I felt my mood improve. My spirits automatically soared.

Uh-oh.

I'd only meant to gather a few, yet before I knew it, my mind had become completely engrossed in the task. With a shake of my head, I drove the plants from my mind and tried to focus instead on what I planned to do from there on out.

Miroslav had yet to give me a response to the proposal I'd given her. But I'd expected that; in fact, if she'd readily agreed to conspire to trap her own comrades, I would've been extremely suspicious of her intentions. The fact that she hadn't answered yet but hadn't immediately rejected my offer meant she was genuinely considering it, and her heart was wavering. It probably wouldn't be much longer until she agreed. So I moved on to the next concern on my mind—one that had only gotten more prevalent as my days of feasting on Miroslav's soul had continued.

"I'm glad I'm much stronger now and all, but still, aren't I a little...*too* powerful?"

One might retort with "So, you've just been *acting* satisfied all this time?" but when it came right down to it, I couldn't say it wasn't true. I'd first felt something was odd back when Miroslav had awoken in the cave. At the time, I'd used vigor to endure her spell—or no, "endure" wasn't the word, considering her attack hadn't so much as scratched me. I'd defended rather than dodged, because I'd known I could take the hit, but I hadn't expected to come out *unscathed*. After all, when it came to vigor manipulation, I was still a novice. Awakening to a Shinsou typically increased one's vigor dramatically, but it shouldn't have made me any better at controlling it. Plus, I was still only Level 6, so how had I held my own against a renowned adventurer's magic so easily?

My level itself was another curious matter. When I'd first eaten Miroslav's soul I'd become Level 6, and even though I'd dined on her soul every day for half a month now, my level hadn't risen at all since.

My largest soul intake so far had been from the Lord of the Flies, and that one monster had raised me from Level 4 to 5 right away. I'd consumed Miroslav's soul for long enough now that I could guess it was about 40 or 50 percent the size of the Lord of the Flies' soul. And since I'd been chowing down on it over the course of half a month, factoring in the amount it regenerated as well, I should have ingested at least five times the amount of soul as that monster's by now. Yet each time I'd displayed my level, it still showed me at Level 6.

Of course, I already knew it would become more difficult to raise my level the farther I advanced. It was common knowledge that it took more experience to go from Level 6 to 7 than it did from Level 5 to 6, and perhaps if I'd been Level 20 or 30, I would have been satisfied by that answer. But I was only Level 6. It shouldn't have taken that much more experience to advance.

"I thought souls were supposed to yield more potent experience," I grumbled. "Wait, if consuming that much soul won't even let me reach Level 7, how does everyone else manage to raise theirs?" Roughly calculating that amount of soul into regular experience, I figured it should have been an outrageous amount. I just couldn't believe that typical Level 7 adventurers had earned that much. It was far too great an amount to explain away with a mere difference in ability.

Perhaps the amount of experience required to level up was far greater for me than anyone else. In other words, most people's one hundred was more like ten thousand for me. It was the only logical explanation I could come up with, but if so, why? I'd have expected an amount like that to be for a dragon to level up, not a human.

"Wait a minute...could it be?"

Thinking back to my Shinsou awakening, it was definitely plausible. My Anima, the Soul Eater, was a dragon, so it would make sense for my body to possess dragon-like properties as well. And if so, it answered the question I'd been agonizing over all these years: why had I spent so long at Level 1?

There were several theories about how leveling up worked, but the prevailing one was that even taking down ten thousand

monsters wouldn't raise your level as long as they were weaker than you. To a dragon, however, *everyone and everything* was weaker. Dragons would never gain any experience from anything below their level—in other words, they could only gain experience from other illusory beings. In that case, it was no wonder my level hadn't risen back on Onigashima or during my entire time in Ishka.

And from that, I inferred another possibility: If my body's dragon-like properties were why my leveling conditions were so different, then the rate at which I improved per level was probably different as well. It was the difference between a human's strength and a dragon's strength, so I never should have been comparing the two to begin with.

"To think it was that simple all this time... In that case, I wish there was some way I could see my experience gain and stats, not just my level." If only my display had some qualifier, like "Dragon Level 1" or something, perhaps my life up until now would've turned out very differently. Still, there was no use crying over spilled milk, and since my adverse conditions had led me to seek the strength I had now, it wasn't a complete waste. That was how I chose to look at it, anyway.

I automatically recalled the hometown I'd been exiled from. As strong as I was now, I could return there at last. And I would no doubt become even stronger. Considering the toughness of the monsters on Onigashima, there would be all sorts of substantial souls ripe for the taking. And then there was my father. I doubted he was going to let me back into the family, but considering my current strength, he would surely at least permit me back on the island.

An image of my father formed in the back of my mind, majestic, wearing his usual blue battle surcoat. The Mitsurugi family, tasked with defending Onigashima, also had eight loyal units, all of whom were masters of the Illusory Blade and dedicated to the banishment of all demons and aberrations. They were collectively called the Eight Banners of Seirin.

Seirin was Onigashima's original name. In fact, that was still its official name to this day, but almost no one called it that anymore

save for its elderly residents, who referred to it as Seirin Island. Back before the Demonic Gate had manifested, the island had been lush with verdant trees, and the scenery had been gorgeous. However, that was over three hundred years ago, and even the elderly on the island had never seen the original Seirin for themselves.

The blue coats that the Eight Banners wore had always symbolized strength in my young eyes, and I'd aspired to wear one of my own someday. It had always been my dream to line up alongside them, my father next to me. And now, I was strong enough to make that dream a reality if I wished. It would also fulfill the promise I'd made to myself when I'd first left the island. *One day, I'll come back here. I'll gain the strength I need to fight, and I'll return,* I'd told myself, and even now I remembered the chagrin I'd felt as though it had been yesterday.

And yet—or rather, precisely because of that—I no longer had the desire to return to the island. Even if I got my exile overturned and became a knight of Seirin like I'd once dreamed, I'd just be another soldier. I'd no longer be treated like a weakling, sure, but nowhere near the level of my father, Ragna, Ayaka, and the others who'd trained alongside me, not to mention the siblings Gozu and Cecil. I didn't even want to imagine living under the thumb of any of them. When I'd first gotten kicked off the island, I'd wanted them to acknowledge me, but reflecting on it now, it wasn't that I'd wanted their approval. I'd just wanted to prove them wrong.

Now, I wanted to show them I was stronger than they thought I was. I wanted to throw my chest out and laugh in their face. To prove to them how wrong their decision was. But I wasn't ready yet. I needed to get stronger first. I'd eat the souls of Miroslav and the Falcon Blades. Then I'd devour the whole guild. And I'd get stronger—much stronger. Then, when I'd had my fill, I'd return to that island and I'd show them. Show them how superior I was. That was the goal I, Sora Mitsurugi, would work toward from now on.

Of course, this was completely different from my original goal, but there was no helping it. As I was now, I couldn't empathize one bit with the Mitsurugi family's ideals of salvation and protection. It wasn't like I'd ever lost sight of that goal, but from this point on, I

carved it into my heart permanently. I wouldn't stop my revenge on Miroslav and the others, but I had reaffirmed exactly what I was seeking beyond that revenge, where my objective lay. And I made sure I would never forget it. After all, ever since I'd awakened to my Shinsou, it had been harder to resist getting drunk on its incredible power.

I'd never imagined the mere act of gathering herbs would have given me such clarity. Making a mental note to try picking herbs the next time I felt hesitant or uncertain, like a kind of meditation, I finally noticed my surroundings. Without even realizing, I'd amassed a massive pile of herbs next to me.

5

Smiling wryly at all I'd unconsciously gathered, I scooped the herbs up and was about to carry them back to the cave when all of a sudden, the ground shook. The tremor was so violent that it tossed me up into the air. At first, I thought it was an earthquake, but then multiple beastlike cries reached my ears, as though several monsters were fighting each other. I realized that the tremor had to have been an aftershock from their ferocious battle, and judging from its intensity, they were rather large monsters at that. From the number of cries, it sounded like there were at least ten creatures involved, but they also sounded like the same variety of monster, so perhaps it was a whole group against one. Most likely a bunch of monsters were on the hunt and trying to take down their prey.

Then I heard one of them scream, much louder than before. It was a single voice, so it was probably the prey. Perhaps it was exerting all the strength it had left for one final attempt at resistance, because I heard a rustling like it was flapping its wings madly, attempting to escape into the air. But it failed and once again crashed to the ground. Maybe if it had flown up in a straight line it would have been uninjured, but it flew at a bad angle, skidding across the ground diagonally and into my line of sight. It was a two-legged demi-dragon with vivid blue scales—an indigo wyvern. The

wyvern was followed by its pursuers.

"Hey there, sonny! How strange to see a human in these parts! Hee hee hee!" one of them said. They were man-eating monsters known as manticores. They had faces like an old man, bodies like a lion, and tails like a scorpion, and primarily inhabited forests. They could speak human languages, but by no means were they friendly to humans. It was often said you should prepare for a fight if you ever encountered one. Its lion's body was just as agile as it looked: It could run along the uneven forest ground as though it were completely level. In other words, it was nearly impossible to outrun in its natural habitat.

The scorpion tail was highly venomous and had twenty-four spikes on it. A single swipe had the destructive power to fell even the largest trees, and I'd even heard it had the ability to launch the spikes from its tail as projectiles. In short, it was a monster you would never want to run into in the forest.

"And I ran into ten of them, huh? Honestly, how much luckier could I get?" I said to myself dryly. One after another, the group of manticores pursuing the wyvern bounded into my vision. There were ten in all. I sighed and set the bag of herbs on the ground. Whether I'd have to fight them or make a run for it, I couldn't do either while holding the bag, so I made a silent vow to come back and retrieve them once all this was over.

"Tee hee hee! Compared to a wyvern, there ain't a lot of meat on those bones, sonny, but humans do have their own special, irresistible flavor! Your luck ran out when you ran into us!" the manticore taunted me.

I decided to test whether what I'd read about manticores was true. "If the sun were to rise in the west, the rivers flow backward, and fire burn underwater, what would that mean to you?"

"Go on, keep babbling your nonsense. None of it matters, since your life is already forfeit, tee hee hee!"

The manticore didn't listen to a word I said. Just because they could speak the language of humans didn't mean they wanted to talk to us. A manticore only ever said what it wanted and showed no interest whatsoever in conversing with others. Indeed, it was just as

I'd read. That was convenient for me, since it saved me trouble.

As I thought to myself, the manticore kept talking. "What an excellent day this is! A wyvern falls to the ground, a human dies, and my belly will be full! Truly, this is bliss!"

"Then die blissfully," I said. "Shinsou Reiki."

The instant I manifested my Shinsou, the manticores shook like reeds in the wind. The one who had ridiculed me shut up as well. They were clearly wary of me, but by not attacking, they might as well have waited for me to draw my sword. After all, my Shinsou took the form of one.

"Devour them all, Soul Eater!"

I now manifested that weapon. The violent glint of black light as it appeared made the manticores recoil in surprise. I fixed my gaze on the creatures and assumed a battle stance, my sword at my left hip and the tip of the blade pointed behind me. It was similar to a quick-draw stance, but since my Shinsou didn't have a sheath, it only resembled one. I imbued my blade with vigor and unleashed the same Gale attack I'd used against the Lord of the Flies. However, that Gale had only been an imitation of what I'd seen back on the island. It had still been powerful enough to finish my enemy, so I hadn't minded at the time, but I was curious to see how strong it was now that my level had risen.

I didn't think about how I was no longer cursed to be at Level 1 or about how I was "only" still Level 6. I ignored my human limitations. I didn't need to think about how powerful or weak I was; I just needed to put everything I had into this strike right now. I strengthened my vigor to the max and increased its capacity as far as it would go for the strongest output possible. Vigor began to swirl around my blade, like a spiral of flame or breath from a dragon. The space around me began to creak as if giving way. My Shinsou howled as though it couldn't hold back from devouring any longer.

Perhaps the manticore who'd spoken to me could instinctively feel how my power had risen to a frightening degree, because it cried out to its brethren, "Fly away!"

"Too late!" As though to mimic a high-pitched scream, my black blade flashed forward in a straight line. The enemy should've been

too far away for my blade to reach them, but the sword had absorbed so much of my vigor that it covered the distance instantaneously. Bizarrely, rather than a slash from a sword, it was like the attack leaped forward and devoured the atmosphere itself. Even a monster like the manticore, who prided itself on its agility, couldn’t dodge the attack fast enough.

Five manticores raised cries of surprise and pain as they fell to the ground, blood spraying everywhere. With just one attack, I'd taken out half the group. The others either hadn't been within range of the attack or had reacted to their leader's command faster than the others. I targeted the latter group next, the three that had tried to fly into the air to escape, pointing my blade at the fleeing trio. I noticed the leader's eyes go wide with shock, and my lips automatically curled up into a smirk.

"Die."

It was impossible for a monster without wings to avoid an attack in the air, so my second slash mowed down all three of them with ease. Normally a manticore's torso was protected by fat and muscle, tough to cut through. But my black blade sliced through it all like butter, sending three fountains of blood through the air. An astounding amount of soul poured into me immediately afterward. The feeling of pleasure that hit me was so abrupt and intense that I nearly cried out.

It seemed I was just as much a force to be reckoned with as I'd guessed. After all, I'd eliminated eight notoriously dangerous man-eating beasts in no time at all. It also proved my earlier theory regarding my level. At the very least, I was now certain that I'd been mistaken about my power for most of my life.

With that new understanding, I gripped my fist tightly, thinking I would take out the last two manticores next. But just as I turned to look at them...

"*GRAAOO!*" With a roar, the wyvern bit one manticore's head off, then used its tail to finish the other one with one swipe. Both most likely died instantly.

Every inch of the wyvern's indigo scales was stained with blood, and more than half had been torn off, revealing bloody flesh underneath. There was no doubt it was critically wounded, and if it hadn't been an indigo wyvern, the most ferocious and formidable member of the wyvern race, I might have thought it was near death as well, but considering it was able to finish off two manticores with ease despite its injuries, I highly doubted it. The question was whether it would choose to direct its might at me next. It had

ultimately been my ally, but I wasn't sure whether it had helped me deliberately. In terms of brutality and animosity toward humans, the indigo wyvern wasn't much different from the manticore, so I wouldn't have been surprised if it had decided to attack me next.

Incidentally, wyverns were generally friendly to humans. In fact, the Kanaria Royal Army had a special dragon division that tamed them for riding. But that only applied to those who were familiar with a human's touch from the moment they were hatched. Wyverns in the wild only saw humans as prey, and no matter how kindly they were treated, they never warmed up to the human race.

The indigo wyvern was a superior breed, and it was especially fickle. It was said that the dragon knights of Kanaria were enamored by how much more majestic and powerful it was than the other wyverns and were constantly trying to tame them, but none had yet managed to succeed.

The indigo wyvern spat out the manticore's head as though in disgust, then turned in my direction with a menacing growl. Expecting it to charge me at any minute, I raised my blade, but contrary to my expectations it didn't attack. With rounder, wider eyes than I'd expected for a wyvern, it only looked at me. Staring at my own reflection in its oblong, snakelike pupils, I considered my next move.

Then, without warning, the wyvern's gaze left me and turned in another direction. A beat later, I followed its gaze. One of the manticores, the leader, was still alive, and he had gotten to his feet.

So, I failed to finish him off, I thought in disgust.

The wyvern let out an earsplitting cry full of hostility and fighting spirit, clearly directed at the manticore rather than me. As its long neck bulged, something like steam rose from its mouth. It was about to breathe fire.

Um...wait, an indigo wyvern's about to unleash its fire breath in the middle of the forest?!

Then I remembered that the manticore had severely wounded the wyvern in an attempt to capture and eat it. I remembered the helplessness, fear, and anger I myself had experienced just before being eaten, so I hesitated to interfere with its revenge.

The indigo wyvern expelled a fireball about the size of a human head, and the projectile flew through the air in a straight line. The manticore tried to flee, but it was a direct hit. As though proving the intensity of the wyvern's breath, the manticore was engulfed in flame and charred to death before it could even scream.

Afterward, I examined the area a little ways out, suspicious. After all, I'd never heard of manticores forming groups, let alone groups of ten. To begin with, it was the first time I'd ever seen even one around here. They were supposed to live deeper within the forest, so why had they come out here in a group? My initial guess was that something had attacked their habitat and they'd had to flee.

But after around half an hour of inspection, I couldn't find anything that would point to that, and in the end, it was a wasted effort. Perhaps I'd learn more if I followed the manticore's trail farther, toward their habitat in the deepest part of the forest, but I wasn't *that* curious. For now I just decided I'd pay special attention to any rustlings or noises in the forest.

Returning to my original location, I'd expected the wyvern to have long since disappeared but was surprised to find it was still there. What was more, it was moaning as though in pain and almost looked like it was writhing on the ground.

And after it looked so majestic and imposing earlier too, I thought, but then I realized something—the manticore's tails were deadly poisonous. They hadn't managed to hit me, but they had to have struck the wyvern at least several times. The poison was most likely working its way through its body.

What should I do? I scanned the area. Fortunately, I had the herbs in the bag that I'd picked. Among those plants were some with antidotal properties, but I wasn't sure if they'd be enough to neutralize the manticores' poison. Even if they were, I'd likely have to use my entire supply. And just because those herbs worked on humans didn't mean they'd work on wyverns.

"Antidote, antidote... Oh, right, there *is* one I know will work! The one that got rid of the Lord of the Flies' poison!"

Jirai Ao Ochs! The tree wasn't too far from my current location. If I imbued myself with vigor and ran at top speed, I could probably

make it there and back in less than an hour.

Thinking about it more rationally, I suppose I didn't really have any reason to cure the wyvern. In fact, it would've been safer for me to kill it right there. But when I recalled those big, round eyes it had looked at me with, I hesitated to do so. It had helped me get rid of those manticores, so I supposed I could at least return the favor. If it still decided to attack me once it was healed, I'd devour its soul then. After taking one last look at its long neck stretched out on the ground, moaning in agony, I did some exercises to warm up, then dashed away at full speed.

Skipping ahead to the conclusion, I managed to save the indigo wyvern's life. After eating the fruit from the Jirai Ao Ochs, it let out a piglike squeal as though puckering from its sourness but was soon after free from the poison's malaise and chirped happily. Meanwhile, I was once again reminded how incredible the Jirai Ao Ochs was.

6

Miroslav Sauzaar hated men. And if you asked her why, she would probably first bring up her father.

The Sauzaar company was one of the largest and most influential companies in all of Kanaria, and Miroslav's father was the man who'd built it up from nothing. It had once been a humble, nondescript clothing store in the corner of the royal capital, but he had expanded the business to its current size in a mere thirty years. There was no doubting his immense talent as a businessman. But as a father, he was a failure. No, he was the worst father one could have. At least, Miroslav thought so. He always had women to the left and right of him. Worse, it was a different set of women each day.

That was because he was just as much or more of a womanizer than he was a business prodigy. Miroslav herself was the daughter of his seventh mistress, a traveling dancer whose passionate dancing and flaming-red hair had enticed him enough to conceive Miroslav. When she was a baby, she'd lived with her mother in a run-down mansion rather than the main Sauzaar estate. The residents in the

area would always whisper among themselves as they passed, calling it the "whorehouse."

Miroslav couldn't recall a single time her father had spoken to her as a child. The offspring of his legal wives living in the mansion all wore vivid, stylish clothing, but Miroslav had been dressed in plain, undyed outfits. Meanwhile, her mother, as well as the other mistresses living there, got all dolled up every day in case her father ever came back, sometimes even competing with each other to win his favor. In Miroslav's young eyes their behavior was pathetic and disgraceful, and she swore to herself countless times that she would never become like that.

So she hit the books and studied diligently. She set her sights on enrolling in what was known as the gateway to intellectualism, the Sage Academy. She would become renowned for her intelligence so that she'd never have to sell her body to anyone. However, by the time she was ready to take the entrance exam, a lack of effort hadn't been the problem. A child like her had no way of affording the exam fee. So, begrudgingly, she'd asked her father for financial aid. However, she hadn't begged. She'd pitched it to him as an investment, saying that if his daughter were to enroll in the Sage Academy, it might raise his company's stock greatly. Her persuasion worked, and her father put up the money for her to take the exam.

As a result, Miroslav succeeded in escaping the "whorehouse." But the academy itself turned out to be a completely different battleground. Her first obstacle was her appearance. At the time, she couldn't have cared less about how she looked. She maintained proper hygiene, of course, but she didn't care if her hair was a mess, didn't care if her freckles stood out, didn't care if there were bags under her eyes from pulling all-nighters studying, and couldn't be bothered to put on makeup. That was something women did to attract men. She had an irrational fear that by applying makeup, she might unconsciously end up becoming similar to her mother.

