



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

Mato Kousaka

Illustration by Gaou



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By **Mato Kousaka**
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CHARACTER 2

The Executioner

A powerful adventurer who is the subject of many rumors. Whenever adventurers are 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.



CHARACTER 4

Lululee Ashford

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



CHARACTER 6

Laila

The newest receptionist at Iffole Counter. She's a total fangirl for the Executioner and obsesses over their (presumably) handsome looks.

Characters



CHARACTER 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...



CHARACTER 3

Jade Scrade

The leader and tank of Silver Sword, the strongest party in the guild. He's a good-looking, sincere, and modest man, 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...



CHARACTER 5

Lowe Losblender

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



CHARACTER 7

Glen Garia

Guildmaster of the Iffole Adventurers Guild. In his youth, he was a highly capable frontline attacker and member of Silver Sword.

"Receptionist A right before getting
put on tournament duty."



**"Ahh,
nothing
like
going
home
on
time
...!!"**





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but I'll Solo Any Boss to
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Mato Kousaka

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NEW YORK

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Mato Kousaka

Translation by Jennifer Ward

Cover art by Gaou

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

GUILD NO UKETSUKEJO DESUGA,

ZANGYO WA IYANANODE BOSS O SOLO TOBATSUSHIYO TO OMOIMASU Vol.4

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0

“N-no way...! How’d they find me already...?!” a man cried out in despair as he ran through a back alley.

The deep darkness absorbed his hoarse voice. He ran frantically through the deserted backstreet. After nearly tripping over his own two feet, he knocked over a stack of wooden crates, but he kept forcing himself to move.

If they caught him, he would die—that was all he knew. Sweat ran down his pallid face. The moment he put his hand on a wall and turned a narrow corner, his breath caught, and he stopped in his tracks.

A young man was standing ahead of him, blocking the way.

“...!!”

He was draped in black, so as to blend into the darkness of night. His nose and mouth were covered by a black cloth, and his hood was up. Only his eyes, red like blood and trained on the man, were visible under the powerful light of the moon.

The man felt his blood run cold in an instant. He could have sworn the person in front of him had been following him from behind just now. Yet at some point, he had circled around and overtaken him.

“Shit!” The man panicked and tried to turn back around, but he came to a halt before even managing to take three steps. His retreat had been blocked by a thick wall of ice. As it dawned on him that there was nowhere to run, his mind went blank.

“Hey, can we end this pointless game of tag already, Mr. Rule-Breaker? I wanna hit the sack,” the red-haired young man said with a shrug. His casual way of speaking, as if chatting with a friend, belied the animosity in the stinging night air. So for a moment, the man was filled with a vain hope.

“P-please! Let this slide, okay?!” After having been pursued for so long, he

was out of strength. No—even if he were completely fine, there was no way he could take the cleaner in a fight.

“That’s out of the question.”

“I needed money! I’ve contributed to the guild, too! You can let me off for making a little profit on the side, right?”

“That isn’t something for me to decide.”

“Weren’t you a guildmate just a little while ago?! There’s such a thing as duty to—”

“Listen.” The young man laughed off the man’s desperate remarks. “A guy who would sell top secret information for just a few coins is no guildmate, by most people’s standards.”

“...”

“Oh, and by the way, the guy who tried to buy it from you is no longer in this world. Even if you want to sell it, you can’t,” the cleaner said menacingly, grinning as he stuck up his index finger. “If you’d simply been breaking rules, maybe we’d have been kinder. But you crossed a line.”

“Ngh... Shit...” It appeared the cleaner wasn’t going to let him off, no matter what the man said. He ground his teeth, then let his head slump in defeat—only to draw the dagger at his belt the next moment and attack the cleaner.

“Piece of shiiiiiiiit!!”

If he was going out anyway, he would take the young man with him. With that energy, he sliced at the cleaner. He swung the blade with all his might, his life hanging in the balance; to put it less charitably, he swung with wild desperation. He knew full well that there was no one more dangerous than a man intent on going out rampaging.

But the next moment, something covered the man’s mouth. The cleaner had effortlessly dodged his attack, then slipped closer to clamp his hand over the man’s face. At the same time, he struck the man’s hand, sending his dagger falling to the ground.

“...! ...!”

Panicking now that he'd been deprived of his weapon and his words, the man grabbed the cleaner by the arm. But his foe didn't even budge. As the man grew more incoherent, a cold voice penetrated him.

"Quit wailing. People are trying to sleep."

The cleaner's voice sounded completely different from how flippant and friendly it had been earlier.

"...!"

The man's eyes were sucked toward the cleaner's. He saw it. The moment their gazes met, the man froze in terror. The light in those eyes was bereft of humanity.

The cleaner's gaze was cold, as though he saw the man not as a person, or even as a living thing, but as an object. That's when it clicked for the man. To the cleaner, killing someone wasn't much different from swatting a fly. It had never been a matter of killing him or letting him live, forgiving him or not forgiving him—it wasn't on that level at all.

Please—

The cleaner didn't even let the man voice a final plea for his life.

"Flama."

The cleaner chanted a strange spell that the man had never heard before. There was a horrible whooshing sound, and blue flames flickered out from the hand around his face. An instant later, they enveloped it.

"—!!"

The man's head was gone in the blink of an eye.

All that remained in the cleaner's hand was a wavering blue flame. His spell had completely erased the man's face, without even leaving ash.

The man's body crumpled, having lost its support. The neck wound where his head had come off was cauterized and bloodless. The cleaner glanced at the body and tossed the blue flame at it.

"Skill Activate: *Sigurth Ashinu.*"

When he activated his Sigurth skill, the blue flames instantly flared.

The fire undulated like a great snake that was coiling and baring its fangs. In accordance with the caster's will, it devoured the man's body.

With each lap of the flames, the man's body was reduced. Eventually, after the fire had gobbled up even his feet, the cadaver vanished, as though there had never been anyone there to begin with.

The young man they called the cleaner stared at the spot where the man had vanished.

Seconds ago, his target had been full of life as he ran around, begged for forgiveness, and resisted, but now there was no trace of him, not even ashes. The young man had quite literally erased him, without leaving screams, blood, or body to speak of.

This is why they call me "the cleaner," he thought after a moment of reflection. Then he muttered to himself, "What a nasty job."

In the now entirely quiet back alley, the young man took off the black cloth that covered half his face. He pulled down his hood to reveal hair that was bright red, like his eyes. Once he returned his useless rod to his waist, he was quickly transformed into the young man who the world knew as an elite adventurer.

Lowe Losblender, the rear attacker of Silver Sword.

"Fwah, I'm gonna go home and turn in."

Just like that, he had pushed the fact that he had disappeared someone into a corner of his mind. Yawning, Lowe returned to his lodgings.

1

“Ahh, nothing like going home on time...!!”

Spreading her arms wide, Alina Clover looked up at the sky, dyed red with the setting sun.

She was on Iffole’s main drag. It was bustling with people going home on time, and they all had refreshed expressions on their faces from being finished with work. On days when she had overtime, Alina would only ever glare resentfully at this sight, but for the past few days, she had been able to see them off with a calm smile.

“I’m gonna go hooome and clean my plaaace, and maybe I’ll take a bit of time to cook some soup. I’ll take a nice, hour-long soak in the tub, and after my bath, I’ll do some exercises, and before I go to bed, while drinking some warm milk, I’ve got to read that book I borrowed from Laila...” Looking up at the bright evening sky, Alina cheerily counted on her fingers. She had finished work on time that day, so she could do lots of things once she got home. Her heart was way calmer now than when she was busy.

Things had been low-key like this for the past few days.

“Ahhhhh, everything’s in order! My lifestyle is in peaceful order!”

Alina was moved to tears, her whole body trembling as the utter tranquility of her life made her twist around.

“This is the peace I was looking for... Viva going home on time!”

As Alina was skipping along while humming, a voice came to her from the side. “Isn’t that nice, Alina? You haven’t had any overtime lately.”

It was that stalker guy, walking alongside her as if there was no issue with him being there: Jade Scrade.

Glancing at him, Alina snorted imperiously. “If only you were gone, it would be perfect—or at least I’d like to say that. I’ll let it go this time.”

He was still annoying, lying in wait for Alina as always when she left work, but she did him the favor of not using her typical insults or violence. Which was because—

“It’s Jade from Silver Sword!” an adventurer who was walking down the street suddenly cried out.

A group of adventurers instantly discovered Jade and swarmed around him. They surrounded him in a heartbeat, and Alina was tossed out of the crowd of people.

“Hey, what’s a composite skill?!”

“I heard that you got through the super-large dungeon, the Civi Cathedral, without a frontline attacker...!”

“Is it true that you surpassed Sigurth skills?!”

The adventurers mobbing Jade hit him with a barrage of questions, one after another.

“Huh? Uhh...” Put on the spot, Jade scratched his cheek and gave a nonanswer.

One month ago, a new dungeon had been discovered: the Civi Cathedral. It was a super-large dungeon with seven floors. Everyone had assumed that the completion of the Civi Cathedral would drag on, Alina included.

After all, more layers meant more floor bosses. Alina had been prepared for it to take at least a month before all floor bosses were defeated and the full dungeon was cleared.

However, Silver Sword had gone to clear it this time, defeating all floor bosses in under a week to completely finish the dungeon. And that was despite them using a frontline attacker having unhealed wounds from their recent excursion through the hidden layer under the guild headquarters.

It was a brilliant achievement, the likes of which had rarely been seen in the past few years. Out of nowhere, it gave rise to a new rumor whispered among the adventurers.

The story went that the leader of Silver Sword, Jade Scrade, had used a never-

before-seen skill called a composite skill when clearing the Civi Cathedral. Apparently, the adventurers who had coincidentally seen Silver Sword fighting all claimed that its power surpassed that of Sigurth skills.

As the adventurers cornered him excitedly, eager to uncover the truth behind the rumor, Jade dodged their questions with a smile. "It's still a secret. I can't show my cards when the fighting tournament is coming up, right?"

With so many people pressing him, Jade desperately chose his words to avoid answering. Then, as though suddenly acknowledging his point one after the other, the adventurers backed off.

"More importantly, will you guys be all right? Silver Sword is gonna be participating in the fighting tournament, too. This isn't the time for you to be dawdling around."

"Th-that's right!"

"I don't really get how, but they're saying that a composite skill knocked out a floor boss in one strike...! We've gotta train if we're gonna go up against that!"

No sooner had Jade said this than the adventurers raced off out of town.

"Good grief... Huh, Alina?"

Finally taking a breath, Jade found Alina waiting with her arms crossed, and he approached her with confusion on his face. He must have assumed that she would leave him behind and go straight home.

Meanwhile, Alina's head was tilted downward, her shoulders shaking as she let out a low chuckle. "...Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh, heh-heh-heh-heh-heh."

"A-Alina...?" At this disturbing sight, Jade broke into a cold sweat. Heedless, Alina laughed out loud again and immediately clenched her fist.

"This means that if we use your composite skills from now on, we won't have any trouble clearing most dungeons, right? Does this mean that maybe, just maybe, I'll never get overtime again...?!"

Alina jerked up her head and took both of Jade's hands in hers. She stared deep into his dark gray eyes, her own sparkling. "Thank you, Jade!"

"Huh? Huh?"

Jade froze in shock; he had never been thanked face-to-face by Alina before. As he kept looking back and forth between Alina's eyes, sparkling with gratitude that he rarely saw, and with his hands resting in her small, soft palms, he immediately went red to his ears.

"And that means you've saved me from having to be the Executioner...!"

"Huh? A-ah..."

Normally, Jade had the mysterious confidence of a defiant stalking bastard, but now it was nowhere to be found. Jade looked away from Alina as if he couldn't take it anymore, his face red, opening and closing his mouth.

"Well, I've still got a long way to go when it comes to fighting dark gods, though... But well, if it makes you happy, then I guess my practice was worth it... Oh, I know!" Jade continued to be embarrassed until his face suddenly lit up, as if something had struck him, and he turned to Alina.

"Why don't you join us in the upcoming fighting tournament, then, Alina?! We just so happen to be missing a frontline atta—"

"Not happening. Don't get carried away." She coldly rejected him with a bright and cheery smile.

"..." Jade also froze, with a smile on his face.

Leaving behind Jade, who'd wound up like a statue, Alina hummed cheerfully as she skipped down the road home.

2

“Hey, hey, is reception for the fighting tournament still not open?!”

The irritated adventurer slammed the counter, but Alina never let her business smile waver. She smoothly voiced the standard phrase that she had gotten completely used to saying lately.

“As it says in the notice from guild headquarters, reception for the fighting tournament begins in two weeks. Please wait until then.”

“Two weeks?! I can’t wait that long! I’m ready and raring to go!”

Uh, look, I’m telling your ass to wait, okay? I don’t care how raring you are.

The words almost escaped her lips, but she swallowed them down. Normally, this would be where her irrepressible urge to kill these unreasonable adventurers would swell up, but Alina was a little different today. Yes, these narrow-minded adventurers who vented their anger at her like this were insignificant. That was because Alina was now in possession of the most powerful source of calm known to man: having zero overtime.

“The only orders I am able to accept at the moment are ordinary quests. If you’re looking to register for the fighting tournament, then please come again in two weeks.”

“...”

Seeing Alina smiling brightly, the adventurer must have understood that there was no point in complaining, as while he looked dissatisfied, he left.

Exhaling, Alina once again looked around Iffole Counter.

There hadn’t been any new dungeons discovered since Civi Cathedral was cleared, so things had been peaceful. But despite that, there were more adventurers here today than usual. But the ones actually looking for jobs on the quest board were in the minority; most were talking about something else with the other adventurers.

They were all recruiting party members for the fighting tournament that would be held in a month.

The fighting tournament. The event of an adventurer's dreams, held once every four years.

It was a party-versus-party battle, where participants would be able to assemble groups of up to four people to pit the skills they had polished in quests against one another. It was, so to speak, a fight to decide the best adventurer party.

Of course, most people would participate in the tournament with their usual party, but there were also some who would put together bands of stronger fighters in a serious attempt to win the competition. Iffole Counter, where many adventurers gathered, was a convenient place for them to solicit such allies.

Well, if they're just chatting instead of taking quests, they can talk their heads off.

With a chuckle, Alina retreated to the office.

When she sat down at her desk, Laila smirked from the desk next to hers. "You're in a great mood, Alina."

"Of course. It doesn't seem like there'll be overtime for a while, and even if they do find a new dungeon, Silver Sword will manage it somehow."

Yes, this was how things should be. Adventurers swiftly clearing dungeons, and receptionists focusing on helping people take quests. There was no need for, say, a receptionist who had gotten sick of overtime to clear the dungeon herself, hiding her identity and knocking out floor bosses on her own. The world was operating as it should be, and Alina couldn't hide the smirk on her lips.

"The only thing to worry about now is who's going to be in charge of the special window for the fighting tournament..." Meanwhile, Laila muttered about her anxieties. "Once the registration begins, we'll temporarily set up a special window for the fighting tournament...! I hear hell awaits if you're appointed to be in charge of it...!"

"Yeah, I do hear that."

The fighting tournament came once every four years. Alina had yet to experience it in her career as a receptionist so far, but she'd been hearing about it a lot lately.

Once the registration for the fighting tournament began, each office would set up a special window to field applications. And of course, a receptionist would have to be put there to process things. The offices couldn't stop processing quests like usual during this time, so they would designate a single person to be in charge of the fighting tournament, foisting—er, entrusting—everything related to it on them, including the special window.

And the adventurers who wanted to sign up for the tournament would naturally storm Iffole Counter, the largest quest office in Iffole, to do so. Apparently, there was always a massive line at the special window during tournament season, while the other reception windows sat totally empty.

"The fighting tournament special window—otherwise known as the window of death...! Whoever is in charge of it will be flooded with work and die! ...Or so they say. That's probably hyperbole." Laila's fingers trembled as she pictured the frightening sight.

Her fear was quite justified. The fighting tournament was a major event that rivaled the Centennial Festival, where the person in charge would not only have to deal with the applications, but also have to handle the office processing, the tallying, and the communication with headquarters. Basically, that receptionist would manage all the work related to the tournament. And since the winner would receive a rare and expensive prize, the job was a big responsibility, where errors were even less permissible than usual and where the entrants had to be strictly vetted for qualification.

But Alina laughed off Laila's anxiety, shrugging at her. "It'll be fine, it'll be fine. Only the poor sap who ends up with the task has to go through hell. Though it's true that the fighting tournament is a huge event that only comes once every four years. It makes sense that a lot of work goes into putting it on, and that mistakes aren't allowed. That's why they generally appoint veteran receptionists with a lot of experience under their belt. It's got nothing to do with us, since we've only been here a few years."

“...O-oh, really...?!” Laila asked, raising her chin as if she’d found hope.

Seeing her junior’s anxiety, Alina gave her a reassuring nod. “And the truth is, the seniors’ faces have been looking pale lately. They never know when the counter manager is going to clap a hand on their shoulder and ask them to take charge of the window of death, aka fighting tournament duty... Everyone is scrambling to pretend they’re busy and avoid the chief.”

“I—I see...!” Laila’s face brightened with clear and obvious relief. “But it’s true, if you think about it, yeah! There’s no way that they’d leave such an important duty to a newbie... Plus, normally you’d have a demonic look on your face if this sort of super-awful job was waiting for you, but you’re totally fine this time! I thought something was wrong!”

“...You didn’t have to say that part.” Though Alina shot a glare at her junior, the corners of her lips pulled up as she continued speaking. “The thing is, the fighting tournament period is heaven for everyone who isn’t in charge of it. Most of the adventurers focus on the tournament, so the number of quests we get goes down. So while we help out with the work a bit whenever we’ve got some free time, we get to leave when we’re supposed to! How wonderful! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Hey, Alina.”

Right as Alina was relishing her victory, someone clapped her on the shoulder.

Instantly, her smile froze. No question about it—the voice that had come from behind belonged to the counter chief.

“Ah...huh?”

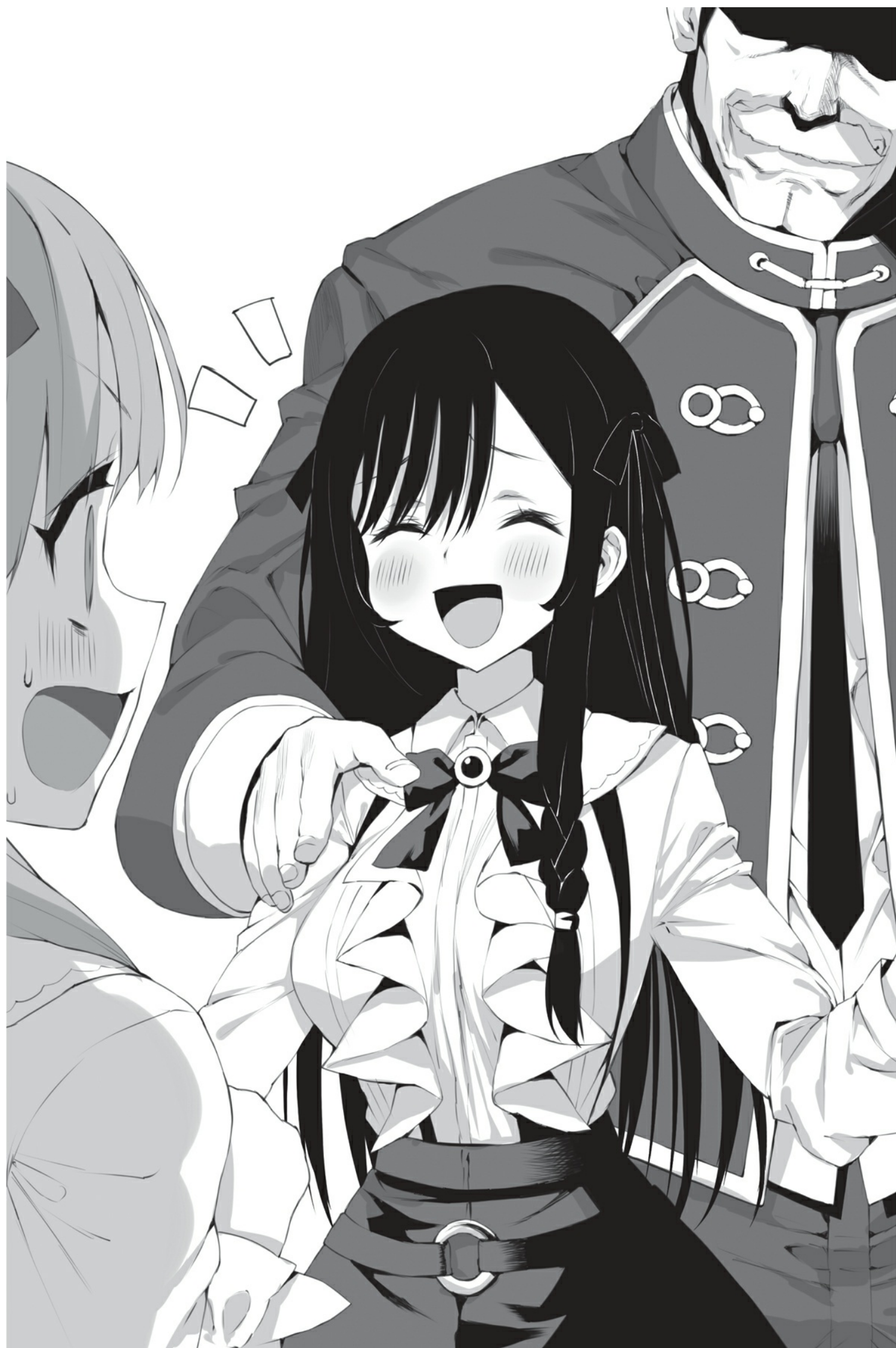
Alina slowly turned around. And there, indeed, stood the counter chief, a mild smile on his face.

Instantly, Alina sensed murmurs of unrest run through the office.

The fact she’d been addressed directly by the counter chief, who rarely moved from his desk, at this time, along with the fact he’d just tapped her on the shoulder, could only mean one thing.

No, it couldn’t be.

No way no way no way. It was impossible.



Alina desperately rejected the worst possible possibility that flitted through her brain. Every year, they chose a receptionist who had more than seven years of experience under her belt. She was still in her third year. She had only finally begun to understand what quest-processing work entailed, how to manage it, how to improve her efficiency. Plus, she'd only just started being entrusted with slightly important work—she was that sort of mid-range employee who was neither newbie nor veteran.

“Wh-what is it?” Alina asked with a gulp as a heavy silence settled over the office.

The other receptionists stopped moving, and they held their breath as they watched. Despite how many people were staring, the counter chief smiled and handed Alina a stack of papers.

“These are some rush documents that headquarters has asked for. It's the selection of the people who've applied for Civi Cathedral at Iffole Counter in the past few days. Can I leave these to you, Alina?”

“Huh?”

She looked down at the stack of papers that he held out to her. It was a job completely unrelated to the fighting tournament. Seeing that, Alina was instantly relieved, the tension in her whole body easing.

“Huh? Ah-ha-ha-ha, oh, sure, yes, sir, understood.”

While babbling from having gotten too worked up, Alina accepted the stack of papers. The counter chief's business seemed to be actually only that, and he gave a nod and then turned around. The other senior receptionists who had been frozen also started returning to their own tasks, as if time had resumed after being stopped. While mentally complaining that this was really bad for her heart, Alina flipped through the documents she had been handed—

“Oh, and—”

The counter chief suddenly stopped, turning around to Alina as if he'd just remembered something, and then he made the announcement that would slam her with despair.

“There’s something important I want to talk to you about regarding the upcoming fighting tournament, so could you come to the visitor’s table?”

“Alina, the truth is, I’m thinking of putting you in charge of the fighting tournament work.”

Hearing the absolute worst request from the counter chief, Alina stood up and immediately argued back, “I’m against it! I...I mean, I heard that veteran receptionists have always handled it in the past! I’m still in my third year, and I’m really inexperienced!”

“I understand that, of course. But starting this year, I’ve been thinking about changing the simplistic policy of leaving it to a veteran.”

Showing no concern at all for Alina’s desperate refusal, the counter chief continued in a leisurely manner.

“Last time, I left things to a veteran receptionist, but unluckily enough, a new dungeon was discovered right when the application period of the tournament was going on. Since she was removed from her regular duties, we lost a major worker and fell behind on our normal office work. In the end, that veteran wound up being forced to take on her ordinary duties on top of handling the tournament...”

“...”

So that was it.

True, it would be a major blow not to have a big player available during a busy period. That was partly just down to lack of personnel, but sometimes, you had to rely on a veteran if something unusual came up, too.

“That receptionist has already moved to a different office, but it’s been four years since then, and the receptionists at Iffole Counter have all grown. I’m sure it would be all right if I left the fighting tournament duty to anyone, but I hold your ability in high esteem, Alina. I think you’ll be able to do a great job handling the tournament. I want you to gain more experience and knowledge so you can be an even better receptionist.”

“...”

By the way, Alina had no right to refuse.

Unless there were major extenuating circumstances, like if she was about to give birth, or she was critically ill, she had to put up with whatever she was assigned. That was why her seniors had been worried sick over the possibility they would get the job. Because no sooner would the chief ask you something than he would saddle you with an assignment masquerading as a request.

“.....Got it...”

With no choice but to accept, in a vanishingly quiet voice, Alina staggered over to a sofa and crumpled into it.

3

Once Alina returned to her desk, she was fixed with piercing stares.

“A-Alina...,” Laila addressed her timidly. She must have gotten the gist about what the counter chief had talked to Alina about.

Like a creaking machine, Alina stiffly and awkwardly turned to Laila. “What...?”

“Yeep! Your face is like a mummy’s...!” That expression must have sealed it for her, as Laila gulped. “So you got put in charge of it after all...”

“He says I’m on tournament duty, yeah...”

“...That happened incredibly quickly after being foreshadowed...” Laila must have had nothing else to say, as she lowered her eyes as if mourning the dead.

“...Why?” Despair seized Alina’s heart, eventually giving way to anger.

“Whyyy am I on fighting tournament dutyyyyyyyyyy?!” she cried, holding her head in her hands. “Where... Where do I even start?! I don’t know the first thing about the fighting tournament...! The woman in charge of it previously has already left the office, so there’s no one to teach me!”

While the others around watched what was going on with Alina, they seemed unsure of how to talk to her.

Despite things growing uncomfortable, a certain individual called out cheerily for Alina. “Oh yes, Alina.”

It was the counter chief. Alina was no longer hiding her anger, her eyebrows pointing downward and her eyes flashing as she turned around. “What is it?!”

“I forgot to give you these. They’re explanations on taking over tournament duties, which your predecessor left behind. The forms that were written up for the tournament four years ago are in the basement storage room, so check those for reference.”

The takeover documentation. Those were notes that her predecessor had written for the next person in charge, covering all the essentials of handling the tournament, from how to do the work to things to watch out for. Their mere existence dramatically decreased the burden on whoever was handling the tournament. No, it would be more accurate to say that anyone on tournament duty would be dead without them. The presence or absence of that documentation would decide whether the new person in charge would live or die.

“G-god...!”

There was still hope. Alina leaped on the piece of paper that the counter chief had handed her. She quickly opened the carefully folded document—

And what was written therein struck Alina speechless.

Fighting Tournament Application Workflow:

Have them fill out the application form.

Submit the application numbers to headquarters.

Go for it and do your best!

“Th-three lines?”

“...Huh, is this the takeover documentation...?!?”

Laila, peering in from the side, was also speechless in the face of this far too light “documentation,” which concluded in only three lines.

“Don’t give me just three lllllllllllines!!” Alina howled at the heavens, squinting in anger. “And with that pointless encouragement at the end?! Functionally, there are only two lines that reference the actual work!!”

“Th-this really is rather...”

“No, wait! There’s still hope...the manual!”

No sooner had Alina said that than she was grabbing a key hanging off the

wall and unlocking a door that was normally tightly closed.

Beyond the door were stairs leading to the basement. She shot down the stairs to arrive at a little record room. This was where past documents from Iffole Counter were stored, packed in orderly rows of shelves. Alina clung to a shelf from the edge and traced the spines.

“A-Alina, what’s gotten into you...?!” Laila followed after Alina and headed into the storage room.

“I’m looking for the manual. When a receptionist is put in charge of something, she writes a last testament about it for future receptionists in preparation for her departure...um, rather! It’s a booklet explaining the general workflow and ins and outs of a task that gives you past examples and stuff...! Even though that tournament only comes around once every four years, there’s gotta be an old manual on it in here—there it is!”

Alina’s bloodshot eyes locked onto a spine that had FIGHTING TOURNAMENT MANUAL written on it.

“If I read this, most of this stuff will...”

Opening it up at a random spot, she flipped through the pages with practiced hands. But no matter how much she flipped and flipped, the manual was totally blank.

“Wh-why? Why?!”

Alina panicked and flipped backward through the book. Eventually, she came across some handwriting at the top of the very first page. There, in half-faded characters, the following was written:

“I’m too busy, and I don’t have the energy to make a manual. Go for it and do your best...”

“Like I saaaaaaaaid!!” Alina slammed the book onto the floor in a rage. “If you can’t make anything, then don’t leave behind documents with

overcomplicated titles!! If I could just go for it and do my best, then I wouldn't have a problem here!"

"A-Alina, please contain yourself...!"

In the end, all Alina could do was pull out every last document related to the past fighting tournaments, as a flustered Laila watched.

Things happened, and a few hours later—

A mountain of past documents that they had pulled up from the basement stacks as reference had formed around Alina's desk. It had the imposing aura of a fortress of books.

Upon seeing this, the other receptionists said, "A-ask me for anything if you're in trouble, Alina" and "Do you want a snack, Alina?"

The senior receptionists normally hated getting involved in trouble and never butted in on other people's work, but now they were unnaturally kind. They placed snacks on her desk one after the other, as if laying out offerings to appease a deity. Ultimately, even Sulie, Alina's enemy-number-one, said, "Miss Clover... I'll take over totaling the quest forms for the time being."

"Why...? Why did I wind up assigned to tournament duty...?" Alina sobbed.

And this was how Alina's hell began.

4

One week later, many adventurers swarmed Iffole Counter the moment applications to participate in the fighting tournament opened.

Alina's counter had been converted into the window for the tournament. Even though business hours had yet to start, there was already a long line in front of Iffole Counter.

While the adventurers in line waited for their turn to come, their eyes shifted nervously to a statue that had been placed on Alina's counter.

The statue was like an avant-garde art piece and appeared to be shaped like a person. Strange patterns were carved into the surface of its body, and there was an eight-pointed magic sigil inside it—the mark of Dia, which signified it was a relic.

Though it was exposed by being on the counter, a barrier of Sigurth skills had been erected around it, preventing anyone from touching it.

“That's the prize for this year's tournament...! An ultra-large pure relic, entirely untouched and unaltered!”

The adventurers who were waiting for reception to open looked at the statue placed on Alina's counter and broke into murmurs.

A pure relic. Unlike relic arma or crystal gates, which were made from processing relics in some way, these types of relics were completely unaltered.

Pure relics were more expensive than processed relics, but the pure relics that were lying around in dungeons were palm-sized at largest. Small items or common pure relics that could be obtained in any dungeon were practically worthless.

However...the pure relic that was the prize for this year's tournament was a little different. It had to be about as long as a dagger. It was noticeably larger than the pure relics that were lying around in most dungeons, and it looked

fairly rare, too.

“Whoa, I’ve never seen a pure relic that big!”

“They say that if you sell it, you’ll come out with enough cash to buy a relic arma and get change...!”

“If I can get my hands on that thing, I can kiss my worn-out equipment good-bye!”

As the adventurers gawked at the pure relic like wild dogs looking at a feast, the service windows of Iffole Counter finally opened.

“Welcome! You’re here to apply for the tournament, right?” With a taut smile, Alina greeted the first adventurer who came running over to her.

She had zero experience with this job, but the workflow was about the same as receiving ordinary quests. She had the entrants fill out the participation form, and after checking that they were qualified to participate, she finally asked them to present their license cards and sign.

The annoying part, however, was that she had to do this for every single participant. When adventurers were signing up for a quest, you could normally just have the party representative check and sign, cutting down on the amount of people you had to process.

“A full party for the fighting tournament.”

“Understood. Well then, please fill in this application form and have every member of your party present their licenses and provide their signatures.”

“Huh? All members? I’m the only one who came.”

“...”

Look. See, right there.

While losing it behind her smile, Alina said meaninglessly, “Oh, I see.”

The guild headquarters had, in fact, publicized how to apply for the tournament via the bulletin board for several days now. But dim-witted adventurers who couldn’t even register for ordinary quests right would never read those explanations beforehand.

“Signatures and license cards from all party members are required for application, so please come back again with your entire party.”

“Huh? I have to come back later? What’s the problem with me being the representative?”

“We need all participants to provide their licenses and signatures. Otherwise, you’ll be disqualified from the tournament.”

“...”

Beneath her cold smile, the first adventurer left with his half-filled-out form.

All right! Next!

Alina greeted the second adventurer. Unusually for adventurers, who were often rough and unkempt, this man was well-groomed and had a nervous look on his bespectacled face. Alina’s instincts as a third-year receptionist instantly kicked into gear and told her that this intellectual adventurer would be okay.

“Here’s the application form. Please fill in everything beforehand, signature included, and show me the license card for every member of your party.”

Sure enough, the intellectual adventurer submitted the form with everything filled out on it like he was used to this, plus the license cards of his entire party. She was grateful he’d done everything perfectly.

