
The Central Provinces Arc
IV
The Water Magician
AUTHOR: Tadashi Kubou
ILLUSTRATOR: Mebaru


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✦THE KINGDOM OF KNIGHTLEY✦

THE CRIMSON SWORD



[ABEL]

B-rank adventurer, swordsman, and the leader of the party "The Crimson Sword." He's twenty-six years old and seems to be hiding some kind of secret...?

[LYN]

B-rank adventurer, air magician, and a member of The Crimson Sword. She's teeny tiny.

[RIHYA]

B-rank adventurer, priestess, and a member of The Crimson Sword. Her voice rings as sweetly as a bell.

[WARREN]

B-rank adventurer, shield bearer, and a member of The Crimson Sword. He's a taciturn giant of a man over two meters tall.

SWITCHBACK

[RAH]

C-rank adventurer, swordsman, and the leader of the party "Switchback."



[RYO MIHARA]

Protagonist, D-rank adventurer, and water magician. He was granted immortality and the ability to manipulate water magic in his new life. His favorite things are comedy and coffee. Forever nineteen.

ROOM 10

[NILS]

E-rank adventurer, swordsman, and a resident of Room 10 in the guild dorm. He's twenty years old and a rascal, but he cares deeply for his friends.

[ETO]

E-rank adventurer. Priest. A resident of Room 10 in the guild dorm. Nineteen years old. His lack of physical strength is his weakness.

[AMON]

F-rank adventurer and a resident of Room 10 in the guild dorm. He's sixteen years old and the person with the most common sense in Room 10.

✦THE DEBUHI EMPIRE✦



[OSCAR]

A fire magician nicknamed the Inferno Magician. According to Fake Michael, he'll stand in Ryo's way, but how...? He's also the protagonist of the side story "The Fire Magician."

[FIONA RUBINE BORNEMISZA]

Eleventh princess of the Debuhi Empire and Commander of the Imperial Magic Division. Her father, the emperor, dotes on her since she's the youngest of his children. She has an extraordinary bond with Oscar...

UNKNOWN AFFILIATIONS

[LEONORE]

Akuma and absurdly powerful. She's a battle maniac who seems to have enjoyed fighting Ryo.

[THE DULLAHAN]

The Water Fairy King and Ryo's sword master. Gifted Ryo with a sword and robe after taking a liking to him.

[FAKE MICHAEL]

By Earth standards, his existence is close to that of an angel's. He explained things to Ryo when Ryo reincarnated.

ADVENTURERS' GUILD

[HUGH MCGLASS]

Master of Lune's adventurers' guild. He's a fierce-looking man who is one hundred and ninety-five centimeters tall.

[NINA]

One of Lune's guild's receptionists. Like a famous idol, she has a dedicated fanbase among Lune's adventurers.

WIND



[SERA]

An elven B-rank adventurer, the sole member of the party "Wind," an air magician, and a highly accomplished swordswoman. Her age is a secret.

✦THE DEBUHI EMPIRE✦

[ROMAN]

The current Hero, a position held by only one person every generation.Nineteen years old. An honest, earnest, and incredibly good person with a dazzling smile.

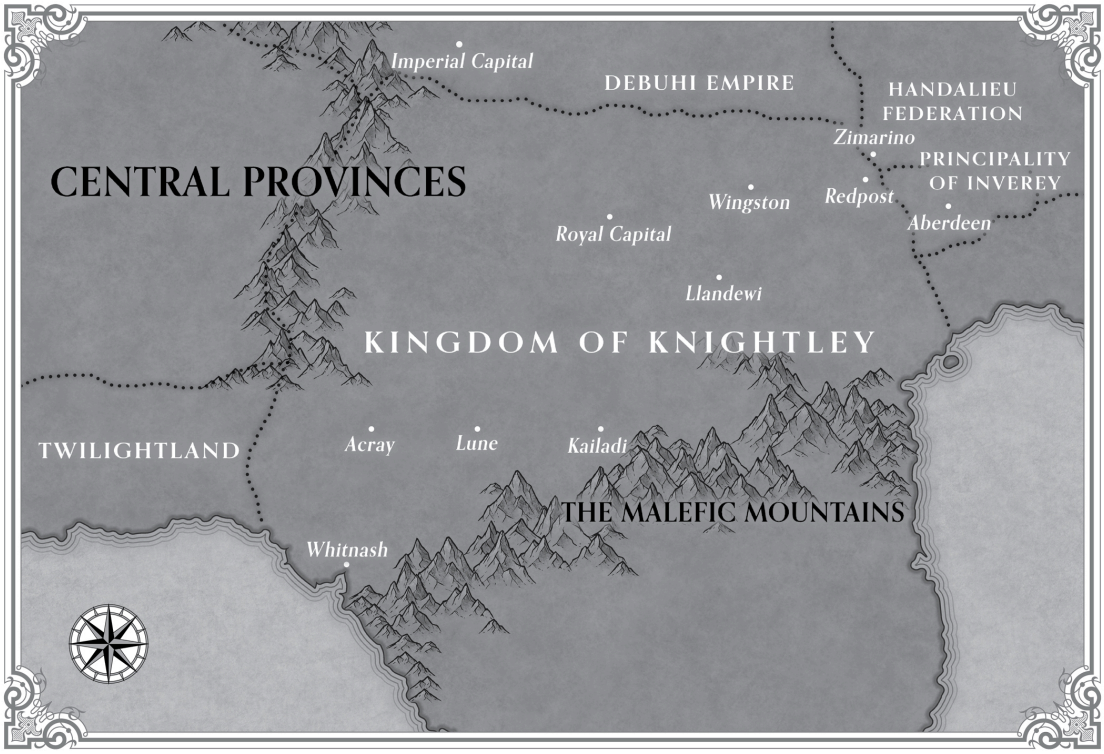

Imperial Capital
DEBUHI EMPIRE
HANDALIEU FEDERATION
Zimarino
PRINCIPALITY OF INVEREY
CENTRAL PROVINCES
Wingston
Redpost
Aberdeen
Royal Capital
Llandewi
KINGDOM OF KNIGHTLEY
TWILIGHTLAND
Acray
Lune
Kailadi
THE MALEFIC MOUNTAINS
Whitnash

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Prologue

The Kingdom's Second Highway ran from the royal capital of Crystal Palace, through Wingston, the largest city in the eastern region, to the town of Redpost on the country's eastern border. Redpost bordered the Principality of Inverey and the Handalieu Federation.

Ryo, Prince Willie, Rodrigo, their four guards, and the six adventurers led by Cohn headed west along the Second Highway toward the royal capital. The carriage Prince Willie and his companions rode in was relatively large and fairly well-made, and had been newly purchased in Wingston. The prince had lost all of his letters of credit during the Sect of Assassins's attack on their group, so Ryo had advanced him the funds. Because once they'd entered the Kingdom, Ryo was basically a rich man.

Currently, he was acting as Prince Willie's guide.

"What was it that we ate last night? Gratin, you called it? I must say, it was quite delectable. Never could I have imagined an inn in such a small town serving something along those lines... I'm reminded once again of what a powerhouse the Kingdom of Knightley truly is." Prince Willie was singing the praises of the dinner they'd eaten last night on one of the pit stops during their journey.

"I know, right? I couldn't agree more," Ryo said, nodding enthusiastically beside him, as if he personally had something to do with the meal.

The rest of the group—Rodrigo, the four bodyguards, and six adventurers including Cohn, who led them—watched over the pair with indulgent smiles.

"In fact, I feel like I'm ready to go all out tonight during our magical training!" the prince declared eagerly.

"Your Highness, please don't push yourself too much..." Ryo rushed to caution. As the boy's guide, stopping him whenever

necessary was also part of his job. If you were curious about why, it was because...

"I know, I know. I ran out of magic last night. But! I have a strong feeling I'll be just fine tonight."

"Respectfully, *I* have a strong feeling the exact same thing will happen tonight since you have a tendency to try too hard..."

Prince Willie was very much enjoying his water magic training. Even Ryo was surprised by how gung ho the boy was. Consequently, more often than not, he passed out from exhausting his stores of mana due to his zealousness.

Everyone in their group, Ryo and Willie included, understood that with the problem of the Sect of Assassins settled, they no longer had to fear any surprise attacks. And this explained why the young prince trained to the point of—well, actually, *beyond* the point of exhaustion. The others were happy enough to indulge him with their biggest threat eliminated.

Rodrigo had been the prince's attendant since his birth and it delighted him to see the changes in the boy now. As the eighth son of the royal bloodline of the Monarchy of Joux, Prince Willie had endured much during his life in the palace. His inherently gentle personality was likely the reason he had spent so long being considerate to so many. As a result, those around came to view him as weak and forgettable, which had, in fact, been the general consensus of Willie up until he left Joux for his studies abroad.

However, he'd been different as a wee boy. His kindness endured, but he'd also retained his strength of heart. Moreover, he had also been a hard worker who dedicated himself single-mindedly to every pursuit.

So Rodrigo was overjoyed to see the prince steadily recover traces of his old self on this trip. He was well aware that the catalyst for the change was none other than Prince Willie's body double and bodyguard, the water magician named Ryo. And for this reason, he was grateful to Ryo from the bottom of his heart.

That night...

"Just a little bit longer. Just a liiittle bit. Please. The teensiest

longer."

"Your Highness, you know what happens every time you say that..."

"I'm fine... Ah..."

"I hate to say I told you so...but I told you so..."

Tonight, just like the evenings prior, Prince Willie fell asleep after exhausting all of his magic and Ryo sighed at the entirely expected result. None of the others commented though, having grown used to the sight by now.

Still, Ryo worried a bit about him. Ideally, the boy should stop right *before* his mana ran out and *then* go to bed. Over their time together, Ryo had somehow come to understand when the prince was about to cross the threshold and always tried to stop. However...Willie just kept charging forward. And then eventually collapsed from running out of magic.

It's tough for a servant to have a master who tries too hard.

In any case, with so many of their problems now solved, the group continued on the road to the royal capital.

◆

In a village roughly two miles from Crystal Palace, the capital of the Kingdom of Knightley, four adventurers visited its church in the evening. The priest who opened the door seemed a bit surprised, but welcomed them without a word. He beckoned for one of them to follow him to his den.

The priest placed his hand on the side of a bookshelf situated farthest back in the room and chanted something. The bookshelf slid aside, revealing the wall behind it. There was a hole just large enough for a single person to pass through. When the man stepped through it, the priest placed his hand once again on the bookshelf and after returning it to its original position, he left his den.

The man who had walked through the hole immediately placed his hand on a stone nearby and chanted something. Light illuminated the hole all the way to the back at his words. A very long corridor stretched so far ahead that it was difficult to estimate its

length.

Exhaling quietly, the man started walking down the path.

After thirty minutes of walking, he arrived at a spot where the path split into three. He unhesitatingly chose the one on the right. After more walking, he reached a spiral staircase, which he climbed up. A stone door stood at his destination. He placed his hand on it and chanted something again. The door opened on its own and the man stepped through. He walked forward another fifty meters before he met another stone door.

He unsheathed his sword halfway and tapped the door three times with the butt of the hilt. A short time later, he heard three taps coming from the other side. That was his signal to tap another seven times.

Then, finally, came the sounds of the lock being undone and the bolt unfastened, after which the door opened.

"Welcome, Albert."

"Begging your pardon, Your Royal Highness, Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Knightley."

The man who welcomed him inside, addressed as the crown prince, looked to be around thirty years old with a sickly complexion. And the man who entered the room, addressed as Albert, was...Abel, Lune's B-rank adventurer.

"It's just us. Plus, I haven't heard you call me 'Brother' in a while, so indulge me, won't you?" With a rueful smile, the crown prince slowly sat down on the bed.

"As you wish, Brother," Abel said a little bashfully.

The crown prince nodded happily in response. "Unfortunately, this isn't a social call. I asked you to rush here under the utmost secrecy because we have a serious problem on our hands." The Crown Prince panted as he spoke, likely due to overexerting himself physically.

"His Majesty has relinquished his key to the Hall of Champions."

"Wha...?" Abel could say nothing else in response to the crown prince's announcement.

The Hall of Champions. Known as the true treasure vault, it was a place located deep in the royal family's official treasure house. King Richard, who had restored the Kingdom of Knightley's fortunes, built it several hundred years ago during his reign in the extreme north of the country. It was protected by all the elemental magics as well as alchemical safeguards.

Since the time of King Richard's reign, several treasures said to be capable of destroying the world's balance rested inside. Moreover, as part of his dying wish, he demanded that everything within the Hall of Champions must not fall into the hands of the lower social classes. Such were the unimaginable things contained within the Hall, things that must not be released into the world. And only two specific individuals were allowed to open it.

"For generations, the king and the crown prince have been in charge of the keys..." Abel said, recalling the information he had learned once upon a time in the royal castle.

"Exactly right. And Majesty has relinquished his right to open the Hall of Champions."

At this point, the crown prince stood up, picked up a jug of water on a nearby table, and poured himself a cup. He took a sip.

"If one of the two people with a key abandons it or dies, the other will know. So, I became aware of what happened, but...I don't know *why* His Majesty has done such a thing. Though I may have an inkling."

"What do you mean?" Abel asked his older brother.

"These past two years...I don't know how to describe it, but...it's as if our father has lost his spirit, his drive... He's often...dazed? That's how he seems to me... Yet there are also times when he's back to his old, animated self. In short, he's very unstable."

"That can't be... Is he ill? Would that explain it?"

That was the first possibility Abel thought of upon hearing the crown prince's explanation.

"It's possible. But there's another possibility too."

"Such as?"

"Poison or magic controlling his mind."

Abel's eyes widened in shock then.

"Don't be ridiculous! All of us in the royal family never take off our necklaces of tranquility. That should be true of His Majesty too. Those necklaces are specifically designed to ward against every poison and mind-control magic known to man. For him to be under the influence of one of those while wearing it is absurd..."

"Yes, all of that would be true if he were wearing a *true* necklace." In direct contrast to Abel's agitation, the crown prince spoke calmly. "Having said that, unlike us, His Majesty has to attend all sorts of ceremonies, some of which he must perform without wearing any clothes at all."

"Ah..."

It was easy for Abel to imagine the scene as his brother pointed out. Their father definitely took off his necklace during ceremonies like that. So if someone had switched it out for a fake...

"That possibility never even occurred to me..."

"To be clear, it's still *just* a possibility. Because there's still a chance he's simply sick. Even though the high priest from the central temple has visited Father several times to cast Cure."

The Heal spell healed wounds and Cure healed poisons and illnesses.

"The same one whom Father has known for ages...?"

"Yes. He visits despite his busy schedule. While there is improvement in his state after the high priest's use of Cure, he reverts back in a matter of days. Since Cure isn't anywhere near as powerful as Heal, it's difficult to determine whether poison or illness is at work..." The prince remarked with a frown.

If it is *poison, then someone close to His Majesty is responsible...?*

With that thought, Abel looked at the crown prince. His older brother inclined his head just a bit. Of course, the crown prince had already considered this and made his move.

"In any case, he evidently gave his key away during one of his more lively periods." The crown prince took another sip of water. "That is why I asked you here, Albert. I'm the only one at the moment with a key to the Hall. Which is why I'm going to register you as the second holder."

"*Me*...?"

"Yes. His Majesty gave his away when he was lucid. It's impossible otherwise to hand over a key and register another holder. I don't really understand the mechanism behind it, but the alchemy is apparently King Richard's doing. And once a key has been relinquished, the same holder can *not* be registered again. This makes you the only logical choice, since you're second in line for the throne, Albert. We don't have a moment to spare." Then the crown prince shrugged and continued jokingly. "With my body being what it is, who knows when I'll shrug off these mortal coils, eh?"

"Brother, don't even joke about that, do you hear me?!" Abel raised his voice, his face twisted in an angry scowl.

"Forgive me, forgive me," the crown prince said, brushing off his younger brother's anger. Then his expression became a bit grave again as he continued. "Another thing I wanted to discuss... It won't be right away, but...you may have to come home earlier than planned."

"I...see." Abel gave the crown prince a slight nod. He had suspected this topic might come up after he'd received his brother's summons.

"You've already accomplished your original goal of becoming a famous adventurer. After all, there aren't many in the nation who *don't* know the name of Abel the B-rank adventurer from Lune, eh?"

The crown prince chuckled softly as Abel's cheeks reddened a bit.

"Since the reign of King Richard, the Kingdom has been a country of adventurers. They are a mighty fighting force for our national defense. In which case, as one who will someday lead our military, I must learn how an adventurer thinks. And that is why I wish for you to return to the royal family because you have the necessary experience as an adventurer. When you do, I'm confident the Kingdom's adventurers will gladly dedicate themselves even more passionately for the sake of our country and its people... Once upon a time, you told me exactly that, Albert, and I believed you. How could I not, when my little brother is a prodigy?" Beaming, the crown prince recalled from memory the words the second prince had declared in his younger days.

“Brother, please stop teasing me...” And said second prince blushed furiously at having them repeated back to him.

“But I’m not. I truly believe in your vision.” The crown prince looked at Abel gently. “I’ll manage the political side of things and you’ll handle the military... That was our dream, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes, it was...”

For a while, a comfortable silence stretched between the two brothers. Perhaps each was thinking back to his memories of the past.

The crown prince broke the quiet first.

“Well, there you have all the sordid details. Right now, I need you to come with me to the Hall of Champions so I can register you as the second key keeper.”

“Are you absolutely certain? At the moment, I’m technically not a part of the royal family. Don’t you think Harold would be a better choice?”

Harold was the crown prince’s son.

“He’s only twelve years old. Much too young for such a burden. Once you return home, you’ll be reinstated into the line of succession, Albert. After me and you, he’ll be third in line for the throne. Except he is still only a child. Logically, it would be better to register him after you, in the event something happens to either of us.”

Abel responded after a brief, thoughtful pause. “I understand.” He would do what his older brother had asked of him. However, something troubled him. “I’m fine with you registering me as the second keeper, Brother, but I’m worried about your health...”

“Today is actually a relatively good day. So long as you lend me your shoulder, I can manage sneaking into the Hall of Champions and returning without anyone the wiser.”

At this point, the crown prince picked up two robes and handed one to Abel.

“This is known as a ‘recluse’s robe.’ It was created at the Royal Center for Alchemy, allowing the wearer to pass by undetected no matter how much noise they make. Needless to say, its misuse is

strictly prohibited, eh?”

Then the two brothers quietly slipped out of the room.

◆

After they finished doing what they needed to do, Abel entered the underground path from the same set of hidden doors and walked the two miles back to the church in the village from the royal capital of Crystal Palace. When he entered the church’s canteen, he saw the other three members of the Crimson Sword eating dinner.

“Welcome baaack, Abel,” said Lynn, the air magician.

“Thanks,” he replied.

“They’ve kindly prepared a plate for you as well, Abel,” Rihya, the priestess said as she motioned to an empty chair.

He sat down and began eating in silence. The other three continued eating without saying a word as well. He finally spoke once he’d polished off his plate.

“I’m going to the capital tomorrow. There’s something I need to check.”

“Oh? Are you going to drop by the guild?” Rihya inquired.

“No. I’m gonna do things without involving them for a while,” Abel answered with a shake of his head.

“But all inns and hotels in the capital have strict background checks. What do you plan on doing about that?” Lyn asked.

She spoke only the truth. Guests couldn’t book lodgings without showing proof of identity, and guards frequently checked the approved guest lists. In the case of Abel and his party, their guild cards acted as identification. However, if he used it when reserving a room at an inn, the inn would reach out to the guild to perform a reference check. In other words, there was a very good chance that the guild would find out anyway that the B-rank party Crimson Sword was in the royal capital.

“Don’t worry about it. I have an idea,” Abel said with a grin.

Lyn got a bad feeling at the sight of his unnerving smile...

◆

The four members of Crimson Sword entered the royal capital without incident and arrived at their destination.

"I knew it..." With those words, Lyn fell to her knees.

This was the Royal Institute for Magical Research, also known informally as Hilarion's Estate. As the chief royal magician of the Kingdom of Knightley, Hilarion Baraha was also in charge of the Institute. Both guests and staff could stay overnight in the research facility since it was equipped with numerous lodging areas inside.

The breed of people known as researchers dedicated themselves so intently to their work that they were often reluctant to go home... But this mindset was how you became a top-tier scholar. And for these people, a place that combined both a laboratory and dormitory was nothing short of heaven.

However, the same couldn't be said for Lyn, the Crimson Sword's air magician. She had once assisted Hilarion with his research and conducted her own here. Her time at the Institute had been challenging to say the least, which probably explained why she considered the Institute one of the most depressing places of her life.

The Institute was equipped with buildings for both research and experiments, as well as other outdoor and indoor facilities for conducting experiments. It occupied a vast area despite being located within the royal capital.

The four of them headed to the topmost floor of the research building...the laboratory of Hilarion Baraha, the origin of the Institute's nickname. When they arrived in front of the lab, Abel opened the door without even bothering to knock.

"Old man, you in here?"

Such a casual greeting defined the relationship between Abel and Hilarion.

"I know that voice. Abel, that you? Take a seat anywhere over there."

For whatever reason, the voice came from the other side of the office desk...even though no one was there. Ignoring the instruction, Abel looked to where the voice originated. There, he saw Hilarion's chair on the other side of the desk and...a wooden box, roughly the

size of an adult head, with slightly rounded corners resting on the seat.

The voice was coming from inside the box. When Abel reached out to grasp it, the connecting door to the adjacent room opened and an elderly man appeared.

"I told you to sit down, didn't I?"

Abel flinched and jerked his hand back immediately. Naturally, the other three had already sat down obediently like they'd been told from the get-go.

"Good grief, boy. If I didn't know better, I'd say you never grew up."

Shaking his head, Hilarion Baraha sat down on one of the sofas in the room.

"I mean, technically, I *have* grown..."

"Bah, as if anyone would believe you."

Then Hilarion rang the tabletop bell twice. Exactly ten seconds later, a knock sounded on the door and a young woman entered.

"How may I help you, Chief?"

"We have guests. Pour us five cups of tea... No, coffee, please."

"Right away, Sir." The woman bowed and departed.

Abel stared at Hilarion with interest. "Sooo, guess the Institute's serving coffee now too, huh?"

"You just met Sura and she hails from the south. The coffee she makes is delicious," Hilarion answered with a nod.

Sura came back with five cups of coffee and set them down in front of them before leaving again. Hilarion placed a palm-sized box on top of the coffee table and pushed what looked to be a switch.

"It's an alchemical box designed to prevent eavesdropping. We finally received our own supply of them."

"Wow. The developments in alchemy really are outstanding... One of my friends is obsessed with alchemy, you know. I wonder if he'll be able to make something like this someday." Abel sounded impressed as he stared at the anti-eavesdropping device.

"Albert, you have a friend? Well, color me shocked. I guess you have indeed grown, eh? Oh, I remember Arthur mentioning a water magician. Is that who you're talking about?"

By Arthur, he likely meant Arthur Berasus, special advisor at the Bureau of Royal Magicians. He had visited the city of Lune to investigate the Great Tidal Bore and had narrowly escaped death in the dungeon, alongside Abel and his party.

"Wait, you know about him too, old man? Well, did you know he also saved my life?"

"Hm... Lyn, your eyes tell me you have thoughts on this water magician. His name is Ryo, right? Tell me, is he powerful?"

"Why the heck are you asking her and not me...?" Abel protested.

"Because you don't know what makes a good magician; that's why. Lyn, on the other hand, does." Hilarion's blunt assertion made Abel puff his cheeks in annoyance. Next to him, Rihya chuckled quietly at the sight.

"Master, Ryo's basically a monster when it comes to magic," Lyn declared in answer to Hilarion's question.

The elderly man frowned slightly. "For *you* to call someone a monster is serious business indeed... Now, tell me in detail what you mean by that."

"He uses a lot of original spells. I don't know how he does it though."

Abel nodded vigorously in agreement as he listened to Lyn's report. And for some reason...his arms were folded proudly, like he had something to do with Ryo's abilities.

"Hm... Arthur had told me as much too, but...he really is a fascinating young man, eh? I'd love to meet him and talk to him myself."

Upon hearing those words, Abel stared at Hilarion in surprise. "Old man, make sure you stick to just conversation if you ever meet him, okay? Don't ever make him mad."

"What would happen if I did make him mad?"

"He'll freeze a village or even an entire city like it's nothing..." Abel had never witnessed the scene for himself, but he ended up blurting out the first thing that came to mind... If only he knew exactly what he'd described *had* actually happened in the Kingdom's east.

"Oooh, a water magician who can freeze an entire city, eh? I bet

it’d be a sight to behold,” Hilarion said while sipping on his cup of coffee.

“You’re not taking my warning seriously at all, are you?” Abel remarked, his expression exasperated as he stared at the old man.

“Don’t get your britches in a knot, boy. I believe you. Sounds just like one of those stories about the Inferno Magician. What was it again? He supposedly burned down entire cities?”

“Speaking of, I’m pretty sure I saw that spell. I think he called it ‘The Fall of Heaven and Earth.’”

Hilarion’s eyes widened. It was the first time the chief of the Institute looked truly astounded since their little gathering started.

“Albert, no, Abel, why do you know the name of that spell?” Hilarion practically pounced on Abel. There was nothing ordinary about the vigor or intensity of his reply.

As a researcher of magic, there was still much Hilarion had yet to see with his eyes concerning magic... So it was no wonder the unexpected news roused his excitement. No less because one of his own pupils before his very eyes possessed the heretofore unknown data!

It wouldn’t be an understatement to say that Hilarion had dedicated his entire life to the study of magic. His zeal was such that he might even have dissected Abel just to extract the information... Perhaps that was how it felt to the young man in question at least.

“Right, well, um, we kinda met him in Whitnash. The Inferno Magician was enraged and he used that spell to rain down countless flames from the sky. Back then, his target was much smaller, but it was obvious to me that the magic is originally a destructive one meant to be used on a much wider range, so I figured it could burn a city to ash...” Abel answered while recalling the incident in Whitnash.

“Ah, you’re talking about the surprise attack then. I heard about the imperial prince and princess in attendance, but I had no idea the infamous Inferno Magician was there too. But hell and damn, boy, I can’t believe you survived an attack like that up close.”

“Yeah, ’cuz Ryo’s the one who countered The Fall of Heaven and Earth,” Abel said quietly.

"What did you say...?" Stunned, Hilarion was at a loss for words.

And then...

"That does it. I'm off to Lune right now. I'll see you all when I see you."

Hilarion stood up, ready to leave. Abel and the others rushed to stop him.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold your horses, old man. First of all, Ryo isn't even *in* Lune right now."

"What? Then where the heck is he?"

"Before we came here, we were in Redpost, where he just so happened to be too. But he and the group he was traveling with were heading to the Principality of Inverey on a job, so...even if everything went fine, there's no way he's back in Lune already."

"No. This can't be..." Hilarion dropped to the floor on his hands and knees in the classic pose of despair.

"Yeeeah, I'm never gonna understand the species known as researchers..."

Hilarion didn't hear Abel's mutter.

After some time passed, Hilarion finally stood up. Then he sat down on the sofa again, looking completely unruffled and recovered from the shock.

"Ya know, I just realized I didn't ask you young'uns why you're here in the first place."

"Wow, you really are gonna act like nothing happened, huh... And you ask us *now*?" Abel responded, exasperated, before continuing. "Well, let's just say things are happening in the palace and I wanted to investigate a few of them in secret. Which is why I want you to let us use this place as our inn while we're here."

"Hm... Sure, I don't mind. Besides, we have plenty of vacant rooms. As for the 'things happening in the palace'... I'm guessing you mean His Majesty's sudden change in behavior?"

"Yeah... You noticed too, huh, old man?" Unsurprised, Abel confirmed Hilarion's suspicion.

"'Course I did. I *am* technically the head royal magician and that takes me to the palace quite a bit. *However*, your father and I

haven’t had our one-on-ones like we used to.” Hilarion looked a bit sad.

Unlike Abel, Knightley’s current king, Stafford IV, could not only use magic, he also possessed a profound well of knowledge on the topic, so he and Hilarion had always engaged in lively discussions on the subject for decades now. Both of their rise in the political ranks meant their late-night debates had dwindled. Even so, they regularly chatted over tea.

Unfortunately, those casual meetings had also vanished these last two years.

“Hey, old man, got a question for you. Who’s become the most powerful person in the capital over the past three years or so?”

Suspect anyone who benefits. The fundamental truth of the world.

“Hm...a good question indeed, boy... Off the top of my head, I can think of Knight Commander Baccala, Grand Chamberlain Sorel, and Minister of Finance Fuca.”

“Interesting...”

Abel, too, knew all three individuals. Eight years ago, when Abel still lived in the royal palace, they had already been working as civil servants. Except, compared to now, their standings back then had been low...

“Well, thanks for the info.”

“Don’t do anything crazy now, ya hear?”

Then Hilarion downed the rest of his coffee.

◆

Crystal Palace, the capital of the Kingdom of Knightley. Originally, the name of the royal palace itself had been Crystal Palace, but at some point in time, it became the name of the capital itself, turning the royal palace into simply “the royal palace” or just “the palace.”

In the Kingdom, the windows of the various lords’ mansions were fitted with plate glass. However, the royal castle, true to its name, had thin crystals embedded in its windows instead, making its facade glitter. As the central palace of a great nation, it was lavishly

decorated with crystals, its interior kept bright at all times by alchemical tools. It was even popular with visiting ambassadors as well as those in residence in the country.

The headquarters of the Royal Order of Knights was located in a section of the castle grounds. Currently, a total of five hundred knights belonged to the Royal Order. Two hundred of them were stationed in the headquarters while the rest were either in branch offices scattered across the royal capital or working at training centers.

In the Central Provinces, a knight was a profession and not a member of the peerage. Duke, marquess, earl, viscount, and baron —these were the five ranks of the aristocracy. Though a few countries had the position of baronet, just below baron, it was limited to one generation and therefore not considered strictly nobility.

Having said that, most of the knights in the Royal Order were those of noble blood who weren't heads or heirs of their houses. Typically, they were third sons or beyond. However, a hierarchy still existed among these folks depending on their exact position, which resulted in clear discrimination. In short, even aristocrats came in all shapes and sizes.

The knight commander of the Royal Order was Baccala Tow, the current Earl of Ware. He had an imposing physique and wielded a powerful sword, as one might imagine given his size. He was originally the second in line, but after his father and brother both died in the Great War ten years ago, the seat of the earl had come to him. From there, he used the fortune he inherited to send all manner of bribes to all manner of individuals... After many twists and turns, and a pinch of luck, he succeeded in becoming the knight commander.

Of course, even though he gained the position through rampant bribery, he was originally a skilled swordsman and one of the best knights in the Kingdom. Behind his back, people questioned whether his skills had declined since becoming commander. However, today he was practicing his swordsmanship in a corner of the headquarters.

Commander Baccala's adjutant rushed over. "Commander," the adjutant said, "Earl Peergynt is here to see you."

"Hm? Did we have an appointment?"

"No, he isn't on your schedule for the day."

"I see. I'll be right there, then. Serve him a glass of our finest spirit while he waits."

After wiping off his sweat, Baccala headed off to meet his guest.

◆

"I hope you haven't been waiting too long, Earl Peergynt."

Those were the first words out of Baccala's mouth when he stepped into the parlor.

"Oh, no, not at all, Lord Commander. I'm the one imposing on you out of the blue. Please, don't worry about it."

Earl Peergynt had done plenty of dastardly things to earn his terrible reputation among the royals and nobility at court. At the same time, he was well-known as someone who could solve most problems so long as you paid him enough. A character like him was valued by a select few in any time period and society. Which meant there were also others who reviled him as a snake in the grass.

It went without saying that Peergynt had been instrumental in helping Baccala rise to his current position.

"So... To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit today?" Baccala asked after his adjutant poured his tea and left the room.

"You see, I have a boon to ask of you, Lord Commander." Earl Peergynt then placed a bag stuffed with something on the edge of the table before continuing. The contents jangled when he did so. Most people would undoubtedly realize money was inside. "The truth is, Baron Washer's third son is seeking employment, so he reached out to consult with me on the possibility of the boy joining the Royal Order of Knights."

"Hm."

"What say you, Lord Commander? Won't you use your power for the greater good?"

"Well, that could be a mite tricky, since the Order has hit its

quota.”

At Commander Baccala’s reply, Earl Peergynt took out a second bag similar to the first and placed it on the edge of the table.

“I understand completely and am deeply sympathetic. Please, isn’t there *anything* you can do...”

“You say that, but frankly, my hands are tied.”

So Earl Peergynt took out a third bag similar to its previous two counterparts and placed it on the edge of the table too. All three were lined up neatly. Commander Baccala spared them a brief glance.

“Well, since you’re the one asking, Lord Courtesy, I suppose I can figure something out,” the knight commander said with a shake of his head.

“Oh ho, you never disappoint, Lord Commander. You have my sincerest thanks.”

And with that, Earl Peergynt rose briskly, his attitude saying he didn’t wish to linger. After shaking hands with Baccala, he exited the room. Neither man had alluded to the bags on the table the whole time.

Once he made sure Peergynt was gone, Baccala picked up the three bags and carelessly tossed them into a nearby box in the adjoining room. The box, situated in a corner of the room, was large enough to hold a person. Other similar bags took up roughly seventy percent of the space inside. To no one’s surprise, they were all bribes he’d received thus far.

Ever since becoming the knight commander, Baccala’s position changed splendidly from the one giving bribes to the one receiving them. Which side of the equation were you on? The answer could be an indicator of your status in the current Kingdom of Knightley.

Once upon a time, becoming a knight of the Royal Order had been the most popular professional aspiration among men in the Kingdom. In fact, during the time of the previous knight commander, Alexis Heinlein, the royal knights had been feared for their daring. However, though only ten years had passed since the former commander’s retirement, the core of the organization was already rotting...

◆

In a straight line about a hundred meters from the Royal Order's headquarters was the center of the royal palace, where King Stafford IV's study was located. Two rooms from there was the room where Grand Chamberlain Sorel waited.

He was fifty-five years old this year, a balding man who was starting to put on weight. According to court hearsay, the king trusted him deeply. It was the grand chamberlain's job to oversee the king's official duties.

If a king was of sound mind, it was highly unlikely that the grand chamberlain would have much power. However, throughout Earth's history, because the position put the individual so close to the most powerful person in a country, there had often been cases where a grand chamberlain mistakenly gained power... And so the current Kingdom of Knightley was heading in the wrong direction.

Today as well, Grand Chamberlain Sorel had a mountain of bribes waiting for him. If anyone dared to incur his wrath, it would cause all kinds of problems, from not being granted an audience with the king to not having their documents approved. Sorel would harass them by leaving out papers or refusing to let the king sign them. But if a small gift could pave the way, surely many would choose that option.

"I couldn't get it done because of the Grand Chamberlain's ire."

Anyone would scoff at such an excuse.

However, there was someone that even Grand Chamberlain Sorel couldn't hold a candle to—the Minister of Finance, Fuca. In the Kingdom, overseeing the Ministry of Finance was synonymous with holding the power to collect taxes. Tax was levied on income, but Sorel was, of course, evading taxes. How could he possibly declare the money obtained through bribery?

And Minister Fuca was aware of this. He knew, yet turned a blind eye. This was humiliating to Sorel. Still, he tried not to think about it. Thinking about it made him irritated, but as long as he didn't, he could just think of it as something that didn't concern him... That was how he came to terms with the situation. Since you couldn't

always get what you wanted, some sacrifices had to be made. Grand Chamberlain Sorel had experienced this necessity more than enough in his life thus far.

Before him stood said Minister of Finance. Behind him was the Minister of Domestic Affairs, Earl Harold Lawrence. Fuca had brought the other man along on this visit.

"Grand Chamberlain. There is something of which I must inform His Majesty as soon as possible. Might I be granted an audience with him now?"

Though Fuca posed it as a question, it was, naturally, an order designed to force the meeting with the king. Sorel had no choice but to comply.

"Of course, Your Excellencies. Please follow me."

Sorel stood up first and knocked on the door of the king's office.

"Your Majesty, Earls Fuca and Lawrence are here to request your permission on an urgent matter."

"Let them in."

Sorel did just that. His job ended here. He needed to withdraw from the room quickly. Fuca was especially strict on such matters of formality. Even so, Sorel heard the voices from behind him as he walked away.

"Your Majesty, it has come to light that we'll need more funds than expected to repair the collapsed Lowe Bridge. As such, we would like to temporarily allocate some of the development funds for Vedra to the bridge's repair..."

That was all Sorel heard before closing the door behind him.

"Vedra"? What in the world is that? I've never heard of it...

Being the grand chamberlain meant he was in charge of the king's official duties. But this was something wholly unfamiliar to him, an unusual circumstance when it came to knowing what went on within the walls of this castle... It made him very curious.

However, Sorel chose to seal his curiosity away. There were many things in this world he was better off not knowing. This was especially true in the world of nobility. And even more so in the royal castle, where, in some cases, knowing certain things could put your life in danger.

Yes, best not to know about things like “Vedra.”

◆

“Our prospects have much improved thanks to you, Earl Lawrence. You have my gratitude.”

“Not at all. This too is for the sake of the Kingdom. Everything depends on the domestic circulation of goods. Ergo, restoration of the Lowe Bridge is our highest priority. I admire Your Excellency as well for your hard work in securing the funds.”

After exiting the king’s office, Minister of Finance Fuca and Minister of Domestic Affairs Harold Lawrence were strolling through the castle grounds.

“You have very much earned your reputation for your keen insight, Earl Lawrence. The other ministers could stand to learn a thing or two from you.”

Fuca was fed up with the constant negotiations he had to conduct with the other ministers, who were reluctant to have their budgets cut.

“It is, of course, vital that we develop Vedra as quickly as possible, considering its importance to national defense. However, the peaceful governance of the Kingdom, including the lives of its people, depends on restoring the business of commerce to normal. As the one in charge of the Ministry of Domestic Affairs overseeing Vedra’s development, you understand this fact better than anyone else and I admire that about you.”

Fuca was in a good mood since it was almost guaranteed that they’d secured the additional funds for repairing the Lowe Bridge.

“You flatter me, Your Excellency,” Harold Lawrence said with a slight bow of his head.

Compared to Minister of Finance Fuca, who was already in his fifties, the Minister of Domestic Affairs was only thirty-five years old. Though the age gap wasn’t quite to the level of a parent and child, it was still considerable. There was also the power of the Ministry of Finance to consider, since it had the authority to allocate budgets for each ministry and collect taxes in the country. This was reflected in

the difference in status between the Finance Minister and Home Minister.

Of course, the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, responsible for domestic security and defense, was by no means a small one. In fact, in terms of the number of people it employed, it could even be considered one of the largest ministries, as it was also responsible for the development of the national guard and defense weapons. The fact that Harold Lawrence was in charge of this ministry in his mid-thirties was a testament to his tremendous ability, a point on which everyone agreed.

"Oh, good, I'm glad I found you, Your Excellent. We have a problem regarding the matter in the east."

"Again?!"

At his subordinate's explanation, Fuca's jovial mood vanished as a scowl marred his face.

"My apologies, Earl Lawrence. Duty calls. Until we meet again."

With those words, Fuca headed toward his own, practically jogging while listening to his subordinate's report.

Harold Lawrence watched him surreptitiously, a corner of his mouth lifting almost imperceptibly. Then he started walking toward his own office.

◆

Abel spent a few days gathering information.

"Hearts as black as coal, huh..." he muttered quietly.

Rihya and Lyn, who'd been talking to each other next to him, stopped and faced him expectantly.

"Knight Commander Baccala and Grand Chamberlain Sorel are completely corrupt, every inch of them stained dark. I still don't know if the Finance Minister Fuca is directly involved, but he seems to be tacitly condoning both of their wrongdoings." After saying this to the pair, Abel reflected on the information he had gathered.

Sure, they're corrupt, but...I don't think they've gone as far as committing high treason against the king.

That was what he felt.

“Barely five days have passed and you’ve already learned all this? Well done,” Lyn said, impressed, as she stared at the pages lying on top of the desk.

“All thanks to a few old acquaintances of mine.”

“The order of knights has a strong presence in His Majesty’s direct vicinity...which makes sense why your old friends would occupy such posts. It’s also precisely why none of them are in the Ministry of Finance, hm?” Rihya teased him when he disclosed the source of his information.

“I have a lead on the possibility that the Minister of Finance is connected to both the Knight Commander and the Grand Chamberlain.”

“But that information must have come from one of those two, right?” Rihya crushed Abel’s resistance with a single twist.

“Ugggh... Well, not like I had a choice... No matter how much I wrack my brain, I can’t think of anyone good enough with numbers to infiltrate the Ministry of Finance...”

“You know, Abel, for some reason, I can imagine what you and your entourage were like as little kids...” With her arms folded across her chest, Lyn nodded repeatedly.

◆

A few more days passed after Abel read his report out loud.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” The raised voice came from the design office of the Royal Center for Alchemy situated near the east gate of the royal capital.

“Director...” the man’s subordinate said with a disappointed expression. Of course, the subordinate knew they weren’t being scolded. It was just the director’s anger at the unreasonable notice.

“Vedra’s development budget has been temporarily frozen...” the man in charge said, reciting the words through gritted teeth.

“Yes, Sir...” In turn, the subordinate nodded, their expression even more grave now.

“Do they even understand?! Vedra is our trump card in this futile war with the Empire, one in which we’re at an overwhelming

disadvantage!" Unable to endure it, the director shouted again.

"Director..." the subordinate said helplessly.

"In the first place, this enterprise is under the direct control of His Royal Majesty!"

"Until last year, Sir, when control was transferred to the Minister of Domestic Affairs..." the subordinate pointed out calmly.

The director grimaced at the unfortunately true fact. "I know... I know, but..." he murmured, still scowling. Then he abruptly stood. "I'll be back. I'm going to the Ministry of Domestic Affairs!"

And with that, the director flew out of the design office.

◆

"Your Excellency, Baron Kenneth Hayward, Director of the Royal Center for Alchemy, is urgently seeking an audience with you," a staff member announced.

"Let him in," replied Harold Lawrence, Minister of Domestic Affairs.

Kenneth spoke the moment he stepped inside the office.

"Your Excellency, I am Kenneth Hayward, Director of the Royal Center for Alchemy and I come here today to discuss the temporary freeze of the Vedra project's development funds."

"Baron Hayward, I was actually about to call on you to explain the situation. Please, take a seat on that sofa." So saying, Harold moved to the one across from Kenneth's and sat down.

"Your Excellency, Vedra's development is the most important thing we can do for our country's defense as well as solve its most pressing problems. Allow me to be blunt: We do not stand a chance against the Empire without it."

"Baron, although I happen to agree with you...I'd suggest you refrain from saying such things out loud. Particularly within the walls of this castle."

"Ah..." Even Kenneth realized his words implied the direct obsolescence of the Royal Order and Bureau of Royal Magicians.

"I understand what you want to say, Baron, and I feel the same. However, there are those in the nucleus of political power who don't

understand this. Your funds have been temporarily diverted for the reconstruction of the Lowe Bridge."

"The Lowe Bridge..."

Kenneth also knew about the collapse of the bridge and the resulting disruption in travel and trade between the southern and eastern parts of the Kingdom. He also knew the direct and indirect damage was massive enough to require a hefty sum in repair costs. Even so...

"I realize that doesn't change the fact that national defense is essential. It's a major factor in why Vedra's development has been rushed in the first place. Unfortunately, I'm powerless in this particular situation, so I ask that you curb your disappointment." After saying his piece, Harold bowed his head.

As a member of the aristocracy himself, Kenneth understood the gravity of *Earl* Harold Lawrence's action. The other man outranked him not just politically, but socially too.

"Please raise your head, Your Excellency. I let my emotions run wild and for that, I sincerely apologize."

"Thank you, Baron. Perhaps you understand the difficult position I'm in now?"

When Kenneth also bowed his head, Harold took both of his hands in his with a smile.

"Your Excellency, if I might confirm one thing... The budget includes the purchase of a second unit of the magic stone I need, yes?"

"You refer to the wyvern magic stone?"

Kenneth nodded in response to Harold's answer.

"It does, and I'm pleased to inform you we did in fact successfully buy the second one. However, that is the last one. It will arrive from Lune in less than a month's time."

Kenneth decided to content himself with the news of the second stone's acquisition. Now he had a way to solve the problem of low output that had plagued him and his team up until now.

"Understood. Thank you very much for seeing me today. I'll excuse myself now," he said, then exited the Finance Minister's office.

Harold Lawrence watched him walk away with an indescribable light burning in his eyes.

◆

"Well, well, if it isn't Kenneth in the flesh. How long has it been?!" a voice called out from behind Kenneth just after he left the Ministry of Finance.

"Zach. It's Baron Kenneth Hayward to you. B. A. R. O. N! We're not like those lousy second sons of the nobility who can't inherit titles, so have some manners for once in your bloody life."

"Ope, when you're right, you're right, Scotty. Baron Kenneth Hayward, Lord Bombast, it has been much too long since our last meeting." Then the man named Zach gave him an excruciatingly polite bow.

"Zach, you cheeky dog, don't think I don't know you're deliberately riling me up. Not to mention you've been repeating the same tired old joke for the past year... Anyway, you know damn well I'm just an upstart who received my title after having one of my inventions recognized." Shaking his head, Kenneth approached the two men.

Zach Kuhler and Scotty Cobouc were both second sons of their respective aristocratic families and knights in the Royal Order. The two of them and Kenneth had also been drinking buddies for many years now, members of an unofficial organization called the Alliance of Second Sons.

"But I want to be an upstart too," Zach grumbled.

"Just be grateful you're even getting a salary as a knight," Scotty retorted.

"Anyway, pretty unusual to see you in Domestic Affairs, Kenneth," Zach commented idly.

"Oh, wait, the Center for Alchemy is under their jurisdiction now, right?" Scotty recalled.

"That's right. I had a complaint about the budget..." Kenneth replied with a sigh.

"Senior researchers sure have it tough, huh?" Zach thumped a

heavy hand on Kenneth's shoulder and nodded in vigorous sympathy. Then he spoke again, as if suddenly remembering something. "Which reminds me: Kenneth, did you know Abel's in the capital right now?"

"Abel?"

"Yup. The president of our Alliance of Second Sons," Zach said, bursting into laughter.

"Now that you mention it, despite being a member of the Alliance, I don't think I've ever met the President..." Kenneth tilted his head thoughtfully while searching through his memories.

"That's because Abel works out of Lune, in the south. You wouldn't meet him unless a job or some other business brought him to the capital, like this time," Scotty answered Kenneth's unspoken question.

However, neither of the other two men expected the alchemist's reaction.

His eyes widened. "Lune?!" he practically shouted. "Did you say 'Lune'?!"

"Ahhh, I remember now. You're originally from Lune, aren't you, Kenneth?" Scotty spoke, recalling what he'd told them once upon a time.

"All right, it's settled! The four of us are drinking tonight! Between you and Abel, I'm sure you two will have a ton of stories about Lune. Plus, you should meet the president of our Alliance at least once." Zach decided on the get-together without their input.

"Huh..." Kenneth the alchemist was at a loss for words by the sudden turn of events.

"Zach, you dolt, you know Abel's a busy man," Scotty, the knight, said, expressing his concern.

"If he can't make it, then the three of us will drink the night away instead!" Zach said, devising a plan B. "Kenneth, my man, just drink your worries away!" Zach laughed heartily.

◆

At precisely seven in the evening, Kenneth Hayward, alchemist

and baron, arrived at Let Those Who Are Drowning Drown in Their Cups, the tavern the Alliance of Second Sons always frequented. Despite its incredibly unique name, the establishment had plenty of private rooms to go along with the delicious alcohol and delectable food. No wonder it was popular among a certain sect of the capital's residents. Because private rooms were vital to provide space for the upper echelons of society to or those in professions like the knighthood—who needed to maintain decorum at all times—to drink in peace.

The usual proprietress held up four fingers in greeting, indicating the fourth private room. Kenneth raised a hand in thanks and walked to the designated location, then opened the door.

"Aha, he's here!"

Zach Kuhler was the first to notice him. As for Scotty Cobouc, his reaction was a bit delayed, engrossed as he was in perusing the menu.

"You're both early, huh?"

"No, we actually just arrived a few minutes before you," Scotty replied, looking up from the menu.

When Kenneth sat down, a knock sounded on the door almost simultaneously.

"Your fourth has arrived," the proprietress said. A moment later, the door opened and a man walked in.

"Zach, Scotty, isn't this the same place we came three days ago?"

It was Abel, Lune's B-rank adventurer.

◆

"Today is the first meeting between Abel, President of the Alliance of Second Sons, and Baron Kenneth Hayward, a member of said Alliance who claimed the title of baron with his own hands and is making a name for himself as a genius alchemist in the royal capital."

"Wow, an alchemist *and* a baron? That's amazing!" Abel exclaimed, sounding genuinely impressed.

"Zach, please," Kenneth protested, embarrassed. "Let's not get

carried away...”

“Pish posh, Kenneth. You’re the only member of our alliance who’s currently a noble. Don’t be so shy.” For some reason, Zach said this proudly.

“Which means...the other fourteen still haven’t acquired titles of their own, right?” Abel asked, wanting to confirm the facts.

“Yup, including you, Abel,” Zach said affirmatively.

Then the two of them howled with laughter.

“Anyway, let’s drink, boys. We’ll start with beer. Sound good to everyone?” Zach suggested.

“Not ale?” Abel said with a quizzical tilt of his head.

“Heh heh heh. Abel, Abel, Abel. The trend in the capital now is to start with beer then move on to wine, ale, and what have you,” Zach explained, his right index finger raised like a pompous educator’s.

“Huh. I had no idea...”

Zach’s words had made Abel notice the passage of time.

“So. The three of you met here three days ago as well, right?” Kenneth, the alchemist, inquired.

“You got it. Abel told us to hand over super-duper top secret information, so we did exactly that here, in a super-duper top secret way. Thanks to all the skullduggery, I even had to skip the ‘We’ll start with beer’ line... Tragic, don’t you think?” Zach answered dramatically, as if acting out his own one-man play.

“Do you really have to make it sound like ‘And the source of our pain is Abel...’? Jeez.” Abel stared exasperatedly at Zach.

“You’d better watch out, Kenneth. Abel’s the kind of man who’ll take things by force from people who don’t want to give them up,” Zach said, pretending to whisper the words to him even as he spoke in a normal volume.

“All right, Zach, you wanna go? Let’s go. Challenge accepted. Sorry, Scotty, but just think of Zach as having never existed in the first place. ’Cuz he won’t after today.” There was menace in Abel’s voice.

“Well, that’s unfortunate. Gents, raise a glass to our fallen brother, Zach. He was a good man...” Scotty accepted the threat blithely.

"Guys, stop," Zach said. "It doesn't sound like a joke when you jerks say that, so seriously, cut it out."

Kenneth, meanwhile, was laughing hysterically at the exchange. After he caught his breath, he spoke. "Abel, I heard you're an adventurer in Lune."

"Yeah, you heard right," Abel answered.

"Contrary to appearances, he's a brilliant B-rank," Zach said, strangely proud.

"The truth is, my family hails from Lune."

"Whoa, really?! What a small world... I set Lune as my base, let's see...seven years ago now."

"Ahhh, then I must have just missed you. I moved to the capital from Lune right around that time."

Abel and Kenneth opined over their shared circumstances.

"I invited my parents to live with me about a year ago."

"Oh, that's right. You moved them into the manor that came with your new title, Kenneth," Scotty remarked.

"I did. We're originally farmers, but the condition of my father's leg worsened, making it difficult for him to tend to our vast holdings. So I asked him if he'd be willing to oversee my new estate's management and he agreed. Now he and my mother are both enjoying life there with my vassals." Kenneth sounded happy.

Simply put, a manor in the Kingdom of Knightley was a village bestowed upon a noble. They tended to be either under the direct control of the royal family or part of the territory of a noble family that had died out. Though the history of such estates varied, generally speaking, they weren't very large. The taxes collected from the manor went to the noble or lord who owned it, so as long as they didn't live a lavish lifestyle, they could live comfortably on the taxes alone.

In the case of Baron Kenneth Hayward, in addition to his manor, he also had income from his position as the chief researcher at the Royal Center for Alchemy. So for a newly appointed member of the peerage, his income was quite high.

“Man, you sure put the rest of us to shame, huh?” Abel remarked while eating bandit’s fried chicken. He was impressed by Kenneth’s filial piety.

“The house we left behind in Lune finally sold not too long ago. Thanks to that, my anxiety for the future disappeared completely. I can’t tell you how relieved I am.”

Abel nodded in understanding even as he continued munching enthusiastically on various dishes.

“Oh, yeah, the house you told us about, the one with the rugged stonework in the kitchen.”

“That’s right, Zach. My mother said she wanted a spacious counter because she loves to cook, so my father had a stonemason acquaintance of his make a custom one for her.”

Upon hearing this, Abel, who’d been busy eating until now, froze.

“What’s wrong, Abel?”

“Wait a sec. Kenneth, this kitchen of yours, is it made of a huge, imposing, black stone called ‘granite’? And does the house itself have doors in three places...?” Abel ignored Zach, who stared quizzically at him because of how suddenly he’d stopped eating, and questioned Kenneth instead.

“I’m not sure about the name of the stone, but everything else in your description is correct. And yes, the house does have doors in three locations. Why do you know all that though?”

“Ummm... ’Cuz my friend is probably the one who bought your house...” For whatever reason, Abel clearly found it difficult to admit this.

Kenneth’s eyes widened in response. “You don’t say! Wow. Then please convey my appreciation to the buyer. It was on the market for more than six months. I almost asked my parents whether we should lower the price when the sale finally went through. Not to mention, the buyer paid all in cash.”

“Yeah, well, he has money...”

“Abel, why are you acting so strange?” Scotty asked pointedly, seeing Abel sweat.

“Uh...so the guy who bought Kenneth’s house...sort of remodeled it... But don’t worry! It still looks the same!”

"Huh?"

"The thing is, your house didn't have a bathtub, right, Kenneth?"

"Correct. A river runs right next to the house, so we all used to bathe there. Although during the winter months, we set up large barrels in the yard and poured hot water inside..." he answered, thinking back to his days in his old house.

"Well, the guy who bought it can't live without a bathtub. Which is why he transformed a part of the house into a huge bathroom. I figured I'd let you know about the renovation, in case you had an emotional attachment to the place..."

"Ah, I see now. I'm not bothered at all. I don't think it's a bad thing to make things easier to use."

"Oh, yeah?" Abel was very obviously relieved by Kenneth's words.

"Huh. A friend of yours in Lune..." Scotty murmured thoughtfully.

"Yup. He saved my life too. Not once, but twice." Abel resumed eating, both his hands and mouth moving while he engaged in conversation. How very adroit he was.

"Is he an adventurer, then?"

"Sure is. What makes him even more unusual is that he's a water magician."

"Whoa! That *is* rare!" Zach exclaimed in surprise.

"Is it really?" Kenneth, the alchemist, inquired as he perused the menu. He wasn't particularly knowledgeable on this topic.

"Yeah, extremely. Water magic apparently isn't suited for combat. There are barely any water magicians in the Bureau too. I'm pretty sure the number of adventurers in the capital who use water magic is zero. Having said that, water magic is the most in-demand magic in everyday life. Meaning water magicians don't even have to go out to dangerous battlefields or on dangerous adventures. Merchants and others find them especially useful," Zach answered, staring up at the ceiling as he recalled what he knew.

"So that's your savior... Well, a savior doesn't always have to be someone who saves your life on a battlefield, hm? After all, everyone needs water to live," Scotty said, theorizing about Abel's savior.

"I mean, you're not wrong, but...he actually saved me in combat too. That reminds me. He's completely obsessed with alchemy."

At Abel's words, Kenneth's head jerked up from scouring the menu.

"We're still discussing the buyer of my old home, yes? And you're saying he's crazy about alchemy?! Ahhh, I'd love to help him with anything and everything on the subject if I could."

Abel smiled ruefully at Kenneth's enthusiasm. "Well, if you ever get the chance, do just that. His name is Ryo and he's a water magician who also happens to be an adventurer from Lune. Remember that."

◆

After Abel said his goodbyes to his friends and left the uniquely named tavern, Let Those Who Are Drowning Drown in Their Cups, he realized he was being followed.

I don't care if they tail me, but...I hope they don't go after those guys too.

He was worried about the three of them. Zach and Scotty had mentioned walking Kenneth back to the Alchemy Center, so...

I really don't think they'll hurt a baron.

Alchemist Kenneth Hayward's acquisition of the title of baron made him a full-fledged member of the aristocracy. Attacks on nobles carried surprisingly severe penalties. Taking that into account then, Abel thought the probability of them being attacked was low.

As for the other two, they would manage. He didn't dwell too deeply on the problem.

Knight Commander Baccala, Grand Chamberlain Sorel, and Minister of Finance Fuca—these were the three men Abel had been investigating. So the three individuals following him might just be one of those three's subordinates.

I sensed five in the beginning, meaning two must have gone somewhere else. The fact that there are three still following me makes me think I'm their real target.

Abel veered away from the main avenue and slipped down one of the back alleys. He'd played in this area quite often as a child and his body still remembered the roads like it was second nature,

despite almost ten years having passed since he'd last lived in the royal capital.

Several minutes later, in the shadows of a side street, Abel successfully knocked out the three people following him in a guerrilla fight using all sorts of random items, like broken doors he found bafflingly in the middle of the street. All without a single scratch on him. Incidentally, the dastardly trio consisted of two men and one woman.

"Right, then..." he muttered to himself before whistling through his fingers.

A minute later, an enormous figure appeared.

"Warren, be a pal and help me carry them? Sorry and thanks."

With a nod, Warren lifted the two men, hefting each one onto a shoulder. Abel slung the woman over his own shoulder. They made two turns on their brief journey and arrived in front of the Institute for Magical Research.

"Let's take them to the underground test site. We'll interrogate them there," Abel said with an evil grin.

◆

One of the men opened his eyes. He was sitting in a chair placed smack-dab in the center of a spacious area. He couldn't move at all because his arms and legs were tied to the chair.

"Shit!"

He should have been shadowing the target, but said target had suddenly appeared behind him and rendered him unconscious in a single blow.

"No one told us he was so skilled..."

It was too late to say that now though. The three of them had been tasked to abduct the target. He'd honestly thought it would be easy. Their only problem had been how to transport the man after kidnapping him...

Unfortunately for them, reality turned out to be quite different.

"What are we supposed to do now..."

"Just spill your guts and you'll feel loads better."

The bound man hadn't expected a response to his mumble. Hearing it shocked him because he hadn't detected the presence of another person in the vicinity. And instead of belonging to the young man who had attacked them, the voice was...an old man's. The old man in question approached him and when he was close enough, the would-be kidnapper recognized him.

"Impossible... Hilarion...?"

The moment he whispered the words, the old man closed the gap between them and smacked him hard on the head with the staff in his hand.

"Ow!"

"That's *Lord* Hilarion to you. Don't you forget it next time. Young'uns these days really need to learn their manners."

Hilarion was practically huffing and puffing with anger. The sight stunned the man even more. Then he muttered, almost to himself.

"Why is such a bigwig here..."

Hilarion Baraha was the chief royal magician of the Kingdom of Knightley. When discussing the most powerful magicians in the Kingdom, his name was the first to come to mind. He was largely acknowledged as one of the Kingdom's most powerful magicians.

"Hm. So you *do* know that I'm a bigwig. Then let me tell you something you clearly don't know—the one you tried to attack has a close connection with this bigwig. I won't say anything bad, but it's best if you tell me everything you know."

Hilarion deliberately tapped the staff against his palm.

"Ngh... Like I can betray my client!" That was all the man said before he shut his mouth uncooperatively.

"Hm... The fact that you have the gall to still act defiantly despite knowing I'm Hilarion means...you underestimate magic at your own risk."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"I may not look it, but folks call me the Kingdom's most powerful magician. Now consider the state you're in, bound to a chair and all. If you don't cooperate, you're asking to be on the wrong end of my magic. Do you really think you'll leave this place with all your limbs

intact?”

At Hilarion’s credible threat, the man’s teeth started chattering in fear and his face paled.

“Th-That’s not fair! Untie me!”

“Oh? If I untie you, then that means I can use my magic without holding back? Are you saying your body will be able to withstand it?”

Hilarion’s expression was relaxed. He used his own renown to frighten the man. In a way, you could call this the wisdom of age.

“I thought so. Why don’t you start by telling me your name first?”

◆

Once Hilarion finished interrogating the captive, he returned to his office, where, for some inexplicable reason, he found a gaggle of girls.

“Oh, welcome back, Master.”

