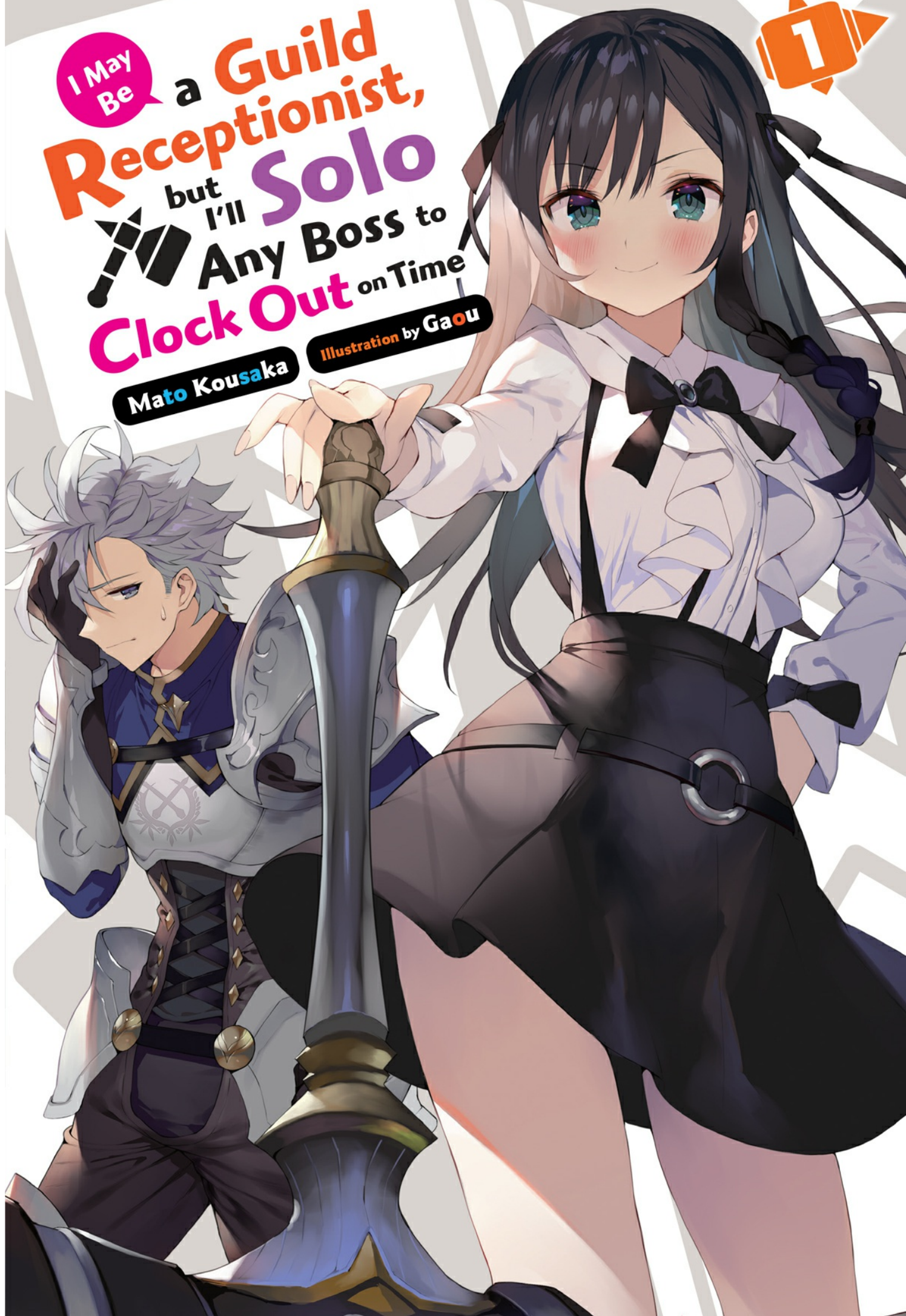


I May Be a **Guild**
Receptionist,
but I'll **Solo**

 **Any Boss to**
Clock Out on Time

Mato Kousaka

Illustration by Gaou



I May Be a **Guild**
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By **Mato Kousaka**
Illustration by **Gaou**

I May Be a **Guild Receptionist,** but I'll **Solo** Any Boss to **Clock Out** on Time

Characters



CHAR-
ACTER 1

**Alina
Clover**

A girl working her dream job as a receptionist. Completely uninterested in aiming high, she's satisfied with the stability and security of her current career. But if this exhausting overtime keeps up, her hidden side might show...



CHAR-
ACTER 2

**The
Executioner**

A powerful adventurer who is the subject of many rumors. When adventurers get stuck on a dungeon, they'll swoop in, solo the boss, and leave without a word. Some say they have to be a total hottie, but it's not even clear if they exist.



CHAR-
ACTER 3

**Jade
Scrade**

The leader and tank of Silver Sword, the strongest party in the guild. He's a good-looking and sincere man of few words, which has earned him a lot of fans. After learning Alina's secret, he does everything he can to get her to join his party, but...



CHAR-
ACTER 4

**Lululee
Ashford**

Silver Sword's healer. Despite her youthful appearance, she's a member of the strongest party in the guild. Possesses rare skills and healing magic.



CHAR-
ACTER 5

**Lowe
Losblender**

Silver Sword's ranged attacker. The life of his party. As a black mage, he specializes in powerful attack magic.





I May Be a Guild Receptionist,
but I'll Solo Any Boss to
Clock Out on Time



Mato Kousaka

Illustration by **Gaou**


NEW YORK

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Mato Kousaka

Translation by Jennifer Ward

Cover art by Gaou

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GUILD NO UKETSUKEJO DESUGA,

ZANGYO WA IYANANODE BOSS O SOLO TOBATSUSHIYO TO OMOIMASU Vol.1

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[36](#)

[37](#)

[38](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

1

Receptionist Alina Clover liked things peaceful.

She didn't want to live in a big mansion. She wasn't interested in getting rich or marrying into money. She didn't need a life full of drama or ups and downs, either. It was enough for her to make a decent living, enjoy her time, and lead a leisurely day-to-day existence.

That was why she'd chosen to work as a receptionist. Her job was to send adventurers off into dangerous dungeons. On top of being stable and secure, it was a public sector position, so she wouldn't ever need to worry about being fired or losing her salary.

Yes, Alina had assumed she would be guaranteed a peaceful life the moment she became a receptionist.

Dressed up in a cute receptionist's uniform, she would take it easy at the quest counter while the adventurers were risking their lives in dangerous dungeons day in and day out. She'd take her time with her office work and head home once the workday was over...

...or so she'd thought.

Right up until the moment she actually started working.

"Next, please!!" Alina half yelled in an aggressive tone that was about a hundred times away from the ideal.

Her long black hair was in disarray. Her bangs were askew, but she didn't even have the time to fix them as she glared menacingly at the adventurers. She didn't look anything like a refined receptionist taking her time on her clerical duties.

"Next!! Please!!" Alina's yell swept over the heads of the jostling adventurers.

Mind you, she wasn't angry in the slightest. Receptionists took quest orders from adventurers with a smile before kindly sending them on their way, so she

would never be like that—however, now was not the time to be so heedlessly optimistic. She needed to raise her voice, or she wouldn't get anywhere with processing.

There were a number of quest offices in the great city of Iffole, and Iffole Counter was the biggest of them. Right now, the place was so packed with adventurers that taking even a single step forward was a struggle. It was as turbulent as a battlefield.

But in this horribly crowded office building, the sole adventurer who responded to Alina's call sidled up to the reception window like nothing was out of the ordinary.

"So it's finally my turn."

Heavy iron armor rattling like he was trying to show it off, the large warrior approached. A slickly shining, well-used black battle-ax sat on his back, advertising that he was a seasoned adventurer.

"Hey, is that...?"

"Isn't that Ganz the Raging Blade...?!"

"Whoa! He's a guild elite! This is the first time I've seen him!"

Suddenly, murmurs rippled through the crowd of adventurers as they realized who he was.

The man they'd called Ganz hid his face with an iron helmet, but the black-lacquered battle-ax he carried gave away his identity to Alina. A recognizable magic sigil in the shape of a sun was carved on his battle-ax, making it flicker with a pale light. Items of its caliber could not be created with modern smithing techniques. It was clearly a cut above the mass-produced weapons that were in general circulation.



His ax was one of the highest ranked weapons around: a relic arma. Of course, no ordinary adventurer could carry that thing. Only one who had braved a dangerous dungeon and defeated deadly monsters would possess such a unique treasure.

But Alina didn't need an attention-grabbing item to recognize him. Being a receptionist, she was in contact with adventurers every day. She couldn't have forgotten what the most famous of them looked like if she tried.

Stop dragging your butt and just get over heeeeeeeere!

That was all Alina thought when she laid eyes on him, cursing her poor luck all the while. There were four other reception windows aside from hers. *Of all the times this old braggart could come to my window, why did it have to be when I'm so damn busy?*

Some nasty complaints momentarily crossed her mind, but she didn't let them get past her plastered-on business smile. She just swished her unkempt hair and said in a slightly higher tone of voice, "Welcome. Please choose the quest you would like to accept."

"Defeating the second-floor boss in the Belfla Underground Ruins, Hellflame Dragon. Thanks."

The adventurers were all raptly watching Ganz, *ooing* as they started chattering loudly to one another.

"The guild's elite party is finally headed out to defeat the boss in the Underground Ruins!"

"So they're bringing out the big names to clear the dungeon...!"

"There's nothing that Raging Blade Ganz can't cut down!"

Ganz listened in satisfaction for a while, puffing out his chest so far his nose was pointed up to the ceiling. On his armor flashed a crest of two swords crossing. That was the insignia of the Silver Sword, an elite party selected from a handful of the most powerful adventurers.

"Seems like people are expecting great things from me. Guess it makes sense with how long it's taking to clear this dungeon. Damn right you'd turn to Silver

Sword.”

“Umm, yes, of course.” Alina casually ignored him as she quickly prepared the quest form. Then, soft enough that Ganz couldn’t hear, she muttered, “It’s taking them *forever* to get through this dungeon!”

“Huh?”

“Oh no, it’s nothing. Well then, participating in a four-member party requires a second-class license card while going solo requires a first-class license card. Please present your card and sign the quest form.” Alina rattled off the usual instructions as fast as a tongue twister and thrust the quest form at him. She just wanted him to fill it out already.

But beneath his iron helmet, Ganz simply snorted with pride, making no move to pick up the feather pen. “I’m from Silver Sword. If you’re a receptionist here, shouldn’t you know my class without having to bother checking my license?”

So annooooooying!

“Of course, I know. But no matter what your class is, that doesn’t change the fact that adventurers always deal with danger”—it was taking some serious restraint for Alina to keep her smile on—“and it’s our job as receptionists to prevent them from needlessly risking their lives by confirming whether their skills are appropriate for the dungeons they enter. Asking you to present your license is how we keep everyone safe.”

Alina obviously knew Ganz’s rank. The relic arma battle-ax clearly indicated who he was.

Relic arma were creations of the ancients, a people who were said to have flourished on this continent before meeting destruction in a single night. Constructed with the ancients’ incredible technology, this class of weapon outclassed their modern counterparts in both attack power and durability.

Ganz was Silver Sword’s frontline attacker. He’d used his relic arma to slice countless bosses to pieces, just as his nickname—the Raging Blade—implied. He also had a second-class adventurer license.

But the regulations stipulated that she couldn’t assign quests to those who had not presented their license.

“...I see. So then...”

It seemed that Ganz was mildly satisfied with Alina’s thorough and kind explanation, as he stripped off his helmet and set it on the counter with a *thunk*. This revealed a man with deep-set features and a thick beard. “How about this?”

“Please present your license.”

“...I am Gan—”

“Please present your license.”

“...”

“Please present your license.”

She said it three times for good measure. Ganz finally gave in and pulled out his license. She didn’t care whether he was an elite or if he had a fancy nickname. Alina had to get through all the many adventurers who were waiting to receive their quests.

“...Hmph, a newbie... Guess I have to.”

Alina passed her gaze over the silver card that he placed on the counter. “Thank you for presenting your license. Well then, until level two with a party. If this is all correct, then please sign the quest form.”

She shoved the feather pen and the quest form at Ganz before he could protest. Ganz seemed reluctant as he signed the quest form.

“Have a nice adventure!” Accepting the form he’d filled out, Alina flashed Ganz her plastered-on business smile and tossed the form into the box at her side. There was actually still more to fill in, but after looking at the long and winding line behind him, she decided there was no time for that.

“Sorry for the wait! Next, please!”

2

Iffole Counter was so quiet late that night, it was as if the wild bustle of the afternoon had never been.

Business hours had long ended, but a lonely light still shone inside the guild office.

The space held row after row of desks, each of them piled with documents. And behind one desk, where the papers were stacked particularly high, sat Alina, her face buried into the table.

“Ahhh...I’m so tiiired...,” she said weakly, adding the quest forms she had finished processing to the pile.

Alina’s reception duties were over for the day, but she was still wearing the uniform the guild had provided her. Since no one else was around, she’d taken off her short boots, tied up her black hair, and pinned back her bangs to expose her forehead. At her side was a potion that would be familiar to adventurers. Though this restorative medicine was mainly used for treating injuries, it was also believed to have surprisingly stimulating effects.

The other receptionists had long since gone, but Alina was still at the office, dealing with a massive amount of overtime work. Yes, this was the trial that fell on the shoulders of those who couldn’t finish during the normal hours of operation—working past business hours on overtime.

Alina had gone into “serious mode” so that she could somehow get home as quickly as possible, but she was still staring at a tall pile of documents that she had to process.

“I wanna go home...,” she muttered amid the silence.

She wanted to leave. To go home. To stay there and never come out—the sorrowful cries of her heart gushed out one after another, but she firmly restrained them. She couldn’t call it a day until she was done making the totals.

In addition to taking care of the postprocessing for the documents she had filled out at her reception window that afternoon, Alina still also needed to total the number of quests made that day at Iffole Counter.

Alina had started working as a receptionist when she was fifteen, and this was her third year in the field. She hadn't been here as long as her coworkers, which was why they'd foisted the responsibility of totaling onto her. When the office was busy during the afternoon like it had been today, this basically guaranteed overtime. The older receptionists hated the task and shoved it off on one another, leading to Alina winding up with it.

"..."

But I hate it, too. She sniffled at the unfairness of the world. Knocking back the potion, a magic drink that imbued people with energy, she faced the ungodly, voluminous mountain of unprocessed documents. With no hope or light in sight, the heartless height of the pile was enough to drive her to despair.

"There's no end to it..."

No matter how many potions she tried to trick herself with, she couldn't overcome the limits of her human body. The many documents she hadn't been able to process with overtime alone these past few days hadn't decreased in volume at all; in fact, they just kept piling up and up. Clearly, she wasn't keeping up with processing.

"Everything...everything is that boss monster's fault..." Alina muttered like a spell as she flipped over a single quest form that she'd placed aside.

It was the one she'd processed for Ganz that afternoon—the defeat of the floor boss in the deepest level of the Belfla Underground Ruins, the Hellflame Dragon. It was fair to say that the creature was the source of her overtime.

No one had defeated it yet, so progress through the Underground Ruins was at a standstill. Once all the bosses in a dungeon were defeated, the monsters in it would leave, but since no one had bested the dragon, the monsters in the Belfla Underground Ruins just kept coming.

And where there were monsters, there were adventurers. That was because the guild put out reward money for defeating monsters—which was how

adventurers made a living.

When a dungeon was on the verge of being cleared, adventurers would take all the quests they could while it was still possible to make money. The result was the picture of hell: The quest office would be packed like it had been that afternoon, and Alina would be overwhelmed by a large volume of extra work come nightfall.

Still, usually these periods of crunch didn't last for more than a few days—but because everyone was having so much trouble with the Hellflame Dragon this time, her hellish turmoil had persisted for nearly a month.

“Everything...”

Alina bit her tongue.

Before the adventurers' progress through the Belfla Underground Ruins had stalled, Alina had indeed been enjoying the best a receptionist's uneventful life had to offer. She would complete a certain amount of work and go home on time, get good sleep at home to recover from exhaustion, and then set out for another hard day's work the next morning.

But ever since the Hellflame Dragon created this overtime, her life had become a bleak routine of nothing but eating, sleeping, and working; eating, sleeping, and working. Even if she decided to work on her days off, she wouldn't be free of this hell as long as the dungeon boss was around.

After she'd finally gotten a stable career as a receptionist, this endless overtime was threatening to upend the peaceful lifestyle she wanted more than anything.

“...This sucks...”

Alina understood that the work she was overburdened with wasn't the product of anyone's deliberate malice.

The boss, the monsters, and the adventurers who surged in to slay them were all just desperately trying to live their lives.

On top of that, the dungeons the ancients had left in this land long ago were packed with not only expensive relics but also the valuable knowledge and

unknown technology of the ancients. The exploits of adventurers would eventually come back to the residents of Iffole and enrich their lives.

The truth was that the metropolis Iffole had been built purely on the strength of its adventurers. As a resident of the city, Alina had to be grateful that they traversed into hostile dungeons day after day.

And yet. That was all just a nice-sounding front. At the end of the day, no matter how much the city developed, it wouldn't reduce Alina's overtime.

"Agh...I can't take it anymore. I'm at my limit," she said in a low voice before she slowly brought out a new quest form.

Alina had been buckling down, urging herself to just hang on until the Underground Ruins were cleared.

Her overtime was really only temporary. It was like a sudden storm. All the adventurers had to do was clear the dungeon; then like the clouds parting after the rain, her stable and uneventful days as a receptionist would return. Alina had been clenching her teeth this whole time in the hopes that she could just work through the crunch, wait for it to pass.

But her overtime hell had dragged on so long. Too long. She was at her limit.

"They're all so useless! Incompetent adventurers who can't even defeat a single boss...!"

Then she pulled out the card that she'd been hiding in the pocket of her uniform. This thick card, shining gold, identified the holder as a first-class adventurer—something a receptionist shouldn't have been carrying.

This first-class license, which the guild granted to only a fraction of its most capable members, was Alina's last resort for getting rid of her overtime. She didn't care what sort of future awaited her after using this card, so long as it would make her current workload vanish.

Still enraged, Alina filled in the quest form. "If this thing—if this thing just disappeared...!"

Solo defeat of the second-floor boss of the Belfla Underground Ruins, the Hellflame Dragon.

Suddenly, the light that fatigue had stolen from her eyes returned. No—the shine of her jade-green eyes became even sharper, showing hints of murderous intent, like that of a predator making to finish its prey.

“I swear I’ll leave work on time...!”

3

Once, the ancients flourished here on the continent of Helcacia, passing their days in peace and abundance.

Blessed by Dia, the god that had been revered on Helcacia since ancient times, they constructed an unimaginably high-level society using advanced technology and knowledge. They named it Diania after their deity.

But one night, they suddenly vanished from the continent, meeting an abrupt end. With the ancients gone, the monster population soared, completely transforming the peaceful and bountiful Diania into a dangerous region that none dared enter.

Two hundred years ago, a dauntless band of individuals dared to set foot on the continent, and they began its conquest. Yes, they fought with monsters, entered dungeons, and once again built human villages. Those were the adventurers.

“But c’mon! How can they call themselves adventurers? They’re just a bunch of riffraff who can’t even defeat a single boss...!”

In the east of Helcacia, deep inside the Belfla forest, there was an open hole that led to some subterranean ruins: the Belfla Underground Ruins.

It was an A-class dungeon, which the guild recommended be explored in a party of four, but Alina was strolling around its deepest level all alone, complaining to herself all the while. “They have no idea...no idea how much suffering this overtime has caused me...!”

Dungeons created by the ancients generated ether, which heightened magical power. Monsters gathered in search of ether, causing these valuable sources of knowledge from the ancients to wind up as dens for dangerous creatures.

“...Overtime sucks so bad...”

Alina was headed for the deepest area of that floor. She occasionally peeked

out down a side route to see a candelabra that was still glowing after two hundred years, or a collapsed decoration that contained a mysteriously glowing rock. These were all valuable relics made from the ancients' advanced technology. If she took them home, she could exchange them for a ton of cash—but instead she strode briskly onward, not even sparing a glance at the pile of treasures.

“...Overtime sucks so bad...”

She was not dressed in her usual receptionist outfit. Instead, she wore a cloak with a large hood that completely covered her face. Additionally, she had nothing in the way of weapons or tools to protect herself. If another adventurer had seen her, they would have panicked and stopped her.

But there was no sign of anyone but Alina here.

In the depths of the strata, where the ether was thickest—otherwise known as the “boss room”—sat the boss's throne. The monsters would compete for this territory until one beat out its weaker competitors; then the victor would reign as the boss, and the other monsters wouldn't come near. On a similar note, adventurers who lacked confidence in their abilities would also steer clear of the boss room.

“Overtime.”

Suddenly, Alina came to a halt. A large door had appeared before her. The thick aura of ether oozed out from behind it. The moment she opened it, she was hit by a wave of suffocatingly hot air.

Past the entrance was a broad, circular open area.

Once, there must have been grand ceremonies held here. But now the place was inhabited by a great fire dragon, roaring and thrashing around.

It was the floor boss of the deepest strata—the Hellflame Dragon.

“Crap, it's strong...! Can we even get near this thing?!”

“Its scales repel ice magic, too...!”

A single party was struggling against the rampaging fire dragon. Their armor was engraved with matching crests of two swords crossed—they were

members of Silver Sword. Among them was Ganz the Raging Blade, who had taken on this quest.

“My battle-ax isn’t working...”

Ganz now showed none of the spirit he’d had when he’d taken on the quest—he was looking up at the floor boss, dazed. The weapon he was so proud of, the relic arma, was greatly damaged, and there was not a single wound on the scales of the raging fire dragon to show for it.

“Don’t give up, Ganz! Pull yourself together!” The tank of the party, a young man, aggressively encouraged him while raising his giant shield to protect him. Despite his encouragement, the situation seemed grim for them, and a scowl formed on the tank’s face as he looked at the Hellflame Dragon. “It’s so strong, even relic arma won’t work... This thing must have eaten a relic...!”

Monsters could grow in power by absorbing more ether of increasing density, but very rarely, one would ingest a relic by accident. The intense power of the relic would typically overwhelm the creature who ingested it, but every now and then, a monster would resist it, gaining a toughened body and enhanced magical power. This meant they could get much stronger by absorbing relics than from ether alone.

Even knowing that, the dragon’s power had come as such a shock to Ganz that he lost not only his will to fight, but his confidence as well. “I-it’s no use, I can’t...” He groaned. It seemed like their frontline attacker, indispensable for defeating a boss, was beyond recovery.

Seeing that, the tank hesitated for an instant before he quickly made a tough call. “...This isn’t looking good. Let’s withdraw for now— Wait, who are you?!”

Cutting past the elite party as they made to withdraw, Alina headed straight for the Hellflame Dragon.

The tank blanched when he laid eyes on her. “H-hey, what are you doing?! Without any kind of armor, you’ll get burnt to a—”

“Skill Activate: *Dia Break*.”

Alina muttered, cutting off his attempt at restraint. Suddenly, a white magical sigil formed beneath her feet as she headed to the fire dragon, and a

mysterious white light enveloped her cloak. She thrust her palm out and spread her fingers, and a giant war hammer appeared out of thin air.

“A skill?!”

“Hey wait, what’s with that skill?! I’ve never seen anyone create a weapon—”

With the voices of the shocked elites at her back, Alina took hold of the war hammer and went into a combat stance.

It was a massive weapon as tall as Alina herself. Fine silverwork that could only be produced with advanced technology decorated the hammer of the weapon, and white light ran across its surface. Opposite the massive hammer was a sharp, pointed pickax, making the weapon even more lethal.

You clearly couldn’t find it on the open market.

“So it’s you...you damn miserable dragon...” Alina approached the Hellflame Dragon, grumbling to herself.

You’d think the war hammer would take quite a lot of strength to lift, but she swung it up with ease, slinging it over her shoulder. The weapon was completely unsuited to someone as small as her.

The Hellflame Dragon must have noticed her murderous aura, as it turned toward her. Its gaping maw, filled with sharp fangs, was capable of swallowing Alina whole. Scorching-hot flames licked at the edges of its mouth, and its roar alone could have bowled a man over. But Alina didn’t so much as flinch before her massive foe.

Graaaaawr!

Howling powerfully enough to make the ceremonial arena tremble, the Hellflame Dragon opened its mouth wide. It was preparing a breath attack that would burn everything to a crisp: Hellflame.

“H-hey, you gotta dodge that! Do you have a death wish?!”

“This is all...’cause you won’t go down...!” Her eyes glinting, Alina looked up for the first time. “...That’s why my overtime hell never ends!”

The fire dragon unleashed its breath. As the Silver Sword party scattered in a panic, Alina bounded toward the creature instead.

She kicked off hard enough to crack the stone floor of the ceremonial arena. Her inhuman leg strength rocketed her slight frame nearly to the ceiling, allowing her to avoid the raging blast of flames.

And then she swung her giant war hammer overhead.

“Diiiiiaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!”

Giving a yell filled with intense resentment toward the monster that had caused her endless overtime, Alina smashed her weapon into the Hellflame Dragon’s face.

A dull, sickening *ba-wack* resounded, making the whole arena shudder. The tremendous blow shattered scales that had repelled even swords and sent the massive frame of the fire dragon flying. The monster slammed into the wall, where it made a large dent before sliding down to the floor and spasming there for a while.

In the now-hushed arena, three dumbfounded voices muttered, “““..... Huh?”””

Having been unable to get in a single effective hit on the Hellflame Dragon this whole time, the party now stood with their mouths hanging open, speechless at the unbelievable sight.

It hadn’t been just any party fighting the Hellflame Dragon. These were members of the Silver Sword, an elite group made up of the fiercest fighters. There was no way that some puny little no-name adventurer would be able to send this boss flying in one hit when a group of their power had failed to put up a fight against it.

But Alina ignored everyone standing there frozen in shock, approaching the Hellflame Dragon to mercilessly bring down her war hammer on the spasming monster once again.

“It’s because of you! That my overtime won’t end!” A cry of anger rose from her mouth, hidden by her hood. Like a toy, the giant fire dragon bounced right and left with each stomach-churning smack. “I’m sick! Of! Overtime!”

She brought the war hammer down again, breaking off one of the Hellflame Dragon’s horns. No—based on how the horn barely held its original shape, it

would be more accurate to say she had pulverized it.

“I want to go home on time already! You”—battering her helpless foe, Alina crouched low like she was going to end it, winding up to swing the war hammer overhead. The light of her skill shone particularly bright from her weapon —“piece of craaaaap!!!”

Her finishing blow punched through the boss’s stomach. The Hellflame Dragon’s head flung backward as it let out an agonized, dying cry. Eventually, its head slumped listlessly, the light fading from its eyes, before it turned to fine dust with a flash and dispersed into the air.

Silence.

Everyone there was dumbstruck. Suddenly, a heavy clunking sound broke the hush of the ceremonial arena. A red crystal was lying where the Hellflame Dragon had disappeared. That red orb, containing a special magical sigil in the shape of a sun, was the relic the creature had mistakenly ingested.

The item was valuable, but nobody cared about it. All eyes were focused on the small adventurer whose face was hidden by a hood.

Having witnessed an almost inhuman feat of strength, they were left wondering just what they had been struggling so much for, and all they could do was stand there.

Jade Scrade, the tank of Silver Sword, continued to hold his favorite relic arma, his greatshield, at the ready as he stared in a daze at the spectacle before him.

The small-statured adventurer keeping their face hidden by a cloak was neither taking pride in the incredible feat of having beaten down the Hellflame Dragon without a contest, nor showing interest in the relic lying there. They just sniffed like they were unsatisfied and waved an arm. The war hammer Jade had never seen before, the one that had appeared from thin air, disappeared without a sound.

He couldn’t comprehend anything that had just happened.

“...You’ve got to be...kidding me...,” he finally wrung out.

Since Jade was a tank, he was always on the front lines of dungeon dives. He not only took the enemies' attacks on himself to protect his allies, but also acted as their leader, giving them orders in combat. He had fought with many adept fighters, and he thought he had a better idea of their strength than anyone. But he'd never seen the kind of incredible power this adventurer had exhibited before.

"The...the Executioner...", Ganz muttered in the silence.

"...Executioner?"

"You don't know? There's an urban legend about a mysterious adventurer who suddenly appears in difficult dungeons where progress stalls. They solo the boss and complete the dungeon by force...!"

"S-solo the boss?!"

Adventurers normally worked together in a party of four to fight monsters. The tank specialized in defense and drew enemy attention, the healer cured the party's wounds, the frontline attacker served as the main offensive force and used close-range weapons, and the long-range attacker used magic to cut through swaths of enemies and provide offensive support.

This was the most efficient team structure, the sweet spot between too many and too few people. It had taken a whole century of trial and error, of winning countless battles in cramped dungeons, to develop.

And that wasn't even getting into fighting a floor boss, the highest-ranked monster within the strata—you needed a healer and a tank for that. It was beyond reckless to try defeating it alone.

But Jade had seen just that a moment ago. A single frontline attacker with a war hammer had faced a boss head-on and crushed it without any assistance.

"..."

Jade turned his gaze to the "Executioner" once more.

But the unknown adventurer paid no mind to the elites' confusion. Instead, they gazed at the dust of the Hellflame Dragon as it wafted away, muttering, "Now I should be able to leave on time tomorrow..."

Then they spun around and left, passing Jade and heading straight for the door to the ceremonial arena.

“!”

As they passed by, their cape billowed up and brushed him. Jade’s eyesight was above average, so he happened to catch a glimpse of the Executioner’s face under their hood.

It was neither the visage of a battle-hardened man nor a reaper-like Executioner.

Just the face of girl wearing a tired expression.

4

“Have a nice quest!”

From behind the quest counter, Alina checked over the quest form that had just been filled in, then sent off an adventurer with her hundred-point smile. There wasn't anyone else lined up on the other side of the counter. That meant she didn't have to put off the paperwork until later, so she quickly filled it out on the spot.

The day after the Belfla Underground Ruins were cleared, the adventurers who had been surging vanished as though they had never been there to begin with. Looking around Iffole Counter now, Alina saw that it was entirely calm again.

The sunlight shone in through the skylight in the high ceiling, illuminating the large lobby. Adventurers would usually be gathered in front of the quest board, which spanned an entire wall, choosing their tasks earnestly or eagerly exchanging information. It was the latest model of quest board, developed based on the technology of the ancients, and it automatically updated the available quests in real time. It was an exceptional item that always displayed the newest information.

That was just the sight Alina had wanted to see.

But the moment she noticed there were no adventurers awaiting processing, she put up the AWAY FROM SEAT sign at her desk and briskly retreated into the office.

“I've done it again...” She took a seat, then covered her face with her hands, lamenting her foolishness. “Aghhhhh, I've done it agaaaaain...,” she croaked weakly.

When she next lifted her hand, her gaze fell on the piece of paper in her hand. It was a search request form that the guild had issued.

Early that morning, every office in Iffole had received a document requesting

they search the city for a particular adventurer. The subject was a small-statured adventurer wearing a cloak that obscured their face and gender. They wielded a giant silver war hammer. Their name was—the Executioner.

“I’m...so stupid...”

Alina hung her head once again.

The number of requests she needed to process had indeed decreased after she’d cleared the Belfla Underground Ruins. She would probably finish her backlog in a few days and would be able to leave the office on time. But her relief came with a price: The tale of the Executioner who slayed the Hellflame Dragon solo had spread among the adventurers in the blink of an eye. To make matters worse, the guild was now searching for them with the intention of appointing them as Silver Sword’s new frontline attacker.

Alina had lost her mind after an eternity of overtime hell, and this was the result.

“...”

She took a peek at the golden license card that was squirreled away in her pocket.

There was only one explanation as to why Alina had something like this when she was just a receptionist. It was so she could kick the ass of any boss that caused her overtime, clear its dungeon, and force her workload back to normal.

If not for this first-class license card, she wouldn’t be able to take on any highly difficult dungeon quest, never mind solo a boss, so she’d made it under a fake name.

...Well, I don’t think they saw anything definitive... I mean I did basically hide my face. It’s okay, it’s okay.

So she told herself, but this search request form was cause for concern.

Ganz the Raging Blade already served as Silver Sword’s frontline attacker, but there was a reason the elite party was scrambling to locate the war hammer wielder to fill the same role.

“So Raging Blade Ganz is retiring, huh?”

She happened to overhear two young adventurers chatting. They were in a corner of the office with a newspaper spread open, examining it intently.

“Quitting due to untreatable wounds...it must have been a grisly battle. Hearing stuff like that makes me worry about how long I can stay an adventurer...”

“Oh, does it? I, for one, am using this chance to try to get into Silver Sword!”

“Forget about it; they’re all monsters with Sigrus skills.”

“But that’s the dream, right? Join their ranks, and you can live in the nicest part of Iffole city, make crazy amounts of money, and get all the girls you want, just like Jade...”

“They’ll turn you away at the gate unless you have at least a second-class license. First do something about that flimsy fourth-class license of yours!”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t need a lecture... More importantly, this is the guy! The Executioner!”

Alina tensed up for a moment when she heard that name.

No sooner was the adventurer pointing at the newspaper with a sunny expression than he was staring rapt with attention at the Executioner. “They downed a boss that even Silver Sword was having trouble with in one blow, man. That’s so cool. I wonder who they are.”

“I’ve heard rumors of the Executioner a bunch of times before, but I never thought they actually existed.”

“But this is coming from Jade of Silver Sword, so it’s got to be true.”

“Well, I hear all the search and information teams in the guild are out looking for the Executioner, so they’ll find ’em soon enough.”

“Ahhh, I hope they turn up soon. I wanna see what kind of person they are.”

Alina heaved a bitter sigh and tuned the adventurers out.

Silver Sword? Ridiculous. I can’t let myself get found out. She clenched a fist and swallowed her spit.

Yes, she couldn’t get found out—receptionists weren’t allowed to have a

second job.

A receptionist had to be ready to process quests swiftly and in optimal condition at any time. Adventuring on the side was out of the question, and if it got out that she'd gone so far as to make a license with a fake name in order to beat a boss, then there was no question she'd be let go on the spot.

Even if they had to endure hellish periods of crunch, receptionists had stable work and pay, so it was an incredibly attractive profession. From another angle, during the periods when she could go home on time, you could basically say her career was her calling. Plus, its generous benefits and stable income made planning for the future a breeze.

How did adventuring stack up with that, you ask? Well, adventurers wore down their weapons and armor quickly, so they racked up mountains of repair fees. Their schedules were highly irregular, and they ran after monsters day and night. No matter how bad their injuries, they needed to cover treatment out of pocket. And if they lost a leg or something while working, they would be out of a job. Earnings were unstable, so adventurers had to deal with the added fear of being forced onto the streets.

Most importantly of all...receptionists are employed for life! You don't have to worry about a job for the rest of your days...!

Even if you didn't choose a career as unstable as adventuring, society was cold and unfair. It was quite possible for any business out there to go bankrupt and dissolve. You could get fired for poor performance, or your employer could vanish one night without paying what you and your fellow workers were owed. There weren't many jobs that would guarantee your employment the next day, much less the next year.

Additionally, receptionists were members of the public sector. Their work never dried up, and they wouldn't even be fired for poor performance. They were also appointed by the Adventurers Guild, the foundation that had built Iffole. All that was to say, receptionists wouldn't vanish overnight.

A profession that guaranteed you would have work the next day and a wage for life—that was the essence of reception work.

Yeah...that's why I took this job...!

Out of every career out there, it was the only one that employed you for life.

Besides, this overtime was only a temporary pain. Soon enough, Alina would get lots of new, younger coworkers, and if she left the busywork to them, her schedule would normalize. If she could just hold on until that day, then she could lead the ideal receptionist life from there on out, with a lifetime of stability.

I can't let something this stupid end my life as a receptionist...!

She crumpled up the search request form and swore that to herself.

5

It was a month after the Belfla Underground Ruins had been cleared. In a coliseum in the city of Iffole, a fighting tournament was being held among adventurers.

Jade sat in a front row seat, focusing on the match as cheers erupted all around him.

His eyes, as well as many others', were fixed on a daring swordswoman wielding her blade onstage. Her opposition was a large man twice her size, but she was overpowering him.

"Skill Activate: *Sigrus Roar!*" she yelled, and the red light enveloping her body glowed even brighter. That same moment, she effortlessly flung back the man she'd been locking swords with. Her superhuman power was far beyond a typical woman's strength.

"Ngh...! Skill Activate: *Regin Over!*"

Deducing he would lose the match at this rate, her opponent threw everything he had into the match. He charged up his strength, then unleashed the power of his skill *Muscle Over* to its maximum level. Then he sliced at the swordswoman, his body glowing with blue light.

Clang! Their blades flashed, and sparks scattered fiercely as the pair collided. Red and blue light crossed as the impact rippled through them both, the shock powerful enough to make the coliseum shudder.

