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Act One: Wandering / The Ashen Princess of Slaughter

# **Chapter 4: The Ashen Princess, Part Two**

## **Prologue**

Dungeons were living structures—ancient hermit crabs that, upon becoming monsters, had claimed caves or ruins as their shells.

These monstrous hermit crabs had evolved over time to feed on the aether and life force of living beings that ventured inside and became lost within their corridors. In order to determine the best ways to attract their most efficient prey—humans and monsters—dungeons could even read the lingering thoughts and desires of beings who died inside them. From those thoughts, they could craft various things within themselves to lure in more unsuspecting victims: ideal environments for monsters, precious metals and gems favored by people, equipment and magical tools made from special minerals, and so forth.

Since dungeons weren't themselves human, much of what they crafted was essentially trash. However, after absorbing lingering thoughts for prolonged periods of time, dungeons grew more sophisticated. They expanded their layers, turned caves into stone corridors, and eventually began to create items humans couldn't produce, such as magical swords and mythical treasures.

Eventually, the thousands of years' worth of thoughts that the dungeons had absorbed developed self-awareness, becoming "dungeon spirits"—beings distinct from the spirits of the natural world. These dungeon spirits could bestow blessings upon intelligent creatures who reached a dungeon's deepest levels. These blessings, known as gifts, consisted of special abilities that surpassed the usual limits of human power.

Heroes of eld had sought these gifts, and with their power had overcome numerous hardships, leading the world and its nations to peace. Because of this, even today, people continued to venture into dungeons in hopes of receiving gifts—despite knowing that more than just their dreams awaited them.

Once more, the young royals of the Kingdom of Claydale were preparing to challenge a dungeon.

A few centuries ago, the Kingdom of Claydale had grown into a major power by absorbing the old Dukedoms of Dandorl and Melrose. This had made the nation a threat in their neighbors' eyes and, to counter any aggression that might result, they had begun a tradition of sending the next generation of royals into dungeons in hopes they would attain gifts. Thus, the current crown prince, his half sister the princess, and two of his fiancées were all being sent on a dungeon venture.

While the preparations were ongoing, Count Leicester, the chief court sorcerer, was in his estate's office conversing coldly with a young lady—one of the prince's fiancées who would be participating in the excursion. Their exchange was so distant that one would doubt they were father and daughter at all.

"Listen, Karla," the count began, "I will not tell you to return safely. All I want is for you to ensure His Highness doesn't die."

"As you wish, father."

"I will not permit that you bring our servants as your attendants. Find a suitable escort elsewhere."

"I understand."

These were not the words one might expect a parent to say to a child heading toward near-certain death, but Count Ignace Leicester nevertheless bluntly said them, scowling all the while. Karla, meanwhile, simply narrowed her sunken eyes and smiled cheerfully.

How many years had it been since they'd last had a familial conversation?

The father treated his daughter as an object. The daughter regarded her father as less than human. The gulf between them was impossible to cross; one might've even described the pair as enemies. Ignace had, in fact, tried to kill Karla more than once. He'd kept her alive as a child only because he'd thought she might be of use, but the older she grew, the greater the danger she posed.

The only reason they hadn't tried to kill each other directly yet was Karla's status as the prince's fiancée.

She didn't have long to live, regardless. A simple strike from an ordinary person could have killed her. And yet, even when poisoned by the people of her household, Karla had endured.

"Hurry and go," the count commanded. "Preferably, be a shield for His Highness and die as an act of service by House Leicester for the crown."

The father told his daughter to die. The daughter laughed in response.

"While that sounds fun, I might need a shield of my very own. Might I bring one of my brothers?"

"You...!"

"Oh, I jest, dear father. I forgot I only have one brother left." Indeed, of her three brothers, only one remained. And even that brother had been away from the estate for years, fearing that Karla would kill him too. "Now then, father, have a wonderful day. Shall I also pay my respects to mother?"

"Get out!!!"

Count Leicester hurled a bottle of ink at Karla, hitting the door just as she closed it and leaving a dark stain and an unsightly dent in the wood. Hearing the sound from outside, Karla chuckled softly and walked merrily down the hallway.

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Karla's desire lay inside the dungeon, and her opportunity to seize it had arrived sooner than she'd expected.

Normally, a teen—royal or otherwise—who wasn't even of age to attend the Sorcerers' Academy would've been considered too young to venture into a dungeon. The reason that this expedition was being conducted so soon likely had something to do with Princess Elena and Karla herself.

Karla had grown more and more obsessed with power. She'd surpassed even the court sorcerers in skill, which had made the royal family view her as abnormal and a threat. Elena, meanwhile, had grown wiser and wiser. She was displaying more and more of the qualities befitting a queen, which had made

the royal family want to assess her capabilities relative to the crown prince's sooner rather than later.

Ideally, they would've waited until the crown prince came of age or, at the very least, until the princess's enrollment in the Sorcerers' Academy. Karla's original plan had been to continue honing her abilities until then.

But what pleased Karla wasn't the fact that her opportunity had arrived sooner than anticipated. It was the fact that, since Princess Elena would be in danger, there was a chance that a certain girl—one who had changed both the princess's fate and her own—would make an appearance.

"Now, who needs to die so that I may see you sooner...?"

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Adjacent to the main royal palace, where the king and those involved in politics worked, was the royal villa, where the royal family actually resided. The villa wasn't a single structure—the castle at the center housed the king's chambers and was surrounded by the residences of the three queens. Scattered beyond them were various other castles, both large and small, among which was the relatively new "princess's palace," located on the eastern side.

"My attendants for this dungeon expedition will be Sera and Chloe," Princess Elena explained. "Sera was one of the chiefs of security for the queens' palaces, but as of today, she is officially appointed chief of security for the princess's palace. I thank you both for your service."

"Yes, Your Highness," the two handmaidens replied in unison, bowing gracefully.

Due to concerns over potential interference from the nobility faction, the dungeon excursion was being conducted in secret, with the number of assigned personnel kept to a minimum. Aside from guards and porters, each participant was only allowed to bring two attendants.

One of Elena's chosen, Chloe, was still young but had been caring for Elena since the princess's birth. Elena trusted the handmaiden deeply, and because Chloe was also a knight with the Order of Shadows, her participation had been all but assured from the start.

There was likewise a reason that Sera—originally responsible for the queens' security—was being appointed as Elena's exclusive guard. Elvan, Elena's older half brother, had lost trust in the Order of Shadows after the attempted kidnapping of his sister during her trip to Dandorl. As a result, he'd chosen not to bring any members of the Order with him on this excursion.

While Elvan had acted out of concern for his sister, from Elena's perspective, things were more complex than that. Practically speaking, there weren't many people capable of acting as both bodyguards and attendants to the royal family. Among those, the number of trustworthy personnel was lower still. Elvan's only option had been to bring the attendants who usually cared for him. These attendants weren't as skilled as members of the Order. As royal aides, they did possess basic fighting skills, but not of the caliber required to navigate a dungeon.

Thus, the king had decided to protect both of his children by appointing Sera—a Rank 4 member of the royal guard—Elena's exclusive guard. However, just as His Majesty's mentality as a king was different from his mentality as a father, so too did his mentality differ from his daughter's.

"Our objective is not to obtain a gift for me, fortunate as such an outcome would be. Our priority is to ensure my brother, the crown prince, returns safely," Elena declared with steely determination. "To that end, we must all protect him. You two must be prepared to lay down your lives if need be." She was fully willing to include herself among those acting as shields for her brother.

"Yes, Your Highness," the two replied, nodding firmly.

Seeing their resolve, Elena allowed her stern expression to soften slightly. "I'm sorry, Chloe, and I'm especially sorry, Sera, for dragging you into this."

"There's no need for apologies, Your Highness," Sera said with a smile. "Chloe and I have been prepared for this from the moment we joined the Order of Shadows."

Chloe, who stood serenely next to Sera, nodded in quiet agreement.

This was a dangerous mission, and they might not return alive. Yet there was no sense of despair in the two resolute handmaidens' eyes—they were filled

with only strength.

"This is a rare opportunity, Sera, and so I have plucked you from my mother's side. I do hope this isn't an issue."

"I am at your command, Your Highness." Sera gave a small, wry smile at Elena's display of political acumen and maneuvering far beyond her eleven years.

Elena was prepared to risk her life for this mission, but she had no intention of dying. Instead, she was already considering what would happen after her safe return. She wasn't simply thinking of the immediate results of the expedition but their further ramifications as well. This foresight was a quality that the crown prince lacked, demonstrating that Elena had a greater capacity for rulership than her brother. Although the enlarged aethercrystal in her heart —a byproduct of her four elemental affinities—had left her physically frail and incapable of being a proper queen, she hadn't resigned herself to anything.

After all, when she was younger, she'd met a certain girl. That girl hadn't given up, even in the face of enormous adversity, and had saved Elena's life. The princess had been fighting alone in the darkness of her uncertain future, and the girl had come into her life like a ray of moonlight illuminating her path.

From that moment forward, Elena had resolved that she would never give up either.

I wonder what you'd think of me now, Alia.

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"Father, you must let me go as well! I'm Clara's older brother, and it's my duty to protect the crown prince, besides!"

"Absolutely not, Rockwell. You're the heir to the Margravate of Dandorl. Act like it."

Rockwell had only just learned that his sister, the crown prince's fiancée, had been assigned by the royal family to join the dungeon expedition. Desperate to protect her and his friend Elvan, he had pleaded with his father to allow him to take part, but his father, the current Margrave of Dandorl, had staunchly refused.

Perhaps if Rockwell had asked his hotheaded grandfather, who adored Clara, he would've obtained permission to tag along. But, since the family peerage had already descended to his father, that decision could have come from no one else. In contrast with Rockwell's grandfather, his father was a rational man—as befit the position of grand general of the royal army. It was his father's responsibility to help navigate the current unstable political climate.

As a rational young man himself, Rockwell understood his father's reasoning and knew he couldn't take any reckless actions.

Clara watched the exchange between her father and brother in silence, almost as though the subject didn't concern her. If she asked her grandfather, would he forbid her to go? If she earnestly begged her father, would she be spared from walking such a deadly path?

No, of course not.

House Dandorl and its vassals were unanimous in their wish for Clara to become the first queen; it stemmed from a desire to honor her aunt, who'd been forced into the position of second queen despite having been originally intended as the first. Before regaining the memories of her past life, Clara, too, had wanted to be first queen. She hadn't known any better. It was her family's wish, and so she'd convinced herself it would be the best path for her as well, and now it was far too late for her to say she no longer wished for it.

In the otome game, Clara had no gift. It was possible she'd simply failed to obtain it, but in the game's story, the dungeon excursion didn't take place until much later. During the game's demon plotline, the characters would venture into a dungeon to grow stronger. Perhaps the trigger for that plotline had happened sooner in the current timeline.

The original game only began after the heroine enrolled in the Sorcerers' Academy. Even if Clara were to befriend her, there was a chance Elvan would become romantically interested in the heroine. And if that happened, those around them, captivated by her charms, would consider getting Clara out of the way to make the heroine the first queen.

Though the game didn't delve too deeply into these details, Clara understood the situation now. To make the heroine, a princess from the Margravate of

Melrose, the first queen, false charges would be brought against Clara to eliminate her politically. She'd spent a long while thinking of how to proactively neutralize the heroine, but now, faced with the possibility of dying before that could happen, she felt her world grow darker.

What...am I even doing...?

### The Rainbow Blade

After fighting off the orcs threatening the barony I'd once lived in, I'd reunited with my former mentor—well, he was rather hands-off, but still qualified as my mentor—and teamed up with his ally, the sorceress Samantha, to take down the traitor Graves. In the process, we'd fought against *and* alongside a mythical coeurl named Nero. While we'd managed to drive Graves away, we hadn't been able to finish him off, leaving the situation and our feelings unresolved—and a rematch looming ahead.

Now, as it turned out, Viro had a new job for me.

He wanted me to protect the royal children during a dungeon excursion...which meant protecting Elena. I wouldn't refuse. If she was going to be in danger, I would protect her; I'd vowed as much. But Viro said that to complete that assignment, I needed to join his party, the Rainbow Blade—and he told me as much with a coy little smile, as though he'd just made a great offer.

I couldn't help but give him a half-lidded glare. "No."

"What?!" Viro's voice cracked in disbelief, and he looked stunned; clearly he hadn't been expecting my blunt refusal.

If I recalled correctly, the Rainbow Blade was one of the few Rank 5 parties in this country. I had no idea why Viro wanted me to join them. If he wanted to fill Samantha's position, a proper sorcery user should've been the choice. Viro had been searching for one for a long time, as I recalled.

Besides, I'd always been a solo agent and didn't really know how to fight in a group. It wasn't that I couldn't do it at all, but my fighting style relied on stealth and assassination, so it was more effective for me to fight alone, as I had

against the orcs.

Samantha cackled loudly. "Another flat rejection, boy!"

"Don't act like I just got dumped, Samantha!" Viro growled. "Besides, I've got at least one woman in my life, you know!"

"Still getting milked for all you're worth, huh?" Samantha looked at Viro with a mix of exasperation and pity. "You never learn..."

"No, no, listen! It's different this time, all right?! Alia, don't listen to the old bat's nonsense! Wait, why are we talking about this?!" Having finally remembered the topic at hand, Viro roughly ran a hand through his brown hair, then suddenly turned back toward me.

"You're going to go bald at this rate," I pointed out.

"Shut it! Just listen to me, okay?!" With a somewhat strained expression, as if holding back, Viro began to explain the reasoning behind his invitation.

On top of needing a replacement for the sorceress Samantha, Viro had been looking for a scout to be his own successor. A typical adventurer would start thinking about retirement by the time they hit forty. High-ranking adventurers with significant aether aged slower, however, and it wasn't uncommon for them to remain active into their fifties. Although Viro was in his late thirties, he looked to be in his early thirties, so he was very much still in his prime as an adventurer.

"I'm not gonna retire anytime soon, but the Rainbow Blade is special. It has a long history. Not just anyone can take over for a departing member, and it takes years to pass down all the knowledge necessary to work with us. Besides that, well, my woman wants me to find a stable job with a proper salary. And the Order of Shadows has offered me a high-paying role as a knight instructor..."

I listened quietly as the conversation took a strange turn.

"Girlie, take at least half of what he says about his woman with a grain of salt!" Samantha interjected. "Every few years he says stuff like that, then comes crawling back!"

"Okay," I replied with a nod. I could see that being the case.

"Hey, you two, what the hell?! I'm telling you, it's *for real* this time!" Viro protested. "Wait, that's not what we're talking about. Point is, I've decided you're capable enough to take over for me, Alia. Also, a random adventurer can't act as the princess's guard. Guarding the royals was a direct request to the Rainbow Blade. Doesn't matter if the princess trusts you when the others don't see it that way, yeah?"

Now that reasoning, I could understand. I was indeed a former urchin turned adventurer. Although I'd reached Rank 4, which afforded me recognition as an adventurer, that didn't necessarily translate into social trust.

"Don't think of it as joining any old party. Think of it as joining a *clan*. A group with a purpose. I mean, you see me taking on solo work all the time, right? All of us are strong individually, so we can do individual assignments, but for big jobs, we act as a party. Besides, if you end up not liking us, you'll just wander off anyway, won't you?"

Viro knew me well. I could only nod. "I see."

It made sense. A trusted adventuring party such as the Rainbow Blade could take on national-level assignments. Before, when I'd been assigned to the princess as a maid, I was still a child and had a referral from Viro, so I hadn't been met with much scrutiny. But now, with my more mature appearance and increased power, getting near Elena wouldn't be so simple. Yes, the Order of Shadows was in need of capable fighters, as seen by their attempt to recruit Viro after Graves's defection—but at the same time, it seemed that they'd grown even more careful about letting suspicious individuals in.

As for succeeding Samantha... While sorcery was a necessary skill for adventuring, a dedicated sorcery user wasn't strictly essential to a party. The Rainbow Blade had been on hiatus while searching for a replacement for the sorceress—but high-ranking sorcery users were scarce. It seemed that, to maintain their relationships with their clients, they'd decided to resume their activities. They'd even deemed it acceptable to bring in a Rank 3 user of light sorcery for the job protecting the royal family.

On top of that, the name "Rainbow Blade," with its century-long history, was more than just famous. It acted as a powerful deterrent in the underworld; they

would hesitate to mess with a member. But still...

"This bothers me," I grumbled. "I feel I've been trapped into agreeing from the start."

"Yeah, adults play dirty like that," Viro remarked. "But you're smart enough to have noticed that you couldn't really refuse. I knew you'd catch on." The self-proclaimed "dirty adult" laughed and lightly patted my shoulder.

Oh well. It was fine, I supposed. While the royal family would no doubt have capable guards and wouldn't absolutely need me, my presence would make Elena's safe return likelier.

"All right, Viro. I'll be joining your 'clan,' not your 'party.' Does that work for you?"

"Of course, Alia. I'll be counting on you."

Samantha cackled loudly again.

And so I joined the Rank 5 adventuring party known as the Rainbow Blade. Joining a party came with positives and negatives for me, but I figured right now the benefits outweighed the drawbacks. Viro explained that they did work as a party, such as right now, about once a year. That would leave me the rest of the year to operate independently, like he did, so it didn't seem like such a bad arrangement to me.

"All right!" Viro exclaimed. "Since this is settled, let's go over the schedule." "Okay."

To summarize Viro's explanation, the young royals—Elena included—would be heading into a dungeon four months from now. Two of the participants were my age, so there was no rush for them. The other two, however, were set to enroll in the Sorcerers' Academy at the start of next year, which meant the expedition had to be completed by the end of this year. And as for which dungeon...

"It's one of the major dungeons in the country, located on an island within the Duchy of Hoodale," Viro explained.

There were three major dungeons in Claydale: the one controlled by the royal

family that I'd explored with Karla, the one in the Duchy of Luxton to the southwest, and the island dungeon under the jurisdiction of the Duchy of Hoodale.

Large-scale dungeons were managed by either the royal family or one of the ducal houses, which were pillars of the nation. There had to be something significant in those dungeons to warrant how tightly they were controlled. Was the goal for the next generation of royals to obtain whatever that was?

Elena... Will you be safe?

Either way, I suddenly had a new mission. With four months to go, I considered returning to Cere'zhula for a while, but apparently I needed to head to the royal capital to meet the other members of the Rainbow Blade. It made sense. While I wouldn't have time to go see Galvus for weapon maintenance, I'd been meaning to ask his brother Gelf to work on my armor—I'd been feeling some discomfort around my hips and chest lately—so I figured I could prioritize that for now.

Viro, who had just finished administering first aid to himself, picked up our discarded luggage and began preparing to leave. "All right, first we go back to the capital. With just Alia and me, we should get there in about three weeks."

"You're in quite a hurry," I couldn't help but point out. Samantha and I both could use healing spells, so the rush seemed odd. It was almost as though he was trying to flee something.

Viro shuddered slightly. "I mean, not really..."

"The boy here wants to leave before the duke's men arrive!" Samantha said, cackling. "With the coeurl gone, the duke will lose face!"

"Well, duh! I mostly interact with royalist nobles, all right? If someone with the nobility faction sees me, I'll be in serious trouble. So let's hurry out of here, Alia!"

The current royal family focused more on meeting domestic demand, which meant areas with weak industries were struggling and found themselves forced to trade with other countries for income. These nobles, known as the nobility faction, were at odds with the royal family and had caused foreign influences to

spread within the country.

"Sure, but what about Samantha?" I asked.

"Oh, right. We've gotta sort out her reward. If we'd managed to finish the job, we'd have gotten paid through the guild, but..." He turned to Samantha. "What do you wanna do? Go to the capital with us and meet with Dalton?"

Samantha scrunched up her face in clear irritation. "I don't want to see that old dwarf or that oddball elf again! You tell them whatever you want, boy. I'm heading home to play with my great-great-grandchildren."

"All right. And your reward?"

"Pah, as if I care about the pocket change the Order is offering. Use it to buy some equipment for the girlie. So long, boy! You too, girlie!" Samantha said loudly with one final cackle. Like she had the first time we'd met, she ran off down the road before I had the chance to get a word in and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"Is she really senile?" I asked.

"I'm starting to doubt it, but...her nonsense definitely screams 'senile' to me."

"Hmm."

Samantha and Viro had a good dynamic. Although, despite being human, she was over a hundred years old, and I had the feeling she'd live a hundred more... Was she *really* not a yokai?

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And so Viro and I headed for the royal capital to meet with the rest of the Rainbow Blade. Since it was just us two, we could've crossed the mountains to avoid monsters, but Viro was a city man and not too fond of that idea, so we couldn't take any shortcuts.

"By the way, Alia, besides your combat power, do you have any means to prove you're Rank 4?" Viro asked as we walked.

"My Shadow Magic is Level 4. I know some Level 4 spells, so I think I could cast them with a bit of practice."

The Level 4 shadow spells were called Illusion and Confusion, and I'd learned the incantations and their meanings from Cere'zhula. My Shadow Walker spell was also Level 4, but it wasn't exactly standard.

"That'll do. To join the Rainbow Blade, you'll need to update your rank at the Adventurers' Guild in the capital. My initial plan was to have you join first and handle the actual party registration later, but it'll just be easier to handle things if you're already registered as Rank 4."

"Got it."

All I had to do to guard the royals was join the Rainbow Blade, but Viro believed that my being Rank 4 and not 3 would make a significant difference in how I was perceived, especially when it came to getting approval to guard Elena directly. That was why he wanted me to update my rank. Still, it hadn't even been six months since my last update. I had a feeling this was just going to bring more trouble...

"I'd take you to a small dungeon on the way and teach you the basics and protocols and whatnot, but I'm sure you'll be fine learning on-site. Just pick it up as you go, yeah?"

"Okay."

Viro was being hands-off as usual, but he knew this approach suited me. Though he might have seemed laissez-faire, he wasn't sloppy.

"I'll send word to the Adventurers' Guild in the capital. If we're lucky, you may even run into someone from the Rainbow Blade there. Our leader, Dalton, will probably want to test you. He's a pretty scary dude, so be mindful."

"Hmm?" I understood the part where the leader's name was Dalton, but...
"Aren't you coming to the capital too? You said we were both going."

"I am, but... Well, we kinda did let Graves get away, so I need to deliver that report in person." Viro's tone was despondent, but with an undercurrent of annoyance. "Pray it's not considered a total failure."

"Got it," I said with a small smile.

If we were going to separate anyway, we didn't need to travel together all the

way to the capital. I had to practice the Level 4 shadow spells too—though it wouldn't be as disruptive as practicing other elements, it could still bother people in a city. We traveled together for another ten days, during which Viro told me about dungeon exploration. Then we parted ways, and I continued toward the capital on my own. With that, I had little reason to stop in towns other than to restock supplies.

While traveling through the forest late at night and practicing Illusion, I was suddenly hit by a gut feeling. I couldn't sense any dangerous creatures. There was nothing in my field of vision or Detection range, and the intuitive sense for danger I'd honed over the years remained quiet too.

Still, something felt...off. I looked up and into the distance, and for the briefest of moments, my eyes reflected the image of a black beast on the surface of the moon hanging over the mountaintop.

"Nero...are you there?"

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About three weeks later, I arrived in the capital without any issues.

Along the way, I'd heard rumors that Duke Helton had dispatched a group to kill a mythical beast but hadn't achieved much. He had, however, announced that the roads were now safe, effectively bringing the incident to a close.

It was impressive how far word had spread, but I'd heard before that the Adventurers' and Traders' Guilds had long-distance communication tools. Some nobles must've been very eager for that information if they'd used those.

"Come to think of it, I haven't visited the Adventurers' Guild in the capital before," I mused. I'd been to the capital a few times, but with all the enemies I'd made, I'd avoided crowded spaces—including the Guild.

The Adventurers' Guild in the capital was about as massive as a noble's estate and located directly behind the Traders' Guild on the main street. In any town, the two guilds were always next to each other; it was a deliberate choice so that the Traders' Guild—which had helped fund the establishment of the Adventurers' Guild—could efficiently purchase materials. Since the Traders' Guild was always prominently located, it was impossible to miss.

While adventurers tended to be a rough bunch, the ones coming to the capital seemed to have a better sense of decorum, so the Guild was cleaner and better cared for than the norm. The large double doors were left wide open, likely due to the high foot traffic and to prevent adventurers from scuffing them with their weapons and armor.

I walked into the lobby, which was as spacious as a ballroom. Overhead, it was open to the second floor, with sorcerous lights hanging from the ceiling far above; the stone floor was lined with many chairs and tables for adventurers to use while negotiating with clients. At the far end of the lobby were about ten reception counters, behind which were receptionists far more beautiful than the ones elsewhere.

Scale and grandeur aside, the layout was no different from that of other guilds. When I arrived, shortly after noon, about a dozen adventurers were milling about; many of them shot sharp glances my way, likely having noticed my youth.

A quick look around revealed that there were almost no younger or less experienced adventurers here. It made sense; adventurers who came to the capital typically honed their skills elsewhere and visited this place seeking connections with nobles or wealthy patrons. Naturally, they tended to be older and higher ranked.

While there might have been novice adventurers who'd been born in the capital or were simply passing through, I'd heard most requests in the capital were geared toward more experienced adventurers, so novices usually left the city quickly. As a result, most of the adventurers here were Rank 3 or above. Some of them seemed startled, and others avoided looking at me; I assumed those had scanned my stats.

Any adventurer who underestimated me based on my appearance wasn't worth worrying about, however. The Scan skill could quantify a person's aether and abilities based on their visible attributes, but an experienced, capable enough person could sense such things even without using Scan. In a place like this, filled with strong adventurers, few would be foolish enough to willingly pick a fight.

Some of the receptionists here seemed to have the Scan skill as well; I assumed they were former adventurers. A few of them looked at me and left their posts. An elderly gentleman, rather well-dressed and clearly not a receptionist, emerged from behind the counters and approached me.

"Welcome to the Adventurers' Guild," he said. "Might you be Lady Cinders?" "That's not a name I've ever personally used," I replied.

"My apologies, Miss Alia. Rumors of your exploits have reached us in the capital, but I wasn't expecting one so young. The members of the Rainbow Blade have already informed us about you. I'll be personally handling your rank update and other matters today. We will assign you an official representative in the future, so please bear with us until then."

"Sure."

Viro had likely been the one who had contacted the guild ahead of time. The guilds seemed to gather information from various places using the long-distance communication tools, but still... I hadn't expected that the "Lady Cinders" nickname, used mainly in the underworld, would've spread so far as to be casually brought up in an Adventurers' Guild.

As for this older gentleman, he'd likely used the name as one might when addressing any other high-ranking adventurer going by a title. I doubted there had been any deeper meaning behind it. Although it didn't feel great to be referred to by that moniker, there was no sense in complaining about it at this point; I'd grown accustomed to it after so many people connected to the underworld had used it.

But soon, I was reminded that although this name might have been far more notorious in the underworld than in "proper" society, there were those even among adventurers who dabbled in jobs adjacent to the underworld.

"Hey, did you just call that little girl 'Lady Cinders'?" a light fighter in his late twenties asked with a smirk after overhearing our conversation.

"Miss Alia has matters to discuss with the guild. I ask that you save your questions for later."

"I mean, it's not like this will take long, right? I'd love to know how the pretty

little lady supposedly took down a whole branch of the Assassins' Guild. Or how she wormed her way into the Rainbow Blade."

I stared at him silently. Based on his demeanor, he was probably Rank 3 or so. He was sizing me up based on my appearance alone, which told me he assumed I hadn't joined Viro's party through merit but by some other means.

Judging others by appearances, being unable to assess their true abilities...

This man knew of my nickname and still chose to provoke me thoughtlessly. It suggested he likely wasn't directly associated with the underworld but probably took on violent jobs adjacent to it. Perhaps he was a thug who'd been blessed with natural talents and had connections in the underworld, through which he'd heard about me.

I made this assessment out of caution, and it took only a few seconds. This man wasn't concealing his strength; he wasn't sophisticated enough for that. There was nothing else to him. With no more reason to engage, I gave him a quick glance and began walking toward the elderly gentleman.

The adventurer's presence swelled with anger at being ignored. His facade of decency peeled away, and his attitude shifted to something more boorish. "Hey! Don't get snooty with me, girl! Say something!"

I could've said something to appease him and settle things, but I saw no reason to go out of my way to indulge his temper.

"Miss Alia, please, let us settle this amicably," pleaded the elderly gentleman. Having already assessed my combat power, he wasn't worried for me—he was worried for the provocateur.

"Don't worry," I said. I wasn't interested in causing trouble on my first day here either. "I won't make a mess."

"Miss—"

I half turned and quickly raised my left arm. The light fighter looked wary for a moment, but it was too late to block my attack—he should've tried to dodge or defend himself as soon as I began to move.

"Gah!" In one swift motion, the weighted pendulum I'd pulled out of Shadow Storage came down on the man's head with a crunch. "Ugh..."

The man dropped to his knees from the blow. I hadn't planned on killing him, but seeing him still glare at me even as he crumpled made me half sigh. *Did I hold back too much? Should I just go ahead and kill him?* 

As I considered this, the man's face twitched and turned pale. But before I could do anything, an unfamiliar woman's voice rang out. "Restrain this man, quickly!"

"Wh-What are you doing?! Let go of me!" the man shouted as the previously idle guards moved to apprehend him. But, dazed from the blow to his head, he couldn't put up much resistance as they dragged him off.

Normally, neither the guild nor the city guards intervened in disputes between adventurers. At worse, one might be penalized, but all that would do was lower one's standing with the guild. This lack of intervention partially stemmed from the fact that nobody could truly stop a high-ranking adventurer. But, more importantly, the lives of adventurers—many of whom were rough and unruly—were considered far less valuable than those of ordinary citizens.

The guards in the guild were there primarily to protect clients from getting caught up in trouble, so even in situations like this, they didn't act; though the elderly gentleman had tried to stop me, he hadn't tried to get the guards involved. Perhaps they'd acted this time due to my affiliation with the Rainbow Blade, a party that ordinarily took requests from the royal family. Or, perhaps, it was because *I* was the wronged party.

So who had given the order?

"Lady Tabatha, why are you here?" the gentleman asked.

"I sensed there might be bloodshed if I didn't intervene. I'll take things from here, so please stand down."

He regarded her with suspicion. "Isn't this outside your purview?"

"That is no concern of yours," she replied, keeping a neutral expression and deflecting his question calmly. "Please return to your work."

"Very well..."

After finishing her conversation with the elderly gentleman, the woman

turned toward me with a polite smile, glancing at me as if confirming my identity. "Lady Cinders... Miss Alia, I presume?"

"Yes," I replied, and her eyes narrowed slightly.

This woman was...strong. She wasn't a receptionist or an ordinary member of the staff, and she was wearing a loose robe, so it was difficult to fully gauge her strength. Still, I could sense she had power comparable to that of Sera of the Order of Shadows. And although she wasn't a guild employee, she somehow had the authority to give them orders. Who was she?

She must've sensed my caution, because her smile stiffened slightly and she bowed her head. "My apologies, Miss Alia. We seem to be attracting quite a bit of attention here. Would you mind accompanying me to the back?"

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I was brought to what appeared to be a reception room. After about a quarter of an hour, the woman returned holding documents of some sort.

"Thank you for waiting, Miss Alia. Would you like something to drink?"

"I'm not thirsty." I was seated on a couch; before me on a table was a cup of what looked to be herbal tea. She'd poured it for me before leaving the room and I hadn't touched it, instead leaving it to cool.

"I see." She smiled, seemingly unbothered. Finally, she got to the topic at hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Tabatha, an auditor for this guild." Tabatha bowed her head slightly.

"Auditor," I found myself repeating, unfamiliar with the term.

Perhaps taking it as a question, she began to explain, "Indeed. You may have noticed, but I am not a staff member of the Adventurers' Guild. I was sent here by its parent organization, the Traders' Guild. As such, some people here do not view me favorably, which is why it took me some time to return."

So that had been the reason for my wait.

According to my knowledge, auditors were supposed to monitor and investigate the internal workings of an organization. Why would someone in such a position have any business with a mere adventurer like me?

"I've heard about the matter of your promotion to Rank 4, Miss Alia. There's no issue with that itself, and normally a staff member of the Adventurers' Guild would handle the review and the Rank 4 proceedings, but..." Tabatha trailed off with an air of hesitation.

"Is there a problem?"

"Well, my role is to oversee financial audits of this guild, but in truth, I am also tasked with keeping an eye on things to ensure no specific noble holds too much influence. Because of this, my job involves a certain level of risk, and so only sufficiently capable individuals can carry it out."

Perhaps Tabatha had wanted to apologize for making me suspicious of her combat power, but it was too late for that.

"The issue right now is related to the influence of nobles, specifically."

Tabatha proceeded to explain. To summarize, top-tier adventurers were likelier to have dealings with nobles. The nobility wasn't always united, and currently, two factions—the royalists and the nobility supporters—were quarreling over their respective interests. If any particular noble were to attempt to exert undue influence over the guild, not only would it lead to information being leaked to the opposing faction, but it could also harm the credibility of both the Adventurers' and the Traders' Guilds and compromise their neutrality.

"I get that. What does it have to do with me?"

"Those in the know are aware that the Rainbow Blade has ties to a certain noble family. And while on paper you would be joining this Rank 5 party as one of the participants in an escort mission, a higher-up within the Adventurers' Guild has reservations about this, claiming that you're too young to be promoted to Rank 4, Miss Alia."

"And you think that person is from the opposing faction?"

"My job is to ascertain that, but it seems likely."

So, while there was no proof yet, this noble—seemingly connected to the opposing faction—was trying to prevent me from joining the Rainbow Blade as a means of disrupting the escort mission.

"Does the guild have a say in party composition?" I asked. The Rainbow Blade was Rank 5, but Viro was Rank 4. Even if I didn't get promoted and had to stay at Rank 3, I didn't think that would stop me from being able to join.

"Not typically, but since you're still in your early teens, the guild can impose restrictions under the pretense of protecting a young adventurer. This system is in place to prevent the exploitation of younger adventurers by unscrupulous individuals, but in this instance, it's being twisted to serve an agenda."

"I see..." I did recall being warned about exploitation upon first registering with the Adventurers' Guild. "Well, in that case, I don't have to join them," I said as I stood up.

"Pardon?" Tabatha replied, caught off guard.

"My objective is to complete the job itself. It's not ideal, but I expect the client will just approach me directly about it."

Viro had said that joining the Rainbow Blade would help me gain the credibility necessary to act as a royal escort. Still, if Sera had been the one who'd asked him to track me down, then I could probably join the mission eventually anyway, even if it took extra time.

"W-Wait, Miss Alia!" Tabatha hastily called out to stop me as I tried to leave the reception room. "Is the client a member of the royalists?"

"I don't know. And even if I did, not revealing such details is part of being trustworthy, wouldn't you say?"

In truth, all I knew was that the request was to escort a group of royals; I had no idea which noble family had made it. Tabatha, as a member of the Traders' Guild, probably wanted to verify the client's identity and get details on the Rainbow Blade's mission. But, since Viro and the others hadn't disclosed anything, I wasn't going to either.

"I see," she murmured. Likely having realized I was deliberately keeping things from her, she paused for a few seconds to think, then turned her attention back to me. "In that case, Miss Alia, would you consider accepting a request from the Traders' Guild?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain everything."

The request from Tabatha and the Traders' Guild had to do with her own duties. The request itself was only a pretext, and the specifics weren't important—it was something the Traders' Guild had planned to commission the Adventurers' Guild to do regardless. My task was to complete the request and demonstrate that my abilities were suitable for a Rank 4; I would then be bumped up a rank and the Traders' Guild would officially endorse my entry into the Rainbow Blade.

The point of this was to suss out which noble family the biased higher-up at the Adventurers' Guild was in contact with, then dismiss said higher-up.

By agreeing to this request, I would get my rank updated, join the Rainbow Blade, and proceed with becoming Elena's escort, all while avoiding the higher-up's meddling.

"How do I 'demonstrate' that my abilities are suitable?" I asked.

"I will be personally verifying your performance on-site, of course."

Tabatha herself had the skills of a Rank 4 adventurer and would be accompanying me on the request to assess my abilities—this meant the request effectively served as a substitute for my Rank 4 promotion exam. I wasn't sure whether it would be enough to sway the biased staff member within the Adventurers' Guild, but I understood that this was just the way things were. This was a situation of my own making, after all.

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The request from the Traders' Guild involved investigating an old mine, shut down long ago, not too far from the capital. I boarded Tabatha's carriage, almost in secret, from the back entrance of the Adventurers' Guild. The entire thing felt oddly rushed.

"Investigating an abandoned mine sounds like something anyone could do," I pointed out. A task like this would've been perfect for a Rank 2 adventurer party.

Tabatha nodded in agreement. "This information is still known to very few, even within the Traders' Guild, so I ask that you keep it confidential. The mine

was closed and abandoned over a hundred years ago, but a caravan of merchants recently heard reports from villagers that monsters have taken up residence there. The caravan's guards decided to investigate and found signs that the mines were being turned into a dungeon."

"A dungeon," I repeated. Those were formed when ancient hermit crabs turned into monsters and claimed particular areas as their homes, though their exact ecology remained poorly understood.

If a young individual had chosen the mine as its first shell, dealing with it would be simpler. But if this was an older crab that had abandoned its previous spot and drifted here, it could have already attracted powerful monsters. Tabatha explained this investigation had to be kept secret from the Adventurers' Guild because they would've handled the situation differently from the Traders' Guild.

"When a new dungeon forms close to human settlements, the Adventurers' Guild conducts an investigation and prioritizes eliminating it immediately afterward. The Traders' Guild, however, prioritizes evaluating its potential commercial value."

Minerals deep underground within a dungeon were considered treasure. Even in an abandoned mine fully exhausted of iron and coal, the activation of a dungeon could cause previously unreachable ore to rise closer to the surface. If silver ore were present, the dungeon's aether could even produce its enhanced form—mithril.

Mithril didn't rust or decay and remained strong even when forged thin, making it ideal for crafting armor. And because it was a good aether conductor, mithril weapons could damage malevolent spirits and other incorporeal beings. It was also beautiful; though I'd never seen any myself, I knew there were coins made from intricately crafted mithril—colloquially known as platinum coins—that had ten times the value of a gold coin due to their rarity and artistic worth.

A dungeon, therefore, could potentially hold all of that value. However, if the monsters it attracted were strong enough, it could result in the nearby villages being wiped out. The Adventurers' Guild would never take such a risk, which was why it generally opted to eradicate dungeons preemptively. The Traders'

Guild, however, would argue that if a village was an obstacle, the residents could simply be relocated.

Our duty was to confirm whether the site had truly turned into a dungeon and assess the types and ranks of the monsters present. If it hadn't become a dungeon but was still dangerous, we were to eliminate the threat.

"What's your weapon of choice, Tabatha?"

"I'm a water sorceress. My melee combat power isn't as high as yours, but I excel at defense, so there's no need for you to protect me." Dressed in loose robes that concealed her figure, Tabatha certainly looked the part of a sorceress. She didn't even have a knife at her waist, so she either used another weapon or was particularly confident in her own abilities.

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After about a day's travel, we reached our destination. We hadn't bothered preparing meals or setting up camp, instead relying on ready-made food purchased in advance at the capital, so we were able to arrive by nightfall.

It really wasn't that far from the royal capital. Typically, one wouldn't have expected a coal mine so close to such an important city, but apparently this was a relic from an older time. Although the mine had been deactivated, a village remained nearby, cultivating wheat for the capital.

If a dungeon had indeed formed near such a place and was attracting monsters, a decision had to be made quickly to either destroy or manage it. The village would be in danger otherwise. *If* there was indeed a dungeon.