Lyn noticed him first.

“Thanks. Should I even ask what you three are doing...?”

Indeed, as he pointed out, there were three young women in the room: Lyn, Rihya, and an unfamiliar girl. He had a sneaky suspicion the stranger was one of the trio hired to abduct Abel. The boy must have left her interrogation to the two of them.

“Why, we’re having a tea party. Oh, allow me to introduce you to Oriana, a C-rank adventurer based here in the capital. According to her, the Finance Minister’s subordinate hired them.”

Oriana stood up at Rihya’s remark.

“M-My name is Oriana and I’m humbled to make your acquaintance, Lord Hilarion.” She bowed her head deeply.

“R-Right... Well, take it easy, eh?”

That was the only thing Hilarion could think to say. Because the information he’d gone to such great lengths to acquire, these two young’uns had obtained easily. Moreover, he had purposely knocked out the man before coming here in order to make it easier to move him later... Yet to his bafflement, Lyn and Rihya had used the sweets to turn one of the attackers into an informant. It took all his willpower to stop himself from collapsing to his knees. Nevertheless,

an indescribable sense of defeat overwhelmed Hilarion.

Then, a short thirty seconds later, Abel returned to Hilarion's office, having completed his own interrogation of the second man, and upon hearing the same report as the old man from his party members, he fell to his knees in shock.

◆

"Um, we're members of the C-rank party Morning Star belonging to the capital's adventurers' guild. Originally, this was a legitimate job we accepted through the guild. We were hired to protect the client and eliminate any suspicious individuals," Oriana explained after Abel prompted her. "Then tonight, the client discovered one such person's location and ordered us to kidnap him..."

"Which is why you were following me."

"Yes..." she replied to him with her head hanging.

"You had others follow my friends too, didn't you?"

"Correct. But only to verify their identities."

Abel was relieved to learn that Kenneth and the other two wouldn't come to harm.

"I truly am so sorry. Since the job and instructions both came from the Finance Minister's aide, I honestly didn't think it would be a problem." Oriana's head drooped farther.

It would be unreasonable to doubt a request coming from one of the central political figures in the country. As members of the B-rank party Crimson Sword, the three of them understood this better than anyone, considering how many jobs just like this they'd taken on until now. That was probably why none of them actually blamed Oriana and her party members.

Though Abel now knew the mastermind behind the planned surprise attack on him, said mastermind hadn't informed Oriana and her mates of the reason for his abduction. However, his impression of Minister Fuca had most definitely taken a turn for the worst. He thought of him as a black-hearted villain now.

"I think...my only option here is to let them capture me, so I can go undercover," Abel muttered quietly.

Lyn and Rihya reacted immediately.

"Objection, good siiir! I am so toootally opposed. That's waaay too dangerous." For whatever reason, Lyn dragged a few words out to emphasize her opposition.

"I'm opposed to your idea as well. Abel, don't tell me you've already forgotten what happened the last time you went 'undercover'?"

"Huh?"

"All right, let me remind you: You infiltrated a smuggling ring and then...do you remember how you were swept out to sea? If not for Ryo, you'd be dead, Abel!"

Just as Rihya said, Abel had accepted a job to expose a smuggling ring, so he'd gone undercover, but the smugglers' boat had left port earlier than scheduled. To make matters worse, the ship encountered a storm, then was attacked by a kraken, before washing up in pieces on the coastline of Rondo. Lady Luck must have been smiling at him because Abel was the only one who'd survived the shipwreck. Moreover, if Ryo hadn't found him soon after, he would have undoubtedly been dragged back into the ocean by its tides, destined to meet the same fate as the smugglers.

In light of his last experience with going "undercover," even Abel understood the reason for Rihya's fierce resistance to his suggestion. Having said that, no other effective strategies came to mind. He'd be solidly on land this time though... But that wasn't a comforting or convincing argument at all, so best not to use it... So Abel looked to Hilarion to help him find the right words.

"Heh. Hoping to borrow an old man's wisdom, eh?" Hilarion responded confidently.

Despite feeling irked by the way he said it, Abel couldn't think of another solution. "Old man, you got a better idea?"

"Basically, we need to make sure you don't vanish off the face of the realm *and* we have to avoid putting your life in danger, right?"

Then Hilarion stood up and walked toward a cabinet. He came back carrying a thumb-sized ball and an iron box five centimeters thick, about the size of two palms. It looked like a clock with only a short hand was embedded into the box's surface.

"A certain alchemist made this tracking device. Whoever is in possession of this ball can be found using this box."

Hilarion then proceeded to infuse just a smidge of his magical energy into the ball. For the briefest of seconds, the ball glowed before the light winked out almost immediately. Simultaneously, the clock on the iron box began emitting a light and the short hand moved in the ball's direction. Then the light from the clock started blinking rapidly.

If Ryo had been here, he would have shouted, "A homing device?!"

"The short hand shows the direction and the speed at which the light flashes shows the distance. It uses the air magic spell, Probe. Do you remember the residual magic detector you used when investigating the dungeon? The mechanism is the same as that. Though apparently, the alchemist had a hard time making the box and receiver smaller." When Hilarion flicked the ball with his finger, a corresponding sound came from the box. "Something worth noting is that any sound this ball picks up is sent to the box. This makes it easy for whoever has the box to know what's going on."

If Ryo had seen this, he definitely would have said, "A listening device?!"

Hilarion placed the box on top of his desk and handed the ball to Abel.

"Wow. I can't believe alchemy's advanced so much that it's possible to make stuff like this..." Abel murmured in amazement.

"Oh ho ho, that's where you're wrong," Hilarion replied. "It just so happens that the alchemist who invented this is a genius. Even in this vast capital of ours, only two alchemists can be called that. Or maybe, only one now."

"By any chance, is his name Kenneth?" Abel asked.

"Well, well. You know him, eh? Bull's-eye. Baron Kenneth Hayward," Hilarion answered with an emphatic nod.

"The thing is...the rest of Oriana's party was sent to follow him." Abel glanced at the C-rank adventurer. She had shrunk herself as small as possible in her chair out of misery.

"You're joking, right? His Royal Majesty himself invested Kenneth

with his title as baron and you're telling me he was being tailed...? Things are going to go sideways if the higher-ups find out about this."

Hilarion didn't mince his words on purpose and Oriana paled in response. Regardless of the fact that their orders were handed down by the Finance Minister's subordinate, if anything happened to a noble whom the king himself had raised to that status...he would surely find out. And who would protect a mere adventurer after incurring a monarch's wrath? No one. She would be discarded and executed along with the rest of her party.

Hilarion stared at Oriana as she seemed to arrive at this conclusion on her own.

"If you have a mind to cooperate with us, I'd be willing to intervene on your behalf," he proposed.

"T-Truly?!" she said, pouncing immediately on his offer.

"Of course. I swear on the name of Hilarion the Great. So what do you say?"

"Yes! Absolutely!" Oriana nodded vigorously again and again.

Meanwhile, Abel watched their exchange. *Seriously, what a crafty old fart...* his eyes said.

Hilarion and Abel headed to the (provisional) underground interrogation room. There, they *should* have found the unconscious member of Morning Star but...he was conscious once more.

"What, awake already, young man? That was fast."

"Damn you to hell for knocking me out without warning! Untie me already!"

"You really think I'll untie you just because you asked? Keep dreaming, boy."

Abel watched their quarrel disinterestedly. A few minutes later, Rihya and Lyn came in. They brought Oriana with them.

"Oriana! Are you okay? They didn't do anything terrible to you, right?"

The restrained man stopped arguing with Hilarion, his attention completely on her. He was obviously worried about her.

"I'm fine, Hector."

Then Warren walked in carrying the third and last of their Morning Star captives.

"Isaiah..." All the man named Hector could do was say his comrade's name in a strained voice. Because only Isaiah's head was visible as he lay slung over Warren's shoulder with rope circling him from neck to toe. To put it frankly, he looked like a bagworm.

Warren was expected to carry him from the outset.

"All right, members of the C-rank party Morning Star from the royal capital. Hector is the leader, then we have Oriana and Isaiah. We already know that you were hired by the Finance Minister's subordinate. Oh, right, I forgot to introduce myself. Well, I don't think I need to, but I'll do it anyway. The Kingdom of Knightley's chief royal magician, Hilarion Baraha, at your service." Then he pointed at Abel and continued. "And the one you tried to kidnap is Abel of Lune's B-rank party, Crimson Sword." With that, Hilarion revealed Abel's identity.

"B-rank..."

"No wonder..."

"Hrngh..."

It turned out that one of them was not only strung up like a caterpillar but also happened to have a gag in his mouth.

"Now, the biggest problem you lot currently face is..." Hilarion deliberately paused there to take a deep breath. "Your support of the Finance Minister, who's suspected of high treason."

His words sent a shock wave through all three of them. They looked like they were on the verge of collapse after being knocked hard in the head by something. High treason was the crime of rebelling against the royal family. The Kingdom considered the crime much heavier than treason against the country itself, so the punishment was much more severe too. Most convicted of high treason were either sentenced to the death penalty or life imprisonment. And if they were found guilty of aiding the Finance Minister, they would face one of those two judgments...

Hector, the leader, was the first to speak. "No way..." he said.

"With that said, considering you helped him without knowing anything, it's plain as day that they'll abandon you to the wolves

without a second thought, which makes your plight a sad one. But if you choose to cooperate with us, I don't mind intervening with His Majesty on your behalf. What do you say?"

"A-Are you serious?" Hector asked. He seemed to feel the most responsible because he was the party leader.

"Of course I am. I swear on the name of Hilarion Baraha the Great," Hilarion answered with an emphatic nod.

Hector looked at Oriana and Isaiah. Both inclined their heads in silent agreement.

"Okay. Then we'll rely on your compassion, Hil...Lord Hilarion."

Hilarion smiled with satisfaction upon hearing that.

"Excellent. Oh, right, there's one more thing I need to tell you young'uns. The other two of your party went after Abel's friends, didn't they?" Hilarion asked.

"Yes," Hector answered.

"Well, one of them is Baron Kenneth Hayward, whose title was conferred by the king himself. That, plus the fact he's a full-fledged noble, means big trouble if something happens to him."

"Th-Those two are only supposed to verify their identities! We don't have any intention of doing anything to His Majesty's nobles!" Hector shouted in desperation.

"Hm. For your sake, I pray that's the truth. All right then, let's get to the heart of the matter. What we want you to do is help Abel go undercover."

"Undercover?" Hector tilted his head in confusion.

"Yes, so we can obtain proof of the Finance Minister's high treason. It's especially vital we have as much as possible considering we're talking about a national leader committing the crime. Your party will capture Abel as planned and take him to Fuca's subordinate. That's essentially your role in this."

"Is that really all we have to do?" Hector sounded almost disappointed. Up until now, he'd been relentlessly threatened by the old man, so he had braced himself for an unreasonable request. But all they were being asked to do was carry out their original task.

"You got it. So are you going to help us or not?"

"We will. As long as you don't go back on your word," Hector

replied with a firm nod.

"They conduct stringent security checks. It won't be possible to take you in armed," Hector said when he saw Abel hide a dagger on his person. Everyone was doing their final checks after finishing their preparations.

"Also, that ball...I think you should put it somewhere harder to find."

He was referring to the transmitter, a thumb-sized ball. Abel had put it in his pocket, assuming anyone who searched him would think it was a rock. But now...Hector was pointing out the flaw in his idea.

"Huh, guess you have a point..." Abel almost sounded like he was mumbling to himself. "Then the problem is where to hide it."

"What if you sew it into your clothes?" Hector sensibly suggested.

"Why not hold it in your mouth the entire time?" Rihya said bitingly.

"Yeah, then just swallow it and carry it in your stomach!" Lyn took her friend's caustic remark to the extreme before immediately hiding behind Warren.

"Should I really be trusting these jerks with my life..." Abel lamented, gazing up at the ceiling.

◆

Morning Star's hideout, somewhere in the royal capital. Hector, Oriana, and Isaiah carried Abel, tied up and stuffed in a bag.

"Jeez, Hector, you're late."

Kenjii and Taarou let them in. The two of them had returned first.

"Yeah, well, let's just say we got held up," Hector said with a sigh from the depths of his soul.

"As far as the three we followed, one went into the Royal Center for Alchemy and the other two entered the Royal Order of Knights' housing. Since all we had to do was see where they went, we came back once we had our answer. That was good enough, right?" Kenjii asked Hector.

"Yeah, plenty. Moving forward, don't lay a finger on any of those

three.”

“Huh?” Puzzled, Kenjii tilted his head in response to Hector’s command.

“We found out they’re nobles and one of them got that way thanks to His Majesty himself personally bestowing the title on him. So. Not a single finger. Don’t report about them to the client either. We didn’t see anything. Got it?”

“G-Got it.” Kenjii nodded automatically in the face of Hector’s intensity.

“All the client wanted was this man. Once we hand him over, they won’t give a rat’s ass about anything else. He was drinking alone, then we captured him on his way back. That’s our story and we’re sticking to it. Understood?”

“Yup, understood,” Kenjii replied. Taarou nodded.

When Hector said things like this, the two of them knew from their long friendship with their party leader that something had gone wrong. And they also knew from experience that in such cases, the best thing to do was to wait for Hector to solve the problem. So they had no qualms doing as he asked.

They let Abel out of the sack around half an hour later. He could hear drunken voices laughing from beyond the door on the left.

“The barracks for hired adventurers,” Hector whispered to him.

At that moment, the leftmost door opened and a man walked out.

“That him?”

“Yeah, it is,” Hector replied.

“I’ll take him. You guys rest over there. Good job.”

Then the man called over another person from inside and the two sandwiched Abel between them before performing a security check on him. And just like Hector had said, it was a very thorough, stringent one.

“All right, walk.”

Once they finished, they marched Abel forward. After a brief, worried glance in his direction, Hector opened the door on the left and entered the adventurers’ barracks with his comrades.

Flanked by the two men, Abel walked down the hallway for a

while, then arrived at a deserted room. He estimated it was as big as two classrooms combined from his school days. Three men stood around a chair placed in the center of the room.

"Sit."

They forced him to take a seat on the chair. Only his arms were bound by rope. Did this mean the men were confident in their abilities? Or had they simply dropped their guard...

The moment the man in the front, who seemed to be the leader of the group, spoke, a different door from the one they'd entered opened, and two more men walked in carrying a cask. Upon seeing it, the five in the room started shouting in a panic.

"You idiots! That doesn't go in here!"

"Take it to the room all the way in the back. Hurry up!"

The two men carrying the cask bowed their heads in apology while leaving the room.

Well, they sure got their britches in a bunch... Wonder what's in it?

Abel felt like he'd found the thing he needed to investigate.

"Now then..." the man who seemed to be the leader said. "There's two things we want to ask you. One, who do you work for? And two, how much do you know?"

That first question is one I'd like to ask you bozos too. Then my *second question would be: "What the hell are you up to?"*

Abel retorted, but only in his mind. For a few minutes now, he'd been covertly inspecting their clothes and such in an attempt to ascertain their identities or which organization they belonged to. Unfortunately for him, none of the items they wore gave him any clues.

"You better answer before you find yourself in a world of hurt."

At those words, one of the men standing next to the leader took out a knife, his manner deliberately flashy and menacing. Abel opened his mouth when he saw that.

"Fine. I'll talk."

"Oho, guess you do have more brains than balls, eh?"

"Pain isn't my thing. The one who hired me is the knight

commander," Abel spoke without thinking.

He knew that the men surrounding him were connected to the Minister of Finance. He also knew that said official was overlooking Knight Commander Baccala's and Grand Chamberlain Sorel's crimes. So naturally, there must be a reason he was turning a blind eye to their illegal activities. It was also possible he was receiving favors. In either case, when it came to the three men, the Minister of Finance was the most powerful since he could expose the other two whenever he felt like it, leaving Baccala and Sorel outmatched.

Which begged the question—what would the pair do? Abel could think of two possibilities. One, do nothing and remain content with the status quo. Or two, get their hands on the Finance Minister's weakness and, if possible, obtain evidence of *his* misdeeds in order to ensure he couldn't expose them for theirs easily.

That explained why Abel's statement of working for the knight commander rang true. Of course, from his point of view, there was no physical evidence, and it was all just guesswork on top of guesswork on his part.

Interestingly, the leader reacted almost violently to his words.

"What did you say...?!" That was all he said before he fell silent.

His reaction shocked not only his lackeys but Abel as well, though he concealed his surprise.

Whoa, didn't see that coming. He basically just implied that the Minister of Finance was already suspicious about the knight commander making moves... Oh, man, this is a great lead, on top of the cask earlier too. I really hope my lucky streak keeps going! Going undercover was *the smart choice, after all.*

Abel nodded in his head countless times, pleased by the knowledge his decision hadn't been wrong.

Some time passed in silence, during which the leader seemed to be organizing his thoughts. Then, once he finished, he looked at Abel and questioned him further.

"So you say the knight commander hired you? Then why were you sniffing around?"

"To obtain proof of the Finance Minister's illegal activities, just in

case."

He wasn't lying either, regardless of the knight commander's involvement. Besides, as far as Baccala was concerned, even if Fuca was his ally *now*, that didn't mean he would be forever. Meaning it wouldn't be strange for the knight commander to conduct his own investigation seeking the same information for the day the Minister of Finance turned on him.

"I see. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"You could say that," Abel replied, pretending to be honest.

"Where is it?"

"I handed it over to someone I can trust. If they don't hear from me regularly, I told them to make sure the information ends up in the hands of the domestic affairs investigators."

Upon hearing his words, the leader's expression didn't change, but his underlings' did, shock eclipsing their faces. The domestic affairs investigators belonged to the department of domestic affairs and were responsible for looking into the crimes of government officials. Depending on the situation, they were sometimes even granted direct authority over nobles through royal decree.

"Interesting. Why them and not the knight commander?"

"Self-protection, of course. Why else?" Abel's knowing tone implied, "It takes one to know one." Considering how long he'd been an adventurer, he was able to pull off the act easily. However, contrary to his appearance, disturbing thoughts ran through his mind.

This guy's definitely a different breed than the others... No way is he used to this skull and dagger stuff. He might actually be a good guy on the inside, but that's not gonna help him here. He's the one to knock out and kidnap if things come to that. The other issue is dealing with the rest of these clowns.

Realistically speaking, this situation—unarmed, his hands bound, surrounded by five men—wasn't ideal. He needed to reduce their numbers just a bit...

"Hm. What do you say to selling us this proof you have? Naturally, if you won't do that, then we don't mind taking it by force either." The leader glanced pointedly at the knife-wielding man

standing next to him.

"Didn't I tell you I'm not a fan of pain? As long as you give me enough money and help me flee the country, then I think we can work something out."

"Fine. You got yourself a deal. Now tell me about this proof of yours in detail."

Abel floundered for a reply then. Obviously, he'd never had any such evidence in the first place.

"Uhhh, right, so about that—"

He suddenly started coughing, his face twisted in agony.

"You okay? Someone get him some water."

One of the thugs immediately left the room to obey the leader's command. In the meantime, Abel continued coughing, tumbling from the chair onto the floor.

"Son of a bitch, what's wrong with him? Hey, one of you get a cleric in here."

Another of the men left the room to do his bidding.

I think I can handle this many.

When one of the men approached him to check on him, Abel, still lying on the floor, grabbed his leg with his hands and dragged him down. At the same time, he rolled over and pressed his left foot onto the man's neck, rendering him unconscious. Then he took the knife from the man's belt.

The remaining lackey charged him after seeing what happened to his comrade. Abel held the knife with his hands still tied up. He blocked the man's punch with the outside of his arms, then with the knife turned sideways, stabbed it under his armpit.

"Gaaah!" Screaming pathetically, the man writhed on the floor. A bundle of nerves is located around the armpit area. Depending on the person, some people pass out if stabbed there... As a swordsman, Abel knew this from experience.

Finally, that left only Abel and the leader.

"I thought you wanted cash and a way to flee the country...?" The leader was slowly backing away. He clearly intended to escape through the door behind him.

"I lied. Sorry." That was all Abel said before he rushed the man.

“Hngggh...!” Unable to evade Abel’s dash, the leader collapsed in agony from the elbow he took to his solar plexus. For good measure, Abel kicked him in the head, knocking him unconscious. He was now finally able to cut through the rope binding his hands with the knife.

At that exact moment, the door to the room burst open and people came flying in—the three members of Crimson Sword and Hilarion. They knew from the “ball” sewn into his clothes that he’d already acted, so they had rushed into the building.

“Hi. Did you guys see a room like a barracks near the entrance? There should be a bunch of adventurers in there. Did they notice you?” Abel questioned them very casually.

“I erased any signs of us with my magic, so we’re A-okay,” Hilarion answered proudly.

“Goodness, Abel! Stop making us worry, will you?!” Rihya scolded him while clinging to his arm.

“Y-You’re right, that’s my bad,” he apologized meekly.

“So did you find any proof, boy? I’m thinking no, based on what we heard.”

“Maybe, maybe not. We can start with this guy.” Abel indicated the unconscious leader with a jerk of his chin. “It looks like he knows a lot, so we’re taking him with us. Warren, sorry to dump this on you all the time, but can you find a bag over there to carry him? Also, earlier, two guys came in carrying a cask and these guys freaked out when they saw it. That got me curious, so I wanna check it out.”

“Hm. He told them to take it to the room all the way in the back, right? Abel, you and I and...Rihya will go. Warren, Lyn, handle these men.”

So Abel, Hilarion, and Rihya slipped through the door in the back.

A wide hallway stretched outside the door. Since the room Abel had been interrogated in lay at one end of the hallway, they decided to walk down it to see what was on the other end. On the way, they knocked out the man who’d brought water, the man who’d brought a cleric, and the cleric too before continuing.

“This must be it.”

They arrived at a set of double doors. Abel pressed his ear to one of the doors to listen for any sounds, but he heard only silence.

"Let me try. *Bring to me the pulse and existence of life. Probe.*" Hilarion chanted the air magic spell. However...the speed with which he said the incantation was terrifyingly fast. It took him only a second.

"Doesn't matter how many times I hear you, I still can't believe it. I know you're just saying whatever, old man." Abel sounded both amazed and suspicious at the speed.

"Stop spouting nonsense, you idiot boy. This is just the natural result of long years of training and study. Nobody's inside."

Acknowledging Hilarion's words, Abel opened the doors and entered the room. It was twice as big as the one he'd been interrogated in. Fifty barrels just like the one he'd seen were lined up in the back.

"Hm," Hilarion murmured, lightly tapping the casks and listening closely to the sound. "Definitely not wine."

"'Course not," Abel said, exasperated by the elderly man's nonchalance. When he surveyed a few of them, he noticed a substance like black sand stuck to the top of the lids, like the contents had spilled over.

"Black sand?" Abel remarked with his head tilted in puzzlement.

"I don't believe it..." Hilarion was temporarily at a loss for words after touching the black sand and sniffing it. "Abel, we have to get out of here. *Now.*"

"O-Okay, got it."

Hardly anything ever flustered Hilarion. But now he advised them to draw with sweat beading on his forehead and his expression stiff. Abel too understood whatever this stuff was, it was legitimately dangerous. So the three of them hurried back to the room he'd been in, regrouped with Warren, carrying the leader in a sack, and Lyn, then walked quickly to the door that would lead them outside.

"Give me a second. I'll let them know too." Hilarion cracked open the door to the barracks where the adventurers had gathered and chanted. "*Wind, murmur. Carry my voice. Whisper.* Hector, it's Hilarion. Get yourself and your party out of here as fast as you can.

Then get away as far as you can."

After giving his message, the five of them hurried out of the building.

The Crimson Sword and Hilarion returned to the Institute for Magical Research fifteen minutes later, since only a kilometer separated the hideout and the Institute. Abel, Warren, and Hilarion headed directly underground on account of the leader trussed up in the bag. They went to the room where Hector, leader of Morning Star, had been questioned.

Once Warren put the still unconscious man down on the floor, Abel asked Hilarion, "So, what exactly was in those barrels, old man?"

Whatever the substance, it had been enough to panic a man of Hilarion's caliber. Abel would be lying if he said he wasn't curious.

"That is something called Black Dust.'"

"Black Dust?"

Well, it was definitely black...but more like sand than dust.

"It shouldn't be somewhere like that at *all*. Which means I'm real keen on hearing what this man has to say." Hilarion paused there. He had just gotten his first good look at the leader's face and...it turned out to be one he knew. "This is Lord Fuca's younger half brother. They share the same father but different mothers..."

"Brother?" Abel responded to Hilarion's shock with confusion. Involving his own brother in a conspiracy...if word got out, Fuca himself would be suspected of being part of it too. He thought anyone with a lick of common sense would come to the same conclusion.

"Yes, he is. Technically, Fuca has at least fifteen other half brothers. Let's just say his father was *brimming* with vitality. I'm pretty sure this one is the youngest out of them... He and Fuca are more than thirty years apart in age."

"Dang, you sure do know a lot about Fuca's family tree." Abel was honestly impressed by Hilarion's wealth of knowledge on the topic.

"Because his older brother, the one right above him, works here."

"What?"

"He's a researcher. Back when he used to commute from the family estate, this young man would tag along sometimes with him. I think his name is...Sica? And the older brother is Saca."

So it wasn't so much wealth of knowledge as it was the fact that this man was the younger brother of one of Hilarion's employees.

Okay, so Fuca's the oldest son, Saca is the fourteenth son, and Sica is the fifteenth...right?

Abel organized the information, which mostly consisted of the brothers' names...

Sica, the villainous man in question, opened his eyes thanks to Hilarion.

"Ngh... Where am I?" he mumbled.

"You're awake, eh?" Hilarion remarked.

"L-Lord Hilarion..." The man realized immediately who stood in front of him.

"Been a long time, Sica."

"Why are you here...?"

"Why don't you take a gander at him? That should help you answer your own question." Hilarion called Abel over to stand next to him.

"You're... From earlier..." Sica didn't know what else to say.

"Figured it out, boy? Also, bloody hell, Sica, you know better than anyone that Saca works for me. Well, if we're going to get bogged down in semantics, he works *in* this building."

"Then this is...Hilarion's Estate."

"Yup. And it's going to hurt me something fierce to tell your brother that you betrayed our country," Hilarion said with a shake of his head.

"W-Wait, please! I didn't do anything like that..."

"How can you say that after we saw what you hid away in your hideout?! I know damn well it was Black Dust!"

"That's..." Sica trailed off, unable to continue.

"You know exactly what it is and you also know it shouldn't be left somewhere like that."

Sica hung his head dejectedly in response to Hilarion's words and muttered, "We're just trying to put a stop to the black-market

trade...”

“You what now? Explain yourself, boy.”

Instead of answering Hilarion, Sica only sunk into a gloomy silence. Abel couldn’t take the silence, so he gave voice to the suspicions that had been niggling in his mind since seeing the casks earlier.

“Hey, old man, how about you tell me something while Sica gets his act together? What exactly is this Black Dust that was in the barrels?”

“Hm... I think it went into mass production after you became an adventurer, Abel. Maybe that’s why you don’t know. It’s...a powder that explodes when ignited by fire,” Hilarion answered him gravely.

“An explosion... Like the Inferno Magician’s Firestorm spell?”

“That’s right. The eastern region of the Kingdom is the only place in all of the Central Provinces where it’s mass-produced. Well, I use the term ‘mass production,’ but the amount isn’t actually much. But depending on how people use it, Black Dust will change the very shape of war. Which is exactly why we don’t export it and its very existence is a top secret even within the nation. It’s stored in special vaults exclusively here in the royal capital and in Llandewi under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Domestic Affairs. Baron Kenneth Hayward and I know about the vault here because we made it together, but...the stuff needs to be stored carefully. Despite the barrels being alchemized, the powder itself is incredibly unstable.”

Sica shook his head several times during Hilarion’s explanation. He seemed to be conflicted inside. Seeing that, the elderly man spoke to him gently.

“Sica. The fact that you’re so worried tells me a brother might be involved, eh?”

The words must have struck him hard because moments later, Sica jerked his head up to stare wide-eyed at Hilarion.

“What?” Hilarion said. “You thought I didn’t know how all your older brothers dote on you? Even Fuca, the oldest and thirty years older than you.” He deliberately paused then, evidently having an inkling of the situation at hand. “Abel. I give you my word, so can I tell him who you really are?”

"What?" Abel was shocked by the elderly man's sudden proposal.

The eyes he cast at Hilarion said, "Here? *Now*?" But he only hesitated for a few seconds.

"Yeah, all right," he acquiesced with a shrug.

"Thanks. Sica, this adventurer is Abel and his real name is Albert Besford Knightley. He's the second son of His Royal Majesty, Stafford IV."

Sica's eyes widened even more and his mouth fell open in shock this time.

"You understand, don't you? That the best thing you can do for yourself now is tell us everything here. Before it's too late. I, Hilarion Baraha, and he, Prince Albert, will act as witnesses to your testimony. If you want extenuating circumstances to be taken into consideration, you can't ask for better allies than us, you know."

Ah, so that's why he wanted to reveal my identity. Leniency in case one of his brothers is *involved. And even if that's not possible, at least this way, Sica can avoid his entire family being crushed. 'Cuz the old man knew he'd do whatever it takes to avoid the worst-case scenario.*

So Abel thought to himself.

"All right..." A full twenty seconds lapsed before Sica spoke again. "As you already surmised, Lord Hilarion, I'm trying to help my brothers." Then he bit his lip anxiously.

"And Lord Fuca, the Minister of Finance, is involved, right?"

"Yes, Sir... He's the guardian to all of us younger brothers..."

Fuca's and Sica's parents were no longer in this world. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why Fuca took such good care of his fourteen younger brothers. And maybe this time, he had used his family's situation to his advantage...

"Are any of you being threatened?" Hilarion asked him quietly.

Sica nodded and replied, "Luca... He's been kidnapped. His captors extorted Fuca into selling Black Dust on the black market..."

"Aha. Let's see... Luca's the fourth son, right? Regardless, Fuca's the Kingdom's Minister of Finance. The most powerful minister, to boot. Everyone in the country knows how deeply he cares for his siblings, which means the boy's kidnappers...aren't fellow citizens. A

foreign power then?”

“Luca isn’t in the Kingdom. We learned that much from our investigation. As for the person at the center of it all...” Sica stopped talking at this point. Despite everything he’d disclosed so far, he was still hesitant to say any more.

“Sica, if you don’t tell us everything you know, we can’t help you,” Hilarion said. His words were harsh, but his tone was gentle. He couldn’t begin to imagine how afraid the boy and his siblings must be with their beloved brother abducted and taken abroad somewhere.

“I understand. Originally, the Black Dust was only supposed to be transported to...” It seemed like he had to force the rest of his response from his throat: “...to Carlyle.”

“What?! Did you...” Hilarion paused, speechless. The same could be said of Abel standing next to him. Carlyle was a city in the Kingdom’s north. It was the capital of the Dukedom of Flitwick and sizable enough to claim the title of the north’s second-largest city.

The larger issue—and the reason for their shock—was Duke Flitwick himself. The current duke was Raymond, King Stafford IV’s younger brother. In short, Sica had just testified to a royal prince’s act of treason.

“This is beyond...” Overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation, even Hilarion couldn’t find the right words to keep going.

The silence stretched for a while and Abel broke it first.

“Let’s map all this out right. The Black Dust in the capital’s special vault is being diverted onto the black market, then transported to Carlyle in the north. All of this happened because the Finance Minister’s younger brother, Luca, was kidnapped by people trying to extort Fuca. Luca was taken out of the country. So far, so good?”

“Yes.” Sica nodded weakly in response to Abel’s question. He had started to understand not just in his head but also in his heart that his only option now was to reveal everything to him and Hilarion.

“In that case, there are still a few things we don’t know. First, why is there still Black Dust here in the capital even though it should have already left on the black market?”

"Though we were forced to smuggle it out, Fuca understood how dangerous the stuff is and that it can become an extremely powerful weapon if it falls into the hands of someone plotting a rebellion. So most of what we sent to Carlyle were fakes that only looked like the real thing. We did mix in some real ones to deceive them a few times. The information about the special storage vault had also been leaked, so we had no choice but to store the amount that was supposed to have been smuggled out somewhere else, and that's where it ended up..." Sica answered.

"Got it. Then my next question has to do with Carlyle—specifically Duke Flitwick. If he really is a traitor and Luca is stashed somewhere abroad, then that means he's joined forces with a foreign power. Right?"

"Yes..."

"Which country is it?" The quietness of Abel's voice showed how incredibly vital the answer to his question was. Which country was in league with Duke Flitwick, also Prince Raymond, and plotting to act against the Kingdom's key figures? Depending on the answer, war was a possibility too.

"My brother was abducted by the Handalieu Federation."

The Handalieu Federation was one of the three major countries in the Central Provinces, alongside the Kingdom of Knightley and the Debuhi Empire. Its territory bordered the Kingdom's eastern region and the Empire's southeastern region.

Ten years ago, it fought a large-scale war with the Kingdom and lost. As a result, its neighboring vassal states, such as the Principality of Inverey, gained complete independence. In addition, part of the Federation's territory was ceded to the Kingdom, dealing a considerable blow to the country.

Given this background, naturally, relations between the two nations weren't good. However, a peace treaty had been signed, diplomatic ties restored, and people and goods flowed freely between them. They were by no means at war.

"Hm? The Federation and Duke Flitwick?" Hilarion muttered.

"Don't tell me those rumors are true."

"Yes, they are," Sica affirmed.

"What rumors?" Abel asked.

"That the duke and Lord Aubrey of the Federation have formed a secret pact," Sica explained.

"Wait, a secret pact? With *the* Lord Aubrey, the Federation's current de facto leader who became its chancellor after the Great War?"

"Yup. Not a man you should let your guard down around," Hilarion cautioned.

During the Great War, Abel had still lived in the royal palace, so he'd had access to a great deal of information about the affairs of other countries. Although he wasn't on the same level as his older brother, who had already gained a reputation as a shrewd and intelligent, albeit frail, prince by then, he nevertheless learned what he could about other nations.

"Then...Duke Flitwick wants the throne while Lord Aubrey wants to reclaim the territory the Federation lost in the conflict?" Abel laid out a plausible scenario.

"That's what people are speculating. The diplomat who made the accusation committed suicide in the compound where he was under protective custody after the first hearing, so a lot about this still remains a mystery."

"So what you're saying is he was silenced."

An assassination disguised as a suicide to keep someone quiet... Such a phenomenon apparently exists in any world.

"But...if someone that powerful really is involved in an operation of this scale, then...it's only a matter of time before they realize the Black Dust you've been smuggling is fake." Hilarion sounded worried.

"Yes, we're prepared for that possibility. A separate task force should be rescuing Luca right around now. It's made up of the best of the best under Fuca's direct command. Ultimately, the Black Dust business was just a strategy to buy time for the rescue... The amount we stole can be used as evidence, but you also have to keep in mind that Black Dust is a top secret product, and many people don't know the actual amount the Kingdom has. Meaning no one is

in a position to pursue the matter openly."

Sica's response only served to further confirm Hilarion's concerns.

Once Minister Fuca had his brother back, he might be planning to confront Duke Flitwick using the real Black Dust he'd moved as evidence. Of course, he could be doing this for the good of the Kingdom. However, at the same time, he wouldn't let anyone get away with laying a hand on his precious brother, even if that person was the king's younger brother... So perhaps he was conveying that intention through his machinations.

Seriously though... Uncle Raymond...?

Because from the perspective of King Stafford IV's second son, Abel, Duke Flitwick was also his Uncle Raymond.

To begin with, Stafford IV and his younger brother Raymond had never been on good terms. One reason that might explain this was that they were half brothers, the sons of the previous king's first and second queens, respectively. Also, with Stafford IV having mastered both magic and swordsmanship to a high level, not to mention possessing outstanding ability as a statesman, his younger brother must have had a hard time living in his shadow.

Raymond wasn't incompetent by any means, but not only did he lack Stafford's openness and charm, he was also somewhat introverted. However, the situation was more than enough for the royal family. A younger brother was just a younger brother. A spare heir. If he were to surpass his elder brother, there would have been an uproar in the family. And worst-case scenario, a civil war... If the Empire or the Federation intervened, the Kingdom would be in danger of collapse.

But even if the royal family was satisfied with the status quo, Raymond was a human being. He had his own feelings and pride. Complicated feelings could arise between brothers even in normal families. And this was especially true of a member of royalty...

Fuca is the oldest, Luca is the fourth son, Saca is the fourteenth, and Sica, in front of me, is the fifteenth... I need to make sure I get all their names straight, Abel thought, then inwardly shook his head.

He looked as if he were deep in thought, and he was in fact thinking about the king's younger brother, Raymond... Simultaneously, while updating his mental catalog of the brothers' names, Abel might also have been infected by the mindset of a certain water magician he knew...

"Spend time with the wise and you will become wise, but the friends of fools will suffer." An apt saying indeed.

Just as they finished verifying all the information, the ground shook.

"An earthquake? Kinda rare to have one in the capital, huh?"

"I don't think that was an earthquake..." Hilarion rushed out of the room.

"Sica, Warren, you two stay here. It'll be bad if people see you in particular, Sica."

That was the only thing Abel said before he too dashed out of the room and up the stairs to the first floor. The two men exited the building at almost the exact same time. They both surveyed their surroundings and saw a column of smoke rising from the east.

"That must be it." Then Hilarion chanted. "*Wind, carry me in your hands. Float.*"

An instant after his rapid-fire incarnation, Hilarion's body levitated off the ground. Ten meters, twenty meters...then he rose higher than the Institute.

"Old man, what's happening?" Abel shouted from below.

Hilarion took it as an opportunity to leisurely descend once more. "It's the building we were in. I'm pretty sure the Black Dust caused the explosion. The entire surrounding area is damaged."

"Shit. There goes our evidence."

They didn't know who was responsible. It might even be an accident, but the timing was too convenient for that. So it was only natural to think that the explosion was triggered by someone.

"I'll check out the site later. Abel, I want you to focus on protecting Sica."

"You mean there's a possibility they'll erase him too?" Abel replied to Hilarion with a nod.

“Exactly. Which reminds me, I sure hope Morning Star made it out safely...”

Hilarion had urged Hector, leader of the party known as Morning Star, to escape from the hideout as quickly as possible when he and Crimson Sword were departing...

“I think they’re fine. They may not be saints, but they’re still C-rank adventurers. Plus, the famous Hilarion himself warned them. So even they must have realized something dangerous stunk to high heaven there.”

Any adventurer worth their salt who had reached C-rank should have been able to avoid such danger. As an adventurer himself, Abel had a high opinion of his fellow adventurers.

◆

The soldiers deployed to an accident were usually tasked with preventing curious onlookers from approaching the scene. And in situations like this one, where trouble was abound in the royal capital, the number of onlookers was unusually high. As a result, even soldiers who were supposed to be on leave had been mustered to the location. Even then, the rubbernecks still outnumbered them.

For this reason, a type of alchemical device, a red no-entry rope, had been used to cordon off the scene. Touching it caused a shock to race through the person’s body. It was a rope designed to prevent curiosity-seekers from trespassing any farther.

However, an elderly person grabbed said rope, lifted it, and passed under it into the area. Right in front of the soldiers’ very eyes.

“Hey, old man, you can’t come in here,” one of the soldiers said. “Wait—why isn’t the rope zapping you?”

“Hmph. Because I helped make it, you dolt. I know how it works better than anyone.”

“What?”

“I’m Hilarion Baraha, the chief royal magician. Now be a good lad and bring me whoever’s in charge.”

Everybody froze solid for a few seconds after hearing his remark. Then, one of the soldiers finally grasped what he'd said and rushed off to do Hilarion's bidding. The remaining soldiers stayed quiet, glancing uneasily at each other. None of them had the confidence to deal appropriately with the sudden appearance of one of the country's authority figures. Especially since the only one among them who'd spoken to him addressed him as "old man"...

That very same soldier looked deathly pale. It was easy to see his pallor even in the dark of night.

A minute later, the soldier in charge of the investigation hurried toward them.

"Apologies for the wait, Lord Hilarion. I'm Lex, vice captain of the capital's garrison," Lex introduced himself with a salute.

"Thanks for coming. I know you're busy, but would you mind telling me what's going on? Especially since the blast earlier shook my laboratory too. Not to mention all the researchers aren't getting any work done on account of fussing over the smoke and whatnot. As the head of the Institute, I have a duty to give them an explanation too, you know. So why don't you tell me what you know?"

"I understand. At the moment, we have an investigator on the scene. However, frankly speaking, not much information has been communicated to us yet..."

"Allow me to step in," someone said, inserting themself into the conversation.

"Earl Harold Lawrence himself, eh? So the Minister of Domestic Affairs was already here? That was fast."

"Well, it wasn't exactly a minor explosion, was it? With chaos erupting in the royal palace too, I knew I had no choice except to rush here as soon as possible," Lawrence explained in response.

But it hasn't even been that long, Hilarion thought. *Methinks he got here way too fast because something's not adding up.*

The moment that hint of suspicion sprung into a corner of Hilarion's mind, Lawrence continued. "According to the investigator, some sort of fire spell went out of control."

"I don't know of any fire magic capable of causing an explosion of that scale," Hilarion replied, looking entirely unconvinced by the investigator's findings.

"I, for one, find it hard to believe there's a spell you're unaware of, Lord Hilarion. That said, other possibilities exist. Perhaps the perpetrator failed to execute a spell fusing alchemy or several of them activated some kind of magic simultaneously and they lost control."

"Hm. Fusing alchemy with magic, eh..."

Hilarion fell deep into thought. Of course, he knew that the explosion had actually been caused by Black Dust. However, the recently announced "alchemical fusion magic" itself was a research topic that interested him as well. As such, he had studied it in much more depth than ordinary magicians. Because of this, Hilarion knew that the current state of alchemical fusion magic couldn't possibly produce that level of destructive power. But there was no point pursuing this argument. He had something more important to verify right now.

"I think I get the gist. Oh, what about injuries or fatalities? This building looks a right mess, you know. I see some damage to other buildings in the vicinity too."

"It's in a terrible state indeed. The remains of ten people were discovered on the first floor of this building. Based on the items scattered about, we believe they were adventurers. That in itself is one piece of evidence for our alchemical fusion magic theory."

Except there aren't any bloody adventures who can even use it yet! So that's literally impossible! Hilarion raged in his mind.

"Ten adventurers, huh? Do you know who they are?"

"No, not yet. Does it interest you to learn their identities?"

For a moment, Harold Lawrence's attitude shifted...or so it seemed to Hilarion. Poking his nose into things too much would be dangerous, so he decided to tread carefully.

"Yes. I've been trying to recruit talented adventurers to try their hand at fusion magic at the Institute after they retire. Especially if they've already caught my eye in the past... Sadly, since they're dead, I'll need to find replacements as soon as possible," Hilarion

answered blithely.

"I see your point. Staff from the adventurers' guild are identifying them as we speak. It shouldn't be long now before they make their report..."

That was when a man approached them. Hilarion knew him as well: Josiah Onsager, submaster of the royal capital's adventurers' guild.

"Lord Minister, we've finished identifying the bodies. Oh, Lord Hilarion. How do you do?"

"Fine, fine, Josiah. Been a while, eh?"

"Tell us who they were, Mr. Onsager," Lawrence asked.

Josiah grimaced. "The adventures were definitely based here. Six members of the C-rank party Dragon Claw, and four members of the D-rank party Black Shadow."

Josiah was clearly heartbroken by the death of his friends. As for Hilarion, he was relieved to learn that Morning Star hadn't been caught up in the blast.

The six must have been the adventurers in the barracks. So the four likely came back after we left. Just awful luck for them all...

Hilarion grieved for the poor souls.

"Is that so? How terribly unfortunate. Thank you for your service. Once we complete our investigation and take care of the formalities, we'll return the bodies to the guild. Please be patient in the meantime."

"Understood. Thank you from me as well."

His conversation with Harold Lawrence over, Josiah left, walking toward the guild.

"I think it's about time I head back too. Apologies for any bother, Lord Courtesy."

"No bother at all."

The throng of onlookers naturally parted for him when he strode toward them. Then he was on his way back to the Institute.

An enigmatic light glimmered briefly in Lawrence's eyes as he watched Hilarion go. Then he returned to his duties at the scene of the explosion.

◆

The day after the explosion in the royal capital, Prince Willie, Master Rodrigo, and their entourage of escorts, which included Ryo, were continuing their journey toward the capital on the Kingdom's Second Highway. Because this national road passed through many towns and cities, they usually spent the night in an inn somewhere. It was a wonderful thing when you didn't have to keep watch in shifts at night while camping under the stars. In exchange, they had to make good time on the road during the day.

Since their time in Wingston, the east's largest city, Cohn generally acted as the carriage's driver. Not only was this man an adroit adventurer, he also proved to be an excellent coachman. Ryo baselessly assumed that Cohn had trained himself mentally since childhood. Such capable personnel were worth their weight in gold. Though Ryo arrogantly thought these kinds of things, he was technically Cohn's subordinate.

And perhaps precisely because Cohn was such a skilled man, he heard both the sounds of swords clashing carried over the wind and the horses' restless whinnying.

"Hey, something's happening in the forest, toward the north," he called out to the three individuals inside after sliding open the partition from the driver's seat. The guards and adventures around the vehicle immediately went on high alert.

"Yes, I can hear it too. Smells like trouble to me. Your Highness, what do you suggest we do?" Ryo already had a feeling what the prince's answer would be, but he asked him anyway.

"If anyone is under attack, I would very much like to help them..."

No one had come to their aid when they'd been under fire. No surprise there. After all, no one wanted to willingly get themselves into trouble. Or perhaps no one else had been passing through on the highway then... However, if others *were* in fact in trouble like they themselves had been a few days ago, he wanted to lend a hand... So Prince Willie thought.

There was a chance of injuries or loss of life—but he might not

have thought that far ahead. Nevertheless, the adults around the young prince marveled at his caring nature, which explained why they didn't want him to grow up to be someone who felt entitled to being served and provided for simply because he was royalty.

"Understood. Then us six adventurers will take a look. Ryo and the guards will stay with you, Your Highness," Cohn said, handing out his orders that reflected his absolute trust in Ryo.

The most important thing was ensuring Prince Willie's safety. And only Ryo could ensure it absolutely. That was why Cohn left Ryo attending to the young man while he and the other adventurers braved the unknown in the woods.

"I'll protect His Highness. Without fail," Ryo promised Cohn.

When Ryo activated Passive Sonar to investigate the area, he discovered around ten people moving four hundred meters away. Passive Sonar worked just barely at this distance in places like this one, dense with trees. Maybe that was why Cohn, with his keen hearing, had heard the noises first, since he sat outside the carriage while Ryo was inside. Such incredible ears the man had! After telling him the distance and number of people, Cohn nodded, then took off running in their general direction with the other adventurers.

The coach had been pulled over into the shade of a tree along the highway. Ryo waited on top of the roof while Prince Willie and Master Rodrigo remained inside. Based on what Passive Sonar told him, Cohn waited and watched the group of strangers for a bit before charging in. But that wasn't what concerned Ryo.

Seems like there's five people somewhere else...?

They had quietly sneaked to a location two hundred meters from the scene of the battle. However, the five weren't moving. Perhaps they were observing.

Are they just randoms who have nothing to do with the original group and came to watch? Trying to see how the situation pans out? It's possible. Not wanting to get involved in something annoying but still feeling curious about it... People are people, hm?

Meanwhile, it seemed like the matter was settled. All six adventurers were unhurt. Besides them, only two others were alive.

"Your Highness, they're coming back with two individuals who survived."

"Truly?! I'm so glad they're safe. And that they managed to help..." Then Prince Willie trailed off.

"My lord?"

"Ryo, was my judgment wrong?"

He'd decided to place his people's lives in danger to rescue others. That reality was likely what troubled him.

"Your Highness, there is no right or wrong answer in quandaries like this one. On some occasions, your decision would be the right one, and on others, you would be criticized for it. However, whatever choice you make, you must be prepared to take responsibility for it until the very end. And on the off chance something happens, you have to be ready to take action too."

"What do you mean?"

"For example, let's say Cohn and the others had died this time. What would you do then? Especially for their surviving family members who may be living abroad? Or what if they'd been seriously wounded instead? Would you leave them behind and continue onward to the Kingdom's capital? Depending on the severity of their injuries, you might have even been forced to do just that. Or...if the people they went to help attacked us instead...just like last time."

Prince Willie stiffened just the slightest bit upon hearing all that. After rescuing him from the Sect of Assassins, Ryo had explained why they had targeted him in the first place: Their leader wanted the prince's blood. At the time, Willie wasn't afraid but the shock of learning his body had been a target didn't dissipate so easily.

Knowing all this, Ryo had posed all these hypotheticals to him. This was something the young prince *had* to overcome. And Ryo had decided he could.

"What would you do if they were villains instead? Even if we defeat them here, what would you do if others continue to target you? There's a lot you have to think about. Moving forward, I believe it's vital for you to think about these kinds of things so that you're able to make the decisions you need to."

"Such a difficult predicament..."

"There's no denying that. It's not like you have to become capable right away. Just start becoming aware of things like this little by little..."

Predict the outcome and then make a decision. No matter what world, what situation, or what position you are in, you will always experience this.

At sixteen, Prince Willie was still young, but it wasn't a bad idea for him to gain this experience now. Ryo believed this.

Just as Cohn and his band of adventurers, along with the two others, came into view of those inside the carriage, the group of five who'd been watching and waiting moved to pursue Cohn and the rest of them.

Ryo stood up on the roof of the carriage, his gaze focused on the eight. The two individuals they'd rescued were injured and unable to run quickly.

"*Ice Wall 8.*"

He constructed the wall of ice to protect them in the event that the five strangers actually attacked. Within the confines of a forest, any sort of long-range attack, whether arrows or magic, would be incredibly difficult to execute... But not impossible.

A stitch in time saves nine. It was best to make the first move.

And just as Ryo expected, two arrows flew from the group of five. They hurtled straight toward the necks of the two people Cohn and his adventurers had rescued...

Klang. Klang. The ice wall repelled the arrows before they found their marks.

The duo under attack appeared stunned by the loud sound of something crashing into a hard surface behind them. When they whipped around, they saw the arrows fallen on the ground.

"This way!" Ryo shouted from atop the carriage.

Without a moment's delay, they headed toward him. Cohn and the others arrived almost at the same time.

"Ryo?"

"There are five others, separate from the ones you took down,"

Ryo replied to Cohn's unspoken question.

His answer surprised them all, including Prince Willie and Master Rodrigo inside the vehicle.

"Those two arrows they fired came from a distance of two hundred meters away, plotting a course directly for these two's necks. The archers are terrifyingly skilled."

"Aiming for their necks from that far...? That would rank them among any country's best..." Cohn said with a shake of his head. It was a truly difficult shot.

The enemy went on the move while the group conversed.

"Four of them have split off, two going left and two right. They're coming closer. Only one of them hasn't moved from the same spot. I'll intercept them with my wall of ice. Everyone, position yourselves around the carriage."

At his words, all eight stood with their backs to the coach. Willie stuck his head out of a window.

"Cohn, I'll back you up. Everyone else, be on the defensive. *10-Layer Ice Wall Package.*"

With the exception of Cohn, a wall of ice surrounded the group in all directions.

"Protect those two," he barked at the other adventurers. It was obvious he intended to handle their assailants on his own. Their defenses were perfect. All that was left...

"I'll stop the pair coming from the right, so I'll leave the two coming from the left to you, Cohn."

"Got it," Cohn replied to Ryo's instructions.

Considering we now have two strangers in our midst, I shouldn't use magic that's too *flashy. That means... An Ice Wall to stop them!*

"What the hell? There's an invisible wall here," a confused voice said, coming from their right.

Ryo had succeeded in immobilizing them by enclosing the duo in an Ice Wall. Next up, the two on the left.

"They're almost on us!"

At Ryo's signal, Cohn held his sword at the ready.

Bellowing, two attackers charged.

"Grrraaarrr!!! Whoa!"

But before they could get within reach of Cohn...the first one slipped.

Ice Bahn.

"Gaaaaaah... Dwah!"

And then...the second one did too, tumbling dramatically.

For a moment, Cohn couldn't comprehend what had happened. Nevertheless, he acted almost reflexively upon seeing the fallen men. He rushed toward them and kicked one in the head, knocking him out. He did the same thing to the other man when he tried to scramble to his feet.

"All right, now the two from the right!" Ryo shouted immediately.

"Leave it to me!" Cohn moved to the right side of the carriage and readied his sword again.

Ice Wall, release.

Almost instantly, the other pair of attackers rushed forward.

"Haaaah!!! Hrngh!"

Just like his comrades, the first one slipped and fell in front of Cohn, who executed an explosive kick at him without delay.

"Eat shiiit...! No—"

The last one also slipped and fell, then also found himself kicked in the head.

Thus the battle ended.

Wait a minute, what about the fifth one...? When the heck did they even disappear?

Ryo couldn't detect their presence in range of his Passive Sonar.

"The four who charged us are all geared for melee combat, which means...the fifth one must have been the archer capable of firing in succession at high speed, with precision to boot," Ryo remarked as he studied their equipment.

"That is...a very logical conclusion. What a ridiculously talented bowman," Cohn responded with a small shake of his head.

He and the other adventurers tied up the four men with spools of rope they got from the coach. In the meantime, Ryo handed out potions he'd bought in a city to the two people who'd been chased.

"You have my gratitude."

"Thank you."

Each thanked him.

Amid all this, Prince Willie and Master Rodrigo disembarked from the carriage.

"Allow me to present His Highness Willie from the Monarchy of Joux," the latter said.

The strangers' eyes widened in surprise. Judging by their expressions, they had assumed, from his fine clothing, that he was of the aristocracy...but to think he was actually a prince.

"I-I'm Matthew and this is Luca," one of them said, then they both lowered their heads respectfully at Willie.

Rodrigo acknowledged their greetings and proceeded to introduce everyone else in their group, including Ryo.

With the introductions over, naturally, the next question to come up was, "Why were you fighting with them?" Matthew looked to Luca, who nodded, giving his silent permission. So Matthew posed the query.

"The truth is, we were part of the task force deployed to rescue Luca, who was abducted by the Handalieu Federation."

The words "abducted" and "rescue" told Ryo they'd gotten themselves tangled up in quite the quagmire. He sighed quietly. Rodrigo and Cohn must have felt the same, but as expected of their training, neither man's face betrayed their resignation.

"We were headed to the royal capital, but our pursuers overwhelmed us and now I'm the only one left of my unit..."

Then...in the eyes of the Kingdom, these two probably aren't criminals.

Ryo found himself secretly relieved by the thought. The Federation might have considered them lawbreakers, but at the very least, these men could enter the Kingdom of Knightley's royal capital without issue.

"Master Rodrigo, I'd like a word in private."

Then Cohn and Rodrigo walked a short distance away from the coach to talk. They must have been discussing what to do about the two strangers. If they were to be thought of as additional escorts, well, the more the merrier. Although the Sect of Assassins had

stopped attacking them, they weren't the only groups after Willie. However, the fact remained that they were also being chased by foreigners. If they were taken in as part of Willie's entourage, there was a good chance of trouble.

The next city on this highway was Stone Lake, a two-hour walk from here. From there, it would require another two days to reach Crystal Palace, the royal capital.

If it comes down to a toss-up, taking Willie's feelings into account will probably mean...we'll take both of them.

Ryo thought to himself.

And in the end, Rodrigo and Cohn suggested to the pair that they accompany their group on the journey to the capital.

"We are, of course, grateful for the offer. Unfortunately..."

"We're being hunted. Chances are good they'll come after us again."

Despite their gratitude, both Matthew and Luca expressed their concerns.

"Let us deal with that if or when the time comes."

Prince Willie nodded happily in response to Master Rodrigo's suggestion.

◆

They now had a plan of action. The only thing left was deciding what to do with the four captives.

"They don't seem like adventurers to me," Ryo muttered to no one in particular.

"Oh? Is that right?" Prince Willie remarked with his head tilted curiously.

Ryo said this even though their equipment resembled that of adventurers specializing in close-quarter combat...

"I don't know how to describe it, but...I just don't feel the grizzled aura characteristic of adventurers from them."

Then Ryo glanced surreptitiously at Cohn.

"Damn you, Ryo," Cohn grunted. "Why did you glance at me just then?"

Ryo looked away. “No reason...”

“I see...” Mr. Rodrigo murmured thoughtfully as he compared the four captives to Cohn.

“Oh, come on, not you too, Mr. Rodrigo!” Cohn lamented.

“The difference is the stubble, yes?” Rodrigo commented, his eyes still on the attackers.

“Ohhh... That’s a very good point. I’m just now realizing that many adventurers don’t shave their five o’ clock shadows, same as Cohn. In contrast, these four clearly groom themselves properly. Almost as if they’re knights...”

All the knights of Lune always paid close attention to their appearance. Ryo had imagined the faces of a few he knew thanks to his frequent mock battles with Sera at the order’s training ground.

“Posing as adventurers despite having the air of knights... Something smells fishy,” Cohn said bluntly.

Their carriage had been parked on the side of the highway. It went without saying that passersby gawked curiously at the bound captives even as they went silently on their way. Those who stuck their necks into clearly troublesome business were few and far between.

Then one of the four finally opened his eyes.

“Have a nice rest, friend?” Cohn spoke to him.

When the man realized his hands and feet were bound, and his comrades were in the same state, he tightened his lips. “Hmph.”

“Guess you understand the situation, huh? So why don’t you tell us who exactly you are?”

He, of course, remained silent.

“You know, I’m not good at this kind of thing... Hey, Ryo, you have a stomach for the tougher things in life, right?” Cohn’s tone was such that he might as well have been saying, “You love alcohol, right?”

“I really don’t understand why you’re suddenly roping me into this, but all right, I’ll bite. The truth is, I struggle with this sort of role too. What’s the word? Interrogator? Torturer? Not long ago, I tried my hand at using an ice saw with another captive, but...let’s

just say I didn’t do a great job.”

As he spoke, Ryo recalled his time with Abel when they’d infiltrated the Grand Duchy of Volturino and forced the soldiers they’d captured to confess the truth. He was only talking about his failure, so why was the man trembling? Cohn was frowning too.

Perhaps they’d interpreted his tale as “torture gone wrong.” From a general perspective then, that meant he’d allowed the target to die without extracting the necessary information. It was vital to choose your words carefully.

“However, I’ve learned from my mistakes, so this time around, I’d like to try other methods. For example, plunging a thin ice needle into your eye or gouging your frozen heart from your chest and showing it to you... Yes, I do believe these will work just fine.”

Naturally, Ryo was just setting the stage. He wasn’t planning on actually torturing the man, merely discussing how best to present it. For whatever reason, he spoke loudly enough for the target in question to hear him... But that was nothing more than a careless oversight on his part.

“Uhhh, Ryo, I think that might be overdoing it...” Cohn apparently misunderstood and actually believed Ryo was going to torture the man.

As for the man in question, he’d gone deathly pale.

“Okay, I’ll concede that the heart thing is a bit much, but I firmly believe that stabbing him in the eye will get us results. Supposedly, it doesn’t actually hurt. Just a little prick and the person is traumatized for life, unable to forget the experience.”

At this point, the man’s teeth began chattering and the muscles on his face froze—and not because of Ryo’s water magic. Why, he could never do something so inhumane! Perish the thought.

“Hey, I’m not a fan of hurting people either, so why don’t you just tell us who you are and under whose orders you’re operating? If you do, I’m almost positive he’ll, you know, not stab you in the eye,” Cohn said gently, crouching to put himself at the man’s eye level.

“I-I can’t tell you...” The words, his first so far, seemed to be wrung from the man’s throat.

Meanwhile, Ryo was in the process of generating, then erasing, a

thin ice needle from the tip of his finger. Over and over again. The clacking of the man's teeth grew louder as he watched from the corner of his eye.

"Well, that's too bad. Ryo!"

Ryo took a step closer.

"W-Wait, please!" the man shouted.

"What is it? You don't have a lot of time until he's on you."

"I-I want to tell you, but I *can't*... So please just wait until our captain—our leader, I mean—wakes up."

He said "captain," which means...I'm probably not wrong about them being knights or something similar.

Ryo chose to keep quiet out of a samurai's compassion.

"Then you guys are knights and not adventurers, right?" Cohn, however, wasn't a samurai.

The man widened his eyes, at a loss for words.

Just then, their captain—no, the man whom the others evidently thought of as their leader—regained consciousness. At almost the exact same moment, Prince Willie noticed a group of riders coming toward them on the highway from the west. He raised his voice in warning.

"Riders are approaching us."

Even from a distance, it was clear that they were soldiers of a city's garrison. A passerby on the way must have tipped them off about Ryo's group.