"Gah!"

Ultimately, the large man was the one to go flying.

A predictable outcome. The blue light that glowed around him was the hallmark of Regin skills, which couldn't surpass the limits of human ability. The swordswoman, on the other hand, had activated a Sigrus skill, which granted access to powers beyond human limits. In a direct competition of strength, the

man was destined to lose against a skill of that caliber.

“...Hmm, that’s not it.” The audience was the most excited they’d ever been, but Jade was frowning. “It’s true that she used a superhuman strength–type skill, but the adventurer I saw was even more powerful than her...”

“That’s ridiculous. There aren’t any other well-known female adventurers with skills like that out there.” The fighting tournament organizer beside him spoke loudly, to keep from being overwhelmed by the cheers.

“But it’s not her. Her hair was a different color, and her features didn’t resemble this woman’s at all.”

“I dunno if I should say this, sir, but are you sure you weren’t dreaming? Even if you use a Sigrus skill, laying that kind of beatdown on a floor boss that swallowed a relic is impossible. And that goes double for the Hellflame Dragon since it evaded defeat for so long, y’know?”



“He’s right, Jade.” The voice at his side came from a girl wearing the pure white robes of a white mage, sporting a bob haircut. “I’ve never even heard of a girl wielding a war hammer in the first place. Even men struggle with them. And besides, this isn’t the time for you to be loafing around spectating!”

The woman who’d flatly scolded Jade just now—Lululee Ashford—was quite adorable for how boldly she spoke.

Her voice was youthful, and she was so short that the magic rod she used was taller than she was. On top of that, her large, charming eyes and evenly cut bangs made her resemble a child. Despite appearances, Lululee was a top-notch adventurer, the healer of the guild’s elite Silver Sword party.

Her innocent-looking frame belied the overwhelming power and Sigrus skills at her disposal, which made her invaluable for clearing difficult dungeons.

“But you also saw her, Lululee. That power was no dream.”

“Yes, but we don’t have enough clues to search for them. It’s true that they were small, but you can’t assume they’re a girl. Besides, the record for the solo quest was under a man’s name.”

In the month since the Executioner had cleared the Underground Ruins and the guild started looking for them, Jade had also been carrying out a personal search for that war hammer wielder. Only Lululee had been faithful enough to go along with him.

“No, it’s a girl. I’m sure I saw a young woman with black hair and jade-green eyes,” Jade stated flatly.

But he hadn’t told that much to the guild—partly because he was less certain about her features, but more because he wanted to find her before they did.

“We have new quests from the guild, Jade. Stop doing this—we have to start looking for a new attacker. You’re the leader of Silver Sword, so you have to be on top of things!”

“...Yeah, you’re right, but...” Lululee’s lecture left no room for argument. Jade just scratched his head.

Now that Ganz had left Silver Sword, he knew that their number one priority

was selecting a new frontline attacker. He couldn't be wasting time searching for an adventurer who'd left no clues.

But ever since Jade had first laid eyes on the mysterious, war hammer-wielding girl in the depths of that dungeon, he'd been powerfully drawn to her. He needed to find her himself.

Yet even after fishing through all the registered female adventurers and paying some capable information dealers, he hadn't been able to turn up a single lead on her. At this point, he was starting to get the feeling that he really had been seeing things and that this female war hammer wielder didn't exist.

"...Okay, I'll start going through the frontline attacker candidates tomorrow," Jade said unenthusiastically, exiting the coliseum.

He left the coliseum, the frenzy of the audience replaced with the peaceful sounds of the Iffole streets. As he walked down the bustling streets, Jade thought back on what had happened a month prior. In stark contrast to her fearsome attack power, the girl's face had been cute. "Executioner" didn't seem like a fitting name for her.

And then there was that mysterious white glow, a totally different color from Sigrus and Regin skills, which had generated her weapon. She clearly had some unknown power.

"A Dia skill...? It couldn't be..." For a second, the name of a legendary skill mentioned in ancient texts crossed his mind.

The ancients had once wielded those abilities and dubbed them blessings of the gods.

It was said that Dia skills surpassed even Sigrus skills in power, possessing the capacity to bring about the splendor that had once earned the continent of Helcacia the name Diania. But these abilities had vanished along with their creators. Though a far cry from Dia skills, Sigrus skills were currently the strongest class of abilities.

That being said, if the adventurer had access to those lost powers, it would explain her incredible strength.

"But word would have gotten out if an adventurer had a Dia skill..." Muttering

to himself, Jade pulled a red orb out of the pouch at his belt. It glittered beautifully in the daylight. Though he had no idea what kind of technology it was, he could clearly make out a sigil in the shape of a sun in its center. This was the relic that the Hellflame Dragon had mistakenly swallowed.

That girl with the war hammer didn't seem at all interested in the orb...

Every single relic the ancients left behind was engraved with a magic sigil shaped like a sun. The eight rays of the carving, which fanned out as if stabbing everything they touched, were a symbol of Dia. For that reason, the magic sigils of the sun that were seen on relics and relic armas were all called the mark of Dia.

As per their name, these relics had functions that far surpassed what modern technology could achieve, so they fetched a high price. Any adventurer would leap on an item like this without hesitation, but it had seemed like the Executioner's goal was solely defeating the boss. He didn't know why that was, but she'd seemed pretty pissed at the Hellflame Dragon.

Whatever the case, the relic was worth a lot of money. The Executioner deserved the treasure.

“...”

Jade stared fixedly into the shining red orb. That face he'd seen beyond her hood was burned into his eyes and wouldn't go away. He did have interest in her as a war hammer wielder with unknown power. But completely separate from that, he wanted to see her again. For some reason, he was powerfully drawn to her.

I'm going to find you...I swear.

Steeling his resolve, he stuck the red orb into his pouch. But then—

A girl passed in front of Jade, her long, glossy black hair swaying.

“!”

Jade's breath caught in his throat. He stopped in his tracks, and all other sound seemed to vanish.

The moment they crossed paths, he saw that the black-haired girl had

beautiful green eyes.

“...!!”

He was speechless.

All the thoughts that had been filling his head went out the window, and he glued his gaze on her.

There's no mistaking it.

The girl's profile matched the war hammer-wielding girl in his memories. Instantly, Jade dashed like he'd been struck from behind, plowing through the street to chase after the girl. He could see her delicate figure about to be buried in the crowds. That long black hair, swaying over her back—this was the war hammer wielder he'd been looking for.

He couldn't let her get away now.

“Wait...!” Heedlessly chasing after her, he finally got through the crowded street. Just when he was about to catch up to her...

“...Huh?”

He saw her full form from behind and stopped automatically.

Those short boots tapping on the stone pavement; the black, knee-length skirt that swished around her thighs; the white blouse with the Adventurers Guild crest embroidered on the chest; that charming outfit, plus a ribbon tied around her neck, didn't at all conjure the image of someone slinging a war hammer over their shoulder.

“Wha...?”

Jade's mouth hung slack for a while. Frozen, he looked up at the sign of the building that the delicate girl headed into—the biggest quest office in the city, Iffole Counter.

“...A-a receptionist?!”

Yes, she was wearing the guild-issued uniform of a receptionist.

6

A man dashed into Iffole Counter.

The moment he entered, he cut right through the lobby and swiftly headed to one of the receptionist windows. As he did, the chatter in the lobby settled, and silence spread. Noticing the man's presence, one adventurer after another widened their eyes and let their mouths hang open wordlessly.

"Huh?"

When Alina tilted her head questioningly, the man who'd become the center of attention thrust his face into her reception window.

"Hey."

A tall young adventurer was bending over on the other side of the counter.

He had clearly picked her out, even though there were other windows and receptionists available. The man had silver hair and a handsome, pleasant face. The greatshield over his back was a relic arma with the mark of Dia carved into it, and the longsword at his waist and the armor he wore were all first-class items. His muscular, sturdy-looking build screamed top-notch tank.

Now that I can get a good look at him, there's no one who doesn't know this guy's name.

He was a monster among adventurers, the first to have attained three Sigrus skills, and his handsome features had captured the hearts of many women. A first-class adventurer, he was said to be the strongest tank in the guild.

This was Jade Scrade, who'd become the leader of Silver Sword at the age of nineteen.

A-aaaaaaaack!

She froze up the moment her eyes met his, preventing her from getting out an immediate "Welcome."

A member of Silver Sword. That meant he was one of the adventurers who'd seen her beat up the Hellflame Dragon one month ago.

Why had he come here? She thought the elite party had run out of quests for the moment. Had she been found out? No way. She'd hid her face the entire time she was in the dungeon, had taken the quest under a fake name, and had even used a fake first-class adventure license. Nothing should have led him to suspect that receptionist Alina Clover—

“Jade!”

But then, just as Alina spiraled into confusion, a savior appeared. A moment after Jade came up to her, a receptionist from another window shoved Alina aside with incredible force and inserted herself in front of him.

In addition to a beautiful face that any man would turn to look at, the woman had a figure to be proud of, with the cleavage of her ample bust peeking out from the neckline of her uniform dress shirt. Her name was Sulie, and she was the most popular receptionist at Iffole Counter.

Though she hadn't so much as glanced at Ganz, the older man also from Silver Sword, Sulie was now fluttering her long eyelashes and showing off her sparkling blue eyes as she looked up at Jade, the famously handsome adventurer.

“How can it be that someone of *your* stature has come in person all the way out here?”

The woman was so eager that Jade recoiled for a moment, but he quickly recovered and started searching for Alina. “I have some business. Hey, the black-haired girl who was just—”

“If you're taking on a quest, then please allow me to handle anything you need.”

“Uhhh, no, that's not what I mean...” Jade shifted his gaze past Sulie and glanced at the other side of the counter. “Um, that receptionist over there.”

“Huh?” Sulie arched her brows in displeasure, turning the direction Jade had pointed. Alina, who was trying to sneak away, twitched before quickly turning away. “...Alina Clover is still somewhat inexperienced as a receptionist. If Silver

Sword is taking on a quest, then I can—”

“I’m not here for a quest. I’m here to speak alone with Alina.”

“...Speak...alone...with her?”

“Yeah.”

“...Understood.”

Left without a choice, Sulie called for Alina, gave up, and returned to her window. Maybe this was just Alina’s imagination, but it seemed like someone was giving her the stink eye as she returned to the counter.

“...”

What a disaster. She grimaced but stood at attention at her window regardless. “...What is it you need?” she asked, head hanging slightly as she plastered on a smile to keep from being rude. She would rather die than talk to this dude, but he was the leader of the elite Silver Sword. It was fair to say he had the same status in the guild as commanding officials.

“There’s something I want to ask you,” Jade began.

“If you’re taking on a quest, then let me know whatever you need.”

“One month ago, I saw an incredibly strong war hammer user in the Underground Ruins.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard the stories.”

“The truth is, I’ve been searching for them ever since. That rings a bell with you, doesn’t it?”

“I’m very sorry, but I have no knowledge of an adventurer who fits that description. If you’d like, I could go ask the other receptionists,” Alina said, trying to make a swift escape, but when Jade continued speaking, she ground to a halt.

“I’ve got sharp eyes and a good nose, you know. I can even see pretty well in the dark.”

Then Alina’s breath caught.

“So I did get a good view of her face, Alina Clover. I know the person swinging

around that war hammer was a girl with black hair and beautiful jade-green eyes.”

Finally, Alina was left speechless.

Black hair and jade-green eyes—she’d gotten those from her mother. And Alina was the only person at Iffole Counter with those traits.

“...I see,” she just barely managed to answer, slowly turning to Jade.

He was staring right at her, and she looked right back at him. Silence dominated the reception window for a while, their gazes clashing.

It seemed that Jade was certain...that the girl before him was the Executioner.

...Crrrrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaap...!

Behind her calm facade, Alina was dripping a waterfall of cold sweat. A momentary bout of dizziness assailed her, and her vision wobbled. It felt like she would be sucked into the ground.

No way, this has to be a joke, she thought. For a few moments, her brain had a field day, giving excuses to no one in particular. But I was hiding my face with my hood, but it was pretty dark in the dungeon, but there was no way he could’ve seen...

But no matter what she said, it was too late. The time for regrets had passed.

No matter their reasons, receptionists weren’t allowed to have another job. Obviously, moonlighting as an adventurer was out of the question.

It’s...it’s over...! My...my life as a receptionist... It’s over...!!!

Alina gulped down her spit as her life flashed before her eyes. She hadn’t been a receptionist for long, but the job had brought her a measure of stability and security. Thinking back, she’d done nothing but overtime, and she felt like she didn’t have much in the way of good memories, but you could say it was a hundred times better than being an adventurer, living with the constant threat of death or joblessness at your back.

The light in Alina’s eyes had begun to fade as she resigned herself to her fate, but suddenly it blazed up again.

...No.

Not yet. She'd finally landed a secure career. She wasn't about to give it up now.

"Man, that explains why I couldn't find her, no matter how hard I searched among the adventurers."

As Alina was engaged in that long struggle, Jade was on the other end of the spectrum, cheeks flushed like an innocent child as he smiled happily. "I never thought you'd be a receptionist—oh yeah, I figured I'd give this to you! Take it, you earned it."

It seemed this man was unaware that his actions were causing the receptionist before him the greatest crisis of her life. His dark gray eyes sparkling, Jade placed a red orb on the counter. This relic, which contained the mark of Dia, must have been inside the Hellflame Dragon's stomach. Alina glanced at it, but right now she had more pressing concerns than a red ball.

"...Mr. Silver Sword." Alina breathed out a long, weak sigh. She forced her heart to settle and slowly opened her mouth. "Right now, I am in the middle of work. If you're here to tease me, I ask that you please leave."

"Huh? No, this isn't teasing, I really am—"

"...Mr. Silver Sword."

Alina slowly lifted the orb from the counter.

"Relics are crystallizations of the ancients' knowledge and technology. They're supposed to be stronger and more durable than any modern substance."

"Hmm? Yeah. That's right. That's why relic weapons are strong—"

"Hmph!"

Alina squeezed the relic, and it gave a tiny creak before the orb—which no human should have been able to break—shattered. The fragments fell around Jade's feet.

"..."

The glad smile on his face froze in place.

“Y...y-y-y-you just crushed a relic in your hand...?!”

As the strongest tank in the guild and someone who had taken the attacks of many monsters with his relic arma shield, Jade would completely understand...

...the superhuman level of strength it took to crush an orb in one hand.

As Jade trembled there faintly, pale in the face, Alina gave him her winning customer service smile. Then she tilted her head and, in a voice just quiet enough that no one would overhear, said, “I just want to live in peace as a receptionist.”

“...Huh? ...Uh...right...”

“I won’t let you mess that up for me. And I don’t care if you’re an elite or whatever. If you don’t want your stomach ripped open like that damn dragon, then get lost. And don’t you ever show your face to me again.” In a complete departure from her earlier high-pitched customer service voice, Alina delivered this threat in a low, cold voice that seemed to be pulled from the depths of hell itself.

“...”

Jade just stood there at a complete loss for words. He opened and closed his mouth like a broken doll for a little while as he looked between the shards of the relic lying at his feet and Alina’s smile, which was anything but friendly.

“That clear?” she asked.

“...”

“Do. You. Get. It?”

But it seemed that he did sense the urge to kill beneath Alina’s smile, for after his face grew paler and paler, he eventually muttered, “...Yes’m” very quietly before he dejectedly left the service window.

7

Alina gazed at the Iffole cityscape beneath the sunset, sucking in a big lungful of evening air.

(Ohhh, it's so wonderful to be able to leave on time...!)

Savoring the happiness of being able to leave work before nightfall, she headed homeward with a spring in her step.

That was how it should have been anyway. Merely a few paces later, her modest happiness crumbled like a fragile object.

“Sup.”

Who but Jade Scrade was standing obstinately by the side of the road, where the magic streetlamps had started to light the way.

“...”

Alina's face twitched. Jade was the leader of Silver Sword and was reputed to be the strongest tank in the guild, so people were naturally looking his way. And because he'd addressed Alina, they'd started staring at her curiously as well.

The hell's this guy doing...?!

It was totally careless of Jade to call attention this way since he was so famous, but he seemed completely oblivious of that fact. Alina's fists began to tremble, but she somehow managed to cover her rage with a smile.

“Whatever can I do for you, Mr. Silver Sword?”

Alina was still wearing her receptionist uniform. She couldn't just blow off someone who held sway with the guild. Jade broke into a cold sweat like he was kind of scared when he saw her customer service smile, but she nevertheless forced up the corners of her lips.

“Sorry, I know your shift's over,” said Jade. “But there's something I just have to talk to you about.”

“It’s about accepting a quest, isn’t it? I’m very sorry, but Iffole Counter’s reception hours are over for the day. Good-bye.” Though Alina was smiling, there was no emotion in her voice. After shoving that businesslike answer at him, she spun away.

But Jade panicked, suddenly grabbing Alina’s arm to stop her. “H-hey, hold on!” She tried to shake him off on reflex, but her arm wouldn’t so much as twitch.

“...! Is this...a skill?”

It wasn’t just that Jade had a strong grip. She couldn’t move her lower arm an inch, as though something otherworldly was holding it in place. Alina shot a glance at Jade. His hand was wreathed in a hazy red light—the glow of a *Sigrus* skill.

“...Hey.” Alina shot an accusatory glare at him for having finally resorted to force.

Beneath her gaze, Jade made an awkward face. “I do feel bad...but you seem like you won’t even listen to me unless I do this...”

“I’m explicitly saying that I don’t want to listen to you.”

“...One of my skills, *Sigrus Wall*, can harden whatever it touches. It’s not effective on human bodies, but I can harden clothing to restrain people,” he muttered quietly—not that she was listening. It seemed like an excuse anyway.

She continued to glare at him, letting her earlier smile fall as she narrowed her eyes. “Huh, I didn’t expect you’d stoop to that level.”

Suddenly, a disquieting aura emanated around her. Jade must have picked up on the murderous rage in her eyes, since he panicked and rattled off quietly, “I—I’m here as the leader of Silver Sword! I’m going to make you listen... Executioner!”

Alina fell silent for a few seconds, staring daggers at him.

She could activate a skill to fight him off and break away by force. But as long as other people were watching, she couldn’t manifest her war hammer, the trademark of the Executioner.

“...”

With little alternative, Alina ultimately scowled and heaved a sigh, pointing down the lane. “All right. Let’s go somewhere else, at least.”

8

They went to the end of a dark back alley off the crowded main road. Once Jade confirmed that there was nobody around, he finally started talking. “I’ll get straight to the point,” he started. “I’ve just got to have you join Silver Swoooooooooaagh!”

Alina didn’t wait for him to finish. She silently manifested the war hammer, then struck mercilessly at her defenseless antagonist.

A loud cracking sound rang out in the alley at dusk, leaving a deep dent in the stone pavement.

A cloud of dust billowed up from where she’d swung her war hammer, but she only succeeded in ruining the street; her target was gone.

“So I missed...”

He wasn’t a member of Silver Sword for nothing. Alina scowled, clicking her tongue as she raised her war hammer again and glared at Jade, who had dodged suddenly toward the wall.

Jade was practically speechless at this point, and his face twitched as he stared at the war hammer. “Wh-wh-wh-wh-what’re you doing?!”

“Shutting you up,” Alina replied briefly.

“...!” Jade realized there was no hint of humor in her expression, and the color drained from his face.

“Receptionists aren’t allowed to have multiple jobs... If I get found out, I’ll be fired on the spot... I can’t let my career end here...”

“W-w-w-w-wait, don’t be so hasty...!”

“You resorted to force first.” Alina’s jade-green eyes flashed dangerously in the dim light of the back alley. “That means you must be prepared—now die for my peace.”

“Wait, wait, wait!!” Backed against the wall, Jade thrust out his hands. “And where the hell did you pull that war hammer from?!”

“I don’t know. It just pops up when I activate the skill,” Alina said.

“Ah! I knew it. Your ability...” Jade stopped as if he’d realized something. “...Is it a Dia skill?!”

“The heck is that?”

“You don’t even know what it is?!”

“Oh, shut up. That’s my business.”

“Dia skills are the powers that the ancients are thought to have used... They’re one step above even the highest class of modern Sigrus skills! Their existence is only mentioned in old texts...”

“If you only know them from old texts, then how can you be sure this really is one of those Dia skills?”

“Manifesting a special weapon the moment a skill is activated is a phenomenon not even seen with Sigrus skills! So your ability is at least different from those, and it’s even more powerfu—”

“Uh-huh. Well, I don’t care about that.” Still glaring at her target, Alina brought down her war hammer, which whizzed as it swung through the air. “Shall we keep going?”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!”

“Why don’t you pull out that wonderful shield on your back if you’re so fond of your life?”

“I didn’t come here to fight you, Alina. I’m not getting out my shield...!”

“Roger.”

“I—I—I—I—I can’t let myself die in a place like this!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Silver Sword is in trouble right now!”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Can you stop inching closer with that dead look in your eyes...?”

“I told you not to ever get near me again, didn’t I?”

“S-sorry for barging in while you were working...! But when Ganz saw your attacks, he took it so hard that he called it quits, and now Silver Sword doesn’t have a frontline attacker!” Jade rattled off rapidly.

“...Huh?” Alina furrowed her brow. “I heard Ganz retired because he was hurt too badly to recover.”

“...Ganz has a lot of pride. It would be the end of him if it got out even for a second that Silver Sword’s frontline attacker couldn’t get over being outclassed by a mysterious war hammer wielder.”

“...Hmph.”

Alina hadn’t imagined Ganz’s retirement having anything to do with herself. Feeling a bit awkward, she lowered her weapon. “So what? Are you trying to say that it’s my fault and I should do something about it?”

“That’s not what I mean...!” Jade clenched his fists like he was steeling himself and said, “I want you, Alina!”

“I’ll sue you for sexual harassment and abuse of authority.”

“Wait, wait!”

“It’s not like you need to bother a tired receptionist like me to get attention from women.”

“No, other women don’t matter. You haven’t left my mind for even a second since the moment I laid eyes on your power and face. I’ve been thinking of you every day.”

“That’s seriously creepy...”

“I’m just that serious! I want you to join Silver Sword!”

“Listen...” Alina sighed, then slowly spelled it out for Jade again. “I just want to live in peace as a receptionist. There’s no room for your intervention there. Could you please stop getting in my way?”

“...Then why did you defeat the Hellflame Dragon?”

Alina's brow twitched.

"If you just wanted to be a receptionist, then you shouldn't have gone to the trouble of clearing a dungeon. Then I wouldn't have found you, and I wouldn't have gotten this desperate, either."

"That was because I was sick of overtime."

"And the guild wouldn't be in this much of an uproar— Huh?"

"I beat that thing to get out of doing any more overtime."

"Huh? Wait, um...overtime?" Her answer was so surprising that Jade blinked in stunned shock. "You defeated the Hellflame Dragon because you didn't want to do overtime...?"

"What's with that look? Do I need any other reason...?" Alina took a huge step, flared open her eyes, and leaned toward Jade to grab his lapels with a bloodcurdling sneer. "Do you understand the despair you feel when you see an endless pile of documents? The urge to kill you get when you're behind on work and someone shoves even more on you? The rage that bubbles up when you want to go home but can't?!"

"U-uh, um...I can't say I do, sorry."

"Since you guys were dragging your asses on clearing that dungeon, my overtime never let up! So! I! Ended it! I made sure I could go home on time again with my own two hands! What's wrong with that?! The nerve of you all, snooping around trying to find out who I am!"

"S-s-s-s-sorry," Jade apologized automatically, but suddenly he stuck up an index finger because he'd thought of something. "Oh, if you join Silver Sword, you won't have any more overtime!"

"That's just because you don't clock out at a regular time. That's not the same as no overtime."

"Urk!"

"I want a secure career, not an unstable line of work like adventuring, where you never know when you'll be out of a job because your leg got torn off."

"Uh, from what I've seen of you, I doubt there's anyone who could kill you,

though.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Anyway, I have no intention of joining Silver Sword,” she said like a smack, as if to say she would not be taking any more arguments, turning away from Jade one last time. “If you’re looking for a frontline attacker, then go elsewhere. Also,” Alina paused, then planted her feet to glare at Jade over her shoulder and say in a low voice, “if word gets out about this...I won’t let you off the hook...”

“...”

The threat had such power that Jade gulped down his spit and fell silent. This seemed to make him finally give up, as when Alina left the alleyway, Jade just stared at her back and didn’t try to chase after her again.

9

The next morning, Alina woke to the sound of chirping birds.

Morning light poured in through the window, gently illuminating the room. She got out of bed, opened the windows, and inhaled the fresh morning air. Rows of orange roofs and the clock tower could be seen in the distance. The sleepy city was suddenly coming to life.

Despite this invigorating morning view, her mood was dour.

“...I’ve been...found out...,” she muttered in the quiet, giving a heavy sigh that negated the refreshing morning air.

What do I do...? Should I have made him suffer a little in order to shut him up...? Wait, but if I give someone that high up in the guild a beatdown, wouldn’t I still get canned in the end...?

After brooding over these violent measures, Alina panicked and shook her head. “What should I do...?”

She wobbled back to her bed as if sucked toward it, falling into it with a thump.

“Aghhhhh! I hate this...,” she said, burying her face in the sheets as her frustrations overflowed.

“I don’t wanna do anything I wanna escape from reality I don’t wanna go outside I wanna stay cooped up at home forever...!”

Alina flailed her limbs like a child as she vented her unvarnished, honest feelings.

Though the area where she lived wasn’t the fanciest district in the city, it was at least a quiet residential neighborhood; you couldn’t live in a place like this on a newbie adventurer’s earnings. Here, there were no insistent tanks or customers to deal with. There was no mountain of documents. There were no annoying relationships. No overtime. It was heaven on earth, where she could

pass time as she pleased. It was her oasis, the one place where she could relax.

“Ah...I want to lie around at home forever...”

Despite the fact she was only nineteen years old, Alina had been able to get a loan thanks to how stable her career as a receptionist was. She'd been able to borrow a large sum from a moneylender and make the big-ticket purchase of a house—in other words, she'd acquired the paradise that was a home of her own. Hooray for being a receptionist! Adventuring was unsteady work, especially since you never knew when you would breathe your last breath. Obviously, this lack of reliability meant that getting a loan or borrowing money was out of the question. There was no way she could go down that path.

“Being a receptionist really is the best... I'm not...gonna get fired...!”

Alina buried her face in the bedsheets, huffing into them to steel her resolve.

Since the Belfla Underground Ruins had been cleared, Iffole Counter should have been peaceful that day—but then *he* showed up at the quest office.

“Jade! What can I do to become a better tank?!”

“Please sign my weapon!!”

“C-could you shake my hand...?!”

Only a few hours had passed since the reception windows opened at Iffole Counter, but the place was already packed with plenty of adventurers. An abnormally large cluster of people had gathered around one of the built-in tables. In the center of that group, surrounded by adventurers, was a young man with a relic arma greatshield, Jade Scrade.

“...”

Alina did her best not to pay attention to the throng as she dispassionately processed quests at her reception window, but the high-pitched voices flying up from behind her made her mood go from bad to worse.

“Ahhh...Jade's as handsome as ever...!”

“I-if I wave at him, do you think he'll wave back...?”

“Oh, he turned this way! He looked at me!”

The other receptionists had gathered around Alina’s window, which was closest to Jade, and were staring at him passionately. That meant Alina’s reception window was the only one functioning. Even though it was business hours, her colleagues looked like they would leap out into the lobby at any moment, shrilly chittering back and forth to one another. Alina wasn’t happy with how they were blowing off work, but those feelings paled in comparison to how irritated she was with Jade.

Why...is he still heeeeeere...?!

Jade had been the first person to arrive at Iffole Counter, insisting he was doing a “survey about the Executioner,” and he’d been sitting there ever since. The other adventurers surrounded Jade of Silver Sword as soon as they noticed him, and word spread about him being at Iffole Counter in the blink of an eye. Now the quest office was buried in adventurers, and it wasn’t even noon.

“...”

Alina scowled and looked out the window. The clock tower that lay beyond the rows of orange roofs was just about to declare twelve in the afternoon. *Hurry up and ring already.* She couldn’t wait for her lunch break to start. She needed to get away from this place fast.

“Jade! Let’s have lunch together!”

Then the clock tower bell rang at last, and the receptionists instantly leaped away from their windows, pushing past the other adventurers to gather around Jade.

“Get out of the way, you people.” A quiet, dignified voice scolded the receptionists scrambling for Jade. It was Sulie.

The moment she’d discovered Jade was there, she went to the trouble of redoing her makeup and fixing her hair. Now more beautiful than ever, Sulie sidled up to him with full confidence. “I’ll be the one to speak with Jade... Oh my, Jade?”

But he was already gone.

10

Up a set of narrow stairs from a back road, on a tall hill where you could see the townscape of Iffole, there was a little, forgotten vacant lot. The lone bench there was Alina's standard lunch spot.

"...I'm finally free..."

The empty lot overlooking the square was always deserted, so Alina had taken a liking to it.

"I hate this. I wanna go home...", she muttered, slumping on a bench.

Jade had caused a bunch of clients to crowd around Alina's reception window, so she was already beat after only working her morning shift. Head drooping from a surge of exhaustion, she sluggishly munched on her sandwich.

The one thing she looked forward to at work was her lunch break, when she could have some alone time. It was her comfort.

Just then, however, the voice she least wanted to hear violated the sanctity of this holy ground. "Whoa, this place is great. It's quiet, and there's nobody around. I never would've guessed you could find this in Iffole," Jade Scrade said thoughtlessly as he took the seat next to Alina like it belonged to him. "Man, I was just looking for a quiet and empty lunch spot. If you're going to eat your lunch here every day, then I'll come with you."

"Skill Activate: *Dia Break*."

Seeing the war hammer manifest soundlessly out of thin air with a white glow, Jade panicked and leaped out of his seat. Perhaps he was thinking about when she'd swung at him mercilessly the day before, as this time he didn't hesitate to take the shield off his back.

Protecting himself like a little creature faced with a wild beast, he timidly peeked his face out from behind the shield. "I—I—I—I didn't do anything! I didn't expose your identity, either!"

“Shut up, stop slacking off at my workplace, and do your own job, you stupid silver asshole!”

“Uh, I’m an adventurer, so I generally don’t have fixed hours. It’s fine for me to slack off.”

“...Hmph.”

Since Alina was tied to her reception window or her desk every day, morning till night, hearing Jade heedlessly mention the privileges of adventurers made a vein pop on her forehead.

“When I go on break at work, I have to check if things are busy or not, and if someone thinks I’m slacking, both the staff and clients complain to me... How dare you just out and admit you’re goofing off to someone in my position!”

“W-wait, no! I’m not slacking! This is a valid use of time! It’s for my Executioner survey—”

The war hammer struck the ground at Jade’s feet with a cracking sound. Seeing that, Jade withdrew his remarks...which sounded a lot like an excuse. “...I’m sorry.”

“Do your job for real this afternoon. You got that?”

“Yes, ma’am...”

Alina dismissed her war hammer, snatched her lunch box, and walked out swiftly to find a new place for her lunch break. But then it occurred to her that Jade, who stuck out so much, would be right at her heels no matter where she went. It wouldn’t be wise to leave the lot so thoughtlessly.

Alina took two, three steps forward and stopped. “...Agh, right when I could get a break alone...” Left without a choice, she sighed and returned to the bench, where she resumed her lunch.

“Alina, you’re actually more ferocious than a wild troll, aren’t—”

The vacant lot turned into a crater in a single strike. Undaunted, Jade sat down beside her.

“That’s ’cause you’re so damn persistent,” Alina said.

“Heh...once my mind’s set on something, I never give up the chase. Plus, I am actually the strongest tank in the guild. I have confidence in my endurance, sturdiness, and vitality— Owowowow! Stop pinching the skin on the back of my hand!” Jade swiftly retreated to the edge of the bench, after which a moment of silence followed.

“...When did you first manifest that Dia skill, Alina?” Jade’s question broke the silence. “There are so many ‘unskilled’ people around who are upset they can’t use them.”

“I won’t tell you,” she answered curtly while grumpily stuffing her cheeks with a sandwich. “Besides, it basically comes down to luck whether a skill will manifest or not.”

“...I guess you’re right.”

Skills were completely different from magic. They were unique abilities that people were born with.

Unlike magic, which anyone could activate with the proper mana and knowledge, a skill couldn’t be used until it manifested. It was commonly accepted that all people were equipped with inborn skills, but the conditions for manifesting them were still not understood, so it was currently impossible to make one activate deliberately.

Moreover, there was no clear answer as to what determined the nature of skills or even where their power came from. They were shrouded in mystery.

“That’s why it’s a waste for you to be a receptionist with an ability like yours. It really is a shame.”

“It’s up to me how I want to use this power.” Alina finished eating her last sandwich. Tidying her empty lunch box, she rose to her feet. “Anyway, you’re wasting your time hanging around my workplace like you’re trying to harass me.” Sending that remark behind her, she glanced at the clock tower. That one-hour lunch break she had been so looking forward to had ended in a blink of an eye. The passage of time was so cruel. It felt like she had only rested for five minutes.

“Agh...guess I’ll work hard this afternoon, too...” Leaving Jade behind, she

trudged off to the office.

Sadly, receptionists had fixed lunch breaks since they were paid by the hour. Alina wasn't allowed to take breaks whenever she wanted like adventurers.

11

“Huh? Where’s Jade?” It was afternoon at the reception window. The young man standing before Alina who had finished applying for a quest restlessly looked around the lobby. “I came all the way here because I heard he was in Iffole Counter...”

“He was in this morning. I haven’t seen him since noon,” Alina answered nonchalantly as she checked some signed documents.

“Huh?!” The young man smacked a hand on his face in frustration. “You’re kidding me! But I wanted to ask Jade the trick to tanking...”

“That’s too bad. But I’m sure Mr. Silver Sword is quite busy,” Alina said, putting on a calm act to keep her foul mood from showing on her face.

But she was drowned out by an angry yell. “That’s why I’m telling you to give me a quest, like I say!” Then there was the violent *bam* as someone struck the table.

Iffole Counter was even busier than usual, but that furious shout silenced it all in an instant. Startled, both Alina and the young man glanced at the source of the noise, toward the reception window beside them. There, a tall young man wearing a scowl was leaning over the counter, berating the receptionist.

“I’m a first-class adventurer! If I say give it, you give it!”

“...Erk.” A noise slipped out of Alina, and she wrinkled her nose. That man, who had a red tattoo on his face, was an adventurer she didn’t really want to get involved with if she could help it: Slay Ghost.

Though he earned a first-class license, which only one-tenth of adventurers possessed, he had a nasty temper and disposition. He was also a chronic complainer who would always cause a scene at the reception window.

“B-but...” The receptionist who was being yelled at blanched and completely wilted away. Her name was Laila, and she’d only started just this year, so she

didn't have the capacity to retain her composure while dealing with him.

"..."

Alina swiftly looked around the area. The other adventurers had gone totally silent, and nobody was trying to help. Even if Slay Ghost was a nuisance, his first-class license was proof that his skills were the real deal, so everyone understood that he couldn't be silenced by force.

"I—I don't know of any quests like that, either..."

"There's no way! You're hiding 'em, aren't you?! You high-and-mighty receptionist!"

"B-but...I'm not..."

Seeing that Laila was utterly at a loss, Alina sighed and went over to her. "Did you need help?"

When she called out to her from behind, Laila turned to her with tears in her eyes. "A-Alina...!"

She looked at Laila, signaling her to step aside, before she moved in front of Slay.

"Don't give me this crap!" he shouted. "I'm telling you to stop hiding the secret quests and give 'em here!"

"...I see. A secret quest, huh..." Alina nearly heaved a sigh in front of him.

At the same time, she got why Laila had been paralyzed. Every receptionist got a complaint about secret quests at least once in their career.

"As my colleague said before, we have no secret quests," Alina told him.

"Don't give me that canned answer. Just shut up and give 'em!"

"..."

It seemed he wasn't going to take no for an answer. Alina quickly realized that it would be impossible to convince him with words. But none of the receptionists at Iffole Counter could give him what he wanted.

That was because there was no such thing as secret quests.

They were simply baseless legends that seemed plausible because they had passed from adventurer to adventurer. Whenever groundless rumors about hidden dungeons or the like started to spread, they would get more complicated, turning into whispers about “secret quests” before you knew it.

“I know all about it. You take the secret quest, and a hidden dungeon containing special relics shows up! You guys just want to monopolize those relics for the guild, don’t you?!”

“The quests aggregated by the Adventurers Guild are all presented on the quest board. Aside from that—”

“Don’t you talk back to me!”

Slay struck the counter with a threatening *bam*, then glared up at Alina. “Adventurers are gods! Do as I say!”

Agh, maybe I should give this guy a whack.

Alina let Slay’s blustering go in one ear and out the other as she pondered how to get out of this situation. She could pass it off to a superior, but Slay wasn’t the type of complainer who would be satisfied if he got service from someone with more authority. What to do...?

