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“What in the world are you?!”
“These goblin materials are all from high-rank species!”
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“Very well.
Let’s see the
results of that
training!”
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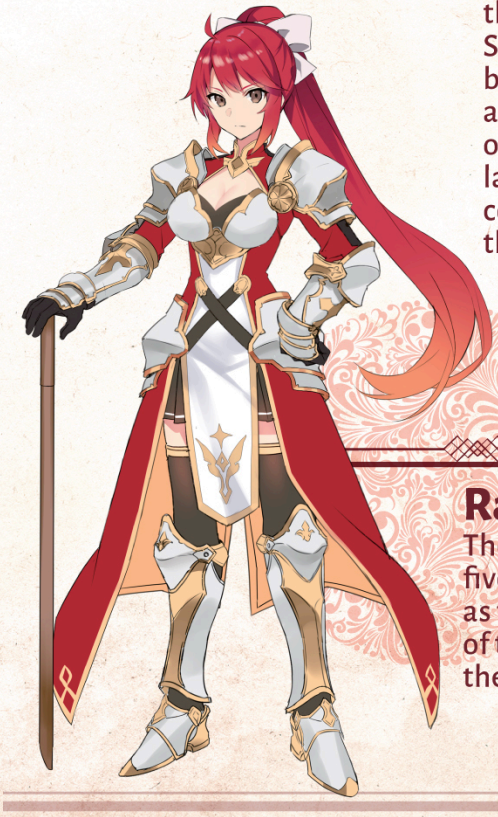
Noa

A boy raised by his five strict older sisters. Fed up with their harsh lessons, he decides to leave home to become an adventurer.



Aeria

The oldest of the five sisters. She is a successful businesswoman and the president of Fiore, one of the largest trading companies in the land.



Raiza

The second oldest of the five sisters. She is regarded as the strongest swordsman of this generation and holds the Swordmaster title.

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Characters



Fam

The third oldest of the five sisters. She holds the title of saint at the Holy Cross Church, the largest religious organization in the land.



Ciel

The second youngest of the five sisters. She is a genius mage who holds the title of sage.



Ecrecia

The youngest of the five sisters. Blessed with incredible talent, she is one of the most famous artists in the world.

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Prologue: Little Brother Leaves Home

"Another one-hit KO..."

Having beaten me in our daily practice match, my big sister Raiza sighed in disappointment.

"How many years has it been since you began learning the sword, Noa?" she continued.

"Three years..."

"Why are you still so weak after training under me for this long? At this point, I'd call your lack of talent a talent."

"Urk... But I'm doing my best..."

"No excuses!"

Thud!

A merciless iron fist slammed into my forehead. I clutched my head in pain as Raiza yelled even louder.

"All you've gotten better at is talking back. You're weak because you lack guts!"

"Guts this, guts that... That's all you ever say, Raiza! How am I supposed to learn when your answer to everything is 'use your gut to figure it out'?!"

"Hey, are you criticizing the teachings of the Swordmaster?!"

Thud! Thump!

This time, she kicked me instead, probably taking out her frustration on me. She seemed to be holding back a little, but I still felt she was overdoing it.

"Enough!" Raiza snapped. "You're incapable of using the sword. Give up on making a career of it and just sit quietly at home."

"But sis, I—"

"This conversation is over! Be grateful I made time in my busy schedule for you!"

Raiza brushed away my outstretched hand and left. I stared after her in a daze.

It wasn't this bad before...

At the very least, she'd never shot me down this curtly. Now that I thought about it, it had probably started around the time I'd said I wanted to become an adventurer. That was when Raiza's lessons had suddenly grown excessively violent, with her constantly telling me that I didn't have enough talent to leave home.

"Did you make Raiza mad again, Noa?"

"Ciel..."

Ciel, one of my other big sisters, had suddenly appeared behind me. She was leaning on her staff with a look of amusement on her face.

"You could give up on the sword and become a sorcerer instead," she suggested.

"Didn't you say I had no talent for magic?"

"Oh, that's right. Sorry! I completely forgot!"

That's obviously a lie! Her mouth had apologized, but her eyes were still laughing.

"But you *have* managed to fail at everything you've tried. Has there ever been anything you could do?" Ciel asked.

"Uh..."

"You don't even have a redeeming feature you can reply with on the spot! Honestly, the incompetence is astounding." She sighed with a shrug, then turned to look at me properly. "Listen up, Noa," she said in a condescending tone. "If you can't do anything well, you should just stay home forever. Let your sisters take care of you. A peaceful life with your family is a luxury other people would envy, you know?"

"Fine."

"Huh? You're awfully obedient today. Well, if you understand, then go and learn a skill useful to the rest of us—"

"I'm going to leave home," I declared.

I wouldn't remain quiet any longer. My patience had reached its limit. Besides, I was already fifteen years old. It was time for me to figure out adulthood on my own. I couldn't rely on my sisters

forever, so this was the perfect opportunity.

"Hold on a minute. Are you being serious right now?"

"Yeah. I'll pack my things by tomorrow."

"No way. If this is a joke, it isn't funny."

The look on Ciel's face changed when she realized I wasn't joking. She was clearly panicking at the unexpected turn—her normally easygoing tone was awfully flat.

It kind of serves her right.

"Tell Raiza for me. She'll probably stop me if I talk to her myself."

"I can't tell her that! How do you plan on living away from home, anyway? It's not that easy to find work!"

"I'm thinking of using this chance to become an adventurer. The guild is always looking for new people."

The moment I mentioned the word "adventurer," Ciel's eyes widened. She stepped right up to me and shook her head furiously. "No! Absolutely not! I know you've said you want to be an adventurer, but it's an extremely dangerous job! You're too clumsy to survive!"

"It'll be fine! I'll only choose work I can do. I won't be reckless."

"Even so!"

"I'll make sure to start with things like slime exterminations."

Ciel was at a loss for words. The work of an adventurer covered a wide variety of tasks. Some were dangerous like she'd said, but others were tasks like gathering herbs or doing odd jobs around town, things I could do.

"At any rate, I'm leaving. My mind is made up."

"Hey, calm down! Don't rush into this! At least let us get together to discuss it first! All our sisters should be back at the end of the month. Why don't you wait until then?"

"Nope. If I wait, Aeria will trick me into staying."

Our big sister Aeria ran the largest trading company on the continent. I had little chance of winning an argument against the best negotiator among us. I wasn't bad at arguing myself, but I'd never beaten her before.

"Ugh, why are you so insistent on leaving home? Don't tell me you have a woman hidden away somewhere!"

“Why would you even think that?! I’m always with you guys when I leave the house!”

One of my sisters would always tag along whenever I tried to go somewhere. As a result, I had no memory of going out alone in the last five years. Was it even possible to find a girlfriend in such a situation?

Ciel, however, still had a frown on her face, unconvinced. “You could have made a hole in the house to sneak out in secret.”

“Do you seriously think I could pull that off?!”

“You never know. Even *you* can dig a hole with magic.”

“Argh! Either way, I’m leaving! If I stay at home like this for too long, I’ll end up a useless member of society!”

“Wait! Hold it right there, Noa!”

Ciel desperately tried to stop me, but I escaped her grasp and packed my bags to leave that very day.

Chapter 1: Border Town Rajah

"Finally, I'm here!"

A month had passed since I'd left home. After a number of shared carriage rides, I had finally reached the border town of Rajah.

The west side of the continent was called the demon realm, ruled by demons and monsters, while the east side was called the human realm, ruled by humans and demihumans. Rajah was located on the boundary between the two and was renowned as a mecca for adventurers.

It was the perfect place for me to start a new life as an adventurer, far away from home.

"It should be safe now that I've come this far."

My sisters were incredibly powerful. When the five of them came together, they could control the entire nation with ease. But I had crossed three country borders to get here from our homeland, the Winster Kingdom. *My sisters shouldn't be able to extend their search here anytime soon.* The fact that I still couldn't be completely at ease was a testament to how terrifying they were.

"Yes, and it was all thanks to you, Mr. Sieg!" the merchant who had gotten off the carriage with me said.

His name was Ortho. I'd met him at a town along the way and spent the last week or so of the journey with him. Sieg was the pseudonym I was using, having borrowed it from the name of the hero who had defeated the Dragon King Badias long ago. If I used my real name, my sisters would find me in no time at all.

"Mr. Sieg, you're trying to become an adventurer, right?" Ortho asked.

"Yes, that's right."

"In that case, take this." He handed me a letter sealed with wax. "This is a letter of introduction to the Adventurers Guild. I've been

acquainted with the guild for a long time now, and I'm sure it will be of use to you."

"Wow! Are you allowed to give me something like this?"

"Of course! It's the least I can do to express my gratitude to you, Mr. Sieg. This journey only ended safely thanks to you!"

I didn't think I'd done anything to warrant such a reaction. Ortho was probably referring to how I had helped out when the carriage was being attacked. But the main forces during that fight had been the adventurers hired to escort the carriage. All I had done was support them by taking out the monsters that slipped past them. It was the adventurers who should've been commended for that fight, not me.

I explained that to Ortho, but he dismissed it with a shake of his head.

"There's no need to be so humble! I've had to watch many adventurer fights in my line of work, and I'm sure it was you who contributed the most to that battle. In fact, the other adventurers... I don't want to speak too badly about them, but if anything, they saw how strong you were and sent all the troublesome monsters your way on purpose."

"Huh..."

Was that really what had happened? Now that he mentioned it, the goblins I'd fought in that battle had seemed stronger than usual. I'd defeated many goblins while training with my sister, and they'd always taken one hit or less to defeat.

"Well then, I shall excuse myself here," Ortho said. "My shop is located in the commercial district south of town, so please drop by if you ever need potions. I'll give you a discount."

"Thank you for everything! I'll make sure to visit your shop once I've settled in!"

After bidding him farewell, I made my way to the guild with the directions I'd requested in advance. The carriages stopped at the east square, so I just needed to follow the road straight west.

After walking for a bit, I noticed more people armed like adventurers on the streets. As expected of the border town Rajah, it was a bustling place full of people.

"That must be it. It's huge!"

An imposing building made of brick finally came into view. The lion crest of the Adventurers Guild hung over the entrance.

"All right, here goes!"

I went through the double doors to find myself in a space that served as both the lobby and tavern. Directly across from me was a bulletin board of requests on a wall. Beside that was the reception counter, and the registration counter was... *Ah, over there.*

"Welcome. Are you here to register for the first time?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then please fill out this form."

Free to come, free to go. The Adventurers Guild was well-known for that, and it showed in how few fields there were on the form. I used Sieg as my name but filled the rest in truthfully. The fewer the lies, the harder it was to get caught.

"The form has been received. With this, you are now an F-rank adventurer of the Rajah branch guild."

"Thank you."

"Do you have any questions?"

"I have a letter of introduction. Do I give that to you? And can I sell some monster materials right away?"

As soon as I asked that, the receptionist's eyes scanned my entire body. When she confirmed I was only carrying a small bag, she tilted her head in confusion.

"Of course you can, but where are the materials?"

"In this bag."

"Huh?! Don't tell me... Is that a *magic bag*?!" She stared at me wide-eyed.

Huh? Was it that unusual? "Do you not see many magic bags around here?"

"Well, they're extremely expensive items."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

I had made the bag myself under Ciel's instruction. She'd said I had to be able to do that much if I wanted to become a sorcerer. Maybe there just weren't many sorcerers around Rajah.

"There are quite a lot of materials. Is it okay to take them out

here?”

“In that case, please come around to the back.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you. You can give me the letter of introduction too.”

I handed her the letter before following her behind the counter. The area she led me to was like a warehouse of monster materials. There was even a large space for dismantling parts.

“You can take out all the materials you want here.”

“Okay!”

I immediately began emptying my magic bag, but for some reason, the receptionist’s face gradually grew paler.

“What in the world *are* you?!” she shouted in shock.

“I’m not sure what you mean...”

I struggled to reply to the unexpected question. Why was she so shocked by some goblin materials? Monsters like these could be defeated by any amateur with a little experience under their belt.

“I’m just an amateur who’s learned a little sword and magic before.”

“No way! These goblin materials are all from high-rank species!”

The parts I’d taken out had come from five monsters. Four of them were high goblins, and one was a goblin general. High goblins were classified as rank D, while goblin generals were rank C. It would normally take a B-rank adventurer to take them on solo.

“A B-rank adventurer is already top class! Were you a knight somewhere before this, Mr. Sieg?”

“No, nothing of the sort.”

“Then are you...” The receptionist shot me a dubious look, then checked the letter in her hand. “Let’s see... It says, ‘I’m sure you’re surprised by the high-quality materials he brought in, but I can testify that they all came from monsters he defeated himself.’ I see he must have predicted our response.”

She checked the signature on the back of the letter and nodded in understanding. Her expression immediately relaxed—it seemed Ortho was right about being respected by the guild.

“If Ortho says it, then it must be true. Which means... Could you wait here for a moment, Mr. Sieg?” she asked.

"Sure thing."

The receptionist hurried off. What exactly was she going to do?

Left alone in the warehouse, I looked around as I waited. As one would expect of an adventurers' mecca, there was a wide variety of stuff stored here. Just looking at it all was quite interesting.

"Are you Sieg?"

"Oh!"

I had been so absorbed in looking over the room, I'd failed to notice someone was trying to speak to me. I quickly turned to see a man as muscular as an ogre standing behind me. At a guess, I'd have said he was in his forties. He was dressed casually in a coat, but he had a strong aura about him.

"Yes, I'm Sieg."

"I'm Abert, the master of this branch."

Well, that explained the aura! My eyes widened in surprise.

Sensing my unease, the receptionist beside Abert stepped forward. "There was something I had to ask him regarding your registration. That's why I called him over," she explained.

"Huh? Is there a problem?"

"Not a problem, no. It's just that your abilities appear to be quite high, so we'd like you to take a special examination."

Special examination? That sounded rather serious. The materials I'd brought in seemed to be the cause of the commotion, but had those monsters really been that strong? They'd felt kind of strong for goblins, but they were still just goblins.

"A special examination is used when an accomplished knight or mercenary joins the guild. By fighting a mock battle against an examiner and scoring high enough, you can start as a D-rank adventurer," Abert explained.

The receptionist nodded. "It's a fairly difficult process, but we think you'd be able to pass without issue. Are you interested in trying it out?"

"Are there any disadvantages to taking it?" I asked.

"Not at all," she answered firmly. "If D-rank requests end up being too much for you, you can always take lower-rank requests instead."

In that case, there was no reason not to try. As an adventurer, it was better to be a higher rank than not.

"Okay, let's do it!" I agreed.

"Got it! The examination will be held tomorrow, so please come to the guild in peak condition."

"Will do."

After that, I received my money for the materials and left the guild. The four high goblins got me four hundred thousand gold, while the general was worth five hundred thousand, making nine hundred thousand gold total. That would likely be enough to last the next three months. I was running low on the funds I'd brought with me for my journey, so it was perfect timing.

"Anyway, am I actually pretty strong?"

I recalled the days I'd spent getting beaten up by Raiza. I'd always thought I was extremely weak, and my sister had said the same of me.

"You're incapable of using the sword."

But judging from the guild's and Ortho's reactions, that didn't seem to be the case.

"Was my sister actually wrong about me? Nah, that's impossible."

As I was lost in thought, I reached the corner where all the inns were located. I had an important exam tomorrow and needed to rest well tonight, so I chose a slightly fancier inn than I normally would have picked and rested until morning.

"Are you Sieg?"

The next day, a girl called out to me as soon as I went to the guild for the special examination. She had two daggers at her waist and wore light leather armor.

"And who are you?" I asked.

"I'm Kuruta, the examiner assigned to you by the guild."

"I see..."

If she was the examiner, then she had to be particularly strong. But at a glance, she appeared to be the same age as me or even a little younger. I hadn't been expecting that.

"Hm? What's that look for? You doubting my skills?" Kuruta

scowled.

"No, I'm just impressed by how young you seem."

"Kuruta is one of the rare A-rank adventurers of our guild! She's young, but her strength is no joke!" the receptionist immediately stated.

Kuruta puffed up her chest proudly at the introduction. Her confidence reminded me a little of Ciel. Come to think of it, how were my sisters doing right now? Were they searching for me?

"Distracted, are we?"

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"From my point of view, your skills are even more questionable. You look unsure of yourself, and I can't feel any of the vigor of the strong in you."

Vigor, huh? Well, it was true I had my doubts about my strength. I'd been training in the sword for the past three years and had spent practically every day being told I was worthless. It was hard for me to believe I actually had any skill.

"The examination will be held in our underground training area. I will be observing, so please follow me," the receptionist said, leading us down the stairs to the training area.

Wow, it was such a nice and bright underground space! It was more like an arena than a training ground, and it was large enough to fit a dragon.

"Now, if you could both select a weapon for the mock battle."

In a corner of the training area was a selection of wooden weapons. I chose a sword, while Kuruta picked two daggers, dual-wielding her weapons.

"Okay, are you both ready?"

"Yes!"

"Then let the special examination begin!"

At the receptionist's signal, Kuruta and I readied our weapons. Hmm... She had a well-guarded stance but was still full of openings compared to Raiza. I'd been worried when I'd heard she was A-rank, but was this all?

"Hiyah!"

I lowered my stance and lunged forward. One flash later, the tip

of my sword ripped through the air, creating a vacuum blade. Kuruta's eyes widened at the sight of it.

"No way!" She leaped to the side and barely managed to avoid the slash.

Oh, was my move a rare one? But Raiza had called it "a basic move of the sword." The fact that Kuruta seemed shocked was even more shocking to me.

"An air slash... The hidden art of the Swordmaster. Where did you learn that?"

"From my sister— I mean, at a sword dojo in town."

"There's no way a dojo would teach a move like that! But fine, this means I don't have to hold back either," Kuruta answered.

Then, for some reason, she placed her daggers on the ground. Was this the rumored nil-wielding style? When I looked closely, I could see magic energy gathering in her hands. She was going to fight with magic blades instead of physical ones.

"Wooden daggers don't transmit magic very well, you see. It's easier for me not to use them at all."

"Ah! Kuruta, that's going too far! The special examination is just to assess strength, not fight to the death!"

"Don't worry. I won't injure him."

As soon as she said that, Kuruta leaped my way like she was dancing. She used irregular movements that made the most of her flexible body, swift and hard to read. It seemed she specialized in combat against people rather than monsters. But in the end, she was still inferior to Raiza. My sister's movements couldn't be read at all—the moment she drew her sword was the moment her blade reached me.

Since I had dealt with that kind of combat for so long, simply being able to see Kuruta's movements meant she was no longer a threat.


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"Hah!"

"Wha?!"

My sword struck her arm and shifted her trajectory. Kuruta lost her balance, and I did a half-turn to make one more strike at her back. She arched her back and cried out in pain, then— "I give. It's my defeat," she said, falling to her knees. She looked both somewhat regretful and refreshed as she made her declaration.

The receptionist acting as umpire blinked in astonishment. "H-He won?! A newcomer beat an A-rank?! What should I do? This has never happened before! Oh my!"

"Calm down!" Kuruta cried.

"Ah, I know! I'll call the guildmaster over!"

Before we could stop her, the receptionist ran off to find Abert. Kuruta and I exchanged a look.

"Good grief, she gets worked up so easily," Kuruta said with a sigh.

"Is she always like that?"

"Pretty much. But the bigger problem right now is..." She closed the distance between us silently.

What is she doing? There was something different about her aura, making me falter a little.

"You don't have to avoid me. It's not like I'm going to do anything scary."

"Um...what *are* you going to do? Something that involves me?"

"Yeah, I am. It's simple."

She paused for dramatic effect, and I gulped nervously. What was this feeling? I'd felt it with my sisters before! I watched her warily as she chuckled mischievously.

"Wanna join my party?" she asked.

"Huh?"

The question was so unexpected, I had to ask her to repeat it.

"Here's your reward for the materials: three hundred thousand gold!"

I accepted the coins from the receptionist and stuffed them in my wallet. A week had passed since the special examination, and I had

successfully begun my life as a D-rank adventurer. Since I had beaten an A-rank, there were talks of starting me at an even higher rank...but there was no precedent for that, and after taking my opinion into account, the idea was ultimately rejected.

I had been a little hesitant about starting at such a high rank. There was more to being an adventurer than just combat power, so it didn't feel right.

"Are you okay with this?" the receptionist asked.

"If you mean my rank, then I'm fine with D. I can work on raising it."

"That's great, but I meant the party with Kuruta!"

"Oh, that..."

I had thought hard about Kuruta's party invite ever since our mock battle, but in the end, I'd chosen to reject it. There wasn't much an A-rank could do with a D-rank, and I didn't really like how overbearing she was. It reminded me too much of my sisters.

"Like I said, Kuruta is one of the top adventurers of the Rajah branch. An invitation from someone like that is a very rare opportunity! It's such a waste to turn it down!"

The receptionist seemed irate at my decision—it was already the third time I'd heard this in the past week. Well, she was probably just worried about how I'd turned down such a good prospect. I'm sure it was unheard of for an A-rank to invite someone so much lower to a party, but in my case, I had been blessed by my sisters' guidance for so long, it didn't feel particularly special.

"Not to mention..." She grinned slyly and beckoned me closer.

I leaned in toward her.

"Kuruta's got quite the body beneath those clothes. I've been to the hot springs with her, and I can guarantee you won't regret it, Sieg!"

"Hey, what are you saying?!"

"Male-female adventurer pairs tend to end up in *that* kind of relationship, you know? You could have a chance too!" She giggled coquettishly.

"That won't be happening for me!" I blushed furiously at her teasing. It wasn't something to be proud of, but before leaving

home, it had been several years since I last talked to a woman other than my sisters. My relationship experience was practically zero. Even if I paired up with Kuruta, there was no way it'd develop into anything further. "Besides...there's something about Kuruta I just can't trust."

"How come?"

"Well, she was mocking me before we fought, right? The way she suddenly did an about-face and invited me doesn't sit right with me."

"Well, high-rank adventurers tend to be fickle like that. And in Kuruta's case, there are circumstances behind her search for strong comrades."

Circumstances?

I tilted my head curiously, and the receptionist covered her mouth with a gasp. She then slowly lowered her hand and smiled apologetically.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Could you pretend you didn't hear anything?"

"Of course. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you very much. Still, if you continue to reject Kuruta's invitation, you'll have another problem on your hands." She glanced around and, upon confirming that there was no one nearby, lowered her voice. "Like I said before, Kuruta is one of the top adventurers in this guild. Yet a newcomer keeps rejecting her party invite. What do you think the other adventurers will think when they see that?"

"Ah... You mean they'll be envious?"

"Exactly. You're already gathering attention for passing the special examination, so you have to watch your back."

I see...

That was an emotion I was very familiar with after living with my sisters. The feeling of being surpassed by someone who'd started learning after you was quite tough to endure. I could empathize with them, but that didn't mean I wanted to be targeted. My sisters had worked me to the bone, so it wasn't like I hadn't put in the effort to get where I was.

"In that case, I'll take some requests from town and lie low for a while," I said.

“From town... You mean town requests?”

Town requests were menial tasks like cleaning or transporting things for the townspeople. The rewards were generally low, so high-rank adventurers never touched them. Not even low-rank adventurers did them unless they were struggling for money, but it was extremely important work to keep up the town’s trust in the guild.

“Yes. I have some savings now, so I’ll slowly work on improving my reputation by doing town requests first.”

“That would be effective, but...are you sure? It’s almost unheard of for a D-rank adventurer to take on odd jobs.”

“Of course. I want to get to know the townspeople better anyway.”

After hearing my reply, the receptionist took out a bundle of requests with a look of resignation. Rajah wasn’t called the adventurers’ hub for nothing—the pile of town requests was as thick as a dictionary.

“Whoa, that’s a lot!”

“Well, no one likes to do chores.”

Did the receptionist have a mastery of speed-reading? She flipped through the bundle at light speed before suddenly coming to a stop.

“How about this one? The church has placed a request to clean up the graveyard,” she suggested.

“Let’s see... An eight thousand gold reward? Sounds good!”

“The church is pretty good about payment.”

“I’ll take it!”

And with that, I headed for the church at the edge of town.

Interlude: Big Sister Conference #1

While Noa was fulfilling the church's request, his sisters were gathering at his home in the Winster Kingdom. Due to their busy schedules, it had been roughly a year since the last time they had all gathered together.

Under normal circumstances, it should have been a peaceful family get-together. But on this day, the sisters were raging out of control.

"What is the meaning of this? Weren't you two here with him?!" a blonde girl with curls in her hair shouted angrily. Her name was Aeria. She was the oldest of the five sisters, and she also served as the young president of Fiore, the largest trading company in the land. It had been quite a while since she had last come home, and yet...she had returned to find that her little brother, Noa, had gone, leaving Raiza and Ciel behind. It was a complete bolt from the blue to her. "Why didn't you do more to stop him, Ciel?! You should've been able to restrain him with your magic!"