Th-thank you!!

It wasn’t every day you came across an adventurer who’d read the explanations beforehand. Alina sighed in relief. This might have been her first tournament, but veteran adventurers would have already experienced it multiple times. Of course they would know how to do it.

“Thank you very much. Well then, we will accept your application to par—”

“Hey! You!”

But then a man cut in.

No, not just one man. Two other adventurers, probably members of his party, stood behind him as he roughly grabbed the intellectual adventurer by the hand.

“You’ve always done it with us before... You never said you were gonna apply with another party just for the tournament!” The adventurer who had just barged in was bright red in the face as he yelled at the intellectual adventurer.

But his aggression just made the intellectual adventurer glance at him in scorn. And then, to top it all off, he sighed blatantly. “Ahhh, sorry. Didn’t I say? I was scouted by a stronger party, so I figured I would join them this time.”

“What?!”

“I do feel sorry for you all, but I’m serious about trying to win. Wouldn’t anyone want to join up with the strongest adventurers they can?”

“Asshole! What makes you think I’m gonna let that kind of selfish—?”

“I’m allowed to switch parties. Could you stop following me around?”

“Bastard! Now you’re asking for it!”

The argument between the short-tempered adventurer and the intellectual adventurer heated up comically.

“...” Alina watched expressionlessly. So much for a smooth application.

With a little sigh, she butted into the adventurers’ exchange. “...Sirs, I’m very sorry, but if it seems that you’re not ready to apply, then please come another day.”

“Wait, please. I’ll apply right now. I waited a long time, and I can’t bear to do it all over again.”

“But you’re keeping the customers behind you waiting...”

“Shaddap! Butt out of this, receptionist!” The intruding adventurer turned the brunt of his irrational anger on Alina. The next instant, he finally grabbed the intellectual adventurer by the lapels.

“Ha, resorting to violence when you don’t get what you want? I was never happy with you people in the first place. Do you understand that you’ve only gotten this far because I was always covering for you? My new party is higher level overall compared to you three, and I don’t have to babysit them, either. It’s obvious which I’d choose, isn’t it? I could even take this as an opportunity to leave you for good.”

“Y-you asshole! Now you’re *really* in for it...! Get ready for a beatdown!”

Immediately, the adventurers went to blows.

“ ... ”

Alina just watched quietly as the scene descended into madness.

Things were not looking good.

5

It was late at night in the empty offices of Iffole Counter.

Alina sat down on the visitor's couch, steeped her fingers together, and solemnly opened her mouth. "—And that was how the disaster of the first day of tournament applications went."

Her report was directed at a man sitting opposite her.

There was already a large mountain of application forms in the desk area behind her, but Alina took her eyes off them for a moment. She had bigger problems than the volume of documents to process.

"Unsurprisingly, the main issue is the rule about every member of a party needing to give their license and signature to apply. Not even half the applicants knew about it or understood it. And it's downright inefficient, not to mention unhealthy, for me to have to explain it every time, get insulted, and then drive them off... We need a quick fix for this."

After that long preface, Alina let out a sigh and said, "And so now, I shall open the first strategy meeting concerning fighting tournament applications."

"Glad to be here." The man sitting across from her, Jade Scrade, had his hands folded in his lap, and he answered Alina with a serious look in his eyes. "But the special window for the tournament, huh... The crazy high number of entrants you have to process aside, the biggest problem is that your workflow keeps getting bogged down."

"That's exactly it." Alina gave a big nod. "The confusion at the service window is not only an obstruction to smooth reception work, but it also causes clerical errors—input errors, checking errors. If there's even a single error, then I'll be playing catch-up on the mistakes, so processing the documents will take a lot longer. A single error will be fatal...!"

"So the first day, you felt like you were just barely keeping up with all the adventurers who kept coming in without having read the application rules?"

“Exactly. But from what I’ve heard, it’s like this every single time the tournament happens. You’re at the adventurers’ mercy the whole time, and highly skilled receptionists deal with it by just diving in headfirst... It’s really inefficient. I’m sure that’s because it’s only ever held once every four years, so the job keeps on getting passed on to the next victim without being improved at all.”

If they’d needed to field applicants for the tournament every day, like with their ordinary reception duties, then the office would have improved the process so it could be handled more efficiently. But applications for the tournament only happened once every four years. Looking at the “three-line takeover” or the “blank-paged manual,” it was clear that the one in charge had their hands full with office work and hadn’t had the time to think about any plans to improve it for next time.

Most likely, the ones in charge of past events had tucked the related documents in the basement stacks as soon as the tournament was over, thinking *out of sight, out of mind*, and had let four years pass without ever considering it again.

“The tricky part is it’s once every four years, so it’s unlikely that the same person will handle it more than once. A new person is forced to start from scratch every time, without any accumulated know-how...”

“Then the first thing to do is set up a smooth process for receiving applications and make it routine. Then we can have future receptionists copy that...,” Alina said.

“A-Alina...!” Jade leaned forward in his seat, as if he were struck by something. “It’s amazing that you’re thinking about the receptionist who will be taking over in four years, when you’re having a tough time now.”

“...I mean, I kind of have the feeling like I’ll be put in charge of the tournament next time, too...”

“...I see...”

Banishing that nightmarish prediction, Alina clenched her fists. “And so today, we’re going to come up with a plan to smooth out reception during the day!”

“Yeah, I guess that is the number one priority.”

Jade nodded, and the two of them began planning.

6

It was still early in the morning as Laila walked down the main street of Iffole.

Most people would start heading off to work later, and there was hardly anyone else out at the moment.

Laila was at the very bottom of the hierarchy of receptionists at Iffole Counter, so it was her job to tidy up the workplace before it opened. While she did think this was a drag, Alina was thoughtful enough to help her out, so it wasn't that bad.

When she went in from the back entrance that led straight into the offices of Iffole Counter, she saw that someone was already there.

"Oh, Laila. You're early," came a charming voice, and the tall young man Jade Scrade appeared.

As the leader of the guild's elite party, Silver Sword, he was equivalent in rank to the managers of the guild. Despite that, his clothes were already dirty first thing in the morning, his pretty silver hair was wrapped up in a cloth like a construction worker's do-rag, and a hammer was in his hand. He had abandoned his typical light armor for a pair of pants and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and his handsome face, which had made so many women his prisoner, was dripping with sweat.

Seeing that he was clearly not doing the sort of job fitting of his station, Laila accidentally forgot to greet him and asked candidly, "...Wh-what are you doing...?"

"Oh, I had a bit of a strategy meeting with Alina yesterday. We wanted to implement it in time for today, so we were up working all night."

"All night?!"

"It's no big deal. Anyway, could you just come in through the front entrance for me?"

“...?”

While Laila was doubtful, she left the office through the rear entrance and circled around to the front of Iffole Counter.

“Wh-what is this...?!”

And then she was shocked to see that things were clearly quite different from how they were before.

A giant wooden sign had been put up on the side of Iffole Counter’s front entrance. Written in big letters on the paper posted there was the following:

Attention all fighting tournament applicants

- **Signatures from all participants**
- **License cards from all participants are both required to apply. Please confirm that you have these.**

“I—I see,” said Laila. “It’s true that there were a lot of adventurers yesterday who didn’t understand the application requirements... A prompt to ask them to check if they have everything before entering the office would be effective!”

Impressed, Laila nodded a few times. The thing Jade had been making while dressed up like a civil engineer was this sign. As understanding dawned on her, Laila went inside to find yet another big sign right in front of her.

Attention all fighting tournament applicants. Signatures and license cards from all participants are required to apply.

“I like this! Even if they happen to miss the sign at the entrance, they can turn back around an—”

As Laila continued over to Alina’s counter, yet another sign caught her eye.

Attention all fighting tournament applicants. Please be ready with signatures and license cards from all participating members.

“And another heads-up to make doubly sure! That way, people who missed

the earlier signs will *have* to catch on.”

Then Alina’s counter came into view at last. Signs had been carefully set up even in the spot where the applicants would be lining up.

Signatures! And licenses! From everyone! For the tournament!

“...H-hmm.”

Now it was just large words scribbled out incoherently. Laila decided to ignore it and came up to the counter.

“...Wh-what...?”

Behind it was Alina, wearing a beaming smile and emanating an imposing aura.

At the foot of her counter was a massive poster and a standing signboard. The desktop was lined with signs, leaving the absolute minimum amount of space, and on top of that, there was a wooden sign hanging from the ceiling.

They all bore text, written out like a ghastly curse.

Signatures for all party members.

License cards for all party members.

All party members!!

Old format application forms not allowed.

Shut up and line up.

Just bring all your party members, okay?

Once you’ve filled everything out, scram.

If you haven’t decided on your party, then don’t bother lining up.

If you’re going to fight, do it outside.

“...”

The indescribable yet palpable rage of those signs struck Laila speechless. “... At some point, the notices start to feel like angry rambling...”

“Heh-heh. Now even those idiots will notice.” With a bright smile on her face,

Alina puffed out her chest proudly. “Because we’ve done all this, I won’t have my time taken up by a single applicant when they come to the counter and start arguing about stuff...!”

“R-right. With this much signage, they’re going to see at least one.”

“The points written on these signs and posters are things I was forced to explain over and over yesterday. It was a mistake in the first place to expect those stupid adventurers to actually look at the application rules for the tournament.”

“I...I see...”

“If I write up this many, then there’s no way they can start complaining to me right at the counter about how they don’t have their licenses or they don’t have all their signatures. It’s perfect...!”

“But wait, did you work Master Jade like a dog all night to get this done...?”

“Way to be rude. I made sure to pitch in and make some of the signs myself, too. Like that one!” Alina said, pointing with a smug look at a little sign that was clearly shoddier than the others. It was already tilted diagonally, but when some wind blew through the open door, it was the only sign to wobble and tip over, falling to the floor with a *thump*.

“...”

“...”

“I-it’s fine, as long as you can see it!”

Alina awkwardly righted the sign she’d made and averted her eyes.

“I figured that people would get hurt if I left it to Alina to make signs of that size...” Jade, who was watching their conversation, smiled uncomfortably.

“Nice call there, Master Jade.”

It was a good thing Jade was there. A strange sense of relief washed over Laila. *The power of love sure is amazing—it got him to work all night for Alina’s sake*, she thought idly.

“Anyway, we’re on day two of applications. I spent the whole day yesterday

dealing with nonsense, but things won't be like that today...!"

Alina clenched a fist as the flames of anger mingled with fighting spirit burned in her jade-green eyes.

Now come at me, stupid adventurers...!

As Alina waited behind the special tournament window and readied her business smile, she felt herself getting fired up.

Once business hours started, Laila opened the door to Iffole Counter. The first adventurer to come inside was signing up for the tournament, of course. He leaped straight for Alina's counter.

"Welcome," said Alina. "You're applying for the tournament? Well then, please present signatures and license cards for all participants along with this application form."

"Huh? For everyone? I never heard about that."

"....."

Calm down, calm down.

Sensing her business smile freezing, Alina desperately restrained the impulse to activate her Dia skill on reflex.

This man, who had been waiting outside before Iffole Counter opened, must have at least seen the large sign that was installed outside the entrance. She'd made Jade go through trial and error to write a heads-up notice in large and simple text, ensuring it would be visible from as far away as possible and understandable even to an idiot. If this guy were normal, a normal dude with good intellect and common sense, then wouldn't his eyes be drawn to the words "fighting tournament," the very thing he was trying to apply for? What had that man been doing outside? *Oh, I see, this guy has no intellect or common sense. I guess there's no helping it, then. It was my mistake to have tried communicating to him in writing. Oh well, it's no big deal. What's the big deal if it gets in my face that the effort I put in staying up all night making signs was useless from the very first customer? They're stupid adventurers. They're idiots*

and morons. This is just the usual crap I have to put up with every day.....

In that split second, Alina came up with a logical explanation for what had happened, to maintain her sanity. And then, in the name of her pride as a third-year receptionist, she opened her mouth with the utmost calm.

“Please die a billion times!”

“Huh?”

“Please come back once you have all your party members sign this application form. Make sure to bring all your license cards, too.”

“D-did you just tell me to—?”

“I think you might be hearing things.”

“...”

The adventurer seemed to want to say something, but when he saw Alina’s expression, he immediately swallowed his words. For some reason, his face contorted in fear.

“F-fine...sorry.”

After delivering a tiny apology, the adventurer dejectedly left Iffole Counter. Alina called for the next adventurer waiting in line, as if nothing had happened.

7

Alina continued battling adventurers like so, and the next thing she knew, a week had passed since the beginning of the fighting tournament application period.

Today as usual, Alina was silently and diligently working overtime at the offices of Iffole Counter at night.

“...So...tired...,” she muttered in the empty office, practically emaciated as she ran out of steam and collapsed face-first on her desk. It had been a week of dealing with the adventurers who came surging in with the force of crashing waves during the day, plus reception work she was unused to, and tackling overtime hell during the night. Though things at the reception window were now functioning fairly smoothly, an absolutely demonic amount of office processing was looming next.

“...”

She glanced at her desk to see a mountain of unprocessed documents. And this was just the amount she’d wound up with after Jade had helped her—if he hadn’t been there, then she may have died, in many senses of the word.

So this is the “window of death”... Fearsome, indeed.

Alina mustered her energy and got up from the desk, leaving the office room. She was headed to the counter. She had left some documents to process on the floor by her counter, which she’d tossed quickly on the floor during business hours.

“So much...”

Just looking at the amount of forms exhausted her. Just as she was about to carry them to the office room, her eyes suddenly landed on the prize on the counter.

The vaguely person-shaped pure relic.

Though the valuable object appeared to have been left there defenselessly, it was in fact protected by many layers of trap-type Sigurth skills, which would prevent anyone from touching it.

“Agh... I can’t believe they’re all going nuts over this incomprehensible thing...”

The adventurers participating in the fighting tournament had different reasons for participating, like the glory of victory, or doing it for the memories, but the most common was the chance to win this expensive prize. If you sold it, an expensive relic arma would be within reach, and you could order a new set of stronger armor, too. Since adventurers couldn’t get loans, getting a lump sum of cash meant an increase to their fighting abilities. Of course, those who were capable of winning already had relic arma, but still, adventurers were all about dreaming about getting rich quick.

“It’s really starting to bug me... What’s with this thing’s shape anyway? It looks like it’s mocking you...”

While grumbling to herself, Alina poked the head of the statue with her finger. The protections from Sigurth skills were all ineffective on Alina, who had a Dia skill.

The strange patterns drawn on the surface of the figure and the mark of Dia dimly blinking inside its body were indeed mysterious. But the slightly twisted pose it was in made it seem as though it was making fun of you.

“Hya!”

On a sudden impulse, Alina gave the forehead of the pure relic a light flick. A pleasant *konk* sound rang out softly in the quiet Iffole Counter.

“Hmph. I’ll let you get off with just that this time.”

Pointing a finger at the pure relic, Alina once again scooped up the heavy stack of papers.

“Aghh, I wish this fighting tournament would end right away... And that I’ll never be put on tournament duty again.”

Creak.

Alina's complaining was cut off by a strange sound.

"?"

She was about to head into the office room but stopped. Turning around, she searched for the source of the sound.

Crack, crack...

She could hear a strange noise—it was coming from the pure relic.

"Huh...?"

Alina had a bad feeling about this. The next moment—

With an empty snapping sound, the neck of the statue cracked, and the head flew off. *Tunk*, roll. The thumbnail-sized head fell and rolled up to her feet.

"Huh?"

For an instant, she went totally quiet.

Alina gazed at the head lying there, as if it somehow had nothing to do with her. Next, she directed her gaze to the statue on the counter. The vaguely silhouetted relic, which appeared to have been made without any concern for detail, stood there in its twisted, mocking pose.

But it had no head. Its neck had been cleanly and entirely broken off, and perhaps because of the substance of the pure relic, its neck was flat across, as if it had been sliced off with a blade.

She looked to the floor one more time. The head was there.

She looked at the counter again. It had no head—

"Pyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah—!!!!!"

Alina screamed, tossing away the documents in her arms all at once.

She hastily scooped up the head rolling on the ground and stuck it on to the neck of the pure relic statue.

"Huh? So fragile! Huh? Huh?!"

She was so rattled that she tried to reattach the head over and over, as if fitting puzzle pieces together. She twisted it, pushed it, and put it upside down.

But of course, it did not stick on with a clicking sound, and Alina grew paler and paler.

It was not just a figure that was in poor taste. It was a super-valuable pure relic that had been left by the ancients, and more importantly, it was the prize for winning the fighting tournament.

“I-I’ve got to stick it on!”

Alina panicked and retreated to the office room, coming back with a box of tools. They were supplies for some light repairs, including some old-fashioned adhesive made using the bodily fluids of a monster. Alina put some on the broken neck and somehow stuck the head back on.

“I-it seems...okay...but maybe not.”

Fortunately, the crack on the neck wasn’t very apparent, thanks to the fact that the break on the neck was fine enough to have been made by a master swordsman, plus the fact the statue was covered in unfathomable patterns.

“...”

While listening to her heart continue to thud, Alina gently returned the figure to its original position. She circled from behind the counter to the customer side, looking at it from a distance and at different angles, checking to see if there was anything strange.

“Yeah, okay. It actually seems fine.”

She gave herself a thumbs-up and then breathed a sigh of relief. Picking up the scattered papers, she was about to return to the office room as if nothing had happened, when—

“Wait, there’s no way that’s okaaaaaaaaaay!!!!”

Coming back to her senses, Alina immediately held her head in her hands.

Oh no, oh no...! I’ve done it now, haven’t I?!

Dripping cold sweat, Alina wrapped her head around the situation.

She had sent the head of a super-valuable pure relic figure flying... That part was obviously a problem, but she could imagine a future that was far more

frightening.

If people found out that Alina had destroyed it, they would arrive at a fatal question: How could a mere receptionist break a pure relic in the first place, with how incredibly strong and hard it is? Of course, no ordinary human could break a relic with their bare hands. Then they would reach the conclusion that Alina was not just a receptionist.

If...word gets around...it's over... My peaceful receptionist life is over...!!!!

Shivers racing up her spine, Alina crumpled on the spot. She put her hands on the floor and hung her head as her vision went dark.

As despair washed over her, a vision of the worst possible future played out in her brain. The winning adventurer would proudly accept this figure on the day of the fighting tournament. Surely, they wouldn't sell it right away, and they would bring it home for a while and use it to decorate their room or brag about it to other people. And then they would happen to notice, *Huh, wait, is there something off about the head...?*

".....!!!!"

Once they realized the head was broken, they would instantly search for the culprit, and suspicion would fall on Alina from Iffole Counter, where the figure had been left. No, people would just assume she was the culprit. And then word would get out that Alina had done it, and that she was strong enough to destroy a pure relic with a single flick.

What do I do, what do I do...?!

The one silver lining was that nobody had seen her actually commit the crime. If she had been seen, then she'd be out in one shot. While Alina was worried, she was just a little relieved that she had scraped through by the skin of her teeth—but then—

"Hey, what are you doing out here, Alina?" a voice suddenly asked from behind.

"Byaaaaaagh!" Alina's shoulders leaped up.

When she turned around, there was Jade, blinking in surprise at Alina's shriek.

“I came to help you with overtime again... Did something happen? You’re kneeling on the floor.”

“O-oh, it’s you, Jade... Don’t surprise me!”

Picking up the forms she’d dropped, Alina feigned composure as she got up. While making the excuse that she had just stumbled a bit, she realized something with a gasp before she took another step.

That’s it! I remember Jade said that Silver Sword would be in the fighting tournament, too...

She felt like a faint ray of hope had shone into the darkness of her despair.

Jade’s party ought to just win and get this prize for her. They wouldn’t get at her for breaking its head off. And if she wanted to make their victory even more assured, then she might as well—

“...Hey, hey, Jade.”

“What is it?”

“Silver Sword is participating in the upcoming tournament, right? What are you going to do with the prize if you win...?”

“The prize? Yeah, huh... I guess one of us would just use it as a decoration? It’s not useful in battle, and there’s not much use in selling a pure relic to split the profits for us, at this point.”

For the rich guild elites who had large sums of contract money and quest rewards, even a pure relic that regular adventurers would be drooling over was nothing more than pocket change. Hearing that, Alina made up her mind.

“What, are you going to join us in the tournament after all? Ah-ha-ha.”

“I will.” Alina said just those two words.

“Huh?”

As Jade’s eyes went round in shock, Alina declared firmly, “I’m going to be in the tournament, too!”

No sooner had she said this than she was heading over to Jade with a ghastly look on her face, grabbing his lapels, and flaring her eyes wide. “In exchange...!

Please give that pure relic to me if we win!!”

This was no big deal. She just had to win the broken statue for herself.

Then the world will never find out about my misdeeds or crazy strength. It's perfect...! It's a perfect plan...!

The corners of Alina's lips curved up sneakily, like a villain's grin.

“I—I don't mind at all... But wait?! You're actually joining in?!”

“What, something wrong with that?!”

“No, but you seemed like you had no interest at all in joining before, so why the sudden change of heart...?”

Alina averted her eyes from Jade, who was still in disbelief, as she answered falteringly, “...I just want the prize.”

“You want the prize?!”

Instantly, Jade's face stiffened, as if he had been hit by lightning. “You actually want that thing? You, the girl who told me the only thing she wants is to go home on time?!” Jade was dubious as he closely observed the statuette on the counter. “Huh...? What's so great about this weird figure...?! Is it how much it's worth? Its shape? The color...?!”

“Nwaaaaaaaagh!! Don't look too closely at iiiiiiit!!!” As Jade stared awkwardly at the prize that she had just glued back together, Alina reflexively punched him in the cheek.

“Gerf!”

“What's the problem?! I like stuff like that!” she said thoughtlessly, snapping at him.

Jade looked as though he'd received a shocking revelation. As in, *So she likes weird things like that, huh...* He balled his fists, his face twisting in frustration. “Ngh...! How could I have not realized that when I've been watching you all this time?! But I guess people aren't selling mystifyingly shaped statuettes every day, so it makes sense I wouldn't notice...”

Alina seemed to have created some of the misunderstanding about her tastes

and preferences, but regardless, her secret was safe for the time being.

Privately relieved that Jade was such an idiot, Alina let out a forced sigh. “If you haven’t gotten a frontline attacker, then it’s perfect for you guys if I join you, right?”

“Well, we really are grateful for that. But if you wanted the prize, then you should have told me earlier. I thought for sure that you had broken the prize on accident and were trying to win it in order to destroy the evidence or something.”

TWITCH.

Jade’s all too accurate hypothesis made Alina’s whole body jerk upward.

“Wh-whaaaat are you *talking* about? There’s no *way* it’d be something like *that!*” Her voice squeaking, and dripping cold sweat, Alina forced up the corners of her lips in a smile.

“...Hmm? And oh yeah, there’s something with the neck of this prize, too...”

“Jade.”

As Jade was about to arrive at the truth that he must not know, Alina gently took his hand.



Instantly, the *crrk crrk crrk* sound of creaking bones rang out.

“Ow ow ow ow ow ow!” Jade shrieked. While getting teary-eyed from the pain, he turned to see Alina’s smile, as kind and peaceful as that of a holy mother.

“Hey, you came to help me with overtime again today, right? Let’s get started? Okay? ...Okay????”

“...”

Jade was hit by a dreadful aura emanating from behind that smile. He had no choice but to rub his stinging hand as it swelled up and reply, “O-okay...”

8

And so things happened, and they worked late into the night doing overtime.

From beside her, Jade suddenly murmured, "...Alina."

"...What...?" She lifted her head, and her eyes met with Jade's; he looked concerned, for some reason.

"Why don't we take a break?"

"A break...?" Alina repeated vaguely, looking up at the wall clock. It was already past midnight, and it was true that Alina's concentration was close to its limits. But if they wasted time on a break, they would never be able to go home.

"...If we take a break now, we'll never finish...and I'm still fine."

"Uh, but right here," Jade said, holding out a form like he wanted to say something. It was one of the documents Alina had processed. Jade was checking her work to make sure there weren't any errors.

"What...? Did I make a mistake?"

"You wrote 'I'm tired, everyone die' on it."

"..."

"..."

Taking it from him to check, she found that she had indeed written what was on her mind, in handwriting like a wiggling earthworm that was just barely identifiable as letters.

"Let's take a break, Alina."

"Phew...I can't believe I did that... Guess I have to, then..." she muttered as she stood up, her eyes empty of light and energy. Then she tottered off to the changing room, saying, "I'm going to get some air."

It had been getting chilly at night lately, so Alina figured she would put on a

coat before going out. She opened the door of her locker with a *clack*, and with her brain still on pause, she put on her coat, changed her shoes, and put on her mask.

Oh? Alina's hands stopped. The friend to overtimers—potions that she kept in her locker—was already running low.

"Jade...I'm going to buy some potions while I'm at it..." She called out to Jade, then left Iffole Counter, heading to the general store where she bought her usual potions. The place stayed open surprisingly late.

This general store, which mainly sold consumable items for adventurers, was a standard shop for adventurers to stop by before they went to dungeons. They would replenish everything they needed, like potions and rations, then head off to their destination.

As usual, light was seeping from the general store's windows. Wallet in one hand, Alina stepped in to the general store as though she were sucked into it...

...without realizing the grave mistake she'd just made.

Since her brain had stopped functioning from exhaustion, the outfit she had changed into...was, in fact, her full Executioner's costume.

9

Late at night, the bells on the entrance jangled, and the shopkeeper of the general store lifted his head from the newspaper.

“Welcome! Today only, we’re open until morning for the Great Plains Quest. If you’re going to Altano, we have everything you need here—”

He’d been repeating this greeting a lot lately.

But when he saw who exactly was visiting so late at night, he trailed off halfway through his spiel.

Under the heavy shadow of exhaustion appeared a customer who seemed totally devoid of vitality, their face obscured and their presence ghostlike. They had on a hood that completely hid their face and a cloak that the shopkeeper had seen before.

“The Ex-Ex-Ex...?!”

The Executioner, the man often talked about in the newspaper, had wandered into his shop.

Kicking his chair with a *clunk*, the shopkeeper stood up with wide eyes, babbling inarticulately. He was so shocked that he pointed at the customer with a trembling finger, but the Executioner didn’t even bother lifting his head.

The Executioner looked completely different from the heroic figure that the shopkeeper had heard stories about.

When the Executioner featured in the paper, he’d been wielding a majestic, giant silver war hammer over his shoulder. When he stood before a massive stone golem or a labyrinth as if none could stand against him, it was an awe-inspiring sight indeed.

But that person was nowhere to be found—the Executioner looked incredibly exhausted, and his feet were unsteady. He didn’t appear to have been weakened by a major wound; if anything, he seemed like a stray cat who’d

gotten caught in the rain. Like an adventurer who was tired from daily work and despairing about the future.

“Hey...hey...just what the heck happened to you?!” The shopkeeper, who had a reputation for being kind and understanding, grew concerned about the exhausted man’s health. “Did you get chased around by a strong monster? It couldn’t have been in the Great Altano Plains like everyone’s talking about now —”

“Potions,” the Executioner muttered quietly, cutting off the shopkeeper.

“Huh?” the shopkeeper replied blankly as the Executioner held out money with a practiced gesture. It was the exact sum that the shopkeeper charged for a box of potions.

“Potions, please.”

“Potions?!”

“A box worth.”

“A box worth?!”

The Executioner wants a box of potions?!

Blanching, the shopkeeper stiffened.

These days, potions were not very important items to adventurers, and they wouldn’t walk around with large volumes of them. That was because they had healers. There was a limit to the number of potions that could be carried. It used to be that healing alone was insufficient, so adventurers would pack potions into big backpacks and such, but those days were long gone.

A box of potions, in this day and age... There were just two types of people that this shopkeeper knew who would buy them like this.

That was people who weren’t adventurers at all, who would believe the myths that they made you more alert and would stock up on them, and the other was—

When going into an annihilation battle...!!

An annihilation battle. That was an act of suicide: hunting every single

monster in a dungeon.

Of course, the only way to clear all the monsters from a dungeon was to take the time to defeat all the floor bosses and wait for the monsters to leave. Charging into a dungeon on spirit alone and routing all the monsters in a short period of time was a completely impossible feat.

But there were some types out there who couldn't stand to wait for the monsters to leave of their own accord once the boss was gone.

Typically, those kinds of adventurers had lost someone dear to them in a monster attack. And so, possessed by their hatred, they would try to take revenge, even at the cost of their lives.

The shopkeeper had seen a few adventurers like that. Those people never seemed terribly depressed. You'd catch them looking down a lot, and then one day, they would suddenly get a sunny look on their faces. They would laugh and say something like, *I'm thinking I'll try another dungeon*, then buy up so many potions that it was strange.

And then they would never come back.

".....!!!!"

The shopkeeper clenched the potion he was about to pack into a box. Ah yes, he knew. The people eager to start an annihilation battle didn't really want to purge monsters.

They wanted to die.

They'd grown tired of the pain of living and were searching for a place to expire.

Could it be that the Executioner is looking to go out in an annihilation battle...?!

A hopeless frustration welled in the shopkeeper's chest.

But he sounds so young...! Are you really planning on throwing away your life for nothing...?! It's just getting started...!

The shopkeeper tensed his shaking hands and turned to the Executioner. He had to stop him. When a promising young person was about to head off to their

death, an adult had to prevent that from happening.

Swearing on his soul as a businessman, the shopkeeper put on the bravest smile he could. “H-hey, son... What’re you gonna use those potions for...? You don’t need that many, right? How about three?”

“Three isn’t enough. I need these to battle through the long night.”

So he was planning on doing an annihilation battle after all...!!

The shopkeeper was certain. His hunch was right. The Executioner always soloed the bosses of dungeons where progress had stalled because he was chasing his lost comrades...

Is he so powerful that he’s unable to die? Oh, God! What a cruel fate!

On closer inspection, the Executioner’s small frame stood out even more. He had to be about half the height of the large adventurers the shopkeeper saw. With that androgynous voice of his, he seemed just like a boy whose voice had yet to break.

“Son!” Without thinking, the shopkeeper grabbed the Executioner by his slim shoulders. “I understand your pain. But doing all that won’t make anyone happy!”

“...? Uh, I’m going to drink all of this myself.”

“Yourself?!!!!!!!!!!”

Ahhh. Ahhh...!

The shopkeeper prayed to God. And then he was ashamed of himself.

Going alone, no matter what. How disrespectful of him to besmirch the Executioner’s determination with his paltry sympathy.

The shopkeeper had met many adventurers. Many had come, and some had never returned. But to think of them as pitiful, to dismiss them with such thoughtless emotion, was rude to each and every one who had fallen.

If I don’t encourage these guys, will I be able to sell my potions with pride from now on?! No!!

“I understand your determination...! Take ’em, son...! Ngh...sob...”

“Huh...? Why are you crying...?”

Heedless of how weirded out the Executioner was, the shopkeeper slammed down the wooden box packed with potions, his shoulders trembling. *Pathetic, for a grown man. My tears won't stop...*

“Huh? There's three extra...?”

“That's a bonus. Take it.”

The shopkeeper turned away from the Executioner, then gave him a big thumbs-up over his shoulder. “I won't laugh or pity the way you live... Give 'em hell and go out like ya mean it...!”

“...Uh-huh...”

The bells on the door clanged, and the Executioner left.

Once again alone in the store, the shopkeeper fell to his knees. “Executioner...! I won't forget you...!”

The shopkeeper wiped his tears with his arm and then began to write large letters on a big wooden board he used to advertise his wares.

10

“Oh well, I’m glad nothing happened.”

The following evening at the offices of Iffole Counter. As Alina stared at the newspaper and froze, Jade smiled wryly.

Alina stared at the spread in confusion. There was a big photo of a certain general store, which wasn’t a problem in itself. But the words on the sign outside the shop? Now THAT was an issue.

Written out in large letters was the phrase: *The shop where the Executioner buys his potions!!*

According to the eyewitnesses interviewed in the article, the Executioner had been wandering the streets like a zombie in the dead of night, even coming up to a stray cat and telling it he was lonely.

Iffole had been in an uproar since the first thing that morning, when the newspaper had been delivered. Once they read the article, the adventurers started racing around town in a panic, searching for the Executioner.

Each and every one of them wanted to get the Executioner to join their party in the fighting tournament.

And it was all because Alina had been so exhausted from overtime that she changed into her Executioner outfit by mistake and went off to buy some potions.

“I...I don’t...remember...,” Alina muttered in a daze. Frankly, she had been so exhausted last night that she couldn’t remember a thing.

“...Hold up, Alina. Are you telling me you leave your Executioner outfit in the changing room at work...?” The look in Jade’s eyes seemed to say, *That’s far too careless.*

Alina averted her gaze. “Th-that’s just how it is! It’s just more convenient that way. Besides, thanks to this uproar, my reception window has been empty

today, so I plowed through my office work. Things might actually work out, in the end.”

“...W-well, then doesn’t that mean you can take the day off tomorrow? The office is closed, right?”

“There’s no way I can...” Alina’s shoulders immediately drooped. Iffole Counter was closed tomorrow, and everyone there had the day off, Alina included—at least that’s how it was supposed to be. Of course she couldn’t take time off, with all the things on her plate, so she was planning to work all day tomorrow as well.

“...O-oh... Well... Give it your all, I guess...”