Because of her mindset, the boys treated her terribly, and even the girls avoided her whenever possible. Still, she didn't mind. It meant she didn't have to trouble herself with anyone and could devote her entire life to her studies. In fact, Miroslav turned out to

be a top student, becoming even more proficient in academics and magic than some of her seniors. The faculty had high hopes for her, and taking pride in that fact, she studied even harder. In other words, she fortified the wall isolating her from everyone else.

As a result, the other students started to regard her as stuck-up and cheeky. As time went on, they began harassing her, both directly and indirectly, and not just the boys. Miroslav hated boys, but that didn't mean she got along any better with the girls. In fact, because of how hard she herself had worked to get into the academy, she looked down on the girls her age who were prettying themselves up and fraternizing with the boys instead of studying like they were supposed to. These feelings unconsciously began to show in her attitude and tone, and the few friends she had gradually left her, until finally, she didn't have a single ally within the student body.

Of course, this wasn't the result she'd wanted, and for a while, she spent her school days constantly unhappy. The turning point came during one of their field trips where they were studying the ecology of monsters in a village called Merte, Raz and Iria's hometown.

Raz, extremely curious about the outside world, had been surprised to see a girl his age researching monsters like a professional and had worn her down with excuses until she finally agreed to take him along. At first Miroslav had kept him at arm's length, but Raz continued to praise her ability as a researcher rather than see her as a member of the opposite sex, and gradually, she warmed up to him. By the time the trip was over and she had to leave, she realized she'd completely fallen for the boy.

That was also when she first learned that he aspired to be an adventurer. There were quite a few students in the academy studying magic, and she knew many of them went on to become adventurers after graduating. But that was considered the path for low achievers. The superior mages-in-training all typically became royal mages or worked for the kingdom at one of their magic research institutions.

Miroslav had wanted to take that career path as well. Her fire magic was at a level that very few mages could reach in a mere five-

year span, and the academy's top brass had already approached her with various job offers. However keen she was on Raz, she wasn't about to turn down a glorious career path for some boy younger than her, so she was prepared to never see him again.

But then, things took a turn. Miroslav completed the Academy's curriculum at thirteen, two years earlier than it took most students to graduate. Normally this would have cemented her as a genius, a prodigy, and she would have graduated with the highest honors. But on the day of her final exam, she didn't show up because she was locked inside the archival room in the basement of her dorm. She'd wanted to break the door down with magic and escape, but the room was so small that the spell might injure her as well, and she didn't want to damage the old texts in the room besides.

To this day, she still didn't know who the culprit was. After she'd managed to escape on her own, she'd explained the situation to the faculty and requested a retake, but they'd denied her request. The royal scouts who had come to see the child prodigy perform had been upset with the Academy for wasting their time, and the Academy had viewed her absence as a serious problem. As such, not only did she not get her prosperous career, she was banned from graduating altogether and forced to drop out.

Miroslav was alone to begin with, so she didn't have anyone to help her, and none of them would willingly help someone who'd earned the Academy's ire anyway. In the end, the only path available to her led her to knock on the doors of the Adventurer's Guild. And of course, it went without saying that Raz was there as well.

At first, she deliberately avoided him because she didn't want him to see her as a failure. She didn't want to explain to him that she'd been expelled from the Academy like a delinquent. Trying to convince herself it was the path she'd really wanted all along, she first set out to gain prestige as an adventurer. Then, once she'd done enough that she could take pride in her profession, she would approach Raz at last. Considering that the very first party she joined in that haste to rise through the ranks was a party of men who nearly sexually assaulted her, perhaps it was no wonder her dislike of men was so severe.

Now, Miroslav found herself at the mercy of the opposite sex yet again. At first, she hadn't been worried. Sora was only Level 1, after all, so she could defeat him easily if he tried anything. But after the first day of being held captive, she realized that was not the case. The young man she'd once derided as a parasite and chased from the party had somehow become unbelievably strong. He had been impervious to her most powerful magic, canceled out her fastest spell, and humiliatingly interrupted her ace in the hole. Each time Sora stole her lips, she felt she lost something precious. It was like he was sucking it out of her and chewing it up. More than a few times she'd felt like she would die.

Of course, she'd tried to resist. She'd attempted to kill the man—no, *monster*—in front of her. Right, *monster.* That was no human; otherwise a Level 1 like him would never have been able to withstand her attacks. But against that creature with Sora's form, any attempts at resistance had been futile. She was unable to escape, and the days of humiliation continued. Each time he brought his lips to hers, she wanted to vomit, but her body heated up on its own and she felt pleasure she didn't want. Her heart and body disobeyed her will, and each time, it nearly drove her insane.

She'd thought about ending her own life as well. It wasn't like Sora was monitoring her at all hours of the day. He might be able to keep her from resisting or escaping, but he couldn't keep her from killing herself. However, she hesitated to do it. She was afraid of death, for one, but more importantly she knew that killing herself wouldn't foil Sora's plan in the least. He was using her as bait to lure the others into the forest depths, but even if she died, Raz and the rest would still come after her. She couldn't bear the thought of Raz coming to her rescue only to find her dead. She didn't even want to imagine how that would make him feel.

So she was robbed of even the option to commit suicide. She couldn't resist, couldn't escape, and couldn't end her own suffering, so she had no choice but to do as her captor said. Having come to that conclusion, she gave up—or at least pretended to.

However powerful Sora was, he was just another human male in

the end. A shallow, sex-crazed man. If she pretended to submit to him, he would let his guard down just like all the other men who'd tried to hurt her. Then, when Raz and the others came, she'd strike. That was her plan. So the next morning, she quit resisting his advances and became obedient to him. And when Sora's attitude toward her softened in response, she couldn't help but smirk to herself. Now she just needed to hold out until Raz and the others got there, and it'd be her win. Of that she was convinced.

It had never occurred to her that Sora might change his plans. Having discovered a new way to use the Soul Eater's power, he'd scrapped his original plan in favor of a new one. Miroslav had no way of knowing that, of course, and naturally she couldn't ask Sora why he wasn't trying to lure his former party there sooner. Subjected to obscenity daily and humiliation with no clear end, more fissures formed in her heart as the days went on, and she even lost the confidence she'd been keeping to herself.

She started to direct her anger not only toward Sora but toward the guild, who had failed to send out a search party, and the Falcon Blades, who hadn't come to rescue her no matter how much time passed. She had no doubt Raz was searching for her frantically, of course, but what about Lunamaria and Iria? Perhaps they were relieved to be rid of a rival and had made stronger advances on Raz in the process. She couldn't shake that doubt from her mind. After all, the longer Miroslav remained absent, the more convenient it would be for the two of them. What reason would they have to go out of their way to look for her?

Eventually her doubts became conviction, which quickly morphed into hatred and anger. Normally she never would have gotten so heated and would have realized that Sora was intentionally saying things to fan the flames of her anger, but after being imprisoned for so long and forced to act against her will day after day with no hope of escape or release, her heart had become brittle. It was too much to ask her to think rationally in that state.

As a concubine's daughter, Miroslav had been under the protection of the Sauzaar company growing up, so she had never known true destitution. For that reason, she was surprisingly weak

against acts of violence and malice. Sora had not only caught on to that weakness but taken advantage of it. By acting like he was going to cross a line he deliberately hadn't crossed before, he scared her enough to get her to listen to his proposal. She knew if she agreed, she'd be selling out her comrades. But if she refused she'd lose her last shred of pride and dignity and meet a terrible fate.

As Miroslav struggled with what to do, Sora whispered something else in her ear. *Don't think of it like you're betraying your comrades. You'll just be getting revenge on Iria and Lunamaria for abandoning you. If you cooperate, I promise I won't lay a hand on you or Raz ever again. But if you don't, I'll take what you hold most precious and kill everyone in the party, including Raz. In other words, I'm letting you decide whether he lives or dies.*

With her heart, mind, and conscience all dulled, betrayal sounded like the best option she had. It was almost like a demon was whispering in her ear...

Ten days later, Miroslav Sauzaar appeared in Ishka. It had been a month since she'd vanished, so naturally, the guild and adventurers who'd been fervently searching for her all this time, including her comrades, ran to her, beside themselves with joy. Then they realized the long red hair she'd been so proud of had been cut to shoulder length. That, on top of her being gone for an entire month, made them wonder what in the world had happened.

In response, Miroslav slumped her shoulders, bowed her head, and apologized timidly, which was decidedly out of character for her. She explained she hadn't agreed with the reasoning for her house arrest and had gone out as an act of defiance. The guild staff looked stunned for a moment, then their faces became scarlet with rage. After all, she'd made a fool of them with her actions.

She got on her knees and apologized again. Now that she'd been on her own for a while, she'd cooled off and was ready to accept whatever punishment they gave her. With those words, she managed to defuse the situation, and everyone calmed down. After that, Miroslav was dragged to the guild and severely reprimanded, but that was all. The guild's warrant for Sora, who had secretly been

suspected of abducting her, was also rescinded now that she had been found.

Ten days later, Sora returned to Ishka, bringing with him a single slave. The arrival of that slave would set a new, even bigger conflict in motion, but at the time, only one other person besides Sora himself knew that.

Chapter 5: The Chipped Blade

1

When I returned to Ishka for the first time in nearly a month and a half, I had two things with me I hadn't had previously. The first was a black katana. This was not my Shinsou, but a regular weapon forged by a human blacksmith. That said, it was forged with black steel, which was a metal known for its toughness, and by a smith in Ad Astera. The price of a weapon made from black steel usually went up to double digits in gold coins, and in fact, I'd paid fifty for mine.

The reason I'd been absent from Ishka for so long was because I'd gone to the empire in search of this sword—at least, that was the story I'd cooked up. As for where I'd gotten all that money, it was partly from selling the remains of the monsters I'd defeated in Titus Forest. Manticore tails and the like sold for high prices, and those had netted me eighteen gold coins. Selling the herbs I'd gathered in the forest depths had earned me two more gold coins, which wasn't much compared to the monster parts, but earning even one gold coin from herbs alone was significant in itself. As I'd expected, the herbs from the forest depths had sold for a hefty sum.

The rest came from selling the possessions that the dead adventurers in the Lord of the Flies' cave had left behind. Selling them in Kanaria would likely cause trouble for me later on, so I'd sold them while I was in Ad Astera. There was all kinds of valuable equipment in the bunch, like necklaces with magic-boosting properties and shields that blocked magic, and I'd gotten sixty gold coins for the lot, making eighty in total. Considering that the value of one gold coin was enough to comfortably live on for a whole month, the value of *eighty* went without saying. Such wealth had previously been foreign to me, so I'll admit, at first it was difficult to keep

myself from jumping for joy and screaming, "I'm rich!"

The unique appearance and toughness of black katanas made them a popular weapon of choice, and only a handful of smiths out there forged katanas, which was why black versions were especially expensive. A regular katana would have been cheaper, but I hadn't gotten a black katana because I thought they looked cool. I wanted to hide the existence of my Shinsou.

I suspected that once I got back to Ishka, I'd get into a battle with other people sooner or later. And when that time came, it'd be far too conspicuous to suddenly summon a black blade out of nowhere. It wouldn't surprise me if some adventurers in Ishka had heard of the Illusory Blade style or the concept of a Shinsou, and it wouldn't take long for them to connect the dots and deduce my relation to the Mitsurugi family, even more so since my name, Sora, was of Eastern origin. So I'd decided to carry a black katana at all times; that way if I ever did need to unleash my Shinsou, no one would notice.

In other words, I'd never intended to buy anything other than a black katana from the start, and after purchasing the weapon, I'd had thirty gold coins left. With that money, I'd purchased the second thing I'd wanted: the beast girl who was now trailing behind me. I turned around to look at her.

"I-Is there something you'd like me to do, master?" she asked timidly, looking incredibly nervous.

Young, healthy, and preferably able to hold their own in a fight. And fifteen years old, if possible—those were the conditions I'd given the slave trader, and this was the girl he'd introduced me to in response. Her name was Seele Aruus, which apparently meant "the lion's bride" in the language of beasts. It sounded like a warrior's name if I'd ever heard one, but it was only later I had learned that, outside of the occasional farming tool, she'd never even held a weapon. What was more, she wasn't even a lion—she was an ocelot, a type of wildcat.

"No, nothing," I replied. Part of me did wonder whether the slave trader had fleeced me, but she fulfilled all of the other conditions I'd given, and judging from what I'd observed from her during our

journey from Ad Astera back to Ishka, there was nothing wrong with her speech or behavior. She'd only recently become a slave, so she would appear lost or confused on occasion, but there was no helping it. She was still just as important a purchase as my black katana. At the time, she'd already had a previous contract with another owner, and I'd had to use all my money to buy her out, but it had to be done.

As I reflected on that, I entered the Bluebird Inn, the very same place I'd stayed when I'd belonged to the Adventurer's Guild. Upon seeing my face, the innkeeper scowled as though on reflex. I flicked a silver coin at him—payment for a full month's stay—then handed another to his daughter, who just happened to be passing by. Perhaps a silver coin was too much to be considered a mere tip, but I felt it was an appropriate gesture considering all the trouble I'd caused her last time. I also planned to give her more tips of the same amount throughout my stay.

Upon entering my room, I recalled the confused looks on the faces of the innkeeper and his daughter and chortled to myself. That said, I'd have to tide myself over with that small victory for the time being; after all, I hadn't chosen this inn so I could rub my newfound wealth in their faces. It was an inn for guild members, meaning many of its guests were adventurers, and the inn itself was closely tied to guild management as well. As proof, back when the guild had stricken my name from their records, the inn had been informed in less than an hour. So if I chose to stay here, the guild would definitely find out about it.

I doubted they still suspected me in the case of Miroslav's disappearance. However, I'd insulted the guildmaster to his face, and the guild knew about my beef with the Falcon Blades as well. There was no doubt they still considered me a dangerous individual. So I'd deliberately chosen an inn where they could easily keep tabs on me. That way, on the off chance that something *did* happen in the city in the meantime, they'd know I couldn't be the culprit. In other words, I was going to have the guild itself prove my innocence.

Still, if there was an incident in Ishka right after I returned, they might get suspicious anyway. I'd explained this to my accomplice as

well, and for that reason, I was going to lay low and live an honest life for the time being. Beginning today I would be returning to my true calling in life: herb-gathering!

Sure, I could easily take out monsters or bandits with my current strength. But because I wasn't part of the guild anymore, those jobs weren't available to me. More importantly, I wanted to keep my strength a secret for now. Everyone needed to keep thinking that I was still Level 1. Of course, considering I'd returned from the Lord of the Flies' lair alive, some probably had their doubts, but most still thought I was a Level 1, a parasite. And I would let them believe that for a little while longer.

2

In Kanaria, Ad Astera, and across most of the rest of the continent, slaves were considered the lowliest caste. To my knowledge, the only part of the continent that had abolished slavery was the Holy Monarchy to the south, and even then, they couldn't entirely eliminate a system so deeply rooted everywhere else. Apparently, nowadays, the monarchy turned a blind eye to nearly half of the cases of slave trading and possession within its borders.

Still, not all slaves had the same conditions. Take this amusing anecdote: A green young man from a well-to-do family purchases a slave one day to work as a gravekeeper. One day the young man decides he wants to try alcohol and orders the slave to go buy some. The slave responds, "Young master, my job is to tend to the graves, not to purchase alcohol." Reluctantly, the boy goes to buy the booze himself. In that story, even the slave had rights his master couldn't infringe upon.

Here's a more specific example: A young girl of marriageable age knocks on a slave trader's door in order to pay back her family's mounting debt. At that time, the girl has the right to choose how much of herself she's willing to sell; more bluntly, whether her chastity is included in that sale. If it's not, she has the right to refuse any sexual demands her master might make. She would receive less

money from the slave trader in return, of course, but she had the right to choose. Slaves who were willing to perform these services sold more easily than those who weren't, as long as they didn't have some other outstanding talent raising their worth. Those that refused were often lowballed or, in some cases, turned away completely. There was no point for a slave trader to buy a slave that wouldn't sell.

The girl I'd purchased, Seele Aruus, had chosen to sell all of herself, meaning that she couldn't refuse anything her master requested of her. Naturally, that had raised her value, and so had the natural talents her ocelot lineage had blessed her with. Her natural eyesight was so good it was almost like it had been boosted by magic, and her sense of smell was also outstanding. She could race along treetops like a monkey and swim underwater as effortlessly as a fish. Yet she was honest and obedient, and while her body was more lanky than curvaceous, she did have a refreshing wildness to her. It was no wonder she'd already had a previous offer on her.

Apparently, her father, the breadwinner of her family, had lost his legs in an accident, and with him no longer able to work, they'd fallen into poverty. As the eldest daughter, Seele had sold herself into slavery to save her family from their predicament. And upon hearing her story, I'd used all the gold coins I had to cancel her previous contract.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't playing at being her knight in shining armor. The reason I wanted her wasn't to eat her soul either, but to set up a trap for a certain elf. Anyone would have sufficed as long as they fulfilled my specific conditions. But I'd been so adamant about purchasing Seele in particular once I'd learned of her circumstances because they suited my plan to a T.

Now my slave, Seele was currently lying across my knees like I'd ordered her to, moaning erotically, though we weren't doing anything erotic in the least. I was only fiddling with the cat ears poking out from her head.

As I stroked her ears, I fondly recalled how as a child, I would similarly play with the cat who had taken up residence in the dojo. Back then it would scratch me without warning shortly afterward,

causing me to sob in pain, but this girl had to let me do whatever I wanted, so no danger of that this time! Heh heh.

"Er...master?"

"What is it?"

"H-How long are you going to play with my ears?"

"At least until sunrise, I'd say. And I plan to make this a nightly ritual."

She fell silent for a while. "Did I...do something to upset you, by any chance? If so...mmm! I'll apologize!"

"No, nothing of the sort. Rather, I'm grateful to you for letting me do this. It's just..."

"Um, yes?"

"I'm a freak who finds women incredibly attractive when they're exhausted."

"Huh?"

"And even more so if *I* tire them out. Just consider yourself unlucky you ended up with a perverted owner like me and let me do as I please." As I spoke, I lightly rubbed the side of her waist.

Having been given an entirely different kind of stimulation all of a sudden, Seele's body gave a jolt, and she let out a seductive moan so loud it resounded through the room. Her face immediately went red with embarrassment at her own outburst. I combed her soft chestnut hair with my left hand, then used my right hand to toy with her ear again.

Just as I'd promised, her sweet moans reverberated through the room until daybreak. And afterward, rather than going to sleep, I took her straight to Titus Forest to gather herbs. When that was done and we returned to the inn, I had her lie on my lap again, playing with her ears and occasionally her tail.

The next day, and the day after that, and even the day after that, I repeated the same routine. Of course, after multiple days of this with no sleep, anyone would be fatigued. The longer one went without sleep, the weaker they got and the worse their condition became. Before long, dark circles appeared under Seele's eyes and her cheeks began to hollow out.

And yet, I continued to bring her to the forest. The other

adventurers in the inn, as well as the innkeeper and his daughter, all begged me to let her rest, but I ignored them all with a snort. And one day when we were about to leave Ishka and head to the forest, four figures stood in front of the gate to block our path—the Falcon Blades.

3

"I see you're still working hard at herb-gathering. If you like herbs that much, why not become a doctor? Maybe then you'd finally be useful to humanity." Wearing her usual pointed hat and mage's robe and equipped with her usual magic staff, Miroslav addressed me in the same abusive tone as usual. The only difference was that her long red hair was now cut off at the shoulder. It looked like she'd woven her shortened hair into a braid that was now hidden under her hat.

"Thanks for the tip. If that's all you came here to say, could you kindly move out of the way? Unlike you four who make a living wagging your tails for the guild, I have work to do."

"It's not like we came here because we wanted to talk to you anyway. But..." Miroslav glanced at Seele behind me. When she saw how emaciated she was, a pained look crossed the mage's face. "Even I never thought you'd stoop so low as to have a girl younger than you carry all your luggage. What a despicable man. And from what I hear, this isn't the first time you've done it."

"What I do with my slave is none of your business. And I don't think you have any right to be lecturing me, murderer."

"Have you heard the saying 'one who knows little often repeats it'? If you continue to debase me with groundless accusations, you'll earn the guildmaster's ire."

"Ooh, the guildmaster. How scary. I wouldn't have to say such nasty things if you hadn't stuck your nose in my business in the first place, you know."

"Word around town is that you've been doing awful things to that girl every night, treating her like some kind of pet monkey.

Apparently, after somehow getting a hold of money the likes of which you could never normally earn, you went right to the slave trader's—just what I'd expect from a boor like you. If it's a woman you want, maybe you should learn to be less repulsive so they could stand to be around you for once!"

Once Miroslav had said her piece, Raz stepped in. He'd been sufficiently riled up, because his expression was filled with righteous indignation. I touched on this some before, but Raz was from a poor farm village, meaning he was no stranger to the concept of husbands being forced to sell their wives or daughters into slavery to pay taxes. In fact, during my time in the Falcon Blades, Raz's tone would always become heavy whenever such topics were brought up, and it was the same for Iria, who'd grown up with him.

