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Story/ Isle Osaki
Art/ kodamazon
Zero Damage
SWORD SAINT
I Enrolled in a Magic School and Wound Up in a Contract with the Demon Queen


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"U-UM, CAN YOU HELP ME?"
A SLIM AND KIND-LOOKING YOUNG MAN WAS GAZING DOWN AT ME WITH A WORRIED EXPRESSION. I SUMMONED THE COURAGE AND SPOKE TO HIM.
"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"


NITEN ENMEI-RYU THUNDER STANCE.
CERBERUS GROWLED AND CROUCHED, GLARING AT ME LIKE I WAS ITS PREY.
I FOCUSED ON MY OPPONENT AS WELL, PUSHING ALL OTHER THOUGHTS OUT OF MY MIND.
I'D RECEIVED POWER FROM THE LEGENDARY DEMON QUEEN.
FAILURE WAS NOT AN OPTION.

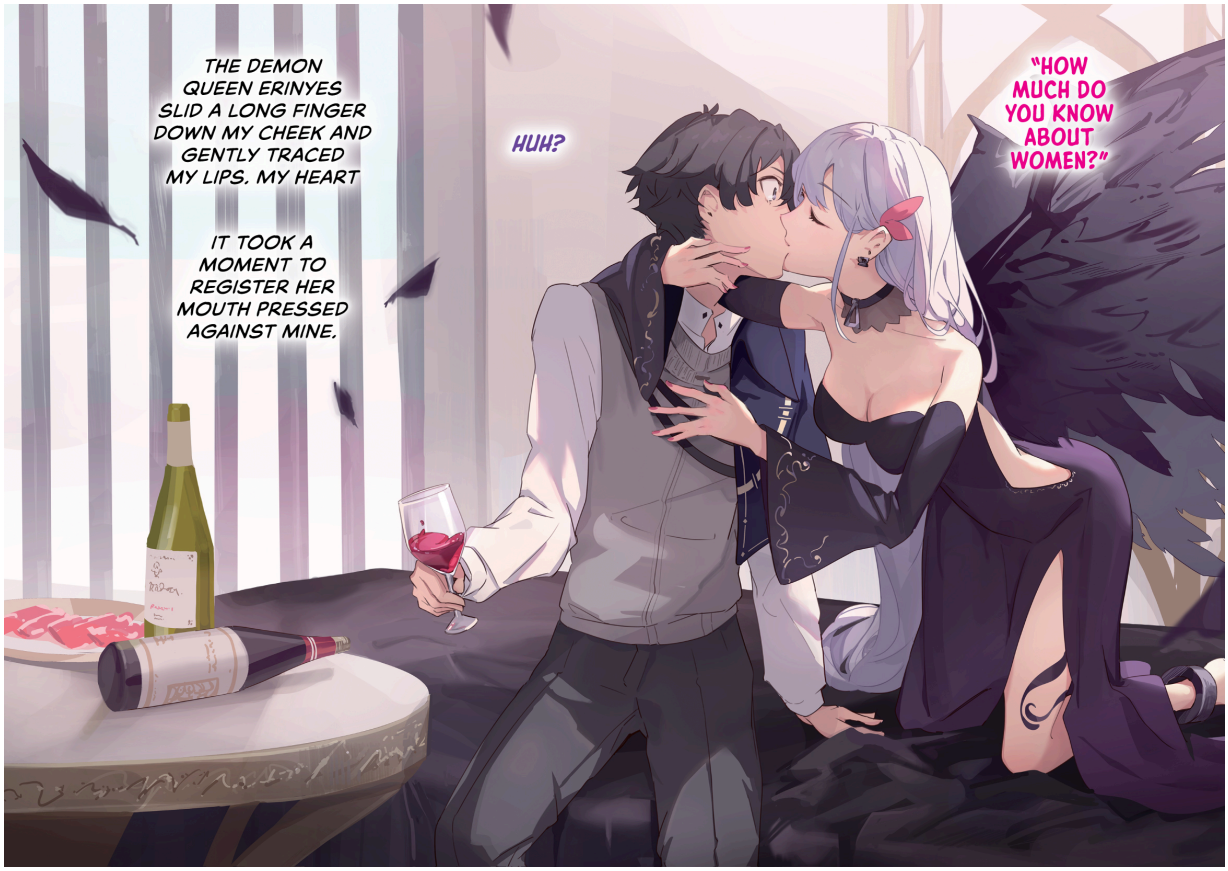

THE DEMON QUEEN ERINYES SLID A LONG FINGER DOWN MY CHEEK AND GENTLY TRACED MY LIPS. MY HEART
IT TOOK A MOMENT TO REGISTER HER MOUTH PRESSED AGAINST MINE.
HUH?
"HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT WOMEN?"

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Prologue: Meeting the Demon Queen (Part One)

Erinyes—that was the name of the Demon Queen who once ruled over the Southern Continent. Her beauty enthralled all who gazed upon her, and none could resist her siren-like voice. She was a High Archangel who'd fallen from Heaven, and so it came to pass that some called her the Fallen Queen. A thousand years ago, Abel the Savior defeated her in battle and sealed her away in a prison underneath the Last Dungeon.

Everyone on the Southern Continent knew that story. I—Eugene Santafield—had heard it many times as a kid. The Demon Queen Erinyes was a mythological figure from worlds away, a bogey who appeared in children's picture books. That was how things were supposed to be.

***

"Um, Headmaster Uther, are you really going to let this young student accompany you to the forbidden Seventh Sealed Prison? It's far too dangerous," a young teacher said in a worried voice.

Because of an incident in my past, I'd left my hometown and enrolled in Lykeion Magic Academy, which was in the heart of the Southern Continent. On my very first day of school, this teacher had called me out of class.

"There's no need to worry," the headmaster said. "I'll take responsibility should anything happen."

"If you insist, I suppose there's nothing more I can say."

The headmaster and my teacher were holding a very ominous conversation right in front of me, so I asked, "Um, pardon me, where are you two taking me?"

"You'll know when we get there," the headmaster replied. "Just follow us, Eugene."

"All right..."

The two led me to a massive black gate behind the school grounds. I could sense a dark and eerie mana emanating from within. *Is this the corrupted mana they call miasma?*

"I-I'm so sorry, headmaster, but I can't go any farther!" Without my noticing, the teacher had stopped several paces behind the headmaster and me.

The headmaster sighed before giving me a curious look. "Eugene, it's not affecting you?"

"Huh?" I tilted my head quizzically before looking around and then down at my own body. I had no idea what the headmaster was worried about; I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He chuckled and said, "I knew it. After all, you're the only student who has ever passed the joke exam I made years ago for mages specializing in white mana. I had an inkling that you would be the only student capable of entering the Seventh Sealed Prison."

The headmaster continued to smile, but I had no idea what he was so pleased about. Regardless, I had more pressing concerns. Just what was behind this creepy black gate? I thought back to the tales that had been passed down through the generations in this dungeon city. It was here that the legendary hero and the Demon Queen had fought their final battle a thousand years ago, and here that the Demon Queen was sealed to this day.

"Headmaster, is—?" But before I could finish asking my question...

Rumble... Rumble... Rumble... The earth began to shake. This had been happening an awful lot since yesterday.

"Eek! It's the Demon Queen! She's doing it again!" The young teacher fell down, landing on his bottom. The headmaster shot him a weary look.

The Demon Queen? Curious about the teacher's words, I looked up at the headmaster.

He was looking down at me. "Now then, Eugene. There's something I must tell you."

"Y-Yes?" I nodded, shrinking back a little from the mana and aura that had begun to emanate from the headmaster's body.

"Beyond this gate lies the sealed Demon Queen."

I sucked in a breath. Hearing those words made my whole body tense up. Those of us who'd spent our entire lives on the Southern Continent had no firsthand experience of the Demon Queens and Kings. Apparently, the faraway Northern Continent was still under demonic thrall, but the Southern Continent had not been governed by a Demon Queen in a thousand years, nor had any been sighted in that time.

"The Demon Queen has awoken from her seal. That's the cause of the earthquakes that began yesterday."

"She woke up?!" I shouted, my voice coming out louder than I'd intended.

"And that's why we had to come here and investigate," the headmaster continued. "To tell you the truth, though, the Demon Queen has always despised me. I can't blame her, considering I'm the one who's in charge of maintaining her seal. I can't very well show my face in front of her, lest she kill me."

I swallowed and hesitated before asking, "So, what do you want me to do?"

Lykeion Magic Academy was the finest magical institution on the Southern Continent, and Headmaster Uther, as the head of that school, was widely believed to be the greatest mage in all the land. If *he* considered the Demon Queen to be a threat, then what could I, a mere student, possibly do?

"Under normal circumstances, Demon Queen Erinyes is quite mild-mannered for her station. She won't attack a young boy out of the blue. Uh, probably. I would like you to check on her in my stead. Of course, I've prepared some gifts to put her in a better mood. If the situation goes sideways, you can just toss them in front of her cage and run."

"Why do *I* have to... I mean, why are you asking me? I'm new here," I asked, posing an obvious question. There must have been better options.

At my words, the headmaster slowly opened his mouth and

replied, "That teacher over there, who's shaking like a leaf on the ground, is the best we have when it comes to Barrier Magic."

It took a few seconds for the words to sink in. "Huh?" I widened my eyes and turned to look at the teacher.

"Don't ask the impossible from me!" he wailed. "If you'd asked me a few years ago, I would've had no problems entering that prison! But *you* were the one who summoned mythical being after mythical being from all kinds of worlds! Now the Seventh Sealed Prison has descended into chaos, and *no one* can enter it!"

The headmaster frowned at the teacher's complaint. "How can you blame me? They all just sounded so interesting," he replied without a hint of apology in his voice.

I'd had the impression that the headmaster was a rather *austere* person. But it seemed he was a lot more blasé about things than I'd thought.

"So, Eugene, you now know what I want from you, and of course, I won't ask you to do it for free. If you can hand the Demon Queen my gifts, I'll cover your tuition for an entire year."

"You'll cover my tuition?!"

That was very tempting indeed. My original plan had been to work at my dad's place of employment after I graduated from my local school. However, I couldn't do that anymore thanks to a certain personal issue. My father had accepted my decision...or rather, he'd said, "If you're gonna spend your free time lazing around the house, you might as well travel and broaden your horizons!" and kicked me out. He was the one paying for me to attend Lykeion, which pained me, since I should've become independent by now. If I could cover my own tuition, I could save face with him.

"I understand," I said. "I'll accept this mission."

"Are you serious?!" the teacher yelped. "Eugene, I think you should reconsid—"

"Besides, how could I miss the chance to see a legendary Demon Queen with my own eyes?" I continued. I was putting up a front, but a part of me was completely serious. This would make for an exciting story to tell my father.

The headmaster grinned. "Good, lad! I expected nothing less

from the descendant of the Sword Saint!”

“The descendant of the Sword Saint” was something my father had written on my application. The Sword Saint was a legendary figure of about five hundred years past who had, if only temporarily, brought peace to the Eastern Continent. Apparently, he was one of my ancestors. Although it didn’t count as a lie, we also couldn’t prove this admittedly suspicious ancestry.

“Now, let’s go,” the headmaster said before murmuring a strange spell that I couldn’t quite make out.

The black gate slowly opened. The headmaster strode in without hesitation, so I followed him. The door closed behind us with a resonating *boom*. I looked around the dark prison, illuminated only by magical lamps. The headmaster made his way deeper inside, and I followed him at a distance. The air was so stagnant that I was already struggling to breathe, so I doubled up on all the Barrier Magic in my repertoire.

Szzt...szzt... Thump...ring...thump...ring... Shing...shing...shing...shing... Ah ha ha! Hee hee...hee hee...hee hee...

The prison was dimly lit. From all around me, I could hear the sounds of things being dragged as well as eerie sobbing. Some noises, I suspected, came from things that weren’t even human.

“Hey, you there! Do you want to play with me?” a whisper sounded right next to my ear.

I whirled around but didn’t see anyone behind me.

“Eugene, that’s the voice of an evil spirit. You mustn’t listen to them,” the headmaster said.

“Y-Yes, Headmaster,” I said, terrified. I steeled my nerves, then ran after him.

We walked for some time before reaching the deepest part of the prison. The air felt heavy, and though it wasn’t hot, I couldn’t stop sweating. My instincts were screaming at me that I should back away. That it was far too dangerous to venture any farther...

“I can’t continue past this point or else the Demon Queen will notice my presence. Here, take this, Eugene,” the headmaster said, and a basket promptly popped into existence. It contained bottles of

wine, loaves of bread, and a single red fruit.

"*These* are the gifts for the Demon Queen?" I asked. *It's a pretty simple basket. Will this really put her in a better mood?*

"She's just woken up after sleeping for over a hundred years. I figured food would be an appropriate present, as she'll be hungry," the headmaster explained. "For dessert, I prepared for her this Fruit of Life. It's quite rare, and it wasn't easy to get my hands on it, but I suppose quelling her anger is far more important."

"Th-The Fruit of Life?!" I exclaimed. *As in the legendary fruit said to grant whomever eats it eternal youth?!* I was staring down at the basket in shock when the headmaster gave my shoulder a hearty pat, forceful enough to push me forward.

"I'm counting on you. Good luck, Eugene."

"I... Thank you, Headmaster Uther."

At the headmaster's urging, I proceeded alone through the deepest depths of the underground prison. My footsteps sounded louder than usual. Eventually, I found myself standing in front of a cell far larger than any of the others lining the underground passage.

Now, what should I do? Should I just leave the basket here, or should I say something?

A lovely voice interrupted my indecision. "Who's there?"

The sound was like someone splashing cold water over my head. I slowly turned toward the voice and saw a pair of crimson eyes, as red in hue as blood.

"I've never seen you before, boy."

Her skin was as white as snow, and her long hair sparkled as if with stardust. A pair of obsidian-feathered wings protruded from her back. She looked exactly as the legends said, though her beauty transcended any story I'd ever heard.

"What's your name?"



"It's...Eugene Santafield."

"Oh? What a nice, strong name. Come closer."

My body was paralyzed from fear, and my legs were trembling. But under the influence of her irresistible charm, I obeyed her command and walked into the cell. At that point in time, I had no idea that this meeting would be a catalyst—for the chaos that would soon engulf the entire continent, and for my own ascendance to the position of the Sword Saint.

Chapter One: Eugene Goes to School

It all began about one year prior.

"White mana? That's my only ability?" I murmured from the podium, stunned.

I was currently in the middle of the Glenflare Military Academy's selection exam. Upon reaching fifteen—the age of majority in the empire—students could take the exam and join the army in an official capacity. After a grueling training regimen, these new adults received a Blessing from Ilia, the goddess of fate. This Blessing of Ability served as a lodestar for the course each student should chart in life.

I—Eugene Santafield—was the best student in the academy, achieving top marks across the board. Everyone expected great things from me, and I, too, saw success in my future. Whether the subject was swordsmanship, strategy, or military leadership, I was the number one student in my class. I worked hard every day to become stronger and better than all my peers.

So why? How could this happen?

Mind blank, I stared down at my selection card. These cards were transparent, but when held up before the statue of the goddess, they took on the colors of the owners' abilities.

And my card had turned pure white. Black signified offensive ability, white was defense, and gray a mix of the two. The seven colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet—each represented a unique ability. The more abilities students possessed, the more colors appeared on their cards. Average Joes ended up with solid gray cards. Meanwhile, the cards of those with defects in their abilities turned pure black or pure white...like the one in my hand.

The teacher who'd looked out for me throughout my time at the academy tried to encourage me. "Eugene, you have my sympathies. Stay strong." However, I recognized the disappointment in his gaze.

"Hey, there's a line behind you! Go back to your seat!" jeered Massio, the third-place student at the academy, as he shoved my back.

I couldn't even work up the effort to dodge him, and as I stumbled back to my seat, I heard the cheers of my classmates all around me.

"All right! I've got three colors!"

"Dammit! Only two!"

"Yo, apparently, someone's got *five* colors!"

"For real?!"

I stared into space, unable to form a thought. My childhood friend Airi was saying something to me, but I couldn't make out the words. After a while, someone shoved his way between us.

"Sup, Airi? Apparently, your childhood friend is a big ol' failure. A chosen one like yourself shouldn't hang out with nobodies like him." It was Massio, who'd finished his exam. He patted me on the shoulder, smirking all the while. Red, green, and gray adorned his card.

Three colors? He's outstanding...unlike me.

"Man, it really is *too bad*! The top student in our grade pulling a white card and becoming an absolute failure. Who could've seen this coming?"

One of Massio's friends butted in too. "Right? And an ability that's only good for defense? Does the military even have the space for freeloaders?"

"Probably not! No department would want a single-colored loser!" another one added.

"You bastards..." I was trembling with rage, but they weren't wrong. White mana only granted defensive magic. That my card was pure white meant that none of the mana in my body could deal damage.

During my time at the military academy, I'd learned all I needed to become a Magic Swordsman, which involved infusing mana into

my blade. However, if I channeled my white mana into a sword and attacked an enemy with it, it would do no damage. I was a failure of a swordsman. Why had the goddess blessed me with white mana and nothing else? If only I had something—*anything*—else, I could've made up for any limitations in my abilities with hard work and training.

Massio and his friends weren't done yet.

"You can't be a Magic Swordsman with only white magic."

"Why don't you become a Healer instead? We'll come visit you if we ever get injured on the job."

"If you don't wanna be a Healer, then I guess Barrier Master is your only other option. A life of wandering around, reinforcing the barriers around cities... Sounds like a pretty satisfying job. Just not one *I* would ever wanna do!"

The three of them burst out laughing at that.

"Dammit." I couldn't say a single word in response. I could only hang my head in silence.

***

When it rained, it poured. I stopped wanting to go to school and started skipping classes. That was when Airi, my childhood friend, paid me a visit. I thought she'd come to comfort me, but she was acting off. She refused to meet my eyes, and she hadn't come alone; she'd brought a friend with her. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Eu... I think we should spend some time apart." Airi and I went way back, which was why she referred to me as "Eu." Her voice, once so familiar, was now as cold as ice.

"Huh? Wh-What are you talking about, Airi?"

I thought back to the card Airi had pulled during the selection exam the other day. It had shimmered like a rainbow, denoting her seven abilities. That card was proof that she was the very best. She was brimming with talent. In contrast, I was at the bottom of the food chain. We'd grown up together, and now we were worlds apart. The sheer shame of that had pushed me to avoid her as of late, but I had never imagined she would say something like this to me.

Voice quavering, I asked, "'We should spend some time apart'? What do you mean?"

Airi didn't look up at me, though her expression was one of deep sorrow. Her friend spoke in her stead. "Hey, use your brain, Eugene. This is a critical time for Princess Airi. If she hangs around with someone as inept as you, people will start spreading weird rumors about her. You don't want that, do you?"

"What?!" Fury flared through my chest at the cruel way she'd phrased it. *Who are you calling inept?! Airi and I aren't betrothed yet, but our parents approve of our relationship. You're our classmate—you* know *we promised our futures to each other!*

"I hear that the second prince of one of the bigger countries in the Blue Sea Union is interested in marrying her," the friend continued. "A rainbow ability and a prince, huh? I'm so jealous! Airi, you're *so* lucky!"

"Hey! You promised you wouldn't talk about that in front of him!" Airi hurriedly covered her friend's mouth. This reaction was proof enough that the friend's words were true.

"Airi..." I said. "You're marrying someone else?"

"You've got the wrong idea!" she exclaimed. "My father didn't ask me before he—"

"That's right!" the friend interrupted. "This is the will of Airi's dad, His Imperial Majesty. So, Eugene, you better not hold a grudge against her."

I was speechless. Airi was indeed the princess, which did indeed mean that her father was the emperor, the most important man in this country. For an imperial citizen, the emperor's words were absolute. Even a toddler knew that.

"Airi, I... I wanted to be the Imperial Sword for..." The words that almost spilled out of my mouth were so foolish that I immediately swallowed them back down.

The Imperial Sword was the emperor's right-hand man, so called because he was always at the emperor's side to protect him from any threat. That had been the goal I was working toward. Airi looked away with a sad expression. Meanwhile, her friend's lips twisted in a small smirk.

"Pfft! You're a reject swordsman who can only use white mana, and you aspired to be an Imperial Sword?"

"Hey! Stop making fun of Eu!"

Making fun of? Airi's words stabbed into my chest.

"Sorry, sorry," her friend said. "Let's go, Airi."

"Huh? But... A-All right." Airi permitted herself to be dragged away. Not once did she turn back to look at me.

The next day, I dropped out of the military academy.

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"And then, after your childhood friend dumped you, you holed up at home until your dad kicked you out and forced you to enroll in Lykeion Magic Academy, right? Jeez, how many times have you told me this story? Must be over a dozen by now."

"Shut up, Claude. A hero like you will never go through what I did. The least you can do is listen."

Currently, I was attending Lykeion Magic Academy as a student in its General Education program. The academy was the best school on the Southern Continent. Both its courses and its students were of the highest caliber. I had been moping around at home when my father literally knocked some sense into me and all but tossed me here. Few of the students knew about my past, so I'd once again learned to enjoy my school life. Though I thought my father could've used a gentler hand, I had nothing but gratitude toward him.

The person walking beside me was Claude Percival, a student in the academy's Hero Course. He possessed an ability of five colors, and his job was a Hero-in-Training. He was the best of the best. In contrast, my jobs were Healing Mage and Barrier Mage. I only possessed white mana, so these were the only two jobs available to me. My lifetime earnings would be a hundredth of his. Things were really rough. It was almost enough to bring a tear to my eye.

"Your childhood friend is Princess Airi, right? I hear she's joined the Heavenly Knights, the top warriors in the empire."

I clicked my tongue. "Yeah, that's right. And she's dating one of her fellow knights too."

Lykeion Magic Academy was in a far and foreign land, but given Airi's fame, rumors of her still reached our ears. Apparently, that arranged marriage with some country's second prince had fallen through. But I heard that she was now in a relationship with a young and elite imperial general—that my childhood friend had completely forgotten me and was having a grand old time with her new lover. *Infuriating*.

Perhaps my expression gave away the direction my thoughts were headed in; Claude hastened to express his sympathies. "Oh, but you're the only one I can trust with my wyvern, Eugene. Thanks for always taking care of my partner."

"Well, yeah, I'm a member of the Biology Club. I'm just doing my job."

Many of the students in the academy were members of clubs, institutions similar to the unions we would be able to join when we entered society. Our classes taught us quintessential magic and battle techniques as well as general knowledge. Meanwhile, our clubs taught us about the hierarchy that existed between juniors and seniors. Many students joined to make connections with students from other years.

I belonged to the Biology Club. Under normal circumstances, students could choose which clubs they joined of their own volition. In my case, though, the headmaster was the one who had picked the Biology Club for me. But in return, he'd exempted me from paying tuition. That being said, I had to perform so many annoying tasks and odd jobs as part of the Biology Club that it didn't feel like a fair trade.

Claude and I stopped in front of a large cage and undid the massive lock that kept the door closed. The lock, like the cage itself, was a custom-built magic item.

"Hey, partner!" Claude said as we stepped inside the cage and a wyvern covered in gorgeous ultramarine scales landed near us. It growled low in its throat to express its joy as Claude ran his hand over it. "How've you been?"

As Claude hung out with his wyvern, I filled up its feed before saying, "Claude, I'm finished up here."

"Grrr...grrr..." The wyvern leaned toward me, so I rewarded it with a few pats. Apparently, this one had a rather ornery disposition. I'd earned its trust after using my magic to heal some injuries it had suffered.

"Partner, we've got an expedition tomorrow. Let's take to the heavens together, you and I," Claude said with a bright smile at the wyvern.

He was a pompous guy. Not to mention, he was popular with the girls. But that was hardly a surprise. He was a hero, after all.

I left the cage and headed across the grounds. For some reason, Claude followed me the entire time.

"Is there something else you want from me?" I asked.

"Eugene, you're about to head to *that* cage, right? I'll go with you," he replied.

I paused for a moment before saying, "Weirdo. I don't mind if you come with, but don't push yourself, okay?"

The grounds that Lykeion Magic Academy gave to the Biology Club were expansive. This was because the headmaster loved oddities and kept many rare and unusual magical beings in captivity. Some of them were so dangerous that they were "designated calamities." These were confined in the Sealed Area, which became more dangerous the deeper you went in.

When we entered the Sealed Area, the air was stagnant, and the more steps we took, the thicker the miasma became. A normal person would have had difficulty breathing here. As a Barrier Mage, I didn't have any problems, but...

I glanced to my side out of concern for Claude and saw that he had turned pale. *I knew it...*

"Claude, I told you not to push yourself," I said.

"I-I'm still okay," he replied.

I slowed my pace to match his. Eventually, we reached a gargantuan gate crafted from black metal. This was the taboo Seventh Sealed Prison. Beyond it roamed mythological creatures, the most dangerous specimens in the academy's menagerie. I'd heard that even meeting their eyes was enough to drive a normal person crazy. Taking care of them was part of the Biology Club's duties, but

this was also an undesirable task that only a Barrier Mage could handle. It made sense that no one was keen to volunteer.

"S-Sorry, Eugene. I can't go any farther," Claude said, stopping in his tracks. Cold sweat beaded his brow.

"You made it pretty far today," I said.

"Yeah, I did. I'd sure love to meet the legendary Demon Queen one day, but I can't tolerate this thick miasma yet."

"Don't get too reckless. See you later." I pushed open the heavy sealed gate, and the miasma that had been building up inside poured out in a rush. Claude fell to his knees with a pained grunt. "Here—*Mind Heal*," I said.

When I'd cast the spell on him, Claude staggered to his feet, his legs still wobbly. "Hey, Eugene, I've been wondering this for a while now, but how is this miasma *not* affecting you? I'm a Hero-in-Training and I can't even stand it."

"How many times are you gonna ask me that? It's because I'm a Barrier Mage."

"There's a Sage on my team who can use Barrier Magic, but he passed out some distance away from the black gate of the Seventh Sealed Prison."

"That's because he's been slacking on his training."

"I really don't think that's it..."

"See you." I waved at him before closing the gate from the inside.

But right before it slammed shut, I heard Claude mutter, "There's something *seriously* wrong with you."

What could possibly be wrong with me?

***

Every living being inside Lykeion Magic Academy's Seven Sealed Prison was a mythological creature and designated calamity. If even one of them escaped, it could destroy an entire city. So I'd heard, anyway. In reality, there had never *been* an escape, so I had no way of confirming the veracity of that rumor.

As for why the academy housed such dangerous creatures, we had the headmaster to thank for that. He had always been an

eccentric, so it made sense that he had bizarre hobbies. All the cages had multiple locks on them, and you had to dispel them in a specific order or else they would never open. Even without them, the quintessence that the seals couldn't hold back flowed through the air as a thick shroud of miasma. Any ordinary person who entered this place would instantly fall into a coma. Claude was a hero, and *he* couldn't even handle it. No one would be so foolhardy as to try sneaking inside.

I carefully went through the troublesome steps that granted me access to each cage. If I took too long, though, *she* would get mad at me. *I should hurry.* Panicking a little, I proceeded deeper inside. The sign on the cage in the deepest depths of the prison read: Fallen Queen Erinyes.

With slow, measured steps, I entered the cage. The miasma hanging in the air clung to my skin. It was so thick, it was akin to a cloud of poison. To prevent myself from losing consciousness, I'd cast several layers of barriers around my body. After all, it was because of my protective white mana that the headmaster had chosen me as the Demon Queen's caretaker.

"It's been a century since I last allowed a student in here! You should be proud of yourself, Eugene!" I remembered the headmaster telling me jovially. *Yeah, and then, right after that, he forced me to join the Biology Club.*

I sighed and dragged my feet as I walked deeper into the giant cage. It was full of glamorous furniture that made it resemble a noble's bedroom. I made my way to the massive bed at the back of the cage. On top of it lay a woman, her foot secured to it by a thick chain.

"You're finally here. What took you so long?"

"This is the usual time, isn't it?" I replied airily as I looked down at her. *No matter how many times I see her, I can't get used to how breathtakingly gorgeous she is.* If I'd asked a thousand different people their opinions on her looks, they would all have agreed that she boasted an inhuman beauty. *Well, that makes sense. She really* isn't *human*, I joked to myself.

She had pale skin and bright red lips. Though her physique

showed traces of youth, she exuded a mature and seductive elegance. A pair of wings—proof that she had once served the Goddess in Heaven as an Angel—protruded from her back. However, the feathers weren't white. Instead, they were a corrupted black.

Her name was Erinyes, the Fallen Queen. In eons past, she had been a High Archangel in the service of the goddess in Heaven. However, after provoking the goddess's wrath, she'd been cast down to Earth, making her a fallen Angel. It hadn't taken her long to earn the title of Demon Queen, and she'd brought the entirety of the Southern Continent to heel. More recently, having been laid low by the legendary hero, she'd been spending her days sealed away in the academy.

"Now then, fulfill your duty," she said.

I bit back a sigh before saying, "Yes, yes, I know."

I approached the enormous bed and sat down on the mattress. It creaked under our combined weight. The beautiful demon queen stripped me of my clothes and climbed on top of me.

"It's been a week since the last time," she said.

"I brought you some food and a change of clothes," I informed her.

"Give them to me later!" Eyes burning in her ethereal face, she leaned down over me and pressed her lips against mine, stealing my breath away.

It was my duty, as a sacrifice for the Demon Queen, to provide her with my essence every month. This was the most difficult but also the most important task I'd been assigned as a member of the Biology Club.

***

"Phew, I'm exhausted," I said, stretching my arms above my head. Next to me was the Demon Queen, a thin blanket wrapped around her body. *Is she asleep?* But when I looked over at her, I saw her staring up at me.

"Hey, Eugene?"

"What is it, Your Majesty?"

"Stop calling me that. I told you to call me Eri when we're alone, didn't I?"

"Yes, yes, understood. Would you like something to eat? All I've got is bread, ham, cheese, and wine, though."

"Yes, I would. Bring the red wine."

"Roger that."

I took the food out of the basket and placed it on a plate before handing it over to the Demon Queen Erinyes. She worked her way through the various items, popping them into her mouth one by one, while I simply watched her exquisite profile. The sultry atmosphere from earlier had vanished, and now she was more akin to my pet cat, who was still in my childhood home.

"Are you thinking something rude?" she asked.

"O-Of course not," I stammered. *She's got sharp instincts. Even sealed away, she's still a Demon Queen.*

Eri said nothing for a moment, then sighed. "You were *so* much cuter before!"

"By before, you mean a year ago?"

Eri had suddenly woken from her centuries-long slumber more or less the moment I enrolled in Lykeion Magic Academy. Perhaps she'd still been sleepy, but she had been in a foul mood and rampaged without ceasing. Worried that she'd break the seal, the headmaster had panicked and ordered that many offerings be delivered to the Demon Queen.

Thanks to my talent in Barrier Magic, I could enter her cage, which was why he'd chosen me as the delivery boy. She'd focused on me rather than the headmaster's gifts and taken my essence by force. Sure, I'd been in a self-destructive mood after the shock of my breakup, but it had still taken me aback.

"I like you!" she'd said. And since she'd made a direct request that I continue visiting her, I couldn't escape from this task.

Ever since then, I'd had to offer the Demon Queen Eri my services every week. The schedule left my body feeling heavy. *Giving her my essence never stops being taxing.*

"I should get going," I said. "I still have to check out the other cages."

"Stay until morning!" Eri whined in a cute voice.

"I have school tomorrow..." *Unlike a certain Demon Queen who's on vacation every day.*

"Oh, pooh. You're *so* mean to me, Eugene," Eri said with a pout. Then she wrapped her arms around my back and whispered into my ear, "Hey, don't you think it's about time you freed me from this place?"

She looked up at me through her long lashes, taking advantage of her adorable appearance even as she made that terrifying request. We'd had this conversation dozens of times before.

"I already told you, I can't break the seal here. The headmaster is the only one who can," I said.

The seal on Eri's cage was a special one, and the headmaster personally took regular trips down here to recast it. I, a mere student, could never hope to break it.

"If you sign a contract with me, then you'll get my mana, you know? No one, not even the headmaster, can defeat you if you use the Demon Queen's mana. Just kill him and rule over this place in his stead."

It took me a second to find my words after hearing that. "You say some really scary stuff like it's nothing, you know?"

I had my fair share of complaints about the headmaster after all the trouble he'd dumped into my lap, but I was still grateful to him for all the help he gave me. I could never kill him. Besides, even with the Demon Queen Eri's mana, I doubted I could defeat him. That man was a true monster.

"But if you gain power, you'll be able to get back at that childhood friend who tossed you aside," Eri said.

I couldn't respond to that. Some time before, I'd let slip my grievances about my past—both the bitter memory of my selection exam and the agonizing pain of Airi, my childhood friend, breaking up with me.

"You never know," Eri continued. "She just might fall for you all over again and want to get back together with you."

It was a long while before I could say, "Not interested."

That was a lie. Even now, dreams of my breakup with Airi

haunted me, so that I frequently shot awake in the dead of night. Pathetic as it was to admit, that incident had left me traumatized.

Eri giggled. "But you're unsure if turning me down is the right choice, aren't you? Sign a contract with me and this Demon Queen will help you regain everything that you've lost."

She gave me a sultry smile. These were the sweet words of a demon... No, this was a fallen Angel's temptation, and any man who fell for it would be dragged into the depths of sin. *So, in other words, just an ordinary conversation between the two of us.*

"All right, I've done my duty, so I should head out," I said as I rose from the bed.

"Wait, wait, I was kidding! It was just a joke!" Eri cried, grabbing onto me.



"Stop saying weird things."

"But I'm booored!" Eri kicked her feet to let out her frustration. Her dignity as a Demon Queen was long gone.

"If you're bored, then just use the Satellite System over there to see what's going on in the Dungeon," I said, pointing at the giant screen inside her cage.

Though the screen was currently dark, this magic item could show what was going on outside if the user channeled mana into it. That being said, it could only display the inside of the Last Dungeon, Babel.

"I'm already tired of it!" Eri complained. "It's only ever the same people going inside! I'll watch it if *you* go, though."

"That reminds me, I haven't gone dungeon exploring in a while."