"Sure, I would've been *able* to, but I didn't *want* to!" Ciel snapped back. "You make it sound easy, but the slightest mistake could put Noa in danger!"

"Are you saying it *isn't* dangerous to let him outside?! Our adorable little brother could be attacked by monsters or bandits right this moment!"

"Now, now, let's all calm down. Fighting among ourselves won't do any good."


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A girl in a white habit interrupted Aeria and Ciel's quarrel. Her name was Fam. She was the third-oldest of the sisters and the saint of the Holy Cross Church that stretched across the continent.

"Noa leaving home is a crisis. But that is all the more reason for the five of us to band together to address the situation. Like the hero of legend, Helios, who likened his three sons to arrows—"

"Skip the sermon. You'll put Ecrecia to sleep." A listless blue-haired girl cut off Fam's long speech. Her name was Ecrecia. She was the youngest of the five sisters and one of the most famous artists in the land.

"In *Ecrecia's* opinion, you guys have always been too strict," she said bluntly. "It's no wonder Noa ran away."

"What?! You agreed with us before!" cried Aeria.

"That's right!" Ciel added. "When mom and dad passed away, the five of us decided that this was how we'd educate him. We may not be related by blood, but Noa is our precious little brother. We said we wouldn't spoil him and would raise him to be tough!"

"Yes. It pained me to be so harsh, but it was for the sake of making him stronger..." Fam murmured.

"That may be true, but there's a limit to everything," Ecrecia said, shooting Raiza an accusatory look.

Raiza immediately leaned forward to defend herself. "I didn't want to hurt Noa either! I wanted to guide him through every step gently! I wanted to shower him with compliments! But you all know that doing that wouldn't help him gain true strength. The most important part of fighting is having guts! An indomitable spirit can only be obtained through harsh training!" She raised her fist passionately, her words carrying the weight of her experience as the Swordmaster.

But Ecrecia merely furrowed her brow in disapproval. "There it is: Raiza's meathead logic," she said.

"Who are you calling a meathead?! You're not that smart yourself!"

"Smarter than you, at least. You can't even say your multiplication tables."

"I...totally could if you gave me enough time!"

"Then what's nine times three?"

"Guh!"

"Cease your petty bickering! There's barely any difference between the two of you!" Aeria snapped in disgust.

Raiza and Ecrecia fell silent in embarrassment. When it came to intelligence, the two of them added together couldn't hold a candle to Aeria.

"At any rate, our first priority is to locate Noa," Aeria continued.

"Yes, we have to secure him as soon as possible," Fam agreed.

"I don't think there's much to worry about, though. With his abilities, he easily could survive a dragon attack," Raiza noted.

"That's true. I was pretty thorough about beating knowledge of magic into him, so he shouldn't have a problem surviving. The bigger concern is..." Ciel trailed off with a serious look, hesitant to finish her sentence. The gazes of her four sisters converged on her, and she gulped nervously. "Well, if he succeeds out there and becomes *popular with girls*."

The air in the room instantly froze. The other four women had all but turned into stone, unable to speak a single word.

The silence continued for several seconds. Aeria was first to understand the situation and yelled hysterically, "Absolutely not! The only women allowed near Noa are his sisters! The general public getting near him is preposterous! We must eliminate them!"

"Indeed we must. Imagine if Noa got a girlfriend... God grant us salvation!" Fam cried.

"Grr... I'd never accept any other woman! *Never*!" said Raiza.

"Out of the question. Absolutely," Ecrecia agreed.

The sisters ranted noisily over each other for a while. Although they would never say it directly to Noa, the love they felt for him was on another level. If they ever deemed it necessary, they wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice themselves for him. Their strict attitudes were a reflection of that love.

"We have to move as fast as possible to avoid that," Ciel announced.

"In that case, I will return to the company and send out instructions. You girls begin gathering your own information!" Aeria

ordered.

"Understood. God, grant me your guidance..." said Fam.

"We'll have to pull ourselves together and get right to it," said Raiza.

"After a quick break, yes," Ecrecia agreed.

The rest of the sisters gave their replies, and Aeria wrapped up the meeting.

"Let's gather again the next time we're all free," she said. "Until we locate Noa, we should try to share information with each other at least once a week."

"That sounds like a good idea, but will you have time, Aeria?" asked Ciel.

As the president of a trading company, she was the busiest of the siblings. Her schedule was planned down to the minute, making it extremely difficult to secure free time once a week. Even the noble class had to wait months to meet with her.

"It's fine. If it's for Noa's sake, I'll *make* time."

"Perfect answer. Then we'll see you next week," said Ciel.

"Hopefully we'll find him by then..." Raiza murmured.

"Rest assured, those who have faith will find salvation," Fam stated.

"Just do whatever's possible," Ecrecia told them.

Thus, the five sisters commenced their full-blown search for Noa.

Chapter 2: Church and Underground Waterway

"Huh... It's pretty big."

On the outskirts of Rajah stood a grand stone building with a cross at the top of the tall roof—a church of the Holy Cross. They were the largest religious organization on the continent, and my own big sister Fam was the saint there. Given the scale of the institution, it was no surprise that their places of worship were so grand.

"Hello. Are you here for the cleaning?"

As soon as I entered the chapel, a woman in a habit approached me. She had the calm demeanor one would expect from the clergy, but there was a luster to her skin that made her seem quite young—in her early twenties, I would guess. Her gentle smile was charming, and she was quite an attractive woman.

"Yes. My name is Sieg, and I'm here about the job request to clean the graveyard."

"I see. Thank you for coming today. The graveyard is behind the church. Please follow me."

The nun led me through the chapel and out the back of the church, where we arrived at a rather large graveyard. There were countless gravestones lining the inside of the city wall, and my eyes widened at the magnitude of it.

"Whoa... It's huge."

"Adventurers gather in this town, as you may know. It's unfortunate, but there are quite a few who lose their lives in combat."

The border town Rajah was a famous hub for adventurers. But while many were here to chase their dreams of becoming heroes, not all of them made it out alive. It felt like I had just caught a glimpse of the darker side of the town.

"The other nuns and I normally do the cleaning, but we can't always keep up with a space this big. That's why we make regular requests to the adventurers."

"Looking at the size of this place, I can see why."

Just by glancing around, I could see a few hundred graves—it definitely wasn't a number the nuns could manage by themselves.

"The cleaning tools are stored in the shed over there. Help yourself."

"Got it."

"It's part of our etiquette to offer a prayer before cleaning a grave. Do you know how to do that?"

"Yes, of course."

That was something Fam had beaten into me. She was normally a gentle big sister, but she was extremely strict when it came to etiquette. Thanks to her, I knew my manners through and through.

"Then I'll be praying in the chapel. Please finish up for the day when you hear the church bell ring."

The nun bowed and went back inside.

Now, it's time to get down to business!

The bell rang a little before sundown. It would take quite the effort to clean the entire graveyard by then.

"Manual labor would take way too much time. I'll purify it with magic."

I made the sign of a triangle and cross with my right hand and instantly activated my light magic. White light rained down, erasing the dirt from the gravestones in no time at all. This was the light magic spell Blanche. It was normally used to purify undead monsters, but it could actually be used this way as well. It was a life hack Fam had taught me herself.

"Phew! I managed to finish it all."

Several hours of purifying gravestones later, just as the sun was starting to set against a red sunset sky, I managed to finish cleaning the graveyard before the bell rang. Sparkling clean gravestones surrounded me. It was quite a magical sight in its own way, and I nodded in satisfaction.

Man, it really feels good seeing things clean!

Hopefully the nun would be just as pleased to see it. I hurried inside through the back door to find her in the chapel.

"Sister, I'm done cleaning!"

"Huh? The bell hasn't rung yet..."

When I called out to her, the nun had turned to me with a skeptical look. She glanced over at the clock on the wall and turned to look at me disapprovingly.

"There are still thirty minutes left on the clock. Please do your work until the end."

"But I'm here because I've finished my work."

"Excuse me?"

Hmm. Our conversation didn't seem to be going anywhere. Maybe it'd be faster to just show her?

I dragged the begrudging nun with me back to the graveyard.

"I... Huuuh?!"

Rows of gravestones glittered in the sunset. The nun's expression changed the moment she saw that. She rubbed her eyes multiple times as though she couldn't believe what she was seeing, then turned to me with her jaw open.

"What... What's the meaning of this?!"

"Like I said, I cleaned it all."

"*All of it?!* Every last gravestone?!"

"Yes. That was the request, wasn't it?" I asked.

The nun shook her head furiously. "No, all I asked was for you to clean until the church bell rang. The most I expected you to complete was around one-fifth of the graveyard."

"What?! You didn't mean I should finish cleaning all of it before the bell rang?"

"Of course not! The graveyard is so big, it's impossible to clean in one day. I expected you to spend a week cleaning it all up."

Oh dear, it seemed I'd been completely mistaken. No wonder our earlier conversation had gone in circles.

"But I'm amazed you got it this clean. I can see my reflection in the stone."

"That's because I used magic."

"Washing it with water magic doesn't leave it this clean, does it?"

"It wasn't water magic. I purified it with light magic. An application of Blanche."

"*Blanche?!*" the nun exclaimed in shock. She looked around the graveyard once again.

"D-Did you cast Blanche on *all* of these graves?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Well, yes."

"I can't believe anyone is capable of such a thing!"

"No, it was no big deal."

"Thank you so much! *Thank you so much!*"

The nun grabbed my hand and shook it with tremendous enthusiasm.

Huh... This was strange. I'd been told that Blanche was the basic of the basics and that every clergyman should be able to use it. Was my sister's knowledge wrong again?

"Um...it's okay, you don't have to thank me that much. It's fine!" I said, desperately trying to get the bowing nun to raise her head.

I was baffled by her reaction, but it seemed I had done something pretty amazing.

"This is too much to accept!"

After returning to the church, I yelped at the amount of money the nun tried to hand me. There was one gold coin, then another, and another... The total came to a staggering five hundred thousand gold. Over sixty times the promised reward of eight thousand. It was way too much even for finishing a week's worth of work in one day.

"No, this is still undercutting it!"

"Huh..."

Still, I'd done this of my own accord. It didn't feel right to accept such a large amount of money for it. They were a large enough church not to face any financial hardship from spending this much, but still...

"The truth is, there have been several incidents involving the undead recently."

"Huh? Here in this graveyard?" I asked in surprise.

On rare occasions, bodies buried in their graves could resurrect as

the undead. But that only happened with graves that had fallen into ruin. It happened when they were abandoned for dozens—possibly hundreds—of years. The graveyard behind this church was tended to regularly by the nuns. It shouldn't have been possible for that to occur...

"Yes. We don't know the reason for it, but as the church in charge of maintaining the graveyard, we couldn't ignore it. That's why we were considering asking the saint to make a pastoral visit to our town..."

"The saint?!" Didn't that mean Fam?! If they called my big sister over, she could find me!

"Yes. But that need is gone now that you've purified it for us. I doubt we'll be bothered by undead when the graveyard is in such a nice state!"

"Oh... Well, that's great..."

I exhaled in relief. I was using a pseudonym just to be careful, and the saint shouldn't have anything to do with the guild...but my sisters had terribly sharp senses. They could probably detect me if I was within a several-kilometer radius of them.

"So that's why you were so grateful."

"Yes. A lot of preparation is required before a visit from the saint. The church here is one of the larger ones, but it's still a considerable amount of work."

"Considering the expenses involved in a visit from the saint, five hundred thousand gold is nothing... Is that what you meant?" I asked.

"Yes, exactly!"

Fam herself preferred to live a simple life of honorable poverty, but as the top member of the Holy Cross Church, she couldn't move around alone. She needed to be accompanied by guards and a minimum number of attendants. Requesting a pastoral visit from her could easily cost several million gold.

"Right, I understand now. In that case, I will accept the gold."

"Thank you very much. If you don't mind me asking, where did you learn to use Blanche? Only a select few from the Holy Cross Church can use such a spell..."

Really, now? My sister had suggested it as "a useful spell to remember," so I had assumed it was something simple. *Hmm...how should I answer her?* The nun was part of the Church, so I had to be careful not to reveal myself as a relative of the saint.

"U-Um... I learned it from the priest in my village."

"Priest, you say?"

"Yes. He was apparently quite an important person in the past. He taught me a lot of things."

"I see. Maybe it was Father Fezzan? Or Father Cordoba?" the nun muttered to herself with a hand to her chin.

Luckily, it seemed like someone similar really did exist. Clergymen must enjoy teaching things to people. I'd been able to dodge the question easily enough.

"Well, I'll be leaving now," I said.

"Ah, hold on a minute!"

"Yes?"

"You said you learned Blanche from a village priest, right? Did he teach you Sanctuaire by any chance?" she asked with a pleading look.

Was she being troubled by something? Sanctuaire was a spell that created a holy area that prevented the infiltration of miasma. Did it have something to do with the undead she'd mentioned earlier?

"Yes, I did learn that one. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like you to investigate the underground waterway. The density of miasma suddenly increased recently, and we suspect that has led to events like the undead in the graveyard. It's quite a large waterway, so it's difficult to investigate the miasma without Sanctuaire."

"Right, that makes sense."

"Of course, this will be an official request from the church through the guild. The reward should be about fifty thousand gold a day."

Fifty thousand a day! Those were quite favorable terms for an escort mission. The normal D-rank requests I took were worth eight thousand to ten thousand gold a day. Even after factoring in the

risks of the job, it was a substantial amount.

"In that case, I'd love to do it! But the rank of the request might be a bit too high for me since the rewards are usually decided by rank."

"Huh? Aren't you a high-rank adventurer, Sieg?"

"Aha ha. I'm afraid not. I'm only D-rank."

"Whaaat?! You're a D-rank that can use *Sanctuaire*?!" the nun screeched.

It took me another twenty minutes to convince her I wasn't lying.

The next day, I went to the meetup spot for the job request. The nun was already waiting there with two other adventurers. It seemed there would be other guards besides me. We were heading to a dangerous underground waterway, so it made sense to form a party.

"Good morning!"

I greeted them brightly, and the nun and male adventurer immediately returned my smile. But while they had turned my way and nodded, the female adventurer looked like she was in a terribly bad mood. She merely shot me a judgmental look.

"Let me introduce you," the nun said. "This is Nino and Rouga. Both of them are B-rank adventurers who help us quite often."

"I'm Rouga. Nice to work with you."

"My name's Sieg. It's a pleasure to meet you."

I exchanged a firm handshake with Rouga. He was a good-natured, traditional kind of veteran soldier. His body was large and muscular, but he didn't have a particularly intimidating aura. He felt more like a reliable big brother.

"I'm Nino. Pleasure." Next, the female adventurer—Nino—held her hand out with a blunt greeting.

Had I done something to offend her? I couldn't help but shrink back at her harsh gaze. Was I giving off bad body odor or something?

Rouga burst out laughing at my confusion.

"Don't mind Nino! She's just envious of you."

"Huh?"

I'd get it if she was a lower rank than me, but wasn't she a B-rank? I still didn't have any achievements to envy.

"Nino's a longtime fan of Kuruta, you see. She's asked to form a party with her several times now, but Kuruta's always managed to give her the slip. Then you appeared, with all the rumors of Kuruta inviting you to a party. That's why she's so grumpy."

"I see... But that's not my fault, is it?"

"Nope, it sure isn't. That's why: Nino, I get how you feel, but grow up."

"I can't help how I feel, but I'm a professional. I won't let it affect my work," Nino said in a cold tone. It sounded like she was willing to work together, but getting along would be a different hurdle.

I'd heard there were adventurers envious of me, but I hadn't thought I'd meet one here. Things had turned more troublesome than I thought.

"Don't mind her. She's just being a brat and taking it out on you."

"Who are you calling a brat?!" Nino snapped. "You acted the exact same way when the receptionist girl you liked got a boyfriend!"

"Don't bring up the past."

"It was only three months ago!"

The two bickered with each other for some time after that. Nino still appeared to be in her late teens, while Rouga seemed to be in his forties. There was enough of an age gap for them to be parent and child, but they were on surprisingly good terms with each other. Even their bickering was heartwarming to watch. Maybe they were more like teacher and student?

"Let's leave it at that and go on our way. Follow me, please!" The nun clapped her hands, interrupting their conversation. It seemed she was quite used to their antics.

She led us in the direction of the outer city wall. Roughly fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the end of the alleyway where the entrance to the underground waterway was located.

"That's a heavy-looking door," I commented.

"A criminal organization once made their base in the underground waterway. Ever since that incident, the entrance has been tightly guarded," the nun explained. She opened the thick steel door to the

underground, and warm air rose from within to blow our way. It clung to our bodies, making all of us frown. There was a little miasma that had been carried along through the air.

"This is nasty. The air's contaminated all the way up here," Rouga muttered.

"What could have caused it?" Nino mused.

"Sieg, can you please cast Sanctuaire now?"

"Of course."

At the nun's request, I held the palm of my hand out and recited the spell. There was no telling what could be waiting for us in the waterway, so I added a little more magic energy to reinforce the holy area created by the spell. White light flooded the place we were standing, covering the four of us like a veil.


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“Oh my! I can actually see the holy area! Even high-ranked clergymen struggle to create this level of density!”

“Wow. This is quite reassuring.”

“At least you’re not entirely useless.”

The nun and Rouga expressed their admiration, while Nino just looked vexed. She shot me an antagonistic glare. It wasn’t like I was trying to pick a fight with her or anything...

“Now that we’re ready, let’s get going!” The nun stepped into the corridor with a lantern in her hand. The three of us followed.

What could be waiting at the end of the eerie darkness? I considered the various causes of the abnormality as I went down the stairs.

“Phew...”

With the nun in the lead, the four of us made our way down the path beside the waterway. The stone tunnel was extremely dark, and the air was warm and damp. On top of that, the stench rising from the sewage was rather intense. Sanctuaire blocked the miasma and toxins in the air, but it was still a harsh environment to be in.

“This is harder than I thought,” the nun said, stopping to wipe her brow. Her breathing was harsh, and she seemed to be exhausted.

Two hours had passed since we’d entered the underground waterway. While we had taken a few breaks on the way, it was about time the fatigue set in. We’d already fought small monsters like bats and rats several times now, but unlike us adventurers, the nun was just a regular civilian. It was a little too much for her to bear.

“Are you okay? You’re looking pale,” Rouga said.

“I’m just a bit tired...”

“I’ll take the lead from here. Lend me the lantern and map,” Nino said, carrying the nun’s belongings for her. She wasn’t a B-rank adventurer for nothing—even though she was smaller than the nun, she still had a look of ease on her face.

However, it didn’t feel right to make a girl carry all the things. Rouga already had his hands full with his own weapon and belongings, so I figured I should step forward here.

"Shall I hold some of it?" I offered.

"No thanks. I'm trained for this."

"But..."

"You focus on maintaining the holy area. The miasma is getting thicker and thicker."

Jeez, there's really no persuading her at all...

But what she'd said was correct. The farther into the waterway we went, the thicker the miasma got—albeit in small increments. It wasn't enough to harm the body instantly, but keeping the holy area up was vital.

"I just have to lead us to the red mark on the map, right?"

"Yes. That's the deepest area of the waterway. But it's quite a distance away, so it's best to take frequent breaks."

"Sounds good. It'll probably be dark by the time we're done," Rouga said, checking the time on his pocket watch.

We walked for another thirty minutes until the path along the waterway suddenly came to an end, connecting to an open area. It seemed this was the confluence point for all the sewage in town. The huge space was like an underground lake, making for a breathtaking scene.

"It's huge!" said Rouga.

"Perfect, we can take a break here," Nino suggested.

"Okay! My feet are almost at their limit..." the nun muttered.

"Wait! Something's headed this way! Be alert!" I warned them.

There was a faint but odd presence in the area. Nothing small like a bat or mouse. I immediately drew my sword.

"It's here!"

"Tch! From below?!"

Five ghouls suddenly leaped out of the sewage. They had been hiding in the water, waiting for us to pass. What a nuisance!

I sliced off the head of one ghoul and kicked it in the abdomen. It was a clean hit. The monster lost its balance and fell back into the water.

"Take that!" Rouga yelled, using an explosive shield bash to fend off three of the remaining ghouls at once.

Whoa, nice power!

The ghouls slammed against the wall and fell down into the water. There was no sign of movement afterward.

Nino took on the last ghoul by drawing a black dagger and cutting off its head.

"Oh! That gave me a fright. Is anyone hurt?" the nun asked.

"We're all fine because of Sieg. Thanks for warning us," said Rouga.

"I suppose I should thank you too. You noticed before I did, and I'm a ninja," Nino muttered, bowing her head despite her curt tone.

If I recalled correctly, ninjas were warriors from the East who specialized in covert operations. I'd heard of them, but this was my first time meeting one. Nino's hair was black too, so perhaps she had Eastern blood in her.

"That was nothing. Being able to detect enemies is a basic skill."

"Really? I think it's pretty tough to detect enemies that are out of sight," Rouga said.

"It's a high-level skill," Nino added curtly.

Huh, really? My sister had said that every swordsman should be able to fight with their eyes closed.

"But this is a little strange," the nun noted.

"Hm?"

"Fighting off the undead is a normal part of church work, but I've never seen them waiting in ambush like this."

She looked at the defeated ghouls and tilted her head in confusion. Then she brought a hand to her chin and started thinking out loud.

"Ghouls have very low intelligence as a species. You could even say they *don't* have any intelligence. Their general pattern is to wander around and prey on whatever catches their eye. They shouldn't be capable of ambushing a group."

"I see. That *is* curious," Rouga agreed.

"They look just like every other ghoul, though," Nino replied. She crouched down to get a closer look at the ghoul's face. Then a ripple spread across the water behind her. The surface trembled, and a large black shadow fell over the murky water.

"Look out!"

"Huh?!"

I tackled Nino backward just as a large skeleton rose from the water. Hey now, what was something like *that* doing in the waterway?

Twisted horns that pointed up to the heavens, fangs that could tear flesh and shatter bones, and claws that could crush boulders... While it had lost all the flesh from its bones, its sheer size was enough to make its former appearance evident.

The four of us yelled its name in unison.

"A dragon zombie!"

In ancient times long, long ago, dragons ruled the skies. Their bones could be corrupted by miasma over many years, turning them into a type of undead called dragon zombies. As the species known to be the rulers of the sky, they remained extremely powerful even in death.

In terms of the Adventurers Guild, they were classified as A-rank —also known as the disaster class. A single one was capable of destroying an entire city.

"What in the world?! That's one hell of a monster!" Rouga yelled.

"We have to run! If that large body blocks the narrow exit... Aaah!" the nun cried.

A large group of ghouls had suddenly appeared in front of the tunnel.

You're not getting away, they seemed to say. Hostile intent could be felt clearly from their actions.

This was bad. No matter how weak ghouls were, it would take a while to defeat that many, and the dragon would catch up by then.

"This is a very clear trap. Is someone trying to kill us?" Nino asked.

"Maybe there's something past here they *really* don't want us to see," Rouga replied.

"At any rate, we have no choice but to fight now!" I drew my sword from its sheath once again, pointing it at the dragon's eyes.

It went without saying that dragon zombies were powerful monsters. They were tough to hurt when they were alive, as their

resistance to magic was ridiculously high, so they couldn't be purified by Blanche. Which meant the only option left was to fight it directly.

I could beat an A-rank adventurer. It would be fine. If I could defeat Kuruta, I could defeat a dragon zombie of the same rank!

That's right—I *should* be able to win!

"Rouga, you protect the nun! Nino, can you support me?"

"Leave it to me! I won't let it lay a finger on her!"

"I don't like it, but I will do my job properly."

Nino reached into her breast pocket and took out a black, star-shaped object.

Is that...a shuriken?

I'd heard it was a throwing weapon the ninjas to the East liked to use. The trajectory was hard to read, and they were annoying to deal with using a sword—or so Raiza had said.

"Hiyah!"

The shuriken curved in a circle and struck the skeleton.

Clink clink clink!

Sparks flew as the blade bounced between the bones. The dragon slowly turned to face Nino. It had barely taken any damage, but...

"Now's my chance!"

I burst forward and leaped up to the top of the waterway. The dragon zombie's reaction was delayed by just a moment. I had one target: the magic stone that formed an undead's life source. I dodged the claws that slashed at me by a hair's breadth and weaved through the bones.

"Raaah!"

I struck with all my might.

Clank!

My sword hit the magic stone inside the skeleton, and the high-pitched sound of a skull being pierced could be heard. This was a lot tougher than I'd thought! My slash was capable of cutting through steel, but it had been stopped by the stone's surface. The tremendous amount of magic energy inside it had formed a barrier.