Tabatha decided to head straight to the abandoned mine without stopping by the village. I didn't know how long the mine investigation would take, but even if we did go to the village, it wasn't guaranteed we'd find a place to sleep at this hour. I had no intention of wasting any time.

"Now, shall we proceed?" Tabatha asked.

"Let's."

We left the coachman behind with the carriage and entered the abandoned mine. Thanks to Night Vision, there was no need to light any lamps, and I took

the lead, with Tabatha following behind. Though this wasn't a subject I was particularly well-versed in, according to my knowledge, this mine seemed fairly standard. It looked a bit disturbed, perhaps from people who'd ventured inside after its deactivation—the rock surface was freshly scraped here and there, particularly within the first few dozen meters from the entrance, indicating someone, or something, had been here recently.

"There doesn't seem to be anything here," I mused aloud. If the area were turning into a dungeon, there would typically have been signs, like unnaturally flat ground or partially absorbed debris. There were no such indications here.

"Perhaps the changes are taking place deeper inside. Let's proceed farther."

"All right."

Dungeons had a certain air; one could feel the aether permeating them. These mines didn't feel that way at all. And, while the abundance of aether made it difficult to detect monsters inside dungeons, there didn't seem to be any here.

We proceeded deeper still and finally found something unusual.

"This is...a kobold, I think," Tabatha said, grimacing at the sight of the carcass—a monster with a dog's head—lying in the darkness.

It could've simply been that the Rank 1 monster had wandered in and died, except that this one had been slain with a blade. A rusty short sword lay discarded nearby, and upon closer inspection, I spotted traces of blood that suggested a struggle had taken place.

"It could have been a fight between monsters. This might be a dungeon that attracts humanoid monsters, similar to the major dungeon near the Leicester territory. Let's keep going, Miss Alia," she urged as I examined the kobold's corpse.

### "...Right."

Each dungeon had its own regional characteristics. In wooded areas, insectand beast-type monsters would appear; in rocky areas, bird and reptile types were common; near bodies of water, aquatic monsters were predominant. In dungeons near human settlements, humanoid monsters were more numerous. With that in mind, this would indeed seem to be a dungeon with demi-beast-type monsters.

"Miss Alia, what is that?" Tabatha asked, giving me a puzzled look as I poured a liquid from a ceramic bottle along the path of the abandoned mine. Perhaps she'd noticed its scent?

"It's monster repellent. Don't worry, it's not poison."

"I see..."

She'd probably heard about how Lady Cinders had used poison to wipe out an entire branch of the Assassins' Guild. Whether she was wary of me or just concerned, I wasn't sure, but this really wasn't poison.

As we went deeper, we encountered more kobold carcasses but no bodies of any monsters that could've killed them. The number of corpses wasn't particularly alarming either. We kept going, not hitting any dead ends, and eventually reached what seemed to be a large space: a crossroads that doubled as some sort of storage area. The moment I stepped inside—

#### Whoosh.

A faint sound cut through the air. I jumped to the side, alert, and an arrow pierced the rock wall behind me with a loud *thunk*. While dodging subsequent arrows with Martial Mastery, I tracked the direction they were coming from.

Four, five, six...

"Shadow," I chanted, conjuring illusions that could deceive Night Vision. The arrows began to fly toward them, and the moment the barrage of projectiles was exhausted, I dashed toward the area from which the arrows had been fired. I swung my weighted pendulum in a sweeping arc, aiming for the concealed presence.

### Clang!

Two presences quickly moved to avoid the attack, while a third attempted to block the pendulum. Another arrow flew from that direction, and I could sense panic in the air; the arrow lacked the precision of the earlier shots. As I was about to rush in using a shadow clone as a decoy, I suddenly felt something

malicious coming at me from behind and somersaulted into the air to avoid it.

There were no new enemies in the direction of the entrance—but *she* was still there.

"Is that your weapon of choice, Tabatha?" I asked.

"Oh, how disappointing. You figured it out?" Tabatha looked genuinely exasperated as she swung a thin silver chain with a spiked weight at the end. It was a String Manipulation weapon, like mine...and likely made not of simple silver but aether-enhanced silver. Mithril.

"How could I trust someone who won't even light up a torch to investigate a mine?"

While it wasn't strange for someone as skilled as Tabatha to have Night Vision, this entire thing had been unnatural. Besides, she'd been way too cautious around me. Even if she wasn't truly my enemy, it was impossible for me to trust someone who was constantly on guard like that. And those weren't even the only reasons this situation had been suspicious.

Tabatha still appeared annoyed but gave me a look of understanding. "I'd expect no less from you, Cinders. I've heard stories about you—you're quite a bit of trouble. Lights on, you lot! This one's more skilled than all of you!"

At Tabatha's command—perhaps she'd decided the darkness gave me an advantage—flames and sorcerous lights flared up around us, revealing the hidden attackers. Just as I'd expected, this wasn't a dungeon but a trap.

There were six women between their mid-teens and twenties, dressed in black leather armor. Judging by the ambushers' presences, their individual combat power had to be around 300 or so, on the low end of Rank 3. They were all glaring at me, bows in hand, as though I were their sworn enemy.

It wasn't entirely untrue. Some of them bore faint burn scars.

"Remnants of the Assassins' Guild," I wagered. A wave of tension rippled through the group.

"Stay calm!" Tabatha barked sharply, preventing their moment of distraction from turning into an opening for me.

The women braced themselves against any sudden moves on my part, then slowly positioned themselves around me. They discarded their bows, drawing daggers and short spears instead.

"You're smart, aren't you, Cinders? As you've guessed, these are survivors from the Northern Border District branch. How did you figure out the trap?"

"So this is about revenge, then." I ignored Tabatha's question and surveyed the surroundings.

"That's their reason, yes," she replied with a light shrug. "Personally, I transferred from that branch to the central one almost six years ago, so I don't really care. Dino and I just didn't see eye to eye. If I'm being honest, when I heard that the branch went up in flames as soon as he became the leader, I had a good laugh about it."

One of the younger survivors of the Northern Border District raised her voice in protest of Tabatha's mockery. "Hey!"

"Be quiet," Tabatha snapped with a glare. "You lot came running to me for help, and I'm going out of my way to do you a favor for nostalgia's sake. You know that, don't you?" She let out a displeased sigh, cautiously watching me as she swept her hair back. "Well, whatever. I have my own business here. Why don't you tell me what the royalists are plotting? Not that you have to tell me right now, of course. These girls have a bone to pick with you. I'm sure they wouldn't mind torturing you for a bit. You'd like that, wouldn't you, ladies?"

The first girl had shrunken back at Tabatha's sharp rebuke, but the others hurriedly replied in unison, "Yes, ma'am!" Their faces were hidden behind masks, but their actions made it clear how terrified they were of Tabatha.

So Tabatha had infiltrated the Adventurers' Guild—or rather, the Traders' Guild—to spy on the royalists. It was no simple matter for someone from the Assassins' Guild to pull off an infiltration like that, so it had likely been facilitated by someone within the Traders' Guild, probably with ties to the nobility faction. And if that faction was hiring the Assassins' Guild and backing Tabatha, it could only mean one thing: They wanted the royals assassinated.

Tabatha moved to stand in front of me and block the entrance while the women shifted to circle around me, their movements soundless and perfectly

coordinated. If one of them panicked and made a run for it, it would create an opening for me, but Tabatha was a skilled fighter and had perfect control over the women. She wouldn't allow that.

"Now, Cinders, I recommend you behave. You don't think you can win this without a plan, right? Cooperate and you might even die painlessly. That is, assuming these ladies allow it."

"Pain." The moment I unleashed the spell, Tabatha froze. But I immediately felt as though something was coursing through me and hindering the spell—she'd probably known I could do this.

Tabatha quickly distanced herself from me, which was perfect. I knew I couldn't kill a Rank 4 like her with a single blow; all I needed was for her to be a little farther away.

#### Whoosh!

As soon as everyone's attention shifted to Tabatha, I swung my weighted pendulum, grazing the temple of the young woman who'd protested earlier. As she instinctively moved to dodge, I sprang forward; my knife sliced horizontally across her abdomen. That single moment of distraction from Tabatha was enough for me to kill at least one person.

But I wasn't going to kill this one. Not yet.

"You...!" one of the women hissed, lunging at me with an enraged expression. I parried her short spear thrust with my dagger and swiftly leaped backward, taking the opportunity to slip out of their encirclement.

I hadn't underestimated them for a second—even Tabatha alone would've been an equal match for me. These women weren't as strong as their old comrade Kiera had been, for instance, and were only Rank 3. But there were six of them, and escaping would be no simple task.

That was why I'd begun by targeting the weakest one and severely injuring her. With a gash in her abdomen and a blow to the head, she would definitely die if left unattended. If these women had been typical Assassins' Guild members, they would've likely left her to die. But these were survivors. They'd made it through a terrible situation and developed a strong sense of

camaraderie. The fact that they wanted revenge despite being assassins was proof of this, so I knew they would care for their injured friend.

They'd been too confident in their advantage and had fed me more information than they should have.

"Stop her!" Tabatha commanded as she recovered from the effects of Pain. The women charged at me, weapons at the ready.

I was Rank 4, but my melee combat skills were still only Level 3. Even Martial Mastery and String Manipulation at Level 4 didn't necessarily translate into an overwhelming advantage for me.

"Don't engage her one-on-one! Surround her!"

Shing!

A spear thrust and a dagger strike came at me from either side, and I used my own dagger and knife to deflect them. Tabatha seized the chance and lunged at me, swinging her mithril-chained pendulum. The weight at the end was spiked and could easily rend flesh, causing heavy bleeding even if the blow wasn't fatal. The equipment Gelf had made for me could likely withstand one hit, but I didn't relish the idea of testing it.

"Shadow Walker."

In an instant, I vanished into the shadows, and the spiked weight smashed into the rocky ground with a crash. Immediately, I emerged from Tabatha's shadow, swiftly brandishing my black knife.

Clang!

The knife sliced through Tabatha's robe only to be blocked by something metallic underneath.

"Oh, you're asking for it, Cinders!" she growled, casting off her robe and revealing gleaming, silver-colored chain mail.

That was likely also made of mithril. I'd never believed that she was a simple mage. The highly aether-conductive mithril chain mail had likely been what had reduced the effect of my Pain spell too, by channeling Tabatha's aether.

"Annoying brat!"

"I could say the same."

Although the fight had been evenly matched so far, that didn't change the fact that I was at a disadvantage. Right now, one of the women was occupied tending to her gravely injured friend, so their numbers had been temporarily reduced by two, but it was only a matter of time before both of them rejoined the fight.

Tabatha scowled at the injured woman and the one helping but continued to issue commands to the others. "Keep her at bay! She has no plan!"

She swung her chain at me again. I deflected the spiked weight with my dagger, but the difference in skill between us stunned me for a brief moment. The remaining women seized this moment to attack, and though I dodged most of their strikes, I still got grazed on the arm and shoulder.

As Tabatha had said, it would've been nearly impossible to fend off five attackers in a confined space like this without a plan. But...who said I had no plan?

"Die!"

Fueled more by hatred than Tabatha's orders, the women lunged at me again. I vaulted upward to evade, only for Tabatha's chain to come sweeping toward me.

"This ends here!"

In that split second, I kicked off in midair, using the momentum to avoid the spiked weight. I chanted, "Spark," igniting a piece of cloth I'd pulled from Shadow Storage and wrapped around a throwing knife. Swiftly, I flung it at Tabatha.

"Are you daft?!" Tabatha's eyes widened slightly, but she easily dodged my flaming knife, not even bothering to block it.

But she hadn't noticed what was behind her, had she? She'd positioned herself near the entrance to block my escape, and behind her, there was something very specific.

"What?!"

Flames suddenly burst forth. They weren't very intense—not yet—but left unchecked, they would surely spread. In the confines of this coal mine, the toxins from the smoke could cause serious harm. I could withstand the toxins for a while by covering my mouth with my spider-silk scarf, but...could *they*?

"Have you lost your mind?! Why would you use fire in a place like this?!"

I had used fire to wipe out the Northern Border District branch of the Assassins' Guild too. That hadn't been my plan; it had been a stroke of luck. The survivors from that attack, who still bore the burn scars, were now starting to panic.

"I told you it wasn't poison," I pointed out.

"You can't be serious!"

It was the oil I'd been spreading on the way here that had caught fire. Fire was threatening, due to both the intense heat and the toxic smoke it caused. I'd laid my trap knowing they'd panic upon finding themselves in a blazing inferno.

Panic sapped one's strength and clouded one's judgment. As if to demonstrate this, Tabatha hadn't even noticed that the women's past trauma had dulled their movements. Instead, she was still carelessly swinging her spiked weight. She was stronger than me in close combat, but we were evenly matched in Thread Manipulation. And, thanks to my trap, I now had the advantage.

"What?!" Tabatha shouted as my pendulum clashed with the chain of her spiked weight, pitting our Thread Manipulation skills against one another.

One of the panicked women yelped as her neck got caught between the pendulums, and the second Tabatha and I both instinctively pulled back our weapons, her neck was crushed.

One down.

"You'll pay for that!" Tabatha snapped, yanking forcefully on her chain and pulling both the corpse and me toward her.

Finding myself suddenly off-balance, I was exposed as she drew a dagger from her waist. In this situation, dodging that attack would be difficult; I made the

split-second decision to focus solely on defense rather than counterattacking. Just as she prepared to strike, however, an extremely powerful presence surged behind her.

"What?!"

Tabatha and I both froze in place from the overwhelming force. Behind her, there was nothing but the fire I'd started. I'd ignited the passageway not only to trap Tabatha and her group but also to prevent Tabatha's coachman—who was likely still outside—from coming in.

So who was it that had defied the flaming corridor to come here?

The next instant, a hulking, cloaked man burst through the flames, aether swirling around him. He shrugged off his now flaming cloak and unsheathed the massive sword on his back, scattering embers everywhere.

"Well, I wasn't expecting this," he said, aiming his enormous blade at us. "Which of you is the bad guy?"

I stared at him.

"...Feld?"



## Feld

"You know me?" Feld asked, his eyes wide as he glanced at me. I hadn't meant to call his name out loud, but... "Oh! You're that strong little adventurer I met in the royal capital that one time! Been a while...and look at you, even stronger! Could kick my ass if I don't go all out. Now, let's see..."

Despite his cheerful, relaxed tone, Feld's eyes narrowed slightly when he scanned the rest of the group.

"What's going on here? It's not very smart, you know, setting fire to an abandoned mine."

### ▼ Feld

Species: Humanð (Rank 5)

Aether Points:  $212/225 \triangle +30$ 

Health Points:  $357/370 \triangle +20$ 

Overall Combat Power: 1494 (Boosted: 1908)  $\triangle$  +116

Feld had grown a good bit stronger in the last three years too. Judging by the increase in his stats, he'd learned some physical skills, raised his sorcery level, and improved his combat endurance and overall stats. He hadn't changed appearance-wise, though he'd already looked older than his age when I met him. And come to think of it, he'd been only twenty back then, so it made sense he'd become stronger with age.

Why was he here, though? I was sure he'd understand the situation if I explained everything, but that would be difficult considering the circumstances.

"Adventurer!" Tabatha interjected before I could speak. "I am a guild official! These women suddenly set the place on fire and attacked me! Please, I beg for your assistance!" Having sensed Feld's strength, she was putting on an act to win him over to her side.

Feld glanced at her and gave a small nod. "Yeah, I remember seeing you at the guild."

Tabatha smiled faintly.

Who would he believe in this situation? I could bring up Viro, a party member of his, and maybe he'd believe me, but...even then, if I were in Feld's shoes, I would take that with a grain of salt.

"Okay, I get it," Feld said. He covered his mouth with a cloth to block out the smoke and looked at me. With one hand still firmly on his greatsword's pommel, he slightly tilted the blade's tip, as though signaling something.

### Vwoosh!

His sword swung down forcefully on Tabatha, scattering the smoke in its path. She barely managed to jump out of the way, avoiding the strike.

"A-Adventurer, what are you doing?!" she screamed.

"Sorry, but I'm not so stupid that I can't tell what's happening here," Feld retorted coolly.

As soon as Feld swung his sword, I'd begun to move under Stealth. Taking advantage of everyone's attention being focused on him, I slipped behind one of the women, wrapped an arm around her neck, and snapped it.

"Cinders!" Tabatha shouted again, reacting with exaggerated shock at one of the "suspicious" women in black being killed.

Feld sighed, frowning at her obvious act. "I had a feeling. The second I stepped into the Adventurers' Guild, I got an urgent request from the deputy guildmaster. Guess rushing over was the right call."

"A request, you said?" Tabatha glared at him, dropping her facade.

Sensing her true strength, Feld pointed his sword at her with the cool composure of a seasoned warrior. "I was told an adventurer, a party member of mine, had been taken by a 'suspicious staffer.' The deputy guildmaster said you could be an agent of the nobility or a member of the Assassins' Guild. Which is it?"

Tabatha ground her teeth, baring them in a snarl, and didn't answer.

Most likely the answer was "both." Could the deputy guildmaster be that older gentleman? He hadn't seemed to have the best impression of Tabatha. Perhaps he'd been suspicious of her from the beginning.

"They were keeping tabs on you from the start," Feld explained. "You couldn't gather any info, could you? They were just waiting for you to make your move. Guild staff followed your carriage, and they've already captured your coachman outside. Now be good, drop your weapon, and surrender."

Realizing her plan had fallen apart, Tabatha clicked her tongue with a loud, frustrated "Tch!"

She'd overestimated her abilities and thought that with her beautiful and charming outward appearance, she could gloss over any awkwardness or suspicion. To be fair to her, despite the fact that the Adventurers' Guild had had their suspicions from the beginning, they couldn't have detained her until she made a move—which meant she did, indeed, have some level of skill.

But the self-important Tabatha, counting on using the remnants of her old branch as pawns, had grown greedy upon seeing an enemy of theirs appear at the guild. I could tell from her actions that she craved the admiration and envy of others. That was why she and Dino hadn't gotten along—the two were too similar. She'd treated her surviving juniors harshly, likely to feel superior and satisfy her ego.

"Damn it!" Tabatha cursed with a cough.

Thick black smoke from the flames near the entrance was filling the air. While there was still a vast open area ahead, Tabatha and her group—unlike myself and Feld—hadn't prepared for this and were already inhaling the toxic fumes.

"Don't just stand there, morons!" she screamed at the women, dropping all pretense of composure. "At this rate, you'll just die without doing anything!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" one of them replied.

"We'll get Cinders at least!" another added.

I narrowed my eyes as the two recklessly charged forward. Be it avenging a fallen comrade or attacking desperately in a life-or-death situation, I knew all too well the unimaginable strength people could unleash when cornered. That

was why I wouldn't let my guard down. But...

"Gah!" the woman with a dagger groaned as I sidestepped her attack and drove my elbow into her face with enough force to cave it in.

"You shouldn't be thinking about revenge if you're afraid of death," I said. If these women's lives were so desperately important to them, they should've clung to them and stayed out of trouble.

"Eek..." squeaked the other woman, a seasoned Rank 3 adventurer. She'd remained somewhat composed up until this point, but after witnessing her friend's instant defeat, she panicked and ran to Tabatha, pleading for help. "Please—"

"Thanks for coming," Tabatha muttered, kicking the woman and sending her flying toward Feld, who was blocking the entrance, with a loud *thunk*.

"You!" Feld grunted. In an instant, he struck the bewildered woman down with his greatsword.

Tabatha seized that brief opportunity and bolted toward the blazing flames, chanting, "Veil!"

It seemed Tabatha's claim about using water sorcery hadn't been a lie. She'd cloaked herself in the Level 2 water spell Veil, which granted resistance to natural elements such as fire and snow. Between that spell and her mithril chain mail, she had a decent chance of survival, even if she suffered burns in the process.

Despite being nearby, Feld couldn't stop her. Tabatha was desperate to survive, even if it meant abandoning the women who had trusted her. She leaped into the flames, mocking us as we were left behind in the inferno.

"Burn in your own flames, Cinders! Ah ha ha!"

But just as she dove into the fire, Tabatha's eyes reflected multiple ceramic bottles flying toward her.

"Did you think I was out of oil bottles?" I asked.

Crash!

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!"

The oil jars shattered within the flames, causing them to flare up and engulf Tabatha. Her shrieks, mixed with the sound of steam rising as though from water poured onto hot stones, echoed through the confined space.

"Surely you didn't think I'd let you escape," I said.

If I could do something, I always assumed other people could too. That was why I'd anticipated her attempt to flee. And there was no way I'd let an enemy like her get away and become a permanent thorn in my side.

"The only people who still call me 'Cinders' are associated with the Assassins' Guild branch I wiped out," I told her, though I wasn't sure whether she could actually hear me.

The reason I'd so carefully laid out this trap was that bit of information, which Tabatha had unwittingly provided me when we met. Her calling me by that moniker had been enough to make me suspicious of her. To me, she'd been an enemy from the very start.

Tabatha, whether or not she'd heard me, slowly crumpled within the flames.

"Hey!" Feld called out, looking at me in protest. He'd distanced himself from Tabatha as she disappeared into the worsening flames. "What are we gonna do?! Now we can't escape either!"

Indeed, even for someone like him, who'd managed to cut through the fire, the flames had grown too big to permit escape. While some of the assassins might have survived, the fire had already spread too far, and we could no longer afford to finish them off; our own lives were at risk.

"Don't worry," I said. "Just hold on to me."

"What are you planning?" he asked, clearly uneasy about clinging to someone as small as me. After a moment of hesitation, though, he grabbed my shoulder, and I handed him a pendulum with a fire-resistant string. "What's this?"

"You can throw axes, right? Throw this as hard as you can toward the exit. Hurry."

"Uh, sure. I don't get it, but sure." Feld trusted me, despite not knowing what I was planning. He wrapped the pendulum's string around a hand axe and

hurled it with all his might toward the exit.

I'd been planning my escape from the start. The two of us were a bit heavy, but with my current aether reserves, I figured I could manage.

"Shadow Walker."

\*\*\*

"My apologies, Miss Alia, for involving you in this internal matter," the older gentleman said.

"Don't worry about it."

In one fell swoop, I'd managed to get rid of a group of annoying would-be avengers and an unrelated attacker. It had saved me time, and since this gentleman had noticed Tabatha's suspicious activity and immediately alerted the Rainbow Blade, the Adventurers' Guild had fully backed me up.

The older gentleman, who'd introduced himself as the deputy guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild, summarized what he'd learned: Tabatha had indeed been sent by the Traders' Guild, but the person who had recommended her for the job was unknown. While this was an apparent case of a noble house forcing their hand, the Traders' Guild claimed to not know which family it had been.

Not only was it suspicious that an unknown like Tabatha had become an auditor, the Adventurers' Guild had also found her actions questionable. For these reasons, they'd assigned a surveillance-specialist scout to keep an eye on her, and this scout had been the one to lead Feld to the abandoned mine.

This was speculation on my part, but it seemed likely that Tabatha had infiltrated the Traders' Guild to secretly gather information on the royal family's movements. This had happened around the same time that the Rainbow Blade came off hiatus, so the two things were possibly connected. But, since the Adventurers' Guild had suspected something and withheld information, Tabatha hadn't been able to glean much. She'd then set her sights on me—someone involved with the Rainbow Blade. It was likely a coincidence that the survivors from the Northern Border District branch had sought Tabatha's help, and she'd presumably planned on using them as disposable pawns.

In the end, we still hadn't learned which noble house was targeting the royal

family, but it was highly likely an assassination attempt against the royals was going to take place.

"I'll have Viro report that to the Order," said Feld, who had been listening in.

"Though it's not concrete information, knowing about a potential risk should be enough to keep them on alert."

That would mean more work for Viro, but the scout would get it done, no doubt.

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"Illusion."

I cast the Level 4 Shadow Magic spell in the training grounds of the Adventurers' Guild, sending a flurry of flower petals swirling around me. My weighted pendulum then shattered the illusory petals and smashed against a log, while my slashing pendulum carved deep gashes into the wood's surface.

Murmurs of admiration rose from the guild staff. This was the adventurer rank promotion exam, and since tests for Rank 4 and above only happened once every few years, many guild employees had come to watch.

Feld, who was among the observers, nodded with approval. "I see. Viro rarely brags about his students, so I was curious what made you so different. I get it now."

"It's still difficult for me to use this in real combat, though," I pointed out. I could only really pull it off in a calm environment like this; I wasn't sure whether I'd be able to use Level 4 Shadow Magic and Level 4 String Manipulation at the same time during combat. If my control over both were reliable, I wouldn't have needed to use fire in the fight against Tabatha.

Ever since the day I'd watched Feld's back vanish into the twilight, reaching him had been my goal. Though I'd reached Rank 4 and gotten a bit stronger, his back still seemed so far away.

"I don't think you're that far off," he mused. "But anyway! Looking forward to working with you, Alia."

"Yeah."

Feld had turned out to be a swordsman in the same party Viro was a scout in —the Rainbow Blade. After Tabatha and I had left for the abandoned mine, Feld had come to the guild, where he'd received an urgent request.

The other members of the Rainbow Blade included the elven animist Mira, whom I'd met before, and their leader, the dwarf Dalton. These two, alongside their former sorceress Samantha, were founding members of the party. Even with a dwarf and an elf in the group, it was incredible to think that a party could last for nearly a hundred years. Even more surprising was the fact that Samantha, a human, had been an adventurer for close to a century.

Still, when considering the roles within a party, not having a dedicated spellcaster limited our tactical flexibility. The issue was whether we could make up for that with Mira's animist magic and my own shadow magic.

Feld nodded thoughtfully as I shared my concerns. "I get it, but Dalton figured that as long as we have someone who can use light sorcery, we can manage. That's why I raised my Light and Fire Mastery levels to 2, but there's still spells I can't use. Honestly, I'm relieved you joined us, Alia."

"I see..."

"You know, at first I thought your fighting style was unusual for a student of Viro's, but it makes sense now. You had a different teacher for sorcery. Even Samantha couldn't use Level 4 shadow sorcery, so I can't wait to see what you can do."

"Right."

Feld and I were walking through the royal capital. I'd had no issues updating my adventurer rank, and the older gentleman at the guild, counting on my return, had already prepared a Rank 4 guild tag engraved with my name.

Adventurer tags were made of different materials depending on rank. A Rank 1 tag was made of impure copper, but starting from Rank 2, magical iron was mixed in. The higher the rank, the higher the amount, so that the tags slowly got blacker the further up one went. My old Rank 3 tag had been quite dark already, but the new Rank 4 tag was almost completely black, barely different in

color from pure magical iron.

A tag with magical iron took quite some time to craft, but Viro had apparently made arrangements for mine beforehand. He was quite competent...even if, from a child's perspective, he looked like a pretty useless adult.

Now that the incident had been dealt with and my rank had been upgraded, I didn't really have any other business left to take care of. I'd mentioned to Feld that I needed to visit Gelf's shop to get my armor adjusted, and he'd offered to take me there, knowing I wasn't too familiar with the layout of the royal capital, so off we'd gone.

Feld remembered meeting me in this city before, but didn't seem to realize I was the same urchin he'd encountered on the side of the road before that. Back then, I'd been disguising myself as a boy, and now my appearance had changed a great deal; it was only natural he hadn't made the connection. I had no intention of telling him the truth either.

I now looked close to an adult commoner and was officially his fellow party member, so he was treating me as an equal, not a child. Like Cere'zhula, Feld was the kind of good-natured person who'd just teach survival skills to children and had no ulterior motives, so I trusted him. Maybe that was why I didn't want to tell him. Perhaps I was afraid that, if he knew I was that same child, he'd start treating me as a kid again.

As we walked in silence, I made a mental note of how odd it felt to be walking around the city with someone else. Normally, I was on my own, and I couldn't recall ever feeling like this. I'd grown up a good bit, but walking next to Feld, who was much bigger than me, made me feel a curious mix of comfort and embarrassment. It was strange but not unpleasant.

It wasn't just the two of us for very long, though.

"Oh! Feld."

"Hey, Mira."

By coincidence—or perhaps not, since she might well have been on her way to Gelf's too—we ran into Mira, the elf who'd once guarded a group of noble youths with Feld.

"Oh, that girl..." Mira said as she noticed me hiding behind Feld, staring at her.

"Do you remember her?" Feld asked. "She's that one adventurer from the dwarf's shop. Her name's Alia, and she's Viro's apprentice. She'll be joining our party."

"Really? Well, I'm glad! I've been the only girl since Samantha retired, so I'm glad to have another around. Nice to meet you! Just call me Mira."

"Okay. Nice to meet you too, Mira," I replied.

Mira the animist. If I recalled correctly, her full name was Miranda. She was a wood elf, and supposedly, wood elves were skilled hunters and expert archers. And she'd called the elderly Samantha a "girl"—maybe that was an elven thing? Either way, she seemed genuinely happy to have another woman in the party; she was smiling warmly at me as Feld introduced us.

"So, where are you two headed?" she asked. "Gonna see Dalton?"

"Alia needs her armor adjusted, so we're heading to Gelf's first. She hasn't been in the capital in some time, so I'm walking her."

"Oh, Gelf's? I have some business there too. Can I come with?"

So she was on her way there after all. We had no reason to refuse her request, and so the three of us decided to head to Gelf's armor shop together.

I noticed men around us kept stealing glances at Mira as she smiled and chatted with us. Cere'zhula had mentioned to me before that elves were a proud people, and with that pride came a strong sense of self-esteem. But Mira didn't give off an aura of sharp arrogance. She was also beautiful and looked young, around twenty. Many men seemed captivated by her.

Was it perhaps Mira's gentle aura, or her soft appearance, that drew men to her? I could see either being the reason.

"What's on your mind, Alia?" Feld asked, noticing I wasn't participating much in the conversation.

"Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking that Mira's really pretty. She's not Viro's girlfriend, right?" I wondered if Feld liked women like her too.

Feld gave a subtle shake of his head so Mira wouldn't notice.

"Oh, no, no," he replied with an odd expression. He leaned down to bring his face closer to mine—he was a good thirty centimeters taller than me—and whispered conspiratorially, "Mira may look young because she's an elf, but she's actually around Samantha's age. Maybe it's different for elves who still live in the forest, but... Uh, to put it bluntly, Mira's basically an auntie on the inside."

I tilted my head, unsure what "auntie" meant in this context.

Feld didn't seem to notice and sighed deeply. "See, Mira... She treats me and Viro like kids, always stuffing candy into our pockets and stuff. A lot of guys hit on her because of how she looks, but they usually lose interest within three or so days."

"I see..." So her gentle personality wasn't a result of mellowing out from living in human society for nearly a century. It was because she had turned into an "auntie."

Now that I thought about it, Cere'zhula looked young, around thirty. But she'd lived in human society for so long that she called herself an "old lady"...

"Alia, have you heard of the dark elves?"

"Yeah." I nodded, trying to hide my surprise. Had I let my thoughts about my mentor slip?

"Don't bring them up around Mira, okay? I dunno the details, but she had a bad experience long ago on some battlefield somewhere. Like, she got bullied or something by a really strong demoness. She still holds a grudge, see."

A strong demoness. That kind of reminded me of a certain sharp-tongued dark elf I knew.

"Anyway, that's the story with Mira," Feld concluded. "Why the sudden curiosity?"

"A lot of men have been staring at her."

"It's always like this. A bunch of 'em are staring at you too. I mean, you're one heck of a beauty."

I didn't respond.

I'd been told a few times before that I looked good, but I didn't understand it myself. Still, hearing it from Feld—coupled with the fact he was treating me like a grown-up now—felt oddly pleasant, if embarrassing.

"Hey," he called out, noticing I'd gone silent. Maybe he'd embarrassed himself, since he awkwardly scratched his cheek with a fingertip. "Don't zone out in a place like this. Keep your wits about you."

"Okay..."

The royal capital was far more crowded than other cities. I must've slowed down while walking, because Feld mentioned I was lagging behind and cautioned me to not lose sight of him and Mira. Instinctively, I closed my fingers around the hem of his cloak.

"Uh, Alia?"

"Yes?"

I tilted my head and looked up at him, wondering if something was wrong. He averted his gaze for some reason.

"No, it's nothing."

\*\*\*

I was still holding on to a much-quieter-than-usual Feld when we arrived at Gelf's armor shop.

"Gelf, are you here?" I called.

"Oh dear! If it isn't little Alia and little Mira! And what a handsome fellow you have with you."

As always, Gelf wore a tight leather outfit that left little to imagination. He gave "handsome fellow" Feld a wink of his long, perfectly curled lashes, and the swordsman took a half step back with a strained expression. Mira smirked slightly.

"Gelf, my outfit has gotten tight around the hips and chest, and it's hindering my movements. Can you do something about it?" I asked.

"Candid as ever, aren't you, dear? Ah well, I knew you'd be growing up soon, so I already have a new outfit ready for you. Now come, try it on."

Gelf pulled me into the back of the shop, collected my current gear, and handed me the new set.

"Looks like you took good care of your old outfit, but it's seen some rough battles, hasn't it? Armor can't make you invulnerable, so make sure to take care of yourself."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"This new set has been tailored to match your current appearance. The shape hasn't changed much, but the design is a bit more mature, so your defense has been further improved!"

What kind of defense does he mean? I wondered.

It was indeed similar in shape to my previous sleeveless, high-collared dress, but the material was upgraded. Though this new version, too, was crafted from wyvern wing membrane, it had improved fire and water resistance, making it more suitable to harsh environments. The design, meanwhile, had been adjusted to fit my growing body. The side slits in the skirt were deeper, and the skirt itself had been lengthened from above the knee to below. It was slightly lighter, easier to move in, and more flexible as well.

"Oh, you look fantastic!"

"Yeah, this is really good."

It felt like we were praising different aspects of the outfit, but we both liked it, so it was fine. When I returned to the front of the shop after changing, Mira's eyes all but sparkled.

"Gelf does it again! Alia, you look so cute!"

"I do?" I wasn't sure, but if she said so...

I pulled a knife from one of the slits to test the outfit's functionality and noticed Feld subtly averting his gaze.

"Feld?" I called out.

"Uh, yeah, looks good."

Hearing him say that felt reassuring, somehow. It was the same odd, unconditional sense of security I'd gotten from him earlier, when I grabbed the hem of his cloak. Which...made sense, now that I thought about it.

"I feel safe around you, Feld," I said casually.

Gelf's eyes widened, and for some reason, Mira's eyes sparkled even more brightly. Feld, on the other hand, seemed a little flustered, his gaze darting around.

"R-Really?" he asked.

"Yeah... You're kind of like a dad," I explained honestly.

Feld froze in place, and Gelf and Mira pointed at him and burst out laughing.

... Had I said something wrong?



A month had passed since my arrival at the royal capital, and the season was now autumn. I'd also turned eleven years old.

For some reason, instead of staying at an inn, I'd been living with Gelf. During this time, I'd learned more about equipment maintenance and, with Mira's help, started making potions and other alchemical products. True to her elven nature, Mira was knowledgeable about herbs, and she was the one to make potions for her party using alchemy. She'd been incredibly pleased to find out I could make them too.

I'd also been spending more time with Mira and Gelf than with Feld, who'd seemed strangely under the weather. Mira and I had grown much closer; she would occasionally surprise me by slipping paper-wrapped candy into my pockets.

Feld eventually recovered from his mysterious funk. I'd been with him at the Adventurers' Guild training grounds, going over combat tactics, when I was finally told I'd get to meet the Rainbow Blade's leader—Dalton. Up until now he'd been busy coordinating with nobles for our next mission alongside Viro, who also hadn't been around much. Samantha had already retired, so of course, she wasn't present. Apparently, it had been several years since the entirety of the Rainbow Blade had last gotten together.

Dalton owned a mansion in the royal capital where the party stored the treasure they'd collected over time, and all members could help themselves to it. Feld and Mira took me there for my first-ever visit, where we were greeted by a visibly tired Viro and a striking dwarf who exuded strength.

"I'm Dalton," he said. "You must be Viro's apprentice. Alia, was it?"

"I learned scouting techniques from Viro, yes," I confirmed.

The large, imposing dwarf—very different from the stereotypical short, stocky mental image one might have of his kin—scrutinized me with a piercing gaze. Though Galvus and Gelf were also dwarves, they were crag dwarves, known for living in mines. Dalton was a mountain dwarf, a different kind that lived in forests. The differences between the two types weren't as immediately obvious

as those between wood and dark elves; crag and mountain dwarves were distinguished by their birthplace, build, and personality.

Crag dwarves lived in mines and worked as blacksmiths, tended to be inflexible and stubborn, and had muscular bodies thanks to their work digging in caves. Mountain dwarves, meanwhile, lived in forests and worked as carpenters or silversmiths, were closer in physique to humans, had an affinity for finer tasks, and tended to be more social.

Dalton, who had been an active frontline adventurer for over a hundred years, was about as tall as a human but bulkier and more muscular than a crag dwarf. Compared to him, Feld—whom I'd thought of as a mountain of a man—seemed almost dainty. A suit of full-plate mithril armor and an enormous war hammer were lined up in the mansion's living room; they were both so massive that an average warrior would have struggled to even equip them. Of course, an average warrior couldn't ever have afforded such equipment, what with it being worth as much as a small castle and all.

"Hmm." Unlike most dwarves, Dalton kept his beard short and neatly trimmed like Gelf's. He fiddled with it as he stared at me, then grinned. "I was curious about how good Viro's prized apprentice could be, and as far as combat power goes, you pass. But the Rainbow Blade is one of the most trusted Rank 5 parties in all of Claydale, and even nobles respect us. I don't care where you come from, kid, but if you wanna be one of us, then I'm gonna need to see you show the *guts* worthy of our name."

#### Boom!

In an instant, a wave of malice and intimidation burst forth from Dalton, so intense that it almost seemed to make a phantom sound. The Rank 5 fighter's powerful presence made him seem enormous. With astounding speed, Dalton swung his war hammer—nearly as tall as me—in an upward motion with one hand, then brought it crashing down toward me.

So this is what the pinnacle of Rank 5 looks like, I thought. The pressure was overwhelming; my body trembled with fear. But this wasn't my first time facing a Rank 5 opponent—I'd fought Graves and Nero before. The moment I felt the malice coming from him, I instinctively activated Boost and shot forward like an

arrow.

#### Whoosh!

As we clashed, the air in the room quivered, forming a swirling vortex. Dalton's war hammer hovered just above my shoulder, while my black dagger stopped just millimeters short of his left eye.

"We can stop here, or we can fight to the death," I said.

Dalton let out an amused chuckle, then turned his gaze toward Viro, struggling to not burst into laughter as he acknowledged my fighting spirit and unwavering precision. "Hey Viro, where'd you find this one? There's no way she learned all this from just you."

"Uh, ouch?" Viro replied. "Well, someone else taught Alia how to cast spells, and she's trained under Sera from the Order too. Better not treat her as a kid. She'll eat even someone like you alive."

"Ha ha ha! Got it! Y'know, when I heard you'd brought back a chick who wasn't even an adult yet, I thought maybe you'd run out of grown women to dump you and started going for the younger ones. But what do you know! This one's a great find!"

"Double ouch?!"

Oh. Was that what Dalton had assumed? This exchange had given me a stronger grasp of Viro's position within the party.

Feld and Viro both let out sighs of relief and wiped away the cold sweat that had formed on their brows as they'd watched Dalton and me clash. The only one who seemed unbothered by the intense situation was Mira, who was the least skilled in melee combat; she just clapped her hands gleefully instead.

Though I still held my dagger, Dalton lowered his war hammer without hesitation and nonchalantly approached me to pat me lightly on the shoulder.