I'd considered working as a dungeon explorer and making a name for myself that way. But my lack of offensive magic had forced me to give up on that plan; the handicap my white mana imposed on me was far too restrictive.

"You should do it! I'll cheer on your exploration efforts, Eugene," Eri said, giving me a smile so sweet that I found it hard to believe she was a Demon Queen.

"Unfortunately, I've only ever reached the 9th Level." A swordsman who couldn't deal any damage would have a hard time exploring the more difficult levels of the dungeon.

"If you use a magic sword, you can challenge the Boss of the 10th Level, right? Why don't you?"

"I stopped training with a sword, since I can only use Barrier Magic and Healing Magic now."

In the imperial military academy, I'd majored in swordplay. I'd even attained full mastery over a style of swordplay that was said to be the most powerful on the Eastern Continent. My dream had been to become a Magic Swordsman and wield a magic sword to protect my childhood friend and my country. But ever since that fateful exam, I'd never touched a sword. I did, however, still practice with a wooden stick; I couldn't fully let go of my dream even now.

Eri's alluring voice reached my ears. "If you sign a contract with me, you can use a powerful magic sword whenever you want."

She was still trying to sell me on the idea of a contract, and in truth, her offer was a tempting one. A contract with the Demon Queen could solve a lot of my problems. But...

There's no breaking the rules of a demonic contract. You absolutely *had* to hold up your end of the bargain or the demon might take your very soul.

Eri's goal was to escape from this cage into the outside world. In other words, the price of the power that tempted me was to free the Demon Queen who'd ruled over the Southern Continent a thousand years ago. *Nope, no way. Absolutely not.*

"I'm heading out now. If there's an emergency, call me with that magic bell over there."

"Oh, phooey, you're such a square." The Demon Queen Erinyes pursed her lips in an adorable pout.

"I'll come by again next week."

"See you then! ♡" She waved at me, smiling brightly. It was hard to reconcile this kind of behavior with the image of a Demon Queen.

After I left, I checked over the other magical beings in the underground prison. All of them were fast asleep thanks to the seals on their cages. Eri had been the only one awake and full of energy. It only took me about an hour to finish my rounds.

***

Today was yet another exhausting day, I thought as I dragged my feet back to my room. Every time I had a rendezvous with Eri, she drained me of my stamina. Granted, my own mana was always overflowing afterward...

I don't feel so good. I should take a nap. But the moment I reached the door to my dorm room...

Klang klang klang klang klang! An ominous alarm sounded throughout the school.

"An abnormal situation has arisen in Babel, the Last Dungeon. All explorers D rank and above must assemble at the Dungeon entrance immediately. I repeat..."

I glanced down at the explorer badge pinned to my chest. The

words “D rank” blinked back at me. As someone who fulfilled the requirement, I had to join the others.

I guess I don’t have a choice. My nap would have to wait. After leaving the dormitory, I headed for the Last Dungeon. *Now then...*

I looked up at the massive tower, which seemed to extend all the way above the clouds. Its diameter was so great that a small city could have fit inside, and it was said to boast a thousand floors, though no one in the history of humanity had ever reached the top. No human or near human race could have built it, and so people believed the gods had constructed it as a training or proving ground.

This place was called the Last Dungeon, or Babel. Located in the middle of the Southern Continent, it was the largest dungeon in the world. The magical academy I attended—no, even the city-state that the academy existed in had sprung up after the Last Dungeon.

Many had gathered here to seek the treasures inside the gargantuan dungeon, which had prompted others to set up stores to supply their needs. In time, enough people had settled down to form a city around Babel, and, as the city grew, it became a city-state. That was the origin of the dungeon city, or dungeon country, of Karaf.

In the event of an anomaly inside Babel, all the explorers who lived within the city were duty bound to prioritize defending the dungeon. Students of Lykeion Magic Academy weren’t exempt. Currently, I saw a few dozen explorers gathered in the square outside of the dungeon entrance.

Not many people are here... The city housed several thousand explorers, but it seemed that the higher-ranking ones were absent. That made sense, though. The higher an explorer’s rank, the more often they went exploring, after all. My explorer rank of D was the bare minimum necessary to enter the dungeon unaccompanied. Most of the others here had the same rank as me.

“Thank you for coming, everyone!” The man who’d spoken was a member of the dungeon staff, public officials who supervised Babel and retrieved injured explorers from inside. “A Dungeon Destroyer has appeared inside Babel! This is an urgent situation. Everyone, look at the Satellite System!”

No one needed to be told twice. We all looked up at the giant screen displaying the inner goings-on of Babel and grimaced as one. The 5th Level of the dungeon had turned into a sea of flames.

What's going on? Normally, all the floors up until the 9th Level consist of woods and grassy plains. The Last Dungeon was a massive construct comprising a thousand floors, with the scenery and environment changing every ten levels. I'd made my way up to the *9th* Level before, so I could tell at a glance just how bizarre this situation was.

"Such an inferno cannot be the result of natural causes! Someone must have set fire to the dungeon! Though we've been trying to put it out, our efforts thus far have been in vain. We would like everyone here to investigate the cause of the fire as well as help with extinguishing it."

After the staffer revealed the reason behind the summons, people around me began murmuring to each other.

"What the hell? Ask the impossible of us, why don't you?"

"None of us will last a second in those flames."

"Fire-resistant armor is so expensive."

This situation was far too dangerous for such low-level explorers.

"We will lend everyone fire-resistant robes free of charge. Those who need them can pick them up here. As well, explorers who help us with this task will, regardless of performance, receive compensation—"

As soon as I heard that, I turned and slowly made my way to the dungeon entrance. The others' reactions were more varied; some continued to hesitate, while others lined up to receive their fire-resistant robes.

"Eugene!" called a middle-aged man whom I recognized as one of the staff, approaching me. "Are you going in?"

"Yeah," I replied. "The sooner the better, right?"

"It's an emergency, so yes, I'd really appreciate it."

"I don't envy you your job. All I need to do before I go in is sign here, right?"

"That's correct. All right, that's all the paperwork sorted. Oh, and don't forget this! Sorry to foist my own hand-me-downs on you." He

handed me a fire-resistant robe that looked decidedly frayed at the edges.

"I don't need one," I told him. "I've got my Barrier Magic."

"Oh, don't say that. Being prepared for any situation is the most important thing for an explorer. Besides, you may come across some stragglers in there, so you should bring that just in case."

"All right, I got it. Thanks."

After expressing my gratitude, I walked in through the door and entered the 1st Level, then made my way toward the center of the floor, where the Dungeon Elevator was.

The elevator was an ancient relic. No one knew when it had appeared, nor how it worked. Nonetheless, everybody used it because of its sheer convenience. Some bizarre technology allowed it to carry passengers to any floor they'd reached through their own efforts. Thus, I could only use it to access floors up to the 9th Level.

I pressed the button for the 5th Level and the Dungeon Elevator began its slow ascent. Soon, it came to a halt, and the doors parted on a blazing inferno. Thanks to the barrier around the elevator, the heat and the flames hadn't reached me or any of the other passengers, but they had swallowed up everything else. Many other explorers had already gotten to the 5th Level. However, none of those in the elevator with me made a move to venture through the doors; their words and expressions were laced with fear.

"Hey, do they really want us to go in there?"

"I sure don't wanna..."

"It's impossible to see through the flames and smoke. We won't be able to fight back if any monsters attack us."

"*Are* there any monsters on the 5th Level that can withstand that blaze?"

"Who knows? It's not like any of this is normal."

The inferno had stopped the explorers from progressing any farther. I, however, started making my way to where the fire was most intense.

"H-Hey!" one explorer called out to me. "You're not wearing your fire-resistant robe!"

"Don't worry!" I replied. "I can use Barrier Magic!"

"O-Okay, but, even *if* you're a Barrier Mage, this fire is still way too strong!"

"Don't be an idiot! Come back!"

To soothe everyone's worries, I waved at them from within the fire. No one said anything more, so I must have succeeded in reassuring them. I progressed deeper into the roaring flames. The fire had reduced the trees to charcoal that had dispersed across the ground like sand. Thanks to the barrier I'd cast around my body, I couldn't feel the heat. But the sight of flames surrounding me on all sides made it difficult to relax.

Could anything have survived this? Most likely, a monster of the fire element had started it, and one from the higher levels too. Perhaps it had descended through Babel in search of prey. But, taking into consideration that a Boss guarded the 10th Level, I couldn't think of any monster capable of getting all the way here and doing this. But no sooner had that thought occurred to me than—

Hic...sob...sob... Under the crackling and crumbling of the wood, I heard the faint sounds of someone crying. *Is that...a girl's voice? Is she an explorer who got left behind in the dungeon? But why is she still here? Surely she doesn't have the luxury to be sitting around crying.*

I had to remain on guard. Some monsters could imitate human voices and lure explorers into traps. That being said, I'd never heard of such devious creatures roaming the 5th Level. In that case, could this be an ordinary human? Very little about this situation made sense, but I couldn't ignore someone in distress.

I cautiously made my way toward the source of the voice. *There's someone there.* I could see them where they were sitting in the midst of the flames. Right where the fire was the strongest, a girl was crying as her body burned.

Chapter Two: Eugene Has a Fateful Meeting

◊ ###'s POV ◊

When I opened my eyes, I was sitting in an unfamiliar field.

"Where am I?" I murmured before realizing something. *No, that's not right. There's a more burning question I need an answer to.* "*Who* am I?" I had no memories of my own life. *I-I'm so scared. What's going on? What am I doing here? Where's my home? My family? My classmates?*

I couldn't remember anything. No, wait, I had memories of my childhood. Though they were foggy, I could recall my parents' faces. *I have a younger...yes, a younger sister. I can remember the faces of my friends from elementary school, as well as the new friends I made in middle school. And... Ugh!* A splitting pain erupted in my skull.

Someone's voice echoed in my head. "Sumire!"

Sumire... Yes, that's my name. I think, anyway. Okay, I remember my name. That calmed me down a little. But what about my surname? My head was still throbbing. I couldn't remember how I'd ended up here. Wherever "here" was...

"###!"

"#####!"

That was when two men came up to me, chatting with each other in a language I couldn't understand. For a moment, I thought to ask them for help, but when I saw the look in their eyes, I tensed up.

"#####!"

"######, ####!"

They were grinning at me, but in a way that wasn't well-meaning so much as sleazy. Not only that, but they were wearing strange clothes and didn't look friendly at all. My high school uniform, I

realized, had fallen to tatters and exposed my skin in all the worst places.

One of the men said something as he approached me. An image of what they would do to me flashed through my mind, and goose bumps rippled across my skin from the fear and disgust.

"Don't come any closer!" I yelled. "Don't touch me!"

Of course, that didn't stop them, and the first man grabbed my arm. The one behind him was yelling something in encouragement.

O-Oh no!

"Noooo!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, and in the next second, flames erupted around me. I only noticed that afterward, though, for I lost consciousness.

***

"Wh-What's going on?"

How much time had passed since I fell unconscious? Instead of the men from earlier, I found myself surrounded by flames. Oddly, I didn't feel any heat. I noticed some black soot clinging to my arm, so I patted it off before standing up. The movement drew my attention to something unbelievable and, with a scream, I immediately curled up on the ground again.

M-My clothes! The uniform I'd been wearing had completely burned away, leaving me naked. *O-Oh no, what should I do? Is there anything I can cover myself up with?* I looked around but saw only grass. Even worse, the fire was rapidly spreading.

"Huh?"

I caught a glimpse of an enormous shape moving about. *Is it the men from earlier?! No, this is far bigger than they were... W-Wait, is that a* bear*?!*

Indeed it was—a massive one that looked to be at least two meters tall. It was rushing straight at me. *It's gonna kill me!*

Or so I thought, but then the wall of fire stopped it in its tracks and forced it to turn tail and flee.

What was that all about? And hey, now that I'm paying attention...the fire is coming from me*? What's happening to me?*

I stumbled over to a boulder, sank down against it, and pulled my knees up against my chest to hide my nudity. Then I cried. In addition to the bear from earlier, a number of other large animals showed up, including wolves and lions, but none of them dared approach me. I panicked a bit when more people appeared speaking a language I couldn't understand, but they couldn't draw close to me with the fire in the way.

"#####!"

"#####?!"

They were yelling something at me, but I couldn't comprehend the words. Some of them were so cruel, they even shot arrows at me, but all of the projectiles were burned to charcoal before they could reach me.

The entire time, the fire spreading outward from my body grew in heat and intensity. Before long, it had transformed the surrounding field into a sea of flames. I felt like I was seeing a vision from hell.

What's going on? Am *I in hell right now? Did I die? I don't understand... I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand I don't understand... If this is a nightmare, then let me wake up!*

The tears never stopped flowing.

***

I must have been crying for an hour when I heard someone speak to me.

"###..."

I twitched and looked up toward the voice.

"######?"

A slim and kind-looking young man was gazing down at me with a worried expression. He wasn't like the scumbags from earlier, or the people who had stared at me with enmity in their eyes. I could sense his concern for me, so I summoned the courage and spoke to him.

"U-Um, can you help me?"

"#! #####? ######..." He rubbed the back of his head, looking unsure of what to do.

Yeah, I figured we couldn't understand each other... But then he handed me a piece of clothing. *O-Oh, I forgot! I'm naked right now!* I grabbed it from him—it appeared to be something like a raincoat made of fabric—and wrapped myself in it. *This is a robe or something, right?*

The man smiled at me and extended his hand. I was about to take it when I abruptly shrank back. My hand was on fire. Though I couldn't feel the heat emanating from it, that didn't mean others shared my immunity. As proof of that, the bear that had tried to lunge at me had run away after a taste of my flames. The fire had warded off my human attackers as well.

Now that I thought about it, why was this man able to stand in this fire without it affecting him? He wasn't wearing anything like a firefighter's uniform. He was still standing with his hand extended, though his expression had taken on a more troubled aspect.

It's impossible to do anything for me. If you touch me, I'll hurt you. Or even worse! I-I could kill you!

The men who had tried to attack me earlier had disappeared. At first, I'd assumed they had run away. But now that I thought about it, I could see something black and charred nearby... *D-Did I kill them?* I wasn't cold, but I couldn't stop shaking.

At the next moment, something grabbed my hand.

Huh? I looked up. The tall man was still giving me a small smile. *I-Isn't it hot?*

"######?"

Are you all right? Even without understanding his language, I was sure he was asking me something like that. In this hellscape, his gentle smile was the only thing saving me from utter despair, like a god I could cling to. That was my last thought before I passed out.

◊ Eugene's POV ◊

"Huh? Oh, she fainted."

The girl with fire licking at her skin was unconscious, though her breathing was steady, as if in sleep. I could tell from her soft inhales

and exhales that she wasn't dead. The moment she lost consciousness, the flames rising from her body became weaker and weaker until they finally vanished. Now that the inferno had lost its source, it began to die down as well.

But just who is she? I doubted she was a human; no human girl could do such a thing. At first, I'd wondered if she was a monster or demon, but I couldn't sense any ill intent from her. I had no way of ascertaining her identity.

In any case, though, I should bring her back. With the girl on my back, I returned to the 5th Level entrance and used the Dungeon Elevator to descend to the 1st Level. The moment I stepped out, the middle-aged dungeon staffer ran up to me.

"Eugene! Who's that girl? Is she a stranded?"

The stranded were those who couldn't make their way out of the dungeon on their own and so needed help from others to escape. I couldn't blame him for assuming that.

"Um, well, it's hard to explain," I said before proceeding to recount everything I'd seen on the 5th Level.

"So she's the Dungeon Destroyer?" he asked.

"Or someone involved with one."

"Got it. I can take her from here, so—"

But before he could finish, a loud voice calling my name interrupted him.

"Is the D-rank explorer Eugene here?!" a higher-ranking member of the dungeon staff was calling out.

I raised my hand. "I'm Eugene."

"His Majesty has summoned you! You are to report to the courthouse with that Dungeon Destroyer at once!" As soon as he finished speaking, soldiers surrounded us.

"Give the boy a moment to breathe, for goodness' sake!" the middle-aged man yelled, furious on my behalf. "Eugene just returned from the dungeon!"

"Am I right to interpret your words as treason against our king?" the other dungeon staffer growled.

"What are you talking about?! I would never betray His Majesty! I'm just saying—"

"Thank you," I said. "But it's all right. I'll go."

"Eugene..."

Though the middle-aged man still looked worried, I picked up this girl whose name I didn't know and looked over at the staff and soldiers. I'd expected them to order me to hand her over, but they didn't. I followed them to the sole courthouse in this dungeon city. There, the king separated the innocent from the guilty based solely on his own judgment.

The king of this city-state was no tyrant. Rather, he was more akin to the personification of curiosity, always eager to poke his nose into his people's business.

I just hope things don't get even more *complicated*, I thought as I walked, not looking forward to what was about to come.

***

The Southern Continent was dominated by three major powers: the Grenflare Empire, into which I was born; the Blue Sea Union, a republic consisting of many small countries; and the Holy Alliance, a coalition of theocracies led by the Cardia Halidom. Currently, Karaf was an independent city-state and wasn't dominated by any of the three. That meant it was a melting pot of citizens from all three powers. During trials, it was our custom to pick jurors from each of the three to prevent national chauvinism from affecting the final verdict.

"Foul Dungeon Destroyer... God himself created the Last Dungeon. How dare she defile it? She ought to be sentenced to death!"

The one calling for the most extreme punishment likely hailed from the Holy Alliance. Citizens of the Alliance venerated the Last Dungeon as a sacred site constructed directly by God. As a result of this fanaticism, they had little mercy for those they termed Dungeon Destroyers.

"Calm down for a moment. You were watching on the Satellite System, yes? The criminal is surely a rare magical being. Think of all the progress we can make if we use her as a lab rat."

This next speaker hailed, I was pretty sure, from the Blue Sea Union. The small countries that made up the union were constantly vying with one another for greater power, and skirmishes broke out routinely. Therefore, many of them had a pragmatic cast of mind and were willing to use any tools at their disposal to get the upper hand. This person fit the stereotype.

"Everyone, we don't even know if she's guilty or not, so how can we label her a criminal? Our top priority should be figuring out the truth."

The one who'd made the calmest statement hailed from the empire... Actually, I recognized him as a teacher at Lykeion Magic Academy. *Whew.* At least they'd chosen *someone* with sense for the jury.

I was on the witness stand next to the girl who had been accused of being a Dungeon Destroyer. We were waiting for all involved parties to assemble. The girl had woken up earlier, but she looked terrified, as if she didn't recognize where she was. Meanwhile, the jury continued to squabble with each other.

"That girl ignited the fire! We all saw that. It's definitive proof!"

"But she didn't appear to be in control of the flames. It might've been an accident."

"The only way to learn the truth is to ask her, but the language barrier means we can't understand each other."

"She could be acting. It's just too suspicious."

"She's obviously speaking *a* language, even if it's one we've never heard before."

"It must be the tongue the demons from the Northern Continent converse in. The foul language those heretics use is unintelligible."

"The academy has been studying the language of the Northern Continent, and her words don't match any that we know of."

"So? She could be a member of a lesser-known species that spends its wretched existence in some backwater province!"

I could see the gallery filling up with people who must've heard the rumors about the Dungeon Destroyer. Everyone was so nosy. But I could understand. The king only personally judged cases of extreme importance to the city-state, which naturally piqued

everyone's curiosity.

Next to me, the girl wore an expression of concern, her gaze cast downward. I wished I could do something for her, but I couldn't even soothe her fears since I didn't speak her language. But then, suddenly...

"His Majesty has arrived!" a loud voice echoed through the courthouse, and everyone looked over at the entrance.

A broad-shouldered middle-aged man walked in. A crimson cloak with gold embroidery flowed behind him. Though he appeared to be in his early thirties, no one knew his real age. He cast his keen gaze, so closely resembling that of a carnivorous beast, across the people sitting in the courthouse before letting it rest on me.

"Eugene, it's been too long. How have you been?" he asked, smiling with his teeth.

"Long time no see, Headmaster Uther," I replied with a courteous bow of my head. The rest of the people in the courthouse copied the motion.

King Uther Mercurius Pendragon was not only the ruler of the dungeon city Karaf but also served as the headmaster of the academy. If you asked him, though, he was "a magical scholar and an eternal explorer." Apparently, he'd just *happened* to ascend to the positions of both king and headmaster.



"Settle down, everyone. We only have a limited amount of time, so we must use it wisely. Now then, let's commence today's trial."

"O-Of course, King Uther," began a servant of the court. "Allow me to explain the details of today's—"

"There's no need for that," Headmaster Uther interrupted him. "I've already perceived all I need to with my Clairvoyance. I'm well aware of what happened."

"My apologies!" The functionary hurriedly set down the documents he had been about to read off.

The headmaster never changes. He's always in a hurry, as if he's rushing through life. I wonder why, though? No mage can ever hope to reach his level.

"In that case, King Uther, I'm sure the answer is obvious. That girl has committed a sacrilegious act, defiling a relic of the most high God. She ought to be subject to the most severe punishment, and the Holy Alliance will be more than happy to administer it."

"No, no, please permit the Blue Sea Union to take custody of her. To have ignited such a blaze, she must have extraordinary mana capacity. If we play our cards right, she could be a valuable tool."

The headmaster ignored the requests from both the Union and Coalition jurors. Instead, he said, "Settle down, everyone. We should hear the girl's own testimony." He rose from the judge's chair, stepped down from the bench, and came to stand in front of me. "Eugene, place this bracelet around Sumire's arm."

"Sumire?" I'd never heard that name before, but I could tell by following the headmaster's line of sight that he was referring to the girl.

"You haven't even asked for her name yet? Well, I suppose it's of little consequence. Hurry now, Eugene."

"Y-Yessir."

As he commanded, I looked at the girl to wordlessly ask if I could place the bracelet on her. I thought she would refuse, but she nodded without complaint. With a click, I fitted the bracelet around her wrist, and the headmaster asked her, "Sumire, do you understand what we're saying?"

For a long moment, she didn't say anything. But then... "Yes, I

do.”

Oh! I can understand her! Murmurs erupted through the courthouse. Before Headmaster Uther’s arrival, the staff had used many magic items in an attempt to decipher her strange language, but to no avail. Naturally, we were all surprised at how easily Headmaster Uther had resolved the problem.

“Now then, could you introduce yourself to us?” the headmaster continued.

“My name is Sumire.”

The headmaster was right—her name really *was* Sumire. *What a strange name. I don’t think anyone on the Southern Continent has a name like that.*

“Do you know where you came from?” the headmaster asked.

Sumire thought for a moment before replying, “No, I don’t. When I woke up, I was in that field. My memories... They’re foggy.”

“Amnesia, eh?” At Sumire’s words, the headmaster stroked his beard, lost in thought.

“Amnesia? How convenient! I don’t believe it for a second!” someone in the gallery yelled.

Sumire jumped at the angry voice. *They don’t have to take such an aggressive tone with her...*

“Is there anything you do remember?” I asked, trying to sound as gentle as possible. “Like your birthplace, for instance.”

“My birthplace? I-It’s Tokyo, Japan. I was born and raised there.”

Japan? I’ve never heard of such a place. Judging by the sound of the name, though, I’m guessing it’s a country on the Eastern Continent.

“We should use Appraisal on her! That way, we’ll know whether she’s telling the truth!” the juror from the Holy Alliance yelled.

“Did you forget we tried that already? For whatever reason, we couldn’t discern anything,” someone replied.

“And that’s why I’m saying she’s suspicious! She must have something to hide if she’s deflecting our Appraisal!”

The juror from the Holy Alliance was resorting to any reason he could think of to paint the girl as a villain.

“Hmm, you couldn’t see anything with Appraisal, you say?”

Headmaster Uther said. “I see. By the way, Eugene, can you tell me two reasons Appraisal might not work? You should’ve learned this at school.”

Hey, why are you dragging me into this?! “Um, either the target is using a spell to interfere with the Appraisal, or the Appraiser isn’t very good at their job.” *That’s it, right?*

“Preposterous,” someone complained. “The courthouse only hires experienced Appraisers. I doubt they lack the necessary skill.”

“Do you, now? But my Appraisal Eye is showing me both her species and her status.”

At the headmaster’s words, the grumbler fell silent.

What the heck, Headmaster Uther? So you knew her identity this whole time? “So, what is she?”

“Do you really want to know?” He grinned at me. The headmaster relished his theatrics, but he also made them cool. “Very well, I shall give you your answer! She is an Ifrit! A being from the Age of Legends, said to have gone extinct in ancient times!”

In response to the revelation, the courthouse fell silent. *An Ifrit? That’s the kind of thing you only see in picture books.*

“The Ifrits walked the Earth before the first humans. Now they have returned from extinction! Reincarnated into the modern age!” the headmaster continued, sounding excited as he explained.

He sure seems to be having fun. Makes sense, considering how much he loves rare magical beings.

“A-All right, I can accept that she’s an Ifrit. But where did she come from? That doesn’t explain how she popped into the dungeon! And besides, it’s the undeniable truth that she damaged Babel. Her crime mustn’t go un—”

But the juror from the Holy Alliance paused when Headmaster Uther raised his hand.

“Let’s go through your concerns one by one,” he said. “First, you wish to know where Sumire came from?” The courthouse fell silent again; everyone awaited his next words. “The hint to that question lies in the words Sumire spoke earlier.”

“My words?” Sumire murmured, confused.

“Earlier, she said she came from Tokyo, Japan. Unfortunately,

there is no such country or city in this world!”

“Th-That can’t be true!” she exclaimed in a panic. She must have thought that Headmaster Uther was calling her a liar.

“Hold on, now,” Headmaster Uther said. “I said ‘in this world,’ didn’t I? That means both Japan and Tokyo exist in the world you came from, Sumire.”

Shocked muttering broke out among the gallery and the jurors.

“What’s he talking about?”

“Wait, could he mean...”

“No way!”

Oh, I see how it is...

“Um, what does he mean?” the girl whispered to me.

And I bet you don’t want me to answer her, right? I glanced over at Headmaster Uther, who shot us both a grin.

“Sumire, welcome to Lykeion Magic Academy. We welcome you, reincarnator from another world!”

The girl gave him a blank stare, mouth agape. “Huh?”

Apparently, the girl I’d found in the Last Dungeon was a true rarity—a wanderer from another world. “Reincarnator” was the umbrella term for anyone who hailed from a world separate from ours. Apparently, they often received excessively powerful blessings during the transportation process, which meant it was common for them to reincarnate as special beings here. This was my first time meeting one. In fact, most of the people in the courthouse had likely never set eyes on a reincarnator until now.

“Heh heh heh, it’s been too long since our last visitor from another world. I look forward to chatting with her.”

Judging by his words, Sumire wasn’t the first reincarnator Headmaster Uther had met. That made sense. Though no one knew his actual age, rumors had it that he’d been the headmaster of Lykeion Magic Academy for the past two hundred years. I couldn’t even imagine how many things he’d seen and experienced in that time.

“Please, hold on a moment! The first person who attempted to rescue her was an explorer from the Blue Sea Union! Doesn’t that mean we have the right to her?” the juror from the Union exclaimed.

Uh, didn't you say you wanted to treat her as a guinea pig or weapon earlier? The girl named Sumire hid behind me, looking anxious.

The headmaster rubbed his chin. "Hmm, the first people to discover Sumire tried to assault her. Or are you talking about the ones who shot arrows at her? Yes, you're right that those explorers hailed from the Blue Sea Union, but can we really say their purpose was to 'rescue' her?"

"W-Well, that's..."

"And if you wish to take her in, you will have to pay for both the damages resulting from the fire she started and the restoration efforts to follow. Could you remind me how much all that costs?" He'd aimed the question at the secretary next to him.

"We haven't finished with our calculations, but we believe costs will exceed five billion gold."

"F-Five billion?!" the juror squeaked.

"We've asked all the higher-ranking mages in the dungeon city to help with the restoration efforts. That's the cost if we wish to pay them a fair wage," the secretary explained.

"So? What do you think?" the headmaster asked.

"N-Never mind," the juror from the Union sighed, letting his shoulders slump.

The next person to complain was the juror from the Holy Alliance. "King Uther! What about her crime as a Dungeon Destroyer?! She damaged God's holy creation. Her punishment must be severe!"

"Oh? Have you forgotten? 'We must care for wanderers from other worlds.' Isn't that what the scriptures from the Holy God say?"

"Y-Yes, but..."

"She's not the evil demon you fear she is. She's an Ifrit, as I said —a member of an ancient race. Not only that, but she's just arrived in this world, and what happened was an unfortunate accident caused by her ignorance. Fortunately, none of the explorers died or received any injuries. Shouldn't we listen to the scriptures and approach this matter with more magnanimous hearts?"

"V-Very well." The juror from the Holy Alliance stepped down as well.

"No one died or received injuries?" Sumire murmured from next to me.

"Is something the matter?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"N-No! It's nothing!"

Was she worried about something?

"Your Majesty, Eugene Santafield is an imperial citizen. If he was the one who rescued her from the dungeon, then the empire has an obligation to help her, does it not?" asked the teacher from the empire, who'd remained silent this entire time.

An imperial citizen must always strive for the empire's prosperity. That must have been the ethos motivating his statement. In the beginning, he hadn't seemed terribly interested in the proceedings, but after learning that the girl was both an otherworlder and an Ifrit, he must have realized that he had to do something.

Headmaster Uther stroked his beard as he pondered the juror's words. "Fair point. In that case, I appoint Eugene as Sumire's guardian. The academy will shoulder the cost of repairing the fire damage. As for what happens to Sumire from now on, I would like for her to decide for herself. Is that all right with you?"

"It is; I agree with your decision," the teacher replied, making no attempt to gainsay the headmaster.

In the dungeon city, King Uther's word was law. None would dare go against it. In other words, both Sumire's fate and my own were already decided.

Me? Her guardian? I glanced over at Sumire and realized she was watching me as well. Without meaning to, I met her large eyes, which were regarding me with worry.

"All right, you heard me, Eugene," said Headmaster Uther. "I'm leaving her in your care. Don't look so worried! You can come to me any time you run into trouble."

"Uh, sure," I said with a nod. The situation just continued to develop without any input from either of us.

I looked once more at the girl beside me, and my heart skipped a beat. Considering all that had happened, I'd never gotten a good look at her. Now that I did, I realized she was very cute. She had big eyes, peach-colored lips, and shiny flaxen hair. The skin visible

through the slits in her robes was smooth and pale. I'd thought this when I first met her in the dungeon, but... *She's a really beautiful girl.*

Was that because she was a reincarnator from another world? Or because she was one of the Ifrits, a unique race? Or perhaps *she herself* was special? *No, stop thinking about such trivial matters. First, I have to get to know her better.*

"I guess we'll be seeing a lot of each other. I'm Eugene Santafield," I said, extending a hand.

"I'm, um, Sumire. I'll be in your care." She slowly and nervously reached out to hold it.

And that was how the task of caring for Miss Sumire, the Ifrit and reincarnator from another world, fell into my lap.

***

"So you were late coming here because you were too busy looking after that girl from another world?" the Demon Queen Erinyes asked, narrowing her eyes at me.

She was lounging about on her bed in only her underwear. I averted my gaze from the seductive sight as best as I could.

"I'm really sorry about that. I was just so busy this past week," I said, clapping my hands together and lowering my head at her. This was the gesture that those on the Eastern Continent often used when apologizing.

"Hmm, is that so? Busy taking care of a girl, huh?"

"It sounds like you've got something more to say..."

"Did you *do* anything to her?"

I couldn't believe what she'd just asked me.

"Of course I didn't!"

"Oh? *Really* now?" As she spoke, Eri leaned forward until her face almost touched my neck. "I can smell another woman's scent on you, Eugene. Looks like you and her have gotten pretty close."

"Well, yeah. I'm her guardian now."

"Spill the beans! You've already slept with her, haven't you?!"

"I already told you I haven't laid a finger on her!" I felt like

someone whose lover was grilling him about infidelity. But Eri wasn't my lover, and nothing had happened between Miss Sumire and me. I heaved a sigh as I continued to answer Eri's bombardment of questions.

The Demon Queen was very tenacious today, and so I swore to myself that I would never bring up Miss Sumire around Eri ever again.

◊Sumire's POV◊

"Today, I'll show you around Lykeion Magical Academy."

"Okay! Thank you, Mister Eugene!" I replied as I followed him.

I'd spent the previous night in a giant hospital, which was where I would stay for the next seven days so the doctors there could observe me. Nothing felt wrong with my body, but apparently, they wanted to take the opportunity and give me some more information and advice about life in this other world.

Another world... Yes, I—Sumire Sashiougi—had been reincarnated in another world! I remembered my name, but all my other memories remained foggy. In my previous life, I'd been a Japanese girl, born and raised in Tokyo. My parents had lived in the Shinagawa ward, and I had often played with my younger sister in the park near the canal. Though I had some vague memories of my family's faces, I could hardly remember my friends'.

Lately, all my recollections of my previous life had come to feel more and more like a dream. Sometimes, I even wondered if those memories were nothing more than hallucinations. However, I didn't have the luxury of sitting around and trying to remember more about my past.

Life in this other world was very difficult. Though I could speak the language here thanks to the king's magical bracelet, everything else was completely foreign to me. I had to learn everything—from food to clothes to quintessential tools—from scratch. Fortunately, though I had no possessions to my name, everyone had treated me fairly so far. That was thanks to my status as an otherworlder. Apparently, the god of this world had taught the people to treat otherworlders with kindness. *Thank god!*

"Miss Sumire, over here."

"O-Okay!" I'd been spacing out when Mister Eugene's voice called my attention back to the present. He was still giving me an explanation of the facilities around the academy:

"This is the special classroom, where you'll have your lessons. For now, you'll receive private tutoring from, if memory serves me right, Miss Rin. I'll introduce you two later.

"This here is the cafeteria. It's open from eight in the morning to eight at night, so you can use it whenever you please. Miss Sumire, since you're an otherworlder, the school's giving you some financial aid, right?

"Over here are the training grounds for warriors and mages. Me? I'm a Barrier Mage, so I don't make use of them."

I jotted down every detail and description Mister Eugene gave me about the school so that I wouldn't forget about any of it.

"And here's the staff room. Oh, and there's Miss Rin. Let me call her over." With those words, Mister Eugene walked up to a beautiful woman with fox ears protruding from her head.