My sword shattered.

“Tch!”

Damn it, I must have placed too heavy a load on it! It was a mass-produced sword I’d bought at the capital after leaving home—not a bad product by itself but nowhere near enough to withstand a dragon zombie.

“Use this!” Nino shouted, throwing me something.

What was this black object? It looked like a longer and narrower version of a shuriken, not something commonly seen on this continent.

“It’s a kunai made of black magisteel! It shouldn’t shatter so easily!”

“Thank you!”

I’d never heard of a kunai before, but I instinctively knew how to use it. I grabbed the handle, which had cloth wrapped around it, and stabbed the magic stone once more.

Focus.

The tip of the kunai made contact, and fierce sparks flew.


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"Take thaaat!"

I made one, two, then three stabs with the kunai at the exact same point. Swift and accurate, faster than the eye could see. By the time I reached ten stabs, the barrier protecting the magic stone was creaking in protest. With the sound of tearing steel, light shattered.

Crrrack!

The black blade dug into the blue magic stone.

"Groooooh!"

The dragon zombie made a terrifying roar as it was defeated. Its large body sank into the water and ceased moving.

Phew! I was worried for a moment there, but we managed to defeat it safely.

I landed back on the ground and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

"We're saved!" the nun cried.

"Yeah, looks like we're all good now," Rouga agreed.

"It vexes me to say this, but it was all because of Sieg. Thank you." Nino bowed deeply to me. Although she said she was vexed, she had a gentle look on her face. It seemed she had softened a bit since our first meeting and could now accept me a little.

Rouga and the nun copied her and bowed to me.

"I only did what I should," I told them.

We were comrades for this job, so there was no need for such gratitude. It was a little embarrassing having everyone bow to me. Besides, even though our opponent had been a dragon zombie, I still had a long way to go if I was breaking my weapons in combat. Raiza would've been able to stop it with a single stick, maybe even bare-handed.

"Still, I wonder who could've done such a thing. It was clearly an ambush for us," the nun said, looking around at our surroundings.

At some point, the ghouls blocking the exit had also vanished, almost like they'd been given the signal to retreat.

"No regular caster could control a dragon zombie," Rouga said.

"It'd be nice if we could go farther in and check what's there, but... Hmm..."

I picked up my broken sword and hummed in thought. I hadn't expected a situation like this, so I hadn't brought a spare. It was a little too risky to wander into the unknown unarmed.

"Let's retreat here. This request was for an investigation, not to fight high-rank monsters. We shouldn't push ourselves any further."

"Nino's right. Sieg's sword is busted, and we won't be able to win against another monster of that class."

Nino and Rouga calmly suggested for us to turn back. The nun nodded firmly in agreement. She seemed eager to leave this place as soon as possible; I could see her still trembling faintly.

While there was something bothering me, I decided to go along with the others. "Then let's retrieve the materials and head back," I said.

Thus, we returned to the surface to give the guild our report.

Chapter 3: Reward and Blacksmith

"I can't believe that happened in the underground waterway..."

That evening at the Adventurers Guild, the four of us gave our report to the receptionist, who immediately turned pale. A disaster-class monster had appeared beneath the town, after all. Anyone would react that way.

"Could you hold on for a moment? With the matter being what it is, I cannot deal with this here," the receptionist said in a hushed voice. She glanced at our surroundings worriedly. If anyone overheard us, it could create a panic. It made sense to move to another room.

"For now, could you wait in the meeting room? Do you know where it is?"

"Yeah, I know," Rouga replied.

"Then I'll go and call the guildmaster." The receptionist made a quick bow before hurrying behind the counter.

In the meantime, Rouga led us to the meeting room. He had previously used this room to negotiate with a client about a job request.

"Phew... I've been on my feet all day."

"We barely had any breaks on the way back. Even I'm exhausted."

The nun and Nino threw themselves down onto the sofa and sighed tiredly. After gathering the materials from the dragon zombie, we'd pretty much walked the whole way back without stopping. Rouga and I still had stamina left, but the other two were quite tired.

"After this report is over, I'm going to stay at a good inn tonight. The guild should be giving us quite the reward for our information," Rouga said.

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah, at least a million gold. If we split it between the four of us, it'll be at least two hundred fifty thousand each."

Whoa! That was quite the income! I'd be able to buy a new sword to replace my broken one too.

"Yay! Payday!"

"In your case, Sieg, you have the dragon materials to sell too. You can make ten million from that."

"Wow! Then we'd each get 2.5 million!"

"No, I'll pass on that share."

"I'm the client for the request, so there's no need to count me in. I don't have any qualifications as an adventurer either."

Rouga and the nun turned down their share of the profits. Sure, they had barely participated in the fight, but it was still gracious of them to give up such a large amount. That being said, I couldn't accept all of it like that.

"How about the next time we're on a job together, you take a larger share?" I suggested.

"Yeah, that works for me."

"And for the nun, um...you can come to me if you ever need help!"

"That works for me too. Thank you very much."

The two of them smiled. It would be nice to get along with them in the future, and hopefully Rouga would be able to receive his proper share next time.

"I'm also fine with a nine-to-one split."

"Are you sure, Nino? You contributed quite a lot."

"All I did was distract the enemy. You were basically fighting by yourself. It's an appropriate ratio."

Well, if she was fine with that, then okay! But if she decided to complain later, that could cause some trouble. And it also made me feel guilty keeping such a large amount to myself...

"You don't look convinced. Do you think I'd go back on my word?" she asked.

"Of course not! But such an extreme split is a little unheard of."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't do something so unsightly. I wouldn't want Kuruta to catch word of it. Besides, I'm a B-rank adventurer.

I'm not short on funds anyway." Nino thumped her chest proudly.

Right, she had a point. B-rank adventurers made enough to live comfortably as long as they weren't wasteful. There were a few B-rank requests posted on the bulletin board, and they all promised over one hundred thousand gold.

"Sorry for the wait!"

The guildmaster and receptionist came over while we were talking. We immediately stood up and greeted them with a bow.

"Oh, no need for that," Abert said. "Let's get right to it. You're sure it was a dragon zombie that appeared in the underground waterway?"

"Yes. We have proof too." I grabbed my magic bag and took a dragon fang out of it. Abert and the receptionist froze before its impressive size.

"I believed you to begin with...but it's a bit terrifying to see in person."

"Yes. And it seemed like there was someone in control of the dragon zombie."

"Please describe that in detail. If it's true, we have a terrible situation at hand."

"We don't have concrete proof of that part, but..."

We began to describe the events in detail. The more we spoke, the more the guildmaster's brow furrowed.

"All right, I get the picture. Lumeria, prepare an investigation team immediately. All members should be at least A-rank."

"Understood."

"Find out if there are any S-ranks who can move too."

"Will do. But don't get your hopes up," she answered with a troubled look.

There were only a limited number of S-rank adventurers across the continent. Even in an adventurer hub like Rajah, there was no guarantee one was present. It'd be lucky if there was one in the entire country.

"If there aren't any here, you can contact *them*."

"Are you sure?"

"I'd rather not rely on a nonadventurer, but sacrifices need to be

made at times.”

“Very well.” The receptionist nodded and left the room.

Who could they have been talking about? There couldn’t be many people on the same level as an S-rank adventurer out there. Maybe the general or the commander of the nation’s knights?

“Things should be okay with this. But please make sure to keep the matter to yourselves. There’d be chaos across town if this got out.”

“We know.”

“As for the reward...let’s see. I’ll make it one million per person on condition that you don’t speak of it to anyone else.”

Whoa! An even bigger number than expected! If I added it to the dragon materials, it’d be roughly ten million. A whole digit more!

“Wow... The situation is terrible, but that reward is astounding.”

“You’ll be able to make more in no time, Sieg.”

“Huh?! Adventurers sure are something else...” I murmured to myself in wonder at the unexpected fortune I had obtained.

“Ooh!”

A pile of gold coins was stacked on the counter. I stared at the sparkling mountain, spellbound. After selling all the dragon materials and accepting the reward for our information, we’d received a total of fifteen million gold. An amount this large was so rare to see, I could almost feel an unknown magic energy radiating from it.

“Please check that the amount is correct,” the receptionist prompted us.

“Uh, right! Um...”

I lined the gold coins up in stacks of ten. Since I was counting already, I figured I might as well separate everyone’s share too. Ten for the nun, ten for Rouga, twenty-five for Nino...

“There’s no mistake. There’s one hundred fifty coins in total.”

“Thank goodness. With an amount this large, it’s nerve-racking just to hand it over!”

“The same goes for receiving it! Okay...let’s split it now.”

“Aww yeah!”

“Hee hee. I’ll use it carefully.”

Rouga and the nun beamed as they accepted the coins. Nino also looked more pleased than usual. Although there were still things to worry about, it would be best to rest today. I took a deep breath to pull myself together. It was time to head back to the inn and have a good meal!

"Now, what to use this for? Oh, that's right, Sieg. After you've rested up, do you want to go to the waterway street tomorrow? You're not taking a new job either, are you?" Rouga asked.

"Sure. My sword's broken anyway, so I'm free tomorrow."

Stamina-wise, I could probably work if I wanted to, but there was no reason to push myself so hard. I wanted to buy a new sword anyway, so I was grateful for the invitation to town. I was still new to Rajah, so it'd be great if he could show me around.

"Eugh..." Nino groaned.

"I shouldn't have judged you based on appearances, Sieg. You're within your rights to go, but as a member of the clergy, I can't say I'm impressed," said the nun.

"Huh? What do you mean?" I looked at their disapproving faces in confusion. Was our conversation just now that bad?

The receptionist noticed my confusion and laughed. "Ah, Sieg only just arrived in town. You don't know what the waterway street is, do you?" she asked me.

"No, I haven't heard of it."

"The waterway street is a dangerous area where all the brothels are located."

"Wha?! Where were you going to take me, Rouga?!" I yelped in protest, but he merely stood with his hands on his hips and laughed heartily. He didn't seem to feel any shame—in fact, he looked rather smug about it.

"You don't get it. Adventurers are meant to go all out spending the money they earn! Since it's your first time, I'll teach you how to pick a good store."

"No, thank you! If I did that, my sisters would—"

"Sisters?"

Oh no! My sisters' enraged expressions had flashed so clearly in my head, I'd accidentally said more than I'd intended to. I lived

alone right now, so I didn't have anything to fear. My sisters really had a big influence on me, huh?

"Um, the sisters I left back at home wouldn't approve. That's all."

"I see. That was quite the look of fear you had just now. Are your sisters that scary?"

"Well, yes. But they raised me by themselves, so I'm grateful to them for that."

"Hmm. In that case, let's forget about it," Rouga said with a somewhat disappointed look. It wasn't like he'd invited me out of ill will, so I felt a little bad for turning him down. If only there was something to make up for it...

"Ah, that's right! Could you take me to a blacksmith, Rouga?"

"Do you want to buy a sword?"

"Yes. I have money now, so I'd like to splurge on something good!"

"In that case, I'll go too. I need to restock on shuriken," Nino said.

Come to think of it, the shuriken she'd used against the dragon zombie had fallen into the sewage. It didn't look like a mass-produced weapon, so it was probably best to order a new one soon.

Rouga thumped his chest with confidence. "Leave it to me! I'll introduce you both to the best smithy in town."

"Ooh!"

"He's a master craftsman I've yet to mention to Nino. He's quite expensive and only takes new clients through referral from regulars...so consider yourselves lucky!"

"Thank you very much."

Thus, we decided to visit the master blacksmith with Rouga's referral.

Late that night, after the Adventurers Guild had closed its doors, the receptionist, Lumeria, was working alone at the counter. She was still working on the tasks the guildmaster had given her.

"Hmm... I can't find anyone free. This is troubling."

Find out if there are any S-ranks who can move. Although she had gotten to work immediately after receiving this order from the

guildmaster, as she had expected, there was no one with any availability.

As the top members of the Adventurers Guild, S-ranks were always in high demand. In addition, many had enough fame and fortune to choose their jobs. Most only worked enough to get the guild off their backs, while the worst offenders tended to go AWOL entirely.

"It looks like I have no choice but to call *them*," Lumeria mumbled to herself, picturing the person's face in her mind.

That person was almost guaranteed to be reachable at their home. After all, the reason they kept refusing to become an adventurer was that they didn't want to leave. There was nothing wrong with their abilities. If anything, they were stronger than the guild's current S-ranks. But they were still an outsider rather than an adventurer. Although they were extremely capable, it wasn't right to rely on them all the time. Doing so could affect the guild's image.

Although the guildmaster had given permission to contact them, Lumeria hesitated. "Well...I suppose it's better to move sooner than later. I'll call them."

Considering where they lived, it would take two weeks for them to reach Rajah in the guild's high-speed carriage. It would be far too risky to wait for something more to happen before contacting them. The receptionist clapped her hands as she made up her mind and reached for the communication orb.

"Good evening. This is Lumeria of Rajah. I'd like to ask about Master Raiza's plans for the near future."

The Swordmaster, Raiza. As the strongest swordsman of the era, she often helped the Adventurers Guild.

"What a busy place!"

The next day, Nino and I were following Rouga through the east side of town. At one corner that was lined with workshops, we could hear the loud clanging of hammers striking metal and saw sparks flying from furnaces inside the stores as we walked along the streets. The energetic yells of the craftsmen could also be heard everywhere.

"I can feel their fervor all the way here. It's a little suffocating," Nino said.

"This is where all the workshops are located. There's about a hundred buildings in total," Rouga explained.

"A hundred?! That's a lot!" I exclaimed.

"Adventurers from across the land gather here. Materials from the border forest also end up here first, so it's natural for craftsmen to gather here."

I see, so there was both the demand and materials. It was no wonder the craftsmen would gather here.

"The dwarf nation is also nearby," Rouga added.

"I've never seen a dwarf before."

"Then today's your day. The smithy we're about to meet is a dwarf."

"Ooh!"

Dwarves were a handy race well-known for their blacksmith work. The equipment of the heroes of legend were all said to have been made by them. The sword Raiza had was also dwarf-made, if I recalled correctly.

"He's an old man with a bit of a temper, but he's the best in this town."

"I look forward to meeting him!"

It was the dream of every adventurer to have a powerful weapon. Due to our profession, we had to entrust our lives to them.

"Oh, we're here. This is the place."

"It's huge! I'd expect nothing less of a dwarf-owned store!"

Rouga came to a stop in front of a store with an extravagant entrance. It was a two-story building, larger than all the other workshops around it. The weapons displayed on the shelf all looked fancy and expensive. I should be able to get an amazing weapon here!

"Ah, not that one! Over here!"

"Huh?"

There was a narrow alleyway beside the store. Rouga had already walked ahead and was beckoning us over. We walked forward to see a small workshop at the end of the path. There was smoke coming

from the chimney, so it seemed to be in business, but...

"*This* is the place?" I asked.

"It doesn't look like the workshop of a master craftsman," Nino commented.

"Don't worry; this is it."

Rouga led us inside the workshop, where we were immediately greeted by a blast of hot air. Whoa! It was hot enough to make my head spin just standing there. I wiped the sweat from my brow as a bearded red-headed man came out from the back of the store. He had to be the master blacksmith Rouga had mentioned. At a glance, he seemed to be in his forties. The bulk of his muscles were in his arms, which were as thick as clubs, giving him a triangular frame. He was shorter than Nino, who was already on the smaller side, and looked exactly like what I'd heard dwarves were like.

"Hey, Barg! Your workshop's as hot as ever!"

"Ha ha ha! Our furnace has far more firepower than the cheap things out there!"

"Even so, your poor customers are suffering out here."

"Customers? Who, this scrawny guy and gal?" Barg turned to me and Nino with a skeptical look.

Lanky?! I mean, sure, I was slender compared to the likes of adults like Rouga. But it hurt to be called that as a man.

"This is Sieg, and this is Nino. They're my work colleagues. They might not look tough and brawny, but they're very reliable fighters. Sieg took out a dragon zombie just yesterday."

"A dragon zombie! That's impressive, but..." Barg marched up to me and started massaging my arm muscles with both hands.

Huh? The unexpected sensation tickled so much, I started laughing. "Wh-What are you doing?" I asked, squirming.

"Checking the quality of your muscles. Hmm. You must have gone through serious training. They've been built up extremely carefully..."

Barg muttered to himself while squeezing my arms. The look in his eyes was dead serious, but he seemed to be lost in his own world.

"I see," he said after a long moment. My arms were almost numb when he finally released me from his survey. "Just what kind of

training did you go through?" he asked in a serious tone.

"Huh? Normal training...swinging my sword and stuff."

"That alone wouldn't have resulted in that physique. You need to repeatedly push your body to the limit and heal it to result in something like this."

"Ah..."

Up until Fam was officially appointed the saint and left home, she had attended all my sword training sessions. Whenever I reached my limit, she would cast healing magic on me. If it had only been once or twice, I would've appreciated her kindness, but...every time I reached my limit, she would heal me. *Every* time.

Going through that over and over again was basically torture. It made me feel like a monster being tormented for having regenerative abilities.

"Looks like something came to mind?"

"Well, yes. Is my body in bad condition? Am I on the verge of falling apart after pushing myself too hard?"

"Not at all! It's the opposite; I've never seen such dense muscles before!"

Barg's eyes suddenly started sparkling in excitement as he enthusiastically raved about muscles.

"I'm pretty proud of my muscles as a dwarf, but mine are nothing compared to yours! I've never seen such awe-inspiring muscles. They're sublime—treasures of the muscle world! I can't praise them enough!"

"Um...right..."

"But the average sword wouldn't be able to withstand them. Hold on, I'll bring you a worthy sword right away!" With that, Barg rushed to the back of his workshop.

What in the world is happening? Left in his dust, I looked over at Rouga and Nino.

"It's in a dwarf's nature to appreciate muscles," Rouga said.

"Yes, there's no need to be bothered by it... Pfft."

"Ah! Nino laughed! Nino's laughing at my predicament!" I shouted.

"I am not laughing. That was...a sneeze."

"I've never heard of a sneeze like that!"

Nino and I continued bickering until a few minutes later, when we were interrupted by Barg and the jaw-dropping sword he'd brought with him.

Interlude: Holy Sword Versus Ancient Golem

While Noa was out shopping with Rouga and Nino, the Swordmaster Raiza had been summoned to the royal castle by the king. She wanted to refuse, as she was busy searching for her missing brother, but she couldn't turn down a royal decree. She tried to stop her discontent from showing on her face as she reluctantly visited the castle.

"Thank you for coming, Swordmaster Raiza."

"I will always answer your call, Your Majesty."

"Admirable! Admirable indeed. Now, there's something I want you to look at today."

Oh? What was it this time? He'd called her to show off a rare cat from the south that he'd requested from a merchant just the other day. She wasn't in the mood to deal with his boasting right now.

But Raiza swallowed the complaint that was on the tip of her tongue. Almost a month had passed since Noa left home. She'd been using all her connections to gather information, but she was yet to find a single hint about his whereabouts. Thanks to that, Raiza's mental state wasn't the most stable right now. She was at risk of snapping even though she was in front of the king.

"Are you feeling unwell?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine."

"Good. I was going to have you move a little today."

"Oh?"

"You'll see. Follow me."

The king stood up from his throne and started walking with his group of followers. Raiza followed him until they reached the training arena within the castle grounds. There were roughly a hundred knights of the Royal Guard stationed at the castle, and the training

arena was designed to allow them to practice to their hearts' content, so it was quite spacious.

There was an unfamiliar object at the center of the arena. It looked like a metal golem with thin pipes wrapped all around it.

"Now, Raiza, do you know what that is?"

"It looks like a golem, Your Majesty."

"Indeed, indeed. But this is no regular golem—it's an artifact excavated from ancient ruins, and it's equipped with an ancient weapon within."

Raiza became a little more wary of the golem when she heard it was an artifact. If what he said was true, it was almost priceless in value. She had been forced to look at many of the king's rare items before, but this was the first time he had shown her an artifact.

"Go on, Magrev. Activate the thing."

"Yes, Your Majesty! Right away!"

A man in sorcerer's robes stepped in front of the king and raised his staff in an exaggerated gesture. The golem got to its feet. It was roughly three meters in height. With its entire body made of metal, it looked like a knight of steel. It was no wonder the king wanted to show off its valiant figure.

"It's still too early to be shocked. Magrev, use the thing!"

"Right away!"

Magrev raised his staff at the king's order. Objects that looked like bundles of pipes suddenly flew out from the golem's abdomen. The knights guarding the king all raised their voices in surprise.

"Ooh!"

"Amazing!"

An explosive sound echoed through the area. The training dummies at the edge of the arena had been blown to pieces. Behind them, multiple holes decked the castle wall. If a human had been standing there, they would have been blown to smithereens.

"Astonishing, isn't it? This ancient weapon is called a Gatling gun," the king explained. "The explosive magic planted within the pipes can shoot two hundred small iron pebbles every minute."

"It's impressive. I've heard rumors of it before, but this is my first time seeing one in person," Raiza said.

"Indeed, indeed! As large as this world may be, there are barely any ancient weapons left in such good condition!"

"Yes, I wholeheartedly agree."

"So, Raiza...would you like to try fighting it?" the king asked excitedly.

Raiza paused. "Excuse me?" Even she was shocked by the sudden offer.

But Magrev immediately laughed. "Your Majesty, that is far too harsh of a request! There's no way a sword could win against this golem! Please think it through more carefully."

"Really? Raiza is the Swordmaster, you know!"

"Even so! This golem is a weapon made from ancient technology. A primitive weapon like a sword stands no chance against it."

"I cannot overlook those words, Sir Magrev," Raiza said firmly, clearly expressing her displeasure at his tone.

Magrev looked at the golem smugly. "Will you fight the golem, then?"

"Very well."

"Oho!"

This time, the lack of hesitation in her reply shocked both him and the king. Although they had suggested the challenge, they hadn't expected her to actually agree to it.

"So you will fight for me?!" the king cheered.

"Yes."

"But are you sure about this, Your Majesty? The golem can only listen to simple commands. Ordering it to go easy on her is—"

"There is no need for that. Make it come at me at full power," Raiza replied.

Magrev clenched his staff with a frown. "I won't accept any blame if you come to regret this."

But Raiza had already moved in front of the golem. She drew her sword. The steel had been refined to perfection, shining white under the rays of the sun.

"Your Majesty, will you grant me a wish if I win this battle?"

"Hm? Let's hear it first."

"My brother went missing a month ago. I've been so busy

searching for him, I'd like to take a leave of absence for a while."

"Very well. You have my word."

Raiza nodded in satisfaction at the king's response. She then held her sword so that it was pointed at the golem. The atmosphere shifted slightly. The clamoring nobles and knights fell completely silent.

Sensing that change, the king immediately raised his right hand. "Begin the battle!" he declared.

An explosive sound rattled once again. Hundreds of iron pebbles flew out of the golem's abdomen, mercilessly targeting Raiza. A single hit from the storm of pebbles could easily smash a human body. But Raiza merely smirked.

"What?!"

"That's impossible!"

"She's... She's cutting them down!"

Sparks scattered through the air with the clink of every metallic strike. Raiza's sword moved faster than the eye could see, turning into a barrier protecting her body. Several hundred iron pebbles were deflected, becoming fireworks that dispersed in the air.

"I-I can't believe it! Is she even human?!"

"It's my turn next," Raiza said.

"Guh! Crush her, golem! Your mithril body should be able to withstand any cut—"

Before Magrev could finish his words, Raiza ran forward. Her sword curved through the air with a flash, and an intense firework burst from the golem's body. The screech of tearing steel rang through their ears as the giant's body split vertically and fell to the ground in two pieces with a massive crash.

"Whoa!"

"So *that's* the peak of sword mastery!"

"The ultimate weapon of ancient technology...defeated just like that!"

"I will be taking that promised leave now. Good day." Ignoring the astounded royalty and nobility, Raiza immediately made her departure.

It was shortly after this that she received an emergency request

from the Adventurers Guild.


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Chapter 4: Black Blade

"Whoa! It's jet-black!"

The slender sword Barg had brought from the back of his workshop was completely black in color. It looked like it was made from a special metal. The blade released a strange light, almost making it look like dark glass.

I'd never seen anything like it before. My big sister Raiza was a sword-collecting fanatic, but her collection didn't have anything like this in it.

"What an unusual sword. What is it made of?" I asked.

Barg chuckled. "What do you think?"

"If I had to guess, maybe stone? It looks a little like obsidian."

"No way! As if it'd be made of a cheap material like that!" He shook his head furiously, offended by the mere thought. It seemed the sword was made of an extremely rare material—perhaps some kind of gemstone?