"I like you! Welcome to the Rainbow Blade, Alia!"

And so, just like that, I officially became a member of the Rainbow Blade. A few days later, we set off for the Duchy of Hoodale to prepare for our journey to the island where the large-scale dungeon was.

# **Assailant**

We traveled from the capital to the Duchy of Hoodale in a large, high-speed carriage belonging to Dalton himself.

At first glance, it looked like a noble's carriage but without any decoration. The lack of ornaments wasn't due to cost factors; rather, it was meant to reduce weight and increase speed—apparently, this carriage had been as costly as a royal one. It might've looked simple, but it was reinforced with sorcery and alchemy. Dalton boasted that it could, in theory, withstand a Level 5 fire spell.

"We've never actually taken a hit like that, though," Viro pointed out. Furthermore, while the carriage could withstand one such attack, a second one would render it unusable.

Underneath the carriage was a compartment several centimeters tall for storing weapons and equipment that couldn't fit in the main cabin; this space could also be accessed from below. The roof was used to store loot, and both of the storage spaces were enhanced with shadow sorcery, increasing their carrying capacity and reducing the overall weight of the items within.

Occupants rode between those compartments, and the interior of the carriage had plenty of room for even larger men like Dalton and Feld; it could easily fit about ten people.

The carriage was pulled by four horses and further enhanced by magical tools; it could also run under its own power, fueled by aethercrystals.

"Look, Alia, I'm bringing you along because of your light-elemental spells, but that doesn't mean I'm just letting the rest of your skills go to waste. Your primary role will still be as a scout," Dalton explained inside the carriage.

"How should I handle mid-combat healing?" I asked.

"Even when we had Samantha with us, we rarely needed to heal during combat. Mostly we used potions after fights. If you're worried, just remember to heal yourself first, like Feld does."

I didn't really heal myself during combat either. I could if there was an opening, but that moment could just as easily prove fatal.

"I want you to heal us only if our injuries are severe enough that they

interfere with fighting. But we're all warriors here. No sense wasting so much mana that you can't fight anymore when it really counts. And mana recovery potions have diminishing returns if you drink too many in one day."

"Got it."

I had no objections to his logic; it made sense. Still, it was important for all of us to be aware of each other's roles, or else the party as a whole wouldn't function smoothly—in terms of either coordination or healing.

Currently, the party's structure was...

Heavy Fighter / Defense, Damage

**▼** Dalton

Species: Mountain Dwarfð (Rank 5)

Aether Points: 250/250

Health Points: 512/512

Overall Combat Power: 1940 (Boosted: 2420)

Swordsman / Frontliner

▼ Feld Luin

Species: Humanð (Rank 5)

Aether Points: 225/225

Health Points: 370/370

Overall Combat Power: 1494 (Boosted: 1908)

Scout & Light Fighter / Surveillance, Trap Removal, Skirmisher

▼ Viro Dorne

Species: Humand (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 220/220  $\triangle$  +10

Health Points:  $320/320 \triangle +10$ 

Overall Combat Power: 1056 (Boosted: 1281)

Animist & Archer / Magic Damage, Magic Defense, Surveillance, Skirmisher

▼ Miranda Mormore

Species: Elf<sup>Q</sup> (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 350/350

Health Points: 175/175

Overall Combat Power: 1097 (Boosted: 1321)

Illusionist & Assassin / Healer, Surveillance, Skirmisher

▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 270/270

Health Points: 210/210

Overall Combat Power: 916 (Boosted: 1123)

We had shared with each other not only our combat power and fighting styles but also our special skills and trump cards. It was rare for adventurers to reveal the tricks up their sleeves, but if I was too caught up in pride and Elena got hurt, all of our preparations would've gone to waste.

My personal trump card was my primordial Boost technique. For Mira, it was her knowledge of spirits' individual weaknesses. It was only when she divulged that valuable information that I realized how much she'd come to trust me already.

Since Samantha, their retired sorceress, had been Rank 5 compared to my Rank 4, the party's overall strength had decreased. However, according to Dalton, the other humans in the party, Feld and Viro, had grown stronger since

Samantha's departure. Depending on how well Mira and I could coordinate our spells, we should be able to fight at a level comparable to before. Still, since the plan was for me to eventually take Viro's place, the search for a sorcery user would continue.

Our final destination was a large-scale dungeon located on a remote island, so the carriage was headed for a port town within the Duchy of Hoodale. Normally, we would've taken the relatively safe main road, gone through the duchy's capital, then headed east from there to the port town. However, the path we were taking veered away from the main road and traversed the woods. The others explained that, while this path was narrower than the main road, it was less frequented by ordinary travelers, which made it easier to use the carriage.

Dusk began to fall as we progressed through the forest, and thus it was time to start looking for a good spot to build a campfire.

"Master Dalton," the coachman called out, "I can hear the sounds of swords clashing up ahead, although it's quite far out. I can't tell the attacked from the attackers at this distance. What shall we do?"

The coachman was an elderly man who also served as a steward managing Dalton's estate. He wasn't a professional steward but rather a retired member of the Order of Shadows whose skills roughly equated to those of a Rank 3 scout. Though his combat abilities had declined with age, his surveillance skills were very reliable.

"Think some idiot caravan is being attacked? Pain in the ass, but whatever. You younger ones go clean up their mess," Dalton ordered with a frown, noticeably displeased by the hassle.

Taking a less-traveled path meant faster travel, even if it wasn't as safe as taking the main road. There were plenty of dangers—even discounting bandits, thieves, and wolves—but a well-guarded group would nevertheless be safe. All that a caravan traveling through here needed to do was hire a group of mercenaries or adventurers. Still, some merchants, in a misplaced effort to save money, chose not to and ended up suffering losses. It was possible that the victims in this case had been attacked because they'd failed to bring adequate

protection, which explained Dalton's foul mood.

"Let's go, then," Feld said.

"Okay," I replied as we both rose from our seats.

Dalton had ordered the "younger ones" to go. Mira, despite looking youthful, remained seated, munching on dried fruit. Viro had moved to stand up, looked at me, realized he wasn't considered young, and sat back down.

As Feld and I stepped out of the carriage, we could indeed hear the faint sounds of swords clashing in the distance.

He looked ahead with a slightly tense expression. "Those are some sharp sounds. This isn't a monster attack. It's people—and trained people too. Be careful, Alia."

"Understood."

Out of an excess of caution, we relayed this information to our coachman, the butler. Anticipating a chaotic battle, Feld opted to draw a pair of hand axes instead of his greatsword. I didn't draw any weapons myself and simply ran down the darkened path.

Taking advantage of my Night Vision, I took the lead, with Feld following behind me. Despite wearing armor and carrying heavy weapons, he didn't seem to be struggling to keep up at all. He really was strong.

After several seconds of running, we spotted the faint lights of spells and torches ahead, giving us a general sense of the situation.

"Looks like a noble's carriage is being attacked," I said. "The attackers are humans too."

"Can you identify the attackers?" Feld asked.

"They're wearing black leather armor and covering their faces. Should we assist?"

"Seems straightforward enough. I'd say we go ahead."

"Got it. I'll go first."

At that moment, I activated Boost and dashed forward. Feld and I were evenly

matched in our agility stat, but since I weighed less than he did, I could run faster. Using Night Vision, I spotted several fancy-looking carriages in the distance. The guards, despite being outnumbered nearly two-to-one, were holding their own. They seemed skilled, but...they were at a slight disadvantage.

I spotted a knight struggling to hold his own against three attackers and sprang into action.

"Pain," I chanted as I ran, taking aim and unleashing the shadow spell as soon as the target was in range.

"Gah!" One of the attackers, who'd been raising a spear, screamed in agony from the spell's illusory pain.

Startled, the man next to him turned around, only for several throwing knives to embed themselves into his masked face. As the attacker with the spear froze in pain, I slashed his neck with my sickle pendulum. Still in motion, I kicked the final black-clad man in the face, then sliced his exposed throat with my black knife.

"I'm a passing adventurer," I told the knight. "You're being attacked, right?"

"Y-Yes!" he stammered with a vigorous nod, clearly in shock that I'd just wordlessly killed the three masked men in black.

"Am I interfering? I can go if you don't need help."

"No, I appreciate the help. There were more attackers than we'd anticipated, so I'm worried about the carriages ahead. Uh, but you are...?"

"An adventurer," I repeated. "With the Rainbow Blade."

"The Rainbow Blade?!" he echoed, his face brightening with relief. The name must've been familiar to him.

A few of the remaining masked attackers, perhaps annoyed by my interference, began to move toward me. Each of them had a combat power of around 250, meaning at the high end of Rank 2 or the low end of Rank 3. They weren't particularly skilled, but I still couldn't underestimate them, depending on their resolve. Nevertheless, their choice of leather over metal for their armor—prioritizing stealth for their ambush—meant they weren't too difficult for me

to handle.

Swiftly, I swung my weighted pendulum, and its end shot out of the shadows to strike the man leading the charge in the side of the head. The solid blow stunned him, and I spun to follow up with a throwing knife, which pierced his throat.

With a flick of my wrist, I drew back the pendulum through the darkness, using its centrifugal force to create a wide arc. The weighted end slammed into the skull of the next attacker rushing toward me, shattering it.

"Damn it!" cursed another masked attacker. Realizing that my weapon was attacking from the darkness, he shielded his vital spots with his arms as he charged forward.

In response, I jumped up and drove my knee into the arm he'd raised to protect his face. He groaned, lifting his head and creating a gap for me to exploit—I slipped my arm through and wrapped it around his neck, then twisted around him to snap it.

"Look out!" shouted the knight I'd just assisted.

The next moment, I spotted two more attackers charging in, swords at the ready. Just as the knight was about to jump in and assist me, a pair of hand axes whizzed past him and embedded themselves into the faces of both assailants.

"Damn, Alia, you're fast!" Feld grumbled as he caught up, drawing his magic steel greatsword from his back in one fluid motion. With the momentum of his charge, he cleaved one of the attackers cleanly in half, from top to bottom.

"I-Is he with you?" the knight asked hoarsely, astonished by Feld's display of sheer power.

I gave the knight a nod before calling out to Feld, who was already on the lookout for the next enemy. "There are carriages ahead under attack as well."

"Got it. Alia, you head that way. I'll take care of these guys."

"Understood."

Though I already knew Feld was strong, his power never ceased to amaze me. Even if there were a few Rank 3 opponents in the mix, he wouldn't have any

problems as long as he didn't let his guard down.

"Come on, you masked bastards!" he shouted.

His recklessness did worry me a little bit.

As Feld charged at the now slightly more reticent attackers, I darted past, moving fast enough that no one could keep up with me. I passed by one of the carriages under attack and noticed a familiar emblem on a piece of damaged paneling.

# The royal family's crest?

That same crest had been on the carriage Elena had ridden in during her stay in Dandorl. Was this group connected to the royal family? Dalton had mentioned that, for safety reasons, he hadn't been informed of which route the royal carriages would take.

There was a possibility that this was either the crown prince's or Elena's carriage, headed for the dungeon, but...with so few guards, why hadn't they taken the main road? Viro had most certainly warned them about the risk of attack—although granted, those two weren't the only royals. Hopefully the fact that they were taking this path meant this was just an emergency supply transport unit.

As I continued down the path, I saw the bodies of both black-armored attackers and knightly defenders lying scattered in the darkness. There was no need to check any of them for a pulse; with my ability to see mana, I could tell none of them had any life force left. Had they wiped each other out, or were there still skilled enemies around?

#### Whoosh!

Instantly, a knife came flying at me from the shadows of the forest. I instinctively deflected it with a pendulum pulled from Shadow Storage, then ducked behind a tree. I spotted a shadow among the trees and swiftly threw a knife from the slit in my skirt.

Silence followed. My throw had likely been dodged. I couldn't tell who it was in the dark, but from the brief glimpse I'd caught of my opponent's mana, I could sense their strength.

### **▼** Unknown

Species: Human?

Aether Points: 182/220

Health Points: 221/260

Overall Combat Power: 929 (Boosted: 1126)

Sensing my own combat power, the figure unleashed a wave of intense malice that shook the dark woods.

I see. So there is a skilled fighter here after all.

### Reunions

Based not only on this opponent's combat power but also their ability to erase their presence and the sheer pressure emanating from them, I could tell that they were quite skilled. I estimated this was a Rank 4 assassin, likely one that specialized in scouting skills.

This enemy showed no hesitation. Their movements were purposeful, suggesting a strong conviction and will. Enemies like this one were more dangerous than their combat power alone would suggest.

In the dark forest, we'd caught brief glimpses of each other. While I'd lost sight of them, they had to know I was hiding behind this tree. I couldn't afford to fight reactively; I'd be at a disadvantage. With this in mind, I hooked the sickle blade of my pendulum onto a branch above me and, using the string, swiftly leaped into the tree.

My enemy, however, had the same idea. As I jumped, I could hear the sound of something small cutting through the air, coming from a different tree. It didn't seem to be a knife, and I couldn't identify what it was, but I still sensed that taking a direct hit would be dangerous. With the momentum of my leap, I jumped to another treetop, and a moment later, something struck the tree I'd just been in.

I didn't know my enemy, and I didn't know what weapon they were using. But I could pinpoint their general direction and sent my pendulum flying toward them. With careful finger movements and aether manipulation, I maneuvered the pendulum around the tree trunk. The faint sound of metal being deflected echoed through the night air, and a shadow leaped from behind the tree.

Even with Night Vision active, I could only catch the outline of the figure, indicating their Stealth level was exceptionally high. But in a battle like this, if I could take my opponent down with me, that was enough. I quickly pulled a knife from the slit in my skirt and threw it at the silhouette. The air around the figure swirled with wind magic, deflecting my throw. Before I could react, I sensed something being launched from the shadow's position. I quickly used the tree as a shield, and something solid embedded itself into the bark.

Was this...shrapnel? Was that what the earlier attack had been too?

Shrapnel didn't have the attack power of a throwing knife, but the small, sharpened chunks of metal were a tricky type of concealed weapon. In the hands of a skilled user, they could easily pierce skin and lodge deep into flesh. What was especially worrying about this weapon was that it could be thrown without any sort of preparatory motion, making it difficult to dodge. A hit caused intense pain and bleeding that was difficult to stop.

As for what had deflected my knife, I assumed it was a wind spell, Air Curtain, which created a barrier of wind around the caster that could deflect projectiles. The fact that my opponent could use it meant they had at least Level 2 in Wind Mastery, making all of my long-range weapons except the pendulum ineffective.

They were turning out to be a more difficult opponent than I'd anticipated, but I still had other means to handle this.

"Illusion," I chanted as I leaped from tree to tree, activating the Level 4 shadow spell. While I wasn't yet skilled enough to create an illusion of a living creature that would look convincing in broad daylight, in darkness, it was a different story.

I conjured the presence of angry, wildly swarming bees, accompanied by a loud buzzing sound. In that instant, the shadowy figure leaped out of hiding.

Timing my movements carefully, I kicked off a nearby tree trunk and launched myself at my opponent; we met midair, trading kicks.

### Thud!

The figure's kick struck my shoulder, while mine struck their side. But that wasn't the end of it; while both of us remained airborne, there was still an opening for attack. In a split second, I shifted my body in midair, the aerial maneuver both instinctive and measured. Twisting, I kicked the empty space, changing my posture.

Clearly confused by my impossible movement, the silhouette hesitated.

This Martial Mastery move had been taught to me by Cere'zhula, once known as the Fiend, who'd survived countless battles using both her spells and this very technique. Taking advantage of my opponent's bewilderment, I aimed my black dagger at them. They instinctively blocked the strike with a knife, the clash making our weapons deflect off of each other.

My opponent's Martial Mastery and Dagger Mastery skills had to be at Level 4. My own Martial Mastery was also Level 4, but my Dagger Mastery was only Level 3; I couldn't overpower them. Instead, I put some distance between us once more.

At that moment, the figure threw another piece of shrapnel at me. This time, I spun my body and rotated my arms to dodge the attack and, using that momentum, flung my weighted pendulum. The centrifugal force made it heavier, and it crashed through branches as it arced toward the figure. The weight smashed into their wind barrier, breaking it and sending them to the ground with a faint gasp.

A woman? I wondered. During our earlier exchange of kicks, I'd gotten a feel for their weight and build, and this seemed likely. I immediately shifted my combat strategy to prioritize speed.

My opponent flung another piece of shrapnel, timing it for the precise moment I landed on the ground. Without stopping for a second, I rolled to the side to evade the attack, then brought my weighted pendulum down forcefully, aiming it directly at the figure.

Despite being in an unstable position after their fall, my opponent managed to slide sideways, dodging the pendulum, and simultaneously unleashed a sharp blade of wind mana.

That's Wind Cutter, I thought to myself. The equipment Gelf had made for me could withstand a direct hit without being cut, but if I took the full brunt of the spell and flinched for even a split second, who knew what might come next.

"Shield!" I chanted quickly, summoning a magical barrier to perfectly align with and deflect the Wind Cutter, which I could clearly visualize thanks to my ability to see mana. "Shadow!"

In the dark of the woods, even with Night Vision, distinguishing between the two versions of me would be difficult. Someone paying close attention might figure it out, but the figure didn't waste time trying, instead choosing to launch shrapnel at both versions simultaneously. My illusory copy vanished upon being struck, while I managed to dodge and used that brief moment to close the distance between us.

I thrust my black dagger at my opponent, but they slid to the side again, narrowly evading my blade and countering with a downward slash of their own knife. In close quarters combat like this, with barely any space between us, neither of us bothered with feints; we aimed only for vital points, hoping to kill with one strike.

Each of us dodged the other's attack by a hair's breadth. I slid to the side to avoid the knife, crouched like a cat, and swept at my opponent's legs with a powerful kick. They deftly evaded the blow, their long skirt twirling as they rolled to regain distance.

That movement... It was very familiar. My opponent must've realized it too, as a strange pause of one or two seconds fell between us.

At that moment, my Detection skill alerted me to several individuals approaching.

"They're over here!" someone called out. Four of the black-armored attackers were coming closer.

How irritating. The moment that thought crossed my mind, I kicked off the

ground and rolled low, launching my sickle pendulum as I spun. The attacker in front barely dodged the blade, but I immediately yanked on the string and brought back the sickle to slice through the man's carotid artery.

Using that momentum, I pushed off the ground with both hands, coiling my body to propel myself forward. I kicked a second man's legs out from under him, and as he fell, I drove my black dagger deep into his forehead, killing him.

Two left.

As I focused on their presences, I realized the remaining attackers were frozen in place from the pain of being struck by shrapnel. In an instant, the shadowy figure leaped forward and snapped their necks.

Both of us remained cautious, still in Stealth, but neither of us seemed willing to fight anymore. As we silently observed each other, I was certain I recognized this person.

"Sera?" I called out.

"So it is you, Alia. I started to wonder halfway through..."

Having confirmed each other's identities, we both dropped out of Stealth and revealed ourselves.

"Long time no see, Sera."

"Three years is indeed a while, but still a very short amount of time for how much stronger you've grown..."

Although I'd only been with Sera a brief while, she'd taught me many useful skills beyond just Stealth and Martial Mastery—skills that had helped me survive.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"Viro didn't tell you? I joined the Rainbow Blade to take part in that one mission."

Sera's eyes widened visibly in the darkness, and she let out a long, tired-sounding sigh. "Viro did tell me you were alive, but I see what this is about. He didn't invite you into the Rainbow Blade to safeguard you. It was to secure you. He deliberately hid how much stronger you've become."

So Viro hadn't shared everything about me. While Sera seemed to think his intention had been to secure my talents for the Rainbow Blade, I doubted that was the only reason. A few meters of distance remained between us, hinting at underlying tension.

"Alia, I heard about Graves attacking you. I understand why you may not trust us."

"I have nothing personal against you, Sera, but the Order of Shadows is a different matter. I won't fight them, and depending on the situation, I may take on individual jobs for them like Viro does. But I won't be returning to them either."

Viro had to have realized that the moment Sera learned how much stronger I'd gotten, she would attempt to recruit me back into the Order of Shadows. By ensuring I joined the Rainbow Blade, he'd given me an excuse to reject the Order—which he knew I still couldn't trust.

"I see. But regardless..." Sera gave another small sigh, gazing at me intently. "I never would've guessed you'd catch up to me in only three years."

"I don't think I've quite caught up to you in melee combat just yet."

"Frustrated as I am that Viro took you in, you'll be able to grow even more with the Rainbow Blade. How unfortunate for my son..."

I tilted my head in confusion, and Sera let out yet another sigh, pressing her fingers to her forehead as if she had a headache.

"You've grown quite beautiful too. And you've kept your hair long, I see..."

"I promised you and Theo I would." That was the whole reason I'd kept my hair long.

Now that I thought about it, I had trusted those two a great deal. How was Theo doing, I wondered?

At the mention of my promise, Sera's gaze softened, and the harsh atmosphere of our earlier deadly clash eased a little.

But now wasn't the time for that. Sera knew this, as her expression turned neutral once more and she lightly brushed the dust off her handmaiden's

uniform before glancing into the distance. "This is hardly the place for casual conversation. I believe those were the last of the attackers in this area... Since you're here, Alia, does that mean the rest of the Rainbow Blade is too?"

"Our swordsman Feld and I are the only two who came to assist. He's wiping out the rest of the enemies as we speak. Unless they have someone as skilled as you on their side, this should be over soon." I paused for a moment. "Who are these people?"

"I can explain once I'm certain Their Highnesses are safe. Since you're with the Rainbow Blade, come with me. We can talk as we walk."

"Got it."

Their Highnesses, I thought. So there were multiple members of the royal family here. But if Elena were here, why hadn't Sera mentioned her? Was she not here? Still, I couldn't imagine Sera serving any of the royals besides the queens and Elena, and I doubted the queens would have come to a place like this. Who were these royals, then?

"Allow me to explain things briefly," Sera said. As we moved through the pitch-black forest, silently gliding along the ground, she gave me a quick rundown of the situation.

The royal family's influence had been weakening of late. The most widely believed reason for this was that the king's official wife, the first queen, was relatively low in status. A powerful group of aristocrats known as the nobility faction harbored resentment and anxiety about the crown prince—the queen's flesh and blood—ascending the throne as the next king.

In an attempt to stabilize the power of the throne, certain younger members of the royal family, though not even old enough to attend the Sorcerers' Academy yet, were being sent into a large-scale dungeon to obtain something important. Although the expedition into the dungeon wasn't known to the aristocracy as a whole, the nobility faction had caught wind of it and taken this as an opportunity to plot an attack on the crown prince.

The central branch of the Assassins' Guild dispatching Tabatha to infiltrate the Traders' Guild was likely connected to this scheme.

"We also received a warning from Viro that the Assassins' Guild was planning an attack. In response, a certain individual offered to act as bait to ensure the crown prince's safety," Sera explained.

It was unclear whether the nobility faction's goal was to assassinate the crown prince and install a more favorable successor, or to abduct the crown prince and make him into their puppet. However, it seemed a certain member of the royal family, upon learning of the plans for an attack, had used that information to set a trap for the nobility faction.

So that's why there are so few guards, I mused. They seemed to have selected knights of considerable skill, but I recalled the one I'd helped mentioning that there had been more attackers "than anticipated." And while it was possible that the covert nature of this mission had required limited personnel, perhaps they just hadn't been able to afford the extra protection.

"You took quite a risk," I remarked.

"I think there were more enemies than anticipated because the Assassins' Guild declined the job and a different group ended up orchestrating the attack. This was probably a result of compensating for a lack of quality with numbers. I suspect it was because they caught wind of your involvement, 'Lady Cinders.'"

"I see..."

The central branch of the Assassins' Guild hadn't directly opposed me. The attack had likely been a result of Tabatha acting independently due to her former ties to the Northern Border District branch. It was possible that, upon realizing I was part of this mission, the central branch had pulled back. Sera had prepared for a small group of elite assassins, but with three times the expected number of attackers, her people had been overwhelmed.

"So, who are the royals you mentioned?"

"It would be best for you to meet them directly. Normally this wouldn't be possible, but as a member of the Rainbow Blade, you've earned that privilege."

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As we emerged onto the dark road, a large carriage guarded by several knights came into view. They noticed our approach and raised their weapons

warily, but as soon as they recognized Sera, they sighed in relief.

"Lady Sera, you're safe!" a knight exclaimed, rushing up to her. "Our attackers
—" He stopped mid-sentence as his eyes flicked toward me with suspicion.

"This young woman is with the Rainbow Blade, the party hired by His Majesty and the prime minister," Sera assured him calmly. "She helped me eliminate the attackers. How are Their Highnesses?"

"Oh, this is the adventurer we were told about! My apologies, miss. You seem so young. And Their Highnesses—"

"...Alia?" came a quiet voice just then. A blonde girl about my age stepped out of the carriage.

"Princess Elena..." I murmured.

"It really is you..."

When I first met Elena Claydale, first princess of the kingdom, she'd been frail to the point of needing recuperation. Over the past three years, however, she seemed to have improved remarkably. She was now eleven years old like me, but her aether-fueled growth made her look more like a girl of thirteen or fourteen.

As we gazed at each other, no longer children, Elena gave me a warm smile. Her eyes showed a hint of tears as she took a step toward me.



"Elena, wait!" called out a man's voice, causing her to halt. A man in his midtwenties rushed out from the carriage, stepping in front of her to shield her from me.

"Lord Uncle!"

"Don't be careless, Elena. You may think you know her, but this girl wears the attire of an adventuring ruffian. You! State your purpose!" the man demanded, drawing an elegant dagger from his waist. He pointed it at me.

"'Uncle'?" I muttered. A noble relative of hers? With his wavy blond hair and deep blue eyes, he certainly resembled her.

I glanced at Elena standing behind him, and she sighed softly, nodding.

"Yes, that is correct. This is His Highness Amor Claydale, the younger brother of my father, the king."

#### Vow

Amor Claydale, younger brother to the king...

I didn't know much about the royal family, but from what I could remember of Sera's lessons, the current king had six siblings, three of whom were also male. The royal women had lost their places in the line of succession after marrying into ducal families or foreign houses, and some of the men, too, had married into distant countries. The youngest brother, however, hadn't been engaged for certain reasons, and thus remained with the royal family as a prince.

Was this him? What I'd heard about the royal family from Sera was that the current king, who'd chosen a woman of low status as his first queen, had few children. Amor had, as a result, been left unmarried as a "spare."

Typically, the younger brother to a king held power equivalent to that of an archduke, assisting the king in political matters and acting on his behalf in times of need. But if my suspicions were accurate, Amor hadn't been granted that power at all. Instead, he was simply *there*, existing as part of the royal family without actually doing anything. If so, it made sense that Amor was far from

fond of the crown prince, the first in the line of succession. Perhaps that was why he'd developed a twisted sense of protectiveness toward Elena, whose position was similar to his own.

"You! Say something!" he demanded, pointing a dagger at me as he grew impatient with my silence. He was glaring at me, as though afraid of something.

Sera, her expression weary, gently chided him, "Please stop this, Your Highness. This young lady is a member of the Rainbow Blade, and one of our allies in this mission. The group's leader, Dalton, has even been made a baron for his achievements."

"A first-generation noble is no different from a commoner," Amor spat. "A dwarven noble, and an adventurer no less, is little more than a ruffian."

He seemed a bit hardheaded. Or perhaps he was just trying to protect Elena, his niece, in his own way. From his behavior, it seemed clear he was afraid someone would die during this dungeon expedition. Perhaps he wasn't usually this aggressive.

Still, no one liked being insulted, regardless of why. Elena likely understood this as well, since she gave me an apologetic look and nodded. Finally, we were reunited. There was much I wanted to say, but ours was not a weak bond, and we did not lick each other's wounds. All we needed to do was survive—both of us.

I turned my back on Amor as he argued with Sera, and he snapped at me. "Where do you think you're going?!"

"The enemies here have been dealt with. Sera and the knights are more than capable of handling your protection, so do as you please from now on. I'll be checking the surrounding area just in case, then reuniting with my party. If you have any further complaints, take them up with my employer."

"What?!" was the only response Amor could muster.

Normally, speaking to royalty in such a manner would have been a grave offense, but neither Sera nor the knights moved. Elena, meanwhile, covered her mouth with her hand and turned away.

I'd heard it had been the prime minister of Claydale who had requested the

Rainbow Blade. But while he might have been the client, our job was to protect the royal family; thus, our actual employer was His Majesty the King.

Amor might have been royalty, but in this case, doing as he pleased would've gone directly counter to the king's orders. It was understandable, then, that Sera and the knights hadn't intervened—although I suspected that wasn't the only reason. Another factor was likely the respect the knights, as warriors, had for the Rainbow Blade. Besides, Amor's behavior lacked the dignity expected of royalty. Lastly, perhaps they'd noticed that Elena and I knew each other. The fact that the princess hadn't even been able to speak to an old acquaintance because of the prince's interruption had made things unnecessarily tense.

In short, the knights seemed, predictably, to respect Elena—who was part of the line of succession—more than Amor, whose position within the royal family was nominal at best.

Until next time, Elena.

I gave Elena a small wave, and she smiled wordlessly.

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By the time I returned to the first carriage, the other attackers had been dealt with, and the knights were rounding up the few survivors.

As I emerged onto the road, Feld, who'd been speaking to the knight I'd saved earlier, noticed me and raised a hand slightly. "Hey, Alia. Glad you're safe. How did things go over there?"

"Ah, Miss Adventurer, you're alive!" the knight exclaimed. "Are Their Highnesses safe?"

"They're both fine," I replied, feeling a little awkward. I wasn't used to people worrying about me. Well, Viro and Sera did scold me for my recklessness, but still. "I've personally confirmed that."

Although there had never been a reason for concern, given that Sera had been with the royals, the knight was clearly relieved. He'd likely been worried about Elena as well. These knights were said to be elite royal guards, responsible for protecting the royal family. Though their orders had been to prioritize eliminating and capturing the attackers, the knight told me that, had I

returned any later, their plan had been to leave the wounded behind and go confirm Elena's safety. He seemed profoundly grateful that it hadn't been necessary.

I left the cleanup to them and returned to the carriage alongside Feld, who showed no signs at all of injury or fatigue.

After I reported everything that had happened, Viro stepped out of the carriage as if to switch places with me. Sera was our connection to our employer, after all, and Viro was likely on his way to greet her. I figured there would be some tension between him and Amor and, sure enough, Viro came back with a frown. Without a word, he lightly flicked my forehead with his finger.

As a result of Viro's conversation with Sera and the others, it was decided that our carriage would join Elena's entourage on its way to the port town. We were to scout ahead, however, and wouldn't have much direct contact with them. Worked for me; despite my relationship with Elena, I doubted her uncle Amor would want to see me.

From what Sera had told Viro, Amor wasn't part of the original expedition plans and had strong-armed his way in. While on the one hand, I couldn't imagine the royal family allowing their "spare" to venture into such a perilous dungeon, on the other, it hit me then just how desperate the royal family was to secure reliable power.

Just what was it that they were seeking from the dungeon...?

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"Clara... I suppose I still can't accompany you, can I?"

"Brother, our father has already forbidden it, has he not?"

In the port town within the Duchy of Hoodale, Clara smiled wryly at her older brother, Rockwell, who had accompanied her this far. This wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation.

The royal family's large-scale dungeon expedition was about to begin.

Although elite royal guards and a Rank 5 adventurer party had been assigned to protect them, the participating nobles were still minors, not even old enough to

enroll at the Sorcerers' Academy. There was a very real danger of death. The royal family had decided to conduct the dungeon expedition in the conviction that both Elena and Karla, whose skills had grown remarkably, had high chances of obtaining gifts. For this reason, they were willing to risk severe losses—it was expected that half of the knights wouldn't return.

Rockwell had only learned about the confidential expedition because his sister Clara was one of the participants. Despite having already been admonished by their father, Marquis Dandorl, he continued to insist on accompanying his sister, spurred by the expression of impending doom on her face.

"Rockwell, give it a rest. You're making Lady Clara uncomfortable."

"But Mikhail, what kind of knight am I if I can't protect my sister when she's in danger?"

"We have our own roles to play. His Majesty himself forbade our participation, remember?"

Mikhail Melrose, who'd come to see the group off as a friend of the crown prince, had repeatedly tried to dissuade Rockwell. He'd been told the truth by his grandfather, the prime minister: This dungeon expedition wasn't just a bid for power by the royal family but also a test of the current generation of royals and their willingness to put their lives on the line.

Although Rockwell wanted to protect his sister, he was the heir to one of the kingdom's two foremost noble houses. Both he and Mikhail were in positions to be protected, not protect others. Royal guards had a duty to serve as shields and lay down their lives if necessary, but Rockwell and Mikhail were not allowed to take on such a role. The king believed that, even if the expedition ended in total annihilation, the two boys—as the future grand general and prime minister—would be essential to support the second prince's rule. Thus, they had been denied permission to participate in the expedition.

Clara watched their exchange with a gloomy expression. *I wish my brother could protect me.* 

In her previous life, Clara had been an ordinary high school girl. She wasn't prepared to face death again. Before recalling her past life's memories, Clara

had been more willful and had still had pride as a noble. Back then, she'd known nothing and would've likely been able to die holding on to that pride—but the current Clara couldn't even recall what being proud of her nobility had felt like.

Elvan, who had accompanied the others in their carriage, looked at his fiancée with concern. "Are you all right, Clara?"

"Your Highness..."

The two had known each other since before their betrothal. Clara had often gone to the palace to spend time with Elena, and on occasion the three of them had played together. At the time, she'd been a haughty young noblewoman. She'd gotten along well with the intelligent Elena but looked down on Elvan somewhat, believing the boy lacked the sense of duty expected of royalty due to the freedoms with which he'd been raised. Even after regaining her memories, Clara saw Elvan as a child, since in her previous life she had only lived to her mid-teens. This had put a certain distance between the pair.

However, of late, with the increasing pressure brought by the questions regarding her resolve as a royal fiancée and the beginning of the otome game's story drawing nearer, Clara felt an ever-present sense of looming death. Having lost her noble pride, she was now a much weaker version of herself. Elvan had noticed and begun to show concern for her.

Their shared weakness as nobles had brought them closer. Perhaps their relationship was a simple case of two frail creatures licking each other's wounds, but nevertheless, it had become a lifeline for Clara. Even if she were to become close to the otome game's heroine, Alicia, she knew that once the protagonist got involved with the crown prince and became the Holy Maiden, the Holy Church and the people would acclaim Alia as the rightful queen, regardless of Clara's efforts.

And if Alicia were to become the rightful queen, Clara, as a princess of a former royal family, would be seen as a political obstacle that needed to be eliminated. The game simply depicted her being convicted of a crime, but behind the scenes, complex political dealings were involved.

Clara's position as the crown prince's primary fiancée meant happiness was

beyond her reach.

Thus, eliminating the heroine was her only option. After much anguish, she had resolved to do exactly that. But the heroine remained under the protection of House Melrose and the Order of Shadows, and Clara hadn't been able to get close to her.

Do I really have no choice but to rely on that...?

"Clara?" Elvan called out.

"Ah, it's nothing. Thank you, Your Highness."

"Why are you thanking me all of a sudden? Clara, you're acting strange."

There was much on her mind. But the more she thought, the more the fear of death tormented her. Elvan's smile, not at all like that of a royal, had become the only thing in this world she could trust.

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Several days passed with no further attacks as we traveled with Elena's entourage. Finally, we arrived safely at the port town within the Duchy of Hoodale. Since Elena was still a bit frail, I'd expected we would be staying for a few days to let her rest, but the rest of the expedition group had already arrived. The surviving attackers were handed over to Order of Shadows agents on standby in town, and the rest of us were to immediately proceed to board a ship.

According to Viro's report, the attackers had been sent by a baron who was himself operating under a marquis allied with the nobility faction. It was likely that the marquis would abandon the baron to his fate like a lizard dropping its tail to distract its pursuers. Nevertheless, it beggared belief that a single baron could have gathered so many attackers. Viro suspected that, if they dug deeper, they would uncover a much dirtier plot. He thought the mere fact they'd obtained leverage over the marquis who'd backed the baron was already a major coup.

After leaving the elderly steward and the carriage at a mid-range inn, our party headed to the large ship we were to board; our departure was set for two days from now. The ship, a military vessel owned by Duke Hoodale, was capable

of carrying up to a thousand soldiers. For this trip, however, only about a hundred and fifty people would be on board. That number included the participants in the dungeon expedition, the knights of the duchy, and the crew.

The day of our arrival, only Dalton and Viro met with the other key figures involved in the mission. The next evening, a formal gathering was organized for everyone. During the meet-and-greet in the ship's party hall, the crown prince, who stood between Elena and Amor, looked a little surprised to see me.

I was wondering about his reaction when Feld quietly whispered to me, "Remember the first time we met? That kid, 'El,' that Mira and I were guarding back then? That's him. Looks like he remembers you, Alia."

Ah, yes. The "first" time Feld and I had met. I remembered that.

So "El" had been short for Elvan. I hadn't recognized the crown prince at all until Feld's comment. It was surprising, really, that the crown prince of all people would be allowed to wander around town so freely. But I wasn't all that curious about him. I was far more interested in the girls standing next to Elena.

One of them was Clara, the daughter of Margrave Dandorl. I hadn't seen her in several years, and she'd grown to look about fourteen—a fully blossomed, beautiful young lady. As soon as she saw me, her face turned pale.

The other... When she spotted me, her sickly face, marred by deep dark circles under her eyes, twisted into a wide, almost grotesque smile. *Karla*. So *she* was a royal fiancée as well.

### ▼ Karla Leicester

Species: Human♀

Aether Points:  $440/450 \triangle +55$ 

Health Points:  $29/51 \triangle +4$ 

Overall Combat Power: 749 (Boosted: 1123)  $\triangle$  +426

She'd grown terrifyingly strong. Her health points remained low, almost as if cursed, but her aether now surpassed even Samantha's and Cere'zhula's. What

brutal battles had she endured to gain such power? She'd likely thrown herself into extreme fights all on her own. If Karla and I were ever to face each other in battle, it would undoubtedly turn into a life-or-death struggle, dragging everyone around us into it.

Dinner was served as a standing banquet. While some of the expedition members had brought along associates, this evening was limited only to the actual participants due to the covert nature of the mission. Since the majority of the participants was under twelve, which was considered the age at which children entered adult society, the younger ones like Karla and Elena finished eating early and retired to their cabins.

As an adventurer, I wasn't bound by such rules. But, since Viro became a hopeless drunk once he got enough booze in his system, I retired early as well. I decided to go up to the deck and enjoy the night breeze.

The cool wind brushed against my skin. The deck was peaceful. Monsters did appear even at sea, but the ship was still docked in the harbor and the crew was making use of monster-repelling incense, so there was no danger in stepping out here. Still, Elena and the others with their guards wouldn't come out here at this hour.

I'd come here for two reasons. One, to stay on alert for human attackers. Two, because I had a feeling.

"I knew you'd come, Alia."

"No one would worry about you being out here alone, huh, Karla?"

This was the dangerous girl I'd met two years ago. Her appearance and mental state had already been precarious then, and now that she'd matured, they had only gotten worse. Perhaps it was her weak constitution, or perhaps the madness that consumed her—either way, her pursuit of her goals was single-minded. There was a certain beauty to that, even if nobody understood her.

Karla approached me slowly, not bothering to conceal her overwhelming aether. With a smile, she reached out a hand and lightly scratched my cheek with a sharp black nail, leaving a thin red line. In return, I gripped her thin neck with one hand, my fingers digging into her pale throat.



"You want to fight to the death here?" I asked.

"No. This is not a worthy stage for our showdown," she replied.