Or the escaped archer summoned them...? In which case, they would be enemies... There's even the possibility they're corrupt, like the situation in Llandewi...

Ryo bitterly recalled Llandewi, the city where Gekko's caravan had stayed for the night and been ambushed. The vice captain of the knightly order there had already been in the Sect of Assassins' pockets and taken away the Sect members they captured.

"We are soldiers from Stone Lake," one of the riders called out, "and we're here because we received a report of a quarrel on the road."

"Such discourtesy! This is His Highness Willie, a prince of the Monarchy of Joux. How outrageous of you to question him from atop

your steeds! Is this what passes for manners in the Kingdom of Knightley?!" Mr. Rodrigo's sharp rebuke struck the soldiers like a lash.

"What...?"

"Our apologies!"

With those remarks, the eight of them dismounted.

"Please forgive us. We didn't know we were in the presence of royalty from Joux. Begging your pardon, but would you be able to present documents attesting to your identity?" The one who seemed to be the commanding officer addressed them politely this time, a complete turnaround from earlier.

"Here."

Willie handed him the necklace around his throat. The CO flipped it over, then withdrew a business-card-sized alchemical device from within his clothing and held it over the necklace.

"I have confirmed your identity," he said a moment later. "Let me extend my deepest apologies once more for earlier." Then he returned the necklace to the young prince.

"Bygones, so long as you understand." Willie sounded unperturbed.

Even in situations like this, he maintained his dignity. As expected of someone who was raised as a prince. Ryo was impressed.

"In short, these people dared to raise a hand against royalty. Do I have the gist of it?" the commanding officer asked, looking at the four captives sitting on the ground.

"No...! Hold on. We didn't know— We didn't mean to!" the leader of the attackers, who had woken up moments before, yelled in a panic.

No wonder too. Regardless of a nation's size, big or small, an attempt on the life of one of its royals meant the death penalty. In some cases, the families of the perpetrators were also executed.

"Just because you didn't mean to doesn't change the fact you still attacked us, and by proxy, him," Cohn emphasized.

The two men were pale.

"W-Wait, please. Look at the crest on my scabbard," the leader of the four captives pleaded.

The captain from Stone Lake jerked his chin in silent command at one of his subordinates, who picked up the scabbard and brought it to him. His expression changed the second he saw it.

"This is a ducal crest..." Then with a gasp of realization, he stopped talking.

A ducal crest? So they're knights serving a duke somewhere?

Ryo thought to himself. Of course, he didn't know which duke. Even if he heard the name, he was confident he wouldn't know it.

"See? Now you understand, don't you? We're not suspicious people. This is just a mistake, a misunderstanding. As soldiers of Stone Lake, you comprehend the meaning of that crest, right?" The captured man seemed to be quite skilled with his tongue because the captain looked extremely troubled by the ducal coat of arms.

This too came as no surprise. Though Willie was a prince, the Monarchy of Joux was a tiny country that shared no border with the Kingdom of Knightley. It was inevitable that the balance of power between a prince of a faraway country and those possessing a ducal crest of the garrison's own nation would begin tipping in the captives' favor.

"Lord Captain. Would you allow me to inspect that sheath for a moment?" Prince Willie spoke politely to the hesitant man.

"Huh? Oh, yes, of course."

He handed it over to the prince, who studied the scabbard briefly before returning it.

"I understand why you're concerned, Captain. There isn't much I can do in this situation, considering these men are in the service of Duke Flitwick."

"S-So you are aware of this crest as well, Your Highness," the garrison captain replied, a huge drop of sweat trickling down his face. He likely found it unexpected that a prince from such a distant nation would recognize any coat of arms from the Kingdom of Knightley, much less a ducal house.

"I am. It belongs to Lord Raymond, the younger brother of the king, yes?"

Willie's words sent a shock wave through everyone gathered here. Luca was the most agitated. It wasn't fear on his face, but

something close to—no, it *was* anger.

"I can't comment on the prince or his entourage, but those two are criminals. We need to take them back to the dukedom's capital of Carlyle," the leader of the captives said to the garrison's commanding officer. By "those two," he obviously meant Matthew and Luca.

Prince Willie's reaction was almost violent.

"I refuse to allow it. They're *my* attendants now. As a prince of the Monarchy of Joux, I hereby formally reject that demand."

The prince practically burned with rage. It was the first time both Ryo and Cohn had seen him like this. In a way though, they weren't surprised. He had risked the lives of Cohn and the other adventurers to rescue the two men, so abandoning them now would waste their efforts. And such a prospect was clearly unacceptable for His Highness.

"Your Highness, I understand what you're saying, but..."

The garrison's CO still seemed inclined to believe the captured men. Duke Flitwick's men.

People like him bend to either authority or violence. Though I guess both are forms of power... I wish I knew someone important too, so they could help us out of this pickle... Alas, I don't know anyone in Stone Lake or the royal capital.

Ryo lamented his lack of connections. But almost immediately, he remembered something.

No, wait! I do *know someone in the capital?!*

He approached the captain and whispered to him. "Lord Captain, wouldn't the best course of action here be to summon a higher-ranking official and let them pass judgment?"

If given the chance, many would jump at the opportunity to escape the burden of a difficult decision.

Ryo pressed his advantage. "This is a problem involving a prince and a duke. Any careless decisions made now may lead to more trouble later."

"I-I see. I do believe you have a point," the garrison captain conceded.

"Hey, there's no way in hell we'll let that happen!"

"Villains should keep quiet. *Ice Casket 4.*"

Before the leader of the captives could say any more, Ryo encased all four of them in coffins made of ice.

"What in the world...?"

"We can't have our attackers escape, you see. Don't worry. They're still alive."

"O-Oh, well, in that case..."

The garrison's commanding officer was completely devoured by Ryo's display of "violence."

Authority is all that's left now.

"All right, on to the topic of who exactly to summon. Wouldn't you agree it should be someone on the level of a national leader?"

"Y-Yes, of course... However, they're all incredibly busy people, so..."

"With your permission, I suggest Master Arthur Berasus, special advisor at the Bureau of Royal Magicians. If the request comes from me, I believe he'll come immediately from the capital. What do you say?"

"Y-You know— I mean—you're acquainted with Advisor Berasus?"

They had returned together from Layer 40 of Lune's dungeon.

"Yes. Tell him this is a request from Ryo, an adventurer of Lune, to speed things up."

"Astounding! But...what if he's not currently in residence there? What then?"

I don't know anyone else...which leaves me no choice except to rely on Abel's network.

"In that case, please ask for Master Hilarion. You can tell him the request is from Ryo, Abel's friend."

"What?! You know Lord Hilarion too?! Say no more. Listen up! Ride out right now to the capital. One of you go to Advisor Berasus and another to Lord Hilarion."

Hmmm... I guess this Hilarion character who sent Abel so many letters is actually a bigwig?

"In the meantime, I ask that you all please proceed to Stone Lake. We would have you wait there for the arrival of Advisor Berasus or Lord Hilarion. As for these frozen individuals..."

"Leave them to me." And with that, Ryo prepared four of his Carts to transport them.

◆

Cohn and Matthew sat in the driver's seat of the boxed carriage while Prince Willie, Mr. Rodrigo, Luca, and Ryo sat within the cabin. The four Carts carrying the coffins made of ice followed behind the vehicle. The prince's bodyguards and adventurers as well as the soldiers on horseback surrounded the carriage protectively in front and back. So the group headed to Stone Lake in this formation.

"Thank you kindly, Ryo, for humoring me. In the heat of the moment, all I could think to say was that you're my attendant..." Willie said apologetically.

"Not a problem at all, Your Highness. You sent your men out to rescue these two knowing the potential dangers. I'm sure you thought that simply handing them over without so much as a discussion would have been a great disservice to Cohn and the other adventurers, right?" Ryo understood the boy's heart was in the right place.

"I really am sorry for causing everyone all this trouble." This time, Luca spoke with his head bowed.

"Master Luca, the fact that you were pursued even after escaping from the Federation, and moreover targeted by the king's younger brother, makes me think you're a very important individual, eh?" Mr. Rodrigo remarked mildly. What he left unsaid was, "Perhaps it's time to tell us who you really are and the truth of your circumstances."

Luca inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment and began talking.

"I'm the younger brother of Fuca, Minister of Finance of the Kingdom of Knightley."

Finance Minister Fuca! What an unfortunate name...

At the mention of the name, the first thing that popped into Ryo's head was the name of a character from Alexandre Dumas's *The d'Artagnan Romances*. Specifically Fouquet, the Superintendent of Finances. Tragically, he winds up being the pawn of René d'Herblay,

once upon a time Aramis of The Three Musketeers, and his scheme to take control of France. Of course, Fouquet actually existed in real life.

Even as the rude thoughts spun through Ryo's mind, Luca continued explaining.

"Prince Raymond formed a secret pact with Chancellor Aubrey of the Handalieu Federation. And unfortunately for me, I found out about it by pure accident. In order to force my older brother to align himself with them, they took me as a captive to the Federation. Let's just say I don't plan on undergoing that bitter experience again anytime soon."

If Fuca is the Minister of Finance, maybe there's a counterpart here identical to Comptroller-General of Finances Colbert too... Speaking of Colbert, he's a famous person who appears in bold type in high school world history textbooks in conjunction with mercantilist policies...

Though Ryo's imagination ballooned even more, he kept his mouth shut. Meanwhile, Willie and Rodrigo listened attentively to Luca's tale.

"Matthew and his team work directly under my brother. They're the ones who rescued me."

"Based on what I've heard, the relationship between King Stafford IV and Prince Raymond is strained. So wouldn't it be prudent to appeal to His Majesty about this situation through your elder brother?" Prince Willie suggested to Luca.

"There's no denying that His Majesty is on bad terms with his younger brother. But...the palace is dealing with its own problems at the moment..." Luca replied with a shake of his head.

"Hmmm..." Willie fell into thought. Then when he abruptly looked up, he saw Ryo nodding quietly to himself over and over, clearly thinking about something. "Ryo, do you have an idea?"

"Huh?"

Ryo's mind had wandered to d'Artagnan arresting Fouquet in the story... Of course, none of that showed on his face. He quickly played back the conversation at hand and offered an alternative.

"Um, maybe we can ask Master Arthur Berasus for his advice on

that too?"

"A key authority figure arriving from the royal capital, hm? A fine idea indeed." Prince Willie nodded emphatically.

Phew, I somehow managed to talk myself out of that one.

Ryo was relieved.

"Do you actually know Special Advisor Berasus, Master Ryo? You didn't just lie to gain control over the situation?" Luca questioned pointedly.

"I do, in fact, know him. If I may exaggerate a little, I'd say we're comrades in arms."

"Wow." Prince Willie reacted first in response to Ryo's declaration. "Despite your youthful appearance, you have a wealth of experiences, don't you, Ryo!" And he sounded extremely excited for some reason. He continued, "I wonder if I too can broaden my experiences after some more training and discipline..."

"I think so. Probably..."

"Starting today, the city's soldiers will protect our lodgings, yes? At least until Lord Berasus appears. Which means, we don't have to concern ourselves with an ambush, so I can practice magic just before my body gives out!"

"I-I think so. Probably..."

Until yesterday, the young prince had practiced magic to the point of collapsing from mana exhaustion. Evidently, he planned to turn a new leaf starting today by practicing until he was *almost* at his limit instead of surpassing his limit like before. But Ryo knew better. He knew the boy would most definitely practically until his mana ran out again. Because the water magician's disciple was *very* dedicated to his learning...

Two days after the group had arrived in Stone Lake, the captain of the city's garrison and Special Advisor to the Bureau of Royal Magicians, Arthur Berasus, entered Prince Willie's room. First, Arthur greeted His Highness before turning to Ryo, pleased to reunite with him. With his long, white beard, gray magician's robe, and large staff, he looked every inch a powerful magician.

"You're looking well, Ryo," Arthur said jovially. "Though I have to

admit, I was taken aback by your request for assistance, unusual as it is. Needless to say, I rushed here without a moment's delay."

"Thank you very much, Lord Berasus," Ryo responded gratefully with a smile.

"Didn't I tell you to call me 'Arthur,' boy?" Then he suddenly surveyed their surroundings. "Speaking of, I heard this has something to do with a duke or what have you. But...I don't see anyone matching the description here..."

"About that. It would be a challenge to bring them in here, so they're in the garden," the garrison captain explained.

"Oh? Why is that?" Arthur cocked his head curiously and approached the window overlooking the garden. "Aha, I see the light now... Splendidly frozen, eh? Ryo, that's your doing, isn't it?" The advisor grinned pointedly at him.

"Well, they *did* attack us, so I just made sure they couldn't escape..."

"Hands and feet bound with rope *and* frozen in ice...and looks to me like they're still alive too... Personally, I never want to see the inside of one of those ice coffins, thanks." That last part came out as a barely audible whisper.

They took turns telling Arthur everything that had happened, how it had happened, and what they hoped the outcome would be. One of the frozen people was thawed and brought into the room. He introduced himself as Bader.

"Hm, I think I have the gist."

Arthur asked for a refill of his black tea once everyone finished saying his piece. He remained silent until his cup was full again. After taking a sip, he spoke again.

"Firstly, Matthew and Luca *will* journey to the royal capital with Prince Willie as his attendants. Any interference there will inevitably lead to a diplomatic headache. As for the attackers... Bader, was it? You and your men will return and update your master of the developments. But first, you must pay for your crime. Considering your attack failed and all you succeeded in doing was making fools of yourselves slipping and sliding, I think twenty days in jail should

be enough. You'll serve your time here in Stone Lake. I'll inform the local magistrate myself."

Prince Willie and his people basically got everything they asked for. Ryo wasn't too surprised. After all, when he'd asked for the special advisor, he'd hoped for this exact outcome. Three cheers for a rigged trial. Hip, hip, huzzah!

"I'll unfreeze them right before departure tomorrow," Ryo promised the garrison captain and Arthur.

Incidentally, Bader had been refrozen and once more stood in the garden in his ice coffin...

"Oh, right, I almost forgot to mention. I went ahead of my people, but a few folks from the Bureau should be arriving sometime today here in Stone Lake. They'd like to personally escort you and Prince Willie's entourage to the capital, Ryo."

"Huh?!" The baffled exclamation was the only thing he could come up with in response to the advisor's unexpected announcement.

"That's how they want to thank you for saving them in Lune. There you have it, Your Highness. Does the Bureau of Royal Magicians have your permission to accompany you?"

"Yes! Yes, of course. Thank you so much!"

Well...we only have the one coach, so I suppose...it wouldn't hurt to have more people with us and really make a show of a foreign prince's grand entrance into the royal capital.

That was how Ryo convinced himself to go along with it.

The next morning, after thawing the four attackers just like he had promised, Ryo headed to where the carriage was parked in front of the inn. There, he found a long line of magicians from the Bureau...

"U-Um, aren't there...a *lot* of them?" he whispered to Arthur, who had walked over to stand next to Ryo as soon as he arrived. "There must be at *least* fifty of them."

Arthur must not have anticipated such a ridiculous number either because his voice came out a bit strained when he replied. "I-I honestly thought only five or six of them would come..."

The sight of fifty magicians escorting the prince's vehicle on foot would certainly make a magnificent spectacle in its own right.

"Ryo...I had no idea you saved so many people..." Cohn, sitting in the cabman's perch as usual, murmured quietly to Ryo.

"Neither did I..."

It goes without saying that when the group arrived at Crystal Palace two days later, they were the talk of the capital.

◆

That day, Hilarion was out on business. He actually hadn't been back to the Institute since yesterday because of said business. He returned at three in the afternoon and was unsurprised to find a gaggle of young women clustered in his office around a table of sweets.

"Why do you girlies always have to eat in *here*?"

"Because these sofas are absolutely *divine*," Rihya quipped happily.

Even Hilarion didn't have a retort in the face of her sunny smile.

"Master, a rider from Stone Lake arrived yesterday with a message then left just as quickly. I put it on top of your desk," Lyn informed him.

"That right?"

That was all he said before walking over to read the missive.

"Ryo? Really?"

Lyn heard his low mutter. "Did you say 'Ryo'?" she said.

Hilarion jolted back to reality when he heard Lyn say the name. "Uh, I just remembered something I have to do. I'll be back, but not tonight, so let Abel know, will ya?"

"Sure, of course. Safe travels," Lyn said, puzzled.

He had one of the Institute's boxed carriages brought around and asked the driver to travel through the night and into the next morning without stopping. His destination was Stone Lake.

"This Ryo must be the same water magician Abel told me about. And he wants *my* help in Stone Lake? Why not? Now I can finally

put a face to the name! Not to mention an up close and personal look at his many original spells. Heh heh heh. Lady Luck is smiling down on me, eh? Far be it from me to let this chance escape!”

Unfortunately for Hilarion, the shades were drawn over each of the coach’s windows. Unable to see the road outside, he completely missed the vehicle passing by—the same vehicle being escorted by Bureau magicians. Such was the misfortune that befell him.

Naturally, by the time he arrived in Stone Lake, Ryo was long gone.

◆

This happened a few days before Ryo and the rest of Prince Willie’s entourage arrived in Crystal Palace, the Kingdom’s capital. Two adventurers stood in front of His Lordship’s manor in Lune, the largest frontier city in the country—the C-rank party Switchback’s leader and swordsman, Rah, and its scout, Sue. After announcing themselves and stating their business to the guard on duty, they now waited for the person they had come to see. Ten minutes passed.

“Rah, Sue, apologies for the delay. I hope you weren’t waiting long?”

It was Sera, a B-rank adventurer and sword instructor for the city’s knights.

“No, not at all. If anything, we’re sorry for coming here without warning.”

Sue bowed her head. Meanwhile, Rah stood there frozen stiff.

The woman known as “Sera of the Wind” was already the stuff of legends as far as members of the adventurers’ guild were concerned due to her fearsome talents and equally overwhelming beauty. Because she was an elf, not only could she wield powerful air magic, but she was also a highly skilled swordswoman.

So Rah’s reaction was fairly normal at being in the presence of a living legend. Sue, however, spoke to her without any difficulty. That was par for the course for most of the female adventurers who met Sera, in fact.

“Um, the truth is, we worked a job with Ryo to the Principality of Inverey, but he ran into some trouble, so he’ll be a bit late returning to Lune. He wanted us to give you a letter and here we are to do just that.” Then Sue handed Ryo’s letter to Sera.

“I-I see. He won’t be back for a while, hm...? No, never mind. Thank you for the letter, Sue. I’ll head back to my room and read it straightaway.”

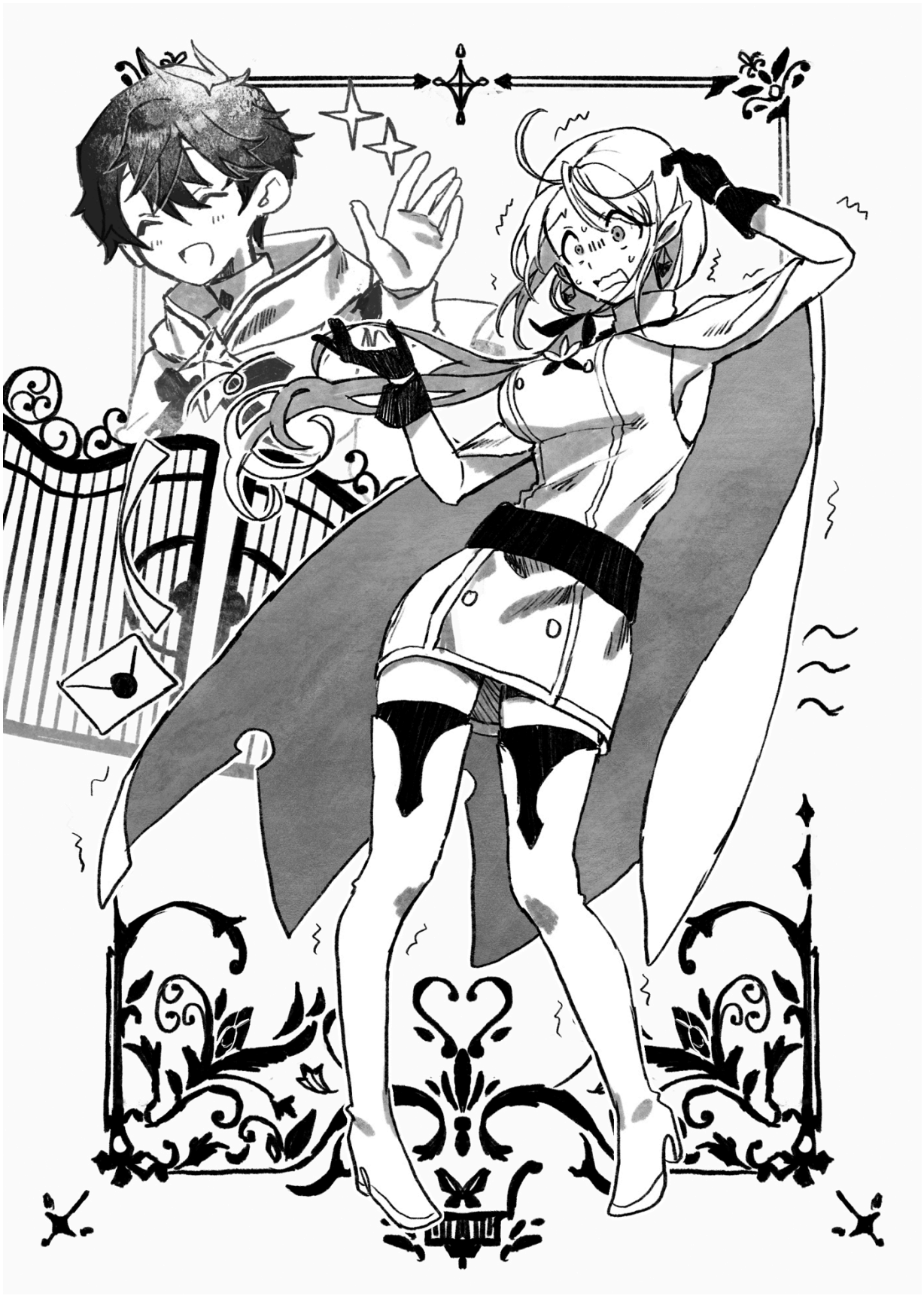
“You’re welcome. Please excuse us, then,” Sue said before dragging the frozen Rah away with her. The guard on duty tilted his head in confusion, wondering why she’d brought Rah along in the first place.

Once the two adventurers were gone, Sera opened the letter on the spot. Despite what she’d said about reading it in her room, she was simply too curious to wait any longer. She skimmed it once...then read through it more carefully...and her knees gave out.

“M-Madam Sera?!” the guard cried out in surprise and concern.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

She raised her right hand to stop him from rushing over, before slowly standing up. Then, swaying unsteadily, she started plodding toward the manor hall. “Royal capital... Royal...capital... Royal...” she muttered over and over again.



A few moments of walking and she found herself in front of the building. Suddenly looking very determined, Sera whipped around, her steps now forceful. Her new destination was the knight commander's office.

As usual, two knights stood sentry in front of the knight commander's office.

"I'd like to speak to Ser Neville."

The knight had never seen such a steely expression on her face before.

"Y-Yes, ma'am, please wait a moment." One of them knocked on the door. "Commander, Madam Sera is here to see you."

A man's deep voice came from inside. "Let her in."

She stepped into his office.

"Miss Sera, what can I do for you today?" Neville Black, commander of Lune's knights, called out to her cheerfully.

She silently strode over to his desk, slammed both hands down on it, and leaned down aggressively into his face.

"Ser Neville! Does the order have any reason to visit the capital anytime soon? It must, yes? It must, it must! I'm right, aren't I?!"

"Wh-Whoa, Miss Sera, what brought this on? Calm yourself."

Neville himself wasn't feeling particularly calm either, overpowered as he was by the bloodcurdling aura radiating from her.

"So. You're asking about any upcoming plans to visit the capital? Uhhh... Yeah, we are. The order's been entrusted with transporting the additional magic stones the royal family bought. Eight of us are leaving tomorrow. The list of personnel has already been determined, though..."

"Is that so? Then I'd like you to add me to it as well. I'll reimburse you for the increased travel expenses at a later date. As their sword instructor, it is, after all, my duty to ensure my pupils are performing well and supervise their delivery of the requested goods."

"But you've never done anything like that before now..."

"Ser Neville! I trust there is *no problem* with including me on this journey, yes?"

"Uh, no," Neville said, giving in. "None at all."

"Very good. I appreciate your cooperation. I'll inform His Lordship

myself.”

Then, with a brilliant smile, Sera left the knight commander’s office.

“No problem at all, but...what in the hell even made her ask...”

Even the highly regarded, extremely capable, and well-known knight commander Neville Black couldn’t think of a reason for her bizarre behavior.

Converging in the Royal Capital

"Everyone, you have my gratitude."

With those words, Prince Willie bowed his head. Mr. Rodrigo, standing diagonally behind him, did the same.

"No, no, please. I'm just glad we managed to get you here safely," Cohn said, embarrassed.

"We were only doing our jobs. Please, raise your head, Your Highness." Ryo sounded a bit panicked.

They were in front of the Kingdom of Knightley's royal castle. The volunteers from the Bureau of Royal Magicians, who'd escorted the prince's entourage, had already departed, returning to their official duties. As for Matthew and Luca, after expressing their thanks, they had set off for the ministry of finance, accompanied by burly bodyguards who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

That left Prince Willie and Mr. Rodrigo, who were now saying their final goodbyes to Ryo and the other adventurers.

"Ryo, won't you grant me one last boon?!" The boy looked determined.

"How may I assist you, Your Highness?" Curious, Ryo kept his tone light in response.

"May I call you 'Master' from now on?"

"I'm sorry, but I would rather you didn't..."

"That is unfortunate," Prince Willie said, disappointed. "Then I shall simply call you my mentor."

"I wish you wouldn't..." But the word didn't feel like much of a compromise to Ryo.

And then the boy and his retainer entered the castle to report on their safe arrival in the capital.

"All right, Ryo, we're thinking about visiting the adventurers' guild. What about you?"

With them gone, it was just Ryo, Cohn, and the other adventurers

the other man had led on the journey. Once Cohn and the others went to the guild, this temporary party would dissolve. Since this was his first time in the royal capital, Ryo was in no rush to be anywhere in particular. The only thing on his agenda for the foreseeable future was to say hello to Special Advisor Berasus.

So just as he decided to tag along with Cohn and the rest...he heard a familiar voice call out to him from a group of people coming out of the castle.

"Ryo?"

When he turned around, Sera rushed him at the speed of sound and hugged him tight.

"Ngh...! S-Sera? Why are *you* here? I suppose that question goes for all of you in Lune's order of knights too."

For a few moments, she simply embraced him in silence. Eden, a platoon commander in the order, answered Ryo instead.

"Ummm, we were entrusted with the task of transporting certain items to the royal family. Which we actually completed just now."

"Huh... Wait, Sera too?"

"Yes, Madam Sera as well. Although, technically speaking...she wasn't part of the original plan. You could say she was a last-minute addition..." Eden was clearly trying to be diplomatic.

"It's not like I had any other choice." Lifting her head from Ryo's chest, Sera finally spoke. "You asked Sue of Switchback to deliver to me your letter, yes? Then, when I opened it and read that you'd be visiting the royal capital, I... Let me explain myself properly. You see, Ryo, we elves require a vital nutritional supplement, and...that is what you are to me. Without you, I'm lost. So now that you know, please act accordingly henceforth!"

"Uhhh... I'm...sorry?"

"Nutritional supplement"...? What the heck kind of nutritional supplement am I? But also...that's the first time anyone's said something like that to me.

"Good." She beamed. "So long as you understand."

The destructive power of her smile transcended everything. Ryo was willing and able to fight the entire world for the sake of that smile...

But first, he needed an answer to the mystery she had just dropped on him.

"By the way, what exactly do you mean by 'nutritional supplement'?"

"Hm? Oh, that. Right. Do you recall the guardian beast who mentioned something about how being around you extends one's lifespan?"

"I do..."

"That. That's it. I told you before how elves are essentially half fairy, so I suspect the guardian beast you encountered also falls in the fae category. Our term for this is the 'fae facet' and for those who possess it, you are a very valuable source of nutrition, Ryo. Another feature of this involves the ability to exorcise evil...is the best way I can describe it. And of course, the refreshing effect. We mustn't forget that either. I suggest you keep all this in mind."

The knights listening in on their conversation nodded while oohing and aahing.

"Uh," Ryo said, "does that have an effect on humans too...?"

"No, not at all," she said frankly. "As far as I know, anyway."

"Um...then...does that have an effect on *me*?"

"No, probably not. As far as I know, anyway." Her bluntness remained unchanged when he pressed further.

For whatever reason, a tremendous sense of defeat afflicted Ryo then. Amid all this, he didn't even notice Cohn excusing himself and the other adventurers with a "Uhhh, we're just going to head out now."

◆

"So let me see if I have this right. Luca has taken refuge in the ministry of finance and Sica's whereabouts are unknown. With the fetters we placed on him gone, the Minister of Finance not only has no incentive to align himself with me, but there's a good chance I've made an enemy of him? I'd heard the Federation's Information Agency was staffed with only the elite, but you buffoons can't even catch one man. Seems the rumors about you lot were just that,

considering these disastrous results."

"We are deeply ashamed."

"Not to mention, Hilarion is backing Fuca from the shadows. Have I missed anything else?"

This was Duke Flitwick's estate in the royal capital. A man and a woman were talking in the duke's office. The slender man wearing a monocle spoke while perusing the documents before him.

As for the woman, her brunette hair was trimmed to her shoulders and her gray eyes glittered with intelligence. Though her appearance was lovely, her conversation with the man made it clear that it was all calculated and she did, in fact, work for the Federation's Information Agency. Even her apology was no more than a token one...

"Moving on. This man named Abel connects them all?"

"Correct. He was conducting his own investigation into the Black Dust as well."

Abel had already attracted the scrutiny of not only Sica and his people but also those under the duke's command. An inevitable circumstance because his principal occupation was adventurer and not intelligence analyst. However, what these people didn't realize were the bits of misinformation and disinformation riddling the documents.

"Where is Hilarion right now?"

"We received reports that he left the capital yesterday and was bound east on the Second Highway."

"Which means, now might be our only opportunity to dispose of this Abel character."

The monocled man fell into a thoughtful silence for a bit. Getting rid of him might prove more difficult than expected. According to their data, he was quite a capable young man. If he didn't send in their best, they could expect to have the tables turned on them.

"Then...we'll have to use *them* to ensure his elimination."

"Agreed. We have already taken the necessary steps."

"Oh? Tell me more."

"Gordon, Berlocke, and Roman—these are the three who will be deployed. Gordon alone should be able to handle him easily enough,

but including the other two guarantees success."

"Fine. Clean this mess up before Hilarion returns."

"Understood." With that, the brunette woman exited the office.

The man with the monocle smiled faintly.

"An ambush by the Hero, eh..."

◆

Gordon was on cloud nine. This was the first time in his twenty-three years of life that he was popular with women. As the fire magician in the Hero's party, Gordon most definitely wasn't a bad-looking guy. In fact, you could say he was better-looking than average.

However, he was a tad insensitive, a tad overconfident, and a tad condescending, all of which explained why women never gave him the time of day. They might have been able to overlook one of those flaws, but all three? In one man? Impossible.

But his time in the sun had finally come because a woman crazy about him had appeared here in the royal capital. Her name was Nancy and she was Viscount Othniel Fletcher's secretary. The monocle-wearing noble was a man possessed of a calm aura. Duke Flitwick's chief retainer in all but name, he managed the duke's interests in the capital. As for Nancy, his secretary, she was a lovely woman in her twenties with very expressive eyes.

And Gordon was hopelessly in love with her.

At long last, springtime had arrived for Gordon...

Roman the Hero couldn't be happier for his friend. The same went for Berlocke, the earth magician, who toasted to Gordon's happiness countless times. Graham, the clergyman, simply nodded with his usual stoic expression. Meanwhile, Alicia, Morris, and Ashkhan—the air magician, scout, and enchanter—all frowned.

"Are you *sure* you're all right? You're not being deceived or anything?" Alicia asked.

"I think any woman attracted to Gordon needs to have her eyes examined," Morris quipped.

Ashkhan let her silence do the talking.

In short, each of the three women expressed their worries in their own way.

After arriving in the Kingdom's capital, the Hero's party had requested an audience with King Stafford IV. Unfortunately, due to His Majesty's poor health, they were currently being detained in Duke Flitwick's residence. Although "detain" might be too strong of a word, since they could do what they pleased. Then there was the fact of Gordon enjoying the springtime of his life. All in all, things were just fine.

For Graham, his days on the ducal estate couldn't be more fulfilling as he spent them in deep conversation with the clerics of light of the Central Provinces, eagerly discussing their respective deities and religious teachings. The trio of women in the Hero's party —Alicia, Morris, and Ashkhan—also enjoyed their time there, hosting tea parties with the lady's attendants and developing individual connections.

During their stay here, Gordon's outings with Nancy had become more frequent. A short time ago, she'd invited him to go with her to a newly opened restaurant in the royal capital. Simply put, a date! He didn't think he could fly any higher, he was so excited. Unfortunately for him, a third *and* fourth wheel appeared, putting a complete damper on his mood.

"Roman, Berlocke, why are you two here?" Gordon asked, his expression fearsome.

"Nancy said she'd treat us, that's why," Berlocke replied, scratching his head.

"I have to admit, I *was* worried about ruining things for you..." Roman answered, scratching his cheek.

And then Nancy arrived. She whispered apologetically to Gordon. "I'm sorry, Gordon. His Lordship bade me to be hospitable and take them with us..."

"Ahhh, I see. Don't even worry about it! Definitely wouldn't want you to get in trouble for disobeying the viscount. So, yeah, no problem at all!"

"Truly?! Oh, Gordon, you're ever so kind!" Nancy said, clinging to his arm.

In response, his face flushed scarlet as he grinned bashfully...

Gordon's first date was going pretty well. He completely ignored the two men trailing behind them and made sure to focus both his gaze and mind on Nancy. The route they walked circled the Institute for Magical Research, an area full of delicious restaurants and stylish apparel stores, all things that didn't catch his attention. He didn't even know where they were or where they were going because he wasn't familiar at all with the map of the royal capital.

As for the two men trailing behind them, they enjoyed the outing in their own ways, unconcerned with the couple walking in front of them. They entered various little cafes and shops and bought tasty-looking treats. They also browsed the collections at different weapons shops.

Unfortunately, tragedy always strikes unexpectedly.

With the other two off who knew where, Gordon and Nancy ate lunch at a fancy restaurant. When he told her he would take care of the bill, she stepped outside before him. After paying, he exited the establishment, only to find...Nancy collapsed on the ground, coughing up blood.

"Nancy!"

He rushed to help her up.

"Gordon..." she gasped, her breathing faint.

"How the hell did this happen?!"

He hurriedly made her drink one of the potions he always carried with him. Once she finished the vial, Nancy gestured toward the other end of the street.

"That...swordsman..."

She pointed at a lone man with his back to them.

"Him?! He did this to you?!"

Gordon's vision went black with rage. All he could see was Nancy coughing up blood and the man responsible for that. He gently laid her down on the side of the road before standing up. Eyes blazing with rage, he grasped his staff. Then he chanted.

"*Blade Lange Trident.*"

Three whirling tongues of flames burst forth from Gordon's staff

toward the man. This spell was the most powerful one in his arsenal for one-on-one battles.

"Abel!" a woman screamed.

"*Sanctuary.*"

The same woman planted herself in front of the oncoming trio of flames and cast the spell. It was a type of emergency defense magic. In an instant, she created the barrier without reciting an incantation. The secret technique of a cleric.

Sanctuary activated correctly and negated Gordon's Blade Lange Trident, but the kinetic energy of his spell still sent the woman flying into the wall behind her.

"Rihya!"

Abel's eyes jerked toward Rihya as she was blasted away. Just then, Lyn and Warren appeared, turning the corner.

"Lyn, Warren, take care of her."

Then Abel ran in the opposite direction.

Gordon, his most powerful spell blocked, rushed to cast another one.

"*Fire Ball.*"

It raced toward his target at incredible speed, but Abel sliced through the Fire Ball with his magic sword.

"No way!"

Those were Gordon's last words before Abel's left fist slammed into his solar plexus, knocking him out. Unfortunately, that didn't solve the problem. Roman and Berlocke just so happened to be exiting the shop next door at that time. As they watched Gordon drop unconscious to the ground thanks to Abel's punch, they couldn't make heads or tails of what was going on.

On one side, there was Gordon, unconscious after taking the hit to the gut. On the other was Nancy, coughing up blood. Realization finally hit Roman. The man who took Gordon down was the enemy. And he was the villain here.

Roman unsheathed his holy sword, Astarte, while racing toward Gordon and Abel. Abel saw him from the corner of his eye. Just in time to avoid his all-out thrust.

Thus, through an unfortunate combination of coincidence,

misunderstanding, and malice, began the battle between Roman the Hero and Abel the genius swordsman in the streets of the royal capital.

The moment Roman charged at Abel, Berlocke cast a spell.

"*Stone Javelin.*"

But his stone spear was obliterated by an Air Slash loosed from the other side of the street. There, he saw a young girl holding a staff glaring at him.

"Must be that swordsman's friends, eh?"

While the battle between the swordsmen intensified, the magicians on either side kept their counterparts in check without interfering.

There wasn't a single curious onlooker in the area. In fact, no one approached them. The shops nearby had all firmly shut their doors and slatted shutters from the inside.

Any time fights break out in the street, one of two phenomena occur: spectators either flock to the scene or people lock themselves up inside their homes. You might be wondering what determines one response from the other. Well, that depends entirely on how dangerous the fight is.

Just imagine it and you'll understand. Let's say opponents are duking it out with rifles. Do you think that will attract onlookers? Of course not, since no one wants to risk their life if they get caught up in the shoot-out.

That was how the clash of swords between Roman and Abel looked to the capital's residents. While someone usually would have already reported it to the garrison for the city's keepers to handle, this country lacked phones or any other method of instantaneous communication. Notifying the authorities wasn't a simple matter.

This guy is scary fast. His blows are powerful too.

As he continued deflecting Roman's sword, Abel couldn't help feeling astonished. While his opponent wasn't on the same level as the demon princes he'd once fought in Layer 40 of the dungeon, his speed and force were definitely abnormal for a human. Even though

Abel held his own through a combination of technique and experience, he understood this fight would be a tough one.

I guess he's with the fire magician I took down a few minutes ago, huh... Were they hired by the masterminds who orchestrated all the recent back-to-back disasters? No, that's impossible. His strength is something that would put him at the top of the pack in any country.

Well, I certainly didn't expect him to be such a skilled swordsman... Does this mean the Kingdom is full of talented warriors like him? Based on his ability alone, out of all the people I've faced thus far, he's undoubtedly one of the best... No matter how I attack him, he thwarts me every time. It feels like an unspeakably high wall, different from that time against Leonore...

Roman the Hero was starting to enjoy himself just a bit. The sight of Gordon being defeated and Nancy coughing up blood had fueled his initial charge. At first, he'd focused entirely on taking down the enemy, but now he was beyond those sentiments.

He thrust, and then slashed, but his angle was just off enough for his opponent to push his blade away cleanly. So for his next attack, he forcefully slashed down. Again, the other man brandished his own sword with exquisite timing, catching Roman at the point before he could fully use his strength, overwhelming him.

To evade like that required skill and experience far out of Roman's depth. And it improved to be a valuable lesson for the Hero himself.

By this time, Alicia, Morris, and Ashkhan joined their comrades. They had been enjoying themselves in the city on their own. But like Berlocke, they were unable to interfere because of the resistance keeping them in check from the other side of the road.

This, however, didn't actually pose much of a problem for the Hero's party. Why? Because Roman was the one doing the fighting. More importantly, he wasn't fighting Leonore or the Inferno Magician. In a one-on-one battle against anyone else, there was no chance of him losing.

"Then again, people like Her Highness exist too."

Morris's comrades pretended not to hear her murmur because that imperial princess was an exception too.

◆

Ryo and Sera were walking around the royal capital while eating crepes. To his pleasant surprise, Crepe, the food stall he'd encountered in both Whitnash and Lune, was also here in Crystal Palace. They decided to stop by after Ryo insisted, where an old man well into his seventies had sold the crepes to them. Now, as for Sera's reaction...

"Wow! This truly is delectable!" She praised the confection with her first bite.

"Riiight?" Ryo puffed out his chest proudly. He'd been confident she would like it because they had similar tastes in food. "A while back, the shop had a stall near Lune's east gate, and that was delicious too. It must be a chain store, huh... Anyway, my favorite is this whipped cream and banana combo. It never lets me down!"

"Now I understand why you were so insistent, Ryo. Life would be so much poorer if one never experiences such a divine dish!"

Delicious food makes people happy. Delicious food makes people's lives richer. This is an unchanging truth, no matter the era and world.

Enveloped in this happiness, the two continued walking. Before long, they heard the sounds of swords clashing.

"Who in the world is foolish enough to engage in a sword fight in the middle of the royal capital?" Sera sounded baffled.

"It sounds like a one-on-one fight, and only the two of them are going at it..." Ryo said thoughtfully.

Both of them had above-average hearing, so they could easily determine the number of combatants. Since the noise was coming from the direction they were headed, if they kept going, they'd find out what was happening... And so, with that casual thought, they did exactly that while enjoying their crepes. What they found was...

"What an incredible clash of swords..." Ryo blurted out.

"Indeed, they're both quite talented." Sera was impressed too.

"Is it just me," Ryo said, "or does one of them look suspiciously like Abel?"

"Hm...it most certainly isn't just you," Sera said, confirming his suspicion. "Considering Lyn and the others are on the other side of the street, I think your guess is right."

"Well, this fight is becoming one for the ages, huh? None of us can even get close to them," Morris, the scout, commented.

"No kidding. The fact Roman's opponent can keep pace with him at all is unbelievable. What *is* he?" Alicia, the air magician, muttered quietly in response.

"Yeah...exactly what I was thinking! How is it even possible that he's holding his own against the holy sword, Astarte? Any normal blade would have been shattered to pieces after Roman's first strike!" Morris questioned, unable to wrap her head around the situation.

"That just means *his* sword isn't normal then. Look closely. It's glowing red, so it must be magic," Alicia answered.

"He wields a magic blade...? Honestly, what *is* he..." Morris asked, puzzled.

Ordinary adventurers couldn't get their hands on magical weapons. Encountering someone in possession of such an item by coincidence in the middle of a city...the odds were incredibly low.

Morris shook her head again and surveyed their surroundings.

"No wonder there aren't any crowds here."

"I can't say I don't understand. I wouldn't want to risk my life either. Besides us and the other man's comrades, Roman and his opponent are the only ones on the street. Speaking of, what about those two? Are they not planning on escaping?" Alicia asked, looking down the street.

There, a man who seemed to be a magician and a beautiful woman wearing a cloak stood eating something...

"Oh, the woman, she's an elf..."

"You're right! Just what I'd expect from a royal capital. First, a magic sword wielder and now an elf. There must be so many other unusual folks here too, huh?" Morris sounded excited.

"I-I wonder..." As for Alicia, she didn't sound so convinced, so she simply kept her reply noncommittal.

Roman and Abel's sword fight continued. And while they fought, Abel realized something.

I'll lose at this rate.

The difference between their abilities was almost nonexistent. Though Abel was more technically proficient, he could only inflict minor, occasional wounds on his opponent. Each time he did, the young man's party members grew even more tense.

But the rate at which their mental stamina depleted was very different. Roman's style of swordsmanship, which embodied constant boldness, ensured he was always on the offensive. Meanwhile, Abel's more technical style meant he remained on the defensive. Abel knew that if he failed to deflect even one blow, the damage would be fatal. Because Roman surpassed him in terms of speed and power.

One mistake was the difference between life and death... Only those who'd confronted the reality of this tension understood it. And that tension had been gnawing at Abel from the start. The fact that he managed to survive the fight so far through skill, without faltering, was a testament to his genius with the sword. However, this was precisely why he sensed the inevitable defeat that lay ahead.

"To be able to drive Abel into a corner with his sword... He's incredible," Ryo murmured.

He expected Sera to reply since she'd been chatting throughout the fight. When she didn't, he grew concerned.

"Sera?"

"H-Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. That sword, the one Abel's opponent is wielding... I'm almost positive it's Astarte, the holy sword," she murmured.

"Wooow, a holy sword! Then does that mean Abel's sword is a magic sword too, since it glows red?"

The words "holy sword" had a powerful effect on Ryo. When you're talking about a fantasy setting, the words "magic sword" and

“holy sword” get people fired up! Such wonderful words indeed.

“That’s correct. I have heard that the holy sword Astarte has been used for generations by the Hero born in the Western Provinces.”

“The Hero!”

So this world has a Hero too, huh?!

This was the first time Ryo had heard of the Hero’s existence.

“What’s more, a shocking number of spirits are gathered around him. They tell me he is known as ‘Roman the Hero.’”

“Whoa... I... What... Honestly, the fact that you can talk to spirits is more shocking to me, Sera.”

“Elves have a deep connection to spirits from the moment they’re born,” she explained, a tad boastful.

Ryo thought she was ridiculously cute at that moment, but decided to keep it a secret.

“If there’s a Hero, then that means there must be a Demon King too... Wait a sec... I vaguely remember something about demon princes, was it...?”

“What?! Ryo, don’t tell me you’ve encountered a demon prince! Where?! When?! You must tell me everything because we can’t ignore something so major!”

“Oh, in that case, you have nothing to worry about. We ran into a few in the dungeon’s fortieth layer, but we defeated them.”

“I-I see. Ahhh, you must be referring to the forced teleportation incident, yes? Yet I don’t recall hearing of demon princes...”

“Never mind all that, Sera. If Abel kills the Hero here, won’t that turn into a huge problem?” he asked.

Her eyes widened briefly at his question, then she answered. “That’s...a good point. The Hero’s death means there wouldn’t be anyone to defeat the Demon King... Not to mention the ensuing diplomatic crisis between the Kingdom and the Western Provinces.”

“Got it. Then...their sword fight is just about to see its end, hm?”

“Indeed. Abel is in an unfavorable position.”

Ryo and Sera had come to the same conclusion.

“But we’re talking about Abel here. I think he’ll risk everything on a last-second gamble and turn the tables.”

"And if he succeeds, the Hero may die. Which isn't ideal."

"Agreed, so we should stop them sooner rather than later. Abel stepped in and defused the situation in Whitnash, meaning it's my turn this time. I have a plan, Sera. Would you mind buying two more of the same crepes for me?"

"S-Sure...? I have no idea what you're scheming, but consider it done." Then she took off for the crepe stand.

"All right, now for my part in this..." With that murmur, Ryo started walking toward the sword fight.

Morris, the scout, only noticed the water magician after he'd slipped past them.

"Hey, you," she called out. "Turn back. It's dangerous."

Though she thought it was strange she hadn't even sensed him until then, the fact that she couldn't get closer to him as he continued walking toward Roman and Abel's sword fight was even stranger. By then, it was too late to do anything about it because the magician was already near the two fighters.

"Gentlemen, sheathe your swords!"

At his shout, both Abel and Roman jumped backward.

10-Layer Ice Wall.

Instantly, an invisible wall of ice sprung up between them and forcibly separated them.

"Ryo, stay out of this. 'Cuz I don't know what I'll do, even if it's you."

"You don't have it in you to kill me, Abel. You can't," Ryo said firmly.

Despite knowing he was fighting a losing battle, Abel had no intentions whatsoever of giving up. After all, Rihya had been hurt defending him. To be forced to end the fight was unacceptable, even if it was Ryo who was intervening.

However, Ryo ignored Abel's feelings on the matter and doggedly continued. "Abel, be quiet for a second. You there. You *are* Roman the Hero, yes?" Ryo asked, wanting confirmation on Sera's intel.

"Uhhh... Yes, yes, I am," Roman answered.

"He's what?!" Abel sounded agitated.

"You heard right. This is the Hero, Roman, and at the very least, he can't die until the Demon King has been defeated."

"Arrrgggh!" Abel groaned.

"Now, then Lord Hero. Allow me to introduce you to your opponent—Abel, a B-rank adventurer of the Kingdom. He's not a shady character. He's a wonderful person. He even works as the guild master's proxy in the city of Lune."

"A B-rank adventurer of the Kingdom..." Roman murmured thoughtfully.

"Does something about Knightley's adventurers concern you?" Ryo asked.

"Oh, no, it's just... Well, the truth is, we came here after training in the Debuhi Empire under Lord Oscar Luska, otherwise known as the Inferno Magician. During our time there, we heard there's an adventurer in the Kingdom, a water magician, whom even Lord Oscar supposedly views as a rival. So I was simply wondering... If you had any information on the individual in question, I would very much appreciate it..." Roman inquired politely, having already sheathed his sword.

"What the hell? A water magician? Wait a minute... No..." Abel began.

"I see," Ryo interrupted, keen on shutting Abel down before he let anything else slip. "So you're searching for a water magician, Master Roman. As far as I know, the Schwartzkoff family are the masters of water magic in the Kingdom. Maybe this information will be useful to you."

"The Schwartzkoff family. I'll keep that in mind. Thank you very much."

Ryo had provided Roman with information that, while not false, would throw him off the scent. Abel could only stare at the genuinely thankful Hero with pity in his eyes. Why? Because he knew the real answer to the young man's question. That very water magician was standing right there, acting as mediary with an extremely nonchalant expression.

"Excellent. How about a token of your truce? Sera, if you would."

She appeared immediately by Ryo's side and handed him two

crepes.

Ice Wall, Release.

Ryo dispelled the unseen wall of ice, then gave a crepe each to Roman and Abel.



"Eating delicious food makes people happy. So enjoy your crepes and we'll call this little incident water under the bridge." Ryo nodded in satisfaction. "And if you're still not content, Sera and I will gladly stand in as your opponents. Abel, Sera said she's ready whenever you are." Those last words were definitely designed to taunt Abel.

"I am indeed. I believe I've improved a tad through my sparring with Ryo," Sera added, happy to join him in the provocation.

"As if you weren't already strong enough. If that's really the case, I may as well just forfeit from the get-go," Abel muttered.

Sera smiled faintly. "In any case, if you two are well and truly done here, we'll make ourselves scarce. Ryo, let's go. There's a long-standing famous café on that street. Their cake set is positively to die for."

"Ooooh, I can't wait."

Chatting away, Sera and Ryo left the scene. Peace restored.

"Wait, why the heck are they even here in the first place?"

Nobody heard Abel's words.

Just as Ryo and Sera ordered the cake set at Café de Chocolat's branch in the royal capital, a lone swordsman entered the restaurant and took a seat near Ryo.

"Oh, Abel, I didn't know you like this eatery as well," Sera remarked.

"Sit there all you want, Abel, but I still won't treat you," Ryo piped up before he could even say anything.

"Not like I *want* some newbie to treat me anyway!" Abel retorted in an angry whisper. Talented in many ways, Abel was.

"Ahhh, I see now... You're trying to get Sera to pay for you instead, huh?" Ryo said in disgust.

"I'm almost certain you earn just as much as I do, but...I suppose I wouldn't mind," Sera replied with a shake of her head.

"Damn it, that's not why I'm here! I just dropped in to thank you jerks for earlier. For stopping us," Abel said, inclining his head.

"To think the day would come when you would speak words of gratitude from the heart... Oh, wait, it's only because Sera's here, isn't it? I wish you were always this honest." Ryo just couldn't stop

bullying him.

"Abel, you mean to tell me you normally don't exhibit such proper manners when the occasion calls for it?" Sera tilted her head, curious.

"Let me answer for him," Ryo interjected. "He definitely doesn't. He really is such a handful. If only he were a little more up-front... Wait, I just thought of a great way you can express your appreciation, Abel. Give me money. Whenever you want, however much you want, I'll always accept your generosity!"

Ryo's suggestion was so outlandish, Abel snapped. "Wow, what a fantastic idea. I was actually gonna introduce you to an incredible alchemist as thanks, Ryo, but let's just go with your idea instead, buddy. How's that for appreciation, huh? Huh?!"

"I'm sorry, Abel. You are a marvelous person! Beyond compare!" Ryo's attitude immediately did a one-eighty in the face of Abel's wrath.

Sera chuckled at their exchange. "Heh heh heh. You two certainly know how to entertain." Abel sighed, exasperated. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Anyway, the alchemist is Baron Kenneth Hayward. He's still young, but the guy's a genius, skilled enough to be the country's face of alchemy."

"A baron... Abel, I don't really have any experience conversing with nobles..."

"Oh, *now* you get serious? Relax, you'll be fine. Kenneth is originally a commoner, elevated to the aristocracy because of his unparalleled skill and results with alchemy. Plus, he's from Lune. Are those hints enough for you to figure it out? If not, here's another one—the house you bought."

"My house? The previous owners had moved to the capital after their engineer son became a noble and invited them to live with him — Wait, that's him?! No way!"

"Yes way. That's the family. I went drinking with him and a few friends not too long ago and told him about you. He was grateful you paid all in cash, so he said he'd be happy to discuss alchemy with you. But he's a busy man at the heart of this country's developments in alchemy, so don't be a pest, okay?"

"Don't worry, I won't. I'll only ask him a few things. As long as he can teach me some basics, I'll be happy as a clam. Then I can get down to business and study seriously once I get back to Lune."

Ryo had inherited an alchemical notebook from Hasan, the leader of the Sect of Assassins, but he still couldn't make heads or tails of its content. Having said that, he had no intention of showing it to others. Because Hasan had entrusted it to Ryo as his *successor*, he was determined to polish his alchemical skills and understand the man's writings on the topic.

"Sounds like a plan to me. He works at the Royal Center for Alchemy. As for where it is...that's kinda hard to explain. I'll get in touch with him today, then take you to him tomorrow morning."

"Got it. Where exactly are you staying, Abel? Just so I know where to find you."

"The Institute for Magical Research, two blocks from here."

Then he started explaining the Institute's location. Ryo and Sera listened while eating cake. In the midst of all this, Sera quietly dropped a verbal bomb.

"Abel, did you order anything?"

"Now that you mention it, he didn't. Just taking up a seat like he owns the place, hm?" Ryo said pointedly.

"Gah..." Abel was dumbfounded by his own faux pas.

It went without saying that he ordered a cake set then.

After the three of them finished eating, they sat in the restaurant for a little while longer chatting, then headed out. As they were leaving, they heard a voice in the distance.

"Madam Seraaa!" It was one of the knights who'd come with her from Lune. "I found her, I found her!"

The other knights, scattered in the area, congregated when they heard that.

"I guess they were looking for you, Sera," Ryo said from next to her.

"It seems so," she replied with a nod.

"We finally found you, Madam Sera."

"Is something wrong, Eden?"

Eden was the platoon commander of the unit dispatched on this occasion to deliver the goods. He handed over the letter to Sera.

"When I returned to the margrave's mansion, I received this letter addressed to you. It seems to be from the Enclave. They asked me to deliver it as soon as possible."

Sera took the letter from him and opened it on the spot.

"What's the Enclave?" Ryo whispered to Abel standing next to him.

"The elves living in the Kingdom inhabit the area known as the Western Forest, located in the western part of the country," Abel explained. "They're granted autonomy by the national government. The Enclave exists in the royal capital as a liaison point for the Western Forest. Eight years ago, when I was still living here, only two elves were permanently stationed in the Enclave." Abel gave him that thorough explanation.

"With the Enclave's expansion in the past five years, the number of elves residing in the capital has increased. I've heard a dozen or so have even entered the Royal Order of Knights and Bureau of Royal Magicians to train in those respective disciplines. And this letter is related to that." Sera paused then, lapsing into a thoughtful silence for a few moments, before continuing. "To put it simply, the Enclave staff learned of my arrival here and are requesting I instruct the elves there. Moreover, the Grand Elder is in the capital as well for whatever reason. All this makes me think that the timing...is much too convenient."

She paused again to analyze the situation, then glanced at Ryo and Abel before pondering things once more. A long twenty seconds later, she spoke again, having arrived at some conclusion.

"Ryo, Abel, you're both coming with me. I think that's the best option in this case." And with that, she started walking briskly.

"Say what?"

"Um, Sera?"

Despite their obvious confusion, both Abel and Ryo followed her. The only ones left behind were the group of knights from Lune, looking relieved to have fulfilled their duty.

The three of them headed to the Enclave together, with Sera in the lead and the two men trailing behind her. They passed through a large square dominated by a magnificent statue of a knight raising a sword to the sky.

Ryo looked askance at it.

"That's Ashton, the founder of the Kingdom," Abel explained.

"Oh, wow. I just thought it was an amazing replica of some knight."

"Well, King Ashton *was* a knight before he established this country, so you're not necessarily wrong. That's why the surname of the royal family *and* the name of Kingdom have been Knightley for generations. Because it was originally a nation of knights." Abel nodded somberly.

"A knight who became king... Le gasp! Don't tell me he usurped the throne by killing the original king...?!"

"No! Where do you even come up with this stuff?!" Abel said, exasperated by Ryo's outlandish hypotheses.

"He received permission from the country he served to build this one here."

"Which country was that?"

"Well, according to legend, the Supreme Empire of Babylon."

"Babylon..." Ryo whispered, unable to muster any other words.

Babylon... One of the two ancient and powerful empires, alongside Canaan! Both names appeared in the Old Testament. Babylon, the enemy of God. Canaan, God's promised land. Their cultural backgrounds were completely opposite. So was this Supreme Empire of Babylon polytheistic or monotheistic? Or perhaps they believed in angels and demons. The name alone carried such grand implications.

It's quite fascinating that Babylon, which originally means the "gate of God" in the Akkadian language, was vilified in the Old Testament. Even ignoring that, anyone could deduce that whoever had named the Supreme Empire of Babylon was definitely a reincarnated person. Of course, it also wasn't hard to imagine that the person must have been afflicted with Main Character Syndrome.

A question suddenly crossed Ryo's mind.

"Then where was this Supreme Empire originally located?"

In answer, Abel pointed his right index finger up. "The sky."

"What?" He sounded flabbergasted.

"Supposedly, the Supreme Empire was a flying continent."

Fantasy through and through! The most classic of classic fantasy tropes!

"And is this f-flying continent still flying somewhere now...?"

Ryo was practically huffing from excitement. In contrast, Abel was the epitome of calm.

"As far as I know, it's just part of the legend passed down over millennia. I've never heard of a flying continent being discovered, though, so who actually knows."

"Of course it's never been discovered! Because flying continents and castles in the sky are always hidden by incredibly thick clouds, making them invisible to the naked eye!" Ryo said very matter-of-factly.

"Oh-Oh, yeah? Learn something new every day, I guess?" Abel was done in by Ryo's intensity.

Then Sera, walking in front of them, joined their conversation.

"The lore of the floating continent has been passed down to the elves as well. Depending on which Grand Elder is currently visiting the royal capital, you may just have the answers you seek, Ryo."

His face brightened instantly at her words.

"Fantastic! I can always count on you, Sera. As for you, Abel..."

"Hey, I didn't even do anything, so why are you painting me as the bad guy here?!"

◆

"I just remembered, Abel," Ryo said. "I saw Rihya slumped on the ground during your fight with the Hero. Is she all right?"

Abel's expression took on a gloomy cast. "Yeah, she'll be okay. The Hero's fire magician suddenly attacked me with his magic and Rihya protected me using Sanctuary. But... But even though the flames vanished, the momentum of his spell didn't, and it blasted her into the wall. She's pretty much recovered thanks to a potion,

but we're having her rest in the Central Temple just in case. It's kind of a homecoming for her too."

By the time Abel finished talking, his expression went from gloomy to frustrated. He clearly couldn't forgive his own carelessness for letting her get hurt.

"So that's what happened. Now that you mention it, I *did* notice a fallen young man on the side of the street we came from. He looked like a magician too, so he must have been this fire magician you're talking about. I suppose all fire magicians are like that. Makes you just want to round them all up and freeze them, hm?"

"I...wouldn't go *that* far..."

Abel couldn't bring himself to agree with Ryo's over-the-top opinion. No doubt the image of a certain fire magician in a certain empire fueled his malice. Even if he understood that his friend's anger was rooted in the man hurting his fellow Room 10 mates.

"Anyway. Turns out their guide—whatever she was—was the cause of things. By the time the fight ended, she'd disappeared. They had split up to look for her afterward."

"I bet she was leading that idiot fire magician around by the ear. In my homeland, we have various names for those kinds of extortion schemes, like badger games and honey traps. So I think whatever she pulled clearly worked on that idiot fire magician."

Every time Ryo said the words "idiot fire magician," he took care to emphasize the "idiot" bit.