"May I hold it?" I asked.

"Of course. But it weighs a ton, so be careful."

"Whoa! You're right!"

The weight of the sword sank into the palm of my hand. It was like holding a lump of lead. How high *was* the density of this thing?

I gave it a light swing, and air whistled sharply as the blade moved. This was amazing! It was clearly different from any of the swords I had swung until now. It fit so snugly in my hand, I could barely feel the weight I'd felt earlier.

"What a nice sword!" I exclaimed.

"Right? It's my magnum opus!"

"So what is it made of? Tell us already," Nino demanded impatiently.

Oh, right, we still hadn't heard the answer to that. The three of us looked at Barg expectantly, and he snorted triumphantly.

“Meteorite.”

“Oh?”

“In other words, meteoric iron. It was originally a meteorite of this size, but it shrank in the melting process,” Barg explained, spreading his arms wide to convey the size.

At a glance, it seemed like the meteorite had been two meters in diameter. No wonder it was so heavy and hard—such a large object had been condensed down into a single blade.

“This is the strongest sword I’ve ever come across. It won’t break even if a dragon steps on it. It should be able to withstand your full strength,” Barg continued.

“Thank you very much!”

“And there’s something interesting about the material too.” He picked up a lantern from the side of the room. It was the type that created light through a glowing magic stone. He lit up the stone and brought it close to the sword.

“Whoa!”

The moment the tip of the sword touched the lantern, the light went out. A gold mist flowed out of the stone that had been glowing inside the glass and toward my sword, like it was being sucked into the blade.

“Was that magic energy just now?” I asked.

“Yup. The meteoric iron in this sword has properties of magic absorption and storage. If you use it well, you can cut and nullify magic.”

“Wow!”

Swordsmen struggled the most against magic attacks, but this sword had its own built-in countermeasure. Of course, I was able to use my own defensive magic, but being able to block spells with my sword would make things much easier.

“But it can’t absorb it endlessly. It needs to expel the magic after it reaches its limit.”

“Hm? Does that mean you can cast magic through the sword if you fill it up with magic energy in advance?”

“That it does. I bought the meteorite for this sword at an auction, and I had to outbid several people who were intending on turning it

into a staff."

"That's incredible! Casting magic through a sword would create much more freedom in battle!" I said excitedly.

But for some reason, Nino and Rouga both frowned. On top of that, Barg, who had been explaining things so happily moments ago, looked a little troubled—as though he were dealing with a child who had unrealistic dreams.

"Um...it's better not to include magic in your fighting style," Rouga advised me.

"Why is that?"

"People who can use both the sword and magic tend to try using both together. But in all my years, I've never seen it work out well. Not even once."

Nino and Barg nodded in agreement. I had thought it was a good idea, but I guess it was more difficult than it seemed. Now that I thought about it, my sisters had always said not to do things halfway. They liked to emphasize the necessity of mastering a single path first.

"Besides, isn't light magic your specialty, Sieg? That element is focused on healing and purification, so it isn't suited to combat," Nino said.

"Um...no? Light isn't my specialty or anything."

"Huh? But you used such a high-level Sanctuaire!" Nino stared at me in confusion.

But I wasn't lying. It wasn't like I particularly excelled at light or anything. Ciel and Fam had beaten *every* single element into me, though according to them, I had only been able to learn the spells "to an average level." If only I'd had an element I excelled in...

"Don't tell me... Are you saying you can use other elements at the same level as your light magic, Sieg?" Rouga asked.

"Yes, that's right."

"I take back what I said just now. You could probably make it work," he answered with a look of realization.

Once again, Nino and Barg nodded along with him.

"Back to the topic... How much will this sword cost?" I asked nervously, returning the blade to its sheath. It was made of

extremely valuable meteorite, and Barg had called it his magnum opus. Considering he was one of the top craftsmen in his field, it had to have a hefty price. I only had ten million gold on hand...and considering the quality of this sword, it didn't feel like enough.

"Let's see. First, the meteorite cost ten million at an auction."

"Ooh..."

"Next, I used a huge number of valuable flame crystals to melt it. After adding on a month of my labor..."

Barg muttered his calculations to himself. It seemed he had created it without really thinking about selling it, and now it was too much for him to handle. If Aeria had been here, she'd have been scolding him for failing at the basics.

"All right, let's go with thirty million."

"Thirty million?!" Rouga and Nino yelped with me.

That was enough to build a house in the city! But when accounting for the skill and materials that had gone into the sword, it seemed like a fair price. I just didn't have that kind of money, and though I'd had a smooth start as an adventurer, there was no telling how long it would be before I made that much. Dragon materials didn't grow on trees.

"Hmm... I don't have that much..."

"Even if you account for future earnings, it's quite a lot to save," Rouga agreed.

"Figures. How much do you have on hand?" Barg asked.

How was I meant to answer that? Perhaps it was best to be honest instead of haggling here. Aeria always said honesty was a basic element of business.

"Roughly ten million," I replied.

"I see. Then I'll sell it for that much if you agree to some conditions," Barg said.

"Really?!"

"Yeah. I've been struggling to find a buyer for this one for some time now, since there are barely any humans who can use such a heavy sword. Besides, those with more physical strength tend to prefer larger weapons. I went and made this without considering the consequences, just because I'd obtained some of the finest meteoric

iron. A rare failure from me, if I do say so myself," he admitted with a self-mocking laugh.

Huh, so that was why. The size of the weapon didn't affect air slashes, so I didn't have a problem with it. In fact, I found large weapons could sometimes get in the way—especially in narrow dungeon corridors and such.

"I get it. If you're willing to sell it for ten million, I'll buy it!"

"All right. It's a deal!"

"So, what are the conditions? If they're too out there, I might not be able to fulfill them..."

Seeing as he was offering a discount of twenty million gold—enough to build a small house in the countryside—his conditions might be extremely harsh to make up for it. Hopefully it wouldn't involve anything illegal.

Sensing my worries, Barg burst out laughing. "Don't worry! It's no big deal! I just want you to take a few of my job requests and prove you're a worthy owner of that sword."

"Is that all? Are you sure that's worth a twenty-million discount?"

"Of course! There's nothing better for a weapon than an owner worthy of wielding it. I was having trouble selling it anyway, so it's fine." He laughed heartily with his hands on his hips. It was a terribly generous offer, which probably meant he was making a fortune from his regular sales. When I looked closely, I could see his back teeth were made of gold.

"What kind of job requests are they?" I asked.

"I want you to gather rock titus shells for me. I use them as whetstones, but the supply has been unstable lately. I'd like to secure some in bulk."

"Rock tituses are B-rank monsters that are close to A-rank. They have extremely strong defenses, which swordsmen tend to struggle against," Nino explained without missing a beat.

If I had anything to add, it would be the fact that rock tituses were giant tortoises. Anyway, a monster that couldn't be cut was indeed a good opponent for a swordsman to test their ability. Considering how large the discount was, it was a fairly easy task.

"You sure know your stuff, miss. But he should be capable of at

least this much if he wants to be a worthy swordsman," Barg said.

"That's right. I'll do my best!"

"All right, I'll put an official request in through the guild, and I'll lend that sword to you until you complete the job."

"Thank you very much!" I shook Barg's hand and bowed deeply.

Oh man, I'd never thought I'd come across such a nice sword! The price was really high, but at least I'd gotten a sweet discount on it.

While I was sighing in relief, Nino and Rouga started talking to Barg themselves.

"For rock tituses, I'll definitely need more shuriken. Do you sell them here?"

"Yeah, they're over on that shelf."

"Ah, then I'd like to request a shield to hold the shelled bastards at bay. Can you upgrade this one for two hundred thousand gold?"

"Yeah, I can do that. At a specially reduced fee."

"Uh, excuse me!" I hastily interrupted them before they could get carried away. "Do both of you intend to come along?" I asked, looking closely at Nino and Rouga.

"Yeah?" Rouga replied.

"But we're not even a party or anything. You don't need to help..."

Now that the waterway investigation was over, there was nothing binding us together. We were just a gathering of three random people, tagging along with each other on a shopping trip. However...

"Don't be a stranger! Adventurers help each other out in a pinch!" Rouga insisted.

"Reluctant as I am, I have to keep an eye on you to make sure you don't go near Kuruta," Nino added. "Besides, rock titus requests will definitely be classified B-rank. You won't be able to accept it without forming a party with us, you know?"

Ah, she was right. Party ranks were determined by the highest-ranking member of the party. If I joined up with these two, I would be treated as a B-rank. Conversely, if I remained solo, I would only be able to take D-rank jobs.

"You two are the best! Thank you! Thank you so much!" I

thanked them both over and over again.

Thus, the three of us formed a party to hunt rock tituses.

On the way back from Barg's workshop, we dropped by the guild to register our party right away to make us all eligible to accept the rock titus request. We could have waited to apply the next day, but the guild was generally busy in the mornings.

"There's no problem with the form. I'll accept it now," the receptionist said with a bright smile.

Huh, did something good happen? She was in a much better mood than usual.

"You look super pleased today. Something good happen?" I asked.

"Can you tell? I finished dealing with the urgent situation, so I'll be able to get a good night's sleep tonight. A whole five hours!" she said.

Wow, five hours... That didn't seem very long... I was pretty sure humans ideally wanted eight hours. But if the person in question was happy about it, I wouldn't say anything. The Adventurers Guild had long business hours and lots of work to do, so she must have been pretty busy.

"The urgent situation... You mean the underground waterway?" Rouga asked in a hushed voice.

"Well, yes," the receptionist said with a nod. "An investigation team has been prepared. It'll be formed with talented A-rank adventurers."

"Right, and I'm one of them."

"Yep, Kuruta will be there too— Huh?!"

We whirled around to see Kuruta standing right behind us. She smirked mischievously and came even closer.

"Kuruta! Were you listening?" the receptionist asked.

"Yeah. You shouldn't be telling others about the investigation. It's not public knowledge."

"Oh, these people are the ones who discovered the monster along with a nun from the church," the receptionist explained.

Kuruta took one look at my face and nodded in understanding.

“Hmph. When I heard it was a newcomer, I wondered if it was you. I see I was right.”

“I hope I met your expectations,” I answered with a laugh.

“I’d call it apprehension rather than expectation. I’m sure you’ll mess up sooner or later.”

Apprehension? Did I really look like a dangerous person? I had always considered myself rather docile. Besides, all I’d done in this incident was discover the monster. It’s not like I’d created trouble myself.

“More importantly! Is it true you’re part of the investigation team, Kuruta?!” Nino suddenly interrupted, pushing between us. Her excitement and enthusiasm were unlike anything I’d seen from her before. I could almost see the sparkles in her eyes. Come to think of it, Rouga had mentioned she was a fan of Kuruta’s...

“Yeah, that’s right,” Kuruta replied.

“Please be careful down there. The monster at the end of the waterway will be quite formidable. If anything happens to you, I’ll—”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not an A-rank for nothing. I can make my way around any situation.”

“Of course! I am aware! But the threat in the waterway is completely unknown.”

“I know, I know. But this incident may have ties to my past. I want to go no matter what,” Kuruta said, expression darkening slightly. Her lighthearted tone vanished, replaced by seriousness.

The receptionist had once said she had her own circumstances. Was this related to that?

“Ties?” I asked.

“It’s a common enough story. I’m pursuing the demon that destroyed my hometown. They specialized in undead sorcery.”

“I see. So you think this incident might be related to the demon.”

“But there are many demons that can use undead magic. It might not be the one I’m after.”

Despite her words, Kuruta had a confident look in her eyes. Perhaps her intuition as an adventurer was telling her otherwise. Whatever the reason, she seemed to believe the matters were related.

“In that case, please take this,” I said, taking a small pouch from my pocket and offering it to her.

She narrowed her eyes curiously. “What is this?”

“A protective charm. The magic stones inside are infused with light magic. It should be able to ward off some of the miasma.”

“Huh. That would be useful.”

“A rare moment of thoughtfulness from Sieg! Please take it with you, Kuruta!” Nino said, snatching it out of my hands. She muttered something under her breath like she was casting a curse before handing it over to Kuruta.

She’d just cast something on it, hadn’t she? I could feel a faint shift in the magic energy. “Did you just booby trap it, Nino?”

“Don’t be silly, Rouga! I didn’t do anything!”

“You *sure*?”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind. Nino wouldn’t do anything to harm me.” Kuruta dismissed him with a laugh, accepting the charm. “Thanks!” She then left with a wave—not surprising for a broad-minded A-rank adventurer.

“Time for us to leave too,” Rouga said.

“Yes. We need to prepare for tomorrow,” Nino agreed.

“I hope the investigation goes smoothly,” I replied.

“Kuruta is with them. No matter what happens, she’ll figure it out.”

Nino had real confidence in Kuruta’s abilities, huh? Well, there was nothing we could do about it either way. It was best to focus on our own job request.

With that, the three of us returned to our respective inns in preparation for tomorrow.

Chapter 5: King of the Wetlands

In the border forest west of Rajah, roughly half a day's walk south, there was a large wetland that ran along the edge of the forest: the Pantanel Wetlands. Rain fell there for most of the year, and an eerie white fog covered the land even in the middle of the day.

There were many powerful monsters that lived here, so only veteran adventurers ever visited the place. Rouga said it had been a while since he'd last come too.

"It's so humid," I said, pausing to wipe my brow. Moisture lingered in the air and clung to the body. The land was also hard to walk on.

"Let's take a break. The rock tituses are still a little ways off," Rouga said.

"Have you fought rock tituses before?" I asked.

"Yeah. It was also for a request from Barg."

"Huh."

That was reassuring to hear. But this was still a request for me, so I couldn't rely on him too much. He didn't need to do any more than help out as a party member.

"Rock tituses are basically ridiculously huge tortoises. As long as you watch out for their bite, you shouldn't have a problem, Sieg."

"Their bite?"

"Yeah. They extend their necks and snap at you. Their jaws are so powerful, they can munch through a boulder this big with ease!" Rouga spread his arms to show how large. A human body would stand no chance against an attack like that.

I gulped nervously.

"You should also watch out for the wetlands. It's rare, but bottomless swamps do exist here," Nino added in warning.

"Urk... That sounds problematic. How do you tell where they

are?”

“They’re slightly darker in color compared to the area around them. For example, over there.”

Nino pointed at a spot roughly fifteen meters in front of us. Upon closer inspection, I saw there was a dark, oval patch of ground.

“Watch this. Yah!”

She picked up a long branch on the ground and threw it like a javelin. The branch arced elegantly through the air and stabbed into the middle of the dark ground. It was nearly as long as a human but was swallowed up in no time at all. It took less than ten seconds to vanish from view. Although it was just a waterlogged branch, it had disappeared at a terrifying speed. If a human stepped there...it would be a disaster.

“Do you see how scary bottomless swamps are?” Nino asked.

“Yes. I’ll be sure to watch my feet when I fight.”

“You can also use them to your advantage and trap your prey. But you put yourself at risk that way, so I don’t recommend it,” she added.

That was an option in a pinch, but it didn’t sound like something to go out of my way to try. At worst, we could fall in with the enemy.

“Well, I’m sure Sieg won’t have an issue fighting them the normal way. He has that sword too,” Rouga said.

“Yes. With a sword like that, he can cut through a rock titus’s shell.”

I looked down at the black sword I’d borrowed from Barg. Forged from hard meteoric iron, the blade was sharp enough to slice right through a hard shell. In fact, it was so sharp, it made it harder to handle. I worried about slicing off a finger every time I sheathed the blade.

“Nah, it’s not possible to cut through those shells,” Rouga argued.

“With a sword like that, I’d say it is,” Nino insisted.

Rouga shook his head vigorously. “No way!”

Was it really that impossible? My sister would’ve said a swordsman should be able to cut through steel using a wooden sword. Were her standards weird after all?

“Let’s get going already,” Nino said.

"Yeah," Rouga agreed.

We resumed walking for a while. Eventually, a large black shadow appeared on the other side of the white fog. It was as large as a mountain, but it was slowly moving. There was no mistaking it—it was a rock titus. And there were more nearby.

"There it is," Nino said.

"Yeah. There's more than I expected," Rouga said.

"I'll lure one over with a throwing knife. Get ready to shield yourself, Rouga."

"All right. And Sieg will take it out while we're distracting it, right?"

Nino nodded. "Yes."

Right. That sounded like a good plan. All I had to do was land a powerful blow on the enemy once it was lured over.

"Here goes. Yah!" Nino took out a shuriken and threw it. The star-shaped blade rotated rapidly, making a sharp curve like a pendulum. It struck the rock titus directly in the head.

The rock titus roared in an un-tortoise-like voice. Its humongous body then proceeded to move rapidly—again, at an un-tortoise-like speed. The ground shook with each step of its elephantine feet. It really was a giant size, almost like a moving castle.

"Over here! Come on!" Rouga yelled with his shield braced, drawing the enemy's attention.

The rock titus's head suddenly shot forward. Jaws and teeth like a crocodile's brushed past Rouga's shield. That must have been the bite attack. It sure packed a punch! Shield or not, a direct hit from that would hurt. But at the same time, it created quite a large opening.

"Hiyaaah!"

The creature's extended neck took some time to return to its normal length. I used that time to swing my black sword down.

A satisfying crunch could be heard, and blue bodily fluids sprayed everywhere as the head flew through the air.

"All right! That's one down!" I cheered.


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When I turned back, I could see a second one already making its way over, followed by a third and a fourth. It seemed the group had been alerted to the threat. For tortoises, their reaction speed was surprisingly fast.

This...was a little unexpected.

"Hey! I've never seen them rush all at once before!" Rouga yelled.

"Wild monsters can instinctively sense the strength of their enemy," Nino said. "Perhaps Sieg is simply too strong to be ignored."

"It's my fault?!"

Nino laughed. "Be proud they're acknowledging your strength! Looks like we'll have to deal with them all in one go!"

Rouga immediately moved forward to protect us, and thus, the rough-and-tumble commenced.

"Groooh!"

With an unusual roar, the herd of rock tituses charged. Their speed was unimaginable for tortoises. If not for their golden eyes, it would have looked like a small mountain range was moving on the other side of the fog.

"Guh! Their attacks pack quite a punch!" Rouga shouted. He stood at the front of our party, parrying the bites of the enemy. His B-rank experience really shined here—he was able to redirect the heads of the charging rock tituses smoothly with his large shield. But the more the enemy rushed him, the more difficult the situation became.

"Over here! Yaaah!" Nino threw her shuriken to assist Rouga. She seemed to be using some special technique to throw the projectiles. The black stars moved randomly, as though they were being pulled in every direction by strings.

The shuriken struck the titus shells one after another with a series of loud metallic clanks. The rock tituses were large, but they weren't too smart. Unable to follow the trajectory of the shuriken, they chased them in the wrong direction.

I used the opening Rouga and Nino had created to slash at the monsters. "Take this! Hiyaaah!"

My black blade flashed. Their heads flew, spraying blood everywhere. The sword forged from meteoric iron carved through their tough skin like paper.

A deep, earth-rumbling roar resounded from somewhere.

"Huh?" *What was that?*

The tituses came to a sudden stop and immediately began to retreat. We watched the fleeing herd with confused looks.

"What just happened? They suddenly turned docile," Rouga said.

"I have a bad feeling about this," I answered.

"Look over there! Something's coming!" Nino shouted.

She was pointing at a titus that was one head taller than all the others around it. Its shell was a fiery red, and steam rose from the holes opened across it. It was like a walking volcano. That couldn't be a rock titus...

I glanced over at Rouga, who clicked his tongue with a grimace.

"That's a magma titus, a deviant species of the rock titus," he explained.

"Is it strong?"

"In terms of pure strength, it's not much different from the others, but... Watch out!" he yelled just as the magma titus sprayed steam from its mouth.

Hot! I managed to avoid direct contact, but I could feel the intense heat from where I was. A dead branch on the ground caught fire. The blast looked like regular steam, but it was basically a flamethrower!

"Humans don't stand a chance against its vapor," Rouga warned. "It also releases heat from its entire body, so you'll get burned just by going near it!"

"Doesn't that clearly make it stronger than the rock titus?" Nino asked.

"Its shell is much softer, and it doesn't have the magic resistance of the rock titus. It also moves pretty slow, so it can easily be defeated by mages. But there's no worse matchup for a swordsman."

Right, so it was the type that specialized in killing close-combat classes. *In that case, there should be a way of dealing with it.* My black blade had the unique ability to act as a catalyst for magic. It

should be possible to add magic energy into my slash attacks. The spells I knew were focused on support, so it wouldn't have much offensive power...but a magic blade might be able to defeat that giant magma titus.

No, it *had* to.

"I'm going to use a magic blade!"

"A magic blade? What's that?" Nino asked.

"I'll put magic energy into a slash attack and send it flying! It should be able to cut the magma titus!"

"Hey, now! Is such a thing even possible?!" Rouga shouted.

They looked completely bewildered. Of course they would. When I'd bought this black blade, we'd mentioned combining magic with sword moves as a possibility for the future. No one would have expected that future to come the very next day. I was still skeptical about it myself.

"I don't know if it'll work, but I think it's worth a try. I don't see how else we can defeat it," I pointed out.

"I heard you were capable of using air slashes. Can't you try that first?" Nino asked.

"That's normally for combat against other people. It doesn't have much power."

The magma titus might have a softer shell than the rock titus, but it was still as hard as a rock. A weak slash of air probably wouldn't work on its defenses. Not unless it came from my big sister...

But I was still an amateur, so I couldn't live up to her yet. There was also the option of aiming for the neck, but the magma titus appeared to have a shorter one than the rock tituses. Instead of a weakly guarded bite attack, it had evolved to use a steam attack.

"Can you stop it from moving for a few moments? I need a little bit of time to prepare my magic blade."

"All right, I'll try. But my shield...would require getting up close," Rouga said.

"I'll do it. I have an idea," Nino said with confidence.

I exchanged a look with Rouga and nodded. It would be best to leave it to Nino.

"Now..."

Nino ran in front of the magma titus. She took out a shuriken and threw it forward, purposefully keeping it straight. The shuriken struck the enemy right between the eyes, drawing its attention to her.

"This way! Follow me!"

Nino controlled the magma titus's movements by changing where she threw the shuriken from.

The vulcanian body slowly began to accelerate in speed as it stomped loudly toward her.

"Yah!"

A threaded kunai flew from Nino's hand, lodging deep into the branch of a dead tree with a thunk. Nino leaped backward with all her might, using the rope from the kunai as a swing. She was...

I see! The magma titus was headed toward a darker patch of land. I clapped my hands in realization—Nino was luring it to the bottomless swamp!

"Groooooh!" The front half of the magma titus's giant body sank into the ground. It was so big, it couldn't fall all the way into the swamp...but that was enough. I gathered my magic energy before it could escape.

"Take this! Gyaaaaaah!"

The power of ice filled the black blade, and a blade of ice was sent flying with the slash attack I released. Cold air drew a white line as the blue slash flew through the air. The vulcanian shell froze over in an instant. Then, with a screeching scream, the monster's body split apart.

Yes! It worked!

I pumped my fists in celebration.

"I was worried for a moment there, but I'm glad it all worked out!" On the forest path back from the Pantanel Wetlands, Rouga laughed heartily.

Our hunt had been a resounding success. We'd taken down four rock tituses and one magma titus. According to Rouga, that was nearly two million gold *after* subtracting what was needed for Barg. If we divided that by three, it was quite a large amount for one day's

work.

"So, Sieg, how do you feel about going to the waterway street this time? With this much gold, I can introduce you to a nice store!"

"Um..."

"Isn't it about time you grew out of your womanizing ways, Rouga? This is why you end up so broke, you have to mix your ale with water."

Ale was already low in alcohol, so wouldn't that make it mostly water? I gave Rouga an unimpressed look. He nervously avoided making eye contact.

"It's none of your business what I do!" he snapped.

"It's inappropriate to mention it in front of a refined lady like me, at least."

"Pfft. A refined lady, right."

"Ah! You just laughed! I heard it!"

Rouga and Nino bickered between themselves. Good grief. Were they good friends or not? With their age gap, it looked like a family quarrel between a father and daughter.

"Uh, at any rate! Let's hurry and get this back to town!" I interrupted.

"You're right. If we don't hurry, night will fall," Nino agreed.

The sun was already beginning to set. It was still the season for long hours of daylight, so we would probably make it if we hurried. The two reluctantly ceased their bickering and walked faster.

"You're both higher-ranked than me, so please act like it," I said.

Rouga laughed. "I don't want to hear that from you. It's terrifying to think of what you're capable of if you're like this at rank D."

"Come to think of it, why don't you rank up, Sieg? You should've fulfilled the conditions for it already," Nino added.

"Ah..."