I released my grip on her throat, and she used a handkerchief to wipe the blood from my cheek before casting Restore to erase the wound.

"You look beautiful when you bleed, Alia. I want to taint you with the blood pouring from my heart one day."

"Leave me out of your death wish."

"It would be a tragedy if you weren't the one to kill me."

Karla clutched the bloodstained handkerchief to her chest as though it were precious. We walked to the edge of the deck and leaned against the railing side by side.

"Why are you going into a dungeon?" I asked.

"You haven't heard? Our objective is to obtain gifts from the dungeon spirit."

Ah. So that was what the royal family was after. Gifts. The dungeon spirits could bestow a variety of powers, among them mind reading, weather control, and even future sight. While there were limits and costs associated with such powers, the nation would undoubtedly prosper if the royal family could secure useful abilities like those.

But there was more to it, wasn't there?

"Why are you going, Karla?"

The smile briefly vanished from Karla's lips. "I want a gift too. Why would I not reach for power that's available to me?"

"Do you understand what you're getting into?"

Gifts bestowed by dungeon spirits came with a caveat. These spirits were not mortal beings. The power that they offered to those who made it to the depths of a dungeon was toxic to living creatures.

"Of course I do. Perhaps some, such as the beautiful, naive Prince El and the little Dandorl lady, don't understand, but the princess has most certainly done her due diligence. Do you think she'll refuse a gift, if it's offered to her?"

It didn't escape my notice that Karla had referred to Clara, her senior, as a "little lady."

"Dungeon spirits grant wishes," I pointed out.

"They do."

Cere'zhula had taught me as much, and my own research had confirmed it. Dungeon spirits did grant wishes, but not to all who reached them. It took a strong desire...and being worthy of the wish. The wish could then be granted in the form of the gift, but that wasn't the only way for a wish to be fulfilled.

"Are you going to wish for your body to be healed?" I asked.

A powerful gift could destroy the recipient. This was because, often, the most intense wishes were selfish. Humans could be quite foolish, and as such, they were punished. But perhaps a pure wish could still come true?

I didn't know what Elena would wish for. My hope was that she would wish for her own body to grow stronger, even if just a little. But she was a princess, and as royalty, there were other things she might need to wish for. I would respect her will, no matter what.

But what of Karla?

She narrowed her eyes slightly. "Getting a gift would be wonderful. Maybe I'll finally be able to live as myself," she said dreamily, gazing up at the moonlit sky. Then her violet eyes turned to me, and a faint smile graced her lips. "You're just like the moon, Alia. That's why we creatures of the night reach for you."

"I might be willing to help you," I told her, stepping away from the railing.

"Oh?" Karla looked at me with amusement. "And what if it results in me trying to kill you?"

"How would that be any different from now?" I asked, glancing briefly back at her.

Karla burst into laughter, further draining her already limited stamina.

As dawn broke, the ship set sail toward a remote island within the duchy's waters, where the large-scale dungeon—home to a spirit—was located.

As the ship prepared to depart, Rockwell gazed at it with a worried expression on his face. "They're leaving soon," he said. "I hope they make it back safely."

"Indeed," Mikhail replied with a nod, though he didn't share the same level of concern.

The two of them, being minors and outsiders, had not been allowed to participate in last night's banquet—which had doubled as a send-off ceremony. They'd already said their goodbyes beforehand, however.

Rockwell had a close relationship with Elvan and with his sister Clara, so his concern was genuine. Mikhail, meanwhile, due to his role as the future head of operations of the Order of Shadows, had always kept others at arm's length. Or so it seemed on the surface. Outwardly, Mikhail was genial and friendly, but he avoided getting too close to anyone. Inwardly, Rockwell knew, Mikhail was quite compassionate and simply worried that becoming too emotionally involved would prevent him from making cold, rational decisions.

Even as he worried about Elvan, Rockwell glanced at Mikhail with concern.

"What, Rockwell?" Mikhail asked. His tone was far more casual than usual; he sounded more like a friend than a noble.

"Nothing," Rockwell replied with a faint smile, feeling slightly awkward. He opted instead to change the subject. "By the way, are you still looking for that adventurer? I think there's an Adventurers' Guild near here. Do you want to stop by later?"

"Ah. Yes..."

This was about a female adventurer Mikhail had only met once, a few years ago. The encounter had been brief, but it had left a strong impression on the boy's young heart. Ever since, he had been searching for the peach-haired girl not only in the capital's Adventurers' Guild but also in other branches wherever he traveled. He'd had no luck, however.

It was rare for Mikhail to be so fixated on someone. Noticing the pensive look on his friend's face, Rockwell suddenly remembered something. "Oh, by the way. I saw Elvan this morning. You know that party the prime minister hired?"

"The Rainbow Blade?"

"Yeah, them. Elvan said there was this girl among them he was surprised to see."

"What...?" Mikhail suddenly turned to look after the departing ship and, for a brief moment, caught a glimpse of pink-blonde hair flowing above the deck. He tried to dash toward the ship. "That girl!"

"H-Hey!" Rockwell called out, quickly grabbing Mikhail's arm.

"Let go, Rockwell! That's her!"

"Calm down! The ship's leaving! We'll cause a scene if we go running after it now!"

Rockwell's words reminded Mikhail that they were both high-ranking nobles. The expedition was confidential, and even their presence here required discretion. Realizing this, Mikhail reluctantly came to a halt.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"It's fine. Are you sure the girl Elvan mentioned is her, though?"

"I don't know." He'd only caught a brief glimpse—pink hair and a profile. It wasn't enough to conclusively state it was the same girl, but he didn't want to believe he was mistaken.

He silently stared after the departing ship, offering a silent prayer for her return.

Please, stay safe.

# **Dungeon Expedition: Entrance**

Forests had forest monsters. Deserts had desert monsters. And seas had sea monsters. But our journey by ship was uneventful.

Perhaps it would've been different for a smaller boat, but monsters wouldn't attack the type of large vessels nobles owned—unless the monsters themselves were enormous. Smaller boats were outfitted with protective measures, such as inverted hooks to prevent sea monsters from climbing onto the deck. It was

also customary to scatter monster-repelling herbs around vessels, a practice refined over generations of fishing.

People had settled in this region over a thousand years ago. Even as nations had come and gone, the inhabitants had remained, working hard to make the environment safer. As a result, monsters rarely approached even small boats anymore. In such conditions, there wasn't much for me to do aside from practicing magic solo, sparring with Viro to try and raise my Dagger Mastery to Level 4, and occasionally chatting with the friends of the knight I'd saved.

"Miss Adventurer! A word?" a knight called out.

"Sure," I replied.

Knights, who had chosen combat as their profession, didn't seem to hold any bias against adventurers. I'd grown to look like a fourteen-year-old, so the younger knights didn't treat me as a child. They approached me one after another, wanting to know my name and asking questions about my hobbies.

Why would they ask me about hobbies, of all things? My name, I could understand, but...

"Uh, my hobby is...gathering medicinal herbs?" I ventured. I at least had the sense not to say I mixed poisons in my spare time.

"Of course a renowned adventurer would be well-versed in medicine as well!"

Well, I had studied medicine under Cere'zhula, so I was in fact well-versed in it, yes. But why were the young knights' faces turning red? The knight I'd saved on the road eventually showed up and apologized to me as he dragged them away.

"I love having you around, Alia," Mira said with a smile, placing a hand on my shoulder from behind. "People leave me alone."

I tilted my head in confusion, but she simply smiled again without offering an explanation and walked off toward the ship's dining hall.

The ship's voyage had been uneventful enough for the knights to relax, but I still hadn't gotten a chance to speak with Elena again. It had been a while... But, thinking about it, it was only natural. I was just an adventurer, after all, and one

typically needed an official reason to meet with a princess. And even if I had one, Prince Amor would likely not allow his niece to meet with an adventurer.

How did I know that? Well, Elena's guardian maiden—Chloe—had remembered me, come to ask about my well-being, and told me about Elena's situation. She'd been present at the lakeside castle during Elena's recuperation and had been Elena's caretaker since the princess's infancy. Elena trusted her fully.

I remembered Chloe because she'd immediately trusted my assessment when Elena had been kidnapped. Come to think of it, she'd been the one to make arrangements for me to be Elena's sole attendant. She'd created an environment where Elena could easily voice her frustrations and relax.

Chloe had also updated me on Theo, Sera's son, who was a year younger than me. Even after my disappearance, Theo had clung to the belief that I was alive and devoted himself to his training. Apparently, he was quite talented—unsurprising, since he was Sera's son—and could reach Rank 3 if he kept training for a few years. Chloe said he was looking forward to seeing me again.

"The poor boy," she said.

"Why?" I asked, puzzled.

In response, Chloe only placed a hand on her cheek and sighed softly.

She served as both an attendant to the princess and a knight of the Order of Shadows. Her hair was long and black, her frame was slender, and her features were kind. But, despite her serene demeanor, she was actually a heavy-warrior-type knight. Although she looked to be in her early twenties, she was strong and trustworthy enough that she'd been assigned, along with Sera, to protect Elena on this expedition.

Chloe's combat power was around 400, making her about as strong as a Rank 3. I was confident Elena would be safe unless we found ourselves in extreme danger. Though Chloe's outfit looked like a loose-fitting maid uniform, she wore finely woven mithril chain mail underneath, making her defense comparable to that of the royal guards. She also carried a large shield and mace—heavy enough that I'd likely have struggled to move if I equipped them.

Sera seemed to not have changed at all. Like me, she prioritized speed; the only armor she wore was her monster-leather maid uniform and, under that, a mithril fiber corset. How much had that cost, I wondered. Apparently Gelf had custom made it for her. If I had enough funds in the future, I figured I'd ask him to make one for me too.

There were no issues on our end and, from what Chloe had told me, none on Elena's either. Which just left the crown prince Elvan and his uncle Amor...

Elvan had always been concerned for Elena due to her poor health. In the aftermath of Graves's scheme, he had grown suspicious of the Order of Shadows and refused their protection. Although each participant in the expedition had been permitted to bring up to two attendants, and Elena was protected by elite members of the Order, Elvan's attendants had minimal combat abilities.

Amor, who had decided to join at the last minute, was in an even worse situation—he'd insisted he could take care of himself and brought only a porter.

Clara had at least brought a female knight from Dandorl, so she was in a better position than either of those two. This did mean, however, that Sera and Chloe would have to focus on protecting Amor and Elvan, so it would be hard to count on them in combat.

In other words, the expedition's offensive force was essentially restricted to my group—the Rainbow Blade. We could rely on the royal knights to an extent, but considering the circumstances, it was best for them to focus on defense and leave offense to us.

I'd have liked to have sparred with Sera for practice, but since she was officially a handmaiden, she didn't have time for that. The deck was too cramped for me to spar with Feld or Dalton.

"I'd like to see Mira's animist magic in action, though," I said.

"Are you *trying* to sink the damn ship?!" Viro cut in suddenly. He wasn't just randomly joining the conversation; he'd clearly been waiting for a chance to talk to the beautiful Chloe.

Hadn't he said he had a girlfriend?

"Now then, if you'll excuse me," Chloe said with a polite smile before turning around and setting off in search of Elena.

As Viro's gaze followed her figure, I grabbed his shoulders, making him flinch. "Hey! It's not what it looks like!" he exclaimed. "I'm totally dedicated to my girlfriend! It's just, y'know, a graceful beauty like that is, uh, a sight for sore eyes! I just looked for a second, all right?!"

Watching Viro tell on himself, I couldn't help but give him a somewhat cold glare before nodding. "So you're not doing anything, right? Want to spar with me?"

"Again?!"

And so I did most of my sparring with Viro. Whereas Sera and I both used multiple weapons, Viro was a more traditional light fighter. When it came to fighting enemies, I aimed for an efficient kill, but his techniques were greater both in variety and precision.

"You're not wrong to focus on a single, winning blow," he explained. "But don't get too caught up in that. We're not proper warriors like Feld or Dalton. If you still want a strike as powerful as a warrior's, though, focus on mastering one technique."

"Got it."

Viro's focus wasn't just on defeating enemies; he'd honed all of his skills equally, giving him the type of strength necessary to survive in any situation. In a way, this aligned with the tactics Cere'zhula and I used—tactics designed for solitary survival. It was precisely because of this that Viro had survived the battle against Graves. I realized now that learning from him was essential if I wanted to know how to fight in a party like a proper adventurer.

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We arrived at our destination, the remote island, on the night of the fourth day.

From what I could tell through Night Vision, it would be a scenic place during the day. But of course, this operation was covert, even if part of the nobility faction seemed to be aware of it, and thus arriving at night had been intentional.

It was impossible to tell whether or not the Assassins' Guild had truly withdrawn from any involvement. Even heading to the dungeon was a risky endeavor, as simply going into town could cause a stir. While the townspeople would know a large noble vessel had arrived, that wouldn't be enough to cause a commotion on its own. But a large group consisting of not just the expedition members but also numerous guards and attendants provided by Duke Hoodale would definitely stand out.

If rumors started spreading, other nobles would pick up on the apparent absence of the royal family from court and connect the dots.

"They've already got a cover story," Viro explained. He'd already done some intel work, it seemed. "There's apparently a guesthouse near the dungeon that's reserved for royalty, similar to that lakeside castle in Dandorl."

We would bypass the town and head directly to the guesthouse. There, we would make our preparations, then head to the dungeon two days later, early in the morning. This dungeon was open to all adventurers, so even if we went at the crack of dawn, a group of nobles surrounded by over thirty knights was certain to draw attention—but apparently this wasn't going to be an issue.

"This is classified information, so be mindful. We're working under the royal family, so we have a duty to keep things confidential. If any info leaks, the Order deals with the people responsible, and if that's us... Well, you catch my drift."

To get straight to the point, this dungeon had a secret entrance for the exclusive use of the royal family. I was barely even qualified to know about such a thing, but I assumed Elena and Sera had vouched for my trustworthiness.

This dungeon reportedly had 90 floors, with most adventurers only descending as far as the 40th. Normally, the deeper one went in a dungeon, the stronger the monsters became, so adventurers didn't push past the 40th floor due to time and budget constraints.

It was said that the first three floors could be explored in a day, but reaching the 10th floor was a three-day round trip. By the 20th floor, monsters below Rank 3 were rare, and going there and back took about two weeks. For an ordinary adventurer, this was the limit, no matter how prepared they were.

Going any deeper took not only a high-ranking party but also significant financial resources.

More classified information: This dungeon had been fully conquered several hundred years ago in a joint effort by the royal family and the Adventurers' Guild. At the time, a team of a hundred adventurers and several times as many supporting troops had spent about a year on the endeavor. During that expedition, they'd discovered a return point of sorts on the 70th floor and, with the help of the court sorcerers of the time, managed to stabilize and secure it as a permanent entrance and exit point.

This entrance was maintained, at an enormous annual expense, so that the royal family could obtain gifts. If taxpayers knew their money was being spent on such a thing, criticism of the royal family would've gone through the roof. Conversely, allowing unrestricted acquisition of gifts would lead to people gaining power without understanding the risks, potentially causing a collapse of the country's order.

It seemed that no method was out of the question when it came to maintaining the nation's stability.

"Would the spirit give gifts to people who start partway through?" I asked.

"Eh, maybe," Viro replied. "That's probably part of why they're sending all the younger royals in hopes at least a few will get one."

Sounded like the dungeon's spirit still granted gifts even when people took the backdoor approach, but it was strange that almost no one outside of the royal family and their fiancées had ever received one. I didn't know what criteria the spirits used, but if I were them, I wouldn't grant a gift to people looking for shortcuts. I'd reserve them for those who legitimately risked their lives for power.

Between the three royals and the two fiancées of the crown prince, how many would receive a gift, I wondered? Would Elena seek one for the sake of the nation? If she deemed it necessary, she would pursue it without the slightest hesitation. She was just that resolute. Still, I didn't think she would actually seek one. She believed in her own strength. Karla and I were much the same.

Although, if either of those two wished for their bodies to be healthy, and that wish was granted in the form of a gift, I would support it.

But...what would the other three wish for?

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On the eve of the dungeon expedition, the royals were resting their bodies and minds in their respective guesthouse rooms.

"My uncle can be quite a handful," Elena said with a sigh as she recalled Amor's behavior.

Holding back her agreement, Sera poured tea into Elena's cup. "He must have his own burdens to bear, given his position. And I've been wondering, Your Highness... Are you certain you don't wish to meet with her?"

Arranging a meeting in the confines of the ship had been difficult, but in the guesthouse, Sera could easily bring the adventurer girl to Elena's room if the princess so desired.

Elena narrowed her eyes slightly at the calming herbal tea and shook her head. "It's fine. She and I are not friends. If she survives, if she stays safe, that's enough for me."

The princess and the girl had met in their younger years. The adventurer had not only risked life and limb to save Elena but also safeguarded the princess's heart. She was the only true kindred spirit in Elena's life.

Though the time they'd spent together had been brief, it had undoubtedly been a balm to Elena's heart in many ways. Alia was like the moonlight, illuminating Elena's lonely path through the uncharted darkness of protecting the kingdom. The two had different ways of life, but in another sense, they were birds of a feather, and so Elena could not bend Alia's path to suit her own selfish desires.

"If that is your wish," Sera acquiesced.

Although Elena had insisted they were not friends, her concern for the girl showed how much the princess had grown in every way and learned to keep her feelings in check. On her small shoulders rested the heavy responsibility of

protecting the ten million lives of the Kingdom of Claydale. The crown prince, who should've shared this burden, lacked the appropriate resolve. The king, concerned over Elena's frail health, had kept her away from politics, turning into an obstacle in her path.

Sera had begun to seriously consider how she might safeguard not only Elena's body but also her mind to support the princess in her lonely battle.

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Meanwhile, Clara—the young lady of the Marquisate of Dandorl—received a visit from a boy.

"Prince Elvan," she said. "Is something the matter?"

"Well, I was worried about you, since you didn't look well earlier. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Despite her fiancé's seemingly unreliable nature, the fact that he cared for her brought a faint smile to Clara's face. Danger weighed on her mind—not only the danger she was bound to face before the main scenario of the otome game even began but also the reemergence of a girl who closely resembled the game's heroine, which had stirred up Clara's past trauma.

In her former life, Clara had lived to be older than her current self. While she couldn't remember every emotion she'd experienced in this life, she knew she'd had pride as a noble once. That pride had begun to fade as her memories returned, and now she felt unable to risk her life for the country.

On the way here, Elvan had shown her considerate care. Although Rockwell and Mikhail had also worried for her, they were high-ranking nobles who had a duty to risk their lives for others. For that reason, Clara found Elvan's kindness particularly comforting.

The queen, a member of a relatively carefree middle-ranking noble family, had chosen not to subject Elvan to royal education. Though her intention, as a mother, had likely been to show him the same love she'd received from her parents, the queen didn't seem to understand that royal duties and resolve were in a realm of their own, far removed from such considerations.

In the otome game, Elvan was moved by his bond with the heroine, who had been raised as a commoner. Through her influence, he came to reflect on his inadequacies as a prince and grew into a proper heir. But right now, Elvan had no connection to the protagonist and remained unreliable.

Clara had once been a commoner and, as such, shared certain sensibilities with the heroine, but now that she was a highborn noble, she was told effort was expected of her. No matter how hard she tried, she could never truly replace the heroine. Still, Elvan's vulnerability had allowed him to see the fractured part of Clara's soul. It was precisely because of his weakness that he could empathize with hers.

For the first time, Clara felt like she could see Elvan not as a game character to be "romanced" but as a true human being.

"I'll work hard too, all right? Let's both keep going, Clara. I'll protect you as much as I can."

"Yes, Your Highness..."

Although Elvan was mild mannered, which the nobility faction saw as evidence of a lack of spirit, his kindness was a lifeline to Clara. He extended his hand to her, and she took it.

Is there anything I can do for him...?

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Elsewhere, on a pitch-black terrace, a dark-haired girl in white nightwear danced alone. She moved with simple steps that any noble girl would know, reaching out a hand as though to a phantom partner. Karla's face wore a childlike yet horrifying smile as she extended a hand to the moon and made a wish.

"May tomorrow come soon..."

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Finally, the day came for us to go into the dungeon. Early that morning, we gathered in the garden behind the guesthouse, which was surrounded by high walls. Supposedly, the dungeon's hidden entrance lay here, though I couldn't

see any signs of a door.

The thirty-some participants in the expedition wore expressions combining determination, nervousness, and barely concealed fear. The door led to the dungeon's seventieth floor—a place where adventurers of lower ranks could die instantly. Anyone would have felt rattled braving that danger not of their own volition but for the sake of others.

I caught Elena's gaze as she stood surrounded by her royal guards and Amor, and she gave me a small, troubled smile.

Initially, I'd accepted Viro's invitation to join this escort mission in order to prevent anything from befalling Elena. Now, however, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to do that—not with Amor hounding her. He wouldn't let me close.

Amor likely saw Elena—who, due to her fragile health, had left the position of heir to her brother rather than vying for supremacy—as a mirror of himself. In his own life, Amor, too, was kept idle by the royal family. I could sympathize with his position, but people overly concerned with their own struggles could be particularly troublesome when backed into corners.

Even the crown prince, Elvan, had tried to talk to me several times at first. Amor had stopped him each time. He'd since given up and was now focused on caring for the pale-looking Clara.

Elvan's other fiancée, Karla, had essentially been left to her own devices. She was used to exploring dungeons solo and hadn't brought any attendants. All she had was an expandable storage bag. Honestly, she looked the most eager out of us all. Even the royal guards tasked with her protection could sense her intense aura and kept their distance.

Noticing my gaze, Karla gave me a cheerful, unburdened smile and a small wave.

"A-As per His Majesty the King's orders, the dungeon expedition shall now commence!" Elvan proclaimed nervously.

At the crown prince's words, the knights responsible for guarding the royals formed a protective circle. Elvan directed his ring, which bore the royal crest, at a boulder; an entrance of sorts slowly emerged on its surface as it parted with a

hefty rumble. Once it was fully opened, the crown prince, protected by the knights, took the first step inside. The other royals followed.

"That's our cue," Dalton prompted, and the rest of us nodded and went in after him.

The Rainbow Blade entered last and regrouped with the royals in a spacious area just ahead of the entrance, where we took the vanguard. This initial section had been crafted by court sorcerers of eld and was of a visibly different color. Beyond here lay the dungeon proper.

"Alia, let's go," Viro urged.

"Got it."

From here on out, it was the Rainbow Blade's time to shine. As scouts, Viro and I went ahead to detect traps and dangers. These traps weren't intricate or mechanical; most were straightforward but massive and lethal. Some spewed poison gas when stepped on, and others caused the ceiling to collapse. With a large group of amateurs like this, extra caution was necessary.

Viro scanned for traps, relying on his intuition and experience and carefully ensuring the path was safe before advancing. "You try it, Alia."

"All right."

I followed the method he'd taught me and checked for traps, but instead of the main path, I focused on the side routes. With an inexperienced group, this was an essential precaution, as some might stray from the path out of curiosity or other needs. Beyond what I'd learned from Viro, I also used my special sight to detect any unnatural shifts in mana.

But traps weren't all that I was checking the side paths for.

"Viro," I called out.

"Yeah, something's coming from that direction."

With larger groups, formations stretched out. The longer the line of people, the more time it took for everyone to pass through an area. A small party could move quickly, but moving slowly like this gave monsters enough time to approach undetected.

"What do you think it is?" Viro asked as a test.

Recalling his past teachings, I tried to visualize the approaching enemies. "I don't know these footsteps. Broad, fast, heavy. One foot louder than the other, so probably armed with one-handed weapons. Large humanoid monsters...estimated three or four."

"That sounds like either orcs or ogres. Likely ogres. They're not as heavy as orcs but have higher physical abilities, so their steps are faster and heavier." He activated the shadow sorcery spell Noise to relay a message to Dalton and the others at the rear. "Dalton! Three to four closing in, possibly ogres!"

Moments later, we heard the knights talking behind us.

This dungeon seemed similar to the demi-beast dungeon near the royal capital. Humanoid enemies suited me just fine, so I had no complaints.

"No point in keeping quiet now, huh," I said.

"Ah, it's fine. Even knights rarely get the chance to fight high-ranking monsters. Once we take out a few, these guys should calm down... Look! Here come the *ogres*!"

### ▼ Ogre (Rank 3)

Aether Points: 138/143

Health Points: 384/401

Overall Combat Power: 494 (Boosted: 572)

Ogres were Rank 3 monsters, like orcs, but on the higher end of that range, whereas orcs were on the lower end. Though ogres were quite strong, they weren't on the same level as an orc soldier. Still, their skin was supposedly tougher than an orc's. Instead of using my knife, I unsheathed the black dagger and prepared to step forward. Before I could, a large hand gripped my shoulder and stopped me.

"Feld?"

"Leave this to us," he said with a grin.

Brandishing his magic steel greatsword, Feld charged forward. Dalton followed closely behind, fully clad in mithril plate armor, his thudding steps causing the ground to tremble.

"Grooooooooar!!!"

Noticing only two enemies had rushed out, two of the ogres leaped forward to meet them. There was a biological difference in stats between ogres and humans or dwarves, so I could understand the creatures' heedless aggression, but...

"Haaah!"

Feld suddenly lunged forward, a blur of speed. One of the ogres raised its club to strike, but Feld's greatsword cleaved the thing and its weapon into vertical halves. With a heavy thud, the ogre's two parts fell to the ground, spraying gore everywhere.

Wow. From a distance, Feld looked more like an ogre than the actual ogre.

"Oh. I see," I said.

"I know, right? Can't even tell who the ogre is," Viro remarked nonchalantly.

With a loud cry, Dalton rushed in shortly after Feld. As the dwarf leaped forward, his armor deflected the ogre's crude club and his massive mithril war hammer bore down on the monster and smashed it as though it were made of wax.

So this is what top-tier adventurers are like...

Behind me, I could hear the knights murmuring in awe. They seemed to have regained their composure, realizing that the creatures in this dungeon weren't the terrifying monsters of childhood tales but foes they could actually fight.

Feld and Dalton quickly finished off the remaining ogres, then returned. The knights cheered in admiration, honoring their victory.

## **Dungeon Expedition: Seventieth Floor**

Typically, dungeon expeditions took a considerable length of time. Even in the

upper levels, it would likely take over a day to clear a single floor without the maps the Adventurers' Guild had charted. This was even truer on the lower floors, where monsters were stronger and paths more intricate. It could take days to clear a single floor while navigating traps and fighting monsters, and, occasionally, backtracking to upper floors proved necessary.

The royal family, however, had documents that included a map of the path beyond the seventieth floor. Usually, people went into dungeons to collect treasures from each floor, but we ignored those entirely, focusing solely on progressing along the preestablished route with no detours.

Generally, people had the impression that the deeper one went into a dungeon, the stronger the monsters became. And while it was indeed the case that earlier floors were populated by lower-ranked monsters, with higher-ranked monsters appearing deeper into the dungeon, legendary-type monsters didn't appear even beyond the seventieth floor. What changed from that point on wasn't exactly the *strength* of the monsters but rather the *difficulty* of fighting them. On the middle floors, monsters appeared sporadically, but on the deeper floors, they showed up one after another, leaving little time for rest and making it likelier we would get caught by surprise.

In these levels, Rank 3 monsters like orcs and ogres were common. Not only that, they always attacked in groups. To make matters worse, these monsters were highly aggressive. This deep into a dungeon, the monsters were starving; although the environment was perfectly designed to draw them in and sustain them, the dungeon itself didn't provide enough food to keep them satisfied. The high-density mana found in dungeons acted as a source of nutrients and allowed them to survive without eating much—but this didn't mean their hunger disappeared. And what these monsters craved most was the flesh of people.

Supposedly, the dungeons subtly influenced the monsters' behavior to prevent them from eating each other. Not only that, visitors unlucky enough to get trapped in upper-level traps were funneled into the lower levels to serve as food for monsters, thus keeping them from getting too used to starvation.

As a result, monsters in these lower floors were perpetually aggressive. They could sniff us out from afar and track us down, attacking us day and night.

Thankfully, not all enemies here were Rank 3 or higher; when larger groups attacked, they often included lower-ranked creatures like Rank 2 hobgoblins or low-end Rank 3 high kobolds. Against those, the royal guards could step in to assist.

Prince Amor, however, objected to having the guards take the lead in combat.

"What are you doing?! It's these adventurers' job to clear the path. You knights are tasked with protecting the younger royals like Elvan and Elena!" he snapped.

Though bluntly put, his protest was logical. That was why we'd been hired, and none of us in the Rainbow Blade were sensitive enough to be hurt by his statements.

Still, reasonable or no, a poorly phrased statement could rub some people the wrong way. We'd be going faster if more people took action. The young knights were being denied opportunities to prove themselves and growing frustrated, while Sera and Elena were mentally exhausted from trying to keep them in check.

Most unsettling of all was the fact that Karla hadn't attacked a single monster, even in a dungeon where no one would've stopped her.

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Initially, as people made camp, the atmosphere had been somewhat cheerful. The royals had even smiled at the simple meals they'd never tasted before.

Now, however, several days into the expedition, some were starting to make faces at each meal. They'd lost the sense of day and night and slept in fear only to wake up to more darkness. Slowly, their faces were beginning to reflect discomfort and fatigue.

"Seems like the only ones who are still feeling good are us and that girl over there," Viro commented while chewing on rations during a break.

I nodded in agreement and glanced at the girl in question. Even during breaks, Karla didn't join the royals and kept to herself. The royal attendants seemed scared of her and maintained their distance. Sera and Elena occasionally offered her tea, and she would politely accept, but she mainly nibbled on snacks she

took from her storage bag.

Used to dungeon diving, Karla seemed to silently enjoy the convenience of having meals that required no effort on her part. I could relate to that. Since I often camped alone, I wasn't particularly bothered by the current situation.

On the other hand, I figured Viro, who preferred to spend the night in inns, might have grievances about eating on his feet—

"It's better than your food," he told me flatly.

Since monster meat was plentiful, I figured it would be wise to use it instead of consuming our precious rations, but he'd strictly forbidden me from doing so. Granted, I couldn't deny that the choice of eating humanoid meat was unappealing.

Elena, like Karla, had no complaints about the meals. She seemed to have so little appetite that I began to worry about her health, but no one could really complain, given our situation.

Well, almost no one.

"Where's the head handmaiden?! Elena isn't eating well! Don't you have anything better for her?" Amor demanded.

"Uncle, I'm perfectly fine..."

While it was likely he was trying to watch out for his niece, his misguided concern was only adding to Elena's burdens as she tried to appease him. And the knights' frustration only grew as they watched the frail Elena push herself, but Amor, preoccupied with his own issues, remained oblivious to the strained atmosphere.

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The tension in the air finally snapped after we cleared two more floors and reached a wide hall with multiple intersecting pathways. We all moved forward, into the center of the hall, and at that moment, a number of us—Viro and myself included—looked up.

"Heads up!"

"Draw your weapons! A horde is approaching!"

At that warning, all of us—knights and adventurers—unsheathed our weapons, and Mira unleashed the lesser wind spirit she commanded into the air.

"O wind spirit, shield us in your breeze!"

As the barrier of wind enveloped our group, goblins, hobgoblins, and other low-ranked monsters swarmed in from the corridors leading into the hall.

"Dammit! It's a monster room!" Viro shouted.

A monster room was a type of dungeon trap—a safe-looking area that would suddenly be flooded with monsters.

"Let's go!" Dalton commanded.

"We shall offer our support! On our honor as royal guards!"

"On our honor as royal guards!!!"

As Dalton and Feld charged forward, the young knights, who'd had few opportunities to fight until now, likewise sprang into action against the monsters trying to surround us. In this situation, protecting the royals would've been a wiser decision, but the knights were restless from being held back for so long and had reached their limit. After days in the dungeon, they'd lost their ability to make clear judgments.

Caught in the sudden chaos, I was readying a pendulum to provide support when someone called out to me.

"Are you sure it's wise for you to go with them?"

"Karla...?"

At Karla's amused words, a horde of monsters began pouring in from the passage we'd just come through.

"What?! Knights! Get back here!" Amor shouted, but in the heat of battle, his order didn't reach them. "Damn it!"

Fearing for her life, Clara faltered as if about to faint, and Elvan caught her just in time. Seeing their masters in such a state, the royal attendants—unused to combat—began to panic.

"Stay calm!" Sera commanded. "Your priority is Their Highnesses' safety!" As one of the few capable fighters among the attendants, she rose to the occasion and began to direct them.

Amid the tumult, Elena and I exchanged glances as she resolved to protect the crown prince.

"I-I won't let these beasts harm anyone!" Amor declared, steeling himself. He pointed his dagger at an approaching high kobold.

Though he'd received formal training in swordsmanship, it was likely this was his first time in real combat. I admired his attempt to protect Elena and Elvan despite his fear, but this wasn't his job.

"Ah!"

Just as the high kobold's claws threatened to tear into Amor's throat, the blade of my sickle pendulum slashed through the monster's face.

"What?"

"Step back," I said, moving in front of the stunned prince as the creature collapsed to the ground. I drove my dagger into a nearby hobgoblin and used my knife to slash the throats of a pair of kobolds. "I'll take it from here."

"Alia!" came Elena's strained voice as I lunged forward to deal with the approaching monster. Sera was protecting her, but she looked like she was struggling to hide her distress—perhaps she was thinking back to the time I'd nearly died trying to protect her.

It's all right, Elena. I flashed her a reassuring smile for just a moment before readying my pendulum and knife.

A monster room was triggered when a victim stepped into a seemingly empty space, whereupon the dungeon summoned a horde of monsters. Such a trap was highly dangerous, and difficult to evade too, but mercifully, the monsters answering the dungeon's call were generally of lower rank. Still, sheer numbers were a threat in their own right. Each creature might be weak individually, but when ten or more swarmed a single person, even Rank 1 or 2 monsters could prove fatal.

Dalton and the other members of the Rainbow Blade were powerful enough to dispatch each of these creatures with one blow. However, because they also had to keep the royals from harm and assist the knights, they couldn't unleash their full strength. For better or worse, they were bona fide adventurers and could take down an ogre or a troll in one strike—but when it came to handling large groups of weaker monsters in chaotic combat like this, their weapons were actually overkill.

"W-Wait! Why is a young girl like you stepping forward?!" Amor shouted. He was still determined to fight and seemed concerned for my safety.

His words were harsh, but it was clear from his attitude toward Elena and Elvan that Amor was, at heart, a good person. Even if I was an adventurer he thought little of, he likely still didn't wish me harm. For someone like him, who took things at face value, it was probably unthinkable for a girl close to Elena in age to stand at the front lines.

Although his determination to step forward himself—whether out of male pride or noble duty—was commendable, right now we had no capable fighters on this side. The knights were caught up in the chaos and couldn't pull back. A few guards remained, but their duty was the same as Sera's; they weren't meant to fight but to guard the royals, with their own bodies and lives if necessary.

"There's no time for this. Stay out of my way," I muttered, giving Amor a brief, intimidating glare to shut him up.

"Wh-"

I waved lightly at Elena and Sera, then charged into the swarm of monsters advancing toward us, slashing through them as though trying to clear an avalanche with a machete.

Look. Watch how I fight.

"Grah!"

I clicked my heels quickly and kicked at the face of a charging kobold, completely crushing its skull with the hidden blade. Before I even landed, I unleashed my slashing pendulum from Shadow Storage and sliced the throat of

a goblin attempting to flank me; moments later, my sickle pendulum flew toward a hobgoblin and carved deeply into the back of its neck.

"Gyahhh!"

Two goblins raised their rusty daggers and attacked. Upon landing, I absorbed the impact with my knees and thighs, then sprang forward faster than their descending daggers and thrust my black knife and dagger simultaneously into their foreheads.

"Grooooar!"

A hulking high kobold and orc charged forward next, brandishing a rusty spear and stone axe, respectively. I released my grip on the blades embedded in the goblins, dodged by arching backward, then kicked the high kobold's chin upward with the blade on the tip of my boot. As blood splattered everywhere, I swung down my weighted pendulum to crush the orc's skull.

"Gyah!"

The next kobold and goblin charged in, only for the slashing pendulum to circle back and slice both their throats in one sweeping motion.

"Haaah!"

I used the pendulum string to retrieve my weapons. First, I grabbed my dagger, then drove it into the forehead of an oncoming hobgoblin. Next, I snatched the knife from midair, spun with my whole body, and decapitated a high kobold. For a brief moment, the horde hesitated as the creature's severed head flew toward them, leaving a trail of blackish blood in the air. Even though the monsters were under the dungeon's influence, it seemed hunger hadn't fully overridden their sense of self-preservation.

But I wasn't about to let this opportunity go to waste.

I aimed my slashing and sickle pendulums at goblins on either side of me and tore off their heads, then yanked the pendulums back, slashing the throats of two kobolds in the process. With blood spraying around me, I spun the pendulums and dove back into the monster horde.

"Grah?!"

### "Gyahhh!"

I kept killing one after another, not pausing for a moment. Finally, a glint of fear appeared in the eyes of the once-berserk monsters, and their movements began to slow. Fear had a way of freezing the body, and in battle, there was no such thing as a moderate amount of fear. Any fear needed to be conquered or overcome—otherwise, death was the only possible result.

As I wove through the sluggish horde, dodging their attacks, I slashed the throats of several goblins with my black knife, then stabbed my dagger upward into the jaw of a high kobold, piercing straight into its brain.

#### "G-Grahhh!"

At the sight, the terrified monsters began to recoil, their movements turning erratic. I ducked to avoid several spear throws, lowering myself to the floor and balancing on my fingertips like a cat. Pushing with my arms and kicking my legs, I launched myself forward and used the blade on my heel to slash the throat of a hobgoblin. My palm shot up to strike the underside of an orc's jaw, and a horizontal slice of my knife followed, cutting into its exposed throat.

#### "Gahhh!"

A hobgoblin swung wildly at me with a rusty machete, and I deflected the strike with the plated glove on my left arm, diverting it to slice through a nearby kobold. A high kobold lunged at me, its sharp claws out, but I sidestepped and kicked it toward the machete-wielding hobgoblin. The collision made the two creatures stagger, and I took the opportunity to cut down both of them with my knife and dagger.

I maximized my focus on Detection to avoid the monsters' blades. Moving with feline fluidity, I slid beneath their legs on the stone floor, taking advantage of any openings to dispatch the creatures.

No hesitation. No fear. I'd kill every last enemy in my path.

Spinning to constantly adjust my position, I boosted my pendulums' centrifugal force and used them to slice through necks, crush skulls, and tear open arteries, killing monster after monster.

Half down. Half to go.

"What the..." Amor whispered hoarsely.

That adventurer was a slender, youthful girl, close in age to his niece Elena and the fiancées of his nephew Elvan. She was somehow acquainted with Elena and had displayed what Amor could only describe as a belligerent attitude toward the royals. She'd ignored his efforts to protect the children and charged alone into the horde of monsters.

Even the Rank 3 royal guards would have struggled to survive if surrounded by five armed hobgoblins. In the heat of battle, knights had allies to cover for them—they weren't expected to face multiple enemies alone. Though such scenarios were covered during training, they were exceedingly rare during real combat.

And these monsters weren't just Rank 1 goblins and kobolds. There were Rank 2 hobgoblins and Rank 3—lower tier, but still Rank 3—monsters like orcs and high kobolds. No matter how skilled the girl might be as a member of the renowned Rainbow Blade, there was no way she could win. Or so he'd thought.

Using strange weapons and martial techniques, the girl had swiftly cut down dozens of monsters. With each glint of her black blade, another life was reaped, her ash-covered hair turning crimson with monster blood. Between that and her movements, graceful and lethal, she evoked the image of a rose made of iron.