At the time I'd suspected something had happened during their childhood that was making them act this way, but I hadn't been able to ask them about it. Back in the cave, Miroslav had finally told me the story: A local girl Raz had doted on as a little sister had been sold off by her parents, and it was a traumatic memory that stuck with him to this day. The girl was three years younger than he, meaning if she was still alive today, she'd be fifteen.

"Sora, that girl sold herself into slavery to protect her family, didn't she? You should treat her well. And if you can't, then release her!"

"Like I said, it's none of your business how I treat her. And you're ordering me to release her now? What right do you have to order me around?"

"All right, I have another idea." Raz stepped forward, reaching for the blade at his hip.

Seeing that, I snorted. "Oh, so now the honorable hero's going to steal my slave from me by force? Or do you just plan to kill me instead? That would certainly explain why you decided to gang up on me here, away from the public eye. First the incident in the forest and now this. How far the Falcon Blades have fallen."

"Nonsense! I'm not trying to steal your slave; I want to make you realize the error of your ways!"

"Dress it up all you like, Raz. You, a high-ranking adventurer, are

still forcing a commoner to bend to your will. *That* will earn the guildmaster's ire."

"So you're determined not to listen, no matter what?"

"Listen to what? You've done nothing but push your own morals on me since we started talking. Say I *did* release this girl. What would be in it for me? I spent thirty gold coins on her, you know."

"Well...if you release her, I'll pay you thirty gold coins! Would that satisfy you?"

"Of course not. What kind of idiot would sell something for the same value they bought it for?"

"Then I'll pay sixty, or even a hundred! I'll pay whatever you want! Just name your price!" Raz bellowed, clearly agitated. Even a Rank 6 adventurer wouldn't have the funds to fork over a hundred gold coins at the drop of a hat. The corners of my lips turned up into a grin.

"In that case, I'll release her for a million gold coins."

"I...huh?"

"Did I stutter? A million gold coins and she's yours. I'll even let you pay in monthly installments of a hundred thousand if you'd like."

"Bullshit! No one has that kind of money!"

"You just told me to name my price. Going back on your word so soon?"

"But...there's obviously a limit to that!"

"You're demanding I release a slave I have no intention of selling, so of course I have to hike the price up. Who says I have to look inside your wallet first and check if it's an amount you can afford?" I sneered at him. "Let me guess, you wanted me to name an amount like one hundred or two hundred, didn't you? Then you could hold me to it and ask the Sauzaar company for a loan. The president wouldn't refuse to finance a promising Rank 6 adventurer, not to mention his daughter's future husband. A conniving plan, and I don't even have to think about it to figure out whose idea it was." I glanced at Miroslav.

"Rgh..." Of course, I'd hit the nail on the head. Raz bit his lip in vexation.

"You wanted to rescue an oppressed slave with good intentions

and a tactful, diplomatic approach. It's a moving story—just the kind I'd expect someone like you to love, but sorry, Raz. If you want to continue playing the hero, leave me out of it. Continue your honest adventuring shtick and you'll no doubt be successful. But don't let this witch lead you astray with her words."

"I've had enough. Duel with me."

"Excuse me?"

"Sora, I challenge you to a duel!" He removed the glove on his left hand and threw it at me. The worn leather glove struck me in the chest, then fell to the ground. "I'll fight to win that girl's freedom! If I win, release her!"

"I refuse."

"What are you, scared?!"

"Naturally. I'm only Level 1, remember? What fool would agree to a battle they have no hope of winning, let alone one that wouldn't benefit them at all?"

"Oh? Then—"

"If you win, I'll become your beloved slave instead," Miroslav said, stepping forward and interrupting him, her gaze on me filled with contempt. "You'll agree if the conditions for your victory are to your benefit, won't you? If I became your slave, you could do whatever you wanted with me. Oh, and of course my personal funds would become my master's as well. And though I've never calculated the total value of my collection of magic stones and texts, I can at least guarantee it's well over thirty gold coins."

"Wait, Miro!"

"It's okay, Raz. I don't believe even for a second you'll lose. It doesn't matter what I offer him, because it'll never come to pass anyway. And even if you were to somehow lose, well, I'd be satisfied knowing I trusted in you. I'd be proud of the fact that I kept believing in you and wouldn't blame you in the least."

"Miro...you really trust me that much?" Raz started to tear up. Seeing that, Miroslav's cheeks flushed red. As usual, their lovey-dovey drama cropped up with no regard to the situation, although in this case, the nuances were a tad different.

"Sorry to break you lovebirds up, but I refuse that condition as

well. You must be crazy if you think I'd cohabit ate with Miss Murderer."

"Sora, you...!"

"But if it was that elf instead, I might consider it," I said, glancing at Lunamaria, who had yet to say a word. Iria hadn't spoken either, but that was probably because Miroslav had told her not to so that she would be the one leading negotiations.

The elf blinked in confusion, looking puzzled as to why she'd suddenly come up in the conversation. "M-Me?"

"Not even a hundred gold coins could buy something as rare as an elf slave in her perennial youth. However, for such a condition, I would naturally want your consent first. If you don't possess the same blind faith in your leader as Miss Murderer here, feel free to refuse."

I looked at Raz, then jerked my chin toward the glove on the ground. "Only if you all agree to that condition will I pick up your glove."

Raz looked wary. "Really?"

"Yes. If you doubt me, we can even make this guild-sanctioned and have the guildmaster preside as a witness. If you win, I'll release Seele from my service. But if I win, Lunamaria becomes my slave. Of course, it'll be your job to convince her to agree to those terms, and if you can't, no duel. Understand?"

"I... All right. I'll convince Luna somehow, get the guild on board, and set everything up as quickly as I can. In return, Sora, until that day I want you to—"

"Don't worry, I haven't laid a hand on Seele. If you doubt me, ask the innkeeper's daughter. I know she's constantly got her ear to the door of my room, monitoring me just in case." With that final remark, I picked up the glove at my feet, and regardless of Seele's and Lunamaria's feelings on the matter, the duel was set.

4

"That was excellent, Raz! You sure showed that coward what for!

Not that I expected anything less from you!" Smiling congenially, Miroslav heaped praise on Raz in front of Lunamaria. In response, Raz scratched his cheek in an awkward fashion.

"Er, sorry, Miro. To tell you the truth, by the end there, I'd completely forgotten about saving you from him. It wasn't that I showed him what for; I just let my anger get the best of me."

She chuckled. "That's because you're a good person. And because of that, the boor saw fit to take advantage of your kindness. Thanks to your efforts, that Seele girl will be rescued from his clutches. That was your doing and no one else's."

She took both his hands in hers and gave him a radiant smile. Raz managed an embarrassed grin. Lunamaria watched them both, her bewilderment evident on her face. Miroslav noticed her stare and turned to her, her eyes downcast.

"Still, I never would have dreamed that the boor would want you as a slave instead of me, Luna. That was the only part I didn't expect. I apologize for that."

"That's..." Lunamaria began.

"But no worries!" Miroslav continued, cutting her off. "Raz wouldn't lose to that weakling in a million years. He's Level 16, and the parasite is only Level 1! No matter what happens, Raz's victory is set in stone! I'm sure you feel uneasy about Raz agreeing to hand you over as a slave, but I beg you, have faith in him, just like I do." She bowed her head deeply.

Raz also nodded confidently, as though to reassure Lunamaria it would all be fine. "That's right. I'd never lose to a coward who only punches down, tormenting a girl who can't even fight back. I hate that you became our bargaining chip, Luna, but it's the only way to save Seele! Please understand!"

Even as he begged, however, it didn't seem to Lunamaria like he thought she'd ever refuse. He was probably confident in his own victory and believed the rest of the party felt the same way, so she'd surely feel she was safe.

But Lunamaria didn't nod in agreement. She couldn't, because she alone had sensed the power concealed within Sora. And that power seemed to have doubled in the short time since she'd seen

him last. She'd expected it this time, so she hadn't frozen in surprise like before, but each time she looked at him, she felt like her heart was being squeezed in a vise. If it was a question of whether Raz could win against Sora as he was now, Lunamaria could only shake her head.

Raz, noticing the elf's hesitation, looked confused and almost hurt as he opened his mouth to ask the reason. But before he could, Iria, who'd been silent up until now, spoke up instead.

"Raz, don't. It isn't a question of your ability versus the other. You offered her up as a bargaining chip in a battle that had nothing to do with her. You really expect her to agree to that so easily? Of course she's hesitant."

"Oh, I guess you're right. Sorry, I just got a little worked up."

"Besides, don't you think something's off here?"

"Off? Like how?"

"If you're Level 16 and Sora's Level 1, there's no question you'd win against him in a fight. But Sora should know that better than anyone. Why did he agree to a fight he couldn't possibly win?"

"Why? Because he thinks he can win, obviously."

"And I'm asking you, why would he think that? He accepted because he thinks he *can* win. And we're in the dark about what that might be. Remember, he hasn't shown himself in Ishka for nearly two months. He probably went back to the empire, but while he was there, he might have picked up some power we don't know about. We shouldn't underestimate him."

When he heard Iria's warning, Raz's brow furrowed in thought, and Lunamaria saw this as the perfect time to reveal her feelings to her comrades. "Actually, Raz, this is kind of related to what Iria is saying..."

"Huh? Do you know something, Luna?"

"Well, this is just based on my intuition as a spirit user, so it's difficult to prove, but Sora seems...different from before."

"Different?"

"Yes. Sora's likely not Level 1 anymore. I sense he now holds a power far greater than he used to. I think something might have happened back when the Lord of the Flies captured him." She

refrained from using the term "dragon," as it might have made her hypothesis seem less credible. Instead, she explained the abnormality within Sora as simply as she could. And as Raz listened, the crease in his brow became deeper.

Seeing that, Miroslav spoke up. "Don't worry, Raz. It'll be fine."

"Miro?"

"So what if he *did* gain a level or two? Even if he spent the last two months killing every monster he could find, he'd still only be Level 3 at most. Maybe if he was desperate, he'd make it to Level 4 but certainly not any higher than that. And considering even that's four times stronger than he was, of course his new strength would make him arrogant. But against you, Raz, he'd be like a child facing off against an adult." She continued, raising her voice. "Over the past few years you've braved and weathered countless dangers while all he did was gather herbs. You're way ahead of him not only as an adventurer but as a fighter. He could never bridge that gap in a mere two months. Right?"

"Yeah, you're right! Of course!"

"Also, I think I have an idea of what Sora's presumed 'chance of winning' Iria mentioned might be."

"Really?!"

"Yes. He said he bought that Seele girl for thirty gold coins. Where did he get that kind of money? Back at the guild, he also had the money to summon a priest to use Sense Lie. Where did he get *that* money? My guess is that he sold off the possessions of the adventurers who died in the Lord of the Flies' hive."

"Come to think of it, there *was* a party of Rank C adventurers among the missing persons, wasn't there?" Iria murmured.

"That's right. More than a few of them probably had enchanted equipment, and knowing him, I'm sure he didn't miss the chance to make off with it all before escaping the monster's hive. How else could he have suddenly come into so much money, when he didn't even have the funds to leave a tip at the inn he was kicked out of before?"

"I see. Then that also explains the new blade at his hip," Raz said.

"Yes. I bet he got that by pawning off the dead adventurers' possessions too. In other words, there's no cause for concern. He went to the empire because he couldn't sell them in Ishka without being found out, then used the money to buy a weapon far better than he deserves and a slave he'd otherwise never be able to afford. Then he returned to Ishka so he could flaunt it to everyone. Just from the fact that he deliberately chose to stay at the same inn as before, that much is obvious."

"Then the 'chance of winning' Iria suggested is..."

"That sword of his, of course." Miroslav chuckled. "In other words, a child who's only ever played with toy swords secretly got his hands on a grown-up's blade, and now he's swinging it around thinking he's hot stuff. You don't need to worry about him, Raz."

Having shut down Lunamaria and Iria's misgivings entirely, she looked at Raz again. Then, she gently, lovingly stroked his cheek with her hand. Was it just Lunamaria's imagination or was there a momentary, difficult-to-describe twinkle in her eyes?

"Raz, disciplining a naughty child is an adult's job," the mage cooed. "And it's the duty of a veteran to knock arrogant rookies down a few pegs. Show that boor Sora the might of a true adventurer, a true warrior. And do it for that poor beast girl's sake as well."

5

Duels weren't an uncommon way to settle things in Ishka. The more belligerent adventurers would often choose to settle their disputes with swords or fists rather than words. However, for the results of a duel to be officially recognized, there needed to be a witness who could impartially select the location, make the arrangements, and vouch for the results. Disputing the results of the duel was tantamount to insulting the witness, so to ensure those results held, it was best for combatants to seek out a witness with authority and status. Conversely, if the witness they chose wasn't respected enough, their duel would be considered a mere public

display of violence, and the town would punish them both accordingly.

Just as I'd proposed, the guildmaster, Elgart, agreed to preside over our duel. He decided on the guild's training grounds as the battlefield so that we wouldn't have any rubberneckers or unnecessary spectators. Aside from Raz, Elgart, and me, only the Falcon Blades, Seele, and Ridelle, the receptionist with the braided hair, were present. Truthfully, this was something I hadn't counted on. I'd imagined nearly everyone in the town would come to watch our duel. I understood the guildmaster's concern: Our dispute was deeply related to the guild, so it would be a problem if one of us said something in the middle of battle that reached the ears of other adventurers. However, it also meant that if Raz lost, they could potentially sweep it under the rug with ease. Considering Elgart had done the same with Miroslav's crime, I certainly wouldn't put it past him.

As I was thinking this, the door to the training ground burst open, and a middle-aged man ran toward us, panting heavily. "Phew... I-I apologize for the lateness! A problem cropped up just before I left to come here, and it took longer than expected to resolve!"

Broad-shouldered and decked out in silk garments, he gave the impression of a well-to-do merchant. There was a glint in his narrowed eyes as he addressed everyone present.

"My name is Fyodor, and I am from the slave traders' association. I will be acting as witness to today's duel alongside Sir Elgart. It is a pleasure to meet you all." Once he finished introducing himself, he turned to look at Elgart. "And thank you once again, Sir Elgart, for your invitation. I must admit I was surprised at first, since requests from you are rare, but this should prove to be quite exciting indeed!" He sounded almost giddy as he spoke.

"The details are unchanged from what was written in the invitation," Elgart replied. "And the scheduled time is nearly upon us, so if you're ready, Mr. Fyodor, I'd like to go ahead and begin."

"Indeed, no objections here. Will this duel end with someone becoming a new slave, or will a current slave get released? Either way, as someone in the trade, the results are sure to be interesting!"

As detached from the situation as he sounded, the man's association spanned the entire continent. The organization's ties with each nation were deep; in fact, its overall influence surpassed even that of many lesser nations. Considering the association had specifically dispatched Fyodor here, he was no doubt more than qualified to preside over the duel. Not acknowledging Fyodor as a witness would be tantamount to picking a fight with the organization, which was an unappealing prospect, to say the least.

Acknowledging that the witnesses were in place, I turned my gaze once again on Raz in front of me. He had his sword in one hand and a round shield in the other, and he was wearing a steel helmet. All his equipment was likely enchanted and first-rate—no doubt a perk of being backed by a large company like Sauzaar. Meanwhile, save for the black katana on my hip, my appearance was the same as ever. I was wearing my usual tattered leather armor, which barely protected my chest. Just looking at the differences in our gear, it seemed obvious who would lose. In fact, if Raz had been more immature, he might have made fun of me.

Naturally, though, no one present dared laugh. Depending on how fierce our duel got, one of us could end up dead, so they knew we would take it seriously. Raz's eyes on me were determined and stern as we waited for the signal.

"Now then...combatants, draw your weapons!" Elgart's voice boomed.

Raz responded by raising his sword and shield. I held my katana at waist level. I wasn't going to use my Shinsou or vigor for this fight in order to keep my power hidden from the guild, association, and anyone else watching. I also wanted to test what I was now capable of on my own, without that power.

With a sharp breath, Raz took a step forward and unleashed a deadly strike. If I'd just stood there and done nothing, it would have undoubtedly severed my left arm at the shoulder, but he'd have to try harder than that to finish me. I casually stepped backward, making him slice air instead. That compromised his balance, leaving him open for my counterattack.

I unleashed my strike with perfect timing, but perhaps I had

underestimated the ability of a Rank 6 adventurer, because he immediately raised his shield, blocking my attack. In the past, Raz had had a habit of putting all of his strength into his attacks, but it seemed he'd gotten more prudent about reducing his openings. No sooner had I thought that than his next attack came faster than I'd anticipated. It was even quicker than his last strike, like he was swinging a light stick rather than heavy steel. Apparently, his first attack had merely been a setup for this one.

Realizing I didn't have time to dodge, I parried it with the back of my katana. The impact traveled through the blade and made my hand go numb. He'd clearly learned how to use his body weight to his advantage. Perhaps I should have expected it, but he had improved by leaps and bounds over the past five years.

"What's wrong, Sora?! You'll never win against me if you just keep dodging! Come at me!" Delivering a third, fourth, and fifth blow in quick succession, he goaded me into attacking.

In response, I curled my lip. "Thanks for the warning."

First I leaped to the side, dodging his thrust, then I dodged his subsequent attempt to bash me with his shield. When all that failed, he tried to trip me with a leg sweep, but of course I avoided that too. During his attempts to attack me, I observed him using one of the four fundamentals of the Illusory Blade style: Zankei Soukan.

The "kan" part of its name meant "observation." A certain general of the empire once famously said, "Know yourself and thine enemy and you need not fear a hundred battles," and that didn't just hold true for soldiers. Since I couldn't rely on my Shinsou or vigor here, Raz had the advantage when it came to strength. He also had far more overall experience as an adventurer. So for me, the key to bridging that gap was to pay careful attention to his movements.

From an outsider's perspective, I probably looked like a snake watching its prey's every move, waiting for its chance to strike. And Raz must have been irritated by either my behavior or his inability to land a single hit so far, because his swings became slightly wider. Not so wide as to carelessly leave himself open, but less accurate.

At this point we hadn't even exchanged thirty blows yet, so no doubt some of the spectators were thinking it was far too early for

him to get impatient. But it was exactly what I had expected, because the fact that Raz had yet to win meant he was struggling against a Level 1 adventurer. He was failing to land a single blow on a former Rank 10 adventurer who'd been expelled from the guild, which was, of course, embarrassing, especially under the watchful eyes of the guildmaster and his comrades. Doubtless they were starting to get concerned as well. Miroslav's earlier words were probably spurring him on too: "Show that boor Sora the might of a true adventurer, a true warrior," she'd said. With such a shameful showing in front of her, it wasn't surprising he was growing impatient.

Having confirmed my suspicions and learned about my enemy, I now knew where to strike. Raz had always been weak to provocations; after all, he was a naive farm boy at his core. So I tossed his earlier words back at him.

"What's wrong, Raz? You'll never win against me if you just keep swinging your sword like a madman."

"Shut up!" he yelled in irritation. "Stop hopping around like a coward and face me already!"

"Sorry to disappoint, but this katana isn't meant for direct combat. This is how *I* fight. Even so, I didn't expect a Rank 6 adventurer to have such a hard time hitting a weakling like me."

"Rrrgh!"

"And your attacks are getting sloppier by the minute. There!"

Raz had lowered his shield slightly, which I exploited with a stab to his chest. The blade hit a gap in his armor, wounding him.

"Guh?"

"See? You let your guard down just now." I continued to stab him whenever he was open, aiming for chinks in his armor. Raz's face contorted in agony. He tried to knock me away with his shield, then thrust at me with the sword in his other hand as though to pay me back. But his swings were wild, completely unlike the calculated slashes he'd delivered at the beginning. They were even easier to evade than before.

We continued to exchange blows for some time afterward. Then, once we'd reached fifty strikes between us, I put some distance

between us and faced him at last. He was out of breath, and his face was twisted in pain. Blood spilled from the gaps in his armor, staining the ground.

He was weaker than I'd thought. Frankly, Ayaka and Ragna five years ago had been far stronger than he was now. And I knew why: Raz was used to facing off against monsters, not humans. Of course, I doubted this was the first time he'd faced anyone that wasn't a monster. There was no shortage of human enemies that adventurers were tasked with exterminating: bandits, necromancers, heretic priests, and the like. But he was most familiar with fighting monsters and likely hadn't learned how to properly defend himself against humans and their weapons.

As for me, I'd had a wealth of experience fighting against other humans since I was little while trying to learn the ways of the Illusory Blade, and even now those techniques and frame of mind were still ingrained in me. What was more, my opponents back then had been the so-called "golden generation," the most promising youth in the history of Mitsurugi. Pitted against such capable sparring partners, I'd had no choice but to learn.

Now, all those experiences had finally borne fruit. And having confirmed that fact, there was no need to draw the battle out any longer. I took a step forward.