There were two main conditions for ranking up. The first was to complete a certain number of job requests at your current rank or higher, and the second was to have enough achievements for the guild to approve of your ranking up. The achievement condition was basically a bonus, so as long as you didn't go out of your way to only grab safe jobs, it was fine.

"I should make the quantity condition with my next job."

"Great! Then you'll officially be C-rank!" Rouga said.

"Yes!" Nino agreed.

C-rank was the middle class of adventurers. Many adventurers ended their careers there. It was basically the ceiling for those without talent. At some branches, C-rank was the highest rank available.

"The rewards start getting more lucrative at C-rank. You start earning enough to live comfortably, and it's the most enjoyable period for an adventurer—although you do have to deal with more troublesome requests."

"Such as?"

"C-ranks are obligated to participate in emergency requests from the guild. There's no punishment for refusing, but if you want to have a peaceful life as an adventurer, it's better to accept them."

"Requests from the guild don't reward as much either. They're the most familiar with the market price, so they aim for the bare minimum that adventurers will accept."

Hmm...so it wasn't always advantageous to increase one's rank. Well, even if it was a minimal reward, that wasn't a problem as long as they paid up. And the Adventurers Guild seemed reliable in that regard.

"Oh! There's the town!"

While we were speaking, Rajah came into view. It was just a little longer until we got home. Since we were on a downward incline, we ran the rest of the way.

Roughly thirty minutes later, we had safely reached the town.

"Phew! We managed to make it back! Next stop, the guild— Oh?"

"What's the matter, Rouga?"

"Isn't it kind of noisy over there?" Rouga pointed to the edge of the square.

Like he said, a small crowd had formed. Was something going on? Judging from the looks on their faces, it wasn't for entertainment. They all seemed kind of nervous.

"Hey, is that the nun?" I asked.

A familiar girl in a robe was at the center of the crowd. She was

the nun from the church, whom we'd been with just the other day. She looked terribly pale, as though she was upset by something. We made our way through the crowd to reach her.

"What are you doing over here?" I asked.

"Ah! It's Sieg! Something terrible has happened! The graves... The graveyard!"

"Take a deep breath. Calm down before you speak," Nino said, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder and breathing deeply, encouraging the nun to copy her and regain her composure.

"Do you remember the graveyard you purified, Sieg?" the nun asked.

"Of course. It wasn't that long ago."

"The truth is...more undead showed up there. Thankfully, it was in the middle of the day, so they were suppressed without an issue, but once night falls..."

"Huh? But didn't you say it was fine because I purified it?"

"Yes. It should have been impossible for undead to manifest in that state. That's why I have to go to the guild for help. But I also have to call for the citizens to evacuate... Oh, what should I do first?!"

After explaining everything in one breath, she clutched her head in a panic. She was completely overwhelmed by the situation, which was understandable, since I had believed the graveyard to be safe too.

"The first priority should be to keep the undead within the graveyard. Rouga, Nino—it'll be a battle, but are you willing to come with me?" I asked.

"Of course," Rouga replied.

"Let us make haste. Who knows how much time has passed by now," Nino agreed.

Judging from how many people had gathered, it had been some time since the nun had arrived at the square. If we didn't hurry, things could get troublesome.

"Whoa! What now?!" Rouga yelled.

"An earthquake?!" Nino asked.

"No, this tremor is from an explosion... I have a bad feeling about

this. Run!”

The ground was shaking like something was trying to burst out. We ran toward the graveyard with a feeling of foreboding.

Chapter 6: What Rose from Underground

"Ugh! There's miasma everywhere!"

At the large graveyard behind the church, we found the area I had purified with light magic completely steeped in miasma. How could this have happened in the span of a few days? No graveyard should build up this much miasma in such a short time.

"Sanctuaire!"

I immediately deployed a holy zone to protect us from the miasma. A white, veillike barrier surrounded the three of us. The pale-purple miasma hanging in the air around us was immediately cleared.

"That should protect us for a while," I said.

"Thanks. I wonder where the miasma came from..." Rouga muttered.

"It might have something to do with the underground waterway," Nino said.

"Even so... Whoa!"

The ground shook once again as thunderous explosions echoed up from underground. It was like something was ramming against the surface of the earth. There was no way this was an earthquake.

"That was a close one. Nearly bit my tongue," Rouga said.

"Grrrrrr!"

"Tch!"

With an eerie cry, a rotten hand reached up from the base of a gravestone. The orange sunset was turning into a navy night sky. The undead woken by the miasma began crawling out of their graves with the nightfall.

"There's so many of them! Nino, Rouga, can you help gather the ones in front of me? I'll purify them all at once with Blanche!"

“Leave it to me!”

“I can handle that.”

Rouga got his large shield ready as Nino grabbed her daggers. The pair directed the swarming zombies to gather before me.

“Blanche! Blanche!”

I cast purifying magic twice in succession at the moving wall of zombies. The holy light turned them to ash, returning them to the ground. Although there were a lot of them, they were just the lowest-ranked zombies. With the support of my black blade, I’d cleaned them all up with one spell.

“Looks like we’ll be done in no time!” Rouga said.

“Yes. Thankfully they’re just zombies,” Nino agreed.

“Huh?! There it is again!”

For a third time, the ground shook. It really seemed like something was happening below us. We braced our legs and waited for things to settle, but there was no sign of it easing up. In fact, the shaking seemed to be getting closer.

“Something’s coming!” Rouga warned.

“A giant mole?” Nino asked.

“They don’t live near here!”

“It’s here!” I shouted.

The ground exploded, sending the zombies flying. At the same time, intense miasma spouted out of the ground. We carefully moved over to see that a large hole had opened in the middle of the graveyard. It appeared to be quite deep, as we couldn’t see the bottom even when we leaned over the edge. A deep darkness lay within.

“What is this?” Rouga asked.

“It looks like something burst out from below,” Nino replied.

“This humid air... Is it connected to the underground waterway?” I asked.

“Most likely,” said Rouga. “Nino, do you have the map of the waterway memorized from last time?”

“Of course I do. It’s a basic ninja skill.”

“Then do you know what part of the waterway we’re above right now?”

She brought a hand to her chin and thought for a moment. She had only borrowed the map from the nun briefly. Was she really able to remember it? I was watching her with a dubious look when she suddenly gasped.

"The farthest corner. We're right above the deepest part of the waterway!" she said.

Rouga looked shocked. "Really?"

"That doesn't sound like a coincidence..." I murmured. Somehow, I had a bad feeling about this. I quickly held a hand out to urge Rouga and Nino backward.

One step, then two. We slowly distanced ourselves from the edge of the hole. You could call it a gut feeling. For no reason at all, I just felt like it was better to do that.

Then, from the bottom of the hole, a hair-raising screech could be heard. At the same time, a large humanoid figure with wings flew out. It was a grotesque shape that was neither human nor beast, with skin that had a black sheen. It clutched a small girl in its large claws.

Wait, that silver hair was—

"*Kuruta!*" Nino screamed.

"Oh no! Kuruta!" I yelled.

Somehow, she had been captured by the monster. She seemed to have been knocked unconscious, as she was being taken away without a struggle.

"Hold it right there! Stop! Stop moving!" Nino desperately threw her throwing knives at the departing monster. But its wings appeared to be made of metal, as it deflected the projectiles without flinching.

I also released an air slash, but it evaded it as well. It seemed to be quite a strong monster. Or perhaps...

"It might be a demon!" Rouga shouted.

"A demon?! That thing?!"

"Yeah, it matches the features of the one spotted at the border forest before."

"We have to report it to the guild right away! Kuruta's been... Kuruta's been taken!" Nino cried in a panic. Her idol had been

abducted by an unknown being; it was unsurprising that she was upset. It was impressive that she could hold a conversation in her current state at all.

"Yes, we should go right away!" I agreed.

"You two contact the guild. I'll stay here and clean things up," Rouga said.

"Thank you very much! That'd be great!"

And so, Nino and I left Rouga to handle the graveyard and ran to the guild.

"That *does* sound bad," the guildmaster said once he'd heard our report. He had a deep frown on his face. The appearance of a demon was a serious incident.

"What could have led to this? Holes shouldn't open up out of nowhere," I commented.

"The demon must have set up a base underground. The undead have appeared in the graveyard before, but it makes sense if they were caused by the miasma seeping up from underground."

Miasma could desecrate and corrupt anything it came in contact with. Given enough time, miasma deep underground would eventually build up and reach the surface.

"I see. And when the investigation team reached the demon's base, he decided to flee."

"Sounds about right. You said you heard an explosion before the hole appeared, right?"

"Yes, several times."

"The cornered demon was probably blowing up his base. Then, when a hole opened from the explosions, he took that chance to escape."

It was all conjecture, but the guildmaster summarized the situation succinctly. The miasma that filled the underground waterway had probably come from that base too. The dragon zombie's presence could also be explained as a guard for the base.

"But why was Kuruta taken?" Nino asked. "I cannot imagine a winged demon would need a hostage to flee. I also can't believe a demon would be cornered so easily, even when facing a team of

elites.”

“That’s a good point,” I agreed. “He was so powerful, he should have been able to put up a good fight.”

I recalled how he had deflected our attacks with his wings. With that much strength, he would have been capable of fighting the investigation team. Considering the violent personality of most demons, it was unnatural for him to just flee.

“We have no choice but to wait for the investigation team to return for that,” the guildmaster said. “They should’ve been able to leave through the hole the demon made, so it won’t be long now—”

“Excuse me, guildmaster!”

Speak of the devil—or should I say demon? Just as the guildmaster was about to wrap up the conversation, the receptionist came into the room. She was followed by Rouga and another male adventurer I didn’t recognize. He looked to be in his late twenties and wore high-quality armor. He had to be Rouga’s rank or higher.

“Ooh! Good to see you safely back, Schlein!” the guildmaster said.

“Thankfully. Other than Kuruta being taken away, we’re all accounted for with no life-threatening injuries. Those who were wounded are being treated right now.”

It seemed like Schlein was the captain of the investigation team dispatched to the underground waterway. He glanced at us curiously before explaining his situation to the guildmaster. Most of it was exactly as the guildmaster had guessed. The only new information was that the base appeared to be some kind of research facility.

“What was that demon researching underground? Judging from his actions, he must have been desperate to keep it a secret,” Rouga said.

“We weren’t able to find the answer to that, but I believe it’s related to undead sorcery. The demon was in control of a large number of undead.”

“Whatever it was researching, it’s most certainly not good,” Nino muttered.

“I’ll dispatch someone familiar with undead sorcery later. The more pressing matter is Kuruta’s rescue,” the guildmaster said,

crossing his arms.

Schlein immediately turned to him. “The enemy is very strong. We only managed to avoid being wiped out thanks to the demon retreating first. If we had kept fighting, we would have been the ones to face defeat.”

“Even with so many veterans on the team?” the guildmaster asked.

“Yes. It’d take an S-rank adventurer to defeat him,” Schlein said firmly.

It was a blunt admission of defeat from someone who was most likely an A-rank adventurer. I’d figured the demon was strong, but I had underestimated his strength. The thought of him coming back to attack the town was terrifying.

“An S-rank, huh? We put in a request to someone but didn’t receive a very favorable response.”

“By someone, do you mean the Swordmaster Raiza?” Schlein asked.

“That’s right.”

Bwuh?! Wait, did they mean my big sister?!

The sudden mention of my sibling’s name left me spluttering. My big sister was indeed on par with an S-rank adventurer. No, she was even stronger than that. “Swordmaster” was the title given to the victor of the Great Sword Festival held every four years. It was a tournament where thousands of warriors from across the world gathered to determine who stood at the top. Her strength was the real deal—she could even slay a dragon in one swing.

“She normally comes running at requests like this, but apparently she has to deal with some family circumstances first. It might be some time before she can move.”

“Which means we have to call another S-rank adventurer,” the receptionist said.

“Indeed. We don’t even know where Kuruta was taken. Perhaps we should wait before we gather a team—”

“Wait! Wait just a minute! I can tell you her location right away!” Nino interrupted. She reached into her breast pocket and took out a compass-like tool. She pointed at the needle with a frantic look. “I

placed a detection spell on the charm Sieg gave to her! We can locate her with this right away!”

“Hey, now... Was that what you were doing when you were acting all shady? Can’t say I’m impressed,” Rouga said.

“It’s a little bit questionable...but it helps this time, Nino,” the receptionist agreed.

“We still don’t have enough strength to pursue her, though. With most of the investigation team injured, it’ll be difficult to gather enough forces to fight.” The guildmaster shook his head weakly. There was a look of regret on his face, but at the same time, he was firm in his decision. As the leader of this guild, he had to convey his disapproval clearly.

However...

“In that case, I’ll go alone! I’ll save Kuruta by myself!” Nino insisted.

The guildmaster shook his head. “Absolutely not! What could you do alone?!”

“But...” Nino bit her lip in frustration. Her expression was so heroic, just watching her made my chest hurt. Her feelings for Kuruta were much more than simple adoration. If only I could do something to help.

“I’ll go with Nino. Kuruta looked after me during my special examination,” I said.

“We value your abilities a lot, but that would be far too reckless. There’s no guarantee the demon won’t come back to town, so we need to leave some forces here!”

“It’ll be okay. In return, I’ll tell you how to get the Swordmaster here.”

The guildmaster stood up from his chair in shock. “What? Really?”

I took a knife out and showed it to him.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“An item that can summon Swordmaster Raiza. If you tell her its owner is here, she’ll come right away.”

“Who are you, Sieg, really? Wait...don’t answer that.” Despite looking skeptical, the guildmaster accepted my suggestion. Now, I had to do something about this before my sister arrived. First up

was freeing Kuruta from that demon as soon as possible.

With determination, I pulled myself together.

Interlude: Sister and Information Broker

A month and a half had passed since Noa had left home. The sisters had been using all their connections to search for him to no avail. Even with their powers combined, locating a specific person on this vast continent was a difficult task.

"That Noa you're searching for may no longer be in the country."

In the downtown district of the royal capital, Raiza was meeting with a man in a run-down tavern that smelled of cheap alcohol in the middle of the day. His name was Argus, and he was the best information broker in one of the largest cities in the world, the Winster Capital. He was a former adventurer and one of Raiza's old acquaintances.

"One and a half months ago, a man matching Noa's description boarded a carriage heading south. He probably changed carriages after that, leaving the country."

"Hmm. So you think he left the capital as soon as he left home?"

"No, he probably stayed downtown for the first day. I found info on someone matching him staying at an inn. He probably planned his route carefully in advance," Argus said, gulping down the ale before him. He had heard that the missing boy was Raiza's little brother, but when he'd looked into Noa's actions, he'd found that the two siblings were nothing alike. As an information broker, he could tell that the Swordmaster before him was a meathead no matter how much she tried to hide it.

"Aeria's lessons sure backfired on us..." Raiza muttered.

"Aeria? You mean the president of Fiore?"

"Yes. With the exception of magic, our big sister Aeria handled his general education. She used to teach him a full five days a week but recently shifted to homework only."

"Oh wow, the president herself? That's quite the instructor. Do you know how much it costs to attend one of her lectures?" Argus asked.

"Not at all. How much is it?"

Seeing Argus's reaction, Raiza could guess it was expensive. But she had no idea what the exact number would be. In the first place, Raiza herself disliked desk work. She couldn't be paid to attend a lecture, much less pay *to* attend one.

"One million gold. A whole million!"

"What? That's not much. I made one hundred million from taking out a dragon just the other day."

"That's because your income is on another level. One million is equal to three months' salary in the capital!"

"Hmm. When you put it that way, it does sound impressive!"

Raiza was shocked by the amount of money needed to study. Argus merely sighed at the wide-eyed woman before him.

"What I'm trying to say is, this Noa is actually a smart kid who received a top-tier education, isn't he?"

"Well, yes."

"In that case, it'll be even more difficult to find him. Backbreaking work, even."

Once he said that, Argus silently held his hand out in front of Raiza. Raiza looked around the table and placed the fruit in front of her in his hand.

"No, I'm not asking you to hand me that."

"Huh?"

"Money! Don't make me spell it out for you! Give me money!"

"Oh, if that's all you want, just say so. How much?"

"If I have to search outside the kingdom, I'll want ten."

"All right."

Raiza reached into her wallet without hesitation and took out a handful of white-gold coins. One coin was worth one million gold—it was a high-value currency that only nobility or merchants carried around with them. Even Argus was left dumbfounded by the casual way she took it out. It was his first time dealing with a client so willing to pay.

"I can't accept it all upfront. I'll take half as an advance payment," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"You shouldn't be paying all of it in one go."

"I'm happy to pay even more than this."

"Just so you know, I can't guarantee I'll find him even if you pay me." Argus immediately corrected Raiza's misunderstanding. He didn't want her to think he could do anything just because she paid him either. Even for the self-proclaimed best in the kingdom, this task would be tough.

"Oh. That's a shame."

"I'll be on my way now. Gotta get to work, after all."

"I'll also head home for today."

Just as Raiza left the tavern, an unfamiliar woman called out to her. Judging from her uniform, she was an employee of the Adventurers Guild.

Another job request? Raiza furrowed her brow. She had just rejected a request from the border town a few days ago, but they were being pretty persistent about it.

"You're Swordmaster Raiza, right? My name is Amy, and I'm from the capital branch of the Adventurers Guild."

"Indeed, I am Raiza. What do you need? It couldn't have been easy to find me," Raiza replied politely, putting on the dignified face of the Swordmaster.

Amy straightened her posture and looked at her pleadingly. "The Rajah branch has reached out once again. The situation has gotten much worse, and they need you there as soon as possible."

"I believe I refused that request already. As I said before, I cannot leave this city until I resolve my own issues."

"The guild is offering one hundred million in reward."

"I'm sorry, but that amount is meaningless to me." Raiza brushed off the hand that tried to hold her back and made to leave. But Amy suddenly said something she never would have imagined.

"Please wait, Master Raiza! We actually have news for you regarding the little brother you're searching for."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone who knows your brother's whereabouts turned up at the Rajah branch. He was apparently in possession of a knife engraved with a family emblem."

"That better be the truth," Raiza said menacingly.

Amy turned pale at the pressure being released by the strongest swordsman but firmly nodded her head.

"I-I swear it's the truth."

"I see. I'll have to go, then."

"Thank you very much! We'll prepare a high-speed carriage for you right away!"

"No need. That would be too slow."

Amy blinked in surprise. The high-speed horse carriage of the Adventurers Guild was probably the fastest method of transportation in the land. Any higher speed would require riding a tamed dragon. The only ones who could do that were the knights of the Great Kingdom.

"Do you own a tamed dragon, by any chance?" Amy asked.

"No. Those things are no good for long distance travel; they get exhausted too fast."

"Then how will you get to Rajah?"

"I have feet, don't I? I'll run there."

Raiza began stretching on the spot, then ran off as soon as she was done, leaving a dumbfounded Amy behind. She was so fast, she had vanished beyond the horizon before Amy could even react.

"Rajah's over two thousand kilometers away from here," Amy mumbled in shock.

But common sense didn't apply to Swordmaster Raiza.

Chapter 7: Demon in the Forest of Evil Spirits

"I can't believe I ended up calling her here myself," I muttered under my breath. We were on our way home from the guild, and I didn't want Nino and Rouga to hear.

The knife was a present my sister had given me for self-protection. She had carved our family crest into it personally, so there was no other like it in the world. If she was told the owner of that knife had appeared, she would definitely take action. For someone who liked to use corporal punishment on a daily basis, she was strangely overprotective like that. She probably thought of me as her property or something.

"That should give me around two weeks' time."

There was no doubt the guild would prepare their high-speed horse carriage for her. It would take roughly two weeks to get here from Winster on that. I had to do something about this incident and leave town before she caught up to me. As long as I didn't get injured or anything, I would probably have enough time.

"I'm sorry you had to use your trump card for me," Nino apologized, sensing my grave mood. This had all started because she'd insisted on saving Kuruta early, but now that things had come to a head, it didn't really matter who had started what. I didn't want Kuruta to suffer for longer than necessary either, so I hadn't been planning on waiting for the guild to get its forces together in the first place.

"Don't worry about it. I'm acquainted with Kuruta as well," I said.

"Thank you very much. I will repay you for this later."

"There's no need for that. Instead of repaying me, think about repaying Rouga."

Rouga was joining us on the mission to rescue Kuruta. He had

volunteered himself since Nino and I didn't have enough defense by ourselves.

"I'm basically her guardian at this point," Rouga said, nodding with his arms crossed.

"We're not like that. I just got stuck with him against my will." Nino elbowed him in the side in protest.

Rouga gave her a troubled look. "Hey now, did you forget who taught you the basics of adventuring?"

"Bringing up the past over and over again is one of the signs of old age."

"Old age?! I'll have you know I'm still in the prime of my life!"

The two bickered in their usual way. With the situation being what it was, it was a reassuring sight to see. But I couldn't let them continue quarreling forever, so I stepped in to mediate.

"Save the rest for when you get to your inn. The two of you are staying around here, right?" I asked.

"Should be right ahead," Rouga said.

"Ah! That's the sign there!" Nino pointed at a large inn with two floors. It was big enough to be called a hotel. It seemed being high-ranked adventurers didn't come without perks.

We asked the receptionist to add an extra guest to Nino and Rouga's room before making our way there. The plan for tonight was to discuss our strategy for rescuing Kuruta. The reason I was staying in their room instead of booking my own was that it was larger and more comfortable.

"Now...where should we begin?" Rouga said.

"The first step is to find where Kuruta is located. Can you do that, Nino?"

"One moment. Let me get the map out."

She went over to the backpack in the corner of the room and took out a map of Rajah and the surrounding area. She pointed at the top left—the northwest of the forest area.

"In the border forest?" I asked.

"Not quite. That's the Forest of Evil Spirits," Rouga replied.

Well, that was a rather sinister name. Demons sure liked living in shady areas, it seemed.

“If I recall correctly, there’s an abandoned mansion in this forest. Maybe the demon is using it as a base.”

“I see. That sounds plausible.”

“There’s a rumor that the mansion has lots of experimental equipment lying about. What if the demon plans on using them on Kuruta?” Nino mumbled, paling at the thought.

A-rank adventurers had plenty of value as test subjects. It was a mystery why the demon had taken Kuruta away, but that seemed like one possible explanation.

“Terrifying. Who knows what a demon’s experiments would involve...” Rouga murmured.

“Yes. That’s why we have to save her as soon as possible!” Nino insisted.

“But we don’t know how strong the enemy is,” he continued. “We just know they’re a caster that can use undead sorcery to create something as strong as a dragon zombie. They might be in the middle of creating an undead army as we speak.”

“It’s relatively easy to create large numbers of the undead... It wouldn’t be impossible,” I agreed. If the demon had enough materials like dragonbone, they could create an obstacle too large for us to carry out our rescue mission.

“It might be best to just launch a surprise attack as soon as possible. If we avoid a prolonged battle with the enemy, we should be able to get in and out,” Nino said.

“Sounds like that’s the only option. But even if we go with that, we really need a little more force on our side...” Rouga muttered.

“There’s nothing we can do about that. The enemy might come back to attack the town, so the guild cannot allow any other adventurers to leave.”

Presently, all C-rank adventurers and above were on standby at the guild as part of an emergency request. This was in case the demon attacked before Raiza could get there. Since the enemy’s strength was unknown, the team couldn’t risk being underprepared. If anything, Rouga was meant to be there rather than here with us. In the midst of our serious discussion, someone suddenly knocked on the door.

“Huh? A guest?” I asked.

Who could it be at this late hour? I slowly opened the door to see...

“Sister?”

The nun from the church stood there with a small mountain of belongings and a look of determination on her face.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Why was she here in this room? How did she even know we were staying here? Despite all my questions, I first led her into the room. The bag on her back looked awfully heavy.

“Phew! Thank you very much,” she said as she set everything down and caught her breath.

Nino and I looked at her in confusion.

“Why are you here? You have to go through the guild for job requests.”

“No, I’m not here to make a job request. I’m here to make a delivery and give you my thanks for earlier.”

“For earlier?” I echoed.

She must have meant the zombies at the graveyard. We had discussed things with the guild and settled on treating it as an emergency request. It shouldn’t have been an incident that required a delivery so late at night.

“We appreciate the thought, but you didn’t have to rush all the way here, you know? How did you even know where we were?” Rouga asked.

“The guild told me.”

“Hey now, what happened to adventurer privacy?!”

Rouga clutched his head in exasperation. Whoever the culprit was, it meant there was a careless employee at the guild. No matter how trustworthy the nun was, giving out personal information to others would eventually lead to trouble.

“Due to the nature of my delivery, the guild wanted to make sure it reached your hands as soon as possible.”

“Is it something useful for adventuring?” I asked.