"Well, if I forgot before, I sure won't forget now how much you hate fire magicians, Ryo."

And then, not long after, they arrived at the Enclave. The residences of the nobility lined this particular section of the neighborhood.

"Whoa. It used to be such a normal house before..." Abel whispered as he stared at the building.

The Enclave was a three-story stone structure with buildings on all four sides surrounding a large cobblestone courtyard. Ryo thought it looked like London's Somerset House, which often appeared in movies.

"They relocated here to make way for a larger building. This land belonged to some earl whose dilapidated mansion stood here before. Although I have to admit, I quite liked the Enclave's old location, small as it was," Sera replied, smiling ruefully.

At that moment, Ryo suddenly felt as if the sun had disappeared behind a wall of clouds. When he looked up, however, the sky was completely clear.

"It's an eclipse," Sera said, glancing upward. "The sun is missing."

"A partial solar eclipse..." Ryo suddenly tensed as he remembered what had happened during the total solar eclipse in Lune. When he'd been trapped in some kind of cloister and forced to fight Leonore, the akuma. The onset of this partial eclipse led him to assume the same thing might happen again, but...nothing happened thus far.

Sera smiled faintly at his reaction. "Don't fret, Ryo. There is no dungeon in the capital. A Great Tidal Bore won't occur."

She had clearly misunderstood.

"What do dungeons and Great Tidal Bores have to do with this?" Abel asked, confused.

It was clear that Abel didn't know yet the connection between eclipses and Great Tidal Bores.

With Sera at the head, Abel in the middle, and Ryo in the back, the trio entered the Enclave and stepped into the courtyard. Just as they'd seen from the outside, buildings surrounded the space on all four sides. It seemed like training and sparring matches could be held here...

Two people headed toward them from the back of the courtyard. The first was a woman who looked to be around thirty years old. A man around twenty years old walked at her flank. Both of them had slightly pointed ears... Elves.

And they were both beautiful. Elves were always beautiful. This was an indisputable fact.

"Welcome back, Sera," the woman called out with a smile.

"Lady Matriarch? *You* are the Grand Elder visiting the royal capital?"

Sera bowed her head deeply. Seeing that, Abel and Ryo hurriedly followed suit.

“My lady, this is Abel, an adventurer from Lune.”

“Master...” The Matriarch hummed, puzzled, “Abel, is it?”

“That’s right, my lady. Abel, an *adventurer*,” Sera repeated, emphasizing his vocation.

“I-I see. Welcome to the Enclave, Master Abel.”

The Matriarch seemed to finally understand Sera’s implication as she greeted him with a smile.

Her response seemingly overturned the notion that Ryo had of elves being an exclusionary race, based on his knowledge from light novels. Of course, the basis of this trope on Earth can be attributed to the lore of elves created by J.R.R. Tolkien, a man who must have been reincarnated on Earth from another world.

Facts and fallacies abound.

Ryo believed this wholeheartedly.

Once Sera finished introducing Abel, the Matriarch fixed her eyes on Ryo. Her intense, unblinking stare made him a tad uneasy...

“And this is Ryo, another adventurer from Lune.”

“Hello, I’m Ryo.”

The Matriarch stood there, frozen and unresponsive.

“My lady?” questioned the young man standing behind her.

She finally jolted back to life.

“Forgive me, forgive me. I found myself utterly enchanted.”

The woman seemed thirty years old yet spoke like someone far older, which felt odd to Ryo. But seeing no one else react to her manner of speech made him wonder if it was just in his head.

“Enchanted?” Sera’s eyes narrowed just the slightest bit.

“Indeed. Well, to be precise...Master Ryo’s robe is what captivated me. To think that I would set my eyes upon it again in my lifetime is an unexpected joy.”

And with that, the Matriarch scrutinized his robe from top to bottom again and again.

“My lady...” Sera interjected. “While I’m sympathetic, you’re making Ryo a tad uncomfortable.”

“Hmmm... When was the last time I encountered the Fairy King’s robe? Nigh on twenty years I believe. So you cannot begrudge me my excitement, child,” she objected.

Twenty years? How old is *she, then...?*

While Ryo kept the question to himself, the same couldn't be said of Abel standing next to him. His lips were much looser.

"Twenty *years*?"

"Lady Matriarch... Begging your pardon, may I call you that as well...?" Ryo asked her tentatively.

"Yes, of course. Forgive me my discourtesy."

Then she looked at his face. And froze again.

"U-Ummm?"

He felt himself panicking. And in his panic, he looked beseechingly to Sera.

"Don't fret so, Ryo. She's merely recognized your real worth. She'll return to us before you know it," she said, unperturbed, as if the Matriarch's behavior were nothing out of the ordinary. A flustered Ryo and a calm Sera.

However, Ryo wasn't the only one.

The Matriarch's unusual behavior had the young man who'd accompanied her in a tizzy. He followed her gaze to Ryo's face and realized Ryo himself was the cause of his lady's strange attitude.

He wasn't exactly wrong. Unfortunately, people seldom saw eye to eye in such situations.

"You scum!" he seethed. "What have you done to her?!"

Th-This is a typical light-novel development where he'll cut me down in anger! I've endured so much disappointment... Trope after trope, they never end up happening— Is now finally the time?!

Ryo's thoughts brought a faint smile to his lips. Naturally, that only added fuel to the fire of the young man's fury.

"Why are you smiling?!" he snapped, unsheathing his sword. Then he tensed, ready to slash at Ryo, and—

Sera lunged the instant he moved, slamming his sword hand with her fist. The bones of his index, middle, and ring fingers shattered. Before he could even cry out, she swept his right leg out from under him, toppling the young man down. Face-to-face with the ground, all he could do was groan in pain while clutching his right hand.

Sera's face was expressionless as she stared down at him.

The commotion brought the Matriarch back to her senses. First,

she looked at the fallen young man in surprise. Then she stared at Sera, her head tilted in confusion. After catching sight of his sword on the ground, she seemed to put most of the pieces together.

"Locksleigh... You fool. Ryo, please accept my apologies for this stripling's crassness." The Matriarch bowed her head deeply.

Ryo was disappointed at having another stock development foiled. He also felt sorry for the young man Sera had thrashed. So he grew flustered again just a bit when the Matriarch apologized to him.

"Oh, please, don't worry about it."

"Locksleigh is still so young, you see. And that is why he cannot sense your magnificence, Ryo," she said with a shake of her head.

"Your magnificence, huh?" Abel said.

"Depending on the words that come out of your mouth next, Abel, you may be leaving this world behind," Ryo warned him sharply.

"Who, me? I wasn't gonna say anything. Nothing at all," Abel said, suspiciously averting his eyes.

"Sera, thanks for earlier."

The three of them and The Matriarch were leaving the courtyard and on their way to a parlor. The young man who'd been knocked down by Sera had been taken to the infirmary by another elf.

"There's no need. If anything, I'm sorry for placing you in danger despite being the one who brought you here, Ryo." Sera bowed her head in response to Ryo's gratitude.

"No, you're the one who saved me, so it doesn't make sense for you to apologize," he said with a grin. The effect was instantaneous on her. She'd been looking dejected this whole time, but now a smile bloomed on her face.

Yup, a smile suits her the best.

Ryo nodded hugely in his head.

The parlor was beautifully furnished. It was on a completely different level of grandeur than the guild master's office in Lune, one he'd visited countless times. At least, that was Ryo's opinion.

When the four of them sat down, one of the Enclave staff served black tea. After a few moments of relaxation, Sera broke the silence

first.

"Lady Matriarch, what brings you to the royal capital at this time?"

The question of an elder visiting the city at the same time as she had been on her mind since reading the letter. The timing seemed too good to be true. Then the Matriarch's answer blindsided her.

"Divination brought me here. It told both of an unsettling presence here and a splendid encounter. Ryo must have been the encounter, eh? And splendid indeed it was."

Out of the four here, Abel was out of his depth. As a human, he couldn't detect the "fae facet" Ryo gave off and his understanding of the Fairy King's robe was rudimentary at best... However, he couldn't overlook the Matriarch's words.

"If I may, what do you mean by an 'unsettling presence' in the capital?"

Ryo didn't know it, but Abel was the king's second son. Sera, meanwhile, actually did know this truth. And the elder realized this too since she'd seen him in the royal palace once upon a time. So to the two elves, his question came as no surprise.

"Hm, I did say that, didn't I? You must understand that divination is nothing more than that. Meaning even I do not know the particulars. Yet regardless of what occurs, a fair few elves reside here in the capital, having left our woodland home. So I came because I thought it would be easier to deal with the situation if I was nearby."

According to the Matriarch's explanation, there were over fifty elves in the royal capital. Considering that Sera was the only elf in Lune, that was an extremely large number. This was due entirely to the expansion of the Enclave. Before, some elves had been temporarily stationed with the Royal Order of Knights, but there were none there now. Twenty of them were conducting research at the College of Magic. The rest were involved in work at the Enclave.

"The fact that they all left the Royal Order can only mean...?" Abel asked.

The Matriarch grimaced. "Yes, unfortunately, things are not going well there."

Evidently, even the elves knew of the breakdown in law and order among the royal knights.

"While I will not deny such concerns account for part of the reason for my visit to the capital," she continued, "another just so happens to do with Sera. Since she would be here anyway, I thought it a good opportunity for our young to train with her. After all, the knights she instructs in Lune are said to be the best of the best in the Kingdom, yes?" She stared directly at Sera.

"In light of Locksleigh's atrocious behavior, I'd say it's best to work on their discipline first," Sara said, her tone scathing. She was apparently still in a temper about the young man's attempt to attack Ryo.

"As much as it pains me to admit this, I thought the same," the Matriarch replied, scratching her cheek.

"All right, let's say for the sake of argument he *had* succeeded in cutting Ryo down. What would you have done then, my lady?"

"When you put it like that, I cannot condemn you for your actions."

"Exactly. He could have invited disaster upon the world itself, you know," Sera said, her expression so grave that it threw Ryo into confusion.

Huh? What the... Then where exactly am I in this world's hierarchy?

"Damn, Ryo, so your existence is single-handedly holding up the world?" Abel chimed in.

"I'm not so sure about that..."

Both Abel and Ryo couldn't make heads or tails of the elves' conversation. The women ignored them and continued talking to each other. In the end, they decided that Sera would train the Enclave's residents for three days.

"I'll start with their temperaments and minds..."

Having heard Sera's mutter, Ryo and Abel both prayed for her trainees.

With Sera's duties decided for the interim, just like she'd promised him, she steered the conversation with The Matriarch into the topic he was interested in. Namely...

“My lady, Ryo would like to learn more about the floating continent,” she said with a smile.

He nodded vigorously. From their conversation thus far, he’d learned that The Matriarch was more than two thousand years old. That meant she would know much more about the floating continent than people’s folklore and legends.

“I see. I would, of course, be more than glad to tell you what I know. So where would you like me to start?” The Matriarch responded, delighted. Perhaps because of her position as a Grand Elder, she didn’t mind answering people’s questions.

“Well, first of all: Does it still exist today?” Ryo asked, his eyes sparkling.

“Indeed it does.”

“Whoooa!” He was ecstatic. Then that meant the chance of visiting it someday in the future.

“I know not its exact location, but since there has been no news of it falling, it must therefore be floating somewhere in the world. That said, a few centuries ago, I *did* spy a small one. It is hard to see them with the naked eye. They’re often masked by clouds,” she explained.

“I knew it! I knew the clouds were covering them up!”

Ryo’s guess to Abel turned out to be right. He pivoted toward him, his expression smug and triumphant.

“Yeah, yeah,” Abel mumbled, feeling defeated for some reason.

Sipping her black tea with a smile, Sera listened to the conversation.

The world was at peace.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last long...

“It is said that those who live on the floating continents possess purple hair.”

“What...?”

The Matriarch’s casual remark left Ryo and Abel speechless. Images of the purple-haired man and woman they’d met in Lune popped into their heads. The man whom they’d fought... It couldn’t be...

“N-No, no, there has to be a lot of purple-haired people, right?”

Ryo sounded hopeful.

"Get real, man," Abel said, dashing his hopes. "You know the answer as well as I do."

"You can't be sure of that. Maybe they just used light to make their hair *look* purple."

"Except I fought him at close range and his hair was *definitely* purple."

"But then that means the people of the floating continents are monsters..."

"Well, yeah, I guess so. That reminds me. He attacked me in Wingston too," Abel remarked.

"And when exactly were you going to tell me about that?!"

"Gimme a break. We literally *just* met again not too long ago."

"Abel, the three Cs of being a full-fledged member of society are Communicate, Contact, and Consult. If you don't communicate things properly to me, it puts me in a bind."

"What do you want me to do about it?" As usual, Abel was exasperated by Ryo's irrational objections.

"Anyway. I'm surprised you survived an attack from such a savage person."

"That was all Lyn. She riddled him with holes using Bullet Rain."

"You're joking..."

"That *should* have taken him out, but...he disappeared the second she did. He might have used some kind of transfer magic."

"Then...considering our encounters with them...maybe they've already flagged us as enemies and won't invite us to their floating continent..."

"There's no maybes on that score, pal. More like *definitely*. They aren't inviting us anywhere anytime soon," Abel said bluntly.

"Ngh... It is what is, I suppose. If they won't invite us, we'll just have to find a way up there ourselves!"

"I knew that was your plan all along, Ryo." Abel didn't look at all surprised. He'd apparently seen right through Ryo from the start.

The Matriarch, clearly entertained by their conversation, finally interjected: "So, you two have met the people of the floating islands."

"Uhhh, I'm not sure that's how *they* would categorize it..." Abel remarked.

"My lady, do they also have glittering blue eyes?" Ryo asked, wanting to confirm what they already knew.

"Let me think... I have never heard of such about them."

"Then they can't be from the floating continents! Isn't that great news, Abel?!" Ryo had completely bought into his wishful thinking.

"Honestly? I hope that's true, for both our sakes." Meanwhile, Abel wanted to believe it, but he suspected otherwise.

As for the truth...

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Ryo and Abel said goodbye to Sera, who remained behind in the Enclave to train the elves, and started walking back.

"Ryo, you have a place to stay?"

"I do. I have free rein for a week at the annex at the Monarchy of Joux's embassy. They told me to let them know if I plan on staying any longer and they'd work something out," Ryo replied, thinking of Prince Willie.

"The Monarchy of Joux? Jeez, another unusual connection under your belt, huh? It's even farther east than the Principality of Inverey. How the heck did you even manage that?" Abel shook his head repeatedly in surprise.

"Let's just say it was an eventful experience. I can't stress how eventful..." Ryo thought back to the journey from Inverey to the Kingdom's capital.

Watching him, Abel looked like he suddenly remembered something. "Do you know where the embassy is? The capital is massive and it's pretty far from here."

"Huh? Where, you ask..."

Ryo lapsed into thought. Prince Willie, Mr. Rodrigo, and their bodyguards had gone straight to the royal palace without stopping at the embassy because their formal entry into the country would be conducted there. The embassy staff had prepared everything, including a change of clothes, in the castle's guest rooms. In other

words, Ryo, Cohn, and the other adventurers hadn't visited Joux's embassy even once since their arrival... He didn't know about the others, but this was his first time in the capital, so of course he had no clue where the embassy was located, much less where Margrave Lune's capital residence was.

"Now that you mention it, I have no idea," he muttered in a daze.

Abel nodded, suspecting as much.

"Abel, why do you look so smug?!" Ryo snapped. "Just so we're clear, I didn't lose to you!"

"I'm not," Abel said, unfazed. "I was just thinking about how unsurprised I am."

But at that moment, he saw something unexpected: a woman in a robe, its hood all the way up, walking briskly along. His eyes followed her closely. Of course, Ryo, walking beside him, noticed.

"What is it, Abel? Thinking of cheating on Rihya?"

"Why is that the first thing that pops into your head? Obviously not. There's something about that woman..."

"Please warn me if you're planning on starting a battle royal with Rihya. I'll side with her."

"What battle royal?"

"You'd obviously be the one in the wrong, Abel. And the bad guys always lose. That's been true since the world came into being. I stand on the side of good, the victors. And when I'm looking down at your corpse after you've chosen the wrong path, I'll say, 'Abel, you idiot.'"

"Okay, are you done insulting me now?" Abel said with a shake of his head. "I'm pretty sure that's the same woman from earlier."

"Don't tell me you *already* cheated... But it hasn't even been that long!" Ryo quipped.

"I'm gonna kill you," Abel retorted.

"Ah, how I love our little skits, Abel. Of course, I'm only joking. Don't think I've forgotten your battle with the Hero. No way you could carry on an affair in that situation. Which means..."

"Yup. The one who had the Hero's fire magician by the balls."

"The wicked woman."

"Uh, well... I guess technically, yeah." Despite the hint of

discomfort he felt at that description, Abel couldn't think of a reason to refute it either, so he ended up agreeing.

While conversing, the two somehow found themselves heading in the same direction as her...

"Abel, if we're going to tail her, I think we should put more distance between her and us."

"Agreed. She's definitely not normal. It's almost like she has special training... I can't tell you why I think that though."

"Likely because of the way she walks or carries herself."

"Huh. That's it. Ya know, Ryo, you're pretty sharp when it comes to things like that."

"Oh, stop, you'll make me blush," he said in response to Abel's genuine compliment.

"Then the question is, how far back should we hang?"

"I've memorized her characteristics. I can keep track of her at even two hundred meters using Passive Sonar." Ryo sounded proud.

"Wait, seriously?" Abel's eyes widened in surprise.

The area was between the northwest and western districts of the royal capital, and there was a fair amount of foot traffic. Still, the woman might notice them if they followed her for long enough, but it should be fine with Ryo's magic. Abel knew from experience how difficult it was to tail someone without being noticed—especially someone with special training. So he was once again reminded of the incredible power of Ryo's magic.

"She was gone by the time your fight with the Hero ended, hm?"

"Yup. And like I told you at the café, he and his party were searching for her."

"Then it's brazen of her to walk around like this even though the Hero's party is hunting her."

"Well, the capital *is* huge. It's hard for people to spot you once you blend into the crowd."

"But we found her," Ryo pointed out.

"True. Coincidence is a scary thing, huh?" Abel shook his head a little. In truth, he knew from personal experience how difficult it was to look for someone in the capital's crowds. But that wasn't the case this time.

Ryo watched him, his eyes sharp. “Abel,” he said, his voice soft but firm, “don’t even think about trying to pull the wool over my eyes.”

“You wanna tell me where this is coming from?”

“I bet you used something like Combat Skill: Search or Sword Skill: Seize, right?!” Ryo looked aghast. “I know subterfuge is your specialty, but you’ve gone too far if you’re keeping secrets from *me*!”

“Okay, just so you know,” Abel said without missing a beat, “neither of those ‘skills’ actually exist.” He did wonder, however, where exactly Ryo got all of his unfounded confidence from.

The woman they trailed was heading to the heart of the capital’s western district. They maintained a distance of two hundred meters even after entering the area.

“So many companies in this area,” Ryo said, looking around.

“Yeah. The central temple is smack-dab in the middle of the city and the nobles and wealthy merchants live in the north, where the palace happens to be, while the commoners live in the southern part of the capital. Roughly speaking, the western district is full of companies, whereas the eastern district has a bunch of workshops, including the Royal Center for Alchemy.”

“Oooh! The place where the famous alchemist works!”

Ryo was clearly looking forward to meeting him. He nodded happily again and again.

“Yup, Kenneth. But it’s not *only* workshops. ’Cuz both Joux’s embassy and the Institute for Magical Research, where I’m staying, are both in the eastern district, since it’s pretty big.”

“I see. Wait a second, why a research institute instead of a regular inn?”

“Weeell, it’s kinda complicated...” Abel replied with a slight grimace.

“Don’t tell me you finally committed a crime awful enough to have your face plastered on wanted posters? Are regular inns out of the question now?”

“Like hell I did! I wanted to look into some things, so I decided it was more convenient to stay with an old friend than in an inn. That’s all.”

That was when Ryo noticed something.

"What is it, Ryo?"

"That woman entered a shop."

"Hm. How about we take a stroll past? I wanna know what kinda shop it is."

"I couldn't agree more. We're very much on the same page. However..." Ryo cocked his head thoughtfully.

"Something bothering you?"

"Yes. I'm almost positive a few people are surveilling that shop, in several groups no less."

"That *is* suspicious, huh?"

The woman who deceived the Hero's party into attacking Abel had entered a shop, which just happened to be under watch by several people. It smelled like trouble. Anybody would have thought so, even if they weren't an outstanding B-rank adventurer like him.

Instead of walking toward said store, Ryo and Abel decided to watch it from a street corner some distance away.

"It's that one, with the bright orange eaves."

"Got it. Looks like the sign says 'Gongorad & Co.'"

"Gongorad? I feel like I've heard that name somewhere..." Ryo searched through his memory.

"'Course, you have. That's 'cuz Gongorad is the most powerful merchant in the western part of the Handalieu Federation, so it isn't weird for him to have a branch in the Kingdom's capital."

"Ahhh, now I remember! The villain pulling the strings behind the curtains in the Grand Duchy of Volturino, the one who ordered that captain or whatever to steal the red magic stones."

Ryo had not expected the evil mastermind to operate a company here in the Kingdom.

"Is the world just small or do bad people just do a lot of bad things..."

"Maybe both." This time, Abel had no objections to Ryo's words and simply nodded in acceptance.

"All right, Abel, the fact of the matter is that we know she went into a corrupt Federation business. However, we obviously don't know what she's doing inside. On top of that, we don't know why

Duke Flitwick's secretary is connected to said business. Any bright ideas, *Abel*? Well, *Abel*? Now's your time to shine, *Abel*!"

"First of all, why are you saying my name like that?"

"Well, *I* don't want to jump in and see how they react. That kind of thing is more in your wheelhouse. You know, reconnaissance and all that."

"The hell it is!" Abel soundly rejected Ryo's suggestion.

You can't always get what you want. That's how the world works. How sad for Ryo.

"Having said that, I'm also not a fan of just calling it quits at this point."

"Then allow me to humbly offer a compromise. Instead of the shop, you can launch a one-man attack on the people surveilling it."

"The hell I will!" Abel said without a moment's hesitation. "Although I have to admit," he continued nevertheless, "I *am* curious about whoever's watching the shop. I wonder if there's a way we can find out without arousing suspicion. Ya know, do it reeeal quiet?" This time, it was Abel's turn to propose a suggestion. He wanted to avoid using force, but he wanted information too.

"An unreasonable request, methinks."

"Oh, begging your pardon, my lord! But be serious for a second here. Any commotion would be a bad idea. Or have you forgotten this is the royal capital?"

"I'm not sure someone who was engaging in a fierce sword fight in the middle of the city not too long ago has much of a leg to stand on," Ryo admonished with a dramatic sigh.

"Hey, not like I had a choice in that..." Abel protested unconvincingly. "Besides, we were in the eastern district, and...I hate to say this, but fights aren't uncommon there. This part of the city is different though, with all these businesses. Not to mention luxury stores here in the western part, which means aristos and the wealthy alike. Any problems and the garrison will come flying in."

"I'm against class discrimination!" Ryo abruptly declared. Too bad for him, this was a monarchy. With both royalty and nobility. There was no equality to begin with.

You really can't always get what you want. That's just how the

world works.

"Okay, for now, let's circle around the people watching and try to see what we're dealing with."

"I suppose we could do that. It isn't as if we have any other options," Ryo agreed. He more or less had to since neither of them could come up with a better idea.

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Ryo and Abel sneaked around from behind to observe one of the four groups monitoring the shop. But as they watched from a distance, Abel tilted his head in confusion. This action, of course, caught Ryo's attention.

"Abel, what's wrong? Did you change your mind about ambushing them and forcing them to disclose their objectives? I don't mind leaving everything to you. I'll retreat and watch things unfold."

"Not a snowball's chance in hell. How many times do I have to tell you? Anyway, the problem is that I recognize one of them."

"Oooh, what a lucky break for us! What does he do?"

"He's a member of the Second Royal Guard..."

"The Royal Guard I understand, but there are *two* of them?"

"Yeah, the Second serves the crown prince. That guy...his name is Emmanuel. I heard a rumor that he was promoted to company commander."

Incidentally, the source of said rumor was Abel's friends in the Alliance of Second Sons, Zach Kuhler and Scotty Cobouc, who just so happened to be knights in the Royal Order.

"Wait, if he's a company commander, then doesn't that mean he's only outranked by the regimental commander and battalion commander? That makes him a leader, so he may even become the regional commander himself eventually."

"You're not wrong and he's definitely one of the most successful in my peer group, but that begs the question...why is he surveilling a business?"

"Good point. So he was either demoted or, conversely, that company is so dangerous it warrants direct monitoring by the top

brass."

Both Abel and Ryo pondered the situation, but neither could think of the right answer. It was inevitable considering the lack of information. They both understood this.

"Abel, at this point, I think we should just ask him directly," Ryo suggested.

"I don't disagree... But..." Though Abel wasn't opposed, he *did* glance at Ryo, who completely misunderstood the look.

"Why are you looking at me like that?! Despite what you may think, I'm *not* the kind of person to hit someone in the solar plexus with an Icicle Lance or freeze them with an Ice Casket out of the blue!"

"Uh-huh. I seem to have this suuuper vague memory of you doing exactly the latter in the Grand Duchy of Volturino," Abel remarked pointedly, referencing the incident with the thief.

"W-Well, I didn't have a choice back then. It was the dead of night and the city was under martial law. What else am I supposed to do when a lone, suspicious man creeps in the street? Besides, he turned out to be the bad guy trying to smuggle the red magic stones out, so in the end, I wasn't wrong," Ryo hastily explained.

Abel took his words in stride. "Sure. *That* time."

Technically, their current situation *was* completely different. Even Ryo wouldn't be dumb enough to arbitrarily unleash ice spears or encase people in ice coffins. Probably.

"Yeah, I don't think you're that reckless either. Fine, let's just do this. Stay behind me, Ryo."

Abel sneaked forward, almost soundless. Following him, Ryo found himself deeply impressed by his friend's silent movements. Of course, he didn't voice his praise. If Abel grew too big for his bitches, he would only hinder himself! Ryo, naturally, was always genuinely invested in Abel's personal growth!

"Ryo, why do I get the feeling you're thinking something weird right now?"

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about. Stop talking in riddles and call out to them already."

A cold sweat trickled down Ryo's back at Abel's eerily prescient

words. He couldn't underestimate a swordsman's intuition.

Before long, Abel stood behind the surveillance group they'd targeted without them ever noticing.

"Long time no see, Emmanuel," he said quickly. "Don't say a word. Turn around quietly."

"Huh? Oh, Alb..."

"Jeez, man, has it really been so long that you already forgot who I am? It's me, Abel the adventurer. *Abel*. Do you remember now? A. B. E. L. The *adventurer* named *Abel*." Abel repeated the words "adventurer" and "Abel" several times. Almost like he couldn't bear being called by another name. The emphasis he placed on them didn't go unnoticed.

"Uhhh... Right, it's been a while...A-Abel..."

"Oooh, so you remember, huh? Good, good," Abel said, relieved.

"But...why exactly are you here, A...bel?" Despite fumbling for a second, Emmanuel said the right name again. As a company commander of the Royal Guard, he spoke politely.

"You see, we're kinda chasing a woman and she just so happened to enter Gongorad & Co."

"The one earlier? If I recall correctly, she's Viscount Fletcher's secretary."

"Ya don't say... And just to make sure, the same Viscount Fletcher who runs Duke Flitwick's capital estate, right? She's *his* secretary."

"Well...she's an important figure," Emmanuel said with a frown.

"What do you mean?" Abel sounded confused.

"She's a spy for the Federation's intelligence bureau, but at the same time, she seems to be leaking information to the Empire also..."

"Hold it right there. Did you just say the Empire?"

In the Central Provinces, the Empire meant the Debuhi Empire to the north of the Kingdom of Knightley. Alongside the Kingdom and the Handalieu Federation, the Empire was one of the three major powers making up the Central Provinces. However, in terms of national power, it was far superior to the other two, making the Empire a much more dangerous opponent than the Federation.

"Yes, I did. Not only is she connected to Duke Flitwick, she's

leaking information to the Empire as a spy for the Federation. On *top* of all that, she has a long history with Gongorad & Co. as well. That's what we know of her so far, based on our investigation."

Abel lapsed into a thoughtful silence after listening to Emmanuel's explanation. As for Ryo standing behind him, his eyes were wide in surprise at this turn of events. Apparently, all kinds of folks were maneuvering secretly, hidden from the general public.

"In fact, despite being based in the western part of the Federation, Gongorad & Co. has also established ties with the Empire over these last few years, likely to gain a financial advantage within the Empire. But its actions against the Kingdom have been clearly hostile."

"What makes you say that?"

"For one, the theft of confidential information from the palace leaked to the Federation government."

"Ahhh," Abel said with an emphatic nod. "So *that's* why you have this branch under surveillance."

"We're actually about to conduct a raid since a few of the companies forming the Second Royal Guard just arrived."

When Abel looked, he saw a group of people some distance away signaling to Emmanuel.

"You are? But the Royal Guard doesn't have the authority to do that, no? The capital falls under the Capital Guard's jurisdiction."

"That is normally the case. However, the crown prince himself directly asked His Majesty for a temporary transfer of control, so here we are."

"Why wouldn't Brothe— Why wouldn't His Highness use the Capital Guard instead though, since they report to the ministry of domestic affairs...?" Abel asked.

"Unfortunately, His Highness hasn't seen fit to disclose the reason to me..." Emmanuel replied with a shake of his head.

"Wasn't Lex in the Capital Guard?" Abel asked, referring to another member of their drinking group, the Alliance of Second Sons. They'd known each other for a long time now, so if the Royal Guard sought cooperation from the Capital Guard, he'd be more than happy to help. "He should be pretty high up on the chain of

command, right?”

“Yes, he’s a lieutenant commander now. The commander was found guilty of accepting bribes, so that position is currently vacant. So for all intents and purposes, Lex is in charge.”

“And he’s...on the up-and-up?”

“A...bel, you should know better than anyone how earnest and brilliant he is. That side of him hasn’t changed one bit. Not then or now.”

“His Highness’s intellect is one we can’t begin to fathom. He must have a good reason for going so far as to request an official sanction from His Majesty to use the Second Royal Guard instead of the Capital Guard. Still...” That was when Emmanuel noticed Ryo standing behind Abel. “Um, A...bel, who might this be?”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot. He’s Ryo, my friend. Also an adventurer in Lune. Don’t worry, you can trust him.”

“Is that right? Then allow me to introduce myself. My name is Emmanuel Salk and I’m a company commander in the Kingdom of Knightley’s Second Royal Guard. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I appreciate your courtesy. I’m Ryo, a D-rank adventurer in Lune. It’s hard to believe someone as mannerly as you knows Abel, who so rudely keeps people waiting after forgetting they exist. So the pleasure is all mine.”

“Yeah, that’s just the way he is,” Abel said, scratching his cheek. “He’s not a bad guy though.”

“Then if you’ll excuse me, I need to lead my men. A...bel and Ryo, please wait here to avoid getting caught up in this.”

With that word of caution, Emmanuel and his comrades began inspecting their gear.

Ryo and Abel moved a short distance away from the members of the Second Royal Guard to have an unsettling discussion in hushed tones.

“It’s happening again, Abel. It’s happening again!”

“What? What’s happening again?”

“Exposing a spy... A spy who infiltrated the Kingdom is about to be unmasked. We did this in Lune too. Twice, at that!”

"Huh. Now that you mention it, you're right."

"And both times, we ran into those purple-haired people. Once is a coincidence, but twice is a pattern. Which means a third time is likely. Maybe the same thing will happen this time too..."

"Nah, no way. I doubt it. I really...doubt it..." Abel said, but he couldn't completely refute Ryo's concern. You never knew what could happen.

"All things considered, I suggest we refrain from charging in this time. As the saying goes, 'A wise man keeps away from danger.' And we're wise men, right? So let's do what Emmanuel said and watch over things from here."

"Uh, well... I guess we shouldn't get in their way. Okay, we'll wait here!"

"Huzzah!" they both whisper-yelled, thrusting their fists into the air...

Whether by chance or as a result of the pair's excited fist-pumping, the raid succeeded without incident. Half the Second Royal Guard, the company behind the raid, had been mobilized for the operation. Twenty people, including the manager of the Kingdom's royal capital branch, were arrested.

Two people had escaped by jumping out of the second-floor windows. When they turned the corner, they encountered a man and a woman, both with purple hair... But this wasn't noted in the reports. And, of course, Ryo and Abel didn't run into such dangerous characters either...

However, the Second Royal Guard didn't find the woman, Viscount Fletcher's secretary, who had entered the shop. Instead, they discovered something completely unexpected.

"Hm... This doesn't seem to be a crystal, but...I've never heard of an alchemical tool like it..." Emmanuel murmured as he stared at the item.

It was a sphere, a bit larger than a person's fist. At first glance, it looked like a dark crystal. Closer inspections revealed a pitch-black smoke wriggling inside the ball. Yes, the word "wriggled" described it perfectly... It was entirely alien, remotely unlike anything man-made.

"Contact the Bureau and have Lord Arthur Berasus inspect it," Emmanuel ordered the subordinate next to him. "Until he does, this will remain under heavy security in the palace's underground vault. It would be a serious problem if it suddenly broke and disaster struck. Is that understood?"

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"I sure am glad nothing serious happened. Aren't you too?"

After ensuring the raid had gone smoothly, Ryo and Abel left the area. The only reason they'd even been there in the first place was to find the woman who'd caused the fight between Abel and Roman the Hero. Although they were still curious about why she'd entered the shop...

"Too bad she wasn't inside," Abel replied with a small shake of his head.

The Second Royal Guard had stationed folks at the back entrance too and no one had gone in or out of it.

"Maybe there was a secret passage underground or something?" Ryo wondered baselessly.

"If there is, Emmanuel and his people will find out soon enough."

"That's true. I suppose the real problem would be if there isn't one."

"Then she might have slipped out some other way. Either way, not really something for us to worry about, right?"

"Of course it is. What would you do if something truly *insane* happened in that building?" Ryo asked, feigning gravity. However, Abel knew better and refused to take the bait. He must have guessed Ryo was planning on saying something ridiculous. Ryo picked up on his attitude too.

"Abel, you think I'm just thinking something frivolous, aren't you?!"

"Oooh, you a mind reader now?"

"How rude! I'll have you know that all sorts of events exist between heaven and earth that your puny little mind can't even comprehend."

“Like what?”

“Urk... Like... Aha! I know. For example, perhaps there was a dragon inside that building and it ate the woman and that’s why the Royal Guardsmen couldn’t find her.”

“Yeah, not a chance!”

“But why...”

“Hello, ’cuz they didn’t find a dragon full after a meal?”

“Ugh, sharp deduction, Abel... However, I have no doubt the dragon made itself invisible,” Ryo said, grasping at straws now.

Abel blew a deliberate, exaggerated sigh. “You really think a dragon is small enough to even get inside that building?”

“W-Well, when you put it like that...”

Ryo knew a dragon. He had seen one up close and even talked to said dragon. If memory served right, the creature had been around fifty meters long.

“On second thought, it’s more likely she was hacked into pieces by a ruthless swordsman like you, Abel, than eaten by a dragon.”

“Screw you!” Abel shot down his second theory without another thought.

“Anyway,” Ryo said, awkwardly trying to change the subject. “How do we get to the Monarchy of Joux’s embassy from here?”

Abel scowled at him.

Unable to bear his friend’s gaze boring into him, Ryo continued. “A-Abel, you seem to know the capital like the back of your hand, but don’t you ever get lost?”

One way to wiggle out of an awkward situation was to broach a completely unrelated topic of conversation with the other person. Abel sighed quietly and decided to go with the flow. Because he was a really good guy.

“This part of the city is known as the western district. Or, also the business district. A lot of the shops here are geared toward a wealthier clientele, but if you keep going south, you’ll start seeing stalls for commoners.”

“Oooooh. So, generally speaking, the north side of the capital is for nobility and the south side is for plebs?”

“Yeah, more or less. Since the palace is located in the

northernmost part of the north district, a lot of the aristos just naturally clustered there. Even the elves' Enclave we were in earlier used to belong to an earl. The Empire's and Federation's embassies are also in that area, but interestingly enough, other countries have theirs in the eastern district."

"You mentioned that's the one with workshops, right? Including the vaunted Royal Center for Alchemy, hm?" Ryo sounded happy. He was incredibly excited to meet the famous alchemist there.

"Yup, it is, along with the Institute for Magical Research, where I'm staying, as well as the Monarchy of Joux's embassy, where you'll be staying, Ryo. But the eastern district is pretty huge, so all three of these places are pretty far apart."

While the two of them chatted, they took the road leading east.

"The quickest way there is to cut through the center of the capital."

"And you said that's where..."

"The central temple is, yeah."

The street from the western business district toward the city center was fairly wide and lined with many stalls.

"I really love this atmosphere," Ryo said, looking around. "While all those fancy shops are nice in their own right, a city filled with street stalls is just so much more thrilling."

Abel smiled wryly at the sight of him. "I get that. When I still lived in the capital, I used to eat at the stalls all the time."

"I bet you're the third son of some noble, right, Abel? You must have been such a naughty kid too," Ryo concluded, imagining a young Abel.

"Nah. I'm a second son, aaand I don't think I was all that naughty either."

"But you probably skipped school a lot to play with the bad kids in the neighborhood, causing all sorts of trouble, didn't you?"

"I *did* play with them, but...I didn't cause anyone trouble...I think."

"I wonder," Ryo said with a shrug. He sounded both skeptical and condescending.

With a glance at the central temple, the two of them entered the eastern district. Though it was known as the workshop district, there were also many eateries and other magnificent structures, giving it a lively air. The high street in particular was full of shops of all kinds, so it wouldn't be out of place to call this area a business district too.

"The eastern district has lots of stores just like the western one, huh!" Ryo goggled at everything while walking. His face said he was really enjoying himself.

"While the western district has a bunch of clothes shops, the eastern's got stuff for your everyday needs, plus weapons and alchemical supplies."

"Ooooh! Now you're speaking my language!" Ryo's eyes sparkled even more considering his current obsession with alchemy.

"Relax. I'll take you to see Kenneth tomorrow. Despite being so young, he's apparently a genius alchemist making a name for the Kingdom. Pretty sure he'll be on the cutting edge of alchemy if he isn't already."

"Amazing! I can't thank you enough, Abel. For everything!"

"Uh, you're welcome, I guess." Abel seemed a bit embarrassed by Ryo's unusual bit of praise.

Right now, they were heading to Joux's embassy, where Ryo would be staying. But the truth was...he needed to stop by somewhere else first. Because he had a message to relay. The place just so happened to be in the eastern district too and that was where they arrived...

"This is...incredible. Like a fort."

"Yeah. No matter how many times I see it, I can't help feeling awed."

In front of them loomed Margrave Lune's capital residence, an enormous mansion with towering walls and a gate that looked like it wouldn't break even if a tank crashed into it. This imposing structure stood out dramatically even in the eastern district.

"This place could withstand even under your attack, Abel."

"Why the heck would I be attacking it in the first place?"

"For one reason and one reason only, of course: to take my life as I barricade myself inside it."

"I don't even wanna know how you come up with these ridiculous scenarios. But to be clear, that particular one doesn't make a lick of sense."

"One never knows what could happen in this world. Therefore, one must be prepared at all times. In short, always conduct oneself as though one were on a battlefield," Ryo said matter-of-factly.

Abel shook his head, his expression saying he was mystified by Ryo's words. "Well...I guess I ought to make my move *before* you make your last stand inside, huh?"

"Are you saying that besieging a castle is a foolish strategy...?"

"I'm just saying all I have to do is lure you away first."

"Hah! As if I would ever accept any of *your* invitations, Abel!"

"Hey, Ryo, what do you say we grab a bite to eat? Cake? Curry? Actually...how about both? My treat."

"You don't have to ask me twice!"

"See, like a lamb to slaughter."

"You sneaky son of a...!"

As peaceful as the royal capital was, you should never drop your guard...

They waited a bit after telling the gatekeeper standing in front of the shockingly sturdy gate the reason for their visit. Then the gate opened just a little and a knight emerged from the estate grounds.

"Thank you for your patience, Ryo, Abel."

It was Eden, a platoon commander of Lune's order of knights and leader of the unit deployed to transport the magic stones the royal family had purchased. Needless to say, those stones were the ones Ryo and Abel harvested from the wyverns. However, Eden didn't know this.

"Hello, Eden. I'm actually here to deliver a message..." Then Ryo told the knight that Sera would be staying in the elves' Enclave.

Although the message was brief, Eden's eyes glinted with some flash of insight. "Very well. Then, I take it that means...Madam Sera is training the elves?" Eden said with a rueful smile. He knew that anyone trained by her would become stronger, but the training would be punishing. Still, it was far better than dying on the battlefield due to half-hearted training.

“You’re spot on. So...let’s pray for the elves.” Ryo sent up a prayer to a god he didn’t even believe in, while deliberately ignoring Abel, who gave him a suspicious sidelong glance.

With the message from Sera delivered, the two walked for a while longer before arriving at the Monarchy of Joux’s embassy. The walls and gate seemed solid enough, but...

“I can’t help comparing this to the margrave’s estate...”

“Well, you shouldn’t, if only because his place is abnormal. The embassy’s construction is way above average too,” Abel said bluntly.

Witnessing the peak of some kind of art or technique would cause *anyone* to lose their sense of normalcy. You had to watch out for that.

“If you say so. Anyway, thank you very much for guiding me all this way, Abel.” Ryo bowed his head in gratitude. You had to show manners even to your close friends.

“No problem. I’ll drop by tomorrow morning to take you to the Royal Center for Alchemy.” And with that, Abel set off toward the Institute for Magical Research where he was staying. From behind, he could hear a conversation.

“Hello again, Mr. Rodrigo. I’m looking forward to staying here tonight.”

“Welcome, welcome, Master Ryo. His Highness will be most pleased as well.”

“Is it just me or...is the staff really enthusiastic about cleaning?”

“For good reason, since the Kingdom’s crown prince will be visiting us tomorrow.”

“Wooow.”

Mayhem in the Royal Capital

Within the central temple in the royal capital, a man wearing a white priest's robe descended a flight of stairs into a massive subterranean cemetery. There, the temple's greatest and most renowned high priests and saints slept. The man continued to the fifth and lowest level and then opened a door. While this entrance usually required a special key to open, he discovered it was unlocked.

When he arrived at the designated spot, he took out what appeared to be a fist-sized crystal ball from inside his robe. However, upon closer inspection, black smoke could be seen whirling inside. He placed it on the floor and then imbued the necklace, a disposable talisman for warding off the undead, hanging from his neck with magic. Despite being incredibly expensive, its effect lasted for two hours. A superior item that allowed the user to avoid attacks by most undead. It was certainly not something any run-of-the-mill cleric could get their hands on.

Yet the man activated the necklace without hesitation as he continued pouring his magical energy into the crystal ball. Moments later, a *klink* echoed in the space, like the sound of glass shattering. But the crystal ball hadn't broken. Instead, the black smoke inside burst out as if it had never been trapped inside and spread everywhere.

After a while, undead creatures, mainly skeletons, emerged from the smoke. They numbered in the thousands. They multiplied, filling up the entirety of the fifth underground level.

"Sooner than I planned, but I have no other choice. Heh heh heh. With this, the Temple's destruction is assured. And the capital will be thrown into chaos," the man muttered, his lips twisting into a sneer.

Then he froze. Some other kind of creature began appearing.

"How... How is this possible? There should only be undead..."

Those were his last words before the creature's hand flashed, striking the man's head from his shoulders.

◆

The morning after Ryo stopped the bloodshed in the middle of the capital, Abel visited the Monarchy of Joux's embassy. Ryo was ready and waiting for him, so they headed straight to the Royal Center for Alchemy. Since Abel had scheduled an appointment yesterday, the alchemist, Baron Kenneth Hayward, was already there. Ryo and Kenneth opened up to each other right away and it didn't take them long to start talking about alchemy.

His duty done, Abel returned to the Institute for Magical Research.

Abel stepped into Hilarion's office on the highest floor of the Institute and found a lot more people inside than when he'd left that morning. Seven more, to be exact.

"Oh, hello, Abel. Apologies for the intrusion." Roman the Hero greeted Abel upon seeing him.

"Uh, hi." That was the only thing Abel could think to say. His eyes sought out Lyn, who'd been holding down the fort here at the Institute. He asked her why there were so many people here.

"Ummm...because they left Duke Flitwick's estate, apparently."

She went on to tell him that Nancy, the secretary of Viscount Othniel Fletcher, the man in charge of the duke's capital residence, was behind yesterday's troubles. She'd pretended to be hurt by Abel, which incited Gordon to attack him. Then she'd disappeared from the scene by the time things were over. Lyn said Roman and his party had searched high and low for her in the area but didn't find her.

When they'd returned to the duke's residence, they discovered Nancy was a Federation spy sent off to the dukedom's capital of Carlyle. After spending the night there, the Hero decided he couldn't trust Viscount Fletcher, so the whole party ended up leaving the estate. Incidentally, Gordon remained curled up pitifully in a corner

of Hilarion's office.

"According to Graham, the clergyman, 'Roman's powerful intuition befits one who is the Hero.'"

"Gotcha. That explains why this place is suddenly so packed."

Although Hilarion's office was fairly spacious, having the population balloon from the three of them—originally Abel, Lyn, and Warren—to ten definitely left Abel feeling a bit claustrophobic. Rihya was still in the central temple, while Hilarion had yet to return after his departure three days ago.

"Sheesh, where the heck *is* that old man?" Abel muttered to himself.

"Oh, that reminds me," Lyn said, Abel's words sparking a memory of the day Hilarion left. "A rider came from Stone Lake with an urgent message for him. I remember him mumbling something about 'Ryo' when he saw it."

"That's all he said?"

"Yup. But Ryo's here in the capital, so..."

"Right, chatting up a storm with Kenneth in the Center for Alchemy as we speak..."

While the two of them talked, a strange sound came from one corner of the room. A mechanical wail of sorts. If Ryo had heard it, he might have said something about London's air raid sirens. However, no one present had ever heard anything of the sort.

"Omigosh, what *is* that?"

"What the hell?"

Both Lyn and Abel sounded confused. Not a moment later, the door opened and Sura, basically Hilarion's secretary, entered. She strode swiftly to a corner of the office and pressed a button on a box there. The siren stopped.

"You've reached the Institute for Magical Research. How may I help you?" Sura said to the box, a device that reminded him of the alchemical ball he'd had during his undercover assignment that transmitted his voice to identical devices in other locations.

"This is the central temple," a voice replied. "We have an emergency. Monsters are flooding out from the temple's underground levels. At this rate, they will break out into the city

itself. We request immediate assistance."

Abel turned toward Sura and nodded right away. Then he looked at Roman the Hero, who nodded back at him.

"Lord Hilarion is away on business. However, the B-rank party Crimson Sword and the Hero's party currently in residence will provide reinforcement."

Before Sura even finished speaking, they were all racing out of the office. Abel left her with a message as he rushed out.

"Contact Ryo too. He's at the Royal Center for Alchemy."

Gordon jumped up from his fetal position and ran out after them.

◆

The central temple in Crystal Palace, the royal capital, was the center of worship of the Goddess of Light in the Kingdom of Knightley. Situated almost in the exact middle of the city, it was a place that commoners, nobles, and royals alike visited to pray, day and night.

And in the northernmost part of the central temple was the Sanctum of Silence, an oval-shaped chamber fifty meters in radius with a high, domed ceiling. In the center of the room, a flight of stairs led down to the temple's catacombs.

At present, a battle was taking place in front of the stairs leading from the first underground level to the second.

"Ngh! This isn't working."

"Monks, fall back! The rest of you, provide fire support!"

Armed to the teeth, monks in the Kingdom knew how to fight as devotees of the Goddess of Light. Some priests and priestesses, like Rihya of the Crimson Sword and Eto of Room 10, entered the battlefield as adventurers, but they were always part of the rearguard. But monks wore armor, carried holy, blessed staves, and were vanguards who fought on the front lines. While some occasionally became adventurers, most spent their lives in service to the temple. As such, no one could say they had much combat experience. Even so, they were still a valuable fighting force on the front lines in the defense of the central temple.

"Bombard them!"

"*Light Javelin.*"

A dozen spears of light arced through the air, piercing several targets apiece. Each spear killed its targets efficiently without overlapping, evidence of the monks' ability to communicate even during their retreat from the fourth level to the first. But in her heart, Rihya, in command of the forces, was panicking.

We should have cut their numbers down considerably. And yet...their power hasn't dwindled at all.

No matter how many monsters they destroyed, they just kept coming and coming. Almost like...a Great Tidal Bore.

The first sub-level is right above us... Things will become much more difficult if we can't manage to hold them off and they make it to the Sanctum of Silence because that space is much too large.

They'd been able to stave off the creatures by taking advantage of both the narrowness of the catacombs and stairs to reduce the area of contact. But if monsters spilled into the Sanctum of Silence, also known as the Oval Room, she and the others would succumb to the sheer volume of the enemy's numbers. But the odds of them defeating the flood of undead before they reached the chamber were...

Impossible.

Despite such thoughts racing through her mind, Rihya didn't let them show on her face.

If a commander lost heart, their troops would be routed in an instant. If a commander doubted their ability to win, they'd almost certainly lose the battle. If a commander looked indecisive, then they'd soon be overwhelmed. This was how important the role of a commander was.

Rihya was heading up this battle because she'd been appointed by High Priest Gabriel, the person in charge of the royal capital's central temple. As holder of the highest seat among the Kingdom's clerics, the high priest would normally lead the charge and all those affiliated with the central temple would obey.

However, Gabriel knew that he had neither the ability nor the experience to take command in battle. He'd never been very good at

fighting, and he didn't have much experience putting his life at risk. So there was simply no way that such a person could lead calmly...especially since they were fighting a great host of monsters.

The moment High Priest Gabriel came to this realization, he'd abruptly looked to his side. And there stood Rihya, watching the monsters surge forward, her expression dignified and resolute. He knew that once upon a time, she'd been called a saint. After all, it was Gabriel himself who'd appointed her so. He could only think that it was the Goddess's will that such a woman was here at this moment.

And so he had appointed her as battle commander. And he himself led the magical strafe unit under Rihya, fully following her orders. This sight made even those surprised by his decision to agree to fight under her. With her reputation as a saint combined with the backing of High Priest Gabriel and the full support of the monk captain Gawain, they were able to fight a defensive battle without collapsing under the monsters' onslaught.

"Prepare to fire. Monks, be ready to commence assault once more."

"Aye!"

She expected no less from the warriors. Their morale remained high.

"Bombard them!"

"*Light Javelin.*"

They took down a decent number of the monsters, mostly skeleton-types. But for some reason, there were goblins too...

Why... Why are there goblins among them? I can understand the presence of bone-type skeletons and spirit-type wraiths considering this is *the catacombs, but* goblins*? I've never heard of anything like this happening before, but it just doesn't make sense... Where in the world did they even come from? Or could it be...*

"It's an ogre!" The shout came from the monks as they charged into the fray.

They're right! An ogre. What on earth is that massive thing doing here? The passage is barely two meters high?!

An ogre about two and a half meters tall walked with its back

hunched, meaning it couldn't utilize its size or strength. However, ogres possessed an unbelievably high amount of stamina, so just one was enough to seriously affect the speed at which humans destroyed their enemies. Focusing on the ogre meant allowing the rest behind it to close in on them.

We can't move forward, making retreat inevitable... The monks and the strafe unit have high morale, but their stamina and magic aren't infinite... It would be best to switch them out with fresh blood. And why isn't the Royal Order of Knights here in the first place? We should have contacted them first, yes? For goodness sake, their barracks are right there...

Rihya looked at High Priest Gabriel then. He understood what she wanted, but could only shake his head. In other words, the knights hadn't arrived yet.

She gritted her molars, shut her eyes, and took a deep breath, an effective way of calming herself. She then opened her eyes and gave orders.

"Once we've defeated the ogre, I want the monks to fall back. Strafe unit, open fire once the enemy has been drawn out."

Even if this *was* a retreat, they would buy as much time as possible between the first and second subfloors until reinforcements arrived. Rihya's plan was solid.

Compared to the battle they fought below the third sublevel, they held off the enemy for a considerable amount of time in front of the stairs between the first and second. However, they were finally reaching their limit.

"Abandon the second floor. Monks, stall the enemy on the stairs. Strafe, retreat to the center of the first subfloor, and prepare to fire. Once that's complete, I want the monks to fall back there as well."

"Understood!"

Up to this point, there had been quite a few injuries, mainly among the monks, but miraculously no one had died. Since they were all clerics, their injuries healed quickly, so they could fight with virtually zero damage. Such a battle would normally be impossible, but the advantageous location and the large number of clerics made

it possible. Not to mention Rihya's strategy of buying time and minimizing casualties had contributed a great deal to their success.

However, she knew both the monks' stamina and the strafe unit's magical power were close to their limits. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do. They had no other option but to continue buying time and waiting for reinforcements from the Royal Order of Knights.

"Strafe unit, retreat complete. Monk, fall back to the center of the first floor."

At that command, the monks who'd been holding back the enemy on the stairs fell back with Captain Gawain in the lead and Vice Captain Chase bringing up the rear. Both had given it their all on the front lines, meaning they'd lost the most physical and mental strength.

Captain Gawain practically stumbled his way to his destination. However, at the back, one person suddenly disappeared from view. Vice Captain Chase had fallen.

By the time Rihya noticed, a hobgoblin was almost on top of him. Just as she was about to cast Light Javelin, someone grabbed her arm from behind to stop her. And then she heard it.

"*Wind, by your will, be the blade that cuts through my enemies. Air Slash.*"

A swordsman darted past right as Lyn's spell cut through the hobgoblin's neck unerringly. At almost the same time the monster's head flew off, Abel reached Chase, hefted him on his shoulders, and came back to Rihya.

"Abel..."

Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Sorry we're late, Rihya."

The reinforcements the clerics had been desperately waiting for had finally arrived.



◆

Abel and Roman the Hero fought all the way at the front. Meanwhile, Lyn, Alicia, Berlocke, Graham, and Gordon, the fire magician who'd gone into shock thanks to Nancy's sudden disappearance, bombarded the enemy with magic. The clerics used this time to rest and recuperate since they'd been fighting without pause.

Although this particular magical strafe unit consisted of only five people, they were all exceptional individuals—Lyn, a B-rank adventurer and air magician, and the magicians of the Hero's party. Compared to the priests and priestesses who weren't cut out for battle in the first place, their firepower was more than enough to back up the two genius swordsmen on the front line, Abel and Roman the Hero. They made a heroic picture fighting the way they did.

"Incredible..."

Nobody knew who said it, but that single word represented all the resting clerics' feelings. None of them, including High Priest Gabriel, could wrap their heads around the fact that the Hero himself was here with them now. So in the end, they gave up trying to understand and deemed it divine will, just like Rihya's presence at the start. In times like these, those who serve God may have an advantage. Because God can shoulder all the responsibility.

"Gosh, this feels too much like a Great Tidal Bore," Lyn remarked to Rihya.

"I couldn't agree more," the other woman replied.

They kept up the magical bombardment the whole time. Thanks to the peerless stamina of the two men fighting on the front line, the others weren't as pressured by the onslaught. It came as no surprise then that Rihya finally exhaled in relief, releasing some of the tension she'd been feeling commanding the clerics on the retreat from the sublevel four.

"That's the phenomenon where an *endless* stream of monsters comes out of a dungeon, right?" Alicia interjected, overhearing their

conversation.

"You got it. About six months ago, one occurred in Lune's dungeon. That's the city we use as our base. The previous one had happened a decade before Lune's. But this isn't a dungeon, is it?" Lyn answered her.

"It most certainly isn't. Just a five-level catacomb where the remains of renowned high priests and saints lie," Rihya explained.

There were mummies, but they were substantially different from anything that came out of a dungeon.

"Then could it be that these monsters are connected to *another* place...?" Alicia said with a thoughtful nod.

"Is that even possible though?" Lyn sounded surprised.

"It shouldn't be, for *humans* at least, and I've never heard of an item capable of something like that, but... Something like this happened to us," Alicia said, an image of Leonore, the akuma, popping into her mind. "We were creating an altar to summon a demon king when someone appeared out of the blue. They were able to communicate with us even though they *weren't* human. I'm just thinking if *that's* possible, maybe this place could also be connected to somewhere else."

Although Lyn and Rihya found it difficult to imagine what Alicia said, they could somehow feel the presence of an incredible being in the world. Then, for no logical reason whatsoever, Rihya remembered something and turned around to question High Priest Gabriel resting behind her.

"Your Reverence, why hasn't the Royal Order of Knights come?"

The moment this outbreak started, that organization was the first the central temple had contacted. However, not a single one of its members had yet to arrive. Their absence made no sense given their barracks were a mere three blocks away. Even in their armor, it wouldn't have taken them more than thirty minutes to reach this place after making contact.

"I thought it strange as well, so I tried to ascertain the cause for the delay. It turns out, they have officially declined to mobilize any of their people to assist us," the high priest said, grimacing.

"What?!" Rihya said, her tone both hysterical and exasperated.

“What in the world are they thinking?!”

“Some rubbish about how protecting the country is a knight’s duty. The Royal Order has fallen to deplorable depths ever since that man became knight commander.” Gabriel sounded just as fed up as her.

Meanwhile, strange things were beginning to happen outside the central temple’s subterranean crypt. Reports of skeletons and goblins sighted across the city had reached the Capital Guard’s command room.

After dispatching his people, Lex, the vice captain of the Capital Guard, stood reviewing a map of the royal capital. “What’s this?” he murmured, studying the tacks pinned to the map. Each one represented a monster sighting. “They’re all from the north side of the city...”

The sightings were confined to the north, marked by the nobles’ quarter in the northern part of the district and the central temple to the south. It was clear that someone had *intentionally* orchestrated this phenomenon. However, even with this knowledge, Lex had few options.

First of all, the Capital Guard wasn’t nearly as well armed as the Royal Order. Normally, that wouldn’t be a problem since they only dealt with drunks and rowdy adventurers... D-ranks and above rarely caused them any trouble, so frankly speaking, they only dealt with E-ranks and below, who weren’t particularly strong.

Compared to drunks and E-ranks, these enemies were entirely different kinds of beasts. After all, the reports even included an ogre sighting. And that was precisely why Lex asked the Royal Order for help. Yet...they’d refused.

“What’s the meaning of all this?” he groaned. How many times had he muttered those words?

To make matters worse, the position of captain of the Capital Guard remained vacant, even in this emergency. The previous captain was found guilty of bribery and dismissed, so for the past few months, the Minister of Domestic Affairs had been serving in the role. But of course, Earl Harold Lawrence was a busy man,

considering he was in charge of such a massive ministry of the Kingdom... In other words, Vice Captain Lex essentially ran the Capital Guard. Then perhaps that explained why the Royal Order had dismissed his request.

At that moment, his subordinate rushed in.

"Sir, we just received a message from the palace."

The man handed him a piece of paper.

Lex groaned after he finished reading it.

"Sir?"

"Apparently, the Royal Council is convening shortly. Lord Lawrence will be reporting to His Majesty, and I'm to assist him."

"Even though there's a crisis going on right now?"

"Unfortunately, yes, since this is the Royal Council we're talking about. Maybe they can allocate some of the Kingdom's spare military forces to help with security in the city... I'll just have to think positively about this. I'm off to the palace."

The Capital Guard's command room and barracks were right next to the royal castle. Just a quick dash away. But in light of the urgent situation on their hands, he would rather stay here, likely because this was the place in the royal capital where the most accurate information congregated.

However, it was also necessary to provide accurate reports to his superiors. If they handed down the wrong orders based on incorrect data or assumptions, his subordinates were the ones who would suffer. Lex thought things over and decided on a course of action, then started off toward the palace.

◆

"Honestly, nothing compares to talking to a real alchemist! I'm learning so much!"

"I'm always around, so feel free to reach out anytime."

Ryo was on cloud nine, and Kenneth seemed quite happy as well. After all, kindred spirits enjoyed discussing shared interests.

Suddenly, a visitor arrived who destroyed the Royal Center for Alchemy's peace.

"Excuse me, Ryo, but a messenger is here for you from the Institute for Magical Research," said Raden, Kenneth's subordinate and assistant chief at the Center, accompanied by another man.

"Huh?" Ryo tilted his head, curious. Only Abel knew he was here, and Ryo knew Abel was staying at the Institute. "For me? What does the Institute want with *me*?"