“Hey...! Don’t just stand there silently! Say something...!” Blood rushing to his head, Slay finally reached out to Alina and grabbed her by the collar. “You’re just a receptionist...! Is that how you look at an adventurer?! Your face pisses me off!”

Slay had no qualms about raising a fist up against a powerless receptionist. Laila shrieked when she saw this.

Then everyone started freaking out, of course. While that was going on, Alina maintained her composure and declared, “Committing an act of violence against a receptionist will result in you being stripped of your license.”

“Who cares, bitch?! I won’t be satisfied until I sock you a—”

“Hey,” a low voice cut in, and someone grabbed Slay’s fist from behind and stopped it.

The irate adventurer turned around in a huff, then widened his eyes as he got

a look at the man who'd shown up. "J-Jade Scrade?!"

The presence of the strongest tank in the guild, who also had a first-class license, naturally rattled Slay. "Why are you here, Silver Sword...?!"

"Let go of her, Slay."

Slay was momentarily overwhelmed beneath Jade's piercing glare. "H-ha! Elite my ass, tanks are just trash mobs! You're weaker than attackers!"

Slay released Alina's lapels and swung at Jade instead. But before his fist could reach the tank's face, Jade caught it firmly in both hands and stopped him.

"Ngh...!" Slay was stuck, unable to pull away or overcome Jade. His angry expression gradually stiffened.

"Did you just say...tanks are weaker than attackers?" Jade clenched hard, and Slay's bones creaked from the strain.

Slay immediately twisted his face in pain and cried out, "Owww! L-let me the hell go, you damn tank!"

Jade released Slay after punishing his fist to satisfaction. The belligerent adventurer immediately bounced away, rubbing his injured hand.

"The next time you raise a hand against Alina or any receptionist, you're getting more than that..." Jade shot him a glare.

Overwhelmed by his murderous rage, Slay took a step back. His face contorted into a grimace, the reality sinking in of how much stronger the elite before him was.

"...D-dammit! You'll pay for this!"

In the end, Slay got in one last remark and slunk out of the reception office.

After he left, cheers resounded around Iffole Counter, and all the adventurers praised Jade. "Th-that's Jade, all right!"

As the looks the receptionists were giving Jade became even more heated, he hastily checked on Alina. "Are you all right?!"

"..."

She was silent for a few moments, then turned away from his concerned gaze.

The white magic circle that she'd been on the verge of activating to give Slay a beatdown vanished without anyone seeing. Alina had nearly busted out her skill in front of everyone.

"...Yes. Thank you for helping me," she muttered in thanks.

Jade seemed to be relieved at that. He breathed a sigh of relief, then furrowed his brow a bit as he scolded her lightly. "Listen, there are some dangerous guys out there, so don't provoke them too much."

You can't use that skill in front of people was what he was implying. Though she frowned internally, Alina rounded her back apologetically.

"You're quite right. I'll take care in the future. By the way, Mr. Silver Sword, you'll continue to be here, won't you?"

This time, it was Jade's turn to shudder.

"We would be very grateful to have a reliable personage such as yourself loitering arou—gracing us with your presence," she said, giving Jade a broad grin. It was an ice-cold, zero-degree customer service smile. She'd brought up the corners of her lips, but her eyes were totally devoid of amusement.

Jade must have picked up on something behind her grin, as his panic blossomed before her eyes. "N-no, I—I was just about to go," he followed up with a stutter, gushing cold sweat. It seemed he did actually feel guilty. "But when I peeked in, thinking maybe I could stay for just a little longer, that man started quarrel—"

"Yes, of course, we wouldn't mind. Stay as long as you like."

"...W-well, if my sticking around further is a bother, then I suppose I'll get going."

"That's unfortunate. Please do come visit Iffole Counter again!"

Defeated in the face of Alina's customer service smile, with many adventurers and receptionists bemoaning his departure, Jade swiftly left Iffole Counter.

12

Nothing in particular happened after that, and now it was just about time for Alina's shift to end.

The clients at the reception window had trickled away as the day wound down, and she made use of this chance to go purchase some office supplies. She was hoping to leave these sorts of odd jobs to the newbie, Laila, soon, but she also liked handling this task, since it enabled her to openly leave the office.

She was taking her time on the errand so that she would get back right when business was over for the day. You started using these kinds of sneaky tactics once you got to your third year as a receptionist. An unwitting chuckle escaped from Alina's lips.

"Yeah...this gravy train is what being a receptionist is all about...!"

In the town square she passed through towered one of the emblems of the city of Iffole, the giant crystal gate. Taller than the roof of a detached house, the blue, hexagonal crystal prism was a convenient transfer device that could teleport you to distant towns and dungeons. This valuable technology had been gleaned from the knowledge of the ancients, and it was no exaggeration to say this crystal gate had been key in turning Iffole into a metropolis.

"Hey, you guys caught a real prize there!"

"A raid boss, huh? Not bad!"

Right then, some adventurers returned with a massive dark gray monster strapped to a custom cart, causing a momentary stir. The townspeople and other adventurers who saw the creature called out to praise their accomplishment. The adventurers grinned bashfully at the praise, raising their hands in response.

Defeated monsters would normally disperse into mist and leave nothing behind. The monster in the cart—a giant Clay Golem of stone—had just been put into deep sleep, and they hadn't completely finished it off. They were

probably using the giant crystal gate in the square to carry it to a monster research lab in order to use its parts for weapons and armor.

It must have taken multiple parties working together to defeat the creature, as a crowd of adventurers surrounded the cart, smiling with satisfaction while sharing their impressions of the battle.

Viewing the pleasant scene out of the corner of her eye, Alina deliberately took the long way around, into a back alley. But then—

“Alina!” came a call from behind, turning her expression momentarily dour. She didn’t stop or turn back, just went right ahead, but the owner of that voice completely ignored the rejection in her body language and came up to her side.

“Man, what a coincidence, seeing you in a place like this!”

If he were a dog, he would certainly be wagging his tail hard enough to rip it off—it went without saying that the man who’d come to make that bold-faced remark to her, smiling all the while, was Jade Scrade.

“...You were following me.”

“I—I wasn’t following you. No way was I lying in wait for you to come out or anything, okay?” Jade blatantly looked away, desperately waving his hands as he changed the subject. “More importantly, Alina, you’re tired from work, right? Let’s go out to eat! I’ll treat you to something nice!”

“I’m fine. I’m still working.”

“Then is there nothing you want? It’s my treat! So join Silver—”

“No, thank you.”

“...”

Seeing Alina was completely unapproachable, Jade touched his index fingers together and fell into a sulky silence for a while before muttering, “...But look, if Slay from this afternoon comes back to try again, you’ll be in trouble.”

“Your concern is unnecessary.”

“So then where are you going, Alina?”

“I’m. Going. Back. To. Work! Don’t follow me!!!”

Shaking off the persistent tank, Alina raced through the back alley.

“Dammit, every single one of ’em pisses me off...”

Slay Ghost clicked his tongue loudly, angrily kicking a rock lying in the square.

A roiling anger rose within him as he remembered the incident at the quest office that afternoon. Especially that receptionist. Not only had she not shrieked once, that bitch had been looking at him like he was trash—

“...Yup, I won’t be satisfied until I knock her off her feet...!”

Slay stopped. His eyes happened to land on the monster on the cart that was parked in the big square.

Judging from the large size of that giant stone creature, it was no ordinary boss. He strolled up to examine it, and it seemed to be asleep.

Observing the rough stone face of the Clay Golem, a cruel light lit in Slay’s eyes.

“Hya-ha-ha...! I’ll knock ’em all off their feet...!”

13

“...She ran away from me...”

Watching Alina disappear into the back alley, Jade slumped his shoulders.

He knew that no amount of persistence would make her change her mind.

It would be easy to use his status to force her into joining Silver Sword. But there would be no point in that. There was nothing more fragile than a party that had been put together by force. At the very least, he had to offer conditions for working with them that Alina would deem acceptable.

Jade had no idea what those were. She wasn't the kind of person to be won over by money or material things, either—

“What should I do...?” he muttered with a heavy sigh. Suddenly, the whole back alley shuddered. “Huh?” Jade furrowed his brows in confusion. There came another big tremor, then another, and a sinking feeling caught in his chest. That was when...

GWAAAAAAAAAAAA!

...an earsplitting, inhuman howl rang out. Jade widened his eyes. “A monster?!”

At the same time, he could hear someone yelling in the back alley, “Oh no! A golem's started rampaging in the square!”

Before they were even finished speaking, Jade had already raced out onto the main road. In a complete departure from the quiet back alley, there were already villagers on their way home here, crying out and falling over themselves as they ran this way and that in a crucible of confusion.

“!”

Jade immediately noticed what was wrong. A rough stone face was peeking out above the orange roofs. It was the head of the giant Clay Golem.

“No way...!”

Jade pushed aside the scrambling bystanders, racing for the central square. The monster that had been put to sleep in the square when he’d passed by there earlier came to mind. Had it grown violent after being roused from its slumber? Whatever it was, they couldn’t have a monster like this rampaging right in the middle of town. With a grim expression on his face, Jade raced into the big square.

“Hey, what’s going on...?”

Jade trailed off once he laid eyes on the scene in the square.

The area was in a horrible state. The stone paving had been pulled up, benches were crushed, and the giant crystal gate—the symbol of Iffole—was swaying back and forth, with large cracks running through it.

But the worst aspect of that nightmarish scene was the many adventurers who had fallen.

The eerie red eyes of the Clay Golem were trained on the adventurers slumped at its feet. The stone monster had its hands together to form a double fist, which was already high above its head.

“Yeep...!”

With their weapons and armor cracked and broken, the adventurers could do nothing but stare up dumbly as the Clay Golem brought down its fists...

Jade took the shield off his back and slid in front of them. A heartbeat later, the Clay Golem’s fists, teeming with centrifugal force, slammed into his greatshield. The shock of impact was intense. Jade’s whole body shuddered, but he managed to block the attack.

“J-Jade?!”

“Withdraw, now!” he shouted to the others, and they got to their feet. When Jade noticed the Clay Golem’s gaze following one of the adventurers as he ran off, he drew the sword at his waist.

“*Hastor!*”

He cast an illusion spell. This incantation for tanks messed with its target’s

awareness, capturing their attention for a short time. When he thrust his sword, wreathed in magic light, into the ground, it glowed even harder, and the Golem immediately stopped trying to chase after the adventurers. Then the Golem turned its wide, round stone face toward Jade.

“I’ve pulled the Golem’s aggro! I’ll hold him here in the square!”

GWAAAAAAAAA!

Roaring loud enough to make the ground tremble, the stone giant changed its target to Jade and swung at him.

“Ngh!”

He blocked the blow with his greatshield, but it shoved his braced legs back slightly. It was an incredible attack. If anyone but a tank with strong defense had taken it, they’d have gone flying instantly or died on the spot in the worst case.

“You can’t...block that alone, Jade...! That thing is a raid boss...!” One of the adventurers being carried over someone’s shoulder just barely shouted that to him. The man was carrying a shield—he must have been one of the adventurers who had put the Clay Golem to sleep and carried it into the square.

“A raid boss...?! ”

Jade groaned bitterly and looked up at the Clay Golem.

What made the monsters called raid bosses special was their giant size, which granted them abnormally high endurance and attack power, more than double that of regular bosses. It was essentially impossible to defeat them without multiple parties, so you needed to get at least three together to take them on, ensuring you had plenty of tanks and healers in your ranks.

“...I understand. So then what’s going on here?”

“I—I have no idea... We were thinking of getting materials from it, so we put it to sleep and brought it back... It shouldn’t have woken up for three days at the very least, but it suddenly went on a rampage...”

“So that means—”

“Hya-ha-ha-ha! You’re here, trash tank!” a familiar-sounding laugh rained

down on them, cutting Jade off.

He looked up and saw a figure on the shoulder of the Golem. That man with a red tattoo on the left side of his face was Slay Ghost, the very same adventurer who had been ranting and raving at Iffole Counter that afternoon.

“You...!”

“Hee-hee, this is a nice view. How do you like this? My Sigrus skill, *Sigrus Jammer*.”

Slay’s smug remark told Jade everything. “You’re controlling it, Slay?!”

“That’s right. This guy is in my sleep state right now. It’s rampaging around in its dreams!”

“Do you understand what you’re doing? If a golem goes wild in the middle of town—”

“Oh, I completely get it. I’m gonna crush you, that irritating receptionist, and this whole damn town!”

An uncanny cracking sound leaped to Jade’s ears. Something like a big white orb was growing between the rough rocks on one of the Golem’s legs. In the blink of an eye, it swelled over the rest of the rocks, making the leg even larger. The Clay Golem lifted up that giant limb.

“I-it’s using *Death Crush*!”

“No way! If he uses that skill here...”

The adventurers in the square immediately cried out, faces going pale.

“Th-that move will even instakill a tank! Don’t try to block it! Run, Jade!”

“You’re telling me to—”

Jade felt the strange aura of the attack as a tingling on his skin. His instincts were practically as sharp as an animal’s, and they were telling him to dodge. But when he quickly surveyed the area, he saw there were still a number of adventurers close by who couldn’t stand on their own. They would surely perish if he didn’t block this now.

“...!”

Jade glared at the bottom of the giant's foot and raised his partner in life—his greatshield. A *boom* sounded as the Golem stepped forward, and Jade yelled, "Skill Activate: *Sigrus Wall*!" The ability's red light enveloped his whole body. The greatshield and his armor immediately hardened, increasing his defense power. A heartbeat later, the Clay Golem brought down his massive foot on him with a heavy thud.

"Jade!!"

He'd just barely blocked the attack.

Though the ground was caving in around his feet from the force of the impact, Jade was resisting the giant's stomp with superhuman defense. The adventurers in the square all held their breath.

"Wh-whoa, he blocked a *Death Crush*..."

But even so, Jade was looking worse for wear. Even if he was managing to withstand it now, he would quickly grow too fatigued to keep on blocking if the battle dragged on. He glanced over at the crystal gate; it was broken and lined with huge cracks, so they wouldn't be able to use it to teleport.

"...We have no choice but to bring it down here...!" Jade yelled. "I'll block this thing's attacks! Gather more adventurers in the meantime!"

"B-but you can't take that on alon—"

"The longer this goes on, the more likely I am to lose. Hurry up!"

"...Roger!"

Though the adventurers looked back guiltily, they scattered out of the square.

"Ha, there it is, *Sigrus Wall*. To think you took an attack from a raid boss on your own and lived. You really are Silver Sword material." Looking down from the shoulder of the giant, Slay stroked his chin as if he were impressed. But the smirk he wore showed he was unfazed. "But how long can you hold out against a raid boss without a subtank and a healer?"

"..."

Slay was right. When fighting a powerful raid boss, the correct choice was to have multiple tanks taunting it in turn, switching out over the course of a long

fight to keep it from focusing its attacks on one tank. No matter how capable a tank was, they would quickly run out of strength if they took the brunt of every intense attack.

“Heh-heh...you get it now, trash tank? I’m someone you shouldn’t be making mad!”

The Clay Golem cried out as if irritated by the prey that it had failed to crush underfoot, and it stomped on Jade a few more times. With each booming stomp, the whole square shuddered. Jade withstood its attacks while slowly guiding the Clay Golem away from the injured.

“Ha-ha! Getting it to follow you to protect the worms who can’t move? It’s tough being a tank, huh... But even that is pointless. Hey, Clay Golem! Turn this town into hell!”

When Slay gave the instruction, the Clay Golem hunched over as if it were charging up.

“What is it this time?”

GAAAAAAAAAAAH!

With a particularly loud roar, pieces of rock flew from the Clay Golem’s body in all four directions.

“An area attack...! Shit!”

Suddenly, pieces of rock were raining down over the city, breaking the rows of orange roofs and stone walls. In the blink of an eye, screams rose all throughout Iffole.

Area attacks were the one thing you couldn’t block by drawing aggro. Feeling deep regret, Jade repelled a flying rock as it rained down on him. It rolled along the ground—but it wasn’t just a piece of rock.

It slowly swelled up, then suddenly transformed into a human figure, becoming a little golem that attacked Jade.

“Wha...?!”

He swiftly swung his sword and sliced the small golem in two. Its defense was nothing like that of its parent, but if this many went rampaging around the

town...

“Hya-ha-ha, this is a disaster, huh? The whole city’s become a battlefield!”

“Dammit, you bastard...”

Jade grimaced. Now that small golems were tearing through the city, the adventurers would be forced to focus on dealing with them. That would make gathering forces even more difficult. This fight was getting uglier and uglier.

14

“Aghh geez, it’s so loud...!”

Alina glared at a stack of paperwork back in the offices of Iffole Counter. The roar of the Golem was loud enough to rattle the windows, making her scowl.

Iffole Counter was pretty close to the big square where the stone monster was rampaging, so of course everyone had evacuated, and it was completely empty...with the exception of Alina, who was at her desk frantically doing office work.

“...My...stupid boss...!!” Alina said in a low voice as she glared at a piece of paper with *Please finish the report form for the complaint this morning* written on it. She had clearly not gotten this order from her boss before going out to shop.

Of course, securing her safety was more important than her superior’s order. But Alina knew—you had to do these sorts of forms within the day, or you were guaranteed to forget the details. And then it would take forever to fill out, and the task would drag on like a poison or a curse, interfering with your ability to go home on time the next day.

And what awaited beyond that was the thing she dreaded most...overtime. This wasn’t the time to be leisurely evacuating.

“Stupid manager...! I won’t stand for this,” she said in a low voice. Just then, a particularly loud roar boomed out from the big square.

GAAAAAAAAAAGH!

That summoned a chain of screams, and the situation seemed to devolve into further chaos.

“Huh?”

The roar even got Alina to check out what was going on outside. Beyond the orange roofs, she could see countless rocks flying out from the rampaging Clay

Golem. Riding on its shoulder was Slay, the customer with a complaint who had caused that tiff at the office that morning. It looked like this mess was his fault.

...Well, he is the type who you can't talk down. This shouldn't be a surprise.

As someone who had to deal with troublesome customers on a daily basis, Alina gazed on the scene with utter calm.

He'd caused a total disaster. But surely some adventurers would show up, subduing both him and the monster. This was Iffole, the city of adventurers, after all. Didn't he know the place was crawling with them?

"And so what, it's just an area attack. It's nothing to freak out about—"

Suddenly, Alina froze as she watched the rocks go flying with abandon.

A number of them were flying in a direction that she knew well. It was a place pretty close to the big square, a quiet residential district—the neighborhood where her home was.

"Wha...?"

Despite being mentally stunned, Alina's body activated her skill practically on instinct. With a burst of white light, she leaped up with superhuman leg strength, jumping across the roofs to head to her house in a flash.

As she got closer to her home, a bad feeling swelled within her. Against the cityscape, she spotted her ordinary, orange-roofed house. Maybe it was her imagination, though; she could see a silhouette like some sort of twisted chimney stuck in it... No, she could now see it clearly with her naked eye. But she didn't want to believe it, so she dashed single-mindedly for her house. And when she landed in front of her house, she laid eyes on...

"Ah...ah..."

...a fragment of the Clay Golem, burrowed into the orange roof of her precious home.

"N-no way..."

The sight was more than enough to make her mind go blank. Her legs gave out, and she fell to her knees. As she sat there, stunned, the rock swelled up before her to turn into a golem that tottered unsteadily, went through the roof

where it had been caught, and fell into the house.

With each flail of the golem's limbs, there came a rattling and crashing. Windowpanes broke, a hole opened in the floor, and the whole door flew away. It sounded as though her house was wailing in pain.

"...But I still have...thirty more years...on my loan..." Watching in shock as her house was reduced to mere rubble, Alina felt a single sensation quietly spark within her.

"...That...stupid whining assshooooooooooooole!" Flames of rage roared in Alina's eyes. She staggered to her feet and turned back to where the Clay Golem had appeared in the big square. She had lost all rational sense now, the rest of her thoughts drowned out by anger.

"I'll kill you."

15

“Hya-ha-ha-ha! It’s no use no matter how many petty adventurers show up—you’re done!”

As Slay shouted this, the Golem took a big sweep at the adventurers. The attackers, who’d been focused on dealing damage, didn’t manage to evade in time and were blown away. Heals went flying to them immediately after.

He’s right...there’s not enough of us...!

Jade calmly analyzed the situation. Though they’d gathered a few parties’ worth of people, he couldn’t say things had improved.

“Dammit, my moves won’t reach!”

“Come on, ranged attackers, hurry and hit it with your magic!”

“You idiot! I can’t just blast magic right in the middle of town!”

The adventurers were hard-pressed in the face of the Clay Golem’s defenses. As its appearance suggested, the Clay Golem had high resistance to physical attacks. It stood to reason, then, that it would be best to attack its weaknesses with magic.

“Shit...this really is the worst place for a battle...”

What to do? As Jade ruminated on his regrets with a scowl, something terrifyingly fast came zooming in and hit the arm of the Clay Golem.

GEEEEEEOOH!

The Golem cried out in pain, which came as little surprise. That thing had come flying in so hard, the Golem’s right arm was torn from its socket.

“Huh?!”

Even Slay, standing atop the Clay Golem’s shoulder as it staggered wildly, widened his eyes in shock at that, his smile wiped off his face.

All eyes were on the Golem’s severed arm flying through the air as it fell on

the crystal gate in the center of the square. As the giant blue crystal tilted over even farther, there was fluttering of a cloak, and then someone landed before Jade.

It was the small-framed adventurer, their whole head covered by a cloak, holding a giant war hammer.

Jade's eyes bugged out of his head as he took in the sharp contrast between her tiny body and her massive weapon. "Ali— Executioner?!"

Noticing her presence, the other adventurers stopped what they were doing to stare at the hooded war hammer wielder.

"Hey, is that...? No way, is that the Executioner?!"

"Why are they here?! I thought they only showed up in dungeons where progress had stalled!"

Even with many eyes on her, Alina, dressed up as the Executioner, didn't react at all. She just stood there silently, her head hanging.

Jade hastily called out from behind her. "Wait, even you can't go up against a raid boss—"

"Executioner!" Atop the shoulder of the Golem, Slay spied the war hammer user and cried out gleefully. "Hya-ha-ha-ha! This is getting interesting... You're the one the guild is going crazy trying to find! If I kill you, it'll piss them off a hell of a lot!"

"...Executioner!" Jade instinctually grabbed Alina's shoulder and stopped her. "It takes multiple parties to beat a raid boss! If you're going to fight, you should work together with every—"

Alina swiped his hand aside, cutting off his warning as she muttered in the softest voice, "How dare you...my only comfort..."

"Huh?"

"...That house...that home...was my only comfort...from my exhaustion from work... An oasis...in modern society... It was...my paradise...!!!"

"...Huh?"

“That...house... How dare...how dare...how...dare...!”

Alina trembled in rage and clenched her war hammer. Her cloak fluttered eerily as an incredibly murderous aura emanated from her body. It was so terrifying that Jade stiffened up. Dripping cold sweat, he timidly called out to her. “H-hey! Execu—”

“I’ll kill you!”



Boiling with rage, Alina leaped off the ground to reach the Clay Golem's remaining left arm in a single bound. Then she swung the war hammer from the side, the wind whizzing around it as she kicked up a whirlwind and struck.

There was a sickening *crack*. Although the Clay Golem had resisted every physical attack that had been thrown at it before now, her blow shattered its forearm to pieces.

GOOOOOOGH!

The Clay Golem cried out and lurched backward. Its red eyes, which had been locked on Jade, were unable to resist the urge to swing toward Alina.

“...H-Hastor!”

Jade hastily raised his sword, thrusting the shining tip of his blade into the ground. He pulled the attention that had been directed at Alina back to himself, and the Golem faced him again. The monster had been on the verge of approaching her. Certain that it had stopped, Jade sighed in relief and shock.

Wha...? Just how strong was that attack?! If I let my guard down, she'll take all the aggro herself...!

Even if you used magic to draw the enemy's attention, strong blows that hit hard in succession shifted their focus to back the attacker. Right after major, time-consuming spells from black mages, you'd have to watch out to make sure the enemy's attention didn't shift toward them—but even so, not once in all the time Jade had tanked for Silver Sword had the aggro been peeled off him like this. All Alina had done was hit the enemy to begin with.

I never imagined she had such incredible attack power...!

Jade furrowed his brow with a different kind of tension. Each time that Alina attacked, he would have to recast Hastor at the same moment, or the aggro would come off him easily, just like now.

Alina's cloak...doesn't look like decent armor. At the very least, it doesn't look like it can resist an attack from a raid boss... Even if it's on the off chance, I can't let her take any attacks...!

And like, it's bad for my heart as the tank if you fight in just that thin coat

against a monster, so could you not. Jade complained in his head as he gulped with anxiety. Shield raised, he focused on Alina's movements to keep the enemy's attention from leaving him for even a second.

But she knew nothing of his anxiety. She was muttering softly to herself as she let rage take over, leaping off the ground. "The sin of destroying my paradise...deserves certain death... I'll strike you down to hell..." She easily jumped up even higher than the roofs, to the same height as the Golem's face. Her cloak flapping, she brought up her war hammer in midair.

"S...s-strike her down, Clay Golem!" Slay ordered thoughtlessly, panicking.

It swung up its arm sluggishly as it was commanded. No—it actually had no arms left to raise, since Alina had just destroyed half of the Golem.

"Repent with your life...you...big lugaaaaaaaaaaaaaaggh!!!!!" Alina brought her rage-filled war hammer down atop the Golem's head.

There it is! The aggro!

Jade readied his sword to recast Hastor immediately—but his hand stopped right there.

BATHUUUNK!

Alina delivered such a powerful blow that the Golem's head sunk into its body—no, it penetrated right through its body to crash into the ground.

Jade had been bracing himself to regain the enemy's attention, while Slay had been right there watching the unbelievable power of Alina's strike. Both of them gave the same flat reaction at the same time.

"...Huh?"

"...Huh?"

It wasn't just the two of them. Everyone who had been watching the Executioner's battle in the square was silent, gaping at the Clay Golem, which was still frozen in an upright position despite missing its head.

"I...finished it off...in one strike...", Alina muttered in the silence.

In the hush of the square, the Golem's massive frame wavered and tilted.

Starting from the ends of its four limbs, it dissolved into dust, and by the time it was tipped over, its whole body had dispersed and vanished.

“N-no way... You’re kidding me. Not a single one of *our* attacks worked...!”

“Is this...a dream...?”

As Jade looked at the adventurers, whose mouths were hanging half-open in shock, he suddenly realized why Alina hadn’t worried one whit about armor. It wasn’t even that she was just ignorant; she was simply so overwhelmingly powerful that she could end everything in one strike, so she didn’t need armor in the first place.

Alina landed with a *thump*, but she didn’t look at the adventurers or at Jade as she marched toward Slay with her war hammer over her shoulder.

“...S-stay away from me!” Slay shouted on the ground, his voice cracking with fear. “Wh-who are you?! What the hell was with that attack?! You’re not human! This is impossible, impossible!”

Ignoring his cries, Alina remained silent and kept walking toward him.

“S-say something, you, monst—”

“Don’t...,” Alina muttered softly, “break...other people’s...things.”

Now she was right in front of Slay. The blood had completely drained from his face, leaving him pale as a sheet. She stopped, taking in his expression of despair.

“Yeep!”

“Did no one ever teach you that...? You”—she swung up her war hammer—“stupid whining assshooooooooole!”

“GYAAAAAAGH!”

A *kaslam* roared out through the town as she smashed down the war hammer—not on Slay’s face, but right beside his ear on the stone paving of the square.

But that weapon, which had slaughtered a raid boss in one strike, was more than enough to make him faint like a maiden and piss his pants to boot.

16

“My...home...”

The residential district of Iffole was dyed red beneath the sunset. Alina was huddling by the side of the road, her arms around her legs, gazing sadly upon her beloved, half-destroyed house.

Repairs to the damage the Clay Golem had done to the city of Iffole had already begun. Though evening had fallen, the city was still bustling, with construction workers rushing all around, carrying wooden planks under their arms.

Fortunately, the damage to the city had been minimized because the Golem was kept within the bounds of the square and defeated swiftly. Apparently, Slay’s license had been revoked, and he’d been tossed in an underground cell, but Alina didn’t care about that whiner anymore.

“Wow...it got hit real hard, huh...?”

Beside her, even Jade seemed at a loss for words, standing there vacantly as he gazed at the gruesome sight. Alina sniffled. The thing she wanted to protect the most lay in ruins before her.

“How do I go on living tomorrow...? Now where do I find comfort from the mental and physical exhaustion of work...? And I had thirty years left on my loan, too... This isn’t fair...”

“Ah, Alina—”

Jade’s words caught in his throat, and he was silent for a while. His gaze wandered about as if he were unsure of something, but in the end, it fell on Alina’s small rounded back. Clenching his fists in determination, he yelled, “...T-tonight! Why not stay at my place?!”

“I’m staying at an inn, duh! Can you not talk nonsense?”

“...”

Alina rose to her feet to give him a look. He was frozen up and white like a statue.

She furrowed her brow with displeasure, then sniffed. "Because of that stupid whining customer going on a rampage, I have to do overtime. Get lost already."

"...Okay." Jade's sorrowful response rang out in the dark of the residential area.

17

Late at night in Iffole, while everyone was slumbering in bed, a man and a woman were out walking.

They were in the square where the Clay Golem had gone on a rampage that afternoon. The symbol of the area, the crystal gate, was still in ruins. It looked like the aftermath of a war zone.

No. A raid boss was just rampaging right in the middle of the city. We should be grateful; it's miraculous that this was the extent of the damage.

Glen Garia stroked his chin as he gazed upon the square, faintly lit by a single surviving streetlamp. "So the Executioner showed up here?"

"Yes, that's what I've heard," replied his private secretary, Fili, who was in attendance beside him. She had a tight bun and silver-rimmed glasses. She furrowed her brow in obvious displeasure then pushed up her glasses. "Of course, Jade from Silver Sword was, as well. But why do you all fixate so much on the Executioner when you can't even be sure they exist? Many talented frontline attackers are registered with the guild."

"Well, that's because they're hiding some incredible possibilities."

"...You mean Dia skills?"

"We still don't know that yet. Not without meeting them in person. But it's worth figuring out for sure, and right now, I'm of the same opinion as Jade. I'd like to bring 'em into Silver Sword."

Fili breathed a small, resigned sigh. "...If you say so, then I won't argue... Guildmaster."

Glen Garia—to be more precise, the highest authority of the Adventurers Guild, the guildmaster—curled his lips up into a smirk. "Heh, you've made a mistake, Executioner. I'm thankful that you've protected Iffole, but now that you've shown yourself, your luck's run out... Don't resent my skill."

Glen held up one hand and declared into the darkness of the night, “Skill Activate: *Sigrus Chronos!*”

18

“Ahhhhhhh my house has caved in I got overtime in the end and I’m gonna curse that stupid whining customer for generations...!”

Alina’s resentment rang out through the office, late that night.

She was the only receptionist there at the moment. The other receptionists also had some paperwork they needed to catch up on, but they’d used the Clay Golem uproar as an excuse to leave work early.

“Well...I don’t know what I should say... But cheer up, Alina.”

Scowling, she glared at the man who’d said that irresponsible thing to her. “I told you to get lost. Why are you here?”

Who else but Jade Scrade was boldly sitting at the desk beside her.

If this were just some random adventurer, then she would have immediately reported him to the guild and had him thrown out. But since he was the leader of Silver Sword, equivalent to a position of authority in the Adventurers Guild, he even had the right to walk into the quest office, where it was staff only. That being said, Silver Sword consisted of dungeon-clearing elites, so they normally wouldn’t have any business in here.

“And hey, it’s got to be fine for you to go home by now, right? Everyone else has left,” Jade pointed out.

“Go home? Leaving this big mountain of papers? Yes, once, I was like that—the type to think, *I’m not in the mood today, so I’ll do it another time when I have more motivation...*”

“Huh?”

“But then I realized! Tomorrow suffers from today’s laziness...! Above all else, I’m never going to get even a *drop* of motivation to do overtime! And the longer you put it off, the more it piles up, until you’ve got a frightening amount of extra work on your hands. So I’ll deal with it right this instant! And then I’ll go

home on time tomorrow!”

“You’re a surprisingly hard-core worker, Alina.”

“Besides, I’m sure that all the inns are full today with people who have lost their houses like me. We have basically everything you need to stay overnight at the office.”

“Having everything you need to stay overnight is kind of...huh? Hey wait, if the inns are all booked, then it really is best if you stay over at my—”

“Sleeping at the office is ten billion times better than that.”

“Hey...”

“Like I keep *saying*! You’re obnoxious, so get lost already!”

“I don’t want to. Some nasty villain could show up and take advantage of all the commotion while the city is being rebuilt... I can’t leave a girl by herself. I’ll be waiting here until you’re finished with your work.” Jade beamed at her, as if he’d found a pretext.

Alina glanced at him, then scowled even deeper as she shifted her gaze to the papers on her desk. “As I said, your concern is unnecessary. If someone weird shows up, I’ll whack ‘em myself.”

“That’s fair, I guess. Anyways, I’ve finished up this pile of documents.”

“Huh?! Already?!” Alina kicked back her chair with a *bang* and leaped out of her seat when she heard his shocking report.

Jade had been hanging around and being annoying this whole time, but he kept going on about how he’d help her with overtime, so she’d just given him some sloppy instructions and a stack of papers and left him be.

“Also, I noticed a few simple omissions and entry errors, so I corrected those, too.”

“...”

Alina accepted the documents with a trembling hand, then briefly checked them over. She was speechless. The forms were perfectly filled out, as though they’d been processed by a veteran receptionist.

That was fast! But all I did was give him a brief rundown...! He processed the documents correctly, bundled them carefully, and even put them in the right order...and that's on top of checking them, too!

Alina's face grew paler than it had ever been when confronting a vicious monster, and she widened her eyes in shock.

With office work, each individual task was plain, monotonous, and simple. The problem was the overwhelming number of tasks you had to perform. And since processing quests was part of the public bureaucracy, you couldn't afford to make even a single notation error or leave even a single field unfilled.

The work of processing an incredible number of documents every day was basically a contest of stamina. Against a massive quantity of forms, you'd think you did everything right the first time, only to notice errors when you checked them again. People tended to underestimate filing documents and skimmed through them carelessly. Being able to fill them out perfectly was the mark of a true receptionist.

Not only did he process a pile of documents without any errors in a short period of time, but he also has the focus to maintain a high level of performance when it's almost midnight...! What incredible toughness he has... What competence...!

Clenching the documents, Alina bit her lip and fell silent for a few seconds. Then she glanced over at Jade as he was about to deal with the next stack and sat back down. "...Hey, have you done this type of office work in the past?"

"No? I've always been committed solely to adventuring. Well, I occasionally read instruction manuals on swordplay and how to bear a shield and stuff, but I have no history with office work."

Alina stiffened at his indifferent reply.

I see! So he's one of those naturally skilled types who can handle anything from the start with just a little bit of education and not make any mistakes!

Alina was the complete opposite. She was clumsy. No matter how she tried, she would start off by falling for every pitfall, and she wouldn't learn anything without making all the mistakes first. She gritted her teeth.

It had taken Alina over a year to perfectly manage the paperwork that Jade pulled off instantly.

“...Ngk.”

Feeling like her pride as a receptionist was being torn into shreds, Alina muttered in a low voice, “That pisses me off...*nothing* pisses me off more than people like you...!!”

“Huh? Did you say—?”

“Nobody pisses me off like naturals who show up and instantly jump right past all the blood, sweat, and tears I put in as a receptionist for three years!!!” Alina cried, banging her head on the scattered forms on her desk. “Why is the world so unfair?!”

“C-calm down, Alina! I’m not amazing! You just taught me well! Really!”

“W-wahh... I don’t wanna anymore... This day has just been a parade of unfairness... I can’t scrounge up any motivation anymore... I can’t work hard...”

“O-okay, Alina, just leave the rest to me and go to bed for the day. I’ll finish up everything perfectly.”

“But I’ve got too much pride as a receptionist to let you do that, either!” Almost teary-eyed, she glared resentfully at the flustered tank.

Just then, something hit the floor with a *thunk*.

“...?”

Her eyes were drawn to the sound. Under the glow of the lights, shining faintly, was half of a broken red stone, which just barely contained the magic sigil of the sun. It was a piece of the red orb that she had once crushed in order to threaten Jade.

“Is this...the red orb that you crushed before...?” His eyes following Alina’s, Jade paled a bit, perhaps remembering the fear he felt that day.

Alina sniffed as she scooped up the piece of the orb. “Yeah. It was perfect for a paperweight, so I’ve been using it.”

“A priceless relic as a paperweight...”

“What?”

“No, it’s noth... Hmm? Is there something written inside it?” The broken face must have caught Jade’s eye as he picked it up because he was pointing at it questioningly.

For the first time, Alina turned over the piece of the red orb and noticed that tiny gold letters were carved into its rough surface. “You’re right; something is written here...and whoa, you could spot it from that far away? But these letters are so tiny...”