“But it’s fine... Coming to work on your day off is heaven...” Alina forced the corners of her lips upward and forced out a hopeful remark. “Since the window is closed... I won’t have to deal with stupid adventurers who don’t listen, I won’t have to worry about the boss or seniors watching, and I can take it slow and focus on my own work for the whole day. Sounds heavenly...right?”

As she was saying that, Alina realized just how outrageous she was being. “Waaaaaaagh! Did I just say that work on a day off is heaven?!”

“Huh? Y-yeah, pretty clearly...”

Jade was confused to hear Alina suddenly shriek, but he nodded.

Seeing that, Alina held her head in her hands. “If I start saying ‘It’s great getting work done after hours and on weekends,’ then I’m finished, finished! ... Those are late-stage symptoms! Proof that work has become a higher priority to me than my peace and quiet...! Are you okay with that, Alina Clover? No, no, of course you aren’t! Open your eyes! How could you be grateful to have your evenings and weekends ruined?!”

“...”

As Alina clutched her head in her hands and shrieked, Jade rubbed salt in the wound with an even more cruel remark. “...Alina, I can’t help you tomorrow.”

“Huh?!!!!!”

Time stopped.

For a few seconds, Alina wore an expression of despair, like that of an abandoned kitten, unable to so much as twitch. But she immediately snapped out of it and gave an exaggerated shrug of her shoulders. “A-ahhhhhh, I see. Well, it’s fine. I’m not so cruel that I would tell you to help me the whole day on a holiday, am I? I’m not thinking that at all, right? I’m...totally...fine on my own...”

Though Alina was trying to put up a bold front, there was no energy in her voice, and she was turning into sand, starting at the head.



Seeing Alina on the verge of fading away, Jade hastily clarified his last statement. “But I’m only busy during the afternoon. I should be able to swing by at night, like usual.”

“So you’re coming at night!” Alina’s face brightened.

Of course, Jade had no obligation to help Alina with her overtime, and it benefited him not at all, and Alina wasn’t so mean that she would consider something as arrogant as to work him to the bone the whole day not only for her daily overtime, but also on days off.

She wasn’t that mean, but a tiny part of her did think that if she could use his office abilities for a full day, she could make a lot of progress. Just a bit... Well, quite a lot.

“Of course, I would be up to help the entire day if I wasn’t busy... But something came up all of a sudden.” Jade seemed genuinely regretful, his face twisting up as he clenched his teeth, balled fists trembling as he exposed the frustration in his heart. “Being alone together with you for a full day in a quiet, closed office is basically like being on a study date...! To think I would be letting this chance go... Damn work... How dare you come between a man and his romantic pursuits...!”

“Huh, so you do actually do things for your job...?”

“Who do you think I am, Alina...?”

“Some dude who spends all day stalking me.”

“...”

Jade seemed to want to say something, but Alina ignored him and got to work.

11

Lightly popping out of the crystal gate, Jade alighted on a land of soft grasses.

It was fields of green and the bright blue sky as far as the eye could see. He saw mountains in the distance. An old road cut through the grasslands, and the occasional boulder rose up from the ground. Unobstructed scenery, the sort that cleared the heart, spread before him.

“The Great Altano Plains sure are big.”

“It’s such a pretty sight!”

Lowe and Lululee, who had also come out here through the crystal gate, casually commented on the location. Adventurers wouldn’t normally have much to do with this place—even caravans took their time moving along the old road here. But now there were plenty of them here, Jade’s party included.

Of course, Silver Sword had not come here for fun and games. This was work.

“Is this quest really worth us coming out here?” Lowe muttered as though it didn’t quite make sense as they went down the old road. “The boss is only going to be on the level of a B-rank dungeon, at most. It doesn’t have to be us out here.”

“If we were just defeating monsters, then sure,” said Jade. “Our job is to find out what’s making them come here.”

Two weeks ago, the Adventurers Guild had issued a strange quest: *Defeat the monsters on the Great Altano Plains.*

Monsters, which were supposed to appear only in dungeons, had appeared on the Great Altano Plains, which were not a dungeon. The condition for completing that quest was to defeat the monsters that had popped up on the plains.

The monsters weren’t very dangerous, but no one knew why they had started showing up here. Since there was nothing else to do until the fighting

tournament, many adventurers had taken on the quest of defeating monsters on the Great Altano Plains.

Jade looked around the calm vista. Even after coming all the way out here, he still couldn't get a whiff of ether or anything. "Normally, monsters won't go near places that don't have ether, to say nothing of a boss-class monster that can win the territorial dispute for a dungeon here, even if it's just B-class. It's strange. I guess the guild didn't pay too much attention to it at first and wrote it off as an abnormality, but the monsters just keep coming... Anyway, this quest will be good practice for the tournament, so I'm sure the adventurers are glad to have it, though."

"Doesn't this mean it's the same as the Forest of Eternity?" Lululee tilted her head. "That wasn't a dungeon, either, but a monster still showed up there."

"I considered that, but it's not the same as what's going on here."

Normally, ether was emitted from dungeons, which were constructions made by the ancients.

The exception was the C-class dungeon known as the Forest of Eternity. The Forest of Eternity was, as the name suggested, a forest rather than a man-made structure. Despite that, it emitted a slight amount of ether, attracting weak monsters. But it turned out that the source of this ether leakage was a hidden dungeon in the forest.

"There's not a hint of any ether around here. There's nothing that would make monsters come close..."

"Hmmm..." Lululee furrowed her brow as she crossed her arms.

"Anyway, the quest we've been given this time is the defeat of the monsters on the plains and to identify what's drawing them here... Though that's easier said than done; searching these massive plains seems like a huge undertaking..." Jade came right to a stop.

"What's up, leader?" asked Lowe.

"...A scream."

Lululee's and Lowe's faces tensed. They knew Jade's eyes and ears were

superhumanly sensitive, even when he didn't have his skill up.

"There's a party fighting somewhere...this way."

No sooner had Jade said that than he was running off toward the source of the scream.

12

“...What...?!”

By the time Jade rushed over, a battle had already broken out.

A group of adventurers were being surrounded by black shadows.

The monsters had red eyes and were covered in jet-black fur. Their four legs ended in double claws for ripping prey to death, and large fangs and a long tongue protruded from their mouths. It was a pack of blackwolves.

“S-save us!” cried one of the adventurers, who’d noticed Silver Sword. The monsters had surrounded the party, preventing them from escaping.

A number of the adventurers had already fallen. The healer was helping them, but seeing as the treatment wasn’t getting them back to full shape, it seemed their wounds were severe.

“That’s a real big pack,” Lowe muttered.

Blackwolves weren’t a significant threat on their own, but in a pack, they were bound to kill even a first-class adventurer. When encountered in a dungeon, they had to be dealt with before they called for help, but it was too late for that.

Jade swiftly got a handle on the situation, drew his blade, and raised his greatshield. “Lowe, can you do it? We’re going to lump them up.”

“I’m good. Leave it to me.”

As soon as he’d heard Lowe’s response, Jade thrust his sword into the ground and cast his illusion spell. “Hastor!”

Magic light at maximum power emitted from the tip of his sword, enveloping the swarming blackwolves. This was the Hastor spell for tanks that manipulated a target’s senses to draw their aggro. Each and every blackwolf, without exception, turned their red eyes toward Jade.

“You’re taking all that aggro?!”

The tanks of the other party weren’t glad that Jade’s move had saved them—in fact, they went pale and cried out, “You’re attracting aggro from too wide a range! You’ve gathered too many, Jade Scrade!”

They were right to point that out.

Drawing a monster’s aggro via magic wasn’t all that difficult. That was precisely why tanks had to pay attention to Hastor’s range of activation—to not take too much aggro from the monsters.

Once their attention was captured, the monsters would charge at the tank all at once. So if a party’s attackers weren’t able to deal with the monsters, or if there were too many monsters for the tank to withstand, then using Hastor was nothing more than suicide.

“Even for Silver Sword, this is too reckless—”

Lowe’s chant cut off the pallid adventurer’s voice.

“Sphera!”

The concentrated ball of black magic fire zoomed over the heads of the blackwolves. Of course, the attack was not nearly enough to burn this pack to a crisp. But—

“Skill Activate: *Sigurth Ashinu!*”

Lowe activated his Sigurth skill on the Sphera that Lowe had thrown. The moment the red skill light hit the small ball of flame, it spread into an incredible sight.

The single orb of flame multiplied into more Spheras while maintaining the same speed. Eventually, what had been a little ball of flame swelled into a huge conflagration, becoming a pillar of flame that shot up to the heavens.

“What...is this...?!”

In the swirl of hot wind, the adventurers cried out in tandem—this massive phenomenon was clearly beyond what could be manifested with magic.

The pillar of flame made of overlapping Spheras swallowed the pack of

blackwolves in the blink of an eye. The dazzling light and heat burned the monsters, preventing them from escaping.

“The pack is being swallowed up... Wait, h-hey!”

One of the adventurers who had been staring at the pillar of fire gradually grew panicked.

Even after swallowing up the pack of blackwolves, the pillar of flame showed no sign of calming, continuing to expand. The adventurers hastily retreated.

“It’s still getting bigger?! Are you trying to burn us up, too?!”

“I know, okay...?!” Lowe’s expression grew severe, and he clenched his rod tight and swung it. The flame pillar surged and blazed even higher, as if resisting Lowe’s attempt to calm it. The flames burned the blackwolves to ashes, and then burned even those, scorching the earth. When at last there were no more monsters, the pillar of fire vanished.

“Wh-what a skill...!”

“It’s like a stampede of horses came through here,” the tank from earlier muttered, while looking at the blackened earth. He was no longer on his feet, staring at Lowe like he couldn’t believe it.

“Lowe, are you all right?” asked Jade.

“Yeah. Man, *Sigurth Ashinu*’s always a wild one.”

Lowe’s *Sigurth* skill, *Sigurth Ashinu*, was a skill that duplicated certain phenomenon a thousand, if not ten thousand, times over.

It was ineffective on objects and other skills, but it was highly compatible with spells that artificially induced natural phenomena. Being endlessly amplified, the magic would balloon in firepower and swallow all enemies in an instant.

But on the other hand, once a skill had started to reduplicate, it was a struggle for even the caster to restrain it.

“If we could use your skill in a dungeon, too, I’d have no complaints,” Jade muttered earnestly.

Lowe shifted his eyes. “...Strong skills always have limitations. I held it back

quite a bit even today, y’know?”

Since *Sigurth Ashinu* was extremely difficult to control, it would affect your allies in a cramped dungeon setting. Because of that, Silver Sword limited it to outdoor use only.

“Well, leave any big cleanups out in open spaces to me. I’ll do the hard work this time.” Wiping the sweat dripping off his chin, Lowe took a breath.

Jade checked to see if there were any enemies left, then asked Lululee to heal the wounded.

“But anyway, a pack of that size—where did it come from? There aren’t any big dungeons nearby...” As Jade was saying that, something sparkled in the corner of his eye, and he trailed off.

“What’s up, leader?”

“Something’s there.”

The earth was nothing but sand and rock, so anything that reflected the light of the sun couldn’t be natural. Jade started searching the area, and eventually, behind a great boulder that had to be twice his height, he found a crystal.

“This is—”

It was a hexagonal prism crystal that sparkled green. It was like a palm-sized version of a crystal gate.

“Is that a crystal?”

“A crystal, out here?”

Lululee and Lowe tilted their heads, and right as they did, the crystal emitted a bit of light, accompanied by a low humming sound.

“!”

Jade immediately got in front of the other two and raised his greatshield. Before his eyes, the strange crystal emitted light, along with a single shadow.

It was the black four-legged beast they had just seen—a blackwolf.

“A blackwolf?!”

The monster rattled them only for a moment. Jade immediately drew the sword from his hip and drew the blackwolf's aggro.

"Glassis!" Lowe fired off his ice spell at the same time, getting ahead of Jade to freeze the blackwolf in ice. There was no need to use his skill if he just had one to deal with, but the problem was that crystal.

"Is the crystal the source of the monsters?!" Jade cried.

"Leader, can I break it?!"

For an instant, Jade hesitated to answer. If they left it be, the next monster would appear from the crystal. But as far as he knew, no one had ever observed monsters emerging from a crystal before. If they wanted to actually figure out why monsters were generating here, then they ought to bring the crystal back without breaking it.

Do we seal it with an ice spell...? No, there's no guarantee we can do that.

They didn't know what this crystal really was, after all. Bringing something like that into the town or to guild headquarters would be too dangerous, and this section of the plains was too far from a crystal gate to bring a guild researcher to.

The green crystal hummed again, and the moment it started emitting light, Jade made the call. "Let's break it here."

The instant Lowe got permission, he waved his rod at the crystal. "Glassis!"

Chunks of ice flew at the green crystal, covering it. Eventually, the large hunk of ice creaked, shattering along with the crystal.

"...No monsters." Jade made sure that there weren't any monsters around, then returned his shield to his back. Picking up the scattered shards of the green crystal, he furrowed his brow.

"The way the monsters were appearing just now..."

"We've seen it somewhere before... Wait, I feel like we see it a lot, on a daily basis." That must have been bothering Lowe, too, as he had a perplexed look on his face.

"Something we see on a daily basis?" Lululee tilted her head.

Jade answered, "It's the same way things appear when using a crystal gate."

With a gasp, Lululee made the connection, her eyes widening "Y-you're right..."

The hexagonal green crystals were installed in major towns and buildings. They were created in imitation of the ancients' relic technology, and when used with a crystal gate, they allowed you to warp anywhere in an instant. Gates were very important to adventurers, of course, since they were always going back and forth between dungeons and towns, but these days, regular people increasingly used gates as a form of transportation.

The slight vibrating noise that made the air hum, and that flash of light—those same things happened when people used a crystal gate to teleport.

"But the crystal gates that the guild made aren't supposed to teleport monsters..."

Naturally, they had considered the possibility that monsters might accidentally wander into a crystal gate that had been placed near a dungeon and get teleported to a settled area. To prevent this, the guild adopted a system of screening subjects for teleportation via license cards.

There were no restrictions on crystal gates that connected towns, but the crystal gates that went to dungeons had been built to prevent anyone without a license from using them. That was how the guild guaranteed the safety of crystal gates.

"If this thing is a crystal gate, then it's one I've never seen before. It's different from the ones in the underground prison, too..." said Lowe.

"...Whatever the case, now we know the source of the abnormal monster appearances on the plains." Though things still weren't quite adding up, Jade scooped up a number of crystal fragments. "Let's leave the rest to the guild researchers. I bet Shelley would leap on this."

"For sure. Though I just know she's gonna get pissed that we broke it."

While listening to Lowe's grumbling, the party turned back along the old road.

13

“Agh, I’m tired!”

Alina flopped over face down on her desk.

The refreshing morning sun was streaming into the offices of Iffole Counter. Alina could hear the bustle of the city outside, but here in Iffole Counter, it was quiet.

Of course it was. The office was closed today, so none of the other receptionists had come to work.

“It hasn’t even been an hour since I started...”

After looking at the clock with an expression of despair, Alina turned her gaze to her mountain of documents.

“There’s so many...”

Lined up around Alina’s desk were wooden boxes of documents labeled either PROCESSED, CHECKED, or UNCHECKED. She stared at the imposing boxes for a while, then gave her cheeks a smack.

“But this is the final push, so I just have to do it. Okay then, Jade, you go from that mountain of papers—,” Alina said, turning to the desk beside her where Jade always sat and trailing off when she noticed no one was there.

“Oh yeah, he isn’t coming in today.”

She remembered that he said he’d gotten an emergency job. Tiring, even by her own standards. Alina gave a little sigh, then silently went to work again.

The next moment, however, she immediately set her feather pen back down. She just couldn’t quite concentrate today. Maybe it was because there was nobody there with her. No, it was weird for Jade to be sitting at the desk beside her in the first place. He wasn’t a receptionist, and he wasn’t an office worker at all. He was an adventurer.

“...”

For a while, Alina listened to the faint sound of activity coming from outside. The whole office was quiet and still, the kind of silence that felt nostalgic to her.

“Now that I think about it, it’s been a long time since I last did overtime alone. Though I guess this is technically ‘weekend work,’ not overtime...,” Alina muttered.

She’d come to take it for granted that Jade would help her with her overtime, so she hadn’t felt like this in a long time. But for some reason, despite how she used to think of being alone as refreshing—

“O-of course I’m feeling a little sad; I’m down a fighter today!” Forcing these words from her mouth, she faced the documents.

14

By the time Jade returned to the guild headquarters, the sky was already red.

He handed the fragments of the green crystal to the researchers. Now there was just one more thing to do before he could go help Alina. He quickly headed over to the guildmaster's office and knocked lightly at the door. The moment he stepped inside—

A sharp voice flew at him.

"I'm against it!"

The voice was refined and feminine but clearly angry. As Jade startled and froze in place, his eyes fell on a rare sight.

The large volume of documents was piled up on the office desk. There was Glen, who seemed to be battling with them, and then the woman who was hounding him, leaning over the desk—his private secretary, Fili.

The yell had come from Fili, Glen's personal guard. She was always cool and composed and kept her feelings close to her chest. Jade had never seen her like this.

As Jade blinked with surprise, Fili noticed his presence and strode right up to him, fury in her eyes. "You tell him, too, Jade. This unreasonable, stubborn old fart!"

"Old what?! What's wrong, Fili, is this really you...?"

"Ahhh, Jade, sorry for dragging you into this."

Glen, guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild, seemed utterly exhausted, smiling wryly as he scratched his head.

He had tanned skin and deep, dignified wrinkles, and a physique on par with that of any young adventurer. One month ago, right after the incident beneath the guild headquarters, he had seemed terribly haggard in his recovery bed, but now he seemed back to his old self.

Save for the fact that he was missing an arm.

That was because in the aforementioned incident, he had used a god core to turn himself into a dark god. To remove the god core embedded in his body, he had parted with his left arm.

“The truth is, I was unreasonable with the healers and got them to discharge me from the treatment center right away. Fili has been like this ever since.”

“Then does that mean you’re not entirely recovered...?!” asked Jade.

“You push yourself a lot, too, Jade,” Glen shot back.

“Please don’t compare yourself to someone so much younger than you,” Fili scolded. “How many years apart do you think you are?”

“...” The all too harsh remark struck Glen silent for a moment. It must have hit close to home, but he covered this by clearing his throat, glancing at Fili to check her mood. “...Well, Fili, I understand how you feel, but I’ve already made up my mind. Even if you call me a stubborn old fart, I’m going.”

“That kind of thinking is exactly what makes you a stubborn old fart. You’re already one limb short to begin with—in your position, it’s ridiculous to head out alone to a place we know is dangerous...! I won’t allow it!”

“Wait, wait, what actually happened? What do you mean, someplace dangerous?” From how angry Fili was, it must be no trivial matter. Jade had only come here to report on their survey of the Great Altano Plains, but now he was having to play mediator.

“...Ahhh, well, about that...” Glen hemmed and hawed, like he was reluctant to explain. But after looking back and forth between the entirely furious Fili and the confused Jade, Glen massaged the spot between his eyes and gave in. “... Yeah, I have been meaning to tell you, Jade. Let me start from the beginning.”

Glen leaned way back in his chair, let out a long sigh, and began. “I got the healers to let me out early so I could do some research on hidden quests. Something’s been bugging me about them, you see.”

“...So that’s what has you worked up.”

Hidden quests. The term referred to mythical quests that were the subjects of

adventurers' urban legends. They weren't supposed to really exist.

But it turned out that the stories were true. Unlike normal quests, hidden quests were detailed in gold engravings that could be found on certain objects. Accepting them would reveal a hitherto undiscovered dungeon.

It sounded just like a treasure hunt, but the reality couldn't be further from that. Slumbering inside hidden dungeons were cruel dark gods who would instantly slay anyone who entered unaware—that was how dangerous these quests were.

"How could something still be 'bugging you' after all this time? You've researched hidden quests extensively for fifteen years, haven't you?"

Ever since Glen was appointed to guildmaster fifteen years ago, he had been secretly investigating hidden quests in search of dark gods. When Jade tilted his head, wondering if there was even anything more to know about them, Glen gave him a little nod.

"That's right. For fifteen years, I used every means at my disposal to conduct extensive research on hidden quests. And that's exactly why something feels off to me... It's only been a few months since the discovery of the White Tower, but in that span of time, *a suspiciously large amount of hidden quests have been found.*"

Jade gasped and widened his eyes.

"...Now that you mention it, that makes sense..."

The first hidden dungeon, the White Tower, had appeared when Alina had destroyed a relic that a monster had happened to swallow. The second, the Forest of Eternity, had been found and brought to them by the Information Brokers Guild. A few months back, no one had found mention of hidden quests in any records, so they were considered nothing more than simple rumors, but now the guild was practically swimming in them.

"This is against the rules...but I bought some intel from the Information Brokers Guild regarding their acquiring of the hidden quest to unlock the Forest of Eternity. Apparently, a book containing the hidden quest for it just showed up at guild headquarters one day."

“...So someone left the hidden quest there...?”

“It’s strange. Whoever it was didn’t *sell* the book to the Information Brokers Guild—it was as if they were telling them to *come find the hidden quest*... But that’s where the trail runs cold. The Information Brokers Guild also looked into the person who left the hidden quest, but they said they couldn’t find anything on them.

“I see...” Jade folded his arms and furrowed his brow. “So then why is Fili so angry?”

“...The truth is, I do have a hunch as to who this person could be.”

“Who?”

Glen fell silent for a while, as if hesitating to speak, but eventually, he slowly parted his lips. “The fourth Sage.”

“The Sage? Of the Four Saints...?”

Once, when the continent of Helcacia had been a dangerous place overflowing with monsters, there were four adventurers who dared venture into this hostile land.

They defeated the monsters, creating an opportunity for people to settle there. Eventually, they brought together the adventurers who had poured into Helcacia and had created the basis for what would become the Adventurers Guild. The descendants of these four adventurers became known as the Four Saints.

Those with the blood of the Four Saints were seen as holy, and though they weren’t directly involved in administering Helcacia, they safeguarded its history as rulers. However, the fourth generation of saints had a problem.

A decade ago, one of the Four Saints, the Sage, suddenly vanished.

“The Sage disappeared right after I was appointed as the guildmaster and started searching for hidden quests. That was right as I was thinking of looking into the Four Saints. It’s always bothered me that he disappeared right at that moment.”

“...Could it be that the Sage knew something about hidden quests...?”

“It’s possible. The Sage was a wise man. I could imagine that he picked up on what I was doing and forestalled me by disappearing.” Glen took a breath, then quietly continued. “That’s why I’ve decided to go look for the vanished Sage. He’s also the one who compiled *Libri*, the book that details the history of this continent. He might know about dark gods, too.”

“But the searches for the Sage have turned up short, even with the full effort of the Adventurers Guild behind them. How do you plan on finding someone who might not even be alive...?”

“I’m relying on the Dark Guild’s information network.”

“The Dark Guild?!” Jade’s eyes widened at the words that left Glen’s mouth, and he was struck speechless for a while. At the same time, now he understood what Glen was trying to do and why Fili was so openly angry with him.

“It couldn’t be... Do you intend to go to the Dark Guild headquarters?”

“I do.”

Jade heard Fili sigh. There was not even the slightest hesitation in Glen’s eyes, and this unnerved Jade, too. “It’s too dangerous. At the very least, they’re not an organization that the guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild should be negotiating with directly...!”

The Dark Guild—it was an ancient guild, with just as long a history as that of the Adventurers Guild.

It was the most powerful force in the underworld, and it would take on all sorts of requests of ill repute—intelligence gathering, slave trafficking, kidnapping, anything that could be bought and paid for, regardless of legality.

The Dark Guild was composed of mages who admired magic and had a distaste for skills, an unusual stance on the Helcacia continent, where skills were thought to rank the highest. The mages who had been left behind by the Age of Skill Supremacy had devised their own unique powers, secretly constructing a force in the shadow of society—the Dark Guild.

“I hear that the knowledge and information in the Dark Guild’s possession encompasses depths that even the Information Brokers Guild can’t reach—things that they can acquire precisely because they live in the underworld.

They're the only ones we can turn to."

"Maybe that's true, but still..."

There was a major problem with Glen's proposal: The Dark Guild held a sincere antipathy—a hatred, even—for the Adventurers Guild, which held skills in high regard.

The Adventurers Guild tacitly permitted the Dark Guild to exist, as a necessary evil. No—they had been forced to do so. The Dark Guild's inferiority complex about skills had given rise to unique spells, their "forbidden techniques," which were said to rival even Sigurth skills now. Since the Dark Guild had expanded its influence using that power, it would be difficult to eliminate.

And that wasn't even getting into the fact that Glen was now missing an arm, and so could no longer wield his superheavy two-handed greatsword like he had back in his prime. Just what would become of him if he waltzed into the Dark Guild?

"That's why I'm against this." Fili, who had been listening patiently, furrowed her brows severely. "Even the past guildmasters avoided direct involvement with the Dark Guild. At the very least, you should contact them through a messenger or a letter."

"No. The guildmaster going in person will be quite the statement. If I hesitate in the face of danger, we won't get anywhere."

"But—!"

"Fili." Glen cut Fili off, looked her right in the eye, and said, "Li'l miss and Silver Sword have been fighting with dark gods despite knowing the risks—no, I made them fight. Let me do this, at least."

"..." Faced with the firm determination of Glen's gaze, Fili dropped what she was about to say. After a moment of silence, she sighed in resignation, pushing up her glasses as she presented one condition. "...Understood. However, you will let me accompany you to the Dark Guild."

"No, I can't—!" Glen panicked.

"What's that?" Fili's silver-rimmed glasses instantly flashed, a cold brutality

emanating from the eyes behind them. “Without your arm and your ability to wield a greatsword, you’re just an old man with some muscle. Wouldn’t you say it’s too late to make a fuss about not having a guard? But if that’s how you want to be, then from now on, your meals will only consist of the green beans you hate so much, and with my authority as your private secretary, I’ll put together a nightmare schedule with a total break time of five minutes per day—do you have any complaints?”

“...” After Fili rattled that off in one breath, Glen’s mouth hung open, like that of a fish. “.....S-sorry...I’d love to have you come along as my guard,” he said. Was Jade seeing things, or had Glen gotten smaller?

After processing that Fili was capable of silencing the guildmaster, once revered as the strongest adventurer of all, with a frigid glare and a threat of green beans, Jade muttered earnestly, “You’re scary when you really get angry, Fili...”

“Did you say something, Jade?”

“Nothing.”

With a sigh of disappointment, Glen turned to face Jade once more.

“...Well, that’s how it is. I’ll be away from Iffole for a while, since the Dark Guild headquarters is far away. I plan to come back for the day of the fighting tournament...but take care of Iffole until then.”

The day after Alina finished her hellish weekend work.

Time was a cruel thing. No matter if she worked from sunup to sundown when the office was closed, no matter if she cried and threw a tantrum, as if to say, *No, no, I haven't rested today, don't end, weekend*, the weekdays would always cruelly arrive. Wondering how the world could be so outrageous, Alina glared at her pocket watch.

The second needle moved along with a *tick, tick*. The offices of Iffole Counter were enveloped in an odd silence.

Opening hours were just about to end, and there were no customers in the building. But the senior receptionists who were always holed up in the office, working on their individual tasks or getting ready to go, were all standing at their posts at their counters, holding their breath as they watched Alina.

Because today was the final day for applications for the fighting tournament.

The deadline for applications was when business hours ended at Iffole Counter. Alina had anticipated that some fool would rush in at the last minute to apply and was waiting expectantly.

Just fifteen seconds until business hours were over.

After checking, Alina looked up from her pocket watch. She let out a slow breath and then focused all her nerves on the open front entrance.

The street outside was a jumble of townspeople starting to head home and adventurers who were just heading off to dungeons. But she couldn't sense anyone about to rush into Iffole Counter. Indeed, these past few days, hardly anyone had come to apply. Unusually, it was fair to say that most people seeking to participate had finished applying.

And then, the moment the second hand reached the peak of the clock—

The town bell rang out with a low *bong* at five in the evening. Business hours

were over.

Instantly, Alina's eyes flashed, and like a commander directing battle, she pointed to the front entrance of Iffole Counter.

"The time has come! Go, Laila!"

"Right!"

Laila, who had been lying in wait, instantly leaped out from her own counter, staying low as she rushed over to the door as quick as she could. With a *gachak gachak gachak!* She locked the double locks in a practiced motion, turning around lightly like she was dancing to announce with a broad smile, "Business hours are over!"

Alina tossed away the pocket watch she'd been holding and threw both hands into the air as she cried to the heavens, "Tournament applications are oveeeeeeeeer!!!"

As she howled in victory, unstinting applause flew at her from all around.

"Congratulations, Alina!"

"You worked so hard!"

"Thanks for all your work, Alina. Want a snack?"

"Great work, Alina."

Even the counter chief came out from his office and thanked her.

"Thank you very much, everyone, Counter Chief...!" Accepting their thanks, Alina quietly wiped away a tear. "All that's left is to foist—rather, submit all the application documents to the guild headquarters, along with the tally results, tomorrow, and then my work on tournament duty will be just about done...!"

She would have some light reception work left for the day of the tournament, but it was insignificant compared to the exhausting task of gathering the applications. It was an easy job. That was to say, her work at the special window for the fighting tournament, aka window of death, was just about done...!

I...I managed to finish this job alive...

So filled with emotion that she was getting choked up, Alina resolved that she

would definitely leave on time that day, indulge in cake to her heart's content as a reward, and get lots of sleep.

16

Silver Sword convened at the otherwise empty training grounds at guild headquarters, a wide-open space made like an arena.

“The fighting tournament is coming up soon,” said Jade. “We took care of the quest at the Great Plains, so now we have a while to focus on practicing to win the fighting tournament.”

There with him was Lululee Ashford, their healer, and their rear attacker, Lowe Losblender.

Lululee tilted her head in confusion upon hearing Jade’s plan. “But what are we going to do for practice? We don’t have our frontline attacker, Alina.”

“Could we be practicing composite skills?” Lowe asked.

Jade nodded. “To be honest, what we should be prioritizing right now is preparing ourselves for more battles with dark gods.”

“So that was what this was about? Well, we can already activate your and my composite skills perfectly. Which means...”

“Ugh. I still can’t even activate one at all,” said Lowe.

“If we can combine our skills with Lowe’s, we should be able to make a pretty powerful composite skill,” said Jade. “We might be able to control it better indoors, which could give us an edge against the dark gods... Could you work with me until we can activate it?”

Lowe’s skill, *Sigurth Ashinu*, boasted a high firepower and was said to be second to none among Sigurth skills. Jade figured that if they could make it into a composite skill, it would be a reliable weapon against the dark gods. Plus, by using Jade’s skill as an intermediary, they might be able to rein in *Sigurth Ashinu*’s tendency to go out of control and expand until it was satisfied. Just finding out how to use it in cramped dungeon spaces would be useful.

“I know, okay?” Though Lowe grumbled, the corners of his lips curled up, as if

he were somehow enjoying himself. “I’ll play with you as much as you want today.”

17

“Gah!”

An incredible bursting sound rang out, and Lowe was blasted away by the shock.

“Ngh!”

Jade leaned way back but managed to stay on his feet, staggering. Meanwhile, Lowe was rolled along the floor of the training grounds. The dark red lights instantly melted away, and the skill that Jade had been maintaining with all his energy vanished.

Lowe got scraped all over as he rolled across the ground, but before he could groan in pain, he let out a wail of frustration. “Agh, I can’t do it at all!”

Their attempts to combine Lowe’s skill, *Sigurth Ashinu*, with Jade’s skill hadn’t succeeded in the slightest. That was because Lowe couldn’t control his skill.

Sigurth Ashinu was wild and uncontrollable by nature; once activated, it would completely ignore the will of the caster and keep reproducing endlessly until its target was destroyed. If he could control it, they wouldn’t have limited him to using it outdoors to begin with.

“Agh, I’m beat...” Whining, Lowe tried to stand up. But he was hit by instant vertigo, and he stuck out his hands to catch himself.

“You’ve overused your skill. Let’s stop here for today,” Jade said, but he still seemed to have some strength left, enough that he could stand on his feet with his hands on his hips.

“...” Lowe, on the other hand, was completely sapped of strength and couldn’t even stay upright on his own. He did feel somewhat frustrated by this difference, but at the same time, Lowe also knew that Jade had been pushing his body for quite a while now in an attempt to improve his skill endurance.

Jade had been working hard. He would endure backbreaking training during

the day, and then, astoundingly, would help Alina with overtime at night.

This endurance monster...

Once again impressed by Jade's superhuman endurance, Lowe sprawled out on the ground, spreading his limbs out wide. "It's no use. I'm really exhausted..." The harsh sunlight poured down on his heated body. He lay on the hard earth and let the strength leave his body; it was comfortable, kind of like he was floating.

"Why am I the only one who can't use a composite skill?" Lowe griped. "You had no problem working with Lululee, right? This is bringing up some complicated feelings."

"Maybe we're just compatible. I guess it's since your skill is too powerful..." Jade tried to figure out what was wrong as he sat next to Lowe. The two of them gazed out at the huge training grounds together for a while.

"Want to try restricting the range a bit? I could control it a little. Just a little."

"Yeah..." Jade muttered, tilting his head curiously. "I feel like something is off, unlike the time with Lululee... Lowe, *Sigurth Ashinu* is a Sigurth skill, right?" Jade asked nonchalantly.