“Yes! I heard there was a demon that could use undead sorcery, so I went and prepared these in a hurry.”

She rummaged through her bags, eventually taking out a wooden box full of glass bottles. They were filled with a transparent liquid and decorated with detailed facets. It had to be a high-quality liquid that couldn't be compared with the average potion. Now, why did it look so familiar?

I tilted my head and stared at it, but Rouga reacted with shock.

"Hey, hey, hey now! This is first-grade holy water!"

"I dug them out of the church's warehouse in hopes they'll be useful in a fight against the demon!" the nun said proudly.

"You really went all out, huh? This stuff is almost never seen in the wild," Nino said.

"You all helped us a lot this time. Consider it a show of gratitude from the church and me." She dragged the wooden box in front of us.

First-grade holy water was the highest grade of holy water possible, created through the prayers of the saint. Although this was an emergency, it was an amazing item to suddenly have on hand. The nun must have truly felt bad for all the trouble we'd gone through.

"With this much holy water, the undead will be a piece of cake!" Rouga cheered.

"Yes. It should make up for our lack of forces. Thank you so much," Nino added.

"Um, I know it's a valuable item...but is first-grade holy water really that amazing?" I asked, confused by their excitement. I knew it had a strong effect, since it was created by my big sister Fam. And I'd been told the church rarely used it because they wanted to maintain the brand value. But was it really something to be so grateful for? From what I had seen in the past, Fam created holy water with pretty lighthearted prayers.

"First-grade holy water is said to be ten times as effective as any other holy water. Not only can it purify the undead, but it can also be used to treat wounds," Nino explained.

"Huh..."

"For close-range classes like me and Nino, it's a must-have when fighting the undead. Splashing it on our weapons beforehand makes

the stubborn undead a one-hit kill," Rouga added.

"I see. In that case, you should split the holy water between yourselves. It'll be more effective that way," I said, making up a plausible reason to decline the gift.

It was just a rumor I'd heard before, but...there was a theory that first-grade holy water contained a part of the saint's body, such as her hair, nails, or a little bit of blood. No matter how untrustworthy those rumors were, carrying something like that with me was a little... It wasn't that I didn't like Fam! It was just a bit awkward as her brother.

Fortunately, I could use Sanctuaire against the miasma instead.

"Are you sure? I mean, we'd be grateful for it, but..." Rouga said hesitantly.

"If you find yourself struggling without it, just say the word. We'll pass you some right away," Nino agreed.

"Thanks. I'll let you know if I need it."

"Now, it's about time I head back. Everyone, please take care of yourselves. I caught a glimpse of the demon as it flew away, and it looked like a repulsive being. Please don't let your guard down. I prepared so much first-grade holy water because I want you all to survive!" the nun said in a trembling voice.

From the sweat on her brow and her purple lips, it was clear her fear was on another level. Seeing her expression was enough for us to pull ourselves back into the right mindset. Although we had gained powerful supplies, our enemy was a demon. The fight wouldn't be an easy one.

"You're right. That demon might be who Kuruta has been searching for all this time," Nino said.

"Come to think of it, Kuruta did say something like that. This demon might be the one who destroyed her hometown."

"Yes. Kuruta originally came from a family of valiant warriors. A demon capable of destroying her hometown must be extremely powerful."

We had to be even more careful against an opponent like that. The frown on my face deepened, but Rouga suddenly looked relaxed.

"Either way, we'll defeat the demon and save Kuruta. That's all there is to it," he said.

"That's right!" Nino said brightly.

We finished our preparations and set out for the Forest of Evil Spirits the next morning.

"So, this is the Forest of Evil Spirits..." I mumbled.

Several hours had passed since we'd left town. After walking northwest through the grasslands, a gloomy forest had appeared before us. The leaves on the trees were all dark in color, and the trunks resembled gnarled white skeletons. It was almost like they were afflicted by the miasma. On top of that, a sound resembling the groaning undead echoed around us, amplifying the creepiness.

"It's no wonder they call it the Forest of Evil Spirits. It's so creepy," Rouga said.

"It's even worse than I imagined. Is that because of the demon?"

"No clue. Sorry, Sieg, but could you cast a Sanctuaire just in case?"

"Of course. I was just thinking the same thing."

I couldn't detect any miasma yet, but I cast a Sanctuaire to be safe. Even a small amount of miasma could be harmful if breathed in over a long time. Holy light covered us in a veil, making the air feel a little lighter.

"The mansion should be at the end of this path. Let's hurry!" Nino said, pointing at a narrow path between the trees. It seemed to be a proper path created by someone, with the grass removed and the dirt hardened. From the look of it, adventurers went into the forest pretty often.

"The enemy is most likely watching this path. Be very careful," Rouga warned.

"I know. I'll keep an eye out for any traps."

There could be a pitfall trap somewhere. The enemy might be hiding in the forest beside the path, ready to shoot magic.

The three of us moved carefully with Nino in the lead.

"There it is!"

Around an hour after entering the forest, a castle-like building

came into view.

So, this was the abandoned mansion... The outer wall had eroded here and there, and vines were tangled in layers. Right... It must have been abandoned for quite a few years. At least a few hundred years had to have passed since its construction.

"It's quite a grand building," Rouga said.

"And Kuruta is inside?" I asked.

"Yes. My locator magic is pointing there," Nino answered while looking at the map. She was able to pinpoint the spot now that we were in the forest.

"All right, make sure you have everything ready. There's gonna be a load of enemies in there," Rouga advised.

"Got it!" I replied enthusiastically.

We increased our speed as we got closer to the mansion. It was more like we were jogging than walking—but for some reason, the distance didn't seem to change. We'd been moving for a while, yet we weren't any closer.

"This is weird," Rouga said.

"Are you sure this is the right path, Nino?" I asked.

"There's no mistaking it. There's only one road to the mansion."

"Hmm. Could the building be an illusion?"

"Let's test it. Illusion Eye!" Nino said, focusing her magic into her eyes. Her pupils turned a crimson red and released a faint shock wave. Was that a ninja technique from the East? Ciel had mentioned it before, but it was my first time seeing it in person.

"We're not caught in any illusion...and it doesn't seem like the surroundings have changed either."

"Which means we're simply far away," Rouga concluded.

"So it seems..."

Nino didn't sound convinced, but we couldn't afford to stand around any longer. We resumed running toward the mansion, but the distance still didn't change.

"Hmm. It really is strange," Nino said.

"But it isn't an illusion, right?" Rouga asked.

"Right. If there was magic involved, my magic just now should have caught it."

“So why can’t we get there?”

“The road might have been altered,” I suggested, observing our surroundings once again. Perhaps there was a clue somewhere, no matter how small. I looked around, wide-eyed, and spotted some tracks at the edge of the path. “Hm? What’s this?”

The mark led all the way to a tree growing on the side of the road. It was almost like the tree itself had moved—no, this was...

“I see. Nino! Rouga! Move to the middle of the path right now!”

“Huh?”

“There are treants in the forest! They’ve been moving the path so that we can’t reach the mansion!” I shouted.

The forest moved in reaction to the revelation. Hey, this was way more than just one or two! I clicked my tongue at the sheer number of trees that had suddenly shown their true colors.

“What on earth?!” Rouga yelled.

“We’ve got no choice now! Run for the mansion!”

“Right!”

We slipped past the approaching treants and ran at full speed. Luckily, plant-type monsters were much slower than normal enemies. They could attack from afar by extending branches and roots, but none of them were threatening.

We brushed away the branches with our swords and charged forward in a group.

“Raaah!” Rouga used a shield bash against the final treant before us, blowing it away.

All right, the path was now clear! We could see the mansion’s garden through the trees and ran straight at the wall surrounding it, shutting the iron gate behind us.

“Phew!”

“At least it worked out.”

Nino took a wire rope from her bag and tied the gate firmly shut. With that, the enemy wouldn’t be able to get in for a while.

The treants outside the gate were making a commotion, but the thick stone walls and iron gate didn’t even budge. It seemed this mansion was well prepared to defend against an attack.

“Good grief. What a nuisance,” Rouga said.

"They were really intent on stopping us."

"Yeah, we have to be more careful from here— Gah!"

As soon as he said that, the ground started bulging up, eventually revealing the forms of large, black, lanky dogs. Their bodies were rotting and had patches of exposed bone, making it clear they were already long dead.

"What terrible taste in guard dogs," Nino muttered.

"Yeah, even a wild boar would be better than this," Rouga said.

We faced the large pack of undead dogs with stiff expressions.

"Take that!" Rouga used a shield bash to knock the dogs back. Murky blood and rotten flesh scattered as the pack was swept away.

Beside him, Nino threw her kunai to stop the dogs at the back. The blades had been soaked in holy water, allowing them to pierce through the monsters easily. Multiple dogs fell to a single throw.

So, this was the effect of first-grade holy water! The biggest advantage the undead had was their tough bodies. They could regenerate themselves in an instant even if they lost a limb or two. But the wounds on the dogs weren't recovering. In fact, smoke was rising from them as they disintegrated into ashes. The power of the holy water removed their entire evil existence.

"Blanche! Blanche!"

Not wanting to fall behind, I cast my purification magic in quick succession. A blinding light turned the approaching dogs into dust. This sword really was a good catalyst for magic. The undead dogs were far stronger than zombies, but they weren't an issue at all.

However...

"There's no end to them!" Rouga shouted.

"They must be multiplying somewhere," Nino replied.

"Probably!"

No matter how many we defeated, the dogs kept appearing. Where were they coming from in the limited space of the garden? We didn't have endless stamina, so we had to take a break at some point. Unfortunately for us, the situation only got worse from there.

"We have company! Are those...knights?" Rouga asked.

The mansion was built around the garden in a U shape. Fully armored knights appeared from the two ends of the building. They

were probably some kind of zombie knight. Their movements were a little stiff compared to regular humans, but they seemed to be able to follow commands to some extent.

"Hmph!"

Nino threw a kunai, but it was blocked by a knight's shield. It seemed they had some intelligence after all. Nino had no choice but to take out a dagger and switch to close combat instead. Rouga immediately moved forward to support her.

"You good?" he asked.

"I'll manage. The enemy's a bit troublesome for me, though."

"Worst-case scenario, you can throw the holy water right at them."

The two stood back-to-back. Their weapons had been soaked in holy water, and they both had fierce grins on their faces. As top-class adventurers, they had fought battles like this many times before.

"Sieg, you head in first! If you get surrounded too, you won't be able to move from here either!" Nino shouted.

"But at this rate..."

"Tch! Another big one's incoming!"

To top it all off, a giant knight larger than any of the others had appeared. At a glance, it seemed to be around three meters tall. It looked like some kind of ogre, judging from the gray skin and bulging muscles that could be seen in the gaps of the armor. While we had prepared to attack, the enemy had similarly prepared to defend. This many forces were on par with a dragon zombie.

"I'll lure that one's attention. Go now, Sieg! Before the situation gets worse!"

"Yes! From the look of things, the enemy still has more forces waiting! If you don't defeat the demon behind it all, it'll never end!"

Rouga and Nino urged me to go ahead while glancing at the mansion entrance. They did have a point. It looked like the enemy still had plenty more soldiers waiting. The undead attacking us right now had to be taking orders from the demon somewhere. If I could defeat that demon, their movements should cease.

"Got it," I said.

“Leave this to us!” Rouga told me.

“Make sure you tell Kuruta how valiant I was!” Nino added, smoothly sneaking in her own personal request. It seemed she was still relaxed about everything.

I let out the breath I was holding and nodded at them before running.

Sensing my movements, the dogs and knights chased after me with a collective roar. I evaded, blocked, and deflected their attacks in quick succession. There were a lot of enemies, but they moved extremely slowly. When compared to my training with Raiza, it was no big deal.

Well, maybe it was a bit pitiful to compare them to the Swordmaster...

“Hah! Yah!”

I evaded their attacks and used air slashes against the enemies blocking my way. My mind was hyperfocused, making time appear to slow down. My enemies gradually started hitting harder, but I slipped past them all without an issue.

“All right!”

After making it through the entrance of the mansion, I closed the door behind me. *Phew.* I could finally take a breather. I turned to look around the lobby just as it lit up eerily.

“Huh?”

“Well done getting here. I welcome you,” said a low and commanding voice that sounded like it had crawled out of the ground.

I looked in the direction of the voice to see the demon at the top of the stairs. It was a grotesque being that looked like a cross between a human and a winged beast. Just the sight of it filled me with a visceral disgust.

“You! Where did you take Kuruta?!” I demanded.

“Hmph. I was just about to bring her to you. Get over here already!”

The demon commanded Kuruta to step out from behind a pillar and show herself. But there was something strange about her. Her eyes were vacant, and her expression didn’t fit the urgent situation

at all. Her movements were stiff like a machine. It was almost like she was a life-sized puppet.

"What did you do to her?!"

"I had her cooperate in my undead sorcery experiment. I'm glad it went so well. By using her strong emotions as a catalyst, I was able to get a large number of spirits to possess her, turning her into a living being with a body as resilient as the undead!"

What?!

A chill ran down my spine at the demon's repulsive actions. Forcing multiple spirits to possess her would have put her body under tremendous strain. It would have felt like she was being tortured by having her flesh torn apart. What this demon had done was unforgivable!

"So that's why you abducted her."

"Exactly. It's rare to come across someone so perfect for my needs. The possession process requires a vessel with strong hatred and skill in combat to use as a catalyst. She had everything I wanted."

After saying that, the demon moved behind Kuruta, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, and smiled as though to provoke me.

"Technically, she could still be saved. You can try all you want—but you won't be able to do anything without using Lesoleil."

"Then that won't be a problem."

"What? There's no way a swordsman can use—"

"Lesoleil!"

This was an advanced spell even by Fam's standards. I hadn't wanted to use it against the dragon zombie because of how much magic it consumed.

Its colossal power was released with a blinding light.

Interlude: A Certain Demon's Research

Creating the strongest undead with one's own hands... Anyone who dealt with undead sorcery dreamed of that at least once.

The demon Valgema was no exception, having spent many long years researching this topic, the result of which was a secret technique that could make spirits possess a human body and turn them into a "living undead." That way, they would possess strength and intelligence like no other undead. If not for the ethical issues, it would have been the perfect spell.

But there was another problem with it. The souls of most humans intensely rejected spirits, leaving their bodies unable to withstand the process. The solution Valgema had come up with was to synchronize the mind of the human with the spirits. If the human and spirits were united by a single emotion, the physical rejection could be ignored.

But how could the living have the same feelings as the dead? Valgema had researched until he'd found an answer. The simplest way was to make them feel hate for the same target. In order to make that happen, he had chosen the most straightforward and demonic method: He'd attacked and slaughtered multiple villages, then waited for an avenger to appear. That way, both the living and the dead would feel intense hatred toward him.

Of course, if he couldn't control the avenger after they became undead, they would turn on him and attack him. It was an extremely risky experiment, but Valgema had been confident in his control. At the same time, he'd felt a dark desire typical of a demon. Being able to make a pawn out of the avenger that had set out to kill him had to feel amazing.

And so, Valgema had spent several hundred years attacking

villages while waiting for an avenger until an ideal subject had finally appeared: Kuruta. Her hatred had fermented over the years, and that same amount of time had been spent training her body. On top of that, she was still young and could be physically pushed past her limits.

Valgema had immediately grabbed her and created the strongest undead of his dreams. However...

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it all!"

In a single moment, the undead was purified. Kuruta was turned back into a human before demonstrating any of her true power. It happened so fast that Valgema was speechless.

And with that, hundreds of years of research were lost in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 8: Sibling Reunion

"Wraaaaaah!"

The demon roared, thrashing its limbs like a child throwing a tantrum. *Where did that rational attitude from earlier go?*

In losing its mind, it also seemed to lose its limits. Its fists smashed through the walls, and its feet shattered the floor. At this rate, the mansion would be flattened into ruins!

I quickly rushed over and retrieved Kuruta, who was still in a daze.

"Brat! I'll kill you!" the demon yelled.

"Guh!"

The demon moved about swiftly and erratically, just like a wild beast. I set Kuruta down by a safe spot near the wall and intercepted the enemy with my sword. It was strong! Like being hit by a giant! My whole body went numb from the impact.

So, this was the physical power of a demon. It sure was troublesome!

"Die! Repent with your life and die! Return these last few hundred years to me, the great Valgema!"

"What are you going on about?!"

We exchanged more blows. There was no rhythm or form to the attacks, but the power and speed were menacing. All I could do was block and defend while retreating, and I was eventually driven against the wall of the mansion.

I grunted. There was no other way!

"Blanche!"

"Hah!"

I closed my eyes and released a bright light through my sword. The demon was blinded and stopped moving for a brief moment. I slipped behind it and immediately released a blade of light magic that sank into its back.

It groaned in pain, but the blow didn't appear to do much damage. This demon was tougher than I'd thought. The light magic of my sword prevented its wound from regenerating, but that was all. It didn't seem like I could wear it down so easily.

"You've done it now, human!" the demon cried, somewhat calmer now. The pain must have helped cool its head, which was an unfortunate result for me.

I immediately distanced myself and cast a few magic blades to keep the creature back, but they were all deflected by its claws.

"It's my turn next!"

"So fast!"

There was a sharpness to the demon's movements that hadn't been there earlier. It was still a little rough around the edges, but the demon made up for that with pure physical power. Honestly, in terms of power alone, this demon was on par with Raiza!

I held my sword up sideways to block the charging enemy. Sparks flew from the black blade of meteoric iron as it withstood the force. After being pushed some distance, I purposefully leaped up, as trying to stop the entirety of that force would break my bones.

I flew back toward the wall but plunged my sword into the floor before crashing, barely catching myself in time.

"Oops, there's a tear in the floor." I was surprised by the chasm I'd made. I really would have broken a bone if I'd tried to withstand that!

"Not bad, brat! You'd make a good subject for my experiment!"

"Never in a million years!"

We slashed at each other once again, sword against claw, creating fierce fireworks as we exchanged blows. As one would expect from a demon, this was a tough fight...but my sister was stronger than it, and the more I fought the demon, the more I could recall my time training with her. That's right—I should be able to get through this!

"Damn it! What's with this human?! Are you a clergyman?!"

"I'm a swordsman!"

"Then how can you use Lesoleil?"

"Who knows? Take a guess!"

For one brief moment, spanning less than a tenth of a second, the demon's suspicions toward me caused a delayed reaction. My taunting had redirected a fraction of its thoughts toward something else. This was my chance!

I released a heavy blow with all my might. My black blade sank into the demon's neck.

"Gaaagh!"

But as expected, the demon refused to give up on life. It twisted its body in an impossible way at the last moment in an attempt to evade the mighty blow.

It's going to get away!

It was an absurd movement that ignored the structure of its body. By bending in a way impossible for humans, it was about to avoid a direct hit.

Just then, there was a whoosh as a knife came flying out of nowhere, stabbing the demon in the back. It had been thrown by Kuruta. She had returned to her senses and managed to move enough to attack.

Under normal circumstances, the blow would have been too weak to do anything. But in this case, the timing of her attack had been perfect. The demon reacted to the knife.

"Raaaaaah!" I shouted, cutting off its head without hesitation.

"Phew... It's over."

I looked at the headless body of the demon and sighed in relief. That fight just now had really pushed me to my limit. I had already lost half the feeling in my arms from taking so many consecutive heavy blows. If the battle had gone on for a few more minutes, I might have been overpowered.

I sheathed my sword and went over to Kuruta, who looked bewildered.

"Hey...what's going on?" she asked. "I saw you being cornered and acted on reflex, but I have no clue what happened."

"Did you lose your memories, Kuruta?"

"So it seems. I can only remember a little," she said, holding her hand up in a pinching gesture to describe exactly how much. She had been possessed by dead spirits against her will, so it was no

wonder she was shaken up. In fact, it was probably a good thing she didn't have to remember her pain.

I gave her a quick summary of what had happened to catch her up to speed. She turned paler and paler as she listened to me.

"Whoa! Sounds like I've caused quite a lot of trouble this time. Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it. How does your body feel?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Better than normal, actually. Probably thanks to your Lesoleil, I guess?"

"Probably. My sister always said that its light really helps with muscle pain."

"Your sister?"

"Never mind that!" I quickly shook my head. *Oh dear, my exhaustion must be getting to me.* I had to be careful not to let my guard down until I could take a proper break.

"Hey! Sieg! Are you okay?!"

"We're here to assist!"

The door to the mansion opened and Rouga and Nino came rushing in. They took one look at me and Kuruta and beamed in relief. Nino in particular looked like an angel had descended in front of her—or like she was about to ascend from the joy of seeing Kuruta safe.

"Kuruta!"

"Whoa there!"

Nino immediately leaped into her arms. Even Kuruta looked troubled by her sudden actions. But Nino continued rambling without a care.

"I was so worried about you! When I imagined what kind of horrors you were going through, I was ready to run to your rescue all by myself! But I knew that the chance of that succeeding was low, so I had to form a party..."

"Okay, I get it. You've made your feelings loud and clear."

"Really?! Then let's go on a trip together! I'll take as many days off as you want!"

"How did that lead to this?!"

Kuruta faltered at Nino's vigorous enthusiasm. In the meantime,

Rouga approached me to explain the situation outside.

"The undead we were fighting suddenly stopped moving, so we figured something had happened here and came running," he said.

"I see. So that demon was controlling the undead outside after all."

"Yeah. As you'd expect of a demon. It controlled a huge number at once."

The volume of undead had felt endless. Controlling a number like that would've been impossible for a human sorcerer. The demon really had tremendous skills—including the fact he had turned Kuruta undead without killing her. However, there was no point in having amazing skills if you were going to use them for evil.

"Now that we've all calmed down, let's go home," Rouga said.

"Yes, let's do that."

"Don't forget the demon's corpse. That's worth a fortune."

Huh, really? Was it used as materials for something? I took out my magic bag and headed over to the corpse in the room. But then...

"Huh? Where's the head?"

The head that had been rolling around on the ground had suddenly vanished. *Don't tell me...*

I quickly called out to everyone in warning. "Be careful! The demon might still be alive!"

"What?!"

"Too late!" a voice said from above.

I looked up to see the head floating at the top of the staircase. Oh no, the demon was still alive even in that state! I'd underestimated the vitality of a demon.

"I can't live long like this, but I can sure take you all down with me!" the demon yelled.

"You! What are you doing?!"

"It should be obvious. I summon thee from the depths of the demon realm, Demonic Dragon Hydra! I forfeit my remaining life to you!"

As soon as the demon yelled that, blue flames swallowed its floating head.

Argh! Why did it have to go and do that at the very end?! A hydra was a nine-headed serpent that lived in the very depths of the demon realm. Its power was disaster-class, ranking at the top end of S-rank monsters. If it rampaged through the human realm, one or two countries could be wiped out. It was a dangerous creature that the demons couldn't control either—yet that demon had summoned it knowing he wasn't long for this world!

"Raaaaaaaaahhh!"

"There it is!" I yelled.

A magic circle appeared in the sky, from which disfigured heads came slithering out. The walls and floor of the mansion crumbled apart as the area was flattened. Hey now, wasn't it a little *too* big?

Eventually, the body of the hydra appeared too. It was so big, it was almost comical—easily over twice the size of the magma titus we'd fought. It looked like a mythical beast from an ancient legend.

"Looks like the only thing we can do now is pray," Kuruta muttered.

"Keep your head high, Kuruta!" Nino said encouragingly.

"But this is just..."

"It's too much. It's not something humans can possibly deal with," Rouga said, agreeing with Kuruta.

"Not you too, Rouga..."

In the face of the walking disaster of an opponent, Kuruta and Rouga lost the will to fight and let go of their weapons. As veteran adventurers, they could clearly see the difference in combat power. Even I could tell I didn't stand a chance against this enemy. Considering how worn out I was after fighting the demon, I'd last three minutes at most...but that was better than nothing.

"Everyone, please run away," I said.

"Sieg?! Are you thinking about buying time for us?!" Rouga shouted.

"No! You'll die!" Kuruta objected.

"Do you want us all to die here together?!" I snapped back.

"That's..." Kuruta was at a loss for words.

In a situation like this, it was impossible for us to all be saved. Someone had to stop the enemy and allow everyone to run away. I

had to be the one to do it!

"I will stop that thing no matter what. So hurry!"

I drew my sword and faced the hydra. Eighteen eyes glared back at me. Nine writhing necks loomed as though they ruled the skies. The overwhelming size of my opponent made me feel like I was being crushed.

I really might be done for!

Just as I was about to accept my fate, a hand reached out to grip my sword with me.

"You really have gotten better at talking back, Noa."

Raiza smiled cheerfully as she stood beside me.


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The Great Sword Festival was a tournament held in Elbania, the nation of military arts, every four years. The victor was given the title of the strongest swordsman: the Swordmaster.