“I told you, I have good eyes.”

That reminded her that, yes, those good eyes of his had exposed her side gig as an adventurer. Scowling at that unpleasant memory, Alina read out those little letters: “...Proces...sing...quests...?”

The moment she said that familiar phrase, a bright light flashed from the piece of orb.

“Get back!”

Alina instinctually turned away from the dazzling beam. Jade reacted quickly, slapping the orb out of her hands and pulling her behind his back.

“Whoa, hey!”

But the orb shard just bounced to the ground before it glowed brightly, then floated up as golden letters spiraled out from it into the air.

“What...?!”

The next instant, the golden letters lined up in midair to form a single sentence.

“Wh-what is this...? A...quest form...?”

Jade furrowed his brow as he read the letters floating in the air. For a message that had emerged in such a dramatic manner, its contents were very mundane. Once the whole thing was visible, Alina blinked in confusion.

DESIGNATED ADVENTURER RANK: N/A

LOCATION: THE WHITE TOWER

ACHIEVEMENT CONDITIONS: DEFEAT ALL FLOOR BOSSES

REQUEST GIVER WILL NOT BE INDICATED. RECEIVER SIGNATURE ABRIDGED.

RECEIPT OF QUEST ACKNOWLEDGED AS PER ABOVE.

After a while, the golden letters melted away, and the light vanished from the piece of red orb. Now just a piece of crystal, the shard hit the ground with a *thunk*. Silence followed.

“ ... ”

For ten seconds, Alina gazed at the now-inactive red orb and murmured, “... Maybe I’m tired...”

“This isn’t a dream, Alina.”

Jade cautiously picked up the piece of red orb. There wasn’t a trace of the golden letters that had been carved inside it.

“That was a quest form, right? Clearly,” he said.

“...Well, yeah.”

Both Alina and Jade had been processing a mountain of quest forms. This was one thing they could be absolutely certain about. The golden letters had very clearly just conveyed the same message as an average dungeon quest—leaving out the part where words had popped out of a shard.

“A quest form from a relic...?” Jade asked. “Anyway, I’ve never heard of a dungeon called the White Tower.”

“Yes, this is very strange. I’ll give you that strange relic, so good luck to Silver Sword for the rest.”

“Alina, you’re obviously trying to pretend you didn’t see that, aren’t you?”

“Of course. I’m not going to get myself involved in what’s clearly bound to be a hassle.”

“ ... ”

“What’s with that look? Do you want to say something...?! Listen, I’m already under enough pressure with work. You can see the mountain of documents in front of me, can’t you?! That has nothing to do with me!” she spat.

Jade breathed a sigh of resignation and eyed the relic. “Fair enough. For now, I guess investigating this relic comes first.”

19

A week had passed since the incident with the Clay Golem.

Alina had handled the paperwork that had been piling up far faster than anticipated, so now she was having another relaxing day at Iffole Counter. As far as she was concerned, things didn't get much better than this. But when she took a look at the morning newspaper, her jaw dropped.

Is the Executioner Based in Iffole? The Guild Seeks Their Exceptional Talent, but Where Are They?

Reading the headline that popped out from the front page, Alina covered her face with her palm.

I've done it again.

Even now, a week after the Clay Golem had gone on a rampage, the front page of the newspaper was decorated with an article about the Executioner. The guild had declared that they would grant them a major sum as reward for defeating the Golem and protecting the town, but they obviously weren't showing up to accept. And now the news was saying they were looking for them around Iffole, which she definitely should have expected.

Aaaaaaagh I've done it agaiiiiiiin...

Alina had been so angry about her house being destroyed that she'd tossed caution out the window to take revenge, and this was the result.

Worse still, it hadn't happened within the confines of a dungeon this time around. She had raged right in the middle of the city before the eyes of countless adventurers.

"Why does this always happen...? This is all because the Clay Golem destroyed my house!"

"Ah, you're grumpy again!"

She shuddered when she heard a voice come from behind. Turning around

with a jolt, Alina found the newbie receptionist, Laila, peering at her with wide eyes and bouncing pigtails.

“Oh, it’s you, Laila. You startled me.”

“What’s with that hello? Look at you, with that wrinkle between your eyes again!” She puffed up her cheeks in a huff, but that gave way to a carefree smile an instant later. “More importantly, thank you very much for helping me deal with that difficult customer the other day.”

She was referring to when Slay, that notorious whiner, caused an incident a week back.

“You were so cool! If you were a man, I would definitely fall for you!”

“W-well...guys like him are rough for a newbie to deal with all of a sudden...”

Laila probably wouldn’t have guessed Alina had been on the verge of whacking Slay in public back then. Alina darted her eyes around, a strained smile on her face.

This wasn’t the first time she’d needed to clean up after Laila. The girl wasn’t a very good employee, even as recent hires went, but her open honesty made her hard to hate.

“But like Jade said, please don’t be too reckless. You actually have a lot of hidden fans, Alina, so it would be awful if someone messed up your face— Hmm, what are you reading?”

“Oh, this is, uh...”

“This is...that Executioner person, right?” Laila noticed the newspaper, her eyes sparkling as soon as she saw the headline popping out on the front page. Then she huffed in enthusiasm and sidled up to Alina. “So that means you’re an Executioner stan, right?!”

“...Executioner stan?”

“Aww come on, I’m talking about whether you’re a Jade stan or an Executioner stan!”

“Uh, why the scary choice of options?” Alina scowled.

Laila stuck up her index finger with much self-importance and announced the most unbelievable fact. “Didn’t you know, Alina? Right now, the Executioner is just as popular with girls as Jade!”

“Huh...? Huh?”

“Never saying a word or revealing his true identity, appearing out of nowhere, calmly pulling off things that ordinary people could never accomplish, saving people from trouble before disappearing again...isn’t that just the *coolest*?! And most of all, he’s strong! Now that’s a guy you can stan!”

“I—I see...”

“And I’m not going to hide it—I stan the Executioner, too!” Laila said, narrowing her eyes in enthusiasm. She was the picture of a maiden in love.

“Even though you’ve never seen their face?”

“He’s obviously a handsome man underneath that hood! There’s no doubt!”

Exhaling aggressively from her nose, Laila sidled up to Alina. “He’s the hero who saved Iffole! And he’s so committed that even a reward won’t get him to reveal his name! *Eek*! That’s just too cool! I’d like him to hit me with that war ham— *Ahem*! Protect me, rather...”

“...”

Laila had let slip some sort of desire, but she corrected herself immediately. She seemed utterly wrapped up in fantasies about the Executioner as she twisted this way and that, like she was ready to faint. At this point, all Alina could do was sigh.

Apparently, the world had already made the Executioner into a mysterious, handsome adventurer with a heart of justice.

“And then there was his completely unexpected team-up with Jade against the Clay Golem this time around! Did you see it?! Is there anything more extravagant?! The strongest tank working with the strongest attacker, and they’re both hotties! The headcanon writes itself...!”

“I see. I’m glad you’re happy.”

For now, it seemed like no one had seen her face. Feeling both relieved and

exasperated, Alina heaved a sigh. Just then...

“G-guildmaster?!”

An overexcited cry rang out through Iffole Counter. It was followed by the loud pattering as the office chief, who rarely seemed to do anything other than sip tea at his desk, leaped out to greet him.

Everyone else who worked at Iffole Counter said the chief was like a rock; he never moved from his desk, and he rarely ever left the office. But now he was rushing to greet their unexpected visitor, dripping sweat and pale in the face.

“Huh?! I-is that...the guildmaster?!”

Laila caught her breath in shock as she spotted their guest across the counter.

She wasn't the only one to be caught off guard. Everyone at Iffole Counter widened their eyes as they turned to look at the man standing there.

He was past middle age, and the guild crest was woven into his fluttering cape. His hair was shaved short, the look in his eyes was sharp, and his skin was tanned light brown. Though there were wrinkles on his face, his physique was no lesser than that of any young adventurer in the office.

Th-the guildmaster...Glen Garia?!

Alina was also startled by the arrival of this rare visitor.

Glen Garia. During his adventuring days, he'd wielded a greatsword as a frontline attacker. He'd claimed the title of the strongest for himself and now held the highest position of authority in the Adventurers Guild, the guildmaster.

“G-G-G-Guildmaster! How unusual to see you all the way out here...!”

The office chief was clearly flustered, which came as little surprise. Iffole flourished primarily because of its adventurers, so it was fair to say the leader of the organization that supported them, the Adventurers Guild, functionally controlled the city. This wasn't someone who would just wander into one any old office in town.

“Hey, there's no need for alarm. I'm just going on a stroll because I had some time to burn.” Glen gave an amiable smile that contrasted with his rugged looks as he clapped his hand on the office chief's shoulder.

“B-but if we’d known ahead of time that you would be here...”

“Ga-ha-ha! It’s fine, it’s fine, don’t fuss so much over me. I just heard that the Executioner had showed up nearby, so I stopped by to kill a little time.”

Alina tensed at the guildmaster’s remark.

“A-are you referring to how they put down the Clay Golem the other day?” asked the office chief.

“They put on an impressive show, didn’t they? It’s made me curious about them, too.”

Glen glanced around the office, then strolled up to the first reception window to catch his eye.

It was Alina’s reception window.

Wh...why is he coming to meeeeeeeee?!

This man was functionally the highest authority in the city of Iffole. It went without saying that he was the last person she wanted to run into. She was so anxious that the blood drained from her face. The guildmaster came up to her just as a nasty sweat started dripping down her back.

“Hey, how are things going, lovely receptionist?”

It was incredibly intense seeing him this close up.

This was the strongest adventurer of them all, a man whose name had once roared across the continent. He had a completely different air about him than the adventurers with whom she usually dealt at her window. His eyes seemed to see through everything, which made Alina even more anxious.

Though the chief was watching her in a way that suggested he was worrying about her screwing up somehow, Alina nevertheless managed to put on her usual customer service smile. “Nothing’s out of order.”

“I see, I see, that’s great.” Glen gave a hearty guffaw, then continued like he had suddenly thought of something. “By the way, do you know what my skill is, little miss?”

“Of course.” Without time to think, Alina nodded. “It’s *Sigrus Chronos*, a

Sigrus skill that enables you to stop time in your locality, and also lets you turn back time to observe the events of the pa..." Suddenly, Alina got a sinking feeling and trailed off. Why was she getting déjà vu? It was just like that time when that stupid Silver Bastard, Jade Scrade, boldly sidled up to her reception window and told her he'd seen the Executioner's face.

"Correct. I'd expect nothing less of a receptionist."

"Th-thank you very much," she responded, her face stiffening.

Glen narrowed his eyes, as though he'd figured out why she was panicking. "For example, I can use my skill to stop time in the main square where that unidentified Executioner appeared, then rewind time by a week. Then I can even peek at the face behind that hood."

"Ahhh, Guildmaster!" said the office chief. "So you came to ascertain the Executioner's identity."

"Half-right, Chief." His eyes still focused on Alina, Glen arched the corners of his lips into a smirk. Next, he said something incredible. "The truth is, I've already seen them."

Alina's heart leaped in her chest.

What...did he just say?

She stood there in a daze as she stared at the guildmaster across the counter.

His gaze bore straight into her. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest, and Glen's face seemed to fade out of focus.

"D-does that mean you know who the Executioner is, then...?" the office chief timidly inquired. His voice somehow sounded like it was coming from far away.

The moment when it seemed the identity of the infamous executioner would finally be revealed, tension ran through Iffole Counter. At last, all commotion faded away, as everyone awaited the guildmaster's response.

So it's over? she thought in the back of her mind, as if this were about someone else.

Is it over?

After a long silence, Glen flicked his eyes away from Alina and shrugged dramatically. “Unfortunately, I didn’t find out who they were.”

He laid a hand over his face in a theatrical manner, shaking his head wide before continuing. “Ultimately, *Sigrus Chronos* only lets me peek into the events of the past. I can’t change what happened there at all. And it turns out that bastard was wearing a mask under their hood. They were careful as hell. They anticipated my skill.”

“I-is that true...? I can’t believe they managed to get around your ability...” The chief slumped his shoulders, and everyone at Iffole Counter went back to their business.

Except for Alina, who was as still as a statue.

She hadn’t been wearing a mask.

Of the people there, only Alina was certain.

Ahhh—he got me.

“Silver Sword needs a talented frontline attacker right away. We would very much like to welcome the Executioner...or rather, that war hammer wielder, into their ranks. But it seems that they won’t be budged into joining.”

Glen glanced over at Alina. He was giving her the exact same look that Jade had given her when he’d learned she was the Executioner. The guildmaster knew who the receptionist across from him really was. He had definitive knowledge of this. And he hadn’t shown up at Iffole Counter just to kill time.

“Now then, I’d feel bad to hang around too long while you’re working, so I’ll get going. Sorry to bother you, miss.” Glen gave her a bold-faced smile, then leaned in toward her. “It’s hard to talk here. I’ve got a coach ready out back. Come to the guild headquarters,” he whispered to her.

“!” Alina’s eyes widened. By the time she jerked up her head in shock, Glen was already leaving her reception window and holding up a hand at the office chief, who was trying to walk him to the door.

“...”

In the end, Glen left without revealing her identity to anyone.

The mood in the coach was dour.

“I got found out... I got found out... I got found out...,” Alina muttered like a spell, burying her face into her knees as she sat on the edge of her seat. She was totally absorbed in her own misery.

The guildmaster had very courteously arranged a coach to pick her up. It had been waiting in a back alley a short distance from Iffole Counter, where people wouldn’t see. Alina would rather have died than get in, but she had no choice since her identity had been exposed.

She’d taken her afternoon break, then left Iffole in the coach en route to the Adventurers Guild headquarters, which was outside the city limits.

Under normal circumstances, being picked up in a coach would have been luxurious, but right now Alina felt like a death row prisoner heading to the guillotine or a cow on the way to the butcher.

I’ve been found out I’ve been found out I’ve been found out I thought I’d eventually get found out but now it’s really happened...

Fired. That word spun around inside her head.

She’d been so stupid, she could laugh—though there was absolutely nothing funny about the situation.

Things were seriously not okay this time. She wasn’t dealing with someone like Jade, whom she could threaten to make things work out somehow. If she used the same tactics on the guildmaster, she’d be worse than fired. She would basically be kissing her life good-bye.

“C’mon, don’t get so down, Alina.”

That comment wasn’t comforting in the slightest. Alina glared at the man beside her, Jade Scrade, and smacked at his hand as he tried to take advantage of the confusion to reach out and rub her back.

Jade had ridden along in the coach that picked her up. Sitting opposite him were two other adventurers.

One was a small-statured girl with a bob cut carrying a long rod, and the other was a lanky and lean mage in a black robe. Alina knew them both. Lululee Ashford and Lowe Losblender—famous first-class adventurers with powerful Sigrus skills. They were also members of Silver Sword.

This lineup suggested the guild was willing to use force to keep her from running away until they got to the guild headquarters.

“Cheer up, Alina,” said Jade. “The guildmaster isn’t going to gobble you up or anything.”

“Don’t talk to me, snitch.”

“Hey, I didn’t tell anyone. Trust me on that, at least.”

“Shut up... Who cares... I hate you. Hit your pinkie on a dresser corner and die.” Alina was taking it out on the wrong person.

“Huh...?!” Jade asked, his lips trembling as he wore an expression that looked like he’d been struck by lightning. “You...h...h...hate...me...?” As pale as death, he hunched over and brought his arms around his knees, just like Alina. “Even though you called me stupid and told me to die and get lost, the fact that you hadn’t said you hated me was my one saving grace...”

“Jade, she probably hated you quite a lot from the star—mggh!” The healer, Lululee, attempted to make a rather apt jab, but the black mage Lowe hastily covered her mouth.

“The man is heartbroken enough as is, Lulu. Don’t finish him off.”

“I mean, it’s the truth.”

“A man in love is a delicate thing.”

“Jade’s in love...? Jade, the guy who never so much as looks at the pretty girls who come on to him? I want to cheer him on, but it looks like he’s got no chance, so—mggh!”

“Lulu.”

“He’s got to accept reality.”

“So there *is* a woman out there who doesn’t have eyes for Jade. Color me surprised.”

The girl with the bob and the red-haired black mage whispered to each other while Jade sat in the corner, distressed. Glancing at the carefree Silver Sword crew made her want to ask, *Are you aware that right now you’re actually about to put an end to my life as a receptionist?* Alina hit the window of the coach with a heavy sigh.

“But anyway, could a cutie like you really be the Executioner?” Lowe leaned forward like he couldn’t hold back anymore. “*You’re* the one who took down the Hellflame Dragon and destroyed the Clay Golem in a single swing? Really? You just look like a receptionist to me...”

“You’ll learn soon enough,” Jade muttered, but Lowe still didn’t seem convinced, tilting his head.

“...But if Alina’s the Executioner, she must actually want to be a receptionist, huh,” Lululee interjected with disapproval. “Sure, she might be strong, but isn’t it mean to force her into adventuring?” she pointed out.

“I agree.” Lowe nodded deeply. “Any man who forces a girl to do something she doesn’t want is a disgrace—not to mention that a party put together by force would obviously fall apart right away to begin with. It’d be awkward for us, too.”

“Hey, Jade? She rescued us when we fought the Hellflame Dragon and also saved Iffole from the Clay Golem. I think the guildmaster would be the last man to repay her for that like this... You must have heard something, right, Jade? Be nice and spit it out!”

“...It’s a secret,” was all he said before falling silent.

21

A giant stone fort stood a short distance away from the city of Iffole. The guild flag soared above the watchtower there, and beyond its sturdy iron gates was an area about as large as a town.

The Adventurers Guild headquarters had once been an S-class dungeon itself. Glen Garia had cleared it during his days as an elite adventurer, and the guild now used it as their base of operations.

Flanked by Silver Sword, Alina proceeded down a long stone hallway. Eventually, she went through a set of open iron doors to a broad courtyard. Or perhaps *courtyard* wasn't entirely accurate; there were no flowers or benches in sight. It was just a cold, open space, big enough to easily fit a large crew fighting a raid battle, surrounded by a tall, sturdy wall. In fact, this was less a garden and more—

“...A fighting arena?”

It seemed like a strange place to bring someone to talk. Alina furrowed her brow at the fact that someone had chosen it.

“This is the biggest training ground the guild has,” replied the lone man standing in the open area.

“I”

There stood an older warrior wrapped in a fluttering red cloak emblazoned with the guild emblem and wearing a well-used longsword at his back—Guildmaster Glen Garia was waiting for Alina.

At his side was a straitlaced, bespectacled secretary. The woman was watching Alina with a look in her eyes that suggested she didn't quite believe this was the Executioner.

“...What did you want to talk about?” Alina asked curtly, her lips turned down in a frown. A nobody receptionist shouldn't really have been acting like this

toward the highest authority in the guild, but Alina was feeling somewhat defiant at the moment, figuring she was going to get fired anyway.

Glen, on the other hand, didn't seem bothered at all by her rudeness. In fact, he was eyeing her closely, tilting his head with curiosity. "Man, the more I stare at you, the more it seems you're just a normal receptionist. Do you know how much it surprised me to see the Executioner had your face when I used *Sigrus Chronos*? ...I still can't believe it."

"If this is all you called me here to talk about, I'm leaving." Brow furrowed in displeasure, Alina continued, "I have to pack my bags and get ready to go back to my parents' house."

"Hold up there, li'l miss. You can pack your bags, but it's not your parents' house you're going to."

"Hmph, if you want to fire me, then just do it. But I'm not joining Silver Sword."

"Hey, hey, hey, hold on—it seems like you're misunderstanding something. I didn't call you here to force you to join Silver Sword, and I'm definitely not going to fire you."

"Huh?" Alina blinked. She hadn't expected this.

"Of course, I wouldn't do that. I'm an adventurer, too. I get that using my power to force you into joining Silver Sword against your will wouldn't make a good party."

"...Then why did you call me here?"

As if he'd been waiting for that question, the guildmaster grinned and said, "I want you to have a bout with me, Executioner."

For an instant, Alina didn't process what she'd just heard. "...Huh?" Alina returned Glen's bold gaze, staring back at him. "A bout...?"

"That's right. Let's decide whether you'll join Silver Sword the manly way—with our fists."

"I'm a woman, though."

"Details, details."

“...”

It seemed he was being serious. Alina narrowed her eyes, probing Glen's intentions. "...If I win, what will you do for me?"

"The guild will back off the Executioner."

"I"

"Whether you go into dungeons as the Executioner or work two jobs, I promise you that it won't threaten your position as a receptionist at all. However, if I win, then you'll give in and join Silver Sword."

"...!" Alina widened her eyes at the reward he'd presented.

The threat of being fired gone. That meant she could continue working as a receptionist forever, free of any anxieties. That was far more valuable than a fat stack of cash, or the honor of being selected as guild elite or whatever.

"How about that? It shouldn't be a bad deal for you, eith—"

Instead of replying, Alina took a step forward. "Skill Activate: *Dia Break*."

Winning would grant her lifetime tenure as a receptionist. She didn't even have to think about whether she would accept this duel or not.

A white magical sigil appeared below Alina's boots, and her war hammer soundlessly materialized out of thin air.

"A-a white magical sigil...and a war hammer...!"

"So you're telling me Alina really is the Executioner?!"

Ignoring Lowe and Lululee losing their cool behind her, Alina grabbed her war hammer and marched right up to Glen.

"That's it... There we go!" The guildmaster sounded somehow happy.

Alina stopped just barely out of the range of his longsword. As she stood there silently, staring straight at her opponent across from her, Glen's expression suddenly grew tense.

"Just so you know, I won't go down easy." Taking off his bombastic cape, Glen also drew the sword on his back, flashing a bold smile.

Glen Garia. He was a legendary adventurer, the strongest attacker in his day.

His full command over *Sigrus Chronos* was referred to as “a once-in-a-century miracle.” Indeed, seeing him fight while he controlled time was like witnessing a modern-day manifestation of a deity, and the way he swung around his greatsword to mow down his enemies was like a raging lion. No one had broken his record for the number of dungeons cleared. He stood at the pinnacle of adventurers in both name and deed.

“*Sigrus Chronos* is said to be the strongest of the Sigrus skills. No matter how much strength you’re packing, it’s meaningless before my ability to freeze everything at once... Hey, li’l miss—no, Executioner! How are you gonna fight me when I stop Time? Don’t you think you can get through this skill of mine so ea— Bwah!”

Alina didn’t wait for Glen to finish his blustering; she just smashed the end of her war hammer straight into his bold smile. Her blow seemed to half compress his face with a nasty crunch. He went flying a moment later, as though it had taken the rest of his body a second to catch up. A number of broken teeth flew into the air as Glen skidded along the ground, dirt parting on either side of him, before he finally slammed into a wall and came to a halt.

There was a momentary silence.

“G-guildmasteeeeeeer?! ”

He’d been blasted away so mercilessly that his secretary shrieked and ran up to him. Glen lay on the ground, unable to move for a while, before he somehow got back on his feet with a groan.

“A-a surprise attack! How dastardly!” his secretary admonished Alina, glaring at her, only to freeze like her breath had caught before she could say more. Then, right before Alina’s eyes, she paled like she’d seen a monster and finally let out a tiny *eep!*

“It’s your fault for blabbing on and on forever when both of us already had our weapons drawn...,” Alina said in a low voice. All the negative emotions that had been building up inside her had condensed into a sinister aura that was emitting from her whole body.

“If I win...then I can be a receptionist forever... Even better if the overtime that sometimes happens goes away, too... My ideal peace is waiting for me...!” she muttered to herself, dragging her war hammer along the ground.

As she slowly approached her prey, she looked so sinister that her nickname, the “Executioner,” someone who torments a sinner until their death, was indeed appropriate.

“...!”

As her murderous aura silenced the onlookers, Alina addressed Glen impassively. “Guildmaster. It was deeply merciful and considerate of you to decide to settle this by force. I thank you.”

The next instant, Alina’s eyes shot open, and she kicked off the stone pavement without hesitation. “Now diiiiiiiiiiiiie!!!”

Alina zoomed up to Glen in the blink of an eye. Jade panicked, his sense of danger screaming, as he witnessed her bloodcurdling expression and utterly merciless intent to kill. “This is why I told you not to be so careless about challenging her—Skill Activate: *Sigrus Wall*!”

Jade cut in front of Glen, his large red shield at the ready. “Calm down, Alina! If you hit him for real, it will clearly kill—”

“You’re in the way, you snitch bastaaaaaaaaaaaaard!” Screaming a war cry, Alina brought her hammer straight into Jade’s greatshield.

That shield of his had withstood countless attacks from many powerful foes, but now it was letting out a worrying creak that echoed around the training grounds. Unable to withstand the blow, Jade and his shield were sent flying, creaking all the while.

“Gwagggh!” He hit the wall without slowing down, collapsing against it like a worn-out doll.

“Jaaaaaaaaaade?!” Seeing the ferocious attack power that had left Jade twitching there at the edge of the training grounds, Glen, who’d somehow gotten to his feet, blanched. “This can’t be—she can send the strongest tank in the guild flying?!”

“Lulu...if I’m not entirely blind...then it looks like...our leader was launched into the air...?”

“I think you’re probably...not mistaken...”

Lowe had drawn his weapon on reflex, but he couldn’t bring himself to attack after seeing the strongest tank around get thrown to the ground in a single strike. Beside him, Lululee even hesitated to fire off a heal. Both were dripping cold sweat.

“Wait, hold on. Jade is the most powerful tank in the guild right now. If he can’t do anything, then...” Lowe realized it with a gasp—there was nobody in the world who could stop Alina. Just before he could voice this fearsome fact, he shut his mouth abruptly.

Alina had swiveled her head around to look at them.

“Yeep!”

“Yeep!”

“Are you two...also going to get in my way...?”

Lowe and Lululee both hastily hid their weapons behind their backs.

“O-ohhhhhh, I don’t think we’re really thinking anything like that, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha?” Lowe laughed nervously.

“Yyyyyyyyyeah, we were just doing as we were t-t-t-told,” Lululee agreed.

“I see.”

“...Ngh...!”

The secretary glared at Alina and swiftly stood in front of Glen to protect him. “Please get back, Guildmaster!” Then she drew a few knives that she’d hidden at her thigh, her expression immediately changing from a straitlaced secretary’s to that of a disciplined guard. But even so, she couldn’t keep a few signs of anxiety from showing on her face. “The Executioner’s attack power is unknown. It’s too dangerous! As your secretary-slash-guard, I will fin—”

“Hmph!” Alina closed the distance between them in a soundless instant, swinging her war hammer right up to the secretary’s nose, so close it just barely

touched. Her glasses were instantly tossed into the air, their lenses shattering. The wind pressure undid her tight bun and swept it into disarray.

“...”

...*Clink*.

The metallic sound of the crushed glasses hitting the stone paving rang out in the otherwise silent training grounds.

“I...I couldn’t even...see it...” The secretary couldn’t move an inch. Eyes wide with shock and expression stiff with fear, she stood there in a daze as if she were watching an incomprehensible monster.

“For...the sake of...my peace...!”

Taking her eyes off the shocked secretary, Alina fixed her gaze on Glen’s face alone as she bent deep at the legs to swing her war hammer.

“Diiiiiiiiie!!”

But right before the war hammer could punch through his face with a thunderous roar...

“Skill Activate: *Sigrus Chronos*!”

...Glen thrust out his hand at Alina. He’d been waiting for this.

Confirming that he’d activated his skill just barely in time, Glen sighed.

With time at a standstill, the world was dominated by silence.

The stiffened face of his secretary, the elites—who were looking shaken up for the first time in a long time—everything stopped. Save for Glen, who lowered his longsword to wipe the sweat off his brow.

“Th-that was close...,” he muttered. Though he was now certain he would prevail over Alina, his remark was genuine. He wasn’t in the mood to celebrate a win. If anything, he felt like he’d just barely escaped a battlefield with his life.

“Good grief, forget *executioner*, this girl’s an ogre...no, a devil.”

Glen took a close look at the girl and the killer war hammer that had come right up to him. Then his grim expression broke into a smile.

“Though this li’l miss could even beat a devil. Heh-heh,” he said. But as he laughed to himself...

...a creaking that he couldn’t have heard in this soundless world reached his ears.

“Wha—?!”

Glen turned around and widened his eyes. That sound had come from Alina, who should have been frozen in the middle of swinging up her war hammer, yelling “Die” with a ghastly expression.

“Hey, whoa, no way...!”

With one creak and then another, the sound gradually grew clearer. Fearing the worst, Glen panicked and put some distance between himself and the girl. A heartbeat later, a bizarre snap rang out as time itself warped, and Alina started moving.

“Huhhh?!”

Her hammer came down on the empty floor of the training ground with a loud crack. She tilted her head in confusion. “I feel like something stopped for a moment there...”

“N-no way!”

Glen’s face paled as he looked around himself in a tizzy. Time remained still for everyone except Alina. *Sigrus Chronos* hadn’t been outright canceled.

“You...goddamn broke through my skill?!”

Seeing time stopped and the mysteriousness of a completely silent world seemed to finally bring Alina back to her senses, and she looked around with her brow furrowed. “It’s stopped...?”

“This is my observation room...li’l miss.”

Only this girl was not stopped, here in a space where all time was supposed to be frozen. Though Glen didn’t want to accept it, he had no choice but to explain. “This space is cut off from the great flow of time, and time for everyone but me is temporarily stopped...or so it was supposed to be.”

At this point, Glen was getting tired of being shocked, and with a sigh, he covered his face with a hand. "...Why are you moving...?"

"Dunno."

Glen forgot about their duel and considered the phenomenon, but in the end, he came to only one answer. "Ngh...so that's what it is, after all."

"?"

"Ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha!" Heedless of Alina's questioning look, Glen laughed for a while, then snapped his fingers. "Sorry, li'l miss. I lost."

As he graciously declared his defeat, sound returned to the soundless world.

22

“...Huh. So you’re willing to back down that easily.”

Glen had a somehow sunny expression as Alina continued to look at him questioningly.

“Easily? Not only do you have the attack power of a monster, you can break through *Sigrus Chronos*. I’m never gonna win. I’m not ready to die yet.”

“Guildmaster?!”

Glen shrugged as his secretary blanched and raced up to him.

For those whose time had stopped, it would have happened in an instant, but seeing that Alina had lowered her war hammer, the secretary breathed a sigh of relief. Lululee was casting a heal on Jade in a corner of the training grounds, while Lowe was helping him up.

“More importantly, allow me to apologize, li’l miss. For making you fight a match with me—the truth is, I kind of wanted to find out what your skill really was.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean whether it was really a Dia skill or not.”

“...”

“Only Sigrus skills can break through Regin skills, and the only thing that can break a Sigrus skill is a Dia skill. So goes the theory. Basically, skills can only be surpassed by an ability of a higher rank.

“...”

“But that’s ultimately just a theory—or at least it was, since no one had ever manifested a Dia skill before. That’s why Sigrus skills are the most valuable right now, and *Sigrus Chronos* could be the strongest skill. But you managed to escape from the observation room of time even after being subject to its

constraints. In other words, there's no doubt that you're the first Dia-skill user."

"Huh." Alina made a disinterested sound as she dismissed her war hammer back into thin air. "Well, whatever. For now, since my peace has been guaranteed..."

"Wait, but..."

Glen tucked his longsword behind his back, sweeping his gaze across the signs of destruction that were scattered across the training field and scratching a cheek.

"That's some terrifying power you've got. The walls and the floor here were all made by melting together shards of relics..."

"That's why I tried to stop you, Guildmaster," Jade cut in disapprovingly. He'd recovered thanks to Lululee's heal, but he was a sorry and ragged sight to see; with the exception of his greatshield, his armor, accessories, and other equipment had been damaged. "I understand that you wanted to measure Alina's power, but challenging her to a fight is suicide... Look at how messed up my equipment got after taking a single hit..."

"But, man, that really was great... It's been a long time since I was prepared for death."

"Same here."

Following Jade's lead, Lowe and Lululee both nodded earnestly. Glen groaned in frustration when he saw even the elites flinch at Alina's power.

"But now that I've actually seen it for myself, I like that power and pluck even more... You're a lot stronger than most people out there. It's a total waste to make you a receptionist."

"That's what I said, too," said Jade. "But Alina said she wants to stay where she is."

"Anyway!" she cut in. "Now my peace has been guaranteed. So stay out of my business from here on out!" She glared at Glen, then gave a snort and turned to walk the other way. Since she'd taken a half day off, she wanted to spend some alone time relaxing.

“Hold on, Alina.” Jade was the one to stop her.

Just then, her eyes grew colder than a midwinter morning, and she snapped back at him in a low voice that would freeze anyone who heard it. “What, snitch?”

“I keep telling you, I didn’t snitch! I actually stopped him, and about this—”

“In the future, you won’t talk to me at all, either, and you won’t barge into my workplace, right?”

“...Calm down and listen to me, Alina.”

“No. I’m leaving.”

“A new dungeon was discovered,” Jade told her quietly.

Alina stopped in her tracks. “...Huh...?”

“It’s east of Iffole, close to the Elm Canyon. It’s a large, four-level dungeon. And it’s probably an S-class dungeon, the most difficult kind.”

“A n-new...dun...geon...?” Alina muttered in a daze. Her gaze shifted entreatingly from Jade to Glen. “You’re kidding. Tell me you’re joking.”

But Alina’s plea was heartlessly shattered when Glen acknowledged Jade’s statement. “...No. What Jade said is true. And the exploration team who discovered it believes that it’s even more difficult than the Belfla Underground Ruins, where we struggled with the Hellflame Dragon... Since Silver Sword hasn’t found a new frontline attacker, clearing this dungeon is, frankly speaking, impossible at the moment. The guild is carefully screening for a new frontline attacker for Silver Sword, but we can’t quite decide on the right person, and we need a talented attacker right aw—”

“Who cares about that?!”

“Huh?” Glen had a blank look.

Alina grabbed him by the lapels, aggressively shaking him as she yelled, “Do you know what happens when a new dungeon is found? All the adventurer riffraff show up, and the number of quests they apply for explodes! And who do you think has to deal with those applications?!”

“Hey, stop, you’re choking me...”

“Receptionists! I’ll be up to my eyeballs in quest applications from all the adventurers applying to delve into the new dungeon, and it’ll be eternal overtime until someone clears it!”

“O-overtime?”

“Overtime hell starts once more...”

After yelling a while, Alina released Glen’s lapels and weakly crumpled to the ground.

She had finally escaped from overtime hell by sending the Hellflame Dragon packing, and now she was back to returning from work on time. So how was another hellish period of crunch coming? Her lips trembled as she vividly imagined her never-ending days of overtime.

“...H-hey, Jade.” Keeping the stunned receptionist in the corner of his eye, Glen whispered to Jade, “Did this lady become the Executioner and beat the boss because she hates overtime...?”

“Yeah. There was apparently no other reason.”

“...”

Alina wrapped her arms around her knees and muttered, “Overtime... overtime...,” like a spell.

Glen watched her for a while. As if attempting to smooth things over, he then cleared his throat and said, “The truth is, miss, that this new dungeon is way different from all the others. It’s a *hidden dungeon*.” He pulled out a familiar-looking piece of red orb. “The White Tower—you’ve heard of it, right?”

“!” Alina abruptly shut her mouth upon hearing that word.

“It’s actually what I brought you out here to talk about.” Glancing at Jade, Glen continued. “I’ve heard about things from Jade. Some words resembling a quest form suddenly appeared from this relic. I’ve been involved with the Adventurers Guild for a long time, but I’ve never seen or heard of something like this.”

The secretary chimed in from the side to add, “I looked into our records as far

back as possible, but there's no indication of that phenomenon occurring in the two hundred years since the guild's inception."

"...I had my doubts about it, but I had the exploration team survey the White Tower that the golden letters indicated. And then, well...they actually found it—a new dungeon that no one's seen before. I gathered the employees of the guild to look into it, but we were forced to conclude..." Glen paused a moment there, fixed his gaze on Alina, and opened his mouth. "...that this is one of those so-called *secret quests*."



“What...?” She doubted her ears. “That’s just a legend. Those things don’t actually exist.”

“That’s what we thought— I did, too. But this quest that we couldn’t have even discovered without you, plus this dungeon that was hidden until this strange quest was received...the only explanation is that it’s a secret quest, like in the old stories.”

“...”

“The guild has taken the utmost care exploring new dungeons so far, of course, but the more I hear about this, the more I think this quest is unprecedented. We have to be even more cautious with the White Tower.”

“...Why are you bothering to tell me about this?” Alina asked reluctantly, though she kind of had a bad feeling about it.

And she got back just the answer she’d expected. “With your Dia skill, I’d like to ask you to serve as Silver Sword’s frontline attacker. Of course, Silver Sword will offer our full support and will compensate you generously.”

“I feel like this is different from what you told me before our bout.”

“I had to say that, or you wouldn’t have fought me.”

“Heh... I see... Well, true...but...”