For a moment, Lowe was struck speechless. But it really was just an instant, just the slightest moment that a normal person wouldn't really be bothered by. "Of course. If that's not a Sigurth skill, then what is it, right?"

"Yeah, of course." Jade fell into thought.

Privately, a touch of guilt crossed Lowe's heart. Noting that Jade really did have good intuition, Lowe smoothly changed the subject. "Once we can use a composite skill, just having you alone might be enough."

"Maybe for normal battles, but not against dark gods."

"Well, yeah."

Even if he and Lowe did manage to create a composite skill, they couldn't necessarily beat a dark god with it—in fact, it was pretty unlikely at this point. Jade understood that plenty, but he had been pursuing composite skills anyway.

It was impressive that he could work so hard for something they didn't even

know would be useful.

Lowe didn't like wasting his efforts when results weren't guaranteed, but he kind of liked how Jade could be that way. Besides, Jade did get frustrated sometimes, too.

That was why Lowe would stick with this endurance monster until he was satisfied.

"Lowe, you're actually kind of enjoying yourself, aren't you?"

"Ah, you noticed?" Lowe grinned openly, and Jade responded with a knowing smile.

"I've never practiced with someone like this," Lowe found himself saying. "I've always practiced magic and my skill on my own."

"You're self-taught? Why...?"

"I wonder."

He didn't even have to think about it—there was one very good reason why. Back then, he couldn't have let anyone—not his enemies and not even his friends—see his abilities. Not that he'd had any friends.

"I think it's because I was embarrassed to have other people watch," Lowe lied, smoothing things over with a smile.

"It's unusual for you to talk about yourself, Lowe."

"Huh, do I seem closed off?"

"Yeah. It's like you draw a line for important things."

Jade really *did* know Lowe. *It goes to show why he's been the leader of Silver Sword all this time.*

Just then, Lululee's anxious voice flew at them, along with a *patter patter* of hurried footsteps. "Ah! Lowe! Are you all right?!"

Oh yeah, she went off somewhere earlier..., Lowe thought. Then an intense smell hit his nose, and he forgot his exhaustion and leaped to his feet. "That reeks!"

"Don't say that!" The source of the stink was a cylindrical bottle that Lululee

was carrying.

“L-Lululee... What is that...?!” Jade, whose eyes and nose were sharper than the others’, must have been hit harder by the intense smell. Despite how he had been totally fine with overusing his skills, he was now crawling on the ground, trembling all over.

“I made a special recovery medicine that will work—maybe—on skill exhaustion!” Lululee announced. “Since heal spells don’t heal skill exhaustion...I tried mixing a bunch of things through trial and error to see if I could come up with an effective medicine. And since we’re close to guild headquarters, I got help from the researchers as well.”

“Huh...? Y-you can drink that...?”

Inside the transparent bottle Lululee carried was a black-green fluid that was thick, like mud. Occasionally, it gurgled and spat out an ominous bubble, and it was not colored like something that should be put in the human body.

But Lululee smiled at Lowe like an angel as she clutched the suspicious drug. “Of course! I tried combining every single medicinal herb that seemed like it would be effective.”

“A-ah, I think I’m feeling a little better. Yeah, I think I can stand. I’ll be able to get up in five seconds, so can you take that suspicious concoction and go far away—?”

“No need to hold back! Come on, come on!”

Lululee took advantage of Lowe’s inability to move and grabbed him by the head, pressing the bottle to his mouth.

“Mmmmmmmmggh!”

A few seconds later, Lowe’s shriek rang throughout the training grounds.

18

“Agh, I thought I was gonna die.”

After training for composite skills with Jade, Lowe played it safe and went to the healing room in guild headquarters to rest.

While lying in bed, he recalled the taste of the “special medicine” that Lululee had made him drink and scowled. It had tasted exactly how it looked. The liquid went way beyond the allowable range of medicinal nastiness, and it was no exaggeration to say Lowe had just about died from drinking it.



“You recovered from skill exhaustion so severe, you were prepared for death...so the medicine worked, after all!” Lululee, sitting beside the bed, flashed a smile.

“I just about died from that medicine.”

“I wrote down the recipe, so it’ll be possible to mass-produce. You can relax and devote yourself to skill practice.”

“...”

She wasn’t listening to him at all. Lululee seemed really happy for some reason, her cheeks flushed, just like a child who had been praised for their cooking for the first time. *Well, I guess I’ll let her do what she wants,* Lowe thought, upon seeing her expression, and he prepared himself for what was to come, in many senses of the word.

“Oh yes.” Looking satisfied, Lululee stuck up a finger like she’d just remembered something. “When I was making my special medicine, I heard a little something from the researchers... Apparently, the crystal gate that we found during the Great Plains Quest wasn’t made by the guild after all.

Leaning against the wall, Jade was the first to react to this information. He must have been concerned about it, too. “That crystal gate for teleporting monsters?”

“The researchers were all baffled. They said they’d never seen a crystal gate like this...”

Lowe furrowed his brow at Lululee’s report. “So then there’s someone else aside from the Adventurers Guild that can analyze relics and make crystal gates?”

“And they’re misusing them to teleport monsters...,” said Jade.

They could only catch a slight glimpse of the ancients’ technology through analyzing relics. The Adventurers Guild currently controlled the study of relics and was putting it to good use. This was to prevent the technology from being abused, just like it had been in the Great Altano Plains.

For that reason, the guild bought relics at a high price that adventurers found

and hired excellent researchers like Shelley under good conditions. There were currently no other large organizations that had the kind of people with expertise and funds in order to make crystal gates on their own.

“This time, the gate showed up in the middle of the Great Altano Plains, so there wasn’t a lot of damage, but if you were to bring that into town...,” said Jade.

“I’m told that we don’t need to worry too much about that yet,” said Lululee.

“Did the researchers say that?”

“That’s right. Apparently, you have to place the gates that use those crystals an appropriate distance apart, so they don’t interfere with each other. The big town crystal gates have a very wide interference range, so if you put any other gates inside the city, they would break.”

“I see, an interference range... So that’s why the gate using that green crystal wasn’t near town, but in the center of the Great Altano Plains?”

“So then the problem is who made the crystal gate, huh?” Lowe said.

“I can’t imagine it...,” said Jade. “Even the Adventurers Guild took many years to develop the crystal gates, and they invested in a whole bunch of researchers...”

“You can’t think of anything, Lowe?” asked Lululee.

“Me? Hmm.” Though Lowe made a pondering gesture, he already had one idea. He knew of one organization with technology that rivaled that of the Adventurers Guild. It wouldn’t have been strange for them to have developed crystal gate technology in secret.

Guess I’ll look into it...

Despite thinking one thing, he said the opposite aloud. “Not really. The higher-ups at the guild would know way more,” he lied without so much as a blink, shrugging calmly. He kind of hated himself for being so used to doing this sort of thing. Of course, he also had the skill to keep those feelings off his face.

“Well, there’s no immediate danger, so I guess it’s best to leave it to the guild.” Jade folded his arms and gave a little nod. “I’ve told Glen. The guild

should look into it.”

“That reminds me, is Glen all right? He’s gone to the Dark Guild headquarters, hasn’t he?” Lululee’s expression grew concerned, as if she’d just remembered. They had heard from Jade that Glen was heading to the Dark Guild headquarters to get some information on hidden quests.

Even if it was for hidden quests, Jade seemed to have doubts about this, a serious look on his face as he groaned and scratched his temple. “I tried to stop Glen...but it was no use... He’s just as stubborn as Alina...”

“Agh, this is the problem with people who have too much initiative,” said Lowe.

“H-he’s not going to start a fight, so I’m sure he’ll be fine!” Lululee added.

Lowe wasn’t so sure about that.

So long as their territory was respected, the Dark Guild wouldn’t do anything. But they would never forgive people who tried to waltz in on their turf or people who tried to run away with their treasures—their knowledge. If the worst happened, Glen might really not come back.

Of course, Lowe would never dare to say such things to his nervous companions.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Glen isn’t an idiot.”

With another lie, Lowe put on a smile.

19

Nighttime. Lowe was sitting in a noisy corner of a tavern.

Lowe's mild skill exhaustion had healed, though whether this was thanks to the "special medicine" Lululee had forced on him, he couldn't tell. But that awful taste of that mysterious fluid was stuck on his tongue, so he was drinking some strong alcohol to wash it down.

Gazing absentmindedly at the drunken adventurers causing a ruckus, he waited patiently for the person he was to meet up with.

"Hey! You're looking dour!" came a cheery voice, accompanied by a smack on the back.

Lowe violently spat out the drink he was about to swallow. "*Koff!* Goddamn... It's bad for my heart when you show up like that, Gald. Cut it out."

"It's your fault for letting your guard down." A young man came over to him with a cheerful laugh. His irises were noticeably small, his skin was pale, and his hair was brown. He was dressed in light equipment, with a knife at his waist—a typical adventurer getup. Gald ordered some ale from the server and sat across from Lowe.

"So? It's been a long time since I last heard from you, so what's made you reach out so suddenly? Oh, if it's about a girl, I'll stick with ya till morning!" Gald was grinning, and he looked like he was in a great mood. "Man, how long has it been since I last chatted with you over drinks? Do you have off work tomorrow? Let's chat till morning. I have no plans tomorrow!"

While sighing at Gald's relentless cheer, Lowe got straight to the point. "Hey, I know this is a weird question, but you don't know anything about a crystal gate made by someone other than the Adventurers Guild, do you?"

"Whoa, brutal. Talking about work?!" Gald pursed his lips with a *tsk*. When the server brought him his drink, he tossed it back sulkily and sighed with sincere disappointment.

“I figured you would know,” said Lowe.

“Ah, so you’re counting on me?” Gald’s bad mood vanished in the blink of an eye, his eyes instantly shining as he flashed a toothy grin. “A crystal gate made by someone other than the guild—do you mean that thing on the plains?”

“You know?” Lowe was a little taken aback to hear Gald bring the plains up, unprompted.

“*We’re* tentatively looking into that incident, too. Just between you and me. I’ll say it because it’s you, but...” Gald lowered his voice slightly, and with a completely different air from before, he whispered, “Lately, things have been a little unstable at the Dark Guild.”

The Dark Guild. Gald calmly saying that name did not surprise Lowe.

That was because Lowe knew that Gald, a man dressed like any other adventurer, who seemed incredibly ordinary aside from his annoying peppiness, was in fact a mage member of the Dark Guild—an assassin. Of course he wore adventurer equipment to mingle among ordinary people.

“Unstable?”

“Yeah. Just before monsters started to appear on the plains, a whole bunch of the younger members all left the Dark Guild...and since they didn’t take the appropriate steps, they became pact-breakers.”

“...”

The appropriate steps. That meant having their memories removed.

The Dark Guild possessed powerful spells that they had cultivated on their own, along with technology derived from knowledge that was kept from the public, referred to as a whole as “forbidden techniques.” They didn’t want those techniques to leave their ranks. For that reason, anyone who wanted to cut ties with the Dark Guild had to have their memories of the forbidden techniques erased. Those who left the Dark Guild without adhering to these terms were called pact-breakers, and the guild would protect their forbidden techniques by marking these people as targets for assassination.

“I’ve been in the Dark Guild for a long time, but it’s not like I know all their

forbidden techniques. If, among their techniques, there was a way of creating a crystal gate...”

“You mean there’s a good chance that a pact-breaker brought it to the outside?” Lowe asked.

“Yep. That’s why I’m keeping my eye on the Altano incident, too. If you find out anything, let me know!” Gald smiled brightly, then knocked back his drink.

Lowe sighed. “A whole bunch of pact-breakers, huh...? I gotcha. No wonder I’ve had a lot of ‘work’ lately. So that’s what’s been going on.”

“I’m actually surprised you didn’t know.”

“I don’t wanna get too involved with the Dark Guild. It’s best not to pry too deeply.”

When Lowe put the money for the booze on the table and got up, Gald instantly pouted in protest. “Huh? You’re going already? We’re not gonna talk about your love life?”

“Like hell I would.”

Leaving behind Gald as he gave a bored *tsk*, Lowe walked out of the tavern.

20

Even after Lowe left, Gald continued drinking alone. *Just gets what he wants and then skedaddles—I see Lowe is as cold as ever*, he grumbled in his head, despite thinking the opposite.

Lowe was cautious around Gald. And his discretion was justified. He really had a good intuition.

When Gald gave a hollow smile, a loud voice flew at him abruptly.

“Hey, buddy. Got a Sigurth skill?” A burly, drunk adventurer holding a tankard of booze cheerily approached Gald.

Gald made it seem like he was startled to have been spoken to suddenly, but privately, he wasn’t particularly shocked. From the corner of his eye, he had seen the drunk adventurer notice him and come striding over.

“We’re in need of a ranged attacker—you wanna join the tournament together?”

“A Sigurth skill? Ahhh, I don’t have one,” Gald answered with a flippant smile.

Instantly, the drunk got a haughty attitude and clicked his tongue. “Oh, so you’re a small-timer?”

Gald’s eyebrow twitched upward. “Isn’t that being a little harsh? I may not have a skill, but I’m plenty strong. Since I’m a mage.”

“A mage?” Instantly, the man burst into peals of laughter. “A mage without a skill is strong? C’mon, c’mon, just what year do you think this is? These days, an adventurer is useless without a skill.”

“That’s not true. If you master magic, you can beat someone with a skill, too...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. Unlucky bastards who weren’t blessed with skills can’t get through life unless they deny reality like that!”

“...”

“These days, magic is something for street performances. There’s no point in having a mage with no Sigurth skill in a party—”

“Flama,” Gald muttered, cutting off the man’s nonsense. The instant he invoked the spell, there came a short sizzling sound of something burning.

Gald’s right arm, wreathed in a mysterious blue flame, had pierced the man’s abdomen.

“...Ah...”

Not even permitted to scream, the man died on the spot.

Quiet at last, the man toppled over. The tankard slipped from his now-limp hands. Gald smoothly took the tankard, while with his free hand, he pushed the man by the shoulder, causing him to slump in his chair like a puppet. If he returned the half-empty tankard to its spot in front of the adventurer, the man would look as if he had drunk too much and fallen asleep.

Nobody would notice the hole in his stomach, with his abdomen hidden by the table—since the wound had been cauterized by high-temperature blue flame and there was no bleeding.

The noise and chatter continued in the tavern as usual. Nobody would imagine that an assassination had been carried out in the blink of an eye, one that you wouldn’t notice unless you looked closely.

“Have a nice rest there until someone notices, you piece of trash,” Gald whispered with a smile. He left enough money for the “passed-out drunk” old man, as if nothing had happened, and left the tavern.

“...Magic is strong. But nobody gets it,” Gald muttered into the cold darkness of the night after leaving the tavern.

Well, of course they wouldn’t understand. That was because the really strong mages were all with the secretive Dark Guild. While the Dark Guild had long since developed magic that surpassed skills, they made every effort to hide their existence.

“That’s why no matter how much time passes, these skill-brained idiots get so

full of themselves...!” he spat bitterly, and then he recalled a sickening memory of not so long ago.

“Exposing forbidden techniques to the world is not allowed,” the guildmaster of the Dark Guild had stated bluntly.

Without any consideration, he rejected Gald’s suggestion that the Dark Guild officially reveal their magic techniques and knowledge to increase the esteem of mages.

“I can’t accept that,” Gald had replied. *“If we don’t do that, then those skill-brained idiots will laugh at us forever, saying that magic is lesser than skills...!”*

“Let them talk. The people you describe as ‘skill-brained idiots’ wouldn’t understand our findings even if we explained them.”

“But...”

“Continuing to protect the secrets of forbidden techniques is a part of protecting the mages who are members of the Dark Guild. One day, you, too, will come to understand this.”

Protecting mages?

The guildmaster’s weak claims made Gald want to puke. They couldn’t protect anything. The history of magic, which had been used way longer than skills, and the pride of mages who used that magic were being disrespected by skills.

“I’ve got to make them understand—those idiots—that magic is stronger than skills,” he muttered darkly, and then he heard a scream in the distance. It was from that tavern. They must have finally found the body.

Ahhh, they really are nothing but idiots— With a little smile, Gald vanished into the darkness of night.

21

The next day, Alina headed to guild headquarters with a large volume of forms to submit.

As soon as she arrived with her box full of documents in tow, the staff leaped up from their seats.

“Hey! The stack from Iffole Counter is here!”

Instantly, shriek-like cries flew back and forth in the room.

“Iffole Counter?!”

“It’s too early! The stacks from the other counter offices haven’t been put together yet...!”

“Please tell me it’s a lie!”

Some of them were even holding their heads in their hands and collapsing while screaming and crying. Their frightened eyes were on Alina—no, on the mountain of wooden boxes waiting behind her.

Yes, working at counter windows during the fighting tournament was exhausting work, but the offices at the guild headquarters, which ran the tournament, had an even more tiring workload. Their tasks in preparation for the tournament were wide-ranging: going back and forth between related parties, sending notifications to all counter offices, putting together the schedule for the day of the tournament, securing management staff, and everything from a strict check of participants’ qualifications to producing the contest table.

So it wasn’t hard to imagine what would happen when a large volume of application forms came in from Iffole Counter, the biggest reception counter in the city, right when the workers at guild headquarters were buried under tons of work. It was just what they were most afraid of.

“Here are the applications we’ve received at Iffole Counter. Please take care

of them.” Ignoring everyone else’s agitation, Alina gave a bright and sunny smile. Perhaps this was the dawn of a new hell for them, but she had already escaped hers. She was done. She didn’t care about how the people at guild headquarters would suffer.

“Ahhh...an unmanageable amount, as usual...!”

The staff, with deep circles under their eyes, looked at the pile of wooden boxes, and their pallid faces got even paler.

“But Iffole Counter is amazing, too, for handling this much so well every time. Nice work. Wanna go get some drinks?”

“No, but I appreciate the offer. I’ll be going, then—” Alina pleasantly refused with a business smile. Just as she was about to turn around, some adventurers passed right in front of her nose. She heard their frantic voices, along with the pattering of their feet.

“Hey! They’re saying Jade Scrade is at the training grounds right now!”

“Let’s go. We’re gonna miss it!”

She just about bumped into them. As she watched the adventurers in exasperation, the men at the office chuckled with embarrassment.

“Master Jade has been practicing in the training grounds every day lately. Since he’s one of the candidates to win, the adventurers joining the fighting tournament come by to study him.”

“Ah...is that what that was about?”

“And they’re kicking up even more of a fuss this year, too. Apparently, Master Jade has devised some incredible technique called...what was it again...a composite skill? I don’t really know much about that combat stuff, but from how panicked the adventurers are, it must be a pretty big deal.”

Saying farewell to the shrugging employee, Alina left the office. As she headed for where the carriage was parked, she found herself getting worried about something else.

That takes care of my office work. Now I just need to do something about the tournament prize...!

Frankly speaking, this part was more important.

The worst possible outcome kept playing out in her mind: someone aside from her winning and taking the prize. She pictured them gazing emotively at the prize, only to notice the crack at the neck... Growing suspicious, they would give it a poke, and the head would roll right off—

Alina shivered violently, going completely pale. The search for the culprit would start immediately. If it got out that Alina was responsible, the fact she'd been strong enough to destroy a pure relic would also get exposed...!

“My...my peaceful lllllllllife—!!!”

She had intended this scream to be internal, but before she knew it, the words were flying right out of her mouth.

The next thing she knew, the people around her were looking at her in surprise, and as soon as their eyes met hers, they hastily looked away and strode off, as if they'd seen something awkward. She could hear whispers from those watching at a distance.

“There's a weird receptionist over there...”

“Aw nooo, she's still so young... I wonder if she's struggling with work...”

“.....!!”

The looks of curiosity and pity assailed her one after the other, and she instantly went red to her ears.

“Ah...! Today's just another uneventful day in my life! Ah-ha-ha...!” she quickly yelled out to cover for herself, making things even worse. Then she fled the scene like she'd lost a battle.

A-anyway! I have to win, no matter what—no matter what...!

Alina clenched her hands into fists, steeling her resolve once again.

On the day of the fighting tournament, she would be handling reception work at the venue, but if things worked out according to what she'd been told, then her duties would end before the match itself, and she would be free. If that was the case, then she just had to show up for the match with Silver Sword disguised as the Executioner and snatch the prize.

Whatever it takes...!

Eyes blazing bright, Alina headed for where the carriage was parked. On the way there, she happened to stop by the training grounds.

There, just as the male employee had said, was a crowd of adventurers. They had come to observe their opponent and see what his composite skill was all about.

But as she observed the rough adventurers from behind, Alina noticed they were not railing on about how they would expose their rival's weaknesses—they weren't so much as twitching. Instead, they were completely quiet.

"...?"

Even Alina stopped in her tracks at the abnormal silence. Then she cut through the wall of people, meaning to look just for a moment. And when the training grounds finally came into view—

"!"

Alina widened her eyes at what she saw.

Jade was standing alone in the huge training grounds. Red lights flickered around him, and similar red lights studded the ground in several places.

Standing surrounded by the light, Jade was so focused that he didn't even see the audience that had gathered.

The adventurers—no, even Alina—all stopped breathing when they saw Jade.

His whole body was covered in so many wounds that "skill training" was an inadequate description of what he was going through. He must have wound up on the ground at many points, as his armor was dirty, and signs of bleeding from severe skill exhaustion could be seen here and there. He also looked anemic, his face pallid, and it was all he could do to just stay on his feet. But his dark gray eyes were blazing with indomitable flames.

This didn't look anything like practice. Jade was pushing himself so severely that it wouldn't come as a surprise if he claimed to have been fighting a boss.

"—Converge... Deploy...!" Blood flowed from his lips as they moved, but even then, Jade did not rest.

“Composite Skill Activate: *Millia*!”

The red points around Jade converged into a red glow on his red shield.

When he caught those dazzling lights, he rocked back slightly. But he did not fall to his knees, his feet never leaving the ground.

Jade’s composite skill, *Millia*, used *Sigurth Blood* to force *Sigurth Wall* to reduplicate many times over. When he’d used *Millia* during his fight with the twin dark gods, she could have sworn that he had said that four or five reduplications was his limit.

Those red lights... How many are there...?

Alina widened her eyes at the number of lights she saw. There were easily more than four or five, and each had to be sustaining the effects of *Sigurth Wall*.

“Ngh...!”

She heard a sickening spraying sound.

Blood spurted out from Jade’s braced legs and his shield arm. Alina had seen this before—it was the consequence of extreme skill exhaustion. But even as he bled from almost his entire body, Jade continued to endure.

Alina was not the only one left speechless at the sight. Jade’s hellish “practice” had also struck the crowd of adventurers speechless.

“*Koff...!*” Finally, Jade released the skill and fell to his knees. By that time, a pool of blood had formed around him.

“...Maybe I’ll back out of the tournament,” someone muttered amid the silence—it was an adventurer standing beside her.

“Huh? Weren’t you happy that we could finally get class four and were able to qualify to compete?”

“I was just going to enter for the experience. I applied without much thought, thinking that it would be good training if I could fight some strong adventurers and that maybe I would win by some fluke... How embarrassing. I was treating it like a game. I’m not qualified to stand up on the same stage as a guy who practices like this every day,” the adventurer said and left.

“ ... ”

After glancing at the adventurer as he walked off, Alina lowered her eyes.

Was Jade practicing like this every day? And then coming in like nothing had happened, to help her with overtime?

...What an idiot...

Her heart palpitated painfully.

22

The Dark Guild was a long way away from Iffole.

Of course, being such a secretive organization, the Dark Guild did not have a crystal gate at its headquarters, and it was not a place that anyone could simply walk into. It took a few days to get there by carriage, and when Glen finally arrived, the Dark Guild did more or less let him in.

Shown into a large reception room with a small old man sitting opposite him at the table, Glen found himself unable to hide the tension he was feeling.

He was sitting across from the guildmaster of the Dark Guild, Zepha Langres.

The man's age was unknown, and he had been the guildmaster of the Dark Guild for over forty years. He didn't look much different from an old man you might see anywhere, but his presence alone inspired an indescribable tension within you.

Zepha slowly opened his mouth. "...So then what business does that Adventurers Guild have with us today?" His cold voice was sharp, as if to imply that while he had let Glen in, he would not welcome him with open arms.

"I would like to access information that only your people have," Glen said briefly, keeping himself from being swallowed by the man's intimidating presence.

"...Information, you say?"

"It's about the whereabouts of the Sage, who disappeared thirteen years ago."

Zepha fell silent. After a long silence, an exasperated sigh slipped from his lips. "You don't understand anything. You should be aware that the Dark Guild does not think well of your Adventurers Guild."

"..."

"You people of the Adventurers Guild wouldn't understand—not when you

live in the pretty public world, showered with admiration. You have no idea how we've suffered, pushed into the filthy underworld, forced to get our hands dirty to survive as social outcasts, treated as if we don't exist." The light in Zepha's eyes flashed slightly as he stared at Glen. "And I hate you in particular, Glen. You've had a ghostliness hiding deep in your eyes ever since your appointment. I can see flashes of deluded conviction behind your dubious smiles. And I don't like any of it... Give you information? Give *you* the treasure we spent years gathering? That's quite the brazen thing to suggest."

"..."

Sure enough, getting help from the Dark Guild was shaping up to be a challenge.

Glen grit his teeth a bit at Zepha's ice-cold words. It seemed like he had been left adrift. "...I do believe I understand your situation. But I came because sacrifices are necessary to solve this problem."

He couldn't give up so easily now.

Glen returned Zepha's look with indomitable conviction.

A smile crossed Zepha's face. "I see. So you're resolved for this. Very good, very good. Well, then."

A shiver raced down Glen's spine.

"—Can I take it that you came to die?"

With a start, Glen realized that he was surrounded by men pointing their blades at him.

"...!"

Behind him, he sensed Fili, holding her breath. They had to be the Dark Guild's forces. They had appeared soundlessly, wielding similar daggers. Those blades all, without exception, were wreathed in a mysterious blue flame.

Is that magic...? No, it's no ordinary magic.

Glen narrowed his eyes at the indescribable presence wafting from that blue flame.

“Glen Garia. Now that your fighting days are behind you, you’re insignificant, basically a baby. We can send your head flying before you even use your skill,” Zepha said dispassionately. “Thus far, the Adventurers Guild has avoided direct negotiations with us. While you would send sacrificial pawns, your leader has never come here in person. I acknowledge you for doing what your predecessors didn’t. I take it as proof of your respect—but it was too reckless.”

“Heh-heh-heh,” Zepha laughed, steepling his fingers together. “We will not give in to a mere skill. Just looking at you fools in the Adventurers Guild, submitting yourselves to skills, makes me want to vomit. I will have you carved up and made into food for the dogs.”

“...”

So he had failed. For a few seconds, Glen closed his eyes.

He hadn’t thought that the Dark Guild still resented the Adventurers Guild and skills this much. That sort of thinking was decades old. It appeared that so long as Zepha remained in charge, negotiations with the Dark Guild would keep breaking down.

“So be it,” Glen said, letting out a breath.

“...What?”

“I came here knowing full well I could lose my life. If needed, I will offer my life.”

“...” Zepha fell silent.

Glen returned his probing look with a direct glare. “But I still have something left to do. I can’t resign myself to death just yet. I have a proposal for you.”

Zepha’s eyes opened slightly for an instant, as if he were overwhelmed. Glen placed a black stone before him.

“...This is...?”

“You wanted to know about dark gods, didn’t you?”

Zepha’s breath caught.

“Of course, I didn’t come here saying that I want your information for free. In

exchange, I offer you the information the Adventurers Guild has on dark gods. Couldn't we somehow come to an agreement with this?" Glen proposed, refusing to give in to Zepha.

After a long silence, Zepha suddenly began trembling slightly. "...Heh...heh-heh...ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He finished with a loud "ha-ha-ha-ha!" Seeing Glen startle, Zepha slammed one foot down on the table and then jabbed his thumb up.

"Okay. Then we have an agreement."

"...Huh?"

Glen blinked at the abrupt change in the atmosphere. Zepha showed no concern at all for Glen's confusion, sitting back down in his chair and kicking his legs up on the table, whistling as he rocked back and forth.

"Oh, it's a huge help you came here. Ah, you all can back off now."

At the old man's signal, the assassins all bowed, looking somehow embarrassed as they disappeared. Glen watched, unable to say a word.

"Sorry for threatening you. I wanted to try playing a real Dark Guild boss, you know." Zepha shyly put a hand to his head with a sheepish chuckle and continued when Glen didn't respond. "I was going for a *showdown between guildmasters* sort of thing. I've been thinking up the right lines for decades now, polishing and polishing them... But the previous guildmasters were all so scared, none of them ever came. Ahhh, that was fun. Now if my time comes, I can just drop dead. Ka-ha-ha!"

"..."

"Come on, this old man just leaned hard into a self-deprecating joke. Not gonna laugh, sonny?" At this point, Zepha was less the guildmaster of the Dark Guild and more a pleasant old man.

Glen slumped when he saw Zepha's earlier tension and foreboding presence

vanish. “You don’t...resent the Adventurers Guild?”

“Resent you? Oh, about skills? I mean, the Adventurers Guild hasn’t done anything wrong. What would I resent them for? The world chose skills. We weren’t chosen. That’s all.

“Not many old folks back then could understand that,” Zepha grumbled carelessly. Suddenly, a smirk came to his face, and he pointed to Glen’s missing arm. “Hey, Glen. You’ve had a better look to you lately. Was that missing left arm of yours possessed by an evil spirit?”

Startling, Glen widened his eyes. Partly, he was surprised that the guildmaster of the Dark Guild had been observing him, but he was also surprised that Zepha was right about his arm. “...An evil spirit, huh...? Yeah, maybe that was what it was. It was a pretty rough exorcism.”

Zepha gave a big nod, as if he were satisfied by Glen’s answer. “Then good. We’d also like to know about the beings known as dark gods—” As he spoke, he suddenly cocked his head. “But how did you know that we want information on them?”

“That was a bluff,” Glen said nonchalantly. “I figured it wouldn’t be strange for the Dark Guild to have learned of their existence. But you did know, after all.”

“...” Zepha opened his eyes wide for a moment, and then he opened his toothless mouth and laughed aloud. “You’re really quite the character.”

23

“So then was it about the whereabouts of the Sage?” With a “hmm,” Zepha sank deeply into his chair. “First, Glen. Don’t be angry to hear this.”

“?”

“We of the Dark Guild played a role in the disappearance of the Sage.”

“What?!” Glen automatically smacked both hands on the table and leaned forward.

Zepha continued, ignoring his reaction. “Whoa there, don’t misunderstand. This was on his request.”

“A request...from the Sage?”

“To become someone completely different and run away—that was his request. We used our forbidden techniques to give him a completely different face and let him escape.”

“...”

Hearing this, Glen muttered with blank amazement. “...No wonder... No matter where we looked, we couldn’t find him...”

“We were also curious about why the Sage would suddenly request such a thing. So we followed him after his disappearance. But the last thing we got ahold of was a record from ten years ago.”

“What did it say?”

“...That the Sage is considered dead.”

Glen’s breath caught.

“Apparently, after his disappearance, the Sage pretended to be an adventurer and led a life of poverty. We never understood what his goal was, but it looks like he had been released from all his obligations and was enjoying his free life as an adventurer. But—in the end, he was attacked by a monster and died.

Good grief, what an uninteresting way to go out,” Zepha said dispassionately with a little sigh. “That’s all I know about the Sage. Please don’t let this leak to the Four Saints. I still want to play at being the guildmaster of the Dark Guild.”

“Of course. But...now I’m certain—the Sage vanished of his own volition.” Glen folded his hands on the desk and touched his forehead to them. “I prayed that he was alive...but I suppose that’s just how it is.”

Glen tucked the information that he had gained from Zepha away in a corner of his mind and reached out to the god core.

“I thank you, Guildmaster. Well then, I’ll hand over the information that I have—”

“Well then, see you again!”

Wearing a business smile, Alina watched the adventurer who’d just gone up to her reception desk leave. Behind him as he lumbered off slowly, huffing like he was getting himself pumped up, was not the entrance of Iffole Counter but the exit to the massive, roofed lane of an arcade.

This was the venue of the fighting tournament. Yes—the day of the tournament had finally arrived.

The counters were located at the side of the arcade, beneath an arched ceiling high enough to make you look up. The receptionists on tournament duty from each office in Iffole were receiving the participants. On top of that, weapon and armor shops, as well as repair shops, had also taken the opportunity to set up rows of stalls, with even souvenir shops selling to the audience members.

“...It’s time.”

Having finished checking her list, Alina briskly closed her counter and went inside.

The receptionists on tournament duty also had work on the day of the event. They were required to take the attendance of the participants whose applications they had received. Though this was really just the simple yet brutal task of marking everyone who didn’t make it to the reception desk on time as “disqualified by default.”

Since potential victory in the competition was hanging on this, the receptionists weren’t going to be nice like they were usually and accept an adventurer out of the kindness of their hearts past business hours. Any careless saps who didn’t go through reception the day of could bring their complaints straight to office headquarters, where the results of the match were managed.

In other words, now that reception was closed for the day, Alina’s work on

tournament duty was over.

“...All right...!”

But there was still something she had left to do.

It was a far more important job than her stupid tournament duty.

I'm gonna get that victory prize, no matter what...!

As Alina steeled herself, her gaze fell on the center of the circular lobby.