Those ears are real, aren't they? There were multiple races of beastpeople in this world with ears like dogs, cats, or other animals. Apparently, my teacher was a fox beastperson.

The teacher approached me and said, "So you're the otherworlder I've been hearing so much about. I'm Rin, your teacher. Should you have any questions, feel free to ask me. If I recall, you'll be staying at the hospital for a few days, correct?"

"That's correct! My name is Sumire Sashiougi, and it's a pleasure to meet you! I was told that I'll only have to stay at the hospital for a week, and then I can move to the academy's dormitory after that."

"Understood. As I'm sure you already know, the headmaster appointed Eugene as your guardian. Think of me as his assistant when it comes to those duties. If you have any problems that are difficult to discuss with a man, do not hesitate to ask me about them."

"A-All right. Thank you."

"Mm. You're welcome."

Miss Rin spoke in a curt tone that was unlike that of any other woman I'd met before. She was so cool. *I'll ask her if I need*

anything. But Mister Eugene's my actual guardian, since that's what the king ordered. As Mister Eugene was a student, I found it odd that he was taking on that role. Apparently, though, in this world, one became an adult at fifteen, and Mister Eugene was seventeen.

As soon as we finished our conversation, Miss Rin returned to her seat—she must have had a lot of work to do—and Mister Eugene resumed our tour.

"Mister Eugene, I'm so sorry to cause you so much trouble," I said, feeling awkward, and he gave me a wry smile in response.

"His Majesty, the headmaster, personally assigned me this duty, so it's an honor rather than a burden. And besides, he's paying me well."

Duty... A duty, huh? My chest tightened when I heard that word, and it was hard to describe what I was feeling. *So once he's finished carrying out the king's orders, he'll stop spending time with me? Wait, stop, stop! Don't start getting all mopey!* I chased my negative thoughts away and buried them in the corner of my mind.

After about an hour, Mister Eugene finished showing me all the important facilities.

"Well, that's everything you'll need during your time here. Is there anywhere else you'd like to check out? The academy's pretty big, so I'm sure it's hard to commit everything to memory in one day. But was there anywhere that caught your attention?" Mister Eugene asked, turning his head to look back at me.

"Um, I'd first like to learn how to avoid getting lost, so could you show me around one more time?"

"Sure. Let's go around the academy once more, then, and this time, I'll show you everything on a map too."

Mister Eugene had accepted my request without looking annoyed or impatient. What a gentleman. As I followed him and listened to him explain the school in a calm voice, I thought back to when I first met him. Amid that hellish inferno, he'd reached out to me with a kind smile and taken my hand. I flushed at the memory. *Mister Eugene was* so *cool in that moment... I'm sure he's popular with the girls.*

"Oh, that reminds me. Miss Rin told me earlier that they've

finished preparing your student ID and handbook. We should go get them from the School Affairs Division."

"Sounds good!" I replied with a nod.

"The student council room is near the School Affairs Division office. Since we'll be in the area anyway, I'll show you that as well."

"If I remember correctly, the academy's student council is a pretty large organization, right?" I asked, thinking back to what a teacher had told me. When I first heard about it, I'd thought, *Wow, student councils exist even in this completely different world? That's really neat!*

"Yeah. The student council counts as a club, but it's also one of two major factions within the school. The other one is the Swordsmanship Club."

I hummed in interest. *So those two clubs are the most popular. A Swordsmanship Club sounds like just the kind of thing you'd expect to find in a fantasy world.* "Are there any clubs that focus on magic?"

"Of course there are. But magic vastly differs depending on your element."

Mister Eugene explained that there were different groups for the different types of magic. Not only that, but the relationships between the various clubs weren't very good.

"That sounds really complicated," I said.

"Don't worry; you'll get used to it in time," Mister Eugene assured me. He told me a little more about the clubs at the school, but there were so many that I couldn't commit them to memory all at once.

"By the way, are *you* in a club?" I asked.

He paused for a moment before replying, "Yeah, I'm in the Biology Club."

"The Biology Club!" *I didn't expect Mister Eugene to be in such a cute-sounding club. He didn't give off that impression. Since we're in a fantasy world, I wonder if he takes care of fairies or unicorns?* Out loud, I asked, "May I go check it out later?"

"Well, you can, but..."

I blinked in confusion at Mister Eugene's reluctance. Did he not want me to watch him go about his club duties? As I wondered about that, Mister Eugene entered the building the Student Affairs

Division was in, and I followed him. Inside, the receptionist gave us my student ID and handbook. It was only after I held them in my hands that I noticed a problem.

"Mister Eugene, the student handbook is pretty big, isn't it?"

I'd been under the impression that, as a handbook, it would be rather small. However, it was closer in size to a hardcover book and so heavy that I had to hold it with both hands. *Man, I do* not *want to lug this everywhere!*

"Miss Sumire, try holding the handbook and saying, 'Close Book.'"

"Um, C-Close Book?" The next instant, the handbook disappeared without a sound. "Whaaat?! Mister Eugene, the handbook just vanished!"

"Next, try saying, 'Open Book.'"

"Open Book?" This time, the handbook popped into existence in my hands! "Whoa!"

"See? You can take it out and put it away at any time with those words."

A-Amazing! This makes it much easier to carry around.

"The student ID and handbook double as your actual ID for Lykeion Magic Academy, Miss Sumire," Mister Eugene continued. "They're important documents full of personal information, like your skills and status, so don't walk around with them out. Always put them away with Close Book."

"I-I understand. Close Book!"

"All right. Now, let's go over to where the student council is."

After saying that, he walked over to the giant three-story building right next to the Student Affairs Division. *Is the student council room in there?*

"Mister Eugene, what is this place?" I asked.

"This is the student council room," he replied.

It took a second for the words to sink in. "Huh?" *Th-This? It's less a room and more an entire building...*

"Our school takes extracurriculars really seriously. A club with actual achievements can be assigned a building as their room. The student council is one of the biggest clubs in the academy; that's why they get so much space."

I made a noise of understanding. *Now that I think about it, schools in the world I came from gave the bigger rooms to popular clubs with lots of members. But an entire building! That's pretty crazy. This world operates on a whole other level.*

"Students are free to visit the first floor of the student council room," Eugene said. "They offer a consulting service if you have any problems with classes or your club. I doubt you'll need to make use of it, though, since you can go to Miss Rin."

"I have you too, right?"

At my words, Mister Eugene gave me a slightly embarrassed smile. "Ah, right. I suppose you do."

I planned on asking Mister Eugene for advice if I ever needed it. He was really easy to talk to, after all. But... *I wonder if he has a girlfriend?* If he did, then she might get mad that I was monopolizing his time. From our conversations, I didn't get the impression that he had a special lady in his life. Or at least, I hoped he didn't. *Er, wait, not that I mean anything weird with that!*

"Oh? If it isn't Eugene. I almost never see you here," a female student said when we walked into the first floor of the student council room. She must have been a member of the club, since she was wearing an armband.

"Hello," Mister Eugene said. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Of course not. You're welcome to visit at any time. Who's that girl next to you?"

"This is Miss Sumire Sashiougi. She's a transfer student."

"Wait, is she the one said to have come from another world?! Wow, I'm honored to meet you! My name is Teresia, and I'm part of the student council's General Affairs team. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"I-I'm Sumire Sashiougi, and the pleasure is all mine." Considering her reaction, gossip about me had obviously already spread throughout the academy. It was a little embarrassing.

"Miss Teresia also acts as the consulting service I mentioned earlier," Mister Eugene said. "Don't hesitate to reach out to her if you have any questions or problems."

"Heh heh heh, come by any time! I'll break out the delicious tea

and snacks."

"All right, thank you," I said. That was a pretty enticing offer. Miss Teresia felt like someone who would be easy to get along with.

"We should get going, Miss Sumire," Mister Eugene said.

"Okay! Miss Teresia, I'm sorry for taking up your time."

Mister Eugene and I bowed before turning to leave. However, Miss Teresia's expression clouded, like she had something she wanted to say.

"Eugene, you won't meet the president?" she asked.

"I'd only cause her trouble if I did," he replied.

"That's not..." Miss Teresia hesitated before finishing, "That's not true."

"Please tell her I said hello."

It felt like something had happened between Mister Eugene and this student council president. Though I had many questions about that, this didn't feel like the right place or time to ask them. I should wait until later.

That was when some male students entered through the door, chatting all the while. All of them, with their muscular physiques and weapons hanging from their belts, looked like the warrior type.

Oh, wow! This really feels like a fantasy world now! They just carry around weapons like it's a normal thing here!

When they noticed us, they stopped talking and their expressions changed. They narrowed their eyes and stalked toward us. *Wh-What do they want?*

"Hey, Eugene. What business does the Biology Club's little errand boy have with the student council?"

"Are you here to bother the prez again?"

"She's got no business with you, Eugene!"

"Hey, cut it out!" Teresia said in an attempt to stop the students from jeering at Eugene.

"Miss Sumire, let's go," Mister Eugene said.

"O-Okay."

Though Mister Eugene ignored their words, the male students stood in our path, refusing to let us leave.

"Hey, don't ignore us, Eugene."

"What's this? You've got a real cutie with you."

"Hey, sweetheart. Stop wasting your time with this geek and come hang out with us." One of the students raised his arm to wrap it around my shoulders.

Huh?! I froze up, unable to move or defend myself. But Mister Eugene grabbed the boy's arm before he could do anything.

"Stop it. She's not interested," he said.

"Huh?! You think you're cool or something? Let me go!" He tried to rip his hand out of Mister Eugene's grip, but it didn't budge at all. "D-Dammit! I can't get myself free!" The student finally backed away from me after Mister Eugene released him. "Asshole! If it's a fight you want, you've got one!"

How did you come to that *conclusion?! You guys were the ones itching for a fight!* Nonetheless, the students had us surrounded.

"Mister Eugene, what should we do?" I stammered.

"Things sure have taken a turn for the troublesome," he said.

Despite his words, his expression was... *Huh? He doesn't look troubled.* I could instinctively tell that Mister Eugene was as calm as ever. *He's not panicking at all, so I guess I don't have to either?* In fact, the male students in front of us were the ones who'd lost their cool.

"What if you'd injured him, huh?!" yelled the student next to the one whose arm Mister Eugene had grabbed, as if to justify this fight.

"Do you want me to cast some healing magic on it?" Mister Eugene asked.

"That's *not* what I meant!"

Um, wait, is Mister Eugene a bit of an airhead?

Just then, a beautiful and slender female student descended the stairs. "What's with all the commotion?"

"Madam President!" I heard Miss Teresia say.

At the same moment, the male students, who'd been lowering their stances in preparation for battle, jumped away to put distance between us. The girl who came down the stairs resembled a flower with lovely white petals. She had glossy black hair and eyes that shone like sapphires. Everything about her exuded elegance—the way she talked, walked, and even stood. Judging by everyone's

reactions, she was the president of the academy's student council.

"What's going on here?" she asked.

At her question, the boys who'd been bothering Mister Eugene with such confidence earlier fell silent and awkwardly averted their eyes.

What's with that attitude?! They're acting like completely different people! The president turned her attention to us and her expression changed in a heartbeat. For a moment, she looked surprised, but then a grin spread across her face.

"Eugene?! You came to see me!" And with that, she leaped forward and threw herself into his arms.

H-Huuuuh?!

Chapter Three: Eugene Heads for Babel

◊Sumire's POV◊

"Eugene?! You came to see me!" the president exclaimed as she threw her arms around him.

When I first saw her, I'd thought her akin to a graceful noblewoman. But now, she was latching onto Mister Eugene with a lovey-dovey look, her cheeks flushed a bright pink. *Huuuuh? Are these two in a relationship?! But Mister Eugene doesn't look too happy, Miss Teresia looks exasperated, and the guys who were trying to pick a fight with us are gritting their teeth.* I thought I could guess what they were feeling.

"Sara, calm down," Mister Eugene said.

"Oh, but it's been *so* long since we last saw each other! Why don't you stay a while? You have time, don't you?"

"I'm still showing Miss Sumire around the school. Next time, all right?"

The president's expression had been so soft and excited as she spoke to Mister Eugene, but at the sound of my name, it changed. After a long moment, she echoed, "Sumire?" That was when she finally noticed me staring open-mouthed at her. When our eyes met, her expression went blank. "If you're with Eugene, that means you're that reincarnator girl, right?"

"I-I am! My name is Sumire Sashiougi. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Sara Iglesia Lodis. I am the president of this academy's student council."

With a swish, she tossed her lovely black hair over her shoulder. She was acting like a stereotypical cool beauty, as opposed to the lovestruck maiden from moments before. *Whoa, the gap between*

now and earlier is insane!

"Wait, *you're* the reincarnator?!" yelled one of the boys who'd been bothering us.

"Why is she hanging out with Eugene?!" another exclaimed.

"We discussed this during one of our regular meetings. Eugene was the one who rescued Miss Sumire from that horrible fire in the dungeon, so the headmaster assigned him as her guardian," Miss Teresia explained. So the topic of my existence had come up during a student council meeting, then.

One of the boys clicked his tongue. "Again with the favoritism!"

"Backdoor bastard!"

B-Backdoor? I glanced at Mister Eugene, who was scratching the back of his head with an uncomfortable expression.

"Excuse me? He was admitted into this school after he passed the Special Admissions Exam. How long are you going to slander him like that?!" Miss Teresia yelled.

But that didn't stop the boys from slinging insults at Mister Eugene.

"Hah! That just means the headmaster prepared an exam specifically tailored to his skills, right?!"

"There's no way someone who only has white mana could ever get into Lykeion on his own merits!"

"I hear your old man's an imperial noble. You just used his connections to get in, didn't you, Eugene?!"

"Eugene's Barrier Magic is impressive. None of you were able to lay a finger on him during your last match, remember?" the president said, but that wasn't enough to stop them either.

"I'm not the same guy I was back then! If we fought now, my attacks would rip right through his shields!"

"And besides, he has no offensive power. He's a failure of a warrior!"

Mister Eugene's expression clouded over. That was how it looked to me, anyway. *What's wrong with these people?! Why are they so mean?!*

"Mister Eugene! Let's get out of here!" Furious, I grabbed Mister Eugene by the arm and headed for the exit of the student council

building.

"Yeah, you're right." He clearly wanted to leave as well.

"Pathetic! You're making a *girl* defend you?!" a boy yelled from behind us, but I ignored him.

"Huh? Wait, are you already leaving, Eugene?" the president—Miss Sara—called, and Mister Eugene turned to look at her.

"Sorry for the disruption, Sara."

"Will you come and visit me again?"

Mister Eugene hesitated before replying, "Yeah. See you next time."

I could feel Miss Sara's lingering gaze and the boys' hateful glares on our backs as we left the student council room.

◊Eugene's POV◊

"Ugh! What's with those people?! How infuriating! Don't you agree, Mister Eugene?! They were accusing you of all sorts of nonsense!" Miss Sumire ranted, her body shaking with rage. They'd annoyed me as well, but now she was saying everything I wanted to say in my stead.

"Their accusations weren't without merit. Here, let me show you my magic." From the sheath hanging from my belt, I took out the knife that I used when exploring. "Miss Sumire, touch this. Not the blade but the back of the knife."

"Okay... Wow, this is a big knife," Miss Sumire said as she tapped it.

"It's a sturdy one that I use to chip off any gems or monster materials I come across in the dungeon," I explained. "Now, let's use it to slice my finger."

"W-Wait, what? M-Mister Eugene, what are you—"

Miss Sumire panicked a little when she saw the red droplets of blood bead on my skin. But a cut this minor didn't hurt at all.

"If I infuse this knife with my mana and turn it into a magic sword..." The blade glowed white. "Miss Sumire, touch it again."

"O-Okay." Miss Sumire pressed her finger against the blade and immediately noticed the difference. "Huh? It's squishy!"

"That's what happens to anything I channel my mana into."

"Wow, it's so soft! Is this something specific to your magic, Mister

Eugene?”

“Yup. Not only that, but if I do this...” I cut my own finger with the knife again, and Miss Sumire screamed.

“What are you doing?! That’s so dangerous!”

“Don’t worry. Look.”

“Eww, blood is... Huh? It’s not gushing out? And the cut you made earlier is all healed up!”

“My magic sword heals whomever I attack.”

“Oh, wow.”

Miss Sumire looked surprised. I couldn’t blame her. This was the main reason I’d given up my dream of becoming a Magic Swordsman: With my white mana, I couldn’t attack anything. In fact, I would only end up healing my opponents.

“Do you understand now why they think of me as a reject swordsman?”

“U-Um...” Miss Sumire looked like she didn’t know how to respond.

“But all that stuff about my backdoor admission was a lie. I passed the official admissions exam to get in here. It’s just that, since I can’t use any attack magic, I had to take a special version of it.”

“Oh, so that’s what happened.”

Apparently, the headmaster hadn’t come up with the Special Admissions Exam specifically for me. Rather, a prospective student in a similar boat had required it in the past.

So I hadn’t entered the academy through a backdoor admission, but the thing was that after I passed the Special Admissions Exam, the headmaster had left an unbelievable comment: “I never thought someone could actually pass that one.” No one had passed that test until I came along. At the time, I’d wondered why in the world he would design a test like that, but I supposed it was just an indication of how rare it was for someone to only possess white mana and still be accepted into this academy.

Thus, as the sole person who had passed the exam, I’d caught the headmaster’s attention, and he’d seemed to view me as some sort of oddity. Then, after telling me that I could approach the

Demon Queen in the underground prison without any ill effect, he'd foisted the job of caretaker onto me. *Now that I think about it, a lot sure has happened*, I thought, gazing into the distance, but Miss Sumire's voice pulled me back to reality.

"In any case, those people really annoyed me! I never want to go to the student council room ever again!"

"Is that so?" I didn't think she could get away with that, but I shot her a small smile anyway. I thought that was the end of the conversation. However, I noticed her looking at me as if she had more to say. "Miss Sumire?"

After a moment, she said, "By the way, there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Oh, okay?" I could take a guess at her question.

"What's your relationship with the student council president? Miss Sara, I believe?"

Yeah, I figured. Everyone in Lykeion Magic Academy knew that Sara, the student council president, was abnormally familiar in her interactions with me.

"Um, if it's difficult to talk about, then you don't have to tell me!" Miss Sumire added.

"It's all right. It's not a very interesting story, though," I said. I proceeded to tell her all about my relationship with Sara.

We'd first met about a year ago, when we'd both only just enrolled in the academy. I was a Swordfighter who couldn't attack my enemies. Meanwhile, Sara was a Sister who had trouble using healing magic. We'd both had our fair share of troubles. In my case, though, I excelled in a single ability, whereas Sara possessed talent she had difficulty using. She didn't know the first thing about healing magic, though she had gone through some serious training in the Cardia Halidom.

That being said, no one in their right mind would have wanted to form a party with a Sister who couldn't heal, so it had fallen to me to team up with her. We were a party for about half a year. Sara was in charge of offense even though she was a Sister, while I played support even though I was a Swordfighter. It was an unorthodox arrangement, for sure, but we'd still managed to reach the 9th Level

of Babel.

"And as time passed, Sara awoke to her true talent. Now, her job is Paladin. Not only can she use healing magic, but she can also wield a holy sword. She's one of the best fighters in the academy."

"What happened to the party you two formed?"

"Sara transferred from General Education to the Hero Course, and so we decided to disband our party then."

"Oh, I see." Miss Sumire's expression clouded over. She might've assumed that she'd asked me an uncomfortable question.

"That's all in the past now. I think Sara feels bad about disbanding the party, which is why she pays me so much special attention. Honestly, though, she doesn't have to worry about my feelings or anything."

"Huh?" Miss Sumire looked surprised at my words.

"What's wrong?"

"Miss Sara... Um, no, it's nothing." She tilted her head to the side and appeared unconvinced by my response, but she said nothing more.

All right, then let's drop the subject. "You already heard this when we were at the School Affairs Division, but make sure you don't lose your student ID or handbook. The Lykeion Magic Academy student ID is the most trustworthy piece of ID you can have on the Southern Continent. With it, you can enter most countries, as well as public facilities like the library. You also need that ID if you want to access the Last Dungeon. The handbook has a sleeve for you to put your ID in, so keep them together."

"Got it! Thank you!"

Miss Sumire nodded at my explanation. All of this information was very important for a student at this school, so I didn't mind repeating myself. However, something else I'd said seemed to have caught Miss Sumire's interest.

"The Last Dungeon is that really big tower in the middle of the city, right?" she asked, pointing over at Babel, which was visible even from the school.

The tower was so gargantuan that when you were standing close to it, it looked like a wall that extended beyond the clouds. It was

the largest dungeon on the Southern Continent.

"Yeah, if you're attending Lykeion, then exploring the Last Dungeon counts as part of the curriculum. I'll teach you about it bit by bit." *Granted, I can only take her up to the 9th Level. I'm sure it's fine, though. Miss Sumire only just arrived in this world, so she won't be going into the Last Dungeon anytime soon.*

"I'd like to go in there!"

"Huh?" I hadn't expected that response at all.

"I came into this world through the Last Dungeon, didn't I?"



"Yeah, I think so. That's where I found you."

"That means I might find my way back home somewhere in there, right?"

"Well, I guess the possibility exists," I replied hesitantly. *Oh, so Miss Sumire wants to return to her original world.* If I had to be honest, the chances of her managing that didn't seem high. But I didn't see any point in telling her that right now, so instead, I asked, "Do you want to try going next week? I can show you around, though only up to the 9th Level."

"Is that really okay?!"

"You can't escape dungeon exploring so long as you're a student at this academy. Let's get you used to it nice and slow."

"But you want to go *next* week?"

"There's a lot we have to do to prepare, like buying supplies we'll need for the exploration."

"Oh, that makes sense!"

"I'd also like to familiarize you with the services the academy offers, so I'll show you around again tomorrow."

"Thank you!" Miss Sumire chirped.

I spent virtually the rest of the week in her company, explaining how to survive and thrive in this world.

***

"And that's about it as far as recent events go."

"Hmm..."

Though I'd decided to avoid talking to Eri about Miss Sumire, she'd forced me to give her all the details about my time with her.

"We're about to go dungeon exploring and... What is it, Eri?" I noticed that after I delivered my general summary of my week, Eri's expression had turned grumpy.

She heaved a dramatic sigh before replying, "I'm so bored! You spend all your time with that girl from another world!"

"What do you want me to do about that? The headmaster ordered me to do this, and Sumire just arrived in this world."

"Huh? 'Sumire'? When did you drop the honorific?! I knew it! You

slept with her!”

“Of course I didn’t!”

“Then why did you drop the formality? That’s not how you told the story!”

“She said that she doesn’t like me calling her ‘Miss Sumire.’ Said that it sounds like we’re strangers.” That being said, Sumire still referred to me as “Mister Eugene.” I wouldn’t mind her dropping the prefix with me too. “Anyway, see you later, Eri. I’m heading out to Babel.”

“I’ll be watching your dungeon exploration from here! ☆ *And* I’ll be making sure you don’t lay a finger on that Sumire girl!”

“I won’t! And you don’t have to waste your time watching us explore the lower levels.” We would be making the dull climb up to the 9th Level, so I doubted anything interesting would happen.

“Do your best, Eugene!”

“Sure, sure,” I replied, waving at the Demon Queen as she lounged about on the bed like a dozing cat. Then I left the Seventh Sealed Prison.

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“Wow! So this shows what’s going on inside the dungeon?” Sumire exclaimed as she stared up at the giant monitor hanging over the plaza before the Last Dungeon.

“That’s the Satellite System,” I explained. “It doesn’t just display the goings-on in the Last Dungeon to us here. Everyone on the Southern Continent can watch it—it keeps people informed about every country’s progress.”

“Th-That’s an amazing feature! But what’s the point of that?”

I supposed it was only natural that all of this was still unfamiliar to a girl hailing from another world.

“Well, the first reason is safety. Even in a normal dungeon, it’s not rare for trouble to occur between explorers, which can then lead to more serious crime. Thanks to the Satellite System, the explorers in the Last Dungeon, Babel, are on their best behavior. They’ve got the whole continent’s eyes on them, after all.”

"That makes... Wait, huh?" Sumire tilted her head to the side. "But *I* was almost attacked."

"Oh... In your case, they probably mistook you for a monster." I couldn't blame the spectators. Sumire *was* the person who'd turned the 5th Level into a sea of fire. I'd also had my guard up when I first encountered her, as I'd thought her a monster or demon.

"I-I see," Sumire said, lowering her head sadly.

"You're a student at the academy now, so don't worry about it too much. If anyone's mean to you, I'll knock them flat."

"Hee hee, thank you." Sumire's expression brightened again, so I continued with my explanation.

"The other reason is that the countries on the Southern Continent are trying to conquer the Last Dungeon to improve their reputations, so they're all checking the Satellite System to monitor how their rivals are performing."

"A country can gain prestige if they explore the dungeon?" Sumire asked. It was a question I'd expected from her, as she'd only come to this world about a week ago, so I decided to include the historical background of the Last Dungeon in my explanation.

"Did you know that the Southern Continent was in a constant state of war until about five hundred years ago?"

"Miss Rin taught me that during our classes!"

Back then, the relationships between the Grenflare Empire, the Cardia Halidom, and the Blue Sea Union hadn't been as cordial as they were today. All three powers had histories of bloodshed and conflict.

"A certain explorer put a stop to all that," I continued. "He discovered a weapon in Babel and used that to single-handedly defeat all three armies."

"Huuuh?! He did that all by himself?!"

"Well, he had a companion, so it was the two of them. Apparently, he didn't actually want to stop the war, but Althena, the goddess of justice, ordered him to. After he put an end to the conflict, he continued to enter and explore the dungeon. That was when the quarreling nations realized that conquering the Last Dungeon, Babel, would have far greater returns than simply winning

a war.”

“Oh, that makes sense. So that’s why every country is so eager to explore the dungeon.”

“Since then, dungeon exploration’s become such a priority that not even a single war has broken out. Instead, all three powers are competing to see what they can find in Babel or how quickly they can get through it. Some even refer to our current era as the Age of Dungeon Exploration.”

Sumire made an understanding noise and nodded fervently. At some point during our conversation, we’d reached the front of the line to the dungeon desk. We handed our student handbooks to the receptionist and finished our applications without trouble. I glanced to the side and saw that Sumire’s expression had tensed up from nerves.

“Just relax,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“R-Right!”

We showed the dungeon staff our student ID’s and then walked inside.

***

“Wow, amazing! We’re inside a building, but it’s like we’re still outside! For a dungeon, it’s not very dark either!”

Sumire was scampering here and there, turning her head every which way to take in the sights. Any onlooker could tell she was a complete novice, but this was still a safe place for her to express her excitement. There were no monsters on the 1st Level, after all; it was a safe and lively area absent of any dangers. There were rows of stalls selling equipment and items to explorers, with merchants hawking their wares to attract potential customers.

“Hey, cute little miss! Why don’t you check out my store?”

“Heeey, young miss, over there! You’re a novice, aren’t you? Then you need to stock up on your magic items!”

“For a limited time only, we’re offering our stock for twenty percent off! Oh, and since you met my eyes, young lady, I’ll offer you and only you a *further* ten percent discount!”

"U-Um..."

Sumire looked like she didn't know how to respond. This was a common reaction among explorers having their first exposure to Babel's 1st Level. Before any hawker could grab her, I took Sumire by the hand and led her deeper into the dungeon. The farther we went, the fewer stalls there were. Eventually, we saw a large stone structure before us.

"Hey, Eugene! What's with this giant stone tablet?" Sumire asked.

"Oh, that's a list of the Record Holders," I explained.

Sumire looked up in awe. Mimicking her, I directed my attention to the plaque as well:

First Place: Christo Gama (Record: 500)
Second Place: Uther Mercurius Pendragon (Record: 451)
Third Place: Bruno Rosenhain (Record: 437)
Fourth Place: Leonhardt Rothschild (Record: 402)
Fifth Place: Orlando Bacque (Record: 391)
Sixth Place: Charlotte Murray (Record: 349)
Seventh Place: Clark Romak (Record: 326)
Eighth Place: Chester Macduff (Record: 303)
Ninth Place: Rosalie J. Walker (Record: 300)
Tenth Place: Medea Parker (Record: 289)

And so on and so forth. The tablet logged the names of legendary explorers. The larger names were the leaders of the exploration parties, and the names of their party members were engraved in smaller text. Incidentally, the explorer in first place had been a solo challenger. He must have been a real beast. Every explorer dreamed of seeing their name on this list. But the journey to get on the plaque was a perilous and difficult one indeed.

The second name from the top was a familiar one, as it belonged to the headmaster of the academy. He really was an amazing person. No one in the past hundred years had broken the records set by those from first to ninth place. In fact, no one in the past *five hundred years* had broken Christo's record.

I remember when I aspired to see my name up there. The greatest glory one could achieve on the Southern Continent was to break one of those records in the Last Dungeon. When I'd first fled

the empire's military academy, I'd thought it would be a way to prove myself to my old classmates. But the wall those legends represented was far more difficult to scale than I'd ever imagined. I was still a low-ranking explorer who'd only reached the 9th Level.

"Eugene, you're not aiming to become a Record Holder?" Sumire asked.

I thought about it for a moment before giving a vague reply. "Don't worry too much about what I'm doing."

After cutting the conversation off there, I took Sumire to the center of the 1st Level. There, we saw about ten Dungeon Elevators towering over us. Each one had a line in front of its doors.

As I'd expected, Sumire reacted with shock. "Huh?! The dungeon has *elevators* in it? But it's a dungeon!"

"It's convenient, right?" I said.

"Well, yeah, but...is this allowed?"

"You can't really use them to cheat, since they'll only take you to a floor you've already reached with your own ability. Without these, there would be no way for anyone to travel all the way to the 100th or 200th Levels."

"O-Oh, that makes sense."

"So, which floor do you want to go to? The 5th Level? That's where we found you, after all." Accordingly, the Dungeon Elevator should be able to take us back there.

"U-Um, there? I want to go, but there's also a part of me that doesn't want to." Sumire crossed her arms, muttering under her breath and furrowing her brow. I was in no rush, so I gave her all the time she needed to decide. "Hmm. In a situation like this, we should start from the 2nd Level, right? But maybe it's better to start from the higher levels and get a feel for what's awaiting us inside. I wonder what the right choice is?"

Her expression kept changing as she talked to herself. This was her first exploration. It was important for a novice to spend time and think about how they wanted to approach the dungeon. Jumping in without a plan was far more dangerous. Thus, I decided to wait until Sumire came to a conclusion on her own. That was when...

"Hey! Hurry up!"

Suddenly, someone yelled at us from behind. Turning, we saw a score of explorers standing there. *They're wearing blue clothes with yellow crests in the shape of a shield. That means they're explorers from the Blue Sea Union.*

"How dare mere students impede our way? Cede your place in line if you don't know where you're going!"

"E-Eugene!" Terrified, Sumire hid behind me.

Man, these guys sure are rude. There were ten Dungeon Elevators to choose from, so they didn't have to use the one we were in line for. In fact, some explorers who'd arrived before us were still loitering about as they decided which floor they would start from. Why had these ones gone out of their way to bother us? *Probably because we're a pair of young explorers, so they figured they could intimidate us into giving them our place in line. What a nasty way of doing things.* Choosing which level to start from was one of the most important decisions an explorer had to make. Spending time on that wasn't a bad thing. In other words... *They're newbies. It's a waste of time to argue with them.*

It would have been ridiculous to take them and their bad attitude seriously, so I waved them forward. "Go ahead."

"Humph!" The man at the front of the group—presumably the leader—stalked past us. His companions followed with their heads held high, as if it had been a given that we'd let them use the elevator first.

"Is that *really* enough equipment for exploration?" one asked.

"And it's just the two of you? The ignorance of novice explorers is truly frightening," another commented.

"Today, we'll get past the 10th Level!" the leader announced.

"Yessir!" his group roared in unison.

What the hell? You guys are so gung-ho about going in, and you still haven't cleared the 10th *Level?*

"Jerks," Sumire muttered.

"Forget about them. Let's go. If you're unsure of where to start from, let's take the stairs to the 2nd Level and make our way up slow and steady," I suggested.

"Okay!"

And so we headed for the stairs that would take us to the 2nd Level.

***

The 2nd Level of Babel was a Field Area. Grassy meadows stretched before our eyes, and small trees covered in dark green leaves dotted the area without blocking the view.

"It looks like the 1st Level here," Sumire observed.

"Don't let your guard down, Sumire," I said. "The 2nd Level's where monsters start appearing."

"Right! Got it!" she replied, her voice tense.

Granted, the only monsters that showed up around here were low on the danger scale. Even if they managed to bite people, they could only inflict minor injuries.

"Sumire, stay close to me. My Barrier Magic and Healing Magic only extend a few steps away from me."

"Okay! I'll make sure to stay inside that range."

This was something I'd made a point of repeating over the past week: The range of my magic was extremely short, which was part of the reason I couldn't find a party that would let me in. I also couldn't heal multiple people at once, so I wasn't exactly the best Healer around. Thanks to these limitations, I'd almost never moved around or explored in a group. My partnership with Sara had been the only time I'd worked with another person.

"O-Okay, come at me!"

Sumire held up the shield we'd purchased at the academy's equipment store and looked around, never relaxing her posture. Watching her put a smile on my face.

However, a problem soon arose: No matter how long we waited, no monsters jumped out to attack us.

"Eugene, where are the monsters?" she asked.

"That's odd..."

We wandered around the 2nd Level for a bit, but we saw neither hide nor hair of any monsters. At one point, we caught a glimpse of a Jackalope. But the moment it saw us, it jumped and ran away,

disappearing in a blink of an eye. It was only when I shot Sumire a glance that I recalled something: Sumire was an Ifrit.

An incredible amount of mana was pouring from her body. Though she now had enough control over it that she was no longer spontaneously generating flames as she had when we first met, that didn't change the fact that she stored a monstrous amount of it in her body. I'd become accustomed to seeing and taking care of dangerous creatures during my time at the Biology Club, and so I'd forgotten that normal monsters viewed an Ifrit's mana as a threat. All of them were fleeing the second they laid eyes on Sumire.

This isn't going to help her gain experience. I said, "Sumire, let's use the Dungeon Elevator and go to the 5th Level instead."