Suddenly, Alina shot open her eyes and sidled up to Glen, sending him a bloodthirsty glower. “Do you think...I would do this for money?! If you want me to do anything, then you’ve got to come up with a dramatic business improvement plan to get rid of overtime...!” Instantly, a white magic sigil started forming at Alina’s feet.

Seeing the sudden white glow, Glen blanched. “F-f-f-f-fine! I get it, so get rid of the magic sigil!”

“So long as you understand.”

Alina snorted and canceled the activation of her skill. Then she furrowed her brow in skepticism. “If it’s such a dangerous dungeon, then shouldn’t you make sure to sort out Silver Sword’s forces before going in? Can’t you leave it to other parties at a time like this? The Adventurers Guild really likes to exploit its

workers...”

“Wait, don’t get the wrong idea here—,” Glen replied hastily.

But Jade interjected and answered for him. “Adventurers are results oriented. That doesn’t change, even if you’re specially selected by the guild, like Silver Sword. That’s why my party will do everything we can to get some results when a new dungeon is found. We’ll clear it before other adventurers get ahead of us and contribute to the development of the city. It doesn’t matter what kind of shape we’re in. Either we produce results worthy of elite adventurers, or we can’t call ourselves Silver Sword. That’s all there is to it.”

Jade stared right at her, a serious look in his eyes. Alina looked away.

Just as he’d said, adventurers were results oriented, for better or for worse.

In that area, they were definitively different from receptionists. If a receptionist worked on time, then they would be paid a fixed income, and it wouldn’t be a big deal if she needed to take a sick day every now and then. That was because receptionists worked in an organization where someone would always be around to cover for them.

By contrast, adventurers could take a break anytime for as long as they wanted—if they produced results. In exchange for a freer schedule, they were bound to results. And that went double for the elites selected by the guild.

“...I see,” Alina muttered with a sigh. It seemed Silver Sword’s lack of a frontline attacker had become a pretty serious problem. And now that they had even found a secret quest, they were desperate. She understood that. Alina could also empathize with the pain of being short on people; she was always thinking that if Iffole Counter could get another two or three more receptionists, then no one would have to do overtime, even in the event the adventurers got stuck on a dungeon or a new dungeon was discovered. But...

“But that doesn’t mean it has to be me. I see tons of adventurers every day,” Alina said aggressively as she jabbed with her index finger. “With that many, there’s no way there isn’t even one frontline attacker who can go to an S-class dungeon. Look elsewhere, come on.”

Alina completely shut them down and turned her back on Glen one last time.

They had just that very moment settled the appearance of a new dungeon—in other words, the second coming of overtime hell. Things would be tough for her from now on, too. She didn't have the time to bother with Silver Sword's problems.

But when Alina tried to briskly stride off, Glen called out to her from behind. "Hey, li'l miss."

"What is it? Did you need something else?"

"What if I told you that your overtime will disappear if you cooperate with us—then what would you do?"

The offer he'd presented made Alina stop in her tracks.

"My overtime would go away...?" She furrowed her brow in suspicion as she turned around.

Glen wore a severe expression like he'd swallowed a bitter bug, like this was the one condition he hadn't wanted to offer, as he answered reluctantly, "You might be forgetting, but I am more or less the highest authority in the guild. The organization moves on my word—even if it's an abuse of power. I could double the number of receptionists at Iffole Counter if that's what it takes. Then your workload would decrease, and your overtime would go away."

"Wha...?!"

"You won't be joining Silver Sword, just working with us this once. Of course, we won't tell anyone about it. Once the dungeon is clear, then you can go back to being a receptionist. How about it—not a bad offer, right?"

"..."

A long silence followed.

Only Guildmaster Glen could offer a condition like that.

Furthermore, his proposal was far more attractive than a large pile of money. It was beyond her wildest dreams.

"J-just to confirm...," Alina asked trepidatiously, desperately restraining the squeak that threatened to come out in her voice. "I'd only be working with you this one time, right...?"

“That’s right. Well, we’d love it if you would lend us a hand after that, though.”

Alina fell silent.

Working with Silver Sword would basically mean clearing this new pain-in-the-ass dungeon, the White Tower or whatever, with them for the secret quest. To maintain her uneventful life, she would have to do the very thing she’d avoided most: adventuring.

But then she looked at it from another angle. If she just sucked it up this one time, then no matter how busy her reception window got in the future, they could just throw people at the problem, arranging a workplace environment with no overtime at all. A wonderful life without overtime was in store for her. Did she really need to waffle around here?

No.

After letting her gaze wander a while, Alina eventually opened her mouth and said quietly, “...I...I guess I have no choice. But just this once.”

“So you’ll do it!” Glen beamed.

Alina glared at him and scowled. “Ugh...! My hands are tied, okay...! This is all for achieving my ideal: going home on time...!”

God really did like to make things complicated for her. Why make things difficult for a receptionist by granting them a Dia skill? They should have just given it to an adventurer.

“I-in exchange! You’d better keep your promise about making my overtime go away!” Alina snapped back at him. As she turned away, she felt a twinge of regret that she’d manifested this skill two years earlier.

23

One summer day two years ago, around the time when Alina had just become a receptionist...

It was the last night of the annual Centennial Festival in Iffole, which was held for three days and nights.

Excitement in the city for the festival's finale was reaching fever pitch, and the sounds of lively groups of musicians performing and the rough laughter of drunk adventurers reached Alina's ears.

Yes, Iffole Counter was right in the middle of the great city, and in the empty office at night, she had heard it so clearly it hurt.

"Why...do I have to do overtime...even on a special day like this...?"

To little surprise, there was nobody else in the office. Everyone in town had finished up work early that day to partake in the festivities. Alina was the only one putting in overtime, and it went without saying that thinking about that only amplified her distress over the situation.

"How can these people call themselves adventurers...? City of adventurers, my butt...!" Alina muttered resentfully as she glared at the mountain of papers piled up in front of her. "Those good-for-nothings can't even defeat a boss...but somehow they manage to party it up during a festival...!"

The Adventurers Guild had been established in this land to survey and understand the technology and powers of the ancients. So it followed that there were many adventurers living in the great city of Iffole, which was their base. They called it the hot-blooded city of adventurers.

"God, let me go home already..."

Her willpower exhausted from working at Iffole Counter, said to be the largest and busiest of the quest offices in Iffole, during this overtime hell, she at last landed face down on her desk.

That was when a legend of uncertain veracity happened to pop up in Alina's mind, sung along in festival music: *During the Centennial Festival, the blessings of Dia will be granted to whoever wishes for power with the strongest will that day.*

The Centennial Festival was originally a ritual for the ancients to beg for the power of Dia, which had long been passed down in this land. People had started copying the rituals as part of an investigation, but of course no blessings came of that, so these days, the event had become an excuse for the adventurers to have a wild party.

But, thought Alina's lazy mind, if that legend was true, and she made a wish with all her will behind it, then that Dia or whatever might just get rid of her overtime.

"Please, let me go home, God!" she wound up yelling unintentionally, but of course there was no one to respond. The loud sounds of festival merriment continued to reverberate through the quiet office.

"Someone...anyone...hurry and defeat the boss..."

Silent tears falling from her eyes, Alina entreated the adventurers.

The guild raised the reward for defeating monsters while the Centennial Festival was being held, so Iffole Counter would always get a flood of quest applications during that time. Maybe the guild thought of it as just a bit of an event to get the adventurers excited, but for a newbie receptionist who still couldn't manage to do office work quickly, it was a brutal assault.

Worse still, the adventurers already had been having trouble with the boss of a tough dungeon before the Centennial Festival even started, so the quest office had already been full of adventurers. Again, that was before the Centennial Festival had begun. It was the picture of hell.

If only the adventurers could defeat the boss, at least. Alina bit her lip. So long as that monster drew breath lived, her overtime would not end, even when the festival did.

"If I could defeat the boss..." Alina muttered that absurd idea. "Then I could say good-bye to overtime."

Of course, that wasn't a realistic way of tackling crunch. Alina couldn't even beat the petty monsters that roamed around in a dungeon, and receptionists were forbidden to hold a second job to begin with, so a side gig as an adventurer was out of the question.

"...Agh...I've had enough... I'm nowhere near done...but I'm going home... I'm gonna enjoy the festival...just a little..."

By the time she'd finally found a place to finish and left Iffole Counter, it was already long past midnight.

"Ahhh...it's over..."

Thinking she'd at least get a taste of the festival atmosphere on the last day of the Centennial Festival, Alina headed to the town square, but all that awaited her was an area completely free of people.

"...Yeah, of course."

She sniffled, and then an empty feeling swelled up at once, weighing down on her whole body. Smothering a voiceless scream, Alina trudged away from the square.

"Work tomorrow, too... I'll go home early to sleep..." she mumbled with fatigue.

The street was totally dark. Her legs felt too heavy to go home. She happened to catch sight of a drunkard who was lying happily by the side of the road after enjoying the festival to its fullest; she thought about giving him a kick.

"..."

...It's so frustrating, Alina thought. This feeling was different from anger or sadness—it was much darker.

It's so frustrating. Why is it always me?

The quest office was so busy during the day that she didn't even have time to enjoy eating her lunch. Though she still was unused to the work, she managed her office tasks somehow, dealing with a large volume of adventurers. She'd withstood continuous overtime, giving up her days off, shaving down her body, soul, and private life to work hard.

After all that, why do I have to get treated like this?

Ahhh, I hate it. I hate them all. I hate them so much.

The surging adventurers; the guild, for raising the reward; the boss monster, which wouldn't go down; the good-for-nothings who couldn't defeat it—she hated everything that had caused her overtime.

"I wanna whack every single one of them." Her honest feelings slipped out in spite of herself. Alina bared her teeth and clenched her fist.

I want power.

Anything was fine. The power to stop time, or office work ability that surpassed human ken, or even a power to thwack the boss in place of the incompetent adventurers would do.

Anything was fine, so long as it would get rid of her overtime. She wanted incredible power.

"I'll whack it all away...! All of it...!!" she muttered, forced out through clenched teeth.

That was when it happened.

A burst of white light shined into her field of view.

"...?"

Alina stopped automatically. Were her eyes tired from doing too much office work? She tilted her head doubtfully and looked at the source of the light... below her feet.

"Huh?"

She wasn't seeing things, and it wasn't eyestrain. In the darkness of the night, with the festival lights all out, a white magical sigil was clearly drawn beneath her feet.

"...What's this?"

Her brain was so exhausted, she couldn't even think, and as she was furrowing her brow and tilting her head, the magic sigil vanished without a sound.

“...?”

Though the whole thing puzzled her, Alina went back home, fell into bed, and slept like the dead. When morning broke, she had completely forgotten that strange incident.

It wasn't until a few days later that she realized she had manifested an incredible skill of superhuman strength.

24

“I overslept!!” Alina leaped up with a cry.

In a total panic, she looked out the window to see the sun had long since risen. Outside, many adventurers were already heading to the quest office to get their quests.

“Oh crap oh crap oh crap!”

Her skin pale as a sheet and her tousled and bedhead-ridden black hair flying all around, Alina did the minimum of personal grooming, her expression severe. This place was not her beloved home sweet home—she was in a cheap inn on the outskirts of Iffole. Various circumstances had led to her lovely home getting a big hole in the roof, and she was living at this inn temporarily until those repairs were done.

Upon changing into her receptionist uniform, Alina suddenly realized, “Oh! It’s my day off today.” Immediately, her grim expression turned sunny and bright. “Yeah, today’s my day off!”

In the city of adventurers, the metropolis of Iffole, there were a number of quest offices where you could receive your quests. They had things set up so that all the offices were closed on different days, and there would always be one office in operation.

“It’s so great when you get up thinking you have work, but then you realize that actually it’s your day off...! Ahhh, I’m going back to bed.”

After savoring this happiness to the fullest, she leaped into the sheets still in her uniform, ready for a luxurious return to bed. But a moment later...

“Alinaaaa!”

As if he’d been aiming for this moment, she heard the voice of the man from whom she least wanted to hear coming from her window.

“...”

I'm hearing things, she told herself, burritoing herself in her blanket. He shouldn't have known that she was living here temporarily. There was no way he could be here.

"Ah! Li! Naaaa!"

But the voice of that man—Jade Scrade—clearly reached Alina's ears, and louder than before, in fact. What's more, the way his voice bounced rather cheerily made it even more annoying.

"...Ah, now that I think of it, I'm moving today." Remembering the hassle she would be dealing with that day, Alina sighed.

Since she would be helping out Silver Sword this once, the guildmaster had offered her the same reception as Silver Sword—in other words, a free stay at their private lodging in the fanciest district of Iffole.

"..."

Left without a choice, Alina crawled out from under her blankets and looked down from her second-floor window. The street was bustling with adventurers going about their business that morning, save for one person down there being loud and annoying.

He was a tall young man with a sturdy build, silver hair, and a handsome, cheerful face. Jade, the strongest tank in the guild. To the average person, he'd look like a flawless pretty boy.

But Alina knew that on the inside, he was just a stalker.

"He followed me again...?"

She had to assume so if he knew where her inn was. Alina heaved a sigh and ignored Jade's annoying solicitations, closing the window tight before she quickly started to get ready.

"A-Alina, out of uniform...!"

Though she was getting ready to move lodgings, her house had been destroyed, so she only had a full traveler's bag worth of possessions on her.

Beside her, Jade watched curiously as he carried the bag for her.

It was her day off, so of course she wasn't in her usual uniform. That day, she was wearing a plain dress with a completely unsexy leather belt that had a pouch dangling from it. Jade must not have had any quests to go on that day because he didn't have his usual shield and armor on, just a sword for self-defense.

"I'm not so devoted to work that I'd even wear the uniform on my day off." She *was* devoted enough to leap out of bed thinking she had work that morning, but she wasn't going to bring that up.

"But anyway...", Alina continued, "I don't really come to this end of town much, so this feels kind of strange."

The two of them were walking along a quiet street in the richest district of Iffole.

The cobblestone roads were well-maintained and lined with elegantly decorated streetlamps. The pedestrians were all wealthy and well-dressed, and occasionally a fine two-horse cart would pass by. Of course, nobody was so crass as to give them curious looks, even though Jade was famous. The placid atmosphere here was a far cry from the places where adventurers gathered.

Glaring sharply at Jade, who continued to physically show his excitement even in this part of town, Alina complained in her head, "Ahhh...it would have been amazing if I could have come here alone on my day off, though..."

"Uh, Alina, you said that out loud."

"And hey, how did you know where I was staying in the first place? You followed me home after work again, didn't you?!"

"Hmm? Of course I did. I had to, or I wouldn't know," he admitted nonchalantly.

Okay, I'm gonna finish this stalker off right here. Alina made up her mind, but when she clenched her fist...

"Might I show you the place now?" A woman's voice cut into their conversation as she pushed up her silver-rimmed glasses.

The guildmaster's secretary, Fili, had been walking ahead of them silently. She

was the one facilitating the move that day; Jade was just there to carry things.

Once the two of them finally quieted down, Fili glanced at them and pointed to the large lodging up ahead. “That will be your new residence, Miss Alina.”

Lodging wasn’t the right word for it. The place was a far cry from some kind of stable made for beginner adventurers who didn’t make much. It was a pure white building encircled by elegant walls, which lay in the finest area of the city of Iffole.

“Every one of the elite parties the Adventurers Guild employs reside at this inn, Silver Sword included. I’ve been charged with offering you the same reception as Silver Sword, Miss Alina. Of course, we will pay you an income equal to theirs as long as you continue to assist them.”

They passed through the gates into a garden with a fountain, then into a large entrance hall inside the building. Fili continued speaking in a businesslike tone as she ascended a spiral staircase and came up to a room. “From now on, you will be staying here.”

Fili opened the door, and Alina’s jaw dropped when she saw the inside. “Wha...?!”

The room had to be two times bigger than Alina’s entire house. Smack-dab in the middle of it was a double bed surrounded by a canopy. It also contained a leather sofa and a charmingly decorated chest near a window.

“What’s with this room...?”

Alina stood there in shock, taking in luxury the likes of which she had never seen before. No, no matter what sort of place she was living in, the important thing was the bed, with space for lazing about on her days off. Alina entered the bedroom with trepidation and pushed her hand into the mattress. It was neither too soft nor too hard—a comfortable springiness. The bed she’d been sleeping in before seemed like it was made of rocks in comparison.

“Wahhhhhhhh! This bed is telling me it’s time to go full shut-in! Ahhhhhh!”

Unable to wait a second longer, Alina leaped into the bed. Happiness flooded her senses as she was enveloped by softness. Even the blanket was incredible.

“Ahhh, I never want to get up again,” Alina mumbled, face buried in the sheets.

“I’m glad you’re satisfied,” Fili said dispassionately. “Please use it to your heart’s content. Well then, Jade, if you would offer her a detailed explanation of this inn and its use.”

“Huh? Is that all right, Fili?”

“I have work to do now. See you.” No sooner had the secretary said that than she’d sped out the door.

Jade watched her go, then gulped. “I-I’m alone with Alina, in her cute regular clothes...?! So basically, this is a da—”

“Okay, I’m cooping myself up alone here for the rest of the day. Could you leave now?” Alina gave him a swift kick to boot him out of the room and shut the door in one clean motion before locking it.

“Wh-whyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!”

Jade’s wails and the sound of him banging on the door rang out for a while through the guild’s first-class inn.

25

Alina had a fulfilling day off lounging in bed. Then the next day, she and Silver Sword began their exploration of the White Tower.

The morning was pleasant and refreshingly sunny. But when Alina got out of the carriage, she slumped miserably as she trudged to the Adventurers Guild headquarters.

“My paid time off...,” she whined, complaining sorrowfully into the ground.

Receptionists received twenty paid vacation days a year. They could take these days of paid leave freely, so long as they didn’t obstruct business. And of course, these blessed days generated pay while resting.

But right now, she was using one of these precious days off for something that had nothing to do with resting. The cruelty of it all!

And what was she doing with her valuable time off? She was striding brazenly into the guild headquarters.

“My...! Paid time off...!” Alina bit her lip and sniffled.

Alina had always used her paid time off with the greatest care. She would force herself to go to work, even if she felt a little sick. That was because she was in the “I want to take lots of days off at once” camp.

She would pick a time when work had settled down and combine paid time off with regular holidays to unleash everything she’d saved up—of course, you did need to take care not to make the holiday so long it would irritate your boss—but when she won a “mini” long vacation like that, she’d spend the whole day at home and live the lazy lifestyle of her dreams.

This was the ultimate luxury available only to those who worked...! A reward only allowed for people who had resisted the irresistible and endured the unendurable, continuously overcoming their urges to use up their paid time off.

The sadness of having one day less of that reward had left Alina stricken since

that morning.

“Th-the guildmaster said you could take special leave, didn’t he, Alina?”

It seemed Alina’s depression was beyond what Jade had imagined. Walking alongside her, he desperately searched for the words to try to console her. But no words would heal the sadness of having lost a precious vacation day.

Alina’s eyes were actually moist with tears as she gave Jade a sharp glare. “I’m just a single receptionist at the bottom of the guild hierarchy. If I took off special leave under direct order from the guildmaster, it’d be way too suspicious!”

Special leave were days off given by the order of the guildmaster, only for those recognized as necessary to the guild. At the very least in her work so far, Alina had never heard of a receptionist being given special leave. Of course, taking special leave wouldn’t immediately tie her identity to the Executioner, but she wanted to avoid any unnecessary attention.

So it was that Alina, with overwhelming sorrow, had opted to take paid leave to protect her peaceful lifestyle as a receptionist at all costs. This was so that she could smoothly clear the dungeon without raising any suspicions, then return to her old life without issue.

“True...”

“What’s more, this is going to take longer than one day, and each time my paid time off will go down. Do you know what that meeeeeeeans?!” Finally, Alina grasped at Jade’s lapels, and with a wail from her soul, she shook him aggressively back and forth. “Paid time off! Is an adult’s! Reward! It’s just as valuable as human rights!!!”

“Ah, I’ll bring it up with the guildmaster later to see if he can do something about that, okay! I’ll ask him, so let me g—”

“N-now, now, Alina, calm down.” Around the point where Jade’s face was turning blue from oxygen deprivation, Lululee intervened. “We’ll clear the White Tower in a flash! Lickety-split!”

“*Ngh*... Though I don’t want to do it, you’re right... This is all so that I can go home on time...!” Alina muttered bitterly, clenching her fist.

Indeed, Glen had promised that if she worked with them and they cleared the White Tower, he would double the amount of receptionists at Iffole Counter. By basic math, there would be two receptionists at each window, halving the amount of office work. That meant not only would her overtime decrease, it would also be easier to take time off.

What a brilliant future...! I swear I'll make it happen!!

So Alina vowed as she looked up at the giant crystal gate that appeared before her eyes.

In the square right in the middle of the Adventurers Guild's property stood a crystal gate used exclusively for going to dungeons. It was a special structure—to teleport with it, you needed an adventurer's license card.

"The guild search party who discovered the tower has already set up a crystal gate at the White Tower."

Alina held up her license card, and her vision was flooded with blue light. After a momentary sensation of floating, her boots hit hard ground. Once her eyes recovered from being blinded by the strong light, she looked around to see that she had already left the Adventurers Guild square.

"Wow..."

She was on the edge of the Elm Canyon, an expanse of reddish-brown, desolate earth. Not many dungeons had been found in the endless, untouched wilderness of this part of the continent.

The little crystal gate had been set up a short distance from the canyon. Though the guild had revealed that there was a new dungeon here, conditions for taking quests in the White Tower were strict because it was an S-class dungeon, so there were still no other adventurers around.

The dry wind racing along the wasteland sent Alina's cloak fluttering up. Seeing there was no one else around, she pulled off the hood that had been hiding her face and looked over at a strange structure standing alone in the valley.

"That's...the White Tower..."

The beautiful, pure white, spiral-shaped tower stood out against the reddish-brown wasteland.

It was different from the standard column shape that she had imagined. It was cone shaped and wide at the bottom, narrowing at the end as it climbed upward. The outer wall wrapped around it beautifully, like a swirling wind, and the structure was all the more remarkable for how it contrasted with the Elm Canyon.

“Allow me to properly introduce myself.” As Alina stared with wonder at the White Tower, Lululee popped forward. “I’m a white mage and the healer of Silver Sword, Lululee. Nobody in this party will ever die as long as I’m around!” She proudly patted her chest with a smug chuckle.

Between her baby face, bob haircut, and the fact that she was even shorter than the rod she wielded, Lululee resembled a little girl who’d never set foot in a dangerous dungeon.

But Alina knew that her young face belied her incredible healing abilities. Coupled with her cuteness, she’d been dubbed “everyone’s cure-all.”

“I’m the black mage rear attacker, Lowe. I specialize in ranged attacks, so I’ll be counting on you at short distances,” Lowe said next. Everything he wore, from the robe on his person to the rod in his hand, was a matching shade of black. His catlike, slightly slanted eyes were striking, and though the younger receptionist, Laila, hadn’t made a fuss about him, Alina had heard he had just as many fans as Jade.

“But anyway, a secret quest... So they really exist.” Lowe meekly folded his arms as he walked out toward the White Tower.

Jade gave him an exaggerated nod. “No wonder no one was able to take the quest, if you had to break a relic in order to get it.”

“What are you trying to say?” Alina cut in.

“Nothing... But that’s enough fooling around.” Jade suddenly narrowed his eyes as he looked at the White Tower.



There was a seriousness in his slightly lowered voice. His gaze on the White Tower was sharp, like nothing she'd seen before—maybe this stemmed from his sense of responsibility as a tank, the lifeline of the party.

From a distance, Alina had thought that the White Tower wasn't all that tall, but because it was wider at the base, it was surprisingly large on approach and left an impact. When they arrived at the White Tower, the entrance gaped open.

"Oh yeah, before we go into the dungeon, take this."

Jade handed Alina a pale green crystal wrapped in a silver decoration. The raw, unpolished crystal with rough corners contained the mark of Dia, and on the silver decoration that surrounded the crystal was carved the crest of two swords crossing—the mark of Silver Sword.

"...Is this a relic?"

"It was developed from one. The guild made these guiding crystal shards just for Silver Sword."

"Hmm."

"If the person holding this relic is on the brink of death, or if the shard breaks, then all the other shards will guide you toward it at once. Basically, it's a method of emergency contact that tells you if your allies are in trouble."

"That sounds pretty convenient."

Alina looked closely at the crystal shard that she'd been handed. A chain had been strung through the decorative silver casing so that you could hang it from your neck.

"It'd sell for a lot of money. Rare items like this aren't sold on the market." Lowe gave a nasty snicker.

Lululee hit him clean in the face with her rod.

"Ow!"

"This is proof of our comradeship as members of Silver Sword! How can you talk about it like that?!"

“It was just a little joke...” Lowe sounded like he was in pain.

While listening to that, the party set off for the White Tower.

A mysterious sight spread out through the first strata of the White Tower.

It was nothing but endless darkness and white columns resembling great trees. There were no walls or dividing spaces, only the occasional pale shine of light from relics installed in the pillars.

“What’s with this place? This is a weird dungeon,” said Alina.

“Dungeons are all weird places, though...,” Jade replied.

Suddenly, Jade stopped in his tracks. He must have sensed something, as he fell silent for a few probing seconds, then shot swift eye signals to the party. Lululee and Lowe drew their weapons in response.

Alina also noticed the heavy footsteps approaching.

Eventually, a giant black dog with three heads—a cerberus—peeked out from behind a pillar.

Grrr...

The cerberus, a creature said to guard the gates of hell, pointed all three of its heads at the party and bared its teeth in a low growl.

“It’s a c-cerberus...,” Lululee noted, her voice tense with anxiety. The demonic canine was so large you had to tilt your head to see all of it.

“For real?” Lowe whispered quietly beside her.

“Cerberus was a boss in an A-class dungeon. And they’re just walking around normally here...!”

Jade had his shield raised and was at the ready, but when Alina started taking a step forward, he restrained her with a hand. “Alina, in a party battle, the tank goes first and attacks to direct the enemy’s threat first.”

“Hmm?”

“It makes it easier to fight. If the tank fails to direct the threat, then

nonfighters like Lululee will get into trouble fast. The frontline attacker needs to hold back at first to make it easier for the tank to taunt the enemy.”

“Roger that.”

“You’ve never fought in a party, right? This’ll be good practice. Let’s go!”

Graaaaaaaaaaawr!

With a war cry, the cerberus blew out a stream of magic fire. The attack licked over the floor and pillars as it approached, and Jade met it head-on.

“Skill Activate: *Sigrus Wall!*”

The cerberus’s magic fire struck Jade’s raised shield, but he easily blocked it, sending the fire scattering in all four directions. At the same time, he unsheathed his sword and thrust its point into the ground.

“Hastor!”

This incantation emitted an illusory light that focused the target’s attention on the tank alone. The light, tinged with magical power, dazzled the cerberus for a moment. An instant later, it locked its three pairs of eyes onto Jade.

“Okay! Now, Alina, I’ve taunte—”

He didn’t have time to finish.

Alina was already dashing past his side, war hammer in hand. With a powerful leap off the ground, she cut through the air with a whizzing sound to reach the cerberus in the blink of an eye and swung her war hammer at the distracted beast.

A dull *badum* rang out as her hit landed, rattling the pillars that lined the strata. A sideways strike. It crushed the three heads of the cerberus all at once.

A short cry followed, like a frog being crushed.

Smacked in succession like a series of wooden clappers, the cerberus was denied even a proper death rattle—it was immobilized in just one hit. It collapsed with a thump, and then its giant corpse dissolved into mist starting from the edges before smoothly vanishing into the dim light.

“I see. So this is what party battles are like.”

Alina turned around with a hearty nod to find that both Lululee and Lowe were watching her with blank expressions.

“Lulu, I don’t think I’ll be doing anything today.”

“I don’t think I will, either.”

“Huh? Did I do something bad?”

“...No. It’s not bad. It’s not bad at all. Yeah. If there is anything bad, it’s just that when a monster is killed in an instant, then there’s no point in having a party anymore, that’s all...,” Jade said sadly, slumping.

After that, Alina’s slaughter in the name of “practicing party battles” continued. The unlucky A-class monsters that appeared before her could only survive until the point where Jade taunted them.

“Wow, what amazing power. It’s exhilarating to watch.”

While watching the fourth casualty—or the fourth unlucky monster of the day—turn to dust a few seconds after its appearance, Lowe nodded earnestly.

“She gets rid of everything in one hit, so it feels easier than a C-class dungeon.”

“You think...? For me...it’s like with every monster that she kills in an instant, I lose some of my purpose as a tank...”

Alina snorted at Jade’s depressed tone. “I have no time to waste on trash mobs. So long as my paid time off is getting used on this expedition, I’ll show no mercy.”

“Of course.”

“...By the way, leader.” Lowe suddenly put a finger to his jaw as he voiced a question. “This has always bothered me, but...nobody uncovered evidence of the White Tower before this. But if there were already monsters in it, then does that mean it was just that humans couldn’t see the dungeon, and it’s always existed?”

“It makes sense to assume as much. I have no idea why they hid it, though...,” Jade answered, sweeping his gaze over the dim light of the dungeon strata.

“What were the ancients thinking...?”

“That reminds me—the ancients just up and disappeared one day, huh?” Alina didn’t really know much about them. She was only aware of the well-known theory that the ancients had suddenly disappeared from the continent in a single night.

“That was the anger of Dia,” Lululee answered Alina’s question.

“The anger of Dia?”

“We know that the ancients were very inquisitive, and that they did lots of research in pursuit of even greater power. Relics with powerful functions are the remnants of that—many dungeons contain what are thought to have been research festivities, and the Centennial Festival was also a ritual to gain power from Dia. Surely, the ancients were so immersed in their research that they offended Dia and were destroyed for it.”

“...That’s a pretty wild story.”

“It’s a metaphor for how signs of the ancients disappeared so suddenly that nothing else explains it.” Jade supplemented Lululee’s explanation. “Even if there was an incredible monster on the Helcacia continent that the ancients lost a battle to, for example, there’s no way they all could have been completely annihilated in one night. There’s no evidence that a massive natural disaster took place during that time, either. You just have to chalk up the disappearance of the ancients to an act of god, or it can’t be explained,” Jade said dispassionately as he looked cautiously around the area.

“Hmm...”

“Two hundred years ago, adventurers crossed onto the continent, the Adventurers Guild was established, and we began doing surveys... But just about everything had been laid waste to by monsters at this point, and we don’t really understand much more now than we did then. In terms of investigating the ancients, managing to discover a new dungeon here is progress to be thankful for.”

“Well...I for one would like them to never find a new dungeon again. It just makes more overtime for me.”

Inadvertently remembering her days of overtime hell, Alina grimaced.

“Is this...a door?” Alina asked without thinking, looking up at the giant iron double doors that appeared before them.

After traversing a pathless way of rows of pillars, they came upon a pair of great iron doors with magnificent decorations and complex magical sigils carved into them.

“It seems like it leads to a boss room,” said Jade.

“The floor boss for the first level. Let’s kill it right away,” Alina replied.

“I’d like to agree...but it looks like you need a key.”

“A key?”

On closer inspection, there was indeed a keyhole in the iron door. The door wouldn’t budge, no matter if they pushed or pulled.

“...Hold on, where should we look for the k—”

Before she could finish, Jade suddenly pulled the shield off his back. While Alina wondered what he was doing, he hid her completely behind his shield.

“Hey?! What are you doing—?”

“Ha-ha! If it isn’t Silver Sword, still short a member!” Interrupting Alina’s complaint, a few men appeared from the dim light with mocking cackles.

The brown-haired swordsman who stood at the lead took one look at Jade’s greatshield and furrowed his brow. “Hmm? What are you bringing out that for? You saying you wanna fight us?”

“Oh, just being cautious.”

“Ha, so you’re chicken. Well, what can you do? It looks like you don’t have enough people.”

Peering out between the decorations of the greatshield, Alina sneakily observed the men who’d appeared. The one standing in the lead and smirking

was a young adventurer with his long brown hair tied behind him—a swordsman. The three adventurers behind him had to be his party members. However, unlike most adventurers who envied the guild elite Silver Sword, they clearly seemed to look down on them.

“That’s right, Rufus. We still haven’t settled on a frontline attacker,” Jade lied calmly with a shrug of his shoulders.

Immediately, the man he’d called Rufus cackled victoriously. “You’ve really blown it, huh! So you couldn’t get your last ray of hope, the great Executioner, huh? How the elites have fallen! We’ll clear the dungeon first this time.”

Alina had heard the name Rufus before. In fact, many receptionists and adventurers would have heard that name before. He was the leader of a high-ranked party that was thought to be the second most capable after the guild’s elite party, Silver Sword.

“But if Silver Sword is relying on some mysterious hoax war hammer wielder, then you’re finished.”

“...Hoax?”

Jade raised his brows.

“Of course. That whole thing about beating up the Hellflame Dragon and defeating the raid boss in one strike was obviously fake. Otherwise, the person who did it wouldn’t need to hide their identity! If they’re not a fraudster, then they should just identify themselves. But the fact they aren’t means they’ve got something to hide. The guild leadership are a bunch of morons for continuing to look for this so-called Executioner!”

Rufus and his team of adventurers guffawed for a while. When Jade’s party didn’t offer a word of argument in return, Rufus must have felt sure of his victory, as he seemed in a fine mood while he pulled out a little key.

“Oh, that’s...!” Lululee cried out, looking between it and the keyhole in the door.

“It seems that God’s showing favor to me.”

Rufus gave a mocking smile. For an instant, his eyes showed a hint of blazing,

fierce ambition, and he muttered like a groan, "...They say there are special relics you can't find anywhere else in hidden dungeons that show up when a secret quest appears. Just you watch. I'll attain power even stronger than the Executioner!"

"Huh...?"

"You guys can just sit there twiddling your thumbs until we're done clearing this place!"

With a loud laugh, Rufus unlocked the doors and disappeared within.

"What's with those guys...?"

The doors closed firmly with a heavy thud. After waiting for Rufus's party to be completely out of sight, Alina came out from behind Jade's shield.

"Despite what they look like, they're a party of first-class adventurers." Jade breathed an exasperated sigh and returned his shield to his back. "They're the next most capable party in the guild...but as you can see, they've got some personality issues."

"They always go straight to picking a fight..." This probably wasn't the first time that Silver Sword had gotten this kind of harassment from them. Looking largely resigned, Lululee continued, "Rufus and his party are all adventurers who were rejected when they applied for Silver Sword. That probably explains why they always try to get in our way... Just how petty can you be?"

"But now we're stuck. If they took the key, then we can't get past here."

"That's a problem. My paid leave is hanging on this." No sooner had Alina said that than she'd wordlessly activated her skill. Her eyes were fixed on the big iron doors that Rufus's party had shut.

As Alina stepped slowly toward the door, a white magical sigil appeared under her feet, and a giant war hammer manifested from thin air. "...Stupid pain-in-the-ass door needing a key or whatever..."

"Huh? Wait, Alina? You can't be—"

"It's all this door's fault!!" With a yell, Alina threw her whole body into

slamming her war hammer against the thick door.

There was a dramatic crash, and the ceiling shuddered. Though you'd think that the door would never open unless unlocked, the war hammer hit it so hard that it crumpled easily, shattering it to pieces and blasting it away.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Neither key nor door mattered now.

Jade and company gazed expressionlessly at what remained of the entrance she'd ripped apart with exceptional brute force. A smashed-up piece of the iron door hit Jade's quickly raised shield and bounced off.

Meanwhile, with a loud “Hmph!” Alina glared at the other side of the entrance she'd torn open by force. “I don't have the time to waste on this door when my paid leave is on the line.”

“Hey, Alina. I think the ancients worked pretty hard to make that door. They put a lot into the decorations and stuff,” Jade pointed out.

“I don’t care. I want to move on as quickly as possible.”

Beyond the destroyed door was a big hall. It was filled with particularly thick ether that clearly suggested the presence of a boss, but the all-important monster was nowhere to be found. There were just stairs leading to the next floor.

“Huh...? Are these the stairs?”

“So then the first floor is over?”

“...Rufus’s party was ahead of us, but not enough time has passed for them to have defeated the boss... That’s strange...I’ve never encountered a floor that didn’t have a boss...”

While tilting their heads in puzzlement, the party went up the stairs in the back and proceeded to the second floor. The second floor was completely different from the mysterious space with all the pillars on the previous floor—it was a long corridor that stretched out ahead. Magnificent, decorated stone pillars stood at regular intervals on either side as it continued farther in.

“This is strange. There’s no sign of monsters.” Jade furrowed his brow in confusion, then stopped abruptly.

“What is it?” Alina asked.

“I feel like I just heard something.”

“...? I can’t hear any—”

Alina’s statement was cut off by the faint scream of a man coming from down the hallway.

Gyaaaaaagh...!

“!”

Both Lowe and Lululee had heard it as well.

“Someone screamed?!”

“That cry—was that Rufus’s party?!”