A porter who doubled as a guard murmured in awe, "Lady Cinders..."

Amor turned to the man in surprise. "What? Do you know who she is?!" he demanded.

Intimidated, the porter gave a small, cautious nod. "N-Not in detail, Your Highness! But I have heard rumors of an ash-covered girl who single-handedly wiped out branches of the Assassins' and Thieves' Guilds..."

Another servant behind the guard seemed to recognize the story, which had been spread by merchants and the like. "I've heard about this! They say she annihilated an entire horde of orcs attacking a barony to the north, all by her lonesome!"

Elvan gasped at the tales. Even Elena and Sera, who had already heard the rumors, were struck anew by the girl's heroic feats.

Clara's breath hitched—she was familiar with the story, since the destroyed branch of the Assassins' Guild had been located near Dandorl. Many of the rumors, such as the girl wiping out a notorious combat-focused branch of the Thieves' Guild, had seemed like tall tales. But now, seeing the girl fight before them, she had no choice but to believe those stories. Thinking that she'd once considered having this girl eliminated made Clara feel faint.

She turned to Elvan, who had moments ago held her hand and vowed to protect her. The prince was trembling. He stared intently at the girl, completely captivated. At this, her consciousness faded.

"Clara!" Elvan called out, catching her as she fainted. Even then, his gaze was still fixed on the girl whom he'd once simply thought of as beautiful.

Amor too was stunned, muttering in disbelief. "That's not possible..."

It was, indeed, unthinkable. No one should've been capable of such feats. Yet as Amor watched the girl slay monster after monster before his very eyes, the undeniable reality shattered his assumptions, carving a powerful sense of fear into his mind.

"Alia..." Elena murmured. Beholding the unbelievable growth of the girl she'd once made a vow with, the princess placed a hand over her heart as if to reaffirm that vow.

While the others looked on in fear, curiosity, and awe, Karla appeared utterly enamored with the girl dancing across the battlefield. She'd refrained from dirtying her hands, choosing to just watch. Karla wasn't interested in taking lives —she simply wanted to relish the sight of the girl's wounds and kills.

Exhaling a breath hot with her twisted passions, Karla focused her intense gaze on the girl.

"I was right, Alia... You look beautiful covered in blood."

The final high kobold's neck broke with a dull snap, and I released the string and watched the creature crumple to the floor.

With that, all the monsters were dead, and we'd cleared the trap. More than fifty bloodsoaked corpses were left scattered around me. Elsewhere, the knights had finished their battles and hurriedly made their way back to the royals. They looked at the carnage around me and stepped back in astonishment.

Among them were the young knights who had spoken to me aboard the ship. But even they seemed overwhelmed by the sight of me covered in blood and made way for me to pass.

I gave a small wave to Elena, who stood among the royals, surrounded by knights. She gave a slightly annoyed sigh, then finally offered me a small, resigned smile.

"Alia!"

Feld and Mira came running toward me, and I stepped forward to meet them.

I'll keep growing stronger.



# **Dungeon Expedition: Eightieth Floor**

"Graaar!"

Taking advantage of the ogre's loss of balance after I dodged its rusty iron club, I leaped forward, raising my knife high. "Double Edge."

The two-strike combat technique pierced both of the ogre's eyes. It dropped its weapon, howling and clutching its face in agony; I slid behind it and drove my black dagger into its ear and through its brain, finishing it off. It was hard to do any damage to an ogre using my throwing weapons or knife—their hide was tough enough to be used for high-grade leather armor—but I could still take it down in one-on-one combat.

Our leader, Dalton, had seen that I could hold my own unexpectedly well and assigned me to handle occasional monsters on top of scouting ahead. Moreover, due to my unconventional fighting style, the knights in the rearguard tended to move more cautiously if I was near them. While they readily acknowledged the strength of warrior-types like Dalton and Feld, they seemed to find me unsettling.

At first, Dalton had tasked me with handling orcs and hobgoblins, but as the days passed, he'd gradually begun assigning me to deal with Rank 4 enemies like ogres. The shift had been necessary so we could clear the floors faster.

"We're done," Dalton said as he and Feld moved back, having just defeated two trolls.

"All right," I replied.

"Well, let's do our other job then, yeah?" Viro said, stepping forward with me in tow.

Trolls were Rank 4 monsters in terms of combat power, but because they had special regenerative abilities that scanning assessments couldn't quite catch, the Adventurers' Guild classified them as low-end Rank 5. Viro and I wielded smaller weapons and couldn't really do much against them through conventional means, so we needed to rely on the larger weapons wielded by the frontliners.

"How frustrating," I muttered under my breath.

"Can't quite handle a Rank 5 yet, huh?" Viro said. "Well, don't let it get you down. Sure, you can't handle a troll right now, but once your Dagger Mastery reaches Level 5, they won't be a problem."

"Do you know any Level 5 Dagger Mastery techniques, Viro?"

Cere'zhula had Dagger Mastery too, but since it was only at Level 3, she couldn't use the higher-level techniques. I figured maybe Viro, being Rank 4, might know something about them.

"Never seen 'em. Scouts are everywhere, but combat-focused scouts like us are rare. I can't teach you what I've never seen, but I've read about Level 5 techniques in the guild's records. They mentioned a dual-handed eight-hit combo, but I can't even begin to imagine how that might work."

"Huh..." An eight-hit combo... I couldn't picture it at all. Simple, repetitive strikes tended to have weakened impact.

"Well, for now, just focus on getting Dagger Mastery to Level 4. Even those techniques are already something else, y'know? I'll see if I can show you sometime when His Fussiness over there isn't watching us like a hawk," he said, referring to Prince Amor.

"All right."

As we took the vanguard, Viro frowned at the corpses of the trolls that Feld and Dalton had defeated.

"You know what bugs me, though?" he asked.

We hadn't been collecting monster materials up until this point, but we'd been taking the aethercrystals from ogres and higher-ranked monsters. Now, though, even the troll corpses weren't being looted. Naturally, the ogre I'd defeated had also been left behind.

Viro looked at his own ogre kill, muttering just loud enough for me to hear, "This is *such* a waste..."

"Aren't we getting paid extra to make up for it?"

The reason we were leaving Rank 4 materials behind to progress faster was

for the sake of the individuals behind us, whom we were escorting, after all.

"All right! Let's wrap it up for today!" Dalton called out once we reached a relatively safe spot.

His words drew sighs of relief from the rear. The knights and the entourage they were protecting made ready to camp. They were visibly fatigued; exhaustion was written all over their faces as we readied the monster-repellent incense to keep lower-ranked threats at bay.

We'd entered the dungeon's seventieth floor and progressed to the eightieth in the span of a week. According to Mira, exploring this deeply into a dungeon typically took over three days per floor, so our pace was already remarkable by any standard. However, this had only been possible by strictly adhering to the royal family's ancient records and pressing forward with no detours at all.

The knights had been deprived of sunlight for days and left without any sense of accomplishment. Repeating the same tasks over and over, with no sense of time, constant exposure to danger, and in a closed environment like this had started to wear on them mentally. And the knights were feeling the strain despite being used to battle—it wouldn't be surprising at all if the royals, who'd led sheltered lives in the palace, were reaching their breaking point.

As the Rainbow Blade crossed the camp to set up our own, I briefly made eye contact with Elena. Her face showed traces of fatigue as she gave me a small, strained smile. Elena was mentally strong, though. She was even ready to lay down her own life for the sake of the nation, so I was certain she could endure this trial.

Meanwhile, Amor, who sat near her sipping water a servant had fetched for him, looked the most miserable of all the royals. His eyes were dark and hollow. Still, he'd been the one to strong-arm his way into the expedition, so he couldn't afford to complain. He claimed to have joined to protect Elena and Elvan, but his demeanor suggested that he, too, wanted to try for a gift so he could make a difference.

Torn between his true feelings and his public front, he seemed lost, unable to figure out what would be the best course of action in the face of his fatigue and the harshness of reality. He'd stopped trying to butt in after watching me fight

—instead, whenever our gazes crossed, he'd avert his eyes and mutter under his breath.

The other royals seemed to be faring slightly better. Clara and Elvan had begun staying closer to each other after the monster room. Before, she'd look at me with fear, but now there was a spark of hostility in her gaze. Although Elvan appeared bewildered by this change in Clara's demeanor, caring for her seemed to be helping him maintain his own mental stability.

Karla was the only one who looked completely unchanged. She still seemed awful, in more ways than one, but despite having the lowest health points of the entire group, she somehow looked to be enjoying herself tremendously. It made some sense, since she was used to dungeons.

The members of the Rainbow Blade were in the same boat. Dalton and Mira had been adventuring for over a century and were completely unfazed. Viro still had enough energy to complain about the lack of booze. Feld, with his broad shoulders, was more annoyed by the narrow spaces than tired. And although I didn't have much experience with dungeons, I was used to environments that were far from comfortable.

With all of that in mind, Dalton had consulted with Elena and Sera about further increasing the pace for the sake of those who were struggling with the dungeon environment.

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"Feld," I called out.

"Again, huh," Feld replied, understanding immediately. He gripped his greatsword and stood.

Viro was already on the move. Noticing us, Dalton and Mira rose as well.

The dwarf hefted his war hammer and gave a crooked grin. "Think beef's on the menu tonight?"

As we sprang into action, the knights, who had been relaxing, let out panicked murmurs. That same instant, the sound of hooves came from the corridor ahead, drowning out their startled cries.

"Minotaurs!" one of the knights shouted as four of the beasts burst forth from the corridor.

Minotaurs were monsters with massive humanoid bodies and the heads and hooves of bulls. They were on the higher end of Rank 3, like ogres, but their charging power when agitated was said to be savage enough to take down even an ogre with a single blow. Because of that, they were considered Rank 4 in difficulty level.

"Take them down in one hit!" Dalton shouted to us upon realizing the knights weren't ready for battle.

The minotaurs were already dangerously riled up, charging at us like actual bulls, with their black horns thrust forward. Dalton and Feld sprang forth, brandishing their weapons, while Mira began chanting a spell.

"Take the leftmost one, Alia!" Viro commanded. Since our strikes lacked power, he and I focused on the same target.

"Got it!"

"O earth spirit of strength unyielding, lend me the power to impale my enemies!"

Mira's spell activated, causing the stone floor of the dungeon to rise like clay and form a giant stake that pierced through one of the charging minotaurs.

The other beasts saw this but nevertheless continued forward, their eyes flashing with rage. One of them slipped past the minotaur Mira had impaled and made a beeline for her.

"Don't think so!" Dalton snapped as he dashed in. His war hammer smashed into the minotaur's head with a loud crunch, crushing it as though it were made of soft cheese.

"Haaah!" Feld shouted as he swung his greatsword in a horizontal arc, cleaving another minotaur's head into two halves.

"Alia, create an opening!" Viro yelled.

"Got it."

I charged straight at the oncoming minotaur and kicked off the ground. As I

vaulted over its head, I used the momentum to loop a pendulum string around its horns and yank them upward, exposing its chin. Confident in my skill, Viro had already begun charging in, his mithril dagger raised high.

"Critical Edge!"

Viro's dagger drove straight through the minotaur's lower jaw into its brain.

The Level 4 combat technique aimed for a target's weak spot, thus multiplying its attack power many times over. If the technique missed a vital spot, it was no stronger than an ordinary strike, but when precisely aimed, it dealt immense damage. It was, in essence, an advanced version of the Level 1 technique Thrust, which I frequently used due to its versatility. Although Critical Edge required extreme precision, the idea of targeting weak points was at the core of all combat techniques.

While I watched Viro, pondering how useful the technique was, I heard another ferocious roar coming from behind us.

"Bwooooooargh!"

Another minotaur burst forth from the corridor, charging straight at us.

The knights had only just regained their footing when, seeing the defeated minotaurs, they'd let their guard down again. Few were ready to fight, and while we had all taken down minotaurs, none of us were in a position to respond immediately.

Right at the end of the minotaur's path were Elena and the other royals. Sera, sharp as ever, moved to protect them. While she was skilled enough to handle the beast one-on-one, she couldn't finish it in a single blow any more than Viro or I could, so her plan was likely to try and stop it at the cost of her own safety.

"Alia!" Feld shouted out to me. "Do your thing and do it now!"

I glanced back at the other members of the Rainbow Blade for a moment and saw them nodding. They all knew about my trump card. "Do your thing" meant using it.

Without hesitation, I gripped my black knife between my teeth and crouched low, my nails digging into the ground as I began to discard the impurities from

the mana I used for Boost. As the mana reached peak purity and rushed through my body with heightened intensity, my Boost surged to its absolute limit.

"Hah!!!" I shouted, pushing myself off the ground with a powerful thud; my toes left behind gouges in the stone floor.

I shot forward, the dungeon scenery a blur in my peripheral vision as I barreled toward the minotaur that was charging at the royals. I caught up to it just before it reached them and, with all my strength, swung my knife from behind, slicing its head clean off.

#### Swoosh!

The minotaur's decapitated body fell to the ground. Its severed head landed right in front of Clara, who promptly screamed and fainted.

Exhausted from expending nearly all my aether and health in an instant, just as I had to defeat the orc general, I collapsed and tumbled across the floor until I came to a rest on top of the minotaur's corpse, where I lay immobilized.

I guess even humanoid cows can be turned into steak, I thought foolishly, my head hazy from the exhaustion.

"Alia!" Elena called out in a near scream as she rushed toward me. "Alia, are you all right?!"

"You're being reckless again," Sera chided, arriving at the same time as the princess. "Can you move?"

"I'm fine," I managed to mutter.

A large pair of hands lifted me off the ground, holding me by the armpits like a child. "Well done, Alia."

"Feld..." Had he followed after me?

I gave the worried Elena a small, reassuring smile. Viro, who had also come running, grinned at me. Finally, I let out a breath, squinting as I took in the view.

So this is what Feld sees... The world's so vast from up here...

"The minotaur attack confirms that we've reached the final area of the dungeon," Dalton announced. He'd just returned from checking the passage ahead for threats. "Look alive, people! We're almost there!"

Indeed, minotaurs could only be found in the deepest parts of the dungeon. The enemies were growing stronger, but with the end now in sight, the knights seemed unbothered by Dalton's rough tone. In fact, their spirits were lifted.

Still, we didn't set out immediately. Knowing the journey ahead would be even more grueling, everyone took half a day to double-check their equipment and rest both physically and mentally. I was exhausted too, unable to move after using the primordial technique. As I cast Restore on myself and Sera came over to assist, a healing spell came from an unexpected source.

"High Cure."

An immense amount of aether washed over me, soothing my battered body. Although I still felt fatigued and wouldn't be able to move right away, it would certainly help me recover faster.

"Karla," I murmured, unsure why she'd healed me.

She gave me a small smile, narrowing her eyes, and leaned down to whisper in my ear as I lay there. "Don't you dare die before you kill me."

I didn't respond. Back when we'd first met, I'd told her I could kill her, if that was her wish. She remembered that, it seemed. Would she still want to die even if her body were healed, I wondered?

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After our half day of rest, we set out to finish the dungeon. I could stand again, but my limbs were still weak, which made combat difficult. I was rubbing my legs, figuring I'd be fine as long as I could walk, when someone approached me unexpectedly.

"Excuse me. If you don't mind, may we carry you?"

Before me stood the young knights who'd spoken to me aboard the ship. They'd been keeping their distance since the monster room.

"Why?" I asked.

"After watching you fight, we came to understand what's truly important," one replied.

"You're essential to this expedition," another said. "You'll recover faster if you don't have to move. Please, allow us to carry you."

For whatever reason, they didn't seem afraid of me anymore.

I wasn't exactly thrilled about the prospect of being carried by people I didn't know very well, but they did have a point about me recovering faster with less movement, so I nodded in agreement. They looked delighted.

"Then I'll do it."

"No, I'll be the one to carry her."

"No, no, allow me."

Just as a bizarre argument was breaking out, a woman in a maid's uniform approached from the side and gently lifted me into her arms. "Since Miss Alia is a lady, *Her Highness* has instructed me to handle this. I trust that's acceptable?"

"Yes, ma'am," the knights replied in unison.

Chloe, Elena's bodyguard, smiled sweetly at the young knights. They took a few unconscious steps back.

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According to Chloe, I was lighter than the shield she normally carried. She told me this while carrying me on her back and holding that same shield in her hands. What unfathomable strength her slender body concealed. Thanks to her, I was able to return to the front lines within a day.

We were progressing at a pace of about a floor per day, but in comparison to how hopeless things had seemed before, the morale among the nobles and knights had improved significantly. This in itself was helping us proceed faster. As we ventured deeper, the number of minotaurs increased and they grew more aggressive. But we all worked as a team and carried on.

Beyond a certain floor, monsters stopped appearing altogether.

"Is this a trap?" Feld asked.

"No... We're near the final floor," Dalton replied.

We followed a straight passage devoid of enemies until we reached a staircase. Upon descending it, we were met with a massive iron door. Everyone held their breath.

"The innermost door..." Elena murmured, her voice clear as a bell in the silence.

This was the ninetieth floor—the deepest level of the dungeon. There were no walls partitioning the room here, only a single enormous door, about three meters wide and five high, decorated with intricate reliefs.

Although I knew dungeons could supposedly read the thoughts of the deceased, I was still taken aback by how clearly the door seemed to suggest the presence of some sort of powerful will. Whether it was the dungeon spirit or something else, I couldn't tell. But as we proceeded into the chamber, I felt something watching us.

"All right. In we go!" Dalton declared after Viro and I checked the door thoroughly for traps.

With a rallying cry, Dalton, together with Feld and the knights, pushed the heavy iron door, which slowly creaked open. And beyond it...

"What is that?"

Three massive humanoid figures awaited us, standing side by side. On the left and right were two minotaurs, one blue and the other red, the colors seeming to indicate they were higher rank than the ones we'd encountered before. Between them was an enormous black minotaur, standing at a towering three meters tall.

"Be careful," Dalton cautioned. "That's a Rank 6 minotaur destroyer."

"Bwooooooargh!"

# **Dungeon Expedition: Depths**

At last, we'd reached the deepest part of the dungeon. Awaiting us in an arena-like space over a hundred meters in diameter were three unique

#### minotaurs.

## ▼ (Azure Bull) Minotaur Brute

Species: Monster (Rank 5)

Aether Points: 180/182

Health Points: 730/731

Overall Combat Power: 1587 (Boosted: 1890)

### ▼ (Crimson Bull) Minotaur Brute

Species: Monster (Rank 5)

Aether Points: 201/203

Health Points: 692/694

Overall Combat Power: 1694 (Boosted: 2037)

## ▼ (Black Bull) Minotaur Destroyer

Species: Monster (Rank 6)

Aether Points: 250/252

Health Points: 801/806

Overall Combat Power: 3240 (Boosted: 3960)

#### A Rank 6 monster!

I'd heard from Cere'zhula that such creatures existed, but I'd never imagined we'd actually face one. Rank 5 was considered the peak of what most beings could reach. For humans, Rank 5 meant being a master or legendary hero. Going beyond that required something truly transcendent, above what ordinary races could attain.

From behind me, stifled gasps and suppressed screams rose from those with the Scan skill. Even Elena turned pale. Seeing her, I steeled myself, pushing my emotions deep down as I began to analyze our enemies' strength.

The minotaur destroyer—or black bull, as I'd chosen to nickname it—had a massive pitch-black frame, standing at over three meters tall, with two twisted, gnarled horns sitting atop its bovine head. It wielded a colossal double-headed axe made of enchanted iron. A human would struggle to even lift such a weapon, yet the monster held it effortlessly.

Judging by the minotaurs' aether and health points, all three were melee types, but the black bull had the best balance between offense and defense. The two standing on either side of it seemed weak by comparison, but they couldn't be underestimated. As Rank 5 monsters, they each possessed combat power comparable to that of Gorjool, the orc general I'd fought. And Gorjool had been quite formidable.

Moreover, these monsters were in perfect condition. A drawn-out approach of whittling down their stamina over a month wasn't an option.

The azure bull was a bruiser, its bulky frame standing at about two and a half meters tall. Its arms were so packed with muscle that they bulged unnaturally. It was possible I could counter its strength with my speed, but given the enormous double-handed sword it was wielding, close combat would be nearly impossible.

The crimson bull had two steel halberds that looked similar to those used by humans. Its red frame was still quite imposing, and the halberds looked like mere hand axes in its grip. What made this one particularly terrifying was that, though it was smaller than the blue one, its combat power was actually higher. This likely meant it focused on speed, and all of its stats almost certainly surpassed my own.

"Bwooooooargh!" the black bull roared, seemingly irritated by our inaction at the door. The entire arena shook, and even the trained knights trembled in fear.

As we stood there in tense silence, the azure and crimson bulls stepped forward slowly, their mouths twisted as though they were sneering at the feeble humans.

"Can we...defeat them?" Elena asked shakily, unable to conceal her fear.

Dalton cast her a questioning glance. "If it were the destroyer alone, the Rainbow Blade could handle this. But we can't handle all three. Should we turn back? There's no guarantee anyone will receive the dungeon's gifts either way. If you want to risk your lives, it doesn't have to be by doing this."

"No," Elena said quietly, shaking her head.

Dalton asked her what the royals were truly after. Were there no other means by which to achieve their desired end? Were they not insisting on this plan simply because of the sunk costs?

"It's true that we royals came here seeking power," she replied. "But at the same time, we came to prove our resolve, for the sake of our nation and our people. I will not turn back."

Hearing Elena's resolute declaration, Elvan and Clara held their breath, and Amor—unwilling to accept the harsh reality—gave a slight shake of his head.

But at that moment, the knight I'd saved on the road stepped forward and declared, "We will fight!"

His face was tense but determined as he cast me a quick glance and gave a small nod. Seeing him, the other knights were emboldened to step forward as well.

"Sir Dalton, please give us your orders! Though there are only ten of us royal guards, we are the shield of this nation! We shall do everything in our power to hold the enemy at bay!"

"W-We'll join too!" The three court sorcerers, who so far had focused only on healing, also stepped forward wearing tense expressions.

Dalton gave them all a quiet nod, acknowledging their determination. "All right, then. Got it!"

Now that the azure and crimson bulls had begun moving under the black bull's command, Dalton quickly began to issue instructions of his own.

"Royals, do you see the altar behind the destroyer? I believe that's your intended goal. We'll create an opening and signal when it's safe for you to move toward it."

Elena and the others looked over at the altar-like structure standing against the farthest wall and gave somewhat unsteady nods in response.

"Rainbow Blade, we'll be handling the red one. Knights, focus on luring the blue one away. If the destroyer makes a move before we've taken down the red one, Feld and I will handle it—the rest of you stay away. Mira, you provide support. And if the red one is still alive at that point..." Dalton paused and looked at Viro and me. "You two hold it back to buy us time. Can you manage?"

"Not like we can say no!" Viro exclaimed, clapping his hands to psych himself up.

I gave a silent nod.

"If that happens, I will assist Alia," came a cloyingly sweet voice.

The knights instinctively made way as a sickly girl wearing a smile reminiscent of a deadly flower took slow steps forward.

"Karla..." I whispered.

Her lips curled up slightly more.

Under normal circumstances, Karla—as the crown prince's fiancée and someone we were supposed to be protecting—would've never been allowed to fight, regardless of her level of skill. Yet the attendants and her fiancé Elvan were too overwhelmed by her ominous aura to protest. Not even Sera, one of the kingdom's chief security officers, could stop the girl.

"Is my assistance not to your liking?" Karla asked.

It was more concern than dislike on my end, but despite her personality, I knew she was capable.

"You'll...help, my lady?" Dalton asked. He seemed aware of Karla's dangerous nature, but in this situation we needed all the strength we could get. Realizing that her aether was comparable to Samantha's, he reluctantly gave his approval. "I see no issues with your combat power. You're a noble and should be protected, but if you're truly determined to demonstrate your resolve, we'll count on your help if necessary."

"Of course. I have no intention of dying to these insignificant creatures." Karla

cast a knowing glance my way, and we briefly glared at one another.

Dalton let out a small sigh and turned his attention to the two advancing enemies. "Let's go!"

"Bwooooooargh!"

As we began to move, the two minotaur brutes, who up until that point had been approaching us with slow, taunting steps, sprang into action as well.

"This way! Get the blue one!"

Following Dalton's plan, the knights moved to lure the azure bull to the left, firing arrows as they did.

When both brutes began to chase the knights, Mira cast a water spell to intervene. "O water, seize my enemy!"

The crimson bull, in a display of agility that seemed incongruous with its massive frame, leaped over Mira's spell, then lunged at her. But Mira was no ordinary sorceress—she quickly jumped back, using Level 3 Martial Mastery and Boost to create distance.

"Haaah!" Feld shouted.

Shing!

"Bwooooooargh!" the minotaur roared, its halberds clashing against Feld's greatsword with a shrill metallic sound and scattering bright sparks through the dimly lit dungeon.

Crash!

"Bwoh?!"

At that moment, my weighted pendulum struck the minotaur's temple, and Mira immediately switched to her bow, unleashing an arrow that grazed its head. But both attacks were largely deflected by the crimson bull's sturdy horns and barely affected it. It glared at Mira and me but couldn't afford to divert its attention from Feld.

"Raaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Bwooooooargh!"

As Feld struck at the crimson bull with full force, the creature had no choice but to use both hands to block the attack. Mira seized the chance to unleash a bow technique.

"Shadow Bind!"

The Level 3 sorcery technique, combining archery with sorcery, pinned the crimson bull in place. Sorcery techniques were less effective against high-rank opponents, however, and shorter in duration. Still, Mira's Shadow Bind created an opening—one that a certain man would not allow to slip by.

"Dark Mist!" Viro chanted.

"Bwoargh?!"

A shadowy fog enveloped the crimson bull's head, obstructing its vision and causing it to halt. Taking advantage of this precise timing, Dalton swung his massive war hammer down on the minotaur. The fluid display of teamwork from the Rainbow Blade—one of the few Rank 5 parties in the kingdom—left even me in awe. But...

"Graaaaaaaaaah!"

In that instant, the black bull, which had been watching silently, let out a deafening roar. Its intense aura made all of us freeze momentarily.

"Bwoooargh!" roared the now blinded crimson bull. It swung its two halberds wildly, forcing Dalton and Feld to back away.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, the azure bull had knocked back a stunned shield-bearing knight and was swinging at several other immobilized knights with its greatsword. The knights in the rear quickly moved to the front, but the minotaur grinned crookedly at their thinned defenses.

"Reform the line!" Dalton commanded.

"Get the injured to safety!" Elena shouted. She, Sera, and the court sorcerers began to work on treating the knights' wounds.

All of this from the slightest action by the black bull... The spellcasters, who'd been holding back to conserve their power for attacking, had been forced to use their aether for healing, robbing us of the chance to finish one of the

minotaurs off.

The black bull, realizing the crimson one couldn't handle the Rainbow Blade alone, began advancing toward us with its massive axe. For a moment, I wondered whether we'd be able to handle this, but there was no time for doubt—I had a job to do.

"Viro!" I called out.

"Right! Dalton, go!" Viro shouted as he and I began to move.

"You got it!" Dalton replied, resolute. "Come on, Feld! Mira!"

"Roger!" Feld yelled.

"Understood!" Mira said.

We immediately rebuilt our formation, and Dalton, Mira, and Feld charged to fend off the approaching black bull.

"Bwoooargh!" the crimson bull roared, having successfully shrugged off the effects of both Shadow Bind and Dark Mist. It tried to chase after Dalton and the others, but at that moment, Viro's throwing knife grazed the tip of its nose, making it hesitate just long enough for my weighted pendulum to strike its horn with a resounding metallic *clang*. "Bwoh!"

"You're not going anywhere," I said.

"What she said," Viro added.

We both moved to block the crimson bull's path, brandishing our knives. It would be challenging for just the two of us to hold it off, but even if we couldn't defeat it, we could at least buy some time.

"Bwoargh..." it groaned. Though the minotaur was sturdy, its horns were attached to its skull, so any impact would be transmitted directly to its brain. The crimson bull shook its head as if trying to clear it, shot us an angry glare, and readied its two halberds once more.

"Let's go!"

Viro darted forward to distract it with his footwork, but I noticed *something* and instinctively tripped him up, making him tumble forward.

"Wh— Aliaaa!" he yelled, turning to complain at me. But not one moment later—

"Fire Breath," came a chant light as a song, and a spray of flames shot over our heads, lightly scorching the crimson bull's arm as it scrambled to dodge.

A Level 4 spell. There was only one person here who could've cast that. I turned around to see Karla pointing her finger at us and wearing a disturbingly placid smile.

Viro's eyes widened at her. I knew time was of the essence, so I calmly told him the truth of the matter. "Be careful. Karla won't hesitate to kill you."

"What?! That girl's terrifying! How the hell am I supposed to be careful with her around?!" he protested.

That was just who Karla was, though. There was no other way for me to explain. I wasn't sure whether she was helping or "helping," but despite the risk, we needed her strength in this situation.

"Raaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Bwooooooargh!"

I heard Dalton roar and glanced over to see him acting as a shield against the black bull. He was forced back several meters as blows rained down on his full plate armor. Feld and Mira were attacking, but the difference between their stats and the minotaur's was too great, and they couldn't do enough damage.

It wasn't surprising. A Rank 6 opponent like that required the Rainbow Blade's full strength. Even the sturdy Dalton with his full plate of mithril armor wouldn't be able to withstand the massive thing's attacks indefinitely.

It was the knights who were in the most precarious situation, though. The black bull's roar had disrupted their formation, and while there didn't seem to be any fatalities yet, the court sorcerers had been rendered unable to use their spells offensively and had no choice but to protect the thinning line of defense. Each of these people had combat power around 400; none of them could withstand the azure bull's attacks on their own. At this rate, the knights were bound to be wiped out.

Still, if we could bring down the crimson bull with Karla's help, that should create enough of an opening.

"Can you do this, Karla?" I asked.

"Of course," she replied simply. She dropped her usual calm smile and aimed a hand at the crimson bull. "Dig Volt."

The lightning spell—a combination of water and wind sorcery—struck at the crimson bull. Wary of Karla, it jumped to evade; however, Dig Volt's power dispersed over a wide area. Thanks to Karla's substantial aether and skill, the spell's range exceeded the norm, and the creature couldn't completely avoid taking the hit.

"Whatever!" Viro grunted.

More unsettled by Karla than the crimson bull, Viro nevertheless charged at the minotaur. The bull swung its halberds in response, but the movements were a fraction slower than usual, likely due to the lingering effects of the lightning. Viro managed to deflect the attack.

"Hah!" I shouted, not about to sit idly by. From the opposite side, I swung down my weighted pendulum.

High-ranking monsters were terrifying due not only to their raw strength but also their massive bodies and tough hides. Smaller weapons like Viro's and mine couldn't do significant damage, nor could they strike at vital spots. Even Karla's earlier lightning spell had likely just damaged its skin without penetrating its organs.

"Bwooooooh!"

Clang!

The minotaur, then, was especially wary of my weighted pendulum and Karla's spells, quickly raising its halberds as a shield. Unfortunately, it was also underestimating the man in front of it.

"Double Edge!" Viro shouted, seizing the opening in the crimson bull's defense. Instead of using his Level 4 technique to target a vital spot, he used a lower-level one aimed at the creature's eyes to set up the next attack.

"Bwooooooargh!" the crimson bull roared, meeting the attack head-on with its horns instead of retreating.

### Clang!

"Whoa!" Viro yelped, staggering back from the impact. To him, it must've felt like striking solid rock. The crimson bull, its eyes flaring with anger, turned its attention to him.

### Clang!

"Bwoh?!" While the minotaur was distracted, my weighted pendulum struck its horns, causing the massive creature to stumble.

I wasn't sure my combat techniques alone could kill it, though, so I looked over to Karla for the finishing blow—only to see a humanoid phantom, similar to the ones I could create with my Shadow spell, in her place.

"Until we meet again, Alia," came Karla's voice from deeper in the chamber. She'd seemed ready to fight alongside us, but instead she'd already moved away.

"Karla!"

Had this been her plan from the beginning? She'd waited for the minotaurs to advance, using us as decoys to get ahead. She smiled back at me and waved, then dashed into the depths of the battlefield, toward where the altar lay. Had her only goal from the start been to claim the dungeon's gift?

Not that that was an issue, but this wasn't the right time!

With Karla on the move, the others, who had remained hesitantly in place, began to run as well. Clara, too, snapped out of her frozen state.

"Your Highness! We should go too!" She sprinted toward the altar, pulling the bewildered Elvan along behind her.

"O-Okay!"

"Brother!" Elena called out. "You mustn't!"

Sera, who had been busy assisting the knights and guarding Elena, couldn't stop them. Despite Elena's protests, Clara and Elvan, followed closely by their

attendants, dashed after Karla, further intensifying the surrounding chaos.

"Bwooooooargh!"

Angered by our attacks and agitated by so many people suddenly moving, the crimson bull went berserk, ignoring Viro and me and abruptly shifting its focus to pursuing Karla, Clara, and the others.

"Damn it!" Viro cursed. Since he was still on the ground and I was the faster of the two of us, he tapped my back and ordered, "Go, Alia! Don't let the royals die!"

"Got it!"

Was this what Karla wanted? I kicked off the ground and ran alone after the minotaur. I accelerated and purified my mana for Boost, but even then, I couldn't reach the crimson bull fast enough. At this rate, although Karla could stay ahead thanks to her own Boost, the creature would reach the crown prince and the others before I could catch up.

"Pain!" I chanted quickly, aiming for the crimson bull's back. The minotaur, however, only shuddered briefly and didn't slow.

I might've been able to catch up if I had used the primordial technique and purified my mana completely, but I still wouldn't be able to take down a Rank 5 in a single hit. Instead, I unleashed multiple spells simultaneously to try and slow it down.

"Shadow! Weight!"

I sent the weightless Shadow ahead to stand in the crimson bull's path, then cast Weight to increase the monster's own body mass. Still, that only delayed it by a tenth of a second... That was all the time I could buy. But it was enough that I managed to just barely get in range.

"Shadow Walker!"

Linking my mana to the crimson bull's, I transported myself to its shadow and, as I emerged, drove my black dagger into its neck. The puncture was shallow, though, as I couldn't pierce through its powerful neck muscles with my strength alone.

"Bwooooooargh!" it roared, thrashing its head and throwing me back.

I unleashed my pendulum and wrapped its cord around the minotaur's horns, then swung through the air like an acrobat and drove my knee straight into its snout, hard.

"Grah!"

The crimson bull reeled, blood spurting from its nose. For a moment, it snapped out of its frenzy, and a glimmer of clarity returned to its eyes. Unfortunately, now its anger was directed squarely at me. I had no choice left but to face the Rank 5 monster head-on. At least it had stopped chasing after the crown prince and the others.

The idea had always been to create an opening for them to go to the altar. Their recklessness meant things hadn't gone exactly to plan, and now I was separated from Viro, left to fight this thing alone...but so be it.

I'll be your opponent.

"Bwooooooargh!"

"Haaaaaaaaaaah!"

I wouldn't hold back. From the start, I'd planned on fighting with all I had.

The crimson bull charged forward at terrifying speed, swinging its halberds down at me. I purified my mana to the limit of what my body could withstand and enhanced my Boost as much as I could without exhausting myself. While this level of purity only afforded me a slight advantage, I managed to dodge the attack by a hairbreadth. Without it, evading the Rank 5's blows would've been impossible.

"Illusion," I chanted, refracting light to obscure my figure as I unleashed the weighted pendulum.

"Graaah!" Unable to dodge the cross-shaped, whirling pendulum in time, the crimson bull opted instead to deflect it with a toss of its horns.

In an attempt to clear the field of my illusion, the crimson bull swung its halberds wildly. I leaped to dodge, slid under its legs, pulled a knife from the slit

in my skirt, and flung it upward.

"Bwooooooargh!"

The massive minotaur, towering over two meters tall, momentarily flew into the air as it leaped up to avoid the throw. It glanced down as I slid across the ground, grinned, and hurled the halberd in its left hand at me.

"Hah!"

I rolled on the floor, using my back muscles to get out of the way of the halberd, and unleashed my pendulum, wrapping the string around its legs while it was still in midair. Noticing this, the crimson bull kicked out, sending me flying as I clung to the other end of the string.

We're not done yet. The string was still wrapped around it.

"Shadow Walker!" The minotaur had no shadow while airborne, but the blade of its massive halberd did—and in an instant, I was behind its back. "Haaah!"

It noticed quickly and countered my kick with an elbow strike. The blade on my heel grazed its cheek, but the impact from its elbow blasted me backward, even as I brought my left arm forward to guard against it.

"Bwoooargh!"

We both landed on the ground. I'd taken a good bit of damage and was off-balance and down on one knee when I saw the crimson bull quickly hurl its remaining halberd directly at me.

I had no way to dodge.

Clang!

Several knives came flying from the side, striking the halberd and altering its trajectory just enough to send it careening past me.

"Alia! Are you all right?!"

"Viro... Thanks."

Viro caught up and stood protectively in front of me as I rose to my feet. He and I faced the crimson bull, which had retrieved the first halberd and was now pointing its blade at us. Though it would be harder for the creature to defeat us

together, we still lacked the ability to deal a decisive blow. The only reason I'd defeated Gorjool was that the orc general had taken my primordial technique head-on.

What now?

Before I could get an answer, the air around the battlefield began to shift dramatically.

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"Bwooooooargh!"

The black bull—the minotaur destroyer—let out a thunderous roar and turned away from Dalton and his group, shifting its attention to us.

Wait, no—it's heading straight for the royals!

"Is the black one guarding the altar?!"

Viro's guess was probably correct. The roles of the crimson and azure bulls were unclear, but it was very likely that the dungeon had drawn the black one here specifically to guard the altar.

"Viro! Alia! Slow it down!" Dalton shouted as he chased the black bull down.

It was a near impossible order, but Viro, who knew our leader well, sprang into action immediately. "Fine! Alia, hold off the red one!"

"All right!"

With no time to hesitate, I struck the side of the crimson bull's head with my weighted pendulum as it attempted to chase after Viro.

"Bwoargh?!"

"You're not going anywhere!"

I was worried, though. Could Viro hold off the black bull alone? Dalton had initially said only he and Feld should approach it—because the rest of us risked instant death from a Rank 6's attack.

Nevertheless, Viro gave a strained smirk as he faced the destroyer, which was barreling toward him like a landslide. He took a fist-sized orb from his enchanted bag and hurled it at the creature. The black bull tried to swat it away

with an arm, but the impact made it explode right in its face with a thunderous boom.

"Bwooooooooooogargh!" the black bull roared in agony, engulfed in flames, as the fire seared its face.

"Eat treasure, bastard! How's *that* for an ace in the hole?! I'll have you know that thing goes for five large gold!" Viro shouted triumphantly at the flaming bull.

Based on his nonsense, it seemed the item he'd used was similar to the poison gem Samantha had mentioned before—a type of rare dungeon loot. Personal possession of such gems was normally prohibited. Samantha had said they usually had sorcery sealed within; if so, it was likely Viro had gotten one specifically for this mission. Judging by the explosive power, I figured it was likely imbued with the Level 5 fire spell Fireball.

"Are you two all right?!" Feld asked as he caught up. He swung at the black bull with his greatsword, sending blood spraying from its back.

"Sniper Shot!" Mira shouted. An arrow like a beam of light shot forth from her bow and pierced the black bull's neck.

"Raaaaaaaaaaa!" Dalton roared as he finally caught up and charged in, swinging his massive mithril war hammer with all his might down onto the black bull's head.