"Raz!" Seeming to sense something dangerous in my movement, Iria instinctively cried out to warn him. In response, he quickly repositioned his sword to defend.

My blade extended toward him like a snake, then wrapped itself around his sword. In the next instant, a high-pitched metallic clang resounded throughout the arena, and Raz's sword spun through the air before planting itself in the ground a short distance away. As he stood there unarmed, staring dumbfoundedly at his weapon on the ground, I thrust my blade at his neck.

"That's enough!" the guildmaster announced calmly. "Sora is the victor!"

At that moment, as I glanced at Raz's expression, I had a sudden thought. The look in his eyes was probably the same as mine back when I'd lost to the Dragon Fang Soldier during the ceremony five

years ago.

"W-Wait! I demand a rematch! Fight me one more time, Sora!" That was the first thing out of Raz's mouth when he'd finally come to his senses. He didn't even thank Iria beside him for tending to his wounds with healing magic. He just glared at me with crazed, bloodshot eyes.



“You’re free to dispute the judgment of the witnesses if you want,” I said with a shrug, “but you do realize those witnesses are your guildmaster and a member of the slave traders’ association, don’t you?”

“No, that’s not what I meant! I acknowledge my loss this time. I accept it. Which is why I want a rematch! The outcome of a duel shouldn’t be decided with only one round, right?! This time, I’ll beat you!”

“Hmph. Well, I don’t mind, but who do you plan to wager this time?”

“What?!”

“I won this match. You just said you accepted the outcome. So Lunamaria is mine now. If you want me to agree to a rematch, you’ll need to bet someone else. And I don’t want Miroslav, so Iria’s all you have left to offer.”

Seemingly on instinct, Raz glanced at Iria beside him. She immediately shook her head, her expression leaving no room for negotiation.

“Iria, please!”

“Absolutely not, Raz. I healed your wounds, but my magic can’t recover the blood you lost. Even if you did fight him again, you’d lose.”

“No, I’ll be fine! I know how he fights now, so I’ll win next time for sure!” he shouted.

In response, Iria slapped him hard across the face with her open palm. A dry sound rang out through the arena. Raz looked completely dumbstruck as she reprimanded him, her childhood friend.

“Get a grip, Raz! How long do you plan to run from the truth? You lost! If you don’t accept that first, what point is there in a rematch?!”

“Iria...”

Her scolding seemed to have finally forced reality to sink in, because he fell to his knees in despair. And looking at both their expressions, it was all I could do to keep from snickering in delight.

Iria’s admonishment had been harsh, yet well-meaning and kind. And to be fair, it was probably the correct way to handle the

situation. But sometimes when people were in the throes of despair, they didn't want to hear what was right. And sometimes when men were down, they wanted to latch on to those who showered them in sweet nothings instead. Even the bonds of childhood friendship weren't indestructible.

I didn't signal to Miroslav with my eyes for her to act. I didn't need to. Everything was going just as we'd planned.

6

I now had my very own elf in my possession, though contrary to what some might expect, I didn't go around whooping and hollering with joy at the prospect. However, as I stood in my room at the inn that night, seeing Lunamaria wearing a slave collar, I can't deny that an impulse other than the desire to devour souls rose up within me. After all, I'd once had a crush on her. I'd never worked up the courage to tell her so, but with her in front of me like this, it was hard for me to contain myself. What was more, she had relinquished all her rights to me in an official slave contract with Fyodor as a witness, so she couldn't refuse anything I asked her to do—and of course, there was no need for me to hold back. I certainly wanted to get right to it, but before that, there was something I needed to confirm.

"Now then...what exactly are you scheming?"

Lunamaria was standing there, eyes downcast, her face scarlet from embarrassment. Right now she was only wearing a silk one-piece that was tight against her body, emphasizing its curves. It didn't cover her arms or legs, and it exposed much of her chest and back. It looked almost like she was ready to go for a swim, but it was closer to lingerie than a swimsuit.



It was arousing, to say the least. Not to mention she was an elf, a race synonymous with grace and dignity. Most men would undoubtedly swallow hard upon seeing the sight, and I was no different.

But I hadn't made Lunamaria wear such a thing out of some perverted desire. I wanted to make sure she didn't have any weapons hidden on her.

"I'm not scheming anything, Sora."

"Don't bullshit me. You wouldn't have agreed to the condition if... Well, you were probably confident that Raz would win too, but still, you were far too obedient. You didn't even object to the slave contract. You should have known how you'd be treated once that contract was in place, so for you to accept with no resistance whatsoever, I can't help but think you're deliberately getting closer to me so you can strike when I least expect it."

Of course, I hadn't given her much of a choice, so even if she *had* resisted earlier, the outcome wouldn't have been any different. Still, if she was such a pushover, she wouldn't have been able to survive as an adventurer for as many years as she had. She obviously had some secret plan to finish me off.

The problem was that I couldn't pinpoint what she had in mind. The most likely thing would be for her to decapitate me in my sleep, but because a member of the association had drawn up the contract, she would face punishment from them if she killed her master. Also, the collar around her neck was enchanted with three different spells: Track Movement, Paralyze, and Suffocate, all of which would make it rather difficult for her to get away with killing me. Even if she managed to take me out, the combined effects of those spells would make it impossible for her to escape. Given how intelligent she was, there was no way she wouldn't have realized that. So I was puzzled about what her true intentions were.

"I'm really not, Sora. I promise. It's just...there was something I wanted to ask you."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"Sora...who *are* you, really?"

I was stunned for a moment. "What, suggesting I'm some

heartless monster?”

“No, absolutely not! I would never!” Lunamaria shook her head frantically, then looked away, as though hesitant to continue. Then, after steeling herself, she looked directly at me, her eyes glinting with resolve. “I can see the dragon within you.”

I didn’t speak for a while. “Excuse me?”

“There’s a dragon inside you. I can see it. A dragon with scales blacker than the night itself. I first noticed when I saw you in the forest, heading back from the Lord of the Flies’ lair.”

“Oh? You don’t say?”

“I don’t know whether it’s merely taking up residence in your body, or whether it took over your human form as well. But I can see the dragon clearly. Hence my question: Who are you?”

“Since I was born, I’ve never been anyone other than myself. That’s my answer. However...” I thought for a moment. She was most definitely talking about the Soul Eater. And if she’d noticed as I was heading out of the forest right after I’d awakened to my Shinsou, then I doubted she was lying about being able to see it. “Did you tell anyone?”

“No. I can only sense the dragon’s presence thanks to my ability as a spirit user, so I have no proof to convince anyone with.”

“Does that mean other spirit users could sense it as well?”

“I couldn’t say. We spirit users each perceive spirits differently, so it would be irresponsible for me to confirm either way.”

“I see. Then for now, I’ll keep in mind that others might be able to see it too. Right, come to think of it...” I thought back to when I’d encountered Lunamaria in the forest, as well as the confrontation with the Falcon Blades at the guild. Both times, the elf had looked deathly pale, shaking like a leaf. “Was your fear before due to this dragon you saw?”

“Y-Yes, it was. It felt like it was staring me down from up close. I couldn’t even breathe, I was so frightened.”

That explained it, then. In that case...perhaps her chasing me down and apologizing after I’d left the guild hadn’t been to make herself feel better after all? I’d mocked and insulted her for that, but maybe I’d been a bit too hasty. More importantly...

"If you can see the dragon inside me, then you must have guessed I might win the duel with Raz. So why did you accept my conditions so easily? The matter was only between Raz and me; you had every right to refuse."

"Well...that's a good question," she said. "Now that I've told you I can see the dragon, I suppose there's no need to hold back anymore."

"Meaning?"

"It was because of Miro. Correct me if I'm wrong, but...are you two cooperating with each other?"

"Cooperating?" I immediately said with a dismissive snort. "You must be joking. You honestly believe I'd work with that detestable woman? What, did your spirit user's intuition give you that idea as well?"

"When Miro returned to the town after being gone for so long, I sensed something was off. Her spirit behaved abnormally on occasion, worryingly so. But I didn't have any concrete proof, so it was just a vague suspicion...until the day you and Raz agreed to the duel."

"And what made you so certain then?"

"It was something Miro said to me. She said she'd only planned to offer *herself* up as a bargaining chip and was sorry that the burden ended up falling on me instead. She said she hadn't expected that outcome. And yet, as she spoke...I noticed a mischievous leprechaun atop her shoulder, dancing with a smug grin on its face. That's when I realized: Miro was enjoying this outcome. Afterward, she said all those things to rile up Raz. And when Iria and I tried to warn him, she laughed off our concerns and persuaded him to duel you anyway." She shook her head weakly. "That's not all. Miro was also the one who first mentioned that beast girl Seele to us. It was as all as you'd planned from the beginning, wasn't it?"

"An interesting theory. But again, if you suspected me from the start, why did you agree to become my slave? If you thought Miro was in cahoots with me, why didn't you warn the others? Raz would have... Well, he probably wouldn't have believed you, actually, but Iria would have at least heard you out. You could have even gone to

the guildmaster.”

“I certainly considered it. But if Miro was expelled from the party as a result, I was afraid you would resort to other, more direct measures instead. I decided it’d be wiser to settle things before the dragon was unleashed.”

“You thought it’d be wiser, did you? In other words, you thought if the dragon targeted you, you could offer yourself up and save everyone else? Well, it is typical in myths for young maidens to be sacrificed to evil dragons, so I can see why you might have had that idea.”

“If I’m overthinking all this, I apologize. However—”

“No, it’s exactly as you suspect. You weren’t overthinking anything.”

Normally I would have been concerned that she might record my confession somehow, but I didn’t sense anything around me. There was no one outside the door or above the ceiling listening in either, so whatever I said here wouldn’t come back to bite me. And even if it did, I was sure I could cover it up somehow.

“Still, why would you go as far as to become my slave to find out? You do know that it’s only in fiction that heroes come to rescue damsels in distress, don’t you?”

“If you want to apologize to make yourself feel better, go do it in front of a mirror, hypocrite,” she said. They were the exact words I’d once said to her. I grimaced. “That fateful day in the forest, when the Lord of the Flies went after you, I abandoned you. Even though I knew exactly what would happen once the monster caught you, even though I saw what Miro did with my own eyes, I prioritized myself and my comrades’ lives over yours. Whatever you decide to do with me, I deserve. I’m a hypocrite, just as you said.”

She slowly made her way over to me, got down on her knees, and bowed deeply. She looked just like a slave pledging fealty to her master. “This time, I’m prepared to atone with my actions, not words. If you would permit someone like me to serve you for the rest of your life, I would be most grateful.”

“Hmph. So now you’re using me to absolve yourself of guilt?”

As though expecting the question, she shook her head firmly and

stared right at me, her blue eyes shining like jewels. “No. It’s up to you to decide whether I’ve made up for my actions, not me. If I do this for my own satisfaction, it could hardly be called atonement. I will simply do all I possibly can to serve you.”

“Is that so?”

If she had nodded to my question instead, I would have pointed out that she was still the same hypocrite as always and punished her for it accordingly. But it seemed like the elf before me was serious about atoning for her sins, and for multiple reasons, I was glad to hear it. Of course, I didn’t let that emotion show on my face and looked down on her with a scowl instead.

“You’ve been saying ‘let me serve you’ over and over again for some time now, but you’ve already long since become mine. I’ll have you serve me whether you like it or not, so you never had a choice in the matter. Don’t forget that.”

But Lunamaria seemed to read the true intent behind my words, because she placed her hands on her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. Then, with another bow of her head, she spoke, her tone earnest.

“Yes, my master.”

Chapter 6: The Peaceful Way to Pick a Fight with the Guild

1

With Lunamaria in my possession, it was now time to set my sights on my next target: Iria, the Falcon Blades' warrior priest.

That said, this one would require a little more time to prepare. After all, the bond between childhood friends wasn't so fragile that it could be severed in a single day. Not that it'd be impossible to goad Raz into a rematch by offering Iria as collateral, and that would have been my preferred method as well, but knowing Iria's personality, she'd never agree to it, even if Raz asked. Therefore, I would have to focus my efforts on Iria herself this time rather than Raz.

And what was I to do in the meantime? That was obvious. It was time to start my revenge on my other target besides the Falcon Blades: the Adventurer's Guild. That said, I didn't plan to use any direct methods like killing the guildmaster Elgart or abducting Ridelle the receptionist, because neither of those would suffice.

The reason I wanted revenge on the guild was that they had swept Miroslav's crime against me under the rug. I wanted to make it so the guild could never pull something that disgusting ever again. The problem was that even if I eliminated Elgart and Ridelle, would whoever came after them hand down a different judgment if a similar situation cropped up? Would they really hold the assailant accountable and listen to the words of a "parasite"?

I highly doubted it. The guild's members were going to act in the interest of the guild first and foremost. When weighing an ex-Rank 10 adventurer against the guild, a hundred out of a hundred people would undoubtedly come to the same conclusion Elgart had.

Simply getting rid of Elgart and Ridelle wouldn't complete my

revenge. Therefore, I was going to have the entire organization submit to me. That way, no matter who became the guildmaster, they could never bother me again. This would also likely be the most effective revenge against Elgart and Ridelle. What would they think if the actions they had taken for the sake of the guild ended up leading to the guild's downfall instead? As I imagined it, the corner of my mouth automatically turned up.

Now that I'd decided on a course of action, the next step was to work toward it. In order to bring the guild to its knees, I'd need to do two things at once: First, raise my own reputation. If my influence was greater than the guild's, they wouldn't be able to keep me in check anymore. And second, lower the guild's reputation—decrease its influence, in other words. To do these things simultaneously, I needed to attack the guild fair and square, and in a way that benefited the townsfolk and the world.

I first planned to do this by taking care of the unmanageable—or rather, incomplete—requests that had piled up at the guild. I myself couldn't take on these quests since I was no longer a member, but I had Lunamaria now. There was nothing in the receptionist's precious rulebook saying a slave couldn't become an adventurer, nor was there anything saying an adventurer would be kicked out of the guild once they became a slave. Lunamaria was, as of now, still registered as an adventurer there. I'd had her leave the Falcon Blades but kept her in the guild as a point of contact for me to accept requests.

My goal was, as mentioned, to clear the guild's backlog of unpopular requests. Jobs without enough of a reward to justify the risk, jobs with a reasonable reward but that were too much of a time investment, jobs with high payouts but even higher levels of danger—for one reason or another, no adventurers had bothered to pick them up, which was a big problem for the guild. The clients hounded the guild repeatedly, asking how much longer they'd have to wait for their request to be filled, and any adventurers they assigned the jobs to turned up their noses in refusal.

So the guild generally handled those jobs in one of two ways: Either they issued them as a penalty to adventurers who didn't

follow the rules, or a qualified guild employee took care of them instead. That usually sufficed in other towns, but here in Ishka, the town of adventurers, all sorts of requests poured in on a daily basis, including unpopular ones. And I was going to help them out by taking care of the requests they couldn't. The clients who'd been waiting for results all this time would no doubt be thrilled, as would the guild for having one less matter to deal with. It would be a win-win for everyone.

Of course, the more perceptive members—such as Ridelle, most likely—might suspect I was up to something and bar Lunamaria from taking any more requests, but if it came to that, I'd counter by complaining to the clients. I'd tell them that even though it was the guild who'd put their requests on hold, they'd also rejected my attempt to take on those requests for them. The clients would no doubt become enraged, and the guild's reputation would plummet.

If they wanted to keep that from happening, the guild would have no choice but to allow Lunamaria to take the work. And of course, I would be completing them myself using the power of my Shinsou. I decided to call my plan "The Peaceful Way to Pick a Fight with the Guild (Part One)."

I had my plan down pat. The only problem now was what to do with Seele Aruus, the beast girl I'd purchased. Once I'd baited Raz into the duel, her role had ended, and if she'd wanted me to, I would have gladly freed her and sent her back to her hometown. That had been my plan from the start. I'd bought her for thirty gold coins, which was a lot, but it wasn't like I'd earned that money on my own. It had never belonged to me to begin with, so I didn't feel like I'd wasted it.

But as it turned out, someone else had put a stop to that plan: Seele herself. According to her, even if she returned to her hometown, her family wouldn't be any better off, and she'd have to sell herself again like before. There was no guarantee her next master would be any better than I was, so she begged me not to turn her loose, even getting on her knees and bowing deeply.

"I'll do my best to be of service during the night as well," she

said, her cheeks flushed slightly as she turned to look at Lunamaria, whose face was even redder with embarrassment.

Well, that stood to reason, considering Lunamaria and I had been quite active last night. As for how active, Seele had been staying alone in the next room for the past several days, and apparently, she hadn't gotten any sleep last night because of us. If I had to compare feasting on Lunamaria's soul to something else, it would be like sipping on the finest full-bodied wine imaginable. I've never had wine like that, though, so I could only guess.

At any rate, I wasn't going to free a slave without her consent, and regardless of whether her "services" were satisfactory, the more allies I had on my side in the future, the better. Her agility, superior eyesight, and sense of smell would prove especially useful. So I abandoned my plan to release her and decided to have her earn her keep instead.

Afterward, I had Lunamaria head to the guild and remove herself from her party, just as I'd planned, then had her compile a list of all of the quests that hadn't been accepted yet. She was a Rank 6 adventurer, same as Raz, so aside from the abnormally difficult ones, the majority of the quests there were available to her. And from that list, a particular quest caught my eye.

"A griffin extermination?"

"Oh, yes, that client wants someone to defeat the griffin inhabiting the Skim Mountains. Apparently, it killed his son and grandchild."

"Griffins aren't the type to suddenly show up on the road by coincidence. Were these family members of his adventurers who were looking to score a big bounty, by any chance?" Griffins, creatures said to rule the skies, had the head and wings of a hawk and the body and claws of a lion. They were extremely powerful and had a tendency to roost in high places and stockpile gold in their nests. I'd heard plenty of tales of adventurers going after them, seeking to strike it rich, only to meet an untimely end.

"Yes, the entire family is made up of adventurers. The client is seeking revenge on the griffin for the death of his son and

grandchild. However, the footing on the mountain is poor, and it would be risky to fight a griffin in such an environment. Moreover, unlike goblins and orcs and the like, griffins don't attack humans without a good reason. The guild has recommended this quest to numerous veteran adventurers, but they've all refused, asserting that the reckless, greedy family members deserved what they got."

"And that's why the job remains incomplete, huh? Let's check the reward. Hmm...it's decent but certainly not enough to justify going toe to toe with a griffin." Before even worrying about the monster, you'd need to make preparations to climb the mountain, which was a chore in itself. Well, no wonder there hadn't been any takers thus far.

In other words, it was the perfect quest for me.

"Anyone who took this quest wouldn't be doing so for their own personal gain, but out of pure compassion and sympathy for the grieving client. A textbook tale of heroism."

"You mean to take on this quest, master?!" Lunamaria looked shocked.

"I do. Fortunately, I have an idea about how I might scale that mountain."

I was alluding to the wyvern with indigo scales. In the days since I'd cured the poisoned wyvern using the fruit of the Jirai Ao Ochs, it had made a nest on top of the precipice leading to the Lord of the Flies' hive. Apparently under the impression that the hive was *my* nest, it seemed to be vigilantly protecting the entrance. This was likely a gesture of gratitude for saving its life, but considering how it cooed and chirped happily whenever it saw me, perhaps it was simply fond of me. It was a little puzzling that an indigo wyvern, known to be virtually untameable even by specialists like the dragon knights, would cozy up to the likes of me so readily, but the creature only mimicked my confused head tilt in response to my questions, so I'd likely never learn the truth. I did have a guess, though—it was of the dragon family, so it might have been feeling a sense of loyalty and deference to the dragon inside me.

Indeed, the wyvern seemed eager to obey whatever order I gave it. As a test, I mounted it and told it to fly, and it did so without any

protest. However, because it wasn't used to having extra weight on its back, it struggled to stay in a straight line, wobbling to and fro until ultimately making a crash landing in the forest. Belatedly recalling that the wyvern was wild and wouldn't know the proper technique for flying with a rider on its back anyway, I was ashamed of my own shortsightedness and apologized to the creature. But the wyvern looked even more embarrassed by its failure, and every time I saw it now, it would look at me with expectant, round eyes, as if to say, "Wanna try again? I won't mess up this time!" flapping its wings like it was raring to go. It seemed to want a chance to redeem itself.

Thinking that flying to the Skim Mountains might be good practice, I figured I'd get a saddle from somewhere and give the wyvern a chance to try again. As I said, those who learned to mount wyverns in combat were called dragon knights and were highly respected in the kingdom. If I was able to ride an indigo wyvern, it could lead to the birth of a new legend—the legend of the stray dragon knight! My notoriety was sure to skyrocket.

Of course, it was also possible that the wyvern would be gone when I returned to the Lord of the Flies' hive, but even then, I had a backup plan. I'd simply use my vigor to its fullest and scale the mountain on my own. Whatever the case, I wasn't going to bring either Lunamaria or Seele with me. I had different tasks in mind for them.