Jade was already racing down the hallway toward the sound of the scream. Alina and the others followed after, racing down without stopping.

Eventually, they came to what looked like the room of the second-floor boss, and the doors were already half-open. Jade leaped in first to see how things were inside.

“...!”

They were in a chamber with a massive magical sigil drawn on the floor. Three adventurers were lying on the ground, covered in blood. Judging from their equipment, they were the men who had been with Rufus not long ago.

“Lululee!” Jade called out.

The healer was already waving her rod, sending healing light flying out. But her spell did not reach the fallen men; it simply passed their bodies in vain.

Lululee froze with a start and stopped casting. She quietly lowered her rod, glanced at the adventurers in a daze, and said, “...They’re dead...”

Alina suddenly stopped in place, unable get any closer to those cold bodies. The stench of blood was strong as the dark red puddle of blood spread in the dim light. The aura of death hanging over that spot was so intense that she couldn’t move her feet.

This was the second time she’d experienced the death of an adventurer she knew. The first time was when she had still been little—

“Alina,” Jade called out to her, and she snapped out of it with a start. “Best not to look.”

“...”

After saying just that, he turned over one of the bodies lying face down in a

sea of blood. The one equipped with a broken metal circular shield in one hand was the tank, who should have had the best defense of the party. But he'd taken a violent wound to the stomach that had most likely killed him instantly.

"Penetrating the tank's shield to kill him in a single hit...that's quite the attack," remarked Jade.

"They all got hit in the same way," Lowe noticed as well.

"Yeah. Did the floor boss get them...?"

They investigated each of the bodies, but seeing the third body, Jade furrowed his brow. "...No. Just one of them was—"

"Jade," Lululee called out to him, and he looked up. "Rufus is gone."

Just as she said, there were only three bodies. Keeping their guard up, they searched carefully, finding the missing adventurer before long.

"Rufus!"

He was sitting stunned behind a column. Blood was splattered on his pallid face, and he didn't have a trace of his earlier spirit. But fortunately, his injuries didn't look severe.

Jade put a hand on Rufus's shoulder and asked him quietly, "What happened?"

After a long silence, he slowly opened his mouth to mutter, "...I dunno..."

Jade's expression turned even more grim. In terms of pure capability, Rufus was just as good as any member of Silver Sword. If he'd encountered a monster that had left him stupefied, it was clearly a powerful foe.

"...A humanoid monster suddenly appeared from that magic sigil...the bastard was using a skill..."

"A skill? A monster was?!" Jade cried out in shock.

Skills were fundamentally limited to humans. He'd never heard of monsters using them, even the humanoid variety.

"...Anyway, let's leave here for now." Breaking the heavy silence, Jade stood up.

“There are monsters lurking around the area. And if the floor boss isn’t here, then other monsters can easily come and—”

But Jade’s warning came a few seconds too late.

A great wind suddenly whipped up above them.

With his good eyes, Jade spotted something in the dim light at the roof and cried out sharply, “Get down!”

Alina was drawn to look. The moment she saw the large shadow of wings under the wavering light of the lamps...

Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

...there came a shriek so shrill she thought her eardrums would burst. A man-eating bat with sharp black fangs was descending, its wings outstretched in a menacing flap. It was a Bloodbat.

“Of all the times...!”

Lowe didn’t miss a beat, waving his rod. He deployed a magical sigil in the air, and an intense swirl of flame assaulted the monster. The bat of the underworld swept out of the way, but faltered in midair, as if flinching.

“Skill Activate: *Dia Break!*”

Seizing on its moment of flinching, Alina flew in. A white magical sigil rose in the air, and grabbing the war hammer that appeared, she slammed the Bloodbat over the top of the head.

With a heavy *badonk*, she smacked the Bloodbat down hard enough that it formed a crater in the ground. It spread its wings and continued flailing for a while, but eventually, after some continuous spasming, it died.

“I guess that wasn’t the humanoid monster.”

“It was just drawn by the smell of blood. Other creatures are coming. We have to get out—”

“Th...that war hammer...!” Rufus cut Jade off, his eyes wide in shock as he pointed at Alina and the war hammer she’d summoned with her skill. “No way... you’re the Executioner?!”

By the time she realized what she'd done, it was too late. Rufus's face went paler, pale enough that it would be an exaggeration to call it surprised, as he stared at Alina in fear.

"...That's right." She had no choice but to acknowledge it.

Alina sighed and nodded, and Rufus said something unexpected. "Oh...so that's what's going on...the Executioner...isn't human...! You're with that humanoid monster, aren't you?!"

"With them?"

"That's enough, Rufus! There are things you can say and things you can't—"

"The monster that attacked us was just like you...!"

"Huh?"

"It created a weapon out of a white magical sigil!!"

She heard everyone's breath catch. Regin and Sigrus skills couldn't create weapons or white magic sigils. Those were all the same characteristics as Alina's Dia skill.

"It couldn't be... Was the ability that monster used...a Dia skill?"

Even just a monster using a skill was difficult to believe, but the suggestion that it had a Dia skill, which they'd thought only Alina could have, was even more improbable. It was a lot to take in at once, but nobody could deny that possibility.

It explained why Rufus's party, which was at the very least the second-strongest party in the guild, had been destroyed in just a few minutes. They had already found out through that fight with the guildmaster that Sigrus skills were ineffectual against Dia skills.

"...We'll talk about this later. We're getting out of here." Jade made Rufus stand up, not giving him time to argue. "This is one dangerous dungeon."

They were in the guildmaster's office at the Adventurers Guild headquarters.

Glen sat at his stately work desk as Jade reported the results of their survey on the White Tower. The guildmaster leaned on both elbows, listening in silence until Jade was done.

"I see, so Rufus's party was..." Glen wore a hardened expression as he was informed of the adventurers' deaths. Though his eyes seemed cool as he stared into the air, they contained a note of deep sadness. It was a stare that you could only obtain after many years of experience—a look that showed you understood the absurdities of the world.

Jade knew that Glen had also lost a party he'd cared about, people who had once had his back. That had also been the reason he'd retired from active service—which was why Jade had wanted to avoid delivering a report of this nature, if possible.

"Agh...I never get used to death reports, no matter how much time passes..." After closing his eyes for a while, as though he was offering a silent prayer to the departed, Glen heaved a sigh and opened his mouth reluctantly. "...A missing floor boss and a monster with a skill. And a Dia skill at that? This is more trouble than I imagined."

"The monsters wandering the tower are on a completely different level than the ones we've encountered before. Thanks to Alina, we managed to proceed without trouble...but this is clearly not just a new dungeon. We should reconsider opening quests to the public."

"I see..." Looking grim, Glen fell silent. After a long pause, he told Jade quietly, "We'll put the clearing of the White Tower on hold for now. We'll prioritize surveys first... We wound up showing the li'l miss a nasty sight. I'll apologize later—"

"Hold on." A man dashed into the room, cutting off Glen. It was Rufus, still all

bandaged up.

“I thought you were still recovering, Rufus?”

Having survived the humanoid monster’s attack, Rufus had been sent straight to a treatment room the moment they came back from the White Tower. Thanks to Lululee’s quick healing, it seemed he hadn’t sustained any serious wounds.

But Rufus was yelling like he didn’t care at all about that. “Put the clearing on pause? How can the great and mighty Silver Sword, of all people, make such a goddamn weak declaration...”

“You should know better than anyone just how terrible that place is, Rufus. Go back to your room,” Glen scolded him strictly.

But Rufus just snorted at that before making a preposterous statement. “How about I expose the Executioner’s identity to the whole town?”

The next instant, Jade approached Rufus threateningly. “Rufus! I was wondering what you’d come here for—”

Rufus cut him off and thrust a finger at Glen. “If you don’t want the Executioner exposed, then take that thing off Silver Sword and put me on instead. I’m going to the White Tower.”

“Wha...?!”

“Hmph! So you bastards knew who the Executioner really was, huh? And you’ve been doing your best to hide it because of that. No wonder! Since that’s a monster in the shape of a human! It’d be a hell of a fiasco to have a monster in Silver Sword!”

“Enough!” Jade grabbed Rufus by the bandages after hearing him insult Alina. “Are you out of your mind? You just saw your comrades get killed by a humanoid monster!”

“So what? They were unlucky. That’s all.”

“What did you say...?!”

“Whoa there, should you be hitting me? The Executioner’s identity might just pop out of my mouth if that happens.”

That immediately brought a grim frown to Jade's face, and he fell silent.

Rufus grinned in satisfaction. "I never liked the Executioner in the first place. The next candidate for Silver Sword's frontline attacker? Pushing me aside? That's my spot. I'm not letting a monster like that take what's mine...!" Rufus muttered in what sounded like a groan. There was resentment in his voice, and his eyes blazed with jealousy.

"Rufus...what is your goal here? You're an adventurer, so you should understand that going up against a Dia skill just heightens the risk that we all die. You're not going to get out unscathed here, ei—"

"Ha, who said that I'm fighting that monster?"

"...What?"

"In the depths of a hidden dungeon revealed by a secret quest lies a special relic," Rufus murmured, his eyes shining eerily with desire. A low laugh escaped from his bared teeth, as though he couldn't restrain it.

"Do you know what that relic does? *It lets you acquire a Dia skill...!*" Rufus declared with strange certainty.

Jade widened his eyes. It was true that tales of secret quests were always accompanied by whispers of special relics in hidden dungeons, but he'd never heard of one that would enable you to acquire a Dia skill. This information was sudden, and it didn't feel right.

No—the most dangerous thing would be taking this dubious information at face value and letting Rufus lead them by the nose. This wasn't worth risking their lives over. Had Rufus's intense jealousy dulled even his powers of judgment?

"If I can just get that, then I can succeed as an adventurer...! Then you all will be bowing your heads to me soon enough, begging me to join Silver Sword."

"Rufus...! Think calmly about this! Skills are inborn traits! They're not something that you can learn after the fact! Risking your life on something that uncertain—"

"Shut up! Don't you dare give me orders! Ordinary folks like me have to

gamble to surpass prodigies with an abundance of talent!”

“ ... ”

He was wrong. Frustrated, Jade closed his mouth.

Rufus’s abilities as an adventurer were the real deal. But he blamed other people for the fact that he’d been rejected from Silver Sword, letting his jealousy control him and wasting all his hard-earned potential. No matter what strong powers he acquired, so long as he was dominated by such dark feelings, he would not be selected for Silver Sword.

“Where did you even get that information to begin wi—”

“You guys just need to shut up and show me to the fourth floor!” Rufus yelled over Jade, bloodshot eyes bulging as he spat, “You’re coming with me to the White Tower. You got that? This isn’t a request. This is a threat. Neither you nor the guildmaster have the right to refuse...!”

After coming back from the White Tower, Alina returned to Silver Sword's luxurious lodgings to kill some time.

Everyone else was busy—Jade was immediately summoned by the guildmaster, Lululee was healing Rufus, and Lowe was analyzing information from the White Tower. The only one with nothing to do was Alina, who was out of the loop.

Knock, knock. There came a sudden rapping on Alina's door. She gave a lazy reply, and Jade came through the door.

"Hey." Without a shred of remorse, he sat down on the edge of the bed where Alina was sprawled out, flashing his usual smile. "Did you get some good rest in?"

"Somewhat."

"The White Tower is going to be sealed up for a while. Adventuring of the area will be limited to Silver Sword only."

"Uh-huh."

"You're not interested, huh... Though I get it, with everything that happened..."

"So long as we clear the White Tower quickly, and I can avoid using up any more paid time off, I'm fine."

"About that, Alina." Jade suddenly got a meek look on his face and said something unexpected. "We're making Rufus Silver Sword's frontline attacker."

Alina blinked in confusion. For an instant, she couldn't process what she'd just heard. "Huh? What about me?"

"You'll be removed from Silver Sword. You can go back to being a receptionist."

“...Huh.”

He'd been utterly fixated on her, yet Jade had just outright told her they would be parting ways; Alina was at a loss for words for a moment. She got up after a few seconds' thought. Jade was avoiding eye contact, but she forced him to look at her.

“You're not going to ask me something like, *Now that we're even, come help me out with this other dungeon, right?*”

“I won't.”

“And what about the promise about getting more receptionists to make my overtime go away?”

“We'll do our best on that one, since you helped out Silver Sword like you promised.”

“...”

This was fishy. Alina furrowed her brow. This was *too* fishy. She didn't know what Jade had discussed during his report to Glen, but the stinking, stalking bastard Alina knew wouldn't accept a decision like this lying down. He was definitely leaving something unsaid.

“...Well, whatever.”

She was about to pursue it but decided to drop it. If Rufus was going to the White Tower instead, she would gladly accept that. She could avoid wasting any more of her paid time off.

“Now that things are settled, this is the last day I can spend in this room... though I hate to part with this bed. I'm going to pack my things, so could you leave now?”

“...That's the Alina I know, all right.”

Even though she was telling him to get out, Jade smiled sadly, as if he were relieved to see she was the same as always. He really was acting strange. Alina furrowed her brow; it was clear that something was off. Jade wasn't the kind of guy to wear that sort of mature expression and resign himself to doing what had to be done. He usually looked like a kid going on a rampage, begging for

something he wasn't going to get.

"..."

But Alina didn't pry any further. She put her suspicions in a box. Jade obediently went to leave, and she watched this strange sight quietly, right until the moment when he was about to shut the door.

And then before she knew it, she found herself asking him quietly, "...Are you really okay?"

Alina was a little surprised that the words had actually escaped her lips.

It wasn't like it mattered. Not with this idiot.

Jade must also have never expected she'd be concerned about him, as he turned around with his mouth hanging open.

But now that Alina had said it, there was no taking it back, so she pasted on a scowl as she continued, "The humanoid monster uses Dia skills, right? Sigrus skills are weaker. Can you manage with them, somehow?"

"..."

Jade didn't reply immediately.

Normally, he brandished an incomprehensible amount of confidence and positivity, but now he was acting unlike himself and looking away. After a few seconds of silence, he muttered, "Even if we can't manage somehow, we do what we're told—that's how it is with Silver Sword."

Alina gulped at the lowness of his voice, at how he sounded prepared for what was coming. But his morose expression only lasted an instant, and he immediately went back to his usual look, giving her a flippant smile. "I'll be fine even against Dia skills. You're always smacking me around, but I'm totally fine now, aren't I?"

"...True."

"As long as the tank is standing, the party won't fall. I'm the tenacious type—I won't go down that easy," he said. His smile looked put on, and it just gave Alina a sense that something was wrong. She furrowed her brow at the feeling, but Jade continued on, heedless of her discomfort. "Well, this has been a bit of

an irregular occasion, and it was unfortunate, but I'm not giving up on you. Let's go dungeon-diving together sometime."

"No."

"By the way, you can use this room all you want until the repairs are done on your house. —Right then, see you."

"..."

After saying his piece, he left. As she watched him go, a foreboding feeling welled up in her chest, and she vaguely recalled the events of the distant past.

It happened when Alina was still very young, less than ten years old.

Alina's hometown was far from Iffole. Her family ran a tavern in a remote village on the eastern edge of the continent. Of course, the few taverns in that rural area were always overflowing with local adventurers, and she'd been particularly close with one of them, a young adventurer named Shroud.

"Hey, Alina, I've told you again and again, don't call me Uncle. I'm still in my twenties, so I'm more of a big brother, a go-getter."

In the tavern, which was noisy and overflowing with adventurers as always, Shroud scowled and jabbed a finger at Alina. He had already said this line over ten times.

Shroud was a lanky young man, and he wore equipment typical of a frontline attacker, a set of light armor and a longsword. Your garden-variety adventurer. Though he was still in his early twenties, Alina found his reactions to being called Uncle amusing, so she'd taken to calling him Uncle Shroud.

"Big bro Shroud! C'mon, try it! Repeat after me!"

"Uncle Shroud!"

"...Fine, just call me Uncle, okay." Shroud slumped, then sulkily knocked back his booze.

Satisfied at getting the reaction she'd wanted, Alina bounced around and tittered, while the other adventurers watching him cackled.

"Gya-ha-ha! From Alina's point of view, you're an uncle just like us, old man!"

"Shaddap! Don't lump me in with a bunch of fat middle-aged adventurers like you! I'm still a sharp and spry twenty-three!"

"Hey, hey, Uncle Shroud."

"What is it, Auntie Alina?"

Alina's eyes sparkled at his immature comeback, and she made her usual request. "Tell me about your quests again today! What kind of dungeons have you been to lately?"

"Agh...you really are a curious kid. I'm sure there's nothing interesting about the stories of a dull adventurer like me."

"That's not true!"

Alina liked to listen to Shroud's stories. To that end, she would take him to the tavern every day, claiming she was helping out her family.

But just as Shroud said, his adventurer stories contained no thrilling twists or tales of heroism against monsters.

He was completely unlike those hot-blooded adventurers who would boldly challenge monsters and dungeons in an attempt to gain fame. He liked to go to safe dungeons that had already been cleared and had no bosses. He'd map out the details of the dungeon, and if he was lucky, he would spot a relic that other adventurers had failed to grab, retrieve it, and exchange it for money. He said he was "like a cowardly hyena."

But Alina still loved his stories.

"Cause I'm gonna be an adventurer when I grow up, too!" Alina declared, fists clenched in front of her chest.

The drunks all around her cried out, "Nice!"

Alina started getting into it, cheeks flushed as she spoke of her dream. "I'm gonna be a great adventurer, go on big quests in dungeons with you, Uncle Shroud, and get rich! And I'm gonna live in a big house and live a super-exciting life!"

"Cheers to the adventurer Alina!" The guests decided to have a rousing toast on her behalf and tossed back their drinks.

But Shroud did not seem amused, his lips bent downward. "An adventurer? Ha-ha, forget about it, that's impossible for a runt like you."

"You can do it, even if you're small!"

"Instead of a dusty old job like this...why not be a receptionist?! You're bound

to become a beauty when you grow up, so you should be a receptionist, Alina.”

“What? I don’t wanna be one, that seems boring. And then I couldn’t go on quests with you.”

“Kids don’t have to go on quests.”

“What?!”

“Anyway, there’s nothing good about being an adventurer, you know. The monsters are scary, the dungeons are chilly, and it’s an unstable gig that just gets you through the day! You can’t get any loans, and weapons and armor are really expensive, but they break right away!”

“...???” Alina was too young to understand half of Shroud’s complaints. She didn’t know what a loan or day labor was, and she had no idea what was wrong with those things.

Alina tilted her head in confusion, and Shroud glanced at her before continuing, “And what’s more, I’ve only ever manifested a plain old Regin skill. At this point, success as an adventurer is impossible—that’s what makes being a receptionist perfect! It’s a government job! It’s stable, so you can earn money your whole life. You can get loans, too. You don’t need expensive armor or weapons, and best of all, you get paid by the hour. You go to work on time, and once it’s time to go, you can go home! And after that you can eat and sleep and drink booze like you want! Nghhh! If I were a woman, I’d have become a receptionist.”

“I don’t really get it, but being an adventurer seems like more fun.”

“Agh, you’re such a kid. That’s how children think. But what can you do?” Shroud shrugged his shoulders and dramatically shook his head.

Alina puffed up her cheeks at him. “Hey! Maybe I’m a kid, but you’re a ‘small fry’!”

“Bfffffft!” Shroud spewed out the booze he’d been drinking when he heard that. “Hey, who taught Alina to say that?!” he yelled, smacking the tankard on the table, and his friends in the tavern all burst into laughter. Understanding that they were all culprits, Shroud scowled.

“It’s okay! I’ll protect you, Uncle Shroud!”

“Dammit, saying it with sparkling eyes like that... I don’t think you get what it feels like for an old man to have a little girl saying she’ll protect you...”

“I’ll team up with you, Uncle Shroud!”

“Aghhh, yeah, yeah, I get it, I get it, I’ll form a party with you, I will.”

“Really?! Then it’s a promise! Don’t break it.”

“Yeah, of course. I may be weak, but I’m a man of my word.” Shroud did a pinkie swear with Alina, and then headed out for a quest with the others like usual.

But after going out on that quest, he and the others stopped showing up at the tavern. Never mind that—a week passed without them even coming back to town.

Unable to take it, Alina asked the regulars, “Hey, guys, when is Shroud coming back?”

The adventurers’ hands all froze on their drinks. They’d always laughed so cheerily before, but now their mouths were all meekly shut.

“...?”

They all understood what it meant if there was no news of some adventurers who had gone into a dungeon a week ago. But none of them had the courage to tell Alina the facts.

That was when a man dashed into the bar, face pale. “Shroud’s party has returned!”

“!” Her eyes sparkled. Those were the words she’d been waiting for.

“Wait, Alina!”

She heard someone tell her to stop, but she dashed out of the bar without a moment’s hesitation anyway. She headed to the village entrance and stumbled upon a beat-up group of adventurers in damaged armor. It was Shroud’s party.

But the man himself was nowhere to be found. And what’s more, even someone her age could sense the unusually dark and gloomy air that had come

over these men, who normally knocked back alcohol with loud laughter. They were pale as death.

Alina leaped on them. “What about Shroud? Where’s Shroud?”

One of the party members vacantly raised his head. His eyes and cheeks were sunken as if he hadn’t eaten for days, and his face was pale. He looked like he had just barely escaped hell with his life, making Alina feel all the more anxious.

Was Shroud like this, too? Then she had to take care of him right away. She’d give him some hot stew, throw in some booze, and tease him by calling him an old man. Though he only ever complained about that, she had to make him cheer up, just like she always did.

“...He’s dead,” the man muttered quietly. He was so worn out, he didn’t even hesitate to consider whether he should be saying that to a child.

“Huh?” It was so sudden, all Alina could do was blankly blink her eyes at first. “...He’s...dead...?” She forced her lips to turn upward as she grabbed the man’s battered armor. “You’re joking, right...?”

He was teasing her. Just like how Alina would call Shroud Uncle for fun.

But none of the other adventurers denied what he’d said. Looking at their stricken expressions, the meaning of those words gradually forced themselves into her brain.

Alina’s eyes fell on the luggage rack they had been dragging. The large rack, big enough for one person to lie down on, was covered by a cloth, and there was an arm dangling out from a gap in the cloth.

“Shroud?!”

Alina rushed up to the rack to cling to it. She tried to rip off the cloth laid over it, but someone with a strong grip held her back. “...You can’t look, Alina.”

The man had seemed completely worn out, but now his eyes flashed as he wrung out the last remnants of his strength to rebuke her.

“No! Shroud! Uncle Shroud.” Alina resisted with all her strength.

“This is his last request! This is the one thing I can’t back down on!” the man yelled. She stopped what she was doing.

“Huh?”

His hand, clasped around her arm, was trembling slightly. Finally, Alina saw the reality of the scene before her. The fingers on the arm hanging from the gap in the cloth were pallid white. Whoever was under there hadn’t so much as twitched despite the racket she’d made.

The man looked away from where Alina stood frozen, and quietly, he said the definitive line: “...Shroud...isn’t coming back...”

Having the words shoved in her face, Alina stood there for a while. She drew her hand away from the cloth and retreated two, three steps back, as if running from the cold body that she could sense through the fabric.

“It...can’t be true...”

She tripped over her legs and landed on her bottom.

The body was taken to the treatment center along with Shroud’s party, and the surrounding adventurers offered Alina remarks of concern. But everything they said just rang hollow. She didn’t hear any of it. The facts screamed at her in the haze of her mind.

“Shroud...isn’t coming back.”

Those cold, merciless words destroyed all her wonderful memories of Shroud. His tales of adventure were painted over black—as were his flushed cheeks when he would toss back his booze, and his scowls when she called him Uncle, and her dream of going into a dungeon with him one day.

“...Hey, what about...our promise...?”

Before going to bed every night—even just the night before—she would dream about the fun she was going to have. Alina was going to delve into dungeons with him as an adventurer and defeat ferocious monsters before he could. Beating him to the punch in fights was bound to make him scowl. But in the end, he’d smile hopelessly and say, “Wow, Alina,” and pat her head.

“...Hey...Uncle Shroud...come back,” she muttered in a daze. There was no longer anyone to argue back in annoyance.

Alina stared into space as she sank onto the cold ground. The adventurers left

her alone, the other people went away, and the sun fell. But even after the cold veil of night fell, Alina continued to gaze out of the village in search of a trace of Shroud.

Yet no matter how long she waited, he wouldn't reply.

The truth she'd been told contained no warmth—it was cold, hard, and mean. It rudely awakened Alina to the coldheartedness of the world.

“—!!”

Alina shot up in bed.

An unfamiliar room came into view, and her mind was addled for a moment. But she quickly figured out she was in Silver Sword's lodging and breathed a long sigh. Her neck was soaked with sweat. Scowling at the disgusting feeling, she got out of bed. She opened a window, and a chilly early morning breeze blew in.

It's been a long time since I last had that dream...

Her memories of Shroud had resurfaced after she laid eyes on the bodies of Rufus's annihilated party members.

“...”

Gazing listlessly out over the still dim city of Iffole, Alina traced her distant memories.

Shroud had been killed by a floor boss. He had been doing his usual work in a well-traversed dungeon. He'd thought it had been cleared, but there was actually a floor that nobody had noticed. He got lost down there and was taken by surprise. A small fry like him, who had avoided monsters to begin with, could never have handled a floor boss.

“...”

Alina shook her head and forced away the painful memories. For some reason, that look on Jade's face the other day reminded her of Shroud.

Wanting to rid herself of this awful feeling like a lump in her throat, Alina opened her mouth. “Overtime starting today, huh...”

Sighing, she started changing into her receptionist uniform.

She had never thought she would use those words to take her mind off her worries.

They were on the fourth floor of the White Tower. Their second sortie had brought Jade's party to the deepest level of the dungeon.

The fourth floor was a dark place, with only the little lights on the walls to rely on. But to Jade, it was as clear as midday.

Not only that—his ears caught even the breathing of monsters on the other side of the walls, and his nose gave him an accurate sense of where they were.

The skill *Sigrus Beast* forced his senses past their human limits, enabling him to detect the presence of enemies over a wide range from just the slightest sound or smell. It was Jade's second skill.

Sigrus Wall wasn't the only ability in his possession. He was the first adventurer to have manifested multiple Sigrus skills, and he had two more in addition to *Sigrus Beast*. But since using multiple abilities was quite a burden on the user, he typically stuck to using *Sigrus Wall* in combat.

"There wasn't a boss on the third floor, either... This is getting even more baffling..." Jade muttered.

He was using *Sigrus Beast* to avoid the humanoid monster that was probably still wandering the dungeon, but this also allowed his party to slip past unnecessary battles with the powerful monsters wandering around the S-class dungeon. Since they hadn't encountered any floor bosses, either, at first glance, it would appear the party was moving smoothly through the White Tower.

"This is convenient for us, though. Having to fight the floor boss on top of this would be too much of a drain on you, leader," Lowe said. Despite his statement, his expression was somber. He gave Jade a look of concern. "...Are you okay, leader? Don't push yourself."

They had overcome countless deadly situations together. He could see that Jade was tired.

“I’m okay—is what I’d like to say, but I’m actually going to need to rest a bit.”

They were right in the middle of a long, continuous corridor, but after confirming that there weren’t any monsters around, Jade sat down and leaned against a wall.

At a glance, *Sigrus Beast* seemed like a convenient skill, but it was a double-edged sword—the vast amount of information it fed Jade relentlessly drained his energy. He couldn’t afford to keep it activated for hours at a time. But he’d kept it up ever since they’d entered the White Tower. To make matters worse, he’d been using *Sigrus Wall* whenever they ran into monsters they couldn’t avoid.

He knew that using multiple skills was a heavy burden, but they had to avoid encountering the humanoid monster that used Dia skills at all costs. That had forced him to make some tough calls.

“...”

Jade continued using *Sigrus Beast* as he closed his eyes and rested his body. He’d been a tank long enough that he had confidence in his endurance, but that didn’t make using his skills for an extended period of time any less exhausting.

“Jade...let’s go back for now.” Lululee examined his face with concern. “Heal spells won’t cure the fatigue that comes from using skills...”

Lululee was normally firm and strong-willed, but that wasn’t apparent now. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. She could be a worrier, and she certainly didn’t want to see Jade looking so pale.

Yeah, let’s go back.

The words came to the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed them down. Normally, he wouldn’t have hesitated to make the decision to withdraw. The tank was the keystone of the party, and if they were weakened, the likelihood of the party being wiped out shot up. Keeping this skill activated to avoid the humanoid monster and fending off the other powerful creatures prowling around had been a reckless idea to begin with.

But then a mocking voice cut in. “Hah, don’t be so dramatic. You just used your skill a bit. I can’t believe you call yourself the strongest tank in the guild.” It

was Rufus.

“Rufus...!” Lululee’s expression immediately grew stern. “Jade wouldn’t be so overextended in the first place if you didn’t keep attacking without waiting for him to taunt!”

“Cram it, pip-squeak. This is how I do things. I’m not gonna wait around until you taunt the enemy.”

“If you’re going to be that selfish, then I’m not going to heal you anymore, Rufus...!”

“Stop it, Lululee.”

Rufus’s egocentrism had stretched Lululee’s patience to its limits. Jade knew that, but he still stopped her. They’d entered the dungeon as a party, so they would have to find a way to make things work. Now wasn’t the time for a falling-out.

“But he’s such a—”

“I get that you’re not happy about the way we do things, Rufus, but this is how it is right now. You’d better play along if you want to keep your head on your shoulders. Also, you need to carry your guiding crystal shard. It’ll let us know if anyone’s in trouble.”

“That thing? Spare me the fake friend garbage. And if you whine at me about that too much, I might get so agitated that I go around town shouting about the Executioner’s true identity. Capisce?”

“...” Jade groaned in frustration and fell silent.

That was why they were forcing themselves to go through the White Tower—because he couldn’t allow Rufus to expose Alina’s big secret.

Lululee and Lowe felt the same way. The healer furrowed her brows and shut her mouth.

“I’ve gotten enough rest. Let’s go,” said Jade.

Lululee seemed frustrated, but Jade patted her on the head and stood up. Right now, his number one priority was avoiding the humanoid monster; he needed to keep Lululee and Lowe safe after dragging them into this. All of that

was hinged on smart use of his *Sigrus Beast* skill.

He cautiously moved onward as he considered the situation.

Rufus claimed that his party had been wiped out by a “humanoid monster” that had emerged from a magic sigil. But something about his claim was suspicious.

It was clear from the wounds on the bodies of his three party members that they had died instantly. Only a monster could have caused such inhuman injuries. But if Jade’s hypothesis was correct, then one of them had in fact *succumbed from a stab wound*. It had been dark, and all the bodies had been covered in blood, so he didn’t fully trust his brief assessment. Nevertheless, Jade’s vision was sharp, and one of the bodies had seemed off to him.

It was almost like someone had plunged a sword in their back.

Rufus is the only one who could have done that. But there’s no good reason to kill your party members in an unknown S-class dungeon... Having fewer allies would just make things more dangerous for him.

Naturally, Jade was also keeping an eye on Rufus. But even if he somehow got Rufus to confess to the killing, they couldn’t oppose him since he knew Alina’s identity.

Sighing, Jade glared through the dim light down the corridor.

An untrustworthy ally is deadlier than the toughest of dungeons...

They pressed onward, and the end of the corridor came into view. A large iron door appeared from the darkness. Jade could sense the thick presence of ether beyond it.

“...This is the end of the dungeon, leader,” Lowe muttered.

Jade nodded. Drawing the longsword at his hip, he cautiously opened the door.

“...!”

The instant they stepped inside, Jade automatically covered his nose with his arm. The stench of blood was overpowering, much too intense for his *Sigrus Beast*—enhanced nose.

But he couldn't make out anything apart from the ghastly odor. After looking around the room, Jade quietly gulped. "...Lowe. A light."

The black mage responded with a swing of his rod, and a little ball of light floated up to the ceiling. It revealed a chamber with a particularly high ceiling, surrounded by four grand pillars.

"This is..."

In the center of the area was a cadaver so thoroughly eviscerated that you couldn't even tell what it had been to begin with. The corpse, already felled by someone else's hand, gradually melted away into the air. This vanishing phenomenon was unique to monsters. That could mean only one thing.

"Could that be...the floor boss...?"

"No way. Does this mean that someone else beat the floor bosses ahead of us...?"

"They were weaklings, the lot of them."

Jade snapped his gaze to the source of that sudden voice.

Before him, a man appeared from behind one of the thick pillars. He didn't look anything like a typical adventurer.

He was naked above the waist, exposing his brawny muscles, and he had no weapons or armor to speak of. A loose cloth was wrapped around his waist, and his long golden hair hung artlessly to the small of his back.

But what stood out most about the man was a black stone buried in his solar plexus. It was about the size of a fist and emitted an eerie, sinister light.

"...!"

Jade hadn't noticed the man's presence at all, even with *Sigrus Beast* activated.

A foreboding feeling raced through his body as the horrible truth sunk in. Before Jade could figure out why his fight-or-flight response had kicked in, Rufus fell on his backside with a *fwump*.

"The humanoid monster...!" he muttered in shock, pointing to the man who

was slowly walking toward them.

“A humanoid...monster? Not quite. I am neither monster nor man.”

The man smirked. Then he thrust out his arm and said, “Chant: *Dia Storm*.”

“I”

That was a Dia skill he was using. Just then, lines of light accompanying its activation ran through the stone buried in the man’s solar plexus. A white magic sigil appeared beneath his feet, and a giant spear materialized out of thin air.

The lance’s silver ornamentation resembled that of Alina’s war hammer.

“I am the dark god Silha.”

“Dark god...?!”

Silha readied the spear he’d created with a belligerent smile.

“I’m glad you’re here. The souls of those ugly, pathetic monsters taste foul, but they just wouldn’t stop coming! I was getting sick of killing them!” Silha yelled gleefully before he leaped off the ground to attack Jade and the party while they were still coming to grips with what was happening.

“Ngh—Skill Activate: *Sigrus Wall*!”

Silha’s blow came so fast that it was difficult to even see, but Jade blocked it just in the nick of time. With a grating clash of metal, his greatshield just barely changed the trajectory of the silver spear. A sharp flash passed right by his ear. If he had reacted any slower, his face would have been pierced, shield and all.

“! My shield...!”

The lance was so powerful that it had left a crack in the section of the shield it had struck. Jade’s expression turned grim as he assessed the damage. This greatshield wasn’t just a relic arma. He’d also hardened it by applying *Sigrus Wall*. For it to be damaged so easily...

“What fine reaction speed. I can tell you’re stronger than the monsters around here. This’ll be fun.”

Clunk.

Suddenly, a high-pitched sound rang out behind Silha. Jade’s sheath, which

he'd thrown out at the same time he raised his shield, had clattered to the ground. Silha took his eyes off Jade for a second to examine the source of the noise.

"Now! Run for it!"

Taking advantage of the opening, Jade raced for the door.

In this sortie into the White Tower, he had decided on one rule: They would do everything they could to flee if they encountered the humanoid monster. Their current party didn't stand a ghost of a chance against it. Lowe and Lululee swiftly responded to Jade's instruction, and they headed for the door they'd just passed through.

However.

"Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Like hell I'm letting you get away! Skill Activate: *Sigrus Prisoner!*"

Rufus's shrill laughter echoed across the room.

Instantly, an iron grate appeared in front of the entrance to the chamber, blocking their avenue of escape. The iron grille wound around from one edge of the room to the other, cutting off every possible exit.

"...!"

Jade turned to Rufus, who was in no hurry to flee.

The fear that had been showing on his face was abruptly replaced by a vulgar grin.

I knew we couldn't trust him...but why did he have to betray us now of all times?!

Though Jade regretted that things had gone this way, he quickly shifted his focus back to the dark god. But there was nothing in the space where Silha had been standing a moment ago. He'd vanished.

I can't sense his presence...

No matter how far Jade extended *Sigrus Beast*, he couldn't sense anyone aside from the four people here. Sweat beaded on his neck. That spear could

come flying at them at any moment, from any position.

“Cut the bullshit, Rufus! This isn’t the time to be playing around...undo your skill!”

“Undo my skill? I don’t wanna.”

Rufus was eerily calm for someone ostensibly trapped in the same dire situation as the rest of the party. It was as if he were looking down from the stands of a colosseum where wild beasts had been unleashed.

“Hey...since you guys are gonna die anyway, I’ll let you in on something nice, as a souvenir for the underworld.”

Rufus suddenly lowered his voice, peered at Jade’s face, and curled up the corners of his lips in a smirk. “Originally, the dark god was sealed away in this dungeon.” Smirking away, he put a hand on the iron grille. It warped and bent in response to the will of its wielder to let him slip out to the other side, then returned to its previous shape.

“But I undid that seal. It said it would operate if you fed it human souls.”

“...”

Again. That same sense of unease prickled at Jade’s skin. Rufus was talking about something they’d never heard of before with full confidence. He had known about the existence of the dark god since before coming to the White Tower. But how?

Only about a week had passed since they discovered the quest form in the red orb and confirmed the existence of the White Tower. Could Rufus have really found out about this completely unknown being in such a short span of time?