# Snap!

The top half of one of the minotaur's gnarled horns broke off and went flying off in another direction. But it had broken for a reason—the black bull had realized it couldn't dodge and purposely used its horn to absorb the impact of Dalton's blow.

#### "Grah..."

Though it had been shot with an arrow, slashed across the back, and had its horn broken, the black bull had endured the attacks. With its scorched face, it glared fiercely at Dalton, then swung its massive battle-axe, sending him flying with a single hit.

"Dalton!"

Feld stepped forward to shield the fallen Dalton, but the black bull released another menacing roar, making it clear it would get rid of anything in its path. "Bwooooooargh!"

Feld managed to use his greatsword to block a sweeping blow from the minotaur's battle-axe, but his large frame was hurled back several meters.

"Shit!" Viro cursed as he tried to jump in to provide backup, but the mere shock wave from a downward swing of the black bull's axe sent him flying.

Watching this all unfold, I'd been about to leap into the fray as well, but the crimson bull I'd been holding off attacked to block my path.

"Bwoooargh!"

Clang!

My dagger clashed with its halberd and the impact sent my lighter body flying backward.

"Alia! Guys!" Mira shouted, grabbing several arrows and drawing her bow. But in the chaos, a third monster, which had been fighting elsewhere, turned its attention to us.

"Bwooooooargh!" roared the azure bull, charging in a frenzy through the knights surrounding it.

Now the blue one too...

What now? Mira was barely holding off the black bull, and Dalton and Feld were still down. Viro had recovered from the shock wave and noticed the incoming azure bull as well, but like me, he lacked a powerful blow that could take down a Rank 5 monster.

I tasted my own blood as I swallowed, gripping my black knife and dagger, watching my undeterred comrades. Their determination fueled my own. Injury and death were both things I'd long since prepared for, but I wasn't just going to take them lying down.

"Grah..." Sensing my resolution, the crimson bull paused warily for a moment.

I will kill you. Shatter my body, leave nothing but my head, I don't care—I will rip out your throat. You're dead, I resolved, staring it down.

"Haaaaaaaah!" I shouted, forcing every last bit of air out of my lungs as I circulated purified mana through my body. I pulled myself taught as a bowstring, ready to unleash my primordial technique.

"Bwooooooargh!" the crimson bull roared, gripping its halberd with both hands and leaning forward to charge.

But just then, in the corner of my vision, I saw Karla reach the altar. She turned to me, smiled gently, and touched it.

As the crimson bull and I lunged at one another, our weapons aimed at each other's hearts, a sudden burst of white light poured forth from the altar, engulfing the entire arena.

#### **Iron Rose**

When I came to, I found myself in a completely white space.

It stretched on endlessly in every direction. Being in this blank, pale world made me feel as though I were submerged in pure white cream. The sensation of nothingness was disorienting.

But my mind was calm. Strangely, eerily calm.

Just moments ago, I'd been battling the crimson bull. Now I was here, seemingly enveloped in the light that had burst forth from the altar. The heat of battle, the heightened aether that had coursed through me—everything had dissipated. Even the wounds on my body and my depleted aether points were slowly beginning to recover.

This place brimmed with such perfect serenity that I felt completely safe.

Which was, in itself, dangerous. I stopped my hand from reflexively sheathing my knife. I did not want to be forcibly pacified or pulled out of combat. What had happened to the battle? Were the others safe?

Realizing I needed to return immediately, I gripped my weapon tighter and cautiously surveyed my surroundings. Suddenly, a voice echoed in my mind.

-It's been a long time since I last saw a rose of the moon. You've done well to reach me, child of Melrose.—

The voice, unidentifiable as male or female, young or old, made me tense. It continued inside my head.

-How cautious you are, child of Melrose. Fear not. No one shall harm you in this place. Time here is compressed, and its flow differs from that in the outside world. Be at ease.—

"Child of Melrose?" I echoed guizzically.

It sounded like thoughts were accelerated in this place; Boost could be used for the same enhancing effect. I couldn't afford to relax, but if time wasn't passing outside, I could take a moment to grasp the situation here first.

This "melrose"... Cere'zhula had once told me of a flower that bloomed only on the night of the full moon—one that could serve as both medicine and poison. There was also a noble family bearing that name. What did this voice mean when it called me a "child of Melrose"?

The voice spoke again as if to answer my question.

—Several hundred cycles of this world's seasons ago, I bestowed that name upon a human woman who came here. Your golden hair, tinged with pink, is proof that her blood flows in you. Rid yourself of that unsightly gray and show me the true color of the rose within.—

The illusory ashes on my hair were forcibly dispersed, and under the effect of the dense mana in this space, my pink hair shimmered vividly.

—I once again congratulate you on finding your way to me. You are a living rose, bearing the color of my beloved flower. Tell me, child. What is your desire?—

"What are you?"

There was only one possible answer, but nevertheless, I asked the question to be certain. In response, a presence began to manifest directly before me.

-I shall reveal myself. I trust you can endure it.-

"Ngh!"

The presence materialized into the form of a woman dressed in magnificent attire resembling traditional ceremonial garments. Her overwhelming presence had me momentarily dizzy.

-I am what your kind calls the Spirit of the Labyrinth.-

This was unlike any spirit I knew. Its presence, its essence, its very being were on an entirely different level. As I gazed at it, a lesson from my mentor resurfaced in my mind.

Accounts existed of spiritual entities in this world that, when exposed to the powerful wills and thoughts of deceased heroes and other such great figures, could transform and linger in those figures' resting places. They were similar to local deities, in a way.

Dungeons, formed by ancient hermit crabs that had mutated into monsters, were said to absorb and retain the thoughts of the dead and use that knowledge to create treasures and artifacts coveted by mortals. Among those who had perished within the dungeons there must've been countless heroes—perhaps even champions and holy maidens.

And perhaps the combined thoughts of such fallen had come together, fused with these spiritual entities, and become this being—the Spirit of the Labyrinth. If so, the word "spirit" on its own seemed almost too mundane to describe it. I pondered whether this entity should be called a greater spirit or even a holy spirit.

I focused all my strength in my core, keeping my consciousness from slipping away as I made ready to confront the spirit directly.

"So you're one of those spirits that grant gifts," I said.

—Indeed I am. For over a millennium, you children of man have challenged the dark depths of this labyrinth. Those who have proven themselves worthy and reached me have been invited here as a reward, and I have granted them my blessings in the form of gifts. But not all have received such an honor. In recent centuries, some, it seems, have resorted to trickery.—

So it did know about the entrance leading to the seventieth floor...

"So why did you call me here?"

Karla had been the one to reach the altar, with Elvan and Clara next on the list. I had been in the middle of battle. Why call me?

-You are not the only one whom I have summoned. Four total have been invited here.—

"Four?"

I couldn't see anyone else around. Was the spirit preventing me from seeing them, or were we in entirely separate spaces? Given the overwhelming nature of the presence before me, it seemed logical to assume it could engage with four individuals in different places simultaneously.

-The number is no more than a whim. At times, I summon no one. Of the four today, three, including yourself, I find endearing in their quests for strength. The last harbors a soul I find intriguingly unique.—

A "quest for strength"... Several faces came to mind. But what could possibly be so unique about a soul that a spirit of this caliber would find it intriguing? I had some of the knowledge of that woman who'd attacked me and claimed to remember another life in another world. But from what the spirit had said, the "unique soul" wasn't mine.

So who was the fourth?

Before I could grasp the answer, the spirit stepped forward.

-You children of man are precious beings. Perhaps it is the thoughts of those who formed me that have led me to feel as much. Now...state your desire. I shall bestow upon you a gift.-

So the spirit granted gifts out of a love for people, did it? Were the other three it had summoned the ones who came to my mind, I wondered? Had they already accepted the gifts?

These gifts granted power beyond one's natural limits. That same power could destroy its wielder. Nevertheless, there were those who sought such power, driven by desires more important to them than life itself. The royal family of this kingdom, for example, had risked their lives for generations for the sake of the nation and its people.

Such wondrous power might even allow me to defeat the minotaur destroyer, but...I had only ever had one answer.

"I do not want anything."

-And why is that, child of Melrose? Do the children of man not desire to achieve something in their short lives? Humans are feeble. They die so easily. Does it matter if power shortens your lifespan by a few decades? Does it matter if your soul is scarred? You can simply start anew in your next life, even if as a lowly insect.—

There was a world of difference between humans and spirits in how they perceived time and lifespans. Even this spirit, who claimed to cherish people, had a perspective closer to that of a child "lovingly" keeping a bug without truly understanding what its short life entailed.

And "a few decades" was a greater cost than I'd anticipated. It made sense now that the great heroes and gifted royals I'd read about in history books had led such tragically short lives. But that wasn't why I was refusing.

"I will get what I want with my own strength. What value is there in something gotten solely through power given to me by someone else?"

Power and glory granted by another could just as easily be lost to the whims of another.

Elena, who had been born into the royal family, sought strength of her own volition for the sake of her people. She didn't rely solely on what was given to her; she cultivated wisdom and strength through her own efforts—so much so that it had led to her isolation. And Karla, even knowing she had no future, was locked in a desperate struggle to achieve her own desires.

I thought my rejection might offend the spirit, but instead, it listened intently. It narrowed its eyes, almost nostalgically, looking eerily human for a moment.

-The woman on whom I once bestowed the name Melrose likewise said she did not wish for the excessive power of a gift. That was precisely what endeared her to me, and why I gave her the name of my beloved flower. If you, too, truly need nothing, then I shall bestow upon you a name as well.—

"I don't need one. And what's this whole 'melrose' thing? Why are you giving

people names?"

-The melrose was nothing more than a rose that existed in the realm of the faefolk. On a whim, a leprechaun took one into the physical world, where it just barely took root. The color of your hair is evidence of the name I have bestowed. Any faefolk in this land would have a fondness for the hue of that rose's petals. Have you not, from birth, been free of illness that the mischief of faefolk might otherwise have wrought? Though the effect of the name is modest, it was a fitting boon to a woman who wished for the prosperity of her lineage.—

So that was why my hair was this color. And indeed, if the women—the childbearers—of a family were immune to illness, this would affect birth rates significantly. And the spirit was right; I had never been seriously ill and could even sleep peacefully in the depths of the woods in midwinter.

—I have not always been rooted to this dungeon. Long ago, I lived closer to mortals. We spirits would watch over them, and by bestowing names upon the abilities they'd devised to fight, we transformed them into combat techniques. In some ways, bestowing names comes more naturally to spirits such as I than granting gifts.—

Combat arts, which were considered short-form non-elemental magic, were indeed said to activate through a spirit's recognition of the chant. I'd always found that mechanism to be slightly unusual, but now I figured that perhaps this was a consequence of other spirits that, like this one, had cherished humans since ancient times.

—I have been watching over you, too, ever since you entered this labyrinth. I saw you, child of Melrose, using arts named by spirits, and struggling with one that is as of yet incomplete. Thus I wish to bestow upon you a name as well. That woman, like you, shone as the moon illuminating the night sky. That was why I named her Melrose, after the moon rose. But you are different. You fight with a heart as strong as iron. The name I bestow upon you is uniquely yours and shall transform your incomplete ability into a combat technique.—

The spirit's beautiful feminine form glided closer and gently touched my cheek with its pale fingertips as though it truly did cherish me.



-Now, return to the battlefield. Children of man can only reach me once in a lifetime. It is unlikely that we will ever meet again. If I may ask, please stop tarnishing your melrose hair with gray. Instead, allow me to incorporate your true color into the name I bestow upon you. Should you seek power, speak the name I give you. And that name is...—

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"Alia!!!"

As my blurry vision came back into focus, I heard Feld calling for me.

I found myself back in the arena at the deepest level of the dungeon. The battle hadn't progressed at all. Feld and Dalton were still on the ground, struggling to rise after getting struck. Mira was frantically darting about, trying to halt the black bull's movements, while Viro worked to draw the azure bull's attention.

Feld had likely been worried because my presence had disappeared from the field for a few seconds. The situation remained dire, but I had made it back in time.

"Bwooooooargh!" The crimson bull, having lost sight of me for a moment, roared angrily upon spotting me and charged at me like an arrow, halberd in hand.

I exhaled, expelling what remained of my unease. Nothing about me had changed, except my hair—no longer masked by illusory ashes, it was now back to its pink-tinted gold hue.

Though I wasn't completely free of worry, my heart was calm. I was confident. This wouldn't be the end of me. I felt no anger, no hatred. From the depths of my placid heart, calm as a still lake in a storm, bubbled forth a fierce fighting spirit.

As the halberd's blade sliced through the air, aiming to cleave my body diagonally, I chanted the combat art named after the title the spirit had bestowed upon me.

"Iron Rose."

### Clang!

"Bwoh?!" The halberd struck the floor violently when I vanished from the crimson bull's view. The next moment, my black knife slashed across its neck from behind. "Grah?!"

The cut was shallow—but a cut nonetheless.

Reflexively, the crimson bull swung its halberd, slicing through the space where I'd just been standing. I evaded its attack with a high-speed maneuver, kicking off the ground to shift positions, and slashed at its leg. Blood sprayed into the air like petals scattered in the wind.

"Bwooooooargh!"

Enraged, the crimson bull swung its halberd wildly. I repeatedly darted around at high speed, able to see and dodge each strike, slashing at its arms and legs. As I fought, my hair shifted from its natural pink-tinted gold to an ashen, scorched-iron gray.

Light trailed from my iron-colored hair, leaving behind streaks as I dashed at the crimson bull to face it head-on. Using the halberd's descending blade as a springboard, I leaped into the air like a metallic comet soaring through the sky. The lingering light from my hair scattered like wings of silver, and the crimson bull's momentarily startled eyes reflected my cold gaze.

As though slicing through my own image, I brought my blade down directly on its right eye.



## ▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 124/270

Health Points: 159/210

Overall Combat Power: 916 (Uniquely Boosted: 1769)

Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 124 seconds

#### **Vow of Flames**

"Groooooooar!"

Its eye slashed, the crimson bull let out a roar of agony and began swinging its halberd wildly. I didn't have time to keep my focus solely on it, though.

Born of the primordial technique that enhanced my body with rampant mana, Iron Rose had become a combat technique after the spirit granted it a name. That name was also a title bestowed upon me in acknowledgment of who I am.

"Alia! Back Viro up!" Dalton commanded, having risen to his feet after watching me fight.

"Got it!"

I ditched the crimson bull and turned my attention to Viro, who was holding off the azure bull on his own. I started running, the scenery around me blurring as if I were flying past. Before, my technique had been wild and uncontrollable. In comparison to that chaotic, unbalanced version, Iron Rose gave me an even stat boost across the board and was much easier to keep in check.

"Viro!" I called out. Thankfully, he was still alive, but in terrible shape after fighting the powerhouse that was the azure bull on his own. I sped up even more, leaving behind trails of light as I flew like a comet toward the azure bull, the blade on my heel aimed at its head.

"Bwargh!" the minotaur grunted. A sharp metallic *clang* echoed through the air as it deflected my blade with its horns. Its head wobbled violently from the impact.

"Alia?!"

"Heal up, Viro," I said. I landed smoothly and tossed him a spare potion from Shadow Storage before launching myself at the azure bull a second time, slashing at it with my knife.

"Bwooooooargh!"

It wasn't surprising that even though I'd gotten faster, my lightweight body still couldn't deal much damage. The azure bull noticed me coming and swung its massive greatsword in a powerful downward arc. I crossed my black knife and dagger and caught the enormous blade head-on.

"Haaah!"

The sheer weight made my joints creak in protest, but it wasn't unbearable. Mustering all my strength and skill, I stepped forward and deflected the blow, then delivered a powerful elbow strike to the azure bull's forehead.

"Bwoooh!"

It wasn't just my speed that had been enhanced. My strength and endurance had also more than doubled. Thanks to that, I could hold my own against the azure bull—but I didn't plan on using brute strength alone.

"Bwoh?!" it grunted in confusion as I disappeared from its sight. In an instant, I was behind it, driving my dagger into its neck with both hands.

"Bwooooooargh!"

Just how thick is this thing's hide?

As the minotaur thrashed in agony, I leaped off its back, scattering trails of light in my wake. I slashed at its exposed hand, sending its greatsword flying from its grip. Although my strength was usually about the same as an ordinary adult's, the combat technique's enhancement allowed me to deal with the azure bull's weapon. And with my agility—originally on par with the azure bull's —doubled, I could now outmaneuver even the two Rank 5 minotaurs.

I quickly kicked the fallen greatsword away, but the enraged azure bull ignored it and went down on all fours. With its two horns pointed at me, it charged forward, aiming for a full-body tackle. In response, I stepped forward

and drew two concealed weapons from Shadow Storage.

Light trailing behind me, I rushed forward at maximum speed to meet the azure bull head-on, closing the short distance of a few meters in an instant. Just before impact, I drove my weapons into each of the azure bull's eyes. Before its twisted horns could impale me, I leaped over its massive body.

"Bwooooooargh!" the azure bull roared in pain, tumbling and rolling across the stone floor.

"Support the adventurers!" one of the knights shouted. Those who could still move had caught up.

"Viro, take over from here," I said, entrusting the azure bull to him and the knights before heading to assist Dalton and the others.

### ▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 82/270

Health Points: 159/210

Overall Combat Power: 916 (Uniquely Boosted: 1769)

Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 82 seconds

My aether reserves had taken a significant hit. Normally, Boost consumed one point of aether every hundred seconds, but this technique was burning through my aether at a hundred times that rate. Had I been in perfect condition, I could've maintained Iron Rose for 270 seconds, but even then, considering the potential need for other techniques and spells, it would have been prudent to assume the actual usable time was much shorter.

Even more pressing than that was the fact that my still-developing body had begun to protest under the strain. My bones and muscles were creaking already, even after only a few dozen seconds of using the technique.

"Still, I can't stop here."

I accelerated even further, sprinting toward the black bull as it engaged Dalton and the others. Closing in from behind, I gripped my black dagger with both hands and drove it into the back of one of the minotaur's knees, piercing straight to its kneecap.

The black bull let out an earsplitting roar of pain.

"Grooooooooooooar?!"

It glared at me ferociously and swung down its massive fist. I released my dagger and kicked off the ground to leap away. Trails of light flared like wings as I soared into the air to deliver a kick to the black bull's face, taking advantage of the fact the knee injury had compromised its stance.

The black bull, however, quickly attempted to sweep me away with its enormous horns. But Dalton and his team had already broken one of them. My heel blade drove straight into its forehead.

It retaliated immediately, swinging its massive battle-axe toward me with a menacing roar. "Bwooooooargh!"

"Dark Mist!" I chanted reflexively.

The black fog enveloped the black bull's face, causing its aim to shift slightly. I managed to kick the battle-axe aside as I maneuvered out of the minotaur's range. As I landed, my legs gave out, and I found myself momentarily on my knees.

### ▼ Alia (Alicia)

Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 43/270

Health Points: 159/210

Overall Combat Power: 916 (Special: 1769)

Combat Technique: Iron Rose / 43 seconds

My aether reserves were even lower now. I'd cast Dark Mist, but it shouldn't have consumed that much. Perhaps being under the effect of Iron Rose meant

aether consumption was increased across the board?

"Nice, Alia!" Dalton said. He seized the opportunity and charged in, swinging his war hammer down and crushing the black bull's right arm. Its massive battle-axe went flying.

"We'll take it from here!" said Feld, now recovered. He followed up immediately, severing the black bull's left arm with its greatsword as the beast tried to shield its neck.

"Sniper Shot!" Perfectly timed, Mira's arrow pierced all the way through the black bull's neck.

"Bwooooooargh!" the minotaur bellowed. Still alive, it thrashed about violently in a berserk rage.

As I watched Dalton and the others dodge its blows while continuing their assault, I could feel myself reaching my limit. To conserve what little aether I had left, I deactivated Iron Rose. My hair shifted from its iron-gray color back to the usual pink, and the sudden heaviness of my body forced me back to my knees.

But my battle wasn't over yet.

"Bwoooh..."

The crimson bull, its right eye destroyed, glared at me through its remaining eye, dragging its halberd along the stone floor as it drew closer. Blood streamed endlessly from the deep gash in its eye, and its body, cut and torn all over, had lost much of its strength.

Still, its fighting spirit raged on. Its fury-filled gaze now reflected nothing but me.

"Bwoh..."

I forced my screaming joints to obey and rose to my feet, gripping my black knife with both hands to face the wounded crimson bull head-on.

The creature no longer cared about victory. All it wanted was to kill me—and the feeling was mutual. I'd already made my decision to kill this enemy. It would die by my hands.

I sharpened my focus, drowning out the surrounding noise and unnecessary sights. As we both gripped our weapons, the sweat on my cheek and the blood from the crimson bull's eye dripped to the stone floor. In that instant, we both leaped forward simultaneously.

As we collided with a resounding *thud*, I deflected the blade of its halberd and leaped over the creature. Immediately, it deflected my own blade with its horns. Both of us were pushing our bodies to the limit, our speeds now evenly matched. But my burst power was higher, and I managed to slash its wrist. Without hesitation, it ditched its weapon and lowered its head, aiming its horns directly at my heart.

Don't be afraid, I told myself. Stay steady and observe. Your strength lies in seeing your enemy.

Shing!

When it struck at me with its sharp horns, I didn't dodge. Instead, I aligned the tip of my black knife to intercept the blow. At that moment, something deep within me clicked into place.

The force of the impact sent me flying into the air. Using the recoil's momentum, I twisted my body midair and raised my knife high above my head while upside down.

"Critical Edge!" I shouted, unleashing the Rank 4 combat technique almost subconsciously. My weapon sliced halfway through the crimson bull's exposed neck.

"Bwargh!"

Its massive body wavered, blood gushing from its neck and mouth. Just then, a familiar voice echoed from a distance.

"Soul Thorn."

"Karla...?"

Karla cast aside her sorceress's robes, revealing a pure white dress. Black, thornlike patterns writhed across her pale arms and neck as she radiated an overwhelming surge of aether. The dying crimson bull stood no chance as

Karla's fire sorcery raced along the arena floor and engulfed it in a massive blaze. It was incinerated in an instant.

"Here we go!" she chirped playfully. Ten or so massive orbs of flame, each as large as a person, flared into existence, floating around her.

Are those Fireballs?!

Fireball was the Level 5 fire spell contained in the gem Viro had used before. The sheer amount of aether in each of these was extraordinary. Sensing the danger, I shouted at my companions who were still in Karla's line of sight.

"Everyone, get back!!!"

Sensing the urgency in my voice, my party members and the knights retreated just as Karla unleashed her barrage of Fireballs. The explosions roared across the battlefield as the raging inferno swept over the arena. The azure bull and the black bull were engulfed in the sea of fire, their final desperate movements gradually stilling until they collapsed in the blaze.

Still, I could feel the sudden burst of aether emanating from Karla. Without hesitation, I dashed toward her, chanting, "Iron Rose!"

Once more, my pink hair turned iron gray. Trails of light scattered from my hair like a comet's tail as I shot forward, closing the distance to Karla. Just as she began to ready another spell, I leaped at her with a sharp heel kick.

"Karla!!!"

"Alia!"

### ▼ Karla Leicester

Species: Human♀ (Rank 4)

Aether Points: ∞/450

Health Points: 29/51

Overall Combat Power: 749 (Special: 2333)

Gift: Soul Thorn / Life Exchange

At that moment, a surge of aether burst forth from the black thorns entwined around Karla, and the vines surrounding her body moved as though controlling her, allowing her to nimbly evade my kick.

"Ice Javelin."

Countless spears of ice shot forth from Karla's hand. I swiftly dodged them and spun around to strike at her neck with my knife. A block of ice shaped like a thorn blocked my blade with a sharp *clang*.

At the same time, Karla cast Dig Volt, which I narrowly evaded by accelerating, clawing at the floor for leverage. I countered with a heel blade kick, but Karla dodged by leaping into the air, laughing as she pointed her fingers at me.

"Fire Breath."

"Critical Edge!"

My combat technique cleaved through the flames to gouge Karla's shoulder. The split flames brushed me as well, but neither of us paid our wounds any mind. We continued our battle in midair, and Karla, controlled by the thorns, exchanged kicks with me at point-blank range.

Our kicks passed one another and each of our feet struck powerfully at the other's side. The sound of flesh meeting flesh echoed as we both twisted in midair. We landed opposite each other—me atop rubble, Karla within the flames.

Surrounded by the blazing inferno, Karla grimaced slightly in pain. But when our gazes met, she broke into a radiant smile, innocent as a child traipsing through a field of flowers.

"Oh, Alia, that hair color suits you beautifully too."

Even as I winced from the kickback of layering Iron Rose with another combat art, I managed a glare at Karla. "So that's your gift. Why didn't you ask for your body to be healed?"

This confirmed my suspicion that Karla was one of the people the spirit had summoned. Had she forgone this gift in exchange for longevity, she could have

lived at least as long as Elena. But no, she hadn't wished for that. She'd sought even greater destructive power instead.

The words she'd said earlier, "Soul Thorn," had to be the chant to activate her gift. In exchange for the overwhelming surge of aether, Karla's very life seemed to be draining away by the second. The black petals that scattered from the thorny black vines enmeshing her body looked almost like fragments of her dwindling life force.

"I don't need that. Ordinary life is trivial. I have no use for it." Surrounded by immense aether, she stood untouched by the flames, twirling a lock of her black hair between her fingers as though indifferent to her own fading existence. "To heal this body, I'd have to do away with the aethercrystal lodged in my heart. But if I did that...what would've been the point of the years of practice, of all the blood and sweat I poured into training my aether?"

"Karla..."

"I will carry on until my life is spent. I will burn every last thing that drove me to insanity, and I won't let anyone interfere. Not even you, Alia." Her eyes shone with madness as she smiled at me, grim yet serene.

At that moment, the spirit's altar in the distance sank into the ground and disappeared, leaving a door in its place. It slowly slid open, allowing a faint light to seep through.

"That spirit is shockingly kind, isn't it? The path home opens up once you've defeated the final enemies."

Holding the hem of her dress amid the flames, Karla lightly curtised as though parting ways with a chance acquaintance made by the roadside.

"Now then, Alia, until next time. Let us wait for a stage worthy of our confrontation and settle things. I'm looking forward to it."



# **Epilogue**

"Count Leicester...it has been quite some time. Do you think we'll hear from them soon?"

"Indeed it has, Your Majesty..."

King Reinhardt von Claydale was consulting with his chief court sorcerer, Ignace de Leicester, who had come to the king's private office in the palace to deliver a report. Internally, Ignace was considering the possibility that the expedition had been wiped out, but he chose to say what the king wanted to hear.

"If all goes well, we should indeed receive news soon. Even should the expedition take longer, I estimate no more than two weeks before it's done."

If that period were to pass with no news, the likelihood of the expedition having ended in total annihilation was very high.

Members of every generation of the royal family had ventured into that dungeon in an attempt to obtain gifts. Each time, they had returned safely, with the only casualties being among their escorts. Given that history, the odds of complete failure were slim—but the issue was that unlike previous attempts, undertaken by adults, this time the task had been entrusted to a group of children. Children too young to even attend the Sorcerers' Academy.

Moreover, due to the rising threat posed by the nobility faction, the number of knights sent to escort them had been limited for fear of attracting attention and, consequently, interference. Nevertheless, the dungeon expedition had been judged too important to forgo.

The royal family's authority had dwindled to such an extent that the nobility faction, with the support of neighboring countries, had grown in influence and begun to destabilize domestic affairs. The king had arranged for the crown prince's swift engagement to several daughters of influential nobles within Claydale, likely in hopes of securing the support of moderates who had yet to

take a stance.

As the chief court sorcerer, Ignace belonged to the loyalist faction. He was less pessimistic than the king. He figured that, troublesome as it would be if the expedition members were to be wiped out, there was still time to groom the young second prince into a fitting crown prince.

"My daughter, Karla, is with them. Though normally she is quite useless, she *is* gifted enough in sorcery to rival a court sorcerer. I have faith she will meet Your Majesty's expectations."

The king had been confiding in Ignace precisely because, like him, the chief court sorcerer had also sent offspring to the dungeon. Normally, he would have been sharing such concerns with his two queens. But the first queen, the daughter of a viscount, had not been raised to deal with the pressures of rulership; ruminating on the realities of the dungeon expedition, she had grown ill from stress. The second queen, meanwhile, had never had any interest in her daughter to begin with.

"I see," Reinhardt said, allowing himself a small, relieved smile. "She must be quite the capable young lady." Although the king knew there was no other choice, he'd never wanted to expose his children to danger.

Though he returned the king's smile with one of his own, inwardly, Ignace was furious.

If only death would take that murderer already. Even just thinking of Karla as his daughter made him sick. Though he'd praised her excellence to the king, that had been a veneer to hide his true feelings. He wished only for her to die. Accursed child.

Karla had killed two of his three brilliant sons and slaughtered several of his servants. Even now, recalling those events filled Ignace with seething hatred. He'd let it slide because, at that point, the girl had been more useful to him alive than dead. Though all of Ignace's children were mere pawns to elevate House Leicester, losing the majority of them would have risked affecting his family's reputation. He'd already lost two sons and couldn't afford to lose a pawn as useful as the crown prince's fiancée—not at that point. Besides, Karla had been weak and would have been easy to dispose of.

Due to Ignace's experiments, the girl had acquired all six elemental affinities, making her an immensely powerful sorceress. However, as a side effect, her body had become unstable. Healers had told him she wouldn't live past twenty. Ignace had figured that, if his noble house could produce a queen, it didn't matter when she died. Even should she manage to make it to age twenty, tolerating her existence for another ten-odd years had seemed worth the hassle.

However, Karla's aether had grown at an astonishing rate that far surpassed Ignace's expectations. Even as a child of five or six, she'd already been delving into a dungeon. That dungeon, managed by House Leicester under royal orders, was known to be dangerous even to experienced parties—and so the nearby town was a hot spot for skilled adventurers. But after Karla began venturing inside, local reports of adventurer deaths had increased. The odds of her being involved in such incidents were high.

Though Ignace could hardly stomach even the sight of his daughter, her aether and overall combat power had kept soaring with each assessment of her growth. By the time he'd grown alarmed enough to try and have Karla killed, she'd already become too powerful for ordinary assassins to handle.

To make matters worse, rumors had it that the Northern Border District's branch of the Assassins' Guild had been annihilated—supposedly by someone named Lady Cinders, though the truth remained unclear. Many assassins had left the royal capital to fill the newly created power vacuum, leaving no one capable enough to take down Karla.

At this point, Ignace wouldn't have minded at all if the entire expedition were wiped out, as long as Karla was among them. But these, of course, were not the words he said next.

"There are talented members of the Royal Sorcery Corps with them as well. I assure you, Your Majesty, the crown prince and the princess will both return safely."

In reality, the crown prince was the child of a middling noblewoman with no ties to the nobility faction, and the princess was only the king's second child. Their deaths would not be felt deeply, but Ignace chose not to voice that.

"Indeed," Reinhardt said. "It would gladden me if Elvan's fiancées and all of the knights returned safely as well..."

"Don't worry," a voice suddenly echoed in the room. "Everyone is safe. As far as I'm aware, anyway."

Reinhardt and Ignace looked up, startled, and the king's two guardian maidens, who had been suppressing their presence to avoid disturbing the conversation, sprang into action.

"Who goes there?!"

One of the guardians, an armored fighter, moved to shield Reinhardt. The other, a scout, sensed a presence in the room, drew her dagger, and leaped toward the source.

"W-Wait!" Ignace shouted. He knew that voice.

"Guh!"

His warning had come a moment too late. The guardian maiden had been frozen solid in midair. The overwhelming chill and the surge of aether caused everyone in the room to grow pale.

From behind the frozen woman, a sickly-looking girl stepped out, her dark hair contrasting with the white of her gown. She smiled faintly. "Ah, that was a risky thing to do. Anyone else might've seriously hurt her."

"Karla!" Ignace shouted.

When had she arrived? How long had she been there? How had she escaped notice?

Ignoring her father, Karla gracefully curtsied before King Reinhardt. "Your Majesty, it is I, Karla Leicester. I have come ahead of the others to deliver my report."

Though she was the crown prince's fiancée and the daughter of the chief court sorcerer, Karla's outrageous behavior could not be tolerated. However, the oppressive aether and violent aura emanating from her were even more chilling than the freezing cold that had fallen upon the room, leaving all present hesitant to so much as call for the knights. Besides, surely the steward and royal

guards stationed outside the office would've noticed the commotion—yet there were no signs of movement. Had she done something to them already?

"What are you doing, Karla?!" Ignace demanded. "You can't use sorcery here \_\_"

"Father, why are you shouting in His Majesty's presence?"

"You insolent little—"

"Enough, Count Leicester," Reinhardt said, cutting short the tense exchange, which hardly befitted a parent and child. He cast a sorrowful glance at the frozen handmaiden before turning his gaze toward Karla. "Firstly, allow me to commend you on your safe return, Lady Karla. I must, however, ask why you killed my guard."

"Ah, she's not dead. Not yet."

With a wave of Karla's hand, the ice encasing the handmaiden melted, and the woman collapsed onto the floor.

"Count Leicester, heal my guard," the king commanded. "I will hear what your daughter has to say."

"Yes, Your Majesty..." Ignace cast Karla a piercing glare as he reluctantly pushed himself to his feet. He began to cast a healing spell on the barely breathing maidservant.

Ignoring him, Karla offered the king a small smile.

"When you say you've 'come ahead of the others,' do you mean that Elvan and Elena's dungeon expedition is done?" Reinhardt asked.

"Yes, precisely," Karla replied. "I walked out of the dungeon a short while ago, ahead of the others, but the crown prince should be making his way out shortly as well."

"And...what did you mean, they're safe 'as far as you're aware'?"

"Well, my business in the dungeon was finished, so I had no reason to linger there. Luck permitting, the others will survive, I'm certain." Karla's smile didn't waver, even in the face of the king's piercing glare. "Karla!" Ignace interrupted. "How dare you speak in such a manner before His Majesty, about His Highness! You are a subject of this kingdom! It's your duty to protect the crown prince!"

"Why, father, I never knew you were capable of sounding so human." She cast a derisive glare at Ignace, as though looking at a worm.

"You wretched beast!"

"A wretched beast, child to a soulless monster. We make quite the pair, don't we? So, what will you do about it?"

"You impudent—"

"Enough!!!" Reinhardt commanded sharply, silencing the escalating conflict between father and daughter. "Lady Karla. You said you've only just emerged from the dungeon and that the others are yet to come out. But somehow, here you stand, far away from there."

Understanding the implication, Ignace turned sharply toward the king.

"Does that mean you've obtained a gift?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." At Karla's affirmation, everyone's eyes turned to her. Her pale, bloodless lips moved to chant. "Soul Thorn."

In that instant, thorny black vines coiled around Karla's waxy white skin, causing an overwhelming surge of energy—infinite aether, fueled by her very life. Ignace's eyes widened as he witnessed the astonishing power emanating from his daughter. Sweat trickled down his brow.

"Shall I initiate the succession for House Leicester here and now, father?"
"...You beast."

None present could hope to defeat Karla in combat. Even if they summoned all of the palace guards to strike her down, the loss of life would be unimaginable. While a single blow would be enough to end Karla's life, there was no way someone who had forsaken her own life for power would beg for mercy. Besides, that blow would come at too high a cost. Hundreds of lives would be sacrificed in the process. If she fought in earnest, Karla could easily bring down a large portion of the castle—and everyone inside—with her as she

fell.

"What is it you want?" Reinhardt asked directly, understanding that if she'd truly intended to kill them all, they'd already be dead. There was a purpose to her display of power.

"A deal, Your Majesty."

"What are your terms?"

"I will protect my dear Prince El with this power. And if the royal family has enemies, I will dispose of them."

"And in exchange, you want us to overlook certain transgressions?"

"Ah, Your Majesty is much sharper than that soulless husk over there. Yes. For the rest of my existence, I will keep Prince El safe. I will treasure him, like a pretty gem in a box."

It was an outrageous proposition—a demand made with all of humanity held hostage.

The king paused. "Very well."

"Your Majesty!" Ignace exclaimed in shock.

Considering the nature of the proposal, accepting it had been the king's only option. "Once my children return, I shall send an envoy to address the matter further," Reinhardt said. "For now, you may go and rest."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I shall await this envoy," Karla replied with a sweet smile.

She lifted the hem of her dress and curtsied to the others, who still stood unable to move. Then, likely using an advanced teleportation spell fueled by her immense aether, she vanished, leaving behind only the remnants of her audacity and the chilling cold she'd brought upon the room.

Amid the frigid aftermath of his daughter's visit, Ignace clenched his teeth in silence, pounding a fist against the floor.

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In a forest near the Leicester estate that had often served as her refuge, Karla

—her face ashen and streaked with blood from a violent coughing fit—began to twirl and dance. She'd obtained even more power than she'd initially planned. With it, she had finally laid the foundations for the stage she'd been dreaming of.

Humans couldn't use spells above their skill level because they couldn't control the necessary aether, causing costs to multiply exponentially. But with infinite aether, Karla had fully bypassed that limitation. Her current power enabled her to cast spells two levels above her skills.

Karla had never placed her trust in anything but her own power. She'd believed that, eventually, she could master Level 6 sorcery on her own. However, her short life wouldn't have allowed the time for it. That had been why she'd desired the ability to "get an advance," so to speak, on the power she believed she was meant to have.

Until now, Karla had been weak, dabbling in various things in hopes of crafting the stage she envisioned. She'd even brought certain *forces* into the kingdom that she should never have meddled with. But now that she'd gained the power she wished for, such things were no longer of use. From here on, she could achieve everything on her own.

As Karla imagined her dream stage—the royal capital painted in flames, blood, and death—her bloodsoaked lips curled into a satisfied smile.

"Such lovely weather today!"

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I need to make a decision soon...

The royal family's dungeon expedition had concluded. Miraculously, no one had died—everyone had made it back to the surface. While each individual's efforts had played a part in the success, the contributions of the Rainbow Blade—the kingdom's foremost adventuring party—had been significant. On her way back to the manor the group was using as a guesthouse, Clara pondered the results of the dungeon venture.

A lot has happened...

Karla Leicester, the most notorious villainess in the otome game, had

obtained a gift clearly meant for destruction. In the game, this didn't happen. Perhaps it was a consequence of the expedition having happened earlier than it did in the game's plot.

Not only that, a pink-haired girl who resembled the game's protagonist had also gotten a distinctly unusual ability. Together, she and Karla had dealt the finishing blow to the Rank 6 monstrosity guarding the dungeon's depths.

Without their intervention, Clara might not have survived. Still, her knowledge from her past life meant she couldn't help but view the two with growing apprehension. A sense of dread gripped her tighter and tighter, making her feel as though her very life was ebbing away.

And it was, in fact, quite literally ebbing away. Even now, the gift Clara had obtained was working nonstop, seeking the optimal course of action for the best outcome, relentlessly gnawing at her mind. As a result, she was constantly wracked by agonizing headaches.

The dungeon's spirit had recognized that Clara's soul had come from another world and, on what the spirit had called a "whim," offered her a gift. All Clara had wanted was the power to survive her fate—and so she'd been granted an ability that allowed her to recognize the key choices that would determine her future, essentially functioning as a guide for an otome game.

Her gift, Foresight, could calculate possible outcomes of each course of action. However, the futures she could see depended on what information was already available to her, and the immense strain of these calculations ate away at her lifespan.

At first, Clara had thought that eliminating the heroine would solve her problems. However, between the limitations of Clara's past life knowledge—she'd been a simple high school girl, after all—and the obstacle posed by the Order of Shadows, that plan had proven impossible.