"A short time earlier, the Crimson Sword and the Hero's party responded to reports of a sudden, massive monster outbreak in the catacombs beneath the central temple. Just before they departed, Master Abel requested you be contacted as reinforcement and mentioned we could find you here to relay the message."

"Monsters?" While he understood the words, he had no idea what the message actually meant, so Ryo cocked his head again in confusion. Having said that, refusing to help them wasn't really an option.

Ryo stood up. "Kenneth, I'll be back before you—"

The Center's gatekeeper suddenly rushed in through the doors. "Baron Hayward, we have an emergency!" he shouted. "An ogre was sighted in the city! Other monsters too!"

The news surprised the three people in the room.

"Th-That can't be..." Raden gasped.

"It seems this strangeness isn't constrained to the central temple then. The entire capital is under attack," Kenneth said calmly, analyzing the situation.

"Ogre in the capital..." Ryo mused, in his own world. "This could be the start of an amazing scene... Like someone screaming, 'Troll in the dungeon!'..." Then he came to his senses. "If an ogre is loose in the city, wouldn't it be best to evacuate somewhere more fortified?"

"You're right," Kenneth said, acting immediately. "Raden, issue an evacuation order. Tell everyone to secure only the most classified information and then escape."

"Yes, my lord!" Raden rushed to do just that and pressed a green button on the wall.

A warning alarm sounded, then a green light enveloped the room and corridor.

"This is an evacuation order. I repeat: This is an evacuation order.

All alchemists are ordered to evacuate after securing all level-one classified information."

Through some device or technique, the words reverberated throughout the entire building.

"Wow... That's...amazing."

The sight surprised Ryo. It felt like something out of a fantasy setting.

"During his reign, King Richard implemented quite detailed protocols for the Center in case of an emergency," Kenneth explained with a rueful smile, noting Ryo's reaction.

"The same one who restored the Kingdom to glory?" Ryo asked, his tone awed.

"That's correct. This happened centuries ago, but he was, in fact, the Royal Center for Alchemy's first chief," Kenneth replied as he gathered what he needed. Then he asked Ryo if he had any ideas on a suitable place to take refuge. Even though they'd only talked for an hour, they both knew what the other was capable of.

"I do, actually. I saw Margrave Lune's capital estate yesterday, and I think it would be perfect. It's almost a fortress. I believe it can withstand anything and everything."

"A logical choice, considering it's also here in the eastern district. But the Center has forty staff members. I'm not sure they'll be able to take all of us in so easily..."

"Leave it to me. I'll handle the negotiation. Contrary to my appearance, I *am* an adventurer of Lune," Ryo replied with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. Oh, I ought to take these along just in case." Kenneth looked at two devices sitting side by side in the corner of the room. Each was about the size of a four-liter thermos and shaped like a cannon. "If we end up barricading ourselves, they will come in handy."

Strangely, gunpowder shouldn't have been common here on Phi...

"Leaving them behind will only see them destroyed, so I may as well, especially since they're both still just prototypes," Kenneth continued with a laugh.

"Prototypes... That word has such an amazing ring to it. Conjures up all sorts of ideas."

Nobody heard Ryo's murmur. And even if someone had, they probably wouldn't understand...

Five minutes after the alarm sounded, all forty of the Royal Center for Alchemy's staff were gathered in front of the building's entrance. Alchemists, assistants, guards, and other helpers.

"Ryo, we're counting on you to get everyone to safety."

"And I won't disappoint. *5-Layer Ice Wall.*"

He surrounded them all with a wall of ice, adding a smidgen of blue to make it opaque. If it were completely transparent, they might hurt themselves by crashing into it...

"A wall of ice...? I know you're a water magician, but I've never seen anything like this before. Incredible!"

"Oh, it's nothing, really."

Kenneth's praise embarrassed Ryo. The others, even those who weren't alchemists, tapped on the ice wall experimentally. He wasn't surprised to see that those who worked in the Center were interested in not just alchemy but magic itself.

"All right, everyone, we're heading out. The margrave's residence is less than a kilometer from here. I don't think it'll take more than ten minutes to reach it. The ice wall is three meters wide, so please make sure to follow behind me."

And with that, Ryo started walking. Next to him, Kenneth held a bag containing one of the "prototypes." Behind him, Raden carried another bag containing the other "prototype." The others stayed close behind them.

With Ryo and Kenneth in the lead, the group must have looked from afar like they were moving forward inside a pale blue ice tunnel. Despite the report of an ogre sighting, they weren't attacked. Of course, even if they were, the ice wall would protect them.

When they arrived at Margrave Lune's estate ten minutes later, they found the place already under heavy security. The gate was closed, and the two gatekeepers yesterday were nowhere to be found. Instead, archers stood atop the soaring walls.

"Well...you weren't joking about this being a fortress. I have to admit, I find the defenses even more imposing than I imagined."

Kenneth's gaze went from the gate to the ramparts then to the archers stationed on top of the latter. Behind him, Raden nodded in vigorous agreement.

Ryo stopped in front of the gate and shouted, "Pardon us!"

A voice shouted back from the other side. "Who are you?! State your business!"

"My name is Ryo, a D-rank adventurer from Lune. Everyone else here works at the Royal Center for Alchemy. Due to the strange occurrences in the city, we come seeking shelter here. So please convey this message to Captain Eden!"

"Just a moment."

Ryo felt a measure of relief when he realized they weren't going to be turned away. He didn't think Eden or any of the other knights of Lune he was familiar with would do such a thing, but this was the royal capital and he didn't know the margrave's people here, so...

After a minute's wait, he heard someone call down from atop the wall.

"Master Ryo?"

He recognized that voice. When Ryo looked up, he saw Eden, platoon commander and leader of the knights who'd transported the magic stones from Lune.

"That's me, Eden. Hello."

"Right, yes, hello... Ahem. Then the rest of you must be the folks from the Center. There still aren't many skeletons and goblins here, but... Oh, forgive my manners. Please, come inside. Open the gate!" Eden barked that last bit as an order.

Thankfully for them, it turned out that Captain Eden was a high-ranking knight, even among the margrave's capital staff. That was how the group of people from the Royal Center for Alchemy succeeded in entering Margrave Lune's estate. Considering what was about to happen in the royal capital, this evacuation proved to be an excellent move on Ryo's part.

◆

An hour had passed since Abel and the others' arrival in the

central temple. They took turns switching places with the somewhat recovered clerics and continued to stave off the horde of monsters in the middle of sublevel one. Now that they had the necessary combat power, they could stop retreating for now.

Unfortunately, the monsters just kept coming. Abel and Roman the Hero had defeated a fair quantity on the front line, but the other monsters had dragged the corpses away without them even noticing. Abel's hope to kill many enemies and thereby form a wall of corpses was naive.

"There really is no end in sight, huh? Roman, you doing all right? Think you can hold out for a little longer?"

"Yes, I'm still fine. But I *am* worried about the magicians and their supply of magic," he answered.

Abel glanced at Lyn's expression. She wouldn't run out of magic right away, but he could feel her approaching her limit. He knew because they'd fought together for a long time. He and Roman switched places with the monks, falling back temporarily. He used the opportunity to talk to Lyn.

"Lyn, I'd like to tell you to save your magic, but I think it's already too late for that."

"Yeah, no kidding. Fighting for this long is asking the impossible of a magician. You know that. What's worse is that the magicians in the Hero's party are in even more dire straits than me," she replied in a hushed tone.

Abel looked at the folks in question. Even he could tell they were nearing their limits.

"This is bad. God, I really hope someone managed to get in touch with Ryo."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I asked one of Hilarion's people to let him know just as we left. This mess would be a bit easier to manage with him around, don'tcha think?" Abel said with a sigh.

At that moment, he heard a voice come from behind.

"*Water Jet 256.*"

Suddenly, the heads of theirs went flying, one after another.

"*Permafrost.*"

Next, the area up to the stairs leading down to sublevel two transformed into a world of ice. The unexpected development stopped everyone, monks included, in their tracks.

"Abel, Abel, Abel. Don't you know you'll never improve as a swordsman if you're always lounging around?"

Who would appear but Ryo, the strongest water magician Abel knew.

"You're late, man."

"I'll have you know it's not my fault. I had to help Kenneth and his staff evacuate to Margrave Lune's estate first. A famous philosopher once said, 'The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity to defeat the enemy.' That means you must first prevent the enemy from winning even if they attack you," Ryo nattered on, discussing his perplexing tactics as if they were cold facts.

"Riiight..." Abel didn't understand most of what he said but understood that Kenneth and his people were safe. However, a question popped into his head at that point. "Wait, does that mean these things appeared in other places too?"

"Seems like it, yes. Although there aren't many of them in the eastern district..."

The people nearby listened to Ryo and Abel's conversation.

"Your Reverence..." Rihya started, overhearing their conversation.

"I know, Rihya," Gabriel replied. "The Royal Order of Knights and the Capital Guard must be attending to those outbreaks, which explains why they didn't send reinforcements here."

His expression was especially grave because he now knew for certain that they would have to continue this battle without aid and without knowing when it would end. That was why Abel's sudden nonchalance surprised him.

"Nah, we'll be fine. Ryo's here now," Abel said, facing Gabriel.

Ryo shook his head a little when he heard that. Then he looked around and spoke. "As far as I can tell, the magicians are right on the cusp of running out of magic, hm? How should we proceed? Should I use a wall of ice to funnel them in one by one and have Abel defeat them all by himself?"

“Why does it always have to be me doing all the work? Besides, Roman’s still got plenty of stamina left.”

Ryo looked at Roman too and nodded. “You’re right. So full of life.”

“U-Um, you were the one who interceded yesterday, yes? I offer my deepest thanks.” With that, Roman bowed his head.

Maybe it was the wrong place and the wrong time to say thanks, but a little gratitude always went a long way.

“Oh, no, think nothing of it,” Ryo said humbly.

“Fellas, don’t you think this conversation can wait until *after*?” Abel quipped.

“Anyway, for now, I think we should have the... What are those folks on the front line called? The temple warriors? Let’s have them rest. Their strength is clearly flagging.”

The monks did as Ryo suggested.

“Hey, Ryo, what are we supposed to do about the ones you froze?”

“What do you mean?” he replied, not understanding Abel’s question.

“Well, they’re dead, right?”

“Oh, I see. Yes, the goblins and orcs are dead. As far as undead types like skeletons...I’m not really sure if ‘dead’ is the correct word to use for them.”

“Same difference. No need to split hairs at this point. Besides, I’m pretty sure more of them are just gonna come up from sublevel two and below...”

Abel turned out to be right. Just then, more skeletons surged up from the stairs leading to that underground floor.

“Skeletons marching through a world of ice... What a surreal scene,” Ryo mumbled, almost to himself.

“You’re not bothered at all by any of this, huh? Must be nice being you.” Abel sighed heavily.

“In any case, we probably shouldn’t waste too much time here considering the other appearances across the city. I’ll use Ice Wall to sort them. Abel, you and Roman eliminate them at the front. I’ll take care of any you miss. Meanwhile, the other magicians should focus

on recovering their magical powers. How does this plan sound?" Ryo asked, looking inquiringly at Rihya and High Priest Gabriel. Of course, he didn't know the man, but Ryo assumed he was the highest-ranking person here based on his clothes, the fanciest of the lot.

"If you think it will work, Ryo, then please proceed," Rihya said with a nod.

Abel and Roman took that as their cue to spring into action and resume their extermination.

"Ooooh, what a splendid spectacle. They're both amazing." Ryo watched them from behind, impressed by their movements.

They took down most of the attacking monsters. Ryo decapitated the few that managed to escape before they could get much farther. The streams of water were almost imperceptibly thin, meaning most people only saw heads suddenly falling off monster bodies. One by one, Abel, Roman, and Ryo eradicated the enemy, bringing a profound sense of relief to those watching. Having fought for so long, they finally allowed themselves to feel a glimmer of hope.

After some time passed, Ryo suddenly turned toward Rihya and High Priest Gabriel. "Is there a passageway or something here that connects to another place?"

"There shouldn't be..."

"It is as Rihya says. Why do you ask?"

"It just feels like fewer of them are coming out... Maybe because we made a dent in their numbers?" Ryo muttered.

"In that case, I sure hope this ends soon," Lyn said happily in response.

"Ah!" Gabriel yelped.

Ryo, Rihya, and Lyn looked at him.

"The third sublevel is connected to the basement of an old monastery. However, there are three doors along the way, each secured with a holy seal."

"I had no idea..." Rihya said, surprised.

"Of course not. And why would you? That passage is never used. Not to mention, I don't think anyone has even checked to see if it's

still there after the monastery was relocated," Gabriel replied with a nod.

"What's inside that old monastery now?" Ryo asked.

"Let me see... The Royal Order's second training grounds."

"So even if they were to break through and use the passage, the Royal Knights should be able to handle them, yes?"

Gabriel's answer put Ryo at ease, so he decided to concentrate on the task at hand. However, it was unfortunate that Ryo's standard for a knightly order was Margrave Lune's. The former Royal Order was one thing, but as for the current...

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When it happened, there were sixty knights in the second training grounds. Thirty were outside, and the remaining thirty were in the indoor lounge. The whole building trembled, and if they'd been decent folk, the thirty in the lounge would have wondered what was happening. Except more than half were drunk. Day-drinking Knights... The rot at the top always reached the bottom. This was inevitable, regardless of world, era, or organization. The only ones who went to investigate were the ten sober knights.

They saw a horde of skeletons, wraiths, goblins, hobgoblins, orcs, and ogres pouring out of the storeroom at the end of the corridor. The knights stared at the approaching horde, completely consumed by their despair. They didn't even draw their swords. Never mind the twenty drunkards. The monsters surged into the rest area and engulfed them in an instant.

The storage room at the end of the corridor... When this building had been a monastery, this room was connected to the central temple via the basement. Of course, the knights didn't know this. Whether they knew or not, it probably wouldn't have made any difference.

The monsters spilled out of the building and headed toward the thirty knights practicing outside. The only guiding principle behind the horde's movement was the direction of the nearest living person. The thirty knights outside put up some resistance in comparison to

those inside, but they were swallowed in less than two minutes.

Knights were accompanied by their squires, who'd helped them equip their armor and mount their horses in the past. While technological advances now allowed knights to armor themselves without help, they continued taking squires as something of a tradition. Those retainers became victims all the same.

The hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of monsters headed farther north. To the first training grounds of the Royal Order. The thirty knights undergoing basic training there were engulfed without any resistance. Even considering it was a surprise attack, it was hard to believe that these were the Kingdom's elite. Then the monsters went even farther north. To the knights' barracks.

The knights' barracks was one of the most important bases of operations for the Royal Order alongside its headquarters inside the palace, and it was also home to many of the top brass. For that reason, guards were stationed at various entrances.

As expected, they weren't drunk. They not only had to deal with their fellow knights but also with people from outside the organization, so they couldn't afford to be stupid. Considering that members of the royal family and important figures of the country sometimes visited, the guards at the entrances might be the most sensible of the Royal Order present.

And as expected, they reacted quickly. When they saw the monsters approaching, they rang the bell, signaling an emergency, per protocol.

At least now the knights at the barracks wouldn't be caught off guard—or they *shouldn't* have been. Unfortunately, they were so relaxed that they didn't tense up at all when they heard the bell. What's more, the horde had so much momentum that the guards at the entrance couldn't muster any resistance at all. They and the bell were devoured, snuffing out its signal. It happened so quickly that the relaxed knights concluded that it had been a false alarm and went about their day.

An ogre easily smashed apart the gate the guards had been manning. This was the royal capital, not the frontier, so it was no

exaggeration to say this was the *last* place anyone would expect to see such a creature. The gate would be difficult for a human to break through, but stood no chance against an ogre.

The knights at the barracks only noticed something was wrong when the monsters invaded the building itself. Only then did resistance begin. In the corridors and staircases, it was possible for one or two people to resist. However, they were eliminated one by one by the violence of the horde's overwhelming numbers.

By the time the horde had purged the first-floor corridors and rooms, the stairs to the second floor had been abandoned halfway up. It was sheer coincidence that Knight Commander Baccala, who usually stayed at headquarters inside the royal castle, was even here. He had come to retrieve some personal belongings from his office on the fourth floor of the barracks. However, his time relaxing and sipping some of the high-class whiskey he had kept in his office backfired. By the time Baccala noticed something was wrong, the second floor had already become a battlefield. It was only then that the knight finally came to his office to report it.

"Sir, the barracks are under attack by skeletons and ogres."

If anyone knew the whole story, they wouldn't have been able to stop themselves from cackling at this report. First, they would have said, "You're telling me this now?" Then they would have followed up with a, "Of all the things in the world to choose, why skeletons and ogres?" Finally, with a last laugh, they would have said, "Well, there's nothing we can do about it now."

While he was reporting, the battle on the second floor ended, and the sounds of fighting could be heard from just below, on the third floor. At this point, Commander Baccala considered escaping through the window. The notion of descending to the third floor to take command of the battle never even occurred to him. However, jumping from the fourth floor would surely result in serious injury, even if the fall didn't kill him. Moreover, there were monsters outside the building, looking up...

As he hesitated, the sounds of fighting grew closer, to right beside him, from the fourth-floor corridor. That was when he finally drew his sword. The door came crashing down at the same time and

something came flying in. Baccala instinctively swung his sword, killing the goblin in a single slash.

While he was by no means an incompetent knight, he'd dropped his guard since becoming the commander of the Royal Order. The fact that his sword stopped after cutting down the goblin was proof.

An axe immediately came flying and struck his chest. Blood spurted from his mouth. Out of reflex, he dropped to his knees. He raised his head quickly, but it was too late. The last thing he saw was a hobgoblin swinging his sword. Baccala Tow, Earl of Ware, died at the age of thirty-eight.

The monsters that overpowered the Royal Order's barracks were unleashed onto the capital, joining the others already set upon the city, appearing not only in the underground levels of the central temple but all over...

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The Enclave was the embassy in the royal capital for the elves who lived in the Western Forest. Five years ago, it was moved to a corner of the nobles' quarter in the northwest of the city and currently had around thirty elves stationed there. Among them, fifteen were considered the most elite of the permanent staff and had been trained by a woman staying there since yesterday. Although it had only been a day, the staff's eyes were filled with fear and awe... Never mind that both words have similar meanings.

Their training this morning had been even tougher than yesterday's, but the group somehow managed to eat lunch. They knew that if they didn't, they wouldn't be able to last through the afternoon's training. After their lunch break, they came out into the courtyard and spotted the woman, Sera, standing on the road in front of the Enclave's main building.

Locksleigh, who she'd trounced after capitalizing on his mistakes, approached her. Of course, he was no exception, and the same fear and awe that afflicted the others filled his eyes too. Yet at the same time, he was beginning to admire her strength. Whether that was

the reason for his approach was unclear.

Sera noticed him drawing near and called out, "Locksleigh, are such events popular in the capital these days?" She was looking ahead at a creature about three meters tall walking toward them, a club in its hand. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be an ogre.

"Not at all, actually. However... I do believe that's an ogre. But why is it here...?"

A monster in the streets of the royal capital was an...unlikely sight, to say the least. That's why Sera had asked in the first place, but even Locksleigh was baffled by what he saw.

"Cutting it down shouldn't pose much of a problem should it attack. Even so..." She sounded almost refreshed, though there was nothing refreshing about what she said.

Locksleigh heard her words loud and clear. However, he pretended not to. Because he sensed danger.

Then she suddenly turned around to stare at the road behind her. There, she saw people running desperately, as if chased. When she looked more closely...

"Orcs?"

They were as tall as humans. Sporting pig heads, the monsters were just a tad stronger than goblins.

"Ah, I see now. Something is amiss in the city," Sera murmured. She then drew her sword. "Locksleigh, save the people fleeing and lead them to safety inside the Enclave. I'll handle the ogre." Next, she turned toward the courtyard and raised her voice. "We have an emergency! Teams 1 and 2, defend the road and help the civilians. Team 3, bring out all the weapons in storage into the courtyard. Summon the Matriarch at once."

She didn't even wait to make sure the elves did as instructed before she charged the ogre. Considering it was nearly three meters tall, its height alone made it difficult to lop its head off.

When it noticed her rushing toward it, the ogre raised its club in the air and swung down. Sera ran past its right side, slashing at its knees. As the monster dropped to the ground and its head drooped forward, she decapitated it from behind.

The image of her taking down the ogre with such ease was

burned into the memories of all the elves from the first and second teams setting up a defensive line on the road. Not a single person said a word. When Sera returned to them, the Matriarch came running out of the courtyard.

"What is this I hear of an emergency, child?" she asked, surveying their surroundings.

Ogre and orc corpses littered the street alongside the dismembered bones of skeleton creatures.

"I cannot believe this is happening in the capital..."

The unsettling presence the divination had warned of must have been referring to this then.

"My lady, all these people fleeing for their lives must have been out walking when the outbreak started, so I suggest we shelter them here in the Enclave. I don't see an end to this anytime soon."

"I concur. As this is the nobles' quarter, most of the aristocrats will sequester themselves in their estates... Yet it would be terrible if they encountered this while out and about, so we shall protect them. Since we know not how long this situation will take to resolve, we should refrain from using magic as much as possible." The Matriarch inclined her head in agreement.

"We'll use ranged attacks to keep them at bay and focus on killing them with bows and arrows. Skeletons and ogres can't be killed with that method, so we'll have to fight those at close range or with magic."

"Indeed. Let us proceed with that plan."

And so, a long defensive battle began at the Enclave. But that was only part of the chaos erupting all over the royal capital.

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Elsewhere, at Viscount Westwood's residence in the city's nobles' quarter, Zach Kuhler and Scotty Cobouc of the Alliance of Second Sons were visiting to deliver some documents from their order. Normally, this kind of job didn't demand a knight of the Royal Order, much less two. But both of them often jumped at the opportunity to take on tasks like this. And it definitely wasn't because they liked to

grab a bite to eat after making deliveries, go to a café that caught their eye, or just wander around town...

"Don't be foolish," Zach might say if someone pointed that out. Their detours only made them a *little* late, plus they allowed them to patrol the town, so it was fine! Never mind that the Capital Guard, an organization separate from the Royal Order of Knights, was responsible for Crystal Palace's security.

However, there was another reason the two were late leaving the viscount's residence that day. The head chef there had asked them to try his new dishes. The Westwoods had been known as gourmands for generations.

The current head of the family, Harvey, was the head chef of the country's state guesthouses and was responsible for the food served in the three locations throughout the Kingdom, including the one in the capital. These facilities were designed to welcome visiting dignitaries. In other words, Viscount Westwood was a name and title often associated with fine food.

It was only natural to assume that the head chef at the viscount's residence was exceptional. If Westwood's wife asked you to try his new dishes, you simply didn't refuse. Moreover, the head chef actually knew the names of these two very well thanks to his sister, the proprietress of the pub, Let Those Who Are Drowning Drown in Their Cups, which just so happened to be the establishment frequented by the Alliance of Second Sons.

In fact, even among the tavern's regulars, the members of the Alliance were known as young men with good taste. Perhaps it was because they'd been entertaining themselves in one way or another since they were teenagers and had developed sophisticated palates... So when the head chef heard that they were coming, he begged the viscountess to let them try his food. Of course, she didn't object. Neither did they. And that was how they now found themselves enjoying a veritable feast in the viscount's dining room well after having accomplished their delivery task.

Just as Zach and Scotty were raving about the new dessert the head chef brought out as the final course, a woman's scream came from the garden. The two looked at each other, then quickly grabbed

their swords and ran out. There, a stunned maid sat on the ground, staring at the estate's gate, its thin, iron bars woven together.

When they followed her gaze, they saw a skeleton looking in from outside. Considering that one would never expect to see a real skeleton in the royal capital, the pair immediately wondered if it was a prank. But then a second skeleton appeared—a skeleton archer, at that, and it began firing arrows at them...

A skeleton archer's arrow would injure you if it found its mark, and needless to say, it would kill you if it hit you in the wrong place. No one would be cruel or stupid enough to pull a joke like this. At this point, they had to admit that something was amiss.

They slashed the incoming arrows with their swords and ran to the gate. Zach thrust his sword through a gap in the iron bars and pierced the monster's forehead. Scotty did the same, stabbing his blade in the forehead of the remaining skeleton. The two skeletons collapsed on the spot.

Blunt weapons, such as clubs and hammers, were the most effective against skeletons. If you could crush their skulls with one, they'd stop moving. However, swordsmen and spearmen preferred to kill them by stabbing them through their skulls. Of course, this was harder than it looked. If the sword didn't strike at the perfect angle, the curvature of the skull would deflect the sword to the side. The fact that Zach and Scotty were able to execute this was a testament to their skills as above-average swordsmen.

After killing the skeletons, they looked at the road through the gaps in the gate. There, they saw not only skeletons but also goblins, hobgoblins, orcs, and even ogres.

"Hey...what *is* all this?"

"How the hell should I know, man? But this is bad. Very, very bad."

Zack and Scotty were confused by this situation, one they'd never encountered before.

"Then let's go up to the second floor and see what's happening in the rest of the neighborhood."

"Yeah, good idea."

Then they carried the maid, still limp in the garden, back to the

mansion.

At the royal castle.

"In other words, the nobles' quarter is at the epicenter of the monster outbreak," King Stafford IV muttered.

A fairly large map of the capital was spread out on the round table used for the Royal Council. The city was roughly circular in shape, with the central temple at its center. The Royal Order of Knights' barracks were located adjacent to the immediate north of the temple. Because the palace was built on the north side of the city, this area was home to many mansions of wealthy merchants and nobles, and was commonly known as the "nobles' quarter." And that was where the monsters were currently wreaking havoc.

"What in the world is happening...?" Minister of Finance Fuca murmured.

Earl Harold Lawrence, Minister of Domestic Affairs, raised his hand. "Allow me to explain using the information I've managed to gather."

Behind him stood Vice Captain Lex of the Capital Guard.

"Monsters have been sighted in multiple locations in the northern part of the city," Harold continued. "Among these, it's been confirmed that a large number of them appeared in the underground tombs of the central temple in particular. However, with the help of adventurers, it seems the temple will be able to continue fending them off."

Needless to say, many were relieved to hear this. The central temple was not only the center of the capital but also the center of faith. If monsters overran it, faith in the temple would plummet and inevitably lead to political instability. Those here knew that religion could be a powerful tool for governance if used properly. The central temple's positive outlook for defense was the first bit of good news since this series of unfortunate events began.

But that was where the good news ended.

"Unfortunately though, the monsters there managed to get aboveground at the Royal Order's second training grounds, which were connected to the temple's underground tomb. They then

attacked the first training ground and the barracks before spreading to the nobles' quarter and converging with the other monsters."

"Have you any inkling why the barracks were attacked?" King Stafford IV asked after listening to Harold Lawrence's explanation.

"We don't know the exact reason. Having said that, our experts theorize that they may be drawn toward heavily populated areas. In other words, places brimming with life force. As you're aware, this is a characteristic of the undead, which there are many of this time, including skeletons and wraiths. This may be a natural consequence of the monsters originating from the underground tomb. However, the same tendency has been witnessed in goblins and orcs, since there are also reports of them attacking and killing living humans and then eating them."

No one spoke after Lawrence finished making his report, as if they worried even a single word might alert the horde... A few of those in attendance at this session of the Royal Council actually feared such delusions.

"I heard that the knights at the barracks have been wiped out. Is it true?" Finance Minister Fuca asked.

"Regrettably, yes," Harold Lawrence answered, his expression somber.

"The only surviving members of the Royal Order are the two hundred or so inside the palace headquarters, which they're currently guarding."

"What of the Bureau of Royal Magicians and Second Royal Guard?"

"The former departed the capital yesterday for training purposes. As for the latter, it has accompanied the crown prince as his protection detail to the Monarchy of Joux's embassy."

"In essence, then, the only military force remaining to fight at the palace is..."

"Correct. Excluding the surviving Royal Knights, only the First Royal Guard remains."

The participants of the Royal Council were at a loss for words at the sheer lack of fighting power. No one could deny that the First Royal Guard consisted of elite soldiers, but they were only one

hundred in total. With the two hundred surviving members of the Royal Order, that totaled three hundred knights. Even accounting for the presence of some squires, that number was simply too low.

As an individual force, the Capital Guard wasn't strong. Nevertheless, there were reports of its members moving to various parts of the city and fighting with the help of nearby nobles.

"Lord Lawrence, what do you propose we do now?" Fuca asked.

"We should mobilize the Capital Guards to the royal castle. Only five hundred remain in the barracks, since the others are already scattered all over the city," the Minister of Domestic Affairs answered.

Standing behind him, Vice Captain Lex frowned. The Capital Guard was designed to maintain order in the royal capital, as its name suggested, *not* the palace. Instead of protecting the citizens like they were supposed to, they would now defend the royal castle... Even though he understood the necessity of the command in such an emergency, Lex still felt helpless.

However, they face an even bigger problem. The fact was that the Royal Knights, the city's greatest fighting force, had been annihilated without much resistance. Many of those here had heard rumors of Knight Commander Baccala's illegal accumulation of wealth but none had denounced him. Likely because some of them had done similar things...more or less. Some of them had even received their desired positions thanks to his petitioning on their behalf... Some also thought that if they held on to the information and evidence, they might be able to use it someday.

Everyone in this chamber understood that all of this had corrupted the Royal Order and led to the current situation. Of course, no one would admit it out loud. Even now, with things so hopeless, no one did.

The country's collapse was just around the corner.

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A nation must endure endless, continuous exposure to external pressure. No matter how peaceful a nation may seem within, it can

only continue to exist because there are people who deal with that external pressure.

It's like being in a submarine deep under the sea. If you neglect to deal with the pressure, or fail, water will mercilessly crush you. Even a single weak point will be exploited.

It's an administrative body's task to deal with this issue. However, when that organization becomes too large, like a national government, its individual members lose sight of this mission. Who could blame them, really? So the bureaucrats become stuck doing the same thing, along with the ministers who lead them, and the nation perishes. Sadly, no nation is immune to the process.

Currently, two unfortunate knights were on the verge of becoming victims of their country's bureaucracy: Zach Kuhler and Scotty Cobouc.

They definitely *weren't* victims of their own laziness. Nope—definitely not. And they definitely *hadn't* become embroiled in this mess just because they'd been too busy loafing around that day to make it home on time... Nope, not the case at all. They were simply two more unfortunate victims of their nation!

"We're the only two who can fight. The viscountess, her daughter, the head chef, butler, and the maids—all ten of them are noncombatants, after all..." Zach said.

"I mean, you're not wrong. There are about twenty spears in the viscount's collection that we can use. We can use them to attack from a distance so we don't get caught up at the gate. The lady of the house gave us permission to use them too."

"Right now, not too many monsters are focused on this estate. They're just trudging along the road to the right."

"Then something must be drawing their attention in that direction. Let's take down the monsters at the gate first and go from there. It won't hold long since it isn't designed for combat."

Their course of action decided, they set about defending the mansion. They both briefly regretted having stayed to enjoy a leisurely dinner rather than having gone straight home after their shifts. If they had, however, the people here would have fallen victim to the monsters...and that would have left them with a guilty

conscience.

The courtyard of the elves' Enclave had become a shelter for people from the neighborhood. The residents of the three mansions on either side of the Enclave had fled there after seeing the elves' early line of defense. Many of the folks in the nobles' quarter had attempted to defend themselves, but it hadn't taken long for the monsters to overrun the premises, leading to casualties.

The street in front of the Enclave's entrance was one of the main thoroughfares that extended from the royal capital's central temple. In modern Japan, it was easily three lanes on each side, for a total of six across. It intersected an avenue that extended from the palace, making the area quite wide.

At present, monsters swarmed across the entire width of the street from every direction. If this had been an ordinary aristocrat's estate, it would have been invaded within five minutes. However, the Enclave's defensive line of elvish archers was unusually strong.

If Ryo saw the scene, he would probably say, "Just like I thought! You can't have elves without bows!" Perhaps it was a racial characteristic, but the weapons elves excelled with weren't swords, spears, or axes; they were bows. Of course, there were exceptional cases like Sera, who was particularly skilled with a blade. But they were few and far between.

And while she boasted superb swordsmanship, she was also a top-notch archer, her skill on full display in this defensive battle. Her arrows, as well as those of the other elves taking part in the defensive battle, almost never missed their target. The only difference was whether they hit a vital part of the body or the spot next to it. Not a single arrow was wasted.

"Sera, we have managed to accommodate most of our neighbors who sought refuge here. Unfortunately, those who did not must have resigned themselves to their lot. Let us pray that each can resist."

"I hope so too, my lady."

"It is high time we focus our efforts on defending the grounds now instead of the road. For our resources—time, people, arms, and

more—are limited."

The Matriarch had a point. Even though they were trying to conserve their magic and ammunition, it was a battle of attention at this point.

But Sera had noticed something. The estate catty-corner to the Enclave was still doggedly resisting. Its residents were staving off the monsters at its gate by stabbing them with spears from the inside. And with just two people. However, their effectiveness had been declining over the past few minutes. They have been tiring.

"My lady, that house over there in the opposite corner. It's the only one that has managed to avoid succumbing to the onslaught. They're fighting back using spears, but they'll soon be at their limit."

"Oh? If I recall correctly...I believe it belongs to Viscount Westwood."

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"This is not looking good, Scotty. I can barely lift my arms anymore."

"I suppose we're finally seeing the results of slacking off during training, huh?"

Zach and Scotty were on the verge of exhaustion. They had managed to protect the gate up until now, but as their fatigue grew, so did the number of monsters at the gate. The sheer number of monsters was steadily wearing the gate down. At this rate, it would certainly fall and the creatures would invade.

They both knew that everyone in the surrounding residences was already dead. And their last ray of hope, the Royal Order of Knights, was nowhere to be found. Of course, they understood the extent of the organization's corruption better than anyone—as well as how much power it'd lost as a result. Even so, it was still one of the most powerful combat assets at the royal capital's disposal. So for its ranks to have been decimated was unimaginable...

As far as they could see, the only nearby survivors were in the elves' Enclave over a hundred meters away. Unfortunately, too many monsters loitered in the distance between here and there. If it had

been just the two of them, they might have had a chance. But them and ten civilians? They'd never make it.

"So what do we do now?"

Just when Zach decided he needed to steel himself for the worst, he suddenly looked in the direction of the Enclave and saw a woman with long, platinum blonde hair who looked like a commanding officer. She then raised her hand in a silent command of "Come here!"

He wasn't hallucinating. He knew he wasn't. That was the moment Zach made up his mind.

"Scotty, we're heading to the Enclave."

"N-No objections here, but...how? How are we going to make it?"

"I think we'll be fine. The captain over there will back us up."

Scotty was a bit mystified by Zach's suggestion, but he said nothing. At the very least, staying here was a death sentence considering their worsening circumstances. If anything, Zach's newfound resolve at this precarious moment gave him the courage he needed.

So they decided that Scotty would go first, the ten noncombatants next, and then Zach would bring up the rear on their trek to the Enclave. The only thing left to do was wait for the right moment to put their plan into action.

From a distance, Sera saw people exiting into the mansion's courtyard.

"It seems they're ready," she murmured. Then she looked at the first squad. "Just like we planned."

And with that, she raised her hand in the direction of the other estate. One of the men waved back at her in response.

"All right, commence operations! Squad one, fire!"

Up until now, they'd only been firing at monsters that came within range. Now, at Sera's command, they fired volley after volley at those between the Enclave and Viscount Westwood's home. In the blink of an eye, they opened up a route completely devoid of anything living.

Once the survivors in Westwood's estate made sure their way was

clear, the gates of the mansion opened and they ran toward the Enclave. The man in the lead arrived first and helped usher in those behind him. But then the man bringing up the rear, far behind the rest, stumbled and fell.

"Shit!" Zach spat. His legs were finally feeling the strain of all that fighting. Before he went down, he noticed an orc way too close for comfort. Then he fell, knowing he wouldn't be able to fight his way through anymore... Even if he was an optimist, that was the only thing he could think.

Then, a split second later, silver flashed between him and the orc... Then the orc's head went flying.

"Can you stand?" the woman with the platinum blonde hair asked without looking at him.

"Y-Yeah."

"Good. Then get up and run."

He did as she said and raced toward the Enclave. Normally, he would have refused to leave a woman behind, but that thought didn't even enter his head. It was clear as day that she was completely out of his league as a swordsman.

As Zach entered the Enclave's courtyard, the woman's command echoed down the street.

"Fall back."

The elves forming the defensive line immediately withdrew into the Enclave's grounds. The woman stepped inside last. As soon as she did, the gates closed behind her. They were nothing like the gates at the viscount's residence. These were solid, durable.

"Zach... You're alive." Scotty sounded a bit teary. When he saw his friend fall, he'd been afraid that was the end of him. So it was only natural that his tears would flow at the turn of events.

"I sure am. We were lucky, really lucky." His eyes remained on the woman who'd saved him. He knew she was the commanding officer here. Then there was her terrifying display of skill with a sword only moments earlier.

Scotty followed Zach's gaze. "I'd heard that all elves are beautiful, men and women alike," he said, "but she stands out even among

them, eh?"

"She sure does." A determined look flashed across Zach's face, then he strode toward her.

"H-Hey, hold on, Zach."

"She saved me, so the least I can do is thank her and ask her name," he replied, his steps not faltering. When he reached her, Zach bowed his head.

"Thank you very much for letting us in. I'm Scotty Cobouc, a knight with the Royal Order."

"Thank you for saving me earlier. Zach Kuhler, also with the Royal Order."

"Oh, think nothing of it," Sera responded airily, turning to move on.

"Wait, may I ask your name? Working with the Enclave like this means we'll have to draft an incident report later, so..." Zach fudged the truth just a bit. Yes, there were rules in place for incident reports, but...he hadn't written one in years.

"I see. Well...the truth is, I'm not actually part of the Enclave staff. I just so happened to be here at the right time. My name is Sera and I'm the sword instructor to Margrave Lune's knights."

"The sword instructor to Margrave Lune's knights..." Zach was speechless.

Lune was the largest city on the frontier and, aside from the capital, one of the largest in the Kingdom as a whole. Furthermore, Lune's knights were renowned for their strength. In light of the decline of the Royal Order of Knights, they were said to be one of the most powerful orders in the country. So if she was their sword instructor...her tremendous show of skill earlier made complete sense.

"Jeez... No wonder..." Zach muttered while remembering how her blade had flashed when she saved him.

"For now, I suggest you all take your rest. We don't know when this turmoil will end." With that, Sera headed toward the Matriarch.

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“Ryo. Heeey, Ryo. I’m getting tired, ya know... Can’t we switch soon...?”

“What are you going on about, Abel?! If this is all it takes to get you whining like a baby, you’ll never become a first-rate swordsman!”

“But...I’m pretty sure...I’m already...a first-rate swordsman...I think.”

The surge of monsters continued unabated in the central temple’s first sublevel. Ryo adjusted his Ice Wall as necessary to continue funneling monsters into their kill box. Currently, Abel and Roman the Hero were slashing down enemies with their swords.

“Take a page from Roman’s book! Look at him. Not a single complaint as he cuts through the monsters. Roman, how are you feeling?” Ryo asked.

“I’m completely fine! I can most certainly keep going,” Roman answered with a ready smile.

“You heard him, Abel! That’s the kind of exemplary answer I expect from a swordsman. So you come up seriously lacking when I compare your recent behavior to his.”

“Hey, no fair! Roman’s the bloody Hero! With a capital H! A Hero is the pinnacle of mankind. Of course I’m not gonna measure up in comparison.”

Even as they talked, both Abel and Roman continued swinging their swords without pause.

“Feels like we’ve been fighting forever at this point,” Abel grumbled.

“I concur. I wonder when this will end,” Roman replied with a wry smile.

“I wasn’t there, so I don’t actually know, but I heard the battle in Lune’s dungeon during the latest Great Tidal Bore lasted quite a while,” Ryo remarked. “Is it true, Abel?”

“Yeah, it is. A few thousand monsters is a lot in ‘normal’ circumstances, but there were more than thirty thousand this year. No matter how many we took down, they just kept coming and coming...” Abel responded, thinking back to the event.

“Wait,” Roman asked, surprised, “so something like this occurs in

other places too?”

“It sure does. Well...monsters *do* flood the city, but that’s the only thing this and that have in common, since the phenomenon in Lune happens periodically. Meaning we have a bunch of ways to deal with the situation. But as for what’s happening here now... Neither Rihya nor High Priest Gabriel have heard of something like this before, so this can’t really be compared to Lune’s Great Tidal Bore,” Abel explained while they continued fighting. Despite his complaining, he had yet to rest his sword arm, which impressed Roman the Hero.

“You truly are remarkable, Abel... I expected nothing less from a B-rank adventurer.”

“Heh heh heh. Go on, don’t stop now with the praise.”

“Roman, Abel has a tendency to get carried away, so don’t commend him too much. Do you know those signs that warn people from feeding wild animals? The same principle as that.”

“Who the hell are you calling a wild animal?!” Abel snapped back, infuriated. “At the very least, I think my results speak for themselves even when stacked against the pinnacle of mankind.”

And still, Abel kept slashing. But a shadow passed on Roman’s face at those words.

“The pinnacle of mankind, eh...”

“See what you’ve done? You’ve sent Roman into shock by declaring yourself his equal,” Ryo joked.

“The hell I did!” Abel protested.

“Oh, no, that’s not it at all. Since I was born as the Hero, I won’t deny that my potential is considerable. However, there are still many out there who are much stronger than I, so...I’m most certainly not the pinnacle of anything,” he said with a strained smile.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where’s this coming from? Did someone kick your ass that badly?”

“Well, as a matter of fact...yes.”

“You’re still young. Don’t even worry about it. You’ll definitely get even stronger from here on out.”

“Thank you. In my head, I understand that myself, but...I’ve learned from painful experience how utterly useless a sword is against one who wields magic. So...”

"Ah, in that case, been there, done that, and yeah, it sucks." Abel stared pointedly at Ryo then. For the briefest of moments, he stopped swinging his sword.

"Abel, who said you can take a break? If you're going to keep running your mouth, then please make sure your hands stay moving too," Ryo quipped immediately.

"'Cuz my sword won't have any effect on that so-called magician barking orders over there." And with that, he resumed cutting down the enemies before them.

"I see," Roman said with a quick glance at Ryo.

"Hey, so, circling back to what you said... Were you talking about the Inferno Magician?" Abel asked Roman, his sword hacking away at monsters.

"He's part of it, yes. I was no match for him. During our first practice match, he erected a Magical Barrier and Physical Barrier at the same time. Both were so tough that even this holy sword, Astarte, couldn't breach them."

"I'm not surprised to hear that considering what a heinous fire magician he is. That is definitely something he would do!" Ryo said with a vigorous nod.

"How would *you* have handled him then, Ryo?" Abel asked.

"The solution is obvious: I would have surrounded Roman with an Ice Wall. No need to rely on dubious spells such as Magical Barrier or Physical Barrier."

"Pot calling the kettle black, don't you think? If anything, your ice wall is *more* heinous—it doesn't even *let* its victims attack in the first place!"

"Preposterous! Ridiculous! Outrageous!" Ryo's eyes were wide and his expression said, "How dare you say that?!"

Roman burst out laughing then. "Oscar is actually a wonderful person. Rather, I received the shock of my life from another opponent..."

"The only thing I can think of that would shock a Hero is some kind of inhuman monstrosity." Abel sounded intrigued.

"Funnily enough, I don't think that foe *was* human. She looked like a beautiful woman and could talk like us, but also had horns and

a thin tail."

"Aha. In that case, definitely not human. But I've never heard of a race with that appearance also capable of speech... Did she tell you her race or name?"

"Yes, right before she left. Leonore."

"Roman..." Ryo gasped. "Did you just...say 'Leonore'...?"

Roman was surprised at first by Ryo's agitation, but then a possibility popped into his head.

"Indeed I did. Ryo, I may be wrong, but did you perhaps fight her?"

Roman remembered what she'd said about there being someone ten thousand times stronger than him. His intuition told him that someone was the water magician he was currently looking at.

Roman was the Hero. In his inexperience, he sometimes felt humiliated when he was defeated in one-on-one battles. However, it wasn't an understatement to say that his potential was second to none, meaning his instincts far surpassed the ordinary individual's. In fact, these instincts—a result of analysis based on past experiences and subconscious information—are what told him he still had room to grow.

"I-I-I have no idea who you're talking about. I don't know this Leonore person..."

Anyone could see how suspiciously Ryo was acting.

"Ryo," Abel said, exasperated, "don't even bother. You're not fooling anyone."

"Urk..." Ryo had no rebuttal. "Honestly," he sighed, left with no other choice, "I don't want to think about her."

"Leonore told me there's a human ten thousand times stronger than me that I needed to surpass. Now I'm almost certain she meant you, Ryo." The whole time he spoke, Roman the Hero continued defeating monsters.

"Well, well, well," Abel jeered, grinning. His sword arm continued all the same. "Someone thinks highly of you, huh, Ryo?"

"As if I give a flying hoot. Another fight with *that* thing? No thanks. More importantly, how did you even encounter her, Roman?" Ryo asked him what had been on his mind since Roman first

mentioned her. He'd been captured in the space she referred to as a "cloister," so he'd been forced to fight her. What about the Hero though...?

"The truth is, in the Western Provinces, we have a ritual to summon the demon king. We planned to defeat it once we called it forth, but Leonore appeared instead."

"That's...insane," Abel said, astonished.

"Her objective was the object used in the ritual."

"I know slaying demon kings is your duty and all, but man—you Heroes have it tough, huh?" Abel said.

"Since you don't know Leonore at all, allow me to warn you, Abel. If you run into her, do not, under *any* circumstances, challenge her. Got it? Even if you pitted all four of you in the Crimson Sword against her, she'd kill you in an instant."

"Okay. Fine. But what am I supposed to do if *she* attacks first?"

"As long as you don't make the first move, she'll ignore you...probably. What do you think, Roman?" Ryo asked, tilting his head quizzically.

Ryo's intuition told him that the nature of Leonore's existence meant she simply didn't care about humanity. It was like how humans didn't feel anything for the rocks they found lying around.

"I agree. Because we ended up going on the offensive since we thought she was the demon king, and well..."

"Ahhh..." Ryo and Abel said in unison.

"I see... Then I'm glad you lived to tell the tale too, Roman." Ryo summed things up with that comment.

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"The wave of monsters feels like it's thinning out," Ryo remarked.

"I agree," said Roman.

"Just a little longer, huh?" Abel replied.

"Abel, moments such as this are precisely when you need to brace yourself."

"Riiight. But why are you singling *me* out?"

"One glance at Roman and I know he's not the type to drop his

guard. As for you, though...”

“I don’t do that!”

“Be that as it may, you’re you, Abel, so I thought you could use some advice anyway.”

“Uh-huh. The only help I need is dealing with your unreasonableness.”

It was at this point that they finally saw the last of the monsters rising up from sublevel two.

“I do believe that’s it,” Roman said.

“Abel, why don’t you charge in to make sure? What say you?” Ryo suggested.

“I say, hell no!” Abel said.

“Huge ones showed up at the very end during Lune’s Great Tidal Bore, right?”

“Yup. Three generals and a king.”

“But nothing this time, hm?”

“Well, yeah, ’cuz this *seems* similar but it isn’t the same.”

“Let’s hope so. Then why don’t the three of us move forward a little at a time? *Ice Wall, Release.*”

All of his Ice Walls disappeared at Ryo’s chant.

“Hold on!” Abel said, stopping the other two just as they were about to walk ahead. “How about we drink some water and take a break? If we rest for five minutes, that should be plenty of time to see whether or not something else comes up.”

“Excellent idea!”

“You’re a genius, Abel!”

“Huh. I actually feel like you meant that, Ryo. Are pigs gonna fly now?”

After a five-minute break, they led the group down the steps leading to the second underground floor and verified that no more monsters were coming. They continued their cautious trek all the way down to the fifth sublevel, the lowest one. And there, they found a blackened crystal ball the size of a fist.

“Didn’t we see this...in Lune’s dungeon...?” Ryo said from next to Abel.



"Yup. Identical too," Abel replied, having had the same thought. Then he called over the High Priest Gabriel behind him and asked, "Do you have any clue what this could be?"

"I haven't the faintest... At the very least, I haven't seen it in the temple nor heard of such a thing in our lore."

"Too bad."

Abel and Ryo both believed that someone had brought this object in here and used it to cause this pseudo-Great Tidal Bore. In addition, the passage leading to the old monastery on the third sublevel was destroyed. From that, they could surmise that the monsters had passed through it to reach the Royal Order's second training grounds. Having confirmed this much, the group decided to head back up.

Then—

Boom.

"*5-Layer Ice Wall Package.*"

Boom, bang, thump...

The moment he heard the first thunderous sound, Ryo enclosed everyone in an ice wall. Immediately, a second roar came, followed by a third. Even more worrying than the sounds was the earth shaking beneath them.

"An earthquake? Rare for the capital," Abel said, blurting out the first thing that popped into his head.

Blessed with instincts sharper than a normal person, Roman the Hero countered him. "No, I very much doubt it's an earthquake. The best way I can describe it is... Well, it feels like something massive is falling?"

Twenty seconds later, both the sounds and tremors stopped.

"*Ice Wall, Release.*"

After confirming there was no collapse or other damage on the first sublevel, Ryo dispelled the Ice Wall. Then he and Abel looked at one another, nodded, and ran toward the stairs leading aboveground. Roman rushed after them.

In the meantime, their party members walked instead. They were tired and lacked the infinite supply of stamina of the other three...

Ryo, Abel, and Roman surfaced in that order and raced through

the central temple's north gate into the square stretching in front of it. From there, the widest avenue in the royal capital extended north in a straight line. At the very end lay the palace. Because of its width, you could see almost the entirety of the enormous castle even from here.

And the sight that greeted them was...

"That island's impaled the palace," Ryo murmured.

To an outsider, these words would be completely incomprehensible. But Abel and Roman nodded silently. Anyone witnessing the scene would understand. There was no other way to describe it.

An *island*—far larger than the structure it loomed over—had pierced the *foundation* of the royal castle at a forty-five-degree angle. How could an island have lanced through the palace?

"It fell from the sky..." Ryo's voice remained low.

"You think it's a piece of one of those floating continents or whatever? No way." Abel tried to figure out a logical explanation.

"I've heard of that legend," Roman said. "Besides the main continent itself, there are supposedly smaller islands drifting in the sky too."

One thing was clear: Something extraordinary had happened.

The Fallen Island

A woman's scream echoed through the cockpit: "Blast it! What's wrong? Why can't you control it?!"

"Because an anomaly was detected and the suspension engine stopped," a man replied without any intonation.

They both looked like normal humans—except their hair was purple and their eyes were blue, though they weren't glowing at that moment.

If Ryo and Abel were there, they might be surprised to see the people who attacked them—or they might just be impressed to find themselves on the bridge of a floating continent.

However, the current situation embroiling the two in the cockpit was far from impressive.

"I already *know* good and well that an anomaly has been detected, Julius! My question is, *why*, in an infernal place like this? Have you forgotten this is the bloody capital of the Kingdom of Knightley?! The city Ashton himself chose! Ergo, it's simply impossible for anomalies to exist here!" The woman, Livia, was desperately trying to turn the situation around while tapping on the console.

"Facts don't lie, Livia," Julius coolly pointed out.

Either way, the reality was cruel. The two were piloting a small-scale floating island-class transport vessel with a total length of two hundred meters. While the organization they belonged to considered it *small*, its length certainly couldn't be denied.

It looked like an island. In fact, a floating island-class transport vessel was a chunk of land that had been hollowed out, equipped with a suspension engine, transformed into a ship, and then launched into the sky. So if a two-hundred-meter-long island flying through the sky lost its ability to generate lift... Naturally, it would fall. No way around that inevitability.

“The wings are jammed! They won’t budge no matter what I do!” Livia was utterly enraged.

“Well, it’s starting to swivel now.” Julius’s calm tone remained unchanged.

The island veered to the right and began descending...

“Prepare for impact!”

“Ready as we’ll ever be.”

And then...it fell.

The island crashed with a thunderous, echoing roar... But the people in the cockpit couldn’t hear it over the shrill blaring of the warning alarm. Livia tapped the console once to stop the sound and then again to collect information.

“What’s the ship’s status?” Julius asked.

“A collision of this level shouldn’t be enough to damage the shell... Argh! Except that’s exactly what’s happened to the front exit!”

“That’ll make it easy for outsiders to infiltrate,” Julius said quietly, standing up from his seat. “How long until we can get it airborne again?”

“A good question...” she said, calm now. “I would wager about two hours to cut off the damaged circuits, reconnect the bypass, and make other necessary repairs.”

“Understood. Then in the meantime, I’ll make sure no one gets near.”

“Please. Hm? Hold on...” Livia looked at the screen connected to a device resembling a periscope. “Are those ogres?!” she screamed. “Orcs as well! What? How? This *is* the royal capital, is it not? Have you heard anything about Knightley’s destruction? No? Then *why* are these creatures running amok?”

“We only recently concluded our investigations in Lune and Wingston. The Kingdom is very much still standing.”

“Even so, we’re quite literally in the heart of the capital. In fact, it seems we landed on the palace... No helping it now. Either way, it can’t be the norm for ogres to be here?”

Livia fell into a thoughtful silence at that point. Julius waited

without saying a word.

"Fine, we have no choice. Julius, I give you leave to remove one level of your bindings. Undo it in the back. You may also take an aide with you. Let's see... Wake Drusus from cryosleep. The two of you will protect this ship." She paused. "You have my permission to eliminate anything or anyone that approaches. Ogre, human, and anything in between."

Her tone had changed...into one of a superior officer commanding a subordinate.

"Very well." He pressed his right fist to the left side of his chest, bowed sharply, and accepted his orders.

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"That *definitely* has something to do with the legends about the floating continents, doesn't it?" Ryo murmured.

"Looks like it," Abel replied.

"I wonder if scary people are on board."

"Chances are good, I'd say," Abel agreed.

"I do believe this is your fault, Abel."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Abel said bluntly.

"Don't you know that being able to admit your mistakes is a sign of maturity? I think it'd be best if you conceded and accepted your mistakes, Abel."

"Yup, I have no clue what you're yammering about, Ryo."

As they bantered, they ran as fast as they could to the royal castle from the central temple. On the way, they took down any monsters they encountered. Why? Well, moments ago...

◆

As soon as Ryo, Abel, and Roman had surfaced aboveground, the first thing they saw was an island jammed into the side of the royal castle. When the rest of their party members emerged a few minutes later, the same sight made them freeze in response too.

"Ryo and I are gonna check things out at the palace," Abel said.

"The rest of you, protect the temple."

The clerics on the surface had been driving back any monsters that got too close. Compared to the flood underground, however, the number of monsters on the surface was much lower. Because most of them were walking north.

Rihya, Lyn, and Warren nodded in silent agreement. All three knew why Abel was impatient to go to the palace. He turned to Roman and continued.

"I'm sorry to ask this of you and your people, Roman, but do you mind protecting any citizens who manage to escape here?"

"Not at all. You can count on us," he said without hesitation. As expected, that spirit was very much suited to the Hero.

However, only one person here, a certain water magician, remained unconvinced. Before he knew it, he was dragged into Abel's excursion toward the palace—an excursion that was going to be both dangerous and concerning regardless of how you looked at it.

"Abel, why did you unilaterally decide I was going with you?"

"'Cuz my father and older brother are in the palace. I'm worried about them, so I *have* to go. And I want you to help me, Ryo," Abel said honestly, even if he did omit who his father and brother were exactly.

"W-Well... I realize they're probably in a bind since they work there and this situation is obviously frightening, so we *should* help... But..."

"If you help me out now, I'll treat you to the daily special in the guild's canteen."

"In that case, I don't really have a choice, hm? Of *course*, I'll help you rescue your father and brother! I was ready and willing from the start, you know. I mean that."

"Riiight. If you say so."

Just a single daily special was enough to make Ryo proactive.

That brought us to now. The road stretching from the central temple to the royal castle was incredibly wide. Ryo and Abel focused on reaching their destination as they overtook the monsters walking north on the path. Abel dealt with any goblins and orcs near them

while Ryo took care of the ogres and skeletons farther away.

Abel took most of them down with a single stroke, lopping off heads or stabbing them through the chest to shatter their magic stones. At a glance, Ryo didn't seem to be doing much of anything. However, a closer look revealed dead monsters scattered here and there, ice spears protruding from their chests.

Abel glanced at Ryo from the corner of his eye. "Maaan, magicians sure have it easy, huh?"

"H-Hey, I *am* hard at work in my own way, all right?"

Ryo's persecution complex had made him interpret Abel's joke as a biting criticism. "Working hard isn't about giving the impression that you're working hard. It's about producing results. If you succeed in reducing the amount of work you need to do in order to produce results, why, that's just the result of your own efforts. I think more bosses need to recognize that!"

"Relax, buddy. No one thinks you're slacking off." Abel smiled ruefully at Ryo's insistence. He really hadn't been thinking anything like that. In fact, he was impressed by his friend's efficiency in defeating the monsters.

"T-Truly? Then I'm glad to learn you're not a useless boss, Abel." Ryo was relieved to realize that Abel meant what he said. He continued, even as his eyes remained glued on the island piercing the castle. "You know what amazes me? No one's come to gawk at the astounding sight."

"Well, duh. Have you even *seen* the bedlam happening in the streets?" Abel replied as he casually decapitated a passing orc.

"The evil capital, Crystal Palace..."

"Ya know... It kinda pisses me off that even I can't argue with that." Abel accepted Ryo's mutter without further comment. Despite Lune being his base of operations now, the royal capital was where he'd grown up. Seeing it overrun with monsters like this definitely wasn't fun at all.

"I didn't realize the palace was so far away," Ryo remarked.

"'Cuz the capital is massive. I'd estimate it's about two kilometers from the central temple?" Abel said with a nod.

Since the castle itself was huge and the island jutting into it even

larger, the sight was clear even from the temple. However, a fair distance separated the two locations.

"The more progress we make toward the north, the denser these packs of monsters are becoming."

"Yeah. This is bad, in a *lot* of ways."

"By the way, what kind of work do your father and brother do in the palace, Abel?"

"Uh... Um. Why? Why do you ask?" Abel sounded a bit panicked.

"Well...considering how many ogres and such are here, I just wondered if they were knights or guardsmen forced to deal with such a tough situation."

"Ah, yeah, in that case, no need to worry. 'Cuz their jobs have them working inside, so..." Abel answered, a nervous sweat trickling down his back.

"Oh, so office work? Lucky break for them, then." Ryo nodded vigorously in understanding.

For a moment, Abel stared at Ryo. The light in his eyes showed he was debating whether to reveal the whole truth to his friend. He figured it wouldn't be a problem if Ryo knew everything...

But the thought died almost immediately when, in the next instant, an orc charged them.

Meanwhile, the situation in the royal castle was even more chaotic than the two could have imagined.

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"Wh-Why are goblins coming out from under the palace..."

"Orcs too!"

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait. Did you say skeletons?"

"Oh, no... Oh, no. Ogres!"

The tip of the "island" had pierced the royal castle down to the underground storeroom. The "black sphere with smoke moving inside" stored there had broken, and monsters began spilling out...

Of course, no one knew this yet.

The Second Royal Guard, guarding the crown prince at the

Monarchy of Joux's embassy, had requested an appraisal of the black sphere. They'd asked specifically for Arthur, special advisor to the Bureau of Royal Magicians, but he was on a training exercise away from the royal capital. Most people were unaware of the sphere's existence, so the fact that no one understood the truth of what was happening couldn't be helped.

Nevertheless, even if they didn't know of the sphere's existence, the city's residents saw the creatures pouring out of the royal castle... And the monsters that had originated elsewhere in the capital also began to head toward the palace, as if drawn to the island that had fallen from the sky.

At that moment, if there had been someone who could see through the monsters' movements, they might have noticed that they were heading in two different directions—toward the northwest of the capital and the palace.

However, monsters weren't the only problem the castle faced. Indeed, they also had to deal with the fallen island...

"Vice Captain, are you sure all we have to do is surround them?"

"We don't have a choice. We were told that the First Royal Guard would be raiding the island on their own..." Vice Captain Lex of the Capital Guard answered his subordinate's question with a small shake of his head.

The First Royal Guard's role was to serve and protect the king. This position afforded them a surprisingly strong sense of prestige compared to the other regiments. Naturally, all members were nobles or heirs to noble titles. Of course, that didn't mean they had no skill with the sword. Unskilled people would never be able to become members of the Royal Guard. However, from the commander down, all the members of the First looked down on the other regiments.