“Then I just had to take you guys to the White Tower to seal your deaths! Guess my gamble paid off, huh?! Oh how the mighty have fallen!”

“...Answer me, Rufus—where did you get that information?”

“I’m not gonna tell you everything just ’cause you asked, moooron! Now you louts are done for, and I get a Dia skill out of it, too. I’m the only one who wins here! I can hardly stop laughing here, ha!”

“...Human souls? Hey, it couldn’t be your allies’ deaths were...” Then Lowe’s

face froze, as if he'd just figured it out. It seemed Jade's prediction had been correct.

"Allies? Ahhh, if you mean those useless nobodies, I killed them to revive the dark god," Rufus said like it was nothing and laughed. "Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha! That was amazing. The looks on their faces as I killed one of 'em in the room the dark god was trapped in! And when the seal broke, they shrieked like you wouldn't believe! But the real spectacle was when I stopped them from escaping with my skill. I guess you could say that despair was written all over their faces?"

"...H-how could you? To your own allies...?" Lululee's voice was hoarse with shock.

Rufus's party members had trusted him until the moment of their deaths, at least. But he'd offered their lives like it was nothing to slake his ambition.

"I hate Silver Sword so much, I'll do anything to kill you. You guys are finished! Finished! You're all gonna die here!!" After a few moments of wild joy, Rufus stuck out his tongue and waved at them. "I'm gonna take my time looking for that Dia skill. You guys enjoy your last ugly struggle. I'm looking forward to hearing your death cries ring out through the floo—"

Rufus was interrupted by a heavy *thud*.

"...Huh?"

He looked down in bewilderment. At some point, a giant blade had sprouted from his chest. Someone had effortlessly driven a lance into him from behind, boring through armor and all.

"Wha—?!"

Rufus widened his eyes in shock, and he slowly turned around to look at who impaled him. Silha had sneaked up behind him.

"Wh-why...?!"

"Why? What a foolish question. I can break through your prison more easily than paper."

There came the sound of crashing metal, and then a few seconds later, the metal grille was in pieces. A chill ran down the spines of Jade and his party. They

hadn't been able to sense Silha's presence at all.

"Th-this isn't...what I was told...! They said...the person who undoes the seal... won't be killed...!"

"Pitiful. I don't know who tempted you, but all who enter my view are fated to be devoured without exception."

"...!"

Rufus's face twisted in despair as if to say, *I've been lied to.*

"Your whining has spoiled my entertainment—but I suppose I should thank you. After all, it's your shortsighted plotting that freed me!"

Rufus belatedly spat blood and coughed violently. He reached out to Jade and his companions in search of help. But it was clear that his wounds were fatal, beyond what a heal spell could fix.

"Ah...ah...!"

His bloody, trembling hand weakened and fell, and he expired atop the spear.

"...Heh-heh, ahhh, disgusting. Heh-heh...heh-heh-heh, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What a vulgar, small-minded, and filthy soul!"

Silha drew his lance from Rufus's corpse. He spared not a single glance to the fallen adventurer, who had slumped in place. He shifted his gaze to where Jade and the others were. "Now then, what about your souls?" His eyes flashed oppressively, like those of a hungry beast overjoyed to have spotted its prey.

What do we do?

Jade got in front of Lululee and Lowe and attempted to find an exit route, focusing his nerves on every single one of Silha's movements all the while. Lululee's and Lowe's decision to keep their cool and stay where they were was an excellent one. Just like Jade, they must have figured out that one wrong move would spell death.

The dark god Silha had Dia skills at his disposal, and his attacks were powerful enough to tear through *Sigrus Wall* and *Sigrus Prisoner* with ease. They couldn't beat him in a straight fight.

“What’s wrong? Are you not going to struggle for me, like a prey animal caught in a predator’s gaze?” Silha tilted his head as if he was growing impatient. “Then I’ll make the first move!” He swung his lance like it was nothing, readying it at his hip as he drew close.



“Get down, leader! Ignis!” Lowe cried. Jade ducked. The same moment, a stream of magic fire shot over his head toward Silha.

“Kwa-ha-ha! What is this little game?”

Silha swung his spear, quelling the flames with the air it kicked up. The attack had been ineffectual, but it succeeded in creating the slightest opening in Silha’s assault.

“...Lululee!”

Jade thrust out his shield, and as he did, Lululee intuited what he meant and activated her skill. “Skill Activate: *Sigrus Revive!*”

Light shone from her rod to envelop Jade. Simultaneously, Silha threw his lance at Jade, impaling both him and his shield—but not even a single drop of blood spilled from the tank’s wounded shoulder.

“Oh-ho...!”

Silha widened his eyes slightly and retracted his spear again. Jade’s shoulder, which clearly should have been injured, was as good as new. His deep stab wound was healed before their eyes.

“A skill that grants regenerative abilities? Interesting.”

Silha licked his lips before he turned to Lululee and made an outrageous declaration: “I’m going to take that for myself.”

“Huh...?! ”

“Chant: *Dia Drain.*”

The light of a skill ran through the black stone in Silha’s stomach, and a white magic sigil deployed before their eyes. From it emerged a giant mirror with a silver, decorative border.

The mirror did as it had been told after it materialized, and an image of Lululee showed up on its surface.

“Run!”

Jade shuddered, and he tried to tug Lululee away by the arm as quick as he could. But he was a moment too late; the mirror emitted a flash of light that

enveloped her in an instant.

“Lululee!”

Jade’s expression stiffened with fear, like his heart was caught in a vise. But when the light cleared, Lululee was still standing. She wasn’t wounded, either. But...

“My rod...is gone...?!”

...her magic rod had vanished.

“I don’t need this wand.”

Just then, Jade realized that Lululee’s rod was in Silha’s hands. The dark god glanced over it, then snapped it like a twig in his hand and tossed it.

“But that self-regeneration skill is interesting. That’s all I’m after,” Silha said. Then he bit into the soft flesh of his own inner arm. Blood spurted out from the gash, dyeing his arm red.

Silha stared intently at this, then smirked. “Chant: *Sigrus Revive*.”

Suddenly, a white light enveloped his arm, regenerating his missing flesh and sealing his wound.

He had used Lululee’s skill.

“...S-skill activate! *Sigrus Revive*!” Panicking, she attempted to invoke her skill, as if she didn’t want to acknowledge what had happened. But no glow followed her incantation.

“N-no...” Her hoarse voice rang out across the dead silence of the room. “My skill...is gone...”

White mages wielded healing magic, using their rods to convert ether into healing. Lululee was as good as useless without a medium to cast with. Now that *Sigrus Revive* was gone, she had been stripped of every avenue she had to heal someone.

“He uses...multiple Dia skills...,” Lowe muttered, staring blankly as the mirror disappeared.

The silver mirror had been created from a white magical sigil, just like the war

hammer and the silver spear. It must have stolen the target's abilities from the root. There were plenty of Sigrus skills that could drain people of their ether or physical energy, but none that could outright snatch another's skill.

“...”

With Lululee's *Sigrus Revive* gone, Jade watched the white light that had enveloped Silha disappear before his eyes, certain that they'd been pushed into a hopeless situation. Despite that, he desperately racked his brain in an attempt to find a way out of this.

“...Leader. Do we have any options left?” Lowe muttered lowly.

“He uses multiple skills, and they're all powerful. If he's made like us humans, he should begin to show signs of exhaustion from using those skills at some point.”

“...Yeah...if he works like normal.”

Lowe's observation was astute. Just using two Sigrus skills wore you down quite a bit. Dia skills were even more powerful than that, so it stood to reason that a normal human would keel over after using more than one at once.

But Jade had a sinking feeling. Though the dark god looked human from the outside, his aura was completely otherworldly. There was something overwhelming about him, something that couldn't be measured by human standards.

“If we could just create an opening somehow...even for an instant—” Jade quickly swallowed what he would have said next. Suddenly, he saw something glint from behind the dark god's long, matted hair.

A mark was carved into his temple, and a familiar one at that—the magical sigil of the sun that represented Dia.

“Th-the mark of Dia?!” Jade widened his eyes in shock. It was the same pattern carved into relics. The ancients would always carve this on the things they had made to mark them as complete.

Hearing Jade's shriek, Lowe noticed the mark carved into the dark god's temple and gave a gasp of his own. “It can't be... That means he's...a relic made

by the ancients?!”

Their enemy was neither man nor monster. In fact, if he really was a relic, then he wasn't even alive in the first place. That meant they couldn't count on him getting exhausted from using multiple skills.

“What's wrong? You look pale.” Silha smiled like he was playing dumb. His eyes blazed with a merciless light, the look of a man considering how to toy with his captured prey.

“If you won't start, then I'll make my move. Chant: *Dia Judge*.”

There wasn't even time for them to lose hope.

As the dark god invoked his skill, three magic sigils appeared from thin air. No sooner had they appeared in front of Jade, Lululee, and Lowe than silver swords had risen slowly from the ground. The blades trained their sharp points on each of their targets, then stopped flat.

“That's a...” A chill ran down Jade's back. “A homing multi-hit skill!”

He was too panicked to think straight.

A homing multi-hit skill generated multiple attacks on all targets at once, granting them near perfect accuracy. It was practically impossible to evade them if you didn't have a sharp eye or incredible athleticism.

Jade clenched his teeth. A surefire hit from a Dia skill. As members of the party's rear guard, both Lowe and Lululee had modest defenses, so a single hit would be enough to kill them.

“...Dammit!” He couldn't let the two of them go down here. “...Lululee, Lowe. I'll take this attack. Use the opportunity to run.”

“Wha—? Hey, leader?! What are you going to do?!”

Jade didn't reply to Lowe's question. Instead, he glared at Silha. “You're facing off against me.”

“...Facing off? You mean one-on-one? Against me? Ha-ha, you're an interesting man!” Silha stared into Jade's eyes with deep interest, then shrugged. “Relax. I'll leave the sword aimed at you for last. It'll be just you and me once the two behind you are dead.”

“I can’t let that happen! Skill Activate: *Sigrus Blood*!” Jade cried, triggering his third skill. A red glow instantly burst from his body, and all three of Silha’s blades trained their points on him.

But Lululee cried out when she saw what was happening. “J...Jade?!” she practically screamed. “We promised you’d only use that with *Sigrus Revive*!”

Jade’s third skill, *Sigrus Blood*, forced all attacks directed at his allies onto himself. It was practically an act of suicide, but they had used it effectively in tandem with Lululee’s *Sigrus Revive*.

But now that all of Lululee’s avenues of healing were blocked, it was a literal act of suicide.

“It can’t be... Are you trying to get yourself killed...?!”

Jade didn’t answer. Instead, he moved far enough away to ensure his party members wouldn’t be caught in the attack. Never before had he backed down from his position as his allies’ shield, but he no longer needed to be in front of them—because every sword would come to him.

“Oh-ho.” Silha made an appreciative sound. “Weak as your skills are, you can handle multiple at once. Not bad, for a human. Take my judgment!”

One of the swords came at Jade from behind and stabbed into his lower stomach.

“Gagh...!”

He instantly doubled over as intense pain racked his body. Though he tried to remove the blade, his hand had lost its strength. The sword vanished once it completed its attack, and fresh blood instantly burst from the wound left in its wake.

“Jade!!”

Lululee’s cry of grief sounded distant, as though it was meant for someone else. But Jade braced himself to keep from falling, holding out through sheer force of will.

Seeing him like that, Silha’s face shone. “Wonderful! You’re the first to ever remain standing after taking my judgment!”

“Hrk...! C’mon, attack me more...!”

Blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth, Jade grinned boldly at Silha. “I’ve been training with Alina every day, so I won’t go down easy...!”

He flicked his eyes at Lowe, urging him on. *Hurry and go*, he said with that look. Jade would have no way of protecting Lowe and Lululee if the dark god’s interest shifted from him.

“...”

Lowe picked up on what Jade wanted. But he hesitated to commit to running away. Meanwhile, the second sword was fixing its point on Jade, ready to pierce.

He couldn’t find it in himself to ask Lululee to make this cruel decision. The only one he could turn to was Lowe.

“Lowe!” Jade yelled hard. Lowe’s face drained of blood and turned grim, as if he’d steeled himself. Or maybe he was in emotional pain.

“Ha-ha-ha...so is this what they call willpower? Humans are so interesting.” Silha laughed in sincere delight and raised his right hand. Following its master’s order, the second sword slid through the air to stab Jade in the thigh. The blow forced him to the ground, as if to say, *Get down on your knees*.

“Ngh...!”

“Ja—” Lululee couldn’t take it and tried to rush up to Jade, but Lowe scooped her up in his arms. “Lowe?! What are you doing?!”

“Now’s our chance. We’re running!” Lowe yelled, his face pale as a sheet.

“You’re telling me to leave Jade behind?! No, I can’t! Jade!”

Lowe ran to the exit, carrying Lululee as she flailed. Silha watched the pair for a second, but then turned back to Jade, as if the prey before his eyes was much more interesting.

“...”

Jade staggered to his feet as he heard Lululee’s voice grow distant. Dragging his useless leg, he slowly crept toward the door the two of them had gone

through. Silha's last remaining sword was close behind, but he didn't care.

"So in the end, your comrades left you behind. Inevitable. That's just how humans are."

"Yeah..."

The blood flowing from the open holes in his stomach and thigh would become fatal soon enough. Feeling like he could pass out if he let his guard down, Jade beat back the intense pain assailing his body, closed the half-open door, and placed his hand on it.

"Skill...activate...*Sigrus Wall*...!" The door was enveloped in a red light as it hardened before his eyes, sealing Silha in the chamber with him.

"Oh-ho...? So you would deliberately block your avenue of escape? Your spirit impresses me."

A Sigrus skill wouldn't seal them in here for long against the dark god's Dia skills, but it would at least buy Lowe and Lululee enough time to leave the White Tower and flee to the crystal gate. On the off chance that one or both of them were to change their minds and try to come back to save him, they wouldn't be able to get into this room.

"..."

There was only one thing to do.

Jade steeled himself, turning from the door to face the dark god once more.

He had to buy time for Lowe and Lululee to flee by keeping Silha's attention on him, here in this sealed room.

Because it was the tank's duty to protect their allies by putting their body on the line.

"Ha-ha-ha! Marvelous! What magnificent vitality!" Seeing that the light in Jade's eyes had yet to fade, Silha grew even more enthusiastic, his face sparkling. "So very worth devouring."

Just as he curled up his lips in an expression of ecstasy, the last sword disappeared. In exchange, a whole array of magic sigils lined up around Jade, surrounding him with double the number of blades as before.

“...!”

“Now then, how many of these can you take before you can stand no more?”

His whole body reeled in the face of certain death. Ignoring his instincts screaming at him to run, Jade instead glared at the terrifying swords.

The silver lining was that Silha was interested in him. He wouldn't target Lowe and Lululee as long as Jade still drew breath.

“...”

Is this where I meet my end?

The moment he had that vague, cold thought, Alina's face crossed his mind out of nowhere.

Now, of all times, he thought back to her grumpy expression and furrowed brows. Jade actually kind of liked that look on her. Though if he said that, he would probably get whacked with her war hammer again.

Ultimately, all he'd done was mess up her life a bit.

She must have seen him as a nuisance. Like Alina said, that power was hers. How she used it was her choice. And Jade had come to understand that, but he'd just been hopelessly drawn to her ever since he'd discovered her in the depths of that dungeon. It had nothing to do with her having a Dia skill. Like a kid who enjoyed teasing his crush, Jade had wanted to be involved with her even if she thought of him as yet another irritating adventurer.

I like Alina.

The way she seemed mature at a glance but was actually exceedingly childish.

The way she was completely honest with her desires.

The way she tried to resolve every problem by force.

The dead look in her eyes she had at work. The fake smiles that she put on for adventurers. The terrifying expression she wore when she was made. That scowl of sincere distaste she would give Jade. And the look of refreshment that would come to her face when she left home on time.

That's why...

...That's why I wanted to keep seeing her, just a little longer...

His wish that would never come true rising in his mind, Jade clenched his teeth and shut his eyes. When next he opened them, he abandoned his sweet fantasies, the light in his eyes showing that he was prepared for certain death.

“Your attacks are nothing...!”

He would remain standing to the last, take any and all blows. If he died, even his corpse would protect his comrades as a meat shield. That was what tanks were for.

“They’re nothing compared to Alina’s war hammer! They don’t even tickle!”

Now suddenly free of Silver Sword, Alina returned to her normal routine as a receptionist.

Naturally, this included doing overtime late into the night.

“Agh...I wanna go home...,” Alina muttered at Iffole Counter in the middle of the evening. Normally, this complaint would simply vanish in the air, but today there was someone to respond to it.

“Honestly...why do I have to do overtime, too?” asked Alina’s junior, the new receptionist Laila, with dissatisfaction.

Her eyes were normally cute and round like a cat’s, but now they were at half-mast as she laid her chin on her desk and grumbled.

Alina glowered at the girl and scolded her. “This is cleaning up! After! Your mistakes! If you don’t stay behind, who will?!”

“Urk...you’re right...”

“You can go home on time tomorrow if you finish up today, so stop moving your mouth and start moving your hands.”

Drinking a little of her potion, the overtime worker’s friend, Alina glared at the mountain of documents piled on her desk.

The discovery of the White Tower had shocked the adventurers, since it proved the secret quests of legend were actually real. Of course, they’d anticipated getting a surge of requests to enter, but the guild ended up limiting exploration of the White Tower to Silver Sword after Rufus’s party was annihilated.

On top of that, the overall number of quests being taken had decreased, as though the death of one of the top parties had reminded the adventurers of the dangers of their profession.

Alina and Laila wouldn’t have gotten any overtime if they’d done things

properly. But in the single day that Alina had been away, Laila had made so many errors that Alina was roped into helping her.

“Well, I can see the end of it this time, so I guess it could be worse...,” she muttered as she resumed her desk work.

This time was different from the never-ending overtime that happened when adventurers got stuck on a boss. No matter how long it took Silver Sword to clear the White Tower, it wouldn’t affect Alina’s work.

Which reminds me, they’re going to the final floor now, aren’t they?

According to what she’d heard from Laila, who was always up on the latest gossip, Silver Sword had already gotten past the third floor. Alina didn’t know where this information was coming from, so she couldn’t trust it entirely, but she nevertheless breathed a sigh of relief.

Wait, why am I relieved?

“But anyway, it’s too bad, isn’t it...?” Laila said suddenly.

“What is?”

“About the Executioner! The guild is giving up looking for him!” she sobbed, lying face down on her document-covered desk.

“...”

After Glen lost his match with her, he had done as promised and called off the search for the Executioner. The guild had also announced that it wouldn’t ever resume again.

All this was to say that Alina’s side job was safe from being exposed, so there was no longer any risk that she would get fired. Everyone had also quickly moved on from the Executioner. She would hold her position as a receptionist forever.

Now, if she could just do something about the sudden bouts of overtime, then her ideal life—having a stable career where she could go home on time every day—would finally be within her grasp.

Silver Sword must have actually been doing pretty well if they’d gotten to the fourth level with Rufus filling in for their frontline attacker. The repairs on

Alina's house would be done soon, too. Then she could move out of Silver Sword's lodgings and go back to her old receptionist life.

Everything was about to work out in the end.

So then why do I not feel relieved about this?

"And they have Rufus as their frontline attacker instead?! This doesn't make sense to me," Laila remarked.

"Why not?" Alina asked her.

"Cause he's not hot!!!"

"Uhhh..."

"I wanted the Executioner in that spot! Just fit him right in there! Why is the guild giving uuuuuuup?! Wait, is there something there in your desk?"

"Huh? Yeah, lots of stuff."

"Something's glowing..."

"Huh?"

Not understanding what she meant, Alina tilted her head and looked into her desk. She was surprised to find, just as Laila had said, a glow strong enough that it couldn't be concealed escaping from the seams of the drawer.

"Too much overtime. It's gotten to my eyes...," Alina grumbled.

"Don't be silly! Open it, please!"

She opened the drawer with trepidation. Frightened, Laila peered in from behind Alina's back. The source of the light rolled out... It was...

"Wow, what a pretty crystal!" Laila cried.

"Geh!"

Quick as a flash, Alina snatched up the crystal and hid it in her hand.

But it continued to emit a bright glow—it was the guiding crystal shard that Jade had given to her when they had gone to the White Tower. You wouldn't expect the vast majority of adventurers to have one of these, never mind a receptionist, and Silver Sword's crest had been carved into it.

That was so close!! She didn't see it, right...?!

As Alina's heart pounded, Laila twisted her lips in dissatisfaction. "Hey! Don't hide it! Please show it to me!"

"I-it's nothing, just a glowing rock."

"If it was just a rock, it wouldn't glow!"

Shoving her coworker aside, Alina thrust the crystal fragment into her pocket, deciding to ignore the fact that you could still see the glow from there. Realizing that Alina wasn't going to show it to her, Laila gave up and reluctantly returned to her desk.

That reminds me, I forgot to return this... I'll toss it into Jade's room or something after Silver Sword gets back.

Alina got herself remotivated and was about to get started again, but right when she was about to drink the last of her potion, she suddenly recalled something.

If someone holding this shard is on the verge of death, the others will lead you to them.

The purpose of the guiding crystal rose in her mind.

"...!"

Aline widened her eyes and froze.

Her breath caught.

Her heart started pounding.

Slowly, she touched the crystal shard through her clothes. It was still shining, faintly warm from the heat of its glow.

A loud *clunk* rang out in the office, and before she knew it, Alina was kicking away her chair and rising to her feet. Now it was Laila's turn to be startled. She stared in confusion at Alina, who had burst out of her chair without a word.

"U-um, what's wrong?"

Alina couldn't even answer Laila's question. The pounding of her heart was blaring in her head. If the glow of the crystal shard was getting strong, then Jade

or another member of Silver Sword was at death's door in the White Tower at this very moment. Realizing that, all Alina could do was stare at the mountain of documents in front of her.

The cold words of the adventurer who had informed her of Shroud's death came back to her.

"Shroud...isn't coming back..."

"I"

A moment later, she sprang into a run and dashed out of the office.

"Alina?! Hey, Alina?!"

Laila's yell grew distant. Alina herself didn't even know why she was running.

Alina raced through Iffole's nighttime streets, glowing crystal shard in hand.

She still didn't really understand what was propelling her—she had just lost herself.

She needed to turn around, go back to the office, and deal with her overtime this instant, so she could get home on time the next day. That had always been the most important thing to her. Yet she kept on running ahead, pitching forward, showing no signs of stopping.

The only thing that was clear was her destination. She was heading for the crystal gate at the guild headquarters. She activated her skill and practically flew there at full speed. Going down the street, she leaped over the large gates and cut across the silent courtyard.

In the darkness of night, the crystal cast a pale, hazy glow. Alina tried to present the adventurer license card that she kept hidden in her pocket.

"Wait!"

Someone ordered her to halt, and Alina came to a sudden stop.

Then she finally came back to her senses. Shoulders heaving, she looked at the men approaching.

"Who goes there?! The crystal gate is sealed right now!"

Their equipment rattled as they surrounded Alina—they wore matching armor emblazoned with the guild crest and were outfitted with longswords. It was probably guild headquarters' equipment.

"Huh? Oh, a receptionist?"

When the guards saw Alina's receptionist uniform, they lowered their raised weapons anticlimactically.

"What are you doing out here? This crystal gate is for going to dungeons. Only

adventurers can use it. If you're looking to travel to another town, then use the crystal gate in Iffole."

"Hey..."

A guard grabbed Alina's arm, trying to force her to leave, and she panicked. She nearly whacked him away with her skill but stopped when she remembered she was still in uniform.

Dammit, Alina blanched.

She had sprinted here in such a thoughtless frenzy that she hadn't brought a disguise of any kind. If only she had a cape or something to hide the Executioner's face—her face.

"..."

What to do. What to do?

An impatience that made her want to scratch at her chest was throwing her thoughts into disarray.

She had to go now. He was on the verge of death. If she didn't go now, he would die.

But on the other hand, her rational mind was chiding her for being foolish.

If she forced her way through the crystal gate, then at the very least, it would get out that she had a license card...that she was an adventurer. And it would get out that she was the Executioner if she used her war hammer to deal with the guards. She'd finally achieved stability as a receptionist and had just barely been keeping her secret identity under wraps before this, but that slipup would send it all tumbling down. Everything she'd worked for would instantly collapse.

Shroud's death played back in her mind, along with some cold words.

Adventurers all wind up dead anyway.

They waltz straight into dungeons with no guarantee of reward, get attacked by monsters, and die. They're people who opt into that risky lifestyle.

But I'm different. I've been working as a receptionist to avoid those risks. I've kept at it even when there has been overtime, even when it's been tough.

Because I don't want the unstable life of an adventurer.

So why am I throwing that all away for some adventurers? I've finally secured a stable career, so why do I have to watch that slip out of my fingers?

"..."

"That's how it is with Silver Sword."

Jade had said that like it was obvious. The remark lingered in her ears. His party went into dungeons to get results, even if it was dangerous. That's what Silver Sword and all adventurers were there to do.

What the heck was that? It was so stupid. If you died, everything went down the drain. Even Shroud, who had always avoided danger, had lost his life. Keep gambling, and you were bound to lose eventually.

Anyone could have predicted the members of Silver Sword would wind up dead, and it served them right. They really were fools.

Alina had no obligation to go save those idiots.

Leave them be.

"Skill...", she muttered, before she even knew it.

"Huh?"

"Skill Activate...! *Dia Break!*"

Clenching the crystal shard, Alina said the very words she couldn't afford to say.

A white magic sigil soundlessly deployed at her feet. The white light tore through the darkness of night and produced a war hammer. She took it by the handle.

Ahhh, I can't go back now. I'm such an idiot. I'm just so stupid.

"What...?!"

"A skill?!"

The guards panicked and backed away, raising their swords.

"You're not a receptionist?! Wait, what even is that skill?!"

“W-w-wait! Wait a minute!” One of the panicking guards yelled out particularly loud, as if he’d realized something. “Th...th-th-that giant...war hammer!”

The other guards also realized what he was trying to say, and one after another, they all choked on their words.

“...It can’t be..... Th-the...Executioner?”

The guard who was pointing at Alina seemed utterly confused.

Well, duh. The person standing before him, their war hammer at the ready, was neither a mysterious handsome adventurer nor a sturdy woman warrior.

She was just a receptionist.

Alina didn’t hide her face. In fact, she firmly lifted her chin, readied her war hammer, and growled, “Get out of my way.”

“Shroud...isn’t coming back.”

Those words lingered in Alina’s heart like a swollen lump. Back when she’d been a young dreamer, they’d beaten into her the harsh reality of risk-taking.

That’s why Alina had thought she didn’t need to become an adventurer, lead a wild and crazy life.

She didn’t want to live in a mansion. She wasn’t interested in being rich or marrying into money. She didn’t need a life of excitement and drama, either. Just leading a modest lifestyle where she could while away the hours in peace would be enough.

It’s better than watching someone die.

“I’m...sick of that...!”

She’d had enough. No way did she want to feel like that again.

So Jade was on the verge of death, was he? He wasn’t coming back? Bullshit. *I’m not letting that happen. I’ll drag any fool like that kicking and screaming back from the dungeon.*

Even if that meant taking a huge risk.

“Step aside, or I’ll whack you out of the way...!”

“Stop it, Lowe! Put me down!”

Lululee flailed in Lowe’s arms, and he finally relented. No, it was more accurate to say that his strength had given out. Shoulders heaving as he panted, Lowe sank down on the spot. He’d run full speed through the dark dungeon from the fourth floor to the second, carrying Lululee all the way. As a black mage, he wasn’t all that physically strong to begin with, and now he was at his limit.

He collapsed against the wall and wiped off the sweat pouring down his neck as Lululee yelled at him.

“Lowe, do you understand what you just did...?!”

“...” He hung his head and gave no answer.

Seeing him like that, Lululee berated him further. “Why did you leave Jade behind?! Why did we leave without him...? Jade’s going to die at this rate! We have to go back, or he’ll, he’ll—”

“And what would we be able to do if we did?!” Lowe shouted back at Lululee, and she swallowed her words with a start. “Go back?! No way am I letting that happen! Are you gonna undermine our leader’s decision?!”

“...!”

“He staked his life on letting us escape...! We had to run...!”

“...!”

At a loss for words, Lululee bit her lip.

She understood as well as he did that the two of them would only slow Jade down against the dark god. To keep everyone from dying, one person had to sacrifice themselves, and the others had to flee.

“Even if we went back now, Jade’s sealed the door with *Sigrus Wall*! Do you

think we can break through that? There's nothing we can do at this point...!" Lowe yelled, going hoarse at the end like it hurt to say. Seeing how completely pallid he was, Lululee realized that he hadn't wanted to do this, either. He'd wanted to find a way for all three of them to survive, somehow. But the reality was that this was their only option.

"..."

Lululee's legs gave out, and she slumped down on the spot. Lowe's bitter expression warped. Before he knew it, tears were running down his cheeks.

"Jade...is going to die...?" Lululee asked, almost hoarse.

"..." Lowe just looked away.

She grabbed his robe with shaking hands, pleading for him to say it wasn't true as she wrung out, "He's going to die...?"

He answered with silence. But it spoke volumes. There was no way Jade could beat the dark god alone, especially not when he was on death's door.

Lululee bit her lip and recalled the last she'd seen of their leader. A normal adventurer would have long since died of those wounds. And she had only been able to watch.

She was helpless.

She was a healer, but she hadn't been able to act when it was most important.

She was hopelessly helpless.

She hung her head, placed her hands on the cold ground, and cried.

Jade had strove to fulfill his responsibility as their tank. He had stood up until the end against an unknown foe and put his life on the line for the sake of his allies. He'd been an exceptional leader.

But...before being the leader of Silver Sword, before being an excellent tank... he was a dear friend that Lululee and Lowe didn't want to lose.

"Someone...someone...save Jade...!" Lululee prayed. She would send it to a reaper, anything, if they would just save him. If they would grant them the

strength to do what they couldn't, she wouldn't mind if it was even the devil.

Someone, please—save our friend.

“...We can't do anything...but...,” Lowe muttered in the silence. “There is one person who might be able to do something.”

Lululee jerked her head up with a start, a soft light on her face.

Lowe pulled out the decoration hanging from his neck. It shone pale green in the gloom of the dungeon. It was the special item that only Silver Sword members were allowed to carry—the guiding crystal shard.

“I”

Lululee realized what Lowe was trying to say.

“With wounds like that, of course it would glow...if *she* notices this—”

Grr...

But right at that moment, as if cutting off Lowe's single thread of hope, the low growl of a monster rang out.

“I”

He turned around with a start to see a large monster lumbering out of the darkness. It was a four-legged beast with a sturdy, muscular body and two giant horns—a behemoth. The monster had already trained its hungry eyes upon them, and it had lowered its head to aim for its prey.

“Tsk!”

Right as Lowe pushed Lululee behind his back and raised his rod, the behemoth bared its fangs and attacked.

It's fast...! Lululee imagined the worst and gulped. The behemoth had caught them by surprise, so it was a step ahead of them. A magic attack took a few seconds to activate. Would Lowe's spell be faster than the monster's attack?

“Igni—!”

Ba-wam!

A loud sound assaulted their ears, but it was neither that of the behemoth

ripping up Lowe nor that of magic flames burning the air.

Suddenly, *something* swooped in faster than either of those things. It struck the behemoth right in the side, sending its sturdy frame flying off into the darkness.

Gyarn! cried the behemoth, spasming from just that single attack before eventually dissolving away under the glow of the light.

“...!”

As both Lowe and Lululee gasped, the “thing” that had felled the monster in a single blow landed in front of them, skirt fluttering. It was a girl clad in the charming uniform of a receptionist.

But in her hands, she carried a dangerous-looking war hammer, which was already half-covered in the fresh red blood of the monster. Her normally beautiful receptionist uniform and her pretty face were smeared with monster blood, so she looked more like an unhinged murderer than anything else.

But no matter how unhinged her appearance, she was their savior.

“Alina...!”

She glanced at the guiding crystal shard that swayed at her chest, confirmed that it wasn’t pointing to them, and heaved a sigh of relief.

“That’s good. You two are okay,” Alina said, but her expression was still severe; the pale green light of the guiding crystal shard was pointing deeper into the dungeon. “Which means this light is actually for—”

“Alina, you have to save Jade!” Lululee clung to her without a thought. “He’s going to die...!”



As Alina watched Lululee plead, her face a mess from crying, she grasped the severity of the situation. Her expression became even more grim.

“...He’s at the end of the fourth floor, fighting with the humanoid monster... no, the ‘dark god Silha.’ In the direction the light is pointing.” Lowe calmly explained the situation in Lululee’s place.

“...Dark god? Not a monster?”

“That thing is...most likely a relic.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has the mark of Dia carved into his body, just like a relic... At the very least, it’s clear he was created by the ancients. He works by devouring human souls...and he uses multiple Dia skills.”

“...”

“The special relic that can be acquired from a secret quest that the legends always spoke of...it must be the dark god,” Lowe continued. “Jade used *Sigrus Wall* to seal himself in with that thing. He’s trying to buy us time to escape... He’s probably planning to sacrifice himself.”

“...I see.”

As if to say she’d heard enough, Alina turned in the direction the light was shining. “I understand. Leave the rest to me.”

Alina followed the light of the guiding crystal shard, racing along the fourth floor in the direction it led.

This floor was just a large, extended hallway, so there was no way to get lost. Alina swung her war hammer without hesitation the moment a pair of tightly shut iron doors came into view.

“Haah!”

She broke down the doors with a single smack. Alina let her momentum take her in at a slide, then came to a sudden stop.

She’d skidded to a halt because the room was pitch-black and eerily quiet. Wasn’t Jade holding off that dark god or whatever right now? She couldn’t hear fighting, either. As she stared into the deep darkness of the chamber, a strong sense of unease ran through Alina’s heart.

The only source of light in the room, the glow of the guiding crystal shard hanging from her neck, shot ahead into the depths. Continuing to glare into the impenetrable darkness, Alina crept forward while staying alert for the dark god.

“Jade?” she called out with trepidation into the silence. There was no answer. She continued along through the frighteningly persistent quiet, as though she were being guided. Then she stopped abruptly.

The light of the crystal shard had finally brought her to its goal. The pale green beam pointed to a man lying against the wall with his legs flung out. Her light was being sucked toward the crystal shard at his chest.

His silent form was in a terrible state.

He must have taken countless blows, for his armor was horribly damaged and falling apart in places. It didn’t look capable of doing its job anymore. He was covered in wounds and caked in dark blood, the deep crimson sea spreading around him evidence that his attacker had penetrated his armor with ease.

Lying at his splayed-out feet was his familiar relic arma greatshield, cracked all over and just barely holding its original shape. His silver hair, dirtied red, hung limply.

That was all that was left of Jade.

“...!”

Alina’s whole body was struck with shock, as though she’d sustained a direct hit to the brain.

Her breath caught, and she was momentarily speechless. The muscles in her face froze, her eyes widened, and all she could do was stand there, gaping at the sight before her. Her heart pounded wildly, the sound of its violent beating ringing out through the eerily silent space. Her legs trembled uncharacteristically.

“...Jade...?” she wrung out, timidly calling out to him, but his head continued to hang. It didn’t even move even a little.

“No...way... Come on. Answer me!”

Despite her yells, Jade was as still as a corpse.

Even though he would normally come over to her without her calling.

Even though he would follow her around so much it was obnoxious.

“...!”

She hadn’t made it in time.

Alina bit her tongue hard enough to cut herself, clasp her war hammer tight in the face of the undeniable.

She was too late.

Despair weighed her down, and her gaze fell. Immediately, the memory of being told of Shroud’s death passed through her mind. Glaring at the tips of her feet in the darkness, Alina did her best to resist what was welling up inside her—but in the back of her mind, this all made sense. It was as if it were happening to someone else. He was an adventurer. This was the obvious result. He had just reached the end of the line, the fate he would have reached eventually.

With a jolt, Alina suddenly leaped to the side. A beat later, a vicious attack pierced through the place Alina had been, right at Jade's feet.

"Oh-ho, you can dodge my attack? Another one who can amuse me. Today is a good day." With a voice that sounded pleased and lively, a human man pulled out the silver spear he'd thrust in the ground.

No—his bared upper body, splattered with blood, and his long golden hair were indeed those of a human, but seeing something like a black rock buried in his stomach, he was clearly not one.

Alina had no basis for it, but she made a guess.

"The dark god...!"

This was the dark god Silha—the being Lowe had called a relic.

The man smirked as if to affirm her guess, creating a ball of light in his right hand to illuminate the room. On the man's temple, Alina could indeed make out the sigil of the sun you would normally find on relics—the mark of Dia.

"Have you come to save that man? Unfortunately, he's dead," Silha told her readily, glancing at Jade's silent form. "I was just thinking of devouring his soul. Still, he did show me a rather enjoyable time. I was under the impression humans were frailer than that. He was more tenacious than I'd expected," he continued, smiling. His mocking tone suggested that he saw Jade as nothing more than a throwaway toy.