Trying to befriend the heroine wouldn't solve anything either. It wasn't the heroine herself who would harm Clara. Rather, what posed a problem was the fact that Clara was the crown prince's primary fiancée, preventing the heroine from becoming queen. Others would work to disgrace Clara and send her into exile. While Clara's family could perhaps protect her, she couldn't fully trust her

brother—one of the people who would become infatuated with the heroine.

Her fate loomed over her. She would be exiled to the perpetually cold Sacred Mountain in the Theocratic State of Fandora and live the rest of her life in isolation, growing old and dying without ever seeing the outside world again. Worse yet, there was now the immediate risk of Karla outright killing her.

If she stepped down as the crown prince's fiancée, she might manage to survive. However, neither House Dandorl nor her aunt, the second queen, would allow her to do so under the current circumstances. Not even Clara herself could imagine relinquishing her position after all this.

"Are you in pain, Clara?"

"No, Your Highness. I'm fine."

Even after their return to the guesthouse, Elvan remained at Clara's side. No one else was in the room, and normally, it would've been unthinkable for an underage boy and girl of their status, engaged or otherwise, to be without attendants. But the servants, exhausted from overwork, had fallen ill. Now Elvan could visit Clara's chambers with no one to pry.

"I'm still not used to my gift," she explained. "But I will adjust soon."

"I'm so sorry, Clara," Elvan said. "I couldn't get a gift myself, and now the burden falls on you..."

"Please, think nothing of it! I want to be of assistance to you, Your Highness!" "Oh, Clara," Elvan murmured softly, pulling her into a gentle embrace.

I... I love him, she thought. Had he been the mature and dignified royal from the latter half of the otome game, she might've felt nothing but admiration for him. But because he was still vulnerable, he had been drawn to Clara—vulnerable herself—and offered her unconditional support.

Now she could understand the feelings of her counterpart in the game, who was fond of Elvan and spiteful toward the heroine. She might've made the same choices herself, had she been put in a situation similar to that in the game. In fact, it was possible that the game version of Clara wasn't simply an alternate universe version of herself with no past life memories but rather the very

person she would become in her own future.

"Clara, please, just call me 'El."

"Prince El..."

The two slowly drew closer and awkwardly shared their first kiss.

I can do this. No one is taking El from me.

No one. Not the heroine. Not Karla. Anyone who tried to get in the way of her future with Elvan would be erased from this world. She'd gotten a blessing for that very purpose.

The moment Clara steeled her resolve, Foresight showed her several highly probable futures. A terrible headache struck her, and she clutched her face with one hand as she recalled elements from the otome game.

Demons... The evil race...

Enemies of mankind, servants of wicked gods, harbingers of evil.

In the otome game, Clara, driven by jealousy, had contacted several different forces in an attempt to eliminate the protagonist. Likewise, the other villainess, Karla, had allied with destructive powers to harm the kingdom. While the current Karla seemed more focused on her own power than external alliances, Clara was certain such forces still existed. Depending on the route chosen by the player, the game could resolve without them ever revealing themselves. Nevertheless, it was guaranteed that they lurked somewhere in Claydale until the end of the plot.

Knowing this, Clara began to think about how to contact them.

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"How's your arm?"

In a place completely devoid of sunlight, illuminated only by the faint flicker of a candle, a man nodded in response to the question rising from the shadows.

"It's fine. It'll take some getting used to, but..." A soft creak echoed as the man raised his black metallic arm. He struck the stone wall beside him, causing the air in the room to shake. "Once I have more practice, I'll be able to use it

just as well as the old one. Even better than the old one, perhaps."

The man had lost his arm months earlier when it was torn off during a vicious confrontation, forcing him to retreat to this place. He'd sustained injuries so severe that they would've killed most before they could even have made their way here. Yet he had survived. Instead of spending years regenerating the lost limb, he'd opted for a new one.

"Impressive," said the second man, hidden in the shadows. He was stunned as he observed the first man smash the wall without hesitation—merely moving that arm had to be excruciatingly painful, after all.

Though the two men hadn't been acquainted long, they had a shared sense of both understanding and dread.

The man in the shadows and his comrades had infiltrated this country for nefarious purposes. The nation, surrounded by rocky mountains, ocean, and monster-infested wilderness, was further protected by an organization known as the Order of Shadows, making its defenses exceedingly difficult to breach. Several years ago, however, a certain black-haired girl had given his group the means to establish a foothold here.

That girl had betrayed them, however, leading to the deaths of many of the man's comrades. Though she was now their enemy, the parting gifts she had left behind had allowed the survivors to carve out a sanctuary in the darkness.

It had been after this that they'd come into contact with the one-armed man who now stood before him. He hadn't always been missing an arm, it seemed, and he possessed in-depth knowledge of the country's inner workings. He'd taught them ways to evade the Order of Shadows, the nation's powerful intelligence agency.

That knowledge hadn't been offered on a whim or out of kindness, however. The one-armed man was driven by an insatiable lust for strength. He coveted the group's combat prowess and unique techniques. The specialized prosthetic arm they'd furnished him with had originally been found in a dungeon and been bestowed upon them by the leader of their clan.

"We have given you a priceless artifact. In turn, we expect you to give this your all, Graves." The group, too, needed the man's power to kill the black-

haired girl who had betrayed them.

And Graves, who had been defeated in combat by the joint efforts of Alia and a mythical beast, had been biding his time, polishing his skills and blade under the cover of darkness. He flashed the dark-skinned demon a predatory smile. "That goes without saying."

In the lightless void, he narrowed his eyes as though staring far into the distance.

"Protect the princess, Alia. Show me what you're made of."

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"Your Highness. I have brought the adventurer girl," announced Chloe, the princess's guardian maiden, from the doorway.

Elena gave her permission from within the room, and Sera opened the door to usher me inside.

After emerging from the dungeon, we'd headed straight for the guesthouse. The others, exhausted, had fallen into a deep and relieved sleep. I, meanwhile, had received a summons to Elena's chambers from the princess herself.

"Welcome, Alia," she said.

"Your Highness," I replied.

Elena seemed fatigued too. Yet, upon seeing me, she moved to rise from her seat for a moment—only to catch herself and sit back down.

"Come closer, Alia. It's just the two of us and my attendants. You needn't bother with pleasantries or formalities."

"Got it."

Guided by Chloe, I took a seat on the sofa opposite Elena. As the aroma of freshly brewed tea filled the room, the princess began to speak.

"I'm sorry for calling you at this hour. I'm sure you're tired, but I felt like this could be our only chance to talk."

Amor, who had previously gotten in the way of Elena meeting privately with adventurers, was fast asleep tonight. And for him, it might have been about

more than simple physical fatigue—it felt as though he was deliberately avoiding us.

"How's your arm?" she asked.

"It's fine," I replied, instinctively moving to cover my right arm as she gave me a concerned look.

My newly named combat technique, Iron Rose, had caused a buildup of aether-induced heat in my arm. But, since it was still only a variation on my original primordial technique, I figured I would be rested enough to recover full use of my arm after half a day.

That wasn't the only reason she'd summoned me here, however.

"What of your gift?" I asked bluntly.

Elena's eyes widened slightly, and she gave me a strained smile. "Straight to the point, I see. Here I was, trying to think of what I wanted to chat with you about after all this time, but... I guess that's not very much like us, is it?"

The princess's tone had noticeably grown lighter and less stuffy, indicating this was an informal conversation. She took a sip of the tea Sera had brewed and exhaled before continuing.

"I turned down the spirit's offer. You did too, I imagine. Instead, I wished to be healthy again. But, because of that..." She paused, then suddenly raised a hand toward me and chanted, "Fire Arrow."

However, even though I could see the movements of her aether with my mana vision, there were no traces of any fire mana, nor did the spell activate.

"I think...it cost me my affinity for fire and all related skills," she said. "The spirit mentioned something about mending my soul. With one of my affinities gone, the aethercrystal pushing against my heart should gradually shrink as well..."

If this was true, then Elena might indeed grow healthy once more. However, instead of seeming happy about this, the princess let out a self-deprecating sigh.

"I worked so hard to train my Fire Mastery to Level 2, and now it's gone.

Although I understand why this was necessary, I think I can see why Karla didn't wish for healing."

"Ah..."

Skills were embedded into one's soul. Maybe the process of erasing one was similar to using Restore to erase a tattoo. As for what Elena had claimed to understand—perhaps the spirit, powerful as it was, wasn't omnipotent. Maybe giving was easier than taking. Removing a skill from Elena's soul might have been the limit of what it could do for her.

"Dalton mentioned the dungeon spirit gave you a boon, Alia," Elena said.

"Yeah," I confirmed. This was likely the real point of her summons.

Elena leaned forward slightly, peering into my eyes. "There are many now who have witnessed your power. Even if you try to keep it a secret, people will inevitably learn of it, and nobles will try to pull you into their orbit."

I'd come to the same conclusion already. Although what I'd gotten from the spirit hadn't been a gift, strictly speaking, it still made me unique in this kingdom. I'd become an adventurer so I would not be subject to the whims of nobles or the mercy of fate, but thanks to my newfound power, the nobility's claws were reaching for me once more.

"I can protect you, Alia, but it would mean restricting the freedom you seek. If you truly desire to be free, I suggest you leave this country."

"Elena..." I began, and her downcast gaze lifted to meet mine. "I won't run anymore."

"Alia..."

I'd always known it would come to this. Even without a gift, if I grew powerful enough to defy fate, there would inevitably be those who sought to use that power for their own ends.

"You're in danger too, Elena. If people find out you've regained your health, there will be factions trying to make you queen. Others will oppose that and may try to take your life. What will you do then?"

"I..." Elena paused, briefly closing her eyes before reopening them and gazing

at me with newfound resolve. "I thought it would be best if my brother were to open his eyes to reality. But now I have another choice, don't I?"

With those words, Elena stood and gently extended her hands toward me.

"I won't run anymore either. I will aim to become queen. Will you lend me your strength, Alia?"

I stood as well and gently enclosed her outstretched hands in mine. "Yes, Elena."

From now on, many nobles would attempt to exploit her. Countless enemies would target her. Graves, who had been after me, was sure to come for her as well. And I would protect her—that was the very reason I'd grown stronger. The paths we'd walked separately had now converged, and we would begin walking down the same road.

Elena's eyes reflected a powerful will. No longer did she have the face of an eleven-year-old girl; now she had the face of the first princess of a great nation.

"Alia of the Rainbow Blade," she said firmly. "I formally request that you serve as my bodyguard within the Sorcerers' Academy when I attend it a year from now. From then on, for three years...or at the very least until my brother graduates, I charge you with my protection and the elimination of my enemies."

I knelt before Elena as she made her formal request. "As you command, Your Highness."



Our serious expressions shifted into small smiles.

Karla would undoubtedly be attending the same academy as Elena. I would settle things with her there. I wasn't just going to defy fate—I was going to destroy it.

Finally, the otome game—which that woman had loved so much, and I despised just as much—was about to begin.

## To See You Again

"Dig Volt."

A little over a year before the royal family's dungeon expedition, a flash of violet light shot from the hands of a petite robed figure, striking several goblins in a dimly lit dungeon.

"Graaah!" shrieked one of them. But despite being scorched by lightning, the goblin survived and lunged forward with its rusty dagger.

"Blast." A gust of wind burst forth from the figure's left palm, blowing the goblin away before it could attack. "Guillotine."

The figure's right palm released a blade of wind that severed the goblin's neck. Its head, etched with an agonized expression, rolled away, exposing its red crown.

"Phew..." sighed the robed figure—Karla Leicester—as she removed her hood.

She had reached the fifteenth floor of a large-scale dungeon owned by the royal family and managed by House Leicester. This was about as far as one could go alone. While it would be possible to venture deeper by properly setting up camp within the dungeon, solo exploration meant there was no one to assist with standing watch, which complicated matters.

Karla rolled up her sleeve, revealing a cut that had begun to turn a slight shade of purple. It was clearly infected. The rusty dagger the goblin had wielded must've been coated with a toxin. She gave the wound a lick to confirm that it was, indeed, poisoned.

### "Detoxify."

The spell easily neutralized the poison. Karla decided to leave treating the injury for later and moved to a concealed spot, out of sight. Having reached her limit, she sat down.

Her complexion was visibly poor, and not just from the poisoning. Despite having Poison Resistance, she had prioritized removing the toxin instead of restoring her dangerously low health points.

"I don't have enough aether," Karla muttered under her breath. She took a vegetable-stuffed cookie from her enchanted bag and crunched on it, then washed it down with an aether recovery potion.

At the fifteenth floor, there were practically no Rank 1 monsters around. While monsters Rank 4 and above didn't appear by this level, groups of Rank 3 ones were common. The monsters Karla had just defeated weren't ordinary goblins but a Rank 3 variety known as red caps, which possessed scout-type skills and were adept at using poison. Karla herself was Rank 3, so against multiple Rank 3 opponents, the risk of sustaining injuries was high. It was difficult to defeat them all in one hit, after all, as demonstrated earlier.

There were few area-of-effect spells below Level 3. Among the standard ones, only the water-elemental Waterball qualified, but it lacked the power needed to kill enemies Rank 3 or higher. To compensate for this, Karla relied on lightning-elemental sorcery, which combined water and wind. But Dig Volt, while highly dispersive, couldn't be truly considered an area-of-effect spell, and the damage it dealt was inconsistent.

Because of this, Karla often got injured, which forced her to rely on her sorcery to heal herself as well as eliminate any enemies Dig Volt couldn't kill. This caused her to rapidly use up her aether, slowing down her progress through the dungeon. To endure longer explorations, she'd stocked her expanded storage bag with portable food and potions, but even these were limited. Though Karla ate little and didn't mind skipping meals, prolonged battles slowly whittled away her already limited health points, making breaks like this one necessary.

"I bet she could do this on her own," Karla mused as she crunched on a hard-

baked cookie, her thoughts drifting to the ash-covered girl who'd changed her fate.

Alia. A solitary girl who had once promised death to Karla. Upon hearing rumors about a young girl nicknamed Lady Cinders who had extinguished an entire branch of the Assassins' Guild, Karla had immediately known it was her. So Alia was alive, sharpening her skills on the battlefield of survival. Karla couldn't help but feel soft in comparison. Combat against enemies one knew was mere routine. If she wanted to fight Alia to the death, she needed to grow stronger too.

A dark smile played upon her lips. "I need to rank up."

Rank 3 was the limit for ordinary people. In other words, anyone working hard enough could eventually reach it. Rank 4 and above, however, were accessible only to those who had surpassed their limits. Karla had originally planned on reaching Rank 4 during her time at the Sorcerers' Academy, but now she felt even that wouldn't be enough to match Alia's resolve.

"I want power," she murmured to herself.

Since the day she had, at only five years old, killed her brothers, Karla had been relentlessly seeking power, dreaming of killing her father and setting the nation itself ablaze. To survive, she needed to be strong, and thus she'd endured daily threats to her life from her father, mother, and servants. It was during this time that she'd developed the Poison Resistance skill. She'd also stopped taking her meals at her family's estate.

She'd sought strength to live and to kill. Now that was no longer enough. Karla wanted to become strong purely for her final showdown against Alia.

"Bwoooargh!"

Her lovely fantasy of fighting Alia was rudely interrupted by the appearance of three orcs. Annoyed, Karla pushed to her feet, her gaze sharp and menacing as she turned to the intruders.

"Perish." In an instant, she conjured multiple Flame Javelins and unleashed them all at once, fueled by her fury.

A loud boom echoed through the dungeon as the orcs were engulfed in the

roaring flames and collapsed. One of them, however, like the red cap earlier, hadn't been killed instantly. In its dying moments, it hurled its stone axe at Karla with an angry roar, grazing her side and sending her flying into the dungeon wall.

She coughed up blood but managed to slowly rise to her feet again. Bringing a hand to her cheek in frustration, she muttered, "Oh, how vexing... Am I weak?"

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▼ Karla Leicester
Species: Human♀ (Rank 3)
Aether Points: 154/410
Health Points: 6/47
Strength: 6
Endurance: 3
Agility: 10
Dexterity: 8
[Light Magic Lv. 3]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 3]
[Earth Magic Lv. 3]
[Water Magic Lv. 3]
[Fire Magic Lv. 3]
[Wind Magic Lv. 3]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 3]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 3]
[Intimidation Lv. 3]
[Detection Lv. 3]
[Night Vision Lv. 1]
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[Basic Scan]

Overall Combat Power: 472 (Sorcery Power: 708)

Karla let out a small sigh, looking almost like a sheltered lady going shopping with no knowledge of the value of currency. Even drenched in blood and smelling of death, her demeanor suited her perfectly as a member of a high-ranking noble family.

The Sorcery Power listed in her stats didn't just refer to the damage of a single spell but also represented the versatility and destructive power that came from mastering multiple elements. It was similar in principle to the way melee-focused classes could use Boost to enhance their physical attributes. Based on this fact, there should be virtually no Rank 3 opponents capable of defeating Karla—yet this still fell short of her ideal.

She was used to grueling life-and-death situations. Pain and suffering were familiar to her. Death was no longer a concern. Even wounds that would kill an adult weren't fatal to her as long as she immediately unleashed light-elemental aether from the aethercrystal in her heart. This was just her daily reality, and one she found no comfort in.

"Perhaps it's about time..."

Her current health points made her far too vulnerable. If she was to set the royal capital ablaze, she needed to compensate for them. Before meeting Alia, she'd considered attracting certain harmful foreign forces into the kingdom to undermine its stability. Now, however, she'd lost interest in such trivial schemes.

Still, she recalled a peculiar story she'd once heard from an informant of hers...

\*\*\*

Two days after her decision in the dungeon, Karla found herself within a rather unsafe part of the Leicester domain.

"It should be around here..."

Karla's father, Count Leicester, had a strong elitist mentality. While he excelled as a court sorcerer, he could hardly be called a competent ruler. House Leicester cared only about sorcery and lineage, leaving the governance of their domain to a steward. Strict regulations were enforced, thus making administration of their lands easier. But this did not equate to good public order. Savvy merchants had left the Leicester territory, leaving behind only those connected to dungeon and adventuring-related industries. The countdom's primary source of income were subsidies for managing the large-scale dungeon under the royal family's domain.

Even so, Leicester wasn't that much worse off than other noble territories. Many noble houses used similar methods of governance, especially those whose domains had local specialty products and other sources of revenue. Such methods had blind spots, however, and many illegal organizations found these places to be convenient bases of operation.

The faint sound of gravel crunching underfoot made Karla come to a stop. At the edge of her vision, she spotted a group of rough-looking men.

"You there!" one of them called out. "You the kid who's been murdering people around here?"

Realizing the men's hostility was directed at her, Karla quietly turned to face them. Her body remained small and frail despite her aether-fueled growth spurt, and it wasn't uncommon for her to be referred to as a child. To the average observer, however, the sight of grown men questioning a child about murder would seem bizarre indeed.

Karla was unruffled. She spoke evenly, playing dumb. "Do you know where I can find an informant from the underworld?"

"I asked you a question, runt," growled the apparent leader, a man in his thirties with a menacing voice.

"I guess you don't know. That's fine," Karla said dismissively. She turned her back on the man, and his face flushed with anger.

One of the younger men, unable to hold back, lunged forward. "You brat! He asked if y—"

#### Crunch.

Without turning to look, Karla quickly flicked her hand and shot out a stone projectile that smashed straight into the younger man's head. The force of the spell was such that his head was obliterated instantly, and his body collapsed in place with only a slight sway. A fountain of blood erupted as he fell, painting the remaining men in a dark shade of red.

After a pause, the young men, drenched in blood and flesh, began to shriek, with some collapsing to the ground in horror.

Their leader, though equally soaked in gore, remained steady. He glared fiercely at Karla. "So you *are* the killer!"

There had been multiple murders in the area—and since the victims had been beggars and slum dwellers, law enforcement hadn't cared. But some of those victims had been related to these men.

Shouting angrily, the leader drew a dagger and charged at Karla. With a combat power of over 400, he was likely on the upper end of Rank 3, making him a combat-focused assassin by underworld standards. That meant he could quickly close the seven meters separating him from Karla, and could take her out without giving her a chance to cast a spell.

But Karla was no ordinary sorceress.

It wasn't that he'd underestimated her because she was a child. Their raw combat power was roughly equal, after all. But as a sorceress, Karla was at a disadvantage at this range if she couldn't make the first move. Besides, few children could overcome the fear of an approaching blade.

Got her! the man thought, certain of his victory, his dagger's tip mere inches from Karla's throat. But at that very moment, he noticed her staring at him, unblinking. A chill ran down his spine as an indescribable sense of dread washed over him.

"Dig Volt."

Thunder echoed in the air as a bolt of lightning erupted from Karla, striking the man and blasting away his lackeys behind him.

While lightning magic by itself didn't create shock waves, by adjusting the power of the electric shock, the caster could cause the target's body to spasm and jerk with such severity that the target would effectively be propelled backward. And indeed, there *weren't* many children who could overcome the fear of an enemy's blade closing in. Only two, in fact. Unfortunately for the man, he'd met one of them.

Had Karla lacked precise control of her aether or an extraordinary composure that no child should've had, she would've been the one to fall. But for her, this had always been the obvious outcome. Such were the limits of a man who could only evaluate others by their combat power.

"Y-You...little..." the man rasped.

"Oh. You're alive," Karla remarked.

The man's Rank 1 and 2 subordinates had all been killed outright by the lightning strike's astonishing power. But their leader, though prone and smoking from head to toe, was still alive. Karla was unconcerned that she'd failed to finish him off, however. Narrowing her deeply shadowed eyes, she smiled down at him almost mockingly.

"Well, it makes sense. You used your blade's aether to try and deflect the lightning, didn't you? Close, but not enough, I'm afraid. If only you'd just swung straight at me, maybe I would've died."

"Ugh..."

The man had lost because he'd tried to protect himself. He'd lost because he'd lacked the grit to stand up to a child. Karla's taunts cut deep as she moved to grip the immobile man's hair, lifting his head and leaning in close.

"But this is fine. The useful ones always die so quickly, it's been hard for me to make any progress. So...could you tell me the way to the Thieves' Guild?"

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Underworld organizations were hidden from the general public. Small-scale groups often disguised themselves as residential homes or trading companies. Older organizations, on the other hand, sometimes operated in plain sight—but they were so entrenched in the history of their cities that they went

unrecognized for what they were.

The Thieves' Guild, which Karla was searching for, was a large organization with no single central headquarters. Local branches remained hidden within their regions of operation, and many relocated periodically to evade detection. Because of this, Karla had been unable to track them down until now.

"Now, miss, this is a problem, you see. I believe you were specifically told not to hurt our guys?" a man said sarcastically as he addressed Karla in the reception room of the Thieves' Guild.

This particular base was disguised as a trading company dealing in imported goods. Karla, seated elegantly on the sofa across from the man, paid no mind to his barbed remarks.

"It's your fault for moving so often," she replied with a cheerful smile. "If you'd trained them better, maybe they wouldn't have attacked me for asking a simple question."

The man—Lloyd, the head of this branch of the guild—paused, offering Karla a smile laced with feigned sincerity. "We'll be more mindful."

It had been three years since Lloyd had first become involved with Karla. Their initial encounter had taken place after one of his men, a con artist, had tried to cheat Karla during the sale of a large quantity of materials she'd harvested from a dungeon. The attempt had ended with the swindler dead. Lloyd, recognizing right away how abnormal the girl was, had wisely chosen cooperation over antagonism.

Although dungeon-sourced materials were valuable, the reason Lloyd paid Karla above market rate wasn't that the guild had need of those materials but as a form of protection money so she wouldn't oppose them. While he was still proud of his quick thinking, he did regret not having simply turned tail and fled. This would have definitely earned him scorn in the underworld as a coward or a mad fool, but he had seen firsthand what happened to those who underestimated or provoked Karla. Entire combat-focused factions, including their leaders and men trained from birth, had been incinerated at the young sorceress's hands.

Karla had a point. Lloyd should have told his people what she looked like and

strictly instructed them not to mess with her. His reluctance to do so—and his branch's constant relocations without notifying her—stemmed from a faint hope that they could someday sever ties with her entirely.

"Man, and there's this other girl too..." Lloyd began. "Word has it she's barely more than a kid too. What is it with girls these days?" His weary sigh was interrupted when Karla's eyes lit up with excitement, making his heart nearly stop. "Wait, you know her?"

"Yes. She's the only person in the whole world who's allowed to kill me. She's very special to me."

Lloyd bit back the urge to curse at the heavens. Why did he have to be involved with not one but *two* horrifying girls?

The other girl in question had destroyed the Northern Border District branch of the Assassins' Guild as well as several branches of the Thieves' Guild that had dared to oppose her. In the underworld, she was known as Lady Cinders.

Within the Thieves' Guild, there was a fierce debate between the combatfocused factions, which advocated for retaliation, and the moderate factions, which believed the potential costs of further losses warranted restraint. Even a council of representatives from the most prominent branches remained unable to reach a consensus.

Currently, given that Lady Cinders was wreaking increasingly more havoc, opinions within the council leaned toward avoiding involvement with her. And so, if the council were to learn that Lloyd had been making deals with someone connected to Lady Cinders, his position as head of this branch could be in jeopardy.

Well, maybe not...

Although Karla was a business associate of Lloyd's, she was also a dangerous individual from the guild's perspective. She claimed Lady Cinders would kill her, but Lloyd was well aware of Karla's nature. The situation was likely to escalate to a showdown between the two.

Whatever the council's stance was, Lloyd had no intention of risking his life by getting in the way of such dangerous people. Not only that, if the two were

going to fight each other to the death, there was no need for the guild to take any action. As a bonus, if Lloyd were to volunteer that information to the council, it could elevate his standing and possibly grant him a seat among its members.

Still, it was a risky gambit. If he said the wrong thing, he could end up with both Karla *and* Lady Cinders as enemies. To minimize this risk, Lloyd knew he had to stay on Karla's good side to some extent.

"Now then, miss. How can I help you today?"

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Two months later, Karla arrived at a certain noble's territory along the western border. Given the proximity, she could've gotten there sooner, but she'd needed some time to prepare.

"Now then...where might they be?"

According to the intel Karla had received from the Thieves' Guild, the individuals she sought had last been seen about a year ago. No further sightings had been reported since then, but during that time, there had been a noticeable increase in disappearances in remote villages.

It wasn't particularly unusual for people to disappear, especially in remote villages along the border. In a world where monsters existed, habitable areas for humans were limited. While the human race had been gradually expanding its territory inland from the coastal regions, they'd been unable to push past a certain boundary—and the scarcity of good places for people to settle was the primary reason for the stagnation. As mercenaries specializing in exploration, adventurers scouted for habitable areas and cleared out the monsters there. But, if they pushed too far, formidable and merciless monsters would emerge.

Even after eradicating monsters and securing an area for habitation, sending settlers to establish villages often proved futile. Nearly half of the newly established frontier villages were abandoned within a few years due to the constant threat posed by monsters.

Disappearances, then, were often attributed to monster-related deaths—but the missing, in those cases, were typically hunters venturing into the woods or

people straying too far from the village. The current incidents, however, involved people within villages disappearing without a trace, which was virtually unheard of.

Naturally, villagers would react to these vanishings by petitioning the local lord for aid, citing the suspected criminal nature of the situation. And when knights or soldiers were dispatched to investigate, the disappearances would cease. After a period of time, they would begin anew in a different village.

The local branch of the Thieves' Guild had attempted to sell this information to the local nobility, but only one confirmed eyewitness report of suspicious activity had ever surfaced, and no direct evidence linked it to the disappearances. As a result, the idea had been dismissed. Dissatisfied, that branch had approached multiple other branch leaders, offering the information for sale.

Lloyd had purchased the intel as an investment, hoping that if corroborating evidence came up later, the info could be sold to a high-ranking noble for significant profit. Unfortunately, no such additional details had ever emerged. He'd initially approached Karla with this information at a somewhat high price, but eventually, she'd managed to secure it for a pittance.

Karla had used her connections as a noble and bribed willing officials to gather more detailed information about these disappearances. Combining this with her extensive knowledge of the texts in the Leicester family library—banned books included—she'd formulated a hypothesis.

Assuming the eyewitness account was accurate, she'd theorized that a certain group of individuals wanted to infiltrate the Kingdom of Claydale for the purpose of intelligence gathering and sabotage. And they had a good reason for doing so. As entities distinctly separate from what were broadly categorized as "people," they couldn't easily enter human cities. While they might've been able to establish bases by leveraging underworld connections despite their hostility toward people, they appeared unable to do so. Karla speculated that this inability had something to do with the disappearances.

Whatever their reason for the abductions, it had to be related to their struggles with their infiltration plans. The constant moving from place to place

while continuing to kidnap people suggested they'd yet to succeed at establishing a foothold. Furthermore, the fact that they needed to regularly carry out new abductions despite their frequent relocations indicated a clear pattern.

"Found you at last."

Late at night, inside a charcoal burner's hut in a certain village, Karla confronted one of the individuals as he attacked a villager. He bared his fangs at her the moment he became aware of her presence.

"You really are inhuman."

Though these beings resembled people, they were anything but. Such entities were often characterized by their need to prey on people for sustenance. While these entities' thought processes and behaviors were similar to those of people, their need to feed off of people made them incompatible with human society. Even the underworld shunned them.

But there was an even greater, more significant reason that they struggled to enter cities and infiltrate nations.

"I've never seen a demon before," Karla mused.

"You wretch!"

The term "demon" was a derogatory label for dark elves—sometimes also called the "evil race"—and an umbrella term for all those who opposed nations ruled by "people." While their existence was absent from the official history books, banned texts revealed that dark elves were the original inhabitants of this continent. They had been deemed "evil" and driven out by the Holy Church, an institution brought over from other continents by the people who had migrated here.

The dark elves hated the Holy Church and all nations that followed its teachings. Forced into exile, left with no choice but to survive in harsh lands, they even accepted other nonhuman creatures into their fold, granting them citizenship, to bolster their armies.

Before Karla stood a dark elf man, a member of the evil race, and an abominable nonhuman.

"Die!" the dark elf shouted with a heavy accent as he drew a weapon.

"Huh..."

### ▼ Nonhuman Man

Species: Dark Elfð (Rank 3)

Aether Points: 194/212

Health Points: 153/230

Overall Combat Power: 360x2 (720)

While his apparent ability suggested he was around Rank 3, the combat power revealed by Scan far exceeded that level. Dark elves were said to have strength equivalent to that of wood elves—yet this nonhuman man possessed power closer to Rank 4, so it seemed he was Rank 3 in name only.

Though Karla wouldn't hold back, she hadn't come here looking for a fight.

"Wait. I have a proposition for you."

The man silently froze in place. Not because he trusted her, but because he could instinctively sense Karla's strength. There was something about her—something beyond raw combat power—that made him feel that fighting her would be unwise. Of course, as a prideful nonhuman, he had no intention of losing to a mere human. Yet it was precisely his nonhuman senses, which were picking up on Karla's unsettling aura, that gave him pause.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Oh, you'll hear me out? Wonderful."

Karla had also briefly considered putting him in his place in a fight, and so she had to suppress her thinly veiled bloodlust and offer him a smile instead. The smile only made him more suspicious, but his caution was trumped by his innate sense of superiority as a nonhuman over what appeared to be a sickly child.

"I know you're trying to infiltrate this kingdom. It's not going well, is it?"

"What about it?"

Since they looked so different from humans, nonhumans like dark elves opted for small, elite infiltration squads. But they were also sworn enemies of human nations and needed to prey on people to survive. This made it difficult for them to associate with humans at all, and so they'd made virtually no progress over the past year.

"What if I told you that there's a place where no one will care if people go missing, filled with buildings nobody owns, that you could use as a base?"

"What do you want?" the man repeated.

If such a place did exist, it would save him and his group a good deal of trouble. A secure base would allow them to expand their operational range and finally take their first step toward their goals. But why would a human girl like this share such information? What could she hope to achieve?

Karla's lips curled into a chilling smile, her gaze dark. "It's simple, really. There are many people I want dead."

She told him of her wish to burn everything to ashes: everyone who had toyed with her life and fate, those who had condoned it, and those who had carried on without a care even as they'd obliviously played a part in it. To that end, she wanted to facilitate the entrance of demons—who also hated humans—into the country and exploit their strength for her own ends.

Her hatred and other emotions were palpable even to the man. He was stunned. But something in her rage and bitterness resonated with him, and her reasoning made sense.

"I understand," he replied. "But I can't make decisions."

"That's fine. Can you take me to someone who can?"

"We're all separated now, but I can help you meet some of us later."

"Please do, then. My name is Karla, by the way." Even knowing he was nonhuman, she extended her hand to shake his.

Despite the deep unease bubbling in the depths of his mind, the man hesitantly took it. "You can call me Musa."

Naturally, while Musa had agreed to hear Karla out, he remained reluctant to share too much. Still, from the nuances of their conversation, Karla could grasp that the demons' numbers were small—perhaps a dozen or so at most. From what she could gather, despite his combat prowess, Musa was one of the weaker ones of his group, which made Karla nod with satisfaction. If she was to burn down the royal capital, she needed them to be strong, after all. And if they were all nonhuman like Musa, their combat capabilities likely exceeded their nominal ranks. Her efforts to track down demons and contact them were sure to pay off.

"As a gesture of goodwill, I'll give you this," she said. In order to earn Musa's trust, Karla presented him with a gift that made his eyes widen.

It was an item his kind desperately needed if their infiltration attempts were to succeed. After all, when a spy infiltrated a foreign land, their first step was often to connect with the local underworld, at times even spending fortunes to obtain this one crucial thing.

"A map!" he exclaimed. "Is it real?!"

"Of course," Karla assured him. "You need one, don't you?"

Musa stared intently at the detailed map in Karla's hands. Over the past year, his group had been trying to get their hands on one, but they'd failed even to make contact with a branch of the Assassins' Guild rumored to accept nonhuman creatures. Because of this, and despite the risk, they'd resorted to splitting their already small numbers and searching individually in hopes of securing one.

Raiding remote villages and trade caravans had yielded no worthwhile maps, however—only crude sketches of the immediate vicinity. In contrast, the map Karla had brought was highly detailed, showing all main roads and major cities of the Kingdom of Claydale.

Musa reached out and took the map. With this, their plans could finally move forward. Just as he began to pull the map toward himself, however, Karla tugged hard, and the map tore along a crease, leaving each of them holding one half.

"I'll give you the other half once you've proven yourself useful," she told him. "For now, that half should suffice, right?"

Musa clicked his tongue in frustration. The half in his hand detailed the western region of the kingdom, where he and his fellows were currently hiding. It was, indeed, sufficient to locate a base of operations. However, Karla's half showed the royal capital and its surroundings—critical information for his group.

"Fine. You can meet others tomorrow. Does that work?"

"Yes, of course. I look forward to hearing good news."

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The following night, Karla came to the abandoned village Musa had directed her to. The dark elf confirmed she'd come alone, then stepped forward to greet her.

"You're here," he said.

As Karla surveyed the area with noticeable interest, Musa's expression darkened slightly. Judging by the state of the decaying buildings, the village had likely once housed around 300 settlers but had been abandoned for over a decade. While the exact reason for the abandonment was unclear, Karla figured even the demons hadn't been able to turn it into a base. Some of the homes showed signs of recent repairs, but the dark elves must've still deemed them unfit.

Musa might have felt judged by Karla's inquisitive gaze, perceiving it as a silent critique of their failed efforts. But she hadn't scanned her surroundings for any such trivial reason.

"Aren't your friends going to join us?" she asked.

There was a noticeable shift in the air around her, as though something unseen had stirred.

"So you noticed us, girl."

A dark elf man flanked by two others, one male and one female, revealed himself several meters behind Karla. From this man's presence alone, it was

obvious he was tremendously skilled. His two comrades seemed to be at around Musa's level, approximately Rank 3. The woman was visibly displeased —perhaps she was the one who had stirred earlier.

Musa and his Rank 3 fellows were on par with Karla—or slightly weaker, disregarding raw combat power. But this man was in an entirely different league from the others.

"Huh..."

#### ▼ Demon Man

Species: Dark Elfð (Rank 4)

Aether Points: 234/254

Health Points: 328/389

Overall Combat Power: 925x2 (1850)

If the Rank 3 dark elves, Musa included, were surveillance specialists, then it stood to reason that this particular man, with his high combat power, was a warrior. He seemed to have scanned Karla's combat power as well, gazing at her in slight condescension as he drew the halved map out of his pocket.

"I've examined this map. It seems genuine," he remarked, flippantly waving it at her. He, unlike Musa, was fluent in the common tongue.

His careless handling of such an important item suggested two things: He wanted to assert dominance over Karla, and he'd likely already made a copy of the map. "With this, we can easily find a base. Prey too. And if we had the other half, an assault on the capital would be feasible as well. But..."

The man glared down at Karla with the arrogance one might expect from a dark elf—no, from a nonhuman demon.

"Girl... Karla, was it? Musa told me of your goals. It seems you wish to use our strength? I find it arrogant that a human would suggest such a thing, but I'll overlook that for now. What exactly do you expect from us?"

Though they spoke of cooperation, neither side could truly fulfill the other's

desires. The demon likely thought that, since Karla had gone so far as to provide them with a map, they could get something even more beneficial from her. But for that to happen, they needed to align their expectations.

The Rank 4 demon's relentless attempts at intimidation weren't simply a tactic to gain the upper hand in negotiations but also a result of his inherent disdain for her as a human. Although it was not by their own will that demons had been deemed nonhuman, their strength had become one of their chief sources of pride. That pride led this man to subconsciously look down on Karla—which, paradoxically, made him willing to entertain her peculiar proposal.

"Before I share that, may I have your names?" Karla asked with a sweet smile.

The man frowned at her casual tone but, seeing no harm in her question, nodded magnanimously. "My name is Suleiman."

"Wasim," said the tall man next to him.

After a short pause, the woman added curtly, "Seda."

"Thank you," Karla said. "Those are wonderful names. Suleiman, are there others as powerful as you?"

"Worry not. All of us are warriors of the same clan. We may not be as strong as our chief, but we will not lose against humans."

Karla nodded thoughtfully in response. So there were multiple Rank 4 individuals among them. But since Suleiman had referred to their leader as their "chief" and placed the other warriors beneath this chief, it likely meant there was no one of Rank 5 among them. Although, she speculated, perhaps the chief was Rank 5.

"That's good to hear. I have no use for weaklings," Karla remarked, letting her true feelings slip out.

For a moment, Seda bristled with anger. Suleiman raised a hand to calm her, then gestured with his chin for Karla to continue.

"As for my own desire," Karla went on, "Well...it's a bit of a long story."

Karla was starting to feel she had reached her limit. Deciding that she'd maintained her facade for long enough, she cast aside her robes and grasped

the hem of her dress, moving as though dancing.

"I wanted to kill everyone. I wanted to burn everything. But I'm weak. On my own, I couldn't even kill a thousand people." Her sudden monologue came in a voice that carried the giddiness of a girl in love, in sharp contrast with her figure, which resembled a ghoul returned from the great beyond. "I was all by myself. No one understood me. But one day, as I stood there alone, a prince came to me."

Karla turned slightly, and her sparkling, fervent gaze made Suleiman and the others hold their breaths involuntarily.

"I wanted to leave a mountain of corpses and die atop it. But not at the hands of those who cast me aside, who saw me as unnecessary. No, only *she* understood me, and my true desire." Karla's demeanor began to shift, making the demons grow visibly uneasy. Confusion flickered across their faces as they began to sense something was wrong. "Wouldn't it be marvelous? Us two, killing each other on top of a heap of bodies. But no. I've been too soft on myself. I've grown complacent. It wouldn't be fair of me to expect her to kill me if I can't try to kill her in turn. She grows stronger by fighting against impossible odds, after all."