The similarly named Second Royal Guard, considered protectors of the crown prince, was completely different. While many of its members were also from noble families, most were second sons or lower. Moreover, the Second also included commoners at the crown prince's discretion. The only criterion was strength. However, the

crown prince himself always personally interviewed potential candidates, and it was rumored that anyone with a rotten character would be rejected on the spot.

Anyway, the First had been tasked with breaching the island. The Capital Guard would surround it, ready in case something were to happen... These were the tasks given to these units even though they were practically the palace's last remaining fighting force. Therefore, the fallen island shouldn't be their priority right now. The more pressing issue was the horde of monsters outside the palace's walls and moats. If they raised the drawbridge and closed the gates, the palace wouldn't fall so easily. That was why the First Royal Guard was determined to enter the "island" and prove themselves in this unprecedented situation.

Unfortunately...

"T-Trouble! They're coming from underground!"

Lex was the first to react to the alarm. At this point, he didn't even ask who "they" were. Nor did he ask why they were coming from beneath the castle. *They* had appeared, so he had no choice but to deal with them.

"All members of the Capital Guard, follow me! We will protect His Majesty!" With that shout, he led the charge toward the doors. The rest of his subordinates were right behind him. All thoughts of the fallen island had vanished from their minds, leaving the First Royal Guard in front of the island. Alone...

The Capital Guard returned to the palace, where they confirmed that the monsters had already spread out onto the first floor from underground.

"I want the Third Company to defend the Central Grand Staircase to the very last. Fourth will take the east stairs and Fifth, the west. Under no circumstances do we allow them to reach the second floor. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"First and Second Company, with me. We'll protect the area in front of His Majesty's office and the Small North Stairway."

"Yes, Sir!"

Each company ran to their posts after Vice Captain Lex gave his orders.

The king's study was on the north side of the second floor. Nearby was a set of stairs called the Small North Stairway. Unlike the large staircases on the east, west, and central sides, this one was often used by officials when taking documents to and from the king's office.

Because of its rather inaccessible location, some nobles and cabinet members who worked at the royal castle were unaware of its existence. Then there was Lex. He was an old friend of a certain young man who was now a swordsman in the city of Lune, so he was familiar with all the unusual spots like this one within the palace.

Two guards stood in front of the king's study. As expected, the First Royal Guard had done its duty by stationing them there. However... As Lex and the others approached, they heard the following conversation.

"Ugh, I wish we'd been taken on the island incursion too."

"Supposedly, there's a ton of treasure inside."

An especially pointless conversation.

"Of course they're useless," Lex murmured. "Why am I not surprised?"

It went without saying that the pair didn't hear Lex's mutter. But his subordinates behind him definitely did. They also grimaced, shaking their heads a bit at the mess they'd found themselves in.

Of all the military forces stationed in this corrupt city, the Capital Guard might have been the only one with integrity...

"I'm Lex, Vice Captain of the Capital Guard. Monsters have appeared from underneath the palace. Therefore, we will now assist in protecting this building."

"Huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

The two Royal Guardsmen looked perplexed by Lex's announcement. If they listened carefully, they would have heard the faint sounds of fighting and screams. However, they seemed entirely unaware.

"Prick up your ears—the inside of this castle is already a battleground!" Lex snapped.

His words finally settled in their heads and the two men paled. Although they'd been notified of the monster outbreak occurring in the capital, they most certainly hadn't anticipated the creatures showing up *inside* the palace itself—or that they'd be part of the personnel responding to it. They lost their composure completely.

"Monsters have already appeared on the first floor. We of the Capital Guard have split ourselves among the three main staircases and will guard these to the death to prevent them from reaching the second floor. Next, we plan to guard the area that includes the Small North Stairway and His Majesty's study. I trust you have no objections?" Lex only asked out of courtesy. His tone brooked no refusals.

"N-Not at all..." The two royal guards nodded meekly in response.

Thud. The sound came from the small staircase farther back.

"Damn it, they're here already! First Company, protect His Majesty here. Second, with me!"

No sooner did he bark the command than he took off running. Following behind him was the twenty-man Second Company of the Capital Guard. The First remained in front of the king's office.

As for the pair of Royal Guardsmen, despite their pallor, determination filled their faces as they remembered their duty. After all, they weren't rotten to the core. Their discipline was simply lacking a bit. It was up to them to redeem themselves now...

Despite being called the *Small* North Staircase, it was one of the more average staircases in the royal castle... The width of the stairs was at least five meters. Monsters ascended, an orc at the front.

Lex sliced its head off in one stroke without ever exchanging blows with the creature. He went down the steps and decapitated monsters one after another, each requiring only a single slash.

Even his subordinates, who had heard of the vice captain's skill with a sword, were mesmerized by his bladework. The weapon flashed like a whip or an urumi each time he swung. He was far more skilled than even knights, who were considered experts in

swordsmanship.

The Capital Guard was an organization that maintained public order in the royal capital, so they rarely killed people. While subduing drunks or violent adventurers, they might injure their opponents in the process, but they never brandished their swords with the intention of taking a life. If there were ever cause to take life, it would be during a raid on a bandit stronghold housing foreign spies. However, strictly speaking, even in those cases their purpose wasn't to kill the enemy, but to incapacitate them and jail them if possible.

In other words, the members of the Capital Guard never wielded their swords with lethal intent. Even against monsters. After all, this was the royal capital—the one place in the Kingdom where they were least likely to come into contact with them.

In light of that information, it was easy to see how shocking Lex's prowess with the sword was. His weapon was peculiar, better suited for the battlefield than a city guardsman. Perhaps even more akin to an adventurer's or an assassin's...

Of course, none of his subordinates knew why he was so skilled in the first place. They'd heard rumors within the unit, but this was their first time actually witnessing the sight. However, anyone who saw it would understand: His talent was extraordinary.

Lex landed a fatal blow, took control of the stairs, and reached the first floor. His subordinates hurried after him. The density of monsters was higher here around this smaller staircase than in the other areas.

"Tsk. Too many bloody orcs... What a headache. Listen up, men. We'll meet them between the first floor and the landing halfway up. Make sure to attack from high ground. There are a lot of enemies, so brace yourselves!"

"Sir, yes, Sir!"

His words had fired up the Second Company. Thus, the battle began.

The stairs turned into a battleground: people against non-people.

"Second Platoon, fall back. Third and Fourth, advance."

Under Lex's leadership, Second Company defended the Small North Stairway. At the moment, they were holding their own against the monsters, but he was worried.

There were reports of ogres in the rest of the capital too. We haven't seen any inside the palace yet, but the instant one shows up, the defensive line will fail, regardless of which staircase.

Ogres stood roughly two and a half meters tall and leveraged their massive bodies to swing blunt instruments like clubs. People couldn't parry or block their attacks, especially when a single blow was enough to destroy a shield. What's more, their surprisingly thick skin meant neither arrows nor a blade clumsily wielded could pierce them.

Ogres' height eliminated the advantage of any high ground, meaning they'd need to steel themselves for considerable casualties if an ogre appeared. That didn't even account for the Capital Guard's lack of clerics. Currently, they were healing any injuries with the potions they had on hand, but their supply wasn't infinite. The longer the battle went on, the greater their disadvantage. Even a child could see this logic.

That was when they heard a shout from afar.

"It's an ogre!"

Lex's fear became a reality.

"Well, it was only a matter of time, huh?" he muttered to himself. He noticed his subordinates' unease right away. How could he not, when they fought side by side?

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll handle the ogre. The rest of you continue battling the other enemies."

"Yes, Sir!"

They'd all seen Lex's earlier display of swordsmanship, which was one reason those under his command remained calm. Never mind that Lex himself wasn't sure he *could* take down an ogre...

Albert... No, he's Abel now. I remember him telling me once upon a time to stab them in the eyes or through the ears. But...I'm afraid that might be impossible for me.

However, his anxiety and lack of confidence didn't show on his face. After all, he was a commanding officer. If he wavered, then his

subordinates would too. That was the one thing he needed to avoid.

Then, five minutes later.

"That's..."

"An ogre..."

His troops murmured as they spotted the monster lumbering toward the stairs.

"Haaa..."

Lex took a deep breath. Leaving the other monsters to his people, he waited for the right time to strike. The ogre took a step. Another. Yet another. Now!

The instant it reached the bottom of the staircase, he leaped from the landing. Lex grasped his sword in a two-handed reverse grip and used his momentum to plunge it into the ogre's eye. He felt the blade spear through the bone of the orbital socket and penetrate its brain.

Mouth agape, the ogre convulsed soundlessly. Lex used that as his cue to pull his sword out, kick its enormous body, and spring back again onto the landing. The ogre fell backward with a thud, facing upward.

Second Company roared in triumph. That battle cry blasted away everyone's fatigue and rejuvenated their will to fight. What Lex had done was simply his job as their captain.

Ten minutes later, another challenge was about to test Second Company's defense of the Small North Stairway.

"Ogres sighted!"

"Five of them this time..."

The one who felt the most sense of danger at this news was Lex himself.

This is...not going to be easy.

As he'd confirmed earlier, stabbing an ogre in the head through either an eye or ear was the best way to kill them. However, it was impossible to execute such a technique on five ogres at once. That meant there was a high chance that the other ogres would kill his subordinates while he was eliminating them one at a time.

Of course, abandoning this staircase was out of the question. The

king's office was right there, so if they left this spot, they would have to defend the area immediately in front of the study. And that wasn't a realistic option.

I guess I have no choice but to take them down one by one, even if that means incurring casualties.

But something unexpected happened just as he hardened his resolve and opened his mouth to inform his subordinates of this course of action.

"Icicle Lance 5. Permafrost."

Icy spears impaled the heads of the approaching ogres, jabbing them through the right eye, left eye, right ear, left ear, and wide-open mouth, respectively. At the same time, the surrounding area—and the monsters rushing at them—froze over.

"All right, Abel, I'll admit that you were right about how easy it is to pierce them through the eyes and ears. But...it seems to me that stabbing them through the mouth is actually the simplest way."

"Only 'cuz *you* can use ice, Ryo. Not the case for a swordsman, since it's tricky to stab a blade through an ogre's mouth."

The magician and swordsman raced toward them while carrying on such a conversation. The ice that covered the ground had small bumps, allowing them to run without slipping.

As for the Capital Guard's Second Company, its members were stunned speechless. Including Lex. At first, they couldn't wrap their heads around what'd just happened. Even when they finally registered what'd *happened,* they still couldn't muster words. After all, they had no idea how something like that could have possibly happened.

Lex, recognizing one of the two people approaching them, grasped the situation first.

"Al— Abel?" He rushed to correct himself before he said his friend's real name. He'd heard that "Abel" was the name he'd been operating under since becoming an adventurer.

"Hm? Lex, is that you? Fancy meeting you here. Wait, why is the Capital Guard defending the palace?"

"Well, let's just say it's complicated and leave it at that, shall we?" Lex answered Abel with a small shake of his head.

"Strangely enough, I completely understand. Oh, yeah, are His Maj— Are Father and Brother safe?"

"Aha. Now I see why you came. His Maj— Your father is in his study upstairs, and your brother is currently away from the royal castle on official duties," Lex replied, glancing at Ryo. He'd figured out that his friend hadn't told Ryo the whole truth, so he'd chosen his words carefully when replying.

"Are you serious? In his condition?"

"Yes. Yesterday, a prince from the Monarchy of Joux arrived. He went to pay his respects earlier this morning."

"So he's at Joux's embassy." Abel flashed a look at Ryo, then averted his eyes.

Ryo noticed and stared back, surprised but silent.

"You...think he's okay?" Abel asked.

"The Second Royal Guard is with him, plus the embassy is in the southern part of the eastern district, so... I believe so, yes."

"Why?" Abel pressed, the latter part of Lex's answer piquing his attention. "Is there something special about that area?"

"According to information gathered at headquarters, the monsters have appeared in the northern half of the royal capital. They've gone no farther south than the central temple."

"Ah, I get it now." Abel nodded. "Which means someone was definitely behind this, huh?"

"It's only natural to arrive at that conclusion," Lex agreed.

Ryo nodded silently too.

"Oh, right, Abel. Would you like to see His Maj— Ahem, your father?" Lex sneaked a peek at Ryo again. Abel's father was the king. It wasn't a problem for Abel to enter the king's office, but the same couldn't be said for his companion, whom Lex didn't know well... Abel seemed to understand the meaning behind Lex's pointed glance. He answered with a slight shake of his head.

"Nah, it's fine. Just glad to know he's safe. I was actually more worried about Brother, considering his health, but not much I can do about that right now since he isn't here."

"What's your next move then?"

"Good question. Hmmm... Guess we'll head back to the central

temple. I asked Rihya and the others to look after the folks there, so we should do our part too, huh?"

Lex looked like he wanted to say something but was clearly hesitant about whether he should say it.

"Spit it out, Lex. You need our help with something?"

"Well...yes, actually. I want you to check something."

"What?"

"How the First Royal Guard is faring." Lex paused to gather his thoughts, then continued. "They went to investigate the fallen island. While I won't deny that I find them to be a detestable lot, they're still the palace's last remaining line of defense, alongside us in the Capital Guard. So I'm concerned."

"Damn it, of all the places for them to go..." Abel grumbled with a small shake of his head. Then he looked at Ryo. He'd assumed his friend wouldn't want to go. But...

"Let's go, Abel."

"You sure? Didn't you say you *don't* wanna go anywhere that dangerous?"

"It would be a disaster for the palace if its last line of defense vanished. Besides, since we're here, I'm not sure my conscience could bear it if we left *without* at least taking a peek."

"Can't say I don't know where you're coming from." Then Abel faced Lex. "Okay, we'll go check things out there. The First is full of some pretty tough guys, so we may just end up observing from a distance. But we'll come back here and update you once we get a lay of the land."

Ryo nodded in vigorous agreement. A moment later, however, he stopped abruptly.

"What is it, Ryo?"

"Do you think...anyone was actually on that island...?"

"Gooood question. If there was, let's just hope the First didn't do anything stupid."

"Hey, Abel, did you know that's what people normally refer to as 'foreshadowing'?"

"Huh? What are you even talking about right now?"

When Ryo and Abel arrived where the "island" stuck out of the palace, they didn't find anybody.

"Where *is* everybody...?"

"Yeah, this is weird. Lex said the First Royal Guard should be here."

Both of them were puzzled. There wasn't a single soul here. Not one. Nobody from the First nor any of the monsters that had surged up from under the royal castle.

"Oh, I see swords and things scattered here and there."

"Me too. And that's probably...blood, huh?"

Even though there was no one here, weapons lay fallen on the ground alongside streaks of blood.

"I have a *very* bad feeling about this."

"Same."

Just then, a voice rang out.

"*Coruscare.*"

"*10-Layer Ice Wall.*"

Ryo's wall of ice blocked the two vividly glittering clusters of flame rushing toward the two of them.

"That fire—"

"Is the magic of those purple-haired people!"

Both Abel and Ryo realized the same thing. This had been a possibility, of course, since hearing from the elves' Matriarch about the purple-haired people's connection to the legend of the floating continents. They'd been prepared for the presence of said individuals aboard the floating "island" the second they saw it.

And what had happened was proof. Two men appeared from the shadows of the island—both with purple hair and glowing blue eyes.

"Come any closer and we'll kill you. Withdraw, now," one of them shouted.

"Do you hear that, Abel? The audacity to make demands after striking first. We'd both be dead if not for me."

"Louder, Ryo. What's the point of whispering all that? Give 'em hell," Abel replied, exasperated.

"But that will only anger them and lead to a fight. You know I'm a pacifist. I'd rather you didn't lump me in with a battle-crazed

swordsman like yourself, Abel."

"There's no way anyone would believe *you*, of all people, are a pacifist, Ryo. Ain't no way."

"How rude!"

Their bickering meant they lost the chance to retreat. Because one of the purple-haired men recognized them.

"I remember you two..." As soon as he spoke, anger suffused his face.

"Abel, we've been discovered! Your strategy failed."

"Except I didn't do anything... Anyway. Looks like he *is* the guy we fought in Lune, huh?"

"Seems so. I've decided to call him Purple Hair Number 1 for now. That reminds me... Didn't you and the rest of the Crimson Sword fight him in Wingston too? Lyn put holes in him with her Bullet Rain spell, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Purple Hair Number 1's face is red with rage. Though I suppose anyone would be furious about having their body riddled with holes. He has a right to be angry," Ryo said, arrogantly folding his arms across his chest.

"Screw that. *He*... Oh, excuuuse me. *Number 1*. Well, Number 1 is the one who attacked first, so it's his own damn fault," Abel insisted, having apparently accepted Ryo's moniker for the villain. "'Sides, looks like he's pissed off at you too, Ryo, not just me."

"Even though I've done nothing to him? There seems to be some sort of misunderstanding. I should talk to him right now and clear things up..."

Ryo's idea was rejected before he could even attempt it.

"*Firefall.*"

"*10-Layer Ice Wall.*"

Through his spell, the man generated a continuous, fiery barrage —like a sideways, never-ending cascade of flame—at them. Ryo immediately constructed his wall of ice, but realized his mistake right away.

"What an unexpected level of force. *Laminate, Switch.*"

The wall of ice started to thicken automatically, reinforced by

layer upon layer... And the waterfall of fire continued its relentless assault, chipping away at it. Sparks flew with the phenomenon of annihilation.

Shockingly, the two were evenly matched!

"So powerful..."

Ryo couldn't help but grimace. The power of this magic was on the same level as Leonore the akuma's. In other words, there was nothing normal about it. He'd grown stronger since fighting her in the space she'd called a "cloister," so his lamination spell could withstand Purple Hair Number 1's offensive. He'd come a long way, considering she'd almost overpowered his layers back then...

"Then I'll back you up."

No sooner did the words leave Abel's mouth than he circled around the outside of Ryo's Ice Wall and charged Purple Hair 1 from the flank. Unfortunately, their enemy wasn't alone.

Klang.

Before he could even reach Number 1, someone intervened: the other man with the purple hair.

"Purple Hair Number 2..."

Even Abel heard the water magician's mutter. He wasn't surprised by the name either.

So began his sword fight with Number 2.

Ryo observed the battle while staving off the waterfall of flames with his layers of ice.

He's not exactly weak... I'd say about the same as Number 1 when we encountered him in Lune? In that case...

With that judgment, he came up with a plan in his head. A complicated strategy would have been impossible at the moment, so he improvised something simple—something Abel could execute easily. Ryo was just operating on intuition.

"*Ice Bahn.*"

The instant he cast the spell, ice formed underneath Number 2's feet. Naturally, unable to find his footing, the man slipped and pitched forward. Abel kicked him in the head at the perfect moment. Then, not missing a beat, he ran toward Number 1, closed the gap between them, and swung his sword down.

Klang.

Without moving a single beat, Number 1 parried Abel's downward strike using a sword that seemed to have come out of nowhere. The torrent of fire continued unabated—meaning he was attacking Ryo with magic and simultaneously fending Abel off with his blade.

"Mind-boggling..." Ryo was genuinely stunned.

Abel swung his sword again and again. Down, up, thrust... This wasn't the Abel Ryo knew. He was attacking far too frequently, which could only mean...

"A diversion? I see. *Icicle Lance 16.*"

Icicle Lance 256.

While maintaining his wall of ice, Ryo generated sixteen ice spears and flung them directly at Number 1.

Abel had been attacking so frequently to draw the man's attention away from Ryo. It was a diversion meant to signal Ryo to attack with magic while Number 1 was distracted. Unfortunately...

"*Murus Lapis*," Number 1 said without even looking at Ryo. A wall of stone appeared instantly, repelling all of his sixteen Icicle Lances. Not a single scratch on him...

"That hardness is unbelievable."

Although Ryo was surprised, this turn of events wasn't completely unexpected. Based on how things had unfolded so far, he'd started predicting things might turn out this way.

The ability to adapt was a weapon of its own.

And that was exactly why his sixteen ice spears had also been a diversion. Abel must have known too, since sixteen was too few for the Ryo he knew, and the number itself had been a clue in this situation where they couldn't communicate using words.

He jumped backward at the same time Number 1 constructed his stone wall. At that moment, ice spears silently rained down from above.

"*Murus Lapis.*"

Their enemy just barely managed to rebuild his stone wall in time above him, again repelling Ryo's attack.

The board was set. Above. Below. Number 1's attention divided...

Abel crouched and dashed within arm's reach of the man, using

his momentum to thrust his sword up into the man's chest.

"Ngh!" Number 1 grunted. But then... "Tsk."

After hearing the man click his tongue in derision, Abel leaped backward again. Number 1's blade mowed through the spot where Abel's head had just been.

"I stabbed him through the chest and he's *still* not dead?" Abel complained.

"I suppose we shouldn't assume he only has one heart," Ryo responded with a frown.

"Guess I screwed up. Should have stabbed him in the head, huh?"

"Or decapitated him."

The brain is the body's control center, so the most effective way of controlling an opponent is to either crush it or prevent it from issuing commands to the body. Of course, this effectively meant killing the opponent.

At first glance, their conflict appeared to be a *battle* between two individuals. A closer look, however, saw just how one-sided their fight was... In short, a difficult situation to comprehend.

"I won't make the same mistake twice," Abel muttered.

Then, at that exact instant: "*Laminated 10-layer Ice Wall Package.*"

"*Meteor Inver.*"

Ryo had detected the flow of magical power from their opponent and quickly put up an ice barrier to deflect the countless pieces of something raining down on him. *Thwak, thwak, thwak, thwak, thwak, thwak, thwak, thwak, thwak...* It sounded like a machine gun. The projectiles exploded on impact with the self-thickening ice wall, creating a shower of annihilation sparks even more brilliant than the one created by the blazing waterfall.

"What an incredible saturation attack... 'Meteor,' was it? Hasan had a spell with the same name too. Those projectiles must be small meteorites designed to explode on impact, hm?" Ryo was remembering the magic Hasan, the head of the Sect of Assassins, had used on him. He'd called it "Meteor."

"Small *what*? I didn't catch the second word he said either. 'In'

something?”

Apparently, Abel didn’t know the word “meteorite.”

“They’re rocks that fall from the sky,” Ryo explained.

“Wait, that’s actually a thing? Damn, Ryo, the world you know sounds dangerous.”

“Abel, this isn’t the time to play dumb.”

“I’m not though. I’m being dead serious.”

The laminated packaging was blocking Number 1’s attack, but its four-sided coverage prevented Abel from attacking. All they could do was stay on the defensive. The thumb-sized meteorites fell without pause on them from the sky.

“Ryo, at this rate...”

“I know, I know. I’m doing my best to think of a way to free you from the grip of that waste of space, so you can do your thing, Abel.”

“Wow, tell him how you really feel.”

Harsh insults aside, Ryo *was* trying to come up with a plan to break through this impasse. He’d use Revamped Ice Shield No. 2, the spell he’d created during his battle with Hasan. The fact that he only remembered it thanks to the word “Meteor” earlier was a secret.

“The problem: How do you stop a never-ending stream of meteorites... Hm, I wonder if Ice Wall will work?”

Abel kept his silence and simply waited while Ryo mumbled to himself. Because he knew that in times like these, his friend would always find a solution.

“Okay, it’s now or never. *10-Layer Ice Wall Package. Revamped Ice Shield No. 2.*”

He generated a new wall of ice one meter outside the Laminated Ice Wall protecting them. Of course, it was destroyed as soon as the small meteorites hit. Without a second’s delay, he deployed a Revamped Ice Shield No. 2 on the inside of the ice wall.

Revamped Ice Shield No. 2 was a spell that automatically froze water vapor in the air when it came into contact with a foreign object, such as other magic. In effect, it created tens of thousands of small ice shields instantaneously. In fact, each time a small

meteorite collided with it, the impact generated another ice shield, and then, when another small meteorite hit this new one, the crash emitted a spark of annihilation... Basically, a chain reaction was occurring.

"*Revamped Ice Shield No. 2. Revamped Ice Shield No. 2. Revamped Ice Shield No. 2.*"

Using the time he'd bought them, Ryo created an even thicker shield of water vapor.

"Abel, are you ready?"

"You know it. Just say the word."

With a shield this thick, it was highly unlikely that any small meteorites would slip through. In short...

"*Ice Wall, Release.*"

They would be fine even with the ice barrier surrounding them removed. Undoing it meant Abel was free once more to go on the offensive. The moment Ryo dispelled the wall, he charged. He closed the gap between himself and Number 1 in a flash and thrust with his sword. *Slash.*

"Wha...?!"

Number 1 extended his right palm. Of course, his blade plunged straight through the man's flesh. Purple Hair 1 had done it on purpose. But why? To stop his prey from escaping, of course. When Abel realized he was caught, he gritted his teeth in frustration.

Wham. Klink.

"Ngh!"

Number 1 punched him in the solar plexus with his right fist. The ice armor covering him shattered explosively and Abel sustained damage... Then his body went flying backward. Number 1 was hot on his heels, intent on finishing him off.

Abel vaulted himself into a reverse somersault with his left hand, then immediately righted himself into a position to intercept. Of course, Number 1 saw that, but didn't stop sprinting toward him. It took him only a second to reach Abel. When he did, he planted his feet and delivered another blow with his right fist...

Slip. He couldn't find his footing. Had he even been aware of the ice magically spreading only under his feet? Number 1 lost his

balance.

As if he'd predicted this, Abel swung his sword lightning fast, slicing the man's head off.

After the strike, Abel refused to drop his guard. He kept his eyes on his opponent even as Number 1 fell onto his back.

And then, Abel finally managed to catch his breath. A break at long last. The tension he'd been carrying dissipated.

Krak. A purple light assailed him, but a blue light blocked it.

"Abel, it isn't over yet!"

"Thanks, man."

Ryo dashed to stand in front of him and blocked the attack with Murasame.

As for the purple light that attacked them...

"To think you'd go and lose your head after the removal of one level of your bindings..."

...it was a woman holding a spear, her blue eyes and purple hair both glowing. She was frowning, though who's to say whether it was because her attack on Abel had been thwarted or Number 1 had been decapitated. Her eyes narrowed when she saw the blade Ryo had used to stop her.

"That is...the Fairy King's sword, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ryo answered honestly. He had a feeling lying would have been pointless, which spoke volumes for the kind of opponent the glowing woman in front of him was.

"And the robe as well?"

"Yes." Once again, he answered her honestly.

"It remains invisible to me, but I sense a fae facet overflowing from you."

"I've heard something similar before."

Yesterday, in fact, from Sera. That someone like him was a very valuable source of nutrition to those who possessed the fae facets. Although she hadn't directly said Ryo himself brimmed with a facet, it seemed safe to assume so.

"I can hardly believe it, but evidently, *you* were the outlier, hm? Readings stronger than a volcano, and it's all coming from one person... No one will believe me, no matter how much I insist. The

mere thought of reporting this makes me despondent."

Ryo listened to the woman's mutterings with an inscrutable expression. Of course, he didn't even understand half of what she'd said.

"I've switched to bump navigation," she continued, "so the ship should be able to take off, but that means the suspension engine breaks down easily... Argh... I'll definitely have to write a report on that as well..."

Ryo continued, expressionless. At this point, he'd given up on understanding anything she said.

"Eh, such is life. I'll be taking Julius back, thank you very much, as I'll need to reattach his head to his body. Ah, Drusus too, evidently. Until next we meet."

Number 1's body—and head—vanished the second she spoke. The unconscious Number 2 disappeared with him. Then, a moment later, so did the glowing woman.

As Abel and Ryo stood there dumbfounded, to their further bewilderment, the island vanished too. Yes, vanished. It didn't begin floating or shoot off into the sky. No, it simply disappeared without a sound, no rhyme or reason to it.

The two of them stood there, gobsmacked, for what felt like forever but was really only a minute or two. Ryo broke the silence first.

"At least we know that Purple Hair Number 1's real name is Julius."

"We sure do."

"She was the same woman we saw in Lune, wasn't she?"

"She sure was."

"I've never felt pressure like that before."

"For a second there, I thought we were gonna be crushed."

"I don't want to fight her, even if you beg me to, Abel."

"Yeah, I don't think that's gonna happen. Ever."

"Just so you know, if you get captured and they lock you up on the floating continent, I'm not rescuing you."

"I doubt that's gonna happen either."

Ryo gripped Murasame like it was a ceremonial baton. “Well, on the slim chance it does, it’ll be adieu, Abel,” he said, spouting the words how d’Artagnan would have.

Abel couldn’t think of anything to say in response. Apparently, life came first, even before friendship.

A group of people, led by Vice Captain Lex of the Capital Guard, ran toward them. He smiled in relief when he saw they were both fine. Then he noticed the island was gone.

“What happened to the fallen island?”

The other soldiers who’d come with him surveyed the area too. There was no way anyone could have missed something so humongous. So the fact that they couldn’t see it anymore meant it was no longer here... Still, they couldn’t help but look for it.

“They left.”

“They left?” Lex said incredulously.

“Yeah. One less threat to deal with.”

“Huh. Well, that *is* good news. You’ll be glad to know we’ve exterminated most of the creatures that burst out from underneath the palace.” Lex gazed at the royal castle. The monster problem was solved there, but not in the capital itself, where more still roamed.

“According to the report I just received, many of the monsters in the city are heading toward the northwestern district.”

“Wait, really?” Abel cocked his head in confusion.

“Yes. They’re on the avenue leading straight there,” Lex said, pointing to one of the three wide streets in front of the royal castle.

“Oh, man, you’re right... That’s the only one they’re clustered in... The other two are almost empty...” Abel responded, staring at the road Lex pointed at. It was the only one with an abnormally high density of monsters.

Ryo must have sensed something at this point because he finally spoke: “Abel, what lies at the end of this street?”

“I mean, just your regular old... No, wait— The nobles’ quarter! Ryo, that’s where the elves’ Enclave is!”

Ryo took off running then.

Defensive Battle at the Enclave

Rewind the clock a few hours, to before Ryo and Abel clashed with the purple-haired group. A fierce battle had taken place in front of the Enclave, which had sheltered twelve people from Viscount Westwood's mansion and then shut its doors. For a while after, nothing happened.

Of course, the monsters tried to scale the walls and gates, but the defenders averted a crisis by shooting through the second- and third-floor windows. It was around the middle of the afternoon when things changed. Up until then, the monsters had mindlessly lumbered forward, but now they surged in groups and retreated when the timing was right—almost like someone had come forward to command them.

"My lady, this is..." Sera began.

"Yes. It seems someone troublesome who is capable of manipulating them has arrived. Perhaps the true mastermind... Or perhaps a monster who can control them all by force..." the Matriarch said, frowning. She much preferred the former scenario. The latter meant the Enclave might not be able to hold out.

"Even so... Given how much time has passed, I can only assume that the lack of a counterattack from anywhere in the city must mean that the capital's fighting forces, including the Royal Order, have fallen..." the Matriarch muttered.

"We *can't* be the only two left..." Zach Kuhler, the knight who'd evacuated earlier, said to Scotty Cobouc, who'd also taken refuge.

"If you are, then that makes you both valuable survivors," she responded with a slight laugh.

At that moment, a sudden roar rocked the vicinity.

"What the hell?!" Zack shouted instinctively, then immediately realized the source of the sound. His eyes were glued to where the gates had stood, which had been blown away. The sheer shock of

the sight rendered everyone motionless.

Well, except for one person.

"Everyone, prepare for close combat!" Sera shouted, calling everyone back to their senses.

She drew her sword and positioned herself where the gates had been. Now freed from their dazed state by her order, the others headed toward the gate with swords and spears in hand, albeit a few moments delayed. The archers continued firing with greater speed than ever before at the monsters swarming the Enclave's entrance and walls.

The mysterious destruction of the gates was a testament to the viciousness of the monsters' onslaught. To nobody's surprise, a fierce melee ensued.

It went without saying that Sera threw herself into the fray alongside Zach and Scotty, who were both active members of the Royal Order of Knights. Though they were no match when it came to the bow and arrow, their sword skills were far superior to that of ordinary elves. These three held the center while the spearmen prevented the creatures from charging and the archers shot from the second and third floors. They established this formation, or way of fighting, without anyone realizing it.

But after holding strong for a while, they encountered the first of their troubles.

"My lady, we've run out of arrows!" an archer on the second floor shouted down to the Matriarch in the courtyard.

"Argh! What terrible timing! I knew it would happen eventually, yet it's still a terrible shame upon us as elves. Should we survive this, we shall henceforth store ten—no, a hundred times as many arrows! Is that understood?!" she said sternly to Carson, head of the Enclave, who stood nearby.

Running out of arrows was irrefutable evidence of incompetence. In a defensive battle like this, the elves' archery skills were peerless. They'd simply run out of arrows because there were too many enemies.

Sera also heard the archer's shout.

From here on, we'll have to use magic to defeat the monsters... Mana is a finite resource, just like arrows. With so many enemies at hand, it will be consumed much faster than it can be recovered. This is going to be tough.

She forced herself to remain calm despite her impatience. No matter what, she mustn't give voice to these thoughts. She knew doubt was something a commander could never voice, otherwise they risk creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. A commander's words, whether positive or negative, contain a lot of power. That was precisely why she bellowed her commands with all her might—even when she didn't believe in the words herself.

"Just a bit longer! Hold until the sun sets. Reinforcements will arrive then!"

Where would they come from? Who even remained to reinforce them? There weren't any, of course. Sera understood that.

However, this wasn't the time to spout facts. What she needed were inspiring words that gave everyone strength. Their factuality was irrelevant. The larger truth was that there were people who somehow managed to persevere thanks to her words. Even if her declaration only postponed their inevitable defeat, it was far better than dying now!

After the defenders fought off the umpteenth wave of attacks, *they* appeared.

Three hulking, swaggering figures that parted the horde of monsters as they approached. The one in the middle gave off a frightening aura.

"Devils..." The word spilled unbidden from the Matriarch's mouth. She had been fighting on the front line with everyone else to push back the tide of creatures. Even in the chaos, Sera heard her clearly.

"*Those* are devils...?" Sera herself had never met one despite having lived for more than two centuries.

Devils were the enemies of gods and angels. They'd evolved into demon kings.

The Matriarch stared at them for a few moments in silence, and then, she trembled violently, as if struck by lightning. "No..." she

murmured. “Can they be...? Impossible...”

“Regardless of what they are, our only option is to defeat them. I’ll handle them,” Sera declared.

But someone grabbed onto her arm and held her back using every ounce of strength she had. The Matriarch.

“Sera, no. Absolutely not. I forbid you from engaging. Even you cannot triumph over them.”

“My lady...?”

“The one...the one in the middle is no mere devil. *That*,” she said, “is an arch devil.”

“An arch devil?”

Sera had never heard the term. Locksleigh, listening by the side, also looked puzzled.

“Devils evolve into demon princes, and one of those will ultimately become a demon king. However, there exists *another* path of evolution, at the end of which lies an arch devil.”

“And you’re saying these...arch devils are even stronger than a demon king?”

“A demon king is extraordinary, yet an arch devil is leagues stronger than a demon prince, said to be the child of a demon king. Moreover, the one before us is a sword wielder.”

“That *is* a blade, isn’t it...”

The arch devil in the middle of the trio held a sheathed sword. Standing two meters tall, it looked almost human. Of course, its entire aura was overwhelmingly different.

“There are records of elves defeating the magic-wielding kind, though that victory came at a cost of a hundred lives.”

“Then I suppose I’ll just have to become the first elf to defeat a sword wielder, hm?” Sarah said, forcing her voice to sound optimistic.

“Sera, child...”

“Don’t fret, my lady. I’ll be fine. Besides, our only means of survival now is to fight and win against those things. And you’ll be pleased to know I’ve grown a smidgen stronger recently.”

Then she drank the water from her bottle and strode to where the gates had been. Outside, the monsters retreated a little, forming

a circle with a radius of about fifty meters.

"Hm, the best I can hope for is a one-on-one fight," she murmured to herself as she stepped outside. Then she raised her voice. "Arch devil, I will be your opponent."

Hearing this, the creature seemed to smile faintly.

Let's see... I have no mana left. How long can I go without Wind Robe?

Thus far in this savage defensive battle, Sera had been on the front line, straining her physical, magical, and mental strength to their limits. Nevertheless, she *had* to fight. There was no one else who could stand against the arch devil.

The creature took a step forward and drew its sword from its sheath. The devils on either side of it did the same and stepped back.

So began the final stage of the defense of the Enclave.

The arch devil struck first. Under normal circumstances, Sera would have rushed in at the speed of sound using her Wind Robe, but considering her lack of mana, that wasn't possible. Instead, the arch devil dove in at lightning speed, and their sword fight started.

Parry the downward swings, dodge the horizontal slashes, and deflect the thrusts.

If she tried to fully block the attacks, her sword *might* make it through unscathed, but the same couldn't be said of her wrists. She risked getting disarmed. Sera had to confront this understanding after just a few clashes.

Parry and counterattack, dodge and counterattack, deflect and counterattack.

She was extremely thorough in deploying her counters. The arch devil must have realized as much when it found itself unable to go full tilt on the offensive.

Suddenly, it jumped far back to put some distance between them and gripped its sword with both hands. The two-handed weapon was odd for this world, its long blade thin and curved. Yet the strangest thing of all was how the monster held it.

He grasped it close to the hilt with his left hand and just below

the guard with his right, leaving a gap between his fists. Usually, two-handed sword users would keep their fists together. Thus the strangeness.

However...

"I know that grip. It's the same as Ryo's!"

Indeed, because that was the way to hold a Japanese sword or a bamboo sword. Considering the dozens if not hundreds of times she'd faced off against Ryo, she knew his swordsmanship very well.

"But Ryo's footwork and movement are completely different. The world truly is so expansive, with its many different styles of swordsmanship."

Sara was honestly impressed. And a little happy. The monster in front of her probably couldn't fully understand what she was saying. Regardless, such a creature must have undoubtedly spent time and effort training with its blade. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been able to wield it so magnificently.

To think that an individual who came from a strange place and wielded a strange sword now stood before her... Pure joy unfurled inside her at the chance to fight this opponent. Perhaps she was a bit of a battle junkie...

Their sword fight lasted for over an hour. The attacks on the Enclave stopped during that time. As far as the monsters were concerned, their boss was fighting one-on-one, so it was unthinkable to ignore that and continue the attack.

In other words, Sera had thus far managed to defend the Enclave for over an hour on her own. Unfortunately, her strength was beginning to dwindle. She had countless cuts all over her body. The same was true for the arch devil. They were evenly matched.

She and her opponent put some distance between them to catch their breaths. No one knew what the outcome would be. However, one thing was certain to everyone watching: The next blow would decide the battle. Of course, nobody understood better than the two people dueling.

The arch devil readjusted its sword. Sera raised hers to her shoulder. Then the two of them stood still.

The fight would be settled in an instant. That was exactly why they needed to seize that one, defining moment... Otherwise, something could break the equilibrium.

That something ended up being a catalyst far away. They heard the sound of something incredibly heavy falling from a great height, then came the moment for them to make their moves.

The arch devil stepped forward with lightning speed and brought its sword down in the same instant. It struck so quickly that no one even saw it happen.

However, Sera was no longer in the same position. Her opponent had calculated for that possibility. It forcefully changed the blade's trajectory just before it touched the ground and slashed sideways to the left, using its entire body.

Yet again...Sera wasn't there. The monster was stunned, and with that expression on its face, it was decapitated. Then her sword pierced through the magic stone in its heart.

Sara had used her Wind Robe technique to rotate 270 degrees instantly around the creature, and by appearing to its right, she had moved to its blind spot. Her speed was beyond the arch devil's imagination. She had spent the past hour recovering her magical energy and had fought without even once donning the Wind Robe. And this victory was the fruit of her labor.

The moment she stabbed her blade through the arch devil's magic stone, Sera's magical energy depleted. She dropped to one knee and tried her best to stay conscious. She had only defeated the arch devil and didn't know how the other devils and monsters would react. It wasn't over yet.

As she tried desperately to stand, she noticed a sound drawing closer—the sound of something heavy falling from a great height and then crashing into the ground. It was the same sound that had heralded the final blow to the arch devil. *Thunk, thunk, thunk.* The sound repeated, over and over, growing louder as its source approached the Enclave from the road leading to the royal castle...

Unsurprisingly, the monsters, including the two remaining devils,

had noticed the sound as well. And they were looking in the direction it was coming from. The colors of the sunset dyed the sky over the royal capital. Those sounds were coming from that very sky...

"What in the heavens *is* that noise...?" The Matriarch murmured.

"A wall of...ice?" Zach said.

Ice... Ahhh, I see now... You're on your way here.

Another wall of ice fell from above, crushing the monsters on the street. She spotted a robed magician running toward her on top of the fallen ice.

◆

Ryo took off down a street swarming with monsters. Abel and Vice Captain Lex watched him from the palace.

"Um... Abel, he ran off..."

"Yeah. Probably heading to the elves' Enclave," Abel said in response. That was all. He didn't bother running after his friend.

Lex eyed him suspiciously. "Are you sure you don't need to chase him?"

Abel glanced at Rex, then looked back at Ryo's departing figure. "He doesn't seem all that tired, whereas *I'm* exhausted. Come to think of it, I've never seen him tired..."

"But he's a magician, isn't he?" Lex replied, surprised.

Generally speaking, magicians didn't possess as much stamina as swordsmen and the like, and since they used their magic continuously in battle, they tired out easily and faster.

"Yeah. Except there's nothing normal about him." Abel nodded gravely.

Krash. The sound of something heavy falling filled the air. Then it repeated... *Krash, krash.*

"Oh, hey, I think that's Ryo's calling card—crushing things with ice walls."

Abel recalled the ice wall he saw squashing a golem on his way back from the Forest of Rondo. Just then, he heard the voice of one of his comrades.

“Aha! There you are, Abel!” It was Lyn, the air magician of the Crimson Sword. Their other party members appeared soon after her.

“Oh, Abel... I’m so glad you’re safe.” And with that, Rihya hugged him tightly.

“Th-Thanks. And—uh, sorry if I made you worry,” he said, blushing a little as she accepted his embrace.

Another party appeared behind her.

“The monsters around the central temple are gone,” Roman the Hero said.

Abel nodded quickly. “Got it, thanks.”

While they talked, the sound of heavy objects falling continued to echo through the streets, becoming more distant. Roman frowned as he looked off in that direction.

“Abel, may I ask what *that’s* about?”

It was a simple question. As expected of the Hero, his keen eyesight made out the walls of ice falling from the sky.

“Ryo’s ice wall. The same one that separated the monsters from us underground earlier. He creates it in the air and drops it to crush his target. A simple but terrifying spell.”

Abel was well aware of his friend’s extraordinary abilities, so he wasn’t particularly surprised.

“That’s how he can crush a bunch of them at once, but I wonder if he could have used it underground. And look at him running on that crushed ice. Wait, what? How? How is he doing that? Wouldn’t you normally slip and fall?”

Abel’s questions were different from those of an ordinary person, likely due to his relationship with Ryo.

When Ryo arrived in front of the Enclave, all eyes, including the monsters’, were on him. Among them, he spotted a platinum blonde woman on one knee, her head hanging down. From there, he jumped in at supersonic speed and embraced the woman, supporting her weight.

“Sera!”

“Ryo... You came.”

She was conscious. As far as he could see, she didn’t have any

serious injuries—but so many small cuts!

Ryo took out a special potion from his bag and raised it to her mouth.

"Sera, here. Drink."

At that moment, the monsters started to move. Their leader, the arch devil, had been defeated, and many of them had been crushed by Ryo's ice walls. Though they had been briefly stunned, they were finally returning to their senses.

The two devils began giving orders.

"Shut it," Ryo said quietly, trying not to startle the woman he held. Then—"*Water Jet 256.*"

In an instant, 256 heads, including the devils', fell off. Then another 256, followed by yet *another* 256... He decapitated the monsters group by group before they even knew what had happened.

By the time Sera had finished downing the potion, all monsters within sight had fallen, their heads separated from their bodies. No one uttered a sound at the shocking sight. The only exception was Sera, who watched from within the cradle of Ryo's arms.

"Thank you," she whispered softly in his ear.

"Thank you."

◆

Even after all the monsters' heads had fallen off, Sera clung to Ryo, who kept his arms firmly around her. From her perspective, all their problems had been solved, so there was no need to pull away from him. From his perspective, although he'd beheaded all the monsters he could see, he still needed to make sure that there were no more approaching.

In the end, nothing happened after that, and once he determined the situation was handled, Ryo peered into Sera's eyes. "Everything seems fine at the Enclave now. Most of the monsters in the royal capital have disappeared too. So...maybe you should take a break, Sera?" he suggested with a smile.

"Hmmm... I think that's a good idea," she agreed.

The Matriarch must have heard their conversation because she approached and said, “Well done, child. I shall take care of the rest now, so I bid you to rest. Forgive me for imposing, Ryo, but won’t you help Sera to her room?”

“Of course.” With a nod, he released her—only to tuck his left arm under her knees and scoop his right across her back to lift her into a bridal carry.

“Ah...!” she cried out in surprise.



"U-Um, Ryo, I... This..." Sera stammered, blushing with embarrassment.

"You must be exhausted after everything you've been through, Sera. I may be a magician, but I've trained a bit. So don't you worry about a thing and just trust me."

"All right."

Bashful but happy...she wrapped her arms around Ryo's neck. They headed toward one of the buildings on the Enclave's grounds.

Unbeknownst to them, the Matriarch nodded enthusiastically to herself as she watched them walk away...

◆

"Damn, Ryo did a phenomenal job crushing them." Abel sounded impressed.

The Crimson Sword and the Hero's party traveled along the ersatz ice road stretching from the palace to the Enclave.

"As long as you don't think about what's *under* the ice, it's a nice enough path, I guess," Lyn said as she stepped firmly on the road.

The Hero's party was silent. Only Roman, who had good eyesight, had been able to see the ice falling clearly since the others had been a considerable distance away. The members of the Crimson Sword knew Ryo well enough, so they were convinced by Abel's explanation. The members of the Hero's party remained unconvinced, however. While they knew Roman wouldn't lie and saw the ice coating the road with their own eyes, they still couldn't accept something their brains had deemed impossible.

Nevertheless, both parties arrived at the Enclave. One of the walls had a massive hole in it... And Gordon, a fire magician, was keenly interested in the destructive force that had caused it.

"Lady Matriarch, I'm glad you're safe," Abel called out to the Matriarch, who was leading her people in the courtyard.

"Oh, hello, Abel. Yes, I managed to survive. Hm, hm... You seem to have brought someone very unusual," she said, frowning as she scrutinized Roman.

"Wait, don't tell me you know who he is?"

"Indeed I do. The Hero, yes? Your presence here in the Central Provinces is unexpected."

Her casual guess was met with surprise by the members of the Hero's party.

"The number of spirits floating in the air is extraordinary. An elf with even a modicum of experience would know right away," she said with a laugh.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Roman, the Hero of the Western Provinces."

"Are you now? I am Ryun, a Grand Elder of the Kingdom's Western Forest. I am also known as the Matriarch and you are free to address me as such."

"So *that's* your name, huh?" Abel said to himself loudly enough that even the Matriarch heard.

"If the Hero introduces himself, then it would be remiss of me not to return the gesture, eh?"

Then, amid all of this, Abel heard a familiar voice.

"Abel?"

When Abel looked in the direction of the question, he was startled by who he saw.

"Zach? And Scotty too. What the hell are you guys doing here? Not that I'm not glad to see you safe, but still."

"Yeaaah, about that. We just so happened to be at a viscount's mansion nearby and got caught up in the commotion. Sera helped us out," Zack answered with a small nod.

Rin looked around. "Speaking of, I don't see her anywhere."

"Ryo isn't either... Even though he should be," Abel chimed in.

"She fought to her limit, so I asked Ryo to take her to her bed," the Matriarch answered, looking at a corner of the building. They guessed that was where he'd carried her.

"Well, I'm sure Sera wouldn't let anyone get the jump on her, no matter who she's up against," Abel said, nodding.

However, Ryun shook her head in response. "No, the battle was too close on this occasion. Unsurprising really, considering she confronted an arch devil when she was utterly exhausted, physically and magically... I daresay the margin was razor-thin."

“An arch devil?!” Rihya exclaimed.

“What’s that?” Abel, who knew nothing of the subject, tilted his head in curiosity.

He wasn’t the only one. In fact, everyone but the Matriarch, Rihya, and Graham, the clergyman from the Western Provinces, had no idea what they were talking about.

“Devils evolve into demon kings, but arch devils lie at the end of a different evolutionary path,” the Matriarch explained.

“They’re said to be stronger than even demon princes,” Rihya said.

“Arch devils hold positions akin to generals in a demon king’s army,” Graham said.

“Huh. Pretty clear then that no one should be messing with them... Wait a sec. My lady, did you say that Sera ran out of mana?”

“I did. Abel, you are wondering about her Wind Robe, yes? Your supposition is correct. She fought the arch devil without it.”

“You’re kidding...”

Abel didn’t know how powerful an arch devil was, but he did know how strong a demon prince was. He thought back to the bitter memory of how helpless he’d been when he fought one of those. Imagining Sera fighting something stronger than a demon prince with only her sword was unbelievable, regardless of how strong she was.

“I am not. At the very end, she spent their entire duel recovering a small amount of mana, then used it to cloak herself in Wind Robe and defeat it. None of us realized how tremendous her skill with a blade had improved until then.” The Matriarch smiled happily at a surprised Abel.

“So, heeey, Abel. You know Sera well?” Zach, the royal knight, suddenly cut into the conversation.

“Yup. We’re both adventurers based in Lune,” Abel answered.

“Oh, yeah? T-Tell me more,” Zach urged.

Lyn caught on as she watched their exchange. “I think he’s in love with Sera,” she whispered to Abel.

“No way...”

Of course, Sera’s beauty was unrivaled. Even during the siege

here, she had probably been on the front line the whole time, exposing herself to danger while commanding the others.

In light of all this, it was easy to see why people admired her. To knights, who made their living on the battlefield, she was nothing less than the goddess of victory. *But*... There was a huge "but" here.

Abel had his fair share of people in Lune who had tried to make a move on Sera, or *had* made a move on and found themselves in a bad way. A person's status or background was irrelevant to her. After all, Margrave Lune's successor had his shoulder broken and a sword thrust into him...

The only exception was Ryo. Abel thought his friend had feelings for Sera too. Lyn agreed with him one hundred percent. This was also the consensus within the Crimson Sword.

In that case, it would be best for others not to get in the way of their relationship. For their own sake, others should steer clear of Sera... And now, right before his eyes, his old drinking buddy was about to become one such person. Abel had no choice but to stop him with all his might!

"Right, so... Zach, Sera's a famous B-rank adventurer. And, oh, yeah, I almost forgot! She's also the sword instructor for Lune's knights. She won't give any man who isn't strong the time of day."

"Yeah, I know she's strong. I'd have to be blind not to figure that out after what I saw. That's why I decided—starting today—I'll live by the sword! No more slacking off for Zach Kuhler!" For some reason, Abel's explanation fired him up even more.

Abel clutched his head in despair then... Next to him, Lyn, Rihya, and Warren shook their heads.

"But still, what a disaster outside..." Roman the Hero said, staring at the road facing the Enclave.

Abel turned to look at it. He hadn't noticed when they had entered moments ago, but now he finally took note of the corpses, over a thousand, lying there.

"They're all...headless...?" Even he had never seen anything like it.

"Yeah... It happened earlier without warning. After Sera defeated the arch devil, a block of ice fell from the sky. Then, a robed

magician showed up, hugged Sera, and a second later, all the monsters went down for the count," Zach explained, a hint of jealousy tingeing his expression.

Things clicked for Abel. "Oh, duh. It was Ryo."

Everyone's eyes focused on him.

"Wh-What? What'd I say?" Abel sounded uneasy.

"This... Are you saying Ryo's responsible for all this?" Roman the Hero questioned.

"I'm...*pretty* sure. I've seen him decapitate monsters with thin streams of water. Only three at the time, but...now that I think about it, he decapitated devils back then too," he answered, recalling the incident on the dungeon's fortieth floor.

"Abel, you're telling us he beheaded *all* of these monsters? Over a thousand? Basically in an instant? And you're *sure* we're talking about the same robed magician?"

"Yup. I mean, no one else could have done it," Abel concluded. "It'd be far scarier if there was someone other than him who *could*." There was no doubt in his expression. The same, however, couldn't be said of the others, who looked tense.

"I'm gonna say this just in case you guys didn't already figure it out, but don't make Ryo angry," Abel continued. "Okay?"

Everyone nodded vigorously in answer.

After talking for a while, they heard the sound of a carriage stopping on the road. The crest belonged to Margrave Lune. Two men disembarked. One was Eden, the platoon commander of the transport unit of Lune's knights. The other was...

"Kenneth! You're safe!" Abel cried out in joy when he saw them.

It was the genius alchemist, Baron Kenneth Hayward.

"Abel! And Zach and Scotty too! I'm glad you're all safe as well," Kenneth said happily.

"Since you're with them, does that mean you were hiding in the margrave's mansion?" Abel asked, looking at the coat of arms on the carriage and Eden's chest.

"That's right. Ryo escorted me and my staff there."

"Oh, yeah, he did mention that. Good job, Ryo." Abel nodded

cheerfully.

"I'm amazed you all managed to survive, holing up like that. Because as you can see, the estates around here..." Zach said.

"Didn't hold up as well," Scotty said, finishing the thought.

"Well, Margrave Lune's place in the capital is basically a fortress... They wouldn't have survived otherwise," Abel remarked, visualizing the place.

"The alchemical tools Baron Hayward brought with him helped us quite a lot," said Captain Eden, who had brought Kenneth here.

"We made it as prototypes for a weapon to defend the city... They're much smaller than the real thing, but I'm glad they were useful," Kenneth said with a bashful smile.

Eden looked around. "By the way, is Madam Sera safe?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Ryo took her to her room, apparently."

"Oh! So he's here too. In that case, I'll inform the margrave's staff at his mansion that everyone is safe. Have a good evening."

With that, Eden got into the carriage and headed back the way he'd come.

"Soooo..." Abel surveyed the city outside the Enclave grounds and sighed deeply. "Putting the capital back to rights is gonna be a pain in the neck, huh?"

◆

There were three great powers in the Central Provinces: the Debuhi Empire in the north, the Kingdom of Knightley in the south, and the Handalieu Federation in the east. The Handalieu Federation bordered the Kingdom to the southwest and the Empire to the northwest.

The Empire was superior to the other two countries in every way, but the Kingdom and the Federation had maintained a balance for a long time. However, that balance was greatly upset by the Great War between the two countries ten years ago.

The result? A tremendous victory for the Kingdom. The Federation ceded part of its territory to Knightley, and conceded complete independence of several small nations that it had

controlled as vassal states. One of these was the Principality of Inverey, which lay to the south of the Federation and bordered the Kingdom to the east. Although small, Inverey possessed many important resources, and its complete independence was a major blow to Handalieu.

"Heh heh heh heh heh. Aa ha ha ha ha! Wa ha ha ha ha ha!"

The laughter of Jeclaire, the capital of the Handalieu Federation, echoed throughout the chancellor's office.

"Your Excellency..."

When the owner of the room had his fill, an aide came to him carrying a report.

"Ah, forgive me. But you read it too, didn't you, Lamber? The report on the uprising in the royal capital. The destruction of the Royal Knights, and the enormous damage inflicted on the nobles and their families. And the incompetence of the leaders who were unable to take effective measures against the entire situation. How can you not laugh at all of it?" With that, Lord Aubrey burst out laughing again.

However, after a while, his laughter subsided, and he continued speaking with a small frown. "But now it's clear. Something is amiss with His Majesty." He was referring to Stafford IV, king of the Kingdom of Knightley.

"That *is* certainly strange behavior for King Stafford, who's typically lauded for his wisdom." Lamber nodded slightly.

"I wonder if something ails him? Or..."

"Or, my lord...?"

"Or this is someone else's work and not ours..." Lord Aubrey shook his head a few times. "Unfortunate for the people of the Kingdom... Though there's little they can do about it."

"And therein lies the issue with centralized power."

"Distributing power creates too many delays in decision-making. Centralizing it means the consequences are that much more severe when it breaks down. Such are the challenges when managing any organizations run by people," Lord Aubrey opined.

Assistant Lamber showed the documents in hand to the chancellor then. “Your Excellency, I’ve confirmed Viscount Fletcher’s death in the turmoil.”

“I see... Well, I suppose not everything will go as planned. I believe I’ll wash my hands of Flitwick for now since we’ve achieved our goal of sowing chaos at the heart of the Kingdom. Is the Empire interfering with the dukedom itself?”

Lamber nodded. “They seem to have some major objective in mind, and have contacted Duke Flitwick himself.”

“Duke Flitwick...Raymond, the king’s younger brother. He has made a secret pact with our Federation and is, even now, in touch with the Empire... Hmph. Spread yourself too thin and you are bound to suffer. Fool,” Lord Aubrey muttered. “Oh, that reminds me... The spy we sent to Fletcher was...Nancy, yes? What news of her?”

“She left the capital before the situation turned.”

“Excellent. Send her to the western part of the kingdom.”

Lamber paused, concerned. “Are you certain, my lord?”

“Are you worried she may be in *league* with the Empire?”

“Yes, Your Excellency...”

“Very good. I’m using her with that knowledge. Evidently, General Rancius, commander of the Twentieth Imperial Regiment, otherwise known as the Shadow Regiment, has entered the western part of the Kingdom. So I’ve no doubt of his involvement in, shall we say, *myriad* matters.” Lord Aubrey laughed knowingly, having anticipated Lamber’s worries. “Still, both the number of monsters and the ensuing rampage were more than I expected... I wonder about the cause...”

“Apologies, my lord, but we still don’t know.”

“Eh, no helping it.” Lord Aubrey didn’t expect an answer to be found in such a short time anyway. To begin with, the “gem” had been procured from a suspicious source.

“What was it called again... Ah yes, a ‘sacred jewel.’ Are we able to acquire another?”

“I anticipated that, so I tried to reach out to our contact from last time, but I received no response.” Assistant Lamber bowed his head.

"Hm, in the wind, eh? Well, we've managed to cause mayhem in the Kingdom and that is good enough for me. With their knights annihilated, they'll be unable to send reinforcements to other countries. At long last..."

"Indeed, our troops will be able to march in four months."

"Meaning...the end of spring, or the beginning of summer." Lord Aubrey smirked. "You *will* kneel before the Federation again, Inverey."



◆

"Thank you all for your efforts," Willie, the eighth prince of the Monarchy of Joux, said to the staff and knights who had defended the embassy.

While many aristocrats' houses had been destroyed by the monsters that had suddenly appeared, the Monarchy of Joux's embassy had refused to allow itself to be overrun. Of course, its location in the nobles' quarter had a great deal to do with this. Destruction had been greatest in this section of the capital, particularly between the northwest district, where the royal castle stood, and the northwest district.

In contrast, Joux's embassy was situated east of the central temple, near the northern edge of the eastern district. A large country wouldn't have built its embassy here, but things had panned out well for them, so enough said. Nevertheless, a survey of the area revealed the extent of the devastation. Being in the northern part of the eastern district, they'd had to deal with a considerable number of monsters. The fact that the embassy was safe was a testament to its staff's efforts.

Prince Willie himself happened to be there that day to deal with a guest from Knightley's royal family. Originally, it was supposed to be his first day at school, but his debut was postponed without notice to two days later. How fortunate for him.

The academy was located in the northern district of the royal capital. If he'd been there instead... Merely thinking about that chilling possibility made him sincerely glad that he had stayed at the embassy. Furthermore, it was thanks to the guest from the royal family that he hadn't gone...and in his heart, he was forever grateful to him—the crown prince of the Kingdom of Knightley, who had just returned to the palace in a carriage under the Second Royal Guard's protection.

"His orders were so precise..."

Prince Willie knew he could learn much from the crown prince and how he'd handed out his rapid-fire instructions.

"Once things have settled down, I'll have to visit the royal castle and express my gratitude properly."

Then, a thought crossed his mind: the safety of his acquaintances, albeit few, here in the capital.

"I think my mentor...will be fine. Even if he were surrounded by legions of enemies, I imagine he'd annihilate them in an instant."

Willie was thinking of Ryo, whom he considered his mentor. To Willie, a water magician, Ryo was truly the greatest teacher he could have hoped for. While he'd never seen his mentor actually annihilate an enemy, he could picture it so easily.

"So I'm certain he'll be fine," he said, nodding. "And then there's...Cohn."

Cohn was the leader of the adventurers who'd escorted him and Rodrigo from the Principality of Inverey. Willie had told them they could use the Joux embassy freely, but he hadn't seen them again since. Maybe they were no longer in the capital.

"Then I can only hope that means they were spared from this tragedy." With that thought on his mind, Willie shook his head and gazed outside.