"Huh? Right off the bat? Will I be okay?"

"It looks like the monsters on this floor are staying in today." As we headed for the upper floors, I refrained from telling her that she was scaring them off.

◊ 5th Level, Babel ◊

Just as on the 2nd Level, the scenery here was that of a Field Area. Seven days ago, Sumire had transformed this place into a hellish inferno, but it had returned to its usual grassy greens thanks to both the dungeon staff's firefighting efforts and Babel's self-reconstruction mechanism.

"There aren't any monsters here either!" Sumire said.

I didn't say anything in response. *Actually, there* are *monsters here. I can sense them.* I could feel their gazes on us as they observed from a distance. Apparently, the monsters on the 5th Level remembered Sumire, as she had been the one to burn up their home. They were even more scared of her than the monsters on the 2nd Level.

I didn't think her mana would be this intimidating. Do we really have no choice but to move on to the upper levels? Making it to the 6th Level on one's first exploration would be a pretty unfathomable record. Normally, it was inadvisable to go through the dungeon at such a rapid pace. Back when I was actively dungeon exploring, it had taken me days to clear each floor.

"Reincarnators from other worlds are special, Eugene. You

shouldn't apply our world's rules or common sense to them," Headmaster Uther had once told me, stroking his beard.

I see what he means now. As usual, the headmaster was right.

After we made our way to the 6th Level, some monsters started to brave Sumire's presence and come out of hiding. The one now standing before us was a Gray Wolf, a monster with a danger ranking of two.

"A-A monster! Eugene!" Sumire exclaimed, clear panic in her voice.

"Calm down, Sumire. I'll be right next to you, ready to support you."

I held up my sword so I could jump in to protect Sumire the moment she needed it. However, I wouldn't be the one doing the fighting. Sumire would. I wanted her to start by calmly observing the monster's movements. Gray Wolves were fairly dangerous creatures, but even a novice explorer could deal with them if they knew what to look out for.

"All right. Come at me!" she yelled, trying to pump herself up.

I hadn't given her any weapons, only the shield for her protection. This was so she could focus on defending herself first.

As if in response to Sumire's war cry, her body began to emit more mana. *So her emotions are doing that?* Her mana was awesome enough on an ordinary day, but the mana of an Ifrit raring for battle was unbelievable. An incredible amount, rivaling that of ten super high-tier mages, cloaked Sumire's body.

This is the power of the legendary Ifrit? The red mana emanating from Sumire's body burned the grass with an audible sizzle. Spreading like fire, it traveled along the ground until it reached the Gray Wolf. With a pathetic whine, the monster turned tail and ran away. *I'm guessing the heat burned its paws.*

"H-Huh? It ran away," Sumire said. She was still holding on to her shield as she stared, open-mouthed, after the fleeing Gray Wolf.

For real? She chased away an entire monster just by showing off her mana! "Wow, you lucked out."

"Y-Yeah." Sumire tilted her head, looking unconvinced by my explanation.

That was when I noticed something. “Uh, Sumire? Is your shield on fire?”

“Huh? E-Eek! It really is! Oh no, I have to extinguish it!”

Sumire’s shield was glowing a bright red. But now that I was paying it closer attention, it didn’t look right. Despite the crimson light radiating from the shield, it wasn’t actually burning or turning black. Was this...? Was it really...?

“It’s been Enchanted with magical fire?” I murmured.

“Enchanted?”

“Enchantment is a spell that imbues weapons or armor with elemental properties,” I explained. “Normally, though, there’s a specific spell you have to cast if you want to Enchant something.” Apparently, Sumire’s Ifrit mana could passively Enchant items. The shield, now bearing the properties of magical fire, continued to glow red for a while. “It’s amazing you can do this just by channeling your mana through something.”

“It is?” Sumire still didn’t seem to understand what an extraordinary feat she’d pulled off.

Enchant was a high-level spell. People valued mages who knew how to cast it, and hiring one cost an arm and a leg. If the other explorers found out Sumire could do this, many parties would clamor to have her enter Babel with them. I had the feeling that my time as her guardian would be a lot shorter than I’d expected.

“Eugene?”

“It’s nothing. Let’s keep going.”

As if to ignore the wave of loneliness that washed over me at the thought, I led Sumire higher into the dungeon. I wanted her to experience at least a few actual battles, but I’d underestimated just how powerful an Ifrit’s mana was. On the 7th Level, we ran into a pack of Great Wolves, which were known for their aggressive nature. On the 8th Level, we entered the territory of the Great Black Bear. These were giant and vicious creatures, each twice the size of a normal humanoid. And then, on the 9th Level, we came across a Crimson Lion. Despite its bestial and frightening form, it was capable of using fire magic. However, no matter what monsters we encountered, they refused to attack us.

They huddled together in fear, practically saying, "We mean you no harm, so please, just keep walking." The Crimson Lion, in particular, jumped the moment it laid eyes on Sumire the Ifrit. Before we could even get ready for battle, it raced away until it was a quivering speck in the distance.

You little furball... The last time I'd made it to the 9th Level, a Crimson Lion had rushed me, practically salivating at the thought of dining on human flesh! Apparently, monsters of the fire element viewed Ifrits as a much higher species, one they refused to attack. In the end, we made the trek from the 6th to the 9th Level without a single enemy encounter. *Seriously? She matched my record in a single day!*

"Eugene, what should we do? The floor above us is the Boss's territory, right?" Sumire asked.

"Yeah, it is..."

"We reached the 10th Level so much earlier than I thought we would." She looked innocently confused.

The 10th Level of Babel... I never imagined we would reach this place on our first day. I'd never even been there before. However, I'd seen it on the Satellite System, and so I knew that was the floor Babel's first Boss had claimed as its territory. Not that I'd ever challenged it myself...

I glanced at Sumire's face. The nervousness that had been clouding her expression when we first entered Babel had cleared up, and she looked far more relaxed. This wasn't good. Of course, it wouldn't do for her to be overly anxious either, but an explorer who didn't understand the dangers wouldn't last long in here.

Sumire had the talent to make it all the way to the 9th Level without breaking a sweat. I was sure she would soon surpass me and become an excellent explorer in her own right. But she'd reached the 9th Level on her first exploration without fighting a single monster. It was too dangerous for her to keep exploring while under the impression that the dungeon was no big deal. As her guardian, I wanted her to experience *some* kind of challenge before leaving Babel.

"Do you want to go check out the Boss?" I suggested.

When she heard that, her expression tensed. "Th-The Boss?! Is that really a good idea?"

"We'll be safe as long as we don't enter its territory." *And if push comes to shove, I'll just protect Sumire with all my might. I can't protect a large group of people, but I'm more than confident in my ability to protect a single person.*

A conversation I'd once had in the Seventh Sealed Prison came to mind.

"Even I, a Demon Queen, would have trouble leaving a scratch on you, Eugene."

"Really, Eri?"

"Really. You should have more confidence in yourself."

"Huh..."

The words Eri had once spoken to me echoed in my mind. The Demon Queen herself had given me her stamp of approval, so we would be okay. *I think.*

"O-Oh, I see," Sumire stammered. "All right, if you think that's what we should do, then let's go for it, Eugene!" She gave me a trusting smile.

"Let's go."

"Okay!"

I sucked in a small breath before we slowly made our way up the stairs to the 10th Level.

Chapter Four: Eugene Fights the Boss

The 10th Level, where the Boss waited for explorers to challenge it, differed from all the preceding Field Area floors. Its territory comprised the area around the stairs leading up to the 11th Level, which meant that you had to defeat it if you wanted to ascend any farther. Unlike on the 2nd to 9th Levels, no monsters prowled the 10th. There were some herbivorous creatures wandering around, but they were all the Boss's prey. The Boss was so overwhelmingly powerful compared to the other monsters below that the dungeon had given it an entire floor so it wouldn't descend to the lower levels and ruin the ecosystem.

"GRAAAAAAHHHH!"

Its roar echoed through the room, and Sumire flinched back from the noise. We were standing at the exit near the stairs and observing what was happening on the 10th Level. Before us stood an enormous shadow; smaller shadows rushed around it.

"Aaaahhhh!"

"H-Help!"

"We need to reorganize ourselves! Anyone who can fight, stay where you are!"

"Captain, don't be ridiculous! We need to retreat!"

"We can't! This time, for sure... This time, for sure, our country *will* get past the 10th Level!"

I recognized the combatants as the Blue Sea Union explorers who'd bullied their way past us at the Dungeon Elevator. Looked like they were having a hard time against the Boss.

"Let's get closer so you can observe another team fighting a Boss," I suggested. "It's safe so long as you don't get too close."

"R-Really?!"

The relaxed expression that Sumire had worn while we explored the lower levels had vanished. This should serve as good experience for her. Since she was still trembling, I took her by the hand and led her closer to the Boss.

As the Blue Sea Union's exploration team continued to engage the Boss, I could see a glowing white line around them. This was the Challenger's Border. So long as we stayed outside of the line, the Boss wouldn't attack us. Ostensibly, anyway. If we needlessly taunted the Boss or attacked it from this distance, it would still retaliate. That was why explorers who weren't interested in or prepared for a fight never crossed the line.

I won't so long as those guys aren't getting wiped out, anyway. From my observation, several members of the Blue Sea Union team were injured, but fortunately, no one had died yet. They were at a disadvantage, so no one would blame them for retreating. Explorers could challenge a Boss as many times as they wanted. They didn't *have* to defeat it today. However, it seemed that their captain was the stubborn type.

"Gah!"

The Boss tossed another explorer into the air. He was unconscious before he even hit the ground. The dust that rose from the impact reached Sumire and me where we stood watching.

Not everyone had to fight the same Boss. Sometimes, it would be a Giant guarding the stairs; on other days, it would be a Dragon. After an explorer defeated a Boss, a new one would appear to take its place the next day. If an explorer tried to take advantage of the lull in between Bosses, the stairs leading up to the next level would disappear. The only way to ascend to the next floor was to defeat the Boss. Currently, the Boss of the 10th Level was a vicious black-hued Troll.

A black monster, huh? Those usually had highly aggressive personalities. Even worse, it was a Large Boss. Bosses were categorized into different sizes: Small, Medium, Large, and Colossal. This wasn't going to be an easy fight.

"H-Hey! You're that student explorer we saw on the 1st Level! Help us out!" the captain said after he noticed us.

Easier said than done... As an outsider, I'd receive a penalty if I walked into the Challengers' Area.

"E-Eugene, you won't help them?" Sumire asked, tugging on my sleeve.

"I'll receive a penalty if I interfere in a Boss fight without an official request or permission," I explained. "People outside can observe this fight through the Satellite System."

I looked up at the round machine floating above us. It was responsible for streaming the fight to the Satellite Systems outside, and I was sure that the dungeon staff and supervisors were watching over us through those screens.

"Wh-Why won't you help us? You plan to just watch us die?" the captain yelled.

Does this guy not even know how *to ask for help? The dungeon staff should've explained all this before they went in.* But then...

"We are members of the Blue Sea Union, and we request your aid!" another explorer exclaimed, raising the flag to indicate their need for reinforcements. That one over there knew the rules that explorers had to follow when inside Babel.

All right. Now they've officially requested my help. However, it was still up to me to decide whether I actually wanted to lend them a hand. *These guys were pretty rude to us when we met them in front of the Dungeon Elevator, but...* I sensed Sumire looking at me with a mix of expectation and anxiety. *I guess I don't have a choice.*

"Sumire, I'll go help them. Stay here," I said.

"O-Okay! Be careful!"

With that, I walked inside the Boss's territory.

◊ Sumire's POV ◊

The massive Troll stood at around five meters tall, and the entire floor rumbled each time it took a step. My body trembled at the sound of its terrifying roar. Eugene's expression never wavered from his usual calm, but would he really be all right against such a horrifying creature?

"Aaaahhhh!"

The Troll sent yet another explorer flying. *Oh my God, it broke his leg. I'm so scared!* I'd never realized how dangerous dungeon

exploring really was. Our journey up to the 9th Level had been so peaceful, so I'd had no clue what it was like at the higher levels. The Troll was holding a large log like a club, and he swung it down on the captain. *Oh no, watch out!*

"Captain!" a member of his team cried.

"Run away!" yelled another.

"A-Aaarrgh!" The captain couldn't escape; he was tripping over his own feet in his panic.

I-If that Troll hits him, he'll die!

Boom! The club hit the floor so hard that it was like an earthquake. I'd squeezed my eyes shut on instinct, and I slowly and fearfully opened them to see...

"You all right, old man?"

The captain was sitting on the floor, knees still knocking together, while Eugene, expression relaxed, blocked the club with one hand.

Huuuuh?! "Wow, amazing, Eugene!" I blurted out. Now that I was paying closer attention, I could see a white glow emanating from Eugene's hand. He had cast a magical shield between his palm and the Troll's club. *H-He blocked the blow with such a small shield?*

"Old man, hurry and get out of here," Eugene said.

"S-Sorry!" The captain, who had been so high and mighty when we first saw him, scrambled to safety on all fours.

"The rest of you, flee the Boss's territory!" Eugene barked.

"A-All right!"

"Thank you so much!"

"You saved us!"

The explorers hurried to obey Eugene's order, pausing only to help their wounded.

"GRAAAAHHHHH!"

The Troll roared, furious that he'd stopped its attack. It raised his foot high into the air, prepared to bring it down on Eugene!

"Barrier Magic: Greater Lightshield." A larger shield of light appeared on Eugene's arm.

No, why aren't you dodging it?! I thought. Then I realized he was staying there until all the explorers could make it to safety. In other words, Eugene was acting as bait to keep the Troll occupied.

The Troll stomped down to crush Eugene, but a dull clang, like the sound of cars crashing into each other, rang out through the air.

Before I knew it, I was screaming, "Eugene!" But when I saw what had happened, I blinked. *Huh?* The Troll's foot hung suspended in the air. Meanwhile, Eugene was standing stock-still in the same spot where I'd last seen him. The only difference was his expression. He was furrowing his brow a little, as if the attack were on a par with a pebble striking his foot. *Uh... That's insane, Eugene...*

The explorers, who'd fled from the Boss's territory, were staring back at Eugene and the Troll, their mouths hanging open.

"Amazing..."

"No way!"

"Just who is that guy?"

"GRAAAAHHHH!" the Troll bellowed, as if letting out its frustration at Eugene and his meddling. It raised its fist and brought it down, over and over. *Bang! Clang! Boom! Bang! Clang! Boom!* It punched and stomped Eugene as well as striking him with its club. The ground shook and the air trembled as it continued its rampage, each attack sounding like a miniature explosion.

Eugene continued to stand there, not moving a single step, as he endured the attack with a pained look on his face. *Um, actually,* can *I describe that expression as "pained"?* His expression looked more like he was thinking, *Man, it just started raining, but I forgot my umbrella at home*.

H-He's way too chill about this. Each of the Troll's strikes sent shock waves through the floor, and yet none of them could get past Eugene's shield. The wall of pale light between them deflected all of its attempts to harm him. *So this is his Barrier Magic? Isn't it, like, super strong?*

Huff...huff...huff... The Troll was panting, its shoulders rising and falling heavily. Having exhausted all its strength, it ceased its onslaught. It backed away, glaring at Eugene with unbridled hatred all the while, before plopping down on the steps that led to the 11th Level.

Eugene heaved a sigh before dusting himself off. "It's over."

He approached me, smiling. My entire body heated up from

excitement, and before I knew it, I'd run over and grabbed him in a tight hug. *He's so amazing and strong and awesome!*

◊ Eugene's POV ◊

"Eugene, you were incredible!"

"Whoa!"

Sumire embraced me. I could feel how soft and warm her body was.

"You were so cool!" she continued.

"R-Really?"

I felt quite pleased as she looked up at me with sparkling eyes. At the academy, the students often spread rumors about me, like the story that I'd gotten in through a backdoor admission, and it felt like I didn't belong. Sumire's straightforward and sincere praise made me happy. *I'm glad I did my best in that fight, then.*

"Urgh..."

"Ow..."

"Hey, get a hold of yourself! Does anyone have medicine?!"

"No, we're completely out."

"Unbelievable..."

At those words, I turned away from Sumire and saw the Blue Sea Union explorers talking. I heard, too, the defeat in their voices. They hadn't used the time to heal up their wounded.

At least bring enough supplies for everyone, I thought. Though I was a little exasperated at their lack of preparation, I couldn't ignore them and so approached one of the injured explorers.

"Oh, you!" an explorer helping his hurt companion said when he noticed me. "Thanks for earlier. If you have any extra medicine on hand, we'd like to buy it from—"

"High Heal," I said, interrupting him and curing him in an instant with my spell.

"You fixed such a serious injury just like that?!" the explorer exclaimed.

"You're even capable of healing magic?!" another cried. "Not only that, but you're an expert at it!"

Uh, you just had a broken bone, and the spell I used was a standard intermediate-tier spell. Wait, don't tell me this team doesn't

even have mages who can cast intermediate spells? I'm surprised they attempted the Last Dungeon with such a team.

"P-Please, help the others!" the explorer begged.

"Yeah, I will. I have to heal everybody one by one." After that, I walked around and cast healing magic on the other members of the Blue Sea Union team. By a stroke of luck, no one had suffered anything more serious than broken bones, and so I finished the job in a matter of minutes. I returned to Sumire and said, "Sorry to have kept you waiting. I've finished helping everyone, I think."

"Thank you for all your hard work, Eugene!"

Though I hadn't expected to have to bail out another group of explorers, Sumire's expression told me she'd gotten something out of this experience. After all, she'd witnessed a fight against a Boss, and she'd learned what a Barrier Master and Healer could offer a party. As far as first explorations went, this was a pretty good one. Now it was time to head back. But right as the thought crossed my mind, someone ran up and blocked our way.

"Wait a second!"

"Hmm?"

I recognized him as the captain of the team. He kowtowed before us, his attitude a complete one-eighty from the haughtiness he'd displayed on the 1st Level. "P-Please, lend my country your strength!"

You're really putting me on the spot here. I didn't know how to react and was giving him an awkward look when another explorer from the team spoke up.

"Captain, we can't do that. He saved us from the Boss, so we have to give him the reward for that first. The dungeon staff are watching us through the Satellite System, remember?"

"Oh, uh, right. How much should I give?"

"I'm a student at Lykeion Magic Academy, so you can contact the academy about that. There's a specific portal for dealing with assistance rewards. By the way, it's against the rules to avoid payment. Doing so too many times can result in explorers from your country being barred from entering the Last Dungeon. I'm sure I didn't need to explain all that to you, though."

The captain's surprised reaction told me another story. *He really is a newbie.*

"Understood," said the other explorer who'd spoken earlier. "We'll pay whatever price your academy asks for the help you offered us. But I'd like you to help us with something else. Please help us kill the Boss. Ah, it's a little late for introductions now, but my name is Daniel. I am the vice captain of this exploration team. We hail from the Tormore Kingdom, which is part of the Blue Sea Union."

Vice Captain Daniel had his head in the game. This was my first time hearing about the Tormore Kingdom, though. Over a hundred different countries made up the Republic of the Blue Sea Union; the Tormore Kingdom must have been one of the smaller ones.

"I am Eugene Santafield, a student of Lykeion Magic Academy. This is Sumire Sashiougi, a fellow student of Lykeion."

"I-It's nice to meet you! My name is Sumire Sashiougi." She dipped her head in a bow.

"So, why do you want our help in defeating the Boss?" I asked. "Is there a reason you're in such a hurry?"

"Well..."

According to their explanation, the Tormore Kingdom was on the brink of bankruptcy. To resolve this crisis, it had used all its remaining funds to form a team of explorers to send into the Last Dungeon.

"I dare not show my face to His Majesty if we return home empty-handed. Our kingdom owes another country in the Blue Sea Union an unfathomable amount of money, and if we don't repay that debt, we'll lose land as our collateral."

Upon hearing Daniel's story, Sumire and I furrowed our brows. *Okay, I get it. So they're here to save their country. It makes sense that they're taking so many risks to press forward.*

"Eugene, how does getting past the 10th Level equate to paying back the money they owe?" Sumire whispered to me.

"After a Boss is defeated, treasure sometimes appears. Even if nothing happens, you can still break down a Boss's corpse for its parts and materials. I'm guessing that's what they're after."

"That's not all. The area around the 11th Level contains valuable

magical berries and such. If we harvest and sell them, we can repay the interest, at the very least." Daniel's face was twisted in deep despair.

They're really going through it.

"Please! I'm begging you!" the captain wailed again. Now that I thought about it, the only thing this captain had done was kowtow and ask us for help. He was trying to appeal to my emotions, and it just so happened that sob stories easily swayed me.

"Eugene, what should we do?"

"I'm not sure how I *can* help you. I can only use barrier and healing magic."

"How can that be? You displayed such fine technique when you parried all the Troll's attacks without receiving an injury. If you work with us..."

The vice captain hadn't given up on convincing me to help them, but I doubted I could live up to his expectations. Thanks to the Satellite System, I'd watched numerous explorers defeat the 10th Level Boss, and so I knew how powerful a team of explorers needed to be to get past this floor. No one here was strong enough to defeat that Troll. Even if I supported them with my healing magic and barriers, it would be difficult for them to get to the 11th Level.

Sumire was still looking at me, a mix of expectation and nervousness in her eyes. If I turned down the Blue Sea Union explorers' request, would I disappoint her? I looked up at the dungeon's ceiling as I pondered this. Under normal circumstances, I would have turned the explorers down. My mana only let me protect and heal others; I couldn't use it to attack. After seeing Sumire's mana, though, I wanted to try something.

"Sumire, will you lend me your strength?" I asked.

"Huh? You're asking me?"

The vice captain looked surprised at my question. "Will that girl fight for us too?"

"W-Wait, you want me to fight against that Troll? E-Eugene, I can't!"

"Don't worry. *I'll* be the only one fighting it." I took Sumire's hand in mine.

"E-Eugene?!"

"I just need to borrow some of your mana."

"Huh? S-Sure..."

I strengthened my hold on Sumire's hand. *Mana Link.* Hot mana poured into me from that point of connection.



Mana Link was a technique that allowed one mage to siphon mana from another. It required finesse, as going overboard and taking too much mana could end up damaging the receiver's body.

Unable to give up on my dream of becoming a Magic Swordsman, I'd used Mana Link with many different mages, but to no avail. The effect of my white mana always overwrote theirs. However, the immense volume and power of an Ifrit's red mana—not to mention its innate Enchant properties—might be the solution to my problem. The red glow that Sumire's shield emitted had cemented my theory.

Sumire's Ifrit mana slowly poured into me. My body temperature rose, but it didn't feel uncomfortable. It was a strange heat that even made my heart beat faster. I felt like the mana was boiling the blood flowing through my veins, and white steam rose from my skin. *So this is the mana of an Ifrit...*

"Sumire, how do you feel?" I asked.

"Um, it kind of tickles."

"You're not feeling sick or anything?"

"Nope! I'm fine." She smiled at me.

All right, this should be enough. I released her hand.

"Excuse me, but what are you two doing?" the vice captain asked, looking at us in confusion.

"I'm going to challenge the Troll, the Boss of the 10th Level," I said. "Can someone lend me their sword?"

"H-Here!" The vice captain handed me his sword.

I gave it a careful inspection. The sword was around the same length as my arm, and the blade was just slightly thinner than that of the standard sword used by the imperial army. If I was too rough with it, it would snap in half.

Barrier Magic: Enhancement. I used my Barrier Magic to strengthen the sword, but even like this, it couldn't cut through anything. *However, if I use an Ifrit's mana...* I poured the mana I'd received from Sumire into the vice captain's sword to create the Magic Sword: Flameblade. Red light glowed from the blade, and a strange sizzling sound rose from the metal.

"Whoaaa!" The explorers from the Blue Sea Union raised their voices in a cheer.

I stared at the red glow. This wasn't like any magical reaction I'd ever seen before. In the past, I'd tried using the normal Enchant spell dozens of times, but it had never gone well. No matter how hard I tried, my white mana would dispel others' Enchantments as well as my own. As a result, I kept ending up with dull magic swords that couldn't deal any damage. That was why I'd given up on my dream of becoming a Magic Swordsman.

Now, though, I was holding a sword full of fire magic thanks to the mana I'd received from an Ifrit. Carefully, I poured in my own mana. The red light didn't waver. I tried tapping the blade, and the high-pitched sound of mana clashing against mana hit my ears. The surest proof that Sumire's mana worked was that the magic sword hadn't become soft. The Ifrit's mana had overpowered my white mana.

With this magic sword, I can fight. I clenched the hilt tight.

Sumire tilted her head at me. "Eugene?"

"Thank you, Sumire," I said, smiling at her. Then I looked over at the Tormore Kingdom explorers. "I will fight the Boss alone. I'll give you all the spoils too. Just remember to leave enough for the assistance reward. And of course, you don't have to pay if I don't actually defeat the Troll."

As expected, the explorers protested.

"You plan on fighting it alone?"

"That's impossible!"

"We'll fight with you!"

However, I couldn't back down here. "My Healing and Barrier Magic don't have a lot of range, so fighting as a group will put us at a disadvantage."

After ruminating on my words, the vice captain nodded. "I understand. We're counting on you, Eugene."

"Thanks. I'll be heading over now."

"I'm cheering you on, Eugene!" Sumire clasped her hands before her chest as she saw me off.

"Be careful out there!" a Blue Sea Union explorer said.

"Don't push yourself!" another cried.

I waved at them, then slowly entered the Boss's territory. When

was the last time I'd held a sword? The moment I remembered, a wry smile danced on my lips. *Isn't that obvious? It was the day Airi dumped me.* Ever since that moment, I'd forsaken the way of the sword, despite all the time and effort I'd put into it. It had been, admittedly, a moment of weakness. But today, I once again had a sword in my hand.

I tightened my hold on the Blue Sea Union explorer's sword, which was far lighter than the standard sword of the imperial army, then whispered to the explorer badge that designated my D rank, "Eugene Santafield will challenge the 10th Level Boss."

The explorer badge was a magic item that bore a dungeon enchantment. I could use it to communicate with the supervisor of the dungeon.

"Explorer Eugene, your challenge has been processed. Good luck," a mechanical voice rang out on the 10th Level. At the same moment, a glowing white line—the Challengers' Border—appeared around me and the Troll.

That voice apparently belonged to the supervisor of Babel, the Last Dungeon and a creation of the gods. Some believed that, as an agent of the Holy God, the supervisor of Babel was an Angel. I'd never seen them with my own eyes before, so I couldn't confirm the veracity of these rumors. Angel or not, the supervisor had now accepted me as a challenger.

It's been over a year since I enrolled in Lykeion, and I'm finally standing in here as a Boss challenger, huh? The thought made me a little emotional.

"GRAAAHHHH!" the Troll roared upon seeing me enter its territory.

Thud... Thud... With every step the Troll took, the entire ground shook under its weight. There was still quite some distance between us, but I already needed to crane my head back to look up at it. It glared at me, each eyeball the size of a human head.

It's huge. In the past, I'd fought against an Ogre, but that had been a training exercise at the military academy. Not only that, but I'd gotten to work with the other students, and the instructor had been standing nearby in case we needed help.

I had to take down this Troll alone. No one could bail me out of danger. Oddly, though, the thought didn't fill me with fear. Instead, memories of my past swordsmanship training flowed through my mind. *Now that I think about it, what did my old man say to me before?* The words of my father, who had done double duty as my swordsmanship teacher, echoed in my brain.

"Listen up, Eugene. In a fight, don't just keep your eyes on your opponent. Pay attention to the entire battlefield."

"Uh, dad? I just wanted some advice on my next tournament. Why are we talking about battlefields?"

"Because our Enmei-ryu is a swordsmanship style that shines on the battlefield. Winning a duel is meaningless when you're standing on the battlefield."

"Sure, but...if I don't win the tournament, my grades will slip."

"Who gives a damn about grades? Survival and protecting your master are the only things that matter in life. On the battlefield, assassins might target you or send poisoned arrows your way. In situations like that, what will you do?"

"Did you hear me? Assassins using poisoned arrows aren't going to show up at a swordsmanship tournament."

"How can you say that for certain? Airi's a princess, isn't she? Some ruffian might try to kill her, and if that happens, it'll be your job to protect her."

"Okay, okay, I hear you, old man."

Though his advice had been absolute rubbish, I'd ended up winning the tournament anyway.

The Troll's gargantuan frame approached me fast. Sumire and the other explorers watched us from outside the Boss's territory. Thanks to how open the 10th Level's Field Area was, I could see everything, including some deer-like herbivorous animals watching us.

I guess I'm noticing everything so clearly because... I was calm, apparently. Even though this was my Boss battle, I wasn't nervous at all. The Troll's threatening growl reached my ears.

"Now then..." I lowered my stance and held the fire sword, its blade glowing bright crimson, at the ready.

As if wary of what I would do, the Troll also held itself at the

ready. I thought it would charge me, but instead, it hefted a child-sized boulder and hurled it into the air. It flew straight at me, audibly cutting through the wind.

I didn't panic and simply cast a spell. *Barrier Magic: Lightshield.* With a loud clang, the boulder hit the barrier and broke apart.

"Whoa!"

"Eek!"

Fragments of the boulder flew toward the explorers watching the fight from behind me. Was Sumire all right? I whirled around to check on her. Fortunately, the fragments of the boulder hadn't been flung that far. She was still clasping her hands together, as if praying for my success.

Well, now I really *can't lose.* I turned my attention back to the Troll and saw it preparing to launch more boulders at me. *I'll defeat it up close.* That was the best way to prevent any injuries among the spectators. *Niten Enmei-ryu Wind Stance: Skystep.* This was a technique that closed the distance between my opponent and me with a single step. After I used it, I darted within arm's reach of the Troll.

"GRAH?!" the Troll roared, surprised at my speed. It raised its fist and brought it down on me. With a resounding *boom*, it shook the entire floor and embedded its arm, as long and thick as a pillar, into the ground.

I took a sharp breath and swung my sword at the Troll's arm in a horizontal slash. The blade cut through it without making a single noise or leaving any lingering sensation in my hand. The next moment, with a deep thud, the Troll's arm fell limply to the ground.

"GRAAAHHH!" the Troll screamed. Enraged, it tried to grab me with its remaining arm.

As I dodged its swipes, I checked the remaining mana in Flameblade. I'd only swung it at the Troll once, but it had already lost half its glow. *It has one more strike in it at most*.

The Troll, face twisted in fury, raised its foot to crush me under it. *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!* It kept stomping, like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

Niten Enmei-ryu Wood Stance: Willow Rose. I dodged each of the

Troll's attacks with ease. Blood was pouring from the stump of its arm. Perhaps it would be wiser to retreat to a safer distance and wait for it to run out of strength. I glanced over at Sumire. Every time the Troll brought its foot down, she would let out muffled little screams like "Ah!" and "Eek!"

Actually, I should end it now lest I cause her any more unnecessary worry. I lowered my stance and held up my sword, ready to counter the Troll's next attack. Its foot, as large as a tree, bore down on me. I jumped away at the last second and attacked.

Niten Enmei-ryu Fire Stance: Lionsbane. I twisted my body and swung my sword as if performing a dance. The fiery blade sliced through the Troll, and its dying scream echoed through the entire 10th Level. It fell to the ground with a rumble and lay there unmoving. Rather than let my guard down immediately, I waited for it to get back up, but no matter how long I stood there, the Troll remained motionless. *Did I win? But that was so easy...* I was still unsure when a robotic announcement rang out.

"The winner is the explorer, Eugene. Congratulations."

I was unable to speak. To my surprise, the joy of victory didn't well up inside me. Instead, I was more perplexed than anything. Had I *really* won against a Boss? Only dregs of the red mana I'd taken from Sumire remained in the sword; it had lasted just two attacks.

I let out a quiet breath before saying, "Sumire—"

But before I could tell her I'd won, she rushed over to me and hugged me, jumping so high that she wrapped her arms around my head. I could hardly breathe with her around me, but I placed a hand on her back to steady her.

"Eugene! You won! Congratulations!" she exclaimed, giving me a sunny smile.

"Yeah, it was all thanks to you."

That was when it finally set in for me, and I couldn't stop the grin spreading over my face. I'd won. I'd won! When was the last time I'd been able to smile from the bottom of my heart? Before I realized what I was doing, I hugged Sumire back.

"Whoa, Eugene?!"

"Oh, sorry."

"Ah, um, eh heh heh. It's okay!" She blushed, but the smile on her face didn't lose its radiance.

And that was how I succeeded in slaying the Boss of the 10th Level.

Interlude One: From the Student Council Building

◊ Student Council General Affairs Officer Teresia's POV ◊

In the parlor of Lykeion Magic Academy's student council building, a massive monitor displayed the various floors of the Last Dungeon via the Satellite System. If students got themselves in trouble while exploring the Last Dungeon but the dungeon staff were too busy to rescue them, members of the Student Council Task Force would go in their stead.

However, we weren't in a state of emergency at the moment. The atmosphere in the student council room was quiet and peaceful. I'd settled into a corner of the parlor, dealing with paperwork while drinking some tea I'd prepared for myself. When I heard murmuring around me, I looked up to see, projected on the monitor, a student facing off against the Boss of the 10th Level. Apparently, that student was rescuing explorers from the Blue Sea Union. Not only that, but he was an acquaintance of mine.

Eugene? He was the student who, just the other day, had dropped by the student council with the otherworlder, Sumire. I heard the jeering of the other spectators from all corners of the room.

"Would you look at that? The backdoor Barrier Master's gone up to the 10th Level."

"Huh. He's always skulking around the lower levels. What's he doing up there?"

"I bet he's trying to act all cool and tough around that reincarnator girl."

I sighed internally. How unfortunate. As Warriors in the Advanced Course, they had no reason to direct such antagonism toward Eugene, who was a General Education student. I agreed it was odd

to see Eugene in a Boss's territory, though. In fact, this could be my first time seeing him there.

Curious, I set down my pen and kept my eyes on the screen. Eugene was acting as bait to distract the Boss from the Blue Sea Union explorers, who were clearly weaker than he was. When they'd had a chance to escape, he proceeded to fend off the Troll all by himself.

Amazing! And I wasn't the only one who thought so. The insults turned to whispers of awe.

"Whoa, that was...awesome?"

"Don't you usually need a team of over ten people to challenge a Boss?"