"I'm heading out for a while, you two. While I'm gone, take care of as many of the quests on this list as you can. Just pick whatever looks doable for now, and while you're at it, Lunamaria, I want you to teach Seele the ropes of adventuring."

"Understood, master."

"I-I'll do my best!" Seele declared, looking determined. "Please take care, master!"

Feeling the gazes of my two collared slaves as I left the room, I tipped the innkeeper's daughter a silver, as I did whenever I happened to pass her, and walked out onto the street, thinking, *Now then, where to find a saddle and a set of reins?*

2

"Something's strange... Very strange."

Ridelle sat in a corner behind the information counter, muttering to herself with a deep scowl on her face. It was sunset, and there were few people left in the lobby at this hour. It wasn't an expression she would ever show to her colleagues, and certainly not to adventurers, and yet, the fact that a scowl had unconsciously appeared on her face proved how uneasy she was right now.

Then, one of her colleagues called out in a bright, cheery voice, "Hey, Riddie, there you are! I brewed you some tea, so here ya go. Huh? What's wrong? You look like you just opened your dresser only to find a bunch of dead cockroaches inside!"

"Parfait...can you please refrain from your gross comparisons? Especially the ones that involve eating and drinking."

"Oh, right, you're a city girl, aren't ya? We country folk see roaches all the time, so things like that don't bother us."

"Enough. I don't want to hear about the ecosystem in the country. How did that werewolf extermination at Attende Pass turn out?"

"Oh yeah, I just got the results of that. It was a total success! Just like the griffin in the Skim Mountains, the banshee in the public cemetery, and the scylla at Lake Toya! All the problem quests I've had piled up until now are suddenly no longer problems! Isn't that great?! The guildmaster himself even praised me personally!" She struck a pose, forming a double peace sign with her hands.

Ridelle found the gesture irritating, but she couldn't blame her younger colleague for her excitement. The credit for taking on such problem quests went to the adventurer responsible, of course. However, it also raised the reputation of the receptionist who had recommended that quest. A receptionist's ability to cajole an adventurer into taking on a nuisance quest was considered as important as any of their other skills. Four of these quests had now been completed in quick succession, and those were only the large-scale ones. In all, twenty problem quests had been accepted and successfully completed in an absurdly short period of time. It was

little wonder Parfait was in such high spirits.

The guild receptionists were pretty much the poster girls of the Adventurer's Guild, but that in no way meant their job was easy. Contrary to popular belief, it wasn't just approving adventurers' requests for jobs and handing them their rewards upon completion. They had to look at each request from each client, determine whether it was doable, and negotiate a suitable reward. If the client couldn't pay what the job was worth, they'd be turned down, full stop. If you were a guild receptionist, you surely knew what it was like to have to turn down a penniless farmer with tears in his eyes, begging the guild to rescue his family after they had been abducted by goblins.

Receptionists were also tasked with advising adventurers against jobs they wouldn't be able to handle, which sometimes led to being yelled at, called names, or despised. They were also encouraged to flatter and stoke the egos of veteran adventurers to wheedle them into taking more dangerous jobs.

Of course, in spite of the responsibilities they had, they weren't perfect. Sometimes they erred in judgment and sent novice adventurers on quests far above the party's ability, getting them all killed. Sometimes the guild's information was wrong, which led to the death of a party member, in which case the receptionist would be subjected to the brunt of the party's ire and grief. For that reason, no matter how capable or excellent they were at their job, receptionists with weaker constitutions ended up either quitting early or requesting to transfer to other departments. It was often said in jest that guild receptionists had more nerve than the adventurers themselves, and it was true that you needed to be made of tougher stuff to keep such a job. In that sense, Ridelle, who'd been a receptionist for over five years, and Parfait, who'd had her job for a whole year now, were quite thick-skinned indeed.

Despite Parfait following her around all innocently, going, "Riddie, Riddie!" Ridelle could tell the plucky girl was secretly gunning for her position as head receptionist, which she'd gotten thanks to her outstanding ability to mediate and problem-solve. Normally, Ridelle would just smile and think to herself, "That boldness of hers will take

her far in this line of work," but the current situation had her so worried that it wasn't even on her mind. After all, she sensed something uncanny about how quickly the quests raising Parfait's reputation were being completed.

"So, which quest did you recommend to Lunamaria next?" Ridelle asked.

"Actually, that's just what I was about to discuss with you! Listen to this, Riddie! You know up 'til now she's only been taking on quests that are more trouble than they're worth? Well, a bigwig count or something asked for her by name. Apparently, he heard about the griffin quest and wants her to kill another one for him so he can mount it on his wall as a decoration."

"I see, and since he's a bigwig, the guildmaster told you to prioritize that request over the others."

"You got it! So anyway, I assigned her the job like the guildmaster told me, but—get this—she turned it down! Even though it could have gotten her in good with the nobility and she'd make a ton of money besides!"

"Oh?" Ridelle's eyes narrowed slightly. "I see."

"Yeah, what a shock, huh? So I was looking for some other quest to give her instead, and you know that one a while ago from the orphanage, the one about gathering ald herbs from Titus Forest for the sick kids? She took that one instead!"

The reward for that quest, Ridelle remembered, was five copper coins. That was barely enough to buy a sausage sandwich and milk at a food stand. Lunamaria might as well have volunteered to do the job for free. Normally, such a request would be turned down by a receptionist before even being posted, but there was a special rule that requests from orphanages and almshouses couldn't be refused. Those were to be posted on the board with no questions asked in hopes of a good samaritan with free time on their hands coming along and completing them someday.

Ald herbs were medicinal plants that were effective at curing fever. Most likely someone at the orphanage had fallen ill, but those herbs didn't grow on the outskirts of the forest. They could only be found deeper within. While the adventurer wouldn't need to go all

the way to the deepest part of the forest to find them, the job would require far more effort than five copper coins' worth. Of course, that had no doubt been pointed out to the client, but said client was probably holding out hope that someone would find it in their heart to take the job anyway. And, ultimately, it seemed someone now had.

"Still, Lunamaria sure did get busy right after leaving the Falcon Blades, huh?" Parfait said, tilting her head in puzzlement. "Back when she was in the party, it kind of seemed like all she did was follow Raz and the others around with a smile, but now that she's on her own... Nah, that parasite guy's probably pulling her strings, huh?"

The Falcon Blades had made a name for themselves as a spirited party of youths, so one of them entering the guild lobby wearing a slave collar unsurprisingly drew attention. Not to mention, at this point, almost everyone affiliated with the guild knew of the circumstances surrounding the party. Even a child could figure out that Lunamaria's new master, Sora, was controlling her actions.

Ridelle folded her arms. "Lunamaria and that other girl, Seele, have remained in Ishka almost the entire time. That would mean that starting with the griffin, Sora would have to have carried out all of those exterminations himself. Yet a Level 1 like him could never... No, come to think of it, if he were *truly* only Level 1, he never could have beaten Raz."

How could an adventurer—or rather, *ex*-adventurer—who couldn't even rise past the lowest rank suddenly grow skilled enough to defeat Raz? That was Ridelle's main concern, but Parfait, who couldn't have cared less about Sora, was fixated on another point entirely.

"Right, right, that duel! Man, I really wanted to go see it! I mean, I'm the one assigned to the Falcon Blades, so shouldn't I have been asked to go instead of you?!"

"As the head receptionist, I had a duty to attend," Ridelle replied calmly. "Regardless, I feel Lunamaria's behavior is extremely suspicious. I'd like to prevent her from taking any more quests, if possible..."

But Parfait just laughed off her concern. "I don't think it's that big of a deal, personally. I mean, they're taking care of a bunch of requests that no one would ever normally touch. Isn't that a good thing? I bet that parasite is trying his best to curry favor with us so we'll let him back in the guild."

"No. The guildmaster offered to invite him back as a Rank 9 adventurer, and in no uncertain terms, Sora turned him down. I doubt he'd want to return to the guild after all this time."

"But what if he just, like, let his emotions get the best of him back then, and now he regrets turning down the offer? It'd be hard for him to swallow his pride and admit he was wrong, so he's using Lunamaria to get in good with the guild again. If so, maybe he's actually shy? That's kinda cute!"

"I highly doubt it's that simple," Ridelle said. And just by looking at Parfait, it was clear she didn't actually believe it either. Parfait was in charge of the Falcon Blades, and that successful party had been her ticket to a higher reputation in the guild. Now that the Falcon Blades were on hiatus, she was most likely thinking that whatever Lunamaria and Sora were planning, it didn't matter. As long as her own reputation went up as a result, she'd defend them.

Ridelle didn't believe Parfait's thinking was wrong. In fact, it was probably exactly the right attitude to take. Lunamaria was only taking on quests that the guild didn't know what to do with. Her actions were benefiting not just the guild but their clients and the town of Ishka as a whole. It was Ridelle who ought to be blamed for wanting to put a stop to that without proof of any misdeed.

All those belonging to this guild, adventurers and employees alike, are expected to work for the sake of the town.

Ridelle recalled what she'd told Sora over two months ago, back when she'd announced his expulsion. Right now, Sora was the one working for the sake of the town, and Ridelle was trying to prevent that because of some vague doubts. The roles had been perfectly reversed.

Surely that couldn't have been his aim all along?

And yet, she unconsciously bit her lip. An ex-adventurer had gotten rid of a griffin, banished a banshee, subjugated a scylla, and

wiped out a werewolf. To Ridelle, it almost felt like his actions were mocking them. Like he was trying to show them that by getting rid of him, they'd made a huge mistake.

Upon investigating further, she learned Sora was staying at the Bluebird Inn and had been giving tips to the innkeeper's daughter daily. This was clearly a dig at the girl who'd chased him out with the remark that he ought to at least leave a tip the next time he came. It wouldn't be unreasonable to think he would behave the same way toward the guild that had expelled him.

And yet, though it made sense, Ridelle was certain that wasn't all there was to it. She didn't think someone who'd enslaved a former comrade and broken up a party he used to belong to would be satisfied with such petty revenge.

Several days later, her suspicions proved correct. Lunamaria submitted a notice that she would leave the guild and threw away her status as a Rank 6 adventurer. At nearly the same time, the guild received word from many clients asking that their requests be withdrawn, stating they'd grown tired of waiting and would request someone else's services instead.

That "someone else" was a party of adventurers unaffiliated with the guild. A new clan whose leader had gotten rid of a griffin, subjugated a scylla, banished a banshee, and wiped out a werewolf.

They called themselves the Bloodstained Blades.

3

Adventuring parties unaffiliated with any guild were known as clans. Though they couldn't enjoy any of the perks and boons the Adventurer's Guild provided, they weren't bound by any of the guild's rules or restrictions either, and nothing was deducted from their reward, including information fees, mediation fees, and the like. Having to negotiate with clients on their own took more time and effort, but depending on how well those negotiations went, they could reap much greater rewards than if they'd gone through the guild. Because of that, it wasn't uncommon for adventuring parties

to leave and form clans once they'd gained a reputation for themselves.

As proof, there were well over a hundred clans residing in Ishka alone. However, half of them—actually, around seventy percent—hadn't received any requests for quite some time, and another twenty percent had become jacks-of-all-trades, taking on not just adventuring work but any job they could to make ends meet, including criminal work. In other words, only about ten percent of them successfully functioned as true adventuring clans.

The guild was a massive organization spanning the entire continent, home to an overwhelming amount of talent. They possessed a great deal of information, were closely affiliated with every other branch of influence, had a long and active history, and had built up a level of trust surpassing many developing nations. No adventurers who'd previously only been fighting under the guild's umbrella could possibly hope to match their level of influence and power. There were many cases of adventurers who'd found fault with the guild hollowing out their pay and formed their own clan, only to rejoin the guild less than a year later with their tails between their legs.

Part one of my plan to peacefully pick a fight with the guild comprised accepting and completing many of the quests the organization had left alone for a while and bringing those who doubted the guild's ability to get things done to my side. Of course, that wasn't the entire plan, hence the "Part One." This was only the beginning, and if there is a beginning, there must also be a middle and end.

The number of clients I'd taken in was, in truth, probably only a drop in the bucket for an organization as large as the guild. And none of them were so influential that losing them would hurt the organization in any way. In fact, I was probably doing the guild a favor by taking those clients off their hands. But regardless of how few I'd won over, the fact remained that they'd chosen me and the Bloodstained Blades over the guild. And that alone was highly significant.

Going from zero to one had a different significance than going

from one to two, even though both were a difference of one. In other words, it was harder to go from lying down to standing up than it was to go from standing up to running, since you were already on your feet.

And regarding my plan, I had more than a few ideas about how I could increase from Level 1 to 2. Like the following, for instance...

The path from Titus Forest to Ishka had been beaten by adventurers and hunters heading to and from the town for many years. I was no exception. Of course, I had traversed it so many times by now that I could do it with my eyes closed. Now, however, I was looking at this familiar path from a slightly different perspective —namely, about twice as high up.

Each time the heavy undulations reached my body, my vision jumped up, then came back down. For some time now, every traveler I'd passed had stared at me, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. *Heh, heh...after all this time, people are starting to recognize me!*

But of course. After all, it wasn't every day they saw a human riding a wyvern. Everything was going just as I'd planned, save for one element I hadn't considered.

"Guh...this was a rougher ride than I was expecting!" I groaned atop the saddle.

"M-Master...I think I'm starting to feel sick," Seele said weakly, her arms tight around my waist. She'd looked like she wanted to ride, so I had let her on, but perhaps that had been a mistake.

Meanwhile, Lunamaria was on the ground, walking beside us and looking completely composed. "Wyverns are specialized for flight, after all. It's probably not used to ground travel."

"I know that, but since this is going to be my big debut as a dragon knight, I wanted to make an appropriate entrance... Ouch!"

"M-Master, are you all ri— Ow!"

We both ended up biting our tongues from the undulation at nearly the same time. Seeing us purse our lips in pain, Lunamaria smiled.

"You two are like peas in a pod."

I groaned. "Should we have flown a little closer to town after all?

But if we got too close, we'd risk being hit by the ballistae or trebuchets..."

If we carelessly approached the town with a wyvern, they might think it was a hostile monster from Titus Forest and attack. Knowing that, I'd chosen to touch down a distance away and walk the rest of the way to Ishka. That was why we were on the ground now, except...

"Come to think of it, we flew all the way to the Skim Mountains and Lake Toya, didn't we? This is the first time we've ridden on the ground, but I didn't expect it to be so uncomfortable."

Hearing my spontaneous grievance, the wyvern hung its head and moaned dejectedly, as if in apology. *Uh-oh, looks like it's more sensitive than I expected.*

"No, no, it's not your fault! We'll work on it together, okay? I mean, your flying has already gotten a lot better since the first time!"

The wyvern perked up and craned its neck to look at me as if to say, "You mean it?!"

Yes, I mean it. So have more confidence in yourself. You're a wyvern who can do anything you put your mind to. Oh, but don't get so enthusiastic that you blow your fire breath everywhere. The walls of Ishka are in sight, so if you end up accidentally hitting them, we'll be in trouble.

As I continued to soothe and encourage the wyvern, Seele laughed in amusement. "This creature really understands you, doesn't it, master? I wonder why it won't respond when *I* try speaking to it."

"That's probably because there's some sort of hierarchy in its mind that places me at the top, even above itself."

"Oh, I see. And I'm probably below that, so it's like 'Don't talk to me, you neophyte.' Right?" She nodded in satisfaction.

"Actually, unless they're familiar with humans from an extremely early age, most wyverns simply see them as prey and nothing more," Lunamaria clarified. "For any human other than master, it probably just doesn't feel the need to listen."

"In other words, Seele's words are like a pesky fly buzzing around

its ear," I said with a smirk.

"M-Master, isn't that a little mean? But that *would* explain why it looks like it's glaring at me dangerously from time to time..." The beast girl gave a shudder and squeezed my waist even tighter. Perhaps she was imagining the wyvern's tail, as thick as a log, crushing her into the ground.

Feeling two soft mounds press into my back, my mouth naturally relaxed into a grin. *Hey now, get a hold of yourself. Now's not the time to be thinking about that,* I chided myself. Still, I couldn't help but think about our activities during the night... No, not about erotic acts, but my soul-eating.

At present, I was Level 7. I'd leveled up upon taking down the griffin, but there had been no progress since then. The scylla and werewolf souls had been delicious, and I was feasting on Lunamaria's soul every night, but this time the gap between levels was larger than it had ever been. I couldn't help but think that with the amount of souls I'd eaten, a normal adventurer would have reached Level 20 by now.

It was almost like the first time I'd leveled up, it had required a cup's worth of experience. Then the next time had been a bucket's worth and the time after that a barrel's worth. The required experience would likely continue to double each time I leveled up, in which case simply feasting on Lunamaria's soul every night wouldn't be enough. Seele hadn't done anything to me, so bedroom activities aside, I wouldn't do anything to her soul. And it would still be some time before I could acquire Iria, since meeting up with Miroslav now could ruin the entire plan. Recently, I'd been considering asking Seele for permission to eat her soul, but since I held my life in her hands as her master, asking for her consent would be no different than forcing her to agree, so I hadn't done it as of yet. For now I had no choice but to sate myself on various monsters and apparitions.

At that moment, a voice interrupted my thoughts. "You there, stop where you are!" The voice faltered a little, as if the person it belonged to was frightened.

I looked around. At some point, we'd been surrounded by town

guards. It went without saying that they were wary of us. However, they had yet to draw their weapons, likely because of the wyvern's presence. Most likely, they were even warier of us as a group than they were of the beast itself. Wyvern-riding dragon knights were a pillar of Kanaria's royal army. Not only were they extremely skilled in combat, but they were nobility, and the knight leader, Raikou, was the current head of the dukedom directly related to the royal family. Wait, was he the current head, or was he just next in line?

At any rate, the dragon knights of Kanaria were unquestionably an elite unit, so the guards might have been hesitant to raise their weapons because they thought I was one of them. At least one guard had probably seen my face around town before, but they were too intimidated by the wyvern itself to pay too much attention to the face of its rider.

Having been ordered to stop, I pulled the reins and, leaving Seele on top of the beast, hopped down. It was a steep drop for sure, but I landed without incident and turned to face the guards.

"Clan leader of the Bloodstained Blades, Sora, requesting permission to enter."

"Before we grant you permission, where did you get that wyvern? Are you a dragon knight of Kanaria, by any chance?"

"No, I have no affiliation with them whatsoever. I found this wyvern injured in the forest and nursed it back to health. After that, it became strangely attached to me, and I came here today to register it as my pet."

"A-A wild wyvern? Are you not concerned it might go berserk?"

"Would a wyvern that goes berserk upon seeing humans permit me to ride it? As long as no one provokes it, there won't be a problem. For example, I wouldn't thrust those spears of yours at it if I were you."

I shouted this so that everyone who had me surrounded would hear. It was amusing seeing all these guards, who usually acted so tough, shudder in fear.

A monster pet was just as its name suggested: a captured monster serving as a human's subordinate. These monsters were domesticated, either by using carrot-and-stick tactics or simply

forcing them to obey with magic. You had to go through a rigorous inspection before being granted permission to keep a monster pet. I didn't know whether I'd be allowed to keep an indigo wyvern as one, but even if they didn't, it was fine. After all, from the moment all eyes had gathered on my indigo wyvern, my objective here had been completed.

If Part One of my plan was to usurp the guild's clients and form my clan, then Part Two was to make it known that the clan leader was a dragon knight unaffiliated with the royal knights. Word of a dragon knight that didn't answer to any superior would probably spread like wildfire, not just through Ishka but through all of Kanaria, as would the fact that the dragon knight in question had been expelled from the guild and formed an active clan of his own.

This would raise questions about why the guild and its guildmaster had expelled someone of such outstanding talent and cast doubt on their overall judgment. Of course, I'd been expelled because I hadn't followed the rules and had been completely talentless, but even if Elgart countered with that argument, to most people it would sound like a mere excuse. Some guildmasters from other towns might even blame Elgart for having a dragon knight in his guild branch and throwing the adventurer out of his own accord. They'd undoubtedly see it as a failure.

The guild wasn't a charity, so they needed as many capable members as they could get. A dragon knight could traverse dense forests and tall mountains with ease, and considering how fast wyverns were in flight, they would be incredibly useful for emergency situations as well. And yet, Ishka's guildmaster had discarded all of those possibilities. The more prestige I gained as a dragon knight, the more foolish the guild would look.

At that moment, I recalled what Ridelle had said to me back then: *All those belonging to this guild, adventurers and guild employees alike, are expected to work for the sake of the town.*

She had been absolutely right. Even though I was no longer affiliated with the guild, I was still a citizen of Ishka, and I intended to work for its sake. If my work just happened to disadvantage the guild in the process, those receptionists wouldn't be able to hold me

accountable. Why? Because they were also citizens expected to work for the sake of the town, and it was in their best interests not to keep me from my activities. If they did, it would look bad for them, and they weren't going to do anything that would make them lose face.