◆

Cohn had already left the capital by the time of the monster outbreak. Firstly, he was a C-rank adventurer from the Principality of Inverey. Secondly, he had a very close relationship with the principality's government.

When he showed up at the adventurer's guild in the capital, he found a letter waiting for him.

"Come to the embassy at once."

The brevity of the message lent it urgency. At the Principality of Inverey's embassy, his identity was confirmed, and he received instructions directly from the government. He frowned at the details and then threw the paper into the fireplace. After making sure it had burned to ash, he left the room.

"Sure, the money is good, but as always, the mission is dangerous..." he muttered to himself, leaving the royal capital. As a

result, he avoided the impending mayhem.

In straightforward terms, his order was espionage. The principality was still a very young country, having only gained its independence ten years ago. Setting aside its bureaucracy, the country's intelligence organization was well renowned, albeit small in scale.

However, for a nation of its size to survive, information gathering was crucial. So the government had its most loyal adventurers engage in intelligence activities. This was a feat that only Inverey could accomplish given its resources and wealth in comparison to other small nations.

Inverey selected veterans who'd worked behind the scenes during the Great War ten years ago—veterans whose efforts successfully dealt a blow to the Federation. This indispensable personnel was one of the reasons why Inverey had gained considerable power in just a decade.

Cohn was one such adventurer. And now, his destination was Jeclaire, the capital of the Handalieu Federation.

◆

If the Kingdom of Knightley had to choose a magician to represent them, it would be Hilarion Baraha.

In Knightley, royal magicians were set for life because only those with a high skill set in magic could even hold it. The elite of the elite, these one hundred royal magicians served as magical bodyguards. And the head of this group was Hilarion, the chief royal magician, who'd served for the past thirty years.

Despite Hilarion's lofty status in the Kingdom, he'd left the royal capital during the chaos, heading a bit eastward to track a certain character. Needless to say, he was surprised by the dramatic change in the city upon his return. He went straight to the palace, and after a few meetings and talks, it was already dark by the time he returned to the Institute for Magic Research. His office was on the top floor. He could hear voices inside even in the hallway.

"Oh, right, I forgot Abel and the others were here."

Then he opened the door, took a step inside, and froze. More than ten people crowded the room. If not for Abel and his party, the office would normally be empty. Now... Well, the office hadn't been this crowded in decades.

"Oh, Master, welcome back." The first person to greet him was Lyn, an air magician and Hilarion's apprentice.

"Ah, thanks," Hilarion managed, still in shock.

"Hey, old man. Roman and his people don't have anywhere to stay, so we brought 'em here. Hope that's okay with you," Abel said, jerking his chin at the folks in question.

"Uh-huh... And I'm guessing that's them, eh?"

"Yup, Roman the Hero and his party."

"Say what now?"

As far as Abel was concerned, he was simply stating a fact. But, in the moment, Hilarion had trouble wrapping his head around the news. If you came home after some time away, only to find a dang Hero and his party there...you'd be baffled too.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Roman, the Hero of the Western Provinces. I'm deeply grateful for the honor of being a guest in your home, Lord Hilarion," Roman said politely.

"N-Not a problem at all. Relax, take a load off."

At a glance, Hilarion could tell the young man was earnest, and he wasn't cruel enough to chase him away.

And so, the Hero's party secured lodgings in the royal capital.

The Road Back to Lune

Three weeks after the turmoil, the royal capital finally regained some semblance of calm on its slow road to recovery. Two adventurers were walking along the South Highway that led from Crystal Palace to Lune on the frontier. The combination of swordsman and magician was a common enough sight.

Sera and the rest of the Crimson Sword had already returned to Lune with the city's knights on the transport squad. At first, she'd been reluctant, but eventually came around, knowing that Ryo would be back soon anyway. Rihya, though, wasn't convinced... However, an urgent request had come to her from the temple in Lune through the central temple, so she had begrudgingly gone with them.

Summoned by his brother, the crown prince, Abel had been kept busy with various tasks, making him unable to join them on the trip home. Though he knew how capable Lune's knights were, he still felt uneasy sending Rihya back alone, so he sent Lyn and Warren with her as escorts of sorts. Before she left, Rihya made him promise that he would *definitely* return with Ryo. She thought having him along would be the solution to most problems.

So a week after everyone else, Abel and Ryo finally left the royal capital and set off on their journey back to Lune.

"Hmmm... In the end, a rather uneventful trip..."

"Are you being serious right now?"



Abel was at a loss for words when he heard Ryo muttering to himself as they walked side by side. His reaction made Ryo realize he'd been louder than he thought, so he decided to go for broke.

"Let me clarify before I cause any misunderstandings. I just meant that wasn't any standard light-novel event like a fighting tournament or a school arc, you know?" he explained carefully.

"Yeah, I have no idea what you're talking about," Abel said.

"Okay. Normally, in the royal capital arc, you'd jump into the fighting tournament and make a name for yourself or join the academy and get people oohing and aahing over you. But neither of those things happened this time."

"Oh, yeah, sure, when you put it like that..." Abel snorted. "Half the time—actually, no, *most* of the time, the stuff that comes out of your mouth is utter nonsense, Ryo!"

"Do you *have* to be so mean?" Ryo said, feigning offense. "On this page, dear reader, you'll find an image of a wounded Ryo."

"Why are you painting *me* as the bad guy here?"

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about the details, Abel."

"You really are the worst, you know that?!" Abel snapped at Ryo, who had mysteriously found himself in a position to comfort a friend who'd been falsely accused.

"Haaah... Anyway. There's never been a fighting tournament in the capital. At least, not in the last hundred years."

"Awww..." Ryo despaired at the frightening truth exposed by Abel.

"Speaking of fighting tournaments though, the one in the imperial capital is pretty famous."

However, hope rose anew within Ryo at this revelation from his friend.

"The Debuhi Empire?!"

"They hold it once every four or five years. I think a ton of adventurers from other countries participate as a commemorative thing."

"Wow. Does that mean it's going to be held soon?!" Ryo said, betting on the flicker of hope.

"No, not for a while, since the most recent one was only last year." Unfortunately for him, Abel quashed it.

Gloom overtook Ryo once more.

"Of all the rotten luck..."

"And as for the academy nonsense you were going on about, did you forget you're already a grown-up, Ryo? You're way too old to enroll now."

"That's irrelevant. The classic approach is to join the academy and have people make a fuss over how strooong and amaaazing and so on you are!"

"Yeeeah, I still have no clue what you're babbling about."

Abel's dismissive wave might as well have been rubbing salt in Ryo's wound.

"I just remembered to ask... You've been hanging out at Kenneth's for the last week, right?" Abel questioned Ryo, ignoring his depression.

"I have! He taught me everything from the basics to the secrets of alchemy. We even made some incredible potions together. Now I'm a full-fledged alchemist too!" In an instant, Ryo was back to normal, bragging about his achievements under the genius alchemist, Baron Kenneth Hayward.

"Not to be a stick in the mud, but isn't it impossible to master all that in a week?" Abel said, completely brushing him off. If a third party were listening, they'd be inclined to agree with Abel's skepticism.

"All right, fine, so I might have exaggerated a bit about the secrets part. However, I can definitively state that I'm now an advanced student of alchemy!"

"Nah, gonna call a foul on that too."

"No, no, no, no... Is that all you can say, Abel? So much negativity is no good for educating your disciples, you know."

"Except I don't have any. And neither do you, Ryo. Don't lie."

Ryo smirked. "Abel, Abel, Abel. You really need to find better information sources. You're so out of the loop! I'll have you know that I already have five disciples!"

"No... No way..." Abel was shocked to hear the pride in Ryo's voice. Of course he was. It just wasn't possible for Ryo to even *have* disciples.

"Five apprentice merchants from the Principality of Inverey. That's right, Abel, *five*. And Prince Willie, the prince from the Monarchy of Joux. Oops, silly me, I can't count. *Six*. Heh heh heh."

For reasons unknown, Ryo's smug expression annoyed Abel something fierce.

"Just to be clear...are they learning magic from you?"

"Of course. I'm a magician. What did you think I was?"

"I dunno... A magic swordsman, I guess?"

"Really?! That sounds so cool! Fairly clever, especially for *you*, Abel! Maybe I should call myself 'Magic Swordsman Ryo' from now on," Ryo said enthusiastically. "Le gasp! He who chases after two hares catches neither, as they say. Ergo, think I'll focus on magic, and...give up on the path of the sword."

"Never mind that you're making damn good progress on the path of the sword anyway."

"Ha! Like I'll fall for that! You'll make me try both, and then when I can't master either, you'll look down on me and say I've been hoisted by my own petard. Isn't that right, Abel?! Your cruelty knows no bounds!"

"Well, according to you, I'm a monster, so I don't even know why you're surprised by your own delusions anymore."

No road is long with good company, or so the proverb says. Traveling with someone is more fun than traveling alone. At the very least...you'll never get bored.

On the first night of their journey, the two stayed in Deopham, a satellite town of the royal capital. It was the largest one south of Crystal Palace and served as an inn town. From there, travelers could either take the Third Highway or the South Highway. The former led to Acray, the largest city in the south, and the latter to Lune.

"What a wonderful inn, huh! I love the fact that it has a communal bath!"

"I know you love your baths, Ryo, and that's why I chose it. This place is famous in Deopham. Top-notch *and* safe. You'll sleep like a baby here."

"Abel, you...you're amazing! I'll treat you to dinner tonight. Eat

whatever you want."

"Weeell. I paid in advance and dinner is included in the price."

"Boo... Foiled..."

Ryo's plan to get Abel in his debt had failed.

Day two.

After leaving Deopham, the two walked along the South Highway on the way to Lune.

"Abel, have you noticed something peculiar?"

"Yeah, I get the creepy feeling we're being watched. It's been like that ever since we left the inn."

"Just the type of instincts I'd expect from a B-rank adventurer. 'We're being watched.' I'd love to be able to say stuff like that," Ryo said wistfully.

"So it's different for you, Ryo?"

"Correct, since I use magic..."

"Man, that's way more accurate than instincts!" Abel said, annoyed.

"The question now is, *Why* are they watching us? If they wanted something valuable, they'd target a merchant, no? The South Highway is one of the kingdom's most important trade routes, so there are plenty of merchant caravans to go after. Then again, committing theft on such a busy highway may as well be suicide."

"All very good points. So why target two adventurers, one of whom looks like a skilled swordsman? Could our pursuers be blind...?"

"Uh-uh, no way."

"But there's no other explanation. Once you eliminate the impossible, then whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth! A certain great detective said that once!"

"Yeah, I don't know who this 'great detective' is, but they're probably right. *You* clearly haven't done so, though. You didn't even eliminate any of the impossibilities!"

Ryo's eyes widened in shock. "To have *you* of all people pointing out someone's failings," Ryo tutted.

"Oh, yeah, great manners. Rude jerk." Abel glowered.

"Anyway, jokes aside. Maybe...they've mistaken us for someone else?"

"Very possible. They may think we're part of some royal family on a secret mission."

"Y-Yeah, maybe."

Abel was the second son of the current king. Ryo didn't know that. However...

"Abel, there's something you're hiding from me."

"Huh?" Abel was startled by Ryo's quiet words.

"You flinched a little when I talked about royalty just a moment ago."

"D-Did I?"

Cold sweat ran down Abel's back.

"Abel... I don't want to imagine the worst, but you didn't perhaps sneak into a royal's room and steal treasure, did you? If so, I'm saddened to announce that I have no choice but to capture you and turn you in. And then I'll receive my reward..."

"Like hell I did!"

Despite sensing the ominous gazes watching them, the pair continued on their journey peacefully.

Day three.

The two of them were back on the South Highway, heading toward Lune.

"I knew it... We're being watched again today."

"Yeah... I can feel someone's gaze."

Both Ryo and Abel had the same feeling today.

"Abel... Is it possible you've incurred the wrath of someone powerful?"

"Ryo... Did you maybe mess with some scary people?"

Each pressed his hand on his chest as each expressed his thoughts out loud. And then they sighed almost at the same time. Apparently, they were both thinking the same thing.

"Why are they even waiting to make their move at this point? Just do something already."

"I couldn't agree more. I wish they'd just get on with it and put

us out of our misery."

"Uhhh, sounds to me like you're hankering to put *them* out of their misery, and that's giving me the willies, so stop it, will you?" Abel grimaced as he imagined Ryo chopping off his head.

"Don't worry. I'll protect you, Abel! Unless our opponent is incredibly strong, in which case you can protect me while I run away!"

"Wow. That's just wrong in so many ways."

"Ugh. *When* are they going to attack us?"

"So you think they actually will? And they won't be satisfied with just watching us?" Abel knew it was just wishful thinking. Even so, he couldn't stop himself from putting the idea out there.

"Well, there's always three of them within a five-hundred-meter radius. Besides, if all they ever did was *watch*, they'd be deep in the red, don't you think?"

"Meaning even thieves think in terms of profit and loss, huh?"

"In a sense, they *do* run small businesses. If they're not tight with their own purse strings, they'll go under in no time."

"Um. If you say so." Abel was overwhelmed by Ryo's unusually passionate speech for a moment. "Aberdare, where we stayed yesterday, is the last big town in the capital's metropolitan area. The ones we plan to stay in today and tomorrow are much smaller. 'Course, that means fewer people on the road. But this *is* the South Highway, so there'll still be a fair number of them passing by."

"Ah, so that's why you believe they'll attack us soon. Possibly at night, when it's especially dangerous since everyone is asleep!"

"Yeah. Why are you smiling about that?"

"Now, Abel, it's not what you think. I'm simply of the opinion that it's better to have them reveal themselves as soon as possible so we can kill them quickly instead of waiting around not knowing when they'll come. After all, we can't just attack people who are watching us because we *think* they might be thieves... Right?"

"Right."

Day four on the South Highway.

"They're here!" Ryo whispered to Abel.

"What should we do?"

"Let's keep walking like we are. I estimate...five minutes until we make contact. They'll come from all directions to surround us."

"Ya don't say. How many?" Abel asked, frowning.

Ryo counted the number of people with Passive Sonar. "Twenty."

"That's a pretty big group for bandits."

"I'm going to cover us in armor they won't be able to see. *Ice Armor 2.*" As Ryo chanted, invisible ice armor generated on the surface of his and Abel's clothes.

"Strength in numbers, as the saying goes. Even if they're bandits, we could get hurt if they overwhelm us."

"I appreciate how you're careful about things like that, Ryo," Abel said, impressed.

"Even a great assassin and alchemist was caught off guard by a certain someone's sheer number of moves. I don't want that to happen to you, Abel."

"I'm surprised you even know an assassin, and one who's an alchemist too."

"Everyone has a past, Abel. I'll tell you about him someday."

The man Ryo had in mind was, of course, Hasan, the leader of the Sect of Assassins.

Five minutes later, Ryo and Abel found themselves caught in the enemy's net. Three men appeared.

"So you finally decided to show yourselves. Been a while since we left Deopham. Not one to slack off, are you, gents?" Abel taunted them.

Why was he provoking them? Just because.

"So you *did* notice us," the man in the middle said.

He looked tough with his shaved head, but his prominent forehead made Ryo think he was intelligent...

"We have you surrounded. Resistance is futile," the bald man continued.

"Ehhh, that's for us to decide. Let's chat a bit first. Tell us what you're after. Can't fault a guy for being curious, right?" Abel spoke casually, like he had all the time in the world. Not a problem at all

though, because he wanted information.

"What we want is that sword you have."

"What?" Abel tilted his head in confusion.

"That's a magic sword, isn't it?" the bald man asked rhetorically. He clearly already knew the answer.

"Nope," Abel denied flatly.

"You really think you can lie to us?" barked the short-haired man next to the bald man.

Ryo didn't think *that* bandit's forehead made him look intelligent...

"Too bad for you but we know the truth. And we want it *real* bad. Sure, we could take it by force, but if you're willing to negotiate, we can offer you gold, jewels, or what have you for it. Whaddya say?" the bald man suggested, holding the short-haired man back with one hand.

"It's not for sale," Abel said bluntly.

"Then why don't we bring out a few things *we* have that aren't for sale?" the bald man proposed.

At this point, Abel and Ryo grew curious. What kind of "things" was he referring to? And where were the gold, jewels, and "what have you"? Did they have a backer, or were they negotiating on someone's behalf? If so, who?

Both Ryo and Abel couldn't help being intrigued by this mystery; actually raising those questions could be a negotiation technique in and of itself...

"Ryo, what do you think?"

"I'm curious about a lot of things. For one, I wonder if they'll take us somewhere."

That was their only exchange, conducted in low whispers.

"Gonna be real honest with you guys: I don't plan on selling it. But I also won't deny that I'm interested in the things you have that aren't for sale either. Guess we have ourselves a real conundrum here, huh?" Abel said matter-of-factly.

Everything he said was true. For some reason, sticking to cold, hard facts could be awfully persuasive.

"Then we'll take you to our village. You'll get your answers there.

Follow us.” With that, the man started walking.

Ryo and Abel glanced at each other. Both of their expressions said they knew they had no choice but to follow, so they did just that.

After walking for nearly two hours, they finally arrived at their destination.

“Finally... Haaa, finally... Haaa, we’ve arrived... Haaa, that was quite a distance,” Ryo said to Abel, panting.

Abel couldn’t muster a reply. Instead, he hoped his stare would convey the fact that he knew there was no way Ryo had gotten tired from walking such a distance.

“Hm, must have been a tough road for a feeble magician,” the man with the shaved head said tauntingly, walking behind them. He didn’t seem to realize he was being played for a fool by said magician. Ryo realized and, continuing to huff, whispered to Abel.

“I’m stellar at this acting business, wouldn’t you say?”

Abel felt discouraged for some reason when he heard this.

Just like the man had said, their destination turned out to be a village. There were about twenty houses, with a plaza and a building with an altar in the center. However, something felt off to Ryo. He didn’t know what the source was, which only made him feel more off.

Abel seemed to feel the same discomfort.

“This is weird. Isn’t this weird?” he whispered very quietly.

Ryo nodded silently. While he still didn’t know what was causing it, he realized he’d had this same feeling before. *Where*, though? The first thing that came to mind was magic nullification, but that didn’t explain the sensation.

Magic nullification...? The one-eyed assassin hawk, Behe-chan, Hasan... Ah! The Sect of Assassins’s village! It feels just like that village!

Ryo finally realized the true nature of his unease. The Sect of Assassins’s headquarters was also a cleverly disguised village that had given Ryo the same impression.

What made him feel that way though? It wasn’t the lack of

women. There were women here, as well as in the village of the Sect of Assassins. A lot of them had fierce eyes, which perhaps made sense for this group of people. So that wasn't it...

No children?

Yes, the lack of children here, and in the village of the Sect of Assassins. In any village, there were at least a few kids. You could hear them playing, their high-pitched voices piercing the air. But...

I think the Sect of Assassins likely had other villages besides that one. Villages or facilities that focused on raising children...to be assassins. That's why they weren't there. So what about this village? I'm not sure... Is it only meant to look *like a village? And there's a separate one where people actually live...? Hmm, that doesn't feel right either...*

He decided to whisper to Abel what he had noticed. "No children."

The moment he heard that, Abel's eyes widened a bit. Then he inclined his head slightly in agreement.

The two were brought to the village square, where they saw an old man wearing a black robe, his white hair reaching down to his waist. Three others, all in black robes as well, accompanied him. Everyone except the old man wore a hood, creating a somewhat eerie atmosphere.

However, Ryo's attention was focused on the long staff the old man held in his hand. He'd seen the combination of the ornamental cord and stone carving attached to it before. It was the same as the one the Grandam in Nils's village had attached to her staff. Eto had called it a carved statuette, but...

The shape of the carving was different.

The ornamental cord was the same, with seven colors intertwined. Ryo, not being a priest like Eto, naturally had no idea what the carving represented. So, pinning his hopes on a last resort, he decided to ask the B-rank adventurer beside him.

"Abel, do you know anything about that stone carving on the white-haired old man's staff?"

"I don't... But the rainbow-colored cord is pretty."

That was the extent of his knowledge. Apart from the clerics of the Goddess of Light, everyone else who knew of the carving had

disappeared from the annals of the history of the Central Provinces. It was unsurprising then that Abel didn't know either.

The white-haired old man was the first to speak.

"Welcome, esteemed guests. I'll cut to the chase. We want that magic sword. Of course, not for free. What would you be willing to receive in exchange? Do you have a fair price already in mind?"

"Like I told the other guy, I don't plan on giving it up so easily. First things first: I wanna know why you want it," Abel said confidently. Even Ryo was impressed by his attitude in times like this.

"Hmph. Fine, I'll tell you. We want to dedicate that magic blade to God."

"Oh? I'm thinking...*not* the Goddess of Light. Am I right?"

"Don't put our divinity in the same category as that false god!" he snarled, marking an abrupt sudden change from his slightly condescending, relaxed attitude.

Ryo concealed how startling he found the man's about-face.

"Pardon my outburst. I'll show you to the shrine and explain. Follow me."

The white-haired old man and the six others in black robes headed toward the hill at the back of the village. Ryo and Abel looked at each other once and followed. The man with the shaved head and his comrades trailed them.

The entrance to the temple was a tunnel that burrowed into the hill. The tunnel ended in a dead end, but when the white-haired old man pushed with his hand, it opened up with almost no resistance.

"Come in."

The old man and his people went in first. Abel, Ryo, and the three men who had brought them followed. The inside was much larger than Ryo imagined, about the size of a soccer field. The ceiling was also more than ten meters high.

The three men behind them closed the entrance and stationed themselves there. Urged by the white-haired old man, Ryo and Abel walked to the front of the room. Ryo had felt something the moment he entered this space.

A hidden shrine?

It had the same aura as the one in Nils's village. At the very back was what appeared to be a perfect, unbroken sphere. The one in Nils's village was chipped. This one wasn't.

While different in color and size, the transparent ball enshrined before them somehow felt like the black balls he'd retrieved from Layer 40 Lune's dungeon and the fifth sublevel of the central temple. If someone told Ryo that it was a crystal ball, he'd believe them.

"Come here," the old man said, beckoning them over to the altar.

As they approached, he chanted something in a low voice.

Then Abel dropped down on one knee. Ryo followed suit.

"Now, obey me," he ordered.

But they didn't move.

"Eh?"

The old man was suspicious. Then he chanted again in a low voice. "*Slave*. Obey me."

"Piss off!" Abel spat, still on one knee, unable to lift his head.

"Outrageous! The Slave incantation isn't working? I cast it in the temple! The legend states that even a demon king can be subjugated, so this... This is impossible."

"If something like this works on a demon king, then I guess a demon king mustn't be all that special, huh?" Sweat streaked Abel's forehead, but he resisted the old man's magic.

"Mind control magic... *Dark* magic... Extremely rare these days, ya know. If this temple strengthens it, then you must be a priest of the God of Darkness in the Pantheon of Seven."

Abel had seen right through him.

"Since you know that much...you're no ordinary adventurer."

"I'm just a B-rank with a hatred for mind control magic!"

Abel finally clambered to his feet. His face remained pale and large beads of sweat still glistened on his forehead, but he had broken through the spell's effect thanks to the necklace of tranquility he always wore. It allowed its wearer to recover from even the most powerful status ailments and mind control magic in a matter of seconds, but the fact that overcoming the magic had taken Abel so long proved the power of the white-haired old man's dark magic.

"Damn you...! But your companion has fallen into my hands, and I'll have him fight you. Now, obey me!"

"I refuse," Ryo said, standing.

"*What?*"

The white-haired old man and Abel exclaimed in unison—the former because he was worried that his magic had failed and the latter because he was dumbfounded by Ryo's inexplicable strength.

"Ryo, you're okay... But how?!"

"Something that doesn't work on you definitely won't work on me, Abel!"

"That doesn't make any sense."

The reason it didn't work on Abel was thanks to the national treasure-level item he wore. But why hadn't the dark magic affected Ryo?

"Sera told me herself that I have something that exorcises evil. Ergo, the Slave spell must be some kind of evil magic. That's why it doesn't work on me!" Ryo oozed with confidence.

Abel had no idea how he could be so confident. But...he was.

"Damn it. Hurry up and call for more aid!" the old man shouted at the bald men watching from the entrance. They quickly opened the stone door and ran out to do his bidding. The door remained open, even after reinforcements arrived.

"What will you do against all of us now? Hand over the magic sword and I'll spare your life," the white-haired old man offered.

About thirty more people entered the temple. Such offers, backed by military force, were rarely more than a form of intimidation.

"No matter how many of you there are, it's not gonna change anything. I'll send you all to hell, so bring it on!" Abel yelled with all his might.

He made such an imposing sight that even Ryo was impressed.

"All right, Ryo, your turn to shine. Do it."

"The audacity, Abel..." Ryo regretted being impressed.

But then, something strange happened. The entrance to the temple suddenly turned jet-black. A square stood there now, five meters high and four meters wide. Ryo was the only one who'd noticed it.

If there had been any survivors of the Central University's research team here, they would have pointed out that it was what President Clive Staples had named "The Gate." If there had been anyone from the Hero's party here, they would have recognized it as the same portal that had appeared near their artificial altar, from which...

"Heh heh heh. 'Tis mine, at long last. I've only ever received a weak response, so I was never able to pinpoint the exact location. But...I see. A temple carved into a mountain with a door made of stone. Now, where's the sacred jewel..."

From the gate emerged the akuma Leonore, with horns and a thin black tail.

Leonore's loud monologue drew the attention of the nearly forty individuals present. Unperturbed by her impromptu audience, she walked toward the back of the temple. While searching for her target, she discovered something else.

"Hm? Hmmm? Could it be...Ryo? It *is* Ryo! Such an unusual place for a reunion."

"You are imagining things. I am not who you think I am."

"No, I don't believe I am, and I do believe you are."

Her expression was that of a predator happy to have found its prey.

While they conversed, she found the orb enshrined in the very depths of the shrine. She approached with a speed that could almost be mistaken for teleportation.

"Yes, yes, quite the artifact. 'Tis mine now."

She held up her right hand, and the sacred jewel disappeared in an instant.

That was when the old man and his lackeys finally sprang into action.

"Who in blazes are you?"

"What did you do to the ball?"

"Are you one of them?!"

Leonore strode away, ignoring all the questions aimed at her. And then she chanted.

"*Stalagmite.*"

Countless stone pillars appeared around her and pierced the men's throats with precision. In just a few seconds, more than thirty people, including their initial captors with shaved heads, turned into silent corpses. Now, apart from her, Ryo, and Abel, the only ones standing in the temple were the white-haired old man and the six men in black robes.

The old man had been chanting something in a low voice for some time. He finally finished and glared at her. Instantly, thin black smoke enveloped Leonore.

"Hmm, dark magic. But weak. Unable to control even a fly."

With a wave of her hand, she dissipated the black smoke. Just like that.

"Come to think of it, dark magicians are supposedly rare these days... And *they* want one as a sample. You'll do just fine in that regard. I don't need the others. *Stalagmite*."

Once again, sharp stone pillars pierced the throats of the six black-robed men. After that, a stone struck pebble struck the old man's stomach, knocking him unconscious.

"I think I've dallied long enough, Ryo. My apologies. Time to fight."

A smile appeared on Leonore's face as she spoke. It was so intense the only word to describe it was "gruesome."



"I was afraid of this..." Ryo sighed deeply.

"You should have anticipated our showdown. Doesn't the thrill of battle events make you feel glad to be alive?" Leonore said, delighted.

"No, I think that's a misunderstanding on your part..." Ryo replied, displeased.

"Uh, Ryo?" Abel finally spoke.

"Abel, don't you dare try to challenge that thing. Remember the one who took Roman to school? Well, *that's* her. Leonore."

Abel was speechless. He didn't think he'd meet a being like her *now*. Was this good timing or bad?

Roman would surpass him. He'd known that the moment they'd clashed swords. The fact that she'd "taken him to school" meant she'd probably do the same to him too. For God's sake, she'd been shooting stone icicles at her opponent this whole time. Not a single one of them had even seen the projectiles coming either.

"Then 'tis safe for me to assume that the Hero has placed himself under your tutelage, Ryo? Excellent. I need him to grow stronger, into someone befitting his status." Leonore nodded happily.

"Now, tell me about that swordsman. Is he an acquaintance of yours, Ryo?" she asked, staring at Abel. "I assumed so, which is why I've kept him alive."

"Yes. But laying a hand on him is against the rules. If Abel is hurt, *I* will die, and then you'll never be able to fight me again."

His words shocked Leonore.

"N-No!" she said, panicking. "You can't mean that! I refuse to believe it!"

I can use this to negotiate, since ensuring Abel's safety is my biggest concern right now...

So Ryo tried to do just that.

"I promised a certain woman that I'd bring him back safely to her. And if I can't keep it, I'll offer my life in exchange. That's why he can't get hurt, Leonore."

"Hm... But hurting him will get me what I want. It'll send you into a blind rage, Ryo. It will bring out the real you, and *that* is who I wish to fight." She propped her chin on her hand and mulled the

situation over.

"Leonore, do you want to fight me with everything you have or do you just want to beat me?"

"Aren't those the same thing?"

"No, they're completely different. If Abel's hurt, my life is forfeit, regardless of what happens. Our fight will be pointless no matter how much power I use, right? But if you promise not to lay a hand on him, *I* promise to fight you with all my might."

"You swear...to keep your word?" She narrowed her eyes.

"I do. What about you, Leonore?"

"Very well. That man... Abel, is it? I swear I will not lay my hands on him."

Phew. Abel's safe now. I know it's just a verbal promise, but I have a feeling Leonore isn't the type to break any kind of promise she makes.

"And there we have it, Abel. Please watch us from a distance. Do not under any circumstances intervene. Even if it seems like I'm on the verge of death. Is that understood? Promise me you'll stay out of this."

"Okay. I promise," Abel said, cowed by his friend's ominous speech.

"Leonore, before we start, there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Hm? I'll answer you if I can. Go on."

"The sphere you took earlier—is it the cause of Lune's Great Tidal Bore?" Ryo didn't beat around the bush.

"Ahhh, you *would* ask such a complicated question. We call that a 'sacred jewel,' but yes, that's one of its functions. But if you're asking whether the event occurred naturally, I have to tell you that's not the case. 'Tis hard to explain. I'd say its purpose is eliminating waste. Mn, perhaps *culling* is a better word... Something like that."

Her answer was incredibly vague, but the word "culling" seemed to align with Ryo's hypothesis.

"In other words, this sacred jewel connects a location where the monster population has become overpopulated with Lune's dungeon. The monsters move from their original location to the dungeon through this passage. When they overflow out of the dungeon, the

humans hunt them down in the phenomenon known as a Great Tidal Bore. Do I have the gist of things?"

"For the most part, yes. Well done. Whether in Lune or elsewhere, the phenomenon only summons a number of monsters the people there can handle. We try our best to adjust the numbers accordingly, although this year's was a bit higher than usual..."

"Does that include the mayhem in the royal capital a few weeks ago too?"

"No, that wasn't us." Leonore frowned for the first time. "While a sacred jewel *was* used...that was something else. I can't say more." Apparently, even akuma had their own hierarchies and interpersonal relationships to deal with, just like mankind.

"That brings me to another point. There were devils in Layer 40 of Lune's dungeon during the Great Tidal Bore. Can I assume your people were involved with that too, or...?"

"Did you say forty? Hm... As far as I'm aware, our apparatus is installed on the eleventh floor. Mayhap 'twas the devils' doing. Unlike the goblins and such dispatched, they're relatively intelligent. So they might or might not have acted on their own. I wouldn't know."

"I see." Ryo was satisfied for now since he'd learned what he wanted to know. "Thank you very much for answering my questions. Now it's time for me to hold up my end of the bargain. Are you ready to fight?"

"You are *most* welcome! And I'm more than ready!"

Smiling fiercely, Leonore pulled a sword out of nowhere.

That's definitely infinite storage or inventory or what have you, the kind of storage that uses subspace in light novels... I'm so jealous!

Even as the thought flashed through his mind, Ryo pulled Murasame from the belt at his waist and generated its ice blade.

"Then let's begin, shall we?"

Leonore's words marked the start of their battle.

"*Hellfire.*"

A thick pillar of flame rushed from Leonore toward Ryo.

"*Laminated 10-Layer Ice Wall.*"

A wall of ice appeared in front of Ryo, its layers multiplying as the flames raced in his direction. When flames crashed into ice, the collision produced mist instead of the usual sparks of annihilation—perhaps because of the sheer power of Leonore's magic. The vapor filled the air, obscuring Ryo's view.

She used Hellfire last time too. No matter how powerful it is, she should know by now that it isn't powerful enough to break through my layers of ice. So that means...it's a diversion! Her real attack will come from my blind spot, either behind or above.

At that moment, Ryo jumped to the left, did a full spin, and landed with one knee on the ground. Just as he'd expected, Leonore leaped at the spot where he'd been with her sword in hand.

"*Stalagmite.*"

"*Icicle Lance.*"

Ryo countered the sharp cone of stone, fired at point-blank range, with a flurry of ice spears. Of course, Leonore hadn't actually expected this attack to land. It was another feint!

She rushed him at the speed of sound, closing the gap in an instant, and swung her sword. Twice, then thrice, their blades clanged as they found themselves in a deadlock. That was exactly what Leonore had wanted.

"*Flame Spear Barrage.*"

Ryo felt a sudden pressure on his sword and then found himself blasted backward unceremoniously. Leonore had known that any distance between them would allow Ryo to counter her magic, so she'd fired an attack spell from her weapon instead. Even Ryo, who had trained his magic generation speed, couldn't intercept a spell fired from *that* close.

He slammed into the wall behind him.

"Ngah!"

He coughed up both blood and spit. He'd counterattacked before crashing into the wall, creating sixteen Icicle Lances that rocketed toward Leonore from the ceiling. Despite the attack coming from her blind spot, she handled it easily.

Ryo had, of course, expected as much. He'd just wanted to keep the distance between them. Now...

Abrasive Jet 256.

Two hundred fifty-six streams of water surrounded her.

"About time!"

Her savage smile deepened at the sight.

"*Wind Talon Dance.*"

Countless Air Slashes started whirling around Leonore. They smashed into Ryo's streams of water, creating 256 points of annihilation. All of his Abrasive Jets vanished.

Once upon a time, Hasan, the leader of the Sect of Assassins, had cloaked himself in a spiral of pebbles and vanquished Ryo's Abrasive Jets. Leonore's defense seemed like the air version of that spell. The rationale behind it was the same. Either way, his trump card had been soundly defeated.

And yet, Ryo wasn't particularly shocked. This time, even his Abrasive Jets had been a diversion to buy him time to mend his wounds. He knew her point-blank magical attack and his collision against the wall had left him with internal injuries, so if he didn't treat them, there was no way he'd be able to continue fighting. He didn't think he could take on someone of Leonore's caliber injured. He wasn't that conceited.

With the time he'd bought himself time using his Abrasive Jets, he drank a special potion and successfully mended himself.

"As if I would allow that spell to cut me into pieces *twice*," Leonore said, scoffing. She looked smug.

"Ah, yes, an attack working more than a single time would be too easy," Ryo replied, sighing deeply.

He had long since accepted that the power of her magic outclassed his. So if he couldn't beat her on strength alone, his only option was technique. But what did that mean in the context of magic? Ideas. He'd thought to cut her into pieces using 256 streams of water, but Leonore could still use her overwhelming force to counteract his technique.

"Ugh, this is so frustrating," Ryo said, truly exasperated to find himself surpassed on power and unable to counter with better technique.

He'd been mulling over his 256 water jets ever since Hasan had negated the spell, but Ryo hadn't yet come up with anything. There had been moments when he'd felt an idea surfacing, but nothing had ever quite reached the surface. And right now, he was in the middle of a battle. Needless to say, his opponent definitely wouldn't wait for him to come up with one.

"'Tis my turn now! *Blazing Spear.*"

"*Jamming. Laminated 10-Layer Ice Wall.*"

Thin, fiery spears shot from Leonore's hand, penetrating the layers of Ryo's ice wall with ease. He dodged those projectiles by the skin of his teeth.

"I wasn't fast enough. Is it really that hard to learn from example? I've practiced so much since then, but...Hasan was truly incredible," Ryo muttered to himself. He regretted his failure with Jamming.

Hasan-i Sabbah, the leader of the Sect of Assassins, had used the spell. It involved mixing your own magic with the magic your opponent was casting, thereby blocking the generation itself. While the method was simple to understand, in reality, it required incredible precision and extraordinary generation speed to actually execute.

Even Ryo had failed to do so, meaning using it in actual combat was another matter entirely. However, if you could master it...you could seal your opponent's magic!

"You attempted something else before you created that wall of ice, didn't you?" She smirked at him, guessing correctly.

"Why, whatever are you referring to?" Ryo played dumb.

"Geh heh heh. Are you going to do something to entertain me?" Leonore cackled devilishly. She really was enjoying herself. *"Blazing Spear,"* she chanted.

"*Jamming. Laminated 10-Layer Ice Wall.*"

Thin, fiery spears shot from her hand again. And once more, their high piercing power meant they tore through his layers of ice easily. For a second time, Ryo dodged them. But...

"They're weaker. Interesting. What did you do, Ryo?" she asked, smiling thinly.

"N-Nothing. Nothing at all." He played dumb again.

I need to sense her magic faster... Trying to follow it with my eyes takes too much time. In that case...maybe sonar will be faster? Passive Sonar.

He had cut off Passive Sonar in order to focus on Jamming, but now, he reactivated it. And then...he closed his eyes.

"Wha—" The sight stunned Leonore. For a moment, anger suffused her face before she quickly suppressed the emotion and regained control of herself. "You dare insult me by closing your eyes? I knew it. You *are* attempting something you haven't done before. Fine. Challenge accepted!"

"*Blazing Spear,*" Leonore chanted for a third time.

"*Jamming. Laminated 10-Layer Ice Wall.*"

Her flame spear dispersed before fully gaining form.

"Impossible!" She was shocked.

"Heh heh heh." Ryo grinned. "I did it. I made Jamming work."

"Again! *Blazing Spear.*"

"*Jamming.*"

This time, he didn't bother even raising his ice wall. Once more, Leonore's flame spear dispersed without fully gaining form.

"What in the hell have you done?"

Eyes wide, she looked between her vanished flame spear and Ryo. She, of course, understood that Ryo had done something to prevent her spell from generating completely. But she didn't understand *how*.

"Ryo, what did you do?!" she screeched.

"Um, well, I can't say..."

When she asked him so aggressively, he dropped his smug expression and averted his gaze. He didn't want to show her his hand yet.

"Is that right?! Then I'll *force* you to tell me!"

"Just don't kill me, please. If you do, you'll never know!"

"Death is no hurdle to me, Ryo! All I have to do is crack open your skull and absorb the knowledge directly through magic!"

"Is that actually possible...?"

Leonore was obviously willing to go to any lengths to discover

why her spell had disappeared, putting a quick end to Ryo's negotiations for his life.

She raised her sword overhead.

Ryo held Murasame in the *seigan* stance, pointing the blade toward her eyes.

"*Blazing Spear.*"

"*Jamming.*"

It was her signature surprise attack spell, yet, for the third time, her flame spear scattered without fully gaining form.

"Gah!" Leonore screamed in frustration.

"Heh heh heh." Ryo smiled broadly.

This might have been the first time he surpassed her in magic.

Klang.

Ryo deflected the downward blow from Leonore's sonic leap. He brimmed with confidence, elated by the knowledge that his skill had leveled up. That was why he'd been able to parry her so smoothly.

"*Barrage.*"

"*Jam...*"

She cast the spell at point-blank range, making it impossible for Ryo to get off Jamming in time. Ryo flew backward, sword and all.

"Ngh!"

He smacked into the wall again.

Leonore didn't stop there. She hit him with a follow-up strike.

"*10-Layer Ice Wall.*"

"Curse you! *Fivefold Blazing Spear.*"

He couldn't block even one of those fire spears with his layered ice walls, so there was no way a mere ten-layered ice wall could block *five*.



He narrowly dodged the one aimed at his throat.

He deflected the one aimed at his chest with Murasame.

His robe repelled the one aimed at his right shoulder.

But the one aimed at his stomach deeply pierced through him.

And the one aimed at his left leg plunged through his thigh.

"Hngh!" he grunted.

"Geh heh heh. What a fine picture you make, Ryo."

As she slowly approached, Leonore laughed devilishly. Anyone but Ryo might have even described that smile as seductive.

"It's not...over...yet..." he said through gritted teeth.

"Oh ho, still some fight left in you, eh? You are truly one of a kind, Ryo." She looked impressed and her smile changed from seductive to terrifying.

"You can't move with that leg, you know. Are you planning to dodge both my sword and magic with only your torso?"

"I still have my magic! *Water Jet Thruster.*"

His supersonic dive closed the distance between them instantly. *Klang, klang, klang.*

He struck back-to-back-to-back. It was a hit-and-run tactic, his body moving with each attack. He kept his right foot planted on the ground while his injured left leg, completely bent at the knee, hovered in the air. A fine mist scattered in his wake.

Leonore instantly understood. "Jumping while blasting water?" Though surprised, she still smirked. "Superb! I knew you wouldn't disappoint me, Ryo! However..."

During his final attack, she slammed her sword into Murasame.

"Your blows are far too delicate!"

Ryo caught the strike with Murasame, but *didn't* lose his balance. The moment his blade skidded off hers, he shifted his center of gravity and used Water Jet Thruster and the momentum of his parry to execute a precise circle, as if he were doing Tai Chi. His spin brought him around to her back, which he slashed.

"Huh?"

His attack should have landed, but he didn't feel his weapon collide with anything. Had he attacked an afterimage? A clone? He didn't know, but it wasn't the real thing!

He whipped around, lightning-fast—

And found the real Leonore right there. Then he realized it was too late. Still clutching Murasame in his right hand, Ryo raised his left arm to protect his neck.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Leonore's sword slice his left arm off at the elbow... He instinctively swung his sword and watched Murasame effortlessly carve Leonore's head off her body.

The battle came to an abrupt end.

"I need a breather," Ryo said deliberately.

He had decapitated Leonore. As for his own injuries, he'd suffered serious damage to his abdomen and left leg, and his left arm was severed at the forearm.

First, he coated the blood vessels in his abdomen and left leg with ice to stop the bleeding and froze the knob of flesh on his left arm to stop the bleeding there and protect it against the elements. He also froze the part of his left arm that had been sliced off.

Having done all of this, Ryo could finally calm down and think. Composing himself, however, meant acknowledging the pain and limitations of having his left arm severed.

He could no longer wield his sword properly. Murasame was a two-handed Japanese sword. While some highly specialized sword techniques—or even *iaido*—could be executed with one hand, Japanese swords were fundamentally designed to be wielded with both hands, making them extremely difficult to wield one-handed.

At the martial arts hall where Ryo had learned kendo, one of the more seasoned students there had used only his left arm to wield his sword because he'd lost his right arm from the elbow down at a young age. After much training, the young man had surpassed swordsmen who'd used both hands... Even so, wielding a Japanese sword with one hand was no easy feat. Moreover, Japanese swords were even more difficult to use than bamboo swords... And Ryo was most definitely *not* Tange Zazen.

If there were a high-ranking cleric of Rihya's ability around, they could use the spell known as Extra Heal to regenerate his missing body part. The ordinary Heal couldn't repair such severe wounds,

however... Unfortunately, there was no such person here.

Given how far from the royal capital and other large cities they were, expecting to find a high priest to cast an Extra Heal on him within the next day was unrealistic. Ryo remembered Lyn saying something in Redpost about the twenty-four-hour window a healer had to regenerate severed limbs.

He had made several potions in the capital with the genius alchemist, Baron Kenneth Hayward, but even a man of Kenneth's talent couldn't create an elixir capable of restoring a missing body part. It was a testament to clerics' extraordinary magic, especially Extra Heal.

"Reattaching a severed arm..." Ryo muttered. Just saying the words out loud plunged him into the depths of despair.

While Ryo brooded, Leonore's headless torso sat upright.

All he could do was stare at the scene in a daze as her body stood, walked over to her severed head, and placed it on her neck.

"Damn and blast, it won't stick."

Finally, her head spoke.

"Ahhh... I see now. Your sword is the Fairy King's, which complicates the repair greatly, eh?"

"You're alive? Well, good for you, I guess," Ryo managed to say.

"Hmmm. Eh, it's fine. I'm sure I'll figure something out when I return. You win this time, Ryo."

"You chopped my arm off!"

"Yes, but you slashed my *head* off. Any way you look at it, 'tis my loss."

"But you're not dead... And here I am racking my brain about what to do with my arm."

"How do I say... Consider it an inherent trait unique to my race. Not much I can do about how our bodies work, eh? Oh, I almost forgot. I must take that dark magician back with me."

Leonore, holding her own head under her left arm, lifted the white-haired old man onto her right shoulder.

"Until next we meet, Ryo. And when that time comes, *I* will emerge the victor! I enjoyed our bout."

Then she disappeared into the Gate, cackling like a maniac.

Abel walked over to him.

"Ryo, I'd ask if you're all right, but that's obviously not the case, huh?" Even he grimaced at the state of his left arm.

"Correct. I think the first thing we should do is get out of here."

Holding his left arm with his right, Ryo did. Despite the holes in his stomach and left thigh, he honestly didn't feel much pain—probably because the persistent throbbing pain in his left arm overpowered his other two wounds. On the walk outside, he started thinking about the process of reattaching his left arm. It dismayed him greatly, but there was no other realistic solution.

I need to reconnect the bones, muscles, nerves, blood vessels, and skin. Of these, the most difficult are the nerves and blood vessels...I think. Normally, this would require microsurgery because the blood vessels are so thin. Of course, I've never done it... If this were Earth, I'd be helpless, but lucky for me, magic exists here on Phi. And even luckier, I'm a water magician.

Outside the cave, he sat down on what looked like a bench.

"Ryo, a high-ranking cleric should be able to fix you right up with Extra Heal, but..." Abel couldn't finish. Grief twisted his face. He knew they wouldn't reach a high-ranking priest in time for them to reattach his arm.

"I know. Has to be done within twenty-four hours, right? We just don't have the time. I'm thinking of doing it myself."

"Wait, can you actually do that?"

Having witnessed all the extraordinary things Ryo had done so far, Abel couldn't eliminate the possibility.

"Maybe. Naturally, I've never attempted the feat before."

"Yeah, true." Abel's slumped in dejection.

"*But* I came up with a method and I want you to help me, Abel."

"Like you even have to ask! Just tell me what I need to do!"

Reenergized, he practically tackled Ryo in his eagerness to help. Ryo took out a potion from his leather bag.

"This is the highest quality potion Kenneth made for me. Of course, it won't regenerate missing body parts, but its restorative power is tremendous. I'll use a few water magic tricks to get it to an

effective state. When I give the signal, I want you to pour half of the liquid where I tell you to."

"Got it."

Abel took the bottle from him.

"Let's get started, then," Ryo said, and grasped his frozen left forearm with his right hand, thawing it. Of course, the limb wasn't wet, since the ice was magical. He thawed the wound on his left arm as well and tried to attach the severed forearm back in its original location.

He let out an involuntary cry of pain. No wonder, because the nerves were exposed, and he obviously hadn't used anesthesia on himself. For now, he had no choice but to get through this on sheer determination alone. Just grin and bear it!

First, he connected the bone. The fact that she had sliced right through the bone was a testament to Leonore's skill with a sword.

"Cutting bone is incredibly difficult. She really is incredible."

Ryo was strangely impressed by her handiwork. Still, he couldn't escape from reality. The surface of the cut looked clean, and the angle made it easy to connect the two parts. He placed the bones of his stump and severed arm together, then bound them with a film of ice.

He was grateful that he could use his water magic to more accurately understand his body parts' condition than he could with the naked eye thanks to the water in his body.

Next came the muscles, but...frankly, there was nothing he could do. He couldn't connect each individual muscle fiber, so he hoped they would fuse back together on their own... He'd have to leave that job to the potions.

Then came the first big hurdle: joining the many nerves that ran up the length of his arm. If something went wrong, his fingers might cease working, so he had to be careful...

Normally, one would use nerve sutures or nerve regeneration induction tubes to join nerves, but Ryo had no such skills nor induction tubes on hand here. Either way, he joined the nerve endings of both parts of his arm and surrounded each one with a

film of ice to fix them in place. He'd have to put that problem on the back burner as well.

For now, he needed to ensure the correct nerves were reattached to each other... It would be terrible if he misaligned the joint and reattached nerves to *different* nerves. The bones had fit snugly together, however, so the arm and hand were in the correct positions. As long as the nerves were close to each other and of the same thickness, there was no way to screw it up.

This was where water magic came into play. If it was inside the body, it was probably made mostly of water. Ryo's detection was good down to the micrometer, so he probably wouldn't make any mistakes during the reattachment process.

The final hurdle? Vascular anastomosis. Advanced anastomosis techniques would have been required if he were back on Earth. Reattaching blood vessels one by one with a needle and thread would have been an incredibly painstaking task, but the perfect anastomosis technique, such as Alexis Carrel's, could have reconnected the blood vessels without any leakage.

But this was Phi. Ryo reconnected the blood vessels not with needles and thread, but ice. He attached a film of ice to the inner and outer walls of the blood vessels to be connected. Since blood flows through the inside of the inner wall, it wouldn't leak. Compared to surgery on Earth, Ryo's method took far less time and wasn't difficult—at least for a water magician of Ryo's level!

That was how he connected the bones, muscles, nerves, and blood vessels using ice.

"Abel, it's your turn."

"Oookay...but the skin isn't attached yet, is it?"

"Pour the potion little by little through this gap in the skin. I'm going to rotate the arm slowly, so make sure you get it all around. The ice inside will allow the potion to permeate, so don't worry about that."

"No idea what you mean by that last part, but you can trust me to do my job."

Abel removed the stopper on the bottle, ready for Ryo's signal.

"All right, here we go," Ryo said, gripping the end of his left arm

with his right and slowly rotating his entire left arm. Abel steadily poured the potion in time with his movement. Light glowed inside his arm wherever the liquid struck. A fantastical sight.

Ryo repeated this process about four times, observing the whole time. For some reason, he felt various parts adhering together inside his arm. After waiting for a while, the sensation disappeared. Then, gently, very gently, he tried wiggling his fingers.

"I can move my fingers..." Ryo whispered.

"Whoooa!" Abel was overjoyed.

All five fingers moved properly. His wrist seemed fine too.

"Now, let's close the skin."

He returned the skin, which he'd incised to make it easier for the potion to enter his arm, to its original shape. And finally, he remembered the wounds on his abdomen and left leg. He didn't pour the remaining potion on himself but drank it all. That way, not only would it reconnect the skin on his arm but also heal his other wounds. The glow appeared again, then disappeared. Ryo's body was back to normal.

"I'm so glad..." he sighed, relieved to the depths of his soul.

Not knowing what to say, Abel slapped Ryo on the shoulder repeatedly as he congratulated him.

◆

Only a little farther until they reached Lune.

"Another uneventful journey..."

"Are you being serious right now?" Abel said, walking next to Ryo. He'd overheard Ryo's mutter. "How the hell can you say something like that after your left arm was *cut off*? No offense, but you're nuts." Abel genuinely believed what he was saying.

"To be clear, I meant there were no classic light-novel events like bandits attacking or rescuing a young noblewoman."

"Yup. As usual, I have no idea what you're talking about, Ryo."

"Oh, come on, you know how it goes. You're walking down the road minding your own business when you're suddenly attacked by bandits. Then you fight back and nab all the treasure they've been

hoarding. Or you rescue a noblewoman from monsters or bandits, and the noblewoman's family showers tons of favors on you as thanks. Doesn't that sort of thing happen pretty often?" Ryo asked passionately.

"No," Abel said bluntly. "Not at all, actually."

◆

"Hey, Ryo."

"What is it? Are you about to bring up money again?"

"No, you jerk. When have I ever tried to borrow money from you?!" Abel had to take a moment to cool his temper. "This is serious business. I was wondering why you didn't freeze Leonore when you were fighting her."

"Ohhh..."

At his question, Ryo thought back to his battle with the akuma and glanced at his left hand. There was a faint scar where she'd cut off his arm.

"Simply put, I can't just freeze anyone."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yes. I don't know if it has to do with a person's mana or something else, but I can't freeze powerful magicians. At least, not yet."

"Not yet?"

"Well, no one knows what the future holds, right? Also, Sera let me try to freeze her, but I couldn't. She's an elf, though, so chances are good something else was the reason."

"Yeah, Spirit Protection," Abel muttered, using his royal knowledge.

"Oh, so you know too! She said the same thing. I also had the chance to test out my freezing technique on Arthur from the Bureau a while ago, and it didn't work on him either."

By Arthur, Ryo meant Arthur Berasus, special advisor to the Bureau of Royal Magicians. He was one of the Kingdom's leaders who had traveled to Stone Lake at Ryo's request.

"You're experimenting left and right, huh? Even sacrificing Arthur

on your quest for knowledge."

"What a rude way to phrase it, Abel! All he did was help me develop my magic. Is wanting to know my full potential so wrong? Anyway, that's why I didn't try freezing Leonore. It likely wouldn't have worked." Ryo frowned as if considering how easy a solution that would have been.

"You *do* know that it shouldn't be possible to freeze people at all, right?"

"I do... Arthur said the same thing, actually... Besides, it's not like I could do it right off the jump either. When I lived in the Forest of Rondo, I tried on monsters first, but my magic just bounced off their bodies. After lots of grueling practice, I succeeded."

"That's, uh, pretty crazy..."

"Effort is the strongest tool," Ryo declared, his expression strangely smug.

"Oh, I just remembered something I've been meaning to ask you too, Abel."

"Sure, go ahead."

"Darn it, you were supposed to say, 'What? This about money again?' You still have a long way to go, hm?"

"What do you want from me, man?!"

"A talent for comedy, of course..."

"How about I make it so you can never laugh again instead, Ryo?" he said, casually brushing his hand against his sword.

"I'm joking, you know that. You should know by now not to take me seriously, jeez..."

Then Ryo deliberately burst out laughing. The speed at which Abel unsheathed his sword was impressive, and Ryo knew that he was at a disadvantage at such a close distance... He was always thinking about combat. He'd become a meathead at this point...which meant even his brain might have become muscle.

"My question has to do with Combat and Sword Skills."

Combat Skills were special ones acquired by swordsmen, spearmen, and other people who fought using weapons. From Ryo's perspective, they looked different from the ordinary techniques you

gained through hard training. They almost resembled magic.

"Are Combat Skills a type of magic for physical jobs?" Ryo asked.

Abel's eyes widened.

"There actually are researchers who support that theory. In reality, though, I don't really know."

"Even though you use them?"

"Yeah. Think about it like this—we don't really know why magic works the way it does, right?"

"True." Ryo thought about the various spells magicians, including himself, used.

"Some folks can cast spells like you without using incantations while others need them. Monsters can use magic too. Some can even use magical nullification," he added, remembering the battle between a behemoth and wyverns.

"Right, incantations! Besides myself, Sera, and that darned fire magician I'd rather forget even existed, everyone chants them. Actually, that's not completely accurate. I just remembered the grandma in a village that worshipped the Earth Mother Goddess. She didn't use incantations either and told Eto, who was with us at the time, that people who serve the Earth Mother Goddess also don't. Well, more accurately, there were never any incantations to begin with. At some point in time, though, they became commonplace.'"

"Oh, yeah? I had no idea... That reminds me. I learned way back that Combat Skills first appeared in the Central Provinces a century ago. Maybe those two things are related...?"

"Then there's the Hero's party..." Ryo said, thinking back to their fight in the underground tomb. "They didn't use incantations either."

"You're right. What was the term they used again? 'Trigger word'?"

Ryo suddenly looked up. "That! That's it!"

"Uhhh, what're you talking about?" Abel said, startled.

"That phrase, 'trigger word'!"

"You mean words that activate magic...?"

"I don't mean the words themselves, but the word 'trigger' itself! Do you know what it means?"

Abel, not quite understanding Ryo's excitement, tilted his head. "I

mean, does it matter? A trigger word is a trigger word...?"

On Earth, a trigger is the part of a gun the user pulls to fire it. It made symbolic sense why the same word was used to describe the final word that activated a spell, but why *that* word specifically? After all, guns didn't exist in the Central Provinces yet, did they? Only recently had the region started secretly producing "Black Dust," which was the equivalent of Earth's black powder.

The explosion that Ryo and Gekko's merchant caravan encountered in Llandewi had likely been caused by gunpowder or a similar substance. Even though Black Dust was such a recent innovation, the word "trigger" had been in common parlance for some time. Ryo found the whole thing a bit odd. Then he remembered one more relevant fact.

"Bullet Rain! The most advanced wind magic spell or whatever it's called, the one with the ridiculously long incantation."

"Yup, right on both counts."

"Exactly! Do you know what the word 'bullet' means?"

"Do I need to? 'Cuz all I know about Bullet Rain is that it's Bullet Rain..."

On Earth, a bullet is a projectile fired from a firearm. So "Bullet Rain" aptly referred to a hail of bullets. But why, in a world where bullets did not yet exist, did a spell called Bullet Rain exist?

"There truly are so many things I just don't understand here," Ryo remarked with a frown.

"Weeell, not to rain on your parade, but I can only give you answers about Combat Skills."

"Thanks for trying your best, Abel. I suppose I'll have to ask others about the rest."

"Why do I get the feeling that you're being condescending? Whatever. I just won't worry about it. Anyway, it's said that Combat Skills spread throughout the Central Provinces roughly a hundred years ago, although none of the stories mention who used them first," Abel said.

"Only a hundred years ago? That's fairly recent, no?"

"I personally wouldn't consider a century 'recent,' but to each his own, I guess."

"I mean, that span of time is half Sera's age..."

"Sure," Abel said, sighing, "if you're using an elf's lifespan as your frame of reference, you'd probably consider *most* things recent. As I was saying, researchers still haven't decided whether Combat Skills count as magic, so nobody knows."

"I see... I wonder if they can be used in areas where magic has been nullified. Don't you think that'd be nice?"

Abel froze. "No gonna happen, man, especially since spaces like that are rare."

"But what about battles against monsters?"

"Again, not gonna happen, since fighting a behemoth-class monster is practically impossible. Not like you'd win either, with or without Combat Skills."

The only magical nullification Abel had ever witnessed was created by a behemoth.

"When an assassin hawk evolves, it gains the ability to nullify magic."

"Whoa. Are you serious?" Abel was beyond surprised.

Ryo had experienced it firsthand during his battle with the one-eyed assassin hawk. The assassin hawk wasn't commonplace in the Central Provinces, but it was possible to encounter one. Its ability to kill you before you ever saw it made it one of the most feared creatures.

"At least the one I fought did. It was frightening."

"Damn, and you won, Ryo? Good job." Abel meant those words from the bottom of his heart. For a magician, losing their magic meant losing their life.

"All thanks to this," Ryo said, pulling Murasame from his belt to show Abel.

"That's the one you used in your fight against Leonore. An ice sword, huh? Is it just me, or is that thin blade curved? Never seen anything like it, honestly."

"Its name is Murasame. Legends laud its power. There's even a proverb: 'A blade of ice, when drawn, scatters jewels.'"

Abel was a bit put off by how lovingly Ryo was gazing at the blade in his hands. "Th-That's cool, I guess. I suppose an ice sword

is the perfect weapon for a water magician."

"Yes, apparently. My master gifted it to me when I scored my first hit against him."

"Wow. Must be pretty special, then, huh?"

Abel didn't even realize he was touching his own beloved sword as he answered.

Lune came into their view just after noon. It was March. Spring had arrived here, a city located even farther south in the southern nation of the Kingdom of Knightley.

Ryo was finally back after two months away from his home base. He had originally planned to return in about forty days, but, after his time in the Principality of Inverey, he had dropped by the Kingdom's royal capital and found himself embroiled in the turmoil there...

"It's been too long," he muttered with heartfelt emotion.

"Yup, so let's get a move on."

At Abel's urging, he continued toward Lune.

Epilogue

In the white realm, Fake Michael spent his day, as usual, overseeing several worlds.

"Dominus Ryo Mihara, you truly are a delight to watch," he said, looking at the stone tablet in his hands. "I wonder if they selected you for reincarnation because they knew how entertaining you'd be... A genuinely fascinating individual. You have interacted with many of Phi's supernatural beings... And here and there, some are beginning to notice your uniqueness... I hope you can overcome your impending trials."

He chuckled, but worry laced his tone.

"Oh? *More* unusual characters, I see... And what's this? As one destined to walk the path of Asura, you will at long last experience war... Your life will take a hectic turn, Dominus Ryo Mihara... I'm not sure if peace was ever in the cards for you. I hope you take care of yourself and live your life well..."