"Look! He ended up keeping the Boss busy all by himself!"

"Damn, did Eugene finally start getting serious?" someone said as he leaned against my table, blocking my view of the screen.

Ugh! Who is this?! I looked up to see a handsome male student with blond hair looking down at me.

"Hey, Teresia," he said. "Got a minute?"

"Oh, Claude. Welcome. Is there something you need?"

Claude Percival was a student in the same year as me. As a Hero-in-Training, he was quite well-known around the school.

"Well, I forgot to hand in my expedition request. My captain chewed me out for that, so I brought you my form."

"Not again with late applications... How many times does this make it?"

"Sorry, sorry." He raised a hand and winked at me. Was his apology really sincere?

I accepted the form from him and thought of his earlier words. "Claude, do I remember correctly that you're close with Eugene?"

"Yeah. He's the one in charge of taking care of my partner, and I've asked him to accompany me on expeditions a few times too. He's a real stand-up fellow."

"Oh?" *You don't hear that every day.*

Eugene was in General Education, while Claude was in the Hero Course. Only a handful of the over ten thousand students in Lykeion Magic Academy were permitted to enroll in the Hero Course, and

Claude was one of the chosen. Yet, from Claude's perspective, Eugene was worthy of respect.

Just then, the monitor displaying the 10th Level caught our attention.

"Oh, there's Eugene again," Claude said.

"Mm-hmm. But is he really going to fight the Boss himself?" I wondered aloud as Eugene, wielding a crimson magic sword in one hand, stepped into the Boss's territory.

I heard the more combative students scoffing:

"Hah! He'll never defeat the Boss!"

"He can't attack with that magic sword!"

"*We* could take down the 10th Level Boss easily!"

"Yeah! Our team wouldn't even break a sweat!"

They really view Eugene as a rival of sorts, huh?

"Hey, Teresia," Claude whispered into my ear. "Why do they hate Eugene so much?"

Your face is too close. "It's because President Sara likes him. They're not happy about that."

"Oh, so it's about Sara, eh? Yeah, she's got a keen interest in that guy."

"That reminds me. President Sara's in the Hero Course too. Do you two often chat with each other?"

"Nah, Sara's always busy, so we never have the time. She has to carry out her duties as the student council president as well as take on missions as a Saint Candidate, right? Now she's what I would consider a bona fide monster."

"Please don't use such insulting language to talk about her."

"Sorry, sorry."

I was a little angry at Claude for describing President Sara, whom I respected, as a monster. I doubted he'd meant it derisively, though.

A roar rose from the audience in the student council room. I looked up at the screen just in time to see Eugene slice off the Boss's arm.

"Huuuh?! That was wicked!"

"He's gonna defeat it, isn't he?!"

"N-No way!"

Everyone's eyes were glued to the screen as, all by himself, Eugene killed the Troll that served as the Boss of the 10th Level.

"H-He defeated it?"

"He downed a Boss, all on his own?"

"Th-This has to be a joke."

"Who even remembers the last time someone defeated a Boss without any help?"

"I've never seen anyone accomplish such a feat."

The buzz of conversation never ceased, and everyone looked bewildered at what they'd just witnessed. Claude, still standing next to me, was the only one who didn't seem surprised.

"Nice work, Eugene," he said.

"If he's this powerful, why has he been hiding his strength?" I asked, curious.

"Well, he's got his fair share of troubles." Claude clearly knew the reason, but he didn't seem inclined to share it with me. "Oh, by the way, Teresia..."

"What is it?"

"I'm getting peckish. May I have a cookie?"

"Of course, but I have to warn you, they're getting soggy."

He was pointing at the cheap cookies I'd found to pair with my tea. Quite some time had passed since I took them out of the box, and I had lost any interest in eating them. Did Claude like sweets? Ignoring the way I tilted my head at my own unspoken question, Claude nibbled on the cookies like they were the most scrumptious treats.

"Thanks, Teresia. You're a lifesaver. I'll make it up to you with some dinner. My treat. When are you free?"

I heaved a heavy sigh. *So this is what he's really after?* I'd heard rumors that Claude was the son of a noble family from one of the bigger countries in the Republic of the Blue Sea Union. As a student in the Hero Course, Claude had the latent ability to become a Hero, which promised a bright and successful future. On top of that, he had a rather handsome face. He was the perfect man. That is, if you ignored his lecherous tendencies.

"We can go to a restaurant in the dungeon city or take my wyvern and head to a port. I'll escort you wherever you please," he said with a grin, forcibly continuing this topic of conversation. He offset his aggressive approach with his sweet looks. I was sure that many girls fell for this trick.

"Oh, yes. You're a Dragon Knight as well, aren't you?" I said. "Is it safe for me to ride your wyvern as well?"

"Of course, so long as you're with me. It might be scary at first, but once you get used to it, the views are unbeatable. How about it?"

He really didn't let up with the invitations. I supposed I preferred this over meeker men.

"Claude."

"What is it, Teresia?" He smiled at me, as if the idea that I would turn him down had never occurred to him.

"Lately, the student council has received multiple complaints regarding a certain Dragon Knight. He's been flirting with girls from the Swordsmanship Club and the Martial Arts Club, which has a demoralizing effect on the boys in those clubs as well. These complaints are quite a pain in the neck for us, you know?" I said, acting as if I didn't know who I was talking about.

At those words, the smile on Claude's face faded away, leaving behind a blank expression. Then he opened his mouth and said, "Is that so? Must be tough, Teresia."

"It is. It *is* tough. If only that Dragon Knight would smarten up a little, I wouldn't mind going out for a bite once in a while." I glanced up at him through my lashes and saw the smile return to his face, albeit a stiffer one than usual.

"Oh, really? So you like more serious boys?"

"I think most girls prefer the serious type."

"Okay, I got it. I'll head back for today, but I'll see you later, Teresia."

"Next time, make sure you submit your forms *before* the due date!"

He waved at me as he walked away, and I gave him a small wave back. *Good grief.* The other members of the student council were

still raving about Eugene's victory over the Boss. Speaking of Eugene, I'd never heard rumors regarding his love life. He was the complete opposite of Claude. There was the chance that people avoided talking about Eugene's conquests out of consideration for Sara, though. The moment the thought passed through my mind...

"What is the meaning of this ruckus? What is going on?" President Sara came striding up to me.

"President Sara! Eugene just defeated the Boss of the 10th Level."

"Wha—?! You're kidding! He did?!" President Sara dropped her customary elegant manner of speech; this always happened when she talked about Eugene. "Miss Teresia! Explain yourself! What happened?!" She punctuated each word with a violent shake of my shoulders.

"P-President Sara, please calm yourself! Um..." I gave her a quick rundown of what we'd just witnessed on the screen. "And so he defeated the Boss to help the explorers from the Blue Sea Union. It was amazing, really. I'm sure the recording magic saved the footage, so you can watch it for yourself and... President Sara?"

I trailed off halfway through my explanation when I sensed something wrong. President Sara was staring at the screen, her mouth agape. When I followed her line of sight, I saw the new student, Miss Sumire Sashiougi, hugging Eugene. Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks flushed red. *Oh, goodness. I suppose we can't count Eugene out of the love race just yet.*

"Eugene and Miss Sumire are becoming fast frie—" The last word died on my lips.

"How dare she... *My* Eugene..." I'd never heard such a low and furious tone from the levelheaded President Sara before. She sounded like she wanted to curse Miss Sumire to death.

Sh-She's so scary! Despite my unease, I asked, "Er, President Sara?"

She gasped as if she had just realized what she was doing, then smoothed out her expression again, much like Claude had earlier.

"It's nothing," she said. "I'll have to *congratulate* Eugene next time I see him."

She sounded like her usual sophisticated and beautiful self, but I knew the truth. President Sara seemed like a candid and easygoing person, but in truth, she was *very* prone to jealousy. *Oh, Eugene. Good luck.* For his sake, I prayed things didn't get too out of hand. I returned to my work, ready to process the form Claude had handed me earlier.

Chapter Five: Eugene and Sumire Progress Farther

With Sumire's help, I'd defeated the Boss of the 10th Level.

"Thank you! Thank you so much! You saved our count— Urgh..." The captain of the Tormore Kingdom explorers broke down into tears.

"It's no trouble," I said. "I'm just glad I could defeat it."

The captain was a very emotional man. At the Grenflare Empire's military academy, our instructors had taught us to separate our emotions from our actions. As someone who always strove to live up to that lesson, I could never have cried this openly in front of other people. Besides, my father's opinion had been that "Men should never shed tears in front of others!" That old man had always believed in mind over matter.

The Satellite System was broadcasting the fight, which meant that people on the outside could see us as well.

"Eugene, Sumire, we will never forget what you've done for us today. I promise to pay you the reward for saving us from the Boss as well as helping us slay it. Here is a Goddess's Memo."

The comparatively calm vice captain handed me a piece of paper with a signature on it. The memo bore the crest of Althena, the Goddess of Justice, and was an enchanted contract. Those who broke their promise would suffer divine punishment, apparently. Judging by their reaction, though, I doubted that I needed to worry about them skipping out on the reward money.

"Hey, look, Eugene! There's treasure over there!"

"Huh?"

Sumire was pointing at a brown chest. *That's...*

"It dropped some treasure?"

On rare occasions, these spoils appeared after the defeat of a

Boss. I'd never seen it happen before, so my body was thrumming with excitement as I opened up the chest. Inside lay a massive hunk of metal, its surface shining dully.

"What's that?" Sumire asked, cocking her head.

"Hmm, it's probably some kind of magical alloy. I'm not versed in metallurgy, so I can't identify it."

I would've preferred a more obvious prize, like a magical weapon or a jewel. But I supposed this was what I should have expected from the 10th Level. It looked heavy, and we couldn't haul it around with just the two of us, so I supposed we had no choice but to leave it here.

"All right, Sumire. Let's head back to the academy."

"Huh? You don't want to check out the 11th Level?"

"You want to keep exploring?"

"After watching you fight, I'm raring to see what else lies in this dungeon!"

Wow, she's enthusiastic. "You're not tired?" I asked.

"I still haven't fought a single monster," she replied.

Oh yeah, she's right. I hummed in thought. Over the past week, I'd repeatedly gone over what she should do in the event that she came across a monster. However, once we'd actually gotten into the dungeon, I'd been the only one who'd had to fight. Since this was Sumire's first time in Babel, I wanted her to experience a battle firsthand.

"All right, then, let's go check out the 11th Level. Only for a little bit, okay?"

"Okay!"

"W-Wait, are you two heading to the 11th Level?" the vice captain hurriedly asked us when we made for the stairs.

"Yes, that's right," I replied.

"What about the treasure?! And you haven't even stripped the Boss of its materials. I believe they're quite valuable."

"You can have everything."

"R-Really?!"

"Go ahead and take them."

Hauling them around would slow down our progress through the

Last Dungeon, and anyway, I planned on accepting the reward money from the Blue Sea Union explorers, so I was still earning income. *Of course, the biggest prize is learning that I can fight and defeat a Boss.* Granted, the criterion I needed to meet in order to accomplish that was "absorb Ifrit mana."

Nonetheless, this realization was an unfathomably valuable reward. I should have been the one thanking them. In comparison to this newfound knowledge, the heavy magical alloy and the Boss's materials were worth pennies. Letting the Blue Sea Union explorers take them was my way of showing gratitude.

"Y-You've helped us with so much. I don't know how we can ever repay you." Even the vice captain began sobbing. Apparently, he'd just been holding back his emotions this whole time. Was everyone from the Tormore Kingdom prone to tears?

"Ah." At that moment, I remembered what I had borrowed from them. "I'll return this sword to you. Thank you for letting me borrow it."

"Eugene, if you want to use that sword while exploring, I'm happy to give it to you," the vice captain offered.

"Really?!"

"Of course! You defeated the Boss for us as well as giving us the treasure and materials! That's pretty much the only thing we *can* offer you."

I decided not to refuse his offer. "Thank you so much. I'll take care of it." The sword would serve as a souvenir of my victory over the 10th Level Boss. I slid it back into my belt, the weight of it already familiar. "Take care, everyone."

Sumire added her own farewell to the explorers from the Tormore Kingdom. "Be careful on your way out!"

They waved their arms at us, bellowing their goodbyes as they saw us off. I felt a little embarrassed by the attention.

"Thank you! Thank you! We will never forget what you did for us!"

"If you ever have the chance to visit the Blue Sea Union, drop by the Tormore Kingdom!"

"Eugene, Sumire, please keep your guard up!"

“Wargh... Thank you!” The captain was still crying. He wasn’t as bad a person as he seemed at first glance.

“Hey, Eugene! It feels good to help others, doesn’t it?!” Sumire said, grinning as she hugged my arm.

For a second, I felt bashful at the sensation, but then I processed what she’d said. “As an explorer, it’s not good to show kindness to others.”

“Is that so?”

Kindness left openings for others to exploit. Explorers should strive to be more cunning. That was what Lykeion taught us.

“But I agree,” I said. “It’s a pretty good feeling.”

“Right?!”

We were only on the 10th Level, so I doubted anyone was paying attention to us. Everything was fine. And with that, we headed up to the 11th Level.

***

From the 11th Level of the Last Dungeon, Babel, the environment changed. We emerged into a Rainforest Area teeming with trees that towered far above us.

“So this is the 11th Level? Gulp,” Sumire said from next to me. That she actually said the word “Gulp” out loud proved that she was still relaxed about exploration.

“The trees grow wild here, so compared to the 2nd to 9th Levels, it’s far harder to see what’s around you. Stay sharp,” I said, as if this weren’t my first time as well. I only had secondhand knowledge of this place thanks to footage from the Satellite System.

Rustle! Squee-squee-squee-squee! Grr...grr... The sound of shaking leaves and bizarre animal cries reached us from a distance. From the 11th Level, we would start seeing more aggressive and powerful monsters than we had encountered below. The very air was thick with danger. Sumire grabbed my arm, and I pulled her in close, concentrating on our surroundings so I could cast a barrier around us the moment something tried to attack.

What monsters would come at us? We waited in silence.

"Monsters aren't showing up," Sumire commented.

"Yeah," I replied.

We continued to wait, tense and on edge. But in the end, all we ended up doing was standing there in the middle of the dungeon, Sumire pressed against my side.

"Do you want to explore a little?" I asked.

"Okaaay!"

Relaxing, Sumire looked around. Was *I* the one who was too nervous simply because I'd never come up to this area before? No, when it came to dungeon exploration, there was no such thing as being "too careful."

"Hey, Eugene," Sumire said.

"Yeah?"

"It was really cool how you defeated that Boss with a magic sword!"

"Thank you. My father started training me in the sword before I can remember."

"Wow! Actually, I was wondering about something. Why did you have to turn that sword into a magic one? Couldn't you have defeated that monster without borrowing my mana?"

"Oh." I often received questions like this from people who didn't know how to fight with a sword. A normal weapon wouldn't cut it, though. "You've never attacked a monster with a sword, have you?"

"O-Of course not! I've never attacked *anything* before!" She shook her head furiously. Sumire had already told me that the world she came from didn't have any monsters, which meant people didn't use swords or magic on the daily.

"One blow against a monster is all it takes to dull a regular sword. Monster bones, in particular, are so tough that they can damage the blade, and slashing at an Undead with a sword can cause the metal to corrode. Goblins and Orcs wield weapons too, and parrying their attacks can chip away at the sword, causing it to become less sharp over time."

"Oh, I see! That makes sense!"

"Exploration, especially when we're in Babel, usually takes a long time. You won't encounter this on a floor as low as the 11th Level,

but as you proceed through Babel, you might encounter Stampedes, where up to a hundred monsters swarm you at once. An unenchanted sword won't be of much help when you're dealing with that."

"Ah... Does anyone sell swords that are already magical?" Sumire was lobbing question after question at me.

"Of course. There are magic swords that carry a Perma-Enchant spell. Magic or holy swords like that usually have names."

"Why don't you use one of those?"

"Oh, well, that's because..."

As one of the more influential swordsmen in the empire, my father possessed multiple magical weapons. When he'd learned that my only ability was white mana, he had lent me a favorite of his. The moment I channeled my white mana into the weapon, which had a market value of three million gold, it broke and turned into mere junk.

"Don't worry about it," my father had said, but I could never forget that glum look on his face.

Ever since then, I'd stopped pinning my hopes on a magic or holy sword. A magic sword that cost three million gold couldn't handle my white mana, and even more commonplace swords with Perma-Enchant on them were still expensive. I was a mere student; I didn't have the financial luxury of buying and breaking them willy-nilly.

"So that's what happened," Sumire said after I finished explaining. "Hmm? But how come my mana worked fine?"

"That's because you have Ifrit mana. It's special, I'm sure."

"O-Oh? My mana is special?" Sumire, a perplexed expression on her face, looked down at her hands.

I watched her, smiling at her endearing reaction. I had a theory—perhaps what Sumire possessed was actually ether and not mana. Magic users drew the quintessence from the air, refined it into mana, and used that to activate spells. Ether was a more powerful and advanced version of that quintessence. It was said that the Angels from Heaven were the primary users of ether, but I wouldn't be surprised if Ifrits could access it as well.

Anima was a power that was even stronger than ether. However,

I didn't think Ifrits were capable of handling or using that. It was said that only God could wield anima. In any case, my conclusion after spending a week with Sumire was that her mana felt different from a normal person's. I wasn't a professional, though, so I couldn't identify it with any accuracy.

I'll ask Headmaster Uther about it the next time I see him. He would probably delight in giving me an answer. The problem was that he was so busy I had no idea if I could ever get a meeting with him. I was still thinking about his schedule when a small humanoid monster with green skin emerged from the undergrowth.

"Gyah! Gyah!" it growled.

"Sumire, a Goblin!" I warned her.

"*That's* a Goblin?!" she shrieked.

The Goblin was holding something like a rusty hand axe. While the monsters from the 2nd to 9th Level were mostly bestial, the ones from the 11th Level onward had intelligence, which meant they could use weapons or attack in organized packs. We had to be careful. I stood in front of Sumire to protect her.

"Gyah! Gyah! Gyah!" the Goblin yelled, baring its teeth at me in a show of intimidation.

Goblins are pack hunters. If there's one in front of me, I should assume there are around ten more hiding in the area. This was basic knowledge for dungeon explorers. I didn't jump to attack the Goblin and instead paid attention to my surroundings. The Goblin didn't attack either. It simply tried to scare us.

"Eugene?"

"Sumire, don't let your guard down."

"R-Right."

After a while, I heard a rustle in the bushes, and five more Goblins emerged. Though I'd expected them to be hiding nearby, I hadn't thought there would be this few. They had probably been waiting for Sumire and me to move apart, but since neither of us had taken a single step, they had lost patience and revealed themselves.

I swapped places with Sumire so that I was the one facing the five Goblins. Sumire would have to deal with the one behind us.

"Sumire, I'm going to borrow some of your red mana," I told her. "I'll defeat them, so just focus on defending yourself against any that attack you!"

"Okay!"

I held Sumire's hand in mine. *Mana Link!* Her magic flowed into me.

"Magic Sword: Flameblade!" My sword shone with a crimson light. *Good. Now I can cut down those Goblins!*

"Hee hee, I'll finally make my debut as a real dungeon explorer! I'll defend myself. I'll *super* defend myself!"

Sumire was fired up. She held aloft the shield we'd gotten at the academy, and in response to her emotions, her red mana flared. As if resonating with her magic, the air trembled and the earth shook.

Oh? The shield in Sumire's hand was turning red, and with a sizzling noise, the ground under her caught fire. *Hmm? I see a pattern in the scorched earth. Is that a magic circle? I don't believe Sumire capable of drawing something this complex when she only just started learning the basics of magic.*

"All right, come at me!" Sumire yelled. At her cry, a massive pillar of fire erupted from her body.

"Huh?!" *Wh-What the—?!*

"Hmm?" Sumire didn't notice what she had just done. The next moment, the pillar burst apart, the fire flying in all directions and triggering explosions wherever it landed.

Wait, that's Firestorm, a high-tier fire spell! It required insane power, rivaling that of a court mage's.

"Gyaaahhhh!" The dying screams of the Goblins echoed through the air.

"Eh? What? Huuuh?" Sumire finally noticed the inferno raging around her body. By the time the fire died out, the Goblins had already been reduced to charcoal. The two of us stood in awkward silence until Sumire broke it with a loud cry. "Wh-What did I *do*?!"

That's my *question!* It seemed that once Sumire's emotions reached a boiling point, she subconsciously cast high-tier magic. Now that I thought about it, when we first met, she'd accidentally turned the 5th Level into a sea of fire. *Trying to figure her out is*

useless. I'd thought I understood her powers, but I was still in the dark. Everything she did was beyond my expectations. However, there was one positive I could see about the overwhelming situation.

"I'm glad your clothes are all right, Sumire," I said.

"Huh? Oh! Are these clothes fireproof?"

"There's an unlimited budget for equipping reincarnators, so you're wearing the best money can buy." And I was glad for that, even though this was only her first exploration. It would have been terrible if she'd lost all her clothes here.

"E-Eugene, are you all right? I didn't burn *you*, did I?"

"I'm fine. My Barrier Magic is always active."

I'd defended myself against Sumire's flames during our first meeting as well. Had anyone else been her partner, they might have been in danger, though. Didn't that mean there were only a handful of people with whom Sumire could form a viable party?

Having come to the same realization, she and I stared at each other. Maybe it was a trick of my mind, but even the red light emanating from my magic sword seemed unsure of what to do. Since I hadn't needed to use it, I dispelled the mana, and the color of the blade returned to its normal silver.

"Congratulations on your first monster kill in a dungeon," I said.

"R-Right."

My words sounded empty even to me, and Sumire didn't seem like she felt any sense of accomplishment. Just in case, I made sure Sumire's magic hadn't caused yet another fire, but Firestorm had only been active for a short period of time, so it hadn't gone out of control.

"Let's go," I said.

"Okay..."

We pressed on. Though small monsters like Goblins and Kobolds appeared, we got rid of them without any trouble. Then, after walking around for a bit, we discovered the stairs to the 12th Level. *We should stop here.*

I told Sumire that we should probably head back, and she agreed with me. She'd made amazing progress through the dungeon for her first time. There was no merit in trying to go any higher. Instead of

ascending to the 12th Level, we chose to return to the Dungeon Elevator.

Carefully, we made our way through the Rainforest Area. The giant pillar of the Dungeon Elevator stuck out and was easy to recognize. A barrier around it barred any monsters from approaching, so the immediate vicinity was safe, and it was here that we were likeliest to run into other explorers. The door to the elevator was slowly coming into sight when I noticed something.

Hmm? Before us was a group of almost twenty explorers. As their clothing all bore the Lykeion Magic Academy emblem, they were students from our school. They had pitched several tents and were cooking over a fire. I guessed they wanted to spend the night at this camp. Some of them noticed us and looked up. Sumire and I gave them quick nods of acknowledgment as we passed them, but...

"Huh? Hey, you two go to our school, right? Heeey!"

A girl who was sitting at the campsite rose and approached us.

◊ Sumire's POV ◊

"Hello! You're Eugene from the Biology Club, right?" a female student said to Eugene. She had a slender frame, and she moved quickly and lightly. Her large, almond-shaped eyes reminded me of a cat's. "My name is Leona Bianchi, and I'm a member of the Martial Arts Club. Nice to meet you!"

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Eugene Santafield. How did you know my name?"

"*Everyone* knows you! You're Headmaster Uther's favorite," Miss Leona giggled. I'd assumed she only knew about Eugene, but it turned out she knew me as well. "The one next to you is the girl who came from another world, right?"

"Y-Yes! My name is Sumire Sashiougi! I'm pleased to meet you!" I quickly lowered my head in a bow.

"Are you two heading back?" Miss Leona asked.

"Yeah, we're done exploring," Eugene said.

"Then why don't you join us for dinner?"

At the word "dinner," my stomach began to growl as if on cue, and I realized that there was a delicious smell in the air.

Eugene hummed in thought and gave me a curious look. "What

do you think?”

“I’m fine with that!” I said.

She had gone out of her way to invite us, and I might make a new friend. Miss Leona seemed easy to talk to.

“All right. We’ll take you up on your offer. Um, how much do you __”

The moment Eugene started talking about money, Miss Leona laughed, her voice loud and clear. “No worries! We always make too much and have tons of leftovers. Don’t hold back—dig in!”

Miss Leona’s such a friendly person.

She guided us to our “seats,” which were just sheets of fabric, similar to picnic blankets, which the club had laid out on the ground. The person who had been stirring something in a giant pot handed me and Eugene some bread and bowls of thick soup. The aroma that filled my nostrils was fragrant, spicy, and somehow nostalgic. *Wait, is this...?*

“Go ahead! Eat up!”

“Th-Thank you for the food!”

At Miss Leona’s urging, I spooned up some soup and carefully placed it into my mouth. I sucked in a breath at the flavor that hit my tongue. *Th-This is...?!*

“It’s good,” Eugene said.

“Isn’t it? There’s tons, so feel free to have as much as you want,” Miss Leona said.

As I listened to their conversation, I shoveled more and more of the soup into my mouth. After I finished, I let out a satisfied sigh.

“Wow, Sumire, you eat so fast!” Miss Leona’s eyes widened.

There was something I absolutely needed to ask her. “What’s the name of this soup?”

“Um, it’s called curry and— Oh! Right!”

“Yeah! It’s something from our world!”

The taste was so familiar I wanted to cry. I’d been living in this world for a while now, and it was my first time eating something from home. According to Miss Leona, a past reincarnator had popularized the dish after arriving here. *Right, I’m not the only reincarnator. There were others before me, and they introduced*

curry to this place. I wonder what country they came from?

"Eat as much as you can, okay?" Miss Leona said.

"Thank you!"

Now that I thought about it, maybe I was a little unsightly inhaling all that food in front of Eugene. As we ate, he chatted with Miss Leona and they exchanged information on the dungeon. Right when it was about time for us to take our leave, Miss Leona smiled and made a suggestion.

"Would you like to join our camp?"

"Is it okay to invite outsiders? Aren't you in the middle of dungeon exploring?" Eugene asked, looking bewildered. He'd told me that dungeon exploration teams were basically all rivals; they usually weren't so friendly to each other.

"We're part of the third string, so our goal is to help the new club members get used to the dungeon and gain experience. The first string, who are aiming for the 200th Level, are way intense," Miss Leona explained with a shrug.

Wow, first string and third string? That means these people aren't part of the regular lineup. This really is like a club activity to them.

"I see," Eugene said. "Sumire, what do you think?"

"I'd like to chat with everyone some more!"

"Then we'll take you up on your offer."

"Okaaay! I'll introduce you to the other members! To tell you the truth, a lot of us have been dying to speak with you, Miss Sumire the Reincarnator!"

With that, Miss Leona rushed off to the others. Meanwhile, Eugene gave me a rundown of the Martial Arts Club, which he said was one of the biggest and most popular clubs in the school. They were a group of individualists, each aiming to perfect their own unique fighting techniques. Many of them were oddballs, but there were a lot of friendly people as well. I could see what he meant after our conversation with the amiable Miss Leona.

He also told me about some of the other famous clubs at the school. The Swordsmanship Club was the largest combat-oriented club as well as the strongest when it came to dungeon exploration. Magic-focused clubs existed as well, but there wasn't a single large

club; instead, there were many small clubs separated by element, with bitter rivalries between them.

"The Fire Magic Research Club will definitely want to scout you, Sumire," was Eugene's guess—apparently because I was an Ifrit.

Hmm, I wonder what I should do if they really invite me to join them. The last thing I want is to get involved in some rivalry.

Eugene also mentioned that the Student Club Task Force took itself very seriously. That reminded me of the time when members of the Student Club had tried to pick a fight with Eugene. It must've been full of terrible people.

After a while, Miss Leona returned with several new members of the Martial Arts Club in tow, and we all chatted for a while. When I talked about the world I'd come from, they listened to me with awe on their faces. *It's not as if I have anything interesting to tell them, though.*

But apparently, to them, just being able to speak with an otherworlder was a valuable experience. We talked about lots of different things until Miss Leona invited me to take a bath with her. Meanwhile, Eugene accepted a training invitation from some other members of the Martial Arts Club.

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"Phew, that was refreshing!" I exhaled.

"Hee hee, how did you like our magical open-air bath? It's the pride and joy of the Martial Arts Club!"

Yes, Miss Leona didn't stutter, and you didn't mishear! To my surprise, they had set up an authentic open-air bath! This otherworld was on a whole different level.

"What an amazing magical item!" I said. "Is it the Martial Arts Club's?"

"Yep! It was really expensive, but we all pitched in with the money we earned from dungeon exploring. Nothing more important than a nice bath, after all."

"I totally get you!"

Miss Leona and I, steam still wafting from our bodies, returned to

Eugene and the others. He was training with the boys from the Martial Arts Club. While the club members were bare-handed, Eugene was wielding a wooden sword. To all appearances, Eugene had an advantage thanks to his weapon. In action, though, he wasn't pressing the attack, just parrying and dodging them without breaking a sweat. The boys were chatting as they practiced.

"Your swordsmanship is amazing. I heard you hail from the empire, but what school did you learn?"

"It's the Niten Enmei-ryu, a style from the Eastern Continent. That's where my old man's from."

"Cool! So this is a foreign style."

"No one from the Swordsmanship Club has ever learned an Eastern style of swordplay, so this is great training."

"All right, let's go another round!"

"I don't mind, but is it really okay for me to be the only one with a sword?"

"Yeah, this is great. It helps us practice for our upcoming match against the Swordsmanship Club!"

"Next time, we'll get those sword-swinging bastards! Right, guys?!"

"Yeah!"

Apparently, the boys from the Martial Arts Club were taking advantage of the opportunity to practice against Eugene, a swordsman. They were really excited about this. *I heard they spent the entire day dungeon exploring, so I'm impressed they still have this much energy.*

After sparring, Eugene and the boys went to wash off their sweat at a nearby waterfall. According to them, there was a small spring they could bathe in, but wouldn't it be cold? Miss Leona and I chatted with the other girls in the Martial Arts Club as we waited for the boys to return, which didn't take long.

"Welcome back, Eugene!" I said, greeting him with a wave.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, Sumire," he said.

It had gotten dark. They told me that this was "nighttime" in the dungeon.

"There's nighttime inside a building?!" I'd exclaimed, shocked, but

they had told me to abandon my common sense and logic. Babel was a dungeon that God had created, so normal rules didn't apply to it. It had its own ecosystem, and its monsters had their own lives to lead. That was why, like the world outside, Babel had a day and night cycle. The darkness of night was making me drowsy.

"Oh, yeah. Where are you two gonna sleep? Eugene, are you gonna sleep in the same tent as the other boys while Miss Sumire sleeps in ours?" Miss Leona asked.

That was my plan, so I was about to nod, but Eugene spoke up before I could.

"Nah. I have my own tent, so I'll sleep in that."

"Huh?! Eugene, you brought a tent?!" I cried. "We weren't planning on spending the night in here, though."

"I always bring a tent when I'm dungeon exploring. Sometimes, the wait for the Dungeon Elevator can eat up half your day."

I couldn't believe that Eugene was so well prepared that he could spend the night on a whim like this.

"Hey, hey, show me your tent!" I said.

"Sure," he replied.

Eugene extracted his tent from his exploration bag. It must have been a magical tent, since it started out small and, in the blink of an eye, grew so large that it could fit four people inside. It looked quite sturdy too.

"Whoa, that's an Autumn Peak brand, right?! I'm sooo jealous," Miss Leona said, giving Eugene and his tent an envious look. Apparently, even this otherworld had name brands for outdoor equipment.

"In any case, I'll sleep in here, so don't worry about me. Sumire, you and Leona should—"

"Hey, Eugene, how many people can your tent fit?" I interrupted him.

"Hmm? It's for four people."

"Then I'll sleep in there too! I was feeling guilty about squeezing in with Miss Leona and the others."

"Huh?!"

At my words, both Eugene and Miss Leona reacted with palpable

surprise. I hadn't said anything weird, though, had I? I was in Eugene's party, so I figured the sensible thing to do was stick together.

"You're fine with that, right, Eugene?" I asked.

"W-Well, I am if you are," he mumbled.

"Uh... Oh! You two are like *that*, huh? Ah ha ha, sorry to have bothered you!" Miss Leona ran off, her face red.

Hmm? I wonder what's wrong?

"A-All right, it's time to sleep, Sumire."

"Okay!"

Eugene was acting strangely too. He was usually so calm, but now it was like he couldn't settle down.

Wait, huh? That was when I finally realized why Miss Leona had been blushing earlier. Now that I thought about it, sleeping in the same tent meant... *AAAAHHH!!! WHY THE HECK DID I SAY THAT?!*

◊ Eugene's POV ◊

I can't relax.

Sumire was lying down, a thin blanket over her body, and close enough that I could touch her if I reached out. She was so beautiful that she could have passed for the princess of some distant country, and she looked even more alluring than usual after her bath. Since she hadn't brought any pajamas, a girl from the Martial Arts Club had lent her some. The thin shirt accentuated her curves.

"Oh? You plan on making a move? Even though you have me*?"* Eri's voice echoed in my head for some reason.

Damn you, fallen Angel! Stop showing up in my impure thoughts! I shook my head as if to dislodge them all from my brain.

"Eugene?" Sumire called out to me.

"Y-Yeah?" I replied, my voice higher than usual. I waited for Sumire to continue, willing my racing heart to slow down.

"Do you have any siblings?"

She just wanted to know about my family.



"No. I'm an only child."

"Oh? I had a younger sister in my past life."

"Is that so?"

"I don't remember much about her, though, and I can't recall my friends' faces at *all*." Sumire didn't have any family now, and she didn't have many friends. She had been chatting with the Martial Arts Club girls earlier, but the loneliness of that realization must have hit her now that she was alone. "Can you tell me some stories from your childhood?"

"Mine? I don't mind sharing some, if you're interested."

Sumire had once told me she liked to hear other people's stories because she didn't have any memories of her own. I decided to tell her more about myself if it would help her.

"I was born on the Eastern Continent," I started.

"Huh?! I didn't know that you weren't born here."

"I was brought here as a baby, so I remember nothing about the Eastern Continent."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a long story, but..." And with that, I jumped into my tale.