"What are you trying to say?" Suleiman couldn't help but interrupt. His face reflected both confusion and a creeping sense of dread in the face of the incomprehensible.

Karla had proposed cooperation and asked for theirs in turn. She'd admitted that her own power, as it stood, wasn't enough to achieve the results she wished for. She'd said she needed the demons and their strength. And the demons had thought they'd understood.

But their understanding had been flawed. The basis of their every assumption had been fundamentally wrong.

"I'm glad you're so powerful. Because, you see..."

Karla whirled around to face them, her features lighting up with a pure, innocent smile that made the demons shudder as though they were standing before an abomination.

"...By killing you, I can grow stronger too."

"Get back!" Suleiman shouted in response to the ominous malice emanating from Karla.

He leaped back. Musa and Wasim moved a moment later. Seda, however, couldn't immediately grasp the meaning of Karla's smile and words—and was engulfed in a massive blaze.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

"Seda!" Musa shouted. He hurriedly used water sorcery on her as she writhed in the flames.

"Stop the girl!" Suleiman commanded, sensing the surge in Karla's aether.

Wasim lunged as Suleiman flung a needle at the young sorceress. Karla didn't bother trying to dodge. Instead, she widened her eyes and took the hit from the thirty-centimeter-long magic iron needle directly as she unleashed her spell on the defenseless pair.

"Dig Volt."

Lightning pierced through Wasim mid-lunge and struck a now drenched Seda. The resulting flash evaporated the water in an instant. She shrieked in agony as the lightning coursed through her, using the water as a medium and incinerating her from the inside. Her charred body crumbled to ashes and scattered in the breeze.

"Ah. So not even a vampire can withstand that," Karla mused idly.

"You wretch!" Musa shouted, glaring at Karla with bulging eyes.

Though vampires—people who had turned into bloodsucking monsters—were typically outcasts, demons were said to accept even them, and other similar creatures, into their sparse ranks. Still, compared to ordinary dark elves, vampires were ostracized for their need to feed on humans. They were likely only marginally tolerated for their combat skills, which made them apt at killing the inhabitants of human nations. Thus, they needed to prove themselves useful in that regard. Otherwise, their small clans wouldn't have risked extermination by attempting highly dangerous foreign infiltration missions.

Likewise, the reason vampires had been trusted with such a critical mission probably had to do with their exceptional attributes and immortality. As long as they had aether remaining, their bodies could regenerate. This extraordinary regenerative ability allowed vampires to ignore their bodies' physical limitations, which granted them exceptional combat prowess.

Still, having bodies at all meant they weren't immune to death. They could be killed—through decapitation, the destruction of the aethercrystals in their hearts, or complete incineration.

"Was this your plan all along?!" Suleiman demanded.

Karla gave him a small smile. They'd been right to be wary of her. She'd had a single objective this entire time. "You will feed my growth."

Weak opponents made for poor nourishment. Growth required battles so harsh that a single lapse in focus meant certain death. Karla nonchalantly pulled the long needle from her stomach, laughing with delight even as her face turned paler still.

"Kill her!" Suleiman commanded angrily.

Their group had been persecuted even among fellow demons. They'd volunteered for this dangerous mission for the sake of their fellows. Their bond was strong, and the death of one of their own filled them with fury and hatred.

"Yes! Come at me with all you've got," Karla said excitedly.

"Silence!" Enraged by her taunts, Wasim, having already recovered from the damage caused by the lightning, extended his long claws and leaped at Karla again.

"Stone Shot," she chanted, sending a stone projectile flying toward him.

Though Wasim managed to swat it away, the impact shattered his arms; the sheer force of the spell was overpowering. But...

"It's over!"

Suleiman vanished instantly, reemerging from Karla's shadow and driving a magic iron needle directly into her chest. But Karla simply reached for him with a pale white hand. Instinctively, he backed away from her.

How could she still be moving after being stabbed through the chest? Why had he—supposedly immortal—instinctively pulled back? An indescribable sense of dread, an ominous feeling of impending doom, washed over him. Something he hadn't felt since becoming immortal.

"Failed again," Karla muttered quietly, still impaled by the needle.

Musa had recovered from the lightning-induced paralysis, and he, Wasim, and Suleiman surrounded Karla once more.

"You... Are you immortal?!"

"How could I be?" Karla asked. Slowly, she pulled the needle from her chest—and instead of gushing out, her blood stopped flowing from the wound almost immediately.

Suleiman realized Karla's entire body was faintly aglow and understood that she was using healing sorcery. But no matter how skilled a healer she was, she should've been dead. Her heart had been pierced. How was she alive?

"Raaah!" Wasim shouted, unable to contain himself.

This was merely a Rank 3 opponent. A child, no less. And a sorceress, unable to engage in close combat. Yet Karla's uncanny nature, bizarre fighting style, and effortless killing of Seda—a fellow vampire—had pushed Wasim to his mental limits. Once again, he extended his claws and lunged at her.

His shattered arms had already regenerated. If not for their immortality, both Wasim's and Musa's injuries would have been too severe to allow them to continue fighting. The same immortality that had saved Wasim also drove him to recklessly attack Karla. Still, he could no longer endure the incomprehensible fear she instilled in him—a fear his immortality couldn't protect him from.

"What?!"

Karla barely dodged Wasim's claws, wielded with physical capabilities far exceeding those of a human. Still, she couldn't completely avoid the hit, and blood spurted from her shoulders. She knit her brows in irritation.

"Raaah!"

Musa also charged at Karla, dagger in hand. As if driven by an unseen force,

Wasim continued to slash at the girl with his claws. But Karla managed to evade their relentless assaults by a hair's breadth, even if not perfectly. Though she avoided fatal injuries, her body and dress were now tattered and stained with blood.

Karla's health points were comparable to those of a child, so even a small amount of blood loss should have brought her to the brink of death. Yet somehow, through all of this, she remained standing.

Suleiman glared silently at the scene, observing intently. He wasn't a pure fighter-type—he could use sorcery as well. Due to his relatively low aether points, he generally reserved shadow sorcery for assassination-style combat. In this dire situation, he was biding his time, waiting for the perfect moment to cast a spell.

But his eyes showed a hint of confusion and anxiety as he watched Karla. Vampires didn't grow. While their bodies could regenerate and they were ageless, they couldn't mature or learn new skills. This made him afraid of Karla. She wasn't like them, bound to fights that disregarded life and death. Karla was changing, evolving, through battle. It terrified him.

"Haaah!" Musa shouted, swinging his dagger.

Karla, despite her vastly inferior speed, narrowly evaded the strike. At that moment, Suleiman's body shuddered, and his eyes widened with shock.

"Fall back!" he commanded, the cry doubling as the invocation for a Level 4 fire spell, Fire Breath.

Musa and Wasim, brought back from their berserk frenzy by the shout, instantly leaped back. A torrent of flames surged toward Karla, who stood motionless.

"I see..."

An Ice Javelin formed at Karla's fingertips. Through precise control of her immense aether, she directed the javelin toward the torrent of flames, and it sliced through them as though it were a sword.

"What?!"

Musa and Wasim gasped at the unbelievable sight. Suleiman, aware of its implications, stared in utter astonishment. This was why Suleiman—no, all the vampires had been afraid.

Vampires didn't grow. But humans did, and children especially grew at an extraordinary pace. Karla had thrown herself into this reckless battle to use them as fodder for her growth. Only now did the meaning of those words truly register.

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▼ Karla Leicester
Species: Human♀ (Rank 3)
Aether Points: 327/410
Health Points: 6/47
Strength: 7 \triangle +1
Endurance: 3
Agility: 11 \triangle +1
Dexterity: 8
[Martial Mastery Lv. 3] NEW!
[Light Magic Lv. 3]
[Shadow Magic Lv. 3]
[Earth Magic Lv. 3]
[Water Magic Lv. 3]
[Fire Magic Lv. 3]
[Wind Magic Lv. 3]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 3]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4] \triangle +1
[Intimidation Lv. 3]
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[Detection Lv. 3]

[Night Vision Lv. 1]

[Basic Scan]

Overall Combat Power: 511 (Sorcery Power: 766) \triangle +39
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"Ah... I understand now," Karla murmured. Her bloodied skin regenerated as though she were an immortal creature too.

Consumed by rage, Wasim lunged recklessly at her once more. "Raaaaaaaaaah!"

There was a significant gap in physical ability between humans and vampires, and yet Karla managed to dodge Wasim's attack with movements unlike anything she'd shown thus far. She cast Waterball, sweeping all three of her opponents away.

She had rapidly acquired the Martial Mastery skill and increased it to Level 3. Normally, such a skill grew over time and through training, but Karla had thrown herself into a near unwinnable battle and acquired it all at once. Against two opponents she was more or less evenly matched with and one who outmatched her entirely, a sorceress like Karla would've had no chance of survival if they got into melee range.

That had been precisely why Karla had considered this battle a worthwhile endeavor.

At the edge between life and death, one could see what was otherwise hidden. In a death-defying struggle that would've already killed an ordinary human ten times over, Karla had deliberately accepted blows she'd known she couldn't evade, managing to avoid critical damage to her vital organs. She possessed anatomical knowledge that she'd gleaned from forbidden texts, and had put it to practice using her attackers' bodies. Brushing against death, she'd dodged their attacks, healed herself with magic, and managed to acquire Martial Mastery under the most extreme of conditions.

With her newly acquired skill, Karla could now use Boost. This, in turn, had elevated her Aether Manipulation skill to Level 4, granting her the proficiency to

tear through even Suleiman's spell. Now dramatically strengthened by her improved Aether Manipulation, Karla used the resulting forty percent increase in thought speed to observe Musa, Wasim, and the still-stunned Suleiman. It was as if the world itself had changed. She could perceive reality on an entirely different level.

With her accelerated thinking, she could now anticipate her enemies' movements and thus respond with greater precision and unleash even more intricate spells.

Overcome with exhilaration, feeling as though she were on the cusp of grasping something more, Karla let out a loud laugh. "Ah ha ha ha!"

"Wasim! Fall back!" Musa shouted at the fallen Wasim, perhaps recalling Seda's fiery end after being hit with lightning when drenched from a water spell.

Vampires could endure lightning strikes that would be fatal to humans, but Wasim had already been struck once and wouldn't be able to withstand another hit.

Realizing this, Musa immediately leaped forward, spreading his arms to act as a shield for his fallen comrade. But when Karla raised her hand, unleashing a wave of cold air, a triumphant grin spread across his face. "That won't work on us!"

Vampires were weak to fire and lightning but resistant to cold—Musa was convinced he could withstand the ice spell and kill Karla afterward.

But behind him, Suleiman screamed in a panic, "Musa! Don't take that hit!"

Musa had wanted to help, but his wide-open stance to shield his ally had ended up inadvertently blocking Suleiman from attacking. If only Musa had left Wasim to die, they might have been able to defeat Karla.

If only Suleiman had left Musa to die, he might have killed Karla.

But neither could bring himself to act so ruthlessly. The moment Suleiman's desperate voice reached Musa's ears, Musa saw the sinister glint in Karla's eyes and realized his mistake.

"Ice Javelin."

Ice sorcery relied not on cold but hardness and speed to destroy its target. But Karla's Ice Javelin hadn't been crafted with a focus on destruction. Instead, she'd prioritized its freezing power, enhanced by her Aether Manipulation.

The water clinging to Musa's body froze solid and acted as a medium, allowing the ice to extend inward and freeze him entirely. With a single Stone Shot, Karla shattered his frozen form.

"Musa!" Suleiman screamed.

Karla giggled amid the sparkling fragments of ice drifting in the air. She chirped gleefully, "You still die when shattered, don't you?"

Suleiman's gaze hardened, and he abruptly declared, "Wasim. You need to die."

"Understood," Wasim replied without hesitation.

Karla was an overwhelming foe. Neither of the two remaining demons thought of her as an ordinary Rank 3 anymore. Still, as terrifying as she was, she wasn't a warrior worthy of their respect. Despite being just a girl, she'd demonstrated an abnormal mindset and an extraordinary rate of growth, and had killed two immortal vampires. Left unchecked, Karla would undoubtedly become a calamity for the demon race as a whole.

Suleiman and Wasim both understood that this was their last chance to defeat her. Here, now, while she was still at Rank 3.

"Raaah!" Wasim roared, lunging at Karla as Musa had, aiming to immobilize her. He knew this would lead him to the same fate as Musa's, given that Karla could now use Boost and had accelerated cognition.

"You die here, Karla!" Suleiman yelled as he unleashed his spell. He would not let Musa's and Seda's deaths be in vain. He and Wasim were both prepared to give their lives to take Karla down. "Fire Breath!"

Although Suleiman, as a vampire, had stopped growing, his precision with fire and shadow sorcery had been honed over countless years. Powerful or no, Karla was still Rank 3 and shouldn't have been able to counter the spell.

She shouldn't have been.

"So that's how you do it," she murmured quietly.

Suleiman had just inadvertently given Karla the final push she'd needed to grasp something new. His repeated demonstrations of meticulously honed sorcery had become a catalyst for her.

"Fire Breath," she chanted, unleashing a massive torrent of flames from her palm—her own Fire Breath spell, fueled by her immense aether.

Wasim, caught between the two opposing Fire Breaths, was instantly vaporized.

"Damn you!"

"Ah ha ha!"

The two flaming pillars collided to the sounds of Suleiman's enraged cry and Karla's gleeful laughter, sending sparks of aether flying everywhere.

## ▼ Karla Leicester

Species: Human $\$ (Rank 4  $\triangle$  +1)

Aether Points:  $327/440 \triangle +30$ 

Health Points: 2/47

Strength: 7

Endurance: 3

Agility: 11

Dexterity: 8

[Martial Mastery Lv. 3]

[Light Magic Lv. 3]

[Shadow Magic Lv. 3]

[Earth Magic Lv. 3]

[Water Magic Lv. 3]

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[Fire Magic Lv. 4] △ +1
[Wind Magic Lv. 3]
[Non-Elemental Magic Lv. 3]
[Practical Magic x6]
[Aether Manipulation Lv. 4]
[Intimidation Lv. 4] △ +1
[Detection Lv. 3]
[Night Vision Lv. 1]
[Basic Scan]
Overall Combat Power: 732 (Sorcery Power: 1098) △ +221
```

Unbelievable...

Suleiman's eyes reflected his incredulity as he took in Karla's rising combat power.

Neither he nor his comrades had chosen to become vampires, but thanks to their transformation, they possessed exceptional strength among the demon clans. Although their power had led to alienation even among fellow demons, this mission had been their chance to improve their standing by dealing a critical blow to a human nation.

But that hope, which had once seemed to be within reach of the powerful undead, had been shattered—by a lone growing human girl.

The clash between the stagnant vampire and Karla's ever-growing strength disrupted the balance of the flames. As one pillar of fire emerged victorious, Suleiman sorrowfully glanced at the night sky for the last time.

"Forgive me, Chief..."

The memory of the girl who had sent them on this mission flashed through Suleiman's mind for a moment before perishing with him in Karla's flames.

Blood trickled from Karla's lips, a result of unleashing such powerful aether.

As she stood among the ashes of the fallen demons, she felt nothing for their deaths. She brought a hand to her chest, gently, like a maiden in love, and gazed up at the moon.

"Finally, I can see you again... Oh, Alia..."

# The Princess Through the Eyes of a Maid

Chloe had been assigned her new role at the age of fifteen, right after graduating from the Sorcerers' Academy.

She'd been born into a family of knights directly in the service of House Melrose. Her brothers, as men, had always been destined to become knights serving the margravate. As a woman, however, Chloe had a different role. In most knightly families, daughters would marry other knights—but Chloe had been slated to become a knight of the Order of Shadows.

This arrangement suited Chloe just fine. Although the Kingdom of Claydale did employ female knights, their duties were typically limited to acting as escorts for high-ranking noblewomen or performing what amounted to ornamental roles at ceremonies. They rarely participated in battle, which made it nearly impossible to rise through the ranks by distinguishing themselves through their swordsmanship.

In a world where skills—etched into one's soul—determined one's abilities, gender differences meant little in combat. But the aristocracy still clung to traditionalist values, which often kept women constrained. For talented young women like Chloe, it was a frustrating reality. But as a knight of the Order of Shadows, her circumstances would be different.

Chloe's family had served House Melrose for generations, and she herself wasn't opposed to wielding a blade. With her innate physical strength and endurance, she'd earned high praise as a heavy knight.

Knights of the Order of Shadows were combat specialists, operating in secrecy to eliminate foes and gather crucial intel, both domestically and abroad. While many members of the Order performed noncombat roles, akin to civil service, the Order's knights were trusted elite operatives. Only those capable of tracking

down and defeating opponents were considered for the role, and these knights were comparable to royal guards in prestige.

For Chloe, who had only ever been to the southern regions of the country and the royal capital, the prospect of traveling across the land and engaging in espionage and combat was exciting, even if she felt a bit guilty for her enthusiasm. But her first mission after graduating from the Academy was far more significant than she as a rookie could've ever anticipated.

When she was summoned to the royal capital and received her assignment from her new direct superior, a woman named Sera Sildoren, Chloe was sure she'd misheard.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did you not hear me? Chloe, you are to serve as a personal maid to Her Highness, Princess Elena."

Unfortunately, Chloe had not misheard. Inexplicably, she'd been selected as a maid for the newly born Princess Elena, daughter of the second queen—a role far beyond what anyone would ordinarily expect for someone with no experience.

"Why was I chosen, if I may ask?" She understood that assignments from the Order were absolute, but still, she had to know.

Sera Sildoren, daughter of Baron Sildoren, was a Krus woman—a rarity among Claydale's nobility—whom Chloe admired. House Sildoren was known within the Melrose vassalage for their loyalty and combat prowess. Despite being only twenty, Sera had already reached Rank 4 and had been appointed chief of security for the queens' palace.

Few were aware of her combat abilities, but she was widely known for her beauty. Stories of her charms had spread well beyond the kingdom. Notably, a diplomat from the desert Empire of Kal'Faan, whom she'd encountered through her duties as the queen's maid, had fallen for her at first sight. He'd been so taken that he'd even proposed marriage—an event still fresh in Chloe's memory.

With someone like Sera present, Chloe couldn't understand why she, a rookie

from a lowly family of knights, had been chosen to serve as the princess's maid. Seasoned knights of the Order might've been more difficult to command, but surely someone of Sera's caliber could handle them.

Overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation and driven by her personal desire to see more of the kingdom, Chloe had pressed her superior for more information. But Sera's expression remained unchanged, her tone calm and direct.

"This stays between us. Her Majesty the Second Queen, Princess Elena's mother, is in a precarious state of mind. We have determined that your skills as a shield are essential to the princess's protection."

"What?" Chloe blurted out. Was she being tasked with guarding the princess at all times, even against potential abuse from the queen's tantrums? "But I've yet to prove myself. My family's standing is low..."

"That's not an issue. I've reviewed your Academy records and evaluations. Neither you nor your family are ideologically suspect. Based on this, I personally recommended you to Lord Melrose, and he approved."

"I see..." So they'd already done a background check. Chloe had no way out of this. In her passion to prove herself worthy of being a knight of the Order, she had inadvertently proven herself worthy of this assignment. "I understand. I will do my utmost to meet your expectations."

Though she was suddenly being thrust into the exclusive world of the royal court, Chloe found solace in the fact that Sera would be there to help her should she need it.

Sera gave a satisfied nod, then added, almost as an afterthought, "One more thing. I'll be retiring at the end of this month to marry. I'll be counting on you."

"What?!"

And so began Chloe's first-ever mission as a knight of the Order: serving as the princess's guardian maid within the royal palace. She hadn't been left completely on her own; a male member of the Order of Shadows had also been assigned as a steward to assist in caring for the princess. But it was unseemly for a man to handle the princess's personal needs, which left Chloe to shoulder

much of the responsibility on her own.

Though Chloe wasn't the princess's sole caretaker, the others serving as her attendants were women of status, such as second or third daughters of baronial and baronetical families. Even within the Order, young Chloe held the lowest rank. To make matters worse, the other attendants, fearful of the second queen's temper, performed only inconsequential tasks. Chloe was left alone to handle things such as tasting the princess's food for poison and changing the girl's diapers.

Still, Chloe persevered—because of how endearing Princess Elena was.

With her golden hair and blue eyes, Elena resembled a fairy in both beauty and demeanor. She grew deeply attached to Chloe, who was constantly by her side, caring for her. When Elena cried for her largely absent mother, Chloe would hold her close. Before long, Chloe came to think of Elena as her own little sister.

Things changed when Elena turned three. The second queen began subjecting the princess to harsh, borderline abusive "elite" education. Elena worked tirelessly, desperately seeking her mother's affection. But when the strain of obtaining four elemental affinities caused Elena's body to deteriorate, the second queen turned her back on her daughter.

After this, Elena's demeanor began to change. She'd always been a gifted child, and now her latent abilities blossomed, granting her the wisdom to even offer counsel to her own father, the king. Though watching Elena's transformation was bittersweet for Chloe, she resolved to protect the princess with her life. Chloe no longer saw herself as a knight loyal to the royal family but as one devoted solely to Elena.

Elena's demeanor changed yet again after she encountered a certain girl.

The king, seeing glimpses of Elena's potential as queen, had summoned Sera back to her post. Sera, in turn, had appointed a pink-haired girl as a trainee guardian maid to Elena during the princess's stay in Dandorl. This girl, much like Elena, was sensible beyond her years. After the girl rescued Elena from a kidnapping attempt, the princess matured further. When news came that the girl had gone missing in the north, during a mission for the Order of Shadows

after Graves's betrayal, Elena was deeply anguished, clinging to hope for the girl's survival.

To support Elena, Chloe worked tirelessly alongside Yosef, the steward who had been serving the princess since her birth, to improve her surroundings. After the attempted abduction, Chloe—who had been unable to accompany Elena into the dressing room due to her low social standing—rose to the position of head attendant and gained the authority to oversee the princess's retainers.

Years passed, and by the time Elena began to display brilliance as a royal that surpassed that of her elder brother, the crown prince, word of the pink-haired girl's survival reached their ears.

Elena, now tasked by royal decree to undertake a dungeon exploration, learned that the girl would take part in the mission as an adventurer assigned to protect her. At the news, the pervasive tension that had surrounded Elena for years seemed to dissipate entirely.

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"How do I look...?"

"Perfect, Your Highness."

In her daily life, Elena carried herself with the poise and demeanor of a princess. Though she was only eleven, her exceptional mind understood the weight of a royal's responsibility to lead and protect her people.

At the young age of four, Elena had given up on becoming a ruler due to her poor health. Though she judged her brother unfit to be king, she'd resolved to act as his shield during the expedition, ready to sacrifice herself if necessary to prevent chaos within the kingdom.

Over the last few days, however, that image of Elena as the ever-disciplined princess had been completely shattered.

"But perhaps something more practical would be better..."

She likely thought herself unchanged. In public, under the scrutiny of others, she kept the strict and dignified grace expected of a princess. But now that the

whirlwind of official duties she'd taken on in her brother's stead had eased, she'd begun to fidget like an excited girl preparing for an outing, fussing over her clothes and hair for the dungeon venture.

"Since Your Highness is a sorceress, I don't believe heavy armor is necessary," Chloe remarked as she patiently accompanied Elena, finding the princess's behavior during the preparations charming.

She knew why Elena was nervous. She'd be seeing the pink-haired girl, Alia, again. Though Elena had met many noble ladies, their interactions had been superficial, akin to those of butterflies flitting about a garden. They would speak out of familial duty, not friendship. Not truly.

Even Mikhail Melrose, with whom Elena could hold a conversation, constantly evaluated others as though measuring them with a ruler. Dealing with him was exhausting. Meanwhile, Clara Dandorl, the only girl with whom Elena had engaged before, had changed and could no longer be considered a friend.

Inevitably, most of Elena's interactions were with adults. And while the *princess* could converse with them, *Elena* couldn't be truly at ease. She did have Chloe and the steward Yosef, who had been with her since her birth, but they were still her servants, not her peers.

Alia, however, was different. Elena saw her as an equal, as a bird of a feather. The only person in the entire kingdom she felt that way about. Alia wasn't just a friend—after all, the chasm between a princess and an adventurer made a simple friendship impossible. Instead, their powerful bond transcended societal conventions.

Elena's current flustered state was nothing more than a young girl's anxiety over reuniting with someone she wanted to impress—Alia.

"Y-You're right. I won't be fighting on the front lines..." Elena conceded.

"Indeed, Your Highness. This robe may be understated, but it suits you perfectly," Chloe said.

In an enormous closet—larger than the average commoner's home—dozens of travel outfits, designed to make the princess not look like a princess, had been prepared in advance by the women of the Order of Shadows specifically

for this expedition. Elena couldn't afford to be in this state in front of other maids and attendants, so only Chloe was present. As the princess selected outfit after outfit, spreading them out, Chloe realized she'd have to clean everything up after, and her face tensed slightly.

"I want this one, and this one...oh, and this outfit too."

"Of course, Your Highness. I'll add them to the list."

Elena's indecision about clothing was unusual—the princess generally had no trouble using her knowledge and intuition to make quick choices. Chloe maintained a gentle smile, though a bead of sweat ran down her forehead.

Will all of this even fit?

Elena's bag was custom-made, with its storage space enhanced via sorcery. It had been commissioned by the king himself out of love for his daughter, crafted by the Sorcerers' Guild, and boasted the capacity of a full wagon. And still Chloe was seriously wondering whether she'd need to reduce the number of shields in her own expanded storage bag to make room for all of Elena's belongings.

Chloe's patience eventually paid off, and Elena finally decided on a set of outfits for the expedition. The handmaiden sighed in relief, but the princess turned around as if struck by a thought.

"What about my hair? Does this work, you think?"

"Any hairstyle suits you beautifully, Princess," Chloe replied.

Despite the challenges, Chloe didn't find the process bothersome or tedious. It was endearing to finally see Elena, who'd never allowed herself any moments of childishness, excited about her first peer.

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The dungeon expedition was a success. Elena had been healed of her physical frailty and decided to become queen for the sake of her people. Not only that, she'd secured Alia's cooperation.

Following a heartfelt moment that had felt like a new vow with Alia, Elena had bid the adventurer girl farewell with the dignity of a princess. But no sooner had she fallen into contemplative silence than she turned abruptly to Sera and

Chloe.

"Say, you two. Alia can certainly be my bodyguard, but...how do I arrange for her to attend the Academy with me?"

Faced with the unusual display of willfulness, Sera—now Elena's chief attendant—gave a wry, troubled smile. Chloe, meanwhile, struggled to hold back a laugh, her eyes narrowing affectionately as though looking at a beloved little sister.

Even if no one else does, I believe you and Alia are friends, Princess Elena, she thought.

### **Afterword**

Hello if we've never met! And if we have, welcome back! I'm Harunohi Biyori.

Volume 4 is finally here! This volume marks the final chapter of Act One. From the next volume onward, we'll be going into Act Two.

When working on the web version, I generally try to calculate enough content for each major arc so that there's enough material for a book. This time, however, I messed up, and because of that we ended up with a longer story that had to be split into two parts. Since the last volume wrapped up at a natural stopping point, this one had less content. To help make up for it, I added a longer exclusive side story about Karla that hadn't been included in the fast-paced web version.

Since Alia had to fight many battles to grow stronger, I didn't want Karla's growth to be about mere talent. That's why I wrote the story of how Karla rose to Rank 4. Of course, I also included plenty of foreshadowing for volume 5, so I'm very happy with how it turned out.

I can't wait to see the light novel's volume 4 in manga form, though it feels like the manga will be at volume 10 already by the time it's caught up! It's a tough job. I can't thank the manga artist, Wakasa Kobato-sensei, enough for the incredible work.

This volume focuses on the large-scale dungeon expedition. I know a few of you start reading from the afterword, so here's a brief explanation: The blessings gained from such explorations are so powerful that even the royal family wants them!

Even one without any combat skills could change the tides of war with the power of foresight. The ability to scan enemies in full detail would completely expose foreign spies. These two abilities alone could thwart foreign schemes and expand the kingdom! But the price for these gifts is often the very lives of those who receive them.

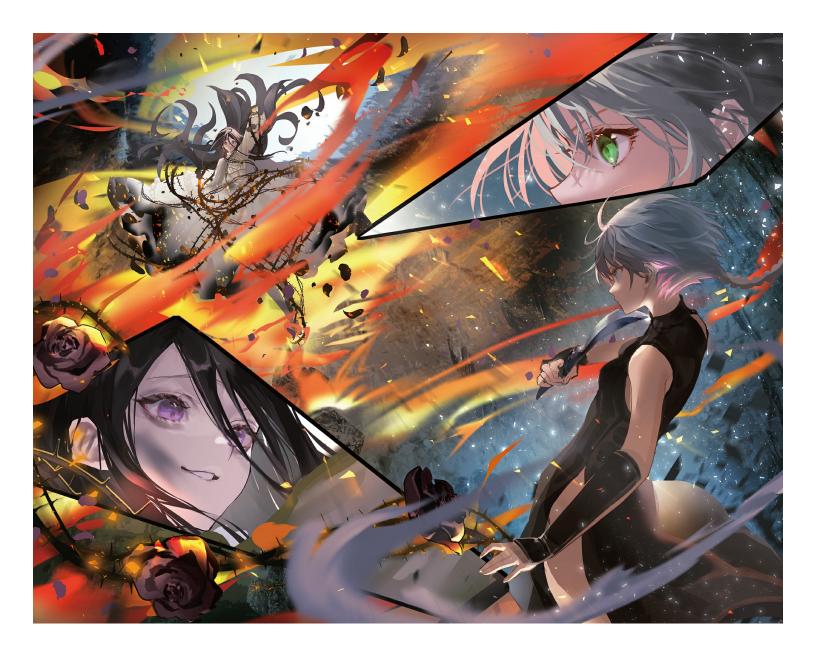
In an academy filled with those blessed by the dungeon, who will survive...?

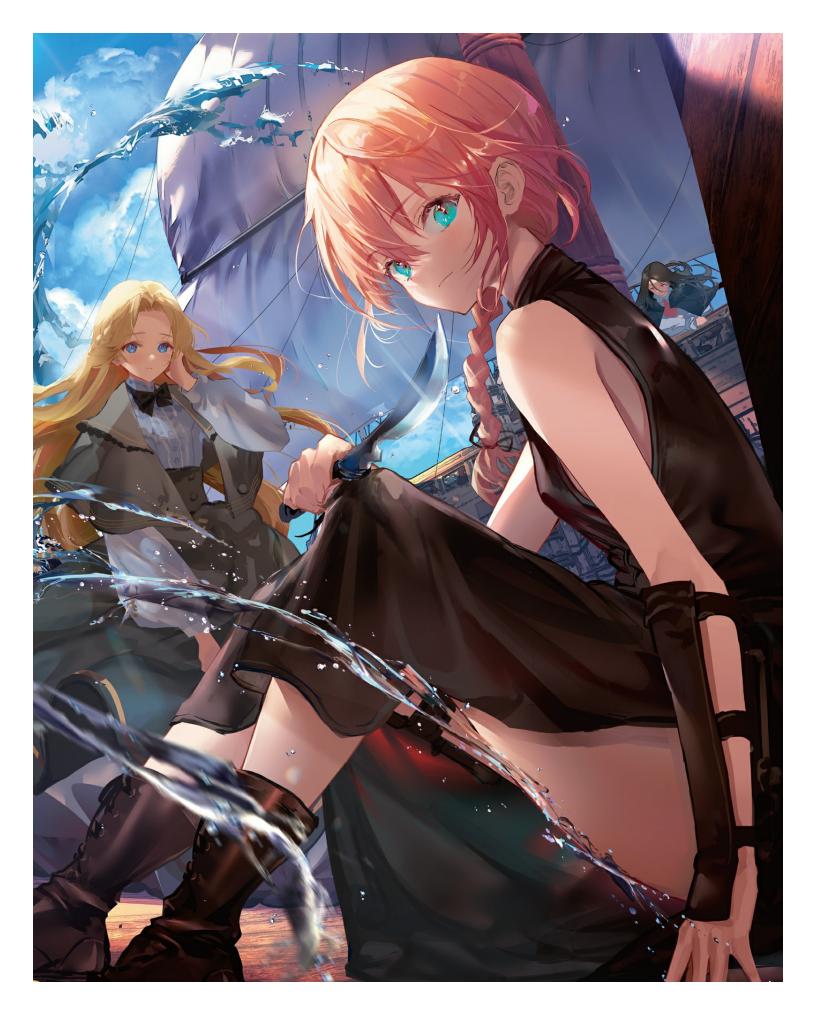
Act One was focused on wandering and exploration, and Act Two will finally cover the main storyline of the otome game. Having diverged greatly from the game's original premise, Alia will enter the Sorcerers' Academy as Princess Elena's bodyguard. What kind of life awaits her there, now that she's grown strong enough to single-handedly take down Rank 5 monsters? Check out the next volume and find out!

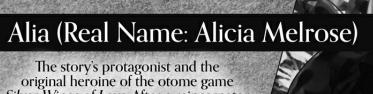
A light spoiler: I've received requests to expand on Alia's life at the academy, so I'm planning to add more on that as well.

Once again, Hitaki Yuu-sensei graced us with incredible illustrations. And once again, my cover ideas got shot down by my editor, lol.

See you in volume 5! To all readers, the bookstores selling this series, and everyone involved in its publication, my deepest thanks!







Ihe story's protagonist and the original heroine of the otome game Silver Wings of Love. After a reincarnator tried to kill her, she acquired special "knowledge." Doesn't hesitate to kill to survive.



### Elena

Princess of the Kingdom of Claydale. Though she's a villainess in the otome game, she sees Alia as a kindred spirit. Prideful and deeply values friendship.

### Clara

A reincarnator and the princess of the Margravate of Dandorl. One of the villainesses of the otome game. Wary of Alia.



### Karla

A noble lady hailing from the Countdom of Leicester. The worst of the villainesses from the otome game. She wants to kill Alia and be killed by her in turn.

# characters



### Feld

A friendly, highly skilled adventurer who taught a young Alia her very first battle skills.

# Viro

An adventurer and highly skilled scout. He took an interest in Alia and brought her to Sera, a knight of the Order of Shadows.



# Sera

A combat handmaiden and high-ranking knight of the Order of Shadows, operating under the Margravate of Melrose. Trained Alia in the ways of combat maids.



### Samantha

An exceptionally skilled sorceress and a founding member of the Rainbow Blade. It's uncertain just how senile she really is.



### Graves

Formerly a senior steward of the Order of Shadows, he's a fanatic who would do anything for the royal family's stability. Current whereabouts unknown.







A spirit residing in the dungeon located within the Duchy of Hoodale. It appeared before Alia in the form of a beautiful young woman. The spirit grants gifts to humans who reach its dwelling.

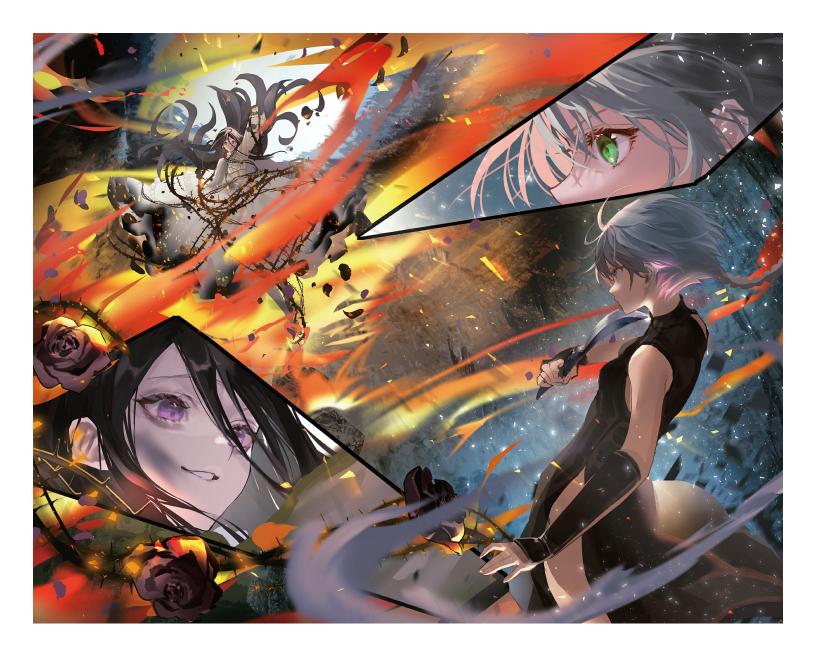
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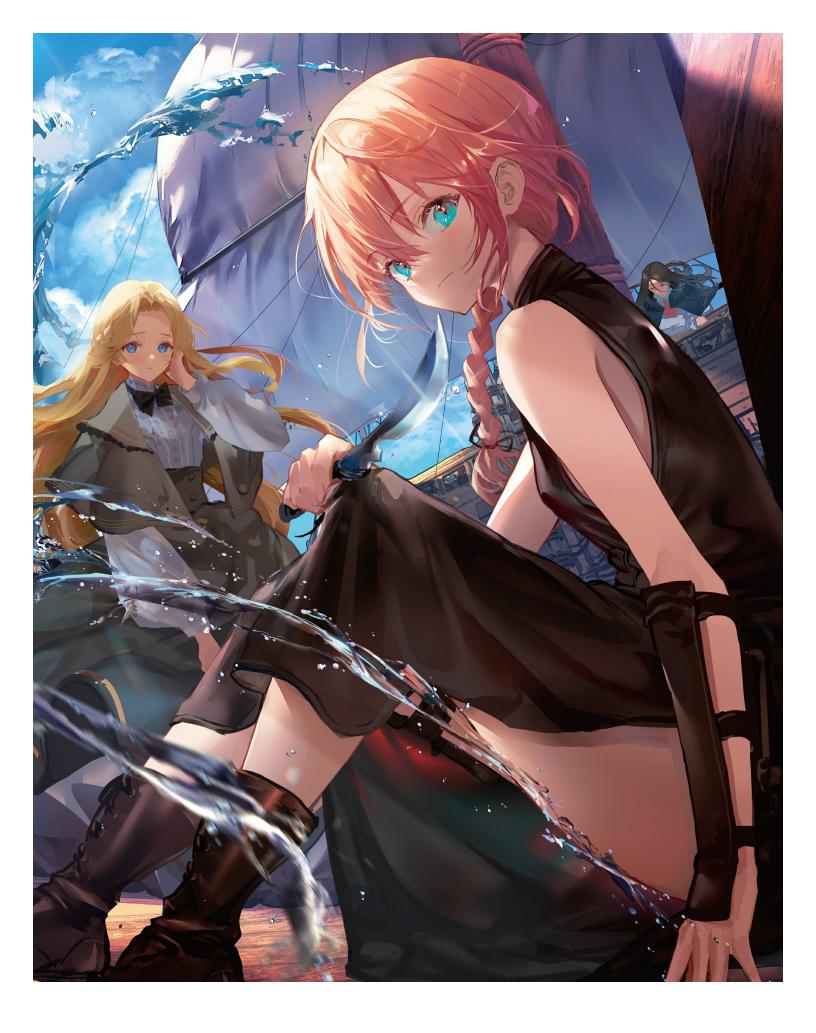
## Character Data Compilation

# Cere'zhula



Alia's mentor in the art of sorcery. A demoness/dark elf. During her time fighting for the demonic army, she was known as the Fiend. Has four elemental affinities.







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The Otome Heroine's Fight for Survival: Volume 4

by Harunohi Biyori

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