Just by becoming Swordmaster, one gained enough fame and status to be recognized by the king of a major nation. Due to this, the number of participants always surpassed the thousands. Many of them were knights being openly sponsored by their home country or adventurers that had already made a name for themselves. It was truly a gathering to decide the strongest swordsman in the world.

As a victor of that tournament, it went without saying that Raiza was incredibly strong. I'd thought I was already aware of that—but apparently I hadn't understood the full extent of what it meant.

"Is that Raiza's full strength?" I asked, looking up at the hydra that covered the sky as far as I could see.

Raiza was leaping about between the nine writhing heads with ease. She was literally running through the air, propelling herself forward and controlling her direction using kicks. It was an ultra-advanced technique called skywalking. My sister had mastered it to the point of moving in any direction—even *upward*.

"Hey, Sieg, who is she? You were talking to her earlier, right?" Rouga asked.

"Are you two acquainted? She's way too strong to have come here by coincidence," Kuruta said.

"*What* is she?" Nino asked skeptically.

The three of them were bewildered—in Nino's case, she didn't even believe my sister was a fellow human. She had asked *what*, not *who*. But that was understandable, seeing how unhumanlike her movements were. Besides, I was even more confused than they were right now. Only three days had passed since the guild contacted Raiza. A high-speed carriage would have taken at least two weeks to get here from our hometown. There was just no way she could have made it here so fast. Had Ciel finally completed the legendary spell for teleportation?

"Um...that's...er..."

I couldn't tell them the truth. Being a relative of the Swordmaster meant losing one's freedom to move about. Hmm...what should I

do?

As I was struggling to answer, the battle reached its climax.

"Haaah!"

Raiza twisted her body and cut off one of the giant heads. She continued running through the air, this time twisting the other way to split another hydra head down the middle. Hydra scales were said to be harder than steel—yet she was slicing them like they were made of paper.

"Looks like it was all bark," Raiza said.

She had cut off all the heads, but just to be sure, she severed all the limbs from the body and sliced them in half too. By the time she sheathed her sword, only five minutes had passed. A great demonic dragon from the demon realm, capable of wiping out nations, one-sidedly erased in moments...

My sister stretched her arms and turned to me with a grin—a knowing grin that sent a chill down my spine. It was more terrifying than the corpse of the hydra behind me!

"Now that the obstacle has been dealt with, explain the situation to me from the top," Raiza said.

"Sorry, everyone!"

There was no other choice—I had to run! I quickly turned my back to my sister and made a break for it.

Thanks for everything, Kuruta, Rouga, Nino! Sorry I couldn't tell you about our mission's success directly, Barg! I'll leave the rock titus materials behind for Rouga to bring to you!

I apologized to everyone in my head and ran from my sister at top speed. However...

"Did you think you could get away?"

"Eek!"

Raiza was suddenly before me. In the brief second I'd closed my eyes to apologize to everyone, she had moved in front of me. Was she really the same living being as me?!

I tried to change direction, but wherever I turned, she was in front of me.

"I surrender."

"Good."

Realizing it was impossible to get away from my sister, I reluctantly raised a white flag.

"I can't believe you're the Swordmaster's little brother! You really can't judge people by their appearances, huh?"

"I knew you were amazing, but it all makes sense now."

Nino and Rouga were shocked to hear my sister's explanation. Ever since then, they kept giving me teasing looks. From their expressions, I could tell they couldn't wait to spread word of this. If I didn't say anything to stop them, it'd be common knowledge across town by tomorrow.

"Please don't say anything! My life will be ruined if everyone finds out!" I warned them in a panic.

"We don't mind staying quiet, but what about Raiza?" Rouga asked.

"I have no intention of publicizing this either. Once I've given my report to the guild, I plan on quietly taking him home," Raiza said, grabbing my hand firmly. Then, for some reason, she shot Nino and Kuruta a sharp glare. "Noa is my little brother. It's best for him to come home with me! Got it?"

"But he looks like he wants to stay here..." Nino pointed out.

"Sieg's got a real bitter look on his face right now," Kuruta added.

"It's not Sieg, it's Noa!" my sister snapped at them in annoyance and yanked me toward her. She then looked straight into my face. "Noa, your goal is to get stronger, right? In that case, the best way to do that is to train by my side. Even if you have no talent, you might become a full-fledged swordsman with another five years or so of training!"

"He beat a demon, so he's already plenty strong," Nino countered.

"Yeah, he's clearly stronger than me, and I'm A-rank," Kuruta agreed.

"Naive fools! That's how you end up losing your cool before a mere hydra!"

Raiza showed furious opposition to their opinions. Well, if we went by my sister's standards, a hydra was no more than an

oversized snake. If all I wanted to do was improve my skills, there was no doubt returning with my sister was the best choice. I might even be able to defeat a hydra myself someday.

But that was neither here nor there. Hmm...

"Raiza. I want to stay here after all," I said.

"What?! Do you have a problem with my teaching?! I'm the Swordmaster, you know!"

"That's not it! Your lessons are tough but really productive. The problem is relying on you like this."

"What do you mean?"

"You're too strong, sis. That's why I tend to rely on you for everything. I can't become independent that way. And if I learn from you, I'll always be an inferior version of you."

I appealed to her earnestly, but my sister still looked reluctant. Normally, this was when she'd start throwing fists to get me to listen...but she wasn't doing that today. Was it because we were in front of other people, or was she actually considering my words?

Raiza folded her arms and thought for a long moment. Then... "I have two conditions."

"Ooh! Thank you, Raiza!"

"Don't thank me already! Listen to the end! The first condition is that in the unlikely event that you want to start dating someone, you contact me first. Do not start dating without permission. Or I won't forgive you!"

"Um...right!"

"The second condition is..." She paused dramatically.

For some reason, I had a really bad feeling about it. *Don't tell me...* No matter how much of a meathead she was, she wouldn't be *that* unreasonable, right? I mean, the difference in our strength was night and da—

"Score a blow against me. By whatever means possible."

I knew it.

It seemed she was more of a meathead than I'd thought.

"Score a blow...against *you*?"

Wasn't that impossible? How many people in the whole *world* could do that?

I repeated Raiza's words for confirmation, but she just nodded nonchalantly.

"That's right. If you can get a single blow in, I'll allow you to stay in this town. I won't even mention it to our sisters."

"You mean you'll give up completely?"

"Yup. I'll keep it a secret that you're here. As long as you get a single hit in."

Hmm. So if I could hit Raiza once, I'd be able to stay in Rajah without any issues. Raiza was pretty trustworthy when it came to keeping her promises... I wouldn't have to worry about her keeping her word, but the condition she'd given was near impossible. We had crossed swords in practice battles many times before, but I had yet to score a single blow against her.

"Does it have to be one blow? Can't I prove my strength by defeating a monster?"

"No. There's no point if you don't show your strength directly to me."

"But..."

"I'm already compromising a lot because of what you've accomplished here. I would have taken you home already if you hadn't done something notable," Raiza said, glancing at Nino and the others.

It seemed she had taken their opinions seriously, and she *was* being a lot more reasonable than she usually was... I suppose that could be called a compromise? *Grrr... What should I do?!*

While I was stressing over this impossible task, Raiza continued. "Well, it's not like you could win against me even if you tried. It's a smart choice. If you don't want to fight, I'll just take you home."

"Fine. Let's do it."

"Hm?"

"Let's duel. I'll score one blow against you!" I declared.

Raiza looked at me in surprise. Up until now, I would have backed down after a statement like that. She probably hadn't expected me to agree to such a hopeless match. Oh no... Would she scold me for this?

I watched Raiza warily, but she ended up smiling. "Pfft! You've

really grown up, Noa!”

“Have I?”

“You have. The past you would’ve been too scared to fight me.” She turned to Rouga. “Um, Rouga, is it?”

“Need something from me?”

“Is there anywhere in Rajah we can hold a duel? Preferably somewhere that outsiders can’t access.”

“Let me think... There’s a small arena in the basement of a tavern on the waterway street. You can rent it for yourself.”

“Then I’ll book the place for three days from now. Prepare yourself, Noa.”

“All right. I won’t lose, sis.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Thus, the duel between me and Raiza was decided.

“I can’t believe that demon summoned a hydra! But I’m glad to see you all safe!”

In the guild meeting room, we gave our report to the relieved receptionist. The guildmaster clutched his head at the mention of a hydra, even though it was already dead.

“A demon that strong was hiding in our town? Something might be happening in the demon realm,” he muttered.

“I’ll put it in the report to the guild headquarters. It may require further investigation,” the receptionist said.

“Please do. Make sure the request for an S-rank adventurer is still active too.”

“Understood.”

The receptionist bowed once before leaving the room to do her work. The guildmaster turned to us and bowed once more. “Again, thank you for solving this incident. As the guildmaster of the Rajah branch, please accept my gratitude. Especially Master Raiza, whom we didn’t expect to come and support us so fast. Thank you so much!”

He bowed his head deeply. The angle was awfully low for a man of his status, but it conveyed the extent of his gratitude. After all, without knowing anything about my situation, it would seem like

Raiza had come running at full speed to help Rajah. Raiza was awkwardly scratching her cheek because of it.

"Your gratitude has been received," she said.

"I'd like to move straight to discussing compensation, but it's already late. Do you mind if we continue this tomorrow?"

"That's fine with me. What about you, No—Sieg?"

"We're fine with that too."

And so, the four of us left the guild. Now...what would I do for the next three days? The first stop would have to be Barg's shop, to give him a late report on his job request. I could stop by the guild afterward to pick up my reward. That would likely take up the entire next day, since I was still exhausted. As for the day after...

"Do you have a moment, Noa?"

"Please call me Sieg while we're in town."

"Ah, sorry about that, Sieg. I have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"Can I stay in your room tonight? It's really late, and I've yet to find an inn."

"Huh? Then..."

"Absolutely not! Even if you're siblings, that's appalling!" Kuruta interrupted suddenly. Ignoring my confusion, she took my hand and pulled me toward her with tremendous force, as though to protect me?

What? Why was Kuruta responding on my behalf? Why was she pulling me toward her?!

I looked at Rouga for help, but he just smiled and avoided eye contact. Nino's cheeks were puffed up in anger, but she remained silent too.

"I see. In that case, I will be showing absolutely no mercy on you in three days' time, Sieg. Prepare to be beaten black-and-blue!"

Oh no. For some reason, the situation had taken a turn for the worse!


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Chapter 9: Before the Duel

"Hey, now, why the long face?"

The next day, I visited Barg's shop with Nino and Rouga. Barg took one look at us and sensed that something was wrong, immediately pausing his work to come up to me. "Did you fail the request? If you did, you'll have to return that sword."

"No, the request wasn't a problem. Here are the rock titus materials."

I took out my magic bag and grabbed the rock titus shells from within it. Barg accepted the shells and took out a small hammer to test against them. The sound of a material neither metal nor stone echoed.

"Yup, there's no mistaking it. It's good quality too," he said happily.

"We also have this." I took out the magma titus materials and showed them to him.

Barg's eyes lit up the moment he saw the blackish-brown material. "Oooh! Could this be...?"

He took the material from me and tapped the shell with his hammer. The sound was a little deeper than the rock titus shell. His expression brightened until he was beaming from ear to ear.

"Nice one! It's been ages since I've seen magma titus materials! They make better quality whetstones than rock tituses, but they're few in number and hard to defeat!"

"In that case, you can have these too."

"Thanks! Since it's separate from the rock titus materials, will eight hundred thousand gold do?"

As one would expect of a master craftsman, it was quite the generous offer. He was already selling the black blade to me for practically half price. I immediately nodded.

"Then it's a deal. But if you went and defeated a magma titus,

the job must have been a great success. So why do you look so glum?"

"A lot happened afterward," I replied.

"Yeah, everything was smooth until the end of the Pantanel job," said Rouga.

"It was everything *afterward* that was exhausting," Nino added.

The three of us sighed as we recalled the incident with Kuruta. Although it had been resolved safely, it had been quite the major event, even involving a boss monster like a hydra. Not to mention my big sister...

"Come to think of it, there was some commotion about zombies appearing at the church. Was it related to that?" Barg asked.

"Well, yes...but we can't tell you the details."

"I see. It must have been serious. But the fact that you're here now means it's been dealt with, right?"

"Yes, the incident itself is over. It's just...one thing led to another, and now I have a duel coming up."

Barg nodded in understanding. He smiled cheerfully, his eyes practically turning into lines. "A duel, huh? That sounds fun."

"It's no laughing matter! I'll be in big trouble if I don't win, and my opponent is really, *really* strong!"

"You were strong enough to defeat a magma titus, no? There's nothing to be scared of."

"That's..."

"His opponent is Swordmaster Raiza," Nino explained quietly.

Barg's eyes widened like saucers. I guess he hadn't been expecting the Swordmaster either. It was a famous title, after all...

"Hey, hey, how did you end up agreeing to that?!"

"There were circumstances. I can't tell you the details..."

Things would definitely get messy if I said I was her little brother. In order to protect my peace, it was best to keep it a secret. Unfortunately, my silence seemed to cause Barg to misunderstand.

"The rashness of youth, huh? I get it, that feeling of wanting to challenge the strong. I once challenged the dwarf king to a blacksmith match myself!"

"W-Wow..."

“Anyway, I’ll be happy to lend a hand. I’m quite fond of reckless guys like you!”

“I appreciate the thought. Thank you very much.”

If my sword broke in the duel with my sister, I’d come straight to Barg for repairs. Hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that, though. It was more likely my body would break first.

“I’ve made a few things in my downtime that might be of use. Take a look and see if there’s anything helpful.”

“Oh! In that case, yes, please!”

“All right! Heh heh. You’ll be the first people to lay your eyes on these.”

Barg headed to the back of his workshop while humming gleefully. Was he turning his storeroom upside down? There were a lot of banging and crashing noises. When the sounds eventually ceased, he returned with a large wooden box filled to the brim with objects like cannonballs and weird dolls.

“Huh... You make things like this too, Barg?” Rouga asked.

“Are they magic tools?” Nino asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got quite a collection. What do you think of this?” He picked up a small throwing knife. There was a thin pipe tied to the hilt.

“What is that?”

“It’s a throwing knife, but there’s a small bomb built into the hilt. It makes quite a powerful impact and can create a smoke screen to obstruct vision, but the weight balance makes it quite difficult to throw.”

“I see. It sounds like it could be useful,” I said, glancing over at Nino. She could control her kunai so freely, maybe she’d be good at throwing knives too? Her technique might help in my duel against my sister. I immediately turned to her and bowed my head deeply. “Nino! Can you teach me how to use throwing knives? Please!”

“There’s no need to beg. Of course I can. But there’s no time, so I’ll be pretty strict about it.”

“Thank you very much!”

“What about shield techniques? They might come in handy too,” Rouga said, tapping the large shield on his back. True, his shield

techniques could also be of use in our duel. I normally focused on evading attacks, but blocking moves were great in a pinch.

"Please teach me too! But are you sure about this?"

"About what?"

"Don't high-rank adventurers normally hide the tricks of their trade?"

To an adventurer, the skills they'd mastered were their most valuable assets. They didn't go teaching them to others so easily.

But Rouga just laughed at my hesitation. "We're not strangers. We're comrades now, no?"

"Rouga...thank you so much!"

He laughed again. "Don't worry about it."

"Then how about you learn my nil-wielding style while you're at it?" a voice suddenly said from behind us. I turned to see Kuruta standing there. She smiled at the shock on my face. "You weren't at the guild, so I went looking."

"Why are you here, Kuruta?"

"I had to give my thanks to the person who saved me," she said. She refined her magic energy and created a small blade in the air. It glowed a pale blue as it spun around like a martial arts demonstration, slicing through the air quietly but swiftly. "I overheard a bit of your conversation. If you're training for the duel, I can teach you my techniques too. As you can see, they're quite useful."

"Oh! Yes, please!"

"Good attitude. I won't hold back."

"Okay!"

And so, I was to undergo training under three instructors before the duel.

Interlude: A Sister's Heart, a Brother Unaware

Le Luxent was a long-established business founded over a hundred years ago at the center of Rajah along the main street. Raiza had been staying in a suite room normally reserved for royalty and nobility since the night before. This was the place she had been shown to after asking the guild to direct her to an inn.

"Just how considerate are they trying to be? Good grief."

It was an extravagant room that probably cost five hundred thousand gold a night—an over-the-top accommodation even for the Swordmaster. But that was how desperate the Adventurers Guild was to make a good impression on her. Their intention was clear—they wanted her to become an adventurer someday. Raiza normally didn't notice such tactics, but this one was so obvious, even she could tell.

"Well, I do understand how they feel."

Demon activity was on the rise lately. The Adventurers Guild probably wanted to secure forces to deal with it. Their persistence in scouting Raiza was, in a way, most reasonable. However, she herself had no intention of becoming an adventurer. She knew she'd get so tied up in one job after another that she wouldn't have time for herself. Technically, an adventurer had the freedom to choose their own jobs, but in reality, it was extremely difficult to turn down requests from the kingdom or nobility. It would be one thing if Raiza had negotiation skills, but she was unfortunately lacking in that department. She generally turned people down without beating around the bush.

"I suppose I should let Fam know."

As the saint, Fam knew a lot about demons. They were the sworn enemy of the church, so they had already investigated them

extensively. Fam was basically an expert on the topic, so she would probably have ideas about how to deal with them.

In the end, Raiza had been acquainted with the Adventurers Guild for a long time. While she wasn't interested in joining them, she did feel obligation and sympathy. It wouldn't hurt to introduce someone who could help them.

"But what's more important right now is..."

She frowned sternly. A vein throbbed in her forehead. In contrast to her earlier composure, her personal feelings were fully exposed.

"How could Noa have changed so much in a single month?!"

That woman who had taken Noa's hand and pulled him away from Raiza—Kuruta, if she recalled correctly... The mere memory of her face filled Raiza with disgust. She still had no idea how far their relationship had progressed. It was possible that it was all one-sided on Kuruta's end. But at the end of the day, Noa was a man. He had enough desire to sneak glances at Raiza and their other sisters when they were dressed down. He might just appreciate the attention from Kuruta, who was *moderately* cute. Yes, Raiza had acknowledged her as *moderately* cute.

"I could totally do that too! If I just..."

Raiza grumbled to herself with more vigor.

Noa definitely had talent. His skill was already greater than that of the average swordsman. But he was lacking in the most vital factor of spirit and guts. That was how Raiza evaluated him. He was intelligent, but that often led to him giving up earlier than he needed to. That was why Raiza was always so strict with him—she wanted him to overcome that. She believed harsh training was the best way of improving mentally.

But the truth was, she loved Noa so much, she wanted to spoil him every day. Those pent-up feelings had accumulated over the years and were now on the brink of spilling out. She wanted to run to Noa's side right this moment.

"Argh! No more thinking!"

Raiza took a wooden sword into her hands and started swinging. She focused her mind to calm her thoughts as much as possible. Her skillful swings cut through the air with a satisfying sound.

“I will win against Noa and bring him home! Then...I’ll spoil him until he says, ‘I love you, big sister!’”

Her sword moved faster as her feelings swelled. The sound of her blade eventually turned into a high-pitched whistle as it approached the speed of sound and began to send air slashes across the room. But Raiza was so distracted, she failed to notice that. Until...

“Ah!”

The air slash she’d sent from her sword tore open the wall of the hotel. A large hole was left in the thick stone wall. Raiza gasped, but it was already too late. The hole was big enough for a person to enter the room; it clearly needed repair.

“Looks like I got too emotional... But it’s fine! I’ll win no matter what!”

Raiza pulled herself together with sheer willpower.

Three days later, the duel between Raiza and Noa finally arrived.

Chapter 10: Duel

And so came the day of the duel.

Kuruta and Raiza joined our party of three as we walked down the waterway street. The neighborhood was an assortment of taverns, restaurants, and brothels located alongside the waterway that ran through the town.

The receptionist lady had once called it a dangerous area, and there was indeed something indecent about the air here. It was still the middle of the day, but the scent of alcohol was everywhere, and women could be seen soliciting clients in the shadows between buildings. We were walking in a group, so no one tried to bother us, but it would've been a different matter if I had been walking alone.

"Are you sure there's space to hold a duel around here, Mr. Rouga?" my sister asked doubtfully. It certainly didn't look like the place for an arena. In fact, there was no sign of anything like that to be seen.

"Don't worry, I've made sure to reserve the place. It's that tavern over there." Rouga pointed at a large two-story building on a corner of the street.

There was a bottle of wine drawn on the large sign at the front. But despite the size of the building, there weren't many customers within. Though they appeared to be open for business, there was only one drunk man sitting at the counter.

"It's pretty empty right now. I suppose that's to be expected, given the hour," Raiza said.

"It was originally a place to eat and drink while watching thrilling fights take place, but preparing the fighters and monsters was more costly than they anticipated. They gave up on the arena component, and now the bar's on the verge of closing too."

"Leftover dreams of the strong, huh?"

"But thanks to that, we were able to reserve it today for cheap."

Rouga made us wait outside the shop and went inside first. He walked up to the man at the counter, who seemed to be the owner, and started talking to him amicably. It looked like Rouga was a regular here.

"That's the lord of the waterway street for you."

"What's that?"

"What, haven't you heard of it before, Sieg?" Kuruta said teasingly.

I shook my head, and Nino sighed.

"It's all because Rouga wanders around this area whenever he has a day off. They started calling him 'the lord' at some point."

"Wow..."

"You better not follow in his footsteps, Sieg. I'll get mad if you fool around like that, got it?" Raiza warned me in a low voice. The way the corner of her mouth twitched was scary. I'd better be careful not to accept any of Rouga's invitations. If I stayed out all night, I'd probably come home to my sister waiting in my room.

"Hey! Come on over!" Rouga had finished his conversation with the tavern owner while I was busy trembling.

As soon as we entered the tavern, he led us downstairs.

Ooh! This was impressive! The arena at the bottom of the staircase was better than I had expected. I couldn't believe they'd made such a nice facility below a tavern of all places. At a glance, I figured it could seat two to three hundred spectators. There was plenty of space for us to fight.

"The walls of the arena have been reinforced with simple magic barriers. As long as you're not reckless about it, you should be good to fight."

"I see. That's reassuring."

"But only by normal standards, okay? It probably can't withstand many of *your* moves."

Rouga emphasized his warning to Raiza. Well, there was basically nothing in this world my sister couldn't cut. A magic barrier made by Ciel would probably hold, but it was highly unlikely the walls here had that class of magic involved.

"Rest assured, there's no need for excessive force in a duel

between humans. I will also be using a wooden sword." Raiza took her sword out of her magic bag. She moved to the middle of the arena and held it out in front of her. The air changed.

Just by holding her sword, she emitted an extraordinary aura.

"We'll be in the spectator seats, then."

"Do your best, Sieg!"

"Don't let the Swordmaster scare you! Show her who's boss!"

Nino, Rouga, and Kuruta all sent me words of encouragement as they moved to their seats. Now, it was finally time. A drop of sweat rolled down my forehead as I drew my black blade.

"Hm. You've got a different look in your eyes than when you left home," Raiza said.

"I've been training."

"Very well. Let's see the results of that training!"

She laughed, eyes glinting like a bird of prey. The most prominent characteristic of her swordwork was her speed. The slightest loss of focus on my part would result in defeat. It wouldn't even take a second. My biggest task right now was to endure the first move she made after the signal to begin.

"Now...begin the duel!" Nino announced.

Here goes!

I immediately prepared to defend myself as Raiza moved first—as I had expected. She leaned forward and closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. As always, she had tremendous speed. And if I wasn't mistaken, her movements were a little sharper than normal too.

I tried to guard myself with my sword, but I couldn't keep up with her speed. So far, it was exactly as I had expected—and I was prepared for it.

"Hah!"

But the moment the wooden sword was about to slam into my side, a burst and explosion could be heard. My clothes had torn, and a black substance splashed out. Raiza was caught off guard and immediately leaped back.

She stared my way with a stern frown. "What just happened?"

"I planted a small bomb in my clothes. It was designed to spray

ink everywhere upon impact," I explained, taking a round black pill-shaped object out. I threw it on the ground, and it burst apart with a loud noise.

This was one of the items Barg had given me. Raiza normally aimed for the same spot, so I had planted this along with some ink in advance. My sister had sharper senses than most people, so she'd immediately noticed the abnormality and retreated.

"What a weird trick to use! You know you can't win against me like that!"

"I know. That's why I've come up with something that isn't just a petty trick."

I sent fire magic energy into my black blade and held it at the ready. The sword turned red with heat and released scarlet flames. This was a new technique I had obtained after coming to Rajah: the fusion of magic and sword skills to make a magic blade.