***

My grandfather and father were swordsmen who, to uphold the family legacy, served a small country on the Eastern Continent. My old man married my mom when he was eighteen, but she died soon after she gave birth to me.

The numerous countries of the Eastern Continent were in a perpetual state of conflict, and wars broke out frequently. When the country we served was devastated in a massive war, my family, including my grandfather, scattered to various parts of the world. My father took me and fled to the Southern Continent. That's where my memories start.

To raise me, my father traveled the Southern Continent in search of work. He eventually came across a dragon attacking the then crown prince—now the emperor—on a hunting trip. With only a sword as his weapon, my old man saved the prince, who was so

taken by my father's swordsmanship skills that he hired him on the spot as his bodyguard. I don't know how much money the prince offered, but I hear it was a hundred times what my dad had been earning as a mercenary.

And with that, my father, now working for the imperial palace, settled down in the empire. Today, he's the Imperial Sword, the emperor's right-hand man. He's still single, by the way. He hasn't remarried. I hear that he's received hundreds of proposals and offers of arranged marriages, but he's turned them all down, including arrangements suggested by the emperor.

Once, I asked him, "Why won't you remarry?"

He just said, "Because I still have your mother."

Ever since I heard that answer, I've avoided bringing up the topic. After my dad became the emperor's bodyguard, I started attending the empire's military academy and living in the dorms there. That was where I met Airi, my childhood friend. Her full name is Airi Areus Grenflare, the seventh princess of the Grenflare Empire. My first impression was of a snobby girl.

"Hey! I hear you're a good swordsman. Duel me!" she ordered me. At the time, she was the first in our grade when it came to swordsmanship.

"I don't mind."

My father had started teaching me how to handle a sword when I was four years old, but this would be my first time sparring against someone my age. I ended up completely annihilating her.

"H-How?!" she cried after my victory. "I d-didn't even *scratch* him!"

I remember feeling a strong sense of guilt when I saw the tears welling up in the princess's eyes.

"Princess Airi, this is our twentieth match, so can we call it a day?"

"One more time! This'll be our last match!"

In the end, Airi forced me to spar her fifty times before her endurance ran out.

From that day forth, her challenges became part of my daily routine.

"Eu! Let's duel! I'm gonna win this time!"

"Another one? I have to study for my tactics exam."

"I'll help you with that! Just fight me!"

"Fine, fine."

I taught her techniques from the Enmei-ryu, and Airi absorbed them like a sponge, improving by leaps and bounds. In return, she helped me with my studies. She'd received a first-rate education since youth. Back then, I could only really read and write. Without Airi's tutoring, I couldn't have kept up with the advanced lessons the military academy offered. Before long, we became rivals competing to become the best in our year.

***

Those were the days. Emotions threatened to overwhelm me. My chest always felt uncomfortably tight when I spoke about Airi, but I'd recovered enough to share my past with Sumire. I went on to tell her about the military academy's Selection Exam, and how I couldn't become a Magic Swordsman like my father. Then I told her how I came to study at Lykeion Magic Academy.

"And that's my story. My father told me that graduating from Lykeion Magic Academy will guarantee me a job in the empire, and he doesn't mind if I stay in the dungeon city as long as I like it here." I'd ended up speaking for a lot longer than I'd expected. Had I spun an entertaining yarn? Worried, I looked over at Sumire, who was staring right back at me. "Is something the matter?"

"I can't believe that Airi girl! How could she say that when you were suffering?!"

Apparently, she was furious at Airi.

"I don't blame her. Airi's a princess. Her status doesn't afford her the freedom of staying with someone as inept as me."

"I can't accept that!"

Sumire was a nice girl. She wasn't afraid to show her emotions. In contrast, I was always suppressing mine. I smiled at her, and she gave me a look like she wanted to say more.

"Sumire?"

"Hey, Eugene. You once told me that breaking an exploration record in the Last Dungeon is a great honor, right?"

"Yeah. It's the goal of all explorers on the Southern Continent."

"I'm sure you could set an amazing record. You defeated the Boss of the 10th Level all by yourself today, after all."

"Mm, I'm not sure I can take all the credit. I only managed that because I borrowed your mana." It was definitely not by my power alone.

"But you're my guardian! If we explore together, then we can definitely reach the 50th...no, the 100th Level, right?!"

"I think we can reach the 50th Level. The 100th is beyond us, though."

"Why?"

"The Boss on the 100th Level is special. As a living creature, it's a completely different beast from the monsters up to the 99th Level."

"Huh? Is that so?"

Sumire's expression twisted in confusion at my explanation. I would have to give her more details about it at a later date. Yes, we had passed the 10th Level. Until today, I had been a D-rank explorer because I'd never challenged a Boss before. But now that I had defeated one, my rank had risen to C. Aiming for a higher floor wasn't out of the question. *Well, it'll be a long while before we have to worry about the 100th Level.*

"We chatted for much longer than I expected. Sumire, we should get some sleep."

"All right." Sumire said nothing after that.

I closed my eyes as well. Silence reigned in the tent for a while until Sumire broke it again.

"Eugene?"

"What is it?"

"I'm thinking of joining your club."

"The Biology Club?"

"Yeah."

It took me a moment before I replied, "I see."

"You're against it?"

"That's not it."

I just felt that, as a reincarnator from another world, Sumire could find far more suitable clubs to join. But if that was her own decision, I had no reason to oppose it. The only thing I was worried about was...

I have to introduce them *to Sumire?* Including me, the Biology Club was a small group of only five members. But every single one of them was, without exception, extremely *weird*. I just hoped Sumire didn't freak out.

"Yay, it's a promise! Good night!" Sumire faced away from me, and her breathing slowed down in sleep.

I closed my eyes as well and let my consciousness fade. I must have been more tired than I realized, because I fell asleep within seconds.

***

The next morning, I was organizing my supplies when the sound of something clanging against metal shattered the still air.

"Good morning! Rise and shine!"

I peeked outside our tent to see Leona banging a pot with a ladle.

"Hey, Sumire. Wake up!"

"Mm, five more minutes..." Sumire was still half asleep.

Apparently, she was the type to sleep in. It took a few more attempts to wake her up. Seeing a girl's face slack in sleep had made me feel a little shy. After she rose, we ate a breakfast of canned food in our tent. We'd just finished when Leona burst in.

"Hey, Eugene, are you heading back today?" she asked.

Sumire and I exchanged looks before I replied, "I don't really have a preference between staying or leaving."

"I'd like to chat with Miss Leona and the others some more!" Sumire said.

"Same here! Let's explore together, then!"

Thus, with Sumire's consent, we were roped into a joint exploration with the Martial Arts Club. They were really a friendly bunch. I hurriedly stowed away my tent.

"All right! Let's move out!" At Leona's announcement, we set off.

The journey through the dungeon was surprisingly smooth.

"An Orc!"

"Heck yeah!"

"Surround it!"

"It's too slow!"

"And its attacks barely do any damage!"

"GRAAAAH?!"

Even when monsters appeared, the aggressive members of the Martial Arts Club defeated them within seconds.

Are these guys really the third-string members? The sheer number of teams within the Martial Arts Club surprised me.

"This is how you throw a straight punch, Sumire."

"L-Like this?"

"Yeah, exactly! Nicely done! And here's how to do a kick."

"Oh, wow!"

As we moved through the dungeon, Sumire was learning some martial arts from Leona.

"You're doing so well, Sumire! What do you think about joining our club?"

They were even scouting her. Her popularity was as otherworldly as she was.

"I a-actually plan on joining Eugene's club."

"The Biology Club? You can join more than one club, you know? Just think about it!"

"O-Okay! I will."

I honestly thought it would be better for her to join the popular Martial Arts Club rather than the much more minor Biology Club. But this was Sumire's decision, so I held my tongue.

"Eugene! Someone got hurt!"

"Here—Heal."

I used my magic to heal a Martial Arts Club member who'd been hurt while fighting off a monster. No one was seriously injured. At worst, they'd only suffered bruises and cuts.

"Whoa, that's crazy! I've never seen a Healer close a wound that quickly!"

"Eugene, you're amazing! Wanna be our club Healer?"

"Hey, you can't scout him! He's the vice president of the Biology Club, remember?"

"I know that, Captain Leona!"

So they were trying to scout me too. I'd never explored a dungeon with such a large group before, nor had anyone ever relied on me so heavily. *It's not a bad feeling.* I had to thank Sumire for deciding she wanted to tag along with the Martial Arts Club.

The exploration proceeded smoothly. Getting past the 11th Level was a given, but we also cleared the 12th with no issues. Once we reached the 13th Level, we took a break. Then, on the 14th, we experienced a brief scare from a band of Kobolds, but we defeated them without anyone getting hurt. There was a higher level Kobold among the horde, though, and it targeted Sumire.

Sumire fell backward with a shrill scream when the Kobold jumped at her. At the same time, she activated Firestorm, reducing it into charcoal. It had picked the wrong person to attack. The members of the Martial Arts Club, whom I'd warned multiple times to keep their distance from Sumire in battle, were all left speechless at the burst of magic.

Whew, that was a close one. Of course, I had cast a barrier to protect us from Sumire's flames. Leona, the captain of the third-string members, had a strained look on her face after seeing the danger. Despite that mishap, though, we made it to the 15th Level.

"Let's camp here!" Leona called to everyone.

Tonight, they served meat and vegetables they'd grilled on an iron plate.

"Yay, it's a barbecue!" Sumire cheered.

A barbecue? I'd never heard that word before. Perhaps, like the curry, this was a dish they had in Sumire's world? This "barbecue" was a meal I would've never eaten on a solo exploration. It was simple yet delicious. Though we were eating the Martial Arts Club's food, no one asked us to cough up any money. I supposed healing them with my magic was payment enough in their eyes. Since I'd only had to deal with minor wounds, though, I felt guilty about mooching off of them.

"Sumire, let's go take a bath!"

"Yeah, come on! ♪"

"Your skin is *so* smooth, Sumire!"

"What's your routine?"

Sumire had befriended the girls of the Martial Arts Club. *Actually, wait, are we gonna camp together tonight too?* I hadn't expected Sumire to spend two whole nights in the dungeon on her first exploration. I'd known it for a while, but her potential was really off the charts.

Will Sumire stay in my tent tonight? I wondered as I set it up. The very thought was making it hard to concentrate. *I don't think it's good for a young man and woman to spend the night in a cramped tent together, but hmm...* As I was fretting about that, someone approached me.

"Eugene, thank you for your hard work today."

"Leona, sorry, and thank you for letting us crash your exploration for two days now."

"What are you talking about? You're the reason we still have an ample supply of medicine, so really, we should be thanking *you*," she replied, drawing closer with a smile. She narrowed her eyes and leaned down to whisper into my ear, "Someone who joined up with us today told me an interesting piece of gossip."

If she was whispering to me, she must not have wanted the others to overhear us. I asked in a lower voice, "What?"

"Did you really defeat the Boss of the 10th Level all by yourself?"

I thought about it for a bit. But there was no point in trying to hide it. Someone must have seen the broadcast through the Satellite System. "Yeah, pretty much."

At my words, Leona widened her eyes. "Holy crap! No wonder the headmaster likes you so much!"

"Nah, I just got lucky. I only defeated it because I was able to borrow Sumire's Ifrit mana."

"Yeah, but still, most people can't do such a thing! In that case, Eugene, I have a favor to ask." Leona's voice turned serious. Whatever she wanted to ask must have been the real reason she'd approached me. "It's about this exploration. Could you stick with us

until the end of it? I can't get enough budget to pay you for an official collaboration between our teams, though, so it would have to be, like, two teams moving in the same direction. Pretty much what we're doing right now."

She lowered her head with a guilty look in her eye. Unlike the official request for assistance the Blue Sea Union explorers had made on the 10th Level, this would be off the record. However, the Martial Arts Club had helped us progress farther than we could have on our own and shared their food with us. I, too, had been feeling guilty about how I hadn't repaid them for all that.

"Sure. I'll have to discuss it with Sumire, though."

"Really?! Hooray!" Leona threw her arms up in celebration.

I wasn't too worried about Sumire turning down the request. She was getting along with the Martial Arts Club girls, so I figured she would agree.

"By the way," I said, finally broaching a subject I'd been curious about for a while, "what floor are you aiming for?"

I had an inkling as to what the answer was, though. Judging by their skills, they were probably trying to get to— "We're hoping to defeat the Boss of the 20th Level."

Leona's answer was exactly as I'd predicted.

Chapter Six: Eugene Aims for the 20th Level

Leona's revelation of their group's goal—to defeat the Boss of the 20th Level—didn't surprise me. In fact...

"Won't that be a walk in the park for you guys?"

That was my honest opinion. I knew for myself, after sparring with the Martial Arts Club members, that they were all well trained. I felt bad for thinking this, but they were leagues above the Blue Sea Union explorers I'd met on the 10th Level.

"Yeah, I don't think we'll have a problem either," Leona replied, not bothering with false modesty. I'd heard that the third-string members of the Martial Arts Club had reached the 19th Level many times in the past, which explained why the trip up here had gone so smoothly; it was akin to a review trip to let them get in some more fighting practice and experience. "The thing is...I'm worried about something."

"Hmm? What is it?" I asked.

"Eugene, have you heard the rumors? About how the Bosses have been weirdly powerful lately?"

"No. This is my first time hearing about it."

To be fair, until my meeting with Sumire, I'd never expected to fight against a Boss. Since I'd never planned to explore the floors above the 10th Level, I'd slacked off on gathering information about them.

"They say that the difficulty settings within Babel have been messed up as of late," Leona said. "That Troll you fought is proof of that. In the past, there's no way you would have run into a large black monster on the 10th Level. Something like that would've been standing guard on the 20th or 30th Level, at the very lowest."

"Is that so?"

That had been my first time fighting a Boss, so I hadn't noticed anything strange. I'd watched other explorers face off against Bosses through the Satellite System, and my first thought after actually fighting one myself had been, "Oh, okay, so this is about how strong a Boss is." This was when I finally clued in on what Leona's worries were.

"So that's why you wanted my help. You were worried about relying on healing items, so you wanted me with my white mana to tag along."

"Bingo! And in case of an emergency, we can always have you defeat it for us, right?" Leona winked.

"I won't steal the Martial Arts Club's prey. What's the current Boss of the 20th Level again?"

"A Goblin King."

I nodded at the reminder. A few days ago, I'd watched on the Satellite System as a group of explorers challenged it, only for their efforts to end in failure. Unless another group had defeated it between then and now, the Boss should still be the Goblin King.

Unlike the Troll on the 10th Level, the Goblin King was the type of Boss that commanded a group of enemies. Goblins weren't too powerful on their own, and the Goblin King itself would be on the same level as, or maybe even weaker than, the Troll on the 10th Level. The problem with the Goblins wasn't their individual strength but rather their teamwork and sheer numbers. Still, if the Martial Arts Club members worked together at peak strength, they should be able to defeat the King, albeit with some effort. It would serve as a great learning experience for Sumire too.

"All right, I got it. Leave the support to me," I said.

"Thank you, Eugene! You're a lifesaver." Leona squeezed my hands tight.

"R-Right."

The members of the Martial Arts Club didn't hesitate to dish out the physical affection. When I went to wash off with the boys, they would also touch me while saying things like, "Eugene, you're so buff!" or "Hey, what's your training regimen?" Did this obsession with physique stem from their involvement with the club?

I figured Leona would leave now that she'd made her request, but even after she released my hands, she was standing before me, looking around awkwardly. Then she asked, "By the way, I hear that you're pals with Claude from the Hero Course. Is that true?"

"Claude? Yeah, I take care of his wyvern as part of my duties in the Biology Club, and I've joined his party on expeditions as a last-minute member." I didn't understand why Leona was bringing this up out of nowhere.

"Oh, wow, really?"

"Why are you asking about him?"

"Mm... Actually, no, it's nothing!"

"Uh, okay?"

And now I was left with no idea of what she wanted to ask.

"Good night and see you tomorrow!"

With that, Leona left and, as if she had been waiting outside, Sumire entered. She must have just come out of the bath, since steam was rising from her body.

"When Miss Leona passed me, she told me she'd be counting on me tomorrow as well."

"Yeah, Leona and the Martial Arts Club plan on getting past the 20th Level, and they want us to help them."

"Oh? Did you say you would?"

"Only if you're okay with it."

"Of course I am! I've made so many new friends!"

The words brought a smile to my face. Sumire was a cheery and kindhearted girl. When she first arrived here, her expression had always been clouded over with confusion and fear, but lately, I only ever saw her enjoying herself. I was glad the Martial Arts Club had invited us on their trip.

"We have to prepare for tomorrow's exploration, then!" Sumire said.

"Yeah, you should retire early tonight."

"You're not going to sleep yet?"

"I want to get in some practice with my sword." As I said that, I drew the sword that explorers from the Blue Sea Union had given me.

I didn't get to use this at all today. That being the case, I would have to make up for it with tonight's training session. I slowly held the sword in the Niten Enmei-ryu stance. Usually, I swung with a wooden sword during practice, but the weight of a real sword was far more comforting.

Hmm? I looked up when I felt eyes on me. Sumire was watching me, resting her head against her hand.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"May I watch you?" she asked.

"Go ahead," I replied with a wry smile.

I have an audience, huh? Simply swinging a sword would bore her, so I looked around. Since we were in the Rainforest Area, we were surrounded by trees. Among them, I noticed one that was on the verge of dying. Fat chunks had been torn out of its base, as if something had been gnawing on it, and its only remaining leaves were all dried up, barely clinging to its branches.

This is a good one. I went up to it and slammed the palm of my hand against the trunk. The tree shook from the impact, and leaves fluttered down from the branches. *There're about twenty of them,* I guessed at a glance as I held my sword at the ready. *The move to use here is...*

Niten Enmei-ryu: Wind Stance: Air Sickle. It was a dance-like technique that sliced up everything around the swordsman, making it useful when one was surrounded by enemies. I slashed through the leaves with precise swings before looking over to Sumire in a wordless "How was that?" I figured she'd be impressed by my moves, but she was just staring at me, mouth agape and eyes wide.

"Sumire?"

"E-Eugene..."

"What'd you think of that?"

"D-Did you just cut all the leaves *before they even reached the ground*?!"

"Yeah, but I'm out of practice. Missed a few. If my old man saw that pathetic display, he'd really give me an earful."

"W-Wow! You're so amazing that I don't even know what to say, but, Eugene, you're just incredible! Hey, what else can you do?!"

"Hmm. All right, I'll show you this."

In a good mood from Sumire's unguarded praise, I decided to show off the various techniques of the Niten Enmei-ryu school of swordsmanship. It had been a long time since I'd done this. Sumire was so loud with her compliments that the members of the Martial Arts Club, curious at the noise, all gathered around us, and I ended up having to demonstrate my attacks for them too.

In the end, we all went to sleep at a late hour. A day like this wasn't so bad once in a while, though.

◊ The Next Morning ◊

We set out for the 15th Level. Thanks to the magic of Babel, the stairs leading upward changed locations every day; that was why we didn't bother looking for them the night previous. It would've just been a waste of time. The experienced members of the Martial Arts Club had reached the 19th Level in the past, though, so it didn't take us long to find the stairs up to the 16th.

That was when a group of Goblins attacked us. A Hobgoblin, a more powerful strain of Goblin, led them. I was about to borrow some of Sumire's Ifrit mana to help fend them off, but the Martial Arts Club members defeated them all before I had the chance.

"Aw, man. Too bad, Eugene," Sumire said.

"Well, nothing we can do about that," I replied with a shrug.

On the 17th Level, we ran into a group of Orcs but defeated them without issue as well. After the fight, we took a break near the Dungeon Elevator. Other members of the Martial Arts Club came to meet us there, holding more food in their hands. They didn't hesitate to share some with Sumire and me. We ate a meal of meat, vegetables, and fried fish in between slices of bread and covered in a flavorful sauce.

"Wow, sandwiches!" Sumire said with a joyful look. Apparently, this was a familiar meal to her.

I enjoy this a lot too, actually. Maybe I should make them myself next time. After lunch, we continued our exploration.

On the 18th Level, a troop of Kobolds attacked us. Since they used weapons like spears and bows, which allowed them to attack enemies from a distance, the Martial Arts Club members, with their

shorter reach, had some trouble fighting them. I continued to act as a Healer, though no one received any serious injuries.

It took us about an hour more to reach the 19th Level. As Healer, I mostly hung out near the rear of the party with Sumire. Truthfully, I was rather bored.

"Looks like I won't be needed this time either," I said.

"Ah, sorry about that, Eugene. But safety first, right? Thanks to you being here, we don't have to be wary of cutting loose," Leona said. She must have felt bad, since she had been the one to extend the invitation.

"We're really making smooth progress," Sumire said. She looked like she wasn't really paying attention to her surroundings. I had to remind her of where we were.

"Sumire, just so you know, you'll have to abandon such naive thoughts once we get past the lower levels. There's a reason Babel is the Last Dungeon, and that it's the only one that humans haven't fully conquered yet. We were talking about the 100th Level, but the difficulty spike from the 50th Level is nothing to scoff at either. We're C-rank explorers now that we got past the 10th Level, and passing the 50th Level will turn us into B-rank explorers. The gap between C and B is a wide one."

"That being said, we're still on the 19th Level," said Leona.

"Well, yeah."

Leona was right. We were still in the lower levels. There shouldn't be any danger, so long as we played it safe and abided by the usual rules of exploration. Without running into any trouble, we eventually discovered the stairs to the 20th Level.

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As soon as we reached the 20th Level, I noticed something off. *It's far too quiet.* That in itself wasn't so weird; the only monster roaming around a Boss's territory was, of course, the Boss. Nevertheless, something was strange. Though it was nothing more than a gut feeling, I was sure something horrible was about to happen.

My father's past words echoed through my mind: *Eugene, trust in your swordsman's instincts.*

"Leona," I started, but I refrained from suggesting that we go back.

Leona, the captain of her party, had a grave expression on her face. She must have sensed the wrongness in the air as well.

"Eugene, what do you think about this place?" she asked.

"I don't know why, but it feels off here," I replied honestly.

"Captain, is something the matter?"

Sumire and the members of the Martial Arts Club were waiting for Leona's order. Normally, I entered the dungeon on my own, so I could leave off exploring the moment I didn't feel like it anymore. But right now, we were moving as a team. Our journey here had gone smoothly, and morale was high. They would never turn back without a plausible reason.

Leona looked like she was struggling to make her decision, but she sucked in a small breath and said, "Watch out, everyone. Move carefully."

"Yes, ma'am!"

In the end, she chose to continue the exploration. I didn't say anything to dissuade her or change her mind. After all, I was an outsider in this party. The Martial Arts Club had the final say in what we did.

We slowly made our way deeper into the 20th Level. Unlike during our journey through the previous floors, everyone was silent. They must have caught on to their captain's anxiety. The 20th Level was still the Rainforest Area, so tall plants surrounded us on all sides, making it hard to see beyond them.

Rustle...rustle... The sound of grass being trampled caught my attention, and when I looked toward the sound, I saw a deer staring at me. Other herbivorous animals—harmless creatures—were visible among the greenery. I didn't see any monsters.

"No Goblins as far as the eye can see," a Martial Arts Club member muttered.

The only monsters that existed on the 20th Level were the Goblin King and the Goblins under its command. However, we hadn't seen

hide nor hair of them.

As we continued our trek through the 20th Level, we came across something strange. It was a small humanoid monster lying prone in a puddle of blood.

It was a Goblin's corpse.

Without hesitation, I said, "Leona, let's retreat. There's something weird about the 20th Level right now."

"Yes, let's turn back," Leona agreed.

"Huh? Captain Leona, we're heading back?!" a Martial Arts Club member cried.

"Eugene, what's wrong?" Sumire asked.

"The 20th Level is the Goblin King's territory right now, so the only monsters we should encounter are Goblins," I explained.

"But that's a Goblin corpse right there. Something really bizarre is happening here," Leona added.

The only possibility I could think of was that a new Boss had emerged and taken the Goblin King's place. On rare occasions, two Bosses spawned on the same floor, leading them to fight to the death for the territory. If we encountered them during their battle, we would have to deal with two Bosses at once. The instructors at Lykeion Magic Academy had taught us to *always* avoid such a scenario.

We turned around and started heading back. Leona and I brought up the rear, and without slowing our fast pace, Leona asked, "Eugene, what do you think is going on?"

"I think one Boss is usurping another," I replied.

"Yeah, same. Bosses that commonly appear on the 20th Level, aside from the Goblin King, are Kobold Kings or Orc Kings."

A Goblin King and its subjects were fighting against another group of monsters for this patch of land. That would explain the Goblin corpse we'd seen back there. But something about that explanation didn't sit right with me.

"It's too quiet," I said.

"It is. I was wondering about that too," Leona replied with a nod.

Goblins, Kobolds, and Orcs weren't exactly known for their quiet demeanor. In battle, they often roared to intimidate their foes. If two

different groups and species of monsters were duking it out, then it should have been far noisier than this. Yet the Rainforest Area remained silent, as if all the living creatures on this floor were holding their breath. We quietly yet swiftly made for the Dungeon Elevator.

One of the Martial Arts Club members asked in a dissatisfied voice, "Captain Leona, are we really going back down? We made it all the way here."

"Yes, even if you think I'm being overly cautious, we're leaving."

Beyond the trees of the rainforest, I saw the long, thin spire of the Dungeon Elevator. Right as I breathed a sigh of relief, a loud *boom* resounded through the air and shook the ground. A massive shadow stood before us on four legs. At first glance, it resembled a black Great Wolf, but it wasn't. It was so large that it towered over the treetops.

This thing was far bigger than the Boss of the 10th Level. The moment I laid eyes on it, goose bumps rippled over my skin. Every instinct was screaming at me: *This thing is dangerous!*

"Th-The Goblin King!" someone yelled.

The corpse of the Boss we came here to defeat—the Goblin King—hung in the mouth of one of the four-legged monster's three heads. The beast calmly stared down at us.

"I-It's Cerberus!" someone else screamed.

Cerberus, or the Guard Dog of the Underworld, was a monster said to reside in the land of the dead. It was a creature we'd only heard about in old legends. Despite being far bigger than the Troll on the 10th Level, it was so light on its paws that it could easily leap over our heads. It had taken the Goblin King, the original Boss of this floor, for its prey and was now consuming it. Humans were nothing more than insects to a monster of this caliber.

"Everyone, run!" Leona yelled. At her command, the club members scattered in all directions.

Sumire didn't understand the gravity of the situation, so I grabbed her hand and ran deeper into the rainforest.

"Sumire, we're getting out of here!"

"O-Okay!"

I had no idea what was happening either. Why were we encountering a Cerberus on such a low floor?

"Eugene, is that three-headed dog really strong?!" Sumire asked.

"That's a Divine Beast! There's no way to kill it!" I said.

"Huh?! Wh-What do you mean?!"

But before I could answer Sumire's question, I heard an ear-piercing scream, so chilling that it raised the hair on the back of my neck. It was followed by the snap of breaking bones, and then the wet crunch of something being chewed reached us.

"Eh?" Sumire sucked in a breath, her face pale. The next moment, she tripped on her feet and fell. "Ah!"

"Sumire!" I picked her up and kept running.

"E-Eugene, that sound was—"

"Don't think about it right now," I panted.

I focused on sprinting as fast as I could, trying to put distance between us and Cerberus. But the worst was yet to come.

"Commencing Deus Discipline, the 100th Level challenge," a mechanical voice sounded out over the 20th Level.

"Th-The 100th Level?" Sumire echoed in a confused voice, but I couldn't answer her.

I was just as lost as she was. Why was an announcement for the 100th Level playing here? I looked around as I ran, trying to find somewhere safe. *Is there anywhere we can hide? There!* I spotted a hole in the base of a giant tree, just large enough to fit two people. Monsters might be hiding out from Cerberus inside the hollow, but fighting them was far preferable to trying to fend off Cerberus.

Still holding Sumire in my arms, I dove into the hollow, which was just large enough for both of us to fit if we squeezed together. *W-We're safe!* I set Sumire down and immediately cast a spell over the entrance. *Barrier Magic: Hidden Veil.* This kept those outside from seeing us in the hole. In fact, the spell should disguise the hollow as well. *But I wonder if my barrier can mask our scents from Cerberus, a Divine Beast?*

"E-Eugene—"

"Shh, wait," I whispered, raising a hand to interrupt Sumire's worried murmur. I strained my ears.

Thud... Thud... Cerberus was stalking nearer, the ground shaking slightly with every step it took. I could hear someone's frantic heartbeat, though I didn't know if it was mine or Sumire's. *Huff...huff...huff...* The beast's rapid panting reached my ears.

"Eek!" The small scream escaped Sumire's mouth, and I hurriedly slapped my hand over the lower half of her face.

Cerberus languidly lowered one of its three heads toward the hollow. One massive eyeball, as large as a human head, was searching for its next prey. I felt like my eyes met that large black pupil, but it didn't notice us. The barrier was working.

Huff...huff...huff... The sound of its breathing echoed through the hole. Sumire had clasped both hands over her mouth as if to stop her own breathing.

Hurry up and go somewhere else! I prayed in my heart. Cerberus glared at the barrier for a moment longer before it finally padded off. *W-We survived.* My knees gave out, and I slumped to the ground.

"Hey, what was that?" Sumire asked, her voice thick with tears.

I pulled her close against me and felt her body trembling. I was probably shaking as well.

To calm myself down, I slowly explained, "Sumire, the school taught you how we rank monsters based on how strong and how dangerous they are, right?"

"Y-Yeah. Miss Rin explained it to me."

I nodded. Monsters were ranked based on their danger level, so when explorers encountered one in the dungeon, they could decide if they wanted to fight or flee. "Designated calamity" was the name for the most powerful creatures on that scale; it referred to monsters that could destroy, or had destroyed, an entire town. Mature dragons, for example, counted as designated calamities. Ancient Dragons, who were said to have lived for over a thousand years, were all designated calamities, without exception.

I'd never fought against a designated calamity. My old man had, apparently, but he'd also once said, "I'm not crazy enough to *want* to fight against a monster that's a designated calamity."

"So you're saying that Cerberus thing is a designated calamity?" Sumire asked.

"No," I replied, gritting my teeth. Yes, the most dangerous monsters were designated calamities, but Cerberus wasn't included among them, for it was a Divine Beast. "Divine Beasts are far more powerful than those designated calamities. They're monsters who've lived for hundreds of thousands of years, since way back in the Age of Legends."

"H-How can that...?" Sumire didn't seem to comprehend. I, too, wished that this were all just a nightmare.

"Divine Beasts are the vassals of God in Heaven. Under normal circumstances, they would never be on this level. They're special beings that only appear in this Last Dungeon." Yes, normally, one would never run into a Divine Beast, as they only appeared under specific conditions. "When God created the Last Dungeon, He set up a Deus Discipline every hundred floors, and they're the only place where one would encounter a Divine Beast. So there's no way we should be running into one on a floor below the 100th. There's just no way."

"This is the 20th Level, right?" Sumire murmured, sniffling.

"Yeah, it's weird. This is unprecedented."

Something impossible was happening. Was this what Leona had been talking about when she mentioned an anomaly in the dungeon's difficulty settings? Even so, this was just too crazy. What was the Last Dungeon thinking, sending a Divine Beast after explorers who'd just reached the 20th Level?!

No, getting angry isn't going to help us. Sumire was shaking like a leaf. To ease her fears, I hugged her even tighter, and slowly but surely, her trembling subsided.

After a moment, she asked in a soft voice, "Eugene, what did you mean when you said we couldn't kill that thing?"

"Unlike monsters, Divine Beasts are overflowing with limitless life energy. Explorers don't clear a Deus Discipline by defeating the Divine Beast. Instead, they have to use their smarts and courage to overcome this challenge, and then proceed to the next floor. That's what a Deus Discipline is all about. So some people call these monsters that appear every hundred floors Discipline Beasts."

"How do we overcome the challenge?"

"It depends on the Divine Beast," I answered in a weak voice.

The highest floor of the dungeon I'd reached before now was the 19th; only on this trip had I finally succeeded in overwriting my past record. I'd never imagined I would have to face off against a monster from the 100th Level.

Sumire fell silent at my words, but as if she couldn't bear the quiet, she spoke again. "I-Is that three-headed monster really strong?"

"Yeah, Cerberus is a famous Divine Beast." Drawing on the knowledge in my memories, I continued, "There's no rule or pattern behind which Divine Beast will appear in a Deus Discipline. Unlike the other levels, the 100th and 200th Levels are usually empty. The dungeon only summons a Divine Beast after a challenger shows up. This isn't the first time Cerberus has served as a Deus Discipline, but as far as I know, there hasn't been a single explorer in the past century who's bested it."

It was only after I finished speaking that I realized how horrible all my intel was.

"Th-This can't be happening," Sumire whimpered.

Some Divine Beasts were far more powerful than others. The exploration classes at the academy taught us to simply give up if we had the misfortune of encountering the Guard Dog of the Underworld in the dungeon.

"I wonder if Miss Leona and the others are all right," Sumire continued.

"I have no idea. Hopefully they got away."

"What should *we* do now?"

"Now that things have come to this, we have no choice but to wait for the dungeon staff to save us."

Those on the outside should be monitoring the situation using the Satellite System. Surely they were putting together a rescue team.

"Are the dungeon staff strong enough to defeat that creature?" Sumire asked.

"I doubt it. They'll probably request help from the higher-ranking explorers who've already cleared the 100th Level."

"O-Oh, right! That puts me at ease!"

A small smile returned to Sumire's face, but I still had my own worries. A-rank explorers—adventurers who'd cleared the 100th Level—were few in number, and they spent pretty much all their time inside the dungeon. The dungeon staff would have to find a party outside and hire them for an immediate rescue mission. Would we be so lucky?

I looked over at the bag of supplies I'd brought. Since we hadn't initially planned on spending the night here, I hadn't brought a lot of food. With only about half a day's worth of provisions left, would we be able to survive until help arrived?

Sumire and I huddled closer in the small hole as we continued to wait. Every once in a while, Sumire asked me a few questions. But, truthfully, with my attention occupied by the Divine Beast roaming outside, I couldn't focus on our conversations.