There sat a pedestal that held the victory prize, which was sealed off by Sigurth skill barriers. The large, completely unaltered pure relic, sale value notwithstanding, was filled with a quiet majesty, and the magic lights above it gave it even more of a sacred air.

Yes, that was the statuette whose head Alina had flicked off.

She had to get her hands on it somehow and destroy the evidence. After psyching herself up once more, Alina headed to headquarters to report the attendance results, her eyes blazing.

“Oh, there you are, Alina—!”

Just then, a familiar voice called to her from behind, and Alina jerked to a stop. When she turned around trepidatiously, she saw Laila, running up to her while waving.

“Geh, Laila...!”

“Why the *geh*? Come on!”

“O-oh, no reason!”

“You’re finally done with tournament duty, Alina! I got a seat for you!”

“I’m going home to sleep.”

“...”

When Laila looked at her like she wanted to say something, Alina sighed. “And actually, Laila... Listen, um... What’s with your outfit...?”

“Huh?”

Laila blinked her wide eyes, as if it were surprising that Alina should question

it.

First, she had a bizarre headband around her forehead with the words EXECUTIONER LIFE written on it. On her back was a cape with a giant heart mark on it, along with an illustration of the Executioner, and the bag hanging from her shoulder was packed to bursting with other visually noisy fan goods.



“What’s with my outfit...? Isn’t it obvious?!” Laila’s eyes sparkled as she clenched her fists. “I came out here today to cheer on my fave with all my heart!”

“...”

Well, Alina had anticipated this. But still, Laila’s getup was so overenthusiastic that people were quickening their pace around her to avoid making eye contact with her as much as they could.

Totally ignorant of this, Laila clasped her hands in front of her chest and squirmed around happily. “Did you know that I stopped breathing when they announced the competitors yesterday...?! I automatically took half the day off to make some emergency cheering merch!”

Every year, the matchups for the tournament were announced all at once, during the pre-event festival. Laila must have noticed that the Executioner’s registered adventurer name—Levolc Anila—was in Silver Sword’s party. Obviously, that was a fake name Alina had made in order to get an adventurer’s license, but the world already knew it as the Executioner’s name.

Naturally, the fact the Executioner was participating had instantly become the talk of the town. In fact, it was anticipated that this year’s fighting tournament would have nearly double the audience numbers and that participants would be withdrawing, and even though it was still early, the arcade was overflowing with people.

“W-well then, I still have to report to headquarters, so...have fun cheering,” Alina said insincerely as she quickly parted ways with Laila to head for headquarters.

“Go home and sleep...huh.”

Watching her senior receptionist depart as she briskly left, Laila giggled. Her eyes left Alina, going to the victory prize figure that was on display in the center of the lobby.

“You should have just said nothing and pretended you didn’t know about that

weird figure being broken. You take things so seriously, Alina.”

Even if Laila had tampered with the figure in order to lure Alina out to the fighting tournament...she still found it almost unbelievable that Alina had shown up in an attempt to hide the evidence, exactly according to plan. Though she expected this behavior of the bungling receptionist, Laila did feel a little bad about having done that to her. Still.

“...” Laila squeezed her right arm. The god core lurked beneath her clothes—sensing its presence, Laila bit her lip.

“I’ll be cheering you on with all my heart this time, too, Alina. So—”

I already made up my mind that I’d do anything to fulfill my goal. I’m not like how I was before, after all.

“—Please kill the dark gods, okay?”

25

The venue for the fighting tournament had been built on a vast wasteland far away from Iffole.

Of course, it would take weeks to get there if you were traveling by physical methods. Crystal gates were used for transportation, with many abundantly installed at the venue.

The fighting arena represented the peak of present-day technology and had been built with the goal of “making something close to the dungeons left by the ancients.” Appropriately, it was ridiculously large.

Once you passed through the large arcade, you would come out into a wide lobby, and when you crossed the great-roofed corridor that extended from there, you entered the venue where matches were held.

“Agh, in the end, I never did activate a composite skill with you, leader.”

Jade was by the side of the competitors’ entrance at the venue for matches, waiting for the starting bell. Next to him, Lowe sighed, grumbling as he sat there. Cheers could already be heard from outside, and they were just a step away from the fighting state.

Even after coming this far, in the end, he hadn’t managed to successfully pull off a composite skill with Lowe even once. But as was characteristic of Lowe, he didn’t seem terribly upset about it.

Jade gave him an easy smile anyway. “Well, there’s no helping that we couldn’t do it. That happens sometimes.”

“This is because you won’t drink my special medicine. It’s incredibly effective. Probably.” Lululee scolded him with her hands on her hips, her cheeks puffed in a pout.

“You mean that stuff that isn’t fit for human consumption?” Lowe shot back.

“How rude. Humans can drink that! Probably.”

Just then, Lululee looked furtively around the arena. “Anyway, when is Alina showing up? I thought for sure she would come with you, Jade... Our match is about to start.”

The plan this time was for the “Executioner,” aka Alina, to join their matches as Silver Sword’s frontline attacker.

Of course, the registered participants all had to be there for the start of the match, or they would be disqualified on the spot.

Seeing Lululee’s concern, Jade pointed to the stage and said, “Oh, if you’re worried about Alina, she’s already here. Look, over there.”

“Huh?”

The place where Jade was pointing—the stage where they would be fighting—was laid out in a circular shape. It was large enough to easily surpass the scale of the coliseum in town. Its sturdy walls and floor were made from relic shards melted together, and it was surrounded by spectator seats that resembled stairs. There was no ceiling, so the sun would shine down on it from first thing in the morning.

It was still early for the matches to start, and there was obviously nobody onstage—or at least there shouldn’t have been. There was, in fact, one person already there.

It was the Executioner, standing there silent and imposing, a mask on their face, a hood over their head, and a cloak covering their body.

“.....”

Lululee’s jaw dropped as she lay eyes on the figure, who was filled with quiet resolve.

“Alina...what are you doing...?”

“She said she’d get in trouble on the off chance she was disqualified for being late, so she’s been waiting there the whole time,” said Jade.

“...”

Everyone was already in a frenzy, knowing that the Executioner was going to show up for the fighting tournament, but seeing that rare individual arrive

earlier to the stage than anyone else, the audience couldn't hide their confusion.

“Hey, that's the Executioner, right...? He's been standing there for over half an hour since starting time...”

“I-it just feels like he's ready to kill...!”

“Nah, that's not it, he's just the type to be on time!”

Hearing the commotion from the audience, Lowe laughed, saying, “That's no surprise.”

And then Lululee caught sight of something odd in the stands. “J-Jade, what's that...?!”

A strange group filled a section of the stands that surrounded the whole stage.

Though most of the audience was in awe of the Executioner's quiet air of intimidation, the Executioner's aura seemed to bounce off that one section in particular, which was emanating a bizarre sort of enthusiasm. While the audience there was more or less taking care not to cause trouble to the other audience members, they were holding up various banners and flying a giant flag.

The hanging banners featured some passionate and superbly nostalgic cheer slogans, such as ENCHANT THEM! EXECUTIONER SPIRIT!; SPIRIT IN THE KILL!; ABSOLUTE VICTORY! UNDEFEATED LEGEND; and on the big flag fluttering in the wind, the word EXECUTIONER and a hammer symbol they'd come up with.

It was the Executioner fan group that had gathered from somewhere or other.

The group consisted mostly of young women, but their eyes emitted a sharp light. While it wasn't necessarily all of them, they did not have the cute air of young girls yelling out to competitors that they liked. They had the eyes of warriors waiting for battle, as though they were standing on the same stage as the Executioner.

“Whoa, man! The Executioner cheer squad is here. They're staying totally

quiet, though.” Lowe held his stomach and laughed.

Jade shrugged at him. “They said that they can’t be making a fuss when the Executioner is staying silent.”

The one to have said this was, of course, Laila.

“...But, Jade, why is Alina so into this...? This is different from how she is usually...,” Lululee asked Jade in a whisper, overwhelmed by Alina and the cheer squad’s bizarre aura.

“Apparently, Alina really wants the prize for this competition.”

“That weird figure...?!” Lululee furrowed her brow, unable to understand why.

Jade felt the same way, but it would be tactless to criticize someone else’s tastes. Lululee glanced over at Alina, standing there in silence, and gulped at Alina’s abnormally heightened focus.

“And she looked so motivated...! She must really want that weird figure—I mean, the tournament prize...”

With an “okay, then,” Lululee clenched her fists and seemed to calm herself. “Alina has always helped us out. So then this time, we’ll lead her to victory with the strength of Silver Sword!”

“Yeah, of course.” Jade nodded.

“...Well, she might not need our support, though,” Lowe muttered, and then the starting bell rang. As the audience cheered for the moment they’d been waiting for, Jade and company stepped out.

“We—we really have to face the goddamn Executioner...”

One of their opponents, who had also come up onstage at the same time as the bell, looked at the Executioner and gulped. “When I heard the rumors, I thought it was some kinda joke...”

“You could just surrender,” Lowe told him.

“Surrender? You gotta be joking.” The enemy ranged attacker laughed off Lowe’s remark with confidence. “If we can kick the Executioner’s ass here, then

we'll be famous! There's so many people watching that he'll have no excuse if he loses."

The tank curled his lips in a smirk. "Did you know? Some people have doubts about the guy they call the Executioner."

"...Doubts?"

"They say the Executioner is just a load of hot air and that his reputation comes from rumors sparking more rumors! It's a pretty common story for a guy you hear is strong to turn out to be not that big a deal when you actually fight him."

Well, that type of story often arose out of jealousy and envy. Sighing privately over this foolishness, Jade suddenly realized that they were only up against three people.

"Hey, you have no frontline attacker. I thought the match chart said you were a full party..."

Voices of dissatisfaction also started coming up from the audience, who had been holding their breath just moments ago.

"Hey, what are their competitors doing?" "I thought I'd get the chance to see the Executioner fighting, but a loss by default?" "Well, considering who they're up against, there's no helping that"—this kind of chatter grew louder, until finally, the time when the opposing team would be disqualified arrived. After examining the situation, the judge came onstage.

"For the first match, due to the absence of a competitor, Silver Sword is considered the winner by—"

Just as the judge was about to declare Silver Sword the winner, a lone figure finally appeared at the entrance gates.

"So it's finally my turn." Muttering that remark, a large-framed attacker in iron heavy armor slowly came up onstage, completely ignoring the urgency of the situation.

"—Ahhh, who could have guessed that fate had this in store?" the man said sonorously as he took step after firm step toward them. They couldn't see his

face, covered in armor as he was, but on his back was a black battle-ax that reflected the light of the sun.

“When I saw your strength once before, my spirit was broken. My confidence, my pride—everything was torn to shreds...”

With a start, Jade widened his eyes upon hearing that familiar voice. Lululee and Lowe were similarly taken aback. Only Alina was tilting her head in confusion. The enemy’s tank grinned as if he were satisfied by their reactions.

“Heh, you should be surprised, Silver Sword... I’ve lined up a very special party to crush you today.”

The judge decided that the match would commence and backed down from the stage. The armored man who had boldly arrived late, as if he were playing the leading role for the day, continued to speak.

“I resigned from the adventurer elite like I was running away. I thought I would lay down my weapon and retire from adventuring... But I did not give up!”

His words gradually grew heated, until finally he stood before them and yelled, “I went out to train! Hammered by rain and blasted by the wind—and then I recovered! So I could one day cross that great wall! I never thought the opportunity would visit me so soon!”

With a rattle, he released the clasps of his iron helmet and tossed it aside. The man had deep-set features and a heavy beard.

“Now is the time when I will tell you with pride! Yes! My name is Ganz the Raging Bla—!”

That instant, Alina summoned her silver war hammer and slammed it into the armored man’s face, which was wide open after he’d thrown away his helmet.

“Ahhh!”

The armored man let out a weak yelp as he flew in a perfect arc in the sky, after which he slammed into the ground far, far away with a ridiculously loud *rattle-rattle-CRASH*.

Things went quiet in a split second, and after that, the man didn’t so much as

twitch.

““““ “”””
...”

That merciless strike had caused not just Silver Sword but also the enemy part and the audience to fall quiet.

“H-hey. Executioner...”

Jade tried to choose his words carefully and come up with the best thing to say in this situation, but scarcely a sound left his lips.

That armored man who had been sent flying within seconds of opening had probably been Ganz. It had to have been Ganz.

Once, he had been Silver Sword’s frontline attacker. But his spirit broke when he saw the Executioner’s strength firsthand, and he withdrew from Silver Sword.

For whatever unlucky reason, they wound up meeting again like this—and Ganz ended up falling to the Executioner once again.

However, Alina’s concern seemed to be purely on winning the fighting tournament. “What? The bell rang, so the match should have started.”

“Ahhh, it’s fine, that’s not a problem, but that was just Ganz—”

“Ganz? Who’s that?”

“...”

Praying that Ganz wasn’t still conscious to hear this exchange, Jade cleared his throat and raised his shield. “Th-then let’s collect ourselves and fight,” he said, trying to restart the battle as if nothing had happened.

“J-Jade, that was Ganz, just now,” Lululee remarked in concern.

“Lululee.” Lowe placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her. “Let’s not wound the man’s pride any further... Sometimes, it’s kinder not to notice someone.”

“Y-you bastards...!”

After watching Ganz get sent flying halfway through his opening remarks, the enemy tank went red in the face and yelled, “So the great Silver Sword would launch a surprise attack against a regular adventurer?! Do you not have the

noble spirit to fight fair and square?! Huh?!”

“Noble spirit to fight fair and square?” Alina took a step forward and snorted at the man’s remark. “The moment we stepped into the ring, it was kill or be killed...”

“Executioner, just so you know, killing is against the rules and will disqualify us instantly,” Jade reminded her.

“...”

“I—I know that,” Alina argued back quietly, then faced the enemy once again.

“D-dammit, let’s go! Ranged attacker!”

The tank must not have been able to stand Alina’s quiet aura of bloodlust, as he hastily raised the round shield he had equipped on his arm. Since he’d instructed the ranged attacker to strike, it was apparent that he was about to activate some skill himself... But Alina recklessly started winding up for a swing.

“For my victory prize—!”

“S-Skill Activate: *Sigurth May*—!”

“Diiiiiiiiiiiie—!!!!”

The enemy tank could not activate his skill in time.

Destroying the relic-embedded floor with her every step, Alina charged straight for the tank. She raised her hammer overhead, then slammed it down on the tank’s round shield.

Apparently, killing would get you instantly disqualified for rule-breaking, so she held back just a tad.

But that didn’t stop the round shield from getting pulverized with a *babam!* The war hammer went straight into the tank’s stomach, and the tank was flung away in a clean and straight line. Plunging into the floor of the stage with a *grrrrrk!* he bounced and spun yet still didn’t slow down, ultimately crashing dramatically into the wall of the stands before finally coming to a stop.

The arena went dead quiet.

Upon witnessing the brutally destructive power that the Executioner had

dished out, the enemy ranged attacker, who had been preparing to strike, and the healer, who had been readying a heal in preparation for getting hit, stopped what they were doing and froze.

“...I-is he alive...?”

The judge quickly ran up to them and confirmed that the tank, who had two or three broken teeth, was breathing.

“The match continues!” the judge announced, snapping up a hand, but the healer and ranged attacker just froze where they were standing, stunned. Naturally, their frightened gazes were directed at the Executioner.

“What?” Alina shouldered her war hammer again. That gesture alone was enough to send a jolt through her opponents, and the two of them yelled out at the same time, ““I...I surrender!””

“Anyway, it’s surprising that Alina wants such a strange figure,” said Lululee.

Lowe was in the stands. At his side, Lululee smiled wryly as she looked down on the stage where they had been standing just a while ago.

“Well, weirdos like her are gonna like what they like,” said Lowe.

Since their first match had ended swiftly, Silver Sword decided to watch the tournament until it was time for their next match. Alina had said she was going to take a nap to catch up on her sleep and vanished somewhere, and Jade was being chased around by his fangirls, so he’d left them behind.

“There’s time until the next match, so we can take our time now to watch our riv—”

Just then, murmurs burst out around them. Noticing this, Lululee looked around at the people in the stands. The audience members all seemed confused and startled as they looked down at the stage.

“H-hey. Look at that...”

“One guy? There’s only one of them?”

“It looks like he’s not a tank or a healer, just an attacker.”

“Come on, you can’t go in solo just because you can’t gather a party.”

When Lowe was compelled to look, he saw a single adventurer standing in the arena with many eyes on him. The man was tall and spindly. His weapons and armor were the type that could be bought on the market, not relic arma, and he looked rather lackluster.

“He’s gotta be just doing it for the experience without really thinking about it.” One of the audience members poked fun at him, and laughter burst out. Instantly, they were whistling and calling out to him, jeering at the “party” of only one. Not only did the man lack the necessities for a party battle—a tank and a healer—from the fact that he was participating by himself, but it was also

clear he didn't plan on winning the match.

But it didn't appear that way to Lowe.

"...!"

From the moment he'd lay eyes on him, something cold raced down his spine.

"He must be a beginner. Participating in the tournament is good experience, after all—wait, Lowe? Lowe?"

Lululee shook his shoulder, and Lowe snapped out of it with a start.

"What's wrong?" Lululee asked.

"...Oh, nothing. Just thought the guy looked like an acquaintance."

Lowe had been inadvertently staring at the lackluster adventurer, but he returned his eyes to Lululee and forced a smile. Of course, there was nothing at all familiar about the man's face, but the shivers that had penetrated his whole body still lingered.

"You have acquaintances?" Lululee took the opportunity to tease him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jabbing her in return, Lowe breathed a sigh.

What was that, just now...?

It was a somehow nostalgic feeling that could only be described as "nerves that hadn't fired for a long time going off."

"—O-ohhh?! He's pretty good!"

As Lowe sat there in confusion, the audience, which had been jeering in amusement, now cried out in surprise. Some of the people in the stands were even getting to their feet. Startled, Lowe returned his gaze to the arena to find that there were already two adventurers lying on the ground, incapacitated.

And neither of them were the lackluster adventurer. They were from the opposing party.

"What, what happened?!"

"I dunno, he's using, like, some kind of magic I've never seen before..."

Gradually, agitated murmurs spread through the audience. On that note, the lackluster adventurer clasped his knife and walked toward his opponents alone. The opposing party's ranged attacker and healer were still in the fight.

"S-Skill Activate: *Sigurth Shade!*"

The black mage hastily chanted his Sigurth skill. His own shadow extended out from him, warping and twisting to instantly attack the lackluster adventurer, as though it were a snake with a will of its own.

"—Flama."

Lowe clearly heard the voice of the lackluster adventurer as he chanted those words quietly.

Instantly, red flames were summoned. This was a fire-type spell often used by black mages.

The moment the audience realized that the magic they'd never heard of was just a normal black mage spell, the red flames formed a thin shroud around the man's dagger.

Eventually, the red flames flared into a new color—pure blue.

"...!"

Lowe's eyes widened, and he stiffened.

As the audience burst into cheers, the opponent's shadow snapped at the lone adventurer. The man indomitably held his knife wreathed in blue flame in a reverse grip, then plunged it into the shadow.

A flat *pashoop* sound rang out.

The shadow dispersed in the blink of an eye. The same went for the blue flame that had wreathed the man's knife, and the clash between techniques ended with them being canceled out.

"...Huh...? The Sigurth skill vanished...?"

"That was magic, right? Huh?"

A number of people around Lowe realized the impossibility of what they'd just seen and tilted their heads. Yes, magic was a power weaker than skills—a

spell definitely shouldn't have enough power to nullify a Sigurth skill.

"What was that? Does that mean that blue thing was a Sigurth skill, after all?"

"But that guy chanted a spell, right...? Though it was one I've never heard of."

"Well, if they canceled each other out, that means it was a Sigurth skill!"

"I don't really get it, but that was amazing! He looks like nothing special, but he's pretty good!"

"So he wasn't just participating for the experience. But just what was that spell?" Lululee wondered aloud, but Lowe heard neither her words nor the cheers around him.

Shivers ran down his spine, and he quietly gulped, his eyes wide. As Lowe beheld the spell, words spilled from his lips.

"...Forbidden technique—"

The audience, who knew nothing of this, broke into cheers. Finally, the lackluster adventurer used the mysterious blue technique to defeat all his opponents, who had looked to be superior to him. The drama of it made everyone forget their confusion and erupt in excitement.

The lackluster adventurer seemed shy, scratching his head as he left the venue. He walked with his lanky back hunched, as though embarrassed; he didn't carry himself like he was strong. And then, before he stepped down from the stage, he happened to lift his head—and lock eyes with Lowe's.

It was an instant—just an instant.

The man's face shifted and *blurred*. Like an elaborately crafted doll shattering upon being hit, the shape of his face undulated and crumbled—giving Lowe the glimpse of a different man's face.

He had sharp eyes with small irises, pale skin, a mole under his right eye, and a straight nose and thin lips.

It was the assassin of the Dark Guild, Gald.

"...!"

Lowe instantly shot up out of his seat.

“L-Lowe? What’s the matter?”

Lululee startled and looked up at Lowe. The black mage was too rattled to even answer. No—it would be more accurate to say that he didn’t know what he should say. In a rare course of events, he found himself unable to decide how to proceed. Meanwhile, the lackluster adventurer—no, Gald—vanished from the stage.

“...Lululee. I might not be able to make the next match.”

“Huh?!”

It was all he could do to tell her that. Of course Lululee was shocked by his remark and got out of her seat, but by that time, Lowe had already taken off after Gald.

An assassin didn't show his weapons to others.

Anyone could be convinced of that.

Among the mages of the Dark Guild—the world called them assassins—there were some who learned so-called forbidden techniques, arts that were kept secret from the public. These were higher-order magic techniques devised from many years of study and persistence from black mages who had lost their status due to skills. They were the weapons of the Dark Guild. With these forbidden techniques, the Dark Guild had managed to survive in the shadows in a world of skill supremacy.

There were countless forbidden techniques out there, from the dangerous to the trivial. Only the guildmaster of the Dark Guild knew them all.

And the Dark Guild had just one simple and ultimate pact—do not bring forbidden techniques to the outside. When someone who had learned forbidden techniques wanted out, the Dark Guild would erase their memories of the techniques with one such secret spell—Memory Erasure. They were just that thorough.

Those who broke this pact were referred to as pact-breakers.

Flama...is one of the forbidden techniques...!

It wasn't something you'd be allowed to flaunt in front of a large audience. Gald had clearly violated the pact.

Lowe raced down the stairs of the stands, heading for the arena below. Though he knew somewhere in his head that it was too late, his body kept moving of its own accord.

Going down the stairs, he came to the entrance to the arena, but nobody was there, of course. He immediately headed for the lobby. While running along the covered hallway, he desperately looked, but that lackluster adventurer could no

longer be seen in the crowds. Of course. It was an assassin's job to vanish into the darkness, so he wouldn't be able to chase him down so easily. Lowe came to a stop in the lobby and wiped off his sweat.

Gald, what the hell are you thinking...?!

Gald was no fool.

He was aware that pact-breakers would most certainly be dealt with; Gald should have known best of all that there was no benefit at all to making an enemy of the Dark Guild. The man had deliberately showed Lowe his face, making a sort of declaration of war before vanishing. It was clear that he had not come to enjoy the fighting tournament.

"Lowe!" someone called from behind him, and he turned around to see Lululee chasing after him. Panting hard, she tilted her head in concern. "Lowe, what's with you all of a sudden? What do you mean, you can't be in the next match?"

"...Ah, I mean..." Unable to adequately reply, Lowe faltered and fell silent.

He had no way to explain to Lululee that Gald, a member of the Dark Guild, had brought forbidden techniques outside the guild and become a pact-breaker, and that he was trying to do something here at the fighting tournament. The situation was relatively straightforward, yes, but telling Lululee would be the same as digging his own grave.

He was scared to be asked about why he knew so much about the Dark Guild.

"Ah, there you are. Hey, guys."

As Lowe was unable to reply, a voice came from the distance. Jade was running up to them.

"The next match is about to start, so let's head to the arena...huh?" Jade said as he suddenly came to a stop, furrowing his brow quizzically as he noticed the two of them were covered in sweat.

"...Did something happen?"

"Nah, nothing," Lowe answered without missing a beat. Lululee looked up at him with unease, but Lowe shrugged lightly, like always.

“A guy I thought I knew showed up in a match. I chased after him, but I lost sight of him.”

“Wah! Wah! So you’re the Executioner!” A boy adventurer with a youthful face was clamoring excitedly onto the arena stage.

“Is he by himself...?”

Alina furrowed her brow at the number of their opponents.

Though the starting bell had rung, the boy was still by himself. There was also no sign that any allies would show up.

“The judge isn’t stopping the match... Does that mean you applied solo from the start?” Jade muttered, lowering his voice in a question.

Lowe was silent, as if he were wary of something, while Lululee seemed somehow anxious.

“So he’s doing it for the experience?” Alina asked Jade. It seemed clear at a glance that the boy wasn’t trying to win.

But Lowe answered no to her question. “We should keep our guards up. I just watched a different match where a guy was participating on his own, too, and he beat a full party like it was nothing.”

“One person beat a full party...?!”

Ignoring Silver Sword’s confusion, their opponent continued to act excited. “My name is Gose! It’s an honor to be able to fight the Executioner!”

He was about fourteen or fifteen years old. He was roughly the same height as Alina, and you’d be hard-pressed to call him muscular, even if you were trying to flatter him. His delicate frame was lightly armored, and he had a knife at his waist. The one unique thing about him was that he had a large stuffed leather bag hanging from his shoulder, even though they weren’t in a dungeon.

“Man, whoever seeded these matches was awful, making an innocent boy like me fight the Executioner. You don’t want to whack li’l ole me with a war hammer, right?”

“Skill Activate: *Dia Break*.”

“Wait wait wait!”

While thinking, *If nothing else, this guy is annoying*, Alina mercilessly pulled out her silver war hammer.

Gose’s face twitched as he watched this. “U-um, listen, I don’t think I could beat you in an honest fight, okay, so I came today thinking we could do something interesting!” he said in a panic, and then with a “ta-daa!” he brought two statuettes out from his leather bag.

“!”

Alina’s eyes widened with a start, and she froze.

The two statuettes were exactly the same shape. And they weren’t just any figures. They were vaguely human-shaped, twisted around in a mocking pose. Odd patterns danced on their surfaces, and the mark of Dia flickered mysteriously inside their bodies.

Yes, they were the same as the prize that was supposed to be in the lobby.

Alina wasn’t the only one to be taken aback at this. When the audience members saw the statuettes, a great commotion instantly broke out.

“Hey, is that the victory prize?”

“Why does that kid have it?”

“And there’s two that are exactly the same...?”

“Is one a fake? Is this for entertainment?”

“You!” Unsurprisingly, the judge couldn’t just stand by and watch, so he called off the match, came up onstage, and approached Gose. “Is one of those real? If it is, this is theft—”

Alina saw Gose’s lips curl into a smirk.

“Flama.” The boy muttered a spell and pointed his index finger at the judge. Instantly, a mysterious blue flame about the size of a small grain came forth from his fingertip to attack the judge like a lead bullet.

But the blue flame just skimmed the judge’s head. “W-waaaagh!”

Gose cackled as the judge panicked and fell on his bottom. “Don’t get in the way, pops.”

For an instant, cruelty peeked out from the boy’s innocent smile, and he summoned another blue flame from his right hand and directed it at the judge.

The judge blanched at the boy’s clear hostility.

“Wait!” Jade immediately got between the boy and the judge, greatshield raised. “Attacking the judge will get you disqualified. Are you aware of that?”

“Th-that’s right...,” the judge wrung out hoarsely, pointing at Gose from behind Jade’s back. “You little shit, acting nicely and then pushing your luck...! Disqualified! Disqualified! Disqualified!”

Gose snorted at the immaturely wailing judge, then paid him no more attention as he turned to Alina. “Frankly, I thought it was strange that you would show up in the tournament. You seem like you wouldn’t be interested in this sort of thing.”

Alina’s heart pounded in her chest. “...What are you trying to say?”

Gose giggled at her wariness. Then he lowered his voice and said in a whisper, “Hey, could it be that you know the *secret of this figure*...?”

“...?!” On reflex, Alina sucked in air and made a weird sound.

Seeing her freeze, Gose puffed out his chest proudly, as if to say his intuition had been on the mark. “I’m just like you, Executioner. I know the secret of this statuette.”

As Alina stood there speechless, her hands trembled slightly.

The boy knew—that she had flicked the figure’s head off...!

For a moment, her mind went blank from despair. It was such a shock that she lost her sense of balance, growing dizzy enough to feel as though she was being sucked toward the ground. She was so rattled that she forgot all about the possibility of shutting him up with a good thwack from her war hammer.

As Alina gritted her teeth and somehow resisted the urge to break down, Gose said something even more unbelievable.

“Hey, let’s play a game. One of these statuettes is the real deal, and one is a fake that looks exactly the same. If you can win at this game, then I’ll give you the real one. But if you can’t win...I’ll reveal what the real figure *really is* right here.”

“...?!”

“How about it? Wanna give it a shot?”

“...” After a silence, Alina nodded. Since the boy knew, she had no choice but to accept this game.

Gose seemed satisfied as he returned the two figures to his bag for the moment, then stirred them around inside before pulling them out once more. “So which one is the *real* victory prize?” He smirked mischievously. “You only get one shot. And you do know what will happen if you get it wrong, right...?”

His laughter gradually increased in volume, and as he saw Alina’s expression grow more severe, Gose cackled like he couldn’t hold it back any longer. “All right, then! Pick one! Get it wrong, and the world will be destroyed! It all rests on your choice!”

The world will be destroyed?

Alina cocked her head in confusion—that was quite the dramatic way to put it.

Is he trying to say that my peaceful life will be ruined...? ...I don’t really get it, but oh well.

Meanwhile, Jade stared at Alina with eyes wide in shock. “The world will be destroyed...? What is the meaning of this, Executioner? What’s the deal with that statuette...?!” he asked.

Alina fell silent. Cold sweat streaked down her temple.

I flicked off the head of the tournament prize.

Alina waffled about whether she should own up to it or not. If it was just Jade, then maybe she could tell him quietly. Wait, but if she could just get that figure, then her perfect crime would be complete. Just a little more, just one more step

“I can’t say right now,” Alina said heavily.

The stinging tension of her remark must have gotten across to him, as Jade closed his mouth.

She gave him a look that said, *I’ve got this*, and he responded with a little nod.

Letting out a breath, Alina turned back to the prize.

She had to choose fast to end this stupid game. She was impatient. Because if you looked *reeeeeeally* closely at the real figure, you could tell that there was a strange crack in it...!

On top of that, though Jade had intuited that he needed to be silent right now, his eyes and intuition were unusually sharp. If the boy asked him to pick out the real one, he would inevitably examine the statuette. She had to end this game before he figured it out...!

“Hey, c’mon, Executioner, hurry and pick!” Gose jeered, stirring up Alina’s impatience. “Or should I give you a hint? If you get down on the ground and say, ‘Please tell me,’ then I wouldn’t mind—”

“The right one,” Alina said decisively.

“Huh?”

Gose had been smiling in amusement, but when Alina answered instantly, full of confidence, he blinked in puzzlement.

“The right one.”

“...”

A brief silence passed over the arena. Gose gazed at Alina for a while, their gazes clashing. Alina was absolutely sure. She could see a faint crack in the neck of the right figure.

“...Really? Are you really okay with that?”

“The right one.”

“I—I could give you a little more time...”

“The right one.”

“You should consider it a bit more...”

“The right one.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

At her side, Jade was getting anxious and worked up. The audience also must have caught on to the tension, as they were dead silent.

“—*Tsk*. Why’d you have it right...?”

The click of Gose’s tongue rang out in the quiet fighting arena. He stopped using the high-pitched voice of a boy and twisted his face in a hateful expression.

“This is no fun!” he yelled out in a fit of anger, throwing one of the statuettes in his hands at Alina... It was the left figure. Jade immediately came up to Alina and knocked the figure away.

“Not that one! The right one!” Alina cried out, heedless, but Gose held the real one in his arms and leaped way back.

“No more games! I’m done with that! I’m switching to a game where if you want the real one, you steal it from me!” he said quite arbitrarily as he summoned blue flame in his hand. As Alina watched the hostile boy, a light bulb went off.

I...don’t really get what’s going on, but this is my chance!

Alina activated her skill without hesitation and pulled out her war hammer

“If that’s what’s going on, I guess I’ve got no choice!”

“Alina?! Wait, if you attack him carelessly—”

Ignoring Jade’s attempt to stop her, Alina swung back her war hammer and approached Gose.

“Yes, I’ve been waiting for that attack!”

Instantly, Gose brought the figure out in front of himself, using it as a shield.

“I”

Of course, now that she'd started swinging her war hammer, she couldn't stop it abruptly. Even if her brain did recognize that Gose had made the figure his shield, it wouldn't be able to get that message across to her body in time. Alina's war hammer continued to swing forward—no, in fact with even greater speed—to slam Gose away, figure and all.

The sound of something breaking rang out through the arena.

As the audience, judges, and Jade watched, there came a lifeless *smash*. The statuette flew through the air and shattered into pieces, starting from the stomach, right where the mark of Dia was.

The audience members instantly broke into shrieks.

“Waaaagh! The victory priiize!”

“The pure relic! The pure reliiic!”

The onlookers burst into a commotion at the shattering of the statuette, grieving and breaking down. From the corner of her eye, Alina saw the judge foaming at the mouth.