As I considered all this, a small chuckle rose from my throat.

4

Early in the morning, Lunamaria left Ishka through the town gates toward a nearby forest. The dew-kissed greenery along the path exuded a dense grassy smell as she walked.

It was already the end of spring, and summer was about to begin. Even though it was only morning, it was so hot that just standing outside was enough to make you start sweating. The hottest days of the year would doubtless be here soon...and yet, Lunamaria was sweating for a completely different reason.

As she made her way to the forest, she gently placed a hand on her chest. She was wearing a sage's robe, a purple garment awarded to students of the Academy as proof of their graduation. Only those who attained the qualifications to become sages were allowed to wear it, and thanks to the enchantments placed upon it, it raised the wearer's defense, endurance, and magic potency tremendously. There was mithril thread woven into the fabric, making it highly resistant to both heat and cold. It was also modifiable to be worn comfortably in any weather or season, even in the hottest summers and coldest winters. Several generations ago, the head of the girls' branch of the academy had found their uniforms to be, in her words, "lame," and designed this more fashionable modern garment as a result.

Currently, Lunamaria had her robe modified for winter, and nearly every inch of her body was covered. Naturally, this was unbearably hot, but she had no choice. It was either that or expose the shameless outfit she had on underneath.

Back when she'd first become Sora's slave, he'd given her a

revealing silk outfit to wear, one that exposed her shoulders and thighs and only minimally covered her chest and waist. To a naturally timid elf like Lunamaria, she might as well have been in the nude. Configuring her robe for summer would mean leaving her legs, shoulders, and chest mostly out in the open, so she had no choice but to wear the winter version instead. Still, it didn't change the fact that she was walking around virtually naked underneath, and she couldn't help but feel extremely embarrassed.

Lunamaria was not only an elf, but a sage, so she frequently drew attention from others wherever she went. Over the past five years of adventuring, she'd grown used to the stares, but now, out in the open in this getup, she felt a different kind of tension and was more wary than ever of being seen. Whenever Sora saw her nervous like that, his lips would curl up into an amused grin. She unconsciously recalled that look on his face and broke out into a cold sweat once more.

After walking for some time, Lunamaria reached the forest. Unlike Titus, this was not an ominous place teeming with demonic creatures. Squirrels ran along the ground, and birds were chirping in the treetops. This was where Lunamaria came to relax. Taking a deep breath of relief, she cast off her robe at last. Back when she'd first started coming here, she'd been too shy to do that, regardless of whether anyone was watching, but recently she'd come to think that if no one else was around, it wouldn't be a problem. She knew that her outfit, as well as her activities with Sora during the night, were her master's deliberate attempts to embarrass her. But after over a month of experiencing such shame, the forest elf's pure heart was starting to wear down.

When Sora wasn't amusing himself by putting her in embarrassing situations, he would close her lips with his own. Each time this happened, Lunamaria felt her strength, mana, and something else even more important drain away from her. What could that have been? To this day, she hadn't managed to come up with an answer. But whenever she recalled the sensation, her body would involuntarily start to tremble. Was it out of fear...or pleasure? She didn't know, and that scared her so much that she wished could

forget the sensation forever. It was a numbing sweetness akin to sexual pleasure, a relaxing impulse to give all of herself, body and soul, to a superior entity. Each time Sora wrapped his arms around her, she felt the sensation imprint itself onto her even deeper.

Whatever Sora did to her, she would accept. She'd vowed as much back when she'd first become his slave. No, "accept" wasn't good enough. If she was merely enduring his deeds, it couldn't be called atonement. She would not only accept but reciprocate to the best of her ability. She'd devote her entire being to her master. That was what she felt it meant to be a slave. It was her duty. And yet...lately, she hadn't felt like she was acting out of a sense of duty at all. She wasn't accepting or enduring Sora at all anymore; rather, she found herself waiting, longing for him...

Having thought that far, she shook her head so violently that her flowing blonde hair spread out parallel with the ground. She had become his slave in order to atone. However many nights they'd spent with their bodies intertwined since then, she couldn't let herself have such thoughts when it had barely been over a month.

She took deep breaths in order to relax. Then, after some preliminary stretching, she jumped up and grabbed a tree branch overhead. Sora had ordered Lunamaria and Seele to use today as a rest day. He was probably concerned that if he didn't give them a break every now and then, they wouldn't be ready for the forthcoming strenuous activities required to raise their clan's reputation. And Lunamaria had used her rest day to come to the forest. She had something she wanted to confirm.

This place had become something of a training ground for her. As a sage, spirit user, and hunter, she would come here in her free time and race through the forest to polish and improve her physical ability. She used the tree branch as a fulcrum to flip herself up on top of it, then, narrowing her eyes, immediately kicked off of the branch and leaped toward another. She hopped from branch to branch, tree to tree, sometimes using vines to swing across, and sometimes bounding along the treetops like a monkey. She didn't use magic or rely on her spirit summons; she used only her own physique to make her way through.

The forest was nowhere near as vast as Titus. Even so, it didn't even take an hour for her to make a full lap around it, and she wasn't out of breath once she was finished. That alone confirmed her suspicions: However physically fit she was, there was normally no way she wouldn't be exhausted after making her way around the forest in less than an hour.

"I knew it. My physical ability has increased considerably. No, not just my physical ability; my mana and spirit attunement are both much higher as well." She'd noticed it while in town as well, but this confirmed it. Her spirit energy was stronger than it had ever been. If she were to use spirit magic right now, she was sure it would be the most powerful spell she'd ever casted. All of her abilities had rapidly, drastically increased from before. Normally she would have thought it simply meant that she'd leveled up, but when she had checked, her level hadn't changed.

So what was the reason for this dramatic boost in ability? She'd first noticed it a month ago, so Sora had to be the cause. In truth, ever since she'd come over to Sora's side, she'd felt like she was overflowing with energy both day and night. It was like she was in permanent perfect condition. For the first few days, she had thought it might be a temporarily heightened state of tension from an abrupt, dramatic change in environment, but once three, five, ten days had passed, she'd come to realize there was nothing temporary about it. Therefore, there had to be another explanation. And Lunamaria the sage had an idea as to what.

"They say every part of a dragon is precious," she muttered. Its scales could be used to forge tough armor, its blood and flesh made for potent medicine, its claws powerful weapons. Even its eyes, bones, and body hair were all prized as valuable materials. Unlike inferior dragons like wyverns, which were hatched from eggs, true dragons were said to have no incubation period. To begin with, they never had a mother. Much like lightning, tornadoes, earthquakes, or erupting volcanoes, they were natural disasters that simply manifested once the proper conditions in the world were met. Illusory calamities foisted onto the earth, given flesh and blood—that was the true definition of a dragon.

As such, they were essentially enormous lumps of extremely potent mana in physical form. It only stood to reason that every part of their bodies, from the smallest bone to the finest strand of hair, were extremely valuable. It was said that drinking their blood could cure any illness and eating their flesh could reverse the aging process, and that wasn't entirely wrong.

But what if, for some reason, a dragon took the form of a human? What if the human exchanged their soul with a dragon's, and the dragon's soul came to reside in a person? Wouldn't that person be granted a humongous, terrible level of strength?

"I really hope I'm just overthinking things..."

However, she knew the possibility of that was extremely slim, because Lunamaria wasn't the only example. There was also the beast girl, Seele. Ever since Sora had called her to bed, her power had begun to noticeably increase. Lunamaria had been tasked with overseeing Seele's training, so she could easily tell the difference. And Seele herself had likely noticed it as well. If it was discovered that Sora's blood was endowed with the same worth as a dragon's, it could lead to serious trouble. If she wanted to prevent that...

"I suppose I'll have to discuss it with him properly after all."

Up until now, Lunamaria had forbidden herself from questioning Sora about the dragon inside him. She had become his slave to atone for her wrongdoing, not to find out his secrets. And if he ever so much as suspected she was snooping around, she knew his attitude toward her would immediately worsen. Yet, now that her own physical condition had changed so drastically, she judged it would be *more* dishonest of her to stay silent about it. However Sora might react to her boost in power, nothing could be done about it until he learned the truth. So she decided she would discuss it with him when she got back. She slapped her cheeks to steel herself, then continued to make her way through the treetops. Since she was already here, she figured she might as well determine what her current physical ability's limit was by exerting herself until she ran out of stamina.

In the next instant she disappeared into the forest, leaving behind only a small noise when she leaped away.

5

The day after Lunamaria came to me with a tense look on her face and informed me about her abnormal physical abilities, a rumor that a two-horned demonkin had been seen in Titus Forest started to spread. Lunamaria's news intrigued me for a number of reasons, but I found the demonkin rumor more worthy of my attention at the moment. As I said previously, the horn protruding from the forehead of a demonkin was extremely rare. And for the demonkin in question to have two horns, it could only be one individual.

"That's got to be Suzume, no doubt about it," I muttered. I recalled the face of the two-horned demonkin who'd been captured along with me by the Lord of the Flies. I'd been to the forest many times since then but had yet to come across her again.

The forest was vast. Judging by the lack of news of demonkin sightings before now, she'd probably set up some kind of barrier camouflaging her home from human sight. It was a miracle I'd even encountered her in that monster's lair in the first place, so I had doubted I'd ever see her again—but to hear about her now in this way!

"So, what should I do?"

The other humans had every reason to target her, and once she was caught, it was obvious what they'd do to the poor girl. They'd break her horn off, for starters, and then they'd probably kill her. If she was lucky enough to survive, they might put her on display for all to see, or if she was unlucky, they might sell her off as some eccentric's plaything. In the worst case, they might just use her as a tool to birth children. After all, each child she had would be one more horn ripe for harvesting.

When I thought about that, I felt sick to my stomach. But I did recall Lunamaria mentioning something similar before, except in that case the target hadn't been a demonkin, but an elf. In the kingdom of Kanaria, or rather in all of the human realm, there were no laws stating that demonkin had human rights, so they had an even worse social standing than elves, who did possess those rights. That meant that whatever happened to Suzume, no matter how cruel, no one

would be held accountable for it. If I wanted to keep her from harm, I couldn't rely on anything but my own power. And since demonkin horns were so precious, I suspected the ones pursuing her weren't going to give up until they'd captured her. They might keep at it for a year, or even ten. Did I really have any reason to protect her for that long?

The answer was obviously no. What was more, if I were to fight other humans to protect a demonkin, the reputation I'd built up for myself and my clan would plummet. That meant I'd have less influence, and I wouldn't be able to continue with the plan I'd been focusing on for so long. With that perspective, it certainly seemed like deciding to save Suzume would not only *not* be beneficial, but harmful to me in the end.

However...

Indeed, there was a "however" here. How can I put this? I'd already saved her once, so to leave her to wallow in her misfortune this time just seemed...wrong. It left a bad taste in my mouth. For example, let's say a young girl was rescued from a goblin lair only to be attacked and killed by bandits afterward. Who in their right mind would want that to happen? Was it really so bizarre to wish for her continued happiness after she was rescued once? At the very least, I didn't want to hear that she fell into misfortune once more. In other words...

"I don't do good deeds very often, but when I do, I'd like to not see them defiled."

Recalling the satisfaction I'd felt when I'd saved Suzume the first time, I made my decision. As for the clan's reputation, let's see... I could just say that I hadn't intended to rescue her, but rather fight her pursuers to make her *my* prey instead. After all, it wasn't uncommon for adventurers to argue or sometimes even fight each other over rare item drops. And while that in itself might cause my reputation to drop, I could always just raise it again. Plus, thinking rationally, those guys had become my enemies the second they'd targeted someone I'd once protected. Eating the souls of my enemies didn't conflict with the vow I'd made to myself, and if there were any women among Suzume's pursuers, I could increase my

supply of soul energy. In that case, it would be foolish to stand here and abandon Suzume while she was in danger.

At that moment, I heard a knock on the door, three quick raps. When I asked who it was, the innkeeper's voice answered. His statement was brief: "You have a guest here to see you."

"Good day, Sora. It's been a while. Well, actually, it hasn't been *that* long, now has it? I sincerely apologize for showing up with no prior warning."

Fyodor, the narrow-eyed, plump man from the slave trader association, bowed deeply. He'd presided over my battle with Raz the other day, along with the guildmaster. I hadn't had any contact with him whatsoever since making Lunamaria my slave, but I couldn't imagine someone so influential would make their way to my doorstep without a significant reason. There was no doubt about it—whatever he had to say, it wasn't going to be anything good. I don't think I let my wariness show on my face, but Fyodor's already narrow eyes grew even narrower. He might have been smiling.

"The truth is, I have a request I'd like you...no, the Bloodstained Blades clan, to take on."

"An impressive association brimming with influence is requesting something of a brand-new clan formed only several days ago? That's a first." Surely there were a number of other, more distinguished clans he could ask, weren't there?

In response, Fyodor emitted a bizarre noise that was somewhere between a chuckle and a stutter. "True, the Bloodstained Blades are a new clan, but their name is already resounding throughout Ishka. Word of a black katana user riding a wyvern and accompanied by an elf slave and beast girl has spread. They're talking about how you defeated a griffin for the sake of an elderly man's peace of mind, how you got rid of a banshee wailing every night at the public cemetery so the kids at the orphanage could sleep soundly, and how you went to Lake Toya, found the scylla disguising itself as a human, and rescued the innocent youth it had imprisoned. Or how, with a single stroke, you slew the werewolf, a creature feared by residents in that area for many years, at Attende Pass."

"You've done your homework," I said.

"Well, information is power. And I'm always diligent about gathering it. Besides, how could I not look into someone who defeated a Rank 6 adventurer at only Level 1?" He made that odd laugh again, but then, as though worried he'd already wasted too much time, he fell silent and looked at me directly. "Mr. Sora, as you've no doubt already heard, a demonkin has been spotted in Titus Forest."

"Seems so. Although from what I've heard, it's only a rumor right now."

"It's true. My men from the association have seen the demonkin three times now."

"Already? Then—"

"That's right," he said, cutting me off. "We made our move before those rumors even started—the very day you and Raz had your duel, in fact. That day, an adventurer who'd lost his way in the forest happened to spot a demonkin and came to us to sell that information."

I thought back to that day. Come to think of it, when Fyodor had arrived at the guild to preside over the duel, he'd been out of breath, saying something else had come up right before he'd left. That must have been when he'd learned about the demonkin. If they'd been chasing Suzume since then, they must have already gathered a considerable amount of information, most likely including where she lived.

As though he'd read my mind, Fyodor continued. "During the third sighting, my men chased the demonkin for a while, and thanks to that, we already know the general area where it lives. However, it's located deep within the forest, and as you know, Titus's depths are a breeding ground for dangerous monsters. The experienced hunters we've sent to capture the demonkin have, on more than a few occasions, fallen prey to these creatures, which is why I'm requesting the services of you and your wyvern instead."

"I see. With my wyvern, you want me to fly past all the dangerous monsters and head directly to the area in question. In other words, you want me to capture the demonkin for you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. In the first place, we only know the demonkin's *general* location, which is still considerably broad. We won't ask you to search the entire area. We simply want you to transport our men and their supplies there. You'll be making numerous round trips between Ishka and Titus, but we're prepared to compensate you for the trouble. In fact, if you'd like another slave in your service, you need only ask. That reminds me, we obtained a quite intriguing one just the other day."

"I'd certainly like to take the job, but..." I leaned forward in order to look interested and pretended to think it over. From what I just heard, it was clear that Fyodor, and by extension, the association, fully intended to capture Suzume. In other words, if I wanted to protect her, the organization this man belonged to was my greatest adversary. I wanted to turn him down, but I was afraid he'd think I wanted the demonkin for myself, at which point he'd definitely try to hinder my efforts.

Of course, I could manage if he just put a target on *my* back, but if he set his sights on Lunamaria or Seele instead, it could be a problem. The slave collars they both wore had been developed by the association, and if they wanted to, they had the power to revoke my authority over the collars and use them as they saw fit to harass or torture both girls. And if I tried to set up a countermeasure to prevent them from doing so, they'd see it as a declaration of war. If I went to war with the association, I'd be too preoccupied to even think about rescuing Suzume, and he could just send another unit to capture her while I was distracted.

Besides, to be honest, I felt like I could trust this association more than I could the guild. Although it hadn't been my personal request, Fyodor had agreed to witness our duel, and he hadn't tried to bury the outcome afterward. I was rather grateful to him for that. I'd really rather not oppose his association directly if I could help it.

Seeing my reply hadn't been immediate, however, Fyodor's eyes narrowed even further. "Oh? Is my request perhaps inconvenient for you in some way?"

"I wouldn't use the term 'inconvenient,' per se, but the truth is, I have another request I'm busy with right now. And I can't take your

request until I finish the other."

That wasn't a lie. At present, I'd taken on a job from the orphanage to gather ald herbs in the forest—the same kind of jobs I'd previously taken through the guild. Back then, I had finished requests within the day, but fever seemed to be running rampant among the children, because the head of the orphanage had come to the Bloodstained Blades with another request for more herbs. The reward was paltry as usual, but since I wanted to appear as an adventurer who took requests out of the goodness of his heart and not out of a desire for personal gain, I'd accepted right away. The orphanage's parent organization was the Temple of the Earth Mother, so it would strengthen my connections with them on top of raising my reputation anyway. I couldn't pass up that kind of opportunity. That was yesterday.

"Another request, you say?" Fyodor said thoughtfully. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, can I hear what it is?" He had a searching look in his eye.

"Adventurers have a duty of confidentiality to their clients," I said calmly. "You wouldn't have come to me if we were so untrustworthy of a clan as to blab our clients' information, would you?"

"Oh, no, I never intended to suggest such a thing. Forgive my rudeness in asking." He bowed exaggeratedly, like an actor in a play, and didn't let any displeasure show on his face, which impressed me. Of course, if he was as diligent about his information gathering as he claimed, he no doubt already knew exactly what the request was. His question just now was probably meant to gauge my worth as an adventurer. And judging by the slight change in his expression just now, my response must have earned a passing grade.

Still, as things stood now, I'd turned him down, so I had to clarify or there would be trouble. "Once I've finished the other job, I'll contact you again. If at that time I have the necessary resources, I'd be happy to help."

"Oh, that's wonderful news. Once you're free, please do contact the association at your leisure."

"I certainly will."

The shrewd slave trader turned to leave. Once he was gone, I

looked down at the floor with a grim expression, imagining the commotion that was sure to come over the next few days.

Chapter 7: Sea of Rot

1

Once Fyodor left, I immediately took action. I was going to protect Suzume *and* accept the association's request, but for that to happen, I needed to meet with her as soon as I could. Fyodor had confirmed that his men had seen her, but he hadn't said where. That was probably to ensure I didn't get the jump on them. Even if I could ride a wyvern through the skies, Titus Forest was the size of a small country, so it'd be impossible for me to find her in such a wide area. He had probably assumed that as long as he didn't tell me the location, I wouldn't capture her before he did. Never in a million years would he have guessed that I had long since made contact with her. I'd been one step ahead from the start.

Still, it was only a small step, and they could definitely overtake me if I wasn't careful. That was why it was imperative to make contact with Suzume posthaste. Luckily, I already knew exactly where to look: near the Jirai Ao Ochs tree where I'd parted with her. If I searched that area, she wouldn't be too hard to find, especially with my vigor enhancing my physical capabilities, allowing me to cover large distances quickly.

There was just one problem: If her home had some sort of magical or spiritual barrier around it, I wouldn't have the power to dispel it. I might be able to force my way through, but if I destroyed her protective barrier, it could leave her exposed to her pursuers, defeating the purpose of my actions. With that in mind, I decided to bring Lunamaria and Seele along. Lunamaria was a forest elf, so she could surely perceive unnatural wards and barriers in the forest better than I could. And Seele was an ocelot, so her five senses were sharper than other beastkin's. I had no doubt that she'd be a great asset in locating Suzume quickly.

The forest depths were so harrowing that most adventurers avoided them entirely, so Lunamaria and Seele would be braving extreme danger. But since they were my slaves, they couldn't refuse my orders. The three of us headed for the forest depths.

"So, this is the deepest part of Titus Forest," Lunamaria murmured in awe, looking down at the scenery below her. We'd made our way to the top of the precipice that had once served as the entrance to the Lord of the Flies' lair to get a bird's-eye view of the area we were about to traverse. "I can sense a tremendous spirit presence in the area. It reminds me of my birthplace, the Forest of Origin." Her eyes narrowed, as though fondly recalling the memory.

In contrast, Seele looked awfully tense as she peered down at the vast expanse. "Indeed, it's...really something... I'm getting dizzy just looking at it." She left the cliff edge in a hurry and returned to my side, her eyes darting around warily. Perhaps she was watching out for monsters. By now she'd gotten much more used to adventuring and monster encounters, but she still wasn't ready for the Titus depths.