"..."

Alina gritted her teeth.

She couldn't parse the feelings welling up inside her, but they swirled with hopeless intensity in her chest.

This was who'd done it?

The person who'd killed Jade?!

"Well, I can have my meal later... I should prioritize keeping my prey from escaping!"

Silha gleefully swung his large spear around and approached Alina. He was

fast. He was within range in an instant, but Alina managed to block his strike with her war hammer in the nick of time. Their weapons clanged together, and the air shuddered. Her legs gave out, and she was pushed backward.

“Oh-ho?! So you can block my spear?!”

“...You’re the dark god,” Alina growled, blocking the spear.

She remembered Jade’s expression as he’d left the inn, saying it would be okay.

Just what about this was okay?

Wasn’t he going to go to some dungeon with her?

Adventurers could never keep their promises—not him, or anyone else.

“I’ll...kill you...!”

Alina swung her war hammer with all her might, pushing back the silver spear.

“Oh-ho?!”

She sent Silha flying into midair with her superhuman strength. Then she slammed down her war hammer, aiming for his defenseless abdomen.

“I’ll kill you!!”

Silha shot into the ground, and Alina brought down her hammer on him again. She gave into her anger and pounded and pounded away. The room shook, dust whipped up, and the stone paving leaped into the air.

“Ha-ha, interesting, this is interesting.”

But after she finally ceased attacking, Silha stood up again like it was nothing. All she had to show for that string of blows was a single trail of blood dribbling from the corner of Silha’s mouth, and he even seemed glad as he wiped it away.

Suddenly, Silha dispersed his spear and thrust out his right hand to quietly intone, “Chant: *Dia Judge*.”

As if in response, something like the light of a skill ran through the black stone in his stomach. Just then, a number of magic sigils appeared in midair, creating swords that surrounded Alina.

“...!”

She didn't even have the time to feel shaken—the longswords came at her from every direction all at once. She leaped off the ground largely on reflex, escaping into the air. Gazing down below at the many swords that effortlessly drove themselves into the hard floor, she spun around to get ready again.

“Don't think you can get away.”

Alina realized that yet another sword had materialized behind her back.

She repelled it with her war hammer when it launched at her. It was lighter than the spear thrust she'd blocked before. But then...

“!”

...she let her guard down the instant she landed. Then another longsword instantly materialized before her, as if it had been waiting for that exact moment.

I can't avoid it.

Alina's face stiffened.

As she stared death in the face, that single instant dragged out into a few dozen seconds, as if the second hand of a clock was ticking down until the end. Everything seemed to slow to a crawl as the fearsome silver blade crept toward Alina's heart.

“Skill Activate: *Sigrus Wall!*”

A voice rang out from somewhere, and a large, battered shield shot out in front of her.

“!”

That greatshield looked like it would fall apart at any moment, but it glowed with a particularly strong red light. At almost the exact same time, the sword flying toward Alina bounced off the shield with a *shing*, shattering what remained of it.

Now.

Alina's instincts told her to jump. Using the fragments of the sword as a

smoke screen, she went straight for Silha at max speed.

“Huh?!”

“Diiiiiiiiiiiie!!!”

Silha couldn't keep track of Alina's abrupt attack. It must have seemed to him that she'd been far away one moment and in front of him the next. His face stiffened as she slammed her war hammer into his cheek, the full weight of her body behind it.

“Gah!”

Silha was blasted away in a tailspin and slammed into one of the four grand pillars. The whole room shuddered terribly, and the pillar crumbled from the impact, burying Silha beneath a mountain of rubble.

“...”

As the room became quiet once more, Alina slowly lowered her war hammer and turned around. Ahead of her was Jade—coughing out blood like he was in pain and unsteady on his feet, but nevertheless attempting to get off the ground.

“...Jade...”

In the end, he sunk down, choking painfully.

Alina ran over to him. He was covered in so much blood you would have mistaken him for a dead man. Getting down on her knees in the pool of blood that still continued to spread, she reached out to his cheek with trepidation.

It was warm.

Though his cheek was pale and white, it wasn't cool to the touch like that of a corpse.

“You're...alive...?”

“I was asleep.”

“Uh...huh?!” She cried out, and Jade finally lifted his chin.

Half his face was covered in flowing blood, and what bare skin she could make out was pallid. Only his dark gray eyes betrayed his usual baseless confidence.

He smirked at Alina. “Cause I was terrified to hear your war hammer.” He glanced over at the blood-soaked weapon. It was proof Alina had beaten down every monster she’d encountered, from the first floor to the fourth.

“When I heard you pummeling away...I decided I couldn’t die here. I want to go into a dungeon with you one more time, after all. I wanted to hold out until you came, whatever it took, so I lay there and played dead while I recovered.”

“...”

Once you got him going, he just wouldn’t stop.

Alina was too exasperated to speak.

Just how shameless was this guy, taking a nap on the brink of death and believing help would make it in time?

“Look, it’s like I said, Alina. I’m tenacious, so I don’t go down easy,” Jade said with a cackle. However, he widened his eyes in shock a beat later.

“A-A-A-Alina...?!”

Before she knew it, tears were falling from her eyes.

“You’re c-c-c-cry—”

“Shut up and die!”

“Gaugh!”

Alina slammed her fist into his gut and turned away.

“Aghhhh!”

He lay there twitching on the ground as though she’d delivered a critical hit—but he’d obviously had it coming. That jerkass, pretending to be dead.

“...”

Alina pursed her lips tight in frustration and embarrassment before she turned away, roughly wiping away the tears with the back of her hand. Despite her wish to the contrary, her tears came spilling out like they’d broken through a dam in her moment of relief. She sniffled loudly as they ran endlessly down her cheeks.

It had been a long time since she'd last cried—not since that time in her first year as a receptionist, when she'd been yelled at for something that wasn't even her fault and wept alone in the bathroom at the unfairness of society.

“S-sorry for making you worry, Alina...”

“Shut up. Don't look at me. How can you even be alive with those wounds in the first place? Who has vitality like that? You stupid silver cockroach...!”

“Co...”

“Agh, I shouldn't have come. I still have work. Now I'm going to have overtime tomor—” Alina's whining and complaining was cut off halfway when Jade suddenly grabbed her arm. Then he wordlessly drew her into a hug.

“Hey...?!”

She tried to shake him off on reflex, but Jade was stronger than expected, despite his injuries.

“Hey!”

He responded to her protests with silence, refusing to let go of Alina. He embraced her so hard it hurt, as if he were confirming her presence there with his whole body.

In his arms, Alina suddenly noticed Jade was trembling—so slightly that you wouldn't imagine this was the man who had courageously clung to life this whole time.

“...Ahhh, it's Alina.” His voice sounded strangely cheerful from up above, as though he was struggling to get out his words. “It's Alina...”

Hearing his voice, Alina closed her mouth and stopped moving.

Jade's arms were warm, and she felt the heat of life in them. There was none of the cruel coldness she'd felt when she'd learned of Shroud's death.

“ ... ”

What can you do? Alina thought, her whole body relaxing. She let herself be in Jade's arms for a while and quietly closed her eyes. Basking in his faint warmth, she let out a little sigh...

...and kicked him away a moment later.

“Aghhhhh!”

Coldly looking down at Jade as he fell to writhe around on the ground again, Alina scowled and spat, “Could you not cling to me while you’re all covered in blood? You’ll get my uniform dirty. I have work tomorrow, you know.”

“So mean!”

“And drink this,” she said, tossing Jade a little bottle with a translucent liquid in it.

“...A potion? Why do you have one...?”

“It’s my overtime friend. That’s the last one that I have. I was just doing overtime, so I drank some of it...but I’ll have you pay me back a hundred thousand times over later. So remember it.”

Jade widened his eyes as he looked at the small, half-empty bottle. “I get an indirect kiss?!”

“I’m smashing it.”

“I’ll take it, with gratitude.”

Alina glanced at Jade, who was forcing the potion down his throat even as he choked back blood, then shifted her gaze back toward the darkness to remain on guard.

The mountain of rubble atop Silha was stirring. Eventually, it parted with a crash, and the dark god appeared out from underneath as if nothing had happened.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Blood flowed from Silha’s temple as he let out a dry laugh, but there was no trace of his earlier lightheartedness. His widened eyes were bloodshot as he trained them on Alina.

“I never would have thought you’d knock me back like that. Not bad, war hammer girl.” The dark god emitted an abnormal bloodlust that made Alina ready her weapon.

Silha was unfazed as he approached her step by step. “And that man, as well. How wonderful that he could withstand so many fierce blows. You two have truly entertained me.” As Silha stepped forward, his body began to glow, and his wounds healed before their eyes.

Alina furrowed her brows when she noticed that even the blood at his temples had stopped flowing. “His wounds are closing up...?”

“That’s the effect of the skill he stole from Lululee,” Jade explained. “He can reverse any injury while it’s activated.”

“What the heck?! That’s against the rules!”

“Against the rules? No, no. I’m simply omnipotent.” Silha brought up the corners of his lips in a smirk. “Time to get a little serious.”

That instant, the light of a skill poured out from the black stone in his stomach.

“Chant: *Dia Storm!*”

Silha grabbed the silver spear that materialized yet again and charged at them. Realizing that they wouldn’t be able to evade his attack in time, Alina quickly stepped into his range and deflected the tip of his silver spear with her war hammer.

Her war hammer met his lance with a *clang*, generating a wave that rushed instantaneously through the room. The two were equally matched in power, and their weapons trembled up against each other.

“Ngh...!”

Alina just couldn’t push any farther. It was as though a large wall were barring her path, one that she could not overcome no matter how hard she strained. Worse still, she was gradually being forced backward.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! What’s wrong, girl? Where did that spirit go?! Chant: *Dia Judge!*”

Instantly, magic sigils deployed in the space behind Alina, creating four swords that attacked her wide-open back.

“Alina! Get down!”

Immediately dismissing her war hammer, Alina slid toward the spear that was coming for her. The brutal thrust skimmed overhead, and she evaded the swords coming at her from behind.

“...*Dia Break!*”

Then she summoned her war hammer again for a counterattack. Leaping off the ground, she aimed for the brief window where Silha needed to recover from his thrust.

“Hraaah!”

Alina’s war hammer struck the dark god square in the face. A dull *clonk* rang out as it slammed into him.

“Did that do it?!”

The dust billowing up covered her field of view. She had felt the impact of the strike. Even a being of Silha’s caliber couldn’t come away from a blow of that intensity, which was enough to kill most monsters, unscathed.

A shiver ran down her spine.

“...!”

Instantly, Alina leaped back without really knowing why. At the same moment, a dreadful flash cut through the dust from behind the gray-colored veil.

If she had acted just a moment later, then her torso would have been cleaved in two by now.

Alina had just barely evaded the attack. But it stirred up a raging wind that swept her off her feet, and she was blasted away. Her vision spinning, Alina struck the wall back first, and she came to a stop. When she lifted her head, she found she’d been thrown quite a distance.

“...”

She felt a slight stinging pain under her eye—and then the sensation of a lukewarm fluid dripping down her cheek. It was practically a miracle that she hadn’t sustained more severe injuries, considering she’d been attacked from all sides.

“Are you okay, Alina...?!”

Jade limped over to her, dragging his leg. Even though he was far more injured than she was, he grimaced seeing that line of red run down her face.

“That was a fine attack, girl. But you chose the wrong opponent,” a quiet voice rang out, and Alina knew her hunch was correct. She looked to the place where the dust was settling; there stood the dark god, unwounded.

“Not even a scratch?!” Jade cried out in surprise.

“That was not nearly enough power to break my body.”

Alina glared right back at Silha as she sat up off the ground.

She’d suspected this already, but Silha was right. No matter how much she hit him, her blows never felt like they did when she was finishing off a monster. The dark god’s body was solid like she’d never felt before.

“But it seems you have powers of the same level as those people who created me,” Silha said with an uncanny smirk, casually pointing at Alina with his spear. The people who had created the dark god...he was referring to the ancients, who had crafted him as a relic and left the mark of Dia on his temple.

“Then there is no reason you could beat me,” he boasted.

“...What do you mean?” Alina asked.

“Heh-heh. Today, I’m in a good mood, so I’ll humor you. You’re doomed to die anyway.” Silha smiled jovially, raised his left arm high, and with his face twisted in elation said, “Because those people, those foolish humans...every single one of them was devoured by my hand.”

“...Huh...?” Jade gasped from off to the side. “...H-hold on a sec... That means...the ancients were destroyed by...a dark god?!”

“That can’t be that surprising. It’s only natural that the strong cull the weak.”

The mark of Dia, carved by the ancients as proof that he was a relic, continued to glow plainly at Silha’s temple. Of course, the ancients wouldn’t have crafted him had they known he would be their downfall.

But their superior technology and insatiable spirit of inquiry led the ancients

to create a transcendental relic with a will of its own—this dark god—so in a sense, they had spelled their own doom.

“...But they were spineless. They couldn’t lay a single scratch upon my body with all their power.” The dark god stated this despair-inducing fact with utter nonchalance.

“Wha...?!”

None of the powers at the ancients’ disposal—in other words, Dia skills—had harmed the dark god.

“...Y-you’re telling me...D-Dia skills...won’t work...either...?”

Alina herself understood fully that this was neither a bluff nor a lie. Silha had taken a direct hit from her Dia skill, *Dia Break*, and emerged unscathed.

But most persuasively, the ancients had been wiped out in a single night despite having access to Dia skills. That proved the overwhelming strength of the dark god better than any words could.

“Now you understand. You cannot possibly defeat me with powers on the same level as theirs.”

“...”

A heavy silence fell upon the chamber.

None of their attacks would work. Not only that, just one hit from the dark god would spell certain death for them, and they had no way to heal or defend themselves. By contrast, Silha could employ multiple Dia skills at once without ever tiring.

They couldn’t win.

Jade whispered this observation aloud.

He hadn’t said this because he was catastrophizing in the face of a powerful foe. It was because his work as a tank, where you had to prioritize survival over victory, had given him the ability to analyze situations with a clear head.

The fact was, there was no way they could triumph against the overwhelming presence that stood before them.

“...Alina...I don’t have a shield anymore, or anything I can harden with *Sigrus Wall*,” Jade muttered quietly to her. “And I can’t use that rubble over there as a shield against that spear, either.”

“...So what?” Alina asked.

“So I’ll use myself as a shield. Then you can take him by surprise like before... and use that opportunity to run.”

“...”

Alina neither agreed to nor rejected his idea. She just stayed silent and looked away.

After a while, she opened her mouth to mumble, “Don’t wanna.”

“I have no other strategies...! I’m a tank, Alina. Let me protect you until the end.”

“No.”

“But...!”

“No!!” Alina wiped the blood from her cheek and stood up.

“...That’s what a tank would say...,” she muttered, readying her war hammer again. She clasped the handle firmly, fixed her glare on the invincible god, and leaped off the ground toward Silha. “...But there are some things receptionists can’t give up on, either!”

“Y-you can’t do it, Alina! Don’t go for him again!”

Shaking off Jade’s attempt to stop her, she swung her war hammer with light speed force, making the air groan as it collided with Silha’s spear, coming toward her.

“Ha! It’s the same, no matter what you do. You don’t have the power to defeat me!” Silha crowed.

Unsurprisingly, she lacked the strength to push him away or back off when they clashed, so their weapons just made a nasty straining sound.

But despite this, Alina continued to strain against him. “I swear that one day, I will live my ideal peaceful life...that’s the one thing I absolutely won’t back

down on! I'll do easy work! As a safe and stable receptionist! And come back home on time every day! And...!

And—Alina clenched her teeth and glared at the threat that stood in her way.

"Everyone will come home! If they can't, then I'll drag them back myself...!"

That was when a strange cracking sound rang out.

"Hmm...?"

Silha started to lose ground.

At the same time, something like uncontrollable feelings of rage rose up from her war hammer. From just that anger alone, the atmosphere twisted, swirling around, and in the darkness, Alina's jade-green eyes flashed.

The unsettling cracking sound coming from Silha's silver spear didn't let up.

"I'm not...gonna...!"

Finally, the lance shattered into pieces with a *ba-ching!*

"Oh-ho?!"

"I'm not gonna just let him die in this plaaaaace!"

She'd finally pounded through Silha's defenses. Alina put all her fury behind her war hammer and slammed it into the dark god, sending him flying straight into the wall.

Silha hit the wall with a boom, then immediately started healing his wounds as he raised himself up from the rubble. Alina looked over to see his spear, which she'd destroyed with her war hammer and knocked away, dissolving into white light starting from the tip and melting into the air.

The dark god saw this, but he still let out a low, bold laugh. "Interesting...what an interesting girl you are! Chant: *Dia Judge!*"

Instantly, countless magical sigils surrounded Alina.

They were deployed with such a density that the magical sigils overlapped one another, the room glaringly bright from their glow. Without a moment's delay, the magical sigils spat out a vast quantity of swords that trained their tips on Alina to finish her off.

“...!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! There’s nowhere for you to run, now! These thousand swords will continue to follow their prey forever, until they pierce your heart and present your soul to me!”

It was climactic.

The sight of well over a hundred swords filling the air to stab just one person to death could only be described as climactic. Just one circle around wasn’t enough to deploy them all, and two, three circles of blades surrounded Alina overhead.

“There’s so many...! Dammit...!”

Jade, who knew more than anyone how terrifying *Dia Judge* was, dragged his useless leg, leaving a trail of blood as he desperately tried to get to Alina. He was too exhausted from using his skills repeatedly to turn the blades toward himself using *Sigrus Blood*. Not only that, but he could barely move, so he couldn’t even be a meat shield for her. The frustration of it made Jade yell out, “Enough...enough! Alina! Get behind me! Use my life!”

“I told you, I don’t wanna do that!”

Alina stubbornly refused to move from where she stood. She knew there was no point in evasion. Instead, she crouched down low and changed her war hammer to a reverse grip as she quietly observed the incredible number of swords and readied herself.

“I’m going to get back alive,” Alina said. “I won’t even let some stupid crappy dumbass stalker silver cockroach bastard, or Lululee, or Lowe...or a single one of you die in this place!”

Shroud’s profile crossed her mind.

What she’d learned from him. The pain she’d realized. The reckless dream she’d given up on.

That day had changed the way she thought. She wanted a secure life now. She had no regrets about that decision. She wasn’t about to turn back now. She didn’t know if that was the right thing or not—but there was one thing she

could say for sure.

She never wanted to experience the pain again that she'd felt when Shroud had died.

Above all else, *that* was the peace Alina had sought.

"Ha! I appreciate your determination to stand your ground, girl. But you will die here! Slice her to pieces, O swords!"

Under that command, a torrent of blades poured down with a thunderous roar.

"Alina...!"

Jade's cry was drowned out by the howl of the countless swords. The dark gray storm made to leave not even a shred of meat, but Alina glared straight at it and clenched the handle in her grip.

After suddenly manifesting this power two years ago, she'd given the whack to everything outrageous she'd encountered. She'd forced anyone who blocked the path to her ideal peace, be they monsters or the guildmaster, to yield to her.

So she should be able to do that now, too. There was no way this time would be an exception.

"I'll kick the asses of anyone who interferes with my peace...no matter who they are!!"

Alina swung her war hammer sideways, from right to left.

There was a low, dull humming sound, and then a wild gust of wind raged through the room. That violent swing from the war hammer shattered the swords in front of her that were about to pour down on her, and the blast of wind blew away the swords coming from behind, too. The thousand swords that attacked one after another were scattered by the breath of the war hammer, until not a single one remained.

"Wha...?"

After the wild wind died down, only Alina was left there, standing there quietly.

“You turned aside my technique with the wind of your attack alone...?” Silha said in disbelief as Jade’s breath caught in his throat.

Alina’s war hammer was different now—and Jade had never seen this before. Before their eyes, the silver-decorated war hammer had become wreathed in gold particles that were shifting and changing. Her weapon shone bright enough to fill the room with light.

“Wh...what...is the light of that skill?” Jade gasped.

“What a...fancy new move you’ve brought out...! Chant: *Dia Drain*!” Silha cried, and in response, a round mirror with silver decorations appeared from thin air.

That mirror, which would steal from the root the power of the one reflected in it, sparkled with reflected light, and then slowly reflected Alina’s form.

By the time that Jade cried out, “Don’t get caught in that mirror’s reflection,” it was already too late. Alina’s whole figure was already in the mirror. The relic shone powerfully, so as to try to steal *Dia Break*.

“Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s quite the fine power you have, girl! Truly worthy of being stolen by me!”

...*Crrrk*.

But a strange sound came from the mirror.

The moment Alina appeared in its reflection, the mirror emitted a feeble light as cracks grew along its surface, groaning with strain. Eventually, it shattered to pieces with a loud *snap*.

“Wha—?”

Now it was Silha’s turn to be stunned.

“The dark god’s mirror...broke?!”

Seeing the mirror scatter helplessly before Alina, Jade was shocked, too—because this was the same principle as when Alina had broken through Glen’s Sigrus skill, *Sigrus Chronos*.

Namely, that the higher-rank power would overrule the lower-rank one.

For the first time, panic showed on Silha's face. He drew back defensively, one step, two. Finally, he leaped off the ground to put distance between himself and Alina.

"Ch-Chant! *Dia*—"

"Too slow."

But Alina had already circled around behind him.

Silha's eyes widened in shock; he couldn't even perceive her presence in time.

"Wha...? How can you be faster than before?!"

A strange zooming noise rang out.

Alina slammed her strangely glowing war hammer into the dark god's arm. Her strike scattered golden particles as it landed, the blow so powerful that it tore Silha's whole limb from his shoulder and sent it flying.

"G-gaaaaaaagh!"

The dark god fell to the ground, blood gushing from where his arm had been.

"...D-damn you...! How dare you take my arm?! Chant: *Dia Storm!*"

The moment Silha got up, his eyes bloodshot with intense resentment, he used his remaining arm to throw his great spear up at Alina. The lance came at her like an arrow, but she lightly twisted around to evade it, and it just whizzed by in vain.

"It...it can't be...!" Heaving rough breaths, Silha watched Alina come to an easy landing with terror in his eyes. Next, he examined his own body, missing its right arm. His expression transformed before her eyes into one of fright, and his face went pale. "My body cannot be broken...!"

"In my peaceful life..."

The dark god's shoulders twitched. As he hastily brought his gaze back to her, Alina took a step closer to him.

"...there won't be anyone who doesn't come back. I won't let that happen."

She spun her war hammer around to face the other way. This was the pickax-shaped side, which, unlike the flat striking side, was sharply pointed for

definitively destroying its prey.

Seeing that, Silha's expression spasmed. "...I-impossible...you can't surpass an omnipotent god."

Every time Alina put power into her weapon, streams of golden light gushed out of it, blasting away even the slightest shadow with its powerful shine. With that fantastical spectacle around her, Alina's cute receptionist skirt was fluttering, but her stance was nothing like what you'd imagine of a completely typical receptionist—it was a violent stance with her giant war hammer swung up overhead as she powered up even further.

"Like I said...! This is for...! My! Peace!"

"Impossible! You can't surpass a god! This is impossi—"

"Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie—!!!"

With a powerful leap that easily shattered the hard floor, Alina bounded toward the dark god, slamming her war hammer into him with all the power at her disposal.

"Gugh!"

A streak of light trailed behind her war hammer as she thrust its sharp point into his tough frame. Digging into flesh and shattering bone, it tore through his back, sending the dark god's blood spraying.

Pierced by the war hammer and having fallen to lie on his face, finally, Silha showed no sign of getting up again.

No—more accurately, even if he did get up, he was beyond recovery. A large hole had been opened in his torso, a fatal amount of blood had splattered out around him, and the heart that one assumed he had, and everything else, was missing.



“...You destroyed the body of a dark god...that even the ancients couldn’t beat...” Jade’s soft mutter broke the dead silence of the room.

“Things actually worked out, huh?” Alina replied.

The powerful light from earlier had completely subsided, and now it was just the same old silver war hammer slung over Alina’s shoulder as she sighed.

“Things wouldn’t normally just work out like that... Normally...”

Ignoring the practically exasperated edge in Jade’s voice, Alina’s gaze turned to Silha.

“...D-damn you... A mere human...!”

Chest pierced by the war hammer, Silha had already lost the light that would heal wounds. But despite the hole in his body and the twisted mess of a thing he had become, he could still speak.

“A dark god...is stronger than anything... I must be omnipotent...or there is no point in my having been born...!”

But naturally, he couldn’t move his arms or legs, the words he wrung out were wheezing, and he sounded like he was in pain. Silha glared at Alina with resentment anyway.

“I see,” Alina replied. “That’s too bad. Perhaps you could have survived if you didn’t get in the way of my overtime.”

“...Alina, that’s definitely something a villain would say.”

“I won’t accept this...!” Silha scraped his nails on the ground as he tried to crawl along, refusing to give up. But that alone made his body cry out, and he coughed up a torrent of blood. His arm trembled, lacking even the strength to raise up his body.

“I won’t accept this... I won’t...! I can’t lose...! I will devour you...!”

“You don’t know when to give up. You’re finished.” Alina expressed her blunt disregard.

But the dark god just laughed low. “Finished...? Heh-heh...ha-ha-ha-ha... what’s finished...?”

“...?” There was something too unsettling about his statement there to simply declare this the sentiment of a poor loser. Alina furrowed her brow.

The dark god curled up his lips in a bloody smirk, and he made an unbelievable declaration. “Did you think that I was the only one of my kind in this world?”

“Huh...what?!”

To Alina, that remark was practically harassment. She’d struggled so much to beat this one—it would be unbearable for there to be more. The dark god’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth wide to laugh as if he was enjoying Alina’s blatant disgust.

“I will never accept...that something can surpass a god...! There can be no such thing! Heh-heh...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! We *will* acquire that power! The second, the third dark god will most certainly—”

“Shut up!”

“Gwagh!”

Halfway through his remark, Silha was interrupted when Alina brought down her war hammer on his stomach.

She put all her strength into it, driving it mercilessly into his stomach—and the stone with sinister black sheen that was buried there.

A cracking sound rang out from the stone, and Silha’s eyes rolled back into his skull.

His head slumped weakly, his limbs splayed outward, and then his body dispersed with white light.

“.....Um.”

Gazing at the white light as it flowed away, Alina muttered, “He’s finally dead.” Jade timidly addressed her from behind.

“...I have the feeling...he was still saying something...”

“Losers should just shut up and die.”

“You’re brutal...!”

With a shake of his shoulders, Jade scooped up the cracked black stone that was left behind after the dark god vanished into nothingness. The gem had lost its eerie aura and was now completely silent. The skill light had faded, but you could vaguely make out a little magic sigil of the sun inside the faintly translucent rock.

“The mark of Dia... This stone is a relic. So this is the dark god’s heart.” Jade sighed and sank down on the spot, his strength leaving him as he looked up at the ceiling with exhaustion. “A dark god, huh...? What a hassle we’ve stumbled into.”

Alina dismissed her war hammer and snorted, her uniform fluttering. “Just so you know, I only came this time because we were temporarily working together, and I’m not having anything to do with this in the future. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that stuff the dark god was blathering on about at the end.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“What, do you have a problem with that? I gave up doing overtime to come here. If I had worked hard today, then I could’ve gone home on time tomorrow, but now I have to stay late catching up!!” Alina lowered her brows in anger as she leaned in toward him aggressively.

“I—I—I—I get it, okay, sorry...!” With a panicked apology, Jade continued. “But because you showed up, nobody died. Thanks.” He grinned.

“...” Alina twisted her lips and looked away. She was also thinking—she was glad it wasn’t his cold body that was lying here.

Though she didn’t want to accept that she was thinking the same thing as him.

That was when things suddenly got noisy at the entrance, and Lululee’s call of “Jade!” flew at them.

They looked over to see Lululee dashing into the room. As soon as she saw they were safe, tears started dripping again from her eyes, which were already puffy from crying, and she leaped on Alina. “Th-thank you, thank you so much, Alina...! Wah, wahhhhhh!!”

Lowe also cursed, “You dumbass leader!” as he slung an arm around Jade’s

shoulders. He was smiling, but his expression was complicated, like he was glad but also like he wanted to scold him. On the receiving end of that, Jade scratched his cheek awkwardly.

“ ... ”

While watching the adventurers gladly confirm the others were safe, a smile slipped onto Alina’s face.

Alina was a little envious to see it.

For a moment, she saw Shroud’s party in them. Depending on just one choice, on just one moment of judgment, they surely could have had a future like this.

But, well...

It was good enough that she had prevented the tragedy that had just about occurred in front of her. That’s what she thought. Surely, it was worth having destroyed her ability to go home on time the next day to come here—

“...This is way too exaggerated...”

It was in the middle of the night at the silent Iffole Counter. In the office, Alina was sighing at the newspaper she had spread out.

Titled *White Tower Conquest Special Edition*, the newspaper featured an impressively exaggerated version of the story of the White Tower, which they had cleared a few days ago. The guildmaster had also made a statement to the paper about the incident, shamelessly declaring, “I would like to offer unstinting compliments and honor to the Executioner.”

I don't need that; I just want you to get rid of my overtime already.

Guildmaster Glen had yet to fulfill his promise—to increase the number of receptionists at Iffole Counter and to do away with Alina's overtime—he said it would take time. While waiting eagerly for that day, in the end, Alina was working overtime again that day.

“Agh...I want to go home... I really am tired...,” she muttered, while as per her usual habit, she rummaged in her drawer. She groped for the magic drink that forced energy out of people: the potion, but her hand found nothing. *Oh yeah, I gave my last one to Jade.*

“...Well, I didn't get exposed as the Executioner, so that's acceptable...”

Then Alina slumped face down on her desk.

Alina truly had been ready for it—for the security at guild headquarters who'd found out her identity to spread the truth around society, and to never be able to put on her receptionist's uniform again.

But now that she'd tried popping the lid, what lay before her was an every day so typically mundane that it was anticlimactic. Even the way she was exhausted from overtime like this was entirely the same as always. As for that security, Glen had just told her one thing: “I shut them up.” She'd felt like she

would get a glimpse of the organization's darkness, so she hadn't pressed him about it, but thanks to that, Alina's identity wasn't yet exposed.

"Agh, how long is this overtime going to go on? This is because those good-for-nothings can't even beat a boss..." Venting a familiar complaint, she scowled.

After the White Tower had been cleared, new dungeons were discovered near it, one after another. Of course, Silver Sword had been badly wounded in the White Tower, so they were resting. Instead, many other adventurers came bragging of their skill to come out and clear the new dungeon. But as expected, they were stuck on this dungeon, too.

Even after all that work to clear the White Tower, in the end, Alina was buried under overtime yet again.

"It's just a boss... Hurry and beat it already, come on..." Alina lamented, but then it suddenly struck her.

...But they're trying pretty hard, huh.

They headed into dungeons knowing the danger, in search of results. The work was nothing but risk, and she thought it was really stupid. No way did she want that. She didn't want it. But.

"..."

Alina happened to recall what had happened the other day in the White Tower. Seeing the members of Silver Sword sincerely gladdened to see the others were safe, out of nowhere, she had realized.

Ohhh, I see, this is the work they've chosen.

Just as Alina would continue on as a receptionist, even if that meant overtime, they would continue to be adventurers, no matter what kind of danger they encountered—because that was the path they'd chosen for themselves. At the end of the day, both receptionists and adventurers were taking a risk in working for the sake of something they didn't want to relinquish. They were both foolish, and both noble, and in the sense that they were working their hardest, they were the same.

They're working hard, too, so maybe I could push through this overtime, as well.

That thought happened to strike her. But even so, it was a fact that overtime was evil, and well, it would only be a little longer that she was obediently doing overtime. Just around three minutes—

“Alina!”

That was when a voice she shouldn't be hearing right now, a voice she didn't want to hear, flew at her, and instantly her expression twisted into something sour.

When she turned in the direction of the voice—to the reception window that should already be closed, she found a single intruder in the dark lobby. It was Jade Scrade.

“...”

She didn't know how he'd gotten into Iffole Counter when it was locked, but with this guy, it was too much trouble to bother asking. Instead, Alina put a really firm line between her eyes and wrung out in a low voice, “I'm doing overtime right now...”

“I know, that's why I came.” Jade chuckled smugly, proud for no reason.

But even so, he was a painful sight to see.

He didn't have his usual weapon and armor on him, with his bandage-covered torso peeking out from his light attire, open in the front. Both arms were the same, and his left arm was even in a sling. He must not have been able to move one of his legs well, as he had a cane that was just barely enabling him to walk.

Though he looked gravely wounded, when he saw Alina, his face sparkled with vim and vigor. “Since it's half my fault that you had overtime today, I thought I'd help you out!”

“I'm fine.”

“...”

“And hey, how are you so perky? Even with Lululee's powers, I thought you wouldn't be healed for a while.”

The skill that had been stolen by the dark god Silha's mirror had apparently come back to her once the mirror was broken. But the wounds Jade had suffered were deep, and any instant healing was ineffective, so he had received the diagnosis that he was to refrain from adventuring for recovery at home, and that a full recovery would be three months—so Alina had heard.

“I'm beat up, but I have energy. That's why I have time to kill.”

“...Just where does that energy come from...?”

When Alina had heard about Jade's condition, she'd happened to realize something frightening. He'd been wounded so badly, even a healer as talented as Lululee couldn't do anything for him... That meant that batch-sold cheapo potion Alina had handed him that time hadn't done a thing. That wasn't even counting that it had been half-drunk, so there hadn't even been enough to get much of an effect out of it.

In other words, Jade kept himself moving the whole time while basically having one foot in the grave. That kind of bottomless energy even weirded Alina out.

“Heh-heh-heh, well...” Unaware of her thoughts, Jade proudly puffed out his bandage-covered chest. “It was thanks to your half-drunk potion filled with your lov—”

“Drop dead!”

“Hrk!”

Finally, Alina slammed her iron fist into Jade's face, crushing it into a wrinkly mess. And Alina kept going, grabbing him by his bandages. “What is this? What do you want, to come and barge in on me while I'm doing overtime? Is that it? Do you have a death wish?

“I mean, you went back to your house—ahhh!”

“The repairs on my beloved home have finished! Of course I'll go back!”

“I planned to have you attend to me at my sickbed...”

“Just shut up and go to sleep!” Alina spat before heaving a great sigh.

Aghhh, in the end, nothing's changed.

Her house had gone back to normal, her identity as the Executioner remained concealed, her overtime was the same as always, and her stalker was getting more and more persistent. Not a single thing had changed about her irksome situation.

“...Jade.”

“What?”

“Help me with overtime,” Alina muttered quietly.

Instantly, Jade’s expression sparkled so hard you’d expect him to expel flowers, while Alina had scowled. But some small sacrifices were necessary for the more pressing issue. She would take whatever help she could get in order to go to bed on time.

Agh, I’m gonna have overtime tomorrow, too, at this rate, Alina thought with exasperation.

Nothing about the situation had changed—but somehow, she felt like she would be able to give it her all tomorrow.

The End

Afterword

That's it! I'll write about a girl who beats down overtime and everything else that comes her way.

My tired brain happened to be struck with that idea one day while I was munching on my late-night snack of convenience store rice balls at work. That was what led me to write this book.

After that, I slowly chipped away at it in my spare moments between overtime and working on days off over the course of a year, but not even in my wildest dreams did I think it would win a prize in the twenty-seventh Dengeki Novel Awards.

Nice to meet you. My name is Mato Kousaka.

Sorry to drop this on you so suddenly, but I'm bad at living. I'm the type of clumsy person who will plunge myself into the deep end without knowing what I'm getting into until I say, "Ah, this is tough."

The protagonist of this story, Alina, is also one such clumsy person. Despite that, she still finds her own answers, sometimes trash-talking adventurers and whacking bosses along the way, as she gives it her all as a receptionist, by her own faith. I would be happy if watching her allows you to keep working a little more tomorrow.

...

.....

Welllll, that all sounds well and good, but when I was actually writing the book, I was feeling like, *Waaaaugh, my boss and my job and everything connected with overtime pisses me off, so I'll beat them all down (in the story), yaaaaaghhhhh!!* I'm sorry. People who feel the same, I understand. Let's yell

together with Alina and vent our frustations, then work hard again tomorrow. Even when things don't seem bright, there's something to be learned from what we do now... There has to be some kind of value to it...!

I'm very sorry for having exposed myself in such an unseemly manner. For those who read the afterword first and have yet to read the book: That's the sort of story this is. I do hope you'll enjoy it.

Well then, finally, the acknowledgments.

To everyone at the editorial department who discovered the possibilities of a book like this; to my editors, Yoshioka and Yamaguchi, who spared a lot of their labor when they're already busy to help out a dunce like me; to my writer friends, who always encouraged and supported me; to our cold but gentle modern society that gave me lots of experience...most of all, to you, who picked up this book: I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Honestly, thank you so much!

I hope to see you again in the next volume.

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