But Alina kept her cool. Since what had just happened had clearly been inevitable. No matter how you looked at it, Gose was at fault for shielding himself with the figure. *It's not my fault. I just happened to hit it.* In other words—she had successfully destroyed the evidence in a totally unsuspecting manner!

A sparkling smile came to Alina's face.

I did iiiiiiiiiiiit!!!

She was so pleased that she smirked under her hood and cheered in her heart.

The shattered figure made a *clunk* sound as the biggest piece of it hit the ground first. Next, the smaller fragments fluttered down, along with the head, which had escaped its glue and flown away. That head was the only part that was suspicious, as there was some hardened glue on it, but oh well, they wouldn't know.

Phew, now I don't have to go all the way to victory. Man, glad that's over. Time to go home and sleep.

“Heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha...”



As Alina dismissed her war hammer so she could go home, she suddenly heard Gose break into unsettling peals of laughter.

“?”

“Thank you for breaking it.”

The next moment.

The broken pure relic shone powerfully as it floated in the air. As Alina furrowed her brows, golden letters flew out in a line before her.

The golden letters shone brilliantly in front of her and eventually formed a single passage.

DESIGNATED ADVENTURER RANK: NONE.

LOCATION: THE DARK TOWER.

ACHIEVEMENT CONDITIONS: DEFEAT ALL FLOOR BOSSES.

THE REQUESTER NOT INDICATED. RECEIVER SIGNATURE ABRIDGED.

AS PER THE ABOVE, RECEIPT OF QUEST ACKNOWLEDGED.

“Urk...a hidden quest?!” Jade cried out in shock.

“Huh? No way.” Alina’s cheeks spasmed.

“Now, then—the quest has been received. I invite you...to the hidden dungeon!”

No sooner had he said that than Gose pulled out an unfamiliar green crystal from his bag. It was already emitting light.

“Alina, get away from that thing!”

By the time Jade said that, it was already too late.

Light flashed from the crystal, enveloping Alina whole. Her body lightened, and she felt as though her feet were leaving the ground. And then the moment Jade grabbed Alina’s arm— “Teleport!” Gose cried gleefully.

—her vision was enveloped in light.

After the floating feeling subsided, she landed on a cold stone floor.

“Where...am I?”

As Alina’s vision recovered from the dazzling light, her surroundings became visible. Alina narrowed her eyes as she realized she was in a completely different place from the fighting arena.

It was a large, circular room. It was dead quiet and dim, with lines of cold and smooth black pillars along the walls. The walls and floor were all made of the same smooth black stone.

“...A hidden dungeon...”

She heard Jade’s voice from her side. He’d been teleported, too. Gose was nowhere to be found. Looking all around, Alina happened to notice the object that was illuminating the room.

“This is...”

It was a green crystal, shining dim and pale, the same one that Gose had carried. A number of green crystals were spread about the black room.

“Best not to approach. They’re crystal gates.”

Jade stopped Alina before she could touch one.

“Crystal gates?”

“Yes, crystal gates from some unknown maker...,” Jade said as he looked around the crystal-filled area. “There was that incident where monsters were appearing on the Altano Plains, right? It turned out that the monsters were being teleported in from a crystal gate.”

Now that he mentioned it, she recalled there had been an incident like that while she was overwhelmed with tournament duty.

“So then does that mean the monsters that showed up on the plains were

teleported from this hidden dungeon?” she asked.

“Most likely. But why is it that Gose was able to use the green crystal gate at the tournament arena...? There were already a number of giant crystal gates made by the Adventurers Guild installed at the arena. The interference should have made his crystal unusable...”

“—With how large the stage was, we were just barely out of interference range.”

With a start, Alina looked toward the source of the voice to find Gose emerging from the darkness.

“You can thank the Adventurers Guild for that, since they wanted to show off by making such a pointlessly large arena.” Gose chuckled mockingly. While he appeared to be a boy, there was a sober shadow in his eyes.

With a completely different air to him from before, he shrugged his shoulders. “I meant to bring the Executioner here alone, but it looks like you’re here, too. That’s fine, I guess.”

“...Who are you?” Jade stepped in front of Alina, his voice low and wary. Of course, it was clear that Gose was no ordinary adventurer.

“I don’t matter here, do I? Come on, Executioner, it’s your time to shine.”

Gose took a step forward, and lights lit, as if in response.

The lights instantly became a line, then a circle, mixing and overlapping in a complex pattern to form lines of text. Eventually, this all became one giant magic sigil, floating dimly in the darkness. Then white specks of light brought forth the magic sigil. They rose like bubbles, converging in the center of the magic sigil to create a human shape.

“I-it couldn’t be—!”

Jade’s breath caught, and Alina’s eyes widened.

A golden-haired man emerged from the white light.

He was engraved with the mark of Dia, and there was a black stone in his forehead—he was a living relic, a dark god.

“Dark god. It’s time for a quest. Fulfill your role,” Gose said solemnly to the entity who had appeared.

Responding to the call, the dark god opened his eyes. The man had a face so beautiful that it was mystical, with long slitted eyes and a straight nose. His limbs were long and slender, and he was clad in a robe with a mysterious pattern that Alina had never seen before. He was the complete opposite of the burly dark god Silha.

But the awakened dark god neither moved nor said anything, just patiently gazed at Alina and Jade before him.

“Dark god,” Gose called out one more time, urging him on. “Come on, eat people for power—”

“Silence, fool,” the dark god spat, making Gose’s eyes widen in shock for a moment. The dark god furrowed his brows in clear displeasure, glaring at Gose. “Have you filthy swine still not learned to leave this power well alone?”

“Wha...?” Gose looked impatient, as if to say, *This isn’t what I planned.*

That was when Jade suddenly realized something. The dark gods that slumbered in hidden dungeons were supposed to revive from human souls. So far, they had all awakened from people dying in the dungeon. After that, they’d tried to kill more people on cruel impulse in an attempt to gain Dia skills.

But this dark god had awakened and shown himself without any sort of sacrifice.

“Were you the one chosen by the quest?” The dark god turned his eyes, which had silenced Gose, to Alina without hesitation. It seemed he understood that Alina had a power equal to that of a dark god, but there was no belligerent light or cruel shadow in his eyes. He had a very different air from the dark gods they’d seen before.

Ignoring everyone's confusion, he opened his mouth dispassionately. "I am Raum. It is my fate to fight you... But I do not wish for that."

"Dark god! Cut this out! You're not allowed to do that!" Gose yelled.

Raum bared his teeth. "Silence! It's because villains like you abuse this power that dark gods became monsters...! I—no, we did not create dark gods for something like this!!" Raum howled with a menacing look on his face, and the room trembled.

Though Jade was overwhelmed by Raum's intimidating aura, he was confused by what he'd said. "Created...the dark gods...?! So then the dark gods made the dark gods?"

"No." Raum emphatically denied Jade's hypothesis.

"We were human. The dark gods were created to save the world. We did not make dark gods in order to enact such cruelty...!" His hands trembled and his back hunched as he wrung out these words, hints of intense regret and fear, like that of a human, showing in his voice.

Oh, so dark gods were once humans...

Not too long ago, they had learned that people became dark gods when they were embedded with a god core. That meant this man, Raum, had also been human and that he'd only turned into a dark god after a god core was embedded in him for whatever reason.

Is he not that influenced by the god core...?

By "such cruelty," he was most likely referring to how the dark gods had destroyed the ancients. Jade didn't sense in Raum the cruelty the other dark gods had shown.

"...How are you able to move without having consumed a human soul?" Jade cautiously asked Raum, staying on guard just in case.

"..." Raum seemed to regain some of his composure and lifted his chin. "Human souls are too powerful to use as a power source in the first place. They shouldn't be used that way. They become overloaded and go out of control. If a dark god is not used in the wrong way, then they can be controlled... Like this."

Letting out a breath, Raum muttered into the silence, “Disarm.”

The next moment, the god core embedded in his forehead changed. The white lights running through it stopped and eventually vanished.

“Now I will be no different from any other human,” Raum murmured, and he looked toward Alina.

And then he said something unbelievable.

“Will you kill me?”

“...?!” Jade and Alina were both left speechless at Raum’s unexpected proposal.

“The dark gods slumbering now were once talented and kind people. They were not at all fearsome monsters... They all wanted to be useful to the world...”

“...”

“I also don’t know when I might be given humans’ souls and wind up a mindless monster. Please, free me from this core before I end up like that.”

Alina gave Jade a troubled look. Jade also met her gaze with a glance, hesitating to make a decision.

At the very least, Raum was still possessed of his human reason and had no intention to fight—should they kill him now? There were many things they wanted to know about the dark gods. As Jade wavered over how to reply, it happened.

Soundlessly, something fell down from above.

They fell right before the dark god’s eyes, then slit Raum’s throat without hesitation

“Kah...?!”

Large volumes of blood spurted out, and the whites of Raum’s eyes showed as he fell face forward. A man had descended from the ceiling. He dug out the god core from Raum’s forehead with a smirk.

“Ahhh, man, silencing a dark god, what a nasty assignment.”

The young man rose and slowly turned toward them. He had small irises and pale skin. He watched as the fallen dark god Raum started to vanish from the edges, then pointed to Jade. “Hey, so you’re, like, that guy from Lowe’s party, right? Jade, was it?”

Why would Lowe’s name come up? Seeing Jade rattled, the man smirked. “I’m an acquaintance of Lowe’s. The name’s Gald. Not that it matters if I introduce myself—you guys are gonna die right away.”

Jade was about to take a step forward but stopped once he noticed what Gald was holding.

“A crystal gate...!”

The next thing he knew, it was too late. Gald held up the green crystal, and light filled his vision.

Once the light died down, the sound of people clamoring leaped into Jade's ears.

The powerful light of the sun was beating down on them, in a sharp contrast from that calm and dark space. They were onstage in the fighting arena, right where they'd been before being dragged into the hidden dungeon.

"Look, someone showed up out of nowhere!"

"Jade of Silver Sword...and who's that other guy?"

"The Executioner isn't here!"

The audience didn't seem to understand the situation, still sitting leisurely in their seats as they chattered. Jade looked around the arena with a start and realized that Alina wasn't there.

"Alin— Executioner?!"

No matter where he looked, he couldn't find her.

"Ahhh, Gose is gone, too. Maybe he was dropped off somewhere. These crystal gates are unstable sometimes," answered Gald, who had also been teleported. He was talking with disinterest while amusing himself with the god core he'd extracted from Raum, tossing it in the air over and over like a toy.

"Somewhere...?!"

"He may have been left behind there, and he might've fallen somewhere around here. Not that I care, since my job here is done—" Gald snatched the god core out of the air, held it up to Jade, and smirked. "By the way, shouldn't you be worried about this?"

"...!"

So Gald planned to turn into a dark god—

A chill ran through Jade's heart. It wasn't difficult to imagine just what Gald

was trying to do. This place was filled with people. If he were to change into a dark god here—

“Turning into a dark god would just overwrite your personality! Things wouldn’t go your way...!”

“You don’t understand *anything*. The idiots who get controlled by the god cores end up that way because of their idiotic pursuit of skills.”

“What do you—?”

Just then, a yell cut between them. “You people!”

When Jade turned to look to find the source of that reckless voice, he saw the judge, striding over to them and looking quite upset, his face red. “This is why I can’t stand people who don’t stick to the rules! Stealing the victory prize, breaking it, vanishing and reappearing—this isn’t a place for an anarchic brawl! It’s a sacred fighting arena! If you understand, then get—!”

“Don’t be stupid, stay back!”

Jade’s warning was too late. Gald gave the judge a bored glance, then generated a little blue flame from his palm and tossed it. The fireball soundlessly passed through the judge.

The judge, who had been yelling right up until that moment, instantly stopped talking.

No—he could no longer speak—since there was a little hole in his chest where the blue flame had passed through.

The light vanished from the judge’s eyes, and he fell to his knees, as though a string had been cut.

“...!”

Gald had killed the judge as easily as he breathed. This brought a scowl to Jade’s face.

For a moment, the place was enveloped in utter silence—and then, the moment that the judge fell face forward and hit the ground—

“Yeeeeeeeeek,” a piercing shriek erupted.

“Is he dead? Did that guy kill him?!”

“He killed the damn judge!”

“Run! Hurry!”

With that, the audience instantly fell into confusion, and everyone started running for the exits.

“Ahhh, the idiots are going nuts.” Watching, Gald smiled.

“You bastard...!”

“These maggots just don’t shut up,” Gald muttered, tossing the god core into his mouth. He swallowed it so effortlessly that it took Jade time to process what had just happened.

“You’re swallowing it...?!” he cried.

“Now then, what’s gonna happen? ♪” Gald spread his hands in amusement.

The next instant, a dark shadow leaped out from his mouth and instantly covered his face. It was such a repulsive sight that Jade was struck speechless. The screams from the audience grew louder and louder.

Eventually, the shadow that covered his face converged on his forehead, forming a black mark of Dia.

“Hmm, a well-made core really is different.” With a lick of his tongue, Gald gave a composed smile.

“...Your personality hasn’t changed...?”

When Glen had turned into a dark god, a cruel and brutal personality similar to that of the other dark gods had taken hold of him. But even after swallowing the god core, Gald was coolly keeping ahold of himself.

Gald shrugged at a rattled Jade. “To be more precise, the *core* doesn’t go out of control. That dark god before said so, right? What harms the core is having the wrong source of power...human souls. Once a human soul gets into the mix, you’ve got a cruel and capable killing machine on your hands,” Gald said, like it was nothing.

Jade furrowed his brows. “...Where did you learn all this about god cores?”

Gald knew far too much. Seeing this was giving Jade déjà vu.

“...Did you learn this from *them*?”

“Them”—the person who had given Glen knowledge about god cores and prompted him to turn himself into a dark god. He had curried favor with Glen for a long time, using him to retrieve god cores. And then he had taught Glen that humans could embed a god core in themselves to become a dark god. “They” clearly knew quite a lot about dark gods. And knowing that, he’d told Glen only what was convenient, taking advantage of his weaknesses and using him.

When Gald had killed the dark god Raum, he had said it was a “nasty assignment.” In other words, he was acting on someone else’s orders.

After a slight pause, Gald opened his small-pupiled eyes wide and gave a toothy grin. “So what if I did?”

Seeing Gald acknowledge it so readily, Jade froze.

“But, well, it’s not like I worship them. Maybe they think they’re using me, but I’m just using them. Dia skill? Human souls? I don’t need those. What I want is power—the power to flaunt the truth to those skill-brained idiots and crush the cowardly Dark Guild...!”

No sooner had Gald said that than he swung an arm at the stands. At the same time, Jade felt the arena suddenly grow darker. He looked up at the sky—and his breath caught.

“!”

There was a blue ceiling above them.

No, it was all blue flame. The same fire that had soundlessly pierced the body of the judge just now. That brutal blue flame was filling the whole sky of the arena.

“Wh-what is that...?”

The audience members froze for a moment, their brows furrowing in unease and suspicion as they stared at the blue flame curiously. The corners of Gald’s lips curled, and he laughed cruelly.

“—Now then, a question: How many people in this arena *will still be recognizable after experiencing what’s in store?*”

Jade moved before he could even think. “Composite Skill Activate...!” He put one hand to the ground and cried, “*Millia!*”

Instantly, red lights extended in four directions, like shadows emerging from his hand. They went along the floor and along the walls, reaching as far as the audience. Even after reaching the tops of the walls at the height of the stands, the red lights didn’t stop, quickly deploying through the air. Flying skyward, the red lights instantly connected with one another, forming a red ceiling around the roofless fighting arena.

“Ngh...” He’d deployed his skill to envelop the entire vast fighting arena. That tremendous effort left Jade with a severe look on his face.

Normally, he would have to set up *Sigurth Wall* first for this composite skill. But he’d take the time for that, given the situation. It was a happy accident that he’d gained the ability to use his composite skill without any preparation by practicing *Millia* over and over.

As if it had been waiting for Jade’s skill to complete, the blue flame that Gald had summoned began to rain down on the stands.

A terrific cracking noise rang out in the fighting arena, shaking the whole edifice. The red wall deployed over the stands was blocking the shower of blue flame. The audience, running about frantically, screamed even more as the place rumbled as though hail was hitting the roof.

“Huh! Wow, so that’s the composite skill everyone’s talking about? To think it’d be equal to my Flama!” While Gald offered insincere praise, the blue rain came down even harder.

“Ngh...!” Jade’s whole body broke out into sweat. He was managing to hold down multiple layers of his skill at once, but protecting the entire arena was incredibly taxing. His strength was being rapidly sapped, the strength of his braced legs weakening.

“A god core strengthens all physical abilities—that includes the mana that already flows through the body. Right now, my magic powers are bottomless.

How long do you think that composite skill of yours will hold out against them?”

Gald had been smiling like he was enjoying himself, but now he suddenly turned serious, glaring at Jade with resentment. “You lucky bastards in Silver Sword were blessed with skills—so I’ll destroy you with magic alone. I’ll make all the idiots out there who think skills are the strongest understand the power of magic...!”

“...So that’s your goal...?!”

No sooner had Gald said that than he summoned a blue ball of flame in the palm of his hand, tossing it at Jade.

“Damn it...!”

While maintaining the barrier overhead, Jade dodged the blue flame that came at him. He knew from experience that the blue fire was not just magic. His instincts warned him that he couldn’t afford to come in contact with it. He was using all his strength to keep *Millia* in the air, so he didn’t think he could use it to defend himself.

Jade evaded a second and then a third ball of flame coming at him. The more he moved his body, the dizzier he got, his field of vision narrowing. He could tell that skill exhaustion was rapidly setting in.

The Flama rain still did not cease. Gald remained where he stood, continuing to send out multiple orbs of blue flame. He wore down Jade’s endurance like a hunter slowly driving down his prey.

“Ah...”

For a moment, one of Jade’s legs weakened and buckled.

Skill exhaustion—the moment he thought that, one of the fireballs that pursued him split into multiple small balls, taking the opportunity to rain down on his leg with a *bam-bam-bam*!

“Agh...!”

Smoke streamed up from Jade’s leg. There was no bleeding, but the blue flame had melted flesh and burned the wound shut. The pain was so intense that he was seeing stars.

Yes, this was wearing him down.

Jade had realized what Gald was after. Right from the start, he'd been aiming to take the audience hostage, forcing Jade to use up his skills and drain his stamina.

"Gotcha!"

Immediately, a new fireball flew for Jade. He couldn't move his wounded leg at all, and it didn't seem like he would be able to dodge any more. He instantly raised his greatshield.

"*Millia...!*" He allocated just a slight amount of the barrier deployed in the air to his shield. Thanks to his quick decision-making, the blue flame hit his shield and dispersed.

"Ohhh, this is the first time I've ever seen an ordinary person take a hit from Flama and stay conscious. Usually, the pain makes them pass out, among other things—oh, but I guess that's about all you can take?"

A hole had opened up in the wall of *Millia* Jade had deployed in the air. Half the audience was still inside the arena.

"If there's a hole opened up...does that mean I can attack from here?" Cackling, Gald swung his finger like a conductor, directing the Flama that was raining down to fall on the open hole.

"...!"

It was him or the audience. His skill was stretched too thin, and Jade could no longer protect both—the moment he made that decision, he undid the allotment on his shield without any hesitation. That repaired the hole in the aerial wall, but at the same time, the red light of the skill vanished from his greatshield with a *bashoop*.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Right, done!!"

Gald, who had been trying to do that from the start, unleashed a Flama in the shape of a giant arrow at Jade. Jade was unable to evade or defend and could only watch as the blue arrow approached. But even so, he did not release the aerial wall protecting the audience until the end.

A sickening sizzling rang in his head.

“...!”

The Flama arrow had pierced Jade’s stomach.

Jade coughed up blood, and his knees buckled. His greatshield rattled to the floor with a great crashing sound. The red barrier in the sky decomposed before their eyes, the hole spreading. When the red barrier vanished entirely, the shower of blue fire relented.

“Did you really think I’d kill the audience? They’re important witnesses to tell of Silver Sword’s humiliation!”

As Gald laughed, Jade passed out, collapsing face-first on the ground.

“...J-Jade Scrade...was beaten...?!”

The audience went quiet, staring at the unmoving tank with a hole in his stomach. The sight was so hopeless that they stopped fleeing for a moment.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Gald’s shrill laughter rang out in the dead silent arena. He approached Jade with a teasing step and laid one boot on his head. “Hey, hey, so how does it feel to get beaten with magic alone, no skill or anything? Piddling stuff like magic never even crossed your mind, did it? Huh, could it be you can’t hear me anymore?”

Finally, Gald kicked Jade in the head, throwing back his own to laugh. “I’ll never accept that magic is weaker than skills!”

That was when Gald turned around with a start. His face twisted with joy as he saw a familiar man from the corner of his eye.

“If it isn’t Lowe!”

Lowe and Lululee were running down into the arena.

“Lululee, is our leader alive...?!”

“H-he’s alive.”

Running up to Jade, Lululee checked his breathing. Lowe could also hear Jade’s labored breathing. It was accurate to say he was breathing, but just barely.

If only they had come earlier, this never would have happened—Lowe regretted his earlier decision. After Jade and Alina had vanished via the crystal gate, Lowe and Lululee had left the arena to find the vanished pair.

“I’ll heal him! I swear it...!”

Hearing that vow from Lululee, Lowe turned back to Gald. The scene in front of him made him feel anger and frustration beyond words. While maintaining his composure so as to not be swallowed up by those feelings, he glared at the man before him.

“...Gald...”

“Hey there, Lowe. You took your sweet time.”

By the time Lowe’s ears picked up on the slight whizzing in the air, Gald was already right in front of him, thrusting out the same knife he’d used during the match.

“Ngh!” Lowe just barely blocked it with the rod he drew from his waist. Their weapons rattled as they struggled against each other.

“Hey, how long are you gonna keep swinging around this toy? If you mock me, I’ll start playing for keeps.” Blowing a sigh like he was bored, Gald backed off from Lowe for a moment. “C’mon and bring out your old weapons. I’m not interested in some cowardly ‘ranged attacker adventurer.’”

“...” Lowe fell silent, unable to reply.

Gald furrowed his brow sullenly. “Oh, okay, *okaaay*. Then I can take that as you accepting your death!” Furious, he summoned blue flame in his hand. Then he flung it in a rage—at Lululee, who was busy healing Jade.

“...!” With an unconscious click of his tongue, Lowe raced out toward Lululee. The instant he released his rod, a pair of knives slid out from both his sleeves. Grabbing the pair of blades in a reverse grip, he quietly muttered a spell. “Flama.”

Soundlessly, blue flames burst out from both knives. They flickered once, then followed the will of their caster and covered the blades of the daggers.

Lowe circled around into the path of the blue balls of flame and sliced them with his twin blades, which were wreathed in the same blue flame.

There was a quiet sizzle as the flame balls flying toward them just slightly singed the sleeve of his robe, then scattered.

“...Huh?”

Puzzled, Lululee blinked.

“Lowe...what is it? That spell...”

“...” Lowe didn’t answer Lululee’s question.

Gald whistled to stir the pot. “It’s the Dark Guild’s forbidden technique, healer girl.”

“...Huh...?”

Lululee looked at Lowe questioningly, but even then, he remained silent.

Flama.

It was a powerful fire spell, backwardly compatible with the more commonly known fire spells. Heightening the firepower to its highest intensity would make it cauterize wounds and keep them from bleeding. If this flame enveloped a target, they would be annihilated entirely, making it perfect for assassination.

It was one of the forbidden magic spells that the Dark Guild devised over the course of many long years, and its power rivaled that of Sigurth skills.

“Forbidden...technique...?” Lululee’s shocked voice rang out through the

arena. “H-how would Lowe know the Dark Guild’s forbidden magic—?”

“Nooow then, why would Lowe know forbidden techniques? I wonder. Huh, Lowe?”

“...Lululee, leave Gald to me and focus on healing our leader.”

“B-but...” Lululee fixed her anxious gaze on him.

He knew that telling her to focus on healing their friend in this situation was an unreasonable request, but Jade’s life was more important than his own excuses or explanations. “Please.”

“...Got it.” Lululee nodded, and seeing her turn back to Jade, Lowe turned to Gald.

“Hmm, but now I know for sure,” said Gald. “You still haven’t had your memory of forbidden techniques erased. So that means you haven’t completely cut ties with the Dark Guild.”

“So what? You’re a pact-breaker now; it’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

“Leaving the Dark Guild and even becoming a dark god—the hell are you trying to do?”

Lowe desperately racked his brain as he tried to buy time.

The amount of flame from Gald’s spell is clearly beyond what a normal human can summon...

Because Flama was so powerful, there was a limit to the amount of flame you could summon with it, and even those with greater magic powers could only produce a fireball the size of a small stone, at most. For that reason, it was most effective to wrap the spell around a weapon or body part, giving you more surface area to work with.

But the Flama arrow that had pierced Jade had been huge. Just forming something like that would take an enormous amount of magic power.

Lowe glanced at the mark of Dia on Gald’s forehead.

It must be from the god core he swallowed... I’d lose in a straight fight...

“What am I trying to do, you ask?” Gald paused there. He dropped the cackling, joking laughter and muttered with a serious look, “Lowe, have you never questioned it? Why skills exist.”

“Huh...?”

“Why did mages lose their status?”

“...”

Two hundred years ago, at the time when adventurers had crossed the ocean and moved to the Helcacia continent, the magic had been a rare and great power. Black mages, who made use of natural phenomena through magic, and those who used healing white magic were highly valued.

And since they possessed these techniques, they naturally came to the shores of Helcacia as adventurers themselves.

But over the course of years, those who moved to Helcacia began manifesting skills one after another, reducing the status of mages. They came to understand that the power of skills was greater than that of magic.

People with skills were sought after, and magic wound up a product of a bygone era. The people who could only wield magic were left behind, while the mages who had skills could finally call themselves adventurers with pride. The same sort of thing had happened to healers, too.

“Even though people claimed the age of magic was over, there were people who chose to be pure mages, without relying on skills. In skill supremacist Helcacia, those people independently devised forbidden techniques to take back the mages’ status, carving out a position for themselves as assassins,” Gald muttered, his words laced with unconcealed resentment.

“To put it bluntly, that means the only thing left was dirty work nobody wanted to do, like killing people for money. Hey, why do you think that is? Why is it that we mages were chased from public life, given no way to live other than playing the bad guy?”

“...”

“It’s all because of skills...! It’s because skills manifested two hundred years

ago that the balance of powers fell apart...!”

Gald’s voice trembled with the intense resentment he’d shown flashes of before. Eyes flaring wide, he muttered in a low tone, “I won’t forgive the god that granted people skills. I will bring this continent back to normal...back to that time when magic was king...!”

Gald shrugged as if to say this discussion was over. “Aaanyway, I’ve been talking too much.” His mood took a light turn, and he suddenly touched his right hand to the ground.

“Glassis,” he chanted, and as he did, walls of ice shot up around the arena.

Was he planning to shut them in? Lowe immediately sliced at the ice walls with his twin daggers wreathed in Flama, but the thick ice didn’t budge at all, repelling his blades.

Flama doesn’t work...?! Is the ice strengthened by the god core...?!

Flama was powerful enough that it would burn even a Sigurth skill. If it wasn’t working right now, it followed that Gald’s regular magic was more powerful than Sigurth skills. With a quiet click of his tongue, Lowe took a fighting stance in front of Lululee.

“Wh-what’s going on...?!” Lululee panicked, looking around at the ice walls rising around them, covering Jade protectively. Soon enough, the ice walls made a ceiling, enclosing them in the blink of an eye.

“Hey, Lowe...it’s been a while. Show me...your skill.”

As Lowe stood there frozen, Gald approached him.

“!”

Lowe just barely dodged the blue knife that Gald thrust at him, then took a big step back. That was when Lowe realized. Gald was after—

“Lululee!”

The next thing Lowe knew, Gald was grabbing hold of Lululee by the neck and lifting her into the air.

“Hn...kuh...!” Lululee scratched at Gald’s hand like she was in pain, but his hand didn’t so much as twitch.

“Hey, c’mon, hurry. Use your skill, Lowe. She’s gonna die, y’know?”

“...”

“Use your *skill*? How about you show your friends *if your skill is really impossible to use* in a closed space?”

Unable to decide how to proceed, Lowe just stood there for a few seconds.

Seeing him like that, Gald snorted. “Well, if you’re gonna abandon her, that’s fine by me.”

Gald lit a blue flame on the knife in his other hand. He drew it closer to Lululee and—

“—Skill Activate!” Lowe yelled instantly, without having been able to reach any clear decision. He knew what Gald wanted—to make him use a skill he couldn’t deploy in closed quarters. But if he hesitated now, then Lululee would die.

Lululee looked at Lowe and desperately shook her head. Heedless, Lowe yelled, “*Sigurth Ashinu!*”

Once activated, Lowe’s skill swept through the room, sweeping up the blue flame around his knives.

A human’s amount of magical power could produce a small stone’s size Flama at most. But Lowe’s skill would multiply that Flama. While growing at an incredible speed with a *bwoosh*, the flames bloomed in search of an exit, spreading and spreading, ignoring the will of the caster, burning up everything —

No. The multiplied blue flames converged on a single point, as if sucked toward it. Just like a tamed dog, they settled into Lowe’s right hand.

“...?!” Lululee’s eyes widened. It was obvious why—Lowe had always told her and Jade that *Sigurth Ashinu* was a difficult skill to control and that he couldn’t use it in small spaces. But now Lowe was using that “uncontrollable” skill just fine in this small, enclosed space.

Sensing Lululee’s confusion, Lowe unleashed the Flama, which was continuously multiplying and condensing in his hand, at Gald.

With a blazing *whoosh*, the giant blue flame launched toward Gald.

It was so powerful, the recoil felt like it was going to tear his arm off. Lowe quickly supported his casting arm with his free hand, bracing his legs on the ground. The Flama he had unleashed was like a massive dragon. Guided by Lowe's will, it snapped at Gald's arm as the enemy mage strangled Lululee, tearing off his limb.

"Agh...!"

The pain made Gald release Lululee.

The ice walls Gald had deployed melted away and vanished. Flung aside, Lululee drew in a hasty breath, lying on the ground as she watched the scene before her.

There was a large hole in Gald's shoulder. That was the only way to describe the phenomenon. His upper arm, where the blue dragon had passed, had been burned up in an instant, devoured without even leaving ash.

Bitten right off, Gald's right arm fell, burnt at the shoulder, with smoke rising instead of blood. The nasty sound of burning flesh hit her nose. But more importantly than that, Lululee couldn't believe the sight before her.

"Y-you can use...your skill...indoors...?"

She had heard that Lowe's skill *Sigurth Ashinu* was impossible to use in a closed space, due to its power and difficulty to control. And the fact was that thus far, Lowe had never used his skill in a restricted space like a dungeon before. That went for even in battles against floor bosses or dark gods.

"Ah-ha-ha-hya! Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Gald laughed madly, his right arm lying on the floor. "Heeeeey, did you see that? Luluuuuuuu! He can use it! He can! He actually can use his skill! It was a biiiiiig lie that he could only use it outside!"

"L-Lowe, what is the meaning of this?!" Lululee asked Lowe while hearing Gald's coarse laughter. Lowe stood there, dazed. "You've been lying all this time...?"

Even those times when they'd fought dark gods and had been just about to die. When they had despaired, thinking there was no way. When Jade had just about died. When Alina had just about died.

Even though he could use his skill, he'd been pretending he couldn't?

"P-please tell me it's not so!"

"I can't," Lowe muttered in acknowledgment. "I knew that if I used the

forbidden technique Flama, then I could use my skill indoors. But if I used a forbidden technique in front of people, I'd be made a pact-breaker. That's why I've hidden it—all this time."

"..."

Lululee's face went pallid, and she was speechless.

Lowe couldn't look Lululee in the eye.

"There we go, friendship broken. Good job!" Smirking, Gald picked up his fallen arm. "He was originally from the Dark Guild—meaning he's an assassin who's killed lots of people with that skill. The Dark Guild is so unfair. They're supposed to be a group that doesn't rely on skills. But he was blessed with both magic and skills. One day, however, he suddenly left the Dark Guild, and now he's saying he's an adventurer."

Grumbling, Gald shoved his right arm back onto his shoulder. The joint should have been burned shut, but it stuck there without any trouble, as though he was attaching the arm of a ceramic doll.

"Well, even if he did become an adventurer, can we really say that Lowe got the 'friends' he wanted? If he was lying to them, then they're not really his friends, are they?"

Then Gald suddenly vanished.

"!" Lowe lost sight of him. He felt a chill, and the next instant, the blade of a knife thrust at him from the side.

He bent backward to dodge, mostly on reflex. Next, the tip of the blade flowed toward his throat, and he blocked it with his twin blades.

Gald's dark eyes were unable to meet Lowe's gaze as their blades clashed. "My magic will destroy even your great skill." No sooner had he said that than he leaped away backward. He spread his arms to summon Flama in the space between them, the fire swirling around and swelling. Lowe's eyes widened at the sight.

Just summoning Flama consumed more than double the magic power of ordinary magic. With the low amount of mana humans had, you wouldn't be able to produce very much of it without relying on a skill. The god core really had granted Gald an incredible store of magic power.

“How are you gonna stop my Flama strengthened by the god core?” Gald laughed “hya-hya-hya-hya!” in amusement. “All you’ve got is your skill!” he cried, flinging a large ball of Flama at Lowe.