Before leaving, Lunamaria had voiced her concern about taking Seele with us. Since I'd ignored her and brought her along anyway, I now had to make sure to protect her. With that thought, I grabbed Lunamaria's right shoulder and Seele's left. Both looked startled, but I paid them no mind. Just like when I'd rescued Suzume the first time, the quickest way to the depths was down. With both of them in my arms, I leaped down the steep slope. The sound of the violently blowing wind overlapped with the elf and beast girl's terrified screams.

Feeling their angry glares on my back once we reached the bottom, we headed for the Jirai Ao Ochs tree. I'd parted with Suzume there before. That meant her home had to be close enough for her to walk there on her own. I thought that by heading around the perimeter, I might find some sort of clue as to her home's location.

As it turned out, I was saved the trouble. As soon as I reached the tree, a clue presented itself. I heard a sudden cry of surprise

from behind me, and when I turned to look, Seele's brow was furrowed, and she was holding her nose. I asked her what was wrong.

"S-Sorry, master! I-It's just...this place seriously stinks!"

"Stinks? Really?"

I tried sniffing around myself but didn't smell anything out of the ordinary. Since this place was untouched by human hands, the combined fragrances of dirt, grass, wood, dead trees, animals, and monsters made it especially pungent, but nothing unusual. Seele's keen sense of smell must have detected something I couldn't. It seemed like it had been worth bringing her after all.

"What does it smell like, specifically?" I asked.

"Like something rotten. And...I can't really describe it too well, but it's like it's searing my nose and throat..." She coughed hard.

"Hm...someone spreading smoke to ward off the monsters here, perhaps? Can you tell where it's coming from?"

"Ugh, just a second." Seele closed her eyes, and her nose twitched for a while. Finally, she nodded curtly as though in understanding and turned to me with a serious expression. "Each time the wind blows from the north, the smell gets stronger. Therefore, I think the source is in that direction."

"I see! Excellent work!" I praised her.

We headed north as she suggested, and I warned her to cover her nose and mouth with a cloth, as the smell was sure to get more intense the closer we got. Indeed, as we walked, she seemed to be in even more pain. The smell eventually became so strong that even I started to notice it.

Then, Lunamaria spoke up, looking tense and cautious. "Be careful, master. The spirits here are screaming, crying out to be saved, and an unbelievable number of them, at that. It's as though all the plants here are crying out in agony..."

She suddenly put a hand to her mouth like she was about to vomit, and indeed, some did escape her lips. Immediately afterward, Seele started moaning in pain. Apparently, the cloth wasn't enough for her to defend herself against the overpowering stench. They quickly recovered just enough to continue, but I could tell they

wouldn’t hold out for much longer. Before they reached their limit, I had to find Suzume’s home, get out of here, and take them back so they could rest.

Thinking that, I cleared some branches that were blocking our path...and just beyond, I saw *it.*

2

The forest was rotting. The trees were all dead, the plants all withered, and the ground decayed. Watery burbling emitted from the muddy ground as it constantly spewed poisonous miasma. This was what had been affecting Seele so strongly. Just standing before it made my eyes water, and my nose and throat were all scratchy. That was how many toxins were in the air. The vegetation, having all turned dark purple, exuded a sweet odor similar to a fruit just before it goes bad. The tree leaves, scattered by the wind, instantly turned black upon touching the ground, as though burned to a crisp.

Lunamaria observed it all, looking dumbstruck for a while before belatedly letting out an alarmed cry. “It can’t be...a Sea of Rot?! Master, please get away from there immediately!”

I didn’t have to be told twice. We quickly headed back the way we came, putting as much distance between us and what Lunamaria had called “the Sea of Rot” as fast as we could. The look on her face had been so urgent that I’d scooped both girls up and made a beeline for the Jirai Ao Ochs.

Once we made it back to the tree’s base, I let out a deep sigh. “Back to square one, huh?” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

It went without saying that neither of them responded. They were both panting, their shoulders heaving up and down. I waited for them to get their breath—especially Lunamaria, since I wanted to know what the hell I’d just witnessed.

“The Sea of Rot,” she said finally, placing a hand on her chest, “is a natural phenomenon where, for some reason or other, the ground starts emitting a thick miasma. It tends to occur near volcanoes or previous battlegrounds, and it’s very rare. Whenever it does happen,

it clears up naturally in a matter of days. And yet..."

"Considering how much it had spread back there, it doesn't look like it's clearing up at all," I finished.

"Yes." She nodded weakly.

From what I could tell, the affected area only seemed to be a small portion of the vast Titus Forest. But it was still large enough to engulf a quaint village. And I didn't want to think about it, but it was entirely possible it had spread all throughout the depths ahead as well.

"There's no guarantee this is the only place it's affected either," she said. "I mentioned it was a natural phenomenon, but some monsters have the ability to spread it as well. It's said that back in the Age of Myth, a hydra's poison once covered the entire Holy Monarchy to the south in that rot."

"A hydra... So you think a hydra might have created this one as well? True, I *have* heard the deepest part of Titus is teeming with illusory creatures."

"No, master, according to legend, the hydra is a creature with nine heads, each of which are even taller than the fortress walls defending Ishka. If one was prowling around, there's no way it wouldn't have been noticed by now. In any case, I highly doubt a hydra caused this abnormality."

"I see. I guess we should count ourselves lucky we don't have to deal with a hydra." Was it a natural phenomenon, or was there some other source? I didn't know, but a Sea of Rot manifesting in Titus was clearly abnormal...and alarming.

Lunamaria's grave expression said as much as she continued. "If the rot swallows up the entire forest, the forest's blessings will vanish as well. Medicinal herbs, lumber, materials dropped from monsters... The products supporting Ishka's economy will all be gone. Ishka will fall into a panic!"

"You're not wrong. And the monsters that lost their habitats won't just quietly die from starvation either. They'll fight to survive."

"Indeed. With no prey to catch in the forests, they'll start going after humans. A monster invasion will be unavoidable. And there's an even more serious problem." She explained that the Kale River,

the forest's source of water, was also what everyone in Ishka used. The Sea of Rot would dry up the river, affecting not only Ishka, but all of the other towns and villages in its vicinity. It'd be a serious issue that would affect the entire kingdom.

As she spoke, I thought back to the request from the orphanage. The ald herbs they'd asked me to gather were supposed to cure fever. What if the fever outbreak at the orphanage was also due to the toxic rot? What if the miasma had made its way into the river water and the mouths of the residents, and the children had been the first to suffer because their immune systems were weaker than adults'?

It was just a theory at the moment. But it was entirely plausible, and that was enough for me to take it seriously. I therefore had two options: Either stop the miasma at its source or return to Ishka and warn everyone about the Sea of Rot's spread. The more I delayed in notifying them, the slower we'd be in preparing a countermeasure, and the more dangerous the threat would become.

With that in mind, I chose to make warning the town my priority. Stopping the threat at its source was critical, but it would be hard to pinpoint that source in such a widely affected area, even more so since I wasn't a specialist. Right now, time was of the essence. And that made my choice clear.

"All right, you two take the wyvern and head back to Ishka," I told Lunamaria and Seele.

They exchanged glances, then Lunamaria spoke, as if for both of them. "'You two'? And what do *you* plan to do in the meantime, master?"

"I'm going to stay here and look for Suzume. That's why I came here in the first place."

"Er...we both know you're quite capable, master, so we won't tell you you're being reckless. However, I fear the Sea of Rot is more dangerous than you might think. It's not something you can cut down with a sword, and in case the worst happens, you'll have no one to protect you..."

What, you're worried about me? Why would you two care if I died? You would both be freed from slavery, so why does it matter?

I was about to make that smart remark, but when I saw the expressions on their faces, I unconsciously stopped myself. They were genuinely concerned about my safety. In fact, I'd already written in my agreement to the association that they were both to be freed were I ever to die, but in this world, there were times it was best not to give voice to your thoughts, and this was probably one of them.

"W-Well, don't worry," I said somewhat awkwardly. "I don't plan on dying, and I can just head to the Lord of the Flies' lair if things get rough. I'm going to tell the wyvern to head back there once it drops you two off in Ishka, so I've got an escape route all planned out."

Lunamaria looked like she wanted to say more, but in the end, she stayed silent. Maybe she thought she'd be wasting her breath, or perhaps she just didn't want to spend any more time arguing. Seele followed suit and didn't say a word either.

I picked them up once more, then ran back to the Lord of the Flies' lair where the wyvern was waiting.

3

"Now then, I suppose I ought to go too," I muttered to myself after Lunamaria and Seele had flown south on the wyvern. I slapped my cheeks to try and psych myself up for the task that lay ahead.

To be honest, I myself wasn't entirely sure why I was so attached to Suzume. I'd said before that I didn't want to have one of my few good deeds defiled, and that was the truth, but prioritizing a young demonkin girl while a Sea of Rot was infesting the forest depths would no doubt seem like a baffling decision to the majority of people.

If I had to guess, I think I was probably seeing myself from five years ago in Suzume's situation now. Of course, her status and situation were entirely different from what mine had been back then, but there was one thing that *was* the same between us: Suzume was desperately struggling to survive, and no one was reaching out

to help her. That was why I had no choice but to extend my own hand. If I abandoned her now, I'd be no better than everyone else who had abandoned me. And I'd rather die than have that happen.

I kicked off the ground so forcefully that chunks of terrain flew up into the air as I dashed forward. Right now, I was confident that I could run three full days and nights without getting tired. And after running for who knows how long, I finally arrived at a bizarre settlement right in the middle of the deepest part of the forest.

It was a small village in a circular clearing, with wooden houses lined up next to one another. And they weren't run-down shacks or straw huts either—they were all rather well-made. There was a clay wall surrounding the village, and the gate was made of wood. At first I thought I'd stumbled onto a hidden elf village, but the architectural style of the houses was clearly that of humans. And the way they were made of wood rather than stone reminded me of Eastern architecture, like the houses back on Onigashima.

There were over twenty homes in all, and each looked like it could hold around five people, so there had to be at least a hundred villagers settled there. And for such a large village to be smack-dab in the middle of Titus Forest, where demonic beasts were said to roam in broad daylight unchecked, it was bizarre to think that no one had discovered or so much as mentioned it yet, meaning it was most likely completely isolated from the outside world. In other words, this was...

"A village of demonkin."

A village sealed off from the rest of the world by a barrier. No doubt that was exactly what I was looking at right now.

"But if so, why isn't anyone here?"

I scanned the area, but the village was dead quiet. I cocked my head in puzzlement. Even if they'd noticed I'd come through their barrier, they couldn't have fled that quickly. Not to mention, I didn't feel like I'd come into contact with anything resembling a barrier. The path didn't try to lead me astray, I didn't run into a solid wall, and no guards attacked me either. That was strange indeed. And when I stepped farther into the village, vigilant of my surroundings as I did so, the frown on my face deepened.

There was no sign that anyone was living in any of the houses. The vegetables in the gardens had all dried up. There were no farm tools leaning against the walls or flower pots with plants in them. I walked around and inspected nearly half of the houses, and they all had their gates shut and windows boarded up.

"Rather than the village being abandoned, it's almost like no one lived here to begin with."

I decided to go farther in, and once I did, a foul smell reached my nose. The odor, so pungent it pierced my nostrils and lungs, was awfully familiar. I squeezed my eyes shut, and then, bracing myself, continued forward. The sight that awaited me was, in a sense, exactly what I'd expected.

The north side of the village was almost entirely engulfed in rot. The massive tree before me, which I guessed was probably over a hundred years old and the cornerstone of the village, stood tall as though reaching up to the heavens, but it too was starting to decay at the roots. The trunk was cracked and brittle, and its leaves had shriveled and fallen. It looked like it was a hair's breadth from death. And clinging to the trunk...was a single monster that looked like an eight-legged lizard. It was covered in dark-red, poisonous-looking scales, and it was over six meters in length. It intermittently let out a strange, lilting cry. It very much matched the description of the venomous creature that had likely caused the Sea of Rot, which Lunamaria had warned me about just before returning to Ishka. In other words, a basilisk, said to be the Lord of the Snakes.

According to the elf sage, the basilisk's most defining characteristic was the deadly poison seeping from its body. Apparently, there was once a knight who'd killed a basilisk, and despite having defended against all of its attacks, he had died. The monster's venom had made its way through the knight's spear to poison him. That was just how dangerous the creature was. Wherever it went, the grass shriveled, the earth decayed, and clean springs became toxic swamps. It was a disaster-class monster that warranted extermination on sight.

Six of its eight legs adhered to the tree trunk, while the remaining two had its prey in their grasp. The prey, I observed, had two

familiar horns on its head. It was most definitely Suzume. Even from a distance away, she looked pale and sickly. She didn't seem to be conscious, and her body had gone limp, like she was already dead. Considering how potent the basilisk's toxin was, just getting close to it was dangerous enough, let alone falling directly into its clutches. I didn't know how long ago it had happened either. It could very well be too late.

"Shinsou Reiki."

Still, whether Suzume was alive or dead, I certainly wasn't going to let the basilisk live. With a single deep breath, I powered myself up with the vigor coursing all throughout my body and unsheathed my Shinsou. Before the Lord of the Snakes could even notice me—though even if it *had* noticed me, it wouldn't have made a difference—I swung my blade artlessly at the creature just as it was about to swallow Suzume whole.

4

The Forest of the Village Shrine. That was how the demonkin referred to what the humans called Titus Forest. Suzume was the last remaining member of the demonkin Kamuna tribe, tasked with protecting the forest.

Originally, Kamuna Village had been a small settlement with around a hundred demonkin living there. Their creed was to "never invade the human world and never let the humans invade the village," and as long as it didn't harm the forest, they did whatever it took to uphold it. In response to their resolve, the humans had chosen to wipe the village out. Forty years ago, an army mainly composed of samurai who'd come from the East had annihilated Kamuna Village. The demonkin had fought back as best they could, but the might of the samurai had been too much for them to overcome. In the end, only seven demonkin had survived, but they were either elderly who were long past the age where they could fight or children who were too young. Suzume's parents had been two of those children.

After that, the remaining demonkin had tried to rebuild and return to their normal lives, but the forest depths were teeming with dangerous creatures, and it proved impossible for a group of children and elderly to survive among them. One had succumbed to disease, one had been killed by monsters, one had given what little remained of his food supply to one of the children and starved to death. One by one, the demonkin had begun to die out. By the time Suzume was born, her parents had been the only ones left.

And now, her parents were gone too. On the day she'd turned three, her father had gone out to hunt and never returned. And the day she'd turned six, her mother, who had fallen ill, had drawn her last breath. For the past seven years, Suzume had defended the village entirely on her own. She went out to search for edible plants and fruit while the sun was in the sky, and when night came and the monsters grew more active, she returned to the village to maintain and repair all of the paths and houses—except her own. This routine had been her mother's duty back when she was alive, and Suzume had taken on the duty in her absence. "In case they ever come back," her mother had said with a sad smile, and even now, her face was burned into Suzume's memory.

There was another duty she'd inherited from her mother as well. She was to give offerings to the sacred tree towering at the north of the village and perform a dance. It was a ritual to pacify the great snake spirit inhabiting the land, to suppress it and make sure it stayed asleep. The villagers of Kamuna had passed down this ritual for generations, and Suzume's parents had prioritized the ritual over everything else, even if it meant giving up their own food supply. Even after falling ill and becoming unable to dance, her mother had never given in and had taught young Suzume the etiquette so that the ritual could continue. The Lord of the Flies had captured Suzume because she hadn't had enough food for an offering and had had no choice but to leave the barrier and brave danger to gather what she'd needed.

Then, she'd met a lone human who had rescued her.

Now that she thought about it, perhaps that had been the first time she'd exchanged words with anyone since her mother's

passing. She had been so desperate to survive that wanting company had never even crossed her mind. Thanks to the barrier surrounding the village, the monsters never invaded, so small animals like squirrels, rabbits, hedgehogs, and birds visited on occasion, and she talked to them sometimes, so she'd never felt lonely. She'd never felt the desire to leave the forest and visit the human world.

However, after her encounter with the stranger, Suzume's feelings toward humans had changed ever so slightly. Perhaps they weren't monsters who would immediately become hostile and attack upon seeing a demonkin, but beings with whom she could find common ground if she talked to them. Before, whenever she saw a human lost in the forest, her first impulse had been to stay silent and run away, but recently, she'd called out to one of them and guided them back to the river. It wasn't the same human who'd saved her, but it was a human nonetheless, and to her, helping another human was like indirectly returning the first's favor. A thirteen-year-old girl like her never would have dreamed that the human she had guided had turned right back around and sold information on her to Fyodor and the association.

Thanks to that, the location of her village had also been discovered, and one hunter after another had come after her. Afraid for her own safety, she couldn't go past the barrier, and with no means of procuring food to offer the snake spirit, she could no longer perform the ritual to suppress it. She'd never predicted any of it.

And so, the Lord of the Snakes had spread its rot all over the forest, swallowed up a portion of the village, and with the sacred tree now near death, the barrier had vanished as well. Suzume had been forced to confront the monster all on her own. As its oblong pupils characteristic of a serpent had stared at her, she'd stared back with bloodshot eyes. Was that joy in its gaze from seeing its prey right in front of it, or was it loathing from seeing the one who'd kept it suppressed all these years?

Whichever it was, she'd tried to run away, but one swipe of its sharp tail had slammed her against the tree trunk, and the basilisk,

nimbly closing the distance, had grabbed her immediately afterward. A cry resembling a joyous chortle had issued from the monster's throat—it had climbed the tree with Suzume in its clutches.

So this is where I die, she thought, trembling in pain and fear. She knew she had to escape or she'd be done for, yet her body wouldn't move. She knew why. Because the Sea of Rot had dispelled the barrier around the village, even if she did live another day, life would only get tougher for her as she went on. More days of hardship and suffering would no doubt await her. There was no way a thirteen-year-old girl could survive on her own in the depths of Titus without any means of protection, so the wisest thing for her to do was die here and keep her suffering to a minimum. She could even see her mother and father again.

Live in happiness, Suzume.

That was the last thing her ailing mother had said before dying and leaving her daughter behind. She was sad that she hadn't been able to honor her mother's wish, but it would be futile to hope for anything more at this point.

"I'm sorry, mother," she uttered, her voice trembling.

As though to mock her feelings, the basilisk extended its long tongue and started licking her all over. It was a repulsive sensation, like something crawling all over her body, but she no longer had the strength or the will to resist. Her vision was gradually dyed black. Her consciousness sank into darkness. Just as everything around her was about to go dark, she thought she saw a figure in her vision—but no, it was surely just her imagination. No one could possibly have come to rescue her, and even if they had, they'd have just been rushing to their own death.

With that last thought, Suzume let the last bit of her consciousness fade away. But then...

"GAOOO?!" The monster let out an earsplitting shriek right beside her. She didn't even have time to wonder what was happening before a weightless sensation enveloped her body. She realized she'd been freed from the basilisk's viselike grip.

The basilisk had carried her up into the sacred tree, so now that she was released, the laws of nature dictated that she would fall to

the ground. What was more, it wasn't a drop she'd be able to survive, and for some reason, her body wasn't moving like her brain was telling it to. Was that due to the monster's venom, or was her body's response delayed because she'd given up mere seconds ago?

She reflexively squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself...and then she heard his voice.

"Whoa, that was close. I almost accidentally dealt you the finishing blow."

The voice made her realize that she'd been grabbed in midair, and she felt herself and the one carrying her touch down on the ground. Gingerly opening her eyes, she saw a young man with black eyes and black hair grinning down at her. It was a familiar face, which was exactly why she was so bewildered.

"S-Sora?"

The young man just winked at her. She couldn't make heads or tails of what was happening, but she knew she at least had to thank him and opened her mouth to speak. But in the next instant, her eyes opened wide. The basilisk, its eyes burning with rage and hatred, had raced down the tree trunk—and leaped off the tree right at Sora. Whether human or demonkin, Suzume knew its enormous body would crush anyone underneath it.

"Uh...ah!"

She tried to warn him, but just like her body, her mouth wouldn't move properly. And with Sora carrying her in both arms, he wasn't holding a weapon he could defend himself with. Even if he had been, no weapon could defend against the weight of a serpent that was nearly ten meters long.

Run! she wanted to cry out. *Leave me behind if you have to! Just run!* But before she could even try to form those words, the basilisk's massive body came down.

Sora jerked his chin up, looking above him. He saw the large snake falling but didn't so much as frown. His reaction was one ten-thousandth of what Suzume's had been. Then, still looking upward, directly at the beast, he opened his mouth and cried out.

His shout was so loud that it nearly split her eardrums. When she heard it, her body jolted upward. It had surprised her, of course, but

that wasn't the only reason. Her horns, the source of her magic power, had sensed an extreme discharge of mana in that shout, which had caused her to react. It stirred her to her very core. Her ears rang, and for a moment, she couldn't perceive any sound whatsoever. And that was just from the aftereffect of the shout. She genuinely believed that if she'd been hit by it directly, it would have torn her to shreds.