Time passed slowly. How long had we been in here? It felt like we'd been hiding for hours, but there was always the chance that only an hour had passed. As soon as the thought passed through my mind, a robotic announcement rang over the 20th Level.

"The Deus Discipline has ended. All challengers have been eliminated."

Sumire was the first to react. "Huh?"

All challengers have been eliminated. That was what the announcement had said, but could that be possible? Sumire and I were right here. Then again, we hadn't formed an official collaborative party with the Martial Arts Club. We were simply two groups traveling in the same direction. So if the Last Dungeon only considered the Martial Arts Club members the challengers of this floor, that meant...

"A-All of them have been eliminated? Th-Then, what about Miss Leona? I c-can't believe..." Sumire started shaking violently, and I pulled her into a silent embrace.

What should I do? No, there's nothing to think about. We have no choice but to stay here using Hidden Veil. The moment I decided on our next course of action, the robotic voice sounded out again.

"To the new challengers inside the Boss's territory..."



Sumire and I both jumped in confused surprise. *New challengers? We're probably the only people left on the 20th Level.* The supervisor of the Last Dungeon knew we were still in here.

"If you wish to cancel your challenge, please move outside the territory at once. If you remain inside the boundary, the Deus Discipline will begin automatically," the voice continued.

What the hell? Are you kidding me? Hey, we're on the 20th Level, dungeon supervisor! Why are you starting a Deus Discipline as if that's a normal occurrence here?! But I couldn't say any of that out loud. The Divine Beast Cerberus was camping outside the tree.

Now that I thought about it, we'd only assumed that the Deus Discipline was exclusive to the 100th Level based on precedent. Not once had this been an actual concrete rule. Simply staying here wouldn't solve our problems either. Sumire was trembling, pale-faced. I had to protect her. I was her guardian.

Steel yourself, Eugene Santafield!

"E-Eugene..."

"Sumire, put your trust in me and stay here."

"Where are you going?!"

"I'll act as bait."

"A-Are you nuts?! The Martial Arts Club had so many members, and that thing defeated them all!"

"Don't worry. I have a plan."

"B-But—"

"There's no time. Sumire, do *not* move from here."

With that final admonishment, I left the hollow. To lose a Deus Discipline, you had to let the timer run out. I'd heard that once a challenger used up their allotted time, the Divine Beast would return to its summoner. Apparently, this rule was to prevent people from using stall tactics against an unkillable Divine Beast and to give other challengers a chance to attempt the Deus Discipline. Losing to one due to the time-out rule wouldn't end in the challenger's death either.

The question was whether I *could* buy time against the Guard Dog of the Underworld. Regardless, there was no point in complaining about the situation. I had to drag out the fight until

either the dungeon staff rescued us or the Deus Discipline timed out. Those were my only options.

We *could* continue to hide in that tree, but the supervisor of the Last Dungeon knew Sumire and I were still here inside the Divine Beast's territory. The Divine Beast could sniff us out if we continued to stay in the hollow. If that happened, I would have to fight it while protecting Sumire, and that simply wasn't feasible. It would kill us both.

"I'm heading out, Sumire," I said.

"Eugene..."

"Can I borrow your mana?"

"Yeah..."

Sumire was still trembling, so I took her hand and squeezed it. *Mana Link.* I siphoned the red mana from her, feeling the immense heat flowing through my body. She moaned softly as I did, so I might've taken too much at once.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. Please avenge Miss Leo—" She cut herself off and shook her head. "Eugene, you *have* to survive."

"I know."

Sumire was staring up at me, tears welling up in her eyes, so I forced myself to smile before I headed outside. Once I was out of the hole, I cast a second barrier over the entrance. I absolutely had to prevent Cerberus from noticing her inside the tree. After I finished my task, I looked around the 20th Level again.

It's quiet. I couldn't hear birdsong, let alone the sounds of animals in the rainforest going about their lives. Every living creature on the 20th Level was prostrating itself before the might of the Divine Beast.

"I, Eugene Santafield, will challenge the Deus Discipline," I said to my D-ranked explorer badge.

"Challenger Eugene Santafield's request to attempt the Deus Discipline has been processed. Good luck," the mechanical voice of the supervisor's announcement rang through the air.

It's been processed, huh? In that case, I couldn't back down now. A shimmering white line—the Challengers' Area—was drawn around

me, marking me as prey to the Divine Beast.

Thud...thud... Cerberus's footsteps drew close. All three heads growled as the mythological monster stared down at me. My heartbeat was roaring in my ears. My entire body trembled from either fear or adrenaline.

Dad, what should I do in this situation? I asked him in my heart. He was my swordsmanship teacher, but also the model I strove to emulate.

Smile. That's what you should do whenever you're in trouble, Eugene. If you keep your spirits high, you'll solve any problem that comes your way.

The father in my memories was as ridiculous as ever. But he never once steered me wrong.

I let out a soft exhalation before grinning and holding up my sword in the Niten Enmei-ryu stance. "All right. Let's do this!"

Chapter Seven: Eugene Challenges the Deus Discipline

I held my sword at the ready as Cerberus stared down at me. My stance was a defensive one in the Niten Enmei-ryu. I had to somehow buy enough time for the rescue team to reach us.

"Magic Sword: Flameblade."

The blade glowed bright crimson and sizzled. A high concentration of mana—more than enough to kill a Troll or Goblin King—was bursting from the sword, but would this be enough to damage a Divine Beast? Before I could even start wondering that, Cerberus rushed at me, its gargantuan size belying its speed.

"GRAAAH!" It brought its sharp claws down, striking so fast they resembled a black gust of wind.

I used the Niten Enmei-ryu Wood Stance: Willow Rose to parry the attack. *Ow!* My timing had been perfect, but I wasn't able to avoid the entire blow. Its claws tore through my barrier like it was paper.

"High Heal," I murmured, closing the deep gouges in my arm.

Whoosh!

"Damn!"

The Guard Dog of the Underworld's paw was coming at me from the side. I couldn't dodge it!

I quickly cast a barrier around myself. "Barrier Magic: Greater Lightshield!"

Boom! It took me a second to realize that the beast had sent me and my barrier flying with its attack. I went bouncing across the ground before I managed to gather my bearings and flip onto my feet. I panted heavily. My entire body was aching, and I couldn't push enough oxygen into my lungs. Cerberus approached me, each step as loud as thunder. It was staring down at me, its expression

almost disappointed.

This is impossible. There was no way I could hold it off until help arrived. If I had to guess, Cerberus's earlier attacks had been to feel me out. As evidence of this theory, the three-headed monster had never once used its vicious fangs on me. If it had taken this fight seriously, it would've killed me in an instant.

I exhaled and steadied my breathing. Playing it safe wouldn't do me any good. I had to be more proactive.

I relaxed my defensive stance. Lowering my body, I slowly prepared myself for the next attack.

Niten Enmei-ryu Wind Stance: Skystep. I closed the distance between myself and Cerberus in a heartbeat. If my opponent had been a Troll, this speed would have been enough for its eyes to lose track of me. However, I was up against a Divine Beast. It followed my movement with no trouble.

Like I give a damn! Niten Enmei-ryu Fire Stance: Lionsbane! I'd used this to slay the 10th Level Boss. By spinning, the user could add the force of their momentum to their attack. I sent the crimson blade, burning with Ifrit mana, straight into Cerberus's neck.

Clang! The sound of metal striking metal sounded out. Cerberus had blocked my attack with its teeth.

"HYAAAH!" I relentlessly continued my assault.

Bang! Bang! Fshh! My attacks sliced through Cerberus's skin, spilling a few drops of blood. The wound was nowhere near fatal.

"GRRAAHH!" Furious, Cerberus opened its mouth wide and bore down on me, prepared to swallow me whole.

I gritted my teeth and flung myself out of the way as I slashed with my sword. I'd dodged not to flee but to attack. Cerberus may have been fast, but it was also several times the size of a Troll or Goblin King. I could gain the upper hand if I took advantage of the blind spots around its paws. However, the moment I made an error in judgment, the monster would crush me like a bug. I had to strike the perfect balance between offense and defense. Every second counted if I wanted to fight it on even footing. However...

Szzt...szzt... The mana was slowly but surely draining from the Magic Sword: Flameblade I was wielding. This was red mana I'd

siphoned from Sumire. Since it wasn't mine, the sword would eventually run out. If I lost Sumire's mana, I would regress back to a defective Swordsman, incapable of attacking my foes.

Slash! Cerberus's sharp claws ripped through all three layers of my barriers.

"Ow!" The attack gouged a chunk of flesh from my shoulder. "Heal!" I didn't have time for a High Heal. I needed to stem the bleeding and keep moving. If I stopped for a breather, it would be my last. "Barrier Magic: Full Armor!"

I had to replenish the barrier around my body. If I didn't protect myself, Cerberus would turn me into mincemeat. My own mana was running low, though. Unlike Sumire, I didn't have a limitless supply of it. The moment I could no longer keep up my Barrier Magic, Cerberus would shred me into ribbons.

No, I can't keep this up. I'll lose in a matter of minutes. But Sumire was still here on the 20th Level. I couldn't turn tail and run. *What can I do?* Suppressing my growing panic, I racked my mind for something that could turn the tide.

"Eugene...with me."

A beautiful voice echoed through my mind as I thought back to a conversation I'd had with the Demon Queen Erinyes.

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"Hey, Eugene, did you know that we've formed a provisional contract?"

I had just spent the night with Eri. She'd been as intense as ever, so I had been drifting off, but her words shook me awake. *Provisional contract?*

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean?!"

"Don't make that face." She shot me a seductive smile as she gently ran her fingers through my hair. "I've been 'taking care' of you, haven't I? We're bound by the Contract of the Flesh, one of the Five Great Contracts. The mana inside our bodies connects us to each other, you see. Think of it like the Mana Link mages use with each other."

"Is that how it works? I thought contracts required mutual consent."

"You consented the moment we slept together, didn't you?"

"O-Oh, right." That made sense.

"The Contract of the Flesh is the only one that can be signed without the other party knowing about it. All the others require a proper ritual. So, Eugene, if you ever want to enter a *real* contract with me, you can call on me at any time." She giggled girlishly. "Congratulations!"

"Why does it feel like I was tricked into buying something expensive?" It felt like a scam. I couldn't believe I'd obliviously entered a provisional contract with a Demon Queen.

"Oh, stop complaining. Not many people can say they were able to sign a contract with *the* Demon Queen Erinyes, you know? Considering how compatible our bodies are, I'm sure you're the only human who's able to form a contract with me."

"Really? I thought anyone could if they knew Barrier Magic."

"Of course not! They wouldn't even be able to hold a normal conversation with me! You should be proud of yourself, Eugene. You're really something."

I said nothing in response. The Demon Queen's words were akin to soothing honey. The angelic whispers wormed their ways through the fractures in my heart, still broken from the breakup with my childhood friend. That made sense, considering Eri *was* a fallen Angel. In any case, she was obviously trying to manipulate her way past my emotional defenses.

"By the way, do you know what my abilities are?" Eri asked.

"Of course."

The Demon Queen before me was a legendary figure who had conquered the Southern Continent during the Dark Ages a thousand years ago. Even children knew of her otherworldly powers.

"After her banishment from Heaven, the fallen Angel Erinyes lost the white of mercy and the yellow of light. In return, she gained the black of violence, the indigo of poison, and the violet of death," I said, reciting what I'd learned at the military academy. "That's the story, right?"

"Yes, it is. That's the story most people know."

"It's not the real one?"

"I have one more power, and it's something you can obtain for yourself after you make a contract with me." Eri cupped my cheek and whispered into my ear, "When you're *really* in trouble, don't hesitate to call on me. You don't have to come all the way to the prison; you can communicate with me even from inside the Last Dungeon. My mana is inside you, waiting for its time to blossom. You only need to say a few simple words to unleash it."

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I avoided Cerberus's attack. I only had enough stamina left to dodge a few more. After thinking about it over and over, I'd finally made up my mind. I was about to do the unthinkable—form a contract with a Demon Queen. Despite my misgivings, my desire for strength was genuine.

The monster rushing at me was the legendary Divine Beast Cerberus, the Guard Dog of the Underworld. I didn't want to simply roll over and accept my fate without trying to change it first. Steeling my will, I opened my mouth and said, "I, Eugene Santafield, form a contract with the Demon Queen Erinyes."

The next moment, a strange and horrifying miasma engulfed my body. It felt like some indescribable living creature was crawling all over my skin. *So this is the mana of the Demon Queen Erinyes?* Or was it ether, a far higher form of magic than mere mana? But the ether-like mana that I received from Sumire the Ifrit didn't feel like this. It was some other terrifying power, and it filled me with an odd sense of omnipotence.

This is the power of the Demon Queen who once ruled over the Southern Continent. The fear I'd felt when facing off against the Divine Beast had faded. Now, my body was trembling with anticipation, eager for the chance to annihilate my opponent.

I swung my sword, barely putting any strength behind the movement. Yet the sound of the blade cutting through the air was akin to the roar of a hurricane, and the powerful stroke tore apart

the view before me. The trees of the rainforest fell to the ground, the rings of the stumps so cleanly visible that it was as if someone had reaped them with a giant scythe. A light swing had done this much damage. What could I do if I used my full power?

Ugh... The strength fled my body, and I stumbled. No, it wasn't my strength. Rather, it felt as if my very life energy had been drained away. I couldn't keep on using this power, and I doubted I could remain conscious for much longer. Fortunately, Cerberus had backed away a few paces, leveling a cautious look at me.

I looked down at my sword, from which a faint, high-pitched noise emanated. The mana inside Magic Sword: Flameblade was on the fritz, and the red light had turned weak. *I-I have to hurry and...make a new...magic sword...* The Demon Queen Erinyes possessed four different powers: the black of violence, the indigo of poison, the violet of death, and the... *Oh no.* I felt my consciousness slipping away with me. My thoughts were getting all jumbled together. It was almost as if some other persona had taken over my body.

"Eugene! What in the world are you doing?!"

Was that Eri's voice? This wasn't good. I was experiencing auditory hallucina—

"Who are you calling a hallucination?! I'm the real thing, okay? The genuine article!"

"Eri?"

"The one and only! You agreed to enter a contract with me, didn't you? That's why we can communicate telepathically like this."

"O-Oh, I see..."

"More importantly, use your Barrier Magic to put up some mental defenses. As you are now, your mind can't withstand the miasma of a Demon Queen!"

"All right."

I obeyed Eri's warning. *Barrier Magic: Steel Heart.* This was a spell for erecting mental barriers, but I seldom used it. After I cast it, the fog in my mind lifted.

"Thanks a lot, Eri."

"Mm-hmm, make sure you keep up those mental defenses

whenever you use my mana! Otherwise, you'll turn into a vegetable."

I gulped at that. If Eri hadn't warned me in time, I would've been done for. *"Thanks. I'll go see you after I'm out of here."*

Eri laughed. *"Good. Now, you're* mine*."*

"What did you just say?"

"Hey, now, don't take your eyes off the enemy. You're still fighting that cute little Cerberus, aren't you?"

It felt like Eri had just said something frightening. I would have to go ask her about that later as well. But she was also right about Cerberus. That was the more pressing matter.

I sucked in a soft breath and channeled the mana I received from Eri into my sword. *Magic Sword: Darkblade*. The blade turned black to represent the color of the mana I was using. Black mana governed violence—simple and crude. I didn't think I could use any complicated magic with a Demon Queen's mana without some practice first. That being the case, I would need to use the most powerful attack in my arsenal and end this in one strike.

Cerberus growled low in its throat, as if wary of my new power. *Wait, no, those eyes... It's laughing?* I didn't understand it myself, but it seemed to me that Cerberus was happy.

"Ah ha ha. Looks like little Berry is happy that it met someone who can put up a challenge. It usually spends its days in that depressing underworld as gloomy old Pluto's guard dog. I can totally understand why it wants to cut loose on the surface." Eri sounded excited as well.

"Eri, are you acquaintances with Cerberus?"

"Of course I am. Veteran Angels often visit the underworld. I used to bring Berry treats from the surface all the time since he liked them so much. Food down there didn't look yummy at all."

"Wow, uh, you're really amazing."

"Did you just notice that now?"

I knew of her fame as a Demon Queen, but now that she mentioned it, I hadn't heard any stories from when she was still an Angel. If I survived this battle, I'd have to ask her to tell me more.

"Well then, my sweet Eugene. Do your best out there."

"Right." There was a lot I wanted to say to that, but I should

focus on the problem in front of me. I'd received power from the legendary Demon Queen. Failure was not an option.

Cerberus raised its three heads and howled.

"Agh!"

The sound whipped up a gust of wind, sending the trees of the Rainforest Area flying. A clearing formed between me and Cerberus, almost like a dueling ring.

How's Sumire? I glanced back at the tree I'd hidden Sumire in. Fortunately, it was still standing, and the barrier I'd set up around her was still active. She was safe.

Cerberus growled and crouched, glaring at me like I was its prey. I focused on my opponent as well, pushing all the other thoughts out of my mind.

Prepare yourself. Though I didn't say the words out loud, I copied what my old man liked to say. Apparently, this was something the people on the Eastern Continent said before a duel. *Niten Enmei-ryu Thunder Stance.* I returned my black sword to its sheath and lowered my stance, holding my hand over the hilt, ready to pull it out at a moment's notice. This was the fastest attack in my arsenal.

To my surprise, Cerberus vanished. It had jumped high in the air. My sixth sense told me that it was trying to reach me in one leap. I would meet it head-on instead of trying to avoid it.

Let's fight.

Boom! I stepped forward, the impact of my foot hitting the ground sounding like an explosion. *Arcanum: Kirin!*

I rushed forward, darting past Cerberus at the speed of sound. I was moving so fast that time seemed to slow to a crawl around me.

Slash! My sword lopped off Cerberus's middle head.

"GYAAAHHH!" The monster roared, twisting and rampaging in pain. Even with only two heads remaining, it didn't fall to the ground.

I grunted at the pain coursing through my body. I'd only used one attack, and yet it had put an immense burden on my body. Would I be able to swing the magic sword again? Cerberus still had two more heads; I couldn't pass out now.

Come on, Eugene. It's not... It's not over yet! The Divine Beast

was immortal. Even if I severed its other heads, Cerberus wouldn't die. My body was on the verge of collapse, but I pushed myself to my feet and held up my sword.

However, Cerberus didn't move. It was as if it had lost its will to fight. The silence between us was a heavy one. After a moment, a large magic circle formed underneath Cerberus's paws.

Is that a magic circle for summoning magic? Cerberus's remaining heads turned to look at me and smiled, baring their teeth. *Wh-What?* My hands shook on the hilt of my sword, but Cerberus didn't attack me.

You did well, young swordsman. I felt like I heard a voice say those words before Cerberus disappeared into the light.

Huh? Left alone on the 20th Level, I had no idea what would happen next. My head was hurting and my thoughts were becoming tangled together.

"Victory goes to the challenger. Congratulations," the robotic announcement sounded over the 20th Level.

I couldn't react to the words at first. *I...won? Wait, what? It's over?* The strength left my body, and I fell to my knees. I deactivated my magic sword as well. As soon as I did, the sword I'd received from the Blue Sea Union explorers fell apart. I no longer had a weapon to defend myself with. Then again, there was no longer an enemy standing before me.

Ah, right. My mind finally caught up to the situation. I'd defeated Cerberus and won that unfair Deus Discipline.

Chapter Eight: Eugene and Sumire Become Partners

◊ Sumire's POV ◊

Victory goes to the challenger.

The moment I heard those words, I scrambled out of the hollow and raced over to Eugene. He had slumped to his knees, eyes dull.

"Eugene!" I yelled as I practically threw myself at him and hugged him tight.

It took a long time before he rasped, "Are you okay, Sumire?"

"Stop worrying about me! You're so much more..."

I trailed off. Though Eugene hadn't sustained any serious injuries, even breathing was taking a lot out of him, and he could hardly speak. *He's a mess...* Seeing him like this made me want to weep out of frustration. *I'm useless. All I do is cry and wait for him to save me. Why am I so weak?*

"We should head for the Dungeon Elevator," he said. "The dungeon staff might've arrived."

"R-Right."

We stood up and made our way through the 20th Level without exchanging a single word the entire time. Eugene was still unsteady on his feet, and each step seemed to require a gargantuan effort. I slowed down to match his pace. When we reached a small clearing, we paused. Cerberus had trampled the trees and its claws had left deep gouges in the dirt. Here and there, I could see pools of deep crimson blood.

"Huh?"

It took a moment for my mind to catch up and realize that *I* had been the one to say that. My brain wasn't processing the sight before me. Red *things* were scattered all over the clearing, making for a grotesque sight. I recognized them as the corpses of the

Martial Arts Club members. Everyone's bodies had been mangled or ripped apart. In their last moments, they must have been terrified by the sight of death all around them, for the faces of some were still twisted in fear. I couldn't stand to gaze upon the carnage for any longer.

"Ah...aah..." Wordless noises kept leaking from my mouth while Eugene stood in silence, his expression tense. Then I saw her. Miss Leona was lying in a pool of her own blood. "No way..."

I staggered over to the pile of meat that had once been Miss Leona. I thought back to her bright smile when she'd invited us to camp with them...her serious expression when she was teaching me martial arts...her excited voice when she scouted me for her club... It had been just half a day ago, so all the memories remained, clear and pristine, in my mind. But I would never be able to make new ones with her.

I collapsed to the ground and broke down in tears. *Why? How did this happen? Is this what's considered normal in this world? Is this a place where friends I made mere hours ago can die the next instant?*

"I can't do this," I wailed. "I can't... I can't live in a world like this." Between Eugene's presence and my new friendship with Miss Leona, I'd started to like this place a little. But now... *This is too cruel. Just too cruel!* "Take me back! Take me back to my original world! God, if you're listening..." Another sob cut my empty pleas short as tears continued to pour from my eyes.

That was when I felt an arm around my shoulders, tugging me into a hug. I didn't need to look up to know it was Eugene. *What?* No words of comfort could soothe the pain in my heart.

"Sumire, do you want to return to your original world?"

At Eugene's words, the blood rushed to my head.

"Of course I do! How do you expect me to live in this hellhole?! What kind of stupid world is this, where your friends can die at any minute?! My world was...my world was so much more peaceful than this place!" I shouldn't have been saying this. Eugene had helped me so much. He'd put his life on the line to save me from that horrible monster. But I couldn't hold the words in. This was nothing more than a tantrum. Nothing more than an act of embarrassing hysteria.

"I want to go back! Take me back! Back to my original world!"

"Sumire."

Eugene was speaking to me, but I couldn't reply. I was all mixed up; not even I was sure what I wanted to do. *I have to calm down*, the rational side of me was saying, but another part of me wanted nothing more than to indulge in more tears. Then I heard Eugene's voice.

"I'll help you get back to your original world."

Huh? What are you talking about? "That's impossible!" I snapped back, my head shooting up to glare at him.

But Eugene's expression was dead serious. "For every hundred floors an explorer conquers in the Last Dungeon, they can receive a Heaven's Gift from God."

"Um, what's that?" I didn't understand what he was trying to say. Why was he bringing that up right now?

"The Heaven's Gift you receive on the 500th Level is something called the World Gate. Apparently, you can use that to travel to another world."

For a long time, I couldn't say anything, and even when I finally mustered up the strength, the only word that escaped me was "Huh?" *T-Travel to another world? There's something out there that'll let us do that?! If I reach the 500th Level, I can go back to my original world?! U-Um...* Thoughts still jumbled together, I managed to say, "Th-There's no point. I'm an Ifrit now, so even if I return, it's not as if I can just live as a normal human—"

"The Heaven's Gift on the 300th Level is the Spring of Transfiguration, which lets you take on any shape you want. You can use that and transform yourself back to the human you were before your reincarnation."

"Wha—?! HUUUUH?!" *For a miracle to be that attainable—it's almost too good to be true!* "W-Wait, so, I really *can* go back to my original world?!"

"Well, only one person has reached the 500th Level in the past five centuries, which means they're also the sole person who saw the World Gate. It's basically a myth at this point, so I can't guarantee anything," Eugene said, looking apologetic.

"B-But there's still a chance that it *is* real, right?!"

"Yeah. Christo, the first-place Record Holder for Babel, spoke of his experiences. He said that the World Gate was on the 500th Level, and he could use it to travel to alternate worlds at will."

"So then, I can go back?"

"At the risk of repeating myself, but no other explorer had ever made it there to confirm whether Christo was telling the truth. We only have his word to go on."

However, now that I knew the possibility of going home existed, the weight on my heart lifted. I felt like I saw a light at the end of the tunnel. *I mean, Eugene just won against that Cerberus monster, which is supposed to be super strong! If he'll help me out, then there's a chance we can make it up there!* However, I still had a question I needed an answer to. "Eugene, why are you going through so much to help me?"

I'd blurted it out without thinking. What in the world was I expecting? Eugene was my guardian; that was the only reason he put up with my selfishness. He would just tell me it was his job.

"Huh?" Eugene looked surprised. "Hmm..." He looked upward as if lost in thought, then murmured, "The Santafields hail from a small country on the Eastern Continent. Our original name was written with the characters for 'holy field.' As a lineage of Sword Saints, we guarded our masters for generations. Granted, a war ended up destroying our homeland." I'd heard this story before, back when we were sharing a tent. "When my old man found a new master—the emperor of Grenflare—I was pretty jealous of him. I guess the urge to serve is just written in our genes."

A master? They're like the samurai in my old world.

"So when I lost the master I wanted to serve—my childhood friend who wanted to become the next empress—I felt like I'd lost my goal in life."

"R-Right." I nodded awkwardly at Eugene's sad anecdote.

Looking me straight in the eye, he continued, "My dad...no, my entire family has a creed we uphold. A Santafield must not swing a sword for himself. We must use our swords for others."

"I...see."

"I was thinking about that earlier. Though I lost a master to protect, I can still wield my sword to help a crying girl."

Crying girl? I didn't know how to respond until I noticed Eugene was staring at my face—my face, which was wet and messy with tears. I felt like a pathetic child who'd started crying while throwing a tantrum and so hurriedly wiped my cheeks.

"That's why I want to get you to the 500th Level, Sumire. If I manage that, you might be able to return to your original world, right?" He smiled. His eyes were clear, absent of doubt or uncertainty. I could tell he really meant the words he said.

"Th—"

I'd wanted to thank him, but I stopped myself. Eugene was a sweet person, and his kindness made me want to rely on him. But was that the right thing? Should I hide like I had earlier and leave all the fighting to him? Was it right of me to let him suffer while I quivered in fear behind him? No, absolutely not.

"Eugene!" I said. "Let's go to the 500th Level *together*. I'll help *you* out too!"

"Sumire?"

I grabbed his hands. "I'll get stronger! According to the headmaster, Ifrits are really powerful, so I'll train and become a good fighter too! If we work together, we can definitely make it up there! I'll get you to the 500th Level and carve a new record into that stone plaque!" I was speaking so fast that the words were tumbling together.

Eugene looked surprised, but his expression soon softened into a smile. "Yeah, you're right. With only white mana, I'm a Swordmaster who deals zero damage against my enemies. Without your mana, reaching the 500th Level is beyond my wildest dreams."

I hurriedly shook my head. "Th-That wasn't what I meant by it!"

Eugene slowly held out his right hand. "Become my partner, Sumire. Let's aim for the 500th Level together."

"Partner"? That sounds wonderful! I would rely on him, and he would count on me. We would combine our powers and work together to overcome any difficulty in our path.

"Yeah! Let's go!" With a bright smile, I held Eugene's hand and

shook it.



With that, we became a team of explorers, seeking to upset a record that hadn't been broken in five hundred years.

◊ Eugene's POV ◊

After Sumire and I vowed to reach the 500th Level together, I heard a voice calling out.

"Helloooo?! Eugene!"

Someone was approaching from the direction of the Dungeon Elevator. It was the middle-aged dungeon staffer I was acquainted with. *Whew. They got here earlier than I expected.* I could see other dungeon staff with him; they must have hurried here due to the emergency.

"Hey!" I greeted him. "You came to help us?"

"Man, I can't believe what a mess Cerberus made of this level," he said.

"Tell me about it." *I lost count of how many times I thought I'd die.*

"Here! Take this Healing Drink. You look awful!"

"Thanks."

I accepted the potion and chugged it down. The cloying sweetness spread over my tongue and the recovery effects coursed through my body. Within seconds, the fog that had enveloped my consciousness cleared up.

"Would you like some as well, young miss?" the middle-aged man asked, and Sumire shook her head.

"No, I'm okay! I was hiding the entire time."

The drink's neon green color might have put her off. It didn't taste bad, though. The other members of the dungeon staff were inspecting the damage from Cerberus's rampage as well as the corpses of the Martial Arts Club members. I could hear them chatting as they worked.

"Aw, jeez, that thing really had a field day here."

"It's gonna be a real drag looking for missing body parts."

"We should demand overtime."

"Wha—?! How can they speak like that?!" Sumire exclaimed, furious. But to the dungeon staff, this was an everyday occurrence.

Admittedly, I don't think this level of gore is commonplace.

"Calm down, Sumire," I said before turning to the middle-aged dungeon staffer. "Hey, can you start with this girl here? Her name is Leona, and she's a friend."

"Sure thing. This little lady, right?"

The staffer approached Leona's body. He took out a bottle and tilted it to produce a drop of liquid, dazzling rainbow in hue. It fell and landed on Leona's body, and the moment it did, light enveloped the corpse. The next moment, the wounds closed up and her eyes snapped open.

"Huh?!" Sumire exclaimed.

Leona blinked several times, gathering her bearings, and then pushed herself upright into a sitting position. She was still a little unsteady.

"Hmm? Sumire and Eugene? Wait, the dungeon staff's here too?" Her gaze was unfocused, like she'd just woken up.

"Leona, how are you feeling?" I asked.

"Uh... Whoa, why does it feel like I went through some absurd ordeal?"

"Don't push yourself too hard. No one should remember their last mom—"

"My last moments?" She paused, then raised her voice. "Ahh! Wait, I remember! Hey, listen, I've got something crazy to share!"

"What is it?"

Mere seconds after her resurrection, Leona was already back to her energetic self.

"The Guard Dog of the Underworld killed me, right?! So that's where I got sent! I was wandering around for a bit, and the last thing I saw before I came back was the dog! It was *in the Underworld!*"

"Well, yeah. That's where it lives," I replied.

Ah, right. Getting killed by Cerberus means you'll see it again after your own death. Sounds like a real drag of a reunion.

"It looked kinda sheepish," Leona continued. "Like, if you're gonna be all torn up after killing someone, don't do it, right?! Whoa, wha—?! Speaking of torn up, my clothes are a disaster! Do you even know how much these cost?!" She stared down at herself, grimacing.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—" Sumire was trying to say something, but the words weren't coming out.

"Sumire?" I asked.

"Sumire, is something wrong?" Leona questioned.

At our prompting, Sumire screamed, "WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON?!"

Oh yeah. The whole "contract with a Demon Queen" thing took so much out of me that I didn't even think about how Sumire must be feeling. I forgot I never told her something vital about explorations.

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"Okay, so let me see if I've got this straight. The magic items the dungeon staff used were Ambrosia Tears, which can revive any explorer who dies in the Last Dungeon within twenty-four hours. But you can only use them on floors below the 100th Level?"

"Sorry, Sumire," I said. "I forgot to explain that to you."

It was basic knowledge that all students learned at the academy, but I hadn't anticipated that she would need to know it at this point. I figured that her teacher would tell her about it in time, and so I'd neglected to inform her prior to our exploration of the lower levels. *Besides, when we entered the dungeon, I wasn't expecting we'd have to fight against a Boss, let alone a Divine Beast.*

"Does that mean it's okay for us to die in here?" Sumire asked with a conflicted expression. She might've been thinking that being scared had been a waste of energy.

"Mm, not really," I replied. "Babel penalizes you if you die."

"Penalizes you?"

Ambrosia Tears could revive the dead, but it had lingering side effects.

"Sumire, someone brought back using Ambrosia Tears can suffer from amnesia," Leona explained. "If they're particularly unlucky, it may even cause debilitating damage to the body!"

"What?!" Sumire shrieked.

Leona was right. Ambrosia Tears weren't omnipotent; their

purpose was to resurrect the recently deceased, nothing more and nothing less.

"Fortunately, that didn't happen to me." Leona twirled on the spot as she examined herself.

"Doesn't it also leave you feeling sick?" I said.

"Mm-hmm, that's right. To tell the truth, I've been feeling really uncomfortable ever since waking up." True to her words, Leona's face remained pale.

"O-Oh, is that so?" Sumire said, her expression serious again.

"This is important, so keep it in mind going forward," I added. "You can't be brought back if a monster eats you."

Sumire sucked in a breath, the color draining from her face. She must've realized anew that our earlier confrontation with Cerberus wasn't the kind of thing we could be optimistic about in general, even with Ambrosia Tears.

"That goes for Divine Beasts too. Granted, Cerberus only ate the Goblins this time and left all of us alone."

The body we'd heard it munching on had been a Goblin. Apparently, Cerberus didn't eat humans. I wondered why not.

"That's because Berry is a Divine Beast with principles," Eri's voice echoed in my head. *"It won't eat any challenger brave enough to face it."*

"Really, Eri?"

"Of course! It's been forever since it was summoned for a Deus Discipline, so it got a little overexcited. I don't think even Cerberus expected to appear on the 20th Level."

Her comment gave me pause. *"Say, Eri, why* did *a Divine Beast appear on such a low floor?"*

"Who knows? It's a mystery for the ages."

"Do you know something I don't?"

"How could I? In case you forgot, I'm sealed deep underneath the academy."

"Right."

Eri's tone made it impossible to tell if she was lying. I would have to see her after I returned to the school. Besides, I had a lot of things I wanted to ask her about. My most burning question had to

do with the cost of the contract. She was a Demon Queen, so I doubted she would let me off easy. Though I didn't yet have any reason to regret the contract, I wasn't exactly jumping for joy either. What would she ask of me?

"Oh, my sweet Eugene. You did so well in the fight against Berry! ☆ I'll be waiting for you!" With that, Eri cut off the telepathic conversation.

"Eugene, what's wrong? You were spacing out."

"O-Oh, it's nothing, Sumire. I'm a little tired." I smiled to soothe her worries.