As the orb passed over the stage, the floor peeled upward from the heat, melting and deforming. Lowe nearly dodged, out of habit, only to force himself to stop. He couldn’t dodge anymore. Lululee and Jade were behind him.

“...!”

Goose bumps rose all over his body. If that fireball hit him—he would die in an instant. No—he would be erased.

Just then, his thoughts turned to Jade. He wondered if the tank always felt like this, rock-solid on the spot with his allies’ lives on his shoulders, standing in front of them, prepared to take every attack.

“Skill Activate!” Lowe steeled himself and threw his daggers. Blue flames flared in his tensed hands.

He was never going to abandon Lululee and Jade or let them die.

Lowe liked spending time with them. He’d been desperately lying and lying all this time because he wanted to protect his relationship with them.

“—*Sigurth Ashinu!*”

The blue dragon that burst out from Lowe’s skill clashed with Gald’s Flama.

“...Move...move...!”

Alina was jostled around amid the confused crowds as she tried to make her way forward somehow.

After being enveloped in the light of a crystal gate from that hidden dungeon, Alina had been flung out near the entrance of the arcade. Before she had time to make sense of things, confused people came out from the arena all at once, surging toward the entrance to the arcade. Even if Alina was there dressed as the Executioner, everyone was so upset and panicked that nobody noticed her. They were desperate to escape the arena.

“...”

Jade and the others must have been inside the arena right now, fighting.

Just before he'd teleported away, the man who killed a dark god had acquired a god core. If he thought to, he could use the core to make himself a dark god. So then all this confusion must have meant...

Impatience burned in her chest. No matter how she tried to convince herself it was okay, she couldn't rid herself of her strong sense of unease.

The escaping people surged forward like a great wave, holding Alina back. She was trying to move against a crowd of thousands, after all. Even if the arcade was very large, there was still a limit to the amount of people it could hold. Alina somehow reached one of the counters that lined the sides of the arcade, then began walking across it.

“Jade...!”

She was worried about him—he would surely be the first to die. *I've got a bad feeling, I've got a very bad feeling*, she thought, moving her feet impatiently. Even as she worried about Jade, memories of another man flickered through her mind.

An adventurer who had gone to a dungeon and never returned—Shroud, seen from behind.

Would Jade never come back, just like Shroud? That powerful anxiety made Alina impatient. Jade would be sure to search for her first thing if he knew she wasn't there. As a tank, he always prioritized protecting his allies.

So why wasn't he coming, then? Why wasn't he trying to find her? Normally, he would pop out of nowhere, saying, "Alina!"

"Move!"

Running along the rows of counters, Alina emerged from the arcade to reach the wide lobby. She flung herself into the waves of people once more. Thanks to the wide space, it was easier to get through than the arcade was, and when she was just about to enter the corridor that led to where they held matches—

"You can't go that way."

Those words, delivered from behind, made Alina stop.

It was a man's voice. It was a little low and lazy, like this was too much trouble for him... But behind his words, she sensed a hint of kindness.

For an instant, that kind voice blew all Alina's impatience away.

As though time had stopped, the confused people around them vanished. The tumult disappeared, and a soundless world spread out around her. The people fleeing in confusion passed by while bumping into her.

That familiar voice made Alina's legs tremble.

That's ridiculous. There's no way, she thought as she turned and looked behind.

Among the people fleeing was a young man, an adventurer, standing there.

He looked to be in his early twenties. He was wearing the kind of equipment sold anywhere, and he had a bland look to him; he was the type that wouldn't

stand out in a crowd. You couldn't have called his thin frame combat worthy, even as a compliment, and his unshaven, placid face was framed by long hair.

He was just like any other adventurer. But he had been tucked away with great care in Alina's memories.

"...Shroud...?" Alina called his name with a shaking voice.

The bland adventurer—Shroud, who should have been dead—shrugged just like he had when he was alive. "*I told* you adventurers are no good. You should've just stuck with your quiet receptionist job. Now you've gotten wrapped up in this..."

"Huh...?"

"Fighting a dark god? Why would you do that? That's not your job."

"..."

"You don't have to go. It's not too late now. Turn back."

The Shroud in front of her was an illusion. That much was clear.

He looked just like he had a decade ago. The way he talked and gestured were just as if he'd leaped right out of the past.

"...Turn back?" she repeated. Something felt abrasive and suspicious.

Turn back? Abandon Jade and the others?

"That's right. There's no reason you have to bother fighting. Silver Sword will manage somehow."

"..."

Oh, so that's it.

Alina suddenly understood. When she'd been very young, Shroud's words had held incredible power. Because she had loved him, she had been very influenced by his behavior. That was why she had become a receptionist.

But in the time since Alina had turned seventeen and gotten a job as a receptionist, a lot of things had happened, and she had changed.

"No. I'm going."

Shroud raised an eyebrow.

“It’s true, maybe this should be an adventurer’s job. I thought so, too, a little while ago. But now things are different.”

Just a little while ago, Alina had been running from Shroud’s death by working as a receptionist, while avoiding looking at adventurers... But now she was different.

“Because there’s people I don’t want to lose. I’d rather fight than lose them.”

Now she was a receptionist of her own free will. And she had a reason to fight. There were people she had to protect.

“Um, anyone who gets in my way...”

Alina’s silver war hammer appeared in her clenched hand. She clasped the handle with both hands, swung it up, and then she raced out toward Shroud.

“...gets a whack, even if it’s you!”

“Huh?! Hey, wait, listen...!”

As Shroud abruptly panicked, Alina slammed him mercilessly with the war hammer.

“Shut up, you phony!!”

She swung the war hammer as hard as she could, but it just swept through Shroud’s body. He vanished into thin air, and someone else rolled to the floor.

“Wahhh!”

Dumped to the ground was a short adventurer with a somehow boyish face—it was the boy adventurer who they’d just fought in a match in the tournament, Gose.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

They glared at each other, and an awkward silence momentarily descended on the lobby.

“Uh...um, this is, ah—”

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM?!!! Thought you’d pull a fast one on me, huh...?”

Instantly, the fires of rage burst into flame around Alina. She was so angry that she found herself smiling.

First, this guy Gose made fun of them with the victory prize that Alina had been trying to win, then he’d teleported them and gotten in their way, and now he was putting on this outrageous impersonation of Shroud. Even Alina had reached the limits of her patience.

Looking up at Alina standing there imposingly, Gose hastily tried to cover for himself with a cute smile. “O-oh, this is, um, part of a plan, like, Gald just made me do it... Um, it’s my skill...”

“I’ve had just about enough...”

“Hyeeee! No violence! No viol—!”

“...of you treating me like an idiot—!!”

The fighting arena quaked. Alina smacked Gose flying with her war hammer, sending a few bystanders along with him.

For as long as he could remember, Lowe had been putting food on the table by killing people with magic.

He didn't remember the reason he had gone down a path where he needed to dirty his hands. He had the feeling that he had just been focused on escaping a cold and isolated life on the street. He went to knock on the doors of the Dark Guild himself, and before he knew it, people were calling him an assassin of the Dark Guild.

But I—

Even after becoming an assassin, Lowe would often absentmindedly gaze into the yard of a local orphanage. He liked to watch children of his age playing outside.

He'd been absently thinking of things like that when the ball they'd been playing with had rolled to his feet.

For the first time, the children's eyes gathered on him. Suddenly, Lowe, who was still young, grew nervous. The nervousness of having been acknowledged for the first time by these people who seemed dazzling to him, who he had only ever watched, made him freeze. He wouldn't even get this nervous when cutting open an adult's throat with a knife.

"...!"

I want to play with them.

The moment he picked up the ball that had rolled toward him, a hopeless thirst overflowed in him. The hope that maybe if he screwed up his courage, they would let him join them rose in him. And then they would become friends, and then they might be able to promise to play again tomorrow.

What Lowe had always wanted had come close enough to reach. Heart pounding with excitement, he faced the children who'd come to get the ball,

screwed up his courage, and said, “H-hey. Let me play, too—”

Hearing that, the children were puzzled for a moment, but eventually they cried out all at once.

“Eek! This guy’s the redhead who’s been watching us all the time lately!”

“Scary!”

“The orphanage director told us to watch out for him!”

The children all yelled and yanked the ball back from Lowe, and then they ran off.

“...”

Left all alone, Lowe regretted it, thinking that he shouldn’t have said anything. He knew that they lived in a different world. Having joined the Dark Guild in order to survive, dirtied his hands with blood, and come to bear many secrets, surely he couldn’t join the kind of children who played in town.

Feeling miserable, Lowe turned around to go—when the ball bounced back to his feet once more.

“?”

He suddenly stopped and turned around, and a boy he didn’t know was standing there. He had to be about the same age as Lowe.

“Get the ball.” The boy grinned.

“Huh? O-okay...” While Lowe was confused, he threw the ball. The boy caught it but didn’t make to leave, watching Lowe intently. “Wh-what?”

“You don’t have any friends?”

Lowe’s shoulders twitched. “S-so what?! Leave me alone!” Having the nail hit on the head, he wound up yelling. He was being teased. When he turned away his flushed, hot face, he heard something unexpected.

“Then play with me.”

“...Huh?”

“Being alone was boring, right? I’m Charlo. What’s your name?”

“...”

Mouth hanging open, Lowe was speechless for a while. Then, with a start, he hastily introduced himself as Lowe in a quiet voice, and Charlo smiled gladly, throwing the ball over to him.

When he went to the same place the next day as well, Charlo was there playing, and as soon as he found Lowe, he invited him like it was nothing. After that, Lowe and Charlo came to play every day.

“Hey, look, Charlo!”

One day, when Lowe raced to the usual spot where they played, he showed Charlo some magic he had just learned.

It was just lighting a little blue match-sized flame on the end of his index finger. But even such a small thing made Charlo’s eyes sparkle.

“Whoaaaaa, whaat? That’s so cool! I don’t really get it, but it’s cool!”

“Right? It’s not normal magic.” Without being aware just what a crime it was that he was doing, the little Lowe snorted proudly. “It’s called ‘Flama.’ With my magic power now, I can only make as much firepower as a match, but once I grow up, I’ll be able to do even cooler moves.”

“It’s so pretty.”

“Don’t be dumb, this isn’t pretty; it’s a really powerful spell, okay?!”

“So then you’re gonna become a powerful adventurer!” Charlo said without missing a beat.

“Huh?” Lowe blinked.

Seeing Lowe puzzled, Charlo flushed with excitement. “I know all about it. Black mages are the rear attackers in an adventurer’s party. I wanna be an adventurer in the future, too! Ah, I know, once we’re adventurers, let’s make a party. You’ll be the rear attacker, and I’ll be the front attacker!”

“A-ah, yeah!”

Lowe felt like he’d suddenly had cold water splashed over him, like he had been drawn from a dream back to reality.

Lowe would not become an adventurer. That was because Lowe was already a member of the Dark Guild. But he was glad that Charlo would invite him, and he wound up nodding, with a rather complicated smile.

After that, Lowe played with Charlo practically every day. Everything was fun with him, and that continued for about a month. Then one day, it happened.

“Hey! Charlo!”

Lowe went to the usual square and said hi to Charlo as usual. But when Charlo turned around, he didn’t react like he usually did.

“...Who are you?” Charlo stared at Lowe’s face and tilted his head.

“Huh?”

Not understanding what Charlo had said, Lowe stopped on the spot. He thought it was a bad joke. But Charlo was looking at him like a stranger.

“Wh-what are you talking about? It’s me, Lowe,” Lowe said desperately to Charlo. “Listen, some things you can joke about, and some things you can’t—”

“Lowe...?” Charlo just muttered like he really didn’t get it, even after hearing Lowe’s name. Even though just the day before, he had been calling him that all the time. “Sorry, I really don’t know you. Are you mistaking me for someone else?” Charlo said, and then another friend called him, and he left.

“...Huh...?” Left behind, Lowe couldn’t understand for a while what had just happened, and he just stood there.

That was when he heard a low, husky voice murmuring to him from behind. “—Lowe.” It was the voice of a familiar old man. It was the voice of Zepha, guildmaster of the Dark Guild, who would never be in the middle of town. That was how Lowe figured it all out.

“...You...erased his memories...Charlo’s memories...” Lowe clenched his fists and glared at his toes.

The presence behind him was not rattled in the slightest as he answered, “That’s right. Flama is a forbidden technique and confidential information in the guild. The ordinary folk cannot know of it. Even a small child who understands nothing.”

“Why...even his memories of me...?”

“Erasing knowledge is one thing, but erasing a memory of having happened to see something by chance is difficult to control down to the details. You must erase all memories attached to it, including the one who showed them and the situation they showed it in. And in the first place, your act is a breach of pact. Normally, you would be killed—”

Turning around, Lowe grabbed Zepha’s clothing. “Then kill me!”

Zepha paused his speech.

“You should just kill me! Why even his memories...?!”

“...Whether you live or die, it’s the same. What has been found out must be erased.”

Lowe’s tears overflowed.

If he would be forgotten, he would rather have been killed first.

“...He was the first friend I’ve ever made...!”

In the end, that was it for him and Charlo. Charlo never suddenly remembered and came to visit him, and neither did Lowe go to visit him. That was all friendship was, ultimately. Ever since then, Lowe had never made friends, throwing himself into work alone.

Having gone on many years like that, one day when he turned fifteen, Lowe said to the guildmaster of the Dark Guild quite nonchalantly, “Hey, gramps. Can I leave the guild?”

“Go ahead.”

Lowe got permission so easily, he automatically spurted out the booze he’d been drinking.

Guildmaster Zepha, across from him, scowled in sincere distaste. “How dirty... please don’t.”

“Huh, really? I never thought you’d let me.”

“Do you think the Dark Guild is like some kind of organized crime profession?”

“Isn’t it?”

“So long as you don’t break the pact, I won’t do a thing. There are in fact a number of others who have had their memories erased and returned to society without a problem. Following the rules is the same for both the public sphere and the underworld.”

With a sigh, Zepha muttered, “Lowe...I remember that cruel thing I did to you, long ago.”

“ ... ”

That cruel thing. Lowe knew immediately what Zepha meant. It was about Charlo. Having such a nostalgic memory brought up now made Lowe dimly think back on the past.

“...There’s nothing really for you to feel bad about.” Lowe shrugged with a casual smile. “That was my fault to begin with, for showing off forbidden techniques. I brought it on myself—”

“Hmm? I don’t feel particularly bad at all. That was all your fault.”

“... You rotten old fart...” Lowe knew that, but having it said to him with a nonchalant attitude and a stuck-out tongue pissed him off. Lips twitching, Lowe restrained the urge to sock him one and let out a hard sigh.

Seeing him like that, Zepha cackled gleefully. “While I don’t feel bad, ever since that incident, I’ve had the feeling like it was just a *little* early for you to join the Dark Guild.”

“What? You’re telling me that now? I’ve been with the Dark Guild over ten years, though.”

“You’ve managed to earn enough money to live, haven’t you?”

“ ... ”

It was true that his initial goal was money to live. And then, just like he’d been aiming for, the Dark Guild had helped Lowe make money. They had given him the way to make money. In that sense, Lowe had fulfilled his goal in joining the Dark Guild.

“Lowe, you have something that we didn’t have. If you’ve fulfilled your goal, then there’s no need for you to be in the Dark Guild any longer.”

“You mean a Sigurth skill? Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard enough of those nasty comments—”

“Not that.” Zepha’s eyes pierced Lowe. “A heart capable of having hope in people.”

“...What?”

Seeing Lowe furrow his brow skeptically, Zepha cracked a smile. “People are hopelessly foolish creatures—that’s all that we think of them. You’re different. If you ever come to despair of people, then come back to the Dark Guild.”

“...I’m gonna erase my memories of forbidden techniques, however, so I won’t be useful even if I do come back, though.”

Once Lowe erased his memories of forbidden techniques, he wouldn’t be much different from any other black mage. And his Sigurth skill was difficult to control with regular spells, so it would become useless. Leaving the Dark Guild basically meant letting go of most of the combat techniques that he had cultivated thus far. Lowe was prepared for that.

“Oh yes, about that.” Suddenly Zepha’s tone brightened, and he stuck a finger up. “Lowe, why don’t we set one condition for a bargain? If you accept my condition, then I’ll exempt you from the memory erasure when leaving the Dark Guild. Since frankly, it’d be regrettable to lose your strength.”

“A condition?”

Always the crafty old man, Lowe thought, but he listened to what he had to say.

“How about in exchange for exempting you from the memory erasure of forbidden techniques, even after you’ve left, you help with our work? Specifically speaking, dealing with pact-breakers...since they have forbidden techniques and are tough to deal with. It has to be someone capable, or they’ll get killed instead.”

“It’s totally obvious your ulterior motive is to work me like a dog.”

“And you can keep your skill from being useless. It’s not a bad deal. You’re going to become an adventurer anyway, right?”

“...”

While he felt miffed at how Zepha was talking like he saw through everything, he was on the mark, so Lowe pouted. “It’s not like I’m that attached to forbidden techniques or my skill, though—”

“—Once we’re adventurers, let’s make a party!”

Lowe suddenly remembered that remark from long ago.

Had Charlo become an adventurer? Had he become a strong frontline attacker and found a party around now, and was setting out to dungeons? Maybe he might meet him again, as an adventurer.

...Well, if I’m going to be an adventurer, then it’d be advantageous to have some strong cards to play...

He couldn’t use Flama in front of other people, but there was no harm in having it as a means to protect himself if the time came. He didn’t like being made to help Zepha, but if he didn’t like it, then he could just get his memory erased and cut ties with the Dark Guild completely.

“Fine. I accept your condition.”

“Oh-ho. You’re being unusually obedient.”

“I don’t see a problem with that.”

“By the way, the boy Charlo who you used to play with long ago hasn’t become an adventurer.”

“...”

“Now he’s started a family and is living peacefully as a guild employee.”

Lowe sighed. “You really are a nasty old man. You’re gonna tell me that? You instantly shattered that dream I had.”

“I’d rather you say that I eliminated the time you’d waste chasing a pointless fantasy.” Cackling, Zepha suddenly lowered his voice. “Nothing you’re hoping for will happen. Are you all right with that?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Even hearing that Charlo wasn’t an adventurer weirdly made sense to him.

Charlo had been cheerful with lots of friends, and he could easily manage in society without bothering to throw himself into a dangerous job like adventurer. And plus, finding out that he wasn't working a dangerous job was actually a relief.

"Then we have an agreement. I'll get out of this depressing place right away."

"Take care."

And so when he left the Dark Guild and tried out being an adventurer, before he knew it, he had wound up with Silver Sword. He had planned to take it casually, and once he was satisfied, casually retire.

But—when the trouble that was the dark gods came around, it had made it difficult to leave. No, even more trouble than that was the presence of Jade and Lululee.

If Lowe used his forbidden technique in front of them, then of course Lowe would become a pact-breaker. Not only that, instantly the Dark Guild would come to the two of them and erase their memories. Lowe's presence would be erased from their memories, and the details of that would be deleted.

"—...Who are you?"

The words Charlo had said had always ached, deep in his heart.

He had never thought that being forgotten would be this painful.

He just really didn't want that.

Jade and Lululee were the only people he just didn't want forgetting him. That's why he hadn't used forbidden techniques, no matter what the situation.

He did think he was stupid. Clinging to that, lying instead, deceiving his friends, and watching from a distance even when they were in terrible trouble

—

“Lowe...!”

Lululee’s hoarse scream echoed emptily through the arena.

Lowe collapsed with a *thud*, a deep gouge in his side. The floor around him had peeled up, melting, with the marks of a clash between incredible heat sources vividly carved into it.

Gald’s highest-power Flama, using the god core, and Lowe’s Sigurth skill, *Sigurth Ashinu*, using Flama, had collided head-on. And Lowe, lying there, indicated the result.

“Ah-hya-hya-hya-hya! I win!” Gald clapped his hands mockingly.

It had looked as if Lowe’s skill had rivaled Gald’s Flama. But it had gradually been pushed back, pushed back by the force of Gald’s magic power, strengthened by the god core. Lowe had just barely avoided the trajectory of the attack, letting it skim his side to keep the damage to the absolute minimum.

“Ah...ngh...”

But his wound as he lay there was worse than if he’d just been skimmed by a spell. It looked like he’d been gouged out. Heat rose from the wound, and he broke into a cold sweat all over from the pain.

“Skill Activate: *Sigurth Revive!*”

Just a heal spell would be no good. Lululee had already used her skill on Jade, but she activated her skill a second time. Her body abruptly felt much heavier, but in exchange, Lowe’s trembling stopped a little.

“Oh, that was a fun show I got to see there.”

Gald’s foot strode into Lululee’s view. No sooner had she noticed it than a dull impact ran through her stomach. Gald had kicked her. By the time she understood that, Lululee was in the air, sliding over the stage.

“Urk...”

Lululee desperately got up, trying to approach Lowe. But Gald was blocking the way before her.

“Now then, just you left, huh? Your skill was...well, I guess it doesn’t really matter,” Gald muttered in disinterest, swinging up his leg in order to kick Lululee again.

“...”

She immediately closed her eyes, but the impact never came.

Lululee opened her eyes with a start to see someone’s back, defending her.

Jade’s back was there, swaying unsteadily as he barred Gald’s way.

“Jade! You can’t move yet...!”

She hadn’t finished healing the hole in his leg or in his abdomen. And plus, Jade’s whole body was already racked with skill exhaustion, which couldn’t be healed.

“Oh, so you can still stand? Wow, you’re something.” Gald clapped spontaneously. “Did you make sure to watch Lowe the liar? That means that all this time, while you guys were spitting blood fighting, he was secretly slacking. That’s what you’ve been desperately protecting, calling him a friend—”

“Shut up,” Jade said in a low voice. “Lowe is one of us...!” He glared at Gald with indomitable flames burning in his eyes. But that seemed to be the most he could do, and he coughed like he was in pain, spitting blood.

“Persistent little cockroach!” Gald cried, spraying spittle, and he was about to punch Jade right in the temple...when his arm stopped flat. Instead of punching, he leaped, moving away from them.

At just about the same time, a heavy blow slammed down on the spot where Gald had just been. A beat later, there was the sound of someone lightly landing on the ground.

“You...!” Seeing who had appeared, Gald clicked his tongue.

Landing there quietly in a dramatically fluttering cloak that covered her whole

body was Alina, war hammer at the ready.

“ ... ”

Her bad feeling was on the mark.

Alina looked around, and seeing how hopeless things were, she bit her lip.

Jade and Lowe were lying on the ground, and Lululee must have overused her Sigurth skill to heal them, as her face was pale, but she was still trying to heal them.

It was fair to call this a total party wipe.

“Lululee...the two of them aren’t dead...right...?” asked Alina.

“They’re alive! But they’re badly wounded, and Jade’s skill exhaustion is also severe...”

“ ... ”

With a little bite of her lip, Alina looked toward the small-pupiled man who had driven Jade and the others to defeat.

This was the man who called himself Gald, who had killed the dark god Raum in the hidden dungeon they had teleported to and stolen the god core. He was an acquaintance of Lowe’s...so he said, but looking at the merciless wounds on Lowe from Gald, it was clear that he was no gentle “acquaintance.”

“So you’re the Executioner...and that’s your Dia skill, *Dia Break*, huh?” Gald already bore the familiar mark of Dia on his forehead as he glared at her.

He’d become a dark god. That was why he had managed to push Jade and the others to this point.

“...So what?” Alina shot back.

But Alina’s arrival made him cry out in glee. “If I kill you, then that’ll prove that my magic is the strongest...! After Silver Sword comes you! You’re gonna die for my goal...! In order to prove that magic is better than skills!”

“...To prove that...?” Alina muttered, her voice trembling slightly. “You did this...for something like that...?”

She clenched her war hammer so hard that her hands turned white. She bit her lip hard enough to bleed.

Hopeless fury welled up from within her.

This wasn’t a dangerous dungeon, nor was it a place where adventurers would be working. It was just a fighting arena. Once they finished this once-every-four-year tournament, someone would win, and then it was supposed to end.

So then why? Why did Jade and the others have to nearly die?

Why did they always try to steal away the people Alina cared about—?

“*Something like that, you say?*” Gald’s eyebrow twitched. “...Oh, I see... something like that...that’s all it is...” Muttering, he thrust out his right arm, palm to the sky. Suddenly, his arm began to turn black.

“!” Alina went on guard, readying her war hammer, while before her, something even stranger began to happen to Gald’s blackened right arm. The palm of his hand roiled black, bubbling just like a muddy swamp.

“...Right now, even the mages of the Dark Guild are all such damn cowards, they all ignore it, but...” While this creepy sight was unfolding, Gald continued to mutter. “Do you understand just how much the mages two hundred years ago resented skills, having their positions stolen from them...?”

Gald’s hand made a burbling noise like something was about to gush out. Eventually, the black fluid that overflowed from his palm dribbled to the floor— instantly, just as if it had opened up a hole that went deep into the black dark, a pitch-black puddle spread on the floor.

“Wha...?!”

Alina had no idea just what was going on. Only the shivers running up her spine were telling her something bad was happening. Darkness leaked from Gald’s right hand, and the fallen darkness spread the black puddle even farther.

“Two hundred years ago, with their magic rejected and driven into the

shadows, the mages left behind words of a curse—in exchange for their own lives.” Hanging his head, Gald finally turned his dark eyes to Alina.

“...*Skills should be destroyed...*,” he muttered in a low, low voice, like a spell, and that moment, there was a rippling sound as the black puddle spread on the floor undulated.

“Skills should be destroyed...!”

That undulation gradually became greater, and it whirled around.

“Skills should be destroyed!!”

That moment.

The black puddle swelled large, and something leaped out, as if breaking through a film.

“?!”

A low howl like a ghost’s rang out. It was black and long and quickly rose to the heavens. Alina looked up, and filling her field of view was a jet-black dragon floating in the air.

“Wh-what is that...?!”

Maybe it would be more accurate to say that the black fluid was taking the shape of a dragon. The black fluid that composed its body undulated, dripping on the floor, dyeing it with black. It was different from a dragon, like a monster, but its eyes glowed red, and it bared its fangs like a starving beast.

“Forbidden technique: summoning the cursed dragon—” Gald smirked. “Come, cursed dragon...the skill users you loathed are right in front of you.”

The cursed dragon moaned, “Wooohhh...!” like a lament. The moment its red eyes saw Alina—a cold shiver hit her spine.

Clear malice. Jealousy enough that you’d want to claw at your throat, suffocating envy... Humiliation, frustration. And an all too powerful murderous intent that was all those mixed together.

When the red eyes of the cursed dragon captured her, those dark feelings hit Alina like a wave. Alina had never before been hit with this many massive

negative emotions, like all of humanity's darkness condensed, and it froze her.

"Devour her!" Gald ordered, and the jet-black dragon howled and attacked Alina.

"...!"

She understood that it was not just an attack, but her feet wouldn't move. Immediately, she raised her war hammer like a shield, to block its fierce fangs.

"...?!"

That was when Alina's breath caught—since the moment the cursed dragon bit into the silver war hammer, a repulsive pattern had appeared on her weapon. It gradually spread as if eating away at it, covering the whole war hammer.

"What is this...?!"

She let go of the war hammer at once, and the cursed dragon waved its head about, as if to tear the prey it had bitten to shreds. *Baching*, went the war hammer as it was crunched in the dragon's mouth.

But that wasn't all. The black pattern that had corroded the war hammer appeared on Alina's arms as well. It was a repulsive pattern, like tangled snakes.

"Woohhhh...!"

Having destroyed the war hammer, the cursed dragon cried out like it was lamenting. Its gaze of condensed malice toward humans turned to Alina as if to say, *You're next*.

"...Skill Activate: *Dia Break!*" Alina activated her skill before she could be caught in that fear once more. But—

"...Huh...?"

Nothing responded to Alina's call.

No white magic sigil or silver war hammer appeared. Alina couldn't understand what had happened, crying once more, "*Dia Break!*"

But no matter how many times she chanted it, the silver war hammer did not appear after all, and her Dia skill did not activate.

“My skill won’t work...?!” Alina looked down at her hands in shock. She didn’t feel anything strange physically, and she wasn’t experiencing skill exhaustion. It was just that strange pattern covering her hands.

“—Flama.”

When she lifted her head with a start, Gald was firing off a blue flame. When it came close, she somehow dodged to the side—but her leap was weak. Unable to activate *Dia Break*, her muscle strength was back to that of an ordinary human’s. Leaping not even half as far as she had imagined, the Flama just barely passed by her side to disappear. If she’d reacted even a little late, she would have been hit.

“...!”

Her heart pounded.

Her skill wouldn’t activate... In other words, right now, Alina was just a girl with no powers at all.

“What’s the matter? Can’t do anything without your skill?” Gald smirked in amusement at her pale face. The black cursed dragon circled around him protectively.

“Well, I guess I didn’t have to ask!” Cackling, Gald fired off countless Flamas.

“...!”

A wide area attack. For an instant, Alina’s thoughts all came to a halt. There was no way for her to evade with her strength now—

The Flama was right in front of her face, but someone wrapped their arms around her waist and flung her to roll off to the side.

“Hn...?!”

She was flung so hard, she dug into the ground of the arena. She was scraped here and there, but she had evaded the Flama just by a hair. Alina lifted her face and saw the man who was lying face down like her at her side and cried out, “Lowe...?!”

Lowe was holding his wounded side, his expression grim. He was supposed to have been getting healed by Lululee, but he had saved Alina from Gald’s attack.

“Y-your injury...”

“This isn’t the time for that... I’m the only one who can move right now...!” he said, but his face was pale and bloodless, and he was soaked in sweat. His pained gaze flicked toward Alina’s arms. “Dammit...I never thought Gald would even use the damn cursed dragon...”

“Hey, the heck is this?! My skill won’t activate...!” Alina pressed Lowe, who seemed to know something.

Lowe said bitterly, “It’s a forbidden technique. Some mages two hundred years ago made it in exchange for their lives. It’s the oldest and most dangerous forbidden technique, the ‘cursed dragon’...”

“Cursed dragon...?”

“A powerful curse born from resentment... It’s a curse spell that robs your skills.”

Hearing that, Alina was shocked. “R-robs...skills...?!”

“Oh, what an observation!” Gald’s elated voice rang through the fighting arena. The corners of his lips were pulled up, and he touched the cursed dragon.

“Forbidden technique: cursed dragon... When I learned about this, I became certain. It’s possible that magic can even surpass Dia skills. If I use this to kill the Executioner...then those skill-brained idiots have to open their eyes...!”

“...Surpass...a Dia skill...?”

Proof. She finally understood the meaning of what Gald had said. Gald had always planned to use that repulsive dragon to seal away Alina’s Dia skill.

“Do you know what this dragon really is?” Gald coldly narrowed his eyes. “It’s the resentment of mages over the course of two hundred years. It was their resentment for having their positions stolen by skills and the value of magic diminished by rotten-eyed idiots, but even then they swore they would one day strike back, and so ended their lives... Even the Dark Guild didn’t know what to do with this forbidden technique. They even sealed it away.”

Alina looked down at the curse patterns that marked her arms.

“...I can’t use...my skill...”

It was like the heavy weight of despair weighed down on her whole body.

She couldn’t fight. She couldn’t protect them. So they would all die.

They would all die, like Shroud. Every single one of them would be gone.

She would be alone again—

When Alina was just about swallowed up by despair, Lowe’s words made her snap out of it. “...We just have to destroy that cursed dragon.”

“But my skill—”

“I’ll do it,” Lowe muttered. “I’ll destroy the cursed dragon.”

The moment Lowe said that, Gald burst out laughing, holding his stomach. “Destroy the cursed dragon?! With your useless Sigurth skill that can’t even beat Flama?”

“...”

“I beat your skill. A pitiful fallen loser doesn’t get to talk without the victor’s permissi—”

“I wanted to fight, too. Always have.”

Powerful regret and frustration flashed in Lowe’s heart. He clenched his teeth as he stood before Alina.

Every time Jade, Lululee, and Alina had been forced into tough situations, he had chastised himself for it, over and over.

When they had first encountered a dark god in the White Tower, and when they had fought the twin dark gods in the Forest of Eternity, and when they had been forced into a hard fight with Glen as a dark god underneath guild headquarters—

He should have said that he still had one more move, that he could use his Sigurth skill. Despite that, while the others had been fighting desperately, he’d been in the background, frightened of that one thing Charlo had said to him.

“—...*Who are you?*”

Even though they could have died. *Being more scared of being forgotten even then is strange, if I do say so myself.* He was dishonest. Weak. He shouldn’t be standing shoulder to shoulder with the others, calling one another friends.

But then the very thing he’d gone so far to avoid, the thing he’d been afraid of, had happened. Now that the others had learned about forbidden techniques, they would have their memories of him erased. Just like Charlo. What he had been most afraid of would happen. There was no way to avoid it

now.

So then if this would be their last fight anyway, right before their memories vanished—then protecting these people who called a liar like him a friend was the last battle he could do.

“I’ll fight, too.”

Alina must have sensed something in Lowe’s calm eyes, as she said no more.

Lowe thrust up one hand. In his spread palm, he summoned a Flama the size of a little rock.

“Skill Activate: *Sigurth Ashinu!*”

Flama swirled in Lowe’s palm.

Before their eyes it grew, clashing and roiling, becoming a great ball and swelling in size. It climbed into the sky like a whirlwind, sweeping upward, getting even bigger. Eventually, having continued to increase limitlessly, the Flama created a blue ceiling, as if to cover the whole fighting arena.