"Oh? How fascinating."

"The battle's only just begun, Raiza!"

Who would win this battle? It was time to test the results of my training.

"Haaah!"

Red flames rose from the black blade, sending sparks flying with every roaring swing. But Raiza blocked my wild flurry with her wooden sword perfectly. The difference in weapon was of no concern to the Swordmaster. She redirected most of the power from my swings to keep the wooden sword from breaking.

However, it seemed I had succeeded in blocking her offensive moves. Apart from the first attack, she was completely focused on defending. Maybe she was worried I had another trick waiting? Either way, I had successfully survived Raiza's first attack! *Yes!*

Raiza's most troublesome attack to deal with was her superhigh-speed charge attacks. It was a move that referenced the art of sword drawing popular in the East, and it was far faster than what I could react to. Luring her away from using it after the first move was extremely important. I could deal with the rest of her attacks.

"And yet!"

I was unable to attack Raiza as I had planned. Her defense was better than I had expected. I was aiming to whittle away at the wooden sword with my magic blade of fire, but she managed to block the heat by wrapping her sword in a vacuum. At this rate, I would run out of stamina before the wood broke. The heat of my sword made me break out in a sweat.

"We're getting heated now, Noa!"

"Yeah, you can say that again!"

"Then let's see you endure this!"

Raiza's movements got even faster—and heavier too! Her sharp attacks gained more force, making my hand go numb from the impact. Hey, now... How much strength did she have in such thin arms?! It felt like I was being punched by a giant! I wanted to raise an objection. Was this person really the same human species as me?

"Guh!"

"It's time to end this!"

Unable to withstand her force, I gradually began shifting backward. The wall of the arena came closer to my back. Oh no! I'd have nowhere to run at this rate! In the stands, Rouga, Kuruta, and Nino offered a steady stream of cheers and commentary, one after another.

"Sieg!"

"Hang in there! Don't lose to her!"

"Do your best!"

Seeing my predicament, everyone cheered from the stands. I had to win for their sake as well!

I pulled my fire magic back and transformed the flames into the shape of a shield. It was an application of Kuruta's nil-wielding style of fighting. I then held the shield at an angle to repel Raiza's slashes.

The moment Raiza's attack was deflected with a clang, she lost her balance for a brief moment. This was my chance! I leaped into the air like an acrobat and attempted to slash at her from above.

"Too slow!"

But my opponent was the Swordmaster. She recovered immediately and easily blocked my slash attack. I did a flip in the air

and landed behind her.

"Ugh! He was so close!"

"That sister of his really is something else."

"It'll be a challenge to create a big enough opening..."

The voices in the stands were shocked by Raiza's ability. But I had expected this much from her. I wouldn't have struggled so much until now if it was that easy to beat her.

"You really are amazing, sis."

"If you want to stop my sword, you'll need to steal all five of my senses first."

"That's impossible for me."

We bantered lightly while taking our fighting stances at a distance. A tense air filled the underground arena. I focused my senses until I could detect the slightest air that brushed against me.

"Say, Raiza. Aren't you going to use *that* move?"

"Hm?"

"The hidden art you once showed me. I've been working hard until now. I won't let you say I'm not worthy enough for you to use it," I said, staring straight into her eyes.

She nodded, then hesitated for a few moments. Eventually, she gave me her biggest smile yet.

"Very well. Die a noble death to my hidden art."

She held her sword up high, and a pale blue flame started pouring out of her body. It was "sword force," a materialization of extremely refined energy.

"Here goes..."

The energy that flowed out of Raiza's body created three humanoid shapes, which became more intricate until they were indistinguishable from Raiza herself. The Ring of Four Sword Gods: Raiza's ultimate hidden art for human duels, that she only used in a pinch. By cloning herself with her sword force, she could overwhelm the opponent with numbers. The most troublesome part was that all four needed to be attacked at once to deal any notable damage.

"Be honored, Noa! I rarely ever use this move!"

"I know. Thank you for showing me, Raiza."

"You can be grateful, but you should know I won't lose now that

I've used it. It's impossible for you to attack all four of me at once."

The four Raizas all laughed heartily as one. She then readied her sword and slowly circled around me—before making a sudden attack.

"It's over!"

Due to her splitting into four people, the speed and accuracy of her attacks fell off dramatically. But being attacked in four directions at once wasn't something I could deal with alone—*or at least that was true in the past!*

"Hiyaaah!"

I turned my magic energy into a blade and threw it. The throwing techniques Nino had passed down to me let me accurately aim at Raiza's approaching clones. Of course, I didn't expect an attack like that to work on her. Raiza easily evaded and slashed at me with all three of her clones. But at that moment, the blade I had thrown curved and came back to me. This was the amazing part of what Nino had taught me.

Raiza was able to evade that attack too, but there was a small opening.

"Take that!"

"Hah! That won't work on me!"

She and her clones deflected my magic blade right back at me. I leaped up in an attempt to create some distance between us. Raiza's clones weren't as powerful as her, but they were still a challenge to land a hit on. I'd thought I'd have a chance if I could scatter her attention, but...

"Don't give up, Sieg! We're watching you!"

"Hold on! You've got this!"

"Concentrate and you'll find an opening! You can win!"

Cheers came from the spectator stands once again. Of course I wasn't about to give up yet! All I needed was one blow. I focused all my senses, sharpening them for that sole purpose. Time felt like it slowed down, and my head started to hurt from concentrating so hard. But...

"Okay," I mumbled.

"Hmm? Did you think of something?" Raiza grinned fearlessly. Her

four voices resonated, creating a creepy echo.

But I ignored her as I raised my sword up high. I mustered all my magic energy and poured it into my sword. The blade turned red with heat, then started glowing white.

"Fool. Raising your strength won't prevent me from parrying it."

"Are you sure about that?"

I swung my sword down with all my might. The magic in my slash flew in every direction. Raiza and her clones evaded it easily, but that wasn't all. The slashes continued out until they struck the barrier of the arena—and returned.

"Nice idea, but it's the same as what you just tried!"

Raiza evaded the attack with ease, a look of disappointment on her face. But this move was different than the throwing attack I had just used.

"Haaah!"

I created a shield with magic and used it to repel the returning slashes. This was the difference. By using a shield, I could make the slashes bounce one more time. It wasn't possible with throwing knives made of magic.

"What?! It curved one more time!" Surprised by the move, Raiza's reaction was briefly delayed.

This is it!

I took out the special throwing knife I had received from Barg. Raiza immediately tried to deflect it, but the explosive planted in the knife blew up at the same time. Smoke filled the arena, obstructing our vision. It was an elementary mistake Raiza would never have made under normal circumstances.

"Raaaaaaaaagh!" I used all my might to thrust my sword forward as fast as I could. *Please, hit her!*

The blow I released with a prayer passed Raiza's sword from above. She tried to defend herself, but the tip struck her armor with a loud clang. At the same time, the three clones disappeared in a puff of mist.

Yay, I got one blow in! Against that big sister of mine! Whoo!

All kinds of emotions rose up within me. I thrust my fist at the sky and spun around on the spot meaninglessly. I couldn't suppress

the explosive joy within me.

"How..." Raiza began.

"Huh?"

"I get that you landed your hit. But how did you know which one was me?" Raiza stared at me with a vexed expression. Since there were four of her, it made sense to assume the chance of my attack hitting was one in four. If my wholehearted slash had landed on a clone, it would have been meaningless. But that was only in terms of probability. In my case...

"I'm your little brother, you know? I can tell which one's the real you at a glance."

"What?!"

"I can't explain it in words, though. Call it a brother's intuition."

Raiza's face reddened a little. She muttered under her breath for a bit, then suddenly turned back to me. "I like that answer, but it doesn't count!"

"Doesn't count?!"

"That's right. Relying on luck doesn't count!" Raiza shouted, pointing a finger in my face.

What kind of reasoning was that?! Even I couldn't agree with that irrational reasoning. Kuruta and the others watching also looked shocked.

"You're just being unfair now, Raiza! You rely on your intuition all the time! You also once said luck is a skill in itself."

"Even so!"

Where did her majestic figure from when she was fighting go? Raiza started throwing a huge tantrum. Her face turned bright red, and she stamped her feet as though she couldn't control herself. She was acting like a child. Did she really want me to go home that much?

I tilted my head in confusion at the supposed Swordmaster before me. She sure was stubborn about getting her way. But at any rate...

"I'm glad I won. Thank you, everyone!" I said, sighing in relief.

"I can't believe you actually beat the Swordmaster," Rouga said

keenly, having come down from the spectator stands.

The Swordmaster was the title of the strongest in the land. Although I had used all kinds of tricks and tactics, the fact that I had won carried a lot of meaning. Kuruta and Nino also had triumphant looks on their faces.

"It was worth all the training we did together. A victory for our bond!" Kuruta cheered.

"Sieg and I are not that close. I merely did it to thank him for saving you, Kuruta."

"I'm glad to see my shield techniques came in handy at the end."

"Yes, I don't know how I could've done it without your techniques, Rouga. Nino and Kuruta too, thank you so much!"

I bowed my head to the three of them once again. At least half of my victory against Raiza was thanks to them. I'd have to give my thanks to Barg for all the items later too. I already had a main weapon, but maybe I could buy a secondary weapon from him.

"Have you sulked for long enough, Raiza?" I asked.

I looked over at the corner of the arena where she was sitting curled in a ball. She was moving the dirt of the arena floor into a meaningless pile, looking more like an upset child than an adult.

"I won't move from here until you say you'll come home."

"Come on now, don't be stubborn. Here." I offered her my hand. Raiza slowly lifted her head and stared at me. Her expression was weak and pitiful. She was a normal girl right now, not a Swordmaster.

"Do you not need me anymore, Noa?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"I've been strict with you until now so that you would grow up tough and resilient. But now that you've gotten this strong, you don't want to be with your strict and nagging sister anymore. That's why you won't come home. Am I right?"

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Raiza's words were so soft, I could barely hear her. Large drops of tears fell from her eyes. Was that what she'd been thinking this entire time? *Raiza...*

Unable to bear the sight of her so frail, I hugged her from behind.

"Wha! What are you doing?!"

"Even if we're not related by blood, you and I will always be family. It's not because I don't want to be near you."

"Then why—"

"But I have to become independent someday. And in my case, that someday is now."

"Independent..."

Raiza's expression fell from bright to dark once again. No matter the reason, she was upset about me leaving her. Hmm. How should I say this? It's not like I could go back home with her. I looked at Kuruta and the others for help, but they looked just as troubled.

"I know! You can just visit me whenever you want, Raiza."

"Hm?"

"With your legs, it doesn't take you that long to get here from home, right? You can just come and visit me around once a week. We can reduce the visits once you get used to it."

"Oh, I see! I can come to you instead!"

Raiza clapped her hands together excitedly. She smiled from the bottom of her heart as she got to her feet. By the time she'd brushed the sand off her armor, she was completely back to her Swordmaster self.

Thank goodness. It was my usual big sister. There was no sign of weakness in the way she stood with her hands on her hips.

"Noa... No, *Sieg*. As your big sister, I'll allow you to stay here as an adventurer. I won't try to bring you home anymore, and I won't tell our sisters about you."

"Ooh! Thank you, Raiza!"

"It's what I promised, after all. I lost my composure for a bit there...but I'll keep my word."

All right! With that, I had Raiza's approval! I pumped my fists as Kuruta and the others came up to me.

"You did it! Now we can keep on adventuring together!" Kuruta

said.

"Yes! Why don't you take this chance to join our party, Kuruta?"

Come to think of it, Kuruta had helped me prepare for my duel with Raiza in passing, but she wasn't an official member of our party. She was basically a comrade, but there was still a clear divide.

"Ooh! I was wondering when it'd be brought up, but I didn't think it'd come from you! Of course, I'd be happy to."

"Thank you very much."

"Good job, Sieg! Your best work yet!" Nino said excitedly. She was practically vibrating with joy—she did admire Kuruta a lot.

As I was watching her heartwarming reaction, Kuruta suddenly stepped forward. She attempted to link her arm through mine, but—

"Ahem! Let me make this clear, Sieg. I only approved your adventurer activities. I did *not* approve you having any illicit sexual relationships."

"Oh, come on! I don't have any ulterior motives like that!" Kuruta protested.

"Yes. Kuruta and I are merely comrades."

"You don't have to put it so bluntly either. Am I really that unattractive?"

For some reason, Kuruta's face looked glum. Had I said something to offend her?

Raiza cleared her throat and snapped me out of my panic. "At any rate! If you get a girlfriend without my approval, I *will* beat you to a pulp! Don't think you'll win like today!"

"Um, right! I got it, sis."

"Good. Enjoy your life as an adventurer to the fullest. Since you've left home, you might as well learn just how big this world is for yourself. Get even stronger than you are now!"

"I will!"

And so, Raiza officially gave me her approval to continue adventuring. I didn't have to quit being an adventurer! Of course, there were still four other sisters whose approval I had to win...but with the greatest hurdle passed, I could finally exhale in relief.

One week later, I was making my way to the guild as usual when

I ran into Raiza on the street. I had said she could come visit me whenever she wanted, but this was rather fast. I'd figured she'd gone back home after our duel. I had thought this back when she'd shown up for the hydra too, but she could really move *fast*.

"Did you already go home, Raiza?!"

"Yeah. I wanted to see your face again soon."

"Wow... Don't you think that's a little too overprotective of you?"

"You've got too many bugs swarming around you. I have to watch out for you," she grumbled sullenly.

I didn't think the people around me were that dangerous. Still, Raiza sure had a lot of belongings with her. Instead of her usual magic bag, she had a large one mainly used for transporting cargo on her back. That one was big enough to use for moving house.

"Are you going on a long-term job, sis?"

"Hm? What makes you ask?"

"You've got a huge bag on your back."

"Oh, this? I bought a house in this town, so it's for moving in."

House? A chill ran down my spine at the ominous word. *Don't tell me...did she...?*

"Are you planning on *living* in this town?!"

"Of course. I may not be able to stay the entire time, but I should be here for around half of every month."

"I see I underestimated how far you would go..."

Raiza's overwhelming initiative left me in a daze. And thus, the border town of Rajah gained a new resident.

Epilogue: Big Sister Conference #2

Meanwhile in Beogran, capital of the Winster Kingdom.

The sisters' mansion was located in a section of the city close to the royal castle. It stood taller than the surrounding extravagant buildings constructed by the nation's top nobility.

Today, the sisters had all gathered there to exchange information about Noa's whereabouts—with one exception.

"Raiza isn't coming?" Aeria asked, brows furrowed in confusion.

Out of all of the siblings, Raiza had been closest to Noa as of late. She was extremely protective of him, so it was unthinkable for her to miss this meeting.

"I was shocked when I found she was skipping too," Ciel replied. "I heard she received an emergency request from the Adventurers Guild in Rajah, so she'll be staying there for some time."

"Raiza isn't an adventurer, though. It should be easy for her to refuse."

"It was an important matter involving a demon or something. Raiza's a compassionate person, so she probably couldn't refuse them." Ciel shook her head with a sigh.

While Raiza had a strict image as the Swordmaster, she was actually a kindhearted person who always wanted to help others. When that was added to her tendency to be a meathead, she was actually rather easy to deceive.

"Come to think of it, Raiza contacted me recently too. She said a hydra had appeared near Rajah," Fam commented.

"Hmm. That's news to me. Is that true?" Ciel asked.

"Of course. From what she told me, the demon that had settled in Rajah sacrificed its life to summon it. It may be an ill omen sent by god."

"If that's the case, it's no wonder she couldn't make it today," Ciel replied, convinced by that reasoning.

However, Aeria and Ecrecia still had stern expressions.

"Ill omens aside, a hydra isn't something a demon can summon easily. It can easily destroy a kingdom or two," Aeria noted.

"Hydra scary. A major disaster," Ecrecia muttered with a shudder. Her face was pale.

Aeria's expression was also stiff, although not as obvious as Ecrecia's. Unlike the other three, they didn't have any notable combat power to defend themselves with, so their fear was greater.

"I'm even more worried about Noa now. I used Fiore's information network to search for him, and he apparently left the country and headed west," Aeria continued.

"That's not good. The elemental magic I taught him won't be enough against a hydra," said Ciel.

"My light magic won't be enough either..." Fam muttered, struggling for words. As the saint, she had personally given Noa lessons in light magic. If he ever came across an evil being, he should have been able to deal with most situations safely. However, a hydra didn't fall under "most" situations. Considering his comparatively limited skills with the sword and other elemental magic, he would struggle greatly against such an opponent.

"It looks like we have no choice but to send one of us out to find him ourselves. Before something happens to him," Ciel concluded.

"In that case, Ciel or Fam would be best, since they can deal with demons," Ecrecia suggested.

"I agree. Ecrecia and I wouldn't be able to protect Noa in an emergency," said Aeria.

"In that case, I'll use the saint's edict to call the holy army together. If they spread across the West, the land will be safe from demons, and with the army's numbers, we'll find Noa in no time!" Fam declared.

"That's too over-the-top, Fam," Aeria scolded her.

The holy army was an expeditionary force that could only be called together in the name of the saint. It comprised a certain number of soldiers from each nation, making a total of roughly two hundred thousand people. It was a large enough number to find Noa and deal with any demons that appeared, but it was definitely

overdoing it.

"Besides, it'd take a whole year for the holy army to get together. We don't have that kind of time," Aeria continued.

"Then I'll go alone."

"Didn't you have trouble adjusting your schedule just to get here today, Fam? Will you be able to do that?" asked Ciel.

Their meetings to exchange information were normally held weekly, but they had been delayed because Fam had been busy. While Aeria had managed to free up half a day every week, Fam couldn't even manage that much. That was how important the role of a Holy Cross Church's saint was. It was normally unheard of for her to leave the church grounds.

"I'll go. I can fight, and I don't have any other responsibilities," Ciel volunteered.

"Oh? Didn't you say you were busy with your thesis?" asked Aeria.

"I can whip something up within a week."

"Right. Of course you can," Aeria answered, impressed by Ciel's words.

The average magician would take up to a year to finish writing a thesis, but Ciel's talent for magic was extraordinary.

"Ecrecia thinks Ciel should go too," said Ecrecia.

"I agree. I don't doubt Fam's abilities, but her position makes things much harder for her," said Aeria.

"I suppose that's for the best. May god be with you, Ciel," Fam agreed.

"I'll get ready to depart immediately. Aeria, can you inform Raiza of this through your company's magic orb? She may have found a lead on Noa as well."

"Sure thing. I'll contact the branch over there right away."

Thus, the sage Ciel departed on her journey.


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Afterword

Hello, everyone! This is the author, kimimaro. Thank you for picking up this book.

I started writing this story at the end of February last year. COVID-19 had just begun to spread, and society as a whole was very anxious and uneasy. At that time, I had just left my company and was spending all my time at home. My next job was already decided and I had planned on taking a break before starting, but my holiday plans were canceled due to the state of affairs. I shut myself at home, but it felt extremely lonely. I was longing for company so much, I ended up writing a story about a little brother surrounded by boisterous older sisters.

That became this work, *Worthless at Home, Whiz in the World*.

I'd like to take this space to give my thanks to Mokyu, who had to draw the large cast of characters. You really brought them to life with your illustrations. My personal favorite is the insert image of the big sister conference. The gathering of such quirky big sisters in one room was great to see. Everyone should go check it out too!

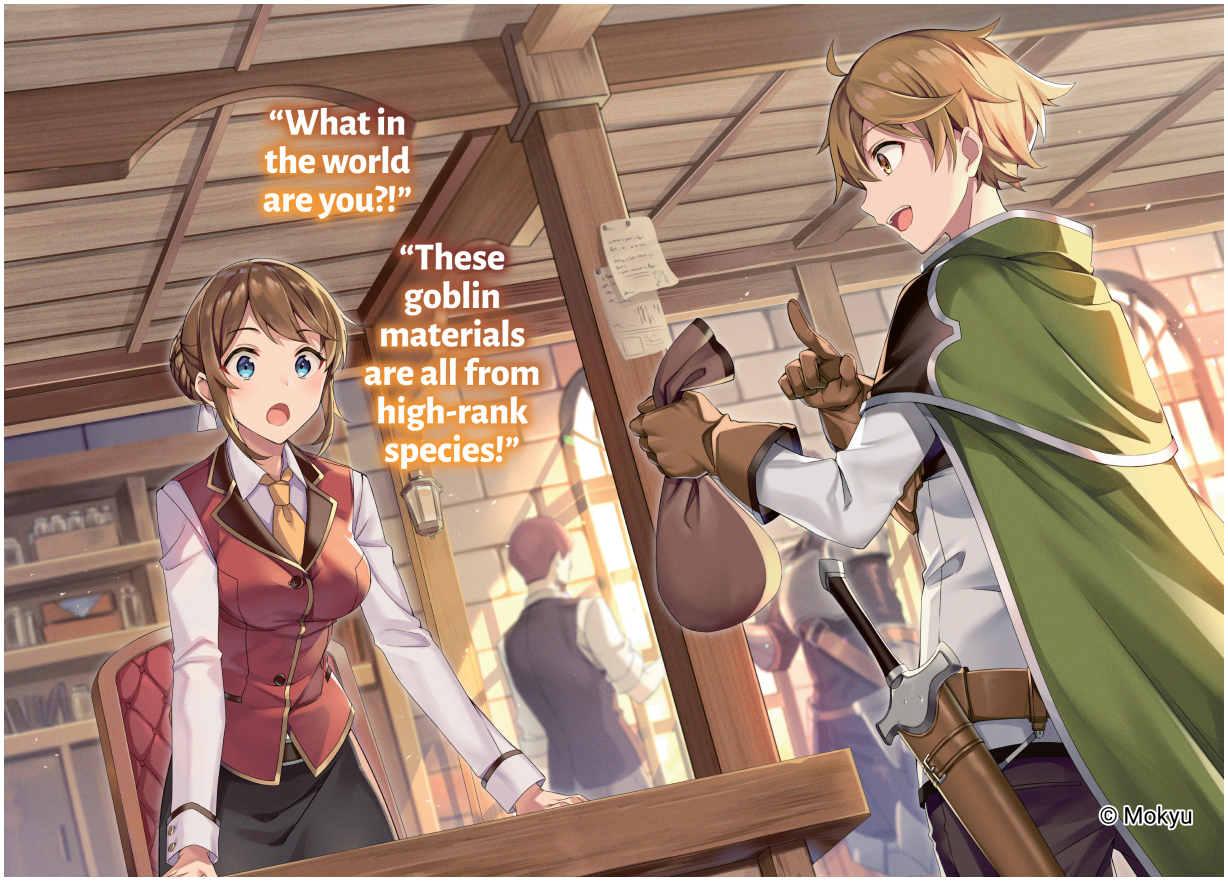
I'd also like to thank everyone involved in the publishing of this volume, which was much harder work than usual. I was fortunate to have a lot of leeway in my schedule for this release, but I had a lot of worries regarding releasing a book under the current state of emergency. Thankfully, this was published safely with everyone's efforts.

Thank you all very much. Let us meet again in volume two.

February 2021


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Illustrator: Mokyu
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Worthless at Home, Whiz to the World


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Illustrator: Mokyu
Worthless at Home, Whiz to the World


“What in the world are you?!”
“These goblin materials are all from high-rank species!”
© Mokyu


“Very well.
Let’s see the
results of that
training!”
© Mokyu



Fam
The third oldest of the five sisters. She holds the title of saint at the Holy Cross Church, the largest religious organization in the land.



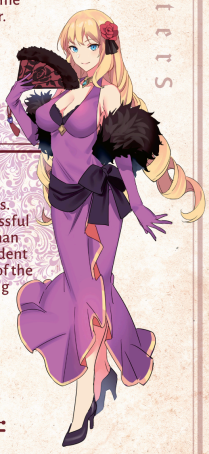
Ciel
The second youngest of the five sisters. She is a genius mage who holds the title of sage.



Ecrecia
The youngest of the five sisters. Blessed with incredible talent, she is one of the most famous artists in the world.



Noa
A boy raised by his five strict older sisters. Fed up with their harsh lessons, he decides to leave home to become an adventurer.



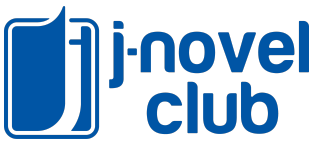
Aeria
The oldest of the five sisters. She is a successful businesswoman and the president of Fiore, one of the largest trading companies in the land.



Raiza
The second oldest of the five sisters. She is regarded as the strongest swordsman of this generation and holds the Swordmaster title.

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characters



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IE de MUNO to Iwaretsuzuketa ORE desuga, SEKAITEKI niwa CHO YUNO dattayodesu Volume 1
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