A little farther away from us, Leona was chatting with the middle-aged dungeon staffer.

"You're the captain of this team, yes?" he was saying. "We'll go revive the other explorers you came with, so could you accompany us to make sure we don't miss anyone?"

"Of course. I understand."

"Also, we're covering the cost of the Ambrosia Tears for now, but we'll be sending an invoice to your academy some other day. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that you're responsible for paying the fee, yes?"

"O-Of course. Um, just out of curiosity, how much do Ambrosia Tears cost right now?" The dungeon staffer didn't immediately respond to Leona's question, and his expression grew darker. "Um, what's the matter?"

After a pause, he replied, "Three million gold."

"HUH?! That's over three times the market price! How does *that* work?!" Leona screeched.

"A recent incident forced us to use the majority of our inventory, which is why the few bottles remaining have skyrocketed in value."

"Th-Then, how much will it cost to revive all the members of our club?" Leona asked in a trembling voice.

If I remember correctly, there are over twenty members in the third string of the Martial Arts Club, right?

"You'll be buying in bulk, so it'll be cheaper, but it will still cost fifty million gold at minimum."

That's an insane amount of money!

Leona froze for a moment before chuckling weakly. “It’s all over... Farewell, my carefree student days. It’ll take my whole life to pay off that debt. I-I’m ruined.”

Sumire, who’d been listening quietly this whole time, raced over to her. “M-Miss Leona! You don’t have to shoulder everyone’s debt, you know?!”

“I have to. In times of crisis, a captain has to take responsibility. That’s the rule. I was the one who planned this trip too. Ah, it’s over! All the years of my youth, gone in a flash! I can’t believe it!” Leona’s eyes took on an empty look as she chuckled dryly to herself. Next to her, Sumire looked uncomfortable and concerned.

No matter how you slice it, what happened on this trip was totally unfair. I wish there were something I could do for her, but it’s not as if I have millions of gold sitting in my bank account.

A scream broke through the awkward silence. “Th-This is crazy! Everyone, check this out!”

It came from another member of the dungeon staff, who was hurrying over to us. Judging by his clothes, he was in a more managerial position. Everyone else gathered around to see what the matter was.

Did something happen? But it didn’t take me long to see what he was talking about.

“H-Hey! You’re the one who decapitated Cerberus, aren’t you?!”

“Yes, I am.”

He was pointing at Cerberus’s severed head. I wasn’t too interested in the logistics of Divine Beast summoning, so it hadn’t occurred to me that it wouldn’t simply return to the Underworld with the rest of the body. Even if I *had* been curious about it, I hadn’t exactly had the luxury of thinking about anything less immediate than my own survival.

The members of the dungeon staff were still chattering excitedly around me.

“That’s amazing! I can’t believe we have the opportunity to bring back a Divine Beast’s head!”

“How much gold will it net us if we sell it?!”

“Think bigger, man. If we get it stuffed, I bet there are tons of

nobles out there who'd want it mounted in their mansions. We should auction it off! I can't even begin to imagine how much the price will go up!"

Are you sure we can treat a Divine Beast's head like this? I was a little worried, but if this really broke some moral code, an announcement would ring out. *Actually, wait a second. The announcer was the one who declared a Deus Discipline on the 20th Level, so it might not be a stickler for details.* I was still pondering this when the higher-ranking dungeon staffer spoke to me.

"Eugene, that head is your trophy. You can bring it back with you if you wish, but if you let us handle it, we'll exchange it for as much gold as we can on your behalf. Of course, there'll be a handling fee. I assure you we have the resources and connections to negotiate a far better deal than you can on your own, considering you're a student."

He looked serious. It must have been very important to him that the dungeon staff be put in charge of dealing with the head; his boss might have ordered him to secure this deal.

"I'm a total amateur when it comes to business, so I'll leave it in your hands," I replied.

He immediately grinned. "That's great to hear! Thank you, Eugene!" He turned to the staff members still hovering around Cerberus's head and yelled, "The explorer gave us permission! Place it in storage and take it to the union's warehouse at once! Got it?!"

"Yessir!"

In the blink of an eye, the Cerberus head was carted away. That was when a thought hit me.

"Excuse me, there's something I'd like to request," I said to the staff member.

"What is it, Eugene? We'll accommodate you the best we can."

"Could you subtract the fee for the Ambrosia Tears from whatever money you receive for the Cerberus head?"

"Oh? If I remember correctly, you aren't an official member of their party, yes?"

"It's fine. They asked me to help them, but I couldn't protect a single club member."

"I see. Understood. I'm sure that even after paying off the Ambrosia Tears, you'll have plenty of money left over. I will inform you of the details at a later date."

"That sounds good. Thank you."

Our voices must have reached the girls as well, because they hurried over.

"E-Eugene?! W-Wait a sec!" Leona looked panicked.

"Eugene!" In contrast, Sumire had a wide smile on her face.

"I can't have you doing that much for us!" Leona exclaimed.

"But, as the accompanying Barrier Master, my job was to serve as a shield for the Martial Arts Club. Just consider this me making up for my failure."

"You didn't mess up so bad that I would've taken fifty million gold from you!"

"If you really can't let this go, you can pay me back at your own pace. There's no interest, no collateral, and no time limit. I won't bother you when I know you have money either."

"E-Eugene..." Leona's expression softened, though I couldn't read the exact emotion.

"Eugene, don't you think you're being too casual about this?" the middle-aged dungeon staff member asked in an exasperated tone.

"It's fine," I assured him. "I wouldn't know what to do with all that money, anyway."

"Eugene, you're wonderful!" Sumire threw her arms around me in a tight embrace. She was always straightforward and bold when expressing her emotions.

"All right, have it your way. I have to get back to work." The middle-aged man joined up with the other members of the dungeon staff. They had to comb the 20th Level for other bodies.

Sumire was holding on to me, but I looked over to Leona, who was still staring off into space, and said, "Seriously, don't worry about the money. You still have a lot of work to do as the captain of your team, right? Take it easy and rest up."

Leona sighed. "Thank goodness you're around, Sumire—otherwise I would've fallen for Eugene myself! I swear, I'll make this up to you one day, and I *will* be paying back the money!" After she

said her piece, Leona hurried off in the same direction as the dungeon staff. She still had to make sure all the club members were brought back to life.

"All right, we should head back," I told Sumire, patting her head a few times.

"Okaaay!" Sumire drew back, albeit reluctantly.

When we made our way to the Dungeon Elevator, I heaved a mental sigh. *Finally, we can head home.* This had been Sumire's debut as an explorer. In retrospect, it had made for a crazy first experience. *But we learned a lot in the process.* I glanced over at her and found myself meeting her doe-like eyes. She was staring straight at me, and my heart skipped a beat.

When she noticed we were looking into each other's eyes, she giggled. Seeing the open humor on her face, I felt a wave of affection wash over me. For a moment, I wanted to hug her, but I shook off the intrusive thought.

"I look forward to being your partner, Sumire," I said.

"Yeah, same, Eugene!"

We smiled at each other and walked into the Dungeon Elevator. And thus began our attempt to scale the Last Dungeon, Babel.

Interlude Two: From the Empire

◊ In the Grenflare Empire ◊

Einherjar Palace was situated in the heart of the Grenflare Empire. It was the largest artificial construct on the entire Southern Continent as well as a symbol of the empire's prosperity. Beyond the entrance was the presence chamber, where one could speak with the emperor. The chamber's colossal door swung open, and a sophisticated-looking knight emerged. A medal resembling a golden Pegasus adorned her chest, denoting her as a Heavenly Knight, the highest rank one could attain among imperial knights.

Her name was Airi Areus Grenflare. She had suppressed a minor rebellion in one of the empire's vassal states and had just finished reporting the results to her father.

He's working me, his own daughter, like a pack mule! Airi lamented to herself.

"I am not the sort of emperor who gives his most capable subordinates the luxury to lounge about. You did well, Airi. You shall be sent your reward soon," the emperor—Airi's father—had said. He looked far more youthful than his actual age.

Airi was grateful for his words, and she knew he had a high opinion of her. This was necessary, as she aimed to succeed him on the throne. However, accepting that fact didn't make her schedule any less packed.

I'll spend tomorrow resting up. Her soldiers had done well in suppressing the rebels. She would reward them with time off. She continued to walk down the long, straight halls of the palace, lost in thought. All the nobles and high-ranking knights stared at her as she passed them.

"Look! It's Princess Airi!"

"She's always so cool and beautiful..."

"I hear she and her lover, General Berthold, are seeking to

become the next rulers of our empire!”

“Ahh! Our country will be in such safe hands!”

They were whispering, but... *I can* hear *you all, you know? Lower your voices, for goodness’ sake.* However, Airi didn’t tell them off. There would be no end to it if she started correcting this behavior. Whispers and gossip were an unavoidable part of her everyday life. *I know that it’s my fate as a member of the imperial family, but the attention I receive no matter where I go is...* It was something Airi still wasn’t used to.

“Do you look outside the window every time you hear a bird sing?” her father had once said, but she didn’t think she could emulate his nerves of steel just yet.

If only he *was around...* The face that appeared in her mind’s eye was that of her childhood friend. When she’d had him at her side, she had felt she could pass the time in peace. But to wish he were here was akin to wishing for the moon. Airi picked up the pace, doing her best to ignore the noise around her as she made for the exit. But then, through the rabble, she heard some concerning words.

“Hey, did you hear that someone defeated a Discipline Beast in Babel all by himself?”

“Wow! I wonder who he is and where he’s from. Is he a Holy Knight from the Alliance? Or maybe a Dragon Knight from the Republic?”

“I hear he’s an Imperial Swordmaster.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news!”

“So tell us! Who defeated the Discipline Beast? Surely he’s someone famous.”

“He’s an imperial citizen who became an explorer. He must be some inconsequential clout chaser who lost his marbles.”

“Well, hold on to your hats for this part—the one who pulled off that feat was the Santafield son!”

“You mean the one who apparently only has white mana?”

“That’s right! The oddball who was the first in his class at the military academy yet transferred over to Lykeion Magic Academy.”

“I still hear people lamenting about his lost potential. If he had

mastered either Barrier Magic or healing magic, he could've become the best in the entire empire."

"Well, he *did* want to become a swordsman, so..."

"His father is the great Imperial Sword. Of course he wants to follow in his old man's footsteps."

"Still, defeating a Discipline Beast is an incredible achievement. I'm sure his father's happy to hear about that."

"You said it."

Airi walked over to the chatting knights, her heels clacking on the floor. "Tell me more about what you were discussing."

"P-Princess Airi!" When they recognized who had addressed them, the knights snapped to attention and raised their hands in smart salutes.

◊ Imperial Army Intelligence Corps ◊

Airi entered the headquarters of the Imperial Army's Intelligence Corps, which gathered and compiled information from the entire continent. All the agents inside were busy with their tasks. As every one of the documents lining the shelves contained confidential information, very few people could access this room, with Airi—as an imperial princess—being one of them.

"Sorry to intrude."

"If it isn't Princess Airi! What brings you here today?"

"Did something happen in the Last Dungeon?"

At Airi's question, the man sitting in the middle of the room—the supervisor of the Intelligence Corps—furrowed his brow. "So the rumors have reached your ears as well. Your Highness, your childhood friend has been making a name for himself in the dungeon city."

"I'd like to see the recordings of him."

"Of course. Right this way."

The Intelligence Corps kept all the footage that the Satellite System recorded within the Last Dungeon so they could scout any promising or skilled explorers who weren't affiliated with the empire. They also secretly maintained contact with the imperial explorers sent to the dungeon city to better keep an eye out for potential assets.

The footage the officer showed Airi depicted the 20th Level of Babel. At first, Eugene simply ran away from the three-headed monster—Cerberus, the Guard Dog of the Underworld. He looked rather pathetic as he picked up the girl who was accompanying him and dove into the hollow of a giant tree.

But then the footage showed him standing up against Cerberus. With a flaming crimson sword in hand, he faced the monster alone. He seemed incredibly brave, and the sight piqued Airi's interest.

"What's that magic sword?" she muttered.

Airi knew for a fact that Eugene could only use white mana. However, the sword in his hand was glowing a vivid vermilion.

"I'm guessing it's mana from Sumire, the girl with him. Apparently, she's a reincarnator who's inhabiting the body of an Ifrit. He used that same magic sword to defeat the Boss on the 10th Level," the head of the Intelligence Corps explained.

An Ifrit reincarnator? This was the first time Airi had heard about her. She continued watching. Despite Eugene's initial disadvantage, he pushed back Cerberus with an impressive strike. *Kirin, an advanced technique of the Niten Enmei-ryu...* It brought back memories.

Airi had trained with him, but even after all their time together, she'd never reached his level of skill. Part of the problem had been that, as a princess, she couldn't devote all her time and attention to swordsmanship; there had been many other things that she'd needed to learn as well. But the main reason was that Eugene was simply leagues above any of the other swordsmen at the military academy. Clearly those skills hadn't declined during his time at the magical academy either. Yet another detail caught Airi's attention.

"What was the magic sword he used at the end of the battle? At first glance, it looked like any other black mana sword, but..."

"Considering it lopped off the head of a Divine Beast, there's surely some secret behind it. We've been looking into it as well. Our guess is that it has something to do with the dungeon city's ruler, King Uther. He's always been the secretive type." The head of the Intelligence Corps stroked his beard, a troubled look on his face.

After pondering for a few moments, Airi asked, "As a member of

the Imperial Army's Intelligence Corps, what is your opinion of that battle?"

"It was fantastic. The Discipline Beast's irregular appearance on the 20th Level means we can't say they've passed the 100th Level, but I'm sure they'll accomplish that feat in time."

"I see," Airi replied calmly. In the footage, Eugene was conversing with the reincarnator girl.

"If that's all, I'll stop the video."

"Wait a second. Can you make the audio louder?"

"Of course."

He adjusted the volume until they could hear what the pair were saying. In the video, Eugene was comforting the crying girl—the Ifrit. Something he said made the girl smile.

"Become my partner, Sumire. Let's aim for the 500th Level together."

"Yeah! Let's go!"

Airi watched as Eugene and the Ifrit girl shook hands.

"The 500th Level? What a lofty goal, young Eugene. It'll be a glorious moment in imperial history should he accomplish it." The head of the Intelligence Corps chuckled heartily. It was clear he didn't take Eugene's words seriously at all.

In the footage, the dungeon staff used Ambrosia Tears to revive the students the Divine Beast Cerberus had killed, and the reincarnator girl reacted with almost exaggerated surprise. It didn't take long before the din of the explorers' conversation filled the room. They discussed the price of Ambrosia Tears and debts—things of no consequence to the princess of the empire.

The head of the Intelligence Corps was about to suggest that they stop watching the video but changed his mind when he saw the dead serious expression on Airi's face. *Perhaps she's relieved to see her childhood friend in good spirits*, he thought.

Not once did Princess Airi's eyes shift away from the footage of the 20th Level of Babel.



Epilogue: Meeting the Demon Queen (Part Two)

"Hmm, so you came to this school after your childhood friend dumped you, huh? You've been through your fair share of troubles, boy," Demon Queen Erinyes said in between drinking straight from her fifth bottle of wine.

She'd loosened the front of her dress, and the length of pale thigh visible in the slit of her skirt added to the alluring image. A rich spread, including thick cuts of ham and steak, lined the table before her. Though I'd handed her the gifts that the headmaster had given me before my venture into the Seventh Sealed Prison, she'd complained that "bread and wine are far from enough food" and so had forced me to make several trips between the school and her cage.

"Come on, boy, drink up! Or are you trying to say you don't want my wine?!"

"I-I'll have a glass."

According to the empire's laws, I was already an adult, so I could legally consume alcohol. I'd just never imagined the Demon Queen would be my first drinking partner... I threw back the wine, feeling it burn all the way down my throat.

"Whoa! A heavyweight, are you? Come on, come on, have some more!"

The Demon Queen topped off my glass again. She was in an awfully good mood. In that case, I'd succeeded in my mission of buttering her up, but I had no idea when she would allow me to leave. It didn't seem like her makeshift banquet would end anytime soon. A conversation I'd once had with my father came to mind.

"Eugene, I'll be late coming home tonight. I have a meeting with the empire's top brass. What a pain in the ass..."

"Do you have *to attend that meeting?"*

"Yeah, some social events are unavoidable as an adult. You'll understand when you're older."

"Huh. Sounds like being an adult's pretty hard."

Back then, I hadn't understood what he was talking about. Though I'd felt bad for him that he had to work extra hours, I'd also found such adult-specific bonds cool and envied him the experience.

"You know, you're really something," the Demon Queen said. "Normal people faint or fall ill if they spend too much time near me and my miasma. Are you still feeling all right?"

"The headmaster said something similar. I'm still fine. I can use Barrier Magic, so..."

Demon Queen Erinyes hummed, staring at me with keen interest. She didn't stop there either. She started poking my cheeks and patting my hair. Her hands were soft and warm.

Once she had touched me to her heart's content, she continued the conversation. "So you haven't contacted that childhood friend of yours since you came here? I'll lend you my ear—tell me *all* about it!" She was grinning at me.

Yeah, this really is a pain in the ass. "Before I dropped out, she said she wanted time apart. I haven't seen her since, and she hasn't sent me any letters. I'm sure she's already forgotten about me."

Bringing up Airi depressed me all over again. I'd thought that I could forget her if I enrolled in a school far away from the empire, but apparently I needed more time.

"Oh, that expression of yours is so precious! Here, let me offer you some comfort! ☆"

"Huh? Wai—"

The Demon Queen pulled me in close and pressed my face against her chest. Her skin was unbelievably smooth.

She giggled and said, "Sweet boy, feel free to cry into my chest."

"Um... My name isn't 'boy.' It's Eugene," I managed to mumble as the Demon Queen Erinyes started stroking my hair. It felt like she was treating me like a kid whenever she called me "boy," and I didn't appreciate it.

"Yes, you told me that earlier. I know your name. Eugene, I'm

sure you'll grow into a fine man." She smiled and narrowed her eyes, her expression so bewitchingly beautiful that she looked like an oil painting. "Hee hee... Well then, Eugene, if you're no *boy*, how much do you know about women? How far did you go with that childhood friend of yours?"

She slid a long finger down my cheek and gently traced my lips. My heart skipped a beat at the contact.

"N-Nothing happened between us."

Airi and I had never really behaved like young lovers during our time together at the military academy. We'd simply spent our days training and studying to improve our grades like proper students. In retrospect, I regretted not doing *something*, at least.

"Huh? You two didn't even share a kiss?" the Demon Queen said, face slack in genuine surprise as she peered into my eyes.

The memory caused me to lose control over my temper, and my voice came out a lot harsher than I'd meant it. "Yeah! That's right! How many times will you make me—" But something cut me off. *Huh?*

It took me a moment to register the Demon Queen Erinyes's mouth pressed against mine.

Time passed as I sat there in shock. I was losing myself in the soft sensation when the Demon Queen finally pulled away.

Grinning, she licked her lips and said, "How did you like your first kiss?"

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What was...?"

"My, what an adorable reaction! ♡ It really was your first kiss. Let's do it again! ☆"

Erinyes leaned toward me. I hurriedly tried to push myself backward, away from her, but she'd grabbed my arm while I was distracted and now shoved me down onto the mattress. She moved exceptionally fast.

"Um..."

"Don't worry. Just leave *everything* to me."

"L-Leave everything to you?"

What was she talking about? I couldn't even guess at what this Demon Queen was trying to say. I just had an awful feeling that

something crazy was happening right now. My heart was beating so fast it was practically hopping out of my rib cage.

"Oh? The military academy trained you well. You're quite muscular."

"Huh? H-Hey!"

I didn't even realize she'd unbuttoned my shirt. But with her still pressing down on me, I couldn't move.

"You must be lonely, what with your childhood friend dumping you and all. I'll help you forget about her," she whispered into my ear.

Her sweet voice sent a shiver down my spine, and she pulled me into another kiss. I stopped resisting. The Demon Queen's hands were all over me. Despite this being our first time meeting, she knew exactly where to touch to draw out the most pleasure.

"I grant you the privilege of calling me Eri," she said. "Take pride in that."

It took great effort to simply murmur, "Eri."

With a soft rustle, the Demon Queen slipped out of her dress, and her naked body was so exquisite, I felt my breath catch in my throat. Slowly, she climbed on top of me.

"I'll bring you to Heaven. ♡"

At that moment, all thoughts of my childhood friend completely fled from my mind.

And that was how I ended up offering my body to the Demon Queen Erinyes.

Extra Chapter: Eugene Speaks with the Club President

◊ A Year Ago ◊

"Good work, Eugene! I'm impressed you buttered up that Demon Queen!" the headmaster exclaimed after I returned from my night with Eri. He'd agreed to exempt me from tuition until I graduated rather than for a single year. "She asked to meet you at regular intervals, so she must have really liked you. How did you do it? If you don't mind letting me in on your secret, of course."

"Wh-Who knows? I sure don't," I replied awkwardly.

"Hmm... I'm dying to know, but I suppose that can wait. I'm sure you're exhausted, so get some well-earned rest back in your room. When you have time, there's a student I'd like you to meet. Here's my letter of introduction, so go meet her at your leisure."

"Uh, sure. Understood," I replied with a nod, and the headmaster patted me on the shoulder.

***

The next day, I went to the giant round building at the back of the school. The words "Biology Club—Sixth Sealed Prison" were written on the door. It was a different building from the Seventh Sealed Prison, where the Demon Queen was confined. I looked down once again at the memo attached to the letter of introduction from the headmaster.

◊ Memo ◊

The First to Seventh Sealed Prisons of Lykeion Magic Academy are maintained by the Biology Club, of which I am the adviser. To make things easier in the future, I'd like you to join this club, as well

as inform the president of this. I've written this letter to explain things in more detail.

The club president's name is Medea, and she lives in the clubroom within the Sixth Sealed Prison. I'm counting on you.

Headmaster Uther Mercurius Pendragon

I looked up from the letter and sighed. "So where *is* the clubroom?"

The inside of the Sixth Sealed Prison was a rainforest, and the humidity had turned the ground muddy. It was hard to see and walk.

Grr...

In the distance, I heard the growling of some massive creature—likely something belonging to the Biology Club. *Now that I think about it, I don't know what they're keeping inside the Sixth Sealed Prison.* The headmaster hadn't given me any details.

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Eugene! After all, you entered the forbidden Seventh Sealed Prison without suffering any ill effects!" he'd said before throwing his head back and laughing.

I wished I'd thought of pressing for more details, but there was no point in dwelling on regrets. *I'll hide my presence, then.* Camouflaging myself with Barrier Magic, I ventured deeper into the Sixth Sealed Prison. The headmaster had drawn a simple map on the letter of introduction, showing me how to get to the clubroom within the prison.

Why do I need a map to navigate a school building? It hammered home just how extraordinary this academy was. The military academy had been spacious as well, but it was nowhere near Lykeion's scale.

Boom! A gargantuan creature suddenly appeared right next to me. I hadn't sensed its approach at all; it had fallen from the sky.

Oh, what the hell? I hid myself in a tree's shadow and held my breath.

Rustle rustle rustle...

A giant dragon was shuffling about mere spear lengths away. I slowly backed away and beat a hasty retreat. After walking in the

opposite direction for a bit, I came across an artificial pool; although I was still inside a building, it was the size of a lake. In the pool, a water dragon and its baby were swimming happily. On the shore, an earth dragon was warming itself in the sunlight. Apparently, this prison even let in natural light.



That was when I finally realized what this place was. *The Sixth Sealed Prison is a dragon's nest?! He could've warned me in advance!* I hated that irresponsible headmaster.

***

F-Finally, I made it. By the time I saw a building that looked like the clubroom building, I was exhausted and dying on my feet. The Sixth Sealed Prison was full of dragons of several different species. As a rule, dragons hated sharing space with other types of dragons, but oddly enough, none of the ones in here were fighting over territory.

That wasn't to say they were tame, however. On my way through the Sixth Sealed Prison, I had seen the mutilated bodies of small monsters, ripped apart by fangs and claws. They must have been food for the dragons, since all of them were missing huge chunks of flesh. If the dragons had noticed me, that might have been my fate as well.

I approached a small brick house. Curiously, despite the lack of a barrier, none of the dragons approached it. *It's not booby-trapped or anything, right?* If my mere approach tripped a powerful trap spell, then I'd march right up to the headmaster and tell him I'd join the Biology Club when pigs fly. Fortunately, nothing happened, and I made it all the way to the front door.

Oh, wow. That was when I finally noticed that there was someone with immense power inside the house. No wonder the dragons avoided this place: They were too afraid to draw near it. *Is the person inside really a human?* The immense pressure emanating from behind the door was almost equal to that I'd sensed from the mythological creatures in the Seventh Sealed Prison. I nervously knocked on the door twice.

After a moment's silence, the person behind the door said, "Headmaster Uther? You're visiting way earlier than usual." The voice was a lot cuter than I'd expected.

"My name is Eugene. I'll be joining the Biology Club, so I came to introduce myself."

I sensed the occupant's confusion after hearing my name and reason for visiting. "Hmm? Did you come alone?"

"Yes. It was a difficult journey."

"D-Difficult, huh? Didn't the dragons attack you?"

"I snuck around them by concealing my presence."

"Oh? How fascinating. I'm interested in hearing what you have to say. Come on in. The door's unlocked."

"Excuse me."

I twisted the doorknob and slowly stepped inside the house. Inside, it was an absolute mess. Bookshelves lined the walls, and I couldn't even see the floor under the sea of books and papers. Everywhere I looked, I saw grimoires and spellbooks. Was this a mage's atelier? A large bed had been set up in the middle of the room, with mountains and mountains of books surrounding it. A small girl was lying on top of the mattress.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Eugene. My name is Medea," she said.

The girl made an odd impression. She looked fragile, yet she couldn't contain the aura and mana rising from her body. Though she was merely looking at me, it felt like I was under the gaze of some giant monster. But she was wearing a loose gown like what patients in a hospital might wear. Judging from how she kept coughing quietly, she seemed to be in poor health.

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Eugene Santafield."

"The pleasure's all mine. Oh, sorry, but can you stay over there? Don't take another step closer."

"Why?"

"Some complicated reasons I don't care to get into. Sorry about that."

Considering she was living in a place like this, those reasons must be serious. I wouldn't press for any further details.

"I understand. Just to make sure, you're the president of the Biology Club, and this is the Biology Club's room, right?"

"Oh? No one told you anything? Well, as you can see, my health leaves much to be desired. Since I can't attend my classes, I use this clubroom-slash-atelier to research monsters and publish my findings.

That's how I earn credits too."

"I see. That makes sense."

It still felt like I was speaking with a normal, albeit frail, girl. What was that overbearing presence I had sensed from her earlier?

"Ah, right. You said you wanted to join the Biology Club, yes? What kind of monster do you specialize in taming?"

"Huh?" I didn't know how to react at first. She'd posed the question as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Hmm? You need to be a Monster Tamer to join the Biology Club. Didn't you know that?"

"I didn't." In that case, I couldn't join the club.

"Hmm. Why do you want to join us?"

"The headmaster told me to. Here's his letter of introduction."

I handed Medea the envelope from the headmaster. After she cut it open, she pulled out the letter and read through it.

"Hmm, hmm, a recommendation from the headmaster, huh? He's a capricious one, isn't he? I feel bad for you, Eugene. Let's see. He wants me to change the entry conditions to allow people who can set foot in the Seventh Sealed Prison... Wait, huh?! Eugene, you can enter the forbidden Seventh Sealed Prison?!" Medea's eyes widened.

"Yesterday, I entered it with Headmaster Uther," I explained. "There were so many scary monsters I'd only heard about in legends."

"Normal people lose their minds the moment they venture inside! I see now why the headmaster likes you so—" Violent coughs cut off the rest of her words. She sounded as if she was in deep pain.

"Are you all right?! I can come back if you're not feeling well."

"Ah, no, it's fine. I'm actually feeling better than normal today. Don't worry."

This is better than normal? Does Medea have a serious illness?

Medea leaned forward, still hacking, and blood splattered from her mouth. Upon seeing that, I hurried over. I pressed my handkerchief against her red mouth and rubbed her back.

Her eyes flew open, and she screamed, "I told you to stay away!"

"How can you say that? Should I call for a doctor?"

"Just get away from me! I'm cursed! It'll spread to you too!"

Medea sounded frantic as she tried to shove me away, but her arms were as weak as a child's.

"A curse?"

"Yes! The Ever Dragon cursed me. If anyone touches me, horrible sores will break out over their skin and they'll stop moving and..." She paused. "And none of that is happening to you. Eugene, do you feel anything amiss?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, my Barrier Magic was wearing off. I recast it, though, so it's all good."

"I understand now. So this is why the headmaster sent you alone." Medea sighed, then gave me a big smile, showing her teeth. "You pass with flying colors. Welcome to the Biology Club, the oldest club at Lykeion Magic Academy. As you know, I'm the club president, and I'm happy to have you aboard."

"Thank you so much. I didn't know the Biology Club's been around for that long."

I'd assumed that it was a newer one given its low prestige and small size.

Medea chuckled. "It's very difficult to join. You have to earn the recognition of both the headmaster and the club president."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, come on, now. Did you walk all the way here with your eyes closed? We can't let in students who'd get gobbled up by dragons, can we?"

"I see." *That makes sense. Can't very well take care of monsters as part of your club duties if said monsters eat you.*

"Looks like you're in the dark about a lot of things. Do you have time?"

"Yeah, I haven't picked my classes yet, so I'm free today."

"Good. Well then, I, as a student of Lykeion for fifty years now, will tell you all you need to know."

"Wait, fifty years?!" I couldn't believe it.

"Oh my. For all intents and purposes, I'm still a sophomore. Some oddballs have been attending Lykeion for the past hundred years, and that's not even taking into account the long-lived species like elves and dwarves. I doubt they're even interested in graduating!"

"Isn't that a waste of money?"

"Students who got past the 100th Level don't need to pay tuition. You didn't know that?"

"Oh... Now that you mention it, I think I read that in the rules. Wait, does that mean you're an A-rank explorer? That's amazing, President Medea." To be certified as an A-rank explorer was one of the greatest honors on the Southern Continent. I had newfound respect for the slender girl before me.

"It's really not that impressive. All members of the Biology Club have gotten past the 100th Level. I'm sure you'll reach it soon enough."

"Ah, I... I can't."

A Swordmaster who couldn't injure or kill his opponents would have a hard time conquering the dungeon. General Education students like me weren't the types of people who could clear the 100th Level. That was for the chosen elite, like the students in the Hero Course.

"You're a fascinating fellow," Medea said. "All the new students at this school are brimming with ambition, yet the look in your eyes reminds me more of a hermit. Despite that, your mastery over Barrier Magic allows you to touch my cursed body without a hint of discomfort. How interesting. I'll tell you about this school, so I'd like you to tell me about yourself."

"I don't mind, but there's nothing really special about my story."

"That's for me to decide."

"All right, then. I was born on the Eastern Continent and—"

"Oh? The treacherous continent that's always at war?"

"Yes. After my homeland fell, my father and I fled to the Southern Continent."

"That must have been quite tough." Medea's eyes were full of sympathy.

"This was when I was a baby, so I don't remember any of it."

"Good. Memories of warfare are best forgotten." Medea spoke firmly. Perhaps she had gone through something similar in the past.

"What else... Oh, apparently, my lineage descends from a Sword Saint."

"Oh! You speak of Zeke Walker, the legendary Sword Saint of the Eastern Continent! He was the one who, along with the great explorer Christo, brought a temporary peace to the Eastern and Western Continents."

"I'm sure the story of my heritage is a fabrication. Hundreds of people on the Eastern Continent claim descent from the Sword Saint."

We continued to chat for a while, and President Medea informed me of the various rules and goings-on at the school. By the time we finished talking, night had fallen.

"It's about bedtime for me. I can't remember the last time I conversed for this long," Medea said before coughing again.

Worried about her condition, I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stay this late. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine. I had fun. Drop by whenever you have time; none of the other club members ever visit me."

"That's a little heartless of them."

"Isn't it? All because the dragons nipped them a few times," President Medea replied with a sad smile.

Uh, never mind, I get it. But I did feel like visiting this talkative club president again. She was a veteran explorer who'd gotten to the 100th Level of Babel, and she'd been a student at this school for many years now. I was interested in hearing more stories from her.

President Medea's sickly appearance had initially prevented me from realizing just how amazing she was. Babel's Record Holders were highly valued on the Southern Continent, and those in the top rankings were so famous that they even appeared in our school textbooks. Headmaster Uther's name, for example, was in them. That was why I had been so nervous when he wanted to speak with me after I enrolled in the academy.

The girl I had just spent hours chatting with was small and obviously unwell. Nonetheless, I should have noticed from her name and her position as the Biology Club president: She was Medea Parker, ranked tenth among the Record Holders of Babel.

It was only later that I learned the true depths of her power.

Afterword

Hello, it's Isle Osaki. Thank you so much for reading *Zero Damage Sword Saint*, and thank you to readers who've also read *Full Clearing Another World under a Goddess with Zero Believers*.

This series focuses on students who study at Lykeion Magic Academy while also exploring the Last Dungeon, Babel. I wanted to write both a dungeon exploration story and a school life story, so I mixed the two together into a combo set.

The protagonist, Eugene, is a boy who once had to give up the path of the sword, but after he leaves his homeland, his experiences at school and the new people he meets help him to mature as a person. The heroines are a reincarnator girl from another world and a fallen Angel who also once ruled over the continent as a Demon Queen. They're both quirky characters. My favorite character is Headmaster Uther! He's a fun guy to write and has a lot more secrets too.

I'd like to thank kodamazon for all the wonderful illustrations. Thank you so much! I'd also like to thank my editor S, who worked on *Zero Believers* with me as well.

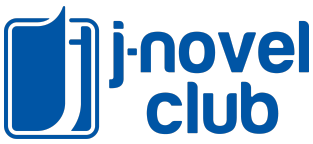
Finally, I'd like to thank all my readers. I hope you continue to support *Zero Damage Sword Saint*.











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Zero Damage Sword Saint: I Enrolled in a Magic School and Wound Up in a Contract with the Demon Queen: Volume 1
by Isle Osaki

Translated by Stephanie Liu Edited by Shakuzan

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