“Ha! Are you stupid? Didn’t you learn before that your skill can’t beat my power?” Gald laughed scornfully.

But Lowe just snorted back at him. “You’re the idiot, *iiidiot.*”

That was when it happened.

“—Skill Activate: *Sigurth Blood!*” Jade’s muttered chant rang out.

“!” Gald’s eyes widened as he gasped. Jade, who should have been curled up, was on his feet. On the verge of death, he thrust out his right arm, which was emitting the red light of his skill.

That was the skill that made him a sacrifice for his allies and pointed the brunt of all attacks at him—the one that could take all the skills deployed around him and force them to focus on himself.

Jade’s activated *Sigurth Blood* mixed with Lowe’s *Sigurth Ashinu*, and immediately the amplified Flama began to converge in Jade’s palm.

Gald’s expression transformed. He had finally realized what the two were doing.

“...A composite skill!”

No sooner had Gald said that than he pointed his palm at Jade and summoned a blue flame. Realizing what he was trying to do, Alina immediately got in front of Gald. “...I won’t let you.”

“Move it! You skillless, inept—”

“I won’t move!” Alina declared firmly, fixing a glare on Gald. Right now, she didn’t have any way to fight at all, but that didn’t matter.

She didn’t fight because she was guaranteed to win or because she had the strongest skill.

Alina had always been fighting to keep from losing things. That hadn’t changed, even now that she had lost her skill.

“I won’t move...!”

“Enough of your nonsense, girl!!” Gald cried, spraying spittle, and shot multiple Flamas at her. Alina clenched her teeth and glared at the high-powered blue flame. Right when the blue flames that could make a human body vanish were about to snap at Alina—suddenly someone cut in front of her, and at the same time, the attacking Flama vanished with a *whoosh*.

It was Jade.

“Jade!”

Jade stood in front of Alina, thrusting out a white shield she hadn’t seen before. It was a shield made of wavering white flames—it was as if all the Flama that had been deployed had converged toward Jade, condensed—enough that it would easily negate Gald’s Flama.

“...Protecting people is my job...!”

Breathing heavily, even on the verge of death, Jade still glared at Gald.

“My Flama...?!”

Having swallowed a god core, Gald could use Flama, which was not just any

forbidden technique. It should have had enough power to defeat Lowe's *Sigurth Ashinu*. The white flame blocking it easily made Gald's eyes widen.

When Jade's shield of white finished its job, it warped and lost its shape. The large clump of flame eventually transformed into the shape of a sword, floating horizontally as if waiting for its next master.

"Lowe!"

The moment Jade called Lowe's name, Lowe zoomed out from the side.

He snatched away the sword-shaped white flame and then grabbed it by each end and tore it apart. It became a pair of twin swords that wavered in Lowe's hands.

Lowe had never succeeded at a composite skill with Jade, no matter how many times he tried. But he'd known from the start how to make it succeed. The one way to make *Sigurth Ashinu*, which would go out of control with regular magic, obey him—that was to use the forbidden technique, Flama.

"It can't be, a condensation of Flama...?! Dammit! Cursed dragon!!"

Gald finally got the cursed dragon that twined around him moving. When he thrust his arm out toward Lowe, the cursed dragon let out a low howl of resentment, attacking Lowe.

But Lowe didn't stop.

In fact, he soundlessly accelerated. Flipping his white-flamed daggers into a reverse grip, he kept his stance low as he glared straight at the approaching cursed dragon. He never slowed down, shooting straight through the beast—

With a piercing sound, like the air was trembling, a white flash ripped apart the cursed dragon.

"Wha...?!"

With that rattled cry from Gald, a dry sound rang out.

The sounds of *crrk*, *crkk* increased in number. It was the sound of countless shining white cracks going through the black cursed dragon. The cracks got bigger and bigger.

“My cursed dragon...?!”

Eventually, with a snapping sound, the dragon of resentment that protected Gald shattered into white light.

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“...Now you’ve done it...!”

Gald glared at Lowe with bloodshot eyes. The white flame daggers vanished from Lowe’s hands, and there was nothing left after.

But the corners of Lowe’s lips quirked up as he muttered, “You handle the rest.”

That moment.

The heavy *thud* of impact sent Gald flying. Alina, with the curse patterns undone, had slammed her silver war hammer into Gald’s side.

“Gwah...!”

Gald’s body flew right in a straight line, bouncing twice atop the stage and sliding. But having swallowed a god core, his body was inhumanly sturdy, and even though he’d been hit with a Dia skill, he didn’t have a single serious wound.

“You bastard—”

But that didn’t matter. Alina didn’t let Gald get up, catching up with him again to thwack him into the air with her war hammer as he was sitting up.

“Guh...! Ngk, Flama!”

Gald, who realized at this rate that he would get beaten over and over without getting to hit back, forcibly shot Flama at Alina from midair. The Flama went right for her face as she was chasing down Gald.

But Alina didn’t back off or evade.

“Haaaaaaaah!!” Swinging her war hammer sideways, she swept away the Flama with brute force. Even just the scattered bits of flames were fearsomely powerful, and they burned Alina’s hair and arms, but she ignored them, plunging forward.

“Wha...?” Her intensity made Gald’s face freeze—and that was right where her war hammer sank in, swung in rage.

“Gerf, gah!” Gald’s body was whacked like a toy, bouncing on the ground. His brain was rattled in his head. Bursts filled his vision. As he lost his sense of balance and crawled on the ground, Alina stood before him.

“W-wai—!”

His cry to stop was drowned out by the smack of the war hammer. He was struck right in the gut.

Sent rolling across the ground once more, this time Gald panicked and leaped up, swiftly checking around him. As Alina pursued him closely with an intense roar, he let out a sharp cry.

“Wait!”

Alina stopped right on the spot—since she knew what Gald was after.

“Look at this! If I move even a little, he’ll go up in smoke.”

Gald’s arm was stretched out straight to the side. He had summoned a blue flame in his hand, and he was aiming at Jade, who had used up all his strength.

“...”

Seeing Alina finally stop her fierce attack, Gald laughed triumphantly. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I didn’t think that was all you had, Executioner. Where’s the value in fighting for a little scrub like this?”

“...Scrub?”

“That’s right, a scrub. He’s a scrub! A scrub who flaunted his great skill everywhere, but then couldn’t even beat magic—”

Gald’s scornful laughter was cut off halfway.

The war hammer slammed right into his side with a *bathunk* of heavy impact roaring out.

“Guhh...?!”

As he was sent rolling, Alina strode up to stand before him. She looked down at him coldly and said quietly, “—You don’t know anything.” With that

muttered remark, Alina wrung her shaking voice out from between her tightly clenched teeth. "...You don't know anything...not about the overtime nobody would help me with...or the work that never lessened...the battles with loneliness and sleepiness...the way your mental state gets negative late at night..."

"...What?"

"And just how grateful I am to hear the words, *I'll help you with overtime*. How much it makes me feel better just to have someone work with me. You don't know anything!"

"...Over...time...?" Gald seemed unable to understand, his expression frozen.

Not giving a damn about his reaction, Alina squeezed the handle of her war hammer. "I'm not talking about whether Jade is strong or weak...! I'm saying that I won't let you steal him from me...!"

Alina had always been alone.

Even in her third year as a receptionist, Alina was still doing nothing but overtime, always alone in the empty office late at night.

But that was the path she had chosen. Ever since that day Shroud had died, Alina had chosen the path of dealing with things alone. She decided to become a receptionist, then became one, dealt with overtime, hated adventurers, and created a secret in order to get rid of overtime.

Since if she was alone, she wouldn't have to lose anyone.

But before she knew it, Jade had showed up at the office where she was supposed to have been alone.

No matter how many times he nearly died, he would absolutely never die—he'd stick with her like a zombie. Jade's presence, not leaving Alina alone, had saved Alina from her fear.

The fear that she would lose someone and the curse of continually being afraid of that—Jade had freed her from that.

"And by the way, just so you know! Jade training in that composite skill was, you know...!"

Heedless of Gald's confusion, Alina bared her teeth.

"For—," she started saying without thinking, then abruptly stopped. Incredible embarrassment rose up, and she snapped out of it in an instant, as if she'd been splashed with cold water, and her anger cooled.

"For...", she started to say, opening and closing her mouth a bunch of times, balling her hands into fists.

But I have to say this. I have to argue back—no one else but me.

Alina pressed her lips together, then steeled herself and yelled like a slam, "For me! It wasn't for the dark god! It wasn't for you! Can you stop getting the wrong idea and laughing away like that?!"

Jade had looked like he was suffering so much, vomiting blood as he trained, and maybe it was silly for him to rely on composite skills, with their uncertain effects. But it had never been meaningless. He wasn't some scrub.

If his determination and his attitude had managed to ease even some of the fear that had settled in Alina's heart, then that was far, far more meaningful than any powerful ultimate attack.

"You don't know anything...! So stop with that constant gross laughter...!"

Alina flared her eyes wide, bounding off the ground to approach Gald.

"! Dammit...!" Panicking, Gald looked between the oncoming Alina and Jade, and left without a choice, he fired his Flama at Alina. Alina swung her war hammer through the empty air, aiming for those things flying at her.

And with a *whoosh*, it swept up a golden shock wave.

Intense wind pushed back the oncoming Flama, driving it toward Gald instead.

"?! " The blue fireballs flew back at him, burning one of his eyes and melting his arm.

"Gwaaagh!"

The moment Gald twisted around in pain, Alina was already in front of him, swinging the war hammer up overhead.

She felt a hot pulsing from the war hammer in her grasp. It was different from the cold silver war hammer she'd been feeling before.

It was Alina's golden hammer, which smashed all obstacles that would try to steal from her what mattered.

Because she didn't want to lose anything anymore. Because if she just cried in sorrow, if she just lamented her misfortune, it would be stolen from her again.

So she would fight.

"...!"

Gald shivered, his cheeks spasming. He couldn't do anything now, just dumbly looking up at Alina.

"St—!"

"Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeee—!!"

Alina's strike pierced Gald's stomach.

The war hammer smashed the god core he'd swallowed, pulverizing the dark god's power along with it. The mark of Dia vanished from Gald's forehead. Lightly sent flying, Gald rolled along the ground and then stopped moving.

Eventually, his body became dust and scattered.

“Alina...”

While gazing at the scattering Gald, Jade wept.

“I’m so happy, I am. But for some reason, I just can’t be *that* happy...”

So your valuation of me is based on my skills at office work..., Jade thought, shoulders slumped, as Lululee and Lowe consoled him in semi-amusement.

“Don’t worry about it, leader.”

“Your determination really got across to her, Jade! That’s a good thing.”

“Yeah, maybe, but...”

As a man, he really did want to be thought of as a strong and reliable guy. Well, Alina’s power was so out of the ordinary, it seemed like it’d be rather difficult to get her to think that way about him, though.

Dammit...I swear I’ll get stronger...

Right as he was firmly swearing that with tears in his eyes, there was the sound of footsteps, and a figure came to stand before him. With her arms folded in an imposing stance, looking waaay down at him wordlessly, was Alina.

Lips pressed in a straight line, eyes totally fixed on him—this face said she was definitely angry. He got that much, but didn’t get why, and so he asked with much trepidation, “Wh-what is it, Alina...?”

Sensing danger, Lululee and Lowe quickly moved away from him.

“...You just about died again.”

“Huh?”

“I said you’re not allowed to die! Why is it every time I take my eye off you, every single time, you go straight to almost dying!”

“I—I didn’t die, so forgive me!”

Jade was yanked back and forth, strangled by his lapels for irrational reasons. Dizzy from blood loss, Jade desperately apologized.

“More importantly, Lowe! Lowe!” Instincts sensing his danger, that he would die at this rate, Jade hastily threw a look over at Lowe. “So in short, this means you’re a member of the Dark Guild?” Choosing the moment when Alina’s hands came to a sharp stop, Jade casually escaped from her grasp and changed the subject. “The Flama that you were using was the Dark Guild’s forbidden technique, right?”

Having the discussion turned to him, Lowe awkwardly averted his eyes. “Ahhh...well, it was a long time ago that I was with the Dark Guild. I’m a proper adventurer now, but well, I guess it’s like I’m just halfway involved with the Dark Guild.”

“Halfway?”



“The iron rule when you leave the Dark Guild is that they erase all your memories about forbidden techniques. But I was exempted from memory erasure, on the condition that I help them deal with pact-breakers. Well, basically the Dark Guild was okay with me leaving, but they didn’t want to lose a fighter.”

“...So that means...” Lululee, who had been listening, went pale as if she had realized something frightening. “All this time, in between work with Silver Sword, you’ve been killing these ‘pact-breakers’—?”

“Hmm, well, I got requests from the guild just sometimes and killed people.”

With a “yeep,” Lululee’s face stiffened. “I never thought you were a dangerous person like that...”

“Ahhh, sorry for never saying anything.”

“Don’t you give me that!!” Instantly, Lululee’s cheeks were all puffed up, hands on her hips as she scolded him. “So that was the reason that you didn’t come drinking with us sometimes?! Unforgivable!”

“...Ahhh, yeah, sorry.”

“But that’s what was going on, huh? Now it all makes sense.” Having listened to everything, Jade breathed a sigh of relief. “Since you’ve been using forbidden techniques without hesitation. If you left the Dark Guild, you would have had your memory of them erased. So then I was worried if you were a pact-breaker like Gald.”

“—Well, about that...,” Lowe muttered, ruining Jade’s relief. “I’m a pact-breaker now.”

“Huh?”

When they blinked, a voice came from afar.

“Li’l miss, you guys all right?” Coming up to them at a trot was the guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild, Glen. Glen saw the ruined arena and the Silver Sword’s wounds, and instantly his expression turned grim. “I’ve heard about everything that happened. The medical team will be coming soon—”

“How dare you come brazenly walking down here after it’s all over...!” Alina

cut him off, her resentful voice ringing out low. “Don’t show up since everything’s conveniently over! Do you know what happened to us?!”

“S-sorry, I’ll miss. I actually did rush back in a panic from the Dark Guild headquarters after hearing about the situation.”

“From the Dark Guild headquarters? How did you get here from that far away —?” Jade expressed doubt about Glen’s excuse, but then Lowe interrupted, voice ringing out.

“Geh! Gramps?!”

Unusually, Lowe sounded panicked for real. He was looking at an unfamiliar old man standing there.

“Hoh-hoh. With my power, moving over a distance instantly is no struggle at all,” the old man said with a low laugh. His back was shrunken and slightly hunched, and his face had the wrinkles of many years. He looked no different from any other old man...but the moment Jade saw him, he felt an indescribable tension.

“More importantly, Lowe—you failed to keep your promise.” The short old man scolded Lowe in a calm voice. “Even if it was my idea not to erase your memories...since the Dark Guild’s forbidden techniques have been exposed, none of you in this place can leave alive.”

“I”

The air around them froze. *Oh, so this man*— Jade quickly realized who that old man was. He was the guildmaster of the Dark Guild, Zepha.

“Gramps, let them off on this one. You can boil me or fry me or whatever you like,” Lowe hastily told the old man, and Lululee lifted her face, with a start.

Jade also realized what Lowe meant to do, and he muttered without thinking, “Pact-breaker...”

Lowe had said that he was a pact-breaker. A pact-breaker meant someone who had exposed forbidden techniques outside of the Dark Guild. Lowe had conditionally left the Dark Guild maintaining his memory of forbidden techniques, but using forbidden techniques in front of Jade and the others

wasn't allowed, after all.

And Lowe himself knew best what happened to pact-breakers, in the end.

"If you're gonna kill anyone, make it just me, Gramps," Lowe argued back determinedly. "Yeah, I'm at fault for using Flama in front of them. But I had to do that, or I wouldn't have been able to stop Gald. If I hadn't stopped him here, he would have spread even more forbidden techniques to the world. Can't you acknowledge my achievement in stopping that?"

Lowe's remark made Zepha fall silent. After some silence, he snorted. "Clever as always. Then I'll let them get off just with memory erasure. But Silver Sword, you will forget everything not just about forbidden techniques, but also about Lowe."

"Wha...?!"

Hearing that decision from the old man, Jade and Lululee panicked and looked at Lowe. But Lowe just quietly listened to the old man's words, and this time, he didn't argue back. He was silent for just a few seconds, then nodded with a little sigh.

"I'm fine with that. Do it."

With Zepha's eyes on him, Lowe smiled at them with total resignation. "Sorry for not fighting with you all this time," he muttered, then walked toward Zepha.

Lululee and Jade didn't know what to say, either, and all they could do was fall silent.

But then Lululee suddenly cried out, "—Y-you can't do that!" Clasp ing her rod, she blocked Lowe's way. "What do you mean, forget about Lowe?! I don't want to do that! I absolutely refuse!"

Jade also somehow dragged himself along, standing at Lululee's side. After a glance at Lowe, he glared at Zepha. "Forget Lowe? You think we would accept a condition like that?"

"We won't hand over Lowe...! And we won't hand over our memories of him, either! He's one of us!"

Lululee faced Zepha with determination, as if to say she was even willing to

fight. Zepha fixed his eyes calmly on them. Jade fought with his gaze as well, but somehow, he was instinctively frightened of meeting eyes with this old man.

Frankly speaking, even if he was an old man, fighting with a man on the level of guildmaster of the Dark Guild at this point would be a bad idea. They had no clue what kind of powers he had. But even if it didn't seem like they could win, he didn't want to give this up.

"Oh-ho. You're quite the reckless little younglings. So you would challenge a foe without even knowing how much stronger they are?"

Eyeing Jade and Lululee, Zepha chuckled as if he were looking at some foolish little animals. His gaze sharpened further, and he turned to Lowe. "Lowe. Look at this. Your friends are defending you with their battered bodies, even knowing they can't win this challenge. Is this what you wanted? Do you understand the weight of what you did? You're no longer so young I can let you off because you're just a little kid."

Lululee cried desperately at Zepha, "Lowe never showed us forbidden techniques until just now. No matter what the situation, he protected his promise with you. He only showed us forbidden techniques this once, today—and besides, this kind of treatment when he's been helping you all this time is just too cruel."

"Just once? What a thing to say. Do you not understand the meaning of forbidden techniques being known by so many people?"

"Meaning...?"

"Many people saw Flama today—soon enough, it will be researched and released to the masses, ways to counter it will be devised, and its strength and value will degrade... Flama has lost its value as a forbidden technique. That was one of the valuable techniques devised silently over the course of years, as we of the Dark Guild, our forebears, were laughed at by the world of skill supremacy, held in contempt, swallowing our frustration and holding back our arguments...and now it has been stolen."

"..."

"Those with skills would never understand...this frustration..."

The silence fell heavily upon them.

He had nothing to argue back with against Zepha's heavy remark.

"Leader, Lululee, thanks. You've done enough," Lowe said with a little smile. "Just because I was exempted from memory erasure and I've been helping the Dark Guild, that doesn't mean I can be forgiven for bringing forbidden techniques into the light. I knew that much. I took that exemption fully knowing all that, and I fought today... I have no regrets."

"...Lowe..."

"Hold on a sec," Alina, who had been silent all this time, cut Lowe off.

With a serious, harsh look on her face, she tilted her head. "I haven't really managed to get a grasp on the situation...but in other words, we have to defeat that old man there, or Lowe will be killed?"

"Alina..." Jade raised his chin with a gasp.

Alina said very briefly, "Then I'll beat him down."

Just as she had declared, a white magic sigil deployed at her feet, and she once again clasped her war hammer in hand.

Recognizing her hostility, Zepha pulled up the corners of his lips. "We've got another brash one here—"

Zepha looked at Alina with her war hammer over her shoulder...and then he quickly withdrew his smile. "...Who are you, miss?"

"? I'm a recep—er, no. I'm the Executioner."

As Alina furrowed her brow quizzically, Zepha eyed her closely for a few seconds, then immediately looked away. "Hmph. So be it. However many you want, come at me. It will all be over in the blink of an eye."

Instantly, Zepha vanished. At the same time, there was a little *tup* sound, and before they knew it, he was right beside Lowe.

"! Lowe!"

Jade turned back to Lowe, breath catching. Zepha's right arm had pierced Lowe's side. It was, of all places, the spot where he had been deeply wounded

by Gald.

“Ah...”

Lowe slumped to his knees.

“Lowe!”

Lululee went pale and ran up to him, and Alina started taking a step toward him, fully ready to attack...when Jade suddenly stopped her.

“What?”

“No, he hasn’t attacked...!”

“Huh?”

His eyes shifted from the puzzled Alina to Lowe. Lowe was slumped down on the ground, looking at his side in confusion.

“The wound...?”

That was the spot that had been gouged into by Gald’s attack. Though it had been healed somewhat by Lululee’s skill, it had still been a painful wound, the flesh not completely restored yet. But then now, suddenly, the wound had been cleanly and completely healed, with even his flesh completely back to normal.

Seeing that, Lululee was even more shocked than Lowe. “He’s completely healed?! But even my *Sigurth Revive* couldn’t heal that!!” she shrieked, both her hands on her cheeks.

Zepha did a complete one-eighty from his earlier cold air, cackling in amusement. “You don’t understand what healing is all about. You’re still a whelp, a dinky little healer.”

“Dinky little healer?!”

“Old man, why would you heal me...?” Beside Lululee, with her eyes wide in shock, Lowe panicked and looked up at Zepha.

“I’m postponing your punishment.”

“Postponing it...?”

“Gald and Gose are not the only pact-breakers who have left the guild during

this incident. This lot who became pact-breakers and vanished all at once apparently had a troublesome backer...known only as *them*.”

“*Them...?!*”

Jade widened his eyes at the familiar address.

During this incident, the one who had informed Gald about the dark gods had been “them.” “They” had taken advantage of Gald’s twisted need for approval, with his dissatisfaction about how mages were treated. When Glen had been controlled, too, “they” had used his deep sadness over having lost his daughter. They’d used nasty tricks that time with Glen, too—so that was who was reaching out not only to Gald but to other pact-breakers as well?

“Lowe. I order you to deal with those pact-breakers in communication with *them*. If you resolve this very much troublesome-seeming business, then I will exempt you from punishment.”

“Really?” asked Lululee.

“I don’t lie, dinky girl.”

“Hey, stop calling me dinky!”

“...You’re pretty nice, for a Dark Guild with iron laws,” Lowe said, looking like he still couldn’t believe it.

“Nice? Nonsense. Even if it wasn’t only your fault, you used Flama in front of people and destroyed the value of an important forbidden technique. I need to have you clean up your own mess, at least, or it won’t be worth it for me,” Zepha said, but he looked away.

Seeing him refusing to be honest about his feelings, Lowe finally seemed satisfied, and he gave a little smile. “So you’re gonna work me like a dog again? Well, if that’s it, then from now on, I’m gonna fight as I please.”

Zepha’s expression relaxed into a smile. His profile looked just a bit lonely.

“Secret techniques are powerful precisely because they’re secret. Forbidden techniques have value precisely because no one knows of them, giving their users, the mages of the Dark Guild, a unique value. That value produces work, and work produces money, and if we have money, then we don’t die like

dogs...”

“ ...”

“We of the Dark Guild have long since protected our own with these methods. Even now, we haven’t been able to find any other way to save those mages who have been left in the cold, without having skills and with the value of magic lost. If we were to indulge in the desire for acknowledgment and casually flaunt our techniques, then after gaining temporary fame, we would be destroyed, with all of our own going down with us. Can you eat fame? Gald never understood that...”

Zepha’s gaze turned toward Lowe, and the grief in his eyes vanished for a moment.

“Lowe. You’ve found some good friends. I will give Flama to you,” the old man said, his cackling ringing out through the arena.

It was a few days after the fighting tournament. As Alina was closing her window at Iffole Counter, she grabbed the bundle of potions she'd brought and briskly walked down the main street. She was headed for the treatment center.

"Jade will be very happy to have you visit him while he's recovering." Lululee, walking beside her, was as glad as if she was the one being visited.

Alina averted her eyes from her smile and snorted. "I-it's fine, I just bought too many potions, so I'm just sharing some."

As Lululee nodded a bunch of times as she chuckled a meaningful-sounding "tee-hee," Alina furrowed her brow at her. "Wait, what's that thing you're carrying...?"

She had been told that Lululee had something she was giving to Lowe, who was recovering at the treatment center like Jade. She was holding with care a bottle of mysterious green-black syrupy liquid.

"It's my special medicine!"

It seemed she was referring to that occasionally bubbling, dangerous-looking fluid. *Is Lowe going to be made to drink that now...?* Her heart aching for the sorrow that awaited him, Alina decided not to mention the special medicine any further.

"A-Aaaaaaaaalina came to visit?!?!"

When they arrived at the treatment center, Alina was welcomed by Jade's cry of shock.

Lying in bed, Jade was in a terrible state, as usual. He had one hand and arm wrapped in bandages and a splint, and when contrasted with the cheer on his face, the degree of his wounds was absolutely awful.

“This isn’t a visit. I just came to give you some extra potions!” Alina said bluntly, placing the potions on the shelf by his bedside. Jade was deeply moved by those few bottles of potion, as if he were observing something holy.

“I...will take the utmost care of these potions...!” Jade said, and he even had tears in his eyes, as at his side, Lowe was swallowing the mystery fluid Lululee had given him in one go, with his eyes rolling back in his head. Lululee looked satisfied.

And then Lululee’s brows turned up as if she’d suddenly realized something. “Oh yes, Alina, the prize was broken, in the end...even though you wanted it that badly...”

Alina’s shoulders jumped awkwardly. “Huh? Ah, now that you mention it, yeah, huh? Ahhhhhh, that’s too baaaad!”

Alina was overcome with sorrow, and she covered her face with both hands as she glanced over to check the others’ reactions. Her managing to destroy the strange figure and evidence of her crimes had, with great relief, concluded with that neck-popping incident, in her mind. Having that subject dragged up now made her privately break into a cold sweat.

“I feel so bad, Alina, when you fought so hard during the tournament...,” said Lululee.

“She really did want that victory prize, after all...,” Jade echoed.

“You think? She really sounds completely insin— Ah, no, nothing.”

As Jade’s and Lululee’s hearts were breaking in their naively honest ways, only Lowe tried to make a sharp interjection, which Alina silenced with a glare from between her fingers.

As this was going on, Jade cleared his throat and rummaged around to pull something out of his bag. “...S-so then maybe it was a good idea that I made this. Take this, Alina!”

“Huh? —Wait, egh?!” popped out of her without thinking.

The thing that Jade put on the table...it was the victory prize that Alina had smashed with all her strength in order to destroy the evidence.



The scattered fragments of that weird figure had been stuck together, restoring it. It was full of cracks all over, uneven, with bits missing here and there, and the mark of Dia that had been blinking inside it was now gone. But the head that Alina had flicked off had been stuck on, and that pose like it was twisting around mockingly had been completely restored.

“Wh-what is this...?”

Seeing Alina speechless, Jade scratched his cheek like he was embarrassed. “I wondered if I couldn’t do something, so I gathered the scattered pieces and put it together again somehow. I actually wanted to make it properly like it had been, but this was the best I could do...”

Alina gazed at the victory prize, cheeks spasming. Well, if you looked closely, then even some pretty small fragments had been carefully glued together, and it was a miracle in the first place to have put that thing back together at all, after its being smashed to bits.

“Alina, you worked hard at overtime and the tournament. It made me want to make you something as a reward, at least.”

“...”

Now that she had destroyed the evidence, frankly, she didn’t want this mystifying figure at all, but—

“...Th-thank you...,” Alina muttered, accepting the battered victory prize.

It would be weird if she didn’t... Besides, well, it wasn’t like she wouldn’t accept the sentiment from Jade.

Then Jade grinned gladly. “Don’t break it now!”

“Y-yeah. Well then, since we’ve handed over what we have to, I’m going to get going—”

Holding the weird figure under her arm, when Alina briskly made to leave, a man came into the sickroom.

“Hey, you look well,” said Glen, cracking a smile.

Alina tried to leave, but completely lost her moment, and the little sickroom, filled with people, became temporarily quite lively.

Glen had arranged for Jade and Lowe to get a private room, so even with the guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild visiting, there was no large fuss made.

Jade watched Glen's private secretary Fili smoothly leave a visitor's gift and then leave as he casually asked Glen, "Oh yeah, so, Glen, did you ever find out where the Sage was, in the end?"

"...The Sage?" Alina scowled, thinking that another troublesome-sounding term had come up.

Glen scratched his cheek awkwardly. "Yeah, there's a bit of a reason for that. I went to the Dark Guild headquarters in order to look into the whereabouts of the Sage, who vanished fifteen years ago."

"You seemed like you were getting along with Gramps...the Dark Guild guildmaster, so the negotiation must've gone well. That's nice," Lowe said, like it was none of his business.

Beside him, Jade groaned quietly. "...Considering the poor relationship between the Adventurers Guild and the Dark Guild so far, isn't it a pretty big deal to have forged a connection with the guildmaster of the Dark Guild...?"

"Indeed it is. I got results pertaining to the whereabouts of the Sage, too."

But despite Glen saying that, his expression grew solemn. He glanced around briefly, then lowered his voice slightly.

"After his disappearance, the Sage was apparently living quietly as an adventurer in a tiny rural village called Fillua. He lived there for about five years."

Alina was about to say, *Hey, you're talking about that sketchy stuff again. Can you stop trying to drag me into it?*—but then she suddenly closed her mouth.

...Fillua?

That was the name of the town where Alina was born.

And also, if he had been living there for about five years since his disappearance, that would have been right when Alina was still in Fillua.

Alina had been born and grown up in Fillua until she had turned fifteen, become a receptionist, and moved to Iffole. Of course, there had been no rumors of any “Sage” or any other weirdo showing up there—Fillua was peaceful place, far away from that sort of fishiness.

“...” Alina furrowed her brow quizzically, and she listened to Glen, out of mild curiosity.

“Why would the Sage be living as an adventurer in a little village...?” Jade wondered.

Glen groaned in resignation. “I don’t know. It’s a little sad for it to be that he wanted to throw away the title of Sage. He was a sharp and able man; he should have been able to conceal himself more thoroughly.”

“So then where did the Sage go after that?” Lululee tilted her head.

Glen paused. He fell hesitantly silent, then eventually opened his mouth slowly. “The Sage—died.”

Instantly, tension ran through the sickroom.

“H-he died...?!” Jade’s eyes widened, and he leaned forward automatically.

Lululee and Lowe were also frozen with shock. Thus far, it had been unknown whether the Sage was alive or dead. The one saving grace was that there had been no proof to say for sure that he had died.

“The Sage disguised himself as an adventurer and settled down in Fillua, and then he was unluckily attacked by monsters in a dungeon and died, I’m told,” Glen explained.

But Jade muttered as if that just didn’t make sense to him. “...Attacked by monsters and died...? Is that true? I’ve only heard of him in stories, but I heard that he was quite the master in battle...”

“I’m still not convinced about the cause of his death, either. The fourth generation Sage was originally talented in both the literary and military arts and had a powerful skill. He wouldn’t have been carelessly killed by monsters... Oh yes, when he was in Fillua, of course he also changed his name,” Glen said, as if he’d just remembered.

And then he said the name of that adventurer who had died, the name the Sage had used as a disguise.

“—His name was Shroud.”

The End

Afterword

The new year has just about begun. Hello, I'm Mato Kousaka.

Just like that, *Guild Receptionist* has reached its fourth volume! This time, Lowe gets the spotlight.

Lowe hasn't played a big role thus far, but if you ask, "What sort of man is he?" then I would certainly, without question, answer, "The type who can get on in the world and in romance."

He won't be the superstar of the class or the workplace, but he's the kind of man who'll get girls to say, "You're kinda great, Lowe." That's right. In modern society, he's the type who will definitely be popular with girls. (I will acknowledge differing opinions.)

But Lowe's smooth operation works because he's actually disinterested in people. He has no hang-ups, doesn't intensely love or hate anything, and that's precisely why he can separate himself from his feelings and always make only the optimal choice to take action. He's canny and clever, but in a sense, he's a sad man, with the most sober heart of all...

...But I envy him for being that clever...

I wouldn't mind being sober and sad; I wanted to be a clever person like thaaaaaat!

While yelling out indecently like that, I was writing Lowe. In a sense, he is an ideal character. I would be glad if you would look forward to seeing, in this book, what sort of troubles a clever man like Lowe will deal with and how he will change!

Now then, while I touched on it at the beginning, by the time this book will go on sale, the new year will almost be here.

New classes, school, work, departments...changing environments...changing relationships...and most of all, at the end of the year and the start of the new one, work is busy.

Can't you hear it? The sound of overtime steadily approaching...!!

Taking care not to ruin your physical or mental health and not to build up too much anger toward your superiors, and when you're at your limits, read some *Guild Receptionist* to vent your stress, and let's get through the new year as well.

And—it's been exactly one year since Volume 1 of *Guild Receptionist* has been printed!

Yaaay! *Clap clap clap!*

It's thanks to all of you that I've been able to get this far. Honestly, thank you very much.

Of course, I received much help from my editors Yoshioka and Yamaguchi for this book as well. And to Gaou, who draws illustrations fine enough to make me faint every time, and to everyone from the editing department, who published and advertised Volume 4, and most of all to you, who picked up *Guild Receptionist*, Volume 4, I offer my sincere thanks.

Let's do our best in the new year, too!

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