As though confirming her guess was correct, the basilisk, who'd taken the full brunt of the attack, went flying upward, defying the force of gravity. "GAOOO?!" it cried as its massive body sailed through the air, as though struck by a cannon at point-blank range.

As Suzume's eyes went wide with shock, hardly believing what she had just witnessed, Sora smiled. "We're going to fly now, so make sure not to bite your tongue."

Fly? she thought, but she didn't have time to ask before Sora bent his knees and kicked off the ground with all his might up into the air, still holding her in his arms. The impact on her body was so sudden that she nearly cried out.

Sora touched down on a portion of ground that was not yet tainted by the Sea of Rot, and after setting Suzume down, he reached for the katana embedded in the ground in front of him. The black blade was spewing such violent, sinister power that it made her recoil in fear, yet Sora grabbed it without hesitation.

At that moment, the ground shook like an earthquake. The basilisk that Sora had sent flying had finally made a crash landing. It immediately reared up, faced Suzume, and roared with what was probably either fury or humiliation. The ground it had landed on was muddy from decay, so the fall hadn't harmed it much.

Sora faced the monster and swung his blade. The basilisk wasn't anywhere near the katana's range, yet his attack sliced off one of its limbs with ease. The monster's leg went flying through the air, spewing venomous blood as the creature's cry of agony cut through the air. When Suzume looked closer, she could see that the monster had only five of its eight legs remaining. She'd just seen one get cut off, so when had it lost the other two? Then it hit her, and at the same time, she belatedly realized the truth of what had just

happened to her. Upon arriving at the village, Sora had cut off the two appendages that the monster had been gripping her with. Then he'd stuck his sword into the ground so he would have both hands free to catch her and leaped into the air toward the tree base to grab her before she hit the ground. Then, after saving her and countering the basilisk's counterattack with an outpouring of mana, he'd flown up into the air and returned to where he'd left his sword. It wasn't anything a normal human would ever be able to accomplish.

Suzume stared at Sora's back, not saying a word. Then Sora quietly called out to her. "Suzume, get back a little."

"O-Okay!" She immediately distanced herself as he'd asked.

After glancing back and confirming she was out of range, Sora raised the katana in his hand high, the tip of the blade pointing toward the heavens.

"Illusory Blade Style."

The moment he uttered it, Suzume felt a searing heat in the air and unconsciously let out a cry of surprise. His katana was blazing bright red, as though it had burst into flame. A pillar of fire stretched into the sky. Suzume had no way of knowing that he'd accomplished this by overloading the weapon with vigor and causing it to combust, but even if she didn't understand the theory, the amount of heat the sword was giving off astonished her all the same.

"Burn this monster to a crisp, and the rot in this forest along with it! Blazing Slice!" The moment he swung his sword down, the flame immediately became a raging torrent, and it headed straight for the basilisk. Its body, as well as the surrounding rot, were enveloped in fire and burned away.

Suzume witnessed it all in disbelief, as though she were experiencing a dream.

5

"Hmm, you're pretty stubborn, aren't you?" I muttered under my breath so Suzume wouldn't hear.

Indeed, the basilisk had been burning for quite some time now after being engulfed in flame, but it seemed its title as Lord of the Snakes wasn't just an embellishment, as a single Illusory Blade technique hadn't been enough to finish it off. Still, it was definitely on the ropes, and this was its final struggle—a vain one, however, because not long afterward the monster fell at last, and I felt its soul pour into me. At that moment, my body gave an intense shudder. By now I knew exactly what that meant: I'd leveled up.

With that, I was now Level 8. As I breathed a satisfied sigh, I heard a listless cry from behind me and, immediately afterward, the sound of something light collapsing to the ground. When I turned around, Suzume had fainted. Her face was deathly pale.

I ran to her in a panic. At first I thought she'd fainted because the tension holding her taut had finally snapped once the monster was no more, but her breathing was ragged, her face was pallid, and when I put my hand to her forehead, she was burning up. There was no doubt about it: She'd fallen ill. I thought about taking her to one of the empty houses in the village but then reconsidered. The thick, billowing smoke from the burning Sea of Rot had taken on a dark, ominous, purple hue, and regardless of what had caused it, I imagined it probably wasn't good for human bodies to ingest. Depending on the direction of the wind, the embers from the fire could even ignite and spread. Either way, it would be dangerous to keep Suzume in the village.

Had I perhaps been too hasty in using a fire-based attack, I wondered? No, if I'd allowed that rot to spread, it would have taken over the entire forest. If my choices were to let the forest rot or burn it to ash, it was obvious which would be less harmful. Perhaps Suzume would have a different opinion since she'd lost the village she'd been born and raised in, but I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

"For now, we need to get out of here. After all, it's entirely possible the basilisk won't be the only monster that tries to attack us."

I couldn't let myself forget that we were in the middle of the forest depths right now. Making sure to stay vigilant of my

surroundings, I carried Suzume away from the village of demonkin.

As you might expect, my destination was the Lord of the Flies' former lair. After laying Suzume down on the bed that Miroslav had previously used, I tried to feed her a Jirai Ao Ochs fruit that I had picked along the way. Her condition was getting worse by the minute, and I'd felt that if I didn't do something, she'd be a goner. But she couldn't eat the fruit if she'd already lost consciousness, so with no other option, I chewed up the fruit myself and fed it to her mouth-to-mouth. I wasn't sure it would work, but fortunately, it did, and her heavy breaths gradually began to stabilize. Her fever went down, and I was finally able to relax. However, we weren't out of the woods yet.

This time her temperature started to drop steadily. The poison was gone, but her stamina wouldn't return. Right now her body didn't have the extra energy it needed to produce heat. Come to think of it, even after eating such a sour fruit, Suzume hadn't regained consciousness. Her energy reserves were likely at rock bottom.

"Not good... At this rate, I doubt she'll last long enough for me to take her to Ishka for healing."

Even if I went there and bought a stamina potion or high potion for her, it'd be the same problem. She wouldn't hold out for the time it would take for me to go there and come back. Uneasiness boiled up within me. I couldn't take her to Ishka, and I couldn't leave her and go there myself, so what was I supposed to do? No, wait... Many things had happened since then, so I'd put it on the back burner, but Lunamaria had told me something curious. She'd said the spirit in my blood was identical to that of a dragon's blood.

"Drink a dragon's blood, and it'll cure any illness. Eat a dragon's flesh, and you can reverse the aging process. That's what they say, anyway. She's so weak right now, it might just make things worse, but if there's even a chance it might work..."

It wasn't a sure thing, so I'd be taking a risky gamble. But I had no choice. I tore a strip of flesh off of my right arm using my teeth, then poured the blood dripping from the wound into Suzume's

mouth. Reminding myself to stop the moment I saw so much as a hint of an adverse reaction, I gave her a second dose, then a third.



Gradually, color started to return to her cheeks. I touched her forehead and arms. She'd been like ice before, but I could definitely feel more warmth now. At that, I let out a huge sigh of relief. This meant she'd probably be fine, but I couldn't relax just yet. I lay down on the bed beside her so that I'd be ready to respond in case her condition suddenly took a turn for the worse.

As I lay there, I thought back to everything that had happened that day. I'd defeated the basilisk. I'd saved Suzume. And I hadn't been injured at all in the process. Looking back on it, perhaps it was the first time I'd set out to do something and actually succeeded. The Sea of Rot was still in the forest, but that wasn't something I could've taken care of on my own anyway.

Having reflected that far, my thoughts naturally turned to the future. What would happen to Suzume now? With nearly half of the village swallowed up by rot, she couldn't go back there. I was also worried about what would happen to other demonkin settlements. I supposed I could offer them this cave, but there was no guarantee the rot wouldn't spread here as well. I wanted them to have a safe place to live, and it had to be somewhere other than Titus Forest.

"Well, let's save that thought for after she wakes up," I mumbled to myself, and then yawned. I still had plenty of energy in reserve, but lying down like this, I was starting to get drowsy anyway.

It shouldn't hurt to take a little nap, I thought...and closed my eyes.

6

The next morning, Suzume and I were in Ishka.

The slave trader, Fyodor, was sitting in front of me, requesting the demonkin's horns. When I replied, his mouth twisted in bewilderment.

"Excuse me? Snake spirit suppression ritual?"

"That's right," I replied. "It's a ritual the demonkin were performing in order to ward off the monster and protect the forest."

We were in a room in a white mansion owned by the slave

traders' association. I was explaining everything that had happened in Titus Forest the previous day, as well as what Suzume had told me about the incident. Fyodor's already narrow eyes narrowed even further at my explanation, and on occasion, his gaze flitted over to Suzume sitting beside me as well. To her, being in this meeting was no doubt akin to entering a den of hungry lions. Each time Fyodor looked at her, she shivered in fear and grabbed my sleeve tightly.

Observing her behavior carefully, Fyodor continued. "So, you mean to say the basilisk appeared because this ritual could no longer occur?"

"Considering the situation, I feel it would be reasonable to conclude as much."

"Hmm...in other words, you're saying I indirectly caused the basilisk's emergence." He put a hand to his flabby chin and groaned in thought. Thanks to the hunters he'd sent to capture Suzume, she'd found it hard to leave the village and couldn't gather the food she needed for the ritual. Just as Fyodor had said, it was the association that was largely to blame for this incident. At least, that was how I wanted it to sound to him.

Fyodor stared at me hard for a while, then spoke. "Well, putting that aside for the moment, you're certain the basilisk is no more?"

"I can confirm it was swallowed up in flame along with the Sea of Rot, and I doubt it would be able to escape such a large conflagration." However, I added that I couldn't confirm whether it was dead, as I hadn't stuck around to check its corpse.

"After all, I wasn't in any state to do so," I concluded.

"Meaning?"

"During the fight, I fell victim to the basilisk's poison. I was certain I was going to die...when this girl, Suzume, rescued me."

"Oh? A demonkin rescuing a human? That's a new one for me. I've heard a basilisk's poison is potent enough to taint the earth itself, so how did she do it?"

"With this." I showed Fyodor the fruit of the Jirai Ao Ochs. He looked at the yellow fruit, then back at Suzume, who shivered again upon sensing his gaze.

"So let me get this straight. You're saying this fruit is an elixir

capable of curing the basilisk's poison?"

"It's a secret that's apparently been handed down throughout generations of demonkin. And thanks to that, I'm able to sit here before you today to tell the tale. Suzume saved my life, and it wasn't just because she cured the poison. She unleashed that enormous flame, well aware she'd lose her own village in the process, to eradicate the monster and save us all." I looked right into the slave trader's eyes. "Most likely, the basilisk was the source of the Sea of Rot. In other words, not only I, but all of Ishka, is in her debt now. My creed is to return malice with malice and reward goodwill with goodwill. Therefore, I will be protecting Suzume with my life from here on. And if possible, I'd like you to aid in her protection as well."

"You're asking our association to aid in protecting a demonkin? I don't mean to be rude, but is there a chance she's deceiving you? Perhaps this is a ploy she's cooked up to worm her way into Ishka for the purpose of some scheme?" He glared at Suzume, and she shivered a third time. "How are you so sure the basilisk appeared because the ritual couldn't be performed? I've certainly never heard of suppressing a demonic creature with merely an offering and a dance. Wouldn't it make more sense for her to have summoned the basilisk from the depths using her demonkin magic?"

"Hm. Well, if you doubt her that strongly, I see we have nothing more to discuss. I would have liked us to be on the same side, Mr. Fyodor, so it's a real shame."

I motioned to Suzume, and we rose from our seats. The guards standing behind Fyodor gave us sharp glares and reached for their weapons. At the moment, only Suzume, Fyodor, his two guards, and I were in the room. Among us, only the guards were armed. I'd left my own weapon at the association's reception desk. Of course, the slave trader had over ten other men on standby in the room above us and next to us as well. It would be easy for him to kill me and capture Suzume if he gave the order. At least, he clearly believed that was the case.

Preparing to unleash my Shinsou at any given moment, I watched Fyodor and his guards like a hawk. Once the guards drew their weapons, that would be my cue.

But Fyodor held a hand up, and the guards froze in place. “Wait. I apologize for my rude remark, Mr. Sora. Let’s not jump to conclusions. All I said was that it’s a possibility. Pedantry from an experienced merchant, if you will. It’s in our nature to be skeptical, you know.”

“Oh, is that so? Then I apologize for my rudeness as well. I just worry because I can’t help but think that me protecting Suzume would conflict with yours—and the association’s—interests.”

“I see. And the reason?”

“This, in fact.” I pointed to the Jirai Ao Ochs fruit I’d shown him earlier. “The basilisk is gone, but the Sea of Rot remains. And if more people start falling ill because of it, the demand for antidotes will skyrocket.”

“Hmm. So may I take that to mean that you’re prepared to entrust the research and management of this fruit to us?”

“You may.” I nodded, and with the groundwork now laid, I continued. “Naturally, I’ll assist in procuring the fruit for you. With my wyvern, I can make round trips from Ishka to the depths in no time at all, saving you the time and effort. What’s more, the curative properties of this fruit aren’t limited to the basilisk’s poison. In fact, it neutralizes nearly any poison out there. If such an elixir is produced from this fruit, adventurers, not to mention nobles and royals fearing assassination by poison, will be clamoring for a supply. For the association, it’ll be like you’ve acquired your own golden goose.”

“Oho, you don’t say.”

“And while I can’t deny that you’re ultimately responsible for preventing the ritual and causing the basilisk to appear, the only ones who know about that right now are those in this room. As long as we’re cooperating, I won’t leak any information that would put you at a disadvantage. I’m prepared to take the secret to my grave.”

Conversely, if we were ever to be at odds, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell anyone. And if such information spread, the association’s reputation would be tarnished. The appearance of the basilisk and the Sea of Rot were both serious issues that concerned all of Kanaria. Simply claiming “I didn’t know about the ritual” wouldn’t

suffice as an excuse.

By this point, I'd said quite a lot, but ultimately, there was only one thing I wanted Fyodor to understand: *Keep your filthy hands off Suzume.* And to make that message clear, I was prepared to offer him the profit from the Jirai Ao Ochs, as well as conspire to keep information that would be disadvantageous to him under wraps. As long as he stayed away from Suzume, I would uphold my promise.

My opponent was an experienced slave trader who had been in business many years, so there was no way he didn't get the message.

Now then, which way will the scales in his mind tip? I wondered as I waited for his answer.

Epilogue

"U-Um, master...are you sure?"

"Hm? About what?"

"Are you sure...I can have my own room?"

"Yeah, no problem. I mean, we have so many rooms now, it'd be a waste not to use them," I said offhandedly.

In response, Seele blinked in confusion, as though she couldn't quite believe what I'd offered her. Next to her, Suzume was wearing a similar expression. Lunamaria, for her part, was looking at the scene in front of her with a hand on her chin in thought.

I couldn't blame any of them for their reactions. After all, I was just as surprised as they were. We were in the high-class residential neighborhood on the north side of Ishka. Before our eyes was a mansion so large that around twenty people could comfortably live there. And starting today, it would be my home. I wouldn't be renting it either—the estate, as well as the territory around it, all legally belonged to me. Yeah...anyone would be surprised to hear something like that out of the blue.

"Looks like I underestimated the association," I said with a wry smile. "I knew they were wealthy, but to offer something like this right off the bat?"

During our discussion the other day, Fyodor had agreed to my terms. After considering the pros and cons of going after Suzume and antagonizing me, he'd shaken my hand and we'd worked out a deal. That meant the association and I were now in the same boat. Naturally, I'd had my knife hidden behind my back in my left hand while I was shaking with my right, but I knew that this was the best way to keep Suzume safe for the time being.

More than that, Fyodor had apparently seen some kind of business potential in me, and upon forging our partnership, he'd invested in me in a variety of ways, one being the mansion in front

of us right now.

"Er, Sora..."

"Hm? What is it, Suzume?"

"Are you sure you don't mind me living here too? Won't I just...be a burden?"

"You'd never be a burden to me, Suzume. I *want* to be with you," I responded with a serious expression.

"Oh! I... I see!" Her face turned beet red, and she scurried away. She no longer looked haggard, as she had right after the basilisk fight. That in itself was a relief.

Then Lunamaria spoke up. "Master, just a warning: The more people you align with, like this association, for instance, the less freedom you'll have to choose your actions."

"Yeah, don't worry. I'm well aware. I'd actually intended to turn him down at first."

"Really?"

"Yeah. But...well, when I saw the bath in this place, I couldn't refuse."

Again, I was being completely serious, but Lunamaria blinked her blue eyes in surprise.

"But...wouldn't the public bath suffice?"

"It does the job, sure, but a bath should really be experienced in private. Plus, the public ones are all steam baths. It doesn't really feel like a true bath if I'm not submerging myself in a tub brimming with hot water, you know?"

Back when Fyodor had first floated his proposal for the mansion, I'd told him (half-jokingly) that if it came with a hinoki tub, I'd consider it, but I'd never dreamed he would take me seriously. He had indeed found one and had the thing installed by the end of the day. That was the association for you, I guess. Then again, considering what he'd put me through with the basilisk incident, maybe he felt more compelled to placate me.

"Man, I haven't seen a bath like this or smelled this kind of wood for five years! When I first saw the size of this thing, I was worried about how we were going to fill it or heat all that water, but we can fill it up anytime using the waterworks from the Kale River, and

Lunamaria's salamander summon can heat it up in no time, so no need for firewood either! It's a perfect setup!"

The more I talked about it, the more excited I got, and before I knew it, the three women were staring at me, dumbfounded. *Uh-oh, looks like I got a little carried away.*

I cleared my throat, then tried to gloss over my behavior by changing the subject. "Um, well, baths aside, it's good that we now have a base of operations for our clan. And now we have the association's connections at our disposal too."

The Sea of Rot and the basilisk had been unexpected developments, but in general, everything was going according to plan—the plan to get revenge on the Falcon Blades and the Adventurer's Guild, that is. The news that I had defeated the basilisk and saved the town would undoubtedly give Raz's achievements a run for their money and become instrumental in proceeding with the next phase of my scheme. The same went for the guild: With this success, I could propel my clan to greater heights. Just imagining it made me grin.

Meanwhile, seeing me chuckle to myself, Lunamaria and the rest exchanged perplexed glances.

Afterword

Greetings! Gyokuto here. I thank you greatly for holding this humble work in your hands right now. It's been ten years since I learned about the medium known as the "web novel" and published my very first work on a certain novel submission site. To think that the day has finally come when my own work has been physically sent out into the world! When I got the call from Earth Star Novel that they wanted to publish this story, I remember thinking, "They must have invented the phrase 'overcome with emotion' exactly for times like this!" That was probably a strange thing to think at that moment, but still.

Truthfully, I can't quite believe it, and I keep pinching myself to make sure it's not a dream, but there'd be nothing too endearing about a man at my age doing that, so I'll refrain.

Now then, to expound more on the work, in this story, the protagonist is exiled from his birthplace for being weak but awakens to a new power later on, with which he then proves himself superior to everyone else around him. The premise itself is rather common, I would say, but since I deliberately included edgy content, like gore and sex, I didn't think it would ever get published at first. Yet, contrary to my expectations, its ranking on Shousetsuka ni Narou shot up, and once I'd reached the top ranking board—a level I'd thought I'd never reach—I remember laughing out loud because it felt like someone was playing a trick on me. After that naturally came the pressure of having to maintain my position on the ranking board and getting calls from the Narou managers saying, "Don't you think this work of yours goes a little too far?" Luckily, however, Earth Star Novel announced their contest, I applied and somehow won...and now we're back to the present day. All sorts of other things happened during that time, like me falling ill and my parent becoming bedridden with illness, but in the end, I'm relieved this

book made it out into the world.

To the illustrator Yunagi, thank you for gracing this book with your beautiful art. Simply seeing a work of mine illustrated is enough to overwhelm me with emotion already, so having such high-quality art on top of that puts me on cloud nine. This must be what dying and going to heaven feels like. I feel like I understand now, strangely.

To the editor Furusato, I simultaneously apologize for all the trouble I caused you as a newbie with no idea how publishing works, and I am incredibly grateful for how professionally and calmly you deal with my problems. I had issues, both professional and personal, one after another, throughout this process, most of which were my own fault, so this book absolutely never would have made it to print if it wasn't for you.

To all the readers of the web novel version, it was thanks to your support and praise of the web novel that this book was published. I'll be working on both the web version and the print version at the same time from here on, so please continue supporting both!

Lastly, another thank-you to all the readers who are holding this book in their hands right now. If this work eased the tedium of life even for a little while, I couldn't wish for anything more.

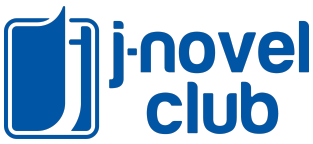
And with that, I'll lay down my pen for now and hope to meet you all again in volume 2. Thank you very much.


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Revenge of the Soul Eater: Cast Out as a Weakling by My Sword Saint Father Volume 1
by Gyokuto

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