The Fire Magician IV: Fiona

A year had passed since the incident at Marquess Meusel's villa. Marchioness Maria Kulkova had returned to the imperial capital after living in her country estate for six months. She had been traveling between the imperial capital and her territory every six months since her husband, the marquess, was alive.

"He's not here?"

"That's right, Maria. Oscar is currently away on a job in the north."

"Unfortunate... Perhaps I should have tried to reserve him as an escort... Though I'm unsure if the adventurer's guild has a system like that."

Just like the last time she'd stayed in the imperial capital, Maria wanted to request Oscar to be her bodyguard for six months, but Eckhart, the head butler at her capital residence, had brought her information that made her request impossible.

"I asked them to contact us upon Master Oscar's return."

"Thank you. Let's hope he comes back soon. Norbert can assume the post in the meantime."

"Understood. I'm glad to see how much of a shine you've taken to young Oscar, Maria," said Norbert, the commander of her knights. He bowed respectfully and smiled.

"He's learned a great deal in the last six months alone. Isn't it fun watching someone grow?" A shadow suddenly fell over her face, ousting her happy smile. "However, the core of his heart remains frozen. I hope he meets whoever is destined to thaw it sooner rather than later."

Everyone on her staff liked the straightforward, adaptable Oscar. Above all, they liked how earnestly and seriously he tackled each of his assignments. Any decent person would never deride a hard

worker and, naturally, Maria only surrounded herself with decent people.

That afternoon, her head butler, Eckhart, brought Maria a letter along with her coffee.

"Maria, a personal letter has arrived from His Imperial Majesty."

"Hmm..." Maria nodded, reading the letter. "He's requesting my presence at the castle tomorrow morning to introduce me to Princess Fiona. Come to think of it, Her Highness's tenth birthday is soon."

◆

"A pleasure to meet you, Marchioness Kulkova. I am the eleventh daughter of King Rupert VI, Fiona Rubine Bornemisza."

"The pleasure is all mine, Your Highness. Please call me Maria."

"Thank you very much. Then please call me Fiona."

Maria and Fiona stood in the presence of Emperor Rupert VI, who nodded happily—the very picture of a doting father.

"Fiona, Maria is one of the most cultured and socially active women in the Empire. Make sure to learn as much as you can from her."

"Yes, Father. I've heard so many wonderful things about you, Maria. Thank you as well for inviting me to your prestigious salon. But...is it truly all right for a child like me to attend?"

"Fiona, you have nothing to worry about. Simply acclimate yourself to these new changes in your life little by little. Besides, you are already quite refined."

Maria's smile seemed to reassure the princess. A smile is a powerful thing in any situation.

"Queen Frederica taught me many things. She was very sophisticated and wise. But at the same time, she had the strength to wield a sword and draw a bow, making her any knight's equal."

Fiona's face lit up. "Oh, really?!" She had never heard of her deceased mother's courage or her aptitude with the blade, so the knowledge surprised and pleased her.

"Yes, because I admired her tremendously." Maria smiled,

reminiscing.

"Maria, I'd love to hear more about my mother."

"Of course, Fiona. I have so much to tell you."

Rupert watched over the pair enjoying their conversation, still looking very much the doting father. He had introduced Maria to Fiona because this scene was exactly what he'd been hoping for. Anyone would be happy to see things go their way. And, in his case, it was all the more sweet to see his beloved daughter smile.

Four days later, Fiona made her debut at Maria's salon. The gathering went smoothly, the atmosphere peaceful and calm as usual. The princess, nervous at first, had settled in comfortably by the time it was over.

Everyone else was surprised, though—especially the palace insiders. First of all, a member of the royal family was attending Maria's salon, which did not typically host nobility. Moreover, it was the youngest princess, Fiona. She wasn't even ten years old yet, so it was clear to everyone that it hadn't been her education that had secured her an invitation to the salon. In short, her presence was undoubtedly the Emperor's will. But to what aim? That was the question on everyone's minds.

The court officials, their mindsets distorted by various circumstances, never considered that Rupert had asked Maria to invite his daughter to the salon because he wanted her to talk about the girl's late mother, Frederica, or help further her education by exposing her to new ideas. They never considered the possibility that he, a father, wanted to make his daughter happy.

In the end, people see what they want to see and believe what they want to believe, often projecting their own judgments onto others. A sad reality.

◆

Two weeks after Princess Fiona's first salon appearance, her tenth birthday party was held at the palace. In the Empire, a tenth birthday party signified a young person's introduction to society.

Rather than host parties at their own mansions, many nobles preferred to attend communal debutante balls held by high-ranking nobles or the imperial family. Princess Fiona's tenth birthday party was the first ball organized by the imperial family in four years, and the only communal celebration that year among the great nobles. In other words, many noble families intended to use the occasion to debut their own children at Princess Fiona's party.

Even before Emperor Rupert and Princess Fiona, the day's main event, appeared onstage, the debutantes made their rounds across the venue. Since today was her day, instead of doing the same, Fiona had to wait for the aristocrats to come to her... Although dealing with them all would be difficult, she had no choice. She might have been the eleventh daughter, but she was still a princess.

Debutantes who were neither princesses nor children of noble families were accompanied by their parents on their social rounds. The nobles they greeted would barely remember meeting them, but they still had to be on their best behavior to maintain relationships and appearances. The world is full of many troublesome things.

"Presenting His Imperial Majesty Emperor Rupert VI and Her Imperial Highness Princess Fiona."

The audience's attention was glued to the stage at the front. There, Fiona appeared, escorted by her father, Rupert.

"She's so beautiful..."

"How very lovely..."

"What an absolute angel."

Hushed admiration swept through the crowd. That was how beautiful Fiona looked in her dress. She was only ten years old and didn't yet have the allure of an adult, but that didn't matter. With her eyes cast down slightly, she was the very picture of grace, even to nobles who'd been desensitized to beauty.

The aristocrats had believed the rumors of her constant sword wielding and complete lack of ladylike beauty... But the rumors were unfounded. She was impossibly gorgeous, like a flower blooming in the heavens, a jewel shining at the end of a rainbow, or a star glittering in the far reaches of the sky.

Fiona was stunning.

Introductions, a dance, more introductions, more dances... Round and round Fiona went on the dance floor, the smile plastered on her face as she performed her official duties. She was reaching her limit, but she'd somehow managed to endure it so far.

The climax of her birthday party that day wasn't the greetings or the dancing, however, but the presentation of her father's gift.

"I give this sword, Raven," Emperor Rupert VI said, "to my beloved daughter, Fiona."

With these words, Rupert personally handed over the jet-black sword to her. Raven was one of two legendary swords passed down in the imperial family, worn on the belts of successive emperors, including Rupert.

Once upon a time, a young Fiona had told him she wanted that sword. Surprise had filled his face—she'd only been four years old at the time. Yet he hadn't given it to her at that moment. It wasn't something to pass down arbitrarily, especially *because* he loved his daughter so much.

"You want Raven, eh? I'll lend it to you when you practice hard and learn to swing it properly," Rupert had replied—half jokingly, half serious.

That had been six years ago. Since then, his beloved daughter had chosen to swing her sword over playing house. As an imperial princess, she'd led a very busy life, but not a single day had passed without her practicing her swordsmanship. And Rupert had watched over her as both a father and an emperor.

Now the day had finally come for him to fulfill his promise. Convinced that she was now worthy to wield Raven, he presented it to her. Fiona thanked him, stumbling over her words many times. But her attention was still on Raven, and after she finished expressing her gratitude, she hugged Rupert tightly. She had finally obtained her heart's greatest desire over the last six years. Her joy was indescribable.

◆

After Emperor Rupert had given Fiona Raven, an heirloom passed down for generations in the imperial bloodline, the story spread throughout the palace. This gave rise to massive speculation.

Rumors that His Majesty planned to name Princess Fiona as his successor spread as if they were the outright truth. Rupert's first child was the twenty-two-year-old crown prince, an issue of his late Queen Frederica. Like Rupert, he used fire magic and was reputed to have impeccable insight, behavior, and personality.

But rumors had a mind of their own.

"That is the sort of gossip making the rounds lately," Hans said to Rupert in summary.

"Hm... I'm not surprised, considering how many people thrive on this nonsense. When the Empire was only a kingdom, several women ruled queens. But I think it unfair to place such a heavy burden on Fiona."

With a heavy sigh, Rupert essentially declared to Hans that he had no intention of making Fiona his successor.

"I gave her Raven," he explained, "because she's a far better match for the sword."

"Is that so?"

"Aye. I can use it too, of course. That's not the problem. It's just...I've never been able to become one with it completely. The Raven's legend says that if the sword acknowledges its owner, not only will it strike faster but also increase the wielder's speed."

"If I recall, Raven possesses both fire and wind attributes..."

"Correct. A very rare magic sword in that right. And the wind is the problem. The weapon refused to recognize me in that regard, so I could never maximize its full potential. I don't know if Fiona can succeed where I failed, but unlike me, the girl has a talent for magic."

As Rupert spoke, he seemed to be reminiscing about his late wife Frederica...

"You suspect she'll be able to use light magic just like our dearly departed queen."

"I do. Ultimately, I can't say for certain where her potential lies. The sword is my domain, not magic."

◆

With his guild commission in the north of the Empire safely completed, Oscar headed toward the imperial capital with the members of his temporary party.

"I knew it. Combat is much easier to manage with you here, Oscar," Elmer said. He was a swordsman and the leader of the party.

"Moving to the capital was the right move," said Zasha, a dual wielder.

The party of six was named "Shooting Spree."

When Oscar had been based in Hemleben in the southeastern part of the Empire, these C-class adventurers had formed a temporary party with him several times. They had even defeated the emperor tiger, said to be the nightmare of the land.

The members of Shooting Spree didn't dislike Oscar. In fact, they loved him, and Oscar himself would rather team up with them whenever he *had* to work with others. But after his move to the imperial capital to gather more information on the scarred man, they'd had fewer opportunities to work together.

Nine months ago, however, Shooting Spree had relocated to the capital due to the Great War between the Federation and the Kingdom. The Empire itself hadn't yet been affected by the ravages of the conflict, but the impact on the rest of the world had been great.

With both the Kingdom and the Federation's productive capacity crippled, they had to import many goods from the Empire. As a result, the Empire's economy had boomed. At the same time, however, refugees from both countries had flooded in, and public safety in places near the border had deteriorated.

Hemleben, where Shooting Spree had been based, had been one such imperial city affected. It was located in the southeastern part of the Empire, close to both the Federation and the Kingdom. Many upper-class people had uprooted themselves to move closer to the Empire's geographic center. Many adventurers who had been making a living also left the city, Shooting Spree's members among them. The more skilled an adventurer, the more money they made, and

these had been the first to leave town, so most who'd remained were D-rank or below.

By the time Shooting Spree had settled permanently in the capital, Oscar had been working for Marchioness Maria Kulkova as her live-in bodyguard. His work had kept him busy enough that he never showed his face at the local adventurers' guild. Of course, those escort jobs were mediated by Moritz Bachmann, the guild master, so no one had censured Oscar for being absent from the guild for a full six months.

That was how long it took for the members of Shooting Spree and Oscar to reunite. This marked their third time teaming up on a temporary basis again.

"I'm thankful for the rewards, but it's a long way back to the capital, huh?"

"Especially when monsters attack even while traveling in the north."

The twin archers Jusch and Rusch munched on abbles, a specialty of the north.

"Quit saying stuff like that or you're going to jinx—" Elmbar began.

"Aaaaah!" came a man's scream from afar.

"Seriously?" Zasha looked back and forth between the twins and Elmer.

"D-Don't blame us!"

"I-It's not our fault!"

Elmer shook his head at the twins' protests.

"I saw something that looked like a wyvern flying in the sky earlier," Oscar said.

"Seriously?" Zasha said for the second time.

"Of course, I don't know if that has anything to do with the scream we just heard..." Oscar continued.

"If it really was a wyvern, then it must be related. We might be in for some trouble." Elmer frowned, falling deep into thought. "Damn, it's going to eat away at me if we ignore this. We don't stand a chance against a wyvern, so here's the plan: We observe from afar. If anyone's still alive, we'll help after the wyvern's gone."

The remaining six nodded at Elmer's decision. Challenging the wyvern with only seven people would have been downright reckless, but abandoning any potential victims completely would feel awful. If the dead had left behind any mementos, they could at least bring them back... Elmer thought that was realistically the best compromise in this no-win situation.

The group approached the source of the scream, hiding among the bushes and watching things unfold.

"There it is," Anne, their scout, pointed out in a low voice.

Ahead of them were two overturned carriages, one of them horseless. Three men who looked like merchants and six men who seemed to be adventurers working as escorts stood nearby. Everyone was looking up at the sky. When Oscar and the members of Shooting Spree did the same, they saw a huge creature circling slowly, eating a horse.

"Yes, that's definitely a wyvern," Elmer said, both his voice and expression gloomy. He'd hoped that Oscar had made a mistake, but the sight above them dashed that hope.

"Arrows don't work on wyverns," Jusch said.

"Magic doesn't either," Rusch added.

"The adventurers are injured," said Mesalt, the healer.

"That must be the wyvern's Air Slash. Its blows are much bigger than a person's..." Elmer said bitterly.

The moment he spoke, the wyvern dive-bombed into the carriage and ascended a second later clutching a second horse in its feet. As it rose into the air, it deftly tossed the horse toward its mouth, snatched it, and began to chew.

They were speechless. This was the first time that they'd actually seen a wyvern. They were overwhelmed by its power.

All except for one.

"If we smash its head..." a voice muttered.

"One of those people could be next," Zasha managed to say. Despite the frustration in his voice, he understood that there was nothing he could do. The fact that they had to stand there watching made them all feel bitter.

"Damn it..." Elmer said.

Meanwhile...

"Um, there's something I'd like to try," Oscar said.

"Hm?" Elmer tilted his head curiously.

"If we succeed, we can escape. But if we fail, the injured wyvern will charge toward us."

The six members of Shooting Spree looked at each other upon hearing Oscar's words.

There was no denying his talent. As a swordsman, he had already surpassed Elmer, who was a professional, and all six knew he was a remarkable magician too. But even so, it was hard to imagine that he could stand up to a wyvern on his own. Wyverns were simply monsters few humans could ever expect to deal with.

Yet at some point, the party had begun to hope. Now that they thought about it, it had been the magician standing in front of them who'd dealt the final blow to the emperor tiger, the nightmare of land. Wyverns were said to be the terrors of the sky. So perhaps...

The six exchanged glances again and all nodded.

"Oscar, do it," Elmer said on behalf of all of them.

"Understood." He nodded firmly.

The next time the wyvern dive-bombed, it happened. It was likely aiming for one of the humans this time, but no one would ever know for sure.

Because, at that moment, Oscar lifted his right hand. A tiny flame shot out at lightning speed, striking the wyvern's head perfectly.

Kaboom.

The moment the flame landed, the wyvern's head exploded from the inside out, as if struck by a bunker buster. The wyvern glided through the air for a while before crashing to the ground.

None of the people in the merchant caravan moved. Right as they had made peace with the fact that one of them would definitely be the wyvern's next victim, the creature had suddenly dropped, headless, to the ground next to them. They found the situation utterly baffling.

The six members of Shooting Spree felt the same as them.

"*Huh?*" Elmer said, voicing the same thought going through all six

of their heads. What happened? They knew the wyvern's head had exploded. They knew it had happened because of Oscar's magic. But *how*? They had their answer there too: Oscar had simply used the right spell. In that case, all's well that ends well?

"No way!" Elmer shouted, unprompted. Nobody knew who he was arguing with.

A wyvern's body constantly generated a defensive membrane of air that deflected all magical and physical attacks. Did this mean then that the barrier didn't cover its head? Impossible. It was the first target people went for, especially the weak.

Many magicians had unleashed countless spells at wyverns' heads before, but no one had ever heard of someone taking it down with a single blow.

And yet that exact phenomenon had just happened right in front of their eyes.

So how exactly did people react in a situation like that? Most of the time, they dissociated.

"*Wow*," Elmer said. "The weather's fantastic today, huh?"

"It-It sure is," Zasha agreed. "The sun feels nice on my skin."

Others, like Anne, preferred to face the truth head-on. She shook her head and smacked Elmer and Zasha on the head.

"Ouch!"

"Ow!"

"Give up and face the facts," she said quietly.

Elmer and Zasha looked at each other. Then, they both nodded, looked at Oscar, and spoke.

"Well done, Oscar."

"Let's head to the carriages."

"Okay!"

◆

"Maria, thank you again for choosing me."

"Enough with the formalities."

When Oscar had returned to the imperial capital, he had found a request from Marchioness Maria Kulkova to be her bodyguard

waiting for him. The contract period was about six months, just like the last time. He had no objections, of course.

After apologizing to the members of Shooting Spree, who'd been planning to celebrate, Oscar had immediately went to the Kulkova mansion. At the party later, the twins Jusch and Rusch drank too much and started rambling drunkenly because their favorite Oscar had gone home—but that was a secret.

Although he'd come to her soon after finishing up his report to the adventurers' guild, Maria already knew about their exploits.

"Oscar, is it true that you defeated the wyvern alone?"

"Not alone. I was with everyone from Shooting Spree."

"But I heard you blew its head off with a single strike of fire magic."

She was as well-informed as always. Even he couldn't help but smile wryly. Seeing that expression made Maria happy. While she was glad to see him do well, she was more pleased by how much more expressive he'd become.

It was a softness she had never imagined from Oscar a year ago. Little by little, she felt that the frozen depths of his heart were melting. More than anything, she loved watching people grow. This affinity had only deepened after watching his progress over the past six months.

Of course, Maria understood this about her personality. The reason she'd begun hosting her salons in the first place was because it brought her joy to see people grow from their interactions with others.

"Oh, Oscar, there's someone I'd like to introduce you to. Kindly accompany me the day after tomorrow."

"Understood."

At the imperial palace, Oscar followed Maria in his formal attire, which had been commissioned as a rush job. In just one year, he had grown to over 175 centimeters, surpassing Maria's height and outgrowing last year's clothing.

But this was the Marchioness of Kulkova. It had been a trivial matter for her to summon the best tailor in the capital to make his

new clothes in time. After all, you couldn't throw on any old rags to visit the emperor's castle.

"Good to see your face again, Oscar."

"Your Majesty, I hope you have been in the best of health since we last met..."

"Stop being so bloody stiff, boy. We aren't strangers."

Oscar wondered if the other great nobles of the Empire detested formalities as much as Maria and the emperor... He was honestly mystified. In truth though, Rupert and Maria were just eccentric.

"I hear you took down a wyvern with only a single spell."

"I'm embarrassed you even know..."

"Bah, don't be. You're only sixteen, aren't you? To be so accomplished at such a young age is fantastic! Couldn't be more relieved to have someone as dependable as you on our side."

Emperor Rupert was full of praise. He had a reputation as being far more meritocratic than his predecessors. Even though the spirit of the Empire itself was essentially meritocracy, he placed an abnormal amount of importance on individual ability.

In theory, meritocracy sounds good, but in reality, it's quite difficult to execute. The task is especially difficult in a large organization. What's the challenge, you may ask? Evaluation. Like most things, it's more difficult to judge than to be judged... Usually, the evaluator is the cause of most problems, typically by shifting the criteria of the evaluation. Results will change constantly depending on who's doing the evaluation.

There isn't a single organization where the evaluator remains constant... People are always replaced, and that includes evaluators too. When that happens, problems become particularly obvious. An evaluator simply cannot conduct their evaluations in the same way as their predecessor. Everyone is human. But that only leads to the dissatisfaction of the employees *being* evaluated.

"I received a positive evaluation before."

"But I did exactly what I was told."

"What criteria is my new boss using to evaluate me?"

It's most likely impossible for a meritocracy that satisfies

everyone to exist.

But in the Empire, the emperor was the ultimate arbiter. His judgments were absolute. Paradoxically, that might have been better.

"Do a good enough job that you don't disappoint His Majesty."

Such a sentiment became a guiding principle. Wouldn't that mean pandering to the emperor? Yes, that was fine. The Empire belonged to him, after all.

Anyway, the meritocratic Rupert held a high opinion of Oscar and the knowledge pleased Maria.

"Maria, I see you brought Oscar along this time. To introduce him to Fiona, eh?"

"You're quite right. He'll also be participating in the salon, so I thought it would be nice to have him and Her Highness get acquainted first."

"A sound decision. Hm, where could she be... More than likely waving her sword in the annex right now. I'll take you to her myself."

Emperor Rupert stood.

"Y-Your Majesty, please, we can find our own way..." Maria said, flustered. Even she hadn't expected the emperor himself to lead the way.

"It's fine, it's fine. Does a father really need a reason to want to spend a little more time with his daughter?"

With a hearty laugh, Rupert strode ahead.

Maria and Oscar glanced at each other, then hurried after him.

◆

The hair on the back of Oscar's neck pricked as he stepped onto the grounds of Fiona's annex.

Something's wrong.

He didn't know what, but he felt like something strange was happening.

"Something isn't right. Come, you two."

Rupert seemed to sense the same thing and ran ahead. As emperor, he'd been through dozens of battlefields. His keen senses detected even the slightest change in the air.

They ran to the courtyard at the center of the annex, where Fiona always practiced her swordsmanship. Rupert, who raced in first, was struck speechless by what he saw: Thin tongues of fire erupted out of her entire body as she clutched the sword Raven in her right hand.

"What in the world is this?" Maria, who had caught up with him, trailed off.

Oscar frowned, surveying the scene carefully. After a moment, he nodded slightly. "That sword is controlling her mind."

"What?!"

He'd been searching for the flow of magical power and found its source in the sword Fiona held. Aside from the three of them, Fiona's attendants were also there, but none of them moved.

Soon, she began swinging her sword. She struck with wild abandon, filled with madness or ecstasy. That was no ordinary sword, however... A ten-year-old girl with a body that hadn't yet fully developed couldn't swing *that* sword so wildly without doing irreparable harm to herself.

"I have to stop this," Rupert muttered, but he couldn't find the right time to step in.

Not only was the trajectory of the sword erratic, but offensive fire magic was spewing from the weapon. If he jumped in carelessly, he would be burned.

"I'll do it," Oscar said. Without hesitation, he rushed toward the girl.

Naturally, Fiona, her mind and body under Raven's control, swung the blade at Oscar and unleashed a fire spell. Oscar deflected the magic with a Barrier, closed the gap between them almost instantaneously, dodged her swing, and rammed his fist into her solar plexus.

"Ngh!"

She let out a choked grunt, then fainted. Raven slipped from her grasp and dropped to the ground.

"Fiona!" Rupert rushed over in a panic.

"I tried to be gentle, but... I'm sorry," Oscar said.

Even though he'd had no choice, he knew no parent could stay

calm after seeing their daughter hit in front of them. Or so he thought... However, Rupert had the instincts of both a father and an emperor.

"Don't apologize. You did it so I wouldn't have to. I'm grateful to you." Rupert bowed his head while holding Fiona in his arms.

At that moment, Oscar found himself deeply impressed by the virtue of the man before him. It wasn't easy for a ruler to humble himself in the face of his subjects so easily...

The court physician was summoned and immediately arrived to treat Fiona. When he said that she was only unconscious and otherwise unharmed, Rupert, Oscar, and Maria all sighed in relief.

"Blood hell... I never thought Raven would control her like that... Did I make a mistake in handing it over to Fiona just because I believed they would be a good match?"

Oscar shook his head slightly. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, I think it's the other way around."

"Oh?"

"Raven and Her Highness are shockingly compatible, which is exactly why that happened. She was probably trying to bring out the best in the sword, and Raven, in tune with her, responded to her desire. But Her Highness might not have been accustomed to using the amount of mana required to use Raven's full power..."

"Your logic is sound. I'm well aware of how much my daughter loves to practice her swordsmanship. She won't stop unless forced, but... Come to think of it, I've never heard of her practicing her magic. It's likely because she's always been able to use fire and light magic like they are second nature. It's been this way almost since her birth." Rupert sounded convinced after hearing Oscar's theory.

And that surprised the boy in question. "Your Majesty, am I correct in assuming that Her Highness casts magic without using incantations?"

"You are. Fiona is just like you in that respect, Oscar."

"I see..." Oscar nodded slightly, coming to a conclusion. "Your Majesty, I'm sure you're aware that incantations regulate spells, ensuring they don't go beyond the users' intentions. However, magic cast without an incantation can go out of the caster's control if they

cannot regulate the magic themself."

"Hm, hm."

"I think that's what happened this time."

"In other words, unless Fiona practices magic more, she'll be unable to draw out Raven's full power."

"Yes. Put another way, if she becomes proficient in using magic and practices controlling Raven's power little by little, she'll eventually become a great swordsman *and* magician..." Oscar concluded.

"Thank you for enlightening me, Oscar. I must say, I'm impressed by your understanding of the subject of compatibility."

"My foster father taught me about a similar case that occurred long ago," Oscar said. The elder really had imparted a lot of knowledge to him.

"Maria told me everyone referred to him as 'the elder.' Was he a renowned scholar?"

"No, he was a retired baron."

"Oh ho. An imperial citizen?"

"No, the Federation. Baron Luke Rothko, former lord of Mashuu."

Rupert grew still, his expression nostalgic, but quickly recomposed himself. "So Lord Luke was your foster father, eh, Oscar..."

"Your Majesty, perhaps you knew the elder...?"

"Yes. A long time ago... In fact, a *very* long time ago, he looked after me too. He was more than just his title, you see. He was known as the most erudite folklorist in the north."

"Folklorists specialize in the study of history and folklore, don't they?"

"Correct. Lord Luke's research was thorough in both depth and breadth. His papers always made for fascinating reading. No wonder you know so much, Oscar, because you studied under him!" Rupert chuckled.

Only Maria noticed the hint of loneliness in his laughter.

"That reminds me. He died during a bandit attack. Is that right?"

"Yes..." Oscar paused, closing his eyes. After a moment, they opened wide. "They killed him right in front of me."

“What...?” Rupert could have never imagined something like that happening. He stared at the boy in shock.

“I *will* have my revenge.”

Though Oscar’s voice was quiet, the determination burning in his eyes was clear to everyone.

◆

“Maria,” Rupert said, turning toward her. “There’s something I have to ask him.”

She smiled and nodded. “Of course, Your Majesty. Don’t worry about me.”

“Forgive me.” Then Rupert turned to Oscar. “Will you teach Fiona magic?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Oscar’s confusion was unsurprising. After all, the emperor himself had just asked a mere adventurer to teach a princess magic. There were any number of palace magicians Rupert could call on instead.

“Because of your intellect, the vast knowledge you inherited from Lord Luke, and your own experiences, I believe you alone understand Fiona’s current situation. So please, I want you to teach my daughter to use magic and, ultimately, Raven, to the best of her ability. What say you?”

Rupert bowed his head.

The emperor had humbled himself not once but twice. It was beyond shocking—it was frightening.

“Your Majesty, please, you don’t have to do that! Of course, I’ll do everything I can!” Oscar said.

“Fantastic! I’m in your debt. Maria, you too, come visit Fiona whenever you want. She doesn’t have any friends her age. It would make me happy if you were someone she could talk to.”

“Yes, of course,” Maria replied with a smile.

And so, Oscar the young adventurer became Princess Fiona’s personal attendant. He was sixteen years old and she was ten.

The Fire Magician IV: Fate in Motion

"Your Majesty, I wish to consult with you regarding Lady Fiona and Oscar..." Premier Hans Kirchhoff began in Emperor Rupert's office.

"Aye, Fiona has become quite adept at using Raven. I recently watched them spar for the first time in a while. Not only has her swordsmanship improved, but her footwork has become quicker. The legends say Raven grants a master it acknowledges as worthy wind-like agility. To think it's actually true... I never experienced it myself. It's hardly surprising though, considering Oscar has been training her." Rupert sounded delighted.

Even as he spoke, his hands continued to move, signing one document after another. Of course, he wasn't signing at random. He put aside anything he had doubts about or wanted to confirm, intending to summon the respective petitioners later for discussion.

"Yes, absolutely... However, there is growing discontent among the nobles."

For the first time, Rupert stopped what he was doing and looked at Hans, who was holding a mountain of papers he'd have to sign later. All the paperwork combined with this unexpected news put him in a sour mood.

"Elaborate," Rupert said. "What exactly are they unhappy about?"

"Well, to put it simply: They find it unacceptable that someone of such low birth has a place beside Her Highness..."

"They have the gall to use his so-called status against him? Oscar is far more noble than any of their useless spawn."

"Indeed, the manners he learned from Baron Luke Rothko, may he rest in peace, and the education he gained under Lady Maria's tutelage, along with his stature and good looks, make him a rather

attractive young man."

Rupert nodded in vigorous agreement.

"It's apparent," Hans continued, "that half the nobles' carping stems from their desires to marry their sons to Lady Fiona."

"Marriage? Over my dead body. No, actually—over the corpse of every man who thinks he's good enough for my princess. He'll find himself used as a whetstone for my blade!" Rupert growled.

Hans knew from their long friendship that the emperor was more than half serious.

"Hold a moment. You said half just now, yes? What of the other half?"

"Noblewomen who want to make Oscar their husband or paramour..."

"Ahhh..." Rupert sighed and rubbed his forehead in resignation then. "Well, there's no denying he *looks* like a fine nobleman. Setting aside the matter of his daily life, he never speaks in public and the boy is far too taciturn for his own good. No matter how I look at him, I don't understand what women see in him."

"Darkness, apparently. They're attracted to it."

"Huh."

Both Hans and Rupert shook their heads.

"In any case, I detest them calling him lowborn and unworthy when he's anything but. After all, he's a magician capable of taking down a wyvern on his own. In one strike, no less. So of course I asked him to be Fiona's teacher."

"I am very much in agreement, Your Majesty."

Rupert thought for a moment. "I'm considering conferring a title on Oscar at some point."

"I thought so."

"Oh, so you knew?"

"I know how your mind works by now, sire. You're waiting until he reaches the age of majority, yes?"

"Aye. If I remember right, he just turned eighteen not too long ago."

"He did. All that's left is for him to achieve something great, preferably sooner rather than later."

"Indeed. I'll think of something."

Oscar, of course, had no idea that such a conversation was taking place in the emperor's office. For him, today was another day of magic and sword training with Princess Fiona.

"Master, I can now do what you told me I should work on yesterday."

Fiona showed him two Piercing Fires floating in her right hand.

"Your Highness... As I have said many times, please stop calling me 'Master.' Just call me Oscar."

"No, you're my master and that's that. If I address someone by their first name, *I* may get carried away and stop listening to them. Ergo, I think it's better to call you Master as a reminder to always show you respect."

Two years had passed since Oscar became Fiona's mentor, and this was a conversation they had almost every day. She listened to him in almost every other situation, but when it came to the matter of his name, she stubbornly insisted on referring to him as "Master."

"Your Highness, you will be visiting Maria this evening, yes?"

"Yes. Tonight's salon will be small, with only Berta and Ella as the other attendees. And don't forget, Master, you're joining us for dinner."

"I remember. However, the city has been particularly dangerous lately, so I've requested extra escorts."

"Because of the street slasher, hm..." Fiona muttered with a frown.

For the past month, someone had been causing trouble in the imperial capital at night. A street slasher. The villain tended to attack people walking alone, so there was little chance that Fiona and the others, accompanied by bodyguards, would be attacked. Even so, the more security, the better.

Viscountess Schondra, Berta Ilkner, and Baroness Reuter, Ella Kettler, were staying with Maria as her guests, but as an imperial princess, Fiona couldn't do the same. If she spent the night anywhere other than her home, rumors would spread... And more importantly, her father, Emperor Rupert, would not allow her to do

so. Even with Maria.

"We have preparations to make, so let's finish the afternoon's training a little early."

"Yes, Master."

◆

The salon ended peacefully, and Oscar and Fiona boarded the carriage back to the imperial castle.

"I still can't believe that Maria was thinking about founding a school," Fiona commented. That was the most surprising thing she'd learned tonight. "She wants to accept not only nobles but also merchants and commoners... Of course, it'll be built in Kulkova territory."

"Likely because there would be too many complications in the capital."

The main topic of conversation at tonight's salon had been Maria's desire to establish a school.

"She said she enjoys watching people grow to their full potential, and that includes us..."

"Well, you *have* grown remarkably, my lady."

Fiona blushed, embarrassed by her mentor's words.

At that moment, a shriek pierced the air.

"Was that a scream?"

The sound wasn't too far from the carriage. Oscar and Fiona both looked out the window. Someone had fallen in the distance. Another individual stood beside them but ran away at the sight of the approaching carriage and escorts on horseback.

"We'll give chase. Lord Oscar, please protect the princess," said Gereon, the captain of the guard.

"Understood," Oscar replied.

Four of the six riders, including Gereon, pursued the man. When the carriage reached the fallen individual. Oscar jumped out of the vehicle and rushed to them. The wound made by a sword was deep, reaching down to the bone. Seeing it, Fiona also got out and stood beside Oscar, chanting immediately.

"*Heal. Heal. Heal.*"

Extra Heal would have healed him in one go, but the spell consumed too much mana. That was why it was common to use multiple instances of Heal instead, except when repairing missing body parts. The wound healed quickly, and as it did, the man's breathing stabilized. However, the blood he'd lost didn't return despite Fiona's quick treatment.

A few moments later, the victim opened his eyes.

When he saw this, Oscar asked, "Can you understand me? You're healed now. Tell us where you live so we can take you there."

They were in the nobles' district. This particular road spanned the distance between the imperial palace and Marchioness Kulkova's capital residence and was lined with the mansions of a number of high-ranking nobles. Judging by his clothing, the victim was likely a member of one of the nearby noble's staff.

"I-I work for Marquess Meusel..."

"Say no more. Rest."

After hearing what he needed, Oscar picked him up and put him in the carriage. Normally, servants were prohibited from riding in carriages, let alone one belonging to an imperial princess. Even though they could be severely punished, Oscar didn't hesitate and Fiona took it as a matter of course. Even the remaining knights guarding her said nothing. She only surrounded herself with good people—people who understood how things were and let themselves be influenced by the twelve-year-old princess's everyday words and actions.

However, something else bothered Oscar. The villain was a well-built man, about the same height as Oscar's 185 centimeters. He wore a robe that covered him from head to toe, with his face covered by cloth. Even so, Oscar had caught the faintest glimpse of a bare sword. It was only a glimmer in the moonlight, so he couldn't be sure, but it looked like the sword his master Rasan had forged and his father Sna had wielded.

"Can't be..." he muttered softly, as if clinging to his doubts.

Marquess Meusel's capital estate was located very close to the scene of the attack. When its residents heard that Princess Fiona

had personally brought the injured servant, it caused a huge commotion. The marquess himself came out to the entrance to thank them and offered his hospitality for the night. They politely refused and asked him to inform the palace about the injured man's condition as soon as possible.

The maids testified that both Oscar and Fiona looked exhausted when they arrived at the castle—perhaps partly because the street slasher had managed to shake Gereon and the other guards who'd chased him. Gereon, the captain of the guard, had been left behind.

◆

"Hans, I've decided."

"Oh?"

Even Hans, a truly competent man, couldn't predict what Emperor Rupert had decided based on these words alone. There were far too many possibilities.

"It's about Oscar."

"I see."

Even Rupert understood that "I've decided" alone wouldn't have gotten the point across, so he didn't get unreasonably angry and say things like "Why don't you understand?!"

"The fighting tournament will be held soon, right? Let's have him participate in that."

"Indeed, the quinquennial tournament will be held next month... Magic is allowed, of course, but don't physical classes have an overwhelming advantage? It's all close-quarter combat. Oscar is a magician."

"He'll be fine. I've seen his mock battles with Fiona a few times, and he can easily hold his own against her swordsmanship, faster now thanks to Raven, with his usual slightly shorter blade. I won't deny winning may be difficult, but even making it to the final four will significantly raise his standing and silence those insufferable aristos. Some success there, combined with his achievements thus far, should be enough for us to make him a baronet, don't you think?" Rupert said.

Hans thought for a moment. “I would agree under normal circumstances, but this is the fiftieth anniversary of the tournament. People confident in their skills from all over the Central Provinces are entering.”

“Surely, you jest...”

Emperor Rupert VI was known for his exceptional wisdom. However, he didn’t know much about the fighting tournament.

◆

“If you command, Your Majesty, your will will be done.”

“Then you agree to participate?”

In the emperor’s office, Rupert and Hans sat on a sofa facing another occupied by Oscar and Fiona. Rupert had just asked Oscar to enter the fighting tournament. The youth had no particular reason to refuse, so he accepted. But...

“Father, *I* am not happy about this,” the princess interjected.

“Fi-Fiona, darling?” Rupert’s voice rose a pitch, despite being both her father and emperor.

“I realize you’re entering Mas—*Oscar*—in the tournament to add some prestige to his reputation and quiet those nobles’ grumbling, but... He’s a wonderful teacher who doesn’t need to do that. My progress should be proof enough. It’d be different if there were any substance to their claims, but they’re just whining. I simply can’t accept validating such rubbish and taking time away from our training.”

“N-No, it’s not like...that...”

A twelve-year-old girl had just rhetorically defeated the same emperor whose wisdom was feared throughout the Central Provinces. However, in any era or world, a father’s weakness is his daughter. A complete loss of face might have been inevitable.

“Of course, I do not doubt that Oscar will win. But he’s human too. Sometimes he’s in good form, and other times he’s not. What will you do if he’s in poor form, loses his composure, and fails to earn a high placement? The nobles may say, ‘I told you so.’ Can you even imagine how I’d feel to lose my teacher because of something

like that?!”

“Uh, well...”

“And you, Hans! Father doesn’t have time to deal with such trivial matters. Your role as premier is to deal with such trifles so that he can focus on things vital to the nation as its emperor. Am I wrong?”

“No, it is as you say, Your Highness.” Hans understood the risk of raising one’s worth through a fighting tournament, so he fully agreed with Fiona’s opinion. The scale of this fiftieth-anniversary tournament, and the sheer number of participants, meant advancing to the top would be much more difficult. No matter how strong someone was, fatigue from consecutive battles could hinder them.

Oscar was already a top-class magician, and his sword skills were quite impressive. But he was still only eighteen years old. In terms of experience, he would inevitably fall short against the other contestants.

The more experience you have, the easier it is to reduce fatigue from consecutive battles, and the less experience you have, the easier it is to accumulate it. This is a truth that has not changed in any place, past or present.

Emperor Rupert’s youngest daughter had him on the ropes, and not even the premier could offer a logical rebuttal. Seeing this, Oscar chuckled ruefully in his mind. After all, it was rare to witness the Empire’s key figures being bested by a child.

“Your Highness, thank you for your concern. However, I would like to participate in the tournament.”

“Oscar?”

“It’s held every five years, and this year is the fiftieth-anniversary tournament. An actual once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I’m fortunate to be of an age where I can enter. I’d like to test myself. Of course, only if Your Highness allows it.” Oscar bowed his head to Fiona.

“Mast— Oscar, I won’t stop you if that’s what you truly want,” Fiona said in spite of her frustration. “Give it your all.”

“Thank you, my lady.” Oscar bowed his head again, this time in gratitude.

“V-Very good, very good. Yes, indeed.” Rupert realized Oscar’s ingenuity and decided to go along with it. Hans shook his head

slightly with a sidelong glance at the tableau. “I won’t demand that you win. Instead, I ask that you place in the top eight at least.”

“Your Majesty,” Hans interjected, “the top eight in a commemorative tournament are on par with the Twelve Knights of the Emperor.”

Rupert was surprised. He had initially wanted Oscar to be in the top four but had amended it to the top eight, thinking this expectation was more reasonable. Evidently, however, that was still a high hurdle.

“You’re serious?” Rupert asked.

“I am.” Hans nodded gravely.

As the name suggested, the Twelve Knights of the Emperor were twelve knights selected from all over the Empire who directly served the Emperor. It was the highest honor and ultimate testament to strength. It was also the position all imperial citizens who lived by sword and magic aspired to.

“Father, suppose...suppose on the very slim chance that Oscar fails to enter the top ranks, he will continue to be my teacher. You *will* guarantee that, yes?”

“O-Of course! You have my word.” Rupert nodded vigorously, crumbling under the invisible pressure radiating from Fiona.

Oscar and Hans smirked but didn’t look directly at either of the royals.

Daughters really are their fathers’ biggest weaknesses.

◆

That day, Oscar visited the imperial capital’s adventurers’ guild for the first time in a long time. It must have been at least two years... He hadn’t been there once since becoming Princess Fiona’s teacher. Of course, the palace had sent a direct request to the guild to hire Oscar as Princess Fiona’s magic teacher... In other words, there was no problem.

There seemed to be a lot more adventurers at the guild now than there had been two years ago. However, Oscar’s business today did not bring him to the usual counter; instead, he approached a

temporary pop-up kiosk bearing a sign that read: “Fiftieth Fighting Tournament Application Counter.” A young man was processing the paperwork, but...he was in the middle of an argument.

“Like I said, I’ll be eighteen on the first day of the tournament! The official rules said this shouldn’t be an issue!”

“I understand, but please give me a moment as I search for the exact rule. Would you happen to remember it?”

“Urk... It was...some time back, so no, I don’t...”

The fighting tournament was open to all professions and races, but there was one restriction: Participants must be of age. In the Central Provinces, for humans, adulthood was eighteen years old. Therefore, you couldn’t enter the tournament unless you were that old or older. Apparently, therein lay the crux of the argument between the man and guild receptionist.

Although it was none of his business, Oscar didn’t want to be kept waiting indefinitely. “Article 76,” he interjected.

“Huh?” the man and the receptionist both said in surprise.

“I’m sorry for startling you. I overheard your conversation. The rule that allows contestants to enter so long as they’re eighteen on the first day of the tournament was added at the thirtieth tournament. Therefore, you’ll find it in Article 76, quite far back in the bylaws.”

“Please wait a moment... Ah, there it is. We’ll accept your application then. I apologize for the inconvenience.” The receptionist bowed to the young man.

“Oh, um, it’s fine, as long as I can enter...” The young man shook his head in a panic, his face flushed. He was officially a contestant now.

“Thank you for your help. My name is Emil.”

“I’m Oscar. I didn’t do much, so don’t worry about it.”

The two exchanged a quick greeting and parted ways.

Oscar took Emile’s place at the front of the counter.

“Welcome, and thank you for your assistance earlier.”

“Not a problem at all. I’d like to register for the tournament too.”

“I understand. Excuse me, but may I ask if you’re a member of

an adventurers' guild?"

"I am. This one, actually," Oscar said.

The receptionist tilted his head slightly.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry, it's just... I've been working here for the past two years, and I don't recall seeing you before..."

"Ah, right. Probably because it's been about that long since I last showed my face here." Oscar shrugged.

"Oh, I see. Then may I verify your guild card?"

"Uhhh..."

Before, he'd always carried his guild card with him as a form of identification. But he hadn't needed to wear it for the past two years, so he hadn't brought it with him. Since anyone could register for the tournament, even if they weren't an adventurer, Oscar hadn't thought it was necessary. Clearly, he'd been careless.

"Sorry... It's been so long that I forgot about it."

"Well..."

"Not to be rude, but I thought you didn't need to be an adventurer to participate in the tournament. I don't remember seeing a rule that required you to present a guild card either."

"You're correct on both counts. However, should something happen, we ask that adventurers present their guild cards if we need to pay reparations or contact others. I suppose you could call it more of an internal guild guideline instead of an official tournament bylaw..."

"That puts me in a bind, doesn't it..." Oscar scratched his head.

For whatever reason, everyone at the palace thought of him as a perfect person, but he did, in fact, have quite a few flaws. For example, his absentmindedness. Oscar himself had long ago resigned himself to his personality because he'd been like that since he was very young.

"I guess I'll just have to go back and get it..."

The moment he spoke, someone called out to him from behind.

"Oscar, is that you?"

When he turned around, he saw two familiar faces: Elmer, the swordsman and leader of Shooting Spree, and Zasha, the dual

wielder.

"Elmer? Zasha?"

"Aha, it *is* you. You've grown taller."

"What's it been, two years? Hear you're teaching some highborn now. Is that true?"

Elmer and Zasha smacked him playfully on the arm. They were excited to meet someone they hadn't seen in a long time in an unexpected place.

"Stop it, that hurts."

"Does it now? Oscar, is it just me or do you seem softer around the edges?"

"Hey, I was thinking the same thing, like he's mellowed out."

Elmer and Zasha immediately noticed the change in Oscar. It was only natural given that it had been two years since they'd last seen each other.

"Have I really?"

"You have, but I think it suits you." Elmer was genuinely happy.

"Same. Plus, you're handsome, tall, can use magic, and your sword skills are amazing... Damn, just saying all that out loud is making me sad. Oh, well, it is what it is." Zasha's tone grew more and more morose as he spoke, which was probably inevitable, all things considered.

"By the way, Oscar, does your presence here mean you're entering the tournament?" Elmer asked.

"Yes, I am. But I forgot my guild card, so..." Oscar admitted sheepishly.

"Ah, that makes sense. You *have* been working over there for a long time, so you probably don't carry a guild card around with you. Wait, why didn't the palace just apply for you? Knights and other military personnel can apply without having to come here."

"I decided too late and missed their deadline. When I went, they told me they could figure something out, but I wanted to show my face here, so I said I'd apply myself. And here I am," Oscar explained with a wry smile.

Elmer and Zasha grinned. The change in him was obvious: the boy's icy heart had 'thawed' considerably.

“Got it. Hey, your name is...Foto, right?” Elmer asked the young man at the counter.

“That’s right, you remembered, B-rank adventurers Elmer and Zasha.”

“B-rank?” Oscar murmured questioningly.

“Heh heh heh, damn right,” Zasha said. “We finally hit it. It’s only been six months though.”

“Congratulations.” Oscar was happy for them.

“Thanks,” Elmer replied.

“So, yeah, Foto, Oscar here is definitely a C-rank adventurer. He stopped coming to the guild right around the time you started working here... But now he’s a teacher to some special highborn.”

“A special highborn?” Foto asked, puzzled.

“Who do you think I mean when I say a *special* highborn in the Empire?”

“Wait... Do you mean in the palace...”

“Shh! Don’t say it out loud!” Zasha hissed.

Foto quickly put his hand over his mouth. He seemed to have an obedient personality.

“Now that you know, you should be able to check Oscar’s identity on the roster, right?”

“Yes. Yes, I can.”

“Wait a sec. You’re a guild receptionist, so you must’ve heard of him too. He’s the guy who defeated the wyvern on his own,” Zasha said.

“What?! He’s *that* Oscar?!” Foto shouted when understanding finally hit.

Several adventurers looked in his direction out of reflex.

Zasha glanced around. “Foto, pipe down, will you?”

“I-I’m sorry, but...um, yes, I’ve definitely heard of *that* Oscar. Wasn’t Shooting Spree with him when he took down the monster?”

“We were just watching,” Elmer said with a wry chuckle.

In the end, Foto confirmed Oscar’s background, including affiliation, using the thick guild roster and accepted his application to participate in the fighting tournament without any issue.

“Thank you both.”

"Aw, come on, it wasn't a big deal."

"Actually, we're both entering too. Just pray we don't get matched up with you, Oscar."

Zasha and Elmer burst out laughing then.

"Depending on the number of participants, the preliminary rounds will be a few battle royales," Elmer explained.

"What's a battle royale?"

"Ten people enter an arena and fight until only two are left. It's a free-for-all. You never know who's going to attack you or where they're going to come from."

"Sometimes, folks will even gang up on someone strong," Zasha added.

Both men had participated in the tournament five years ago but lost in the battle royale preliminaries.

"Got it. I'll do my best."

"The top sixty-four duke it out in the knockout stage, so let's hope we all make it there, huh?"

"And go easy on us if we end up matched."

Zasha and Elmer shook hands firmly with Oscar and returned to their inn.

At long last, the curtains rose on the fighting tournament where Oscar would be reunited with his destiny.

◆

The venue for the tournament was the colosseum in the center of the imperial capital. The enormous, oval complex contained five subterranean floors and nine aboveground. With a major axis of six hundred meters, a minor axis of four hundred meters, and a capacity of hundreds of thousands of people, this massive structure was the pinnacle of the Empire's architectural technology.

And it wasn't just architectural technology, but alchemical too. Physical and Magical Barriers were constantly maintained between the spectator seats and the arena floor. While the Barriers were not fundamentally different from any other, their durability was astonishing. They had yet to be broken. It was particularly difficult to

sustain a Physical Barrier's hardness, but tests on the colosseum's barriers had shown that they couldn't be broken even with repeated hits of Combat Skill: Total Impalement...

Two stages, each with a radius of two hundred meters, had been built within the complex for the battle royale preliminaries and subsequent single-elimination rounds of sixteen. That was also where mock battles were held. Once the top eight had been decided, only one of the stages was used, with all eyes focused on it. Except for killing your opponent, which earned you an immediate disqualification, everything else was fair game. That was the tradition of the Empire's fighting tournament.

The tournament went back 250 years, and simply participating in it was considered an honor. Even advancing through the preliminaries to the sixty-four in the single-elimination stage ensured you'd always have some way to earn money. Sometimes, nobles would even invite you to become their vassals.

It was no wonder that this tournament had attracted people from all over the Empire eager to get rich quick and rise to the top. Moreover, this fiftieth-anniversary tournament boasted prize money five times higher than usual. Naturally, that drew adventurers, knights, and other fierce warriors confident in their skills not only from the Empire but all over the Central Provinces. In the two weeks building up to the tournament, merchants set up stalls and pop-up shops outside the venue, creating a lively atmosphere in the imperial capital even before the month of the tournament.

On the fifth day of the tournament, the venue had been buzzing since the morning.

"Is the emperor really coming to watch?"

"Other than the opening ceremony on the first day, he usually only shows up for the top eight."

"Then does that mean some amazing folks are fighting today and that's why even His Majesty wants to spectate?!"

"Damn, those scalpers are selling tickets for double yesterday's price..."

"What should we do? Kill 'em and take the tickets?"

The violent nature of more than a few conversations could be attributed to rumors of the emperor's visit. On this day, the preliminary rounds would feature a certain individual who just so happened to be an attendant to the youngest imperial princess. But of course, the general public was unaware of this.

◆

"How did it go?"

"The bribe worked, so more or less as expected."

"Good. If he loses in the first round of preliminaries, he'll likely be removed from the princess's service."

The nobles grinned then.

It wasn't at all unusual to gang up on a strong contestant during the battle royale stages. However, it *was* rare to involve tournament staff and have them interfere with the matchups...

◆

"Good luck, Master."

"Thank you, Your Highness. I'll see you again soon."

This conversation took place at the entrance to the seating area reserved for the imperial family. Oscar wasn't nervous at all, but the same couldn't be said for Fiona. She was extremely anxious.

Even though killing an opponent meant immediate disqualification, unfortunate accidents *did* occur since contestants fought using their primary weapons. And despite the lineup of healers who could even regenerate limbs with Extra Heal, you never knew what the future held... That was just how it was in a fighting tournament. Furthermore, incredible amounts of wealth, status, and fame were at stake for this special, fiftieth-anniversary event. Everyone would be fighting with all their might.

In light of all this then, Fiona was understandably nervous. And Oscar knew exactly what was going on in her mind.

"I promise I'll be back," Oscar said, smiling brightly.

This would have been unthinkable for the Oscar of two years

ago...

As Oscar headed to the contestant waiting room, Rupert entered the luxury box reserved for the imperial family.

"Father, you're late!"

"N-No, I'm not... There's still time until Oscar's match..."

"He just left for the waiting room. I wanted you to give him at least a word of encouragement beforehand..." Fiona scowled resentfully at her father, the emperor.

"Uhhh... Ah, yes, I know. I'd intended to arrive earlier, but Hans brought me more work as I was leaving..."

"He's lying, Your Highness," Hans said.

Rupert became even more flustered. A father was always destined to lose... Nevertheless, after doing his best to appease his daughter, he sat in the imperial box. Of course, the general audience could see them, which further heightened the excitement in the Colosseum. The mighty Emperor Rupert VI was so immensely popular with his imperial subjects that it was hard to reconcile him with the same man who'd wilted in the face of his daughter's scolding.

"Oscar will be competing in the next round. However...Your Majesty, there have been some disturbing developments thus far..."

"I'm not worried. I have the utmost faith in him," Rupert said with a dismissive wave of his hand at Hans's concern. "Anyway, save your breath. I have a good idea what those bloody aristos are thinking." His lips curved wickedly.

In one of the many waiting rooms inside the colosseum, where combatants had to sit to avoid seeing their opponents before battling them in the arena, a familiar face entered.

"Oscar."

"Zasha."

It was Zasha, the dual wielder of Shooting Spree.

"You're in the next round, right, Oscar? I'm four rounds after you."

"In that case, I'll make sure to watch yours from the stands."

He was given the standby signal just as he finished talking.

"The next match will begin shortly, Oscar. Please follow me."

"Thanks. Wish me luck, Zasha."

"Good luck, kid."

Oscar and Zasha shook hands firmly.

Ten people took up positions at equal intervals on the rim of a two-hundred-meter-wide circular platform. Thus, the stage was set for a battle royale, which would continue until all but two were unable to fight, meaning eight people were eliminated.

Oscar looked around and saw a familiar face. They'd only spoken once, but Oscar greeted him anyway, since he stood just to his left.

"Emil, right?"

"That's right. And you're Oscar. Thank you again for the other day."

It was Emil, the young man who'd been arguing with the receptionist at the guild. He bowed his head politely.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you, but...I didn't think we'd wind up in the same group match."

"Agreed."

They both smiled wryly.

"Well, may the best man win."

"Likewise," Emil said. He'd been polite throughout the entire exchange.

Both were eighteen years old, but Oscar was over 185 centimeters tall while Emil measured in at roughly 175 centimeters...

"We will now commence the matchup for the eighty-ninth preliminary group of the tournament. Contestants, are you ready?" the master of ceremonies announced. "Begin!"

Something strange happened at once. Everyone on the platform immediately started running toward the same person: Oscar.

"Ah," he muttered with a faint laugh.

Only Emil, taking up a defensive stance to his left, didn't seem to understand the situation. However, the other eight were clearly intent on crushing Oscar, who wasn't particularly bothered. On the contrary, he was glad that they'd made things easier for him.

He wouldn’t hesitate to fight off any opponent who saw him as an enemy. Even though he knew these fights were essentially mock battles, he refused to attack someone who hadn’t attacked him first. But since they’d all decided to attack him at once, there was only one thing for him to do.

Turning, Oscar immediately sliced off both arms of the man attacking from his right.

“Gaaaaaaaaah!” he screamed, dropping to his knees.

“One,” Oscar said.

He then turned farther to his right, dodged the swing of the next challenger, and then sliced his arms off.

“Gyaaaaaaah!” the second man screamed, collapsing.

“Two,” Oscar muttered.

Then he targeted the man to the right of the last, then the man standing to the right of him. Moving counterclockwise, Oscar sliced off both arms of each successive opponent. Just as he’d expected, the last two teamed up, creating a two-on-one situation against Oscar, but the result was the same. Both had their hands cut off...and the referee declared them unable to fight.

“Winners, Oscar and Emil,” the emcee announced.

“Huzzaaaaaahhh!”

Cheers exploded from the stands. No matter the era, no matter how gruesome, people have always been excited to watch others fight... Maybe the gore *is* the appeal...

“Oof. I know how painful that is,” Emperor Rupert muttered. He stared at the men whose hands had been cut off, then at his own right hand and grimaced.

“That’s right, you also lost your right arm a long time ago, Your Majesty.”

“Aye...and it hurt something fierce,” Rupert said, expression grave.

“I can only imagine...” Hans had no choice but to agree.

Incidentally, Fiona didn’t hear them. All she could see was Oscar responding to the cheers in the arena... While healers used Extra Heal to regenerate the severed limbs of the other eight contestants, Oscar and Emil waved to the crowd. Emil looked embarrassed,

though.

"I didn't even do anything..." he muttered, but no one heard him.

A new preliminary had begun on the neighboring stage. To their surprise, most of those contestants were also focusing on one person there.

However, their target remained calm, steadily stripping her opponents of their ability to continue fighting. She lopped the arm off one, the leg off another, and slashed a third's stomach open while somehow avoiding their vital organs. Another, she simply knocked unconscious.

Oscar, watching from the next stage, stared in wide-eyed amazement at the contestant's skill. "Incredible..." Then he noticed something.

"Is that...an elf?"

The incredible swordsman was a beautiful elven woman.

"Just like an elf to be good not only with a bow but a sword too. She's the genuine article. Such terrifying movements," Rupert said, watching the spectacle from the stands. However, his expression was grim.

"Your Majesty, even if she *is* an elf, we can't capture her during the tournament," Hans advised in a low voice.

"No, I don't plan on doing that. I have nothing against elves."

"Really? But your right arm..."

"You're right. It *was* an elf who cut it off. Elves are forces to be reckoned with, fearsome users of both sword and magic. I'd certainly rather not face them on the battlefield... I may have no qualms treating them as prisoners of war when necessary, but you know as well as I do that the Empire doesn't enslave elves. That law exists in name only."

An imperial law *did* exist that allowed the Empire to treat demi-humans such as elves as slaves, but there had been no records of elves being enslaved in the last few decades. However, unlike the other nations in the Central Provinces, the Empire *did* have other criminals who were treated as slaves.

"Evidently, the elf is a B-class adventurer in the Kingdom," Hans said, flipping through the documents in his hands.

“Huh. The Kingdom has an elven village, doesn’t it?”

“Correct, sire. Commonly referred to as the ‘Western Forest,’ it has been there since the time of King Richard, the monarch who restored the Kingdom.”

“King Richard, eh... So tell me: What is her name?”

“They call her ‘Sera of the Wind.’”

Toward the end, the few men remaining on the second stage were hesitant to challenge Sera because she was so formidable. Then they noticed another man standing still. He was facing Sera, wearing a hood that covered his head while a mask veiled his face. It was impossible to see his expression.

The two remaining men, assuming the masked man had to be a worse swordsman than Sera, simultaneously attacked him. In an instant, both sets of arms and legs, a total of eight limbs, were cut off. They hadn’t even seen the man draw his sword. He flicked the blood off his blade and sheathed it. Once again, he returned to his motionless state as if nothing had happened.

Oscar had already left his stage, so he didn’t witness the masked man’s swordsmanship... However, if he had, he would have been surprised. Not by his technique, but by the sword itself. He might not have been certain when he saw it in the moonlight a few nights prior, but in the light of the sun there was no longer any doubt: It was the same sword his master Rasan had forged and his father Sna had wielded.

Afterword

Hello, it's been a while. I'm Tadashi Kubou. Thank you for picking up volume 4 of *The Water Magician*'s first arc. The first volume was published a year ago, on March 10, 2021. As the author, I'm delighted to be able to release this fourth volume exactly one year later.

This volume contains two important episodes: "Mayhem in the Royal Capital" and "The Road Back to Lune." The former is one of the longest episodes in this first arc of the story. Furthermore, I added a lot of content to this volume, making it fairly long...

I mean, honestly, who would actually believe something like that would fall from the sky right on top of the palace? Now you know why Abel has that expression in the frontispiece, drawn by Mebaru-sensei. All the details are in the main story, so for those of you who have started with this afterword first, I recommend you dive straight into the meat and potatoes...

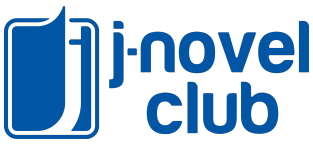
The Water Magician was originally published on the website, Shosetsuka ni Naro, and has now been collected into actual books. I added tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of characters to each volume so that readers who have already read it online can enjoy the story even more (it looks like I'll be adding more in the future...).

Whenever I publish on Shosetsuka ni Naro, I think, "Okay, this is perfect!" After a few weeks or months, however, new ideas and episodes that I want to add come to mind. I've resigned myself to this habit, since it seems part of my nature as an author... Having said that, novelization provides the shape for all my extra ideas and makes the story even more interesting, so I couldn't be happier. While I won't deny the difficulty of adding a hundred thousand characters to something that's already been written, I can't stop myself, because I know it will definitely make the story even better.

I’m sure my tendencies as an author put a lot of strain on the editor in charge of managing my work schedule. I know. I know, but I can’t help myself—I’m sorry.

I’d like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who supported me in publishing the fourth volume, including the editorial team, the illustrator Mebaru-sensei, Bay Bridge Studio for the book design, the printing company, and more.

And to all my readers, it goes without saying that your support is my greatest source of motivation. It keeps me going. I hope you’ll continue to support me moving forward as well.



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by Tadashi Kubou

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